



TAROT CARD ANTHOLOGY: **SYNCHRONICITY**

VOLUME TWO

Michelle Hasker
Tina Bendoni



Whiskey Creek Press

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Tarot Card Anthology: Synchronicity Volume 2
by Tina Bandoni, Michelle Hasker

TAROT CARD ANTHOLOGY—SYNCHRONICITY

VOLUME 2

by

Tina Bandoni & Michelle Hasker

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www.whiskeycreekpress.com

Published by

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Whiskey Creek Press

PO Box 51052

Casper, WY 82605-1052

www.whiskeycreekpress.com

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ISBN 978-1-60313-054-7

Credits

Cover Artist: Jinger Heaston

Editor: Chere Gruver

Printed in the United States of America

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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."

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

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**Other Books by Author Available at Whiskey Creek
Press:**

www.whiskeycreekpress.com

Christmas Candy Anthology

Celtic Love Knots Volume 1

Celtic Love Knots Volume 2

Tarot Card Anthology—Synchronicity Volume One

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Dedication

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

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THE HANGED MAN

by

Tina Bendoni

Eric sat back in his first class seat and took a deep breath. They'd been on the flight less than three hours and already he had gone to the bathroom four times. And it wasn't like he needed the facilities, it was only to throw water on his face. God, how he hated flying.

"It'll be alright."

Eric turned to the older woman sitting beside him. She patted his hand in a comforting gesture.

"That obvious?"

She smiled a welcoming smile. "Not to everyone, perhaps, but I am sitting beside you after all."

"I don't know why, but I've never liked flying."

"You're too grounded for flight. You prefer to keep your feet on the ground where they belong."

Eric smiled at the lady, not sure what she meant, but knowing she was trying to be helpful. It wasn't in his nature to blow her off.

"Are you going to Philly on business?" he asked politely.

"No, I'm living there for the present. I just got back from some time in California. I make the trip once a month or so. You?" The woman reached for her bag, and started searching for something. Good, maybe she was looking for a book or

something and would leave him to suffer through the rest of the trip alone.

"I have business to attend to."

She pursed her lips as she found what she was looking for. It was a small bag of some sort, and held something rectangular in it. *A large deck of cards, perhaps?*

He was right, it was a deck of cards. But even with a quick glance, he could tell they weren't ordinary cards. *Oh, God, they're tarot cards.*

"I thought to keep your mind off of things if you wouldn't mind entertaining an old lady for a few minutes."

Old his ass. She wasn't even his mother's age. He rolled his eyes while she wasn't looking, and quickly turned it into a nod when she looked up.

"Don't worry," she assured him with a smile. "Just one card. I have this compelling urge right now, and since both of us are trapped here..."

He watched as she drifted off in thought as she shuffled the cards.

"Hmmm, interesting."

Eric looked down at the card she had pulled. It was the picture of a young man hanging upside down by his foot. *Strange.*

"The Hanged Man."

Okay, that made sense. But why they would hang someone from their foot was beyond him.

"Seems you're going into a situation that requires an assessment on your part? One that perhaps you've already made your mind up about?"

Eric didn't say anything, but he felt shocked to the core at her words.

"This card tells me that perhaps you need to look at things in a different way, or from a different angle. It's possible you need to let go of something to find what you're looking for.

"Well, you know, I may be wrong. It's not often that I am, but even I make mistakes sometimes." As she was talking, she was sweeping the cards together, and putting them back in her bag. She patted his hand again.

"Don't worry, my dear. You'll know the right choice to make when the time comes."

Before he realized it, they'd landed in Philly and were able to disembark. He lost track of his fortune teller in the shuffle, and had no chance to ask her the questions running around in his head. Not having any luggage other than his carry-on, he headed to the car rental agency to pick up his transportation for the next few days.

* * * *

Eric looked at the large hotel in front of him. It had been in use as a hotel for generations, and had been Philly's pride for much of that time. Unfortunately, the years had taken their toll, and the elegant beauty of the one hundred fifty year old building had diminished some over time. That was one of the things his company hoped to restore. Too much history was being forgotten in the attempt to modernize the world. Buying the Lionnet Hotel was one step in the right direction if someone were to ask him.

Unfortunately, things were rotten in the state of Denmark, and it was up to Eric to find out exactly what was going on.

The doorman opened the door with a welcoming smile as Eric approached the building. Inside, everything was as it should be, however there seemed to be an inordinate amount of people waiting around for hotel rooms. As it was well after four, this struck Eric as strange, since check-in was three o'clock, but sometimes problems arose and small glitches were unavoidable. He checked in and was assured his room would be ready within the hour. He was offered a complimentary drink in the hotel bar and was told he would be informed as soon as he could go to his room.

Again, annoying, but the staff seemed to have the issue under control, offering customers freebies to placate them before any problems arose. The daytime general manager, Doug Ford had mentioned in his emails some of the customer satisfaction issues they had been experiencing and what they had been doing to rectify them across all shifts. This must be one of his attempts, and it seemed to work by the looks of the happy customers around the bar.

Once settled in his room, Eric pulled out the paperwork his people had assembled to see if he'd missed anything. Ford sent regular emails to the main offices of Harris, Incorporated informing them of the progress and issues that had been coming up. He made sure Eric was aware of major problems and what had been done to address them. He'd informed them of various programs for both customers and employees he had initiated to keep satisfaction and morale up. So far, most of his plans seemed to be going well.

The evening manager, however, had had very little contact with the home company. Vickie Johnson had been working at the hotel for a little less than six months and had imparted almost no information at all to headquarters. The majority of her emails consisted of basic numbers on customers, which could be accessed elsewhere, and complaints about staff difficulties. When asked for more input, her emails would improve for a short while, and then deteriorate back to what they had been.

Eric's primary objective was actually to assess the situation himself and once he was sure of the facts, give her a pink slip. He didn't know why she'd been hired in the first place. Which was why he decided to take care of it personally. It was his least favorite part of the job, but he'd gotten used to it years ago. If he didn't do it, customers and other employees suffered.

According to their schedules, her shift started at two today. She'd been in charge for over two hours by the time he got here this afternoon, which was one black mark against her. He would wait to see how the day went before he made his final decision.

A knock on the door surprised him. He got up to answer it and was shocked stupid when he opened the door.

A petite dark-haired woman stood in front of him. Latina, she had green eyes that shined through her thick lashes, twinkling with pleasure. Her red, full mouth was open in a sexy, alluring smile that had his cock twitching to half mast.

"Hello, Mr. Harris. My name is Tori. The management understands you're one of the people who had to wait for your room this afternoon, and sends their apologies.

"Lionnet Hotel prides itself on customer service, and I wanted to see if there was anything else we could do for you to help make your stay here the best it can be, despite the rocky start."

Eric realized he had to say something. He was standing here like an idiot as his cock hardened at the sight of a beautiful woman.

"Thank you, Miss—"

"Just Tori, sir."

"Thank you, Tori. But everything is satisfactory. I assume the problem that caused the inconvenience has been rectified?"

"Actually, yes." Tori's voice grew cold. "Three of our housekeepers were in a car accident on their way to work today. But don't worry, they're all fine and we'll have enough staff here tomorrow to make sure everything is running smoothly. Have a good night."

The beautiful woman turned swiftly away to walk down the hall. She turned at the corner without a backwards glance.

He replayed the incident in his mind. And cringed. He'd sounded like a pompous ass. Not so much what he had said, but how he had said it.

Had he really gotten that bad over the past few years? Not too long ago he would have expressed true concern over the housekeepers. He argued with himself that she didn't give

him a chance, but that wasn't exactly true. He hadn't made it sound like he would care. Had success done that to him?

He had managed to alienate the sexiest woman that he had seen in a long time. Her long, curly hair, the bright green eyes, and shapely petite body. His cock twitched as he envisioned her in front of him again. Only this time naked.

Her body was curved in all the right places. And her ass. *Damn.*

Shaking himself out of his fantasy, he reminded himself she was his employee, even if she didn't know it. Fantasizing about her was not the way to make any brownie points with his board of directors.

* * * *

Eric sat in the bar later that night. It was a weekday, and after ten, so there weren't that many people around.

Everything in the bar seemed to be running smoothly. He thought about letting the managers know who he was tomorrow, but decided things might be better if he waited a bit longer. Already he'd learned some things he never would have if he'd been honest about who he was.

Movement across the room caught his attention. *Tori.* She was dressed as she had been before. A straight black skirt and grey blouse. Instead of looking boring on her, the outfit brought out her dark skin and hair, making her pop in the deep colors of the bar. She was walking around, chatting with some of the staff and a customer or two.

Eric waited until she got close to his table to call out her name.

"Excuse me, Tori? May I have a moment of your time?"

She turned, and he thought he saw a flicker of annoyance on her face. Annoyance and something else. But she moved toward him with a smile on her face.

"Yes, Mr. Harris was it?"

"Good memory."

"That's why I get paid the big bucks." Her smile seemed genuine and welcoming. "What can I do for you this evening?"

"Could you sit down for a moment, please?" He pulled out a chair for her, all but forcing her to sit down unless she wanted to be rude.

"The housekeepers you mentioned earlier, are they okay?"

Surprise flitted across her face. She obviously hadn't expected that from him. "Yes, actually, thank you for asking. They're fine."

"And I want to apologize for not asking earlier."

She blushed. For a young woman that was obviously in some customer service position here at the hotel, she had a very expressive face.

"Actually, I should be the one apologizing. I was rude when all you asked was if the problem had been taken care of."

"Ah, but it wasn't what I asked, it was how I asked it. And that was inexcusable."

"Mr. Harris—"

"Eric, please." *Calm down, boy. She's an employee.* But no matter how many times he reminded himself, he seemed unable to follow his own advice. Her bright green eyes

shimmered in the light from the bar as she gazed at him. He realized he wanted to see those eyes after sex, replete with satisfaction. Satisfaction he was responsible for.

"I'll have to disagree with you on that assessment. I was the one at fault earlier this evening. Thank you for trying to take the blame, but it is totally unnecessary." She stood up quickly. "And thank you for asking after our staff. That was very kind of you. Good evening, sir."

Eric watched her walk out the door. Her ass swung with every step she took, and he found himself unable to take his eyes off of it. Once she'd gone through the door he saw the bartender looking at him. Slowly the man shook his head. Apparently someone didn't want him interested in the young lady.

* * * *

"That's a good book."

The young woman looked up at the sound of his voice.

"Mr. Harris."

"Eric." Eric smiled. He had come to the bookstore this morning trying to find something to help him get his mind off of work. And Tori. And of course, who does he meet up with? He should have expected it and left her alone, but he couldn't.

"I haven't read him yet. Is he really as good as they say he is?" Tori gestured with the book in her hands.

"Actually, I would suggest you start with this one." Eric grabbed another book off the shelf. "This is the first in the series, and if you don't start at the beginning, it can be

confusing. I know I had issues and I only started with the second one."

"How much of him have you read?"

Eric showed her the book he had in his hand. It was the ninth book in the series and had just come out that week. "I guess you can say I'm addicted to it."

"Bet you didn't know he was gonna be here this afternoon."

"Really? I thought he didn't do readings much anymore."

"My sister is the manager here. She said he doesn't do chain stores, and prefers the small bookstores." Tori looked around as though she had a secret before saying softly, "And actually, she asked me to do her a favor today. She has an important meeting she can't get out of, and had promised to take him out to dinner, so she roped me into doing it since tonight is my one night off. I don't suppose I can sucker you into joining me, can I? I can talk books 'til I am blue in the face, but if he asks me if I've read anything of his, I'm screwed."

A tingle ran through Eric at her conspiratorial smile. Did he want to help her out? *Hell, yeah!* A twinge of guilt reminded him that he should be back at the hotel checking things out, but he squished it down. He had plenty of time to figure out what was going on. *How often did someone get the chance to meet their favorite author, and do a favor for a sexy woman all at the same time?*

"Only on the condition that you come join me for coffee now. And you start calling me Eric."

"It's a deal." Her smile brightened up the entire store for him.

* * * *

Eric looked at the woman beside him. He had enjoyed coffee earlier, and dinner had been a pleasure. They had spent most of the day together, in fact, and he found himself drawn to her more every minute he spent in her company.

She was smart, well read, eloquent, not to mention beautiful. When their guest of honor and his wife had suggested going out for drinks and dancing, he could have jumped for joy. The thought of holding her in his arms had filled his mind exclusively for the last couple hours.

She had changed into some black slinky number that went down to her calves, and had on strappy heels that had to be at least four inches high. The top was an assortment of material with triangles cut out at strategic places giving him hints of what lay underneath. And when she'd taken her shawl off, he'd had to catch his breath. Her back was completely bare down to the top of her pert ass. His cock had been semi-rigid through the entire dinner. It was all he could do to hide it now that he was no longer protected by the tablecloth.

Tori directed them to a nearby hotel, but not the Lionnet.

"Spying on the competition?" he whispered in her ear as he helped her off with her shawl, fingers brushing her bare shoulders.

She smiled up at him. "Of course. Always pays to know what they are doing."

It made sense. He would rather avoid the hotel if he could, too. Eventually he was going to have to meet up with Tori's boss, and he didn't want to do it before he was ready. Before he had more information on what was going on in the hotel.

The maitre d' escorted them to a small table on the edge of the dance floor and took their drink orders as they sat down. Eric looked around and made a mental note to add something like this to a couple of his properties out west. The room was reminiscent of a ballroom pictured in old Fred Astaire movies. An orchestra was playing, varying between styles and eras of music. Very classy and understated. He didn't think places like this were around much anymore, but this one seemed pretty popular. It would be worth a shot.

"Care to dance?" He figured he should be able to manage a classic waltz, even if most of the other dances seemed out of his league. Their guest had already escorted his wife onto the floor, so they wouldn't be deserting them.

"I'd love to."

Eric lay his hand on her back as he escorted her onto the floor, and was entranced by the feel of her skin. She was soft and smooth, her skin like expensive silk. As he took her in his arms, his stomach dropped. She fit there like a glove. And they moved together like a dream.

"Thank you."

He looked down at her. "For?"

"Tonight. Joining us."

"I've enjoyed it immensely. The entire day, in fact."

She looked down, blushing.

Eric reached for her chin to pull her face back up so he could look her in the eyes. "What is it?"

"I've enjoyed myself, too. Very much."

His voice dropped an octave as he whispered, "I know I'm being forward, but I have to tell you I don't want the night to end."

He was still holding her chin, and she was unable to look away, but she did lower her eyelids for a moment as her blush deepened.

"Me either."

Wrapping his arm around her tightly, he pulled her closer to him as they continued to move to the music. Suddenly the end of the evening couldn't come soon enough for him. Because when their date ended, their time together would truly begin.

Somehow, he survived the rest of the evening. Remembering to laugh and converse with the rest of the table, despite the fact all he wanted to do was grab Tori and make mad passionate love to her.

He made sure he was always touching her. Her hand, her arm, his leg against hers. The contact was the only thing that kept him calm. And kept him on the edge of his control. If they didn't leave soon, he wasn't going to be responsible for his actions.

"Well, we would like to thank you both for a wonderful night." Eric's attention was pulled back to the present at the sound of the author's voice.

"I can't remember a night I had such an incredible time after one of his signings." His wife smiled as she reached for

her husband's hand. "We are going to have one more dance and then call it a night. I imagine the two of you want to get on with your night, as well." The smile she sent Tori had her blushing again.

"Thank you again for an entertaining evening. Perhaps next time we're in town, we can meet up again."

"I'd love that," Tori agreed quickly.

Eric and Tori watched the two of them walk to the dance floor arm in arm. It was obvious they were still in love even after twenty years of marriage.

"Excuse me for a minute, please?" Tori touched his arm. He agreed to meet her at the entrance and went to pay the bill.

* * * *

"This way."

She looked up from adjusting her shawl as he turned toward the interior of the hotel instead of the outside door. The confusion was evident on her face.

He pulled her into his arms. "I didn't want to put you in the position of bringing you back to my hotel room. The hotel where you work. And I didn't want you to feel pressured to take me back to your place."

A profusion of emotions raced across her face. Shock, embarrassment, relief.

"If I did something wrong, let me know." He had only been thinking of saving her the embarrassment of her boss finding out she was sleeping with a client in the hotel. He knew he shouldn't be doing it, but realized he couldn't not do it.

"No. No, you're right. I didn't think that far ahead."

He sensed the moment was gone. Stark reality interfered with their desires. Realizing it was probably for the best, he offered to take her home.

"No, let's go up to the room and maybe talk, okay?"

Agreeing, he escorted her to the elevator. They were alone in it, and he decided he didn't want to resist any longer. He grasped her around the waist and turned her to face him. And then lowered his lips to hers.

Sweet. Heaven. Her lips were soft and welcoming as they responded to his kiss, opening to let him in and taste her. The earth moved for him, and not until the doors dinged open, did he realize it really had, and the elevator had now stopped waiting for them to get off.

Arm in arm, they walked down to the room which he opened quickly, suddenly more eager than ever. And nervous, to boot.

"A suite?"

Eric looked around. He hadn't even thought of it when he got the room. It was what he was used to, so it was what he got for the night. "Um, it was all they had?" He knew it sounded lame, but was at a loss.

She walked in and turned around checking the place out. "It will do." The corner of her lips crooked up as she removed her shawl and backed toward the archway that led to the bedroom.

Eric closed and locked the door behind him as he tossed the key on the entry table and walked toward her. He reached her at the arch, and took her in his arms forcefully. He took

her mouth with his fiercely this time. She opened quickly for him, allowing him entrance to taste her.

The fruity taste of the drink she'd had while they'd been downstairs matched her taste. Sweet and light. Just like her. He walked her backwards toward the bed, never breaking contact with her mouth, his hands roaming her back, her body, one going up to cup a breast in his hand.

She moaned against him as he rubbed her, his thumb flicking at her nipple. He heard something drop, and realized in some part of his brain it was her clutch, but quickly forgot about it as he nibbled his way down her neck. One of her hands knotted in his hair, the other grasping his ass tightly, pulling him into her.

He pulled away to rip off his coat. She reached behind her neck and unclasped her dress, the material slinking down her body in a silky puddle. There she stood, in just her thigh-highs and panties. He heard buttons pop as he rushed to rid himself of the rest of his clothes.

She slowly scooted back onto the bed, leaving the rest of her clothes and fuck-me heels on. He'd never been so hard in his life. He stalked toward her, grabbing her at the knees, and preventing her from moving back further.

Taking her in his arms, he kissed her again as his hands explored her body, caressing her smooth skin, enjoying the feel of it against his body. He took a nipple in his mouth and suckled at her as though starving and she was his only source of nutrition.

Her moans set him aflame as he gently pushed her back onto the bed. Her nipple slipped out of his mouth with a pop,

and he reached for its sister as he played with the recently abandoned one.

He swirled at it with his tongue, blowing on it as it puckered in reaction. Kissing his way down her body, he pulled her panties off as he moved to the edge of the bed. Kneeling on the floor he pulled her to the edge of the bed. He blew on her pussy, already obviously dripping wet. He inhaled her scent and felt his heart skip a beat.

Slowly he lowered his head and ran his tongue from the bottom to the top of her cleft. She wriggled and he grabbed hold of her hips to keep her in place as he licked her again, and again. She tasted like hot sex. Her liquids were oozing out as he parted her lips and blew against her softly.

Entranced, he gently inserted one finger, and then another, testing her, feeling her clutch at him. Wanting more of her, he ringed her clit with his tongue, tracing circles around it as she writhed on the bed. His fingers inside of her rubbed her walls as he rotated them.

His lips latched onto her clit as his tongue flicked at it rapidly. Her moans turned into pants as she strove for breath, her climax coming quickly. He increased his tempo, pumping at her with his hand, his other parting her lips to allow him better access to the cluster of nerves he was playing with. Her hips thrashed as she screamed his name, thrusting against his lips and hands as she came hard.

Still he licked at her, playing with her as tremor after tremor shot through her body. She was so responsive he didn't want to stop, but if he didn't he wouldn't last long once he was seated inside her.

One last kiss and he pulled his hand out of her to rest his head on her tight curls.

"Oh my God."

He smiled. "Was it satisfactory?" He turned up and looked at her innocently.

She giggled. "Yeah, I think we could say that."

Standing up, he gave her room to scoot back further on the bed. He started to climb onto the bed to join her and then stopped. "Oh, shit."

"What?"

"A condom. I don't—"

"My purse."

"What?"

"That's what I went to do while you paid for the drinks. They have a small, very discreet machine in the ladies' room."

"They do?" He knew they had them in bars and truck stops, but in a high-class ladies' room?

"Yes, they do." She nodded at him. "Now are you going to get it and put it on, or do we want to continue this discussion?"

Without another word, Eric reached down for her purse and handed it to her. Rolling her eyes, she extracted the small package before tossing the clutch to the side. She crooked her finger at him and then opened the condom. He kneeled beside her as she slid it on, squeezing her fingers tightly around him.

He quickly grasped her hand. "No. Let me finish. I'm too close."

She let go of him, and lay back watching him as he finished. He climbed between her legs, and stroked her with his cock. Her hips jerked, seeking him out.

Slowly he entered her, breathing hard. He knew if he went too quickly it would be over before it started. He wanted to make this last as long as possible, but he was afraid it wouldn't be very long at all.

Once he was fully inside her, he took a breath. The look on her face was enough to tell him she was enjoying this as much as he was. He wanted to capture the moment, but her hips had other things in mind.

Eric pulled back and thrust again, her walls sucking him in as he moved. He leaned down to taste her lips and swallow her gasps as he thrust himself inside her. It was close, very close. He reached to grab a breast, tweaking a nipple as he drove in one more time. Her cry of satisfaction echoed his as his world exploded and he collapsed on top of her.

* * * *

Eric awoke hours later. He was alone in the bed, and a few seconds of listening, after calling Tori's name, assured him he was by himself in the suite, too. "Damn." They needed to talk. Well, it wasn't like she could hide. He'd find her regardless.

Wide awake now, he got up and showered before heading back to his own hotel room. He had some things he needed to do before the beginning of the workday.

He arrived at the hotel as the housekeepers were coming out of one of the rooms on his floor. Apparently an early

check out, as not many people wanted their room cleaned when it was still dark outside. One of the women had a large bruise on her face, and he took a chance.

"Are you one of the housekeepers who were in the accident?"

The older woman looked at him blankly and turned to her younger counterpart for help. The young woman smiled at Eric and told him in halting English, that yes, Lupe was one of the women.

"Is she okay? Should she back at work?" He turned back to the older woman and in his halting Spanish, asked her, "*Por qué está aquí hoy? Por qué regrasa a trabajar tan rápido?*" He hoped he had just asked her why she had returned to work so fast.

She scowled and rattled off Spanish he had no hope of following. He caught a couple words like *jefe* and *grita*, which meant boss and yell.

"The boss say no come back today, but the other boss say she come back or no have job."

Eric gave a scowl of his own. Any one with eyes could see the woman shouldn't have returned to work so soon. In addition to the bruise, she had some scrapes, and she seemed to be favoring her left arm. Apologizing to the women, he thanked them, and gave them a tip before he walked in and got out his papers.

Obviously Ford had used some common sense, but he was unimpressed with Ms. Johnson if she had insisted the woman return or lose her job. *What was she thinking? Damn, woman, even though this is a business, you need to have*

consideration for your employees or soon you won't have any at all.

Eric decided the time had come for him to do some real investigating. He wanted his firing of Ms. Johnson to be irrefutable.

He opened his bag to get out his notes, and his ticket stub fell out. Reaching down to get it, he remembered the woman on the plane. She'd told him that he was running on preconceived notions, and that perhaps he needed to look at things in a different way. *What did she mean? Did she mean this situation?*

She'd called him on his judgments. What if there really was more to this than he'd been told?

Damn. This was going to take some work. Eric tried to figure out how he was going to find out what he needed to know. He sure as hell couldn't depend on the managers to tell the truth. Well, if he couldn't depend on anyone being honest, he was just going to have to sneak around.

Changing into clean jeans and a shirt, Eric plotted his day.

It was amazing what he could learn in just a few hours of skulking around. Eric found a busboy and asked him where would be a good place to go for breakfast, somewhere the employees went on break, or for a quick meal. The busboy turned Eric on to a remarkably inexpensive little café just around the corner which turned into a fount of information at meal time.

He managed to catch the rush just before shift change. Employees sauntered in to get a quick bite before going in to work. Two women came in dressed in hotel uniforms and sat

next to him. He listened in on meaningless gossip about their lives, and was about to get up and leave when he heard one of them mention Ford's name.

"Ask him, it won't hurt to try."

"Please, that man won't give a damn if I were to die tomorrow, as long as I didn't do it in his precious hotel lobby."

"Well things haven't been running so smoothly lately."

"The night shift doesn't seem to have as many problems."

"That's because they don't have to deal with as many issues as the day shift."

"I don't know, Robin. Johnson seems to have things pretty under control. You never hear of anyone who wants to leave that shift."

"Well, hell, no. They get more money."

They moved on to other, more personal topics, leaving Eric to consider what they had said. According to Ford, he had been having problems keeping people on the night shift. He was short-staffed because he had moved so many of his people to cover the late afternoon, evening shifts that were so hard to fill. But what the young women were saying contradicted that.

Breakfast over, Eric decided to search a bit more at the hotel itself. It was amazingly easy to get around behind closed doors. Just look like he knew what he was doing and very few people would bother him.

Since he did so well at the diner, he thought he'd check out the break room the hotel had for their staff. There was probably nowhere better than there to find out what was

going on in the hotel. He was surprised he hadn't thought of it first.

Grabbing a soda from one of the machines, he walked in and sat down at one of the crowded long tables. He had his story planned if anyone asked him anything, but no one did. So he asked.

"I just transferred in from one of the other hotels the company owns, out in Colorado, with little info on the place, can any of you guys fill me in?"

"Well, what did you want to know?" A man who looked older than Father Time himself peered at Eric over his coffee cup.

"Well, just the basic lay of the land. Who to go to if there are any problems, who I should avoid, that kind of stuff."

"You'd do best to avoid his majesty at all costs," a voice further down the table piped in sarcastically.

"His majesty?"

"That would be the general manager, Doug Ford."

"Why? What's so bad about him? I've heard pretty good things."

"Then you've been listening to the wrong folks."

A young black man joined the conversation. "Look at him, Danny. He's a clean-cut white boy. You think he's gonna have any problem with the boss man?"

"True. He's got a leg up on us, don't he?"

"The manager's a racist?" Eric was floored. That was not what he had expected to hear. "How sure are you about this?"

"Come on, man. Besides the fact he calls me boy every time he sees me, do you see one person who ain't white doing anything other than cleaning rooms or chopping vegetables?"

"Yeah, some of us unplug toilets." A laugh erupted on the other end of the table. Eric sat back and let them discuss. He figured he would be better off keeping his mouth shut from here on out.

"Well, there's Ms. Johnson."

"What about her?"

"She's one of us. She's a Latina."

"No, she's only half. And Ford didn't have no say in hiring her. The bigwigs did that."

"Well, she does what she can, don't she?"

"What do you mean?" Eric had to ask.

The young man's eyes narrowed, "You gonna be going back and telling Ford about our talk?"

"I'm just curious what you meant by Ms. Johnson helps."

"Boy." The old man spoke up again for the first time since the conversation got going. "Ms. Johnson is good people. You cause any trouble for her, and you'll be answering to all of us. She done helped each one of us in some way. Whether it be helping young Steven here with letters of recommendation to get into Penn State, or standing up for Svetlana when she needed to take some time off to take care of her sick mama. That girl's ours. You understand?"

Eric put up his hands in self-defense. "Understood." Looking at the clock over the table, he jumped up. "Well,

better get going. Need to check in with human resources today. Thanks for the info, guys. I appreciate it."

Armed with the knowledge the staff gave him, Eric returned to his room to look his papers over one more time. There had to be something in there that would help him figure out what the hell was going on.

The emails. There had been something about them that had always seemed to bother him. The time stamps. They were always sent out in the middle of the day or early morning. When Vickie Johnson shouldn't have been anywhere near her work computer. *What the hell?* And the wording looked very much like Ford's emails. *Damn.* Eric began to realize he had been played for a fool. How stupid could he have been?

He didn't know how Ford was intercepting her emails, but it was obvious he was. It was time to talk to Mr. Doug Ford and get things straightened out once and for all.

A knock sounded at his door. A quick glance at the bedside clock showed him it was barely noon. Who the hell was knocking on his door? Laying the papers on the desk, he went to answer the knock.

He opened the door and found Tori standing there. Looking as beautiful as ever, she was dressed in another skirt and blouse, obviously ready for work.

"Um, can we talk?"

"Sure, come in."

Tori walked into the room, and went straight to the balcony doors. She obviously had something to say, but was just as obviously nervous about saying it.

"I'm sorry."

"Excuse me?" *She was sorry?*

She turned and looked at him. "Last night never should have happened. You're a guest of this hotel, and I am an employee. I don't know what came over me. I've never done anything like that before, and it won't happen again. I am going to turn in my resignation today."

"What? Why?"

"It was wrong and unethical."

"On what planet do you figure you did something wrong?"

"Mr. Harris, Lionnet Hotel has a strict fraternization policy prohibiting this kind of thing between staff and visitors. It is as much to protect the employees as anything. I broke that policy, and I need to pay the price for it."

"I'll deny it."

"It won't do any good. You aren't even named in my letter."

"Your boss won't take it. You're too valuable."

She laughed a cruel laugh. "He's been waiting for this chance for six months, trust me, he will jump for joy."

"Tori, what the hell are you talking about?" Eric took a couple steps toward her, but didn't judge the spacing well and knocked into the papers on his desk. They went flying, some of them straight to her feet. She bent down to pick them up and froze.

His eyes went to the papers she had in her hand. It was the severance package for Vickie Johnson. The one he had already decided to rip up.

"Oh my God."

"No, it's not what you think."

"You mean this packet isn't a severance package, despite the title?"

"No, it is. But it isn't."

"You really played me, didn't you?"

"What are you talking about?"

Her eyes scanned the paper further. "Eric Harris, CEO. God, how stupid can I be? I didn't even make the connection. Well, Mr. Harris, I am saving you the trouble. I quit."

She strode past him and almost made it to the door before he grabbed her. "What the hell are you talking about, Tori?"

Shaking his hand off of her arm, she snapped at him.

"Don't call me that again. My name is Ms. Victoria Johnson, Mr. Harris, and I am no longer your employee. You'll have to find someone else to mind fuck in the future."

Before he could even register what she said, she was out of the door and down the hall. *Victoria Johnson? But her name was Tori. Jeezus!* He really fucked up.

* * * *

"But, Mr. Harris, I don't understand."

"What's not to understand, Mr. Ford? You're fired."

"But-but, why?"

"Well, I could tell you it had to do with that comment I overheard as I walked in here. I believe you referred to the evening manager as 'that fucking spic bitch'? Or I could tell you it has to do with the emails you were falsifying, or I could even tell you it had something to do with your poor management skills. But you know, it's hard to narrow it down.

So, let's just chalk it up to the fact that you're incompetent, and although you excel at blaming others for that incompetence, you've been found out. Your severance package has already been express mailed to you from Denver. Expect it tomorrow morning at your home address."

Eric looked around the office. "You have ten minutes to clear out any personal belongings. If you forget anything, we'll be sure to ship it to you when it's found.

"Don't even think of touching that computer. If you did what I think you did, you're lucky to get out of here without criminal charges against you, never mind severance pay." What Eric would really like to do was knock the shithead flat on his ass, but he didn't need a lawsuit. This would have to do.

Eric sat back and watched the little worm get his stuff together. He'd already called in the shift managers and they were waiting for him in one of the meeting rooms. All of them but Tori. Her, he would have to deal with separately.

* * * *

"What do you want?" Tori stood at her apartment door looking as beautiful as ever. She was wearing jeans and a low-cut blouse and his cock perked up at the sight. *Not now*. There were more pressing things at hand than his body. Like his heart.

"We need to talk."

"No, we don't."

His hand stopped the door from shutting in his face. "Yes, we do."

Tori sighed and shook her head. "Fine. Come in. But make it snappy. I have things to do."

Eric strode into the small, nicely decorated apartment. He could see what he now recognized as her penchant for order in the way she had things organized at home. He'd spent the last two days cleaning up the mess Ford had left behind and figuring out exactly what he had done. And how Tori had kept the place together despite what she had to view as a lack of response from the head office.

She hadn't responded to any of his phone calls, emails or attempts to see her. The fact she even opened the door for him today told him she hadn't expected it to be him.

She didn't offer him a seat, and he didn't take one. He stood in the middle of her living room as she leaned against the dining table.

"First off, as you have been told by my people who have called and visited you, you have not been fired. The position of general manager is now yours." He ignored her snort and continued, "We have evidence that Ford was waylaying your emails and altering them. We also have criminal evidence which we may or may not pursue.

"As to the other issue—"

"What other issue?"

"Us."

"There is no us."

He strode to her quickly, grabbing her by the arms. "There damn well is an us."

"We had sex. Once. That does not make an us, a relationship, or anything else except for a stupid mistake."

"Was it?"

Tori shook her head. "Was it what?"

"Was it really a mistake for you? Because it wasn't for me." He let go of her and walked away, pushing a hand through his hair as he talked. "I enjoyed the other day more than I have ever enjoyed being with anyone else. Something in me clicked when you were with me, and since you've been gone I haven't thought of anything else."

"Well you should have thought of that before you set out to seduce one of your employees."

"Dammit, why won't you listen to me? I've tried to tell you before, I didn't know who you were."

"But you knew I worked for the hotel."

It was Eric's turn to sigh now. "Yes, I did. But I never intended it to happen. And by the time it did, I didn't care. I wanted you regardless of who you were, or who you worked for. Or who I was. Part of me convinced myself that since you weren't under my direct supervision, it was okay. I was wrong, but dammit, so are you."

"Tell me honestly. Do you feel nothing? Is this connection I feel all one-sided? Do you really want me to walk out that door and never come back?"

"It'll never work, Eric. You live in Denver, and I live here."

He walked to her, took hold of her hands. "We'll figure out something. We can make it work if we try."

"People will talk."

"Let them talk about me, I don't care. Your employees love you. You can't do any wrong with them."

"I don't know."

"I do. Please, Tori. Give me a chance."

Tori stood there not saying a word. Eric knew his future depended on what she said. He would give up anything he had to be with her, if only she would let him prove it. At her nod, he exhaled sharply.

"Is that a yes?"

"Yes."

"I promise you won't regret it."

"Yeah, well. We'll see." But the smile on her face gave him hope.

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THE LOVERS

by

Michelle Hasker

"The Lovers? It looks more like a triad. Why is there another chick?"

Abigail laughed as she looked at the stunned expression on Annabelle Friedman's face. "Some decks have two ladies with a man between them and others have a male and female. I just happened to pull out this deck for you."

"I guess it could be accurate. I mean I was engaged to be married, but he left me for another woman. This vacation is a compensation of sorts. His attempt to keep me from going to the press, probably."

"So your ex-fiancé is an important man?" Abigail studied her latest reading and wondered how much convincing it would take to make Annabelle realize she'd drawn a positive card.

"Yes. He runs a very successful company. That's why it's hard to believe he dumped me. I'm a much better choice financially. I'm already well established in my career. I have my own money and don't need his. We have a mutual respect and admiration for each other, and got along wonderfully. His new fiancée is an airhead who didn't even go to college. She has nothing to offer him. I hope he makes her sign a prenuptial agreement."

