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## ***Chapter One***

A chill breeze snaked around Miranda Hollander's bare legs as she lay in bed. Outside her bedroom window, a fierce winter storm ravaged Long Island's north shore, covering it with a glistening white blanket of snow. The large crystal flakes swirled and danced in the wind, melting as they landed against the windowpane, forming a hazy barrier between her and the world outside.

A cruel world.

Miranda shuddered as the icy breeze crept up her legs. Reaching for the covers, she wrapped them around her body, her movements jerky and restless. She turned on her side, settling her head against the pillow. Soon, her breathing grew deep and even, her mind drifting into darkness, a haven of dream-filled slumber. The comforter slid from her shoulder, inching down her arm, trailing over her hip and legs.

Miranda jerked it back up, tucking it around her shoulders again, her brows knit into a frown as she tugged on the edge of the coverlet.

A minute went by; then another. Miranda's mind slid into a sleepy, hazy paradise. She stood on an open field, the fresh fragrance of the newly mown grass drifting by her nose. Delighting in the smell, she lifted her hand to shield her eyes from the bright sun and noticed a small boy in the distance. He ran toward her, laughing as his tiny legs ate up the ground beneath him. Joy bubbled up inside her as she ran to meet him; her arms open wide. She longed to gather him close, to cuddle him, to run her fingers through his soft shiny hair, to sing him a lullaby.

But the more she ran, the further he drifted away. Her frustrated cry matched the wind's fierce howl outside her window. The wail tore through her, the pain of loss and heartache like a knife, piercing her fragile emotional curtain. She tugged the covers around her in an attempt to warm her body, her mind drifting back into sleep's haven.

The mattress dipped beside her, then icy fingers danced across her cheeks and nose. Miranda reached for the coverlet, patting the mattress on either side of her legs, only to discover that her warm covering had disappeared.

Miranda jerked awake, focusing on the figure next to her. A woman, dressed in a long white gown sat on the edge of her bed.

Miranda lifted her head from her pillow. “Serena?”

No answer.

Outside, a cloud drifted away from the moon. Soft light glowed through the icy fog lining the windowpane, allowing Miranda to see the outline of the woman’s face, shrouded by a thin, tattered veil.

“Serena, why are you dressed like that?” Miranda blinked once, her eyes adjusting to the darkness.

The veiled woman remained seated on the edge of the bed, a bouquet of white roses in her hands.

*Strange.*

“What’s with the flowers?” Miranda asked.

The pale blossoms radiated an eerie glow, as a blue-white light seemed to emanate from the center of each wilted petal.

Miranda leaned forward and touched her friend’s arm, her heart racing as she watched her hand glide through Serena’s forearm, connecting with nothing but icy air.

Miranda’s eyes widened when Serena’s fingers touched her hand but all Miranda felt was the bone-chilling cold.

Serena leaned down, her face level with Miranda’s. Her frigid breath swirled across Miranda’s cheek; its chill sending shivers down her spine.

“Are you sick?” Miranda whispered.

“*Miraaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaanda....*”

Her name drifted through the darkened bedroom, echoing in every corner. The hair on the back of Miranda’s neck rose, followed by small bumps that lined her arms. Her skin prickled in response.

“*Miraaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaanda...*”

“Serena, stop it! You’re frightening me.” Miranda sat up, wrenching her hand from the icy cold surrounding it. She pulled the covers up to her chin, her back pressing against the headboard, her body trembling.

Serena snatched the covers away, exposing Miranda to the cold air.

*“He’s coming, Miranda.”*

Miranda’s body shook violently. It didn’t sound like her friend at all. Who was this woman? Miranda looked around for something, anything she could use to defend herself against this stranger...this intruder. She reached over and grabbed the water pitcher on her nightstand, hurling it straight at the woman’s head.

It sailed through her, landing on the carpet at the end of the bed. Miranda opened her mouth to scream when the strange woman spoke again in that low, monotone voice.

*“He’s coming.”*

“Who’s coming?” Miranda whispered, swallowing the bile that rose in her throat; it burned as it made its way back down to her stomach. The police never caught Jordan’s murderer. Is that who the woman spoke of?

Miranda’s breath escaped her lungs, forming small white puffs in the air around her. She trembled as the cold permeated every pore, its icy fingers digging into her tender flesh.

Her bedroom door opened, the wood creaking against the hinges. Then a familiar voice from childhood touched her ears.

“Miranda, are you okay?”

Her eyes flew to the doorway where the lone figure of a woman stood, a candle in her hand.

*Serena!*

Miranda’s eyes widened as the bed dipped once more. The strange woman rose to her feet, her tattered veil brushing Miranda’s cheek as she swirled before her, vanishing into thin air.

Miranda heard a scream, a loud piercing wail, only to realize it came from her.

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“Miranda!”

Miranda refused to open her eyes. She kept them closed, squeezing them shut as fear took over her mind and body. *Who was that woman?*

Firm, yet gentle hands gripped her shoulders. “Miranda, it’s me, Serena. What’s wrong? Were you dreaming again?”

Miranda cracked one eye open and peeked at Serena Masters, her best friend. When she found the courage to open both eyes, she stared at Serena’s calm face, relishing the sight of the familiar freckles that dotted Serena’s cheeks, made plump by her pregnancy. Long, red, curly hair hung past her shoulders, her big green eyes like saucers in the dim light of the bedroom.

Miranda shook her head and sighed. “I guess I must have been dreaming.”

Jordan’s happy, smiling face came to the forefront of her mind. A memory surfaced of the last time she’d seen him. Miranda drove him to school that morning, just like she always did, but this last time, Jordan didn’t want his usual hug, claiming he was ‘too big’ for such displays of affection...

She wished he were here now. Miranda bit her lower lip to keep her tears at bay. If Jordan were here now, she’d hug him to pieces—she wouldn’t care how much he complained or how grown-up he thought he was. Miranda pushed those memories aside, like she always did, along with thoughts of the strange woman who visited her room.

Serena placed her candle on the nightstand. Its glow lit the room, the slight breeze made the flame sputter, sending a small plume of smoke upwards. “This house is so drafty.” She shuddered, and drew her robe around her swollen belly, then reached down to pick up the water pitcher lying on the carpet.

“I-I...I’m sorry. I, uh, dropped that.”

*Serena will think I’m totally bonkers if I tell her what I thought I saw!*

Serena walked over to the nightstand, placing the pitcher on the polished wood. “It must have been a helluva dream.”

Miranda sighed. She never could hide anything from Serena. “They always are.”

“Were you dreaming about Jordan again?”

*Among other things.*

Miranda nodded, feeling tears well at the mention of Jordan's name. He would have celebrated his ninth birthday two weeks ago, had she only paid attention—if she had only listened to her gut instincts about that man she saw at Jordan's school days before the little boy's murder.

Miranda gazed at her very pregnant friend, needing to feel life, needing to feel alive. She reached out a hand and laid it over Serena's distended belly, grinning when she felt a knock against her open palm.

"He kicked me!"

Serena laughed. "I swear he's going to be a soccer player when he grows up." She gave Miranda a long look. "I'm so glad you're here."

"Me, too." Miranda leaned back, bracing her shoulders against the headboard. As she did, Serena fluffed the pillows behind her head, smiling as her gaze traveled to Miranda's flannel-clad shoulders. "If you stay with us long enough, we'll get some warmer weather. I promise." Serena smiled.

Miranda shuddered as the cold air swirled around her. "I hate flannel," she sighed. She gave her friend a measured look. "This is a trick on your part to keep me out of that lingerie I like to wear to bed, isn't it? You're keeping it extra cold tonight so I'll wear this ugly thing." She plucked at the sleeve of the gray flannel gown.

Serena's grin widened. "Absolutely. I'm keeping it extra chilly so that my stunning, usually well-dressed friend can make an awful fashion statement."

Miranda smiled back, despite the cold.

Serena fingered the collar of Miranda's nightgown. "We could sew some lace on here, on the sleeves and the hem, too. You'll look downright...sexy."

Miranda rolled her eyes. "I'll look like my grandmother." She shook her head. "Come to think of it, I don't think my grandmother ever wore flannel."

Serena laughed out loud, the bright tinkling sound drifting by Miranda's ears.

"I just wish you were here under better circumstances." Serena told her as she pulled the covers over Miranda's shivering body. "I wish—" She chewed her lower lip.

"What?" Miranda raised a brow.

"That things could be as easy as they once were. Like when we were kids."

Miranda felt a lump form in her throat. "So do I."

She reached over to turn the little knob on the neck of her bedside lamp, but the room remained shrouded in darkness, the only light coming from the moon outside and Serena's candle.

"That's what I came to tell you. The power's out and," Serena shuddered. "As you can see, the boiler is, too. We've got no heat."

Miranda gazed outside where the snow still swirled. "No wonder it's so cold."

"I wanted to make sure you had a working flashlight." Serena opened a drawer in the nightstand, withdrawing a small flashlight, flicking a button on the side with her thumb and aiming a narrow beam of light at Miranda. "It works. I'm glad." She laid it down on the nightstand.

Miranda snuggled against the headboard. "I can't thank you enough, and your Aunt Clarice, for allowing me to stay here with you."

Just then, an elderly woman entered Miranda's bedroom, her curly white hair bobbing in the light of the candle she carried.

"Aunt Clarice, are you still up?" Serena frowned.

"I'm waiting for that new handy man to arrive—that Grady Smith."

Serena glanced at the clock on Miranda's nightstand. "Thank goodness this is battery-operated." She squinted then her eyes grew wide. "Oh my, it's three a.m.!"

"Yes, I know," Clarice replied, setting her candle down on the nightstand next to Serena's. "I imagine Mr. Smith is having some trip in this weather." She glanced outside. "Brrrrr." Clarice shuddered and drew her plaid shawl around her shoulders. "I called the power company. The recording said there'll be delays in power restoration of up to eight hours."

Serena grinned at Miranda. "We could have a pajama party, just like we used to do when we were kids."

Miranda laughed, secretly wishing she could turn back the clock. "Yes, we could." She sighed. "I miss those days."

Serena patted her hand. "So do I."



“Well,” Clarice rose from the bed. “Why don’t you two stay up here? I’ll go back down to the kitchen and wait for Grady.”

Serena rose from the bed. “I won’t let you wait alone, not at this hour, Aunt Clarice.”

“I will, too, Ms. Masters.” Miranda flipped back the comforter and swung her legs over the side of the bed.

Clarice held up a hand, palm out. “First of all, I want you to call me Aunt Clarice.”

Miranda felt pole-axed. She had no one; not a soul in the world cared if she lived or died, except for Serena, and now, this sweet woman, Clarice. After Jordan’s murder, her marriage died, too. Alex, her ex, couldn’t stand the pressure—or her, apparently. She really couldn’t blame him. She cried for days after Jordan died.

Guilt. It ate away at her. If only she hadn’t taken a day off. If only she had driven Jordan to school instead of the housekeeper...if only.

*If only...*

Her eyes filled as she gazed at Serena’s elderly aunt. “I’d love to call you Aunt Clarice.”

Clarice smiled then walked over to Miranda, a stern look erasing her earlier grin. “Now, young lady. Get back in that bed and get some rest.” Miranda swung her legs up onto the mattress, surrendering to the mothering. “Serena will wait with me for a little while.”

Serena sighed. “Aunt Clarice, I’ll wait with you until Grady arrives.”

“Nonsense,” she replied, tucking Miranda in. “I’ll be fine.”

Serena and Miranda passed a knowing look.

“I’m glad you’re here, you darling girl.” Clarice smoothed back a few locks of hair that grazed Miranda’s cheek. “Bride’s Inn will give you safe harbor,” Clarice whispered. “And we will, too.” She grabbed her candle.

Serena did the same. “Sleep tight, my friend.”

The two women walked out the door, leaving Miranda alone once more, her face awash with tears.

Soon, her body warmed beneath the bed covers. She drifted into a deep slumber, her mind filled with strange dreams.

*He's coming...*

Sometime later, she heard the creak of her bedroom door.

## Chapter Two

Jake Hunter gripped the steering wheel as he navigated his Jeep on the narrow, winding road that lead to Bride's Inn. Around him, the snow swirled in a gusty wind, as a blinding blizzard pelted Long Island with snow. A Bluetooth lay imbedded against his ear as he drove through the night. He slid his foot to the brake as he slowed the big Jeep, maneuvering a curve in the road.

A voice came over the Bluetooth, echoing in Jake's ear. "I think you should come back to the office, this is crazy. To be out on a night like this!"

Jake glanced at the newspaper article sticking out from his briefcase on the seat next to him. The title read, '*Mysterious Lady in White foils robbery at seventy-year-old Long Island, Gold Coast mansion.*'

Gold Coast. Mansion. Those words rang in his head as he inched his Jeep up a steep hill.

"Jake, it isn't worth it. Turn around and go home."

He swerved, avoiding something in the road then continued his trek up the hill. "I'm almost there, Mike," Jake replied, narrowing his eyes when the Jeep cleared the top of an incline. Soon, a large three-story home came into view. The road and surrounding area lay in darkness, but up ahead Jake thought he saw a light flicker in a first-floor window. Like a welcoming beacon, a candle glowed, beckoning him. "I can see Bride's Inn now. It's..."

"What?" Mike asked.

Jake shook his head. "Well, it's dark, but from what I can make out, it's one of the most beautiful homes I've ever seen." He pulled the Jeep into the long drive, maneuvering through the deep snow.

*Thank God for four-wheel drive!*

Mike sighed. "It damn well should be for all the effort you're putting into this."

Jake couldn't say what made him obsess about Bride's Inn. Maybe his burning curiosity to see its resident ghost, 'the Lady in White,' or maybe he just needed a change. Something to fill the empty void his wife's death had created.

His eyes opened wide when he saw a tree in his headlights. Jake hit the brakes, his car careening out of control. When it stopped, he realized he had plowed into a deep pile of snow that drifted near the main entrance to the house.

"Jake? You there?"

Jake sighed into his mouthpiece. "Yeah." He gripped the steering wheel and glanced around. He sat back against the seat. "I'm here. Literally. The front end of my Jeep is sitting in a snow drift." He shook his head.

"Shit. I knew it. Just—"

"I'm fine, Mike."

Mike blew out a long-suffering sigh. "You're nuts. Now what are you going to do? Its three thirty in the morning."

Jake sat up when he saw the front door to Bride's Inn open. An elderly woman and a younger, very pregnant one stood in the doorway. Candles glowed in their hands as they peered outside.

"I'm in luck," Jake crowed. "Someone's home. I'll talk to you later."

Mike yawned. "Make that a lot later." He ended the call.

Jake ripped the Bluetooth from his ear and opened the driver's side door, his feet landing in a foot and a half of snow.

The elderly woman lifted a hand, placing it around her candle as Jake approached. "Mr. Smith! We're so glad you made it. We were getting worried."

Jake stopped, the snow swirling around him as he gazed at the women.

*Mr. Smith? Who in hell was Mr. Smith?*

He trekked through the snow, finally stopping at the front door.

"Seth told us to expect you this evening." The elderly woman with the white hair opened the door, beckoning him to enter. She smiled at him, her round face glowing in the light of the candle. "Would you rather I call you Grady?"

Grady, he thought...Grady. That would suit him just fine.

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Serena glanced out the front window, her eyes settling on the Jeep outside. She frowned. “What happened, Mr. Smith?”

Jake eyed the tall, cool redhead. She was something, and pregnant, to boot. He schooled his features. “I swerved. The front’s stuck in that drift, but I think everything’s okay.”

Serena nodded. “I’m glad. You should have waited until the snow let up to come out here.”

Jake looked around. The large house was dark and quiet and...freezing. “Seems like I got here just in time.”

“Yes, well,” Clarice held up a candle. “The electric’s out. I called the power authority, but the recording said to expect delays.”

“You have a generator?”

“I uh, what?” Clarice frowned. “No, we don’t. Seth said we’re going to get one, but,” she shrugged. “As you can see, we don’t.”

Jake wondered who in hell Seth was and how he could let two women stay unprotected in a drafty old house—one that was now freezing cold.

“Seth told us you know a lot about old houses. That’s why he hired you.”

Oh yeah, he sure did. Like how much the land was worth that this old inn sat on.

“I’m glad you’re here.” Clarice patted his arm. “And so is Seth. He says it put his mind at ease to know you would be here to look after everything.”

He played along. “I’ve worked on lots of old houses. If you want, I can check out the boiler and...”

“We can attend to everything in the morning. For now, I think we should all get some rest.” Clarice told him.

He glanced around. “You sure the pipes in this old place aren’t frozen?”

Clarice shrugged. “I’m sure. I think Seth wrapped them or something.”

*Okay, so this Seth wasn’t a total asshole.*

“My nephew does what he can.”

Jake's eyes flew to hers. What was she, a mind reader? But this was good. Now he knew that Seth was the old woman's nephew.

And he obviously wouldn't be back for a while.

Perfect.

"I'm sure he does, ma'am." He nodded at Clarice. The woman named Serena kept her big green eyes fixed on him.

"Well, I for one am off to bed. Serena, you should be, too. Here's a candle for you, Grady. Now, you really don't mind if I call you Grady, do you?"

"That's fine, ma'am."

"Your room's on the third floor," Clarice told him. "Second one on the right."

He grabbed the candle from the woman named Clarice and followed them through the darkened kitchen and hallway, then onto the staircase. Jake's feet skimmed across the treads on the stairs, his step quick and light.

What a staircase! The graceful, carved banister curved upwards, the stair treads wide and welcoming. If only it wasn't snowing, he'd love to see the view from the second floor.

"Good night, Grady," Clarice called out as she and Serena made their way to their rooms on the second floor.

