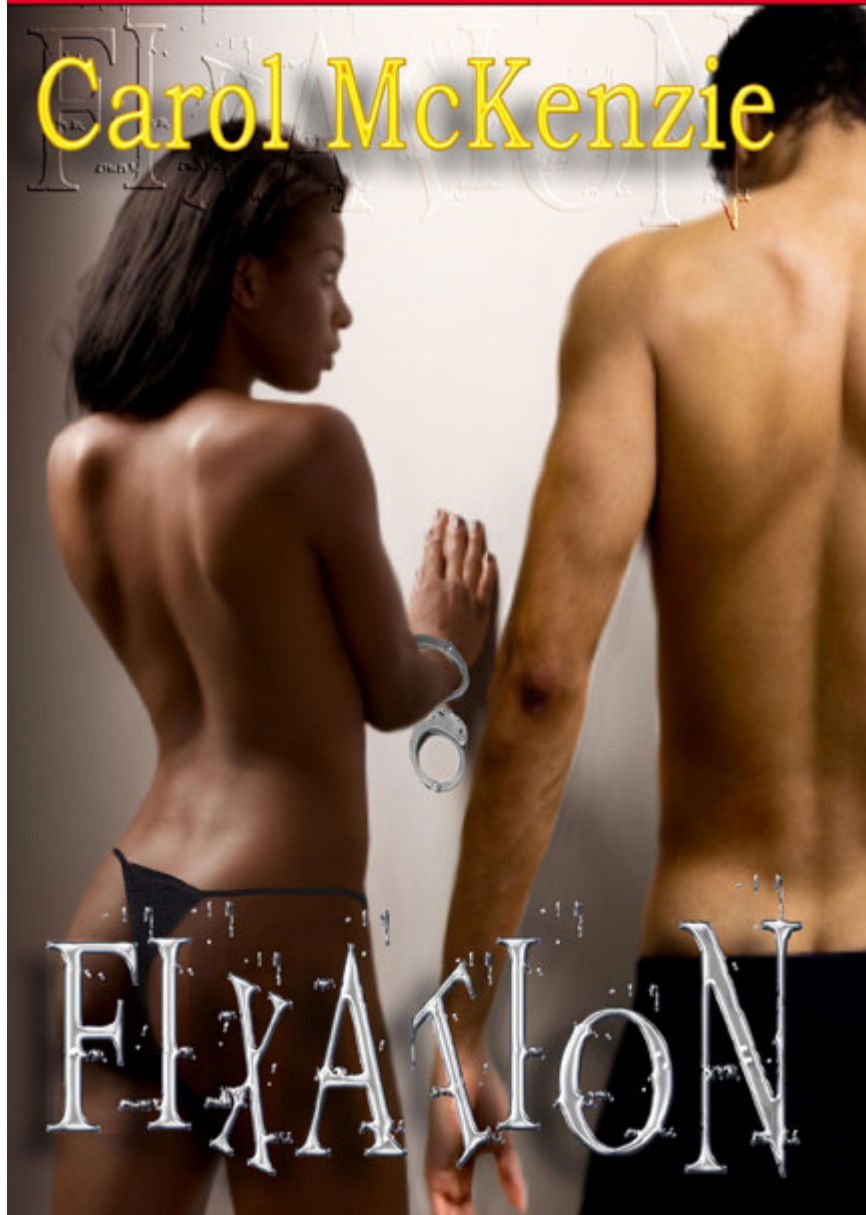


SIREN PUBLISHING

Carol McKenzie

FIXATION



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EROTIC ROMANCE



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A SIREN PUBLISHING BOOK

IMPRINT: Erotic Romance

FIXATION

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CAROL MCKENZIE

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Chapter One

Lenore stepped out of the shower, reached for a fluffy towel, and began swabbing her body dry while water gurgled down the drain. The neighbor's hard rock music vibrated the walls and jackhammers down the street rumbled and rat-a-tat-tatted. The maintenance man ran his weed-eater and came closer to her apartment, setting her on edge. Her favorite scent, yellow honeysuckle, filled the air.

As luck would have it, the moment she propped her foot on the toilet lid and began blotting her leg, the phone in the living room chimed.

Oh damn. She clucked her tongue and glanced at the closed door. *I should get it.*

She wrapped a towel turban-style around her hair and another one around her body. Out of the bathroom and across the soft living room carpet, she padded. The air chilled her skin. She glanced at the partly opened drapes, hoping no one could see inside since she was wet and naked. When she peeked out, she not only heard the maintenance man, she saw him looking in. At least he looked like he peered inside her living room. A foot or two away, outside the window, he swung a weed-eater back and forth across the ground. She gasped with shock. With a free hand, she yanked the drapes closed. *Thank God the door is locked. The nosey bastard.*

Forgetting the maintenance man, she thought, I can't talk long. She snatched the handset up on its eighth ring. "Mueller residence."

"Hi. Whatcha doin'?" her friend asked, in her usual cheerful tone. "I was about to hang up."

She managed to return the warmth. "Oh, hi! I was in the shower." She imagined Brianna's rosy, light beige complexion and dark blonde hair and her mood lightened.

She recalled Brianna Parks's family, including Brianna's good-looking, younger brother and the night they...*I don't want to think about it.*

"Sorry," she said, her tone friendly. "You okay?"

"I am...it's just that I'm naked as a jaybird except for this towel." Lenore glanced at the locked and bolted front door. "Can I call you back? Tonight maybe? I'm gettin' ready for work."

"I just wanted to invite you to go with us this weekend."

"Oh yeah? Who do you mean by us?" she asked with suspicion.

"I'll tell you later. It's a surprise."

Hm. A surprise? "Okay. I do a noon-to-nine stint today."

"In your last e-mail you said you were off this weekend, right?"

She gazed at the long-strapped purse that sat on the cornflower blue sofa less than three feet away. "Yep. Every Saturday and Sunday. From now on. Nice, eh? Three days off on Labor Day weekend."

"Good."

Upon hearing the sound of the buzzing weed eater move to front, Lenore sharply turned the opposite direction and cast her line of vision to where he worked. If the sun is bright out there and the living room is dark in here, surely he can't see inside. Puzzled, she drew her brows together.

"Hello? Are you still with me?" Bri asked.

I'd question her intentions in all this, but I'm due in to work in an hour. Eek.

"Okay. How about I call later, then?"

"Well, okay."

"We'll get the details ironed out."

"Great."

"Call after ten. I'll be here and can talk longer. I hope."

Within the half hour, Lenore put on a stylish gray dress that had a white stripe running down the right side and a white collar, hosiery, and ivory pumps. Once she had her purse in hand and made sure her sharp-cornered paperweight occupied its usual zippered, easily accessible space, she locked the apartment and traipsed to her dark green Ford Explorer. The key in the slot, she turned it to the on position, but it didn't start.

Oh crap, no!

The engine didn't turn over, again. "What the fuck?" After giving it two or three tries, she sucked in a deep breath and shook her head. "Why me?" *I won't let this ruin my whole day. Now all I need is that creepy stalker to show back up. I've got to change my shoes and walk to work.*

* * * *

Lenore hiked down the corridor of the mall that stood twelve blocks from her home and went into Ballanger's Tie-Dye Boutique, without once keeping beat to the soft rock music playing in the corridor. Besides, she didn't feel like enjoying music. Not this day. Her jaw clenched.

Beth Anne Lewis looked up from a pile of handbags, glanced Lenore's way, and shoved her glasses farther up onto the bridge of her wide nose. Her dark brown hair bobbed on her broad shoulders. Her ruby lips formed a wide, white smile. "What's wrong?"

She looked at her, scratched her elbow, and then put the bags below and rose again behind the desk.

As Lenore swept past the desk, she said, "Sorry I'm so late."

"Don't worry about it."

Lenore made a left and entered the back room, muttering, "I've

just had the Explorer fixed. It didn't have a frickin' spark plug wire...or something like that." *What will it be this time?* She tossed her purse aside, sank into a plastic chair, and shoved the Nikes off her feet. Cursing under her breath, she stuck her hand down in a shopping bag and brought out her pumps. She shoved each foot into one and rose, grasping her purse.

Beth Anne peered in from the cashier's desk and said, "So you're closing tonight, right?"

"Yep." She shoved her purse into a cubbyhole.

"Good, I think."

Maybe I'd better cool it and keep my tone warm and friendly even though I've had problems this morning. "Been busy?"

Fluttering her fingers, Beth Anne said, "Eh, so-so."

She reconsidered the looming problem of the day for a moment longer. "That damned car."

Beth Anne's gaze narrowed in on Lenore's face. Her brows knitted together and she asked in an ugly tone, "What now?"

Lenore shrugged and shook her head. "It wouldn't start and I had to walk. Oh, man. Nine blocks. This sucks." She walked over to the water fountain, leaned, and sipped ice cold water. "It's almost enough to make me start smoking again."

"Don't do that. Nothing is worth that. Uh, this is the second time, isn't it? In a month?" Her tone displayed her disbelief and shock.

"Yes."

"Damn."

"I'll say. I'm going to call McKade's Garage and have them go and get it and check it out."

* * * *

An hour before closing time, she glanced at the time on the register and bit her lip, feeling the growing nervousness that threatened to consume her. Multicolored tank tops and their various

tags waved as the air blew on them from an AC vent above.

