



TAROT CARD ANTHOLOGY: **SYNCHRONICITY** VOLUME THREE



Michelle Hasker
Tina Bendoni



Whiskey Creek Press

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Tarot Card Anthology: Synchronicity Volume 3
by Tina Bandoni, Michelle Hasker

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VOLUME 3

by

Tina Bandoni & Michelle Hasker

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WHAT THEY ARE SAYING ABOUT

WITCHY WOES: TAMARA

"Ms. Hasker's writing is both fast-paced and descriptive; even though the story is short the reader is given the impression of much lengthier tale. I appreciated the fact that the scenes describing the coven's meetings were just as detailed and vivid as the love scenes. I thoroughly enjoyed this book, and look forward to the next installments with great anticipation..."

Mickey

Simply Romance Reviews

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DARK GOD OF BELTANE & SHEILA'S SURRENDER

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"Tina Bandoni has done it again with a sensual but awe-inspiring story in her book *Dark God of Beltane*. It is about how now matter how long it takes true love to find you it soon will. This is a whimsical story you are sure to enjoy. With the true intensity that only Tina Bandoni can bring you."

Sheila's Surrender by Michelle Hasker

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Tarot Card Anthology: Synchronicity Volume 3
by Tina Bendon, Michelle Hasker

Deb

Sensual Reviews

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Christmas Candy Anthology

Celtic Love Knots Volume 1

Celtic Love Knots Volume 2

Tarot Card Anthology—Synchronicity Volume 1

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Dedication

From author Michelle Hasker:

To Cynthia—Hope you enjoy your story

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THE SUN

by

Tina Bendoni

"The Sun. An interesting card. You have a very positive time ahead of you, my dear."

Eliana Thomas watched the fortune teller as she pursed her lips. "I've always been told the Sun is a sign of positive things in your life."

The woman smiled. "You're right, it is. It is also a sign of strong masculine energy." She pointed to the young man standing in front of the sun. "The sun god. In your case, I see much ahead of you that is positive. Have you recently graduated or gotten a promotion?"

Eliana furrowed her brow. "Yeah, I graduated from grad school last May. I just got my first job."

"I do see such wonderful things in your future. Many of your goals and dreams are about to be fulfilled, perhaps some you didn't even realize you had."

Eli smiled. Dreams she didn't realize she had? Well if they were about to be fulfilled, that sounded nice.

"Your life is looking up. A new career, health, and you're beautiful to boot. What could you possibly want to see a fortune teller for?"

Eliana snorted. "You don't have to pay me empty compliments. You're getting paid regardless of what you tell me."

"I don't lie, young lady. Do you not feel you are beautiful?"

"Oh, I have no problems with my looks. I like myself just the way I am. But I do know that I don't fit most people's idea of beauty, and that's okay with me. I just didn't want you to feel the need to flatter me for a tip."

"Never." The woman's smile was so sincere, that Eliana believed her. "In fact, young child, this card tells me that you're in for a surprise or two from someone very close to you. Perhaps a male?"

Eliana laughed. "Is this where you tell me I will meet a tall, dark and handsome stranger?"

The woman smiled. "No. Sorry, my dear. I can promise you that I see nothing about a tall, dark stranger in your future."

"Oh well. I guess I can't have everything, can I?"

* * * *

"What did you see her for?" Eliana looked up at Paul and shook her head at his question. They had been friends for years, but sometimes she just didn't get the man. He could be so nice, and then sometimes almost disparaging.

"Paul, it's for charity. It was a bit of harmless fun." Eliana gestured to the entire Green Earth Fair.

She watched his scowl grow before finally having enough and tugging him down to her. At his six feet two inches and

her five foot two inch frame she couldn't reach his face easily unless he made an effort for her.

Still frowning, he bent down and she reached out to his face to wipe the scowl away. "Stop being a shit."

His eyebrows shot up. "Excuse me?"

Eliana placed her hand on her best friend's mouth and told him, "You heard me. Now behave." She kissed him on the cheek gently, as a friend. Because that's all they were, and all they would ever be.

Looking at him though, she lost herself in his eyes like she always did. They had known each other for almost ten years and she had lusted after him that entire time. But with thick black hair, a perfect body and a face more handsome than a Greek god's, Eliana knew she had no hopes of ever attracting him as more than a friend.

So she lusted after him from afar and watched him date thin sophisticated bimbos while she worked her ass off to get her graduate degree. And took any pitiful crumbs he sent her way.

The moisture on her finger brought her back to the present with a snap. Paul had sucked her fingertip into his mouth. Her body reacted instinctively, her nipples hardening in anticipation and desire.

"Eeew!" She pulled her hand away, shaking it and then brushing it dry on her jeans. If he only knew that she wasn't really grossed out by his actions—she was so turned on she was ready to jump his bones. What she wouldn't give to have him sucking on a more intimate part of her.

Knowing those thoughts were pointless, she started walking, only stopping when she realized he wasn't beside her anymore. She turned to look at him and saw something on his face she had never seen before. If she didn't know better, she'd think it was lust. In fact, it seemed so likely that she turned around and checked behind her to see who put that expression on his face. But there was no one there. No one for him to be sending that heated gaze to.

Shaking her head, deciding that she was imagining it, she held her hand out to him, waiting for him to join her. She didn't know what was going on in that head of his but she wasn't going to make a big deal out of it. She was Paul's friend, and would take him any way she could get him.

"Come on, slowpoke. You promised me dinner, and I'm starving."

She could have sworn she saw his eyes narrowing even from over ten feet away. *What the hell was going on in that head of his?*

He strode toward her with purpose in his step before joining her and grabbing her around the waist with one arm, leading her out of the convention hall.

"What do you want to eat?"

"Chinese, of course."

"Of course."

* * * *

"Please pass the salt."

Eliana watched Paul as he licked the back of the spoon. Her pussy clenched as she envisioned him licking her like

that. His lingering gaze had her squirming in her seat as she wondered if he knew where her thoughts had headed. Hell, her thoughts hadn't left there ever since he'd sucked on her finger.

Damn him. If he knew the effect he was having on her, she was going to kill him. It just wasn't fair. He could have anyone he wanted, why did he have to torture her like this? She was supposed to be his friend.

Eliana forced herself to close her eyes. He couldn't know what he was doing. If he knew how much she wanted him, he'd be running in the opposite direction as fast as he could.

Opening her eyes, she saw him watching her intensely.

"What?"

"What, what?"

"Dammit, Paul, why are you doing that?" she asked as she handed him the salt.

"Doing what?"

"Looking at me as though I was something to eat and you were starving."

"Hmmm, well there are lots of things in this restaurant that are worth eating." His hand had grasped hers, and hadn't let go yet. He brushed the inside of her wrist with his thumb. Shivers ran through her body, moisture pooling at her core.

Fuck.

"Stop that." Eliana tugged at her wrist, and was almost surprised when Paul let her go. This kind of teasing was new. He had never treated her as anything other than a friend.

Why the sudden flirting?

"We still on for tonight?"

His demeanor changed entirely. Gone was the confusing sexy Paul from just a second ago. Suddenly her best friend of the last five years was back.

"Yeah, unless you want to change your mind."

"Hell no, I'm looking forward to it." The thrill that went down her spine at his words worried her more than his words warranted.

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Eliana looked up at Paul's front door. *What the hell am I doing here?* Yeah, fine, they'd been best friends for years and going to his place for movies was something they did every once in a while. But things were different now. Something had changed today, and she had no idea what.

"Are you gonna sit out there all night or are you coming in?"

Eli started at the sound of his voice. He had come up to her car and she hadn't even noticed it. Thank God it was only him. But as she opened the car door and climbed out, practically right into his arms, she began to wonder about her safety, or at the very least the safety of her heart.

The hug lasted longer than it had any right to, and his hands traveled up and down her back, sending those same shivers from earlier through her body. By the time he pulled away from her she was wet and quivering in need.

He kept his arm around her until they got inside and he had her seated on the couch.

"I thought something different tonight."

Eliana glanced up at Paul as he looked through the DVDs he had piled on the TV.

"Can we turn the AC down, please?" It was suddenly feeling very hot in his place, and she didn't think the unseasonable heat wave had anything to do with it.

"Nope, sorry, thermostat's stuck. The repairman will be here Monday." He bent down to put one of the DVDs in the player. Eliana caught her breath. Damn she loved that ass. It

was all she could do to keep from grabbing it anytime he turned it to her.

Eliana fanned herself. It really was hot in here. Good thing she'd worn a tank top under her shirt. Well, more of a camisole, but Paul had seen her in it before, why she should be worried about it now was beyond her.

Her nipples puckered at the thought of his lustful gaze from earlier raking over her in only her light top. Oh, God, she needed to get her body under control. And fast. She walked to the TV and started sorting through the videos he had selected for the night.

"9 1/2 Weeks? Wild Orchid? Blue Velvet? Unfaithful?"

"What?" Paul turned and looked at her innocently.

"What is this? Kinky sex night?" As soon as the words came out of her mouth, she regretted them.

The corner of his lip twitched up. "Why? Worried?"

She was never going to survive tonight, she just knew it. She was in trouble.

* * * *

God damn thermostat. How the hell could it possibly be getting hotter in here? Eliana curled her bare feet under her body and forced herself to watch more of the movie. Normally she wouldn't have a problem watching a young Mickey Rourke, but tonight he was giving her way too many ideas. She'd been here little more than two hours and already she was stripped down to her camisole. And she knew it wasn't just the ambient heat that had her sweating. Paul had also

changed and was wearing a form-fitting tank top. It left his gorgeous biceps bare to her gaze.

She knew she was strange, but a man's biceps were just as arousing to her as six-pack abs and a tight ass. Paul worked out regularly, and it showed in every bit of his body.

It didn't seem to matter how much she worked out, though, she was never going to be able to get rid of the extra twenty-five pounds she carried. And she had accepted it. At least she thought she had. Until tonight.

God, what she wouldn't give for one night with him. Just one night of hot monkey lovin'. After that, they could go back to the status quo. Him boffing everything in sight, and her lusting after him from afar.

Paul lounged beside her, spread out as though to catch any errant breeze that may come through the house. Suddenly he stood up and walked to the kitchen. "I'm getting another drink, you want anything?"

"Sure, water could be great," she called out to him. She needed something to cool her down. But she knew a glass of water wouldn't do it. Maybe if she dove into the Atlantic Ocean that would help, but she doubted it.

Eliana's jaw dropped. Paul stood there in the doorway to his kitchen. He'd taken off his shirt, and had a tall glass of ice water that he ran over his hard, wide chest.

His nipples perked as the cold glass passed over them, making her gasp. She watched as a rivulet of water trickled down his chest, over his six-packs abs, and down into his jeans. She forced herself to breathe despite the fact she was

eager to follow the trail of the water. Follow it with her eyes, hands and mouth.

The look on his face had her melting in place. There was no mistaking it this time, that gaze was filled with lust and desire, and it was aimed straight at her.

Her mouth went dry as he approached her slowly, kneeling on the couch beside her. Smiling, he put the glass down on the end table before fishing out an ice cube and holding it to her lips. Instinctively she reached out for it with her tongue, licking the drip of water that was about to fall off its lower edge.

The sharp intake of his breath was audible as she licked her lips, suddenly more nervous than she had ever been in her life.

He took the ice cube and brushed it against her lips, teasing her with it. Her breath came in sharp, quick puffs as her pulse quickened. He dragged the cube over her chin, down her neck, his eyes locked onto hers the entire time. His gaze burned through her, straight to her heart.

"You looked a little hot, my love. I thought I would help cool you down." His voice was husky with what she would have sworn was desire, but he had never shown a hint of it before today. *Why now?*

The cold cube melted against her hot skin, the trickles of water competing with the frigidity of the ice for her attention. He ran it across her collarbones, allowing more water to run down her skin.

Her breath came faster as she watched his eyes follow the path of his hand. His gaze was hot enough to burn her

through to her soul. Her hand went up to cup the back of his neck, running her fingers through his hair.

He darted his eyes up to her face for an instant, and she was speared with the desire in them.

"Eli, please. Don't ask me to stop."

Ask him to stop? Is he fucking kidding? What made him think she would be crazy enough to ask him to stop? She'd wanted this for too long to call a halt to it now. Even if it was just the heat of the night, she wanted whatever he would give her.

She said nothing, just shook her head minutely.

Paul's gaze went back to his hand as he lowered it to the swell of her chest. Wet streaks ran down her camisole, the silk material sticking to her skin. Slowly he ran the cube down the slope of her cloth-covered breast, to her already perked and waiting nipple.

Once again she caught her breath as he rubbed the ice over her nipple, watching it intently as it peaked diamond-hard.

With a groan he tossed the ice across the room before grabbing her by the waist and pushing her down on the couch. His body covered hers as his mouth grabbed hold of her nipple.

Sparks shot through her body as his tongue teased her through the material, flicking at her hardened bud as his hand paid attention to its twin. Her body was aflame, blood coursing through it like molten lava.

Paul nipped at her peak one more time before looking up to her. Confusion filled Eli, fighting with her desire. She'd

thought she could do this without any repercussions, but she wasn't so sure now. She understood none of this.

Paul kept her from asking the question that was on the tip of her tongue with the touch of his lips against hers.

Eli sighed, happy as a child on Christmas morning as all her wishes were answered with that one kiss. Her body felt the kiss all the way to her toes, as heat enveloped her, goose bumps prickling all over her body.

Eli had known she was not only in lust but in love with Paul for at least the last three years. Every time she saw him her heart beat faster and her temperature spiked. There was something about him she found addictive and which created a need in her that she had been unable to quench with any man or toy.

Just with this one kiss, she felt the wait worthwhile. He caressed her lips with his, soothing that need, promising more. His tongue stroked across her lips, and she opened eagerly to allow him in. He slid his tongue across hers, caressing her. She tasted the popcorn and soda they'd been eating while watching the movie. Mixed with his distinctive taste, Eliana felt as though she were consuming ambrosia.

One of his hands wrapped around her neck to tangle in her hair as he kept her head still, her lips against his. Oh hell, there was no way she was moving away from this.

His tongue dueled for supremacy with hers. Darting in and around, tasting every bit of her. The moan that started in her throat grew as his other hand continued to play with her breast, his thumb flicking at her nipple.

With a shock to her system, he quickly pulled away from her, only to continue his kiss down her jawline, to her neck, and her shoulders. Stopping where neck met shoulder he licked and nibbled there, the same spot he had discovered was ticklish when they had wrestled in the past.

She hissed as he as he hit the right spot and shivers ran through her body. His hands stroked her as he moved them quickly over her.

"God, Eli, I have wanted this for so long. I need this, baby."

"What?" *Shit, what was he saying?* Had he said what she thought he had?

His hands, meanwhile had found the bottom of her camisole and snuck their way under the material before starting their way up her stomach. She inhaled sharply as they continued moving over her body up to her breasts.

It didn't matter that he had just been playing with her breast through the camisole, she needed that skin to skin contact. Thank God she hadn't worn a bra. Who cared what he said, what he meant? All she cared about right now was what he was doing to her body.

He stopped his upward movement just before reaching her breasts. His thumbs stroked the underside of them, feather light touches that wormed their way to her soul. She arched into him, eager for more, and when he grasped her breast, she shot straight to heaven.

Paul kept nibbling at her, sucking at her neck, her shoulders, marking her as he played with her breasts, teasing her nipples harder and harder. He tweaked one between his

fingers, pulling it in a sharp tug that had her writhing in desire. Eli's nails dug into his shoulders as he laved her body with attention.

Quickly he moved his head to a breast and took the pert tip into his mouth. The wet heat of his mouth made her gasp again, all breath sucked from her body. And then he started sucking.

Sensations ran from her nipple, shooting into her body, her head exploding as he suckled at her. The sharp bite of his teeth did it, though. Her body arching and twisting, Eli had her first orgasm from nipple contact alone.

"Oh my God!" she screamed, digging her nails deeper into his skin.

She heard him chuckle against her breast as he licked the abused nipple gently. His left hand worked its way down her torso to the waistband of her cotton pants.

Normally when she came to Paul's to watch movies, she wore loose, casual clothes. Something she could sleep in if it warranted, because they had both fallen asleep on the couch more than once. It hadn't even occurred to her to wear anything different tonight, despite the strangeness of the day.

Now she was beginning to doubt if that was a wise choice as he played with the drawstring at her pants. Or maybe it was the wisest choice she could have made.

She felt the tug as he untied the little bow holding her pants tight to her waist. Slowly his hand moved into her pants as his mouth moved to the other breast to drive it as crazy as he had the first.

Eliana was wetter than she had ever been in her life, a fact Paul discovered as his fingertips reached her soaked underwear and he stroked her lips through the material. Eli's hands ran through Paul's hair, her head moving back and forth as he pushed his way into her panties and stroked her nether lips with a finger.

Oh God. He pulled his finger out and she sighed in disappointment. Until he slid his entire hand under the waistband and cupped her core. Immediately, one finger dipped between her lips to graze across her clit. A puff of breath escaped her lips as he pressed down gently but firmly on the bundle of nerves.

Time stood still for Eli as she felt his hand explore her pussy. Fingers spread her lower lips so he could reach her clit and her wet entrance. Her body sucked him in as he slid one finger slowly inside her. Her inner muscles tightened on his digit eagerly.

"Paul." His name came out shakily.

"Eli," he responded in kind, blowing her name across her chest. Suddenly, he grasped the bottom of her shirt and tore it over her head. Before she was aware of what he was doing, he managed to tug her pants and underwear off, too. Her shoes and socks she had discarded shortly after arriving.

He leaned over her, gazing at her body. Instinctively she went to cover herself, but he growled as he grabbed her arms and held them to her sides.

"Paul, please."

"No. Dammit, woman. I have waited a lifetime for this. I am going to get my fill."

Before she could get too uncomfortable under his stare, he positioned himself between her legs, head at her core.

She gazed down at him with surprise as he stroked her lips with one finger.

"You are so wet here." His finger delved into her cleft to cover itself in her moisture. She gasped unable to answer him.

"I never knew you were so responsive before. That you would get so wet after just a little bit of petting." He smiled up at her almost evilly. "I like it."

With his other hand he separated her lips and gazed down at her, his finger stroking up and down her now wide open vulva. A second and third finger joined the first, stroking her up and down, dancing over her in teasing motions.

She could only lie there and watch him as he played with her. He licked his lips before speaking.

"This is exquisite. You are all wet, plump and rosy, waiting for me. Ready for me." With his words he slowly inserted a finger into her canal, followed quickly by another. "You are so tight against my fingers. Your walls are pulsating, squeezing me. It makes me wonder how incredible it will be once I get my cock inside of you."

Eli's body contracted at his implication. His promise. He smiled.

"You like that thought, Eli? The thought of my cock inside you, pumping you hard enough to make you scream?"

She had no words. There was nothing to say other than screaming, "Yes! Please! Now, Paul!" and despite how far they

had come, she couldn't do it, couldn't say what she had wanted to for years.

He moved his fingers, twisting and turning them, scissoring them. Feelings swamped her body. She closed her eyes, all her attention centered on him and what he was doing to her.

The touch of his tongue on her vulva snapped her eyes open in an instant. He lapped at her in long, slow licks, his tongue avoiding the top each time.

She whimpered as once again he got close, but stopped. His gaze caught hers and held it as he opened his mouth and came down squarely on her clit and sucked hard.

The top half of her body came off the couch as she yelled out his name.

There was no more slow and gentle at that point, he thrust his fingers into her forcefully, sucking and nibbling at her clit. On and on he went, playing, eating, licking, driving her insane with sensations. Her hands clenched the side and back of the couch as he ate at her core. She tensed as she felt her release come closer, her body still thrumming from his earlier actions. The final explosion sent her body twitching forcefully as she once again screamed his name in completion.

Once her body had calmed down she was aware that Paul had laid his head down on her abdomen, stroking her leg gently as she rode out her aftershocks. After a few moments, he looked up at her again.

"I want you, Eliana. Badly. Please don't refuse me. But if you do, I'll walk away now."

Tears formed in her eyes at the sound of his voice. Husky with need, his desire evident. Would she refuse him at this point? Could he really walk away if she did? Did she want to refuse him?

What if it was just for tonight? Could she live with the consequences?

Her gaze ran over his face. Need, desire, love were all there. She knew he loved her, but did he love her the way she wanted him to?

Regardless, she knew she wanted this. Had wanted it for a long time. Hadn't she just been thinking she would give anything for a night with him? Would she turn down the only chance she might have to make love with the man of her dreams?

She shook her head quickly.

He nodded just as quickly and moved back. "I understand. There's no reason for you—"

"No, Paul." She reached for him when she realized he had misunderstood her movement. "That wasn't a denial of you. It was me not denying you."

"Are you sure?"

"Definitely."

Words were superfluous after that. He moved up to kiss her once again. Her arms went around him, holding him tight against her as he thrust his tongue inside her mouth imitating the motions soon to come.

He pulled away slowly to stand by her side. His hands went to the button on the top of his jeans and she sat up quickly, placing her hands on his to stop him.

"Let me."

Her breath caught in her throat and her mouth dried as she thought of what she was about to do. She was about to undress the man of her dreams. She still didn't know what had changed. What had made him decide he wanted her tonight? If she were honest with herself, though, she didn't care.

Whatever it was she was grateful for it, and she was going to exploit it as long as she could. She had earned this. Hell, she needed it like she needed the breath in her body.

He moved his hands to her hair, brushing it back from her face with a whisper soft touch. Oh, how she wanted him.

She licked her lips as she slowly unbuttoned the top button of his pants and revealed a bit more of his body. Her mind spun in anticipation. She moved her hands to his hips and hung her head for a moment, trying to get her equilibrium back.

"Eliana? Are you alright?" He cupped the back of her head and made as though to kneel, but she held him where he was.

"I'm fine. Just give me a minute." Her voice was breathy, barely loud enough to be heard.

"Honey, if this isn't something you want..."

She growled. "Shut up, Paul. I want this. Just give me a minute, okay?"

Using his hips as leverage, Eliana stood up, forcing Paul to take a step back. If this was a one-time deal, she was going to take full advantage of it. With shaking hands she reached

for the chest that had tantalized her for years. He sucked in a breath as she touched it gently.

Eliana knew he had undergone laser removal of his chest hair. He had claimed he used to be a walking carpet before he met her and had done it for comfort more than looks, but it didn't matter to her. She would love him even with chest hair, but she had to admit, the smooth, well-defined pecs begged for her examination.

Still shaking, her hand brushed against his hard smooth skin. Sweat droplets covered his body and she knew it wasn't just the heat of the room that had him sweating. It was desire. Desire for her.

She moved closer to him to lick away a drop of sweat running down his chest. His hands tightened in her hair as he groaned her name.

Emboldened, she ran her tongue over the rise of his pec down to his dark brown nipple. Her tongue darted out to tease it as she'd hungered to do for so long now. At his sharp intake of breath, she took his nipple in her mouth and did to him the same thing he had done to her.

Her hands wrapped around his waist, one holding him tight against her, the other squeezing his hard ass. He tasted dark and forbidden. But oh so addicting. His hand crept down her back as he grabbed her ass, and pulled her up to him, rubbing her stomach against his jean-clad erection.

"Eli, please, baby. I need you."

Eliana smiled as she licked his nipple one last time, and slowly kissed and licked her way down his chest, then his stomach, to stop at the open button of his jeans. Her tongue

darted down quickly, only to have him pull her up by the shoulders with a shout.

"Eli!"

Giggling, she sat back on the sofa, positioning herself so she was nearly eye level with his jeans and continued unveiling her prize. He wore button fly jeans, so she put one hand inside to get better leverage and the backs of her fingers brushed against his hard shaft.

Oooh commando. Nice.

Each pop of a button made her mouth dryer and her pussy wetter. Liquid was already streaming down her thighs in anticipation of him riding her.

Finally, his pants were open and he was bared to her gaze. She pushed them down further, past his hips, eager to see him in all his glory.

He shook his hips and stepped out of his jeans when they fell to the floor. She couldn't take her eyes off of him.

Oh, she had known he was big. After being friends for so long, she had seen the outline of his erection before when he was excited, but she had never seen it bare, out in the open.

It jutted out from his body, allowing her to see it all as it bounced with his body's motions. It was long, and oh so thick. Unable to help herself she reached out to grasp hold of it. His moan was a distant sound as blood rushed to her ears.

Licking her lips yet again, she moved in to kiss the tip of it, her tongue darting out to taste the pre-cum on the end. She wanted to play with it, needed to, but he had other ideas. Still having hold of her by the shoulders, he pulled her away from him and pushed her back to lie down on the couch.

She never knew how handy the wide chaise section of his couch would be when she helped him pick it out. The rough corduroy rubbed the back of her body, one more sensation to be aware of as he covered her body with his.

She was on the pill, and clean. And she knew he was clean. He made a habit of wearing condoms with every woman he had ever been with and he was tested on a regular basis. She had no worries of catching anything from him, but when he didn't reach for a condom she was surprised.

Before she could say anything, he spread her legs with his and stopped at her entrance. Eliana sucked in her breath waiting for him to slide into her. *What is he waiting for, dammit?* Eliana raised her hips toward him, wanting him inside her. Now.

She met his gaze and it burned into her very soul. She didn't know what he was trying to tell her with his eyes, but her body responded to the message eagerly.

Slowly he entered her, deliberate in his movements. She felt each centimeter as his cock penetrated, pushing further and deeper into her until he was seated fully.

At that moment she knew why she had needed him for so long. It felt like he had finally come home to her. Tears sprang to her eyes once again at the feelings. Blinking them away, she wrapped her arms and legs around her lover and urged him to move.

It wouldn't last long enough. She knew that it never could, but she would revel in the feelings as long as possible.

He slowly pulled out to the tip before pushing back in again. His hand brushed the hair from her face as he kissed

her lips, cheeks, eyes, over and over. Finally he picked up speed as he moved harder into her, thrusting the way she wanted him to. Needed him to.

Tension in her body built until once again she was ready to explode. He was just as close. His thrusts became faster, sharper as he groaned into her throat, hips pulsing against her.

"Paul!" was all she had time to say as her body flew over the edge of yet another orgasm, her walls milking him as they clenched around him. One final thrust and she felt his seed shoot into her, filling her completely. She had one moment of regret that she was on the pill, and the knowledge filled her that nothing would come of this night.

His whispered, "I love you, Eli," against her neck brought a lump to her throat as she wished he truly meant it.

* * * *

Eli woke an hour later, cuddled in Paul's arms. They still lay on the couch, him holding her tight against him spoon style.

Oh, God, what had she done? It had been the best night of her life, but the price was too much. Their friendship would never be the same. She had destroyed the best thing going for her.

Slowly trying to move away, she was stopped, held tight by Paul's arm wrapped around her.

"Where do you think you're going?"

The lump in her throat came back, and it took Eliana a minute to be able to answer him. "I was going to get dressed."

"Why would you do that?"

She tried to move again, and had as little luck as she had the first time. "It's getting late, Paul. It's time for me to go home."

"You are home."

Eliana sighed. She loved his house, she always had. Not only had she helped him choose the furniture and decorate, but she had been included in choosing the house itself. It was true, she had always felt at home here but he was wrong. It wasn't her home. It was his.

Her home was a small apartment halfway across town in a less expensive neighborhood. Not here. With him. With her heart.

"Paul, stop talking crazy and let me go."

Instead of listening to her, he rolled her onto her back and trapped her with his arm on one side, and his body on the other.

"No. I'm not crazy, and it's about time we talked."

Eli felt the tears building up again. She looked away quickly, closing her eyes. She didn't want him to see her like this. What the hell was wrong with her tonight? She had been weepier and more emotional than she could recall in forever. And she had done something she would always live to regret.