"Night," he replied as he trudged up the stairs. Man, it was a long trek! His earlier adrenaline rush had disappeared, leaving fatigue in its wake.

"Second room on the left," he muttered, as his mind surrendered to an all-encompassing feeling of exhaustion. "Second room on the left," he repeated around a yawn. Finally, he stopped in front of his room and entered. He lifted the candle, his eyes adjusting to the darkness, its glow lighting the walls.

The candle sputtered as a breeze kicked up, then the flame died.

"Shit," he muttered. His eyes scanned the darkened room. Jake started forward only to bump into something hard and solid.

"Son of a bitch," he growled, rubbing his knee.

He kept walking. When his knees bumped something soft, he reached down and patted what felt like a mattress.

Thank God. A soft, comfortable bed.

He stripped out of his cold, wet jeans then lifted the coverlet, sliding into bed, amazed at the warmth. He sighed blissfully.

He drifted into a deep slumber, feeling something warm and soft next to him. Jake inhaled a wonderful odor. The floral fragrance filled his nose, relaxing his body even more.

He dreamt of a woman: a soft, fragrant woman, a woman with long dark hair, a woman whose legs brushed his as they slept together, cocooned in the wide bed, her fanny nestled in his groin, rubbing against his cock...

He shifted, feeling his shaft harden and swell, his body restless and wanting.

Jake woke that morning to bright sun streaming in through his windows. Then he heard the sound of breathing, and a soft little snore. He looked down onto a dark, shiny head. Long, black, silky hair drifted across his arms and chest, some of the strands tickling his nose. It twitched in response, as well as the aroused organ jutting out between his legs.

His body leapt into overdrive when he felt the brush of a feminine mound against his cock. Jake looked down to see a tiny, pink toe run up and down his leg, sending a shiver of longing down his spine. She shifted, her mound brushing his groin. Jake's member swelled in response. He maneuvered his body, being careful not to wake the nymph that laying sleeping in his arms.

He gritted his teeth, holding back the urge to rub the tip of his hardened shaft against her clit. She moved restlessly, her toes curling against his legs. With each pass of her body against his, he felt his mind spin out of control, awash in carnal thoughts. Sweat beaded on his forehead when she slid against his now rock-hard shaft. The flannel gown she wore rose above her knees. His eyes crossed when he felt the silk of some very skimpy panties slide across his thighs.

The lovely black-haired nymph he cradled in his arms moaned, her soft sigh of pleasure making his entire body hard as stone. A jolt of pure lust tore through his body like a lightning bolt. He wanted to push into her, imagining the feel of her hot, slick wet center as he slid inside, her walls squeezing around his member.

Sweat trickled down his back. He didn't want to wake his lovely nymph, but the need to drive into her grew powerful. Jake shifted once more in an attempt to dislodge his body from hers. The aroma of her essence, combined with her sweet, floral scent, sent his senses into a tailspin of sensual pleasure.

The next thing he saw was a pair of violet eyes, their namesake color shown bright as the woman who lay nestled in his arms stared up at him.

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Miranda had the most wonderful dream about a man whose lean, hard body held hers captive. She ran her toe up his calf, marveling at the muscled feel. Like a sleek jungle cat, his legs felt long, sleek...firm. He entwined his legs with hers, his muscled thighs pinning hers to the bed, yet she had no fear.

He moved, shifting his sleek body to accommodate hers. Miranda felt something hard and stiff nudge the cleft between her thighs. Soon, she felt the hard, hot length of him pulse against her mound.

Her jungle cat's arms held her close to his chest, a chest, she noticed as she slid one eye open to gaze at it through the opening of his button-down shirt, which had a dusting of golden hair across its hard angles and planes. A chest she wanted to kiss.

Miranda pushed his shirt aside and nuzzled her face against his pecs, her tongue snaking out to tease and taunt the tiny copper tip of his nipple. As he moved against her, his stiff member nudged her opening. Instead of driving into her like her ex-husband did, causing her immeasurable pain, her dream man held back, kissing her face slowly, lazily, like a giant feline, his lips soft and warm. They grazed her chin, the corner of her mouth, before sliding across hers.

Miranda's eyes popped open to see a pair of golden eyes staring back at her. A bronzed face held a cat-like grin as he moved against her, causing a deep, throbbing ache to form at her very center. Tawny, shaggy blonde hair lay swept back from what she considered to be a high, noble forehead.

"Well hello, there." His deep, languid voice shot through her.

"Oh my God!" she cried out, shoving against him. Miranda managed to disengage her body from his, but felt bereft as she slid away from him.



Who was he, she thought wildly, and what was he doing in her room?

He rolled to his side, propping his head in his hand, his body rising up on his elbow. The man watched her, as though she were his prey.

Her breath hitched when her eyes met his golden ones. They had a glow, a...

"No, oh, no, no." She placed a hand over her mouth when she realized she gazed at a half-clad man. A beautiful, half-clad man. In her bed. The bed sheet dipped below his waist and hips, where her eyes landed on the pair of briefs. She could see the outline of his swollen shaft and the large sac between his bare, muscled thighs.

From the corner of her eye she saw a pair of jeans on the floor next to the bed. His gaze followed hers, then his eyes settled on her once more. "They were wet, I uh, didn't want to sleep in damp clothing." He raised one tawny brow and grinned. "I guess introductions are in order."

She swallowed hard, the scream lodged in her throat.

"Ja...I uh...Grady...Grady Smith."

That name sounded familiar.

He patted the empty space next to him. Miranda noticed his long fingers and clipped nails on his large hand. She shivered, but Miranda couldn't be sure in that moment if it was from the chill in the air or the heated look that came from his golden tiger's eyes.

"Come back to bed." Again he patted the empty space. "And tell me your name."

She shook her head, no.

He grinned. "Does that mean 'no you won't come back to bed' or 'no you won't tell me your name?'"

She inched away from him, the coverlet and sheets tangling around her legs.

"At least tell me your name."

Miranda saw the glint in those golden eyes and the light dusting of tawny, early-morning stubble around his sculpted chin.

"I told you mine, it's only fair."

His deep voice was like an elixir, a balm for her troubled mind. Her body relaxed, including her hands, and that's when the sheet slid from her breasts.

A deep, golden glow lit his eyes from within. Miranda caught him staring at her breasts, her body reacting to his perusal, her nipples peaking beneath her gray flannel gown in response to his scorching look.

“Lovely,” he muttered thickly, reaching out to touch them, but he snatched his hand back. “I’m sorry,” he said, his voice sheepish. “But you have to admit, this is a rather um, embarrassing situation we’re in.”

She inched further away then lost her balance, falling over to land in a heap of twisted linen. When she tried to rise up off the floor, she fell over again, her face heating when her gown twisted in the bedcovers, causing the gray flannel to rise up her legs, completely exposing her bottom to his prying eyes.

*Run! Run and get help...*

When she turned, the intruder stood in front of her, his hand extended in her direction. “I’m sorry,” he murmured. “I didn’t mean to scare you.”

“Like hell you didn’t!” She fought the tangle of bed covers, but the more she twisted and turned the more the covers wrapped around her. Panic filled her when he approached again, extending that same long-fingered hand in her direction.

“Please let me help you, I’ll...”

Tears sprang to her eyes when she jammed her toes against the leg of a small table in the middle of the room. “Ow!” she cried out as stabbing pain tore through her foot.

“For God sake, I’m not going to hurt you. Just let me help you up.” He narrowed his eyes. “What are staring at?” Then he looked down, at the pair of briefs that barely covered his private parts. “Shit,” he mumbled, reaching for his discarded jeans on the floor.

When he turned around she got a good look at his tight, round backside and lean hips. Her hormones soared into overdrive as fear and fascination filled her mind and body. She couldn’t stop staring.

“I’m sorry,” he turned and gazed in her direction, but she couldn’t move. Fear held her captive. “Is this better?” he asked, his deep voice soft, as he stood before her fully dressed.

Miranda swallowed back her fear as her eyes traveled upwards, across his long, jean-clad legs. Then he squatted next to her, making swift work of the twisted linens and blanket covering her legs. She rolled to her side and started to rise when she heard him say, “You have the most adorable little bottom.”

She froze at the sound of his deep voice, her body erupting into flames. Glancing in his direction, she saw his large hand reach out, then he snatched it back once more. In one swift movement, she kicked out her foot, hitting him squarely in the chest. He fell backwards with a muffled “Oomph!”

Miranda rose to her feet and ran towards the door. She had her hand on the knob when she heard his deep chuckle.

“Coward.”

She spun on her heel, watching as he rolled onto his side and rose to his feet. “I’m *not* a coward,” her voice vibrated with anger. Oh, but she was, she thought. She was afraid all the time lately.

He sat up, pinning her with his golden gaze. “Why don’t we start over?” He stuck out his hand. “Grady Smith.”

*Grady Smith?*

She swallowed. “The handyman?”

His cat’s grin stretched from ear-to-ear. “That’s me.”

“Oh my God, oh my God!” Her hands flew to her face, her heart racing. “How did you get in here?”

He raised a golden brow. “I think I should be asking you that, shouldn’t I?”

“This is my room.” She stomped her foot. “You’re in *my* room, Mr. Smith, and I’d like you to leave.”

“Well, now.” He sat on the edge of the bed, seemingly unbothered by anything she said or did. “I was told that my room was on the third floor, second door on the right.”

She thought quickly, drawing her brows into a frown then her eyes opened wide. “You idiot!”

“Nobody calls me that,” he growled low and rose from the bed, his approach slow and calculated.

Miranda stood her ground. For some odd reason, she didn’t fear him. What she felt was intense lust as he approached. “Well, I am,” she angled her chin in his direction. “You’re in the wrong room. You went left, instead of right at the top of the grand staircase.”

He stopped and scowled, then his face split into a wide grin. Soon, he started to laugh, the timbre rich and warm. “This is just too funny!” He flopped down into a chair and continued to laugh, his wide shoulders shaking.

“I’m glad *you* think so!” She stalked away, tears burning her eyes. One escaped her eye and fell down her cheek. She swiped it away, sensing him in back of her. He caged her in, yet she had the oddest sensation, as though his big, golden body sheltered her. She turned to face him.

“Hey,” he crooned in that rich, deep voice. “I’m sorry. That’s all I seem to be saying this morning.”

She blew out a shaky breath. “I’m Clarice’s and Serena’s guest, I don’t want them to think—” Her breath hitched.

He reached out, running the tip of his finger across the moisture on her cheek. “What don’t you want them to think?”

Miranda swallowed, her hormones slipping into overdrive when he touched her face. She didn’t think she could bear the exquisite torture of being in this man’s presence one more second.

She flew out of the room before he could say another word.

### *Chapter Three*

That same morning, Grady Smith, a.k.a. Jake Hunter, sipped coffee in Clarice's kitchen. He gazed outside at the snow-covered ground as the white mass of frozen crystals glistened under the sun's bright rays. The strong, dark brew's heady taste and aroma warmed him inside. Glancing at the fire burning in the hearth nearby, Jake congratulated himself on his ingenuity and his one cooking skill: the ability to boil water.

"The power authority said a crew is on the way. They'll be here shortly." Serena flipped her cell phone closed and walked toward a chair near the table. Jake slid it out, helping her ease into the seat. "Thanks," she grinned.

"My pleasure," he murmured, leaning back against a kitchen counter.

"When Seth gets home, he won't believe how big I am," she sighed, settling her back against the chair. Serena patted her swollen belly. "Daddy's coming home soon, sweetheart," she crooned softly, her face alight with expectation and love.

Jake wondered if this Seth knew what a goddamned lucky bastard he was. Nancy had been pregnant—just three months along—when her car rammed into that tree.

He pushed thoughts of his dead wife and child aside, turning away from the painfully beautiful picture Serena's rounded belly made. Jake felt a catch in his throat, sipping a good mouthful of the strong, hot coffee. He swallowed his tears, as well as the coffee, down into his gut.

His thoughts drifted to Bride's Inn. As he gazed around the large kitchen, his mind spun in a hundred different directions. What changes he'd make...the old inn could be a grand place—a place where brides could walk down that beautiful staircase on their perfect wedding day.

*Careful. Don't get too attached.*

“Good morning!” Clarice’s bright, cheery face greeted him next. She glanced at the fireplace. “Well, I see you have a fire going. Wonderful!” Clarice stuck her hands out in front of the burning logs, sighing. “How nice and warm.”

“Good morning, Clarice, Serena.”

Every nerve ending in Jake’s body went on full alert when he heard his lovely nymph’s voice, his cock stirring against his thigh. She stood at the entrance to the kitchen, her long, dark curtain of shiny hair brushed past her shoulders and arms, ending at her waist. Her large purple eyes remained trained on him, even though she greeted Clarice and Serena.

He swore they held challenge, as though she dared him to say something about their little morning tryst.

Clarice gazed out the window. “We’re in luck! Look, the power company’s here.”

Jake glanced outside to see two Long Island Power Authority trucks pull up the drive.

“We’ll just keep that fire going until they leave,” he told Clarice. “It’ll be awhile, I think, before this place heats up.”

She laughed. “You have that right. Seth says we have to do something about the heat. Split the zones or something.”

He was dying to meet this Seth.

He glanced at the wood piled in the grate near the hearth. “You’ve got quite a bit of firewood in there. Did you haul all that in?” He glanced at Serena.

She held up her hands. “Oh no, not me.”

He looked at Clarice.

“Not me.”

His eyes flew to his nymph’s. “You?”

Clarice looked from one to the other. “You’ve met?”

He stuck out his hand. Miranda’s pale face relaxed. “Grady Smith,” he said by way of introduction, marveling at how Miranda schooled her features.

“Miranda Hollander.”

He felt something inside him give way when she said her name.

*Miranda...*

It flowed over him like a warm breeze, melting the ice around his heart. The ice that had formed the day Nancy and his unborn child died.

He grabbed her hand, her long fingers slender and delicate. “Did you?”

“What?” She raised a brow.

He nodded toward the pile of firewood. “Did you haul all that firewood in here?”

“Yes. I did.”

Her clipped tone held a defiant note.

“Don’t do it again.”

Her mouth parted slightly. Jake had the most unholy urge to lean over and kiss it closed.

“As long as I’m around, no one lifts a finger here, understand?” He gazed at all three of them.

Serena grinned hugely. “You’ve got no complaints from me.”

“Or me.” Clarice smiled and patted his arm. “I’m glad Seth sent you to us.”

He felt an odd stirring in the pit of his belly. It was foreign and unfamiliar, something akin to joy. Someone needed him—and it felt damned good.

His dark-haired nymph stood ramrod straight as she poured a cup of coffee. Serena and Clarice became engrossed in a conversation about her pregnancy. He felt a painful twist on his heartstrings as he listened, so he wandered over toward Miranda.

She inched away from him, and stared out the windows, seemingly absorbed in watching the crew and trucks outside.

Jake moved closer, his hip brushing hers. “Don’t worry,” he whispered over the rim of his coffee mug. “It’ll be our little secret.”

Two bright red spots of color lined her cheeks. “It wasn’t *my* fault, it was yours,” she whispered, her big purple eyes blazing with anger. “You should have...”

He raised a brow and grinned. “What?”

She glanced toward Serena and Clarice, their heads bent together in conversation. “You should have left the bed the minute you knew I was there.”

“I uh, didn’t exactly know anyone was in it. At least, not until morning.”

She snorted. "Right. Sure you didn't."

He sighed. "For your information, sweetheart, *you* were the one who came onto me."

Her eyes opened wide, so did her mouth. She glanced at Clarice and Serena, lowering her voice to a heated whisper. "I did no such thing."

He grinned, enjoying the banter. She had such a lovely flush to her pale, oval face. Her high cheekbones stood out prominently as she spoke.

"Th-the minute you felt anything, you should have said something."

Jake folded his arms across his chest. "You're right."

"I...what?"

"I said you're right. I should have told you how much I enjoyed it." He reached out and brushed a stray lock of hair from her cheek. "Didn't you?"

She gasped. "Th-that has n-nothing to do with it!"

Jake whispered in her ear. "Sure it does. You liked me in your bed. Admit it."

She leaned a hip against the counter, imitating his stance. "You'd like that, wouldn't you?"

He shrugged nonchalantly, but his heart raced, not wanting to admit how much her opinion suddenly mattered.

She grinned—it was a wide, beautiful smile. He felt his heart crack open at the sight. "It wasn't so bad," she replied, smug. "Could have been better."

He chuckled low. "That was because we didn't finish, nymph. Next time, I'll take you to heaven and back."

He glanced at the two women at the table. Clarice rose to her feet, followed by Serena. "Well, why don't you show Grady around, Miranda?"

Miranda's violet eyes flew to Clarice's. "Me? Why me?"

Serena patted her belly, but her big green eyes danced. "I'm feeling just a bit peaked this morning."

Miranda's face fell, but again Jake marveled at how she kept her real emotions hidden as she schooled her features. He wondered just how many times she had done that in her life and why.



She gave Serena a small smile. "Of course. You rest. I'll show Mr. Sm...I mean, Grady, around. He should get started right away on all the chores you need him to do. Clarice, do you have that list Seth prepared?"

"Right here in my pocket." Clarice drew out what Jake considered to be the longest list he'd ever seen.

Miranda walked over and took it from Clarice, then glanced at Jake. "Ready?" She raised one silky dark brow. "There's a lot to get done and I'm sure you want to start right away."

He watched Serena whisper something to Miranda, then Miranda shake her head in response. Serena and Clarice left the kitchen, leaving him alone with her. When she turned, he saw her beautiful bottom outlined by her sleek, dark trousers.

His member twitched. Jake couldn't recall the last time the sight of a woman's backside turned him on so much.

Miranda grabbed her coffee mug from the counter and took a seat at the table.

