



# TAROT CARD ANTHOLOGY: **SYNCHRONICITY**

VOLUME ONE

Michelle Hasker  
Tina Bendoni



**Whiskey Creek Press**

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Tarot Card Anthology: Synchronicity Volume 1  
*by Tina Bendoni, Michelle Hasker*

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VOLUME 1

by

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WHISKEY CREEK PRESS

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## WHAT THEY ARE SAYING ABOUT

### *CELTIC LOVE KNOTS: VOLUME 1 MORGAN'S MAGIC & THROUGH THE VEIL*

"*Morgan's Magick* by Michelle Hasker is a tantalizing story that will have you begging for more. The characters are well detailed and enjoyable; the plot is appealing and extremely sensual. I loved the passion and electricity that flowed between Morgan and Jack and thought the author did a fantastic job of grabbing the reader's attention from the first page and holding it until the last.

"*Through The Veil* by Tina Bendoni is a tempting tale that will leave you wishing for a dream man of your own. I thought the premise of this plot was very exciting and the characters well developed for such a short story. The sex in this story was hot enough to burn and left me eager to read the second volume of the Celtic Love Knots series!"

5 Angels and a Recommended Read

Tammy

Fallen Angels Review

"Through the Veil shows us that anything is possible as long as you believe. Tina Bendoni is sensually brilliant! She takes you through a perfect fantasy and lets you explore a new fantasy realm. I enjoyed the fantasy ... now come and enjoy it for yourself.

"Morgan's Magick is spell binding and truly captivating. Michelle Hasker has an incredible talent to bring you into the world of magic. I truly enjoyed this story and I am sure you will as well."

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Deb

Sensual Reads

About *Morgan's Magick* by Michelle Hasker:

"Whoa baby, when Jack and Morgan give in to their feelings, the sparks fly. Not a word is wasted in this sizzling tale of magickal love."

About *Through The Veil* by Tina Bendoni:

"The heat generated by Alyson and Lucas is scorching. You'll wish for a friendly witch to cast a spell on your behalf after reading this sexy story, I certainly did."

And about the entire volume:

"A steamy anthology that hits all the right notes, CELTIC LOVE KNOTS, VOLUME 1 is a surefire winner."

Rating: Multiple O's

Lori Ann

Romance Reviews Today

Tarot Card Anthology: Synchronicity Volume 1  
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Dedication

For the best editors in the world, Jan and Chere.  
Thanks for believing in us.

## PROLOGUE

by

Tina Bendoni

Abigail Montgomery took one last look around her new shop. Nodding, she decided she was satisfied. Everything was in place. Wards were set and beckonings had been sent out. All that was left was for her to wait. Wait until the chosen ones showed.

Her hand went to the twenty-two cards laid out on her table. The Major Arcana. Few understood the true power behind these cards, but many tried. Abigail was grateful so many learned the arts as well as they could. It had been a dying skill for far too long. Perhaps now, in this new millennium, people would begin to learn what they had so long ago forgotten.

She reached out to touch each card. So many meanings and interpretations. So many ways to get them wrong, or to choose the incorrect path. Only time would tell if those who were destined to learn the truth would be willing to accept it. One's life journey could be told in these simple twenty-two cards. From the wide-eyed wonder of the Fool, with his young, fresh approach to things, to the culmination of a cycle with the World card.

Each had their own story to tell. Each had their own story to live.

Looking out the glass window at the front of her shop, Abigail pondered her upcoming clients. *Who would be first in this cycle?* She could never predict who would show first; she just knew they would come to her.

Every customer was important, but she was here, in this place, at this time, for twenty-two particular souls. They needed the help more than any others. Some were in danger of going down a wrong path. Some had earned that extra bit of guidance only those above could grant.

Sitting in her chair, she relaxed and let the visions come. This was often her favorite part. Receiving the knowledge she needed to help her customers live the lives they were meant to would come later. Now, just a small overview. Something she had grown to think of as a teaser. Not only did it entertain her, but it allowed her to be prepared. Sometimes she needed that extra bit of warning for herself. And this time, she saw the extra preparation for the Death card reading would come in handy. It was always hard to give a difficult reading, and this one would be intense.

Ah, there, the Hermit. She smiled. A misunderstood card, but one of her favorites. In this case, it would definitely require patience on the part of her customer. *She would need to do some serious work, that one.*

The Hierophant. *Another wedding? Yes, but, ooh, interesting.* He definitely has potential, but he is going to need this nudge.

The Magician. She smiled wryly. *Now this one was a twist.*

High Priestess. *Hmm, the damage parents could do to their young without meaning to.*

The Moon. *Ah, a simple one. But would she accept it?*

Judgement. Abigail pursed her lips on this one. *Hmm, this one could go either way. Would she be willing to do what needed to be done?*

Wheel of Fortune. *A bruised soul, that one.*

Her hands drifted faster, seeing slight views of those yet to come. *The Chariot will have a choice to make. Temperance will have to learn to compromise.*

Abigail could tell this time around was going to be a bit different. Times were changing, and people weren't as trusting or open as they'd once been. Would they learn from what she had to tell them? Only time would tell.

She looked out at the passersby, all oblivious to the tiny bubble of magic so near to them. Would their choices change the fate of the world? Perhaps not. But then again, when it is their world one is talking about, their choices are all that matter.

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## THE MAGICIAN

by

Michelle Hasker

"The Magician."

Ada glanced down at the tarot card as if it might attack her at any minute and Abigail stifled a laugh. Maybe it was the preconceptions Ada had running through her head. It was obvious she thought magic was fake and all fortune tellers were phonies.

"It looks like a good card," Ada said after a long pause.

"There are no good and bad cards, my dear." Abigail smiled as the young woman blushed. *She was perfect. Yes, this one would be blessed with love before the week was over. A little magic would speed up the process, but Ada deserved it.*

"I'm sorry."

"It's alright, dear." Abigail looked down at the card and tapped it with her finger. "Now, back to your reading. The Magician. Mastery over word, mind and matter. Ability to turn ideas into actions, handle problems, and control your life. New beginnings. Optimism. Understanding and personal growth. Balance desires with needs."

"Are you sure? I mean, are you sure this is really *my* future?" Ada asked.

Abigail laughed. "Yes, dear. The Magician is in your immediate future."

"This is rich."

Ada snorted and Abigail bit back a laugh. *It wouldn't do to encourage her.* Tapping the card again, Abigail closed her eyes and double checked her vision. After a minute she smiled and opened her eyes.

"You will meet a man—"

"All fortune tellers say that. You promise either riches or love because you think that is what we want to hear. I want to know that my ex will get what's coming to him. Tell me his new girlfriend cheats on him. Tell me his penis rots and falls off, or he contracts some disfiguring disease."

Abigail shook her head, but her smile widened. "Think about what you *really* want to know, my dear. Then this reading will make sense to you. Think about how *you* can apply this card to your immediate future."

"I'd like to know why I let Grace talk me into coming here. You are so stereotypical, from the crystal ball down to the thick purple drapes and fabrics. How did she ever pick you from the rest?"

"Beauty is in the eye of the beholder."

"Do you charge extra for overdone quotes?"

"The first one is free, dear." Abigail struggled not to laugh in her client's face. *This would be a hard one to convince, but the cards were never wrong.* Neither were her visions. Ada would fall hard and fast. The magician convinced her of it.

"How much do I owe you for this?" Ada opened her purse.

Abigail studied her. Ada's blue eyes flashed in anger as she tucked loose strands of her light brown hair behind her ears. She even tried to force her hair into compliance. If she didn't loosen up and relax, all the good things in life would pass her by. The Magician would change all that.

"No charge. You'll see that I'm right, and you will be back for another reading."

"Thanks," Ada mumbled. She stood up, grabbed her jacket, and hurried out the door. "But I won't be back."

"Oh you *will* be back. This I *know*. You pulled the magician in more ways than one." Abigail laughed.

\* \* \* \*

"I don't know why I listened to you," Ada snapped into her cell phone as she tried not to slip on the icy sidewalk.

"Because you know I love you and want what's best for you."

She sighed and wondered if Grace had paid the woman to say what she had. All the information she'd known ... *but pulling a magician? It didn't fit*. Surely the woman had noticed she didn't believe in all that hocus pocus. But then again, maybe not. After all, why get her fortune told if she didn't believe?

"She's a fraud. The Magician? I don't even believe in magic. You could have at least fed her enough information to give me a good reading."

"Calm down, Ada." Grace's answer was barely audible, and broke up as the wind whipped down the street.

Ada pulled the phone away from her ear and shook it.

"You told her what to say, didn't you?" Ada asked as she brought the phone back to her ear. "You and Cybil concocted some nefarious plan and you paid the fortune teller to convince me to play along. Well it didn't work!"

"Ada, stop it! Will you listen to yourself? I did no such thing, but I'm not going to keep wasting my breath. If this is how you want to be, then fine. Just don't forget we're going out tonight. Cybil already bought the tickets, so don't even think about canceling."

Ada growled as she closed her phone and shoved it in her purse. All she wanted was to cuddle up with her cat and watch some old movies. Of course Grace and Cybil would cook up something to ruin her plans.

Something cold and wet fell on her nose, pulling her out of her thoughts. She looked up and a few snowflakes landed on her face as they gently fell from the cloudy sky. At least it was a light snow and not heavy like they predicted.

She pulled out her keys and trudged through the slush-covered parking lot. Grace and Cybil were crazy if they thought she wanted to go out with them tonight. They might be in the market for a man, but she certainly wasn't. Not if they got the winter storm the weatherman predicted.

As Ada sat in the car and waited for it to warm up, she wondered if Grace was telling the truth. If she hadn't fed information to that woman then how had the fortune teller known so much about her? *Could there actually be a grain of truth in the reading? What had the old woman said?*

*A new beginning?* She definitely needed one of those. After Jake left, she'd fallen into a rut that even her friends couldn't

pull her out of. She'd spent every night home alone since he'd left. But that was an easy guess.

*Optimism?* She had never been optimistic. *Why start now?* Ada laughed as she backed out of her parking spot. That one was way off.

*Understanding and personal growth? Am I supposed to be understanding of Jake's infidelity? How am I supposed to grow?* She was a good person. She was nice to people and had lots of friends.

*But you were rude to that fortune teller.*

*No. She's full of it. There's no way she can predict the future. It was stupid to give in to Grace and go there.*

Why am I arguing with myself?

*What else did she say?* Balance desires with needs. *Do I balance my desires and needs? What are my desires? I want a secure job, which I have, and a nice house, which I also have, even if it's a bit lonely.*

The fortune teller's words replayed in her head. *You will meet a man ... Did she want to? Who doesn't want love? But I've been down that road already. It hurts. Too much to risk it again.*

\* \* \* \*

"A magic show?" Ada stared at Grace. "You knew we were coming here and you told that fortune teller to pick The Magician. Admit it!"

"Shush!" Grace grabbed her hand and pulled her close. "Keep your voice down. You're attracting attention."

Ada wanted to protest, but she didn't like all the eyes that had focused on her so she sank lower in her seat and glanced toward the empty stage.

Applause rang out as a tall, dark-haired man took center stage. It was hard to see his features clearly from across the room, but judging from the sighs coming from the tables in front of her, he met with a lot of feminine approval.

"Yves the Magician!" the announcer shouted. An even louder applause filled the room.

"He's awesome," Grace said as she leaned toward Ada. "Cybil and I saw him last month on television and now he's in Atlantic City. He is totally amazing. Wait until you see his act. And sexy? My God ... I just wish we could have gotten better seats."

Ada turned and looked at Grace's awestruck face as she stared at the stage. That was either lust in her eyes, or she was coming down with a cold. Well, as long as Yves was gorgeous, which he was, she could tolerate the magic show.

Sitting back in her seat, Ada prepared for a long boring night. She lifted her hand and caught a waitress' attention, ordered a screwdriver and then turned her attention back to the stage.

Sexy? Grace's comment was an understatement. When Yves pulled off his cape to reveal a white shirt open to his waist and tucked into tight leather pants, moisture collected at the corners of her mouth. Even from across the room it was easy to see his glistening, muscular body under the bright stage lights. Smooth tanned skin teased her from behind his shirt as he began his first trick.

The room grew quiet, and she found herself leaning forward in her seat. With a silent warning to herself to behave, Ada forced herself to relax and sit back.

After showing he had nothing up his sleeves, Yves the Delicious made a deck of cards appear out of thin air. He shuffled them theatrically, and spread them in front of the audience.

When he called for a volunteer, people raised their hands all around the room. He picked an older woman near the front. She giggled and followed a waiter up to the stage. Yves asked for her name and made some small talk that Ada tuned out until he started the trick.

A waitress set her drink on the table. Ada smiled at the young woman, then turned back to see if he'd started the trick. The woman picked a card and showed it to the audience. As Ada sipped her drink, a delicious tingling settled in her belly. Whether the bartender put in too much vodka, or if she was way too absorbed in watching Yves' muscular chest as he waved the cards with a flourish, she didn't care. Feeling more relaxed than she had in days, Ada smiled and lifted her drink at Cybil and Grace in a silent toast. Tonight could be a new beginning. A fun one.

The audience cheered as the woman bowed, then returned to her seat. Yves pulled out a large black top hat and performed a few tricks she'd seen at other magic shows. Some of the tricks were standard and Ada wondered what it was about Yves that made him the best magician she'd ever seen.

Yves suddenly leapt off the stage and wandered around the room. He stopped every so often to make a flower appear for a woman, or a coin for a man. As he advanced around the room, Ada wondered what he had planned. Suddenly he stopped in front of her table and smiled at her.

*Mercy!* Ada stared up into his twinkling blue eyes as her body melted into a puddle of lust. She couldn't stop herself from running her gaze over his form. Yes, he was well built all over judging by the package barely concealed by tight leather. Yves' grin widened as he bowed and made a red rose appear. When he handed it to her, his scent and that of the sweet rose wrapped around her. Masculine and woodsy, his scent reminded her of long, lazy days in the mountains. Shivers ran up her spine when his hand brushed against hers as she accepted the rose.

"Will you be my assistant for this evening?" His voice was rich and husky. Paired with his bedroom eyes he was irresistible.

"Assistant?" Ada stuttered. *How can I say no? How can I actually go on a stage in front of so many people?*

His smile widened and she knew she'd do anything he asked. Cybil and Grace both leaned forward and shouted at the same time.

"Yes! Ada would love to be your assistant!" Grace jumped up and grabbed Ada's hand. She pulled Ada out of her chair.

"And if she is crazy enough to refuse, would you take me instead?" Cybil asked with a big grin.

Yves laughed and grabbed Ada's hand. He kissed it, then turned around. He lifted their joined hands in the air.

"Everyone, meet Ada, my assistant."

Applause sounded again. As Yves led her to the stage, she heard more than one woman mumble that she was lucky. *Hell, yeah.* She was the luckiest woman in the room.

The next few tricks passed in a blur as her senses nearly overloaded at his nearness. Every time he brushed against her, sparks danced up and down her body. If he ever planted a kiss on her, she'd be a goner. When he turned to her with a set of handcuffs, his next request sent her thoughts from heated to downright naughty.

"I need you to handcuff me." Her face must have given her away because he chuckled and said, "Let me rephrase that. For this trick, I need you to handcuff me and attach these chains to my legs. Then you will help me get in that box and secure it with chains and a large lock. Antoine will help you."

Ada drew in a deep breath and nodded. At least he wasn't going to have the box submerged in water. How magicians managed to get out of these traps eluded her and had left her chewing her fingernails when she'd watched them on television as a child.

"Ada and Antoine will secure me with these locks and trap me in this trunk. I will have five minutes of air. After ten minutes if I fail to escape, Ada and Antoine will release me."

Gasps sounded, and a few people clapped. Ada forced a smile to her lips as she held up the handcuffs and tested them, showing the audience they were genuine. Then Antoine

called a few men from the audience to test the chains and locks themselves.

When everyone was satisfied, Ada snapped the cuffs on Yves and looked up into those endless blue eyes. His gaze seared her, flaming her desire. She hadn't known danger excited her, but then isn't that what everyone said? It brought out the baser instincts and emotions in people.

Before she knew what he was doing, Yves kissed her. A soft peck on the lips that shouldn't have been as devastating as it was.

Ada stared at him not knowing what to say or think.

"For luck," he said softly, then repeated louder as he turned to the audience.

She swallowed audibly, then helped Antoine with the chains. Once Yves was in the box and it was chained shut, Antoine started the timer. As the minutes ticked past, Ada grew more and more nervous until the sensation grew stronger than the memory of that short, platonic, yet searing kiss. *Did he feel the same thing when we'd kissed?*

Yves was a professional. He probably kissed a woman or two at each show. He probably could also do this trick in his sleep. But it didn't make her feel any better. Her unease grew as the clock reached the five minute mark.

"Five minutes have elapsed," Antoine announced.

"Something must have happened, why hasn't he appeared yet?" A woman shouted from one of the front tables.

"Suspense!" another person shouted. "He's probably not even in the box. Don't forget this is a trick."

"But we saw him locked in there!" the woman insisted.

"Six minutes have elapsed," Antoine said.

Ada chewed nervously on her lower lip and glanced across the room at Cybil and Grace. Grace sat at the table alone. *Where had Cybil gone? Didn't they notice the magician was in trouble?* Cybil had seen this show before. Surely she would know that this wasn't how it usually went. Maybe she was coming up to help. Ada looked around the front of the room, but she was nowhere in sight.

"Seven minutes have elapsed."

Ada turned to Antoine. She tried to catch his gaze to signal him that something must have gone wrong.

"Antoine," she whispered.

"I saw this show on the television last month. I'm telling you he made it out of the trunk in five minutes. Something must have gone wrong this time." The woman stood back up. "I'm going on the stage and making them open the trunk."

"Eight minutes have elapsed," Antoine said as the man next to the woman grabbed her and pulled her back into her seat.

Ada looked at Antoine and caught a barely perceptible wink. *Didn't he know something was wrong?* Men could be so thick-headed sometimes. Ada reached for the keys, but Antoine lifted them high into the air.

"Give me the keys," she hissed, then added in a fierce whisper, "Something is wrong. He doesn't usually take this long, does he? You heard that woman. He never takes this long. Maybe something is wrong. Are you sure nothing is wrong? Helloooo?"

Antoine kept his face impassive as he looked out into the audience, so she sighed loudly. It felt like forever before he said, "Nine minutes have elapsed."

"Give me the damn keys." Ada growled as she advanced toward Antoine. "Even someone who's practiced holding his breath needs to breathe sometime."

Antoine glanced at the audience, then back to Ada. Ada walked over to the trunk and walked around it to see if there was an escape hatch or something. Perhaps there was a trick door he slipped out of and she could find it and check on him.

"Ten minutes have elapsed," he said as the timer went off.

He tossed the keys to Ada and she set about opening the locks as quickly as she could. Antoine helped her pull the chains off the box and open the lid. She gasped and backed up as Cybil grinned and sat up inside the trunk.

"How the hell did you get in there?" she demanded as the audience erupted in cheers.

Antoine laughed as he helped Cybil out of the trunk. Ada unlocked the handcuffs and then gazed out across the room. *Where was Yves then? Hiding in the audience?* She froze as a spotlight focused on the gorgeous magician and confirmed her suspicions. *How the hell did he pull it off?*

When Yves returned to the stage, he asked the audience to clap for her, then smiled as he thanked her and told her she could return to her table. Ada shook her head and hurried off the stage. *What a rotten trick.* She was foolish to have let herself get so wrapped up in him. The further from that tempting man, the better off she would be.

The rest of the night Yves amazed her with trick after trick, making it hard to remember she was mad at him. And that kiss. *What would a real kiss with him be like?*

Cybil refused to say how she got into the trunk, and Ada knew her friend would keep her promise to the magician. Even with the adrenaline from her fear still running through her, she couldn't help but be amazed as one at a time, three white doves flew out of his hat, each carrying a white rose that they dropped in his hand before they landed on Antoine's outstretched arm. A large white rabbit was a few tricks later, tempting Ada to ask where Alice was.

Yves moved on to a grand finale where he made Antoine vanish from a cabinet, then brought him back. When the curtain closed, a sense of desperate sadness swept over her. She'd just started to relax, but now it was over. Even though she didn't believe in magic, the show had been fun and she didn't want to go home yet.

"Let's go over to the bar. There's a different show coming on in an hour. We can get another drink or two before we go home." Grace rose and looked at Ada as if waiting for an answer.

"Okay." Ada shrugged. The only thing she had to look forward to at home was silence. And being alone. Completely. Utterly. Alone.

*You will meet a man.* The fortune teller's words replayed in her mind. If only it could be true. But it wasn't. All fortune tellers promised either love or success. If one believed in it enough, anything was possible, but Ada didn't believe in magic. Or love. Not any more.

She followed Grace and Cybil to the bar and climbed on a barstool. She ordered another screwdriver and thought about the other things the fortune teller had said. *New beginnings. Optimism. Understanding and personal growth. Balance desires with needs. Control your life.* Now that one she liked. It would be nice to take control of her own life for a change.

Once Jake had controlled her to the point of telling her how to dress and who her friends could be. Never again would she relinquish that much control. This was definitely the time for new beginnings. That thought made her remember how good Yves had smelled up close, and the way she tingled wherever he touched her.

"Thanks for assisting me tonight, Ada."

Ada choked on her drink when Yves spoke in her ear. He laughed and patted her on the back as Grace and Cybil, traitors that they were, greeted him with large flirtatious smiles.

"How did you ladies enjoy the show?" he asked as he sat on the stool next to Ada and draped his arm around her.

She drew in a deep breath and held it as her senses slipped into overdrive. *Ooo, will he kiss me again?* His nearness set her heart thundering, and his scent started a fluttering in her stomach.

Ada refused to answer. He had tormented her with that trunk act of his. He must change the act from city to city or something. But there was one question that bothered her enough to make her break her resolve to remain quiet.

"How did you set Cybil up to help you with the act? She didn't let anything slip, and for her that's amazing."

Cybil grinned and draped her arm around Yves. "This hunk can be very convincing, Ada. I bet if he asked you to let him saw you in half, you'd say yes. When he wants something, not many refuse him."

Ada narrowed her eyes and tried to ignore the twinge of jealousy that seared through her at Cybil's easy familiarity with the magician. She wasn't interested in replacing Jake anyway. At least not this soon. *Or am I? Haven't I said I wanted to move on, to find someone?*

Yves kissed Cybil on the nose, then pulled away to accept his drink from the bartender. "So what brought you ladies out in this weather?"

"Ladies night out. Besides, it's not often my favorite magician has a show near enough for me to visit."

Yves laughed at her comment. *Why didn't Grace nudge Cybil and tell her that her intentions were too obvious?*

Ada signaled the bartender for a refill. She wasn't even feeling slightly tipsy yet, and Grace was driving. If she had to go home alone at least she could go numb.

"Did you enjoy the show?" Yves asked again. "Antoine says you weren't happy with him when he refused to give you the keys. You shouldn't have worried. I do this trick every show. If I didn't change it a little and shake up the audience, they'd grow bored too quickly. It's hard to keep people's attention with all the special effects and computerized things they have now."

Ada turned to look at him when she realized he was talking to her. Cybil was prettier and practically throwing herself at him. *Why wasn't he paying attention to her?*

"I'm sorry if you were scared. I just tried to tell you there was no reason to be," Yves said.

Ada forced a smile. "I wasn't worried at first, but then that woman in the audience said how you're usually out by the five minute mark and I got worried. It was silly of me."

She glanced down at the glass the bartender set before her, handed him some money, and told him to keep the change before she gave Yves her attention again.

"It wasn't silly. From what Antoine said, she had several people ready to come on stage. At least her husband was smart and kept her at the table. It would have ruined the big surprise."

"It certainly was a surprise."

"You aren't mad at me, are you?"

"Mad? No." She stared at him. *Mad? Why would I be mad?*

"Good. I'd hate to think I turned you off magic or something."

Ada snorted and choked on her drink for the second time. Yves pounded on her back once more. Worry marred his handsome face as he asked her if she was okay. When she could breathe again, Ada pushed him away and nodded.

"I'm fine," she choked out.

"Was it something I said?" He laughed, but it sounded forced.

She snorted again and didn't care if it was unladylike. "Magic. Yeah. Are you selling any bridges? I'd be more likely to buy one than believe in magic."

Yves stared at her, then looked at Cybil and Grace before he returned to stare at her again. "You've got to be kidding me. You don't believe in magic?"

"Jake beat it out of her," Grace said. Ada glared at her until she stiffened and quickly added, "Not literally. I mean, he never touched her."

Ada gasped. Her heart caught in her chest and her throat tightened as everyone looked at her. Jake had never laid a hand on her. Not even in the sexual sense. She waited and wondered what Yves thought. Then someone laughed and she decided to play it off.

"Just shut up while you're still ahead," Ada whispered and grabbed her glass. She downed the rest of her drink. "You ladies ready to go? Tomorrow might not be a workday for you, but I have reports to look over."

Ada clutched her purse to her chest and got off her stool. The room spun and she stumbled. Strong arms wrapped around her as a familiar scent tickled her nose. For a minute she relaxed until it registered that it was Yves. Ada jerked out of his arms as heat filled her cheeks.

"I'm sorry, Ada," Grace whispered.

"It's okay. If I hadn't drunk so much I'd be fine. I don't even know my own limit, do I?" Ada forced a laugh but she couldn't meet her friends' knowing gazes.

Cybil and Grace both knew that Jake had never been intimate with her. He'd sworn he wanted to save

consummating their relationship for when they got married. But when she caught him with his secretary at his office, she knew it was all a lie. He hadn't been interested in her, at least not sexually. Spending her money had probably been his favorite pastime. It was also how she knew the fortune teller was lying. No man would desire her. Jake had proven it to her without a shadow of a doubt. But perhaps she could make a new beginning by taking control of her life.

"Don't go yet," Yves whispered as he stepped between Ada and her friends. "I just met you."

Ada laughed. She couldn't help it. *What does he take me for? A fool?* She'd seen the way he and Cybil interacted. *Why act like he wants to spend time with me? To make Cybil jealous? Couldn't he see that she was practically throwing herself at him?*

Yves turned and looked at Cybil. The look they shared wasn't that of two strangers. It was a look of two people who knew each other very well. *What game were they playing? A lover's spat?*

"Cybil? Do you have something you want to share with the rest of the class?" Ada tried to hide her anger behind a smile.

"Let's get out of here," Cybil said as she grabbed onto Ada and Grace. "Come on, Yves."

Yves tossed some money on the bar and followed them into the hotel lobby.

"Do you have a room here?" Cybil asked as she looked at Yves.

"Yes. I guess you want to talk up there. I told you to just tell her the truth."

Cybil nodded. "I think that would be best. Lay on, MacDuff."

They were all silent on the ride up to his room. A myriad of thoughts raced through Ada's mind, but if they stuck together, nothing bad could happen. *Or could it?* Perhaps Cybil had promised Yves an orgy. That thought almost had her laughing out loud. Forcing away the unwanted image that thought brought, Ada concentrated on watching the numbers change as they traveled higher.

"I should have guessed," Cybil said as she looked up and down the empty hallway.

"What? Does he have a thing for the number ten?" Ada shook her head. Just another piece of evidence that they knew each other. "Why are you two pretending to be strangers, anyway?"

Yves gave her a sharp look before he opened the door. He held it as the girls walked past him into the room. Ada glanced around at the hotel fixtures and noticed they looked as impersonal as other hotels.

*Of course it would, he's passing through. Shame Cybil and him either had something or have something going on. If they didn't, I could see how far he's willing to take his flirting. After Jake I'm ready for a man. Or at least sex. What was with the kiss?*

As soon as the door closed behind Yves, Cybil grinned and wrapped her arm around his waist. "Yves is my cousin."

Ada blinked and looked at the two of them closely. They looked nothing alike. *Cousins?* Had she heard right?

"That's why he knew we'd be here and that he could do the switch with me for the trunk trick."

Grace nudged Ada. "It got a little awkward back there."

"A little? Hell I thought Cybil was going to jump his bones at the bar." Ada glared at Cybil as she spoke.

"I'm sorry, sweetie. Yves is more like a kissing cousin. He's a cousin of a cousin of a cousin ... I'm so used to flirting with him that I never thought how you'd take it."

"Don't worry about how I took it. I just met the guy! I don't know why you're acting as if I want him or anything. It was ... the way you were talking..."

"The way I was talking what?" Cybil grinned.

"I thought you were in love with him." Ada rolled her eyes. "At least now I know why Cybil threatened to kidnap me if I tried to cancel. And why you picked me to be your assistant tonight, Yves."

"I didn't pick you because you were a friend of Cybil's. I picked you because you are beautiful and I knew the crowd would love you," Yves said.

Ada rolled her eyes and laughed as she looked at Grace. "Okay, he gets points for being smooth, but what are we doing here?"

"I knew you would never give Yves a chance, so I wanted you to meet him before you said no," Cybil said. She winced when Ada glared at her.

"No." Ada groaned. "No. Please tell me you didn't."

"You need to get out more. I can vouch for him. He's a sweetheart and he won't hurt you."

"I feel like I'm on trial." Yves groaned. He stepped toward Ada and reached for her. He grabbed her hand and held it in his. "Cybil told me about this friend of hers. I fell in love with your description so I asked her to introduce us."

"This whole night was a set up so you could ask me out?" Ada stared in disbelief at Yves, then Cybil, and finally Grace. "What was the kiss? Part of the show or a test? I can't believe you two. My supposed best friends. You must think I am desperate, Yves. Maybe *you're* the desperate one. This has to be the craziest scheme you've concocted yet, Cybil. I don't know if I'm more embarrassed or humiliated. I'm going home even if I have to call a taxi. Good night!"

Ada raced to the door. She needed to get out, and away from her traitorous friends before she did something she would regret tomorrow. She loved them dearly, but sometimes they went too far.

"Wait!" Grace shouted. "Just wait a minute, Ada."

Ada froze at the tone of Grace's voice. She turned slowly and looked at her. "One minute and then I'm gone."

"Ada, you would never have gone out with Yves if Cybil had set you up on a blind date. Hell, you haven't even gone out on a date since Jake-the-loser walked out of your life. Don't you care that your friends love you enough to want to find a really nice guy for you?" Grace asked as she tapped her foot on the floor. "Yves is a nice guy and you would never even have given him a chance if you'd met him on a blind date. You think you need to protect yourself, but all you're doing is hiding from the good ones, and dating the bad ones."

"What about what he wants? He can't want to date a total stranger. Especially not after all this." Ada looked at him for support. He should be just as mad at them for their matchmaking.

"You forget that *I* am the one who asked Cybil to set us up." He grinned at her.

"Oh, come on, Ada. He's your type. Tall, dark, gorgeous. Hell if he wasn't my cousin, I'd take him. You're just pissed because we found him for you. Why can't you give him a chance? I know you're interested. I saw the way you watched him from the table and the way you reacted to him on the stage."

"You're encouraging me to date a traveling magician? I don't want a long-distance relationship, either. Phone sex isn't going to cut it in the long run." Ada crossed her arms. *What argument would they have now?* They had to see she was right.

"I'm settling here. The hotel wants to keep me on year-round. I'll do a few trips to Vegas every year, but other than that I'll be here most of the time."

*Did he think that made it all okay?* Ada shook her head. This was ridiculous. Her friends setting her up with a cousin? What was wrong with him that he needed Cybil to find him a date?

"So what is wrong with you, then?" Ada pinned her glare on Yves. "Why do you need Cybil to set you up on dates?"

"I don't. I asked her to set me up with you. But trust me, she made it sound like you were my type. After meeting you, though, I don't think you are *anyone's* type." He frowned.

Perhaps she was being harsh, but this was damned humiliating.

"I don't know what's gotten into Ada." Cybil frowned and looked at Grace. "Perhaps this was a mistake."

Ada sighed. "Finally, you see it my way." She turned and headed for the door but paused as a flicker of doubt rushed through her.

Her friends had *handpicked* him for her. *What if they were a better judge?* Grace had been right about Jake. Perhaps they were right about Yves. Maybe she'd just blown the chance to take a nice guy home. There was nothing waiting for her at home except for her cat. She glanced back at Yves one last time. Deep in a quiet conversation with Cybil, he didn't notice her hesitation.

This was a good time for her to try and start over again. The New Year was just around the corner. *Do I want to be alone again? But wasn't being alone better than being with a man like Jake?*

The only way she could be with a man was if he wanted to take her to bed. She was far from perfect, so her man didn't have to be either. *What harm would there be in a trial run or two with a potential mate?*

*Because Yves isn't a potential mate. He's a man you want. But he looks too good to be true and might turn out to be the biggest loser you've ever met. Take a chance and maybe get lucky? Not me.*

Ada groaned at the look on Grace's face. It was too soon to decide if Yves was the right one for her, and alienating the first man to show any interest in her in months was pure

stupidity. Her own choices had been bad, so why not try a dating a man her friends had picked? Perhaps they would have better luck finding a suitable match for her. *What could it hurt?*

*It's too late anyway. You've annoyed him and made yourself look like a monster.*

"Ada?" Yves asked as he walked toward her. "Don't go yet. Perhaps springing this on you like this was a bad idea on our part. It seemed as if you were enjoying yourself until you found out it was a set up. Maybe we should each give the other one more chance."

"It was my idea to bring you up here," Cybil said. "Yves thought it would be a good idea for me to tell you ahead of time that this was a blind date, but I knew you'd find an excuse not to come."

As Cybil's words sank in, Ada thought about it. Her friends were right. She'd gone to great lengths to avoid blind dates. Tonight she'd done her best to push not only her date away, but her best friends, too.

"I'm sorry." Ada looked at each of them. "Perhaps I overreacted. It was a bad day, what with the fortune teller and everything."

Grace smiled, Cybil sniffled, but gave her a weak smile, and Yves looked as stunned as if she'd grown another head. *But why wouldn't he think I'm crazy? Haven't I acted that way?*

"We won't set you up on any more blind dates," Cybil promised. "Just go out with Yves. Give him a chance."

"You are doing wonders for my ego, Cybil." Yves groaned.

"Sorry." She laughed and patted him on the back.

"I'm sorry, too. I got upset over something you said earlier tonight and I let it fester until I freaked out on all of you." Ada turned to Yves. "I'm really not a psycho. But I can't see why a man as handsome, successful, and nice as you would need a blind date. I figured there must be something wrong with you and I made you feel bad. I didn't act very nicely either. Please accept my apologies."

Yves smiled as he stepped forward. He clasped her hand in his. "I think we got off on the wrong foot. Why don't we start at the beginning?"

"Okay." Ada nodded. Maybe the initial attraction she'd felt to him would still be there.

"Okay then, Cybil and I will just be leaving," Grace said as she grabbed Cybil's hand and headed for the door.

"Oh no you don't. You two aren't going to leave me alone with him, are you?"

"Honey, if you really don't want us to, there *is* something wrong with you." Cybil laughed.

Yves shook his head and led Ada to the door. "No, she's right. Our first date shouldn't be in my hotel room. Why don't we go out?"

"But not to the bar. I've had enough to drink already." Ada laughed.

"I think Grace and I'll jet. Two's company, three is a ménage, and four is definitely a crowd," Cybil said as she tugged Grace toward the door. "You two children behave yourselves and have fun. And Yves, if the snow gets too bad,

just let her sleep on the sofa. I'd hate to think either of you is driving in this weather."

"But—" Ada didn't get a chance to finish because the door shut. She turned to Yves with wide eyes. "I can't believe they left me here. I mean, I know you're Cybil's cousin and all, but we're virtually strangers."

"Why are you so nervous, Ada?" Yves asked as he stepped closer, drew in a deep breath and sighed as he moved even closer.