Her body pulsed at Paul's nearness. If she had to be honest with herself, she hadn't regretted what had happened,

but she would regret the aftermath. That's what she got for living for the moment.

Taking a deep breath, she opened her eyes to meet his. "Paul, there's nothing to talk about. We had sex. We were both horny, it was hot, we were barely dressed, it happened. We're both adults, free of any other commitment. No big deal."

"It *is* a big deal, Eliana." His eyes raked across her face as though looking for something, but for the life of her, Eli didn't know what that could be.

"Paul, please, just drop it."

"No. Now shut up and listen to me for a change."

Eli's eyes widened. He'd never used that tone of voice on her before. Oh, she knew he had a temper, and had seen evidence of it in the past. But never had it been turned on her. Exasperation, frustration, but never anger.

Shocked, she lay there, saying nothing.

"You've had things going your way for long enough. Now it's my turn."

"Excuse me?" *What the hell is he talking about?*

"It's time you stopped gallivanting around and settled down. You've gotten your master's like you wanted. You've gotten your dream job. And you've gotten your wild oats out of your system. Now it's time to get serious."

"What the *fuck* are you talking about, Paul?"

"You. Us. This."

Eliana was lost. She had never been so confused in her life.

"Oh, shit, I'm doing this all wrong, aren't I?" Paul closed his eyes as he shook his head. Eli took that moment to slide out of his arms and reach for her clothes, pulling them on jerkily.

By the time she was done, Paul had pulled on his jeans and stood there with his hands on his hips glaring at her. He ran a hand over his eyes and took a deep breath.

"Please, Eli. Don't go. Sit down so we can talk about this."

Eli had never been able to refuse Paul anything, and tonight was no exception. She sat down, on the far end of the couch, though, and watched him pace the floor. What the hell had gotten into him?

"Eli, we've known each other for ten years, right?"

"Right." Paul was the older brother of one of her college buddies. The two girls had been roommates for a short while after graduation, and Eli had seen a lot of Paul over that time. The two girls had matched each other well as roommates, despite never getting really close. Eli had gotten closer to Paul than she ever was to his sister.

"And in the last five years we've gotten real close."

"Right." Eli didn't know what Paul was getting at. He was repeating history they both knew.

"Did you ever wonder why I stayed in contact with you after Attie moved out?"

"I thought it was because we were friends." She knew the hurt in her voice was obvious when he swore and came to her. He kneeled at her feet and took her hands in his.

"Yes, we were—are—friends. Good friends."

"Paul, I don't understand what you're getting at. I'm sorry, but you're confusing and scaring me."

"Eli, in the last five years you've had a lot of things going on in your life. You've dealt with losing your father, working full-time during grad school, grad school itself, finding a new job. You've had a lot on your plate.

"In addition to that, you've been working on accepting yourself for who you are. Learning to be happy with yourself, despite what you grew up hearing."

Eliana had never had much support growing up. All her life she had heard that she was fat and lazy, and had eventually believed it. It was only since college that she had realized other people's opinions didn't make her who she was. She made her who she was.

A lot of that confidence had come from her friendship with Paul. It was one of the reasons she loved him so strongly.

"In all that time I have tried to be there for you, to be what you need. But I can't do it any more."

Was he telling her their friendship was over? Had this been a goodbye fuck?

"I can't be there for you like that any more, Eli, because I want more. I need more.

"I've seen you date other guys on and off, and I've stood by saying nothing. Wanting you to be happy."

Eli's brow furrowed. Her mind raced trying to make sense of what he was saying, finally giving up and focusing on what sounded like an accusation. "Of course I dated guys. You've dated others, too."

"I know, but none of them lasted very long. None of them were what I wanted. None of them were you.

"Eliana Thomas, I have loved you for over five years. I have waited for you until your goals were met, until your personal hurdles were jumped, and until you were ready for me. But I'm tired of it. I need to know now.

"Will you marry me? Will you be mine forever, stay with me alone, forsaking all others as I will for you?"

Marry him? What the hell is he talking about? Where had this come from? He'd never given her a hint of anything like this since they'd met.

Is he serious? He'd never lied to her in all their time as friends, there wasn't any reason to start now. He loved her? How could she not have known?

Eli thought back to what the fortune teller had told her earlier in the day. She had said she would be surprised by someone very close to her. Eli had thought she meant something like her sister getting pregnant. Not this.

And her promise that Eli would not be meeting a tall, dark and handsome stranger. It had seemed strange at the time, the way she had emphasized it, but now it made perfect sense. Paul had been her tall, dark and handsome man all along. She just needed to open her eyes to see him. But even more than that, Eli was reminded of Paul's name. His sister, Attie was named after Athena. And Paul was named after Apollo. The Sun God.

"Please, baby, tell me you will. Put me out of my misery."

Eliana gazed at the man she had loved for so long she couldn't remember what it felt like to not love him. The man

who with his friendship and support—and love—had convinced her she was capable and able to do anything and everything she set her mind to.

The fact he loved her as much as she did him would take some time to get used to, but that was okay, they had all the time in the world.

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JUSTICE

by

Michelle Hasker

Athena Marley sighed as she sank back in the hot tub. Why had she agreed to fill in as a beat cop while they were short-staffed? She'd worked hard to earn her position as detective and here she was, suffering because once again she couldn't say no.

It wouldn't be so bad if she had someone waiting for her at home. Other than her dog, there was no one. Abigail said it was part of who she was. That she'd come here during this lifetime with the theme of Justice. She'd also cautioned that Athena was overly critical of herself and others around her, and needed to learn to control her words and her actions if she wanted to find her perfect match. The part about something in the past being rectified confused her though.

With a snort, Athena sank lower in the tub and closed her eyes. Abigail was a good friend, but even fortune tellers with a track record like hers couldn't always be right. There was no Mr. Right for her. She'd learned that lesson the hard way.

The sound of footsteps on the wooden deck drew closer.

"How's the water?" Mike asked as he stepped into the hot tub with her.

"Heavenly." Athena sighed and tilted her head back on a pillow as she stretched out in the bubbling water.

"Did you have to add that perfume to the water? I'm going to smell like a girl for the rest of the night."

"What's the matter, Mike? Got a hot date tonight?"

"Not unless you agree to go out to dinner with me." He sounded hopeful, and once again she felt the pang of longing. If only she were different.

Athena clenched her fists at her sides and forced her thoughts away from how his masculine scent overrode any perfume he thought she added to the water.

His body was hard and muscular. He'd given her wet dreams for months, and his voice was so husky and sensual it often sent shivers up her spine. It took all her self-control to keep her lust hidden and under lock and key. Dating co-workers went against her personal beliefs. If she were honest with herself, she'd admit dating wasn't even on her list of things to do any more. Besides, Mike was too good to be true. He probably snored, or drooled in his sleep, or something that would drive her to kill him after a night spent together. Keeping her eyes closed and her mind on mundane tasks, like breathing, should keep her from embarrassing herself by throwing herself at the poor man.

What would it be like to feel his hands on her just once? To have his mouth all over her body pleasuring her in the same way he did every night in her dreams? But then that was all a fantasy. Steven had assured her of that back in college. She might feel pleasure, but that was because it was a dream. Real life was never as good as dreams. She was as frigid and unwomanly as they came.

"Do you believe in astral travel?"

Astral travel? She sank up to her chin in the water as she pictured him caressing her breast with one hand while he stroked her mons with the other. As her nipples hardened, she fought back a moan. Damn, she was getting good at imagining him touching her. She should be, he was the focus of her dreams.

"Attie?"

"What?" she asked, her eyes snapping open as the vision faded. She turned to him and caught him staring at her, his face mere inches from hers. When had he moved close, and why hadn't she noticed? She gasped and tried to move back, but had nowhere to go.

"Do you believe in astral travel?"

"What's that?" she asked, her breath hitching in her throat as he leaned closer.

"It's when you travel outside of your body. Some people believe you can actually go places. They believe you can talk to people and even make love to them while you're outside of your body."

She gasped as he lowered his voice. Desire tightened her stomach at the light in his eyes. *Co-workers. Can't be romantic. Knock it off.* She gave herself a mental lecture but her body refused to listen. Her nipples pebbled as she stared into his sea-green eyes. Biting back a moan, Attie scrunched back against the wall as far as she could, which wasn't very far.

"Have you ever had a dream that felt so real you woke up drenched in sweat and covered in cum?"

Yeah, like every night. This time she couldn't fight the moan and closed her eyes. "No. I have no clue what you're talking about."

"Somehow I think you do," he whispered as he brushed his lips against her ear. "Tell me about your dream last night, Attie."

A shiver shook through her and she gasped.

"I knew it." He sounded triumphant.

What is going on with him tonight?

Her eyes flew open and she stared at the rippling water. If he kept breathing in her ear like that she'd embarrass herself, and him. "Knew what? That you have a vivid imagination? So who's the chick you've been astral traveling to visit? Is it the one who transferred here from New York? Or maybe the one who just came here from the Academy?"

"You. You came to me," he said then sucked the bottom of her earlobe between his lips and moaned.

Another shudder ran through her as she echoed his moan and turned toward him. "You're crazy," she whispered.

"No I'm not."

"I don't astral travel, and I don't dream about you."

"Liar," he whispered as he leaned closer.

Athena closed her eyes as his lips pressed against hers, and she kissed him with all the passion she'd spent the last fifteen minutes daydreaming about. Their mouths met in a fierce, hungry kiss. His taste and touch was familiar, in fact it was the same as in her dream. He cupped her chin and tilted her face up as he deepened the kiss.

Ignoring the voice of reason as it cautioned her to stop before it was too late, she fisted one hand in his thick blonde hair and grabbed his shoulder with the other. A whimper caught in her throat at the feel of his firm, smooth flesh under her palm.

"Damn, baby. I need more. I can't ... don't push me away again."

Her hands trembled as she wrapped them around his neck and moved so she straddled him. Leaning forward, she brushed the tips of her breasts against him. Only the tattoo of a tiger marred the otherwise perfect chest, and she leaned down to kiss it. Once she tasted him, she couldn't stop, and pressed kisses down to the water's edge and back up to his neck where she found a sensitive spot and worked on giving him a hickey.

Mike ran his hands over her back and down to her ass where he squeezed her and pressed her lower body tighter to his.

"Mmm," Athena moaned as she moved her hips, rubbing her fabric-covered mons against his rock-hard shaft. Even though cloth prevented her from feeling him against her, she was close to coming from his kiss, conversation, and the friction from rubbing against him. Her dreams replayed in her mind and she realized what he meant with his questions. He'd been dreaming of her. And apparently she wasn't the only one to awaken drenched in sweat and cum, to quote him.

Oh, sweet heaven. She wanted him and wanted to know it was real, not a figment of her imagination.

"Sweet, sweet Attie," he whispered as he peppered kisses along her neck and shoulder.

Attie closed her eyes and arched, pressing her breasts against his chest as she leaned back, reveling in the feel of his mouth on her. Obeying her unspoken request, Mike lowered his attention and kissed his way down her front and sucked on her fabric-covered nipple.

"Mike!" she gasped, fists tightening in his hair as she frantically rubbed against him.

"God, baby. What you do to me."

She froze as his endearment threw her back in time and made her remember Steven. He'd always called her baby, but then he'd also called her frigid, cold, unlovable, a failure in bed, and worse.

"Oh, God." Athena gasped and jerked away from Mike. As hot tears filled her eyes, she tried to climb out of the hot tub, but her vision blurred as he grabbed her and pulled her back on his lap.

"Shh, Attie, it's okay, baby."

"Don't call me baby," she snapped and tried to pull away again.

"Okay, sweetheart. But you can't play hot one minute and cold the next when you're rubbing against a man like that."

"I'm sorry." Fresh tears broke free and she hid her face against his shoulder.

"Attie, sweetheart. Did I come on too strong? But you were so responsive. Did I misunderstand?"

"Yes," she choked out as she tried to block the images of her humiliation from her mind.

"Talk to me, Attie. Why so hot and loving one minute and cold the next? Tell me what I did wrong. What did I do to make you cry?"

"Let me go, Mike. Please. You made a mistake. You don't want me. How about Charlotte? Or what's her face, the new girl?"

Mike lifted her chin and met her gaze. "I want you, Attie. Did I misread your signals? Are you going to tell me I'm wrong about my dreams?"

"How would I know about your dreams? But astral traveling is impossible. It's like magic and spells. Not real, but something people believe in anyway. Like the Loch Ness Monster and Big Foot."

Mike laughed and squeezed her close. "I do believe in Nessie, but I also believe my dreams are more than that."

"Mike, let me go. You don't want to do this. We're co-workers. A relationship would go nowhere between us."

"I don't want to let you go, Attie. I want to explore this thing between us."

"There's nothing between us," she argued even as his erection pressed into her side. She wasn't fooling him, or herself.

"I beg to differ," he whispered as he trailed kisses up her neck to her ear. "I can feel you trembling. You desire me. Why are you fighting it?"

Athena shivered and bit her lip trying to keep a moan from escaping. He had one hand on her thigh and brushed his thumb back and forth, flaming the desire she was desperately trying to suppress.

"Please," she gasped. "Don't do this. You don't know what you're asking."

"I want you and you want me. Stop fighting me, Attie. Please. I can't take many more nocturnal visits from you without also having you in my waking hours."

"I don't astral travel. I have no idea what you're talking about."

Mike sighed and shifted her so she straddled him again. His hard shaft pressed into her abdomen as he pulled her so close she could smell, feel, hear and taste only him. The smooth slippery muscles on his chest as she tried to push away, the scent that was him and only him that filled her as she licked her lips and tasted those same muscles. A low groan filled her ears as his hands tightened on her hips, and he closed his eyes and tilted his head back. Athena stared at his throat as he swallowed, then looked up at his face again. His mouth was parted and his eyes still closed as he pinned her in place.

She wanted him so much it hurt. And it would hurt once he found out he wouldn't get any pleasure from her. His dreams, like hers, would remain just that. But how to tell him when he looked, felt, and smelled, so good. *Damn*. She'd given him a hickey. She'd like to give him another, much lower.

Never before had she wanted a man this much. Not even in her dreams. While looks weren't everything, and she'd been attracted to Mike for a while, his body made her mouth water and her pussy ache. *What if this time it was different? But what if it wasn't?* Indecision held her in place, until Mike slid his hands onto her ass and pressed her into his erection.

Just like the dreams. Athena tightly closed her eyes and kept them that way. Her hands slid over his chest and shoulders.

"Yes," he hissed in pleasure as he slid one hand up and cupped the back of her neck. He kissed her hungrily, and she met his kiss and matched it as her desire flared. His other hand cupped her breast and massaged it as she arched into his touch.

Before she realized his intent, he undid the top of her bikini and cupped a breast in each hand. She moaned into his mouth, and slid her hands down to his erection as it strained against his swimsuit. Her hand slipped easily inside and stroked his hard length as he broke their kiss and sucked her nipple into his mouth.

Attie whimpered at the pleasure that raced through her. She'd never had a man suck on her nipples, and she'd never been with a man who'd wanted her as much as Mike appeared to. When he nipped at her with his teeth, then sucked hard, she gasped and arched her back, encouraging him to keep going.

"Oh Christ, Mike. I'm so sorry."

Athena's eyes flew open and she looked toward the direction of the voice. A nightmare from her past stood on the deck with her bikini top in one hand, and a beer in the other. Even though years had passed, his looks had not. Steven Stamos, her worst mistake, stood there staring at her.

Mike looked up and must have seen the horror in her eyes because he turned around and sighed. "Dammit, Steven.

Couldn't you have just snuck back out as quietly as you snuck in? Did you have to interrupt?"

Athena covered herself as best as she could while she reached on the side for her towel, her gaze remaining on Steven.

"Don't go, Attie. Steven was just leaving, weren't you?"

"Attie? Athena? There can't be that many of you? Is that you, Athena Marley?"

Athena finally looked away and grabbed her towel. She wrapped it around herself as she climbed out of the hot tub. She ignored both men as they called her name. All the comebacks she'd wished she'd said to Steven, and now had the chance to, remained unsaid as her mind raced in circles, her only coherent thought to run before he hurt her more. Somehow she remembered to grab her purse as she ran through Mike's house and out his front door.

* * * *

"Dammit," Mike cursed as he grabbed Attie's bathing suit from Steven. "Seriously, man. I've been trying to seduce her for months and you ruined it all. How the hell do you know her, anyway?"

"I went to college with her," Steven said, the expression on his face one Mike'd never seen before.

As a cop, Mike had learned to read facial and body expressions better than most, but for once his friend was unreadable. "Then why did she run out of here like her house was on fire?"

"Um. I have no idea." Steven quickly spun around and headed for the back door.

Mike growled. He reached the door the same time Steven did, and Mike pinned the other man there, crowding him with his dripping wet body. "Try again."

Steven looked up into his face and had the nerve to bat his eyelashes and grin. "Gee, Mike. If I'd known this was what it would take to get you to think of me this way, I'd have done it a lot sooner."

Mike growled and wrapped his hand around Steven's throat. "Start talking before I do something I might regret."

"Okay, okay." Steven lifted his hands in surrender.

"You knew Attie in college, but what happened there to make her run out of here like that?"

"Are you sure it isn't just because I interrupted you two? You've never brought any of your other women home, why her?"

"I'm the one questioning you." Mike growled and went to wrap his hands around Steven's throat again when Steven swallowed and lifted his hands in surrender again.

"Okay, okay. I might have dated her a little."

"Dated? You dated her? But you're gay!"

"Um, yeah, but back then I hadn't realized or accepted it."

"Did you sleep with her?" Even as he asked the question, his insides twisted and his hands fisted. The thought of Steven or anyone else having Attie made his stomach revolt.

"A few times," Steven admitted as he looked away.

"A few times!" Mike released Steven and walked away before he really did something he'd regret. Steven might be

one of his closest friends, but he was gay, and not a threat to his relationship with Attie. Then why did he have the feeling Steven had just wedged himself between him and Attie, and he'd lost her before he'd really had her?

"Look, it was over long ago. In fact, she didn't enjoy it as much as I didn't. That was why we ended it."

"Steven, she looked at you and panicked. That woman is a tough-as-nails cop. She's as tough as any man, and more than some at the precinct. Tell me why one look at you had her reeling in fright and racing out of my door half naked. Hell, she left her fucking clothes here."

"I might have said a few things to her when we parted ways. Maybe she wasn't happy with the way things ended?"

"Does she know you're gay?"

"No." Steven edged his way to the door.

"Talk to me, Steven. Why would Attie run away from you as if you were the devil himself?"

"I don't know." Steven stuttered, and Mike knew he was lying. Steven knew exactly why Attie had raced out the door. He knew and didn't want to tell.

Mike reached out and fisted his hands in Steven's shirt. He lifted Steven up and turned, pressing him against the brick wall of the house. Eyes narrowed, and mouth curled in a snarl, he leaned in close and growled. Steven flinched and tensed.

"Talk to me, Steven. Convince me not to smash your face in. If things had ended nicely between you two she wouldn't have run out of here like that. You're stalling and making me

even angrier. I swear to God, Steven. You better start talking before I do something you won't like."

Steven whimpered when Mike leaned in closer. "Okay, I dumped her. I told her she was frigid and cold, that she couldn't warm up even if she tried." He swallowed.

"What?" A snarl that would put his dog to shame came out, startling both him and Steven.

"I told her she was undesirable and no other man would take pity on her like I had. And ... and ... and I said that..."

"Stop stuttering and tell me what the hell else you said to her!"

"I said she wasn't a real woman. Look, I've always regretted saying those things. But I was denying my sexual orientation. I didn't do it to hurt her. I was striking out at her because she wasn't woman enough to make me want her. I didn't realize until much later that it wasn't her, but no woman could excite me."

Mike shook with the fury coursing through him. As the words ran out of Steven's mouth he fought the urge to sink his fist in his friend's face, but lost. His fist landed with a satisfying crunch. Without waiting to see if Steven was okay, Mike tossed him aside and ran through the house. He grabbed his keys on the way, and raced out the door and down the driveway. Wincing as he stepped on a sharp stone, he ignored the pain. He'd just have to drive without shoes, because there was no way he was letting Attie go. Not now that he finally had a taste of her. And what a taste. It was even better than at night when she visited him in dreams.

He checked the sides of the roads for accidents as he sped to her house. Considering how upset she'd been when she'd left he wouldn't be surprised if she'd crashed her car. It was with relief that he pulled up in front of her house and saw her car in her driveway. Mike jumped out of his car and ran up to her front door. He prayed she answered fast because her next door neighbor was looking at him oddly.

Times like this it was nice to have a spare key. He searched on his key chain until he found the key she'd given him when he dog sat for her. As he unlocked the door, he waved to the nosy neighbor, glad that someone was keeping an eye on his Attie. That made him pause. *My Attie?* When had he started thinking of her as his? Probably when he first laid eyes on her two years ago.

"Attie!" he called out and headed for the stairs assuming she'd be in her bedroom.

"Go away!" she shouted back.

"No!" He yanked open her door and stormed inside, only to halt when he saw her curled in a ball on her bed, crying. She still wore the towel around her, but it gaped open as she looked up at him and rolled to her side, facing the wall.

With a sigh, he walked over to her bed and dropped down on it. Fluffy, Attie's Rottweiler, nudged her nose against his hand. He scratched her head, then pointed to her bed. Fluffy hung her head, but walked over and curled up in her bed. While she stared at him with sad eyes, he turned back to Attie.

"Sweetheart." He crawled onto the bed and pulled her into his arms even though she resisted. "What happened? What did Steven do to you to make you run away like that?"

She sniffled and shook her head. "I was just startled. He was standing there staring at me."

"No." Mike cupped her chin and forced her to look up at him. "He knew your name, and once he said it, you ran out of my house without your clothes or shoes. Talk to me, babe."

"No." She started crying again.

Mike groaned and held her close. Dammit, he didn't want to upset her, but he was pretty sure she didn't want him to know what Steven had done to her. The bastard was lucky he'd left him still breathing.

As he held her close, he felt the silent sobs shaking her body and vowed to hurt Steven with more than just a punch to the face. He held her close until she finally gave in and snuggled against him, crying louder.

With his heart breaking at the sound, he did the only thing he could do. He held her and let her cry herself to sleep. They could talk later. As he lay there with her in his arms, he adjusted his position to a more comfortable one, and tucked her head against his chest. As he nodded off to sleep, he plotted ways to punish Steven. It was a shame they couldn't throw Steven in jail, but he could give the man a beat down.

* * * *

Athena stretched and felt warm arms wrapped around her. She smiled as she recognized Mike's scent, and rubbed her cheek against his hard, warm chest. Damn, he was like an

incubator, he was so warm. If only he burned that hot for her. *Wait.* He did, at least here in her dreams. But since dreams were all she could have, she would make the most of them.

Pressing open-mouthed kisses on his chest and neck, she slid her hands down his stomach and encountered shorts. Usually he was naked in her dreams, but every once in a while a little barrier made the suspense that much better. She slipped her hands inside and wrapped them around his erection. God, he felt even better than in the hot tub. He thrust into her hand as she swiped her thumb across the tip and felt moisture.

The way he filled her hands and the feel of him, all hot and hard made her stomach clench, and her pussy grow wet. With a growl, she grabbed his shorts and yanked them down, exposing his glorious cock. She wrapped her hands around his cock again, and drew the tip into her mouth, licking at the salty pre-cum on the tip.

Mike's moan filled her ears and she drew him in deeper, sucking on him and working him with her hands as she tried to elicit more sounds of pleasure.

"Attie," he said between deep panting breaths. "I want to be inside you when I come."

"Mmm," she answered as she slid him out of her mouth with a pop. Eyes half-closed, she tugged off bikini bottoms that were messing with her good dream mojo, and flung them across the room as she rose over him and guided his cock to her entrance.

Even though she was drenched in desire, as she started to sink down on him, he filled her all the way and then some. In

shock, her eyes flew open and she stared down at him. "Not a dream?"

"Not a dream," he whispered. "God, you're so tight, Attie."

"It's been a while."

He didn't answer. Instead he grabbed her hips and thrust up into her so deep she felt like she'd tear in half. Then he froze and looked up at her as if waiting for something. Suddenly, as her insides clenched around him and juices rushed to her core, she realized he was waiting for her to take charge. He twitched deep inside and she arched her back. Then she leaned over him and stared into his mesmerizing eyes. Mike cupped her breasts and pinched her nipples as she began to ride him, grinding up and down, slow at first, then faster as her stomach and thighs trembled, and tingles raced through her body. *Sweet heaven!* She was awake and not only was she enjoying this, but judging by the rapture on his face, Mike was too.

As he closed his eyes and tilted his head back, she couldn't help but think of how handsome he looked. When he lifted his hips and thrust into her, her orgasm rushed over her before she realized she was about to have one. When she cried out and arched her back, he pressed against her clit, and the added stimulation wrung a strangled cry from her as she clenched around him, coming again in a rush of fluids.

"Oh yeah, babe. God, you're so good."

She hoped he didn't want a response, because she didn't think she could formulate one. Without warning, he flipped her over while staying buried inside her. He grabbed her legs and pushed them back as he rammed inside her, deeper and

harder, until he shouted her name and came, his hot cum filling her and bringing her over the edge again.

Quivering, she slowly lowered her legs and stared at Mike as they both tried to catch their breath. He stretched out next to her and kissed her gently, then pulled her against him and rubbed her back.

Never in her dreams had sex with him been this good. She didn't know what to think, all she could do was feel, as aftershocks raced through her body, and Mike murmured sweet nothings in her ear.

Helpless, she lay there wondering what to say or do. She wanted to tell him to leave, but after sex so good her toes were still curled, she didn't ever want him to go.

"We need to talk," Mike said finally.

"You go first," she said as she buried her face in his neck.

"I know you don't want to get involved with a co-worker, but I'm not letting you go, Attie. I've loved you from the first time you put me in my place. Those blazing eyes and your sense of right and wrong, the way you always put others first, your loyalty, should I go on?"

Athena shook her head and swallowed. What he said scared her. Didn't he realize she wasn't going to be enough to satisfy him? He'd had to take charge and finish himself.

"Please stop," she begged as she rolled away from him and buried her face under the pillow. It wasn't like her to run away from anything, but this was just too much to handle right now.

"Attie?"

She shivered when he put his hand on her shoulder.
"Please, Mike. I thought I was dreaming at first. I wouldn't have—"

"Are you accusing me of taking advantage of you?" Mike asked as he stared at her in horror.

"I ... well ... not exactly. But I mean ... You need to leave, Mike."

"I will *not* leave!" he shouted as he sat up and glared at her.

She shivered and pulled the sheet over herself. He grabbed it and tugged it off.

"You're going to tell me what's wrong, sweetheart. And I want to know now!"

"Oh come on, Mike. After making love to me, you're still here? Why? Are you hoping round two will be better? Aren't you happy with humiliating me once? Are you going to try and do it again?"

"Humiliate you? Dammit, Attie!" Mike grabbed her shoulders and yanked her close.

She drew in a deep breath. The scents from their lovemaking filled the air, and her, with desire. But it would be a mistake. Again. She just couldn't pleasure a man. He was talented enough that he'd given her the best experience of her life. But it was embarrassing to know that it hadn't been as good for him.

"I want to make love to you again, Attie. Not for the reason you accused me of, but because I want you. I love you and I want you to let me make love to you again."

"That's an awful lot of love you're talking about."

"Tell me why you ran out of my place when you saw Steven."

"I forgot to feed my dog."