"Well, aren't you going to show me around?" he asked.

She gave him a sweet smile, but the steel in her voice belied her look. "You've already seen enough this morning."

He threw back his head and laughed. God, it felt good.

"And I'm sure a skilled handyman like you can find your own way around."

Jake angled his head and frowned. "You got something against me being a handyman?"

She shook her head and sighed. "No. But..."

"What?"

Miranda leaned back in her chair and folded her arms across her breasts. God, he remembered how those felt when she had shifted her full weight on him in the bed. Their small, hard tips skimmed his chest...

"I just had a different picture of you in my mind."

He beetled his brows, his heart pounding. "How so?"

She waved a hand through the air. “Just...oh, I don’t know. Look.” She grabbed her mug again. “I’d like to finish my coffee in peace, if you don’t mind. Here’s the list.” She flung it in his direction. “You’ve got a lot to do, Grady, so go do it.”

He snatched it from her hand. “I meant what I said. I don’t want you hauling in any more wood.”

Miranda took a sip of her coffee. “I do as I please,” she replied.

He raised a brow. “Not while I’m here. Seth asked me to watch over everyone, and I intend to do just that.”

She placed her mug down. Its bottom hit the table with a loud smack. “I’m merely a guest here, Mr. Smith. You can be Serena and Clarice’s watchdog if you’d like, but not mine.”

He laughed. “Stubborn, aren’t you?”

She sighed. “Look, what I am or what I’m not is no concern of yours.”

“Oh, but it is, Miranda. Our little ‘meeting’ this morning proved it.”

Her lovely face turned beet red, her large violet eyes a smoky purple. Jake didn’t want to admit how much it turned him on to get her riled.

“How dare you?” Miranda’s voice held a low, angry note.

He walked over and leaned down until they were nose-to-nose. The smell of her perfume drifted by his nostrils, heating his blood. “I’ll dare just about anything.” He felt wild, reckless...as though being in the same room with her brought out some base, animal instinct that had lain dormant.

“I’ll haul wood,” her breasts rose and fell with every word she spoke, “and anything else I choose.”

His eyes met hers squarely. At the same time, a burgeoning feeling of lust grew inside him when he heard her challenging tone. “You haul one piece of wood, one stick, one twig and I’ll haul that adorable fanny of yours over my knee.”

Her breath hitched and her eyes dilated. Jake felt his cock spring to life.

“You won’t sit for a week.”

She rose from the table, but her body trembled. Oh, how he wanted to make her tremble in bed, too!

Before she could say another word, he snatched her up into his arms, and kissed her full on the mouth. She tasted like sweet coffee and...

“Ow!” A strange, metallic taste filled his mouth. Placing a finger against his lower lip, he touched it, feeling blood pool in the fleshy part inside.

Damn, but he itched to deliver that spanking as he tried to stem the flow of blood. He took a step toward Miranda, but she sauntered away, her voice ringing in his ears. “Have a pleasant day, Mr. Smith.”

“The name’s Grady!” he called out, grinning. He didn’t care that his lip bled like a stuck pig.

He hadn’t felt this good in years.

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Miranda stopped outside in the hall, her heart beating wildly, her pulse racing out of control. She looked back to see if Grady had followed her.

He hadn’t.

She hurried down the long hallway, lest he see her true reaction. Her tiger prince, that golden man, had the power to make her body buzz with just a few words and only one kiss! She had the strangest feeling that he toyed with her, enjoying her smug rejection. He thought no more of her protests than he would of swatting a fly.

Miranda had to stop and catch her breath, remembering what his large body felt like in bed. She felt hot, then cold and she tingled all over.

She trembled at the thought of him smacking her bottom. The idea of lying across his thighs awakened feelings hidden inside her all the years she was married to Alex.

Oh, she was definitely losing it! Over Clarice’s handyman, for God’s sake.

She should stay away from him, knowing her track record of relationships and the sad secret she held tucked deep inside her. She heard Grady whistling as he came down the hall. Her heartbeat quickened, her flight or fight response kicking in.

Miranda chose flight; suddenly realizing she had done that for most of life.

## ***Chapter Four***

The days passed, but not Miranda's attraction for Grady Smith, a man who fired her temper, her body...and her emotions. Snuggled on the cushion of the window seat in her bedroom, she gazed outside, her eyes drawn to Grady's tall, golden form as he chopped wood. Since the blizzard, the mid-winter air temperature had risen to an unprecedented sixty degrees. All around the grounds of Bride's Inn, puddles of melting snow dotted the landscape. Miranda watched as Grady removed his jacket, then his shirt. Her breath caught at the sight of the muscles rippling across his back when he bent to pick up the axe. As he swung the blade down, he cut the log in two, tossing the pieces onto the woodpile. He did that several times then stopped, rising to his full height to wipe his brow. His eyes traveled upwards to where she sat near the window then he grinned a knowing, feline smile.

She quickly averted her gaze, moving from the window seat, hoping to calm the traitorous beat of her heart.

This time, she stood near the long drapes, pushing one aside to peek out at Grady. The afternoon sun shone down on him, his golden, tawny head of shaggy blonde hair glinted in the light. Miranda wished she could run her fingers through that thick mane of hair. Her fingers tingled, making her grip the heavy curtain to stop the buzzing she felt in their tips. That buzz traveled through her body as she took in the sight of Grady's lean hips and long legs outlined by a pair of comfortable-looking jeans, his feet encased in a pair of work boots.

"He is something, isn't he?" Miranda turned to see Serena standing beside her. "He's been such a help. Aunt Clarice can't stop talking about him."

"Have you heard from Seth?" Miranda took a seat in a nearby chair.

Serena sat down on the window seat, pulling a long sweater across her swollen belly. “I just got off the phone with him. He said he’ll be home in a few days. The training is almost finished.”

Miranda smiled, delighting in her friend’s happiness. “That’s wonderful, Serena.”

“What’s wonderful is the fact that he’s going to be close to home. Working for the DEA means he’ll be right here on Long Island. I couldn’t be happier.” Serena angled her head. “Want to go into town and do some shopping? I’d like to get a few things for the baby, and then we could go for a walk. It’s certainly warm enough.” Serena blushed. “I’m sorry. I-I must sound silly, but I’m just so glad you’re here.”

Miranda smiled. Maybe she did need to get out. Get some air. Clear her head of all her crazy, lustful thoughts of Grady Smith. She peered through a small opening in the drapes and saw his broad back glistening with sweat as he chopped the logs. A slight breeze kicked up, ruffling his hair. He stopped chopping long enough to put on his shirt, pulling it across his chest. Miranda had to stifle the urge to shout, ‘No!’ as he covered his naked torso. Then he picked up the axe and continued his work.

“A trip to town sounds wonderful,” Miranda replied. Maybe spending time with Serena would wipe away all her crazy thoughts.

Serena rose to her feet. “I’ll meet you downstairs near the parlor.”

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Jake chopped the logs, one by one, enjoying the task. He had forgotten what it felt like to do a hard day’s work. Sometimes, he wished for those simpler days, for those times when he worked on his father’s construction sites, learning the construction business inside and out. The work was hard, but it made him feel good when the project came to an end, knowing he had been a part of it, admiring the tall buildings and skyscrapers his hands helped build.

A rustle in the bushes drew his attention. He put down the axe and glanced behind him. Again he heard the rustle of leaves, followed by the crunch of footsteps. Jake walked around the side of the house, and caught the miscreant. A squirrel scampered away, chattering as it ran for a nearby tree. He grinned as he watched the furry streak of gray as it took cover amid the branches. When he turned, he noticed a set of footprints

near a window well. He squatted to get a better look, snapping his brows together in concentration, wondering at the size of the footprint outlined in the dirt.

Maybe one of the men from the power authority had been there.

Damn, but the print looked too fresh, too...

New.

He glanced around, but saw no one.

Jake rose to his feet, a feeling of unease settling in the pit of his belly, knowing that if he said something to Clarice, she'd worry.

He'd just have to keep this little discovery to himself.

And be on the lookout...

He shook his head as he put away the axe and gathered up the firewood. This old house was getting to him.

Jake glanced upwards, his eyes settling on Miranda's bedroom window. She stood still as a board, watching him. He wondered why Miranda had changed her clothes. She wore a white dress and he could just about make out her face, but it seemed hidden, shrouded by some covering...a veil or something.

Miranda. Miranda. He couldn't stop thinking about her, or how it felt to hold her.

"Ah Miranda," he said aloud. Her name echoed on the wind as a cloud came by, covering the sun. "Miranda."

*"Jaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaake."*

He stopped. When he glanced up, he noticed Miranda remained by the window, her body stiff and straight. She stared out toward the cliffs and ocean beyond, at something only she could see.

*"Jaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaake."*

Again he heard his name, anxiety filling his gut. How did she know his real name, he wondered?

When he looked up, she was gone.

He frowned.

Yes, Bride's Inn was definitely getting to him.

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He walked into the parlor to see Clarice sitting on a sofa, leafing through some mail.

“I finished chopping that wood. You want me to take a look at that leak under the sink in the kitchen?” Jake walked into the room and placed a load of firewood next to the hearth, then glanced out the parlor window. There was a magnificent view of the cliffs and ocean no matter what room he was in. This place could be a gold mine, a...

“Yes, that would be nice,” she murmured, narrowing her eyes as she read the letter in her hands.

He frowned. “What’s wrong?”

She looked up, her blue eyes bright. Jake felt a catch in his throat at the sight, thinking that when the time came for him to leave, he’d miss them.

“Oh nothing.” She tossed the letter aside. “It’s just another letter from that land developer. They want to buy this old place. Ever since that newspaper article hit, you can’t believe the notoriety Bride’s Inn has received.”

He schooled his features and sat down beside her. Reaching for the letter, he scanned its contents.

“They’re making you quite an offer, Clarice.”

She shrugged. “I know, but I don’t know if I want to sell Bride’s Inn.”

He angled his head. “Have you ever thought of renovating it? This place could be—well, you could make it what it once was. A magnificent inn.”

She waved a hand in the air. “That would take a lot of work, and a lot of money.”

He shrugged. “Just a thought.”

“Yes, well, Seth, Serena and I have spoken about it, but,” she smiled. “What’s important now is Serena. I can’t wait for my great-niece or nephew.”

He relaxed against the sofa. “She doesn’t know what she’s having yet?”

“Oh my, no. Serena says she prefers to be surprised. So does Seth. And I can’t wait.”

He rose to his feet, feeling that strange, painfully sweet tug on his heartstrings. “I’ll take a look at that leaky pipe.”

“Thank you, Grady. You’re a godsend.”

He nodded, feeling a lump in his throat.

When he walked into the kitchen, Miranda was there. She stood near the stove, stirring the contents of a tall pot. She had changed into a pair of sleek, black pants and a white blouse, which nipped in at the waist. The stark contrast of black and white accentuated her pale skin. Jake felt positive he had never seen a paler face on anyone.

He leaned against the doorjamb, watching as she tossed her hair over her shoulder. She dipped a spoon into something that smelled absolutely wonderful. He watched the steam rise from the pot, her nose wrinkling as the vapor rose upwards. Oh, how he loved looking at that slim little nose.

She pursed her lips to blow on the liquid in the well of the spoon. His member sprang to life at the sight of those pursed lips. How he wished she'd wrap them around his cock...she'd bend her head to suckle him, her long dark hair swirling around her shoulders...the silky strands would spill over his thighs and...

Miranda gazed at him, her eyes large and round.

"Hello nymph," he smiled.

She dropped the spoon in the pot, letting go with a startled squeak.

Jake approached, watching as she stuck her index finger into her mouth.

Shit. This wasn't good. He imagined it was his cock. His jeans felt uncomfortably tight as they pulled around his stiff, swollen shaft.

He heard her whimper then she pulled her index finger from her mouth, glancing at the reddened tip.

"Miranda," he reached for her finger, placing the tip in his mouth, his tongue sliding across it. Slowly, he pulled her finger from between his lips and blew on the reddened skin. She didn't say a word as he turned on the cold water, placing her finger under the faucet.

"You should be more careful," he told her.

Miranda pulled her hand from under the running water and reached for a towel. "And you shouldn't sneak up on people," she retorted, drawing her silky black brows together. He longed to run his fingers over the crease between her eyes. He wanted to kiss away everything that bothered her. Jake took hold of her hand once more, leaning down



to trail his lips over her index finger. Then they traveled up the back of her hand where he stopped just long enough to lift her palm and place a gentle kiss there.

Miranda's breath left her body in a whoosh. The sound made him hard as stone.

He drew her into the circle of his arms, where his mouth fused with hers. Her lips tasted sweet, yet salty, like the broth she had sipped from the pot. His body leapt into flames when he got a taste of her, his blood simmering like the pot of liquid bubbling on the stove. Jake expected her to push him away, but she didn't, her arms twining around his neck, rising up on her toes to meld her mouth with his. When the tip of her tongue slid across his lower lip, Jake pulled her tight against him, his swollen shaft brushing across her mound. Her breath hitched, her breasts pushing against his chest, the feel of her nipples against his t-shirt acting like the sweetest aphrodisiac.

"Miranda, are you...oh!"

He turned, sheltering Miranda from Serena's prying eyes. Placing a kiss atop her head, he whispered. "We'll finish this later. Unless you want to stay and help me fix a leaky uh," he grinned, "...pipe?"

"You ass," she hissed, but then her face softened, a tiny grin lighting her face. "Fix it yourself," she finished on a huff.

She turned but not before he reached out to pat her bottom. Miranda didn't say a word, but turned slightly to bestow a heated look in his direction.

Life couldn't possibly get any better.

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Two hours later, Jake lay face up, examining the pipe he had just tightened under the kitchen sink, when a drop of water landed on his face.

"Son of a bitch," he growled. He should have known better. A seventy-year-old house like this always had a ton of leaky pipes and it was just his luck to find this one.

Plop! Another drop of water hit his face.

He wiped it away then heard footsteps. Miranda had come back! He grinned, knowing that soon he'd have her in his arms again. Maybe if they had a bout of good, solid sex it would slake his burning need for her...

Or not. When it came to Miranda, he couldn't be sure of anything.

He heard the footsteps again, then the rustle of material. Well, first things first, he'd have her after he had a go at this other leaky pipe. Jake lifted his head, being careful not to bump it on the pipes above. A pair of slippered feet and an icy cold breeze greeted him. The frigid blast of air snaked up his legs and chest, swirling around his head. He shuddered, thinking it came from beneath the sink—maybe there was a hole, perhaps a little opening between the cabinet and the outside wall. Well, no matter, he'd take care of that after he fixed this other pipe, then...Miranda.

"Miranda, hand me that wrench on the floor." He called to her.

When he lifted his head, he saw the wrench fly across the floor, landing hard against the heel of his work boot. "Thanks," he muttered, drawing his brows together in annoyance. "You could have handed it to me like I asked."

No answer. Miranda didn't move; her slippered feet stayed rooted to the floor.

Okay, so maybe she was pissed. He'd be damned if he could understand women! She was just as turned on by him as he was by her...

He grabbed hold of the inside of the cabinet and shoved his body forward; lifting his head when he felt sure he cleared the cabinet entrance.

Jake rose to his feet, brushing his hands on his thighs. "Look, I asked you to hand me the wrench, not throw it." His breath caught in his throat when he gazed at the vision before him. A woman dressed in a tattered white dress stood motionless, a bouquet of white roses in her hands, a veil shrouding her face. He swallowed back his fear, shuddering as the air temperature in the kitchen plummeted. The woman moved forward, but when he looked down, her feet barely touched the floor. She floated toward him, the air growing frigid. He backed away, but she continued to advance.

"Who the hell are you?" he whispered, feeling the hairs on the back of his neck rise.

The woman stopped, transferring her wilted bouquet of white roses to one hand. Raising the other, she bunched the front of her dress, crushing the tattered white material against her stomach. Her face, or what he could see of it, twisted in pain.

"A-are you hurt?"

She nodded her head.

Goosebumps rose on his skin when she floated out of the kitchen. At the doorway, she stopped, turning to gaze at him. “What?” he asked. “What is it?”

She exited the kitchen, with Jake hot on her heels, stopping when he saw her float up the grand staircase, her feet clearing each tread as she ascended the steps.

At the top of the steps, she gazed outside, her body ramrod straight. It suddenly occurred to Jake that this was the woman he had seen standing in Miranda’s bedroom window!

“Jaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaake.”

He shuddered at the sound of his name.

“Jaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaake.”

He swallowed back the fear lodged in his throat and walked up the steps, his body shaking. At the first landing he stopped, looking down at the bouquet of roses that lay there in a wilted heap. He gazed upwards and saw her point straight ahead. Jake looked out the window.

Two women approached, one supporting the other as they maneuvered across the terrain of the cliffs. As they neared, he recognized Serena’s bright red curls and Miranda’s full head of dark hair. Serena slipped on the muddy ground, but continued to support Miranda. Then he saw Miranda slide away from Serena as she hit the ground, her body sprawled in a prone position.

His heart lodged in his throat when the late afternoon sun glinted off Serena’s red hair as she knelt by Miranda’s prone form, the wind whipping around her. He glanced toward the strange woman in white, but she vanished, seemingly into thin air.

As he tore down the steps, Jake noticed a few wilted blossoms from the woman’s bouquet.

They lay on the stairs, the wilted petals scattered across the polished oak wood, casting an eerie blue-white glow as late afternoon sun began to set.

## *Chapter Five*

“Grady, hurry!” Serena rose to her feet as he lifted an unconscious Miranda in his arms.

“Hold onto the waistband of my jeans, don’t try to get up by yourself. It’s getting slippery.” Jake commanded. He shuddered at the sudden drop in air temperature. The puddles beneath his feet were quickly turning to ice.

