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All Bottled Up  
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# All Bottled Up

*Christine d'Abo*

## Dedication

There have been so many people who have helped me along the way. To my very good friends Amy Ruttan, Wylie Kinson and Red Garnier. You've all been there every step of the way, and have put up with my crazy IMs on Friday nights. Thank you so much. To my editor Laurie, who's been patient with my quirks. And last but not least, to my husband Mark, who understands my half responses to his questions, and who keeps me well supplied with coffee and chocolate. I love you, hon!

## Chapter One

“I would then lie on the blanket, pull up my dress to show him I’m not wearing any panties, and ask him if he’d like anything to eat.”

Another typical day at Way to Go Travel for Viola. She loved to dispense sex advice to her clients first thing in the morning. Taking a deep breath, she leaned slightly into her cubicle and spoke what she hoped were words of wisdom.

Viola tried not to giggle when she heard her customer gasp and then laugh on the other end of the phone. She’d always wanted to use that line on a man herself, but never in her life had she been given a chance. Her love life wasn’t exactly stellar these days. Viola smiled again when she heard her customer frantically jotting the line down.

“You are wicked, girl. Okay, so I don’t need to worry about someone coming along and seeing us?”

“Mrs. MacKay, this resort is so private they guarantee you won’t see another soul for the entire ten days of your vacation.”

There was a pause on the other end, and Viola had to strain to hear what was going on. For a moment she thought they’d gotten disconnected, until she heard the other woman let out a deep breath.

“Do you have any questions, Mrs. MacKay?”

“What if he doesn’t want to go down on me at the beach? I mean, that’s the whole point of this trip, to try to ignite that old flame.”

Her heart ached for her client. Over the years, she’d listened to her fair share of customers, all wanting to escape to paradise for different reasons. But it was the Mrs. MacKays out there who really tugged at her heart. Viola leaned in deep behind her cubicle wall and lowered her voice.

“Well, if you don’t wear any panties all day, and put on clothing that lets him know

you're not wearing any, that will help. Also, flirt with him. Grab his ass. Hell, grab his crotch. By the time you lean back on the blanket on the beach, he'll be ripping off his clothing to get at you."

"But he's not really the adventurous type. At least, I don't think he is."

Viola fingered the leaf of her bamboo shoot and looked at her pale, grinning face in the small mirror she had stuck to the side of her cubicle wall. "You'd be surprised. Most people have a naughty side, one they only need to be coaxed into showing. What do you think he'd say if he heard you talking right now?"

Mrs. MacKay laughed. "I think he'd have a heart attack."

"There you go."

"Viola, I was wondering. I almost hate to ask..."

Viola closed her eyes. This was the part of the conversation she loved, when her clients really began to trust her, to share their secrets. It made the rest of her job as a travel sales associate bearable. Thank God her friend Beth was her quality analyst or she would have been fired long ago. Or her calls would have ended up online somewhere.

"My husband has always wanted a...well...a blowjob. We've been married thirty-four years and I've never done that for him. I'd like to try, on this trip I mean."

*Shit.* Viola's mind raced as she figured out what to tell her. Blowjobs weren't her area of expertise. Not that she was against them, but she'd never wanted to spend that much time down there with any of her boyfriends. Most of the men she'd dated were more interested in a quick screw and a nap than playing around. Heaven forbid she have an orgasm. The world might stop turning! That's why God invented vibrators.

"Believe it or not, I think the best blowjobs are the ones that start off playfully. Tease him as you unbutton his pants. Don't try to put his whole cock into your mouth. Lick around a bit and I think..." she stopped mid-sentence. Bill, her boss, was making his rounds and heading her way. *Shit, shit, shit.* "And I think you made an excellent choice with your resort package, Mrs. MacKay."

"No, no, no, please continue. I'm making notes."

The poor woman sounded frantic. Viola bit her bottom lip, trying to gauge Bill's

progress. *Damn it*, he was heading straight for her. No time to even whisper any last words of encouragement.

“Yes, I wish I could as well. What I can do is send you a link with that additional information you requested. That will give you all of the steps you need to perform that last excursion we were discussing.”

Viola quickly searched the Internet for information about oral sex and smiled when an article *not* from a porn site popped up. It even had pictures!

“Oh, oh, someone’s coming. I’m sorry, dear, I don’t want to get you in trouble. Thank you very much for all of your help. This will really make my anniversary wonderful this year.”

“You are very welcome, Mrs. MacKay. Is there anything else I can help you with today?”

“No, I think I’m all set. You are such a sweet girl to help me out like this. I could just hug you. Now I just need to go out and buy something sexy to wear.”

“I’m so happy to hear that. You have your confirmation number, which you can use if you have any additional questions. And please make sure to review the link. I’ll send it to you in a minute, so you should have it shortly. Thank you for calling Way to Go Travel. Have a great day!”

Viola disconnected the call with enough time to minimize the open window on her computer, and watch Bill as he approached her cubicle. She tried not to stare, but she couldn’t help it. *Damn, he was hot*. He wore his brown hair a little long, so he had a tousled look to him. His brown eyes were rich and warm like a blanket. And while he wasn’t perfect, she really couldn’t complain. It’s not like she was a runway model or anything.

She certainly didn’t think he was as big an ass as Beth said he was. So what if the only time he talked to her was to give her another special assignment. He trusted her. He even smiled at her on occasion. That was more attention than most men paid her these days.

Even now her heart flipped when he sauntered up beside her low cubicle wall, leaned

over it and tried to look down her shirt. Not that he would have much luck with that today. She was wearing her long, baggy blue sweater that started at her collar bone and covered her entire upper body and part of her bottom. Beth called it her Bill armor. She found it comfortable, especially in the cool fall weather. It's not like she was trying to discourage Bill from checking her out.

"Viola, you look like you're getting ready to pack up for the day. Doesn't your shift go for another hour?"

Not once did he look into her eyes. He kept talking directly to her chest. She crossed her arms across her bust in an attempt to distract him. Okay, so he wasn't perfect. But at least he found her attractive.

"Actually, I just finished my last call. Remember, I'm leaving early today so I can catch my plane. You approved it three weeks ago."

God, she'd been so happy when she won that contest. Top sales associate for the quarter. Little Miss Viola White from Halifax, Nova Scotia, beat out two hundred and seventy-five other associates in North America to claim the top spot. The entire office actually applauded for her when the email came. It wasn't until later she found out about the company clause. If the winner was unable to go on the trip, it automatically defaulted to the employee's immediate supervisor. She was still trying to figure out the rocket scientist who came up with that rule. Probably an immediate supervisor.

"Right, your prize trip for winning the contest. Is that this week? I completely forgot."

He leaned over and fingered the dark green shoot that currently grew out the top of her bamboo. Bill always toyed with it every time he came to talk to her. Viola watched his long fingers caressing the leaf, the way he rubbed it over and over between his thumb and forefinger. That's how she knew he'd be a gentle lover. By the way he touched her plant.

She tore her gaze away from his hand to look at his face, trying to figure out if he was toying with her or not. Had Beth been here she would have rolled her eyes. Bill damn well knew the trip was today. It took him a second to meet her gaze, but when he



did, she was completely enraptured with his rich brown eyes.

“So when do you fly out?”

If he’d been pissed off about her going, he seemed over it now. His toothy smile shone down at her, which she immediately returned.

“In about five hours, actually. But I need to get home and finish packing. And take my dog to the doggie hotel. That gives me just enough time to get to the airport to pass security. Then nothing but smooth sailing until I reach Cozumel.”

Poor William, her dog, would be traumatized. He couldn’t stand being away from her for more than a few hours, let alone a seven-day vacation. Even when she had to work a double shift, he’d get all pissy at her. He’d ignore her for a good ten minutes once she got home before mauling her. Well, maul as much as a Dachshund could. She couldn’t imagine how he’d react once she got back from this trip after leaving him with a bunch of strangers.

Bill didn’t seem too interested in her dog and began to look around the sea of cubicles. She figured him for a cat person. His only flaw.

“So.” She needed to change the subject before he wandered away. “Who will be covering my shifts when I’m gone? I know we’re a bit short staffed these days.”

Bill’s lips twitched into a small smile. “Rupert will take over your accounts for the time being. I’ve been conducting interviews all week to find some additional staff. We’ve had some attractive candidates.”

*Attractive.* Yes, more than an average share of attractive, young women had paraded past her cube this week on their way to his office. The majority couldn’t have been older than twenty, maybe twenty-two at the most. How the hell was she supposed to catch his attention after him spending time with such attractive women? It wouldn’t have killed him to interview a man or two.

She didn’t have to look at her own appearance to know she didn’t quite match Bill’s definition of attractive. Her 34Bs were all she’d been blessed with and she wasn’t about to feel bad about what she couldn’t change. Well, given enough money she could, but she wasn’t going to pretend to be someone she wasn’t. So what if she was a size twelve and

not a zero? She happened to like to eat.

“That’s good. Rupert’s a great guy.” A quick glance at her floating magnetic clock told her it was time to go. “Is there anything else I can do for you, Bill? I need to finish off my case notes on my last client and then I was going to pack it in.”

She couldn’t forget Mrs. MacKay and her blowjob article. The poor woman would attack her husband like a popsicle if she didn’t send it along. What kind of vacation would that leave her with?

“Actually, I have a few things I need you to take care of before you head out.” Bill’s other hand emerged from behind the cubicle partition and dropped a stack of five or six file folders. “These are special cases and I’d hate for them to sit for a week while you’re gone. I don’t have time to get them finished. I need you.”

*No! He can’t be doing this now!* Viola held a mental freak-out session in her brain, where she punched a very large hole into a cardboard cutout of Bill’s face. She immediately felt guilty. Bill’s the boss and he was only doing what he felt was best for the company. So what if she’d miss her flight because she was stuck doing a job that was supposed to be his and that she never got the credit for. She took a calming breath, and somehow managed to keep a smile on her face.

“I’m only going to be gone for seven days. Besides, I’ve been training Brian to handle some of these. He’s more than ready to take on an official special assignment.”

Bill straightened and crossed his arms so that his elbows brushed the top of her cubicle.

“I don’t trust Brian. I trust you, Viola. Please make sure you get these done before you leave today.”

He then snapped around and marched back down the aisle and into his office. Viola stared after him feeling very confused. Was she just insulted for her poor teaching skills or praised for her quality of work?

*Or maybe Bill is just a jerk.*

No, he wasn’t. He was handsome, charming and even a little sexy. No, he wasn’t the perfect man, but she had failings of her own. What was important was the fact he was

perfect for *her*. She needed a man like Bill, someone who she could rely on, have fun with. God, someday maybe even have kids.

All she had to do was find some way of getting him to notice her so she could show him that.

Viola pushed her mental fantasies aside for the time being. Bill could wait until she got back from vacation. She wasn't going to get out of there on time unless she hauled ass and got this work done. Viola gave her head a shake, kicked her loafers off her feet, and tucked them under her butt. *Now what?*

First things first—Mrs. MacKay. She logged into her personal email, typed off a quick note, and sent the link. The last thing she needed was an official record of *that* conversation on the company server. Even Beth couldn't hide naughty emails sent from the corporate system.

Next she made a few clicks of her mouse and set herself unavailable on the phone system. She needed time to think. She picked up her water bottle and filled up her bamboo shoot with enough water to last a few days. The "Hello My Name Is" name tag that she'd stuck to the side of the jar bled ink as a drip rolled down past the name—Ross.

"First real vacation in three years and I have to stay late," she said to Ross. "I suppose I'd better bring you home too. I wouldn't want to abandon you in this place."

She sighed and picked up her private extension phone. It only rang twice.

"Hello?"

"Beth, I have to work late."

"That sonofabitch. I told you he would pull this shit."

"It's not like he's doing it on purpose. He just trusts me. I think he might actually be coming around and starting to notice me more."

Beth sighed. "I don't know where your idol worship of the man came from but he doesn't deserve it. You can do better than Bill."

Viola closed her eyes and listened as her friend continued her tirade of Bill bashing. After a minute of near solid swearing, she laughed.

"You always make me feel better."

“Hey that’s what a best friend is for. Anything I can do to help? Want me to come in?”

“No, it’s your day off. Besides I don’t think there’s a good excuse for you to come in and check up on me.”

“A quality analyst doesn’t need an excuse. But okay. What about William?”

Viola’s feet hit the floor. “Oh my God, I won’t have time to take him to the doggie hotel. And I haven’t finished packing yet.”

Beth’s chuckle grated for the tiniest of seconds. Viola took a deep breath and tried to calm her racing heart. It was only an all-expenses-paid trip to a five-star luxury resort after all. Nothing to freak out over.

“I’ll tell you what. I’ll bring William to my place. We can keep each other company while you’re away. And I’ll throw the rest of your clothing into a bag for you. That way you can grab and go, baby.”

Her fingers spun one of the file folders around on her desk. “Not unless I get these cases closed in time. You don’t mind?”

“Consider it done. I’ll head over now and bring your pouting pet back with me before he sees you.”

“This is going to be so strange traveling alone.” Viola sighed and nudged a file folder with her finger.

“You won’t be alone for long. The guys will be all over you.”

Viola rolled her eyes. “Sure they will.”

Beth’s sigh came through loud and clear. “How many times do I have to tell you, you’re an attractive woman. Give yourself a chance.”

“I’m short.”

“You’re five-seven. That’s not short.”

“I have gross hair.”

“You have blonde hair and hazel eyes. People would kill for that. All you need is a haircut.”

Viola closed her eyes. “Okay, enough. I give up. I’m a goddess trapped in baggy

clothing and who needs a haircut.”

This was an old conversation that never ended well for her. One couldn’t argue with Beth and actually win. Safer for all involved to roll over and die before things got scary.

“Call me when you get to the airport so I know you’ve made it in one piece.”

“Will do. You are the best.”

Beth laughed. “And don’t you forget it.”

She hung up with a click of the receiver and picked up the first file. If things went her way, she might just finish up on time. Viola kept her head down and her mind focused, lost in the reams of facts and details of Bill’s reports. It wasn’t until she heard a cough above her that she looked up. Brian, her trainee, stood there tapping his watch.

“What the hell are you still doing here? You should have left forty minutes ago. No, make that an hour and forty minutes, because I thought you were leaving early.”

“What!” She looked at her clock. “Shit, I’m not finished.”

“Not finished what? Did Bill dump another project on you?”

A quick scan of her desk and she realized she’d only gotten through four of the six files. And now she was late. In rush-hour traffic, she’d barely make her flight.

“Give.”

She looked up at Brian. “What?”

He didn’t wait and snatched them from her hands. “I’ll finish them.”

“Brian, he wanted me—”

“He wanted you to be late. I’m not going to let that happen. You deserve that vacation. Bill knows if you miss your flight, you forfeit your prize and he’ll get to go in your place.”

“He wouldn’t do that. Bill respects my work.”

Whether or not she wanted to admit it, it sounded like something Bill could do. She had to relax her clenched fingers.

“Bill’s an ass and you’re too naïve to see it. Go, have fun and don’t even think about this place. I’ve got your back.”

Viola hesitated for a second before she stood, tightened her ponytail and grabbed her

purse and her plant.

“Okay.” Her heart was pounding at the idea of her tiny rebellion. A wide grin crossed her face. “Okay, I’m leaving.”

Brian smiled. “Good for you. Don’t worry about these, I’ve got ya covered. I’ll ask Beth if I have any questions.”

Viola hugged Brian as best she could with full arms. “Thank you.”

“Have fun.”

She grabbed her coat and bolted for the door.

The stress of the fourteen-hour trip came to a thunderous halt when Viola dropped her suitcases in a heap on the floor of her suite at the Coral Reef Palace. Thank God she’d made it in one piece. She needed a shower. And a drink. Preferably more than one. The charming girl at the check-in desk promised to send up a pitcher of their famous rum punch, which couldn’t get here soon enough for Viola. If she’d known about the insanity of flying, she would have thought twice about coming.

Viola kicked her bags away from the door so she could open it with little effort. Her energy reserves completely used up, she fell back onto the bed, only to bounce against the hard surface. *How the hell am I going to sleep on this?* A remote-control-like object on her pillow caught her attention. She had to read the card three times to figure out what to do with it.

“What’s a comfort number? How the hell do I figure out what mine is? All I need is rum and a cabana boy.”

Ten minutes later she was testing out comfort number fifty when a light knock on her door got her attention.

“Room service.”

Like a bolt she was at the door. She yanked it open, and practically grabbed the rum punch from the cute attendant. She barely had the presence of mind to shove a few bills into his hand for a tip.

“*Gracias.*” The man smiled and nodded a bit too enthusiastically.

*Damn.* She must have given him too much. Not that it mattered. She was officially on vacation. Grabbing a glass, she shifted her attention to the large double doors that led outside. Viola couldn’t stop the grin that spread across her face as she walked to the room’s balcony, pouring a large glass of the fruit concoction.

Fresh ocean breeze and delicious sunshine rolled over her. It made every twinge of stress melt from her body. *Thank God I slept on the plane.* She didn’t want to spend any more time than necessary in this room. She had a date with her book and a beach chair. And later, she planned on trying every dish on the menu. Work was picking up the tab after all, so why the hell shouldn’t she enjoy herself?

Swallowing the last of her punch, Viola went back inside to grab her bathing suit. Beth had been a life saver. It’s not every friend who would pack for you. Viola pulled the suitcase over to the bed and unzipped it.

She felt the blood drain from her head and settle into the pit of her stomach. Her legs grew weak and she had to fight against the urge to sink to the floor.

“Damn...you...Beth.”

A surprising air of calm momentarily flowed through her. Viola stood straight, made her way over to the punch, and poured herself another glass. She downed the contents in a single gulp before pouring another. Despite the quaking of her knees, she found the edge of her bed and sat. The bright flowery comforter did little to cheer her sinking spirits as she stared at the cause of her shock.

A tiny red bikini.

She fished an ice cube out of her glass and gnashed it with her teeth. At least there was real fruit juice mixed in with the rum. She could pretend that it was a breakfast drink.

Upon closer inspection of her suitcase, she realized the rest of her clothing was different too. Gone were her oversized T-shirts and baggy shorts. Instead, Beth had filled her suitcase with tight-fitting tops and short shorts that showed more than they covered. Beth must have emptied out her own closet in an attempt to spice up Viola’s wardrobe. At least she had her big, floppy-brimmed sun hat. She’d need extra sunscreen to protect

all that exposed skin.

Now, she knew she could survive the seven-day trip with the other outfits. It would take some creative uses of her beach towel, but she was sure she would find a way to cover her ass. The bathing suit was going to be a problem. There was no way in *hell* she'd put that tiny piece of floss on her body. If it would even fit her. There had to be a store nearby where she could get a new one.

Out of the corner of her eye, Viola noticed a folded piece of pink paper tucked between the cups of a lacy black bra. She sighed, picked it up, and flipped it over. She really didn't need to read it to guess the gist of what Beth wrote. She did anyway.

*Right now you're probably pissed off at me. I'm okay with that. You need to relax and enjoy life. Stop hiding behind your fabric armor and let people see the real you.*

*Go find a man and have some fun. And get laid!*

*Love, Beth*

Yup, pretty much what she expected.

Viola let the note fall to the floor and watched it fold over as it landed. Panic clawed at her. Basically she had three choices—hide in her room for her seven days in paradise, go shopping and pray she'd find something that was less revealing, or put on the damn bikini and hit the beach. None were appealing at the moment.

Plus, she was almost out of punch.

She ran her hands over her hair, smoothing down the fuzzies that had escaped her ponytail. *When did I get so old?* Beth teased her that she acted older than her twenty-nine years all the time. Until this very moment, she'd never believed her.

*Old and alone.*

The clock flashed 10:13. She had to make a decision before the entire day was wasted sulking, making her a complete and utter loser.

She set the glass down on the nightstand, stood up and stripped. She stood there naked for several minutes, careful not to look at her reflection in the mirror, before she snatched the bikini top. It took several minutes of naked wrestling with the cunning piece



of clothing before she was able to finally slide her arms into it and secure it into place. The bottoms were more straightforward and it only took a few minutes to tie the side straps that held it in place. The moment she dreaded arrived as she turned to face her reflection.

Skinny, bony knees? Check. Enormous mole three inches above and to the right of her belly button? Check. Hips that were a bit too big for the rest of her body? Smallish chest? Oh yeah.

Status quo.

At least she had her hat. Viola lathered her body with sunscreen, slipped on a pair of sunglasses and her sandals. It changed her. She didn't look like herself. Hell, if she had a scarf that she could drape around her neck, she'd almost look like a movie star. Viola smiled at herself and went in search of her makeup bag. She pulled out and applied her bright red lipstick.

After checking her appearance in the mirror one last time, she spun on her heels and marched out of her room with her head held high. To hell with what people thought of her. She was on vacation after all.

*First one in three years, damn it.* If she couldn't make a complete ass of herself amongst a bunch of strangers, where else could she do it?

Maybe Beth was right and all she needed was to give in to her wild side. She knew it existed, and had the transcripts of some of her steamier phone calls to her customers to prove it. Maybe putting on the red bikini and lipstick were the first steps to becoming a sex kitten. Show the world that Viola White was as sexy as any of the little tarts Bill brought into the office. She squashed her embarrassment at the thought of doing something sexually adventurous, even in a place where no one would ever see her again. Viola sighed and closed her eyes as she waited for the elevator.

She really did need to get laid. The question was how?

## Chapter Two

Viola was able to mostly ignore the air-conditioned chill in the air as she traveled down the elevator, though it required some strategic placement of her arms across her chest to cover up the evidence. When the doors dinged open, she dropped her arms to her sides and walked out into the lobby of the Coral Reef, swinging her towel as she marched purposefully toward the door.

As she stepped out into the sun-drenched heat, Viola stopped. Every inch of her body heated and tingled as the chill was chased away. She sighed. *Heaven indeed.* A group of young men to her right stopped talking and turned to stare at her. She ignored them as best she could, but she couldn't help blushing when she heard one of them say "nice ass" as she walked past them down the path to the beach. *You'd think they'd never seen a pale Canadian before. Or bony knees.* She did wiggle her hips a little bit more as she walked, though.

It being off season, the resort had considerably fewer people than capacity. This also meant fewer people wandering on the beach. The majority hung around closest to the resort. Jet skis and parasailing were the main attractions besides lounging on the white-powdered Mexican sand.

The idea of being social wasn't overly appealing, especially since she felt a bit woozy after the three rum punches. What she really wanted was to read her book under one of the large beach umbrellas near the water. Of course, in her burst of sexual liberation, she'd forgotten to bring it with her. She had to double check to make sure she'd taken her room key. It would have been typical for her to have left it behind, but she had it.

*Well, now what?*

Teenage boys to the left of her. Teenage girls sunbathing in front of her. Potential

male stalkers sitting at the bar. *Choices, choices.*

Viola threw her towel over her shoulder, turned and wandered up the beach to a section that looked deserted except for the occasional strolling couple. After ten minutes, she found a secluded spot where she could still see the resort, but was far enough away no one would accidentally wander up to her.

For the next hour, she took great delight in digging for sea shells in the sand with her toes. She waded out into the gentle ocean waves to catch a glimpse of the tropical fish as they darted close to shore and around her feet. *A mask and snorkel, that's what I need to get a better look.* A Catamaran with a group from the resort roared past her, blasting music out of some large speakers, the occupants cheering. They must be heading out for a scuba-diving excursion. Something else she'd always wanted to try. Maybe she'd be able to sign up for some lessons while she was here. Now that would be an adventure even Beth would approve of.

"Tomorrow," she looked up and said to a small seagull that had landed on the water a few feet away from her.

Viola waded out into the ocean, her eyes still focused on the disappearing ship. She wasn't paying attention to the water as she smashed her toes against something hard. "Sonofabitch!"

Viola tried to grab her toes as best she could while maintaining her balance in the light current. She slipped and fell sideways into the water. Re-emerging, she coughed out the water she'd swallowed. Her eyes stung from the salt and her lungs burned as she continued to cough.

"What the hell...?"

Peering down through her waterlogged eyelashes, she managed to catch a glimpse at what had caused her near toe amputation and drowning. A beam of sunlight cut through the water to glint off the tip of something metal sticking out of the water. It was hard to see exactly what it was because of all the sand her fall had stirred up.

"Shit, I'll probably need a tetanus shot."

Since she was already wet, she dove under the warm water and dug at the object to

free it. It took three trips under before she was able to get a good grip on the tip with her hands. She gave it several hard tugs in an attempt to free it from the tightly packed sand. It refused to move. She was about to give up, but something in the back of her mind told her to try again. This time, after she finally cleared the surface, Viola couldn't believe her eyes.

A bottle.

Its ornate golden metal stopper had been the offending part to hurt her toe. But it was only a fraction of the bottle's beauty, which was covered in jewels. Viola ran her thumb over the sapphire gems that had somehow been secured to the bottle. The glass seemed to melt around them, impossibly binding them to the smoky dark blue glass embossed with gold strips. Its color prevented her from seeing if there was anything inside. It must be worth a small fortune and here she found it completely on a fluke.

*Maybe there's a note.* She'd always wanted to find a message in a bottle. It was one of her many silly childhood fantasies. The top didn't want to come off, no matter how hard she yanked and tugged at it. She'd have to wait until she could get it back to her room to see.

With her eyes locked on the bottle, she slowly made her way back to shore. Sand clung to the smooth glass and she had to rinse it in the water and rub away the quickly drying salt from the smooth surface. It was the most beautiful thing she'd ever seen. She was so taken with her discovery she didn't notice that someone was standing behind her. Until he snapped the elastic strap of her bikini top.

"What the hell!"

Viola spun on her heels, ready to unleash hell on the unwelcome juvenile delinquent. Her mouth dropped open when she came face-to-face with the most amazingly handsome man she'd ever laid eyes on.

"Good day," he said and bowed deeply from the waist. "My name is Jerod. And what is the name of the goddess who awoke me from my slumber?"

The sound of his voice sent shivers of pleasure down her spine. Despite the warmth of the sun and water, goosebumps rose on her skin.

“Pardon?”

Her brain felt like mush. *He called me a goddess?* He must be drunk on the rum punch. It was pretty good stuff after all. She gave her head a shake and tried to place his accent. Mediterranean? Italian? Not Spanish though. She really needed to become more worldly, especially if there were men like him out there.

His eyes were crystal blue, so light she’d almost swear he wore contact lenses. His hair was pitch black, as was his goatee. He wore no shirt, but instead had a midnight blue satin vest that did little to hide the perfect six pack and firm pecs. He stood with his hands on his hips, drawing her attention to the mysteries below his golden belt. His pants were made of the same material, which hugged his thighs nicely. He stood barefoot as the water lapped at his toes.

*Perfect and very yummy.*

“Do I meet your approval?”

She snapped her eyes back to his face and prayed she wasn’t drooling. *Shit, I’m acting like Bill.* Viola felt her face heat and she wanted to crawl under a large beach towel and hide. Face-to-face conversations weren’t her strong suit. That’s why she loved working in a call center—she was braver when faceless.

Beth’s words began to ring in her ears—*get laid*. Viola straightened, looked this snacktastic man in the eyes and smiled.

“I’m sorry, that was rude of me. You surprised me. What did you say your name was?”

“Jerod.”

He looked amused, like someone who was initiating a new member into a secret club. Viola found her gaze constantly slipping over his body, checking out every inch of his half-naked body. When he chuckled, her brain finally kicked past her libido and she held out her hand.

“I’m Viola. It’s very nice to meet you, Jerod.”

Instead of taking her hand, he nodded his head, keeping his eyes locked on hers the entire time. The urge to squirm under the intensity of his gaze was strong. Instead she

buried her toes into the sand and kept staring back. *Think sexy.*

Viola licked her lips and looked up at him with what she prayed was a smoldering glance. Of course, she felt a blush heat her cheeks but she did her best to ignore it.

“So, what can I do you for?” She tried to sound mysterious, and even lowered her voice a little as she spoke.

If she was doing a good job, Jerod wasn't letting on. His amused half smile still played on his lips as he shook his head.

“The question is what can I do for you? You woke me from my slumber and freed me from my bottle. I am a genie and I'm here to grant you three wishes.”

She blinked. Then she closed her eyes and groaned. “Oh crap. Is this part of a resort special event? I'm not going to have to dress up in a costume and go to some special dinner tonight, am I? I really just wanted to keep a low profile this vacation.”

To his credit, Jerod didn't break character. He kept his smile glued in place and continued.

“I assure you this is no trick. I am a genie.”

How the hell did the resort find out she was from Way To Go? Someone from the office must have called up and planned this. Probably Beth. Her sexy act forgotten, Viola reached out and rubbed the hem of Jerod's costume between her fingers.

“Well, you look like a genie. That costume is pretty slick. I'll have to make sure I tell my customers about the interactive quality of the vacation packages. How long were you up there waiting?”

Viola held a hand up to her eyes and scanned the sand dunes behind him. The poor guy must have been out there all day. She should have brought some of the rum punch. They could probably both use the drink.

“It's been one hundred and forty-nine years since my last master found my prison. As a reward, I have it in my power to grant you any three wishes you desire.” His voice lowered on the last as he took a small step forward.

Viola had read about it countless times, but it wasn't until that very moment she truly understood the concept of swooning.

“Anything?” Her voice came out as an awestruck whisper. *God I’m lame.*

Jerod’s smile spread from his lips to the rest of his face. This was clearly a man who was very comfortable with his sexuality and didn’t mind wielding his power on the female half of the population. Maybe Beth was right about the getting laid part. She wondered if he’d be allowed to sleep with a guest. Probably not, but a little harmless flirtation couldn’t hurt.

“There are certain rules, of course. Would you like me to share those with you now?”

A small part of her was getting excited by the game, especially since she’d been lucky enough to get placed with such a cute guy. All she needed to do was relax enough to enjoy Jerod and the role play. She’d have to put a special note in the computer system about this place when she got back to work.

“Sure. Why not?”

He bowed his head again. “Very well. Rule number one. I cannot make anyone fall in love with you.”

*Ah, a warning.* “I’m not looking for a *relationship*, so that’s an easy rule. Just a little vacation fun.” She hoped he got her meaning.

Ignoring her comment, he continued, “Rule number two. I can’t bring anyone back from the dead.”

“Eww. People would try to wish for that?”

“People try to wish for all things.”

The wind caught the edge of his vest and blew it open. Man, did they pick some good eye candy for this character. He probably got off on women drooling.

“Rule number three. There is no wishing for more wishes.”

*Odd.* “What no *you-can-wish-for-whatever-you-want-as-long-as-it-can-take-place-on-the-resort-grounds* wish?”

For the first time, Jerod’s expression changed. The frown actually had the odd ability to make him more attractive than before. His down-turned lips were thick and very kissably appealing. The hair of his black goatee looked smooth, and she stopped her hand just in time to prevent touching him. Viola nonchalantly pinched her arm in a vain

attempt to snap out of her hormone-induced haze. *Sad, Viola. Really sad.*

"I am not aware of the rule you mentioned. While there are other smaller rules, you needn't worry about them. Most of my former masters used their wishes so quickly I rarely need to explain further."

"Can I keep the bottle?"

She held it between them, hoping the little barrier it provided would help her get her concentration back. She didn't like being out of control with her emotions. Bad things happen to people when they did that. On the other hand, Jerod seemed in complete control. She loved a man who could take charge of a situation. Especially a cute one. Even more especially, a cute one who paid his undivided attention to her.

He reached out and brushed his fingers along the side of the bottle before he pinged it with his forefinger. Viola felt a nervous bubble pop inside of her as he looked up from the bottle, into her eyes, and smiled.

"For the time being. Once you have made your wishes, I will need to reclaim my home."

"Do you always have to talk that formally? It must be hard to stay in character like that."

Jerod closed his eyes. "This isn't an act."

He muttered something else under his breath. Viola strained to hear what he was saying, but couldn't. "Pardon?"

He opened his eyes again and Viola gasped. They changed from crystal blue to dark blue.

"I said I hate this part of the relationship."

"Relationship?" she stuttered.

"Convincing mortals that I am who I say I am is getting harder and harder. My master before you didn't believe me, even after he'd made his first wish. He thought he'd lost his faculties. I don't have the patience for this any longer."

Viola took a step back. This conversation had officially moved into the realm of *not* fun.



“Well, I...”

Jerod took a step closer and all memory of what she was about to say flew from her mind. An exotic scent of musk and spices washed over her, sending her head into a spin. He was only an inch or two from her now, but he still didn’t make any contact. He didn’t need to. His eyes held her motionless. She watched as their color blended back from dark to crystal blue. Her body instantly responded to his. Her nipples hardened, pressing against the silky fabric of her bikini top. A shiver of longing washed over her and pooled in a puddle of heat between her legs. She wanted her heart to stop pounding, but there was no way to calm it.

“I am a genie. You are a mortal. Please make your wishes so I may return to my bottle in peace.” His voice was rich, like a sweet dessert.

Viola tried to ignore the little flip her stomach gave at the sound of his voice. Oh this really was bad, she really shouldn’t be reacting this way to a complete stranger, handsome or not. She had to get out of here. Now.

“Look, I’m sorry you don’t enjoy your job. But I didn’t ask to be a part of your game.” She saw the other resort guests playing beach volleyball up ahead. “I’m going to head back now. Please don’t follow me. I promise I won’t say anything bad to your bosses.”

She didn’t wait to see how he’d react to that one. Viola scrambled to grab her beach towel that held her hat and room key. With the bottle now covered by her towel and pressed between her breasts, she jogged as best she could on the sand toward the resort. Her calves were screaming from exertion when she finally reached the closest gathering of people. It didn’t help her heart though. It still pounded like mad.

*Rule number one. Don’t wander the beach alone again.*

A group of high school students cheered as one of the boys in the volleyball game made an impressive dive. Viola noticed several of the girls giggled as they passed a very large water bottle filled with a drink that looked surprisingly similar to her glass of rum punch this morning. Her stomach lurched at the memory.

*Rule number two. Don’t drink large quantities of alcohol on an empty stomach then*

*wander off alone.*

She stood in the middle of the group of students and felt very small and very much on her own. What made her think she could come to a tropical paradise solo and have a good time? A group of adults sitting off to the side caught her eye. They were chatting and laughing in a very civilized manner. Viola took a deep breath and made a few steps in their direction to join them. She stopped when a man wearing a faded Yankees cap and Hawaiian shorts shouted at the group of students. The teacher.

She had about as much in common with these people as she did with the crazy actor down the beach. No, her room was looking very nice at this point. Maybe after a nap she'd be able to try this again. Go out for a late lunch or an early supper and see if she could meet any interesting people.

She walked through the lobby toward the elevator and tried to ignore the whistle and catcall of a hairy, overweight man with a heavy accent.

*Rule number three. Never wear this red piece of floss again.*

The elevator doors were starting to slide closed when Viola ran up and stuck her arm out to catch them. The cleaning woman inside pressed the open door button for her.

"Thanks. Really hot out there today."

"Si."

The woman kept her eyes forward and didn't react to the fact that Viola was standing there clutching an unusual bottle.

"Excuse me? Does the resort hire actors to role play characters? Say...like a genie?"

The woman shook her head. "No, ma'am."

*Shit.* Viola's stomach turned and she suddenly needed to lie down. She'd have to call security once she got back to her room. And then bolt the door shut.

Some vacation. She'd been here one day and she'd already attracted the attention of a few high school students and an apparent stalker. Why were all the really good-looking ones completely nuts? And there was no denying the fact that *Jerod* was unbelievably hot. She was cursed.

The elevator dinged and the doors opened on the fourth floor. Viola checked to make

sure the corridor was empty before bolting down the long hallway to her room, the last one on the right.

In continuation of her excellent luck, her electronic room key didn't open on the first or second pass. She drove her knee into the door in frustration, almost crying from the pain after the impact.

Viola closed her eyes and tried to calm down as tears welled up in her eyes. With a slow, deliberate stroke, she slid her key card through the reader. The click of the lock as it released was the best sound in the world. She ducked into the room and turned the deadbolt, the tension in her body finally able to give. Still, she flipped the sliding lock over and only then did she feel able to calm down.

Viola rested her forehead against the door and closed her eyes. She was getting too old for this. She'd resigned herself to the idea that she wasn't couple material a few years ago. Not that she was old, but at twenty-nine, time was starting to speed up for her in the other world known as relationships. She hadn't had a lot of luck making any progress in that department recently. And while Beth's advice to get laid was tempting, it wasn't what she wanted. Viola wanted a relationship, to be part of a couple. Make a difference in someone's life. Hell, maybe have kids one day.

Okay, getting laid was part of it too. She wanted to be sexy. She'd been very unsexy for most of her adult life. Wouldn't even know how to be sexy if someone walked her through it. Not like there was anyone out there who could do that for her.

Her stomach chose that moment to make an ear-splitting growl that she felt all the way to her head. A quick peek at her watch announced it was after lunch. She rubbed her tummy.

"Room service," she sighed.

"Would you like to wish for some food? I can fill the room with delights beyond your imagination."

She screamed and dropped the bottle to the floor with a thud. When she spun around, Jerod was sitting cross-legged in the middle of her bed.

"How did...when..." Her brain couldn't form a complete thought. Picking up the

bottle, she held it upside-down and hoped it wouldn't break if she had to hit him over the head with it.

"I told you. I am a genie and you freed me from my prison. I am bound to you until you use your wishes. And please be careful with my home. I will need that back."

Anger overcame her fear and Viola swung the bottle violently in his direction.

"No. You are a crazy stalker who somehow figured out where I'm staying. I'm getting security."

However, when she tried to open the door, it wouldn't give. The slide lock was jammed and she couldn't push it open. *Time for plan B.* She started to make her way toward the phone on the nightstand, but didn't want to get too close to Jerod. Instead, she made a beeline to the bathroom where there was a second phone. *Thank God.*

When she turned the corner and turned on the light, Jerod was standing there.

"I am unable to harm you in any way, Mistress. It is part of the code I live by."

Viola promptly fainted.

The next thing she knew, she was stretched out on the bed, the bright flowery comforter pulled up to her neck. She kept her eyes squeezed shut. With any luck, he hadn't dismembered her, tied her up, or whatever it is stalkers do to their victims.

"Jerod?" she said his name so softly, she barely heard it herself.

"Yes, Mistress?"

She squeezed her eyes tighter. How the hell was she going to get out of this?

"I told you, I won't hurt you."

No way was she going to open them to check either. Best just to stay cocooned here in bed, protected by ignorance.

"Please open your eyes, Viola."

His gentle request was so unexpected, her eyes opened on command. She peeked above the mountain of comforter, and found him sitting cross-legged on the oversized ottoman. He had that amused expression about him again. His bottle sat on the coffee table beside him, looking unharmed.

"We won't get very far with your wishes if you choose to hide all day in your bed."

She lifted the covers to see she still wore her tiny, weenie, way-too-small thing that masqueraded as a bathing suit. Apparently her body had been enough of a deterrent to protect her from his advances.

Using the protection of the comforter, she leaned over and grabbed the one over-large T-shirt Beth had allowed her for a nightgown. Once it was safely secured on her body, she stood up and padded her way over to face him.

Viola leveled him with a steady stare and crossed her arms over her chest.

“What can I do to make you leave?”

“Make your wishes,” he said without missing a beat.

“There’s no such thing as genies—”

“I’m one—”

“Just like there’s no such thing as vampires—”

“They exist too—”

“Or werewolves—”

“Wrong again—”

“Or ghosts!”

“Okay, I’ll give you that one.”

Their voices echoed in the room. *Is this guy for real?*

“So you’re trying to tell me that genies, vampires, and werewolves are real, but not ghosts?”

“In a manner of speaking. That’s why I’m not able to bring people back from the dead.”

In a very strange way, it made sense to her. She frowned, driving her fingers into her hair.

“You are something else.” Viola rolled her eyes and marched over to sit on the edge of her bed.

“I can prove to you I’m a genie, if you’d like.”

“Oh this should be good. Will it use up one of my wishes?” She made sure to inject enough sarcasm into her voice someone with ear plugs could hear it.

"Of course not. Are you ready?"

"What do you plan to do?"

Jerod shrugged. "Something dramatic I assure you."

"Go for it, buddy."

Jerod snapped his fingers. Instantly Viola was standing next to him. Instead of being in her room, they were standing on *top* of the ocean waves, the resort and its beach a small dot on the horizon. The water crashed over her feet and legs, cold enough to jolt her from her disbelief.

"Oh shit!"

Viola threw her arms around Jerod and tried to climb up into his arms.

"See. There is no way I could bring you here if I wasn't indeed what I say I am."

"Bring me back, please, now," she pleaded, tears flooding her eyes and spilling over her cheeks. "Don't let me fall. Oh my God!"

"I won't hurt you, Mistress. I wanted to prove to you—"

"Please bring me back," she said as a sob escaped her.

"Viola, it's okay. I'll protect you."

Her heart was pounding so hard she thought it was about to burst through her chest. The rest of her body began to shake and she felt the nausea that usually preceded her passing out creep up her throat. Her eyes were squeezed shut so all she could hear was the waves, squawking of the seagulls and her heart pounding. Jerod's hand stroked her hair as he made soft, reassuring sounds. Slowly, she felt her nerves begin to settle.

"You are perfectly safe. Look," he cooed into her ear.

He lowered her until her feet skimmed the surface of the cool water. He kept his hands around her waist until she felt the surface hold her. Viola squeezed her eyes shut and shook her head. Her grip increased on his arm and neck.

"Trust me. Open your eyes."

She couldn't. But after a minute or two of listening to the waves and Jerod's quiet reassurances, Viola's body began to relax. Another minute and she was able to open her eyes, if only to look at him.

He was smiling at her.

“That’s better. You wanted me to prove my powers to you. I believe I have. Look around,” he said as he wiped a tear from her face.

She’d pushed him into this. Now that she was here, she couldn’t chicken out. Viola forced her body to relax some more and slowly looked down at her feet. The view was breathtaking.

The way the light cut through the water, she could see an amazing amount of life beneath her. Blue, green, and yellow tropical fish swam together in a type of choreographed pattern. They came close enough she could almost reach out and touch them. Several dolphins broke the surface of the water off to her left, their clicks and squealing chatter bouncing off the waves toward her. There were other animals too, but she couldn’t put a name to them. They all passed by without a second look at the two humans standing on top of the waves.

Well, one human and apparently one genie.

“This is amazing,” she said, her voice barely a whisper.

“It’s a shame more people can’t see what you are seeing. It might inspire them to take better care of things.”

Words failed her. Viola stood and really looked at Jerod for the first time. His eyes had returned to their original crystal blue. But other than that, he looked normal.

“How is this possible?”

“Magic.”

*Hard to argue against that.*

“Do you believe me?” he asked, cocking his head to the side.

She took one last look at the ocean below, burning the details into her memory. When she looked back into his eyes, she smiled.

“I do.”

As quickly as they’d arrived, they were back standing in her room. Viola took three steps away from Jerod, needing the air. It took a few minutes but her body stopped shaking once it realized she was back on solid ground. Jerod didn’t move or say anything.

Finally she thought she was able to speak without crying.

“Thank you.”

Jerod frowned. “Thank you for what?”

“Showing me such an amazing sight. I don’t think I could have imagined anything more beautiful.”

With his lips pursed, he looked like he was digesting her words. But instead of acknowledging them, he took a step forward, decreasing the distance between them. He opened his mouth to say something, but stopped. He shook his head and straightened his body.

“Now that you finally believe me, I think we have the small matter of your wishes. So, what will they be?”

Rarely in her short life had anyone ever offered to give Viola something for nothing. While she didn’t doubt Jerod’s powers, she had been around the business world enough to know there was always a price to be paid.

“So what’s the catch?”

She crossed her arms across her chest and waited for the other shoe to drop.

Jerod mimicked her arms, straightening to his full height, which was considerable. God, he had to be over six feet.

“There *is* no...catch. Everything is as I told you. Three wishes and I’ll be gone.”

“I call shenanigans. There’s always a catch in the movies. You wish for money and you find a bag full of it only to be arrested for stealing. Or you ask for a cool car and the first time you drive it somewhere it gets stolen. So what’s the catch?”

Jerod took another step forward and leaned in until his nose was close to her face. Viola breathed in deep and the urge to swoon struck her again. Too much excitement for one day, and not enough rum punch.

“Very well, there’s a catch.”

“Ah ha!” she poked him in the chest. His skin was warm and smooth and she pulled her hand back quickly. No sense in upsetting a genie. “So what is it?”

“While I wield more magic than you can possibly imagine, when I grant your wishes



they must result from something of this world.”

“So if I wish for a million dollars it could be from a bank robbery.”

This wasn’t going to end well.

“Only if I don’t like you,” he said with a grin that made him look devilishly wicked.

“Oh.”

“And I do like you, Mistress Viola. So I promise, on my honor as a magical other-worldly being, I will not trick nor harm you when I grant your wishes.”

Before she realized what he was doing, Jerod had captured her hand in his and brought it to his lips. He didn’t kiss her immediately, but she felt him breathe in deeply, grazing his nose over her knuckles. Then, he brushed his lips over the top of her hand and placed a gentle kiss in the middle.

Viola’s body tingled from the point of contact on her hand, spreading slowly up her arm, and trickling through the rest of her body. Her breasts felt heavy and her toes curled into the carpet. She felt his fingers caress her wrist, a contact so light she’d question later if he’d done it.

Jerod raised his head but didn’t pull back from her hand. The blacks of his pupils grew so large they threatened to swallow the crystal blue.

“Now, I can’t go back on my word.”

“Why?” she whispered.

“Magic.” He winked at her.

Viola felt her head begin to spin. She couldn’t keep up with this. Jerod smiled as he placed her hand back at her side.

“What do you wish for?”

The phone rang. Viola jumped at the sound, but didn’t move. It rang a second time and all she could do was stare at it.

“What’s that?” he asked.

“A telephone.”

“What does it do?”

She looked up at him and shook her head in disbelief. “You talk to people.”

"I knew that, but I was wondering if you did. Going to answer it?"

Her brain kicked in and she bolted across the room. She tripped over her sandals but still managed to answer it in time. She could hug whoever it was on the other end. Things had gotten way too intense for her.

"Hello?"

"How's my favorite Way to Go gal?"

*Who the hell...*

"Bill!"

Viola's heart did a flip and the rest of the world focused in on the phone. Bill was calling her. *Her!* Maybe he missed her. God, please let him have missed her.

"How's the resort so far?"

She caught Jerod out of the corner of her eye. He was sitting on the ottoman again. She had an awesome view of his abs.

"This place is full of surprises. What can I do for you? Is everything all right?"

A pause before he coughed. "Well, I know this is supposed to be your vacation, but I had some questions about the Foster account, and I was hoping you could answer some questions for me. If you're not busy that is?"

*Oh no.* "Sure I can. What is it?"

"That's my girl. It's just a few things I need clarified.

She spent the next ten minutes explaining her comments on the account, trying to clarify what his next steps should be. Viola felt the flutter build in her stomach at the sound of his voice, the casual compliments he gave her on the quality of her work.

"I have to say I'll be happy when you're back in the office, Viola. I miss having your keen eye around here."

"Really?" This was awesome! The fact Bill actually noticed she was gone, that he'd gone through the effort to call her when she was away, meant she was finally starting to make an impression on him. "I didn't think you'd miss me."

"Of course, I am. And I really appreciate this. Promise I'll make it up to you when you get back. Deal?"

*Oh yeah, baby.* “Deal. Thanks, Bill.”

“No, no. Thank you.”

Viola’s mind was racing when she finally set the receiver back down in the cradle.

“Yes!” She jumped in the air and landed facing Jerod. A sudden paranoia hit her square in the gut. “You didn’t do that did you?”

Jerod rolled his eyes. “If I had, I would be as excited as you. This is the longest I’ve ever had to wait to grant a single wish in the past five hundred years.”

“So no?”

“No.”

