



Loose Id

*Bad
Love*

LOUISA TRENT

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LooseId^(R)
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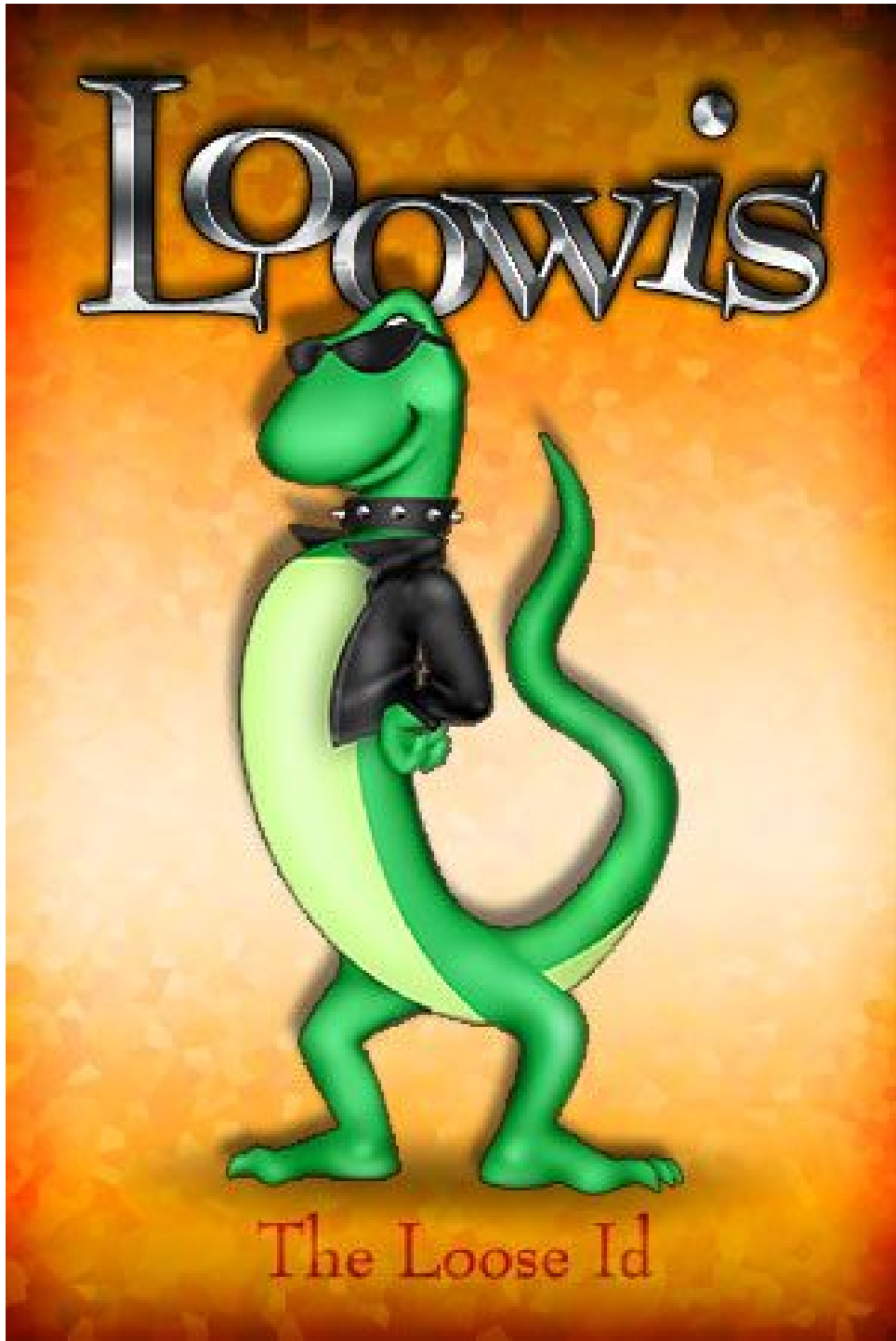
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Prologue

The year 1899, Manhattan, New York

Mrs. Susan Lindsmore reclined on her chaise longue, her outwardly languid pose belying her inner excitement. Her steady gaze glued to the sitting room's oak-paneled door, not a tic or twitch disturbing her carefully composed expression, she tunneled her hand beneath the gold toile pillows plumped at her back –

And forgetting herself, screeched with all the dignity of a fishwife, “Where the fuck is it?”

Her naughty secret was gone.

Fear clutched at her chest. No. No. No. This could not be happening, especially not now when she needed relief so badly. Who could have discovered her hiding place?

The housemaid, perhaps. The day girl cleaned in here just yesterday. She might have come upon it while polishing the furniture with beeswax or beating the brocade upholstery for dust.

Or possibly the cook. Mrs. Harris dropped off the week's menus last night. That fidgety woman was always touching the pillows.

Please, *pleeeaaaaase*, not one of her six stepdaughters during one of their all-too-frequent visits. Anyone else but her innocent darlings.

Panic-stricken, she twisted in the seat, groping, clawing, punching the perfectly arranged pillows, disorganized tassels and fringe flying every which way. Where was it, where was it? It had to be here somewhere.

Wait. She held her breath. What was this?

Her fingertips brushed something papery, something thin, something deliciously decadent wedged between tasteful beige cushions and the chair's mahogany arm. That

something must have slipped from its hiding place while she pretended to count cross-stitches on her ghastly boring needlepoint pattern.

A yank dislodged the discreetly wrapped package. Like a squirrel recovering a hidden acorn from the lawn, she settled her buried treasure on the outermost region of her lap, ready to dig her guilty pleasure back under the pillows again should one of the girls barge in on her. As an additional precaution against discovery, she draped the gray sash of her loose-fitting surah and cashmere gown over the flat envelope. One could not be too cautious. Or sneaky. Her darlings had an uncanny knack for interrupting at the most inopportune times.

Like now, when she was randy as all hell.

From the outset of her custodianship, she had welcomed her husband's brood into her private sanctuary. After all, as their father's second wife, she was the stranger here at Number 22, the interloper, and she had much to prove. Naturally, the girls resented her presence. Naturally, they had striven to drive her away. All motherless children misbehaved the same. To earn their trust, she'd had the lock removed from her private sitting room door and encouraged her new family to come to her with their problems at any hour, day or night.

Just her foul luck, her darlings had taken her up on the offer. Whatever had she been thinking?

Long and short, she had not enjoyed a moment's solitude since. Like Mary Shelley, she had created a monster. Only her *Frankenstein* was a beautiful six-headed she-beast with golden ringlets and an annoying propensity for giggle fits.

In this very room, she had bandaged interminable scraped knees, taught a myriad of schoolroom lessons, bolstered flagging confidence, and listened to endless tales of woe. She had always been there for the girls, had always attended to their wants, no matter how large or small.

Or silly. Extremely and utterly silly.

Discussions about clothes and hair and boys had gone on interminably. Girls born to privilege were such insecure twits. Always concerned with what others thought of them while sheltered from the hard reality of survival. Thank goodness, poverty had spared *her* their ignorance.

Apart from the monetary, she supposed there had been compensations for raising them. Sloppy kisses. Clumsy hugs. Lisped declarations of undying devotion. Pride taken in their successful launches into New York society. Her stepdaughters had all turned out admirably well. No biological mother could be any prouder—or more relieved—at the girls' debutante balls. At any rate, she had done her duty, and now it was time to get on with her life, the one she had put on hold for the last fifteen years. Thirty-three was not all *that* terribly long in the tooth. Still, according to Sir Isaac Newton, gravity could drop her tits to her feet any day, so there was not a moment to waste.

She intended to shake up her dull routine – providing none of the girls caught her. Nothing must jeopardize her darlings' tidy and safe little worlds. Nothing must disillusion them, especially not her. God help her, the girls sincerely believed they loved her.

Loved her?

They knew absolutely nothing about her.

What they loved was the illusion of her, the stylish perception she projected for their sakes, not the real flesh and blood her. Her stepdaughters actually assumed, because of her fluency in the language, that she was French. They envisioned her as a displaced aristocrat of pristine lineage, an impeccably coiffed Marie Antoinette, only in possession of her head. Romantic rubbish! She could hardly countenance their flights of fancy.

Never once, not by thought, word, or deed, did she dissuade them from their ridiculousness. In fact, she guarded their naïveté for it served all of them.

Gravity might someday drop her tits to her feet, but those feet were made of clay. What a shock to her darlings' delicate systems to learn the truth of her sordid background, that she was a former Five Points street swindler, a pickpocket extraordinaire, the daughter of a Siamese concubine trained since birth in the art of satisfying a man.

At least, theoretically. Soon, if all went as planned, she would put theory to the test.

Chewing her bottom lip in wanton anticipation, she slid the brown paper wrapping off her package. Her mouth agape, she shivered. *Ohhhh, my. Oh, my, my, my.*

The editorial staff of *Licentious*, an illustrated underground periodical dedicated to indulging all the sensual pleasures, had outdone themselves. This month's edition, by far and away, boasted the most explicit cover yet.

Unable to contain herself, she stroked the front flap.

The hand-painted lithography depicted a couple making mad, passionate love. In the great outdoors, of all unlikely places. Amid tall ostrich ferns and stout zebra grasses, a nude woman rode an equally nude man. Her perspiring flesh green-shadowed, her astride positioning scandalously uninhibited, the dominant female clenched her thighs about her submissive stud's hips as he – dear Lord – bucked obediently beneath her.

One happy subscriber, she ogled the pictorial from every angle, including upside down, pronouncing it an absolutely flawless execution of the subject matter, with meticulous attention to detail. Never mind the implausibility of the scenario. Never mind that, in real life, the sharp foliage of the various plants would flay the man's broad back to the bone and slice the woman's knees to a bloody pulp. Never mind that such a humid environment would teem with creepy, crawly, *icky* insects of every description and variety. Never mind that, ordinarily, she found pooling and dripping sweat anything but attractive. Pesky logistics and intellectual analyses aside, *Licentious* never failed to inspire her.

Like now.

Now. When one more second was too long to wait for the release of her tension.

She bunched her dove gray mourning gown up over her belly, slid a hand under layers of petticoats and into the gathered waistband of her drawers. Seeped in pulsating pleasure, the area between her legs awash with honeyed liquidity, she found her clitoris and practiced her favorite vice.

Tossing herself off. A phrase lifted from another voluptuary magazine, the *Pearl*. Call the activity self-pollution. A medicinal cure for hysteria. Or settle for masturbation. No matter. Nothing mattered but this brief moment in time.

On the edge, on the cusp, on the precipice, she tensed as the throes of ecstasy approached.

Yesyesyes. Mmm. Oh my, yessss.

The contractions, the convulsions, the release—all were wonderful. But regardless of the strength of the fulfillment, or how the swell carried her away, after the climax, she was still alone. No lover was there to hold her, to warm her as the tremors of physical euphoria faded, leaving her chilled and as limp as a dishcloth.

“Fuck!” She slapped her gown back down to cover her toes.

Self-pity would get her nowhere. She was a woman who took charge, who took action, who made things happen. Why should carnality be any different?

Muttering all sorts of foul gutter epithets under her breath, she flipped the pages of her pleasure aid to the personal ads. Skipping anything to do with mail-order brides and their ilk, she scanned the column for anonymous trysts of an erotic nature.

And there it was, in black-and-white, succinct and to the point, pragmatic carnal requirements that mirrored her own:

WANTED: A 25- to 35-year-old female for sexual companionship in Maine. Two weeks of rustication in a seaside setting. Lodging and expenses provided. Ideal spot for rest and recreation. Only experienced female applicants need apply. Anonymity guaranteed. No romantic entanglements, no personal questions. Reply to publisher for face-to-face interview.

A holiday to indulge herself before Cynthia’s lying-in?

How heavenly.

But dare she do it? Dare she respond to the personal ad?

The pianoforte displayed a family photograph of her six stepdaughters, arranged in chronological order, from the eldest, twenty-four-year-old expectant mother Cyn, to the youngest, just graduated last June from a Switzerland finishing school, eighteen-year-old, Essie. A separate picture of Mr. Walter Lindsmore, her deceased husband, stood off to one side. She owed the wealthy merchant a debt of gratitude, but did she owe him the rest of her life?

No!

Picking up paper and fountain pen from her nearby writing table, she composed an appropriately vague response to the gentleman's *Licentious* personal ad.

Chapter One

Bar Harbor, Maine

Theo "Bear" Donovan rolled to a naked sit at the edge of his extra long, extra wide double bed and dropped his shaggy head into his hands.

Why had Betsy gone and done what she did? What impulse had driven her? Had he ever really known the woman he had married at all?

His shoulders heaved, the usual despairing thoughts consuming him as he slumped on the too-large mattress, so empty without her.

Dammit. Would the loneliness ever go away? Would the pain never cease? Would he always reach for Betsy as sunlight burned the darkness away?

After his wife's death, he started cracking the window at night. A nor'easter could be howling outside, the glass panes rattling in the winds, and he still left the window open. All the more reason to. Despite what had happened between them, this had been her home, and her troubled spirit might want to come in out of the weather. Far be it for him to close her out. Fact was, he would welcome her. Maybe if her wandering soul did pay him a call, they would have it out, once and for all. Shout at one another, break some dishes...fix the past.

Come home, Betsy. Please come home. So much needs to get said.

He gave a long, resigned sigh. Deep within himself, he accepted that she was lost to him in death. But what was tough to accept was how they had gotten lost from one another in life.

He lifted his head from his hands, his burning gaze seeking out her photograph on their bureau. Betsy had been his first girl. His last woman. And she had twisted the idea of love until he hardly recognized it as sweet and pure anymore. He hated what she

had done. Hated how she had destroyed everything he held dear. Hated how she had clouded his memory of their marriage. Had it all been a lie?

Whatever the answer might be, he could never hate her.

He wished that he could.

But the moon would sooner fall from the sky than he could hate Betsy. She had been the love of his life, for all of his life. How could he shut off love like that? How could he let a bad love go?

As things stood now, he was like a goddamned covered pot of soup cooking over a slow and steady campfire. Add some extra kindling, even a dry branch or two, and the flames would flare, the liquid inside that pot going from an easy simmer to a rolling boil. If the pot remained sealed, the trapped steam would have no means of escaping and that lid would blow to kingdom come, supper spewed in every direction.

That was how he felt, like his lid was on too tight and he was about to explode. Fist clenched, he hammered the wall at his side, shattering the plaster.

He had to get out of here.

The bedside chair held a pile of neatly folded clothes. He got to his feet, fumbled his way into a newly pressed white muslin dress shirt, nary a wrinkle to be seen anywhere, and then pulled on a pair of never-before-worn socks and Sunday-best black trousers.

He grimaced. The rough wool, fine for keeping him awake during church service, irritated his morning hard-on.

Scooping a palm under his heavy sac, he redistributed the weight of his stones, coercing his cock to one side, where his erection would be less obvious.

He looked down at himself, checking for any noticeable bulges.

Shit. Even if she looked through thick spectacles, the woman he was off to see was bound to see his indecent need. Ten inches of flint was damn near impossible to hide. Something had to give.

He yanked the hankie from his shirt pocket, ripped open his scratchy trousers, and fisted himself. His grip as unflinching as steel, he struck flint until sparks flew.

Whoever the woman was, she had better be experienced, better know the ropes, better be able to take his off-putting length, better not expect anything in return. He had nothing better to give her than this.

The stream of ejaculate arced, the plug caught in the folds of his handkerchief, which he then balled up and tossed in the laundry basket. Afterward, he pulled on his boots and, with his limp cock hanging out, trotted his ass to the washstand.

The Bar Harbor Inn provided every floor with two baths, a "his" and a "hers" accommodation, the white porcelain fixtures well ahead of their time. For convenience's sake, every guest room also came equipped with a basic basin and pitcher and chamber pot.

He tried to avoid the mirror above the washstand, but his reflection outsmarted him. Wincing at his bleary-eyed face, he rubbed a cum-scented hand along his blunt chin.

Facial hair had proven too much a bother to maintain in the rough-and-tumble life he had lived as a lad, working timber camps, sleeping in cramped bunkhouses, migrating from one job to the next. Vermin infestations pretty much came with the territory, and beards and muttonchop sideburns made fine homes for the nasty little buggers.

He quit lumberjacking years ago but still owned a profitable timber outfit. Even so, old habits died hard. Regardless of current fashion, he continued to maintain a clean-shaven appearance and kept his hair trimmed, the length well below the ear, but not brushing too far past the collar. And he never slicked it back or styled it up with any of those fancy gentlemen's oils. None of that perfumed pomade shit for him. Reminded him of bear grease. What with already carrying the nickname of "Bear," on account of his size and swarthy dark looks, doing anything that might further add to the image seemed like rubbing his uncivilized appearance in his own face.

Not much he could do about either his darkness or his height. Donovan men were tall and black-haired. That was just the way it went. Both his brothers were the same. His eldest brother, Doyle, stood well over six feet, whereas his middle brother, John, was about the same, if not a bit more. He, himself, topped six-two at thirteen, and that was before his growth spurt. One hell of a gigantic growth spurt. He had picked up the nickname of "Bear" soon after. Just schoolyard joshing at first, but the damn endearment stuck.

He did what he could to minimize his wild-animal impact on others. Growling was out of the question, naturally. For the most part, he spoke softly and, except for a lingering consternation over Betsy, stifled any wayward tendencies. For the most part, he was big but harmless.

He hoped the woman he was meeting agreed.

In preparation for his special day, he had bathed the night before, shaved too. Even so, to make the best first impression he could, he continued moving his fingers over his face, hunting down any stray bristles he might have missed.

Hmm. Not too bad. Another session with the straightedge would wait for later.

After pouring cold water from the pitcher into the basin, he washed his cock, then stowed his dried-off rig away. Next he splashed his face. Keeping an eye on the hour, he sluiced his mouth with a tin cupful of clean water, a heap of salt added for good measure, spitting afterward into the chamber pot. After polishing his slightly crooked smile with a line of tooth powder spread on a brush, he salt-rinsed again. Another judicious spit concluded his toilette. No hiding the fact that he was not only big, but too damn blunt-boned for anyone to mistake him for handsome. Ready or not—*not*—he would have to do.

Theo left his private apartment next to the tavern and entered the inn's front hall, a gathering spot for the reception of guests and the like. He hollered into the kitchen, "Be back in time to take the new group of rusticators for a midmorning tramp. A dozen or so say they have a hankering to hike the old Wabanaki hunting trail. Some talk about seeing Sieur de Monts Spring too. 'Course, the damn idiots also claim to have a burning desire to climb Cadillac Mountain. I wager, they see how far they have to truck in their stiff city shoes and their soft haunches never leave the buckboard seat."

Inside the kitchen, Jess looked up from his flapjack and sourdough biscuit preparations, the hotel's specialty, and gave an easy laugh. "Do say. Buckboard, huh? Feed wagon not good enough for 'em then?"

According to longstanding rumor, the ladies all took to Jess's quiet ways and winning smile, enough leastwise to land him in a different widow's bed every night of the week. He never bothered with outsiders, seeing only to the needs of lonely local women. Even so, he spread himself thin. Some nights he got so busy humping, gossip said he had to double up on females, two at a time, in his bed.

"Hey, Bear, when you buying that fancy new carriage to hook up behind the team?"

Theo shook his head. "Hell, flatlanders must think paved streets run between the spruce up here in Desert Island. Next vacationers will be aiming to drive Ford's gasoline-powered motorcars through the mountains. You wait and see."

Inspired by the paintings of the Hudson River School artists, wealthy visitors, including robber barons from eastern cities like Boston and New York and Philadelphia and such, came to Maine in droves by coach, train, and steamers, all of them hoping to experience "Authentic Maine," whatever the hell that was. Fine by him. Rusticators kept the inn's thirty rooms filled and him in business.

"Make up a picnic basket to feed twelve heartily, would you, Jess?"

"Ayuh. Will do, Bear. Get right on it. Pheasant soup to pig-hunted truffles. Caviar and everything." With a good-natured chuckle, Jess waved him off and then returned to his wooden spoon stirring.

The inn's side door slapping at his back, Theo stumbled down the rustic stone stairs, his wool coat and tweed cap bundled under an arm. Hugging the craggy shore, he headed out for Josie's lighthouse.

Maybe, by the time he arrived at the meeting spot, the frosty nip in the March winds would cool his male fever. Maybe the brisk walk would dull his sharp sexual appetite. Maybe the soothing sounds of the ocean would lull his agitation. He hoped so. Jerking off had hardly taken the edge off his need.

Dawn broke over the sky, and as he rounded a rocky bluff, he spied a lone female off in the distance. As stipulated in their correspondence, she waited for him on the short stone jetty leading out to the beacon. She had arrived first. Was her punctuality a harbinger of things to come? Would she also climax before him?

That is, if she climaxed with him at all. He had some concerns in that area.

Crushing seashells underfoot, he made his crazed way to her, to her billowing skirts, to the loose wrap of her shawl...to her breasts, pussy, hips, and ass, to the welcoming softness that made her a woman.

Her back was toward him, her sights on the coastal schooners sailing past the isles in Frenchman Bay. Her face remained shrouded in mystery. Not that he cared. The alignment of her features made not a bit of difference to him. Only Christ, please Christ, make her look nothing like Betsy.

Although it seemed far-fetched, maybe she heard his loping footsteps above the ocean's roar. Whatever the case, the woman turned to him. Her shawl slipped from her head, revealing polished black hair done up in a tight chignon that accentuated her long white throat and exposed her graceful nape.

He dropped his forgotten coat and cap and approached her, a barreling advance. Even in a padded cell of drooling madmen, he doubted he would pass as sane. Would she welcome him? Or would she rightly see him as a deranged lunatic and take off?

If she had any sense, she would start running now. He no longer trusted himself. Not with her. Not with any woman. The man he had once been had died with Betsy.

His contentious cock disagreed. Twitching against his lower belly, his manhood was alive and raring to go.

He closed in on her, each footstep affording him a better view.

Hallelujah. She did not look like Betsy. The sun had kissed his wife. Her hair, often worn in loose ringlets, had shone reddish gold. Her cheerful face boasted more freckles than a constellation had stars. A tiny stature carried her pleasantly plump shape, rounded hills he had contentedly cuddled every night.

The dark-haired lady who faced him was more bony than bountiful. Her spare curves would provoke no contented sighs from him, cuddling neither. All angles, hollows, and boyish, sharp jabbing points, and inches too tall for his tastes, she had the sort of prickly shape that pushed men away, not brought them close.

Betsy's prettiness had lured men like fish to bait. He had been no exception. Her prettiness had hooked him right from the start.

Was this dark-haired lady pretty?

The wide-spaced, slate blue eyes, aristocratic nose, full mouth, high cheekbones, and broad jaw were random details, insignificant facts he briefly considered, then quickly discarded.

Pretty?

He was not the best judge of pretty anymore.

He did know this: the sun had completely ignored her, and her paleness gladdened him. He would never smile at the fortune of gold bullion in her hair. Would never map out the Big Dipper on her face by connecting the freckles. This woman was the equivalent of an exotic midnight flower to Betsy's common garden posy.

Should he cry or laugh? Accept the dissimilarity as profound or dismiss it as meaningless? And what did any of it signify anyway?

Their minds would never come within a thought of one another, and that suited him mightily. Their purpose was carnal. Only carnal. He had posted the ad, and she had responded, both of them with the same goal in mind.

Coupling.

Their motivations were unimportant, their appearances inconsequential. Only their genitals counted.

An ink black strand broke free from its mooring and whipped across ruby red lips. After haphazardly pinning the escaped tendril behind an ear, she swayed into an undulating curtsy that raised his straitlaced brows and sent his wayward cock skyward.

"How do you do, sir?"

He might have known. Her voice was cultured but husky, a voice meant for the night.

"Ma'am." Had he worn his hat, he would have doffed it.

She chafed her arms. "Shocking, the cold. I should have foregone the fashionable cashmere shawl in favor of a serviceable twill coat. But you see, back home in—"

He held up his hand. "No swapping backgrounds. Where you come from is of no interest to me. For all I know or care, you could hail from the District of Alaska."

"Ah, but had I originated from there, I would already be acclimated to this frigid clime."

"Maybe somewhere in Europe then." He noted the dark hair, the odd eyes set above high cheekbones. "France maybe?"

"Oh no. Not you too!" She laughed. "Hardly France."

"Why not? That pornographic periodical has a wide distribution."

"Pornographic! Is what you think of *Licentious*?"

"I always mean what I say and say what I mean."

"Sir, that periodical is an erotic art magazine and, like all provocative literature, sparks an often-divergent point of view that some might term offensive, yet in the wider scope, others might consid—"

To cut off her small talk, he pulled her backward, plastering her against him like the vest he had forgotten to wear. "Be still."

"Pardon?"

Straight up and down and flat all over, she nevertheless stirred him. She had to feel his cock jerk against her. Had to know his hot length branded her ass. Had to understand he wanted to skip the introductory chitchat, preliminaries too, and move straight to bed.

The winds picked up, disarranging her hair, and a scar high up on the back of her neck caught his eye. A sick dread fell over him. He tried to let it go, tried to shake the

dread. But instead of setting the weight away from him, the weight settled over him. He spoke heavily into her ear. "Just let me."

She turned her jaw up to him. Her plump lips came within a scant breath of his mouth. "Your ad lacked certain details. And your letter stressed only the temporary nature of this rendezvous. We should clarify the parameters of this encounter before we proceed. For example, let you do what?"

A reasonable question given the familiarity of their positioning.

"Hold you," he offered, aimlessly. "Just let me hold you."

"Be that your single objective, you have already accomplished your goal, sir. You must want more than an embrace, no?"

She wore no bustle under her flared skirts, not even a pad for stuffing her gown out in back. Molded as he was to her natural contours, his bulge already spelled out what he wanted from her. Why ask?

He thought back to their correspondence. Were there any vague areas she might have misinterpreted? Had he somehow, inadvertently, let her believe this was something it was not?

But no, to his recollection, he had been clear and definite. Furthermore, in her unsigned return letter, delivered to the periodical and then forwarded to him for anonymity's sake, the lady had said she understood.

Their minds would never meet, but in this one area, they both agreed.

"This is no seaside romance. No romance of any kind" – he swallowed – "and, ayuh, I want to do more than hold you."

Chapter Two

As early-spring breezes blew around them, scattering loose stones on the jetty, the nameless female pushed back against him, sealing her backside to his erection.

“So glad to hear your objectives remain unfulfilled, sir. As for me, though embraces are nice, I too need more. For instance, I should like to play games.”

“Games are for children.”

“Not these games, I assure you. A game involving mastery, say of a love slave, is strictly adult fare...”

“Go on!” Her incomplete thought tantalized him.

“Very well, I shall. Imagine, if you will, various leather and metal restraints holding a submissive love slave in place, while the dominant partner... Well...you fill in the blanks.”

When he did, it was as if he had touched a bare wire. A live current of want raced through him.

“Or imagine again, if you will, sir, a private sex club that provides members of certain inclinations with a secret dungeon where masked individuals of dominant leanings paddle others of submissive persuasion. I should enjoy something on the order of that. The employment of flogs and whips would go a long way toward fulfilling my fantasies. Not that I would ever dare presume to direct the manner and style of our play, sir.” Her lashes fluttered, her voice took on an appealingly dulcet tone, at odds with her straightforward sexual description. It was as if she were feeding him information she thought he would want to hear.

Was it? Was this what he wanted to hear?

Paddles. Whips. Flogging?

A prohibited scenario formed in his head. In it, he took her, his misbehaving handmaiden, over his knee and, *craaackkk*, down came his hand hard on her naked ass,

a spanking guaranteed to make her buttocks glow rosy. Later, as she pouted, he kissed the welts all better.

On a surge of heightened arousal, Theo took charge. He ground the hard ridge of his loins to her rear quarters.

“Do any of those ideas please you, sir?”

She pleased his cock well enough, but he could have done without the interruption. “Please me?”

“Yes. I very much wish for this arrangement to work. How might I ensure that it does?”

Close your mouth. Better yet, keep your mouth open and go down on me. Take my cock between your red lips and suck the anger from me as you would poisonous venom from a snakebite...

Where had that perversity come from?

Surely not from inside him. He had never harbored dark thoughts like that before. Always before, he would bite off his tongue before saying something crude like that in front of a female, any female, even a female who had answered an anonymous personal ad in a pornographic periodical. But thinking was not the same as saying. A man could hardly be held responsible for his thoughts.

The question remained, though. Why were those sorts of off-color musings popping into his head now?

Her. She was the reason. This woman acted as some sort of catalyst, bringing out things inside him best kept hidden.

“Sir, just to clarify...the scope of our coming together, as set forth in our correspondence, will entail a two-week departure from our usual lives to devote to the carnal. Correct?”

“Exactly.” But suddenly, the idea weighed uneasily on him.

“A nonexclusive and nonbinding arrangement wherein we give our bodies but withhold our hearts – does that sum up your thoughts?”

“Ayuh.”

“Upon the initial interview, both of us must agree to proceed.”

“Ayuh.”

“I have already decided to go forward.” On a half turn, she dropped her gaze to his erection. “And you appear to have made up your mind as well.”

Rash woman. Would she be as eager when he hammered home the remaining details? When he hammered himself home?

“No intimacy beyond the physical.” A gruff confirmation of a point he had made in his first letter.

“I did not travel all the way here to bare my soul, sir. I have friends for that, should I ever wish to make such revelations, which I decidedly do not.”

"Beyond compensation for your expenses, ma'am, do you seek other monetary compensation?"

"You insult me, sir! I am no whore."

"I stand corrected. And I apologize. Fact is, you speak with a little too much vehemence, a little too much offended righteousness to be an old hand at this. Ever done this before?"

She looked away. "Your ad specified prior knowledge."

"I did. And you evaded the question."

"The answer has a wide berth."

He pulled away from her. "Maybe so, but truth ain't got no wiggle room. Have you ever before responded to a personal ad?"

"Without a first time, none of us could claim experience."

Before, she had spoken with poised modulation, a mature authority. Now, an oddly anxious note had crept into her calm voice. Her evasion nagged at him.

"Shit." He shook his head. "Pardon me. Do not tell me you have never been with a man. Never slept with a man. That you still have your—" The horrifying truth stuck in his throat.

"Hymen, maidenhead, membrane, *cherry*," she supplied. "An inconvenience at most and easily dispensed with. We could even develop a play scene about it. Me, stretched out on a dais, some sort of raised stone platform, wearing a minimum of clothing, perhaps something Greco-Roman. A toga? Positively, something diaphanous. Oh, wait. Make it Egyptian! Yes! Egyptian would be quite, quite wonderful. Cleopatra springs to mind. She was such a powerful female figure in history. And I order you, one of my royal guards, clad in a leather gladiator-type loincloth, to service me..."

His interest spiked, along with his cock. Could he get any harder?

Once again, he shook his head. "A virgin will never satisfy my appetites." He tunneled a hand into his trouser pocket for his money purse. "How much do I owe you for your troubles? Train fare? We can settle terms here on the beach."

"No one else answered your ad, did they?"

A crafty guess, highlighting her keen shrewdness. "So what?"

"Only this: I am here. Why not avail yourself of my willingness? A bird in the hand and all that..."

He still stood behind her and, from his rear perspective, eyed her muscled flanks, clearly defined under her billowing blue skirts—a persuasive argument to continue. But—

"No damn virgins!"

Her sooty lashes all aflutter, she rounded on him until she faced him squarely. "Let me sweeten the deal. I shall do whatever you say. Agree to whatever you like. No

stipulations. No parameters." She winked, a gesture very much not in keeping with her ladylike presentation. "Best not let a gem like me get away."

Her virginity had muddied the waters, but an accommodating nature leached those murky depths clean. Still, willingness could only get her so far –

"No damn virgins!" He had to stay firm.

And firm he would remain until he found himself an experienced woman.

"What if I rid myself of the offending membrane and then return? Will you take me on then?"

"Instead of wasting my time, you should have done that before you arrived," he grunted.

"No need to harrumph at me. I thought of that too. But after due consideration, I dismissed the plan of action. My circle of male acquaintances is limited at best, and unfortunately, they all gossip. I had almost given up altogether on ending my chastity, when I read your charming ad. Who could possibly refuse a man, and I quote from our private correspondence, who knows 'how to keep a secret a secret'?"

He raked a hand through his coarse hair. "A brand-new cast-iron skillet requires lots of repeat seasoning before any meal coming out of it tastes any good. Salt, pepper, some oil – all those seasonings help prime the skillet. But no matter what you do, it can still take months before meat slides out without sticking. The way I see it, sex works the same way. Only with sex, very little pleasure is had during the seasoning process, on either side. You and I...we only have two weeks."

"I cannot believe you are actually comparing me to a frying pan!" She snorted. "Well, what do you suggest I do? And please, *please*, do not suggest seasoning me with salt and pepper, and lard, of all things, before your meat goes in to avoid sticking. Although, on second thought, a smidgen of some sort of sex oil to prime me might go a long way." She chuckled.

She found this situation humorous?

He did not find this situation humorous. Not one bit. This situation was damn serious.

He sorted through his tangled thoughts. "I suggest you find someone else, a man who takes on spinsters and has the stomach for bloodied bed linen."

"Your assumption is incorrect."

"All virgins bleed first time through." Secondhand information. He had no experience with virgins. None. For that matter, he had no experience making love with anyone, except Betsy. He had been eighteen to her twenty-five, and a virgin himself when they wed, and he had never looked back. Never even thought about anyone else since.

So what, she had been his first honey, but he had not been his wife's first beau. So what, she'd had other lovers – *many* lovers – before him. Was something that amounted to common knowledge in town supposed to upset him?

His wife's prior carnal knowledge might have vexed another man. Not him. Her having some experience under her bustle had taken some of the worry off him. *One* of them had to know what to do. Apart from that consideration, he had never wanted to cause her hurt.

"I am not naive, sir. I am quite aware of what is involved in losing my virginity. The incorrect assumption I was alluding to was your statement about my being a spinster."

That was it. End of argument. She could talk fancy all she wanted, but he talked plain, and facts were damn facts. "Were you anything else but a spinster," he blustered, "we would not be having this conversation."

"My word. How you do snarl! Minimally, give the person you are judging an opportunity to speak in his or her own defense before jumping to the wrong conclusion."

"Ayuh. I tend to be a judgmental so-and-so. I also tend to stay clear of testy virgins who call me on the tendency."

"Oh, dear. Please forgive my rudeness. The subject of my virginity is a sensitive one. I have been a widow for these past twelve months, and hardly a wife the fourteen years prior. Curious?" She gasped and briefly covered her mouth. "Forgive me. I quite forgot. No swapping personal backgrounds."

He ignored her sarcasm, which he supposed he deserved, and asked, "You and your husband never do...?" He wiggled two fingers in the air.

Her brows knit. "If that rather bizarre dancing motion indicates sexual intercourse, then no we did not *do* that." Her hands bracketed her nonexistent hips. "But I shall *do* you, sir. Well. And often. I possess a quick mind and a highly fertile imagination and a compelling motivation to learn quickly. Get ready for me to scale the highest mountain peak."