God, how I hate the thoughts of walking home tonight. Everyone I know won't be home, so I can't call them. And I can't afford a cab. Spent all my last paycheck on rent. I need money for food. She frowned, wrapped her arms around her midsection, and stared out into the corridor where a group of teenagers congregated. She remembered the one long, dark road she'd have to walk down. *Crackheads and God-knows-who-else travels that route.*

Refusing to worry about the matter further, she resumed exhuming shirts from a cardboard box. When she had most of the garments stocked, some new beaded bracelets hung on a jewelry tree, and bid the last and only customer good-bye, she went to the back room and pressed numbers onto the keypad. She crossed her fingers over her heart and waited.

"McKade's Garage," said a man with a scratchy voice.

"This is Lenore Mueller. I'm so glad I caught you."

"Yes, ma'am. We're open tonight 'til nine-thirty."

"I believe you checked my car, the Ford Explorer today. I hope you did, at least. Anyway, is anything seriously wrong with it?" she asked, hoping she didn't sound too lame. She bit her lip waiting for the answer. Surely to God it wouldn't cost too much to have it fixed...again."

"Ma'am, I checked it out. The only thing wrong is a missing spark plug wire."

"Again?" She frowned and blinked.

"Yep. Could someone be foolin' around with your car?"

"As in lifting the hood and taking it out?"

"Yeah."

She raised her hand and touched her fingertips to her forehead.

"Oh, dear. Oh, my God." It's him again.

"I'd keep an eye on the son of a gun if I was you. Do you park it in a garage?"

How can I? "No. I don't have one."

"Well, maybe it's a good idea if you call the police, then."

She blinked. He said a word that set her on edge. "Police?"

"I would if it were mine. These service calls can get expensive."

"I appreciate it, Mr. McKade. I'll come in and pay you tomorrow morning."

"No problem."

As she put the handset down on the base, she thought, *Maybe the stalker isn't imaginary. Maybe I really should call the cops. Nah. They'll put me in the same category as the boy who cried wolf. I'll wait and see.* She remembered the scary night she fought off a possible rapist out in the parking lot of a movie theatre three years earlier and stiffened. *That was just a one time thing...I hope. Stuff like that happens in big cities all the time. It's part of city life.*

At nine-thirty, she turned off the bright lights and finished closing up. In the back room, she slipped out of her pumps, put them in a bag, and picked up her purse, all the while singing to herself, "I am strong. I am invincible. I am woman." *Yeah, right.*

She locked up and, carrying her bag and purse, ambled down the shiny mall. "Goodnight," she told the security guard.

"Want me to walk you to your car?"

"Uh, no thanks. I'm afoot tonight," she said with determination.

"If you want to wait I can—" the elderly, fat, harmless-looking gentleman said.

"No, no. That's all right. I live close by." Nine blocks is not really close, but I don't want to put anyone out. *Where's my weapon?*

With the purse strap heavy on her shoulder, she slipped her hand down inside a zippered pocket and grasped the heavy glass paperweight that she kept with her at all times.

She fingered its sharp edge down in the center pocket of her purse and then grasped it firmly. With a sigh, she stepped out into the slightly cool night air. *Don't ever want to use this weapon.* With her insides quivering, she peered around the nearly empty lot. In the distance, a motorcycle's engine revved. After taking a deep, fortifying

breath, she picked up her pace. *I hate this. I'll walk fast. I need the exercise, anyway.*

Chapter Two

After downing a fully loaded Big Mac and a diet cola, Sawyer Parks cleaned up the mess and went out the back door of his house, his stomach full. Grasping a key, he padded out to the garage. *It's time to mess with Betsy.*

Birds twittered in the treetops as they readied to perch for the night. The neighbors, some fifty feet away, battled with words over a financial dispute. He let out a frustrated sigh, thinking he'd seen and heard enough of fighting spouses for the day. Trying to block out their angry words, he glanced over at a jalopy rattling down the street.

A chill settled in the still, evening air. "Ahhh, I'm on vacation for three weeks. Finally." He inserted the brass sliver into the hole. With a twist of the wrist, he unlocked and raised the garage door.

He pushed the Harley-Davidson chopper, with its chrome front end, into the center of the small garage, and he turned on the overhead spotlight and located a soft cloth in a cubbyhole to his right. He grabbed a can of wax, lifted the cap, and dribbled a few drops over the chrome that rimmed the front fender. He began rubbing in small circles.

The area in which he worked smelled of grease and gas. Hubcaps shined like silver spaceships on the wooden walls. Polishing his love and joy relaxed him, especially after a difficult day of stopping drunk drivers and separating fighting spouses in dangerous domestics.

A few minutes before sundown, Brianna drove up, climbed out of her white Mercury Cougar, and entered the garage. Standing next to her brother, she crossed her arms at her tummy, smiled, and drew a few strands of blonde hair behind her shoulder. "Hey, Sawyer."

"Hey, yourself." He stepped away from his bike, leaned, and kissed his sister's rosy beige forehead. "What's up?" he asked and resumed waxing the flecked metallic red finish.

"I think you like Betsy more than anything else, right?"

He smiled, lifted the soft cloth, and shrugged. "Um, no. There are some things I like better. Actually, there are three things I can think of right off the bat."

She laughed. "I would ask what those things are, but I'd better not."

He shook his head. "It's best you don't know."

Her gaze narrowed on his face, unnerving him. "So...um, what're you doing this coming weekend?"

"How'd you know I was off?"

"A little bird that had a big mouth told me."

He laughed, picked up the green can, and opened the lid. "I haven't planned anything, yet. I thought I'd take in a game."

"Well, my boyfriend and I are ridin' to the fair."

"On his Harley?"

"No, on a horse." She giggled and threw up her hands. "What do you think we'd ride on? Yeah, on his bike. With some friends. Maybe we'll spend the night in a tent."

He pictured what it'd be like to go to a biker's rally. "Hmmm. On the campgrounds?"

"At Pyramid Campgrounds. There's a dance. And beer, too. What do ya think?"

Boredom and restlessness threatened to ruin the holiday. *I'm not really a drinker, but I do enjoy an occasional beer. Do I really want to stay home alone? Hell no.* He grinned. "Sounds fun."

"Really?"

He waved a fly away. "Uh, there's one problem...I don't have a date." *I'd feel like such a fifth wheel.*

"I know. I thought about that."

Sawyer pulled his gaze off the metal and placed it on her smiling

face. "What do you mean?" *She's up to something. I can tell by the smirk.*

"Have I got a surprise for you."

"Oh yeah?" He poured a couple more drops on the tank without looking up and then vigorously rubbed the finish. "So spill it, Cupid."

"How did you know?"

"I know you through and through."

She gave him a sly look and fluttered her lashes. "Remember Lenore?"

"Mueller?"

"Right. My friend that I e-mail? You—we knew her from years ago. Of course you do. Well—"

He blinked unable to contain his surprise. The name "Lenore" sounded like pure poetry. He began to study the possibilities, if she was finally free. A whole slew of words that could describe her—appealing, amiable, attractive were just the A adjectives.

He assumed his sister was playing matchmaker and felt pretty sure of the match she was about to make. "So, uh, how can I forget her?"

An image of a girl's soft, brown eyes and delicate coffee-and-cream features assembled, which caused his knees to weaken. *Her well-shaped, smooth legs and ample breasts that begged him for his touch. Christ, now she's thirty-two. How does she look? Looks really doesn't matter in the long run.* Thinking, he scrunched his lips and features. *A woman's personality is more important than looks.*

He remembered the nights during their high school years when his sister had invited Lenore to the house on weekends. They had played Monopoly, rented movies—mostly vampire and monster flicks. At first, he had considered his feelings for Lenore puppy love, or maybe innocuous infatuation, but the feelings wouldn't go away. In fact, they grew. Brianna allowed Sawyer to hang around. In later years, he occasionally dreamed of having Lenore as his woman, though he hadn't seen her for ages. It didn't faze him that she was two years older and her shade of skin was a little darker than his own.

Difference in ethnic backgrounds meant nothing to him. *We're all members of one race—the human race. If any of my friends do mind, well, to Hell with them. They're not friends.*

"Earth to my brother. Have I lost you somewhere?"

His line of vision intersected hers. He turned toward his sister and narrowed his gaze onto her face. "Does she know?" He touched his shirt and blinked.

"I called her."

"When?"

"Earlier."

His mouth threatened to drop open. "And?" He folded his waxing cloth, dribbled a few drops on the back fender, and gained control of his emotions.

"She was busy, maybe gettin' ready to go to work or something. I'll call her back later."

"Okay." He felt his heart rate slow down.

Brianna tilted her head and held out a hand. "So, bro, if she's interested, then do you want to take her?" After a pause, she said, "Or not?"

He shrugged and nodded. "I'd like to..." The day she left in her parents' car entered his mind. "I, uh—"

"Good."

"Hm."

"What?"

He raised a forefinger to his temple. "She's not taken, is she?"

"Nope." She leaned over and picked a piece of grass off her white sandal.

The brilliant idea had drawbacks. Plenty of them. A big one jumped out in front of all of the others. "I like that idea. But, we haven't seen one another for years."

"Nope. That's all right though." She spun and hurried to the car. "Good, then. You're going. Bob and I didn't want to ride alone. Bring a pup tent tomorrow. Er, make that two pup tents. We'll send them in

Glen's pickup."

Pup tents? "Hey, Brianna."

"What?"

"How long have you planned to be gone?"

She stopped, turned back, and smiled a knowing smile. "Saturday afternoon and come back on Sunday morning. No biggie."

Sawyer refused to let a twinge of dread and string of what-ifs unhinge him. "Let me know what she says, all right?"

"I will," she said, turned and continued on her way to her car.