“Yes!”

Viola proceeded to bounce up and down again. The sorry excuse for a bathing suit nearly fell off, prompting her to calm down. Her mind revved at a thousand miles an hour.

“This is big, you know. Bill doesn’t just call people when they are away on vacation. He misses me. *Me!*”

Jerod rolled his eyes, snapped his fingers and began to float in the air. “I think the only thing he misses is the fact he doesn’t have someone there to tell him how to do his job.”

“That’s not fair at all. You don’t even know him.”

That’s when it hit her. She felt a nervous shake zing through her, but she kept it together. Viola cleared her throat and smiled.

“I know what I want for my first wish.”

Jerod looked to the sky and sighed. “Finally.”

Her hands shook from excited nervousness. “What do I say?”

Jerod shrugged. “Simply say I wish for whatever it is you want.”

“Okay, genie, I wish for—”

“My name is Jerod.”

Viola stopped short. “Pardon?”

He placed his hands on his hips and Viola thought she saw a flash of annoyance on

his face before he seemed to regain his control.

“Jerod. Not genie, please.”

“Oh, sorry.”

Viola licked her lips, said a silent prayer that she wouldn't say something else wrong, closed her eyes and let the words fall out of her.

“Jerod, I wish for you to show me how to make Bill fall in love with me.”

## Chapter Three

Viola hadn't thought there was anything she could wish for that would surprise a genie, but apparently that wasn't the case. The look on his face couldn't be described as anything less than shock. He seemed to recover quickly, the muscles in his jaw clenching before a loud groan burst from him.

"I told you, I can't make anyone fall in love with you," he said as he threw his hands in the air.

"You did?" Her mind raced back to try to remember exactly what he had said. *Shit, he had.* Viola crossed her arms and raised her chin a fraction of an inch. "Well, that's not what I wished for."

"No?" His half-amused smile returned to his face.

Viola licked her dry lips and tried to keep her gaze from slipping down to his chest.

"No. I want you to show me what I need to know to *seduce* Bill and make him fall in love with me. I'll be doing all the work. Not you."

That didn't seem to help. Jerod still sat cross-legged, floating in the air over to where she stood. The sight of his magically perfect body nearly took her breath away. His abs were tight, accented by the light as it glinted off the shiny fabric of his pants. His biceps were muscular, framed by the cuffs of his vest, revealing more than they hid. The sight made her mouth water.

"So you want to learn what it takes to seduce a man? Specifically William Clarence Roberts from Halifax, Nova Scotia?"

Viola crinkled her nose. "His middle name is Clarence?"

"Change your mind?" Jerod asked smugly.

"No. Jerod, please grant my wish."

Jerod sighed and dropped his head to his chest. "Granted."

“Woohoo!”

Viola felt a surge of adrenaline rush through her. This was it! She was going to get the man of her dreams to finally acknowledge she existed. Prove that she was the sexiest damned employee Way To Go Travel had. Her mind began to spin out of control, whizzing through the possible things Jerod could teach her. *What the hell did Bill want in a woman anyway?* God, she hoped she wouldn't have to waste one of her wishes on getting bigger boobs.

“Okay, so how do we start? What do we do? Tell me everything.”

Jerod dropped his feet to the floor to stand before her. This time when he looked at her, she did squirm. As his gaze traveled over her body, Viola felt it like a caress on her skin. Her face heated and she felt a quiver of sexual awareness deep in the pit of her stomach, traveling lower. He walked around her in circles several times, poking her side, flicking the back of her ponytail and ping-ponging her bikini strap again.

“Hey!”

“I see we have a lot to work on.”

“Excuse me?”

He ignored her and lifted her arm up to examine her biceps. When he lifted his gaze to hers, Viola knew he was teasing her. She jerked her arm out of his grip and placed her hands firmly on her hips.

“Well?” She used the same tone on Jerod she'd learned when taking William through doggie school.

Unlike her dog, Jerod didn't seem fazed. He took another step forward and, reaching out, tucked an errant strand of her hair behind her ear. Viola shivered, suddenly finding it very hard to breathe. They stood there, staring at each other for several seconds before Jerod stepped back, grinning, and continued his inspection.

“While I can make many suggestions to improve your outward appearance generally, it would be best if I knew about this man you are hoping to trap.”

*Is this guy for real?*

“Win over. I'm not going to *trap* him into anything. Good Lord, what kind of woman

do you take me for? And how can you know his name but not know anything about him?”

“Of course, no trap. Whatever was I thinking,” he said, his voice dripping with sarcasm. “I was able to get an image of him during your conversation. That only tells me the basics of who he is. But I need to know more of William.”

“His name is Bill.”

Jerod waved his hand about, as if to dismiss her correction.

She couldn’t believe this. “Are you going to be a jerk the whole time you’re helping me? Cause if you are, I can release you from your duties and send you on your way.”

Jerod stopped his walk-around. They stood shoulder to shoulder, eyes locked on each other. A small ping of triumph zinged through her when his scowl morphed into his tiny, amused smile.

“I forgot what it was like to deal with a forthright woman.”

“Is forthright a good thing?”

“Indeed.”

“So?”

Jerod sighed. “I will help you win your, what was his name?”

Now she knew he was doing it to piss her off.

“Bill,” she said from between her clenched teeth.

“Your Bill. And I will make an effort not to be a jerk, as you say.”

“Thank you!”

The tension in the back of her neck began to fade away and she couldn’t stop the large grin on her face. If he could really help her pull this off, there was hope for her after all. She wouldn’t have to grow old alone. She would actually get laid. Maybe even more than once.

“As I said, it would be helpful to know the man you...hope to charm. With your permission, I’d like to explore your memories of Bill.”

The idea sounded bizarre, but strangely she’d grown to trust Jerod over the past hour. Well, maybe not trust, he was a genie after all. She nodded and waited for his direction.

His eyes grew wide, the crystal color almost beginning to glow. Mesmerized, unable to look away or focus on anything else, Viola almost missed what he said.

“In order for me to know the man who stirs your heart, I must know your heart.”

“How do you do that?”

Her tongue darted out and wet her lips when Jerod swayed closer to her. His gaze fixated on her mouth for a moment before he met hers again. For the first time since they'd met, she felt an undercurrent of something more than awareness tug her toward him. There was a timeless age to him, something *more*, deeper. She swore she saw his loneliness.

“Close your eyes.” His command was gentle but powerful.

Viola's lids fluttered shut without her thinking, and she felt a sort of energy pulsing from Jerod. He smelled of exotic spices, something that resembled cloves, which warmed her from the inside when she inhaled. Every inch of her skin buzzed and tingled from his nearness.

The last thing she was expecting happened. She felt his body heat draw closer to her, surrounding her face and neck. His fingers caressed her cheek, brushing her skin until he massaged the back of her neck. The air in her lungs seemed to leave her and her heart raced. He didn't tug, but she felt her body sway toward his. Into his warmth.

Her lips tingled when his touched them. The contact was barely there. She felt him inhale, her body instantly responded with a wave of desire snaking through her. She was so close to him, she couldn't resist. Instead of pulling back, she leaned into him and kissed him. After all, if this was how he needed to read her heart to help her win Bill over, then who was she to argue.

Jerod made a strange noise deep in his chest when Viola opened her mouth. His goatee tickled her chin at first, but she quickly grew to enjoy the sensation. His body stiffened when she ran her hands up his arms. He didn't kiss her back at first, so she flicked her tongue out in search of his. She hoped that was all the encouragement he'd need.

It seemed to do the trick. She felt his hands slide down across her back, warming her



skin as they went. Her body swayed into his, pushed against his rock-hard chest and held on for dear life.

Images of Bill popped into her mind. How he would look at her, the things he would say. She tried to ignore them, but couldn't. Bill's casual glance, the way he'd watch other women bend over to pick things up, all bubbled up from her memory. Everything.

Next came the emotions. Every insecurity she'd ever felt zipped through her head, overwhelming her with its power. She tried to pull away, but Jerod held her tight. All her heartaches were laid bare in that kiss, making her feel very small. If it weren't for Jerod's lips encouraging her, his tongue coaxing her inner vixen, she would have run.

When they finally stopped, it was Jerod who pulled back, breaking the kiss. Viola's heart was pounding so loud and hard she thought she was going to pass out.

"Wow," she whispered, not really aware of the fact she'd said it out loud.

Viola opened her eyes and looked up into the grinning face of her genie. He was up to something.

"Find out what you needed to know?"

Jerod shrugged. "I can read Bill from here. But kissing you helps with the...connection."

She knew she was being played. *By a genie no less.* Somewhere deep down, the new, daring, totally in control and sexy Viola took charge. She matched his grin with one of her own.

"Well, I'd like to make sure the connection is really strong then."

Viola reached up and pulled Jerod back for another kiss. She really wasn't sure what she was doing, but he didn't seem to mind. Jerod relaxed into her and devoured her. Images of Bill popped back into her mind, only this time something was different. They faded only to be replaced with a more powerful one. Jerod's face flashed in her mind. She imagined herself in his arms, lying naked on a bed, making love. Their bodies entwined, both of them gasping from mutual pleasure. A moan escaped her and she deepened her kiss, grinding her hips against his leg.

Jerod pulled away suddenly and stepped back. He looked at her long and hard,

confused. Viola trembled, panting audibly as she stood there, not having a clue as to what had just happened. The strange tingle moved throughout her body as before, when he'd kissed her hand. Only this time it seemed to reach every nerve in her body, zapping her deep inside and revving her internal engines. She tried to ignore the fact that she was a little turned on. Who was she kidding? She was about to catch fire, she was so horny.

"Why did you do that?" he asked, sounding more annoyed than angry.

Viola frowned. "What do you mean? I thought that's what we had to do?"

Jerod stepped back from her and ran his hand through his hair.

"Did I do something wrong?" Shit, she didn't want to screw this up before she had a chance to start. See, she shouldn't have kissed him. She needed to play things safe.

He shook his head. "Not exactly."

"What then?"

"Are you sure this is what you want?" Jerod's words were firm, but he reached out and caressed her arm with a featherlike touch.

"Yes." But she lacked her confidence of only a short time ago.

"Very well. But remember, what I am doing is what you wished for. I will help you change into the type of woman Bill can't resist."

"I'm ready." She so wasn't, but neither was she a chicken.

The charged atmosphere between them calmed again. Jerod's easy smile was back, playing across his lips. Her raging libido was relaxing, and she thought she'd actually be able to concentrate again. She'd have to do something later to take the edge off, though she somehow doubted Beth packed her a vibrator.

"First thing, lose this." Jerod nodded as he reached up with his finger and tugged her ponytail until the elastic that held it broke. He dropped it into her hand, and pushed her mouth closed with his finger.

"He hates your hair like that. We'll have to take you somewhere to get it fixed into a more flattering style. And we'll need to get some clothing. Thankfully, there is plenty of sun here, so you won't have to worry about remaining pale."

Viola took three steps back as she felt the blow of his words.

Her stomach felt like it was churning an ocean of acid. “Is there anything he likes about me?”

“Your breasts. Though he prefers plumper ones.”

That was pretty much the deflating prick to her dream. There was no way in hell this was going to work.

“Great.”

Jerod snapped his fingers and an outfit floated from her suitcase and shot for her. It hit her face before falling neatly into her arms. Glaring, Viola dropped her hands to her sides, squeezing the clothing as if it was Jerod’s neck.

“Put this on. We’ll work on your physical appearance today, and start the rest of your lessons tomorrow.”

“You’ve got to be kidding.”

“I never kid.”

She looked down at the clothing and fought the urge to throw them back.

“I’m sure it’s not going to take that many lessons is it? I wanted to enjoy my vacation.”

Jerod shrugged. “It was your wish.”

“Fine,” she said, but then hesitated. “Turn around, please.”

Jerod raised a single eyebrow at her.

“If you want me to get changed, I need some privacy.” She made a spinning motion with her finger. “Around. Please.”

A poof of smoke and Jerod suddenly had his back to her. She kept her eyes on him for a moment before turning around herself. She’d managed to undo the bikini strap in the back, when his disembodied face suddenly appeared before her.

“Need any help?” He grinned.

“Out!”

“I’ll await you in the hall.”

Another small poof of smoke and she was alone in the room.

She hoped.

Not like there was anyway she'd know for sure. She pulled the shirt over her head and slipped her arms through the holes. Only then did she take the rest of the bikini top off, sliding it out through the arm hole. Another few fancy maneuvers and she had her bra on.

Her bottom was another matter all together. Rather than risk exposing her white, naked ass to him, she slid the shorts over the bathing suit bottoms. It might as well be underwear for the amount of skin they covered. Once she was able to snap the button that held the shorts in place, Viola sighed. After wearing the revealing suit, the clingy T-shirt and short shorts didn't seem so bad.

Her hair was another matter. The flat strands clung to her scalp like a shirt to damp skin. She tried scratching some life into it with her nails, but it didn't seem to help. Maybe a makeover wouldn't be so bad after all.

Who was she kidding—this was going to be hell. She was nothing like the type of woman Bill normally gravitated to. Too smart for starters. And, as Jerod pointed out, not endowed enough for his liking. She should forget the whole thing, wish for ten million dollars and world peace like a normal human being and be done with the whole affair.

She could almost hear her mother in the back of her mind telling her to do just that. That's what she would do! Maybe she'd wish for her mom to be a happier person. Though Viola doubted even a genie could fix that. No, there was no point to backing out now. If she didn't go after Bill, learn what it takes to seduce a man, she'd always have doubts and regrets.

Armed with her room key and fresh resolve, Viola marched into the hallway, ready to take on the task of winning Bill. Jerod was leaning up against the wall when she came out. He smirked.

"You still couldn't do it, even though I wasn't in the room."

"Do what?"

"Get naked."

"How do you know that?"

"I can see through walls."

She felt her face grow hot. “Jerk.”

“You are too easy to tease. We’ll work on that as well, help get you a thicker skin. Shall we be off?”

He held out his arm and waited for her to take it. The desire to hit him, knock that smug look right off his face was almost overpowering. Instead she slipped her arm through his and proceeded to walk down the hall toward the elevator. She began to march full steam ahead, but Jerod held her back, slowing her pace. After a few minutes of silent struggle, she gave up and relaxed. The down button depressed magically by itself as they approached.

“Lazy,” she quipped.

When he didn’t say anything, she bumped him with her shoulder. Jerod sighed and Viola caught a glimpse of his naked chest under his vest. The man was too sexy for his own good.

“You need to change your appearance. People will stare at you.”

“You mean people will stare at *us*. Does that bother you?”

She hadn’t thought about it before. Bill certainly liked to stare, but never at her. She’d never really sought out the limelight. She was more comfortable doing her thing quietly in the background. But she wasn’t about to admit that.

“I’m fine with it. Love it in fact. I just thought you wouldn’t want to attract too much attention. Considering what you are.”

The elevator chimed its arrival. The doors slid open and they entered. Jerod met her gaze in the mirror.

“No one would fathom that I am what I am. They’ll simply think I’m your eccentric new boy-toy.”

“Boy-toy?” she laughed. “That doesn’t sound right coming from a...how old are you?”

“Three thousand, one hundred and thirty-seven years.”

Viola opened her mouth to repeat his age but gave her head a shake. “That’s old.”

“I prefer mature.”

“You’re changing the subject.”

He shrugged. “I do need to keep with the times. Otherwise it becomes challenging to grant wishes. I have gone many years between masters, but can see the world change from within my prison. It only takes a little magic.”

The elevator chimed their arrival on the spa level of the resort. A pile of giggling high school girls waited to enter, so Viola couldn’t question him further. She slipped past them quickly, but realized Jerod wasn’t moving as fast.

“Ladies,” he said and bowed his head as he sauntered past.

As he reached her side, she heard the girls whispering. The door started to close until one of the bolder ones held it open for a second and shouted, “If they can’t fix her up for you, mister, come visit us on floor eight.”

They all burst into laughter and disappeared behind the metal barrier.

Viola winced. Nothing like the brutal honesty of youth to put things into perspective. This was a colossal waste of time.

“That was very rude.” Jerod scowled at the door.

“Don’t worry about it. I’ve been told worse. Let’s go see if the hairdressers have some magic to rival yours.”

He didn’t move, focused intently on a spot on the ceiling.

“Jerod? Come on,” she said and walked a short distance ahead.

Only after he smiled did he join her. She suddenly had a very bad feeling.

“What did you do?”

He turned and gave her a look of pure innocence. Not that she bought it for a second.

“What makes you think I’ve done anything?”

Viola looked at the spot he’d been staring at and then back at him. “Lucky guess. Fess up.”

He shrugged. “I simply put a rat in their room.”

Viola’s hand flew to her mouth as she tried to not giggle.

“You didn’t.”

“They need to learn about karma. It will help them later on in life. Shall we?”

Jerod held out his arm and waited for her to take it. Viola shook her head and slipped her arm through his. "Remind me not to piss you off."

They walked through the beveled French doors that led to the spa. Most of the basement level was occupied by the massive beauty operation. A light perfumed mist filled the air, and a festive Mexican song played over the sound system. Several women walked between rooms with a strange array of green, black, and beige mud slathered on their faces. They all wore white, fluffy bathrobes and were sipping drinks.

"Welcome to Paradise!"

A tall, skinny man in his late thirties approached them. His bald head caught the light and shone bright in the dim room. Viola smiled despite herself when he reached out, grabbed her hand and began to poke at her cuticles.

"I'm Peter, the owner of Paradise Spa."

"Nice to meet you. I'm Viola."

Peter patted her hand as he looked up and pursed his lips.

"Darling, I'm so glad you've come. Your hair must just hate this humid climate for it to be sleeping on the job like that." He snorted a laugh. "Don't fret, pet, I'll get my best girls on the job and when they're through, Mr. Yummy here will be eating out of your hands."

The man gave a little growl toward Jerod and clapped his hands together.

"Val, sweetie, I have a special one for you."

Jerod cleared his throat. "Would Lisa be free?"

Viola shot him a confused stare, but didn't comment.

"Oh, Lisa's booked solid right now. Sorry, love."

"Actually my three o'clock just cancelled."

A woman who could have graced the cover of any magazine she wanted strolled out from the side office. Her blonde hair and rich hazel eyes looked natural. She smiled at Viola.

"I'm Lisa. Nice to meet you."

The women shook hands and Viola immediately liked her. She silently hoped Jerod

hadn't done anything to cause that three o'clock appointment to cancel.

"Thanks, Peter. I'll take it from here. She'll be a few hours if you want to come back for her." She said the last to Jerod.

Viola thought he would stick around to watch her transformation. Instead he surprised her by thanking Lisa. He took Viola's hand in his and placed a kiss in the exact spot he had before. The tingle returned to take her breath away. Looking up, he grinned, showing every single one of his perfectly white teeth.

"I'll return when you are done."

And then he was gone.

"What's with the pajamas?" Peter whispered once Jerod had left.

Her mind buzzed through the possibilities.

"It was a bet. He lost."

"Oh, I get it," Peter practically squealed. "Master and servant. Kinky. Enjoy your spa. Lisa, read her the fine print."

Peter spun on his heels and disappeared into the office.

Viola faced Lisa. "He's..."

"Interesting. I know. His heart is huge and we all love him, so not a word. Now, what can I do for you?"

Viola straightened. "I need you to make me drop-dead gorgeous. I know you don't have much to work with, but anything you can do to make me more..." *What was the right word?* "...more alluring, you'd have my undying love and thanks."

Lisa linked her arm into Viola's. "What do you mean I don't have much to work with? You just need a little polishing, hon. There's good stuff under there."

"I'll take your word for it."

For the next two and a half hours, Viola was at Lisa's mercy. The first thing after the most amazing shampoo and head massage of her life, was a haircut. Her hair had hung straight down her back like a weighted curtain since high school. It's not that she didn't want to have something fun done to it, but she was scared shitless that she'd ask for the wrong thing and have a repeat of the bad perm when she was twelve. Plus, she'd never



been good with hair.

That didn't seem to matter to Lisa.

"I can cut, color and style you based on what I think will make you look like a model if you want. Or you can choose your new glam from a book. But either way, your hair's coming off."

Viola took a deep breath. "I trust you. Go for it."

Lisa gave Viola's shoulders a squeeze. "That's a girl. Close your eyes if you want, but I'm going to be performing major surgery to get you the look you want. Okay?"

Viola closed her eyes and prayed. "Okay."

The scissors squeaked in her ear as they pruned her head. Lisa chatted away, occasionally needing Viola to respond, but mostly proceeded to fill her in on the sights around the island. When Lisa began to apply highlights, their talk turned to some of the older resorts around the island.

"Oh, most of the places get upgraded to better spots. This place was like that about ten years ago. Some others get torn down and the land is reclaimed." Lisa smiled as she slopped another glop of the color on Viola's hair. "There's one spot though, that's been converted into a bit of a shelter. Nice spot, but the building is falling apart."

"Be nice to have a pile of cash to be able to give away enough to help people like that. Not that I have any myself." Some days, it would be nice if she could save the world.

"Well, it will take more than money, from what I've heard. But I've never been there myself." Lisa paused snipping for a second. "Can I ask you something?"

"Sure."

"Don't take this wrong, but you said you have a crush on your boss, right?"

"Yes," Viola said slowly. She didn't like where this was going.

"So can I ask about the man who brought you here?"

Her immediate reaction was to defend her feelings for Bill. God, she'd only known Jerod for a day, it's not like she had any feelings for him. But if she was completely honest with herself, that wasn't entirely true.

"I just met Jerod today. He's more of a friend than anything."

"Well, I'm just being nosy," Lisa said, offering a sly smile. "I've seen a lot of vacation romances over the past few years, and you two look like you fit the bill. All I'm saying."

Viola mentally chewed that over while Lisa proceeded to wash the dye out of her hair and blow-dry her to perfection. She couldn't have any sort of relationship with Jerod, could she?

The switch from the dryer clicked off, leaving Viola's ears ringing. She'd kept her eyes shut the entire time, not wanting to be freaked out by the process. Hopefully the end result would be worth it. She heard Lisa sigh when she spun her around.

"Are you ready?"

*No!* "Hit me."

"Open them."

Viola's heart began to pound as she first opened one eye then the other. Her hair, once reaching her elbows, now rested gently on her shoulders. Lisa had cut layers that gave it some bounce. The blonde and red highlights brought color to her face and somehow made her hazel eyes shine.

"Wow."

Lisa chuckled. "I told you. Only needed a little polish."

"Wow."

Viola leaned forward and touched a strand that hugged her chin. The soft strands slid between her fingers with ease. Her whole head felt ten pounds lighter and she looked ten years younger, which was surprising, considering she wasn't even thirty yet.

"I'll never be able to make it look like this again."

But Lisa was ready for that. She spent the next fifteen minutes showing Viola every trick she needed to reproduce the look. She even showed her a blow-drying technique that would save her time. Viola couldn't believe it, but she felt ready to take on the world. Or at the very least, ready to take on Jerod.

"Ready for more?" Lisa smiled at her in the mirror.

“How can there be more?” Viola laughed. “You’ve done so much already.

“Oh no, there’s a lot more. Now, it’s time for makeup.”

They walked over to the next room and Viola was introduced to several other women. They spent forty-five minutes choosing the right shades and types to suit her face. They wrote everything down so she’d never forget.

When she got out of the makeup chair, Lisa was waiting for her, and in her arms was a long mauve box.

“This just arrived for you.”

She handed it over to Viola, along with a note. Viola’s fingers shook as she opened it.

*For our next lesson.*

*Jerod*

Viola flipped the lid of the box open and gasped. Inside, there was a sleek, black silk dress and a pair of three-inch spiked heels. Every woman nearby came to fawn over the outfit, commenting on her boyfriend’s good taste. Viola found herself pushed into a changing room by Lisa.

When she emerged wearing the slinky dress and the heels, she was in shock. Viola checked herself out in the full-length mirror in the lobby. She didn’t recognize herself. Her brown-red lips shone, matching the highlights in her hair. With the dress and shoes, she looked sexy, and for once her breasts didn’t look so bad.

“You’re gorgeous. Now we just need that man of yours to arrive,” Lisa said as she packaged up the bottles of foundation, lipstick, shampoo, and assortment of other beauty products.

“Consider me arrived.”

For the second time that day, Viola’s mouth fell open in shock. Jerod was dressed in a white dress shirt, several buttons unbuttoned at the neck and the sleeve cuffs turned up. The white was a stark contrast to his olive skin and black hair. His genie pants were also gone, replaced with a pair of black dress pants. With his Mediterranean accent completing the package, he looked more exotic now than he did before.

"You changed," she blurted out.

"So have you. Stunning. Your reputation is well earned, Lisa. I thank you."

"Thank you." She beamed. Lisa then leaned forward and whispered in Viola's ear, "He's a keeper."

Viola found herself nodding, until she realized what she was agreeing with. She wasn't going to end up with Jerod. She wanted Bill. Besides, once Jerod granted her other two wishes, he'd be gone.

"I'll send your purchases up to your room. It looks like you're heading out on the town," Lisa said with a big grin.

She gave Viola a little hug as Jerod paid the bill. Viola was still in shock as they walked out of the spa arm in arm. She didn't know what to say.

"Where did you get that money? I thought you couldn't just make stuff appear out of thin air?" she whispered as they left.

"I paid a visit to the casino after I was tipped for helping a charming couple with their bags. We now have sufficient funds to complete your transformation."

Viola had a brief image of taking Jerod to Vegas before she pushed that aside. She couldn't help but stare at him in the mirror when they stepped into the elevator.

"I thought you weren't going to bother with the disguise?"

He shrugged in his easy way. "Why make matters more complicated? Did I not choose the right clothing for this setting?"

"Oh no, it's perfect."

*Too perfect.*

Despite her better judgment, she was finding herself attracted to Jerod. Holy crap, she'd only known him for a day. And he was a genie! Not much in the way of a relationship can be developed there.

But maybe perfect for a fling.

Her stomach took that time to growl in loud protest. With all of the excitement of the day, she'd forgotten to eat. Again. In fact she hadn't had anything besides the three glasses of rum punch earlier this morning. Maybe that explained the light-headedness she

was suddenly feeling.

“I’m starving.”

The elevator opened up at the lobby level and a crowd who were waiting to enter parted for them. She blushed when she realized they all stopped talking and stared at them as they walked through.

“Why are they looking at us?” she whispered to him.

Jerod bent down so his lips were just above her ear, “Because you’re beautiful.”

Shock hit her and she felt her face grow hotter than before. Jerod chuckled and motioned toward the exit.

“I’ve booked us dinner at one of the island restaurants. Shall we?”

“You’re going to spoil me. I thought you were supposed to be showing me how to win Bill’s heart.”

Jerod stopped as they cleared the front doors from the lobby. Viola had grown used to his intense stare, enjoyed it even. When he looked at her like that, she felt he saw everything about her. But still, the silence got to her.

“What?”

“I am. This is your second lesson. I will explain each of them in greater detail when we reach our destination.”

Viola felt her head nod, but her brain was fixated on how unbelievably hot Jerod looked in the setting sunlight.

“Bill likes to take his potential lady friends out for a meal as a first date. I will show you what you need to know for your meal.”

“So it’s time for the real lessons to begin.” Viola’s heart started to pound and her hands grew cold.

Jerod smiled wickedly. “You have no idea.”

## Chapter Four

It's hard to keep up with a genie with an agenda.

Viola struggled to keep her ankles from buckling as she raced to keep pace with Jerod's long legs on the cracked asphalt. *Why the hell is he going so fast?*

"I didn't think Bill was a sprinter."

Jerod stopped suddenly and Viola had to grab his arm to prevent herself from tripping. His gaze traveled to her hand, a perplexed expression on his face. When he looked into her eyes, the flash of emotion vanished and was replaced by his boyish grin. God, she loved that grin.

"My apologies. I was thinking of getting you to your meal as quickly as possible."

"Not unless you plan on carrying me. First day with new shoes. Need to break them in."

Jerod chuckled and winked at her. "You're doing fine."

Viola felt a jolt of energy surge through her. God, she loved it when he looked at her like that. She felt different. Her wild side began to push against her protective exterior, ready to burst out. It was scary and thrilling and totally new.

Even though she was the same woman who won a sales contest because she enjoyed giving sex advice to her customers, this was completely different. There was a safety factor when you're an anonymous person on the phone. It's quite another thing to be walking side by side with a handsome man and pull off her witty, sexually charged comments in person. Not to mention the fact she couldn't think of anything witty to save her life at the moment.

Whether it was a result of her new look, or because Jerod made her feel special, Viola wanted to let that wild part come out and play. A lock of her hair fell forward across her nose. She tucked it behind her ear, looked up at Jerod and licked her lips.

“I think it’s time for my lessons to start.”

Jerod crossed his arms across his chest. “I intended on starting those once we arrived at the restaurant.”

It took a great deal of effort to keep her smile on her face and annoyance out of her voice. Viola licked her lips again and mentally cheered when Jerod’s eyes were glued to the action.

“Let’s be practical here. Does Bill try anything before the meal? On the walk over?” she said as she removed his hand from his pocket and wrapped her fingers around his. “Does he like to hold hands? These are all very important things I need to be aware of. You wouldn’t want me to be caught unprepared. Would you?”

Something changed in his eyes. Viola couldn’t put a label on it, but she saw something before Jerod’s gaze slipped from her face to their entwined hands. His thumb caressed the tip of her forefinger.

“I doubt he would do anything you couldn’t handle.”

*Whoa.* Her skin felt warm where he caressed her, tingling under his touch. She didn’t know what else to say, so she waited. Jerod’s smile deepened as he lifted her hand and brushed a gentle kiss across the back of her knuckles.

“As much as I enjoy the contact, Bill will want to put your arm in his. Like this.”

With the care someone would show a kitten, Jerod lifted her hand and placed it in the crook of his arm. Viola flexed her fingers against his heat, wave after wave rising from his body and across her skin. Her body was now closer to his. Her hip brushed against his thigh, the silk of her dress rubbing her skin as they began to walk.

“This is nice too,” she said, but kept her gaze averted. Her mind reeled, trying to think of things to say. “Now, what else do I need to know to survive my way to the restaurant with Bill?”

She let the weight of her hand settle into his arm as they walked across a park green and down the cobblestone roadway that led to their restaurant. They fell into a comfortable rhythm as they walked, their bodies gently bumping against each other. The fact that she was strolling to dinner with a genie should have struck her as odd, but it

seemed the most natural thing in the world.

“Bill will do most of the talking. But I’m sure you could guess that.”

“He is a bit of a chatterbox,” she said and grinned.

“All you have to do is listen and you’ll be fine.”

So that’s what she did. Except Jerod didn’t talk, and for the first time the silence didn’t unnerve her. Jerod cleared his throat and he pulled her a bit closer to him. Viola looked up and smiled at him. *Guess the same can’t be said for Mr. Genie.*

“You are mastering your initial lessons nicely.”

“Thank you. You’re a good teacher. You should consider a career change.”

Jerod snorted.

Viola giggled as they turned a corner and the restaurant came into view. The bright lights and festive music drifted to them through the newly darkened night. A chorus of laughter erupted from a nearby window, bringing yet another smile to Viola’s face. She couldn’t help it. It had been a very long time since she’d felt this free. They found themselves standing at the junction of the road and the walkway that led to the restaurant.

Jerod turned to her and licked his lips.

“Bill will kiss your cheek before you go into the restaurant. It’s his way of checking to see how he’s doing. If his date pulls back, he knows he needs to lay on the charm. Otherwise, he relaxes.”

“And what should I do to impress Bill?” She hoped she wouldn’t have to pull away.

Jerod reached up and ran the pad of his thumb across her bottom lip.

“Not a thing.”

Viola felt a nervous bubble of energy as Jerod leaned in and brushed his lips across the corner of her mouth. His lips parted, and she felt their warm pressure against her wind-cooled skin. She felt him breathe deep, and she did as well. His exotic aroma made her tingle again and her breasts responded. Her nipples tightened, pebbling against the light silk of her dress. She felt his tongue touch her mouth. She increased her grip on him, her hand flying up to touch his chest.

And then it was over. Jerod pulled back, and Viola was left panting at the gentle kiss



that didn't fully envelop her mouth. *Holy shit he's good.* Or she was weak? At this point, she was past caring.

"Shall we go?" he said and looked up as if nothing had happened.

*Damn him.* He didn't look the least bit bothered from their brief contact. Maybe she was overreacting to the situation? She was hot and horny and any man—or genie for that matter—would get her engines fired up. That had to be it. There wasn't anything at all going on between the two of them. Simply her underused libido.

Viola straightened and smiled as brightly as she could.

"Yes, please. I'm starving."

As they entered the restaurant, a short, balding maître d' greeted them at the door. After checking their reservation, he escorted them to a secluded table in a small private area in the farthest corner of the restaurant. Viola was surprised when the people they passed stared as they walked by. It's not like they were anything special here. Unlike at the hotel, they were dressed as formally as everyone else.

Jerod pulled out her chair and Viola sat down with her back to the wall, looking out so she could see the restaurant. He moved around and took the chair opposite her. She was pleased at how quiet things were at their table. The closest couple sat several tables away. Far enough that she didn't need to worry about anyone overhearing their conversation. She wanted, no, needed to practice her flirting, and the last thing she wanted was to get kicked out for improper behavior.

"So Bill would bring me to a place like this?" Maybe her choice in men wasn't so bad after all.

"No, the island didn't have anything close to Bill's standards," he said, his lips twitching against a smile that threatened to erupt. "I didn't think you would mind."

"No, not at all," she said then looked at him and frowned. "Exactly what are Bill's standards then?"

"Much...lower." He smiled and flicked his napkin over his lap. "Lovely spot isn't it?"

*Okay, bad.* She would be sure to book the dinner arrangements herself if she ever got

her date with Bill. She returned his smile, not wanting him to think anything was wrong, and mimicked the flicking of her napkin as she set it on her lap.

“It’s wonderful,” she muttered.

Their waiter came over and offered them a lovely and almost overwhelming wine list to choose from. Viola picked an Australian Shiraz, Jerod ordered the same. He also ordered a seafood sampler for an appetizer. She would have ordered something as well, but she was preoccupied, fascinated with watching him. The way he spoke, held his head, the confidence that radiated from him—everything. He seemed to be truly enjoying the experience, which was infectious.

“It’s been so long since I’ve been out in the world in this manner. I’ve forgotten how charming it can be.”

“It must be shocking every time you pop out how things have changed. I can’t imagine what it would be like,” she said and tugged at the edge of her napkin.

“Lonely.”

His smile this time looked more like a wince. Instead of continuing, he picked up a roll and broke it apart. She wanted to console him. She understood loneliness. But when she went to speak, all her sentiments felt naïve and hollow. How could she possibly understand what life would be like stuck in a bottle? Jerod brushed the crumbs from his hands, rested his elbows on the table, and leaned forward, steeping his fingers.

“I’d best outline your lessons before our food arrives. I want to make sure I have your full attention.”

“Okay. I’m all yours.”

She cringed, wishing like hell she hadn’t worded it quite that way. But Jerod either missed, or ignored the comment.

“There are six lessons. These are critical aspects and you will have to master them all if you hope to win Bill.”

Viola found herself nodding. She probably would have agreed to garbage collecting at this point. As long as he kept talking with that beautiful voice, he had her undivided attention.

“Your lessons will be in the following order—appearance, conversation, attitude, flirting, kissing, and...” his voice trailed off and Viola watched his eyes darken.

“And?”

Jerod leaned in, lowering his voice. “And anything else I can think of.”

Viola’s stomach flipped from the weight of his suggestion. She couldn’t let him get the better of her, or she didn’t have a hope in hell of surviving his lessons. Leaning back in her seat, she began to play with the neckline of her dress.

“I think I can handle that.” She accidentally popped open one of the small, silk-covered buttons on the front of her dress. When she saw the muscle in his jaw tighten, she giggled. “How am I doing so far?”

“Head of your class.” He said the words into his glass before taking a long drink of his wine.

She was winning this round. Feeling quite smug with herself, she took a sip of her wine before pressing on.

“So with this meal we’re working on which lesson? Conversation or attitude?”

“Flirting.”

Viola began to cough when her wine went down the wrong way. Jerod at least had enough courtesy to wait until she stopped choking before he gloated.

“Are you okay?” he said with a smug grin on his face.

“Peachy,” she managed in between coughs.

“Truth of the matter, your man Bill’s not much for conversation.”

Viola rolled her eyes. “Oh come on. Bill has as much to say as the next guy.”

“Ha! He’ll likely discuss several topics, starting with the office. He’ll try to make himself sound important. Now, you have an advantage because you know the truth.”

“That’s not fair,” she said and took a sip of her water, careful to swallow all before speaking again. “Bill is important. He runs our region. We figure he’s next in line to move into a VP role.”

Jerod didn’t look convinced.

“He’ll then switch the conversation to politics.”

Viola couldn't believe it. "He doesn't."

"You won't have to say anything. It's actually better if you don't. Ah, our appetizers."

Viola had to give her head a shake at the rapid change of conversation. "What?"

She jumped with the sudden arrival of the waiter with the plate of steaming seafood. The young man smiled as he set the hot oval platter in front of them with a dull thud, bowed, and walked away.

The aroma was amazing. Viola's stomach growled its appreciation when she breathed in the mouthwatering scent. She didn't wait for Jerod and dove in with a fork to snatch one of the prawns from the spread. Garlic and tomatoes threatened to drip off the fork, so she shoved it quickly into her mouth.

"To your liking?" Jerod asked as he took a sip of his wine.

She made a mumbling sound and nodded emphatically. Jerod smiled and moved some of the food onto his plate. But he didn't use a fork. Two of the prawns floated across the table of their own devices and paused to hover over the plate. Viola covered her mouth with her hand to hide her full-mouth laugh when the prawns began to dance.

"I can guarantee that Bill's dinner conversation won't be as entertaining," Jerod said in a very serious voice.

"To be fair, you're a tough act to follow."

Their eyes locked across the table. Viola had officially moved past her embarrassment phase and squarely into arousal. Beth had been right—she needed to get laid. Now if she could convince Jerod he was the genie for the job, this might be the most memorable vacation in the history books.

"So..." she slid the tip of the prawn into her mouth and sucked the sauce off with a popping sound, "...this lesson isn't about conversation?"

The prawns came to rest on Jerod's plate and he picked one up with his fingers and popped it into his mouth, making sure to lick the sauce from his fingers. "That's right."

Determined to beat Jerod at his own game, Viola dipped her finger into the wine glass, getting a large drop to cling to the tip. She brought it to her lips and stuck her

tongue out so its tip captured the drop as it fell. Closing her eyes, she made sure to let out a little moan of pleasure before she looked at him again.

“So, I’m supposed to be flirting? See if I have the skills to win Bill over?”

She watched as he shifted in his seat, but she couldn’t be sure if it was a result of her actions. Up the ante. That’s what she needed to do. Without letting on what she was doing, Viola slipped her right shoe off her foot. Slowly, she straightened her leg until her foot found its mark—Jerod’s thigh.

He stiffened immediately, but Jerod must have sensed the impending approach of the waiter, because he leaned in and whispered to her. “You’re being very naughty.”

“Bill doesn’t like naughty?” She began to stroke the outside of his knee and upper thigh with her toes.

“Bill always orders for his date. He thinks it shows he’s a take charge type of guy and it will show his good taste.”

Viola leaned in also, kept her toes busy switching to the inside of his thigh.

“I trust the good taste of my date.” She smiled and licked up the length of her fork, getting the last of the tomato sauce.

He was closer to her than she realized. With her leaning forward, her toes brushed against his swollen cock. She blushed when she realized what she’d touched. Her foot dropped to the floor as her gaping mouth snapped shut.

Jerod shifted in his seat, pulling back an inch. “Minx.”

“I didn’t know genies could get a hard-on.” She couldn’t believe she’d said that.

“What made you think we couldn’t?”

*Good question.* “I didn’t realize you were human.”

Viola felt the tickle of invisible fingers stroking her leg above her knee. She reached down to smack it away, but realized both his hands were on the table. Jerod chuckled and winked at her.

“Little bit of human, and a whole lot of magic.”

Their banter stopped the moment their waiter entered hearing distance. He smiled a big toothy grin when he reached their table.

“You two look like you’re enjoying yourselves.”

Viola smiled back. “We are, thank you.”

Despite Jerod threatening to order for her, he didn’t, which meant she had to make a decision. After a few moments of deliberation, she picked the grilled ginger mahi mahi. Jerod choose a steak, rare.

“Very good. Enjoy your drinks.” He disappeared to the kitchen.

“He looks very happy tonight,” she said, making sure he was watching when she licked a drop of her wine off the outside of the glass.

“He thinks we’re in love.”

Jerod chuckled as she fought not to choke on her drink a second time.

“What?” she asked, half coughing.

“The two of us, in a secluded booth. It’s a natural assumption.”

Viola felt her face warm, though she wasn’t sure if it was from his words, or from the second glass of wine she’d finished. Her head tingled as the alcohol began to work its way through her food-deprived body. What it did was give her courage to play along.

She dipped her finger into the wine, brought it to her lips, and sucked the drop off. She then lazily drew a line down her lips, along her neck, to rest on her chest at the dip of cleavage.

“So, teacher, what would Bill want to do at this point?”

It somehow felt wrong to bring up Bill’s name. But he was the reason she was here with Jerod after all. And Jerod didn’t seem to mind. His eyes were currently following her finger on its sensual journey of her neck.

“Bill would want your finger to go lower,” he said, his accent sounding heavier.

She got a chill of pleasure from listening to him. The exotic sound of his voice was an unexpected turn on. Something she’d never known about herself before.

“Viola.”

Her eyes flicked over his shoulder to see where the waiter was.

“No one can see you.” He sounded urgent. “Undo the button.”

Who was she to argue with a genie? It only took a little pressure for her finger to

release the button from its confines. Her skin was warm, her nail felt good as she grazed the sensitive skin. She felt bold. She never felt bold. Viola continued on and undid the third button.

Jerod sucked in a short breath and watched as she played with the top of her breast. Her finger felt foreign and thrilling at once.

“Bill would like that.” His whisper held a raw edge to it.

“Do you?”

Her question clearly caught him off guard as he straightened in his chair. With graceful speed, he moved his chair beside hers before she knew what was going on. He wrapped his fingers around her wrist and pulled it underneath the table. She found her hand in direct contact with his engorged cock.

“Does that answer your question?”

She flexed her fingers around him, but was at a loss for what to do next. They were in a restaurant, for God’s sake.

“You’re...”

“When I am in your world, I take human form. My body functions as it did before I was cursed. I always could appreciate beauty when I saw it.”

*And how can a lady argue against that?*

“Thank you,” she whispered.

“You do that often. It makes you different from my previous masters.”

“Do what?”

“Show gratitude.”

She felt his cock swell, pulse with blood under her touch. When he released her wrist, she pulled her hand away, but didn’t remove it completely, resting it on his knee. He felt so warm, inviting, it was a temptation she’d never been faced with before. One she definitely wanted to explore.

Viola bit on her bottom lip as she tried to find the right words. “How can I not show gratitude for what you are doing for me? You’ve given me so much in such a short period of time. I look different, I even feel different. It’s amazing.”

"The waiter is coming," he said, but didn't move. "I should return to my seat to give you more room to eat."

"Okay."

He still didn't move. Instead he picked up her hand and kissed it. In a flash he was back in his original spot.

"Drink your wine, darling."

Viola couldn't keep up. He had her so worked up, she thought she would burst. Before she could say anything else, Jerod flicked his finger and the buttons on her shirt redid themselves.

"No sense in giving him a show."

With the steaming meal placed before them, their conversation died down. Viola concentrated on her fish and hoped she could sort out her emotions before the meal was done. She loved Bill. It was only natural that she'd project some of those emotions onto Jerod. He was, after all, showing her how to seduce the man. It would stand to reason she'd feel something for him as a result of all they were going through. *Wouldn't it?*

After supper, Jerod waved his fingers and made a sizable stack of bills appear on the table.

"That should cover things nicely."

Viola gasped. She's never seen that much money in any one place at the same time.

"Ah...yeah. Nice tip."

"He earned it. He didn't flirt with you once."

She giggled as they left the restaurant together. As soon as they reached the night air, Viola shivered. "I didn't think it got this cold here at night."

She heard him snap his fingers and out of nowhere a white knit shawl appeared in his hands. He took great care to drape it over her shoulders.

"We should get you back to your room. I would hate for you to get a summer cold."

"Is that what Bill would do? Walk me back?" She couldn't resist the urge to tease him.

Unfortunately, Jerod didn't look amused.



“Not exactly. He would drive you home in his Ford and make advances toward you the entire time. Which reminds me of another lesson I need to teach you.”

“Rebuking his advances?”

He spun her around so fast she had to throw her arm up against his chest to prevent her from losing her balance.

He leaned in and whispered in her ear, “No. Lesson five.”

Her mind was a whirlwind trying to remember the order of the lessons he’d outline at dinner. “Attitude?”

“Kissing.”

Her mouth suddenly dried. She had to run her tongue over her lips to moisten them.

“What happened to lesson two and four?”

“I’m changing the curriculum.”

“You don’t like how I kiss?” she said, sounding more juvenile than she wanted.

“There’s always room for improvement.”

His hand slid up her arm, under her shawl and across her shoulder, until it rested at the base of her neck. He rubbed his thumb over her pulse line, which made her heart beat even faster.

“I think we need to change the setting.”

He snapped his fingers and they were standing in her resort bedroom.

“That’s better.”

Her chest tightened, making it hard to breathe. “Why did you do that? Someone might have seen us disappear.”

“That’s the wonderful thing about humans. They discount the impossible as a trick of the eyes.” He looked around and made a tsking sound with his mouth.

“Bill wouldn’t approve of this. We need to make a few changes to improve the atmosphere.”

He snapped them again and the room filled with candles. She gasped. The glow they produced was stunning. Shadows reached long and far, dancing on the walls to the rhythm of the ocean waves.

Viola noticed he didn't do anything this time, but suddenly the bright floral comforter was replaced with crimson satin sheets, littered with rose petals. Music filled the air, a light harmony of instruments that sounded like they came from the earth itself. It made Viola sway gently to the sound.

"Better."

"Amazing."

Jerod pursed his lips and examined his handiwork. "It's still missing something. What would Bill do?"

Viola laughed. She doubted Bill would think of any of this. Everything about the room glowed a warm, inviting welcome. It was like a dream. Like Jerod.

"Now I know." Jerod smiled and snapped his fingers again.

A bottle of wine and two glasses appeared on the side table.

"You do that," she snapped her fingers, "for effect. Don't you?"

"I find it makes my masters more comfortable if they know when something is coming. Otherwise they tend to do this."

Viola shouted in surprise when she felt her body moving across the floor toward him. It took a second, but her body finally relaxed as she drew closer to him, but not quite touching. "Cute."

"I did warn you."

She was within an arm's reach of him. A gentle breeze blew in from the ocean sending a ripple of shadows as the candles flickered.

"So this is my next lesson?"

"Kissing is very important to Bill. I want to make sure you are ready for when it happens," Jerod said, his voice growing deeper, his eyes locked on hers.

Viola felt a shiver of desire shoot down her spine. Her body felt like an electric current had charged it and she needed to release it back into the ground. She needed to feel what it was like, just once, to have an attractive man want to kiss her. The special way she'd heard the other women talk about in the lunchroom.

"I wouldn't want to disappoint Bill. I better practice."

Without moving, Jerod was suddenly by her side. He wasn't touching her, not yet. She could tell he was trying to keep things playful. But that side of things was quickly losing its appeal. She really, *really* wanted to get this lesson going.

"So now what?"

She had to fight the urge to touch him. She curled her fingers into the palms of her hands to help. Her patience was rewarded when he repeated his earlier action of caressing her arm. When his hand traveled up and across her shoulder, Viola moaned.

"You're very sensitive there, aren't you?"