Abigail watched Annabelle's animated face and wondered why it was that sometimes the obvious escaped even the most intelligent of people. "If that's how you really feel, you won't like this reading."

"It doesn't count anyway, right? I mean we're in an airplane—"

"Hon, my readings *count* no matter where I do them. I keep my cards cleansed and put them away properly after each reading. But I digress. Let's get on with your reading. We have the rest of the ride to draw up that prenup for your ex-fiancé." Abigail drew in a deep breath, centered herself, then smiled at Annabelle and pointed to the card once more. "The Lovers. What luck you have to have drawn this card. Most women, and men for that matter, would envy you this reading. The Lovers is about attraction, beauty, trials overcome, and of course, love."

"Well it's a little late to pull that card for me." Annabelle laughed and leaned back in her seat. She waved for a flight attendant. Abigail waited until Annabelle ordered another drink, then she tapped on the card.

"Yes, love. You will be forced to make a decision about love, and you'll surprise yourself. Love has no reason and is unpredictable. In this case, it will sneak up on you and bite you in the ass. Someone you have already met will make you reevaluate everything you once thought you knew. Love will happen and no matter what you do, you'll never feel complete without this other person."

"I hope it's a guy and not a girl. The picture on that card doesn't look very promising."

"You don't seem to really believe in this reading, so what does the picture matter? Are you just humoring an old lady? What would it take to convince you that you don't know everything?"

"It's silly to think that a card will predict my future. I make my own destiny, no one else. My actions determine my future, not some mysterious and kinky card."

Abigail shook her head. The awakening, when it came, would be rude. But if Annabelle followed her heart things would work out okay.

* * * *

Annabelle had been relieved when Abigail fell asleep. It had been hard to listen to such an outrageous fortune without laughing out loud. How much further from the truth could she be? Kevin had dumped her and she was on her way to a vacation alone. And now it looked like the hotel had left her stranded. Just another thing to blame on Kevin.

"What a jerk. He doesn't know what he's missing. I was supposed to be the best thing that ever happened to him and he tossed me out like a piece of garbage," Annabelle grumbled as she glanced around the airport. "Where the hell is the hotel transportation anyway?"

She tightened her grip on her carry-on bag and walked toward luggage pick-up. If someone from Hotel Mandou didn't show up soon there would be hell to pay. *Big time.*

What was she doing here and why had she come anyway? Because her ex-fiancé was a nice guy? At least he'd given her an all-expense paid vacation to Hawaii. Perhaps he wanted

her to have a vacation fling and forget about him. Fat chance, but she sure would try and have as much fun as she could. *Why not?* She wasn't paying for it. Kevin Gardner the third was.

Finally, she found the conveyor belt and her luggage. As she reached for the first suitcase someone leaned in front of her to grab theirs and she missed her chance. With a sigh, she stepped closer and looked for her second bag.

"Ms. Friedman?" A tall man with golden skin stepped up to the conveyor belt as she reached for her suitcase.

"Oh no you don't," she muttered as she snatched her suitcase up by the handle before it could slip past her.

Triumphant, she decided to see what the stranger wanted. She turned to look at him and realized her escort had finally arrived. He had short black hair, brown eyes, a short stubby nose, and was dressed in a uniform consisting of a white shirt, shorts, socks, and shoes. *They must have an expensive cleaning bill.* She read his name tag. *Juan, Hotel Mandou.*

"I'm Annabelle Friedman."

"Sorry, I'm running late. There was a mix up with your arrival time. We're very sorry."

"Ah, so they did send someone to pick me up, after all. I have one more suitcase to find and then I'll be ready to go." As soon as the first bag came around again, she grabbed it and turned back to Juan. "Do we have a lot of other passengers to wait for?"

"No, ma'am. You're the only one on this flight. We can leave right away." He gave her a dazzling smile full of brilliant white teeth and reached for the suitcases.

"Thanks." She smiled as he picked up her luggage.

After she slung her carry-on bag over her shoulder, she followed him to the main entrance. She was about to get into the van when she noticed a man climbing into the car in front of her. His laughter reminded her of Kevin's best friend and second-in-command, Luke Phillips. Even his profile reminded her of the man. *What could he be doing here?*

A naughty smile crossed her face as she thought about all the things she'd like to do with Luke. Shivering, she pushed the thought aside. She was meant to be with Kevin. Even if there was no sexual attraction it would have been better than the so-called happy marriages people went on about today. That was why the divorce rate was so high. No one cared about compatibility. All they cared about was who could give them fireworks in bed. Once they were married, it always went downhill.

Every marriage was a partnership. If she found someone she liked and respected then the sexual attraction would develop. It was the instant attraction that she stayed away from. That kind of relationship could only end in pain, as her mother was fond of saying. Luke would be good for a fling, but Kevin would be better for the long haul. Unfortunately Kevin had been taken away from her by a brainless bimbo with big breasts and no ass.

"Ms. Friedman?"

Annabelle blinked and looked around. Heat rose in her cheeks as she realized she was still staring at the spot the car had been. She had a bad case of lust for Luke. Too bad he wasn't here. Maybe they could have had a little fun before

they had to return to the business world. No one back home would be any wiser.

"Sorry, I was making sure I haven't forgotten anything."

"You'll be well taken care of. Mr. Gardner made sure your entire trip was paid for so you won't have any worries. Even your tips are prepaid."

Annabelle forced a smile even though she felt like doing anything else but that. "Yeah, he's such a great guy."

Her sarcasm must have been lost on him because he nodded and ushered her inside the van. Once the van was in motion he began to tell her about various spots of interest and activities that the hotel provided. Before he could finish his speech they'd arrived at the hotel, but unfortunately for her he continued his commentary as he carried her luggage inside and bypassed the check-in counter.

"Where are we going? Don't I need to check in?" she asked as they waited for the elevator.

"That's already been taken care of. Now that we're here, let me tell you some of the history of the hotel."

She tuned him out and dug around in her purse for a mint. A hot bath, a long nap, and then she'd be ready to take the town by storm. Or at least familiarize herself with the room service menu.

"This is your suite," he said as he led her out of the elevator and down the hall. "I think you'll find everything satisfactory, but if you have any problems, or need any assistance, please don't hesitate to ask."

"I'm sure it will be lovely. It looks as if Kevin spared no expense for this trip."

"Actually, this is one of the honeymoon suites. After the Presidential suite, this is the best we have to offer."

It shows how guilty he must be feeling. She refrained from saying it out loud.

Juan opened the door and led her inside. "I'll leave your bags here by the door. Don't forget, if you need anything just pick up the phone and ask for Juan or Ricardo. We'll be more than happy to assist you anytime of the day or night."

"Thank you, Juan."

"Good afternoon, ma'am."

"Good afternoon. Oh wait, your tip." Before she could reach into her purse Juan had already stepped into the hallway.

"It's all been taken care of, ma'am. All expenses. Have a great afternoon."

"Thanks," she said as he closed the door.

She dropped her carry-on bag on the sofa and walked around the room taking in all the details from the stone fireplace to the large sofa and wide screen TV. The décor was white with bursts of color in the draperies and throw rugs scattered around the room. Off to one side was a small but well stocked kitchenette. Maybe she'd stay in and eat dinner instead. She searched the cupboards.

Nature called, so Annabelle stopped searching for food and made her way through the rest of the suite. One door had curtains so she assumed it led to a balcony. The other door opened into a large bedroom. As she stepped inside another door opened, and a half naked, dripping wet man stepped out with a towel draped loosely around his waist.

The dark hair and muscled chest reminded her of Luke, but then lately even a hot dog made her think of the man and what she'd love to do with a certain part of his anatomy. She licked suddenly wet lips as he looked up and saw her. Annabelle froze like the proverbial deer in headlights.

"Luke?"

Hazel eyes met hers and held them steady. "Annabelle. I was wondering when you would arrive. My flight got in a few hours before yours and I was killing time until you got here."

"Killing time?" She sounded like an echo, but didn't care. *God damn, he is hot.*

Annabelle broke eye contact and watched a rivulet of water roll down his cheek, fall off of his chin, and land on his hard, muscled chest. The bead of water then trickled over the smooth expanse of bronzed skin until it reached the fluffy white towel he'd wrapped around his waist.

"What are you doing here?" she asked, wishing the towel would slip a little, or better yet, fall off of his hips so she could see him in his full naked glory.

"Didn't Kevin tell you?"

"Tell me what?" She took her attention away from his abs and the gap in the towel to look into his fathomless eyes again.

"Well, he thought you'd have more fun if I came along. He's been promising me a vacation for months now, and he figured what better time than now? This way you'll have an escort and won't be alone. He can make sure no one takes advantage of you, and that I don't fall for an island woman and hand in my notice."

"What?" *What is he getting at?* Either she was too distracted by his lack of clothing, or he was making up a tall tale instead of telling her why he was really here.

"Basically, I'm your roomie." He grinned and walked over to her, holding out his right hand.

"It's a one bedroom suite, Luke."

"I know." He grinned and winked, sending a rush of fluids to her core. "Welcome to Hawaii, Annabelle."

Annabelle stared at him for a minute, then walked past him into the bathroom and slammed the door shut. She locked it with a loud click and then dropped down onto the closed toilet seat as she drew in deep steadying breaths. Hell, if she'd touched him she'd have wanted to taste him, and as much as she wanted, and thought about making love to him, she couldn't.

"What the hell is going on? Am I dreaming? I wished Luke were here so I could have a hot fantasy filled vacation, and he really is here."

As she sat there, breathing in Luke's scent, she realized how wet with desire she was. She shifted uncomfortably on the toilet. He smelled so good, and looked so hot in nothing but a towel. *What it would take to get him to drop it?*

She groaned and buried her head in her hands. Lusting after Luke was so not a good thing. But she couldn't help it. Just one time should be enough to get him out of her system. But he never looked at her as more than a friend. Since she'd dated his best friend, what were the odds of him even looking at her in a sexual sense?

"Are you okay?" Luke asked as he knocked on the door. "I didn't mean to upset you."

"It's okay. I was surprised, not upset."

"Well, do you think you could come out now? You've been in there for a good fifteen minutes and I need to finish my primping."

Annabelle giggled and looked at the counter. Sure enough, he had personal items strewn all across it, everything from a toothbrush and toothpaste to cologne and condoms.

Condoms? She picked up a foil packet and checked out the size and style. Extra-large and ribbed. Either his ego was humungous or his cock was larger than she'd pictured in her daydreams. He was probably bigger than Woody, her toy.

"Annabelle?"

She jumped at the sound of his voice and flushed hoping he wouldn't notice she'd moved his things. After she dropped the foil packet back on the countertop, Annabelle opened the door and stared at Luke's impressive chest up close. His hand was raised as if he was about to knock again. The towel around his waist drooped even further now, and her eyes caught on the bit of hair that showed in the gap above his—erection! Either they'd starched the towel, or his member was glad to see her.

"Annabelle? Are you okay?"

Immediately she looked up into his face and saw his knowing look. Damn it, he'd caught her trying to peek inside his towel.

"We need to talk," she said, and waved her hand around as she walked past him. "You and Kevin have a lot of

explaining to do. Starting with why you're here in *my room* and ending with why we're sharing a bed."

"That sounds ominous."

Annabelle turned and smirked. "It just could be. I planned on having a wonderful vacation, at his expense. The least he could have done was let me come here alone, find a hot young thing to make wild passionate monkey love to, and come home having forgotten all about him."

Luke laughed as he stepped back inside the bathroom. "Did you and Kevin even make love once in the entire time you dated?"

"Of course not!" Annabelle couldn't hide the disgust in her voice. "Our relationship was based on more than lust. Things would have worked out."

Luke placed his hand near the top of the doorjamb and leaned against it as he looked her over suggestively. "And you were content to not make love to your own fiancé, yet you planned to get laid the first night here? Why does that sound so unlike you?"

The play of muscles in Luke's arms, chest and abs was fascinating, and the addition of a few drops of water slipping down that expanse of delicious flesh didn't help matters. Annabelle licked her lips and shifted, trying to ease the ache between her legs. *Why does Luke have to be so sinfully gorgeous?*

"Annabelle?" Luke closed the distance, grabbed her shoulders and leaned down so his face was in hers. "Did you hear a word I just said?"

"Um. No?" Heat raced up her neck and cheeks as he leaned down even closer.

"You seem very distracted tonight, Annabelle." His voice deepened. "Why is that?"

"Distracted?" She drew in a deep breath, his scent surrounding her. He smelled of coconut and man. Another shot of desire rushed straight to her belly, leaving her quivering and breathless. Damn she had to get away from him or spontaneously combust. She took a step back but froze when he cupped her chin and forced her to meet his gaze.

"Why is it that you are so distracted?" he asked as his thumb brushed back and forth under her chin.

Annabelle shivered and tried to pull back. This wasn't supposed to happen. This was wrong. But damn, he was even hotter up close and personal.

"Annabelle? Are you gonna answer me?"

"What?" she stuttered and moved her eyes away from his penetrating gaze as much as she could since she couldn't turn her head.

"Tsk, ts." He laughed. "Whatever it is, it's bothering you a lot. I've been told that I'm a good listener. Is there anything you'd like to tell me?"

She shivered again as his breath fanned her face. He was close enough that she could kiss him. All she had to do was lean forward and—

"Annabelle." He sighed and shook his head. "You disappoint me."

"Disappoint?" She blinked and met his gaze. "What are you talking about?"

"I can't believe how hard you fight your emotions."

"I have no idea what you are talking about."

"This," he said, then pressed his lips against hers and moved them tantalizingly slow, back and forth until she moaned and leaned into him, pressing her mouth to his eagerly.

"Mmm. That's right, baby. Open for me."

Her legs weakened at the sensual tone of his voice and more fluid dripped between her thighs. Annabelle grabbed onto his shoulders and opened her mouth, meeting his tongue with hers and devouring his mouth greedily. Oh, how she'd longed for this moment, never once thinking it would happen.

"Luke." She sighed, and dropped her forehead against his shoulder as she tried to catch her breath. He rested his chin on her head, the sound of his ragged breathing exciting her even more. What if he was willing to let her act out her fantasies with him? What if he was willing to be her fantasy lover for the entire two-week stay?

"Yes, Annabelle?"

"Can we do that again, please?" She looked up and met his gaze. This time a fire burned in those hazel orbs, and she knew he wanted her as much as she wanted him.

"With pleasure," he said, then captured her lips once more.

This time he was gentle, nipping and licking at her lips before slipping his tongue inside and exploring every inch of her mouth. As their tongues dueled, she leaned into him, pressing her hands against his rock-hard pecs.

"Annabelle," he whispered as his mouth left hers to nip at her lower lip, then her chin, then bite and lick his way to her ear. "I want to fuck you right here, right now, hard and fast until you shout my name as you come again and again until you pass out."

She sighed. "Is that a promise?"

His eyes lit up as he grabbed her shirt and tugged it up and over her head. She quickly stepped out of her pants and stood before him in her red lacy teddy. She wore it thinking she'd be more comfortable to travel, but now, seeing the hunger in those green-blue eyes, she vowed to wear only these from now on.

"You dressed for loving."

"I dressed for comfort," she whispered as she leaned close and sucked his pebbled nipple into her mouth.

Annabelle swirled her tongue around the turgid peak while she slid her other hand down his abdomen to his towel. With one quick tug, the towel fell to the floor, and she stepped back to look at him. Her breath caught and her heart quickened at the sight of his long, thick, throbbing erection.

"Oh, God," she moaned as she licked her lips and dropped to her knees.

"Don't be shy, baby, tell me what you really think." He laughed, but it turned into a groan when she wrapped her hands around him and licked the head of his cock.

"Tell you what I really think?" she asked, licking around the tip and tasting the salty tang of his pre-cum. "I think you're as ready as I am."

"Ohh, yeah," he growled as she sucked him deep into her mouth and throat. "God, baby. You don't beat around the bush."

She slid him out with a pop and grinned. "Not when I see something I want."

"Glad you like the package."

"Oh, yeah." Annabelle sucked him back into her mouth and worked him with her hands as well, sliding them up, then down, and gently squeezing.

"You need to stop, or I'll be done before we even start."

Annabelle hesitated and leaned back, keeping him as far in her mouth as she could while she met his gaze. Teasing him with her tongue, she watched as he closed his eyes and rocked into her mouth.

"I mean it, Anna. I can't hold it back much longer."

She hummed and drew him in deep, then released him with a loud, wet pop. "What a shame, I was just getting started."

"I'll show you, just getting started."

Luke scooped her up, carried her over to the bed and gently set her down. As he leaned over her, he traced a finger along the top of the teddy, sending goose bumps all over her body. He grinned and looked up at her. "Where to start..."

She knew where she wanted him to start. The part of her that was wet and aching and oh, so ready for penetration. She was no virgin, but she'd dated Kevin for over a year. She needed Luke and she didn't think she'd be very patient either.

"You're going to torture me?" Damn, she sounded breathless, no, she *was* breathless, and he was barely touching her. The anticipation was going to kill her.

"Torture is such a delicious word, don't you think?" he asked as he stood up and walked over to the suitcase on the luggage rack.

He isn't leaving, is he? No, not sporting a hard-on like that. Then what is he doing?

Luke gave her a wicked smile as he opened it. After he dug around in it for a minute, he pulled out several ties.

"Luke?" she stuttered, but remained on the bed waiting to see what he would do. She'd known him for years, it had been him who'd introduced her and Kevin. No way would Luke hurt her. Of course she'd never thought he'd want to make love to her either.

"Since you're so eager and willing, I thought maybe you'd be up for a little fun."

"Fun?" she croaked as he drew close enough to climb on the bed and straddle her.

"Fun."

He grabbed one of her arms and lifted it toward a bedpost. Hell she hadn't even gotten a good look at the bedroom because he'd walked out of the bathroom half naked. She loved four poster beds, and this one was going to be perfect for what Luke had in mind. What she hoped he had in mind considering he'd tied her to the post.

"So compliant, aren't you? What a good thing Kevin never saw these qualities in you. He thought you were too pushy and demanding."

"Pushy and demanding!" she shouted, trying to sit up.

Luke pressed her back down with one hand on her chest.

"Shhhh. Relax, Anna. We've got all night, but I want you now. Forget about Kevin and look at me."

"I had forgotten him until you brought him up."

Luke rubbed against her. "Did Kevin make you feel this way?"

She sighed. "You know he didn't. At this point I think the whole eastern seaboard knows we never got it on."

"Annabelle."

"What?"

"Don't make me gag you," he said as he grabbed her other arm and tied it to another bedpost.

"Gag me?" She stared at him, desire thickening between her legs. If he gagged her she could be as loud as she wanted to. That was what she really wanted. Someone to fuck her until she came so hard it made her scream and shatter. She'd read about orgasms so intense women passed out. She'd like to sign up for one. Now.

He gave an exaggerated sigh and lowered his mouth to hers. "I don't really want to gag you, baby. But if you don't stop talking, I will."

Eyes twinkling, she smiled at him. "You wouldn't dare."

"Don't push your luck." He growled and moved down her body, sliding his large warm hands down her thighs and calves. When he reached one ankle, he tied it to another post and repeated the action with her other.

Lying there spread eagle and at his mercy was so exciting she knew he could smell her desire. She was so creamy and

wet it wouldn't surprise her if the bed was damp now. She moved, testing the strength of the binds and was pleased to see that while they didn't hurt, she couldn't get free. Luke knew his stuff.

"Now we get to do this my way." He grinned and knelt between her legs. He looked at her for so long she wondered what he was waiting for. Then he spoke again. "Last chance to change your mind."

"If you don't fuck me mindless, now, I'll never speak to you again," she said and growled at his answering laugh.

"That's all I wanted to know." He slid his hands up her legs to the soft curls at the apex of her thighs. "And how you taste."

Annabelle moaned and tried to move into his feather-light touch. His goal was to torture her. There was no other explanation for this deliberate torment. "Luke."

"Yes?" he asked as he slid his thumb past the lace and pressed against her clit. She jumped under the pressure, her eyes widening as he rubbed the sensitive nub. "Mmhmm. What have we here?"

When he flicked at it again, then pressed against it she gasped, and thrust against him. Leisurely, he toyed with her, alternately teasing her clit and slipping his fingers along her slick folds. Sensations built and increased within her to a fever pitch, but release remained unattainable. Either he switched his movement, or speed. And all the time he acted as if he had nothing else to do but spend hours playing with her.

Annabelle moaned and closed her eyes. *Hours being his plaything? Hours being tortured by him? God, yes.* She wanted that, and more. When he withdrew and slid his finger into his mouth, her body quivered, and her already soaked pussy clenched.

"Luke!" she begged as she turned her head back and forth.

"Perhaps I do need to gag you."

"If you don't want the other guests to know you are a nothing but a tease—" She broke off in a strangled cry as he slid his wet finger deep inside her sheath. Clenching around him, her hips lifted, seeking more.

Luke moved his finger in and out slowly, watching her as pressure built in her stomach and chest. Annabelle fought the restraints, trying to get more of him. One finger wasn't nearly enough. She needed his hard, thick length buried in her to the hilt.

"Please, Luke, I need more," she begged between gasps for air. She wriggled under his ministrations, pleading not only with her body but with words, too.

He chuckled and added another finger to the first. When she writhed desperate for more, he moved them faster and harder, then suddenly stopped. She only realized she'd closed her eyes when they flew open in dismay. Hunger clawed at her belly and desire made her common sense vanish.

"What the fuck?" She glared down at him only to gasp and buck when his mouth closed on her clit and he sucked on it before running his tongue across her folds and dipping inside.

"Luke," she whispered, body shaking as she fought to get free and force him to make her come. "Please, Luke, please."

"You're so sexy when you beg," he said as he looked up at her. He flicked at her clit, and she knew he was trying to make her beg even more. Obviously, Luke had bigger ego problems than she was aware of. Why else this need to reduce his sexual partner to a shivering, needy mass without giving her release?

She yanked at the binds and cursed when he pulled back.

"Patience, Anna. I just want to look at your flushed body. Listening to your sweet moans and sexy noises has me ready to come from just pleasuring you."

"I'd like to come. I really would. Before I die from frustration, Luke."

Luke grinned and slid his hands up her thighs. "It would be my pleasure, baby."

He lowered his mouth to her pussy and latched onto her clit, sucking hard while he thrust two fingers deep within her core.

Annabelle cried out and thrust against his mouth and hand as tingles raced up her legs and belly until she exploded, shattering into a million pieces of star dust. Luke prolonged the sweet release until Anna gasped and pleaded, "Oh, heavens. Enough, Luke. I can't take anymore."

"I think you can," he said as he shifted his position and then plunged into her hard and fast.

She cried out and tried to wrap her legs around his waist, but the binds continued to hold her securely. Luke began to thrust in and out, and immediately the sensations started to build all over again. Within a short time she screamed her release, and he shouted as he came with her.

Luke collapsed on top of her, panting, as he placed tender kisses on her neck and shoulder.

* * * *

"Just think, Annabelle. Two weeks with me won't be so bad, will it?"

She quirked an eyebrow and snorted. "The sex is incredible, I'll give you that. But don't go getting any ideas, bub. This is a vacation fling."

"A vacation fling? Don't you think this could be a little serious between us? We can barely keep our hands to ourselves." As if to enunciate his words he pulled her close and ran his hands up her back.

Annabelle shivered and leaned into him. "We have a strong attraction, but that's all it is. It'll never be more than that. You know that."

"Why can't it be more? I'm curious to see how your mind works."

"Luke, you cannot base a marriage on sexual attraction. There are other more important factors. Stability, dependability, money smarts, education—"

"I have money. I'm not as rich as Kevin, but I'm loaded. You couldn't be satisfied with second-in-command?" Luke asked as he pulled away from her.

"It's not that. I meant money savvy. You know I have money in my own right."

"But you did jump at an all-expense paid vacation."

"So did you, damn it. Besides, he owed me after I wasted over a year on him." Annabelle spun around to walk away,

but Luke grabbed her shoulders and pulled her back against his chest.

"Why so bitter? You admit there was no sexual attraction. Did you really love him?"

"I respected him, had fun with him, of course I loved him."

"Annabelle," Luke said as he cupped her chin and stared into her eyes. "Did you love him?"

"Maybe ... not." She sighed as he released her.

"What do you feel for me, Annabelle? Can you admit what you feel?"

"How would you know what I feel?"

"I don't, but I know how I feel, and you would never have let me tie you up if you didn't trust me as much as you do."

"It wouldn't work. You're not the marrying kind."

Luke growled and leaned over her, pinning her on the bed. "What the hell do you mean?"

"Come on, Luke. Yes, I want to fuck you again. And again. From now until eternity, but that isn't going to last. The passion will die out, it always does. Then what will we have?"

"Our friendship. And what I feel for you won't change, Anna. I've wanted you since the day we met. But I took it slow and wasted my chance to woo you. Now that Kevin is out of the picture I'm going to do this the right way. Let me woo you, Annabelle. Let me show you my love is the forever kind."

"All my life I've been searching for the right man. To think he was you, and right under my nose the whole time ... It just seems too far-fetched."

"This isn't over, I'm not done yet, but I'm too frustrated to even think straight right now. We'll continue this later." He slammed the door as he walked out of the suite.

Annabelle snorted. If that was how he wanted to be, she'd let him have his sulk. This just proved she was right. They were great in bed, but not compatible any other way. She grabbed her purse and headed for the hotel gift shop.

The next two hours passed in a blur as she bought gifts for her family and close friends. Then she came across a sculpture of Lono. While she couldn't quite put her finger on it, she knew she wanted the sculpture for Luke. As she read the description, she quickly changed her mind. *Lono, the god of peace, love, fertility, wind and rain. Oh Lord.*

Before she could put it back, the cashier came over and asked if she needed any assistance. Annabelle grinned as she looked down at her loaded shopping basket.

"No, thanks. I'm good. In fact, I'm ready to pay for my purchases."

"Okay," the young woman led her over to the counter. She had an East Coast accent, and Annabelle wondered if she was a student at the university and worked here for extra spending money.

Finally, curiosity and impatience got the better of her. "Do you go to college nearby?"

"No," the cashier said. "My boyfriend went to New York for college, and we met and fell in love. I followed him back here."

"You gave up everything you know to come halfway across the world because of love?"

"Yep." She grinned at Annabelle. "Love makes you do crazy things, but I've never been happier than I am here. Paul is the most wonderful man. Once we save up enough money we're getting a home built and then we're going to start a family."

"Is your family upset?" Annabelle couldn't imagine her mother's reaction if she announced that she was going to move across the world to be with a man, and she was nearly twice this girl's age.

"Nope. My mom and dad are thrilled. They plan to fly out here once a year, and when we can, we'll fly back home to see them."

"All this for the notion of love?"

The young girl laughed. "Love isn't a notion. It's wonderful." Suddenly, she sobered and looked back down at the cash register.

"What?" Annabelle asked, confused at the girl's sudden switch.

"I'm sorry, I shouldn't laugh at you. You've obviously never been in love. I will pray for you. I want you to have what I do."

"What?" Annabelle blinked in shock. "You're going to pray for me? You don't even know me."

"That's okay. I don't need to know you to be able see that you need to be loved."

Annabelle flushed as the girl finished bagging her gifts. As soon as the girl gave Annabelle her credit card back, she grabbed her bags and left the store at almost a run. *What is it with everyone?*

As soon as she stepped outside she ran into a couple. They smiled and apologized even though it had clearly been her fault. Shaking her head, Annabelle decided to go to the bar for a drink before she had to take her purchases back to her room. If she hadn't been in such a hurry to leave she would have let the girl send the bags up. *Oh well.*

"I need something strong," she said as she collapsed on a bar stool.

The handsome dark-skinned bartender looked up at her with a sympathetic smile on his face. "Have an argument with your sweetheart?"

"He's not my sweetheart!" she snapped, then flushed as he grinned and turned away. "Dammit."

A quick glance around showed she was the only customer this early in the day. The bartender set a tall glass filled with a red concoction that looked like a slushie.

"Now what did he do to make you go spend all that money and hide in here getting drunk?"

Annabelle snorted and rolled her eyes. "It's my money, I'll spend as much as I want. He's an egotistical ass who thinks that just because we slept together I love him."

"Usually people sleep together because they love each other."

"Ha!" She laughed. "This is not a throwback to another era. People have sex all the time without love being involved. Can't I just lust after his body?"

"Sure you can. But is that the only reason you slept with him?"

She went to answer yes, but stopped. Had she slept with him just because she'd wanted him? He was mouth-watering handsome, but until this trip he'd never given an indication about how he felt. Or had he? As Annabelle remembered, different times in the past when Luke had gone out of his way to do things for her and to help her, things some of her other friends would never have done. Could he love her as he claimed?

Abigail's words came back to her. *You will be forced to make a decision about love, and you'll surprise yourself. Love has no reason and is unpredictable. In this case, it will sneak up on you and bite you in the ass. Someone you have already met will make you reevaluate everything you once thought you knew. Love will happen and no matter what you do you'll never feel complete without this other person.*

How did she feel with Luke? *Content. And happier than I've ever been in my life.*

Annabelle took a sip of her drink as she tried to figure out if this really was love and not lust. She had known him for years and did care for him. But love?

With a gasp, she looked up at the bartender. "My mother is going to be devastated. She wanted me to marry for security, not for love."

"I can give you both," Luke said as he slipped his arms around her waist.

Annabelle shivered as she relaxed against him. "Was this a conspiracy? Did you know Luke was behind me the whole time?"

"Us men gotta stick together, honey." He grinned at her. "Luke's been here for the last three hours mourning his lost chance to have you. I had to do what I could to get you to think about giving him a chance. He was in the restroom."

"Yeah, well what about the young girl in the gift shop?"

"There is no young girl in the gift shop."

"What?" Annabelle frowned. "There is too, she rang up my purchases and told me all about her fiancé and the house they are building."

"Sounds like you ran into Madam Pele. Sometimes she takes an interest in our tourists, but usually she doesn't. Looks like she thinks you belong with Luke, too."

"Would you go against the gods?" Luke whispered in her ear. "All I ask is for the chance to woo you properly. Then I'll ask you to make a decision to marry me or not. But please give me this chance."

Annabelle turned and studied his face for a minute. He looked so sincere, so hopeful, so desperate. So sexy. *So mine. So what if he's everything Mother warned me against. He's also successful, nice, considerate, and caring. We're already friends. Why not take it one step farther?*

"I'm not giving you a chance." The look on his face broke her heart, and she immediately regretted teasing him. "I meant, that you don't need a chance to make me love you. I do love you."

Luke shouted and grabbed her, pulling her off the stool. He tugged her close and squeezed her until she laughed and banged on his back.

"You're choking me, you big lug." She gasped and breathed in deeply when he released her.

"I'm just so happy and stunned. I don't ever want to let you go."

You better not. While she couldn't voice it, she could think it. The fortune teller had been right after all.

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STRENGTH

by

Tina Bendoni

"Hey, girlie. Where ya going?"

Oh, shit. Sonya had hoped she'd be able to get home without any problems. She was, after all, in a small town in the middle of nowhere. What were the odds she'd be harassed?

Apparently pretty good. Just her luck, she'd be the only woman harassed in the last ten years in Branch, Montana.

"Home to my big strapping husband. I'm running late, though, so he'll probably be coming to look for me."

An evil smile spread across the face of the young man who had called to her. "Oh, girlie, we know who you are. You ain't got no husband and ain't no one waitin' for you."

It wasn't until that moment she noticed the other young men. They'd surrounded her like a pack of wolves. There were five of them. *Five?* Shit, she was in trouble.

"Look, guys, I don't want any trouble. Why don't you find your girlfriends and spend a quiet night with them?"

"Oh, no, girlie. We want to play with you."

Sonya knew her best bet was to get back to civilization. Fighting them would be pointless, especially given one had a large pipe, and another held a knife. In what she hoped was a move too quick to follow, she whipped around and struck the

one behind her on the chin with a roundhouse kick, following it with a push to clear her way for a run.

She didn't count on them moving so fast. Two closed ranks to block that exit, leaving the only way open to her right. Seeing no other option, she ran. Right into a blind alley.

Trapped like a rat and no amount of cop or martial arts training was going to get her out of it.

"Come on, guys, you don't want to do this."

"Oh, yes, we do. Don't we, boys?"

Out of options, Sonya prepared to take out as many as she could before they touched her. Where the hell was her service revolver when she needed it? Oh, yeah, she remembered. She didn't have one any more.

The boys approached her menacingly. Just her luck, they knew how to attack as a group. As she watched them approach her, her attention was pulled momentarily to movement behind one of them. *What is that? A dog? No, a wolf.* Oh, great, after they were done with her, the wolf would make sure and finish her off.

His growl reverberated through the narrow alley. Her would-be attackers turned around at the sound. His lips were pulled back and his teeth glistened white and large in the light of the street lamp.

"Go away, Lassie. Shoo!" Her pipe-wielding assailant turned to the animal to yell at him before hollering to the group, "Hey, Leroy, looks like the doggie wants to play!" He approached the snarling wolf and swung at him.

The wolf lunged at his attacker, neatly avoiding the pipe and locked his jaws onto the boy's crotch.

"Ouch! Fuck! Let go!" the boy screamed, falling back to the ground. The wolf released him after a quick shake of his head and turned its attention to the others.

He ran for the group and bounded through them, landing between Sonya and her attackers. He turned his back toward her and growled again. *The wolf is protecting me?*

"What the fuck? Screw you, dog. Get the hell out of our way."

Sonya saw up close that it really was a wolf, probably the biggest she had ever seen. Not that she'd seen any outside of zoos but this one was huge. She was hit with the wholly inappropriate desire to run her hands through his gorgeous brown pelt.

The wolf continued to ignore her, his attention on the males in front of him.

Determined to get to Sonya, the young men separated and approached from either side. The wolf turned his attention toward the two who came to the right. While he was snarling and barking at them, another came up from the left to try to grab Sonya. She broke his hold easily, and sent a fist into his nose.

He fell back with a scream, and then scrambled out of the alley when the wolf turned to him. One by one the others decided she wasn't worth it and took after the first, stopping long enough to drag their buddy who was still rolling around on the ground.

Until there was only one left. He held a large blade in his hand, and he looked like he knew how to use it.

"Come on, your buddies are all gone, are you sure you really want to try it?" Despite what had already happened, Sonya's instinct told her to try to defuse the situation. She didn't want anyone else hurt. And who knew how long she could expect her protector to hang around?

"Fuck you, bitch. We should have done this the usual way. But the guys were afraid, you being an ex-cop and all. Screw that shit. This fuckin' mutt ain't gettin' in my way."

The wolf waited, watching every move the young man made. When he lunged forward, the wolf was on him in a matter of seconds. His teeth tore through the leather jacket to the skin underneath, as blood poured out of his arm.

Sonya only had time enough to scream, "No!" before the boy pulled another knife and stuck the wolf in the side.

With a yelp, the wolf jumped away from the blade, blood pouring from its side. With a growl that made the hair on the back of Sonya's neck stand up, the wolf looked at the young man, and prepared to lunge once again despite its injury.

Apparently realizing he wasn't going to win, the young man turned tail and ran at full speed.

Once he was out of sight, the wolf turned his attention toward Sonya.

"Easy, boy. Easy. I appreciate what you did for me, but please tell me you're not gonna try and eat me now."

She was surprised when the wolf tilted his head and—smiled? *Did wolves smile?* There was no other word for the look on his face as he bared his teeth once again and took a step toward her.