Oh hell, yeah. Seeing her again will be interesting. It's not like we don't know each other. The night he spent with her in her bedroom so long ago flitted through his mind—the night they lost their virginity. His cock hardened and stayed that way long after his sister drove away. Just the prospect of seeing her again, of having her ride behind him turned him on. *She may not like me anymore. Years change feelings, likes, and dislikes.* He ambled back into the garage, grabbed a rag, and wiped them off. He reached into his back pocket and drew out his wallet. In the back sleeve, under a spare one-hundred-dollar bill, his social security card, and MasterCard Gold, he located her senior picture. Holding it up, studying her youthful looks, out-of-date hairstyle, and cowl-necked collar from fashions of a decade earlier, he remembered how bad he had it for her at one time. Holding the card, his line of vision rose to a set of wind chimes that swayed in the wind while reliving the luxurious feel of her, the slide of his rough hands up the smooth skin of her inner thighs. *Now, I won't sleep.*

He shook his head to rid himself of the tempting dream. Cool air had replaced the day's warmth. He slipped on a sweatshirt, resumed polishing the fender, and more fully digested the plans he'd made with Brianna. *If the chemistry is still there, and things go right, I'd like to date her again, maybe. I'll have to see.*

Chapter Three

A storm raged through the town the next evening, ravaging trees and bushes. Leaves littered the walks and streets. Lenore barely noticed. *Why me?* Lenore thought, as she stepped up on the curb. Her sneakered feet carried her at a fast pace down the wet concrete. *I won't think about my recurring dream. I can't do that because it'd scare me.*

She cast her thoughts to the area where she lived. It had become more crime-ridden by the day—carjackings, robberies, and drugs. Every month it seemed, something horrible happened along the treacherous stretch of road between her apartment and the mall. Lenore cringed. *Walk. Don't think about it, dummy. Damn it.*

To fortify herself, she lifted the strap of her black leather purse farther up on her shoulder and held her chin high. *I'll not give in. What's the name of that song? I am strong...I am invincible...I am woman. Yeah, mm-hm, right.*

Movement in the shadows caught her attention. For a second or two, she quit breathing. She stopped walking and focused. *Is that a man sitting on a motorcycle up ahead? Is he looking straight at me? Can't be. Crap.* She squinted at him as she stood under a streetlight. She resumed walking and picked up her pace. *Walk faster,* she thought as passed in front of him, feeling his line of vision lowering until he swept over her. *He's holding a helmet, but I can't see his face.*

For protection, she tightly grasped the paperweight in her purse and shuddered. *I don't want to use this thing ever...so maybe I won't have to this time. Maybe all this stuff is just my imagination. I'll be safe in my apartment in fifteen short minutes or less, and this walk*

will be a bad memory. Maybe I should've taken the guard up on the ride. I'm not going back to ask. A hundred or so feet down the road, she cleansed herself of dread and fear by taking a deep breath and found it heavy and dank. The air smelled of exhaust fumes.

He'll not hurt me, so I don't need to contact the police. After the detective referenced her as a whore to his buddy at the counter at Pleasant City Police Department, she had decided to not go back for seconds. *Besides, I don't even know what this supposed stalker looks like. He's not breaking the law...yet, unless he is the one responsible for sabotaging my Explorer, which I can't prove.*

A line of cars and trucks, their headlights on, whizzed by to her left, and a junkyard dog snarled at her to her right, drawing her out of her reverie. The pit bull stood from behind a chain-link fence, its teeth shining. "Yikes." *This area seems safe during daylight hours, but at night, the fuzzy, undulating shadows wreak their havoc.*

Three years prior, a car had barreled off the highway onto the walkway, right where she walked, killing a pedestrian. A shiver spun again through her chest. *Why didn't I wear my light-colored jacket today?*

In spite of it all, Lenore managed to make it into her apartment in one piece. She brought the mail out of the box and locked back up once she stepped inside. Exhausted, she pulled the drapes closed and turned on a night light in the living room. The apartment smelled of lemon furniture polish, air freshener, and fabric softener. After reading the bills, she padded back to her bedroom; dropped her purse on the on the floor beside the bed; plopped onto the soft, made bed; and dragged an inviting, plump pillow under the side of her head.

It'd be nice to have someone. Someone to come home to. Together, we could relax, drink a wine, and he could give me a nice back and foot rub. Oh God, yes. I'd like to have a lover, and I'd feel not only loved, but also safe.

Sleep threatened to take her before she ate or bathed. "Ahhhh," she said, her eyes closed. *I have to get up and do a couple of things*

before I go to sleep, damn it. Restful memories of her childhood returned as they occasionally did at bedtime. When recalling earlier times, she could so easily drift away in the fringes of sleep, going deeper and deeper. Floating like a feather. There were happy times when she was nine and ten years old. Her Aunt Corrine's gentle face as it appeared one summer entered her mind. Actually, she seemed more a cousin who was about the same age than an aunt. They played Canasta, dominoes, and swam at the city pool. For hours they spent playing, picking flowers and telling secrets.

Her weariness wrestled her thoughts away from the past and planted it squarely on her aching feet.

With a moan she kicked off her shoes. Each one dropped to the carpeting with a thump. Relieved of the pain, she relaxed and her eyes closed.

It's dark. I can't see. Fog. Heavy fog.

Lenore plodded to her car from the mall. Fronds from palm trees dropped from above and wrapped around her. *In Illinois, we don't have palm trees. This is weird. Where am I?* She sensed extreme danger. Her heart beat in time to her footsteps as they slapped the wet parking lot. A hand came out of nowhere, grasped her shoulder, and swiveled her until she looked directly up into the eyes of a madman. Standing in the shadows, the buff, light-skinned man with iridescent red eyes gripped her shoulders and said, "I've come to make you mine, Lenore." She screamed to no avail. He wrestled her down and tried to rip her clothes off her body. *My paperweight. I don't have it.* Just as he was about to finish the job he started, she awoke with a start, drenched with perspiration, and crying, pleading for mercy.

She swiveled her head and looked about her bedroom. Pressing her hand to her chest, she thought, *it was a dream. Thank God. But something seems different.* She padded into the bathroom and showered. *Someone in my life is...troublesome...sinister even. I can't put my finger on it.*

She stepped back into the bedroom when the phone rang. It jarred

her senses and drew her out of her dark thoughts. She reached for the handset and asked, in a groggy tone, "Hello?"

"Lenore?" the familiar voice asked.

"Yeah? Bri?" she asked, relieved, and sank down to the sheeted mattress's edge and got comfortable.

"Yep. You're not in bed yet, are you?"

"Huh-uh. What's up?" asked Lenore. She rose on one arm and let out a soundless yawn.

"I'll be short so you can get your beauty slumber."

She raked her fingers through her long hair, trying to rid herself of negative thoughts. *My skin is damp with perspiration.* "What's going on?" she asked, her heart beat slowing.

"Why don't you join us to go to the biker's rally Saturday? To Du Quoin. It was going to be a lotta old-school bikers...camping, food, games and bands...a weekend it."

"Join you and who?"

"I'd be with my boyfriend and you could ride with...Sawyer."

Her heart skipped a beat. *Sawyer Parks?* She felt her jaw drop. *Oh, my God.* "Oh," she said without mentioning her shock at Bri's idea.

"Oh? Is that all you have to say?" she asked in a jesting tone. "I thought it'd be fun. We'll stay the night at Pyramid Campgrounds nearby. We'd go to the fair, party, meet biker couples. We'd sleep in tents on the grounds."

"Tents?" she asked during her attempt to recover from her shock.

"Well, yeah. Each of you in your own tent." A hint of amusement played in her tone. "Unless you and my brother hit it off so well that..."

"Bri. No, no. I, well, uh...he wants me to ride behind him?" *Yikes! How awkward this is. Especially after we've been lovers.*

"Sure. I think it'd be fun. He's broken up with his girlfriend now. He's free, and so are you. And you can get to know Bob."

Her boyfriend, Bob? Disarmed by the interesting invitation, she

sat up.

Images, like wraiths, fluttered in the back of her mind.

Ten years ago, they had gone on picnics and had taken long strolls at Lone Ridge State Park. The last romantic walk she remembered well. The leaves had been particularly colorful that muggy day. They snapped pictures of the foliage and each other. When alone, he scooped her into his arms. They shared a long, slow kiss and intimate, steamy caresses that still stirred her. The clean scent of him lingered as her fiery, erotic hunger flared.

Wild flowers had spiced the woodsy air. White fuzzies had floated around them, and landed in the river below, just like in the movies. Warm, foreign emotion stirred low in her belly. The bulge in his jeans beckoned her to touch him. A torrid move, one she hadn't planned, propelled her hands. Her blood surged as she slid a hand under the waistband of his jeans, smoothed it down and over the fine hairs of his loins. She had ringed the base of his cock with her thumb and forefinger and firmly stroked until his breath caught and his body stiffened. After the release, he had uttered an elongated sigh and followed suit. His hands had wandered down the front of her jeans, causing the button to slip through the hole. Her pants loosened. The moment his finger slid into her damp hole, she knew she needed more.

Continuing was not an option. They withdrew and adjusted their clothing. Hikers approached. The next night, however, after they'd watched a movie, on their way to the parking lot, his voice lowered. "I want—" he'd said and stopped.

"You want what, Sawyer? Say it."

He had sucked in a noisy breath. "I want to really make love to you. Like in a bed."

A pause lingered too long. "Now? Tonight?"

"I—yes. Tonight. We need a bed...and privacy," he said through hooded eyes.