"Nervous? Ahh..." She licked her lips and stepped back until she reached the wall.

"Did I misread your signals earlier?" He brushed his lips against her ear and Ada squeaked.

"Signals? I have no clue ... ahhh..." she moaned when he sucked the bottom part of her earlobe into his mouth.

"Before the locked box trick, you seemed very into me."

"That's just your ego talking," she protested breathlessly.

"Really?" He stepped back and she shivered at the sudden loss of his warmth. "So maybe you'd like to hurry up and catch up to your friends?"

Ada froze, not sure what to do. He nearly overwhelmed her. She couldn't think clearly and if he hadn't stopped, she'd have probably devoured him. What a shame she had no clue what to do. Oh, she knew how it worked, but never having done it herself she was afraid of making a mistake. This was just way too soon to make love to someone.

"I'm sorry. I wasn't trying to tease you. I didn't think they'd leave me alone with you."

"It's my fault," he said suddenly as he took another step back. "I didn't realize."

"Realize what?"

"Grace was dead on accurate when she said Jake never touched you. Isn't that right?"

Heat climbed up her cheeks as she tried to think of a way to deny it.

"It's all right, Ada. We'll take it nice and slow. Why don't we go out for a late meal, get to know each other a little. I'll drive you back home and maybe you'll want to see me again."

"You sure? You don't think I'm a psycho bitch or anything?"

"No. I think surprising you like we did wasn't a bright idea. We shouldn't have forced you into a blind date. But I really do like you, Ada. I want a chance to explore the way you make me feel. I think there is something special between us."

Ada smiled and wondered how he could be so perfect. Then she remembered the locked box trick and decided he wasn't perfect after all, but he was close enough.

## THE HIGH PRIESTESS

by

Tina Bendoni

Linda lay back on the lounge chair as she soaked up the Nevada sun's rays. The pool at Caesar's Palace in Las Vegas was nearly empty, and she liked it that way. She'd come on vacation to do a little thinking and recharging, and she did it best alone. It wasn't quite warm enough for most people, it being only February, but she wasn't there to swim, she just wanted some sun. Going back home with a tan was one of the reasons she'd chosen the desert for her vacation.

Relaxed, she thought about the fortune teller her friend Susan had dragged her to at the start of her vacation.

*"Come on, Linda, it'll be fun. This woman is incredible."*

*"Susan, this is silly. If the woman could tell the future, she would have won Powerball by now. She's just good at reading people."*

"Come on, you cynic, your vacation officially starts tomorrow. This is my gift to you before you get on the plane."

*Linda sighed and let Susan bring her into the storefront. What did it matter what the woman said, anyway? She was going on vacation and she'd be damned if she wouldn't have the time of her life. She sat down and let the woman do her worst.*

*"Beware of hidden knowledge and past conditioning."*

Okay, that wasn't what Linda had expected. She'd prepared herself for the "you will meet a tall, dark and handsome man" speech.

"Excuse me?"

"You base too much of your life on your past. Remember the past has passed, the future is yet to be, and you need to live in the present. Trust your inner instincts, but be aware that everything isn't always as it seems, and often intent and hidden knowledge can make all the difference."

As a social worker herself, Linda was used to telling people to stop living in the past, but being reprimanded by a woman dressed like a gypsy from the nineteenth century was a bit much.

"I don't live in the past."

*"Perhaps. Perhaps not. I tell you only what the cards say. The High Priestess is a strong card, perhaps it is a good idea that you are going on vacation at this time. That time alone is needed."*

Linda shivered as she remembered the look in the woman's eyes, as though the fortune teller had been trying to warn, or encourage her. But, unfortunately, whatever the message was, Linda didn't understand it. Oh well, she was on vacation, alone, and had plenty of time to dwell on her own thoughts. She didn't need those of a tarot card reader affecting her. The last two days had been wonderful, if a bit lonely, and she didn't expect the rest of her trip to be any different.

"Nice day, isn't it?"

The smooth voice sent shivers running over Linda's body, popping goose bumps up as though hit by a cool breeze. A strong, incredibly male presence assailed her senses and screamed at her to open her eyes. *Oh my God.*

Linda was knocked speechless at the sight of the most gorgeous man she'd ever seen. Her eyes started at the top and worked their way down his incredible body.

He was tall, at least six foot four, and had a nice build. His chest was firm and sculpted and tapered down to a slim waist. He wore black bathing trunks that did nothing to hide the size of his—She pulled her eyes back up at that point. The last thing she needed on this vacation was to lust after a man that looked like this one.

She couldn't see the color of his eyes, but his face was smooth and beautiful, making her hands itch with the desire to run them over the smooth skin. Too early in the morning for even a hint of a five o'clock shadow, but she knew without a doubt that when it started he would be even sexier. His hair was as black as the bathing suit he wore, and styled just long enough to fit his bone structure to a T.

"Nice day, isn't it?"

Linda realized she'd spent so much time gaping at the man, that he'd repeated his question.

He smiled and revealed straight, white teeth that looked perfectly capable of taking a bite out of her. She pictured her nipple caught between those pearly whites as he flicked at it with his tongue. A fluttering deep below her stomach grew at the thought of that mouth latched onto her. Anywhere on her.

With a mental yank, Linda made an effort to pull her mind out of the gutter.

"Not too hot to enjoy some sun without danger of heatstroke after just a few minutes." He continued his one-sided conversation as though unfazed by her inability to respond.

"Um, yeah. It is." Finally she remembered to open her mouth and say something. *What did he want? There were plenty of lounge chairs open all around the pool, why did he have to sit here?* She watched him as he lay his towel down on the chair beside her before sitting down, sending that gorgeous smile in her direction again, causing her body to scream with the desire to jump his bones.

"Um, I don't know if there are any waitresses out yet. There haven't been any by since I came out." He probably figured if he sat close to someone who had been waited on he might get faster service.

"No problem, just interested in some sun."

"Okay." Linda's brain ran with questions. *Who is he? Why does he look so familiar to me? What is he doing picking a lounge chair right next to mine? Can't he see I want some privacy?* If she ignored him, she would be fine. He wasn't likely to hit on the likes of her. She laughed to herself. *Hell, I've been here for two days and haven't even gotten a second look from any male, never mind one who looked like him.*

"So, how long you here for?"

"Not long." Maybe if she answered him in short responses, he would leave her alone. She wanted to be alone. The fact her body was screaming for actual contact with his was even

more reason for her to avoid him. *Been there, done that, got the damn t-shirt.* She didn't need any more men like him in her life.

"You enjoying your stay?"

Linda took a deep breath. *Big mistake.* She could smell his cologne. Sandalwood. Of course, it would be her favorite scent. Not a typical cologne, just straight sandalwood. *Down, girl.*

"I was."

She heard him chuckle in response to her rudeness. "Am I bothering you?"

Sighing, Linda decided to take the bull by the horns. "Actually, no. I was just leaving." Although she'd had no intention of doing so for at least another hour, she knew if she stayed beside this man for one minute longer, her icy resolve would melt, and she would be flirting like a school girl. Priming herself for another heartache.

She sat up quickly to gather her things. It was better this way, anyway. She could take a leisurely shower and get ready for the tour to Hoover Dam with time to spare. Shooting a glance at her Adonis, she smiled as she left him poolside.

\* \* \* \*

"Ladies and gentlemen, welcome to Memer's Dam Tours. Please make yourselves comfortable for the ride to Hoover Dam. It will take us just about an hour and a half to get there, with the planned detours to see some sights of Las

Vegas. We will be on our way in just one moment. We have a last minute guest paying and then we will be off."

Linda barely heard the tour guide as he babbled about their itinerary. She was just eager to be going. She never even noticed the man who sat down beside her just as the bus started moving.

"Well, hello again."

That voice. It couldn't be. Linda turned around and there he was, her Adonis from this morning. Looking cheery and friendly, and totally unaffected by her earlier rudeness.

"How—"

"My name is Michael." He put his hand out for hers, and reflexively she put hers in it. Warmth seeped through her body, starting at the hand grasped by his.

"Linda," she responded automatically.

"Nice to finally put a name to the face. I'm glad to see you again."

*What were the odds that he would be on the same tour as I am? In a town of thousands of tourists, hundreds of different tour agencies, how did he end up here, beside me, on the same tour I'm on?*

*Easy, Linda, he got the same brochures you did when you checked in. The hotel or at the very least, some of its employees, probably has deals with various agencies across town. It makes perfect sense he would be here on the same tour. And since Vegas is most often a town for couples, as the only other person sitting alone, it is reasonable he would sit with you.* A quick glance verified that the seat beside her had been the only one available.

Linda forced herself to breathe. Coincidence. Purely reasonable coincidence. No reason to panic.

"Are you alright?"

Linda looked at Michael. He looked concerned. Nothing else. *What did that fortune teller tell me?* That she needed to stop living in the past. Not every man she met was out to hurt her. To trust her instincts.

"Yes, I'm fine. Thank you." At his continued look, she assured him, "Really, I'm okay. And about this morning..."

"Don't worry, you wanted to be alone, and I disturbed you. I apologize."

*Damn. A man who could apologize, even when he wasn't in the wrong? Impressive.* "No, don't. It was my fault. I'm sorry. I just wasn't in a good mood."

He smiled brightly, showing those straight white teeth. "Can we start again?"

\* \* \* \*

Linda looked at the man she'd just spent the day with. After convincing her to start over, they'd shared the ride to the dam in companionable conversation. He spent the tour of the dam by her side, and then walked the grounds of the chocolate factory with her. Their conversation had been easy and friendly, touching upon seemingly every subject under the sun—including the dreaded politics and religion. He was incredibly intelligent and well read, and she found him interesting. She couldn't recall a day she had enjoyed so much.

*But what did he want?* No guy who looked like that would willingly spend the day with a woman like her without an ulterior motive. She could hear her mother in the back of her head, *"Men like him never settle for hamburger when they can get prime rib."*

She knew she wasn't ugly, but she wasn't gorgeous or skinny like most of the women she had seen since she came to town. There were plenty of other women who would look better at his side. And in his bed.

Linda forced herself to look out the window at that thought. *Where the hell had it come from?* He'd only walked with her around the visitor center of the dam, and here she was picturing them naked. In bed. Together.

God, she was so damn horny she was willing to jump the first friendly stranger she met.

"Do you have plans this evening?"

"I'm sorry?" Linda dragged herself back to the man at hand.

"Do you have any plans this evening?"

"Um, well..." Linda hadn't planned on anything other than eating at the hotel restaurant, alone.

"Would you join me for dinner?"

"Excuse me?" She hadn't heard him correctly. There was no way she had.

Smiling, he picked up her hand resting on her leg, and caressed it gently. "I would be honored if you would accompany me to dinner this evening."

"Why?" She blurted it out before she could stop herself.

"Because I have enjoyed your company today, and don't want it to end." His thumb stroked the back of her hand in a feather-light caress sending shivers up her arm straight down to her pussy. Muscles clenched as it moistened in reaction to his touch.

He brought her hand up to his lips, brushing the inside of her wrist with a gentle kiss. "Please say yes."

"Yes." Linda's throat was dry, her voice husky as she responded without thinking.

"Eight o'clock?"

Linda just nodded and gave him her hotel room number, in shock, wondering what she'd just done.

\* \* \* \*

One last look at the clock. *What on earth possessed me to agree to this stupidity?*

*Calm down, Linda. It's just dinner. It's not like he asked you to bed. Bed. Oh my God. What if he wants to sleep with me? What will I do? Okay, I'm not a virgin, but still, go to bed with a man on a first date? I've never done that before. And what if I do and he doesn't like it? I'd never be able to live with myself.*

"Stop! You are going to drive yourself crazy with this. He asked you to eat with him, nothing more."

She looked at herself in the full-length mirror on the closet and admitted she looked passable. Her long blond hair ran down her back almost to her ass, her large breasts were supported rather well by her strapless bra, and the generous

amount of cleavage took attention away from the less flattering aspects of her body, like her stomach.

The outfit she wore was a calf-length little black dress with spaghetti straps. For a plus-sized woman, she thought her arms were well defined, and her shoulders smooth. The scarf hem of the dress hid her overly large calves while pulling the eyes to the four-inch heels she was wearing. It was a beautiful dress, and she'd gotten an incredible bargain on it. Not beauty queen material, but she would do for dinner with a stranger.

She jumped at the knock on her door. It was now or never. Taking a deep breath, Linda balled up her courage and opened the door.

*Damn. He was gorgeous in casual clothes, but in a suit he was freaking unbelievable.* His dark hair was combed back with one lock curled to the side of his face, framing his bright blue eyes as they sparkled. Her body heated as his gaze raked over her.

"You look exquisite." His voice was low and husky, as though he were having trouble breathing.

"Thank you. Same to you."

He smiled at her, sending shivers up her spine.

"I take it you're ready?"

"Let me just grab my wrap and we can head out." Desert or not, it got cold at night. Linda grabbed the shawl from the end of the bed, and turned to see him waiting at the doorway, holding it open for her.

He pulled the door shut behind her, and placed his hand on her lower back on the way to the elevator. The heat radiated from his palm straight through the silk of her dress.

"Do you like French food?" he asked as they walked to the elevator.

"Honestly, I can't say I've ever had much of it, so I don't know. Why? Where are we going?"

"Le Cirque."

Linda's eye opened wide at the mention of one of the most exclusive restaurants in town. They suggested reservations weeks, if not months, in advance, as well as having some of the priciest meals on or off the strip.

She stopped and turned toward him. "Le Cirque?"

He smiled, and reached a hand out to her face. "Yes. Is there something wrong?" he asked as his thumb stroked her cheek.

She didn't know where to begin. "How did you get reservations on such short notice?"

His smile was hiding something. "Does it matter?"

"Why don't we go somewhere more casual?" If Linda were completely honest with herself, she didn't want to go to Le Cirque for the simple reason she didn't want to be around all the beautiful people. Le Cirque had an exclusive clientele, and she knew she didn't fit the profile. "I don't want to put you out."

"It's no trouble at all. Reservations are made and the table is waiting for us."

Deciding not to make waves, after all she couldn't imagine what he'd gone through to get the reservations, she stopped protesting and continued walking down the hall.

When they got downstairs, he asked if she minded if they walked to the restaurant. The Bellagio was only next door, but sometimes in Vegas distances could be deceiving. Since it was a beautiful night, and the area was well lit and exquisite at night, she agreed eagerly. When they arrived at the restaurant, there was no waiting and the hostess seated them near a window overlooking the dancing waters. One of the first things Linda had seen when she came to Vegas was the fountains. She made sure to see at least one show a night. They were beautiful.

After dinner, Michael suggested they walk to the conservatory and botanical gardens the Bellagio was renowned for. Like all visitors to Vegas, Linda had decided to tour the different themed hotels, as each had something unique to offer. She hadn't gotten to all of them, and the Bellagio, with its garden and conservatory was still on her list to see.

"I'd like that. I haven't seen them yet." She agreed eagerly as he escorted her down the corridor.

As they walked through the gardens, both declared themselves amazed by the area. She had to remind herself to breathe more than once as their bodies bumped each other while they were walking. Finally he put his arm around her, which just sent her hormones into overload as every cell heated to boiling point.

*Make small talk. Breathe. Do something.* She was so lost in her orders to herself that she had to ask him to repeat what he'd just said.

"The amount of work involved in changing every flower and plant to reflect each season has to be incredible."

"I know. But the effort is worth it, it is beautiful."

"It is a fitting frame for your beauty, I will grant that."

Linda raised an eyebrow at her smooth-talking companion.

"A bit heavy, there, don't you think?"

"You think?"

"Definitely."

"Why?" Michael tilted his head as they turned to look at each other next to the butterfly cage.

"What do you mean?"

"Why do you think the compliment was overboard?"

Linda sighed. "Because I know I'm not beautiful."

"You are the most beautiful thing in this room." His eyes pinned Linda so strongly her heart forgot to beat.

She quickly turned away and walked to the other side of the pathway. No matter how much she wanted to believe him, reason and common sense told her the truth.

"Why do you do that?" He came up behind her as she stared blankly at the pond in front of her.

Plastering a smile on her face, she turned to face him. "Do what?"

"Turn away or turn cold whenever I compliment you. You did it every time I said something nice about your appearance today at the dam, and then again in the bus." He gently

grasped her by the shoulders and turned her body toward him. "You *are* beautiful."

"No, I'm not."

"What makes you say that?"

"Look, Michael, I'm thirty years old. I know what most people think of me. I'm fat, and nothing you say can change that."

"You are beautiful."

"No, I'm not."

"Linda, Western culture is one of the few cultures that cherish skinny, anorexic bimbos. Throughout history women with curves have been desired and honored for their looks. The oldest goddess figurine ever found represents a full-figured woman. She has large breasts and a full stomach. Very rarely have skinny women ever been appreciated."

"Okay, well we're in the twenty-first century, and here they are."

"Not by me they aren't." He reached out a hand to cup her cheek, the other on her lower back, pulling her closer to him. "Linda, you are beautiful. Your bright green eyes shine with intelligence and good humor. You have gorgeous full breasts that I ache to hold in my hands. Your stomach is nicely rounded and invites me to pillow my head on it for a rest. And your thighs are muscled and strong, fully capable of supporting me as we make love. There is nothing about your appearance that I would change. Nothing."

Linda felt tears spring to her eyes at his speech.

Before she could respond he cupped the back of her head with his hand and pulled her to him. Their lips met in a

gentle, searing kiss that she felt straight down to her toes. His lips burned against hers as he showed her without words what he thought of her. Heat coiled in her body as she melted against him.

If only she could believe he truly meant what he said. She knew it was too fantastical to be true. But maybe she could let herself believe for a little while. Her vacation was over in a couple days. Perhaps she could take what he was offering and just enjoy herself. *Trust your instincts.*

What would it hurt to believe for just a little while that she was sexy enough for a man like this? There weren't any promises being made, any assumptions that needed to be met. Just a night with her own private Adonis.

To hell with consequences, she was going to have fun this vacation. And that included having sex with this hot hunk of a man turning her insides to jelly.

All thoughts flew out the window as he intensified his kiss, his tongue probing her lips for admittance. Eagerly she opened up, allowing him in, pressing her body even closer to him. She heard a moan, knew it wasn't her, and it sent her blood to boiling that she could get that kind of a response from a man like him.

His hand was knotted in her hair, keeping her from moving away. As if she wanted to. His other arm snaked around her body, pulling her tight against him, leaving her no doubt at all that he wanted her. The evidence of his desire pushed into her belly as her hands moved down to his hips, holding him there against her while she responded as good as she got.

He tore his lips away from hers to demand in a husky voice, "I want you, Linda. I don't care where or how, but I want you. Tell me if it isn't what you want because if we continue, I won't want to stop. Hell, I don't want to stop now, but I will."

"Yes, please." She was surprised at how breathless her voice sounded.

"Yes, stop? Or yes, let's find a room before we put on a show for any other visitors and security?" His eyes were bright, glittering with intention.

"Yes, room."

He didn't wait for more than that before grabbing her by the waist and walking quickly to the exit of the hotel. Everything from that point to when they got to her room was a blur of emotion and sensation. Everywhere her body bumped against his flames shot through her straight to her crotch, drenching her panties with desire.

She was unsure how they got into her room. She didn't even remember opening the door before she was in his arms once again, each clamoring for more of the other. She needed to be close to him, and she felt as though he were trying to climb into her skin.

Clothes went flying everywhere, and before she knew it, she was lying in bed naked, Michael beside her, just as naked and breathing hard.

"Let me turn on—"

"No!" Linda realized how panicked she sounded, and calmed her voice before continuing. "Please, no. This is fine."

"But I want to see you."

Linda shook her head, knowing he could see well enough by the light coming in through the crack in the drapes.

"Please."

She didn't know what went through his head, but he finally said, "Okay. If that's what you want."

Breathing a sigh of relief, she reached for him as he moved toward her to take her lips with his once again.

She should have been used to the heat by now. She didn't think it possible to get more turned on than she already was just by a kiss, but she was. His lips seared her straight to her core. He kissed his way down her neck as his hand cupped her breast.

She exhaled sharply at the touch of his hand against her skin.

"Like that?" he asked with a smile in his voice as his thumb brushed feather light across her already stiff nipple.

"Ye-es," she responded jerkily.

He adjusted his hand to gently squeeze her nipple. "That?"

"Yes." She was growling now, eager for him to get on with it, her hands meeting his body. One on his shoulder, one on his hip.

The pinch, when it came, was hard and sharp, and sent her arching off the bed. "Damn!"

"Did I hurt you?"

"Hell, no!"

She heard him snicker as he once again cupped her breast in his hand and brought his lips down to lave attention onto her abused nipple.

"I so do not want..." Lick. "...to hurt you..." Lick. "...in any way." Nip. "I only want to..." Lick. "...give you pleasure." Lick.

One hand dug into his hip, as her other fisted in his hair, pushing him harder against her breast.

His other hand stroked down her waist to her thighs, sliding up and down the outside of her legs. Her legs were one of the few things she was proud of on her body. She walked to work everyday, and rode her bike regularly, so they were strong and firm, if a bit large, but he wouldn't find any cellulite there.

Michael shifted his body to lay between her legs as his mouth worked its way over to her other breast. His hand still played with the first one as he laved attention on its sister. Soft, gentle kisses and light licks of his tongue promised her more as he slowly took that nipple into his mouth.

Linda had always known she had very sensitive nipples. They responded to even the most mild stimulation or temperature change. What Michael was doing to her was anything but mild, though, and drove her wild. Obviously having learned from his attentions to her first breast, he sucked on her nipple with a gentle tugging motion that built in intensity.

Jolts shot through her body at each suckling, shooting straight down to her pussy, liquid easing out between her legs.

His hand moved to her hip as he took one last hard suck on her nipple before working his way down her stomach, to the area right above her pubic hair. His hands joined his

head, holding on to her hips as he turned to look toward her. She could see the glitter of his eyes through the minimal light from the window.

"I am going to make love to you, Linda. I am going to make love to you until you beg me to stop. And even then I won't stop. I won't stop 'til you're so exhausted you pass out."

Shivers went through her body at his words as pleasure engulfed her. She didn't doubt a word he said, and knew without a shadow of a doubt he was fully capable of fulfilling that promise.

He turned his head away, down toward her dripping pussy. His hands moved to her thighs to open her legs wider, providing him better access.

"Mmm, heaven. I love the scent of a woman who is ready for me. It's intoxicating."

Linda fisted the sheet in her hands, squeezing tightly as he moved into her crotch.

Lightly, he flicked his tongue at her, one hand moving to separate her lips before he licked straight up her cleft. Her hips drove down into the mattress, twitching away from his hold at his movements. He didn't let that deter him, though, as he moved in closer, taking her lower lips with his as he teased her open again to allow his tongue access.

Again, another long stroke, this one slow and deep, all the way to her clit. He stopped at the nub, running his tongue around the sheath, playing with it, flicking it as though debating what he wanted to do next.

Her hips had a mind of their own as they moved in concert with his tongue, his hands once again holding her lightly. She wanted more; she needed more. No more teasing.

"What do you want me to do, beautiful? Do you want me to lick you dry?" Again, as he had at her breast, he punctuated his words with movements, matching actions to his words. "Play with your clit?" Her hips thrust as his tongue tortured her once again. "Or suck you into my mouth until you scream?"

She screamed as he pulled her clit into his mouth and sucked hard, the sheath pushed back by his lips while his teeth and tongue nipped and sucked at her inner core. Her head whipped back and forth as she experienced an orgasm so intense her entire body spasmed in response as he fed at her.

"Stop. No more." Her voice was weak, breathless. She'd never orgasmed so strongly or quickly before. If he continued, she had no doubt that she really would pass out from pleasure.

He ignored her pleas for mercy as one hand worked its way to her pussy and he pushed a finger into her tight vagina. Eagerly her body sucked it in, as well as the two that followed it. Michael rolled his head back, watching her as he wiggled his fingers inside her, turning, twisting and thrusting his hand, her hips once again answering his movements.

"You sure you want me to stop, beautiful? 'Cause I don't want to stop. I'm not finished with you. Not by a long shot." He turned his hand so his palm faced upward and made a 'come here' gesture with two of the fingers inside her.

The tension began to build again at his gentle strokes. Slowly this time, but somehow sharper, deeper. Linda felt her whole body prepare for the release he was about to give her. Her breathing came in short, excited gasps, already ragged from her previous orgasm.

"Mi-Mi-Micheal." She couldn't get his name out in one breath. "Oh. My. God!"

He dove his head down back to her clit sucking it sharply and hard as with one last stroke he sent her over the edge again, and again, and yet again. Her entire body thrashed, rising off the bed as she came harder than the last time, before crashing down into oblivion.

Linda opened her eyes to Michael's head resting on her stomach, his face turned to her with a smile.

"Welcome back."

"Oh my God. Did I really pass out?"

"Only for a few seconds."

She brought her hands up to her face. "Oh, God. I am so sorry."

Michael laughed. "Sorry? Woman, that was the best compliment I have ever received. Thank you."

A giggle escaped her lips as she thought about what he said. "I think *I* should be the one saying thank you."

He turned his head to lay one more kiss on her mound before moving up to pull her hands away from her face and bend down slowly to lay a kiss on her lips. "My pleasure."

The kiss started out gentle but quickly grew in intensity, the flame, temporarily banked, roared back to life with a vengeance.

She probed his mouth this time, her tongue begging for admittance. His tongue met hers, stroking it as his hands once again moved to stroke her body.

She wanted him inside her, deep inside her. Reaching for his hips, she pulled at him, telling him without words where she wanted him.

"Are you sure you're ready?"

"If I was any more ready, I would pass out again, now dammit, finish the job."

The beautiful sound of his laughter met her as he kissed her once again before getting off the bed to search for his suit coat. After ripping open the foil package, he climbed back on the bed and positioned himself between her legs. He reached down with one hand to stroke her once, twice more, separating her lips as he slowly pushed his way inside.

She was tight. Very tight, and he was big, but felt so good. He stopped with little but the tip inside and she moved, her hands grabbing his hips to pull him forward.

"Hold on, beautiful. I want to do this right."

*Right?* He wanted to do it right? How the hell could he do it wrong?

He took a deep breath and bent down to hold her, hooking his arms under and around her shoulders as he pushed forward, sliding slowly into her, until there wasn't anywhere else to go.

*God, he is big.* She could feel him inside her, filling her completely, stretching her body. And he felt so good.

He lay there, holding her tight, leaning on his elbows, not moving. She realized she could happily fall asleep with him seated inside her like this. She felt complete.

Slowly he started to move. Linda had thought she was finished for the night. She'd never had such intense orgasms, or so many in one night. Apparently, she was wrong.

The tension started to build immediately as he moved inside her, speeding up, thrusting harder into her, pushing her closer and closer.

"Oh, beautiful, I'm not gonna last long. You are so tight, and still pulsing."

He was right, she could feel her vaginal walls contracting and releasing rapidly around him. Despite everything, her body still hadn't come down from her last set of climaxes, and now was climbing back up. Forget her kegels, she didn't need them tonight.

He held her closer, pulling himself tighter, deeper into her, faster. Her legs lifted up, her hips meeting his every thrust. Oh God. It wasn't possible, but she could feel it coming again, another one. Quickly, before she could even tell him, once again, her body exploded as fireworks went off in her brain.

"Oh, yes. Beautiful, yes!" With one final thrust, he pushed himself as far into her as he could go, and he, too found his release.

\* \* \* \*

"Good morning."

"Morning."

"How are you feeling?" Linda asked hesitantly. She couldn't believe what had happened last night and was afraid he would regret it. Although it hadn't been a one-time event. She thought they'd finally passed out after the third time of the night.

"Wonderful. Thank you. Last night was incredible."

She turned away, blushing. His hand snaked around her chin to pull her to face him again.

"How can you doubt me after last night?"

Her eyes downcast, she answered softly, "It's not that I doubt you."

"You doubt yourself."

She nodded, unsure how to answer him.

"I guess I'll just have to try to work my hardest to convince you how I feel." He kissed her hard before she could respond or even think about feelings. Everything was moving too quickly. It was too scary.

"Now I have some shopping to do today. Would you like to join me?"

"Shopping? Isn't that my line?"

"Please tell me you aren't one of those females who hate shopping?"

"Are you one of those men who love to shop?"

"I actually have been known to enjoy the day at a shopping center. How about you? Up for joining me?"

Linda laughed. "That depends, what are you shopping for?"

"Mostly souvenirs for my mother and sister. My niece and nephew, too."

"Anywhere in particular?"

"Probably here at the Forum shops. I know my nephew Jack would get a kick out of a sword, and I can either find one downstairs in the Roman type kid stuff or over at Excalibur. Everyone else, I know I can find something for them here."

"Okay. Sounds like fun."

"Great. Let me head back to my room, and I will meet you back here in about an hour? We can go get a late breakfast before we start hitting the pavement."

\* \* \* \*

"What do you think?" Michael asked as he help up a light blue t-shirt with "Goddess in Training" emblazoned across the front of it in glitter.

"How old is she again?"

"Twelve."

"And her mother won't be offended?"

"Oh, heck, no."

"Then I think it's perfect."

As Michael went to pay for the shirt, Linda's attention was pulled by a dress in a window across the way.

A dark shimmery purple gown draped the mannequin in the window.

"Come on." She felt Michael tug at her hand. Turning, she pulled her attention from the dress only to realize he was pulling her toward the shop.

"Where are we going?"

"I want to see that on you." He gestured with his chin toward the dress she'd been admiring.

"What are you talking about?" She was not going to try on a dress in front of him. He may have seen her naked, but he wasn't going to see that.

"That color will go perfectly with your skin tone and hair."

"Michael, I can't wear that."

"Yes, you can. And you will."

She tried to drag her heels, to keep him from pulling her into the dress shop, but he wouldn't give in and managed to get her in the door.

Immediately upon their walking in, a saleswoman approached them, preventing Linda from turning and walking right out.

"Good afternoon. How can I help you?" She was bright and cheerful, eager to please.

"We want to see that purple dress in the window, please."

Linda pulled Michael to her, whispering, "Michael, they probably don't even have my size."

The saleslady's smile never wavered as she looked Linda over. "If the lady would follow me, I would love to help her."

Michael pushed Linda forward with a kiss after taking the packages she held in her hand. Unsure of what else she could do, Linda followed the clerk, sure that once they got back to the fitting area they would realize there was no way in hell she would fit into a dress sold at this store.

\* \* \* \*

"Well?" Linda stood in front of Michael, who was sitting in a chair in the fitting area of the upscale shop. He wasn't saying anything, and she became nervous.

She had been surprised when the saleslady had assured her that they did indeed carry Linda's size, and even suggested she go down one after trying the first one on. Linda thought the dress absolutely perfect. It draped her body like a dream. It hid everything she would want it to hide, and accentuated everything she was proud to show off.

The fabric fell in folds down her body, leaving her back bare and presenting a plunged neckline with a modified halter-style top. There was a bra built in that provided just the right amount of support, allowing her to go braless in a formal gown for the first time in her life. It gave her a sense of liberation that was unexpected. She felt free and extra pretty in it. She decided that no matter what the dress cost, she would buy it, even if she had to wear it to every formal gathering she went to for the next ten years.

The saleslady had given her a pair of heels to wear that were made for the dress, and together, they were perfect.

"We'll take it." Michael's voice was husky as he rose gracefully from his chair and approached her. His eyes shone with unmistakable desire. "I knew you were beautiful, but you look exquisite in this dress. Would you please wear it to dinner for me tonight?"

Linda was speechless and just nodded her head.

His eyes never left hers as he brought her hands up to kiss first one, then the other before meeting her lips with his in a kiss that made her toes curl. Energy shot through her body, centering on her pussy as she instantly moistened in remembrance of the loving of last night. Her limbs tingled as tiny goose bumps formed over her skin.

He released her and whispered, "Thank you."

By the time Linda was out of the changing room, Michael was waiting for her at the register. The saleslady had already put the dress and shoes into a garment bag for purchase.

"I'll make sure this is sent to your room immediately, ma'am."

Linda paused in her attempt to get her credit card out of her purse. "But how..." Her voice trailed off as the woman turned away to hand the dress to a delivery person waiting. Suspicious, Linda turned to Michael.

"I wanted to get it for you," he said as he reached for her, and started to lead her out of the shop.

"No." She stopped short.

"Sorry, it's already done, and the dress is gone." He continued walking, his arm around her waist. She had two options: either walk with him, or be pulled along like a child. She chose the former.

"Michael, you are not going to buy me that dress."

"Linda, I already did."

The dress cost a small fortune. There was no way in hell she would let him pay for it. It just wasn't right.

"Look." Michael stopped outside the shop to turn and addressed her gently. "I am the one who made you try it on. I am the one who thinks it looks gorgeous on you. And I am the one who wants to take you to dinner and dancing tonight with you wearing it."

She opened her mouth to protest further, but he lay a finger across her lips before she could say anything.

"No, I do not think you incapable of paying for it. No, I have no ulterior motive for buying it. And no, you are not going to bring it back. Please, Linda, let me do this for you. It isn't a big deal, and it brings both of us pleasure."

He wrapped his arms around her with that and pulled her tight into him. "I want to give you pleasure any way I can. And if convincing you to wear a dress that gets me hard just thinking about what you looked like in the dressing room," he pulled her hips against his, leaving her in no doubt about his reaction, "brings you pleasure, then I want you, no, I need you to have it."

Linda wanted to protest. That dress cost too much for someone else to buy, never mind tossing in the shoes. And it wasn't like she couldn't afford it. *It would have been a stretch, but that's what credit cards were for, right?*

*Does he think he can buy my sexual favors with it?* Linda snorted silently at herself. One, she wasn't someone anyone had ever made an effort to buy sexual favors from. And two, she'd already given him that if sex was all he was interested in. He didn't have to drape her with lavish gifts.

*Just take the gift, Linda. Take it and enjoy it. You know you want it, so stop being a prissy fool and take it. Hell, dinner last night practically cost more than the dress did.* Resigned, Linda jerked her head in a nod. "Okay. But no more gifts."

Michael made a noncommittal sound deep in his throat, then he bestowed a peck on her lips before moving back to hold her waist as they continued walking down the faux ancient street.

\* \* \* \*

Once again, dinner was at one of the exquisite restaurants that had popped up in Vegas over the last fifteen years. But Linda couldn't remember what she ate for the life of her. All she remembered was Michael. The way his eyes burned with desire every time they met hers.

She'd never felt so cherished or desired in her life. She barely remembered agreeing to his suggestion they hit a lounge for some dancing afterwards, just that he said he wanted to hold her tonight.

The heat of his hand against her bare back sent sparks through her body, heating her to boiling. She wanted him so badly she could taste it. Enough dancing, what she wanted was something more private.

He must have been feeling the same, because without a word, he took her hand and led her to the elevator. He turned to look at her before he pressed the floor button, and she nodded quickly, letting him know it was still what she wanted.

Last night they had made love in her room, tonight he was taking her to his suite. It fit in with her plans. She wanted tonight to be perfect.

He opened the door to his suite and she preceded him in.

"Wow. Pretty nice." She walked through the main room of the suite to the large French doors leading out to the balcony. He had a perfect view of the strip. Bally's and Paris were across and down the street and she thought she could even see the Bellagio fountains from his window.

She heard him close and lock the door, and take a few steps before stopping. Turning, she saw him leaning against a wall, eyeing her like a little boy would eye a lollipop.

"Come here."

Suddenly nervous, Linda shook her head, biting her lower lip.

"Come here, beautiful." His voice grew firmer and she felt herself moving toward him.

He grasped her hands, and led her to another door. He opened it and she saw one of the bathrooms Caesar's was famous for. Marble, gold and mirrors. Lots of mirrors.