He continued his exploration, his fingers caressing her neck, until she felt his fingers massage little circles into her hair. Her eyes closed and her body began to relax.

"The secret to being a good kisser is to let the excitement of the moment wrap you up."

"I think I can do that."

She was so wrapped up her body was about to explode from the pressure. She saw his desire etched on every inch of his body. He wanted her—and she wasn't about to say no.

Jerod's eyes were dark pools of black, the crystal blue of his irises all but gone.

"A good kisser uses her whole body. Every last fiber of her being should be focused on the contact of lips on lips. Do you think you can do that, Viola?"

She couldn't take anymore.

"Kiss me." The words were out of her before she stopped to think about them.

"Is that a wish?"

"No. A request."

She heard him growl. A very primitive-sounding growl. One that turned her on more than anything else.

"Yes, Mistress."

He stepped close, his body pressed hard against hers. His exotic scent was everywhere, washing over her so much she could almost taste it. It wasn't until he increased the pressure on her neck, pulling her closer, that her body melted.

When his lips found hers, the contact was light, tentative. Not at all like this afternoon. His lips were a soft heaven, nipping and tasting as he went. But she wanted more. The contact was too gentle, too proper. Viola was bold, wicked. He'd shown her she could be more than who she thought she was. She snaked a hand up across his chest and around the back of his neck. Needing to be closer, she pulled him down. Opening her lips, she coaxed him in with her tongue. They silently dueled, caressing and tasting each other. She moaned, her body still wanting more from him.

Her fingers found his stomach and began to tease the cord of muscles hiding under his shirt. They flexed under her touch as she ran them up his body and over his chest and shoulders. She finally buried her fingers into his soft dark hair, massaging his skin as she did.

His growl this time was anything but playful. She felt powerful, *was* powerful. She had a genie eating out of the palm of her hand. She pushed her body hard against his, thrilled by the feel of his erection against her stomach. *God, I want this. I want him.*

But when he pulled back suddenly, Viola was left standing there, stunned by the missing warmth and contact.

Her voice shook as she asked, "Did I do something wrong?"

His crystal blue eyes searched her face for something. His breath came out in short gasps.

"Nothing. You've done nothing wrong."

She couldn't be sure, but he looked confused. She didn't like this. A tense seriousness floated between them. She reached up and stroked his goatee.

"Would Bill have liked it?"

His eyes flashed anger. "Bill." He closed his eyes and took a breath. "Bill would approve of the way you kiss."

Heart pounding in her chest, she asked the question she really wanted to know. Her mouth was suddenly very dry.

"Did you like it?" she whispered.

When he opened his eyes again to look at her, he wore his confusion again.

“Does it matter?”

She tried to say yes, but the word didn’t want to come out. Viola nodded instead.

“No one has asked me what I liked before. But I have to say, kissing you right now was... I liked it very much, Viola.”

Mentally, Viola did cartwheels. Why it was so suddenly important to make Jerod happy, she didn’t question. He was happy, and he may even like her a little bit. Maybe more than a little bit.

“I’ve never met a man like you before,” she said and leaned in to begin another kiss.

But this time he pulled back. A range of emotions passed over his face, so many she couldn’t keep up. He took a step back and, in a blink of an eye, he’d changed from his evening outfit back into the genie clothing he’d wore when she’d first met him.

“That’s because I’m not a man.” He paused and gave his head a shake. “I haven’t been for a very long time.”

“Jerod, I’m—”

He pressed a finger against her lips. “Don’t say it. You have nothing to apologize for. You’ve passed your kissing lesson with, what’s the expression?”

“Flying colors?” She hated that she sounded like she would cry.

He didn’t seem to notice. Or he couldn’t acknowledge it because of his own emotional flux.

“Yes, with flying colors. We will continue our lessons tomorrow. And you should begin to consider your second and third wishes soon. You are such a quick study, I’m not sure our lessons will last long.”

With a brief flash of light he was gone. His bottle that she’d set on the coffee table glowed briefly before going dark.

“Jerod?”

Nothing. Viola replayed what had happened, tried to figure out where she went wrong. It had been going so well, until she’d asked him a personal question.

She would never have guessed a genie would have intimacy issues.

Energy was rapidly leaving her body. All of the excitement and chaos of the past day

finally caught up with her. Between her adventure getting here and finding a genie, she didn't think she could take much more.

Her body fell with a muffled thud against the satin sheets. She didn't even have the energy to get changed into her pajamas. As sleep began to claim her, she was vaguely aware of the room darkening as the candles doused themselves one by one, and the sound of the balcony doors clicking shut. With a sigh, she let sleep claim her.

## Chapter Five

Day two. Was it only the second day? Viola groaned as she rolled over and looked at the clock. Yes, officially day two and, conveniently, it was nearly half over.

“I didn’t think you were ever going to wake up.”

Viola sat bolt up in bed. She didn’t look at Jerod directly, but out of the corner of her eye she could see him floating near the back corner of the room.

“How long have you been there?”

“In the room or floating in this corner?”

“Corner.”

“An hour. You showed signs of life around then and I thought I would be here to greet you. But you drifted back to sleep, so I stayed to watch.”

That explained the vivid dream of being stalked.

“Don’t you get tired of that?” She groaned and flopped back against her pillow.

“Of what, waiting? I’ve been waiting around in one way or another for the past three thousand years. You get used to it after a while.”

That made her roll over to get a better look at him. “Really? I was talking about showing off. I can’t imagine getting used to waiting like that. It must get lonely.”

As soon as the words left her she cringed. *Nothing personal, dummy*. She didn’t want a repeat performance of last night. At least he didn’t seem to mind as much this morning. Maybe he was tired last night.

“Showing off? You think this...” he waved at the gap between where he sat and his legs, “...is showing off?”

She smiled and blew an annoying strand of hair out of her eyes.

“What do you consider showing off?”

She regretted asking the second she saw him smile back.

“More along the lines of this.”

With a snap of his fingers, Jerod teleported them to the top of a cloud. At least this time she didn't scream. She was too petrified to move, let alone scream. It felt like her eyes were going to pop out of her head, and her heart explode from the panic of being up so high.

“It's beautiful?” he asked, sounding uncertain for the first time.

She couldn't move to answer.

“Viola?”

A large carpet appeared beneath her feet, blocking her view of the ground so far below.

“I'm sorry. I forgot humans have a hard time adjusting to that. Here, sit down.”

He wanted her to do *what*? She looked stupidly up at him, his words not quite sinking into her head. It wasn't until she felt the warmth of one hand on her back and the other wrap around her fingers that her legs trembled and cooperated. She sunk down onto the crimson and gold carpet and tried not to hyperventilate.

Jerod squatted beside her, rubbing her hair as he spoke soothing words in her ear. It was hard to hear him over the pounding of her heart. She leaned hard against his body, needing to feel the contact, his warmth as she held on to him for dear life.

“That's better. You don't look so pale anymore,” he said as he patted her hand.

She looked into his eyes. *Damn him, he was calm. How the hell can he be so calm thirty thousand feet above the ocean!* The world around her started to focus in tight until all she could see was Jerod. His half smile calmed her, knowing he couldn't look that handsome if they were about to crash to the earth.

“Viola, breathe.”

*Breathe? Oh right.* She took a shaky breath in, held it for a second, and slowly let it out. Jerod gave her hand a squeeze.

“Again.”

Slowly, one breath after another, she felt herself get back under control. Her heart hadn't slowed, but the petrifying fear was starting to recede until her muscles agreed to



cooperate once more. Viola tentatively turned her head a little to look out beyond the protective barrier of the magic carpet.

“If you look in the distance, you can see the islands. There’s an active volcano a few miles under the water that looks amazing from here at night. Want to see?”

The combination of his gentle touch and calm voice made her body relax. Once she was able to focus on the object Jerod pointed to, she found she could get control of her panic. *God, this is amazing.*

“It’s hard to see it in the day time,” she managed to say through her chattering teeth.

“I can fix that,” he said and winked at her.

With a snap of his fingers, the bright sun was gone and the darkness of the night sky enveloped them. She should have been relieved she couldn’t see the distance to the ocean floor anymore. But the sudden change was as disconcerting as the initial trip. Instinctively, Viola moved closer to Jerod.

She could see the lights in the dark sky, the volcano burning bright under the ocean. Lights from the island and the resorts shone from below and competed with the moon for which was brighter.

When she looked over at Jerod, he was grinning like a kid. “To your liking?”

“I...love it. You’re right.”

“About what?”

“This is definitely showing off.” She gave his hand a squeeze.

Another snap of his fingers and they returned to the daylight. Viola had to blink several times to let her eyes adjust.

“Is there anything you can’t do?” She shook her head in amazement.

Jerod sighed. “I can’t make people fall in love—”

“Yes, yes I know.” She managed a weak laugh and lightly slapped his arm.

“It’s good to see you smile again.” He brushed a piece of her hair out of her eyes.

The brief contact shook Viola to her core—she shivered hard, her skin instantly covered in goosebumps. That simple touch was more thrilling and scary than anything else he’d shown her that morning. She looked down and realized she was still in her

pajamas.

“Good thing no one can see me up here.”

“Are you ready to head back?”

There was something in his voice that caught her attention. He looked tired. His face had grown pale, and his hand was very cold in hers. If she didn't know better, she'd swear he'd caught some sort of flu bug.

“Are you okay?”

Jerod straightened his back and frowned at her. “Of course I am.”

“No, you're not.” She reached up and touched his forehead. “I think you're the one who's pale now.”

“I'm fine.”

“Jerod?”

“Maybe a little tired.”

Their little trip needed to end. “Take me home please,” she said and smiled. “Thank you.”

Jerod nodded. He snapped his fingers and Viola found herself standing back in her bedroom. The clock showed she'd been away for fifteen minutes. *Amazing*. It felt like they'd been gone forever. Her legs shook as she took a step, proving to herself she was indeed back on solid ground. Viola frowned as she spun around the room. *Where the hell is he hiding now?*

“Jerod?”

Nothing. She ignored the small frightened voice that was more than a little concerned for Jerod and walked over to his bottle. She tried to look inside, but the damned glass was too dark. The cap on the bottle refused to come off, so that wasn't any help either. She rubbed her thumb over the surface, trying to clear away the salty film that covered it.

“You can't get more wishes by rubbing it again.”

A weight lifted off her chest at the sound of his voice. “Are you in there?”

“Get dressed. I'll meet you downstairs after you eat,” his disembodied voice

answered.

“What are you doing?” She held the bottle close to her eyes, squinting in an attempt to see inside. “Are you okay?”

“Don’t do that. You look silly.”

“Thanks a lot.” She set his bottle back down on the table with a thud.

“Ouch.”

“Are you going to hide in there all day? I’m hungry.”

She was also scared half to death. He should have warned her he could get sick like that. Maybe he hadn’t known it would happen. That wasn’t a pleasant thought at all.

“I need a rest. Go eat. I’ll find you and we can continue our lessons then.”

That didn’t sound good. “Are you sure?”

“I’m fine. Go now.”

And then he was gone.

“Jerod?”

Nothing. She kept half an eye on his home, waiting to see if he was going to pop out and shout “surprise”. She really hoped he’d hop out and say something. Nothing.

Viola picked through the pile of clothing in her suitcase, her mind replaying the morning’s events. How did their trip to the clouds tire him out? Was his magic limited? That didn’t seem possible, but something had happened. Without really looking, she slipped into a tight-fitting red T-shirt and a pair of short black shorts. Not bothering with a brush, she combed her fingers through her hair and slipped on a pair of open-toe sandals.

She’d never once considered the possibility that Jerod could get tired from using his magic. Maybe he could also get hurt? It seemed unlikely, but really, what did she know about genies after all? The urge to find a computer with an Internet connection was great. Problem was she doubted she could trust any of the information she’d find online.

Her feet felt heavy as she dragged herself down the hall toward the elevator. Countless possibilities of how a genie could get hurt filed through her mind. Chainsaws, implosion, dragons, aliens. Shit, anything that someone could wish for. Pressing the

down button, Viola vowed she'd be very careful with her next two wishes. If a trip to the clouds could do that to him, imagine what kind of damage wishing for world peace could cause.

Before she knew it, Viola was sitting at the table in the resort restaurant. A young woman bounced over to her and plunked a menu in front of her.

"Can I get you a coffee?"

Viola yawned, nodded and ordered the fruit bowl without looking at the crimson and gold menu. The waitress began to leave, but stopped and turned back.

"I'm sorry if this is out of line. But I wanted to say a few of us from the kitchen saw you and your boyfriend heading out last night. I wanted you to know that we all thought you looked gorgeous."

Viola looked up and gave her a small smile. "Thank you. Last night was magical."

The woman grinned. "With a man like that, I'm thinking most things are magical."

*Oh, you have no idea, lady.* "He's very special."

The waitress actually giggled as she walked away.

Viola buried her face in her hands and sighed. She'd only had Jerod around for a day and her life was in turmoil. Only one day. That's it, that's all, not a minute more. And she still had two wishes to go.

*He'd better hurry the hell up and teach me what I need to know about Bill.*

A short time later, the still-smiling waitress returned with her coffee and fruit tray. Viola began to eat a variety of exotic fruit. She barely tasted it as she shoveled it into her mouth. The waitress dutifully took the empty bowl away and refilled her coffee mug. Viola made small talk, but she was more interested in keeping an eye on the door. Still no Jerod.

Something was wrong.

She checked her watch for the tenth time. He'd been resting for forty-five minutes now. If she stayed here any longer she'd die from caffeine overdose. Or worry. She had to do something.

He'd be fine. He's a genie and more than able to look after himself. He'd been doing

just that for the past three-thousand years. It's not like there was a whole lot she could do to help anyway.

Her search for something to do led her to the front desk and the suggestion of taking a scooter ride to explore the island. The man at the rental booth drew a map on the back of a flyer and pointed her in the direction of the best view and most interesting attractions. Forty minutes and twenty dollars later, Viola pattered down the road, helmet on her head and a grin on her face. The island was a gorgeous place to behold, each turn revealing another treasure. So when she saw the rundown sign for Topics Haven Resort, Viola couldn't believe her eyes. This couldn't be a resort, if you could still call it that. Not a single tourist she knew would set foot in this place. Curiosity got the better of her and she decided to explore.

Thick bushes that didn't look native to the island had overgrown the entrance to the resort, blocking a view of the building from the road. It had only been a fluke she'd spotted the place at all. The driveway was cracked, with tufts of triumphant grass growing straight through. Viola hopped off her scooter, but didn't want to leave it along the roadside. She pushed it carefully over the cracks and through the bushes, feeling very much like the prince in *Sleeping Beauty*, until she made it through to the other side. When she finally laid eyes on the resort, she sighed.

The place was a dump.

The paint peeled on the weathered resort sign, half buried in the bushes, making it look at least fifty years old. The building itself was filled with broken windows and crumbling bricks. The three-story building was only a fraction of the size of the newer resorts, and would never qualify as a Way to Go resort, even with extensive external repairs.

Despite its condition, there were about twelve people all working around the outside of the building. Some looked to be yanking weeds from the garden, while others were trying to board up the broken windows on the bottom level of the building. All of them looked to be locals to the island, except for one. A man in his late twenties or early thirties was helping lift a large beam onto a sawhorse. From the look of it, he was the one

doing most of the lifting and everyone else was making a good show of helping. One of the others saw Viola and said something to him.

The young man looked up at Viola, waved, and made his way over to her.

He was cute, but not as good-looking as Jerod. *Bill!* She chastised herself. *He's not as good-looking as Bill.* Viola pushed all thoughts of Jerod from her mind, instead concentrating on her approaching companion.

"Hello." His voice was deep and smooth. He sounded like he belonged on the radio, reading the top news stories of the day.

"Hi there." She waved back. "I take it this place isn't open for business."

The man spun his faded ball hat around so the rim now shaded his face.

"Actually, it is, in a way. I'm here to help some of the locals fix up their home."

Viola must have looked as surprised as she felt, because he chuckled.

"Yeah, that's what I thought too when I discovered this place a month ago."

"The hair dresser at the resort mentioned that some of the older places were used as shelters. Even said they needed repair, but I didn't think they'd be this bad."

She flicked the kickstand to her scooter and made her way over to the building. The closer she got, the more damage she saw. This place wasn't fit for rats, let alone people. The roof sagged in several places. The concrete pillars were cracked, large chunks having fallen off and crushed the flowers and shrubs underneath.

"Apparently it wasn't this bad a year ago. But after tropical storm Dora last summer, a lot of the weaker parts of the building were damaged. I'm Ryan, by the way."

"Viola." She smiled as they shook hands.

Ryan was a handsome man. And if she wasn't in love with Bill, she'd consider asking him out to supper. Even though blond hair wasn't normally her thing, she'd make an exception for his blue eyes.

She definitely had a thing for blue eyes.

"How many people live here?" she said and turned away, feeling a little silly for staring.

"About twenty. Four families and a few singles. The owners of the resort have pretty

much forgotten about this place. In fact, I'm surprised you're here. Not many people remembered it when I was asking around about it."

"Actually, I just happened to spot the sign as I was driving by. Wasn't intending on finding this place, but I'm glad I did."

"Well, it's nice to see someone take an interest, regardless of how you got here."

"So why are you here helping?" she asked and hoped she wasn't blushing too much.

"I do some work for Habitat for Humanity. I was on the island, scouting around, seeing what I could find, when I ran across this place."

"Scouting out build sites in Cozumel. I think I work for the wrong company."

"Well, you're here aren't you?"

Viola told him all about her contest win and the vacation package clause. By the end of it, he was grinning as wide as she was.

"Well, for our sake, I'm glad it was you who made the trip and not your boss."

"So am I."

Ryan turned around and looked at the building. "I'd love to have the funds to fix this place up, but things are so tight with our chapter right now. We only have enough to build two houses this year, and nowhere near enough to do right by these people."

"I would love to do something to help."

As soon as the words left her mouth, she knew exactly what that something was.

"Well, if you happen to stumble across a spare million, let me know." He grinned a big, wide smile.

Viola returned his smile and stuck out her hand. "You'll be the first to know if I do."

They shook hands and she watched as Ryan disappeared back into the structure.

Viola jogged back out to the scooter, her mind turning over possibilities of what she could do to help, and began her journey back through the bushes to the road. When she popped out, she did a quick double check to make sure no one could hear her.

"Jerod?"

Nothing.

"Jerod?" This time she made sure to be louder.

“You rang?”

As if nothing ever happened, he was standing with his shoulder leaning against a nearby palm tree.

Viola felt a hidden weight lift from her shoulders. *Finally*. She marched over to him and punched his arm.

“Are you okay? You had me scared half to death.”

He glanced down at the impact mark left on his shirt before he brushed it away with his hand.

“Just a little genie thing. No need to worry about me.”

“What little genie thing?”

He looked up to the sky and sighed. “I have the power of the universe at my fingertips. But if I use it for my own purpose, I become drained.” He reached out and tucked a piece of her hair behind her ear.

“Kind of like a security measure. Keep you from dipping into the company piggy bank.” It made sense, in a strange sort of way. “But you’re okay now?”

“Perfect as can be.”

“Then no more showing off. Got it?”

Jerod straightened and gave her a bow. “Of course, Mistress.”

Viola sighed. “Good. I’d hate to think what would happen on my first date with Bill if I didn’t finish our lessons.”

“Is that why you called? Are you ready to continue?”

“Actually, no.”

With her heart pounding, she proceeded to tell him the plight of the locals living in the old resort. For his part, Jerod listened and genuinely looked interested in what she was saying.

“I want to help them.” She was vibrating, she was so excited. “Do you think you can?”

Jerod didn’t say anything for a while. He seemed to search her face, looking for something she wasn’t sure was there.



“What?”

He shrugged. “It’s nice to find someone interested in helping others.”

She opened her mouth to respond, but there was something in the way he looked at her that had her snap it shut again. If she didn’t know better, his expression looked a little bit like respect. And adoration.

Shit.

“Viola, I need you to think long and hard about this wish, and exactly how you want to word it. I’ve seen more than my fair share of good intentions go bad.”

Viola dropped her head so it rested on Jerod’s chest. She took little comfort in his warmth this time. What a decision she had to make—be selfish and ignore the plight of these people and keep the wish for herself, and see them get thrown out of their homes. Or try to help them and potentially ruin the lives they’d created for themselves by making the wrong wish. So either she was a selfish bitch, or a pathetic schmuck with bad grammar. *Great.*

“You don’t have to make the decision now, you know,” Jerod said and she felt him stroke her hair. “Give it a day. Nothing bad will happen to them in a day.”

“Promise?”

She felt him tug her chin and looked up into his eyes. The entire world melted and it was just the two of them. That strange little tingle was back with a vengeance, this time shooting straight to the sensitive spot between her legs. Viola tried to ignore the sensations, but it was a hopeless battle.

“Promise.” The one word held his absolute certainty.

“Okay. I’ll think on it. The best way to help them.”

Jerod walked her over to the scooter and watched as she climbed on board.

“Now what?” she asked, her mind still preoccupied with her decision.

“Your lesson for the day, of course.”

Viola couldn’t help her excitement. After her first two lessons, she was looking forward to what he had in store for her next.

“I can’t wait. Any place in particular you’d like me to go?”

Jerod's boyish grin was back. "The resort, if you please."

"Ummm." She looked around the small vehicle. "Are you going to zap back? I don't have a lot of room for you to join me."

"And you think that will stop me?" He shook his head and snapped his fingers.

The scooter morphed under Viola, the seat extending and the wheels pulling further apart. Jerod swung his leg over the seat and snuggled in behind her.

"Perfect fit."

"I'm never going to get used to this whole magic thing."

She didn't bother to wait for his response, knowing it would be something sarcastic. She turned the key and the scooter purred to life beneath her. They headed out toward the beach and drove up the coast. The sun warmed every inch of her and the wind made her feel alive. She made a mental note to get out for more walks when she got home.

Jerod sat tight behind her. His hands around her waist made her even more aware of his potency. His fingers were long and gripped her in a firm but gentle manner. Images of what those hands could do to her body flashed through her mind, making it very difficult to concentrate on the road. She let out a sigh when the resort finally drifted into sight.

They pulled into the resort rental area as a loud chorus of cheers reached them. A loud beat of music drifted through the air, making her want to sway to the rhythm. She grabbed the attendant and pointed in its direction.

"What's going on?"

"Dance thing." He shrugged, frowning momentarily at the magically altered scooter before jumping onto the back of it to return it to the stands.

She turned to face Jerod and almost laughed at the bored expression on his face. "Wanna see?"

Jerod shrugged a little too causally. "You're my mistress. I will follow you to the ends of the earth until you make your final wish."

"And then what?" she asked with a sick sense of curiosity.

His smile melted away, but he didn't look away. "Then I return to my bottle and disappear until I'm discovered by another."

The idea of him poofing away into nothingness, never to be seen again, made her cringe. She was just getting used to him being around. They stood like that for a while until another chorus of cheers drew their attention back to the small building.

Jerod took her hand and gave a tug. "Let's go see."

When they walked into the room, Viola shivered and squinted instantly. The blasting air conditioner and dim lights of the large entertainment building were a stark contrast to the outside. So much so, it took Viola a few minutes to see what the crowd gathered around. The blaring music was a song she didn't recognize, and was over before she had a chance to figure out what it was. As they approached the crowd, she was finally able to see what was going on. Two young men, maybe in their early twenties, were standing on two separate metal pads in front of a large screen.

"Are you ready?" the computer voice blared out.

The group around them cheered. The two men both leaned back and grabbed a large metal bar that came about halfway up their backs.

"Oh, this is that dancing game," she whispered to Jerod.

He only raised an eyebrow in response.

"It's called Dance Dance Revolution, lady, now shut up," a young teen with dyed black and purple hair hissed at her before turning back around.

The music began again, a fast Japanese song she wasn't familiar with. Arrows filled the screen and the men moved their feet in response. Viola gasped at how fast they were able to move. Her brain couldn't reconcile the timing of the fast-moving arrows with the movement of her feet. These guys weren't missing a beat.

*Impressive.*

In two minutes the song was over and one of the young men threw his arms up into the air and let out a loud whoop.

"Still undefeated."

Two young women cheered and both threw their arms around his neck to kiss either cheek.

"Any other takers?"

No one jumped to take the cocky young man up on his challenge. Jerod snorted loud enough that Mr. Cocky turned his attention to him.

"Who the hell are you?" Mr. Cocky nodded his chin in Jerod's direction.

"We came to play the game," he said with a bored air.

"We did?" she whispered as the kids in the crowd laughed.

"Lesson number three. Attitude." He winked.

"Well it's taken. You and your girlfriend will have to find something else to do."

Viola tugged on Jerod's arm. "Let's go," she whispered.

Jerod didn't move. "My girlfriend wanted to try the game. We'll wait until you're done."

She looked at him, completely surprised. He called her his girlfriend. The little thrill of excitement traveled down her spine, making her stand a little bit straighter. If this lesson was about attitude, then she needed to get ready to play her part. When she caught one of the boys in the crowd staring at her chest, Viola winked at him. He turned quickly away, his face beet red.

"The only way I'm getting off this pad is if someone beats me. And that hasn't happened yet."

The group laughed. She felt Jerod stiffen.

"Don't zap him or anything okay?" she said under her breath.

"The temptation is great."

"You wanna go, *old* man?"

Jerod shrugged, but she saw the devilish glint in his eyes. Viola gave his arm a squeeze. This kid was in trouble and he didn't have a clue.

"Can you?" she asked, releasing his arm.

He smiled ever so slightly. "Of course I can. But how is he going to feel when an old man beats him?" He said the last loud enough for the whole group to hear him.

A few of the young people in the group chuckled. Viola could tell that they weren't giving Jerod a snowball's chance in Cozumel to win. The snide glances and eye rolls told her all she needed to know. And it pissed her off. A mean streak she didn't realize she

had began to rear its head.

Someone called out on the far side. “Do a course. I’ll bet twenty the old guy doesn’t last past the first song.”

“Oh shit, I’ll give him to the second. You’re on.”

A number of other bets began to circle as to how long Jerod would survive. Viola had to do something to defend her genie’s honor. Plus she’d like nothing better than to rub these kids’ collective noses in it.

“I’ll bet fifty that he wins,” she shouted over the noise.

That quieted them down. The young man on the dance pad pointed his finger at her.

“You’re on, lady. Let’s go, gramps.”

Jerod rolled his eyes as he made his way through the crowd to take his place on the dance pad. Viola had to push through as well, so she could get a better view of what was about to happen. She didn’t want to miss a single step.

Mr. Cocky stomped a number of buttons on the pad and selected a game mode that gave them three songs to dance to.

“Highest score wins.”

Jerod nodded and held out his hand.

“Good luck.”

Mr. Cocky snorted. “I’ve been playing this game for two years. Luck has nothing to do with it.”

“Are you ready?” the computer called out.

The group went crazy cheering. Even Viola found herself calling out, cheering Jerod on. She was the only one.

The first song was an old one, “Shout”. The arrows began to fly and so did their feet. Jerod somehow managed to make it look like he was concentrating as his foot hit every arrow. Viola could tell he was toying with the boy, and enjoying himself quite a bit.

“Shit, he’s good,” one of the voices drifted to her from the crowd.

She heard the exchanging of money behind her at the end of the first song. She didn’t take her eyes off the score. Jerod was ahead, but not by much. They only had a few

seconds before the next song began.

“You’re a shark,” Mr. Cocky accused Jerod.

“You’re the one who wanted to take the old man on.”

“Are you ready?” the computer warned them.

The second song was another Japanese one, and boy was it fast. The arrows flew by, doubles and triples together. Jerod looked like he was tap dancing. Mr. Cocky yelled out in frustration when he missed a step, but he recovered quickly.

For his part, Viola watched as Jerod missed an occasional step himself. Probably so he wasn’t perfect. Her heart was pounding and her palms began to sweat. She noticed a few of the group were defecting to Jerod’s side, cheering him on now. When the music ended that time, Mr. Cocky was covered in sweat. Jerod was still wearing his half smile and looked as if he’d just woken up from a nap.

The last song was another Viola didn’t know, but by that time it was irrelevant. Jerod was forced to use his hands in several spots and he even threw in a spin for effect. By the end of the song, the entire crowd was cheering him on. Jerod came out two hundred points ahead of Mr. Cocky, who shook his head in disbelief.

“That was impressive, man,” Mr. Cocky said as extended his hand.

Jerod accepted it and smiled. “Lots of practice.”

Viola burst out laughing. When everyone turned to look at her, she said the first thing that popped out of her mouth.

“The doctor said he needed to exercise more. He chose this.”

Someone handed Viola fifty dollars and the group slowly dispersed. They were finally left alone. She stared at him, grinning until she was sure they were alone.

“That was so cool.” She laughed and threw her arms around his neck and kissed his cheek.

“I’m glad you approve.”

“How did you do that? I could barely keep up with what was happening on the screen.”

“Let me show you.”

Viola found herself standing on one of the pads and Jerod on the other. She felt silly standing in the middle.

“I’ve put it on Basic. When the arrow reaches the top, step on the arrow. Okay?”

“Okay? How the hell do you even know how to use this thing?”

Jerod grinned. “It’s magic.”

Viola rolled her eyes. “It’s lame. Let’s do this, dance *master*.”

For the next hour and a half, she laughed as she tried to hit the arrows. Even Jerod began to laugh as they realized how uncoordinated she was. It was very sad.

“Did I tell you I was the only kid kicked out of ballet class when I was younger? I hurt three other kids one week, and the instructor begged my mother to keep me home.”

Jerod wore a permanent grin at this point.

“Maybe your second wish should be around dancing? I could get you some fantastic lessons. Maybe make you a prima ballerina?”

Viola stopped and looked at him. For a while, she’d completely forgotten he wasn’t real. He wasn’t her boyfriend, they weren’t on a vacation together and he would disappear as soon as her wishes were granted.

“Viola?”

She wanted to cry when she saw the concern on his face. He was worried about her. Her! Other than Beth, no one worried about how she was feeling or if there was something wrong. Why the hell couldn’t he be real?

“Can we stop? I’m getting tired.”

He nodded, running his hand down along her arm. “Hungry?”

“Yes. And we should continue our lessons.” The words weren’t pleasant when she said them. “My vacation isn’t going to last forever and I need to learn how to win Bill over.”

Jerod’s smile faded as well. The two of them stood looking at each other, insane dance music blaring beside them. He nodded, and with a snap of his fingers, the game turned off.

“As you wish.”

## Chapter Six

Viola hurt all over. Somewhere between appetizers and dessert, her legs decided it was the perfect time to have her muscles seize up. The scooter ride on top of dancing a highly addictive game had pushed her body past any level of exertion she'd felt before. She worked in a call center, for God's sake. Not that she was about to let on to Jerod that there was anything wrong. No way. He'd been fussing at her since they left the entertainment building, and the last thing she wanted was to make things worse. Who'd believe a genie could be a mother hen?

The resort restaurant was crowded, the noise rising to an uncomfortable level as their meal progressed. They'd spent half the time in silence because she didn't feel like shouting. And the conversation she had in mind wasn't the sort of thing a person yelled in a family dining room.

It did give her ample opportunity to watch Jerod, to try to figure him out. His blue eyes seemed to be evaluating everything and everyone his gaze landed on. If there was something that caught his interest, Jerod would reach up and stroke his goatee. She doubted he even realized he was doing it. Viola found it more than a little sexy. *God, I'm so screwed.*

She watched as he pushed his plate away, the scallop linguine half touched. She knew he didn't need to eat, but liked that he tried to play the part of hungry boyfriend while in public. Without thinking, Viola reached out with her fork and stole a plump scallop.

"Still hungry?" he said and winked at her.

Her own plate was scraped clean. She even went so far as to soak up every drop of the cream sauce with the last roll. She still felt like she could eat. *Sad, really.* Apparently all it took to charge her appetite was a good-looking genie and a first-rate alfredo sauce.



“It’s just a shame to have the poor little fellow go to waste like that,” she said and popped it into her mouth. In between chews, she managed to continue, “I hope Bill won’t be thrown off by my appetite.”

“It wouldn’t matter. You’d have won him over with that last topic of conversation,” Jerod said in between sips of his wine.

“He had tickets to go to the monster truck rally last year at the Metro center. Talked about it for *weeks*. I swore I was going to jump out the third-story window to end my misery if he’d gone on much longer.”

“He’d be devastated to learn of your demise.”

It had bored her half to tears learning about the trucks and who the favorites were. But because Bill liked it, she’d taken it upon herself to learn everything she could about monster trucks. Hours of her life she’d never get back. She could only imagine what would happen if she actually had to *go* to a rally.

“So, now what would he want to do?” Viola shifted in her seat and pushed her fork into another scallop. “This would be our second date, after all.”

“Second date. Hmm...” Jerod’s gaze flicked across her face and down her body. When he reached her breasts, he smiled and licked his lips. Slowly, he looked back into her eyes and winked.

The heat in his stare made her blush. God she hated that he could do that to her so easily. But she wouldn’t look away. She’d tried to remember lesson three on attitude and mixed it with her flirting. Viola tucked her hair behind her ear, leaned forward and twirled her fork in the noodles left on his plate. He watched her every move with great interest.

“So?” she asked as casually as she could.

“Bill would most likely want to, how do you put it now? Make out?”

*Oh shit!* Viola blushed again, her face so hot, she pressed her hand against her neck. She wasn’t going to survive these lessons with her sanity intact.

“Well, that’s good to know.” She looked up and saw his amused expression. “We should be concentrating on my lessons. It’s not like I have a lot of time left.”

"I agree. Let's see, you've mastered your lessons on appearance," he said with a grin and she felt an invisible hand caress the back of her leg. "And you're more than ready to conquer him in the arena of conversation."

She couldn't help it, Viola grinned like a fool. "Thank you."

"And believe me when I tell you that it has everything to do with your oratory skills and not his lack of standards." Jerod hid his smile behind a sip of wine.

"You're such a charmer." She rolled her eyes, but couldn't stop from giggling. "So what next? Time off for good behavior?"

When he looked up at her this time, the air between them crackled. "Oh no. You still have lessons to learn. No time for playing yet."

Viola's entire body reacted to the weight of his suggestion. There were only a few of her *lessons* left. All of which were very appealing. More than appealing. They were positively enthralling.

Especially lesson four.

Jerod chuckled and, with a snap of his fingers, refilled her wine glass. If she drank much more, they wouldn't be doing much of anything tonight. When he smiled at her again, she picked up the glass and drank the contents.

"You looked like you needed that," he said with a grin.

Since he hadn't said anything about being able to read minds, she figured she was doing her best impersonation of an open book.

*Great.*

"Bill would most likely take you for a walk."

"Is this before the make-out session?" *God, did I just ask him that!*

"Yes. Come along, Mistress. You need some fresh air."

The groan popped out before she could stop it. Jerod raised a single questioning eyebrow in response.

"Legs are sore. I fail at being a dance master." She tried to mimic the voice from the dance game, but it came out as more of a sigh.

"Bill would never ask you to dance at all, let alone play a game. He feels they're for

children.”

Somewhere, Viola’s disappointment grew. Okay, so Bill wasn’t the office comedian or really even participated in any of the office special events. But that was work. He couldn’t possibly be that stuffy on his own time. *Could he?* She wasn’t sure if she could stand endless dates that revolved around him talking about how great he was and monster trucks.

The man had to have fun!

Viola gave her head a shake. No, she was being too hard on him. Bill could be charming, and Lord knew he could flirt. And he’d shown faith in her abilities when no one else had, given her a job when she couldn’t catch a break. In her mind, that counted for a lot. When he wasn’t busy and she had his attention, Bill made her feel important. She could convince him to have some fun. Even change him on some fundamental level. Maybe. Perhaps she could even convince him to play DDR.

Despite totally sucking at the game, she’d had a ball trying to keep up with the arrows. Jerod made it very easy for her to relax and have fun. They couldn’t stop laughing when her feet had gotten tangled and she’d almost fallen on her ass. He’d stopped her from falling and threatened to cast a coordination spell on her, which sent her into another fit of giggles.

They were a great pair.

Viola pushed that thought away as quickly as it popped up.

“You look tired,” he interjected into her thoughts.

Viola looked into his crystal blue eyes and sighed. “A bit.”

“A walk may not be the best thing for you right now. I should get you back to your room.” He sat back against his seat and looked her over again.

At his slow, easy smile, Viola felt her stomach perform a small flip-flop. She wanted him. Not just as a friend, which he’d surprisingly become, but for much more.

She wanted to jump his bones.

More than anything else in the world at that precise moment, she wanted to rip his shirt off, throw his belt out the window, and peel back the opening of his pants so she

could see what was hidden inside. The thought of running her hands over his naked body, circling her hands around his big cock, 'cause she knew it was big, was more than she could handle. *Fuck!* She would then...

"Screw it. Let's go," she blurted out as she jumped to her feet.

A couple sitting near them turned to look at her sudden burst of enthusiasm. Jerod merely chuckled.

"Are you sure?"

*No pants. Really want to see him without pants.*

"Positive. I could use the fresh air. Maybe the nice cool breeze will help clear my head and help my legs. I think you fed me a bit too much wine."

"Help your legs?"

"Sure! Why not?"

Jerod still didn't look convinced, but threw a bunch of bills on the table and stood to join her. She winced as she walked, each step a painful reminder that she really needed to renew her gym membership when she got back home. Viola followed his lead to the back veranda of the restaurant, which gave them access to the beach.

When the door clicked shut behind them, Viola felt a sudden relief of being free of the noise. The dull thud of their footsteps across the wood deck gave way to the soft rustle of sand. The ocean breeze was warm and played with the bottom of her skirt, lifting and caressing her legs. Jerod didn't move to touch her as they walked, which wasn't going to work for Viola. She snatched his hand and locked her fingers around his. When he raised an eyebrow in question, she smiled.

"I don't want to lose my balance."

Each step into the sand sent a sharp ache shooting up her legs and into her hips. Despite the discomfort, there was no way she would let on. He'd insist she go back to her room and lie down. Probably not even give her the choice, just snap his fingers to make it happen. No, a small amount of pain was worth it. Especially since Jerod seemed so relaxed.

It struck her as odd that even though their topic of conversation over the past two

days had been dominated by Bill, she'd been more focused on Jerod. And while her lessons were very important, a small part of her was no longer one hundred percent convinced that her end goal, which was winning Bill's heart, was the right one. Maybe she was fickle. A man pays a little bit of attention to her and she thinks she's in love. Or at the very least in lust.

No, who was she kidding. She enjoyed talking to Jerod and the subject didn't matter. He listened to her, actually cared about what she thought. Teased and played around, making sure she wasn't taking herself too seriously. He'd recognized something hidden inside her, helping her find a way to let it shine through. She wasn't the same Viola White who'd arrived in Cozumel two days earlier. The very idea hit her hard. She'd never considered the fact that maybe she needed to change, or that her dealings with Jerod would do that to her. There was something about him that made her feel special. And it wasn't the fact that her wish was his command.

"So, would Bill be adverse to small talk at this point?" she said a bit too quickly.

Jerod seemed to consider that. "He'd be more interested in trying to get you into bed. If he thought small talk would do it, then no."

Bill didn't sound the least bit appealing when Jerod put it that way. In a sad sort of way, she wasn't really surprised. Maybe Beth had been right all along. God, she really wasn't looking forward to having *that* conversation.

"I guess that's good to know."

He patted her hand with his free one. "What would you like to discuss? Places Bill would like to visit? Things he expects from his future wife?"

"Why don't you tell me about some of your other masters?" Viola stumbled when Jerod stopped walking suddenly. "Hey, a little warning!"

"Why do you want to know?"

In an instant, his demeanor changed. She watched as the smile evaporated from his full lips. His body stiffened and his fingers held hers a little too tight. Fear pounded through Viola at the thought she'd say the wrong thing again. Her mind raced through all the things she could try to say to make things better. Instead, she settled on the truth.

“To be honest, I’m getting a bit tired talking about Bill. Besides, I’m curious. You must have met some very interesting people over the past three-thousand years. I can’t imagine what someone from that long ago was like.”

She swallowed hard and waited. His eyes searched hers, looking for something. In that moment, she felt very small, and very young. Like a child who’d disappointed a parent, but for the life of her couldn’t figure out why. Why the hell did she always have to screw things up?

“Look, if you’d rather not talk about them, I’d understand. I just...wondered.”

After a minute, Jerod shook his head and brought her hand up to his lips. The gentle brush of his lips across the back of her fingers sent her heart racing. He wasn’t mad. *Oh, thank God!*

They continued their walk, but this time Jerod looked lost in thought. Viola bit her tongue, refusing to say anything that would screw something up again. *Patience*. She actually sighed with relief when he began to speak.

“My fourth master was an interesting fellow. A young boy from Rome. He was a very sweet and didn’t believe me for an entire week that I was a genie.”

Viola found herself smiling as they reached the shoreline. “I can appreciate his reluctance. What did he wish for?”

Jerod turned to face her and tucked a strand of her hair behind her ear. “All he wanted in life was food for his family every day, a home for his family, and for his father to die.”

“What?”

The ocean seemed to swallow up her surprised shout. What kind of *sweet* boy wished to murder someone? Jerod shrugged but didn’t answer until they began to walk along the water’s edge.

“His father was abusive. Made the little boy’s mother cry. Beat his sister until her bones broke. He was more than justified.”

Viola shuddered and tried to fathom living with that kind of abuse. Maybe the boy was justified. Even though she’d had a crappy relationship with her mother, she’d never

wish her dead. Mind you, her mother never beat her senseless, only ignored her while she drank.

“What did you do?” She wanted to cringe at her own morbid curiosity.

“Granted his wish, of course.”

She couldn’t believe it. Viola looked up at him, praying he wasn’t serious. “Just like that you killed a man?”

“No. Remember I said we genies live by a strict code. I cannot interfere directly when I grant a wish. I simply arranged for his father to be conscripted by the army. The rest happened of its own accord.”

“He was killed in battle,” she said as she shook her head.

Somehow the difference felt like semantics. Viola was happy when he changed the subject.

“Another master of mine, a woman, was trapped in a loveless relationship. She met another man and wanted to be with him. Her wishes were...interesting.”

“How so?” Despite the voice in the back of her head telling her this would end badly, Viola had to know.

“She wished to be with her one true love. Her second wish was to be free to be with him for the rest of her life, regardless of the consequences. She was arrogant. Beautiful, but arrogant. I granted her wish and she was swept away by her lover.”

That didn’t sound too bad. “What was her name?”

“Helen. You may have heard of her.” Jerod smiled.

He then began to laugh when she realized who he was talking about.

“Helen *of Troy*?”

“She did very well for herself, don’t you think?”

*No way.* “Wait, you only told me her first two wishes. What was her third?”

“To get her out of this mess.” Jerod winked at her.

Viola couldn’t help it, she started to giggle. Maybe she shouldn’t have had that third glass of wine.

“What?”

“God, I hope I didn’t start an international incident because of my wish.”

“Not with your first wish,” Jerod rubbed his thumb over her finger. “But you still have two more wishes with which to wreak havoc.”

“I’ll keep that in mind.”

And that had been the other thing on her mind over supper. What to do about her other wishes? With the full moon shining down on the water, casting silver ripples over the waves, she knew she couldn’t put it off much longer.

She’d never considered herself to be a selfish person. Now was the time to prove it. She stopped and faced the open water. Listening to the waves crashing on the shore reminded her of home. It reminded her that her life, despite some imperfections, was good. The water washed over her bare feet and everything felt right with her decision.

“About my wishes. Jerod, I’d like to make my second wish if I could.”

“Of course, Mistress.”

She smiled up at him. “You sounded very official there.”

He smiled back. “Wish granting is a very serious business.”

“Don’t I know it.”

She took a deep breath, and carefully worded her second wish. “I wish for my friend Beth to win this month’s millionaire charity draw.”

“Are you sure?” He gave her hand a squeeze.

“Positive. Jerod, please.”

He dramatically raised his hand, closed his eyes, and snapped his finger. “Granted.”

Viola let out a big whoop and kicked at an incoming wave, sending spray shooting up into the breeze which splashed her face. She laughed as she wiped the salt water away, feeling more alive and very thankful. When she turned to look at Jerod, she couldn’t read his expression.

“What?”

“You wished for your friend to get rich? Why?”

Her legs began to protest loudly, certainly not appreciating her burst of enthusiasm. She made her way over to dry sand and sat down.



“Every year, Beth buys a ticket. It’s a four-million-dollar prize, half of which goes to the ticket holder and the other half to their charity of choice. Beth has been a member of Habitat for Humanity for years.”

It then seemed to dawn on him. “The old resort.”

“Once I tell Beth about Tropics Haven, she’ll make sure the money goes into repairs and will save their home. God, she’ll be thrilled to be able to do it. Will probably get all dramatic and make an anonymous donation.”

Jerod joined her. He didn’t sit so much as float cross-legged down to the ground, and proceeded to ask her the one thing she didn’t have an answer for yet.

“That leaves only one wish. Do you know what you want it to be?”

“I don’t know,” she said and rested her chin against her knees. “I don’t have to make up my mind yet, do I?”

Jerod smiled as he reached out and tucked a piece of her hair behind her ear. “Of course not.”

The crashing waves filled the lull in their conversation. The memory of standing out on the waves the first day they’d met was still strong. He’d shown her two things she would never experience again—the sea and the sky. But sitting here quietly on the beach would be the memory she’d cherish the most.

“I should get you back to your room. Your legs are very sore and you should rest.”

She cocked her head to look at him.

“I thought I was hiding it okay.” She frowned when another cramp hit her calf muscle. “Why did I agree to walk down here again?”

He shrugged. “I did try to suggest we go back to your room, but I’ve learned you do your own thing, despite what others suggest. If you’d wanted to say no, you would have.”

*Do I?* She’d never considered herself to be overly assertive when it came to what she wanted. She usually took the backseat to others’ needs. It had worked for her most of her life. Maybe this was another change she had to thank Jerod for.

“I wanted to be here with you,” she said the words and realized there wasn’t anyone else she’d rather be with.

A tingle of arousal shimmered through her body. Jerod was everything she'd ever fantasized about in a man. So what if he would disappear after her third wish? She wasn't looking for a long-term relationship on this vacation anyway. All she was looking for was a way to get laid and Jerod went well beyond her modest requirements. She'd just have to ignore the yelling of her heart and everything would be fine.

If only she could get rid of his pants.

Jerod's gaze searched her face. *God, I wish I knew what he was thinking right now. Maybe he's comparing me to his previous masters.* She smiled nervously. Hard to compete with Helen of Troy.

In that moment Jerod swayed toward her and she thought for a split second he was going to kiss her. His eyes shone in the moonlight, glowing crystal blue. The heat from his body pulled at her, beckoning her closer. The air around them simmered with electricity that tickled her skin. She could almost feel what he was thinking.

He rose onto his knees and slid one arm under her legs and one arm behind her back. As if she weighed only an ounce, he lifted her into his arms. Viola sucked in a startled gasp as her arms flew around his neck for balance.

"What are you doing?"

"I need to get you back. You won't be able to move in the morning if I make you walk anymore."

"What, we're not going to poof back there?" she asked, more than a bit surprised.

"I thought you might enjoy taking the long way."

If it meant she got to keep her body pressed hard against his, then hell yeah! Her body reacted to the close intimacy. The dampness between her legs grew and her breasts ached to be touched. He was so strong, more so than any man she'd ever met before, which would stand to reason as he was a genie.

"Sometimes I forget who you are," she whispered against his shoulder.

"Sometimes I forget who you are too."

"And what am I?"

He tightened his grip on her for a fraction of a second before relaxing again. "You

are my mistress. I must grant your wishes.”

“You don’t seem very happy about that.” She fingered the collar of his shirt, her fingertips caressing the light sprinkling of hair underneath.

His mouth brushed the top of her head and she heard him breathe in deep.