"Attie, you didn't even get your shoes or clothes. Your dog wouldn't starve because you took five minutes to get dressed. Why are you lying to me?"

He cupped her chin and forced her to look at him even though she tried to look anywhere but at him.

"Attie."

She looked down at his hand and saw dried blood. "Oh my God. What happened?"

"Nothing," he said as he moved his hand under the blanket. "Tell me why you ran away."

Arguing with him was senseless. He wasn't giving up, and she knew from experience that she could trust him to keep her secret. But she didn't want him to know. After their failed lovemaking session, though, it was too late.

"I dated Steven in college. It wasn't a very good break-up, and I was surprised to see him at your house. I reacted badly, and I apologize. I'm a cop, for crying out loud. I should have better control than that."

"A bad break-up doesn't explain why you ran out of there like that. It was as if you were afraid of him."

Athena looked away and closed her eyes as she tried to battle the wayward emotions first Steven, then Mike, had unleashed in her. "It was what we were doing in the hot tub. I'd never been able to satisfy him in bed and it was a harsh reminder that I wouldn't be able to please you either. I hadn't meant to lead you on. I ... I couldn't resist you. I'm sorry,

Mike. If only you'd left me alone, but you kept pushing and pushing until you broke me. Are you happy now?"

"No, I'm not. You thought that because he didn't enjoy sex with you that I wouldn't? Have you made love with anyone other than him, and now me?"

As she blushed, she kept her face averted and hoped he'd take pity on her and not ask any more embarrassing questions.

"Look at me, Attie."

It was his soft voice that did it. With a sigh, she turned to him and opened her eyes, fighting back tears. "No. And I'm really sorry I slept with you. I trust you not to tell the guys at work, though."

"Tell the guys? Why would I tell the guys anything about you?"

"I know you won't but another guy would."

"At least you have some faith in me." He snorted, and she wondered what he had to be bitter about. She was the one who was a flop in bed. Then she realized he probably wasn't satisfied.

"It's not too late at night. You can probably find someone to ... finish what I couldn't give you."

He sighed again, much louder this time as he put his hands on her shoulders and looked into her eyes. "I don't want to find someone else."

"It's okay, Mike. I'm not a little girl anymore. I know the score and I can handle the truth. You're still hard." She looked down at his erection as it poked out of the blankets.

"It's because I can see your luscious breasts, and I want to make love to you again."

"You must be a glutton for punishment." Her eyes narrowed. "Or are you just determined to try and prove me wrong?"

"Attie, I did enjoy making love to you, and I did have an orgasm, as did you." He grinned widely as he slid his hand down to cup her breast. When he tugged on her nipple, she moaned as the sensation ignited her desire again.

Even knowing she'd failed to pleasure him, she was wet, and growing wetter by the moment.

"You'll be as disappointed this time, as you were the last. Please don't do this to me, Mike. I don't like knowing I can't please you. That I can't please anyone."

"Steven is gay."

"What?" All the blood rushed to her stomach as it clenched tightly at his statement. "I made him gay?"

Mike growled and pinned her down on the bed. He grabbed the blanket and pulled it off of her even when she latched onto it and tried to tug it back up.

"He's always been gay. He didn't tell you that, did he? Honey, how could you please a man who probably wished you were a man the entire time he was with you? He only came out of the closet a few years ago."

"He was gay before he started dating me? Why date me then?"

"He was in denial. He thought he could make himself like women, and he blamed you for his failure. And you did please me. So much so, that I want you again. And yes, this soon."

Athena didn't know what to say, so she just stared at him.

"Attie, since I can't convince you with words, let me try with actions."

"You don't need to lie to me, Mike. I know I'm built wrong, or something."

"No, everything looks like it should," he said as his gaze roamed over her body.

Athena fought the urge to cover up. Even though she protested, she really wanted him buried deep inside her again. She wanted to experience another earth-shattering orgasm. Mike seemed to really want this. He was hard, and kept running his hands and mouth over her breasts, drawing moans from her.

One at a time, he suckled and massaged her breasts and nipples making her body hum, and desire heat her to the point of boiling. Slowly, he kissed and licked his way down her body. As soon as she realized where he was headed, she fisted her hands in his hair and tried to close her legs. With him between her legs, the latter was impossible, and she panicked when his mouth brushed over her mons.

"Sweet heavens!" she shrieked as she tried to get free.

"What's wrong?" He looked up at her.

It was either the sensual picture he made with his head between her legs and his mouth inches from her mons, or it was the concern in her voice, but she sighed and melted.

"Athena?"

"I'm not clean. We just had sex."

"Boy, did we ever. But I want to taste you. Now."

She didn't answer, just watched him as he rubbed his nose against her.

"You smell so delicious."

"But our cum."

"I want to taste yours and see if it's as good as it smells. I love you, Attie."

She sighed, but relaxed her legs. If he really wanted to do it, why should she stop him? She'd never been eaten out before and really wanted to see if all the things she'd heard about the experience were true.

"Can I wash up first?"

He hesitated in the act of lowering his mouth. "Okay. Don't move or I'll spank that gorgeous bottom of yours. I'll get a washcloth."

Athena smiled as he quickly rose and hurried into her bathroom. He returned just as fast with a damp cloth and she sucked in a deep breath as he jumped back on the bed and kneeled between her legs.

Quickly and efficiently, he cleaned her, tossed the washcloth to the side, and buried his face between her thighs. Athena cried out as he licked along her slit before dipping his tongue between her folds.

"Mike, oh God, Mike!" She dug her fingers into the bed as she thrust into his face.

Mike growled and spread her open wider, his thumbs tracing along her mons before one of them pressed on her clit. Suddenly he paused and looked up at her.

"See this?" He moved and gestured to his erection. "This is what giving you pleasure does for me. Listening to you pant

and moan, feeling you writhe under me, God, Attie. I'm so hard I could burst and I'm not even inside you."

"Pleasuring me makes you happy?"

"Yes, Attie. It makes me very, very happy. Say you'll let me do this every night for the rest of our lives."

"Mike!"

"What? We've been friends for too long for me to deny this. I love you, Attie. I want you with me forever. No one else. You. You *do* satisfy me whether you believe it or not."

"This is too much, too fast."

Mike leaned down and kissed her intimately, and not on her lips.

"Christ, Mike! That's playing dirty."

"I'll take you anyway I can get you, darling."

"How about one day at a time?"

"One night at a time." Mike rubbed his nose against her clit. "Say you'll give me a chance to prove my love."

"Yes." Her sigh turned into a scream as he sucked on her clit and thrust two fingers inside her. "God, yes." Her legs quivered around his head as he worked her to a climax.

He took her hand and rubbed it on the tip of his cock as he leaned over her. "Feel that? Feel that pre-cum all over the tip of my cock? I almost came listening to you and tasting your cream as it coated my face and fingers. Do you still doubt how you make me feel?"

Attie stared at him for a long minute. Finally, she shivered under the heat of his gaze and nodded. "No. I believe you. But I need time. This is too fast. I need to think. Let's take it slow so you can change your mind if you want to."

"I won't."

"We'll see. Let's just take it slow."

Mike shouted and kissed her hard, leaving her breathless and trembling. "You won't regret it."

"I bet you'll see to it that I won't."

Mike grinned and pulled her close.

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THE EMPRESS

by

Michelle Hasker

Anne Devereaux glanced down at the card in her hand and then back up at the sign in front of the small storefront.

Abigail Montgomery—fortunes told.

When Becky had given her the card, she'd been excited. A real psychic. One that had an excellent track record and was recommended by several of her friends. Finally, she could get a reading and learn something about her future. While people thought she had it all, Anne knew she didn't. She'd secretly fantasized about her neighbors since the day they'd moved into her neighborhood.

They were both firefighters, but worked alternating shifts. They worked twelve hours on and twelve hours off, so even if one wasn't there, the other usually was. Her nights, and even her days were filled with erotic dreams of either one, or both pleasuring her.

A car horn startled her out of her thoughts. Anne drew in a deep breath to center herself, then pushed open the door and entered the store. Antiques graced most of the surfaces and candlelight flickered from every available space. Heavy red velvet drapes covered the windows and walls, leaving only a lone door visible on the far wall.

Impressive. Abigail hadn't spared any expense decorating the place. Hopefully she didn't make up for it with exorbitant prices for readings. But Becky didn't make a lot of money so there was no way she'd have gone to an expensive psychic.

"Ahh, I've been expecting you."

Anne spun around and stared at the elegantly dressed woman sitting behind a counter.

"Have you?" She couldn't help the surprise that crept into her voice.

"Yes. Becky called. She was so excited. She told me all about you. Why, I feel as if I've known you forever."

"Won't that make it more difficult to give me a reading? Anything you say could be tainted by the knowledge she's given you."

Abigail smiled and rose gracefully. "Nonsense. Please follow me into the back. I have cards already picked for you, but now I can see that you need a different deck."

"You use different decks? I thought cards were cards."

"Becky was right. You're a believer, but you aren't open to trying new things. You're set in your ways and hate it when things don't go the way you plan."

"Gee, and you can tell all this without the cards." Anne couldn't stop the smile even though she knew she sounded rude.

"It's a good thing Becky warned me about your sense of humor. She said that some find it offensive."

"I have no idea why," Anne said, then laughed. "But I'm glad to know I can be my sarcastic self around you."

Abigail shook her head and gestured to the wooden door. "Please follow me." She turned and led the way into the back. A round table sat in the center of the room. The only light was a large candle in the center of the table.

"You have pulled out all the stops for me, haven't you? This place is exactly the way I imagined it."

"Different strokes for different folks. This is what *you* need, but others, sometimes they see something very different from what you do."

"Interesting." Anne smiled even though she had no clue what Abigail meant by that. "So which deck will you be using for me today?"

"Hmmm."

Abigail walked over to a shelf and held out her hand, palm down. She moved her hand over several small boxes on a low shelf. When she reached the end she moved back the way she'd come, until she stopped near the center.

"I think this one." Abigail smiled and walked over to the table. She gestured at the seat across from her and said, "Please sit. I'll begin with a simple one card reading for your immediate future."

"That's it? You aren't going to answer my questions and—"

"No," she interrupted. "Not this time. This first reading will be one card. Then if you are satisfied, I will do a more in-depth reading for you."

"That's a little odd."

"It's also free."

"Come again?" Anne dropped into the seat quickly.

"It's free. If you like what you hear and find it to be true, then you can come back and buy a full reading."

"Wow. I've never heard of a psychic who gives out free samples. Most of them are about how much money they can get."

"I'm not most psychics."

"You can say that again." Anne leaned back in her seat.

"Okay. I'm ready for my free one card reading."

Abigail grinned and shuffled the deck. After a few shuffles she placed the deck on the table. "Cut the deck, please."

Anne nodded and cut the deck, anticipation tingling along her nerves.

"Let's see," Abigail said as she lifted the top card and flipped it over. "Oh. The Empress. I should have guessed."

"Huh?"

"Well, this card tells me that you're a businesswoman. You are wise and make decisions based on the facts at hand. You can be a bit strong-willed, but you're used to being in charge. You're also level-headed and practical. But what many people don't know about you is that you donate a lot of time and money to local charities."

Anne nodded her head and smiled, but didn't say anything.

"This also tells me that you are going to have to take the initiative in some matter if you want what your heart desires. Doubt, ignorance, and worry over your reputation will be your downfall, unless you find a way to get around them. Remember, *you* are what's important here, not what other people think of you. Go after what you want with both hands and grab it before it gets away."

"Do you see me with a man?" Anne asked as she leaned forward.

Abigail smiled. "Actually I see two, but that is all I'll say."

"I'll have to pick between two men?" Immediately her thoughts returned to her neighbors.

"I didn't say that."

Anne laughed. "Of course not. It's all up to me, isn't it? If I make the wrong choice I'll end up alone, and the right one might get me my heart's desire?"

"Something like that." Abigail laughed with her and rose. As she walked Anne to the door she added, "I'm so glad you came in. After doing several unhappy readings, it's nice to have one like yours. I hope you seize the opportunity and don't waste it because your mind won't shut up and let your heart decide."

* * * *

Anne thought about Abigail's words on her ride home. It sounded like she needed to take the initiative, but how, what, with whom?

Maybe a nice soak in the tub with a glass of wine and a good book would take her mind off of things. Perhaps then something would come to her. She was tired of being alone, but most men were afraid of her. Dominating personalities were great in men, but not in women.

As she ran the bathwater, she peeked out her bedroom window. Jamie was home. She knew because he had the red truck. Josh had the dark green SUV, and he'd been gone since late last night. Okay, maybe she had a compulsive need to

look next door to see if she could catch a glimpse of one of them. Just last week both men had been out back gardening in cut off jeans and nothing else. Her vibrator had gotten a good workout that night.

Images of the two men, sweaty and rock-hard made her feel hot and incredibly turned on. As she stripped off her clothes and tossed them on the floor, her hand brushed against her throbbing clit. Did she have enough time to get out her vibrator and pleasure herself before the tub filled?

The doorbell rang before she could grab the toy. With a sigh, she grabbed the closest robe and threw it on, barely noticing what she wore until the bottom of it swished against the tops of her thighs. She'd grabbed the ivory silk robe that was meant for something more seductive than answering the door to a stranger. Hopefully she could send whoever it was on their way and get back upstairs, back to pretending her vibrator was either Josh or Jamie.

"Who is it?" She tried to peek through the stained glass decorating the door.

"Hi. It's Jamie DeCarlo, your next door neighbor."

Jamie! And she'd just been fantasizing about him. Heat flared in her belly. *What does he want?*

"We're canvassing the neighborhoods collecting money for the fire company. Can I talk to you for a minute? It's hard to explain through the door."

"Oh, yeah. Sorry." She pulled the door open and stepped to the side as she gestured for him to come in. "Sorry about that, I was just—"

Jamie's gasp brought her to a halt. Just being near him fogged her brain. How could she have let him in the house like this? She tugged her robe closed, knowing the only thing keeping her from dying of embarrassment was the way his eyes focused on her large breasts. Could he see her nipples through the thin silk?

"Jamie?" she asked after a long pause. "Um ... what can I do for you?"

"Oh. Oh, yeah. Um. We're soliciting ... um, canvassing the neighborhood for donations to buy a new firetruck. For a twenty-five dollar donation you get a calendar featuring a different firefighter each month. For fifty dollars you get the calendar and a T-shirt that says, *Is it hot in here?* For a hundred we'll come to your house and do a free inspection to check how well you have fireproofed your house."

He'd focused on her eyes for a minute, but then given the rest of his prepared speech to her cleavage. Perhaps her fantasies weren't so far-fetched. He couldn't be gay, as she'd thought. Not if he had such a fixation for breasts. Maybe he was bi-sexual. Could she have a shot with him after all? How to see if he was interested in her, though?

"Come in, I'd love to make a contribution. My checkbook is just through here."

As Jamie followed her to her office, she felt his eyes on her backside every step of the way. If she put an extra sway in her step, well, she could be forgiven. He was too delicious to not try and attract his attention.

She wrote out the check for two hundred and fifty dollars, then handed it to him.

"Thank you." His eyes widened as he looked at the amount she'd filled in. "When would you like me to come by for the inspection?"

"You'll be doing my inspection?" She almost shouted for glee. She could think of a way to try and seduce him by then.

Suddenly he cocked his head to the side. "Did I interrupt your bath?"

"I was just about to get in, actually." Did he notice how breathless she sounded? She was about to ask him if he wanted a drink then heard the sound of water. She'd left the tap on. "Oh, crap. Excuse me for a minute."

She pushed past him and raced down the hall and up the stairs. As soon as she set foot in the bathroom she slipped, and slid across the room with a scream, banging into the old-fashioned bathtub.

"Are you okay?" Jamie's voice floated up the stairs.

She wanted to answer him and tell him she was okay, but her mouth wouldn't work. She'd fallen hard, and couldn't catch her breath. By the time she was able to talk again, he'd found her in the bathroom.

"Sorry, I forgot the water was running and I overflowed the tub. Again."

Jamie didn't answer. In fact he looked a little odd. And he was staring at her. Anne glanced down and noticed that not only had her robe slipped open, but it had twisted under her, so she was completely exposed to his view. Her shaven pussy glistened from the water and her breasts were bared.

She groaned and struggled to get to her feet, but kept getting stuck on her robe. Her face flushed with

embarrassment as she wondered if this was karmic payback for watching the two men without their knowledge and masturbating while doing it.

Jamie's arms came around her as he helped her up. Without releasing her, he leaned across to shut off the water. Her nipples pebbled when his arm brushed across her chest, and moisture pooled between her thighs. This time it wasn't from water.

As he pulled his arm back, the fabric of his shirt rubbed over the sensitive buds. A low moan escaped, but she hastily covered it up by ducking her head and grabbing the edges of her robe.

"I'm so sorry." She couldn't even meet his gaze anymore, so she looked at his stomach and caught him adjusting himself. *Damn, he's hard.* His size was impressive and left her even hornier than before.

"Um, I'm sorry." This time he blushed as she met his gaze.

"It's alright, Jamie. I'm sure the sight of any naked woman has that effect on all men."

"Not just any naked woman." He groaned and shifted as if he was uncomfortable.

The fortune teller's words came back to her, and Anne wondered if this was the time for her to take action, to make the first move. The worst he'd do would be to reject her. After this embarrassing incident she wasn't likely to see much of him again, anyway.

Anne loosened her grip on the silk and let it fall open. "It's not fair, Jamie."

"What?" he asked, his gaze alternating between her breasts and glistening pussy.

"You got to see me naked, but I didn't get to see you naked."

He gasped and looked up at her. "Are you serious?"

"Yes." She boldly held his gaze as she dropped the robe on the ground. "Or am I mistaken? Are you and Josh lovers?"

"Lovers?" He stuttered and she wondered if she was coming on too strong. She'd try one more thing, and then she'd give up. For now.

Anne brushed against him as she stepped past him, out the door. Unashamed, she strode toward her bedroom, but didn't make it more than a few feet when Jamie's warm arms wrapped around her. He tugged her up against him and buried his face in the nape of her neck.

"Where do you think you're going?"

"Does it matter?" She bit her lip, wondering what his answer would be.

"Yes. You can't tease a man like that, and then walk away as if nothing happened."

"I didn't think you were interested," she said as her hormones slipped into overdrive.

"Does this feel like I'm not interested?" he asked as he tilted his hips and pressed his erection into her lower back. "I know you watch us when we're outside working."

"You do?" She gasped when he spun her around and cupped her face.

"I do. Are you going to deny it?"

"No." She sighed and stared into his bright green eyes. "I like watching you and Josh. Especially when you two get hot and sweaty and take off your shirts as you work in the backyard."

"So you like to watch?"

The question caught her off-guard. *What does he mean?* Was she into voyeurism or did she like to watch porn flicks, or did she like to watch them working in the backyard?

"I can see your mind is going a mile a minute trying to decide how to answer my question. How about I ask an easier one? May I kiss you?"

Anticipation raced through her at the idea of his soft, full lips on hers. Breathless, she whispered, "Yes."

When his lips covered hers, she moaned and opened for him, meeting his hungry kiss with a hunger of her own. His hands tightened on her hips and pulled her even closer.

"You taste so good," he said as he trailed kisses down her neck and cupped her breasts. He kneaded one while he tugged on the other nipple with his teeth before suckling on it.

Anne arched her back and dug her hands in his hair as pleasant sensations assaulted her. She shivered when he pulled away, but heat flared inside as he took off his clothes with such haste she heard a tearing sound.

"Oops." He grinned as he looked at her.

Then they were together again, melting mindlessly as their hands explored each other's bodies.

"I need you now. I can't wait."

"Then take me, here, now." Anne sighed. This was a dream come true and she hoped it would last forever.

Jamie groaned and guided her down to the floor. He kissed and licked his way down her breasts and belly to her glistening mons. One finger slipped along her folds, then dipped inside.

"You are so wet."

"It's you. You make me this wet. Please, Jamie. I want you inside me now."

He nodded with a grin. He reached back and fumbled in his jeans until he pulled out a condom. Faster than she could blink, he had the latex out of the package and on his long, hard shaft. Without warning, he grabbed her hips and thrust inside her to the hilt.

Anne screamed and bowed her back from the force and intensity of his thrust. Tingles of pleasure shot through her as he filled her completely.

"You are so tight, Anne. So hot and wet and tight."

"Mmm." She moaned and dug her nails into the thick rug.

"Anne," he whispered her name, then withdrew from her and slammed into her again, deep and hard. Over and over he repeated his actions, until Anne could do nothing but hold on for the ride.

Cries of ecstasy ripped from her throat as Jamie continued his hard thrusts. Anne wrapped her legs around his waist and screamed as he sank in even deeper. Her body trembled with desire and need. Pants and groans filled the air as he drove into her over and over again.

Suddenly he stilled, and Anne looked up. His attention was directed to something behind her. She turned her head and saw Josh standing there, mouth open. He appeared mesmerized by the sight of the two of them.

"Josh?" Jamie gasped and looked back at Anne.

"The front door was open, and I heard a scream. Several actually. I wanted to make sure you were okay."

Jamie grinned down at Anne. "Yeah, our Anne likes to make noise."

Our Anne? She forced a smile, and returned her attention to Josh to see what his reaction was. He rubbed against his crotch and stared where she and Jamie were joined.

"I love when a woman isn't afraid to let a man know he's pleasuring her."

"See something you like?" It was out before she could stop it, but he looked up at her and the desire in his eyes made her forget the question as she clenched around Jamie.

"Yes." His answer came out in a harsh gasp as he continued to rub his jean-covered erection, and Anne couldn't help her excitement at the knowledge both of them wanted her. *Would they be interested in a ménage?*

"Well then, why don't you do something about it?"

Josh growled, and Anne tightened around Jamie.

"Damn, I think she means it, Josh. She's getting tighter and wetter as she watches you."

"Do you want me, too?" he asked as he reached for the button on his jeans.

"Yes." Again, she answered without thinking first.

"You want both of us to pleasure you until you scream to the heavens and beg us to stop?"

"Beg you to stop? Never." She laughed and shook her head. "And yes, I would like both of you to make love to me."

"Now?" Josh asked as he knelt next to her.

"Jamie?" She turned her attention back to her lover and waited for his answer. Even though he seemed to enjoy Josh watching, she didn't know if they made a habit of sharing women.

"Sure, babe. The more the merrier."

Josh grinned and lowered his head. He sucked one of her nipples into his mouth and pinched her clit with his finger and thumb.

"Josh!" she cried out, breathless, as pleasure raked through her body. Her nerves stretched taut as men both worked her toward another climax.

"Come for me, Anne."

Josh's words sent her over the edge again, and she exploded, clenching around Jamie as she screamed her release.

Jamie stiffened, then shouted her name as he came. Anne lay still and tried to catch her breath as Josh's grunts and groans filled the silence. When she glanced over she noticed he was trying to stroke himself to climax. She shook her head and grinned.

"Let me suck you, Josh."

At her words, he groaned and came on her stomach. "You are one hot babe, Anne. As soon as you recover I want my turn to fuck you."

Anne blinked and looked back and forth between the men.
"You mean you do share your women?"

They both laughed until Jamie decided to explain. "We've never shared a woman in the past. Now with you is a first for us. We've watched the other once in a while, and jacked off, but never shared. Somehow, with you, it just seems right."

* * * *

Anne looked at the clock and smiled. The men would be here soon to give her a free inspection. They explained that since she'd donated two hundred and fifty dollars she was entitled to the calendar, T-shirt, and two firemen to do her inspection.

The doorbell rang and she had to force herself to take her time answering the door. She didn't want to appear too eager.

Even though the men had stayed for dinner and a long conversation last time, there was still so much she had to learn about them. One thing she'd learned about herself was that even after making love to them she was still as attracted to them as before. Maybe even a little more. They both seemed genuinely interested in her. *Is this what the fortune teller meant?* That she would have to make a choice between the two?

Of course that is what she'd have to do if it proved one or both of them were interested in something longer term. A woman in her position couldn't have two lovers at once. She'd lose everyone's respect. Even if she owned the company, she still had to be careful in regards to her personal life.

First Josh, then Jamie greeted her with a hug and kiss. They stepped inside and dropped a duffle bag on the floor. Jamie crushed her mouth to his and devoured her as Josh grabbed her hips and pulled her back against his erection and sucked on her neck.

Her hands tightened on Jamie's shoulders as she rocked against Josh. Jamie groaned and pressed his erection against her so that no matter if she moved backward or forward one of them pressed into her.

"What about the inspection?" she asked as Jamie tugged at her shirt.

Josh helped undress her, and in a matter of seconds she stood naked between the two fully dressed men. The men shared a glance, then Josh grabbed her and spun her around. He pulled her arms behind her back and held them there with one hand while he kissed her deeply. As his other hand dipped between her legs, something furry clamped around first one wrist, then the other.

"What are you doing?" she asked, a tremor in her voice.

"Do you remember when we discussed fantasies last night?" Jamie asked as he reached in the bag and pulled out a blindfold.

"I told you I was only into bondage if I got to be in charge. Now release me."

They both laughed and shook their heads.

"We saw the excitement in your eyes when we discussed it. We both agree that you need to lose control. We want to give this gift to you. Remember when you said you'd never

beg us to stop after I promised to make love to you until you did?"

Anne slowly nodded.

"Well, that's what we're going to do. Make you beg us to stop."

Jamie slipped the blindfold over her eyes, but she was too excited to argue. They were right. She was in charge all day long, but she needed to be able to give that control to someone else. If the sex last night was anything to judge by, these two experts would leave her sated and unable to move. Odd as it was, she trusted them.

She grinned and licked her lips. "Okay."

Josh scooped her up and carried her upstairs to her bedroom. He placed her on the bed, then left her there.

"Guys?" she asked as she shivered from the sudden chill.

"Just a second, babe."

She heard them rummage in a bag and whispering, but she couldn't tell what they said, or what they had in mind.

"Ready, babe?" Josh asked as the bed dipped beneath him.

One of them joined her on the bed, then both.

"Keep your legs spread wide. Disobey and we'll have to punish you."

"P-punish me?" she stuttered.

Someone slapped her thigh and nudged her legs apart.

"You're gonna have to do better than this, babe."

"Josh," she whispered.

"Yeah, babe?"

"I'm nervous."

"I know you are. Try to trust us, sweetheart. We want to please you." This time it was Jamie who spoke.

She nodded then yelped as something cold drizzled on her stomach, thighs, and pussy.

"Mmm," Jamie moaned. "I can't wait to lick her clean."

"No way, Jamie, it was my idea, I get to lick it up first."

"What if she sucks you off and I lick her clean? Then next time we can switch?"

"Deal," Josh said as more cold liquid dribbled on her.

The sound of the men undressing reached her ears and sent a rush of fluids to her core. Anticipation burned in her veins as her stomach clenched and unclenched. She needed these men desperately. Last night hadn't even come close to easing the ache.

"You're going to suck on Josh while I eat you. You can't come until we say so. If you do then we'll have to punish you."

Anne shivered, but nodded.

A warm male settled over her, and a thick cock nudged against her lips. She opened her mouth and teased the head with her tongue, tracing the rim and dipping inside the slit.

Josh's moan must have encouraged Jamie, because then she felt a mouth on her breast, licking and sucking at the sweet smelling substance. Anne arched her back and gasped around Josh's cock as Jamie's mouth clamped on her clit and sucked on it.

As she tried to work Josh with her mouth, Jamie licked the length of her folds and then plunged his tongue in her. She cried out around Josh and squeezed her legs.

"She squeezed her legs, Josh. We need to punish her."

"Hmm." Josh pulled away from her. As she whimpered in denial, someone snapped their fingers.