After the mirrors her attention was immediately drawn to the large, oversized tub that looked like it could fit four.

She watched in the mirror as Michael pulled her further into the bathroom, letting go of her hands as she stood in the middle of the floor. He walked over to the tub and turned the faucets on full, dumped some lotion into the tub, and then came back to her.

"I want to bathe you like the goddess you are."

"Michael—"

"Shh. Please." He reached for her, his hands cupping behind her neck and pulling her in for a searing kiss. His kisses always started so gentle, but wrought such passion in her that they never stayed that way for long. Before they could build more passion, he pulled back and turned her around.

She saw herself in the mirror, Michael standing behind her. His eyes met hers in the mirror as he opened the fastening of her dress behind her neck. The halter-type top slid down the

front of her body, his hands following the material and catching her breasts as they were set free.

He pulled her back into him, massaging her large breasts with his hands. The stark white of her untouched skin contrasted sharply with his suntanned fingers, and her nipples shone like beacons. Taking both nipples between thumbs and forefingers he gently twisted them until she gasped, liquid flooding between her legs.

Her face was flushed with desire, her skin a rosier shade than normal, and her head was back against his shoulder. He made an appreciative sound in the back of his throat as his hands moved down to her hips to unzip the side closure that prevented the dress from falling to the floor.

She moved her hands to cover herself, but he grabbed her arms and pulled them back down. "Unh uh. I didn't get to see last night. Tonight I do. No more hiding, my love."

His hands moved back down to her zipper and slowly the dress slid to the floor. She was wearing nothing but black panties, thigh-high stockings and the four-inch heels that went with the dress. Her hair was still piled on top of her head with a few ringlets tumbling down.

"Beautiful." It was all he said after a few moments of gazing at her body through the mirror. And after the last couple days with him, she was finally beginning to believe that in his eyes, maybe she was.

He turned her around to face him, and then knelt in front of her. Planting a kiss on her mound, he took her hands and placed them on his shoulders before slowly removing first one

shoe, and then the other. Then he rolled the nylons down, one at a time, kissing and licking every inch of skin he bared.

By the time he was done, her panties were soaked, and she was panting with need. He reached up for her panties, and slid them down, planting one gentle kiss on her pubic mound before stripping them off her entirely.

"Into the tub, my love."

Michael held her hand as she climbed into the tub. The temperature was perfect and the bubbles smelled like jasmine. She watched as he quickly stripped before joining her.

Shutting the faucets off, he moved behind her, and sat down so she was straddled between his legs. He reached for a cloth, and soaped it up before bringing it to her shoulders.

Linda loved few things in life more than a long, hot bath. But she'd never had one with someone else before, and suddenly her conditions of what made a bath wonderful were forever changed.

He laved her body with the soft cloth, rubbing every inch of her. The hot water made her skin extra sensitive to his every touch. He ran the cloth across her breasts, scraping across her still erect nipples. He stroked down her stomach, and each of her legs. Her arms got all the attention they could want. In fact he gave her complete body attention, all except for between her legs.

When she thought she was going to scream from need his hand, sans cloth, finally stroked her plump clitoris. She lay back against him with a deep sigh as one hand stroked her pussy, and the other played with a breast.

"I have wanted you like this since I saw you poolside the other day. The thought of you all wet and slick in my arms made it nearly impossible for me to approach you that morning. I had to wait and calm down before I could talk to you." He whispered the words in her ear as he nibbled down the side of her throat. Nipping at her, he licked the sensitive spot he found some time the night before.

She was lost in the sensations of his words and hands. All the while he was talking, he was still stroking, plucking, playing her body. Gently he slid a finger inside her, followed by another. He pumped her as his thumb played with her clit, bringing her slowly to a calm, gentle orgasm. Tingles shot through her body as though feathers were brushing her skin under a gentle breeze. Sensation rippled across her as she came easily in his arms.

Relaxed, she lay there against him, satisfied. For the first time in her life she felt at home. Protected and cherished. He gave her that. In such a short time he made her feel as she had never felt with any other man. Tears of appreciation pricked her eyes.

Wanting to give him something back, she reached for the floating cloth and turned to him. "My turn."

She lathered up his body, his chest, his back, and his legs, paying special attention to what lay between them. He was hard as a rock, and she knew just how to take care of it for him.

Climbing out of the tub to grab a towel, she instructed him to follow her and encased him in the large bath sheet she

held. Drying his body quickly, she dropped the towel at his feet and knelt down in front of him.

"Linda. You don't have to."

"Shh. I want to." Her hands were on his firm muscled thighs clenching beneath her touch. She sat back and gazed at him for a moment before bringing her hands together to cup his glorious cock.

They'd spent the night together last night, making love more than once, but at her insistence it had remained dark. She had yet to see him in all his erect glory, and she had to admit she was impressed. Thick and long, he filled her quite well. In fact, she suddenly realized she may not be able to handle all of him with her mouth.

Willing, eager to give it a try, she grasped him by the base and stroked upward, her hands cupped around him. He was silky smooth. Partly from the bath, but his skin truly felt like silk to the touch. The hard steel underneath promised pleasure for both of them.

Leaning forward Linda flicked at the tip, licking off the pre-cum already there.

He groaned and wrapped his hands in her hair, pulling at the pins holding her tresses up.

Tired of teasing, wanting him in her mouth, Linda opened her lips and slid him in.

"Mmm." She couldn't resist making the sound as she took him into her mouth. He tasted and felt divine. Her tongue wrapped around him, licking him quickly as her lips worked her magic on him.

One of her hands cupped his balls, squeezing gently, as the other wrapped tightly around the base of his shaft, squeezing and massaging him.

His hands knotted in her now loosened hair as he groaned and moved his hips slowly, helping her as she made love to him with her mouth.

Linda could tell he was close to coming. After all the dancing and then the fooling around in the tub, she wasn't surprised to hear his groaned warning, "Beautiful, I'm close."

But she wasn't about to stop now. She wanted it all from him, and increased her attention. Her left hand reached around to the line between his balls and ass, massaging it as her right stroked his shaft up and down, meeting her mouth as she moved faster and faster, sucking on him, willing him to come.

With a loud groan and one last thrust of his hips, she took him deep into her mouth as he shot his cum down her throat. The salty, nearly sweet taste of him flooded her mouth as she swallowed all he gave.

His hands were still tangled in her hair, and he rubbed her scalp, massaging her head as he pulled away and sank to his knees in front of her.

"Are you okay?"

Linda answered dreamily, "Oh, yeah."

"Did I hurt you?"

She laughed, laying her hand on his cheek. "No, you big lunk. I'm fine."

"That was wonderful." He turned his head to kiss her hand, bringing one of his back to hold hers against him. "But I don't know how much energy I have left."

Linda smiled at him. "Me either. I'm all for bed and a nice long nap."

"Only if I get to pay you back later."

"No worries on that score, trust me."

\* \* \* \*

Linda looked out the small window of her office. Being a social worker at the small city hospital she worked at was a busy job, but she loved every minute of it. Helping people was what she was made to do. Nothing made her happier.

Why then had she been depressed since returning from vacation? As the saying went, what happened in Vegas stayed in Vegas. She was the one who made the decision to leave. He'd told her he wanted to see her again, had even said he didn't want to lose her. And what had she done?

As soon as she was sure he was out for the night, she had snuck off like a thief. She'd gone back to her room, packed and took the first available flight home. Talk about commitment issues. She couldn't even give a guy her phone number, never mind her last name.

Those forty-eight hours had been incredible. But when it came to trusting her heart, her instincts, trusting that she was worth something more than a social worker, than someone who was only good to help others, she ran.

Hell, she wasn't stupid, she was a mental health professional. She knew why she had run. She couldn't face

the possibility of being disappointed or hurt. Like she had been in the past.

*Those few days with Michael were perfect. Why let reality get in the way of a wonderful memory?* He knew everything there was to know about her, except how to find her. She'd never told him where she was from, or where she worked. Michael Conner was a memory, and he would have to sustain her for a long time to come.

It should have been impossible, but she had fallen in love with the man in less than two days. Everything about him turned her on physically, emotionally and intellectually. Even now the thought of him made her heart race and she could smell the woodsy cologne he always wore.

"So this is where you hide out from the world, huh?"

Linda's head whipped around to the door of her office. She hadn't even heard it open, and now it was propped closed and someone was leaning against it. A six foot four someone that looked suspiciously familiar. *What the hell is he doing here? How the hell did he find me?*

"I knew it wouldn't be easy to convince you to let your guard down, but damn, woman, you're one tough cookie."

"Michael? But how?"

Michael shook his head. "You know, Karen told me you wouldn't recognize me, but I didn't believe her. Even at the pool, I thought you were pulling my leg. It was only once we were on the tour that I began to believe she might be right."

Karen was her best friend. A resident on the surgical floor, the two of them often shared lunches and dreams. *How the*

*hell does he know Karen?* She'd never mentioned anyone by the name of Michael before.

Michael smiled. "My cousin knows you better than I gave her credit for."

Linda's mind raced. *What the hell is he talking about? Karen's cousin? Mikey?* But she'd met him only once, over five years ago and barely spoke ten words to the man.

"Mikey?"

"It took you long enough."

"But you're in L.A."

"Obviously not." Michael pushed himself away from the door and walked toward Linda slowly. He perched himself on the edge of her desk and took her hand in his. Her pulse jumped into overdrive as her heart beat out a rapid tattoo. "I don't know how much Karen told you about me leaving, but it was one of those things I needed to do. I had to get out of the mold my father built me into. L.A. was the perfect place to escape to. Or at least I thought it was.

"I worked in a private hospital there for the last few years, but realized it wasn't what I wanted to do. I wanted to come home and make a difference here. My father was right all along."

As he talked, he continued to rub his thumb against back of her hand, distracting her with the sparks of electricity shooting through her body.

"I don't know if you remember the first, actually the only, time we met. It was at Karen's one Thanksgiving. All day you helped her cook and clean. Your boyfriend was to meet you later that night. Something came up and he decided he didn't

want to have dinner there, so he came and got you. Made you leave early, before dinner even started. I had arrived shortly before he did, but I remember wondering how the hell you got stuck with such an asshole. Karen talked about you nonstop during dinner. I don't know if she ever told you, but she hated that guy. Hated the way he treated you.

"You never knew but after that I kept an eye on you here at the hospital. The way you were always there to help people, even above and beyond your job. I grew to love you even then, but the time was never right.

"After I left town Karen still kept me informed about you. When you and that asshole, Adam, broke up, I was ecstatic. But I couldn't come home then. And Karen told me you needed time.

"The trip to Vegas seemed perfect timing. I thought you'd recognize me. I didn't think I look that different, despite the longer hair. It never occurred to me you'd have forgotten about me. And once you started letting your walls down, I was afraid to say anything, because I knew you'd be angry about my deception."

He put his hand up to forestall her comment. "I know, I made it worse by not saying anything, but by then I was hooked. Again. I couldn't let you walk out on me without giving us a chance. So I cheated. And given the chance, I'd do it again."

He pulled her chin toward him. "Please, Linda, give us a chance. I won't hurt you like the men in your past. I promise I will never do anything to deliberately cause you harm."

Linda sat there beside him. She went over everything she'd just heard. *Should I believe him? Can I believe him?*

A voice in the back of her head pulled her attention. *"You base too much of your life on your past. Remember the past has passed, the future is yet to be, and you need to live in the present. Trust your instincts ... intent can make all the difference."*

Perhaps this is what the gypsy woman really meant. It was time to let go of the past. Michael wasn't going to hurt her like Adam or the other men in her life had. He was different. It was time to get out of the past and live in the present for the future. Here was a man promising just that for her. Could she trust her instincts and grab hold?

Yes.

## THE HERMIT

by

Michelle Hasker

"The Hermit! Ada drew the Magician card. How could I get the Hermit? Are you sure you did this right, Mrs. Montgomery?"

Abigail smiled as she studied her latest client. "Oh, yes. I'm sure. The Hermit isn't what you think it is, my dear."

"You aren't either. Ada said you had the typical fortune teller setup, but you don't look like a gypsy woman, and this room, hell this store, isn't what I'd call typical. It's more classy than Ada led me to believe, too."

"Ada saw what she wanted to see and heard what she wanted to hear."

"She did mention you were cryptic." Cybil laughed and glanced around the room again. "At least she got that right."

"The Hermit is not what it sounds like to you. It is a card of introspection, analysis and virginity—"

"I'm no virgin," Cybil interrupted, then laughed. "You are so wrong there."

"No. It doesn't mean you are a virgin. It is a card represented by Virgo. She is often called a virgin, but in reality she is more sexual than one thinks. Anyway, this is the card I picked for your immediate future. It basically means it is time for you to take stock of things, organize your life. Or

get yourself together, if you prefer me to be blunt. The Hermit could also represent someone close to you. A person you often see alone. One who is wise and trusted. They will be able to help you find what you seek."

Cybil groaned and leaned back in her chair. "So I need to find a hermit because his brother or best friend will be my true love?"

"I never said that." Abigail tapped the card and closed her eyes while she replayed the vision in her head.

"I want to know about true love. Will I find love? Is there anyone who will love me and stick around?"

"I've done your reading for now, Cybil. You will find all the answers you seek when you search your heart. The Hermit is the key, but only you can unlock the answer."

"So damn cryptic." Cybil snorted and shook her head. "Okay, thanks for my reading, Mrs. Montgomery."

When Cybil reached for her wallet, Abigail raised her hand. "There is no charge for today. I have been gifted with the answer you wanted and offer it freely to you. Use it as you see fit."

"Use it as I see fit," Cybil grumbled softly as she shook her head. "Thanks, again."

"You're welcome."

Abigail watched Cybil walk away and wondered if she would be as stubborn as Ada had been.

\* \* \* \*

The Hermit!" Cybil tossed the wet dishtowel on the counter. "I get the damned Hermit."

Ada snickered and looked at Grace. "I told you she would be worse than me. And she knows it will come true!"

Both women started to laugh even harder, setting Cybil on edge. "I don't see what's so funny. I mean I'm the most outgoing of us all. What would a hermit see in me, or vice versa? What would we do? Stay in every night? Ugh!"

"What did she say the Hermit meant?" Ada asked as she reached for a chip. "With me, I got my magician, but maybe when she says hermit, she doesn't mean an actual hermit. It could be someone who would rather stay in at night instead of partying."

Cybil groaned. "Come on, Ada. You got your magician. I'm going to end up with a grouchy old hunchback hermit. What would I do with a hermit, anyway?"

"What else did she say?" Grace asked, repeating Ada's question. "We need to hear the rest before we can decide if you're right or not."

"That it is time for me to organize my life, get my act together, yada, yada, yada. Nothing about true love, and of course she didn't say anything about my ex getting what he deserved, or me getting laid."

"You got laid last night. What are you complaining about?" Ada shook her head and grabbed another chip.

Cybil tried to think of a good comeback while she bit into a chip. *It was obvious the woman had been wrong about the Hermit. What about the rest of what she had said?* "Maybe I could use a little organization," she said as she looked around her cluttered apartment.

"*Maybe?*" Grace snickered.

"Okay, I need to clean the place. But I haven't been bringing any guys home anyway."

"Speaking of guys," Ada said as she poured more wine into her glass. "What are you going to do about finding a date for the art auction?"

"Look for a hermit?" Grace laughed.

Cybil couldn't resist joining in the laughter. It was totally ridiculous to even think about being with a hermit. Not like she'd be going to any caves or abandoned trailer parks looking for one anyway.

This was why she'd invited them over. It was almost impossible to remain sad and lonely with the two of them around. But now Ada had Yves and Cybil knew she'd see less of both of them. Reminding herself that she was gaining a cousin, not losing a best friend, only helped a little. At least she still had Grace.

"If you want to do a thorough spring cleaning in here, I can come back tomorrow and help," Ada offered. "Yves is going to Vegas and I know I'll miss him. Helping you will be better than moping around."

"Only together a week, and you can't bear to be separated." Cybil smiled to hide the jealousy she was afraid showed in her face.

Ada blushed, but smiled. "That fortune teller was dead on accurate. Even if she is wrong about you getting a hermit, there is something in there you should listen to."

"Like what?" Cybil asked.

"Didn't she say something about being more sexual?"

"She said the card is represented by Virgo and everyone knows that most Virgos are virgins," Grace said.

"Actually, she said that Virgo is sexual. Think about some of the famous Virgos. I looked them up online last night. Sean Connery is a Virgo. That man is far from a virgin and is as sexy as sin. Cameron Diaz, same goes for her. Hugh Grant, Keanu Reeves, Charlie Sheen, David Copperfield, Sophia Loren, and many more. In fact, I can't even remember all of them." Cybil laughed. "But they are far from what you think of when you hear the word Virgo or virgin. In fact, the list contained several presidents and famous authors."

"Not Bill Clinton, I hope." Ada laughed.

"I didn't see his name." Cybil shook her head. "Anyway, I think I'm just going to forget all about what she said and just keep looking for Mr. Right. She might have been accurate for you, Ada, but no one is perfect. She can't get all those readings correct. Everyone has an off day."

Grace sighed as she stood up. "If that's how you feel then I'm done trying to convince you otherwise."

"Grace, you haven't even gone to see Abigail Montgomery yet. How can you know if she is always accurate?"

"I have been to see her," Grace whispered, tears filling her eyes.

"Why are you crying?" Cybil asked, fear settling thick and heavy in her stomach. "What lie did she concoct for you?"

"She drew Death."

Ada and Cybil gasped. Shock raced through her system as Cybil numbly watched Grace grab her jacket and race out of the apartment.

\* \* \* \*

"Death." Cybil shivered and ran her hands up and down her arms. "I knew that fortune teller was whacked. How to convince Grace of that, though?"

A knock on her door was a welcome reprieve from her inner turmoil. Cybil raced to the door, threw it open, then froze. Her mouth dropped open and she blinked, staring at the Grim Reaper. *What the...*

"Cybil," a deep masculine voice penetrated her stunned mind. "It's just me, Josh."

"Death," she whispered, taking a step back. Cybil lost her grip on the door and stumbled, falling on her ass and backpedaling as the man encased in black drew closer. "You have the wrong house."

"Cybil!"

"No." Cybil shook her head. "You must be mistaken. I got The Hermit. Grace got Death."

"Woman, what the fuck are you talking about?" Josh's voice finally registered as he tugged the hood off his head.

"Josh?" Cybil knew she stared, and her mouth hung open like the proverbial fish, but she couldn't help it. For a minute, she'd thought she'd manifested death. As her thoughts cleared, and the haze lifted from her mind, Cybil jumped to her feet and punched him in the chest. "Dammit, Josh. You scared the living daylights out of me."

"I'm sorry. It's just that I was trying on this costume and wanted to see if you thought it would be good for Samhain."

"Josh, Halloween is months away. What are you doing looking for a costume now? You could lose or gain weight between now and then."

He rolled his eyes. "Of course you would be worried about weight. I found this outfit on clearance. I couldn't resist it. Hell, for ten dollars, I'm practically stealing it."

Cybil shook her head. "What do you really want, Josh?"

"Can I come in?" He glanced up and down the hallway. "I don't want anyone to—"

"See you," Cybil finished. "Yeah, I know. Come in, but be quick because I think you scared me out of eight of my nine lives."

Josh sighed, closed the door behind him and leaned on it. "Cats have nine lives, not bitches."

"You know, Josh, people aren't going to react to your scars the way you think they will."

"You mean they won't scream or faint like you did when you first saw me?" His eyes narrowed as he pinned her with his gaze. Cybil shivered at the sensation of his gaze reaching to her very soul and stroking it. How he managed to do it every time they made eye contact, she didn't know. The sensation was the reason she tried to avoid his gaze, but he probably thought otherwise. *Obviously he thinks otherwise.*

"Well, they'll probably leave you alone when they find out you're a witch. Besides, you can't compare everyone else to me—"

"You can say that again," he interrupted.

Ignoring him, Cybil continued. "It was the middle of the night and you were half naked, in your Celtic warrior getup. I

thought you were a psychopath. It had *nothing* to do with the scars on your face."

Josh looked up at her, and Cybil forced herself to meet his gaze. Of course she couldn't look into his eyes for more than a second or two. If she did, she'd be sucked into their depths while he read her inner thoughts and desires. He'd know she wanted him more than she'd ever imagined possible. He wasn't ready for a commitment, not until he realized his scars didn't define him; they didn't make him what he was. *What he is, is a delicious specimen that I'd like to have my wicked way with for a few hours, days, maybe lifetimes.* The thought sent another shiver up her spine and she hastily looked away.

"See, Cybil. Even you can't look at me for longer than a few seconds without being terrified."

"It's not what you think, Josh. You don't understand."

"I understand perfectly well, Cybil. I'm sorry to intrude on you. I won't bother you again." Josh turned, yanked open the door and stormed out before she could form a response.

"There's goes another perfectly good friendship right out the window!" She cursed as the door slammed shut. It wasn't him she was terrified of. She was afraid he'd see so deeply inside her that he'd learn her secret. Maybe she should tell him. It would be better than this.

Cybil raced into her bedroom and threw herself down on the bed. She stared at the wall connecting her apartment to Josh's. Assuming his was set up the exact same way, she faced his bedroom. *Where does he get off making assumptions about me? Who does he think he is, saying nasty things and then running away as if he's the one who'd been*

*wronged? What is he doing right now?* Heavy metal blared through the wall. *He must be practicing his kickboxing. That means he's really upset.* Cybil groaned and turned her face into her pillow.

"Oh hell, no. Grace thinks she is going to die; Ada is so happy she doesn't need me anymore, and now Josh hates me. How can I have gone from having too many friends to not having any? Even my dates don't call back anymore."

*It's because you're a bitch.* Cybil froze wondering where that thought came from. She wasn't a bitch. People loved her. She was always the life of a party. There was always a guy waiting in the wings to take her out if she grew tired of her boyfriend and if one friend walked away, two more took her place. A bitch wouldn't have friends. *But you don't have any more friends, remember? Maybe Josh meant it when he called you a bitch earlier. He's probably right.*

Cybil buried her head in her pillow and screamed until her throat was hoarse and she couldn't make another sound.

She must have dozed off, because when she woke the room was dark and Josh's apartment was silent. Their earlier fight, she snorted—*Was it a fight if he was the only one yelling?*—replayed in her mind. So what if Josh hated her? He'd come back to her. His self-consciousness about the facial scars kept him from making friends. He'd be back. *And if he doesn't come back? Then what?* That's just plain nonsense. He'll be back. He needs my friendship. *But what if he doesn't? What if he doesn't need you or your friendship?*

"Damn you!" Cybil picked up her pillow and tossed it at the wall. "And double damn that stupid fortune teller."

Cybil curled up in a ball. As she drifted off to sleep she remembered the pain on Josh's face right before he'd stormed out of her apartment. Intentional or not, he had misunderstood her, and it was her fault. Whenever she looked at him, all common sense fled. The first night she met him she'd made a bad impression, but he'd overlooked that and she thought they were becoming very good friends. She must have thought wrong.

Remnants of the night she met Josh flashed through her mind. Giving in to the memories, Cybil surrendered to sleep once more.

\* \* \* \*

*Cybil woke breathlessly as her dream man vanished. He'd been visiting her in her dreams since she'd turned twenty-one. All the dreams he featured in were incredibly hot and erotic, but since she'd moved into this apartment they'd increased in intensity. This time she'd been on the verge of another orgasm when the ringing of the phone woke her.*

*When she'd tossed the phone across the room and heard it smack with a resounding thud against the wall, she turned on her side and tried to go back to sleep. Back to her dream man. He was too good to be real, so why did she cling to him? Because he wasn't real and she knew that. No real man could compare to him. She was lucky enough to have such a vivid imagination, so why not enjoy it for as long as she could?*

The sound of Celtic music filled her bedroom and Cybil sat up quickly trying to figure out where it was coming from. The

man next door. She'd caught glimpses of him, but not enough to get his attention and introduce herself. He looked quite edible, but he was playing hard to get, and she had plenty of other fish in the sea to catch. Why waste her time on him when it was obvious he didn't want a relationship, not even a friendly one?

But playing that music as loudly as he was, and this late at night went beyond rude. He might be the end of the hall, but his apartment bordered hers. She needed sleep and she was going to get it.

Cybil climbed out of bed and wrapped her pink terry cloth bathrobe tightly around her. Memories of her handsome nocturnal lover kept her warm as she trudged next door and banged on the solid wood.

"Coming!" A deep husky voice sounded from deep within the apartment.

"So was I!" she shouted back. At least she'd been on the verge of coming, anyway.

Cybil looked up as the door slowly opened. There, framed in the dark space stood the man of her dreams. Dressed only in a kilt, with his broad chest and well built abs gleaming in the light from the hall, her neighbor closely resembled the sex god who graced her bed during the midnight hours.

"Holy shit."

"Excuse me?"

Cybil glanced up into a face twisted and scarred. Before she could stop herself, she met his gaze and felt herself pulled in as an image of his past flashed before her eyes. An awful car crash and the pain of flames. The suit had protected

his body, but the helmet had been worthless keeping the flames at bay until the rescue workers could pull him out of the wreckage.

As his pain rushed through her body, Cybil moaned and then blacked out.

When she woke, her neighbor had dressed and donned a brown cowboy hat that he'd tilted down to keep most of his face hidden.

"I'm sorry." She'd said the first words that popped into her mind, but they'd been the wrong thing to say because his face hardened like granite.

"You're sorry? For what? Because the sight of me repulses you?"

"No! That's not true." Cybil gasped, tears filling her eyes. She didn't want to confess the truth. He'd never believe her. Instead she looked around the room. Anything to avoid eye contact and the risk of another vision making her embarrass herself further.

"It's okay. Most people can't stand to look at me. Why did you come over here at this hour of the night anyway?"

"It was your music. You were playing it so loud I couldn't sleep."

"I'm sorry. I'll make sure I keep it down in the future. That apartment was always empty so I got used to not having to worry about my noise level."

Cybil glanced around the room again, this time noticing a cauldron, candles burnings and several different items in a bag on the coffee table. Faced with a half-naked man surrounded by pagan tools with anger radiating off him in

waves so hot she flinched, Cybil wondered if he practiced black magic. What was she still doing in his apartment? Better safe than sorry.

"I gotta go. I have a busy day ahead of me and I need my sleep."

His face was hidden from her, but she could tell from his voice that he knew she'd seen his witchcraft items and was getting out while the getting was good.

"I might have the face of a monster, but I can assure you I'm not one."

"I never thought you were a monster. I never said that," Cybil stuttered hastily.

*"You didn't have to."*

\* \* \* \*

Cybil sat up and stared around the room disoriented. He was right. The pain in his expression that night was the same as it had been tonight.

The look on Josh's face made her want to weep, but he also brought on unexpected and painful visions. That was why she avoided eye contact. It didn't happen with every one. In fact it hardly ever happened. But she hadn't been prepared for his scars and in her surprise the vision had snuck up on her.

Not only had seeing him and receiving that vision sent her into a depression, but her dream lover had not returned since that night. Perhaps when she compared Josh to her dream lover it had been a trigger to stop the dreams. She and Josh would never be lovers. And when her dream man had looked

up at her with a scarred face, she'd awakened screaming, and never dreamt of him again.

She was attracted to Josh. *Why deny it?* But being with him was simply out of the question. Yes her body hungered for him, but her mind knew better. Josh was a loner, and that was what he would remain. But he was also a close friend. He deserved to know the truth, not think that he horrified and disgusted her. Sure he might not believe her, but at least she'd have tried.

Cybil checked her appearance in the mirror. It wouldn't hurt to look presentable when she told him she wasn't afraid of him but of the visions he gave her. *Should I mention my dream lover or just stick to my visions?* It wasn't as if her dream lover had come back anyway, and lots of people dreamed of wonderful lovers. She wasn't any different. Not in that aspect anyway.

She knocked on the door three times, but there was no answer. Not that she expected any different. Josh rarely answered his door. That was why he'd given her a key. Cybil unlocked the door and peeked inside.

"Hello?" she called out as she closed the door. "Josh?"

Silence greeted her. Cybil sighed and stepped into the hallway. She'd never been to his bedroom, but she knew he used the second one for his magic. Perhaps he was in there. *But would he want to be disturbed? Oh, hell. I just need to get this over with!*

"Josh?" Cybil knocked on the first door. When there was no answer, she opened the door and looked around. There was a large pentagram on a rug centered in the room. Facing one

wall was a small square table, *his altar maybe?* There was a dark cloth covering it, and several pagan objects including melted candles, an athame, a pentagram and a carved wooden box. The symbol on the box was one she'd seen before. In her dreams. She reached for it. *What could it mean?*

"Cybil?" Josh grabbed her arm and pulled her out of the room. He closed the door and pressed her against it, leaning over her. "What are you doing?"

"Josh!" Cybil gasped and pressed against the door. He must have just gotten out of the shower because his hair was still wet and hung about his face, clinging to his cheeks. He wore nothing except a white towel wrapped around his waist. Rivulets of water dripped off his hair and down over his sculpted chest and abs.

"What are you doing in my apartment?"

"I was looking for you," she stammered as she struggled to catch her breath.

"And you thought I was in that little box? What were you doing trying to enter my circle?"

His hands dug into her shoulders in a bruising grip. This wasn't the Josh she knew. This one acted like the monster he claimed to be.

"Josh?"

"Answer me, Cybil."

"I was looking for you."

"Why? Did you think that this time you could look at my scars without fainting or being so disgusted you had to turn away?"

"Please." Cybil whimpered under his punishing grip. Between his hold on her and the anger radiating off him in hot waves, she knew this had been a big mistake. He didn't want to hear an explanation. He was still angry. *But how could I have hurt him this badly?* Sure they were good friends, but he was acting like a lover scorned. *Lover.* She shivered and tried not to look at his exposed skin, even though it looked smooth and hard. Biting back a groan, Cybil stared up at the ceiling.

"What? Spell it out for me, Cybil."

"You're hurting me," she whispered as tears began to slip down her cheeks. *In more ways than one.*

"By the Goddess," he growled and released her arms, but leaned closer to her so his scent wrapped around her. Soap and the intoxicating scent that was his alone teased her senses. "Tell me why you came and then get the hell out."

"I..." She paused and swallowed. This was hard. Almost as hard as he felt pressed up against her.

Cybil drew in a deep breath and almost swooned as desire swirled in her belly. She grew wet, so wet, as he groaned and dropped his forehead against her shoulder. If she turned her face just a bit, she could press her lips against his neck and—no! But he smelled so good ... *How will he taste?*

As she turned her head, she brushed her lips against his neck. More heat flooded her and her underwear grew so damp and her nipples so hard, she was afraid he'd be able to notice her arousal. *That would scare him off fast, wouldn't it?*

Josh drew in shallow, panting breaths. *Is he sick?* No wonder he was so agitated. He didn't feel good, probably had a fever and who knew what else.

"Are you sick? Can I get you something? Let's get you into bed."

Josh looked up at her and she made the mistake of meeting his eyes. Her own breaths grew shallow and suddenly she realized what his problem was. *How stupid. He didn't take lovers, did he? Of course not. He would be afraid of scaring them off, or being a pity lay. How many other women had looked at him the way he thought I'd looked at him? With disgust and fear?*

"Yeah, I'm sick," he said hoarsely. "I think it'd be best if you left now. And leave the key on your way out."

Cybil froze. "Leave my key?"

"I was stupid to think we could be friends. I..." Josh shook his head.

"No." Cybil grabbed his arms as he stepped back. "We need to talk. Please. I want to explain something to you. Please, Josh. It's important."

Josh looked uncomfortable, but as he stepped back she realized why. He was rock-hard, *everywhere*. Between his misinterpretation of her emotions and his lack of sex since the accident ... he would probably greet any female this way. The decent thing to do would be to leave and let him relieve his frustration. But she wanted him to relieve it with her.

Before he could protest, her hands settled on his hard, damp chest as she rose on tiptoe and leaned into him. Cybil closed the distance between the two of them and pressed her

lips to his. He was soft and hard at the same time, and so hot that she felt as if he'd burn her.

She sucked on his lower lip until he sighed and relaxed, then she kissed him like she'd dreamed of doing for months, no years. Their tongues met, clashed, and danced. Josh moaned and dug his fingers into her hips. He pressed his erection against her, the cotton barrier doing nothing to disguise his hunger.

Cybil reached for his towel, but missed when Josh suddenly pulled away and took a step back.

"I don't need your sympathy, Cybil. I don't need a pity fuck."

She flinched at his harsh tone and language. "It's not pity. It's not sympathy. I wanted to kiss you. Want to kiss you." *Damn it, why does he make me so tongue-tied? No wonder he says I confuse him. I confuse myself.*

Deciding to keep her distance until she explained everything, Cybil walked away and sat on his recliner. Josh sighed, but sat on the sofa and looked at her expectantly.

"I wanted to tell you the truth about what happened the night we met."

"We don't need to rehash you fainting at the sight of me."

"It wasn't your scars but it was the *sight* of you that caused me to faint."

"You are so good for a man's ego, darling."

Cybil shivered at the way he murmured *darling*. *Now isn't the time for these thoughts. Get your head out of the gutter, girl.* "I know you probably won't believe me, but this is the truth. I have this really weird ability, and I used it without

meaning to the night I met you. It overwhelmed me and I passed out. It really had nothing to do with your scars."

"What happened?" Josh stopped fidgeting and looked at her, but Cybil avoided his gaze.

"When I looked at your face and saw your scars, I saw what happened to you. I felt and saw your accident through your eyes. As if I were you."

Josh was quiet for so long that she looked up at him and was surprised to see him staring at her with a mix of shock and disbelief.

"You expect me to believe that you looked at me and knew what had happened? And does this happen every time you look at someone?"

She was surprised by his snide tone, even though she'd guessed he wouldn't believe her. "No, it doesn't," she said. "I don't expect you to believe me. I'd hoped you would ... but..."

Josh laughed and stood up quickly. "Well, I have to give you points for originality, but I've heard better excuses from total strangers. Go on, Cybil. Go home. Leave my key on the table by the door and I won't ever bother you again."

"But I thought we were friends."

"So did I, so did I. But I can't stand the knowledge that the sight of me disturbs you so much. I'll stay out of your life as much as possible and I'll keep my music at a low level when I know you're home."

Cybil closed her eyes and groaned. This wasn't working the way she'd hoped. *How can I convince Josh that his face doesn't bother me? Why do I care so much? Why am I so*

*attracted to a man who obviously can't let himself be attracted to anyone?* Even if he had believed her, nothing would change between them. She'd go on changing boyfriends every other week and he'd stay in his apartment, isolating himself from the world once more.

"Go, Cybil, go on home."

His anger had fled, but it sounded as if it had been replaced with sadness. *Did our friendship mean as much to him as it does to me? If it did, then why is he pushing me away? Why can't he just believe me?*

"Josh," she whispered as she pulled out her key. "I'll give you your key, but I want something in return."

"What?"

"I want you to believe me. Give me a chance to convince you."

He laughed. "You don't ask for much. Why not ask for the world? The moon and the stars?"

"Think about it, Josh. Have I ever lied to you?"

"Listen to what you are saying. *When I look into your eyes, I have visions of your past.* Do you even realize how impossible that sounds?"

"You're Wiccan. Don't you believe in things that aren't always tangible?"

"What does me being Wiccan have to do with anything?" Josh shook his head and gave her a look of disgust. "You know what, I'll just take my damn key and remove you from my apartment and my life myself."

Cybil gasped and stared at him wide-eyed as he advanced toward her. "There. There's your damn key." She tossed it at

him, jumped up and ran toward the front door. She yanked it open and dashed the short distance to her door.

As she closed her door behind her, she heard Josh say, "And stay out of my life."

Sobbing, she collapsed against the door and slid to the ground. That had not gone as she'd planned. Not at all.