"A lofty ambition. Best strive instead for a molehill you can make a mountain out of."

"Oh, very amusing. But you will see. By the end of our time together, I may just leave you at the bottom of the range, staring up at me as I unfurl my flag at the summit. Figuratively speaking. I would much prefer a simultaneous flag raising, if you understand my meaning."

He scratched his head.

"Climax," she said to what must have been his confused expression. "*Orgasm*. Coming. *P-a-r-o-x-y-s-m*," she spelled.

What a prickly woman he had snagged from that damn ad! She was nothing at all like Betsy, the most agreeable of women.

Except she had agreed to faithfulness in their wedding vows and then went and cheated behind his back, so her agreeableness had meant not a goddamn thing in the long haul.

His shoulders went tight with tension. "I read the same journal you did. I know the meaning of that word." Though he refused to repeat it in front of a woman.

He sighed to himself. During their marriage, he *assumed* he had pleased Betsy, but they had never spoken openly about it. *It* being sex. Now, after learning what she had done, he doubted he ever had pleased her. He doubted his ability to pleasure any woman. And here was this woman, this stranger, this know-nothing damn *virgin*, bouncing what he considered obscenities off him like he was some idiot brick wall.

And maybe he was an idiot brick wall. What the hell did he know about sex, anyway?

The missionary position in the dark, nightclothes in place, and that was about it. Hence, the personal ad. A bad idea all around, he could see that now.

That was his thought on the subject. But if his brothers ever found out about what he had done, that he had solicited a woman through a pornographic periodical, they would pat him on the back and say something like, "About goddamn time you loosened up."

Ayuh, Doyle and John would congratulate him. And he would most likely blush scarlet. How did a bedroom conservative like himself get born into a nonconservative family?

His nameless applicant straightened her spine. "Since you seem so reluctant to forge ahead, I am left to wonder why you even bothered to set up this meeting. Why post an ad in *Licentious* at all?"

Funny. He was wondering over those exact same sentiments himself.

As he ruminated over his own inconsistencies, she tossed her head. Her neat chignon came apart. Broke clean away. Poker-straight black hair bounced around her cashmere-covered shoulders, a shiny black waterfall that had him gawking at the sheer beauty of it. As to his lungs, after one hard slam, no air came through.

While doing a piss-poor job of trying to catch a breath, she posed a finger to her square chin. "Sir, I can only believe you arranged this meeting today owing to what I wrote in one of my letters to you, in which I stated an interest in an 'all-encompassing taking.'"

Ayuh. That had done it for him. As a humiliating matter of fact, what she wrote still turned him inside out. An "all-encompassing taking" lit his fire but good.

He kept that information to himself. "Sounds like a heap of wishful thinking coming from a virgin."

"But suppose, just suppose, I am really a promiscuous tart at heart. How will you know unless you try me and find out?"

His balls swelled at her dare. To disguise the bulge in his trousers, he stuck his hands in his pockets. Either that or grab her and kiss her.

No. He was not doing that. Unless the kiss drove her away.

"Give me just this one day, sir, to prove myself. Find me unsatisfactory, and feel free to boot me out on the morrow at dawn. Twenty-four hours is all I ask."

A day. A full day. Another eternity to get through without Betsy.

He looked at her closely. "Why would an attractive woman do this?"

"Why, thank you for the compliment, sir. How very gallant of you."

"Go find yourself a prospective husband, ma'am. One who can get the job done. One who gives you as much praise as you think you deserve."

She laughed. "Oh, the gentle giant has a bite. Well, fine. I think I might enjoy some toothy nuzzling. As to your question, in the future, I may place myself on the marriage market. At present, I am shopping for a temporary lover, not a death-do-us-part spouse. Now, on to *my* question, since I answered *yours*."

"Only fair," he agreed.

"A man of honor, eh?"

Was he honorable? Was taking out a personal ad in a pornographic periodical the honorable thing to do? Was sex without even the hope of love honorable?

"Ma'am, about that honorable question—"

"You know very well that is not my question! My question is this: are you married?"

While avoiding the whole honor question, she forced him to say the painful words. "Just like you, I was married. Just like you, my spouse died. No children."

"Oh, forgive me. I am so terribly, terribly sorry—"

As shared sorrow made for common ground, and he wanted none of that with her, he waved aside her condolences. "And when she was alive, I was never unfaithful."

"Which answers both my questions. You are unmarried and honorable."

Snooty and cantankerous to boot. A hell of an off-putting combination.

That for some perverse reason appealed to him. How prickly would she be in bed? As prickly as a pine needle?

He could tolerate a prick or two, or even a dozen or more, providing only one prick satisfied her.

His prick.

That realization brought him up short. Was he so hungry for sex that any woman who responded to his ad would do, even an unlikely candidate like this one?

This virgin widow, sophisticated in manner and worldly in outlook, was not the easy lay he had in mind when placing that advertisement in the erotic journal. This woman was complicated, when simple was all he could handle.

Despite the freezing temperatures, sweat rolled down his back. Could be, even simple was more than he could handle.

He unstuck his hands from his pockets. Taking his applicant by the upper arms, he rocked her back and forth, a heavy-handed attempt to shake some sense into her. Or maybe, he just needed any excuse to touch her again. During their sparring, time had ticked by a little quicker.

Discomforted at that realization, he asked, "Why sell yourself so cheap?"

"I am not *selling* myself, not cheaply, not at all," she strained through rattling teeth. "I only desire a dignified end to my virginity, and without any commitment on either side. Truly."

Eventually, he stopped shaking her and dropped his hands back to his sides, but his gaze remained glued to her person.

Her shawl provided little warmth. Grief and anger had numbed him to all sensation, except carnal need, but Maine's unfamiliar cold had to cut right through her.

"We can take shelter over here," he hollered against the wind's roar and pushed her along the short stone jetty and up the shell-lined walk to the abandoned lighthouse.

A crazed thing to do. An act of a lunatic. The last resort of a madman. He answered to all. Most especially, he answered to desperate.

And she must be of the same inclination. No guarantee of anything, she had agreed to hand over her virginity to him, without marital or financial compensation. Without even an offer of companionship. If that was not an act of desperation, what was?

Desperate to touch her, he backed her up against the lighthouse's chipped white painted bricks and undid the ends of her shawl.

"You wear no corset." His hungry gaze roamed her unbridled bosom. "Are you bare beneath this gown?"

"See for yourself, sir."

Brazen hussy. He would see. And soon.

Unless he could convince her to leave. For her sake, he had to get her to go.

Go *now*. Before they dug themselves in too deep. Reasoning had done nothing to budge her, shaking some sense into her had also failed. Only one option remained.

Giving her a taste of what she could expect if she stayed.

He leered at her. "Got strong legs?"

She sent him a bewildered look. "Yes, I suppose so..."

"Strong enough to wrap around a man's spine?"

"If the man has a spine. Some do not. Some say one thing and mean another. Some men cannot make up their minds. Some invite a woman all the way to Maine and then do and say silly things in a useless attempt to get her to go home." She sighed, a blustery expulsion of compressed air. "But yes, if the man does have a spine, then my legs are strong enough to take me prancing around a room on a bridle, like a frisky pet pony. Is that what you wished to hear? Or perhaps, you would prefer to hear this?"

She blew through mouth, her lips vibrating. “*Neiggghhh.*”

“Whoa,” he rasped at her whinny.

“Precisely!” She smiled. “Page one-twelve, the January issue of *Licentious*. My favorite one yet. So glad you understand my point.”

No, he did not. As far as he could tell, all of this was pointless.

Except for her smile. That point he understood so well, all the blood drained clean out of his head and went straight to his loins.

What was he doing here? Why had he composed that goddamn personal ad?

He had been lonely. And randy. Three years was a hell of a long time to go without a woman’s comfort. The idea—the letter he wrote—had been just one of those crazed, unexplainable kind of spontaneous things that happen in life. A copy of *Licentious* had been lying around Doyle’s place, near the entrance to his sister-in-law’s studio. A glance at the cover told him the magazine published artistic but controversial stuff that Lily called avant-garde and he called just plain dirty. Then again, his sister-in-law was one of those highbrow painters, and damn talented too from the looks of her work and the prices she received from their sales, so it made sense that her reading material would reflect her taste for naked people and such. A glance inside *Licentious* told him the magazine went beyond garden-variety dirty into downright pornographic, the images like nothing he had ever seen before or since, not even in logging camps, where the all-male population could get a mite frisky in their reading selection. He had only ever picked up that one copy. Still, it came as no surprise that the periodical featured *those* types of illustrations.

“Of course,” she continued, “in my fantasy, the gentleman wears the bridle.”

She lost him. Altogether. A gent saddled up? Why would anyone do such an idiotic thing? He was a big man, but not even he could comfortably carry a saddle on his back for long.

He tsked to himself. Society folks must have nothing better to do with their time but waste it on playing party games, like pin the tail on the donkey and stick the saddle on the horsey. Grown-ups acting like children made no kind of sense to him.

His expression must have altered or something to reflect his consternation, because she rolled her unusual slate blue eyes. “Very well. Have it *your* way. Saddle *me* up and then prepare yourself to go places you have never gone before. How is that? Does that come closer to what you had in mind? Does that submissive image meet with your approval? Only feed me a cube of sugar and an apple every so often and this filly will swish her tail and give you the ride of your life. How about spurs? Do you favor those?”

“W-w-hat?”

“Spurs. Do you intend to wear them? Oh, I do hope so. Spurs would be quite wonderful. Add a ‘gitty up!’ and I am yours. I adore straight-shootin’ cowboy talk. On the other hand, vacillation in a man leaves me cold. *Brrr.*” She shivered.

All he could do was stare at her, because, sure as hell, understanding her went beyond him. He was no cowboy, had never been out west in his life. Why the hell would he wear spurs and talk like that?

“Just to let you know,” she continued, “I would enjoy an exploration of fetishism and sadomasochism, as per the writings of the Marquis de Sade and Leopold von Sacher-Masoch. Also flagellation, as described in John Cleland’s *Memoirs of a Woman of Pleasure*. You know – *Fanny Hill*. Recently, I managed to get my hands on one of the few circulating copies of *My Secret Life*, by Walter. Do you know it? Have you read it?”

Read it? A bedroom conservative like himself would have to think twice before lining a birdcage with it.

“Also ménage. I think two men would –”

Two men?

Whoa. That did it. She hit his flash point. He heard no more. Sharing was not for him. His wife had already led him down that primrose path and finding out had just about killed him. Posting a personal ad in that goddamn scandalous rag of a pornographic magazine was the dumbest thing he ever had done.

Regardless that his brain said this was wrong, wrong, wrong, his cock took exception and said this was right, right, right. His wood was oak-hard. Not because of her mention of a damn threesome, he was not listening to anything more about *that*, but all those other things she had said, those dirty things, those off-color things a good man should never think, never mind act on, perked up his attention.

Especially that part about flagellation.

In some of his darker moments, he saw himself in his thoughts standing over a woman. She was down on the floor, on all fours like an animal, and she was naked. Stark naked, not a stitch on. And he had a whip in his hand. He was laying that whip across her bare bottom, and she was writhing and screaming.

In delight.

And he was pretty delighted too. Enough to pull out his cock and whack off, and then let go, a stream of ejaculate that tagged that bare-naked woman between her buttocks. Only in his thoughts, he disrespectfully called that portion of a woman’s body her ass, and he loved that region, loved it so much, he wanted *to* love it. Only in his thoughts, that woman wore this high-falutin’ female’s exotic face.

None of that pretend cowboy shit either. None of those silly games. He was in charge, and he let her know it, the way a man should let a woman know it—with his male strength.

She talked about a saddle. He would keep her in a bridle all right, chains if he had to, so she would never be able to go behind his back and cheat on him. And far from rolling her eyes at him, far from telling *him* what she would allow him to do, she would be the one groveling at his feet, begging him to take her, her long, black, silky, *sweaty* hair sticking to her cum-sticky body. And because he was in charge, he did take her. Any the hell way he wanted.

If he decided to stick his cock in her ass, he would take out his cock and stick it in her ass. Deep. Real deep. Ram it in there. Push it in there. Pull it out, and then do it again and again. Watching all the while as his hard, dark flesh penetrated her ass. Until she was wailing, it was so deep. Saying, "No no no, please no," but he kept doing her anyway. Doing *it* anyway. And she was loving it, despite her tears. Loving how he was putting it to her, and pleading and begging for more. Which he gave her. Later. Much later. After coming all over her back, and watching the cum dribble between the crack in her ass. Later, he would tie her up. Not loose. Tight. Good and tight. And then he would...

No! He could never do that. Never. Not any of those rough things. He would never give in to that darkness inside himself, that unspeakable yearning that had been brewing inside himself for years. But fuck, he wanted to.

Christ, he was confused.

He had to convince her to leave. His confusion would end if she left. Unfortunately, he could come up with only one way to do that convincing.

No help for it, he cupped her breasts, his thumbs stroking across the rapidly hardening nipples.

That should frighten her off. A virgin and a society lady on top of that would never stand for a man like him pawing her.

Her pink tongue darted from between her white teeth, and she licked her lower lip. One flick. Two flicks.

The move flat-out mesmerized him. His objective forgotten, he pinched her nipple. And a dark thrill came over him. That dark thrill descended on him like heavy molasses and just about smothered all reason. And her receptiveness to his rough handling did nothing to help matters.

Instead of recoiling, she forced the issue. Going up on her toes, she leaned forward, so that his possession deepened.

Jesus help him, he pressed harder. And this time, to the sounds of her throaty purrs, he applied his trimmed nails.

He had to be hurting her. A woman's nipples were tender and should be treated with the utmost care, and here he was digging his hands into her soft flesh, which turned out not to be so soft anymore. Shit. Her nipples had gone hard and long and pointy. What would it feel like to bite into them? Pay their tenderness no mind and snap his jaws down on those hard, pointy ends until she writhed as his teeth cut into them. Not a lot. But some. Enough to bruise them. Enough to maybe draw a droplet of crimson blood. Enough not to scar her, but plenty enough to mark her as his territory. Enough to show her that, in no uncertain terms, she belonged to him. Only him. Knowing there would be consequences, like a good hard lashing across her hindquarters out in the woodshed, she would never stray then.

He twisted her nipple between his thumb and forefinger, and her ruby lips parted. Humid gasps ushered forth from her slack mouth. Squirming, she moaned a guttural, "uh-uh-uh."

His heart hammered in his chest. She had called him on his indecision, and that had dented his damn male pride, pride already crushed by his wife, and he had taken an action he had wanted no part of, an action his brain was dead set against. Hurting a woman went counter to everything he held dear. But bolstered by her receptiveness, buoyed up by the mewling sounds she was making, he applied more pressure.

She writhed, just like in his thoughts. "Please?"

Now was when she would tell him to let her go.

He scowled at her. "Please, what?"

"Do the other breast too, sir."

Chapter Three

Some damn push he had given her.

His attempt to drive her away had him grimacing in pain as his cock butted against his trousers' placket, hunting down release, and none too fussy about what manner and form that release took.

So, she liked what he was doing, did she?

He liked it too. The closeness, anyway. Not since Betsy's passing, not in three long years, had he been this near to anyone. And not just to a woman, to another living person. His skin was hungry for human contact.

And then there was the sex part. He enjoyed the soft give of her female body. He enjoyed that she enjoyed what he was doing. As it turned out, the virgin lady owned a sensual streak, a curious nature that cried out for adventure. Given his limited repertoire in the bedroom, given his failure with Betsy, was he the man to give her the exciting thrills she craved? Did he have the imagination?

After exploring up and down the coast of Maine, inland too, he would say so. Considering his fantasies, the ones he shied away from owning up to, the ones never acted upon, he would say so again. But *should* he? Should saying so become doing so?

His mind returned to honor. Initiating a virgin, taking the sign of her chastity without love in his heart, was not a righteous course. He had no right to do something like that.

Too bad intangibles like honor held no interest for his prodding cock. "Raise your arms above your head."

When her hands shot to the sky, he circled both her slender wrists with his thick fingers, inescapable bracelets, and lowered his head to the sharp points that arrowed outward from under the blue gown's silk bodice.

She had to ache. He could take that ache away. "Like it hard or gentle?"

Her jaw—not a pretty jaw, a beautiful jaw, he now realized—slanted as she pondered an answer. “I would have no idea.” Her brow furrowed. “How would you classify your prior stroke?”

“Decidedly ungentle.”

“Then hard, evidently.”

“How about I use my mouth on you?”

She rubbed her thighs together, an unpolished move coming from such a graceful and elegant woman that told him more than her polite, “yes, please,” ever could.

She wanted him.

“And your nipples?” he asked.

“I thought my nipples were the subject under discussion.”

He had irritated her, and that irritation delighted him. She wanted him so much she was growing impatient with the wanting.

So was he.

“The color,” he rushed out. “Tell me their color.”

Before she could answer, he was mouthing her over the silk.

“Pink.” She panted. “My nipples are pink.”

It took all his control to propel himself away from her. “Pink? Damn. A deep, strong womanly coral suits me better.”

“An adult man honestly admitting to his desires, not an overgrown lad trying to put me off, suits me better,” she fired back. “We shall both have to live with our respective disappointments.”

He was already doing that. *Betsy, Betsy, why did you cheat on me, Betsy?*

Misery never left his side, and this woman offered him oblivion from the pain of his wife’s treachery. How could he refuse?

“Perhaps if you were to...er...bite them, my nipples, that is, the hue would deepen. Like...like...Maine lobsters do after cooking.” She chuckled.

At her bawdy humor, a vulgar image formed in his head of two boiled red crustaceans dangling from the ends of her dainty breasts. He had all to do not to guffaw at the picture. Did nipple clamps come in the shape of lobster claws?

He would find out. In the artist community of Bar Harbor, anything went. If a man knew the right private galleries to look, he could stumble upon any number of sexual devices, from studded nipple clamps to spangled cock rings to sparkly anal dildos. During his marriage, he had never gone searching for paraphernalia to spice up bedroom occasions. Betsy’s love had been plenty enough for him.

The same had not held true for her.

Had he let his wife down? Bored her in bed? Had he not been enough of a man for her? Had she needed more than one lover at a time? Is that why she strayed?

If so, did that same fickleness apply to all women?

If women preferred novelty to constancy, if they saw love as a weakness they could manipulate to their own ends and advantage, then his possessive nature had cursed him to wander through his remaining life alone. For he could not, would not, go through the same heartbreak of loving an unfaithful woman again. And sharing a woman with another man made no kind of sense to him. Could he change an attitude that ran so deep inside him?

This woman said she had something to prove?

That made two of them.

If he could make love to this woman but not love her, if he could hold her close for two weeks and then let her go, if forever was not part of their arrangement, then he would prove to himself that he could see to the needs of his body and leave feelings out of the physical act of release. He would prove monogamy was a learned trait, not a biological imperative ingrained in him, and that meant he could relearn a new attitude. How would he know unless he tried?

He bared his teeth. "Are you sure this is what you want?"

"Yes."

Just a word. She could still change her mind. Women changed their minds all the time. Evidently, his wife had changed her mind about their wedding vows multiple times, beginning right after the honeymoon. Had she ever been faithful to him?

When this woman held her ground, making no move to escape him, he bit the end of one dainty breast. Holding nothing back, he sank his teeth into the silk-covered areola and ground his jaws.

"Oh goodness, oh goodness," she chanted and arched her spine. Her head slammed against the lighthouse's brick exterior. "Oh, goodness gracious. So good."

As she seemed to appreciate what he was doing, his confidence increased. Experimenting, he alternated a tender suckling with a rough nibbling, until she was twisting and writhing, her thighs rubbing and opening, rubbing and opening. She clawed at his wrists. Not to escape, but to release the knot of tension growing inside her. He knew how that went. The same knot of tension was growing inside him.

Letting her go, he stepped back and away.

An idiotic move. Unable to stand on her own, she slid down the side of the lighthouse.

He caught her before she collapsed at his feet. "Are you all right?"

Looking up at him from under thick, sooty lashes, she said resentfully, "No, damn you, I am not all right! How could I be when you left me unfulfilled?" She rubbed at her nipple, an action that drew his hot gaze back to her breasts all over again.

His mouth had moistened the silk of her gown, turning a ladylike design into a lusty invitation. He could plainly see that her nipples had painfully elongated. He had done that to her, given her equal parts pleasure and hurt.

"Run." He groaned, his despair rising. "While you still have the chance. Stay and your pleasure may grow, but the pain is sure to worsen. Guaranteed, I will inflict hurt on you."

"I shall hold you to that promise, sir."

"Enough teasing," he said gruffly. "Leave."

Her bottom lip quivered. "No."

"Consider yourself warned." He yanked her skirts up to the waist, held them there with one hand.

Betsy had worn brightly colored unmentionables, bedecked with rows upon rows of ribbons, ruffles, and tucks. Stiff scarlet satin petticoats had rustled when she walked and peeped out flirtatiously from under her skirts. Scandalous purple drawers clung to the indentation of her cleft and her round posterior. Yellow corsets pushed up and flaunted her already lush breasts, and reflected her flamboyant dance hall girl tastes.

This woman wore simple white lawn underpinnings, as modest as a nun's habit. Maybe that explained why all he could think about was her wearing nothing.

He spoke to her drawers where a dark shadow hinted at what lay within. "Here on out, I supply all your needs, including a place for you to stay."

"I already booked a room in a hotel. Not a grand-scale accommodation, like the Rockefellers, Fords, Carnegies, Astors, and Morgans of Millionaire's Row," she said, listing the names of prominent gentry who lodged in one-hundred-room mansions facetiously called "cottages." "But very nice, all the same." She paused. "Wait! Does this mean you intend to go through with this?"

"That remains to be seen. No rushing a careful Downeasterner. What about conception?"

"I timed this tryst to coincide with my least fertile time of the month."

"Not good enough."

She raised a brow. "Oh?"

Clearly, he had rattled her. She had rattled him too. Maybe his agitation was not as transparent, but for sure, she had shaken him. Sex was new to her. In a way, sex was new to him as well. This raw kind of sex anyway. This rough, no-holds-barred kind of sex. "I promise to withdraw." The method had worked with Betsy for years. His wife had not wanted a child.

Sweat sluiced down his back, fear added to arousal. Once again, he stepped away from her, giving her ample room to leave if she had a mind to. "Lower your drawers."

"Are you determining if I have exhibitionist tendencies?"

John used to watch Doyle's wife, Lily, through the lens of a telescope. Theo had never understood that kind of obsession before, but he was beginning to now. "No one comes here, not even fishermen. This stretch of beach is privately owned."

With a careless shrug, she picked at the tidy bow at her waist. "Oh, too bad. Truth to tell, the idea of voyeurism excites me."

He nodded at her covered mons. "Yet your drawers remain securely in place."

She talked about sexual play, but playfulness was far from what he was feeling. She talked about pretend scenarios, games of bondage, but in his frame of mind, games of pretend were beyond his reach. If she were too ladylike – too damned innocent – for what he did have in mind, she had to go.

Leave NOW! Before darkness closes in around me.

Chapter Four

Susan stood against, of all New England oddities, a lighthouse at the edge of nowhere, with her skirts puffed up around her waist, plucking the ties on her drawers.

Granted, New York's Five Points Asylum was a forbidding and heartless place, but this cold stretch of deserted Maine beach rivaled it, and then some. The glacial winds permeated her very bones.

The man who loomed over her, his legs spread wide, his pelvis slightly raised and tilted, more than compensated for the discomfort.

He desired her. Despite that his manner radiated as much warmth as an icehouse in the tundra, this man's blood pumped hot in his veins. Even a know-nothing virgin like her could tell he needed a sexual outlet. So why try so hard to drive her away, when they both wanted the same thing from this encounter?

If he expected her to cower away from his suggestions, he would need to work a great deal harder. The slum gangs of New York had taught her how to deal with bluster like his.

Never show fear. Never back down. Tease your opponent at the outset, lull him into a false sense of security while determining his vulnerability, and then land a sneak blow at his soft spot as the opportunity presented itself.

She had sneak blows aplenty up her silk leg-o'-mutton sleeves. Hanging on to her virginity for eighteen years, first on the streets and then in a bleak city orphanage, had taken both cunning and a well-placed knee. Retaining her virginity during a fourteen-year sterile marriage and one additional year of false widow's mourning had required a strength of will that went against the very fiber of her passionate nature. Dispensing with her virginity with this man would hardly test her mettle. She could handle him wearing a blindfold over her eyes and with both hands tied behind her back.

An aroused shiver shot through her. Heavens. Bondage! As depicted in last year's July issue of *Licentious*. After seeing the various illustrations, after reading the corresponding article, she was determined to try the form of sexual gratification achieved through restraint.

Of him.

When it came to dominance and submission, she wanted to be the one on top.

Whoever he was, whatever his name, she meant to indulge herself on him. Though not capricious by nature, she would allow impulse to take the lead. For the first time in her life, she would think of no one but herself and do exactly as she pleased. To hell with cares and responsibilities! She had fifteen years to make up for, and only two weeks to cram all the decadence she could into them.

And no one in the society circles she frequented, where gossip passed as entertainment, would be any the wiser.

After removing the embarrassing hindrance of her virginity, she would return home, see to her stepchildren, and then, like all well-set widows, embark on a variety of affairs, emphasis on conducting herself prudently. A nod and a wink to circumspection was a must in society. One must at least *pretend* to observe convention. Conduct herself accordingly, and she would be able to have her cake and eat it too.

That is, if her darling girls stopped smothering her with affection and left her alone.

A highly likely probability, if they found her out.

In a snap of two fingers, they would disavow all tenuous familial ties with her. Like pretty butterflies, they would flutter their pedigreed wings and flap her in the face, their shunning a direct cut to her heart.

Not that she would blame them for the renunciation. No, not at all! Not one whit. She was the toast of New York now, but let a breath of scandal touch her, and there went her impeccable reputation. And society, the fickle bitch, would ostracize the girls for their association with her. Butterflies were pretty but fragile; they would never stand up to such a fate.

She would not let that happen, would not allow anything to shatter her darling butterflies' self-absorbed cocoons. She could never crush them that way. But she would have *something* for herself.

Country estates were hotbeds of illicit passions. She would have one of her friends invite her to a summer house party that featured bedroom swapping as a source of evening entertainment. Ménages, orgies, group sex, intercourse with one's own gender...anything and everything went during those house visits. She had never participated in debauched revelry before, but she would after ridding herself of her virginity. Until, one day, someday, she decided to remarry. Then she would become respectable all over again. Infidelity in marriage was detestable.

But she was in no hurry to relinquish the precious gift of independence her husband had bequeathed her. Her choice. Her timetable.

First, though, she must convince this morose man to allow her to stay.

He *said* he had expected someone experienced. Foolish man! Better than experience, she had an eagerness to learn, honed by a lifetime of privation.

She glared up at him, her strength of will matching his, and undid the bow at her waist. If she could put up with his puritanical prudery, his tedious lack of joie de vivre, she could put up with anything.

Except one more day of virginity.

Men liked fluidity in a woman. They liked movement, shifting, swaying, *bouncing*...in the feminine form. For that reason, she had intentionally gone without a corset or even a bustle pad under her gown, and had worn only one petticoat.

Her plan had worked. His unblinking gaze tracked her every move.

After loosening the tied waistband, she dropped her drawers to mid thigh.

He sucked in a breath, music to her ears.

Look your fill, sir.

He did, though with an absurd, self-flagellant reluctance.

She was beginning to think his holding back had less to do with her virginity than with his own case of cold feet. What was his story?

Undeniable grief etched his features. He had lost his wife. She would guess the loss was recent, and he was still in deep mourning—

Aha! She had just bumped into his vulnerability, his soft spot.

This gruff man knew what it was to love, what it was to grieve love's loss.

And that was enough to know. A heavy influx of reality would ruin the fantasy. She needed no reminder that love was a cruel taskmaster, a responsibility, an unselfish giving of self. She wanted no part of love. Passion, yes. Desire, yes. Sex, oh God, yes. But not love.

Could this man be playful? Could he laugh? Play games? Or did a serious temperament prohibit frivolity? Was he possessive by nature? A problem during a ménage...

Coatless, his thick black hair whipping around his head, he gave the impression of a Maine black bear, newly awakened from hibernation and positively starved for something to eat after a long winter's nap.

Breakfast. That would be her.

Goody.

She tossed her head, bumping her skull against the lighthouse's white and red brick exterior in the process. Heedless of the possible goose egg forming under her hair, she reached for his hand, brought his big palm between her thighs to her body's entrance, slick with her eagerness to begin.

"Wait!" Shaking off her hold, he gently probed her scalp.

She would have none of his tenderness. "To hell with the bump on my head. Get me off!"

Paying her no heed, his fingers continued to probe her scalp.

She knocked his hand away. "You act like I said something dreadful." Coolness had moved into his manner, a chill far worse than the weather. "What?"

"Not dreadful. Confusing, more than anything else."

"Pray tell me the source of your confusion, and I shall endeavor to explain myself."

"Where would a virgin, and a lady to boot, learn the name for self-gratification? And do not say *Licentious*. The one I read contained no gutter talk."

"I would hardly call 'getting off' gutter talk." He should hear her when she really got going! His prude's eardrums would wither.

"An off-color expression then. I have lived with rough men for months at a time and never heard what just popped out of your mouth from any of them. Where would a virgin lady learn that sort of thing?"

The back alleys of Five Points, where she had heard and said much worse. She knew common vernacular, thought in common vernacular, but she spoke with perfect society diction.

She fingered her nape. "I never claimed innocence."

"Virginity either. Nigh on impossible being one without the other, to be a virgin without innocence." He withdrew his hand from her scalp. "You will survive."

"Not if you persist in adding to my already enormous frustration level and I explode from sheer pent-up randiness," she strained through gritted teeth. "And explaining away an unnamed corpse on this stretch of deserted beach might cause difficulties, especially if that corpse died with a lovely bite mark on her tit."

His face visibly paled.

Oh dear. She did it again. Shocked him. How very tedious. Just her luck to have snagged a morally upright puritan from the personal ad. Why would such a prude of a man read an erotic journal, never mind post a personal ad? Unless—

His sudden pallor was due to something else, something other than disapproval over her naughty phraseology. Perhaps his blanched complexion came from her use of another word, a poorly advised word, a sad word.

Corpse.

Why had she dragged death into this?

He was a widower, and obviously, his wife's death had drained him. Fifteen years of household concerns, six stepchildren, all looking to her for emotional support, and a recently deceased husband had drained her too.

She was thirty-three. He looked to be in his mid to upper thirties. Neither of them came to this without a past. The trick to success here was to leave their private, everyday concerns behind and wallow in the selfish decadence of sensual pleasure.

So long as, within the cloak of anonymity, they were carnally honest with one another.

"Forgive me," she said softly. "My thoughtless remark hit too close to home. Considering your loss, I should not have brought up anything to do with bereavement."

"You lost a husband too—"

"Ah, but I barely knew him. I grieve for him as I would a stranger. Your situation differs from mine. You loved your wife."

He looked away, and her heart sank.

Normally, she was the very epitome of diplomacy. The perfect hostess, the perfect guest. She had a talent for uttering inanities that offended no one. A pity she had a considerable knack for saying the wrong thing where he was concerned.

Her skirts were still up around her waist, her drawers lowered. She could have been naked and he would not have noticed. To restore his attention where it rightly belonged, namely on herself, she splayed her legs until her knees were apart and the pubic lips open. "You make me wet."

Obviously a doubter, he looked, seeking to confirm the information for himself.

Why on earth would she lie? She *was* wet. Copiously so. A virgin did not equal innocence. And she was no stranger to self-pleasuring.

The girls' dormitory at the orphanage came with one thin blanket and not even a pretext of privacy. But once she became a teacher, she no longer had to share a lumpy mattress with the other orphaned girls. The first thing she did when she had a bed all to herself was to go exploring down below. All through marriage, she had diddled herself. The solitary poking had appeased her for a while, had soothed the loneliness at night, but nothing had assuaged the emptiness.

She circled her pubic lips with a finger. "I get off—*oops*—rather, I *masturbate*. At times with my hand, at other times with a steam-powered dildo. The vibrations feel lovely between my legs, across my entrance. I have no idea what the dildo, itself, feels like inside. I would prefer my first time to be with the genuine flesh-and-blood article, not with an artificial phallus, no matter how lifelike," she disclosed unrepentantly. "I purchased the device at a health spa. The water jets there were most exhilarating, but I wanted something mobile, something I could use at home whenever I felt the urge. The urge comes over me quite often."

His mouth opened, then snapped shut.

"I have never known a love like yours, but a woman has needs, you know, the same as a man." There! With that admitted, she had exposed her vulnerability. She lusted from every pore. Let him make what he would of it.

"You masturbate to the illustrations in *Licentious*?" he asked, a grudging and awkward question.

"Yes," she answered remorselessly. The periodical was a shared pastime. They had found one another through a personal ad placed within its pages. They had come together for one purpose and one purpose only. Let them be honest about it.

Please, do not poke fun. Do not give me a reason to close up about this one thing, about carnal pleasure.

"I pore over all the pictures, cover to cover," she said. "Indeed, I would like to try out the topics presented in the magazine. Masturbation is one at which I already excel. Trial and error, you know, but I do orgasm. With that said, I am so incredibly tired of having only my own company. My solitary screams echo so in the empty sitting room."

"You masturbate in the...in the...in the...sitting room?"

Poor dear. He blushed so easily. And this from a man once married. A rowdy backwoodsman from the look of him too. Yet he acted like someone's prim maiden auntie. "Why ever not? I live alone now. I can diddle myself wherever I please. During the next fourteen days, I intend to be even more depraved. Lucky you, to be the recipient of my wicked ways. I intend to grab at pleasure in all its many forms. Pain too. You, sir, possess a rare talent for combining the two. With any luck, I should leave Maine sore but smiling."

"Tall order." He reached for her, removed the pins from her hair, one by one. They scattered about her feet. "You give me a lot of credit. I hope I live up to your expectations, ma'am."

"I know it goes against the rules, but the thought of you calling me nothing, or worse, *ma'am*, for the next two weeks makes me want to cringe. Besides, you and I were only numbers in *Licentious*. I can hardly call you four seventy-five, now can I?"

"Guess not."

"Please call me Siam."

"Siam your real name?"

"Yes, actually, it is. Though not the name I go by, not for years, not even in my thoughts. Starting now, I intend for that to change. The name Siam represents the truest me. I have high hopes of being the truest me here with you. I want to recapture that girl known as Siam with you. She was fearless, and I want to be fearless with you. Sentimentally speaking, I would also enjoy hearing my real name fall from another's lips again."

"A pretty name you got there, Siam."

"Too foreign by half, I fear."

"Exotic. Like your face. I like it. And just so you know, I would never reveal your secret. What we do here stays here."

"So you said in your correspondence. 'Good at keeping secrets,' you wrote." She smiled encouragingly. "Now your turn. Tell me what to call you. Anything will do, a

nickname perhaps, another persona, something you feel comfortable answering to and I would have no way of recognizing as belonging to you.”

“Theo. Only my family calls me by it anymore.”