"I think she wants to be spanked."

"Let me do it," Josh quickly said.

"Sure thing." Jamie chuckled and moved away from her.

Anne moaned at the loss of contact, but then Josh flipped her over and brought his hand down on her rear. She flinched, partly from the sound, but mostly at the pain that flared, then turned to heat. Two more times he brought his hand down, but never in the same spot. By the last slap she arched to meet his hand.

"It's no longer a punishment, Josh. See how eagerly she tried to meet that last one?"

"She has such a nice ass, Jamie. I could go on spanking her all night."

"I know, but I want more of her sweet pussy."

They resumed their previous positions, and she eagerly sucked on Josh while Jamie licked up and down her slick folds, lapping at every last bit of the sticky substance. When he began to thrust his fingers in and out of her, she felt an orgasm building deep within. Her legs and stomach quivered as she tried to hold back the orgasm, but it roared to life and consumed her in its intensity. With a scream around Josh's thick member, she pulsed and pulsed, coming until her legs trembled, and her breaths came in gasps.

"She failed us again, Josh."

Anne whimpered, torn between begging them to spank her again, and pleading with them to forgive her and fuck her.

They rolled her on her stomach again, and someone, she guessed it was Josh again, slapped her hard. She flinched, then moaned as the pain turned to a delicious burn. He slapped her again, even harder, and she cried out. His hand came down on her again, as before, always in a different spot, sometimes hard and sometimes softer, but always leaving her breathless in anticipation of the next one.

Someone pushed her on her knees. As one continued to spank her, two fingers slipped deep in her core. She cried out and pushed against the fingers, sucking them in deeper. Anne panted as she struggled to fight the sensations that threatened to overwhelm her. She'd already come and yet her body signaled it was more than ready to peak again.

"Guys." Was that breathless whine really hers?

"No. You can't come yet. You're being punished."

Fingers thrust in and crooked as the smacks came harder and harder until she wriggled under them, alternately trying to get away from and meet them.

"Josh, Jamie, I can't. Please. I'm going to come."

"No you won't. We didn't give you permission."

As if angered by her plea, the strikes to her ass came hard and fast, until she no longer even felt any pain at all, just a warmth that spread throughout her entire body until it consumed her. Anne lifted to meet the smacks, and drove down on the fingers over and over, all her focus on the pleasure. If they didn't want her to come then why were they giving her so much pleasure? And their punishments were so good.

Anne moaned as her juices coated the fingers. When he pressed against her clit she screamed, and exploded, the tremors never seeming to cease, even after the men withdrew their attention.

"Anne." This time it was Jamie. She wondered if he realized he sounded pleased instead of disappointed. "You've failed us again."

She shuddered as her body chilled. Why weren't they touching her?

"Okay, this is what we're going to do. You're going to suck on my cock until I come. If you do that really well, then Jamie is going to give you what you want," Josh said.

"Yes." She eagerly agreed even though she had no clue what it was she wanted, so how could he? The thought of Josh's thick cock in her mouth was enough to make her even wetter, and she shifted, impatient for more attention.

While the boys moved her into the position they wanted, they both kissed and nibbled on her body. By the time they had her situated, she was breathless and soaked with desire.

"Is this your plan? To keep me at your mercy? To keep me aroused until I can't take it anymore?" She gasped and shut her mouth as someone crawled in between her legs and spread her folds open.

"Let's see if you can pleasure Josh. If he comes before you do, then I'll give you a special reward. If you come before he does, then I'll work you back up to a fever pitch, and walk away."

She whimpered. "No. Please. I can do it this time."

Someone snickered, and then straddled her. Josh. He pressed his erection against her lips. "Are you ready for this?"

She nodded, then opened her mouth and licked at the head, lapping at the drops of pre-cum she tasted. He was as aroused as she was. Her punishments had excited them as much as they did her.

Josh slid past her lips and Jamie's tongue darted between her folds and flicked against her clit as he lapped at her juices. Determined to not come before Josh, she tried to ignore the delicious sensation of Jamie's mouth on her and focused on sucking Josh in as deep as she could. If her hands were free she'd be able to please him better.

With slow movements, Josh slid in and out of her mouth, only his low moans giving her an idea of his pleasure. Without the use of her hands, she sucked on him, trying to get him to reach his peak because Jamie's mouth was like heaven and she knew it would be impossible to last much longer.

Jamie spread her open further, and attacked her feverishly, feasting on her like a man starving, as Josh groaned and thrust deep in her mouth.

"Damn, do that again," Josh groaned. "She clamped around me like a vise when you did that."

Jamie didn't answer. Instead he sucked her clit between his lips and slid at least two fingers inside her core.

Anne moaned. When Josh groaned she realized her moan had sent vibrations up his shaft, so she moaned again and made slurping noises as she sucked on him. If he liked it, she'd do her best to please him.

"I'm going to come." Josh leaned over her, thrusting in deeper.

"Mmm, so is she," Jamie said as he pressed his fingers in deep and crooked them.

Anne rocked her hips, riding his fingers as she tried not to gag on Josh. Determined not to come first, she whimpered when Jamie licked along her slit and added another finger, stretching her as he worked them in and out slowly, so slowly she could barely concentrate on Josh because of the building sensations in her belly.

Frantically, she sucked at Josh, working him, taking him as deep as she could as she lifted her head off the bed to meet his thrusts.

Just as she hovered at the brink of her orgasm, Josh shouted her name as his cum filled her mouth. She swallowed and swallowed as he came long and hard. The knowledge that she'd done this to him with just her mouth caused her lower body to tighten.

Jamie moved away from her as Josh rolled to the side with a groan. Josh wrapped his arm over her and kissed her neck as he panted.

"Was it good?"

"Oh yeah," Josh said between deep breaths. "Did she come?"

"Nope."

"Then I guess she gets the surprise."

Anne moved on the bed. Her lower body felt neglected and the men wanted to talk instead of finish pleasing her?

"Yeah."

She could hear the smile in his voice as Jamie moved away. He situated himself between her legs and practically buried his face in her mound as he licked her from top to bottom and back up again. As she writhed underneath him, he fingered her rosette, pressing against the bud with the tip of his finger.

"Jamie!" she gasped and tensed.

"Relax, love," he whispered. Before she could even attempt to relax he sucked on her clit again, pressed two fingers in her sheath, and dipped the tip of his pinky into her ass.

Anne screamed as she came. A million stars exploded behind her closed eyes, and even as she shouted his praise to the heavens, Jamie kept thrusting his fingers into her, and pressed his pinky in even deeper as he licked at her folds.

Bucking against him, Anne clenched around his fingers and moaned as something slid into her ass. Her eyes flew open, but she couldn't see past the blindfold. She hadn't even noticed he'd removed his pinky or that he'd been priming her for something bigger. Whatever it was, it was cold, smooth, and wet as it filled her. The thought of them inserting god knew what in her ass should have scared her, but as it began to vibrate, she could do nothing more than tighten her muscles and moan.

"That's it, baby," Josh whispered as he moved away from her.

When the vibrator began to slip in and out, she realized Josh was doing that, but what was Jamie doing? *Oh please, let him bury that thick cock deep inside me.*

Before she could question him, the handcuffs released her, and the blindfold slipped free. Anne winced and blinked as her eyes adjusted to the dim lighting in the room. She looked down at Josh as he grinned up at her and slid the vibrator in deep.

She moaned and looked up at Jamie.

"Ready?" he asked.

"God, yes." She spread her legs wantonly, trying not to dislodge the vibrator or Josh.

Jamie sprawled on the bed next to her and pulled her on her side.

"Mmm," Jamie moaned as he pressed against her entrance and slowly slid inside.

As feeling returned to hands she hadn't realized were numb, she grabbed onto his muscular arms and tried to pull him close. Even though she'd come countless times, she needed him with a hunger that felt endless.

Jamie captured her mouth with his, and kissed her deeply, their tongues dancing erotically as he slid all the way inside her sheath.

"Damn, I'm jealous." Josh gasped. He crawled behind her and pressed against her as he slipped the vibrator out and in.

Anne turned to look at him, but then Jamie withdrew and slammed inside her, and she forgot everything except to feel. Arms and legs tangled together, as both men pleased her. She shivered as they warmed her from both sides, and she was filled completely.

It was almost too much to handle. Then Jamie reached between them and pressed on her clit. Even as she screamed

his name, the room faded, her body quivering and trembling until everything went black.

* * * *

Anne woke slowly. When she tried to sit up her aching muscles protested. Memories of the boys and their surprise flooded her with warmth. Gingerly, she sat up and glanced around. The sun had already set, and the moon bathed her room in a gentle glow. After all the sleepless nights dreaming of her neighbors, she'd definitely needed the rest.

Where are they? A moment of sadness tightened her throat when she realized they had left. But then she heard a noise downstairs and realized they must have wanted to let her have some sleep.

She needed a shower before she went down to talk to them. And they definitely needed to talk. Where they would go from here, she had no idea, but she'd have to say good bye sooner or later anyway.

Hoping to delay it a little longer, she took a leisurely shower and pampered her sore body while she wondered how they were going to end things. Would they thank her for the donations and be on their way? Had they already left, but finished the inspection first? Or were they waiting down there to end things face to face?

Finally, she could put it off no longer, and she made her way downstairs wrapped in her bathrobe. This way she could go drown herself in the bathtub after they left.

They were inventive lovers, and they were also correct when they said she needed to give up control. She'd never

had so many orgasms before, nor had she ever felt so loved. But love hadn't been a part of it so she'd have to get rid of that thought before it gave her any crazy ideas.

Like the three of them in this house filled with children laughing and playing. She'd always wanted a large family so perhaps that was why it was easy to imagine being married to both men.

The scent of eggs and bacon triggered her stomach into a series of hungry growls. At least one of them had the foresight to cook. As she stepped into the kitchen, she looked up and froze. Josh and Jamie stood with their hips against the counter, their arms wrapped around each other, and their mouths fused together.

Surprised, Anne stood there for a minute. At first she felt betrayed. She'd asked Jamie if they were lovers and he'd said no. Judging by this kiss they definitely were. But as they continued to kiss, oblivious to her presence, the erotic sight aroused her. She had no idea why, but watching them kiss was the hottest thing she'd ever seen.

She must have made a sound because they broke apart and turned to look at her.

"Sleeping Beauty is finally awake," Josh said as he walked over and wrapped her in a warm hug.

Anne returned his hug, forced a smile for Jamie and walked over to the table. They'd set it for three, so they probably planned to give her the brush off speech after they ate.

"Did you sleep well?" Jamie asked as he and Josh joined her at the table. They shared a glance she couldn't interpret then turned to her with expectant expressions on their faces.

"Actually, it was the best sleep I've had in a while."

"Good." Josh picked up a dish of scrambled eggs and handed it to her. "I think you needed it."

"I did. I've been very busy at work and haven't had much time to relax lately."

"Yeah, we haven't seen you working in the yard like you used to," Jamie said as he looked at Josh.

Anne blushed as she remembered how many times she watched them do yard work. In fact she'd stopped going outside when they were out there so she could watch them without fear of being caught.

Finally she couldn't keep the question silenced any longer. "Why did you tell me that you weren't lovers? It's obvious you are. Why the secrecy? Are you afraid I'll tell the neighbors? I swear your secret is safe with me."

"If Jamie told you we aren't lovers, he's right. We're not. But after what we experienced with you, we realized we had a mutual attraction for each other. We were testing it when you walked into the kitchen."

"So you've never been lovers in the past?"

"Nope. But the taste we had with you has made us want to experiment."

Anne knew she paled. She could tell because all the blood drained from her face at his statement. Not only was she a failure at keeping a man, but now she'd turned two of them gay.

"Is the idea that repulsive to you?" Jamie asked quietly.

"I think I'm just shocked. I mean I was cool with it when I thought you two were lovers, but then you said you weren't and you two kind of came across as very hetero."

"No, no. You're right. After denying it, I can't blame you for being shocked." Josh offered her more bacon.

Anne shook her head. She'd had more than enough to eat. Maybe they would just leave now so she could give in to the tears that threatened to escape.

Instead of breakfast passing quickly, like she'd hoped, it was a slow affair. Neither man seemed in a hurry to leave and she wondered why they were hanging around. *Is guilt keeping them here? Do they feel bad about coming on so strong and then leaving?*

"Well, if you two will excuse me, I have some things I need to work on. Monday deadline and all."

"Okay, we'll just clean up and get out of your way." Josh smiled as he rose.

"No, no. Finish eating. I'm not sure how long this will take, but I can clean up. After all, you two made the wonderful meal."

They shared a look and Anne realized she wasn't fooling them. *Oh, hell.* She stood up and hurried from the room. Once she was inside her office, she sagged against the door and sighed in relief. She hadn't realized she was trembling until now, so she walked over to her desk and sat down.

Without warning, the door opened and both men walked in. Anne looked up, trapped behind her desk as one walked to either side and leaned on the maple surface. She leaned back

and looked up at both of them. They wore identical expressions of grimness.

"I know what you guys are going to say. It's okay, you don't need to worry that I misinterpreted the past two days. We can forget it all happened and go back to being just neighbors."

"Is that what you want?" Jamie asked softly.

"Isn't it what you guys want?" Confusion clouded her thoughts. Why were they looking at her like this?

"No. I want you." Jamie reached for her hand. "I want *you*."

She gasped. "Oh. But what about Josh?" She looked at him.

"I want you, too."

"I have to pick? This is what the fortune teller meant. That I'd have to pick one of you."

"Why can't you pick both of us?" Jamie asked.

"That kind of thing just isn't done. Besides, would you two be satisfied sharing me?"

"I think we would." Josh grinned at Jamie. "You're worth it. Besides, you'll have to share us with each other, too."

"Oh," she said weakly. All her arguments fled at the tender expression they both gave her and each other.

"Give us a chance. Both of us." Jamie slid to the floor and knelt on one knee. "I promise you won't regret it."

"But ... how will this look?"

"Who cares what others think? You're all the woman we need, and we do need you. After all these months of watching you I won't go back to looking and not touching."

"Josh?" Jamie had done all the talking so far and she wanted him to express his opinion, too.

"I agree with him. We discussed all this while you showered this morning. We think we can make it work. With our rotating shifts it is rare we're both home at the same time. But when we are you're in for a special treat."

"Oh, my." Anne leaned back in her chair. "How can I say no to that?"

"That's the idea. You can't. So what do you say, Anne? Will you be our girl?"

"Yes." She grinned imagining repeats of last night. "Hell, yes!"

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THE EMPEROR

by

Michelle Hasker

Cynthia looked down at the plain white business card in her left hand. *Peking Place*. This was the place. The man she was looking for better be inside. If she didn't find her quarry before the others did, and if things didn't go according to plan someone would pay.

She'd wanted to scope out the place earlier, but had been ordered not to. Secrecy was of the utmost importance. Or so she'd been warned. The burning need to succeed and prove herself warred with the nagging sense of unease she'd felt since she'd been handed the assignment.

Shaking away the feelings, she stepped inside Peking Place, and was surprised to see it wasn't a Chinese restaurant. Well, that was her fault for assuming it would be. The plain brick exterior didn't give even a hint at the decadence inside. That would also explain why they had private rooms available. This main area was all wide open.

She'd made the mistake of assuming a restaurant was a front for the borderline illegal activities that went on inside. Instead they were right out in the open with it.

Couples engaged in illicit acts filled the room. Some were in booths, at tables, and off in private rooms on upper floors, whether doors were open or closed. Hell, some were getting

hot and heavy in the middle of the dance floor. A flight of stairs filled with people in various stages of sex led up to the private rooms.

She'd been warned these paranormal types preferred to fool around in the open rather than behind closed doors, but she'd never once suspected Clark was into voyeurism and kink, let alone that he was paranormal.

Five years ago, she'd briefly dated him when they'd both gone to Penn State, but then he'd graduated and moved on while she'd gone into intelligence work. Once her boss learned of her history with Clark she'd been the obvious choice to go in and obtain him. It was a good thing her boss didn't know that part of the reason they'd split up was because she hadn't wanted to participate in half of the sexual activities Clark had suggested. It wasn't because she was a prude, but hell things like that weren't normal where she came from. He'd been her first boyfriend in every sense of the word, and some of what he'd asked her to do scared her.

Cynthia struggled not to remember the words from the fortune teller, but failed. The woman's words ran through her head. She'd drawn The Emperor, and the woman had smiled at her as if she'd known things. Things no one else could possibly know. After her years with the agency, Cynthia was more open to the strange and unusual, but the woman had downright creeped her out with her accuracy and her stare.

You are in control of your environment, your body, your temper, your instincts and your love life. Those things will all be tested by a special man. As long as you remain true to yourself and give yourself permission to be aggressive, to

take command, you will come out on top. While The Emperor is usually a father figure or employer, it isn't in this case. It will be someone who will become very important to you. Someone who will become your leader.

With a snort, she glanced around the crowded room and finally found her target. Clark Hudson sat at the far end of the bar with a beer in one hand, and a stunning blonde draped all over him. Apparently he hadn't changed since college.

Thick brown hair drifted past his ears. He'd always been tall. In college he'd been six foot three inches when she'd dated him, but the agency listed him at six foot six. A little weird for him to continue growing—unless a person knew he wasn't completely human. He was more muscular now, too. The way his shirt stuck to him like a second skin, and his muscles bulged in his upper arms made her want to sink her teeth into him.

Stick to the plan, girl. Cynthia repeated the order a few times, then walked down to the end of the bar and brushed against him as she sat on the unoccupied stool on his other side. A shiver ran through her, and she was glad to note the sexual chemistry was still there. At least on her part. The blonde put a kink in her plans though, as all their information had pointed to him being single, but it was a kink she'd just have to work around. Biting back a giggle, she said the word again in her mind. *Kink.* Clark was definitely into kink.

He glanced at her, and she noted with satisfaction that his eyes lingered on the creamy flesh exposed by the wide vee in the front of her leather vest. The matching skirt barely covered her ass, but gave her enough material so she could

perch on the edge of the barstool without sticking to the vinyl.

"So what's your name, handsome?" the blonde asked, trying to draw his attention away from Cynthia.

Oh baby. So the woman wasn't with him. Cynthia grinned as Clark flashed an irritated glance at the clueless woman.

"Look, honey, I told you I wasn't interested. I'm—"

While he was talking, Cynthia leaned in front of him, giving him a free peep down her top as she reached for a book of matches. When Clark didn't finish his sentence, she knew he'd noticed the silver clover clamps and chains. After all, she'd made sure he'd see them. When she'd learned he was her target, she'd studied him and learned all his perversities. Oddly enough, most of them turned her on. She hoped convincing him to work for her boss would be more fun than work for a change.

Clark turned his attention back to the blonde, and Cynthia noticed she wasn't as dumb as she'd thought. Though she gave Cynthia a dirty look, she grabbed her drink and moved to the other end of the bar. At least she realized Clark wasn't interested. It could have gotten rather ugly.

Cynthia flipped the matchbook between her fingers as she looked at Clark. She didn't have to feign interest, thank God. He was dressed in a black t-shirt that was so tight she could see the ripples in his abdomen. His black jeans were probably just as tight, and she couldn't help wondering if he went commando.

The bartender came over and asked if she wanted a drink. Without removing her gaze from Clark, she ordered a martini.

As his eyes roamed over her outfit she grinned and slid one leg over the other so her skirt rode up an inch higher while she balanced precariously on the edge of the stool.

"I don't recall seeing you in here before," Clark said as he finally looked up and met her eyes.

"It's my first time in here." She flipped open the matchbook and reached in her purse for a pen.

"Oh." He looked away as the bartender brought her drink.

Cynthia slipped the man a twenty and told him to keep the change, then she scribbled something on the inside cover of the matchbook and slid it in front of Clark. She picked up her purse, drained her drink, set it back down and pocketed the key the bartender had slipped under her glass when he put it on the counter. With an extra sway in her hips, she headed for the stairs at the end of the bar, and made her way through the people on the steps. Finally, she reached the top. Without looking back, she turned and walked down a narrow hall that was open to the club on one side and had a red door every fifteen feet on the other. By the time she reached number five she chanced a glimpse at the bar and noticed Clark's stool was empty.

"Looking for me, baby?" he asked as he wrapped an arm around her waist and tugged her back against him.

Breathless in anticipation and desire, she slipped the key into the lock. Clark's hand covered hers and they unlocked the door and entered together. Once inside, Clark closed the door and spun her around so fast she was pinned against the hard wood before she could blink. Okay, she hadn't seen that

coming. *Just what is his special ability? And why is it such a secret?*

"Okay, darling. Talk to me. Why did you want me to come in here?"

Cynthia sighed and looked up into his emerald green eyes. "I should have known you wouldn't recognize me. I haven't changed that much since college, have I?"

His hold on her loosened as he looked her over again.

"It's me. Cynthia Ward. Was I that forgettable?"

"Cynthia? Cynthia Ward?"

She nodded and wiggled until she got her hands between them. She pressed her palms against his chest and felt his warmth. He was hard, even harder than he'd been then, but now he was a man, not a boy.

He stepped back, but didn't release her as he looked her over again.

"If you make a crack about how I used to be a goody two-shoes I'll kick you in the balls," she said, then sighed loudly as he remained silent. "It's okay if you don't want this. But when I recognized you, I couldn't pass up the opportunity to have you."

"It's not that I don't want you. It's just that you've changed. A lot. I didn't recognize you. Not only have you changed your taste in clothes, but your whole attitude is different," he said after an awkward moment.

"Did you only follow me up here to find out who I was?" Cynthia asked as she unbuttoned her vest.

"Honey, you were sending me signals no red-blooded man could resist. I followed you up here for some hot sweaty sex."

"Good." She smiled as she dropped her vest to the floor. She reached over and flicked on the light. Fortunately her crew had been in and done a thorough job. The room was prepared exactly the way it needed to be to fulfill Clark's every desire. By the time she was through with him, the man would be putty in her hands. They always were.

Clark tugged on the chain dangling between her breasts. "I see you came prepared."

"I know you were into this stuff back then. I figure by now you're hardcore with it." Cynthia unzipped her skirt and let it fall.

His eyes widened when he noticed she was sans underwear, and hairless. "You really have changed," he said as he eyed the clover clamps. A chain ran between them with another chain attached that ran to her clit which also had a clamp. She knew he loved Y clamps and had practiced until she could wear them without too much discomfort.

He tugged lightly on the chain as if he was testing her. Cynthia didn't have to feign the moan that slipped out as the clamps tightened. Her pussy grew wet as he tugged harder and all three clamps tightened even more. Torture. He was going to torture her to orgasm before she could convince him to join her team.

"Oh, sweet heaven."

"Not yet, but soon, sweetheart." Clark leaned down and captured her mouth with his.

As his lips moved over hers, hot and hungry, she fisted her hands in his dark brown hair and held him close. Clark's hand

roamed down her back. He tugged her against him, cupped her ass cheeks and lifted her up.

By the time she wrapped her legs around him, he had turned around and crossed to the king-sized bed. She'd picked the largest they had available, and made sure the room had been cleaned thoroughly before her team had brought in the toys she'd requested. They knew she hadn't been looking forward to the assignment, but if they could see her now they'd think she'd been lying to them.

Shy, repressed Cynthia had done her homework well. Not only had she learned a few things about herself, but she was no longer shy or inhibited as Clark had once called her. She'd gone to some clubs and went home with a few men to prepare herself for tonight. Just like she'd have done thorough homework on any other assignment.

Clark tossed her onto the bed and tugged his clothes off. When he finished, he stood, staring at her as she lay there spread eagle, watching him.

"This was how I saw you all those years ago," he whispered.

Cynthia bit back a snort. It would only kill the mood if she contradicted him or reminded him of how things had really gone down. Instead she focused on his body and how nicely sculpted he was. Like the fortune teller told her, she needed to remain in control. She was in charge. No more shy, naïve Cynthia.

"How did you find me?" he asked as he stalked over to the bed and knelt between her legs. "This was no chance encounter."

"I'm all grown up now, Clark. When I want something, I get it. And I want you back."

"So you set out to capture me? What do you really want?" he asked as he sat back, suspicion in his expression.

"Our relationship was a failure. I don't like having that hanging over me. I want to prove to you that I can match you in the bedroom and that you were wrong about me."

"My rejection has bothered you this much?" His expression softened, probably from guilt.

"I wanted to prove it to myself and to you."

As he stared at her, she realized she needed to take back control. She'd allowed the past to overshadow who and what she'd become, and that would be the death of her mission. Time to make him want her more than he wanted to talk.

Cynthia tugged on the clamps and moaned. She slipped one hand between her legs and pushed a finger between her folds, grinning when his eyes darkened. "Are you going to fuck me, or just sit there and watch me do this myself?"

At her words Clark growled and grabbed onto her thighs. He lowered his mouth to her mons and breathed in deep.

"Mmm, you smell as delicious as I remember."

"You remember how I smell?"

"I remember everything about you, darling. Including the little mewling sounds you make right before you come."

At his soft words, his breath brushed over her folds, and moisture pooled between her thighs, coating her finger.

"May I?" he whispered.

Obediently, Cynthia pulled out her finger, but before she could do more than that, he captured it in his mouth. His

tongue swirled around her digit as he sucked and licked on it. She moaned, and squeezed her legs together as more fluid trickled between her thighs.

Sex with Clark had been spectacular, and no other man she'd been with had compared, but the strength of her reaction startled her. *He's an assignment, nothing more than an assignment. Remember that. Don't leave yourself open for more hurt.*

Without warning, he released her finger with a loud pop, and then licked along the length of her slit. Fisting her fingers in the sheet, she spread her legs open and arched, hoping he would ease the ache burning inside. She wanted him mindless with need, but he was quickly turning the tables on her as he drew his tongue along her folds and flicked it against her clit. If she had an orgasm she should be able to regain the edge she needed to ensnare him.

"Clark," she gasped and released the sheets to fist her hands in his hair.

He moaned, the sound vibrating her tight nub, and she pressed into his face as a rush of fluids trickled down her thigh. Clark moved his attention and lapped at her juices. He spread her open with his hands and feasted on her, licking and sucking on her sensitive flesh, drawing loud moans from her.

All thoughts of her mission fled under his sensual onslaught. Tension coiled in her stomach and spread through her body like a forest fire. Shaking with desire, she could do nothing but lay there and writhe as he tugged on the clamp attached to her clit and slid his index finger between her

folds. With steady, slow movements, he added another finger to the first and pumped them in with more force as he increased the pressure on her clit.

Tremors ran through her body, when he yanked on the chain and all three clamps tightened at once. Cynthia cried out and bowed her back as she came all over his fingers. Even as her fluids coated his hand, he thrust his fingers in her deep and fast, harder and harder until she screamed his name in another longer, more earth-shattering orgasm.

"You were always so easy to bring to orgasm."

Cynthia gasped and sat up, punching at his chest.

"It was a compliment, babe."

She narrowed her eyes and pressed him on to his back. "I'll show you easy to please." She growled and slid her hand down to cup him.

"Mmm," he moaned.

Wiping that smirk and quiet control off his face was going to be the highlight of her night. That and getting him to sign on the dotted line.

Cynthia leaned down and slid her tongue around the tip of his cock, teasing and tormenting him. He was all hot, soft flesh over hard steel, and she wanted him buried deep inside her. With a mental shake, she focused on pleasuring him. Clark moaned when she licked at the drops of pre-cum leaking from the slit. With a murmur of pleasure, she drew his head into her mouth and sucked on it as she slid her fingers up and down the length of his shaft.

He thrust deeper but she didn't protest, instead she took him in, deep throating him as he fucked her mouth. Cynthia

squeezed his sac with one hand and wrapped the other around the base of his shaft and pumped him.