\* \* \* \*

Cybil struggled down the hall with several bags of groceries. As she reached her door, one bag tipped precariously while she dug in her purse for her key. Josh's door opened and she hurried to get her key before he came out. She wasn't ready to face him yet.

"Thanks, Josh. I really appreciate your help with this."

Cybil looked up at the strange voice. *Josh was letting another person out of his apartment?* Her eyes met Josh's and she flinched. When she ducked her head, the top bag fell out of her arms and the rest of the groceries followed.

"Shit," Cybil cursed as she knelt and tried to scoop up her groceries. She didn't need a confrontation with Josh in front of his friend. She shook her head so her hair covered her eyes. *To hear Josh talk, he had no friends, so where did this one come from?* She snuck a glance at him from the corner of her eye and saw tall, dark, devastating male. He was so handsome she couldn't help but feel a twinge of desire deep in her belly. A vision of her in between the two of them danced enticingly before her until she pushed the thought aside and reached for her groceries.

"Cybil?" Josh leaned down and scooped up a few cans that had rolled near his feet.

"Sorry, Josh. If I'd known you were coming out I'd have waited."

"Cybil—"

"Stay out of your life. I know. Trust me. I've been trying to avoid you for a week now. I was getting good at it too."

Deep sensual laughter sent a shiver up her spine, and Cybil found herself turning to look at the stranger against her will. "Oh my." She gasped as his piercing blue eyes caught hers and held her in place.

"Josh wishes you to stay away from him?"

"Um..." Cybil found herself falling into those eyes. Falling ... falling ... as the deep blue swirled.

His voice came as if from a far distance. "Why would Josh want a beauty such as you to stay away from him?"

Cybil swayed as his eyes darkened to black. Then she pitched forward into a sky as dark as a moonless night. She heard a screech and the sound of a woman's scream. Blood covered her vision, and as she glanced down, Cybil was surprised to see the warm red fluid covering every inch of her body.

"Oh God, oh God." Cybil scrambled backwards and closed her eyes trying to fight the vision. She could hear the cries of many, most of them young. The sounds of chanting and a fire blazing out of control filled her ears.

"Stop her!" the stranger cried out, his voice cracking with emotion. "Make her stop!"

"Beware of the creature within. Do not give in to his demands; do not surrender to his cravings. You must be strong for when you meet your destiny. She comes to you before the end of the year. You must be ready. Prepare yourself." As the words echoed in her ears, Cybil wondered where they came from. *Dear Heaven above am I losing it? Has this damned man's past sent me over the edge into an abyss of no escape?*

A stinging on her cheek brought her back to awareness, and Cybil looked into Josh's frightened face. She rubbed her bruised flesh wondering if she should thank him or not. She glanced down and relief rushed through her that there was no blood to be found. What had happened to this handsome man? He must have been in a war or something. A POW who had been captured and tortured.

"You poor, poor man," Cybil crooned as she slowly shook her head.

"What the hell did you do to me?" he demanded, anger sparking in his eyes. "What in the world are you?"

Cybil stuttered as she reached for her purse and searched blindly for her key. She looked back and forth between the two men, not letting either one hold her gaze. Joy sent her heart thundering as her hand closed on the key. Triumphant, she lifted the key and inserted it in the lock. She had to get out of here before they told everyone what a freak she was. If this had happened a hundred years ago, she'd have been burned at the stake as a witch. Hell, even the witch was looking at her funny.

She ran inside her apartment, but before she could slam her door shut two pairs of hands stopped her. Both men had picked up her groceries and brought them into her apartment. Trapped, Cybil backed up and stared wordlessly as they set her groceries down and turned to face her.

"I'm sorry for your loss and the pain you suffered," she said to Josh's friend. "I didn't mean to invade your mind like that. I ... sometimes I can't control myself."

"This happens often?" the stranger asked as he quirked his eyebrows and looked at Josh, then back at her.

"Um ... the last time it happened was the night I met Josh."

"Dare I ask what you saw when you invaded his mind?"

Cybil shuddered. "He was gaining on the car in first place when another one tried to pass him and clipped him, sending him into a spin. The car spun around, then flipped and rolled. Another car slammed into him right before his started on fire. As the flames drew closer—"

"That's enough!" Josh shouted and grabbed Cybil. "How the hell can you do this?"

"Who cares how? I just don't want her to do that again."

"You were telling the truth then?" Josh whispered.

Cybil nodded. "I don't usually have visions or invade people's minds like that. I apologize, but I find that when I'm around Josh, my self-control shatters."

"So when you look at Josh, what do you see?" his friend asked.

"Flames. And I can feel his pain."

"That's why you fainted? That's why you can't look at me?" Josh released her to grab her hands.

Cybil shook her head so her hair hid her face again. "I can't look at you because when I do, I lose control of myself. I do things and feel things that I don't want to." She winced. *Okay, part of that was a lie, but he didn't need to know that.*

"I'm going, Josh. I hope you two get this taken care of. And no more invading my mind, Ms. Cybil."

Cybil grinned and looked at the stranger. "If Josh wasn't so distracting, I wouldn't have done that."

"I think I know the solution to your dilemma, but it's not my place to say. I'll see you later, Josh. Good evening." With a wink and a wave of his hand, Josh's friend walked out the door leaving them alone.

"I'm sorry, Cybil." Josh took her hands in his and she trembled as his thumbs caressed her wrists. "I ... your story was so far-fetched it seemed impossible to believe."

"It's okay." She pulled her hands away when his touch ignited the desire their argument had banked.

"Dylan was telling me about this procedure I can have done that will reduce some of the scarring on my face. Of course, nothing will get rid of all of it. I'll never be my handsome self again." He laughed.

Cybil shook her head at his self-deprecating words. "You are handsome."

"No, I'm not. Most people can't look past my face, and those who do are usually after my money."

"Usually?" Cybil asked as she sat on the sofa a safe distance from him and his touch. "What about those who aren't?"

"People like you and Dylan are few and far between. Besides, he has his own scars he keeps hidden. Looks like you do, too." He hesitated, then walked over to the sofa and sat down next to her.

When he wrapped his hand around hers, she fought not to pull away as heat flooded her. He smelled like chocolate and coffee and made her mouth water as he leaned against her. She tensed as her body began to tingle where he touched her.

Josh stiffened and pulled away. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to invade your comfort zone."

"Oh God. Look at me!" Cybil burst out laughing. She hadn't been acting like herself for days now, but this was ridiculous. She was not going to continue this way indefinitely. Either Josh wanted her or he didn't but she was going to find out, and now.

"Look at you?"

"It's you, Josh. When you're near me, I can't think straight. My control goes right out the window and I do dumb things and say stupid things all the time. That—this isn't the real me."

"You mean you aren't really as klutzy as you seem to be?"

"No. You seem to bring out the worst in me."

"I-I'm sorry," Josh stammered.

"Why are you sorry? I'm trying to tell you—oh the hell with it!" Cybil grabbed him by the shirt and yanked him close. She

pressed her lips to his and tried to show him with actions instead of words.

At first he stiffened, but as she leaned closer and pressed her breasts against his chest so there wasn't even room for a breath between them, he softened under her and returned her kiss, gently at first, then like a man long starved.

Nipping at her lips, then soothing them with his tongue, Josh made kissing more erotic than anyone else she'd been with. As their mouths dueled for supremacy, Cybil realized that this time she was more than willing to let someone else take control, *but would Josh be willing?*

"I'm not sorry this time," Josh whispered as he broke the kiss to lick and nip his way to her ear. His breath tickled her as he added, "If you want me to stop, say something now, because otherwise I'm going to make love to you, and once we start I don't know if I'll be able to stop."

Cybil moaned. The thought of this hard, willing man desiring her so much that he wouldn't stop; that he wanted her this much and was giving her a way out was more than she'd imagined. She didn't want him to stop. That he put her needs and desires before his own, even when he obviously hadn't been with a woman in a long time excited her even more.

"Don't stop, Josh." Cybil lifted her hands to his cheeks and caressed his scars. When he shuddered, she placed kisses along his face trying to show him that his appearance didn't bother her.

"Cybil." Her name was drawn out and sent shivers up her spine as Josh caressed her lower back.

Moisture pooled between her thighs, and she shifted trying to ease the discomfort. She wanted, needed him inside her, buried to the hilt, thrusting so deep that he broke the hold her dream man had on her. No man had given her an orgasm, except for him. Tonight, with Josh, she didn't think she'd need to fake it. His kiss alone was pure unadulterated sin. His hands, as they moved on her back fed the flames of her desire until she felt like an inferno, or a volcano ready to erupt at any minute.

"You have no idea how long I've wished for this," Josh whispered in her ear as he scooped her in his arms and walked to her bedroom. "I've ached for you since the first night I laid eyes on you."

Her first thought was to laugh and remind him that he hadn't been with a woman for a long time. She was flattered that he felt the need to say such kind things, but she didn't want to hear them.

"Josh," she said between nips at his neck. "No lies between us tonight. We've finally gotten past all that. I want you; you want me. Let's just leave it at that."

He looked like he wanted to argue, but instead he nodded his head and lowered her to the floor so her body slid along the hard length of his. When she stood on her own two feet, he swooped back down and captured her mouth with his.

His skillful manipulation of her body left no doubt in her mind that before his accident he'd had more than his fair share of women. But for now he was all hers, at least until he had the procedure done that Dylan suggested. Maybe she could make him love her before then.

Warm hands slid under her shirt and brushed against her rib cage before cupping her breasts. Cybil was more than grateful she hadn't worn a bra to go to the store. Since she was so well-endowed most bras weren't comfortable and whenever she could she chose to go without. Josh growled his approval before latching onto a nipple and sucking fiercely through the soft cotton of her shirt.

"Damn." She groaned and clung to him as her knees weakened.

"You are so hot," Josh said when he paused. "I used to love dropping in to surprise you just so I could watch you walk around the apartment."

"You have got to be kidding me." The words escaped before she could stop herself, but he laughed and shook his head.

"Nope. Watching you walk around with these bad boys moving around. I could barely keep myself from popping out of my pants." Josh kneaded her breasts as he spoke so she was breathless and barely able to respond.

"I told you, no lies."

"Cybil, you don't lack for male attention. Do you think I didn't see all those men come and go and not wish I could take one of their places?"

"Because I have large breasts?"

Josh groaned and buried his head between said breasts. He continued to work his magic on her as she moaned and wiggled under him. "No, not because of the size of your breasts. Because of you."

Cybil shook her head, but bit her tongue. Any woman would be attractive to a man with self-esteem as low as his. Yes, she was pretty, but the thought of him coming over just to look at her was a little odd. But flattering.

"Cybil."

"Josh?"

"Stop. I can hear the wheels turning in your head. Am I that poor a lover that you analyze everything I say and wonder if it's true or not? Have I ever lied to you? You're really crushing my ego here."

Cybil giggled and relaxed against him. "I'm sorry, Josh. It's just ... well, I've wanted you ever since the night I saw you half naked and practicing witchcraft."

"It's not called—Really?"

"Yes." Cybil grinned as she slid her hands down the center of his chest to the waistband of his pants. She lifted his shirt and pulled it off so she could run her hands over his pecs and abs.

Josh moaned, sending a rush of shivers up her spine. He felt smooth like silk, yet hard like steel. She couldn't wait to feel him thrusting inside her. Closing her eyes, Cybil leaned down and licked his flesh, enjoying the salty taste of him as he groaned and shivered.

"By the Goddess." He cupped her head in his hands as she swirled her tongue around his nipple. She gently bit at the hard nub before soothing the pain with a lick.

"That's it, you little minx. To hell with your need to be in charge. We're doing this my way." Josh pushed her onto the bed and climbed above her until he straddled her.

Cybil stared up at him in astonishment until she met his gaze and froze. This wasn't sweet, neighborly Josh who met her gaze. This was red-hot lust. Straight-up desire. And it was aimed at her.

"You really want me, don't you?" Cybil breathed, unable to keep the awe from her voice. "This isn't just because I'm convenient for you."

Josh's eyes darkened along with his expression. Predator. Moisture pooled between her thighs as he pressed against her, his weight pinning her to the bed even though she had no desire to escape. *This* was what she'd dreamed of. *This* was what she wanted, needed in a lover.

"You, Cybil. No other woman but you," Josh said.

The growl and harshness of his words made her believe him. She reached up and peppered several kisses on his jaw before he gasped and pulled back.

"No," she snapped as her anger rose again. "Don't you dare pull away from me. I want to kiss, taste, touch every inch of you. *Every* inch."

"Cybil—"

"Feel me, Josh. Feel how wet you make me." Cybil grabbed his hand and slid it from her breast to the juncture of her thighs where her desire had not only drenched her thong, but made her sweatpants damp. "God, I don't think I've ever been this wet."

Josh growled again and lowered his mouth to hers. He kissed her with all the pent-up passion she'd suspected he'd been trying to hide. Their tongues dueled for supremacy as he slid his hand under the waistband of her sweatpants. With

one finger, he moved her thong to the side and ran his thumb over her mons.

Cybil arched into him, moaning as he repeated the action before pushing a finger deep inside her. She cried out as her orgasm swept over her, leaving her weak and trembling.

"Oh yeah," Josh whispered in her ear as he crooked his finger and rubbed it against her sweet spot.

"Josh!" she gasped, trembling as he added first one, then two more fingers. She hadn't even finished her first orgasm and he was about to send her into another.

"Come for me, baby. I want to feel your cum drenching my hand. I want to hear you scream my name when you come. Stop thinking and just feel. Let go, baby."

"Sweet, merciful heaven." Cybil whimpered as he increased the speed and force of his thrusts. Her hips moved of their own accord, lifting to meet him as her muscles clenched around his fingers.

"Right, angel," Josh said softly, as his breath brushed against her ear. "You are so fucking hot. And tight. I could fuck you all night long, listening to you moan and scream as your sweet pussy milks my hard cock."

Stars exploded behind her tightly closed eyes as she arched back with a wordless cry. She shuddered as she rode the crest of her orgasm before slowly returning to earth.

"Goddess, baby. You are more responsive and explosive than I imagined. I need to be buried to the hilt in you before I come in my pants."

Cybil gave a half-hearted chuckle as she waited for feeling to return to her legs. *How could he make me come twice from*

*his touch alone? Oh God, will I be able to handle more? How the hell has he been abstinent for this long when he's this good?*

"I can hear those wheels turning in your head again." Josh chuckled.

She looked up and saw that he was standing at the foot of her bed, gloriously naked. He was hard all over, just as she'd suspected. A drop of pre-cum glistened on the tip of his thick cock. He was longer than she'd ever had, but wide like she preferred them. Licking her lips, she looked up to see a grin on his handsome face.

"That got your attention."

With a chuckle, she climbed off the bed and sank to her knees in front of him. His erection leapt against his stomach as she studied it. No way could she get all of that in her mouth, but she was going to give him the same pleasure he'd given her, anyway.

Cybil wrapped her fingers around him and slid them up and down his length. Josh groaned as more pre-cum trickled out of the tip. With a grin, she looked up at him, then lowered her mouth and licked at the salty fluid. He tasted as good as he looked, and she wanted more, all of him. She sucked him into her mouth and slid one hand down his shaft to cup his balls. She gently massaged them while she worked him with her mouth.

Sounds of pleasure echoed in the room making her want him to lose control. Faster and harder she moved her mouth and tongue, sucking and licking at him like he tasted of ambrosia.

"Damn, baby," Josh gasped as he pushed her away and pulled back. "I want to be inside you when I explode. I want to take you to heaven with me."

"Sounds like a plan to me." Cybil grinned and rose, quickly taking off her clothes and reaching for him again.

"You are so good for my ego." He laughed.

"Shut up and fuck me." She growled and grabbed him, pulling him onto the bed with her.

"This is even better than I dreamed. You are better than I dreamed."

Cybil groaned. If he was trying to excite her, it was working. She wanted him inside her, buried balls deep, now. "Josh, less talk more play."

"Yes, ma'am." He grinned and climbed over her. "Oh hell."

"What?" she asked as he froze.

"Condoms. I don't have any." He dropped his head on her chest and drew in deep ragged breaths.

"Oh, I have some."

He lifted his head and met her gaze. "Of course you do." He sighed.

"Look, I like sex. I really like sex with you. Does it matter why I have condoms?"

"Of course not." He took a deep breath. "Where are they?"

When she told him, she leaned back and watched the play of his muscles as he reached for one and put it on. Josh covered her body with his, and kissed her deeply as he reached between them to rub her clit. Moaning, she rubbed against him, digging her fingers into his shoulders and lifting her hips.

Josh brushed the tip of his cock against her, teasing her as he rubbed it back and forth slowly. With a growl, Cybil reached down and guided him inside her. His soft moans and guttural groans were like music to her ears. As he moved within her, it felt as if he were stroking her very soul.

He slowed his movements, and thrust in so deep she caught her breath in ecstasy. Then he began to move again, sliding in and out so painfully slow she wondered if he'd let her reach the orgasm already building.

A delicious tingling started in her abdomen and ran up and down her legs. She wrapped them around Josh and matched his leisurely movements with harsh, quick ones of her own. When he groaned and started to ram in and out of her fast and hard, tremors spread through her body, quickly, like wildfire.

"Oh, oh God. Bryne!" Cybil screamed as an orgasm more powerful than she'd ever experienced raced through her body.

Josh tensed, then grunted as he came. She wished he wasn't wearing a condom, but she knew it was better safe than sorry. But she wanted to feel him without that thin barrier, to feel him as he came, buried deep inside her, while she—

Cybil looked up at Josh. *Did I really shout out someone else's name?* Her dream lover's name had popped out of her mouth without a conscious thought. No other man had come even close, and Josh made love just like her dream lover. *Have I just ruined things at this early stage?*

"That was great, Josh." She smiled and moved under him in a way she hoped would arouse him.

"Cybil."

"Are you hungry? Are you ready for round two?" She was rambling, but what else could she do?

"Cybil. You shouted Bryne a minute ago. I want to know—"

"No, no I didn't. It was a breathy moan that must have just sounded like Bryne. I don't know anyone by that name. Is it Celtic?"

"Cybil. Stop rambling, and stop interrupting me. I want to know why the hell you called me by my magical name."

"*Your* magical name?" It came out as a whisper, but from the look on his face, Josh heard her and wanted to know what she wasn't saying.

Josh kissed her until she couldn't think straight. Breathless, she swallowed deep gulps of air and tried to ignore the trembling in her thighs.

"Where did you get the name Bryne?"

"My dreams." She panted as he pressed kisses on her neck. "I ... oh ... ahhhhh." She shivered and wrapped her legs around him.

"Dreams?" he prompted.

"Ahh, yes." She tightened around him as he sank his teeth into the nape of her neck. "Oh, God. I've dreamt of you. Of him."

"You dreamt of me?" He pulled back and stared down at her.

*He is Bryne, isn't he?* With a gasp, she realized he was.  
"Well, yeah. I've always had these dreams. They started when I turned twenty-one and lasted until I met you."

"I don't understand."

"Me either. But the night I met you, my dream lover's face was visible for the first time ever. Only it was you. Between that and my fainting spell, I pushed it away. You aren't—weren't ready for a relationship."

When Josh just stared at her, she wondered if she'd made a mistake. Maybe he wasn't her dream lover after all and the name was a coincidence. There were any number of reasons for the mix up but she wanted it to be true. She loved him. And now she knew that there was a man out there who could satisfy her *and* keep her attention.

"Why didn't you say something sooner?" Josh asked.

"Um. I didn't think it would be a good idea. Besides, I try to keep my wacky side quiet. The less people who know what I can do the easier and more peaceful my life is. I really don't like all these visions and I've gotten really good at blocking them. Unless you're around. Then all my concentration is shot to hell."

"Maybe if I keep you sated you won't have any more visions?"

Cybil met his gaze and held it. She waited for several heartbeats and almost shouted for joy when no vision came.

"I don't know. Are you up to the job?"

Josh moved inside her. "Does it feel like I'm up to the job?"

*Oh boy did he.* She grinned and slid down his body. "Let's see how long you can last this time, Cowboy."

## THE HIEROPHANT

by

Tina Bendoni

"I can't believe you're making me do this."

"You're part of the wedding party, you have to do it."

"Yeah, but I'm the Man of Honor, not a bridesmaid."

"Christopher, having a penis is *not* enough to exclude you from typical bridal party duties."

Chris groaned and looked around at the women surrounding him. His younger sister and three of her best friends all stared at them while they stood outside the fortune teller's storefront. He knew when he was beat, and sighed in resignation.

"Fine. But if the crackpot tells me I'm gonna meet a tall, dark, handsome man, I'm outta there."

Julie hit him on the arm before grabbing it and dragging him in with her. This was her wedding present from the rest of the bridesmaids, and they were all determined to see Chris participate even if it killed him.

Finally Chris could put it off no longer. All the girls had gone and were discussing their readings with each other. He had no choice but to enter the back room and face the music.

"Come in, come in. I don't bite, I promise."

Chris looked around the small room in surprise. He had expected the stereotypical dark room with moons and stars

and a woman dressed like a gypsy from the movies. He hadn't expected a forty-something woman smartly dressed in what looked like a designer suit, with her hair pulled back sitting at a table bare of decoration.

"Oh, sorry. I was looking for, um..." His voice trailed off as he realized he was about to insult the woman.

"Yes, I know. Don't worry. I am the one you have come to see. If you are looking for the drapes and stars, not today, I am afraid. I felt in the mood for something more, mundane shall we say?" She gestured to the seat opposite her at the table. "Please have a seat."

"So, what do you want to know?" she asked after he was seated.

"Honestly, nothing."

"Nothing? Then why come to see a crackpot fortune teller?"

Chris blushed. Over thirty years old, and still he was sticking his foot in his mouth. *Hell, come to think of it, I said it outside, how did she even know I said it? One of the girls must have told her. That was it.*

"The girls dragged me here. They said it was part of my duties."

"Ah, yes, your sister's wedding." The woman nodded her head in apparent understanding. "So, you have no questions you would like me to answer for you? No desire for money or love?"

"I have money enough, and have no need of love in my life."

"Hmmm." The woman looked down at the cards in her hands that she had started shuffling sometime in the last couple minutes. "Well, regardless of that, those young ladies out there have paid for a reading for you, and a reading you will get. If you have no questions, how about just a general reading? One card?"

"Sure." The sooner she was done, the quicker he could leave. He took the cards from her when she offered them, and shuffled them per her orders.

After placing them on the table, he watched her put her hands on the cards, closing her eyes as though concentrating on them. Opening her eyes, she pulled the first one off the pile, and turned it over to place it on the table.

"The Hierophant." The woman tapped the card as she looked at it before continuing, "The Hierophant is usually the sign of someone in power, or someone wise. Sometimes it can be a priest, rabbi, maybe someone to do with religious ceremonies, but not always. Often it does portend a religious ceremony of some sort, though."

Chris smirked at that. *Of course it did.*

"It can also be symbolic of someone who has something to teach you, perhaps an actual teacher. It implies that perhaps it is time to experience life in a different way." She glanced up at him quizzically. "Are you a bit conventional in something? Or perhaps you should become more conventional? There is something you need to learn, definitely. It is time to think about giving up some of your old routines. Maybe time to try something new."

"Everything I have is working perfectly fine for me now, why would I change it?"

"That is up to you to decide. Perhaps there is something that isn't working as well as you think it is?"

"I'm content with my life the way it is."

The woman nodded. "So be it. That is what the card tells me. I will tell you this, you have an interesting time ahead of you, regardless."

\* \* \* \*

"Chris, I told you, Dawn said to do it like this."

"Who the hell is Dawn and what gives her the right to tell you how to do your wedding?"

Julie sighed loudly enough that Chris could hear her, even on top of the eight foot ladder. The muttering under her breath, however, he couldn't quite catch.

"I told you already at least one hundred times. Dawn is the wedding organizer. And she showed me what different decorations looked like, and told me how to get the effect I want."

"Well then why the hell isn't she here doing this? That's what you pay her for, isn't it?"

"Actually, no, it isn't. She has gone above and beyond what any of the other organizers would do for the same price."

Chris finished pinning up the fabric the way Julie wanted it and turned back to his sister, climbing down the ladder.

"What do you mean at the same price? I told you whatever

you wanted was fine. You don't have to scrimp and get a substandard organizer."

"Dammit, Chris, you still don't listen to me. When are you ever going to learn to listen to a woman?"

"I always listen to women."

"No, you don't. I've told you a hundred times that I chose Dawn because she is the best at what she does, not the cheapest. I like her, and she was willing to give me what I wanted. Not too much and not too little."

"Well at the price this wedding is costing me, someone should be doing everything for you."

"Chris, I *want* to do this. This is what I have always dreamed of. Doing things like this with my friends and family. My fiancé helping right beside me." Julie looked over at Tommy who was helping one of her bridesmaids with the gift table. Everyone was laughing and having a good time. "A wedding isn't about how much you can afford to have someone do, it's about your friends and family being with you like this."

Julie shook her head. "At times like this I can understand why you never have long-term relationships. You're too set in your ways, and always have to be right."

"I don't have a girlfriend, 'cause I don't want one."

"You mean to tell me you're happy with a different girl every week? Don't you want someone you can come home to at night, someone you can share things with?"

"Hell, no. I'm happy the way things are. I don't need the trappings of a relationship." Realizing how he must sound to a woman about to get married, he reached out and put his

arms around his sister. "Honey, it's alright for you, it's what you want. But it isn't for me. I'm sorry, but there isn't a woman on this planet who could convince me to settle down."

"You know that relationships aren't all like Mom and Dad's."

"I know, sis. But really, I'm doing fine. Stop worrying about me."

Chris watched her try to smile for him. She wouldn't accept that he really was okay alone. He had no problem finding women when he wanted them, and he had even had a couple serious relationships in his life. Well, three months was long enough for him, even if not for her. It wasn't his fault. He just never felt the desire to be with a woman long-term.

As he debated trying to explain further, his attention was dragged across the room by a woman walking toward them. She was short, about five foot one and shapely. Her body had curves everywhere it was supposed to, was perfectly proportioned, and the way she moved kept his attention riveted to her.

She was perfect. Suddenly all he wanted to do was take the woman home and make love to her all night.

Julie's head followed his eyes and she smacked him on the shoulder. "Oh no you don't, Cassanova. That's Dawn. You keep your grubby paws off of her."

"Whatever do you mean, sister of mine?" Chris tried to respond lightly, but his eyes never left the woman making her way to them.

"She's too good for the likes of you. I like her, and I don't want you breaking her heart. Anyway, she isn't your type."

Chris pulled his attention back for that. "What do you mean?"

"She isn't tall, blonde and shallow. Leave her alone."

Before he could respond, Dawn was there, reaching out to Julie in a friendly gesture. He watched the two women hug hello, and he felt something drop in his stomach as he saw her smile for the first time.

It lit up her entire face, making was what otherwise an ordinarily pretty face into one that was absolutely beautiful. At the sight of that smile, something roared up inside him and claimed her. "*Mine*," it said. He couldn't explain it but his body hungered for hers in a way it never had for any woman before.

Julie turned her back to him, as though to block him out of the conversation and started to discuss balloon placement. She should know him better than that. Her little maneuvering wasn't enough to keep him off his game.

"Hi, I'm Chris."

Dawn turned that smile up to him, and he could have sworn his knees turned to jelly for a second. "Oh, the older brother. I've heard a lot about you."

"All good I hope?"

She bit her lip, as though keeping back laughter. "What else would your sister have to share?"

*Damn Julie and her big mouth.* She'd probably told Dawn all about his love 'em and leave 'em attitude. Probably scared her off before he even got a chance. Well, he hadn't gotten

ahead in business by giving up when all looked lost, he wasn't about to start in his personal life.

"If it wasn't positive, then it was lies, I am sure." He took her hand, tucked it into his arm as he turned to direct her attention to the balloon-covered material he'd tacked up to the ceiling. "Would a man that had any negative traits be willing to do this for his sister?"

Still biting her lip, she extracted herself from his hold. "Of course not, and I'm sure she appreciates it more than she can say. But on that note, I'm afraid I'm going to have to drag her away from you for a couple minutes. We have some things to discuss."

He raised an eyebrow as she turned away and took his sister arm in arm to a far corner of the room, toward the cake table.

"Well, it looks like our local Lothario just got locked out."

Chris turned and glared at his soon-to-be brother-in-law. "How long have you been waiting to use that line?"

"Oh, probably since the day I met you." Tommy scratched his head. "So that makes ten years, maybe?"

"Shut up." Chris still couldn't believe his baby sister found something redeeming in the vice president of his company. Even if he and Chris had been friends since college.

"What can you tell me about her?" Chris nodded toward the women across the room. He still couldn't believe she was the wedding planner. He'd expected an older woman, someone who had been through a wedding herself, and maybe the weddings of a couple children. Someone staid and

responsible looking. Not someone who screamed sex with every swish of her hips.

Her hair pulled back in a ponytail that went all the way down to the delectable curve of her ass. An ass very nicely squeezed into a pair of old, worn jeans. Her legs looked surprisingly long for someone so short, with the whole package looking perfect. She would fit just right in his arms for a dance or something much more intimate.

His cock stirred at the thought of getting those legs around him as he thrust into her hot pussy. He knew she would be all soft and giving without those sharp edges so many of his bed partners had. What he wouldn't give to get a chance to sample her body intimately.

Shaking himself out of the highly inappropriate thoughts he couldn't believe he was having, he continued to watch the women on the other side of the room. Damn, it had been too long if the sight of a woman in tight jeans and a t-shirt got his cock so hard he could barely move. *How long has it been since I've been with a woman?*

Just last week. Jane. The blonde from the coffee shop. The one who always made his coffee extra strong. He'd walked with her to her car after her shift ended that night, and she had invited him home. It had been one of those one-time wonders he seemed to excel in. She hadn't even asked him for his number. Or offered hers.

"Well, besides the fact my fiancée just declared her off limits to you, she's a teacher and has been doing this wedding planning stuff on the side for a couple years. She doesn't charge much, and is very nice." Tommy looked at his

friend with narrowed eyes. "And I agree with your sister, she's too nice for you. She doesn't deserve to be hurt by you."

"I don't hurt women, Tom."

"Yes, Chris, you do. You try to assuage your conscience by convincing yourself they know the score." He held up his hand, forestalling Chris's response. "Yeah, I know you state up front what you want and expect, but sometimes that doesn't matter. People mistake what they want from a situation, and sometimes get hurt."

"That's not my fault."

"Keep telling yourself that, maybe someday you'll believe it, bud." With that parting shot, Tom walked to the women.

Chris stood there for a few minutes, and watched the three of them talk and laugh. His sister was beautiful, and when she talked about her wedding, her love for Tommy literally shone on her face. God help the man if he ever hurt her, because Chris would strangle him with his bare hands. Although to be honest, ever since he'd introduced the two of them three years ago when she came out for a visit they'd been inseparable. If living together for the last two years hadn't separated them, maybe they had a chance after all.

God, he must really need to get laid. Watching Tommy move up to put his arms around Julie, Chris decided to interrupt the three of them before they came up with more things for him to do.

"Oh, Dawn, could you please? Maria just called and said the florist had a small fire in their storage area. She said they

checked around at the rental places, but no one has any with this short of notice."

Chris groaned as he approached the group. Another thing for them to do.

"Don't worry about it. I can get them tonight. That way we can set them up tomorrow before the rehearsal, and the florist can decorate them as arranged. Let me call my dad and get his truck from him. I imagine it will be a couple hours, though."

"Borrow your dad's truck? No, Chris has a full-size, he can help you, no problem. Right, Chris?"

Plastering a smile on his face, he smiled. "Sure, sis. What do you need me to get?"

Just then they heard a voice across the hall, "Oh, shit!" Tommy tapped Julie on the shoulder with a smile, and told her he would check it out.

"Sorry, Chris, Dawn will explain. I gotta go see what happened over there." Julie, the ever-present control freak ran off after Tommy to fix the newest tragedy besetting her wedding.

"Why don't you tell me what to get, and I'll go get it by myself?" The last thing he needed was to spend any time alone with her in his truck. The way his body was vibrating, and his cock was jumping being near her in a crowded banquet hall, he would jump her bones after five minutes alone.

"Candelabra for the church."

"The church doesn't have any extra?"

She put her hands on her hips and gave him an impatient glare. "In case it escaped your notice, your sister chose a small country chapel for her wedding. It doesn't specialize in frills. It's one of the reasons she chose it."

He had, in fact, wondered what had made her choose the chapel in the middle of nowhere, but it was her wedding. "Fine, just tell me where to get them, and I'll bring them back."

"Sorry, no go, bud. They're at my house, and that means you're stuck with me."

"No problem then." Chris smiled, and once again groaned inwardly, reminding himself he was a grown man.

Following her outside, he led her to his truck, careful not to touch her. Unfortunately, he didn't take into account that she was so short and his truck was extra large. He didn't have a running board to step up on because he never thought he would need one, but once he opened the door for her, he realized she would never get in without his help.

Putting his hands on her waist, he lifted her up to the seat. A shock jolted through him as her shirt parted and his skin touched hers. He felt her stomach contract as she inhaled quickly. Obviously she had felt it too.

Reluctant to let her go, he held on to her long after she was seated. His thumbs stroked her now bare sides, sending sparks shooting through straight down to his cock. This close to her, he could smell her perfume, a light flowery smell, not too overpowering, mixed with a scent that must be purely her. Whatever it was, it inflamed his senses more as his nostrils flared in reaction.

"Um, the candelabra?" Her voice was breathy, and came out sounding like a breeze as it teased across his skin. Quickly letting her go, he mumbled something before stepping back and closing the door.

*Damn.* Maybe he wouldn't survive sitting beside her. Her house had better be real close, because any more than five minutes with her and they were both going to be in trouble.

"So where is this house of yours?"

"Warrensburg."

"Damn, woman, that's forty-five minutes away."

"I know. I usually don't take weddings out here, but Julie was so persuasive, and I really like her. I couldn't resist her."

"Yeah, she can be persuasive when she puts her mind to it."

"You're telling me. Even after I reminded her that I didn't know the area, and that I wasn't going to be here all the time she insisted on having me."

"What makes you—" He stopped himself before he could insult her.

She laughed at him. It sounded like the peal of bells on a summer morning. *Oh God, listen to me now. I sounded like a romance novel even in my own head. What the fuck is the matter with me tonight?*

"What makes me so special that she'd insist I do it? Honestly, I don't know. I did her friend Barbara's wedding last year, and for some reason she was convinced I'd be the one to do hers."

"So what exactly does a wedding organizer do?"

"Well that depends. For your sister, like I said, very little. I went with her to look at places for the ceremony and reception, I helped her with the menu and a couple of other things, advising her here and there, but my real work will be the rehearsal dinner and the wedding day. That's when I make sure that nothing goes wrong."

"And if it does?"

"I fix it. No bride should be bothered by little things like the DJ didn't get served his plate of food, or the videographer needs the lights in the chapel to be just a bit brighter. If there's a problem, I make sure it goes away. Or at the very least, that the bride and guests never notice it."

"And you get paid big bucks for this?"

Again with her peal of laughter. It tightened parts of his body that hadn't been so hard in months.

"Big bucks? Hardly. Maybe if I was stationed in the city instead of so far out, I could ask for more, but out here in the boonies, I do it for very little. More for the fun of it than anything else."

"So are you independently wealthy?" Chris hadn't gotten where he was without paying attention to things, despite what his sister said. He remembered Julie had said she was a teacher, but anything to keep hearing her voice.

"No, actually. I'm an instructor for home-schooled children."

"I thought home-schooled meant they were exactly that, schooled at home? As in their parents teach them?"