He must have forgotten about the wound in his side, because he flinched and stumbled, falling to the ground with a whine.

Sonya didn't even think about it, she ran to him and sank to his side to cup his head in her lap.

"Oh, poor, brave baby. Thank you so much. But we need to get you to a vet. Will a vet help a wolf?"

She reached out to his side. It looked pretty bad, but she was the first to admit she knew next to nothing about injuries to animals. Her touch must have caused him pain, because he whimpered loudly.

"I'm sorry, baby." He licked her hand as she looked around. "My car is just at the other end of the block. Let me go get it and we can get you some help."

He licked her hand again before lying his head down with a small sound.

Only the labored breathing assured her he was still alive. Patting him once more on his head, she eased him from her lap, and ran to get her car. How she was going to carry what looked like a two hundred pound timber wolf into her car, she had no idea. But after he saved her, she wasn't going to leave him to die in the cold.

She made it back to the car in record time. She started it up and headed back to the alley, backing in as far as she could get.

It wasn't until she got out of the car and around a dumpster that she realized her wolf wasn't there.

Instead there was an unconscious, bleeding, and very naked man.

What the hell? Where is the wolf? And how did the man get here exactly where the wolf had been?

Cautious, given the situation of a few minutes before, Sonya approached the man. Yup. Definitely bleeding. In the exact same spot as her wolf. And most definitely naked.

No way, this is so not possible. A wolf didn't turn into a man, no matter what the movies said. Sonya leaned down beside the man. He had dark brown hair the same shade as her wolf's fur.

His injury was still bleeding, but it seemed to have slowed down to a trickle. She wasn't sure what to do.

Well, regardless, she couldn't leave him out here naked in the cold. *Dammit.* Call the cops? No, how would she explain how he got the cut and she found him? *Dammit, dammit, dammit.*

Nothing left for her to do, she kneeled down beside the man, and lay her hand on him. "Mister, hey, Mister Wolfie, I gotta move you. I need your help."

Her voice must have penetrated his daze, because he groaned and mumbled something she couldn't understand.

"I need you to help me get you into my car."

Together, him half-conscious, and her pulling and grunting, they managed to get him to her car. She helped him lie on the back seat before he passed out completely. Seeing his gorgeous muscled body in all its naked glory stirred something deep within her.

"Oh, great, Sonya, see a naked unconscious man and all you can think about is riding him like a cowboy." Quickly she grabbed the blanket from the floorboard and spread it across

his body. She told herself it was so he didn't get too cold, but if she were honest, it was so she wouldn't keep sneaking peeks at him as she drove.

Unsure of where else to take him, Sonya drove to the cabin she was staying in on the outskirts of town. There were no neighbors, so no one would see her drag a man wrapped in a blanket into her living room. Once she had him lying on her couch, she had time to think.

What the hell am I going to do with him? Is he really my wolf? Can a wolf really turn into a man?

Sonya thought back to what she knew about werewolves. Or rather what movies and books had taught her.

Okay, they were men during the day, and wolves at night. Some only turned during the full moon, others turned whenever they wanted to. They had incredible strength, and healed rapidly.

Sonya lifted the edge of the blanket. Well, that was one they got right, his wound had already healed almost completely. It looked weeks old instead of a mere hour or so.

What else did she know about werewolves? They were evil. Well, not all of them. And they looked like some super hairy man.

Damn, this was getting her nowhere. The more she thought about it the more she was confused. Every thing seemed to contradict everything else.

Sonya realized she still had the edge of the blanket up, and more than just his side was revealed. Well, she certainly never heard about that on a werewolf. Were all of them that well endowed?

Blushing, she dropped the blanket. *What the hell am I thinking?*

He seemed to be healing rapidly enough, so she probably didn't need to take him to a hospital or anything. She looked at him again. He would probably be okay to sleep there 'til the morning.

She felt pretty confident that she would be safe. After all, he did save her from her would-be rapists this evening.

Oh, damn. Those shits. She really needed to report them to the cops. The sheriff would ream her a new one when he found out about it. Looking at the clock she realized that there was only going to be one deputy on duty this late at night. She would be better off reporting it tomorrow. After she came up with a story to explain why a wolf would attack five would-be rapists.

Well, she really didn't have to. He'd been as much a surprise to her, as he had been to them. She could just tell the sheriff he disappeared between the time she went to get her car and came back. After all, it was the truth.

Decision made, Sonya decided it was time for sleep. Despite the fact he was her savior, she still wasn't comfortable about leaving a naked man on her living room couch, but unless she wanted to call the cops now and explain exactly what happened she had no other choice. And he *had* rescued her. She couldn't do that to him. Who knew what kind of explanations would follow? Regardless, she locked her door and propped a chair under the doorknob. Her uncle's gun was in the bed table. It never hurt to be extra careful.

* * * *

Sonya awoke the next morning with a start. *What is that noise? There it is again. A thumping.* There was someone in her house. *Who is it?*

Before panic could set in, Sonya remembered the events of the previous night. It must be her rescuer. Should she just stay here in bed and hope he would leave? Or should she go out and confront him?

A quick look at the clock told her what she had suspected. It was after nine in the morning. She had overslept. Staying in bed would just delay the inevitable. Looking down at herself, she decided she was dressed good enough for a confrontation with her hero. She had put on sweatpants and a t-shirt last night. She wore less than this to the gym.

Might as well get going.

She opened her bedroom door to the smell of bacon cooking. He was cooking in her kitchen?

Curious, she walked past the neatly folded blanket and into the kitchen area. The cabin had only one bedroom, and the main room was cut up into sections for the living room and kitchen, with a little area off to the side that she had set up as a temporary office.

As she rounded the area into the kitchen, she stopped short. There he was. Her hero of the night before. She really had to stop thinking of him like that. Savior, hero, wolf. Well, dammit, she didn't have a name for him, what else was she supposed to call him? Looking at him in her kitchen, though, it was hard to believe that he had actually turned into a wolf to help her last night. She had a werewolf in her kitchen.

A very sexy werewolf. She hadn't really noticed much last night, other than the fact he was big, but that was an understatement to say the least. He was tall, about six foot four, maybe two hundred ten pounds, and all solid muscle. His shoulders were wide, and his large biceps bulged as he worked on the stove. His back was solid, and tapered down slightly to a nice slim waist.

Her eyes continued down but were stopped by a large white towel wrapped around his waist. *That's right, last night he was naked.* He wouldn't have had anything to wear, and frying bacon naked wasn't a smart idea. Not even for a werewolf.

Was she really accepting that's what had happened? That there was no chance of mistaken identity? Yes, she was a rational, intelligent woman who had based her life on facts. The facts pointed to a naked werewolf cooking bacon in her kitchenette.

"You hungry?"

She jumped at the sound of his voice. She thought he hadn't heard her over the sound of grease splattering. A part of her deep inside melted at the smooth baritone coming from the man in front of her. Desire coiled up from the pit of her stomach.

"Um..."

Her wolfman turned around and she was struck dumb. She had seen him last night in the alley, and once they got here, but she hadn't really looked at him. He was gorgeous. A chiseled jaw, straight Roman nose, and bright blue eyes that

were framed by thick eyelashes the same shade as his gorgeous brown hair.

Oh my God. His chest was the epitome of perfection. An eight pack, never mind a paltry six, and not an ounce of flab anywhere. Her pussy grew wet at the sight of all that glorious muscle-bound flesh.

A smattering of hair covered it, leading her eyes back down to the towel and what lay beneath. She tore her eyes away, skin flushing as she remembered what lay beneath the towel.

She swallowed, reminding herself to answer. He smiled as though he knew what she was thinking. He had a plate in his hand that looked like it held the entire pound of bacon.

"I hope you don't mind. I was hungry."

"Not at all."

He turned back and started breaking eggs into the grease in the pan. "How many eggs do you want?"

"Two is fine." Was she really doing this? Having a perfectly normal conversation with this man as though waking up and finding him cooking in her kitchen was nothing unusual?

He finished serving up the meals, apparently at home in a kitchen, and sat at the breakfast bar.

"So I suppose you want to talk about last night."

"You aren't going to deny it?"

"Would it do me any good?"

"Well since technically, I didn't see anything supernatural..." Her voice trailed off.

"But you're not that naive, are you?"

Sonya had to admit to being relieved that she hadn't gone insane. Although the fact she was even having this conversation begged the question.

"So, you really did turn into a wolf last night?"

"Yup." He nodded, helping himself to another forkful of his eggs.

"It wasn't a full moon, though."

"Nope."

She sighed in frustration. "You aren't gonna help me with this, are you?"

He smiled and her heart melted. Damn, he was the best looking man she had seen in a long time, if not ever.

"Should I?"

"I kept your secret last night."

"If you hadn't gotten in trouble, I wouldn't have had to reveal myself."

"If you had been more careful, that kid never would have gotten his knife in your side."

He laughed, and her entire body turned to mush. Liquid spied to her pussy in a rush of desire so strong she gasped. How the hell could a laugh do that to her?

"Okay, point taken. I am a werewolf. No, I was not bitten by a rabid wolf, or a werewolf. I was born a werewolf, and yes, there are others. No, I'm not gonna tell you who. We are not forced to change in the light of the full moon. We can change whenever we want to. Often if our energy is low, we turn back to our human form, which is why when you came back last night I was no longer a wolf."

"Your body needed the energy to heal."

"You noticed that, huh?"

Instead of saying anything, she just looked at him. He chuckled.

"Yeah, I guess that wound was a bit big to miss, wasn't it?"

"Are you in any pain?"

He looked down to his side where not even a scar was left of the wound he had sustained last night.

"Nope, not at all. One of the benefits of our kind is we heal incredibly fast."

"What else?"

"Near super strength, speed, extra sharp senses."

"Are you from around here?"

"Not exactly."

Sonya waited, and when he didn't have any further information to impart she said, "Fair enough. I don't blame you, I wouldn't tell a stranger where my pack was either."

He nodded at her acceptance. "You aren't from around here, though."

"No, I'm not. I'm from Philly, but I'm on vacation."

"Why the middle of Montana?"

"This cabin belongs to my uncle. I used to spend time with him growing up. So when I needed to get away, this made the most sense."

"Get away?"

"You have your secrets, I have mine."

"Fair enough."

Sonya laid her fork down and crossed her arms. "So, what are you doing in Branch? No one comes here without a reason."

"Honestly?"

"No, please lie to me."

"I was looking for someone."

"Someone in particular? Or will anyone do?"

"For my brother."

"Is he missing?"

"No, not really, he just decided to get away for a while, and it's time for him to come home."

"And who are you to decide this?" Sonya raised an eyebrow.

"His pack leader."

Wisely, Sonya opted not to say anything to that. After all, what could she say that wouldn't be offensive? She knew nothing about his culture, his way of life. Perhaps leaders did decide every little thing about their people.

He sighed. "Actually, my mother sent me to look for him."

Sonya tried to hide a smile, but found she couldn't do it.

"Yeah, yeah. Don't start."

A giggle escaped. And then another. Pretty soon she was laughing outright at the thought of a big alpha werewolf sent on an errand by his mother.

"Do you know where he is?"

"Yeah, I found his trail. I would have made it there last night if I hadn't been distracted."

"I'm sorry about that, but I really appreciate it."

"No, don't worry about it. My mother would have had my hide if I let anything happen to you."

"Can I ask you a question?" Sonya collected the plates and put them into the sink as she waited for his answer.

"Sure."

"Why did you do it as a wolf? Wouldn't opposable thumbs have been better?"

"Well, two reasons. I figured as a wolf I had a better chance of getting between you and them before they did anything. And anyway, I was already in wolf form. I didn't think they would be too scared of a naked man asking them to stop harassing you."

"Well, regardless, I appreciate it."

"My duty, ma'am."

Sonya groaned. "Ma'am?"

He smiled and she melted. "If I called you what I wanted to, my mama would really have my head on a platter."

"And what would that be, oh, wolf man?"

"Noah. The name is Noah." His voice sent shivers down her spine, and moisture between her legs.

"Okay, Noah." His name came out on a breath. "What do you want to call me?"

He stood up and kneeled next to her, turning her chair to him. "A tasty snack." Leaning forward he gently kissed her on the side of her neck, before working his way up to her ear, her jaw line, and then to her mouth.

His lips were as soft as she had thought, and as gentle as she could have asked for. They teased her, rubbing against hers, causing heat as she opened her mouth to deepen the

kiss. His tongue delved in to tease hers, tasting softly as she inhaled his scent.

"Yum. Definitely a tasty treat."

Did that mean he was gonna eat her? Her pussy clenched at the thought.

A knock startled them both.

"Are you expecting anyone?"

"No."

"Did you call anyone last night? Tell them what happened?" He walked to the small window and looked out onto the porch.

"No, why? Who is it?"

"It's the sheriff."

"Shit. What does Matt want?"

He turned to look at her quickly, "You know him?"

"I told you, I spent a lot of time here growing up. He's a friend of my uncle's."

"Sonya! Are you in there?" Matt's voice came through the wooden door as he knocked again.

"I'm coming! Be right there!" she called back at him. She turned and looked at her guest, and realized that not only was he practically naked, but he looked worried, too. *Is he hiding from the cops?*

"Quick, hide in the bedroom. I'll get rid of him." She grabbed the empty dishes and put them in the sink. No sense advertising she wasn't alone.

Noah looked around, and quickly walked to the bedroom, shooting her one last glance before he pulled the door mostly closed.

Sonya walked to the front door and opened it. "Matt, what are you doing here?"

"Are you okay, Sonya?"

"Of course I am, Matt. What's wrong?"

"Can I come in?"

"Well, I just finished breakfast, and need to finish getting ready, but if it's only for a minute." Sonya winced inwardly at her unfriendly response to a man she'd known since she was five. Maybe he'd chalk it up to the reason she was up here in the first place.

"Did you see anyone strange in Rick's Pub last night?"

"Matt, I haven't been back to town in over ten years. I was eighteen the last time I was here. Everyone in the bar is a stranger to me."

Matt huffed and put his hands on his hips. "Little lady, don't get all snooty with me. Your uncle told me what went down. I know damn good and well you're a good cop, or were until that happened. You know what I mean by strange."

Sonya cringed. She sincerely hoped Noah hadn't heard that last bit of info. She wasn't looking forward to explaining what happened. At least not to a relative stranger.

"No, Matt, there wasn't anyone in the bar who caught my attention. Why do you ask? What happened?"

"We've had a couple assaults lately."

"In Branch?"

"Yeah, it's only been visitors so far, so I thought you being gone so long they might give you some trouble."

"You do realize that means you are probably looking for a local."

"I have been doing this longer than you've been alive, Sonya. I know what to look for, even if I am a small-town sheriff. And it's not necessarily a local. We've had quite a few new guys popping up lately, and one of them was in the bar last night. Rick said he left right after you did. He described the guy as suspicious looking."

Sonya laughed. "Matt, Rick would describe the pope as suspicious."

"Yeah well, that's only 'cause he wears a dress."

Sonya shook her head. "Really, Matt, what's going on?" She watched him as he walked around the cabin, looking as though he were checking for something.

"Matt!" she yelled as he slammed her bedroom door open. He used enough force to slam it against the bedroom wall. *Shit*. How was she gonna get away with this? She had just denied seeing Noah, never mind taking him home with her.

A fierce growl and loud bark met Matt's aggressive move. He back up quickly.

"Shit, Sonya, when the hell did you get a dog?" He backed away so quickly he never noticed it was a wolf in her bedroom, not a dog.

"A while ago. I needed the company."

"Well dammit, woman, warn me next time."

"Well I would have if you'd asked permission to look in the bedroom instead of barging in like a maniac."

Matt had the decency to look sheepish. "Well, you were acting kind of strange. I didn't know if he was in here holding you prisoner or something."

"As you just pointed out, Matt, you've known me forever. And for a short while, I was a cop myself. Don't you think I would have figured out some way to let you know something was wrong? Something more obvious than grumpiness 'cause I just woke up?"

"Okay, okay. Point taken. But be careful. This guy, whoever he is means business."

Sonya thought of the boys who tracked her down last night.

"Are you sure it's only one guy?"

"How'd you know?"

"Matt."

"Actually it's about four guys."

"Then why did you ask me about just one?"

"I told you, Rick said this guy last night looked off."

"Matt, would you please explain to me what is going on?"

Matt sighed and walked over to her couch to sit down.

"There are four or five guys involved in this. Mostly fairly young, but obviously not to be screwed with. So far we have a couple different M.O.s. One of the women reported that she was approached by a young, good-looking man on the way to her car. She tried to avoid him, she said he gave her the creeps, and he grabbed her and pulled her into an alley and raped her. Basically what you would expect from a rape case.

"The others, now they are different. I've had three women report that they were being harassed by a couple guys in a parking lot, or on the way to their cars, or some such thing. Just when things seem to be getting out of hand, another guy comes by and conveniently rescues her."

"Oh shit."

"Yeah. Who wouldn't trust someone who had just saved her from a gang rape? Well, apparently the guy is quite a charmer, what with starting off on the right foot like that, and eventually he proves himself to be no better than the other guys."

"Are you sure they're in it together?" Oh, God. A man who rescues women from a group of thugs. Her eyes strayed to the bedroom door. Noah was peeking out of the room, still in his wolf form. He had to have heard everything the sheriff had said.

Was he the one? Had his rescue really not been a rescue at all? He obviously was a werewolf, his standing there on four legs was proof enough of that if she had doubted it, but what else was true? A knife to the gut wouldn't do him any permanent danger. It would be the perfect setup.

"Jesus, Matt. One of them is named Leroy." She plopped down on a chair as she full implications of last night hit her.

"What? What the hell are you talking about?"

"Last night five young men started to harass me. I was going to report it today—"

"Why the hell didn't you report it last night?"

"Because I know you only have one deputy on duty after midnight on a Monday night. There wouldn't have been anyone to tell, and they would have woken you up and you couldn't have done a damn thing."

"Sonya, you're good, but not that good. How the hell did you get away from them?"

Sonya debated for a moment longer. Should she tell him a werewolf came to her rescue? Was he part of it? Was it part of their plan? Noah came out at that moment and laid his head on her lap.

"Chaney helped me."

"Cheney? Dick Cheney?" The confusion was obvious in Matt's face.

"No, Chaney, my dog. As in Lon Chaney. *The Wolf Man*."

Matt eyed the wolf warily. "That's not a simple dog, Sonya."

"I know. But he's harmless."

"You could have fooled me. I thought he was going to attack me a minute ago."

"That's only because he thought you were threatening me."

Matt looked at the bedroom door. "Damn, I was sure I pulled it tight."

"It sticks. It probably popped open."

"I guess." Matt's voice was uncertain, but unless he knew about werewolves, he would never suspect that Noah—Chaney could have opened the door himself.

"Did you work with him when you were in the city?"

Sonya thought fast. It would explain away some of his actions. "Yes. In fact, I thought about having him trained for the K-9 department, but they wanted to neuter him."

The growl reverberated up her arm. She smiled and sank to her knees to look him in the eyes as she crooned at him.

"But I wouldn't let them cut off his boy parts. He might need them someday." Sonya could swear she saw a glimmer

in his eyes before he buried his head between her breasts, rubbing against her.

"So what can you tell me about those boys?"

"Leroy and four of his buddies cornered me last night. They said something about not doing it the normal way. Chaney heard my cry for help and came after me. He scared them away. After a fight. He got one of them in the arm, and the other, well, um, in the crotch."

"Where was he?"

"Who?"

"Chaney."

"In my car, where else? I left the window open for him."

Matt eyed the wolf. Chaney bared his teeth.

"He can be very convincing when he wants to be."

"I can see that. Any other description?"

Sonya described her attackers from the night before in detail and assured the sheriff she would be available for identifying suspects if needed. It was obvious he knew who she was talking about, though. In a small town like Branch, there weren't that many Leroy's.

She waved him down the driveway from the porch as he left. Turning, she went back into the cabin. Only to be grabbed by the shoulders and pushed against the door hard enough to knock the breath out of her.

"Why didn't you tell him about me?"

"Why would I?"

"I fit their M.O. I've been alone here with you. I could have hurt you at any time."

"That's exactly why. You could have, but you didn't."

"What's to stop me now? I could rape you. No one would believe you. You just lied to a cop, and if you tell them I'm a werewolf, you'd be the one they would lock up."

"You won't force me to do anything, Noah. You can't."

"And why not?"

"Because you can't force the willing." She reached for him then, moving in with intent obvious in every inch of her body.

Their lips met in a searing kiss, sending a jolt through her body, straight to her pussy. And her heart.

His moan as he wrapped his arms around her distracted her from thought. All thought but having him inside her, fucking her.

Her arms went around his waist instinctively. His skin was hot against her hands, his waist hard muscle. She ran her hands up and down his back. Smooth skin and defined muscles thrilled her as she felt the strength he held in check.

Noah tore his mouth from hers to run his lips across her jaw, down her neck, nibbling slightly as he went. Each nip at her skin sent shivers through her body, and sparks straight to her core.

"Noah."

"Mmm." He tugged at her shirt.

"We can't." Oh but she wanted to.

"Why not?" He gave her a devilish grin as he tugged the shirt over her head, throwing it across the room.

She wasn't wearing a bra and he homed onto her chest like a babe feeding at its mother's breast. A hand cupped one as he leaned down to take the other in his mouth.

Sonya forgot what she was saying as the zing of his wet tongue laved at her nipple. *Shower. That's it.* "Shower. I didn't take a shower this morning yet."

He pulled back and stood fully up to look at her.

"Please, Noah. I can't do this without a shower first."

He grinned again. "Why didn't you say so in the first place?"

With that, he bent down and picked her up and turned away from the door. The feel of his hard chest against her naked upper body drove her to distraction. For a man who changed into a wolf, his chest hair was incredibly sparse, tickling at her breasts with each step as he carried her into the bathroom.

Once there, he slowly slid her down his body, apparently enjoying the sensations as much as she did.

He placed her on her feet and reached into the glass shower to turn on the water without letting go of her. Once he was satisfied with the temperature of the water he turned back to her and took her lips in a deep kiss.

His tongue demanded an entrance she gave willingly, opening up to the taste of him. Under the bacon and eggs was a taste that was pure, animalistic male. Her panties grew wet at the thought of what was to come.

Before she realized it, he had her completely naked, and led her into the shower.

After making sure she was wet, he reached for her shampoo and turned her away from him. She'd never had anyone other than a hairdresser wash her hair for her, and never realized how erotic it could be. Tingles started at her

scalp as he massaged and rubbed, and spread throughout her body. Moans came from deep in her throat and he chuckled in response.

"Like that, kitten?"

"Mmm." Speech was beyond her at the feel of his relaxing, erotic massage.

He instructed her to close her eyes as he directed her under the spray of the showerhead to rinse her hair out.

Her eyes were still closed when she heard the bottle of shower gel open and him squeeze some out. The touch of her sea sponge covered in rich lather had her purring in satisfaction. Starting with her shoulders he cleaned her back, working in sweeping circles across her body.

He reached her ass and massaged her cheeks, thoroughly rubbing and squeezing them together as he made sounds of appreciation this time. Slowly down her body he worked, 'til he had her entire backside and legs scrubbed and cleaned.

Her body was afire with sensations. The switch between sea sponge and the calloused surface of his palms moving back and forth sent her skin into overdrive as the different textures rubbed her body.

He slid against her body as he stood up, the dusting of hair on his chest one more texture against her skin. She was a ball of sensations, tingles everywhere. He pulled her back against his chest as he wrapped his arms around her and cupped her breasts in his hands, flicking at the nipples with his wet, soapy hands.

"These are perfect." His voice as he whispered directly into her ear made her weak at the knees.

Sonya roused herself out of her stupor of sensation long enough to reply with another purr. She wrapped her arms backwards, pulling him closer to her. His cock bumped against the curve on the top of her ass as she rubbed into him.

After playing with her nipples for what felt like a small eternity, he worked his way down her stomach to the apex of her legs. The sponge long forgotten, his fingers teased their way into her curls. "I want to taste you, drink of you until you scream for me."

Sonya whimpered.

"Will you do that for me, Sonya? Scream as I bring you to orgasm again and again?" He flicked at her clit, pressing on it briefly before moving his hand away and grabbing her shoulders to turn her around to face him.

Her body exploded at the touch of his lips against hers. She'd never heard of such a thing before, but her body was so sensitized, had been so teased, she had her first orgasm in a long time with just his kiss.

Showered, he dried them both off and picked her up again to take her to the bedroom. He lay her on the bed, kissed her lips gently, and crawled between her legs.

Sonya watched him as he drew in her essence. He closed his eyes and inhaled, as though taking in the aroma of a fine wine.

"I love your smell. You remind me of home." He lay his head down on her mons, rumbling sweet nothings to her as he brought a hand to her moist lips. One finger, down, then up. Her lips spread open for him, eager for his entry.

That finger found her canal, and slowly worked its way inside her, twisting and turning against her tight sheath. Another joined it as he scissored them inside her.

Sonya felt the pressure build as he played with her, stretching her canal, preparing her for his thick cock. He hadn't let her play with it in the shower, and she was eager for it now.

One hand cupped her ass while the other played in her sheath and his mouth dove down on her clitoris. His tongue teased it, circling round, tapping the tip gently, sending her into paroxysms of sensation. Until finally, he latched onto it and sucked her into his mouth.

Her hips went off the bed as she arched into him, exploding once again, fluid rushing over his fingers, soaking his hand and the sheets beneath her.

He lapped her juices up, and then pulled his fingers out, sucking them into his mouth to lick clean as his eyes met hers.

She saw lust, desire, and something else in his eyes. Something she couldn't read, but that shook her to her core with a feeling she couldn't identify.

He adjusted, placing himself at her entrance.

"Are you ready, kitten? Are you ready to scream and purr for me?"

"Yes." Her voice was breathy, weak.

"I can't hear you, kitten." He rubbed his cock up and down her slit, teasing her with it. "Are you ready for me? Are you ready for the big bad wolf to fuck your brains out?"

"Yes, oh, God, yes!"

He didn't wait any longer, and thrust himself into her, filling her completely. He was big. Hell, he was huge. She felt herself stretching to accommodate him as he rammed himself inside her. Once seated as deep as he could go, he stopped and looked at her with his devilish grin. "How does that feel, kitten? Is it nice and tight?"

He jerked his hips forward as he finished his question, and sparks shot through her once again. Slowly he worked his way in and out of her, wrenching each and every sensation from her he could. She lost track of how many times he sent her over the edge, how many times he flicked her clit, bit a nipple, or thrust into her one extra inch.

"Oh, God, Noah, I can't take much more. Noah, please."

"What do you want, kitten? Do you want me to keep going nice and slow, or do you want me to fuck you hard and fast? Do you want me to take you from behind and ram you as hard as I can? What do you want?"

"Noah!" she screamed his name in frustration.

"What do you want, kitten? Tell me."

"Fuck me, please. Now. Hard."

He grinned as he pulled out of her, and rolled her over, propping her up on her knees as he thrust inside her in one quick move.

"Hold onto the headboard, kitten, this is gonna be one incredible ride."

Sonya grabbed onto the oak headboard and held on for her life as he started to ride her. Immediately his thrusts were harder and deeper, reaching parts inside of her that she hadn't known existed.

She felt it building again as he rammed her harder and harder, pumping her higher and higher. His grunting as he moved had her wiggling her ass, pushing it back at him, taking more and more of him into her. Finally the tension was so strong, she felt like her head would explode.

"Oh, kitten!" he growled at her as he pumped, once, twice three times, forcing himself in as far as he could as he shot his cum inside her, sending her over the edge again, her walls milking him for all they were worth.

He collapsed over her, his arms supporting his weight, and keeping it off of her back. Heavy, hot breaths ran across her neck, sending aftershocks running through her system.

"My God, woman. That was incredible."

Sonya giggled. "Um, yeah, you could say that."

He pulled out of her and maneuvered her down to lay beside him as they both caught their breath. She didn't think she'd be able to walk for a week, and damn if it wasn't a feeling she wanted to experience again and again.

* * * *

"I need to go find my brother."

"You need clothes first."

"I can get them from my motel room."

"And just how are you gonna get in?"

"I stashed my clothes and keys before I changed. I won't have a problem."

"You're probably used to that."

"Yeah, you can say that."

"Do you want a ride into town? I promised Matt I would come in and file an official report."

"I can go in as a wolf."

"True, but I can still take you part of the way in the car."

Noah looked down at himself. "And what excuse will you give if someone sees you in the car with a naked man?"

Sonya laughed. "I'm willing to bet my uncle has something around here that will fit you. You two are about the same height. Although he has a bigger gut than you do."

The two of them showered and dressed quickly, and soon were on their way.

"Right here should be fine." They were still a couple miles away from town, with limited visibility around them. She pulled the car into a turnoff area and put it in park.

"Can I come back?"

Sonya didn't know what to say at first. She had been wondering if she would ever see him again. She had expected him to just leave. After all, no promises had been made. There were no expectations of more.

"Excuse me?"

"After I find my brother and send him home. Can I come back?"

"Why?" She was cautious.

He took his hand in hers. "I'd like to get to know you better, spend some time with you. We seem to have had a connection, and I want to explore it further."

"Oh, yeah, I'd definitely say that was a connection."

He scowled. "In addition to that. There's something more. Please?"

She swallowed around the lump in her throat. "I'd like that."

* * * *

Sonya put the book down with a sigh. She had been back at the cabin for a few hours now, and there was no sign of Noah. It scared her that after just twelve hours in his company she missed him terribly. It made no sense how she could become as attached as she had so quickly, but it had happened.

She stood up quickly and went to the kitchen. Reading wasn't distracting her, maybe cooking would. She'd bought enough food for a while, knowing she could freeze whatever she didn't eat and her uncle would eat it when he came back.

He had gone to Florida to visit an old buddy of his and the timing couldn't have been better. That's what had decided her to come here to do some thinking when she lost her job.

She had been a good cop, dammit. But unfortunately, good cops get into bad situations sometimes. She had arrested the wrong kid. His father had been a bigwig in the community, and she had gotten fired. It hadn't been worth it to fight it. There was nowhere to go with it, as it had been as small a town as Branch. She'd find something somewhere else. Her captain had already assured her that she'd get a recommendation from him.

She'd gone to visit an old friend in Philly before coming here. Cybil had dragged her to a fortune teller while she was there. She had insisted that seeing Mrs. Montgomery, as she

called the fortune teller, would perk Sonya right up. Well she was wrong.

The fortune teller had told Sonya that she was right in her beliefs, and that she was a strong-willed, confident woman. She mentioned something about calming the beast with kindness, and Sonya had snorted. It was too late for that. The beast of a politician had been enough for her by then.

Changing direction, Sonya headed into the bedroom. The woman had given her the card she'd pulled, saying something about the deck was specific to Sonya's situation. Finding her tote bag, she brought it out into the living room to search through it for the card. She had put it in there without paying much attention, and was now curious about it.

As she walked through the door back into the living room, she was grabbed from the side. Her bag went soaring, papers scattering everywhere.

Before she had a chance to react, he'd swung her around and slapped her sharply with a back hand across the face. She went sprawling.

"God damn bitch! Because of you, the fuckin' cops have my place staked out and my buddies are in jail. Only reason I'm not with them is I was on a fuckin' beer run."

Sonya stared up, stunned. The guy from last night they'd called Leroy stood there, ranting and raving at her as he paced back and forth. "God dammit, bitch, why'd you have to go tell the sheriff? It's not like we even hurt you. Well, dammit you're gonna get what's coming to you and then some, if it's the last thing I do in this damn town!"

He reached for her and pulled her up by her hair. "You damn whores are all the same. You all want it and when you get it, all you can do is whine about it.

"Well I'll be damned if I'm gonna let you screw me over. You'll pay and then I'm out of here. I never wanted to stay in this fuckin' Podunk town anyway. I should probably thank you." He gave a hideous bark of a laugh at his words.

Still holding her by the hair, he punched her on the jaw this time, sending her flying. She landed on the couch, stunned. He jumped onto her, straddling her as he forced her to lay down. Sonya struggled against him, pummeling him as well as she could despite still being dazed.

He grabbed hold of one of her hands, and trapped it under his knee. Still she fought him, her other hand raking four furrows down his cheek as she screamed at him, "Get off of me, you bastard!"

He roared at her as he slapped her again, this time with the palm of his hand, sending her head back into the arm of the couch. "Who the fuck do you think you are!" He reached for her shirt and ripped it straight down the front, buttons flying everywhere.

She knew it was hopeless. He was stronger than her, and her head was already spinning from the hits he had given her, but she wasn't about to give up. She bent her knees in an attempt to buck him off her body as he reached for her chest.

Expecting to feel his disgusting touch, she was surprised when the weight on her midsection was lifted. She looked up in time to see him go flying backwards, and Noah leaning over her, rage and concern mixing in his eyes.

"Are you okay?"

She nodded quickly, stunned. The look on his face was terrifying. He looked ready to commit murder. As he turned away toward Leroy, she realized that was exactly what he was about to do.

Scared, but for a different reason this time, she jumped up and grabbed onto Noah's arms. "No, Noah. Leave him to the cops. He won't get away with this. They'll put him in jail where he belongs."

"No one touches my woman!" Noah was enraged. She didn't know if she could talk him down.

"Noah! No! You can't. I'm alright. He didn't touch me."

Noah turned his glare to her, eyes raking her face, settling on the cheek she was sure was already swelling from Leroy's blows. "He hit you." The growl coming out of his mouth wasn't even close to human.

"And you stopped him from doing any more. Please, Noah, for me. I can't stand the thought of you going to jail, or being on the run because of me."

She could see the struggle within him. He was shaking with rage. A rage that demanded an outlet. Slowly, visibly, he forced himself to tamp it down.

They both looked at Leroy. He lay against the wall, unconscious. "Go call Matt. I'll watch him."

"Are you gonna be okay?" She lay a hand against his chest. His muscles were tight, hard as stone as he continued to hold himself in check.

"I'll be fine."

"Is *he* going to be alright?"

Noah shot her a grim smile. "He'll be fine. I won't touch him unless he moves and it doesn't look like he'll be doing that any time soon."

* * * *

Sonya watched Matt bundle a still dazed Leroy into the patrol car. She assured him that she would be in later to identify his buddies and sign any additional paperwork that was needed.

Sighing, she closed the door and sank into Noah's arms. He led her to the oversized chair where he sat her on his lap.

"Your woman?"

Noah shrugged. "Yeah, well. It was in the heat of the moment."

Sonya nodded.

"But would that be so bad?"

"Excuse me?"

"Would it be so bad to be the woman of a werewolf?"

"Well that depends. Would this werewolf be my man?"

"In every way possible."

"I don't even know where you live. Or anything about your way of life."

"I live about two hours from here. And really, we don't live any differently. Pack politics are pretty low-key. We have become very human in our dealings over the centuries. Civilization has gotten rid of most of the traditional pack challenges and the like."

"Don't wolves mate for life?"

"Yes, we do. But you weren't born to this life, and I won't hold you to our practices."

"Another part of modern society butting in?"

"In a way. There are lots of young wolves that get involved with women, thinking the females are their soul mates, and they end up being wrong. As a rule, we don't tell anyone outside the pack what we are until pack leaders decide it is okay. Even our teenagers know not to tell their lovers."

"And if they break that rule?"

"We deal with it. It's probably one of the reasons myths about us have never died."