Faster and harder, he drove himself into her mouth as his panted breaths turned to moans and pleas for more. She scraped her teeth along his cock and wet her finger before she slid it down his body and up to his ass. As she pressed her digit against the opening, he cried out and shot his cum deep into her throat.

Cynthia sucked every last drop from him as she slipped the tip of her finger inside his ass. Clark tightened around her and drew her finger in deeper. His eagerness to accept this act shouldn't have surprised her, but it did. She'd known he liked to give it in the ass, but never learned that he liked to take it there, too. Perhaps he wouldn't mind if she called her partner in for a little assistance.

"I don't know whether to be jealous of the men you've been practicing on, or grateful." Clark laughed.

"You can't be jealous," Cynthia said as she crawled up him, dragging the y chains across his stomach. She moaned as they tugged on her simultaneously.

"Did you really look me up just to have sex?"

Cynthia laughed as she propped herself on his chest. She ignored how good his muscles felt under her, and the way feeling him made her pussy tighten in anticipation. "Yes, I want to have sex with you. All night long, and possibly longer if you're willing."

"And if I'm not willing?"

"We'll see about that when I'm through with you."

"Cynthia, you aren't thinking about marriage, are you?"

She couldn't stop the laughter that slipped through her lips. "Marriage?"

"I had to be sure. I'm not the type to settle down, and—" He stopped in mid-sentence as she dragged her pussy over his soft cock. He hissed and pressed against her.

With an evil grin, she reached up and fondled her breasts. "How long do you think it will be before you're ready to go again?"

"You've become one lusty babe," he said, admiration evident in his voice. "I'm so glad you got rid of whatever was repressing you."

"Keep talking, Hudson. You're making me want to leave you here and go find a more virile specimen to fuck tonight."

"Hell no!" he shouted as he flipped her over in a smooth motion and pinned her beneath him.

His cock twitched, and she realized he was getting hard already. So it really was true that paranormals could give more pleasure in one night than a normal. Clark rolled her, then grabbed her waist and tugged on her so her ass was in the air. As his shaft pressed against the crack of her ass, she moaned and pressed back into him.

"Slow down, woman," he growled as he grabbed her waist and held her still.

He reached around and tugged on the chain. Cynthia cried out and arched against him as the clamps tightened painfully. All of a sudden his open palm connected with her ass, and she jerked forward. Because his hand still held the chain, the clamps tightened even more.

Before she could protest, the hot pain turned into pleasure as the stinging lessened. His hand came down again, and she cried out and bucked once more. Her head spun as the clamps did their job, creating a pain/pleasure on her nipples and clit while Clark slapped her ass over and over again. Never in the same spot, the slaps increased in both speed and strength as he spanked her.

"Clark!" she screamed, sensations flooding her system, pleasure and pain mingling and becoming one until she found herself rising to meet the slaps. Cream slipped down her thighs as her pussy clenched around air.

As if hearing her unspoken need, he moved closer and rammed his cock deep inside her. He thrust deep and fast into her pussy until Cynthia tightened around him and came in an explosive orgasm. He didn't relent, though. Over and over he pounded into her, the sound of his wet flesh striking hers only fueled her lust, and kept her still tingling body from calming down.

With his hands on her hips, he tugged her back against him as he thrust up into her, giving her an even deeper penetration. As she struggled to catch her breath she heard his guttural groans and knew he was close. Cynthia squeezed her muscles and whimpered. Clark roared as he came hard, his hot cum filling her.

Cynthia collapsed on her stomach, and Clark rolled to her side. He pulled her close and rubbed her back as she struggled to catch her breath. She'd thought taking lessons from a dominant would prepare her for this, but she'd been wrong. Sex had never been this good. Ever. But it was Clark.

And he'd crushed her in the past. If she wasn't careful he'd do it again. Not because he was cruel, but because he was searching for someone or something he couldn't find.

In the end it didn't matter what she wanted or how she felt. The agency wanted him, and the agency would get him. She was definitely getting too old for this. If she could let him get under her skin like this and she'd only been in his company for ... she glanced at the clock ... thirty minutes, then chances were good she wouldn't last the rest of the year. Losing one's touch in their prime was unheard of. What would she do? She wasn't old enough to retire. One didn't just leave the agency either.

"A penny for them?"

"Hmmm?" Cynthia looked up at Clark.

His eyes gleamed in the dim lighting, reminding her of a wolf. She blinked, and jerked back, but his eyes were their normal shade of blue when she looked into them once more.

"A penny for your thoughts. I can almost hear them whirling around inside your mind."

"I was just wondering how long it would be before you were ready for more."

"I'll be ready soon enough, you vixen. What I really want to do, though, is remove those clamps and suck on your tits and clit. I want to make you come again, just from sucking on you."

Cynthia shivered as she tried to comprehend what was happening. His words set her on fire and created sensations in her she'd never known before. In their younger years he'd never been this way with her, but then again, when he'd

asked her try something new she'd always shied away from it in favor of what he called vanilla sex. It had hurt, but she hadn't been surprised when he'd told her she wasn't woman enough for him. That he needed things she couldn't give, but others were more than willing to. Sometimes she wondered if he'd said that just to make her give in, but she'd refused, and he'd stormed out, leaving her in tears.

"You are different," she said instead of saying what she really wanted to. The past would just have to stay there, in the past. Her assignment was to find a way to get him to join the agency. At any price. She wondered what he was that the agency was so determined to have him. It wasn't often she heard that, in fact this was the first time they had ever used that phrase with one of her missions. *At any price.*

"So are you, Cynthia. You've grown into one hot little number."

She fought the urge to roll her eyes. *A hot little number?* She was more than that. A lot more. Instead, she shrugged and wrapped her arms around him. *What will it take to get him to reveal his secret?* Her partner had suggested she 'fuck his brains out.' That always worked for him in the past. He told her that once you pleasure someone enough, they'll spill their guts and more.

Hoping Scott was right, she ran her hands over Clark's broad shoulders and down his back. She lifted her leg and draped it over him, pressing closer as she removed the clamps and tossed them across the room. As she rubbed her sore nipples against his smooth chest, she felt him beginning to stir to life beneath her again.

"I should go clean off if you really want to eat me out again."

"You got a room with a bathroom? Sweet. Come on. I want to wash you," Clark said as he untangled himself from her and walked over to a small door on the back wall.

"Only the best for me, Clark. I might not have had much growing up, but I won't accept anything less than the best now."

Clark turned to her with a wide grin. "I'll give you some more of the best after I wash you."

Cynthia groaned as she rose. Gingerly, she tested her muscles as she climbed off the bed. She wasn't really sore at all, which was a good thing, since he'd only actually taken her once. By morning Scott would probably have to carry her out of here. *Who knew there really were men who could keep going and going like the damned Energizer Bunny? Is it medication or something supernatural?* It didn't matter what kind of creature he would turn out to be. She'd been trained to handle all of them, and worked only with other paranormals. It was kind of odd that she was the only normal in her group. In fact, she was one of the only three normals who worked for the agency.

"Come on, slowpoke!" he called out from the bathroom.

Cynthia grabbed a duffle bag by the door and brought it into the bathroom.

"What's that and where did it come from?" he asked. His eyes narrowed as he pinned her with his gaze. A shiver ran up her spine.

"I came prepared. The sheets on the bed are mine, the toys are all mine, and I brought some goodies."

"You were awfully sure of me, weren't you?" he asked, his stance weary as she set the bag on the counter.

"If you don't trust me, then go. I can find someone else to come up here and satisfy me. I'm not the same old Cynthia. You can't push me around like you used to." She opened the bag and dug inside for soap and shampoo. As she grabbed the necessities, she moved past him and turned on the shower. "It's fine, Clark. You satisfied my curiosity *and* gave me two orgasms."

"Three."

She ignored him and continued, "What more could a girl ask for?"

Clark growled and grabbed her. He spun her around and backed her against the wall as he leaned into her.

"I don't know what to make of the new you. I loved the old Cynthia, but I can't get enough of the new Cynthia. You've gotten into my blood and I have this insatiable appetite for you. Actually, I've always had this hunger for you. But you denied me before. I don't know what to do first or second or third..."

Cynthia grinned and slid her body up and down his, since the way he had her pinned didn't enable any other movement. "Gee, Clark. You've got more stamina than any other guy I've ever been with."

He growled and turned her, shoving her into the shower and following her inside. "While you're with me there will not

be any other guys. And I won't hear you talk about them either."

"Then maybe you'd better get busy washing me so I don't remember them," Cynthia whispered before she bit his shoulder, then sucked on the spot.

Clark growled and led her under the spray. He grabbed the soap and loofah and proceeded to clean every single inch of her. There wasn't one spot he missed, and by the time he finished she was weak in the knees and breathless.

"Name one of your other lovers," he demanded.

"What?" Cynthia blinked as she stared up into his eyes. She licked her lips. "Name?"

"That's what I thought."

He grinned as he shut off the water and wrapped her in a towel he'd found in her bag. After he dried her, then himself, he scooped her up and carried her back into the bedroom. He set her down on the bed and spread her legs wide open. Then he stood back and stared down at her. After a minute she began to feel suspicious and went to close her legs.

"No!" he said harshly. "Spread your legs wide and keep them that way. I'm not done looking at you."

"Oh," she whispered, stomach tightening in desire.

"Use your hands and spread yourself open for me."

Obediently, Cynthia reached down and did as instructed. Clark licked his lips as he stared at her for another full minute at least. She whimpered, and fought the urge to stroke herself as her desire increased to an almost unbearable level under his lustful gaze. Why didn't he touch her or say something?

"Touch yourself," he said in a harsh whisper.

Cynthia looked at his eyes as she slid one finger in her sheath, and pressed against her clit with her thumb.

"More," he said as his eyes darkened.

Heat flooded her as she realized he was enjoying the show as much as she enjoyed touching herself. Encouraged by his response, she withdrew her finger and rubbed her cream on her clit. As she rubbed the tight, sensitive nub, she slipped two fingers in her core. She slid them in and out, slow at first, then harder and faster as her muscles tightened and tingles began to spread from her feet up to her belly.

Keeping her eyes on him, she rode her fingers until she crested over the edge and shattered into a million pieces. Tremors raced through her body, and she panted, trying to catch her breath.

Without warning, Clark descended on her. He tugged her fingers free and thrust them in his mouth, sucking on them, cleaning off every last drop of her cum. Moaning, she turned her head from side to side as tension began to build in her stomach again.

When he finished with her fingers, he pressed his open mouth over her core and kissed her in a way she'd never dreamed of. Licking, sucking, and thrusting his tongue inside her, he worked her body like a finely tuned instrument. He had her moaning and fisting her hands in the sheets as she writhed under his ministrations. Cynthia couldn't believe he was capable of doing this to her, of bringing her to orgasm after orgasm after earth-shattering orgasm.

She screamed when he sucked her clit into his mouth and rammed several fingers inside her. As he sucked on her clit and crooked his fingers, her body continued to spasm, her muscles clenching and unclenching around his fingers.

Clark pulled out his fingers and spread moisture between her ass cheeks, coating her rosette with cream.

"Oh God," she chanted over and over as he pressed against the opening.

"Yes, baby?" He chuckled against her mons before he began to lick her, lapping up all her juices and bringing her back to the edge quickly.

"Damn," she cursed, tears flowing down her cheeks as he pressed his finger in her ass. Even with all her preparation for this, and knowing that he enjoyed anal sex with his partners, Cynthia hadn't been able to get past her inhibitions enough to let anyone take her that way. But the way she felt as he pressed in there, the fire igniting beneath her skin and spreading through her belly and lower limbs, left her hungry for more. She drew in a deep breath and pressed down on him, but winced at the slight pain.

"Relax, baby," he whispered. "You haven't had anyone this way, have you?"

"No," she whimpered and shook her head.

"Good." The pleasure in his voice was her undoing.

As he gently bit her clit, then sucked on it, she felt his digit slide in to the hilt. She drew in a breath and held it, pleasure shooting through her as he pulled it back out slowly, then pressed it back in.

"Oh, God," she moaned, legs quivering as he brushed against her just right, and a tremor ran through her.

"Ohh, you liked that," he said as he looked up and met her eyes. "Right here?"

She wasn't sure if it was a question or not, but as he rubbed against it again she whimpered and pressed against him desperate for more.

"Not tonight, but soon, baby. I'm pretty large, and I don't want to hurt you. We need to prepare you before I take you this way. Flip over." He released her and moved back.

Breathless, she flipped over onto her hand and knees, and thrust her ass in his face.

"That's my girl," he growled as he moved behind her. He dipped his fingers into her core and spread more of her juices on his fingers before he slipped his cock deep into her.

"Clark." His name came out on a sigh as he sank in to the hilt. He slipped his finger back into her ass and pumped her from both ends as she rocked against him.

She barely recognized her own voice as she cried and begged for more, pleaded with him to fuck her harder and faster. And when he responded by obeying her, she bucked wildly under him, thrashing as something built deep inside her, something fierce that clawed at her insides, trying to get out. Cynthia screamed his name and clenched down on him as she came fiercely.

Hazy with lust and desire, she milked his cock as he continued to thrust deep and fast inside her. Over and over he rammed her until her teeth rattled against each other. Lightheaded, and dizzy from either lack of air, or

overexertion, Cynthia felt the bite on her shoulder and then nothing for a few seconds, until finally there was a searing pain as he pierced her flesh with his teeth.

Wolf! Her mind screamed at her as he thrust over and over again. He was a wolf. She shivered and collapsed on the bed, forcing the panic deep down inside. If he smelled her fear it would encourage his inner beast to unleash. *Shit! No wonder they want him. Ex-military and a wolf-shifter.* His kind was rare. The fact the agency had sent her after him worried her. They knew she feared wolves. She had an empathy with them that made no sense to her, and yet she was terrified of the beasts.

"Cynthia?" Clark's voice came from far away. "Cynthia, calm down, honey. Take a deep breath."

She tried to listen to him, tried to obey, but her fear was overpowering as she tried to buck him off her. Cynthia bolted off the bed and retreated to a corner where she crouched down and faced him. Not taking her eyes off him for a second, she reached back and wiped her hand across her shoulder. Her hand came away covered in blood. Her blood.

"Please, Cynthia."

"Oh, God," she gasped and held up her hand, palm out, as he stepped toward her.

"Cynthia, baby. I got a little carried away. It's not as bad as it looks."

She whimpered, and backed up until she was pressed against the wall.

Clark stopped and stared at her as he ran a hand through his hair. "I guess you know my secret," he said softly.

She nodded and tried to speak, but the only sound that came out was a squeak.

"I can control it. But your fear is making it hard."

Shaking, Cynthia inched her way toward another duffel bag, this one near the bed. Her team had left her protection in case she needed it. Now she just needed to get it without letting him catch her.

She took a deep breath and dove for the bag as he launched himself at her. Intellectually, she knew he'd jumped on her instinctively, but her fear told her he wanted to kill her. Tears streamed down her face as she grabbed onto the bag.

"Cynthia, stop," Clark begged. "You have to stop. Your fear is bringing out the beast in me."

"God." She sobbed and pulled the bag toward her.

Clark grabbed the bag and tossed it across the room as he flipped her onto her back and pinned her on the floor. Cynthia snarled at him, her hands going for his face as she tried to bite him.

"Holy shit!" he gasped as he released her.

As Cynthia dashed across the room, she passed in front of the mirror. Her reflection made her freeze in place. She stared at the grey wolf looking back at her. As she blinked, the wolf did too. Panic hit her full force and she howled as she raced for the door. A large, furry body landed on her and

pinned her to the floor. She only realized it was Clark when he bit her shoulder and rammed inside her.

Whimpering, she tried to shake him off, but he only bit down harder, pinning her beneath him. Her fear was fueling him, but she couldn't stop the sob that escaped as he came inside her. Sated, his beast calmed, he pulled out and shifted back to human as he held her. Cynthia shook as he held her and rubbed her, crooning softly to her as she returned to her normal self.

"You didn't know, did you?" he asked gently.

"No." She shook her head. "How was I supposed to know you weren't human?"

"I meant you didn't realize *you* weren't."

Cynthia stared at him. What was he trying to say? That she was a wolf all along?

"I know you feel bad for turning me into a wolf, but don't think I'm stupid enough to believe I've been one all along." She laughed at him and tugged herself free.

"Do you think you can turn into wolf from a love bite?"

"Love bite? Hell, you wounded me!"

"It looks worse than it is," Clark said as he walked toward her with his hands gesturing he meant no harm. "Honey, if everyone who was bit by a wolf turned into one, there'd be a lot more of us. It takes more than one bite to make you a wolf. I don't know how you didn't know, or why you took so long to make your first change, but you are a wolf-shifter."

"No." She shook her head as she backed up.

"Yes. Think about it, Cynthia. It explains why we were so strongly attracted to each other in college. I knew I needed a

wolf mate, but I couldn't stay away from you. Subconsciously I must have known. I think it was your fear that triggered this change. Maybe it was my bite?"

Cynthia shivered and reached for her clothes.

"Baby, talk to me. You're scaring me. You're the one who searched me out. You can't give me hope and then run away."

She couldn't. Couldn't talk, couldn't look at him. She needed to leave, to get as far away from him as possible. The guys would have to recruit him, she was done. She'd never agreed to let a shifter turn her.

She yanked her clothes on and ran to the door before Clark could do more than pull his pants on. When she pulled the door open and raced through it, she ran straight into wall of solid muscle. Cynthia looked up into the eyes of her partner.

"Scott," she cried out as she threw herself into his arms.

"What's going on?" Scott asked. His deep, calm voice reassured her, even as his arms came around her and held her close.

Cynthia felt some of her fear leaving. Scott was a vampire, and as such, she knew he could hold his own against Clark. Maybe she could too, but she didn't want to try shifting again and find out.

"That's a good question. Who the hell are you?" Clark demanded.

It might have been cowardly, but she buried her face against Scott's chest and prayed Clark would just disappear.

Scott stepped in the room and shut the door. When she looked up at him in confusion, he kissed her lightly on the forehead and pushed her behind him.

"I'm Cynthia's partner."

Clark's face would have been hysterical if she wasn't so terrified of him. "Well you aren't doing a good job satisfying her if she's out trolling for old boyfriends to fuck."

Scott's face paled, and his hands clenched at his sides. "My partner in the business sense, not in the biblical. And you better watch what you say about her. Wolf or not, I'll take you out."

"Wolf?" Cynthia looked up at the back of Scott's head. "How did you know he's wolf?"

"I could tell by his blood and his scent."

"You can tell if someone's a wolf by just smelling them?" She blinked in confusion. "But then that means you already knew he was a wolf. And you didn't warn me? You let them send me in here with the one thing that scares me more than anything else?"

"I wasn't allowed to tell you," he answered softly.

"Damn you!" she shouted, crying as she beat her fists on his back.

"What is going on here? I'm not in the loop and I better be, or in the next five seconds I'm going to end your existence, vampire." Clark took a step forward.

"Spill it all, Scott," Cynthia said as she stepped to the side, but made sure he remained between her and Clark.

"Cyntha was supposed to recruit you for our agency."

"What agency?"

"It's more than an agency, actually. You're ex-military, think about it. I'm sure you can figure out what we're talking about."

"That's what this was all about?" Clark frowned at her. "This was a set up? You lured me up here to ask me to join your group?"

Cynthia flushed as she looked away.

"You really have changed!" Clark grabbed his shirt and yanked it on. "I can't believe I let myself hope there could be something between the two of us."

She flushed even more as she refused to speak. Anything she could say would only make it sound worse. Instead she'd have to deal with the most urgent dilemma.

"Scott, he made me into a wolf."

"What?"

"He bit me and drew blood, then I turned into a wolf."

"Ahh." Scott grinned.

"I don't think you realize what I'm saying."

"Honey, you've been a wolf all along. You know the agency only hires paranormals."

Cynthia stuttered and stared back and forth between Scott and Clark. "I was not."

"You were." Scott nodded. "The gene is dormant in you. It probably was triggered when he drew blood. You admit how terrified you are of wolves, add in the fact he bit you, cluing you in to what he is, and it's no wonder you made the transformation."

"I told you this was a stupid idea," Clark complained as he sat down on the bed. "She probably would have handled this better if we'd done it my way."

"What the hell are you two talking about? You know each other?" Panic raced through her at the familiarity between the two. And the way they were talking made it sound like ... "Did he know what I was doing all along?"

"I should probably explain it to her," Scott said as he watched her nervously.

"And after she mops the floor with you, she'll start in on me!" Clark laughed.

"Start talking!" Cynthia demanded.

"We recruited Scott a few months ago. When he saw you at headquarters, he asked about you, and he let slip that you two had a past. I didn't know he wasn't aware of what you were. In fact, I'm not sure why he didn't know you were wolf, but he didn't. What he did know was that he's been miserable without you."

"You're my mate," Clark said. "I didn't realize it back then when I hurt you, but as the years passed I realized what I'd thrown away. But since I didn't know you were a wolf, I thought there could be no future for us."

Cynthia leaned against the door and slid to the floor. "So all along, everyone has known I could turn into a wolf, except me?" When there was no answer she looked around the room trying to ignore the pain in her chest.

"She's not taking this as well as you said she would," Clark said as he looked at Scott.

"Keep talking," Cynthia glared at him. "I still don't understand."

"You're a smart woman."

"All I can think right now is that you all tricked me. I took lessons and spent my days and nights learning how to be a fucking submissive so you could make me turn into a wolf. I was supposed to be recruiting him, but instead he's already one of us."

"The powers that be were tired of waiting for your latent ability to surface. They wanted to force you. I thought this way would be easier than what they'd planned."

Cynthia shivered at Scott's words. She remembered the last time she'd witnessed someone who'd thought they were normal be forced to realize they were more. It paled in comparison to this.

"You made love to me. Over and over again, trying to force me to reveal my ability?"

"Why not?" Clark snapped. "It was no more than you planned to do to me. Wasn't it?"

Cynthia opened her mouth, then closed it when she realized he was right. She'd set out to seduce Clark and get him to work for the agency. She'd been more than willing to use her body for the agency, so why shouldn't he? But it hurt.

She buried her face in her hands as the pain consumed her. Warm hands covered hers, and pulled them away.

"We're both guilty of something terrible. But can I tell you why I was so willing to seduce you and trick you into realizing what you were?"

She blinked back tears and nodded.

"Once I learned you were wolf, I realized you *are* my other half, my mate. The only reason I chased you away all those years ago was because I didn't know. All I knew was that I'd outlive you and I didn't want to put you through all the extra issues I have to deal with as a wolf-shifter. If I'd known then what I know now, I'd never have let you go."

Cynthia wrapped her arms around herself and rocked back and forth on the floor. Okay, she could understand now why he'd broken up with her. And it was true that he'd set out to seduce her, but she'd done the same thing. Even if it had been under orders. Apparently he'd been under orders too.

"Think about us, Cynthia. Forget the agency right now. I want to know where I stand with you. I want to know if I've blown my chance to win you back. I want to spend the rest of my life with you."

She looked up at him and saw the concern etched in his features. She could feel his pain or was that her own?

"We've both made mistakes, but we were both following orders. If you want to hate me, go ahead. But you are guilty of the same thing you hate me for."

"Are you saying that you love me? That you want to be my ... mate?"

"Yes." Clark sank to his knees.

She looked around and realized Scott wasn't in the room anymore.

"He did his mist thing and evaporated when you were crying."

"Oh."

She didn't know what to say. She hadn't been pining away for him. She'd been plotting ways to get even with him for being so cruel to her. But now she knew why he'd treated her the way he had. He'd wanted to end all contact with her. He'd loved her as much as she'd loved him, but he hadn't even considered making her a wolf. He hadn't wanted to change her, to make her like him so he could have her. Wasn't that more important than the way he'd tricked her into discovering she was like him?

"I thought only cats held down their partners as they fucked."

Clark laughed. "I couldn't fight the urge to mark you, and well, I needed to hold you down or you'd have bolted. Don't believe stereotypes."

Cynthia shivered. Clark wrapped his arms around her before she could protest.

"I know you're mad at me. Hell, you probably hate me. I really do love you. I went along with this plan because not only do I love you, but I agreed with the boss. You should be aware of the wolf that runs in your veins."

"I hate wolves," she moaned, but wrapped her arms around him as she melted into his. He felt so good, and more importantly, she felt safe. Secure. Loved. How could she not believe him? But no way would she give up her control.

"Why?"

"I don't know. But if you think this gives you the right to tell me what to do, you've got another think coming, buddy."

"I didn't realize how badly I hurt you back then," he whispered as he tugged her even closer.

"It hurt, but I got over it."

"Did you really? I never got over you, Cynthia. You were always on my mind. Why do you think I'm still single?"

"I-I don't know. I didn't think about it, except how much I wanted to prove you wrong."

"So I was on your mind." He grinned. "Was I on your mind every time you made love with another man? Did you compare me to him and find him lacking?"

"Damn you!" she cursed as she smacked his chest. "You are so egocentric."

"You love me," he said and kissed her forehead.

"I do not." She narrowed her eyes and pushed at him.

"Fine. I love you, and I don't care if you want to just use me for my body."

Clark kissed her, gently this time, stealing her breath as his mouth moved slow and soft over hers. She melted against him, desire coiling in her stomach. Though she'd protested, her body had still hungered for him, even when she'd tried to run from him. The fear hadn't stopped her from wanting to feel him pounding inside her again.

"It's the wolf in you. It recognizes me and wants to be possessed. You don't have to fight it. It's part of you, fighting will only make it worse."

"I don't want to fight it." Cynthia sighed. "Make love to me, Clark."

His eyes lit as he scooped her up and carried her over to the bed. He set her down and they both stripped off their clothes, then met in the center of the bed in a tangle of limbs. This time wasn't like the others. As Clark lowered on top of

her, his caresses were gentle and patient. He massaged her breasts and sucked on her lower lip.

Cynthia moaned and scraped her nails down his back to his ass, where she massaged him. When he switched to the other breast and nipple, she slid her legs around him and rubbed against him.

"Slow down, baby. I've done you a terrible injustice by taking you hard and fast. I want to make it up to you," he said as he pulled away from her.

Cynthia sighed, but not in disappointment as she lowered her legs and arms. She ran her hands up and down his arms as she met and held his gaze. Her heart twinged, and she gasped as she lost herself in a sea of deep blue. Something happened inside, like a dam bursting, and warmth spread through her body as her heart swelled.

His mouth met hers again, and she gave into the sensations that coursed through her. The desire, the need to feel love, to be cuddled and held tight. Cynthia wrapped her arms and legs around him and rolled him over as she kissed him until she was breathless, and then kissed him some more. Without a word or sound of protest, he matched her, kiss for kiss as he wrapped his arms around her and held her tight.

As wonderful as she felt being held, she wanted more. Needed more. Cynthia deepened the kiss, then trailed open-mouthed kisses down his neck to his carotid. She gently bit him and whimpered as his hands tightened around her. As she began to move, rubbing her damp mound against his

hard cock, Clark reached down, spread her open, and thrust inside.

Cynthia arched her back and froze, letting the delicious sensation of being filled block out every other thought and feeling. Just his cock, buried in her to the hilt. A long, low moan filled the room, and she realized with surprise that it came from Clark. Her eyes flew open, and then she realized they'd been tightly clenched shut. As she looked down at him, his face contorted in ecstasy, his cock twitched deep inside and his balls pressed against her.

Slowly, she pressed down on him even though he was in all the way, and was rewarded with another moan. His sexy noises rushed liquid to her core, and she felt it drip past his cock as she sat there, just enjoying the sensation of being completely filled.