Serena reached up, snagging hold of his belt, steadying her body against his. She remained glued to his side as they trekked across the semi-frozen ground leading to Bride’s Inn.

“Are you okay?” He shouted over the wind.

Serena nodded, her face white.

It seemed to take hours to get back to Bride’s Inn as Jake held Miranda, supporting Serena’s unwieldy body, terrified that she would slip and fall.

Her damned lucky bastard of a husband would never forgive him if he let something happen to Serena.

He wished the lucky bastard were here now.

But it was up to him to help Serena...and Miranda. She moaned once, curling against him as he sailed through the door of the mudroom in the back of the house.

Clarice greeted them, her face pale. “What happened?” Her hands shook as she took in the scene before her.

Serena stepped away from Jake, grabbing hold of Clarice. “Miranda collapsed. We went shopping and when we got home, we decided to go for a walk.” She and Clarice followed Jake into the parlor, where he gently laid Miranda down on a couch. “She moaned, then she grabbed her belly and—” Serena made her way over to the couch when she saw Miranda’s eyes flutter open.

“Serena,” Miranda whispered, clutching her friend’s hand.

"I'm here, sweetie. I'm here." Serena removed Miranda's coat. Jake stood there watching, amazed by Serena's quick, efficient movements as she checked Miranda's body for injuries, running her hands along her legs, her arms, examining her carefully. When she touched Miranda's abdomen, she moaned low, her body twisting in pain.

"Aunt Clarice," Serena's crisp voice commanded, but her eyes remained on her friend. "Please call Dr. Crawford."

Clarice reached for the phone and dialed.

Jake ran a hand through his hair, his heart racing with fear as he watched Miranda writhe and moan on the couch.

"We were walking when she cried out and grabbed her stomach. Then she crumpled against me." Serena ran a hand over Miranda's forehead. "She doesn't feel warm. I don't think she has a fever."

Jake scowled. "Are you a nurse?"

"Yes, but that's a whole other story. Right now, I want you to help me get her upstairs and into bed."

Jake lifted Miranda, being careful not to jostle her. Her body felt fragile...delicate. He felt as though he held the most precious thing in the world as he carried Miranda out of the parlor and up the grand staircase.

When she grabbed her stomach and moaned again, his memory stirred.

The strange woman dressed in white had done the same thing back in the kitchen!

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A little while later, Dr. Michael Crawford examined Miranda, his brow furrowed as he laid a stethoscope against her abdomen. "How long have you had endometriosis?"

Miranda pursed her lips, willing herself not to cry. "Since I was a teenager."

He nodded. "Well, you take these." He uncapped a blue bottle, removing two small pills. Placing the medicine in her hand, he poured a glass of water from the pitcher on her nightstand. "They'll help with the pain."

Miranda looked down on the pills as one lone tear slipped from her eye, landing on her palm. She placed the pills near her mouth then laid them on the night table.

The doctor shook his head. "I wish you'd take them. They'd help cut the pain."

She crumpled the bed sheet in her hand, her knuckles turning white. "I hate the way they make me feel afterwards." Miranda glanced at the bottle. "I've taken them before. I-I feel so woozy and sick when I take them. I just don't feel like myself."

He sighed. "Unfortunately, it's the only thing I can recommend right now."

She blew out a shaky breath.

Dr. Crawford angled his head. "Have you had surgery?"

"Twice. I-I don't want to go through that again."

Dr. Crawford took out a prescription pad from his medical bag then he looked up at her. "I do wish you'd go to a hospital. I think further tests would be—"

Miranda shook her head. He sighed as he scribbled on the pad. "I'll give this prescription to Serena. If you change your mind about the pain medication, she can get it filled. I'm sure the drugstore can deliver it." He gave her a long look. "In the meantime, try taking some extra strength acetaminophen and get some rest." He rose from the bed, giving her a small smile. "You're in good hands here."

"They're...I mean, Serena and I are friends."

"Good. I'm glad there's someone to watch over you."

Grady popped into her mind. If it hadn't been for him, who knows how long she and Serena would have remained stranded out there on those cliffs. Serena would have never left her side and Miranda shuddered, thinking she'd never have forgiven herself if something had happened to Serena's baby because of her.

"If you don't feel better in the next twenty-four hours, don't hesitate to call."

"Th-thank you," she whispered.

He left the room, leaving Miranda alone with her thoughts, her face awash with tears.

It was back. The endometriosis had returned, bringing with it the usual physical and emotional pain.

Her tears flowed harder...

And harder still when Grady walked into her room a few minutes later.

\*\*\*

"What in hell is endometriosis?" Jake asked Dr. Crawford.

The doctor shrugged into his jacket and replied, "It's a condition where the lining of a woman's uterus grows out of the womb, where it's not supposed to be. It can be painful." He frowned. "Has she complained in the past?"

"I uh...well..." Jake didn't know how to respond.

"It's just that it can be painful when...well, during intercourse." The doctor angled his head. "I'm sorry. It's just that Clarice told me that you and Miranda are, well, involved."

Jake's eyes flew to Clarice's. They held a mischievous glint.

He sighed. "Sort of."

At the door, Dr. Crawford turned and said. "I'd like her to take that pain medicine I prescribed. She should get rest, and eat right. Call me if she gets worse."

Jake nodded, watching the doctor exit, then his eyes traveled to Clarice's.

She raised a brow. "Did I presume something I shouldn't?"

He ran a hand through his hair then dropped it to his side. "No, you didn't."

She nodded. "I didn't think so." Clarice smiled. "Why don't you go see her?"

His heart pounded. He'd like nothing more. Oh hell, he thought as he gazed at Clarice's cherub face, he should just tell her everything. Tell her the real reason he had come to Bride's Inn. Maybe if he did, she'd...

"Well, what are you standing there for, Grady? Go and take a bowl of soup to her." She winked and patted his arm. "The doctor said she should eat properly."

He ran to the kitchen and grabbed a tray, and placed a bowl of steaming broth on it. The need to see his Miranda burned through his body.

*His.*

Christ, what a scary thought.

Jake's conscience tugged, bringing his thoughts back around to Clarice. Jake had time to level with the owner of Bride's Inn. Yes, he'd tell her everything...

But now, he had a lot to say to Miranda.

\*\*\*

Several minutes went by before he got up the courage to knock on Miranda's door. Just a few hours earlier, he hadn't hesitated to risk life and limb out on those icy cliffs, but now he feared seeing her in pain.

He knocked again, but didn't wait for an answer, choosing to enter.

Miranda rested on the bed, with her head nestled on the pillows propped against the headboard. She wore a checkered flannel nightgown, the covers drawn up and over her lap. As night fell, the early evening light cast a soft glow around her room.

Her eyes opened the minute he laid the tray down on the bedside table.

Miranda's long, dark lashes looked spiky. A lone tear spilled down her cheek.

That one drop tore through Jake like the slice of a knife.

"Grady," she whispered. Her lips trembled.

He eased down onto the bed, drawing her into his arms, tucking her against his chest. "Hello nymph," he whispered, placing a kiss on her forehead. . Jake felt his shirt grow damp from her tears, but he didn't care. He let her cry until a soft hiccup escaped her.

"Is the pain still bad?" he asked, easing her away from his chest. He wanted to see her face, wanted to kiss away her tears. "Did you take the pain medication the doctor gave you?"

"It's better. I—" She let go of a yawn then gave him a searching look. "I don't want to take that pain medicine, Grady, so don't you start on me."

Ah, his stubborn Miranda sounded like herself. He was damned glad to hear that willful tone in her voice.

He glanced at the two pills that lay on top of her night table, knowing he'd have a battle on his hands. Placing the pills in his right palm, he extended his hand toward Miranda. "Take them, Miranda. Don't be stubborn. They'll help you sleep."

She sighed. "I'm always so fuzzy-headed the next day."

"Come on," he grabbed the glass of water. "You'll feel better."

A few seconds went by. Finally, she gave in, swallowing the pills with a few sips of water.



As much as he wanted to stay, she needed to rest. He started to rise from the bed when he felt a hand on his arm.

“Don’t go.”

Jake sat down again, watching her pale face.

She gave him a small smile. “You brought me soup.”

He shrugged, suddenly feeling tongue-tied. His heart pounded, he thought it would come right through his chest.

“My golden man,” she whispered, running a hand across his thigh. “Just like a tiger.”

Jake froze. Just one touch from Miranda’s hand sent his pulse speeding out of control and heated his skin like an inferno.

*She didn’t need his lust right now.*

“Stay with me. Don’t go.” She reached out and grabbed his hand, pulling him down onto the mattress. Then she let go of a yawn, and surrendered to the pain medication.

Jake watched as her eyes fluttered closed. Easing one pillow from behind her head, he tucked the covers around her shoulders, placing another kiss on her forehead. Jake didn’t know how long he stayed there, watching her sleep. Soon, the room grew dark as the sun dipped below the horizon, the only light coming from the bright moon outside. Jake rose from the bed, pulling a chair over to the side. He eased his body into it, stretching his legs out in front of him.

Hours later, he shifted in the seat in an attempt to ease the sharp pains shooting through his back and legs. He heard a rustle of sound, felt a cold breeze then warmth as a heavy weight descended on him.

He cracked one eye open and looked down. A blanket. That’s why he felt warm. The heavy plaid wool coverlet stretched from his shoulders down to his ankles. When he looked over at Miranda, she too, had another blanket draped across her body.

Jake opened both eyes, his vision blurry, and viewed the shape of a woman in a long, white dress, lit by the soft glow of the moon outside.

Serena...

No, someone else...

Clarice?

He tried to move, but felt the chill fingers of an icy breeze drift across his face.

"*Sleep,*" he heard a voice. It didn't sound like Serena...or Clarice.

Then he saw the figure move away, and float toward the doorway.

He knew he was dreaming when he saw that same figure sail right through the closed door.

## ***Chapter Six***

He woke the next morning to sunlight streaming in through the bedroom window, and muscles so stiff and sore he thought he'd just curl up and die from the pain. Glancing at Miranda's sleeping form, he rose from the chair, grimacing as he worked the stiffness from his legs and back. Jake moved quietly to the small bathroom adjoining Miranda's room. When he came out of the bathroom, the smell of coffee and bacon greeted him, as well as the sight of Serena. She stood by Miranda's bed and placed a tray bearing two covered silver dishes and a carafe on the bedside table.

"Good morning," she whispered to Jake.

He ran a hand through his hair. "Morning," he replied.

"Come have some breakfast."

Jake walked over to her, the smell of the coffee and bacon making his stomach grumble.

"You didn't eat anything at all last night, did you?" Serena asked.

"I couldn't," he gazed at Miranda.

Serena poured him a cup of steaming coffee. He accepted it, grateful once more for Serena's calming presence. She grabbed the blanket from his chair, and beckoned him to sit. Then she smiled. "Maybe you'd rather eat in the kitchen. That chair—"

"—is fine." He finished, plopping down into it, sipping the coffee.

Miranda slumbered on, shifting so she turned on her side to face them. Serena walked over and drew the covers up and over Miranda, brushing some hair from her friend's face. It reminded Jake of the previous night, when Serena had taken care of both him and Miranda.

Or had it been Serena? He wasn't sure of anything anymore, least of all Miranda. He seemed to need her like an addict needed a drug. But what she needed most right now was rest.

“I’ll leave you to enjoy your breakfast.” Serena told him from the door. She placed her hand on the knob then turned to look at him. “Thank you, Grady, thank you for being there when we needed you.”

He swallowed and nodded as she walked from the room, not knowing how to respond, afraid he’d cry if he did.

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Miranda stared as the great, golden tiger ran toward her. Fierce as the animal appeared, she felt no fear as she reached out to touch its golden head. Then she leaned down and kissed the tiger’s mouth, watching as the great beast changed from animal to man. Soon, Grady stood before her in naked glory, his member swollen and stiff, his golden eyes focused on her.

She moaned as her clit pulsed with need. Her breasts, oh, her breasts felt so heavy and...

Her eyes fluttered open. As her vision cleared, she saw Grady sitting on a chair next to the bed, the odor of coffee drifting by her nose.

She watched him sip from a mug. In his large, capable hands, the mug looked like a child’s cup. She focused on his fingertips. Why didn’t he have callused hands? He did so much hard work.

“Well, hello there.” His deep voice resonated throughout the room.

Miranda blinked as his head and face transformed from man to animal then back to man in a matter of seconds.

“Grady?” she whispered.

He smiled. “That’s right. I’m here.” Grady placed the mug down on the nightstand and rose to his feet. He walked over to the bed and sat down on the edge, the mattress dipping in response to his weight. “How do you feel?” He leaned over and placed a kiss on her lips, much like she kissed the tiger in her dream...

Those pain pills. They made her so fuzzy-brained, so unsure of everything and everyone.

But one thing remained clear: Grady Smith was much more than a handy man. He was someone you could depend on, someone who didn't fear risking life and limb out there during the high winds on the cliff.

"Are you in any pain?" he asked, his voice gentle as he whisked some hair from her face.

"I..." Oh, there was pain all right. Her bladder felt like it would burst any second! "I-I've got to use the bathroom." She flipped back the covers and swung her legs over the other side of the bed, away from Grady's prying eyes. Miranda felt her cheeks burning. "I'll be right back."

She placed her feet on the floor and stood up, but her legs felt rubbery. Miranda took one step toward the bathroom when she felt a hard arm circle her waist. She looked up to see Grady by her side, his brows knit into a frown. "If you had to use the bathroom, you should just ask for some help."

"All right," she said, trying to push her embarrassment aside. "I'm asking."

Miranda heard the deep rumble in his chest, saw him grin. "Stubborn," he murmured as he led her to the bathroom door.

She sailed past him, straight inside the bathroom. Miranda started to close the door, when he grabbed the edge, halting her movements. "Need help?"

Her eyes widened. "No!" She shook her head. "No, I-I'm fine."

"Shout if you need me."

Oh, right, sure. That's all she needed. Her haze-filled brain didn't need any more sensual stimulus from Grady Smith.

Miranda went about her business, sighing blissfully when she finished. She washed her hands, gazing into the mirror. A pale face and eyes lined with dark, purple shadows stared back at her. Oh, her hair! What a mess.

Grady didn't seem to notice or care.

Alex always had some comment about her appearance. He had always expected her to look nice, particularly when they entertained or...

Grady's worry-filled voice floated by her ears. "You okay in there?"

"Yes, I'm fine. I'll be out in a minute."

Miranda splashed some cold water on her face then drew a brush through her hair, grateful that her shaky legs supported her weight. Grabbing a bottle of mouthwash, she rinsed the metallic taste from her mouth. A few seconds later, she opened the bathroom door.

Grady stood outside, leaning against the doorjamb, his arms folded across his chest. “How about some breakfast?” he asked, his eyes taking her measure.

“Breakfast?” she squeaked. Looking at his tall, lean form, outlined by his well-worn jeans made her mouth dry. Her eyes drifted down, settling on his groin. A few seconds went by. “Yes,” she replied. “I guess I am hungry.”

“Serena brought up a tray. I don’t know if it’s still warm.” Grady took her arm in a gentle grip and led her back over to the bed. “You sit tight, and I’ll warm it up for you.”

She watched as he reached for the covered dish on the tray.

“I’ll be right back,” he told her. “Just stay put.”

Miranda nodded as she watched him walk out, knowing that she wanted a whole hell of a lot more than food from Grady Smith.

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Jake rushed down the stairs, almost dropping the dish as he made his way to the kitchen. He skidded to a halt when he saw Serena sitting at the kitchen table.

“What’s wrong?” Serena’s auburn brows knit into a frown. “Is Miranda all right?”

“Yeah, I...” He put down the covered dish and ran a hand through his hair. “I wanted to heat this up for her. I think it’s cold.”

Serena gave him a huge grin. “There’s fresh scrambled eggs in that pan on the stove.” She nodded toward the large gas cook top on the counter.

*That’s going to have to be fixed, too. Oh, hell. I’m getting a new one. The whole damned kitchen needs remodeling so when I...*

*What in hell was he thinking? He wasn’t staying here. This wasn’t...*

Home. It could never be. Not for him. Not after all the mistakes he’d made in his life.

Serena rose from the table and reached for a plate in the cabinet. He watched her movements, knowing that he should tell her everything. Right now.

He shoved his hands into his pockets. “Serena, I...look. You should know that I—” Oh, what in hell was wrong now? Why couldn’t he just get this over and done with?

“Don’t say anything, Grady.” She spooned some eggs onto a plate, retrieving bacon slices from the microwave overhead.

*That looks ancient, too. I’m going to have to get a new one when I...stop it! Just stop!*

“Here.” She placed a cover on top of the plate. “Now Miranda’s got a nice, hot breakfast.”

“Serena, there’s something you should know.”

She angled her head. “What? Is it about Miranda?”

“No, it’s about me. Look,” he placed his hands in his pockets again, hoping Serena didn’t see them shake. “I’m, well, I know you think I’m just a handyman.”

She frowned. “Nonsense. You’re much more than that, Grady. Besides, if it wasn’t for you, who knows what would have happened to me and Miranda out there on those cliffs.” Serena’s gaze shifted to the scene outside. Shuddering, she drew her sweater around her swollen belly. “Just take care of Miranda. She needs you now.”

Oh shit, he was sinking deep...and fast. One look at Serena’s calm, trusting face made him want to turn and run.

*Take care of Miranda. She needs you now.*

As Jake strode out of the kitchen that morning, he knew the time for running had come to an end.

That’s all he’d been doing since Nancy died—running from his painful memories, running from his guilt.

This was his chance, his one chance to make things right, to make up for his stupidity and greed.

His one chance, with Miranda.