A bed would be good. God, I love him. She had giggled and traced

the outline of his mouth with one finger, which he promptly captured between his lips. "Let's go to my house."

"Your mom and dad...they'll--"

"They'll be out until ten."

"But it's already nine-thirty."

We're right for each other. I don't care about our different shade of skin or two year age difference. "We'll do it anyway," Lenore rasped. "Let's do it quick though."

Abandoning his old jalopy, they had run to her house. Hand in hand, they had stepped up the stairs, tiptoed down the hallway to her bedroom, sneaked into the small room, and closed the door.

In a clothes-flying frenzy, they had undressed, bounced onto the bed and slipped their lean bodies under the covers. Flesh to sweltering flesh they lay, her breasts pressing into his strong chest. His hard cock pushing into her abdomen. His rough hands had surrounded her waist, slipped back, cupped her ass, and pulled her into his body.

A greedy laugh left his lips. "Your skin is so soft."

The raw eroticism that had gushed through her seemed almost volatile. She had to have him all the way, and she was sure he felt the same. Her heart hammered under the touch of his fingertips. They had left her hips and, with light movement, had skimmed along her rib cage and over the mounds of her heaving breasts.

As the tip of his finger twirled around a nipple, he had murmured, "They're hard, different than the rest of you. Mm." With his lips and tongue, he began a slow, wet ascent from the tight bud to her mouth. Her pussy clenched as he suckled his way up her throat.

His lips had met hers, and his tongue clashed with hers. His breath had smelled and tasted like mint.

"Do what you want, then."

Trembling, she had buried her face into the curly hair on his chest and enjoyed its sleek texture. His sex had pressed against her mound while his mouth continually assaulted hers. When he climbed on top of her, she had placed her hands on his tight, sleek ass. His heartbeat

trembled through her. The moment his cock slid to the entrance between her waiting lips, stretching them to the max, he had paused before sliding in deep. It had felt so exhilarating that a hoarse cry left her lips. Tormented, she spread her legs farther apart as he pressed himself into her to the hilt and stilled. Together, they had stilled and enjoyed the moment. The fit had been so deliciously tight that she felt his shaft pulsing in her core. With her hymen now torn, her virginity was an affliction of the past. In ecstasy, she had wept. The pain had given way to unimaginable pleasure and passion.

"Are you okay?" he had asked, his breath hot on her cheek. With the swipe of his thumb, he rubbed away her tears.

"I'm so fine, you wouldn't believe it. It's a good hurt."

"But we're not done yet." He began slamming his shaft into her faster and harder until her breasts had wobbled and her bottom and back had moved up and back on the bottom sheet. The headboard rapped the wall, and the noise could have been heard all over the house. Her fingers clutched his upper arms as the pat-pat-patting of her pussy continued. Enjoying the height of her own latent need, she had cried out his name and added a breathy, "Yesss."

"Lenore?" Bri's voice cut into the memory, drawing her back to the here and now of her bedroom. "Is there trouble on the line?"

"Yes, I'll go," she said softly, her eyes wet with tears.

"Talk louder. I couldn't hear you."

"Yes."

"Uh, well okay," Bri said in her unique, pert manner. "I'll tell him you'll go. I'll call with the details toward the end of the week."

Chapter Four

The next morning, she hotfooted it to the garage to pick up her car and go buy groceries at Safeway. The oppressive air had stagnated. The early fall season was right on schedule delivering cool nights that yielded to hot, humid days.

A bell dinged as she pushed the heavy, glass door and stepped inside. The air-conditioning felt good. Two or three sets of eyes of waiting customers skittered over her, while she looked around the room. A swinging door behind the counter bore a small, red sign with white letters that read, "Employees Only."

Sunshine poured through the floor-to-ceiling windows. A sundry of items occupied shelves to her right. To her left were quarts of oil, car parts, and scented air freshener cards to hang from rearview mirrors. Bottles of windshield washer solution sat in disarray.

When she felt their attention return to their magazines, she noticed two men who occupied chairs nearby as they read *Guns & Ammo* magazines. Their faces appeared unfamiliar. A dirty, white ceiling fan twirled overhead, stirring the scent of grease.

A chubby man entered the door behind the counter. Coughing, he reached for a rag, wiped his greasy hands, and then peered at her over a gold-rimmed pair of glasses. "Yes, ma'am. May I help you?" he asked, trading the cloth for a pen.

She read the emblem on his chest pocket—McKade's Garage, Clint—and then peered into his eyes. "Uh, I've come to pick up my car."

"Your name is?" he asked while searching for an invoice.

"Mueller, Lenore Mueller."

"Ahhh yes. Here it is." He peered at the bottom line on the triplicate form and glanced her way. After licking his fingers, he pulled the papers apart. "That's seventy-five dollars and fourteen cents altogether." He handed her a pink sheet of paper and put the remaining two under the counter.

"Okay." She read the receipt—one sparkplug and sparkplug wire plus labor. *Labor is so frickin' high*, she thought and filled out a check, making it out for the exact amount. "Okay. I think I have the right amount." She handed it to him, and said a friendly, "Thanks."

"Give me your invoice for a second."

She handed it back. From behind the desk, he gazed down at her from under bushy brows and stamped her paper "Paid," and then entered the date.

In an admonishing tone, he said, "Park under a street light if you don't have a garage, young lady. But, uh, bad guys steal spark plug wires. They can get bolder, if ya catch my drift."

"Okay, I'll be on the watch." Lenore searched his face and found serious urgency that she wouldn't soon forget.

I can't afford to get all upset and scared because something may or may not happen. I'm alone. I have to draw a paycheck and live my life. I refuse to give into fear. She considered acquaintances who stayed at home like virtual prisoners in their own homes. With spread fingers, she combed her bangs while he inserted the check into the register.

"Just thought I'd warn ya."

"All right." A chill shook her voice. "Thanks. I'll watch out." Refusing to think further of the recurring guy in the shadows, she folded the invoice that he handed her, slipped it into her purse, and left the garage, the bells chiming on her way out. *I won't face that detective again. Huh-uh. I won't tell another soul about my mistake.*

A few minutes later, she drove to the mall. Once she parked and shut off the engine, she remembered the mechanic's words of warning. Hoping she'd never see the stalker again, she locked up and

went into the mall.

Walking down the shiny corridor toward the Curl and Cut Salon, located two doors down from the Ballanger's Tie-Dye Boutique, she noticed a special on haircuts, so she got in line at the counter and gazed at the shampoo, hair gel, and curling irons arranged on a counter nearby, while beauticians took their customers back to their chair.

Conversation buzzed among the fifteen or so women. An array of scents—permanent wave solutions, gels, and hair tint—filled the pink and gray room. Soon her favorite male stylist trimmed an inch off her long, raven mane so that it tumbled softly onto her shoulders.

A half hour later, at J. C. Penney's, she bought a new pair of Lady's Wranglers, two new sexy tops, one blue and one pink that each showed a tad of cleavage, and a good bra for the run Saturday.

Before returning home, she purchased a hundred-twenty-minute card at a convenience store so she could add minutes to her cell phone and carry it with her. Getting ready to go thrilled her.

Look at me. I'm like a high school girl again, getting all excited about seeing Sawyer.

She recalled the sad events that led up to their parting. Sunshine-filled days had yielded to erotic weeks, after they had fallen in love. At least a dozen or so intimate encounters later, her father announced that they had to go their separate ways. Her mood darkened.

Lenore had rebelled and ranted. Hating the thought of leaving Sawyer, she fought bitterly with her parents. Her family had demanded, in no uncertain terms, she go or lose her trust funds. Many nights, she had cried herself to sleep. Her father had secured a new job as plant manager of Wireman's Chemical Company in a distant city. Not financially secure enough to support herself, she had to leave.

As she strolled back out to her car, carrying an armload of sacks, she freed a hand and slipped on a pair of sunglasses. She peered at the various items in windows. Admiring new items along the way, she

wondered, *Will my new jeans look okay? Will Sawyer still find me attractive after all these years? Crap, I'm so nervous about this.* Lenore sighed when she stopped at her car and slipped the key into the door lock. *Come to think of it, it's not as though I don't know him. Actually, I'm more than intrigued than anything else. I want this meeting to happen, I think.*

* * * *

Lenore, happy she had her car back, parked, and hurried into the grocery store. After making sure she locked up, she sashayed inside and soon pushed a cart through the produce section, stopping only long enough to pick out all the fixings for a salad. She slowly made her way into the bakery section. "How are you doing?" she asked a familiar, white-headed man behind the deli counter.

"Fine, and you?" he asked as he placed cellophane-wrapped dinner rolls into a flat basket.

While she shopped, an impression of a faceless man etched in her mind. Call it extrasensory perception, but she believed the odd-acting man watched her, not only from her extrasensory perception but also from her peripheral vision, because she saw him peeking out.

Maybe my feelings are false, but the man has bad intentions. Is he the one from Rock's Show Bar? she wondered with dread.

Twice, she looked up from a rack of bread, seeing but not seeing. *There he is,* she thought in shock. The man stood fifteen to twenty feet away. A cookie display hid his face. Then, the next minute, a potato chip display hid it.

Ignoring a strong, gut instinct, she resumed shopping, nabbed a loaf of bread, and pushed the cart down to the lunch meat counter, while remembering the last time she had an identical feeling, but it had happened in Ace Hardware two weeks earlier. She remembered the admonitions the detective gave her regarding a man who stalked women before he assaulted them. *I swear. I'll never go back again,*

unless...She told herself to get a grip. Maybe this is nothing but my overactive imagination.