"Well, there's nothing back home for me anymore."

"We have plenty of cop shops, too, you know."

"I can't believe I'm thinking about this."

"I know. Hell, the last thing I expected was to meet my mate on a trip to drag my baby brother home."

"Tame the beast with kindness."

"What?"

Sonya extricated herself from Noah's hold and went to the pile of papers he had picked up for her while she was talking to Matt. She grabbed the card she had been looking for earlier and brought it back to Noah before sitting with him again.

"A fortune teller told me that I would need to tame my beast with kindness."

She looked down at the card. Strength.

"I've never seen one with a wolf before. Usually it's a lion, or another cat of some sort."

"She said the card was for me, specifically. That it would tell me more than I realized if I would just pay attention to it."

"And has it?"

She looked at the dark-haired woman cuddling with the brown-haired wolf. The two of them looked amazingly like Noah and herself. Was it telling her anything?

"Yes. And I think I'm finally ready to listen." She turned her head up and took the lips of her wolf man in a gentle, possessive, claiming kiss.

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TEMPERANCE

by

Michelle Hasker

"Oh no." Tayla Stevens groaned as she looked out the window. Thick, white snowflakes filled her vision. A light dusting already covered the ground, and according to the weatherman they were going to get fifteen inches or more. "If we have to get snowed in, couldn't it be with the man of my dreams?"

"You'd have to date first. Besides, it's five o'clock," her assistant whined. "I need to go home, but you'll never finish all this in time for the Johnsons' Christmas party if I do."

"Actually, you can. Thanks to all your help, all I have left to make is the fruitcake truffles. You're the best, Sheryl."

"Didn't Mrs. Johnson say she was sending someone over to pick everything up at five?"

"Yes." Tayla sighed. "But I'll just drop off the truffles on my way home."

"You better hurry," Sheryl said as she glanced out the window. "Pretty soon you won't be going anywhere."

"I have nowhere to go anyway." Tayla stifled another sigh. She hadn't. Not since Hunter had left for the big city, anyway.

She still couldn't believe how quickly he'd dumped her and moved when he'd received a job offer at some fancy law firm. And now the big shot was coming home for Christmas, and

his mom was throwing the party of the century at their estate. If the newspapers were accurate, he'd be bringing a girl or two with him. Hunter Johnson, playboy of the year.

"Tayla?"

"Go on home, Sheryl. It's Christmas Eve and you should be with your family. I really appreciate you coming in to help me prepare the food for this party."

"I don't mind, but I do wish you'd reconsider and let me set you up with Ricardo. He's Latin, sexy, and has great moves." Sheryl moved her hips in such a way Tayla had no doubt what moves Sheryl meant.

"If he's that great then why aren't *you* with him?"

"Because I have Dean." Sheryl grinned and her eyes turned dreamy as she began to hum *The Wedding March*.

"Hey, what was it that fortune teller lady said to you? Wasn't it something like seemingly irreconcilable opposites may not be irreconcilable after all?"

"I looked it up online, and Temperance means economy, moderation, frugality, management, and accommodation. I have no clue where she got irreconcilable differences."

"Wasn't that Hunter's excuse when he left?"

"We weren't married, Sheryl. He didn't need an excuse."

"Yeah well, with him back in town, perhaps *he* is why you don't want to meet Ricardo."

"Okay, okay. Set me up with the sexy Ricardo."

"Woo hoo!" Sheryl thrust her fist up in the air and shook her ass as she twirled in a circle. "I *know* you won't regret this."

"I'm regretting it already. Now go on." Tayla laughed. "Get out of here and let me finish. Oh, and leave the door open for the Johnsons. Someone should be here any minute."

Tayla flipped on the radio and began to sing along with the Christmas songs as she gathered the ingredients she needed for the fruitcake truffles.

"Aren't you a sight for sore eyes." Hunter's voice came from behind her and froze her in her tracks.

Tayla slowly turned, her heart thundering in her chest. Her palms grew sweaty as she wondered why he was here, and why he was so damned gorgeous. *Damn womanizer.*

"When Mom said you were providing the food for the party, I volunteered to come pick up the stuff. I wanted to see how you were."

"I highly doubt I rate high in your thoughts if at all. You probably came here to see what you ever liked in me." Tayla's hands shook as she set the squares of semi-sweet chocolate on the counter. She couldn't look at him right now. How dare he walk in here and act as if he'd never ripped her heart out and stomped on it before going off and earning the nickname of Playboy of the Year? "I'm not quite finished yet."

Tayla reached for a knife, and started chopping the chocolate squares into smaller pieces. She hoped he didn't notice the anger in her voice. He'd dumped her and she'd have to learn to live with it. Hell, she'd lived with it for almost a year now. He'd moved on, and she was too. With Ricardo.

"Anything I can do to help?" he asked.

Hunter walked over and leaned against the counter next to her. Her traitorous stomach fluttered as she caught a whiff of

his masculine scent and the cologne he'd always favored. She was pathetic. The man had dumped her, and now just being near him had her ready to throw herself at his feet and ask him to make love to her again.

"I'll just set out the other food, and I'll bring these truffles over as soon as they're finished."

"The truffles? Your fruitcake truffles? No way in hell am I going home without those. Mom would kill me."

"Well I'm sorry, Hunter. You'll just have to."

"I know. I'll take the food home and come back and help you. If we don't have those truffles, I don't know what my mom would do. She'd probably disown me."

Tayla shook her head and bit back a smile. She could wish. His mom had been like a mother to her for years, but when Hunter dumped her, the other woman had kept her distance. It was going to be hard enough when Hunter did settle down, but to lose his mother when that happened would be horrible. As a precaution she'd terminated everything except business dealings with his family, even poker night with his sister Jillian.

"Just let me help you with the truffles. You really have no idea how much trouble I'll get into if I go home without them."

She couldn't fight the smirk that crossed her face. "Who do you think you're kidding, big shot? I know your mom as well as you do. Hell, she was bandaging my boo-boos when I was five. Just tell her I'll bring the treats by in an hour and a half. Two hours at the latest," she added.

Hunter studied her without a word. Then he smiled and nodded. "Only if you promise not to let me down. She'll have my head if you don't show with those truffles."

"You know, Hunter, I'm not the one who lets people down."

Tayla turned her back to him and began to clean up the pots and pans. It would be a long wait while the truffles chilled, but it would be even longer if Hunter stayed here.

Fortunately, he carried the trays out to his truck and left her to her thoughts. Maybe she could just drop off the truffles and leave before anyone noticed she was there. And maybe kids didn't eat candy.

* * * *

The kitchen was spotless, and still the timer hadn't gone off. *Damn those truffles.* At least Hunter hadn't come back. He was the type who would just because she'd told him not to. It'd been a close call earlier. She'd thought she was over the ass, hell she'd even agreed to a date with Ricardo the Latin lover. Seeing Hunter again was like a blow to her chest. She'd had trouble breathing and speaking when he'd made his presence known. What would she do the next time she saw him? Especially now that she realized she hadn't ever gotten over him.

Tayla walked over to the fridge and tested the truffles. They weren't done yet so she reached into another shelf and pulled out a tub of whipped cream and a container of strawberries. With the holidays here, they'd go to waste if she didn't finish the leftover fruit.

"Keep telling yourself that and maybe you'll believe it," she said into the empty room.

As she dipped a strawberry into the whipped topping and raised it to her lips, a pair of warm hands slid around her waist. Tayla screamed and dropped the strawberry, the cool cream slipping down the neck of her shirt. A deep chuckle came from behind her, and a familiar male scent tickled her nose.

"Hunter! God damn it!" she cursed and tried to turn around. His hands held her in place even though she struggled. "You scared the life out of me."

"That's easy to do." He laughed and spun her around. "I used to do it all the time."

"And I hated it!" she shouted and pushed against his chest.

"I've missed you so much," he said as he tugged her up against him and wrapped his arms around her.

"Oh, God." She groaned and shivered at the feel of his warm hard body pressed up against hers.

Memories flashed, unbidden, before her eyes and danced enticingly down her spine to settle in her belly. Something cold and wet slipped between her breasts, and she shrieked and pulled back as she realized where the topping went.

"What?" Hunter took a step back as he watched her wiggle around.

"You ... you ... you made me drop my food down my shirt."

With a growl, she tugged her shirt forward and looked down to see the cream rapidly melting and sticking to her breasts.

"Hell," she cursed and yanked at the strings tying her apron. "Look what you did. And I don't have an extra shirt."

"Let me help you." His voice was husky, and she looked up quickly, catching the gleam in his eyes as he reached for her shirt.

"It's fine! I've got it."

She tried to turn away, but he grabbed the hem of her t-shirt. Even though she struggled, he managed to get the shirt off. Her gasp echoed in the room as Hunter tossed her shirt aside and looked at her breasts. The white lacy bra concealed nothing, especially not the way her nipples pebbled under his gaze.

"Mmm, I love whipped cream. Especially when it's covering you." Hunter licked his lips, then reached behind her and undid her bra before she could protest.

When he lowered his mouth to her breast and licked at the cream she almost came in her pants. It had been so long since she'd felt a man's touch. He affected her like no other, and she wanted more.

"So soft and smooth, you taste as delicious as the cream," he whispered.

He grabbed her waist and backed her into the counter until she arched her back and braced her elbows on the countertop. In this position she couldn't fight him, so instead she surrendered to the feelings he roused deep inside her.

Moisture pooled between her thighs as he wedged a leg between hers and pressed into her. His erection nestled against her belly and a multitude of sensations attacked her senses at once.

"God, I've missed you, Tayla."

He kissed her with a hunger that couldn't be faked. *Did he really miss me? But he's been with all those other women.* Confusion swirled round and round in her mind as she clung to him. His masterful manipulation of her mouth with his tongue reminded her of the delicious methods of pleasure he'd used on her in the past. If there was still a chance, she was going to take it. Even if it was just for one last memory.

Tayla's movement was limited by both the counter and Hunter's proximity, so she wrapped a leg around his thigh and pressed into him.

"I want to go slow," he said between gasps for air. He kissed her neck, then nibbled his way over her carotid to her ear and sucked the fleshy lobe into his mouth.

"Slow? Ahh..." She moaned and gave up trying to talk as he cupped her breasts and lowered his attention to her aching nipples once more. Wonder at the thought he'd planned this seduction sent more heat rushing through her.

He wanted her. But what about this engagement she'd read about in the newspaper? She opened her mouth to speak, but he looked up at that moment and caught her gaze. The desire in his eyes was more than she could deny. He wanted her as desperately as she wanted him.

Tayla groaned and tugged him back up for a soul-searing kiss.

"Sweet, sweet Tayla," he moaned and buried his face in her neck once more. His fingers dug into her hips as he drew in deep breaths.

"Hunter," she sighed, drawing out his name as a shudder ran through her body. Desire clouded her mind and eyes so that all she could see, all she could feel, smell, taste, was him.

"Yes." His husky whisper tickled her collarbone as he licked his way lower and nibbled on her nipples, alternating his attention between them, and keeping her desperate for more contact.

"Please, Hunter." She hadn't planned to beg, hadn't wanted to beg, but to get him to move his attention lower, she'd do just about anything right now.

"I'm going to make love to you, Tayla. Make love to you so thoroughly that you'll never forget this night as long as you live. You'll never find anyone who will give you what I plan to give you."

His cocky attitude should have turned her off, but instead it sent another shiver skittering up her spine. Her pussy throbbed as his words replayed over and over in her mind. Heaven help her, he was worth the price.

Throwing the last of her doubt and inhibitions out the window, she grinned at him. "I'm going to hold you to that promise."

He growled and reached for her pants. Before she could blink he had them down at her ankles. As he lifted her on the counter he removed her shoes and clothes, and tossed them across the room.

"Mine." His eyes raked over her body before he glanced around the room. He grabbed the whipped topping and several strawberries and returned to her.

"You're overdressed," Tayla said as she reached for him.

"This is about you." He pushed her arm aside. "If you can't lay still for me, I'll have to restrain you."

"Restrain me?" She shivered again, more moisture pooling between her thighs. The Hunter she remembered had been more gentle and reserved. He'd never shown this much desire in all the time they'd dated. God, it excited her.

"Maybe I'll save that for another time." His husky promise and the gleam in his eyes promised more than this one night.

"God, yes," she gasped and bit her lip.

"You like the idea of me tying you up and having my wicked way with you?"

Tayla moaned and licked her lips.

"I had no idea, babe."

"Me, either."

He dipped a strawberry in the cream and met her gaze with a devilish grin. "So many delectable body parts, where should I start?"

Tayla groaned. "Stop teasing me and fuck me."

"Teasing you? It's only teasing if I don't go through with it." He leaned close so his breath fanned her cheek. "And I definitely plan to go through with every single one of my promises."

He lowered the berry and slid it across her breasts, circling her nipples, before heading lower. After he dipped it into her navel he left it there while he picked up another one. He

didn't dip it in the bowl, instead he slid it through her damp curls and pressed it against her core.

"Sweet heaven," she gasped, then moaned as he slid the berry between her nether lips.

"I'm going to take you there." His eyes gleamed as he lowered his mouth and licked at the cream he'd spread on her.

He lapped at the cream like a kitten, his tongue sending shivers up her spine. The sensation of the juicy berry at her entrance was unique and she couldn't help but wonder if he was going to do what she thought.

"Oh, Tayla," he groaned, then wrapped his fingers around her breasts and kneaded them. When he bit her nipple, she moaned, loud and long. Then he sucked on it, hard, and she clutched his shoulders, her legs twitching as she moved on the countertop. She was so ready for him but the counter wasn't very comfortable.

"You're like my own private feast."

"Mmmm," she moaned and arched as he ran his hands over her sides.

"I could spend hours feeding off of you, tasting you and sampling everything you have to offer."

When he kissed his way down her belly, Tayla held her breath, forgetting the hard counter. Her stomach quivered under his feather soft touches, and her desire increased the lower he moved. His lips brushed against the soft curls covering her mound as his fingers spread her nether lips apart.

For a moment, he paused and glanced up at her, then he focused on her and the berry. Lips and teeth plucked and nibbled at the fruit. When his teeth pierced the berry, juice dribbled down and he quickly licked it up before returning to the fruit.

Shivering, she spread her legs wider, giving him better access. Hunter ate at the fruit, and flicked his tongue across her clit.

"Hunter." The word escaped in a breathless plea as he increased the pace and pressure of his tongue on the delicate bud.

She writhed on the counter, her breaths coming short and quick as he finished the berry and slid one finger in her depths. She hissed out a long, low breath as he crooked the finger and rubbed it across the spot that brought her to the edge instantly.

As he added another finger to the first, he returned to her clit and sucked it into his mouth. Tayla cried out and arched. She was so close to the edge. Closing her eyes, she listened to the sounds he made as he sucked and licked her. He moaned, the vibrations intensifying the effect as he added yet another finger.

"Hunter," she gasped, and lifted her hips.

He increased the pace of his fingers and drew her clit between his teeth. He grazed over the sensitive flesh and rubbed against her again and again.

This time she shouted his name but it came out more like a keening cry as a million stars burst behind her tightly

clenched eyelids. Spasms rocked through her body as her muscles clenched around his fingers.

"Sweet heaven," he whispered, and then leaned over her to kiss her.

Tayla moaned and dug her hands into his shoulders. "That was nice. But I want you buried to the hilt inside me."

"Mmmm," he moaned and licked his lips. "That sounds good."

Before she could protest, he pulled away. When he quickly undressed, she almost sighed in relief. Then he lifted her off the counter and carried her over to a chair. "Hope this holds our weight," he said as he sat down.

It was her turn to moan as he lowered her on his thick shaft until every inch of him nestled inside her. Without waiting for him to take control, she rose and then lowered herself on him.

Hunter groaned and grabbed onto her hips. He forced her to increase her pace until they both panted, reaching for release. He shifted and went impossibly deep. Tayla screamed as her muscles clenched around him. Hunter's shout filled her ears as he came deep inside her.

Shit. They hadn't used protection.

Tayla quickly climbed off him and grabbed her scattered clothes. She ran into the employee bathroom and locked the door. Shaking, she looked at herself in the mirror. What had gotten into her? She snorted. Other than Hunter.

She washed her face and cleaned up as best as she could in the small bathroom. *What was I thinking? I'm such a moron.*

"Tayla?" Hunter tapped on the door. "Are you okay?"

"Yeah." It came out sounding like a croak so she cleared her throat and repeated it.

"Are you sure? I've never thought you were the love 'em and leave 'em type."

"Excuse me?" Tayla pulled her clothes on and opened the door. "What kind of crack is that coming from you?"

"What do you mean?" Hunter looked as if he genuinely was confused.

Tayla stormed past him and yanked open the fridge. She didn't have time to argue with him, she had fruitcake truffles to make.

"Dammit, Tayla, what the hell do you mean?" He grabbed her hand as she reached for the mixture.

"That," she hesitated and nodded her head toward the counter, "was a mistake. One I won't be repeating. Once a fool, always a fool."

She slammed the bowl down on the counter and dipped her hands into the chilled mixture.

"Excuse me?" Hunter growled and grabbed her hands.

"I have to make these truffles for your mom or you'll be in serious trouble, remember? It's bad enough they aren't chilled as long as they should be, but you *do* need to get back to the house before they send out a search party for you."

"Tayla, we need to talk. You switch on and off so damn fast I don't know where I stand with you."

"Where you stand with me? You're the one who left for the big city. You're the one who wanted a high profile career and

life. You're the one who decided things wouldn't work out between us."

"I did leave, but we discussed this. And we both agreed that we'd give it another try in a year."

"Hunter, you came home to announce your engagement. I don't know what you were thinking when you instigated that scene earlier. It wouldn't help your career any if I went public with your infidelity." Tayla scooped up a small amount of dough and formed a ball. "It probably wouldn't help your love life any either."

"The newspapers exaggerated. I'm not announcing an engagement. I have no intention of getting engaged."

"Bingo." Tayla fought back a snarl as she placed the truffle on a cookie sheet. "Fool me once, shame on you. Fool me twice, shame on me."

"What is with you and those damn sayings?"

"I don't remember you having such a short temper before. City life isn't agreeing with you, is it?" She continued to make the balls while she waited for him to answer. This wasn't going how she'd planned it. Hell, she never thought she'd make love to him again. She was totally unprepared for all this.

"Tell me what happened earlier, Tayla. Was that revenge sex? Was it for old times' sake? It sure felt like you wanted it. A lot. Hell, you were desperate for it at one point."

"I'm not going to listen to you talk to me this way. Get lost. I'll bring the truffles over as soon as they're finished."

"Oh, no. I'm not leaving until we straighten this out once and for all. I told you when I left we should see other people so we knew we really wanted to be together."

"Why don't you just admit that you wanted to be able to fuck other women, Hunter? I don't know why you're even doing this. Why did you come back here?" She looked up at him and waited.

"Because I love you and want you to marry me."

Tayla gasped and stared at him. She opened her mouth, then closed it quickly. *What is wrong with me? Why am I acting as if I believe him?*

"I know you came home to announce your engagement, Hunter. I must admit I'm not even on the betting list. So forgive me if I laugh at your attempt at humor."

"Betting list? What are you talking about?"

"They have a bet on which rich lady you'll be marrying. Which one of your famous clients has won your heart."

"None of them. This is ridiculous. Why can't you believe me?"

"Because you are lying. *You* were the one who wasn't happy with our relationship. *You* were the one who had to leave because this small-town life was just too restricting. *You* weren't satisfied with me or this rinky-dink town and now you act like you're back and wanting to settle down with me. Well I'm just not buying it. Neither will anyone else. You got what you came for. I'll deliver the truffles myself. Now beat it, Hunter. Before your mother calls looking for you."

Hunter frowned, his face darkening in an ominous warning. One she would have heeded in the past, but she was done

catering to him. She hadn't been able to keep him by giving in, so why continue to let him win every time?

"Go. Go before I throw you out on your stupid ass. Thanks for the great lay, now go get married."

His eyes narrowed but she shook her head and turned away.

"You left me and this town. You had your fun with those rich ladies and I can't imagine why you think teasing me will get you anywhere. You and I both know you have no intention of marrying me. I know we forgot to use protection, but even if something happens, I won't hold you responsible. Now go. Go and announce your real fiancée. Oh and you might want to wash my scent off of you before she realizes what a louse you are."

"I don't know what happened to you, Tayla. But I don't like the cold, mean woman you've become."

"You made me this way, Hunter. Deal with it and move on. I had to and I'm not looking back."

She turned her back and waited until the front door slammed, then she grabbed the counter and fought back tears. *Who knew it'd hurt so much to kick the man you loved out the door?* But there was no way she was going to be his thing on the side. Not after the way he'd tossed her away so he could be free to experience life with 'real' women.

* * * *

"Just take the truffles in and leave." Tayla sat in her delivery van arguing with herself. Why was it so hard to get her body to listen to her mind?

The front door opened, and she could no longer hide. Quickly, she climbed out of the van and hurried around to the back to take out the truffles. By the time she pulled out the trays Hunter was there, along with Ranita, his mother's housekeeper. Ranita reached for several trays and headed for the kitchen leaving Tayla and Hunter to follow with the rest.

Lights decorated the path to the front door, but Ranita led them around to the side entrance. Tayla followed them into the kitchen and set her trays down on the counter.

"Please get the silver serving trays from the pantry, Hunter. Tayla can help me arrange them."

"Yes, ma'am."

As soon as Hunter was out of sight, Ranita wrapped Tayla in a hug and squeezed her tight. "I have missed you so much."

"You just missed my sweet treats." Tayla laughed as Ranita frowned and put her hands on her hips.

"That's just plain nonsense! I've missed you and so has the missus."

"Now, Ranita, you just missed my desserts, that's all."

Ranita shook her head and then gasped. "Oh dear, I forgot to tell Hunter to get the serving spoons for the soup. Can you just run on in the pantry and get them for me?"

She didn't want to be anywhere near Hunter, but it was a simple request. She knew where the spoons were. She could grab them and get out before Hunter noticed she was in there. *What is taking him so long to get the platters?*

Tayla crossed the expansive kitchen and cautiously entered the pantry. When she didn't see Hunter, she went to

the right side of the large closet and found the silver spoons, right on top of the platters. She grabbed both and spun around as the door closed with a resounding click. She swallowed and instinctively backed up a step as Hunter hungrily stared at her. *When had he become so insatiable?*

"Hunter?" Her voice cracked, but she didn't bother trying to repeat his name.

"I know what you believe, Tayla. But you aren't leaving here until I get to explain my actions."

She swallowed and took another step back, nervous anticipation skittering up her spine as he advanced.

"You aren't going to let me out of here?" An image of one of her fantasies flashed before her eyes. The one where he tied her up and teased her mercilessly before making love to her until they both passed out.

Hunter grinned and reached for her. For an instant she wondered if he was privy to her thoughts, then gasped, all rational thought gone as she was crushed against his hard chest and his mouth covered hers. She met his kiss as hunger flared deep in her stomach. It threatened to consume her if she didn't stop him before it was too late, but then it was too late as her body melted against him and her mouth and tongue met his, parried, and fought for dominance.

"Yes," he groaned, one hand digging into her hip as another snaked around her back, tugging her into his impressive erection.

She shuddered remembering how good it had been at her shop and knew this time would be just as good if not better.

His betrayal flared, keeping her from surrendering completely.

"Hunter. No. No." Even though the words came out breathless and weak, she meant them. Pushing against his chest with her full hands, she repeated the words until he stopped kissing and nipping at her throat and ear.

"Yes, Tayla, yes. But you are right. We need to talk. You have so many misconceptions that we need to straighten out."

"Me! You're the one who said I wasn't woman enough to keep you. That you wanted to experience life and other women. That you'd never marry me anyway."

"Those things were said in anger. I'd just seen you and Robert Hacker outside the shop. I was so mad that you could go from my bed to his arms like that and I struck out at you."

"But you'd been planning on leaving all along, and you never told me, you didn't even hint at it. And there's never been *anything* between Robert and me. I have no clue what you are talking about." Tayla held the platters in front of her chest as a shield.

"I should have confronted you then, but instead I ran home and plotted how to get even with you. I wanted to hurt you the way I'd been hurt." Hunter looked away at his confession.

"I didn't do anything with Robert. He was a friend. Nothing more. I'm trying to remember what you're talking about, something that you could have misconstrued, but nothing is coming to mind." Tayla fought back tears. All this was

because he'd thought she'd cheated on him? So he'd set out to hurt her and left to start a new life?

"You were by the back door and were embracing. I saw you kiss him on the lips."

Tayla blinked as she suddenly remembered the day as if it had been yesterday. "Oh. My. God. You saw me saying good bye and good luck to my future brother-in-law. Crystal had gone inside to get some desserts to take with them when they eloped." She stopped explaining and shook her head in disgust.

"See, it was a situation anyone could have misconstrued."

"No, Hunter. Any one else would have come forward and confronted the woman. Any one else would have punched the man and taken his woman back or told her to get lost. *After* confronting them." She hesitated, a question on the tip of her tongue that she wanted to know, but wasn't sure she'd like the answer. "What made you come back? What made you realize you'd been wrong?"

"When Mom told me about your sister's pregnancy I realized it had been a mistake. There is no way you'd have slept with your sister's man."

Tayla growled, and fought a smirk at the surprise on Hunter's face. "You should have known me well enough to know I'd never cheat on you. On anyone. I loved you, Hunter. You crushed me with your words and your leaving. And now you're saying that it was *my* fault? I'm not buying it. You're a coward. A weak, pathetic coward. Don't ever touch me again, you prick bastard!"

"Tayla," Hunter said in a low voice. One she assumed was supposed to soothe her. It wasn't working.

"Fuck off, jerk."

She shoved the platters at him and ran for the door. In his astonishment he just stared at her while she grabbed the doorknob and turned it. The door didn't budge.

"What the hell did you do to the door? It doesn't lock from the inside."

Hunter grinned. "I'm not the only one who wishes to see the two of us together again."

"You mean Ranita locked me in here with you?" Tayla stared at him, a mixture of emotions racing through her system.

Hunter nodded and took a step back as she advanced toward him. "I'm trying to apologize here," he said as she swung at him. He grabbed her wrists and held them as she struggled to get free. When she went to knee him he tugged her up against him and backed her into the door, pressing into her so she couldn't break free.

"You're making this harder."

"You couldn't be any harder," she choked out as his erection pressed into her belly.

"I meant the situation." He chuckled against her neck as he shifted and pinned her hands above her head with one hand, freeing the other to trail down her side leaving goosebumps in its wake.

"Damn it, Hunter. You don't play fair."

"Fair? All's fair in love and war, sweetheart."

"I'm mad at you. How can you blame me for all this? If you'd just come to me then, we would have straightened it all out! Instead you've been off sleeping with half of the city's women in your attempt to 'forget' me."

"Actually I never made it to the bedroom with most of them."

Tayla felt her heart shatter a little more with that statement. It should have been a relief he hadn't slept with all of them, but that he had slept with even one was like another knife plunged deep in her back. Her expression must have shown on her face because he cursed and released her to hug her tight.

"Sweetheart, when I first left here I was mad and thought you'd cheated. I slept with a few women in an attempt to forget you, but it didn't work. By the third one I'd stopped sleeping with them and just sent them home alone. The tabloids had a field day and I can't imagine why. I'm just a normal man."

"A normal man who was picked as bachelor of the year and then playboy of the year. Every woman wants you or to be able to say that she had you."

"Except you. You never called or wrote. You didn't try to get me back." Hunter leaned back and looked down at her.

"Why should I? You said you were done with me. Did you expect me to beg you to take me back? After all the mean things you said about wanting to be free to sleep with other people? I was holding you back, remember?"

"No. I just said all that to get back at you."

"For something I didn't do." Tayla felt her anger increasing with each asinine statement Hunter made.

"I didn't know it at the time."

"You should have. You should have known me well enough. When did your mother tell you that my sister eloped with Robert?"

"Last month."

Tayla shook her head and frowned. He was an ass and she was a fool for letting him have his way with her back at the shop. If only she could get her hormones under control. Even now, even hating him as much as she did, her traitorous body loved the feel of him and wanted to press closer to him.

She shoved him away and walked over to the door. After yanking and turning the knob she resorted to kicking the door, but that didn't help either.

"Tayla."

"No." She shook her head and turned her back to him. "You're not the man I once loved. You're not the man I thought you were. You jump to conclusions, don't ask questions, hurt me so viciously, move away and bang a bunch of chicks, then come back here and—what *do* you want from me?"

Hunter placed his hand on her shoulder and spoke softly as he said, "I want you. With me. Forever. I made a mistake and I'm sorry."

"That's not going to erase what you did. What happens the next time you don't trust me? What happens the next time you misconstrue something? Tell Ranita to let me out of here before I bust the damn door down!"

"Tayla. Please. Give me a chance to prove myself to you. Let me show you my intentions are true."

"Like the chance you gave me?" Tayla closed her eyes and turned her head to the ceiling. *Please, please do not let me cry.*

"I love you, Tayla. I'll do whatever you want to prove I love you."

"Would you move back here and give up that lifestyle?"

"I can't. You know I can't do that. There isn't much need for lawyers like me here. But in the city, that is where I can find work. You know I can't come back here except to visit."

"And my shop is here. You expect me to accept your pathetic apology and leave my business to move to the city to be with you and your woman friends?"

"I have no sexual relationships with the women in my firm, or with anyone else. I *want* to have one with you and am prepared to wait for you to accept my apology."

"And jumping my bones back at the shop?"

"I just had to have you. I couldn't stop even if I'd wanted to. Once I touched you I was gone. If you look deep inside you will know that you couldn't have made love with me like that if you hated me as you claim. You couldn't have kissed me so tenderly or so hungrily."

Tayla froze and turned around, her eyes wide open as she stared at him. "You conceited pig!" She hit him in the chest and burst into the tears she could no longer fight.

"Shhh," he whispered as he pulled her into his arms.

"No." Tayla shook her head and jerked away. "I can't do this, Hunter. How long before you hurt me again? How long

before you don't trust me again? How long before you decide to hurt me for something I didn't do? Again. No. You just aren't worth the risk."

The hurt in his eyes shouldn't make her want to weep even more. He'd hurt her purposefully for something she hadn't even done. He'd practically ruined her life and now thought an apology and a roll in the hay would make it all better? *Hell no.*

"Please, Tayla. Let me prove I can be the man you need."

Tayla shook her head and walked over to the door. This time it opened. She turned and looked back at Hunter. "I can't. You'll just hurt me again." Shaking her head, she rushed out the door.

* * * *

"You can't mope around forever," Sheryl said, interrupting another erotic daydream about the night Hunter had made love to her on the counter. "I know you hurt, honey. But what better way to get back into the dating scene then with Ricardo? I guarantee it'll be a night you'll never forget."

"Dammit, Sheryl. I still want Hunter. When I see him my heart races and my stomach tightens. He makes me wetter than any of those pictures of guys you show me from that website. And this is *after* he treated me so horribly. What is wrong with me?"

"You know I can handle the day-to-day running of the shop and you make enough to hire someone to help me. You're now what you set out to be, Tayla. You also have enough money that you could open a new store in the city. I bet it would be just as successful as this one."

Tayla frowned and walked over to the window. She glanced outside. What did she want to do?

"If you want him so bad, why aren't you with him?"

"How can I? He didn't trust me." The thought alone made her want to weep, saying it out loud was like driving a knife into her heart.

"Did you ever give him reason not to?"

"No!"

"Listen, Tayla. What about that girl he dated before you? Didn't you say that she cheated on him? Remember how devastated he was?"

Tayla sighed. How could she have forgotten Theresa? She'd practically ripped Hunter's heart out and stomped on it. "But I'm not Theresa and he should have known me better."

"Honey, how would you feel if you'd come across him kissing another woman?"

"Actually that has happened several times over the past year, Sheryl."

"But you weren't dating. You no longer had a claim to him. Imagine what he felt when he stumbled on you and Robert."

"Sheryl! It was a peck. A peck on the lips. I've kissed *you* more romantically than I kissed Robert." Tayla slammed her hand on the counter and walked over to the window. She looked out and watched the snow gently falling.

"Honey, I know how upset you are, and I know how much time this misunderstanding has wasted. You need to decide if you can move on, or if you want to try with him again."

"I guess this is what the fortune teller meant. Seemingly irreconcilable differences could be reconciled."

Sheryl gasped and grabbed her arm. "Don't look now, girlfriend, but Hunter is coming this way, and he only has eyes for you. I think this might be your last chance. Don't blow it."

Tayla swallowed and turned slowly around. She met Hunter's gaze.

"Can we talk somewhere private?" Hunter looked at Sheryl.

"She has an office. It's small, but private. It's through that door."

"Thanks." He smiled at Sheryl, then grabbed Tayla's arm and led her into the office. "Are you ready to talk?"

"I guess." She sat on the edge of the desk and watched as he walked back to the door and locked it.

"Have you thought about what I said? I know you were upset."

"Upset?" Her eyebrows quirked even though she tried to keep her face expressionless.

"Perhaps that's an understatement. But I'm not letting you go without trying again. I do love you, Tayla. I know I didn't trust you before, but this time I'm going to."

"How do you know you'll trust me?"

"How do I know you'll trust me?" he asked. "It goes both ways, Tayla. Right now you don't trust me. You aren't even willing to budge an inch. I'm willing to do whatever it takes. I'll move back here and buy a house—"

Tayla shook her head. "Stop. Just stop right there, Hunter. I've made my decision."

"And that's it? Nothing I say can change your mind? You can never forgive me for doubting you?"

"Doubt? You were so cruel to me. You tore my heart to pieces, Hunter. I think I have some right to mistrust you."

He sighed and looked away. Then he turned back to her and walked over to the desk.

"If that's how you feel then it won't hurt if I take one kiss goodbye." He pressed his mouth against hers as he grabbed her shoulders. He held her against him as if he was afraid she'd bolt.

Hungrily, Tayla met his kiss, arching her back in an attempt to press her aching breasts against his chest. He must have sensed her acceptance because he pulled back and looked at her oddly.

"What *is* your decision?"

Tayla laughed. "I thought you didn't care. I figured you thought you knew it all."

"I'm sorry. It's what I get for jumping to conclusions. Again. What *is* your answer?"

"Sheryl is willing to take over as manager."

"Does this mean you're going to come to the city with me?" Hunter grabbed her hands. "This is wonderful news. I—"

"Hunter." She waited until he calmed down and met her gaze.

"I don't understand what you are saying then."

"I *am* moving to the city, but not to be with you. I want to be with you, but we need to take this slow. You can't just pick up where you left off. You've been seeing other people while I haven't."

"So you aren't moving to the city to be with me? You *are* brushing me off after all."

His expression tore down the last of her resistance. "No. I'm not brushing you off. But I need time. We both need time. To get to know each other better. To learn to trust each other. Then we can discuss more if that time ever comes."

"Will you be seeing other people? 'Cause that's what this is about, isn't it? You are bitter that I slept with other people *while we were separated*."

"I am not."

"You are too." Hunter laughed. "You are jealous. Green with envy."

Tayla growled and shoved him in the chest. "Shut up before I change my mind."

"Too late," he said as he pulled her close and hugged her tightly. "You're mine. As slow as you want to go, or as fast, it doesn't matter. In the end, you will be mine."

"You're so sure of yourself, aren't you?"

"My mother wants a fall wedding. She thinks the colors would suit you best, and she hopes you trained Sheryl well, 'cause you're not catering your own wedding."