“On the contrary. You’re the most...stimulating master I’ve ever had. That’s why I think you might be ready for lesson four.”

Viola’s mouth dried and she found she couldn’t talk. It was just as well he carried her the rest of the way to the resort in silence. Instead of walking into the front of the building like they normally did, Jerod carried her around to the back. When they stood directly underneath her window, he looked down at her.

“Hold on.”

She barely had a chance to tighten her grip when he began to rise up into the air, floating higher and higher. The landscape began to spread out, leaving a breathtaking view of the ocean, the lights of the hotel reflecting off the dark waves. Music and laughter fill the air, surrounding them, making Viola feel more than a little lightheaded. They kept going up until she thought they would float away. Instead, they reached her terrace. He adjusted her in his arms, pulling her closer to his chest so she could revel in the contrast between his body heat and the cool ocean breeze.

“This is the second most beautiful sight in the world,” he said, a note of awe in his voice.

After a moment, he turned around and gently set her on the balcony, making sure she was safely down before he joined her by walking through the metal bars of the railing. The doors to her bedroom opened on their own, allowing them access to the room.

Walking in, Viola noticed the candles magically appear as they had the night before. One by one, their wicks ignited, bringing the room to life with a soft glow. Viola watched Jerod walk around the room, lost in thought. When he stopped, his eyes locked on hers.

“This is the most important of our lessons. I am going to show you exactly what Bill desires in a woman. Are you ready for that?”

*Yes!* Her mind raced through the possibilities of what lesson six entailed. She

suddenly found it hard to breathe and she had to fight her body's restlessness. Her hands weren't the only part of her body that grew damp. She was ready for this.

*No, I'm not!* Her heart pounded in her chest so hard she thought she was going to die. She waited, watching him, needing to somehow magically know that this was the right thing to do. Because as much as she wanted to delude herself, she couldn't. This night had nothing to do with Bill and everything to do with wanting, needing Jerod.

*God, when did things get so damned complicated?*

"Viola?" he asked softly, his voice tinted with a note of concern.

"Yes?"

"Do you trust me?"

For the first time since she'd met him, Jerod didn't sound confident. Maybe he wasn't sure what she would say. There was something humbling in knowing that he wasn't omnipotent. Not that he had to worry, because it was an easy answer for her.

"Of course I do. You promised you would never hurt me. Remember?"

He nodded, a slow smile crossing his lips. "And I meant it. The first thing we need to do then is help your sore legs."

"My...Bill would be concerned about my legs?"

With great sincerity, Jerod nodded. He pushed the sleeves of his shirt up, exposing more of his beautiful, tanned skin. The muscles in his forearms flexed as he moved, catching and holding her attention for a moment before she returned her gaze to his eyes.

"*Bill* would be very concerned. In fact he would want to help by personally giving them a massage."

Jerod snapped his fingers and a large, cushioned table appeared in the middle of the room. Along the side, there was a wooden sideboard that held an assortment of colored bottles. With another snap, Viola was naked, wrapped only in a terry-cloth bathrobe. She squeaked her surprise, but clamped a hand over her mouth. She really had to stop doing that.

"Bill would do that, eh?"

He chuckled. "Call it creative license. Your massage awaits, Mistress." He waved his

hand in a flourish over the table, before offering it up to her.

Viola couldn't stop the blush that now warmed her face. *Wimp!* She'd been lusting after Jerod a few minutes ago. This was it! Her chance to let loose and prove she was as sexy in real life as she was in her fantasy world. Screw the fact that he wasn't a real man.

*Check that.* Viola looked him over. Nope, there was no mistaking that Jerod was very much a man. He just had a few extra perks.

After taking a deep breath, she placed her hand in his and climbed onto the table. Sitting, she once again examined his spectacular chest. If he wasn't real, she didn't want to wake up from this fantasy.

"Lay back, Mistress. Please tell me if I make you uncomfortable in any way."

She stretched out to her full length, letting her muscles pull against the stiffness. She closed her eyes and tried to relax. The sound of the cork of one of the bottles being popped made her start a little. She adjusted her head, squeezed her eyes tight for a second, before making another attempt to relax. When his hands touched her knee, she jumped again.

"What am I going to do with you? *Bill* will never be able to see your inner beauty if you keep moving around like this."

"I'm trying." She sighed. *Chill, Viola, it's only Jerod.*

He began again. This time she concentrated on his slow, steady movements. His strong fingers worked the rose-scented oil into her skin. He moved from her knee, down her leg to her shin, before sliding his hand around to her calf, where he massaged the muscle. Over and over, he continued on the same path, until she felt the pain begin to recede.

A moan escaped her lips when he continued down lower and began to rub her feet with his firm touch.

"If *Bill* rubs my feet half as well as you, I'll forever be in his debt."

"I have an advantage that our friend *Bill* is lacking."

"Hmm?"

"I'm magical."

She looked up at him, eyebrows raised, but he looked earnestly back at her. Of course he'd have an advantage because of the magic. Viola let her head fall back against the table.

"Hardly seems fair for me to compare him to you then. He'll never meet my expectations."

Jerod chuckled and flashed over to the other side of the table. His hands began the same path on her leg as they had on her other. This time he spent a little extra time on her calf. Each time he returned to the top of the muscle, his fingers would brush the sensitive spot of skin behind her knee.

Viola twitched and giggled.

"You're trying to tickle me."

"I would never dream of doing such a thing. But Bill, well, he's a bit of a prankster. You'll have to be on the look out for his tricks."

And then he winked at her.

She laughed and let her eyes fall close again. He spent a little longer on the second foot, which was great, because she'd hurt it during one of the dances earlier. She'd tried not to let on that her ankle was sore, but he'd obviously known. He seemed to know all the important things. Like how to give a kick-ass foot rub.

"Roll over," he issued the soft command.

Viola did and turned her head so she faced him. This time, she kept her eyes open so she could catch glimpses of him as he worked. From this position, he was able to work on her calves easier. He poured more oil onto his hands and worked it into her skin in long, smooth strokes.

Each time he pushed the oil up, his hands would inch closer and closer to her thighs. Almost to the place she really wanted him to touch. Her body reacted to his firm caress. Her already-damp pussy throbbed with desire. The urge to buck her hips forward, press her clit against the table was overwhelming. When she began to squirm, Viola felt Jerod start to pull back. *Shit!*

"You know, my neck is a little sore too," she said quickly. "It would be great if you

could rub it a little.”

Jerod chuckled, the low, rich sound sending a torrent of goosebumps racing across her skin. He leaned in and spoke next to her ear, his hot breath teasing her skin.

“Your Bill likes to be in charge. It might be best if you pout a little if you want him to do something you want. But as I am here to teach you, I’ll let that one error slip by.”

In a blink, he was standing by her head, the bottle of oil in his hands. Jerod looked down and made a tscking sound.

“This won’t work if I can’t reach your neck. You’ll have to loosen the robe if you’d like your neck rubbed.”

Viola propped her upper body on her elbow so she could look up into his face. Two could play this game. She knew he would be able to see the tops of her breasts if she loosened the robe. And while she wanted him to see her, teasing him held a lot more enjoyment at the moment.

“That hardly seems fair.” She made her eyes wide and pouted with her bottom lip sticking out a little bit. “If I have to take my top off, why do you get to keep your shirt on?”

This time, he grinned. “Ah, well played. Bill would be hard pressed to argue that point. Very well.”

Jerod moved, about to snap his fingers.

“Wait.”

He frowned, but didn’t continue. Viola ran her tongue over her bottom lip.

“I want to watch you take it off.” Her voice sounded husky, sexy as she said it. Very unlike the old Viola.

Jerod still frowned at her. She didn’t want to break the spell they both seemed to be under. So she added, “Bill wouldn’t like me asking that?”

And with that, he seemed to be at ease again.

“Of course he would. Especially since you pouted so nicely.”

His hand moved to his shirt and slowly, one by one, popped each button out of its hole, revealing inch after inch of his olive skin. His muscles rippled as he stripped,

teasing her as he exposed more and more of his chest. When he finally peeled the shirt off and let it fall to the floor with a muffled whoosh, Viola thought she would melt through the table. He moved around to stand at the head of it, his groin mere inches from her face. Viola had a sudden flash of what she'd like to do with his cock once she got his pants off. With mental control she didn't know she had, Viola pushed the image away. Jerod didn't say anything, except to cock one of his eyebrows in a silent question.

Instead she reached down and loosened the knot that held the front of her robe together. She made sure he couldn't really see anything, but that he got enough of an eye full to make things interesting. She lay flat on the table, resting her cheek on her hands. She could feel her heartbeat against the table and hoped she could keep it together long enough to enjoy her massage.

Viola felt his fingers tug the top of her robe down, exposing her neck and upper back. Instead of pouring the oil into his hands, this time he drizzled it directly onto her skin. The warmth felt wonderful as the thick liquid rolled across her skin.

Jerod began to work the muscles of her neck and shoulders. Viola could feel the tension bleeding out of her with every pass over her skin. But she didn't give in to the bliss of her relaxed state, or to the desire to close her eyes and let her brain drift away. She kept her gaze firmly fixated on him.

With his shirt off, she could watch each of his muscles move as he rubbed her. She wanted to touch him, to rub oil over his body, to get close to him. Her fingers tingled at the thought of caressing his chest, arms, and back. Finally, she gave in to temptation, slid her hand out from under her cheek, and touched his side.

Jerod instantly stopped moving. She'd barely made contact, the briefest of touches. She looked up at him and she could see the struggle for control on his face, in every strained muscle in his body for that matter.

She didn't want control.

She wanted bold. She *felt* bold. For the first time in her life, Viola Anne White wanted to live on the edge and *take* what she wanted. She only needed to figure out how to convince him to do the same. She needed to take some of the advice she'd given her



customers over the years. Live life on the edge and don't look back.

Instead of words, Viola acted. She pushed her body up so she could sit her ass on her heels. Propped up this way, she loosened her bathrobe and lay back down on the table, this time on her back.

"Do you think Bill would mind if I got him to give me a full-body massage?"

She knew her nipples were hard, the tight buds rubbed into a frenzy by the robe. This time she did close her eyes, not wanting to see his face, just in case he rejected her. She couldn't expect to lose all her old habits. Deep, calming breaths were the only things that got her through the next few seconds of waiting. But when he didn't respond, she had no choice. She opened her eyes and looked back at him.

"Jerod?"

The muscle in his jaw was jumping, and his hands were balled at his sides. She was about to tell him not to bother, when he let out a harsh sigh.

"No." His voice sounded raw as he spoke. "Bill wouldn't mind at all. Lie back."

When his hands touched her this time, Viola felt a charge pass between them. A small, electric current that sent her senses into overload. She could smell his exotic scent, that sweet mixture of cloves and musk that she could only describe as Jerod. He bent his body over her head each time he slid the oil down her shoulders and arms. His muscles and tendons rippled with the steady back and forth movement. His warmth caressed her skin, lapping over her like the ocean waves.

At last, he moved to where she wanted his touch. He started at her shoulders again, but this time he massaged a path that went over her chest until his hands covered her breasts. With that first contact, Viola moaned. The pressure of his hands on her nipples was too much and not enough. Repeatedly, he caressed her skin, her body coming to life with every touch.

She needed him. *Badly.*

This time when he tried to pull back, she reached up and captured his head with her hands. She lay there, looking upside down at him, her lips only an inch from his. Tentatively, she brought her mouth to his and brushed her lips against his. When she did,

she felt his hands squeeze her breasts, sliding up to rub her nipples between his fingers. After a moment, he opened his mouth, their kiss deepening but still slow. Viola felt alive, cherished. When he pulled back, breaking contact, she felt like she was soaring.

"I would...I want to..." The words weren't forming a sentence, her brain gone to mush.

"You want to...practice?"

She nodded. In a blink, Jerod was on his hands and knees on top of her, this time facing her.

"I doubt Bill can do that," she said and smiled.

"There are a lot of things Bill can't do. But he would certainly do this."

Jerod bent his head and kissed her, but not like before. Gone was the gentleness, replaced with a demanding need that pushed them both to the edge of control. Viola wrapped her hands around his head and pulled him close so her naked breasts could rub against his chest. His knee moved between her legs and his hands entwined in her hair.

His lips were demanding and she opened up for him, letting him taste her. His scent seemed to be everywhere—on her skin, in the air—until she couldn't remember what the scent of the air was like without it. She caressed his tongue with hers, sucking his bottom lip, only to come back and demand a kiss of her own.

When he pulled back, they were both panting hard. His eyes had turned a color she didn't have a name for. It was the most striking blue she'd ever seen.

"Bill would be very happy right now. He's wanted this for a while." His words came out in between pants.

At the sound of Bill's name, Viola cringed. *To hell with Bill.*

"But what about you?" she asked him through the tightness in her throat.

He didn't answer.

She knew this was right, but more than that, she needed him. He'd shown her there was more to her than what she'd ever suspected. She was a sexy, beautiful woman who could take what she wanted. And right now, she wanted Jerod.

Reaching up, she touched his cheek. "I don't care about Bill right now. I don't care

about the game. Do you want this? Do you want me?"

## Chapter Seven

Viola couldn't breathe. Jerod seemed to be doing enough panting for the both of them at the moment though. He looked torn, confused, and very unsure of himself.

"This isn't a game. It's your wish. I'm doing what you asked me to do. What I want doesn't matter." His voice sounded strained and he flexed his fingers, which were wrapped in her hair.

"I know this isn't a game. But you're wrong. It does matter what you want. To me at least."

His head dipped an inch toward her, but he held himself back. Viola bucked up and ground her hips against his body, now slick with sweat. She smiled when he groaned at the contact.

"Do you want me?" she asked again and prayed. *Please, dear Lord in heaven, let him say yes.*

Something in her voice must have struck a cord, because he let out a soft growl as his body shuddered. Jerod lowered his face to hers until there was only a breath between them.

"Yes," he said, his voice as soft as a sigh.

His lips were on her now, kissing and tasting every inch of her. Her bathrobe blinked away and she was left naked under him. Not wanting to lose the privilege of stripping him, she managed to find the button that held his pants together and pulled it open. God, his body was a lesson in contrasts. Hard muscles under soft, warm skin. She ran her hands everywhere, drinking in the touch and smell of him.

Jerod moaned again and nipped her neck. She pulled the opening of his pants wide and moved her hands to explore his hidden flesh underneath. Her fingers touched the tip of his cock and he flinched at the contact. His shaft twitched in her hand, pulsing heat and

the promise of pleasure.

“I can get rid of those for you,” he whispered against her ear.

“No, I want to do it. Sit back.”

He protested by licking her neck. The desire to see him naked was almost over taken by the need to stay right where he was and have him continue doing what he was doing. She’d waited too long to do this for him, for both of them, and she wanted it to be perfect.

She shoved against his shoulders until he slid off the table and stood beside her. She looked down for a second at her own naked body, but for the first time in her life she didn’t feel self-conscious. She wasn’t perfect, but she didn’t care.

Viola pulled herself over so her ass rested close to the edge and her legs dangled over the edge of the table. She reached out and let her fingers continue their exploration of his body. She touched his chest, drawing a line over each muscle. She circled his nipple, making sure to flick it with her fingertip as she went. Her second hand joined the first and she ran them down over his stomach, teasing the hair that made a trail down to the place she wanted to see.

“So, how human are you?” she teased him as she lightly scratched her nails just below his waistband.

He placed his hands on his hips and smiled at her. “Why don’t you find out?”

She was giddy, drunk on the excitement of the moment. Viola stood and pushed her hands into his pants, moving them so she could cup his ass. He was all muscle, his skin smooth under her touch. With most of her forearms now inside his pants, the loose waistband couldn’t hold on and his pants fell to the floor in a heap. They only stayed there a moment before they magically disappeared.

Viola was far past noticing where the pants went. She was focused on the very naked genie standing before her.

“Oh...my,” she said in a breathless voice.

“Does my mistress approve?”

His cock stood thick and stiff at attention and Viola’s nerves tingled as she sized him up. *Big, God he was so big.* Now was not the time to question her limited sexual

experience. She needed to do something. She curled her fingers into his skin and looked him in the eyes.

“I don’t...tell me what I should do?”

Jerod’s smug expression softened. “Have you never been with a man before?”

“Of course I have, but I didn’t really have to do very much and it wasn’t the best experience,” she said, knowing her face was beet red by now. “My first time was really bad, and he kind of laughed at me when I didn’t know what a blowjob was. I just wasn’t built to be a seductress, I guess. So I normally just, you know, push guys away before I get to this point. Easier.”

“How could any man treat you like that?” Jerod spoke in soft tones as his hand balled into a fist at his side.

She really didn’t need him getting defensive on her behalf. Right then, she wanted something far different from him. Reaching up, Viola ran her finger down the middle of his chest, not quite able to meet his eyes. “Can you show me? Please?”

Lifting her chin with his finger, he searched her face and smiled his little half grin.

“What Bill would like?”

“Yes!” she said a little too excitedly. “As you can see, I wasn’t kidding about the lesson part.”

Taking her head in his hands, he kissed her deeply on the lips. He didn’t release her when she thought he would. On and on he continued, until she couldn’t think. Her body was on fire for him, wanting him to touch her, do something. Anything!

She had to pull back. The overwhelming desire to take him in her mouth, to taste him, struck her. He read her mind, or her body language, because he moved to sit on the table.

Panting, she took a single step away from him before she dropped to her knees. The table put him at the right height so that she wouldn’t have to strain. His cock stood in front of her now, the shaft long and thick. She leaned in and only hesitated for a second before she darted her tongue out and tasted him. Tracing a path up his length, she avoided the head of his cock, wanting to prolong his sensual torture.

Jerod moaned and his shaft twitched. Again she repeated the motion, again with the same result. The third time she stopped at his head and slowly licked around it. He was hot and she could feel his blood pulsing under her.

“Bill would approve,” he croaked.

“Do you?” she asked, feeling shy than she had in years.

“I’ll cast a curse on you if you stop.”

Chuckling, she took his tip into her mouth again. She’d never believed she could feel so powerful. But she knew Jerod was completely under her spell. She was in control, giving the pleasure, but also receiving. She enjoyed the thrill, the experience of bringing an all-powerful genie to his knees. At that moment, she knew she was the sexiest woman on the planet.

Her fingers began to explore his body as well. She teased his muscular thighs with her nails. Took his balls in her hand and played with them. She felt them pull tight against his body, the skin that encased them cool. At the same time, his hand began to caress her hair, encouraging her as she worked his body.

“Bill won’t survive you,” he said with a moan.

Viola smiled and rewarded him by licking the length of his shaft again.

“I’ve had a good teacher.”

She had time for one final lick before she felt her body begin to float off the ground. Unlike the other times Jerod had used his magic on her, she didn’t scream. It somehow felt natural to be several feet off the floor. Before she could stop what was happening though, she’d floated out of the range of his cock and was now looking at his chest. When he looked down at her, she made sure to give him her best pout.

“Didn’t your mother ever teach you to take turns?”

This time she giggled. “I was an only child.”

“That explains much. Lie back. You won’t fall.”

She didn’t hesitate and stretched out her sore legs so her entire body floated horizontally. The sensation was very odd, but completely liberating at the same time. Very much like floating in space, she imagined.

When Jerod stood up, he easily walked between her legs, his stomach pushing against her pussy. Viola sucked in a breath, but didn't try to get away. This is what she wanted. What she'd been dreaming about for the past two days. She was about to let her mind go when a thought struck her.

"Umm, do I need to worry about..."

Jerod raised an eyebrow.

Viola felt her face heat. "You know...protection. Condoms?"

That got a smile from him. "No. I'm not capable of reproducing, or carrying disease."

"Oh, that's good."

"Yes, it is."

He ran his hands up the length of her thighs, his thumbs grazing the insides as he went. When he couldn't get any closer, she felt her body rise up, floating higher in the air. His face was now between her legs and she felt him kiss her inner thigh, only a few inches from her clit.

Her body stiffened. A thrill ran through her, starting at her clit to move rapidly into her womb. Shit, he hadn't even touched her yet. With gentle prodding from him, she spread her legs wide, giving him full access to her.

Jerod wet a finger in his mouth and she watched as he moistened her pubic hair, moving it away from her now engorged and sensitive bud. She couldn't breathe. Her body tightened, began to shake. He wet his thumb this time and she watched as he ran it over her clit and brushed the opening to her pussy.

The contact was shocking, but brief. She closed her eyes and waited, praying he wouldn't leave her like that. She wasn't disappointed. The steady petting of his fingers was soon replaced with the heat of Jerod's mouth. Viola groaned and dug her fingers into his silken hair as he licked around her labia, sucking and teasing without touching the one spot she wanted him to. She urged him closer, trying to move her hips, directing his mouth where she wanted it to go.

Finally, he showed her mercy. When his tongue licked her clit, briefly caressing the



swollen flesh, she cried out. She was so horny, she knew this wasn't going to last long. He didn't increase his tempo, but kept the rhythm slow and even. Her body adjusted to the intensity of the pleasure, her hips began to move to the silent beat Jerod pulled from her. The control she'd had only moments ago silently passed to him as he controlled her body. He was now the master.

She rubbed small circles against his head, pulling him even closer to her. He sucked her clit into his mouth, increasing the pressure, increasing the pleasure. She cried out again and her body began to quiver. Close, she was so close.

Jerod must have sensed it. He slid a finger deep into her, thrusting it inside, ramping up the rhythm of her pleasure. She shook violently, but still not enough to push her over into bliss. He added a second finger, then a third, pumping into her madly as he lapped and sucked her clit.

The orgasm slammed into her. Viola screamed her pleasure into the dark as she clutched his head, desperate to hold on to anything. It didn't stop. Jerod didn't stop. He drove her on and on, pushing her orgasm higher and higher. She held onto him until she couldn't take any more and finally pushed him away.

"Too much," she managed to say.

He gave her one final kiss before he pulled himself up and covered her body with his. Viola wrapped her arms around his and had to fight back the urge to cry.

She couldn't talk, instead she kissed him. She poured her heart into that kiss. She licked and tasted him. Tried to imprint his spirit onto hers. When he pulled back, she moaned in protest.

"Please, Jerod. I need you."

He didn't look away from her. She touched his smooth cheek, caressing it. Jerod reached down and hooked the back of her knee, pulling it up. She hooked her leg around his back. She felt the tip of his cock press against her wet, open pussy. Viola watched the expression on his face, looking for a sign that he too felt this strange connection.

"So you know..." he swallowed hard, "...I can keep this up for as long as you need me to."

*Sweet, merciful God in heaven.* “Now, please.”

He pushed forward, her slick passage spreading to accommodate his size. She felt her eyes go wide as her entire body began to tingle. When he was finally all the way inside, he began his slow retreat. The constant, steady advance and retreat stoked her desire again. He moved inside her, maintaining his slow and smooth pace until she felt the return of the sensual tension, the build-up of another orgasm.

Viola began to buck against him. She felt the pressure increase, the need to grind against him, to find her release. But he didn't speed up. She began to claw at his back, suck on his earlobe, do everything she could think of. It didn't seem to matter, he continued on, ignoring her silent pleas.

“Jerod!”

He gave a throaty laugh against her neck. “I'm in control, Mistress. Me.”

“Damn genie.”

He finally quickened his pace, which Viola approved of by clenching her legs around his back. She met each of his thrusts, throwing in a little grind of her own when she did. He seemed to like it, and showed his appreciation by licking her earlobe.

Jerod stopped and sat back. Somewhere along the way she'd forgotten she was floating in midair, and she gasped when it looked like he sat down on an invisible chair. He pulled Viola on top of him, letting her legs straddle his hips. They dangled without touching the floor.

“Now you control things,” Jerod managed to say in between pants.

She rose up and placed her body at the tip of his shaft and impaled herself on him in one smooth, downward stroke. Facing her, he had better access to her breasts. As Viola began to drive them closer to release by grinding her clit hard against him, Jerod captured one of her breasts with his mouth and sucked her nipple. Each flick of his tongue felt like it was connected directly to her clit. She increased her tempo, needing to reach this end together.

“Come with me,” she said, clutching his arms with her hands.

She pulled his face from her breast and locked him in a kiss. She was wild, her brain

shut down and the rest of her body focused solely on the increasing pleasure. So close to the top. She could barely breathe, and she felt a sheen of sweat cover her body. She wasn't going to make it.

Jerod pulled away from her kiss, wet his thumb, and reached between them. When he touched her clit, Viola screamed. Her second orgasm exploded through her body. It would have faded quickly, but she felt Jerod stiffen under her. He cried out and began to slam into her as he pulled her down onto him with his hands. She clutched his shoulders as she felt another wave of her orgasm flood her. It didn't seem to stop. The pleasure touched every part of her body and seemed to reach deeper. It was everything, her entire world condensed into this single, perfect moment.

When their bodies finally came to rest, Viola couldn't think. Breathing was her only focus. Keep the air coming into her body so she wouldn't lose consciousness. Her head fell forward and rested on his shoulder. She felt him wrap his arms around her back and relaxed under his touch.

"You are amazing," he cooed in her ear.

She tried to form a response, but the words came out as a grunt. A very unladylike grunt at that.

"Rest. There's time for talk later."

*Who am I to argue with a genie?*

Viola closed her eyes. The last thing she remembered was their bodies magically being covered by a blanket as they touched the ground.

She wasn't sure how long she'd slept when she managed to pull her eyes open once again. Jerod was still wrapped around her and she snuggled into his warmth.

"I was getting worried," he teased and brushed a piece of her hair away.

"That was amazing."

"So were you."

She looked up at him and smiled. "I wasn't too bad, was I?"

"An expert lover. Bill is a lucky human."

She watched a myriad of emotions flash across his face as he clearly struggled with the reality of the situation. She was human and he wasn't. Despite the intensity of their short relationship, nothing would ever come of it. They came from two separate worlds—literally. Viola may have been able to deal with this if he'd been happy. Except right now he looked so damned lonely. She hated that look. One she'd seen reflected back at her from the mirror more times than she could count.

At that exact moment, Viola's heart broke.

She had to do something. This wasn't right. Jerod had done so much for her, helped her discover who she was, all in such a short period of time. She couldn't simply make her final wish and send him on his way. She'd grown to care about him too much.

She may have even fallen a little bit in love with him.

"How did you become a genie?"

He shifted to the side a bit so he could get a better look at her face.

"What?"

"How did you become a genie? Were you born this way? Do you have genie parents? Go to genie school? What?"

Jerod seemed to search her face, looking for something. An answer perhaps. But he didn't give her what she was looking for.

"It's not something I talk about. But no, I wasn't born this way. I was a human for thirty-four years before." He shrugged. "Before this."

He snapped his fingers and the candle stubs disappeared, only to be replaced by fresh ones. "But being a genie does have its advantages."

"Do you miss it? Being human, I mean?"

He untangled his arm from around her and pushed up to sit beside her.

"Why do you want to know?"

He didn't sound defensive, more confused. As if no one had been curious about who he was, or who he'd been before now.

"I don't know. I've gotten used to having you around. I'm curious." When he still didn't answer, she prodded him again, bumping up lightly against him. "Well?"

Jerod looked out the window. The room stilled, even the ocean waves didn't seem as loud. Everything was waiting to hear what he'd say.

"Sometimes. It's been so long now, my memories have faded. More the remnant of feelings." His voice was very soft, but she still heard him.

Viola felt the tears gather behind her eyes. *He sounds so lonely.* She willed them back, not wanting to risk his retreat to his bottle.

"Is there nothing you can do?" She tried to keep her voice light.

"It's not a disease. It's who I am. I've been a genie for three-thousand years. I wouldn't know what to do if I became human again."

"Sorry."

She felt like a jerk. Or a child. *Typical Viola not able to see the bigger picture.*

Jerod placed a gentle kiss on her forehead. "On the subject of your wishes, I believe I've taught you everything you need to know to win your Bill over."

Viola couldn't believe it. "What? No, there has to be more than that."

She couldn't lose him now. She wasn't ready to move on and try this on Bill. God, she wasn't sure if she even *wanted* Bill any more. And that thought was scarier than anything else.

He snapped his fingers and Viola found herself now comfortably resting in her bed. He'd even taken care to dress her in her pajamas.

"I should go. You need your rest."

"You don't have to. Maybe we can figure out a way that you can stay around." But as soon as she said the words, she realized it was more than that.

He needed to go, he couldn't stay with her like a date, or God forbid, a boyfriend. They didn't have that type of relationship. They didn't *have* a relationship at all. Viola's throat tightened, making it hard to swallow.

Jerod smiled and in a blink he wore the same genie outfit he'd had on the day they'd met.

"That is how these things go. You are the mistress, but I am bound to my position. I've granted your first two wishes. In the morning, you should consider asking for your

final one.”

And then he was gone.

## Chapter Eight

Viola didn't sleep that night, so as the sun peeked up from behind the horizon, she climbed out of bed to watch dawn break on the third day of her vacation. The brilliant pinks and oranges that filled the sky tried to brighten her spirits, but they couldn't.

Three days. That's it, that's all she'd known him. And he wasn't even a man. Though, that wasn't necessarily a negative. She'd started this whole wish thing with the intention of learning how to win the heart of a man. But instead she lost hers to a genie.

Fate had a strange sense of humor.

Her body still tingled with the aftereffects of their lovemaking. Whether it was from the sex or the magic, she wasn't sure. At this point, it didn't really matter. It was the single most amazing night of her life. Shit, she'd made love three feet in the air!

She doubted Bill could compete with that one.

Mentally, she kicked her own ass for even thinking about Bill. This wasn't about her anymore. Jerod was lonely and she had to do something to help him.

The phone began to ring. *Who the hell could be calling her?*

"Hello?"

Viola yanked the receiver away when, on the other end, an earth-shattering scream let loose.

"Beth?"

"Viola! You'll never guess, I mean you won't believe, I never thought it was possible, but then they called me and I just couldn't believe it!"

"Slow...down. I can barely understand you. What's wrong?"

"Nothing." She heard Beth take a huge breath on the other end. "I won the lottery!"

Viola's heart began to race. "Oh my fucking God, no shit! Congratulations!"

It had worked. Her second wish came true. *Thank you, Jerod!*

“Oh hon, we are both quitting and I’m paying off your mortgage. Then we’re going on a kick-ass trip.”

She had to fight not to get caught up in her friend’s excitement, contagious as it was. “Slow down there, sparky. How much did you win?”

“Two...million...dollars,” Beth squealed again, and this time she was joined by barking.

“Is that my William?” Viola asked, suddenly missing her dog. She missed her life when things were simple. And boring. But at least boring made it easy to figure out her life.

“He sure misses you. Been sulking around my place since I picked him up.”

“I’ll have to buy the good treats when I get home. Listen, was this through that charity lottery? Where half goes to a cause of your choosing?”

“Yeah, why?”

Viola sat down and gave Beth as many details as she could regarding Tropics Haven resort and the people who lived there. She closed her eyes and hoped Beth would see things the way she did.

“How did you find this place?” Beth sounded completely baffled.

“It was a total accident, to be honest. If you could just see them, Beth, I know you’d want to help.”

“Of course I’d want to help! Why the hell do you think I’ve been playing this lottery anyway? It sounds like a perfect place to make a donation. I’ll call Habitat and see what I can arrange for them.”

Viola jumped up and cheered. “You are the absolute best human being on the face of the planet. At least the best I know.”

“It’s just good luck you came across that place. The timing is creepy.”

She smiled. “Almost like magic.”

There was a pause on the other end. “How are you doing down there all by yourself? I’ve been worried about you. You know, I can now afford to fly down and join you if you want.”



If it weren't for Beth's excitement rubbing off on her, Viola probably wouldn't have said anything to her. She wasn't sure if Jerod was listening, so she closed the balcony door with her foot and whispered.

"I took your advice."

"What advice, I didn't..." There was a long pause. "Oh shit! You got laid?" Beth's voice raised three octaves.

"Shhh, he'll hear you."

"He's there now? Shit, you need to call me back! I need details. Is he cute?"

Viola laughed.

"Oh you're laughing. That's good. Very, *very* good. This has to be the best week in the recorded history of humanity."

"It's one for the record books, that's for sure." And if Viola had her way, she was going to make things even better.

"Okay, I'm going to let you go for now. But you call me the second he leaves. And take a picture of him! I want to be able to drool along with you when you get back."

She hung up with Beth and, still grinning, she quietly slipped into some shorts and a T-shirt, grabbed her flip-flops and headed out the door. A quiet walk down the beach would help clear her mind. It was early enough that there were only a few joggers out enjoying the warm ocean breeze. Viola kicked off her shoes and sighed when the sand squished between her toes. Careful not to push her aching muscles too hard, she made her way down to the shoreline.

*What the hell was she going to do?* Jerod wanted her to make a decision about her third wish this morning. She didn't think wishing to have a relationship with a genie was something he'd necessarily go for. If that's what she really wanted after all. She kicked at a crumbling sandcastle and stopped to watch the waves crash onto the shore.

Viola hated that she did this when things moved too fast. Putting on the brakes to save herself the grief. But this was different. He wasn't a real man. Check that, he was most definitely a man, but not the sort who would stick around and make pancakes after a night of movies, wine and great sex.

Viola groaned and ran her hands over her face. She had a crush on a genie. *Great.*

"I wasn't expecting to see you out of bed so early," Jerod said as he stepped beside her.

He was wearing the same black pants as before, but instead of a white shirt, he now had on a light blue one. She tore her gaze away from him and shrugged at the ocean.

"Beth gave me a wakeup call. She won the lottery."

"Excellent. You should be thrilled. Your second wish came true."

Viola continued to walk down the beach, letting the ocean water wash over her feet. Jerod fell silently into step beside her.

"I am really happy for Beth and for the people at the old resort."

"But?"

She looked at him and smiled. He was so handsome and kind. Why couldn't she meet guys like this in real life? Because this trip was so far from her real life she might as well be on Mars.

"No buts. Beth is really happy and I'm happy for her. She wants me to quit my job and travel the world with her. But—"

"See, I knew there was a but."

"*But* I still feel like my own life is going down a path I don't want to be on."

Jerod took her by the hand and stopped walking. He ran his thumb across the underside of her wrist over and over, the motion soothing.

"You still have your final wish. Anything you want. Anything at all and it's yours. Money, wealth..."

"Happiness?"

"A single wish away." Jerod smiled, but it didn't quite reach his eyes.

Viola wanted to throw her arms around him and never let go, even though she knew it wasn't possible. She sighed and looked back up the beach toward the resort. "We should get back."

Jerod shook his head, "I don't think so. You're far too serious this morning."

She fought the urge to smack him. "That's not my fault. I'm having wish stress."

“Then we don’t have any choice. It’s time for another lesson.” He placed his hands on his hips and grinned.

“What, now? I thought you said I was done?” Her stomach growled loudly. “Can’t it wait?”

“No. I can’t believe I almost left this out of your curriculum. I’ll look after your tummy along the way. Trust me, this is a critical lesson that will be of great use to you.”

Viola couldn’t stop the smile that spread onto her face. “Okay, I’ll bite. What’s the lesson about?”

“Learning how to explore your options,” he said and began to tug her along the beach. “Your problem is you worry so much about other people, you forget to concentrate on yourself.”

“Are you forgetting wish number one? Slow down will you!”

Without missing a beat, Jerod turned and scooped Viola up in his arms. She let out a squeal that immediately turned into a giggle as she wrapped her arms around his neck. This constant contact wasn’t helping deter her infatuation.

“You’re crazy.”

“You walk slow. And I never forget.”

“Where are you taking me?” She stopped struggling and let her body relax into his arms. Her head fit nicely against his shoulder. “I hope there’s food there.”

“Is Bill aware of your appetite?” he said in a mock-serious tone, which he followed by a low chuckle.

“He’ll find out soon enough.”

After a few minutes, Jerod set her down in front of a large, round hut on the beach. The thatched roof and wooden steps looked to be in immaculate shape, even though it appeared to be abandoned.

“I take it this isn’t normally here?” she asked and bumped her shoulder against his.

He shrugged. “Borrowed it from another location on the island. It won’t be missed.”

Viola wandered up and peeked into the window. The room was immaculately furnished with bamboo and glass tables and what looked to be handcrafted rugs on a

hardwood floor. She couldn't see anything else.

"Oh, I think someone will definitely miss this place."

"The door is open," Jerod said, leaning over the small veranda railing. "Come take a look."

The sand was hot, but Viola didn't bother to slip on her flip-flops, instead making a mad dash for the door. The hut was beautiful! And air-conditioned, which really didn't strike her as being part of the natural décor of a hut. Viola couldn't help the feeling she'd been here before.

"Like something out of a dream," she muttered to herself.

"Please have a seat, Mistress." Jerod bowed deep, sweeping his arm to indicate a round cushion on the floor. In front of it was a table at the perfect height for her to use while sitting.

How could she refuse such an eloquent offer? Viola padded quietly across the rug to the cushion. The velvet tickled her bare arms and legs as she sunk into its feather padding.

"Comfy," she said and leaned forward so she could rub her cheek against it.

Jerod snapped his fingers and a second cushion appeared on the opposite side of the table. "That's from my bottle actually. I'm afraid it goes with me."

"Spoilsport."

Jerod sighed and shook his head. "Are you ready for your lesson?"

Straightening, Viola took a deep breath to chase away a giggle that threatened to bubble up. "All set."

"Very well. You are hungry, correct?"

At the mere thought of food, her stomach growled. Jerod cocked an eyebrow.

"I guess there's no need for you to answer. I would like you to close your eyes and tell me what you would have ordered for breakfast this morning if you could have anything in the world?"

Viola closed her eyes and said the first thing that popped into her head. "An omelet with mushrooms, onions, ooh, and extra cheddar."

When she opened them again, Jerod had his head in his hands.

“What?”

He looked up and she could actually feel his annoyance.

“I said anything in the *world* and you want poofy eggs with fungus?”

“I like omelets!” She crossed her arms across her chest. “What’s wrong with that?”

“I’m trying to teach you about exploring your options.” He muttered something in a language she didn’t understand before sighing and snapping his fingers. “Fine.”

Instantly, a plate with a perfectly cooked omelet resting in the middle of it appeared. Her stomach roared and she moved to grab the fork to dive in.

“Wait!”

Viola froze mid-reach. Jerod motioned for her to sit back and crossed his arms across his chest. He didn’t continue until her hands were resting back in her lap.

“Now...” He rubbed his hands together. “Now if you were able to start over, which would you choose? Your omelet or this?” He snapped his fingers again, only this time a plate of exotic fruits, cheeses, and pastries appeared beside her omelet. The aroma from the pastries made her mouth water, literally. But there was something unappealing about it.

“Honestly, I’d take the omelet.” This time, she managed to control herself. “Can I eat now?”

“No.”

He was frustrated with her, she could see that. It still wouldn’t change things.

“What about this?”

He snapped his fingers again and the fruit and pastries disappeared, replaced with a platter of sausages, glazed ham slices, and a stack of something that resembled pancakes. She didn’t want to, but her giggle finally escaped.

“You’re sweet, but I still want my eggs.”

Jerod snapped his fingers again and again, replacing the food with new and different selections. Rice and eggs with vegetables, mutton impaled on skewers of coconut palms, asian pear crepes with ricotta, quiches, gingerbread waffles, and things she couldn’t

imagine what they were. Finally, Jerod threw his hands in the air.

"I give up. Eat your omelet."

She didn't wait to be told again. Viola didn't taste the first few bites as she shoveled them in. It was only after her stomach was well under control that she spoke.

"I'm sorry. You were trying to make a point and I ruined it."

Jerod eyes searched her face, a faint smile on his lips. "May I ask a question?"

"Shoot."

"Why an omelet?" His voice softened as he spoke. A deep rumble, like thunder after a storm.

Viola's body reacted, the beginning tingles of arousal building low in her belly. She remembered his touch from last night. How gentle he was. How he made her feel special.

*Think about eggs!*

Clearing her mind, she remembered the last time she'd had a perfect omelet. Her grandmother had made it one morning when her mother had been too drunk to cook for her.

"I don't know. It's comfortable. It makes me feel..." She wanted to say *safe*, but that didn't make sense.

"Loved?" he offered.

"Something like that."

Except it wasn't something like that. It was *exactly* like that. "Why did you think I needed a lesson about exploring my options anyway?"

Jerod stood and walked over to the window. "You seemed so unhappy this morning. I thought you were worried about wishing for the wrong thing. I wanted you to realize that you can have anything at all. The most exotic or rare thing in the world is within your grasp. You only have to reach out and take it. I know that the human mind can be limited by your own experience."

His back was to her, but she didn't miss the note of sadness in his voice. She should have gotten up and gone to him, but what could she say? *Gee, I'd really like to pick you because I think you're hot, but I'm not quite sure what to do with a three-thousand-year-*

*old genie.*

"I guess Bill isn't very exotic," she said and sighed.

Jerod turned and leaned back against the wall. Viola let her eyes travel down his body, remembering every inch of his naked skin as she did. He was the most unusual man she'd ever been with. And she *did* want him. Badly. Her eyes returned to his face, but she found she couldn't read his expression. A muscle in his jaw twitched as he crossed his arms across his chest.

"Is Bill your omelet?"

She opened her mouth to speak, but didn't know what to say. Did Bill make her feel safe, loved? *Hardly*. Bill had been her secret obsession, known only to herself and Beth. Bill was a fantasy. Though after all that happened to her over the past few days, she realized he was a pretty boring one.

"No, he's not," she whispered.

They stayed frozen, staring at each other for what felt like forever. Viola couldn't take it anymore. She pushed up from the comfy cushion and walked over to Jerod. She wanted to kiss him. Hell, she really wanted to rip off his clothes and do a little exploring of her own. Instead, she took his hand and led him outside.

"Where are we going?" he asked when she paused to put on her flip-flops.

"I've been in Mexico for three days and other than the hour I spent on the beach when I found you, I haven't had a chance to enjoy the resort. We are going to reserve some beach chairs, order some rum punch and spend the day enjoying the ocean."

"We? If this isn't a part of your wish, I really should return to my bottle."

She wagged her finger at him. "Oh, no, you don't. You're not going to get out of it that easily. Genies deserve a day off every thousand years or so, I'm sure."

"Technically, I'm cursed. I doubt the woman who stuck me in the bottle had vacation days in mind," he said with a shrug.

"What woman?"

He looked at her intensely before shaking his head. "I'd rather not talk about it."

"Ah, I see. You're a chicken." She began to walk away.

Jerod was in front of her in a flash, his eyes narrowed and his hands on his hips. "Pardon me?"

"Chicken." She skirted around him and made a point of not looking back.

After a few minutes, he appeared beside her and quickly fell into step. "Please explain."

"You tell me I need to explore my options. That I choose simple things over the exotic or the rare. And maybe you're right. But at least I made a decision and I did something about it. You have the power right now to enjoy your life and the time you have out of your bottle, and you want to run back and hide?"

"I need to recharge my powers. I've told you that."

Viola stopped and faced him. "It's not that and you know it. Last night you said you wouldn't know how to be human again if you were. Well, consider this a thank you for everything you've done for me. I'd like to treat you to a day of being human."

Jerod raised a single eyebrow, but didn't say a word. Viola took his silence as compliance and dragged him back toward the resort. The resort had beach umbrellas and chairs that could be rented. As they approached the attendant, Viola slipped her fingers through Jerod's. *Better.*

"Excuse me, *por favor*. Can we rent a couple of chairs?"

The young man turned and smiled. "Sí. I can charge it to your room if you'd like."

"Excellent! Where are your two quietest?"

The young man's smile grew wider. "Ah, romantic getaway. That would be those two chairs." He pointed to a couple off to the side.

"What about those?" Jerod asked as he pulled Viola back against his chest with one hand while pointing off to his far right with his other one.

She relaxed into his chest and soaked in his warmth. Her toes tingled and she had the urge to kick her shoes off to let the hot sand soothe her itch.

"I'm sorry. There are no chairs..." the young man stopped mid-sentence. Off to the left of the grouping, two chairs and umbrellas stood a discreet distance from the others. "Those shouldn't be there."



“Perhaps a prank. But you can leave them there for now. We’ll take them,” Jerod said and smiled at the man before leading Viola over to their new haven.

“Do you enjoy driving people nuts?” she said, wishing she could sound even a little upset.

“You’re the one who told me to enjoy myself.”

Jerod chose the seat closest to the others, put his hands behind his head, and sighed.

“So exactly what does a modern couple do on vacation in Mexico?”

## Chapter Nine

Some higher power truly existed, because this was shaping up to be the best vacation ever. Even Beth would have approved.

She went parasailing! Ignoring the fact she was with a genie, that had to have been the coolest thing she'd ever done in her life. Besides walking on water and sitting on a cloud, of course.

Viola even thought Jerod had enjoyed himself. He was certainly laughing enough to make it seem that way. And with the miracle of genie power, they were able to zip around and avoid lines so she could show him some of the gems that human life had to offer. When she'd gone to bed last night, she'd never felt so exhausted in her life. There was only one thing missing. One thing that would have made everything perfect.

Sleeping with Jerod.

The stubborn bugger wouldn't do it. She'd almost dropped to her knees and begged him, but somehow managed to stop herself in time. She sighed, but wasn't about to let herself get disappointed. Not when she had a plan. A most excellently delicious plan.

She was about to take some of her own advice. Again.

Viola quickly slipped out of the T-shirt she'd been using as a nightgown, and into the navy blue tank top and khaki shorts she bought yesterday at the little clothing shop at the resort. Jerod hadn't said a thing when she'd picked it up, but she could tell he liked the clingy outfit. She didn't want to disappoint him by not wearing it.

When Jerod finally popped into her room a half hour later, he looked more than a little surprised to find her up and about. Viola had been waiting for him, anxiously sitting in front of his bottle, trying to keep her hands still in her lap. She gave up on that quickly enough and instead decided to take a closer look at his bottle. She'd spent much of the past little while trying to see what exactly was inside.

“Hello?” he asked, sounding quite confused. He squatted beside her and looked from her to the bottle and back. “What are you doing?”

“Hi. I was trying to figure out what color it was in there. It’s hard to tell because of the glass, but I was thinking blue. Is it blue?”

She looked up and smiled. Jerod cocked an eyebrow at her and gently pressed the back of his hand against her cheek.

“Are you feeling well? You might have gotten too much sun yesterday.”

“Me? Sure. I didn’t sleep much, but other than that right as rain.” She pinged her middle finger against the bottle. “Really thick glass. Is this reinforced with magic or something?”

Jerod dropped from his squat to sit beside her. She mentally willed him to reach out and touch her again. He raised his hand and just for a moment she thought he would. Her disappointment flashed through her when he drove it into his hair and scratched his head. Not that anything could dampen her spirits for long.

She had a plan.

Jerod, much to his credit, looked exceedingly concerned for her.

“Have you eaten? We can go to the restaurant—”

“What’s it like in there?”

“Viola.” He buried his face in his hands.

“Seriously, I’m curious. Look you can either tell me or I can pester you all day about it.”

That convinced him.

“It’s oval with plush carpet and lots of pillows. Satisfied?”

She picked up the bottle and held it very close to her nose. “Color?”

Jerod groaned, plucked his bottle from her hands, and replaced it on the table. “The color depends on my mood.”

“Really? Like a mood ring. That is cool. Are the pillows round or big square ones?”

“Does it matter?”

Viola licked her lips. “Of course it matters. Different shapes change the entire

ambiance of the room. Does the color of the pillows match the room, or do you change them to contrast? Depending on your mood, of course.”

He shook his head and Viola felt a thrill of victory when he rolled his eyes, his shoulders slumping forward.

“You’re not going to stop asking are you?”

“Nope.” She grinned.

“It’ll be easier if I simply show you. Then you can see your fill and sate your curiosity.”

“Deal.” She stuck out her hand and waited for him to take it. When he didn’t make a move to accept it, she rolled her eyes. “We’ll shake on it. Seal the deal. Come on, Jerod.”