After she'd paid and left the store, she noticed that the man followed as she crossed the asphalt going toward the Explorer. He climbed onto a dark-colored motorcycle, a chopper, and slipped on a helmet that he had secured to the sissy bar. "Hello, Lenore." he said in resonant tone, that she didn't recognize. "I'd like you to dance for me."

She grimaced and turned away, her heart thumping with dread. *I don't want to see him, let alone talk to him! Get a description!* He wore blue pants, orange-brown work shoes, and his long dark blond hair streamed from under his black helmet. *Just like the patron at Rock's, he has light hair.*

She cleared her throat, stopped, and gazed at him. "Do I know you?"

"Not yet," he said and sped away, his pipes rumbling.

Her mouth dropped open in her shock. *Should I call the police?* A pregnant pause followed. *No, I don't want to face that damned detective again.*

* * * *

The clock ticked the minutes and hours away. Then, during the quiet moments before dawn on Saturday, she awoke with a start, turned on her side. Seeing but not seeing, she stared at the paperweight that she kept nearby. *Maybe it gives me a false sense of security.* Her mind wandered. After shutting off the alarm, she wrestled with the coming date with Sawyer. *Do we have anything in common? What can we talk about?*

An hour or two later, in the bedroom, she dressed in one of the pair of jeans she'd bought and low-cut top. She sat on the edge of the bed and slipped on then laced her black leather shoes. *It's crunch time,* she thought as she got to her feet. She got her jacket, located her purse, and placed them on a chair. Tense, she opened the front door

and pressed her forehead to the cool glass, thankful for a bright, sunshiny morning. *Rain'll ruin our plans*, she thought, as she stuffed spare clothes, a toothbrush, and toothpaste into a large purse and zipped it closed.

Two minutes before eleven, she heard the low rumble of one, maybe two bikes before they came into view. *It's not the guy at the store. I know these people*. Right on time, side by side, two Harleys rolled into the parking lot. Their motors silenced. Brianna and Bob climbed off one of the two hogs. The second man got off his bike. He wore a leather jacket and a black bandanna. As he neared, she admired his tight jeans and the military cut of his hair. He possessed the sleekness of a panther.

When the three of them stepped up to her door, she discovered the identity of the lone rider. Her body weakened when their lines of vision connected.

"Hey, hi," he said in a deep tone that affected her heart rate. He stepped within two feet and stopped. She managed to not let her mouth drop open.

Brianna approached and asked, "So, I don't think I need to introduce you two...but I will anyway. Sawyer, Lenore. Lenore, Sawyer."

After they shared a shaky laugh, she felt his admiring eyes roam over her, starting at the low point of the V in her top. A low, male growl curled in his throat as though her presence pleased him. Her insides turned to mush, and she quaked. *Sawyer is ten times more handsome than a decade ago but has the same seductive gaze*.

He raised his head. The corner of his lips quirked up when he peered into her eyes, and she was dazzled by his chiseled features. "You're lookin' good."

"Thanks," she said, holding her hands tightly at her side, so that they wouldn't shake, refusing to be intimidated by his obvious attraction. Fumbling for words she said, "And so are you."

Her tummy turned flip-flops when he drew her to his hard chest

and gave her an innocent, welcoming hug. She inhaled his sensual, masculine scent when he delicately kissed the lobe of her right ear. His lips left her, and he stood straight, rising to his full six feet, and whispered in a scratchy voice, "It's really good to see you again, Lenore."

The night she lost her virginity to him returned. *Such woman-killer looks.* She swallowed hard. "Same here." Her stomach clenched and rolled over. *Does he remember our first night of sex? Better still, does he still have the ability to seduce my soul right out of my body?* She forced her line of vision away, toward the horizon, because his presence unnerved her.

An awkward three- or four-second silence passed. Feeling the need to say something pertinent, she cleared her throat. "I—I hear that you're a deputy sheriff now. That's great. If you see me speeding, don't hold it against me." She realized the dual meaning, a Freudian slip and shook her head.

Brianna laughed and shook her head. "You don't want him to hold something against you?"

Lenore politely laughed and shrugged. "I mean...oh well." *Crap!*

Sawyer smiled a knowing smile with taut lips, the same lips that had pleased her so professionally during their earlier experimental years.

As though taking possession of her, he placed his hand on her waist. A shiver tore loose in her belly, like a roof in a hurricane.

"C'mon. Let's ride," he said.

After getting her shoulder bag and locking her door, with a forced, casual air, she left with Bob, Bri, and hand in hand with Sawyer, pleased she accepted Bri's invitation.

After passing through two small towns, traveling through Murphysboro along the State Highway 13, she looked out over the fields and woods and was happy to be riding behind him. She leaned comfortably back against the sissy bar and studied the rear view of him, of his short raven hair, and broad shoulders.

Halfway to their destination, in a public rest room, an hour into the ride, Brianna said out the side of her mouth, "He was really excited about seeing you again. Finally, you are free at the same time."

"I thought about that, too." Lenore plucked a few of her bangs into place and ran a brush through her smooth hair. "He looks...good," she admitted, wondering why some woman hadn't snatched him up into a relationship before she got to him again.

When they finished and went back to the bikes, she looked over at Sawyer and said nothing. She admired him again as he talked with other male bikers. *Same old Sawyer. Friendly as all get out. Likeable and liked by others.* The magnificent Harley god stood less than twenty feet away. For a fraction of a second, as he bitched about the price of gas, his gaze caught and held hers, and then fell away.

I can tell he's proud to have me with him. Her knees weakened, and she let on that their visual connection had no effect.

Brianna took a sip of Coke that she'd just bought from a vending machine and stepped up to Lenore, catching her off guard. "I think he's cute," Brianna said with a proud smile. The Marine Corps and the police training made him tough as a box of railroad ties. Don't let that fool you. He has a heart as soft as a cloud."

"He seems like it." *He is the type who turned women's heads and eyes. Years have passed. Our likes, dislikes, and even our personalities may have changed.* Inexplicable, mixed feelings assaulted her regarding their date. *I need to rule with my head, not my heart. I need to slow down.*

"Hop on, Lenore," he said, winked and smiled a delicious, thin smile. His cheeks dimpled.

Lenore's heart constricted when he clutched her hand and assisted her onto the high backseat of his Harley-Davidson. With his bike between his spread legs, he held the machine steady while she situated herself on the seat. She pressed her soles onto the pegs. He climbed on. The sissy bar supported her back and her knees bracketed

his back. His sudden reappearance made her feel vulnerable. Blood surged like whitewater in a Rocky Mountain creek through her veins. The attraction caused tension that seemed almost palpable.

Bob, with Bri on back, pulled out of the lot, the motor of his black, metallic fleck Harley rumbling low. Six cycles of vaguely familiar people joined them. Sawyer grasped the handgrips. He revved the engine and took off for the highway over the lot of white rocks. She held onto his waist under his leather jacket. Soon the spinning wheels hummed, carrying them toward the highway where they soon fell in behind Bob and Bri. The cushion under her butt vibrated.

"How far is it?"

"Fifty miles or so."

Chapter Five

Two, maybe two and a half, hours later, along the highway, a white sign appeared saying, "Drake's Cafe 1/2 mi. ahead." A similar sign came into view, then another. The third one displayed a turn arrow. The diner sat fifty feet off the road, so he hung a right onto the lot where motorcycles surrounded the building.

"This looks good as any," he said out the side of his mouth to Lenore.

"They're busy."

"The food must be good."

The pipes emitted a low rumble as Sawyer drove toward the diner. Near a window, he pulled into a space that he could view from inside. Nearby, impressive, expensive bikes parked waiting for their owners: a Whizzer, Cushman, Indian, and a Sportster. Admiring them, he shut off the motor, climbed off, set the kickstand, and got his bearings.

"Nice, eh?" he asked her about the other bikes.

She nodded. "Beautiful."

Reggae music burbled and silenced when a door opened and closed. Two bikers stepped down the stairs and strolled toward a bike. Another chopper approached. Its engine quieted and its rider climbed off. The passenger combed the tangles out of her hair while the rider dusted the front fender with a cloth.

Panheads are nice. Sawyer thought, admiring its sleek lines.

Once Lenore had climbed off, he set the security and hoped like hell that no one would try to steal his wheels.

Lenore gazed at a burnt orange Whizzer that caught his eye too. It seemed she could read his mind. "That's pretty."

"Yeah, it is. Maybe when I trade this bucket of bolts off, I'll get one." His eyes lingered on her profile. *She impresses me more than the bike.*

She turned her vision to his red tank. "I love its color. But yours—yours is prettier. The paint job is awesome."

"Thanks. A friend painted it."

"When did you start riding?"

He shrugged, gazing at the handlebars. "Oh...five years ago. It's sort of a hobby when I'm not working. Keeps me sane, I guess."

"I'm not surprised that you're into police work."

He grinned and dropped the keys into his side pocket, glad she came. "I get tired of separating couples in domestics, but other than that, it's a pretty good job."

The rumble of an engine caught their attention. It approached on the lot.

"It's Bob and Brianna," he said.

His sister's boyfriend guided his hog to within four or five feet of Sawyer, braked, and put his feet down. Gazing at Lenore and Sawyer, they remained seated.

Bri smiled. "We'll meet you at the campgrounds. We're not hungry."

"Okay."

"Beck Setten has already rented our spaces and remembered our tents and other equipment in his truck. You just have to get it and set yours up. So, we'll see you there or at the fairgrounds. Oh, your space is 3C, Sawyer. Tootles."

"Gotcha."

