



# HONEST MASKS

Barbra Novac



Loose Id

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# Chapter One

The effectiveness of the mask Chloe Halliday wore to the office each day failed miserably, this being the key to its success. The thin veil of interest she took in her work, through which malaise lingered clearly visible, sat on her face fooling no one, just as all her colleagues' masks didn't fool her. One could be fooled into thinking these masks floated onto each face as part of a dress code each morning, becoming part of the daily appearance, as employees marched through the great glass doors preparing themselves for another day.

In their way, the masks assisted the drones of Electricity Australia. The idle boredom lay behind a transparent veneer, comforting in its consistency, safe in its stability.

Every day, sitting at their desks by nine, smiles plastered on their faces, lips spread evenly over white teeth, they shuffled the paperwork they'd left behind the night before. Every morning, they all wondered why they hadn't completed that task yesterday before they left. Now they had to start the day with it, a mind-numbing chore, now overdue as well as excruciatingly dull.

Each day, they shouted, "Mornin', Bob. How was your night?" or "Tracie, you look nice! New dress?"

The all-important debriefing of television shows or last night's news, usually left till morning tea, could be bumped forward if something really exciting happened. In that case, people would break with convention, allow the energy to seep into the day, and begin the prattle about controversy as soon as they reached their desks.

"Did you hear those Abos refused the fruit-picking job? It was on *A Current Affair*."

"Yeah, take away their benefits! That'll learn 'em."

"My grandfather, Mum's dad, is Samoan! He wouldn't have come to this country if it wasn't for the fruit pickin' being available to Islanders. So the Abos don't want to do it. Don't make 'em, I say. We get more productive Islanders who do want to work in this country."

“Anyone watch *Law and Order*?”

“Lawyers! They should bury the lot of ’em.”

Thus flowed the conversation, each and every day; very little -- including the television shows -- changed.

Chloe arrived ten minutes late, as per her routine. Also according to daily custom, Ross, sitting opposite, glanced at his watch and shouted “Good afternoon” as Chloe bent over the sign-in book. It was a way to make sure she signed in at nine ten a.m. and didn’t cheat the system by writing nine a.m.

Secretly Chloe hankered for the day she’d write nine a.m. even though she arrived at nine ten. Just to buck the system. But Ross was always early, and no matter how many good intentions were made at five fifteen p.m. every day, by the next morning, she couldn’t do without those ten extra minutes in bed.

“Morning, Ross. I’m going to get you a new watch. Yours seems to be broken again.”

Ross grinned at her, shook his wrist, and moved his watch to his ear as if to check on it. “No, no, I think it works perfectly. Nine ten a.m., your check-in time every day.”

Chloe smiled, letting him win this round, but like all victors, it wasn’t enough to satisfy his bloodlust.

With excited eyes, he shouted across to her as she poured her coffee at the urn, “Your chair’s gone. Been nicked. I was here early, but it was gone when I got here. Must have happened last night.”

Chloe looked over at her desk with irritation. “What? I’ve had it three days. This place is unbelievable. Has someone actually stolen it?”

“Told you,” said Ross triumphantly.

He had told her. If you went through the proper channels and got yourself assigned an ergonomic chair, it would get nicked by someone who couldn’t be bothered to go through the process. It was how things always were. A fresh, new chair with an interesting shape and that clean leather smell was too valuable a prize to leave around the desk at night, too tempting to the bored, artificially reduced minds at

Electricity Australia. “And besides,” Ross had claimed at the time, “what are you going to do if it gets nicked? Call the cops? It’s a waste of time if you ask me.”

Chloe looked at the plastic, hard-backed stool that sat at her desk. “I can’t believe someone stole my chair,” she said absently.

“Waste of bloody time gettin’ that thing,” Ross murmured under his breath.

Chloe drooped at her desk and started to reshuffle the papers she’d shuffled into their positions the night before. Mechanically, she turned on the computer and slumped her chin in her hands as she waited for the screen to warm up. Her eyes stung. She had to find a way to get to bed earlier. But then, she knew that was never going to happen. Not the way she filled her nights.

Still wilting into her hand, Chloe let her eyes travel around the grey office. Her two years at Electricity Australia seemed nothing when compared with others in the room. Some of them, like Ross, had frittered away over twenty-five years.

When Chloe had first moved from the States and taken the job there, it had surprised her when her colleagues had treated her like a celebrity. People had commented on her accent, asked her questions about the exotic location she’d come from (San Francisco), and generally treated her like Paris Hilton’s first cousin. Chloe had thought it rather provincial and nice. But soon, she’d discovered the boredom; sheer boredom had driven their interest in her. The curiosity in her hometown had given way to the daily grind. No longer a novelty, she’d blended in hiding behind her own version of the mask, although they still considered her an expert on all things in the United States.

“Why doesn’t the US get that Steve Jobs from Apple to run the country, Chloe? He’s doing damn fine work at Apple.”

“When are they going to bring out the next series of *The Simpsons* DVDs, Chloe?”

“How’s the cleanup after Hurricane Katrina going, Chloe?”

Chloe had warmed fast to her work colleagues. The bond of ennui connecting them had created ties almost familial. Despite the fact that they all thought Chloe odd (she didn’t watch television), they’d embraced her and made her feel welcome. Chloe had come initially seeking this kind of modest, unemotional warmth, so the mind-numbing surroundings suited her well.

Opening her top drawer, she ignored the photograph of her mother she'd carefully placed there to keep her in check. She took out the computer keyboard and plonked it on the desk, ready for the day's work.

Chloe turned toward her screen and glanced down at the Internet Explorer icon. Peeking behind her shoulder to be sure no one was watching her screen, she typed "Eva Peron" into the search engine. Narrowing the search to "images," Chloe sifted through a number of photographs of the iconic politician, searching for the one she wanted.

Soon, an image caught her breath, indicating the end of her search. Eva Peron in a dress made of cotton, lying back in the sun, the exhilaration on her face natural and the softness of her hair wind tousled. The dress clung at the bodice: crisp, sharp, and young. Black-and-white striped in a halter style, the embodiment of Peron as a young woman.

Chloe stared at the image, a familiar thrill working its way around her insides. She forgot the smallness of Electricity Australia and imagined the verve of the woman in the picture. Eva's life was such a strange mixture of confined feminine conformity and a wild, untamed lust for life.

Transported by her reverie, Chloe studied the dress, thinking how she could copy the pattern, her environment slipping away from her. She'd need some cotton, the finest, in white and then black. She'd need to draft the pattern from the picture on this Web site. But that was no problem. She'd done that many times.

"Chloe! Good news! I have the chair!"

Chloe jumped. Hearing her name thrust her uncomfortably into the real world. In a well-practised move, she made the site disappear, leaving the blank desktop suspicious in its emptiness. Looking up, without yet fully comprehending where she was, Chloe gazed into the eyes of Gary, a work colleague, who had stopped, rather foolishly holding her chair while looking down at her.

"What are you looking at on the Net? Was that Evita?"

Chloe laughed nervously. "Of course not! What the hell would I be looking at Evita for?"

"Maybe to get us double tickets to say thanks for making sure your chair was safe?"

Gary made the kind of joke that sounded like a joke, but if you actually laughed at it, you risked causing deep offence. Chloe knew Gary had a mild crush on her, which would explain why he stood by her desk at this moment, looking ridiculous behind a large chair that he'd pushed all the way from his floor.

"Huh?" she answered unglamorously. She glanced at Ross who stared at Gary, openmouthed. She let her gaze drift around the office, to see most of the people on her floor staring at Gary. As an act of generosity that went above and beyond the call of duty, this must have looked conspicuous. Feeling embarrassed and awkward, Chloe didn't know what to say.

"I saved your chair. You know the one you applied for? I saw someone here eyeing it when I was on my way home last night. Worried you'd lose it, I interrupted, and then when he left, I took care of it for you."

This fooled no one. Gary's floor was two below Chloe's, and she felt pretty sure the part about the guy wanting to take it was a lie or Gary misreading a situation.

"Um, that's so wonderful. Thanks, Gary."

"We thought it had been stolen," mumbled Ross as his wide eyes travelled up and down the full length of Gary's frame.

"I was worried about that too, so I took it and locked it in our store cupboard for the night. I wanted to get it back to your desk before you arrived, but damn Harrison had us all into a meeting at eight thirty today."

"Umm...thanks so much. That's one hell of an interest you're taking there. I really appreciate the generosity."

"Enough to have a drink with me tonight?"

Through her peripheral vision, Chloe noticed everyone disappear behind their screens, behind the watercooler, or behind a work magazine. This situation would have to be diffused fast if she could get her head together.

"Um, sure. That was real nice of you, Gary, but I think you'd better get back to work."

Gary looked around the room. Chloe wondered if he was sensitive enough to notice that he'd made a spectacle of himself.



“Hey, it’s just that it’s a special chair to you,” Gary said. “I remember you asking me to take it if I saw it here and thought it might be vulnerable.”

This lie Gary told irritated Chloe, and she felt manipulated into rescuing him now. But he seemed to mean well and had tried a few times to have a simple drink with her. This might have been a way to answer his cry for help, and who knows, he could be happy with friendship if she made her position clear from the outset.

“Yeah. I just didn’t think you’d have to quite this fast.”

Gary looked satisfied. “Okay then. A drink tonight? Our usual place?”

Chloe had no idea where this was and felt manipulated by him again. The desire to rescue Gary still drove her, and self-conscious that he had caught her looking at clothes worn by Eva Peron, she said, “Of course! Right after work.”

Gary placed the chair down next to Chloe’s desk and made his way out of the room without another word. Chloe watched until she was sure he was out of earshot. Turning to Ross, she said, “I guess I didn’t lose that chair after all.”

Ross glanced up briefly from the paperwork he was filling in. “No,” he said and looked back down. “You just have to have a drink with Gary.”

## Chapter Two

Looking out the window, the green lawn stretching right to the edge of the scrubby bush, Maximilian Sebat allowed his gaze to travel to the Three Sisters. The local, indigenous legend named the three unusual piles of rock after the tale of a father who turned his daughters to stone to save them from the Bunyip -- a giant, mythological land creature -- who pounded through the woods looking for food.

When the Bunyip crushed their father so that he was never able to undo his spell, his three daughters remained as rock, jutting out into the gaping canyon. That the formations were three stories high each never dampened the romance of the story, and Max thought of it every time he looked out of his bedroom window, across the blue-grey beauty of the valley.

The choices parents make -- that can't be undone -- stay with their children as masks they can't remove.

Hearing a car horn, Max moved to the window at the other side of his bedroom. He looked down at the front gate of Genius Loci. Max's great-great-grandfather had named the handsome house and its surrounding gardens Genius Loci, Latin for "spirit of the place." His vision passed down through the blood and the land to Max who, even today, upheld all its traditions and practises.

Max treasured this house and the world created within it, just as his father had loved it and his father before him. Max cherished the small generations of brilliant scholars cared for and represented here by the spirit imbued in the earth and air of the place.

But the car in the driveway heralded the arrival of another council inspection. Again, small-minded locals made petty complaints, and again, Max had to deal with them. These were the same complaints these folks' parents had made against Max's parents, and in years past, all the parents before them. The complaints were all effectively the same one.

Max sighed. The misunderstanding from the locals for his small community would never pass away. Just as his community would survive, so would its detractors, and this foolish battle would be going on through the generations to follow.

Max met the inspector with warmth as he stepped out of his car and switched on a special kind of charm passed down through the genes of Max's family. All the men through Max's bloodline were beautiful, charismatic, and very brilliant. This showed in the way they projected themselves. When Max saw the apologetic expression on this man's face, he knew the inspection would be no problem.

"Mr. Sebat, I'm sorry to have to bother you like this. My name's Harrison."

"Welcome, Mr. Harrison. Not at all, not at all. We understand our commune is unusual and can arouse suspicions in the broader neighbourhood. We always welcome an opportunity to clear our name, even if it's only for a while."

Mr. Harrison had a pained expression on his face that gave Max all the information needed to play his cards perfectly. As if to get it all over with, Harrison said, "Let's start with the main house, and then we'll go to the factory."

Harrison carried a clipboard with the usual twenty-pages-or-so questionnaire that Max had seen so many times, he felt he knew it well. Max envisaged this would take about two hours. However, by law, there couldn't be another one for at least six months, no matter how loudly the community complained about what they imagined went on there.

"Certainly. Let's start with the ground floor. The libraries, studios, and science labs are down here. Upstairs is mostly private, but there is a research room you should see as well as a design room."

Max led the way into the main entry hall of his magnificent family home. A large stone mansion built over two hundred years ago, as solid today as the day it was put together by Max's ancestors. Max noticed Harrison's eyes round as he looked up at the mosaic on the entry hall roof.

Taking advantage of the moment, Max said, "Lovely, isn't it? The house was built in 1795, but in the early 1800s, the family's talent did the mosaic as a project. It's been promised to the Tate Gallery in London if we ever disband here and close down, but I doubt that will happen. Assuming we pass inspection, of course." Max laughed with jovial camaraderie, but the inspector's mind seemed to be elsewhere.

"My...my God. I'd heard rumours about the beauty of this ceiling, and God knows I'm no art lover, but this is magnificent."

They paused so that the inspector could catch his breath, the usual response to the first view. Max glanced at his watch and realised he'd have to keep the tour moving.

“You’re welcome back here another time when we are able to have some visitors through, but at the moment, sir, you are on official business, and I still have work to do this afternoon. Do you mind if we press on?”

The inspector, remembering himself, mumbled an apology and shuffled in the direction Max steered.

At the first studio, the inspector again had reason to pause when he saw the familiar image of a Salvador Dali melting clock painted directly onto the wall, a gift from the man himself. Numerous great artists had given them similar gifts. Scores of canvases in various states of completion lay against walls or easels, some covered in loose tarps, others bare for the eye to see.

They moved to the art library sitting between that studio and the next. An enormous room, easily the size of a small conference room, with floor-to-ceiling books. The books sat on heavy dark jarrah shelves with metal rods, which ladders on wheels used to travel the length and height of the shelves. Various priceless objects d’art lay around the room. Max caught the admiration in the glances the inspector gave as he scrawled his notes silently.

From there they moved into the pottery and sculpture room. Large double doors led, via a small path, to a brick kiln that sat, well maintained, in the small garden off the room. The studio had every amenity, catered to every need of the artist. The inspector took his notes with enthusiasm, no doubt spurred on, Max thought humorously, by the creative energy in the air.

From there they moved to the next library, the one, as Max explained, devoted to English literature. It had the same dimensions of the art library, though with scattered tables, desks, and chairs throughout the room. It looked very much like a beautiful, old city library. Two young people, about university age, sat working at desks, oblivious to all around them. Harrison saw them and busily took notes.

“They’re studying hard,” he whispered to Max.

“Yes. They’re the first of the next generation. Everyone born to any of the farm families goes to university depending on their skill level. We watch skill progression through the genes very closely here.”

From there, they went to the foreign-language library and the two science labs. The inspector popped his head in briefly as Max encouraged him along, trying to keep to time. They passed the kitchen, filled with bustling chefs and kitchen hands, and finally arrived at an enormous room toward the back of the mansion. The inspector looked around the walls, from the large dining table stretched across the wall closest to the kitchen, to the games area off to the side, complete with full-sized billiard table, table-tennis table, and smaller card and chess tables. In the far corner sat plump, inviting lounges huddled around a colossal fireplace. The fireplace was cleaned and set up, prepared for a night of jovial company and melting roasted marshmallows.

“Wow,” breathed the inspector.

“We have dinner and join together in this communal room a few nights a week. On other nights, each family retires to their own homes, just farther into the farm behind the factory over there. We are five generations here now.” Max couldn’t help adding the last line about numbers. It meant so much to him that these families of geniuses were nurtured here on this farm.

Max’s bedroom and many other bedrooms with private bathrooms held the space up the stairs. Max explained that famous artists and scientists from all over the world came to stay here, so the extra space remained important for esteemed guests. Max rattled off some of the impressive names that had been through these halls. He knew they’d passed all regulations. However, he also knew this inspection wasn’t about regulatory compliance. The list of well-known intellectuals who took refuge at the commune would be impressive under the circumstances.

At the bottom of the stairs, Max paused on his tour. “That does it for the mansion. Did you want to see the factory as well?”

Max could tell that he had Harrison right where he wanted him, but he also knew the entire form had to be filled out properly before the inspector could tell the council there was no need to question the integrity of the commune.

“Yes, indeed. I need a tour of everything. I do thank you for your time. And again, I do apologise for interfering in this ridiculous fashion.”

“Well, we’ve been here longer than any other member of the community, and yet we’re still the strangers,” Max explained. “Because we keep to ourselves and

because we keep the generations very close, we are looked on with suspicion from the locals.”

Max ushered his guest out of the house for the second part of the tour.

“Is there ever intermarrying? That is another rumour, you know.”

Max sighed. “Never. It interferes with our gene studies. But we do choose our partners carefully.”

“That’s what gives your experiment cult status. This careful selection of mates.”

Max gulped down his frustration. “Yes, but no one ever marries unhappily. If they fall in love with someone outside their IQ level, they simply leave and start their life nearby so they can see their families. We still ensure they are well educated and cared for.”

“Have there ever been complaints about these arrangements?”

“No.” Max smiled again, remembering his charm. “There is no need for complaints when you encourage freedom of choice.”

The two men walked across the white gravel path in the direction of the small factory. Max sensed the inspector preparing himself for a difficult moment, and so Max did the same.

“You know, the complaints are serious, Mr. Sebat, despite there being no real evidence. There is talk that you people are having orgies up here and that you brainwash the children in the commune and keep them against their will.”

Max didn’t break his pace or flinch in any way, but he knew this would be at the base of the complaints. He’d tried to keep his sexuality and the sex in his community private, knowing it caused concern when outsiders got wind of certain information. However, every few years, one of the people involved would tell stories and these would leach out into society. On the international stage, it added to their mystique, but the locals would get irritated. In Max’s opinion, it was because they were never invited, but this suspicion couldn’t be confirmed.

“It’s the same every time, and every time it is proven to be false. You’re welcome to question any of the young people here. They all attend universities all over the country and some go overseas. We currently have two at the Sorbonne, one at

Cambridge, and one at NYU. There's every opportunity for them to get out and run away were that their hearts' desire." Max smiled his warmest smile. "We like to conduct the inspections because it gives us a chance to show that the rumours are not true."

Max paused before they entered the factory. "You understand that this is private property, and that I am showing you a valuable secret. Everything, the machinery included, is patented, and it is against the law to reproduce this anywhere in the world. You are not to take notes, photograph, or copy the machinery, process, or cloth that you are about to see. Do you agree?"

"Yes. I understand this is part of the obligations of inspecting up here."

Max gave him another smile. "I always feel like Willy Wonka at this point. Prepare yourself. This is where alchemy is performed."

Max pushed open the two ornately carved doors at the same time, and the two men entered the enormous room together.

The loom, the design of Max's father, sat in four separate sections, all joined by pieces of taut cloth moving from machine to machine. Each section had a large spindle spinning wildly at the top of its loom. The three-storey-high factory ceiling towered above them, making the room feel like a giant bubble in which they were trapped. White fibres danced and competed for airspace. The rumble of the looms weaving together pounded so loud, it could be felt physically.

People dotted each loom on either side, all wearing strange sorts of yellow helmets. Some monitored the cloth as it emerged from machines; others worked keys and dials on the sides. Each person working the great looms exhibited high-level concentration on the task at hand. The helmets that covered their ears had had visors that lowered to protect their eyes and mouths. Max had to shout at the inspector to be heard.

"We work in three-hour shifts and wear protective headgear that looks after our ears, eyes, and respiratory systems. Everyone in the commune takes a turn. The cloth is our masterpiece. It's the thing that sustains us and provides us with funds to carry on the intellectual activities of the farm." Max directed the inspector to another room, which sat behind thick glass off to the right of the factory.

They walked through a door, Max making way for the inspector, into the room and were immediately relieved when the loud racket of machinery was reduced to a murmur behind the thick glass.

Harrison stared wide-eyed as Max told him the story of the cloth. Across two long tables that ran the full length of the room sat the cloth that the community was famous for. They shipped it all over the world; the demand never ran out no matter what they charged. The cloth came in many colours, but the weave, the texture, and the raw material were all part of the original design.

“It’s woven into our blood. We teach every new generation the looms first.”

Moving among the tables, a man watched Max and Harrison closely, interested in the conversation and the outcome of the inspection. Max noticed, with a smile, the inspector’s eyes wander over to the man again and again as he went about his work.

The man walked over toward them, and Max extended his hand to welcome him into the conversation.

“Mr. Harrison, this is James Achor, my right hand and my life partner.”

Max and James watched for the flinch in the inspector and none came. One of the good things about this area was its open-mindedness concerning politically correct issues. If anything, the inspector looked a little interested in James. However, this was the usual response to any person meeting James for the first time.

“I’m pleased to meet you, Mr. Achor. My apologies for the intrusion. However, I think everything is complete now. I just have a couple of questions more. By the way, that’s some beautiful cloth you have lain out there.”

James eyed the inspector warmly, using his own charms in the same way Max could use his. James’s dark good looks were never wasted on any human being, and the inspector seemed almost flattered by the attention.

“I’m sure Max told you that it is the very lifeblood of Genius Loci.” James’s dancing eyes would have been almost foolish if not for the obvious intelligence lying behind them. With his dark, uncombed hair interfering with his long black lashes, and his boyish charm flirting shamelessly, no one, male or female, could easily resist him.



Max noticed with amusement that Harrison never took his eyes off James's beautiful face as he spoke about the cloth. He was sure he could hear Harrison's heart beating.

"What are your questions, Mr. Harrison?" Max felt if he didn't get a move on with this interview, Harrison would want to move in.

As if he'd been woken from a dream, Mr. Harrison jumped and turned toward Max. "Um, yes. Sorry. I just want to know if anyone has ever actually tried to leave the farm and been forbidden to go."

Max retained perfect outward composure despite the increase in heart rate and faint perspiration breaking out on his palms. Harrison turned back toward James, shyly looking at him and then looking back at his notes, so he was in no position to recognise the slight change in biorhythm Max experienced. Max knew James could see it, but kept cool as he let his lover answer the difficult question.

"No, sir. We've never had a runaway from the commune, and no one has been kept against their will."

James didn't physically respond so as to draw attention toward Max, but his lover's eyes moved to meet Max's, and they had a questioning look in them.

"Good. Then I'm done here." Harrison looked almost sad as he turned away from James and walked toward the door to the factory. As Max moved to follow him, he caught James's eye, the brief exchange telling him James may not approve but would support any lie he told to keep the farm alive.

## Chapter Three

Chloe gathered her jacket and waved good-bye to the others making their way out of the office at sign-off time. Ross had already left, wishing her luck for her date. He'd teased Chloe all day. The teasing didn't focus so much on Gary being a loser -- more his desperate efforts to get her to have drinks with him. No one at Electricity Australia knew him very well. He kept to himself; behaviour definitely treated with suspicion in this company. Chloe had been out to drinks with Gary before, sometimes with friends, sometimes with others. He'd been present for some deep conversations she'd had with a good friend, and therefore knew some detail about her -- secrets Chloe didn't normally make public. For Chloe, however, this didn't constitute friendship, and she'd turned down more attempts to get her to have drinks than she'd accepted. Chloe and Gary didn't have a regular place, and his chair rescuing indicated too much familiarity. It was annoying that he'd gotten his way this time. Perhaps tonight is the perfect time to make my position on a potential relationship clear, Chloe thought.

Everyone in the office knew that Chloe didn't want to date him, if for no other reason than she'd never taken up the many outings he'd suggested. No one really understood why she wouldn't -- both Chloe and Gary came across as a little odd to their colleagues at Electricity Australia -- but he made a bit of a spectacle constantly putting it out there for a refusal. Her disinterestedness and his repeated requests made him look a little desperate, and desperation was unattractive.

Chloe made a last-minute dash for the powder room to freshen up before hitting the pub across the road for her date. Her sleek black bob had barely lost any of its sheen during the day, and the light makeup she'd applied over her smoky, round eyes remained relatively intact.