“When you explored my breasts, *Theo*, handling them not with the reverence given to delicate trophies, but lustfully, like pirate booty, I yearned. I still yearn. For a brief time, your mouth took away the heaviness. Your teeth, biting the tips of my breasts, suckling on the ends, relieved the tightness somewhere else.”

His gaze, no longer warily distant, grew openly intense “Where else. Say it.”

“My cunny.”

He coughed, as if in distress.

On the streets of Five Points, she had learned a similar, if coarser word, for that region of her woman’s body. Not that she could tell him so, not that she could share the horror, the freedom, of growing up on the streets of Manhattan. But would he use what he did know about her, her familiarity with what society deemed crude language, against her? Perhaps call her lower class, which indeed she was, an economic and cultural disadvantage she had kept hidden since the age of eighteen. Her affected airs, donned to impress others, had given her an unimpeded reception into society she would not have had otherwise, regardless of marrying up. Society scorned social climbers.

She saw things differently. To her way of thinking, her merchant husband had paid her for services rendered. Not sexual services, as other, similarly impoverished young women often provided successful men in order to advance themselves, but child-rearing services. For years, she had acted as a glorified nursemaid/tutor in his home, little better than a servant. Her pension, delivered upon his death, came in the form of a bestowment in his will. Only accidentally had hard work and diligence earned her the respect and love of his children. As a result, today she led a comfortable life, filled with social calls, charitable works...her darlings’ deluded affection.

Ah, but in her thoughts, she dropped genteel drawing room euphemisms and expressed herself in her first language, the harsh vernacular of her impoverished youth. Floral words for genitalia sounded particularly false to her ears.

Wanting carnal honesty between them, she offered, “I should not have said cunny.”

“No need to apologize—”

She interrupted. “You misunderstand. Cunny is a recently acquired affectation of mine. I should have rightly said cunt. You see, my ladylike demeanor is but a thin veneer. My sexual vocabulary is as vast as it is vulgar. I have many such vices, Theo.”

“I can appreciate that.”

He could?

Would he consider an overactive sexual imagination a vice? How about a woman whose cunt moistened at a gruff man’s voice?

His low baritone could easily make her come. Theo's bedroom voice oozed sex. Lord, but she dripped.

Oozing and dripping—carnality was certainly a wet endeavor. Surely, her wetness was such that he would slip easily inside her, regardless of the burden of her virginity.

Fill me. Expand me. Plunder me! Rip my hymen asunder.

He said evenly, "That word you said—use whatever fits."

"You," she said, taking another risk, a naughty one, a double entendre one. "You would fit. May I use you? The fit seems perfect. So, go on." She took a step out into space, no acrobatic net to catch her should she fall. "Touch me. You know you want to." For a starved bear, he certainly took his time sticking his paw in the honey pot.

With that bit of prompting, he smoothed a hand over her concave belly and then moved his palm lower to cradle the triangle of pubic hair, damp, though still springy.

As he tenderly petted her pelt, she stared unsmilingly into his eyes, gauging his reaction, testing her own. "I should like to be bare there. What think you of a cunt where everything may be seen at once?"

"Shave your pussy?" he exclaimed, horrified. "A prostitute trick?"

She had expected no less. He had reacted in predictable fashion—appropriately scandalized. The man was lamentably parochial with a narrow and unsophisticated view of the world. What would he think, she wondered, if he knew the truth about her?

"Concubines shave their pubic hair. Would you like me to be your submissive concubine?" she replied. "Would you like me to do whatever you tell me to do, hmm?"

His dark, smoldering eyes flared. Clearly, he would like that very much.

"Where would I find a straightedge in town?" she asked haughtily.

"Do not—"

"You say one thing, but your gaze speaks of something quite different. I swear, your black eyes brand me. You would like me little girl bare there, admit it."

His thick finger circled her pubic lips, the digit sliding. "I admit I made you slick."

Damn him. He admitted something all right, something that showed up her vulnerability, not his. And in that vulnerability, she shivered involuntarily.

So, this is it. This is what sexual excitement feels like with a real man, not an illustration of one.

He touched her, there, at the top of her cleft, where a throbbing and needful nub protruded from the drenched surroundings, and she gasped, her desire right out there for him to see, to hear.

"Like it?" he asked.

She let her panting serve as her reply.

He did it again, this time, rubbing her clitoris.

At least he could find it. At least she would not need to subtly show him the way and then have to pretend he had found the spot all on his own. At least she would not

have to maintain the ruse that vaginal penetration alone would bring her to climax. That she would not require foreplay to come. She supposed she should be grateful for small favors.

Her gaze went out of focus, and she leaned into him. If he noticed her shift in positioning, he gave no outward indication. Taking that as an unexpressed go-ahead, she climbed up on her toes and attacked, careful not to disturb the lovely pumping of the hand between her legs.

Clamping her mouth on top of his, she aggressively smashed their lips together.

They kissed.

Appropriate to her dominant leanings, she was the instigator. Until his tongue pushed inside, and they kissed, forcefully kissed, kissed with mindless abandon, as equals. She liked that too. While she pulled at his black hair, he wiggled a thick finger at the tight entrance of her cunt.

Breathing hard, he fell back from her grasping lips, from her needy mouth, from her hungry tongue, sand ricocheting everywhere. "I felt your membrane. You are a virgin."

His thick mutter sounded like a curse. He had tricked her with the kiss, the kiss she had lost herself to while he examined her with all the impersonal coolness of a physician. The sneaky lout had conned the con artist! How was it that she had allowed him to get the better of her?

Her vulnerability again, the awful lust that went unquelled. Her urgent hunger would be her downfall yet. As for him, this dark stranger, she needed to be cognizant of his wiliness, she needed to take care, for if he was capable of manipulating her here, with a kiss, what else would he be capable of doing?

"I was aboveboard. I told you so." Her breasts heaved. "I told you I was a virgin. There was no need to trick me."

He pressed two fingers, glistening with her juices, to his nose and inhaled. "I hoped you had lied."

"No lies, Theo. Not between us. Not in this. Not in carnality. I demand honesty between us in this."

He kept his sights on her exposed lower body. Then to her absolute thrilled disbelief, he licked his glistening fingers, tasted her juices. "I agree. When it comes to coupling—honesty."

No pretense, no trying to hide it, he desired her. And he would take her. Have her. Ram himself up inside her.

Hopefully.

With a tremendously happy sigh, she flung both hands above her head. As her skirts untucked and came tumbling down, she ordered, "Fuck me!"

Chapter Five

The man who had examined her with cool calculation before now showed her a jaw with a pulse beating like a drum. She was not the only one in need of a sound fucking.

Even so, his hands remained infinitely gentle. As if he were dressing a child, he sightlessly pulled up her drawers, then patted her fallen gown into place.

His voice was a different story.

"Inside the lighthouse," he growled. "Now. Right now."

Siam darted a hasty glance in that direction, to the sun-bleached wooden steps, and her raised arms fell back to her sides as a wonderful sense of inevitability filled her.

This was it, the moment she had been waiting for most of her adult life. Theo would remove the humiliating stigma of her marital virginity. No one would know she had spent fourteen years in a loveless and sexless marriage, with a husband who had looked upon her as an employee not as a wife.

Still, lessons learned in childhood made her suspicious. And this man, despite his plain, countrified speech and simple manner, was more complicated than he had seemed at first blush. "Why there?"

"The lighthouse is private. And vacant. The last keeper moved on a decade ago."

He had tricked her with the kiss. But thus far, Theo had given her no reason to question his motives in bringing her here, to this remote stretch of beach. The fault, if any, lay in her ignoring certain harsh realities. And she should have known better.

In order to maintain her secret life, she had told no one where she was going, only revealing to her stepdaughters her plans to vacation in Maine. Though they had begged and pleaded for all the juicy details, that vague itinerary was as specific as she had gotten. Now, as this big male stranger glared at her, she questioned the wisdom of not

naming an exact location. For all she knew, Theo was a widow owing to killing his wife. A grisly thought.

According to *Licentious*, establishing trust promoted intimacy in lovemaking, especially in a relationship involving dominance and submission. On the other hand, her finely honed suspicion had kept her alive in Five Points.

Who was this man?

Bashful backwoodsman of puritanical morality? A lonely widower who penned a personal ad in an erotic magazine looking for companionship?

Or an ax murderer?

"I cleaned everything out, including the field mice," he continued. "Installed an iron bed. Stocked food in the pantry. Split a cord of wood."

With his handy-dandy ax, no doubt.

He hurried her along. "A gravity-fed reservoir provides water. The cast-iron stove can heat enough to fill the tin tub in the wink of an eye."

Or the time it would take to decapitate a head.

"I also limed the outhouse," he bragged.

Lime. Had he said LIME?

Murderers disposed of their victims with lime.

Hackles rose on her soon-to-be headless neck.

He squeezed her arm. "A fire will warm you."

All right. Not an ax murderer then. An arsonist guilty of burning his wife to death in her bed while she slept, most likely in this selfsame lighthouse. Get me out of here!

She shivered.

He frowned. "I only chose this place because we can do as we please on this end of the beach, dancing naked on the sand included."

Dancing naked on the sand...

Despite his saying that this was no seaside romance, no romance of any kind, Theo was indeed a romantic. She might have known.

His wife again. He had been romantic with his lost wife. How tame and insipidly sweet.

Unfortunately, sweet was not on her things-to-do list. Neither was tame. But they beat dying under the blade of an ax. Not that a romantic would kill a woman with an ax. Poison was so much more poetic.

It would appear he was not the only one with cold feet. She was guilty of vacillation too. Other than not meeting a foul end, what did she really want from this erotic encounter?

Back home, she presented a tamely sweet manner to society. Maine was not New York society. Here she yearned for degeneracy and wildness. If she had to project dull insipidness with this man, she would positively scream.

For the sake of carnal honesty, she made an imperfectly sour face at him, to show him what she thought of romance. "Cavorting naked outside appeals to my exhibitionistic streak, but leave the hearts-and-flowers dancing to someone else."

His face darkened. "If I order you to strip off and dance for me, you will."

Good heavens! Did Theo even realize he was a dominant by nature, albeit a romantic one?

Her thoughts turned once more to *Licentious*, to the illustration of a woman wearing a mastery collar. The model flaunted the symbol of her submission as if diamonds embedded the leather band encircling her throat, not crude metal studs. In Siam's edited version, the man wore the dog collar, not the woman. Now, *that* was arousing. Bondage to a man did nothing for her. Everyone, male and female, had fantasies. Male dominance was simply not hers.

A major area of conflict had just reared its ugly head.

It seemed to her as though she was saying one thing, and he was hearing quite another.

Men. Apart from how to please them—in theory—she was no authority on the subject. She had been a man's wife but never his lover, a mother who had never given birth. Her father had only been a much-repeated story on her mother's lips. Her entire life had been female dominated—with her mother, in a girls' orphanage, surrounded by her six stepdaughters. She knew nothing about living with a man, conversing with a man, having an open and honest dialogue with a man—flirtatious banter excluded. Butting heads with Theo was the sum total of her truthful experience with a man, and even that had been marred, by her suspicious nature, by his exploitation of her vulnerability. Her first kiss with a man, and he had used that kiss against her. That stung.

He placed a determined hand under an elbow. "Come with me. A city woman like you should enjoy the rustic surroundings."

She dug in her heels. "How do you know I live in the city?" She narrowed her eyes. "I never told you."

"Your manner is citified. All you wealthy rusticators talk and act the same. You come to Maine to commune with nature and then balk when given the directions to the privy out back."

"I was not raised with a silver spoon in my mouth." She clamped her lips shut. Why did she keep biting at the hook?

On the slim, outside chance that he was exactly who he represented himself to be, the more reality that intruded into this tryst, the less fantasy there would be. Keep this up, and she would ruin everything! Including her reputation, the one she had first fabricated and then had to live up to for the past fifteen years. If he coerced her into giving him her full name, she might just as well take out a full-page ad in the *New York Times* and admit to fucking a country bumpkin in Maine. He might even blackmail her into keeping her virginity quiet. Oh, the shame of it!

Then again, what would shame matter if she were dead?

Ax murderer, sinister blackmailer, honorable romantic widower—her choices were mounting. Which was he?

“Here we are,” he said, dragging her to the steep set of wooden stairs. “Up you go.”

“My clothing,” she protested, grasping at straws. “My reticule and traveling satchel are inside my room at the hotel.”

“No need for clothing during your stay.”

“But I always dress for dinner.”

“Not raised with a silver spoon in your mouth, huh?” He laughed. “Snob.”

“I am not. At least, not always. I did grow up poor. But one grows accustomed to certain conventions and creature comforts. Formal evening dress is de rigueur in...” She bit her lip. There she went again, talking too much.

In silence, they entered the main living area of the lighthouse. She quickly cataloged the sparsely furnished interior: the rough, wide plank floor; enormous fireplace; two narrow windows letting in minimal light and breaking up the solidness of the whitewashed walls; a spiral staircase off to one side; two chairs and a smallish table; and an incongruous glass vase filled with greenery sitting in the center.

Ordinarily, she would have soaked up the charming New England ambience, but Theo bore down on her and instigated a kiss.

A kiss. *He* instigated a kiss.

His face crept closer to hers, and he seemed to breathe her in, his nostrils actually flaring as he nosed the air around her, before he dipped his knees, which brought his height more in line with hers, a splendidly equalitarian thing for him to do, and laid his cheekbone on her cheekbone. Then he hunched lower, actually hunkering down, until she was taller than he—switching off was something she very much approved of.

Ah...so close.

He made his move, a slide upward toward her lips, a brief contact before skittering away, and then a longer contact, a deeper contact. No tongue. Just mouths. Touching.

Wonderful. Her first real, honest-to-goodness kiss, if she discounted the one she had stolen from him and he had used against her.

She was no shrinking violet, not one to let things evolve naturally, not if she could give them a push. In fear of him changing his mind, her lips clung to his ferociously, almost combatively—she had waited so long and needed this so badly!

And then it happened. He seemed to wake up and come alive. Or at least, his true character did. Taking the lead, he took charge of the kiss. His mouth, forceful, hungry—yes, angry too—just about suffocated her. More assault than kiss, his lips, his tongue, pressed their will upon her.

Without offering up any complaints, she gripped his shoulders, her fingers digging into his shirt for purchase as his big hands flattened on her back, an action that flattened her uncorseted breasts to the brick wall of his chest, her softness to his hardness. Thrilling.

They groaned into one another's mouths, the echo reverberating in their throats. Oh, but the kiss was wet. And noisy. Nothing mannered about it, nothing rehearsed about it. A sloppy, wet, loud kiss, an unmannered kiss, with enough suction applied from both sides to rip the lips off one another's faces and enough tongue to put slobbering dogs to shame. Not a terribly romantic description, but in her world of societal affectation and slavish adherence to deportment, she could not have asked for a finer or truer first *real* kiss.

Her cashmere shawl dropped to the wide planked floor, and she went up on her toes, to compensate for the now-normalized differences in their heights—she had long legs, but the man kissing her was positively huge—and slipped a hand from his shoulders to his front, in search of his cock.

Not difficult to find. His erection, wedged between their bodies, was ridiculously apparent. Thick and long and straining against her, his hard man's flesh put up no struggle when she captured him in her palm.

His groans changed to grunts, an excellent sign, as she massaged him, her fingers kneading his shaft from head to base, a practiced but unused skill learned at her mother's knee. Other girls learned how to sew. Alas, she had learned how to seduce a man with a handjob.

Was he seduced? Had her mother taught her well? Had she adequately prepared her daughter for the profession she had never assumed?

Evidently so. Still frantically eating at her mouth, Theo pushed her backward, practically carrying her through some filmy curtains, gossamer fabric that tickled her face as she passed through its gathered folds.

Where on earth was he taking her now?

God, if she had placed herself in the hands of a man who turned out to be Bar Harbor's equivalent of London's Jack the Ripper she would be just so annoyed.

The lights in her head dimmed from lack of air. Before everything went black, she broke free of the kiss.

But not of him. He still had her wrapped in his muscled arms, her spine nearly broken in two from the exertion of his strength.

The kiss had been wonderful, everything she had ever dreamed of, but no kiss was worth mutilation—Jack the Ripper's *modus operandi*. And besides, she was not dying a virgin.

She was lifting her knee to his inseam when the backs of her legs hit something metal. A quick glance behind her confirmed he was toppling her toward the iron bed he had previously mentioned. A prettily appointed iron bed with clean linen and—the

scent of lavender wafted into her nostrils—lace-encased pillows and a puffy quilt. Would Jack the Ripper have bothered?

No! But a widower with the heart of a romantic like Theo would.

She tried not to take the extra care he had taken personally. After all, he was only acquainted with her through correspondence. Yet she felt cherished. His attention to detail—the greenery on the table, the lighthouse’s swept floors, the lovely bed linen—endeared him to her. The setting made her feel like a bride.

UGH! The very circumstance she had sought to avoid by answering a personal ad.

No connection, romantic or otherwise. Honesty, yes, but no attachment. This was a fuck. A raw and anonymous fuck. Not a courtship. Not a damn prelude to marriage. Not a wedding night. She wanted nothing to do with grand, romantic sweeping gestures.

But—oh, to hell with it. She did want him, desired him between her thighs, and obviously, the man had no intention of killing her. Romancing her, yes. Perhaps ordering her about. But not strangling her and chopping up the pieces afterward.

She fell backward onto the mattress, with him following down after, his tongue restored to her mouth, hers twined around his, their hands everywhere at once. Grasping and clawing and *groping*. Nothing genteel or refined about it. Need overriding artistry.

Somehow, her gown ended up under her chin and her drawers down somewhere around her ankles. She was a virgin, but no innocent. As he came down over her, she spread her legs wide for his approach with what amounted to tasteless abandon. And just like the *pling* of the bedsprings under her spine, reality sank in, and the tenor of the engagement changed on her side. Fear pounced at her from out of nowhere. What had been impatience to know a lover at last changed to the knowledge that this would hurt. Hurt quite a bit.

Just do it. Get it over with. End my virginity once and for all.

Waiting was the worst part.

Finally, he released the front of his trousers. “Look away,” he said hoarsely.

“Do you think me a simpering miss? Why ever would I do such a silly thing?”

“Just do it,” he growled.

Her very thought precisely. When would he *just do it*?

Never, unless she did as the ogre demanded.

With a long-suffering sigh, she looked sideways to the wall. Ridiculous!

And he was there, right there at her cunt, poised up on his bent arms, hovering over her, his cock, which she had yet to see but which she felt in every wary nerve, ready to thrust between the wet lips of her sex.

In anticipation of pain, she squeezed her eyes closed.

He must have sensed her distress, because he pulled sharply away and hung his head over hers, shadowing her face in the early-morn-lit room.

"Look at me," he ordered.

"Would you make up your blasted mind!" She did look at him, though, despite her irritation, but only because he might leave if she refused to do as he bade her.

He huffed. "This will hurt."

"Why announce the obvious?" she spat.

"You requested the truth in this."

She could have done with less honesty here.

With a push, he proved he was not a man given to exaggeration.

Ouch.

As wet as she was, as welcoming, his entry was the stuff of nightmares. She tried to hide the discomfort as he filled her. Not brutally, not all at once, in small increments that spoke of his control.

Damn him. She wanted it over and done quickly. She was not trying to be contrary. But like a tooth in need of pulling, why dawdle? Attach the string to the knob and then slam the door. If she were about to get her head severed from her neck, she would opt for a sharp blade and a precise executioner. The same theory behind those situations applied here.

Doitdoitdoit...

The invasion of his flesh hurt. Once again, she refused to give him any indication. She stoically bit back her gasp and concentrated instead on every nuance of the experience. This day had been a long time coming.

She doubted she would come at all.

Absorb the sensation. Memorize it. You only get one first time.

This sharp pain, this unfolding pressure inside her untried channel, was intercourse. Not exactly like the sensual drawings in *Licentious*, she mused, as he moved deeper inside her body's clasp.

His arms shook. He appeared not to breathe. He was concentrating too, she suspected, not on the significance of the moment, but on trying not to hurt her.

Bully for him. He failed.

Resentment clenched her jaw. He would still get his, regardless of nearly slicing her in two. Perhaps he really was America's version of Jack the Ripper, only he got his jollies from eviscerating virgins, not disemboweling prostitutes. Pleasant thought.

Once lodged deep inside her, he stilled. Brushing her hair back from her forehead, he kissed her brow. Then, holding himself in place, he feathered another soft kiss onto her lips. "Are you all right?"

He asked the question tersely, as if he were pained, and she realized then his forbearance came at a price.

She could not have cared less.

Clearly, she was dying. Clearly, her body could not contain his entirety. Clearly, his unnatural length would come out her mouth. And if the head did protrude from between her lips, she intended to bite it off.

At some point, she had no idea when, she dropped the bedding and clutched him, only absently noting that her nails had embedded themselves into his arms. Good thing he had the shirt's protection, otherwise she would have drawn blood.

Had he drawn blood from her?

She schooled her vocal cords to betray nothing. "Is it done?"

"Your virginity is a thing of the past. The question is," he said tightly, "shall I finish it?"

She pondered his meaning. Why would he ask such a ridiculous question when, with his hard part inside her, the hard part was already accomplished?

"I can still pull out." He lifted off her a bit more. "No other man need know the circumstances of your unconsummated marriage now that the membrane is gone. Maybe your first time should be with someone else, someone you love."

Pooh on love!

Though he did make an excellent point. Her hymen was gone. She could carry on an affair with any eligible man she chose in New York. Someone of her acquired status, someone with some polish and finesse. This man had none of that. His dark looks were as craggy as Maine's rocky landscape. His features were as rough as the terrain was wild. He was masculine, and effete was the style this year.

Perhaps he was right. She *should* put an end to the coupling. "Well, if you choose to stop, by all means do so."

"That is not my goddamn choice. My choice is to fuck you senseless. Put it in your cunt, your ass too, and then finish off by exploding between your too-red lips."

Well, well, well.

Her knotted muscles loosened, a smile spread over her lips. "Be that the case," she cooed smugly, "please do continue."

"Just so you know. This is my first time too."

She moved her clawing hands from his upper arms to his massive, sinewy shoulders, less danger of shredding his skin there. While gripping him, she shifted her hips, her relaxed muscles allowing her interior walls to stretch. His thick length took a good deal of accommodating, but she was getting close.

His words finally sank in. "Your first time too? What is that supposed to mean?"

"I am trying to tell you, and apparently botching it, that this is my first time with a virgin. Not the best experience, is it?"

"If you expect sympathy, you will get none from me."

He flinched. "I just wanted you to know."

“Thank you.” A betraying trickle of moisture rolled down her cheek. God, she was too old to cry. And far too cynical.

Why was she weeping? She was no naive ingénue, no hideously unprepared bride on her wedding night, no starry-eyed romantic rolling around the haystack with her first beau. For God’s sake, she was about to welcome her first stepgrandchild into the family, compliments of Cynthia. Tears were so humiliating, so undignified, in a woman of her advanced age.

Siam sniffed. She had known what to expect here. After all, she had dutifully given all her stepdaughters the premarital “talk.” The fault lay not with this man, not with a lack of sexual information, but with herself.

Emotions, all of them conflicting, swamped her. The crushing letdown, the bitter disappointment of never having been loved, not by anyone, just ambushed her out of the blue. Oh, sure, her stepdaughters *thought* they loved her. But that hardly counted, because they also hardly knew her, the *real* her. And her mother *claimed* to have loved her, but did she? Or had Siam just been an inconvenience, a burden, an unfortunate accident to the woman who had given her life? And of course, no man had ever loved her. Of that she was quite, *quite*, certain. That was all her blubbering signified. Just self-pity. Nothing more.

Then too, she was lying here fully clothed, if disarrayed, under a nearly nameless stranger, someone who had a part of himself rammed inside her body’s cavity, someone whose personal ad she had answered in an erotic periodical. Pathetic when she thought about it. But why pick now to think about it?

Because the time had picked her, not the other way round.

In a state of heightened awareness, it came to her that she was a complete and utter fraud. The cruel parody of her life hit her all at once. Everything about her was a damn lie. She had all to do not to toss him off her and burst into self-pitying sobs.

He thumbed the moisture on her cheek. “Shall I pull out?”

She shook her head. “No.” This was already embarrassing enough. “The pain is fading. Thank you for not rushing.”

“Three years ago my wife died, and I have not been with a woman since. Have not been the same since.”

In an attempt to comfort her, she surmised, he was breaking one of their cardinal rules, telling her something about his marriage, something personal about himself. But did he understand the ramifications of his confession? What his divulgence revealed?

He had not been the first with his wife.

But he was the first with her.

Not that it mattered. He had obviously worshipped his wife, and he barely tolerated her. They were an hour or so removed from never having met. All they were doing was fucking, briefly sharing the same space – her vagina.

All the same, his consideration touched her. The buildup of bitter anguish inside her belly loosened. Her resentment fell away, taking her initiation of pain with it. Everything mellowed out in a lovely golden haze.

Then he moved and spoiled everything. Why, why, *why* did he have to go and move?

"Have to, have to. Sorry," he rasped and slowly thrust. "Next time is sure to improve."

Next time? Who cared about next time? Would she survive this time?

She held on tight, fingers now pulling at his dark hair. The uneven strands spilled over his collar, well within her reach. Scented of the sea, the rough texture swished across her nose. She tried not to sneeze. Refused to weep. Vowed to see this ordeal through to its completion.

He pushed and receded. Five grim strokes in total—she counted them—and then he swelled even more inside her. How could he possibly get any larger and harder?

With a heave and a grunt, he pulled out, took his leave of her. Another muffled grunt, and he was spending on a cloth he had thought in advance to place on the bed so as not to soil the linen with cum. Finished with his climax, he collapsed onto his back beside her, a bent arm flung over his face.

Good heavens! How did babies ever get conceived? Who would choose to suffer such an ordeal more than once, even to perpetuate the species?

Licentious had certainly sold her a bill of goods! She knew a woman's first time was no treat, but this present state of affairs had nothing at all to recommend it. And she refused to think something must be wrong with her, other than uncharacteristic gullibility.

Evidently, not all women enjoyed the act. There must be a small minority, of which she was a member, who gained nothing from the experience. This erotic interlude needed rethinking. Why repeat a mistake? She had accomplished what she had set out to do. Her curiosity was satisfied, she had tried her carnal experiment, and it was time to cut her losses and go home.

Without bothering to pull up her lowered drawers—she would sort them out later—she flipped her skirts back in place in the event of his looking over at her.

Not that he would. Locked away in his own private grief, he had most likely forgotten her very existence.

Chapter Six

Theo roused himself from his postcoital stupor, a lethargy three years in the making, and dragged himself to a stand.

His companion lay as flat as a board on her back, the linen clutched in her hands. Her white-knuckled hold on the bedding told the whole story.

He had hurt her.

Limiting the intercourse to only a few pumps, he had tried to spare her what he could, but she looked to be nursing a grudge all the same. The hurled accusations would fly soon. After she spewed some contempt, maybe she would feel better, not look so damn forlorn.

He had warned her. Still and all, he was the one responsible for her tears. For her pain.

"I sincerely apologize," he said formally. And then hastily, without even thinking, he walked to the straw basket on the floor and shook his wet and limp cock over the rim.

From behind him came a high-pitched squawk.

Fearing the worst, that she was having some sort of apoplexy, he spun around to face her.

Holding her belly, she had rolled onto her side. And snorted, then chuckled, then guffawed.

She was having a fit, all right. A fit of laughter. He had botched things pretty badly. And not for the first time. He had the dead wife to prove it. Had he been enough for Betsy, she would never have left their bed that stormy night to seek out what she had not been able to find with him.

"Go on," he said, ruefully. "Say it."

"Say what?"

"Whatever is on your mind."

"But that would go against our agreement to remain impersonal."

"Woman, I just had my cock inside your body. That is as personal as it gets."

Tears streamed from her eyes. "Well, it is rather silly, is it not? I mean, really, the whole activity from start to finish is absurd. I wonder how our cave-dwelling ancestors ever stumbled on to the idea. Sex is just too, *too* comical for words."

Shit. Shit. Shit.

She had hated it. And not only the pain, which was understandable, but everything about it.

While he watched, not knowing what to do, Siam's laughter ran its course and petered out.

"We should discuss what just happened," he said, opening it all up to discussion. "Or more aptly, what did not happen. For you." He took a deep breath. "I ejaculated, but you got nothing from me except hurt. In my hurry to rush you past losing your virginity, I neglected your needs."

Siam propped herself up to a sit on the bed, her shiny black hair a mass of tangles around her face. Her breasts shifted as she raised her hands to her head to make repairs.

When his flaccid flesh took note, then started getting ideas, he stowed himself away. "Look, Siam, you should be with someone else. A different man. For many reasons, I can spoil this for you. That is the last thing I want to do."

"Are you asking me to leave?"

"No! But neither am I telling you to stay."

She rearranged herself amid the pillows. "Holding back took a great deal of forbearance and kindness. I know I caused you concern. I know rather than talking, you would have preferred fucking me like an animal."

He coughed. *Fuck...like an animal?*

He had never fucked a woman, never mind like an animal. Sure, he hankered to try out a few different things, mutually enjoyable things, but his mind stalled on that description.

Or did it?

Then, on a rush, his words said in the heat of the moment, came back to him. "*My choice is to fuck you senseless. Put it in your cunt, your ass too, and then finish off by exploding between your too-red lips.*"

Hell, yeah, he wanted to fuck her like an animal. Wanted to tie her up like a little ewe and put his hot brand on her ass. Put his hot brand in her ass too. Wanted to pet her like a little kitty, his hand groping her pussy fur.

Still and all, those were his thoughts, and he winced at his irresponsibility at speaking them aloud. *Hell of a thing to say to a virgin.*

“What I said – all that down and dirty stuff – I meant. But that stuff is only part of it. Sex can also be one of the most beautiful, uplifting, and transcendental experiences life has to offer.” He thought of her gales of laughter. “And ayuh, sex can be damn humbling too, especially when a woman sees a man shaking off his limp cock over a straw basket.”

“I think we should try again.”

“Whoa. Hold your horses. You mean to say you want to continue?”

“Well, not without you,” she said pointedly. “And you did say, during the act, that matters would improve with time.”

Mulling over her startling decision, he collected bathing supplies. The night before her arrival, he had seen to the cast-iron stove, shoveling out the old ashes, stoking a new fire. Everything was humming along nicely. After tossing a few small apple tree logs into the stove’s potbelly, he poured off a sufficient amount of heated water from the reservoir to fill a metal basin. He returned to her, placing the supplies on the bedstead.

“May I?” he said and reached for the bottom of her skirts.

“Yes, Theo.”

“You agree so easily. And yet you know nothing about me. I could muck all this up for you.”

“You will not muck this up. And you are not to blame for my hurt. We should both speak to Mother Nature about that.”

Taking that as a go-ahead, he removed her thin-soled slippers and then her drawers. That done, he rolled up her skirts.

“What is it about a woman wearing hose and garters, and nothing else?” he offered, smiling at her bared pelvis, trying not to cringe at the red stain on her upper thigh.

He had done that to her. Never had he thought to bear witness to such a sight. He thought he would be married to the same wife forever, a wife who had not come to him a virgin. He thought they would have children together, create a family, a shared history, grow old together. None of it had turned out the way he planned. For that reason, he no longer made plans. He just tried to get through each day.

In the middle of one of those long days, he went over to Doyle’s house, just to kill some time. While there, he stumbled upon a stack of risqué periodicals that his sister-in-law subscribed to. Inspiration, he thought at the time, and took one home, where he did the obvious thing while looking at the naughty illustrations. For some idiotic reason, afterward, he decided to place an ad in the personal section.

Who knew why he did it?

Who knew why Siam was the one to answer it?

He had never seen *Licentious* before and never had looked at another. Had only placed a personal ad there on a lark—or out of frustration. And now he had taken the virginity of a woman he knew very little about.

Why had she given her innocence to him?

Why had he accepted the gift?

Nothing about this made sense.

Her legs were tightly sealed. Slowly, so as not to scare her off, he bent her legs up to her belly and then parted her knees.

They fell open onto the bed, leaving her splayed wide.

As if it were nothing out of the ordinary, he dipped the bathing cloth in the basin, wrung out the excess water, and placed the warm cloth where she must ache, directly over the notch he had just entered. He allowed the neat linen square to stay awhile, to get her used to his invasion of her privacy, before softly patting her bruised folds. That accomplished, he lifted the cloth away. He repeated the process until she had relaxed, and then dropped the cloth back into the cooling water. Trying not to make any abrupt movements, he got up on the top of the bed with her.

He deliberately kept on his clothes. Deliberately made no move to get her undressed. He inched forward between her legs, then prostrated himself, until he was on eye level with her pelvis, with her notch. Determined to give her something other than pain to remember when she recalled her first time, he placed his hands firmly on her thighs, to hold her open, and then nuzzled her slit. He had never tasted a woman so tangy.

He had never tasted a woman at all.

A second first time for him.

“Oh my,” she sighed, then bucked, as he used his mouth on her.

As Siam moaned, the tendons in her legs straining, he sniffed and tasted and tongued, to his heart’s delight. Her honey rolled into his mouth and dribbled down his throat as she arched and panted...and came...with a hoarse scream against his suckling lips.

That was pleasure, real pleasure, he heard falling from her ruby red lips. Her loud rapture was the finest compliment he had ever received.

The lady was not afraid to vocalize her happiness when things were going well. Not afraid to call him on it when things were going bad. Not afraid to laugh her head off at him for taking care of a little housekeeping over the rim of a straw basket. Not afraid to crack a hand across his ass when she wanted more.

“Again,” she ordered.

Buoyed up by her enthusiasm, he decided—or she maybe decided, or maybe they both decided—he was not done yet.

He pleased her again, this time with the heel of his hand.

Not subtle movements. He was too far gone for anything involving fine coordination, but a rotating pressure that took her from replete to squirming to another lusty wail of completion.

He continued, until she was writhing, then bucking, then pleading, "No no no. No more, no more. Please. I cannot take any more."

He hiked his jaw. "You will."

And she did take more. A hell of a lot more. Another shout, this one shrill, and she collapsed.

He kept his palm, the fingers outstretched, on her mons, claiming that fragile protuberance of pubic bone. "It can be like that with me inside you."

"Now?" she said weakly.

"No. After you heal some." Once again, he came to a stand beside the bed. "You need your valise. Hand over your room key." He reached out a hand.

"Not necessary. As I already explained, I booked accommodations at a local hotel."

He tensed. "Are too staying here." He sounded like some kind of backwoods hick. That was what fear did to him. Made him sound more countrified than usual. "The key." He closed then opened his palm in emphasis.

"No." She climbed out of bed.

He pulled her back against him, afraid if she left, she would never return. "I changed my mind. Now it is." He started in on her hooks and eyes at the back of her gown.

Like a virago, she faced him, fire and brimstone in her slate blue eyes. "I have very few rules about what we do together, but our games end at the word 'no.'"

His hands falling to his sides, he stepped away. "Forgive me. Of course."

"I shan't deny you often. But when I do, I expect you to heed me."