Bob raised a forefinger bidding Sawyer and Lenore good-bye. "See you later, then." Bri wriggled her fingers and Bob drove the bike back toward the main road. Their cycle turned, and they headed north, disappearing.

"Smell that food."

"My tummy's growling," she said. "I'll buy."

"Let's eat, then."

Places that look like this one have good eats. They slipped off their sunglasses, studied the area, and walked toward the entrance.

A bell dinged over the door as they entered. The place bustled with activity. "Where would you like us to sit?" he asked a hostess who carried an armload menus.

"Over there, if you like," she said, as she pointed toward the window.

"Thanks." With his fingertips pressed to the curve of Lenore's lower back, he escorted her to the booth. They sat facing each other and accepted a menu. A few sets of eyes glanced their way.

Waitresses dressed in red and white checked uniforms scurried here and there, catering to two to three dozen people. They carried pitchers of tea, took orders, and wiped away crumbs.

Most patrons appeared to be bikers. They wore bandannas, Levi's, T-shirts or jackets and leather attire. People chattered and laughed. Silverware clinked on plates, and the scent of homemade bread and apple cinnamon filled the air. Servers bustled through swinging doors carrying trays of food, and busboys exited holding dirty dishes and empty condiment bottles. They cleared tables and reset them with silverware and napkins.

Aromatic coffee brewed at a station less than ten feet away from Lenore and Sawyer's window booth. They sipped from glasses of Coke, once they'd given their order. He studied her flawless, light brown skin and delicate features. His demeanor gentled. "We need to talk."

"I know."

"It's like a decade didn't pass. To me, it feels that way at least."

"Yeah, but it did. I must admit...I was a little nervous when Bri invited me."

He noticed her hesitancy and kept his voice low and soft. "We'll just hang out."

"Okay." A relieved expression spread over her face. She nodded

and peered down at her hands.

"Anything you want to know about me?"

An edgy several seconds passed during which she bit her lip. She placed both her hands flat on the table and leaned forward. "I'll bet you have several women friends."

"You'd lose." He grinned and winked.

Surprise beamed in her eyes. "I would, eh?"

"Yep. I haven't dated since the divorce." Since then, he'd immersed himself in his work and forgotten about his social life. He didn't date, go to movies, or even eat out. He stayed content to sit on his couch and watch television. On weekends, he'd go somewhere on his bike, but always rode alone. He considered his feelings for her. *I can see now all this is going to change.* Although his cock stirred, he'd rein in his emotions and keep his hands in check, even though he found her irresistible.

One eyebrow arched, she rested her chin on her one hand as she stabbed a plastic straw into her glass with the other, her eyes riveted on him. "Why didn't you date?"

The question unnerved him. *She always could get straight to the point.* "I didn't want to get my heart broken."

"Me either."

"You won't."

After lunch, they rode to the wooded Pyramid Campgrounds, found space 3C and inquired about the tents.

"Want to set them up later?" he asked.

"Sure."

They rode to the fair a few miles away. Several acquaintances of Bob and Bri stayed behind to watch over the campground.

While someone watched their bike, they rode the Ferris wheel and, ambling around the fair, marveled at the sights and sounds. Fireworks burst in beautiful, symmetrical shapes overhead. They ate at a stand and soon headed back to the campgrounds, where part of the pack waited and watched over the tents. The evening air wasn't

cool or hot. Two men began building a fire. "The next time we go out, I'll take you to a nice place to eat."

"This is fun. I'm enjoying it and am glad I came."

When she looked away, he took in her low-cut top and slender, tapered fingers that could give him much pleasure. Her line of vision returned to her side, and he grinned. Bobbing his head, he thought he could kiss her and have her blouse off her in no time at all. But he'd wait.

Sawyer realized he knew what she was like deep down in her soul. He liked what he saw. He loved the delicate arch of her eyebrows and gentle curve of her cheekbones. The way her lips parted when she yearned for a kiss could make his insides quiver a year later. He grinned. "Tell me about you."

She seemed to tense up. "What do you want to know?"

I hope she realizes that I'm just being friendly. "What have you been doing the past ten years?"

She shrugged and tilted her head. "I, uh, went to college but had to drop out because of lack of funds." Her tone turned sullen. "I intend to go back, but not yet."

"You're frowning. You're maybe even going to cry."

"I'm not."

Unaware of the tenderness in his voice, he said, "I don't want to pry, but—"

"It's just that...well, I can't say right now."

"Okay." He reached across the tabletop and patted her hand. Call it a gut hunch, but when her eyes connected with his, he knew she had a major problem. Sawyer couldn't explain it, not to her or to himself, but he intuitively knew. After all, they had been lovers for many weeks. Wanting to pick up where they left off, he blinked, wondering what in hell she hid...and why she hid it. *Maybe I can help,* "Tell me whenever you feel like it. I want to help."

"I appreciate it."

Sunlight bore through the window and highlighted her raven

mane. It glowed on her soft brown skin. Her sooty lashes cast semi-arc shadows on her high cheekbones. He loved her beautiful hands and long, tapering fingers. Her sweet nature held him captive. He felt fortunate to have her ride with him and decided to reassure her and engage in quiet conversation, in hopes of dating her again.

* * * *

Later, long after they left the diner, Lenore took her sunglasses off and placed them into her purse. Feeling safe, after inhaling a deep breath of the fresh air, she said, "This park is beautiful."

Vaguely familiar bikers greeted them. Thick, tall grass carpeted the landscape, except in the numerous shady spots. Eight picnic tables stood under a pavilion, a minute's walk from their space. The pungent scent of burning wood hung in the air. Three women sat near a campfire chatting about their childhoods, while a man in black shorts sat cross-legged across from them and sang an old Beatles' tune Sawyer said he couldn't remember the name of. Others converged in small circles. A few stretched out on blankets and slept in the shade. A dozen or so people climbed on their motorcycles and left in a group. The truck that held equipment pulled up and parked near the pavilion.

The closest tents were fifty or so feet away. "I'll be back."

"Okay."

"It shouldn't take but a couple of minutes. You want to go with me?"

"Sure."

Taking her hand, he said, "I have to get our tents."

"Tell me what to do, oh honorable scout master," she asked when they returned carrying dark green, long canvas bags.

He gazed over the rims of his sunglasses, his sapphire eyes gleaming, and smiled. After thinking over her words for a moment, an unplanned nasty chuckle left his lips. "I like that master part."

Grinning, she shook her head. "Jeez."

"All right. This is serious business. Pull everything out. Unfold and lay out the tents." He dropped his load and a hammer that he'd borrowed. "Hold on." He went after the sleeping bags, his jeans swishing in the grass with each long stride.

Lenore followed directions, pulled the tents out of the two bags, and began to spread them out on the ground. Upon his returned she asked, "Out of curiosity, where are the rest rooms?"

He stood up and peered around the area. "Good question. I'll ask."

"I'm sure it'll get dark."

"You're right."

He talked to a familiar guy and returned saying, "There's one a hundred feet that way. Behind that tree over there." He pointed west. "I brought a small flashlight you can use if you have to go."

God forbid. "Great." She resumed straightening the tent.

He handed her the flashlight. "Here you go."

"Thanks, I'll put it in my tent."

This man has unadulterated sex appeal.

His obvious scrutiny of her caused her knees to weaken. A grin spread upon his lips. "You realize we could save ourselves a lot of work and just set up one." A mental image of them together in bed lingered.

She threw her head back and laughed. "Oh, you."

"Just kidding." He grabbed four pegs, hammered one into the ground and began stretching the rope from a corner to a peg.

Lenore bit her lip, her anxiety over Sawyer's words clearly sounding in her voice. "No, you weren't." *There's more truth in teasing than meets the eye.*

"Okay," he said and shrugged.

After they engaged in lighthearted banter with a few of the fellow bikers, they rode to the fair. Spending the afternoon together, they rode the Ferris wheel, Tilt-O'-Whirl and attended a country-western concert.

Later, after dark, they ate at a sandwich stand and rode back to the campgrounds, where they sat around the crackling, aromatic fire. With Bri and Bob they chatted and joked. A few of the men drank beer and sodas. Others came to the fire and joined the conversation, making friends. Sawyer put his arm around her and twice kissed her lightly on the lips. Couples drifted to their tents as the night wore on, leaving Sawyer and Lenore alone fireside. His thumb traced the bared skin above the waistband at her lower back. "I can't begin to tell you how good it is to see you. We'll talk more tomorrow. I think now it's past my bedtime."

"Me, too. I didn't sleep too well last night."

He lightly ran the flat of his hand up the side of her arm. "Let's grab some shut-eye, then."

A couple of minutes later, outside their tents, they stood face-to-face outside their tents, and in his eyes, she saw the peaceful scene of a lone biker tossing a log on the red flames. Burning embers shot to the darkened heavens. *What time is it? Eleven? Midnight? It doesn't matter. I want to remember this moment forever,* Lenore thought. Stars flickered in the heavens and a barn owl hooted. *I need his hands on my body.* Tension, hot and thick, pulled between them like an elastic band. Nevertheless, she settled for his lips. *They are good. So good.* His tongue slipped back and over her accommodating tongue. *Deep. Loving and hot.*

His low voice enticed her when he said, "You sure you want to sleep alone? It'll get cold before morning."

"I'll do fine."

"Okay."

They parted and entered the opening of their own tent. Each climbed into a sleeping bag without closing the flaps.

"Good night."

"Mm-hm," he said his tone low.