\*\*\*

Miranda toyed with the ends of the belt attached to the heavy chenille robe she wore over her nightgown. She stood near the windows, gazing outside, her eyes focused on the melting snow and ice covering the grounds of Bride’s Inn, but her thoughts

centered on Grady. She looked down on the checkered nightgown under the robe and frowned.

Walking over to her bureau, she opened a drawer, retrieving a knee-length, amethyst silk nightgown and matching robe. Shrugging the heavy chenille robe from her shoulders, she tossed it on a chair and bent to tug the hem of her nightgown up her legs and hips, past her chest, pulling her arms free of the confining flannel. Grabbing the bright purple silk gown, she let it float over her head and down her body, adjusting the thin silk straps on her shoulders. Next, she tossed the matching robe over her shoulders and gazed into the mirror near the bureau.

Miranda pinched her cheeks, hoping to put some pink color in her pale skin when she heard the doorknob to her room rattle.

Quick as lightening, she hurried toward the bed and settled under the covers before Grady entered.

He walked in, bearing a covered dish, his eyes intent on her. Miranda's breath caught and held, her heart pounding. He moved the plate on the tray to her nightstand then placed the tray on her lap, extending the small metal feet on either side until they rested on the bed. Removing the silver cover from the plate, he released the smoky odor of the bacon slices nestled by a pile of eggs. She looked down on it and bit her lower lip then her eyes traveled upwards and met his.

"What's wrong? Don't you like eggs and bacon?" he asked, furrowing his brows. "I could make you something else."

Miranda reached up and placed her index finger against his lips. He inhaled sharply when her fingers made contact with his mouth. His lips felt as soft as the silk of the gown she wore. "Eggs and bacon are fine," she replied, her voice pitched low. Her finger lingered for a few seconds as she traced the contour of his lower lip, then his upper lip. She dropped her hand when she realized he didn't move a muscle.

He blew out a breath. "Okay, then, how about eating some of it?"

*My seduction techniques must really suck!*

She shook her head and gave him a small smile. "There's something else I want."

Grady angled his head. "What?"



Miranda reached out and took hold of his hand, squeezing it tight. “You.”

He swallowed. Miranda saw the rise and fall of his Adam’s apple, heard his sharp intake of breath. “You don’t mean that. It’s just that you had a scare. And, well...that always—”

She lifted the tray, placing it on the bed. Then Miranda tossed the covers back, revealing her legs. A spark lit his eyes, making Miranda feel hot all over as he stared at her bare legs and thighs, his gaze traveling up to her face.

She rose from the bed and made her way to the door, turning the lock with a loud ‘click.’

Grady shot to his feet. “What are you doing?”

Miranda turned to face him, her hands behind her back as she toyed with the lock. Then she walked over to him. Standing a few inches in front of Grady, she slipped the robe from her shoulders, letting it puddle at her feet in a pool of purple silk. Next, she slipped her hands under the straps of her gown, pushing them down over her shoulders, revealing her breasts.

Grady’s breath left his body on a whoosh. “Don’t,” he said, backing away. “This is crazy, Miranda. You can’t possibly—”

“I couldn’t possibly want you more than I do in this minute.”

Her breasts tingled; they felt heavy and swollen. Grady continued to move away from her, the backs of his knees bumping against the mattress.

But his eyes didn’t stray from her naked chest, and the small spark she had seen earlier now leapt into flame.

Miranda continued to strip the gown from her body, until she stood before him, completely naked.

He groaned. “Miranda, Miranda—why are you doing this?” His member stood stiff and straight, saluting her through the heavy denim fabric of his jeans.

“Make love to me, Grady.”

“Oh Christ,” came his agonized reply as he lost his balance and tumbled backwards onto the bed.

Miranda followed him down, covering her body with his.

“Are you sure about this?” he asked through clenched teeth as she rubbed his stiff cock with her mound.

She shuddered, throwing her head back when the rough denim slid across her little nubbin. Miranda straddled Grady’s lower body. Placing her hands on his shoulders, she leaned down until they were only a breath apart, and placed a kiss on the tip of his nose.

“I’ve never been more sure of anything in my life.” She grinned, her smile growing wide when she felt Grady’s cock push against her thigh.

\*\*\*

*Shit.*

Sweat beaded on Jake’s forehead. He wanted nothing more than to drive into Miranda and give her what she wanted.

“Miranda,” He struggled to rise, grasping her around the waist and reluctantly set her away from him. But this was for her own good...and his. He didn’t need more guilt on his head, and he would have it if he made love to her now. If he caused her any pain, he’d regret it the rest of his life.

He had enough regrets to deal with.

Jake turned and took her hands in his. They felt warm and soft. Her long fingers and nails looked elegant and...sexy. Miranda Hollander was a low, blue flame that burned with sensuality. “There are things you don’t know about me, things that, well—”

She placed another finger over his lips, the same finger he had suckled in the kitchen only yesterday. He grew hard all over again. This time, his entire body stiffened with hot, burning need. Pushing his own needs aside, he grabbed a fork and dug into the eggs piled on the plate.

“What you need is breakfast,” he told her, holding the egg-laden tines of the fork near her lush mouth. He groaned inwardly, wishing like hell that he could make love to that mouth. His hands shook in response to his heated thoughts.

“What I need is you,” her voice was pitched low. It washed over him like a balm, a healing gentle wind. “I want to feel normal, Grady. I want to lay in your arms and make love.”

He shook his head, and put the fork down on the tray. "Please," she begged, placing a hand on his forearm. Jake looked at that long, slender hand, then his gaze traveled to her face. "Don't turn me away. Not now. I promise you, there'll be no strings."

A tiny part of him was disappointed at her words.

*Fool! It's what you want, too. You don't need a romantic entanglement. You just need...Miranda.*

"Miranda," he whispered as he took her in his arms, his mouth closing hungrily over hers. "Miranda..."

Miranda stretched out on the bed, beckoning him to join her there.

Jake gazed at her long, slim legs, her tiny pink toes. Then his eyes traveled up to the small V of dark curls. He reached out, running his fingers through the springy mass of hair, reveling in the silky feel as he slid his finger across the moist entrance to her body. He heard her sharp intake of breath and immediately stopped.

"It's okay," she whispered. "It feels so good, I-I can't seem to catch my breath when you touch me."

Jake ripped the shirt from his chest and made quick work of his jeans and boots, tossing them aside. He followed Miranda's gaze as she took in the sight of him, her eyes traveling from the tips of his toes to the top of his head.

He slid onto the bed, placing one knee on the mattress. It shifted under his weight, his body covering hers as his mouth consumed hers in a fierce kiss. She moaned, but instead of the wail of pain he heard earlier, this was filled with longing and pleasure. He'd be damned if he hurt her. He'd make the sweetest, most gentle love to her. Jake eased the pressure against her mouth, moving so that he didn't lie directly on top of her.

When her fingers skimmed his shaft and sac, he almost came right there on the bed.

"Don't hold back," she begged. "Please. Love me the way you want to love me."

Sweat popped out on his forehead. "Miranda, are you sure about this?"

She nodded, her eyes large. They turned a deep, smoky purple.

He grinned. "Well, my lovely nymph, you're in for a treat."

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Grady shifted his large, golden body, sliding down Miranda's length. He nuzzled her breasts, kissing one, then the other, his lips trailing a fiery path across her skin. She got her earlier wish and drove her fingers through his thick, shaggy hair, luxuriating in the surprising softness. He looked up and smiled that cat-like grin as she toyed with his hair. She moaned when his mouth made contact with her nipple. He suckled her, drawing the crest into his mouth, the end of his tongue laving the tip. Grady treated her other breast to the same exquisite torture, until she lay writhing on the bed.

But this time, her writhing was from pure, undiluted pleasure. A pleasure so intense, she thought she'd expire right there. His fingers played with the ends of her breasts, creating a sensual friction, an intense pleasure-pain that shot from her breasts straight down to the juncture between her legs. Her feminine mound pulsed with need as he drew the tip of her breast into his mouth again. Grady laved it with the end of his tongue, blowing on her moistened nipple, the cool breeze eliciting another moan of pleasure from her as it snaked across the hardened little peak.

She gripped the bed covers, squirming as he continued to pleasure her breasts, molding each one in his large, golden hands, kissing and stroking them until she became mindless with need. The delicious throbbing between her legs grew until she felt her entire body vibrate with desire.

He slid down the length of her body; kissing every inch of her, his lips a fiery brand each time they made contact with her skin. When he got to the nest of curls between her legs, he gently parted her thighs, placing a gentle kiss on her labia. Miranda grabbed fistfuls of his hair, digging her fingers into scalp, her hips jutting off the bed.

"Easy," he crooned. "I promised you heaven, and that's what you're going to get."

He kissed her breasts again then whispered love words in her ear as he lifted her bottom.

She felt something cool and soft. She looked down to see a pillow between the top swell of her backside and the small of her back. She eased her body down onto the pillow, enjoying the feel of the soft, down pillow.

“Does that feel good?” His deep voice washed over her. All she could do was nod in response.

He parted her thighs gently, encouraging her to open her legs wide, grabbing hold of her calves as he positioned her legs over his shoulders. All Miranda could see was the top of his head.

Then he moved, burying his mouth in her dark curls, kissing her labia the way he kissed her body. Miranda whimpered, grabbing hold of the sheet beneath her. He stopped.

She met his wide-eyed look with a smile. “Don’t stop,” she whispered, her voice hoarse. “Oh please don’t stop.”

He continued, moving the tip of his tongue across the tiny pearl of flesh nestled between her thighs. A wash of heat licked her body, the sensual flames warming her super-sensitive skin. When Grady drove his tongue between her nether lips, Miranda cried out, “Grady!” moaning as his mouth covered hers to swallow her cries of rapture. Then he went back to pleasuring her with his mouth and tongue, suckling the folds of flesh covering her entrance with his own lips, gently pulling and releasing her little nubbin. The throbbing grew, the delicious pulsing reaching a crescendo as Grady continued to suckle her, pushing his tongue in and out of her entrance.

Her mind flew in a million directions; her breath came in short, shallow pants, as a shattering climax overtook her body.

Grady nestled her body against his, crooning words of love in her ear. Miranda lay on her side, delighting in the feel of his warm palm as he stroked her back from her shoulders down to the backs of her thighs. She shut her eyes, emitting a soft sigh of pleasure when he stroked her bottom, running the tip of his index finger in the cleft there, causing a shiver of pleasure to snake up her spine.

“Ah, nymph, I love your bottom.” Grady chuckled, the sound warm and sensual. He patted her backside, stroking and fondling her until Miranda wasn’t sure of her own name. When he ran the tip of his finger between her bottom cheeks, she felt moisture build between her legs again. She buried her face against his chest.

His lips skimmed her forehead then he sat up, taking her with him. She lay sprawled against him, her legs entwined with his. He held her for a long time, stroking her back and buttocks, then he held her in the crook of his arm and kissed her, his mouth trailing a fiery path across her lips, her chin, her neck. "Miranda," he breathed, "feel what you do to me."

She reached down, her hand curling around his hard, swollen shaft, feeling the pulsing beat of the vein that ran along the back. Oh, how she wanted him inside her! But a niggling feeling of doubt crept to the forefront of her mind. Would it hurt?

No! She wouldn't let doubt come between her and Grady.

"Let me pleasure you some more."

He grasped her around the waist, easily spanning her, as he gently laid her across his legs, her belly cradled against his thighs. Fear took hold when she realized she had no idea what he planned to do.

"Lay still, nymph. Don't move."

Miranda turned her head to the side. Grady's warm breath tickle her ear lobe as he leaned over and whispered. "I won't hurt you. I promise."

She melted at his words. He placed a tender kiss on each of her bottom cheeks then he gave each one a light smack with his open palm. Miranda gripped the sheets tighter, her fist against her mouth, as a white wall of pleasure started to build inside her.

"I know you like that."

Again he smacked her bottom. She caught her breath as heat snaked across her backside.

Grady stroked and fondled her bottom then he gave it another light smack. She had no idea what he would do next. Would he caress her gently, running his finger along the cleft, or would he spank her?

He ran his open palm from the small of her back to the top rise of her backside, all the way down to her thighs, then he did it all again. Miranda shut her eyes as her tiger prince held her captive, petting and stroking his tigress, preparing her for their mating. She felt the next smack, and this time, her hormones leapt into overdrive as the tidal wave of pleasure started to rise, a great crest building on the ocean of desire and need.

Miranda's clit throbbed. Grady lifted her gently, her bottom rising against his thighs then she felt the tips of his fingers as he stroked her. She grasped the sheets as his fingers continued to fondle her bud, his index finger gently pressing and circling the small folds of flesh. As the crest of the pleasure wave built again, she became wet with her essence. He used it, lubricating her, placing his fingers inside, moving them in and out in a sensual rhythm, and eliciting another moan.

She felt her orgasm start, the pleasure building until it slammed into her body, making her shudder. Again the tips of his fingers circled her labia, causing another climax to overtake her body as she rode the wave of pure bliss. Grady slid her from his thighs. Miranda lay on her stomach across the bed, the soft pillow a cushion against her belly. "Are you okay?" He whispered near her ear, his lips caressing the tender flesh of her lobe.

"Yes," she whispered, smiling. "I'm fine. Just..." She chewed her lower lip, the sheets still fisted in her hands. "Hurry. Please."

He laughed, the sound warm and rich. "It will be my pleasure."

He gave her bottom a little smack, helping her to rise up on her knees. Miranda felt dazed as he circled her waist, his forearm settling against her belly. He held her gently, stroking her breasts, then her bottom. He repeated the action several times, until her body caught fire, each pass of his hand against her sensitive skin igniting her desire. Then he entered her from behind, the tip of his thick, hard shaft nudged her opening, begging entrance.

"Does it hurt? Are you all right?" He whispered against her ear, nipping her lobe.

She heard the concern in his voice as he rose over her. Miranda's eyes filled with tears.

"Fine," she managed.

He began to move, sliding his shaft inside her, filling her, stretching her mind as well as her body. Nothing seemed to matter in that instant, nothing but Grady Smith, her golden man, and the sensations he created as he continued his slow, sensual rhythm. When he pulled out of her, he would gently press the tip of his shaft against her clit, creating a moist friction against the sensitive little pearl of flesh.

Miranda's orgasm rose as Grady continued his mating, increasing the speed as she moaned, her backside writhing against his groin. He shifted slightly, allowing him access to her bottom. He smacked her right bottom cheek as he continued to pump into her.

He spanked her again, this time, just a bit harder, making her clit pulse and throb until her mind emptied of all conscious thought.

Grady's other hand caressed her breasts, stroking her nipples, which peaked and hardened at his touch. But it was the final smack on her bottom that sent her over the edge, her body erupting into a mass of sensual pleasure so intense, it erased the memory of every stab of gut-wrenching pain her endometriosis had wrought on her body.

When her orgasm hit, overwhelming pleasure slammed into her, making her catch her breath. Grady's shaft pulsed, his seed spilling into her.

Minutes passed before her breathing returned to normal. Grady didn't pull out of her, but raised above her, holding her, caressing her breasts, her belly and her backside. Her legs started to shake—that's when Grady slid from her, patting her behind gently.

He sat back on the bed, taking Miranda with him, cuddling her close, stroking her with his large palm. Her eyes grew heavy, her body relaxed, as a bone-deep feeling of contentment washed over her.

"Sleep, nymph," he whispered against her temple, placing a gentle kiss there.

She snuggled closer, seeking his warmth, the shelter of his big, golden body.

"I'll be right here."

Those words were the last Miranda heard as she drifted into slumber.



## ***Chapter Seven***

Pleasure...pain.

Those two words drifted across Miranda's mind when she woke the next morning—alone.

As Miranda stretched and yawned, turning on her side, she reached over and grabbed the pillow that Grady had used to cushion her body. Inhaling deeply, she smelled the musky odor of their mating. She smiled then blushed, her body burning as she thought about what transpired in her bed the night before.

Grady had given her the sweetest pain imaginable. She wiggled her bottom, her clit throbbing in response to her memories of last night. He knew what she liked—she, a woman who feared the pain that endometriosis caused, didn't fear the pain his mouth and hands wrought on her body, for it was a the sweetest pain imaginable.

Oh, how she wanted more, how she wanted Grady.

She started to rise from the bed then stopped, remembering that she told him no strings attached. He owed her nothing. But she owed him...

Everything.

Miranda got out of bed, tossing the covers back, making her way to the bathroom where she removed her nightgown, turning to glance at her bottom in the mirror. She ran her hands over her breasts, where Grady had given her such sensual pleasure, her nipples peaking in response. Then she touched her clit, letting go of a long sigh, imagining it was his hands that touched her. She quickly showered and changed into jeans and a sweater, running a brush through her hair.

*No strings, Miranda, no strings. Don't make a pest of yourself.*

But she wanted to be with Grady...badly.

She walked towards the door. Placing her hand on the knob, she blew out a steadying breath, vowing that they'd just...talk.

Right.

Talk.

Miranda leaned her forehead against the door. She didn't want to talk; she wanted to make love with him again...a handyman. A man who had no material wealth, but a wealth of gentleness and insight into what she liked and even more, what she needed.

How ironic life was. Alex had wealth, but no knowledge of gentleness or kindness.

She went in search of Grady.

The man who had stolen her heart.

\*\*\*

Jake was outside gathering firewood when he noticed the footprints again.

Fresh footprints. He bent to examine them, frowning at their large size.

Big boots had made those prints—a man's boots. And they had made those prints recently, the impression of the boot sunk deep in the mud in the flowerbeds lining the side of Bride's Inn.

He glanced around, expecting to see someone, but all he saw were some seagulls in the sky. Their squawking filled his ears as the wind whipped by his head.