Tayla laughed and wrapped her arms around Hunter. "Slow down. You're moving too fast again."

"Alright, sweetheart, but we both know where this is going."

"Nowhere if you're going to do nothing but talk all night."

Hunter laughed and then kissed her. In one sweep he cleared her desk and pressed her down on it. "I can think of much better things to do with my mouth."

"That's my Hunter." Tayla grinned and pulled him down.

Fruitcake Truffles

Makes 50 truffles:

10 (1 ounce) squares semi-sweet chocolate

1/4 cup and 1 tablespoon whipping cream

1/4 cup and 1 tablespoon butter

3 tablespoons and 1 teaspoon orange liqueur

1-2/3 cups fruitcake crumbs

3/4 cup and 1 tablespoon and 1 teaspoon sifted
confectioners' sugar

Chop chocolate into small pieces. In saucepan over very low heat, melt chocolate, cream, and butter until blended and smooth.

Stir in liqueur and fruitcake crumbs; chill for two hours or until firm.

Shape into one inch balls and chill at least twenty minutes. Before serving, roll in icing sugar or cocoa powder and chill for twenty minutes.

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THE CHARIOT

by

Tina Bendoni

"Oh, God. This boy needs to lose some weight."

Angela snickered as she helped her best friend, Tony, get her boyfriend, Jamie, up to their apartment on the third floor walkup. "Well, you were the genius who thought we should watch the game at the bar instead of at home."

"Aww, come on," Tony grunted as they turned the corner, propping Jamie up against the wall to open the door. "You gotta admit it was more fun than just the three of us."

"Yeah, right. Tell me another one. You just wanted to check out the waitresses in the short shorts."

"They hold no appeal for me."

"Puhlease, Tony. You haven't had a steady girlfriend in over a year. You can't tell me those women half hanging out of their clothes didn't do anything for you."

Tony looked down to unlock the door, so Angela wasn't sure what he said, but it sounded like, "Only one woman holds any appeal for me."

"What? What did you say?"

"Nothing, Angel. Let's get this useless Irishman to bed."

Tony pulled Jamie into the apartment and told Angela to shut the door. She could have sworn she heard Jamie mutter

something to Tony, but decided it was impossible. He had passed out halfway up the last flight of stairs.

Angela caught up with Tony and helped him drag Jamie the rest of the way to the bedroom. Exhausted, they threw him across the bed, but somehow got tangled up in his limbs, and landed on the bed beside him, laughing.

"Do you know how long I've wanted you like this?"

"Like what?" She was still laughing and hadn't registered his serious tone.

"In bed." It was then that she realized he wasn't sounding as drunk as he had earlier. In fact, when she thought about it, she realized he hadn't drunk more than she had all night. And she was still sober.

"Tony, I'm dating Jamie."

"Tell me you don't have feelings for me."

"Of course I do. You're one of my best friends."

His hand crept up to her face, stroking it. "No, Angel, tell me that you don't have more than friendly feelings for me. Tell me right now, and I'll leave you alone."

She tried, but she couldn't. She'd wanted Tony as long as she'd wanted Jamie, but he'd never made any move toward her like that. He'd never once asked her out on a date, or insinuated he wanted any more from her. When Jamie had asked her out, it became a moot point, anyway. And he hadn't done anything in the last twelve months since then either.

She closed her eyes, unable to lie to him.

"That's what I thought." She heard him whisper before his lips touched hers. All thoughts of Jamie went flying out the

window. She inhaled his intensely masculine scent, the smell that reminded her of the hot Latin men she used to read about in her romances. She grew wet as her daydreams about Tony ran through her head. Tony making love to her in her bedroom. Eating her out while she was trying to write a paper. Fucking her senseless in the walk-in refrigerator of his aunt's restaurant the three of them had worked at.

Her lips opened of their own accord, letting him in. She tasted the tang of the beer neither of them had drunk much of.

Wait, come to think of it, they'd only ordered three pitchers over a span of five hours. And they hadn't been the only ones drinking out of them.

As that thought came to her, she felt her breast grabbed from behind. But Tony was in front of her. And Jamie had passed out—she pulled away from Tony as a voice with its South Boston Irish brogue tingled in her ear.

"We knew you'd never admit it, darlin'. I know Tony means as much to you as I do. He's wanted you for so long, I had to give him this chance."

"Ch-chance?"

"Angel." Tony's voice pulled her attention back to him. "I've regretted not saying anything to you ever since Jamie got up the courage I didn't have. Please don't tell me no."

"But, Jamie?" Her head turned back to Jamie, whose head was propped up on an elbow, his body spooning her backside.

"We'll only do what you want us to, darlin'. Tell us now if you don't want this to happen, and Tony will leave."

"What to happen? I don't understand."

Tony turned her face back toward his once again. "Us. This. Together."

"All of us." Jamie buried his head against her neck laying a gentle kiss below her ear.

All of us? Together? It wasn't something she had ever thought of before. Sure, she and Jamie, hell, all three of them, had watched movies with ménage a trois before, she and Jamie had even talked about it. *But with Tony?*

Why not with Tony? Was there any other man she trusted enough? Any other man she wanted the way she did Tony? Any other man she felt about the way she did Tony?

No, there was no other man. It was Tony or no one. And she realized she wanted this. Looking at Tony's eyes searching her face for the answer, she knew she wanted this more than she could say.

"Yes." It barely came out. A whisper so soft that if they hadn't all been so close, none would have heard, but it was enough. The smile that lit up Tony's face before he moved in to take her lips with his once again assured her she was making the right decision.

This time, his kiss was hot. She felt a spark shoot all the way down to her toes curling in her shoes, only to shoot back up to end at the earlobe Jamie nipped at from behind.

She lost herself in Tony's kiss. Their first real kiss. One with passion and intention obvious in every pore. His tongue dove into her mouth, teasing her, playing with her. His hand crept around her ass, pulling her lower half tightly against him. If she'd had any doubt of his interest, it was dispelled then and there.

He slid his lips down her throat, and Jamie turned her head toward him to replace Tony's mouth on hers. Tony's hand moved from her ass, to her hip, to slide beneath her top and cup the breast Jamie had hold of a second before. She groaned as they played her with perfect timing, Jamie's hand moving down to caress her wet crotch. She was creaming so fast, she was sure her jeans were already soaked through.

Tony caressed her breast before pinching her erect nipple through her bra, making her moan against Jamie's lips.

"I'm sorry, baby. I'll get you a new one." She heard the words, but had no understanding of their meaning until she felt the front of her shirt rip open before Tony's lips latched onto her bra covered nipple. He took as much of her breast as he could into her mouth, his hand kneading the rest as he suckled her.

She felt his teeth scrape at her, then his hands pull the cup of her bra down, baring her breast to him. Again, he grasped her nipple into his mouth, this time with a groan that she felt all the way to her soaked pussy. Her hands reached up to cup the back of his head as she realized that Jamie had her pants undone and had worked his way under her panties.

Somehow they had moved, and she was laying on her back practically on top of Jamie with Tony stretched across her upper body. She barely had time to register this when a bite at her nipple had her arching off Jamie with a squeal.

"Oh, babe. I'm sorry. Did I hurt you?"

Angela didn't have a chance to respond before she heard Jamie's deep chuckle. "Oh, no, bro, trust me. That was a good sound."

Tony looked at her with worry in his eyes. "Is he right?"

"Yes." She nodded. Realizing what his worry was truly about, it was her turn to cup his face. "Tony. I want this. If I didn't, I would say so. You both are right. I have wanted you as long as I have wanted Jamie. It was just chance that Jamie asked me out instead of you. Now that you've offered this to me, don't you even dream of taking it away."

"You are one hundred percent sure?"

"Yes, I'm sure. I want this. Tonight. Both of you." She tried to turn her head to look at Jamie, and couldn't quite do it, but she knew he understood by the tightening of his arms around her.

"Thank you, *muirnin*," he whispered in her ear. It wasn't often that Jamie reverted back to the Gaelic he grew up with at home before his parents died, and for him to respond like that made Angela's heart swell with happiness.

Tony smiled and reached down to cup her breast in his hand once again. "Ask, and you shall receive, my angel." She smiled as his head joined his hand at her breast.

Jamie's hand moved back to where it had been a minute before, and she found her attention torn between the two men. Tony suckling deeply at her breast, each nip sending shivers through her torso. Jamie's hand once again found its way underneath her panties, his fingers massaging her lower lips as he separated them to slip a long finger inside her.

She moaned, one hand still wrapped in Tony's hair, the other on Jamie's hip behind her. It was then she remembered that she was the only one with any clothes off. She wanted to feel her men as they were feeling her.

"Off," she said to Tony, tugging at the neck of his shirt.
"Both of you naked. Now."

"Oh, no, Angel, you first." Tony lifted his head up, eyes brimming with desire as he pulled her up so Jamie could pull off her ruined shirt from behind. He unclasped her bra and pushed it over her shoulders to slide down her arms.

"You are so beautiful, Angel." Tony caught her breasts in his hands. Like most Italian men, he had always seemed to have a fascination with breasts, and it had always amused Angela. Tonight it turned her on. Liquid seeped between her legs as Tony buried his face into her chest, kissing each breast in turn as he mumbled in Italian.

Jamie's finger was still inside her, and he reminded her of its presence. How the hell had he helped remove her shirt? With the insertion of another finger into her wetness, and his thumb pressing against her clit, all rational thought left her.

She was vaguely aware of Tony leaving her breasts to pull her undies, pants, socks and shoes off, leaving her naked, open to his gaze, with Jamie's hand on her pussy. Jamie started to move his hand, slowly pulling his fingers out, running them up her lips, and then slowly pushing them back in. His thumb was slowly circling her clit, teasing her with a light touch now and again.

Tony stood there watching them. He licked his lips as his chest moved faster with each breath he took. He glanced behind her to look at Jamie and smiled. She could only imagine Jamie shared the look. The look of a boy on Christmas morning who has suddenly realized he has everything he has ever wanted.

"He's gonna undress for you now, darlin'. I know you want to watch this. I've seen you watch him in his tank tops and tight jeans." Jamie's whisper was punctuated with a thrust of his fingers inside her, her body twitching in response.

Tony brought his hands to the top button on his jeans, and slowly opened it, first the one, then the next, on down 'til she saw an open v of his skin at the fly of his pants. *No underwear? Damn!* She never knew Tony went commando. She licked her lips at the thought. Slowly he stripped his shoes and socks off before standing upright once again.

His hand went from his pants to the bottom of his t-shirt. Angela had seen his chest before. They had all gone swimming, and she'd been around when he'd come out of the shower. There wasn't any reason for her to hold her breath with excitement, but hold it she did. She could swear the bastard was going extra slow, keeping her anticipation at a boil.

Finally, he pulled off his t-shirt in one swoop, throwing it across the room behind him. He worked hard at the gym on a regular basis and even if she didn't know it, she could tell from the full six-pack that glistened up and down his abs, to his wide chest and glorious biceps. Angela had never appreciated the fact he waxed his chest until this moment when she realized it was hers for the taking. She salivated, waiting for more.

Jamie, meanwhile, must have become bored with the show, shifted himself to a sitting position and pulled Angela with him between his legs. He started to nibble on the nerve at the back of her neck that sent shivers all the way down her

spine. One hand played with her nipple, the other still buried in her pussy, fingers stroking slowly in and out.

Angela grinned at Tony, realizing she had a better view from this angle. Tony reached down and stripped himself bare for her gaze. Her pussy clenched around Jamie's fingers at the sight of Tony in all his glory.

Jamie chuckled, moving his mouth from her neck, "I think she likes what she sees, bro. Her pussy tightened so much I think my fingers might be bruised."

Tony's bright smile lightened her heart while all she could do was nod in agreement. He was glorious. His chest tapered down to a slim waist, where a goody trail started, leading her attention straight to his gorgeous, thick cock. It was nearly as long as Jamie's, but definitely thicker. Her pussy clenched again as she thought of that thick, wide cock slamming into her pussy. She couldn't wait to get her hands, and other body parts, on it.

"Oh, darlin', I know what you want." Jamie's voice cooed in her ear, as he slid his fingers out of her wet snatch, running them against her clit, up her stomach, to swirl her juices around a nipple. "You wanna play with Tony's cock, don't you? You wanna grab hold of it and suck it until he is almost ready to explode, don't you?"

Liquid gushed out of her pussy at the image Jamie's words created in her mind. Oh, Gods, yes, she wanted that and more. Her breathing, erratic before, sped up exponentially.

"Go, darlin'." He nipped her neck, before pushing her forward, "You go take care of lil ol' Tony while I get rid of these clothes of mine."

She turned back to look at him, to thank him without saying a word. To thank him for this gift he was giving her. She reached up and brought his head down to hers, tongue diving deeply into his mouth. He still tasted of the beer from earlier. The beer, and hot, sexy, excited male. There was no doubt that her honey was as excited about this as she was. She could feel it in his response, and in his own long cock digging its way through his jeans against her ass.

"Go. Tony's been waiting for you for a long time."

Smiling, she turned away, and crawled on her hands and knees to Tony, who was waiting at the foot of the king-sized bed. Eagerly she approached him, watching his eyes follow her every move. She wiggled her bottom as she moved, knowing his eyes would be drawn to it.

Then she was there. She didn't know what to touch first. Sitting up, she ran her hands across his chest, feeling his smooth pecs, out to his firm biceps, back in and down to his abs. He was rock hard. Everywhere.

"Do you know I've longed to do this for years? Sometimes just watching you as you flirted with other women at the beach made me so wet I was ready to scream. Even with Jamie beside me, I wanted you inside me."

Her mouth played on his chest. Working her way down from the hollow at his neck, down to his chest, her hands splayed against it, feeling the smoothness. She kissed her way to one nipple, as her long nails raked across the other. He inhaled sharply as she took the nipple into her mouth and bit it.

His hands were wrapped in her hair as his breathing increased erratically.

Smiling, she worked her way down his chest to his abs, kissing and licking every inch by delectable inch. He tasted like he looked. Like a Roman god of sex. Decadent, sinful sex.

She bent her body as she licked her way to his hips. She was about to readjust when she felt a tug on her hips, and looked behind to see Jamie naked, kneeling on the bed.

"On your hands and knees, darlin', I have something I want to do."

Adjusting her body, she was exactly the height she needed to be. She cast a glance up through her eyelashes at Tony's face. He hadn't moved an inch. She put one hand out to grab his thick cock while the other supported her weight.

He was as hard as a diamond, firm, and ready for her. Gently she rocked her body forward, guiding the tip of him to her lips. She lay a kiss on the end, tongue sneaking out to lap up the bit of pre-cum leaking out.

"Oh God."

Angela smiled at Tony's invocation before slowly sliding him into her mouth. He was definitely wider than Jamie. He filled her mouth, but she didn't stop until she had him seated completely. Her tongue played with him before she pulled back slowly.

She grabbed him at the base as she hollowed her cheeks to suck on him firmly.

Jamie was playing with her ass. He moved her legs and she felt him adjust his body. The next she knew his mouth was on her pussy lips, and he thrust three fingers inside of

her. The force drove her forward on Tony's cock, causing him to grasp at her hair.

Jamie didn't let that stop him, instead his other hand pulled her ass down toward him so he could get better contact with her pussy. She was kneeling now with Jamie between her legs eating her out and Tony between her lips. She began to work Tony as Jamie worked her, her lips moving back and forth on Tony's cock while Jamie fucked her with his tongue and hands.

The sound of flesh meeting flesh, tongues licking, grunts and groans from all three of them excited her more than she ever thought possible. Tony's hands were wrapped in her hair as he fucked her mouth faster and harder. Jamie sucked her, pumping her with his fingers, thumb flicking at her hardened clitoris sending sparks throughout her body.

"Enough." Tony pulled himself out of her mouth just as she felt him stiffen further. She knew he'd been ready to come.

She whined at the absence of his prick.

"No, Angel, I am not gonna come in your mouth the first time I'm with you. I want that snatch that Jamie is playing with." He kneeled down, meeting her mouth with his, one hand going to her breasts to massage and tease her, the other still locked in her hair, pulling her lips tightly against his.

Jamie's sucking and pumping increased, she was close. The tension was building. She felt her pussy start to contract, small twinges, warning her she was close, oh so close. Then, at once, Tony bit at her tongue, pinched her nipple and Jamie

gave one hard suck on her clit, sending her shooting over the edge, screaming into Tony's mouth.

Tony caught her in his arms, pulling her closer to him. Jamie rolled from between her legs with a satisfied grin on his face.

"I love making her scream like that," he said, his brogue more obvious than usual.

Tony picked her up, and lay her back onto the bed. "You okay, Angel?"

Angela smiled up at him. "Mmm hmm."

The grin on Tony's face melted her heart. "Good, my turn," he said as he moved between her legs.

Angela whimpered as Tony grabbed her hips. She reached out to grab at his cock, but her arms were quickly grabbed from behind by Jamie as he crawled behind her. Tony glanced up at him with a quick smile for his buddy.

"Hmm, what should I give her? You think she wants some more tongue action?"

Again, Angela whimpered.

"That is her favorite, bro."

Tony moved his body to position his face at her opening, his head propped up on his hands so she could see him clearly. He brought a finger to her clitoris, tapping it gently as the smile stayed on his face. His finger traced down her slit, the wetness making sucking sounds as it moved. He teased her, playing with her slit like the strings of a violin before thrusting first one finger, and then another inside.

Jamie's hands were stroking her breasts, kneading them, twisting and turning her nipples as Tony plunged in and out of

her with his fingers. Tony dove for her pussy with his mouth, latching onto her clit and sucking hard.

Before she knew it, she had come again, her body spasming in aftershocks. Not giving her time to calm down, Tony raised up and plunged his thick, hard cock into her in one thrust.

Angela's hips rose up in response. There wasn't anything slow at all about his penetration of her. He rammed in and out of her, driving her faster and faster to another orgasm. She didn't think she could last much longer.

"Oh, Angel. I'm not gonna last. You're pulsing so much." In and out, he drove her closer and closer, until finally, the crest. It. Was. Right. *There*. Her world exploded in ecstasy as she went flying into oblivion.

* * * *

Angela woke up the next morning bracketed by warm bodies. On her side, she was draped over a slumbering Jamie while Tony cuddled her from behind.

Sated, she lay there for a moment reveling in the touch of two warm bodies against her. What would it be like to wake up like this every day for the rest of her life? Was this a one-time thing? Did they want to make it permanent? Her mind swam with the possibilities.

Realizing she was never going to get back to sleep despite her comfortable situation, she decided to get them all breakfast. Extricating herself carefully, she put on her jeans and one of Jamie's sweatshirts before grabbing her purse and shoes and heading out.

For a large city, Boston was made up of lots of little communities where people knew everything about everyone. This area was one of those pockets. She walked down to the corner pastry and coffee shop.

She smiled at the small group of women sitting around a table as she went to order the drinks.

"Look at her."

Angela heard their conversation but didn't pay much attention until she heard them laugh.

"Little slut."

"Tramping around like she owns the world."

"Who does she think she is?"

"She's sleeping with both of them, isn't she?"

"Of course she is. Haven't you seen the way she acts around them? She'll spread her legs for any man."

"Yeah, well, did you hear? She's getting hers. Jamie had lunch with Sheila the other day."

"So?"

"At the Browning Hotel. Both of them looking way too 'fresh' for the middle of the day."

"But that's the..."

"Yup. And he's taking her to Candace Ead's wedding next month."

"Looks like our little Angel is going to be dumped."

The vicious laughter surprised and hurt her. She had grown up in the neighborhood, but her mother had insisted she go to a private school. So she didn't know the women speaking very well, but she hadn't realized they hated her so much.

And how dare they assume she was sleeping with both men just because they all spent so much time together? What kind of girl did they think she was?

They weren't wrong, though, were they? As of last night she *was* that kind of girl. And what had they said about Jamie? He had a date with Sheila? Was last night the last chance to get their jollies before Jamie dumped her? Were they right?

Mr. Giorelli handed her the pastries and coffee with a smile. Mechanically, she smiled back and paid for her stuff before turning and walking out of the shop. She ignored the women who with a few careless words destroyed her world.

In a daze she turned as she walked out of the café. Not toward the boys' apartment, but in the other direction, toward her own.

Angela didn't remember getting home, calling her best friend in Pennsylvania or getting on the plane but apparently she had done all that. Theresa took one look at her and enveloped Angela in her arms. "It will be alright, sweetie. We'll get this straightened out." Theresa then bundled Angela into the car and drove straight to her place.

"Jay will be home later, but he thought maybe he would give us some time together."

"He didn't have to do that."

"Yes he did. Now are you gonna answer your cell phone and let those two men of yours know you're okay?"

Angela looked down at her purse as though she could see her cell phone through the material. She hadn't turned it back

on after getting off the plane, and she knew she would be bombarded as soon as she did.

"Angela, one of them is a cop. If you don't let him know soon, you know he's gonna do something crazy like put out an APB on you or something."

Angela sighed and picked up her cell. It started ringing as soon as she turned it on.

"Hello." Angela cringed as she heard Tony's voice.

"Angela! Are you okay? Where are you?"

"I'm fine, Tony."

"Where are you? Jamie and I have been searching everywhere. Why haven't you answered your phone?"

"I'm sorry."

"Where are you?"

"I'm fine, Tony."

"Yeah, I heard you. Now where the fuck are you?"

Angela knew he wasn't really mad at her, he was worried. She couldn't blame him, either. She had left them without a word so it made sense they were worried. She couldn't remember a time they'd gone all day without talking or texting each other at least once.

"Tony—"

"Don't 'Tony' me in that tone of voice, Angela. Where the fuck are you?"

"I'm fine, and it doesn't matter where I am."

"I am not gonna ask you again, Angela. Where are you? And when are you coming home?"

"Tony, I'm with a friend. I have some thinking to do. Please, don't make this harder than it has to be."

"Harder than it has to be? God dammit, Angela, get your ass home now so we can talk about this."

She'd always known Tony had a bit of alpha male in him, but he'd never turned it on her like this before. She'd be damned if she let him get away with it. He wasn't the only Italian in their little group.

"You do not own me. I will come home when I damn well feel like it. I'm fine. I'm with a friend. I will call you and Jamie when I'm damned good and ready to. Goodbye, Tony."

She hung up the phone on his protest, and almost immediately it started ringing again. Instead of answering it, she just shut it off.

"You okay?" Theresa stood there watching her.

"Yeah, I am. I can understand how they feel, you're right. I did just disappear on them."

"He ordered you home? You? How long has he known you?"

Angela smiled, and then broke down in giggles. "He should have known better."

"Mm hmm." Theresa rolled her eyes. "If there was ever a way to get you to *not* do something, it is order you to do it."

"What can I say? He's a male."

"Yeah, well, what are you gonna do about them?"

"I don't know."

"What do you *want* to do about them?"

"I don't know." Angela realized her voice was plaintive, almost whining. She didn't know what she wanted, or how to decide.

"Do you believe what that bitch in the coffee shop said?"

"Which one?"

"The thing about Jamie dumping you."

"I did at first. It hurt. A lot. But then I remembered he told me about it. Sheila had told him she wanted his help planning a party for her brother, but had hit on him the entire time.

"She'd even tried to blackmail him into taking her to the wedding. Telling him that she'd tell me they'd slept together. He told me he laughed in her face. He would never do that to me. I am as sure of that as I am of my own name."

* * * *

The women settled in for the rest of the evening together. Jay came home after a bit, and they watched a movie before Angela called it a night. She still had a lot of thinking to do, and knew she wouldn't be worth much as company for the rest of the night.

The next day, Theresa dragged her to downtown Philadelphia for some shopping and "girl time."

"You've gotta see this woman, she is incredible. Everything she says is right on the money."

"Theresa, I don't want to see a fortune teller."

"She's not a fortune teller, she reads tarot cards."

"And there's a difference?"

"Just trust me, Angela. This woman is incredible. She told me I would meet Jay, didn't she?"

Angela sighed, deciding discretion was the better part of valor. Of course the woman told Theresa about Jay, that's what they're paid to do. Tell the girls they will meet a man and fall in love. She was smirking as they walked through the

door. She could just imagine the woman's reaction when Angela said no thanks, she had enough men.

Theresa pushed Angela through the curtain at the back of the room. "Go on in, she's waiting for you back there."

"How do you know she doesn't have a customer?"

"Because I made an appointment and if she had a walk-in there would be a sign on the curtain."

"Hello, my dear. How are you today?"

"Okay, I guess. But I'm really not sure how you can help me. Theresa insisted I come see you."

The woman smiled as though she knew something Angela didn't. "Ah, yes. Miss Theresa. How are she and her animal lover doing?"

"Fine. They moved in together and are looking for a companion for Sasha, their dog."

"Good. I am glad to hear it. She was heading the right way, she just needed the reminder."

Reminder? What is this woman talking about?

"But enough about her. You are here today for yourself. How about we keep this simple and do a one card reading? On the house."

"Oh, no, I can pay."

The woman held up her hand. "You are a friend of Theresa's and right now you can use all the help you can get, so don't worry about it."

The woman gestured to Angela to sit down at the opposite side of the table she was seated at. After Angela shuffled the cards and picked one, the woman turned it over, and sat back before saying anything.

"Ah, the Chariot."

Angela looked down to see a charioteer behind two animals of different colors. One light and one dark. Jamie and Tony.

She didn't know where that thought came from but it was the first thing that occurred to her. The charioteer's reins were not tight, but were held firmly in a steady hand.

"Interesting I wasn't expecting..." The woman cut herself off.

At first hearing that, Angela frowned at the fortune teller, who smiled once gain. "Why, what does the card tell you?"

"There are opposing forces in your life. You need to balance things. Take control and deal with the issues. You have conflicting emotions you need to address. See here, two different situations. You are unsure of something. I believe in your case we are talking about men? Perhaps you are trying to decide between them. Or perhaps you have to balance your relationship with both. Or even whether you should have a relationship."

She patted Angela's hand. "You can do it, my dear. Running away will not solve your problem. It may give you a little while to think, but less time than you were hoping for. You must take the reins and control the situation. Only you can do it."

"How do you know this? I know Theresa never would have told you anything. Where did you find out about me?"

"From the card, my dear. The card and a bit of talent."

"That one card tells you all that?"

"Yes, my dear. You have a struggle within yourself ahead but remember, when you achieve your victory it is not the end, it is merely the beginning. And in your case, I believe the beginning of a great adventure."

* * * *

Angela thought about what the fortune teller had told her. Take the reins and control her situation. Did she mean to boss the boys around? Or just tell her to grow a backbone and make a decision?

But how could she make a decision? She realized yesterday that she loved them both. Equally. Even though she and Tony hadn't been intimate until the other night, she realized she felt the same way about him as she did Jamie. They weren't just a couple, they really were a triad.

They pulled into Theresa's driveway and there was a familiar looking car in her driveway.

"Were you expecting company?" Angela asked her friend.

"No. I don't even recognize that car."

With a sinking feeling, Angela realized whose car it was. Jamie and Tony had come after her.

"It's them."

"Them? Them who? The guys?"

"Yeah."

"You want me to turn around?" Theresa put her car in reverse, waiting for Angela's order.

"No. She's right. It's time for me to face the music."

With a deep sigh, Angela got out of the car and got ready to face her men.

They walked through the door together, arms hooked together for support.

The guys were sitting on the couch, Jay opposite them. His eyes brightened up when the girls walked in the door. Angela felt the tension in the room, and she could only imagine how Jay was handling it. *What had they told Jay?*

"Hi, sweetie." Jay got up to kiss Theresa as she came in. "We have some unexpected guests."

Angela had to remind herself that Jay had never met Jamie and Tony before. He must have been very uncomfortable given the situation. Jay was a big man, but both of her men easily matched him in size. Her assumption was verified when he glanced at her before suggesting to Theresa. "Maybe we should all go get dinner." He planted himself between the two women and the men on the couch.

Angela smiled in thanks. "Why don't you two go get something? I've lost my appetite all of a sudden."

"Are you sure you don't want to come with us?" Theresa asked.

"No. We need to talk."

Jay opened his mouth as though to say something, and Angela laid her hand on his arm. "They won't hurt me. Thank you. But I need to do this."

Jay nodded his head curtly before grabbing his coat. He reminded them all that they would be back shortly before he escorted Theresa out with a final glance at them.

She waited for them to say something, anything.

Jamie was the first to speak. Jumping up he grabbed Angela by the shoulders and shook her. "Don't you ever do

that again! You worried us to death. We had no idea where you were or what happened to you."

He continued to shake her until her teeth started to chatter.

"I'm sorry, Jamie. I already said I was sorry."

Jamie pulled her into his arms. "Dammit, Angela. I thought I'd lost you. I couldn't live with myself if something I'd done had chased you away."

"We'd done." Tony spoke for the first time from his position on the couch. Angela extricated herself out of Jamie's arms to face both of them.

"What do you mean?"

"I couldn't bear it if something had happened to you because of something we'd done. Jamie loves you, and if you left his life 'cause of us, or me, then I would never have forgiven myself."

"We need to talk." Angela tried to look both of them in the eyes as she said it. They did need to talk. They needed to talk about what happened and about their future. Jamie sat on the couch beside Tony as Angela positioned herself opposite them on the oversized ottoman.

"I'm sorry, Angela. I never meant to hurt you." Tony's voice was husky, hard to understand.

"Tony, you didn't hurt me."

He continued as though he hadn't heard a word she just said. "I've already told Jamie I'll move out. I didn't want to damage your relationship with Jamie. I only hope you don't blame him for what happened. It was all my fault."

"Is that what you want?"

"It doesn't matter what I want."

"What about you, Jamie?"

"Tony's right. It doesn't matter what we want, it's up to you."

"Bullshit."

The men looked surprised at her expletive. Despite having been raised in the same neighborhood they had, she'd never picked up the habit of cursing as loosely as most of the other people they'd grown up with had.

"This isn't about me. And it isn't up to me alone." She looked at Jamie. "Jamie, what do you want?"

"I want you, Angela. I always have. It's all I have ever wanted."

"And you, Tony?"

"I already told you it didn't matter."

"And I say it does. What do you want from me?"

For the first time Angela could recall, Tony looked heartbroken. Even when his new puppy had died when he was twelve he hadn't looked this lost or forlorn. Or in this much pain. "What do you want me to do, Angela? Tell you I want you? Tell you that everything we told you the other night was true? That I, too, have always wanted you? That I don't know what I will do without you? That the thought my selfishness might have hurt you is killing me inside? And that I would rather be without you, never see you again than cause you any more pain?"

"What about Jamie?"

"What do you mean?"

"If you have me, what does Jamie have?"

Tony looked sheepish.

"Jamie?" she asked.

"We both want you, Angela. But we know that the other night was a one-time thing. We don't expect you to sleep with both of us."

"And if I wanted to?"

"Don't play games with us, Angela." Tony's voice had grown hard. "We've already said we wanted you. And we've already proven we're willing to share you, what more do you want to rip from us?"

"No, you have not said you're willing to share me. Me, the whole package. You were willing to share me one night in bed. That's different than the whole shebang."

"Yes, dammit, we want to share you. We both want to have you forever. We want to watch your belly grow with our children, and we want to raise them together. We love you, and want to be a family, together."

"What will your family say, Tony? Jamie and I are alone in the world, there isn't anyone to care what we do. But you, you have a huge family. What will your mother say when she finds out the slut is sleeping with both of you?"

"She loves you, Angela. Every time I see her, she asks when Jamie and I are going to make an honest woman out of you. She knows better than anyone that not everyone has the same kind of family. A day doesn't go by when she doesn't remind me in what she says or does that we don't pick who we fall in love with. And sometimes it's different from what we expect."

"And the rest of your family?"

Tony gave a harsh laugh. "Come on, Angela, that's part of the reason for her outlook, you know that. One of my aunts is a lesbian, I have a brother who's a transvestite, and a sister who can't settle down for more than a month. You think a triad is gonna blow her mind?"

Angela smiled. Tony definitely did not come from a normal Italian household, that was for sure. Except for the love his parents had for all of their children.

"Is that where you got this idea?" Angela tried to include both of the men in her questions, but she knew that Tony had to answer most of them.

"She gave me the beginning of an idea, yeah. Jamie and I realized that neither of us wanted to lose you. That you were the most important thing to both of us."

"We kind of hoped you felt the same way." Jamie looked at her hopefully.

"I do."

The look of shock on both their faces was worth her weight in gold. "I love you both, and I always have. I think the only reason I agreed to date you, Jamie, was because you were the one who asked, and I was afraid if I said no, we'd all drift apart and I'd never see you again. It was easier seeing one of you with another woman, than never seeing you at all."

"Are you serious?" Tony had a hungry look on his face.

"Yes."

"You want us both? Forever?" Jamie's hopeful look grew to a smile.

"Yes." Angela nodded her head quickly. She barely had time to breathe before they were both on her, pulling her up

from her seated position to hold her in their arms. Jamie's lips met hers in a bruising kiss, sealing them together as though to possess her entire body and soul. Tony turned her head away to kiss her, too. His kiss possessive, but somehow gentle.

"How long are your friends gonna be gone? 'Cause I don't know about him, but I need you now." Jamie's urgency was punctuated by the hard ridge pressing into her hip.

"Who cares? Where's your room? Or do we need to get a hotel room?" Tony pulled his mouth from hers to give his opinion.

"Down the hall. Second room on the right." She'd barely finished before Jamie had her in his arms, and Tony headed down ahead of them.

Tony held the door open, and closed and locked it behind her and Jamie as soon as they were through the doorway. He stalked to the queen-sized bed Jamie sat her on. "You are ours, Angel, and nothing is gonna change that."

"And you two are mine."

Jamie was sitting beside her, and turned her head toward him for a kiss. She heard Tony undressing as Jamie pulled her back to lay on top of him, kissing her all the while. Falling between his jean-clad legs, she felt his hard cock pressed against her thighs. She wiggled her body down against him as his hands grabbed her by the waist.

Warm hands pulled the back of her shirt up, caressing her spine, all the way up to her bra clasp, which was promptly undone. Arms wrapped around her hips to lift her up so Jamie could unsnap and unzip her jeans. Those same hands peeled

her pants and undies down, off her body until she was laying across a fully clothed Jamie, wearing only her shirt and an unclasped bra.

"Give her to me, bro, while you get ready." Tony lifted her up, pulling her away from Jamie and back into his arms. His hands immediately went to her body, one on a tit, the other to her pussy.

"Mmm, I love the way you feel." Her eyes were turned toward Jamie who still lay on the bed smiling at her. Winking, he quickly rolled off the bed to strip.

Tony's lips caressed the back of her neck, working to the concave area below her earlobe to nip and suck. She gasped as he pinched a nipple and thrust two fingers inside her as he bit.

"Already dripping for us, aren't you?"

Angela had already lost the ability to speak. All she could do was nod, gasping as his ministrations.

Jamie climbed onto the bed in front of her, his cock at attention as he licked his lips.

"So, bro, what do you want?" Tony asked his best friend as his hand turned Angela's head to the side to lick her neck from her shoulder to her ear. Angela shivered, and he pumped into her harder.

Jamie reached for her breasts, taking them in his hands to massage. "Hmmm, I don't know. Everything on her looks so delectable."

His head went to one breast, the other still possessed by his hand. His free hand went to her hips, to push her back into Tony's hard cock. She couldn't help herself, she wiggled

back against it. Suddenly eager to have more than just his fingers in her.