"I overstepped the bounds." Terrified of what was going on inside himself, the dark urges that clawed at him, he backed up against the wall. What devilment had come over him? "I should not have pressed for more than you were willing to freely give." He did his utmost to tame the tremors in his hands. "It was wrong of me."

"It was exhilarating of you."

In fear of what he might do, he held himself back from her. "Could you tell me why you choose to go?"

"No." She gathered up her drawers, rolled the underwear up into a ball, bundling them under an arm. After stepping into her slippers, she swept her dropped shawl from the door.

Daring not to leave his position against the wall to help her on with it, he stood by and silently watched as she draped the cashmere over her slim shoulders.

She had made herself clear. What came next was up to her, not him. Christ, he felt like he was suffocating.

“Shall we meet again tomorrow?”

He jumped at the chance. “Ayuh.”

“The evening. After darkness falls,” she specified, heading for the door, not looking back. “So that no one sees us come and go.”

“Should you arrive first,” he countered. “The door will be open.”

“Please wait here. Make no attempt to follow me.”

Without another word, she was gone.

And all he could do was wipe a shaky hand over his mouth and hope tomorrow night arrived soon.

Chapter Seven

For the next two weeks, Siam had taken over the entire third floor at the Bar Harbor Inn. Her turret bedroom suite featured Louis Philippe furnishings, a country French style popularized fifty-or-so years before. Known for its scrolls and curves and polished dark walnut, the rounded lines and lack of ornamentation appealed her taste for simplicity.

The footboard, in particular, drew her. While readying to retire that evening, she drew her finger along the glossy wood, warm and smooth under her stroking touch. She then drew that same stroking finger over her nude body, smooth from the skin lotion she had applied after a long and pampered soak in the bath. Ordinarily, she would have had to share the facilities with her fellow third-floor guests, but since there were no other third-floor residents, she had the WC all to herself. Oh, the creature comforts wealth provided.

My, my, my, she mused, a finger circling her belly, she had come a long way since her impoverished childhood in Five Points. Then she had bathed in an old tin tub in the kitchen of her tenement apartment and peed outside in a common outhouse, a dark, bad-smelling, and usually overflowing wooden commode the entire neighborhood used. Back then her life's ambition was to become a rich man's spoiled pet.

My, my, my, how things do change. Now she was the wealthy one, and at least temporarily, she kept a pet of her own, a big, black-furred Maine bear. The great forest beast had fucked her with extraordinary control, given his wild nature and size. And still her initiation had hurt.

Her bath in the inn's claw-footed tub—not up to New York hotel standards but not nearly as primitive as she had thought it would be—had eased most of her physical soreness. A soothing douche over her private bidet had refreshed her and resolved the rest of the swelling. Since Theo had withdrawn, the chances of conception were remote.

Although she had timed this affair to coincide with her less fertile time of the month, in the future, she would still take extreme care not to conceive.

In direct violation of the Comstock Act against dispensing contraception devices, she had attempted to purchase one of the Mensinga diaphragms. Her attempt had proven futile, which left conning—er, *convincing*—Theo to use a barrier sheath. If he refused to employ a rubber condom, her only recourse was coitus interruptus, the method he had used this morning.

There were no foolproof methods to avoid conception. Even a French shield, a “womb guard” pessary, failed. She had strenuously objected to staying at the lighthouse owing to her inability to douche following intercourse—her bidet and supplies were back here at the hotel.

Just as well she left. Surrendering her body to a man was not the same as surrendering her independence. Physical intimacy without emotional entanglement—that was the agreement. They had come together for pleasure, for fantasy. The intrusion of reality, like the necessity of douching immediately after intercourse, ruined eroticism.

Then why suggest exchanging names? And why then divulge her birth name?

She supposed to lend a sense of permanence to a temporary arrangement, to give a simple fuck the illusion of meaning...to dull the polish of a lie with the untarnished truth.

And what was the untarnished truth?

That her mother was a Siam-born concubine who her American industrialist lover had smuggled into New York, along with her young child, a daughter named Siam. That the same American industrialist, Siam’s own father, had later abandoned them both, mother and child, to the streets. That upon her mother’s death, the city had placed Siam in an orphanage, a sterile warehouse called Five Points Asylum. That four years later, at eighteen, she had been free to walk away.

And go where? Back to running swindles on the streets. Back to running shell games in back allies. Back to thieving—picking locks and pockets, both. Should she have launched a career as a whore?

She had arrived at the orphanage at the age of fourteen, after spending two years on the streets evading capture by the authorities. Always a quick study, at fifteen she began to help teach the younger children at the school on the grounds of the asylum. By sixteen, she taught her very own class. Nevertheless, when she left the asylum at her majority to strike out on her own, respectable positions for a girl of mixed race and impoverished background were difficult to find. The wealthy did not want such as her guiding their precious children. And she had higher aspirations than working as a scullery maid. After much searching, she finally snagged an employment interview for a live-in post that came with room and board—

In the Manhattan home of a traveling businessman, Walter Lindsmore. The fifty-year-old widower was looking for someone to teach his six unruly girls department.

Her *other* area of expertise.

She knew how to whore, how to thief, how to con a mark through sleight of hand, but most importantly, she knew how to mind her p's and q's. From day one, the orphanage had taught its residents proper behavior. Everything had a time and a place. A scheduled orderliness. A regimental discipline that was both confining and liberating, against which she had rebelled and within which she had thrived.

She had conned her way through the interview and had done reasonably well. At least, she thought she had done reasonably well. But Mr. Lindsmore saw right through the swindle. And liked her anyway. Her grit reminded him of his own younger years. Or so he said. Figuring her sharpness would keep the wolves away from the door during his absences, he offered her the position. All she had to do was Americanize her unusual name from Siam to Susan, pass herself off as white, not half-Asian, never again refer to her concubine mother, Mali, and give him no future cause for concern.

Only a fool would not agree.

She was no fool.

At first, she thought she would also serve the merchant as a whore, but surprisingly, he offered her marriage. As it turned out, he had no nefarious designs on her whatsoever. A businessman, Mr. Lindsmore had proposed a strictly business arrangement, a marriage of convenience that would benefit both of them.

She had not loved Mr. Lindsmore. How could she? She had hardly known him. Her husband in name only was gone all the time. In fourteen years of marriage, they rarely saw one another. The merchant had a string of mistresses around the world, and she, as his legal wife, gave him an excuse not to wed any of them. While she, an ever-responsible, ever-grateful *employee*, kept the home fires burning and his heathen children from killing each other, he provided her with security and a legitimate entry into society.

He had also, bless his generous heart, left her well cared for in his will, an inheritance that included a lovely "Italianate"-style brownstone within walking distance of Central Park and a yearly pension for the duration of her life, whether she remarried or not. In his own negligent way, he had loved his children and known her well enough to compensate her lost youth with financial independence.

And that was the untarnished truth.

Far too early yet for bed and, frankly, too charged up for sleep, she removed her hairpins, placing them in the bedstead's top drawer, and shook out her hip-length hair. She wrapped a brilliantly lustrous silk *pha sin*, a tube skirt similar to a sarong and native to Siam, around her slender hips, tying the ends above her natural waistline. Comfortable in her own skin, she moved around the room bare-breasted, as was ancient Siamese custom, picking up a novel to read in the sitting room, setting it back down again on the bedroom table. God, but she was restless.

She moved to the window. For modesty's sake, she might have thrown a lightweight shoulder cloth over one breast or wrapped both breasts, as missionaries

insisted Siamese women do when leaving their homes. But why bother here? Darkness had fallen. No one was outside to observe her seminudity, not at this hour.

That thought had no sooner crossed her mind when she spied Theo crossing the lawn, head down. By moonlight, she saw that his clothing was rumpled and looked to be covered in dirt and twigs and what might have been other forest vegetation. She could definitely tell that his thick, dark hair was windblown. Her lover resembled every inch a big black bear, and a filthy one at that. What was he doing here at the inn?

Surely, no innkeeper would allow such an uncouth individual inside the expensive lodgings, even to buy ale at the tavern. In his unkempt state, he would frighten the paying customers away.

Suddenly, his footsteps stopped. He stared up at her standing at the well-lit window. She ducked out of sight. Then a siege of mischief overtook her. With lamps illuminating her from the front, he saw her as clearly as she saw him. On impulse, she caressed her bare breasts. Cupping them underneath, pushing the small mounds up higher, her fingers plucking at the rapidly distending nipples, she did a solitary erotic dance for him, an undulation of hips and belly learned from her concubine mother.

Theo's mouth flapped open. Was that drool dotting his five-o'clock-shadowed chin or simply wishful thinking on her part?

She felt no remorse for what she was about to do. After all, he *had* made reference to her possibly dancing for him.

Slowly, seductively, she unwrapped the pha sin from around her upper waist, one yard of rainbow-colored, iridescent silk at a time. Conscious that seminudity created a more erotic impression than complete nudity, she left the sarong in place, only parting the loosened folds enough to award him a partial peek at her mons.

Her strategy worked. Dark eyes bulging, he gawked at her newly shaven cunt, the pubic curls sheared during her long and leisurely bath. Purposefully, wantonly, she spread her thighs. Not quite finished with him yet, she began to masturbate, long strokes into her moistened slit—his hot stare had excited her—a thumb diddling her clitoris.

The window was open, and cool breezes off the water fanned her flesh. Her throat arched, and swallowing convulsively, she came on a soft cry.

After flicking off the lamp, she turned away. With a huge yawn, she climbed into bed under the covers. She would sleep now. Would he?

Giving a soft laugh, she closed her eyes and drifted into a smug slumber.

* * * * *

Outside on the sloping grass, Theo struggled to breathe. The entertainment was over, but he still felt like a stampede of wild horses had run him down. The woman he had made love to the day before was staying at his inn. And since she was at the window of suite 301, he now knew exactly who she was.

Siam was acclaimed New York City society hostess Mrs. Susan Lindsmore, the widow of famous importing and exporting entrepreneur Walter Lindsmore. If not for banking business in town, he would have registered her at the front check-in desk himself.

The staff had been expecting her. The wealthy Mrs. Lindsmore had reserved the top floor of the hotel for her private use, a booking made possible due to the earliness of the season. Most rusticators started arriving in May, not March. What were the odds that the woman he had solicited from a personal ad in an erotic monthly would stay at the inn?

Slim to none in his estimation, which explained why he never gambled.

Shit. One thing was as plain as the nose on his face—there went their anonymity. He now knew her identity, and surer than black flies buzzing come April, she was bound to learn his soon.

Theo stared blindly at the window she had just vacated. Of all the hotels in Bar Harbor she could have stayed at, why did she have to pick his?

Dog tired, defeated too, Theo entered the hotel by the employee entrance. After watching Siam carry on for his benefit—Christ, he hoped like hell that hip-rolling number had been for *his* benefit—getting any shut-eye that night was out of the question.

After taking a quick handheld cold shower in the tub to wash off the mud from the trail, he changed into clean duds and slammed back outside.

The little exhibitionistic cock-tease had put on lust-provoking performance to end all lust-provoking performances and then left him high and dry. What was that bright multicolored sheath thing she had on, anyway? He had never seen the like before. The shiny cloth had only covered her from the waist down leaving everything above naked. Her small breasts had shifted, then swayed, then outright jiggled during her performance. When she turned and faced away, she had driven him wild. The wide shoulders, the straight spine, the hand-span slender waist. He kept hoping the tie at her middle would come undone and he would get a peak at her rear.

Her buttocks. Her hindquarters. Her shapely ass.

Her dance was an out-and-out invitation to something he had only dreamed about previously. A hot and sweaty dream that always left him shaken and ashamed, his bed linen slippery with spilled ejaculate. A lurid dance he could have easily dismissed, but her dance had been sensual and arousing, not crude, not vulgar. Her dance opened a window on his desire.

Damned if he knew where a society lady came up with that indecent idea of dancing for him half-naked. For that matter, damned if he knew where she got any of her ideas. Shaving her pubic hair. Only whores did such things. Not that he had ever visited any whores. But from fellow loggers, he knew that to be the case. She'd mentioned concubines, a foreign concept that made him hot under the collar. A

submissive woman, willing to do anything to make a man happy – his erect cock jutted at the thought.

The indecent dance, her filthy talk...it was as if she knew how to get a man going. But how could she, her being a virgin and all? And wanting her again as he did, how could he trust himself to stay in the same building with her tonight?

Only a staircase removed her from where he slept. She bedded down on a floor with no other occupants. If he knocked on suite 301 and she denied him entry, he could bust down the door, force his way inside the room. Or do it the easy way – pull out his master key and let himself in, thus sparing himself a wrenched shoulder. The inn's walls and floors were rock solid. No one would hear the ruckus...

What the hell! Theo raked both hands through his wild mane. Would you listen to him go on? Where was his respect for womanhood in that kind of thinking? Breaking down doors, not taking no for an answer. Would he do rape?

Theo kneaded his rigid neck muscles, a tightness that mirrored the tightness in his balls. They had agreed to meet the next night, and he was sticking to it – even if the agreement killed him.

Inside the stables, he saddled up his palomino and kneed his painted mount toward Doyle's place. It was only a little after midnight, and his big brother and sister-in-law were regular hooting night owls. They would still be awake and, seeing his disheveled state, would volunteer to put him up for the night. Hell, even if they had already bedded down, they never locked up the house. If the lights were out, he would sneak in without disturbing their rest and grab some sleep in any one of their empty rooms. Even his eight-year-old nephew Will's room was empty, as the little tadpole was off in boarding school during the week. Why Doyle and Lily only had the one? For that matter, why had John and his wife of three years not had any babies yet? His Irish-born sister-in-law, Molly, obviously loved little ones. And she came from a large family. She had to long for a brood of her own.

Theo gave his mount his head, letting him gallop like Lucifer was chasing. Folks in glass houses should stay away from pitching rocks. He had no children either. Betsy had decided against them having a family...

Jumping down to the ground, Theo tied his horse to the post and walked up the front stairs to the door. The knob turned in his hand, and in the house, he went.

The foyer showed no signs of life, but a few steps down the front hall and he started hearing voices coming from the downstairs library.

Not voices, he decided, on second reflection. Faint murmurings. Grunts. An odd assortment of groans. Some male, some female. What the hell was going on?

He went to investigate.

At the library door, ajar enough for him to look inside, Theo blinked to clear his eyes. Once. Twice. Was he seeing what he thought he was seeing or was he seeing double?

He was seeing see straight, all right. Both his brothers, Doyle and John, were inside the candlelit room. As were both their wives, Lily and Molly. Four people, two couples, taking advantage of their marital rights.

Shit.

Plush sateen and velvet pillows festooned the floor, and the two couples on top of them were making love. Doyle had his wife locked in a coital embrace beneath him; Molly rode her husband on top.

Doyle and John had always been close, but this close? Close enough to make love to their respective wives in one another's presence?

Theo stood at the door shaking his head in disbelief. He seemed to be doing a lot of that lately, head shaking, that was. Had the world suddenly turned upside down? Had everyone gone crazy?

Making love was sacred and private, between two people only. When had life gotten so goddamn confusing?

Not right to look at them. Not right to stare at the two couples making love there on the floor.

But look Theo did.

And he did a hell of a lot more than look when Doyle rolled off the fiery-red-haired Lily and turned her over onto her belly, but not before Theo got a long look at his sister-in-law's smooth loins.

Christ. Lily had her pubic hair shaved, and everything was right there for Theo to see. *Everything*. That was when he grabbed his semierect gear.

When his eldest brother slapped his wife's ass and said, "Bring this up more so I can get inside you," and his ordinarily persnickety and independent wife rushed to do it, Theo fiddled with his trousers and got himself out. His cock was hard enough to pound rocks into sand. When Doyle rammed his cock between Lily's pale buttocks and she screamed, Theo grabbed hold of his thick, hard length and squeezed. Squeezed himself to make the ache in his balls go away. But he refused to jerk off—that was indecent. He just plain held himself.

That is, until his brother John did the same thing to his wife as Doyle had done to his.

Saying, "Up on all fours, Molly," John took his lively wife by the wrists and raised her up off his pumping hips, giving her no more humping thrusts until she obeyed. And obey, she did. Her full breasts wildly swinging, the voluptuous Molly jumped to do her husband's bidding. She did it real submissive-like too, as one of those trained houris Theo had once overheard two lumberjacks talk about might have done. On hands and knees, her shapely thighs spread wide, Molly wiggled her rounded bottom. "Hold still," John said, and just like Doyle had done, he gave his woman a sharp smack on the rear. Only when she behaved herself did John mount his wife.

Christ. His older brothers were putting their cocks to their wives' asses. Doing them like this was not their first time doing their asses either. Doing them as though they were all very familiar with ass fucking.

As his brothers sodomized their wives, Theo jerked his fist in time to their deep thrusts. Before he knew it, Theo was squirting, right there at the doorway while watching.

His handkerchief caught the plug, his orgasmic grunt he swallowed, and Theo turned away from the library, a tiptoed escape from his oldest brother's house with his now-limp piece hanging out.

He would sleep in the barn that night, a nice haystack where nothing more complicated than mice tunneling in the straw would disturb him.

Or his dark fantasies about doing the same thing to Siam as his brothers had done to their women. Only rougher. Only harder. Only tying her up first. Only using a whip on her ass instead of his hand.

Chapter Eight

With a practiced flick of her wrist, Siam unfurled her linen napkin.

The inn's banquet room faced the beach. Floor-to-ceiling windows afforded spectacular views over the water, a breathtaking panorama that none of her fellow diners appeared to be enjoying. Wrapped up in their various conversations, looking at one another and anyone else who happened by, sipping their wine and savoring their meals, they ignored the very sights and sounds that had presumably brought them to Maine. Whereas she, sitting alone at a table set for two, could fully absorb the seaside ambience.

Lack of companionship did have its benefits, she mused, settling the pristine white rectangle on her lap.

Her mother had been born in Southeast Asia, where children were seen and heard and loved to distraction. Her death left Siam inconsolable with grief...and undisciplined by Western standards.

The orphanage had rid her of the latter and intensified the former.

Along with blind and unquestioning obedience, the bleak institution had stressed the importance of meticulous table manners. Faint silvery scars on the undersides of her wrists proved proper dining decorum had been a hard-learned lesson for her. The Five Points Asylum had also stressed carriage and deportment, strict lessons reinforced with even-stricter corporal punishment. And once again, she wore the faint silvery scars—this time on her buttocks—to prove it. Among the ladies present in the room, she had the straightest spine; her erect posture came nowhere close to the upholstered chair back. Regardless of how tired or disappointed, she never slumped.

The rattan had dispatched her wildness underground, to a secret place where no one could touch it, dull it...kill it. Beatings had made her aware of the importance of fitting in, had let her be aware that there were consequences to every action, had

created a framework of expectation and boundaries. Corporal discipline had also been her only source of attention after her mother's death. She had come to think of the kiss of the lash as a form of affection. In her most needy moments, she had sought out its sting by intentionally breaking the rules. Her yearning for corporal punishment continued as an adult, as did her fondness for rules and regulations. Especially during times of emotional turmoil.

She stifled those submissive urges. Decried her need for physical discipline. Never again would she give up her control, her independence, to someone else, someone more powerful than she, someone with authority over her. Which probably explained why she found torturing the big strapping Theo the night before so utterly satisfying.

When a smiling waiter who had taken her order returned to deliver her meal—poached fish and a vegetable medley—Susan picked up her fork with unrestrained gusto. Rather than eat later, she had elected to dine before keeping her tryst. But sparingly. Even thinking of fucking on a full stomach gave her a serious case of dyspepsia. Theo was huge, after all, and his weight pressing on her abdomen would disturb her digestion and bring on the belches, a not horribly erotic scenario.

Suppressing her appetite in the interests of carnality was a huge sacrifice on her part. She did so love to eat. Never picked at her food. Refused to consider her waistline. And usually asked for seconds. Came from her deprived childhood, she assumed, when having a single meal a day was a luxury never taken for granted. Stealing—she could pick pockets and locks with the best of them—had put food on the table for herself and her mother. After marriage, with food plentiful and its menu planning left to her, she always had Cook prepare huge quantities of simple fare. She disliked fancy presentations for the main course but loved fancy desserts, the fancier the better.

With genuine reluctance, she returned her utensils to their proper position beside her half-full plate. Lord, but she wanted to eat the rest.

But no. Discipline won out. After first greedily licking her lips, to scoop up any clinging morsels of food, she daintily patted her lips and returned her gaze to the window while waiting for coffee to arrive. Whenever would that smiling waiter appear bearing the sterling silver pot and tray that she spied on various tables? She was impatient to see Theo again.

And get herself good and fucked.

Though the first time intercourse had been depressingly dismal, Theo had *risen* to the occasion with little recovery time, showing himself to have the stamina of the shaggy-furred black bear he so resembled.

Not that he had penetrated her again. Not with his cock, anyway. Theo had more than made up her "first-time" disappointment with a surprising foray into cunnilingus. Oh, the things that man could do with his tricky tongue! She had achieved a spectacular orgasm and had high expectations that this next time would exceed her wildest dreams—

"May I join you?"

A tall and distinguished gentleman loitered before her table.

Hmm. Never saw him before.

Whoever he was, he cut a trim and dashing figure in his black evening attire, his graying hair nattily brushed, then oiled slick against his skull with fashionable wings flaring out at the sides like flying buttresses.

Siam pulled herself together. She would never have a second chance to make a good first impression. "I do beg your pardon," she said in her most haughty tone. "What did you say?"

"May I sit and talk with you awhile? Unless... Is someone joining you later, for dessert?"

She wished.

The pastry cart, pushed by the smiling waiter *who had yet to appear with her coffee*, had made the rounds several times during the course of the meal. Naturally, she had stared longingly at everything on display. The inn's homemade tarts, topped with whipped cream swirls, looked heavenly and, appropriately, as light as air. In contrast, the cakes, mostly chocolate and drizzled with icing, looked sinfully heavy and rich. If not for her tryst, she would sample them all.

Who had made those divine slices of decadence?

Someone whose sensual nature matched the confections, she wagered.

She possessed the world's worst sweet tooth, a longing from an impoverished childhood when bitterly stale bread was hard to get, never mind anything fresh and sugary. As saliva pooled in her mouth, she wrinkled her nose and pretended disinterest. "Oh, do they serve desserts here? So bad for you. Never touch the stuff myself."

The gentleman loitering before her table pulled out the unused chair. "I never eat dessert either. See? Already we have something in common."

Hardly. A man without an appreciation for the sensual merits of chocolate and whipped cream started out with one strike against him. And his flirtatious banter? She was not terribly impressed. Witty bon mots were all too familiar from a score of empty Manhattan parties she had attended through the years.

"Here at the inn," he cordially added, "guests customarily intermingle during meal times. The owner, Bear Donovan, encourages that sort of thing."

Bear Donovan. Odd nickname.

"Really? Guests intermingle?" She kept the question suitably bored. "Being a first timer, I was unaware of the practice."

"You have yet to meet the innkeeper?"

"He was otherwise occupied when I arrived early yesterday morning."

"A bit of a backward ruffian, but he adds to the place's rustic charm. I come up every year. From Boston, you know." He extended his hand. "Nathaniel Altron."

"Susan Lindsmore." A soft shake shared, fingers lightly clasping, and she gestured to the vacant chair across from her, the one he had already pulled away from the table. "We have observed civility and formally introduced ourselves, so please do take a seat. And I am here in the wilderness alone. No one is joining me, for coffee and dessert, or otherwise."

"Another gentleman's bad luck is my good fortune." He stared at her bare ring finger.

His meaning was clear. "I was married. Alas, as of a year past, I am now a widow."

"My condolences."

"Thank you. And you?"

"Divorced. And lonely for companionship."

Aha! Mr. Altron was shopping for a vacation dalliance.

As was she.

Urbane and cultured, and about as real as herself, he fit the bill. His smooth suaveness complemented her mannered artifice. Just think, they would be doubly artificial together. "Children?"

"None. You?"

"Stepchildren, all girls. I am quite fond of them." The truth of the statement took her aback. Gone two days and already missing them. "The oldest is expecting her first. I can hardly wait for her to deliver. Although, I am worried." She gasped. "My, would you listen to me go on and on about my domestic concerns."

"I enjoy listening. Perhaps we might continue our conversation outside while catching some bracing Maine air. Would you care to take a walk?"

She slanted her gaze in the direction of the kitchen. Where had that smiling waiter with the devil-may-care attitude gone? "I thought to wait for coffee."

Her new friend patted his inside coat pocket. "I could use a cheroot. Meet me out on the veranda when you finish and we can take a stroll down to the beach then. The weather has warmed considerably since yesterday."

She checked the grandfather's clock off in the corner. Two hours till her assignation. Ample time for a walk before she left for the lighthouse. And why not indulge her curiosity and go with him? Mr. Altron was pleasant company, and she could practice her rusty flirtation skills on him. "A walk sounds lovely."

He rose, took her hand again. Turning the palm right side up, he applied first his lips, then his tongue, to the underside of her wrist.

"Wicked, wicked man," she purred.

"So glad you noticed, my dear. See you soon." With a dip at his trim waist, he turned. On the way to the door, he removed his coat and slung it over one arm, a move that immediately drew her attention to his commendable physique.

An intentional ploy to get her to notice his male attributes?

Presumably.

A strategy she had employed with Theo. Mr. Altron was way out of her league, sexually. She was just out of the starting gate and far too old to make a fool of herself with a stumble. But in a week's time, should he still be at the inn, she might just take him up on his unspoken offer, she mused, straining in her chair to look after him.

She bounced her knees, and her napkin went sailing to the floor.

Oh, dearie me. How clumsy of me. I shall have to retrieve it...

She twisted, bent, reached for her dropped napkin, while focusing her leer at Mr. Alton's commendable buttocks. The sharp creases in his trouser legs went right up to mold his back pockets.

She brought her attentions upward, to his brocaded vest, meticulously tailored to the contours of his trim waist while stretching across the width of his broad shoulders.

She refrained from smacking her lips, though only barely.

There was just something utterly scrumptious about a well-groomed gentleman, one who had enough good sense to use his attributes to their best advantage. Mr. Altron carried himself with the gracefulness of a dancer. And no doubt knew it. Otherwise, why remove the coat?

Just as he was about to exit the dining room, Mr. Altron glanced back over his shoulder. A knowing wink followed and a called, "good evening, Mrs. Lindsmore."

Obviously, he was well aware of her dropped napkin ploy. Obviously, he knew her tongue was hanging out. The scallywag had some conceit.

In a humiliated huff, she reached to retrieve her lost napkin.

Like a decoy mouse to a pouncing cat, the linen square skittered away from her fingertips, as if attached to a string.

"This must be yours, ma'am."

As the napkin fluttered back into her lap, she grimaced.

Ma'am. Caught in the act by her new lover.

"Or should I say, Mrs. Lindsmore?"

She stared at an enormous pair of feet, shod in disreputable, mud-splashed boots.

Dear Lord! Theo had found her out.

Chapter Nine

To add to Siam's already wretched embarrassment, a crick in her back prevented her from straightening out to an upright pose on her seat to confront Theo.

"Here, allow me to help you." One hand under her elbow, he levered her back up into the chair.

"Thank you for the assistance." Her formal words were as stiff as her spine.

"Anytime." He slammed the awaited silver coffeepot on the table.

Theo was such a bear. Big, brutish, and boorish, made to seem particularly so when compared to the suave Mr. Altron who had just departed.

Theo stood there, a stained dishwasher's apron tied at his waist, and glared at her as if he had caught her cheating or something similarly preposterous.

Married fourteen years, and though aching with sexual frustration and in receipt of multiple opportunities, she had remained faithful. Her virginity proved her no cheat. And why should she care what he thought? Why should she need to prove anything?

Theo had no rights over her. And she had never agreed that he would be her only lover on this vacation. She would just have to see what unfolded with Nathaniel Altron. If not him, she would go where whim took her.

She'd had quite enough of wearing a yoke around her neck. A merchant had bought and paid for her like a piece of merchandise, but no one owned her now. How dare Theo make her feel guilty for something she had yet to do! He had no claim on her. She owed him nothing. Certainly not fidelity.

Her back went up like a cat, and she hissed, "Sir, what are you doing here?" A ludicrous question, as his stained apron told her what he was doing here.

With a fine china *clunk*, he tipped her floral cup over in its saucer, reversing its upside-down positioning. "I work here."

There it was—confirmation of her suspicions. He was the hired help. She had given her virginity to a dishwasher.

He poured coffee from the silver pot. Steam and the aroma of dark, rich roasted beans swirled around her.

“Just so you know,” he said, “your dandified admirer has interfered with every lone woman in this dining room since he first started coming up here.”

“Well, he has not, as you so quaintly put it, interfered with me. Yet.” On a fit of pique, she added a hefty dollop of cream and two heaping spoons of sugar to the coffee and then surveyed the crowded room, apprising herself of the interest of any diners who sat within earshot of her table. No one appeared to be listening, but one never knew. “For your information, I invited Mr. Altron to my table. To socialize,” she added caustically. “Something you would know nothing about.”

He slapped a clean napkin at her place setting. “We *socialized* yesterday morning. Your lusty screams as you came still ring in my ears.”

“No need for crudity.”

“Why the hell not? I am crude.”

Oh God, yes, he was, and she was creaming her drawers because of it, she thought, every bit as crude as him. “I could get you fired for that impertinence.”

“You and I have an agreement,” he said stubbornly.

“A nonexclusive agreement,” she insisted.

He deftly served her the flaky French pastry from the tray. “Although the inn is renowned in Maine and beyond for chocolate confections, a *tarte au pomme* is the *spécialité du jour*.”

Imbued with apples, cinnamon and nutmeg, rich cream and butter, the sweet nearly brought a tear to her eye, and she was rarely emotional. But she just loved it when a man spoke desserts.

She pushed the plate away. “No, thank you. And I have changed my mind about the coffee as well.” She looked him up and down. “You should not be acting so familiarly with your betters. You work here. I am a guest. Get back to your dish washing. I shan’t keep you.”

Why had she said that?

To put him in his rightful place? To break his sexual hold on her?

Because he had pleased her, and she could hardly wait for him to do so again?

She had wanted sexual honesty between them. But what she did not want was for him to think he had any authority over her. She would not submit to him. Not in the bedroom, where it was all fun and games, not even to fulfill a role. Outside the bedroom, he was her social inferior. She certainly would not be following the hired help’s orders.

Her lover had a temper, and it was flaring. Even now, in a public room, he stirred her.

"Just so you know, *ma'am*, I do just about everything around here, including laying out what the inn's guests wear to bed. Like that frilly champagne-colored wrap I placed on your bed while you ate dinner. I would have laid out a nightgown too, but damned if I could find one."

He had access to her room? Had touched her personal possessions, her lotions and douches? Her underpinnings?

In finer hotels, staff routinely turned down the bed, refreshed the linen, delivered clean towels...placed bedclothes conveniently within reach. But knowing this man had touched her things sent a wanton shiver through her.

He scrutinized her, his hot gaze figuratively licking her breasts. Far from insulted, she could hardly wait for his mouth, his tongue, to do the same, literally. Could he tell what he did to her? Did her expression give her lust away?

She straightened her shoulders. "For the sake of honest sexual disclosure, I should tell you I seldom wear a nightgown."

"Then sweat is as much as either of us will be wearing in bed tonight."

His words unwisely aroused her. Powerless to do anything about her ill-advised fascination, she lashed out at him. "Sweat is most likely all you can afford. That champagne wrap you laid out on my bed would cost you a week's wages." Her tone dripped condescension. Vulnerability brought out the scared little girl in her, the one a very large man had held a knife to in a Five Points alley.

Bury the memory, bury it deep, as that man had almost buried his knife deep in my neck.

"And that is not what I meant, Siam. What I meant is, I want you naked underneath me."

When? When would he get her naked? Her restrictive gown was suffocating her.

She took a calming breath. He wanted her naked beneath him, did he? Unfortunately, in her fantasy, he was the one naked under her, preferably while she wielded a cat-o'-nine-tails switch.

"Stay away from Altron," he growled.

The unmitigated nerve of the man! After coupling one time, he thought he owned her. Theo's arrogance should have incensed her. His territoriality should have sounded all sorts of alarms. Why then did his dominance make her feel protected, treasured...secure? "I am simply going for a stroll with him, Theo," she soothed. "I have no intention of returning to his room or allowing him to visit me in mine. At least not tonight. I am fully cognizant of my prior engagement with you."

"Glad to hear it. As to that prior engagement, arrive late and I come looking for you," he warned and stormed away.

Refusing to look after him, as she had done with Mr. Altron, Siam once again stared out the window. She was no schoolgirl with a crush. Only a complete dodo bird would take Theo's caring personally. He viewed her as his property, an antiquated paternalistic point of view that reflected his working-class background. Considering her

own lowly origins, it was snobbish to think such a thing, but there it was, she was thinking it.

She tapped her fingers on the linen-covered table. Dear Lord, had she really allowed him, a hotel employee, to caress her breasts, to tease her nipples, to tongue between her legs?

Scandalously, she had done that and more. She had asked—no, begged—him to fuck her.

What was a person of his station doing with *Licentious*?

The subscription cost a pretty penny. Unless—he had lifted a copy from one of the guest rooms he cleaned. Not that his larceny made a bit of difference to her. His character, or the lack thereof, concerned her not at all. Beyond getting her off, Theo held no significance to her. No man did. It was not as though he mattered to her. It was not as though she loved him. She intended never to love any man.

The chair almost toppled as she jumped from the seat. Her mother had loved Siam's father, and just look where that had landed her—with an out-of-wedlock child and having to whore on the street to pay the rent. No man would ever trap Siam like that.

No. No. *No!* She would enjoy her two-week stay here in Maine. Enjoy Theo too, knowing they would never run into each other again, not when she returned to Manhattan, not when she resumed her attendance in the endless party circuit that society demanded. After years of practice, she now moved seamlessly in an artificial world of manners and inhibitions.

In this backwoods world, her thrusting nipples were most unmannerly. Between her thighs had gone uninhibitedly liquid, while her mouth leached dry in very real anticipation of that big, brash, possessive bear of a man storming her body again.

Mr. Altron would help pass the minutes until then. Now there was a man who would be appreciative a wardrobe of fripperies. In fact, he would expect her to wear lace and bows to bed. He would expect her well turned out at all times.

Since her marriage, whether dining alone or not, she dressed for her evening meal. Tonight, under her costume, she had worn a stuffed pad to enlarge her nonexistent hips, two thin petticoats, and a new corset from France. Everything seemed to be French these days, from pastries to underclothes, to words like *du jour*, to various countries in Southeast Asia made French through colonization.

Not Siam, the land of birth, the country of her early childhood.

King Rama V had resisted France's tyranny, as she would resist Theo's tyranny.

But where would she ever feel at home?

She was Siam-born. Had lived in that country until she turned ten. Despite following all the customs and speaking the language, she had never truly been accepted by the Asian side of her heritage. Her white American father and out-of-wedlock birth were stigmas too great to overcome.

Then she came to this country. Her mixed race and inability to speak the language had hindered her ability to fit in here as well.