Jerod let loose a heavy sigh, before he finally reached out and took it.

“Ready?”

“Let’s go.”

The ride was over before it began as they blinked inside. It took Viola a few seconds to get her bearings, but once she did, she could barely believe what she was seeing. The destination didn’t disappoint.

“My God, I’d never leave,” she said, spinning around in a slow circle, trying to take in every detail.

The circular room was at least thirty feet in circumference, and sectioned off with hanging raw silk drapes. Row upon row of giant silk pillows, both round *and* square, lined the floor, each one a different shade of blue, grey or burgundy. The glass walls were a smoky color that swirled between dark blue and burgundy. Viola walked over to one and gently reached up to touch its smooth surface. It wasn’t cold like glass and seemed to radiate a low heat from within. She cupped her hands around her face and pressed against it to try to see outside.

“You can’t see anything.”

“You sound disappointed. It’s really not that bad. I can see my masters when they are near. And I can conjure various objects to amuse myself if need be. That’s all that concerns me.”

She frowned. “You can see me through this?”

Jerod walked over to one of the glass walls and touched it. His hand made it ripple like water and her face rose to the surface.

“As long as you haven’t made your final wish, I am bound to you. Your image used to glow far brighter, but that was before you made your first two wishes.”

Looking around, she realized that most of the area was tidy, except a small corner where a collection of pillows were thrown together. Viola walked over and sat down on one of the larger ones.

“Is this where you sleep?”

Jerod nodded.

Viola smiled and ran her hand over the silk. “I never considered the fact that genies would sleep.”

“When I use a large amount of my power, it drains me. I come here to...recharge.”

“Like after our visit to the clouds?”

He nodded.

“And the other night when we...” She hesitated over the words *made love*. But it didn’t seem right to say they fucked or had sex. It had been more than that.

Jerod stared at her for a moment; his gaze seemed to look deep inside her. He frowned before he offered, “When we were intimate?”

Her head snapped up and she looked at him. “Yes. I’m sorry. I wouldn’t have been so demanding if I’d realized the toll these things took on you.”

“Don’t apologize. It has been a long time since I’ve had the privilege to...be intimate with a beautiful woman.”

Of course she’d blush after that remark. She’d never been called beautiful before. Well, except by her dad, and he didn’t quite count. And that had been years ago, before he’d left her mom. She tried not to think of her messed-up family life, not when she had other priorities just then.

“When I use my powers for my own purposes, I am drained very easily. It’s one of the things meant to keep me in line.”

“So our relationship isn’t typical of how you spend your time with your other masters?” It still felt odd to say that. She’d never think of Jerod as hers, like a casual possession. God, over the past few days, he’d proven to both of them he was more than that.

Jerod linked his hands behind his back and stood smiling at her.

“Not at all. You, for example, talk to me. Most of my former masters demanded their wishes and then I would be on my way.”

That uncomfortable feeling began to creep back. And that was in direct conflict with her plan. Viola looked around quickly, grabbed the nearest pillow and threw it at him. He ducked out of its way with little effort and she felt an invisible hand lightly spank her ass. A fit of giggles threatened to overtake her.

“So what do you do for fun around here? You must get to do some cool things.”

Jerod snapped his fingers and a book appeared, floating in front of her.

“I read. I have access to all the books in the world, in every language imaginable.”

“Wow.”

“It keeps me busy.”

Viola plucked the book from the air and began to flip through the pages. It was written in French. Had she actually paid attention in school, she may have been able to read it. No such luck.

“Is it good?”

Jerod’s expression grew very serious. “It’s a romance.”

*No way.* “You don’t strike me as the typical romance reader.”

He shrugged. “I needed a change of pace.”

Not wanting to waste any time, Viola set the book aside and wandered around. While the room was spacious at first glance, she didn’t know how he could live here and not lose his mind. It was a bottle, after all.

“You’ve lived here for three-thousand years?”

“Three-thousand, one hundred and thirty-seven years.”

“Do you ever get lonely?”

“Sometimes.”

Something in the corner caught Viola’s attention. A large mirror stood propped against the wall, partially covered with a silk sheet. She barely recognized the woman standing there as herself, her looks had changed so dramatically. Jerod had helped her find that woman. Now, maybe she could help him.

Plus, she was feeling a little wicked. She might as well have fun with it. She didn’t know when she’d have an opportunity to be in a genie bottle again.

“A mirror, eh?”

“Part of my punishment, I think. It’s the only thing in here I can’t get rid of.”

She walked over to it and pulled the silk away, fully revealing the mirror. “I like it.”

“You can take it with you if you want.”

“So, you normally control the way things look in here?” she said, licking her lips. Watching her reflection was mesmerizing.

He crossed his arms and raised an eyebrow. “Up to a point. Why?”

“We need to do a little redecorating.” Viola turned her back to the mirror and walked to the center of the room. “A small stage right about here. Circular to match the room.”

A small, black stage, about a foot off the ground, appeared under her feet.

“Did you do that? That’s perfect,” she asked.

“No, you did.”

Her head snapped around to look at him. “What do you mean I did that?”

He shrugged. “The bottle has magic of its own. You’re in the bottle, so you can access the magic.”

“Sweet!”

For the next several minutes, Viola set about creating the perfect setup for her little show. A special treat to show Jerod how much he’d helped her and how much everything he’d done meant to her.

How much he meant to her.

Jerod didn’t argue, and instead chose to sit down on one of his pillows and watch. Except for the occasional chuckle, he didn’t comment. Viola didn’t really notice, she was

so enthralled with her temporary magical abilities. Colors, pictures, lights, everything she could think of appeared as she thought of it. Power like this could get addictive. No wonder whoever had cursed him had placed restrictions on his abilities. A genie out of control would be a scary thing.

“There,” she said triumphantly, putting her hands on her hips.

“And what exactly do you think you’ve done to my home?”

“I’ve spiced it up a bit.”

Jerod rolled his eyes. “Well, you’ve done *something* that’s for sure. Now what is...” he waved his finger in her direction, “...*that* supposed to be?”

“It’s a stage. I’m going to give you a little show.” She paused and hoped the effect would be dramatic enough. “A strip show.”

It worked. Jerod’s finger seemed to hang in the air while he snapped his jaw shut. Viola crossed her arms and put on her best impression of Bill’s smug look that she could.

“Oh yes, Mr. Three-Thousand-Year-Old-Genie-Stuck-In-A-Bottle. A strip show. And do I *ever* intend to give you a good one.”

Jerod had the presence of mind to finally react. He crossed his arms over his chest and shifted up to a straighter sitting position. Viola couldn’t help but notice the growing bulge in his crotch.

“I didn’t know you knew how to...” he struggled to find the right words, “...well, do what you’re about to do.”

She really wished she’d borrowed Beth’s aerobic stripper workout DVDs now.

“I don’t. But as you said, this is a magic bottle. I intend to let my imagination take control and give you some memories.”

And then she did something she’d been longing to do since she’d met Jerod. She snapped her fingers and let the magic fly.

The lights darkened as a single spotlight shone on the stage, illuminating a black high-backed chair. Another snap and a slow, heavy music beat swirled around them, filling the room with rhythm. Viola’s quiet and sometimes frumpy attitude was on vacation. The new her, the sex kitten in hiding, was now unleashed upon unsuspecting



genies everywhere.

A snap of her fingers and a shake of her body was all it took to change from her T-shirt and shorts into a tight black dress. *Oh, I could get used to this.* When she set her foot on the stage, her three-inch stiletto heels clicked on the marble floor.

With each beat of the music, she walked slowly across the stage. As long as her heart kept beating, she'd get through this with her dignity and maybe leave a lasting impression on Jerod at the same time.

The music began to grow. The heavy drum beat was joined by a woman's throaty hum and a base guitar. It was sexy, hypnotic. Viola closed her eyes and felt her body begin to sway to the beat. Her hips swiveled as her knees bent, and she dipped into a grind.

She tried to picture some of the women dancing in the latest music videos. It seemed to help as her hips took on a life of their own. The chair became her toy. She imagined Jerod sitting on it and danced to it as if it were him. She squatted in front of it and opened her legs enough that, had he been sitting there, he would have seen the black lace panties she wore.

Next she turned the chair around so the back was away from her and placed her foot on the center of the seat. Viola looked at Jerod for the first time since her performance began.

He was sitting stone still, his eyes fixed squarely on her. She ran her tongue over her lips and watched him suck in a breath, his hands balling into fists on the pillow. God, he looked like he would explode. Viola chuckled and felt her spirit soar. This was what she'd been missing all her life. She'd spent so much time hiding under layers of clothing she'd forgotten that she could be sexy. That she *was* sexy.

With her leg still propped on the chair, Viola slowly pulled one of the black straps of her dress down. She felt the fabric pull, revealing the swell of her breast still encased in a black lace bra. She cocked her head to the side, exposing her neck.

Jerod moaned and squeezed the edge of his pillow. He didn't take his eyes off her and Viola felt herself blush under the intensity of his gaze. She was putting herself on

display for him, but there was still a small part of her who felt self-conscious. Instead of giving in to the fear, she winked at him and leaned back so her breasts thrust up into the air.

“Touch yourself,” Jerod whispered.

Heart pounding in her chest, she raised her hand high up in the air until she couldn't reach any farther and then slowly bent her arm at the elbow until her finger tip touched the dip of cleavage between her breasts. She traced a blazing path down the now-moist path until she was able to hook the neckline of the dress and tug it down.

Standing straight once again, the dress fell to her waist. A single tug and it pooled to the floor at her feet. Viola kicked it toward Jerod and smiled when it hit his legs. Next, the chair poofed off the stage and was replaced by a stripper's pole that slowly emerged from the floor and rose high into the air.

At that particular moment, Viola wished she'd taken Beth up on that dare a few years back about going to a strip club. She had absolutely no idea how to look sexy swinging around a pole.

Thank God for magic.

Being far enough away, Viola took a running start and threw herself at the pole. She managed to catch the pole with her arm and hook her leg around it. The momentum brought her swinging around the pole over and over until she came to rest lightly on the floor. Not too shabby for an amateur.

The music was pounding now and Viola became slowly lost to it. She stood, leaned back against the pole and unhooked the black lace bra. She didn't remove it right away, instead teasing Jerod with the promise of seeing her naked flesh. Inch by inch it slinked down her arms, barely hugging her skin. Viola turned at the last second so her back was to him as the garment fell silently to the floor. She threw him a sultry look over her shoulder. *God I hope I look sultry.*

“Turn around.” His voice was gruff and impatient.

She pouted but had no plans to disappoint him. She crossed her arms over her chest, covering her breasts, and turned to face him. She bent at the waist, letting her ass stick

high in the air, and touched the ground with her hands. Her breasts fell forward, swaying as she moved to the rhythm. Bending her knees to bring her ass closer to the stage had her squatting. Once again she opened her legs wide, but this time there wasn't a chair to hide her from him.

Jerod was able to see her now-naked breasts and her wet panties. She looked directly at him and licked her lips. He couldn't hide the bulge in his silk pants anymore. And it was all for her.

"Touch your breasts," he said as he dug his fingers into his thighs.

She closed her eyes and reached up with both hands lightly pinching her erect nipples. It was her turn to moan. Who knew stripping was such a turn on?

"Lick your finger," he said.

When she opened her eyes and put her finger in her mouth, she made sure to look straight at Jerod, let her eyes travel down his body to rest on his crotch. She then took her finger, slick with her saliva, and pushed it inside her panties. Her clit was completely engorged with blood, her desire ripe.

She rarely touched herself like this, even when she masturbated. If anything, she'd use her vibrator, but never her fingers. It wasn't something she did. But with Jerod watching, it became the most natural thing in the world. The new Viola was daring, bold, could touch herself anywhere.

As she continued to tease her body into a frenzy, she decided Jerod was getting off entirely too easily.

"Your turn," she whispered in a breathless voice.

"Tell me."

"Grab your cock. I want to watch you."

There was no hesitation on his part. He squeezed his shaft through the silk pants, and began to stroke himself. Nice, but not entirely what Viola had in mind.

With a single thought, his pants disappeared. For the first time, it hit her just how big and perfect his cock was. Her knees buckled and the wetness between her legs increased. The sight of his naked body, his hand slowly pumping his cock, was more than she could

take. What had started out as lighthearted play had now turned into a real burning need. And what she needed right now was him.

Viola pulled her hand from her panties and dropped both hands to the floor in front of her. She then proceeded to crawl across the stage and carpet on her hands and knees toward Jerod. The closer she got, the slower his strokes became until he wasn't moving at all.

"I can take it from here," she managed to whisper.

She rose to her knees and took in everything about him. She wet her fingers on both hands and grabbed the base of his cock, squeezing hard. Jerod's loud moan echoed in the room and enflamed Viola's desires.

When she lowered her mouth to his balls, she inhaled his scent before she ran her tongue around their bumpy surface. They immediately tightened, pulling close to the base of his shaft. She continued to lick them, paying particular attention to the purple vein that ran in the middle of the sac.

Jerod's thighs began to tremble and he ran a hand through her hair and massaged her scalp. Viola began to make her way up his cock, licking and tasting the salty sweat that now covered his skin. The slit in the tip of his head was covered with a bead of liquid. She licked it up and moved around his tip with her tongue. It was intoxicating.

Her teasing was too much, she could tell, but Jerod didn't pressure her to move on. He let her explore, taste him, touch him as she wanted. And she wanted him. Viola abandoned his cock for the time being and rose, half naked, to her feet. She hooked her thumbs in the waistband of the delicate panties and sucked on her bottom lip.

"Should I take these off?"

"Yes," he barely managed to say through his clenched teeth.

"Pardon? Yes, what? You have to ask properly now."

He managed a shaky breath. "Yes, Mistress."

She threw him a saucy grin. "I was thinking yes *please*. But mistress works."

A gentle tug and the panties fell to the floor on their own. She stepped out of them, caught the edge with her stiletto and flicked them at Jerod. He pulled them from his face,

smiled and tucked them under his pillow.

“A reminder for another day.”

“I’ll give you a little more than my underwear.”

She carefully stepped on either side of his legs, completely opening herself up to him. Her pussy lips were hot and dripping wet. She could smell her desire in waves as the scent rolled up her body. Now, she needed him now.

Careful not to lose her balance, Viola grabbed Jerod’s shoulders as she lowered her body onto his waiting cock. A low moan that quickly became a growl escaped her when she reached the bottom of his shaft. He was buried to the hilt, completely consumed by her body.

It was the most amazing feeling in the world.

Though the muscles in her thighs began to protest, Viola stayed in her squatting position, using her feet to leverage her movement up and down. When she didn’t think she could go on any longer, she felt his hands cup her ass, holding her, assisting her with her movements. The pain receded, leaving nothing but the pleasure of their bodies coming together.

Viola squeezed her innermost muscles, clenching around his shaft. The pressure increased her pleasure, her body melting around him. She felt the blood pulse in his cock, growing in size, filling her even more. His hands squeezed her ass. His finger, moist from her sweat, teased the crevice, dipping into the crack and pushing against the opening.

When he slipped a finger inside, she stopped breathing. She’d never felt so filled before. The movements were opposite to the in and out of his cock. Viola began to thrash her head from side to side, the feeling was so overpowering. Jerod bent forward and captured her taut nipple with his mouth. He sucked hard, teasing her with his tongue. It was too much. She felt the pressure build, suddenly aware that she couldn’t stop it.

“I’m going to come. I can’t stop—”

The warmth of her orgasm started somewhere deep inside her, but quickly raced to rush through her body. She screamed. It pounded through her, knocking all of her senses into blackness. Nothing in the world existed except for the pleasure.

She began to cry, the pressure of it all was too much. It wasn't enough. Viola continued to drive her body hard on Jerod. She needed him to finish, bring them both home. To give them a sense of peace.

She honed in on his lips and kissed him hard and deep. Her tears rolled down her cheek and mingled with their kiss. Jerod buried his hand in her hair, pulling her closer, kissing her deeper. She didn't need air, or to breathe. Only this and she could live forever.

Jerod's other hand squeezed her ass cheek hard and she knew he was ready. She dropped to her knees and rode him as hard as she could, careful not to break their kiss. A sharp intake of air and he thrust hard, uncontrollably into her. She drank up his cries of pleasure.

Whether she came again or it was simply a continuation of her first orgasm, she didn't know. It seemed to last forever, each thrust of him into her, pleasure coursing through her, until they collapsed in a heap on the pillows.

Viola lay gasping for air, naked on top of Jerod. His cock still twitched with life inside of her. Already she could feel his juices trickling out of her, mixed with her own.

She felt sore, tired and absolutely wonderful.

Neither of them said anything for the longest time. The only sound was the slowing of their breathing, until they settled into a steady rhythm.

"You're amazing," Jerod whispered into her hair.

"Thank you."

She laid her hand on his chest and let the sound of his heart lull her to sleep.

## Chapter Ten

“Why did we come out here again?”

Viola laughed at Jerod as he kicked a rock out of his path with his foot. It had taken more than a little convincing to get him to come with her to Tropics Haven this morning. Hell, she didn’t think she was going to get out of the bottle ever again. They’d made love a second time, but it was slower than the first. Her mind wandered back, her body remembering the feel of his hands on her ass as she rode him, squeezing her cheeks when he came. After that, she’d collapsed against him and spent the rest of the day and night in his arms. Her body settled comfortably against his muscular chest feeling absolute contentment. She shivered and tried to focus on the purpose of their little trip.

“I told you, I wanted to let Ryan know that some money was on the way. These people have a right to know help is coming.”

“I’d rather have you be the one to come,” he whispered in a low voice and ran an invisible finger down her back.

Viola felt her face flush. “For three-thousand years old, you’re such a kid.”

“And you have a talent for understatement. Some money?” Jerod smiled at her and kicked another rock.

She wanted to throw her arms around his neck and kiss him right there. “Okay, a shitload of money. I can’t wait to see the look on his face.” Viola giggled. Her heart pounded from the excitement, the mere thought of helping these people, actually making a difference, a *real* difference in their lives, was the greatest rush she’d ever felt.

This time when she approached the resort, there were only a few people around. Two women were on their hands and knees in front of the cracked walkway that led to the front door. She could hear a faint melody coming from one of the upstairs rooms, the only indication that anyone else was around. Ryan was nowhere to be seen. A few quick

questions and they learned Ryan was out, though sure to be back any time.

Viola looked up at Jerod and frowned. "Do you mind if we wait?"

Jerod shook his head. "We can go for a walk if you'd like."

"We won't be very long. Can you please let him know we're here and would love to talk to him?"

The woman nodded and returned to her weeding. Viola and Jerod strolled away from the woman toward a well-worn path. Viola didn't hesitate and slipped her hand into Jerod's, squeezing it gently as they walked. She didn't let go even when the path narrowed and they were forced to walk single file. Not that he seemed to mind. The air was warm, making her skin slick with perspiration. The breeze from the ocean didn't seem to reach them on the path.

Before long, the trail wound around and came to a clearing. Ahead of them, a large gated area held what looked to be dozens of small buildings, each glowing in the sunlight. Viola sucked in a breath when she realized where they were. "It's a cemetery. Beautiful."

Jerod didn't say anything, which caused Viola to look up at his face. His teeth were clenched and she could see that his breathing had become slow, deliberate. She gently ran her hand down his arm and tugged lightly at his hand.

"Want to leave?"

He didn't respond at first, but finally shook his head. "Let's go pay our respects."

They made their way across the well-manicured lawn toward the main entrance of the gate. Viola could see the highway off to her right and realized they hadn't passed it on their way here. It was on the other side of the resort, past Tropics Haven. *Who in God's name would build a resort near a cemetery?* No wonder it went out of business.

The gate was shut and held closed with a slightly rusty lock. Jerod wrapped his fingers around the gate door and gave it a light tug. Nothing. He closed his eyes for a second and Viola heard the lock squeak open. Jerod gave the door a shove. This time it swung open effortlessly. She wanted to make a joke, some sort of off-the-cuff comment, but the words didn't come. She was frozen in place, her legs feeling suddenly cold,



numb. *This is such a bad idea.*

Jerod went in several steps, before stopping and turning back to face her.

“Coming?”

She took a deep breath and quietly fell in step beside him as they walked past row after row of colorful crypts. She’d only heard of cemeteries like this, or seen pictures on the Internet and on TV. Now, being here, Viola couldn’t shake the feeling she was being watched.

“You said there was no such thing as ghosts, right?”

He nodded his head. Not that his confirmation added much in the way of comfort at the moment. Viola walked past where Jerod stood and peeked inside the crypt.

“It’s so peaceful here,” Jerod said softly as he reached out to run a finger down one of the bars that protected the coral-colored crypt in front of them.

Not quite the word choice she would have used. Viola clasped her hands behind her back and stared back out toward the road. It felt wrong to be here.

“You have no idea how lucky you are.”

When she looked back at him, Jerod’s face was an unreadable mask. But he was staring right at her and his eyes told her everything she needed to know.

He wanted to die.

Viola didn’t know what to say. She took his hand in hers and gave it a gentle squeeze.

“How long will you live?” Somehow her voice didn’t betray the sudden swell of emotion in her.

He took a step closer and ran a finger down her cheek. “Until the end of time. Or until my curse is broken. Whichever comes first.”

Viola shuddered. She’d never been comfortable with the idea of her own mortality. It had always sent her into a panic attack if she thought too much about it. But not once had she considered the alternative. How painful it would be to see all your friends and family grow old and die, leaving you behind. She didn’t think she’d be able to handle it.

“I’m so sorry. You must be so lonely.”

His gaze slipped from her, locking on a point over her shoulder. "My life isn't so bad when you think about it. I get to see the march of history unfold before me. Meet men and women who would be unknown to me, beyond the normal stretch of my mortality." He paused and sucked in a shuddering breath. "Of course, I've had to be there through wars, unspeakable atrocities, helped generate a few of them for my masters. I've watched everything and everyone I've ever known wither away and die."

"Jerod, I—"

He pressed a finger to her lips. "Don't apologize for something you have no control over. I just wish...well, it doesn't matter does it. Genies don't get wishes."

Jerod straightened and placed a kiss on her forehead.

"Enough of this. We can't have all this serious talk of things we can't change. We should get back and talk to your friend so we can be on our way. We don't want to waste the entire day."

He scooped her into his arms, eliciting a yelp from Viola. She giggled from relief and the sheer silliness of the situation. Before they made their way back to the path, Jerod secured the gate so no one would bother the cemetery. It wasn't until they reached the path that he set her back down.

"Later I will take you to the ruins of San Gervasio. We can go see if X'cel is home," he said as they picked their way over the uneven ground.

"Who?"

"Rain goddess. Lots of fun, really. You'd like her."

Viola giggled again and felt better. "I'd love to meet any friend of yours." Though she had a feeling he wasn't telling her everything.

When they emerged from the path, the young woman who'd greeted them earlier was still there. This time she was busy dropping a beautiful plant into a large hole in the ground.

"Señor Ryan isn't back yet," she said as soon as they were close enough.

"Crap." Viola really wanted to tell him in person. "I guess he'll get a big surprise in a few weeks then."

“You can give it to me now, pretty lady.”

Viola and Jerod turned around as Ryan sauntered down the long driveway toward them. He was wearing a faded blue ball cap that lacked any sort of logo or design. His navy blue shirt was only done up halfway, exposing the corded muscles of his chest. She couldn’t help but stare at him. He must be strong to be built like that.

“Well, isn’t that interesting,” Jerod muttered under his breath.

Ryan’s gaze instantly snapped to Jerod and his eyes narrowed. He stopped for a second, but quickly resumed his progression toward them. He didn’t say anything until he was beside them.

“What’s interesting?” Ryan asked, his attention centered fully on Jerod.

Something *so* wasn’t right. The hair on the back of Viola’s arms began to rise. She wanted to say something but she couldn’t quite force the words out. All she could do was watch the silent exchange unfolding in front of her. Jerod looked ready to whisk her away on a moment’s notice, his arm hung protectively around her waist. Not once did his eyes leave Ryan.

“I forgot, you didn’t meet last time I was here.” Viola struggled to keep her uneasy annoyance down. “Ryan, this is my friend Jerod. Ryan is the man I was telling you about.”

The two men didn’t move to shake hands or exchange any pleasantries at all. Ryan balled his hand into a fist, but released it almost instantly.

“Answer my question, please,” Ryan said, the *please* almost an afterthought.

Jerod didn’t seem fazed at all by Ryan’s rudeness. He shrugged, but tightened his grip around Viola’s waist. “The quality of your timing was interesting. Not many people are that lucky.”

Viola caught the slight emphasis he’d put on the word *people*. If it had been a slight, Ryan didn’t seem to care. He broke out into a wide grin and turned to the woman standing with them.

“Thank you, Cierra. I’ll show our guests around.”

Ryan led them away from the resort, down the driveway a short distance. He waited

until they were far enough away before he turned back to them. "So what can I do for you? I didn't expect to see you back."

Her heart began to race. Every ounce of excitement she'd ever felt came pouring out of her, barreling past her initial disappointment.

"I have the best news!" She proceeded to tell him about Beth's winning prize. As she revealed each detail, Ryan's grin slowly melted until his frown carved deep lines in his cheeks.

"So Habitat will receive half, specifically to fix this place up. Isn't that wonderful?" Her cheeks were sore from smiling so much.

Jerod squeezed her hip and Viola couldn't help but lean against him.

Ryan didn't say anything at first, his gaze traveling from Viola to Jerod. He finally crossed his arms across his chest and leveled a heavy stare at Jerod.

"What's wrong? I thought you'd be excited," she said, but couldn't quite keep the disappointment from her voice.

"Did you have anything to do with this prize?" Ryan jerked his chin at Jerod.

Viola felt her mouth drop open. Why the hell would he think Jerod had anything to do with it? *Unless he knows.*

Jerod didn't give her a chance to ask. He shrugged, but she could feel his body tense beside her ever so slightly.

"It's all respectable. I made a promise. Not that it should concern you."

"If it has to do with these people, then it is very much my concern."

"I would be very grateful for the gift and move along if I were you," Jerod said between clenched teeth, his words sounding very much like a threat.

"Well, you're not me. And it damn well better be without strings or I'll fucking kill you. They've had enough shit happen to them in the past two years for something else to go wrong."

"I doubt you could even touch me. Are you saying my word isn't good enough for you?"

Their voices were rising with each passing second. Viola couldn't take much more.

“Holy shit.” She rolled her eyes. “Do you two just want to whip it out and measure? This is supposed to be *good* news remember?”

Ryan took a step backwards and stared at Viola before slowly nodding his head and grinning. “Just making sure everything is on the up and up. These people are important to me.”

No one moved until Jerod returned Ryan’s smile. “This is a good place for finding people.”

Viola’s head was pounding from the sudden tension around her. Now that the moment had passed, she finally felt she could breathe again.

“And Beth is really excited about helping them. She was even talking about coming down to see Haven. I know she’d love to meet you.”

Ryan cocked a single eyebrow and shook his head. “I look forward to it.” Ryan nodded toward the building. “I had better get back in here. I’ve been away for a few days and I’d like to share the good news. Everyone will be very excited by your friend’s generous gift. I wish you both the best.”

Ryan winked at Viola before he faced Jerod. The two men nodded to each other and, before she could say anything else, Jerod was leading her away back toward their rental scooters. Jerod chuckled a few times but didn’t let her in on the joke, which instantly grated on her nerves.

“What the hell was that all about? I thought you two were going to pound the shit out of each other.” She pulled her arm out of his and crossed her arms across her chest.

Jerod looked over his shoulder briefly before he leaned in and placed a quick kiss on her cheek. “We recognized each other.”

“He knows you? You didn’t look like you knew each other.”

“Not exactly, but we could sense that we were both...different?”

Viola frowned. “Different? And that means?”

“Supernatural.”

She stopped short of her scooter and watched as he climbed up to sit down on his. Jerod turned the key and the motor purred to life.

“Supernatural...what is he?”

“A werewolf. You coming?”

“A *what?*”

*When did my life go insane?* Viola jumped onto the back of her scooter and pulled up alongside his. Best to just let this go until she had a chance to think things through.

“Where are we going?”

“Scuba diving. It’s time you got up close and personal with the fish.”

## Chapter Eleven

Where had the time gone? Viola sat on her bed next to the now fully packed and zippered suitcase and sighed. She'd changed into a knee-length green skirt and a silk blouse, ignoring the fact that the weather had turned chilly back home. She was going to hold onto paradise as long as possible. Reaching out with her toe, she nudged her suitcase.

"I don't want to go back."

"It only takes a single wish and you can stay here forever."

Jerod was floating crossed-legged in the corner. He'd been there for most of the morning, trying to convince her to use her final wish. He even changed back into his genie outfit just in case she changed her mind.

"No."

"*You* are a stubborn woman." He threw his hands up into the air.

She closed her eyes and groaned. They'd had similar conversations over the past two days, each one more insistent than the last.

He wanted her to use her final wish, to let him move on. She wasn't ready.

"What if I need you when I get home? I don't want to squander my last wish just because you're getting tired of my company."

Jerod stepped down from his invisible seat and walked over to her.

"I could never get tired of your company," he said in a low voice that washed over her. Jerod tipped her head back and looked into her eyes. "You don't need me. If Bill doesn't drop to the ground to worship you when he lays eyes on you, he's an idiot."

She pulled her chin away. "Of course, I could just be deluding myself into thinking I'm the type of woman who he wants."

And there was the problem.

“Your wish was for me to show you how to win Bill over. I’ve done that and then some. He’ll be eating out of your hands in no time.”

Viola stood up and walked over to the balcony to take one final look. The past seven days had been a dream. She was Cinderella and midnight had come and gone. She was still left with the task of seducing her Prince Charming. The only question was did she still want to?

She’d spent the better part of three years lusting after a man who didn’t have a clue she existed in any way as a sexual creature. In her efforts to make herself into the type of woman Bill would want, she discovered something—herself. It wasn’t a question of did she think she could win Bill, but whether she wanted to.

And why would she, when she could have a man like Jerod?

So what that he was an otherworldly creature who would disappear if she uttered the words *I wish*. As long as she could keep her mouth shut, he’d be forced to stick around.

That really wasn’t fair to him or her. He wasn’t real. Bill was. And as much as she knew Bill was a bit of a heel, she also knew that in the morning, next week, next year, he’d still be there. She needed that. Not just a want, or nice to have, but a bone-shaking need. Someone there, night after night, who she could count on. Not like her dad, and sure as hell not like her mom. Bill might not be perfect, but he was her best shot.

Somewhere in the back of her head, a little voice was shouting at her. There was another someone, a man she’d never set out to win, but who’d slowly worked his way into her heart. Jerod was a fantasy. But one she wasn’t willing to give up. Not quite yet, at least.

She turned around again and smiled. He cocked his head to the side and she knew he didn’t quite buy her act.

“You’re protesting this trip far too much. Don’t tell me you’re afraid of flying or something. Because I’m not going to buy it after the little cloud stunt you pulled a few days ago.”

His chin dropped to his chest and he sighed. “No, I’m not afraid of flying. I’m afraid of baggage check. My bottle is fragile.”



“Bah, you survived a hurricane. Air Canada should be a piece of cake. Besides, I’ll bring you carry on.”

“It’s cold in Canada. I don’t want to go.”

She crossed her arms across her chest. “You sound like a child. Maybe I should spank you.”

At one time, if she’d said those words she’d have blushed. But the new Viola enjoyed the teasing. And maybe a good spanking would settle her unruly genie. Not that he seemed to mind the idea at all. After their trip to Tropics Haven the other day, they hadn’t seen much of the outside of her room. They even did a little role reversal and she played the servant to his master. He even tied her to a chair and licked every inch of her skin with his tongue until she came hard, screaming his name. Lessons, it was all a part of her lessons. Not that either of them really believed that little pretense any longer. Shit, Bill hadn’t really entered into her thoughts at all until today.

The day she was to fly home and face reality.

Viola sighed and buried her face in her hands. Life wasn’t supposed to be this complicated.

“I miss my dog.”

Jerod was beside her in a flash and brushed her hair away from her neck and placed a gentle kiss there.

“I didn’t know you had a pet.”

“His name is William. He’s been my baby for the last two years. God, he’ll be pissed at me when I get back.”

“William?”

She looked up at the tone of his voice. “Yes. What?”

Jerod shook his head, his shoulders shaking in a silent laugh. “You named your dog after your boss?”

“No!”

“Yes,” he mimicked her.

“No, I named him after the name I *secretly* call Bill. William sounds more romantic.”

That set Jerod off. He laughed and laughed. The more he laughed, the angrier she became.

“It’s not funny.”

“No, it’s hilarious.”

Viola stood, marched over to the side table and snatched his bottle off the table.

“In.”

He didn’t move, but he managed to slow his hysterics to a dull roar.

“Get in the bottle.” She emphasized each word as she said it.

“What’s the magic word?”

“Now,” she ground out.

Jerod wiped a tear away from his face. “Very well, Mistress.”

She could still hear his deep chuckle as she shoved his bottle into her carry-on bag, and yanked her suitcase off the bed. It fell to the floor with a thud, jostling her entire body.

“I’d be more help to you out there,” his disembodied voice teased.

“No...” she jerked the handle of the suitcase hard, “...thank you.”

He must have realized he was pushing her buttons, because he thankfully remained silent the rest of the morning. Once she’d thrown her bags into the taxi, she didn’t feel quite so rushed. But the insanity of the airport security tested her patience more than it normally would have. And it didn’t help that every male she passed took great pains to stop and gawk at her.

For the first time in a week, she actually missed her old, baggy clothing. She wasn’t in the mood to attract this much attention. Getting home would be a relief.

She tugged down the hem of the shirt and silently wished for the millionth time that she hadn’t worn the stilettos. Sensible shoes, not these back killers, were what she needed for traveling. But a part of her wanted to make sure her transformation would be as successful away from the romantic atmosphere of the resort. And what better way than to see what kind of reaction she got on the plane and in the airport. At least she’d know it was a success.

When she finally sat down in first class, Viola thought she was going to die. The flight attendant handed her a moist, heated towel and she quickly buried her face in it.

“You’ll ruin your makeup,” Jerod’s voice whispered in her ear.

“Shut up.”

“Pardon?” The smiling attendant turned back to her.

“Oh, nothing. Sorry. Talking to myself.”

Jerod’s chuckle quickly stopped when she tapped his bottle with her toe.

“Maybe I should have checked my bag.”

“But then you’d be lonely,” Jerod whispered and an invisible finger traced a path up the inside of her thigh. Thankfully, he took pity on her and left her alone for a few minutes.

Viola sighed and closed her eyes. *Why the hell am I so tense?* It wasn’t about Bill. The more she thought about him, the less appealing life with him became. Especially after her time with Jerod, how he showed her how special she was. Still, a part of her hoped Bill would take notice, if for no other reason than to know she could actually do this. And if Bill didn’t pay her any more attention, and Jerod went running off, then who cares. She was a smart, sexy lady who could go into a singles bar with pride now. *Oh Lord, no!* Online dating was more her speed. No matter how much she’d changed on the outside, she still couldn’t handle that kind of pressure.

“Oh lookie, a cute companion.”

Viola’s eyes snapped open and looked up into the face of a heavysset man. His round face was red around the jaw line and neck, and a bead of light perspiration had formed on his forehead. She’d so hoped the aisle seat was empty, but it looked like she wasn’t that lucky.

Viola smiled politely and closed her eyes again. Best not to encourage conversation.

He bumped against her leg as he shoved his oversized body into the less-than-comfortable seat. She tried to squish closer to the side of the airplane to give him more room, but it didn’t really help.

“Jacob’s the name. How are ya, pretty lady?”

He stuck his hand under her chin and waited for her to shake it. She may be many things, but rude wasn't one of them. Viola slipped her hand into his and tried not to cry out when he crushed her fingers in a deathlike grip. His hand was clammy and he smelled a bit like stale cigarettes. She wasn't entirely sure where he was from, somewhere southern US?

"Nice to meet you, Jacob. I'm Viola."

"Well that's an old name. You must love the classics," he said with a grin, leaning in a bit too close. "Or at least your mamma did."

Viola's cheeks began to tremble under the strain of keeping the smile fixed on her face.

"Depends on the classic, I guess."

"So you're heading to Canada, hon? Me too. I'm going up for a business deal. A big one. Lobsters to Virginia. Gonna make a killing. Why are you headin' up?"

"Going home actually."

"Vacationing, huh? Well, that's just great."

"He wants to see you naked," Jerod whispered in her ear. "I can read his thoughts from here."

Viola nodded and bit her tongue, while Jerod laughed in her head. Only after she gained control of the giggle that threatened to burst out of her was she able to answer. "I can't wait to get home, though I'll miss the warmth."

"Well, if all the girls are as pretty as you are, I'll have to stay a while." He patted her knee before he turned and did up his seatbelt.

*Ohmygod no!*

Takeoff didn't do anything to improve Jacob's conversational skills. He talked about wanting to try Canadian beer.

"I need to see if it's as strong as y'all like to think it is."

"I should spike his drink. That would be fun," Jerod whispered.

Viola pinched her lips shut and turned to look out the window.

Jerod didn't let up over the remainder of the flight. Viola had to do everything in her

power not to burst out laughing every few minutes. She even kicked his bottle so hard at one point, she thought she broke it. She wasn't that lucky.

"That wasn't very nice, now was it?"

The next thing she knew, Jerod's invisible fingers began to skirt up her thigh. She crossed her legs, but that didn't stop him. A light caress brushed the side of her breast and down over her stomach. She tried to scratch the spot, but it didn't help.

"Didn't anyone tell you not to upset a genie?"

Over the next several hours of the flight, Jerod continued on, silently bantering with Jacob, with Viola as his captive audience.

*Maybe I should have left him in Mexico after all.*

"I tried to warn you," he said, and she could almost picture his shrug.

He wouldn't even let her sleep. Not that he did anything directly to annoy her. But when she eventually drifted off, her dreams were haunted by him. Images of them walking along the beach, making love under the stars and waking up in each other's arms, wove in and out of her uneasy sleep. She wrapped her arms around herself and gave a light hug, sorry Jerod couldn't be there with her now.

A clammy hand gave her a rough shake, sending Viola sitting bolt up. Both Jacob and the flight attendant were staring at her. She felt her face blush and quickly sat back against the chair again.

"Sorry to have woken you. We are beginning our descent. Can you bring your chair upright please?" the flight attendant said, truly sounding like she regretted waking her.

"Of course." Viola scrambled for the button, but she couldn't find it.

"Let me, sweetheart," Jacob piped up.

He pushed the button hard and Viola's backrest nearly sent her flying into the seat in front of her.

"Thank you."

"Anytime." He beamed and returned to his newspaper.

The landing went smoothly. But things were quiet. Too quiet. She wandered into the airport and made her way to get her luggage. While waiting for the rest of her bags to be

dumped onto the baggage claim, her foot nudged her carry-on bag. Jerod hadn't said anything in a while.

Not wanting to look like a complete freak, she slipped her cell phone out of her pocket and pretended to dial a number.

"Jerod?"

Nothing.

"Jerod?"

"Hello," whispered in a smooth voice from behind her.

Viola spun around and came face to face with him.

"You're...here." She frowned. "Why are you here?"

"Can't a fellow meet a friend at the airport?"

He bent down and scooped her suitcase as it came barreling down the shoot and landed with a thud on the turnstile.

"Is this everything?"

She nodded, still in shock with his little performance. He was wearing a dark blue dress shirt and black dress pants. Like before, his shirt was unbuttoned at the neck and his sleeves were unbuttoned and partially rolled. But unlike in Cozumel, he wore a heavy black leather jacket. He looked devastatingly handsome. His black hair wasn't as neat as before, and Viola instinctively reached up and smoothed it down.

"We need to buy you a mirror."

"I have one. Remember?" He grinned.

Viola hated that he could make her blush so easily. She was too easy a mark.

"You shouldn't have worn those shoes on the flight. Your feet must be swollen."

"I'll live."

He was right, of course. Her feet felt like two puffy balloons trying to push through the holes in her shoes. She couldn't wait 'til she got home and could soak in the tub. Right after she got William, that was.

They walked side by side through the airport and out to the extended stay parking lot. Even the cold November evening air wasn't enough to wake her completely. All she

wanted to do was crawl into a ball under her duvet and stay there for a week. When they reached her car, she had to spend ten minutes with the scraper to clean off the windshield enough to be able to see. Jerod helped as best he could, but he really didn't have the technique down. Poor boy hadn't experienced a Canadian winter before. Plus he was driving her nuts by flicking ice shavings at her. Only after she was finally finished did he seem to remember how to help. Jerod took her suitcase and shoved it into the trunk. Viola collapsed behind the wheel in the driver's seat and let out a loud sigh.

"Home, driver," Jerod said as he jumped into the seat beside her, pulled the door shut, and adjusted himself into a comfortable position.

She was so tired. The flight was exhausting, and the time change was throwing her entire system off. It would take her a day or two before she was fully functional again. Her eyes drifted closed and her brain began to wander.

"I wish—"

She cut herself off immediately, sitting bolt up in her seat. *My God*, what had she almost said!

With wide eyes, she turned to look at Jerod. All traces of humor had been washed from his face.

"I didn't finish that sentence did I?" Her whisper sounded loud in the small car.

"No."

Her heart was pounding enough adrenaline through her system that all traces of sleep were temporarily pushed from her body. Jerod actually didn't look pleased that she'd almost gone through with her last wish. Not the way she thought he would react after all of the harassing he'd given her before they left to come home.

"That was close," she said, and with shaky hands, pushed the key into the ignition of the car. Shit, she was stupid, almost blowing her wish on something stupid. *Dumb, dumb, dumb!*

It roared to life, but she couldn't take off right away. They had to sit there for several minutes while her poor car warmed up enough for them to see out the cold windows. She didn't dare say anything else. What could she say anyway? *Sorry to disappoint you,*

*genie, by not going through with my wish, but I have a crush on you and really want you to stick around a bit longer.* The snow melted, sliding a wet trail down the window and she was finally able to see. She threw the car into reverse and tore out of the parking spot. Home, she needed to get home.

After paying her parking bill, they pulled out onto the highway and began the drive back to her place. Mentally, she chastised herself for her stupidity.

“What were you going to wish for back there?”

She turned enough so she could look at him out of the corner of her eye.

“This isn’t some sort of genie trick, is it? I finish the sentence and you grant the wish?”

He hesitated.

“Jerod?”

“No, of course not. I’m simply curious.”

Still not sure if he was telling the truth, she carefully choose her words.

“I was *wondering* if you could drive a car.”

He laughed. “Well, yes, that would have been a poor wish.”

She chuckled too. “I wasn’t even thinking about what I was saying. The words just started to come out.”

Flicking on her blinker to change lanes, she suddenly needed to know. “Well, do you?”

Jerod adjusted in his seat. “Drive a car?”

“Yeah.”

“No. I can ride a horse and drive a chariot, but not one of these things.”

“I suppose the horseless carriage was more than a few years away when you were human.”

She reached over and touched his leg with her hand, squeezing his firm muscles underneath.

“I’m glad you’re here now, though. Or else I’d still be plain old Viola.”

His fingers covered hers and squeezed back. “You were *never* plain old Viola.”



She looked over at him again, trying to picture how he must have looked.

“A chariot? Really?”

“That is a story for another time. However, I believe I looked quite sexy.”

The rest of the half-hour drive passed quickly. The silence was pleasant, especially after the information overload from the flight.

When they pulled into the driveway of Beth’s condo, Viola turned to Jerod.

“I hate to say this, but you should hide. If Beth sees you, neither one of us will rest until she knows the whole story. And trust me, the last thing we want is her knowing you’re a genie.”

He leaned forward, bringing his lips dangerously close to hers. “This is the Beth who won the money?”

Instinctually, she licked her lips and had to fight against the pull of his body.

“Yes. If she suspects she didn’t win it fair and square, she’d give it back. That would put the Haven in danger and I’d hate for that to happen.”

Jerod brushed his lips against her cheek in a gentle kiss, before he poofed from sight. Viola sat there alone for a second, her heart pounding in her chest. She took a deep breath before she jerked her door open and stepped out onto the iced asphalt. As she walked, her resolve grew. She was going to hug Beth, get William and get ready for her big entrance back to work tomorrow.

Viola raised her hand and prepared to knock on Beth’s door when she heard sudden barking and a running thump land against the door. A quick whimper was replaced with another peal of barks.

“Shut up and let me open it,” she heard Beth mutter before she yanked the door open. “About fucking time!”

The two women giggled as Beth pulled Viola into a fierce hug and damn near squeezed the life out of her, before pulling her all the way in the hall and shutting the door behind her.

“I’ve missed you. And I’m rich! And, holy shit, you look great!”

Beth jerked Viola around like a rag doll, looking her over. She didn’t fight against it,

knowing full well it would be over faster if she didn't.

"What did you do? You look amazing. It was that guy, wasn't it?" Beth's smile nearly took up her entire face.

Viola looked up and had the sudden urge to cry. She swallowed down the growing lump in her throat and shrugged. "It's a long story."

Beth frowned. "Good thing we have time for you to tell it."

William began yapping, having been ignored long enough. He tried to stand up on his back legs, but couldn't quite manage the feat. Viola picked him up and gave him a cuddle.

"Did my baby miss me?"

"God, he was driving me nuts. Little yappy bugger." Beth rubbed his head.

"Hey, now." Viola rubbed her chin on William's head. "Was the big, bad, rich lady mean to my baby?"

William, not appreciating Beth's comment, growled as fiercely as a Daschund could.

"It's mutual, buddy," Beth said and punctuated her comment with a growl of her own.

William, clearly knowing who the superior was, buried his nose in the crux of Viola's arm with a whimper.

Viola smiled and looked at Beth. "I can't believe you're rich."

"I can't believe you're sexy," she said and immediately her hand flew to her mouth. "Not that you weren't sexy before, but you look fabulous now. Not that you didn't look fabulous before. God, I'm a jerk." Beth dropped her head to her chest.

"No, you're not. You looked after my dog." Viola cradled William and flopped onto Beth's couch.

Beth's face brightened. "The guy! You have to tell me about him. Was he cute? Did you make love on the beach? How big was his—?"

"Beth!"

"Details, woman. I need them," she said as she gave Viola a little shake before taunting her, "I'll make you a coffee."

“Oh, hon, I’m beat. I’m just going to take William home and crash. I still have to work tomorrow.” Every muscle in her body was screaming for her to lie down and sleep. Beth wouldn’t mind if she crashed.

“Call Bill and tell him you quit.”

Viola laughed and nudged William into his cage. “I don’t think so. That’s your money, not mine.”

“Whatever, you’re my best friend in the entire world and I don’t want you working there any longer. Besides, you’re closer to me than my own family and there isn’t a hope in hell I’ll share a penny of my money with them. And I need to spend it on someone.”

Viola rolled her eyes. “Spend it on yourself.”

“Shopping spree! That’s what we’ll do tomorrow. Add some more clothing to your new look.”

“Beth, seriously. Jet lag is going to kill me—”

“I am serious.”

“Fight!” they both shouted with a laugh.

The two women entered into a staring contest. This was how they solved all their fights, had been for years. First one to blink lost and had to give in to the other. Viola had no intention of losing this time. Her eyes screamed from the dryness, but she didn’t care. Beth brought her hand to her eyes to pinch them shut.

“Shit.”

Viola threw her arms into the air. “Victory.”

“Fine, have it your way,” Beth huffed. “But the first time Bill pulls his shit on you, I want you to promise me that you’ll walk out of there. Understand?”

Viola pushed Beth’s finger away from her nose. “We’ll see.”

“Promise!”

“Okay, chill out. I promise.”

Beth crossed her arms across her chest and shook her head. “God, I wish I could see the look on Bill’s face when you walk in there looking like that. He’ll trip over his tongue on his way over to molest you.”