Lenore remembered his appearance as he sat across the table from her at the diner earlier that day. She faced him. His eyes, an all-

knowing sapphire blue, stirred and watched her narrowly as she talked. His thick, raven lashes' fan-shape intrigued her. His thick, coal-black hair enhanced the savage, chiseled features of his face. His strong jaw line and wide and full lips could probably turn thin with dislike if he knew what she kept from him. That day, he had seemed curious. And a few minutes earlier, he had seemed needy. She loved how he crossed his arms over his hard chest. Already, she ached for him, yet at the same time, she needed to go slow before delving headlong into a long-term relationship. The cold hard fact was that he had to learn and accept her secrets of the past. *But am I ready to tell him? The answer is an unequivocal "no."* Dressed in jeans and shirt, she slipped into the flannel interior, like a butterfly in a cocoon, getting comfy. Soon she dozed, her hand on the flashlight. *I hope I didn't drink to much soda and water before bedtime.*

Chapter Six

An ugly creature reached for her throat. When he began to squeeze the life force from her body, Lenore awoke with a start. *Wha—where am I?* With her heart beating like a tom-tom, she sat up. Perspiration dampened her skin racked with fear. *I'm in a tent at Pyramid Campgrounds. What time is it? It has to be two or three in the morning. I'm okay. It was just a dream.* The fear subsided, but the urge to pee heightened, she noticed, as she lay awake for a few minutes, getting her bearings. *I don't want to wake Sawyer up.*

She grasped the flashlight, slipped out of the sleeping bag, and tent. Swiftly she padded down the dirt path that led to the restrooms. Knobby ruts pushed into the soles of her bare feet. *What if I step on a snake? Rest assured, I'll die or wake up everyone within a three-mile radius.*

Stars twinkled like gems tacked to a bolt of black velvet. Crickets chirped in the weeds, and bull frogs croaked down by the stream some twenty or thirty feet away. A chill hung in the air; winter approached. She aimed the flashlight onto the path in front of her, vowing not to wimp out though strange noises emanated from fluttering leaves. The outlying area hid in haunting blackness. An owl hooted, and laughter echoed somewhere in the woods, perhaps a couple hundred feet or more away.

I'm so silly. I'll be fine, she thought as she stepped into the small, metal bathroom and closed the door.

As she headed back to the tent, she heard a new noise. A stick popped and leaves crackled nearby, under someone's feet. The footsteps approached. *I'm not alone.* She raised the flashlight in hope

of seeing if indeed someone approached. *What if he's the stalker?* She thought about the possibility a few seconds longer. *Surely not.*

A male voice spoke. "Lenore."

Oh my God! Frozen, she thought, *It's him, the stalker.* Scared, she ran, screaming, and dropped her flashlight along the way. She didn't stop until she was in another man's strong arms near their tents. Unable to see his face, her heart about beat out of her chest as panic stole air from her lungs. "No!" she cried out and fought strong hands that tried to subdue her.

"Lenore, it's me, Sawyer," he said in a calming tone. Sawyer grabbed her wrists and drew her firmly to his hard body. She quit resisting and stilled.

His hands swept down to her hips and up her back. A bit of the top moved up, baring skin on which his pinky finger rested. Distracting sensations shot through her body like fireworks.

Closing her eyes, fighting back a deluge of tears, she surrounded his midsection with her arms and squeezed. Warmth and safety calmed her, and she breathed out her words. "It's him." She peered up, unable to see Sawyer's face.

"It's who?" he asked in a stupefied tone.

She sucked in a deep breath and shuddered in fear. "Back there."

After a moment's silence he asked, "What *are* you talking about?"

"I—uh..." she stammered, groaned, and raised a palm to her head.

"Sawyer?" another male voice asked as the man who owned it approached.

She swiveled her head toward him, and Sawyer held her steady.

I panicked. "Ohhhh..."

"Is Lenore okay? I didn't mean to scare her back there."

"Bob?" asked Sawyer.

"Yeah?"

Feeling like a gigantic fool, she said, "I'm sorry."

"I met her on the path to the toilet and thought I'd walk with her. It's a dark few dozen feet goin' back there. I can see how someone

would get scared."

"You okay, Lenore?" Sawyer rubbed her back. A moment or two later, her heartbeat normalized, but his hand lingered and he continued to stroke her hair and shoulders.

"That was so silly of me, Bob." She wiped away her tears, sniffed and managed to laugh. "I-I guess I got spooked. Sorry, Bob. I dropped your flashlight somewhere, Sawyer."

"I picked it up," Bob said. "Like I said, I didn't mean to scare the hell out of you. Well, I'll see you two in the mornin'. I'm goin' to get some more shut-eye. It's nice and cool."

"Good sleeping weather," said Sawyer, still holding Lenore in his arms.

His breath tickled her cheek and her female needs stirred. "You want to lie down beside me?"

For a moment she thought about the idea but resisted the temptation. "No."

Two, maybe three, pregnant seconds passed. His tone turned flat. "It's not as though we don't know one another, Lenore." He enclosed her hand in his. They bent over and began to enter their separate tents.

Maybe his intentions do not include sex. After a gusty exhalation, she said, "Okay...but just to sleep."

His voice brightened. "That's all I had intended to do when I asked. I'll get your sleeping bag." He turned the flashlight on and tossed it into his tent and onto his sleeping bag.

When he ducked between the canvas flaps of her tent, she said, "Thanks."

"Think nothing of it." He carried the bedding into his tent and spread it out on the floor parallel his sleeping bag. "What did you call him?"

"Who?"

"Bob."

"What do you mean?" *Do I want to tell Sawyer?*

"Never mind." He grabbed the flashlight, and their surroundings

blackened. His resonant voice cut into the silence. "Let's get some sleep." Like she had radar that picked up attraction vibes, she could *feel* his interest.

Their mouths brushed, and Lenore's heart lurched.

His tongue grazed the seam of her lips and she opened for him, allowing him inside to wreak havoc on her needs. He administered an intimate, plundering kiss that stirred dormant pangs hidden deep in her core. She felt his hands caressing his back, during a bewitching moment that she didn't want to end.

He separated from her an inch or two. "We'll talk tomorrow." He hugged her to his chest and then released her.

"Okay." *Damn it! I feel so vulnerable with him right now.*

After lifting a few strands of hair away from her cheek, he skimmed his lips over the rim of her ear. Touching words left his lips. "I remember how we once were, Lenore. Mmm, thinking about it still gets to me."

She had an idea of how it got to him. In fact, it got to her on occasion, too. That was why she kept a vibrator in the second drawer down of her dresser.

His fingers ran over her skin and slipped up under the hem of her top. The pressure was delectable. His warm breath grazed her cheek as he cupped her breast. She sucked in a breath, and her pussy clenched in want of him.

"When you move, breathe, do anything, you excite me." His mouth and his hand left her. "As for tonight. Well, you've had a scary night. Let's get some sleep."

"It's happening."

"What."

"I'm sorry. Never mind." *Love is happening. Can't you feel it?*

* * * *

Sawyer and Lenore broke camp the next day. They bid Bri, Bob,

and several of the other bikers good-bye; climbed onto the bike; and took off on their own. *I enjoy her company*, he thought as they rode to Drake's Cafe on their way back to Pleasant City.

Halfway to their destination, they stopped to stretch their legs and grab a bite to eat. The dining room accommodated four or five patrons. A slow, romantic tune played on the jukebox. The three waitresses busied themselves cleaning tea pitchers and filling salt and pepper shakers.

Proud of his date, their fingers entwined, Sawyer led Lenore to the same window seat they had sat at the previous day. They scooted into opposite sides of the booth and settled in. She pulled the shoulder strap of her purse down and he picked up the table tent and read the menu.

He grinned and gazed into her doe-brown eyes and delicate features. "Hungry?"

The corner of her lips quirked up. "I think I am. How about you?" She peeled the paper down her straw and plunged the end into her drink.

"Yeah."

They each ordered a cheeseburger and Coke. They ate and peered out at his chopper occasionally as they engaged in light conversation. Once they'd finished eating, he asked, "So, who are you afraid?"

She glanced up from the napkin that she had folded into a small square and blinked. "What do you mean?"

"Is someone after you?"

Her heart shuddered at the direct question. "Are you asking because of last night?"

"Yeah. It's the cop in me. I sense these things, don't you know?"

"Busted." She sucked in a deep breath, glanced at him, and diverted her gaze downward. "I thought you might ask." Unstoppable tears brimmed in her eyes.

"Even after all these years, I know you. There's more than meets the eye." *She knows I know something terrible is wrong.*

Bewilderment entered his tone. He shrugged and lifted his hands off the tabletop. "Did I say something wrong?"

"No. It's just that I have someone following me. A man. I think he does aggravating things."

Sawyer's mouth dropped, and his brows drew together. "Like what?" He rested his chin on his hand and waited for an answer. *I won't let her get of out answering.*

"I think he's the one that steals spark plugs from under my hood."

"Does he do anything else?"

"Let's see...well, Sawyer, I see him sometimes in dark places. It's like he's waiting for me...or something. I get scared, because there's a rapist in town that does things like he does, before he rapes them."

"Damn. Did you tell the police?"

"I have."

"And?"

"Nothing. But I was going to go back tomorrow and tell them again."

"Have they called and checked on you?" he asked in disbelief.

"No." She shrugged. "Oh, they did once."

"Once?" It burned his ass that the Pleasant City P.D. didn't check on her. He felt his face turning red. "I'm going to go uptown and have a chat with them."

"What?" she asked, her voice quaked.

She seems vulnerable. He reached across the table, enfolded her hand in his, and gently caressed it. He gentled his voice. "I don't want to scare you, but this could be serious."