Emerging from the ladies' room, Chloe glanced around the office. Even though it was five fifteen p.m., the office was empty. People may have straggled in, but everyone left on time. Seeing she was the last one in the room, Chloe moved swiftly to her desk, one last task on her mind.

Bringing up the saved site with the image of Eva Peron, Chloe printed it and quickly closed down her computer. She grabbed her purse and the piece of paper from printer as she headed for the door.

The sticky, warm night encouraged Chloe to remove her thin jacket as soon as she hit the Sydney air. She couldn't get used to the heat in this city. In spring and fall, the sultriness redeemed itself; the sun beat down through gently icy air, making the senses come alive. But the torrid, lymphatic summers melted the senses. The heat sat heavy, full of liquid, yet jealously sucking fluid out of the body. Tonight, the city seemed alive with people rushing to get home as if there could still be time enough to fulfil one's dreams before bed. People relished a full evening before having to come to work and pretend to do something meaningful again.

Chloe sighed. God, she wished she were going home.

She looked across at the Brothers in Arms and, for a moment, thought she could see Gary in there chatting with some people she didn't know. The street between -- full of bustling cars, vans, and busses -- grabbed Chloe's attention. People ran against lights, through traffic, making nuisances of themselves, committed only to getting home quickly.

Her heart sank as she realised it would be at least an hour before she could leave while still remaining within the bounds of social decency. Absentmindedly she dipped her hand into her bag and felt the piece of folded paper in the top. Maybe she could make just a quick stop.

Reaching past the paper for her mobile, Chloe sent Gary a fast text letting him know that she would be another fifteen minutes. She looked over to see the figure in the group of people reach for his phone and read it. It must be him.

Letting her eyes dart to the left of the pub, Chloe saw a large sale sign in the window of her favourite haberdashery store. They'd started the sale a day earlier; she couldn't be happier.

Without waiting for the lights, Chloe joined the kamikaze jaywalkers and flung herself into the traffic. Cars, stuck in front of green lights with no way out, bleeped horns at her simply because she could move and they couldn't. She reached the other side in one piece and ran into the store.

"Chloe! No surprise to see you. But we close in ten minutes, love. You can't stay here for hours!"

Chloe smiled at Mary, the woman who ran the small store, then looked back at some white Egyptian cotton advertised for sale on a stand. Chloe held the cloth in her hands. Its softness moulded itself around Chloe's skin. The weave had the

complicated majesty of Egyptian cloth, but its drape was almost like batiste. Chloe imagined the fabric connecting fresh with her flesh and marvelled at the beauty of the cloth.

Lost in her reverie, she didn't notice Mary come to her side.

"Beautiful, isn't it, love? What's the project you got in mind?"

Still holding the cloth, Chloe lifted the folded paper out of her purse and handed it to Mary.

Mary whistled softly between her teeth. "I reckon you have almost-magical taste. I don't know where you get your talents from, girl, but this pattern is a brilliant idea. You're wasted over there in that building. Why don't you go back to the States, study design, and work as a designer? Your eye is the best I've seen."

Chloe missed the compliment, being completely focussed on the material. Realising Mary had stopped talking, she turned to her. "I think this is the cloth. I can't believe you had it here, sitting in the doorway almost. I don't even need to order it in."

"This is pretty expensive. I've had to place it at fifty-five dollars a metre, and that's still cheap, which is why I have it on a sale stand. It's the best Egyptian, but I know that you can see that right away." She glanced down at the paper in her hand. "How much are you going to want?"

"I reckon I can do this comfortably with three yards -- sorry, I mean metres."

"Well, *you* could, Little Miss No Mistakes."

Chloe lifted the roll out of its stand. "I'll take it with me now."

Mary smiled and traded the roll for the paper. As she turned, she said, "If you're keen to spend up, I have some gorgeous silk in the back. It just came in. I haven't had time to put it out yet."

Chloe glanced at her watch and thought about how much she was spending already. "No. I can't look. Please don't tempt me. I have a meeting that I'm already late for."

Chloe stayed silent for the rest of the purchase, not wanting to spend too long in the store. She'd already overstayed her fifteen minutes, and she knew Gary would be waiting for her next door. It seemed rude to be making this purchase while he was waiting, despite Chloe's desire to steer their relationship toward friendship. Besides, the sooner she went to see him, the sooner she'd get home.

At the pub, Gary was still busy having a glass of wine while talking to one of the group who had evidently stayed when the others left. The girl had long blonde hair and a popular sort of figure. Chloe recognised her as a girl from the cafe next door who had the men gossiping regularly. She seemed genuinely interested in Gary, and Chloe hoped Gary might be interested in her. She thought he'd seen her when she came in, but his focus on this woman increased, and Chloe hoped he was distracted enough to stay with her.

She took a seat nearby, close enough for Gary to see her, but far enough away for her not to encroach on his style if he decided to stick it out with the cute blonde.

Not to be deterred from his goal, however, Gary soon waved good-bye to the girl and her friends, taking a brief second to check Chloe was watching, and then moved toward her table. He ordered her a generous glass of the best red wine on the menu and sat heavily beside her in the booth.

"Sorry about that," said Gary, a little too quietly so Chloe was forced to move her ear closer to his face. "They mean nothing to me, I promise. I was just chatting."

"I don't mind if you want to spend time with them."

Gary ignored the comment and looked down at her package. "What have you got here? Is this why you were late? What is it?"

Chloe moved the bag to the other side of her seat, but not before Gary had a chance to notice the finely rolled cotton.

"Cloth? You bought more cloth? What do you do with it all? Is this what you work on at nights? What is it for?"

For a moment, Chloe forgot where she was. She looked into Gary's troubled eyes and saw another soul. Moved by the fabric, Chloe felt a desire to reach out. Here sat a person, surely with desires and yearnings like herself. Riding on a wave of longing, Chloe revealed herself.

“I have secrets like everyone, Gary. Don’t you? Don’t you have a passion that drives you to the brink? A kind of hunger inside you that would send you to heaven, if only there were enough hours in the day to make it real? Don’t you have a calling that drags you from the mundane and forces you to fly?”

Too late, Chloe saw the distrust cloud over Gary’s eyes. This small movement told her Gary had shut off any feelings he had for a wild life, and he was enmeshed in the appropriate way of life. Quickly revealed behind the distrust was the slightest moment of fear and then a superior kind of knowing Chloe had forgotten to dread. She watched this entire emotion pass through Gary’s face, and she knew she’d said too much. She’d forgotten she wasn’t talking with a real friend.

“Passions are masks so that you don’t have to face the truths of life, Chloe. You should know that better than anyone. Sure, the day is dull and long; sure, we all feel that. But you have goals that make you a fit member of society. You are not an island, after all. Passion leads to the artistic life, and artists are society’s parasites, providing nothing but troubled thought and worrying ideas.”

“Of course. I just...”

“Just what, Chloe? Forgot for a moment? Forgot who you are -- who your ancestors were -- and what has happened to the people you love the most in your life? You think I don’t remember what you said that night to Susannah, but I do. When are you going to grow up and get over this?”

Chloe turned, her face reddened, toward her wine. She drank down a large gulp, hoping to throw Gary off this line of talk. The anger in his voice troubled her. Of course, he knew her history, but the aggression and the frustration he displayed made Chloe uneasy.

In an effort to escape, Chloe thought of the cotton in the bag and the design to be recreated. She thought of the little piece of world she had in her apartment and the creation being built there, and she wanted to go. More than before, she wanted to escape the oppressive nature of his reason, the destruction of rationality, and the common sense of life.

# Chapter Four

Max clinked on his glass, signalling his forthcoming speech to the crowd.

The one hundred twenty women, men, and children, laughing and chatting at different tables in the large dining room at Genius Loci, stopped what they were doing to listen to Max.

“A big thank-you to everyone for coming tonight! We’re celebrating the favourable inspection results, as well as welcoming our new guests.

“I received word this morning that, again, those who would try to harm us have faltered in the face of pure reason and their inability to outthink us over issues concerning rule of law! Intellect will always win over brute strength, and we are the new breed, evolved beyond the need for force, into an intellectually based humanity. We are the *Urbmensch*. We are the hope for the future, and again we stand undefeated.”

A large cheer roared, accompanied with laughter at the disproportionate strength of Max’s words. The red wine and spirits had flowed freely for several hours now, and the party was well into its deepest point of revelry.

“Now, to my large extended family, and I call you that because each of you has genius flowing through your families’ veins, let’s make welcome tonight the guests we have at the table!”

Ten people sitting near the head of Max’s table stood and took brief bows before everyone present. Again the crowd cheered and hollered, clapping and stomping their appreciation to say their thanks to the people who had stood.

Among the guests were two alternative rock musicians who’d come to the house for a month seeking inspiration, a female particle physicist who wanted to use one of the labs, a husband-and-wife medical research team who’d been invited by Max to intellectually spar with two of the university PhD students, a philosophy professor from Oxford, two women portrait painters who won their week at Genius Loci by being the Guggenheim’s emerging artists of the year, and a writer who’d been short-listed for the Booker Prize three times.

As the guests sat down, the families made a move to pack away the children. Max and James rose and made their way through the crowd, kissing good-byes and wishing them all well. Husbands and wives of the farm who had small children missed out on the hedonistic pleasures of the parties Max and James threw, but this was part of the rule. Everyone knew that when their time came to breed, they gave the offspring everything and committed all they had to the intellectual development of the children. This was how it had always been.

As soon as the families were gone and only the partiers remained, Max stood up and asked for everyone to move toward his table.

Forty or so revellers sat excitedly around the table, which had been cleared of everything except the wine, spirits, and glasses.

Max stood, leaned down, and kissed James sensuously on the mouth in front of everyone. The partiers cheered as Max stood and said, "We are the libertines! We are those who love our partners as the world has never known love, but who taste from other bodies as the world has never known lust!"

Everyone clapped and cheered again.

"Tonight I have a special treat for us libertines to herald the start of the sensual side of the party. The rule is there is no straight or gay; we reject all of society's labels. Everyone tastes from everyone, and no one is refused because of their sex. However, permission is always sought, and anyone is free to withdraw at any time."

Max paused to kiss James again, giving the libertines more to holler and hoot about.

"But now, to start off the festivities."

At that moment, two men and two women from the commune walked in with a large wooden tray on their shoulders. Each one stood at a corner of the tray, which was about the length of a body. Standing at the table, they shuffled the tray a little awkwardly and laid it carefully on the table, down the centre. At that point, Max reached forward and pulled off the sheet covering.

It was a man. A man naked but for chocolates, fruit, and cream, hired for the night by Max to enhance the pleasures of all present.



He lay on his back, a large cluster of fruit sitting precariously at the delicious V below his navel. Whipped cream, which spilled down the line where his legs met almost to the base of his thighs, held the fruit in place. His skin shone with a thin layer of oil that smelled richly of coconut. His open eyes looked around from under dark lashes, setting off perfectly his sandy blond hair.

His abs rippled with small fruity chocolates and blueberries, while a gather of strawberries lay above them at the base of his curvaceous chest. His pecs were so tight the skin drawn across hard muscle looked like it could tear away under the strain. The rounds of his biceps bulged against his sides, giving his upper arms perfect masculine power.

Everyone oohed and aahed at the arrival of this breathtaking creature supplied for their pleasure. Max stood at the head of the table and announced, "Dessert, everyone! Please enjoy."

Immediately the group leaned over the man on the table. Men and women picked at the fruit and the chocolate, enjoying the pleasures of eating before they enjoyed the pleasures of his flesh.

Max leaned forward and lifted a piece of kiwi fruit off the man's left breast. He turned, offering it to James from the end of his finger. James looked Max in the eye and leaned forward, his mouth seductively open, and sucked the fruit off his lover's finger. Max's dark grey eyes turned to a stormy mood as his lover set his blood to boil. James reached out and took Max's hand. Turning it, he moved his face over it and licked small circles on the flesh in the centre of his palm. Max felt his dick harden. He wanted to run his hands over James's hard, smooth ass, but he'd have to wait for the others to catch up.

Turning away from the most beautiful man in the room, Max looked over at the orgy unfolding before them. One of the musicians had climbed onto the table. He placed his hands on either side of the legs of the dessert and was busy nudging fruit away luxuriously with his nose, lips, and tongue.

When he got whipped cream on his face, he looked up, and the particle physicist, who had already removed her shirt to display two perfectly round, medium-sized breasts, licked it off his face in long, sensuous strokes, much like a cat licking its paws clean. He massaged her breast with one hand and rubbed the bulge in his jeans with the other. Then he returned to lick his way up another notch to the mass of fruit everyone wanted to see go.

The professor from Oxford sat between the husband-and-wife team, turning his face to kiss one and then the other as the happily married couple rubbed the giant bulge between his legs. The two female painters had joined with the young students from the farm in a small orgy away from the table on their own. One girl already sat astride a young man as he sucked the pulsing dick of his friend, who kissed the other woman painter. She spread her legs deliciously as her friend moved closer so she could lick her sex to ecstasy with her long, snaky tongue.

Max sat back and unbuckled his trousers. James bent over the table kissing the dessert as Max removed his jeans in order to get that gorgeous cock out for all to see. Max wanted to encourage everyone as best he could so he could have his taste and fill of as many dicks as he felt like tonight.

James moved and wriggled easily to help Max finish getting his jeans off, then stood briefly to lift his T-shirt over his head. James worked out hard, like most of them did at the farm, and had a beautiful body. As he bent to continue kissing the gorgeous young man in front of him, Max reached for one of the many bottles of lube he'd arranged to be brought in with the dessert. They sat in various baskets around the table along with condoms, dildos, oils, and vibes.

By this time, the fruit was eaten, knocked away, or squished between willing flesh. The musician sucked on the enormous hard rod of the young man on the table. He'd pull his head back and move a hand to fist the shaft, and then place his head over it again swallowing it deeply. His clothes had gone at some point, and Max could see the other musician behind him, working his own face into the crevice of his ass. Max loved to see men who usually only slept with women "break their cherry" in front of him. It was the biggest mind fuck, for them and for him. Orgies, when done properly, had no match for sensual excitement. He might get to enjoy one of those virgin asses tonight.

The thought made Max's wood pulse all the more. He stood up and removed his tux jacket and tie and unbuttoned his shirt. Quickly, he removed his tux trousers and his underwear. His cock pointed to the ceiling, hard and ready. He squeezed the tube of lube over James's midback and watched the lazy, heavy drips river their way down his spine to the top of his ass. Then the little stream disappeared into the appetizing dark space.

Max reached around for the wife still hard at work with her husband on the professor. He took her hand and slid it down James's back toward the base of his spine. She stopped kissing the professor, who went directly toward her husband.

Max let her hand go and watched it slide of its own accord, following the lube trail between James's butt cheeks. James, still kissing the gorgeous newcomer, grunted and shifted his legs wider to give her easier access. Curious, the woman got on her knees as Max gently pulled James's ass apart, so she could see deep into his wet, willing hole. Taking his cue, she moved her finger to the opening, gathering up lots of lube to smooth over the tight, ready notch.

She massaged gently around James's ass, leaning in every now and then to take a long lick up and down his dangling ball sac. Then she moved her face toward Max, licking and sucking expertly on the deep purple, plummy end of his engorged cock. Max concentrated on pulling slowly on James's swollen dick. He enjoyed watching this woman working both of them. Soon, she slid two of her fingers into James's hot, hungry hole, which begged for attention in front of her.

Max looked up as she worked James to get him ready. The first musician was preparing to sit hard on the willing cock he'd been sucking, and his friend and the physicist were lubing him up, making him ready. The Oxford professor was naked, in a deep embrace with his man, their hard dicks bouncing and rubbing against each other. Max was so turned on, he felt sure he'd make his way to everyone tonight, female and male, playing in the room.

Max felt a hot hand on his cock and looked down to see the smiling face of the wife looking back at him. She was pulling gently on his dick, ready to feed it into James's ass. Max moved around behind his lover. The wife slicked her fist up and down Max's cock, adding lube. It wasn't necessary. Experience had taught Max how to enter his lover, and they could pleasure each other like no one else. Max spread his legs around James, so that he could feel the brush of thigh on thigh. He steadied the head of his dick at James's ass and hesitated for a brief moment.

James leaned back against Max, signalling him to go ahead. It was a little routine they used every time, to make sure it was intense and pleasurable for both of them.

Max pressed gently forward as James's most private space opened up easily and naturally for his man. James lifted his ass high and curved his back, a move Max loved so much. It was sexy, because it made Max's cock glide in so easily. Gently Max eased his way deeper into James's body. James had stopped kissing the other man at this point, his head back in ecstasy, relishing every moment of his most favourite cock.

Buried to the hilt inside of James, Max pulled his dick back almost out, then pushed it back in very slowly. He did this a few more times, so that James could

get used to the wild feeling, waiting for James to show that he was comfortable and loving it as much as Max.

As Max moved gently in and out of James, the wife, now naked and eager to get involved again, moved in front of him, carefully taking James's rock-hard cock into her mouth. Max smiled because he knew this would be the end for James. Sure enough, James let out a loud groan as he pressed forward into her mouth.

Max felt his own orgasm rising. Nothing turned him on more than James coming while Max was inside him. James braced his hands, palms down on the table in front, as Max moved a hand between the two of them to feel James's balls convulse just as he unloaded into the hot mouth encased over his cock.

This sent Max into a spiral, and he felt the churning of his own orgasm pump and melt as he poured himself into his longtime lover. As his dick still leapt in its tight sheath, Max leaned forward, kissing James's naked back passionately, wild with the love these orgasms always inspired within him. James reached around, feeling for his hand, and Max grabbed at it. They held each other's hands tight as their members relaxed, and they unfolded into two separate people again.

Smiling at the woman they'd just made love with, they both stood up and took her by the hand to lift her to standing also. James leaned in to kiss her and then Max. She glanced down at their members, still semihard, and asked, "Fellas, do these things ever go down?"

"Not for a long time yet tonight." James grinned as he leaned in for another kiss.

# Chapter Five

Chloe saw Gary sitting at the table in the cafe, waiting for her. After leaving as fast as she could from the pub, she'd tried to avoid him for the past few days. This meeting was at his request and made loudly in front of others. She wasn't late; he was early, ready and always waiting. She walked over to him and casually plonked herself down at the chair.

"Hey there." She smiled sweetly as she lowered her face to meet his gaze, which had dropped to the table a few seconds after she'd entered the room.

Chloe had taken a risk today and wore dangling blue earrings that hung below the base of her bob. Her makeup was a little too dark for a day at work, and her dress was a deep Chinese blue satin, tight against her rounded body, happily showing off the curve of her belly and the full waves of her thighs. Conventional beauty had never attracted Chloe, and she had no desire to conform. One of the unattractive things about women today was their desire to be thin. It was boyish and pandered to convention in a way that made a woman look desperate. Dependence, even on fashion, was an ugly thing.

Gary looked up at her. "Aren't you a little bulky for a dress like that?"

Chloe was unfazed. Dressing against convention meant she had to be ready for the barbs against her courage.

"Curves are for showing off, not hiding away," Chloe stated matter-of-factly as if she had that answer well rehearsed. Gary sighed, shook his head, and looked down again. Chloe saw that it would be up to her to carry on the conversation. "What's up? Why did you want a coffee together now, in the morning tea break? We don't have long to talk."

"I just wanted to apologise for flirting with those girls in front of you when we went out the other night. You seemed really upset when you left, and I've noticed we haven't talked much since then."

Chloe realised it was time to take control of this situation. Gary's interest in her had developed into something that couldn't be ignored, and Chloe had no desire to date Gary.

Like all cowards, she'd started the letdown with a careful strategy of avoiding him. And like all cowards, she knew this wouldn't be enough and that she would eventually have to confront him. This was that moment.

However, before she had a chance to answer, Gary went on. "You see, I'm not sure if you've noticed, but I have a bit of a crush on you. Well, not a crush. I'm interested in dating you seriously. I think we have a lot to offer each other, and I don't really understand why it hasn't happened before now. I would have thought you were bright enough to pick up my hints, but you've missed them. I assumed being in a new town and taking a while to find your feet would all be reasons not to notice the seriousness of our connection. However, I think it's time that I brought it to your attention and suggest that we go out together."

*Oh my God! This guy just doesn't get it!*

The idea that she might not want to date him hadn't seemed to occur to Gary. Time to set the record straight.

"I know that we have been having drinks and occasionally coffee, and you have made yourself available to me in important ways. You helped to make me feel safe and comfortable in this new country, and that's been great. I want to thank you for that, and I want to keep being friends."

She paused and took a breath for effect. It was important Gary saw that she had this little speech prepared. It gave him a chance to pick up on the seriousness of the situation and hear what she had to say.

"But my interest stops there. I don't want to date. What I want is to stay friends with you and keep going the way we are. But you have to look to other women for dates. It's really important that you hear this from me clearly, because we don't have long to talk about it. I know it is an awkward situation."

Gary, who had his head in his hands for the entirety of her little speech, lifted his eyes to hers. The anger in them sent an adrenaline shot through Chloe's veins. She looked away, pretending to show interest in the cakes and coffee at the counter.

"How about I buy you your favourite cake? And coffee. You need coffee with cake."

Without looking back in his direction, she jumped up and went to the cafe counter. Lifting out two pieces of cake, she ordered two coffees, giving Gary a moment to

collect himself. Why were men so stupid in the affairs of love? Where were the subtlety and decency? Anyone could see she'd been refusing Gary's advances gently, but Gary had missed the point of everything.

Returning to the table with the food, Chloe sat opposite him. He looked at her with disturbing agitation, as if he'd grown impatient while she collected their food. He held his hands clasped in front, resting on the table, knuckles white. She passed him his coffee and cake and moved her own in front of her.

"You're too fat to eat that. You're so stupid; you can't even tell that you are too fat for that cake. You should be dieting."

Chloe took a deep breath. Men would hurl insults like children if they felt slighted. Where a woman would cringe in embarrassment, a man would move in for the attack when he was hurt. Chloe decided in order to spare Gary any more embarrassment, and herself any more arrows, she'd better get through this and get herself back to work.

However, just as she shamelessly filled her mouth with cake, Gary started up again. He seemed a little more relaxed now, as if he was calming down. He worked his fingers together, his right hand twirling a gold ring he wore on his left. Chloe didn't feel frightened but his behaviour reinforced her opinion that she'd made the right decision in rejecting his advances.

"I have been very patient with you. I have been seeing you only at work and letting you get to know me. But you seem too filled with yourself to see how good we would be for each other. I know about your history. I know about the past you're running from. I'm not tempted by the things you are, and I can set you straight on your path in life. All I want is to make you happy by helping you avoid those things that made your mother so unhappy. I can spare you the inevitability of your genes, your lineage. But you won't trust me, and you won't see me."

Chloe felt as though he'd stabbed her with a knife. How could he use the plight of her mother against her like this? That was a low blow.

"I'm not as convinced as you that the problems of my mother are in my genes. I am thinking I may be able to hold my fears back by myself. I have tried to be good to you, Gary, but the fact of the matter is I'm not interested in a relationship. I only want friendship, and that's all I'm offering. You can take it or leave it."

The anger floated out of Gary's eyes, and for a minute, Chloe thought he might be scared.

"God, Chloe, I'm sorry. Geez, you look really upset. I'm sorry. That was so out of line."

Chloe looked down at the rest of her cake. It was nice, but she had no stomach for it now. "I can't eat any more of this," she said as she pushed it away.

Gary added his untouched plate to hers on the tray. "That's good. You really don't need it."

That was the end for Chloe. The creep had really gotten to her this time.

"Gary. I need to get back to work. I don't want to have lunch today. This whole thing has been pretty upsetting."

Gary nodded as Chloe stood to go. She smiled weakly at him, picked up her bag, and turned away. Hopefully, I'm turning my back on that unfortunate communication forever, she thought.

But this had coloured the day for Chloe. Back at her desk, she stared at the clock, unable to engross herself in the acquisitions work of Electricity Australia, wanting to buy land from unsuspecting pensioners in the outer shires of Sydney. Writing and formulating the letters never had any real punch in the first place, but this had made the work even more dreary than usual.