As he entered Bride's Inn that morning, his mind was troubled—he couldn't stop thinking about the footprints. Was someone watching them? Peering through the windows?

He'd be damned if he'd let anyone hurt Miranda...or Serena or that sweet old Clarice Masters.

Thoughts of Miranda made his pulse beat wildly. He entered the house, making his way toward Clarice's parlor, where he dumped the load of firewood in the grate near the hearth.

Then he went in search of his nymph.

\*\*\*

Miranda knocked on Grady's bedroom door.

No answer.

She opened the door, peeking inside to see a laptop computer and something that resembled a fax machine sitting on a desk.

Strange. Why would a handyman need those?

She walked over to where his laptop computer lay open, the desktop image swirling before her eyes.

“Hunter Industries,” she read aloud. “A Division of Long Island Land Development Corporation.”

Miranda tapped on the keys, bringing the Hunter Industries website into full view.

She heard the click of the fax machine, watching as a printed note spewed forth.

Miranda beetled her brows in concentration as she read, ‘*Jake, how’s everything going? Have you closed the deal yet?*’ It was signed simply “Mike.”

Jake? Who was Jake? And what deal was this Mike talking about?

She glanced at the computer screen, reading Hunter Industries list of officers and staff.

*Jake Hunter, President and CEO.*

She clicked on his name and Jake Hunter’s picture came into view on the screen...

Miranda blinked once, her throat closing, her mind racing when she saw Grady Smith.

Her hand flew to her mouth.

Jake Hunter was Grady Smith!

Her thoughts spun in a thousand different directions, memory flooding in. A few weeks ago, Clarice started receiving letters from that Long Island Land Development Corporation.

“Miranda.”

She spun in the chair, turning to face Grady.

A.k.a Jake Hunter.

“Who the hell are you?” she whispered, her voice hoarse and...broken.

He entered the bedroom, shutting the door behind him.

“You shouldn’t snoop.”

She rose from the chair and walked over to him, clutching the fax in her hand.

“Why?” she asked. “Because I might find out who you really are? You bastard. You lying, cheating—” She crumpled the fax in her hand and threw it at him. It bounced off his broad chest and landed on the floor.

He reached down and grabbed the fax, opening the crumpled paper, his golden eyes scanning each word.

“Does Clarice know who you really are?” Her voice vibrated with anger.

He shook his head. The sight of his golden countenance was almost too painful for Miranda to bear. “No,” he replied, his voice soft. “She doesn’t.”

Miranda blew out a shaky breath. “And you didn’t plan on telling her, did you? What did you hope to do, Mr. Hunter, con us all?”

He ran a hand through his hair. “If you’d just let me explain—”

“Oh, you can explain. To the police.”

She moved to leave, but he blocked her exit. “Get out of my way,” she said through clenched teeth.

“I’ll explain, everything, to all of you, if you’d just give me a chance.”

“A chance to do what? Screw me again? You must have had a real good time. Screwing me. Conning us all!” Her voice broke. She couldn’t bear to stay in his presence one second longer.

“Listen to me, Miranda. Making love to you had nothing to do with this.” He grabbed her shoulders, giving them a shake.

She shrugged out of his hold and ran for the door, wrenching it open.

“Miranda!”

She heard him call her name, but she kept going. She raced out of Bride’s Inn and headed toward the garage, where her car was parked.

Serena had taken Clarice into town to see Dr. Crawford for her annual check-up. She had to find them, tell them, get to the police and—

*And what?*

She lay her head down on the steering wheel, hot tears burning her eyes. Miranda lifted her head, swiping at the moisture on her face, fumbling for the key to the ignition. As she glanced in the rearview mirror, she saw Jake running toward the garage.

Miranda started the engine and gunned the accelerator, pulling out of the garage at breakneck speed.

He jumped out the way as she tore down the drive, away from Bride's Inn, and the man, she suddenly realized, she had come to love.

It was just too bad he didn't care a whit for her.

As she drove, snow started to fall, the large flakes clumping against her windshield.

She didn't care. All Miranda knew in that moment was that life played one more of its ironic tricks.

And had her loving a man who didn't love her.

\*\*\*

Jake was about to go in search of Miranda when a car pulled into the drive.

When it stopped in front of the house, Serena got out and helped Clarice from the passenger side. Both women stopped and gave Jake a searching look.

"What's wrong?" Serena walked up to him, her feet surprisingly light on the porch steps despite her girth. She glanced around. "Where's Miranda?"

He ran a hand through his hair. "I—" He didn't know what to say or how to start.

Another car pulled into the drive. Serena's eyes widened at the sight of the black Maxima as it came to a halt behind hers. She ambled down the steps, toward a tall, dark-haired man who emerged from the driver's side.

Clarice moved to Jake's side, a smile lighting her face. "Well, he's a couple of days early, but it's certainly good to see my nephew again."

*Shit!*

What was he supposed to do now?

Jake watched Serena as she held onto Seth, planting dozens of kisses across his beard-shadowed chin.

The lucky bastard.

Seth Masters wrapped an arm around his wife's waist, leaning down to pat her swollen belly, nuzzling his nose in her fiery-red curls. Then he turned his dark eyes in Jake's direction.

Jake swallowed hard when Seth narrowed his eyes, taking Jake's measure. He saw Seth mouth the words, 'Who's that?' to Serena.

She smiled beatifically. He heard her reply. "Why, that's Grady, silly."

Jake didn't think a human being could move as fast as Seth did. In the next instant, he was lifted off his feet, a hand at his throat, a steely arm shoving him up against a pole near the steps of the porch.

He gasped once as Seth's forearm almost crushed his neck. "Who the fuck are you?"

Jake tried to answer, but his throat closed. The next thing he heard was Serena.

"Seth! Stop it, you're hurting him."

"Goddamn right I am. This isn't Grady Smith. I personally interviewed Grady before I left."

Jake heard Serena's sharp intake of breath, saw Clarice pale from the corner of his eye.

That's the last thing he saw as the world spun around him.

\*\*\*

"You've got five minutes to tell me who the hell you are and what you're doing here."

Jake blinked once, his vision clearing as Seth's dark, angry face swam before him.

"The name's Jake Hunter." He glanced at Clarice. "I own Hunter Industries...and Long Island Land Development Corporation."

No one said a word. All Jake heard was the sound of the wind in the trees.

Clarice walked up the steps. Seth reached out to help her, but she swatted his hand away.

"You're the one who's been sending me those letters?"

He nodded, his throat constricting.

She let go of a shaky breath. “Why didn’t you just tell me who you were when you got here?”

He sighed. “I figured, you’d boot me out on my a—I mean, my butt if you knew who I was.”

“I’m going to do that right now,” Seth growled, taking a menacing step toward him.

Thank God for Serena. She laid a restraining hand on him.

“I came here with the idea to buy this old place, and the land. That’s what I wanted, in the beginning. But since I’ve been here, working, I, well, I—”

“What?” Clarice asked softly, her blue eyes intense.

He swallowed. “I fell in love with it.”

She nodded. “I see.”

“I’m calling the police,” Seth whipped out a cell phone.

Clarice grabbed it from him. “Not until I hear what he has to say. Then, I’ll decide.”

Seth’s dark eyes grew wide. “Aunt Clarice, he’s an imposter. He pretended to be—”

“I know what he did. I know very well. But I know something else: Mr. Hunter took care of us. He rescued Miranda.” She turned to face Seth. “And your wife, too, that day Miranda took sick out on the cliffs. If it wasn’t for Mr. Hunter here,” she gestured toward Jake with her hand. “Who knows what might have happened?” Clarice stepped closer toward Jake, reaching up to lay a hand on his arm.

Jake looked down on Clarice’s wrinkled hand, his eyes stinging.

She gave him a small smile. “Bride’s Inn grows on you, little by little. The walls talk to you, they make you want to stay, don’t they?”

Jake nodded, swallowing past a lump in his throat.

“And Miranda?”

He trembled, knowing she was out there on those icy roads, hurt and confused.

“Where’s Miranda, Jake?” Clarice asked softly.

He told them all the story of how he found her in his room, and what happened after that.

“I’ve heard enough,” Seth snapped, anger lacing his voice. “You’re going to jail!”

“Seth,” Serena laid a hand against his chest. “Please. Miranda’s gone and—”

“I’ll find her,” Jake stated with far more certainty than he felt.

Serena turned her big green eyes on Seth. “Go with him, Seth. Find her. It’s snowing and, I’m worried.” She blinked once, her eyes shiny with tears.

Seth shook his head then leaned down to kiss her trembling lips. “All right, love. Don’t worry. Take Aunt Clarice inside and stay warm.” He cast a hard look in Jake’s direction. “We’ll bring her back, then Mr. Hunter here is going to jail.”

With that, he stormed down the steps, with Jake hot on his heels.

He turned once to gaze at Serena, then at Clarice, and mouthed the word, ‘thanks.’

\*\*\*

Jake’s remote chirped as he released the locks on the Jeep.

“You’ll get us both killed.” Seth reached out to grab the keys from him.

Jake sighed, holding the keys out of Seth’s reach. “Look, I know how you must feel about me, but let’s not fight now.”

Seth turned furious eyes on Jake. “You have absolutely no idea how I feel right now, so don’t push it,” he growled. “I’d like nothing more than to stomp your face into the ground and...” He beetled his brows. “What’s wrong, what are you looking at?” Seth followed Jake’s gaze.

A woman dressed in a long white dress stood at the entrance to the garage. In the next instant, she floated through the doorway, the bottom of her feet barely skimming the garage floor, stopping near the spot where Miranda’s car had been parked.

Jake swallowed hard, his heart pounding. “I’ve seen her before,” he whispered.

Seth grabbed his arm. “It’s the Lady in White.”

Jake’s eyes flew to Seth’s.

“Look,” Seth whispered, “she’s pointing to the ground.”

Both men moved toward the spot where Miranda’s car had been. On the empty patch of concrete, they saw several puddles of a dark, murky substance.



Seth squatted down near the puddle, running his finger through the dark green liquid. He lifted his finger to his nose and inhaled. Rising to his feet he looked at Jake and said, "That's brake fluid."

"Shit!" Jake ran a hand through his hair.

"My thoughts exactly."

Jake wrenched open the driver's side door to the Jeep and got in, Seth slid into the passenger side.

As Jake maneuvered the big Jeep out of the garage, he glanced in the rearview mirror and saw the Lady in White vanish before his eyes.

It was the second time he whispered a silent prayer of thanks that afternoon.

\*\*\*

Miranda rounded a curve in the road leading to town. As her foot slipped to the brake, she pressed on the pedal, but the car didn't slow.

Again she pressed on the brake, but the car showed no sign of response, continuing to careen down the icy road.

"Oh my God!" her knuckles whitened as she gripped the steering wheel. "Why won't it stop?" Again she pressed on the brake, but the car kept going.

She glanced in the rearview mirror to see a big Jeep behind her. For just a second, she thought she saw Jake driving, thought she saw Seth gesturing wildly from the passenger seat.

When she forced her eyes back to the road in front of her, a tree stood directly in her path. She turned the steering wheel, but the back of the car fish tailed. In the next instant, the big Jeep whizzed past her car and made a sudden turn, right for her!

Miranda heard the skid of tires and a loud crash.

Then...nothing.

\*\*\*

"Speed up! Get in front of her!" Seth shouted from the passenger side as Jake hit the accelerator.

Visions of Nancy passed before Jake's eyes when he saw Miranda's car head for the tree.

He drove his foot down on the accelerator and raced by her car, gripping the steering wheel, turning it sharply to the right.

He felt the car vibrate, heard a loud crashing noise and the sound of air as it whooshed by him.

The airbags inflated, cushioning him and Seth as his right front fender impacted with Miranda's. Seconds went by, though they seemed like hours, as Jake tried to focus on the large white mass in front of him. As his airbag deflated, he saw Seth move, heard him groan.

"Are you all right?" he managed to reach over and grab hold of Seth. Seth shrugged him off and nodded, 'yes.'

*Thank God.*

As the airbags deflated, Jake released his seat belt and got out of the car. He raced toward Miranda's car, his feet skidding on the icy road, his heart in his throat. He approached the driver's side as visions of Nancy's bruised and battered body played in his head like the rerun of an old movie. Wrenching Miranda's door open, he saw her sitting there, the remains of her airbag draped over the steering wheel, her eyes wide-open and glassy.

"Miranda," he managed, his voice cracking. "I thought I lost you, I thought—"

She turned to look at him, a large, red welt marring her right cheek where her face impacted with the airbag. "Jake," she whispered.

Her eyes rolled, almost closing.

"Don't!" Jake shouted. "Keep your eyes open, Miranda, look at me!" He reached in and gave her a shake.

Her eyes flew open. She nodded. "I'll try."

"You damned well better try." Jake felt the sudden, inexplicable urge to laugh out loud.

*Miranda was all right!*

In the next instant, he felt a hand on his shoulder.

Seth.

He stood by Jake's side. "I just called 911."

Jake turned to face him. "You're sure you're okay?"

"Positive." Seth brushed past Jake and leaned in to look at Miranda. "Stay awake, Miranda. Do what Jake says."

Again she nodded.

"She's in shock." Seth stated.

A patrol car came to a halt near the car and two officers got out. One of them told Jake, "Just stay there. We've got an ambulance coming."

Jake heard the blare of another siren. "Miranda," he said, his voice breaking.

The cop narrowed his eyes. "Is she the woman in the other car?"

"Yes," Jake swallowed.

The cop gave him a small smile and tipped back the hat on his head. "You're both lucky, and so is she. Looks like you're all gonna be okay."

Seth placed a hand on Jake's shoulder. "That was some driving. You saved her life."

A lone tear trickled down Jake's face.

His nymph lived.

## *Chapter Eight*

Miranda sat on the sofa in Clarice's parlor that evening, a blanket tucked around her, a steaming mug full of sugar-laced tea in her hand. She took a sip, but it tasted like...

Nothing. Like the void where her emotions should be. She felt a freezing numbness inside and out.

She put the mug down on the table, snuggling under the fleece again as a shiver tore through her. The next thing she saw was a pair of tan work boots and denim-clad legs. She gazed upwards into a pair of golden eyes and a bronzed face.

Her golden warrior, her tiger prince.

Her head ached. She swore she could still feel the airbag as it scraped the side of her face. But her heart ached more as she gazed at Jake Hunter. She had fallen for another man like her ex. Another wealthy man who'd use her and then dump her like yesterday's garbage.

Jake's warm fingers caressed her chin. "Does it hurt?" he asked, cradling her jaw in the palm of his hand, running the tips of his fingers over the red mark on her cheek.

She shook her head, no. "How could you?" she asked, her voice barely a whisper. "How could you have deceived us all? Why, Jake...why?"

He released her chin. "I tried to tell you, all of you, so many times, but—"

"What?" she gazed up at him.

"Each time, I just, well, I couldn't find the words. All I can say is, I'm sorry, Miranda. Sorrier than you'll ever know."

"Right," she huffed, turning away, lest he see the tears in her eyes. She'd be damned if she cried in front of him now.

He took a seat next to her and grabbed her hand. "How about something to eat?"

Miranda's throat constricted. The terror she'd experienced that afternoon filled her mind, her hands clenching into tight fists as she recalled gripping the steering wheel.

“Miranda,” Jake whispered, squeezing her fingers. “You’re safe.”

Safe? She didn’t think she’d ever feel safe again.

She rose from the couch on trembling legs.

Jake shot up off the couch, scowling. “Where are you going?”

“To my room.” Miranda drew the blanket across her shoulders and started to walk away.

“Miranda. I’m here if you need me.”

At the door, she turned to face him. “What I needed, Mr. Hunter, was the truth. That’s something that seems to be in short supply around here.” Her voice held a biting tone. She saw his eyes spark with anger.

“Damn it, Miranda. Let me back in. I said I was sorry. I said...”

“Go to hell.”

He shook his head. Gritting his teeth he asked, “Stubborn to the core, aren’t you?”

Miranda raised a brow. “Only when dealing with liars.”

She marched out of the parlor, wondering why she didn’t feel triumphant. She had gotten in the last word, the last parting shot, and had wounded Jake...

But she realized, in that moment, that she had only wounded herself.

\*\*\*

Jake woke to the sound of a low moan. He glanced at the clock. Two a.m.

He flipped back the covers. As he swung his legs over the side of the bed he heard a more disturbing sound.

A terror-filled cry came from Miranda’s room!

He flew across the floor and opened the door. As he raced down the hall, he heard her cry out again. Jake skidded to a halt in front of Miranda’s door, where he met Serena.

“She always has vivid dreams,” Serena told him, her voice shaking with fear.

“But I’ve never heard her cry out like this.” She placed her hand on the doorknob and turned it.

Jake laid his hand over hers. “Let me help her,” he implored.

Serena gave him a searching look. She blew out a breath and withdrew her hand.

“Okay, just...”

“I’ll take care of her,” he promised. He heard Miranda moan, the sound wretched. “Please,” he begged.

Serena nodded. “Go ahead.”

When he entered Miranda’s room, he could see her, tossing and turning on the bed, her face covered with tears. Quietly, he walked toward her bed and squatted down on his haunches. “Miranda,” he crooned, brushing some dark locks of hair that lay on her damp cheek. He brushed the wetness from her face with the pad of his thumb. “I’m here, nymph.”

Her eyes fluttered opened. Jake flipped on the bedside lamp, flooding the room with soft light. He hated seeing the dark circles under her beautiful violet eyes. The bruise on her face seemed more pronounced than ever, a grim reminder of what could have happened that afternoon.

She blinked as she gazed at him. “I-I don’t know what to call you.” Her voice sounded sad...lost.

He rose to his feet, leaning down to place a kiss on her temple. “Jake would be fine.”