"Sweet, Cynthia. I love you," he said as he dug his fingers into her hips and pressed up into her.

"I love you too," she whispered as she ground herself back and forth on him.

She realized that as his sounds aroused her even more, hers had the same effect on him. Shivering, she looked down at him and watched his face.

She'd never seen a more beautiful sight. His mouth curved up and his lips parted slightly as he panted. The control he exerted to keep from taking charge and thrusting into her was obviously taking a toll on him as his hands shook on her hips.

"You feel like heaven," he said as he opened his eyes and focused on her face.

"So do you." She moaned and arched her back as she rose up and slid down on him.

"Yes," he hissed and reached up to cup her breasts. He kneaded them and pinched her nipples as she began to ride him.

With as slow a pace as she could stand, she rose above him, then sank down on him, over and over until his breath hitched and his hands tightened. When he thrust up into her and tried to hold her there, she knew he was close to coming. Hell she was too. She'd never experienced anything this passionate, this soft, with anyone, and she knew she'd treasure this moment forever.

"Cynthia," he said and repeated her name over and over as his body shook under hers.

Determined to make him explode, she leaned forward and kissed him again, hard and deep as he twitched, impatient inside her. Cynthia grinned and then moved, lifting then slamming herself back down on him. He grunted, eyes wide open as he stared at her in pleasure. Again, she moved up and then sank on him fast and hard. Clark shouted her name as he came, his hot cum filling her as her own orgasm swept over her, catching her off-guard.

She clenched around him, milking him as she rode her climax until she collapsed on top of him, thoroughly sated, and feeling complete. His arms flew around her, his hands caressing her back as he gasped for air. He kissed the top of her head and closed his eyes with a sigh.

"I've died and gone to heaven," he said finally.

"No. You're certainly not dead. But this is heaven."
Cynthia sighed and kissed his chest as she closed her eyes.

"You're mine. You can't leave me now," he said. She heard the catch in his voice and knew his fear, because she felt it, too.

"You're wrong, Clark. You're mine. And you're going to spend the rest of your life loving me and pleasuring me."

"Only if you marry me and make an honest man of me."

"When?" She wanted to look at him, but she was so tired from the excitement and sex that she didn't even try.

"Tonight. We'll fly to Las Vegas. You can have a fancy wedding later, but I need to make you mine as soon as possible."

"I don't need a fancy wedding, Clark. All I need is you."

"About damned time you realized it." He chuckled.

"As long as you worship the ground I walk on and listen to everything I say, we'll be okay."

He laughed again, his chest rumbling underneath her.
"Seeing how I'm your new boss, that might make things a little awkward at work."

She froze and looked up at him. "Damn. That fortune teller was dead on accurate. I've got a deal for you. I obey your every command at work, but when you get home you answer to me."

"I'm an alpha, honey. You can't expect me to obey you."

She arched an eyebrow and stared at him. "I'm an alpha, too, honey. And you damn well better obey me in the bedroom."

"I'm too tired to spank you, but when I wake up, you're getting beat for talking to your master like that."

Cynthia laughed. "Not if I spank your delectable ass first."

"Mmm." Clark sighed. "I can't wait to get *in* your ass."

Cynthia shivered as his eyes darkened. "Oh no you don't. Nap first. Then we can play King of the Mountain."

Clark grinned and held her tighter. "Anything you say, my love."

Cynthia sighed and placed her head on his chest again. She had a lot more to say when she wasn't so damned tired.

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THE DEVIL

by

Tina Bendoni

Tabitha looked up at the water stain in the ceiling and debated crying. *Why bother? It won't fix anything. Then you'll have a leaky bathroom and a streaked face.*

Shaking her head as she thought of one more thing needing to be fixed in the house, she walked out of the dining room and smack dab into her younger sister.

"What's wrong?"

"What do you mean, what's wrong?"

"Tabitha, you look like you're about ready to kill or cry. Something happened. What is it?"

Tabitha debated lying to Carol, and decided it wasn't worth it. The girl was fifteen, it wasn't as though she could be turned away with thoughts of an ice cream cone and a bedtime story any more.

"The leak in the dining room is getting worse. I thought the plumber fixed it last time, but apparently not."

"Well then get him back here and make him fix it right."

"Not so easy, sis. When the disposal broke and I tried to call him, his number had been disconnected. He's long gone."

Car put her hands on her hips. "How the hell can you possibly manage to luck out every single time? Doesn't anything go right for you anymore?"

"Yeah, I know, tell me about it. You'd think at least I could have a little sister who was nice occasionally."

"Naw, what would you do with her?"

Tabitha laughed with her sister at their long-standing joke. But underneath, she was still worried. She had a good paying job, and it wasn't like they would become poverty-stricken, but everything seemed to be hitting her at once lately.

The company was going through a restructuring process, and although she didn't think she was in danger of losing her job, she didn't know where she was going to be in a couple months. Carol had applied to a summer learning program at the local university, and their income was too high for much in the way of financial aid. Unfortunately, the house ate up quite a bit of that money, thanks to the fact it was over one hundred years old and Tabitha doubted any of the previous owners did much to it.

Tabitha had been hoping not to have to pay for any more repairs for at least a few more months. So much for their week away before Carol's school started.

"Well, it's Friday night, so not much we can do now. I suggest you take showers in my bathroom 'til we get it fixed."

Carol grimaced. She hated the old-fashioned tub and makeshift shower. "Well I guess it's better than no shower at all."

"What time is your professor coming by?"

"Oh, damn! I forgot! He should be here any minute."

Tabitha shook her head. Even though Carol had a genius IQ, sometimes she lacked any common sense. God, her mother used to say that to her when her parents were still

alive. What Tabitha wouldn't give to hear her mom say that just once more.

Just then the doorbell rang. Car looked down at herself in her jeans and t-shirt with a panicked look on her face. "Tabitha, please. Let him in. I'll be right down. Three minutes."

Tabitha shook her head as she watched Carol run upstairs. That girl needed to get her act together. How Carol managed to juggle schoolwork and all her extra curricular activities was beyond her.

Tabitha turned and walked to the large oak door. She opened it and froze.

"Hi. I'm here to meet with—Tabitha?"

Tabitha stared at the gorgeous specimen of masculinity on her front stoop. A hard, chiseled face, strong jaw, wide shoulders and beautiful milk chocolate skin. Johnny Dow stood on her front doorstep. *What the hell is he doing here?* She hadn't seen him for over fifteen years.

"Tabitha Thompson? What are you doing here?"

What did he mean? Where else would she be? "This is my house."

"But I was supposed to meet a Carol Thompson."

"You?"

"What do you mean?"

"You're the professor who was coming to interview her?"

She didn't think she'd ever see the day, but Johnny Dow blushed.

"Yeah, believe it or not, it's me."

"But how, why?"

"The Step-Up program is my baby. I interview all the kids who reach this level in the application process."

"I didn't know."

Johnny smiled. "Yeah, very few people around here put the football quarterback together with a college professor."

"I thought you'd gone on to play professionally or something."

"No, I decided in college I enjoyed the learning and teaching too much to try to compete in the world of professional athletes."

Tabitha remembered they were standing on her front porch, and he was here for her sister, not for her. "Oh, God, sorry, please come in." She led him into the living room and offered him a seat.

"Can I get you anything? Soda? Coffee? Carol will be down in a minute." Tabitha realized she was babbling, but she was nervous. She'd had a crush on this man since her freshman year of high school, when she first saw him. He had been a sophomore, but even then he was above her. She had been the nerd, he the jock. Every girl had a crush on him and someone like her hadn't stood a chance.

He'd always been polite to her, but that had been part of his charm. He had been nice to everyone. They had even shared a couple electives together. Hell, they even had a couple friends in common. They'd been to events and parties together. Well, at the same time. But she'd never had the courage to approach him. He'd been too perfect. And she had not.

"No. I'm fine, thank you. How have you been? What have you been up to?"

Tabitha laughed nervously. "Nothing much to tell. Went to college, got a master's in business management and now work in Center City. What about you?"

"Went to college on a football scholarship, which I think everyone in town knew. Once I got there, though, I realized there was so much more open to me, so I played my four years and quit. I got a doctorate and moved back. I started this program to help kids from different backgrounds meet each other and learn to work together in a more team oriented atmosphere than high school."

"It seems like a good program. I know Carol is excited about it."

"Well it's only in its fifth year, but I think it's making a difference." He shook his head. "But tell me about Carol."

Tabitha smiled. "She's a trouper. I can't believe how smart she is, or how mature. She's been through a lot, and still she has a great outlook on life."

"And her father?" Johnny seemed to phrase the question reluctantly.

"He's dead."

"I'm sorry, Tabitha. Was he a big part of her life?"

Suddenly it occurred to her what Johnny was getting at. "Johnny, she's my sister, not my daughter."

The relief on Johnny's face was visible. But why would he be relieved?

"She's barely fifteen, Johnny. I'm only thirty."

Johnny shrugged. "It happens. And last I heard you were pretty hot and heavy with Rick Stevens."

Tabitha grimaced. *Rick Stevens*. Probably one of her biggest mistakes. She had gotten lucky by not getting pregnant by him. She'd dated him all through high school and most of college. She had thought they were going to get married when she graduated. That was until her parents died and he'd shown his true colors.

Her parents had been killed in a car accident her last semester of college. Her father had died instantly, but her mother had lingered on. They'd both had health and life insurance, but her mother's long-term care had wiped out everything they had. Rick had stood by her for as long as it took to find out she was broke and had a young sister to raise. Then he had hightailed it out of town.

Since then she'd dedicated her life to making sure Carol had the best life possible, even without parents.

"No, my parents died almost ten years ago. I have been Carol's guardian since then."

"I am sorry."

Tabitha nodded. "Thank you." Changing the subject, she turned to the door of the living room. "I don't know what's taking that girl so long. Let me get her for you."

* * * *

Tabitha sat through some of the interview, but eventually left them alone while she worked on dinner. It seemed to be going fairly well. Johnny had quizzed Carol on her plans for the near and distant future, as well as her dreams and

desires. It had seemed more like a friendly get-together than an entrance interview for an exclusive college program.

Tabitha's concerns about the program had been allayed, too. Both by what Johnny had said, and by the fact he was behind the program itself. She trusted the man.

She also lusted after the man. That apparently hadn't changed in the last fifteen years. He was wearing a white button-down shirt with a sport coat and casual pants that framed his body well. Tab was willing to bet he still worked out on a regular basis. The clothes hid more of him than she liked, though. When she caught herself licking her lips as she thought of straddling him and seeing how hard and firm his body really was, she decided she would excuse herself from the rest of the interview. If they needed her, they would call.

They were just getting ready to say goodbye, and Tabitha was breathing a sigh of relief when it happened. The sound of plaster crashing down on the dining room table, followed by the patter of water dripping had the three of them running to the dining room.

Part of the ceiling was now on the table, along with a considerable amount of water, which was rapidly dripping onto the floor.

"Shit!" Tabitha ran to the basement to shut off water to the house. One good thing about the previous amount of damage, at least she knew were everything was. When she got back upstairs, Carol was on the floor wiping up the water that was everywhere, and most of the plaster had disappeared. Johnny was nowhere to be seen.

"Where'd he go?"

"He took a load of the plaster out to the trash barrels. He said he'd be right back."

Just then, Johnny walked in with a trash bag and push broom in his hand. "I found these where you said they'd be, Carol." He looked at Tabitha and smiled before pushing the remaining plaster pieces into a pile.

"You don't have to do that."

"Nonsense. You stopped the water already. I'm here. The least I can do is help clean up."

Tabitha noticed that he had already taken his coat off. He had obviously been taking care of himself over the years. His well built torso had her own body responding eagerly at the sight. His dark brown skin contrasted nicely with the white of his shirt, and Tabitha's earlier desire to see what was under that crisp white material reared its head once again.

Pushing her hormones aside, Tabitha went to get something to help scoop up the plaster.

With the three of them working together, it took little time to get the dining room in at least some semblance of order.

"Do you have a ladder?"

"What for?"

"I wanna get up there and check what the problem is."

"Johnny, you don't have—"

"Tabitha, I want to. Now stop it and tell me where the ladder is."

Tabitha instructed him where to find the ladder, and while he was gone, she and Carol moved the dining room table off to the side. He came in and set it up before climbing up the rungs. Tabitha winced at the condition of his pants and shoes.

"I think I can fix this. Give me an hour or two to get my tools and come back, and you'll have running water again by this evening."

Tabitha waited until he was on the ground again before protesting. "Johnny, please—"

Again he cut her off, only this time, with a finger to her lips. "Tab, enough already. It's no big deal. I can fix it without any major difficulty, so why shouldn't I? I'll be back in a couple hours."

Before she could protest any further, he winked at Carol as he grabbed his suit coat and walked out the door.

"What a hunk."

Tabitha shook her head. "What? No he's not. Well, yes, he is, but you shouldn't be thinking about that. You should be thinking about the fact his good opinion is what you need to get into the program, not how well he filled out that shirt."

Carol laughed. "Are you gonna tell me who he is?"

"You know who he is. He's Doctor Dow, and works at the university."

"Tab, he called you by your first name. Not only by your first name, but your nickname. And you have been uncomfortable since he got here. Now are you gonna spill the beans or do I have to ask Aunt Kim to tell me?"

Kim was Tabitha's best friend, and had been since middle school. She knew all about Tab's crush on Johnny Dow and Tab was sure she would relish, and embellish the telling.

"He was my first big crush in high school. He was the hot football player who all the girls wanted." As she talked, Tabitha walked into the kitchen to get both of them some

lemonade. It was getting warm outside, and she could use the drink. Carol followed her, continuing her line of questioning.

"But you were dating Rick."

Tabitha frowned as she poured the drinks. "Don't remind me. But this was before Rick. Johnny was a year ahead of us. I didn't even think he knew who I was back then, never mind that he would remember me now."

"Did you know he was the professor I was gonna meet?"

"Hell, no. The Johnny Dow I knew had little use for academics, and even less use for administrators. Not that he was a bad kid, really, he just had other interests. He kept his grades up enough to play sports, but we all knew that once he graduated he was out of here, and never coming back."

"Well what changed all that?"

"He said he just realized he was interested in more. I guess he grew up."

* * * *

Johnny arrived in less than the promised two hours. He had changed clothes, and had a large toolbox with him. He definitely looked like he knew what he was doing, too. Although to be honest, Tabitha lost the ability to think once she opened the door to him.

He walked straight to the dining room and went up the ladder after giving her a smile that sent her heart aflutter and her pussy clenching. His jeans were tight enough to look like they had been painted on. They hugged his ass and thighs like a second skin, and she found herself itching to get a hold

of them. His dark blue t-shirt hugged his pecs equally well, leaving her hot and bothered and almost unable to answer when he asked her a question.

"You said you've had more than one plumber look into the problem?"

"Well, the same one. He's come out twice, did something each time and said it was fixed."

"And probably charged you an arm and a leg each time, too. He wouldn't have been able to find anything unless he had gone through the ceiling or the floor above. I can see the problem here. The joints between the old and new plumbing have popped a leak. It's actually an easy fix, but a pain to get to.

"The other guy was probably too damn lazy to do it."

"Well now that you've found it, why don't you come down and let me call someone else to fix it?"

"Don't you trust me to fix it?"

"No it's not that. I don't want you to feel like you have to."
And I want you out of my house before I jump your bones. How dare you come in here with jeans so tight they leave nothing to the imagination? I haven't been able to think of anything since you showed up on our porch other than getting you inside of me.

"It's not a problem, Tab, quit worrying."

"Well, fine. Dinner will be ready in thirty minutes."

"Are you offering to cook for me?" He poked his head out from the ceiling to look at her with his wickedly sexy grin.

"No, I wanted to know which delivery guy I should call to your house."

"That might be problematic, as no one is home at the moment."

"Girlfriend not home?" Tabitha had already noted he had no wedding ring on his finger.

His laugh sent tremors through her body. "Nope, sorry. No wife, girlfriend or boyfriend."

"Well, the lasagna will be ready soon."

"Great. I love Italian. And it smells delicious. I hope you didn't go to any trouble for me."

"No, I had the day off and started making the sauce before you showed up. I usually make a huge pot and then freeze it."

"Sounds perfect."

"Fine. Whatever." Tabitha grumbled and walked away. She could hear him chuckling as she strode into the kitchen.

"What is your problem, sister of mine?" Carol attacked her almost the second she walked in the room.

"What are you talking about?" Tabitha knew she wasn't being overly polite to Johnny, but dammit, she didn't want him here. She didn't need him here upsetting her equilibrium. Things in her life were unsettled enough, she didn't need him adding more confusion to it.

"Why are you being so rude to him? You're acting like you want him to leave."

"Don't be silly. He's doing us a favor."

"He's a hottie, isn't he?"

Tabitha pulled things out of the fridge, placing them on the counter as she debated how to answer her sister. She didn't

remember him being quite this hot. But then a body at seventeen was much different than that of a grown man's.

"I thought you said he was a hunk? But, yes, he's a hottie."

"I think he's interested in you."

"He is not interested in me."

"What do you mean he's not interested? Every time I look at him, he's watching you."

Was it true? Was he watching her? Why would someone like that be interested in her? She was plain, boring, had a house falling apart around her ears, and nothing to offer any man, least of all one as hot and sexy as Johnny Dow.

"Carol, enough. He's helping out an old schoolmate, that's it. Let's just leave it at that."

"Woman, you need to have some fun in your life."

"I have plenty of fun."

Carol looked at her for a minute and shook her head before walking to the stairs. "Don't forget, Esther is coming to get me in about ten minutes. It's Robin's birthday tonight and we're staying over at her place."

"Damn. I forgot. You haven't even had dinner yet, though."

"Don't worry, Robin's ordering pizza."

"Why didn't you remind me?"

Carol shot a grin over her shoulder as she climbed the stairs. "'Cause then you wouldn't have made such a nice dinner for our guest."

Before Tabitha could stop sputtering, Carol's laughter had faded at the top of the staircase.

* * * *

"Carol said bye before she left."

"Yeah, sorry. She had plans already and I totally forgot."

"Would you rather I head out myself then?"

"No, of course not."

"No hot date tonight?"

Tabitha snorted, "Yeah, right. With the Sci-Fi channel."

"I still can't believe they cancelled *Stargate*."

Tabitha looked up. *Johnny Dow a sci-fi nerd?*

Johnny shook his head. "Yeah, yeah, I know. I've always been into sci-fi. Don't tell anyone."

Tabitha ran her finger over her chest. "Cross my heart."

She watched as his eyes followed her fingers across her chest, and her nipples perked to attention. He licked his lips, leaving her in no doubt he saw the telltale response of her body. Maybe wearing the little tank top wasn't the best idea, but it was warm out, and she had been in the kitchen cooking, with the oven on. It had made sense to change into it. At least somewhere in her mind it had.

Ding.

Saved by the bell. "That's the lasagna. Let me get it out, and um, it has to sit for about fifteen minutes, but then we can eat."

"Great, just tell me where to turn the water on and I will go wash up."

Tabitha gave him directions to the shut off valve and finished preparing the salad. Once she was done, she put the bread in the oven and ran upstairs to wash up as well.

"What are you doing, woman? You should send him home now." Talking to herself had been a bad habit of Tabitha's as long as she could remember. Sometimes it seemed to help, and others she just talked herself in circles.

"I can't send him home after everything he did for us, the least I can do is give him a decent dinner. Fine, give him dinner, but then get him out. Oh, shut up, woman."

"Tabitha? Is everything okay?"

Tabitha looked up and saw Johnny. His wet hair framed his sharp cheekbones, bringing out the blue in his eyes. Tabitha watched as a drop of water ran down the side of his throat, into the neck of his navy shirt. His shirt was damp and clung to him even closer than it had before, leaving her in no doubt as to his physical fitness. His pecs were just begging to be caressed, and his biceps made her body flush.

She swallowed as she realized her mouth had gone dry while she stared at him in her doorway. "Yeah. Sorry, babbling to myself."

"You sure?"

"Mm hm." Damn, he was yummy looking. Tabitha wanted nothing more than to gobble him up. Milk chocolate was her favorite dessert.

"Well, I'll just take the bread out of the oven, and meet you downstairs, okay?"

Tabitha shook herself out of her lascivious thoughts. "Sure, thanks." She watched as he walked down the hall and started down the stairs. "Stupid woman. Stupid, stupid woman. What on earth is going on in your head? Get your hormones in check, get changed and go eat dinner with him so he can

leave. Just because you're thinking with your sex organs, doesn't mean he is."

Finally dressed in a light shirt and broomstick skirt, Tabitha headed downstairs to join her guest.

* * * *

"That was incredible, Tab. Where did you learn how to cook like that?"

Tabitha blushed. "My mom was a great cook, she tried to pass on some of it to me."

"Well she did an excellent job of it." Johnny sat back at the table and took a sip of his wine. Tabitha watched his throat as he swallowed. *Damn*. She had to stop that.

What the hell was wrong with her anyway? She hadn't wanted a man like this in years. Hell, she didn't know if she had ever wanted a man like this. It must be the time of year. Spring fever. She hadn't been with a man in God knew how long. That's it. It was just the time of the year. Linda had just gotten engaged, she was just craving attention.

Tabitha knew she was fooling herself, but right now she had nothing else to go on, and she needed to get some semblance of sanity here.

"Thank you."

Johnny stood up and picked up her dish as well as his own before she could stop him.

"What are you doing? You don't have to do that."

"You cooked, I clean."

"Johnny, you fixed my ceiling, it was the least I could do." Tabitha followed him to the sink with their wineglasses.

Before she could say anything he had already started running the water and scraped the remains into the trash.

After the kitchen was clean, and the leftovers put away, he turned to her with a smile that made her weak in the knees.

"Now, you said something about the Sci-Fi channel?"

"You don't really watch it, do you?"

"Of course I do. I need my regular dose of nerdiness, thank you very much. Anyway, if I didn't, how could I keep up with my students?" Somehow, he had managed to trap her against the island in the middle of the kitchen. His hands lay on the counter, not touching her, but not letting her go anywhere, either. There were mere inches separating them.

She couldn't breathe. His scent filled her nostrils and she felt herself float away on a cloud of desire as all common sense flew out the window.

"Honestly, Tab? There is something I would much rather be doing."

"Really? What would that be?" Her voice came out high-pitched, but breathy.

"This." At the touch of his lips her body exploded. Heat radiated to every extremity and nerve ending. She felt on fire and more alive than she had in years.

Instinctively her arms went around his neck and she returned his kiss with a fervor that threatened to overtake her. She had lusted after this man throughout her entire high school years, and every man she met since then had been subconsciously compared to him. How she had known it would be like this, she didn't know, but it felt right. It seemed that it was meant to be.

His tongue probed her mouth for admittance and she eagerly opened up to let him in. He tasted of wine and tomato sauce, and a taste that was all his own. Mixed with his purely masculine scent, it sent her body into overdrive.

His hands roamed her back, pulling her tighter against him. Tabitha moaned at the feel of his hard body against her.

"Shit." His voice was husky and choked with desire as he lay his forehead against hers.

"What?"

"We shouldn't do this."

Tabitha felt as though a gallon of cold water had been dumped over her. Immediately she tried to pull back. "Okay, fine. Sorry."

Johnny's hands held her tight. "I didn't say I didn't want to do this. I said we shouldn't."

"What's the difference?" Tabitha could feel her face heating up. The first guy she shows any interest in in years, and he didn't want her. How could she have been so wrong?

"Tab. Stop struggling." He pulled her waist against him. Well, if he wasn't interested, she knew his body was. "God, woman, I want you more than any woman I have ever known, but this isn't right."

What he was saying was finally penetrating into her skull. "Why because you're black and I'm white?"

"Hell no! Because we just met after nearly fifteen years, and because your sister can come back any minute and I don't want her catching you making out with her admissions officer."

"Carol's sleeping over at a friend's. She won't be home 'til tomorrow." Tab answered off the cuff, not even aware of what she was saying. That she was giving him permission to do what they both obviously wanted.

"Are you sure?"

Was she sure? Was she sure about her sister? Yes. Was she sure she wanted to do this? She didn't know. She'd been without a man's touch for years, and her body craved the affection.

Would any man do, though? She didn't think so. She hadn't been this turned on since—well since never. She wanted Johnny. Badly.

"Yes. Definitely."

As soon as the words were out of her mouth, Johnny took her lips with his, kissing her forcefully. Desire swept through her body, enflaming already turned on cells. His hold tightened as he ravaged her mouth, tasting every inch of her before tearing his mouth away to blaze a trail of kisses down her throat.

One hand snaked around to cup her breast in his palm as his thumb teased her nipple to a hardened point. His lips latched onto her other breast through her shirt, causing her to arch against him sharply. She threw her head back as sparks of pleasure shot out from his touch, burning her from the inside.

Dimly she was aware that he lifted her onto the counter, her feet no longer touching the ground. His hand returned to her breast while his other one worked its way down her thigh, pushing her skirt up as it went. The feel of his hand against

her leg electrified her, her body on full alert, wanting, needing more.

Tabitha wrapped her legs around Johnny's waist, eager to pull him closer, needing to feel him against her, rubbing away the ache growing between her legs.

Johnny tugged at her shirt, pulling it over her head, and then immediately attacked her bra, unclasping it and letting it slither down to the floor.

"Oh, God. You're beautiful." His hands cupped her breasts as he looked down at them. Tabitha watched his expression as he thumbed her nipples. He looked like a little boy granted an all-access pass to a toy store, and it warmed her to the core. Her hands went around his neck to play in his hair.

She caught his eyes when he looked up at her. "Do you know how much I wanted you in high school?"

"What?" What was he talking about? He barely knew her back then.

"You were the cute little brain who everyone loved, but you were out of my league."

"What are you talking about, Johnny?" His hands were still playing with her breasts, leaving her breathless as she tried to follow his words.

"You were perfect, but I knew I had to give it a try. But just as I got my courage up, you started dating Rick."

"I didn't think you even knew who I was."

Instead of answering right away, his mouth went down to cover a nipple. The wet heat of his tongue had her gasping as she lost all train of thought.

"Oh, I knew who you were, trust me."

Then all talk about the past seemed superfluous when he bit at her nipple sending shafts of desire through her body. Oh, God she wanted him badly. Now. Inside her.

Fumbling at his jeans, she popped the button and pulled down the zipper, eager to get to what lay beneath.

She grasped him under his jockeys. His quick intake of breath sent her pulse fluttering even faster. *What woman doesn't like to think she can make a man gasp for air?*

He was hard. Very hard. And damn, he felt thick. Scooting closer to the edge of the counter, Tabitha hooked her legs behind his waist.

Johnny stood up and kissed her again, his hand wrapped in her hair tightly. "If you don't stop that, Tab, we won't make it to the bedroom."

"Who cares?"

"Don't tempt me, Tab," he growled at her as he nibbled on her neck.

In response, she tightened her hand around his thick cock and squeezed.

Johnny pulled away from her, and extricated himself from her grasp. He ran his hands under her skirt and grabbed hold of her panties to pull them down sharply. Somehow he managed to tear them off of her and throw them behind him. He thrust her skirt up to her hips and quickly kneeled in front of her. With one quick look at her, he thrust a finger into her vagina, ripping a gasp from her.

His shoulders pushed her legs open as his mouth moved down to her pussy. Johnny ran his tongue up her cleft, stopping on the bundle of nerves at the top.

Tabitha grabbed his head, holding him tight against her as he began to suck at her clit.