Soon, the clock struck five, and Chloe was able to clear away her desk. Ross had left by five after five, so Chloe grabbed her purse and left.

Fifteen minutes later, Chloe's hands fumbled with the lock of her apartment door.

Once inside, she closed the door, slumping against it, and flicked the lights of the hall on.

The corridor filled with a muted blue glow, achieved by three separate bulbs close to the roof and hidden behind thin blue muslin veils. Chloe had draped the entire hall, making it look like the inside of a tent.

The pinned gathers at the centre of the ceiling puffed to the ceiling-meets-wall edges, where they'd been pinned in billowy clouds again. Then the material hung



straight down, sitting just ever-so-slightly above the blue-carpeted hall. Nothing else decorated this hall, but Chloe loved it so much. It was wonderful feeling to shut the world out behind her and look down and into the watery depths and the promise that her little world created.

With a sigh of pleasure, Chloe put her bag on the floor and moved to the first room on her right. It was her bedroom. Turning on the light, four separate table lamps lit up immediately, providing the only light in the room. She liked this dark red room, the colour of a passionate rose. The walls had been perfectly primed and the paint chosen for its satiny sheen. The walls looked to be almost dark velvet in their texture, and Chloe loved the sensual restfulness.

A large framed female nude languished on the wall over her bed, which lay on the floor under five heavy, Chinese red covers. Her mother had painted the portrait, and it stretched the full width of the bed. Her mother's paintings covered every other wall too, except where the ceiling-to-floor windows took up half a wall.

She peeled off her clothes and slung them over the open dresser where she kept her daywear. Wandering out of her bedroom, she stopped only to lift a bottle of wine, purchased on her way home, out of her bag. It was an expensive Margaret River Shiraz, but Chloe wanted something special in her little home tonight to drown out the discussion with Gary.

In her deep green kitchen, Chloe poured her wine, relishing the opportunity to walk around naked. Strolling out of the kitchen, she moved toward the most important room of the house, her sewing room. This room was painted in a deep burnt orange, with bright yellow curtains against the windows that looked out onto a little terrace garden with pots of fresh jasmine pouring their scents into the apartment.

Chloe loved this room. Some of her mother's paintings graced the wall again, but mostly the walls held drawings, sketches, and designs of beautiful costumes. A huge draughtsman's desk stood in the corner, the white Egyptian cotton sprawled over it, with various photocopies of the Eva Peron image in different sizes all over the table and pinned to the walls.

To the left of the desk, near the opening doors, lay two large floor-to-ceiling mirrors. And against the back wall, along the full length of it, sat Chloe's most prized of all possessions.

They were her costumes.

A large metal rod, hanging between two chains bolted to the ceiling, held elaborate costumes of great detail for famous women throughout history. Immediately recognisable were Cleopatra's robes, Mata Hari's flowing, sequined skirts and tops, and there was even a full set of armour for depicting Joan of Arc. The costumes made a decorous, lush display. Chloe could sit at her desk, swivel her chair, and just stare at their rare beauty for hours.

After studying the clothes for a while, Chloe removed a long, flowing Chinese silk dress in a burnt red. She slung it over the rack and turned back to the table. She flicked through the various stages of the Eva Peron design. Ready to immerse herself in tonight's theme, Chloe turned to her stereo and placed a Twelve Girls Band CD in the player. As the lilting Chinese music sifted through the apartment, she walked toward the bathroom and ran herself a bath.

Chloe languished in the bubble bath, listening to the music and allowing herself to fall into her small alternate world. She removed her nail polish from toes and fingers, delicately paying attention to every small detail, which helped her get into the mood for her plans.

As the creative feeling made its way through her veins like a drug, Chloe slipped away from the woman immersed in the daily grind of Electricity Australia.

After her bath, she ate a salad and painted her nails the same colour as the dress she'd taken out. She applied her makeup to give her eyes a Chinese appearance, making the roundness of her eyes follow a more delicate almond shape. Soon she was ready for the dress. She'd made it for her own body. It clung to the soft curve of her belly and sat looser on the weighty rounds of her thighs. Looking at the overall effect in the mirror, Chloe felt completely transported. The costume had taken her away from the world outside; the music, the wine, and the beauty of her world had set her free to move about in an artistic trance.

Chloe sat at the drafting table and worked on the sketches of Eva Peron. Nothing made her happier than to carefully extract the dimensions, the measurements, and the stylistic energy of the dress. She added to her specs, making sure every detail was accurate and would be beautifully and logically presented.

This piece was coming together flawlessly, as all her costumes did. Chloe had a feel for cloth, and she knew her designs with an uncanny intuition that bled artistically into her work.

But the real genius lay in the way that it moved her into another world. Chloe was able to let the daily life fall away completely so that she could focus on the task at hand.

After a few hours of working at the table, Chloe stood, stretched lazily like a cat, and moved out to a smaller room at the back of her apartment. There, she kept her computer. Chloe turned it on and moved about the apartment, tidying and making sure everything was in place for her return tomorrow for another evening of escaping from the pain of mediocrity and immersing herself in her costumed art.

When she was satisfied with the house, she sat herself down at the computer, another glass of wine by her side.

Making sure her webcam was on, with her music in the background, Chloe let herself into one of her favourite fantasy chat rooms. She trolled mindlessly through the Playboy Mansion and Digital Love looking for the real artistic creators. Further on, she found chats entitled Eros Games, Play Skins Anime, and Rapture Online. These were the rooms Chloe liked to frequent. Here she could act out her role, playing the woman she'd dressed as, inviting herself into the sexual worlds of others just like her.

With her user ID as Anygirl, she jumped into Play Skins Anime to see who else was online.

As soon as she entered, a prep room asked for her to upload her image. Chloe stared seductively into her camera and clicked the image icon. A few seconds later, she was presented with herself as she looked that night, turned into a perfect computer-generated anime figure. The computer had made her Chinese, which suited Chloe just fine.

Soon Chloe found herself in another world, a world of green grasses and leafy trees. This was her favourite chat room of all, and one she usually turned to for comfort after difficult days. The image of herself as a cartoon walking through lush green fields with skies of the palest blue woke her with the physical responses as if she were actually moving through those fields. Many of Chloe's anonymous friends spent time in here, wandering the fields, looking for a place to have sex.

Chloe never knew where her friends were or what guises they wore that night. It was rare that she didn't come in at the same time, so despite her costumes, she was usually recognisable. Not recognisable from life, but known through that miraculous computer connection, the intuitive feel one can glean from the screen.

The safety of this screen barrier helped Chloe feel secure to reveal her urges, to feel all her sensual impulses. Her mood moved toward this now as she watched her doppelganger wander toward a breezy, knotted lump of trees.

She zoomed in on her character as she ran her hand around the bark of the first tree. Chloe imagined the bark under the skin of her hand, the rough texture mixed with smooth greyish silk of this tree's trunk. As she was close, examining the trees, she moved around its trunk, looking for something in particular. Soon she saw it.

This tree had the small, wood-knotted smiley face that Chloe recognised. She wasn't sure who it was, but one of her regular lovers was waiting for her. Tree people were an option in this game. Walking around, she saw five of the trees in this little wood had faces on them. These were all men, and they were together waiting for someone just like Chloe.

Chloe smiled and typed, *Hi, fellas*. This signalled to the other characters her readiness to play. If there were such a thing as broad grins on trees, Chloe was sure she could see them now.

The trees started to wave their branches around as if they were multiple hands. One tree leaned forward and, with a stray, thin branch, lifted the back of her skirt from behind.

*Rustle rustle*, said the words on her screen.

The other trees moved forward into her space, and soon, hands pretending to be branches surrounded Chloe, pulling gently at her clothes. Lifting her dress, their many branches ran smooth, wooded tree fingers around the soft, fleshy round of her buttocks. Cool, leafy digits moved to her breasts, while other, harder hands kept lifting the cyber dress up and over her head.

As Chloe watched the trees feel up her alter ego, she reached for a wooden box that sat on the edge of her computer desk. Inside the box were many and varied sexual toys that Chloe loved to use on her body. While the trees were hard at work, Chloe selected a heavy latex rabbit for tonight's pleasure.

With the dampness growing at a rapid pace between her legs, Chloe allowed her character's dress to come off completely, revealing pert breasts, a fleshy stomach, and well-rounded thighs.

*Mmm...*one of the trees sighed onto the screen. Chloe revelled in the compliment to her body choice.

She then lay down in the soft, damp, green grass on the hot, summery day, as the trees, looking more and more like rugged men, bowed over her cyber body. Chloe's view could be to watch the scene or to enter her own body and experience it. At this moment, Chloe placed the vibrator inside herself, looking up at the tan-and grey-streaked wooded faces, the green, leafy hair, through to the hot blue sky behind. The view sparked a kind of bliss that manifested throughout Chloe's sexual folds.

Glancing at another view of the scene, Chloe could see the leafy hands caressing every part of her naked body. Fingers tickled at her breasts, pinching softly on her nipples, two trees softly pulled her legs apart to reveal a hairy, silky sex, stroked and toyed with by the gentle, wooded hands.

Zooming in on the arms hard at work between her legs, Chloe could see the branchy fingers parting her labia and revealing a very wet tunnel. Chloe stood for a moment to hike her real silk dress up to her waist. Rubbing the flat of her palm over her pulsing sex, she felt her own, actual wetness seeping out between fleshy lips.

Chloe picked up the vibrator and switched it to max. She sat back in her chair just as a large tree moved its face toward her character on-screen. The face positioned itself just above her open legs, and then a long, slick stick tongue protruded out of the face part of the knot in the tree. It looked like a snake, so strange was the image of that tree's tongue emerging from the knot. The wet muscle made its way straight for cyber Chloe's pussy and licked into her lips right away.

*Oh...yeah. Just like that baby,* typed Chloe.

Placing the vibe against her clit, Chloe watched that woody tongue work her sex to perfection. He was controlling it beautifully, and Chloe made her character writhe hard in response. Other trees helped to hold her down, completing the intensity of the sexual image. Chloe watched this for a few seconds and then placed the heavily buzzing vibe directly against her clit. The instant whirring combined with the powerful images on the screen set her off in the direction of her orgasm.

The other trees, carefully holding her down and running their leafy fingers over her body, now all extended their weird, snakelike tongues in her direction. Soon her

whole cyber body was engulfed in the licking and sucking with these strange serpentine muscles.

*I'm coming*, Chloe typed into the keyboard, awkwardly with one hand, to let them know they had her where they wanted her.

The trees kept up their ministrations until they could see Chloe hadn't moved in a while. In the intuitive world of cyber, this meant the real woman was hard at work on her own body. Chloe came in a wet rush, her excitement materialising and flushing her vagina with thick, clear fluid. The charge of adrenaline, combined with sweet, postorgasmic fervour, raced through her as she slumped back in her chair, spent and very happy.

# Chapter Six

James lay in Max's arms in their bed, looking to the valley as the dawn edged its way into day. The sun shone off the sand-coloured rocks of the Three Sisters, and James wondered at the magical love a parent had when they could make anything happen in order to save their child.

He sighed. Max's gentle breathing caressed the back of his neck, and he felt he could almost die with the happiness he felt.

Almost. One thing was missing from their lives, and James knew he would have to talk to Max about it. It wasn't for him. James was happy with Max, with their life, and with the intellectual pleasures of the farm. But he knew Max needed something special. Sadness ate at Max, deep inside, and James felt it every time it stole another piece of his beautiful lover.

James had a controversial idea, and he needed to approach Max with it carefully. He'd never asked Max about the sadness inside him, though of course he knew all about it. James, like everyone who grew up on the farm, had heard the story from his father. It was the topic never discussed. Now James had to ask Max. Max's mask was about to come down.

As these thoughts ran through James's mind, Max stirred, nestling in closer to him, pulling him to his body, the way any mammal reaches for its mate. He could feel Max's semierect penis pressing against the cleft of his ass, and he felt his own start to harden in response.

"Mmm... Good morning, lover..." Max mumbled into James's hair, sensing he was awake. "What are you doing awake on a weekend when you don't have to get out of bed?"

James pulled Max's protective arm farther over his own body, nestling into his man. "I have something on my mind, and I wanted to ask you about it."

James felt Max stiffen a little and then relax again. "Is it a serious thing? Should my heart be racing like it is, or can I calm down?"

He lifted Max's fingers to his lips. "It is nothing terrible that will threaten anything we have. I am just interested in something. But it may make you uncomfortable to talk about it. Keep hugging me like this. It'll make it easier to chat."

He could feel Max respond to his words and physically relax again. James loved the way Max confessed vulnerability as it occurred.

"Well, you'd better tell me then, because I'm intrigued now."

James took a deep breath. "Why did you lie to the inspector the other day and tell him no one had ever run from the farm?"

James waited in the space he'd created between them. He knew he'd broken an unwritten rule by approaching this territory, but he also knew it stood between them more if he couldn't talk about it. Even now, he had to be patient and give Max the space he needed for this.

He felt Max sigh -- an indication he'd be willing to talk openly about it. They'd have a chance to bridge this gap now.

"I don't like to admit that it ever happened. She's gone, and we lost the bloodline. That's all there is to say."

James rolled over to face Max, temporarily pulling away from him.

"I know this is hard to hear, but I don't think that is all there is to say. I think you should talk to me about what that means to you. It causes you a lot of heartache."

"It was the only time my family behaved dishonourably. I am ashamed of that decision. When she ran away, she took a part of my family's dignity with her. My family should have treated her differently."

Relief flooded through James. They were about to talk. It was so important, and it would mean so much to their future once he revealed his new idea to Max. He had to tread carefully though.

"Tell me what happened?"

"Haven't you heard? We know that all the other families talk about this sadness that sits over us. You must have heard the story from your parents."



“All I know is a young woman fell pregnant at a party and then ran away so she could have an abortion.”

Max looked very troubled. James lifted his arm and placed it over Max so that he could gain courage from his touch.

“She was probably the most gifted person we’d ever had here. She was a genius. No one could compare to her brilliance. She painted well beyond her years in skill and talent. She also played the violin and studied chemistry. These were her profound skill sets. Most of us have one; few of us have two. But she had three, as well as being a natural at the loom.

“I can still remember my father telling me what his mother had told him about her. Her voice lilted like a lyrebird’s. The family thought she was almost a nymph, or some sort of otherworldly creature, such was the profound nature of her talents.”

Max looked lost to James, but he let him alone, so that he could feel the depths of the pain he’d avoided for his family’s sake for so long.

When he seemed ready, he continued. “The family took her to a party at Norman Lindsay’s. He was having another orgy and called on us here because he’d invited overseas guests and wanted to make it a spectacular time for art. So they all went together. They did have magnificent orgies” -- here Max smiled a cheeky smile at James -- “the likes of which we will never be able to replicate. And she fell pregnant to one of the guests.”

The pause went a little too long, and James needed to know.

“Who was the father?”

“Davy Lawrence.”

James’s face went white. Suddenly he understood the entire problem for Max’s family. They hadn’t just lost their star pupil, but they’d lost her unborn child. For a family that prized genetics and had devoted their lives to this experiment, nothing could be more significant than this child fathered by D.H. Lawrence.

“Wasn’t he married to Frieda Weekley then?”

“Yes, but brilliance never obeys convention, you know that, regardless of place in history. He was there with Frieda, Katherine Mansfield, and John Murray. All of them took lovers when their partners allowed it.”

James nestled into Max again. “As many genius do”

Max gave James a smile that warmed him to the core. “When the young girl found out she was pregnant, she wanted an abortion. He was long gone by that time, and it never occurred to anyone that he would be tracked down about a baby. But my grandfather couldn’t imagine living without this child. He saw it as potentially the greatest opportunity for producing an almost-perfect human being.”

James, very pleased with the conversation, encouraged Max to continue.

“This is the big mistake. My grandfather fought with her. She didn’t want to have a child at eighteen years old. When she said she would march out and get an abortion, my grandfather held her against her will. She was detained in cottage three. Then one day, they took her food, and she was gone. The cottage was still locked from the outside. No one knew how she got out; only that she’d gone to have that abortion.”

“I don’t condone it, but I can see where your grandfather was coming from.”

“Yes. But it was wicked. He looked past the human being to a science experiment. He should never have behaved that way nor treated her like that. And he paid the greatest price. He lost not only that child, but the beautiful woman as well.”

James saw emotion rock Max as tears rolled down his cheeks. As the sun rose over the valley, James held his lover, hugging all the sadness and mistakes and bitterness away. James looked down at Max, nestled into him, silently crying, hurting for mistakes he’d never made.

“I think I know how to fix this pain for you, so you never have to feel it again.”

## Chapter Seven

Lying on the bed, their bellies full of dinner and fine red wine, James and Max watched a DVD documentary on the philosopher Jacques Derrida.

It had been three days since Max confessed the details of their lost commune member, and James spent them watching Max cautiously. When Max had goaded James, wanting details of how they were going to fix the problem, James had resisted all attempts to neutralise the intensity of the situation. He knew Max had to sit with the pain for a little while, and he knew Max would try a variety of tricks to get out of it.

But James loved Max. More than he'd ever loved anyone in the world. He'd do whatever it took to ease the sadness in his lover's heart.

James lay in Max's lap as they watched, Max's penis resting against his cheek. The intimacy hadn't dropped since Max's confession. In fact, the honesty had been good for them. Their lovemaking had increased, and the heat level rose.

James's parents were still alive and lived in one of the cottages with his brother and his sister. However, both Max's parents had died very young, leaving Max alone and running the farm in his late twenties. It was before his time, but he took it all on willingly, not wanting to lose the world they'd all created or the livelihood for the families. It made Max a very serious young man, old for his years.

It also meant Max was in the perfect position to get some things changed.

The documentary rolled to a halt, and James moved his head to the side and kissed Max's penis. It twitched ever-so-slightly in response. James pulled back.

"Mmm... A little more of that please."

James wanted to fuck, but he wanted to talk as well.

"Did you like the film? I'd like to debrief for a moment before we get into it."

Max smiled. "Certainly, sir! Yes, I did like the film, but then you know I'm a sucker for deconstruction."

James climbed onto his knees. “That is what this farm needs, some deconstruction.”

Max stared at James blankly. “What are you talking about?”

“I’m talking about making some intrinsic changes on the farm. A few key things that will add an element of authenticity and let the farm evolve around that.”

James could see Max had no idea what he was talking about, so he decided to go on.

“I think the farm still suffers under the weight of the woman who ran away. That legacy, that guilt, doesn’t just live in you; it lives in the entire project. We’re all happy; no one wants to leave, but we also have no avenues for change. We have no social projects, outside of the genetics project, which is -- as you well know -- linked inextricably to the guilt that the farm suffers.”

“We can make any changes that you like. Just bring them up at the meetings, and if we all vote in agreement, then we bring in the change.”

“I’m talking about something deeper. I am talking about a structural change that will impact the whole project. In a lot of ways the farm is trapped in an old world.”

“Well, what did you have in mind?”

James took a deep breath. “Okay, so hear me out. I know that this is dangerous territory. Have you ever thought about having a child?”

“Of course I have. Genetics is our primary scientific study. And I decided it wouldn’t happen through me. I want you, and you don’t make babies. I don’t want any of the women from the farm, or who I met in college, and I would never consider another woman to mate with, so that is that. I intend to school the most gifted child from our generation to take over after me.”

“And then your bloodline will be severed.”

“Well, that’s the sacrifice.”

“Perhaps subliminally you don’t want your family to live on because of what they did. You’re playing out the punishment you think is fair. You are stealing the genes from your family.”

Max looked confused. “How does any of this relate to the running of the farm?”

“I think you need to bring a woman in from outside, and I think you need to have her running some projects. And not necessarily a genius either. She should simply be bright enough to add her own special kind of cleverness in the running of the farm. Her fresh voice will stamp out the male-dominated history and bring unsullied blood.”

Max stared at James so hard, he had difficulty reading his lover. *At least he's thinking. He's taking it seriously.* James decided to go on.

“She will be the new voice that genuinely replaces the one that we lost.”

“But why not a genius?”

“I’m just saying not necessarily. It narrows our field a great deal to restrict ourselves to geniuses, and besides, we know just about every truly brilliant woman in the world.”

“And you want me to have a baby with this female?”

“Only because you made it sound so romantic,” James chided playfully. “You don’t have to love her, but you can if that works. We should both fall in love with her. Bring her into our world.”

“Into *our* world? Our little world? I’m not sure about that. What would a woman do to us?”

“Open our minds and speak to our hearts. Max, it’s just an idea. Can we see if there are any women who take our fancy?”

Max seemed to be thinking and then suddenly looked very sad. “Do you want a woman?”

James smiled and moved toward his big, strong, vulnerable man. “You know that you are all I ever want or need. But I do want this, for you.”

# Chapter Eight

At home that night, Chloe felt sick. The only person in the world trying to help her had turned out to be a total psycho.

Chloe knew deep down, further than her shattered self-esteem, that she didn't want to date Gary because she wasn't attracted to him. But she *did* come home every night alone, build her world out of virtually nothing, and then sit in it till all hours. It did consume her. This made Chloe feel guilty as though she used her art to hide her from the world, rather than get it out there like her great-grandmother, her grandmother, and her mother. Her behaviour prevented her from a normal sort of life, as a normal sort of woman.

Was it healthy? Was her home life her mask? She'd always supposed she wore her mask in the real world, and she buried the artist away so that the artist couldn't harm her as it had the other women in her lineage. But what if the artist masked something as well? What if Gary and Electricity Australia represented her real world and her home, and the art the lie?

Too horrible to contemplate!

*I'll go mad if that is all that I have in my world. I'll go mad like my mother did.*

For a moment, Chloe allowed the longing for an artist to take her over, a man who understood her at her deepest level, who could communicate with that side of her. She thought for a moment. Or even a man who could see and recognise a gap in the world and the way it all worked. Perhaps he could see a space between reality and the imagination and tell her that imagination wasn't always wrong.

After tossing her bag on the hall floor, she walked into her bedroom, distracted for the first time ever from the beautiful surroundings. Chloe couldn't revel in the blue underwater hallway or the red-embroidered bedroom. She flopped onto the bed and had a cry. She cried the cry of the confused warrior who was not sure what war she fought anymore.

Soon the tears subsided, and Chloe was left, eyes swelling, on the bed, wondering about what to do next. She closed her eyes, trying to block out the day and embrace what might be possible for her instead. Purely out of obligation, she tried

to think of Gary. At least give it a go. She imagined him tender, naked, and leaning over her.

Ugh.

That was never going to work.

Letting her thoughts wander, she tried to just let it all flow over her. Floating over hills, past the clump of trees, drifting through rivers and clear blue skies to bring a little peace to her world.

Soon Chloe found herself in a semidream state. A place like the virtual world. Full of sunshine, trees, grass, and blue sky. Unlike the virtual world, she wandered alone there.

Chloe let go, forgetting the troubles of the day and the drama they caused. Breezes trickled across her skin. Her meditation included a gurgling stream and birdsong. The beauty of the place washed over her, immersing her in the pleasures of a warm spring day, and with no one around to tell her what to do, Chloe felt completely at home.

In her dream, a male hand rose up out of the earth and gently cupped her breast. Chloe didn't move. She lay on her bed feeling the masculine hand fondle her from under the earth. Another hand came up and cupped her other breast. Chloe lay there, still as the morning, feeling the harsh, callused hand smooth its way over the soft skin buried beneath her clothes.

When another pair of hands rose up from the earth, stroking and moving over her upper thighs, Chloe had the feeling of sinking freely into the earth, folding in on the two men loving her there.

The hands smoothed their way all over her, gently arousing her, bringing her to a state of bliss. Chloe felt each hand as it trickled over her skin, causing light goose bumps to tighten and energise her flesh. The sensuality swarmed over her as if a thousand little bees worked her veins for honey.

Soon, however, the two men touching her rose up out of the ground. Straight from the shower clean, they moved over the top of her, slowly and gently removing her clothes. Chloe felt the hands on her body, the two men leaning over her, kissing and moving downwards toward the cleft between her legs.

*Mmmm...* Her imagination drove her wild. In the beautiful space of the clear day in her mind, the two men tantalised her, pleased her, acting as men rarely do. Gentle, beautiful caresses. Not like a woman's but like a man with peace in his heart.