“You quit already?”

“The second that little check hit my hands, I called him to gloat. I believe my words were neener, neener. And I’ve decided to sell the semi, by the way.”

She should have realized Beth would have quit her job the second she was able to. But sell her house? Viola’s stomach bottomed out. Her whole world was turning on its head and it was all her doing.

She didn’t want to quit, not yet. She needed to get her bearings first, make sure that this new and improved Viola really was new and improved. Call it a security blanket, but she wasn’t quite confident enough yet to fly solo. But the prospect of working at Way to Go Travel without her best friend seemed rather bleak.

Beth frowned. “Don’t worry, things will be fine, hon. And, like I said, you can always quit if you want.”

“I know.” Viola managed a tired smile.

“Look, I’m being a jerk. You must be exhausted and I’m yammering on. Go home and sleep. But tomorrow night I expect a phone call telling me all about your trip.”

“Deal.”

The two women hugged again, and Viola scooped up William’s cage and carried him out to her car. Her life had changed and she hadn’t stopped to realize what those changes were going to mean. *God, I barely know who I am anymore.*

She opened the passenger door and placed William’s cage on the passenger seat, making sure the seatbelt securely held it in place. By the time she walked around and sat in the driver’s seat, her mind had raced through several scenarios of what would happen tomorrow morning at work.

“What a cute pup.”

Viola let out a startled cry and turned to see Jerod had reappeared. He had William out of his cage and was scratching him behind his ear.

“I hate it when you do that,” she said and prayed her heart rate would slow down enough so she would be able to drive home.

“I know. So this is William. I think I like you better than your namesake.”

Viola moaned and jammed her keys into the ignition. “You haven’t even met Bill yet. And I don’t plan on introducing you either.”

“Well that hardly seems fair. Especially after I’ve worked so hard to get you ready to sweep him off his feet.”

She didn’t bother with a response.

The rest of the ride home consisted of Jerod talking to William, and William eating up the attention. When she pulled into her garage, she didn’t even wait for him. Viola got out and dragged her large suitcase into the house.

“I think you forgot something,” Jerod called to her in his best wounded-soul voice from the car. He even had his hand over his heart.

“Sorry, William.” She marched back to the car and plucked her dog out of Jerod’s arms. She placed a kiss on his head as she walked away from Jerod. “Poor baby.”

Jerod didn’t seem the least bit fazed by her mood swing. He sauntered in through the door and proceeded to walk around her living room, picking up random objects that summarized her life. She pretended not to watch him, but she couldn’t help but be drawn to his movements. God, she couldn’t even stay upset with him around. Why the hell was she upset anyway?

“I need to sleep.”

“I’m surprised you lasted this long.”

When he smiled at her, Viola felt her heart melt. Genie or not, fantasy or not, he was the most amazingly handsome man she’d ever had the pleasure of spending time with. And it felt right that he was here with her. He picked up a history book and began to flip through, chuckling as he went.

“What?”

“This book is wrong. At least half of the events in this book didn’t happen this way.” He tossed it back down onto her end table with a thud.

“They say history is written by the winners.”

“I see that.”

He sat down on his invisible cushion and picked up William, who immediately

curled up on his lap and went to sleep. Her propane fireplace lit up on its own and some light jazz began to play over the stereo.

“So, what’s on the agenda for tonight?”

Viola froze at the sight before her. Who the hell did he think he was, coming into her place and taking over? Thinking and acting like he had a right to be here.

Her *genie*, that’s who. She was the one who’d insisted on him coming back with her, who refused to ask for her final wish so he could be on his way. She’d made this mess, and now she was going to have to wallow in it. She found the arm of her La-Z-Boy and sat down.

“Tonight I’m going to unpack, iron, and get ready for work tomorrow morning. Then collapse into bed. I have to look my best so I can try to catch Bill’s attention.”

“You’re not going to win him over if you’re suffering from jet lag. You need to stay home and sleep.”

She could just imagine the size of the bags under her eyes right now. And as much as she wanted to wow Bill tomorrow, she knew he was right.

“Okay. I’ll call in sick tomorrow and sleep. But then no more putting this off. I want to make sure I *can* pull this off and if I wait too long I’ll chicken out.”

Jerod’s lips puckered and the muscle in his jaw clenched. “I see. What may I help you with, Mistress?”

Maybe she was tired, but it felt like something subtly changed between them. The playfulness was gone, and in its place was a sticky, uncomfortable feeling. The mess of emotions that consumed her threatened to overpower her.

“Nothing. I’m going to have a bath. Help yourself to anything in the house.” She stood and made her way to the bathroom.

“Viola?”

She pushed the door closed, and managed to hold the tears back until the lock clicked into place.

## Chapter Twelve

Today was the day. And if she screwed things up, she was going to go back to Mexico and live in Tropics Haven for the rest of her life. Viola adjusted the review mirror and checked herself over for the tenth time. She adjusted a few strands of hair, pushing them back into place and rubbed her lips together, making sure her red lipstick shone. And just to be safe, she checked her teeth to make sure none had gotten on them.

*What the hell am I doing?*

She had to fight the urge to drop her forehead to the steering wheel in case it messed up her hair. She'd barely come out of her room all day yesterday, totally confused and not knowing what to say to Jerod. That in itself was completely unnerving considering how much they had talked on the island. Nothing had changed since then. If anything, it should be easier for her to talk to him. That's why she'd brought him home in the first place. The problem was, now that she was faced with the enormity of trying to figure out exactly what she wanted out of this pseudo-relationship they had, she didn't know what to say.

The two times she'd ventured out of her room, she'd attempted to talk, only to freeze up before turning tail and hiding in the bathroom before she'd run back to her sanctuary, slamming the door behind her. She'd spent most of her time trying to convincing herself that he was nothing more than a vacation crush, that he couldn't offer her anything long term. *He's a genie for God's sake!* She needed stability, a spouse who could help her raise their children and pay the bills. Who knew if Jerod could even have kids, let alone if he wanted them? None of which mattered, because the fact remained, as soon as she said her final wish he'd be gone.

When she'd finally come out that morning, she was ready to do what she'd been practicing for all week—go to work and knock Bill on his ass. Once she knew, really

honestly knew she could do this, she'd be able to march into the dating scene with confidence. She pulled every trick Lisa, the wonder stylist, had shown her when she'd gotten ready that morning, and marched out of her room looking better than ever.

Jerod was floating in her living room with William curled up on his lap when she turned the corner. He didn't see her at first and she'd been shocked by how normal the whole thing struck her. Her heart pounded when he looked up and their eyes locked. Then his lips twitched into a smirk, like he knew something she didn't.

"Have a good day at work." His voice echoed in the small room.

Another glance at the clock display on her dash told her she had to move her ass or she was going to be late. It was now or never.

Viola took a deep breath, pushed open her car door, and swung her black high heels onto the broken asphalt of the employee parking lot. Seven days ago, she would have slinked in there with no one noticing. With any luck, everyone would see her entrance.

Especially Bill.

As her heels clicked while she walked, Viola tried not to let her nerves get the better of her. *I'm a sex goddess going to work at Way To Go Travel. Get out of my way!* She straightened her shoulders a bit more than before and added a bit more spring to her step, which made it challenging to dodge the frozen puddles of ice that had formed in the parking lot overnight, but Viola wasn't about to stop now she was on a roll.

She was going to blaze in there and ignite every man in the room. And when Bill came running to her side, she would toy and tease him until he begged her to go on a date with him. Then she would coyly agree and have him eating out of her hand for the rest of the night. One date, just to make sure she was making the right decision. That she wasn't giving up on what she thought she wanted for the chance at something that might never happen. She owed it to herself to see this through.

Then all she'd have to figure out was how to set Jerod free.

She'd made that decision yesterday as she lay in bed, staring at the ceiling. Giving him his freedom made the most sense. He deserved an opportunity to live life the way he wanted to and not be tied down to any one person or place. It really was the very least she



could do for him after all the kindness he'd shown her. And if she managed to convince him to stick around for a while, well that would be more than okay.

Viola hesitated for only a second before she swiped her ID card through the employee scanner that released the door. She made her way toward the coat rack and hung up her suede jacket. Her hands were able to smooth out the few wrinkles that the car seat had put into her flared black and tan skirt. She was about to adjust her hair again, when someone cleared his throat behind her.

"Excuse me, Miss. Can I help you?"

She turned around when she realized it was Brian. He was standing there, a look of shock on his face, his unlit cigarette dangling precariously between his middle and forefinger.

"Oh, come on, you trying to suck up to me already?"

It was immensely satisfying when his mouth dropped open. Viola did a little spin to show off her new outfit.

"Like it? I got it on my vacation."

"Viola?" He suddenly sounded like he was twelve.

"Who else would it be?"

When nothing came out of his flapping mouth, she giggled. "I haven't changed that much."

"Are you shitting me? I didn't recognize you. You look *amazing*."

"Thank you," she said and dipped into a small curtsy.

"I mean really good. If I weren't gay, I'd ask you out."

That got her. She laughed, and a burst of excitement rushed through her. If Brian was that blown away, maybe there was hope for her winning Bill over.

"Did you hear about Beth?" Brian lowered his voice and sounded more than a little conspiratorial.

"She called me while I was on vacation. I couldn't believe it. I'm so happy for her."

"Well, she quit on the spot and Bill's been trying to find a replacement. Apparently they hired someone yesterday. I haven't met him yet, but apparently he's quite cute and

started this morning. He's been in with Bill for the past hour."

It would be weird to have someone other than Beth checking her quality scores for her calls. And she doubted the new guy would want to hold their monthly QA session at the coffee shop. It would also mean she wouldn't be giving out any more sex advice. And that really sucked, considering she now had actual firsthand experience she could refer to. She looked at the double doors that led from the coatroom to the floor. On the other side were the sea of cubicles and all of Way to Go's minions, busily convincing their customers to buy vacations.

She should be the poster child for what can happen on one of their trips.

Brian gave her arm a squeeze. "Walk in there with your head held high as if nothing in the world was different. Say hello to everyone you normally would in the exact same way you would. *That* will wow them."

She straightened her shoulders and smiled at him through her excitement. "I think that's a brilliant idea."

A single push and she stepped through the doors and out onto the floor.

Now, there really weren't too many people Viola normally said good morning to. Beth, who'd quit. Brian, who was smoking. And Bill, who never noticed. She took a deep breath, marched over to Bill's office, and poked her head in. Her stomach did a flip-flop when she realized there wasn't anyone there. Damn.

It didn't matter, she'd see him soon enough.

Pushing away from his office door, Viola proceeded to march across the floor toward her cube. She ignored the heads that turned to face her. She ignored the whistle she heard as she walked and the voice that admonished the man. HR violations going on left, right and center. Over her!

After she finally reached her small part of the Way To Go world, she sat down in her seat, took Ross out of her bag and placed him back on her desk.

"There you go, Ross. Home sweet home."

"Excuse me? Are you here to fill in for Viola?"

Viola looked up and smiled at the shocked expression on Bill's face.

“Good morning, Bill. I’m back from my trip.”

The shirt she’d chosen to wear this morning was professional, yet had a low enough bust line to take full advantage of her cleavage. She knew Bill would like it. What she wasn’t expecting was for him to stare so blatantly down her shirt.

“Viola?” he said to her chest.

To put herself on even footing, she stood up as she pulled her headphone set over her head to rest on her neck. He was still a good several inches taller than she was, but not quite as tall as Jerod.

The thought of Jerod made her feel a little bit guilty at what she was currently doing. They’d grown so very close over the past seven days, been lovers. It didn’t seem right to jump into the arms of another man so quickly. *He knew what this was all about when he granted my wish. There’s nothing to feel guilty about.*

She pushed Jerod from her mind and smiled even wider at Bill. “How have things been around here since I’ve been gone? Busy?”

Bill gave his head a shake before giving her a good once over, starting at her head and stopping at her feet.

“I’ve been interviewing new QA analysts, since your friend up and won the lottery on me.”

“I know. I’m so happy for her. Brian said you hired someone?”

Bill looked straight into her eyes and licked his lips. The urge to gag at the sheer sleaziness of the gesture and the leer that followed was almost too much. Hopefully he wasn’t going to be like this from now on.

*I’m just nervous, pull it together.*

“As a matter of fact, I did. We got lucky to find someone of his qualifications who could start right away. He’s coming over now. Let me introduce the two of you.”

Viola tried not to fidget. If things didn’t work out with the new guy, she would take Beth up on her offer to help her while she looked for another job.

“Viola, I’d like to introduce you to Jerod. He’ll be making sure you stay in line,” he said and laughed a little at his own joke.

She damn near broke a heel when she spun around to come face to face with Jerod's crystal blue eyes. He held out his hand and smiled that secretive grin only he could pull off. Her eyes locked on his hand, she opened her mouth to say something, but nothing came out. Her stomach was doing strange things and it seemed that all of the heat had drained from her fingers and toes.

"Very nice to meet you, Viola. I hear we will be working together quite closely," he said, a chuckle in his voice. "Take my hand and shake it," he whispered in her ear.

Instantly she responded and shook his hand. His accent seemed heavier than normal. And he was wearing a tie. She didn't like him in a tie. It was too stuffy, too proper. Very ungenie-like.

"Nice to meet you as well," she somehow managed to get out.

"Bill was just getting me up to speed on how things work here at Way To Go. I hope you'll be able to spare a few moments this morning so we can chat." Something in the way he said *chat* got to her. That, or the fact she felt his invisible fingers trace a line down her back.

"Of course," she said, sounding very much as Brian had a short time ago.

Despite the fact she was standing in a room with over two hundred other people, Viola felt her body respond to Jerod. The wetness between her legs grew and she was suddenly scared he would be able to smell her arousal. He was doing something to her. He had to be. She turned away before she blushed and gave him the wrong idea.

So when she turned to Bill, she tried to give the impression that it was because of him that she was feeling aroused. Her mind began to whiz through all of her lessons with Jerod. She tried to push back the more intimate memories and concentrated on what he said would entice Bill. She tucked a strand of her hair behind her ear and exposed the curve of her neck, giving him a clear view.

Small talk. Something that would keep him engaged.

"I really enjoyed the vacation resort. Really one that we should promote to our customers more," she said and twirled the cord to her headphones.

"Hmm?"

Bill was fascinated by the movement of the cord. Or was it her breasts? She didn't really know, or care at this point, as long as he was paying attention to her.

"The resort. You know, big vacation prize?"

She leaned back just enough that Bill lost his balance and fell forward against the cubicle wall, trying to follow her cleavage. Jerod chuckled and winked at her, which only served to crank Viola's annoyance higher.

The impact seemed to knock Bill out of his daze and his gaze snapped to hers. "Yes, of course. When you get a chance, I'd love to have a complete report on the site."

"Well, I've only just arrived, but I'd be more than happy to—"

Bill waved her silent. "No worries at all. Have your meeting with Jerod and get him up to speed on how we do things around here. After you're done there, stop by my office and you can deliver your report orally."

There was something about the way he said the word *orally* that gave her the creeps. This was the moment she'd been aiming for with her little wish in the first place. She should be thrilled that she'd won him over so quickly. The old Bill would have simply demanded she write up her report in between calls. God, this was easier than she'd thought. Another quick glance at Jerod though, and she knew he wasn't concerned with Bill's behavior. A part of her wanted to make him jealous, elicit a reaction that maybe gave her a hint of his feelings toward her. Or at the very least, punish him for sticking his nose in where she didn't want it.

Time to kick things up a notch.

"The report will be quite *extensive*." She made sure to emphasize the last word, casting a quick glance at Jerod. "An oral report could take some time. Will you have time today to hear it all?"

"Really, I'd love to hear about this place," Jerod piped up.

Viola shot him a warning look. Bill took advantage of the lull, and cleared his throat to bring the attention back to himself. "Why don't we take our time reviewing the material? I'm sure you have some pictures of the building for me to see. How about supper tonight after your shift?" He grinned a little too brightly at her.

If someone had told her a month ago that Bill would finally ask her out, she'd have laughed at them. If they'd continued to tell her that she wouldn't be nervous, and hardly gave her off-handed answer of "I'd love to" half a thought, she'd have called them insane.

Fact of the matter was, she'd been so focused on what Jerod was doing, and annoyed that he'd shown up this morning with the intention of rattling her cage, she hadn't really thought about it. Her attention was on her genie and how she was going to kick his ass when they got home tonight.

"Oooh, dinner and a report," Jerod said and actually tugged her arm. "I think that sounds like a wonderful way to spend an evening."

What the hell was he doing *now*?

"Then it's really too bad that you're not the one going," she said through clenched teeth. "And I'd love to, Bill."

Bill was oblivious to the interchange between her and his new analyst.

"Wonderful. I can't wait to hear all about your adventures." He winked at her and made a small grunt of approval as he gave her another perusal.

Viola clasped her hands behind her back to give him a better look. "I'll be off at six."

"Excellent."

He nodded as he checked out her chest for a final time before heading down the aisle to his office. He shut his door and she didn't see him for the rest of the morning.

"He's going in there to masturbate to his *Maxim* magazines."

Viola spun around to glare at Jerod.

"What the hell are you doing here?" she managed to say through the smile that was now beginning to hurt her face. He better have a damn good explanation or she was going to wish for him to spend the next hundred years cleaning out toilets.

"I heard there was a job opening." He shrugged. "Since you're not letting me get on with my wish-fulfillment vocation, I had to do something."

"And when did you pull this little stunt off?"

He rolled his eyes. "Yesterday, while you lazed about. I didn't think you'd mind."

Viola bent and set her computer status to “in a meeting”, tossed her headphones back on her desk and pointed at one of the meeting rooms not too far from her cube.

“Go.”

“Is that any way to talk to your quality analyst?”

“Now.”

She didn’t wait to see if he was behind her, but marched as quickly as she could in her three-inch heels. She held the door open and waited for him to saunter in before she clicked it gently shut. She didn’t even attempt to hide her annoyance when she turned around, back pressed to the door, and faced him.

“Are you trying to ruin everything?”

He chuckled for a moment before he got himself under control and looked at her very seriously. “You’re the one who wanted me along to make sure everything went the way you wanted it to.”

“Yes, here as in my home so I could talk to you and ask you questions. Not here as in my work and have you underfoot all day long.”

Jerod sauntered over to her and placed his hands on either side of her head against the door. Being trapped between his arms should have been arousing, would have been, if she weren’t so pissed off at him right now. She sucked in a deep breath to yell, but was overcome by his masculine scent. It somehow softened her anger toward him and turned her yell into a growl.

“Someone will see us. Are you trying to get me fired now too?” She swallowed hard.

He brought his body closer to hers, his face so close she could pucker her lips and touch his. She was panting, trying to control her anger and her desire all at the same time. When he licked her bottom lip, she felt her body quiver.

“If anyone looks in the window, they will simply see us sitting at the table talking.” His easy smile spread across his face. “Magic, remember.”

Heat between her legs began to pool and spread throughout her loins, her chest, her breasts. The air was heated, smelled like him and his arousal. She watched emotion swirl in his eyes, making them look darker than normal. He lowered his lids, his gaze roaming

her face, tracing an invisible line down her cheek and neck.

"I'm supposed to be winning Bill over." The words hurt as she said them because, without a doubt, she knew Bill wasn't the man she wanted any longer. Her mouth had become dry and she wet her lips with her tongue.

"I'm giving you a last-minute cramming session."

Jerod crushed his mouth to hers in a searing kiss. It wasn't like his lazy, gentle kisses before. He was demanding as his tongue fenced with hers. His hands hooked the back of her knee and brought her leg up so he could grind his erection against the hot, wet apex between her legs. Her pussy pulsed with wanton need.

"Jerod," she said his name on a sigh.

He trailed his kisses down her neck and nipped the sensitive skin of her shoulder. Viola sucked in a breath and sighed. God, she wanted him. His hand was under her shirt, tweaking her nipples through her black lace bra.

"Will Bill do this for you?"

Jerod dropped to his knees in front of her, hooking her leg over his shoulder. Her skirt was now pushed all the way up, giving him easy access to her. He pushed her panties aside, exposing her damp, engorged clit.

"You're so beautiful," he breathed the words against her so softly she wasn't sure she'd heard him.

Not that she was able to think any longer about it. When his tongue licked a long, slow stroke over her swollen clit, Viola thought she would come undone. He teased her by licking circles around her hood, touching everywhere but the one spot that would give her relief.

"Jerod," she begged and pushed her hips into his face.

"You want this?"

His slipped a single finger into her body. She ground against him and moaned, all thoughts of anything but his hands and his tongue gone from her mind.

Jerod slipped a second finger inside her. "I think this might be more to your liking."

He began to pump his hand into her and she could smell her own arousal now, filling



the small room. Viola bit down on her bottom lip so she wouldn't cry out, drawing attention to them and what they were doing in the room. Instead, she buried her hands in his soft black hair and pushed his face closer.

"You want more." She felt him say the words against her skin.

"Yes."

Her entire body began to quiver. She was close to the brink of orgasm and he knew it. But he wasn't willing to give her what she wanted yet. Viola saw a change come over him. His normally calm demeanor was gone, his body tense, shaking like he was struggling to hold on. Viola responded, her body getting hotter, wetter, barely able to wait to see where his desire was going to take them.

"Beg."

The single word floated to her and she groaned.

"Please," she managed.

He pulled back and moved his fingers to the entrance of her body. "Say my name. Beg me like you mean it."

She looked down at his handsome face and wanted to cry. Why couldn't he be real?

"Jerod, please. I need you."

A primal growl escaped him and he dove back between her legs. He sucked her entire clit into his mouth, the pressure all she needed to push her over the edge. She bit down hard on her lip to stifle her cry of pleasure, her eyes jammed shut hard. Waves of pleasure ripped through her body, forcing her hands to clutch his head, shaking under the strain. He continued to lap at her juices with his tongue, thrusting his fingers into her repeatedly until he squeezed every last drop of pleasure from her body.

Her leg buckled beneath her and she slowly sunk to the floor. Jerod pulled her to him and locked her in a fierce hug. She cried. The tears came from nowhere and rolled down her face, streaking her makeup.

"Viola? Sweetheart?" he said with tenderness and concern.

"Don't."

She dropped her head to his shoulder, but he pulled back so he could look her in the

eyes.

“Did I hurt you?”

*Yes, because you made me fall in love with you and you can't stay with me!*

“No. It's just there's so much going on. I'm tired.”

He kissed her again, but this time there was no anger. She tried to show him how much she cared about him when she kissed him back. She kissed with her heart, her soul and every ounce of love she had for him.

Viola ran her hand down his chest to the bulge between his legs. She squeezed his shaft as he moaned into their kiss.

“So, Mr. Quality Analyst, how high a quality rating will I get if I do this?”

She slipped her hand down the waistband of his pants and brushed the tip of his cock with her fingers. He sucked in a breath, but kept his body still.

“Oh, not too bad. But there's definitely room for improvement.”

“Well, I want to make sure I get an excellent review.” She undid his button and zipper and pulled out his glistening head. “I think I could reach a stellar rating if I did this.”

Viola shifted her body and dropped her head to his lap. She breathed in his musky scent before wrapping her lips around the tip. Her tongue swirled around, tasting him, teasing him to the state of bliss he had her at only a few minutes ago. Jerod groaned as he rubbed the back of her neck with his thumb.

“You're too good at this.”

She chuckled, her mouth still wrapped around him. He stiffened and she felt his balls tighten in her hands.

“That felt nice,” he said in a harsh whisper.

Viola made a few more moaning sounds in the back of her throat as she continued to devour him. She felt his muscles shake, his whole body vibrating underneath her.

“I'm not going to last, sweetheart.”

His endearment pulled at her heart. She closed her eyes, increasing the tempo of her hands and her tongue. Jerod pushed up hard into her mouth and she felt the burst of liquid

fill her. Greedily, she swallowed everything, reveling in his taste, making sure she'd never forget it. After a few heart-pounding moments, Jerod pulled her up into his arms and the two of them lay panting together on the floor.

A knock at the door almost ripped a scream from Viola, but Jerod had his hand over her mouth in a flash.

"Yes?"

"We have this room booked now."

"Sorry. We'll be out in one moment."

Jerod smiled as he looked down at her. "Well, that was good timing."

She pulled his hand away from her mouth and tried to get up. "I'm half naked and they are waiting. They'll know."

"Still don't have any faith in me?"

Jerod snapped his fingers and they were sitting prim and properly at the conference table as if nothing had happened. He stood and extended his hand to her as the conference room door opened.

"Thank you, Ms. White. I see we'll have an excellent working relationship."

"You're welcome." She was about to say his last name and realized that she didn't know it. So she snapped her mouth shut and got up from the table.

One of the women waiting for them to leave fanned herself once Jerod walked past. Viola felt an instant flare of annoyance at the woman and had to fight back the urge to make a nasty remark. Jerod *was* hot, but that didn't mean she wanted every woman there panting after him.

Then it hit her that, even though she was his mistress, he didn't belong to her.

## Chapter Thirteen

Bill's car smelled of cheap cologne and pine air freshener. She knew he wanted to show off his car, his pride and joy, but it would be the last time she'd ever set foot in here. At least he'd opened the passenger door for her. She pulled at the edge of her skirt and tried to cover her knees. It didn't seem to help curtail his ogling. She watched Bill walk in front of the car and climb into the driver's seat. He turned to look her up and down once more.

"Viola, Viola, Viola. Where have you been hiding all these years?"

"In cube 2493-B," she said and flashed him the smile she'd practiced in the mirror for the past three years.

She should have been doing an internal happy dance when he laughed at her witty comment. Before her trip, she would have done anything for that deep, smooth-as-chocolate laugh to be directed at her. Now, she found herself comparing his laugh to Jerod's. And it wasn't as fulfilling.

The fact that Bill had moved so quickly was still a shock. He must have been on the phone for most of the day in order to get reservations at Murphy's Steak House. That place was booked so far in advance, it would have given Toronto's posh restaurants a run for their money. She'd figured it would have taken a week, maybe two before she'd have her date with him. Plenty of time to choose the right outfit and figure out exactly what to do. Nope, instead he'd asked her out on the first day, and not for the simple business supper she'd had in mind. The only good thing was the fact her lessons were still fresh in her mind.

Bill leaned over and whispered, "I've always liked you."

He didn't wait to see the look of shock on her face and instead he thrust the stick shift into reverse, and backed out of his parking spot.

Almost running over Jerod.

She jumped when she saw Jerod's reflection in the side door mirror, standing off to the side. He raised his hand in a solitary wave, a mischievous smile on his face.

"Damn idiot should watch where he's walking," Bill muttered.

"Where *did* you find our new QA analyst?" she asked, trying to keep her tone light and crush the sudden flare of annoyance. She didn't even know who it was directed toward anymore. Probably herself, after everything that had happened today.

"He was a dream come true. Walked in off the street yesterday with a resume so padded, I figured it was make-believe until I called his references."

"Interesting."

She had to give Jerod credit for being creative. The last thing she'd expected was for him to show up at work today. And for his part, he played the role very well. He even took the time to get to know the reps who would be his responsibility. Of course, he probably hadn't considered what would happen when he up and disappeared after she made her final wish. He'd spoil them and disappear from their lives forever.

God, she had to make that wish and let him go. She wouldn't be able to survive another day like today. Her body tingled at the memory of his touch. She'd barely been able to concentrate for the rest of the day, each call she took blended in with the others. It didn't help that Jerod took every opportunity to question her about processes and procedures. Or that he wasn't shy about using his invisible touch to tease her. The funny thing was he'd looked as surprised as she was when Bill asked her out on a date. That only seemed to egg him on more.

They were going to have a serious talk once she got home from supper. It was about time she put her genie in his place.

"I have to swing by the gas station. Hope you don't mind?" Bill said, his breath coming out in cold puffs in the small space.

"Not at all," she said and smiled at his profile. Any chance to pull herself together could only make things go smoother. She needed this to work.

They pulled into a full service station and waited for the attendant to come out.

When nothing happened immediately, Bill laid on his horn. Bill's loud honking was almost to the point of annoyance when finally the attendant, bundled up in a toque and puffy gloves, came jogging across the dimly lit parking lot to the car.

"Sorry, too friggin' cold to sit out here tonight."

Viola's head snapped around at the sound of Jerod's rich Mediterranean accent. He was wearing an attendant's winter coat and the toque had the station's logo embroidered on the front. His crystal blue eyes were damn near sparkling. What the hell was he *doing*?

Bill couldn't see that the person offering to pump gas into his sedan was his new analyst. Either it was because of Jerod's magic, or he really needed to pay more attention to the world around him. She somehow suspected the latter was probably closer to the truth.

"Took you long enough. Fill it up. Supreme."

"You know, sir, with your type of car, the regular fuel will work just as well—"

"I didn't ask for your opinion," Bill huffed.

"Yes, sir."

Jerod quickly jogged around to Viola's side of the car to where the gas tank was. She watched him with morbid fascination as he snapped his fingers and the gas nozzle floated in the air over to the car and stuck itself into the gas tank. Jerod then began to whistle a tune that sounded vaguely like "When You Wish Upon a Star". At that point, she braced her elbow on the side of the door and lowered her head to her hand. He was so dead.

"You feeling okay?"

"Yup. Think I'm still suffering a bit of jet lag."

Bill tapped an annoying beat out on the steering wheel. "You need to try to stay up all night, work the next day, then collapse in your bed tomorrow night around nine. You'll be back on track before you know it."

She raised her head high enough to look at him. *Is he for real?*

"Thanks, Bill. I might try that."

*Not.*

"No problemo, Vi."

Vi? No one called her Vi, not even her parents. She loathed that nickname. Her head dropped back down to her hand.

A light tapping at her window made her look up. Jerod was standing there. His gaze flicked between her and Bill for only a fraction of a second before Bill pushed the button that rolled her window down.

“That’s forty-three, sir,” he said in an overly cheery voice.

“Debit.” Bill stuck his arm out and almost bopped Viola on the nose.

“Sorry, sir, our debit isn’t working out here. Too friggin’ cold, if you know what I mean. You’ll have to go in to the store.”

“For fuck’s sake,” Bill muttered before snapping his hand back. “I’ll be right back. Then we can hit the restaurant.”

As he got out of the car and slammed the door, she heard him swearing, something about crappy equipment, before turning around and shouting at Jerod, “Clean the windows buddy.”

“Yes, sir.” Jerod gave him a half-hearted two-finger salute.

When she was sure Bill was out of earshot, Viola turned around and practically stuck her head out the window.

“What the hell are you doing here? Aren’t you supposed to be back in your bottle? *Waiting?*”

Jerod grabbed the squeegee from the stale window wash bucket, gave it a good, hard shake and slathered the fluid over the windshield.

“I’m cleaning your window.”

“Jerod.” She used the same tone as when William had an accident on the rug.

“I was bored. Thought I might take a part-time job to occupy myself since you will be out on the town tonight.”

This was not going the way she wanted it to.

“You can stay home and look after my dog. He’s lonely.”

Jerod stopped cleaning the window and bent around so he was only an inch from her face.

"I love your dog, but he's not much for conversation. Besides, *you* should be home looking after your dog."

Annoyance was fast trumping any pleasure she'd taken from seeing him.

"I'm busy making my first wish come true. You're not helping."

Making a good show of cleaning the windows, Jerod took out a cloth from his pocket and scrubbed a stubborn frozen streak off the window.

"I'm certainly helping. I'm cleaning the window so Bill can see where he's going and you won't end up in a ditch somewhere."

Hard to argue with that one. Before she could think of a snappy comeback, Jerod straightened and somehow managed to toss the squeegee from the front of the car to land in the bucket.

Viola rolled her eyes. "Show off."

He looked down at her and for half a second frowned. "I wanted to make sure you were okay. Do you need anything? Mace perhaps?"

"Will you stop!"

"There you go, sir. All clean."

Viola was surprised when Bill climbed back into the car. She hadn't even seen him coming, she'd been so preoccupied with Jerod. In typical genie fashion, he was playing his own game. Probably wanting her to feel guilty for leaving him behind. Well, if that was his plan, it wasn't going to work. The reason she was even sitting in this car was because of the wish he'd granted her. How dare he try to screw things up now. Viola crossed her arm across her chest and refused to look at him further. Of course he was hard to miss in the side mirror when he blew her a kiss.

*Of all the nerve.*

For his part, Bill seemed completely oblivious to her change in mood.

"Now we're on our way. I hope you're in the mood for steak."

"I sure am. Extra rare."

Bill wisely didn't say anything else until they pulled into the parking lot.

If the lot was any indication, the restaurant was packed. There wasn't a free space



anywhere close and they were forced to pull into a spot near the back. When she went to open her door, Bill started tsking.

“Now, I thought we’d agreed that I’d be opening all the doors for you tonight.”

*We did?* “Sorry. Habit.”

“Well, you can if you want. I just didn’t realize you were that type of woman.”

Before she had time to question him further, or get offended for that matter, he’d gotten out of the car, slammed the door and stood waiting for her in front of the hood. When she didn’t move to get out right away, Bill tapped his watch.

“Oh, buddy, don’t pull this tonight,” she muttered.

It took two deep breaths to get her anger under control, before she could get out of the car and actually smile.

“I’ve heard about this place. It’s really hard to get in here isn’t it?”

Bill seemed to puff up at her remark. “It is, actually. But I know the owner and can always get a table. You’ll find I have a lot of connections all over Halifax.”

Viola’s smile twitched from the strain. “I’ve always known you were a very prominent man, Bill.”

“Well, I’ll show you just how prominent over dinner.”

He took her hand and placed it in the crook of his arm. Viola looked down at the contact, seeing how her hand rested against him. It felt wrong. There wasn’t the easy comfort she’d grown accustomed to when she’d gone for walks with Jerod. Bill was all about show and, for the moment, she was the thing he wanted to display. Like a watch.

She was so preoccupied, she’d forgotten the lessons Jerod had given her in Mexico. So she didn’t notice when Bill leaned in and kissed her cheek. His lips felt wet from too much saliva. The kiss clung to her cheek like one her neighbor’s five-year-old daughter had given her once. It took every fiber of strength in her body not to reach up and wipe it off.

“What was that for?” Probably completely the wrong thing to ask, but she was curious to see the answer he’d give.

Bill pulled back an inch, but kept his poise. “I can’t help it. When I’m near such a

pretty woman, it brings out the romantic in me.”

The urge to gag was strong. Instead, she gave him a small smile as they walked across the street.

As she'd suspected, the restaurant was packed. She peeked around the crowd, but so far there wasn't any sign of Jerod. Despite Bill's warm welcome by the hostess, they still had to wait fifteen minutes while a table was cleared for them. As they stood by the door, Viola inspected every man who walked through the door, just in case Jerod tried to sneak in or, more probably, sneak up on her. If Bill suspected she was looking for someone else, he never let on. He was too busy talking to notice anyway.

“Matt and I went to university together. Did our MBA. He went into restaurants and I went into call centers. I think I have the better hours.”

He chuckled and she made an attempt to find something he said amusing. She was about to ask him some inane question about school, when she heard a rich chuckle behind her. Viola spun around, about to lay her deadliest glare on Jerod, when she came face to face with a young man in his early twenties. The blond hair should have been a dead giveaway that it wasn't Jerod. But it was his eyes. They were brown.

Not crystal blue. He wasn't going to bother her any more tonight. The little incident at the gas station had apparently been enough for him and she hoped he was back at her place, petting William. Not wanting to admit it to herself, deep down she was disappointed that he'd given up so easily.

Viola sighed thankfully when the hostess finally told them their table was ready. Her feet were screaming as she walked the short distance across the tiled floor to the small table set up near the kitchen. There was little chance they'd have much in the way of privacy sitting here. A loud clang from the kitchen made her cringe. At least she had an interesting view of the doorway and not the kitchen.

For his part, Bill remained silent until the hostess presented them with their menus. Bill then laid his best grin on her.

“I have to say, you look stunning. If I'd have known your looks would change this much, I'd have sent you on a trip south long ago.”

*Did he just insult me?* Viola gave her head a shake and tried to take the comment as a compliment. No, best to ignore it altogether rather than insult her own intelligence.

Viola leaned forward. "So, are you ready to hear all about my trip?"

"Hmm?"

He wasn't even looking at her. His gaze was firmly fixed on her low neckline and the perfect view she'd just given him of her breasts. Leaning back didn't seem to break his gaze. Viola had to bend down to look him in the eyes.

"Bill?"

"Sorry." He straightened, but didn't look even a little bit apologetic. "What were you saying about your trip?"

She couldn't help the sigh that escaped her lips.

"I was going to give you an *oral* report. Remember?"

That seemed to catch his attention. Bill clapped his hands together loud enough that he managed to be louder than the ruckus from the kitchen. Several people around them turned to see what he was about to do. Viola felt like the assistant to an incompetent magician.

"Right, yes. Tell me about the resort," Bill said, his eyelids scrunching up as he tried to look serious.

"Good evening."

*Oh no.*

Viola looked up at the waiter who'd silently approached and now stood beside them. Dressed in a crisp, white shirt, black pants, and a green apron tied around his waist, Jerod smiled down at Viola. *I'm going to kill him.*

"Good evening to you. My name is J and I'll be your waiter this evening."

How she held her groan in, Viola didn't know. Bill, oblivious as ever, had his nose buried in the menu. She waited, holding her breath to see if Bill would recognize Jerod when he looked up. Somehow it didn't surprise her when he never made eye contact with Jerod. Bill never had much patience for people he felt were beneath him. Why hadn't she noticed that before?

“Would you like to hear tonight’s specials? We have some extra special treats this evening,” he said in a very chipper voice and licked his lips.

Viola glared at him and mouthed the words, *I’m going to kill you*. Jerod winked and blew her a kiss.

“Mind if I order for you, I have some great suggestions,” Bill spoke from behind the menu.

Jerod raised a single eyebrow and glanced over at Viola. He knew she didn’t quite believe him the night at the restaurant in Mexico when he told her Bill would do this. After the rest of this evening’s conversations, nothing surprised her anymore.

“Sure. Why not?”

“Wouldn’t you like to hear the specials first, sir?”

Bill shot Jerod a nasty look, before he laid the menu flat on the table and began pointing to the items.

“To start, I’ll have the clam chowder and fresh bread. The lady will have the garden salad. I’d then like to have a steak, medium rare, with a baked potato and gravy. The lady would like the fettuccini alfredo, hold the scallops. And red wine for both.”

Bill snapped the menu shut. Viola did the same with her gaping mouth. Was this the man she wanted to spend the rest of her life with? Option number two—dying an old maid—suddenly had tremendous appeal.

“Very good, sir. I’ll take your order right to the kitchen,” Jerod said in a pleasant enough tone, but he sneered at Bill through his smile. He also didn’t make a move to leave. Jerod looked purposely at Viola and raised a single eyebrow, as if to say, *you’re going to let him get away with this?*

The more she thought about it, the less that Bill’s behavior sat well with her. When did Jerod come to know her so well?

“Actually, I’d like very much to change my order to a rare steak. I’m lactose intolerant and can’t have the cream.”

Jerod tipped his head toward her and winked. “Of course. Two steaks.”

Jerod spun on his heel and marched off to the kitchen before Bill had a chance to

contradict her. Viola watched him walk away, her eyes drawn to the tight curve of his ass. *Damn, he needed to wear those pants more often.*

“I didn’t know you couldn’t eat dairy,” Bill said, his face screwed up in a frown that made him look like a prune.

When she looked at him, she realized that in the last few hours Bill had lost some of his shine. Whether it was because she was seeing him for the first time or because she really had changed on some fundamental level over the past seven days, she wasn’t sure. “Pills.” Bill snapped his fingers. “You’ll need to take some of those lactose pills. After supper, I’ll take you to the pharmacy and show you what you should be buying. That way you’ll always know.”

Then again, the idea of even attempting to change someone like Bill wasn’t that appealing. Especially after she’d spent so much time with Jerod. She peeked over Bill’s shoulder, hoping to catch a glimpse of her wayward genie. What she saw gave her a jolt.

Jerod was leaning back against the counter, talking to the hostess. Well, he was talking. She was attempting to show him her breasts by leaning over the podium that stood by the door. She even went so far as to reach out and touch his chest. Okay, she was probably picking a piece of food off his shirt. But still!

*What the hell is he trying to pull?* Popping in and out of her conversations with Bill, trying to confuse her, only to turn around and flirt with some girl who didn’t even know who he really was?

Viola turned her attention back to Bill, who was happily chatting about something regarding a business venture he planned on exploring. Jerod was a fantasy. Bill, despite his annoying faults, was real. The same couldn’t be said for Jerod. He would either poof away, or run away at the first opportunity. And if he didn’t run after she set him free, he damn well better consider it after his little performance tonight.

When she finally saw Jerod approach them again, this time with their wine glasses balanced on his tray, Viola couldn’t help but show him who the mistress was in their relationship. She quickly switched chairs so that she now sat beside Bill instead of across the table from him. He paused only long enough to stare at her legs which she no longer

had hidden under the table. She re-crossed them, to ensure his eyes weren't going anywhere. As soon as Jerod was in earshot, she laughed.

"That is hilarious, Bill. I didn't know you were so funny. Oh look, our wine."

The scowl on Jerod's face was worth the price of having Bill ogle her. Jerod didn't say anything, only set the wine glasses down a little too hard before he marched away from the table.

"He won't be getting a tip from me," Bill announced, shaking his head. "I'll have to talk to Matt about training his staff better."

"Don't be too harsh on him. He may be having an off night."

And if he wasn't, Viola wanted to make damn sure he was before she left here.  
*Damn genie.*

"That's your problem, Viola. You're too forgiving of other people's faults. Always making excuses for other's poor performance. You'll never survive in the business world with that kind of attitude. You need to be tough." He drove his fist into his open palm.

She knew she wasn't perfect, but she'd never been told that being nice to others was a fault. Maybe she *was* in the wrong business if that's what people thought of her.

"Speaking of business..." she needed to get this conversation back on track and quickly, "...would you like to talk about the vacation resort I stayed at?"

"Where?"

Through the use of some otherworldly strength, she managed to not roll her eyes.

"The resort in Cozumel. Remember, I was going to give you a run down?"

"Oh, yeah." He leaned in and lowered his voice. "How was it?"

She was about to tell him about the residents of the resort and the donation Beth had made, when two things happened almost simultaneously. Bill put his hand on her knee, and Jerod cleared his throat loudly.

"Your appetizers have arrived."

He set Bill's chowder down with a clunk on the table, sending a small portion of the liquid sloshing over the side. He wasn't very gentle with her salad either.

"Fresh pepper?"

The evil grin on Jerod's face sent a chill through Viola. If she didn't know better, based on the look on his face, she'd be concerned for Bill's health. As it was, she was concerned for herself. Jerod cranked the long wooden peppermill over her salad, looking very much like he was wringing someone's neck. Jerod then turned quickly to Bill and the end of the pepper mill caught Bill's water glass, sending the entire contents squarely into his lap.

Bill jumped up with a high-pitched squeal, frantically brushing the ice cubes off his now-wet crotch.

"Oh, terribly sorry about that. Cold?" Jerod asked innocently.

Bill's entire face turned red. "You stupid sonofabitch. I'll have your job for this."

"That's fine, sir. I won't need it after tonight," he said with a shrug.

Viola jumped up and tried to dry Bill's shirt and legs with the damp napkin. "It was an accident, Bill. Try to relax."

When she realized she was close to touching his groin, she quickly handed him the napkin and took a step back.

"Don't tell me to fucking relax," Bill snapped.

Viola's mouth dropped open.

"I'm going to the men's room to dry off and then directly to the manager. I expect a different waiter for the rest of my meal and this entire experience better be free." Bill stormed off, dripping water as he walked.

Viola turned very slowly to face Jerod. The arrogant genie was standing there with his arms crossed, looking very pleased with himself.

"There. I cooled him off for you."

"Are you trying to ruin my life?" she said with a calm voice she didn't entirely feel.

Jerod faced her and smirked. People all around them were looking, not even attempting to hide the fact they were listening to them.

"I did you a favor. He was getting physical with you."

She took a step closer. "Considering what we spent an entire week preparing for, did you ever stop to think, for even a single moment, that maybe I *wanted* him to get physical

with me?"

He snorted. "He's not man enough for you."

Why would he do this to her? He knew all along what she intended to do once she returned home. This was her wish, and now he was trying to sabotage it. It didn't make sense. It was almost like he was jealous. No, he wouldn't be. Best not to even *think* about that possibility.

Viola walked forward and made sure she was right in his face.

"And I would love to know your opinion on who *is* man enough for me?"

He didn't move, didn't speak. He simply stared at her. His eyes seemed to darken, the pupils widening enough to almost completely swallow the crystal blue. Viola's heart began to pound, but she didn't back down. She watched him swallow, his gaze roaming her face as if he were memorizing every detail.

There was a commotion at the front of the restaurant that drew everyone's attention away from their staring match. Somewhere, her mind registered that it was Bill who was causing the scene. Probably getting Jerod fired from his first shift.

"You deserve better than *him*." Jerod motioned toward Bill with his chin.

"What if I can't find better than *him*? Did you stop to consider that for even one second?"

He closed his eyes for a moment and swallowed hard. When he opened them once more, he took a half step to her and whispered, "You'll always find someone better."

And she had—he just couldn't stay with her.

She couldn't handle this anymore. She grabbed her coat and slipped it over her shoulders.

"I'm going home."

She turned to leave and ran right into Bill, who grabbed her by the shoulders.

"Viola, you can sit down. Our waiter is going to be working in the kitchen for the rest of his shift. Washing dishes," he said with enough venom to warrant a trip to the doctor.

"I'd like to go home, actually. I'm very tired and need to lie down."



He squeezed her shoulders a little too tightly. "I think you're being a bit extreme. The man will be fired after his shift. Our steaks will be free. Besides, what else do you have going on this evening?"

It only took two steps back to break from his grasp, and sidestep his body.

"Goodnight, Bill."

"You're making a big mistake."

"I don't think so."

"Viola," he whined, sounding very much like a child.

She didn't wait around to hear any more. She walked out of the restaurant with her shoulders back and head held high. As she left, she could have sworn she heard the light pattering of applause behind her as she did.

Fifteen dollars. That's how much the cab ride back to the office cost her so she could get her car to drive home. And it was worth every blessed penny. Sticking her key in the door alerted William that she was home, sending him into a torrent of barks. She barely had the door open a crack and he'd pushed his small, wet nose through the door to sniff at her.

"Hey, baby." She scooped him up in her arms and felt her body relax as he proceeded to lick her face. "At least you still love me."

William agreed with a small bark. She kicked off her heels, walked over to her couch and collapsed onto it. She wanted to cry, but couldn't. That required a vast amount of energy, something she was seriously lacking at the moment.

Viola closed her eyes and let her head fall back against the couch. "Today sucked."

"I actually thought today went quite well," Jerod said from somewhere in front of her.

Viola groaned. *It isn't going to end.* "Can you please go away?"

She heard him laugh and half rolled over to look at him. Jerod was dressed in his usual genie attire and floating in the middle of her living room. Not only did he have a

smug grin on his face, he was eating grapes. Her stomach growled to remind her that she still hadn't eaten supper and it was damn near eight-thirty.

"I should have waited for the steak."

"It's a good thing you didn't."

When he didn't continue, she threw a pillow at him.

He simply laughed and popped another grape into his mouth before he continued. "The cooks don't like your friend Bill. Whenever he comes to the restaurant, they usually do something to his food."

"Something?"

He shrugged. "It's best if I don't say."

The possibilities ran through her mind at rocket speed, each one more disgusting than the last. She shuddered and thanked her lucky stars for the close call.

"I'm never eating there again."

Their conversation died as they sat there looking at each other. Viola couldn't keep up with the emotions racing through her. She was furious with him for his interference tonight. But at the same time, Bill's performance on their first date wasn't stellar. Bill was a jerk, and her life the way it was right now was certainly better than what he could ever offer her. Had Jerod trusted her judgment, she would have come to that conclusion on her own.