"It does, and they are. Unfortunately not all parents are able to help their children as much as they would like. I am

there for those times. For things like special projects, questions that can't be answered through regular research, learning different ways to do things. I'm kind of a floating teacher for them."

"So you can set your own hours?" He glanced sideways at her.

"Exactly."

"What school system do you work for?"

"I don't." She shook her head and her ponytail swung back and forth. "I'm a certified teacher who can teach from pre-k all the way through high school, with a masters in alternative learning. I work independently. Kind of like a tutor who would work for some of those learning centers. Only I go to the kids' houses and work with them there. The parents hire me."

"So why do you do this, too?" Chris followed her directions onto the highway as he quizzed her.

"Honestly? Because I love it."

Chris frowned. "So in addition to your full-time job, you have this that takes up your free time, doesn't give you much money, and probably stresses you out as much as the brides."

"Exactly." She turned and smiled at him, and his stomach dropped.

"How did you get into it?"

"A few years ago a friend was getting married. She didn't have any family to help her with any of the decisions or chores she had to do. Her bridal party was useless. I barely knew her, but I was there for her when she needed it. I was involved in everything, and I got hooked. I loved it."

"Her wedding went off without a hitch and to this day she still credits me with it."

"So you do it for..."

"The pleasure of a job well done? The idea that I can help some woman have that perfect day they have dreamed of their entire lives? Everyone deserves that one perfect day. Whether they be rich or poor, they deserve to have their dreams come true on their wedding day if none other."

Her voice had grown wistful, and Chris wondered what put that note into it. She suddenly seemed lost in thought, as though she knew what it was like to have that perfect day. Or maybe to not have that perfect day.

"Who was he?"

"Excuse me?"

"Who was he, the man who put that tone in your voice?"

"No one."

Suddenly she was closed off. No longer open and willing to share with him, only giving him directions as needed.

The promised rain started halfway to her house. She warned him that the only way to her place was over a low bridge and if it continued to rain like this, they wouldn't be able to get across. He assured her they would be fine, to which she just sighed and smiled slightly.

"A bit too much?" He was aware he could be arrogant at times, hell, most times. And he also knew that if she said the only bridge might become impassable, she was probably right. He wasn't the one who lived there.

"A bit."

"You honestly think it'll be a problem?"

"Probably not. It's coming down heavily, but we should be able to get there and back."

"So if you can't get back later, where are you gonna stay?" She could stay with him, he wouldn't mind. Really he wouldn't. He only had one bedroom, but that was okay. It meant he only had one bed. And it was big enough for two.

"With my parents. It won't be a problem. We'll pass their road about a mile before the bridge. I've done it before."

They were quiet for the rest of the way to the cutoff that led to her house. He eased the truck over the narrow bridge, and they both looked over the side. The water was less than an inch from the top of the bridge, and it was rising quickly as they watched.

"Um, so, what are the odds we'll be able to get back over that?"

She turned and looked at him with a grimace. "Let's just say it's a good thing Julie's rehearsal dinner is tomorrow night, or she'd be pissed at both of us."

"Hope your couch is extra long."

Her smile lit up the interior of the truck. "Oh, I can do better than that."

They pulled up to her place minutes later, Chris still wondering what her comment about doing better meant.

"Stay there, I'll come around and get you." Chris directed before climbing out of the truck. There was no way she was going to be able to make it down without his help, and even then he wondered about how slippery the ground was.

As he got to the door, she opened it quickly. He put his arms on her waist to help her down. The shock was

completely unexpected. He had decided it was static electricity earlier, but he couldn't have been more wrong. It shocked him so badly he nearly dropped her, and instead, lost his own balance. Both of them went tumbling onto the wet yard.

"Oh, God, I'm sorry. Are you alright?" Her body was tight to his as she lay across his chest. Her soft, full breasts pressed against him, warming him despite the cold rain.

Her laughter caught him completely off-guard, and dragged a similar response out of him. "Well, damn, I could have managed to fall into the mud all by myself. But thanks for the assist."

He nodded, tipping an imaginary hat. "Anything for a lady."

He could have sworn the look in her eyes changed, as her voice lowered. "Well if your plan all along was to get me wet, I have much better ways in mind for that."

His body responded before he did with a growled, "You do, do you?"

Her smile was seductive as she whispered, "Most definitely."

Shocked, he wasn't sure how to answer her, and before he realized it, she was standing with her hand out to him. Afraid of pulling her down to him again, he passed on the hand as he pushed himself up. He followed her to the door, his hands itching to get around her again. Had she really meant what he thought she had? His cock twitched in anticipation.

"Why don't you strip?"

They were barely in the front door when she uttered the words. His head snapped up at her question. *Damn, she didn't beat around the bush, did she?*

"The bathroom is that way. Take a shower while I throw your clothes in the dryer." She gestured toward a door as she walked past it down a hallway, toward what he could only assume was her bedroom.

Realizing she had changed gears on him quicker than a race car, he watched her walk away as she removed her coat.

Muttering to himself, he took his coat off and hung it up on a hook beside the door before walking to the room she had motioned toward.

The bathroom was large for a guest bath, with the tub larger than standard size. There were towels hung on the bars, guest soap and supplies on the shelves. Suddenly he became very cold, eager for the hot shower it promised.

When Chris climbed out of the shower a good fifteen minutes later, his clothes were gone, and a black robe hung next to the towels. It was too big for her and had to belong to a man. *Damn, did she have a boyfriend? A husband?*

No, he hadn't seen any rings on her finger, but a boyfriend wasn't out of the question. Not knowing whose robe it was, he decided to forgo putting it on for now, and walked out the door.

"In here!" He heard Dawn's voice call him toward the other end of the house, and he followed the scent of hot cocoa and something wonderful cooking.

"I wasn't sure if you'd be hungry, so I heated up some sauce I had frozen, thought we could have some pasta—" She

stopped short as she turned around and got her first look of him in the hallway.

It hadn't occurred to him how he would look. He just hadn't wanted to wear another man's robe. But the red creeping up her cheeks seemed to imply that she wasn't immune to a half-naked man standing in her kitchen doorway.

"Didn't you see the robe?"

"Um, yeah, I did. But I wasn't comfortable wearing another man's clothing. Won't your boyfriend mind?"

She smiled at him, a look that said she knew perfectly well what he was doing, and she wasn't going to let him get away with it. She turned off the simmering sauce and leaned her hip against the counter, arms crossed in front of her.

"Boyfriend?"

Her arms brought her chest up higher, dragging his attention to the ample amount of cleavage her silk robe left available for viewing. He gritted his teeth. "Yes, boyfriend. I assume you have one if you have a man's robe waiting around for strangers."

Turning back to the sauce, she waved her hand. "Assume whatever you want. If you're comfortable in only a towel, feel free."

*Damn, this woman was more on again off again than a water spigot.* Her comments, both the one in the truck, and when she lay over his body were deliberate. He knew she wasn't unaffected by him, how could she be? Then she turned her head slightly and she licked her lips, as she took a deep breath with her eyes closed.

Chris smiled. She definitely wasn't unaffected. *Hmmm, how can I best take advantage of that?* He wanted her, and she obviously wanted him. No more game playing.

Taking a few steps closer to her, he brought his body up against her.

"So, is there one or isn't there?"

He heard her breath hitch. "One what?"

"A boyfriend."

"What does it matter?"

He grabbed her by the shoulders and spun her around. "Because I want to know who I am going to have to deal with after doing this."

He swooped down, intending to take her lips in a quick, hard kiss, but she beat him to the punch, meeting him with open wet lips, eager to match his.

The shock that shot through his system when he had touched her earlier was nothing compared to what he felt at the touch of her lips. Soft, full and gentle, they gave way to his pressure as sparks shot straight to his groin, waking up a cock that had been at least semi-hard ever since she walked into the banquet hall earlier today. He groaned as he pressed against her further, opening his mouth to search hers, stroking her tongue as he tasted the sauce she had obviously sampled before he entered the room. Tingles at the back of his head shot down his spine, urging him to deepen the kiss.

And he did. He took her tightly into his arms and crushed her against him as he thrust his tongue between her lips. All thoughts of boyfriend or husband fled as the only thing he could think of was her in his arms, under his body, in his bed.

Her arms twined around his neck as he pulled his body back slightly to allow himself access to the tie of her robe. He tugged at the belt, allowing it to slide free as he reached a hand in to cup her breast.

She was naked underneath the robe and the touch of her hard nipple against his palm was enough to convince him she wanted him as much as he did her. Flicking it with his thumb, he caressed her large breast, weighing it in his hand.

"Mmmm," she moaned into his lips, vibrating against his tongue as he tasted her fully. He pulled his head back and bent down to take her nipple in his mouth, as he bent her over the arm he put around her back. He imagined she tasted as sweet as she smelled, and he wanted to sample all of her.

As he took her into his mouth, her hands wrapped in his hair, urging him harder. Not wanting to be accused of not listening to women again, he was eager to comply. He opened his mouth to take the nub in entirely, before pulling back a bit to nip at it with his teeth.

She had large, rosy nipples, and he couldn't resist playing with them both. One with his lips, the other with his hand. Her sighs and moans of appreciation told him he was doing something right. His cock hardened even more when he heard Dawn hiss, "Yes," as he bit firmly down on one.

Pulling back he looked in her eyes and said, "Bedroom." It was a demand, and she gestured back down the hallway in response as he picked her up and strode quickly in the direction she had pointed.

He barely gave her room a glance. All he saw was the bed in front of them. It was a king-sized bed, plenty big enough

for both of them. Bringing her to it, he laid her down in the middle of the bed, and sat beside her.

She held onto him as she watched him with questioning eyes, tracking his every movement.

"I want to look at you. Ever since I saw you across the room today, all I have been able to think about is this beautiful body. How it would feel against mine as we made love. And how you would taste."

He saw her shiver at his words, and his body grew warm at the pleasure he knew they both were about to experience. He reached for her hands, kissing the palm of each one gently before laying them down at her sides.

Parting the robe fully, he got his first uninterrupted view of her body. And it was something to gape at. His sister was right, he tended to date thinner women but he obviously hadn't known what he was missing. Dawn was soft where a woman should be, and firm where she should be firm. A little bulge over her belly that was adorable, and her breasts were more than enough to fill his hands. And her pussy. He groaned. She shaved her pussy.

"And the boyfriend issue?" He looked at her face. He needed to know if she were dating anyone else, because he knew without a doubt once he had her, he wouldn't let her go back to another man. There was something about this woman, just being near her set his senses on fire.

And it was more than just physical. He wanted her, yes. But he enjoyed her company. He enjoyed the time spent with her at the reception hall, and in the truck just talking.

She shook her head in denial of a boyfriend. "I bought the robe for my father for his birthday. It's next week."

Good, one less guy he'd have to fight for her. "You are beautiful, do you know that?"

Dawn shook her head in the negative. "I'm average. Nothing more."

"Oh, no, you're beautiful. From your gorgeous eyes..." He bent down to kiss them gently.

"...to your breasts..." He cupped them lovingly as he paid homage to each one. Sucking and nipping at her until she was panting.

"...your smooth stomach..." He grasped her by the hips and moved between her legs to more easily have attention on her stomach, licking his way across her belly from hip to hip.

"...to this." His body was already positioned the way he wanted it, and he lay a gentle, sweet kiss on her shaved mound. It was smooth and soft and as he lightly blew across it, she wiggled against his hands.

Smiling, he brought his face down closer and nuzzled against her. "I want to taste you. Please?"

Chris looked up at her from his position between her legs and saw her smile seductively as she said, "Please."

It was all the encouragement he needed before he moved his hands down to her thighs to pull her open for his attentions.

He loved eating pussy. There was something about it that made his already hard cock harden even more. The sweet smell of a woman in the throes of desire, open to him, letting him do with her as he pleased.

Slowly, he brought his tongue out and licked her vagina from bottom to top. Taking the first glorious taste of her into his mouth. She tasted fresh like the dawn of a morning, bright with promise for the future.

It was his secret he would never share with another man, but bringing a woman to orgasm with just his tongue was better for him than an actual orgasm. He loved having her cream coat his face as she called out his name.

Eager for Dawn to experience the same pleasure, he gave her all the attention he could deliver. Licking at her, he worked his way up to her clitoris where he paid quite a bit of attention. Sucking and nipping, he listened to her moans and muttered pleas as he drove her over the edge.

Satisfied she had come, repeatedly, he moved up to cover her body with his.

"Enough," she said breathlessly.

Chris smiled. "Enough? You want me to stop?"

Dawn's hands grasped his hips, and the towel that was amazingly somehow still wrapped around him. "Hell no," she said as she opened the towel and threw it to the side of the bed.

"Condom?" Her voice shocked him. He barely stopped himself in time. *I never have sex without a condom, what has gotten into me?*

"In my wallet." He moved as though to get off her.

"No." She gestured with her hand toward the bed table. He reached over and opened the drawer, pulling one out.

"Glow in the dark?"

She giggled. "From a trip to planned parenthood with a couple of my students."

He grinned before ripping open the plastic package and putting the bright green condom on.

Eager to feel her surrounding him, he repositioned his body so his cock lined up with her pussy, and slowly moved in. The first touch of her against his shaft had him shaking and he had to stop for a minute to take a breath.

"Are you okay?" He opened his eyes to see her looking concerned at him.

"Oh, yeah. Just wanna take this slow." He smiled his reassurance at her as he pushed further in, slowly, until he was seated completely inside her.

He hadn't known what paradise felt like until that moment. He was in heaven, and he was damned if he was going to rush the feeling.

But both Dawn and his cock had other plans. Her body, still pulsating from her orgasms, felt wonderful, tightening and loosening against him, driving him insane. There was no way he would make this last, so he might as well go out with a bang.

He smiled at his own analogy as he started to move against Dawn. Her hips swung up to meet his thrusts as he rammed into her harder and harder. It was a matter of no time at all before he felt the pressure building up, and he knew he was about to come. Reaching down, Chris flicked at Dawn's clit again, pushing against it, driving her to one more orgasm, as he too came with a final thrust.

\* \* \* \*

"You think maybe we should call Julie and tell her we won't be making it back tonight?" He realized it had only been a few minutes since he had collapsed against her, but it felt like hours, and he wasn't eager to move from the heat of her skin.

"I already did. While you were in the shower."

"What did she say? Was she worried?"

Dawn smiled at him. "A little. But I assured her we would be okay."

"Dawn, listen, about this."

"About what? This? Don't worry. It was nothing. We had a little bit of fun. That's it." She tapped him on the hip, and rolled out of the bed. "I'm gonna take a quick shower. You're welcome to sleep here with me, or if you prefer, I have a guest room made up."

"Guest room?" *What the hell is she talking about? Is she kicking me out of her bed after the best sex of my life?*

"I know some guys prefer not to cuddle after sex, so thought I'd make sure you know I'm not making any demands. You can sleep in the other room if you want. It won't bother me either way."

He watched as she walked into the attached bathroom, and he heard the shower turn on. *Didn't she feel the connection between us?* To hell with the spare room, he was going to convince her that he wanted to be with her even if it took him all night.

\* \* \* \*

Chris looked up from the head table at the wedding reception and searched the hall for Dawn. The rain had stopped at some point while they were making love, and shortly after she'd gotten out of the shower, her father called to say the water was down and he was coming over to check on her.

She'd convinced Chris to leave before her father got there, and assured him her dad would take her to pick up her car on Friday. They'd loaded up the candelabra, and she'd given him a peck on the cheek before sending him on his way.

He expected to spend some time with her after the rehearsal dinner last night, but she'd left as soon as the rehearsal was over. He'd had to stay for the dinner, and thought about seeing her afterwards, but Julie had told him something about her having a date.

*A date? After what had happened Thursday night? What the hell did she think that meant?*

And today, she had totally ignored him all day. Only spoke to him to direct him in his duties as Man of Honor. He'd be damned if he let her get away tonight without explaining herself to him.

He saw her meet up with Julie across the room. She was wearing her coat, as though ready to leave for the night. *Oh hell, no.* Before he knew what he was doing, he was out of his seat and halfway across the room.

She managed to get out the door before he reached her, but that wasn't going to stop him.

Finally catching up with her as she got to her car, he called out her name. She turned and smiled slightly at him.

"Dawn, what's going on?"

"What do you mean?" She was fiddling with her keys as though nervous.

"Well, you've been ignoring me, for one."

"Ignoring you? What gives you that idea? I've been talking to you all day."

"Yeah, to tell me where to stand or what to say. Other than that, you haven't said a damn word to me."

"Chris, it was your sister's wedding. That's what I was here for."

"Well it's over now."

"Yes, it is. And it's time for me to go home and catch up on my sleep. I have another wedding next weekend to finish up."

"What about us?"

"What do you mean? There is no 'us'."

"What about the other night?"

She looked down at her keys in her hand. "Chris, the other night was wonderful. But that's all it was. Great fun. It's over."

"The hell it is!" Chris heard himself curse at the same instant her eyes widened in anger at him. *That definitely wasn't the right thing to say.*

"Excuse me?"

"Look, I'm sorry. But I thought we had something the other night."

"We did. We had great sex."

"We had something more than that."

She sighed. "What is this, Chris? A test?"

"What are you talking about?"

Dawn turned away and unlocked her door before opening it and throwing her purse inside. She turned to face him, her body in the V of the car and door. "I know how you are with women, Chris. I knew it going in, and I accepted it. Don't make this harder than it needs to be."

"Dammit! Julie warned you away from me, didn't she?"

Dawn shook her head as she sighed. "She didn't warn me away from anyone. She just wanted to make sure I knew what I was getting myself into."

"But it's not like that with you, Dawn."

Dawn gave a harsh laugh. "Chris, you don't know me. All you know is one night together. Hell, it wasn't even the entire night. It was a couple hours."

She was right. He didn't know anything about her except for those couple hours. And what Julie had told him. Well, that and what he knew about her deep inside. What he felt about her. He really had felt a connection with her.

It had started from the moment he had seen her walk into the reception hall, and it had grown every second in her presence. There was something about her that was different, special. He knew he couldn't let her go. He needed to see if this had any potential.

For the first time in his life he was looking forward to a possible future with someone.

"Dawn, I know this is gonna be hard to believe, but I felt something the other night. I can't explain it, but I need the chance to see if this can be as good as I think it can. There is something between us, and I don't want to throw it away before it even starts."

He reached out for her, lifting her chin with side of his first finger. "Do you?"

She looked away for a few seconds. For a moment he was afraid she would insist there wasn't anything there, that it was all in his imagination. And then her soft, "No," reached his ears.

"I have never felt this way about someone before, Dawn. Can we give it a try? See if this is something real and not just a fluke? Please?" He realized with a start that the fortune teller had been right. It was time to experience life in a different way.

As she nodded, a weight lifted from his chest. It was definitely time to change things. And he was ready to start with Dawn.

## DEATH

by

Michelle Hasker

"Death."

"Death? Are you sure? I'm so very young, I have my whole life ahead of me. I mean, I haven't even found a man to love yet."

Abigail Montgomery stared into the wide blue eyes of the petite blond. Grace Evans, an elementary school teacher, always put her friends and career before herself. Grace wasn't pleased by the news, but she deserved a fair warning so she would be prepared when the time came. The lives of many depended on the choice Grace would be forced to make by the end of the year. The wrong choice could cost more than her life. The price could be her very soul, and those of many others.

"You know what I mean." Grace laughed, nervousness evident in her every motion.

Abigail nodded her head. She wished ignorance was bliss in this case. But she had to give Grace enough information so her client could make the right choice. "You thought you had plenty of time to check the water before diving in. I understand that. In today's world, it is a wise choice. Pulling the Death card during a reading doesn't necessarily foretell your death. It can mean many things; like the ending of a

cycle or a transition into a new state. It can be a warning that you need to change, or you have to sacrifice or give up a vice or even the loss of someone close to you, be it friend or foe."

"But?" Grace asked after a minute. "What aren't you saying?"

Abigail smiled and nodded her head. "Yes, I knew you would be a tough one, but I also saw that you will be strong enough to handle what the Goddess has chosen for you."

"Please, I don't understand what you are saying."

"In this case, drawing the Death card means exactly what it implies. Death. But the death of your body doesn't mean the end of you. Our souls live on to be reborn again and again. The death of your body isn't the end of your existence."

"You are telling me that I am going to die?"

"I'm sorry, Grace, but that is exactly what I am telling you."

Grace stared at her in a stunned silence. Abigail knew the thoughts that were probably running through Grace's mind.

"Do you do this often? Tell people they are going to die, and then expect them to be happy about it?"

"Actually, I never enjoy giving anyone a reading that upsets them, but I can only read the cards that are chosen. I can tell you one more thing. There will be a man—"

"Isn't there always?"

Abigail ignored her and continued to speak. "This man will either be your salvation or your destruction."

"I can't listen to anymore. I'm sorry." Grace jumped up and ran out of the building.

This one would need to be carefully watched. Whenever Death showed up in a reading such as this, Abigail made sure she monitored the people to ensure they didn't do anything rash or stupid. Grace seemed like a girl who had it all together, but receiving a death sentence could transform anyone. She just hoped this one turned out the way her vision revealed it would. Otherwise someone would pay for this.

\* \* \* \*

Grace turned and glanced back once the door closed behind her. She could see Abigail staring after her. When her co-workers had gone to see Mrs. Montgomery, they'd all come back saying how accurate she'd been and several of the futures she'd predicted had been dead on. Of course she only used Tarot cards. Surely there was a margin for error, but somehow, Grace didn't think there'd been a mistake.

Something had been weighing heavily upon her lately. She'd been feeling restless and dissatisfied. Now that she knew the reason, she would have to make sure the rest of her days made up for living such a short life. First thing she would have to do would be to get Ada and Cybil in to see the gypsy woman. She wanted to know her friends would be well taken care of before she left this plane of existence.

\* \* \* \*

Grace sniffled and tried not to cry as Cybil walked up the aisle. As maid of honor, she needed to try and keep her wits about her. Instead, she found her gaze drawn to tall, dark

sin. Josh's best man was so gorgeous she could barely focus on the wedding. If he had made it to the rehearsal yesterday afternoon, she would have at least been prepared for this siege on her senses, but no, he'd worked and now here she stood, in front of all of Cybil and Josh's family and friends, drooling like a babe.

Cybil had warned her Josh's friend and best man was strange and sad. *How did she miss warning me how drop dead sexy he is?* Perhaps Cybil was immune to brooding men with long, thick, black hair and eyes as endless and deep as the ocean, but she wasn't.

Josh moved and Grace looked back down the aisle. With a start, she realized Cybil had reached them. Oh Goddess, she'd almost daydreamed through the beginning of the ceremony. Grace accepted Cybil's bouquet and then turned to face the minister. Now she needed to focus on Pastor Trip instead of that gorgeous piece of male flesh named Dylan.

Even thinking his name sent shivers up her spine. And that wicked mouth of his. When he'd smiled at her earlier, Grace thought she'd cream in her panties. If he was even remotely interested in her, there was no way in hell she'd pass up the opportunity to rock his world.

The tuxedo was obviously his and not a rental because it fit like a glove and was well tailored. Other than his name, Cybil really hadn't said much about him and Josh had never mentioned him before. *Does he have a girlfriend? Oh Goddess, he isn't gay, is he?*

"Grace." Cybil nudged her.

"Huh?" Grace blushed when she saw the minister, Josh, Dylan, and the others staring at her. "Ring?"

Cybil grinned as Grace pulled out the ring and handed it to her.

As the color on her face deepened, she heard Dylan chuckle. *Oh, great. Does he think I'm a freak? Who'd blame him?* Snagged daydreaming at her best friend's wedding. Grace sighed and turned to watch as Cybil made her vows and slid the ring on Josh's finger. When Josh did the same, she studied Dylan. His gaze was steady on the bride and groom, but as if he sensed her attention, he looked up. Their eyes met and held. Just like in the fairy tales, all the noise in the room faded as it suddenly felt as if it was just the two of them alone.

*A man will be either your salvation or your destruction.* As the fortune teller's words replayed in her mind, Grace wondered which one Dylan would be, because if she had anything to do with it, he was going home with her tonight.

Dylan's mouth curved in a sensual grin as if he read her thoughts. When he winked at her, the desire that had been smoldering in her belly spread through her like wildfire. Every nerve seemed alive and tingling and she swore she could feel a feather-light touch caress the nape of her neck.

Fighting back a moan, and trying desperately not to jump on Dylan during Cybil's wedding and handfasting ceremony, Grace looked away.

The rest of the ceremony passed in a blur as the pastor spoke some more before pronouncing them husband and wife. The handfasting was something Cybil had agreed to for

Josh's sake, but Grace had missed it when she'd been daydreaming. With a curse, she pasted a grin on her face and followed Cybil and Josh out of the church. At least now she could put some moves on Dylan.

The photographer snapped photographs in every conceivable position, but Dylan had disappeared after only a few pictures. *Where had he gone and why?*

By the time they were finished with pictures, it was time to climb in the limo and drive to the hotel for the dinner. *The Dance! I get to dance with him. If he hasn't vanished completely.* Grace bit back a moan as images of his body against hers made her wet. *Who'd have thought I, of all people, would fall in lust at first sight?* Well she did, and since she was going to die soon, she was going to live every day to the fullest. She'd start tonight with Dylan the devastatingly handsome.

As she climbed into the limo, Grace noticed Dylan was already inside. He had his face turned to the far side and was on his cell phone.

"I said to take care of it ... I am indisposed tonight. I gave you an order and I expect it to be carried out ... Ramirez, I expect your assignment to be completed by the time I get home tonight."

Grace climbed inside the car and slid onto the seat next to him while Cybil and Josh got in last. The driver shut the door, leaving them in the semi-darkness. Dylan was on the phone, and Cybil and Josh stared at each other like they were already alone. Between the anticipation and sexual tension radiating off the newlyweds, Grace was already strung tight

as a bow by the time Dylan's thigh bumped hers as he turned to face them.

"Grace, this is Dylan, my best man and my best friend," Josh said.

"It's a pleasure to meet you, Grace." Dylan offered his hand.

Grace met his eyes and put her hand in his. Instead of shaking her hand, he turned it and lifted it, placing a soft kiss on the back. Wide-eyed, she stared at him, trying not to shiver as his thumb brushed back and forth across her pulse.

"Dylan and I met at a retreat." Josh smiled when Grace turned to look at him.

"Oh, neat. Are you Wiccan, too, then?" Grace asked.

"Um." Dylan looked at Josh, then back again. "You could say that."

"Okay." Grace sighed and looked at Cybil. "You make a lovely bride. The whole ceremony was beautiful. I couldn't have planned it better myself."

Cybil laughed. "You did plan it. But I agree. It was everything I wanted and more. Thank you, Grace."

"It was a pleasure. I hope you like the honeymoon accommodations I booked for you two."

"I really am grateful for all your help. I wish you had spent the money on yourself, but I think Josh and I will still enjoy the honeymoon." Cybil hesitated, then slid close to Grace and whispered, "Please, please forget what that witch said. Enjoy yourself tonight. And stop thinking it might be your last night."

"Cybil." Grace tilted her head toward the men trying to signal her friend to watch what she said. "You know how I feel about that. Knock it off, please."

Cybil sighed, but then smiled and sat back to lean against Josh. "I can't believe we're actually married. I can't believe I married a hermit."

Dylan frowned, but the others laughed.

"I told you that fortune teller knows her stuff," Grace said.

"Then how could—"

Grace gasped, and Cybil stopped in mid-sentence.

"Looks like we're almost to the hotel. I can't wait to see what you have in store for us," Josh said in the uneasy silence.

One thing Grace was grateful for was that she was no longer as horny as a teenager on prom night and now she was ready to help Cybil and Josh celebrate their future.

Grace and Dylan exited first. Grace was careful not to touch him as she climbed out of the limo and waited for Cybil. Soon they were ushered up the stairs to the Hotel Ranier and led down a red plush carpet into a room lit by candlelight. Josh had insisted on low lighting even though she had argued. Reluctant as she was to admit it, the effect was very nice and romantic. It would be perfect to showcase the ballroom dancers she'd hired as entertainment during dinner.

The next few minutes passed in a haze as the announcer introduced Josh and Cybil and they made their way to the table at the far end of the room. Dylan grabbed her arm, but fortunately there was no shiver of appreciation as there had

been when they'd walked up to the altar and while they'd left the church.

After they took their seats, the band began to play. A waiter handed them glasses of champagne and servers set food down on the table. As soon as the servers stepped to the sides, the dancers entered the center of the room and the band began a waltz.

A fox trot and cha-cha later, Grace needed to visit the restroom. Some people had finished eating, but most were content to watch the dancers. Satisfied no one would miss her right away, she slipped out to find the bathroom. The directions led her past an alcove filled with smokers to a large ornate restroom. She slipped inside the room and was grateful no one else was inside.

Grace dropped onto a chair and put her head in her hands. *Don't cry. Please don't cry. It will only smudge your makeup and not make one bit of difference anyway. So what if this isn't your wedding and you aren't likely to have one before you die? You haven't found anyone special to share your life with anyway. So far Abigail Montgomery has called them all right. Your co-workers and both Cybil and Ada. Your days are numbered, chica, but at least go out with a bang.*

A door slammed shut and Grace looked up as several women walked into the room. She didn't recognize them, but then Cybil's wasn't the only wedding in here tonight. Grace slowly walked back to the ballroom.

"There you are," Cybil said as she grabbed Grace when she entered the room. "Dylan wanted to start the toasts, but I told him we had to wait for you."

"Sorry. I had to run to the ladies' room." Grace leaned over and met Dylan's penetrating gaze. "Sorry to keep you waiting, go on. Roast Josh and Cybil, I mean toast them."

Josh and Cybil laughed, but Dylan smiled and winked at her. Grace swallowed and blinked to break the connection. She pulled her napkin onto her lap and began to smooth out the creases in the linen while Dylan cleared his throat and rose.

The deep timbre of his voice washed over her as he began with a story about Josh at a retreat. As he continued, she lost the ability to concentrate as his husky voice sent her into a delicious fantasy where it was just him and her alone in this room doing the tango with no holds barred. His hands on her as they moved swiftly and gracefully across the floor while everyone else vanished. When he dipped her, he would remove the rose from her mouth with his, and then things would go one step further. He would kiss her like there was no tomorrow. A kiss that would scorch her to her very toes, knock the silk stockings right off her. When his warm hands ran over her body, she would tremble in desire and grow so wet he would be able to smell her arousal, feel it when his thigh slid in between her legs to rub against her in a way that made her feel naked and exposed. The predatory grin on his face would steal her breath as he swooped in for another devastating kiss before he ripped her dress off and made mad, hot, passionate love to her right there on the ballroom floor.

"That must be some daydream," Dylan whispered in her ear.

Grace screeched and blushed as she leaned back in her chair and looked up. Dylan stood behind her, grinning at her as if he knew what thoughts had been running amok in her wayward mind.

"It's time for our dance," he said as he held out his hand.

"What!" she screeched. Grace cleared her throat and tried again. "What?"

"Our dance. Whatever that dream was about, you missed the rest of the toasts, and well, a lot."

"Oh." Grace glanced around the room relieved to see that not many were even paying attention to them. *Who cared to watch the best man and maid of honor dance anyway?*

She placed her hand in his, and Dylan tugged her out of her seat. Grace took a deep breath as his other arm snaked around her waist and held her close while he led her onto the dance floor.

"Care to tell me what was so fascinating you missed most of the wedding and part of the reception?"

Grace groaned as the blood rushed to her face again. *Will he keep me blushing all night long? Goddess, no, I hope he makes me scream his name before the night is through. I want to hear him scream my name as I come with him thrusting deeply inside me—*

"Grace?"

She looked up into Dylan's face and realized they were in the center of the room. "Sorry," she apologized as she faced him and placed one hand on his waist, the other he still held.

"Josh told me the dancers who were in here performing during dinner are all from a class you are taking at a local school."

Grace nodded. "I love to watch ballroom dancing but I think my favorite of all the dances are the Latin ones. Of course I like them all. And so far I've learned a few. Our teachers like us to go out and perform before audiences to build our confidence up, but I've yet to perform."

"Why?"

"I don't know them as well as the others. I have trouble loosening up on the dance floor. I'm so self-conscious, always worrying about what everyone thinks about me. Why am I saying all this? Goddess, shut me up."

Dylan laughed. "Everyone tells me I am so easy to talk to. I love listening to you, Grace. Your voice is so sexy."

She sighed and put a little space in between them, but Dylan pulled her closer.

"Oh." It came out as a squeak, so she cleared her throat again.

"I find ballroom dancing so sexy. My favorite is the tango."

As he said it, her insides melted into a puddle of jelly. It was as if he'd invaded her thoughts and seen her fantasy. But no, they'd been discussing dancing. It was just a coincidence.

"Yes, the tango is a very sexy dance. I haven't learned that one yet." It was a lie, but fortunately it tripped off her tongue easily enough. Grace looked around the room wondering how much longer the dance would last.

"What a shame." His voice purred in her ear as he tugged her so close she was pressed against his chest.

Moisture pooled between her thighs and her knees weakened. Grace wrapped her arms around Dylan's neck to keep from falling.

"Mmmm. You smell delicious. What scent is that?"

"Um." Grace licked her lips and tried to remember what perfume she'd put on tonight. Hell she'd been in such a hurry she didn't even remember if she *had* put on perfume.

"What ever it is, it smells really good on you." Dylan's hands shifted on her back until they rested just above her ass. As he swayed to the music, his erection pressed against her stomach. Grace stumbled in shock, but Dylan kept her upright and pulled her tighter. "Sorry, I didn't mean to make you nervous. I promise I won't hit on you anymore. That is, unless you want me to."

"Hit on me?" Grace stuttered. *He's hitting on me?*

"I've always been a sucker for a blonde. You remind of sunlight. Both your personality and your looks are like rays of the sun illuminating my dark soul."

"And you must be a poet. Or a really corny man."

They both laughed, and her defenses, what little there were, crumbled faster than the blink of an eye.

Dylan buried his face in her neck and inhaled deeply, sending shivers up her spine. Grace moaned and arched in his arms. Embarrassment flooded her, but his hands tightened before she could pull away.

The band switched to a different song, but Dylan held her close, refusing to let her go when she tried to move back.

*Shit. Things are moving so fast. I never dreamed he'd want me. He wants me. Goddess, his desire is digging into*

*my abdomen and, Lady, but does it feel huge. Please don't let me mess up this chance. I want him. I want this. And I will not chicken out this time.*

"Mmm." Dylan moaned against her neck sending more chills racing through her. She leaned back as he lifted his head and met her gaze. "I'm going to kiss you, Grace. If you don't want this, then you better stop me now. I don't think I've ever met a woman who's made me feel as reckless and impatient as you have. I need to taste you, to feel you respond to me in a primitive manner."

Grace opened her mouth to speak, but all that came out was a sigh. She focused on those luscious red lips mere inches from her own. His tongue peeked out between his lips, then disappeared quickly. Lifting her gaze to his, she stared into those fathomless eyes and whispered, "Yes."

Dylan swooped in on her mouth before she even finished the simple word. She melted against him mindlessly as his tongue darted into her mouth and traced along her teeth before dancing a tango with hers.

One hand moved daringly low on her backside, but Grace was beyond caring what anyone thought. She wanted Dylan even if it was just for tonight. Whatever the consequences, she would face them later. He would be worth it. She could tell.

The kiss seemed to go on forever, but Grace wasn't complaining. She was a little lightheaded, and her panties were saturated with desire, but damned if she didn't want him to continue. *Was it possible to come from a kiss alone?*

Dylan pulled back and glanced around the room. "Shit, I got so carried away that I didn't hear the music speed up."

Grace laughed as she noticed the couples around them bumping and grinding to a fast beat. No one was even looking at them. Either they'd been oblivious long enough that the curiosity died out, or the music had just changed.