Chloe woke suddenly to find her pussy wet, and she was moved almost to tears. The dream she'd had was so real and so far from her consciousness that she almost felt it had to be a vision. The men were so good to her, knew just how to touch her, took her in ways she'd barely dreamed of. Something unfulfilled was speaking to her, trying to wake up in her. This was more than a vision. This was something from another consciousness that Chloe hadn't recognised in herself before.

*As if it isn't hard enough to find a good man. Now I have to go and fantasize about two men who are actually incredible.*

But the dream had shaken Chloe, making her feel that more was out there than she thought possible. She felt invigorated and didn't care, for just a moment, that she didn't fit in out there in the real world. The feeling inside her needed to be channelled to her art.

Moving to the design room, Chloe worked for a while on the Eva Peron costume she'd started earlier. The creative energy flowed through her as if it poured out of the vision that she'd had. Chloe worked like this for two hours before she started to feel hungry and noticed that she hadn't really settled in tonight as per her usual routine.

Chloe hopped into the bath, not sure of the outfit she'd be wearing that night. Her energy and thoughts were scattered. Gary popped into her head, and nothing killed the inspiration more than the vision of him telling her that she needed him to save her from the artistic world. As she played the words he'd spoken over and over in her head, her old fears and doubt crept in again.

After her bath, Chloe applied makeup and ate a little food. Then she slipped into her Daisy Buchanan dress à la *The Great Gatsby* and decided to go online. Tonight, going online felt cheap, as if she were a whore to the whole game of who she really was.

In the chat room, Chloe had a sense of being with false people. She didn't read and watch with warm and friendly eyes. She felt that she saw the people in her world for the first time. Where once her games held her attention and magnified her lust,



they now oozed sleaze, as if Gary *had* been in her apartment and seen exactly what she did. His gaze stole her world.

She trolled the Net a little, soon seeing with open eyes that all the folk who lived in the online world lived a fantastic lie. Witches or Jedis or vampires or some strange type of folk addicted to their own nonsense games.

It all confused her. These chat rooms turned dull to her, and she wanted something out of the ordinary. At least she thought she did.

She let her mind slip into a dark place. The striking imagery of the two men had worn off. Chloe started to rationalise it away. It couldn't happen anyway, she told herself miserably.

\* \* \* \* \*

James sat in the English literature study, editing a paper he'd promised to return within a week to an intellectual friend in Slovenia. Ahead by three days, at this pace, the paper could be returned well before the deadline.

He paused from his writings for a moment to watch the shadows of the descending sun across the manicured lawn. The last few days blurred past. The completion of his work, mostly due to the fact that he'd taken fewer hours' sleep, working instead, could partly be attributed to the fact that Max had so embraced the idea of finding a woman that James had almost lost him to the Internet.

Each day, they went about their tasks, running the farm, working the loom, making sure everything was in its place. As soon as they'd finished the final meal of the day, Max raced to the computer, still in his dinner jacket, donned a mask, and talked to women.

James couldn't be happier. Max seemed lighter already. The idea was the right one, James had thought about it for a while, and he'd been able to bring it up at exactly the right time.

James heard the bell for dinner. Knowing he'd be returning to his work soon, he left everything sitting at the desk.

Food lay on the table waiting for them both to enjoy. The kitchen staff did a wonderful job, but on these less-complicated nights, they liked to leave as soon as

the bell for dinner rang. A rare occasion, Max and James found themselves in the house alone.

Max came down the stairs with a gentle dance in his step. He looked gorgeous. He liked to wear his dress jacket and pants even when alone. James wore his jeans and a T-shirt. Max could never get James into the formal gear Max loved so much.

Max paused to kiss James and sat at his place. Immediately, he started to scoop food onto his plate.

“How goes it, man? What have you found up there?” James started to collect food from the various plates in front of him.

“I know you haven’t seen much of me, and that will change. But you were right about getting us a woman. I haven’t found us one yet, but I know she’s out there. I can feel her, James. I can feel her.”

“So you’re not uncomfortable about the idea?”

“Not at all. You were right. The timing’s perfect, and all we’ve got to do is make it happen. It took me a while, but I think you’re on the right track encouraging me to do this.”

Max paused, ate some salad, and looked over at James thoughtfully. He then continued. “How do you feel about this idea now? Does it seem like the right thing to you still?”

“Yeah. I know it’s the right thing. Maybe we’ll love her, maybe we won’t, but either way we need a woman who is more than a casual thing for us. She’ll add to what we’ve got going here already. We won’t have it any other way. Maybe we’ll both get to be fathers.”

Max smiled his warmest smile at James and reached out for his hand. “I’ll find her for us. I’ll find the woman we need, and I’ll get your approval. Then I’ll go and get her, and bring her back here.”

“Be smart about this, Max. It may take a while to find her, and then it may take a while to convince her that the way of life we offer is the right one. This project may outlast your enthusiasm.”

“Yeah, I know. Let’s just see how long this takes.”

\* \* \* \* \*

*Hello?*

Chloe jumped at the flash on the screen. A man online wanted to talk to her. He had a camera, and though the image appeared blurred and dark, she could make out that he wore a handsome dinner jacket, shirt, and bow tie. He had a mask on -- the kind one wears to a costume ball. The black mask on the tanned skin set off the shock of black hair that he'd managed to tame into place. Not only did he appear handsome in the poor light, but striking too. Chloe reminded herself the Internet deceived when it came to image. It could make the ugliest people beautiful and the most beautiful people ugly.

*Hey there! Can you see me?* the man typed again.

Chloe worried that she'd had her webcam on all this time, but a quick check told her she had set it on blurred so she couldn't be seen properly. But the stranger knew she was an actual person, not a game character.

The man typed, *I can see you, though your webcam is blurry, but it's okay. I have the premium version of this game. On my screen, your character has the red halo that signifies a real woman...er...or man.* Whoever this was, he was reading her mind.

Chloe laughed. *So you can tell I'm human, but not what sex I am?* she typed back.

*Not that well. You have a fantastic Roaring Twenties dress on, but I can't tell if you're really a flapper, or...well...perhaps you could be anyone pretending to be a flapper.*

Smiling, Chloe fixed the camera so that it was in focus. *Sorry about that. I like to keep a little mystery in these matters. Sometimes folks want to follow me around, and that can get strange, so it's better to remain a little anonymous.*

*Do you have sound?* he typed.

He wanted to hear her voice. What the hell? How could she get into any more trouble today?

*Sure,* she typed. She made the adjustments to include sound. Now they were standing in a futuristic town, actually talking to each other.

“That’s better,” the man said. “You have a nice voice.”

He had a nice voice too. It had warmth in it beneath the snobby Australian accent.

“So do you. Can I ask you a question?”

“Shoot,” he replied.

Chloe wasn’t in the mood to play games, and this was the best way to weed out the kind of man she had no time for at the moment. “What do you think about having an affair with two men at the same time who not only knew about each other, but were happy to make love to each other as well?”

The man looked so shocked that Chloe thought she must have been out of line. He seemed truly, deeply surprised by her question. Maybe it was a tad early, Chloe thought.

“I think it is a great idea, if all three parties agree,” he stammered. “I find it an unconventional line, but a healthy one. Is that the answer you were looking for?”

“It is the answer I was looking for, but I don’t think it’s an answer that opens up a possibility for life.”

“Why not?”

“Where am I going to find a man who is interested in that? Let alone two men. And I am really fussy. I don’t want to be mercilessly attacked because he’s had a bad day, nor do I want to give up my creating because he wants dinner. You see, anonymous stranger, I am very hard to please. This will have to be a superman, and I want two of them.”

“It sounds like you are a woman who knows exactly what she wants.”

“Ha ha ha... Then I have you totally fooled!”

“What makes a woman, dressed to the nines, ask a total stranger that kind of question right off the bat?”

“I’ve had a shit day.”

“Tell me all about your shit day, ma’am.”

And so Chloe sat back, relaxed with her wine, and told her masked stranger all about her day.

# Chapter Nine

It didn't take long at all for Max to find a woman. After dinner, James had been at his books for a couple of hours when Max called out from the top of the stairs to James to come see her.

James ran up the stairs. Max met him in a warm, masculine embrace at the top. "Okay, I've found her. At least, I think she's perfect. Come and take a look."

James followed Max to the computer. There on the screen was the most beautiful woman James had ever seen. Her bobbed hair shone black, almost as if it were streaked with blue. She wore a silver band around it that perfectly matched her silvery flapper dress. Her round eyes -- heavily made-up in the Roaring Twenties style -- were pale grey, setting off the pale, translucent skin of her face and neck. Her bright red lipstick highlighted her full rosebud mouth, and she'd added a small but obvious beauty spot at the base of her right cheek.

"My God, she's beautiful!"

"I know! I've been talking to her for the last few hours. Shall I try to meet her? What do you think?"

"Is she clever enough?"

"No tertiary, but other than that, she may be a little too clever. Her conversation is marvellous. Guess what the first thing she asked me was?"

"What?" James smiled. The woman was beautiful, and a stunning kind of enthusiasm filled Max.

"The first thing she asked was how I feel about a woman who wants to be with two men."

James turned to Max in shock. "No way."

"Yeah, she's creative, talented. She has an American accent, so I'm not sure where she lives. I wanted your approval before I get into specifics."

James leaned in. She was typing and looking up at the computer. "Can she see me?" James asked.

"No. I told her I had to hop off-line for ten minutes. I turned the camera off. She can't hear us either."

"You know, she looks a lot like the picture we've got of the woman who ran away."

Max leaned in for a better look. "Do you think so? Maybe it's just the costume."

"Come and have a look."

They men ran downstairs to the library where a framed photograph of the party weekend at Norman Lindsay's hung. Twenty-five people smiled up at the camera from a frozen moment in time. James looked briefly at the picture of D.H. Lawrence standing next to Katy Mansfield. The two at the front were always the focal point of the photograph.

This time, James looked past the famous people for the little woman -- barely eighteen years old -- standing slightly to the side at the front. Her dress was very similar to the one the girl on the Net wore; however, that was consistent with the style in 1922.

James caught his breath. He held the picture out to Max. Max took it and looked at her. Her face wasn't so visible, but the hair. The exact same black hair cut in a bob made the two women appear the same.

Max carefully placed the picture back on the mantle. "This is her, James. This is our woman. She's come to rescue me and to set both of us -- no, all of us -- free."

Both men turned to walk upstairs.

"How are you going to handle this? Will you just invite her over?" It now seemed very important they play their cards right. Somehow this fantastic look-alike who wanted two men had dropped into their laps, and James knew they'd not be able to find another one as perfect a fit as her.

"Well, I was going to. I want to ask her here. We'll put on a huge dinner and welcome her and..."

“I’m not sure. Will she go for that sort of thing?” James cursed inside himself. He knew nothing about women.

“I don’t know. Why don’t I talk to her for a while and work it out? We may have to find a way for her to warm to both of us.”



# Chapter Ten

Chloe sat in the bar glancing at her watch. She'd arrived early, at five ten p.m., itching to get out of there early and get home to talk to her new friend online again. She was so excited by the prospect that it even pushed thoughts of her work out of her mind for the day. She had thought of so many things that she wanted to ask him.

But this meeting, she hoped to catch up with Susannah who, Chloe glanced at her watch, was supposed to have been there at four thirty p.m. Chloe tried her cell but found it switched off. Thinking she'd leave a message and get home again, she was halted in her actions by the vision of Gary walking toward her.

Chloe avoided his eyes hoping he'd walk right by, but he didn't. He slumped down at her table, taking the chair opposite without being invited. "Well, well, well. Look who's here?" His voice sounded icy to Chloe, but guarded also. "I'm surprised you don't want to get home so fast tonight."

"I was about to text Susannah because I seemed to have missed her. I'm on my way out the door, because you're right, I can't wait to get home." Gary started at the empty table in front of him. He seemed to be thinking something through.

"You know, maybe I should just come to your house anyway. How would you like that? Is that the kind of attention you are looking for? Why can't I walk you home? What do you do in that apartment at night that no one else is allowed to know about?"

Chloe looked at him, horrified. "Gary, how can I make this clearer? I don't want you. I will never want you. And I never want to have to say this to you again. And if I ever catch you anywhere near my home, I will call the police."

Chloe saw that dark, hungry violence move into his eyes again, and she finally accepted the fact that Gary couldn't be trusted. It was all over. Without having ordered a drink, Chloe stood; walking away from the table, without saying good-bye, she could feel his eyes burning into her back.

On her way home, spooked by what she had just heard and witnessed, Chloe kept looking behind her to check on what might be coming her way. But the streets bustled with the usual folk making their way home after work.

When she finally arrived home, she slammed the door shut, shutting Gary and that problem out of her life for the rest of the evening. No matter what problems lurked deep in her psyche, Chloe knew that he could not answer any of them. This man represented a whole new set of problems, and definitely not problems she could solve.

After running her bath, she dipped herself into the steaming water, which she used to wash away the filth of another day. She needed to expel the dirt of the streets and the city air that clung to her. But she also needed to be rid of the dirt of doing a job that bored her and stole her spark. She wanted no more of the dirt of Gary and his strangeness. An end to the dirt of confusion and worry about the direction her life was taking. Chloe knew that part of what Gary said to her was true, but Gary's strangeness had in a way saved her from actually having to confront and deal with what he'd initially suggested.

Chloe took this up with her new online friend an hour or so later. Dressed in a beautiful silk Japanese kimono of her own design, she put the questions of the direction her life should take to Max.

"The real issue here," Max said to her, "is do you really live or do you only dream to live?"

"You mean do I really live in one of the worlds only? Immerse myself into one particular reality?"

"Yes. Every choice involves risk, even if it is simply the risk of missing out on the thing you didn't choose. You will have to choose the life of the artist, or you will have to choose the life of the everyday worker who lives out her existence. There is no judgement here. There are advantages and disadvantages to both types of lives. But, as Sartre would say, you are free. Choose."

"But I run from the consequences of those choices in both worlds."

"No, actually you run from perceived consequences in both worlds. You don't actually know what is going to happen if you embrace your art or reject it. But Chloe, can I ask you a question?"

“Of course”

“What is your art? Explain it to me.”

Flirtatiously, Chloe detailed the process in making her creations to Max. Just the talk was liberating. She described a joyous, autonomous freedom, the way that she approached her costume making. It started with admiration for a certain woman -- always women -- and moved through to the search to find the quintessential article of clothing that summed her up. That meant *this is me* for that woman. It was deeper than what did she look good in. It was more about who she was in her life.

“The idea is,” Chloe stated, her heart racing, and sweat sitting in a satin sheen on her skin, “what can I wear to be her?”

Chloe then went on to explain how she collected materials that were probably used at the time to make the original clothes, but even in this choice, she did not want to be bound by historical accuracy. She explained how she was looking for the essence of the woman. The thing that has lived on and may not have been obvious at the time that the original dress was made.

Then she built the dress, lovingly and with great care and detail, according to the feeling she had developed for the woman. Eventually Chloe was left with as full a representation of the iconic female and all she symbolised.

“The costume is a way to transcend time and place and even the ugly circumstance of not accurately being her. When I put on her clothes, when I adorn my cells with everything I can about her and get as close to the spirit of her that I can get, a little part of me becomes her.”

Max was deeply interested in all Chloe was saying. “Does this mean that the costume allows you to leave your own little world and enter another?”

“Yes! I think this is part of the attraction of costume parties, etc. But I take this further. I want the clothing to make the woman, à la Coco Chanel. I want the wearer to have the actual experience of being that woman. It’s an artistic moment.”

Over the next few nights, Chloe got to know this eccentric masked man on the computer. She felt strangely understood, in a deeper sense than was provided by patient listening. This man felt her. He knew her complications and had an acceptance of them. He was her, as if he had taken out a dress made of Chloe and

worn it to their meetings. He seemed to be acquainted with her already, before she revealed herself to him.

One night, the hot Sydney air swirled about Chloe, and she wore a thin dress beaded with jewels -- her Mata Hari outfit -- and Max asked her about her mother and what happened to her. In the safety of the anonymity of her room, immersed in the persona of Mata Hari, Chloe let Max know her terrible fear.

“To tell you about my mother, I have to tell you the story starting back further, with my great-grandmother.”

Her great-grandmother had lived in Australia, but went to the United States as an artist. She'd tried to live off her art over there, but it had been too difficult. She'd gotten herself pregnant out of marriage in Australia and tried to raise her little girl. The town that she had moved into shunned an unmarried mother and considered her a slut.

She'd had to make a living, so she worked behind the counter of any store that would have her. Her daughter turned out to be just like her, a wonderful painter and a brilliant artist. “*It's in the genes,*” her great-grandmother used to say to her grandmother. “*Always respect and care for your genes.*”

However, her life had become more and more difficult, and when her daughter had grown old enough for work, Chloe's great-grandmother died of a coronary condition, very rare in women so young. The doctor had declared it a genetic defect. However, so many years later, when speaking of her great-grandmother, Chloe's mother always told Chloe she'd died of a broken heart, because an artist can't live without her community.

As a small-town girl, Chloe's grandmother had tried to make money from her art, but again this life proved difficult. In the nineteen forties in California, only successful art was respected. She worked hard in a small painting studio, as an assistant, trying to put enough money and time together to buy paints and time for her work. Desperate for community, she attempted to connect with the artists who came through the studio.

Finally, Henry Miller befriended her, and eventually took her to his bed. Even though he was not well known then, he was known to the local community, and Chloe's grandmother hoped for a longer connection than the one she got. After a week in his bed, he'd moved on, leaving her pregnant and alone.

Much to her horror, she gave birth to a girl and a scorching reputation. Having been bedded and abandoned by Henry Miller, she fast became the talk of the small town. It seemed everyone knew her whole story and her mother's story, and no one was kind.

Because of the plight of her mother and her own sorry fate, she adopted the little girl out as soon as she was born. She tried to give the baby a new life, free from its burdensome history, but a nurse in the hospital was a rare fan of Henry Miller's work and told the new young couple about the remarkable father of their child and her slatternly mother and grandmother.

Years later, in the late 1970's, the couple, with three children of their own now, shouted the truth of her heritage to Chloe's mother, declaring her wild roots always made her a difficult child and the bane of their lives. Having never connected properly with them, Chloe's mother took the opportunity to separate herself and went in a desperate search for her real mother and some connection with her history. She never found her.

Enormously talented like the women before her, she carried too much emotional baggage and rejected through quarrelsome ways any offer of support for her art, which left her regularly penniless and continually struggling.

For a while, she worked as a waitress at Studio 54. At that time, about the age of twenty-six, she fell pregnant. Chloe didn't know who her father was. He could be a bouncer, a waiter, or Andy Warhol himself. By the time Chloe could have had the conversation with her mother, she'd taken her own life.

Alone in the world, Chloe was sent by the local authorities to an orphanage and remained in the care of the state until the age of eighteen when she was free to leave and live her life.

Chloe had lived alone for several years after that, avoiding any artists. She'd put all her mother's paintings away and promised herself that she would have nothing to do with the life that had caused so much pain for the women in her history. If it was in the genes, Chloe would have nothing to do with them and would get on with her life.

But the blood did flow in her veins, and she could only pretend for a few years. She wasn't able to face the canvas again, but she did move to fabric and started to design and make her beautiful costumes. She soon found herself becoming

addicted and wanting to do nothing but her art. It affected her work and encroached on every aspect of her life.

But worst of all was her inability to connect to the artistic community. Like her mother before her, she felt disconnected. Deep in Chloe laid a fear also, a consuming dread, that if brought to close to a community, she'd suffer the fate of her mother, grandmother, and great-grandmother. If her costumes were too successful, she'd lose herself in the wild, unfettered life of the artist, no doubt ending with her own self-destruction.

At the same time, she ached for the minds of fellow artists.

Chloe's life with any artistic community always ended up in some sort of relationship breakdown as she subconsciously sabotaged any strong connection she could create.

Then, two years ago, she decided to pack everything up and move to Australia. Her mother always said that her roots were in that country, and there was the promise of a fresh start and some hope for a new life. It was so far away, the farthest civilised place Chloe could think of. She wanted a way to remake herself. To have the costuming take a backseat and devote herself to a day job and maybe even settle down to a husband and children.

The drive for community thrived in her still, but she managed it by directing her attentions to the Internet. The comfort and safety of her anonymity and the actual distance helped Chloe feel safe.

“And now the artists I connect with are all illusionists of some kind. Folk who don't feel connected to reality. They all hide on the Internet, and that is where I connect. It has some pleasures, but most of all it is safe, and I feel blessed to be there.”

“You know there are women in history who have lived the illusion as if it were reality. They have stood in the face of reality and refused to accept the roles allocated them. They have refused to acknowledge what is called reality.”

“But that's an illusion. They are just rejecting it rather than rising above it. Reality will come to get even them in the end.”

“I don’t agree. I think they just reject reality as another form of illusion. It is definitely hard to live according to one’s own rules, but I don’t think it is impossible.”

They talked this way for several nights in a row, exciting Chloe to a new kind of optimism. She worked hard on her clothes, finding that she had so much more energy than ever before. Even the daily grind of turning up at work and obediently following through on all her duties there could be accomplished because of the brilliance of these conversations. Chloe was coming alive. Something about this talk was setting her subconscious free even though she still maintained that her conscious needed to be chained.

Then, after a few nights of electrifying conversation, flirting, and pretending online, Max said to Chloe, “I want to meet you.”

Fear gripped Chloe immediately, and she told him she couldn’t. She loved their talk on the computer, but this would die with time when they became tired of this kind of conversation. It was better to enjoy it for what it was.

Without arguing against her fear, Max suggested, “Then can I offer you a gift? I want to give you two books that I think you will enjoy.”

Chloe told him to send them to her work, but Max didn’t want to do that.

He told her that he would leave them in a cafe for her. “I won’t be there when you go to pick them up. I know the cafe owner well enough. I can leave the books there, and they will be available for you.”

Chloe couldn’t ignore the rush through her veins. This sounded like an adventure. And it was an adventure she felt brave enough to have.

# Chapter Eleven

Chloe was nervous. Even though Max had told her, and told her clearly, that he would not be there, and even though she trusted him, she still felt excited and afraid about what could happen to her when she went to the cafe.

He wanted her to have two books. He'd told her already that one was a book about Anaïs Nin. Chloe objected, saying that of course she had all the works of Anaïs Nin, but Max had told her to accept his gift of analysis of her costuming and the way she used it to indicate multiple realms of femininity and reality. The second book was one about Leonor Fini, surrealist painter and another woman who loved costuming. Chloe felt that the offer of these books was a romantic gesture, and she thought the excitement of going to a rendezvous to pick them up even more exciting.

The cafe was one she knew of in town. A popular cafe in the old mint building, it had high ceilings and was styled after Cafe Les Deux Magots, although few artists could afford to drink there too regularly. They served alcohol as well, a nice touch, making it more like a Paris cafe.

Chloe took two hours off work especially for the occasion. Max told her to be there sometime after noon. The excitement had her wriggling in her seat at work all day. She'd worn a dramatic ensemble for the occasion, even though Max wouldn't actually see her. Ross looked twice at her outfit; the long, flowing red hippy skirt coupled with the capelike shirt did stand out in the crowd. Chloe knew that she looked striking, and she walked with spirited confidence.

Finally, three p.m. arrived, and Chloe leapt up, packing her bag as Ross goaded her about where she was going and what she was up to. Happily and easily, she prodded him in return, claiming he would never know because she wouldn't tell him anything about her mysterious life.

And now she'd arrived. In this lovely cafe. As agreed. And soon she would hold the books Max had prepared for her. It was thrilling.

Approaching the counter, Chloe told a waiter her name and said that someone had left some books waiting for her. The waiter looked puzzled for a moment and then asked another waiter what he thought. The second waiter seemed to know



immediately about the books, indicating they'd been left on a table toward the back of the cafe.

Frustrated, Chloe turned to the table. Two books perched invitingly on the table, but a man sat there drinking coffee. Irritated, Chloe turned back and argued that they must have made a mistake because that table was occupied. The waiter shrugged and walked away.