Miranda sat up. He got a good look at the small brown crests surrounding her nipples.

He felt his cock swell.

She pulled the covers to her chin, settling her head back against the headboard.

Shifting his stance to relieve the ache in his groin, he looked down on Miranda.

Her eyes never left his face. “I-I never said...I mean, I should have said thank you.” Her voice quivered.

He sat down on the edge of the bed, grateful that she hadn’t thrown him out. “Miranda,” he reached for her hand. “I never intended to hurt you. Never. I—”

She placed a finger over his lips. “Stay with me. I have to know I’m alive, to get the sound of screeching tires and that awful crashing sound from my head. I need,” her voice broke, her chest rose and fell as her breath came in short, shallow pants. “I need you, Jake.”

Jake slid into the bed and took her in his arms, kissing her forehead, her nose, her cheeks, paying special attention to the bright red mark on her cheek and chin. “God, Miranda, when I think of what happened this afternoon, how I could have lost you in that minute, I wanted to die, too.” He kissed her, trying to be gentle, but as soon as his lips melded with hers, he increased the pressure, his mouth grinding down on hers, his desire growing with each pass of his lips across her lush mouth. Her body molded to his as she shifted against him, turning so that her feminine mound brushed his groin, sending a shiver of longing through his body.

“Are you sure about this?” he whispered. He needed to be inside her—he needed it now.

“I’m sure,” she whispered, running a hand through his hair, tipping his head back to kiss him full on the mouth. “I’ve never been more sure of anything in my life.”

She reached down to cup his swollen shaft in her hand, cupping and massaging the large sac beneath it. Jake sighed, his breath shaky, as he rested his forehead against hers, his eyes meeting hers. “I love you,” he whispered.

Jake’s large hands caressed her bottom cheeks, pulling her tight against his body. He slipped a hand between them, stroking her clit with the tip of his index finger until the folds of flesh between her legs grew wet and slick. He leaned down to suckle her breasts, his teeth scraping gently against their swollen crests, his cock growing stiff and hard when he felt her nipples peak in his mouth.

She writhed on the bed, this time, her moans filled with pleasure. Jake fitted himself inside her driving in, then out, gripping her to keep her close.

“Jake!” she cried. The walls of her channel spasmed. Jake shuddered as he filled her with the last drop of his seed.

They lay fused together for a long time. Miranda’s eyes fluttered closed, her breathing deep and even.

He still didn’t pull away, but let her rest against him.

Jake’s last thought before he drifted off to sleep was of Miranda. She had never said ‘I love you,’ back.

## *Chapter Ten*

Jake walked into the kitchen the next morning, feeling like he faced a firing squad.

Clarice, Serena and Seth sat around the kitchen table, the remains of their breakfasts in front of them.

No one said a word as he walked in. His heart started to pound, his palms grew moist. Clearing his throat, he said, "I owe you all an apology."

Silence.

Jake approached the table. "I should have been honest from the start, I hope you'll accept my apology but whatever you choose to do, I'll understand." He glanced in Seth's direction. "I deserve whatever you think necessary, but believe me when I say, I've never felt more at home. Ever since I stepped through the doorway of Bride's Inn, I've, well—" He couldn't say another damned thing.

Seconds went by, they seemed like hours, finally, Seth spoke. "We've spoken about this already."

*Shit.*

"My aunt wants you to stay."

His heart started to pound again.

"So does Serena."

Jake swallowed. "And you?"

Seth glanced at his aunt and wife. "Ladies, will you excuse us for a few minutes?"

Serena bounded up from her chair. "I'll go look in on Miranda."

"And I've got some painting I'd like to do." Clarice rose to her feet and walked by Jake. She patted his arm and winked.

When they left, Seth nodded in Jake's direction and pointed to a chair at the table. "Have a seat, Mr. Hunter."



Jake eased into the chair.

“Coffee?” Seth raised a brow.

Jake shook his head, wiping his hands across his thighs. He felt a bead of perspiration trickle down his back.

“I had you investigated,” Seth told him. He leaned his forearms on the table. “I found out that the real Grady Smith – the man I originally hired to do some work around Bride’s Inn, got sick. He’s in the hospital with a ruptured appendix. His wife was supposed to call me and let me know what happened, but she was so upset, she forgot.” He narrowed his eyes. “Quite a lucky break for you. It made it easy, didn’t it, to pretend you were Grady Smith?”

Jake swallowed, his throat tight. “I never intended to—”

Seth’s voice held a biting tone. “You resemble him, too. Blonde, like him. No wonder Serena and my Aunt Clarice thought you were Grady Smith.”

“Look, if you’re going to arrest me, just—”

Seth held up a hand. “I’m not arresting you...yet.”

Jake blew out a breath and ran a hand through his hair.

Seth leaned back in his chair and folded his arms across his chest. “What you did yesterday—I was a cop for more years than I care to count, and I was involved in plenty of car-chases. Your driving was...well, all I can say is, you did a damned fine job.”

Jake blinked once, thinking he heard wrong.

“You saved Miranda’s life. And from what I’ve heard from my aunt and Serena, about what you’ve been doing around here and what you did out there on those cliffs, well, I think I owe *you* something.”

Jake’s legs started to shake. He placed his hands on his knees to stop their trembling.

“You can stay if you want. Serena says that you and Miranda are involved. Is that true?”

“I love her,” he blurted.

Seth shook his head. “I hope so. For her sake. She’s been through enough.”

Jake knit his brows. “What are you talking about?”

Seth raised one dark brow. "Didn't she tell you?"

"No, why? What happened to Miranda?"

"A little boy she used to care for died last year. He was murdered."

Jake felt his blood run cold.

"The police never caught his murderer and Miranda swears it was a man she saw loitering at the boy's school. But they could never find him."

Jake ran a hand through his hair. "I think I'll have that coffee."

Seth got up and poured him a cup. "She doesn't talk about it too much, but I know she's scared. She swears that one day, she caught him staring at her, when she went to pick up Jordan." Seth gazed out the window for a few seconds then he faced Jake again. "She carries around a lot of guilt. She's convinced that if she hadn't taken off that day, little Jordan Bailey would still be alive."

"That's crazy! She shouldn't blame herself."

His own guilt over Nancy's death surfaced.

"Why was Miranda caring for that little boy?" Jake asked.

Seth eased his tall frame into the seat. A few seconds of silence greeted Jake before Seth answered. "Miranda loves kids. Always did. Jordan's parents were clients of Miranda's ex-husband. The regular sitter quit, so Miranda jumped at the chance to watch Jordan for them when they mentioned something to her ex about needing a babysitter." Seth took a sip of his coffee then continued. "Jordan attended a special school for gifted children. He was very bright. The day Jordan was kidnapped--"

Jake sat back in his chair and eyed Seth. "That poor kid."

"You've got that right. He was taken, right near his school. Miranda was sick that day, and couldn't watch Jordan, so his parents asked the housekeeper to drop Jordan off that morning. When the housekeeper pulled her car to the curb near the school, that's when it happened. She got out of the car with Jordan, and a maroon van pulled up alongside of her. A man inside the van rolled down his window and asked the housekeeper for directions to a mall or some such place. Next thing she knew, Jordan was gone."

Jake leaned forward and pushed his coffee mug away, his stomach roiling from Seth's story. "They kidnapped him for ransom?"

Seth shook his head. "That's what the police thought initially, but there was no contact made on the part of the kidnapper to extort money from the parents. A few days went by then the police found the abandoned maroon van. The kidnapper drove Jordan all the way out to Long Island's east end—to a wooded area." Seth took a deep breath then blew it out. "They also found Jordan. An autopsy revealed he had been—" Seth swallowed. "Tortured."

Jake ran a hand over his face. "God almighty. No wonder Miranda feels the way she does." He hated the idea that she blamed herself for Jordan's death.

"She's here to try and get her mind off it, but she's scared. Scared that the guy is still out there. The police never found him."

The footprints! Jake remembered the large prints he'd seen in the muddy flowerbeds.

"Look, I never said anything in front of Clarice, Serena or Miranda, but I've seen footprints outside. A man's footprints. When the power authority crews were here, I thought one of them might have made them, but just the other day, I saw fresh prints."

Seth scowled. "Where?"

"In the flower beds."

Seth rose to his feet and started to pace then he stopped, turning his dark eyes on Jake.

"Then we've got our work cut out for us, Mr. Hunter."

"Call me Jake, please."

Seth sighed. "Now you're pushing it."

But his face lit with a smile.

## *Chapter Twelve*

As February gave way to March and spring's warming winds blew across the cliffs, Miranda felt restless. Jake stayed on, working day and night, helping Seth with all sorts of chores around Bride's Inn. Sometimes Miranda caught them laughing, sharing a joke or whatever it was men did that bonded them together. Serena entered her ninth month of pregnancy and Bride's Inn buzzed with excitement. Miranda helped her friend set up her nursery, took her shopping, and kept her company. She enjoyed spending time with Clarice, too. Sometimes she'd spend hours with her, sitting quietly, reading while Clarice painted. They spoke of many things...including little Jordan Bailey.

But Miranda refused to speak about Jake. In fact, she managed to avoid him as much as possible, but she couldn't avoid the emptiness in her heart. Her thoughts scattered, like the wind that blew across the cliffs one afternoon as she walked, determined to exorcise Jake Hunter from her mind.

But she couldn't exorcise him from her heart.

He lingered there, tucked deep inside of her. How odd that life mimicked her childhood fairytales—the frog, Grady Smith, a handyman, had turned into a rich, handsome, prince.

Wealthy, money-hungry, land-grabbing Jake Hunter.

She glanced toward Bride's Inn, shielding her eyes from the afternoon sun as she gazed at the window in the landing on the third floor.

A woman stood there, dressed in white. She didn't move, just stared out at the cliffs and the ocean beyond. Miranda's heart began to pound, remembering that strange dream she had during the first week she had come to Bride's Inn. She neared the back of the house and looked up, but the woman just stared straight ahead.

Maybe her head was still fuzzy as a result of her accident.

Or maybe, she hadn't been dreaming that first night she came to Bride's Inn. And maybe, the woman she saw now was indeed, the Lady in White. Clarice told her that the mysterious apparition that haunted Bride's Inn only appeared to those who really needed her.

Miranda felt a sudden chill as the wind kicked up. If only the Lady In White could mend her broken heart.

Miranda hurried toward the entrance in the back of the house, closing the door behind her as she stepped inside, wiping her feet on the mat to rid her shoes of dirt. She balanced on one foot, leaning on the wall, while she removed one shoe. As she started to remove her other shoe, a deep, familiar voice rang out.

"Where were you?"

Miranda looked up to see Jake standing there, scowling.

Her heart started to beat wildly. She kept her voice steady and replied, "I was out, Mr. Hunter."

He folded his arms across his broad chest. She gazed at him for just a few seconds, drinking in the sight of his tall, golden form. His arms and face, kissed by the sun, had deepened in color—she saw a swatch of pale skin peeking out from the gold watchband strapped to his wrist. She took a closer look at the watch.

A Rolex.

He had good taste...like Alex.

They were both shits.

Jake's voice cut through her thoughts. "I can see that you were out," his voice vibrated with anger. He took a step in her direction, but she didn't move. "Why were you gone so long? We were—"

She lifted a brow, thinking he sounded like he was concerned. "What?" Miranda asked, her heart tripping in her chest.

He ran a hand through his thick mane of hair. "Nothing. I-I wish you would tell someone when you were going out and, maybe someone should go with you. It can be dangerous out on those cliffs."

She sighed, placing her shoes on a rack in the mudroom. When she looked up next, he stood right in front of her. Without her shoes, she had a definite height disadvantage. The mudroom suddenly felt like a shoebox.

“Excuse me,” she tried to brush past him, but he didn’t budge. “Would you mind getting out of my way?”

“Why are you avoiding me?”

Again she tried to push past him, but Jake stood firm. In the next instant, he bent his head and kissed her on the mouth, his warm, silky lips sliding across hers.

“Talk to me, Miranda,” he whispered, his lips trailing over the corner of her mouth. Miranda felt hot all over each time his lips slid across hers. “Please. I’m dying here. You’ll never know how sorry I am for what I did. Everyone else is giving me a chance to prove myself, why not you?”

“And just what is it that you want to prove to me, Mr. Hunter?”

His eyes turned a deep, golden sherry color. She swore she could see them flash and spark. “Stop calling me, ‘Mr. Hunter.’”

She shrugged, trying to appear nonchalant, but her pulse quickened. Miranda didn’t want to admit how much she enjoyed needling him. She could never do that with Alex, he always sulked.

“That’s your name, isn’t it?” She glanced around. “You know, I’ve been wondering about something.”

He raised one brow. “What?”

“Where’s your butler, Mr. Hunter? And your maids and chauffeur and...”

He laughed derisively. “You’ve got something against money?”

“Only people who use it for no-good. Like you. I read about all those land deals you made. Some people say you’re shady.”

“That’s what people say when they’re jealous. That I couldn’t possibly have made that much money doing an honest day’s work.”

She snorted. “Right, like you’re honest.”

He shook his head. “Look, we could go round and round this forever, but you might as well get used to it Miranda, I’m staying.”

*The insufferable ass!*

“Fine, stay. I don’t care what you do. Now, let me by.” He grabbed her upper arm as she moved around him and turned her to face him.

“Just listen to me for one second.”

“Let me go,” she said through clenched teeth. She tried to shrug out of his hold, but he gave no quarter. He grabbed hold of her other arm and held her fast.

“Listen, nymph. Don’t go out alone anymore.”

Her eyes widened. “If you think for one second that I’m going to let you order me around like I’m your servant, then you’re crazy.”

He leaned down, his nose bumping hers. “Please, Miranda, take someone with you, Serena, or Seth or...”

The wind blew clear out of her sails at the insistent, pleading tone in his voice. But it was all an act, a show. “Like I said, I do as I please. Now, I have chores to do.”

She pulled away from him, but felt bereft at the loss of his touch.

As she walked down the hall, she could swear his golden eyes burned a hole straight through her back.

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Seth whistled as he replaced a switch plate on the wall, his dark head bent in concentration.

“Need a hand?” Jake asked as he shoved his hands in his pockets, hoping to stop the tingling and warmth he felt in his palms. It had been days since he’d spoken to or touched his dark-haired nymph, and even after such a brief encounter, his body hummed.

And she made his blood sizzle with her attitude. Damn her and all women!

His shoulders slumped.

Seth put down the screwdriver and grinned. “Still not talking to you, is she?”

Jake scowled. “What do you think?”

Seth walked over to him and laid a hand on his shoulder. “That you’ve got a long way to go before she’s going to give in.”

Jake sighed. “I’m worried, Seth. Did you get hold of the sheriff?”

“Spoke to Harlan the other day. He’s chief of police here in town. He’s been sending a patrol car around every day, but so far, no one’s seen anything or anyone.”

“Well, maybe that’s a good thing.”

“Could be. Either way, I don’t want Miranda out alone.”

Jake nodded.

“And uh,” Seth glanced around. “Get her off the ladder, too.”

Jake angled his head. “The ladder?”

“She’s cleaning the chandelier in the dining room downstairs...alone.” Seth’s grin became wide. “Get my drift?”

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Jake’s heart skipped several beats when he saw Miranda standing on the top of a sixteen-foot ladder. Her dark hair was tied back with a scarf. The jeans she wore outlined her tight round bottom and a pair of white canvas sneakers adorned her small, narrow feet. She looked adorable as hell; the sight of her tight little butt made Jake hard all over...and fueled his temper. His right hand tingled and his palm buzzed when he thought of hauling her over his lap and wailing the daylights out of her. He took two steps in her direction, but stopped, afraid that if he startled her, she’d come tumbling down.

She hummed a tune while she wiped some crystals from the chandelier, hanging each one carefully, picking up the next one then repeating the motions. In the next instant, she turned, her jaw dropping.

“That’s a good way to catch flies,” he called out.

She snapped her mouth closed, her lips forming an angry, tight line.

“And a good way to break your neck, too. Come down from there, nymph.” He kept his voice steady and even, but his heart pounded violently.

Miranda lifted her nose in the air. “Don’t call me that.”

“Just get down from there...please.”

He tried to gentle his tone, but the defiant look in her eyes set his blood boiling. No woman, not even, Nancy, ever had this effect on him.



Jake covered the distance between him and the ladder in a few steps, placing his hands on the lower rungs, fearing it would topple any second. Miranda gripped the top step with both hands when it started to shake.

“I was fine until you got here.”

Damn her stubborn hide! “You shouldn’t do something like this alone. If you’re going to insist on cleaning that damned chandelier, then I’ll help you.”

“Go screw yourself.”

His eyes widened. “My, my, you have quite a biting tongue today.”

“Only for lying, conniving snakes like you.” She lifted her nose in the air, her violet eyes snapping.

He sighed. “Aren’t you getting tired of playing that same old song?”

“It’s on the top of my hit list.”

He laughed—he couldn’t help it. She delighted him no end, angry or sad, it didn’t matter. He wanted her every which way he could get her. Forever.

The thought stunned him.

Forever. Yes, that’s exactly what he wanted, Miranda in his life forever, and he always got what he wanted.

“Don’t you have something to do?” Miranda sneered.

Oh, how he wanted to kiss that little defiant nose. He wanted to kiss her all over.

“I’m doing it. I’m helping you.”

“Go away.”

“Uh-uh.”

In the next instant, he felt something cold and wet hit him in the face.

He lifted the wet rag, grimacing as a drop of dirty water seeped into his eye. Jake tossed it aside and growled low in his throat. “You’re going to pay for that.”

“I thought you were concerned for my safety, Mr. Hunter. You can’t very well seek vengeance while I’m up here on this ladder.”