"Are you thirsty? I think they're about to cut the cake, and Cybil still has to toss the bouquet."

"I could use a drink," Grace agreed as Dylan led her off the dance floor. *And a chance to cool off. Even though I want him more than anything else, this is moving way too fast.*

"What would you like?" he asked as he paused next to a waiter.

"Water would be nice. I'd like to keep a clear head."

Dylan grinned and leaned close to whisper, "That's a good idea. Then when I take you home and make mad, passionate love to you all night long, you can't blame it on the alcohol."

Grace stared at him with no idea of how to respond. Finally, she blurted, "That sure of yourself, are you?"

"Honey, I can last all night long, pleasuring you until you beg for mercy."

"And you always put your woman's pleasure before your own?" she asked.

"I've yet to meet a woman who can make me lose control."

"Oooo. A challenge. How can I resist that?" Grace batted her eyelashes as she studied him. *How many other lovers have you had, big boy? Does it matter, Grace? You just want to fuck his brains out and move on. It's a one-night stand. As*

*long as you practice safe sex, all's well that ends well. And we'll just see if he can keep it up as long as he claims.*

"What do you think, Grace? Will you come home with me tonight?" Dylan asked, then nipped at her ear.

Grace shuddered and let out a breathy moan as his lips trailed lightly over her neck. "Oh, Goddess, yes."

"It's not your Lady's name you'll be crying out later," Dylan promised as he led her over to the bar. "Two waters, please."

Grace shivered, unsure if his threat was one he could carry out, but praying it was.

"There you are. I've been looking for you all night. Excuse me, Dylan, but can I sneak Grace away for a minute or two of girl talk?" Cybil asked.

Dylan smiled and nodded as he released Grace. "Hurry back, Grace. I can't wait to hold you in my arms again."

Cybil shot Dylan a look Grace couldn't understand before dragging her out of the room and down the hall to the ladies' room.

"Grace, I know you believe your death is imminent, but Dylan is *not* the man to spend the rest of your life with. He has deep secrets, painful ones that keep him from staying with a woman for very long. In fact, I don't think he is even capable of being with a woman."

"Cybil." Grace shook her head and held up her hand when Cybil opened her mouth to continue. "Please don't warn me off the first man to make me feel this way. I mean I've been horny before, but never enough to want to make me act like this. I was ready to make love right there on the dance floor in front of all your guests. Only the Goddess knows how I

managed to keep my clothes on when I'm sure Dylan wanted them off me as much as I did."

"So it doesn't matter what I say? Nothing I tell you will change your mind?"

"Nothing. But I love you for trying." Grace gave Cybil a hug, then headed for the door. "Isn't it about time for you to throw that bouquet and get off to *your* little rendezvous with Josh?"

When Cybil smiled, Grace sighed in relief and followed her back to the party. Most of the dancers were mingling with the crowd and dancing on the floor. When a lively beat started, her foot began to tap the rhythm and Grace looked around to see if Charlie was here. She was another close friend, but Grace had yet to get her to see the fortune teller. But perhaps she would take care of that this weekend.

"Hello, gorgeous."

Grace shivered as warm hands slid up her sides and hesitated under her arms. *Please don't let him touch my breasts here. I don't want witnesses when I fall apart under his skillful fingers. Goddess, I hope he takes me home with him.*

Dylan spun her around and pulled her into his arms.

"Would you dance with me again, my lovely lady?"

Before the words could leave her lips, Dylan had danced her to the center of the room. The band stopped playing, and she turned to see what was wrong. Charlie stood to the side, talking to the drummer. Before Grace could walk over and ask what was wrong, the band started playing again, but this time a tango.

Dylan tugged her up against his chest, and she automatically shifted into dance mode, slipping one hand into his and placing the other on high on his arm.

"I thought you said you didn't know how to tango."

"Then why did you ask me to dance? And how did you know they were going to play one?"

"I asked your friend Charlie what your favorite dance was. You told me it was the Latin dances, but she said you love the tango. I simply asked her to go request it as soon as she saw that I found you again."

Grace wanted to question him further, but the music reached to her very soul and she found herself dancing the best she ever had in her entire life, with a man worthy of starring in her wet dreams.

As they moved around the dance floor, Grace felt as if she were on cloud nine. If she died tonight, she would be the happiest woman in heaven.

Dylan dipped her and stared into her eyes. His mouth was almost on hers when the sound of clapping registered. Startled, she looked away and noticed they'd gathered quite an audience.

"Damn, I was mere inches from heaven," Dylan swore under his breath.

Grace giggled. *Giggling? Why am I giggling like a school girl? And how does he know the right lines to use on me?*

Dylan spun her around and led her off the dance floor as the band broke into a lively tune. He didn't stop until he'd led her to a wall and pressed her against it. She bit back a grin that he'd chosen the darkest corner in the room.

"I don't know what it is about you," he whispered. Warm lips brushed against her ear, then slid down her neck and back up again.

"Dylan." She moaned and grabbed onto his shoulders.

"Say my name again," he begged as he grabbed her waist and leaned against her. "I've never heard it sound more sexy."

"Dylan." She ended his name on a low moan when he gently bit her neck. She arched into him instinctively while her hands tightened their hold. *Please take me home. Please, please.*

"Oh, Grace." He sighed. "Please come home with me. I know we just met, but we're not totally strangers. I—"

"Shhh." She raised her finger to his mouth and pressed gently. She let out a small cry of surprise and delight when he opened his mouth and sucked her finger inside. Her eyes met his and held. She would not pass up this chance. It was almost as if he was a mind reader, but at least he wanted her as much as she wanted him. "Yes."

Dylan crushed her against his broad, hard chest and kissed her with a passion she eagerly responded to. Winding her hands in his thick hair, she held him in place while she met his kiss and tried to take dominance.

Not giving an inch, he matched her in intensity and raised the heat factor as his hands moved down to cup her ass. He lifted her up and ground his erection against her.

"Ready to go?" he asked when he finally pulled away.

"Hell, yes. To the ends of the earth if I had to." Grace grinned.

"I don't think that will be necessary. But I have a car outside waiting to take us home."

"I have to say good night and good luck to Cybil and Josh. So should you," she reminded him. "You're Josh's best friend. You can't skip out on him for a roll in the hay."

"To roll in the hay with you, Grace, I'd do just about anything." Dylan captured her mouth again and this time he didn't release her until she was breathless and holding on to him to stay upright.

"Let's say good night *now*." Grace panted as she pulled back to put some space between them.

"Good idea." Dylan grabbed her hand, threading his fingers through hers, and half led, half dragged her over to Cybil and Josh.

"I hope you two have a wonderful honeymoon," Grace said as soon as they were alone. "Please have a safe journey."

"What? You're leaving?" Cybil narrowed her eyes as she looked at their joined hands. "Josh? Say something. Stop them. I don't think this is a good idea."

"Cybil!" Grace gasped. "Please. Enough is enough already. I'm going home with Dylan, not marrying him."

"But I know you, Grace. Don't do this."

"You wound me, Cybil. I thought you knew me better than this."

"I know you better than you think." Cybil leaned close and poked her finger against Dylan's chest.

"Cybil." Josh grabbed his wife's finger. "I think Grace is old enough to make her own decisions."

"But she doesn't know everything I do."

"Cybil," Grace began. "I am going home with Dylan and I'm going to make love to him until neither of us can walk, then we'll do it some more. Have a great honeymoon. See you when you get back. Maybe."

Before Cybil could respond, Grace turned and left. Dylan followed her, which was a good thing since she still had a hold of his hand. Even though it had been warm earlier, the air had chilled and Grace shivered as she followed Dylan to his car.

A large black man stepped out of the driver's side door of a limo nearly as large as the one they'd rode in to get to the hotel. When Dylan led her over to the car, she had to concentrate on keeping her mouth closed.

"This is the *car* you had waiting?"

"Yeah. I like to travel in comfort."

"Damn, what the hell *do* you do for a living?" Grace asked. Dylan looked at her, but she held up her hand and shook her head. "I don't think I want to know. This is just for tonight, so why mess it up with things that don't really matter?"

Dylan smiled and lifted her hand to his mouth. He kissed her open palm, letting his tongue tease the sensitive area before he turned to greet his driver.

"Miguel, can you please phone ahead and tell Maria that I'll be bringing home a guest? Oh, and let Ramirez know I'll be checking on his progress later. I expect him to have dealt with our problem before I get home."

"Yes, Master." Miguel bowed and opened the door.

Grace tried to hide her astonishment as she climbed into the car. *Master? Dylan has servants who call him master? I'd love to call him master while he ties me to the bed and—*

"Grace?"

She coughed to hide her embarrassment.

"Do you have a lot of daydreams? I'm a little envious. You are here in my company and find a daydream more fascinating than me? My poor ego can't stand it."

Grace laughed and leaned back in the seat. "I was wondering why your driver calls you master." She walked her fingers up his chest. "And what I would have to do to get you to let me call you that later."

Dylan's eyes darkened and his nostrils flared. "By the Gods, woman. Are you real? Even in my dreams, I could never have made you up."

"I hope that's a compliment," Grace said as she winked at him.

He groaned as the window separating them from the driver closed with barely a sound, and then Dylan's hands were in her hair and his mouth was fused against hers.

With a sharp tug, Dylan pulled her onto his lap. Grace fisted her hands in his hair and shifted so she was pressed against him completely. When he wriggled on the seat, she moved so she straddled him.

"I want you, Dylan," she murmured between kissing him. "I don't know why I feel this strong an attraction this fast, but damned if I'm not going to take advantage of it."

"I want you, too, Grace. I want you so much I feel as if I'm going to explode. You need to stop rubbing against me like a cat in heat if you don't want me to come in my pants."

"I want to make love to you right here in the limo." Grace kissed his jaw. "But I don't want to be just another conquest." She nibbled her way to his ear. "I want to be more than a notch on your bedpost. I want to be one you remember," she whispered.

"Oh, Grace. You already are." Dylan buried his face in her neck. "I'll remember your scent forever. But I want the first time to be special, not here in the limo like two horny teenagers."

"How do you know the right things to say? I swear sometimes it's as if you can read my mind."

"I can." He leaned back and winked. "I've been around for a really long time, Grace. I know more ways to pleasure you than you can even begin to imagine."

"Oh really? I read a lot of erotic romance; I can't imagine you know something that I haven't read or done before."

"Is that a challenge?" Dylan narrowed his eyes, the predator in him showing in those glowing eyes.

"Well, you issued me a challenge earlier when you said no woman has been able to make you lose control. I bet I'm just the woman who can make you do that."

"Now who is sure of herself?"

Grace grinned and dropped to her knees in front of him. "You said no sex in your limo, but you never said I couldn't pleasure you."

His eyes flamed as she slid her hands up and down his thighs. "Grace?"

"May I?"

"Hell yes!" Dylan growled and helped her unbutton his pants.

Grace moaned when he slid free from his confinement. He was bigger than she was used to, and long enough to put a little worry into her. Drawing in a deep breath, she ran her fingertips over the velvety soft flesh covering his hard erection. With each slow movement, she elicited a groan from Dylan. She wondered how many women had taken the time to love him slowly and thoroughly without demanding he take care of their needs.

He panted and fisted his hands in her hair when she pressed a kiss to the tip of his cock. "Grace."

She wondered if he knew it sounded like he was begging. Suddenly she wanted to make him beg for more. As slowly as she could stand, Grace traced the tip of his shaft with her tongue. She teased the slit and tasted his pre-cum.

"Mmmmm," she moaned as his salty essence tickled her tastebuds.

Dylan's response wasn't coherent as he tried to thrust deeper into her mouth.

"Patience, Dylan. You wouldn't want to lose the bet so soon, would you?"

"With your sweet mouth wrapped around me, Grace, I'll be lucky to last another minute, let alone maintain control."

Encouraged by his response, she drew him into her mouth as far as she could and wrapped one hand around the base.

Her other hand cradled his heavy sac while she worked him with her mouth.

His eyes locked on hers and he grinned. "You're enjoying this as much as I am, aren't you?"

"I could spend all night worshipping your cock." Grace punctuated her statement by drawing him in even deeper, until she gagged. "You're a little bigger than I thought you'd be, though."

"What do you mean? You thought about us doing this?"

Grace chuckled, the sound vibrating along his shaft. He groaned and stiffened even more under her ministrations. "Thought about it? What do you think I kept fantasizing about all night? Only in my dream, when we finished our tango, we were both naked, and writhing on the floor."

Before she knew what he was doing, Dylan thrust his cock in and out of her mouth taking the control from her as he fucked her mouth the way her pussy ached to be fucked. She was already soaked, but more moisture pooled between her thighs as she knelt on the floor listening to his heavy breathing, moans, and sighs of pleasure. She moaned again and he shouted as he bucked in her mouth, his cum spurting to the back of her throat as he shouted her name and yanked on her hair.

Once Dylan was finished, he collapsed back on the seat and stared at her.

"Well?"

"You're a cocky little thing." Dylan laughed. "But I didn't lose control."

"Mhmmm." She adjusted her dress and sat back down on the seat while he fixed his pants. As she checked her hair, he pushed the button for the driver.

"Why aren't we home yet?" Dylan growled. "What's the hold up?"

"Excuse me, Master. But we've been home for the past fifteen minutes."

Grace laughed out loud as Dylan's face darkened.

"I was waiting for the signal to come open your door, Master."

"Well consider this your signal," Dylan said as he slammed his hand on the button, severing the connection.

"Well," Grace said softly as she inched closer. "I guess I'll just have to try harder to make you lose control."

"Nonsense. It is *my* turn to accept *your* challenge."

"Now this is something I definitely can't wait for."

Grace followed Dylan into the house ignoring the smiles from the driver and the woman who answered the door. Surely Dylan brought many women home. They wouldn't remember her name, let alone what she looked like by morning.

Following that nice firm ass up the stairs and down a hall, she didn't even pay attention to her surroundings. It wouldn't matter anyway. Tonight was only a one night thing. Right now she lived day to day. It wouldn't be much longer, the oppressive fog weighing her down increased each day and was almost unbearable. This day, with Dylan, had been the best one in a long time. She hoped to go out with a bang, and it looked like she would.

He stopped in front of a large oak door and turned around. "Are you sure you want to come into my bedroom with me?"

"Did you have someplace better in mind for what we want to do?" First curiosity infused her, but when he shook his head, she began to wonder if he'd gotten what he wanted and now it was time to send her home. "Look, why did you invite me in here? You should have had your driver take me home. Or at least back to the hotel. You're a really hot guy and I guess this is what I get for giving in to my desires and blowing you in the limo. I mean who doesn't get laid in a limo? How cheesy. And now I can add stupid, corny behavior to my list of accomplishments."

Dylan pinned her against the wall and kissed her before she could draw in a breath or say anything else. He kneaded her breasts while his thigh pressed between her legs. She wanted to protest at his roughness, but it felt so good that her breasts tingled and her nipples ached to be tasted.

All rational, coherent thought fled as he deepened the kiss, thrusting his tongue into her mouth and grinding his hard cock against her belly. With a moan, she surrendered to him as he scooped her up in his arms, carried her inside his room and kicked the door shut. Not pausing, he kept going until he placed her on the bed.

Breathless, Grace stared at him trying to understand his sudden mood change.

"Do you still doubt my desire?"

Wordlessly, she shook her head and propped herself on her arms as he crawled over her.

"If you like this dress, you better take it off before I rip it off you."

She blinked and sat up quickly, fumbling with the zipper. Dylan growled and reached around her to help her with the fancy trappings keeping her clothed. Grace turned on her stomach as he carefully slid the zipper down. With each inch of skin he uncovered, he teased her with a slow kiss that sent shivers up her.

"If it's possible to die from system overload, I'm more than halfway there," she joked as he drew his tongue down her lower back to the top of her satin panties.

In a swift move, he flipped her over and tugged the dress down to expose her breasts. His wolfish grin showed his pleasure as he cupped one breast while his mouth worshipped the other with slow nips, nibbles, and licks before he sucked her nipple into his mouth.

"Ooo," Grace moaned and arched. As she rubbed her body against his, he increased his pace, sucking harder as he pulled her dress down even further.

He released her and she quickly took off the dress, panties and stockings, then reached for him. Their mouths met and fused together as he pressed his body against hers. The sensation of his clothes rubbing against her naked flesh aroused her even more.

"You are overdressed." She panted as she tried to take off his shirt.

"Not yet. I need to pay you back for what you did in the limo." His grin told her more than his words as he slid down her body and grabbed her hips. "You are so gorgeous, and

smell so good. I need to taste you. I want to make you shatter into a million pieces while I eat you."

Grace shivered as his breath brushed against her mons. Spreading her legs, she waited for him to make the next move. He didn't disappoint her. Dylan spread her labia open and pressed his thumb against her clit.

"Oh." She gasped and widened her legs.

"I love how responsive you are. Every little touch from me draws such delicious noises from you."

Before she could say anything, he licked her clit, then sucked it into his mouth, swirling his tongue around it while he rubbed his thumbs over her slick folds. She cried out when he pulled away, afraid he was leaving, but he adjusted his position and nibbled at her clit before licking his way lower and slipping his tongue inside her.

Grace tried not to clamp her legs together as he moaned into her pussy. Tingles spread down her legs and up her spine as he plunged his tongue within her depths, then licked along her folds and nibbled and sucked at her clit.

Unable to catch her breath, Grace panted as she lifted her hips, moving against his talented mouth. "Sweet mother!" she shrieked as her body began to spasm, her inner muscles trying to clamp onto his tongue.

Dylan plunged first one finger, then two within her core and crooked them. Grace moved her head back and forth as the sensations increased to impossibly high heights. His mouth clamped on her clit and sucked hard. With a scream, she exploded into those very million pieces he'd mentioned earlier.

"Mmm," he moaned, the sound vibrating against her clit.

Grace bucked against him, her fingers digging into his shoulders. Part of her hoped she didn't hurt him, the rest of her said screw it and tightened even more around his fingers as she continued to come while he thrust his digits inside her harder and faster.

Shaking, Grace locked her legs around his shoulders and fisted her hands in the comforter as he relentlessly continued to manipulate her clit with his tongue and teeth.

"Dylan, mercy, please. Dear Goddess, have mercy."

"You taste so good, but I can't wait until that tight pussy of yours milks my cock instead of my fingers. I want you to come all over me again and again until you are spent. Then I want to feast on your juices and fuck you with my mouth again."

He chuckled, but slowly withdrew his fingers and lapped at her juices, moaning and groaning while he licked and sucked at her. His sounds of pleasure excited her again. The sweet tension began to build once more.

Who'd have known that she would like conversation during sex, let alone the dirty talk like he seemed to like. While she still had her wits, she looked down at him and said, "You know, that was wonderful and all, but where are these new and unique forms of pleasure you promised me?"

Eyes gleaming, Dylan looked up at her with a grin that made her shiver. He looked like he was up to no good, and she couldn't wait to find out how wonderful it would feel.

"First, I need to be buried deep inside you. I can't wait any longer, Grace. If I don't fuck you now, I'll have cum coming out my ears."

Laughter bubbled up inside her and poured out as Dylan smiled at her and slid up her body. But when he plunged his cock deep inside her in one thrust, she gasped and arched against him.

"I don't know what it is about you, Grace, but I've never met another woman like you. You make me lose control and forget myself. I don't want to hurt you, but you feel so damn tight and good." He groaned as she tightened her inner muscles.

"Good. I want you to lose control," she whispered as she rocked against him. "I want you to fuck me hard and fast."

Dylan groaned and dropped his head on her shoulder. "You learn awfully fast."

"Whatever could you possibly mean?" she asked as she feigned an innocent look.

"You know damn well what I mean, you little minx."

Grace grinned and dug her nails into his hips as she moved under him, trying to make him get busy again. Dylan snorted, but resumed his fast, hard thrusts, ramming into her over and over as she tightened around him. Quicker than she thought possible, her body tightened and she careened over the edge into an abyss where she shattered once more. Dylan licked her neck as he filled her with his cock. He rubbed against her sweet spot, making her cry out as she helplessly clutched at him. Screaming his name, she was unprepared for the sharp sting when he bit the side of her neck. She came so

hard her vision blurred and her body twitched. The sensations were so overwhelming she moaned and shivered, tingling all over.

Slowly, as her senses returned, Grace realized Dylan was still sucking at her neck. The sensation made her pussy clench around him. *Is he giving me a hickey?* Then she realized he was making little licking and sucking sounds, like he was feeding on her neck.

"What the fuck?" *Did he have a vampire complex or something?* Grace shoved at him. "I didn't say you could mark me."

Dylan looked up at her, his eyes glowing as red as embers, and her blood coating his lips and chin. As she watched, his tongue flicked out, licking at the fluid.

"Oh. My. Fucking. Goddess. Not only do you think you're a vampire, but you made me bleed." Grace swiped at her neck ignoring that inner voice that said his eyes were an unnatural shade.

"Sorry," he hissed, then cursed as his fangs protruded past his bottom lip. He retracted them, but not before she'd seen them.

Grace screamed and screamed, not knowing what else to do. Then her survival instincts kicked in and she shoved him away. In jerky movements, she climbed out of bed and stepped into her dress. Not bothering to close it, she backed away from him, heading for the door.

"Is this what she meant?" Grace cried out as the doorknob dug into her back. Reaching back, she turned the knob and darted out the door.

"Grace! Wait!" Dylan shouted.

*Wait? Does he think I'm stupid?* She raced down the steps and to the front door. *How in the hell did Josh let me leave with a vampire? This must have been what the fortune teller meant. Dylan must be the man who is either my salvation, or my destruction. Why, oh why did the best lay of my life have to try to literally eat me?* She flung open the door and raced outside.

"Grace! Look out!"

His warning registered too late, as something hard hit her and tossed her in the air. She bounced onto a hard surface and lifted into the air again, repeating the actions a few more times before she landed on the ground. Pain so intense she couldn't bear it raced through her body until she mercifully felt everything shutting down. Laying there trying to breathe hurt so bad she wanted to just stop.

Grace closed her eyes and let the hazy warmth wrap around her. A glowing white light surrounded her, and suddenly she couldn't feel anymore pain. Perhaps Dylan wasn't her destruction after all. *What hit me? Why do I suddenly feel so weightless?* It was then she realized she wasn't in her body anymore.

"Grace!" Dylan's cry reverberated in the driveway.

A car door wrenched open, and Grace's head swiveled that way automatically. She watched in horror as Dylan sank his teeth into a man's neck and ripped at his flesh until he severed the head and tossed it, and the body, aside.

Grace looked down and realized she was floating. A quick glance around revealed her now motionless body face down

on the gravel driveway. A black sedan had been her downfall. She looked at the dents on the car where it'd hit her, before she'd bounced across it and slammed into the ground.

Dylan knelt over her body, blood red tears slipping heedlessly down his cheeks. Unable to stop herself, his pain too much for her to stand, Grace floated next to him and dropped her hand on his shoulder. He froze as if he could feel her, and shouted at the stop of his lungs.

"No!" He looked up to the heavens and yelled, "You can't let me find my other half and then take her away from me all in the same night. Grace belongs here with me! I love her. I've always loved her. I want her back, dammit!"

At his words, visions danced through her mind. Dylan and her in another time. He wept over her deathbed as another man tried to get him to leave her. Memories of more past lives flashed before her eyes. She'd chosen not to join Dylan. Not wanting to be one of the undead, Grace had chosen to grow old and die. He'd stayed by her side to the very end. In each and every lifetime.

His pain pierced her heart, and she wept for him. Time and again she'd abandoned him in life, only to be reborn and do it again. The instant love and lust she'd felt for him was genuine. He'd fed on her blood, but he'd never intended to drain her or kill her. She'd overreacted and proven the fortune teller correct. She'd died.

All of a sudden Abigail Montgomery's words made sense. *"A man will either be your salvation or your destruction."*

"I chose life," Grace whispered. "I want to be with Dylan."

He scooped her motionless body up into his arms and carried her inside the house. She barely heard his order to have the car and body disposed of as he stalked, still naked, through the house to his bedroom. He set her down gently on the bed and then turned to usher out his housekeeper and other servants who'd gathered at the commotion.

"Leave us," he ordered and shut the door.

Grace winced as she looked at the desolation on his face. Turning back to look at her body, she knew there was no way she could survive. Her entire body was covered in bruises and cuts. It was a safe guess that her back and neck were broken, as well as her hips. The pain from her last breaths led her to believe her lungs were beyond repair as well.

"You know what to do, Dylan," she whispered. The only way he could save her was to turn her.

"I'm so sorry, Grace. Please forgive me, but I can't go on without you any longer." Dylan reached into his nightstand and removed a large silver stake.

"Oh, Goddess. He's been planning on killing himself."

"Yes," a familiar voice spoke. "But we can't allow that."

Grace turned and faced a beautiful woman dressed in a loose white gown. Straight black hair fell past her shoulders, and a large golden crown that looked like two horns holding a golden stone rested on her head. Brown eyes stared at her.

"Isis."

"Yes, daughter."

"I don't understand." Grace lowered her head and bowed.

"You know who I am and what I am capable of, correct?"

"Of course." Grace looked up into the face of her beloved Goddess. The goddess of medicine and wisdom; goddess of rebirth. "I don't want to be reborn and continue to make him suffer. Each and every lifetime, he has found me and stayed with me until the very end. I cannot bear to make him suffer any longer. If he kills himself, can we be together again?"

Isis shook her head. "No my dear, I do not want you to be reborn. I want you to become a daughter of the night and continue to worship me. I want you to teach the other vampires about me and Horus, and the others. I believe that you will be the one to bring the vampires into the daylight. Your role is too important to let your life end now. He must remain strong and do what he needs. Can you do what I ask of you? Do you love him enough to live as he is and share my word with others? To be my voice, my messenger? The pain will be great, but the reward more than worth it."

Grace looked back at Dylan and realized what Isis wanted.

"Yes. Yes, I do." Grace nodded and braced herself, but was still unprepared for the intensity of the pain that swept over her as she was thrust back into her mortal body. Crying out, she opened her eyes and focused on her love. He was the reason she was suffering. Only he could make things right.

"Grace?" He dropped the stake. "But you were ... are ... dead. I don't understand."

"I am giving you a chance," Isis said as she appeared in the room. "A second chance. This time do things right."

Dylan looked back down at Grace, then up again. "What ... who are you? How did you get in here?"

"I am the Goddess Isis. I have brought your love back to life, but her mortal shell will not hold her long. You know what you must do if you wish to keep her."

Isis vanished and Dylan looked back at Grace. The pain hurt more than she could believe, but one look into Dylan's blue eyes, and she knew it was worth it. But if he didn't hurry, she'd kill him after she was reborn again.

"I love you," he whispered, peppering kisses on her face. "I'm sorry for what I'm about to do, and for what I almost did."

"Dylan," Grace moaned. She licked her lips and closed her eyes.

"What, love?" he asked as he leaned so close his breath fanned her cheek.

"Please ... hurry ... hurts." She coughed, gasping for air as tears poured down her face. If he didn't hurry, she'd die. Again.

"I love you." Dylan pressed his lips to her, then he buried his face against her neck.

This time she didn't feel anything as he pricked her neck with his fangs, and drank her blood. Lightheaded, she realized he was draining her in order to kill her, but then he would have to make her drink his blood. A weak shudder raced through her body at the notion of drinking the very essence of life.

Something wet pressed against her lips, and Dylan whispered, "Drink. Drink my blood and become one like me. Become one with me. Drink, my love."

This was what her Goddess wanted. This was what she wanted. Grace forced herself to swallow, but choked on the thick, rich fluid. Dylan rubbed her throat and crooned encouraging words as his life force filled her mouth.

Slowly, something began to happen. The pain didn't lessen, but the taste and texture of the blood became addicting as she noticed the sweet and tangy flavor. With a moan, she latched onto Dylan and drank until he pulled away, too soon for her tastes. Grace licked her lips and opened her eyes. She stared into his azure gaze until the first pain shot through her body.

"What?" she cried out as it was followed by another pain, and another.

"Your body is changing. The pain will soon pass, and your wounds will heal. Soon you'll be as good as new."

His hands cradled her face as his lips covered her mouth. Fangs shot out of her mouth and Grace bit down, drawing blood out of his lip.

"Oh my Goddess." She groaned, but licked at the blood. Breathless, she whispered, "Sorry, Dylan."

"Without you, my life is forfeit. I'd do anything for you, Grace. Take every last drop of blood if you want to. I should have warned you instead of springing the truth on you like that. But you made me lose control, something no other woman has done since I was turned."

"Isis?" Grace asked, looking around the room as she propped herself up on her elbows. Already the pain was easing, and her body felt tired and sore as opposed to feeling as if she'd just been hit by a car.

"She was here. She truly is the Goddess of Magic. I'm sorry I wasn't more willing to believe."

"She brought me back because she has a job for me," Grace said.

She tried to sit up and winced. Dylan helped her up, but kept his arm around her.

"We need to get more blood into you. The more you feed the quicker you heal. But I don't want to leave you to feed."

"Then don't leave, my love."

Dylan gasped and looked into her eyes.

"Yes, I love you. I am truly sorry that each lifetime before this I chose death over you. I wasn't ready. But now I am, and I have all the memories of those lifetimes. I'm so sorry for all the pain my deaths have caused you. I never meant to hurt you."

"It's all in the past. I would forgive you, but there is nothing to forgive. I love you, Grace. You're the only one for me."

"I know, as you have always been the one for me."

"And together we shall face whatever it is Isis has in store for you. I'll never leave your side again." Dylan cupped her face and kissed her, leaving no doubt in her mind that she'd made the right decision.

THE WHEEL  
OF FORTUNE

by

Tina Bendoni

Sarah breathed a sigh of relief as she signed away the last connection to Darren she had.

*Thank God.*

She never had to deal with the man or his lawyers ever again. And that was perfectly fine with her. Why she had ever married an ass like him was beyond her.

*Because you were young and in love, Sarah.* She smiled grimly. God knew she would never make that mistake again.

Sarah pushed the paper over the large oak desk and her lawyer smiled at her.

"It's done. You are finally free. Not to mention rich."

"I never wanted that, Kathy."

Kathy Murphy reached a hand across the large desk to hold hers. "I know you didn't, Sarah, but what he tried to do to you was wrong. There was no way as your lawyer or your friend I was going to let him get away with it."

Sarah grimaced. "But this much?"

Kathy practically glared. "The bastard tried to bribe me and then threatened you. He deserved worse than this. He should be rotting in jail."

"I know. But he didn't actually hurt anyone."

"He might have, Sarah."

Sarah knew Kathy was right. After fifteen years of living with the man, she was pretty sure that if pushed, he would do anything to get what he wanted. The only thing that had saved her was his previous indiscretions. And her proof of them.

She had been perfectly willing to leave everything to him in the divorce. All she had wanted was for him to leave the money her mother left her alone so she could buy a small place to live. She hadn't even asked him for alimony, despite the fact he had forbidden her to work their entire fifteen year marriage.

*Well, what's done is done, and he's gone from my life.*

"So, are you still moving to the East Coast?"

Sarah smiled. "Yeah. I have a small place in Pennsylvania. Darren has no idea it's there, and I don't expect him to follow me anyway. Not with what you have in your safe."

"When do you leave?"

"My car is packed. As soon as we're done here, I head east. My cell phone will still be connected for a few weeks, and I'll let you know my new info."

"You'll be sure and let me know when you're ready for visitors, right?"

Sarah smiled once again. As it was she was amazed Kathy was letting her do this her way. "I promise."

\* \* \* \*

Six months later, Kathy joined Sarah at her new house. It was gorgeous, and perfect for Sarah. A remodeled craftsman bungalow, it was small and quaint, much like Sarah herself. She had decorated it in period pieces and colors, and it had become the dream house she had never had with her ex-husband.

Kathy had pointed out how much it suited Sarah and she had to agree. Sarah had bought it just after having seen a picture of it on the Internet. It was a match made in heaven.

It was in a small town, close to a couple of bigger cities, so she was never far removed from the beat of the world, but she could still be alone when she wanted to be.

Today was one of the rare days she had ventured into nearby Philadelphia. Kathy had wanted to see the Liberty Bell, and the steps Rocky had climbed in the movie. Sarah would never understand Kathy's eclectic tastes, but she was glad to cater to her friend's wishes.

"You've changed," Kathy commented to her friend, her head tilted as though seeing Sarah for the first time.

"What do you mean?"

"Well, for one, you have put on some weight, finally. And you look a heck of a lot better. And you look less stressed. You're more relaxed than I have seen you in over ten years."

"Relaxed?" Sarah laughed. "Kathy, I'm preparing to go back to school for the first time in fifteen years. Working on my masters in education when I barely remember anything I learned in my bachelor's program. I'm trying to keep up with kids who are a decade and a half younger than I am, and with

more active minds. Trust me, I can't recall a time when I've been under more stress."

Kathy smiled. "No, I don't imagine you can. But you look relaxed. Those worry lines are all gone. You're happy."

Sarah didn't say anything for a few minutes and thought about what her friend had said. She was right. She did feel relaxed. Even with college, and having to fix up her hundred-year-old house, she was at ease and comfortable. She was content—and dare she think it?—safe for the first time in a long time.

"I am."

"Good. Now, let's go see what the rest of your life has in store for you."

"What?"

Kathy grabbed Sarah's arm and pulled her into a shop before Sarah had a chance to see what was in the windows.

"Welcome, ladies. Have you come to find out what your future holds?" The older woman behind the counter asked them as Sarah looked around the shop.

It looked like a pagan shop or fortune teller place. *Fortune teller?* The woman's question finally registered in Sarah's brain. *Oh, no.*

"Not me, sorry," Sarah assured the woman with a smile before turning to glare at Kathy.

"Yes, you. Both of us." Kathy responded with her own too bright smile as she pushed Sarah toward the woman.

"Don't worry, my child. I don't bite." The woman assured Sarah as she held a curtain back for Sarah to precede her into a back room.

With one last glare at Kathy, Sarah followed the woman's direction and took a seat at the round table in the small room.

"Now, my child. Don't worry. This won't hurt a bit."

"I'm sorry, ma'am, but I really don't believe in this kind of stuff."

"I know. But thankfully, you don't have to believe in it, just me."

Sarah smiled at the fortune teller. She sure didn't look the part, dressed in jeans and a sweater, but Sarah was here, so she might as well give the woman a chance.

"Do you have a question in mind?"

"Um, no, not really. Is that gonna be a problem?"

The older woman shook her head. "Not at all, my dear. I will just do a general reading, if that is okay?"

"Sure, whatever you want."

The woman shuffled her cards, and seemed to meditate over the cards, and then she pulled one.

"Wheel of Fortune."

Sarah knew nothing about Tarot cards. *Was this a good or bad card?* She saw a circular emblem with some markings on it, none of which she could understand, and it was surrounded by mythical creatures. The fortune teller could make something out of that?

"Your life has changed quite a bit recently. Something very important to you has ended not long ago, no?"

The woman startled Sarah out of her thoughts. "How did you know that?"

"Well, I could tell you it was the fading tan line on your wedding finger, but you have that conveniently covered by that beautiful amethyst. So, let's just say the cards told me."

The woman gave Sarah just enough time to glance at her ring finger before continuing on, "You are just beginning a new chapter. Something to do with book learning, perhaps?"

"Things are going to start looking up for you, my dear. You have already had a taste of it, I can tell, and they will continue to get better. There is one more bit of business from the past that will need to be addressed, but it will work out in the end, I promise."

\* \* \* \*

"So, what did she say?" Kathy seemed eager to talk about Sarah's reading after getting her own, but Sarah was still a bit uncertain.

"Oh, the usual. Things will get better, have patience. What did she say to you?"

"About the same."