Chloe felt she had no choice but to approach the man and find out about the books.

As she walked closer, Chloe could see that they'd been left by Max. She interrupted the man at the table, asking if she could take the books, as another gentleman had left them there for her. The man looked at her evenly as she spoke.

Chloe had prattled out her request innocently enough, but by the time she'd gotten to the end of it, the way he watched her gave her a strange mixture of feminine pride to be able to solicit that sort of look in a man's eye and the feeling that perhaps the neckline of the outfit she'd chosen was too low. She supposed he was a little older than her, perhaps forty, but she could see as she'd approached that he had a heavily muscled chest. A little too much muscle for a man who frequented cafes.

When she'd completed her request, he'd kept staring her right in the eye, and then he smiled, showing very white, animal teeth beautifully encased in a smooth grin. He had the look of an old soul; he'd been here many times before. He had an outdoor tan, dark and swarthy, as if many centuries ago he had his own ship and pirated the high seas. He had eyes as any pirate frequenting a girl's dream. They flashed bold and proud at Chloe.

A carefree recklessness in his face and that sexy smirk on his lips had Chloe catching her breath. Somehow, this stranger's looking at her this way should have been an insult, but she wasn't insulted, and that worried her even more. Chloe had no idea who he was, but "good blood," as her mother used to say, was written all over him. It showed in his finely shaped nose, over those full, bloodred lips, to the well-kept black hair and the toned, glowing skin.

She dragged her eyes away from his beautiful smile to the books on the table without smiling back, trying to retain her composure.

"If you want your books, you'll have to take coffee with me." His smile seemed to know for sure she was going to have coffee with him.

“The books will be fine,” Chloe said. “If you think I am going to waste my time with a man who likes to take advantage of situations that have been set up around him but do not involve him, you are sorely mistaken.”

“Your haughtiness doesn’t interest me. But the books do. And now that you’ve told me just a little more, the story of why they are here does as well.” His eyes flashed wicked warmth, curling his lips up a little on the side in a twisted sort of smile that Chloe found worked its way instantly to a place inside her. “How about you just sit with me for one coffee. As a way of apologising for leaving your books at my table. If after one coffee you are not interested in talking to me, you can go.”

Chloe wished she knew a way to resist him. Expecting talking to him and immersing herself in his arrogance would work to turn her off, she agreed to sit.

He ordered two cappuccinos from a passing waiter and then turned to her. “Now. I’m sorry for such a brash introduction, but you are terribly beautiful, and I wanted you at my table here. I know it is arrogant, but I meant what I said. Say the word -- after this coffee -- and you never have to see me again.” He smiled at her again and Chloe noticed his eyes and started to think of pirates once more.

She blushed. “It’s okay. I think the circumstances threw me.”

“My name is James.”

“Chloe.”

“So tell me about the circumstances that bring a beautiful woman out of the office to a coffee shop to pick up books that are not hers when the wait staff don’t know her. I have a strong feeling this will be a good story.”

Chloe related almost the entire story of Max and what she was doing in that cafe that afternoon. Curiously, at least Chloe thought so to herself, she didn’t tell James about the sexual attraction of her online relationship. True to his word, James was fascinated and asked many questions, including why she didn’t want to see this man in person. “You never know, you may really like him.”

“That’s the difficulty. I have a little problem with immersing myself in art. He is a talented, brilliant kind of man, and I am very scared that I would like him a great deal.” She took a breath that sounded more like a sigh and looked through the cafe out to the street. “I think it is better to be safe and avoid artistic men. One can only get disappointed if one tries to fulfil one’s deepest desires.”

She turned back to see those pirate eyes had turned soulful and focussed on her with even more intensity than he had displayed before. He watched her for a full thirty seconds, until Chloe felt almost that she'd have to break the mood with something foolish, when he said in a whisper tinged with sadness, "Tell me about these books."

So Chloe told him a little about her life. James wanted to know immediately why Chloe felt afraid to embrace an artistic existence. Keeping many details private, she told him about her mother and the troubles she had trying to build an artistic life for herself. Despite her attempts at secrecy, she found herself telling him about her mother's emotional troubles... In the past, Chloe found it easy to be cagey, preferring to keep details sparse. But having told Max her story, she now found it less painful to give certain details to James, as if in some way Max could have prepared her for a coffee with James.

A pregnant pause followed Chloe's second telling about her mother in a matter of days. She suddenly felt tired, and she reached out for the two books sitting on the table.

Spotting her move, James leaned in and kissed her on the cheek. Chloe stopped and then automatically pulled away, feeling stunned by this new turn of events. She blushed heavily and looked around to see if anyone was watching. As if ignoring her reaction completely, James said, "I would like to take you to dinner. Please say you'll come."

Flushed, embarrassed, thrilled, and excited, Chloe said, "Yes, of course."

James reached for a napkin on the table and grabbed a pen out of his shirt pocket.

"Number, please," he said matter-of-factly, without looking up at her.

"How about you give me yours and --"

He cut her off. "No way! I don't want to risk any chance of you going home and having second thoughts. This way I know I can follow up and you can't get away." He looked up at her and smiled his disarming smile.

Chloe rattled off her number, heart racing, defences pulverised.

Standing, Chloe picked up the books and moved away from the table. At the front door to the cafe, she turned and saw James looking at her, the pirate's ferocity in his eyes again. He really looked like he intended to ravish her. She smiled and waved, blushed again, and burst out into the afternoon air.

Out of the coffeehouse, Chloe turned in the direction of her apartment. Her mind a whirl, it seemed very important to get home in order to digest the events of the afternoon in peace and quiet. How to handle both of these men was a mystery, but she knew that she wanted to play that game for a little while. She only had a date with James. Honesty with Max right from the start was the best policy. He'd said regularly that she ought to find herself a flesh-and-blood man, as if he didn't mind sharing. This would give her an opportunity to explore that little fantasy she'd tucked away. Suddenly, she bumped into someone. She halted and looked up to make her apologies.

"Gary!" she exclaimed.

"Who were you having coffee with?"

"Have you been following me?" Chloe's heart rate rose, and another flush came to her cheeks. Her hands started to shake as adrenaline coursed through her veins.

"I want to know who you were having coffee with!"

Thinking fast, Chloe looked around to see the street full of people, some of whom were glancing in her direction. She leaned in a little closer to Gary.

"If you don't stop following me, I will call the police and get a restraining order on you. You get out of my way right now, or I will scream in these crowds that you are attacking me."

Gary stepped to the side, and Chloe pushed past him, dropping her books on the ground as she did. She turned in time to see him picking up the books. The Anaïs Nin book had fallen open, and the front page said, *With all my love, Max.*@

Frozen to the spot, Gary didn't move as Chloe snatched the books out of his hands, turned, and ran.

# Chapter Twelve

Max lay in his bed thinking about Chloe. All those years he'd announced that sex was about the person and not about the body at his dinner parties and orgies had come home to him now. He knew, deep in himself, that he could love both James and Chloe. Somehow, the three of them could join as one.

Despite some difficulty in grasping the concept earlier, Max felt he understood where James wanted to go now. James recognised what they needed. More intuitive than Max, he'd known they needed something before it arrived. He knew about the three of them before they'd found Chloe. James had faith she'd be out there, and his belief in himself never faltered.

He heard the bathroom light click off and saw James's beautiful body walk toward the bed in the moonlight. As always when he came to bed with Max, his penis was semierect, as if the very thought of getting into bed excited him. Max loved him for that and a thousand other things that made James so different from anyone else.

"What are you thinking about, lover?" James asked as he climbed into bed next to Max. Max sat up against the headboard, but the thin sheet couldn't hide the bulge of his fully erect shaft. James had his eyes glued to it as he tucked himself in.

"I was thinking about what we will do to Chloe when she accepts both of us, and how it will be with her in the bed with us."

James laughed. "Crowded."

"Yeah. We'll need a bigger bed."

Smiling, James moved his way over toward Max with a seductive shuffle. He leaned in to whisper in Max's ear as he placed his hand on Max's cock. "Will she help make this bigger?"

"Mmmm..." Max closed his eyes and let James work his dick up and down. James massaged it with his strokes, the outside skin floating up and down over the hot, hard shaft inside. Max's balls started to churn, and he opened his eyes to look at his lover.

James leaned in and kissed Max. Their mouths collided in firm, intense kisses. Max felt James's tongue teasing his, darting in and out of his mouth; then it worked its way back in gently, seductively, swirling around and pulling out slowly again as if to tease.

Max slunk down lower into the bed, pulling the cool sheet off his hot erection. James rolled over to climb on top of him. They kissed with more intensity and passion now, the heat swelling and rising in both of them. Max ran his hands around James's shoulder, feeling the muscle contract and move under his skin. He slithered his hands softly down until he reached the firm round of James's ass. Pulling James to him, Max felt his rock-hard erection pressing in against his own swelling cock.

Max felt James respond, pressing into his hot dick with his own, letting the lust take him over. Sexual energy surged through Max as he wrapped his legs around his partner to get their wrestling cocks closer still.

James moved his lips to Max's ear. "Will you fuck me while my dick is buried in Chloe?"

Max groaned and grabbed James by his hair. Pulling his face back, he thrust his own forceful, commanding kisses deep into his mouth. The thought of watching James and Chloe together filled Max's mind: kissing, fucking, and being fucked.

James lifted his face away for a moment as he leaned over to the nightstand. He pulled out some lube and, flicking the lid, moved it directly to the crevice between his own butt cheeks. He stared directly at Max as he said, "Oh yeah. Rub that into me, baby."

He tossed the tube aside and leaned back into Max's waiting kiss. Max worked his fingers around James again until he found his ass, a large mass of lube oiling its way down into James's hole. James moved forward to give Max better access and groaned as he felt his lover's fingers working his ass, spreading the tight, willing hole wider and wider.

James crawled forward, his knees bracing himself on either side of Max, until he was clinging to the back of the headboard. Max took James's cock in his mouth, and James bucked gently as Max swirled his tongue against the sensitive part of his dick, just under the head. As Max serviced James, sucking hard on his rod, he worked more and more of his fingers into James's hole. They developed a smooth

rhythm, James rocking slightly, giving Max plenty of cock in his mouth and plenty of open ass to finger.

Max's cock felt like it was going to explode. In the future when they wanted to do this, Chloe would be nestled between his legs, sucking his dick. Thoughts of taking Chloe and James together were too much, and Max knew he'd let himself get close. James was ready for him, and Max had to have him now.

Max lifted James off him by pushing on his hips.

"Get on your knees," he said.

James slithered down the headboard, bringing his hips high as he did so. Max sat back on his haunches. He always liked to take a good look at James when he was like this. His body was so beautiful; the hard matched the soft, his skin like Thai silk. His tan lines where his swimming trunks sat looked like a pale pink pair of jocks against the deep dark of sun-scorched skin. Breathing deeply, Max ran his hands over those pink butt cheeks, reaching through to have a tug on the restless balls and that rock-hard cock.

Max edged forward, his achingly hard cock nestled at James's entrance. Thanks to many years of experience between them, his partner was well prepared; there was no tension. Waiting for James's signal, Max eased his cockhead into the gently relaxed muscle. Soon James pressed back, taking Max's entire dick into him and letting his lover know he was ready at the same time. With a moan, Max placed his hands on James's hips, watching his cock disappear into his striking body.

The feel of that silk softness against his dick was all that Max needed. The visions of Chloe and James had so aroused him that the tidal swell began to rise, and Max knew he couldn't last too long.

He took slow strokes at first, enjoying the feel of the tight tunnel. Max twisted himself a little until he knew he was in position to massage James's prostate.

"Oh, fuck..." James whispered, and Max knew he'd found it.

He rubbed his cock back and forth, easing it against the prostate, loving the feel of the sheath tight against his dick. James groaned, and Max knew he'd come soon as well. He leaned forward, skin against skin, and took James's engorged dick in his hand. He fisted it gently as he managed to keep up his own thrusts.

He could feel his testicles contracting. He would come in his lover in a second; the buildup had formed over the hours of computer flirting with Chloe, then this small seduction by James. His orgasm gathered inside of him, ready to send him spiralling into bliss. He felt James's cock jerk in his hand and the heat of the liquid spill over his skin. This set him off, and his dick exploded and lurched in James until spent.



# Chapter Thirteen

Chloe clinked glasses with him and said, “Here’s to us!”

James launched a wide, fiery grin. “To us!” he agreed enthusiastically. They both took a sip of their wine.

Chloe looked around the red-tinted room of the gallery bar at the Arthouse Hotel. “I still can’t believe you got me here. Isn’t this the cheesiest bar in town?”

James, without taking his eyes off her for a second, leaned in closer and said, “It’s only cheesy if you are being picked up, and you, my dear, are already picked up.”

Chloe smiled at him, thinking again that he looked like he would literally pick her up, sling her over his shoulder, and carry her onto a large boat where she’d be trapped for months.

Chloe wore her red silk Chinese dress especially for this occasion. James told her he wanted to do something memorable for their first date and, despite Chloe’s protests that she’d promised only one, told her it had to be the Arthouse Hotel. When she said she’d never been there because it was the worst pick-up place in the world, she felt him smile through the phone as he said, “Come anyway.”

Obviously recently refurbished, the famous local haunt had gained elegance above what Chloe had heard. Full of yuppies and the city folk there for an after-hours thrill, it still held some of the old-world charm that earned it a heritage listing.

James smiled at her wide-eyed admiration. “I have a surprise for you later, but come now and have something to eat and a glass of wine.”

They flicked through the menu, glanced over the top of it to make eyes at each other, and then fell back into the menu again. James cut a fine figure, dressed in all black. Chloe had noticed at least a dozen women glance at him as they worked their way through the bar, his tanned skin contrasting with the black in his hair and his heavily muscled chest rippling through his tight T-shirt. Chloe was aware of her own beauty, her red dress clinging to every curve, from her potbelly to the full-sized curl of her backside. The dress buttoned up on a slant away from the high-

necked collar, giving her small breasts a kind of prominence that made them obvious.

Chloe couldn't imagine what James had in store for them after dinner.

James ordered them pork-and-prawn dumplings, chili salt-and-pepper squid, and then a chorizo, tomato, and arugula pizza. He also organised a full bottle of the wonderful red wine they drank.

"Now that I have all to myself the beautiful Chloe, and this is our first date" -- he held his hand up to silence her protest -- "I want to ask you how you feel about possibly seeing more of me. I had a fantastic time with you over the coffee the other day."

"Aren't you supposed to ask me this sort of thing at the *end* of a very successful first date, not the beginning?" Chloe flirted and smiled, but a small piece of fear oiled its way into her belly. She ignored it, sure she had misunderstood him, and let herself continue to have a lot of fun. "Well, I guess what I am trying to do is get your attention so that I can see you again. I want you to think of this date as something we might do regularly. I'd like to fill your dance card for the next few dances, if that's okay with you."

Chloe thought of Max and felt a little nervous. Giving up the wild, free life she'd built at home for a lovely, exciting, but obviously real-world relationship held very little promise. James, regardless of fun and undeniable beauty, would never provide her with what she got from her costuming. And settling down with one man could only mean having to give all of that up.

The memory of her mother loomed, reminding her of that fear. Art caused depression her mother could only escape in one dreadful way. Could artistic intensity send Chloe down the same path? Chloe knew the same blood rushed in her veins, and it had the potential to drive her down the same path. And what if James were to leave her? Could she just go back to the art again?

"It's a tough one for me to answer. I feel like that puts a lot of pressure on the situation."

"Chloe, just think about it. I guess I know that it is ridiculous to push you now, and in a way it was a stupid thing to tell you. I wanted you to know this is a serious night out for me, and that I wasn't interested in making it one of those dates that you just have and then nothing ever happens again."

Chloe suddenly felt strange. She seemed to be bringing out the most intense feelings in men now.

“On a lighter note, here is our food,” James said, obviously pleased to break the sourness of the mood. “You don’t have to do anything to this food but eat it.”

Chloe felt very brave. She looked at James with his dashing pirate eyes and his easy, good nature. Thinking of Max, Chloe decided perhaps she could take a risk with this man. If he wanted to spend more time with her, well, she’d tell him some things to see just how deep that commitment ran.

“I want to tell you something. I hope you understand; this is not the kind of thing I disclose easily. In fact, I haven’t ever revealed it to someone before face-to-face. But your frank seriousness gave me some courage, and I feel I should confess some things to you. Ha ha, you may not want to complete this date, let alone consider a second.”

“I’ll take that chance. What do you want to tell me?”

He certainly looked eager. He focussed on her entirely, completely engrossed in what she may have to say. Chloe again got the feeling that there was more going on behind the eyes of this man than she realised.

She smiled and started to eat her food, a signal to tell him he could do the same. Chloe sensed a nervous excitement in James that she couldn’t account for. Sure, it was a fantastic first date, no denying it, but he seemed too excited. Resisting the desire to immerse into dreams and fantasy, Chloe firmly told herself that she would get to the bottom of it eventually.

Anyway, she thought as she tucked into a delicious fried dumpling, he might not want to follow where she led once she told him about her home and her past.

Over dinner, Chloe told James about her house and about her costumes. He seemed very interested. He asked very good questions, clearly revealing some knowledge of fabric and design. Chloe didn’t have time to tell him the truth about her mother, so engrossed had they become in the conversation about her art.

This was different from the talk she’d had with Max. Max challenged her at the philosophical level. James challenged her at the creative level. He wanted to know if she’d tried a surrealist free form with her designs, working from the unconscious rather than the conscious, controlled state. Chloe, wide-eyed, said she’d never even

thought of it before, but she supposed she had the talent required for that sort of thing. James told her wonderful stories of great designers who had immersed themselves in the rules, then applied multiple techniques to free themselves from the conscious state, to dip into what James liked to think of as the dream, or subconscious aspect, of one's self.

Chloe completely forgot to be afraid of James and relished in the conversation. It was as exciting as the conversations with Max, maybe even a little more so because they were in the beautiful Arthouse Hotel and drinking wine. Chloe felt the surge within her that she put down to a creative high brought on by time with another artist. For the first time, she understood the longing in her mother.

Suddenly James looked at his watch and jumped up. "Chloe, this conversation is so wonderful, I almost forgot my surprise. It only takes an hour. Come with me."

Chloe took his hand as naturally as if they'd been lovers for years, still thrilling to the feel of his skin on her skin. He tugged playfully on her arm and dragged her toward the staircase in the lower corner. They walked up the twisted spiral stairs, a throng of people crowding around them. At the top, James handed two tickets to a woman who looked like a saloon moll.

Chloe stared at her, amazed. The woman took the tickets from James and smiled at Chloe. Then she handed them each a sketch pad and charcoal pencil and said, "Your table is toward the back. It has your name on the reserved sign."

Not fully understanding what was going on, Chloe clutched her pencil and notepad and followed behind James, trying for a moment to look about the room.

This room had the same dark, scorpion-like corners as the rest of the hotel, but the room had been divided up with a small black runway down the middle. A mix of men and women quickly filled up the chairs. Chloe did notice there was a prevalence of men in the room. James led her to a small table toward the back, promising her she'd miss none of the action from this section. He ordered them another bottle of red wine, then turned to Chloe and said, "This is a little gift for your inspiration, darling. I hope you enjoy."

Everyone in the room had large paper pads and charcoal pencils. The bulk of the people sat toward the stage. Soon, however, there was an announcement that the night was starting and for everyone to please take their places. Chloe's heart raced. She felt as though she were in some sort of privileged domain and couldn't image what she was about to see. The woman at the door had given her a good idea.

Some slow music started, and Chloe recognised it as “The Stripper” by David Rose. Soon a woman emerged from a curtained-off area at the back of the small stage. She wore a jewelled corset in ballet pink, a pink G-string, and tall pink sandals. She had enormous soft pink feathers coming out of her hair. Looking around the room, Chloe noticed everyone start to draw. She half turned toward James, to whom she had her back, and saw that he had started sketching as well.

Chloe was in her element. How did he know to bring her here? Hurriedly she started to sketch the costume. The way it moved against the woman’s skin as she danced her burlesque dance. The seams up the back of her stockings, the glittering jewels of her costumes, and the sway of the feathered headdress all moved to make her body more enticing, more elegant. Why? Chloe sketched with these questions in mind, relishing the dim, haunting, male-dominated atmosphere.

She pranced about the stage for a while then moved offstage. Soon another woman came out, this time to a collection of songs from the musical *Grease*. She was dressed in tight white shorts and matching jacket and had two chequered flags with her. Soon she unzipped her jacket to reveal an electric blue bra. Through her act, the jacket eventually came off, but she kept the bra top on. Chloe had already figured out this was burlesque, and no woman would appear naked.

A third woman came out wearing a tiny, flesh-coloured bikini and high, sequined stilettos. She carried a large feather fan with her. She teased with more deliberation and used far more seduction on the crowd. She flashed the fan in front of her as she removed the bra top and then ripped the thong bikini bottom from her body. The fan fluttered teasingly in front of her body, flashes available for the audience but never revealing completely what lay behind those feathers. For the audience, this was the highlight of the show. People were hard at work on their sketches but stopped to ogle at this woman.

Finally, a last woman came out in a red and black corset, with a small red and black top hat, and did a very seductive dance but remained clothed. When she’d finished, all the women came back out (the feathers woman with her tiny bikini firmly in place again), and the house lights went up. People were encouraged to stand up and show their sketches.

Chloe looked down at hers, a mingled mess of limbs, hooks, feathers, and jewels. Nothing fit together as a proper image, but Chloe didn’t care. She wanted to take this drawing home and immerse herself in it for a few hours. Hers was a study, not for show.

She looked over at James who had done a decent job of the woman with the red top hat, her seductive smile glowing at the observer. A woman in the far corner earned applause; she showed a beautiful sketch of the burlesque dancer who removed all her clothes. She was handed a bottle of champagne.

Soon the room started to clear out.

“Well, that was short, but I hope you enjoyed it,” James said, close enough to Chloe to be heard. Chloe thrilled at the feel of his warm breath on her ear. She felt enormously stimulated by what she’d just seen, and not just in the artistic sense. She realised James and she had acted like longtime lovers all night, yet had never even shared a proper lovers’ kiss. Chloe found herself thinking about kissing those full, red lips of his, more than she could think about the art conversation he continued with enthusiasm.

James looked at her with that amused grin slowly spreading over his face. She blushed as if he could read her mind perfectly. For the briefest second, Chloe mused at what a remarkable connection existed between them. It was as though he knew her every thought, and Chloe felt confident she had a similar ability to read him. This man, this moment, could be the opportunity of a lifetime.

If Chloe wanted to move in that direction.

Before her loins completely took over her common sense, she reminded herself that she had to speak frankly with him. He looked as hungry for her body as she was for his, but Chloe sensed that one time in the sack wouldn’t satiate either of them, and James’s conversation when they first arrived indicated he felt the same way.

Chloe had to come clean about her deepest fear. And she had to do it right now.

“James, I have to complete that conversation we had earlier. I have to tell you more about my great-grandmother.”

Chloe caught the faint look of surprise in James’s eyes, before understanding and warmth moved it aside. She knew intuitively that despite all the art talk, he wanted to get back to her place. But he was sensitive enough to ignore those feelings and trust that she had something that needed to be said before they moved into another realm.

“Of course. We’d only gotten as far as your beautiful costumes before. Relax and tell me about the women in your family, and let’s see if I can’t ease your mind and rush you home.”

His beautiful smile relieved any doubts she may have, as she sipped her wine and relaxed into the moment. He topped her glass up and then his own, as if to imply there was no rush; she was to take her time. They had all night if that was required.

“James, I know this sounds strange, but I have deep fears for myself that you have become a part of, and I want to tell you about them prior to us having any physical connection. The words you said at the start of this wonderful date have caused me to see that if this is to have any chance at a future, I need to reveal my fears now. You have been very frank with me; now I need to be that with you.”

He said nothing but nodded enthusiastically, willing her to go on with his smile and warm eyes. Chloe knew that he was preparing himself to talk her out of these fears, to listen patiently, and then tell her that they meant nothing. She had to tell him what scared her so much, so that when those fears arose in her, at least she had his support in dealing with them.