"Oh, God, Johnny!" Tabitha had been without male attention for so long, she had begun to think she would forget how to have an orgasm that she didn't give herself. She was wrong. Quickly she felt the tension building as he played with her clit flicking at it while pumping his finger in her vagina. Another finger joined the first, and both of them curved in a "come here" motion.

It was enough to send her over the edge, screaming his name again.

With one last lick he stood up with a grin. Tabitha grabbed onto his shoulders as her breathing returned to normal.

"Do you know how long I have wanted to do that?"

Tabitha lay her head on his shoulder. "How long?"

"High school?" He laughed at himself. "Although I don't know how good I would have been back then."

"How could I not have known?"

"Guys are good at hiding, especially at that age. We need to be, or our friends would tear us apart."

Tabitha was filled suddenly with the urge to touch Johnny's skin, to feel it against hers as he made love to her. She grabbed the bottom of his shirt and tugged upwards to get it off.

Smooth chocolate met her gaze. She had no choice but to run her hands over the smooth chest and large biceps in front of her. He was soft and hard, silky to her touch, with just a sprinkling of perspiration from the heat in the kitchen. Heat

they had just sent at least twenty degrees higher in the last ten minutes.

Tabitha leaned forward to flick her tongue out at one strong pectoral muscle. His quick intake of breath had her smiling as she ran her hands down his chest to his waist. Her teeth grasped his nipple at the same time her hand wrapped around his cock once again.

Johnny groaned. "Woman."

"What's the matter, Johnny, not man enough to take it?" She made sure she breathed the words as much as said them, watching him shiver in response.

Johnny's hands wrapped in her hair and pulled her head up to face him. "Right now, Tabitha, all I want to do is bury myself to the hilt in your hot pussy."

"What's stopping you?" Her voice was a husky whisper. So thick with desire she barely recognized it as her own.

He closed his eyes for a second and groaned as he seemed to try to get control of himself. "I don't make a habit of carrying around condoms with me. And I can already tell you aren't the kind of woman to take many men home. You wouldn't do that to Carol."

Tabitha blushed at mention of her sister, but pushed all guilty feelings away. "I'm on the pill."

Johnny's eyes narrowed. "Do you trust me?"

Tabitha laughed. "If I didn't trust you, do you think I would let you eat me out in the middle of my kitchen?"

"I promise I'm clean."

Tabitha leaned forward and pulled his head toward hers to whisper gently before she kissed him, "I trust you, Johnny Dow."

Her hands went down to his waist as she kissed him, pushing his pants down, over his hips, eager to get at him.

Without separating their lips, he managed to get his pants and jockeys down before wrapping his arm around her waist. Suddenly he stopped.

"What?" Tabitha ground out in frustration. She wanted his cock inside her pumping away.

"Not here. Let me take you to your bedroom."

She growled at him this time. "No. Here. Now." She grabbed hold of his cock once again, and squeezed tight. "I don't want to wait. I want it now, dammit." She positioned her body as best she could, moving her entrance to his cock and wiggling her hips.

With a moan, Johnny gave in, and sank himself deep into her depths. He filled her fully. Her tight vagina gave way to him as he pushed his way in. Oh, God. It felt so good. He felt so good.

Once he was completely inside, they stayed there for a moment, savoring the feel. And then he started moving. Tabitha grabbed hold of his broad shoulders and held on as he pumped into her. Each thrust of his cock seemed to touch her deep within, dragging forth sensations of an intensity she hadn't ever felt with a man before. He drove her quickly to the edge, pumping, fucking her on her kitchen counter.

"Oh, God, Johnny, I'm gonna come."

In response, he fucked her harder and faster, pulling her tighter against him as he rammed himself into her. With one final thrust, Tabitha exploded in ecstasy with another scream, followed by his moan as he filled her with his cum.

* * * *

Tabitha woke up to the sound of the telephone ringing in her ear. Reaching for it blindly, she encountered something in her bed. Quickly opening her eyes, the night before came back to her in waves.

They'd had sex in the kitchen, and then again in the bed. *Twice*. Oh, God, what had she done?

"Hello?" Her voice was groggy from sleep, and hoarse from all the screaming she remembered doing as Johnny made love to her all night.

"Tab? You okay?" Carol's voice came over the line sounding worried.

Tabitha cleared her throat. "No. I'm fine. I was just still asleep."

At the tug on her hand, Tabitha looked down to see Johnny watching her with a satisfied smile. He started to kiss his way up her arm, working his way toward her neck. She tried to tug away from him, but he wasn't letting her go.

"I'm sorry, Carol, what did you say?" Shit, she'd not even heard a word her sister had muttered. Johnny had her complete attention. Dimly she heard him chuckle as he continued his foray up her body.

"I said that Esther had to leave early for a family thing, so can you just come get me when you're ready to hit Philly?"

"Philly?" Tabitha was finding it incredibly hard to concentrate. Johnny had reached the curve of her neck and was nibbling on her and rubbing her back. Her body fought to respond as her mind fought to control it.

"Tab. Our date to hit the city? We were doing some shopping? Did you forget?" Carol's voice became sly. "Are you alone?"

"What! Of course I'm alone. What makes you think that?" Tabitha started swatting at Johnny's hands, trying to get him to stop, but he snickered and kept going.

"Nothing." Now her voice was sing-songy, and she seemed to be laughing at her older sister. "Just give me a call whenever you're ready to come get me. I'll be ready."

"Okay, call you in a bit. Love ya."

"Love ya." Carol laughed after their usual goodbye before Tabitha heard the click of the disconnect.

"Stop it!" She slapped at Johnny again as she put the phone down.

"I don't want to. You taste too good."

"Johnny, stop. I need to go get Carol. I need to take a shower. We have plans today." She managed to pull herself out of his grasp and out of the bed. Reaching for her robe that lay over a chair she turned and looked at him.

Her body responded to the sight of him on her bed. He looked so gorgeous against her white sheets, lying there like a god. A very sexy, excited god. His brown eyes twinkled at her as her pussy moistened in memory of what they had done all night. And in anticipation of more.

"I need to take a shower. And you need to leave." She forced herself to ignore her body's clamoring for her to jump back into bed with him and ride him like a cowboy. Again.

His seductive smile grew as he moved toward her, practically crawling over the mattress. He reached for her and tugged her toward him by the straps of her belt.

"Okay. You go run and take your shower. But first, a price."

Her heart picked up. The sheet had wrapped itself around his waist and was hanging there precariously as he knelt on his knees. "What price?"

"A kiss."

Okay, a kiss. One small kiss, and then she could take her shower and send him home and forget this ever happened.

She bent down to give him a quick peck on the lips, but found herself caught by his arms as he pulled her toward him, claiming her lips with his. Tabitha's world exploded with that one kiss as she felt her soul come alive and cry for more. She felt complete with him holding her, kissing her, loving her as he had. As he was doing now.

Forcefully, she pulled away from him, breathing heavily.

"Please, Johnny." Her body cried out for more, but she ignored it. She had a sister to finish raising, she couldn't be distracted by this.

With a sigh and a smile, he lowered his arms. "Okay. We'll continue this another time."

She turned away as he got out of bed and started to get dressed. She knew if she watched him, she would be on him in a second, and she realized that wasn't possible. Last night

had been a mistake. A wonderful, glorious mistake, but a mistake nonetheless.

When he was dressed again, he put his arms around her to kiss her gently. She sank into the kiss before pulling away.

"You'd better get going, Johnny. I need to start getting ready."

He reached for again, but she avoided his arms. He frowned. "When can I see you again?"

"About that." Tabitha hugged herself in a defensive gesture as she moved further away.

"About what?" His voice grew harder.

"Well, I don't think we should see each other again."

"Excuse me?" This time there was no mistaking the hardness in his voice.

"Last night was great fun, but it's not gonna happen again."

Johnny grabbed her by the arms. "What do you mean it's not gonna happen again? Why not? And don't you dare say it was a mistake."

Wasn't that just what she had been thinking? Oh, she knew it wasn't really a mistake, but regardless of how wonderful it was, it couldn't happen again.

"It was a night of fun. That's it. No commitments, no attachments."

"Tabitha, you cannot tell me that you didn't feel anything last night. That you don't feel anything now."

Boy was she feeling. Her heart and soul were crying out to her to stop what she was doing. They were screaming that

this man was the one for her. He was the one she had waited for her entire life. But she couldn't do it. It wasn't fair.

"Johnny, I'm sorry. But I need you to go." She closed her eyes as she told him goodbye, not wanting to see his reaction.

"This isn't over, Tabitha. You can't get rid of me that easily."

She heard him stride downstairs and out the front door. As she heard the door click shut, she broke out into tears.

* * * *

"Come on, Tab, you promised me."

Tabitha rolled her eyes at her sister. "I promised you I would let you take me out to lunch, not drag me here. Honey, you're wasting your money on this, none of this stuff is real."

"You promised me."

With a sigh Tabitha allowed herself to be dragged into the fortune teller's shop. The décor was surprisingly understated. The main room consisted of a small shop with items for sale that were easily recognizable as New Age, and some that were surprisingly not. Tabitha picked up a Pan figurine that was amazingly well done. Tabitha could almost think he was looking right at her. Putting it down with a smile, she faced the woman coming in from a back room.

"May I help you?"

"Yeah, we came in for a reading. For my sister. It's her birthday, and I wanted her to get a reading." Carol was so excited the words spilled out of her mouth rapidly.

The older woman looked at Tabitha, almost as if she was sizing Tabitha up. "A birthday present you say?" she asked Carol.

"Yeah, but she isn't crazy about getting it."

"Well, then, how about we do this? I will give you one first, and then one for your older sister."

Carol's face brightened, and then fell. "No, sorry, I only have money enough for one."

The woman winked at Carol. "Well, since you're willing to spend your hard-earned money on your sister instead of yourself, yours will be free."

"Really?" Carol's voice climbed a couple of octaves in excitement. "I've never had a reading before."

"Then this is perfect. I love giving readings to new customers." She put her arm around Carol as she turned toward the back room. "And this way your sister can see it doesn't hurt at all."

Carol laughed and asked Tab if she was coming.

"No, I think I'll stay out here. You get your reading, and then we can head out."

Carol frowned at her sister, but let herself be led into the back room.

Tabitha continued to browse the small shop as she waited. Anything to keep her mind off last night and this morning.

Sending Johnny away had been the hardest thing she had ever done, but she had no choice. There were more important things in her life than fleeting happiness.

Before too long, Carol and the fortune teller were back, both smiling conspiratorially. Tabitha's eyes narrowed, but

when neither of them said anything, she let it go. The woman gestured for Tab to join her in the back room. Tabitha was going to refuse, when she remembered that Carol received a free one on the basis of hers being read. Sighing heavily, she followed the woman back.

Surprisingly, the room was empty of any garish decoration, with only a few wall hangings and knickknacks strewn about.

"Please sit down." The woman gestured to a small round table that was bare of all but a plain tablecloth and a deck of Tarot cards. Tabitha sat and waited for the woman to seat herself opposite.

"Your sister tells me you are a disbeliever."

"You could say that."

"Well, then, how about we do a one card reading? If you are satisfied, then you may come back in the future for a full reading." The woman's eyes twinkled. "And no charge for either you or your sister this time around."

What is this woman doing? This is her job, isn't it? Why would she give away free readings?

"Don't worry, my dear, I have plenty of business. It is my pleasure to do this for the two of you." She handed the deck to Tabitha. "Please shuffle the deck, and pull out one card, but do not turn it over." Tabitha did as instructed and then sat back and watched the woman.

She had closed her eyes and breathed deep. She seemed to go into a trance, almost, or at the very least a state of slight meditation. When she opened her eyes, Tabitha felt herself almost dragged into their depths. *What the hell?*

Unfazed, the woman smiled, and placed her hand on the card. "This card is a symbol of what is present in your life, what you need to address before you can move forward. Nothing is insurmountable, you only need to make the decisions and actions necessary."

Slowly the woman turned over the card. *The Devil. Well that didn't look too good.*

"The Devil card is not a sign of evil as so many seem to think. It is a symbol for voluntary restriction, for self-imposed limitations. It can be something as mundane as chores you know you have to do for the day, to taking someone's life in your hands, and thinking you can be responsible for their happiness."

"What did Carol say to you?"

"Nothing, my dear, nothing. I only tell you what the cards tell me.

"I see that perhaps you are finding yourself chained to a duty you have willingly accepted. Perhaps the need for that duty has passed, or perhaps you can let go of some of it now. It can also be a sign of someone who is too wrapped up in the material world, but I do not think that would be you. Perhaps, though, it's time to work on your inner self?

"I see maybe a chance has been presented to you that you have refused. Because of the aforementioned duties. Life is not all about responsibility. Sometimes you have to let go. You have to live life as it was meant to be lived: Freely. Not as a prisoner of your own making."

Tabitha shook her head. *How the hell does the woman know what is going on? Is she talking about Johnny? What*

else could she be talking about? The only reason she had told him to leave was for Carol's sake. It wasn't fair to Carol.

But did Carol really still need her as much as Tab thought she did? Carol was already looking to college, she was a year ahead of her peer group. Soon she would be out of the house, and where would that leave Tabitha?

Had Carol asked the woman to tell her to lighten up? No, that's not what the woman was telling her.

"You're a young woman, do not let life pass you by."

"Excuse me?" Tabitha pulled herself out of her thoughts to respond to the woman.

"It is within you to make the right choice. Just don't make it too late."

* * * *

"Hey, Johnny left his tools here last night."

Tabitha looked up from placing her keys in the basket at the entry table. Her heart picked up at the mention of Johnny. "He did? Wow, neither of us noticed."

Carol got a sly look on her face. "Why, what else was on your mind?"

"What are you talking about?"

"Well he was a sexy hunk. And he definitely had the hots for you. That much was obvious."

"Well just 'cause a man has the hots doesn't mean you have to act on it." Tabitha walked away from her sister and into the living room. She did not need the conversation going in that direction.

"Tab, when are you going to realize that all men are not Rick? There are some good ones out there, you know. And just because you show interest doesn't mean you have to be bound to him for the rest of your life."

"Carol, I do not compare all men I date to Rick."

"What men? You haven't dated anyone since Rick. You've closeted yourself up in this house with me as though you don't need anyone else. But you do, Tabitha."

"I don't know what you're talking about, Carol. I'm perfectly happy with the way things are."

"Well I'm not. Dammit, Tabitha, how do you think it makes me feel to know you've dedicated the last ten years of your life to me? Everything you do revolves around me."

"That's not true. I go to work. I go out."

"With your married female friends. You haven't been on a real date in years, and even the ones you did go on never went past the first one. Tabitha, it's time to let go. You're not responsible for Mom and Dad dying."

Tabitha's head shot up at her sister's words. "What are you talking about?"

Carol sat next to her sister. "Tab, it was an accident. There was nothing any of us could have done. You've done everything you promised Mom you would do, and then some. They wouldn't want you giving up your entire life for me. And neither do I."

"I haven't given up—"

"Tabitha Thompson, stop lying to me. Stop lying to yourself. I saw something between you and Johnny last night that I've never seen before. You were happy. Hell, you were

glowing. If you dare let that man get away, I will never forgive you. I'm not going to be here forever, sis. What are you gonna do when I'm gone?"

Tabitha's eyes narrowed. "Did that fortune teller say something to you?"

"What does it matter if she did, if it's the truth? You need to start living for yourself, o big sister of mine. Stop worrying so much about me and my future, and worry about yourself."

Carol gave her sister a hug. "I love you, sis. Now call that man and get him back here." She stood up and walked out of the living room, Tabitha watching her all the while. She was quite the young lady, and maybe she was on to something.

"She's right you know."

Tabitha's head snapped up to see Johnny leaning against the doorjamb behind her, arms crossed, looking at her with a strange expression.

"Excuse me?"

"Your sister, she's right. You can't lock yourself in this house for the rest of your life. You are still young, you need to get out and live a little."

"Is that so?"

Johnny nodded his head, saying nothing.

"How did you get in?"

"The door was open, I knocked on the screen, but no one heard me. I just came to get my tools."

Tabitha looked at him leaning there. All her feelings from the night before and this morning came back to her full force. She hadn't thought she would ever see him again and it had nearly killed a part of her to throw him out this morning.

Would he accept her apology? Would he truly understand why she had done what she had? Why didn't he do something? Was he just standing there waiting for her?

"Johnny ... I..."

He pushed himself up and strode toward her purposefully. She held her breath as he rounded the couch and sat beside her to take her hands in his.

"I told you this morning you couldn't get rid of me that easily, didn't I?"

"But I..."

"I knew why you were doing it. But she really is right, you know."

"I know."

"Pretty smart young lady you have there."

"I know. I don't know how I got so lucky."

"Probably a little bit of luck, and a lot of hard work on both your parts."

"So where does this leave us?" Tabitha asked as she looked up into his deep brown eyes.

"Where do you want it to leave us?"

"I don't know, Johnny. It's been so long since I've been in any kind of relationship."

"We can take it slow. I don't have a problem with that. As long as we take it together, okay?"

Tabitha smiled, feeling a part of her soul warm at his touch, his look, his words.

"Together."

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THE WORLD

by

Tina Bendoni

"Congratulations, Kathy. You deserve it." Sarah raised her glass.

Kathy smiled as she met Sarah's glass in midair for a clink, before they both took a sip, Sarah's boyfriend watching them. Kathy sat back and gazed at the two of them. She hadn't expected her best friend to find someone so perfect for her so quickly, but she couldn't be happier for her. Sarah had been through a lot and she deserved some happiness.

"Penny for them." Kathy blinked as Sarah snapped her fingers in front of her face.

"Sorry, was lost in thought for a moment there."

"Do you know how proud Riley would be of you right now?" Sarah's voice softened as she spoke of Kathy's former husband, dead almost five years now. He had been Kathy's biggest supporter, pushing her and supporting her whenever she thought she couldn't do something. How she had survived half a decade without him, Kathy still didn't know.

The pain had lessened, but it was still there. There would always be a hole in her heart where Riley's love had been before.

"I know."

Sarah gazed at Kathy for a few moments before visibly shaking herself. "I'm sorry, Kathy. I didn't mean to bring him up."

Kathy smiled sadly. "No, that's okay, Sarah. I'm alright. It's not like I haven't thought the same thing ever since I got the news today. He would have been very proud of me."

Sarah nodded quickly before she reached out to hug her friend.

"I hate to break this up, ladies, but we need to head to the gate if we want to make the plane."

Kathy glanced at her watch and then back to Jack. "Oh, dammit, you're right." She turned to her friend of nearly twenty years. "I'm so glad you guys were able to stopover here for the day. I can't believe it's been almost a year since I saw you last."

"I know. You're still coming out to Pennsylvania for Christmas, right?"

"I wouldn't miss it for the world." They were walking back to the security checkpoint where Kathy knew they would have to part. Them showing up today of all days had been a wonderful surprise. There was no one else in the world she would rather celebrate making partnership in the firm with. No one else alive, that was.

Kathy's heart gave a twinge. She usually managed to go days without feeling the loss of the love of her life, but today had been exceptionally difficult. Who knew one of the best days of her life was also going to be the worst?

"Are you still planning on going away for the weekend?"

Kathy nodded. "Yeah, it will be the last time in a while that I can get any time away. I probably shouldn't but I've had this trip planned for so long, I really don't want to give it up."

"Don't. You need the time away, I'm sure. And there isn't much you can do until Tuesday."

"True."

At the sound of their flight being called for boarding, Sarah and Jack gave Kathy hugs. It was nice to finally meet Jack, after having heard about him for the last six months, and Kathy realized she liked him. He would definitely be good for Sarah. After promises to call as soon as they got home from visiting Jack's family, the two of them walked off arm in arm. Kathy watched them until they were out of sight, then turned around with a sigh. It was time for her to get a move on if she wanted to beat the worst of the traffic and not spend half of her weekend on freeways.

* * * *

Kathy looked around her suite with satisfaction. She had worked hard to be able to earn some nice little perks in her life, and class A accommodations were one of those things she never ceased to take advantage of. There was nothing like a large room with all the amenities she could ever want, even if she didn't spend that much time in the room. Why be cramped when she didn't have to be?

She set out her things to keep them from getting too wrinkled and sat down to read a bit before getting ready for dinner. She had picked up a romance before leaving the airport, despite knowing she shouldn't have. Romances made

her too sad. Happily ever afters didn't exist, so why did these authors continue to insist they did? Kathy put the book down and stared into space. She'd had the happily ever after. At least she thought she had until Riley died.

Their love had been one in a million. He had been everything to her. Her best friend, lover, supporter. He had been her entire life. And he would be pissed at her for the way she had put her life on hold for the last five years.

Riley had never been one for stopping when life circumstances changed. He had always been a go get 'em kind of person. He would be heartbroken and disappointed to know she hadn't moved on emotionally.

Kathy knew it was time to let go, but it was so hard. It had taken her over two years to start to go through Riley's stuff after he had died. She still lived in the same apartment they had shared when he was still alive, despite the fact she could now afford something bigger and better.

Sarah bringing him up today had just brought things to the forefront. It was time to move on. Riley would have wanted her to.

Kathy got up to get dressed for dinner. This weekend would be the beginning of that change for her. She had everything she needed and wanted in her professional life, and she'd had more in her personal life than a lot of people ever dream of. It was time to start anew.

She looked herself over one last time before stepping out the door for dinner. Her short black dress was perfect for a night at the restaurant here in the hotel. She would just have

a nice relaxing dinner, and come back up here to do some late night reading before going to sleep.

* * * *

At least that was her plan. But as she sat in the bar with the four women she had met just a few hours ago, she had to admit their plan was much better. Kathy hadn't realized there was a convention for businesswomen going on in the hotel or she probably would have made reservations elsewhere. But she was glad she hadn't.

The women met her outside the restaurant when she had nearly broken a heel on a loose tile. After making sure she was alright, they had convinced her to join them, and she had warily agreed. Now she was heartily glad she had. These women had more energy than a football team, and were determined to have fun no matter what. They'd been drinking and dancing for the last three hours, and none of them were ready to stop.

"Kathy, Kathy, come on, look at that one."

Kathy was afraid to turn around. The women were all older than her by at least ten years, and most of them were married. They had been spending the last two hours trying to get her to check out the men as they entered the hotel bar, and making sure she danced with almost every single one. Not that being married had stopped them from checking out and dancing with the beefcakes themselves. As they had stated more than once, looking never hurt anybody.

Kathy laughed the nudges away, and refused to turn from her drink. The last one they had convinced her to look at had

looked like her uncle George. Or at least he would have if she had one. She took another sip of her drink, and realized the woman facing the bar had suddenly gone very quiet. The look on her face alone was enough to get Kathy to turn to see what had her so enraptured.

Damn. Talk about beefcake. Tall dark and handsome didn't begin to cover it. He had to be at least six foot five with short black hair, and a face that looked like it had been chiseled out of granite. Kathy grew wet at the sight of his large chest and biceps barely held in check by his black shirt.

She hadn't felt lust this instantaneous since her first crush in high school. His eyes raked the room as though looking for something, or someone. Kathy licked her lips and held her breath. And then his eyes met hers. She thought she was going to melt in a puddle on the chair from the shock of desire that hit her.

"Oh, my God, Kathy, he's coming this way."

"Girl, he's staring at you. Do you know him?"

Kathy watched him as he approached the table. Time seemed to slow down as he strode in her direction. She told herself to turn away from him, that he was headed to another table behind her. There was no way he was headed directly to her. Things like that only happened in romances and spy movies. Her life was more like a comedy where the girl thought she was being checked out by the hunk, and it turned out he was checking the guy behind her.

No one was more surprised than her when he stopped at their table and put his hand out, palm up. "May I have this dance?"

His voice rumbled through her, sending tingles to places that had no right to be tingling. Heat flushed her body as she instinctively put her hand in his. He tugged her up to a standing position and escorted her onto the dance floor.

When they got to the floor he pulled her into his arms, and she was lost. He held her tightly against his hard chest and he moved their bodies to the music. The smell of man and sex enveloped her senses.

Kathy tried to call the sane part of her brain to the fore, but couldn't. All she could do was feel. The strong muscles in his arms, his hard chest, his firm hand against her back. Heat radiated from every touch, turning her body and brain into mush.

She waited for him to say something, anything, but he just held her in his arms and danced. She willed the song to end, quickly. If it didn't, she really would be a puddle of goo that needed to be scraped from the floor.

"I've been watching you."

She swallowed hard at his husky baritone, the first words he had spoken since asking her to dance.

"I haven't seen you."

He looked down at her, meeting her eyes with his deep chocolate brown ones. "You've been too busy dancing with the young pups all night."

Kathy flushed. "They weren't all that young. Besides, it's not like you're much older than them." Although if she were to be honest with herself, he was probably about forty, no more than five years older than herself.

"Age isn't only measured in years." His accented words made her wonder if he had said exactly what he meant, but she had to agree with him, age wasn't only a matter of years. If it was, then she wouldn't be feeling like she was the oldest woman in the bar. Although in this man's arms, she suddenly felt like a hot horny teenager all over again.

"Do you often spy on women from the back room?"

"No. You would be my first."

Kathy was vaguely aware of the song coming to a stop and changing to something with a hot Latino beat. The man shifted his grip and grabbed hold of her hips as they gyrated together, her body taking control, her mind long gone.

She couldn't recall a time she had been hotter for a man than she was right now. Not even Riley had elicited this immediate desire to get her brains fucked out. The beat of the music drove her on as she rode his leg, sure that her panties were soaked through and that she was going to leave a streak on his black jeans.

Neither said anything as they continued to dance, but she realized she was more than ready to do something totally out of character and take a chance.

After another slow dance as she inhaled his manly scent while he held her close, he asked her if she wanted to take a walk down the beach. She agreed eagerly and went to pick up her purse at the table.

"Honey, are you sure about this? Do you know him?"

"Shh, Marian, let her be." Sabrina hushed the other woman. "Here, take these." She said as she shoved something in Kathy's purse. Kathy looked down and blushed.

"You never know if you might need them. Or how many."

After promising to meet her tablemates for a late lunch the following day, she met her sexy stranger at the French doors leading outside, and walked into the starlit darkness.

Again, they said nothing, only walked through the paths down to the beach.

"Thank you for walking with me."

Kathy gave a nervous laugh. It finally struck her that this probably wasn't the wisest of things to be doing. But she figured as long as they stayed on hotel property she would be okay. After all, she had already made the decision where she wanted the night to end. And it wasn't in her room alone.

"Can I ask you why such a beautiful woman is alone on such a night? Or is it that you are away from your man and decided to have a little fun?"

"I came on vacation to be alone for a while. I needed some time to get away from things. To recharge. And to celebrate."

"Celebrate?"

Kathy debated how much to tell him and then decided, why not? It wasn't as though she would ever see him again after this evening. "I recently received a promotion at work, and thought this a great way to congratulate myself."

"So you and your friends came up for the weekend." He made it more of a statement than a question.

"No, actually, I came up alone. I just met those women today."

"But then I ask the question again, why is a woman such as yourself alone on such an occasion?"

"Because my best friend recently moved to Pennsylvania, and I have no family."

"No other friends?"

Kathy debated lying to him. Even though she had decided she wanted nothing more than to spend the night in this man's arms, that didn't mean he wasn't a crazed kidnapper or killer just trying to find a woman alone in the world.

"Not really. No one I am overly close with at least."

"For this, I am sorry." His accent was difficult to place, but she knew from his wording that he wasn't from the States originally.

"Don't be." Her voice turned cold. The last thing she needed was sympathy from someone who was probably a gigolo out on the make. With a fake accent to boot.

He turned her to face him, his face lit by one of the torches the hotel put out on the paths. "Having no one to share your successes with, your disappointments with, can be very lonely. It is only that I do not wish that on any one."