Jerod's cocky grin was back. He looked very much like he did the afternoon he beat the young man at Dance Dance Revolution. Jerod liked to play to win. The idea that Viola was nothing more than a prize to him hurt.

"Why?" she asked, hoping Jerod knew what she was asking of him.

His lips puckered and, for a second, she wanted to feel his lips on her neck, making the memories of dinner fade. Completely abandon herself to his touch and continue to live in the fantasy. But she couldn't do that either.

Jerod floated over to her and touched her head with his finger. She began to float off the couch and toward him. William began to bark frantically, until she dropped him lightly back on the couch.

Memories of their weightless lovemaking rushed back to her. She'd never felt as free as she had that night. How could any man she ever dated live up to a night like that? When she floated next to him, Jerod took her hand in his and kissed the back of it gently.

"As I said in the restaurant, you deserve better than Bill." His words were hot against her skin.

He turned her hand over and continued to kiss her wrist, rubbing lazy strokes in her palm with his thumb. She moaned when he licked a short trail across her pulse line.

"This isn't fair," she whispered.

"No one said I had to be fair."

She pulled her arm away, confusion mixed with pain made it hard to breathe.

"Viola?"

She swallowed hard. For both their sakes, she needed to do this, to end things. She'd never be able to move on. Besides, if her plan worked, maybe they'd have a chance.

"Jerod, I'd like to make my final wish."

## Chapter Fourteen

Viola watched Jerod closely to see if he knew what she was about to do. Instead of the relief she thought he might feel, she saw a flash of regret cross his face, before he masked his emotions once again. He put his feet firmly on the ground and motioned for her to do the same. Standing as straight as he could, he folded his arms across his chest.

“Of course, Mistress. What is your final wish?”

In her mind, she tossed the words around, making sure they sounded right. Jerod didn't rush her, probably anticipating his immediate disappearance once he granted her wish.

She took a deep breath. “Jerod, with my last wish I'd like to grant you your freedom.”

Jerod stood there, his lips a tight, thin line, staring at her. She'd expected something else. Excitement, perhaps.

“Jerod?”

“I can't.”

She took an involuntary step backwards. “What do you mean you can't?”

He shrugged. “Remember I mentioned the rules that I had to abide by?”

“You said you can't make anyone fall in love with me, you can't bring anyone back from the dead and you can't grant me more wishes.” By the end of her speech, she'd walked right up to him, her finger now poking his chest.

He reached up and took her hand in his. His fingers were warm as he laced them in between hers.

“And I can't set myself free,” he whispered.

Her heart squeezed in her chest. This wasn't fair.

“Why not? I thought you could do anything?”

He pulled her into a tight hug, kissing her hair and temple. She tipped her head back giving him access to her lips. His kiss was tender, comforting. *This isn't fair.*

"Come here." He pulled her over to the couch and sat down. Not for a second did he release her hand. When she relaxed against him, he sighed.

"The genie's curse is a little more complicated than what your books and movies have led you to believe. We are all powerful, except when it comes to our own fate."

"But I thought my wishes—"

"Can't go against the rules. I've been cursed. Nothing can change that."

He looked like he was in pain, embarrassed, but he didn't look away. She didn't want to ask, didn't know if she wanted her opinion of him shattered by some three-thousand-year-old misdeed. But she had to know.

"What did you do?" Her words were barely audible.

Something shimmered in the air, catching Viola's attention. *Magic?* She focused harder, but it moved beyond her sight. Like a word that you can't quite think of. Jerod hadn't noticed, too wrapped up in his own thoughts and memories to see anything else.

"I was a much different man back then. Arrogant, self-centered."

"What do you mean different?" She nudged him with her shoulder and smiled. "You weren't annoying back then?"

He didn't bite. "I was cruel. I killed men in battles and took their women as my own."

Viola felt the momentary joy she'd felt drain away. "You raped them?"

"Gods, no," he said urgently, looking shocked as he gave her hand a squeeze. "If you believe nothing else, please believe that I would never hurt a woman. I loved them all in a small way. Every one of them came to my bed willingly."

Of that she had no doubt.

She took a deep breath and hoped her courage would hold out. "What happened, then?"

He didn't say anything for a long time, his gaze alternating between her face and where their hands met. Every second that passed made her heart break a bit more. In all

the time she'd known him, she never suspected there was a reason like this, a darkness that seemed to weigh on him. They'd been so happy on the island. How the hell could things change so quickly?

"There was a woman," he said finally. He stopped for a second and seemed to steady himself before he continued. "I didn't know at the time, but she wasn't well mentally. My men came to her village. We'd been patrolling the southern border between Olympia and Sparta for months and needed rest. The attacks from the Spartans were growing. They were swift and without warning, and in the end had worn us out."

"When I met her at the tavern, she seemed pleasant enough. She smiled at me, sat on my lap and toyed with my hair. It didn't take much to seduce her. I barely remembered bedding her. What I didn't realize until much later, after her family accused me of her death, was that she'd been a virgin."

He stopped talking, his eyes locked on a point over her shoulder. His guilt was etched on his face, his muscles tight as Viola watched him struggle against the weight of the memories.

Viola couldn't imagine what it would have been like for the young girl faced with the temptation Jerod would have presented. She didn't think she'd be able to resist Jerod if he was in full seduction mode, let alone a young woman with no experience. She gave his hand a squeeze for him to continue.

"The next morning, she seemed to think that our relationship meant something more than it was. I had no idea she harbored these feelings for me when I left. We had to continue our patrol, defend our people. We didn't come back for months and when we did, I found out she'd been disgraced. I'm not sure what happened that night, but I must have bedded her again. Later, I learned, she killed herself." He turned to her, regret on his face like a second skin. "She was disgraced and it was my fault."

"Jerod, that wasn't your fault. There's no way you could have known what she would do."

"No, it *was* my fault. Her grandmother seemed to agree."

Viola pulled back a little, her mind trying to reconcile the story with the man she'd

grown to know.

“She’s the one who cursed you?” Her voice came out as little more than a whisper.

His eyes traveled to her carry-on bag that was still lying in a heap on her floor. With a snap of his fingers, his bottle floated up and out of the bag, and over to rest of the coffee table in front of them.

“I got very drunk that night trying to forget about...gods, I don’t even remember her name anymore. I went to bed. Alone. I woke up much later to this sound.” He shook his head and released her hand to cover his ears. “Chanting. It wouldn’t stop. The grandmother was some sort of shaman. Had a connection to the magic realm. She cursed me.”

“I don’t understand. How?”

His mouth opened and closed several times, but nothing came out. He closed his eyes and growled before he held out his open hand.

“It’s easier if I show you.”

Viola looked at his open hand for a solid minute before she could move. Did she really want to see this? See a side of him that may not be all shiny and magical? She knew that if she didn’t, she’d never fully understand him. Gently she set her hand in his.

“Okay.”

In a blink, she was standing in a room. It was dark and cold, even though a fire burned in a large open pit in the corner. She couldn’t get a sense of anything outside, except to know it was dark and damp.

A moan caught her attention. She turned to see Jerod lying naked on a small mat piled with furs. His body was exactly as it was today—taut muscles, black hair covering his chest, even his goatee. She reached out, wanting to touch him to feel if he was real, when the door opened.

A small woman entered the room. She shuffled past Viola and over to Jerod’s side. Her face was so lined and wrinkled, it appeared to collapse in on itself. The woman reached into her pocket and pulled out a small pouch. Viola tried to get a better look, but was too scared to move.

When the woman reached inside, she began to chant in a language Viola didn't recognize. Words blended with a strange melody that threatened to lull her into a trance. Jerod continued to sleep, oblivious to what was going on. He stretched ever so slightly so the furs moved dangerously close to revealing everything.

"Jerod, wake up," she whispered.

The woman didn't stop and threw a small portion of the powder over him. Her chanting grew louder. From out of nowhere, a second voice joined in. Viola looked around the small room, but there was no one else. When a third voice emerged, she realized they were all coming from the woman. Viola shivered and had to fight the urge to run.

"Jerod." She was more insistent this time, but still nothing.

Next, the woman took out a vial of liquid. She popped a cork off and bent down to pour the thick slime into his mouth. He coughed but swallowed all of it.

"Jerod," she said loud enough this time that he surely would wake up.

"He cannot hear you."

The entire scene froze at the sound of a voice behind her. Viola stood and turned around to come face-to-face with a woman. But not the one who cursed Jerod. This woman looked younger, her face smooth and free of the wrinkles that come with time. A mass of silver hair crowned her head, falling loosely over her shoulders and onto her plain, shapeless black dress. There was something about her, a hint of something ancient.

Suddenly very fearful, Viola took a step backwards. "Who are you? How did you get here?"

"My name isn't important. It has been lost in time for many years now. And as for why I'm here, all you need know is that I'm responsible for making sure justice is met in our world."

"But I thought Jerod was controlled by the curse?"

The woman looked at her and smiled knowingly, like an adult who needed to explain something to a child. She took a step toward Viola, her black dress scraping lightly against the floor.



“What’s important right now is Jerod. Why are you here?”

That was a good question. Why was she here? Because she owed Jerod for his kindness and his insight. And maybe she was more than a little bit in love with him.

“I want to try to help Jerod. To free him,” she said with as much confidence as she could muster.

The woman seemed to consider that, her liquid gaze inspecting Viola. Viola tried not to move, waiting to see if she’d pass whatever secret test she was currently undergoing.

“Why?” the woman asked after several moments had passed.

Viola looked back down to the scene frozen in front of her. The grandmother’s hand was wrapped around the glass bottle Viola recognized as Jerod’s home. Once the scene began to play again, she knew the curse would unfold and he’d be trapped. Again. Viola’s fingers curled into the palm of her hand. *Did he deserve his fate?*

“He’s paid for his wrongs against her granddaughter and he’s very sorry for what he did. It’s time he gets a second chance.”

“Because you feel he gave you a second chance at life?”

“Pardon?”

The woman let out a squeaky laugh. “Child, there aren’t any secrets from me here. You’ve fallen in love with the man who helped you discover who you really are. You want to repay him by giving him what you think he wants.”

A shiver passed down her spine. “What do you mean what I thinks he wants?”

The older woman glided slowly over to Viola and patted her cheek. Her fingers were cold against her warm skin and it sent a chill through Viola.

“He wasted the first part of his life whoring, killing and drinking. He wanted all the power in the world. So she gave it to him.”

The woman wrapped an arm around Viola’s shoulders and tugged her back a few steps. She snapped her fingers and the old woman began to chant again. Viola’s chest tightened when she set the bottle on the floor at his feet. She pulled a small bag from her skirts, opened it and threw the contents over him.

Jerod screamed and Viola felt her body stiffen. His eyes had flown open, his mouth

still wide in a now-silent scream. The old woman's chanting had grown louder, until she was practically shouting in the small room.

Voices from outside the room were coming closer, investigating what was going on. A pounding at the door didn't stop the woman. She threw the rest of the powder on Jerod and shouted. His entire body glowed as he was impossibly pulled into the bottle.

And, in one final flash, he was gone.

"All the power he ever wanted," the woman beside her said in a sad tone.

The scene around her faded until all that remained was Viola and the woman.

"Jerod isn't like that anymore." Her words came out softly.

"Really? Do you truly believe that if he were released, he would stay with you? Remain faithful for the rest of his life?" She turned and looked intently at Viola.

Until this very moment Viola would have said no. He'd been tied down for so long, the urge to wander where he wanted, when he wanted must be overpowering. But, after seeing this, she knew freedom wasn't what he wanted. The look on his face as he'd recounted the story spoke volumes. It was companionship, a purpose for his life that he needed.

"I do." And deep down she knew he would. "But even if he didn't, he still deserves his freedom. A life sentence isn't fair."

Viola was willing to take that chance. Even if he didn't stay with her, he deserved the chance to live his own life. Free.

The old woman shook her head. "I hope you're right."

"I am."

"Time will tell."

The woman blew some dust in Viola's face, causing her eyes to shut, instantly, setting her lungs on fire. She began to cough and cough until she felt a strong hand against her back.

"Viola? Are you okay?"

When she was able to open her eyes again, she found herself staring at Jerod. She was back in her living room.

“Did you do that?” she whispered, not fully trusting her own voice.

He frowned. “I showed you what happened the night I was...changed. What’s wrong?”

“There was a woman...” she cleared her throat, “...who talked to me about you.”

“Not possible. I only showed you an image. The one captured by the bottle,” he said, frowning.

She couldn’t stop her hands from shaking, so she sat on them. “I need to think about what she said.”

“Sweetheart, I think you’re overtired. You need to eat. You still haven’t, remember? You should try to rest.”

She nodded absentmindedly.

“What do you want? I can conjure up anything in the world up for you.”

“A double cheeseburger with large French fries and a chocolate shake.”

When she looked at him, he merely blinked.

“I’m really hungry.”

Jerod snapped his fingers and instantly the aroma of food hit her hard, sending her stomach into a gurgling frenzy.

“Have I mentioned that I love when you do that?” She grabbed the burger and stuffed a large portion of it into her mouth.

“I have to say, I’ve grown rather accustomed to my powers. I’m not sure what I would do without them. I’ve had them for so long.”

Viola stopped chewing for a moment. She hadn’t considered that.

After a large painful swallow, she put the burger down.

“Would that bother you? I mean, not having your powers?”

He leaned back into the couch and closed his eyes.

“I’d miss the floating. I’ve always enjoyed that.” He peeked at her through half-squinted eyes. “No, I wouldn’t miss them. Though I’d be useless for a while until I figured out how to live again.”

Viola clapped her hands together, grabbed her shake and stood up.

"Then that settles things."

"What?"

"I'm going to figure out how to break this curse."

She walked out of the living room, sucking on the milkshake.

"Your food."

"I'm coming back."

It took a while, but she managed to find the power cable to her laptop and brought the whole thing out into the living room.

"What are you doing?" Jerod said and popped a fry into his mouth. He grimaced. "How can you eat this garbage?"

She snatched the rest of the fries before he could devour the rest. "Don't eat them if you don't like them. And research."

"You think you're going to find information on three-thousand-year-old curses that change people into genies? You need to eat more. You're a little light in the head."

She threw a fry at him. "Pessimist. There's more out there than you realize. Even about three-thousand-year-old genie curses."

Her laptop whirled to life, and Viola stuffed the rest of her food into her mouth. Honestly, she didn't have two clues about what to start looking for. But it was the only thing she knew to do. And she had to do something.

"Okay, let's see what we can find."

"Viola, this is pointless."

She glared up at him. "Do you want to stay a genie for the rest of your life or not?"

When he didn't answer, she straightened. She'd assumed he wanted to become human again. Stupid, she never even thought to ask him.

"Do you?" Her voice shook ever so slightly, and she had to clear her throat to get rid of it.

Jerod stared at her, his expression unreadable. "I'm not sure. What would be the benefit of me becoming human again?"

She set her laptop on the coffee table and turned to face him.

“What do you mean what is the benefit? You’d be able to do whatever you want—”

“I can do that now,” he interrupted.

Viola crossed her arms across her chest. “You’d be free to live where ever you want.”

“Every time I am summoned by a new master I’m somewhere new.”

“You would be free of needing a master. You would have free will.” She felt the frustration building. Why the hell was he being so stubborn?

“Will I really? You are forced to go to work every day. You can only buy limited items because you need more money and are forced to work for a man like Bill, who quite frankly, is a moron.”

“But I don’t have to live in a bottle.” Her argument sounded weak, even to her.

He leaned forward, his knees touching her thigh, sending a shiver through her body. His eyes glowed crystal blue, sending her heart into overdrive.

“So I’ll ask you again, why should I give up all my powers to become human again?”

William took that opportunity to insinuate himself between them. He totally ignored Viola and promptly curled up in Jerod’s lap.

“William hates everyone. What did you do to win him over?”

“I gave him treats. The good ones.” Jerod winked and scratched William under his chin.

“If we break the curse, you’ll be able to spend time with William and...” She couldn’t look at him. She kept her attention fixed on William and watched Jerod as he stroked William’s head. “And I would like to spend more time with you too.”

Jerod reached out and cupped her chin in his hands, forcing her to look him in the eyes.

“Really?”

She realized it was the first time since she’d met him that he sounded scared. Could it be that he wanted her, wanted to stay with her and he didn’t know if she felt the same?

“Really.” The word came out as a whisper.

“Show me.”

She heard the tremor in his voice and she loved him for it. He was nervous. He was probably wondering if she could actually break the curse and if he was making the biggest mistake of his very long life. One he'd regret and hate her for the rest of his life if things went sour.

Viola picked William up and set him on the floor. She then stood and offered Jerod her hand.

“There's only one way I can show you. But you have to come with me.”

He paused, looking at her hand before he took it. “Show me,” he repeated.

Her bedroom wasn't an exotic place. There were no ocean breezes rolling in from the balcony. There were no large, king-size beds they could explore. She was almost embarrassed by her belongings, they felt so simple and plain. Or else it was Jerod himself. Things always felt more exotic when he was with her. At least she'd put her laundry away.

She walked to the end of her bed and turned to face him. He'd stopped at the doorway and stood watching her. She smiled as she tucked a piece of her hair behind her ear. She looked down and realized she was still wearing the same clothes she'd worn on her date with Bill. Had it only been an hour since she dumped him? Had she had him long enough to dump him?

Stripping wasn't something she considered herself an expert at. Considering she'd only done it once, and that was in a genie's magic bottle with props, she really didn't know what to do. A creative streak wasn't what she needed right now.

Viola grabbed the bottom of her shirt and pulled it over her head in one swift action. Next, she unhooked the clasp that held her skirt in place and let it tumble to the floor. In only her bra and panties, she walked over to him. Her heart was beating hard and fast and her stomach felt like a cluster of butterflies lived inside.

She took his hand in hers and rubbed his palm with her thumb.

“I can't tell you what your life would be like if you gave up your powers. But I do know I would like to be there with you. If you want me, that is.”

He didn't speak. She felt him stiffen, but she didn't back down. She wanted him. It was about time she stopped being a coward. She needed to know.

"Do you? Want me for keeps?"

## Chapter Fifteen

She felt amazingly calm considering her future happiness was riding on Jerod's answer. She was relaxed and free of the uncertainty that had haunted her most of her life. Why she hadn't said anything to him before now was a mystery. She had feelings for Jerod. Okay, screw it, she was completely in love with him. Why she'd even bothered to go out with Bill was a complete mystery.

For his part, Jerod seemed completely on edge, which surprised her, considering nothing *ever* seemed to bother him, not like this at least.

He brought her hand up to his mouth and kissed the back of it. She felt the familiar tingle as his lips kissed a slow trail up her hand to her arm and around so he could kiss her pulsing wrist.

When he reached the palm of her hand, he placed a single kiss in the center before he brought her arm up and placed it on his shoulder.

"I do want you."

And that's all he was able to get out. Viola sprung on him, her lips crushing his. She didn't want gentle. Her whole life had been gentle, subdued. Right now, the only thing she wanted was hot, sweaty sex.

And a genie in her bed. Not just any genie—Jerod.

She was thankful he had his genie outfit on and not the cumbersome suit from before. Her hands found his sides and traced a path over his abs. She made sure to spend extra time playing with the hair on his stomach and fingered the waistband to his pants.

Jerod pulled back from their kiss only to place his mouth on her neck. She felt his tongue trace a path as he tasted her skin. Her body responded to every touch. When he pulled her bra strap down and kissed her shoulder, goosebumps rose and shivers trailed down her back.



Her hands continued to explore his body. She caressed his flat nipples with her thumbs, causing them to immediately pucker from the contact. He moaned and nipped at her shoulder.

“Minx,” he sighed.

“You have no idea. I’ve been repressed for years.” She grabbed his crotch and squeezed his erect cock. “I have lost time to make up for.”

His groan echoed loud in her room. She continued to massage his balls, enjoying the feeling of them, the coolness of his sac in comparison with the rest of his body.

Not wanting to be outdone, Jerod tugged her bra cup all the way down and attacked her nipple with his mouth. His tongue teased her until she couldn’t think straight, sucking and nibbling on her sensitive bud.

“Don’t...stop.”

She buried her hands in his head and pulled him closer. Her legs began to shake, the strain of standing against so much pleasure was overwhelming. Sensing her plight, Jerod wrapped his arms around her and carried her to the bed.

The duvet absorbed her body as he set her down gently. Not wanting him to escape, she wrapped her legs around his waist, preventing him from leaving her. Not that she thought he was going anywhere. But a girl couldn’t be too careful when dealing with a genie.

Especially since she didn’t want magic this time. She only wanted him.

Jerod smiled and raised his hand, ready to snap his fingers. She wrapped her fingers around his in time to stop him.

“Whatever you were about to do, don’t,” she whispered.

He frowned, but lowered his hand. “Why?”

“You’re all the magic I need.”

His eyes widened. Barely, but she saw it all the same. He kneeled down so his knees were on the outside of hers, trapping her body beneath his.

“You are a unique soul, Viola.”

Not *I love you*, but it would do for now.

"Take your vest off," she said in a husky voice that sounded more like it belonged in a porn movie than from her.

Jerod rose onto his knees, towering above her on the bed. His eyes never left hers as he shrugged the silk garment off and threw it to the floor. She'd seen him naked before, but there was something about the way he knelt over her like that. It set her juices pouring out of her. He placed his hands on his hips, making his biceps flex and relax. She wanted to feel his arms around her. The sooner the better.

"I want you to take my bra off." This time the words came easier. She wasn't a fragile flower anymore. Viola White was in charge and loving every minute of it.

She scooted up into a sitting position, leaning back so her breasts were thrusting up at him. In this position, he had to press against her to reach the clasp in the back. The friction between them, his warmth seeping through her thin material, pushed her arousal even higher.

When the clasp gave, Jerod leaned back. He kept his fingers hooked on the material and slipped the bra down, exposing her to the dim light of the room. His eyes caressed her skin and she shivered under his gaze.

"Beautiful."

It only took her a second to slip the bra off the rest of the way and toss it aside.

"Lay back," he issued his gentle command and sealed it with a lick of his lips.

She felt her body recline, but kept her eyes fixed on him.

"Hardly seems fair. You have more clothing on than me."

He cocked an eyebrow as he hooked his thumbs under his waistband.

"Would you like me to take them off, Mistress?"

*Do I ever.* "Yes."

Jerod smiled and tugged them down half an inch. She tried not to react, but she felt like a child waiting for someone else to open a present so she could have her turn. Another half inch and she felt her impatience grow. When he stopped short of exposing the raging erection that threatened to pop through his pants, she wanted to scream.

"Jerod," she begged, squirming on the bed.

He jerked his pants down so that his engorged shaft stood proud in front of her. Viola felt the air leave her lungs at the sight of him. God, he was the most amazing man she'd ever laid eyes on.

He leaned forward on one arm and fingered her panties. "Now I believe you are the one overdressed."

"I wouldn't be opposed to you removing them."

It was all the invitation he needed. She lifted her hips so he was able to slide them down her legs with ease, before he threw them to join the rest of their clothing on the floor.

When he stretched his naked body alongside hers, Viola suddenly felt everything was finally right. Her hip connected with his thigh. His calf was draped over hers, rubbing and teasing her. Jerod touched her stomach, circling her belly button with his finger.

"I want you," she said and sucked on her bottom lip.

"Want me to what? Touch you?"

He was teasing her of course, but she liked his games. She nodded, squirming under his finger as he brushed the top of her pubic curls. She was so wet, ready for him. All he needed to do was take her.

Jerod lazily drew his hand up her stomach and between her breasts, before letting his fingers brush her hard nipples. His touch was so light it felt like a feather caressing her. She balled the sheets in her hands and prayed she wouldn't lose control as he bent his head down and sucked one of her erect buds into his mouth.

The heavy groan that escaped her made her body shudder. Jerod chuckled, but continued his assault with his tongue. When she reached over to touch him, he knocked her hand away.

"I want to touch you," she said and groaned again when he flicked his tongue.

He pulled away long enough to say, "No," before he returned his mouth to her other breast.

"No fair."

When he looked up at her, his eyes looked dark, the pupils were so wide. He crawled closer to her face, but kept a small space between them.

“Just this once, I want to be the one in control. I want to touch and taste every inch of your body so I can remember everything about you.”

Viola didn't think it was possible, but her heart began to beat even faster. All she could do was nod her agreement. He wasted no time and nudged her head to the side so he could kiss her neck.

He was perfect. Jerod knew exactly where she liked to be touched. When he rolled her over onto her stomach so he could caress her back, she thought she'd died and gone to heaven. Her back was a giant erogenous zone, one that most men never noticed. But Jerod knew. She shivered when he trailed his kisses from her shoulder across the back of her neck and down her shoulder blade. His fingers stroked the small of her back, sending her hips bucking forward into the bed.

And then he began to massage her ass. Never in her life had anyone done that for her. The feeling was out of this world. He would alternate a hard squeeze with a gentle one, running his hand over her flank up to her back again.

“You have the most beautiful ass I've ever seen.”

She giggled. He gave her a light spank in response.

“I was being serious. A woman's ass is one of her most attractive features.”

“Really?” That was a new one for her. She wiggled her bum in the air. “Prove it.”

She should have known better than to taunt a genie. Jerod leaned over and placed a kiss on her left, then right cheek. It felt foreign to have someone touch her there, let alone kiss her. Jerod continued to kiss, moving up to the small of her back. She thought he'd abandoned her ass when she suddenly felt his hand begin to tease her.

She sucked in a breath when his finger slipped between her cheeks to tease her briefly before finding her now very wet opening. He slid a finger inside her to moisten it, before pulling out to tease her clit.

Viola buried her face in the bed to cover up her moan. She wouldn't last long if he kept this up. Her hips joined his hands in the silent rhythm, rocking hard against his

fingers.

“You’re so beautiful. Don’t let anyone convince you otherwise.”

Her body began to quiver, both inside and out. She could feel Jerod’s cock pressing hard against her thigh. She wanted him. She wanted to climax with him inside her. He shifted his body so his head lay beside hers, his hand continuing to tease her. Viola reached down, her hand wrapped around his erection and squeezed. She felt him exhale sharply against her shoulder.

“Can’t leave well enough alone, can you?”

She gently scrapped a nail across his tip. “You’ve taught me too well.”

Jerod rolled her onto her back and eased himself on top of her. This was different from the other times they’d made love. She could almost hear his thoughts. Catch glimpses of their life together.

It was wonderful.

When he eased his tip to the opening of her pussy, Viola locked her gaze with his. She wanted to watch him. Memorize every feature. He pushed into her, his eyes fluttered shut and his jaw clenched. Her own threatened to do the same, but she refused to give in. His even thrusts in and out caressed every nerve inside her, the pleasure building faster than she wanted. Jerod swallowed, his body straining under his control.

And then he bent his head and kissed her. Her eyes shut automatically, focusing her attention on his touch. His mouth devoured her. She could feel him groan into her when she wrapped her arms around his neck and pulled him closer still.

The warmth between her legs began to spread up through the rest of her body. A fine sheen of sweat covered her and she felt her body shake. She couldn’t hold out much longer.

“Jerod,” she gasped.

He knew and increased the tempo, grinding against her pubic bone. Everything was focused on that spot, that single place where she knew he would bring her to heaven. One final grind of his hips and her climax slammed into her. She screamed as wave after wave of pleasure poured over her again and again. Jerod didn’t stop until every last wave

finished rippling through her.

When he eventually stopped, Viola couldn't open her eyes. She held on to his shoulders, gasping for air, and praying she wouldn't die from the overload.

"Look at me," he cooed.

It took more effort than she thought possible, but she managed to open her eyes. As soon as she did, tightness pulled at her chest. Jerod frowned as he brushed the single tear that trickled down her face.

"Did I hurt you?" he asked.

She shook her head, knowing her voice would fail her. Instead, she kissed him. A gentle kiss, one she hoped showed him that she was in love. She ran her fingers along his neck and into his hair.

Jerod resumed his thrusting, this time at a much faster, more urgent pace. Viola thrust her hips up to meet his. Every time, they came together, joining their bodies as close as any two people could be. She squeezed her inner muscles around his shaft, and he faltered for a second.

"Do that again," he begged.

As he thrust forward, she squeezed again. Jerod groaned loud.

"If I could die, that would kill me."

"Then I should stop."

"You wouldn't be that cruel."

To tease, Viola did stop for several thrusts until he bent his head and nipped her neck. She immediately squeezed as hard as she could and held it. Jerod increased the tempo again. Viola's body reacted and she felt her second orgasm build. Her muscles began to vibrate and she wasn't sure if she could hold on much longer. Jerod didn't give her long to wait. His thrusting became frenzied as he cried out. Viola felt her body react and shake as she came a second time.

At last, he collapsed on top of her. Her breath came in gasps as his weight pushed her into the bed. She had to push against him twice before he rolled off onto his side. She wasn't abandoned for long. He draped an arm around her and pulled her close.

His shaft twitched against her back, as the blood slowly returned to the rest of his body. His breath cooled her skin as it returned to its normal steady cadence. She shivered and pulled his arm tighter, and pulled her knees into the fetal position.

“Cold?” he whispered near her ear.

“Mumm.” She snuggled her ass closer against him.

She heard a light snap of his fingers and they were under the covers, the duvet pulled up to her neck.

“God, I love it when you do that.”

He chuckled and tweaked her nipple.

“I thought you loved that?”

“That too.”

The night tugged at her. So much had happened in such a short time, a girl couldn’t expect to continue on after such energetic activities. Exhausted, Viola let her mind drift and carry her off to sleep.

Of course she dreamed.

She was flying through the air over the ocean. Jerod was beside her, showing her all sorts of amazing sights. They landed on an island out in the middle of the water, a soft breeze tugging at her skirt. She left Jerod’s side to explore a group of crabs that were marching up the beach a few feet away.

When she turned around to say something to him, he’d vanished. Confused, she searched the island, but he was nowhere to be found.

“Jerod,” she called out.

The only answer was the wind itself.

“Jerod?”

The island suddenly began to shrink, collapsing in on itself. Viola backed away from the pursuing shore until her back ran into the lone palm tree. Water licked at her toes and began to creep up her legs as the beach was swallowed by the ocean.

“Jerod!”

She tried, too late, to climb the tree. It too was being consumed by the ocean. As the

water rose to her chin, Viola tried to call out one last time, only to inhale a lung full of water.

Her scream reverberated in her bedroom as she sat up in her bed.

“Viola?”

Jerod was there. He wrapped his arms around her and she instantly felt better.

“Bad dream,” she managed to say past the tightness in her throat.

“It’s okay. I’m here,” he said and kissed her shoulder.

She allowed him to pull her back down into the bed. Her heart slowed its crazy beat enough that she didn’t feel as bad.

“Better now?”

She nodded. “I haven’t had a nightmare like that in years. Not since I first moved out on my own.”

“Tell me about it?”

A small part of her wanted to share her fears with him. But somehow she didn’t think he was ready to hear her insecurities right now.

“No. It was just a silly dream. I’m fine.”

Jerod smoothed her hair down away from her face. He kissed her temple, injecting her with a feeling of warmth. And maybe a little something more. Sleep began to tug at her mind again. Viola yawned and snuggled into the sheets.

“Can I get you anything? Anything at all?” he asked.

“You’ve given me so much already. I wish I could give you something to make you as happy as I am.”

Viola’s eyes flew open as soon as the words left her mouth. She spun around in her bed, but it was too late.

Jerod had vanished.



## Chapter Sixteen

The loud banging at the front door wouldn't stop. Somehow Viola managed to drag her sorry ass off the couch and shuffle over to the door. A quick peek through the peephole caused her to sigh.

"Go away, Beth."

"Not until you open this door. I've been trying to get a hold of you for two days now. Open!"

The imminent threat of her friend breaking through the aging wooden door overrode her desire to wallow in self pity. Against her better judgment, Viola flicked the deadbolt and opened the door a crack before turning and shuffling back into the house.

"About frigging time. What the hell have you been doing? I wanted to take you shopping and you're suddenly not returning my calls? Rich best friend here, remember?"

She heard Beth slam the door shut with her foot before kicking her shoes off. William whined and Viola picked him up before flopping onto the couch.

"I haven't been feeling very good."

Beth stopped, planted her hands on her hips, and gave Viola a good, long stare.

"No kidding. You look like shit. Flu?"

*No, a broken heart because I'm a moron and can't keep my mouth shut.*

"Something like that."

Her throat was tight from repressed tears and the pent-up tension she'd felt since she'd wished Jerod away. It didn't match the ache in her chest where her heart had been, but it was pretty close. If it hadn't been for William, she wouldn't have left her bed in the past two days.

Her throat tightened again and she had to close her eyes so Beth wouldn't see the tears forming in her eyes. *God, I'm so stupid.* All she had to do was never wish for

anything as long as she lived and he would have been fine. They would have been together. Now, she didn't know where he'd gone or what she could do to get him back. If there was a way to do that at all.

Viola felt the couch shift as Beth sat down beside her. Her fingers were given a squeeze and Viola opened her eyes and tried to smile.

"Honey, what's wrong?" Beth said, a deep frown etched on her face.

"You wouldn't believe me." A tear rolled down her face, which she quickly brushed aside and hoped Beth hadn't noticed.

Beth wrapped her arms around Viola. Massive, soul-wrenching sobs began to push their way out of her body. She hadn't cried yet, but now there was nothing to stop her. She'd ruined her chance to be with the most amazing man she'd ever known. How was she supposed to go out and hit the dating arena after that?

When she realized that she'd made her final wish and he was really gone, she'd sat there in shock for the rest of the night. She'd hugged his pillow for hours. It was still warm from his body heat, his scent lingering on the pillow case. She doubted she would wash it. It was her last reminder that he'd been real.

It took a good ten minutes before Viola felt she could control the tears. Beth didn't say a word and held her until Viola pulled away and gave her a shy smile.

"Sorry," she croaked.

"Why didn't you call me if there was a problem? Maybe I can help, eh?"

Viola shook her head as she reached for the tissue. "You can't. No one can."

Beth took one of the little pillows that had fallen to the floor and hit Viola on the arm with it.

"Ouch."

"What's with you? You're not normally this fatalistic. Now tell me what the hell is going on before I'm forced to hit you with objects that hurt."

*What the hell do I have to lose?*

"Promise that you'll hear me out. The whole story, before you think I'm insane and call mental health."

Beth drew a cross over her heart. “On pain of death.”

Viola sighed, closed her eyes, and said the words that she’d never said out loud before.

“When I was on vacation, I met a genie. I fell in love with him and now he’s gone.”

She opened one eye a fraction to see the expression on Beth’s face. She didn’t look pleased.

“Look, we can play games like this all day. But I’m not going anywhere until you tell me what’s wrong.”

“Beth, I’m serious.”

“You can’t expect me to believe—”

“Exactly! I told you, you wouldn’t believe me and that there was no point in going over this. Please leave,” Viola practically shouted at Beth.

Viola needed Beth to leave before her self-loathing threatened to jump over and take itself out on her friend. Beth didn’t move, but Viola could see her friend settle and really look hard at her. When Beth slowly started to nod, Viola knew she would hear her out.

“Sorry, hon. Please start over,” Beth said and sat back against the couch.

It took the next hour and a half to relay the events of the last two weeks. She told her all about her first wish and wanting to win Bill. About her lessons with Jerod and how they’d laughed and teased each other at the Coral Reef Palace.

Between Beth’s smart-ass remarks and her questions, Viola didn’t think she’d be able to convince her. Beth only seemed able to focus on the little things, and made light of everything else. Finally, she snatched the pillow and threw it back at Beth before she launched herself from the couch.

“I don’t know what else to tell you. Either you believe me or you think I’m insane. Whatever. I give up.” Viola marched into the kitchen.

“Where are you going?” Beth called after her.

“Water. I’m thirsty.”

Viola yanked open her cupboard door and grabbed the first glass she touched without looking. What the hell was she thinking that Beth would understand? While the closest

thing to a sister she was ever going to have, Beth lived in the world of practical science. She only believed it if she could see, taste, touch, or smell it.

The water tasted good and she gulped most of the contents down without breathing. The glass made a hollow thunk when she dropped it into the sink. The last two days alone had been utter hell. She'd called in sick, but that hadn't stopped Bill from calling her every hour. She'd finally had to turn the sound down on her answering machine so she could sleep. He desperately wanted to see her. Jerod had made sure of that.

*God, I miss you, Jerod.*

She couldn't help but wonder if he was okay, if he'd gotten something to make him happy, or simply gone into some sort of genie hibernation until his new master took hold of the bottle. She wondered if he'd remember her, if he was thinking about her right now. How they'd made love for the last time.

Viola didn't know how long she'd been standing there lost in thought. It wasn't until she heard Beth clear her throat that she was pulled from her thoughts. She turned around and saw Beth standing in the doorway, a strange expression on her face.

"What?"

Beth seemed to be thinking very hard about what she was going to say. When she finally spoke, there was something in Beth's voice that'd changed.

"What did you wish for with your second wish?"

Viola had purposely left that part out of her story, only telling her of her last wish. She didn't want her friend to feel she owed her something. Viola looked Beth in the eye, but couldn't maintain it. She picked up her dish towel and dried off her glass.

"What does it matter? I made some wishes and they came true. Even the one that sent Jerod away."

Her heart still ached at the thought, and the lump in her throat reared its head again. Viola threw the towel aside and got herself another drink.

"I need to know," Beth asked quietly.

She couldn't face her, so Viola looked out the kitchen window at her neighbor sweeping the light dusting of snow from his steps.

“My first wish was to learn how to make Bill fall in love with me.”

Beth snorted, “I still can’t believe that one. What was wish two?”

Viola sighed and closed her eyes. “For you to win the lottery.”

Viola cringed at the silence. When she turned around, the expression on Beth’s face wasn’t readable.

“I knew you’d never take any money if I won the lottery. And with your ticket, half the money would go to help a charity.”

Realization dawned on Beth’s face. “The old resort in Mexico.”

“Jerod couldn’t directly help them, so we had to make something in the real world happen. You winning the lottery was the best thing all around.”

“Why didn’t you tell me?” Beth actually sounded hurt.

Viola walked over and gave her friend a hug.

“And tell you what? Hi, Beth, I met a genie on vacation and I’m going to fix it so you can win a shitload of money.” She shook her head. “You don’t believe me now, and I knew you wouldn’t have believed me then. So I figured it wouldn’t hurt a soul for me to do this one thing for my best friend.”

“I believe you.”

Viola shook her head. “You do?”

“Not sure if that makes me crazy or not,” Beth said and chuckled softly. “Thank you so much. I couldn’t imagine having a better friend.”

“You’re welcome.”

She hadn’t noticed that Beth had been holding something behind her back. She stepped into the kitchen and she pulled Jerod’s bottle out.

“Is this his?”

Viola was momentarily stunned. It couldn’t be his. Could it? She’d assumed his bottle had disappeared when he had. Shit, she’d torn the place apart looking for it, but with no luck.

“Where did you find that?”

Viola reached out and took the bottle from Beth, careful not to drop it. She ran her

thumb over the cool glass before she hugged it to her chest. The tingle she'd felt the last time she'd held it was gone. Maybe it was only her imagination.

"William dragged your bag over to me. It was sticking out of the top."

She walked over to the kitchen table and sat down to look at it. It wasn't as warm as it had been when he was with her. She wasn't sure if that meant anything or not. Having the bottle though somehow eased the pain of his leaving. Could he see her now?

"Is he, umm, in there?" Beth took the seat beside her.

"I'm not sure. It doesn't feel the same as when he was here. I thought it would have vanished with him."

Beth began to tap out a beat on the edge of the table with her finger. Viola's nerves began to grate at the sound. This usually meant Beth was trying to work out a problem in her mind. Not that there would be a whole hell of a lot she'd be able to do here.

"How did he get in there?" Beth asked with childlike wonder as she reached out to touch it.

Viola quickly told her about the curse, the images she'd seen, and about the old woman.

"Did you ever look into this curse?"

Viola shook her head. "We got distracted."

The memory of how they got distracted brought a blush to her face. If she'd only followed through with her promise to find out about the curse, and hadn't let her hormones take over, there'd be a chance Jerod would still be with her.

"And you got him to come out the first time by rubbing it?"

The two women looked at each other for a minute. Viola wasn't sure if this was going to work, but if it meant seeing him again, she'd chance it. Slowly she pushed the bottle toward Beth.

"Take it. I rubbed my thumb over the side of the bottle. I was getting some sand off of it."

Viola noticed Beth's hands shook when she picked up the bottle. She took a single deep breath before she rubbed her thumb over the surface. They both held their breath,

but nothing happened. Beth tried again, harder this time. Nothing.

“I don’t get it,” Viola said, her frustration clear. “It was so easy last time.”

“Maybe because I was the recipient of one of your wishes, I don’t count?”

Viola set the bottle back down between them and caressed it with her fingertip. There wasn’t anyone else she trusted to try the bottle. She could only imagine what some of the people from work would do with a genie. Images of Bill surrounded by well-endowed women eating steak on a yacht flashed through her mind.

Suddenly, a wide smile spread across Beth’s face. “Hang on, I have an idea.”

Beth got up quickly and stalked over to the phone. Viola frowned.

“Who are you calling?”

“There’s a shop downtown that I know about. The woman there knows a lot about weird shit. She may be able to help.”

Viola held her breath when Beth got through to the woman. She gave her the bare minimum in the way of facts and asked if she had any advice. Beth went silent for a few minutes, which just about drove Viola insane. When Beth hung up the phone, Viola stood up, grabbed Jerod’s bottle and held it tightly in her hands.

“Well?”

“She wants us to come down and see her. She said to bring the bottle.”

Viola only waited for a heartbeat before she set the bottle down and ran into her bedroom to change. Before she knew it, they were bombing down Highway 102 into town, zipping in between cars as fast as they could.

“Beth, you’re going to get us killed.” Viola clung to Jerod’s bottle like a life preserver. Not that he could help much in the event of a car accident. Though, she had a feeling his bottle would survive just about anything.

“Will you chill out? I want to make sure we don’t miss her.”

It took another fifteen minutes to navigate through the cars on Spring Garden Road before they pulled onto Water Street, downtown. Beth pulled into one of the pay parking lots and the two of them jumped out.

“Where is her place?”

"It's up a few streets. I stumbled on it completely by accident. I was looking for a book on mind reading and happened to see it in her window." Beth laughed. "She's a very interesting woman."

"You make her sound crazy," Viola managed to say in between breaths as they walked up the hill away from the harbor.

"Well, I thought she was. Until I heard your story that is. Now, I'm not so sure."

Viola's heart was pounding, and it had nothing to do with the steep incline they were currently walking up. If this woman knew anything about Jerod's curse, crazy or not, Viola wanted to talk to her. A cool breeze from the harbor encouraged them to pick up the pace. They turned a corner and walked down a quiet one-way street.

"How the hell did you find this place?" Viola said, shaking her head.

"Shut up." Beth pointed to a white house up ahead. "There it is."

The paint was peeling off the small building, giving it a worn-down look. The two large bow windows in the front displayed a variety of books and objects. It looked like she sold everything from books about how to fix your bathroom and animal skills, to semi-precious stones. No wonder Beth had been drawn to this place. It was just weird enough to warrant further inspection.

They opened the door and a little bell rang above their heads. Other than the two of them, there appeared to be no one there.

"Hello? Ms. Mason?" Beth called out.

"Coming. Give me just a minute."

"Take your time. It's Beth and my friend."

Viola eyed the contents of the store. Books filled most of the small room, lining bookshelves that stood from floor to ceiling. In the few display cases that edged the wall were a strange mix of old jewelry, snuff boxes, and ornate bottles. None of which were as large as Jerod's. Viola took a quick peek inside her bag to make sure it was still there and still in one piece.

When the small woman emerged from what looked to be a store room, Viola almost dropped the bottle. It was her. The woman who'd talked to her in the bottle! Viola



couldn't move, every muscle in her body completely seized up in a strange mix of anger and panic. How could this woman be here?

*This is impossible. It can't be her.* Viola would have chalked it up to extended jet lag if it weren't for the way Ms. Mason smiled at her. *What the hell was going on here?*

"Ah, Beth. I'm so happy you've come back. How did you make out with that book I gave you?"

Beth blushed, but tried to shrug it off. "Not much luck I'm afraid."

"What book?" Viola whispered.

"Your friend here was interested in mind reading. Specifically, how to do it."

Viola turned and stared at Beth, her mouth hanging open.

"Oh come on, it was for fun," Beth said and crossed her arms across her chest. "You always said you'd love to know what Bill was thinking."

"Not literally!"

Ms. Mason chuckled. "Mind reading may not be your thing. Very few are able to do that. But don't give up, you may have other skills you're not aware of. Now." She turned on Viola. "You're the lady with the genie problem."

"Umm, I guess you could say that."

Ms. Mason held out her hands and made a gimme motion. It didn't seem right handing his bottle over to a complete stranger like this. Again she wondered if Jerod would be able to emerge if Ms. Mason rubbed the bottle. He wouldn't be hers any longer.

Viola sighed. If there was any chance that she could get him back, she'd take the risk. Viola pulled the bottle out of her bag, lightly ran her thumb down the side, before she handed it over to Ms. Mason.

"An old one, I see. What was he, one, two thousand years?"

"Three thousand, actually."

She eyed Viola, squinting hard before she smiled again.

"Very old indeed. And your friend said you'd grown attached to him? And he didn't seem irritated by this?"

She shook her head. "No, we got along quite well. He even promised that any wishes

I made wouldn't inadvertently harm either me or anyone else."

Ms. Mason puckered her lips. "I find that very odd indeed. Genies aren't usually a pleasant bunch, you know. A bunch of self-righteous assholes, for the most part."

She didn't want to listen to Ms. Mason's opinions of genie personalities, and at this point, she didn't really care about any other supernatural being but Jeord. Viola felt her stomach start to go funny. She was starting to feel stressed—she hated stress. Only gave her headaches and indigestion. She needed answers and needed them now.

"Do you think there's a chance we can get him back?"

Ms. Mason had walked over to a small table that was shoved in the corner of the room. She barely looked where she was going and barely missed tripping over a stack of books on the floor.

"Maybe. Depends on the curse. Hmm." She flipped the bottle over. "Well, isn't that interesting."

"What?" both Beth and Viola asked at the same time.

Ms. Mason looked up and smiled at the two of them. "There's something written on the bottom of the bottle. See?"

She spun the bottle around in her hand so Viola could see. She had to walk over and take a closer look to see what Ms. Mason was referring to. There, written faintly on the bottom, looked to be some sort of fancy script.

"Can you read it?" Viola looked up at Ms. Mason.

The older woman shrugged. "I'll have to take a look at some of my books. Possibly."

"Will it take a while? I mean we can go and come back," Beth said a little too eagerly.

Ms. Mason smiled a small, strange smile. "No, shouldn't take me long at all. I think I know where the book I need is. Why don't you have a seat over there, Ms. Sampson? You can read some more of your mind reading books while Ms. White and I search my back office."

Beth shot Viola a pained look, but sat down where the woman had pointed and picked up one of the books. She mouthed *have fun* as Viola disappeared into the back.

“So,” Ms. Mason began as she bent over and rifled through a stack of books on the floor in the tiny office. “Tell me how you met your genie.”

Not knowing where to start her search, Viola chose a pile of books in the opposite corner of the room. As she looked, she relayed as many details as she could to the older woman, hoping she wouldn’t have to go into too many of the more intimate details.

“So you tripped over his bottle in the water? Interesting.”

Viola blew some dust off the spine of a book, and looked up. “Interesting how?”

Ms. Mason turned around and sat on the edge of her desk. Viola stopped moving, unable to look away from her intense stare.

“They say that the master doesn’t accidentally find the bottle. That it is preordained, the coming together was set in motion years before.”