“I’ll start with my great-grandmother. She was an artist. An Australian. She lived in this very region, I believe, but the information I have on her is sketchy and unreliable. But she was a part of an artistic community in Australia. She was very brilliant, even for this community, which was one of enormously talented artists. Great-grandmother was something of a star, a wild woman, and a brilliant, talented painter. Anyway, she played around a lot...” Chloe continued to tell him all of the details she knew of her great-grandmother.

James’s face had lost all of its mockery now as he said, “Go on.”

Touched by the intensity with which he was listening, Chloe continued. “Actually, the women in my history have a talent for finding famous men and mating with them. My great-grandmother had an illicit affair with a very famous person, and then my grandmother did the same. However, it brought a lot of pain in both their lives.” Spurred on by James’s interest, she confessed her biggest family secret. “Truth is, my great-grandmother had a brief one-nighter with D.H. Lawrence, and my grandmother had a week-long affair with Henry Miller. Imagine that! I am D.H. Lawrence’s illegitimate great-granddaughter and Henry Miller’s illegitimate granddaughter! Lord knows who my mother slept with at Studio 54. Even my father could be famous!” Chloe paused, watching his reaction carefully. James’s face showed deep concentration with something else emerging that Chloe couldn’t

recognise. He seemed almost out of breath. It was a very exciting story... And it did mean she had these great artists blood in her veins, and this must have been gripping to an outsider. It had never struck Chloe before that this story could be something to be proud of, so afraid was she of what the legacy had done to her mother. But telling James reminded her of the glamour of the story.

“I know it sounds sort of exciting, but my great-grandmother didn’t want the baby, and it was all very traumatic and difficult for her.”

James’s interest grew intense. He’d almost gone a little pale, so strong was his response.

“Yes, yes... Go on. What happened to your great-grandmother?”

“Well, the community refused to let her have the abortion, and so she ran away, claiming that she was going to abort. But my great-grandmother, believing the same as that community, couldn’t bring herself to do it. However she was too consumed with pride and anger to return home. She ran away to the States and had the baby. A little girl. My grandmother.”

Chloe could not help noticing that James was physically affected now. Gone were the spirited grin and the boyish charm. In fact, Chloe had never seen anyone’s countenance change so rapidly from one minute to the next. She started to worry about James’s reaction. It seemed a little too strong for polite interest.

“Can I go on? You seem upset? Is this story worrying you?”

James, who was looking into his wineglass, glanced up at Chloe and said, “What happened to your grandmother?”

“Um, well, the women lived lives of loneliness in the States. We don’t know what happened to Grandma, and my mother never did find her. Mother was a great painter but couldn’t find a market for her work. She waitressed at Studio 54 when she fell pregnant with me. She’d slept around and got heavily into drugs. Before she died, I have mostly memories of her crying and telling me she was always alone, always alone. She repeated it endlessly.” Chloe paused here, filled with emotion.

At this moment, James caught his breath, and Chloe looked up at him sharply. His gaze pleaded with her. The intensity flowing out of him caught Chloe off guard.



She had not, in a million years, expected this kind of a reaction from him to her sad little story.

“What happened to your mother?” James said, his eyes filling rapidly with tears.

“She killed herself. Hung herself in our small back room when I was a very little girl. The last thing she said to me was to forget art and embrace a normal life.”

Big, fat, rainy tears flowed down James’s cheeks. He looked at Chloe as if she were a ghost. As if he couldn’t believe she was real. He leaned over the table and kissed her mouth. Kissed it hard, like a lover who had been to war and had returned a broken, defeated man. The tears ran freely down his cheeks and melted into their kiss, making it one of salt and water and love.

Chloe pulled away, confused and tired from the emotional pain of her story. James’s intense response to her story touched her, but scared her also. If he wanted to impress her with his interest, he’d taken it too far. But Chloe could tell this reaction sat too deep to be flattery. James’s face was ashen, and his hands shook. He gulped down the rest of his wine. He placed his head into his hands, and if she didn’t know better, Chloe almost perceived a sob. She saw two tears drop to the table, and then James started to pull himself together.

He pulled out a handkerchief, blew his nose noisily, and wiped his eyes. He’d lost most of his smooth actions from earlier.

Suddenly Chloe realised why. Her story convinced him. He knew they would not see each other again.

Instantly Chloe’s stomach lurched; she was right. This beautiful, sensitive man, who understood her so immediately, understood her so well now, couldn’t continue with her. He knew that he would only encourage this destructive streak in her, and he would be nothing but trouble. Tears welled in Chloe’s eyes as she slowly realised what his distress really meant.

James composed himself and glanced around the room. They’d attracted no attention, and he seemed physically relieved at that.

Suddenly he tried to face Chloe. “I have to go. I am so, so sorry. I am sorry that I took you out to something like this, thinking that we could just simply seduce each other. You were so right to tell me that story. But I am too upset for your mother and for your great-grandmother, and yes, even for you, to stay another minute.”

Chloe looked down at her shaking hands, mentally willing him to get out of her sight so that she could cry, cry and curse her lineage. Even if her thoughts were confused, this story clearly introduced too much intensity for the man. She'd killed his interest in her, and she watched the corpse of possibility lying dying on the ground. It hurt terribly.

"Of course. I am upset too. Just get me to a taxi, please. I want to get home."

James looked at her with some warmth and confusion in his eyes. He leaned over and held her hand. "Dear Chloe, please don't be upset. It's just that I have to do something. I will call you or come and visit or something, but just for now, I really have to go."

Chloe felt humiliated. He didn't have to give her the "I will call" line. She felt deeply upset and wanted to get away from him as fast as she could. She stood and started to walk toward the end of the room with James rushing to pay behind her. He got caught up in dealing with the bill, so she managed to walk down the stairs alone. The stairs had seemed like so much a stairway to heaven only a few hours before but now felt like her descent into hell.

James didn't catch up with her until she opened the door to step out into the night air. A cab was waiting by the footpath, ready to take drunken rioters home safely. Chloe moved toward it with James on her heels. He opened the door of the taxi for her. James slammed it shut without getting in himself, and Chloe just felt glad to see that he wasn't gentleman enough to get her home safely. She wanted to be alone to cry.

James tossed the cab driver a hundred-dollar bill and told him to take her back to her apartment. He leaned through the window to kiss her cheek, but she pulled away, too hurt to act socially polite.

Broken and confused, James said, "Please, Chloe. I just need to do something. I will call you, I promise. I will explain why your story affected me so."

Chloe looked up at James with a smile on her lips that she never felt in her eyes. "It's okay, James. You really don't have to. I knew it was important information. You need to be able to make proper choices with all of the knowledge at your disposal. Now please leave me alone; I have to go."

It was meant to be a pretty speech, a clean end to a tragic date. But James had already moved away from the window and was hailing another cab behind her.

Her words were lost in the sultry night air.

## Chapter Fourteen

Chloe had hollowness in her heart from which she felt she'd never be able to recover. Stepping out of the taxi, a ride that threatened to last forever the way she was feeling, Chloe almost sprinted up the steps to her home, desperate to get through the door and safely away from that nightmarish date.

Running into the apartment, she slammed the door behind her. The tears started to roll in big, fat splashes as she flopped herself down on her bed and let the torrent wash over her. Chloe's body racked and shook as she cried and cried into the silk covers. It was too bad. He'd just run off like that, his whole demeanour changing the minute she told him about her mother and all the mad women in her life.

Chloe knew that she had to come clean about her past. She knew that it might make him have second thoughts about her. But she had no idea it would make him turn white as a ghost, cry in public, and then run for his life. The date looked so much like a possibility of something, as if they had a chance this all might go somewhere. And now suddenly nothing. Not even a nice date every now and then. Not even a proper good-bye. Not even an attempt at an explanation.

Chloe cried until she had no tears left. This situation had looked hopeful to say the least, and hope had been dashed to pieces in front of her and left her stinging from the cold, hard slap of reality in her face.

Reality. That was what had happened to her. This man reacted honestly, probably more honestly than a lesser man would. He'd made a concerted effort to be clear about where he stood and asked her to do the same so that they might consider a future together. And Chloe had been honest, and he'd been honest right back at her. He didn't want to have relationships with so much madness running through the blood. Strange but true.

The scary thing was Chloe had never thought that the artistic people might reject her. She'd always assumed she had a choice between two lifestyles. To follow one path or another. Chloe couldn't bear to think back over the night. It hurt too much. This opportunity took her very close to the dream she didn't even hope to entertain. Maybe one day, when she'd properly let go of all hope and she knew her place properly, maybe then she would be able to go back over this joyous, almost-perfect date. But it would be a long time before that was likely to happen.

After sobbing for what seemed like several hours, Chloe decided to go online. She didn't want the humiliation of confessing the disastrous night to Max, but she also didn't want to be alone. She thought that she needed another perspective on the whole thing. Max had encouraged her to attend tonight. Chloe didn't want to blame Max for what happened, but she did want him to know that things didn't always work out just because they seemed like good ideas.

As soon as she was online, Max leapt up with a message request. Chloe accepted it, and right away, Max typed in, *What are you doing home? Is your date with you?*

*No*, Chloe responded. *It ended early, and I can tell you now, he won't be coming back.*

There was a pause. Chloe could feel Max thinking.

Then he came back. *Are you okay?*

*I'm really upset. I feel hurt. I don't think this date was a good idea. And to tell you the truth, I don't want to give up my relationship -- as strange as is it -- with you. I think reality hit me in the face tonight, and I would rather have this online world than that scary, real one.*

Max seemed intensely interested in what she had to say. She could feel his focus through the computer. The connection that went on between them helped her calm down usually and she loved it so much. But now, it felt a little odd. Chloe thought again how strange it was that she was attracting such intense responses in men. She couldn't think of answers to these kinds of questions now. Life felt too hard.

*Do you want to tell me what happened tonight?*

*Well, we were getting on really well. It was a sort of dream date. We talked and talked about art and technique. I kept thinking about how sexy he was and how nice...*

Chloe let her words fall away. She felt little uncomfortable blurting this out to Max as if they didn't have feelings for each other. But he had encouraged her to go on the date. She couldn't work out what he was happy to hear and what might give him some pain. And she really didn't want to give him any pain.

As if reading her thoughts, he said, *It's okay. I am the one who thinks you should have two men, remember? Please go on. I am happy that you went on this date tonight.*

Satisfied with that response, Chloe continued and told Max about James and their evening together, and that she thought she may have scared him off. There was a long pause, and Chloe thought she might have lost him for a while. Then Max came back with, *Scared him off? I find that very strange. I don't quite understand. Is there anything that you told him that you haven't told me?*

Suddenly Chloe felt very wary. She couldn't face losing both these men in the one night.

*I don't want to tell you.*

*Why is that?*

*Because you will probably run too, and that is too much to bear. I don't want you to go anywhere.*

*Do you like both of us?*

*Yes. I really do.* Then for the second time that night, the dam burst on Chloe's emotions. *I want both of you. I know that is weird, and I am a horrible person for saying that, but I can't bear the thought of losing either of you. The conversation I have with you I want to continue, and the conversation I have with James is essential to my salvation as well. I can't stand it, but I need both of you.* Chloe paused, surprised by the honesty of her outburst. She was relieved when she saw Max reply, realising she hadn't scared him away as well.

*You should remember it was me who said that was a good idea all along. I gave you books about two women who lived like that. Or do you forget these things?*

Chloe was about to answer when Max went off-line. She tried to message him back but couldn't get his attention. Something had happened. He'd had a power outage or some sort of computer failure. Chloe smiled when she thought how nervously he must be trying to get back online to be with her when he knew she was so upset.

Max's message had soothed her, however. She decided that she would not tell Max about her mother for fear of losing him as well. Messaging with him had made her more lucid, and she started to think about what had happened between her and

James. Really, it was very strange, and his response severe. What if she had misjudged the entire response? He had said that he would call her; perhaps he would. Perhaps she had only imagined that he was so upset, and in fact, he needed to calm down, and then he would call her.

Good Lord, thought Chloe. It could be anything. She knew nothing about him, but perhaps he'd lost his mother in the same way?

A new emotion spilled over Chloe, and she felt like a foolish child. She'd thought of only one possible scenario and imposed that interpretation on the moment instead of actually listening to what James said to her. He told her he needed to go. He wept. He said he would call her. She had run away assuming that to be a lie, but nothing in his eyes gave her that impression, only her own fears.

She walked into her bedroom, suddenly very tired. She'd overreacted, and she felt like a fool. Her response had only complicated matters, not spared her anything at all. She flopped onto the bed, her head spinning.

Thinking about the two of them, and the words Max had said, made Chloe wonder if she could ever have them both. How would that work? Would James just disappear when she needed time online with Max? Would James be okay with her masturbating and watching Max do the same online? That didn't really make any sense. Max said it was all possible, but it seemed to be less of an imposition for Max. He wouldn't be around anyway, and maybe he had other female lovers.

Still, Chloe couldn't help thinking of James's beautiful smile and that cheeky look as he leaned over her. He would lean in and kiss her lips, making them quiver and melting the heat through her tired, cold self. He would lay heavy on her body and kiss her until he'd made a river between her legs.

Chloe closed her eyes and stretched out, cat lazy, thinking of James lifting himself off her and lying by her side while Max rolled over toward her and kissed her on the lips. The feel of his gentleman's hands on her breasts, on her belly, and on the rounds of her hips. He would kiss her, lapping and sucking on her tongue gently, playing little teasing games with his own tongue, and James would lean down and suckle on her naked breast. She would feel that tongue going south while her lips were nibbled and licked. James could dip his tongue momentarily into the swirl of her navel before continuing downward.

Chloe imagined James parting her legs and settling himself between them. Max's kisses would be fevered, while James licked the outside of her labia, teasing her,

making the inside lips ache with anticipatory pleasure. Then Max would roam his mouth down to her nipple, nibbling, kissing, and licking before he came back to her mouth, as James would run his hot tongue up and down the still-closed lips of her sex.

Chloe's eyes flew open with a start. What was that? The doorbell? She lay for a second, her pussy dripping and aching for release, when she heard her own doorbell again.

For no sensible reason, she imagined it must be James. His return was sooner than anticipated, and he'd come to explain everything. Hopefully, Chloe thought as she took a tissue between her legs to clean up a little, he'll fuck me.

Skipping to the door, Chloe ripped off the chain and flung it open.

It was Gary. Horrified, Chloe stood there like a stunned rabbit, not knowing what to do. She looked a state from crying, and not only that, she smelled of sex. This was the last thing she needed. She couldn't get her thoughts together in time. Gary stepped into the hall before Chloe had the foresight to close the door on him. Instead, he grabbed the door from her and slammed it shut himself.

"Gary, this is illegal. If you leave now, I won't press charges, but you absolutely can't stay. What are you doing here? This is too bad."

He looked at her with the hot anger she had seen there before.

"I waited for you, you stupid little bitch. I, who am way too good for you, waited for you, and now you think you can reject me? I am the best you could possibly get, and if you didn't write such high tickets on yourself, you'd know that. I am the one who will save you from this artistic bullshit. And I am the only one who knows how to do it."

Chloe knew now she was dealing with a mad person. She had to get him out of her house and then call the police. But she'd let him in. Through her own foolishness, the same foolishness that had let her down all night, she'd let him in through her own front door.

However, for a moment Gary seemed distracted by what he could see around the hall. He looked at the cloth that created the blue tinge and into her red-tinted bedroom. He saw her mother's paintings. Chloe could see a new kind of anger rising up in him.



He grabbed a handful of the blue muslin and shook it at her. "Is this how you spend your time here? Making these stupid decorations for your home? Look at this place. You live in an Arab's tent. You're mad, Chloe. You're already mad, and there is nothing that I can do to help you, except take you away from this and never let you return."

Turning away from her, he pulled hard on the blue muslin, and Chloe heard a tearing sound. Horrified, but more awake now, she ran to the sewing room as Gary moved to her bedroom. She heard a crash as she pulled the sewing room door shut and locked it with the key in order to keep Gary out of there. She took the key and hid it in the kitchen as she heard another crash from her bedroom.

Turning swiftly, she knew she had to get out of the apartment. She could run for the back door; Gary was at the other end of the house, and she'd get there first. With this strategy in mind, she ran for it, just as she felt his force knock her over. Clamouring forward, Gary used the full force of his body weight on her. It was hard for Chloe to breathe, but still she managed a shrill scream at the top of her lungs. She screeched out a cracked cry for help as Gary tried to block her mouth with his hand, but he was too late.

A second later, the doorbell was ringing, and a voice outside called out, "You in there, come out now so I can see you."

Gary froze on top of her, and Chloe was able to pull her knee up and make a lopsided connection with his groin that was close enough to throw him off guard. He rolled, and Chloe sprang out from under him and ran to the front door. She opened it to see a police officer standing there. A surge of relief welled through Chloe, immediately bringing tears to her eyes.

"What's going on here? You all right, ma'am?"

"No! No, I'm not. That man has attacked me."

Gary still lay on the floor toward the back of the apartment. The police officer asked him to come over and talk to him. Gary, defeated and sullen, did as he was told and walked toward the officer.

"Lovers' quarrel, officer. I guess it got out of control," Gary said sulkily.

Chloe was furious, but she kept her composure. She knew it would be essential in this moment.

“Officer, he wasn’t invited in here. He pushed his way in when I answered the door. I do know him; he’s a colleague from work. I had clearly asked him to leave. And we are not, nor will we ever be, lovers.”

The police officer looked at Gary with tired eyes. “Is this your apartment?”

“No.”

“Were you invited over here by this lady tonight?”

Gary looked at Chloe with the same pleading eyes he’d used on her at work. Chloe, wild with anger, froze to the spot.

“Answer the man, Gary,” she said.

Gary put on a sulky face. “No.” He almost spat.

“Get out. I want to ask this woman if she’s going to press charges.”

Gary looked over at Chloe with pleading eyes as he walked out. The officer looked at Chloe.

“I don’t want to go to court over this, officer, but I don’t feel safe. He asked me out recently, and I said no, and I am afraid he may make more trouble for me.”

“I’ll make a report and take it down to the office. It’s lucky for you I was visiting next door; I heard the scream. I will file the report, and I want you to go down in the morning and back it all up. I think, if what you’re saying is true, you will need to get a restraining order on this guy. That may be all you need. Oh, and you need to tell your boss at work. You don’t want to get him into serious trouble, but that will scare him off. It’s usually enough with guys like this.” The officer looked at her for a moment and then continued. “Will you be all right tonight, ma’am?”

“I think so. I can’t imagine he’ll be back now.”

“Here is my card. I’m two blocks away. I recommend you tell a neighbour -- make it Mrs. Grace next door. I was dropping in on her tonight. She’ll call me if she hears anything funny in your apartment. We could hear the whole carry-on in here tonight. Was it him that broke your stuff?”

Chloe looked around and saw that three of her mother's paintings had been taken off the wall and smashed.

"Yes," she said absently, suddenly very weary.

"Well, that's serious. Make a note of all that stuff and get a restraining order out on this guy tomorrow."

Chloe thanked him and closed the door. She grabbed her keys and went to see Mrs. Grace and spoke with her briefly regarding her situation. Mrs. Grace seemed very worried for her but happy that she had been able to help.

Finally, feeling safe, Chloe locked the door to her apartment and went about locking all the windows and making sure the doors were locked. Grabbing her mobile phone, she took photos of the smashed, ripped, and torn things, ready to see the police in the morning.

She hopped back on her computer one last time in order to download the photos so that they were safe. She saw immediately that Max was online and waiting for her. Chloe burst into tears.

She logged on. As soon as Max replied, she told him about Gary. She spilled her little aching heart out, that heart that had endured so much that day and had gone through so many difficulties. Chloe felt exhausted, emotionally and physically. It was all too much, and she wished she had him by her, with strong arms about her to hold her and care for her.

*My darling, my poor darling. I am so sorry that you had to bear such horrible difficulties. I wish I were there to care for you. And I really think that it is time you let me into your life to do that.*

If she thought nothing else could surprise her tonight, she looked up at his face through her camera now.

*You...want to meet?* Chloe typed.

*Yes. Something happened tonight. I had to go off-line for a while. But I want to see you. And I want to see you very soon. I am worried for your safety, but even more than that, I want to hold you and be with you. I really think it is important.*

*Events are taking me in so many different directions tonight. The plans I laid for myself to keep me safe are crumbling inside me.*

*Please, Chloe.*

*All right! Chloe typed, lifting her arms in despair. What else can I say but all right? Certainly nothing you can throw at me can be as difficult a roller-coaster ride as I have endured tonight.*

# Chapter Fifteen

The next day at work, Chloe went directly to her boss with a statement from her neighbour and the police officer's number and details. In her interview, she explained what happened. Keeping the details as succinct and emotionless as possible, she explained that she had no intention of pressing charges, but she wanted Gary kept away from her, and she wanted her work to support her in the fact.

Her boss explained that this was extremely serious, but because Gary was on another floor, it wouldn't be hard to keep him away. She was asked to make a report to the equal opportunity department, something Chloe did happily right away.

About twenty minutes after she sat at her desk, her boss called her in again. He explained that Gary hadn't been at work for the last four days. A creeping fear moved in on Chloe. A little shaken, Chloe went back to her desk. Her heart raced, and she phoned the police officer to report the facts about Gary missing work.

Other than that, work was its usual dull experience. People came and went. Life went on and nothing really changed.

Except Chloe. Chloe could feel herself changing. First, the conversations with Max, then the oh-so-special date with James, and yes, even the drama with Gary was showing her that she could handle the dangers of an emotive life of excesses. The inevitability of her falling into a life of drug addiction or clinging to self-destruction had faded somewhat. Her mother's troubles, Chloe began to reason, came perhaps from isolation and not from the connection she felt with the artistic community... The destructive, shallow nature of the few connections she did make couldn't be the basis for a judgement on the entire way of life.

That sort of lifestyle was hard for a person with a deep and complex soul, and even harder to maintain beyond an interest level. Chloe's mother had become more isolated after her connection with the artists. However, now that Chloe had a small connection of her own she started to see that there was life in the community, not just the possibility of death. Her mother had not set herself free, and she was too isolated. Chloe felt sure if she connected with Max and with James, and maybe

even with others, that possibility would open up for her, and she could make herself safe from the fears that lived a fruitful life inside her.

That night Chloe sat in front of her computer, dressed in her bottle green mock-up of Frida Kahlo's wedding dress, searching the webby tendrils of the Net for Max. He was late, but he turned up. He put his webcam on, adjusted the sounds levels so they could speak, and the two Internet lovers smiled at each other.

“Sorry I’m late tonight, beautiful Chloe. I was busy on my little farm here.”

“You know, we’ve never talked about your farm. Perhaps you should tell me all about it.”

“Someday I will, my darling, but for now, you are a far more interesting subject. What a beautiful green dress you are wearing. Who are you tonight?”

“Why tonight, good sir, I am the beautiful and talented Frida Kahlo.”

“Ah, an excellent choice. No doubt she will make you feel very brave. Have you read the books I gave you yet?”

“Well, not read exactly, but I have glanced through. They are sitting by my bedside.”

“I want to draw your attention to a beautiful lace shift that Anaïs Nin wears. I can’t remember the page. It’s somewhere toward the middle I think.”

Chloe could hear his deep, sonorous voice melting across her speakers, but Max looked a little sad tonight. Or tired or something that made him slightly lilting.

“I’ll get it in just a second. Are you okay? You seem a little flat tonight.”

Chloe detected a hint of pleasure in her recognition of his state when he responded. “My stunning, wonderful Chloe, I have had some rather amazing news in the last twenty-four hours, and I am sad and happy and in awe at the same time. Everything is fine, and one day, I will tell you all about the news I received. But at the moment, I really want you to look at that costume for me.”

Chloe smiled an exaggerated smile into the camera so he could see it and then raced off toward her bedroom to get the book.

Glancing at the book he recommended, she turned to the page she thought he meant. Anaïs wore the most beautiful lace shift, in midnight black, the shadowy traces and delicious curves of her sexual self showing through. It was already marked as Chloe's favourite picture, and she was sure Max intended her to see it.