He sounded so sincere, Kathy flushed with shame. She looked away. "I'm sorry."

"You just do not wish that I feel sorry for you." He grasped her chin lightly, turning her head so she looked into his dark eyes once again. "Trust me, little one, that is not what I feel."

Before she could debate internally what he meant by that his lips met hers and all thoughts went flying out of her brain.

His lips were soft and hard, harsh and smooth all at once. The earlier heat that had banked in her body flared to life as she gave as good as she got, her arms wrapping around his

neck and holding him tight. Fire roared through her blood, exciting her to a totally new level.

The kiss went on like that for what felt like hours. He held her in his arms, kissing her, tasting her. His hands stroked her back, cupped her head, held her tight against him.

Finally she tore her lips away to breathe deep as he nibbled on her jawline, kissing his way to her ear. Her knees went weak, and he caught her in his arms, pulling her tighter against his body.

"Tell me now, do you want me to stop?"

His breath fluttered over her skin as he whispered the words into her ear huskily.

"No, please."

"Then your room or mine?"

Kathy thought quickly. She had the condoms Sabrina shoved in her purse. If she went to his room, she could go without leaving any trace of herself behind.

"Yours."

They quickly made their way back to the hotel and the elevators. Kathy hadn't realized how long they had been outside, but the lobby clock said two a.m.

He pressed the call button for the elevator. As soon as the doors were closed, they were in each other's arms again. He rained kisses down her throat to her chest, where her wrap dress met in a low-cut V. He pushed her back against the wall of the elevator and before she knew what he was doing, he had the tie of her wrap dress undone.

His hands cupped her breasts over the black lace bra as his mouth continued its foray down her body. He sucked at

one nipple through the material, bringing it to pebble hardness, and dragging a gasp from Kathy.

One hand stayed on her breast, the other worked its way down to her lace undies.

"So wet."

Kathy moaned in response.

His fingers found their way under the lace as he stroked her labia, thumb pressing on her clit. One finger dipped into her wetness as he bit at her nipple.

Sanity returned to Kathy as she realized they were in the middle of a public elevator. Her vagina contracted at the thought of them being caught, liquid flooding over his hand. Oh, God, she never thought public sex would be such a turn-on for her.

With a growl her man tore himself away from her breast and landed on his knees in front of her. He looked up at her with desire stamped across his features before he pulled her panties to the side and dove into her crotch.

Kathy's knees buckled, and she had to grab onto the railing behind her to keep from falling to the floor of the elevator. He devoured her, his tongue lapping at her as he thrust with his finger in and out of her, driving her to a fever pitch.

Her head thrashed back and forth as she held on to the railing as though for dear life. Two more fingers joined the first as he lapped and sucked at her. His second hand was wrapped around her ass, kneading one cheek as he sucked hard, one last time, sending her screaming over the edge.

He sat back on his heels as he watched her get control of herself. He then quickly got up and wrapped her dress tight, holding her in his arms. Reaching over to the panel, Kathy saw him flick what looked like a key, and the elevator started moving again.

Shit, she'd never realized it had stopped. Kathy noticed he hadn't even mussed up his hair as the door pinged right before it opened. He guided her out of the doors, and she stopped short. She expected to step into the hallway, but was surprised to see a sitting room instead.

She turned to him with a question in her eyes.

He shrugged.

Undaunted, he grabbed her by the hand and pulled her into the middle of the sitting room.

Screw the room. She didn't care if it was the best room in the place or the worst. She was here for one thing and one thing only.

"Would you like a drink?" He pulled her into his arms again, and nuzzled her neck. *A drink?* Hell, no, it was the last thing on her mind.

"Mmm," was all she managed to get out before he captured her mouth with his. Suddenly they were stripping off each other's clothing, shirt, pants, dress, all going every which way, until they were naked in the middle of the sitting room.

The urgency that seemed to take them over in the elevator took them again as he quickly walked her back to the bedroom, kissing and fondling her all the while. They fell back on the bed, locked in a tight embrace. He was on the bottom,

cushioning the fall, but quickly rolled them over so his body covered hers.

He leaned back and his gaze raked over her body. Kathy went to cover herself, but he held her hands back.

"Don't."

"But—" Kathy was honest with herself. She had the body of a typical thirty-five-year old woman. She took care of herself and wasn't overweight, but it wasn't like she was fit enough to be in any of those exercise commercials.

"I want to look." He continued to hold her hands, bringing them together over her head as he leaned down for another soul-searing kiss. Kathy didn't know what it was about this man, but his kisses made her toes curl and her pussy drip.

He held her hands together as he worked his way down her jawline to her neck where he nipped at her sharply before moving further down.

She tugged at his hold, eager to feel him under her hands, and was relieved when he let her go. Immediately her hands wrapped around his back to feel his muscles ripple as he moved under her palms.

Her lover took her nipple in his mouth and bit at it, forcing her to arch off of the bed and thrust herself into his mouth. Her nails dug into his back as she moaned.

His other hand found her dripping pussy and entered her canal to stroke her.

"No."

He stopped at her word, his eyes flying to her face.

"I want you inside me. I want that cock buried deep inside me, making me scream as I come."

"Oh, you'll get it, have no worries, just be patient."

"I want it now." Kathy reached down to grab his penis in her hands and stroked it. He was thick. And her pussy leaked out more liquid as she thought of him filling her with it. He pumped at her with his hand and she lost all thought other than his fingers in her, and her hands on him. Oh God was he hard.

She had done that to him. Gotten him so hard she could feel him pulsing beneath her palm. Increasing her pressure on him, she slid her hands up and down his shaft, stroking him, mimicking the feel of her vagina around him.

"Condom." She muttered it, just sane enough to remember. "My purse."

Quickly he climbed off the bed and retrieved her purse for her. "Is this what you came here for this weekend?" he asked her as she took the strip of condoms out. Shit, Sabrina had given her half a dozen of them.

"Um, no, Sabrina stuck them in my purse when we left the bar."

"Mmm, then I owe the lady my thanks." His hand had returned to her pussy to stroke and play with her. The sensations he was creating were almost too much for her to bear. Shakily, she removed one of the packets, tossing the rest to the side of the bed with her purse.

When he reached for it, she pulled it away from him. "Unh unh. Mine," she said.

He raised an eyebrow before positioning himself within her reach.

She got her first full close-up look at his cock and quickly looked at the condom packet in her hands. Thank God, it was magnum size.

She ripped the packet open and placed the condom over his tip before slowly sliding it down his shaft. His eyes closed as she stroked him gently, assuring a tight fit of the rubber.

Kathy tried to keep her fingers on him, but he moved back out of her reach. At her whimper he only smiled before turning his complete attention to between her legs. It took only seconds before he had her soaring again with orgasm, gasping for relief.

It was only then that he positioned himself at her still pulsing center and thrust himself into her. He filled her like she knew he would, tight and snug, sending her over once again. He felt like he belonged there. Like she was made for him.

Once seated in her, he began to thrust slowly, her walls hugging every inch of him as he pulled out and pushed in.

"More. Faster. Harder." She gasped her orders to him, needing more of him. Immediately he obeyed. His thrusts came faster and harder, forcing her body tighter and closer to yet another orgasm. Her nails were digging into his shoulders, her legs bent, propped up to help meet him thrust for thrust, feeling him all the way to her toes.

Her climax, when it came, was just as intense as the other she'd had this night, if not more so. Her body tightened as her inner self exploded into oblivion and she felt his final plunge and his paroxysms into his own orgasm.

* * * *

Kathy looked into the mirror on the bathroom wall. Good God, she had just had sex with a man whose name she didn't even know. She should be ashamed of herself, but she wasn't. She was a single adult, and responsible for her own actions. They had used protection. She had known what she was doing. And was damn glad she had done it.

The fact that her emotions seemed to have gotten wrapped up in what should just have just been a night of quick, anonymous sex was the part she couldn't understand. She'd never done this before. Hell, she'd been with other men since Riley but had never experienced anything this intense, this driving need to be with someone.

Maybe it was the fact she didn't even know his name. Perhaps the anonymity added something to it her lonely heart misinterpreted.

But Kathy knew it wasn't that. There was a connection with the stranger that she had never experienced before. And if she spent any more time with him, she was sure to get sucked into something that she couldn't handle. She wasn't ready for that.

Deciding discretion was the better part of valor, Kathy grabbed her purse, glad she had taken it into the bathroom with her, and opened the door that led to the sitting room rather than back into the bedroom. They had left the light on so she was able to find her clothes easily. Quickly she slipped them on and searched for her second shoe. There it was. She almost had it in her hand before she heard his voice.

"Going somewhere?"

Kathy's head shot up. He was leaning against the doorway leading into the bedroom wrapped in a bathrobe. She'd never even heard the door open.

"Um, well. I figured I would go back to my room and get cleaned up." She slipped the shoe on her foot.

"There is plenty of hot water here. Robes, too." His voice dripped with some emotion she couldn't identify. It wasn't sarcasm, but she knew he wasn't buying her excuse.

"Yeah, well, I, um, tend to have an allergic reaction to any soaps but mine." As she was talking, she started backing toward the elevator. She had no fear of him hurting her, but she didn't want a confrontation. It was better to leave like this. No strings attached. He would be thankful for it in the morning.

"Will you at least tell me your name?"

Her hand had already pressed the call button when she heard his request. She stepped through the doors before turning around to face him across the room. "Kathy," she whispered as the doors slid shut.

* * * *

Kathy sat down to lunch with her new friends. Before she was even completely seated their questions started.

"Who is he? Did you know him before last night?"

"Who cares *who* he was, *how* was he?"

"Sabrina!"

The women at the table giggled as they waited for Kathy's answers.

"I don't know."

"What do you mean you don't know?" Marian asked, her voice loud enough to cause other diners to turn and stare.

"Are you nuts?"

"Marian, calm down, she's old enough to make her own decisions, and you can't tell me you've never wanted a hot night with a sexy stranger. No strings attached."

Marian flushed but remained silent.

"Okay, now tell us all about it." Sabrina leaned forward as though eager for whatever Kathy had to tell.

Kathy looked at the women at the table with her. She'd never had friends quite like this before. She had been a loner in high school, and Sarah had been her best friend through college and law school and ever since. Although they shared much, there were some things they hadn't really talked about since college.

"Well—"

"Well what?"

"Sabrina, let the girl keep her secrets."

Sabrina glanced at the woman who had spoken and frowned at her before returning her gaze to Kathy. "Okay, fine. But when are you gonna see him again?"

"I'm not."

"Why not? Was he that bad?"

Kathy laughed, remembering the elevator. And the bed. Both times.

"Come on, spill the beans." Kathy shook her head but before she could say anything, the hair on the back of her neck stood up, and the women at the table once again fell silent.

"He's right behind me, isn't he?" Kathy asked softly of Sabrina, who was sitting beside her. Sabrina nodded.

The hand rested on her shoulder at the same time as she felt him beside her head, as though about to whisper something in her ear. Or kiss her. Which he did, right on her earlobe.

"Good afternoon, ladies." He stood back up as he greeted the rest of the women at the table.

Slowly she turned her head to see him. He was even more gorgeous than she remembered. He wore a black collared shirt and skintight blue jeans that left nothing to the imagination. *Damn.*

"I was wondering if I could interest the group of you in a private tour of the vineyards and specialty wine cellars this afternoon?"

Kathy crinkled her brow. *What is he up to?* None of the women answered him, all looked at her as though asking for permission.

"It's up to you guys." She shrugged.

"We'd love to, thank you." Sabrina smiled up at him.

"Is thirty minutes too soon for you ladies to be ready?"

Sabrina looked around at the other women before speaking for them. "That's fine."

"Very well." He nodded. "I will meet you at the east doors in half an hour. Until then, ladies."

The women waited for him to be far enough away not to hear them before starting in on her once again.

"Kathy, who is he?"

"I don't know." She shook her head. The hotel offered large public tours, true, but as far as she knew they didn't offer private ones. And last she heard the public wasn't allowed into the smaller cellars, ever.

"What do you mean you don't know? You spent the night with him, didn't you?"

"Who said they were talking?"

Kathy glared at her new friends.

"Sorry, guys, I can't tell you anything about him."

"He must have some pull here. You know the specialty rooms are closed to public tours. They only allow people in the tasting room and the main cellar."

"I'm sorry. I don't know anything about it."

Sabrina picked up her glass. "Well, the poor man doesn't know what he's in for then. We'll have all the information we need within the hour." She turned and looked at the other women around the table. The sly smiles set Kathy's nerves on edge. The clink as their glasses met filled her with dread as she wondered what they were going to do.

* * * *

Kathy followed the women to the east doors. She didn't want to, but needed to find out what the other women had planned.

"Good afternoon, ladies. Thank you for coming. My name is Marco, and this gentleman here beside me is one of the other owners of the vineyard, Giovanni. He has graciously offered to accompany us and answer any questions you might have about the vineyard and its history."

Marco. Kathy barely paid any attention as Giovanni nodded at the group of them and started his spiel. His name was Marco. Somehow it suited him. His dark, hard body and black hair reminded her of a hot Italian wanderer. She couldn't tear her eyes off of him as, with Giovanni, he led them through the tour.

Every time his eyes seemed to settle on her, she burned with desire and need. Her body remembered every single second of last night and it ached for a repeat. Her core pulsed as she looked at him, as though trying to urge her to jump his bones. And when his eyes left her, she suddenly felt cold and alone once again. Oh God, what had she done?

* * * *

"What are you doing?"

"Getting you alone."

Kathy's heart sped up at the thought of them alone, again. Somehow Marco had maneuvered them to be the last two in a small tasting room. He had closed and locked the door behind the rest of her friends, trapping her in here with him. "You can't do this. My friends will—"

"Assume I did exactly what I have done."

Kathy backed up against the wall. Not that she had very far to go, but being too close to him was bad for her libido. Very bad.

"What do you want from me?" Her voice came out breathy, excited. Damned if she didn't want him to take her in his arms and make love to her like he had last night. Where was

her standoffish attitude? Where was the bitch queen her co-workers often called her?

"I think that much is obvious." He smiled the same seductive smile that had her melting in his arms last night.

"So we had good sex. Great sex. You can find that with any woman. I'm sure there are hundreds willing to give it a shot."

He strode toward her leaving barely enough room for a piece of paper between them. He lifted her chin and gazed into her eyes. "We shared something last night, and not just the sex. There is something about you that makes me break all the rules, something that makes me want to live again."

Live again? What did he mean? Did it matter? Don't I feel the same way? She felt alive with him like she hadn't in years. Not since Riley.

No, she couldn't do this. It was unfair. She was being unfaithful to Riley.

Riley's gone, Kathy. He's gone and he's not coming back. He'd be rolling in his grave to see what you have done with your life, the way you have closed yourself off from everyone.

Kathy closed her eyes and felt a single tear escape.

"Why the tears?" His thumb brushed away the drop that escaped from the corner of her eye.

Kathy shook her head, unable to speak. The words of the fortune teller she had visited when she was with Sarah in Pennsylvania came back to her.

"The World. It is the end and a beginning. You will have all you have dreamed of, all you have strived for. But it is also a beginning. A time to start a new chapter of your life. You are

soon to reach that chance, that time when a decision needs to be made, my dear. You can have all you have ever wanted, but you need to take that final leap off the cliff, and face that this chapter is over. It is time to begin anew."

Could she do it? Could she face the fact that her life with Riley was over? That all they had shared was now only a memory?

Kathy opened her eyes and looked at the man who held her in his arms. Last night had been much more than sex. She'd had the opportunity in the past, hell had even indulged before, but Marco was right, last night had been more. She owed him an explanation at the very least.

"I'm sorry. I can't."

"Why? Why can't you? Is there someone else?"

"No, not exactly." She looked down at her wedding set she wore on her right hand.

"Whoever he is, Kathy, he's gone."

At her look up at him, he continued. "It's obvious." He reached down and held her hand with the rings. "You obviously loved him a lot. But he's gone. And I'd bet he's been gone a while."

"How do you know what I'm going through?"

He smiled and pulled something from the neck of his shirt. It was a thin gold necklace with a small diamond ring as the charm.

"I lost my fiancée nearly ten years ago. It took me a long time to recover from it. I keep this with me as a reminder of what I had, and what I can have once more in my life, but

only if I am open to it. I don't often wear it anymore, but it is always with me."

He let the necklace lay on his chest. "How long has he been gone?"

"Five years."

"And what would he say to you putting your life on hold? To you not living?"

"He'd probably yell at me." She smiled sadly.

"Kathy, I don't know if we have the potential for anything more than just a short fling, but I, for one, would like to give it a try. But you have to be willing, too."

Kathy knew that. She stood there with his hands now on her arms, holding her gently, warmth flowing from him into her, heating a part of her that had been cold too long.

"I don't know if I can do it. There is so much still there."

"And I don't want you to lose that, but perhaps together we can build more."

* * * *

Months later, neither Kathy nor Marco noticed the two people watching them as they walked through the park, arm in arm.

"How did you know they would suit each other?" the tall blond male asked the female standing beside him.

"Oh, I had a feeling about it."

"A feeling, huh?" He raised one eyebrow as he turned to look at her.

"It was time. For both of them. Don't you agree?"

"Most definitely. It's been painful watching her the past few years."

"Abigail was a big help."

"Yes, she was."

"So you think the two of them will get it? The happily ever after?"

The man laughed. "Are you kidding? She's the strongest fighter I know. Once she sees what she wants, she goes for it full force. Nothing will stand in her way this time."

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Epilogue

by

Tina Bendoni and Michelle Hasker

Abigail Montgomery glanced around her shop. Over the past year it had taken on various appearances, as had she, to help out the twenty-two people the gods had selected. She didn't want to move on just yet. Philadelphia was a large city filled with thousands of people. People who deserved to have a little nudge in the right direction. Unfortunately, the gods had already chosen her next location, but she'd keep the shop here in Philly because she'd definitely be returning to this wonderful city again.

In the meantime, she needed to make sure everything was ready for her farewell party. The year had been a smashing success. Every single one of her clients had received their happy ending. It gave her hope that the next city would be as lucky in love as this one. If not, well, she wasn't above taking matters into her own hands if she had to.

A quick glance around assured her that everything was set. Now it was just a matter of waiting for her guests to arrive. *Who would be the first? Kathy and her new beau? They'd most likely accompany Sarah and Jack. Or would it be Tayla and Hunter, the two who needed to learn to communicate and trust?*

Abigail shook her head. Regardless of who was first, they all had begun their journeys.

The tinkle of the bell over the shop door drew her attention to the front room. The first couple had arrived. The Fool. Andrea and Cade. Valentine's day. Abigail smiled. Gene had been a big help with them.

Never had she met a woman more stubborn than Andrea. She would have let the best thing in her life go because of fear and pride. Thankfully, Gene had intervened in a delightful manner, and set Andrea on the right track. From the looks of them together, arm in arm, Andrea had learned her lesson well. *Yes, The Fool had chosen well.*

Abigail motioned them into the back room, which now resembled a small banquet hall. Hopefully it wouldn't occur to any of her guests that the small shop shouldn't have a back room that large. *And if it did, well, that was the wonder of magic, wasn't it?*

The sound of bells pulled her attention to the front door once again. Ada and her Magician, Yves. What a cute couple they made. Ada looked nervous, though. She must be worried about her reception. She hadn't been the most polite of recipients, but Abigail understood her. Probably better than Ada understood herself.

"Thank you for coming, Ada. This must be the incredible Yves I've heard so much about."

Ada gave her a hesitant smile. "Mrs. Montgomery. Yes, this is Yves, the man you told me about."

Abigail couldn't resist teasing the poor woman. "Now, I don't recall telling you much about a man, Ada."

Genuine laughter escaped from Ada, and Abigail knew it was Yves who made her so happy.

"Well, no, not in so many words, but if it hadn't been for you, I never would have given Yves the time of day."

"And for that, dear lady," Yves took Abigail's hand and kissed the back of it, "I am eternally grateful."

Shameless flatterer. Abigail smiled and ushered them into the back room to introduce them to Andrea and Cade.

By twos and threes the rest of Abigail's special customers joined her for an end of year celebration. That they came, even the ones who were nervous and hesitant, pleased her. She'd successfully touched the lives of countless people here in Philadelphia, but these were the most important. Twenty-two extraordinary readings.

Linda and Michael stood in a corner, whispering softly. Her little High Priestess was so stubborn and independent, but had been hurting deep down inside. Possibly more than any of the others here. It was good she was finally happy. Michael was good for her. They were another good match.

Eager to make sure none of her guests were neglected, Abigail passed Anne and her two firemen. The three of them made a good grouping. Their relationship was still very new, and they had a lot of tough times ahead of them, but they had promise. The Empress was a level-headed woman in all things, even love. *Yes, they would do well.*

Cynthia and Clark, The Emperor, walked toward the back of the room, caution in every step. Of course, they would make sure there were other exits and no one could sneak behind them, despite the apparent safety of her store. It was

ingrained in those two. Both leaders in their own right, both highly successful in their chosen field. Even more so now that they found each other once again. They were definitely a couple made for each other.

Chris and Dawn. The Hierophant. They looked happy as they talked with Annabelle and Luke. The Lovers. Abigail shook her head with a smile. It hadn't even occurred to her that the two men knew each other through their businesses. The threads of fate were often more intertwined than people gave them credit for. Even she had made that mistake.

The Hierophant and The Lovers. Two very different cards, but each required the recipient to reassess something in their lives. Apparently both Chris and Annabelle had done so successfully.

While Abigail watched, Angela danced by with one her men. Jamie and Tony were the perfect men for her. It had taken long enough for Angela to realize what she had right in front of her, but with others against her, it was understandable. The Chariot encouraged a person to rein in the opposing forces in their life and take control. Abigail saw a long, happy future together for the three of them.

Continuing around the room, Abigail noticed Attie's gaze followed the dancers on the floor with ill-concealed interest. Mike's arm wrapped around her waist, but when he bent to ask Attie something, she shook her head and turned away from the dancers. Her ex had really done a number on her, but perhaps Mike would help by balancing out the Justice that Attie richly deserved.

Josh surprised all who knew him, as he and his wife, Cybil walked around visiting with friends and strangers alike. So much for Cybil's Hermit. They were a good couple, and Abigail was happy to see no troubles ahead for them. They had both been through a lot and deserved the happiness they would bring to each other. It was interesting to see he'd chosen not to get the surgery done.

"Mrs. Montgomery, I'd like you to meet Jack."

Abigail turned and met Sarah and her new man. Sarah looked much better than she had when she had first come to see Abigail, much less haunted. Whatever had been going on in her life since meeting Jack, it had a positive influence on her.

"You would be the police officer?" Abigail asked as she shook his hand.

"That I am, Mrs. Montomgery."

"You're keeping a close eye on this young lady?"

He looked down at Sarah and pulled her tighter against his body. "The closest. No one is going to harm Sarah as long as I am around."

Sarah blushed prettily. It was nice to see the two of them so happy together. *The Wheel of Fortune* picked well for Sarah.

The two walked on, allowing Abigail more time to watch the rest of her customers. She had enjoyed Philadelphia more than she had expected to. No other town had called her to stay as this one had. Perhaps, when her time was over, when the torch could be passed to another, she would be able to

stay and retire here. Keeping the shop was a good reason for her to come back. The people she had met, another.

Abigail was pleasantly surprised to see Sonya and Noah. She hadn't expected Sonya would be able to get him to agree to come. In fact, Abigail had fully expected neither of them to show. But apparently Sonya had more influence with her wolf than Abigail had given her credit for. She had definitely shown Strength in her dealings with her new man.

Tori and Eric were also here. It was nice to see Eric back in the area. Tori missed him when he wasn't around. Abigail felt particularly proud of their relationship. Eric had needed the impetus to get him to look at things in a different way, and what better view than that of the Hanged Man?

Mist appeared in the doorway, then it cleared and Abigail saw Grace and Dylan. What other woman would be able to take Death as calmly as Grace had? She had a very special place in Abigail's heart. Her courage was incredible, and her transformation was equally impressive. That woman had a lot of promise over the next few centuries. Hopefully Abigail would be able to return to see some of the promise fulfilled. And she'd do everything she could to help Grace assist her goddess.

Abigail helped herself to a truffle on the buffet table and smiled as she thought of the woman who had made them. Tayla might have a knack for catering, but her ability to keep a relationship going wasn't as good. While she was still with Hunter, and they seemed to be doing well, they would both need to continue growing and healing, as well as compromising if Temperance was to be satisfied.

The room was close to full. It appeared that almost all of her customers had come to this party, although most of them probably didn't understand why they were here. But that was part of the draw, the magic behind Abigail's ability.

Across the room Abigail saw Tabitha and her young man, Johnny. Now they had been a fun couple to bring together. Carol had been invaluable in that, and probably benefited as much, if not more than the couple themselves. Abigail was very pleased with The Devil's match. Carol's future had been bright before Johnny came into their lives, but now there was a little bit more hope in the household as well.

Her gaze was pulled in another direction and she saw Crystal and Jason. The Tower wasn't always viewed as the most positive of cards, but often it meant that although things were going to seem to fall apart, there was the always the possibility of rebuilding. Crystal was still working on her forgiving, but Abigail was sure she would get there eventually.

Out of the corner of her eye Abigail saw a shining star light up one side of the room. Her "niece" Astrid. That girl was full of so much love and energy, she couldn't help but light up a room when she walked in. Even those without the ability to see her light felt better in her presence. Her mother naming her after The Star had been a wise choice.

And it looked like she herself had made a wise choice the night of the meteor shower. Jared was still in pain from all he had seen and done, his aura remained patchy. But Abigail knew that Astrid's love truly was capable of helping him heal those empty, painful spots. It was amazing how far they had

come in such a short time together. Perhaps the young one on the way would speed things up.

Next to her little star shone another of bright hope. Eliana, a woman of incredible spirit and hope. And her partner shone as brightly as she did. Apollo was aptly named and suited The Sun card very well. The two of them knew each other so well, and had helped the other grow so much over the years, Abigail saw few problems in their future.

Outside Abigail saw a full moon hanging in the sky. A time of uncertainty and fluctuation for those who draw that card. Theresa's life had finally calmed down, her job was secure and meeting Jay was exactly what she needed. She wondered if they knew they were going to be the parents of five new puppies in a couple months. If not, Jay would soon realize it. Maybe Abigail might ask for one to take to her new place.

Sitting over in a quiet corner, Andre and Charlie were enjoying some quiet time together. Despite her fame, the rest of the guests here had not bothered Charlie at all, giving her some much needed rest. They all treated her the same as anyone else, and that had to be welcome for a woman who had avoided Judgment for so long.

The cycle was complete with The World. Kathy and Marco looked happy together. When Riley and Nina had approached her and asked for help, Abigail hadn't been sure she would be able to do much, but she had been wrong. The two of them had suffered long enough, had earned a right to close this chapter in their lives and begin anew. The love and happiness shining off of them truly warmed her.

One last time, Abigail looked around at her guests. Life was good and looking to be better for each of them. It had been a long time since she had been as successful as she had been while here in Philadelphia, and she was pleased with the results. She was still unsure of where she would be sent next, but she was sure they would need her there as much as she had been needed here.

Each of these couples, though, had just begun in their way. And each would need to continue to work toward a satisfactory ending. But Abigail was content. She'd had a good year, and was looking forward to the end result.

With a glance at the guests awaiting her, she moved to talk with each of them once more, to share a bit more advice and congratulations. Her time was almost over, and she intended to spend it with these people who had made it so enjoyable.

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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 an overactive imagination. She would love for you to visit her at www.michellehasker.com.

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