He schooled his features. Two could play at this game.

“Fine. Do what you want. What do I care if you break your neck?”

Jake let go of the ladder and walked out of the room. As he turned his back he grinned, being careful lest her prying eyes got wind of his plan.

Miranda Hollander was his, and by God, he would make her see reason.

No matter how long it took.

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Miranda made quick work of the chandelier, anxiety filling her. How stupid could she be, to think that he really cared? She swallowed around a lump in her throat as the emptiness in her heart grew. How long could she lie to herself?

Her shoulders slumped as she wiped a crystal, watching it glisten in the light. He didn't care enough to stay and fight. To let her rant and rave and...

Just like Alex. He hadn't cared enough to work things out. He had walked out, leaving her alone with her sorrow and her guilt over Jordan.

She hung the last crystal, admiring her work, but it suddenly held no satisfaction.

Lately, nothing did.

Miranda climbed down the ladder, her steps slow and measured. When she neared the bottom, she felt a steely arm around her waist as her body literally flew through the air. The next thing she knew, she felt another arm beneath her bottom. Jake had her nestled against his chest, one arm supporting her back, the other under her backside as he whisked her down the hallway toward the grand staircase.

“Put me down!” She squirmed in his arms, throwing her head back, kicking her legs straight out. “You ass!” She kicked her legs out again then leaned forward, baring her teeth, attempting to bite him on the shoulder. He reared back, dodging her attempt, laughing all the while he ran up the stairs with her.

Miranda opened her mouth to scream, but he leaned down and kissed her. The minute his mouth connected with hers, she felt a hot jolt of desire tear through her body, her clit throbbing in response to his heated kiss.

But she wouldn't let him get the best of her...no way!

On the third floor, he sailed down the hallway to his room and kicked open the door, shutting it with the heel of his work boot as he made his way over to the bed.

Jake dumped her unceremoniously on the mattress. She bounced twice.

He followed her down, pinning her to the bed and kissed her again.

This time, Miranda kissed him back, the tip of her tongue gliding across the fleshy part of his lower lip. She heard him moan, felt his body and his shaft harden as she slid her lips across his. Reaching for the shirt tucked into the waistband of his jeans, she tugged, releasing it, and slid her hands underneath it to the small of his back.

“Yow!” Jake flew up off the bed, his hand massaging his back. “Damn it, why did you pinch me like that?” His eyes turned stormy.

Miranda took that opportunity to scoot off the bed. She reached for the nearest thing to hurl at him...a book. Jake ducked, the book sailing over his head. He narrowed his eyes and charged across the bed, toppling her on it once more.

“That hurt, nymph.” He pinned her hands over her head. “You’re going to pay for that.”

She squirmed beneath him as he rained kisses down on her face. As his mouth trailed a fiery path of kisses across her neck, and down her chest, he held her hands within one of his own, using the other to release the buttons on her blouse and the front catch of her bra. He trailed his lips over her breasts, taking her right nipple into his mouth, treating the little peak to a tender kiss. Her traitorous body responded as she arched her back, pushing her breast into his mouth. Jake reached down and unfastened the button of her jeans, sliding the zipper down, placing his fingers underneath the leg band of her panties, where he teased and toyed with her clit until Miranda became mindless.

Her orgasm hit within seconds of his touch as Jake’s long, golden fingers applied their magic touch.

Her tiger prince...

When she came back down to earth from her sensual high, he smiled at her then scowled. “I should paddle your backside. That really hurt!” He reached around and massaged his lower back again, glaring at her long, red nails.

She felt languid. Raising one brow, she asked, “You and what army?”

He flipped her over in one swift movement and smacked her bottom.

Her bottom stung, but only for a few seconds. It was still enough to ignite her desire all over again.

Jake settled his big body next to hers. “Marry me, Miranda. Please. We’re good together.”

She held her breath as old hurts bubbled up to the surface. The sensual haze wore off as thoughts of Alex and Jake swirled together. He’d wind up hurting her just like Alex.

She buttoned her blouse then looked Jake. “No,” she shook her head. “I won’t marry you.”

He sat up and ran a hand through his hair. “Just tell me why.”

What could she say? That she couldn’t marry anyone? That eventually, he’d want children and...

Panic filled her. She had to get out of his room—had to get away from him.

“Miranda, listen to me,” he grabbed her hand, entwining his fingers with hers. She looked down on it, the sight, painful and...sweet. “I want to take care of you. I have plenty of money. You’d never have to work, you wouldn’t have to lift a finger, you wouldn’t...”

Her heart thumped in her chest. “You think that’s what matters to me? Money?”

He dropped her hand and sighed. “No, it’s just that—”

“My ex left me quite comfortable. So, no, I don’t care a whit for your money, but I do care very much about honesty. You lied once, how do I know you’re being sincere now?”

His face turned stormy and dark, the golden bronze color deepening. “You want to believe I’m a liar because it’s easier, isn’t it, Miranda?”

Her eyes flew to his. “It’s easier to make me out as some kind of villain—a lying, money-hungry land baron. That way you won’t get hurt.”

She sucked in a breath. “You don’t know what you’re talking about!” Miranda rose from the bed and zipped up her jeans, her hands shaking.

Jake shook his head. "Oh, but I do." He angled his head. "You hold onto your hurt and use it like a shield. Haven't you ever done something so wrong that you just die inside each time you think about it?"

She stood frozen, her feet rooted to the carpet...

Jordan...had she been with him that fateful day...he might still be alive.

"Well, I did. The night my wife walked out on me carrying our unborn child, we had a terrible fight. About me and my all-consuming desire for money. The night she and my child died, I wanted to die, too. It was my fault that she took off the way she did...my fault that I upset her...my fault..."

She couldn't bear to hear anymore. Miranda ran for the door.

"The day I came to Bride's Inn, I found what I was looking for: a home, a haven from my troubles and I found you." He walked over to her. "I found that I could forgive myself and go on and learn from my mistakes. Now, I need you to forgive me...please."

Her eyes filled with tears. How could she forgive him if she couldn't forgive herself?

Then she ran out of his room and flew down the hall.

## Chapter Twelve

Outside, the wind whipped through the trees, its low moan echoing across the cliffs.

*Forgive me...*

Miranda trudged along the sandy path near Bride's Inn, her thoughts whirling and spinning off, but they always came back to one thought...

Jake.

*Forgive me...*

She looked up and saw that strange woman in white standing in the landing on the third floor. It seemed as though a veil shrouded her face, but Miranda swore she could see the sadness in her eyes, even at this distance.

*Forgive me...*

Miranda blinked, thinking she was seeing things again, but she could have sworn the woman's mouth moved, forming the words "*forgive me...*"

Miranda swallowed back tears. Yes, maybe it was time to forgive.

Herself...and Jake.

Time to let little Jordan Bailey go and get on with her life...

A life that included her tiger prince.

She placed one foot on the step leading up to the mudroom when a hand clamped over her mouth and nose. Miranda struggled, but the hand remained in place, cutting off her air supply. She felt her world turn gray and fuzzy as her feet lifted from the ground.

Then she bared her teeth and bit the hand covering her mouth. She heard a muffled curse and turned to face her captor.

Her mouth opened, but she couldn't seem to utter a single sound as her eyes took in the sight of the man she had seen at Jordan's school.

The man the police could never find.

Her body shook; her mind a jumble of wild, crazy thoughts, the first being that if she didn't get away from him, she'd never see Jake again.

The man seemed bigger than she remembered—a jagged scar running across his face and right eye. In the next instant, she reached out and dug her nails into his face, their sharp tips catching the end of his nose, cutting deep into the flesh of his right nostril. His scream of pain came from low in his throat as the wound opened wide, blood spurting out to land on the stoop beneath his feet.

She turned to run, but he reached out and snagged her hair, bunching it in his hand. He tugged her forward, until they stood face-to-face.

Miranda whimpered as he leaned down, his stale breath drifting across her nose. Bile rose in her throat.

“Now, you die, bitch.”

Then he dragged her from the stoop toward the cliffs.

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Jake flew down the hallway and stairs in search of Miranda.

He checked in all the rooms downstairs, but couldn't find her. Suddenly, a frigid breeze swirled around his ankles and legs, traveling up his body. When he turned around to see what caused that chill wind, he came face-to-face with the Lady in White. She stood in the hallway and pointed toward the back of the house.

“What?” He whispered. “What are you trying to tell me?”

Her mouth moved. For just an instant, he thought she tried to speak.

Again, she pointed toward the back of the house then she floated down the hallway toward the mudroom. Jake followed, shaking his head, wondering how in hell he could see through her to the other side of the hallway. Her shimmery form skimmed the floor as she led him down the hallway, stopping near the mudroom door.

He didn't know what to do. Yeah, he did. He wanted to run like hell, but she seemed frustrated, as though she needed to tell him something of great importance...like the day she pointed to the puddles of brake fluid in the garage! Jake's heart skipped several beats as she pointed to the mudroom door that led outside, holding her bouquet of wilted white roses in one hand, the petals shaking as she pointed to the doorknob.

“All right, I’ll open it.”

Christ almighty! He was really losing it, talking to...

What? Ghosts?

He turned the knob and stared outside to see...

Nothing.

He was about to shut the door when he felt her icy fingers on his arm. She shook her head and pointed to the steps outside the door. His eyes traveled down and stopped.

Hundreds of bright red droplets lined the stoop outside. Then he saw the footprints. Large familiar footprints, and smaller ones, too.

Jake flew out the door. “Miranda!” he shouted.

“Jake!”

Jake turned at the sound of Seth’s voice.

Seth caught up with him. “What’s wrong? Where are you going?”

He grabbed hold of Seth and shook him. “Call that sheriff. I saw those footprints again and blood on the stoop outside. Miranda’s gone and...” He looked around, his eyes darting everywhere but there was no sign of Miranda.

Seth took his cell phone from his pocket and dialed the police. Then Jake’s eyes widened when he saw Seth reach into his jacket, removing a pistol from its holster. He cocked it once...

Then Jake heard Miranda scream.

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“He wouldn’t listen to me. I told him I’d buy him candy and ice cream if he’d just let me touch him.”

Nausea filled Miranda’s stomach as she listened to Jordan’s murderer.

“I used to watch him all the time. No one saw me. No one, except for you.”

She struggled in his hold. Like a vice, he held her arms and dragged her toward the cliffs.

“He wouldn’t listen. He just kept crying for Miranda.”

Miranda whimpered, but wasn’t sure if it was from the pain of his fingers digging into her arms or the torture of knowing that Jordan had cried for her.



The man dragged her to the edge of the cliff. "I had to shut him up. So I hit him, then I put my hand over his mouth to stop him."

She struggled, digging her nails into his sleeves, pushing against him each time he shoved her further toward the edge. Her foot slipped, she heard rocks spill over the ledge and looked down at the ocean hundreds of feet below where they stood.

Her head spun as he pushed her back, her heels hanging over the ledge.

Miranda screamed as she pushed and shoved, but he was too big, too powerful. God, if this is what he had done to Jordan!

She saw the sky, the birds overhead, as he pushed her body over the ledge.

"They'll think you went for a walk and took a fall. I've seen you walking. That's what they'll think, that you fell." His voice sounded flat, devoid of any emotion, as though killing her was nothing more to him than killing a small housefly.

She didn't want to die! She wanted to be with Jake. She wanted forgiveness.

If she died, there'd be no one to bring this man, this insane murderer, to justice.

She reached out and hooked a foot around his ankle, toppling them to the ground.

They rolled to the edge of the cliff, where he reached out to shove her over the ledge.

That's when she saw him. Like a golden warrior, Jake came charging at them, the sun glinting off his tawny mane of hair. He reached for Miranda, pulling her away from the ledge, shoving her to the side.

She watched in horror as Jake struggled with Jordan's murderer. The man knocked Jake to the ground, pummeling his head and face with his fists. Jake rolled away, reaching out to grab the man's boot when he tried to kick him, toppling the man to the ground. The man rose to his feet and grabbed Jake by the throat, lifting him clear off the ground, and dragged him to the edge of the cliff. From the corner of her eye, she saw Seth lift the gun in his hand, aiming it at the man's upper chest.

In the next instant she heard a crack, like a whip through the air.

The man dropped Jake then he collapsed in a heap, writhing in pain as he grabbed his chest.

Jake bounded up from the ground and ran toward her.

“Miranda!”

She rose to her feet on shaky legs and ran toward him. “Jake!” she shouted over the wind.

He caught her up in his arms, squeezing her tight.

She didn’t want him to let go...ever.

### ***Chapter Thirteen***

Miranda heard a knock on her bedroom door the following day as she folded the last of her clothing and placed it in the suitcase. She shut the bag, zipping it closed when she heard the knock on the door again. “I’m ready,” she called out. “Just give me a second.”

She glanced around her room, a lump forming in her throat as she recalled the events of the last few days, and how she had fallen in love with Bride’s Inn and its resident, ghost, the Lady in White—the ghostly figure of a woman who’d saved her life. She would never see the old inn again, or Serena, Seth, Clarice or...

Jake.

Her heart grew heavy at the thought. She swung her suitcase off the bed and heard the door open. Jake stood in the doorway, his tall golden form filling the small space.

He shut the door and walked into the room. She heard the click of the lock, saw the scowl on his face. Her heart tripped in her chest. She swallowed hard, determined to make him see reason, determined to make him understand why she was leaving...

Everything she had come to love.

She drank in the sight of him. He wore her favorite outfit – jeans, work boots and a t-shirt that stretched across his wide chest. He glanced at the suitcase at her side and shook his head. “I just couldn’t believe it when Serena told me you were leaving.” He walked toward her. “She’s upset, Miranda, and so is Clarice. Even Seth said—” He ran a hand through his hair.

She raised a brow. “What did Seth say?”

“That you’re crazy.”

She angled her chin, determined. But she felt her heart crumble at the sight of Jake’s golden face. “He’s entitled to his opinion.” She started to walk by him, but his hand shot out, gripping her arm.

“Where are you going?” His voice sounded hoarse.

“Home.”

Back to her condo at the elegant North Shore Towers. Four bedrooms, four baths, a nice large den, living room and...

It wasn't home. Bride's Inn was home. Her condo was cold. Stale. It belonged to another life, a life she had shared with Alex, a cold, stale human being. She glanced at Jake, at the warmth in his golden eyes. In them, she had found love and forgiveness and...life. She could live again, really live...

But it would have to be without him.

“You're not going anywhere, nymph.” She collapsed on the bed when he called her by her pet name. “At least not until you tell me why—why you want to leave Bride's Inn. I know you love it here and...” She heard the catch in his deep voice. “And I know you love me. Hell, Miranda!” He ran a hand through his thick hair and started to pace. He stopped, turning to gaze at her, his eyes lit from within. “I've got enough love for the two of us. Even if you don't. Even if...”

“You think I don't love you.” Her eyes filled with tears. “But that's not true.”

“Then why leave?” He sat down on the bed and reached for her hand, entwining his fingers with hers. She looked down on their hands, reminded once more of all the pain and sweetness they represented—like life itself.

“Tell me what's wrong, nymph.” He reached out to tuck some of her hair behind one ear. She shivered at the contact of his fingers as they caressed her lobe. “Tell me and I'll make it right.”

If only he could!

She took a deep breath and plunged headlong into the pool of truth.

“You told me that the night your wife died, she carried your unborn child.”

He drew his tawny brows together. “That's right. But...”

She held up a hand, palm-out. “You wanted children with Nancy, didn't you?”

“Yes, but what does this have to do with us?”

Miranda let go of a shaky breath. “I can't have children, Jake.”

He raised a brow. “Because of the endometriosis?”

She nodded, afraid to say anymore lest she break down and start crying all over him. Miranda rose from the bed and stuck out her hand. “Goodbye, Mr. Hunter and thank you for...everything.”

Miranda took two steps when she heard a low growl. Her body spun then she collided with Jake’s wide, muscled chest. “Mr. Hunter? That’s what I am to you? Mr. Hunter? You drop a bombshell like that on me, you don’t even wait for my answer, for me to...damn you, Miranda!” he shouted. Then his lips claimed hers in a scorching kiss. “I don’t give a damn about that. If you can’t have children, then we can adopt. Hell, let’s adopt a passel of kids.” He kissed her again—hard.

Her heart felt light. Alex had never wanted to adopt children.

“And let’s stay here and make Bride’s Inn into what it once was. A grand place—a place where we could raise that passel of kids. What do you think, nymph, are you game for it? Are you...” he swallowed. “Game for me?”

Was she!

“Jake!” She threw her arms around his neck and kissed him back. “I love you, Jake Hunter.”

“Nymph.” he muttered thickly, kissing her deeply. “I love you more than life itself.”

## *Epilogue*

Life.

It was a precarious thing. A gift. Its real value eluded most people until it was torn from them.

The Lady in White stood at the top of the grand staircase, gazing out toward the cliffs and ocean beyond, then her eyes lit upon the scene below.

Several children played together—their proud parents running after them.

There was Serena's little one, a bright, red-headed cherub, intent on stealing a ball away from his cousin, little David Jordan Hunter, Miranda and Jake's adopted son.

The Lady in White smiled as she heard the sound of their laughter, smiled again when she heard the crew of workmen inside.

The renovations had begun.

Soon, Bride's Inn would be full of happy brides.

As the sun began to set in the distance, Jake, Miranda, Serena and Seth gathered up their brood, bringing them inside.

Life.

Who knew how ironic it could be? But the Lady in White did, for it had played one of its marvelous tricks on Miranda and Jake.

The Lady in White smiled. Perhaps she should tell her. She'd go to her, at night, when it was quiet and...

No, she couldn't. She would let Miranda be surprised.

Let the life growing inside her be the greatest gift of all.