Back online, she held it up for him. "Was this the one you meant?"

"Yes, and of course you have already found it. Have you already started to recreate it?"

"Yes."

They both laughed. Then Max grew suddenly serious.

"Chloe, I want you to make that dress. Will it take you long?"

"I've already started. It's a very simple design. If I can get the right lace, which may be tricky, I can have it made before the weekend."

"Good, because I want you to come to my house on Saturday."

There was a pause, and Chloe knew something else was coming.

"And I want you to bring James."

"James hasn't even called me yet. I am starting to think he won't want to see me again."

Max sighed. "You will have to get rid of this self-effacing nonsense when we see each other regularly. But in the meantime, I am sure it will be okay with James if you just ask him. Oh, and by the way, I am looking at you in that dress, and I just know he will call you again."

"Maybe..." Chloe said thoughtfully. "But whether he does or doesn't, I feel strange asking him to take me to your home. Isn't that a little weird?"

"It's creative. Tell him you have a big surprise for him. If he's half the man you've described, I think he will be enthralled right away. He'll want to get to the farm as much as you will want to show him. What I will do is prepare a beautiful banquet for you both, and then I will come and join partway through. Then let's see how the dinner goes. If it's a little weird for you, you can ask James to take you home.

If you think he is strange, you can ask me to take you home. We can't both be weirdos, now can we?"

Chloe laughed. "Mmm...not sure about that one."

"Anyway, I bet it all works out just fine." Max had that tired tone to his voice again. "One thing is for sure. I want to see you. I really want to hold you, kiss you, and make love to you. If you don't like me when you see me, that's okay; we don't have to do any of those things, but I want to touch you and know that you are safe. That is the most important thing of all."

Chloe felt comforted and sobered by his words. "Do you think I can be safe if you keep encouraging me to be creative?"

"I think that's the only way you can be safe."

"But look at my mother."

"Look at Gary. Trouble may or may not find you no matter where you are or what life you choose. But I happen to think your mother suffered something very specific that may have been solved if she was around the right people."

That made sense to Chloe and answered a call that she felt deep inside.

As if thinking of something else, Max said, "Here is my address. I want you to ask James to come and visit whenever he calls you. I am quite sure he will, but I want to know that you have it and that you are making the dress I want you to wear. Can I have your address? I want to send you something for it."

Chloe read his address, looking at it in a quizzical way. She typed back her address, then examined his location more closely. "Do you live in the Blue Mountains? I didn't know you were so far away."

"Well, it's not that far, and I am not right up in the mountains. I am in a little town called Springwood. It's pretty here, and if James has a car, it's a really nice drive."

"I know the town! A fabric I love very much comes from near that area..."

Suddenly Chloe's cell rang. "Just a sec," she called to Max.



It was James. “I’ve called to apologise for what happened between us the other night and to beg your forgiveness and for a chance to take you out again. I am so sorry. Something that you said triggered something in me, a sad story from my own past, and I was so set upon by your words that I sort of fled. But I want to see you again, and I promise I have my emotions under control this time.”

Chloe could barely contain the thrill flowing through her as she thought of that stunning face on the other end of the line.

“Of course you can see me. Oh James, I am so glad to hear from you. I thought you were angry with me and never wanted to see me again.”

“No, silly. I told you on the night I would want to see you again.”

“Yes, yes, but your exit hardly inspired confidence and rationality. You wouldn’t believe the nasty stuff my head was telling me!”

“Let me make it up to you. I will do anything. Please, make me do anything.”

Mmm, that voice matched that eye twinkle she remembered perfectly. She could feel her body responding.

“Well, there is something I would like you to do actually.” The opportunity was just too good to pass up.

“Anything, gorgeous.”

“There is a place I’d like to go, and --” She paused, nervous for a second. “I’d like to share a secret I have with you up there. It’s up in Springwood. Would you take me there this Saturday?”

“It’s a date! And a secret? How can I resist? I’ll pick you up at five thirty so we have plenty of time together.”

Chloe ran back to her computer. “How did you know he’d ring?” she challenged Max.

Smooth as silk, he replied, “I simply know there is no man alive who could resist you. And besides, from the way you described the parting words the other night, he was always going to call you.”

“Yeah, that is true.”

Max paused for a moment, and Chloe felt the mood change.

“Chloe, are you tired?”

Hope stirred in her belly as Chloe longed for him to read her mind as he seemed able to do.

“No. Not yet.”

“I have something else up my sleeve that I would like you to do tonight. Can you see me in the webcam?”

Chloe couldn't take her eyes off him in the webcam.

“Yes. I see you. You're wearing your mask and your tux as you do each night.”

“Adjust your camera a little so that I can see you better. I need it lighter and clearer.” She fiddled with the online controls. “That's better. I can see your pretty face very well now. You know, if you're happy with me, when you get up here, I am going to want to make love to you. I should warn you, I am a passionate man, not always gentle in my feverish sex. Does that frighten you?”

Chloe's pulse quickened and the flesh of her palm emitted a thin sheen of perspiration. “No, it doesn't frighten me. I think I might like that.”

She saw the slow smile spread over his face.

“Do you think you could prove that to me now?”

Desire coursed its way through her veins as the inner walls of her sex clenched. Max smiled seductively into the camera, his small mask sitting snug over his nose, wrapping tight around his face. She so badly wanted to see him. To feel his hands on her.

“Yes, Max. I can prove that to you now. What would you like me to do?”

Max sat back in his chair, though Chloe could see him clearly still. His eyes were on his computer screen, watching her, but his hands fumbled with the front of his trousers. Chloe felt her eyes widen as Max withdrew his long, hard shaft, sensuously stroking it in front of the camera.

Max's speech came through slightly hampered by his breathy response to his own ministrations. "Do you remember playing games when you were a girl with the little boys behind the toilet block? I'll show you mine if you show me yours?"

Chloe had played these kinds of games as a girl. "Yes, Max, I remember."

Max grinned into the computer. "Somehow I knew you were the kind of girl who played those games. I'm showing you mine, Chloe. I want you to show me yours. Pull up your skirt."

Chloe sat back in her chair, making sure the image kept perfectly within the bounds of the camera. She slid her skirt up to her thighs to reveal their creamy whiteness.

"Mmmm..." he said, stroking his cock, watching her. "That's very nice, but I want those legs spread as wide apart as you can manage. Will you do that for me?"

"Yes."

Heart racing now, Chloe sat deeper into the chair. She lifted her legs with her hands underneath and glided them to loop over the armrests on the desk chair. The rests cushioned her legs softly and held them in place. She drew her skirt back now, feeling the cool air rush between her thighs. Glancing up at the computer screen, she saw her own seductive image. Skirt hiked up, legs spread wide, little cotton knickers sitting between her and complete exposure.

"Are those little panties of yours getting wet?" Max asked while still gently working his delicious-looking cock.

"Oh God, yes!" Chloe panted. The arousal pinned her down now, and the ache between her legs was driving her wild.

"Then hop off the chair and take them off. Before you sit back down again, I want you to get your hairbrush for me and bring that back so that it is within reach."

Chloe lifted her legs off her chair and dragged her very damp underwear down her legs. She ran to her bathroom, gathered up her hairbrush without thinking of what he had in mind, and made her way back to the chair. Max smiled at her when she came back.

"Show me that hairbrush."

She lifted it up. Its long, broad wooden handle moulded into a fat, wide end that sprouted bristles. Chloe noticed a lot of black hairs unglamorously clinging to it. She cringed inside, thinking momentarily that she wished she kept it cleaner.

“Mmm, now that’s just perfect. I want you back in the position you were in before.”

With some effort, Chloe wriggled back on to the chair, keeping her image in Max’s view at all times. She’d forgotten the domestic issue of her unclean hairbrush and now focused on the thrill of her sexual moment. As before, she lifted each leg, hooking them carefully over the armrests of the chair. She hesitated.

“Don’t keep me waiting. You know what I want to see.”

Watching the sexy images on the screen, her eyes darting between herself and Max stroking his dick, Chloe inched her skirt up closer to the tops of her legs. Soon it rose over the curve of the tops of her thighs, finally revealing the mass of dark, silky curls that surrounded and covered her sex.

“Oh my God.” Max panted. “That’s so goddamned beautiful. Play with it for me. Spread those outer lips apart and show me I’ve made you wet.”

While her inner pussy walls clenched, hungry for something hard inside, Chloe looked down to concentrate on her aching sex. She nudged her pelvis forward a little, exposing it more to the light. Glancing at Max, she noticed the frenzied strokes he applied to his erection as his eyes remained glued to the screen. She massaged the outer lips, letting them rub on each other. Then she pulled them apart, the wet, glistening dark pink showing clearly on the big screen.

“I will push my dick in there. This cock I am stroking right now will nestle in and feel at home inside you. Do you wish I could fuck you right now?”

Chloe lifted a finger and thrust it into her tunnel, feeling the joy of her walls contracting around it. Sliding it out, slick with her juice, she massaged her clit gently, sending shock waves of pleasure through her entire pussy. She threw her head back and cried out. “God, yes. God, how I want that delicious cock of yours in my pussy right now.”

“Then fuck yourself. Grab the hairbrush and stick the handle in there. Fuck it in and out and show me what you wish my cock could do right now.”

Driven to a lusty courage, she leaned forward and easily grabbed the hairbrush. Bringing the handle to the entrance to her passage, she circled it around the outside a few times to make it slithery and wet. Tossing her head back again, Chloe eased it into her sex, relishing in the feeling of those tight, aching walls being stretched and massaged.

“You are wild, and you are mine.” Max’s voice seemed faraway as Chloe gave herself over to the delirium. “Fuck yourself and make yourself come now. Right now. I want to come watching you bring yourself to orgasm.”

Pumping the handle of the brush in and out with one hand, Chloe used her other to rub rapidly back and forth against her clit. The orgasm came bounding up her spine and hit her between her legs fast. She moaned aloud, thrashing into the chair, her splayed legs kicking out but staying nicely parted.

She looked up through her postorgasmic haze to see Max shooting cum into the air. It landed unceremoniously around and on his tux. His hair lay more tousled than usual in a mess around his face, which carried a thick sheen of perspiration. He panted, his enormous erection receding, his cock melting into the rest of his body, satiated. Chloe lifted her legs off her chair’s armrests and smiled a dark, seductive smile into the camera.

“Why, sir. That was easily one of the nicest fucks I’ve ever had.”

Not moving, Max glanced exhausted eyes toward the camera. “Chloe, you’d better get up here soon, or you’ll be the death of me, I swear!”

She smiled. “I’m going to go and enjoy this high in my bed and let it dictate my dreams. Is it okay with you if I go now?”

“Before you go, tell me this. If you could be the online woman with me, or the real-life woman with James, who would you prefer? I’m not talking about which man you’d prefer, I’m asking you which woman is the real Chloe?”

“I think neither is the real Chloe. I’m not sure where the real Chloe is.”

“Then finding her, my darling, is our real aim here.” And he turned his computer off, disappearing into the night.

## Chapter Sixteen

After another devitalizing day of greyish dullness at the office, Chloe came home to a package sitting on her doorstep. Tearing a little of the paper away, Chloe saw that it was lace. With her heart racing, she flew inside to wrench open the box.

It was the most excellent black lace Chloe had ever seen in her life. The stretch in the fabric gave gently, not distorting the beauty or the intricacies of the design. It was soft and made of the finest cotton.

It was for her Anaïs Nin dress. The one she was to wear this coming Saturday. Enthused and driven by the beauty of the cloth, Chloe ran directly to the sewing room and started working on it. A couple of hours later, she emerged only for a brief time to thank Max for the beautiful gift.

The dress, and Chloe in it, was ready at five p.m. on that Saturday afternoon. Chloe sat prim and erect in her stunning black lace sheath. Her hair, delicately bobbed, sat sleek and blue-black against her pearly skin. She'd painted her lips a lush berry red, and her eyes were heavy with dark blue shadow. Satisfied she looked the complete picture in the mirror, she sat on her couch, waiting for her destiny.

Making the dress had changed Chloe. Its design and its muse had reached into her in the last three days. In the end, Anaïs changed Chloe. She'd read the erotica and all the wild stories of slavish narcissism and self-aggrandisement, but the spirit of the woman moved her to self-recognition. The female who could embrace the role made out for her and create a world separate from that to be lived and enjoyed. It was this woman's selfless courage, her determination to exist completely true to her own nature, no matter how misunderstood or how inappropriate she may seem, that swept through Chloe as she designed the black lace shift. Ultimately, Chloe knew that she needed to embrace the courage in herself, to stand strongly for what she now wanted for her own life.

The world outside her door and its madness, prowling the streets, waiting for her to emerge and conform as if it had its own mind, was not the way things were meant to be. The so-called "normal life" was just another kind of madness. It could destroy her just as easily as anything else if she were not wholly obedient to its ways. Even if, she had discovered through Gary, she were obedient to its ways.

What she once thought was rationality was in fact another mask, another fantasy, another supposed ideal.

In the solitude of her beautiful apartment, Chloe had decided in privacy and comfort to abandon the plans for a normal life. Max was right; drama and mayhem would find her no matter where she went -- Gary was an example of that -- and she may as well embrace what was hers for the taking. The decision was made, but not how she thought it would be made. It was made without fanfare, without announcement, and without actually having to give anything up. But it was made completely.

Chloe was ready.

As for the night, she didn't know what it would bring. In a few hours, sitting between Max and James, seeing how they got on with each other, she would know if they could tolerate each other in her life. Chloe wanted both men. But this decision required their input. Tonight the three of them together would work a plan and see if a trio of sorts was possible.

Chloe knew today, at this moment, that she had chosen. And she had chosen art. She chose it simply because it gave her more options for who she could be than the offer from real life.

So Chloe sat waiting, ready to embrace whatever came her way. Ready to confess to her two lovers -- neither of whom she'd ever taken -- her hunger for both of them and her desire to see that hunger fulfilled. It didn't matter if they rejected her. They would merely do what was right for them. That was their task. Chloe didn't fear rejection. But then, she didn't really expect it either.

At the ring of the doorbell, the person who answered was the new Chloe. She opened it to James, and the new Chloe reached out her arms and embraced him in a kiss immediately. It was the new Chloe who James kissed, and it was the new Chloe who James held, gently caressing over her clothes. She could feel James's love and his warmth through her lace dress. She could feel him with the entire new woman she claimed to be.

"My God. You are breathtakingly lovely. Did you make this dress?"

"Yes," Chloe confessed. "I actually made it this week. A friend of mine sent me the material, but the design came from one of those books I picked up that day we met in the cafe."

“If I ever get to meet this friend, I’ll thank them in every possible way for encouraging you in this. Chloe, I’m a little early. Can I see your sewing room before we go?”

Chloe took James into her sewing room, the place she’d never taken any other living soul. As she led him around her sanctuary, he smiled and admired everything she made. As he looked, he would glance over at her with obvious admiration and pride in his eyes, making Chloe swim in the warm ocean of her own pleasure. Connecting with James through something so deeply important to Chloe created another successful moment, heralding a good chance for a relationship in the future. Chloe felt her pleasure welling up inside, leaving her fit to burst.

James reached for her as he looked through the room and placed his arms around her, resting them over the curve of her bottom. He leaned down, begging for a kiss. Chloe obliged, feeling his hand cup and curve her ass as she leaned farther into him. She could take him here, right now. But she wanted Max too.

Sensing her hesitation and her moving away, James pulled back, but not before Chloe felt his erection on her leg. Her pussy was already throbbing. She couldn’t help imagining that beautiful piece of manhood entering her and stretching her to accommodate it. James had pulled away, however, and held out his hand to her. The romantic gesture woke her from her reverie, inviting her into the rest of the night.

The trip in the car was peaceful and pleasant. James continued the conversation they’d had at the burlesque show. They moved on to discuss the personal connection to art. The conversation stimulated Chloe, bringing her alive to new ideas and new possibilities again.

“Have you thought of doing anything else with your costumes? Like film? Or photography? Some generous artistic medium that can embrace the entirety of what you are achieving with your work?”

“I have thought of photography, as it seemed like a natural next step in the creation of the concept of becoming someone else. And it’s been partly done before with Cindy Sherman and the like. But I had bad luck with this back home, and I shied away. But on the whole, I have been in isolation, so it’s difficult to get into something like that with no support.”

“Perhaps we can change that?”



“I think so.”

Chloe looked at out the Australian landscape. She’d never get used to this country with its unrelenting, harsh scrubland, its golden beaches, and its fierce bushfires. It didn’t mean she couldn’t love it for what it was; it seemed like a part of her, but this was a land that didn’t want her love and punished her for trying to give it. This was a country to live in, but Chloe knew every human being there was only a visitor.

“We seem to be going a long way into the bush.”

“We’re headed up to the Blue Mountains. I know you haven’t been here before, but I thought, when you suggested coming up here that you were ready to face some demons.”

“I didn’t realise. Are you saying that this is near Normal Lindsay’s place? I’ve heard my mother mention it. I think it is connected to my great-grandmother.”

“We’ll be just down the road. Didn’t you know that? Are you okay about this?”

Nerves scrunched and clawed at her belly, but it had nothing to do with Norman Lindsay’s house. The confrontation between Max and James loomed closer, making Chloe’s heart race a little faster with each mile passed. Even now the fear of connection between the two men overrode all other concerns. As they drew nearer, Chloe feared more and more that James would feel misled.

Talking it over with Max had innocence to it. Max seemed to think it was the most natural thing in the world for a man to want to share a woman with another man. But now that she glanced at James -- his rugged good looks, his broad, muscled chest -- it occurred to her that maybe he preferred the life of a one-woman man, and likely he wanted a one-man woman. He had never indicated he might play games. In fact, he’d made the opposite more than clear. Suddenly this little trip seemed filled with deception.

“Yes. Actually, my great-grandmother and her troubles were the last thing on my mind until now. Why do they call these mountains blue? They look like normal bushland to me.”

“One day I’ll take you to a part of Sydney where you can see them from the distance. There is a wonderful, romantic notion that the gum leaves exude a fume that has a bluish tinge when seen from afar, but unfortunately, it’s just the

incoming UV radiation. Nothing special at all or peculiar to the area. But it was a very special place in the hearts of the indigenous folk here, and you will understand why when you experience it. It's like you can feel the spirits in the hills."

"I feel silly being all the way up here and not looking, but I don't want to be late. Perhaps I can look at the valley another time soon. Perhaps we can come together?"

James smiled a funny sort of smile. "I think you will get a chance to look over the view of that valley anytime you want, my darling one."

Soon James turned off the main road to a smaller road leading off to a small town. Chloe started to feel very nervous. James had grown quiet, and she was doing all the talking now.

"Did you know there is a very famous, incredibly rare, and expensive fabric made here?" Chloe asked.

James looked over at Chloe, then back at the road. "Really?" he said absently.

"Wow, oh yes. It's amazing. It's made by a small community that has been making it for generations. I don't know how many. The weave is a secret passed down through the bloodlines."

James seemed to be thinking. "It never occurred to me to connect you with that cloth, but it makes perfect sense. Maybe we can make another trip up here sometime to catch that view and see the cloth?"

Chloe knew she'd be back for sure. It was all a question of how she'd get there. Would James take her or would he never want to see her again after tonight?

Soon they turned off the road to a smaller road. This one twisted, turned, and had a large colonnade of trees whose branches touched over the road, making an archway.

"My goodness, is this the road?" Chloe asked James.

"Yes. You gave these directions to me. Seems a bit off the beaten track, doesn't it?"

“Yes but, oh James, look at the trees. They are so beautiful. They seem so thick; I can’t imagine a house being built here. It is absolutely gorgeous!”

“Do you really think so? Do you love this very much?”

It seemed important to James that Chloe enjoyed where she was, but she was falling so in love with the scenery it engrossed her mind entirely.

At that moment, they rounded a bend, and there was the house. An enormous old stone house, built into a hollow of smooth grassland and mossy lawns, the terraces sloping to gardens and the gardens reaching to the valley. The house stood firm against a pale purple sky, the setting sun brilliant behind its roofs. Light blazed from every one of the windows, and children were heard playing.

Behind the house and off to the right was an enormous barn. Chloe couldn’t see it properly, but beyond it seemed to be more landscape, and several beautiful, but more modest, houses dotted about the fields.

“My God. This is the most beautiful house I have ever seen. Is *this* the address of the restaurant? Are you absolutely sure?”

James looked happier than he had the entire journey. “Yes. I am so glad you love it.” He seemed to pause and then gather himself. “Maybe it’s a hotel, really, and we can sleep here the night.”

They made their way through two large gates and pulled up in a round, white pebbled drive. The sound of children was gone, and it seemed to have come more from the direction of the homes. Chloe leapt out of the car into the icy mountain air, forgetting that she was wearing a thin lace shift.

A large groan came from the gates, and Chloe spun around to see them close. If she hadn’t turned back to James so fast, she might have seen a dark figure sneak through the safety gates before they closed completely.

Chloe leaned into James as the gates closed. Closed on life as she knew it, thought Chloe, suddenly nervous about what the night might bring. James leaned down and kissed her, softly but lovingly, and Chloe relaxed a little more. He dipped his head to her ear and whispered, “Please relax. Nothing can happen tonight that will take me from you.”

How Chloe wished that were true.

Walking through the enormous front doors, Chloe saw a note with her name on it at a small table to the left. James asked no questions when she opened the note and read it. She told him that it was directions to the dining room where their meal waited for them. James accepted all of this without question again. It was strange. James's compliance went way beyond the duties required to make for a pleasant date.

But Chloe had no time to think about these things because they moved directly into a large dining room. One long, heavy wooden table sat down the middle. A large fireplace had a roaring fire, heating the room, and food was already set at their table. Approaching, they saw place cards. Chloe's seat had her back to the fire, James opposite her, and at the head of the table, a place card with Max's name on it indicated they would have company.

James held the chair for Chloe, helping it in as she sat. She looked up at him. He was beautiful in his black jeans and black shirt with his unruly black hair.

He smiled back at her and said, "You look so good sitting there."

He didn't sit. Instead, he stood next to Max's chair. James hadn't asked a question nor shown any kind of surprise. It dawned on Chloe that perhaps she didn't have the full details of the night in advance. James's behaviour told her he had a surprise up his sleeve. He couldn't conceal his excitement, and although prone to excitement, this went beyond the thrill brought on by a date.

"Good evening, Chloe and James, and welcome."

Chloe turned toward the door in her chair, and there was Max. He wore his tux, and he even had his mask on. Electricity shot through Chloe as she scrambled to get up to meet him. But then she watched him walk toward James. James lifted the mask off Max's face, and Max leaned in and kissed James deeply and sensuously on the mouth.

Chloe stared dumbstruck. She'd expected something for the last few minutes, but the two men being lovers never occurred to her. As they finished their kiss, Chloe said, "So I'm guessing you two have met."

Everyone laughed. Max and James hugged each other hard and then took their places at the table.

“Chloe, welcome to our home. Yes, we have met, and yes, we both wanted you from the first night I saw you online.”

Max sat down at the table and reached over for James’s hand. He then took Chloe’s hand. Max explained that they both wanted her, but they had to think of a way to seduce her before they could approach her. So they came up with the idea of the books and used that to get her to enjoy both of them.

“You mean the two-guy thing was your idea all along?”

Max smiled his warm, attractive smile. “No, it was your idea. We just saw it in you. Do you remember the very first thing you ever said to me?”

Chloe racked her brains. “No. I don’t remember. Tell me.”

“You asked me if it was an impossible dream for a woman to have two men.”

This solicited roars of laughter from the three of them. Max poured her a glass of wine as a white-jacketed waiter hovered in the background, waiting for instruction.

The three lovers talked and laughed about everything. Chloe couldn’t take her eyes off Max. His handsome, dark hair... His teal-grey eyes held mystery, authority, and smouldering sensuality. Easily the most charming man she’d ever met, more charming even than James; her heart soared. The two of them made a remarkable pair. James with his cheeky, sensual eyes and free, loving ways and Max with his perfected manners and his beauty and grace. They boyishly embraced each other, at ease with their sexuality and their physical space. Chloe couldn’t believe her luck. These two men! Hers!