"You like that, Angel?" Tony lifted his head up to whisper harshly against her ear, thrusting at the crack of her ass, his hand, three fingers buried inside her now, pulling her against him sharply.

When she didn't answer right away, he asked her again, "You like that? You want a piece of it?"

Angela's hands had reached Jamie's penis. The thrust from Tony had her hand spasming on Jamie's cock and gasping aloud.

"Yes."

"Who do you want first?" Jamie pulled back his head to gaze up at her, closing her eyes as she squeezed him again.

A thought crossed Angela's mind, and she smiled with what she knew was predatory glee.

"Move back." She pushed at Jamie, forcing him to move back a few steps on his knees. She turned her head to face Tony and kissed him gently.

"Both of you, I want you both filling me at the same time." At his raised eyebrows, she giggled. "Well, we'll save *that* for later when we are home and have some lube handy. Tonight, I'm going to suck Jamie off while you fuck me from behind."

She heard Jamie groan at her proclamation, as she bent forward on the bed. She turned her head back to Tony, whose hand was still buried in her snatch. "That okay with you?"

The grin on his face told her everything she needed to know, as he slowly pulled his fingers out of her pussy and

brought it up to his lips. Her pussy walls contracted at the sight of him licking her juices from his hand.

Jamie's hand wrapped around her head and pulled her to face him. "Are you sure about this? Not just tonight, but about everything?"

"Yes, Jamie, I am sure. How many women in the world wish they could have one man to worship her? I have two. What more could a girl want?"

Tony's hands were at her hips, his cock throbbing against her ass cheeks. "You ready?"

Angela smiled into Jamie's eyes as she answered Tony. "You're the one who had his hand down there, you tell me."

She heard Tony snicker and saw Jamie smile as she widened her legs and then pushed Jamie down on the bed. She bent her head to take Jamie's cock into her mouth. At the same time, Tony maneuvered his cock straight to her pussy lips, and slowly worked his way in until he was seated completely inside her.

All three groaned at the same time. Tony started first, pulling back, then pushing forward into her, gently at first, but gaining momentum. She used his force to help her work Jamie's cock. At each push forward she took Jamie completely into her mouth, only to pull back as Tony partially withdrew from her. Jamie's hands wrapped in her hair, encouraging her to continue.

With each thrust she took Jamie further and further, her mouth tightening on him, her tongue playing games as Tony pumped her harder and harder. The feel of two men inside her at once filled her with elation. Giving pleasure as she was

receiving it. The hard cock throbbing in her mouth, coming closer to orgasm with each suck. Another ramming into her pussy, rubbing up against her walls, going so deep she felt him in her chest, driving her closer to her own orgasm.

"Oh, baby, I'm gonna come." Jamie's hand tightened in her hair as his breathing became more ragged.

Tony took it as a cue to ram into Angela harder and faster, forcing her to deep throat Jamie again and again. Pressure built up in her pussy, her walls tightening around him as her body prepared to let go. Just then, Jamie screamed her name as he came.

The cum shot into her mouth, instantly sending her into an orgasm of her own. Her pussy spasmed around Tony's cock, milking him, as his body reacted to her and shot his load into her hot waiting cavern.

Long after, the three of them were sprawled across the bed. Angela laying across Jamie, Tony across her back.

"Oh my God."

She wasn't sure which of her men had said it, but she had to agree.

"If the sex is this good every time, I don't think I'm gonna survive past age eighty."

"Screw that," Jamie assured them. "I don't think I'll last 'til sixty."

"Well, you'd better, because I'm not gonna be a dried-up old prune who isn't getting any. Especially when I have two studs in my bed every night."

"I guess when you put it that way, we'll just have to live up to it."

"Damn straight." Angela smiled as Jamie's hand massaged her scalp, and Tony's wrapped possessively around her waist. She was definitely in heaven. What she'd said to Jamie earlier was true. Many women dreamed of having a perfect man to call her own. She had two. Who in their right mind would ever want to give that up?

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THE FOOL

by

Michelle Hasker

Andrea gazed up at him, her blue eyes glazed with lust as her fingers dug into his shoulders.

"Oh, Cade," she moaned and wrapped her legs around his waist.

Cade moaned as he slid in even deeper, her body squeezing him tight as he thrust in and out of her sweet warmth.

"Why did we wait so long to do this?"

"You tell me, sugar."

"I'm sorry I was so mean to you. And I'm glad you convinced me to give you a chance. And now we're together."

"Andrea?"

"Yes, love."

"Less talk, more fuck."

She grinned up at him and squeezed him even more tightly. He groaned and tried to hold back, but he was right there.

"Come for me, baby. Come for me, now."

Andrea screamed, her body convulsing around him as his name echoed in the room. Cade shook as his orgasm rocked through him. He thrust one last time, then collapsed on top of her.

Cade growled and stared at the wooden beams above him. Another dream. *Would they never end?* When he'd been given the invitation to come here and lick his wounds, he'd jumped at it, agreeing immediately. He needed to hide away to heal from the broken heart he received when Andrea accepted Antonio's proposal and all his dreams died a sudden death.

Becca's mountain cabin seemed the perfect place to hide and find himself. Instead he dreamt of her, night after night, each dream more erotic than the last. After two straight weeks of this he knew he needed to return to the city. Perhaps immersing himself in work would cure him of her once and for all.

He glanced at the clock and saw that it was blank. *Shit.* Why hadn't his alarm gone off? He picked it up and frowned as it moved too easily. It had a short cord and shouldn't have moved this far.

"Damn ghost," he cursed as he looked behind the nightstand. Sure enough, the clock wasn't plugged in. "Damn."

What a great start to his day. He jerked on pants, grabbed the closest shirt and pulled on his boots, then rushed out the door. He needed to get out of here before Becca's next guest showed up. He'd promised to leave by noon, and judging by the position of the sun, noon had come and gone.

A blast of frigid air carrying huge snowflakes hit him as soon as he opened the door. The storm had hit. Hopefully he could get out of here before the roads became impassable.

Cade lifted the hood on his truck and propped it up. With a low growl, he pulled the collar of his jacket tighter and peered

under the hood. No more women. They were the cause of all his problems. He vowed to stay clear of them as he checked the fluids' levels and spark plugs.

Suddenly, his hat tumbled off his head, and flew across the engine. Cade lunged for it, but his arm knocked against the pole holding up the hood. It fell on his head with a bang, almost knocking him senseless.

Stars filled his vision as he mumbled over his stupidity. Cade extracted himself from the engine and let the hood slam shut. He went to place his hat back on his head when he realized his hand was empty.

Cade stomped back to the driver's side, opened the door, released the hood latch and kicked the door shut. He marched back to the front of the truck, lifted the hood, retrieved his hat and slammed the hood, giving it an extra thump as it closed.

"Stupid truck," he cursed and kicked the front tire.

Pain shot up his leg as his boot slid on the wet surface. Cade lost his balance, his leg twisting under him as he fell. Stunned, he lay there for a few minutes wondering if he was still dreaming. The pain was the deciding factor. His ankle burned as the sharp pain radiated up his calf.

When he tried to stand, the pain increased to an almost unbearable level. Cade dropped back to the ground in resignation, and cursed. Stranded out here in this miserable snowstorm. How could he be so lucky? Maybe if he just stayed right here the next guest would show up before the snow buried him alive.

As he began to debate the merits of being a human ice cube, the sound of an engine reached his ears.

"Please turn in, please turn in," he repeated the mantra, hoping the power of persuasion would make the motorist pull down this drive.

As if in answer to his prayer, a black SUV pulled into the drive and stopped in front of the porch. The door opened and a tall figure dressed in black stepped out into the snow. It looked over at him as Cade shouted and waved.

Becca's warning rumbled through his mind as the person turned toward him. No wonder she'd asked him to leave before noon. Andrea Monroe stood there, a glare on her face hot enough to burn him as she put her hands on her hips. Cade wondered which death would be faster, freezing, or being talked to death.

"Cade?" she whispered.

"Hi, sweetheart." Cade waited for the tirade he knew would follow.

"What are you doing here?"

"I had a little accident." He pointed to his ankle.

"Well if this isn't the lamest stunt you've ever pulled. If I've told you once, I've told you twice, you will not get me into your bed."

"Now, Andrea," Cade began as he leaned forward and pulled up his pant leg to reveal his already swollen and bruised ankle. He continued, "I'm not in any shape to make love to you."

"You really are injured!"

Mesmerized, Cade stared as she kneeled. Long black curls framed her pale face. Blue eyes filled with concern as she ran slender fingers over his ankle. Cade shifted hoping she didn't glance up and see his obvious erection.

"You poor man," she crooned. "Let me help you inside."

* * * *

Andrea chewed on her lip and wondered how to get Cade inside. What would she do with him once they made it there? He certainly couldn't drive with that ankle, not with it so swollen and bruised. She was stuck with him. For at least a day or two. *Great.*

Closing her eyes, she said a silent prayer for strength as even now, just standing near him sent her hormones into overdrive. She tried not to rub her thighs together. If she could just ignore the desire like she'd done every other time they'd been in the same room then everything would be okay.

"Use your good leg to take your weight. I'll try to help you stand."

Andrea held her breath waiting for Cade to argue. He didn't like to take orders, especially from a woman. With her pretend immunity to his charms, their mutual dislike increased with each chance meeting.

"Okay."

Andrea wondered if his injuries were worse than she realized when he gave in quickly to her suggestion. Shrugging her discomfort aside, she pulled on him until Cade stood. He leaned on his truck for support.

"Thank you."

"Are you injured anywhere else?" Andrea fought the concern that flooded her as his face crinkled in pain.

"No, just my ankle and my pride." Cade laughed harshly. "If you let me in and I ice it, maybe I'll be able to leave here tonight."

"I doubt it." Andrea frowned as she helped him over to the cabin. "Your ankle looks really bad, and the roads are almost impassable. I barely made it here."

Even with him putting most of his weight on his good leg, she struggled under him. It took more than a few minutes to make it onto the porch.

"It's unlocked. I was getting ready to leave when I ... fell."

Cade glanced away quickly, leaving Andrea wondering how he exactly he injured himself. Questions could wait. First she needed to get him inside. After she got the door open, she helped him inside and guided him over to a sofa near the fireplace.

"Stay," she teased before going into the kitchen.

As she dug through the cabinets for a plastic sandwich bag, Andrea let out a sigh of relief. Being that close to him had been harder than she'd anticipated. His heat and scent sent moisture straight to her pussy, which now ached and throbbed. With him here, there would be no relieving the hunger with her vibrator.

"Happy friggin' Valentine's Day to you too."

"What was that?" Cade called out.

"Nothing."

She hit pay dirt in the last cabinet, and pulled out a bag with a zipper type closure. After she tossed some ice in the bag, she grabbed a towel and carried it over to Cade.

"Thanks." Lifting his jeans, Cade revealed his swollen, bruised ankle.

"Prop your foot on this stool." Andrea pulled over a footstool and helped him raise his foot onto it. "I'm going to take off your boot and sock."

"Thank you." Cade tugged on his pants trying to pull them up.

Andrea removed his sock and shoe before frowning. "I think you'd better take off your pants."

"On our first date?" Cade gasped in mock outrage.

"Stop it," Andrea snapped. "You can't get the ice directly on your ankle because your jeans are tight and wet. Now strip while I get you a blanket."

"Yes, ma'am," Cade muttered unhappily.

Andrea found a blanket on the bed in the next room. She sat for a moment to catch her breath. The ice had to work. She couldn't spend the night with him and not reveal her true feelings, those of desire contradicting her claims of dislike.

Cade Smith starred in her dreams at night. It was his fault she'd ended her relationship with Antonio. In every way possible, Antonio failed to measure up to Cade and the way she felt when he turned his dreamy sea-green gaze on her, or the way her fingers itched to brush back the stray strand of golden hair that fell in his face. This harsh mask she wore around him kept her safe. If it weren't for the farce, she'd be defenseless against his charms.

Andrea scooped up the blanket and carried it back to the main room. Fortunately he'd removed his jeans by himself, but the sight of him in those white briefs, his erection straining against the cotton, might be her undoing. She draped the blanket over him, grabbed his jeans and carried them to the bathroom.

"Keep busy. Just stay focused, and far away from him. It'll be okay. He'll never guess your true feelings."

"You're talking to yourself again. I can hear you but I can't make out what you are saying!" Cade shouted from the living room.

"I need to get the groceries from my car. Will you be okay until I get back?" she asked as she walked back into the room.

"Yes. I'm a big boy." Cade turned to look into the fire before she could catch his gaze.

"Boy are you ever," she whispered, hopefully under her breath.

Quickly and efficiently, Andrea carried in her supplies and set about preparing a quick, hot meal. Uncomfortable after a few minutes, she decided to try and make small talk to pass the time.

"Norma said it's going to continue snowing."

"Norma?"

"The woman who owns Wilson Market." Andrea ladled soup into two bowls while she waited for the sandwiches to finish toasting. "Her husband says we'll probably get snowed in for a few days."

"Lovely," Cade grumbled. "And I suppose you met this husband of hers?"

"Actually I did." Andrea handed Cade a bowl of soup. She set a plate of sandwiches between them. "Which is why I can't understand why she insists he's dead."

Cade choked. "What?"

"Yeah, she believes he's dead." Andrea handed Cade a napkin.

Cade wiped his mouth and turned to her. "You saw him? You mean Becca didn't tell you the story?"

"What story?" Andrea picked up a sandwich and bit into it, desperate to ignore the sensual desire he stirred by his nearness. A few more minutes of this and she would probably throw herself at him.

"Gene Wilson died of a heart attack a few years ago. His ghost is still here. He likes to create mischief. In fact, it's his fault I'm in this mess."

"What?" Andrea swallowed the now tasteless bite. "I don't understand."

"If you saw Gene Wilson, then you saw a ghost. He's been dead for two years now."

"Two years?" Andrea looked at her sandwich. "Why did you say it's his fault you're in this mess?"

"I was checking the engine in my truck when he knocked my hat off my head." Cade reached for a sandwich and took a large bite. "This is delicious, thanks."

"Knocking the hat off your head gave you a sprained ankle? Let me see your head. Maybe you hit it when you fell." Andrea reached for him.

"My head is fine." Cade growled and ducked out of her reach. "But I think Gene wanted to make sure I didn't leave before you arrived."

"Why?"

"He has a tendency to play matchmaker. Last year he stranded Maxwell and Becca here. Gene is probably ecstatic they got married a few months ago. But now he's bored and eager to pair up another couple."

"If he stranded you here with me, it's not going to work." Andrea crossed her arms and sat back on the sofa.

A loud crash echoed outside. The lights flickered and died. Andrea jumped up, hurrying to the window.

"No. No, no, no," she groaned, leaning her forehead against the cool glass.

"What?"

"A tree fell. It's blocking the drive right behind my car. I think it took out the power line."

"Thank you, Gene." Cade raised his sandwich in salute.

"You're thanking him?" Andrea advanced toward him, not bothering to hide her annoyance. "For what? Leaving me stuck in a deserted cabin with the biggest playboy on the East Coast?"

"I'm not a playboy. I enjoy women, but in moderation. And only one at a time."

Andrea groaned and stomped into the kitchen. The thought of him with other women roused her jealousy and she didn't want him to see it. She splashed some water on her face and washed her hands as she composed herself.

"If I promise not to ravish your luscious body, do you think you could stop snapping at me?" he asked as soon as she entered the living room.

Luscious body? Andrea paused and met his gaze. "I'm sorry. I didn't realize I snapped at you."

"You do it all the time. Sometimes I wonder if you snap at me to hide a desire to get to me into bed."

She choked, then forced a laugh. "That's ridiculous. It's really dark in here, let me find some candles before we can't see at all."

"Good idea," Cade said as he leaned back on the sofa and studied her.

At least it felt like he was watching her, with the way her back burned. She worked her way around the room and finally found candles in a cabinet near the fireplace. Triumphant, she pulled out a box of matches, too.

"Let there be light."

"Think you could find some cards? Maybe if we had something to pass the time—" Cade stopped speaking in mid-sentence.

"Cade?" Andrea looked up.

He stared at something on her left. Slowly she turned her head and let out an ear-piercing scream. The old man from the store smiled back at her.

"You two shall stay here until you stop arguing like children," he said, then slowly faded from sight.

"Wait!" Andrea shouted. "Come back. What are you? The Cheshire cat?"

Cade's laughter brought her spinning back around. Why was she arguing with what must be a figment of her imagination? The two people she'd met at the store were real enough, Cade's overactive imagination had just fueled her mind to create its own ghosts.

With a loud sigh, she gathered the candles, a deck of cards, and a bag of miniature chocolate bars. Andrea pulled the coffee table over to the sofa and set up the candles. She handed Cade the deck of cards and a couple of candy bars, then carried their dirty dishes into the kitchen. As she filled the teakettle and set it on the gas stove to heat, her mind drifted back to Cade. What a shame he was everything she didn't want in a permanent relationship.

As a potential lover though, he was a ten, no doubt about it. All that blonde hair that ran down his chest and flat stomach, the hard, tanned body he displayed without a thought to modesty, and his silly need to make everyone around him laugh. If only he could remain faithful to one woman, or even date one lady for more than a week or two.

Andrea shook her head and sighed as she lit some candles in the bathroom. So what if he was hot? He wasn't a keeper, and she couldn't risk getting hurt. With him it would be short and steamy. She didn't know if she could handle that. Marriage and a family were two goals she'd hoped to complete this year, but catching Antonio with Margie had ruined that.

When she couldn't find anything else to keep her from returning to the living room, she sat down on a chair across from him.

"Okay, shall we pretend we're friends and play a nice game of cards?"

"Sounds good." Andrea smiled.

They played cards until the teakettle whistled. While she poured it in the sink to soak the dishes, she wondered if there was anything else she could do to keep busy. With a smile, she remembered the wine she'd brought to celebrate dumping Antonio. Maybe Cade would celebrate with her. He'd certainly seemed to hate Antonio.

Andrea sliced some cheese and placed it on a plate with crackers. She set them on a tray, opened the wine and put it next to the plate with two wineglasses. Picking up the tray, she carried it back to Cade.

"What have we here?" Cade's eyes lit up when he saw the tray. "Planning on getting me drunk so you can take advantage of me?"

"In your dreams," Andrea snapped, dropping the tray the last few inches onto the table. The bottle wobbled, but remained upright.

"Lighten up. I know you don't have any interest in me." Cade snatched a piece of cheese off the tray.

"I was planning on celebrating tonight."

Andrea poured the wine before sitting next to him on the sofa. She handed him a glass.

"Thank you." Cade took the glass, his fingers brushing against hers.

Andrea hid the shiver that raced up her arm from his touch. She couldn't let him know she desired him. He'd love her and leave her like all his other girlfriends.

"What are we celebrating?"

"I dumped Antonio."

"Tony the spud?" Cade chuckled. "It's about time."

"Tony the spud?" Andrea echoed, her eyebrows rose as she tried to figure out where this one came from. She took a sip of wine and waited for him to elaborate.

"I heard he's like a potato in the sack."

Andrea laughed, and choked on wine. Cade patted her back, but it didn't really help. Each time his hand touched her, heat raced through her. Trying to be friends wasn't going to work. Not when his touch reduced her to a bumbling mess.

"You shouldn't believe everything you hear." Andrea moved away from him and reached for a piece of cheese as she tried to hide her embarrassment.

"Oh, so he set off fireworks for you?"

"Cade!" Andrea dropped the cheese on her lap.

"Come on. Pretend we're two friends discussing our sex lives. Was Tony the spud really a stud in your bed?"

"No." Andrea flushed and shoved the cheese in her mouth to prevent any other words from escaping.

"Want to talk about it? Why did you dump him?"

"He was terrible in the sack, okay? I'd hoped that with time he'd get better."

"Why did you agree to marry him?" Cade asked.

"Because it seemed like a good idea at the time."

"Did you feel desire for him?"

"Desire? Not like I feel for—" She stopped, barely in the nick of time, and gulped down more wine.

Cade sighed and shuffled the deck. "I think we should play a game or two of poker."

"Strip poker? I'm not playing strip poker."

"No. We're gonna play truth or dare. Whoever loses the hand has to pick a truth or a dare."

"Oh." Andrea frowned and looked at the hand he dealt her. She could handle poker. And she could handle a crippled Cade. "Do you need more ice?"

"Yes, thank you."

He handed her the bag of water and damp towel. Andrea dumped the water in the sink and refilled the bag with ice. Grabbing a dry towel she walked back to Cade and dropped it on the table.

"Thanks."

"You're welcome."

Andrea picked up her cards and looked at them again. She needed to win enough games to get Cade to concede she was a better player and quit the truth or dare nonsense.

"Truth or dare?" Andrea asked as she won the first game.

"Truth," Cade growled.

"Why do you date a different woman every week?"

Cade glared at her. Andrea smiled and waited for him to answer. After all, he was the one who wanted to play the game.

"Fine," he sighed a minute later. "I date different women because the one I want isn't interested in me."

"What?" Andrea laughed and slapped his arm. "No really, you picked truth so now give it to me."

"It's the truth." Cade turned away. "The woman I'm interested in won't even give me the time of day."

"So you sleep with all the other women in town in an effort to prove her right to stay away from you?"

"I was doing it to try and forget her, dammit." Cade ran his fingers through his hair. "I answered your question, now deal the damn cards."

"Is she blind?"

Cade's head turned back so quickly Andrea covered her mouth with her hand.

"No. She's not blind. She just isn't interested in me, I guess."

"Maybe she sees what I see? A man who flits from woman to woman." Andrea shrugged. "Do you think you could hold a steady relationship with her?"

"If she would give me a chance, I'd stay with her forever."

This was a side of him Andrea never witnessed before. She patted Cade's knee. "Maybe when we get home, I can talk to her for you. Let her know your interest is sincere."

"Thanks," Cade grumbled, pushing the deck toward her. "Your turn to deal."

Andrea shuffled the cards and dealt them quickly and efficiently. Cade's eyebrows raised but he didn't comment.

Soon enough he won the next hand, and looked at her with a triumphant grin. "My win. Truth or dare?"

"Truth."

"Do you think I'm fat?"

"What?" She laughed until tears ran down her cheeks.

"You know, are my thighs too big? Does my butt stick out?"

"Stop." Andrea laughed until she had to gasp for air. "No, I don't think you're fat. You have a very nice body."

"Really?" Cade purred leaning closer. "What do you think is my best asset? Do you find me attractive?"

Andrea blinked, fighting the urge to answer yes. She gathered up the cards and pushed them toward him, struggling to push away thoughts of him in his swimsuit. There wasn't an ounce of fat on his body. A hard, smooth chest deeply tanned over the summer was something she found hard to forget, and that was her favorite asset of his, but she'd be damned to hell for eternity before she told him that.

"Truth or dare?" Cade interrupted her thoughts.

With a groan, Andrea realized she'd daydreamed through the last hand.

"Dare."

Cade grinned and she immediately tried to retract her answer.

"Nope, you picked dare."

"What's the dare?" Andrea drank deeply hoping the wine would give her the courage to do whatever crazy thing he thought up.

"Kiss me."

"What?" she croaked, setting her glass on the table.

"Kiss me."

Closing her eyes, Andrea prayed for strength. He wanted her to kiss him. Obviously her question hit him harder than

she thought. Repeated rejections from the woman he loved caused him to date women without letting them get close. Could she kiss him without losing herself? Without letting him see how he affected her?

Andrea opened her eyes slowly and took a deep breath as she looked at him again. He wanted a kiss, but he never said what kind. A peck on the cheek would still count as a kiss. She hoped. Quickly, she leaned forward, and pressed her lips against his cheek. Cade turned before she could move away, and her lips slid onto his.

She sighed as pleasure raced up her spine and desire coiled in her stomach. How she wished he would make her forget a relationship between them wouldn't work. When his hands closed on her shoulders she realized she'd melted into him. Horror swept through her, cooling the passion he'd ignited as quickly as water to a flame. She pulled away and opened her eyes to notice him watching her. To hide her reaction, she reached for her wineglass, noticed that her hand shook, and quickly lowered it to her lap.

"Andrea?" Cade reached for her hand. "Why are you trembling? Was the feel of my lips on yours so repulsive?"

"No," Andrea choked out confused and horrified at the expression on his face. Her response must have hurt him somehow. He hadn't felt her desire. *Thank heavens.* "No, you aren't repulsive."

"But, Andrea, you're shaking."

"I know. It's the wine. I think I'm drunk." She wasn't though. When she couldn't look at him anymore, she closed

her eyes and lifted her face to the ceiling. "I think we should stop playing now."

"Oh no you don't. It's only seven thirty, and I'm not spending Valentine's night alone."

Andrea snorted. "I bet you had a date all lined up for when you got back."

"How, Andrea? I was here. Even if I'd gotten home, don't you think I'd be too tired to go out?"

"I find it odd that you didn't have a date. It's not like you."

Cade shrugged. "What can I say? Perhaps I realized no one can make me forget her, so why bother pretending anymore?"

He sounded so sincere she wondered if she'd misjudged him.

"Remember what the fortune teller said? Tell him."

"How do you know about that?" Andrea jumped up and glanced around the room. Neither she nor Cade had spoken, and no one else was here. *Who said that?* Cade didn't even know she'd been to see the old woman. Things were getting creepier by the second.

She'd seen the two people alive and well at the store. There was no other explanation for the weird happenings, though. Cade was actually injured. He couldn't be orchestrating it all from the sofa. No, something very weird was happening, and it scared her.

Andrea had gone to the fortune teller for fun and never expected the things the old lady had told her to come true. Since she'd arrived here, though, things were very weird, and now she didn't know what she believed anymore.

"Tell me about this fortune teller," Cade said as he leaned back on the sofa and glanced over at her.

"I'd rather not."

"Do you want to play another hand? I'm on a winning streak. It will be my next question if I win."

"Then I'd chose dare," Andrea said and grinned back. *Ha, now what, bub?*

"Then I'll make you kiss me again since you seemed to hate it so much."

Andrea sputtered as she tried to form a coherent word to respond to him. Unsuccessful, she sighed and dropped back into the chair. Something cool brushed across her lower body, and Andrea pulled her legs up into the chair. Panic fought to take control as very slightly the chair began to move.

Fear filled her as she looked up at Cade. He'd noticed the chair move as well, but he believed in these ghosts. If he did believe, why didn't he realize it was a malicious ghost? It had injured Cade, trapped them both here, and now it tormented her, and tried to make her tell Cade things he didn't need to know.

"Tell him..." a voice whispered in her ear. "Tell him."

Andrea shrieked, and leapt out of her chair, over the coffee table, and onto the sofa. She buried her head against Cade as tremors racked through her body. Cade made soothing sounds as he rubbed her back in slow movements he probably thought would reassure her, but really only made her wet with desire.

After a few minutes, Andrea dared to glance around the room. They were alone again, but Cade watched her with concern.

"Tell him..."

Cade chuckled and pulled Andrea close. "I think you should tell me about this fortune teller, love. Our ghost isn't going to give up until you do."

"Okay, okay," Andrea grumbled. "It's obvious I'll have no peace until I do. Although why I'm losing my mind is beyond me."

"You aren't losing your mind. No, you're having a hard time believing what you can't see. Tell me about this fortune teller and maybe the ghost will leave you alone." Cade leaned back on the sofa, pulling her with him.

Andrea took a deep breath and leaned forward. "I thought it would be fun. I'd just told Antonio that the wedding was off and I wanted to know what would be in my future. Part of me hoped she really could tell my future, but the rest knows she can't."

"Are you so sure she can't?"

"I ... I don't know anymore." She drew in a deep breath again and quickly released it. "She picked the Fool for me. The Fool! I expected some joke, but then she said that the card represents a new beginning, a fresh start. She said I would be faced with important choices and decisions which need to be made as I begin a new life-cycle. She also said there would be challenges I'd have to deal with along the way. She said I should face these challenges with energy, optimism and faith, and they just might turn out okay."

"Well, that's not so bad. It's a good reading."

"She also said that I'd been acting like a fool, and I'd need to rectify a past mistake in order to be able to make my fresh new start."

"Hmmm." His mouth vibrated near her ear as he wrapped her in another hug.

Shivers of pleasure raced up her spine, but he must have thought she was cold because he began to rub his hands up and down her arms and back.

"Cade." She sighed and tried to pull away. His nearness was going to be the cause of her destruction.

"Sorry, was just trying to warm you up. I forgot my touch was so repulsive." He froze, his hold on her weakening as his face contorted and he looked at her with an odd expression.

"Oh my God. Don't tell me you can't stand any man's touch?"

"What?" Andrea shrieked. "What are you thinking?"

"Perhaps the reason you are always so cold to me, and you didn't enjoy sex with your fiancé is because you just aren't attracted to men."

Andrea groaned loudly. "You've got such a big ego, you know that? I do so like men."

"It's okay, honey. But I'd have been much nicer to you if I'd known you were a lesbian and it was my flirting with you that made you so cold and distant with me."

"Your ego made me so cold and distant with you. I refuse to be another notch on your bedpost."

"Andrea, do you remember when we first met? Do you remember the man I was then?"

She really didn't want to take a stroll down memory lane, but the ghost seemed to like Cade, and if she didn't humor him, Gene would probably torment her some more. At the thought, she nervously glanced around the room.

"Do you remember?"

"Not really, I remember you kept flirting and flirting and flirting with me. Every breath you drew in seemed to be to energize you to come after me with a new tactic. I doubt anyone has ever tried as hard to get into my pants as you did."

Cade groaned and dropped his head back on the sofa. "I knew I was coming on too strong. I just couldn't help it. You're so beautiful, so ... but it doesn't matter. What does matter is that you prefer women."

"I do not!" She gasped. *Is he still on that?*

"Show him," the voice whispered in her ear.

This time, she was so upset she barely realized the ghost spoke to her, or that she listened. All her attention was focused on proving to him she liked men.

Andrea brushed her mouth against his cheek as she whispered his name. Cade turned, frowning. Before she lost her courage, Andrea pressed her lips against his, tentatively at first, then more firmly as he responded.

Her right hand settled on his chest, while the other one fisted in his hair. Andrea deepened the kiss, showing him what she lacked the words to say. Her mouth moved over his, taking what he offered. Cade gripped her waist and pulled her onto his lap then his hands burrowed in her curls and he matched her, kiss for amazing kiss.

Desire flared deep in her stomach and spread like wildfire throughout her body. Moisture pooled between her thighs at his masterful manipulation of her body. Sighing, she relaxed against him, giving as good as she got. All thought of proving she liked men vanished as she gave in to her desire for him. She'd wanted him for so long.

When he nibbled on her lower lip, Andrea groaned and wiggled on his lap until she straddled him. Kiss after searing kiss, the heat level in the cabin rose as she rubbed against his erection. Of course he wanted her, he liked anything with breasts, but somehow it didn't seem as generic as before.

His breath came fast and hard, his chest heaving and his fingers gripping her tightly. His arousal dug into her, and as she pressed down on him, a low moan slipped from his lips, into her mouth.

Antonio had never shown such a hunger for her. That was her last thought of the dud, because Cade's mouth burned a path to her ear, and she moaned, rocking against him as he sucked her lower lobe between his lips. Her juices drenched her underwear as she gasped, trying to catch her breath and regain control of herself. Cade proved her struggle fruitless when he licked and nibbled his way down her neck, then bit into the sensitive flesh near her carotid.

Shuddering, Andrea's hands tightened on his shoulders, and her eyes glazed over, desire taking control. She wanted him, needed him buried deep inside of her, thrusting into her and filling her in a way she knew no one else would.

Cade pulled away first, so Andrea buried her face in his neck, inhaling his masculine scent. She could smell her own

desire, and her face flamed as he lifted her chin, raising her gaze to his.

"It's you, Andrea. You're the one I want."

"Me?" She hated the quiver in her voice. "You don't mean that. You're just saying that because no one better is here."

Cade growled and shook his head. "You, Andrea. Dammit, you. I love you. I've loved you from the moment Becca introduced us. Every time we met, you brushed me off until finally I gave up and started to see other women. But none of them has even come close to you. And not one was able to make me forget you."

"Cade," Andrea groaned, resting her forehead against his. He meant it. Something deep inside told her he was sincere. Perhaps she was a fool for not even giving him a chance. She'd just written him off as another womanizer. "I thought you were interested in a cheap fling. I never realized your feelings could go deeper."

"Does that mean..." His voice broke and Cade turned away.

"Yes, Cade, I believe you. Call me naïve, but I've never met a man who had this effect on me. I've never met a man who wanted me as much as you do."

"Oh, I want you, but it's not for something temporary, Andrea. I want you forever. The white picket fence and two point five kids."

She gasped and stared at him. How could she tell if he was telling the truth? "I don't understand, Cade."

"Do you believe in love at first sight?"

"No." Andrea shook her head.

"Of course you don't. You don't believe in fortune tellers or ghosts either." Cade sighed and tightened his grip on her.

"What can I do to convince you of the truth?"

"I don't know. But a relationship between the two of us would never work. It has to be temporary. Once we leave here you'll find someone else." Andrea flushed as he frowned.

"That's not true or fair, Andrea. Are you accusing me of not being faithful?"

"No, I'm just saying that you can't be with someone for longer than a few days."

"That's because the girl was never you. You can ask Becca, or any of my friends. Once you came into my life, my love life went topsy turvy."

"Oh, I don't know. I've seen some of your dates. All beautiful, but not even one of them was very bright."

"That's because the intelligent ones had me figured out by the end of the first date. They knew they weren't my first choice, and that there wasn't much they could do to make me forget about you. The others, well, they tried." Cade cupped her chin and held her gaze. "Since I met you I haven't had sex with anyone. No one."

"I can't believe you haven't had sex with anyone." She would have laughed, but he still cupped her chin and didn't look away, even when hurt changed his expression to a frown.

Okay. Perhaps she'd made another mistake. A man abstaining from sex? A man like Cade abstaining? She shivered and pulled away, looking down at the floor.

"Okay, perhaps I jumped to the wrong conclusion there, too."

Perhaps when the fortune teller drew the Fool, she meant you. Gene's voice resounded in her head, the last few words replaying over and over.

She remembered the fortune teller's words. That she would need to rectify something in order to make a fresh start. If the ghost thing and the fortune were all real, then Cade must be her problem. She'd misjudged him, and thrown away the chance to get to know him better, and possibly have a relationship with him. All because he'd come on strong and she'd reacted like she normally did to a guy like that.

Andrea drew in a deep breath as she decided it was worth a try. "You're the reason I dumped Antonio."

He stared at her but said nothing. Perhaps he thought she was teasing? How would he know that she'd just had an awakening of sorts?

"I ... I'm not saying I'm in love with you, but I've felt the same desire as you. Ever since the first time we met. And I couldn't sleep with Antonio. He just couldn't make me feel the way you do."

"Are you saying what I think you are?"

"What do you think I'm saying?" Andrea asked.

"Are you going to give me a chance to make you love me?"

"Yes. But if you so much as look at another woman, I'm gone."

"Are you nuts? You're all the woman I need. No one else will do. You aren't just saying this, are you?"

Andrea groaned, but knew she had only herself to blame for this sudden doubt he had.

"Cade?"

"Yes?"

"Shut up and kiss me."

And he did. But it wasn't what she'd expected. Instead of a fierce, hungry kiss, he moved his mouth over hers gently, kissing her tenderly, as if she were made of delicate china.

She melted into his embrace as two ghosts appeared near the fire.

"Another perfect match, Gene."