Two very different worlds, and neither had accepted her, neither place had she fit in. And so she made herself over and became someone else.

In society.

She guarded her place in that world, despite detesting herself for the lie of it.

Before starting for the dining room door, she straightened her blousy “pouter pigeon” bodice. The style overhung her waistband and made her small bust all but disappear – not exactly flattering. Today’s popular monobosom silhouette did nothing for her. Without a clearly delineated waistline, she resembled a flat-bosomed stick. Then there were the rows upon rows of ruched mousseline de soie decorating the high collar and “mousquetaire” sleeves. Not to mention the ruffles capping the shoulders and wrists. Frills, frills everywhere! Fussy details were all the rage this season. Give her simplicity. As to the pastel palette currently in vogue...well, light colors, like the insipid powder blue she had on, washed out her pale skin. She preferred vibrant jewel tones. In their favor, she supposed, ladylike fashions hid her dominant nature. The straight skirts currently in fashion hobbled her take-charge stride.

At least she no longer need contend with huge bustles and their underlying cages, Siam mused, wending her way between the tables to join Mr. Altron.

Under the guise of after-dinner repartee, they would exchange some witty sexual innuendo out on the veranda. Arm in arm, they would stroll to the beach, where she would coyly grant him a kiss. Perhaps two. She might even allow him a bit of naughty fondling. Then, when he grew all hot and bothered, she would dismiss him. Society was a world unto itself, but it was a small world, and who allowed what liberties made the rounds in the gossip mills. She would go only so far with Mr. Altron tonight. Besides, a big black bear was expecting her presence at the lighthouse.

Let him wait, Siam decided, brushing an errant black tendril of hair back from her forehead. Tarry, and Theo’s steely control might slip, the ferocious beast within breaking free.

Dearie me. Should that happen, she might need to rely on a whip and leather collar to tame him.

She ached at the mere thought.

Chapter Ten

In the inn's kitchen, Theo whipped off his apron and turned to Jess. "Going out for a spell."

"Your early departure got something to do with that exotic, raven-haired lady you were scowling at in the dining room, Boss?"

"Could be."

"Stop kickin' and do tell. I want to know."

"As a guest in this inn, the lady deserves her privacy respected."

Jess let go a deep chuckle. "Of all the goings-on that I ever did hear of, that beats the Dutch. You had your mouth all screwed tight, but that was only half the tale."

"What the hell are you talking about?"

"You were making sweet eyes at that woman is all I meant. So go on, skedaddle! Do whatever you need to do. No worries here. I can handle things."

Jess's ability to handle things was why he was second in command at the hotel. Theo only wished his friend would stay on year-round. But that was not the lumberjack's way. Jess had a wandering soul, and timbering satisfied his yen to keep moving, from East to West Coast, wherever the opportunity presented itself.

At the door, Theo shot back, "Should be back around about midnight. Lock up downstairs if something delays me, would you? Leave swabbing the kitchen floor to me. I can do it tomorrow before you get the flapjacks started for breakfast."

Theo owned, managed, and built the inn. He understood its workings inside and out. No job was beneath him. Anything he was called on to do, he did. From cooking and cleaning, to camping and hiking with rusticators overnight in the woods he knew so well. No matter what he did, the work was a labor of love that had turned him, a rough-and-tumble woodsman, into an affluent hotelier. He was damn proud of his

accomplishment. Damn proud he had created something out of nothing. Damn proud a fine inn now stood on a once-deserted stretch of sandbar.

The oceanfront property came dirt cheap. The area had yet to become popular, and earnings from his logging days more than covered the parcel of land. A good thing too, because asking for a loan, hat in hand, was not his way. Owing anyone anything never had sat right with him.

On the east end was a ruin of a derelict lighthouse. Josie's Tower was a fond memory left over from his childhood, and he had no heart to tear the wreck down. Doyle used to take John and him there to fish as kids. That was when the far-fetched notion to fix up the old beacon stuck in Theo's head. No matter how hard he tried to shake it loose, that dream persisted.

On the west end was a run-down little fisherman's shack. To save money, Betsy and he moved into the crude, one-room shanty after their marriage. Like most newlywed couples starting out their lives together, they had been as poor as church mice, but happy. Real happy. He had thought so at the time anyway.

Lost to his recollections, Theo absently fiddled with the undone top button on his shirt. Leastwise, *he* had been happy. That was for damn sure. His born and bred Boston wife had been used to the finer things in life, and maybe their initial poverty had spurred on her restlessness. Or maybe he had been too busy trying to make the hotel work to pay her the attention she had been used to receiving.

Or maybe she had never truly loved him, he conceded, plucking some more at the collar before finally closing up the tabs at the throat. Buttoning gave his fingers something to do as he left the inn.

Whatever the case, Betsy, he realized now, had probably not been happy.

Then their fortunes improved. Inspired by artists' naturalistic paintings and writers' poetic serialized magazine romances, wealthy out-of-state city folks started descending on Maine like recreationally starved locusts. The rich and the powerful made Bar Harbor their summer playground. Wanting to experience nature, but too spoiled for the rugged day-to-day life of camps, they started squawking about a lack of *genteel* accommodations in the area. Some built their own "cottages," a modest name for their grandiose mansions; others wanted a stay in an authentic Maine hotel, as scarce as hen's teeth in the area.

To retain the site's naturalism, the lodgings were deceptively simple and rustic on the outside. To satisfy the guests' craving for luxury, the hotel's interior was opulent, with features that would put comparable Manhattan facilities to shame. Like the grand ballroom, where captains of industry could impress one another with the size of their fortunes. Like the ocean-view dining room, where ladies could show off their twinkling jewels by candlelight. Like the wraparound veranda, where gentlemen could relax for a spell while smoking their cheroots.

The citified rusticators approved of the inn's ambience. Right from the onset, reservations came rolling in. Now Theo booked the rooms far in advance. As all good

hoteliers should, he kept his finger on every aspect of the operation. Rather than live elsewhere, he maintained his own private apartments on the inn's first floor. Then, to add a personal touch, he checked guests in at the front desk himself.

Except for Mrs. Susan Lindsmore.

Off on a hike, he had missed her reception.

Outside on the veranda, there was no way he could miss her. The flatlander, Altron, had his soft, pampered hands all over her as he bent her near double over the wooden railing. Even so, the woman was frisky, and so he expected to see her fight off Altron. Swat his pawing manicured hands away. Do something, anything, to defend her outraged dignity. But he had misjudged her ire. Before Theo's narrowed gaze, she kissed the slick gent right back.

Theo went hot under the collar he had just buttoned.

To hell with their nonexclusive agreement.

Not another thought wasted, Theo rounded on Altron, threw him off Siam, and then landed him a good solid punch to the jaw. The oily gent landed with a hard bounce on the deck.

Breathing hard, Theo stood over him. "Keep your hands off the lady."

Altron nursed his newly dented chin with a trembling hand. "Is this any way to treat one of your guests, sir?"

"Hell no. Good thing you ain't staying here any longer. Pack up your gear and get the hell out."

"Mrs. Lindsmore came out here with me voluntarily. Ask her." Altron swiped at his face, smearing blood all over his stiff Hamilton collar. One of the studs came loose from the detachable collar, yanking the two-inch stand-up style from its moorings on the fancy white shirt. "Go on," he sputtered. "Ask her if I speak the truth."

Theo had already heard and seen enough. "No need to ask the lady. I want you gone."

Siam, standing against the railing, rushed to Altron's defense. "I came out here under my own free will. Mr. Altron is no masher."

"Pardon me for saying so, but a lot you know, ma'am." Siam had just been a virgin the day before. She knew shit about men and their ways. "Another minute, and Altron's hand would have been down your drawers."

Siam's slate blue eyes flashed. "Perhaps that is the very thing I intended."

Pretty shaken up, she had no idea what she said. And here he was adding to her upset. For her sake, he would go easy on Altron.

Theo picked up the battered gent, brushed him off, and gave him a push inside. "Go on. Get your bags. Before I lose my temper."

Muttering under his breath, the flatlander stumbled away, leaving Theo alone with Siam. Walking over to the railing, he took her elbow, just in case nerves got the better of her and she took a toss. "Did he harm you in any way?"

"No, he did not. Now stop manhandling me." Twisting her arm, she tried to jerk away.

Lest she fall, he held on tight.

"You are no gentleman."

"Never said I was." But he had hoped against hope that whatever he was, however she saw him, that it would be enough for her. "As long as no harm was done you, Siam..."

"Mrs. Lindsmore to you." Her regal nose went up in the air so high, he thought for sure the snooty tip would puncture a star. "I have changed my mind about our tryst. I shan't be visiting you at the lighthouse this evening. I have no intention of going anywhere with the likes of you."

He felt like a cannon about to go off. Nevertheless, he gritted his teeth and attempted to be reasonable. He did not want this woman hurt, did not want her to find out the hard way about scalawags like Altron. Like Ben Franklin said, "An ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure." "But you would go somewhere with the likes of that Altron fella, I suppose?"

"You suppose correctly."

"Ask around about him at the inn. See for yourself what sort of reputation that coyote has with women."

"I shall. Now, remove your dishwasher's hands from my person immediately."

Jesus. He had not been enough for his wife and looked like he was not enough for this hoity-toity New York society lady.

Something deep and dark inside him broke to the surface. Once exposed to the ether, that primitive thing ignited and exploded.

He started leading her away. Although dragging would have been a more apt description of his brisk escort.

"Where are you taking me?" she asked, fighting him tooth and nail.

"To the lighthouse."

The tide was high, and March winds whipped cold seawater up into their faces. Neither of them was dressed for a tramp along the shore. The surf was a percolating frenzy of foam and bubbles, splashing them, soaking them—the legs of his trousers, the hem of her frilly gown. But he was used to the weather, used to the cold, used to getting drenched. The hothouse flower with him was not.

Conscious that she was getting soaked, he continued pulling her along, the roughness of the waves matching the rough urgency brewing inside him.

At Josie's Tower, he pushed her up the stairs.

He closed the door behind them, lit the globe oil lamp, and pressed his shoulder to the only exit, daring her to make a break for it. "I left you a change of clothes upstairs. Leave off the undergarments."

Her chest rose and fell. He hated how the newfangled "health" corset she wore squashed the natural shape of her dainty breasts within a stiff busk in front, forcing her straight spine into an exaggerated S-curve shape in back. He preferred her bare-breasted and free to move normally, as she had at the inn's window. She had danced for him alone then. He wanted her to dance for him alone now. A mating dance.

"And if I refuse to change my clothes?" she taunted.

"The ocean spray...the waves... Soaking wet, you could catch your death."

"Your concern is not over the Atlantic soaking me, but a man other than yourself making me wet." She smirked, the corners of her plump mouth indenting like dimples. "Jealous?"

"Ayuh."

"Of Nathaniel Altron?"

Brought low, he hung his head. "I only want you wet from me. I know you want it, Siam." He admitted on a hard swallow, "And I want to give it to you. Erotic honesty, remember? Go change."

Making him no further argument, she turned on her heel.

Chapter Eleven

Lifting the sodden hem of her straight skirts, Siam walked in a hobbled fashion over to the lighthouse's winding staircase.

So, Theo was jealous. Should that please or dishearten her?

Because of her, he had struck a man in the face over a simple, closemouthed kiss. Because of her, he had evicted that same man from the hotel. In her own defense, who gave him the right to take that high-handed course of action? Who gave him the right to tell her whom she could and could not see? Who gave him the right to demand she change her clothing, as if she were a child?

Patronizing lout. As an adult and a free agent, no one told her what to do. No one ordered her about. His domineering attitude was the very last straw. She would show him. Let him cool his damn heels for a while downstairs while she ostensibly did his bidding by going to change into dry clothing. Rather than comply with his insufferable directive, she would return, garment in hand, and shove it right in his face!

Siam blew out a gusty breath. Lord, but she was just *so* annoyed. From listening to Theo, one would think they had arrived at some sort of understanding. Nothing could be further from the truth. From listening to Theo, one would positively think he, a lowly cook/dishwasher, had the authority to evict a prestigious guest, like Mr. Nathaniel Altron, from the inn.

Despite being peeved, she resolved to give Theo the benefit of the doubt. He had expressed his concerns, and nothing if not suspicious by nature, she would investigate his allegations. After making some discreet inquiries as to Mr. Altron's character, then and only then, would she send him a note to set up an assignation.

Her mind began to whirl. Surely, the inn's carriage driver would know the name of Nathaniel's new hotel. Or perhaps the front desk might have a forwarding address...

At any rate, she would locate Mr. Altron. If only to prove to Theo that no man owned her and she would sleep with whomever she pleased, whenever she pleased, and if it pleased her to sleep with Nathaniel, then she would.

What could she say? After a lifetime of celibacy, her sexual hunger was voracious. She would need at least two men, possibly more, to satisfy her pent-up appetite.

Unlike Theo, a man driven by propriety, Mr. Altron was a playful and irreverent scoundrel, who knew how to play the game. He kissed with exquisite expertise, elevating a kiss to a mouth-to-mouth sport. Whereas Theo...

As Siam placed her ruined slipper on the stair's first tread, she tilted her jaw in memory.

...whereas Theo kissed with raw passion.

There was nothing playful or seductive or artistic about Theo's rough kiss. He played no game. Unlike Mr. Altron's kiss, Theo's all-consuming embrace had involved her physically – her drawers clung wetly to her nether regions after sampling *his* kiss.

But was all-consuming what she really wanted?

She was certainly not looking for a deep emotional involvement. A frivolous good time, yes, but no profound commitment. Nathaniel fit the bill.

She sensed she would only enjoy coitus if her sexual partner appealed to her on some level. Not *all* levels. But attraction would heighten the experience. She would never allow herself to be subject to a man's fickle whim, to be entirely besotted. Love annihilated a woman's instinct for self-preservation. Love played a woman for a fool.

She meant for coupling to stay recreational, a physical sport like swimming or croquet. Superficial Nathaniel understood how that went. Intense Theo, on the other hand, took fucking far too seriously, she decided, climbing the rest of the winding stairs to the lighthouse's second floor.

The oil sconces were already lit. This advance preparation signified Theo's confidence in her arrival. He was either horribly conceited or extraordinarily trusting.

The latter.

The lighthouse made for a wondrously romantic setting for a rendezvous, and Theo was certainly a romantic at heart. Romantics were trusting by definition, always anticipating a good outcome to any situation. Since she told Theo she would be here tonight, he had accepted her at her word.

Siam sighed in pleasure at the ambience. Moonlight streamed like white ribbons through the narrow second-floor windows. And who needed music when the ocean crashed like an orchestra's cymbals outside? Just look at those stars, sparkling like diamonds...

She snorted. Theo's sense of romance was rubbing off on her. That would never do. She would need to squelch those mushy inclinations. None of Theo's preparations had been done for her, personally. He had fixed up the place for the anonymous respondent to his personal ad in *Licentious*.

She fiddled with a strand of loose hair. Marriage was commerce, an affair a diversion, and answering an illicit personal ad was fucking. Catching her kiss Mr. Altron must have crushed Theo's trusting nature, must have dimmed his romantic expectations. Her actions had to have hurt him.

His problem if he had expected too much of this, of them, of her. His problem if he had gotten hurt.

And still, hurt or not, he had sought to protect her from Nathaniel Altron.

Unless, of course, Theo was deviously lying about Mr. Altron's poor reputation.

She shivered. The chill, she supposed. The frigid walk across the beach catching up with her. Her clothing really was quite damp, the hem decidedly soaked. Now where was that gown Theo had ordered her to change into? She could at least *look* at it.

She shuffled into a clumsy turn, her straight skirt hobbling her gait again.

Ah! There it was. Hanging on a hook on the wall, a linen dustcover keeping it clean. Theo had thought of everything, she mused, wandering over to it.

Telling herself that curiosity motivated her and nothing else, she lifted the bottom edge of the dustcover, only about an inch or so, only enough to reveal the fabric.

Velvet. Reddish purple, the rich tone of a ripe plum.

At thirty-three, she remained a succulent plum on the branch, ripe for the picking...

As if it would bite, she touched the heavy fabric.

The velvet nap felt so incredibly soft, so lushly dense against her stroking fingertips. She had always loved velvet. And this particular plum color was just so appealing. And the full skirts! Oh my. The flared fullness would allow her to walk naturally, allow her to dance if she chose. What harm would it do to look at the rest of the sensual plum-colored dress?

No harm, she conceded, whipping off the dustcover.

She gasped in delight. How indescribably lovely! The gown was a romantic fantasy spun from the cloth of medieval times, an era of stone castles, bold knights, and their soft-spoken ladies, yet the style was contemporary and blissfully unencumbered. Not a bow or a frill or a loathsome ruffle anywhere in sight, the gown's simple elegance seemingly made just for her. She could hardly believe a big, gruff bear of a man like Theo had selected such a beautifully designed dress.

She stripped to the skin. And stood there naked, staring at the sumptuous plum gown, struggling with what wearing it would mean.

Then reached.

* * * * *

While Siam changed upstairs, Theo awaited her return at the narrow first-floor window, looking out onto the moonlit night. The abrasive salt air permeated everything this close to the ocean, corroding paint, wood, even eating into stone. Upkeep was

pretty near constant at the lighthouse, both outside and in. The pine stairs were old and warped, the linseed oil and turpentine finish worn off a half century before. The risers creaked when he trod on them.

They made no sound under the fall of Siam's light footsteps. No noise at all warned him of her approach. Only her exotic smell gave her presence away.

He turned to face her. "What scent is that you wear?"

"Jasmine. The scent is native to the southeast Orient."

"The fragrance makes me hard." Then he remembered her insistence upon erotic truth between them. "The perfume is not the culprit. Your musk is what does it. You make me hard, just from looking, just from breathing you in."

He sighed. The gown suited her. He knew that it would as soon as he clapped eyes on it in a dressmaker's shop window. The deep purple showcased her flawless skin, a pearl-like translucence that was far from usual. The off-shoulder style displayed her dancer's erect posture. The hint of cleavage sent his hard cock spiking.

He had deliberately not included shoes, and her bare feet poked out from under the hem. She had gone barefoot the other night, when she touched herself at the inn's floor-to-ceiling window, and he wanted to see her like that again. Only this time, he wanted to do the touching. He had thought of nothing else since.

"You look good enough to eat," he clumsily offered, not having the right words to properly express how her appearance thunderstruck him.

"Thank you. I believe that is the finest compliment I have ever received." She stroked a hand over her hip. "The velvet feels soft against my naked skin."

He would not feel soft against her naked skin. That worried him. He had never felt like this before with a woman, so out of control, so torn up inside. Like he would snap if she refused him. Like he would force her if she denied him. He feared hurting her.

He unbuttoned his shirt. Shrugging off the white linen, he undid the trouser button at his waist. "Ever seen a man naked?"

"Yes."

"How about an erect member?"

"An erect member of what?"

Her coyness knotted his belly. "You said bluntness did not offend you."

She batted her lashes. "Indeed not. In fact, your...*ahem*...bluntness is why I am here."

He did his damndest to hold back his blush at her double entendre. He had never run into a foulmouthed lady like her before. Even Betsy, for all her cheating ways, had been genteelly spoken.

He rephrased the question, using plain talk. "You laughed over my limp cock, but have you ever seen a man with an erection?"

Her jaw lifted. "Yes. But not in years. Not since I was a very young girl." Her gaze hit him straight on.

"Now I know where you come by your name. You remind me of a Siamese cat, smart and knowing, with a graceful build, and those grayish blue eyes of yours. Though yours have no slant to them, like a Siamese cat's eyes do."

"My mother named me Siam, after the country of both our births," she said haughtily. "The people of Siam do not have almond-shaped eyes. They have dark, doe-shaped eyes. That was our little inside joke, my mother and I. My straight black hair comes to me from her, but I inherited the slight tinge of blue from my white father. He was one of her customers."

"Your mother worked as a shopkeeper?"

She laughed. "No. A concubine in her country, a whore in his. A poverty-driven occupation in both."

He digested that and said nothing.

She sighed. "Oh dear. The point of the personal ad was anonymous sex, and here I am doing what I said I would not—baring my soul. No one knows of my mother's profession. When I was young, I thought my mother washed the clothes of all the men who came to our tenement apartment. I was only twelve when she passed on. I survived two years alone on the streets before the city placed me in an orphanage. And there I go again. I should not be talking about any of this with you, particularly not now." She batted her lashes. "Now, I should be using my mouth on something other than conversation."

She padded to him. "Drop your trousers. I know how you would prefer I use my mouth."

"You do not."

"No need to look so wretched. I assure you, I do know." She moved closer.

"The pictures in *Licentious*, right? You think to copy the fellatio illustrations."

She tossed her head, long streams of black whipping her pale, bared shoulders, conjuring up visions of black leather whips lashing other areas, rounded heart-shaped areas. "I already admitted to you that I look at those pictures to arouse myself during masturbation. I have no need to use them for instructional purposes. I told you, I was a virgin but not an innocent."

Under her fall of hair, she fingered her nape, then wiggled her shoulders. Her dainty breasts nearly spilled over the deep V-neck of the gown. The décolletage broke his remaining forbearance.

He wanted her bare-breasted, the same as she had danced for him before the window. "Lower the bodice to your waist."

At his hoarse croak, she gave a graceful lift to her shoulders, and her gown plummeted downward on a hush of purple velvet.

In evidence of his roughness that first day, a futile attempt to drive her away, her nipples displayed signs of bruising. The areolae were swollen. *Bitten*. "I got carried away. I never should have done that to you. I marked you..." But even as he claimed abhorrence of his shameful intemperance, deep down, the unmistakable proof of his ownership perversely pleased him.

"I like that you marked me, Theo."

His heart slammed in his chest. She *liked* it?

She cupped a hurt breast, stroked the bitten center. "You like it too, Theo. Admit it. You like that you put your mark on me. Like that you took my virginity. The sight of my maiden blood excited you."

He shook his head. No! Admitting to such a thing aloud would give her power over him. One woman, his wife, had already held that kind of power over him, and she had abused his trust and left him devastated. He could not admit to her that she was right, that he did like that he had left his imprint on her.

Breathing hard, he watched her play with herself, knowing she was really playing with him. He told her to drop the bodice of her gown to the waist and she had complied. But because of her slenderness, the gown was still falling, a slow descent past her hips. Finally, the rucked-up velvet came to a rest a whisper below her pubis, at the juncture that formed the frontal arch of her pelvis.

The sight of her dainty narrowness made him wince. He had been inside that tight channel, and he would sell his soul to be inside her that way again. But Christ, she was small. "Last night, when I saw you at the window" – he swallowed – "your pubic hair was gone."

"Yes. I shaved my loins."

"Why?"

"To expose myself to you, to hide nothing, to show you the extent of my carnal appetite. I would like to retain my privacy during this tryst. With that said, for two weeks, all I am is a hungry cunt."

"I would never reveal your name to anyone and/or what we are doing –"

"I know."

He hung his head. "A drastic move, to shear your curls, when there was no need. I realize you need a man. I need a woman the same way." He looked up into her eyes. "I would never shame you for that need."

"Good to know that even when I am stripped bare and writhing, you will not hold my erotic weakness against me." She smiled. "Practically speaking, shaven loins will ease your next penetration. You are a large man, and your length and girth proved a bit of a challenge the first time. The fewer the impediments, the faster you will be able to get inside me. Erotically speaking, shaven loins visually entice a man. The clitoris wears no veil to obscure the view. Women have been unveiling themselves in such a manner since the Middle Ages. Since the fifteenth century, I believe."

Christ, when she talked about erotic honesty she meant it. Her openness took a lot of getting used to. And is that what that nubbin was called, that excitable scrap of flesh at the top of her pussy – a clitoris? He had never known the correct name for it.

“My sister-in-law, Lily, is a painter. There’s a print of Botticelli’s *The Birth of Venus* hanging in her studio. Her pussy is smooth too. I always admired that painting.” A flash fire warmed his skin.

“Now tell me – last evening, did you find the bare look agreeable on me?”

“Ayuh.” He had been staring at her hurt nipples. Little girl soft a moment before, they had gone hard now, her arousal at this off-color conversation matching his. And all they were doing was talking. What would happen when they got down to it, when they finally touched one another? “I did find it agreeable. Most agreeable.”

“Then I shall certainly continue the fashion while I am here. Would you like to see my cunt now, Theo?” Her hands at her delicate hip bones, she slid her spanned fingers lower, finally hooking her thumbs into the roll of purple velvet. She pushed down on the gown.

“Wait!” He reached for her distended nipple, bruised from his prior foreplay, and gently circled the discolored ring with his thumb. Though steeped in regret, he knew what he wanted, and what he wanted was to inflict more of the same roughness on her. “I need it hard, Siam. Can you take it hard? A man’s hard lovemaking?”

“Yes,” she said evenly. “I can take the *fuck* as hard as you like.”

She was right to correct him. Lovemaking was sweet and gentle. Betsy’s unfaithfulness had smothered those soft sentiments, and so this would be a fuck, not an expression of love.

He purposefully clamped down on her tender flesh, a vise hold on the tip of the areola, and then sank in his fingernails into the already abused flesh. The action took some of the edge off his tension, his anger, his horrible rage.

“Yes yes yes,” she purred as he twisted the tip. “Like so. Just like so.”

To the sounds of her enjoyment, like music to his ears, he bit her, intentionally sinking his teeth into her bruised flesh.

As she mewed, he soothed the new hurt with his mouth.

“Lovely,” she cooed, as if transfixed. “But this is for you, remember?”

He lifted his mouth. “Hush.”

Arching her long white throat, her head listed to one side, taking the inky fall of hair and his gaze with it. As the ends swept past her hips, the back of her neck came into view, revealing her scar, about an inch in circumference, puckering the otherwise-flawless pearl skin.

He traced the indentation with his fingertips. Carrying a few such old injuries himself, he knew a knife wound when he saw it. “What happened to you, Siam?”

In answer, she nipped at his flat nipple with her teeth, the same as he had done to her, her mouth alternately sucking and biting and kissing. Her hand slipped below his waistband.

He tried circling her wrist with his fingers, to hold her investigation at bay, but she slipped free of the restraint.

“Tell me what happened to you,” he insisted.

Her mouth coming away from his chest, leaving his nipple wet and gnawing, she tunneled her hand inside his trousers and withdrew his rigging.

She fell to her knees at his feet, then captured his sac in her hand.

“So heavy,” she said breathlessly.

He understood what she wanted. He wanted the same thing. Sex. And the want on both their sides was genuine and true. He also understood what she was doing, namely, evading his question. And that, he supposed, was her right to do under their no-personal-questions agreement. Still, it tugged at him, that scar. Bothered him. The way her fingers went there, to the back of her neck, from time to time, as if that scar were eating at her, still paining her. That old scar upset her as if it were new. He wanted to know what had happened to her! But Lord, what she was doing to him. The rapture he felt was insistent, more insistent than his need to know the answer to his question. For now.

He let it go, for now, and closed his hot eyes as she played with him.

“Tell me how it feels,” she murmured.

Like she was killing him. That was how it felt. Was he supposed to reveal that to her in the name of carnal honesty?

He kept his silence—so much for full disclosure—when she squeezed his sac, making his stones ache, and then massaged the ache away.

She would slay him if this continued. When she entombed all ten erect inches of him between two hands and slid her fingers up and down, milking him, roughly too, as she went, he moaned as if he were dying for real.

Then she bit him, the vixen, right at the top, on the sensitive crown, and pained or not, dying or not, he thought he would come there and then.

“I need it hard, Theo. Can you take it hard? A woman’s hard lovemaking?”

“Ayuh.” He grunted. “I can take the *fuck* as hard as you like.”

Chapter Twelve

Siam showed Theo no mercy.

After deliberately nipping the bulbous end of his cock, she applied her teeth down the thick length, from bruised tip to rigid base, scraping at his feverishly hot flesh. When his groans increased in number and severity, she licked the damage her foreplay had wrought, soothing the hurt with her tongue.

He grabbed hold of her hair, a two-fisted pull that convinced her to take him into her mouth before he scalped her.

But first, she lapped at him, just to torture him a bit longer, then took him inside by small increments. Once past her teeth, he dropped her hair, fastened both his hands on her skull, and his cock lunged for her throat.

He thrust. Brutally thrust.

In preparation for her life as a whore, her mother had trained Siam in the various techniques of orally pleasuring a man. Even on her knees, she *knew* she could dominate Theo—

She knew it for about thirty seconds before realizing her mistake. No amount of expertise could have prepared her for the eye of a dark storm. Taken by surprise, the fury of his force knocking her backward, she fell, flat out on her back, her gown a plum puddle around her on the floor.

He stood over her and eyed her sprawled there, entangled in her clothing.

“If you expect me to finish sucking you off,” she said imperiously, “the very least you can do is help me up.” She extended a hand, royal queen to a lowly court knave.

Bypassing her bent knuckles, he encircled her upper arm and yanked.

She came up at a bounce, her breasts jiggling. The gown that had tenaciously clung to her lower hips drifted over her bottom.

With a savage grunt, he ripped it the rest of the way, then fondled her naked bottom. Thick fingers perused both cheeks, one pushed inside.

Wiggling and squirming in his grasp, her bare bosom shifting, she shivered uncontrollably as his thumb rimmed her back opening.

"You were warned, Siam. I need it hard. This is your last chance to leave. Agree to my demands or get the hell out of here." He released her.

Naked, she toppled back onto her haunches. Her back bowed, her thighs open, spread lewdly open, she struggled to retain her balance. Mouth leached dry, she thought dismally, Oh God. Who is this man? Will he hurt me if I agree to submit to his authority?

Yes, she answered unequivocally. He would hurt her. Had he not confessed as much? He had warned her, and she took him at his word. The only question that remained was how much—

She would enjoy the hurt.

Her chin dipped, her long hair falling forward over her face like a black curtain, she nodded. "I agree." Once again, she raised a hand for him to help her up.

"No," he said cruelly, crudely. "Not yet. Stay down."

She had agreed and yet still a spark of defiance remained. "Damn you."

"I already am damned. Now spread your feet farther apart. Let me look, as you let me look last night at the window."

Last night at the window, she had directed the play. But this was not play. Not a game. And she was not directing anything. How dangerous was this man to her?

The honey of her excitement rolled down the insides of her legs as she widened the position of her feet. Surely he could see her wetness. Surely he could smell her animal arousal.

Tonight, she had intended to introduce Theo to her carnal mastery. A widower, deprived of the regularity of marital sex, he would be easy to dominate. Give him release, and he would be hers to control. An unsophisticated backwoodsman like him would be eating out of her hand at a taste of naughty pleasure.

Or so she had thought.

Her thinking was misguided. If only she had an out, an excuse to save herself, if only she could say she had underestimated the bear, that he had simply used trickery to turn the tables on her or that his physical strength had overpowered her, but any of those reasons would have been a lie. The truth was, it was her own vulnerability to authority, to rules and regulations...to harsh discipline as a substation for affection...that led her down this path to submission. She herself was her own undoing.

She kept her eyes lowered as he approached, kept her eyes lowered as he slipped a hand between her open thighs and fingered between the folds of her cunt. But she could not keep her eyes lowered when he withdrew his touch from between her legs, held the

hand that had just invaded her to his nose, and then licked his fingers, fingers wet with her excitement.

"Your scent is earthy and sweet." Bending to her, he cupped and squeezed one breast and then the other. "So you agree—no other men will have you during the next two weeks."

"That was not our agreement," she spat. "I can be with another man if I choose. Accept that term or *you* leave."

"You want to fuck that citified gent who refused to stand up and fight me like a man?"

"Him, or some other man. I want to experience every facet of coupling. Just like in *Licentious*."

"You need to change your reading material."

As she took back her power, she smiled smugly, gloating at his concession. Ah, yes. She would have him eating out of her palm yet.

Or minimally, coming under the auspices of her palm.

She reached a finger to his cock, still nicely firm. "I can take care of that for you."

His swarthy complexion darkened. "Do your worst. Just refrain from biting it off."

"And ruin my fun. Ha! I would never punish myself that way."

White teeth flashed in a tanned face. "Allow me to do that for you."

If he thought that would put her off, he was very much mistaken. She was, quite literally, a glutton for punishment. She was still here with a man not easily dominated, was she not?

Their negotiation finished, she resumed her fellatio.

This time, he refrained from pushing to the back of her throat, though his sheer bulky size filled her mouth. In short order—three pumps at the most—he filled her mouth again. With semen. Relishing his lack of restraint, she swallowed his ejaculate.

Quite unexpectedly, he put himself away and then kissed her lips. "Thank you."

How was she supposed to answer?

His polite expression of gratitude took her aback, and disconcerted, cold...*wary*...she trembled.

At her involuntary shiver, he wrapped her up in the plum gown. "Hungry?"

She was always hungry. Tonight, in particular, she was famished, owing to limiting what she had eaten in the inn's dining room.

Her eyes were never bigger than her belly. In private, she wolfed down everything on her plate. And had seconds, sometimes thirds. Out in public was different. Not wishing to appear boorish, she limited her serving size. Fortunately, she was not predisposed to gain weight. Skinny as a child, she had never filled out, no matter how much she ate as an adult.

"No," she replied. "I am not hungry at all. I have a very small appetite. Delicate, actually." Growing up, she had supped on garbage and called the half-rotten refuse a banquet.

Luckily, she had a cast-iron stomach. "The mere mention of food makes me positively green."

"Oh, too bad. I brought a selection of desserts down from the inn for you to sample."

"The pretty ones on the tray, from the cart?"

"Ayuh. The very same."

Ravenous appetites warred with ladylike pretensions.

Pretensions won out.

"I simply could not force another thing down." *Not after having had you* was the less-than-subtle implication.

Chuckling to herself over the vulgarity, she watched him. Ignoring her stellar wit, her implied compliment too, he doggedly set up the table. She watched him bring a covered tray out from the pantry area. Watched him uncover it. One glimpse of the assortment within, and her mouth instantly watered.

He lit a candle. "I thought you demanded honesty between us?"

"In carnality, yes." Though, there were limits to the telling even there. Bruised throats, for example, from a too-vigorous fellatio.

"Food is carnal."

She mulled his astute observation. "I suppose it might be construed so. September's edition of *Licentious* used strawberries in a sensual way. Drizzled chocolate and...and" — she licked her lips — "and swirls of whipped cream, strategically placed on the nude model who posed. Personally, had I been that model, I would have said, 'hang strategy' and eaten the artist's props."

He held out a chair. "Have a seat. You hardly ate anything at dinner."

An excellent point. And one all-too-true. The man had more sensitivity than she gave him credit.

Holding the plum gown around her shoulders, she rushed the table. She had just enough presence of mind to compliment all the trouble he had gone through — "This looks very nice" — before extending a greedy hand toward the dessert tray tongs.

He removed the utensil from her grasp. "Allow me to serve you."

He placed an assortment of treats on her plate, and she scoured the table for silverware. Finding none, she muttered, "Where is the damn —"

"Fork?" he supplied.

Fork him, the wretch. "Yes, the damn fork."

"Oops." He covered his mouth. "How remiss of me," he said with an affected dandy's lisp. "I must have forgotten."