“I figured things got stirred up by the last hurricane that’d passed through. I just happened to be the lucky one to bash my foot on it.”

“There is more to the magic than simple coincidence.” Ms. Mason smiled down into the pages of the book she was flipping through. “No, it was definitely meant to be.”

Viola suddenly got the creeps. “You mean it was fate that I stubbed my toe on his bottle?”

“Something like that,” Ms. Mason agreed. “I find it interesting that it was drawn to you.”

Now what the hell was that supposed to mean? Viola smiled and put on her best telemarketer voice.

“How so?”

“Usually, the genie’s bottle finds someone who is selfish. Based on your wishes, I would say that is something you’re not.”

*Oh.*

“Well, I wouldn’t say that. I did wish for him to show me how to make Bill fall in love with me,” Viola said to the open pages of the book.

Ms. Mason chuckled. “If that’s as selfish as you get, you’re not that bad.”

Viola aimlessly flipped the pages of the book. “I remember Jerod looked shocked

when I made the wish. But I wasn't sure why."

"Probably because most people wish for money, or power."

"I wished for money too." She looked up at Ms. Mason.

"Money for your friend."

Why was she trying so hard to convince this woman she wasn't a nice person? She'd grown up hearing it so much from her mom, that she'd finally come to believe her. That was probably why she'd tried so hard to make up for it, prove that she was nice, she could help others, that she wasn't the root of the problems in her mother's relationship with her father. Viola had wanted nothing more than to have a simple life, to find someone who genuinely loved her. But it had taken her much longer to convince herself that she deserved it.

Jerod had helped her with that.

"You never told me what your final wish was. The one that put you in the predicament in the first place," Ms. Mason said in a voice that sounded like she was trying a bit too hard to be nonchalant.

She didn't want to think about that night, not until she knew if there was a way to get him back. But she didn't want to take the chance it was important. "I wished I could give him something that would make him as happy as I was."

The older woman stopped moving and looked at Viola. "Is that exactly what you said?"

She nodded. "He vanished immediately afterwards. Does it help us?"

"Absolutely." Ms. Mason motioned for Viola to show her the spine of the book she was holding. "Ah. That's the one."

Viola handed it over and waited for her to search through the pages. She hated waiting. But more than waiting, she hated not knowing if there was any way to get Jerod back. She couldn't take any more after five minutes.

"Did you find anything?"

Ms. Mason licked her index finger, looked at Viola over the top of her glasses and flipped another page.

“Yes, but I need to narrow the passage down. Perhaps you could check with your friend. See how she’s doing out there all alone.”

Viola stood quickly. “That’s a great idea. I think I’ll do that.”

She almost tripped on a stack of books trying to rush out of the office. When she saw Beth sitting at the table totally engrossed in a book, Viola momentarily forgot why she was there.

“Hey, whatcha reading?”

Beth looked up and blushed. She tossed the book aside and crossed her arms across her chest.

“That? Oh it’s nothing. Just some fluff Ms. Mason had lying around.”

Viola walked over and sat down across from her friend. “You know I can spot your bullshit as easily as you can spot mine. What’s up?”

Beth found a spot on the wall behind Viola’s head very interesting. “Have you ever...” She sighed. “Have you ever thought you’d heard a voice in your mind? Talking to you.”

“You mean self talk? I’m always chatting to myself in my head.”

Beth shook her head and leaned forward. “Not quite. More like, you’re having a conversation with someone.”

Viola frowned and leaned in close. “Are you serious? Is that why you’re interested in mind reading? You think you’re picking up someone else’s thoughts?”

“Yes. You don’t think I’m crazy?”

Viola smiled and tried not to laugh. “We’re here to try to get my genie back. I’m the last person to criticize.”

Beth closed her eyes, something in her voice changed, making her sound very far away.

“I can’t quite describe it, but every so often I can hear his thoughts. He’s angry and confused, but I’m able to comfort him.”

“Him?” Viola reached out and gave Beth’s hand a squeeze. “Do you know what he looks like? What his name might be?”

“I’ve found it!”

“Later,” Beth whispered and turned toward the back room.

Ms. Mason beamed as she marched out of the back room. She was waving her hand around in the air as she spoke.

“Brilliant curse, really. He had the power to free himself all along. Just didn’t know it.”

Viola stood up, completely forgetting Beth.

“Really? Can we get him back?”

Ms. Mason stood still and Viola had the sudden impression she was being evaluated. She straightened and met the woman’s level stare with one of her own. She wanted Jerod back and she wasn’t going to let anything get in her way. It was then that Ms. Mason smiled widely.

“Yes. But you have a lot of work ahead of you. Do you think you’re up for the challenge?”

“Try to stop me.”

## Chapter Seventeen

Viola lit the last of the candles in her living room and said a silent prayer. It'd been three hours since Beth had dropped her off. She hadn't thought she'd be able to convince Beth to leave, but it hadn't turned out to be an issue. All she had to do was promise on the threat of bodily harm to bring Jerod over to meet Beth tomorrow if this worked.

*When. Not if.*

Half her provisions were still hiding in the plastic bags on her table. There was lots of time to get them out. First she had to see if this was going to work.

Jerod's bottle sat on the floor in the middle of the room. She'd taken care to move as much furniture as she could out of the way, as Ms. Mason had suggested. It was hard to know what exactly was going to happen since there wasn't any information about the success of this particular curse buster.

She gave her appearance one final quick look in the mirror to make sure everything was perfect. The little black dress Jerod had bought for her snugly hugged her curves. God, she never thought she'd be in a dress like this. Certainly not looking the way she was tonight.

She had Jerod to thank for that. Now it was time for her to return the favor in spades.

Viola picked up the small bag of crystals from her table that Ms. Mason had given to her on her way out the door.

"Remember, dear, he might not be coherent when you call him forth. He may not ever remember you. Because of your wish, how you phrased it, everything will hang in limbo until a decision is made."

She took a shaky breath and smoothed her hair. He damn well better remember her after everything that happened. Viola sat down on the floor and crossed her legs, making sure to tuck her bare feet under the bottom of her dress. The three crystals were cool as

they landed in the palm of her hand. She turned each one around with her finger, feeling the sharp edges as she did.

His bottle looked lifeless as it sat there waiting for her to do something. Viola took the green crystal, kissed it and placed it on the right side of the bottle. Her nerves sent her stomach churning.

“Jerod, I don’t know if you’re in there, but I need to talk to you.”

She kissed the blue crystal and placed it on the left side.

“Now, you may not want to talk to me after what I’m about to do to you. But trust me, this is for your own good.”

Only the red crystal remained in her hand. Viola looked at it and felt a rush of nervous energy surge through her. She placed the red crystal directly in front of the bottle. When she pulled her hand away, all three of the crystals began to glow. Viola replayed the words Ms. Mason had taught her over and over in her mind, making sure she didn’t screw anything up. She closed her eyes, licked her lips, and began.

“By the power of earth, wind, and fire, I command thee to obey my spoken desire.”

She opened her eyes and waited. After a minute of nothing, she felt her heart sink. Sitting straighter, she pinged her finger against the bottle.

“Come on, Jerod. I know you’re in there.”

*Oh shit, idiot.* She wanted to slap herself on the forehead.

“I command thee to return to me.”

The air in her living room stilled and grew heavy. William began barking uncontrollably from behind her closed bedroom door. The crystals’ inner glow intensified, lending their light to Jerod’s bottle. What had appeared lifeless only a few minutes earlier now seemed to return to its previous luster. A blast of intense light forced Viola to cover her eyes and still managed to shine brightly through her closed lids. When she was able to open them again, she sucked in a surprised breath.

*Jerod.*

He was lying naked on the floor, his body in the fetal position around his bottle. Viola rushed over to him, yanking the blanket from the couch as she went.



“Jerod? Are you okay?”

He began to shiver and cough, his eyes looking wildly around the room, unable to focus on her.

“It’s me, Viola. Can you see me?”

After a minute, he seemed to be able to see her. A deep frown etched on his face he finally spoke.

“Who are you?” he managed in a weak voice.

His accent was heavier than before, making him sound even more exotic to her ears. She’d hoped he’d appear and they’d be able to start up where they’d left off, despite Ms. Mason’s warning. Viola wasn’t about to get discouraged. Ms. Mason had talked about what Viola needed to do in the event this happened. Viola helped Jerod sit up, maintaining constant contact between them.

“I’m Viola. Don’t you remember me?”

“You’re not my master,” he said, sounding annoyed and dismissive. He tried to turn away from her, but she wouldn’t let him.

“No, I’m not. But I know where your master is.”

His eyes shifted back to hers, but he still couldn’t focus completely on her.

“Take me.”

She shook her head. “Not yet. You’re not ready to see your master yet.”

“I am ready. Take me now, or feel my wrath.”

Viola’s head snapped around when the flame in her propane fireplace kicked in, sending a small wave of heat rushing toward her. Turning back to him, Jerod was panting, exhausted from using even that small part of his power.

“See, you’re not strong enough yet. You need to get your energy back before you see your master. Here.” She grabbed a glass of water she’d prepared earlier. “Drink this.”

She brought the glass up to his lips, helping him drink. He wrapped his hand around hers, holding the glass in place. The brief contact brought back memories of all the times when he’d touched her intimately. He finally pulled her hand away, gasping for air.

“Thank you,” he said, his voice returning to the familiar tone she’d grown used to.

“You’re welcome. How are you feeling?”

He frowned again, as he studied her face. “Do I know you?”

Her insides did a back flip and she couldn’t help but smile at him. “Yes, we’re old friends and used to spend a lot of time together.”

Okay, so that wasn’t entirely true. But she’d spent more time with him than any other person had in the last three-thousand years. Surely that had to count for something.

“But you are not my master?”

“No, I’m not.”

He nodded and accepted her help to stand up. She walked him over to the couch so they could sit and talk. Not that she knew exactly what she was going to say, only what she had to accomplish.

She had to convince him that he could free himself.

“Is that better? Can I get you anything?”

“I’m fine, thank you. But I do need to find my master.”

Viola gave his hand a squeeze. “Why?”

He looked at her like she’d suddenly grown a second head. “Because I’m a genie. I am nothing without my master.”

“Do you remember how you became a genie?”

His mouth opened, but the words seemed to stop before they reached his mouth. Slowly, he closed it again and shrugged. She wanted to hug him then more than anything else, but at this point, it would do more harm than good.

“I know how it happened,” she said and squeezed his hand. “Want to hear the story?”

Jerod hesitated for a moment before he nodded and waited for her to continue. Viola licked her lips, a motion that caught his attention. Maybe there was hope for them yet.

“A long time ago, you were a very powerful man. You fought in many battles and led your men with honor. After one of those battles, you went to a village for rest and food.”

She paused waiting to see if the words were sinking in. When he didn’t say anything to stop her, she continued.

“The first night you were there, you met a young woman. She was very pretty and very shy, but she was quite taken with you. Do you remember?”

His gaze dropped to the floor, but he slowly began to nod. “Yes. Her name was Anona.”

“That’s a pretty name.”

“She was lonely and wanted to spend her time with me. But her family didn’t approve.”

Viola watched a mix of emotions play across his face. His hand squeezed hers in a painful grip. She tried to squeeze back to relieve the tension, but refused to pull her hand away. If this didn’t work, it might be the last time she touched him.

“Do you remember what happened after that?” she asked and hoped something had stuck with him.

When he shook his head, she mentally prepared herself for what she had to say.

“Anona came to your bed one night. She was inexperienced, but you didn’t mind. She gave you her body, asked that you make love to her.”

Jerod shook his head. “No, she was too young. I shouldn’t do this. But she won’t stop.”

Viola realized that he was there, reliving his emotions. Her heart raced with excitement. They were so close to gaining his freedom, and he didn’t even know it.

“It’s not your fault, you know. She wanted to be with you. She didn’t want to be seen as a little girl by her family,” she whispered.

“I know you’re a woman.” He reached out and cupped Viola’s breasts with his hands. “I can feel that. But this is wrong.”

It took every ounce of her control not to give in to the power of his touch. She felt her nipples harden under his caresses, her body spark to life.

“It wasn’t your fault, Jerod. She made a choice. You didn’t force her.”

He shook his head hard. “No, I should have stopped her. But I was so lonely.”

“No one should be lonely. There was nothing wrong with what you did.”

Jerod looked into her eyes. Viola saw his sadness and guilt and knew that it didn’t

matter what she said to him, a piece of him would always feel that way.

“She was a virgin. I took her honor and it caused her to end her life.”

Frustration picked at Viola. She knew a woman’s virginity was a prized possession long ago, but she hadn’t considered that he’d still feel the intense guilt over what his actions had caused.

What he didn’t realize was he’d been wrong. All these years, he’d felt guilt over something he really hadn’t done.

“It was her family. When they confronted Anona, she blamed you. Did you know that? She didn’t want them to know the truth and it was easier to blame the last man she seduced.”

“How can you say that? You weren’t there,” he ground out.

“No I wasn’t. But I know. I know you. I trust you.”

All his years of servitude and loneliness were all the result of a scared girl who didn’t want to admit the truth. Viola’s anger flared through her. She took her hands and turned his face toward hers.

“Listen to me. You did nothing wrong. You’ve been unfairly punished.”

Jerod blinked several times. The fog that covered his mind seemed to lift for a moment.

“Do I know you?”

“I’m Viola.” Her words came out as a whisper.

“Viola?”

He reached up and touched her cheek. His fingers traced a path along her jaw line and down the curve of her neck. She sighed and leaned against his hand.

“Did Beth get her money?”

Her eyes flew open. His face was unreadable, but a small part of the old Jerod seemed to be back. She threw her arms around him, resting her head on his shoulder.

“Yes, she did. And she would very much like to meet you to thank you in person.”

“Where am I?”

He began to rub her neck and the small of her back, tracing a lazy design as he went.

Viola tried to stay focused on the task at hand, but with greater difficulty.

“You’re at my house.” She looked up at him and grinned. “I found a way to break the curse.”

Jerod shook his head. “That’s not possible.”

“Of course it is. All curses have their reverse. It’s a universal rule.”

The real explanation Ms. Mason had given her earlier had promptly gone over her head and through her ears. All she knew was there was a way out. Now she only had to convince Jerod of it.

“Anona’s grandmother is the only person who can free me. She is long dead.”

Viola leaned in so her nose brushed against his.

“Actually there is another way. A loophole.”

“A what?”

“Loophole. A way around the original curse, so you can be free forever. How does that sound?”

Jerod shook his head. “Not possible.”

She couldn’t resist. There was something about him, his scent that drove her wild. She’d done nothing but dream about being with him again and now that she was, all she wanted was a single kiss.

Her lips sought his out, gently encouraging him. He didn’t respond at first. But slowly, he parted his lips enough that she was able to suck on his bottom lip. She ran her tongue over it until he opened his mouth and kissed her back. She wanted to cry, he was so gentle. She wrapped her hands around his neck, pulling him close to her. When she finally pulled away, they were both panting. Only an inch from him, she rubbed her nose against his cheek.

“It is possible. But you have to want to stay.”

“How?” His voice came out as a croak.

When she looked into his eyes, she couldn’t believe the emotion she saw. This was the real Jerod, stripped down to the bare bone. Every insecurity was plain on his face, in the way he leaned toward her, the way he held her hand. He was scared, and it was up to

her to help him.

“Tell me why you were made into a genie.”

He shook his head for a moment before he closed his eyes and took a deep breath.

“I...hurt a girl. Made her do things.”

“You just said you didn’t force her. Jerod, look at me,” she said, a little sharper than she intended.

It worked though, and Jerod opened his eyes and focused on her.

“Viola?” He rubbed his thumb across the pulse line of her wrist and slowly smiled.

It was him. Somehow he’d managed to claw his way back to the surface, back to her. Her hands began to shake so she quickly busied them, tightening the blanket around his shoulders.

“Yes, it’s me. Are you okay?”

“I’m tired. Where are we?”

“My place. Look, forget everything else. We don’t have a lot of time.”

He frowned, but brought her hand up and kissed her palm. “Very well. Time for what?”

“I know how to free you, but I need you to focus on what I’m saying. The spell can only keep you pulled from your bottle for so long before it takes you back.”

He looked from her to the bottle and back. “You’re not my master?”

“No.” She mentally pushed her frustration down. “Do you know why you were cursed?”

He nodded slowly. “Because of Anona.”

“Specifically why.”

“She was an innocent. I took advantage of her.”

She cupped his chin and turned his face back to hers when he tried to look away.

“Did you? Or is that what you were told? Try to remember what happened that night.”

“Viola—”

“Do it. Close your eyes and remember.”

He stared at her a few seconds longer than she'd have liked, but in the end he closed his eyes. The bottle on the floor began to glow, soft at first, but growing steadily in intensity. The sudden flash blinded her.

They were back in the room she'd seen when she was in his bottle before. Her Jerod was gone from her side. It took a minute for Viola to get her bearings.

The fire burned in the corner, smoke from the burning wood clung in the air. Jerod lay in his bed, his fingers still wrapped around the handle of his ale mug. The wooden floor outside his door creaked as the door was pushed open. A young woman, no more than twenty, snuck into his room and quickly shut the door.

Jerod didn't move, even when she pulled away the fur that covered his naked body. Both Anona and Viola sighed at the sight of him lying there. He was gorgeous. Anona didn't hesitate. She quickly untied the front of her bodice and slipped her arms out of her dress. She then pulled up her skirts and straddled his body.

"Wake up, my warrior," Anona whispered in his ear.

She ground her hips against his. Viola felt her face heat, but she couldn't look away, no matter how wrong it felt to be watching this.

Jerod groaned and knocked over his mug, forgotten in his bed. The combination of the ceramic hitting the floor and Anona's moans stirred him finally to life.

"What's this?" he asked in a groggy voice.

"They want to marry me off to someone old enough to be my father. I want to feel a real man inside me before I'm condemned."

Jerod's eyes flew open. "Anona? No."

Viola watched as he tried to push her away. The young girl locked her hands around his neck and ground her hips even harder against his.

"Don't worry. I'm no virgin. Have no guilt about that when you ride out of here tomorrow."

Anona reached back and slipped his cock into her body. Jerod groaned, but stopped fighting her. Viola looked away, but the sounds of their lovemaking began to arouse her. She didn't want to think about what that meant.

It didn't take long before Anona cried out, her pleasure completed. A few grunts later and Viola recognized the sounds of Jerod's own release. Only after their breathing settled back into a normal cadence did she look back. Anona rolled off him and stood, placing a kiss on his forehead.

"Many thanks."

She pulled her arms back into her dress, loosely tied up her bodice and sauntered out the door. Jerod stared after her and chuckled softly. He fell asleep as he was, the fur pulled up, barely covering his groin.

"And this is the man you want to spend the rest of your life with?" Anona's grandmother's voice crackled through the air.

Viola turned to face her, her heart pounding. "Yes, he is."

The woman's face screwed into a hateful glare. "He's a murdering defiler. He ruined my Anona."

Viola's back straightened. "Did we both watch the same scene? I believe it was your granddaughter who came here of her own free will and jumped into the bed of a sleeping, half-drunk man."

"He'd been playing with her all night."

The scene around them changed. They were sitting in what looked to be some sort of bar. Jerod was sitting on a bench, surrounded by a group of men, all of whom were laughing and drinking. Anona sauntered over and refilled Jerod's mug with an amber liquid. As she walked away, he smacked her behind.

"Didn't he tell you a woman's ass is her most beautiful feature?"

The venom in the older woman's voice was viscous, but Viola didn't back down.

"If that's all he's done wrong, then he's no worse than half the men alive."

"There's no love in him. He uses women and throws them away when he's done."

Viola took a step away from her and prayed she would get out of this in one piece.

"That's not true."

Both women turned around at the sound of Jerod's voice. The bar scene was gone, leaving Jerod standing there alone. Viola smiled. He gave her a wink before turning his



attention on the older woman. For her part, she spit at him.

“Lies. That’s all you know. All you want is power!”

Jerod walked toward the woman, but stopped at Viola’s side. She sighed when he slipped an arm around her waist.

“You lie when you say there’s no love in me. I love Viola.”

He said it so matter-of-factly, she almost missed it. She looked up at him, her mouth open.

“You do?” Her voice trembled as she asked.

When he looked at her, he rolled his eyes. “Of course I do. Do you think I’d put up with this silliness for just anyone?”

Viola smacked his arm before she hugged him tight.

“I love you too.”

“You said there was a way around the curse. What is it?”

“There is no way to break it,” the older woman screamed at them.

They both ignored her.

“Ms. Mason said my last wish is what did the trick. I wished that you could be happy. You simply need to say what that is and it will come true.”

Jerod cocked an eyebrow at her. “Simple as that.”

“Well, that depends. If a cat will make you happy, then you’ll still be a genie. You’ll just have a cat. I can’t choose for you.”

And that was the part that was killing her. In the end, it was his decision.

“So if giving up my powers to become mortal again will make me happy, then it will happen?”

Viola grinned. “It was written on the bottom of your bottle. The only thing that could free you was the power of choice. The only way you could be given that choice was for one of your masters to give it to you.”

“Which you did. By mistake.”

When she opened her mouth to protest, he bent his head down and kissed her. His wicked tongue chased away all thoughts and left her with a warm glow. Jerod only pulled

away from her long enough to look at the older woman and grin.

"I would like to inform you that I'm done with your game. The one thing that would make me happy is to renounce all my powers and to be able to spend the rest of my life with Viola."

The old woman threw her head back and screamed. A loud crash, the sound of shattering glass erupted around them. Viola covered her ears and shut her eyes against the sound. After a minute, she peeked through her squint to see what was going on.

She was back in her living room. William was barking like mad in the distance, growling and scratching to be freed.

"You'd better let him out before he puts a hole in the door."

She turned to see a very naked Jerod staring at his bottle, which he held in his hands.

"Are you..." She shook her head and shrugged.

"Normal?"

She nodded. "I was going to say human, but normal works."

"Only one way to find out." Jerod closed his eyes and lifted his hand. "I wish for a pizza."

When he snapped his fingers, she held her breath. It took a second for them to realize nothing happened. Viola squealed and jumped into his arms.

"Damn."

"Damn? What do you mean damn? It worked!"

She squeezed her legs around his waist and hugged him tight.

"Yes, it worked. But I really wanted a pizza. I'm hungry."

Viola laughed as she rubbed her tears on his naked shoulder. "I'll order you one."

His strong arms held her close as he rocked her back and forth.

"You realize that means no more floating sex?"

"I have a bed."

"And no more trips to the sky?"

"I'm scared of heights."

He walked over to the couch and they collapsed on it in a heap of groans and giggles.

“And no more super strength. I didn’t realize how heavy you were.”

She smacked him on the arm. “Jerk.”

He looked at her and smiled. Reaching up, he caressed her cheek with his hand. “I love you.”

“I love you too.”

They sat there in a heap, smiling and touching each other. Simply enjoying the fact that they had the rest of their lives to spend together.

“Ready to teach me about your century? Because I’m clueless without my powers.” Jerod tucked a strand of her hair behind her ears.

Viola kissed him hard, relief and desire filling her. “More than ready.”

What neither of them noticed was the soft glow of the forgotten genie bottle lying in the middle of the floor.

## Chapter Eighteen

"I don't think this is a good idea," Jerod moaned.

He stood at least ten feet away from Ms. Mason's store, his toque pulled down so low it nearly covered his eyes.

"It's freezing. Can we go home?"

Viola laughed and gently shoved his back to get him moving in the right direction again. It had taken her two weeks to convince him they needed to stop by and thank Ms. Mason for everything she'd done for them. Why he was being such a big chicken, she wasn't sure.

"Stop complaining. I'm pretty sure she has heat in her store. We'll go quickly and then I promise we can go home and get you warmed up."

He stopped moving again and Viola ran into his back. "How will we get warmed up?"

Being behind him, she couldn't read his expression, but she could tell from his tone of voice what he wanted.

"I'm thinking bubbles in the bathtub and a nice glass of wine before we make love on the floor by the fireplace," she said and pressed a kiss against his puffy winter jacket.

"I was only hoping for hot chocolate. But sex by the fire works for me."

He chuckled when she groaned and gave him another powerful shove. "Move it!"

"Yes, Mistress."

A group of young men passed them and began to laugh. She distinctly heard the comment, "Pussy whipped" float back to her. Her face immediately burned as she fell into step beside him.

"I thought I told you not to say that anymore? People will take it the wrong way."

“Does it matter what other people think of us?” he asked, his expression quite serious.

When she thought about it that way, to hell with the rest of the world. “Absolutely not.” She smiled up at him and stretched up to place a kiss on his cheek.

The door to Ms. Mason’s was shut and the blinds were pulled down. A large, faded, orange Closed sign hung in the door.

“Shit. I assumed she’d be here.” Viola sighed. “I’ll leave a note at least—”

“No need, my dear.”

Both Jerod and Viola spun around to see Ms. Mason coming up the road, pulling a small metal cart behind her.

“I had to run to the store to pick up a few things for tea. I didn’t have a lick of food in the house for any company.”

“Oh, I’m sorry, were you expecting someone?” Viola asked as she tried to get out of Ms. Mason’s way.

The older woman turned to face Viola as she slipped her key into the lock. “Why, the two of you, of course.” She winked and pushed the door open. “Come in, come in.”

Jerod hesitated at the threshold for a second after Viola walked through. Indecision and a touch of unease were on his face, his back rigid. When he looked up into her eyes, she smiled at him and held out her hand. She hoped that was all the encouragement he’d need to join her. Thankfully, he smiled back and, with a small shrug, he walked into the store and took her hand in his.

“Well, I’m glad the two of you worked that out,” Ms. Mason said from somewhere in the back room.

Jerod raised a single eyebrow at Viola, but she didn’t have an answer. Viola figured Ms. Mason had more than a little power of her own.

“Thanks for seeing us today. We really just wanted to stop by and say thank you for your help. And to let you know that things worked out okay,” Viola said loudly toward the back room.

Viola shoved her elbow into Jerod's side causing him to grunt softly. "Yes, thank you," he added.

"No reason to thank me. I knew from the minute I met you things would work out for the best." She finally emerged, carrying a tray filled with cookies and three steaming mugs of hot chocolate. "I hope you'll join me."

Jerod quickly pulled up a chair at the small table where Beth had sat reading a few weeks earlier. His eyes were locked firmly onto the mug as he stripped off his gloves and toque. Viola couldn't help roll her eyes.

"Who knew the genie had a sweet tooth?"

"Things you should have discovered before you freed me, sweetheart," he teased as he accepted the mug from Ms. Mason. "Thank you."

Viola also accepted her mug, but chose to stand behind Jerod and let Ms. Mason take the free chair. For her part, Ms. Mason looked them both over closely, her gaze passing from one to the other. Viola managed to keep still, but only barely.

"So Mr...what name do you go by now?" Ms. Mason asked as she popped a cookie into her mouth.

"White," Jerod said proudly.

When Ms. Mason's questioning glance drifted over to her, Viola could only shrug. "I thought it best to keep it simple."

It also was a huge turn on that he had taken her last name as his own. Not that they were married or anything, but it was certainly a step in the right direction.

"Viola is trying to find out what we need to get for paperwork to make me..." he drifted off before looking up at her for help.

"To make him a legal person," she offered.

It was an amazingly strange situation. Jerod was human in every aspect of his existence now. He could get sick, needed to eat, and may even want to work at a job someday. Viola wanted to make sure he could do whatever he wanted. Explore whatever part of his lost humanity he wanted to. Beth had given them enough money to live comfortably. Not that Viola wanted to take any, but she'd insisted, saying the only reason

she had it in the first place was because of Viola's wish. But there were some things they still needed to get.

"I'm not sure how to handle this one. I wouldn't know how to do it legally, and going...under the table isn't my area of expertise."

"I think I may be able to assist you in that regard." Ms. Mason pulled out an envelope from under the tray and slid it over to Jerod. "You're not the first supernatural being who's come to me for help."

Jerod looked at the envelope before he reached out to take it. Viola tried to look over his shoulder to see what was inside. She finally gave in to her frustration and plucked the envelope from his hands.

"I was reading that," he grumbled.

"I'll give it back." She placed a quick kiss on his head and then dove into the documentation.

An Italian birth certificate, passport, and a Canadian work visa peeked out at her from inside the envelope. It looked very real to Viola, who shot a questioning glance at Ms. Mason.

"Are these—?"

"Legitimate," she said as she smiled at Viola. "If anyone questions anything, they will find the proper records on file where they should be. From that, you will be able to get everything you need to make sure Jerod doesn't get deported."

Jerod looked up at her, a single eyebrow raised. "Good thing, right?"

Viola's heart was pounding in her chest. "Oh, yeah."

They were home free. Viola leaned over his shoulder, wrapped her arms around his neck, and planted a kiss on his cheek. "This means you can get a job if you want, go to the hospital, anything you need."

He slipped his hand around hers and gave it a squeeze.

"Before we accept this generous gift, I have a question," Jerod said, his voice deadly serious.

Viola pulled back enough to see the intense stare that passed between him and Ms. Mason. The air in the room grew suddenly heavy and Viola had the distinct feeling she was missing out on something.

“Ask away,” Ms. Mason replied, her voice calm and steady.

“Why did you help us? I may not have my powers anymore, but I recognize a supernatural when I meet one. What’s in this for you?”

Ms. Mason sat still for a few seconds before she began to chuckle. “I’m happy to see regaining your humanity hasn’t dulled your perceptions any. There may be hope for you yet.”

“Hope for what?” Viola asked, but they both ignored her.

“Why?” Jerod repeated, leaning forward as he did.

“Because it suited me. I hate it when mortals have all the fun. Besides, the woman who cursed you was a bore and a brute.”

“Who are you?” Viola asked.

“My real name is mine alone. But Jerod’s people called me Ate.” She winked at Jerod. “More hot chocolate?”

Jerod stood up immediately, hooked Viola’s arm and pulled her to the door. “Thank you for your assistance. We’ll be leaving now.”

“Who is she?” Viola whispered. “Slow down.”

“Goddess of mischief. We need to leave now.” He pulled his toque on. “Thanks again.”

“Jerod, the papers,” Viola said and started back toward the table.

Without thinking, Jerod spun around and grabbed Viola’s arm to stop her and snapped his fingers. The brown envelope suddenly appeared in this hand. Viola gasped as they both stared at the paper.

“What did you do?” Jerod asked Ms. Mason, his eyes flicking between her and Viola.

“Interesting. It must have something to do with how old you are. Couldn’t get rid of all that magic.”



“That’s impossible. You said he would lose his powers once we broke the curse. He had to give them up.”

Viola took Jerod’s hand in hers and held it still. He was trembling ever so slightly, but whether it was from fear or excitement, she couldn’t tell.

“There are no absolutes in the universe, my dear,” she said and stood up. “Well, it looks as if you have some playing around to do, and I have a store to open up. If you’ll excuse me, I believe my next customer will be here shortly.”

And before they realized what was happening, they were shuffled out the door.

Neither of them said anything as they walked back to Viola’s car. Viola couldn’t get her head around what had happened. They’d tried his magic after the curse had been broken. They tried so long one day he’d gotten a major hand cramp, but nothing had happened. Once they got back to the car and climbed in out of the cold December air, Viola took his hand in hers and gave it a squeeze.

“Do you think she did something? That it wasn’t you at all?”

Jerod slowly shook his head. “No, it was me. The real question is can I do it again?”

Viola waited, afraid to say anything else. Jerod closed his eyes and snapped his fingers. Nothing happened.

“What did you try to do?” she asked.

She watched him reach into his jacket pocket, but he didn’t remove his hand. He turned to her, caressing her cheek with his free hand.

“Jerod?”

“I’m not sure how things are done in this century. My knowledge of these things is a bit outdated. But I was wondering if we had everything we needed for this?”

Viola watched as he brought his hand out and opened his hand to reveal an engagement ring. The world began to spin around her as he slipped the warm circlet over her finger. She couldn’t speak, instead she looked at him, stunned. Jerod tugged off his toque and ran his fingers through his hair. His gaze bounced between her face and her hand, which he still hadn’t let go. When he finally spoke, she could hear a nervous edge in his voice.

“I know we’ve only known each other—”

“Yes!”

Their eyes locked. He smiled briefly for a second before growing serious again.

“My powers may not last. This could be nothing more than one of Ate’s tricks for her own amusement.”

“I don’t give a rat’s ass about your powers. I love you and I want to be with you.” The words poured out of her, straight from her heart.

Jerod’s mouth opened and for a second Viola didn’t think he’d say anything. Gently, he took her face in his hands and pulled her close. Their lips met, parted, and they drank each other in.

“I love you too,” he murmured against her lips. “Only you.”

They kissed again until Viola began to giggle. “We need to get home.”

“I don’t think I can get us there. My powers aren’t that strong.”

Viola let out a yelp as she felt an invisible finger trace a line down between her breasts.

“Not yet anyway,” he said and grinned.

Viola gave him a light punch on his arm and jammed the keys in the ignition. “Behave until we get home. I’d hate to have to punish you.”

Jerod leaned back in his seat and chuckled as they made their way through the traffic. Viola giggled again when she felt his invisible touch caress her chest above her heart.

“As you wish.”

## About the Author

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*How do you ditch your Fairy Godmother?*

## **Wishful Thinking**

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*The Swann Sisters Chronicles, Book 1*

As her 25th birthday approaches, mild-mannered Philomena Swann lives in terror of her annual birthday wish. Sure, she has a disinterested fiancé and a misogynistic boss, but from experience she knows wishing both away could result in disaster. Why? Because she and her sisters are one-eighth fairy. Not enough to give them magical powers, but enough to qualify for a fairy godmother—from hell.

All Phil wants is, just once, to have the courage to speak her mind. She blurts out her wish...and suddenly finds she can't stop. To her friends. Her boss. Her Nana. And her best friend, hot and hunky co-worker, Josh. Before she can do any more damage, she begs for the spell to be reversed. And it is—with a vengeance. Now everyone else is compelled to tell her the truth. Including Josh.

But the fairy godmother's not done. One more wish could change Phil's world forever—if it doesn't ruin her life first.

*Enjoy the following excerpt for Wishful Thinking:*

"Phil, don't you know nothing you could say would make me want to stop being your friend?" Josh stopped in front of her and crossed his arms over his broad chest. There was amusement but also concern in his deep brown eyes. Phil could see herself reflected in their depths, looking like a frightened rabbit. "Okay," he said, "Come on, hit me with your best shot."

"What?" Phil was still trying to keep the nursery rhyme lodged in her brain but it was breaking up. *Mary had a little...a little...a tall, sexy coworker. No, that isn't right!*

"You heard me." He had a serious look on his good-natured face now. "Give it to me with both barrels. I want you to say whatever comes to mind about me and I promise not to be offended. Nothing off limits, just go ahead and get it over with."

“Josh, please don’t make me.” Phil felt like she was going to cry. *Mary had a little lamb* was dissolving into a senseless blur of syllables. Soon her traitorous thoughts would begin leaking out.

“I can take it,” he said. “You want to tell me I’m a pig or that I need to shut up or—”

“You smell really good,” Phil heard herself say as the wish took over. “And I love your laugh—it’s all deep and rumble and it makes me feel warm just to hear it. And when we talk, I always feel like you care about what I have to say.”

“I do.” He gave her that charming, lopsided grin that had drawn her to him from the start. “That’s all you got? Gotta tell you, Swann, so far I’m not impressed.”

“I like the way you touch me,” she went on, helpless. “You’re always so gentle and your hands are so big and warm...” Oh God, this was *so* inappropriate. She was probably making him horribly uncomfortable.

Josh had an odd look on his face, but all he said was, “Go on.”

“I...I think that’s all,” Phil said with relief. But then a little voice in the back of her brain spoke up. *The dream? What about the dream?* But that was *definitely* out of bounds—far past the invisible barriers Phil had always kept between herself and her friend.

“I had this dream about you once,” she heard herself say. “About us, actually.”

He cleared his throat. “Do, uh, do you want to tell me about it?”

“No,” Phil moaned. “But...but I can’t help it. I...I...” She bit her lip, but it was no good. “I was sitting in a chair, in my dream, I mean. And you came up behind me and reached around and started stroking me...my...” She gestured helplessly to her chest. She could feel herself sweating beneath her white silk blouse.

“Okay, so I was uh, touching your breasts?” Josh raised an eyebrow and cleared his throat.

Phil nodded. *I’m embarrassing him, and humiliating myself. He doesn’t want to cross the line either!* And yet she couldn’t stop. “And then we were suddenly in...in bed. You know how that goes with dreams where suddenly you’re someplace different than you were a minute before?”

“Uh-huh.”

“So we were in bed, uh, naked and...and...And you were kissing me. We...were kissing each other.” Phil felt like her face might set fire to her blouse. What would Josh think of her when she was done? “We...you...were touching me again. All... all over.” Phil swallowed. “And your hands felt just like they do in real life—big and warm and gentle. And I was...I was...” She felt like she might strangle on the words. She was gripping her purse so tightly her knuckles were white. “There was...was more but mostly I remember that then you were...on top of me. And I was...I was saying, was begging you to...to...to...And you did and it felt so...so...”

“So we made love?” Josh asked gently, interrupting her halting words.

She nodded, grateful to him for summing it up so neatly. “Yes! God, I’m so sorry, Josh. I can only imagine what...what you must think of me now.” She put a hand over her eyes, her purse still gripped tightly in the other. Tears of humiliation were wetting her hot cheeks and she was actually shaking with shame. Could this stupid wish get any worse?

“Hey, come on, now, Phil. It was just a dream.” Josh pried her hand away from her eyes and lifted her chin. “Seriously, don’t cry,” he said softly.

“I can’t... I can’t believe I told you that.”

“Hey.” He tried to smile. “Did it upset you that much to have one X-rated dream about me?”

“No.” Phil bit her bottom lip, anxious to make him understand. “It didn’t upset me to have it. But...but...you’re my best friend, Josh, but there are some things we just...we don’t talk about. You know what I mean.”

He nodded and rubbed his chin, making a faint sandpapery sound as his fingers brushed over his five o’clock shadow. “Yeah, I know, Swann.” He took a step forward and looked at her intently. “There’s a lot that’s unsaid between us,” he said, his deep voice dangerously soft.

“There is,” Phil agreed. She could feel a current of barely grounded electricity flowing between them. “I mean...I never...I would never want to make you feel uncomfortable. I don’t want you to feel around me the way I feel around Dickson when he starts talking nasty and trying to cop a feel.”

The tension abruptly lessened as Josh let out a surprised snort of laughter. “Is that what you think? Listen, Phil, believe me, you don’t have to worry that you make me feel the way you feel about Dickhead. I promise you that.”

Phil swiped at her eyes with a shaking hand. She was relieved that they had kept the invisible barriers between them intact—barely. “So you don’t think I’m some kind of pervert?”

Josh laughed again. “Hardly. You can’t help what you dream. I’ve had some pretty, uh, interesting dreams myself from time to time.”

“About me? I mean, us?” Phil asked before she could stop herself. “No, wait, forget I asked that. I’m sorry.”

“Apology accepted,” Josh said with a grin. “Now, come on, get yourself together and let me take you out to lunch.”

Phil took stock of herself. She was sweating and trembling and she still had tears on her cheeks and a lump in her throat. “I’m sorry, Josh. But I’m not in any shape to be seen in public. I don’t want to go out to a restaurant right now.”

“Who said anything about a restaurant?” He took her hand, twining her fingers through his, and led her through the parking lot to where his car, a blue Toyota Hybrid, was parked. “I’m talking about a picnic *al fresco*.” He held up the other bag he had been carrying and Phil saw it was his lunch bag. “I was just going to lunch when I heard the office scuttlebutt and came out to give you your purse.”

Phil tried to smile. “Are you sure you want to have lunch with a mouthy bitch like me?”

He grinned. “Absolutely. So what do you say, Swann? I’m inviting you to lunch at Chez Bowman. It doesn’t have much atmosphere but I promise you the ham and cheese sandwich is divine. Five star cuisine all the way.”

“I say...yes.” Phil grinned at him, feeling a deep relief flood through her. She had said the worst, most embarrassing things her mind could come up with and Josh hadn’t been offended. He still wanted to be around her. After the way everyone else had reacted to her birthday wish, it was wonderful to know that at least one person in her life didn’t want to ditch her for speaking her mind.

“Great.” Josh opened the passenger side door and helped her into the car with a smile. “Let’s go to lunch.”



*What's a nice girl like me doing with a demon like you?*

## I Married a Demon

© 2008 Beverly Rae

Jennifer Randall ignored her instincts and rushed into a vacation-fueled romance and quickie marriage to devilishly handsome Blake Barrington. But as a Level 10 Protector with the super-secret Society, how's she supposed to keep the man she adores happy while hunting down gargoyles, zombies and other evildoers of the Otherworld?

As if balancing work and newlywed nookie sessions wasn't hard enough, now she's been assigned to find the Bracelet of Invincibility before a high demon lord can claim it. And Blake seems hell-bent on distracting her at every turn.

Blake Barrington will do anything to regain his mortality and live happily ever after with the woman he loves. Including delivering to his demon lord the one object that could be his salvation—the Bracelet. Too bad part of the contract includes killing his wife. Getting around this small glitch might be doable...if his ghoul-cursed brother wasn't after the prize, too.

Jenn's suspicions mount, and finally the evidence is undeniable. Her sexy spouse is a demon.

Great. Now what? Shag her husband? Or shoot him

*Warning: Okay, so there's graphic sexual language. So what? Trust me, if chopping off a few demons' heads doesn't bother you, why would the sex? Either way, it's all good.*

*Enjoy the following excerpt for I Married a Demon:*

At the exact moment I noticed him, he was only a few feet from me. Mr. Ta-DaH—my nickname for Mr. Tall and Dark and Handsome—lay sprawled like the King of the World basking in the sun, surveying his kingdom and the lowly subjects he allowed to share his beach. He held a drink in one hand and scrutinized me through dark sunglasses, his chiseled face a mask of controlled passivity except for the slight lift at the corners of his mouth.

I'm good at playing cool. I have to know how to play it cool in my line of work—both of my lines of work. But this guy's intense scrutiny was almost more than I could handle. With my sunglasses resting on the bridge of my nose, I nonchalantly spied on him, trying to appear unaware that he studied me. I tried to suck in my ass, hoping to make the dimples disappear, but knew the battle was lost before it began. How do you suck in a bottom, anyway? Is it the same as a butt clench? I sighed and hoped he liked women with junk in their trunks.

The man was perfect. At least physically, but physical was all I had to go on. His wet hair, silky and shiny black, slicked away from his forehead and curled around his earlobes. Just the right amount of matching chest hair glistened with drops of perspiration, drawing my gaze to all the right places. Notice I said perspiration, not sweat. No one this good-looking ever sweats.

I'm talking the perfect model of a man. The kind of man I'd buy if I could call in my order and have him delivered to my doorstep in thirty minutes or less. Remember how moviegoers went gaga over Matthew McConaughey when he started taking off his shirt? Yup, me, too. I was one of the hundreds, probably thousands of women, who sat through his movies, not caring about the plot. Instead we sat glued to our seats and waited for him to strip off his shirt and take the heroine to bed. Take M's sex appeal and multiply it by a zillion times more heat and that's what oozed from this guy.

His shoulders, wider than the beach chair he leaned against, mesmerized me and I couldn't keep from imagining the way they'd feel. I'd have donated my whole stack of traveler's checks to charity just to feather my fingers over them. I could see the strength in his muscular arms and sense the power he could unleash at any moment. He pressed his mouth to the highball glass, moving his square jaw, and I had to fight to keep from dashing over and licking off the tiny drop of whiskey left on his upper lip.

His eight-pack abs called to me. Come, Jenn. Come and run your hands over me. I let my gaze glide down his rock-hard abdomen. Can you blame me when my heart started pounding and my mouth went dry? Can you understand why the place between my legs overflowed with wetness?

I pondered what to do. Should I say something? Why didn't he say something? How long could we lie here and stare at each other? What would I do if he got up and walked away? Or even more frightening, what would I do if he came over?

Then he smiled at me.

My mouth dropped open. I lifted my head from my beach towel, forgetting to play it nonchalant. Instead I gaped like a schoolgirl with her first crush. He stood and started toward me, making me oh-so-aware of his height and brawn. My examination of this spectacular specimen started at the top and moved slowly downward.

I'd never found men's legs attractive before—I'm an upper torso kind of gal—but the black hairs on his legs, the firm tanned skin stretched over his runner's tendons, converted me to a leg gal right then and there. My membership in the leg lovers fan club was sealed the minute he squatted next to my blanket and gave me a front row seat to the hard bulge in his swimsuit.

Granted, his first words weren't anything particularly clever, but he didn't need clever. He could have read me the directions on how to buckle a seat belt and I'd have thought it wonderful, riveting, mysterious and oh, yes, sexy as hell.

"Hi, there. Why are you watching me?"

Thick as molasses and hotter than the center of the sun, his warm voice traveled over my naked skin and made me shiver in anticipation of steamy nights and luxurious mornings in bed.

"Uh, no. I mean, no, I'm not watching you." I rolled off my stomach and onto my side in what I prayed was a slinky kind of move, and propped my head with my hand.

Sliding his sunglasses to the end of his nose, he arched one thick eyebrow upward and knowing eyes twinkled the word liar at me. "Oh, I see. My mistake." His gaze left mine to make a very slow, very deliberate trek down my thong-clad body, and the tips of his mouth tweaked a bit higher.

Thank you, oh tortuous elliptical machine.

I swallowed, trying to force the liar's lump in my throat all the way down to my stomach. Since when had I ever felt guilty about lying? I was proud I could lie with the best of them. In my line of work—both lines of work—I have to be able to stretch the

truth. Otherwise, I might not live very long—or sell a bug-ridden condo. But something irresistible about him drew the truth out of me. “Okay. Maybe I was. But I was simply returning the favor, if you know what I mean.”

He reached out to take a wayward strand of my hair off my cheek. Yet instead of putting it behind my ear to join the rest of my ponytail, he played with it, rubbing the strand between his two fingers as if he’d never experienced the texture of hair. I found myself wishing I’d spent the extra bucks for a salon-quality conditioner.

“I do and you’re right. I apologize.”

Huh? “What for?” I suddenly envisioned those fingers playing with my nipple instead of my hair. Forget the conditioner, think scented body lotion. The image was so intense, I wanted nothing more than to take his hand and bring it to my breast. How I kept from grabbing his hand, I’ll never know. “Why are you apologizing?”

“For staring at you. I apologize for my rudeness.”

Unnerved by his words, I sat up and tried to position my body as I’d seen countless swimsuit models pose in glossy magazines. Yet instead of stretching my torso and legs in an alluring way, I ended up sitting cross-legged like a big kid. A real turn on—not.

“Oh, were you?” Argh! Stupid comeback, especially since I’d already accused him of staring at me.

“Yes, but you can hardly blame me.”

“I wasn’t blaming you, but I’d be interested in knowing why I can’t. I mean, since you’re apologizing.”

He took off his glasses and, like in all those cliché romance books my mom used to read, our eyes met and a sizzle passed between us. “The answer is very simple. What man could not look at such a tantalizing sight?”

Sure it was a corny line, but I fell for him right then and there. Off the deep end, over the cliff, dived in head first and all those other sayings people use when they fall in love at first sight. As if he could read my thoughts, he leaned closer and placed a feather-light kiss on my lips. Yet, although his touch barely brushed against my mouth, the result rivaled the explosion of a nuclear bomb between my legs. My body’s temperature jumped sky high, matching the burn of the sun on my shoulders.

“What are you doing tonight?”

I knew a leading line when I heard it and I heard this one loud and clear. “The same thing I’m going to be doing in about fifteen minutes.”

His eyebrows dipped toward his nose and he cocked his head to the side. “And what would that be?”

“Having the best sex of my life.”

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