"Yes, it is. I'm winning now."

"That's okay, there are many more people who will seek out our cabin. I still have a chance."

Gene grinned as they faded from sight.

"Did you hear that?" Andrea asked.

"Yep." Cade grinned. "And we are. A perfect match."

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THE STAR

by

Tina Bendoni

Astrid watched the meteor shower with a smile on her face. As long as she could remember she had felt a special connection with the heavens. Maybe it had something to do with her name, but she thought it was more. There was something out there waiting for her. What or who it was, she was unsure, but she knew it was there.

It was why she'd studied astrology. It always seemed so much more fun than astronomy. The stars had more to tell than any one human could ever understand. If only people were open to different things, they would realize there was so much more to their lives.

Abigail had told her this was it. Tonight was the night. Something was going to happen tonight that was going to change Astrid's world, and it was totally up to her how she accepted that offer.

Astrid thought back to the visit she'd paid her mother's friend when she'd found out the woman was in town. Aunt Abby had insisted on giving Astrid a reading, something that was against her usual rules. She almost never read for friends or family. But she'd insisted.

"The Star."

Astrid had smiled at that. Nothing seemed more fitting to her, even if she didn't know the meaning behind the card.

Abby had also smiled. "You know why your mother gave you the name Astrid?"

"She always said something about hoping I would be a shining beacon of hope for others."

Abby nodded. "One who is touched by the Star is self-confident and full of hope. One who gives as she takes, and is blessed and protected in most all she does. She wanted only the best for you."

Astrid smiled sadly. Her mother had been gone for almost three years, and still Astrid missed her. Abby was the closest thing to family Astrid had now that her mom was gone.

"This card, today, tells me that the time has come."

Astrid looked up at Abby with a question in her eyes.

Abby smiled. "Tonight events will happen that will determine your future. There will be decisions to be made over the next few days, and what you decide will affect you for the rest of your life."

"But what happens tonight?"

"I cannot say, but look to the stars and your questions will be answered. I cannot promise that they are answers you expect or want, but they will be there."

* * * *

Astrid watched the last of the meteor shower as she contemplated the rest of her visit with her "aunt." It had been fairly uneventful, but she had refused to expand on her reading. Astrid shrugged her shoulders. She knew that Abby

was rarely, if ever wrong. Something was going to happen tonight that would affect the rest of her life. And the worst thing was knowing that the way the stars directed things, Astrid probably wouldn't know about it until after it happened.

The meteor shower over, Astrid climbed back into her car to head back home. The show would have been much less visible from her own backyard, so the hour-long trip to this spot in the country had been worth it for her. Even if she hadn't found the answers her aunt had promised.

Maybe this was one of those times Aunt Abigail was destined to be wrong.

Astrid was smiling at the thought when she saw a streak of something out of the corner of her eye. Slamming on her breaks, she went into a skid and felt herself lose control of the car. The last thing she was aware of was the car spinning off the side of the mountain.

* * * *

Astrid woke with a headache to end all headaches. *Ugh, where am I?* She tried to open her eyes, and was immediately assailed with a bright light that had her raising her hand and squinting her lids shut with a grunt.

"Shh. You've had an accident. Give yourself time to acclimate to the light." A wonderful sexy voice that had her tingling through her entire body soothed her immediately as a warm hand lay on her arm. "Wait a minute while I lower the glare."

She heard footfalls heading away from the bed, and then return. "That should help some. You can open your eyes, but be careful. Go slow."

Figuring he knew what he was talking about, after all, he must be a doctor or nurse in the hospital, she left her hand over her eyes to shade them as she slowly opened her lids. Satisfied that she wasn't going to be blinded again, she pulled her hand away and blinked rapidly as her eyes adjusted to the light.

Immediately she saw she was in a room, but it wasn't in a hospital. At least not in any hospital she had ever seen. The walls were a deep forest green and photographs lined them. She looked to her right and saw a bureau with some personal items, and a framed picture she couldn't quite make out.

"Where am I?"

"You're at my place."

"Why aren't I in the hospital?" She turned toward the man who had spoken, the one she had assumed was her doctor, and the rest of her questions were blocked in her throat.

The most incredible man she had ever seen stood there beside the bed. He was tall, how tall she couldn't tell, but definitely over six feet. Brown hair, cut fairly long, and parted on the side. Thick wisps hung down on both sides, framing his face. And what a beautiful face it was, too.

Bright green eyes stared at her from a chiseled, gorgeous face. He had a Vandyke beard, which accentuated his laugh lines. Full eyebrows brought her attention back to those incredible eyes as they locked with hers.

"They said you didn't need to stay, as it was only your ankle that was seriously hurt. It seemed better to take you here rather than anywhere else at the time." His voice sent those tingles through her body again, forcing her to almost forget what she was asking him.

"Why? Are you a doctor?"

"There isn't any permanent damage. You'll be okay in a day or two."

"I don't remember anything. What happened?"

"You were in a car accident. I came across it, and helped you out."

"I don't understand."

The sexy man sighed, sending goose bumps over her body. He sat beside her on the bed. "Earlier tonight you were in a car accident. The EMTs said there wasn't any permanent damage, but you have a sprained ankle, and probably a mild concussion."

"My car?"

"Totaled."

"Oh, great. I gotta call the cops. Gotta call my insurance company." Astrid tried to push herself up, and immediately fell back to the pillow.

"That's all been taken care of."

"I'm sorry, I don't remember any of it."

"That's the bump on the head. They warned us you might have some minor memory loss."

Astrid tried to push herself up out of bed. "I need to—"

"Shh, you are still weak. Don't try to move for a while."

"But I need to call—"

"You can do that in the morning."

"Can you take me to town?"

"Why don't you rest some more, and we will talk about it later."

"But—"

Again he interrupted her with a, "Shh," as he fluffed her pillows and pulled the blanket up around her.

He handed her a glass of something to drink, and she suddenly realized she was parched. After drinking it she felt very drowsy and was glad to let sleep take hold of her.

Astrid was flying. She didn't know how or why, but she was floating in the middle of nothingness, as though caught in a cloud on a bright day. Above her she could see the stars twinkling in the sunlight. *How strange.*

She looked down at herself, and saw she was surrounded by a glow, and a rope of light followed behind her. She realized she was in the astral plane, and that was the cord leading back to her body. Friends of hers had told her of this, but it had never happened to her before. Why now?

"Astrid."

She looked up. "Mother?"

Her mother took Astrid in her arms and held tight. "My little star. How proud I am of you."

"I miss you, Mom."

Her mother pushed Astrid back to look in her eyes. "I know, my dear. And I miss you. But it was time for me to go. You know as well as I do that when it is time, we have no say in the matter."

Astrid nodded, tears in her eyes. "Why am I here, Mom?"

Her mother smiled. "To remind you that life goes on. That your life is going through some changes, but things will improve for you. They have already begun. Do not turn away from what you do not know.

"You are capable of so much, my child, but sometimes we need another to help us along our way, to fulfill all we are promised to be."

"Aunt Abby told me earlier that something was going to happen."

"Ah, yes. I didn't realize Abby had been called here recently. Very well. Listen to the advice she gave you, remember it. They are words to live by. For now, you must go."

"Will I be able to come back? Will I see you again?"

"We will meet again. If not in this life, then another."

"I won't remember this, will I?"

Her mother shook her head, smiling. "Not consciously, no. But you will know what you need to do. And remember, my child, I love you."

"I love you, too, Mom."

"Blessed be."

Her mother slowly faded away in front of her, and she felt herself pulled back. Back to her body, to the world she knew. It was time for hope, and moving on. She turned back willingly with a renewed sense of purpose to live her life.

* * * *

Astrid awoke to bright sunshine shining through the window. Snippets of a dream were floating through her brain,

but she couldn't quite grasp them. It seemed important somehow, and she tried to pull it back—but to no avail. The dream escaped her just as dreams always do upon awakening.

"You're awake."

She turned her head at the voice. The same voice from last night. And the same man. Last night she had focused on his face, too groggy to see much of anything else, but today his wide chest caught her attention.

He was wearing a gray tank top that hung on his body perfectly. His biceps were the size of her thighs and all muscle. Moisture pooled between her legs at the sight. Her eyes followed his torso down to his waist and tight-fitting black jeans. *Damn*. Not only was she rescued by a handsome stranger, but one who was built like a Mack truck.

She scowled at herself. He would have had to be if he had carried her anywhere. She wasn't exactly a lightweight.

"Good morning." She found her voice.

"Good morning. Feeling any better?" He smiled and she saw straight white teeth peek through his lips.

Astrid took stock. No more headache. Minor aches and pains. "Yes, thank you, I do."

"Good."

"I'm sorry to put you out, Mr.—I don't even know your name."

"Jared."

"I'm Astrid."

He nodded his head. "Pleasure to meet you, Astrid." The way he said her name sent shivers down her spine. She had

never heard it purred quite like that before. The man oozed sex from every pore of his body. Thank the Goddess she was in bed, or she might be tempted to jump his bones.

Oh, shit, in bed. She looked down at herself quickly. She was wearing a t-shirt and sweatpants. Last night she had been wearing pajama bottom pants and a camisole with an overshirt. How had she gotten—

"Yes, I'm sorry, I had to change you."

She blushed. *Oh, great.* Not only had Mr. Hunky—Jared—saved and carried her ass last night, but he'd seen it naked, too. He must be really anxious to get rid of her. She ducked her head.

"No reason to be ashamed. You have a beautiful body."

"No, I don't."

"Excuse me?"

"My breasts are too saggy, my stomach and thighs are too big, and I am too short."

"Who the hell ever told you that?" He looked almost infuriated.

She crinkled her brow in disbelief. "The entire world?"

He cursed under his breath.

"What?"

"Nothing. Just people can be so stupid sometimes."

"Well, I have to agree with you there." Astrid realized he had diverted her from her embarrassment fairly easily. "Could you please thank your girlfriend for me for the use of her clothes?" She had already noticed he wore no ring.

"Girlfriend?"

"I assume you have one if you have women's clothing laying around."

She could have sworn she saw a blush creep over his face. He didn't blush when talking about her body, but extra clothes from a girlfriend did the trick?

"No, it's not a girlfriend. My sister had them here."

"Oh, well, is she around?" *Of course she isn't, you idiot, if she was, she would have undressed you.*

"No, sorry, it's just you and me."

She realized she should be worried. Alone, in the middle of Goddess knew where with a man who looked like he could bench press a small house, and no way to contact anyone. But she wasn't worried. Somehow, she knew she was safe here. With him.

Just the two of them. And she was already in bed. *What would it hurt to just—No. Stop it.* What the hell was wrong with her? She was never like this.

"So, you think maybe I can talk you into letting me out of this bed and taking me into town?"

He sat down beside her on the bed and picked up her hand, then lay one of his on her forehead. "Why don't we see how you feel later on? I think you might have a fever."

"No, really. I feel fine."

"Now, now. I'm the one who rescued you. The least you can do is trust me to take care of you."

Shit. Was she wrong? Was she in danger here? She knew nothing about this man except he got her juices flowing. He was hot, incredibly sexy, and his smell—a woodsy, clean scent—well, his smell was divine.

"Really, Jared, I think I need to be going."

He sighed. "You're right. I'm sorry. I didn't mean to scare you." He stood up, letting go of her hand.

"The clothes you were wearing are in the top drawer of that dresser. I washed and dried them for you. There's a shower in the bathroom through that door. Do you think you can get up by yourself?"

Astrid started to say yes, and then realized she wasn't sure about it at all. She tried to push herself into a sitting position and found she was unable to do so without Jared's help.

"Oh, my. I'm weaker than I thought."

"It'll pass. You hurt your ankle pretty badly, too."

"It does hurt." She wiggled it under the sheet, and cringed at the pain that followed.

"If you can't walk, I will be happy to carry you."

He really must want her gone badly. "No, don't worry, I can walk. I'll be out of your hair soon."

He ran a hand through his hair. "Woman, I don't want you out of my hair. If you need to stay around for a couple more days, that's not a problem."

"But I don't want to be an imposition."

"If I thought you were going to be an imposition, I would have dragged you to the nearest hospital when I found you."

"Why didn't you, anyway?" Astrid remembered she asked him before if he was a doctor, but he never answered her.

"How were you sure I didn't need one?"

"The EMTs said it was okay when you refused to go."

"I could have been bleeding internally."

"You weren't."

"But—"

"Just trust me. They knew you weren't bleeding internally. There was nothing wrong with you but a possible concussion and being banged around some."

"Thank the Goddess I was wearing my seat belt."

"Yes, I have done that quite a few times already."

"Well, whether I am able to take a shower or not, I really do need to go to the restroom for a bit."

"Of course." He came to the bed and pulled the blanket off of her. Ignoring her protests, he reached down, picked her up in his arms, and carried her to the bathroom. He sat her on the edge of the tub and told her to call if she needed any help.

Why was she so weak? Even given the fact she probably hit her head, she shouldn't be this weak. When she was ready, she was able to hobble to the door and open it. Jared swept her up into his arms once again before depositing her on the bed.

"You haven't eaten anything in probably around twenty-four hours. Let's get some food into you, and then see if you are ready to head home, okay?"

Astrid nodded and watched him walk out the door. She should be freaking out, panicking, she knew that. But she wasn't. She had never felt safer in her life.

Jared came back with some scrambled eggs and toast, along with some tea.

"Sorry, I don't have coffee in the place."

"No problem. I prefer tea, anyway." She thanked him and started to eat. She hadn't expected to be able to keep

anything down, but surprised herself when she realized she had eaten everything he had put on the plate for her. She really must have been hungry.

"Why don't you rest a few minutes, and I'll be back in a bit to help you to the bathroom. If you feel like taking a shower then, I'll help you."

Astrid raised an eyebrow at his accidental implication. The images it had running through her head were anything but accidental, and definitely implicating. *Damn*. She had to get her hormones under control. That was reason enough to leave. If she didn't, she'd be jumping his bones within the next twenty-four hours.

Jared proved to be a gentleman. He helped her to the bathroom once again, and turned on the tub for her, pointing out that a bath may be easier for her. He then left her alone to soak away her aches and pains.

He had assured her that the cops had already been called about the accident, and that she could call her insurance agent as soon as she was feeling up to it. She thought about her desire to get home, and realized there was no real need.

She had taken some time off this week as there was nothing pressing at work, and she had the desire to just get away from it all. Last night was supposed to be the beginning of her vacation. *Why not stay here and enjoy it?* He had already extended an invitation to her, and if she were honest with herself, the thought of staying a few days with a sexy, attentive stranger filled her with an almost decadent sense of fun.

He obviously didn't find her disgusting to look at. Maybe this could be fun. That is, if she could ever move on her own.

Astrid changed into the clothes he had left for her. Although there was nothing wrong with his sister's clothes, she just felt better wearing her own. They covered more of her body, at least.

She sighed. Who was she kidding? Here she was fantasizing that the sexiest man she had ever met would be interested in her. *Hell no*. She looked down at her ankle. It seemed to be a bit better. She could probably get around on her own tomorrow. Hell, if she had a pair of crutches she could get around today. Maybe she wouldn't mention that to him.

A knock on the door pulled her attention back to the matter at hand. Staying with a stranger.

"Astrid? Are you alright?"

"Yes, sorry. You can come in."

He must have showered in another bathroom, because his hair was wet, and he looked even sexier than he had before. He had on a button-down shirt that emphasized his large chest and tapered down to that slim waist. Her mouth watered at the thought of those arms holding her again.

Before she could even say a word, he walked in and swooped her into his arms with a smile.

"It's a beautiful day outside, I thought maybe you might like to sit on the porch with me for a bit before the sun sets."

"What time is it?"

"Late afternoon. You slept the entire day away. I figured this would be a nice way to try to fill in some more of the gaps from last night for you."

He walked through the house and placed her on a porch swing before sitting beside her. It was a bit cool out, but he was prepared for that with a small blanket he threw over her to keep her warm.

The house was more of an elaborate cabin, set in the middle of rolling hills, without a neighbor in sight. The view was incredible and she relaxed back into his arms as they started their conversation.

"Okay. Help me out here, please. I don't remember much."

"What's the last thing you remember?"

"I was driving down the road, and something shot across my windshield. I swerved, and saw the car heading off the road." She shook her head. "I don't remember anything after that."

"I was right behind you. I saw you swerve and go off. I stopped the car, and called the cops. The paramedics came and checked you out. They wanted to bring you to the hospital but you refused."

That sounded right. She hated hospitals. Hadn't stepped foot in one since her mother died. There wasn't much in the world that could get her to go into one again. Unless she were unconscious.

"They expressed concern over your head, and I assured them I would keep an eye on you. I gave the cops my name and number if they have to get in touch with you."

"It's so weird that I don't remember any of it."

"It's the bump on the head, and the stress. I'm sure it will come back to you eventually."

"And you just took me in, a complete stranger?"

He didn't say anything for a few minutes. He looked out across the hills, as though searching for an answer. "There was something about you. Even through your confusion last night, we connected. I needed to see if there was something more or if it was just concern over you and your injury."

He was hiding something. She was sure of it, but she didn't know what. She was in the middle of nowhere, he could have hurt her. Hell, he would have hurt her by now if he was going to.

"What something?"

"Excuse me?"

"What do you mean something there? I can't imagine I was a great conversationalist last night, if I was bad off as you say I was. So what do you mean connection?"

Again, he didn't answer right away. He seemed to be debating with himself. Not whether or not to tell her the truth, but how to tell it to her.

"Something physical. I felt pulled to you in a way I can't describe. My body reacted to you before my mind could catch up with it."

She thought back to her initial reaction to him, even before she saw him. She had felt safe, and then aroused. Incredibly aroused by the sound of a stranger's voice. When she had seen him, the sensations had multiplied tenfold. Her body had reacted more strongly to him than it ever had to anyone. And if she were honest, she was still wet now. Just the act of

sitting here beside him, and her nerves were all awake and aware, tingling with his nearness.

Without a thought, she reached up to the back of his head and pulled him closer to her. She needed to know what this was between them. If it was her imagination, his imagination, or if there was something more.

His lips were gentle at first, barely brushing hers before he pulled back to look at her intently. Apparently satisfied with what he saw in her face, he moved back in to deepen the kiss, to claim her as his.

At the touch of his lips, her stomach dropped out and she felt her world spinning around her. She was aware of nothing but him. His lips on her, his hands on the small of her back, pulling her into him.

His taste, natural and sweet. His smell, woodsy and exotic. His feel, hard and gentle all at once. Her lips opened of their own accord, welcoming him into her as he plunged his tongue in, bringing his taste to her.

Sparks shot through her body, making her feel more alive than she had in years as her body awakened at his touch. Her hands wrapped around his shoulders while he pulled her closer to him, his hands on her waist.

They kissed like that for what seemed like hours, oblivious to the world around them, lost in each other.

"Wow," he said after he pulled away from her and held her close to his side.

"You could say that." She gave a nervous laugh. "I guess that answers that question."

"In spades."

"What the hell was that?"

"I have no freaking idea, but I hope it happens again."

Saying that, he seemed to decide not to give either of them the chance to back out of it before he swooped down and took her mouth in his again. His hands roamed her back as hers twisted in his hair. Moisture gathered between her legs when he picked her up and placed her on his lap so she was lying across him.

He hadn't taken off her underclothes last night, and she hadn't put them on after the shower. So when his hand found its way under her shirt, the hot feel of his skin against hers had her gasping against his lips.

He moved one hand around to cup her breast with a moan as he tore his mouth from hers and worked his way to kissing down her neck. She arched into him as he flicked at her nipple with his thumb, sparks shooting straight to her pussy.

Jared pushed up the thin cotton of the camisole and latched his mouth onto her breast, teasing the tip with his tongue. She squirmed on his lap, trying to get as close to him as possible, needing more of him.

The swing moved with them, his legs the only thing keeping it from swinging with force into the wall of the house behind them. Astrid was a bundle of nerves, her body electrified with need, sparking at each stroke of his hands, his tongue.

Finally she managed to get close enough to him to feel his cock through his jeans. She rubbed her ass against him, feeling his hardness. He gasped and brought a hand forward to cup her through the cotton of her pants.

She was so wet it felt as though there were no barrier at all as he stroked and caressed her, the material rasping against her lower lips. That was until he slid his hand under the material and his hand touched her bare pussy.

She jumped, arching into his touch, nearly pulling away from his mouth. His teeth latched onto a nipple as two fingers slid easily inside her. She cried out as he pulled at her, impaling his digits even further within her.

His free hand held her close to him as he sucked on her nipple and pumped her, scissoring his fingers in her canal. His thumb flicked at her clit, and she was lost in the sensation of her sudden climax.

Astrid rode his hand as he stroked her higher and higher, her body pulsating around his fingers.

"I need you. Now." His voice was raspy when he pulled from her breast.

"Yes, please."

He lifted her again, helping her straddle his body. Her foot bumped the swing, but she ignored the sharp twinge. Somehow he managed to unbutton his pants and slide his cock free. Astrid had just enough time to realize how large it was before he pulled her pants down far enough to pause at her entrance.

"Damn. Condom."

"On pill." She was breathless, eager for him to be inside her.

"You sure?" There was concern in his eyes. Concern for pregnancy, yes, but also everything else that can come with unprotected sex.

"I'm clean and I'm on the pill."

"Me, too. Clean I mean. But—"

This time, she was the one to do the interrupting, only she did it by sliding herself over his shaft as her lips met his in a kiss designed to shut him up.

He felt good. Oh so good inside her. He filled her like no other man ever had.

"Oh, sweetheart." His arms wrapped around her, pulling her tight into him before he started moving under her. She grabbed the windowsill behind the swing and held on as he slammed up into her. Her breasts rubbed his face, and he frantically moved to grab one in his mouth as he adjusted his hands to her hips to keep her where he wanted her.

His thumb snaked down to play with her clit as he sucked and thrust, moaning. She let him set the pace, moving with the motion of the swing as the tension built inside her quickly, rapidly bringing her to orgasm. Her body spasmed, tightening around him as she reached climax, quickly followed by his groan as he came inside her.

* * * *

Seconds, minutes, hours later. Astrid didn't know how long it had been, but she slowly became aware of the world around them. Of that fact she had just fucked a complete stranger on his front porch on a swing, where anyone could have seen them. She should have felt shamed, embarrassed, but instead she felt freed.

A giggle escaped her throat, and grew to a full-blown laugh.

Jared said nothing at first, and then a chuckle rumbled through his chest as he joined her in laughter. "Good Gods, I am so glad I have no neighbors."

"That makes two of us." Astrid was suddenly aware of her position. The way she was practically laying on him, her entire weight supported by her knees and his legs. She went to move and realized he was still inside of her.

Slowly, she eased back, letting him pull out of her. She winced when she hit her bad ankle as she tried to turn to sit beside him. Seeing her cringe, he helped her as best he could, and then wrapped the blanket around both of them.

"I feel like I should say sorry, but it is the last thing in the world I want to do." His arm tightened around her shoulders. "I am glad it happened. And I hope it happens again."

"Just next time maybe in a bed?"

He sat up, "Are you okay? Oh, Gods, I didn't even think. You have to be sore from the accident."

Astrid was about to protest that wasn't it, but realized she would be lying. "A little."

"Oh, sweetheart, I'm sorry."

She giggled again. "I thought you weren't gonna say that?"

He growled at her, pulling her tight against him. They sat there like that for a while longer, watching the squirrels and rabbits run around, birds flitting from tree to tree.

And they talked. She told him about her mother and her job as an architect. He told her about the history of the house, and his own family. He came from a large family, six kids in all and he was the oldest.

They continued their conversation as the sun set, talking long into the night. After a while, he made them dinner and they settled inside.

Eventually, Astrid's yawns became too frequent to ignore and he carried her into the bedroom. They lay down together after removing their clothes and snuggled.

In no time at all, she fell asleep with him spooning her body against his, whispering soothing sounds in her ear.

* * * *

Astrid awoke with a need for the bathroom. Looking over at Jared, she saw he was sleeping soundly, and decided to try to make it there by herself. The swelling in her foot had gone down considerably, and she was able to make it with little difficulty.

Feeling better, she decided to take a quick shower before hunting them down something to eat. She was out of the shower, toweling herself off when she heard it. Something from the bedroom. It sounded like screaming. Or yelling. *What the hell?*

She opened the door and saw Jared sprawled across the bed, thrashing around like crazy, yelling something she couldn't understand. She ran to him, towel falling behind her, foot forgotten in her rush to get to him.

Astrid climbed on the bed and grabbed hold of him as best as she could. "Jared! Jared! Wake up!"

Still he thrashed, pushing her off the bed. Undaunted, Astrid tried again. She feared for him. He was likely to hurt

himself if he continued like that. This time, she lay on top of him, wrapping her body around him, avoiding his arms.

"Jared, it's okay." She talked to him in a soft voice, as she would a child. Shushing him into calmness. "Jared, love, it's okay. You're here, with me. Come back to me, Jared. You're okay."

She held on tight, her head pressed against his chest willing him to calm down with all her spirit. Covering him with a white light, she drew calming energy from her own body to give to him.

All the while she soothed him with her voice as best she could.

Gradually she became aware that his thrashing had decreased in intensity, and he was calming down. Whatever terror he had been trapped in was leaving him. His arms tightened around hers as his breathing slowed and he let go of the horror.

"I'm sorry." His voice was little more than a whisper. He stroked her hair while the other hand remained wrapped tightly around her. "Did I hurt you?"

"No. I'm fine."

"Are you sure?"

Astrid didn't want to lie to him, even if it caused him pain. "I was getting out of the shower when I heard you screaming. You knocked me to the floor before I could get close enough to wake you."

He groaned and held her tighter to him. "Oh, Gods. I am so sorry. I never meant to hurt you."

"Want to talk about it?"

He was so still for so long, Astrid wasn't sure if he would say anything, but then it came out. Bit by bit he told her of his time in the military, what it had done to him. What they had done to him when he was captured.

"Do you dream about it often?"

"Every night. I'm lucky if I get more than an hour's sleep at a time. Even with sleeping pills."

Astrid looked at the clock. "You slept for eight hours, Jared."

Shocked, he looked at the digital readout. "By the Gods. I haven't done that in years."

"You must have been exhausted."

"No, it wasn't that." He shook his head as he looked down at her. "I've been more tired. It was you. You're the only thing that was different."

She shook her head in confusion. "What do you mean?"

"You said you left the bed and went and took a shower?"

"Yeah. I wasn't gone more than twenty minutes."

"That was it."

Astrid sat up, cross-legged to face him, foot forgotten. "'Splain, Lucy."

He also sat up, leaning against the headboard to look at her. He took one of her hands in his and concentrated on it as he began his story. "I told you when I saw you that I sensed a connection between us. That something clicked for me that I needed to explore."

"Yeah."

"I went out last night for the first time at night in months. Hell, maybe all year. There was something inside me that was

urging me to get out. It directed me up to the top of one of the hills surrounding this valley.

"In the military I learned to trust my instincts. When I got caught was the one time I ignored them. But last night I had no choice, I had to go.

"I watched the meteor shower, and then headed back home. A different way than I had come. And that's when I saw you swerve off the road.

"When I found you strapped into your car on the side of the embankment my heart jumped in my throat. The light from a final meteor streaked past the window, shining you up like an angel."

He looked up at her, scanning her face. "I couldn't let you go last night. Even if they had insisted you had to go to the hospital I would have followed you. I couldn't believe my luck when I managed to get you to agree to come here."

Laughing at himself, he looked away again. "Listen to me. I sound like a blubbering fool in the throes of a high school crush."

He surprised her when he looked back at her so quickly. "I'm sorry, Astrid. I kept you here for ulterior motives. But please, don't doubt my feelings."

It was Astrid's turn to look away, to not say anything for a few moments. "I don't doubt them. I feel that connection, too. I won't even pretend to understand it, but it's definitely there. Something tells me I need to be here. I need to be with you. That I have a decision to make that could be the most important one of my life."

"And what would that decision be?"

"To stay here with you or to leave."

"Don't decide yet. Give me more time. Give me one more day to show you how much I need you in my life."

"You don't need—"

"Shh." He put his hand against her lips. "Yes, I do. I need to do it for you, and for me."

Astrid nodded slowly. She couldn't refuse him anything at this moment.

Jared tugged at her with the hand that still held hers and she fell forward to him. He caught her and lay her gently on the bed.

He leaned down and kissed her in the middle of her forehead, and then lightly on each eyelid, his lips caressing her with a feather touch. Working his way down her face, he continued his caresses, lips touching gently on hers before moving on.

Astrid's body was on fire with each stroke of his lips. Shivers shot through her as he paid homage to each and every inch of her body. His hands stroked her arms as his lips followed down one, then back up before heading down the other. Her left hand was clasped by his right, fingers interlocked as he kissed each knuckle and fingertip.

Jared took a breast with his lips, playing the nipple with his tongue as it peaked to pebble hardness. He sucked her into his mouth, tasting her as she groaned. His hand tweaked the other nipple, rolling it between his fingers, shooting bursts of sensation down to her core. Moisture pooled as he made love to her as no other man ever had.

The gentle lovemaking continued down her body. She cringed, and quickly moved her hands to cover her stomach. She was confident in every aspect of her life except her body. It was too fat like she had told Jared before. She would rather he just have sex and get it over with.

"No."

His firm voice surprised her when he grabbed her wrists and pulled her hands away from her belly.

"Jared."

"No, Astrid. I want to make love to your entire body. That includes this. It is part of you, and it's beautiful. Just because the fashion magazines tell you that you need to be a size zero doesn't mean all guys like that."

Astrid felt the anger start to bubble despite her desire. "I don't want to be a size zero, dammit, I just—"

"Astrid." He kissed her stomach. "This is beautiful." He kissed it again. "I am not turned off by a well-rounded woman." He kissed it once again. "Now let me make love to you the way I want to, dammit. You're gonna ruin my flow." With that he gave her a small raspberry on her stomach, and then nipped where he had blown.

He ran his hands over her stomach, caressing her each and every curve. Convincing her more than his words tried that he didn't mind her belly. That he accepted her body the way it was. Her anger slipped away as quickly as it had come, leaving her with a sense of acceptance completely new to her.

Finally, he moved down her hips, to her legs. He sat back and took one thigh between his hands and massaged it all the

way to the ankle, rubbing her deeply, and then back up. Her bones turned to mush.

Slowly he worked his way back to the apex of her legs. He slid between them and looked up at her. "Your body tastes of grace and healing, a shining light that befits your name. You call to me like the North Star to a lost sailor."

With that, he lowered his mouth to her core and fed at her. He licked, nipped, sucked her to orgasm after orgasm. Tiny explosions were going off in her head as he continued his honoring of her.

Jared slid two fingers inside her canal as he flicked at her clit with his tongue. He scissored them as he played with her, pumping her. Driving her to climax yet again.

Finally she had to call enough, she was wrung through, and couldn't take it any more. He moved up to cover her body with his as he slid into her, sheathing himself completely.

Her hips moved to meet his as he thrust into her again and again, caressing her from the inside out. Hands never still, his mouth locked onto hers. Her final orgasm, when it came, coincided with his as they crested their passion together.

* * * *

They spent the rest of the day doing things with each other. Talking, playing games, making love. Astrid felt that connection with Jared grow with each passing moment. She had never felt so alive or loved in her entire life.

The next morning after breakfast Jared said he was going outside to chop some wood in the back of the house. He

assured her he would hear her if she called for him before he walked out.

After her shower, Astrid sat on the front porch in the swing they had used yesterday and thought about all he had told her. Tears formed in her eyes as she thought of the love he had bestowed upon her last night. Neither of them had said the word. They had both talked around it. After all, how could one fall in love in twenty-four hours?

Is it truly possible? Can I be his hope? Can I be the one to help him? She looked down at her hands clasped around her mug of tea, and realized this was the decision Aunt Abby had talked about. This was the thing she needed to decide that would change her life forever.

How did one make a decision like this on such short an evaluation? How can I judge my future on one day and night of loving? What if I'm wrong? What if he needs more than I can give?

Astrid stopped her racing thoughts for a minute and tried to focus on herself. On what she wanted. And she realized then what her decision needed to be.

Jared walked out onto the porch at that moment. He must have come through the back door and taken a shower before joining her, because his hair was wet and he was wearing clean clothes.

He sat down beside her with a sigh, looking out instead of toward her. "I know it's a lot to take in in such a short time. To be honest, I am having difficulty with it, too."

"It is a lot."

"It's too much, I know that. I want to tell you I love you, Astrid, but I don't want to scare you away. I feel at peace with you like I haven't since I was young. You make me whole." He turned to look at her. "You complete me."

"Jared. I've made my decision."

She watched as he visibly girded himself for her answer. He must have been hurt a lot in the past to prepare for the worst like that.

"You seem to think I am your hope, that I can bring you peace or relief from your demons. I don't know if I can do that. I can tell you that I, too, feel more complete with you. Just 'more' than I ever have before. I can't imagine being without you again.

"I don't know what the future will bring. I don't know if this is the right choice, or if it will always be the right one. But for now, right now, it's the only choice for me. I need to be with you, I want to be with you."

"Are you sure?" He grabbed hold of her hands.

"If you are."

"I have never been more sure of anything in my life. Will you move in here with me? Or we can spend the week at your place, and maybe weekends here?"

Astrid looked around. She needed to be in the city for work, but she had grown to love this place like it was her own. "Why don't we try that for a while?"

Jared took her into his arms and held her tight and she was inundated with the knowledge that if she had faith in the future, everything would be all right.

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THE TOWER

by

Michelle Hasker

Crystal glanced down at the business card, then back up at the sign hanging above the door. *Abigail Montgomery—fortunes told*. When she met Abigail on a flight back from Cali, Crystal was surprised to learn she was a fortune teller. Abigail had been dressed in a dark blue business suit and wore her hair in a fancy upsweep. From the diamond earrings to the three hundred dollar pumps, Abigail looked nothing like the gypsy woman her business card implied.

Looks didn't really matter, Crystal decided as she pushed open the door and stepped inside. The door closed with a jingle of bells, and a sweet voice called out that they'd be right there.

"It's me, Mrs. Montgomery. Crystal Neuberg. You told me to stop when I was in Philadelphia."

"Oh yes," the voice grew louder and then a gypsy woman stepped out from behind a curtain. "I remember. That was a long flight, wasn't it?"

"Sure was. But at least you kept me from throwing myself out the window."

"Now, now. That gentleman behind you didn't mean to keep kicking your seat."

Crystal sighed and shook her head. "Nah, I just thought I'd come in here to see you before I went to meet my fiancé's family."

Abigail gave her a look she could only interpret as pity before she led Crystal over to a round table covered with a red cloth. It matched the red velvet curtains and the plush red carpet.

"I'm going to give you a free one card reading. The card I draw will tell us about your immediate future. Give me a minute to select the deck I want, please."

"Of course." Crystal rubbed her hands together and sat at the table. "I'm so excited about this reading. Todd is kind of stuck-up so he wouldn't be caught dead in here, but my assistant will be so mad he missed this."

"Why didn't you bring him with you?"

"He went ahead to the house with my bags. He's such a doll, really. I don't know what I would do without him. Of course he and Todd fight like cats and dogs, but when it comes down to it, both men are indispensable to me."

"Sounds to me like you have more in common with your assistant, than with your fiancé."

Crystal laughed and shook her head. "It might seem that way, but Todd and I really connect. He's a sweetheart and he treats me like a queen. He gives me presents all the time and calls me just to say he loves me. Todd is the greatest man on the face of the earth. Alex, well, he's just Alex. He's also Todd's best friend."