She held back a whine. "But how will I eat?"

"Fingers?"

Pretending to be horror-struck at this breach in etiquette, she stared dumbly at him, as if she had never lapsed into such impropriety. In truth, after her mother's death, starved for nourishment, she had once eaten directly off the floor.

He lifted a chocolate morsel to her mouth. "Taste."

Taste nothing! She attacked the pastry and smacked her lips afterward. "More!"

"Shall we talk during our snack?"

Drat! He said *our* snack. Did he mean for them to share?

Hoping that, lost in conversation, he would forget all about serving himself from the dessert tray, she nodded her agreement—her mouth was too full to do anything else.

"Now what shall we chat about, hmm?" He held a cookie in front of her nose.

She inhaled. Spices and molasses. Ginger, certainly. Cinnamon possibly too. Sheer heaven.

That cookie was hers. She lusted after that cookie.

"Tell me about the lighthouse." That topic should occupy him a while.

"Now. You want to talk lighthouses *now*?"

The subject did intrigue her. Not as much as the cookie waving before her face, but then, nothing could compete with cookies. "Now is as good a time as any. Besides, surely you need time to...er...recuperate your...um...manly stamina before we...ah...resume."

"No."

Men and their conceits! Even this extremely virile male had to answer to the limitations of physiology. So, they would talk.

Or rather, *he* would talk. She intended to wolf down everything on the tray while pretending to listen.

He fell for the ploy. "The three-story octagonal tower is twenty-five feet above sea level. Add the iron lantern, and that brings the height of the lighthouse to seventy-five feet. The exterior is made up of bricks, blue stone, sand mortar, and quick lime."

"Do go on," she enthused while covetously eyeing a nutty confection covered with sugared pecans. "You make it all sound so interesting."

"Not as interesting as the desserts, I presume."

He dropped the nutty treat on her protruding tongue. She had stuck it out at him for teasing her so.

Mmm. Crunchy. Scrumptious, really. She chewed, swallowed, counted how many desserts remained on the tray.

What! Four. Only *four*?

Politeness caught up with her and forced her to say, "Are you having any of the remaining sweets?"

"No."

Goody! More for her!

"The beacon used to warn passing ships," he continued. "This one used a fifth-order Fresnel lens. The prisms inside amplify and focus the beam of light."

He fed her a sliver of something yellow and tart. It puckered her lips. Mmm? Delicious, but what was it?

"Lemon torte," he offered. "To cleanse the palate."

Her taste buds thanked him.

Wait. Was that a double entendre? She had just swallowed his cum, after all...

A wide grin broke across his evil, *evil* face. That was a double entendre!

Then he sobered and was all business again. "You already took the wooden stairs up to the second floor. Next flight up is the lantern—the lighthouse's glass top. Once upon a time, the keeper would fire off cannons if the mist was too pea soup thick for the light to shine through. Later, fog bells were used."

He fed her another fruity delicacy, apple this time. "The keeper would ring the bell with a sledgehammer. Later, a mechanized bell system was installed that the keeper had to wind like a clock."

"Romantic," she said between munches.

"I always thought so, ayuh. Someday, I would like to see this place reopened. Rusticators would love it. The keeper's house is gone now, torn down when it fell into disrepair, but the lighthouse itself can be salvaged." He held out a small piece of layered cake. "This one, I soaked in rum overnight."

Her mouth opened, snapped shut. "You mean to say *you* baked these desserts?"

"Ayuh."

"You do excellent work."

"My best work is not done in the kitchen." Wiggling his brows, he stood.

"Seriously," she said with a chuckle at his surprising sense of humor. "You could put a French pâtissier to shame."

"Inside the inn's dining room, you seemed less enthusiastic. Scornful, more like it."

"That was before I knew you baked desserts."

She thought he would laugh at her tease. But no. He held her to her bad behavior, forcing her to own up to it. "You acted condescending, Siam."

Ah, but she *acted* all the time. After her mother's death, her life had become one long performance. She wished she could tell him so. Wished she could take back what she had said inside the dining room. But there was no taking back the hateful words now. She could only move forward. After an apology.

“Belittling you was wrong of me.” She drew a finger down the bulge in his trousers. “Let me make it up to you, hmm?”

Chapter Thirteen

Theo latched onto Siam's roving finger. "Full moon tonight." He took her hand in his own. "Since you showed so much interest in the lighthouse, allow me show you the lantern." A tug, and she was up out of the chair and following him, the plum velvet gown left behind on the seat.

At the stairs, he placed her in front of him, intent on enjoying the naked view.

Until she began the climb to the third story, her spine straight, her bottom anything but. Then he rued the move.

He should have dragged her behind him, like a caveman. He was feeling mighty primitive at the moment. Never had he seen a woman carry on so. Hips undulating, ass wiggling, her arms raised to her loose hair, piling the raven wealth atop her head, she made him crazed.

He took her malicious carrying-on as long as he could, then, unable to resist her seduction, paddled her, a solid spank applied across the swell of both buttocks.

He would have thought he handed her the moon, she squealed so.

The woman was incorrigible. The whole spectacle, including the sultry squeal, was done for his benefit. And though her antics tickled his funny bone and provoked his cock, he wished she would get serious and take care. One false step and she could hurt herself. The stairs were winding and narrow. So steep, if she lost her footing and fell, she would break something. Like an arm or a leg.

Or his heart.

She left him no choice. When she continued her dangerous shenanigans, he swatted her behind again, only harder the second time around. "Behave yourself."

In response, she wiggled and undulated all the more.

"Watch out," he roared. "Or harm will befall you."

“Oh pooh,” she scoffed. Balanced up on one foot, she turned around, a pirouette solely to pout at him. “Killjoy. I have been in more danger as a child, than here. Stop being such a stick in the mud!”

His wife had most likely condemned him the same. Did Siam deliberately conspire to incite him? First her carryings-on and then a barbed dart flung at his failure as a husband.

Two hands on her waist, Theo lifted the troublemaker up in the air and then set her down, situating her so she was half seated, half reclining on the step above, facing him. He opened her legs.

Now he had his fine view. The staircase was dark, but he could see well enough. And what he missed, he felt. His fingers acting as his eyes, he touched her slit and found the pinnacle of her woman’s passion.

Her *clitoris*, he thought, rolling the new word around in his mind. He manipulated it, as she had manipulated him, he realized belatedly, at her heated giggle. How was it possible for a recent virgin to understand how to instigate a man into losing his good sense?

“Perhaps we should wait till we reach our destination,” she panted under his caresses. “Considering the terrible danger and all that.”

Too late to use reason on him now. He had gone past the point of no return, gone past rationality into temporary insanity. “No,” he said adamantly. “Here on this stair.”

He sent another finger into her, then a third.

Her squirming changed to wild bucking.

“Be still,” he chastised, rounding over her.

“Are you serious?” she muttered. “How do you expect me to be still when you have your fingers up *there*?”

In the darkness, he heard her swallow, felt her breathy exhales fan across his face, smelled her musky arousal. He had splayed her wide. His big lumberjack’s hand stretched the slit, not only the outer pubic lips, but the start of the inner channel as well. And three digits inside her did not appease his ache.

“If you think to fist me,” she rasped, trying to get away, “you had best carry a tincture of oil somewhere on your person.”

Her matter-of-fact pronouncement gave him pause.

He had not thought to do such a thing. Not in those bald words. He had only wanted his whole hand inside her –

Oh.

His shoulders collapsed under the heaviness of his guilt. He had not planned for this to happen. In the heat of the moment, he had been carried away. But now that she had brought up the topic, and he had consented to carnal honesty...

“Ayuh, that is what I what I mean to do. I mean to fist you. But it will wait for later. In the light” – his chest tightened – “so I can see my hand sink into you.”

He withdrew his fingers, wet with her excitement, and smoothed them across her small breasts, his knuckles connecting with a hardened nipple. Unable to wait, he undid his trousers and took himself out. He rubbed her body's lubrication over his cock, her cream mixing with his precum. Without further preamble, he fed himself into her, right there on the stairs.

Her back arched as he entered that first little bit, the wide head of his cock pushing into her delicate folds. As her shallow breaths changed to moans, second thoughts assailed him. "Can you take it all or shall I hold back? You must still be bruised." Betsy had come to him with years of experience. And still, after the wedding night, he had waited a full week before approaching her for marital relations a second time. Who knew how many lovers his wife had enjoyed while he suffered his newlywed celibacy?

The anger came out of nowhere, a black pall of misdirected rage, and in that unreasonable fury, he gave Siam no chance to answer. No time to tell him no. No time to tell him anything. He pushed all the way up inside her.

Shit. She fit him like a tight glove, only warm and wet and pulsating with life around him. He enjoyed the entry so much, he pulled all the way out, bound and determined to enter her again, just for the thrill of the initial penetration.

She gasped. "Please!"

"Please what?" he asked, deliberating what he would do if she were to call a halt to this now. Could he stop if she told him to? And if he could not stop, what would that make him? Uncontrolled, certainly. Undisciplined too. A rapist, as well?

Thankfully, she did not tell him no.

"Do. Not. Leave. Me," she wailed instead.

"Got no intention of leaving you," he grunted and pushed back in, up to the hilt. The sensation was not to be believed. She was just so *tight*.

He clenched his teeth and repeated the motion. Pulled out. All the way out. Sank back in. All the way in. Until he had seated himself deep. As deep as he goddamn wanted. Could he recapture the sensation a third time?

"Oh God, Theo, please no. Do not leave me again."

"Hush," he growled and yanked out his cock.

He rubbed his knuckles into her slit. Not far. He swore to Christ, he would hold off on fisting her here on the stairs. And he would. But she had to know that this was available to him anytime he wanted. He had to make her understand he was not tolerating her holding back on him. Not in anything. Everything was on the table.

She was wet. Dripping. So wet, he could slip his hand right in without too much effort at all. Breathing hard, he let it go. No fisting. Not yet. This time, just his cock was going in.

He pumped his hips, and his cock surged forward, penetrating her notch, and the same sensation as before walloped him, sending a shiver down into his ass. Her pussy was a snug nut to his thick screw.

He pulled out. Had his slippery cock poised to do it a fourth time, to deeply penetrate her tight pussy and then retract, when her arms entwined his neck. "This next time, stay."

He took himself in hand. "You want it, get your feet on the next stair up, knees under your chin, thighs spread wide. I want it in you to the hilt."

She drew up her knees to her belly and split her thighs. "Like this? Is this how you want it?"

It was. Her pussy was wide open, and so saturated for him and from him, he could hardly breathe, never mind speak.

He nodded his head and engaged the slit, slowly, teasing her the same way she had teased him.

"Oh, God, Theo, *pleaaassse*," she begged, her head thrown back, her nipples as tight as knifepoints. And red. So red. He could see that even in the dim light. "Do it. Please do it. I will do anything you tell me to do, if you will only stay."

He did it; he entered her, and this time he did stay.

But not still. He had to thrust. The urge was too seductive to resist. With a flex of his pelvis, he moved inside her, his knees a step below her hips, his elbows placed a step above her head. "Good, so good," he told her. "But I know what will feel better."

On the narrow staircase, he stood, taking her with him. He sucked a mouthful of air into his burning lungs. "Hook your feet around my spine."

As soon as her ankles crossed at the small of his back, he began climbing the stairs. He smoothed a hand up and down her bare legs, his other arm bent under her bare ass, her buttocks shelved on his forearm. He took it slow, a step at a time, thrusting on each tread, to make sure he stayed hard, but rationing the pleasure, making it last.

She was making soft, mewling, appreciative sorts of noises, kissing his neck, his jaw. When he got a little frisky and thrust too deep, she took his lobe between her teeth and bit. And not a tender bite either. "Bloodthirsty wench," he rasped and swatted her rear end. His lobe stung, as if she had bitten clean through.

Not that the stinging mattered. It was just so damn good with her.

He corrected that last thought. If it was good, it was because three years was a hell of a long time to do without a woman, not because he was inside *her*.

At top of the staircase, he paused on the landing. Now where?

An idea struck, one she was sure to appreciate.

Still lodged inside her, he carried her to the glass beacon that had once warned passing ships of the jagged rocks that could potentially ground them. Now only the oil lamp he had hung earlier lit the darkness.

The force of his thrusts intensified. He had her right where he wanted her, where he had to have her, where she would enjoy. This was for her as much as it was for him.

Off in the distance, a two-mast cargo schooner sailed the ink black sea. Though its starboard lamps were visible to Theo, the ship was too far offshore to see them.

The same, however, could not be said of the two fishermen casting their lines from a small skiff anchored directly off the end of jetty. For damn sure those two could see their silhouettes reflected in the glass.

Twin lanterns swinging skyward in mock salute confirmed his assessment. They had an audience.

Siam gave a muffled squawk of embarrassment. "Those men down there...they can see us!"

She was tensing, losing her concentration, losing the pleasure, her gaze on the fishermen.

Without missing a beat, he turned her around so her back faced the glass and he faced the fishermen. He drove up into her, stroked higher, harder, faster, her plump little clit benefiting from his change of positioning.

As he pounded her, she clung to him, her hips moving in rhythm to his shorter and shorter jabs, until she was wildly bucking, thrashing, screaming.

With a wild sob of surrender, she went limp in his arms.

One more push, one more push, and he would come too.

The push came with a heaping helping of reluctance. He hated to leave her. Hated to go. But forcing himself, he pulled out and ejaculated against her belly.

Cum rolling down her legs, Siam leaped wildly from his arms. "They saw us!"

She backed up, her small breasts heaving in agitation, her hands knuckled into fists at her sides. "Those men out fishing...they looked up here...and...and...*observed* us in the throes of passion."

"Ayuh. They saw us. So what?" He thumbed his jaw and tried not to laugh at her look of offended outrage. His tension had decreased, and the world looked a hell of a lot rosier after his climax. If the worse nor'easter of the century chose that time to hit, he would have laughed at that too. Unsettling how happy she made him.

With a doff of an invisible cap, he bowed. "You wanted fun and games, right? It seems to me you also mentioned something about exhibitionism. Well, you got both. I aim to please, ma'am."

"You mean you intentionally let them see us?"

"Ayuh. Those two are buddies of mine. They fish out here every night, same time, same place. I 'spect we just made their evening. The tale should earn them more than one free round of drinks at the inn's tavern."

"At my expense!" She huffed and puffed. "I can only imagine what they might say if they see me in town."

"How would they know you? You had your face burrowed in my chest."

Her hands went to her hips. "They could see my hindquarters!"

"Seductive as all hell, but not easily identifiable."

"Perverted beast!" A smile spreading across her lips, she tossed her head. Exotic slate blue eyes danced with mischief. "I admire that quality ever so much in a lover." Wiggling over to him, she planted a hot wet one on his mouth. "Now tell me, what delightful surprises do you have planned for me next?"

"Next? You plumb wore me out, woman."

"Oh—" Her shoulders slumped.

She sounded and looked so damn disappointed he had to cheer her up some. "Went into town today. To that...er...erotic gallery I was telling you about. I stocked up on supplies."

"Like what?" She did a little naked jig.

"For me to know and for you to find out. Right now," he said, bending his knees and scooping her back up in his arms, "you need to get some shut-eye."

She yawned and stretched, extended a hand to the pile of discarded duds on the floor. "My clothes, if you please?"

"Clothes? What for? Plenty of covers on the bed. And if you get cold, I can always come up with some creative ways to keep you warm."

"As lovely as that sounds, I have a room at the inn. And I intend to sleep there tonight."

"No, you will not—"

A finger pressed to his lips squelched the rest of his arguments.

"Walk me back, Theo, please?"

Cursing another night spent sleeping alone, Theo retrieved Siam's clothes from the floor.

Now that she had gotten her own way, she went peacefully, no further objections, as he carried her back downstairs, where she dressed in a hurry but nevertheless managed to make him hard all over again.

At the inn, she tossed over her shoulder before she went inside, "Till Tuesday then."

He called after her. "What the hell do you mean by that? Today is Sunday. What happened to Monday? I thought we would spend the day together tomorrow."

"Sorry. I made other plans. Tuesday afternoon at the lighthouse. Say noonish?"

An afternoon fuck. That was all he was to her.

He narrowed his gaze on her retreating back. She had him over a barrel. Come down hard on her, and she would pack her bags and leave. "Ayuh. Tuesday. Bring a healthy appetite."

"Oh, I shall." She twittered. "Come prepared by not coming at all till then."

Her and her dirty talk. He scowled as his cock jutted against his trousers for release. "I meant an appetite for grub. I pack a mean picnic basket."

The way to this woman's heart took a detour through her sweet tooth.

Ayuh. He had the competition licked.

Chapter Fourteen

Early the next morning, Theo rose from his lonely bed and jumped into his wrinkled clothes. To devote himself to getting laid, he had cleared most of his usual work activities for that week. Siam's decision not to see him again until Tuesday left him with no pressing plans for that day. With hours to fill before he could see her again, Theo decided he might just as well ride over to Doyle's place to help out with his big brother's barn raising.

John had already arrived and was lending a hand. Of course, the middle brother of the Donovan family lived a hell of a lot closer to Doyle than Theo did, right up the drive in the old family homestead. Too busy yapping with one another as they hammered a crossbeam in place up on the roof, neither brother noticed Theo's arrival. Maybe because he was the youngest, but even as a wet-behind-the-ears kid, he had always gone his own way.

Damn amazing how well Doyle and John got on together nowadays, Theo thought, as he hoisted himself, hand over hand, up a dropped rope onto a transverse beam. Used to be, those two mixed like oil and water. Of course, that was when they vied for the affection of the same woman.

Lily.

Doyle's wife. The beautiful red-haired artist had once put a real rift in their family.

Things were looking downright harmonious now, if the companionable scene Theo had walked in on the other night was any indication.

The barn was already framed, all trusses in place. Three stories off the ground, Theo walked a narrow hemlock rail, hunkering down on top of an eight-by-eight support post, then shimmied across the horizontal plank, until he straddled the timber, a leg on either side at a not-yet-secured joint. Pulling his hammer from his tool belt, along with a one-inch hardwood peg, he got down to it.

Doyle looked over after Theo finished. "Might just as well talk about it than have you brood," he offered.

John gave a peg a good wallop and then nodded his agreement. "The ladies had no idea you were out there in the hall looking in, but Doyle and I knew you were there. You must have some questions. Might just as well open up the whole thing to discussion."

Normally, Theo shied away from anything of a personal nature, but he still had a hard time believing what he saw. "Do that sort of thing often?"

Doyle sighed. "Not in the beginning. One night, it just sort of happened. Lily and Molly put on a bawdy show, and the performance ended up with them naked together, and John and me with our tongues hanging out."

"That was the girls' plan all along," John interjected.

"In any case," Doyle continued, "with Will off in boarding school in Portland and only being home weekends, we both have our houses to ourselves. We can do as we please."

"And do," John chimed in again.

"Lily and Molly are as close as sisters," his eldest brother confided. "And I hold John's wife in the highest esteem."

"And everyone knows about my long-standing affection for Doyle's wife, Lily. Only makes sense us having no secrets from one another."

Theo nearly fell off the roof. "You mean to say, you two swap wives?"

A bashful look passed between Doyle and John, but then his oldest brother stoutly declared, "No! Nothing like that. Molly loves John with a vengeance, nobody else but him."

John said more quietly, "We thought it might happen once, but it never materialized. I think of Lily as a friend, not a lover. But Molly has been getting these hot notions now, what with the baby coming and all, and I just go along with whatever she wants. Otherwise, she might just pick up that old cast-iron skillet of hers and bean me."

Theo stuttered. "Whoa. Back up a mite. You two are expecting a delivery from the stork?"

"In six months' time, both wives are expecting a delivery, and both are as horny as she-goats in spring. I tell you, Mol' just about wears me out. And she wants more babies. Lots of babies." John looked down at his hammer. "And since I love Molly and want her happy, I intend to go along with her, whatever she wants, including getting naked and making love in the presence of other people. Lucky for me, this time, it was only Doyle and Lily. Who knows about next time? Could be an orgy. Doc says mothers-to-be often go through this. According to him, my streak of good luck will end soon."

"Better not." Doyle snorted. "Since Lily started cracking the whip on my ass, the smile never leaves my face."

Theo took the confessional plunge. "There is this woman—"

Doyle's brows arched. "Are you seeing her?"

"Not exactly *seeing* her."

"Bedding her then," John razzed.

"Ayuh," Theo answered softly. He was bashful about such an admission—some things, a man best kept private. It was a point of honor not to tell tales out of school about man/woman matters. But his brothers had gone out on a limb, shared a private part of their lives with him, only right to return the favor. He trusted them. With his life. Certainly to keep his secret. What they had, the three of them, ran deeper than just being kin, just sharing blood. After their folks died, all they had were each other to depend upon. Doyle had given up a lot, his career, just about everything, to raise John and him, to keep them all together, as a family. They had a bond that went beyond the usual ties of fraternity. The least Theo figured he owed them was to drop his usual reserve and speak from the trueness of his gut.

Doyle hit a wooden peg squarely on the head and then looked over pensively at Theo. "Our 'straight and narrow' little brother is finally sowing some wild oats, eh? After Betsy's passing, we were all pretty concerned for you."

Theo thumbed his jaw. He had never talked to them about Betsy, about her death, about what finding out about her cheating ways had done to him inside. Not so much the humiliation of it, although it did smart to be the last one in town to know his wife had taken up with men indiscriminately, but the real meaning of it, that Betsy's infidelity had killed his belief in love.

He knew what he looked like on the outside—like the big, bruising lumberjack he used to be. Blubbering over his loss of innocence would sound downright idiotic coming from a man his size. The Donovans were a tall lot, but Doyle had slowed down charting Theo's boyhood growth spurt when his baby brother's height topped his own. The annual measuring and marking on the wall stopped completely when Theo stood six-four in his stocking feet. That was when he just turned fifteen; he grew a couple of inches after then.

And it was not only his size that made blubbering over a loss of innocence ridiculous. Living hard should have destroyed all Theo's notions about love, about fidelity, about the sanctity of marriage. But he stubbornly clung to his illusions despite everything. He believed in true love.

Who the hell would admit to something foolish like that, especially to his brothers?

If Doyle or John knew or guessed about Betsy's whoring ways, they had never let on such a thing to him, never said anything at all. Not while she was alive, not after her death. Why open it all up now? Why burden his brothers with his anger, his rage? If they knew what was boiling up inside him, they would only fret over his losing what remained of his mind and going on some sort of wild rampage or something.

Theo hammered some more, then said noncommittally. "Wild oats? Ayuh. That about describes it."

"Nothing serious then?" asked John.

"Too early to say," Theo said thoughtfully, his mind on something else as he returned to his pounding. And maybe that explained why his words came out uncensored. Or could be he just spoke his thoughts aloud. "The lady has a hankering for some outlandish activities, things maybe not to my liking."

John spoke up first. "You could do it, if you loved her. Could do whatever she wanted, if it kept her happy. Love is a powerful motivator."

Theo shook his head. "I could never be so generous."

"Never say never, not when it comes to love."

Theo said nothing in return. Faster than he would have credited, he was developing feelings for Siam, but those feelings were new and fragile. And they came with a heaping helping of possessiveness. He could not, absolutely refused, to go through the misery he had gone through with Betsy again.

If Siam needed to "sow *her* wild oats" before she could think about settling down, he would either have to let her go, or stick to his guns and make his displeasure known, and hope she would abide by his feelings on the subject. Because sharing a woman he loved with someone else would just about kill him.

Or cause him to kill the other man involved.

Chapter Fifteen

On Monday, as Siam headed toward her assignation, she smiled smugly to herself.

No longer a virgin—compliments of the robust virility of Theo—she could fornicate to her heart’s delight. Yes, she would most likely continue to experience a few twinges of discomfort, but a little tenderness was a small price to pay for the pleasure of a screaming climax.

She fanned a hand before her suddenly hot face. Just the memory of squirming in Theo’s muscular arms triggered a stimulated physical state.

In a preclimactic flush, she raised her knuckles to the hotel door.

Dear Lord! Not now!

Footsteps approached from the opposite end of the narrow hallway. To avoid detection, she ducked behind a nearby potted fern. The green fronds would hide her as the hotel guests passed her by.

An unescorted woman visiting a man’s hotel room during the day was most unwise. Visiting after dark amounted to social suicide. Getting caught amounted to sloppy planning.

When the coast was clear, Siam tiptoed back to the door and gave three consecutive raps. All very cloak-and-dagger.

When the door opened, she slipped quickly inside.

After breathing a sigh of relief over not being seen, she leaned back against the now closed and locked hotel door and noted the gentleman’s dashing apparel: a debonair gold silk monogrammed smoking jacket and matching gold needlepoint slippers.

She suppressed a giggle. Theo would never wear such attire. Then again, Theo was neither dashing nor debonair.

Mr. Altron was both. He lifted her knuckles to his pursed lips, and a tender moment ensued as he pierced her with his intense stare, an amorous look that lasted far too long for either good taste or believability.

He was faking.

That unblinking look, steeped in theatrics, was a disingenuous ploy to dupe unsuspecting women into thinking he truly cared.

She was not unsuspecting and so understood his libidinous scrutiny meant nothing. Mr. Altron cared for no one but himself.

Her manicured fingers still clasped in his manicured fingers, the light shining off their buffed nails blinding, he pulled her into his arms and plied his mouth to hers, a kiss meant to impress.

She was not.

If he thought to bowl her over with his sexual accomplishment, he failed miserably. She felt nothing.

He broke their lips apart, eyed her overnight bag. "I see you came prepared. Ever work as a lady of the evening, my dear?" He laughed robustly.

All right. *Now*, she did feel something, none of it good.

Her fur ruffled, she had all to do not to arch her back and puff up like a hissing feline. Had all to do to pull in her claws lest she scratch his too-handsome face to ribbons.

He had struck a raw nerve. Her concubine mother had raised Siam to think of herself as a commodity, chattel available for purchase. "One Hundred Men's Wife" as the Chinese prostitutes who served men out west after the gold rush were called—though a wealthy man setting her up in a house for his sole use was the ultimate goal. Years later, that mind-set was still difficult to shake. After all, her husband had indeed bought and paid for her.

All her life she had pretended to be what she was not, namely a lady of impeccable lineage. Emulating society manners and mannerisms had only made her feel more like a fraud.

Not with Theo.

With Theo, she was herself. How could she not be? Her earthy lover had put on no show for her benefit, no airs, no pretensions. He was what he was, no apologies, no excuses. His rough and hurried lovemaking technique had reflected a natural alpha dominance, but no cruelty. Theo wanted her, and his desire showed.

Altron was as much a fraud as herself. His outer gentlemanly charm was but a facade to mask his inner cruelty.

"I shan't be long," she said gaily and marched off for the bathroom, the maligned overnight bag in hand.

A few minutes later, and still fuming, Siam emerged from the bathroom wearing a scandalously revealing pink satin dressing gown.

“There you are, my dear. I missed you.” He took her hands and then her mouth again, before setting her away from him with a flourish so outrageously affected, she knew with a certainty he must rehearse the move before a mirror.

That thought was borne out when, sparing her nary a glance, he gazed lovingly at his own reflection in a shaving mirror conveniently resting atop a chiffonier. While she waited for his attention to return to her, he patted a stray brown strand in place to cover a slightly receding hairline.

So much for her seminude state turning him into a raging sex fiend.

She straightened her back, brought up her rib cage, thrust out her chest.

Finally, she had center stage again.

Sliding a cool, dry palm beneath the edge of her wrap, he perfunctorily caressed her naked flesh. “Ready?”

She almost laughed in the selfish cad’s face.

Eventually, he cradled her *there*, his fingers sinking deftly into her cleft.

She had to hand it to him, though his fondling was a scant too academic for her tastes, a bit too technical, a lot too clinical, she could hardly fault his expertise. Moist turned wet as her libidinous nature took over.

“Shall we adjourn to the bed, my dear?”

Everything decided, he pushed her there.

Beside the four-poster, Nathaniel—silly to continue to call him Mr. Altron in her thoughts—began to remove his natty clothing.

Good Lord, it took him forever. He brushed each article, shook each article, precisely hung each article on the walnut valet stand. Even going so far as to remove the leather suspenders from where they were attached to the waistband of his trousers. In the beginning, as any hot-blooded female would, she ogled his progress, but his fussiness over sharp trouser creases, starched shirt cuffs and collar soon lost her. Her thoughts strayed.

To Theo, a man who looked good even rumped and wrinkled.

She had yet to see her lover naked. His cock yes, but not the rest of him. Not all of him. She could only guess what delights his rough outdoorsman wardrobe hid. Her mouth watered at the thought.

Nathaniel was now at the good part, pulling off his drawers, and so as not to be rude, she jerked her regard back to him.

His cock, like the rest of his sleek build, was long and elegant. Lean. The testicles well formed and taut. He was uncut. The bulbous head was peeking out from the hood, the foreskin peeling back and most likely sensitive to the touch.

Theo’s cock was long too, but also thick and wide. In a word, he was sturdy. In two words, he was sturdy and meaty. His was a blunt-headed club as opposed to a thin baton. Unlike Nathaniel, Theo had been circumcised, so everything was right there for

her to see, even when he was flaccid, a rarity so far. And his balls! My, my, my. The bulging weight of them had spilled over her palm. She licked her lips in memory.

Nathaniel was smooth all over, his chest hairless. What she had seen of Theo's chest had been as fuzzy as a bear. Both men were tall. Though Theo easily surpassed Nathaniel's height by inches. Both men were fit. She could tell that decades of hard physical labor had honed Theo's muscles, whereas she had it on good authority that Nathaniel had never done a tap of real work in his life. One was rich, the other poor, and that made all the difference in the world. At least, *her* world.

When a throat cleared, Siam snapped her thoughts back to Nathaniel. Evidently he was hinting for a compliment.

She supplied him with the expected triteness. "How utterly divine you are."

He turned and preened, dazzling her with the total effect of his good looks.

A nice touch. That immediately smothered any lingering idea she might have entertained about him holding a *tendre* for her.

He indicated his genitals. "Go down on me."

She knew in that instant that if he could have reached his own cock, he would have sucked himself off.

The informal investigation she had undertaken—gossiping with the ladies and staff at the inn—had confirmed Theo's warning. Nathaniel's shady dealings with female guests were all-too-sadly true.

She also found out that the pretend gentleman was a philanderer. Chronically unfaithful to his former wife, he had carried on shamelessly with various society grand hostesses through the years. Now he preyed primarily on lonely widows.

That would be women like her. Which explained his charming introduction of himself at her table in the dining room. Lord, but he had picked the wrong widow to scam.

After draining their purses to support his extravagant lifestyle, he abandoned the lonely widows, leaving them devastated and humiliated.

Rage rising within her, she tossed her head, smoothed a hand over her dressing gown...felt the puckered scar at the back of her neck. "Go down on you?" she said haughtily. "I think not. I get mine first."

The gigolo frowned. "First? Your *what* first?"

"If I need tell you, I might just as well masturbate." Brazenly raising her chin, she proceeded to do just that, touching herself over the satin dressing gown. Breasts. Then lower. Between her thighs. "Ahhh..."

"W-w-what about me?"

"Want an orgasm? Work for it." She allowed her loosened wrap to fall open. "Down on your knees, sniveling worm."

He fell at her feet.

"Pass me your suspenders," she sneered.

Looking up at her from under his thick lashes, he reached an arm to where he had hung them.

"What are you waiting for? Hand them to me," she spat, then added more softly, "And know that when you do, I am your mistress."

He did as ordered.

Suspenders in one hand, she cupped his jaw with the other. "Well done, sniveling worm."

"Thank you, Mistress."

She rather liked the title. Unfortunately, she despised the man.

She slowly circled him while cracking the folded suspenders against her palm. Stopping behind him, she drew a merciless finger down his bare spine.

He shivered uncontrollably.

What she would give for a strap-on dildo...

"Place your hands behind you," she ordered.

When he did, she made quick work of immobilizing his hands at the wrists with the leather suspenders and then gave them a strong tug.

She looked over his shoulder. Precum bubbled from his cock like water from a fountain. Most excellent.

"Did I give you leave to ejaculate?" she asked in a bored tone.

"No, Mistress, but—"

"No buts about it," she rebuked. "Wait for permission before you climax."

"Please, no, Mistress, I cannot wait..."

She eyed his rigid cock and sighed. The man had no control whatsoever.

As quick as the sleight of hand tricks she had once used in Five Points to con marks out of their cash, she slid the tasseled cord from her wrap. She used the pink satin length to tie his hairless ankles together, a modified hog-tying. Which he deserved, the self-absorbed pig. "How much do you wish to come?"

"Oodles, Mistress."

Oodles?

Was that soggy emotion the best he could do? Where was his passion? She hungered for frenzy, madness, *heat*.

She hungered for Theo.

And not just his desserts.

His just deserts...

A different meaning here. She had come here to Nathaniel Altron's hotel room tonight to teach the gigolo a lesson, to give him *his just deserts*, and so she would. It was pointless to draw it out, though. The game was done, finished, and it sickened her. He

sickened her. And still, she owed justice to all those lonely women he had taken advantage of. "You may ejaculate."

He did, an unimpressive showing.

"When will I see you again, Mistress?"

As he had probably told a score of women, she might have said, *I shall send a note by*. Instead, she simply told the truth. "Never."

"You cannot mean that!"

Righteous indignation framed her next words. "Now you understand how being used then discarded feels."

After dressing, she walked to the door. "The maid will release you when she cleans your room tomorrow. I understand she is a horrible gossip. That pink satin cord around your ankles should provide her with *oodles* of merriment. And funny stories to tell."

"Please no." He whimpered. "Everyone will hear. All my friends. Acquaintances. Business associates. I will be a laughingstock in society, my name ruined. The humiliation – Please, no!"

Without looking back, she left his hotel room.

Chapter Sixteen

On Tuesday, Theo arrived early at the lighthouse. While waiting for Siam, he paced a circle in the sand, a deep rut he made no attempt to hide.

He wore his heart on his sleeve for Siam, no sense pretending otherwise.

She showed up exactly at noon, the agreed-upon time. In her dark blue skirt and matching short jacket, with a white embroidered blouse underneath, she was the picture of female emancipation. A “Gibson girl,” cool and calm, ready for anything.

Streams of sweat trickled under his shirt. Standing still was beyond him. Ready for anything was not exactly how he would describe himself.

Siam wanted sexual exploration, adventure...*games*. What he wanted was not nearly as interesting: a lover, a friend, a wife, a companion—all rolled into one. Fidelity. Children. Home and hearth. Comfort. A dream that had escaped him.

A lifetime union between a man and a woman was about more than the act of physical mating. It was about more than the joining of two bodies. It was about a meeting of the minds. It was about stepping off solid ground into belief. Could he ever believe in a woman again? Could he ever trust a woman after Betsy?

Pushing the painful doubts from his mind, he held up his bribe. “Brought lunch.”

She smiled at the picnic basket. “Later,” she said, all flirty-like, and headed for the lighthouse stairs. “Tickle my fancy first.”

He called after her, “I have tender feelings for you. A deep regard that goes beyond a tickle.”