Sarah laughed. "Well at least she didn't charge us much. I was actually surprised to see how little it was."

"Me, too."

Sarah linked her arm through Kathy's as they continued down the walk. "Are you sure you have to leave tomorrow?"

"Unfortunately, yes. I have a huge settlement for a client and the court date is Wednesday. Believe it or not, this one might be worse than yours."

"Ugh, I pity the woman."

Kathy laughed. "Actually, I'm working for the guy. He doesn't deserve what she's doing to him."

"Well, then I know he's in good hands with you."

"We can only hope."

\* \* \* \*

Sarah turned onto her street late the next night. She hadn't expected to get back after dark, but Kathy's flight had been delayed by over five hours. She hadn't left the porch light on or any lights in the house and didn't look forward to entering a dark building alone.

That was until she pulled into her driveway. The garage door was open and there was a light on in one of the spare bedrooms. *What on earth?* She knew she hadn't left the garage door opened. And she hadn't been in that room since Kathy had gotten there last week.

The alarm. She'd set the alarm. She knew she had. That was one thing she never forgot. Kathy had even mentioned it on the way out.

Suddenly shaking, Sarah stopped the car midway up her driveway. *What should I do? Should I call the cops? But what would they say? What would they do? Would they even bother showing up? How long will I have to wait?*

She didn't have much worth stealing. There were nicer houses on the street. *Why would someone break into my place?* Sarah was frozen with fright.

A knock on her driver's door window had her screaming in terror. She looked to the left and saw a man standing a few feet away from her door. He had backed away and was

shining the beam of a flashlight on his face and something in his hand.

It was a badge. Thank God. He was a cop. *A cop? Where the hell did he come from?* Still scared out of her wits, Sarah rolled down the window slightly.

"Can I help you?"

"Is there something wrong, miss?"

"What do you mean?"

"I mean you have been sitting in your car for the last twenty minutes with the engine running and your brakes on. You haven't even put your car in park."

Sarah realized he was right. Suddenly aware of how she must look, she slammed the car into park, and rolled down the window a little bit more. *Twenty minutes? I've really been out here that long?* A quick glance at her dashboard clock assured her she had.

"How do you know how long I've been out here?" *Even if he does have a badge, how do I know he didn't get it from a Cracker Jack box? Do they even give them out as toys any more?* Shit, she didn't know. She wouldn't be able to tell a real badge from a fake one even close up in good light. Never mind from feet away with just the beam of a flashlight.

The man motioned with his head. "'Cause I live next door and I heard you pull up. It caught my attention because I was in the kitchen and putting my dinner in the oven."

Sarah hadn't noticed it before, but the front door to the house next door to hers was wide open, and light poured out from inside.

"Isn't it a bit late for dinner?"

He gave her a crooked, kind of sexy grin that stirred something deep within Sarah that she had thought long dead.

"I work strange hours."

"Are you really a cop?"

"Yes, ma'am." He took a slow step forward, holding his badge out to her, careful not to flash the light into her eyes.

She took the badge into the car and turned the interior light on. Well, it looked real. And it wasn't plastic. His ID was on the other side of the badge wallet.

"Detective Jack Robinson?"

"That's me."

Sarah realized she needed to stop being so scared. It was over. Darren was in L.A., and he would never bother her again. She had to stop being such a coward. Rolling down the window further, she handed the badge back to the officer—no, detective, with a sigh.

"Now care to tell me why you are sitting out here like this?"

"There's a light on in my house. It wasn't on when I left."

"Are you sure?"

"Yes, I'm very sure. I haven't used that room in over a week. And the garage door is open. I never leave it open."

Sarah didn't know what happened, but suddenly the man in front of her was more cop and less neighbor. Whether it was the shifting of his body, or tightening of his muscles, she didn't know and couldn't tell in the minimal light, but there was no doubt at all that he had switched modes, and now meant business.

"You stay in your car. Do you have a cell phone?"

"Yes."

"Okay, call the station and tell them what happened and that I am on the scene. Let them know I'm checking it out."

"But—"

"You stay here, and just make the call, okay?"

Sarah nodded.

"And keep your windows up and the door locked. You hear anything, you peel out immediately and head to the nearest station."

"But what if someone's still in there?"

"That's why you're calling the cops. Right now." He waited for her to get her phone out of her purse before he pulled his gun from his back and headed toward her garage. She half expected him to kick the interior door in, but instead he turned the knob and walked right in. That settled it as far as she was concerned. That door was set to lock automatically behind her whenever she walked out. The only way to unlock it was to do it from the inside. And she hadn't even made that concession for Kathy.

Fumbling with her phone, she made the call as ordered. Whoever she got on the phone promised they would send a car out immediately. They wouldn't let her hang up before the patrol car got there, but they were there in a matter of minutes. As the officers started to get out of their car, Detective Robinson came out of her house by way of the garage door.

She saw him hold up his badge to the officers and call out to them, probably to prevent them from pulling their own

guns. He walked to the side of her car and gestured it was okay for her to get out, which she did.

"Do you have anyone you can call?"

Sarah shook her head. "No. I just moved to the East Coast. All my friends are back in L.A."

He nodded and turned to the waiting cops. "I checked the premises. They're clean, but the house itself is a mess. Unless the lady of the house makes a habit of tearing through her own bookcases, there was definitely someone here tonight. Call a team out. Don't think there will be any prints, but you never know."

Sarah stood by her car, leaning on her open car door. *Someone had been in the house? They tore through my bookcase?*

"Why my house? There are much bigger and more expensive places on the block."

"I don't know, ma'am. Did you have an alarm?"

"Yes, it was on. I know it was. Why didn't it go off?"

"Maybe the wires were cut. Although this doesn't look like a high-tech robbery, you never know. Did you have anything of value?"

"No."

"Anyone who would want to hurt you?"

*Anyone who would want to hurt me? Darren! But he couldn't know I'm here, could he?*

"Miss, are you alright? Your face has gone white." The kind detective put his hand out to her and contacted with her bare arm. The spark that shot through her at his touch made her

knees go out, and he put his arms around her to help her back onto the seat of her car.

*What the hell? What kind of reaction was that?* Her arms were tingling where he still held her. Warmth radiated from their touch, enveloping her in warmth. *Safe. I'm safe.* That was the last thought that crossed her mind before everything went black.

\* \* \* \*

The first thing Sarah was aware of was the warmth of a fleece blanket covering her. It felt warm and safe. She didn't want to move.

*Safe.* She'd had that thought before. *What—* With a bolt, Sarah sat up quickly, opening her eyes.

"Easy, Sarah, easy."

It was her detective neighbor. He sat beside her on the couch and rested a hand on her forearm. Heat. The same heat she experienced before, outside.

"Where am I?"

"In my living room."

"What?"

"You fainted outside in your car. You said you didn't have anyone nearby, and I didn't want you going into the house alone, so I figured I would set you up here until we figured out what to do."

"Oh God, my house."

"I locked it up. I used your keys to make sure everything was locked and turned on the alarm. Not that it did any good earlier."

"I thought you said someone cut the wires?"

"That's what I thought had happened, but apparently not. Someone turned it off about four hours before you got home. Someone who knew your code."

"No one knows my code. Not even my best friend."

"It is something someone could guess? Like your birthday?"

Sarah gave her gorgeous neighbor a stare that told him she wasn't that stupid, and then quickly looked down. Maybe she was.

"Okay, not your birthday, but something just as easy?"

"My college ID number."

"You go to school?"

"Yeah, but not now, I mean my undergraduate degree."

"Okay, so where did you go? Maybe someone in the student office can help us."

Sarah shook her head. "No, that was almost twenty years ago. I don't know if they keep records that long. And anyway, it doesn't matter."

"You know who did it."

"Darren."

"And who exactly is this Darren?"

"My husband. Well, my ex-husband."

"And why would Darren want to ransack your place?"

"He's looking for something."

"Well that much is obvious, Sarah."

She had to change the subject. "How do you know my name?"

He sighed and ran a hand through his chocolate brown hair. It was full and wavy, perfect for running fingers through during sex. *Get your mind on the subject, Sarah.*

It was obvious from the look he shot her that he knew she was trying to change the subject, but he would let her get away with it for now. "I looked in your purse. The officers and I needed a name to put on the report."

"And you needed to make sure I actually did live in the house, right?"

She could have sworn she saw a flush creep upon his face at that question. *Why?*

"Um, well, no. I knew it was you."

"How did you know that?"

"I've seen you in your garden. While you were planting your herbs."

"Hmmm, a man that cooks and knows herbs. Your wife is one lucky woman." She ignored the flutter in her stomach at the thought of this gorgeous man watching her while she was unaware of it.

And he was gorgeous. Now that she was safe and out of danger, she could concentrate on the hunk of a man who had practically rescued her. He was tall, about six foot four, she had noticed that outside, as well as built. But she hadn't noticed how well built he was. He looked to be solid muscle, but not like a weightlifter. He looked like a man who took care of himself and could handle anything that might come up in the line of duty.

She was horrible at judging a man's weight, but she was sure every ounce was solid muscle.

And his face. He had that hard, chiseled look that one often thought of when they pictured a hard-working detective. Half the actors on TV who played cops could have been based on him. And his eyes.

She stared into his eyes and felt herself start to drown in them. They were a deep, dark blue. She didn't think she had ever seen such a color of eyes before, and it was mesmerizing. It reminded her of the pictures she had seen of the deepest ocean. Definitely the kind of eyes a woman could drown in. *What would they look like when they were filled with lust, or desire?*

"No wife."

"Girlfriend?" She swallowed hard, her throat was suddenly dry.

"Nope." He hadn't moved from her side, in fact, she thought he had moved in closer.

"Boyfriend?"

He laughed, showing perfect straight white teeth. "No, no boyfriend either."

"Oh." *What is a man who looks like him, and could obviously take care of himself doing alone? Who cares, Sarah? The point is he is alone. With you. At his place.*

Yeah, but they were here because her psychotic ex-husband had ransacked her home. Lusting after her next door neighbor should not be in her plans. Hell, definitely wasn't in her plans.

Despite that fact, that was exactly what she was doing. Lusting over this gorgeous hunk of a man.

"You?"

"Me what?"

"A girlfriend or boyfriend back home I should be aware of?" The look he shot her was filled with more than just neighborly interest

"No, neither."

"Good."

Before she had time to wonder what he meant by that, her thoughts were frozen by the touch of his lips against hers. It was a soft, gentle kiss. Testing the waters to see if she was responsive.

And responsive she was. She had been too long without male interest, and even longer without a man she was interested in.

The kiss ignited passions she had long thought dormant, and they flared to life explosively. Her arms wrapped around his neck as his reached around her waist and pulled her into him.

There was no fight for supremacy, no attempt to subdue her to his desires, just a gentle sharing of each other's desires.

Gently he pulled away, and lay his forehead against hers.

"I should get home." She needed to be rational. She could do rational.

"No, you shouldn't."

"Yes, I—"

He moved back to look her in the eyes. "Sarah, trust me, you do not want to go back into that house tonight. And until you can get the locks changed and change your alarm code, I'm not letting you go back."

Sarah knew she should be offended that this man thought he could dictate what she would do and when she would do it, but she felt protected instead. *It was kind of nice.*

"Okay, agreed. I wasn't looking forward to seeing the damage anyway. How bad is it?" She cringed waiting for his response.

He shook his head. "Pretty bad, I'm afraid. But you can deal with that tomorrow. You'll have to fill out a police report. And go over everything for insurance. Now, it's bedtime for you."

*Oooh, bed. With him?*

"I have the spare bedroom already made up."

*What is wrong with me? Did I hit my head when I fainted? I must have. Why else am I having these fantasies about a man I just met?* She hadn't had sex since leaving Darren, and that had been over two years ago. And the last few years with him it had been rare, and not very good when it happened.

She must be suffering from withdrawal. *Could a person suffer from sex withdrawal?* It would probably be better if she just went to bed alone. She was ready to jump this man and hadn't even been introduced.

"Thank you, Detective. I appreciate it."

"Jack."

"Excuse me?"

"Call me Jack."

Sarah smiled weakly. "Okay, Jack."

Jack led her up the stairs to a guest bedroom. "The bathroom connects to the other room through there. I'm on the other side of the hallway if you need me for anything."

\* \* \* \*

Sarah woke up to the smell of fresh bacon.

"Good morning, sleepyhead."

There he was. Her hero from last night. She felt a tingle run through her body at the sight of him standing there in her door, holding a tray with breakfast on it.

He was wearing jeans and a dark blue polo that left his biceps bare. She hadn't realized quite how muscular his arms were last night, and she went wet at the sight of them. She knew she was strange, but the sight of nice, toned upper arms had always affected her more than a wide chest or nice legs.

"Ready for breakfast?" he interrupted her train of thought. *God, how long was I staring at him?*

"Um." *Nice and intelligent, Sarah.* "How long have I been out? What time is it?"

"It's ten. I figured you needed to sleep in, so I let you."

Before she could say anything, he strode into the room to the side of the bed. Suddenly she was conscious of only wearing one of his T-shirts. He hadn't wanted her to go back into the house last night, even for something to sleep in, and she hadn't really wanted to go either. His offer of a shirt had been heaven-sent last night. But now, covered in only it and a sheet, she felt as naked as if she wore a skimpy teddy.

She scrambled up, and pulled the blankets up as far as they would go. Unfortunately, with her sitting up, they barely made it to her waist.

"As soon as you're done eating, we can head over and see about the house."

"Do I have to?" Sarah's stomach grumbled both at the sight of a plate full of food, and at the thought of facing what was in her house.

Jack smiled. "Sorry, but you're going to have to eventually, and believe it or not, sooner is better than later."

"I know, I know." She smiled back as she finished eating the breakfast he had brought her. "Thank you, that was wonderful."

"All part and parcel of rescuing damsels in distress."

"And I definitely am one of those, aren't I?"

"Well, I don't know. You weren't screaming help, and there wasn't a bad guy for me to beat up for you, so I guess we can just say you were distressed."

"It's a deal. I guess no time like the present, huh?"

Jack reached for the tray. "I'll meet you downstairs. If you want to take a shower here, feel free. The towels are in the closet in the bathroom."

"Thanks. I think I will take a quick one for now, if you don't mind."

"No problem."

Jack walked out the door, and turned down the hallway without a backward glance.

Sarah sat there for a few more minutes reminding her body to calm down before getting up.

\* \* \* \*

"Oh my God. Is this normal?" Sarah was standing in the middle of her living room floor looking at the damage the intruders had created the night before.

"Honestly? There is usually much more damage than people expect, but it usually isn't this bad. Most of this looks deliberate. There was no reason to tear up everything the way they did." He gestured toward the couch that had been slashed beyond recognition. "They weren't looking for hidden goods here. This was just plain destruction."

Sarah looked around her once again. She didn't know much about normal break-ins, but he was right. A lot of this looked deliberate, like someone really wanted to hurt her.

It had to have been Darren. Darren or someone he hired. He knew she didn't have the tape at her place, so this had to be a scare tactic.

"Care to tell me about it?"

Sarah looked her next door neighbor in the eye. He was a cop. *Will he feel beholden to take me in after he hears my story? Regardless, he was owed an explanation.*

"I was married to a very dangerous man for fifteen years. I was finally able to convince him to give me a divorce just over a year ago. As soon as the divorce was final, I ran from him."

"And you've been hiding here ever since?" At her nod, he continued, "And you've been here, what, six months?"

"Yeah."

"Sarah, I have to tell you unless you got your name and social changed, he could have found you a hell of a lot sooner

than this if he wanted to. What would have made him come after you now?"

"I don't know."

"What about your visitor? The one who you took to the airport last night?"

"No, Kathy never would have told him. In fact, she was my law—oh, damn. If he found out she was coming, he might have assumed she brought the video to me."

"Video?"

Sarah sighed. *In for a penny, in for a pound.* "Kathy, her late husband, Darren and I all went to college together. She found an old video a couple years ago when she was going through her husband's stuff. There is a section with Darren and a couple of the other fraternity brothers doing coke."

"That was years ago, it's not like he could get in trouble for it now."

"But he wants to run for political office. That will keep him from doing it."

"Aah, so that's how you got him to give you the divorce."

"Yeah, and leave my mother's estate alone. He wanted her money for his campaign. I convinced him not to try to touch it in the divorce."

"So, I'm still confused, if you're divorced, and the settlements are final, why would he come after you now?"

Sarah didn't say anything for a few minutes. "To scare me. To remind me who really has all the control in my life."

"And does he?"

"Jack, I have a phone call to make. Thanks for bringing me home." Her voice had grown hard. She was going to take care of this once and for all.

"Oh, no."

"What?"

"You are not going to get rid of me that easily. Go make your call, and I'll wait here."

"But—"

"Sarah, I'm not leaving. Just go make the call. I'll be here when you're done."

Sarah took her cell phone out of her purse, and went to her bedroom to call Kathy.

\* \* \* \*

"Yes, I'm sure."

Sarah listened to Kathy protest what she had just asked her to do.

"Kathy, you know him, he won't give up until he has it. If he really wanted to hurt me, he would have. He just wants the tape back. It served its purpose, now give it to him."

"Can I at least make a copy?" Kathy's voice sounded tinny over the airwaves, but Sarah could still sense the anxiety in it.

She laughed. "I would expect you to. He wouldn't expect me to. He thinks I'm still the innocent naïve woman he married. But you, on the other hand, are a duplicitous bitch."

Kathy's relieved laugh came through the phone lines loud and clear. "Yes I am, thank you very much, and by the time I'm done, you will be, too."

"Thank you, Kathy."

Kathy's voice grew soft. "Anything for you, Sarah. Anything."

"Now go find that hot cop and get your brains screwed out."

"Kathy!" Sarah smiled widely. Feeling truly relieved for the first time in over a year. *This would finally be really over.* Deep down she had known Darren would find her again; it had only been a matter of time. Giving him the tape was the right thing to do, if only for her conscience.

"Go. Darren will have the tape by the end of the day. I hate saying it, but you're probably right. He made his point, let him think he won."

They said their goodbyes and Sarah walked back into her living room.

"Are you going to tell me what that was all about?"

Sarah smiled. "No, I'm not. But I didn't do anything illegal, and I didn't do anything that will get me in trouble."

Sarah looked around the room. The bookcase had been straightened, and all the books had been placed in both subject and alphabetical order, the damaged ones Jack had left off to the side. He had replaced the couch cushions, even though they were ripped, and the floor was clean of any trash.

"I tried to pile up the papers and stuff that were salvageable. Not much was broken, though. You apparently aren't big on knickknacks?"

"No, candles are my decorating scheme. Don't have to dust them." She shook her head as she looked around at all his hard work. "You didn't have to do this, you know."

"I know, but I wanted to."

"Thank you, I appreciate it more than you can ever know."

"Then go out to lunch with me when we're done here."

"Only if I can pay."

"You don't have to do that, Sarah."

Sarah walked up to him, close enough to put her arms around him, but not wanting to take that final step.

"No, I know I don't, but I want to. Not just for this, and not just for last night. But let's say as a celebration of my finally beginning my new life. This time for real."

His arms snaked around her body, pulling her tightly into him. "A new beginning? Is there room for new friends in this new beginning?"

"Yes, new friends, and a whole lot more."

Sarah wanted to say more. To explain everything to him, but that could wait for later. Right now, she decided she would just lose herself in his kiss.

## THE JUDGEMENT

by

Michelle Hasker

"I can't believe you dragged me in here, especially after what happened to you."

Abigail watched from the back room as Grace Evans led her reluctant friend into the store. She remembered Grace very well, and was pleased to see she'd survived her ordeal and was looking better than ever. Death suited her.

"I know you hate these things, but she nailed me, Ada and Cybil. I really think this would be good for you. There is a nasty black cloud hanging over you lately and I wish I knew what to do to help you."

"Well for a start, you could stay here while the crazy psychic pretends to tell my future."

Grace snorted. "Fat chance. I want to hear what she has to say."

Abigail nodded and stepped out of the room. She'd known Charlie Rose would be one of her hardest, but she'd need that barrier to guard her through what was to come.

"Charlie Rose. My name is Abigail Montgomery. It is my pleasure to meet you. If you are ready, we can step into the back for your reading."

"How did you know my name?" The tall, leggy redhead narrowed her eyes.

"Grace called ahead and said she was bringing you. Besides, I watch television."

Charlie glanced back and forth between her and Grace. "If Grace believes you and says you are legit, then I'll give you a chance. But any funny stuff, and I'm outta here."

"You are much more graceful and polite on screen than you are in real life." Abigail hoped Charlie would think about her words. *Harsh as they were, they were the truth. This one had a long journey ahead of her.*

"So did Grace tell you what to say or are you going to make it up as we go?"

"Your sarcasm is unnecessary, and unbecoming, my dear. Are you this polite to all the young men you meet?" Abigail paused and watched Charlie flush. "It's no wonder Grace thought you'd need help planning your future. If you don't watch yourself, you'll find yourself old and alone."

"Like you?" Charlie snapped.

Grace gasped, but Abigail laughed. "You have a lot of rage inside of you, but who are you really mad at, Charlie? Me? Or yourself?"

"I have *no* clue what the hell you're talking about." Charlie turned and glared at Grace. She asked in a low whisper, but Abigail could hear her clearly, "What the hell did you tell this old hag?"

"I speak of something not even Grace knows. Something from your past." Abigail sat down and picked up her deck. As she shuffled the cards, she watched Charlie pale. If Charlie didn't get a hold of her emotions, she was definitely headed for that nervous breakdown the tabloids predicted.

"There are many things she doesn't know." Charlie laughed. "In fact I bet there are a lot of things about her that I don't know."

"You wouldn't believe me if I told you," Grace whispered.

Charlie didn't seem to hear Grace, so Abigail cut the deck and drew the top card. She hesitated before flipping it over. "I'm going to do a one card reading of your immediate future. When you are ready and come back here of your own accord, I will give you a longer, more-in-depth reading. Look at this as your free sample."

"Free?" Charlie smiled and sat up straighter. "You just said the magic word."

"The card about your immediate future is *Judgment*."

Charlie stared down at the card. "Judgment? What the hell are you talking about? Who is judging me and for what? An upcoming movie? A new television show? Tell me, old woman."

"Your patience knows no bounds." Grace sighed and gave Abigail a sympathetic smile. "Please ignore her. She's in a bad mood. I thought this would help her."

"No apologies necessary, Grace. I am pleased enough just to see you." Abigail turned back to Charlie and tapped on the card. "Judgment. This card is about rebirth, resurrection, changes. It could mean something as simple as a job change, or a move. But in your case, it doesn't."

"What do you mean?" Charlie leaned forward and stared at the card. "It looks like a good card to me."

"It *is* a good card. There are no bad cards. In fact, Grace drew Death and she can tell you that nothing bad came of that."

"She's right," Grace said.

Charlie leaned back and blinked. "You got Death?"

Grace nodded. "And Ada got The Magician while Cybil pulled The Hermit."

"But Ada *married* a magician and Cybil a hermit. Why aren't you dead?"

"But, my dear, I am dead."

Charlie quickly slid her chair back, but then stopped and started laughing. "I almost believed you for a minute."

Grace shrugged and looked back at Abigail. "So what does this card mean for Charlie?"

Abigail caught Charlie's gaze. "It means she needs to deal with something in her past. Something she would prefer remain hidden. She must face something she doesn't want to. It won't do any good to hide. Everything is going to come out whether you want it to or not. Face what you have to face, make that decision. Change. Heal and renew. You can overcome the obstacles and come out on top, but you won't be unscathed. Don't run; meet him face to face and rectify the wrong."

Charlie stared at her, horror in her expression, but she composed herself and stood up before Grace noticed. "Thanks so much for the enlightening reading, but you're wrong. There is *nothing* in my past haunting me. Come on, Grace. Let's get out of here. I need a drink."

Abigail watched as Charlie stormed out of the backroom, and out of the shop without a second glance. Grace gave her a hug, then ran after her friend.

"Good thing you have such a loyal friend looking out for you, Charlie. You will need her before this thing is through."

\* \* \* \*

"She's a quack," Charlie said as she ordered another Sex on the Beach.

"She is not."

Grace grabbed her arm so Charlie turned to look at her. "What?"

"She does know the future. She has predicted it three times so far for me and my friends and numerous times for the ladies at my work. If she says you have something in your past waiting to rear up and bite you, then I'd keep a close eye on my rear end."

"She *is* wrong. You'll see. My life is an open book. There's nothing hidden in *my* closet." Charlie hoped Grace wouldn't notice the slight tremor in her voice as she spoke. Or if she did, that she'd attribute it to the drinks.

Grace sighed. "Hiding won't help you."

Charlie felt a twinge of guilt, but quickly pushed that aside. She'd have gotten nowhere in this business if she'd allowed emotions into her heart, and now it was just too easy to not feel anything. *So what if I do have a brash exterior?* It was better to keep everyone at bay so she couldn't hurt anyone again.

The bartender set the drink down on the bar and she grabbed it up and took a deep swallow before she fished around in her purse for some money. As she handed the twenty to the bartender, she noticed how much he looked like Andre. Shivering, she looked away. That had been so long ago. She'd been young and stupid. A summer romance had been a bad idea. Even worse had been his insistence that she have the baby. She had just landed her first movie role and she didn't want to mess it up with morning sickness and an expanding waistline. In this business, she'd have been discarded in a heartbeat. Andre hadn't understood. He claimed theirs was a forever love. And then he'd accused her of murdering their unborn child in order to free herself of him and she'd let him. She'd let him think that even when he'd packed his bags and left. It had been for the best.

Tears filled her eyes as Charlie pushed her drink away. She'd had enough. Time to go home and sober up before her emotions got the better of her and she did something stupid. Like look for Andre. No. That part of her life was over. *Andre is better off without me. Hell, everyone is. Who will miss me when I'm gone?*

"Charlie?" Grace asked as she grabbed Charlie's arm. "Are you okay? *Are you crying?* Let's get out of here and get you home."

Numb, Charlie let her friend drag her out of the bar and drive her home. She barely protested when Grace made her take two aspirin and tucked her into bed. But when Grace said she was going to spend the night, Charlie roused enough

to ask her leave. *It was bad enough I'd lost control of my emotions, but to have a witness to it as well?*

After Grace left, Charlie stumbled into the kitchen and dug around in the fridge until she found the vodka. She mixed a screwdriver, but for her second round, she skipped the orange juice and downed a few shots of vodka. Finally the alcohol kicked in and thinking about Andre didn't hurt anymore. After another few shots for good measure, she made it to the bathroom. *Did I take my pill today?*

\* \* \* \*

An annoying beeping woke Charlie from the most erotic dream about Andre. *Andre?* She opened her eyes and stared at a white ceiling. *What the hell?* She tried to sit up, but the room spun quickly and her stomach heaved. She turned to the side and threw up until she was left breathless and trembling.

Cool fingers brushed against her forehead and a damp cloth wiped her face. She turned gratefully toward her savior and froze. For the second time in as many days, she thought she was looking at Andre. Thick curly black hair hung just past his ears. His sea-green eyes met hers and she felt the room begin to spin. He was a dead ringer for Andre.

Blinking her eyes to clear away the haze engulfing her, she tried to remember how she got here. "What happened? Where am I? Who are you?" The words creaked out of parched lips and a dry throat.

"You are at Community Hospital. Your friend Grace brought you in when she couldn't wake you up."

"I got a little drunk; stuff like that happens all the time. What did I get? Alcohol poisoning?"

He sighed and looked down at her with a frown. "We pumped about half a bottle of muscle relaxants and painkillers out of you. If your friend hadn't found you when she did, you'd be dead."

"Dead?" she croaked.

"Mixing any medication with alcohol is a very bad idea."

"I thought I was taking something else."

His eyebrows raised, but he didn't say anything. *He doesn't think I was trying to kill myself, does he?*

"Regardless of your intent, you need to spend another day or two in here until we're sure you're capable of going home. We have been fending off reporters for you, but you should be prepared in case someone leaks the real reason you're in here."

"Oh, God, no." Charlie groaned.

"You made your bed, now you'll have to lie in it," Grace said.

Charlie looked across the room and saw her friend enter. Grace saw the mess on the floor and winced, but then she walked into the bathroom and came out with a bunch of paper towels.

"Good thing they pumped your stomach before you got sick," she muttered as she knelt on the floor and cleaned up the mess. "What were you thinking, Charlie? What was I thinking? I knew you weren't in the right frame of mind, but when I left you alone, you were in bed asleep."

"I got up to have a few more drinks, then I needed my medication, but apparently I took the wrong one." Charlie grimaced as Grace looked at her with doubt in her eyes.

"I know it looks bad, but I had no idea I was taking muscle relaxants. I mean I'd already drunken myself into a stupor, it's not like I needed to feel any looser."

"I had your doctor fax over your medical history so we knew what we were dealing with. No one would blame you for trying to take the painless way out, although they would call you a chicken." The doctor frowned at her. "Even if it isn't the right thing to do, it'd be just like you to run away and hide from your problems."

Charlie gasped and opened her mouth to say something but Grace beat her to it. "Who the hell do you think you are?" She dropped the towels and turned to the doctor with her hands on her hips.

"Andre Phillips. Charlie's ex-lover, and her current physician."

Grace's eyes narrowed and she looked at Charlie. Ignoring her, Charlie turned to Andre. "I thought it was you, but then again even the bartender looked like you last night. Is there anyway I can request a different doctor?"

"You could, but you won't need one. As soon as all your signs return to normal, you should be ready to leave. I'll leave the personal comments out for the rest of your stay here."

"See that you do that, *Doc*." Charlie glared at him until Grace cleared her throat.

"I'd like to spend some time with my friend. Are you okay with that, Doctor Phillips?"

"Of course. We've been watching her around the clock. This will give our nurses a much needed break. It's not easy keeping the press away from an actress as popular as Charlie. And it's even harder to keep *your* secrets hidden, isn't it?" he asked.

"Ass," Charlie hissed. She'd have thrown something at him but it hurt too much to move. "I hate you."

"That feeling is mutual, darlin'." Andre turned and walked out of the room, closing the door behind him.

"You had an affair with him?" Grace gaped at her.

"Don't make it sound so nasty. Neither of us was married and it was more of a fling. I was getting ready for my first big movie and I'd gone to Florida to get a suntan."

"Don't make it sound nasty? I'm just amazed that you had a relationship, even if it was a fling, with a total stranger."

"It was the summer I found out I had cervical cancer." Charlie turned away before she could see the pity in Grace's eyes.

"By the Goddess. You mean he's the one who got you pregnant? Hell you should be thanking him. If you hadn't gotten pregnant and miscarried, you'd never have known. It's a miracle you can still have children. If it had gotten any worse, you'd have needed a hysterectomy."

"Yeah well, I told him that I didn't want a child and I was going to have an abortion. So when I miscarried..."

"He thought you'd gone through with your threat." Grace finished for her.

"Yeah." Charlie sighed. "I thought I'd never see him again. I hadn't wanted to settle down anyway. I wanted to become rich and famous. A married woman with children wouldn't get those parts I played, the ones that made me the name I am today."

"The name you can't stand," Grace whispered.

Charlie shrugged. "What does it matter? What does much matter, anymore?"

"I think this is what the fortune teller meant. She said something from your past would resurface and haunt you. She said there would be a choice and a change. That you can't run and hide from it."

"Well I certainly can't run and hide from Andre while I'm under his care, can I? But she just got lucky. That woman is a quack and you shouldn't listen to everything she has to say." Charlie almost winced as she heard the acidic tone of her own voice, but she was on a roll and couldn't stop even if she wanted to. "Get out of my room and leave me alone. I don't need you or anyone else."

"All right, Scrooge. But I'll be back tomorrow night to bust you out of this joint. Even if I have to promise to keep you in a padded room." Grace hugged her, then walked to the door. "You call me if you need anything, Charlie. I mean it. *Anything.*"

Charlie nodded and forced a smile. She turned away before Grace could see her tears. "Oh man, I've gotten myself into one fine mess. Maybe there's something good and distracting on television."

She flicked on the TV and winced at the grainy picture of her plastered on the screen. "In other news, actress Charlie Rose is in the hospital after an attempted suicide."

"I didn't try to kill myself, you stupid bitch!" Charlie growled and turned off the television before she heard news that they'd learned about her hideous secret. One so terrible she hadn't even told Grace.

\* \* \* \*

"Charlie?" Andre's voice sounded far away, but she struggled to hear what he was saying. "Charlie?"

"Andre?" She reached out her hand, but he vanished in a puff of smoke. Kind of like what he'd done after he'd learned she wasn't pregnant anymore.

Charlie gasped and sat up, glancing around the room. *Hopefully they will release me today, but what will I say to the media?* The press seemed to enjoy spreading rumors about her supposed suicide attempt, but if they knew the truth, then no one would ever believe she hadn't meant to kill herself.

"Maybe it really would be better if I was gone," she murmured as she brushed her hair. "I wouldn't be able to suffer anymore, and I'd finally stop hurting the people I love."

"Your death really wouldn't make the world a better place," Andre said as he closed the door and leaned against it. "If that is really what you think, then I certainly will advise against your release today."

"Have you talked to my doctor?" Charlie asked, suddenly panicked he might have found out her secret.

"Only in regards to what happened last night. He sent me anything that would help with ascertaining your mental health, nothing more. Are you screwing him, too?"

"What?" Charlie stared at him. "How can you just stand there so nonchalantly and ask me a question like that?"

"Come on, Charlie. I know the business, you taught me well. Sleep your way to the top with anyone who is useful for your career. I'm not sure why you have a psychologist, but he was very worried about you. More than professional concern."

She turned away from him. He was angry with her and had every right to be. She'd let him think the worst of her, so she had no one to blame but herself.

"Not going to defend yourself?"

"Why should I? You're going to believe the tabloids just as everyone else does. You more than the others have a reason to hate me. Hate me all you want, just please let me go home." She didn't want to beg, but at this point she would if she had to.

"I've called your psychologist to come and assess you. If he gives the say so, then I'll release you. Of course I'm still unsure of your mental stability."

Charlie groaned. *Don't say a word, girl. You deserve this. It'll all be over soon and then you can cry.*

"He should be here soon. I just wondered if there was anything you wanted to say to me before you vanish out of my life again."

"For the record, *you* vanished out of *my* life. Stormed out would be more like it. I don't see how I owe you anything."

"You owe me something. That was my child, too." The anger and hurt in Andre's face made her realize it might not have been doing him a favor to let him think the worst of her.

"You've held a grudge this long because you think I killed our unborn child?"

"You admitted it! You said it like you were ticking off items on a grocery list. *I went out to lunch with Delia. I went to see the doctor. Then I stopped for cocktails with Simone. Oh yeah, and I'm not pregnant anymore.*" Andre walked over and stared down at her. "Haven't you regretted it even once? Or are you still the hard, cold bitch you were then?"

Charlie swallowed and looked away. Andre grabbed her chin and lifted her face up before she could blink away her tears.

"Finally. You do have a heart under all that ice."

"Andre."

"Don't. I don't want to hear any of your excuses. Just tell me you've felt some remorse for murdering our child."

She looked away in an attempt to keep her composure. "It was easier for you to think that. I made a big mistake telling you that I was getting an abortion. I should never have said that. I let my emotions rule instead of my head, and I've regretted it ever since. But when you thought I had the abortion, it was easier for me to let you think that than to tell you the truth."

"What are you saying? That you let me think you had an abortion, but didn't? I saw how much pain you were in; I saw the heavy bleeding and your depression. Those are all typical."

"I won't deny that I said I was getting one. But I didn't."

"You miscarried?"

Charlie looked away and sighed. "If I hadn't miscarried, the doctor would have given me an abortion."

"But you just said you wouldn't have done it." Andre growled and ran his fingers through his thick black hair.