"How nice. You're keeping it all in the family so to speak." Abigail came back to the table and sat down. She shuffled the

cards and then set them in the center of the table. "Can you cut the cards, please?"

"Sure." Crystal quickly cut the deck and watched as Abigail picked the top card and flipped it over.

"The Tower." Abigail paused and grew silent.

"That doesn't look so good," Crystal said as she leaned over to look at the card. "I mean fire and brimstones usually mean hell, don't they?"

Abigail drew in a deep breath and looked up. She met Crystal's gaze and held it. "The Tower is actually a good card ... in the end. It foretells misery, distress, indigence, adversity, calamity, disgrace, deception, ruin. This card is about war, destruction, a change. Things that you thought were okay will turn out to be desperately wrong. Someone close to you will turn on you and leave you devastated. Only by this change coming about will the truth be revealed. Things will change for the better, but not until after you face destruction."

"Okay, I so do not like this reading. Can I cut the deck again? Can you try the next card?" Desperate, she reached for them.

"Crystal." Abigail put her hand over the deck. "I'm sorry, hon. This is what your immediate future is."

"But you have to be wrong. My life couldn't be any better."

"It will be even better, but not until after someone you trust betrays you and someone you cannot trust shows you what the true meaning of forgiveness is."

"Okay, all this cryptic stuff is not helping right now. Can you or can you not just read another card? I want a do-over."

"I'm sorry, Crystal, but my reading stands. Please do come back to me for your full reading when the time is right."

"How will I know that? You just said my whole world is going to get turned upside down."

"I know, sweetie. It's a lot to take in all at once, but believe me, it's time for you to come out from the shadows and shine."

* * * *

Crystal put the reading out of her mind. It was obvious Abigail had made a mistake. It could have happened to anyone, but she seemed reluctant to admit it. When she went back for that full reading she could be gracious and give Abigail a second chance. After all, Abigail Montgomery was a nice lady.

After following the directions to Todd's family home, she was shocked to see the size and grandeur of the place. She'd expected a large mansion, but this was more like a castle. Gray stones and stained glass decorated the huge home while wrought iron surrounded the property. A guard at the gate smiled at her, called her by name and told her to go right in.

Damn. How filthy rich is my fiancé?

She followed the long drive up to the house and parked behind a red car. It was now after dinner since she'd wasted a lot of time when she got lost between Abigail's and here. Maybe he'd had to go handle a problem at work.

Since Alex had brought her bags ahead she grabbed her purse, locked up the car, and walked up to the front door. Before she could ring, the door opened and a short round

woman with frizzy brown hair and round glasses smiled at her.

"I'm so glad you finally arrived, Miss Neuberg. The whole family has been expecting you, but Mister Todd told them they had to wait until tomorrow. He was worried and will be glad you got here safely. Are you hungry?"

Crystal allowed herself to be tugged inside while she waited for the zealous woman to finish talking. Apparently the housekeeper wanted to please Todd by welcoming her so enthusiastically. It was a little overwhelming, but she pasted a smile on her face and shook her head.

"When I got lost on Route 1, I stopped for something to eat. If you could just show me to my room so that I can get cleaned up I'd really appreciate it. Is Todd here?"

"I'm sorry, Miss. He had to go see about an urgent matter, but we expect him back any minute now. Please, follow me to your room and then I'll come get you once he gets back."

"That would be perfect, um ... what is your name?"

"Marie. Please, call me Marie."

"Thank you, Marie. I think I might lay down for a few minutes until he gets back then. I want to look and feel my best before I meet his family."

"Oh, don't worry about that, Miss. I'm sure you will win their hearts over immediately."

Crystal blushed and followed Marie up a very wide staircase. She'd been so caught up in the overeager housekeeper that she'd missed checking out the entranceway. Since Marie was walking slowly, Crystal turned around and glanced back down at the foyer. White tiles covered the floor

and huge oil paintings and flowers graced the walls with large urns placed everywhere.

"It's a very impressive house, Miss. But you might want to just pay attention to where we are going. It's very easy to get lost in here. Once..."

With a sigh, Crystal tuned out the housekeeper as she followed the woman down a long hallway past several doors until stopping at the last one on the left. "This is your room, Miss. Mister Todd is across the hall from you, and your assistant is in the room next to you."

"Thank you, Marie. I think I might lay down for a bit."

A moan came from the room as Marie reached for the doorknob. They looked at each other, then Marie opened the door slowly, until they saw two naked bodies on the bed, writhing and moaning.

"Oh. My. God." Crystal's mouth dropped open as she recognized Todd's *derrière*. He had a birthmark that was unmistakable, even from across the room.

"Crystal!" Todd turned and stared at her, horror evident in every feature.

"What are you doing?" she asked, choking on the words as she recognized the other body in the bed. Alex. She made some inhuman sound as she backed up, colliding with Marie.

"It's not what it looks like," Todd said as he pulled out of Alex and stood up.

"Then what the hell is it? I mean you were just *inside* my assistant, Todd. How in the hell is it not what it looks like?"

"It was an accident. A mistake—"

"Our whole relationship was a mistake. You should have told me you preferred men. I thought we were both completely honest with each other. My God, Todd. You are a liar and a cheater and almost an adulterer. Thank God I found out before the wedding. God. I..." She shuddered and backed up again.

An odd numbness settled over her as she watched herself move about as if she was outside of her body. She saw herself grab her suitcases and turn calmly to walk out the door. Todd cried and pleaded, said that his parents wouldn't understand and that it had been a one-time thing to get it out of his system before they were wed.

"You are a liar." Her voice was calm and emotionless as she turned and walked out of the room and out of his house. She climbed in the rental car and drove right to the airport.

Finally, she landed back in Cali and stood near the terminal trying to decide what to do. She hadn't driven to the airport, but wasn't in any condition to be behind a wheel anyway. During the flight, the scene had replayed in her head, over and over like a bad movie she couldn't tear her eyes away from.

"Crystal? What are you doing here in the middle of the night?"

She heard the voice, but didn't recognize it, so pretended she hadn't heard it. The last thing she needed right now was to pretend she was happy. Crystal left the gate and walked toward the exit. She hoped she wouldn't have a long wait for a taxi.

"Crystal! Wait!"

The deep voice registered finally and she recognized its owner, Jason. They'd been close friends until she'd met Todd. The two hadn't gotten along and she'd made a choice she'd thought was the right one. Todd.

She had missed her friendship with Jason, but this was not the right time to rekindle it. Ignoring him again, she passed through the doors and joined the line waiting for a taxi.

"Crystal!" Jason shouted.

He sounded very close, and she knew there was no way she could pretend not to hear him this time. Not when the people around her turned to look at him.

"Jason!" She didn't have to force the smile, but it wasn't a very welcoming one. Judging by the look on his face as he hesitated, as if he wasn't sure of his reception but he caught up to her anyway, and wrapped her in a hug.

His warm embrace and familiar scent wrapped around her like a cocoon, drawing her deep into him where she felt safe. *Safe*. Tears choked her before she even realized she was crying.

"Crystal?" Jason lifted her chin and looked at her, worry creasing his handsome features. His blue eyes flashed as she sniffled and turned away.

"Sorry. I don't know what came over me."

"Are you waiting for a taxi?" he asked as he released her and slid one arm around her waist and took one of her suitcases in the other.

"Yes," she sighed as she dug in her purse for a tissue.

"Let me give you a ride," he said as he ushered her past the line and across the road.

He guided her through the short-term parking to his car. He kept a hand on her at all times until he settled her in the car and closed the door. It wasn't until he released her to climb into the silver SUV that she realized how comforting his touch was, and how much she wanted to feel his arms around her again. She wanted to feel loved, desired, anything but the horrible coldness she'd felt at Todd and Alex's betrayal. Her fiancé and best friend. It was anyone's worst nightmare, but more so hers. She'd given up so much for Todd. She'd slept with him and he wasn't even into chicks. *Oh. God.* She shivered and fought down the tears that threatened to consume her.

"What are you doing?"

"I'm taking you home."

Home. Where is that now?

"Do you want to talk about it? I don't see Todd anywhere, and last I heard you two were engaged. Since he wasn't at the airport I'm going to take a wild guess he's the reason you're crying."

"I don't want to talk about it." She turned to look out the window. Rain began to fall heavily, pelting the windshield. The sound was soothing, and if she concentrated on that instead of the pain tearing at her heart, it didn't hurt as much.

* * * *

"Crystal?"

She sighed as the deep masculine voice enveloped her. Nestling deeper into the warmth, she rubbed her head against the softness cushioning it.

"Sweetheart, you're killing me here."

Peeking through her eyelashes, Crystal looked around. She was in a bed, snuggled under a down comforter. She must have fallen asleep and he'd brought her here, not wanting to wake her. Perhaps he didn't even know where to take her. It'd been months since they'd last talked.

Oh, how she missed those late night talks and cuddling with Jason. He'd been her best friend, and once she'd thought he wanted more. Until Todd had driven a wedge between them.

Right now Jason lay next to her, stretched on the comforter. His erection pressed against his jeans, and she wondered if it was because of her, or if he'd just woken up, too.

Jason was definitely a lover of women, and she'd heard he was good at it, too. She needed someone, something to make her feel desired. Todd had obviously not desired her. He loved men. And she'd been too stupid to notice. But Jason was here, and seemed more than willing. She was already in his bed. Both of them were.

Closing her eyes again, she drew in a deep breath and turned, burying her face against his neck. He smelled so good, like beer and male. He must have had a drink or two after he'd put her in his bed. Perhaps he wouldn't resist if she made a move.

Crystal stretched and felt the soft fabric glide over her skin. He'd undressed her down to her underwear when he put her to bed. Holding back a grin, she wondered what kind of man undressed a sleeping woman and put her in his bed.

"Mmm," she moaned and dislodged the blanket before she curled back up against his chest and nestled her face in his neck once more.

A warm hand cupped her breast and kneaded it as his breathing deepened. With another moan, she arched, pressing her breast into his hand. She must have encouraged him because he shifted next to her, nibbling and sucking on her earlobe.

She moaned, her juices flowing now as he skillfully manipulated her with his mouth and hand. Her damp panties clung to her as he kissed and bit his way lower on her neck. He suckled on the sensitive spot over her carotid. Desire spiked and tremors raced through her as heat shot from her belly to between her thighs. Breathless, she spread her legs, aching for his touch. Tangled in the blanket, she got no satisfaction and growled, one hand fisting in his hair as she tugged his face up so she could kiss him.

Jason met her kiss, his tongue parrying and thrusting with hers. He tasted of beer and chocolate, a sinful decadence. She'd love to pour chocolate on him and lick it off. Secretly, she'd always been impressed with his hard body. *Who wouldn't?* He worked out daily and it showed. Lord, did it show. More moisture pooled between her thighs as she imagined his toned body covering hers, sweat making their bodies slick as they rode a mutual orgasm to completion.

Her pussy twitched, the image bringing her closer to release, and he hadn't even touched her down there yet.

Cool air brushed against her heated flesh and she realized he'd undone her bra. With a sigh, she arched into him again as this time he cupped both breasts and lowered his mouth to draw first one turgid peak, then the other between his lips and sucked on them. Hard.

"Shit." She groaned and bucked at the blankets, trying to pull them off her lower body so he could touch her, pleasure her there.

His tongue flicked at her nipple, then his teeth grazed the sensitive tip before he slurped it into his mouth and suckled. More moisture trickled between her thighs, and Crystal wrapped a leg around him, rubbing against him.

"Mmm. You smell so delicious." He tormented her nipple as he licked his lips, his tongue brushing against the peak and sending more tremors through her.

Kissing his way lower, Jason hesitated only long enough to slide off her damp underwear, then he knelt between her spread legs. His eyes were half closed as he gazed at her shaved mound. Todd's fetish seemed to please Jason as he ran first one finger, then two along her slick folds.

Crystal gasped and moaned as he slowed the movement and dipped one finger just between her folds, then withdrew it. Spreading her legs wider, Jason lowered his head and swirled his tongue around her clit before moving lower and spearing her with it then lapping at the juices that flowed at his manipulations.

"Oh, God." She panted and arched, trying to widen her legs so he could access her easier.

"Oh, yes," he moaned and licked along her wet slit, lapping at her juices and making the sounds of a man enjoying a meal.

Closing her eyes, Crystal threw her head back and fisted her hands in the comforter. Total, unconditional surrender. He could do anything he wanted to her for as long as he wanted. She was going to die and go to heaven. The feelings were so intense she couldn't help the sounds that escaped from her tight throat.

When she bucked under him, his hands pinned her hips in place as he sucked on her clit and gently bit the tiny nub. Crystal shrieked and fisted her hands in his hair as her orgasm swept through her, surprising her with its vehemence. She came and came until she was left panting, and trembling, each stroke and lick from Jason as he feasted on her like a kitten lapping up cream, brought on aftershocks that rippled through her and left her breathless.

Her legs quivered as she stretched them out. Sighing in pleasure, she radiated in the afterglow and wondered if there was more to come or if this had been nothing more than a pleasant dream.

Before she could move, Jason lay down on her and kissed her hungrily. "You make the most erotic noises and you taste so damn good. I have to have you. Now. Say yes, baby, say yes."

It came out as a sigh, but she said yes and nodded her head, wishing she could stay like this forever.

"Oh, yes." His growl made shivers creep up her arms and spine as he placed the head of his cock at her entrance. In one smooth, swift move, he slid all the way in until his balls pressed against her.

Grabbing his shoulders, she dug her nails in and lifted her legs as pleasure surged through her. He filled her so completely she felt stuffed, and still he pressed in deeper. Thick and long, his cock stretched her so utterly and completely she came again with the sheer pleasure of feeling him imbedded so deeply within her.

"Oh, damn." His arms quivered and his body shook as her spasming muscles clenched around him and squeezed.

Slowly, he moved his hips and slid in and out of her slick canal, picking up speed as her inner walls tightened.

"Honey, you feel so good, I can't hold out."

"Come, baby," she said, breathlessly, and wondered at her sudden use of his nickname for her. The thought vanished with one hard thrust.

"Yes, baby, yes," he chanted, sliding in and out, faster and faster, harder and harder as she held onto him tightly.

As he brushed against her sweet spot, she held on as another orgasm began to build. *Is it possible to come so much and so hard?*

"You're so wet, baby. You're drenching me with your sweet, delicious juices. Oh, baby." The last was said on a moan as his body tightened. He grunted as he came, long, and hard, buried deep within her, and triggering her own earth-shattering orgasm. Everything faded to black as he pulled her into his arms and held her close.

Crystal woke feeling sore, disoriented, and thoroughly loved. Her thighs and pussy ached, but in a pleasant way as memories flooded her. Jason, waking her from sleep and making hot passionate love to her. Why had he been able to take her to a place no other male had? Lovemaking with Todd had been pleasurable, but lacking. Now she knew why. Would it always be this pleasurable with Jason?

"Baby?" The soft word, whispered in her ear, sent shivers up her spine.

She smiled and stretched, reaching for Jason, but he wasn't in the bed with her. Opening her eyes, she glanced up at him, confusion clouding her vision. How did he feel about what they'd shared? Was he remorseful and counting the minutes until she left or did he want to try for round two? Oh wait, they'd already done that.

With a groan, she sat up and brushed her hair out of her face. "Sorry to fall asleep on you."

"It's okay. But we do need to talk."

"Talk." She sighed and pulled the blanket up to her neck as she blushed a deep scarlet. "Hell." It came out breathy, and sounded sensual to her, but when she looked up at Jason, his face was a blank slate. No, he looked like he was barely controlling his anger.

"Your cell phone rang while you were asleep. I was afraid it would be an important call, and when I saw it was your mother, I answered."

"Oh?" She swallowed and waited, nervous about what he would say next. What had her mother said?

"Your mother was—is—very worried about you. She said that Alex called her when they couldn't reach you on your cell."

"Alex." Her voice broke as she looked down at the comforter. She picked at it, desperately trying to hold back the tears that wanted to spring forth again.

"Apparently you left them without a word and they were terrified you'd been in an accident or something."

"Okay."

"I told her that I picked you up at the airport, but that you'd fallen asleep so I brought you here. I didn't think you'd want her to know that you were sleeping with three men at one time."

She looked up at him as his words stabbed into her heart like a dull blade. "What?" she whispered.

"I don't even want to know, Crystal. Whatever you do with the two of them is your business, but I don't want to get dragged into this. As soon as you shower and change, I'll take you home."

Her sleeping with three men? A laugh bubbled and she couldn't stop it as it spilled out of her mouth until she was gasping and crying, trying hard not to lose control again, but afraid it was too late.

Jason growled, but climbed on the bed and pulled her into his arms. He enfolded her in a tight hug and held her close until she calmed down.

Finally, she pulled away and wiped her eyes with a tissue from his nightstand. "I'm not sleeping with Alex and Todd. In

fact, I was barely sleeping with Todd." She shivered and couldn't continue.

"It's okay, it's none of my business. I'm sorry if I upset you or accused you falsely. But your mom said something about they both wanted you back, and it sounded as if you were a triad."

"Oh, God." Nausea rose up within her and she jumped out of bed and raced for the bathroom. Her in a ménage with the two of them? It was a shame she had nothing in her stomach because now it pitched and rolled, the acid churning as she fought the icky sensation. "A ménage?"

Crystal gagged and pushed at Jason until he left the bathroom. He stood outside the whole time she was sick, and waited until she was done before he asked if she was okay and if she needed anything.

"I'm fine." It was a lie. Even as she said the words, and heard him walk away to answer his phone, she knew she'd never be fine again. The two men she'd trusted more than anyone else. She'd given up her lifestyle and other friends for Todd. How could she work with Alex knowing he'd been sleeping with her fiancé?

She rose and stumbled into the shower, turning on the cold full force. She stood there shivering under the icy blast of water wishing she could just freeze all these emotions. Or even better, make them go away.

With a groan, she dropped into a ball, and huddled under the spray crying. When Jason knocked on the door she didn't answer. What did she have to say anyway? Wasn't it better for him to think she was in a ménage then to know her fiancé

was gay and using her? And Alex, he'd been her trusted assistant.

"Oh, baby."

Crystal thought she heard Jason, but there was no way he'd have entered the bathroom. But then the water shut off and a soft towel wrapped around her.

"What happened to hurt you so badly?" Jason scooped her in his arms and carried her into the bedroom. He placed her on the bed and climbed next to her. Holding her close, he rubbed her back.

"I'm sorry, Jason. I haven't seen you for months, and then I can't stop crying and blubbering when I do see you. And, um, throwing myself at you."

"Shhh, it's okay, baby. It's what friends are for."

"But we aren't friends. I gave you up when I got serious with Todd. Even if I regretted it from the moment I did it, I did walk away from you without a glance back."

Jason's face darkened. "He might be your fiancé, but I know things about him that I just can't prove."

"Did you know he's gay? Or maybe he's bi, I'm not sure. But he and Alex have been screwing around."

"What do you mean? You have to spell it out. Your mother wasn't very clear, and neither are you."

"Alex was just a friend. I've never kissed him except on the cheek in greeting. Todd, unfortunately, I had the misfortune to sleep with several times. Never very earth shattering either, but I did. When I got to his parents' house and walked into the bedroom they'd assigned me, I found him and Alex on my bed doing the wild thing."

"You caught Todd and Alex having sex on your bed?"

"Well it wasn't at my apartment at least. But damn. I almost married a cheater. And he was cheating on me with a man!" Fresh tears started. She didn't have anything against him being gay, it was him being gay while being with her and marrying her. He could be gay all he wanted as long as he wasn't in her bed pretending to love her.

"That bastard! If he were here I'd kick his ass."

Crystal sniffled and buried her face in his T-shirt. "I just wish we could go back to the way things were before I met him. Before I stopped talking to you. Before I let him dictate my life and tell me what to do."

"It's my fault too, Crystal. I told you it was me or him, and you picked him."

A sob escaped as she buried her face in his neck. If only he could take away all her pain. If only she really could go back in time to when they were best friends again and Todd was an unknown. But after this morning, could they go back? Did she want to? He'd made her feel whole for the first time in her life. She'd been complete and happy. Content. And she wanted that again.

Her hands slid up under his T-shirt, as if on their own accord, and her fingers spread across his pecs.

"Crystal. Baby, I know what you're doing."

"Good, you can cooperate then."

"You're using me to make you feel like a woman. For rebound sex. You are trying to forget about Todd and using me to do it."

Crystal ignored him and got on her knees. She unzipped his jeans, black this time, and reached inside. She pulled his very erect cock from his boxers and gazed at it hungrily as she slid her hand up and down his length.

"Bab—" He broke off on a choked cry as she lowered her mouth and licked the tip. He jumped in her grasp and a small bead of pre-cum glistened on the tip.

"Mmm," Crystal moaned and licked at the drop, savoring his sweet, salty flavor.

"Oh, baby. Please, Crystal. You have to stop. This isn't right."

"Oh please, it's obvious you aren't in a relationship or you wouldn't have made love to me this morning. Twice. Shut up and let me make you feel like a man."

He laughed, then groaned as she drew him deep into her mouth and throat. He was all silky smooth skin and hard as steel, yet as tasty as a decadent desert. He made Todd look like a fumbling teenager and made her feel like a passionate, sex-starved woman.

"I want you to come in my mouth. I want to drink every last drop of your cum as you shoot it deep in my throat. I want to hear you shout my name as I milk you dry, and I want to feel you shudder under my touch."

"Crystal!" he gasped, then moaned and lifted his hips, thrusting his cock deeper in her mouth.

She hummed as she drew his thick length in and out of her mouth. She grazed her teeth along the sensitive tip and was rewarded with a loud, breathy moan. The sounds he made were enough to make her so wet her desire dripped down her

thighs. She wondered if he could make her orgasm with his voice and sounds alone.

With a moan she sucked him in her mouth, then pulled him out with a pop. "Take off your pants." She panted as she waited, greedily eyeing his gorgeous cock as he wriggled out of his jeans and boxers. She almost whimpered when he slid the cotton over it, but then he sprang back out and she leapt on him, sucking him in deeply and cupping his heavy balls with her free hand.

She worked him with her mouth and hands. As he drew closer to his orgasm his balls tightened and he moaned her name, his breaths coming in quick, shallow gasps.

"Baby, I'm going to come."

"Good," she said, then sucked him fiercely.

He came with a roar, and shouted her name as his cum filled her mouth. She swallowed, moaning and licking him as he trembled. Feeling the aftershocks rumbling through him, she drew his whole length inside her mouth while it was softening, and delighted in his guttural groan.

He tugged her up so he looked into her eyes. "Damn, baby. That was incredible."

"Thanks." She smiled and sighed, dropping her head onto his chest.

As she dozed off, she wondered what it would be like to have a relationship like this with someone. To be able to find a man she could trust, though? Not likely to happen after this.

* * * *

She woke abruptly to the feel of a tongue sliding over her clit. "My God!" she gasped and bucked.

Jason held her tightly, pinning her to the bed as he continued his assault, licking and sucking on her like she'd done to him earlier. Writhing and moaning under him, she curled and uncurled her fists in the comforter.

"Jason. Jason. Jason!" She increased in pitch and volume as he licked the whole length of her slit, then dipped his tongue inside before returning to nibble on her clit. She'd never suspected oral sex could feel this exhilarating, and she didn't want it to end.

When he slipped a finger inside, she clenched around him, sucking him in deeper. He crooked his finger and pressed on her sweet spot.

"Damn," she cursed, breathless, as she arched.

Jason added another finger and repeated the action. This time she was prepared, and still arched off the bed, trying to press down on his hand.

"Jason," she whispered his name, repeating it over and over as she moved her head from side to side.

He added a third finger and thrust in deep, crooking his fingers and rubbing her just the right way to make her climb to the edge quickly, but he didn't let her go over.

"So close," she whimpered, breathless. "So damn good."

Jason continued his torment until she barely understood the things she moaned and whispered. One constant thought raced through her mind. *Completion.*

"Please, Jason. Please."

"I love the way you say my name, and the way you beg. I never thought I'd have you in my bed, and I'm not going to waste the chance to show you all that you mean to me."

Crystal blinked and tried to focus on him, but she kept seeing two of him. *What had he said? What did it mean?*

"I'm going to love you right."

Before she could ask what he meant, he was sliding in, filling her again. Slowly he slid out, then back in. Over and over, his movements didn't change in pace or strength. Crystal hung on the edge of a precipice and didn't know how to get him to do what she wanted.

"Please," she begged, the words to ask for what she wanted escaping her as he slid in a touch deeper. With a gasp she rose up to meet him.

"No. Gentle this time," Jason said as he met and held her gaze.

She trembled under him, her need so great that she wanted to snap at him, take control and flip him over so she could ride him like she was meant to.

"Sweet Crystal." His hands slid up her sides, sending shivers skittering up her back. A moan was all she could manage as he shifted a little and slid in even deeper.

"Jason." She growled and wrapped her legs around his waist. Crystal dug her fingers into the bed and thrust up, trying to force him to pick up the pace or at least make him thrust harder.

He tried to pull back until she whimpered and tightened around him.

"Please," she gasped, looking up at him with tears in her eyes. If she didn't come soon she'd scream, or worse. "God, Jason. Please."

Something in his face changed, and his expression grew darker, more sensual. He moved so he was on his knees, and he tugged her bottom up so she was partially on his lap. His thrusts increased in speed as he slammed into her.

The sound of wet flesh striking wet flesh sounded in her ears and added to her desperation. Crystal clawed at the bedspread, gasping and moaning as he drove in harder and harder, deeper and deeper until she shattered, like broken glass, her scream piercing the air.

A ringing sounded next to her, and it took a moment to realize it was her phone. With a sigh, she looked at Jason who was still seated deep inside her, his cock twitching with impatience as he waited for her to decide.

She looked at the caller ID and frowned. "It's Todd."

"Answer it," Jason growled. "And remember who it is that's buried balls deep in your deliciously tight sheath."

Crystal swallowed and answered the phone. "Hello," she stuttered.

"Crystal, thank God. I've been trying to reach you for the past twenty-four hours."

"You mean after you finished screwing Alex, right?"

The sarcasm in her voice was clearly evident to even thick-headed Todd because he said, "I'm sorry you found out this way, but I'm not really gay."

"You're not really gay?" She ended the question on a gasp as Jason withdrew, then slid back in. "How can you say that when I caught you red-handed?"

"I have had this odd attraction to Alex, and when I realized he felt the same toward me, we decided that if we did it just this once, and got it out of our systems, then I'd be able to marry you without it hanging over my head. Without wondering."

Jason took his finger, and slid it in her canal, wetting his digit before he pulled it out and placed it on her clit. She held her breath in anticipation and missed the rest of what Todd had to say.

"What?"

"I said that I want you to fly back out here at my expense. Let's get this straightened out right now. I don't want to cancel the wedding. I still love you and want to marry you."

Jason growled and pressed his finger on her clit, rubbing it and pinching the sensitive nub.

"Still want me?" she repeated while fighting back a moan.

"Are you okay, Crystal?"

"Yes, God, yes," she moaned and moved with Jason, trying to draw him in deeper.

"You don't sound like yourself. In fact, I think we should get on a plane and come out there right now."

"No!" she gasped.

Jason froze and stared down at her.

"Don't stop," she begged, the tension building with each passing second as his cock twitched inside her.

Jason grinned and began to move again.

"Don't stop what? I am definitely coming home now."

She could hear Todd and Alex talking in the background, but she couldn't concentrate anymore. Jason was rubbing her clit and sliding in and out, faster and harder now.

Crystal moaned and dropped the phone on the bedspread. Jason rocked and rubbed against her, his balls slapping against her as she tried to rise and meet his thrusts.

"Yes, God, yes," she whimpered, and looked up at him. She met his gaze and held it as the sound of Todd calling her name came from the phone.

"Answer him," Jason hissed as he gave her the phone back.

"I can't." Her hands trembled as she fumbled for the phone. "What do you want, Todd?"

"I want you back, sweetheart. I never meant for this to happen. It was a one-time thing. Now that I got it out of my system..."

Jason plunged deep in her core, and she shattered, screaming as she came apart at the seams. Over and over, her aftershocks shook through her body. As she tried to catch her breath, she heard Jason pick up the phone.

"Todd, you had your chance and now she's mine." Jason looked down at her.

Fear, wonder and hope filled her at his words. *What is he talking about? This is just a one-night stand, isn't it?* He was just showing her that she was desirable.

"Jason?" She hated that her voice quivered, but she couldn't help it.

He disconnected the phone and tossed it across the room. With a few more thrusts, he came deep inside her, then dropped onto the bed and pulled her into his arms. "I don't think he'll be bothering you again. Not now that he knows without a doubt that you belong to someone else. His pride will keep him from coming after you."

"Was that what this was all about?" she asked. His words and actions confused her.

"Of course. I know that you could never love me. I know that you were just using me to make yourself feel better. To feel desired and loveable."

When the doorbell rang, he pulled out of her. As he tugged on a pair of pants he turned away. "That's the dinner I ordered. I'll be right back and we can talk some more."

Crystal made sure that when he came back she was in the shower. As they ate, she watched him for a sign, but he wore that expressionless mask again. "Jason."

"I know you used me for sex and to help you get over this incident. It's okay. I forgive you. Besides, you were spectacular in bed. I'll help you in this department any day, baby."

She choked as he took a bite of his pizza. Had he just said he was okay with her using his body and that she could use him anytime she liked?

"I used you and you don't care?"

"Nope. It's fine. I understand. I forgive you. But can you forgive Todd so he can get over his guilt and be with Alex? I've seen the way the two of them looked at each other. Last year it was all I could do to keep from pointing it out to you. I

told myself you would figure it out. I was afraid I'd have to show up at the wedding and put a stop to his game."

"Why do I need to forgive him?"

"Because as long as you hold that anger against the two of them, as long as their betrayal still hurts you, you will never move on."

Forgiveness. The fortune teller's words rang in her ears. Abigail had been right. She'd been betrayed and devastated. If Jason hadn't found her at the airport who knows what she'd be doing right now? Probably drinking herself into a stupor.

"He should suffer for what's done to me."

"Crystal, baby. Things wouldn't have gone down like this if the two of you had been in love."

"I do love him."

A shadow crossed Jason's face but was gone so quickly she must have imagined it.

"Baby," he whispered as he shook his head. "The man is gay. I hate to be the one to break this to you, but his sexual preference isn't going to change. And if you really loved him, how could you sleep with me? Repeatedly? And while on the phone with him. I don't think he's ever given you as much pleasure in bed as I gave you today. Can you tell me I'm wrong?"

Crystal opened her mouth to tell him he was, but then she realized he was right. She closed her mouth and swallowed loudly. If she loved Todd, she couldn't have made love to Jason. At least not repeatedly. The sensations, the way she felt so comfortable, the feeling that she'd finally come home.

It was all so clear to her now that he was basically kicking her out of his house.

"Jason. I..."

His phone rang. He checked the caller ID. "It's your mother. I gave her the number because she was so worried about you."

"Talk to her for a minute, please." Crystal smiled as she grabbed a napkin and wiped pizza grease off her fingers.

Jason sighed, but leaned back against the sofa and turned on the phone. "Hi, Mom. I know you're worried, but she'll be okay."

Crystal crawled forward and unbuttoned his jeans. As she worked his zipper down, he looked at her with wide eyes. He shook his head and pointed to the phone. *Your mother*, he mouthed.

Ignoring him, Crystal tugged him free. His erection sprang out of the opening, standing tall and proud, and looking oh so utterly mouthwateringly good. Leaning down, she licked at the head, then swirled her tongue around the tip.

Jason groaned and gripped the phone tighter. "She's upset at Todd's betrayal. Catching him with another guy didn't help."

Crystal drew him deeply into her mouth until he hit the back of her throat. She sucked on him, gently squeezing his balls with her free hand as the other rubbed the base of his cock.

"Yes, Mom. I'll take care of her." It came out squeaky, and Crystal giggled, the sound vibrating on his shaft and eliciting a low moan from him. "I can't talk right now."

He grew quiet and Crystal glanced up at him. He started laughing, so she hesitated, unsure whether to continue or not.

"Sure. I'll have her call you back when she's done sucking me off."

Crystal gasped and reached for the phone, but was too slow. He turned it off and tossed it across the room. He tackled her in one swift move, pinning her underneath him. "I don't know what stunt you're trying to prove, but you will finish what you started."

"It would be my pleasure," Crystal purred as he slid off her shirt and attacked her pants. "And afterwards I'll make you pay for that comment you made to my mother. I can't believe you said—"

"Mmm," Jason moaned as he latched onto her nipple and sucked it into his mouth, leaving her to gasp, and her sentence unfinished. "I love these rosy, pert nipples, and the way your body responds not only to my touch, but my words."

His other hand worked his way down to her pussy and he thrust three fingers in deep. Crystal cried out and arched against him.

"What a shame we can't do this anymore," he said as he withdrew his fingers, and released her.

"What?" Crystal panted as she grabbed his shoulders.

"What are you talking about? Why are you stopping?"

"I refuse to let you use me any more. I know I said I forgive you, and I do, but I just can't keep letting you use my body this way."

"Use you?" Crystal growled and climbed onto of him, pushing him down as she mounted him. She sank on him, taking him in deep. As he slid inside she couldn't fight the sigh and the warmth that spread through her. "My God."

She moaned and sat still for a minute, her eyes closed as she savored the moment, and the feel of him.

"Please don't," she said as she opened her eyes and met his gaze. "I don't know why, but I need you, Jason. I ... I've never felt this way before and I don't want it to stop."

She looked back up at the ceiling as she began to move on him. Jason grabbed her hips and moved with her, thrusting in deeply. She tightened around him, her body already quivering as tiny darts of pleasure shot through her body.

"I ... I ... Oh, God!" she screamed as she came, and came, and came. Her body shuddered its release, her inner muscles clenching around him, squeezing an orgasm out of him which sent her rocketing over the edge again.

Breathless, she collapsed on him, panting and fighting back tears. "Please, Jason. Don't send me away."

"I won't be your plaything. I don't want to be your rebound relationship." He cupped her face in his hands and looked into her eyes. "I love you, Crystal. I always have. It's why I couldn't stand to see you with Todd. I was willing to wait for you, but I couldn't stand to see you with him."

"Love? You love me?" Tears welled and slipped down her cheeks. "After the way I treated you?"

"Shh, baby. I gave you the ultimatum. I knew you weren't ready, but Todd was too slick and he snapped you up."

"I went to him because of that damned ultimatum. Oh, Jason." She dropped her head onto his chest and cried louder.

"I know you don't love me, Crystal. But if you are willing to give me a chance, I'd like to try and win your love."

"I do love you," she whispered. He stilled underneath her. She lifted her head and met his gaze again. "I just didn't know this warm fuzzy feeling, the sense of coming home that I feel with you, I didn't know that was love."

Jason sighed, then grinned and pulled her close for a devastating kiss.

"Forget forgiving Todd and Alex, I'm going to thank them. If they hadn't slept together, I'd never have come home."

Jason wrapped his arms around her. "I'm never letting you go again."

"Thank God." She sighed and dropped her head onto his chest. "Ready for another round?"

"With you? Always."

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS

As far back as she can remember, Tina has been writing but 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 having lived various places across the country. At present she lives in the Midwest with her husband and demanding cat. You can visit her at www.tinabendoni.com.

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.

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