They ate all their meal, drank wine, and laughed some more. Chloe filled them both in on the entire Gary story, and the three grimaced and grinned at the chair at work and Gary’s other inappropriate behaviours.

“We want you here with us, at least, we’ll talk about the details, but I don’t want any more Garys being able to make their way toward you.” Max reached out for her hand to reinforce the firmness of his point. Chloe sat opposite the two men as they talked on about watching her online, waiting for her and the right moment to reveal themselves, telling her how much they wanted her, needed her. Chloe felt everything was perfect except for one last question she had that would mean everything was tied up nicely.

She turned to James and said, "Can you tell me why you got so upset the night we went to the Arthouse Hotel? And where did you go after you left me? Was it here?"

A subdued silence rested over the two men. They looked at each other and then back at Chloe. James nodded toward Max, encouraging him.

"I'll tell you this story," Max said. "We need to tell you anyway. This night has been so special and so wonderful. We want you to be our lover. We want to make love with you every night, keep you here always, and make lots of plans about the future. But we have one more thing to tell you. It's the thing James found out when he spoke to you that night at the hotel."

The looks on the faces of the two men Chloe knew she loved were serious. A slight churning in her belly told her this would be hard to hear. Max went on.

"The people who had refused your great-grandmother the abortion and forced her to run to the United States were my family and extended family here on the farm. This house is part of a commune. We make the fabric you mentioned on the Net when we talked. Your great-grandmother lived here, and it was my grandfather who refused her abortion when she fell pregnant to David Lawrence."

Realisation dawned on Chloe. She put two and two together and started to see how everything fit into place.

Chloe stiffened in her chair as her pulse quickened. The information sunk in fast.

"Why didn't your grandfather let her have the abortion?"

"He wanted to preserve the genes. He felt that a mix between your great-grandmother and D.H. Lawrence would produce a special kind of genius."

"So all the talk about the genes and my mother's longing for the artistic community...her sadness...her longings for association...her suicide...all of this because they all belonged here, but your grandfather threw my great-grandmother out?"

"Not exactly," Max reasoned quickly. "She ran away. But it is true that she ran when she wasn't allowed to abort the child."

"My mother," Chloe said, staring out the window. "My poor, lonely, sad mother."

Anger welled up in Chloe. Anger that she didn't know what to do with. Her mother and her grandmother and her desperate great-grandmother. This callous family had cared more for their stupid science experiment than for her great-grandmother's life. And her mother had paid for that selfishness with her own life.

She turned on Max venomously.

"My great-grandmother died; she died so young. Lonely and sad and desperate for her community. My grandmother felt lost and misunderstood and couldn't even keep her own child. And my mother! My mother killed herself. Can you understand how serious that is? She felt she missed a creative community, but all along, it was this life, this world you've built up here. This life is in her blood, and she craved it. How could you have treated my great-grandmother like that? She was one of your own. How could you all treat her that way? Discard what they tell you about themselves, ignore their pleadings as if they didn't matter?"

Max turned away from Chloe and hid his face in his hands. James looked over at him, obviously very worried. He sat up and moved forward, injecting himself strongly into the conversation.

"Please, Chloe, it wasn't Max. He carries the burden of what his ancestors did. He would never hurt you in the same way. We were thrilled to find you and felt that we could care for you now, and in some way make up for the wrongs and sadness caused your family in the past."

Chloe stood and moved toward the window. She shook with anger.

"And what about my mother? How will you ease her pain? Neither of you told me this from the start. Everything about our connection is masks and lies. You knew if you told me the truth I would never have come. And you may have made love to me without telling me. What kind of monsters are you both?"

Max looked horrified. "That's not true. My God. We want to care for you, embrace you, and bring you back home, but it is always your choice to stay or go."

"Really? Like it was my great-grandmother's choice? I have fallen in love with both of you, and you have turned out to be the very men who destroyed the women in my family. You are the men I have been trying to get away from by using rationality and common sense in my life. As soon as I let art come in through the door, *this* is who shows up for me."

All the pent-up storm and emotions in Chloe, the fears for herself and the sadness for her mother poured out of her. She started to cry, deep, racking sobs wrenching at her entire body. She missed her mother, oh God she missed her mother. Her mother understood her and loved her and nurtured her. It was only in her mother's arms that, even as a little girl, Chloe had ever felt any freedom.

"You and your horrible life stole the only person from me who has ever made me feel understood and loved."

James looked at Chloe, tears in his own eyes. "Chloe, she's not the only person. We have understood and loved you because we are the same as your mother. Max's grandfather made a mistake a long time ago. But it doesn't have to mean anything about us. We've all found each other now, and life can begin for all of us."



# Chapter Seventeen

Max stood by the window watching Chloe walk the floodlit grounds. He could keep an eye on her, but he wanted to be sure she had some space to think.

“What have we done?” he said without turning to James, who sat on the couch near the fire.

“We’ve been honest. We have to let things take their course.”

“You know I won’t recover emotionally if she leaves us. It’s the worst possible scenario. I would have been better to have never met her.”

James stood and walked over behind his lover. He ran his hands around till he held him tight in a warm hug. “You will recover. Together we’ll see you through this. I still think Chloe will come around, but if she doesn’t, we have each other and we always will.”

“I won’t want any other woman. If I can’t have her, it’s just us again.”

“I know that. I can live with that.”

\* \* \* \* \*

Chloe walked the grounds, her head in turmoil and her heart in tatters. Everywhere she looked -- from the large barn that held the loom to the comfortable houses of the other residents -- made her think of her mother and how much she would have loved it here. The crisp dusk air smelt pure and clean, and the chill of the soft green grass padded Chloe’s every step. She paused at the edge of the land, where it sloped dramatically down toward the valley. In the valley, three unusual piles of rock formed independent statues, a monument to the isolation and loneliness Chloe felt at that moment.

The view was beautiful. The setting sun lit the valley so that trees still stretched toward it, and birdsong rang in her ears. Chloe stopped crying to hear it properly, a strange sound, like a bell ringing out two notes.

“The bellbirds sing every night, but I never get used to the majesty of the sound.”

Chloe whirled around to see a young woman standing next to her. She had to be in her late teens. She had a serious but very warm face, and she smiled a cheery smile at Chloe.

“Hi. My name is Melinda. I’m a resident. I hope you don’t mind my intrusion. I heard you crying, and as much as one thinks it’s best to be alone in times like these, really you’re better to have a friend nearby.”

Chloe didn’t want to fight her. She seemed nice, and it did feel good to have a woman by her side. “I confess, I was crying. I am really sad about something. But I’m happy to be distracted for a minute. You’re a resident? Do you work the loom?”

“We all learn that from when we are children, and yes, I take my share, but I’m off to university in the States next year. Harvard Law. Law’s my passion.”

“Wow, you may find you want to settle over there.”

“I will for work. It’s better for my chosen profession. But I’ll come back here all the time. This is my home. My blood. I’m one of the enormously privileged members of this community. Nothing will make me forget that, and I’ll fight hard to be sure nothing takes it away from me.”

“My great-grandmother was one of you as well. She moved, though.”

The young woman’s eyes lit up. “Really? But that is wonderful. That means *you* are one of us! I’ve never heard of one of us coming back after so long. You must be filled with relief.”

“Right now I wonder if it is more of a prison than a home. My mother killed herself searching for the spirit of this place.”

“Then you, more than anyone, must be here. Like your mother and your great-grandmother, this is the only place you can be free.”

Chloe smiled at her and started to walk back toward the barn. Melinda moved quickly to catch up with her. “If you’re conflicted, please don’t be. This is part of you. Just as it was your mother and her mother and your great-grandmother. You belong here.”

“Thanks, but I think I will walk alone for a while now.”

“I have to go for dinner. I wish you great luck in your soul-searching.”

Chloe stood still to allow Melinda walk farther in the same direction alone. Turning back to look over the valley, she wondered how her mother would like it here. That question was easily answered. Her mother would have loved it. She ached for it every day of her life just as Chloe knew she would if she walked away from it tonight.

The sun almost set completely when Chloe realised a stubborn streak kept her from this place. The farm and everything it represented held all her dreams come true, plus dreams she hadn't known to ask for. This place did belong to her. She'd felt it in those first few conversations with Max online and seen it in James's eyes the first day at the coffee shop.

Max suffered under the weight of the decisions of his parents, just as she did. Imagine his pleasure at finding her. At bringing her home and righting the wrong. The terrible injustice caused to her great-grandmother and the women in her past. Chloe saw, with a great, sudden clarity, that she and Max belonged together, and that James, in his gentle goodness, made that happen.

She rushed up to the house. Running through the front doors, she arrived breathlessly in the great lounge room. Max turned from his position at the window, and James jumped immediately from his place on the sofa.

“I'm so sorry for hurting you!” she blurted out, panting through her words. “I love you both, and I want everything that you want for me.”

Max crossed the room faster than James and had her in an embrace that felt like he would never let go. He kissed the top of her head and then worked his way down to her mouth, kissing her softly over and over. Chloe tilted her head up to meet him, and they dissolved into a deep, passionate kiss that held a promise of forever.

Only James could lessen the grip Max had on Chloe, and he moved in just long enough to kiss Chloe in his slow, seductive way. Chloe, relief and gratitude flowing through her, felt something else stirring deep within when James kissed her. James kissed her with the same passion again as Max pulled his own hands away. The stirring deep inside of Chloe moved to between her legs. Her knees buckled slightly as the spirit of the kiss made its way through her.

Max said, "Chloe, I think it is time for us to go upstairs. Tell us you feel comfortable enough for us to make love to you, because we have both been hungry for it for weeks now."

Chloe recognised dampness between her legs. With her heart racing, she said, "Yes. I'm ready. Oh God, I'm so ready!"

Pulling away, James took her hand and guided her toward the door. Chloe followed James, finally, as he led her upstairs. Behind them, Max followed.

At the top of the stairs, James turned her in the direction of Max's bedroom and walked her toward it. Once inside, Max closed the door behind the three of them.

Chloe marvelled at the beauty of the room. The entire house was sophisticated and elegant, but this room showed the passion of real love. In the brief seconds she had to look around, she saw a fat, roaring fire and a large bathroom with a walk-in closet. A huge, white faux-fur rug took up the length of the room. The king-size bed had black satin sheets and several throws made from the factory cloth.

The only light in the room came from the fire. With the reflection flickering in his eyes, James moved toward her, meeting her upturned face with his kiss. His lips were soft but demanding, wanting from her, his tongue yearning and searching hers.

As Chloe kissed him and immersed herself in the feeling manifesting between her legs, she felt another pair of hands come from around her sides and work to undo the buttons at the top of her dress. Max was behind her, gently, insistently, undoing each button in its turn, determined to have her naked in front of them.

Max worked the buttons from their holes and gently pulled the dress and its silk slip off Chloe's shoulders so that they fell to her waist. She was now naked to the waist in front of both of them for the first time. James reached down and caressed her left breast while Max reached around and fondled her right.

Chloe closed her eyes, determined to enjoy and internalise every sensation of the two men and all they could do to her. Max rolled and lightly pinched her nipple while James stroked and massaged her breast. The sensations threatened to engulf Chloe so that she disappeared into them. With the three of them alone in a little world, Max said, "I think we need to get undressed and get into bed."

James pulled away from Chloe, smiling at her, and lifted his T-shirt up over his head. Flickering flames left a rosy glow on the deeply tanned skin, giving James's naked flesh a deep, rich glow. Chloe caught her breath. His muscles, his tan, everything about him said power, possession, and strength. She looked away from his perfectly formed chest to his eyes and saw the wild, dark mischief of the pirate there again. His black eyes danced, fiery flames reflected in them, as Chloe interpreted the depths of desire they displayed.

"Take your clothes off, Chloe. We both need you naked," he said.

James turned and walked toward a chair on the other side of the room, unbuckling his belt as he walked. He sat in the chair and busied himself with removing his shoes and socks. Chloe turned around to see Max unbuttoning his shirt. His tux jacket lay discarded against another chair and his tie with it. He moved toward Chloe and kissed her hard on the mouth, letting his tongue work its way into her, exploring every part of her. Chloe revelled in the kiss from Max. All those moments she sat on the other side of the computer wishing she could feel his lips and his tongue were realised in this marvellous moment.

Max pulled away, giving her room to take off her clothes. She'd worn a small black G-string with the stunning dress. She undid the final button so the dress could slip off with ease. She stepped out of her delicate sandals, then smoothed the dress over the round of her belly and allowed it to fall freely to the floor.

"Phew." James whistled. Chloe turned toward him and smiled a sweet, seductive smile. She felt sexy. These two desirable men wanted her. They loved her body and appreciated it for its curves.

James stood up and pushed his jeans to the floor. As he came back up again, Chloe couldn't take her eyes away from his hard erection. His penis stood thick and long, veins pulsing blood through it, making it alive and ready to give her pleasure. Chloe salivated looking at it. She couldn't work out where she wanted that first.

Without ceremony, she slid the G-string down her legs so that it sat in a pile of wrinkled lace at her feet. She stepped out of them, shamelessly revealing her thatch of black curls to James, who had his eyes glued between her legs. His gaze travelled back to her face, and he said, "Come here!"

She walked toward him as he walked toward the bed. They met there. James slid his hand between her legs immediately, and Chloe hoped he could feel the thick, gluey wetness that signalled her readiness. He stroked her silky softness, sending

Chloe into a spin of competing sensations. Her nipples hardened in response as James dipped to taste one, then the other.

Chloe turned her head to see Max walking toward the bed completely naked. His muscles didn't have James's swell, but he was perfectly proportioned. His tan was an all-over one, while James had obvious tan lines. His long pole was a little thinner than James's, but longer and finer. His shaft bobbed up and down as he walked toward his two lovers on the bed.

Max leaned in and kissed Chloe as James continued to fondle her sex and kiss her nipples. Chloe thought she'd gone to heaven.

Max, intuitively connected to Chloe, as usual, pulled his face away and said, "James, let's give this little lady so much pleasure that she'll never want to do without either of us again."

James lifted his face and grinned at Max. Resting his hand on James's chin, Max leaned in and kissed James deep and long directly in front of Chloe. Chloe sighed, James's fingers still between her legs, watching those two beautiful, masculine men -- tongues entwined, lips enmeshed -- kissing each other with more softness and sensuality than Chloe had ever seen.

James took his fingers away and encouraged Chloe to sit on the bed behind her. She crawled backward, setting herself up in the very middle of the beautiful cloth lying over the bed.

"Lie on your back, my beautiful Chloe," said James in barely more than a whisper. He crawled along the bed next to her and lay down, pressing his body into her side so that she could feel his flesh-covered iron bar pressing against her thigh. Chloe lay back comfortably and turned her face toward James, who leaned down to give her more deep kisses on her mouth.

Chloe felt a pair of hands start at the base of her inner thighs and travel up toward her groin. The hands gently pried her fleshy thighs apart, lightly massaging and stroking the soft, vulnerable part of her leg. Chloe lay there, deeply engaged with James's kiss, her legs spread wide apart.

Suddenly, she felt warm breath against her sex and then the light, quivering touch of a tongue. As she kissed James, Max licked and nibbled at her outer labia, running his tongue through her dark, silky hair, up and down the outer flesh of her vagina. Max swirled his tongue without pulling her open.

The ache at the entrance to Chloe's tunnel throbbed with the most delicious agony. Max's breath came in gasps all over her skin as his tongue continued to lick and lap without actually breaking its way in.

James lifted a hand to pinch her nipples softly, first one breast, then the other. He stroked his fingers gently around each breast and down to the top of her swollen belly, then back up to her breast again.

As if working to the instructions of a conductor, James ran his fingers around her breasts with a little more insistence while Max used his fingers to ease Chloe's outer labia apart. His fingers slowly pried at her flesh, but his tongue was there first to probe and explore its way around the inside of Chloe's hot sex. He ran his tongue down to her opening, thrusting it just inside and rolling it around and around the aching walls, massaging and teasing at the same time.

James kissed her and played with her warm, tingling skin, and Max worked his magic on her pussy. Chloe knew she'd come in a glorious minute. She let herself go, seeing no reason to hold back. Max slid his tongue out of her hole and moved it to her clit, closing his lips around it and sucking with the softest vacuum and flicking it with his tongue.

Lurching skyward, Chloe arched her back and moaned aloud as she came in a huge rush into Max's hungry mouth. In the distance, she could hear James's exclamations and enthusiastic encouragement as she felt wave after wave roll over and around her pelvis, the orgasm wrenching tide after tide of ecstatic fluid out of her.

Chloe relaxed into the warm, soft bed, the delicious numbness of postorgasmic splendour taking her over completely. She could sense the men changing positions but felt too high on her own pleasure to pay it much heed.

"Oh Chloe, Chloe, you're incredible. I love you," James was saying as he climbed on top of her. She spread her legs as wide as she could, encouraging and inviting him into the depths of her body. In one thrust, she felt James's hard rod plunge into her slippery sheath as he cried out in ecstasy.

Max crawled up next to them as James shamelessly plunged his hot, hard flesh into her over and over again. Max pressed his own manhood to Chloe's lips, and she took it willingly. She opened her wet mouth as easily and happily as she had opened her sex. James leaned down and kissed her over and around Max's cock.

Max moaned out his evident pleasure. “Oh God, yes. Both of you suck my cock.”

Driven wild with lust, Chloe let her tongue gather as much saliva as it could and lashed it all over Max’s member. James’s tongue wrestled with hers over the hard, hot flesh as they sucked wildly on each other and on Max’s beautiful rod.

“Jesus.” Max panted.

Chloe reached up and placed her hand over Max’s balls and felt them twitch in response. He was close to coming. She pulled her hand away to help him last as Max pulled his dick out, leaving the two to keep kissing with intense passion.

Then Chloe saw James suddenly lift out of her, but he didn’t move off her. Looking down at her, his eyes glazed with lust, he said, “Stay there just a minute.”

Glancing off to her right, Chloe could see Max working hard behind James. Oh God, he’s lubing him up, she thought, and she almost came on the spot. James looked at her and through her as he was prepared.

James leaned back so that his member was completely out of Chloe now. Soon, his face took on the glow of ecstasy and he let out a sensual sigh, and she knew Max was in place.

Carefully, she felt James’s penis at her gateway again, and Chloe manoeuvred herself up to meet him so that he could come in at a better angle. The tip of his shaft entered her. Then as James sunk into place, deep inside Chloe, she heard Max say, “Oh God, fuck her while I fuck you. Oh, that’s beautiful.”

Chloe parted her legs as wide as she could without interfering with the complicated stance. Soon James sunk all the way down to be at one with her body, and she could feel him pressed hard against her chest and her belly. His dick was lurching into her with such powerful strokes, it took Chloe a while to realise it was Max driving the strokes.

That realisation tipped Chloe over the edge. With her arms out wide beside her, holding the bedspread into balls of cloth in her fists, Chloe arched her back and came again, her vagina sucking on James’s dick like it was a straw.

She felt James cry out, and his seed splashed all over her inner walls. Max called out at that moment, his demented groan signalling his own orgasm.



A minute later, Max rolled happily to the side. James fell off Chloe as well to her other side, and the three of them lay patient and still, letting the intense pleasure of the moment wash all over them.

\* \* \* \* \*

Chloe lay between the two men as they each nuzzled her neck, kissed at her ears, and fondled her breasts. No one said a word as they lay there, relishing in the aftermath of lovemaking.

A huge explosion out in the yard interrupted the peace.

“That sounded like it came from the factory,” James cried as he jolted out of bed. Max had already flown to the window, leaving Chloe bewildered and shocked on the bed.

“Shit! The factory’s on fire! Sound the alarm immediately!”

Max raced to a chest of drawers and grabbed jeans and a T-shirt. Throwing them on, he fled from the room. James had his clothes on by now and flew to a small electrical box on the wall in the corner of the bedroom. He opened it up and hurriedly pushed a series of numbers into a keypad. Immediately a huge siren went off, loud enough that Chloe felt sure it was heard all over the farm.

Chloe’s mind was spinning. She couldn’t work out what was going on or what she was meant to do. James ran to Chloe and said, “Sit here so I know exactly where you are. That way if I need to, I can come and get you.” And he sprinted out of the room.

Confused, Chloe sat listening to the bustle outside. Different sirens were coming up the hill now; Chloe suspected fire engines were on their way. At that moment, another explosion went off in the direction of the factory.

Chloe ran to Max’s open clothes drawer and grabbed a T-shirt. She slung it over her head and raced to the window. Flames -- large, orange, dangerous flames -- came out of the window of the factory on the east side. *My God! The beautiful cloth. The fire will destroy the loom!*

People below ran from all directions to try to save the building. Huge flames licked out the top of the structure now, telling even a novice like Chloe the flames were spreading dangerously fast. In the distance, she could see Max, yelling instructions

at firemen, and James, managing the domestic hoses and working with the others to put the flames out.

As Chloe watched what had just become her world disappear, a sudden longing to help save it overcame her. She raced to Max's closet and threw on a pair of Max's sweatpants and then ran downstairs. Whatever she could do, she would do in order to get this beautiful little world back the way it should be.

Outside, Chloe worked alongside people she'd never met, who would soon become her closest friends, to put out the fire and save their world.

At one point, Max looked over and saw her. He finished shouting his message to the chief of police and walked over to her.

"Chloe, you don't have to do this. Go inside. I don't want to risk you getting hurt tonight."

Chloe smiled up at him. "This is my home, isn't it? I want to save it just like everyone else here does."

Max leaned down, scooped her up in his arms, and kissed her hard on the lips. Despite the seriousness of the task around them, Chloe couldn't help revelling in the feel of Max's lips on hers in a kiss.

Pulling away, Max stood her on the ground again and said, "Welcome home. Now let's get this job done together."

\* \* \* \* \*

Chloe sat in the kitchen of the great house helping James to serve hot cocoa to the firemen, police, and all the extended family who'd come to help put the fire out. When everyone had a drink, Chloe sat with James at the table to listen to the reports from the police.

"Mr. Sebat, we found a body in the wreckage. It seems the second bomb went off while he was holding it, hence the minimal damage to the actual property. We have three items we took from the body. Can you identify them?"

The inspector produced three Mylar bags with a silver key chain, a ring, and a watch in each of them. Chloe recognised them immediately.

“My God. Gary did this? Gary started this fire?”

“Do you know this individual, miss? Is he possibly the kind of person who could do this?”

“I do know him, and I do know that he is the kind of person who could do this. He had motivation.”

“You’ll have to come down to the station first thing tomorrow so we can make a proper statement for the report.”

With that, the officials packed up and left, and soon all the other people did too.

Max, Chloe, and James were left to each other. They sat at the table, nursing hot cocoa, exhausted and at the end of their run.

“The factory wasn’t more than a third destroyed,” Max said mechanically. “We’ll see tomorrow what can be salvaged.”

“I am so sorry that this happened,” Chloe told them. “That somehow I brought this psycho up here with me. I am so sorry that I have caused you all this pain and sadness, and that it will be very hard to recoup the loss for a long time. I am so very sorry.”

Max and James looked at her in unison. They both reached out for her hand.

When Max spoke, it was in a quiet voice. “Chloe, I needed you here for so many things, and rethinking the farm was one of them. Well, that will have to be done now, and you and your costumes will represent a whole new life for all of us. But for now, we need to shower and then get some sleep. Tomorrow will be hard.”

Chloe smiled at them both. “Where will I sleep?” she asked, purely out of interest.

“In between James and I, where you belong,” said Max.

THE END

## Ten Things You Didn't Know About Barbra Novac

1. I am very happily married with two children.
2. I live in the Blue Mountains in a small town called Leura, near Sydney Australia.
3. I have faked accents as a flirting technique
4. I don't do housework and I hate cooking!
5. I love reading romance novels and am proud to tell the world.
6. I love watching *The Bold and the Beautiful* and am embarrassed to tell the world.
7. I have a tattoo on my left shoulder of a snake and an apple and one on my lower back that is a Jack Kerouac quote.
8. I am a feminist but I love the Marquis de Sade
9. I secretly listen to Abba, but officially I love jazz, Indie and the Rolling Stones.
10. I love to go to tarot readers and astrologers.