She turned back. “But I only want a tickle.” Reaching upward, she adjusted her narrow-brimmed bowler.

The breeze off the water had flattened her hat’s jaunty angle. Her words did the same to him, flattened him, took the jauntiness clean out of him. When she stuck a hat

pin deeper into her black coil of hair to anchor the bowler, he wished he could anchor himself down the same way. "Where were you yesterday?"

"With Nathaniel Altron."

He recoiled at the image that popped into his head, his gut twisting with the indecency of what he saw.

He stalked to her, picnic basket swinging. "What the hell did I tell you about him? That Altron is no good."

"I would say he was passable."

No sense blaming it on the sun, he squinted in pain. Christ, was that her way of saying she had lain with Altron?

"Though," she chirped while he nearly doubled over in mortal agony, "I have had better."

His gut twisted worse than before. "But you only ever had me."

"Precisely."

Christ, but she rattled him. Never saying things straight, refusing to set things straight. Keeping him guessing. Had she lain with Altron or not? And did it matter?

To him, it did. "That dandified city slicker is dead."

"Bloodshed is unnecessary. For your information, and not that it is any of your business, I did not go to bed with him. After hog-tying him, I left him kneeling on the floor of his new hotel room."

"You did what?"

"Hog-tied him. The swine deserved it. I could have done worse. I could have carved him up like an Easter ham, but I remembered myself and used restraint." She grinned from ear to ear. "Leather restraints. And a pink silk sash. In all honesty, I can take no credit for the inspiration. *Licentious* featured the very same combination. Apropos to the occasion, I stole the idea."

In front of his widening gaze, she squared her shoulders like an avenging vigilante. "As you suggested, I asked over his reputation. What you purported was true. Nathaniel Altron is a fucker."

"If you knew that, why go to his room? And alone too." His hands clenched. "He could have hurt you."

"I went to his room to teach him a lesson, which I did. At no time was I in danger, because at no time did I lose sight of the type of man he is."

"Good to know you decided against...decided against..." How to put such a thing? "Decided against spreading yourself too thin."

"Make no mistake—my rejection of Mr. Altron's advances in no way constitutes a rejection of all male advances. Should a legitimate gentleman approach me, I shall consider the merits of his address. My intention is to bed more than one male before leaving Maine. But I do have my standards."

He sucked in a breath. "Where is the—you know, what you called him before—bunking now?"

"Never mind. Just know this, the *fucker*, which is what I called him, will think twice before humiliating another woman again." She grinned merrily over at him. "By the way, you look very nice today."

He should. Getting dressed took nigh on ten minutes. He was a big man, and looking like a lady's idea of "nice" took some doing. "Stop trying to change the subject. I can find Altron all on my own."

She batted her lashes. Then, looking him over as if he were a slab of beef, a juicy steer on the goddamn hook, she ran her hands over his chest. "Must be the suede vest and trousers."

Though it just about killed him, he removed her hands from his person. "We need to talk. But not here."

"The subject of Nathaniel Altron is finished."

"Not about him. We need to talk about us. You and me and this agreement we made."

She dropped her gaze to his trousers, where his cock was twitching and jutting and, generally speaking, carrying on something fierce. "Oh, I think we both need to do something other than make polite conversation."

"Polite is not what I have in mind." He led her to his horse, gave her a hand up.

"In case you have yet to notice, I am hardly attired for a ride."

"I noticed." He tried *not* to notice that her rucked-up skirts revealed a shapely pair of legs. "Hold on tight." After stowing the picnic basket, looping the handles around the saddle horn, he mounted up behind her and kneed his stallion to a gallop.

Jumping Jehoshaphat. The woman wore scarlet silk stockings. Scarlet. Silk. Stockings. No man worth his ejaculate would overlook something like that. To incite his hard-on further, she also had on bright yellow garters that encircled her knees. She might just as well have waved a HUMP ME sign at him.

He had mixed feelings about those garters. His wife had worn bright underthings and just look at what happened there.

But this was Siam. Not right to confuse the two in his mind. He would have to work on doing that, he guessed. Keeping things straight.

She looked back at him, nothing to hide. "Where are you taking me?" she asked him, evidently thinking he did have something to hide.

"Hiking in the woods."

"Once again, sir, I ask you to note my ensemble, which is appropriate for a dalliance, but not for trail blazing in the forests of Maine."

"I brought a change of clothes for you."

She shook her head. "A habit of yours, evidently."

"Pardon?"

"This is the second occasion you have supplied me with a new wardrobe for an assignation."

His mouth lifted into a smile as he recalled the purple gown she had worn the evening before last. She had been a naughty vision, an image that would stay emblazoned in his brain until his dying day.

Until Siam wiggled her bottom against his loins, replacing the former image with a new emblazoning.

He just about hollered, "Settle down. I am not looking for an easy lay, if that is what an 'assignation' means."

Giving a laugh, she continued grinding her round posterior against him until his cock was twitching.

"Not today." His voice was firm, though not nearly as firm as his pecker.

In his frustration, he took ahold of her shoulders and set her away from him. Not too far a distance, considering that on the saddle, there was no place for him to go. Except maybe into her *ass*-ignation.

Most likely, she would like that.

Most likely, so would he, he thought with a sigh. "Today we talk."

"This is not about talking, Theo."

"I want it to include talking."

"No changing the rules midstream." She gave another wiggle. "I swear, this saddle has us squeezed so close together you could fuck me without ever opening your trousers. Just the thought makes me want to swoon. Why not stop right here and indulge our natures?"

Siam was a hot woman with a lusty appetite, and he had no problem with that, but—

He had fallen in love with her.

And he had to somehow, either get it straight in his own head that Siam was only interested in experimentation or convince her that they could shoot higher, have more.

More, like in forevermore.

"No stopping until we get there," he grumbled.

After that, they rode in silence.

At the destination, he helped her down from his horse.

Holding on to her lopsided hat, she twirled in place. "I can see why you brought me here. This place is magical."

"Ayuh," he answered. "Magical."

"I could fall in love with this place."

No, *him*. Magical would mean her falling in love with him. Or both of them, the place and him. That would work out fine too. He could never compete with Maine. Could he compete with all those different fellas she had a mind to assignate with?

He reached into his saddlebag and handed over the bundle of clothes. "Change over there." He pointed. "Behind that rock."

Her hands went to her jacket. "What on earth is wrong with right here?"

"Everything," he said glumly while his cock put up a ruckus of a disagreement.

"Prude."

That was him all right, a prude. "Anyone might come along."

"So?" Hands on her narrow hips, she taunted him.

Keeping his eye on the finish line, he refused to let her defensive posturing – what was she so afraid of? – derail him from his goal. He was taking a chance here with Siam, showing her who he really was inside, letting her know he couldn't – or maybe wouldn't – always do as she wanted him to do. In the lighthouse, when he'd had her in front of the window, that had been kind of enjoyable for him, surprisingly so, and in an exhibitionistic sort of way, but he had done what he did to please Siam. He might not always do that. He had his needs too. His fantasies. And a lot of them involved her capitulation.

Like breaking into her room at the inn in the dead of night and climbing into bed with her before she was fully awake. Pulling up her nightgown and touching her as she lay asleep. Roaming his big hands all over her. Opening up her legs. Nuzzling his mouth into her cleft. Swallowing her essence as she dreamed in her slumber. He would get his cock out and draw the head, just the blunt tip, across her lips until she opened for him. And when he came, he would spill his semen between her bare breasts, drizzling whatever remained onto her sleep-softened mouth. And she would never know what he had done to her while she slept.

He never knew he had that secret darkness inside himself, but there it was; he did. And he meant to accept that part of himself, as he meant to embrace all parts of Siam, including her dark and secret parts.

I love you, dammit! Open your Siamese eyes and see what we could have together.

He kept his voice quiet, gentle. Something had spooked her, and adding to her fear was not something he ever wanted to do. "The *so* is – I mean to keep you all for myself."

"And I mean," she said, mocking his Maine dialect, "to give myself away to as many men as I like."

He stretched out his hand, palm up. "For now, we hike, agreed?"

Her mouth twisted. "Agreed," she mumbled and started for the boulder.

She came out wearing the trousers and shirt, obviously bare underneath. He whistled at the sight.

“Very liberating, thank you.” She looked downward, her gaze on his growing erection. “You really intend to hike?”

Calling himself every kind of idiot, he tightened his lips, sucked up the pain in his trousers, and nodded.

“Have it your way then. But how you can walk with that huge hard-on is beyond me. Wasteful too,” she said and set off at a fine clip.

After their walk, which she appeared to enjoy despite her grouching, he spread the blanket, served her the food, finger food all of it, so he could place each morsel inside her plump lips. So as not to miss her swallow, he refused to eat. She ate with relish, like a starving waif would do, as if she had grave familiarity with an empty belly, the sort of hunger that went past one skipped meal into nothing but skipped meals. She ate like she would never be filled again.

He could fill her. If she would only let him close, not just physically. In every way that mattered, he could fill her. For that to happen he had to offer her something beside food.

Himself.

All of himself. The truth without deception. The sadness as well as the joy. The defeats as well as the victories. Maybe after revealing himself to her at his most naked she would trust him.

And so when she asked him, “Why is exclusivity so important to you during these two weeks?” He answered with a truthful, “because my wife cheated. Only, I was in the dark about it. After she died with one of her lovers, both of them half-naked in a turned-over carriage, I found out about the others. I found out I was never enough for her.”

Would he be enough for Siam?

Only time would tell.

He needed them to have that time. Just the two of them. Without any outside interference...

Midthought, a woody *craaack* split the air.

He knew what that meant. Jumping into action, Theo crashed through the undergrowth, pulling Siam with him, a tall pine in hot pursuit.

The tree came down, toppling in an ear-deafening explosion. As needles and cones and fragrant green boughs ricocheted around them, he pushed her to the ground and covered her body with his.

As quickly as disaster struck, it was over. Though the trembling earth had stilled, he continued to shelter her. Sometimes a caught-up stray limb would descend minutes after the initial strike, the secondary fall taking out more lives.

When a smothered moan rose up from beneath him, he rolled off her, turned her over, until she was faceup, staring wild-eyed at him hovering above her. A few blinks cleared his gaze of dirt and splinters, and no time to waste, experience warning him that

delay could cost a life, he probed her face, her skull, her neck. Christ, he had seen so many lumberjacks, good men, die from a freak tree fall, no time to yell “timber,” no time to run for cover. And now her.

Not her.

Kissing calm good-bye, his hands rushing over her, her chest, arms, legs, checking for unseen injuries, he started stripping off her shirt.

She hit at his hands, pushed them away. “*Now* he gets amorous.”

Like the fallen tree, he crashed to one side. “You were so quiet, too quiet. I thought you were hurt.”

“If not for you, I would have been.” She brushed herself off, and wood chips went flying. “How did you know the tree was coming down?”

He gulped in a mouthful of pine-scented air. “I was told.”

“By whom?” She looked around. “No one is here but us. Did a branch bounce off your head?”

“The pine told me. They always do. Right before they give up the struggle to live and go to ground, they sound the alarm.”

“You talk to trees?”

“No.”

“What a relief! For a minute, I thought I was in the presence of a madman—”

“Trees talk to me.”

“Dear heavens. I *am* in the presence of a madman.”

“Folks just have to listen,” he explained. “But most people are so caught up in their own concerns, they never hear the warning crack before a tree falls.”

“How do you know this?”

“From working as a lumberjack.”

“What a varied career. Timberman, now cook/dishwasher.”

He could have corrected her. Maybe even *should* have corrected her. But needing to be enough for her, just as he was, unrefined as he was, he kept his silence.

She struggled to sit on the ground. When he reached to help, she pulled away from him. “Leave me alone.” Her mouth twisted. “On second thought, take me back.”

“Back where? Back to the lighthouse?” he asked hopefully. Hopelessly.

“Back to the inn. I intend to leave Bar Harbor tomorrow.”

“Why?”

“Grieving for your deceased wife, brokenhearted, you... Well, this is a classic rebound situation.” She shook her head. “Right at the outset, I told you, I was looking for fun and games, not anything serious. I wanted someone to fulfill my fantasies, just like in *Licentious*. That someone is not you.”

Shit! She was putting distance between them, setting up all kinds of obstacles in their path to love, going with her intellect instead of her heart.

But what could he do? She had made her thoughts clear. Hell, she might even be right. Betsy had hurt him, and Siam was his first woman since his wife's death, only the second woman he had ever slept with in his entire life. But regardless of what she said, of how her words seem to fit him, he knew what he felt, and what he felt went deeper than a rebound fixation.

If he could only buy some time, he would prove it her. She was attracted to him. He could tell. Attraction was a good place to start. They could have more than attraction. He just needed to convince her to give them a chance.

"You said you wanted to try a ménage," he offered, choking on the words of the bribe. Feeling his heart crack, then break. Sharing her with another man was not what he wanted. But love was generous, love was giving, love was—

Bullshit. He could never share her with another man. Love was faithful, all-consuming, love was owning all of her, good and bad, and included owning her cunt.

Her cunt was all his. Her cunt belonged to him, and him alone. He wanted to please her, he did, and going along with a strong woman like Siam might please her in the short run, but in the long run, she would lose respect for him if she could twist him around her finger. Where would her sense of security come from then?

"I do want a threesome, yes." She scrambled to her feet without assistance, though he did try to help.

Forgive me, Siam. I know you want honesty in carnality, but this lie is for your own good.

"I have someone in mind," he gritted through his clenched teeth. "A friend of mine, and a good man all around. He knows his way around women too, and less-than-conventional couplings."

She pursed her lips. "Unlike yourself."

"I can change." But never about a threesome. He would always strive to give her what she needed, but that might not always coincide with what she *thought* she wanted.

And that was what he told himself that night as he stood in the hallway outside her room at his inn, a bag of tricks in one hand, the master key to her suite of rooms poised at the lock in the other. He was ready to play out her every sexual fantasy.

Or at least those contained in the tall stack of *Licentious* he had borrowed from his sister-in-law. The ones he had read cover to cover after delivering Siam back safe and sound to his inn.

Chapter Seventeen

A hand shot out of nowhere and covered Siam's mouth. She tried to scream, but the thick fingers, male fingers, spanning the lower part of her face prevented any sound from escaping.

The bedroom was black as pitch, she was groggy with suddenly interrupted sleep, disoriented after her sudden awakening, and still she resisted. A scar on her nape attested to a history of defending herself when attacked.

She clawed at her assailant, tried to bite his fingers.

He lifted his hand away from her face, and she continued to snap her teeth at thin air. Then went on the offensive. She elbowed him first in the gut. Next the throat, directly over his windpipe.

Bull's-eye.

While he sputtered and choked, she went for the hard ridge against her upper thigh.

Not his erection, also hard and prominent, but his pocketknife.

She pulled the blade from his pocket. The smooth handle – mother-of-pearl? – felt familiar in her hand. Some things, like riding a bike – like hefting a pocketknife – were too ingrained to forget even over a prolonged lapse of time.

With a satisfying *click*, the single-folded blade opened, and the sharp edge sprang free.

She slept naked. Ignoring her nudity, she kicked free of the entrapment of linen and satin and leaped, a jump that landed her atop him, astride. In that tensed pose, she held the knife to his neck. The urge to cut him was so strong, she could envision the stickiness of his blood on her hands as his life force ebbed away.

She pressed. The point of the knife dug into his flesh.

"Make your move, woman."

Theo!

What was he doing in her room?

And why was he just lying there as she forced the steely tip of the weapon into his skin? A big man like him could have dislodged her within a few seconds. Instead, he lay beneath her, not moving, quiet as death. His possum playing confused her to say the least. She waited for him to huff or blow or pop his jaw or slap the mattress with his hand, signaling an attack. But he remained utterly and completely still.

"I could have severed your head from your shoulders. I still can," she rasped and dug the knife deeper in emphasis. "How dare you break into my room?" She quivered. Not entirely with anger. And absolutely without fear. This was Theo, and she trusted him not to hurt her.

But what *was* he up to?

Flinging his muscled arms out in surrender, he turned his jaw into the pillow under his head and inhaled.

Good Lord. He was sniffing out her scent on the bed linen, just as a big black bear would do. The animalistic trait did liquefying things to her loins. Her cunt gnawed, moistness a hot slick on her thighs.

With the knife held to his neck, she flexed her hips experimentally, then brought her bottom up off his prone body, a launch that carried her pelvis into the air. "Open your trousers."

With an economy of motion, he yanked his cock free and then asked, "Planning on unmanning me?"

"And ruin my fun?" She scooted over him, until she knelt above the pulsating head of his erection. "I think not." She shimmied, and her breasts bobbed, the tips teasing his lips. "Want me?"

"You know I do." He tried to capture a hardened nipple in his mouth.

She allowed him a taste, then, laughing, pulled away. She did the same with his cock. Lowering herself, she let the bulbous head engage her notch, giving him a hint of her wet heat, before withdrawing.

No attempt to hide his frustration, he moaned.

His trusting nature and sincerity made her bristle, but it was wrong to tease him. And treating him like a human dildo was no better than raping him. "I would like to make this good for you too, Theo."

"Appreciate the gesture."

"What would do that for you?" She raised her shoulder to her cheek. "What would make this good for you? Tell me."

"Touching you."

His answer surprised her. As a man, he should want to take, not give. But so far, he had proven himself a generous and considerate lover. He had even offered up a ménage as an inducement for her to stay. That offer must have killed him. Theo was not the sort who would ever voluntarily share his woman.

But she was not his woman. A good thing too, because she would never want to hurt Theo. By all indications, his bitch wife had already hurt him enough. And yet, he still believed in romance, in love, in fidelity.

God, but he made her feel small and petty.

"Go on," she whispered as she bore down on him. "Touch me."

"Thank you," he said, and his big hand made its way to her cleft.

He petted her clit until she was writhing, but made no move to either unseat her or take charge. And he could have. He could have overpowered her so easily. This was the second time Theo, the most dominant and masculine of men, had done that, had let her take the lead. Why?

She put the question away, not forgotten, only pushed aside in favor of more important things.

Sensations. Mindless feelings. Aching need. When he rubbed her clit, she wanted him more than was wise.

She lowered herself onto his cock, a slow and luscious descent. "So good," she groaned, because it was good, very good, and arched her throat, his knife falling from her relaxed fingers and bouncing to the floor.

He palmed her bottom, a thumb wending its way into the crevice.

Oh my. Oh my. Ohmymymy. What he did to her!

As he gently fingered her back opening, a rimming that drove her wild, she squeezed the length of his cock with her inner muscles, squirming at the increased pressure building inside her cunt.

She tried not to use him. Tried to give him as much pleasure as he gave her. With his hands. With his mouth. With his lovely cock. She tried to return the sensations. But it was hard not to take what she needed, hard to think about anything but her own selfish desires.

She moved as she wanted to move. A slow tempo at first, a frenzied speed as she edged toward completion, a mindless abandonment of anything but herself and the seductive oblivion that awaited her. And then she was coming, exploding in bliss, pleasure saturating her, screaming. Oh yes, she screamed and rocked her body, rapture unlike she had ever known breaking her apart.

Afterward, she collapsed limply on top of him, boneless, deliriously happy, his hard cock wedged deep, refusing to give it up, give *him* up, wet juices dribbling out of her and puddling into his thick mat of pubic hair.

In the dark room, illumination dawned.

She was wet. From *her* body's secretions. But what about him? Where was *his* wetness? *His* dribbling juices?

And then, she knew.

She had not pulled off him, and so, considerate lover that he was, he had withheld his own pleasure in favor of hers and refrained from ejaculating. His tension remained unresolved, his cock still as hard as a spike inside her passage. Physiologically, he was able to go again.

Was it too terribly selfish of her to think that was lovely?

Her body limp but far from replete, she nestled her head in the crook of his enviably wide shoulder as huge hands smoothed worshipfully over her back, a reverent tour up and down her spine.

Obviously, he would do anything to please her. Obviously, he adored her. Rightly so! She was quite the catch. And she held him in affection too, as one would hold an overgrown pet in affection.

Once again, she vowed not to take advantage of his trustful nature and romantic soul. She vowed not to hurt him. Would one kick a tame circus bear?

No! Of course not. Trained pets asked for so little, and in return, they offered boundless love and loyalty, without condition.

She sighed. Perhaps she would rethink her decision to return to New York after all. Since she was enjoying herself, why cut the fuck short? She might even consent to the ménage he had volunteered to arrange for her benefit. Who knows?

She bit back a yawn, unable to bring herself to stir. Theo's cock was still lodged inside her, and it felt so right there, she hated the thought of moving.

Selfish, selfish me, she lambasted herself, but did nothing to alleviate his suffering.

A hand cupped her posterior—he did seem obsessed with her buttocks. A finger wiggled inside the puckered back hole, his assertiveness making her gasp.

She gasped even louder when he lifted her off and flipped her over onto her belly, mounting her from behind, his hard cock rooting.

"Like this," he growled.

Growled. Not pleaded. Not begged. Not even asked.

Hell of a nerve.

She had yet to digest this new effrontery, when he was ordering her to, "Spread your legs."

What was this? What was happening? Who was this demanding and forceful man? Where had her gentle and worshipping and submissive Theo gone? What happened to his petlike adoration?

She had thrown the bear a bone, patted him on the head, and now he was snarling at her. Her safe performing bear was turning ferocious on her, a real state of Maine beast.

Well, he had another think coming if he expected her to lie back and take his orders. "How dare yo—"

The reprimand went uncompleted. He drove into her, a back-to-front vaginal penetration. His body flattened on top of her body, he covered her as he had from the falling tree that day.

She was grateful for his earlier rescue. Really she was, but not grateful enough to let him pin her to the bed. The press of his body prevented her from shifting to direct the angle and depth of the engagement. As things stood now, he was in charge.

This did not suit.

A pout took her over. "Get off me."

At her complaint, he came up, but only a smidgen.

Only enough to smack her bottom with the flat of his hand.

"Ow!"

Despite her cry of outrage, and against her formidable will, she enjoyed the spank. In fact, she basked in the attention. The corporal punishment made her feel all warm and glowy, not only on the outside, where it showed, but inside too.

"All fours." Pulling out, he lifted off her.

After taking a lungful of bracing air, she was game for anything, including some more corporal punishment. Not that she would admit to such a weakness.

Instead, she refused to budge, adding a "go fuck yourself" for good measure, but completely ruining the effect she strove to achieve by seductively purring the epithet.

All was not lost. Her misfired attempt at defiance did not go without reward.

He spanked her, and with a speediness that had her dripping with dewy excitement. The flat of his hand coming down with swift authority, he smacked her rump again and then again, until she was pulling on the coverlet and dragging herself into the position he had ordered her to assume.

All fours.

It occurred to her then, as she arranged herself in the classic doggy positioning on the bed, how effortlessly they had switched roles. Rather than resenting his high-handedness, she actually found a letting-go-of-control sort of pleasure in the reversal. Letting him captain the ship freed her to cruise the waves without cares.

She trusted Theo. He would never diminish her as a person, no matter how perverse her fantasy. He knew her as no one had ever known her before, and he accepted her as she was, warts and all. How romantic...

Good Lord! She had to get out of here. Right now. This very instant! Before it was too late. Delay, even a few hours, and she might never find the strength to leave.

Him.

Chapter Eighteen

"Let me go," Siam whimpered. "Before I report you to the owner of this establishment and he fires you for unlawfully entering my room."

Her condescending tone brought Theo up short. What kind of game was she playing at now?

She had climaxed, cuddled with him afterward like a Siamese kitten, and now she wanted him to stop?

It had gone too far for him to stop. Too much was at stake. He was seeing this twisted thing through to its conclusion.

He tried reason. "No need to let doubts get in the way between us. No need to be scared."

"Do I seem scared to you?" she asked scornfully.

"I was talking about me."

"Good, because I am not frightened." she said with haughty disdain. "You are nothing but a lowly dishwasher. Remove your hands from my person immediately."

For a second, he pulled back as if struck. It hurt what she said, but he knew she was only talking out of fear, not of the physical act, but of her true feelings.

She loved him, and that scared her.

"You can do this, Siam. You can take me. All of me. The good and the bad. And that is what I mean to prove. I know you want it, because you told me you did. Now, spread your legs wide so I can get it in you." He pulled the tincture of love oils from his pocket and poured a few drips on his fingertips, then greased up his cock.

"I said no. Remember? Everything stops when I say no."

"Not this time. This time, I heed your wiggling hips, not the false sentiment leaving your lips. Now, spread 'em."

"No," she wept and crawled away, tried to leave the bed.

She was a little thing. Fragile. But her build was not angular. She had curves. Her small breasts jiggled when she attempted to make a break for it. Her trim shape drove him wild.

"Get back here, Siam." He pulled on her ankle, and she slid back toward him across the sheets. "Your ass is getting good and fucked, woman. You got no say in it, hear?"

He two-handed her slender hips, his thumbs rotating over her silky flesh, and held her in place. "Lift your tail to the ceiling."

"I hate you," she sobbed as her hips came up and she splayed her legs wide.

Taking her hiked ass as a vote of confidence, he reached for the lamp beside the bed. As light dispelled the darkness, he eyed her all-fours positioning.

The sight thrilled him, filled him with pride. Thinking he was only a dishwasher, she had done that for him.

"Now you hate me," he crooned, rubbing between her legs, paying strict attention to her greedy little nubbin, making sure her clit was good and primed and she was shaking with lust. "But a hot little piece like you will be panting for more as soon as I get it in."

No need to hold her in place any longer, he took himself in hand and fed himself into her, a little at a time. "So pretty, Siam. Your ass is so sweet. Have to have your ass, sweetheart. Have to have it. Have to have you."

With that gruff whisper, he gave a push, and he was inside, the head of himself buried in her ass. And then she was taking him in, all of him in, still whimpering a little, but holding steady for him as he completed the possession.

"Christ," he rasped. And came out. All the way out. Before penetrating her again. With his length stuffed inside her ass, he waited for her to give him the go-ahead.

"Move, damn you."

That sounded like a go-ahead to him.

He moved inside her ass. Not thrusting — she was too new to this and so was he — but a measured stroke.

His cock was as hard as he could ever remember it being. Leaning forward, he mouthed the side of her neck, hanging on to his control. "Not coming, not coming, not until you do too, with me here inside you."

Her hips coming back against him, pushing back against him, she started rocking, panting, weeping full-out, but he refused to end it, refused to stop, until she climaxed with him.

And she did, on a beautiful cry of surrender. He surrendered too, on an epiphany of emotion.

For her. Only for her.

He loved her.

Too soon to tell her so. Too soon to let her know. She wanted temporary sex, not lifetime devotion.

He pulled her close, settled her so his heart pounded against her heart. Holding her in his arms was more than enough.

For now.

Chapter Nineteen

Sometime after midnight, Siam rose from the bed she had so briefly shared with Theo, dressed in her somber traveling suit, and tiptoed to the door. Her plan was to leave the room and race from the hotel, without disturbing her slumbering lover, the man who had taken her forcibly and then thrilled her to the point of self-annihilation.

She feared his awakening, for if he came to her as she stood trembling by the door, if but one of his warm breaths fanned across her face, she knew to the depths of her being that she would succumb to his animal magnetism. She was just so weak where he was concerned, so vulnerable. Whatever he told her to do, any directive he gave, she would have no choice but to obey. Her once-strong will had crumbled. He had destroyed her ability to save herself. Indeed, even now, survival without him seemed a poor substitute for life.

The door opened with a small betraying squawk, a sharp metallic *click* that surely Theo slept too soundly to hear.

A light turned on. The swift pad of footsteps behind her.

What a fool to think she could escape him.

A big hand flattened on the door. That big hand slammed the door shut.

"I can smell my cum on you," he whispered close to her ear. "You wear my scent like perfume." Hot lips pressed to the side of her neck, where another man, an evil man intent on raping her, had once held the point of his knife.

No comparison between that time and this.

Theo was no rapist, he held no knife—that had been her—and he was far from evil. If history was repeating itself here, she was the one guilty of replaying it.

He stepped back, releasing her from even the stroke of his breath. Oh, but he held her anyway. With his words.

"I love you," he whispered.

The kiss of death was love. Love weakened a person.

Go! Flee this man. Love is not what I want.

Or deserve. Or can ever hope to live up to.

But when he raised the back of her gown, she could find no core of inner strength to fight back, to save herself. It was already too late. He made her so weak.

Escape was futile. Perhaps from the very first.

For her. Not for him.

And though selfish, she was not so selfish as to accept a love that was impossible. "I am not here for love, Theo. I am here for sex."

"Then by all means, these drawers must go," he said quietly.

"Yes. All right. Shall I do it or will you?"

"Allow me." A draft on her naked skin as he pulled down her drawers, a slow unveiling of her bottom in the well-lit room. He could still see her flesh, where dried semen coated her backside, a slick of whitish salt, barely discernable, but still there. In her mind, his ejaculate would always be there. She might just as well have had his name permanently tattooed on her skin.

She clawed at the door, her eyes closing, a desperate longing to wear his fresh cum strong within her.

"Leave on the frilly blouse, but everything else goes."

"Yes. All right. Please" – she swallowed – "could you do it?"

He undressed her. "On second thought, the hose and garters stay." He ran his hand down the inside of her legs. "A fetching look on you."

When he had bared her from the waist down, he insinuated his kneecap between her stocking-encased legs, back to front. He spread her open.

Hurry. Please hurry.

"I want in you again," he told her, his voice gruff. "Same way as last time."

Anal intercourse. Sodomy. Buggery.

Paradise.

Her chin fell to her chest, and she nodded. In case he missed her nonverbal consent, she followed up with, "Yes. All right."

Her breasts brushed against the fabric of her blouse. The nipples were distended. Tight. Pained.

A grimace curled her lips. She needed him to take her breasts in hand. She needed him to hurt them. Hurt her. The hurt would pleasure her.

Hurry. Please hurry.

Not even meaning to, she stuck out her bottom. In invitation. To ease the illicit congress. To tell him with her body to hurry. Please hurry.

Others might view her as a fallen woman for allowing him sodomy, as a woman little better than a whore, a concubine like her mother before her. She no longer cared what others thought. She wanted everything with him, every depravity, every act of sexual congress a man and woman could achieve.

He replenished the oil inside her back opening and brought her away from the door. "Bend over, sweetheart." His arm wrapped around her waist. "No worries about falling, not with me holding you."

But she had already fallen. In love with him.

And still she said, "Yes. All right." How eager she was to concede him everything as she rounded over, her fingertips touching the floor. For him. No other man but him.

To survive Five Points, she had transformed herself into someone else, a pretentious entity she hardly recognized as herself. With Theo, she was the truest, the most honest rendition of herself. Her desires stripped naked, she felt no shame with him. "Fuck me, Theo. Fuck my ass hard."

And then he was there, pushing between the cheeks of her bottom. Her buttocks gave way so easily for him! She gave way so easily for him.

"Mmm," he murmured and pressed, pressed, *pressed* the thick crown of his penis into her.

A tear drained down her face as her tensions eased. Keeping up her societal facade required an enormous expenditure of energy. As she took him greedily inside her body, she felt restored.

The entrance was easier the second time. He penetrated with little resistance.

It felt so good. He felt so good there inside her.

Seated deep inside her, Theo's breathing went harsh. She had done that to him, had aroused him, had excited him. In celebration of the accomplishment, she undulated her hips.

"Stop that," he chastised and pulled back a degree, enough to give her a small swat on her buttock. "Or it will be over before it begins."

She doubted it. The man had fierce control.

The fuck went on forever, until she was squirming and hitting the ground with her fists and cursing, "damn you," and coming, wildly coming, her shrieks resounding in her suite of rooms and most likely spilling out into the hallway. Thank God, they had the entire floor to themselves. Not that what others thought concerned her anymore.

He held her hips, his cock battering her, hammering her, pumping into her, and she climaxed a second time.

Not so, her relentless lover.

His steady hands moved to her bosom, his palms sculpting her blouse-encased breasts. "Forget what I said about keeping on some clothes. I want you naked." And he tore her last covering away, the *screech* of rent cloth ripping into her.

He had not withdrawn after his climax, and he started to move again, a hand squeezing her naked nipple.

"Your tits are amazing. Erotic as hell. Shake your shoulders for me, sweetheart. Make 'em bounce."

Oh, it was just so dirty. Her head-down position. His deep lodging inside her buttocks. His crass phraseology.

In a flash of unbridled lust, she came all over again.

Not so, her relentless lover.

Still hard, Theo withdrew from her body's clasp and helped her upright, helped her turn to face him.

Fully clothed, his cock, erect and jutting, sticking out from his trousers, he said, "Come with me."

"I already did." Adding a pointed, "but *without* you."

Much aggrieved by the power he held over her while keeping himself in full control, she ignored his proffered hand and walked unassisted to the hall bath.

Behind her, Theo switched on the light. "Relieve yourself." He nodded at the modern plumbing, the conveniences impressive considering this was the backwoods of Maine, not the urban sensibility of Manhattan.

In her besotted attraction for this outrageous ruffian, she let go of all artifice and sat her bare bottom on the wooden toilet seat. Shameless, she peed while he watched the stream cascade from between her open legs, his arms folded over his massive chest, a smile tugging at his chiseled lips.

"In the tub with you," he said after she had finished and wiped and took care of all the other intimate details a lady never does in front of a man, not even a husband.

He held her elbow while she swung one leg up over the side of the tub and then the other. "Squat," he said, "your back toward me, your forehead resting on your knees."

She was thirty-three years old, a prominent widow of wealth and social standing, an independent thinker who firmly believed in the equality of her gender, and yet helpless to refuse, she squatted in the tub, her back to him, a submissive anxious to please her master in all things.

After turning on the water tap, his hand was there on her rear end. He was fingering her, as if he owned her.

And indeed he did, body and soul. Her capitulation to him was complete.

"A little swollen," he pronounced, his finger tarrying inside her bottom. "Some bruising, but otherwise the area seems fine." He withdrew his thick digit from inside her anus and began to wash her. "Turn round," he said when he was done.

No need to tell her to open her legs to him, she did so without hesitation, without questioning his right to demand it of her. And then his palm was there, claiming the

right she freely gave, his fingers spanning her cunt, cradling her, before opening the pubic lips.

"I want in here again." He rubbed his broad knuckles against the notch. "That first day, I promised to pull out, but I find myself with an overwhelming urge to ejaculate inside here." He inserted a long, thick digit up into her passage. "That first day," he repeated, "you said your next monthly is due soon."

He stunned her. Not only that he remembered her words, but their implication. He wanted what he wanted, but he also considered the very real stigma of her bearing a child out of wedlock and thought to spare her that.

"The possibility of conception is remote. Wrong time of the month." She dropped her chin to her chest, knowing she would risk pregnancy to have him inside her cunt again, to have his cum there too. Weak, weak, weak. Malleable too, like a lump of warm clay in a sculptor's hands. He molded her to his demands.

Somewhere, from some inner source, she must find the strength to leave him. One thing to jeopardize her own future prospects, quite another to bring a fatherless child into the world. She of all people knew how that went...