"She had cervical cancer," Grace said.

"Grace!" Charlie jumped and turned toward the sound of her voice. "Shut up!"

"Cancer?" Andre asked. "You had cancer?"

Charlie looked at him and was surprised at how pale his face was. "I was going to tell you, but you assumed the worse, which was my fault of course. I wasn't that young, but I was naïve enough to think you wouldn't want a damaged woman. It was a relief when you walked out that door and I could stop pretending I was okay."

"But all this time..."

"I'm sorry." Charlie hung her head. "I thought it was for the best."

"How dare you play judge, jury and executioner! You made a judgment call that affected both of us!" He lowered his voice and turned away, "If you had loved me, you'd have trusted me. You wouldn't have had to suffer alone. I wouldn't have had to grieve by myself. You could have had someone to hold you and help you heal. Damn you for being so selfish!"

"Andre!" Charlie reached for him, but he shook his head and walked out the door. When she would have gone after him, Grace put her hand on Charlie's shoulder and pushed her back down on the bed.

"Let him go, hon. That was quite a bomb you just dropped on him. He needs time to get used to the idea. And he needs to reevaluate his opinion of you. Give him some time."

Charlie leaned against Grace and sobbed. She cried for the loss of her baby and Andre. Grace held her while she cried. At least she still had one friend. Suddenly Charlie remembered something she'd meant to ask Grace.

"How the hell did you get in my apartment?" she asked as she lifted her head.

"I meant it when I told you I was dead."

Grace slowly transformed before her eyes. She turned from a beautiful blonde into a deadly creature Charlie could only call a vampire.

"But..." Charlie stuttered. "How? What? When?"

"I told you that Abigail knows her stuff. What she has predicted for you has come to pass. Now it is time for you to change. For you to stop hiding your secrets and the real you behind that hard shell. I love you, Charlie, but you are the world's biggest pain in the ass." Grace changed back to herself and added, "Oh yeah, don't tell anyone about me being dead or undead, or anything. I'd hate to get staked in my sleep."

When Grace winked at her, Charlie bit back a laugh. "I don't agree with everything that woman said, but I'm willing to concede that some of it has come true. But I do *not* need to go public with my cancer and the miscarriage."

"Just think about it, Charlie. You are wealthy and powerful; the message you could spread to younger women who look up to you might get some of them to see their doctor

regularly and get checked. You knew nothing about this disease the first time around, but think of the awareness you can promote. You could even start a foundation or something."

The protest died in her throat. Most of what Grace said struck a chord deep within. Promoting the awareness of cervical cancer was a good idea. Many women didn't find out until it was too late. At least the first time she'd been spared the fate she'd been dealt this time.

"So you know I have it again?"

Grace nodded. "And I know you will survive."

"Did Abigail tell you all this?" Charlie couldn't stop the sneer. She sighed. Old habits were hard to break. "I'm sorry, Grace. There is no excuse for my rudeness."

"I've gotten quite used to it, Charlie. I'm thick-skinned, so it takes a lot to hurt me. And no, Abigail didn't mention it to me. My vampiric abilities picked up on it."

"The blood?" Charlie asked.

Grace smiled, but didn't answer as she walked over to the door. "I hear Andre coming back. Do you know what you are going to say to him?"

"I haven't the faintest idea."

"Perhaps if you let yourself feel instead of thinking every single thing through and analyzing everything. When you're angry, you let your true feelings show. Can you do that now? To help Andre heal?"

"I ... I'll try." Charlie swallowed. Grace turned into mist as the doorknob turned. The mist drifted across the room and out the window as Andre entered.

"How are you feeling?" he asked.

"To be honest, not that well." She forced a laugh.

"I'm sorry. I know I'm partially to blame."

"No, I brought it on myself. But I'm going to stop hiding."

"That's good." This time Andre laughed. "I wanted to let you know your psychologist will be here in a minute. I wanted to have him verify that you weren't suicidal before I released you. I assume no one knows you better than him."

Charlie read into what he left unsaid. "Yes my doctor is my confidante, but there is nothing other than a doctor/patient relationship between us. If I even talk to a man, the press has him in my bed before the night is out. Not that you need to know, but I can count on one hand the number of men I've slept with since you left me."

"There are some things better left unsaid." He shifted as if uncomfortable.

"It's okay, I'm not interested in your sexual history. But you seem awfully interested in mine, judging by all your comments."

"It's not that. I was looking for ammunition against you. Please, Charlie, forgive me for not acting like a professional with you. I've been an ass and deserve to be fired for the things I've said to you."

"I forgive you, but you didn't even have to ask. I still want to go home though. I don't know why you kept me this long."

"I really thought you were suicidal. But I guess, with your news and all, you decided to get drunk and genuinely made a mistake."

"What news?" Charlie sat up. "I haven't had any news."

"There was a press release that you asked to be released from your contract due to circumstances beyond your control, and that someone else will be playing the lead in that vampire slayer movie."

"Please tell me you are joking."

"I'm sorry. I thought you knew. I figured you set it up."

Charlie groaned and ran her fingers through her hair. *Sure I've mentioned a surgery to my agent, but why in the world was I removed from the movie? Has the press trumped up my accidental overdose even more? Does my agent think I'm too risky and wants to dump me? Someone is going to pay for this. Big time.*

"Knock, knock." Doctor Edwards knocked on the door and opened it. He smiled at Charlie as he stepped inside and shut the door. "You really should leave the door open, young man. You wouldn't want to be accused of fooling around with a patient."

"In this case they'd be right." Charlie laughed.

"Oh, well you should still behave when you're at work."

"No, we're not fooling around. But we were very close in the past." Charlie winked at her doctor.

"I just wanted the opinion of a doctor who knows her very well. I wanted to be sure that we weren't releasing her too soon. I didn't want her to go home and try to kill herself all over again."

"You don't know Charlie very well if you think she'd kill herself. Why, I don't know anyone tougher than she is. Considering the circumstances, I think she's holding up very well."

Charlie tried to signal Doctor Edwards to warn him to keep his mouth shut about the cancer, but he didn't say anything.

\* \* \* \*

Charlie lay in bed thinking about everything that had happened. She couldn't blame Andre for thinking she was suicidal, but she didn't have to like it. Fortunately Doc Edwards gave her a clean bill of health *and* didn't let her secret slip. Since she had another chemotherapy treatment tomorrow, she wanted to get plenty of sleep, but thoughts of Andre kept invading her dreams.

If she didn't get him out of her head soon, she'd probably go crazy. The phone rang, and Charlie screamed. After she caught her breath she looked at the clock and noticed it was after nine. *It couldn't be a telemarketer, so who would be calling me this late?*

"Hello?" she asked when curiosity got the best of her.

"Hi, Charlie. It's Andre. How are you feeling?"

"I'm fine. Why do you ask? Do you make a habit of calling all your patients at home to check on them?"

"No."

His deep chuckle vibrated through the line sending familiar shivers up her spine. *Dammit.* Had clearing the air reawakened those longings she'd thought his leaving had buried?

"I wanted to know if we could get together and talk over old times. I know you had time to heal and move on, but I've held this grudge for so long that I don't know how easy it will be for me. I haven't had a long-term relationship since we

split up, and I'm hoping if we can make peace with each other, I'll be able to get over this. I know you already have, but I was hoping, for old times' sake, that you'd say yes."

"Yes," Charlie answered, then bit her lip. *Why did you say yes? Are you insane? What good will it do to rehash old times with him? And with those feelings stirring to life again, you couldn't be making a bigger mistake.*

*Feelings stirring to life? Who am I kidding? I've never stopped loving Andre. I've also never found a man to take his place. This is a terrible idea.*

"Great. I'll stop by your house tomorrow and we can go out to dinner. Somewhere nice and public so we can chat and get reacquainted."

"You know what. I don't think it's a good idea. You don't need to see me again to move on with your life. All you have to do is forget about that short time period and find a new gal."

"If that's how you really feel, Charlie, I think I need to be more honest with you. I want to see you again, outside of a doctor/patient relationship."

"Andre. It was in the past. I think we should leave it in the past."

"Can't we let bygones be bygones? Now that I know the truth, don't I deserve a chance to make it up to you? Or at least you make it up to me? You left me thinking so many evil things about you and women in general. You owe me."

There were so many responses she wanted to make to his comments, but she realized he was right. *Closure would be good.*

"You can start by telling me how you ended up working at my local hospital," Charlie said after a minute.

"I've always kept an eye on you, and when I saw the job opening, I jumped at the chance. It was pure luck that landed you under my care, though."

"You might say it was luck, my stomach and aching body would disagree." Charlie laughed.

"I could come over and give you a massage."

"Andre, it sounds like you're flirting with me. Be careful, you wouldn't want me to misinterpret your intentions."

"The hell with misinterpreting my intentions. I love you, Charlie. I've always loved you. I never stopped missing you, wanting you, loving you. Your touch, your smile, your heart. I've loved you all along, Charlie. And now that I know what you went through, I am mad at you for pushing me away, but I understand it. I forgive you. I forgive you for being away from me for so long. I'm not letting you go this time. Don't make me let you go."

Tears slipped down her cheeks at his words. She couldn't doubt the sincerity in his voice, and it increased her guilt.

"Don't. Don't do this, Andre."

"Are you crying? Dammit, Charlie. Let me come over now."

"I-I'm sorry, Andre. I-I've always loved you and only you. I'm sorry that my choice affected you so much. I wish you happiness and love with a woman who deserves someone like you."

"Charlie? Don't hang up. Please, Charlie. Give me a chance."

"You shouldn't be begging for a chance, Andre, and I've used up all of mine."

"Charlie!"

She winced as he shouted into the phone. "Good bye, Andre," she whispered and hung up the phone.

Almost immediately it began to ring again and didn't stop until she yanked the cord out. "Just go away like I told you to." Charlie burst into tears at the thought of how close she'd been to getting Andre back. But he'd always wanted kids. He'd never stopped hating her for killing their child. He wouldn't want her now that she couldn't have kids. He had to be lying anyway. *How could he have loved me and hated me so much?*

"There is a fine line between love and hate," Grace said from the doorway.

Charlie looked up and grimaced. "You have got to stop sneaking up on me."

Grace laughed and floated over to the bed. "Hey, now that you know my secret I can use all my tricks around you. Besides, Abigail was right, you do need me."

"I do not need you."

"Awwwww. If this is what being in love does to you, you need to stay that way."

"I am not in love." Charlie growled and got out of bed. She pulled on her bathrobe and walked out to the kitchen. Grace followed her, still floating an inch off the floor.

"You are so in love."

"Am not."

"Are too."

"Oh just knock it off, Grace."

"Knock it off, Charlie." Grace mocked her.

Charlie growled and advanced toward her, ready to smack her, vampire or not.

"Chill, sweetheart. I'll stop teasing you. But you need to stop this torture. How long will you make yourself pay for something that wasn't even your fault? You can't help that you got cancer anymore than the next woman can. What you can do is grab this chance by the horns. Remember what Abigail said. Change. Heal. Make peace with Andre. I swear you will not regret it."

Charlie shook her head. Before she could say anything, a knock sounded on her door.

"Charlie?"

"Andre?" *The man had some nerve.*

"He loves you. Other men would have moved on or gotten over it. He held onto the hate because it made it easier to be without you. Doesn't it seem odd that he so swiftly got over his anger? Because the anger, once it lost focus, disintegrated. His feelings for you are genuine."

"And you know this how? Because of your vampiric abilities?"

"No. My womanly intuition. You should try listening to yours sometime."

Charlie snorted, then jumped when Andre started to bang on the door.

Grace floated over to the door, opened it, ushered Andre in, then closed it behind her as she left.

"Traitor!" Charlie shouted after her.

"At least tell me why," Andre said as he walked over to her. "Give me a reason to leave you alone."

"You want a reason?" Charlie snapped. *I'll give him a fucking reason.* "I have cervical cancer *again*. This time they are removing my uterus. There will be no children. Now go, find a nice fertile wife to live a long *healthy* life with."

Guilt tugged at her heart as Andre's mouth dropped open and he paled. *Okay, maybe it would have been better to break it to him gently.*

Andre dropped to his knees and wrapped his arms around her waist. It was her turn to stare at him in surprise as he turned his head and kissed her abdomen. As tears rolled down his cheeks, she wondered if this was his way of saying goodbye. *What the hell?*

"Charlie, please. Let me stay with you; let me help you. I love you, uterus or not. With or without children. I never dreamed you'd give me a chance, but now that I have it, I'm not letting you go. You're stuck with me."

"Andre." She groaned and slid her fingers into his thick curly hair. Desire curled in her belly and she knew it was too late. *How can I doubt his sincerity?* "Oh, Andre."

He pulled her down to the floor and wrapped his arms around her. "This time, I'm not letting you go. Too long you've been too far away from me. You made a judgment call last time. This time it's my turn. I love you. I need you. Charlie, please marry me. Uterus or not, you are the very breath I take. I need you with every beat of my heart. I—"

"Stop already." She laughed and pressed a finger to his lips. "You are just so goddamned mushy. I want a second

chance with you. I've loved you all along, too. But I let my stubbornness and righteousness keep us apart. I'm sorry for trying to make all the decisions for us."

"I'm sorry that you felt the need to do that. I promise, this time, will be different. This time it's forever."

"Forever," Charlie echoed, tears falling more freely now as he hugged her tight.

"Forever," he repeated, then pressed his lips to hers, claiming her heart and soul.

## THE MOON

by

Tina Bendoni

Theresa looked around the office she'd spent the last five years of her life in. She loved coming into work every day, and she would miss it if she had to change. Sighing, she closed her door gently.

She wouldn't know what was happening until next week at the earliest. It was time to let it go. If John and Mary couldn't save the company, then she would find another job. She knew she would be able to, and probably one that paid more, but had her doubts about whether she would find one as satisfying.

Knowing it would do no good to brood, Theresa locked the front door of the building as she walked out. A week from Monday they would have all their answers.

When John and Mary had given everyone this upcoming week off, every single one of their employees had protested. But they'd insisted. Everyone had been working eighty-hour weeks for the last three months trying to get things in order for the planned merge. If things didn't go their way, everyone might be looking for new jobs soon enough. John and Mary had told them all to take the week off, spend time with family, sharpen up their resumes, even apply for other jobs if they wanted to. They all knew this might be the end.

Hell, some of them had been so worried they had even visited a fortune teller the other day. Deep down, Theresa had confidence things would be okay, but she was still worried about it. How could she not be, despite what the fortune teller had said.

The woman had given each of them a one card reading in addition to the one she did for them for work. Theresa's card had been the Moon.

"The Moon is very appropriate for you right now. It implies a time of fluctuation and uncertainty." The woman had smiled at Theresa then. "Which tells you nothing, since we already did the reading for your company. It also stands for intuition, and we both know your intuition tells you that things will work out for the better there, doesn't it?"

Theresa had been a bit surprised the woman would presume to say she knew how Theresa felt, but she had been right.

"This card can mean many different things at different times in our lives; often it is just indicative of being a woman. Or perhaps of someone that we might come across in our lives. It is a symbol of women, animal lovers and artists. In your case, this tells me there is nothing to worry about. Follow your gut instincts. Your instincts will not steer you wrong."

Shaking her head, Theresa forced herself to head home. Her instincts said it was time to get home and relax. She could worry more next week.

\* \* \* \*

Theresa was attacked the second she walked through her front door. She didn't even have a second to prepare before she was hit with over one hundred pounds and almost knocked on her ass.

"Damn, Sasha, I'm not that late!"

Sasha stood back and looked at Theresa with a hurt look in her eyes before sitting down and tilting her head with a whine.

Theresa sighed. "Okay, okay, so I'm later than usual. Give me three minutes to change my clothes and we'll go for our walk, okay, girl?" Theresa felt guilty at making her beloved golden retriever wait for so long, even though she had a doggy door leading to the fenced backyard. These evening strolls were the highlight of Theresa's day. Sometimes she thought it was the only thing that kept both of them sane.

"Yes, girl. Yes." Theresa continued talking to her dog as she strode into her bedroom to change into something more appropriate for walking the dog. By the time she was done, Sasha had the leash in her mouth and was waiting at the door impatiently.

Theresa clipped on the leash and opened the door. She had only moved into this house about six months ago, but she loved the neighborhood and the people who lived here. It was a wonderful area for a family. *Someday*.

They walked for longer than usual, the nice weather inviting them to stay outside, and by the time they were on the home stretch, it was getting dark. They had turned the corner to their street when Sasha started pulling on her leash and barking furiously.

"Sasha, stop that. Sasha! Stop!" Theresa had never seen her dog so excited before. She looked up to see what Sasha was barking at and saw a young couple in the middle of a heated argument. They weren't even aware of the dog barking at them. The boy was grabbing the girl's upper arms and shaking her.

"Sasha, down, girl. Down."

Sasha wasn't listening. Her barking and tugging on the leash became worse as the couple's argument heated up. Theresa had just enough time to realize the girl had turned to walk away and then tripped over something.

That was enough for Sasha. With more force than Theresa thought the dog capable of, she lunged forward, ripping the leash from Theresa's hand as she dashed across the street to get to the girl.

Everything moved in slow motion. Theresa heard the squeal of tires and the thump as she saw Sasha get knocked forward and lay motionless on the ground in front of the tires of the now stopped car.

Heedless of any oncoming traffic, Theresa ran out to her beloved Sasha.

"Sasha!" Theresa reached her side, and fell to the ground as she reached for her dog.

"Ma'am, let me take a look at her, please."

Theresa was vaguely aware of a calm, male voice, and hands on her shoulders, trying to pull her back.

"Ma'am, please, I'm a vet. Let me take a look."

Finally the man's words penetrated the fog in Theresa's brain, and she moved back enough to let him get in to see Sasha.

"Luckily I wasn't going very fast. Odds are she isn't hurt badly."

The man's voice was calm, assuring Theresa at the same time he made crooning noises toward the inert dog.

"Her name is Sasha."

"Shhh, Sasha, baby." He continued crooning at Sasha, calming Theresa in the process as he felt for damage.

"Miss, my practice is just a couple streets down. Let's get her into my car so I can check her over a bit more. Nothing seems to be broken, but I want to make sure there aren't any internal injuries."

Theresa nodded numbly and allowed the man to escort her to his car, and put Sasha in her lap in the back seat before he climbed into the driver's seat and took off.

The entire trip, tears ran down Theresa's face as worst possible scenarios ran through her mind. Sasha's whimpering finally penetrated to Theresa and she realized she was awake and licking her hand.

"Don't worry, miss. I think Sasha is going to be fine. We'll just get her into the office and check her out." The man was still trying to reassure Theresa as he pulled into the parking lot of the local animal clinic. Some part of Theresa's mind acknowledged it was the new one that her retiring vet had recommended to her. He said the doctors were wonderful with both patients and owners.

The man—doctor unlocked the door, and then carried Sasha back to an examination room. He let Theresa stay there with her dog the entire time. He seemed to be completely thorough, even took x-rays of Sasha.

He asked her questions as he worked. "So what happened? I've seen you guys walking the neighborhood before, but Sasha always looked like a well-behaved dog. What made her run across the street like that?"

"Oh, there was a couple across the street, and they were fighting." Theresa was babbling, but she couldn't help herself. "I got Sasha from a shelter two years ago. Her previous owner had been killed in a home robbery. She doesn't respond well to some men because of it. I guess when the girl fell down, she lost it."

"Is she okay with your boyfriend?"

Theresa gave a watery laugh. "There isn't a boyfriend. And anyway, it's only aggressive men she reacts negatively to. If she is introduced to a man calmly, she's okay. I don't think she was running to attack; I think she was running to protect the girl."

"I'm surprised the shelter found anyone to take her. Usually they end up putting down dogs that have been traumatized like that."

"They were going to, but I was a regular volunteer, and was able to work with her before taking her home. The only saving grace was that she has never attacked anyone. Even when she got to the shelter, her aim always seemed to be to protect the innocent, not harm the aggressor. Honestly, she has never had any problems like this, even with strange men.

I think it was the combination of the raised voices and the girl falling. She isn't a danger to anyone, I promise."

The thought that he might try to report Sasha as dangerous scared Theresa all of a sudden. *What would I do without my Sasha?*

The vet smiled up at her before assuring her, "No, I believe you. The shelter never would have let you take her home if she was a danger. And I believe that she is in no danger tonight, either."

"Are you sure?"

"Definitely. I wasn't going that fast. There's a stop sign at the end of that block, you know, so I was already slowing down. I am sure Sasha probably just received a strong enough bump to knock her unconscious for a while. There's no evidence of swelling or broken bones or anything else that will cause damage.

"She'll probably be in pain for a day or two, but I will give you something for that, and I promise, soon she'll be as good as new."

"Thank you. Can I take her home tonight?"

"I don't see why not. I've given her something to keep her calm, so she shouldn't want to run around much for the next few hours. Let me clean up this mess, and I'll take you both home."

"Is there anything I can do to help?"

He smiled at her again. This time she felt it straight down to her core. Damn, he had a killer smile; it was capable of instantly melting her insides. She felt an awareness start to

grow that hadn't been there before. Or maybe it had been, just overshadowed by her worry for Sasha.

*Damn, the man was gorgeous.* His dark hair, worn shoulder-length, was wavy and full, perfect for running her hands through. His eyes were a deep ocean blue framed by long thick eyelashes.

Her eyes raked over his body. Too shocked to notice before, her gaze settled on his broad chest. He had carried Sasha both to the car and then into the building and hadn't even been breathing hard.

She acknowledged he was probably used to lifting large animals, but still thought it impressive. She could see those arms wrapped around her, holding tightly as they made love.

"I'll be fine. The staff bathroom is through there," he pointed, "if you want to clean up some."

Theresa looked down. She was covered in dirt and dog hair, and she imagined her face was streaked from all the crying.

When she got into the bathroom, she realized it was worse than she'd expected. Her makeup was streaked all down her face, mascara smudged and blush all blotchy.

*And I fantasized about the man while I was in the examination room?* He was probably eager to get rid of her and her dog.

Cleaning herself up, she scrubbed all trace of her makeup off. She preferred little to no makeup, but since they'd had the meeting with the new owners today, she'd listened to her mother's voice in the back of her head telling her to "pretty up" for it. *Every little bit helped, right?*

"That's better."

Her head snapped to him as she walked into the room. For a minute Theresa wasn't sure if he was referring to her or Sasha, and then realized he didn't even notice her enter, as he was stroking Sasha's nose with care.

"I'm sorry, I don't even know your name. I'm Theresa Deas." Theresa approached him once he looked up.

"Jay, Jay Shephard."

"Well, Doctor Shephard, I don't know how to thank you enough. I don't know what I would have done without you."

"It was nothing."

"I don't have my checkbook with me, but if you have somewhere I can leave my information, I will pay the bill later, as soon as you figure out how much I owe you."

"Whoa, there. Pay me later?"

Theresa was a bit taken aback. "Well if you want to wait when you drop me off, I'll write you a check then."

"Don't be ridiculous."

"What do you mean?"

"Theresa, I'm the one who hit Sasha. I could help, so I did."

"Yes, but if she hadn't gotten away from me, it never would have happened."

He walked around the examination table and put his hands on her shoulders. "Theresa, it was an accident. I hit Sasha. I made sure she was okay. You owe me nothing at all. Stop worrying."

"But—"

Surprising her, he placed his fingers against her lips. "Shh." His voice had gone soft and gentle like when he had been soothing Sasha, only this time it was huskier, and sent a tingle straight down to her pussy, moisture flooding it in an instant. She had a compelling urge to purse her lips and kiss the fingers touching her.

"I don't know about you, but I'm hungry. Do you like Chinese food?"

It took her a moment to follow his change in subject, but she nodded, his fingers still against her lips.

"Good. I ordered from The Palace while you were in the bathroom. We can pick it up on the way back to your place."

Once again, Jay carried Sasha to his car, placing her gently in the back seat. Theresa sat in the front seat this time, but spent most of the ride to the restaurant with her attention on her dog.

When Jay jumped out of the car to get the food, Theresa spoke for the first time, talking to Sasha like she always did. "Well, baby, if you had to get hit, at least you got hit by a veterinarian. A cute, sexy one at that, too. I wonder if that man is taken, 'cause I didn't notice a ring on his hand. Oh God, knowing my luck he's gay.

"But damn, what I wouldn't do to get that man in bed, even if just for the night. If I didn't know better, I would swear you knew he was coming, and ran in front of him on purpose. You trying to get me laid?"

Sasha lifted up her head a bit and gave a small yip, before lying it down again and falling asleep.

"Silly dog. I'm just glad he was going slow, and was able to check you out. You scared me to death."

Theresa started as Jay jumped back into the car, handing her the bag of food. "Everything okay?"

"Yeah, I was just talking to Sasha."

"Yeah, sometimes I feel like only my pets understand me."

"Do you have many?"

"Right now, only a pair of cats. My dog of the last fifteen years died a couple months ago, and I just don't have the heart for another one yet."

Theresa nodded in sympathy. "Yeah, I can understand that. The advice to run out and get a new furbaby to replace one we lost isn't always the best."

By the time they arrived at Theresa's house, Sasha was stirring once again. She allowed herself to be carried into the house, but as soon as they got through the front door, she struggled to be let down.

Immediately, she walked to Theresa for a little bit of loving before walking to her bed beside the couch to lie down.

Theresa stood up to find Jay had walked into the kitchen, and was already getting out silverware and plates.

"Sorry." She joined him in the kitchen and reached for the napkins. "Would you be okay if we ate in the living room? I want to keep an eye on Sasha."

He smiled understandingly. "Not a problem at all."

"What do you want to drink? I have soda, water, beer and wine."

"Soda is fine for me."

"Okay, let me pour and I'll be out in a jif."

By the time she had gotten the drinks ready and brought them to the living room, he had the food spread out on the coffee table.

"I wasn't sure what you like, so I got a little bit of everything."

Theresa smiled. "I can see that. This looks perfect."

For the next hour they talked and laughed together, sharing stories of past pets, present jobs, and friends and family. Theresa learned that he had been living on the other side of the state for the last few years, and was just now relocating to be closer to his parents as they got older.

The more he talked, the more attractive he became to her. The tension she noticed earlier never went away, in fact, it seemed to build every time they accidentally touched hands while reaching for the same food, or bumped while adjusting on the sofa.

Every time his hand brushed hers, she felt a spark run through her body. She didn't know what to say to him, but she knew what she wanted to do. *But would he think me too forward?*

When he reached his hand to grasp hold of hers, she was ready to pop off of the couch in anticipation.

"Theresa, I—"

It was her turn to cut him off. Only instead of using her fingers, she used her lips.

If she had thought the touch of his hands was electric, she was mistaken.

The feel of his lips sent her entire body into overdrive. Senses tingling, her body ached for more than just the touch

of his lips. No sooner had the thought formed in her brain than his arms reached around and pulled her close into him.

His tongue invaded her mouth and she tasted the sweet and sour sauce from dinner. It hadn't tasted that good on the chicken, that was for sure.

Her hands crept around to the back of his neck, and she held him tightly, rubbing her body against his.

The kiss seemed to go on forever before he pulled away from her, breathing heavily.

"Oh God, I'm sorry, Theresa. Now is not the time. You're upset about Sasha, and you're feeling thankful. This would be taking advantage of the situation."

"Trust me, Jay, grateful is not what I am feeling toward you right now." She shook her head in denial of her statement. "Well, yeah, I am, but that's not at the top of my mind. I have much more carnal thoughts running through my head than gratitude."

"Are you sure?"

Theresa took one of his hands and laid it on her pussy. Even through the jeans he had to be able to feel the heat and moisture he brought forth from her body. "Does that answer your question?"

"Oh, yeah."

"But is this what you want?"

He grabbed her hand in turn and placed it on the ridge of his cock that she could feel through his jeans. *Oh, yeah, he wanted this too.*

"I have been fantasizing about this since the first time I saw you walking Sasha. I would see you and her strolling

down the street, and wanted nothing more than to introduce myself to you."

"What kept you?" She was still breathing hard. Conversation was getting more difficult as his hand returned to her body and massaged her through the heavy denim.

"Fear. And your neighbor, Mrs. Rebitz."

"What does she have to do with it?"

"She brings her Fluffy in to see me once a week, and tells me everything that goes on. I didn't want to ruin your reputation."

"Well, damn. If that's the only reason, ruin away. She could deal with a bit of real excitement in her life."

"Theresa, I would love to continue this conversation, but not right now. Right now I want nothing more than to take you back to bed and make love to you all night." His voice was husky and dry sounding from his excitement.

"Yes."

"Are you sure?"

"Yes. Yes. And again, yes. I'm a big girl, and I know what I want. And if you ask me once more, I'll throw you out just for pissing me off."

He didn't need any more encouragement than that. Without a word Jay scooped her up and waited for her to point the way to the bedroom, casting one last glance toward Sasha, asleep on the floor.

When they got to the bedroom, Jay set her on the floor beside the bed. He held her hips for a moment before bringing his hand up to stroke her cheek.

"You are beautiful."

Theresa blushed. She didn't feel beautiful, but now wasn't the time to think about that.

"Before we go any further, though, do you have any protection?"

*Protection?* She was on the pill, but still. "Yes!" She was so excited that she actually had some that she blurted it out. "My brother visited last month. He had delusions of getting lucky in the big city."

Jay smiled.

"They're in the guest bathroom."

Jay offered to go get them after she told him where to find them. While he was gone, she pulled the sheets down and turned off all the lights but the small one on the opposite side of the room. She debated taking her clothes off, but suddenly got very nervous.

"Nice."

She turned to see him at the doorway to the bedroom, leaning on the jamb.

"I—"

He smiled at her, and walked slowly forward as she stood there by the bed uncertain what to do. He cupped her cheek in his hand again and brought his lips down to hers.

All her fears and trepidation disappeared instantly at the touch of his lips. Warmth spread through her body as she grew eager for more.

His arms wrapped around her body and pulled her tight against him. Their kiss grew in intensity as he tasted her lips and she opened to allow him access.

Heat built quickly, her eagerness to have him inside her, pumping at her, drove her to tug at his shirt. She heard a button snap as she pulled it out of his pants.

"Oops." She giggled against his mouth as she continued to unbutton his shirt, not letting it stop her.

He tore his mouth away to blaze a trail down her neck. "Don't worry, the dry cleaners will fix it."

"Well then, in that case." Theresa did something she had never done before, but suddenly needed to, as she pulled at his shirt, ripping it open as buttons went flying.

He nipped at her neck. "Little tease, aren't you?" Jay tugged at her sweatshirt, moving back only long enough to pull it over her head before zooming in right back where he had left off.

Theresa yelped at the sharper bite he gave her, and she heard Sasha whimper in the other room.

"Shh." That was the last thing she wanted, Sasha coming in because she was worried about her mistress.

"I've never had to be quiet because of a dog before." Theresa heard the humor in his voice as he reached around to unsnap her bra, cupping her breasts as they fell free. His mouth, still working its way over her shoulders, down to her chest, left wet trails of heat where he touched.

He took a breast in his mouth as he wrapped an arm around her waist to pull her in closer to him. Theresa felt his erection hard and thick through both their pants, and was eager to get her body on it.

She reached for his belt, unbuckling it quickly to unsnap his pants and reach her hand in.

"Mmm."

She wasn't sure who moaned as she grabbed and stroked him. He was thick and smooth, and she stroked him, squeezing tightly.

"Theresa, you had better stop that, or I may just come in my pants. And I have something much better planned." He pulled back from her hand and she let him go regretfully.

In turn, he reached for her pants and had them unzipped and down before she even realized what he was doing. Turning her, he pushed her back on the bed so he could remove her clothing completely, followed quickly by his own.

Her pussy clenched at the sight of him ripping off his torn shirt. His chest was large and well defined, just as she had thought it would be. She wanted to run her tongue down his shaped abs, to taste him, he looked so yummy.

He climbed on the bed beside her to give her one more searing kiss before working his way down her body. She grabbed at his shoulders as he laved attention to her breasts, kneading them and licking them, playing her with hardened nipples.

"How do you like it, Theresa? Do you want it soft and slow? Or hard and fast?"

"Yes, please." Theresa was beyond reasonable thought. She knew she wanted him any way she could get him. She tugged at his shoulders, trying to get him up to her lips, so she could taste him, too, but he looked up at her with a grin and a small shake of his head.

She growled out her frustration as he kissed his way down her stomach, to her navel and out to her hips before moving further down.

Her legs opened willingly as his hand reached her mons, caressing her as a finger dipped into her wetness. He stroked her, spreading her juices around as his mouth reached the junction of her legs and latched onto her clit.

Theresa arched off the bed as he took the nub in his mouth and sucked hard. Simultaneously, he thrust two fingers into her vagina and crooked them.

Her fingers fisted in his hair as he pleased her, driving her to the edge again and again, shivers shooting through her body as she bit back screams of satisfaction.

"Enough, Jay. Enough." She wanted more of him. She wanted his hard cock inside her, thrusting them both to completion.

With one last lick, he pulled back. His face was wet with her juices as he looked up at her. He took a corner of the sheet and wiped his face off before giving her a long, deep kiss.

He reached over to the nightstand and grabbed the condom he had placed there. She hadn't even seen him do it, but there it was. Hell, he must have been feeling ambitious because there was a small pile there.

Jay grinned at her raised eyebrows and ripped open the package.

"Let me do it." She reached for the package.

"Oh, babe, I'd love you to, but I don't think I will last if you touch me again."

With a saucy grin, she pumped her hips against his, and he growled before moving back to place the rubber on his dick.

It was as large as she thought, and pulsed eagerly. Theresa reached, but he moved before she could get her hands on it. He positioned himself at her entrance and slowly pushed his way in.

It had been a while since she had been with anyone, and he felt gloriously thick inside her. Finally he was completely seated within her. She wrapped her legs around him and held him tight for a moment as they both enjoyed the sensations.

Eventually he started moving, easing back slowly, and in just as slow. With a thrust of her hips, Theresa told him, "Faster, dammit. Harder."

He sped up, giving her what she asked for as he thrust into her hard and fast, the tension quickly expanding throughout her entire body once again.

Her body tightened sharply against his as with one final thrust, they came with a shout.

Minutes later, their breathing calm once again, he reached for her face and brushed a curl of hair out of her eyes.

"Does Sasha share your bed?"

"Not usually, why?"

"I'd hate for her to grow to resent me, so we'd have to get a larger bed."

Theresa arched her brow with a smile. "Oh, do you plan on this repeating?"

"Often. And for a long time."

Theresa flashed back to the fortune teller. She had said for Theresa to follow her instincts, and implied that an animal lover would be present in her life.

Well, her instincts said this animal lover was the one for her, and that if she were smart, she would do whatever she could to keep hold of him. Smiling, she buried her head in his neck. Yup, definitely time to follow her instincts.

## ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Michelle Hasker has been writing for two years. She is a member of Romance Writers of America and the Fantasy, Futuristic and Paranormal chapter of RWA.

She loves vampires and things that go bump in the night, so it's no wonder her creations are truly paranormal. While most people only dream of finding love, Michelle's characters find it, but in the most unexpected places.

Michelle lives in Pennsylvania with her husband, four children, assorted animals, and overactive imagination. She would love for you to visit her at [www.michellehasker.com](http://www.michellehasker.com).

As far back as she can remember, Tina has been writing for fun but she always knew someday she would be a published author. Born and raised in the Boston area, Tina finds herself most at home on the East Coast. Despite that, she has also lived in Chicago and Wisconsin, and presently lives in rural Missouri with her husband and demanding cat.

After having worked at many jobs, including a mental health worker for a dozen years, she now has a day job as a substitute teacher, trying to put her college degree to some use reminding kids to strive for their goals. You can visit her at [www.tinabendoni.com](http://www.tinabendoni.com)

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