A harbinger of things to come, he rolled up his shirtsleeve and split her labia with a fingertip, the plump folds separating for him like flower petals. A finger, then two, then three ingratiated themselves inside her as she squatted in the tub, her thighs spread wide for him, her positioning crudely explicit.

She was just so naked. And without any pubic hair, seemed more so.

But she could not bring herself to pull on a false cloak of modesty. Indeed, like a cat basking in the sun of his attention, she raised both arms above her head, the elbows bent slightly like a ballerina.

The three wide digits spread open to a V inside her.

Her arms fell down, and she bit her lip then. Not like a cat. Not like a ballerina. Like a woman about to encounter a painful ordeal. The pressure inside her cunt was increasing.

Her face must have shown her discomfort, for he sluiced her with warm water, the splashes falling over her breasts, her belly, her invaded slit. "I never did this with my wife," he confided and pressed his knuckles against her widening slit. "But I will have it from you."

He was talking about fisting her, and her nipples pointed and reddened in desperate arousal.

He pulled on an elongated tip, while his big hand expanded her below.

Her vagina moistened, and not from the sluiced warm water. He had to know it, had to feel her inner walls pulsate, had to feel the wet flush of her desire.

"Until you brought up the subject in the lighthouse, I thought I was a pervert for thinking about it with you. For having to have it with you. The fisting, that is," he said, putting their mutual want into words.

"Men do like such things," she said noncommittally. "And you say you never did your wife?"

"No." He plucked at her nipple, twisted her nipple, bending his head, he bit her nipple, soothing the hurt with a thumb when he had finished. "I never asked for anything more than the missionary with my wife."

"Yet you demand it of me?"

"You came here for this," he said baldly. "You made it available to me. Why not take what you offered, all that you offered? Sex is all this is about, right?"

"Exactly. Just sex."

But she lied. This had become so much more than just sex to her.

She had to leave. Get away. At the next opportunity.

His hand retreated from her body's clasp, and she raised a brow in speculation. "Finished so soon?"

"I need to oil my hand first, before I fist you."

Ah, even in unorthodox sex, the ordinary intruded.

Her hair was done up in a topknot, suitable for traveling. As soon as he withdrew his hand from between her legs, he removed the pins, the same fingers that had just been inside her. As the scent of her own musk surrounded them, the thick black length, the only real hint of her Asian heritage, fell over her shoulders and streamed down her back.

"Lie back now," he said softly.

He had filled the tub a few inches. Three or four? At any rate, only a shallow amount. She stretched out her body, unbent her cramped legs, her arms hanging loose at her sides, her hair floating like coarse black seaweed on top of the warm water. She watched him remove his clothing, dropping each article indiscriminately on the floor.

He looked wilder naked than he had clothed. More animalistic. His heavy cock clubbed the air. Difficult to accept, that she had accommodated his length and thickness inside her body. Her ass, her cunt, her mouth. Difficult to accept, his genitalia made her mouth water.

He picked up each foot, splitting her open again, as he draped her legs over the sides of the tub, then came down into the tub with her, crouching between her separated thighs, a bird's-eye view of her cunt.

He oiled his hand, a massive hand, with bulging and scarred knuckles.

She licked her lips in anticipation. Of pleasure. Of pain. Of a combination of the two.

"Afterward," he said, "I mean to tether you."

"No!" She gave a cry of alarm. How would she get away from him if he held her in bondage?

"Siam," he said decisively, "that was not a request."

She squirmed in the water, her bare breasts shifting as she strained away from him. "Oh please, do not insist."

"But I do insist. Anal plug, nipple clamps, leather restraints. A cat-o'-nine-tails whip. I brought them all with me. This is what you said you wanted."

"Not anymore," she said and struggled to rise, to get out of the tub. "I have changed my mind."

"Settle down, sweetheart. It will only go worse for you if you fight it. Because I find, I want it too. "

"Theo, please. Anything but restraints. Please, no ties."

But the argument was lost when his knuckles entered her vaginal opening.

She turned her face away, panting as if in labor, as he twisted his wrist, narrowing his thick fingers to a bird's beak, his fist squeezing a scant amount inside the notch.

She tensed, her body going rigid, her knees coming up, bending, as her heels sought leverage on the rim, struggling to accommodate the stretching of tender vaginal tissue.

"Oh God." He was doing it, putting his whole hand inside her.

A moan then, low and feral, departed her drawn-back lips.

He was gentle but relentless, and it hurt. The unnatural intrusion of his hand into her body's clasp hurt like hell.

"Can you take more?" His intense scrutiny lifted from her split labia, where his hand had partially sunk, and he gazed up into her eyes.

She gritted her bared teeth. "Yes. I can take more."

He did her hard, he did her thoroughly, and as his hand moved up inside her passage, his elbow flexing, she screamed and screamed and could not seem to stop screaming, as she came and came, could not seem to stop coming.

Chapter Twenty

It was done; he had fisted Siam. Her cries of release grew hoarse as she writhed out one orgasm after another.

Spent, she said nothing, only looked at him with those exotic slate blue eyes of hers, as he picked her up in his arms and left the tub. After toweling her dry, he carried her back to the bed, placing her on her belly.

“No more tonight, Siam.”

She said nothing in reply, but when he strapped her into the leather harness, she started to cry.

“Hush,” he soothed, buckling the sturdy rigging. “It will be all right.”

The bands and o-rings around her breasts lifted her nipples high. At the sight, he lifted too, his cock shooting for the ceiling. She looked so pretty, naked and bound.

Her tiny waist was also girded in leather. The harness left her pussy exposed, and he could push aside the strap in back for sodomy.

Since Siam liked sodomy, he planned to be pushing that strap aside a lot.

The gear also came with a leash, one that he could either lock in place or hold in his hand to walk her. The art dealer who had sold the tether to him called it multifunctional, and he was right.

Supposedly, bondage was all the rage in Bar Harbor. Supposedly, the dealer had a hard time keeping equipment in stock.

Married ten years, and a celibate widower for three, he had no understanding of such things. Though he was learning quick. And one thing he did know for sure, the longer he held Siam captive, the greater the chance he had of convincing her they belonged together. That they had a shot at a future. A chance for happiness. That what they had going was more than two weeks of fun and games. More than just sex.

He showed her the anal plug. "The art gallery dealer said it was made in Siam. I snatched it up when I heard that." He moved the leather strap aside so he could get at her back opening, a delicate dimple that made his mouth water and seduced him into wanting her all over again.

Not now.

Now, he needed to let his little sweetheart rest, he decided, easing the sex toy inside her. She was all tuckered out, wanting it but too exhausted to enjoy herself. And this was all about Siam's enjoyment.

And his.

"Ohhh. The plug makes my clit tingle."

"Supposed to."

"Oh God. Every time I move, I want you inside me."

"No more tonight." Someone had to be sensible.

"Oh, please, Theo."

He put his foot down. "No."

"But I need to come."

"After you sleep."

"I have to...I have to...touch myself. Please?"

The harness left her arms free, and her pleading got to him. "Go on."

At his permission, she rolled over onto her side and masturbated.

"Not like that," he said harshly and brought her up off the bed. The wall at her back would support her. "Go down."

She slid to a kneeling position at his feet. Spreading her knees, she began to masturbate again. And again, with a yank on the leash cinched around her waist, he stopped her.

"Damn you," she screamed and lunged for the most vulnerable area of his male anatomy, nails ready to draw blood.

While understanding her frustration, disobedience in the bedroom was not something he would tolerate in his woman. And she was his woman, whether she realized that fact yet or not. He had learned the hard way that sometimes a woman needed a firm hand, mastery too, and he meant to give Siam that sort of security.

"Siam," he said sternly, "you need to ask first."

"I did. And you agreed."

"Each time," he said.

Her stubborn chin jutted. "Go fuck yourself."

He yanked on the harness, and she had no choice but to crawl after him as he went to get the cat-o'-nine-tails whip. He lashed the green reeds across his palm, the sting bright and sharp on his tough skin.

She was up on her knees, ready do battle, but with his palm pressed on her spine, he pushed on her upper torso until she had no choice but to round over into a crawling position again.

"Stay down on all fours," he directed.

"Let me up," she said, choking on her fury.

"Shh. This will do you no good, Siam. You need to learn that when I tell you something, I mean it." Like, he loved her. He really did love her.

He hog-tied her, wrapping the harness straps around her body until he had her immobilized, and then locked her in place, the leather ends anchored securely around the heavy chest at the end of the bed. She could no more move than he could stop loving her.

Her long black hair was a mass of tangles, many of the thick strands now falling over her face. He patted her bent head, drawing some of her hair back from her face so that she could see, and then drew a finger down her spine, letting it sink between the crevice in her buttocks. He circled the plug inserted into the hole in her ass.

"Oh no," she moaned when he moved the plug in and out of her. "Oh no, please, no," she sobbed as he kept doing it. When she was bucking, wildly bucking, about to climax, he stepped away from her and let the whip fly. On the fifth stripe across her buttocks, as she hovered suspended on the precipice of preclimax, he stopped. "Now ask me nice."

"May I?" she asked, like a hunk of cold butter would sit in her mouth without ever melting.

"Ayuh." He took another trick from his bag. "Use this."

"A tad optimistic of you," she said dryly, her eyes gone wide.

"That there is the same size as me. I measured. It will fit."

He loosened the restraining ties, and she assumed the same position as before, squatting at his feet, her thighs spread wide. In that splayed pose, hiding nothing from him, at least nothing about her body, she took the carved obelisk and went to town, until he was the one left writhing as she came.

The phallus still protruded from her cunt, and all rigidity save that obelisk had seeped from her body. Her shoulders were slumped, her head lowered, the tension in her legs gone. As she huddled there on the floor, too far gone in a postclimactic stupor to make the effort to move, he walked over to her and lifted her chin.

Her exotic slate blue eyes were glassy, heavy lidded in sexual satiation, her lush lips slack. She had never looked more beautiful. Or more desirable.

Unable to help himself, he reached for her softened nipple, drew his thumbnail across the tip. Edgy as hell, he did it again, only harsher. And both her nipples went to arrow points.

He hunkered down in front of her and took one of those sharp tips into his mouth. He suckled her hard, suckled her good, until she came up on her toes. And then, as she squirmed, he bit into her flesh. Crying out, "Theo, Theo, Theo," she spasmed.

He looked up from his handiwork and smiled at the imprint of his teeth, at the dark bruise already forming. "You belong to me, Siam. No one else but me. Not ever," he told her and moved the phallus inside her again. She hit the pinnacle once more, but her cries of pleasure were stretched thin, the sound bordering on pain.

"Your cunt is drying out," he said after a while and removed the phallus. "Here on out, sodomy. And I still need to do some things to you, things you need done so you will know that I own you."

He went back to his bag of tricks and removed the nipple clamps.

Her hand went to her dainty breast, to the bitten end. She rubbed at the dark smudge. "You are just full of surprises."

"Ayuh."

She tossed her head. Her lethargy gone, she sprang back to life. "I want it done. All of it. Every depraved act. But you need to know, Theo, that no matter how many times you make me come, you cannot make me stay."

"I guess we shall both have to wait and see about that." He snapped the Y chained clamps in place. Two went onto her erect nipples, the third he applied to her clit. Fishing weights gave the chains an additional *snap!* Or so the kindly man at the in-town art gallery told him when he purchased the sex toys from him. If she moved, the weights drew her nipples downward and pulled on her clitoris. The pain, the salesman told him, was supposed to be "exquisite."

Withdrawing the anal plug, he positioned her for a long and leisurely sodomy.

"Sleep," he told her afterward and placed her, grinning from ear to ear, in bed, securing her to the posts by turning the tiny gold key in the main lock at her midsection. "I have work to do." After covering her and kissing her lips, he backed up.

She was fast asleep before he closed the door behind him.

* * * * *

At the sound of Theo departing, Siam opened her eyes. Not knowing when he might return meant there was no time to waste. Reaching for the bedstead, she pulled a hairpin from the top drawer.

Years spent thieving on the streets of Five Points had taught her how to pick locks. Few had bested the skill of her adroit fingers.

A few twists, and she was free.

From the lock. Now, to free herself from Theo.

What she was feeling...this uncomfortably wonderful, confusing, *fucking* irritating urge to give herself over entirely to someone else. Willingly wanting to make that

person happy, even to the exclusion of her own happiness, even to the degree that she would gain happiness from that person's happiness, this could not be love. It could *NOT!*

She could not accept it as love. *Would* not accept it. She wanted no part of that kind of upheaval. Love hurt too much.

She had come to Maine for fun. For games. To lose her virginity. She had done that, she had achieved her purpose, and now it was time to leave. Right now. Before her whole life was tipped upside down.

After dressing once again in her plain dark travel suit, she opened the window, ventured out onto the ledge, and raced down the wooden fire escape. A short walk brought her to the rail station. Luckily the first train left at dawn. She purchased a ticket and, in less than twenty minutes, was on her way back to New York.

Chapter Twenty-one

A week after her escape from Maine, Siam was utterly exhausted but blissfully happy. After twenty-two hours of labor, Cynthia had pushed out a ten-pound baby boy.

Between bouts of celebratory laughter (*Yipeee!* Little George made her a bona fide stepgrandmother) and self-pitying tears (*Drat!* Becoming a grandmother made her feel so *old*), Siam decided to remove herself from the chaos to accept an invitation to a house party in upper New York.

The break would do her a world of good, she thought as her carriage bumped along the road and then entered the gates. Perhaps, the weekend away would unfrazzle her nerves.

Tapping her chin, Siam gazed out the window onto the lawn, still winter brown despite the change of season. The brownstone at number 22 had been an armed encampment since Cynthia moved back for the lying-in, her entire retinue of servants and nursemaids, and naturally her browbeaten husband in tow.

She had done the right thing by coming here. After all, Cynthia no longer required her hourly attendance. In fact, remarkably, all her darlings clung to her less than before her self-proclaimed trip of independence to Maine. Why not kick up her heels?

Siam twittered to herself as the driver slowed the horses. Kicking up her heels was a literal description. She planned to spend her time here with her heels very much in the air.

Over her head, actually.

She had no idea who had sent the engraved invitation, but she was familiar enough with her social circle's Morse code to know "house party" meant orgy.

Naturally, these occasions were all very hush-hush. No host and hostess ever listed their names in writing, never spoke about the sorts of parties they sponsored in

conversation. Since the invitation insisted upon anonymity, she could hardly ask her friends and acquaintances for additional information either.

The carriage slowed to a crawl, then stopped before a lovely, but entirely unfamiliar, country home. Leased, perhaps, just for the occasion?

She had arrived and might just as well make the best of it. A few days of naked cavorting would help her forget Theo.

Who was she kidding?

The mere thought of sleeping with another man made her want to gag. Had she not cut their affair short, she never would have taken him up on his offer of a ménage. The idea of a threesome had lost its appeal.

But she had to do something! Had to force herself out of her rut and jump back into the game. Thinking about Theo consumed her.

With a heavy heart, Siam climbed down from the carriage and made her way up the granite steps to the manor's entrance.

At the landing, a siege of ill health rushed over her. Her belly positively churned. Vomiting in the middle of a naked pile of thrashing bodies would certainly throw a sickly pall over the proceedings. So as not to squash the orgy's erotic mood, she would need to eat lightly at the preceding banquet, always a sacrifice what with her hearty appetite.

Oh dear. The promise of delicious food turned her thoughts to Theo once more, and that was a bad, *bad*, idea. She must not dwell on that wild bear of a man now. She must put his uncivilized, almost-animalistic style of mating out of her mind. All those wonderful orgasms must be forgotten. For the umpteenth time, she forcibly reminded herself he had only been a fuck, a stellar and fiercely possessive fuck to be sure, but nothing more.

Except love.

A love denied, a love rejected, the love of a sterile lifetime that she had refused. It was too late to go back now and fix a mistake. She could not undo the past.

Nor the hurtful things she had said.

Here she stood, valise in hand, about to embark on a trip of no return. An orgy at a country estate. Every woman's fantasy. But perhaps, no longer hers. At any rate, she would soon find out if indiscriminate sex could remove the thoughts of one man from her mind.

At the ringing chimes, the door swung wide. A manservant at the threshold reached for her bag, precious baby photographs of her first grandchild inside. "Allow me to take that from you, madam."

Not on her life would she surrender her valise. Not with those pictures of little George inside. "I can handle things, thank you."

"Very well, madam. The name is Arthur." He dipped at the waist. "Butler here at Red Oaks. Right this way to your room. Follow me, if you please."

Up the grand staircase she went, and to the left, Arthur leading the way. At the end of a long hall, the butler waved his white-gloved hand at an open door. "If you have any questions, do ring for me, madam."

The etiquette of this particular social situation baffled her. At sixes and sevens as to how to proceed, she floundered, her tongue tied in a knot. What she needed to know from Arthur was –

Which way to the orgy?

Arthur bowed again. "Downstairs in the library, you will find the ball."

Siam smirked. Ball or balls?

No matter. Both applied. Though the invitation made no mention of dancing. A banquet, yes, but no waltzing around the floor. Of course, the invitation made no mention of an orgy either.

"The orchestra is taking a brief break, madam. Music and dancing will resume shortly."

"Thank you, Arthur." But whatever would she wear?

She fingered the stuff of her sedate navy blue suit, appropriate for a weekend in the country. Assuming she would have little use for an extensive wardrobe at an orgy, she had packed sparingly, including only one change of clothes for dinner.

The butler nodded to the four-poster. "Your gown is there, laid out on the bed for you."

"I see." Apparently, her host and hostess had thought of everything, and this mildly disturbed her.

"Shall I send up the maid to help you dress?"

"Thank you. But I can manage on my own."

"Well then, madam, if there is nothing else...?"

"Thank you, Arthur. That will be all."

With a formal bow, the butler left, and blissfully alone at last, she surveyed her environs.

A lovely accommodation, as it turned out, furnished with eighteenth-century period pieces. Sighing at the room's understated country decor, she placed her valise on the scrumptious purple coverlet and removed her lightweight spring outer wrap. A toss sent it sprawling on the bed. She proceeded to change, her mind taken up with family considerations, primarily baby George, not the black gown, which appeared simple and suitable, but nothing more.

Her host and hostess had provided a white jasmine hair decoration, but no appropriate undergarments. An oversight or an intentional hint?

Well, to hell with it! Giddy with naughtiness, she went without a chemise and corset, even a petticoat. Daringly, she left off drawers as well. She did wear silk stockings and garters, however, as they would not get in the way.

After hooking herself into the black gown, an easy-enough accomplishment, as there were only a scant few clasps to hook, she caught a glimpse of herself in the full-length mirror, a mindless glance followed by a much longer perusal, as her reflection startled her.

The black evening gown reminded her of the one worn in John Singer Sargent's provocative portrait, *Madame X*. The study of a woman's sexual abandonment had positively scandalized the Parisian Salon fifteen years earlier. Off the shoulder, with a low-cut bodice that sculpted her less-than-full bosom, the gown's velvet folds clung to her straight-up-and-down shape, rounding her out.

Taking in the image, slowly digesting it, she could still hardly believe her eyes. Was that really her in the looking glass?

For once in her life, she looked womanly, not boyishly waifish. She had curves, not ruler skinniness.

Siam looked over her shoulder into the glass.

How daring. There was a wide expanse of skin showing where the gown's back should have been. Not only was her spine displayed, the crevice in her bottom very nearly showed.

A bit shocked, she stuck the provided flower in place and then looked at herself from the front again.

My, my, my. Her host and hostess had exquisite taste and a flair for the dramatic. The loose petals of the white jasmine pinned within the tight confines of her black upswept hair made for a stunning contrast. The black gown juxtaposed against her starkly pale skin underscored the same dramatic influence. Taken as a whole, her ensemble blatantly celebrated the darkness and lightness of an experienced woman's sensuality.

Notes of a waltz drifted upstairs, and without further ado, Siam made her way to the ball.

"One moment, madam."

The ever-helpful butler appeared from out of nowhere. In his white-gloved hand, he held what appeared to be a blindfold. "A requirement."

She arched a brow imperiously at the strip of black silk.

Evidently, her host and hostess thought bumbling about on the dance floor would add to the gaiety. Though not of the same mind, who was she to question the dictates of an orgy?

She offered her nearly naked back to the butler, and he covered her eyes.

"Wait here," Arthur instructed. "Your escort will take you inside momentarily."

She heard no sounds coming from the room's interior. No heavy breathing. No grunting. No cries of release.

Some orgy.

"Is anyone there?" she called.

No answer.

What was she doing here?

She no more belonged here than she did in the staid receiving rooms of her so-called society friends. Yes, she enjoyed physicality, but she had never been of a promiscuous mind-set, had never once strayed from a loveless marriage, and yet here she was, about to attend an orgy.

What was she trying to prove?

That she was just like her mother—a concubine, a whore, One Hundred Men's Wife?

And what was so wrong with being like her mother?

What had her mother really done, what had been her great sin, other than falling in love unwisely and doing the best she could to ensure the survival of the child born of that love, in a foreign country no less?

Her mother had known no other way.

And in a terrible situation, Mali had loved her.

Siam bit her lip. It was time to forgive, let go. Time to stop hiding her true identity. What had she to be ashamed of? She had raised six girls as her own, and yes, she had loved them the same. Love was not always a prison sentence.

She had to leave. This was not for her. She could couple with different men all night, and the memory of Theo would still remain. Because she loved him.

A light hold on her elbow brought her up short, prevented her from removing her blindfold and departing a place she did not belong.

"So sorry," she whispered in the direction of the touch. "I really must leave. I have changed my mind about my attendance here this evening. This is not for me."

Silence.

"Accepting the invitation to this house party was a bad idea." She shook her head. "The realization has come to me just a tad too late that I need to go home and clear up some misconceptions," she said, speaking more to herself than to her escort. "I need to tell my daughters who their mother really is. I know, because I raised them, that they will understand and accept me for the person I truly am. All these years, I have underestimated their characters. Not anymore." She drew herself up, the blindfold still in place, but seeing more clearly than she had in a very long time. "And then, after I tell my daughters my story, then I need to write someone in Maine a letter. I have been such a silly twit. He needs to know that."

Before she could leave, the unseen someone she had been babbling at took her in his arms, and the rich scent of chocolate filled her senses as well the more subtle scent of vanilla beans.

Her mouth watering, she allowed him to lead her into the intricate steps of a waltz. In his arms, she never once faltered, despite the blindfold covering her eyes. She trusted him implicitly, and when he kissed her lips, she kissed him right back.

The orchestra stopped playing. Footsteps marched from the room. Who needed music when a pretty melody played in her head?

Something probed her lips for entry. Not an erect cock, as she had expected at an orgy, but something favored with vanilla.

Whipped cream! Followed by the unmistakable prickly texture of a strawberry dipped in chocolate.

The juice of the tart fruit dribbled into her cleavage. A tongue lapped the stickiness away.

They danced over to what must have been the hearth, for fiery heat lapped at her exposed skin. Or was that her own fevered flush of desire?

Wrong on both counts. It was him.

He mouthed her throat, then the tops of her breasts. A tug sent the low-cut bodice to her waist.

Save for silk stockings and lace garters, she was bare beneath her scandalous gown. With the bodice about her waist, he captured – or she surrendered – her nipples to him.

His mouth was hot. The suckling strong, just the way she liked. But not enough, not what she truly craved.

He fell off her nipple with a wet and impudent *pop* and took the hint. He raised her skirts and placed soft kisses on her bared body, her belly and mons receiving more than their fair share.

A kiss fell softly on her cunt.

“Ah,” she moaned in rapture as his tongue pushed inside.

She was just so hungry for a man.

Any man?

No. One man, the only person who had ever really known her.

Theo.

He knew the real her, understood her needs, her hungers, her fantasies, her vulnerabilities.

They toppled backward, together, onto what must have been an enormous settee, where she arched into his desperate mouthing. As desperate as he, she pawed at his clothing, his trousers, frantically seeking and finding that wondrous masculine bulge.

Blinded, but no longer quite as silly as before, she released him immediately. After some rapacious fondling, she led him to where he would do the most good.

Face-to-face, he entered her, judiciously, a prudent penetration that nevertheless stole the air from her lungs.

He had yet to move, and yet it felt so good.

And then he did move, and everything turned wild.

Who was the dominant, who the submissive?

They rolled on the settee. At some points, she took the superior position. At other points, he took charge. Artificial differentiations like dominance and submission no longer signified anything. They were just Theo and Siam, following no prescribed patterns, assuming no dictated roles. They forged their own way. Exhilarating. Wanton. Liberating.

Fantasy.

"I. Am. Coming." She wailed the staccato announcement, regardless of who might hear, and then promptly did, screaming, "Theo, Theo, Theo."

When she finished screeching, his weight lifted off her, and she ripped the blindfold from her eyes.

"Theo! I knew it. But where is everyone else?"

"There is no one else. Only you and me. Disappointed?"

"Certainly not." Not now, not forever, she decided as he stood.

Her black evening gown hanging low on her hips like a Siamese sarong, she rose too. Bare-breasted, she faced him.

He smiled at her dishabille. "But you said you wanted sexual adventuring."

"As soon as I stepped foot inside the room, I realized that sort of adventuring was not for me. I am a grandmother, for God's sake!"

"Congratulations. You make a hell of a lusty grandmother."

"Thank you. You were quite wonderful too, sir."

"Listen, Siam, could we talk? Really talk? I want to know everything about you, like how a virgin came to be a grandmother."

Confused but deeply moved, she placed a hand over her madly beating heart. "Yes!"

"Ladies first."

"You did all this just for me?"

He shrugged, said simply, "You wanted fantasy."

"But how did you ever arrange it?" She looked around. "Did you lease the house for the evening?"

"I bought the house for however long you would like to live in it with me. This place will give us a fresh start."

"But how could you afford all this?"

"I might not be as rich as a Rockefeller, but I do make a steady income."

"Busing tables at the inn?"

"I own the inn. And a successful logging camp."

She clutched the black gown to her breasts. "Why keep that information to yourself? Why not tell me?"

"I had my reasons. Private reasons."

Private reasons? She was half-naked, had just lain with him, had extraordinary sex with him, at least she thought it had been extraordinary, and then he spoke about “private reasons” to her.

But the very privacy that irked her now was part of their initial agreement, and so she had no reason to complain.

“Your turn,” she said but still hurt over his shutting her out. An irrational hurt. An unjustified hurt. A hurt she could not explain.

“That scar on the back of your neck. Where did you come by it?”

Immediately, without even thinking about what she did, she covered the scar in question. Her hand stayed there, fluttered there, hiding the white mark on her skin.

Of all the things he might have asked her, he had to ask that, the one question she was unprepared to answer.

Oh, she had an answer. A pat answer. After all, her children had asked about the scar. Many times. And she had a prepared explanation. A lie, of course. She could easily have handed him that same lie.

But for some reason, the lie refused to leave her mouth.

And it occurred to her that she had yet to deal with that scar. Oh, not the cosmetic appearance of it, not the puckered flesh on her neck. The true emotional pain of it, pain quite different from what she had convinced herself was the source all these years.

Suddenly, without warning, it came to her just how much she hated that scar. And why. Not because it was ugly. Though it was indeed ugly. And not because it was a constant reminder of her powerlessness.

My God! In fact, just the opposite, she just that moment realized.

How could she put all that into words? How could she share the truth of her realization until she first made sense of it herself?

She had yet to digest the information, had yet to come to grips with it, had yet to understand its impact on her past. She needed to absorb the revelation that might possibly change the course of the rest of her life.

And there was Theo, looking at her with such expectation.

No! No! No! Please do not, do NOT look at me like that.

She was about to let him down. About to shut him out. About to cause him pain. She grieved for his disappointment, but there was not a damn thing she could do about it. Not about any of it.

Why now?

It was all coming down on her, the storm that had been raging inside her for years. She could not put that on Theo. She could *not!* He had his own pain. She would not burden him with hers. That was not what you did to a person you loved.

She loved him. She loved Theo so much. And she was just such a mess.

On the inside.

On the outside, she looked composed and controlled, while on the inside, she was falling apart.

He thought he knew her! What a laugh. Like everyone else, he knew nothing about her, not the real her.

She had to get out of here. Right now. Right this very moment. She had to return to New York.

Her hand fell from her neck, and she yanked the gown into place. "Will you please have my carriage brought around?"

"Talk to me, Siam. Please?" he yelled after her as she fled.

But regardless of the pleading note that had crept into his voice, she kept walking and refused to look back.

Epilogue

Theo waited outside Josie's lighthouse for the applicant who he hoped and prayed would answer his full-page personal ad in *Licentious* for an amorous rendezvous.

She came slowly toward him, and he could hardly breathe, so great was his impatience to take her in his arms. But calling up all his control, he held steady—rush her, and he would risk losing her for good.

She met his gaze, eye to eye. "I brought the *Licentious* ad with me." She showed him the page ripped from the magazine. "Shall I read it to you, sir?"

Too choked up to speak, he let a nod take the place of words.

She began softly. "WANTED: A 25- to 35-year-old female for a lifetime of happiness in Maine. A retreat seaside setting. Lodging and expenses provided. Ideal spot for lovers. Only a sarong-wearing female need apply. Black hair, slate blue eyes, and an ability to dance at windows required. A romantic entanglement mandated, marriage preferred—*will you marry me, sweetheart?*—but not necessary if the lady finds the question disagreeable. While wanting to spend my life with the applicant, she need not answer personal questions—*so sorry I pressed you for answers*. Reply directly to a particular lighthouse for a face-to-face interview on May first, as the sun goes down on the beach."

A midnight strand broke free of its confinement and whipped across her lush red lips. She haphazardly pinned the escaped tendril behind an ear.

"I agree with most of your terms, sir," she said in a cultured but husky voice, a voice meant for the bedroom, and swayed into an undulating curtsy that raised his straitlaced brows and sent his wayward cock shooting skyward. "But not all of your

terms. I hate to be disagreeable, but I think we should talk about everything under the sun. For instance, this scar on the back of my neck by the hairline—”

He held up his hand. “No need to explain—”

“I want to. I need to. When I just turned twelve, on the way home from school, a man wielding a knife in a Five Points back alley assaulted me.”

“Sweetheart, no!” His control eroded, and he rushed toward her.

She held up her hand. “Let me finish. I have never told anyone, but I want to tell you.”

He fisted his hands at his sides. If she could be strong, so could he. “Go on.”

“For years and years, I blamed my mother for raising me to whore. And I hated her for it. Resented that she thought prostitution was the best I could do. Only recently have I understood that was not her intent at all. Information is power, and she dispensed sexual information, to keep me safe, not to have me follow in her footsteps.

“That day, in that filthy back alley, my mother’s openness about carnality saved my life. Among other methods of penetration, she had discussed orally pleasuring a man. She had also discussed how to cause a man pain. You see, despite what went on around me in the city slums, I remained untouched. In hindsight, I now realize, my mother guarded me like a hawk. But she fell ill, desperately ill, and this one day had been unable to walk me home after school dismissed. My mother died the next day. Otherwise, she *would* have been there, and none of what followed would have happened. I blamed her for dying too. For abandoning me. I was just so angry. And it was easier to nurse that anger than admit how much I loved her and missed her. Allowing that hurt inside me took more courage than I possessed, and so I lived a lie.”

He had to break in there, had to correct this false image she had of herself. “That is patently untrue. You are the most gutsy, most forthright woman I have ever met.”

“How can you say that? My whole life has been a falsehood, an avoidance of the truth to save myself pain.”

“Not so—”

“Please, Theo, I need to do this. I need to tell you this. Let me.”

Once again, in respect for her bravery, he nodded and said no more.

She cleared the anguish from her throat and went on. “The man grabbed me, held a knife to my throat, and ordered me to perform fellatio. He said, if I did not make him come, he would kill me. So I did. I made him climax. And as he did, I pushed away from him and stood, then kneed him in the balls. When he dropped the knife, I escaped, with only a scar.”

Theo groaned deep in his soul. “No—”

“Imagine, if my mother had kept me sheltered, if she had not explained the facts of life? I might have died that day in that filthy back alley. What happened might have scarred me in another way. I might have found man/woman relations abhorrent. But I

never did, owing to my mother. She talked of the beauty of sex. Of the trueness and rightness of love, whatever the cost to oneself."

She took a great sad breath, her shoulders heaving. "But I refused to face that love. To acknowledge it. In my anger and shame and resentment, I refused to understand her point of view. Her optimism, despite horrendous dark circumstances, equipped me for the harrowing days that came later. She set a fine example for me. And I never had the chance to thank her for that.

"After I ran from you our last time together, I went home and held a family meeting with my six daughters. I told them my background, how I came to marry their father, all of it, including how much I love them. I laid everything out for them, made myself vulnerable, on the faith that they would not reject me. And they rewarded my trust in them. Far from rejecting me, to a one, they reaffirmed my place in their lives as their mother."

At the completion of her story, hot brine leached from his eyes and trickled down the sunken planes of his face. He made no move to wipe the tears away. She had stripped her defenses for him, and it was only right that he do the same. "I withheld my ownership of the inn from you because I wanted you to love me for myself. I wanted to be enough for you as I was."

Tears poured from her eyes too. She made no attempt to hide them or wipe them away. "And in my insecurity over my own identity, I did not accept you as you were. My pettiness had to have hurt you. I am so sorry, Theo."

Warm spring breezes picked up. Too afraid to move, to frighten her off, he stayed stuck right where he was. From his separate distance, he said, "There is nothing to be sorry about. You honor me with the truth. But you are far too hard on yourself. As of right now, today, we both start over. We go forward from here."

"How?" she said, her voice heavy with remorse. "How can we possibly do that, Theo?"

"One day at a time. No hurry to make everything fit today. Except us. We need to fit. And we can start by holding one another."

They took a step forward simultaneously, independent of one another, but very much dependent on the trust they felt in one another. Then they both took another step, then another, until, together, they met in the middle of the distance that had separated them and took one another in their arms.

"Just let me—" The admonition went unfinished. Fear still rode him hard. Demand too much, and she might take off all over again. He loved her, had already told her so, and she had run. He could *not* lose her. Not now.

She turned her jaw up to him. Her plump lips came within a scant breath of his mouth. "Your personal ad lacked a certain specific detail, sir. We should clarify the parameters of this encounter before we proceed. For example, let you what?"

From her fearless example came his courage. "Love you."

“Be that your single objective, you have already accomplished your goal, sir. I do accept your love, and I offer you mine in return.”

Their minds might not always meet, but in this one area, they both agreed – they loved one another and always would.

 THE END 

Louisa Trent

I am a writer raised in a family of storytellers. My earliest and fondest memory is of my Irish Nana relating a mystical story of a man looking in a window upon a beautiful lady whose long silvery hair swept the floor as she walked. With a simple telling, my grandmother drew me into her tale. A man. A woman. A forbidden love that wouldn't die. From opening word to shivery conclusion, I lived that story with her. Many years later, I'm still awed by the spell of the fantasy world she created with only the dip and swell of her voice.

There's power in words. Hope in love stories. Joy in a happy ending. I'm proud to carry on my family's storytelling tradition.

Visit Louisa on the Web at www.louisatrent.com.