"There's something else."

"What?"

"I don't want to say yet."

"Listen, Lenore. I think it's best I stay with you until this is cleared up."

She folded her napkin in a tighter, little square and sucked in a deep breath. "In my apartment?"

"Yeah. This guy may be a danger to you. I can sleep on the couch." He slipped his wallet out of his back pocket and nabbed a twenty just as the waitress placed the check on the table.

"I'll pay for the food."

"You paid last time."

"Well, okay."

As they walked toward the door, she asked, "But don't you have to work?"

"I'm on vacation. I was wondering what I could do. What do you think? Feel like having a visitor?"

"I'll feel safe with you there. So yeah. Stay for a while."

* * * *

Lenore led him into her apartment. At the door, once she had it unlocked and standing open, with a flourish of the hand, she said, "Make yourself at home." To have Sawyer in her home enticed her with unmentionable stirrings that she didn't want to miss. The scent of fabric softener laced the stuffy air. She kicked off her shoes, dropped her purse on the coffee table, and opened a window.

Looking on, he said, "Thanks, Lenore." He raised two more panes, helping her. "I'll go down and set security on my bike."

She crossed her arms at her waist and bit her lip. A bout of nerves threatened to cause the unraveling of her secret. *Oh my God. What will he say?* "What about clothes? You just have that one set, right?"

"I'll ride back tomorrow and grab a few things and return. I want to talk to the police first thing, though."

As she watched, he exited into the cool, night air, and she closed the door leaving her fraught with anxiety. *If I still smoked, a cigarette would taste good about now.* Lacy, white curtains sucked in and out when the door closed. Left alone with her thoughts, she dropped her purse and sank onto the couch. "Oh, crap, no." *What will he say when he learns the truth?* She plucked a Kleenex from a nearby box and

dabbed her welling eyes. *Houston, we have a slight problem. It's not going to be pretty. This man, who I most want to spend many years to come with, may leave me.*

Later, after they jointly cooked a meal of broiled steak, baked potato, and lettuce salad with ranch dressing, they retired to the living room, each carrying a can of beer.

Instead of turning on the TV, she sank onto the couch beside him and took a sip from her Lite. *I know where this reunion is heading. He needs to know before our relationship goes any further. Damn, I hate this.*

Sawyer stretched out beside her, and supported her lower back with an arm. She turned his way and blurted out, "I have to say this," and stopped mid-sentence and shook her head.

He cocked a brow and narrowly peered at her. "What did you start to say?" He put his beer can on a side table and stilled as though waiting for her to divulge a secret.

Her body unleashed an involuntary shudder. *It's a secret. A horrible one.* "Sawyer. There's a lot you don't know."

"About what?"

"Me."

He laughed, then quieted. As though he suddenly realized the gravity of what she was about to tell him, he shrugged.

While placing her beer can beside his on the table, she failed to keep the shakiness out of her voice. "What I'm about to tell you...may cause you to ride back home and forget that I was ever in your life."

After a pause, he stated, "I doubt that."

She padded to the other side of the room. Gathering her thoughts, she wrapped her arms around her midsection. Her heart thudded in her chest. *I can't have a panic attack now.* "I've reached the point where I have to tell you."

He put both his hands on the back of his head and a foot on the cocktail table in front of him. "Tell me. Get it over with."

Damn it. "I don't want to." Tears stung like welling acid that

spilled down her cheeks. Her nose stuffed until she needed to blow it. His chiseled features blurred, and she reached for a Kleenex.

"Just let it out."

Lenore blew her nose and dropped it in a waste can. "You're right." *Damn this man. He's like a pit bull and hangs on.* Again, she wrapped her arms around her waist and sniffed. "Okay." She cleared her throat, aware that her voice now had a nasal quality. "Three years after you and I broke up, I attended college. I met this woman named Sandy. We became friends. We shopped and went to college games." Lenore swallowed hard. "Well, Sandy, I learned, was a stripper."

"Okay." His brows scrunched together.

"Right. In a club, at night. She made a ton of money. Oh, and she attended school in the day. At first, I was shocked. Then I realized that she, not her parents, paid for her nice car and apartment. She majored in business administration, too. I desperately needed money, Sawyer. It's no excuse, but I had to get some, or I had to quit school. It was simple as that. I didn't have enough for food half the time. Dad had to stop sending money after he and Mom got a divorce. He got fired."

"Go on," Sawyer said, taking his gaze off Lenore and casting it ahead. A sense of dread had entered his voice. He lowered his hands and turned more toward her.

"To make a long story short, she invited me to strip three nights a week. She said that I could make a lot of money doing this and that she'd already talked to the club's manager. They would pay if I'd try it."

"So did you?"

"Oh, crap."

"Well, did you?"

"Yes, damn it, I did! Oh, Sawyer, I needed the money. I was so dumb about everything and life back then." She covered her eyes with her hands and openly bawled. "I didn't strip the first night, I just waited tables. The second night, I did. I—I couldn't stand the lewd

comments and so I quit. I wasn't a very good stripper."

Sawyer blinked. His features remained expressionless.

"You probably don't want anything to do with me now. I know. It's all right. But I couldn't let us go on in a relationship without telling you."

An elongated sigh left his lips. "Finish the story."

"Anyway, this man in the crowd, I guess, took a liking to me. Ever since, four years later, he's been after me. A sneaky man. I don't know what he looks like. His face was hidden by the darkness. But I do recognize his voice when I hear it. He rides a motorcycle sometimes, but I can't read the license. I think he's the one who does things to my car and watches me when I'm outside or going places."

"He sounds like a damned nut case."

"Exactly. Then when I reported it, I heard the police detective in charge refer to me as a 'whore from Rock's strip joint' to his friend, and I swear I'd rather..."

His face turned beet red as he spoke through clenched teeth. "Unprofessional bastard. What's the fucker's name?"

Because Sawyer was a cop, she realized she wouldn't divulge Detective Miller's name. "Listen, Sawyer. No. I don't want to cause a problem. Please don't ask me to tell you."

"You really did that?" he gently asked, his face displaying his disbelief.

"I wasn't any good. It was embarrassing. I quit school. I don't know what possessed me. Please don't hate me."

"I don't hate you...I care about you, still, Lenore, after all these years. I'm going to end your problem, if it's the last friggin' thing I do." Sawyer swept her into his arms and smothered her tearful words with his lips as his hand cradled her chin. "It's okay. I'm not mad."

"It's just that—"

"I'm not mad. Honest."

His admission sounds sincere. She gazed into his eyes. "You're not?" *It's because he is sincere.*

Her breasts, carefully hidden under her chenille housecoat pushed into his chest. His minty breath mingled with hers. Her hands had nowhere to go except on his body. Her fingers spread, the flat of her hand moved up his T-shirt, over his hard pecs. They curled around to the back of his neck as he heated their kisses a few more degrees. Deeply, his tongue probed in an x-rated dance with hers, sliding way back.

I don't remember his kisses being this good.

A growl rumbled low as he nibbled her lower lip. When his tongue left her mouth, she said, "You have such excellent taste in mouthwash."

"I think I especially do in women, one in particular."

"Oh, yeah?"

"In fact, I'd love to show my appreciation of her."

"Mmmm. I'll bet she'll love it."

Chapter Seven

The door, locked and bolted, protected them from an unlikely intrusion. But they weren't worried. Their minds stayed riveted on each other. His eyes lingered over the deep V in her robe. The drapes undulated in the cool night air that breezed into Lenore's apartment and tickled her hands, face, and legs.

Lovemaking was a forgone conclusion. The word *no* seemed a foreign word that she wouldn't want to say. In contrast, his warm body pressed her back into the cushions. His hands roamed over her clothed body and tantalized her senses. He untied the belt at her waist and parted her robe. Her voluptuous breasts remained partly hid under her see-through gown.

His flickering gaze displayed his building hunger.

Much to her delight, his fingers stopped and lingered on her puckered aureole. Through the fabric, he toyed with her tight, hard buds and whispered against her mouth. "My baby's cold." His hand left her quivering skin, reached up, and turned the living room lamp off. "I'll take care of you. Maybe warm you up. Would you like that?"

"Yes." She scooted closer and ran her tongue along the line of his taut lips to give him a come-on signal, unlike she'd ever given any man. She darted her tongue between his lips and deeply into his mouth. *He doesn't realize how much I need this.*

He didn't return the kiss. "Mm, I'd love to."

Her pussy spasmed as an image of the coupling tormented her. "Do it." *Tie me up. Put me in ecstasy.*

A deep chuckle left his lips. He didn't settle until her chest pressed into his body. His thigh parted her housecoat and splayed her legs. He

pulled her belt away and tossed it behind him. The head of his thick shaft prodded her pubic area, and only a thin layer of fabric separated a union.

"Ahh, yes. This is much more comfortable."

"Oh, yes," she shamelessly said. Twitching in her agony, she visualized the erotic picture they probably made as he nuzzled her throat. Her pussy receptive; her clit engorged. *I want him.* Her surroundings blurred. The need of an orgasm churned within. *Put your mouth on me. Make me whole.*

"Let me take care of you."

He nibbled on her in spots known to rapidly turn women on—her throat, behind her ear and her eyelids. His mouth went down on her breasts and inched down to her rib area. He bit her tummy and drew wet circles around her navel on his southward journey.

She caught her breath when he curled a finger around the slender, silky crotch of her panties and pulled it aside.

His teeth scraped against sensitive skin as his tongue furrowed through the trimmed hair on her pubic mound. When his wicked lips tugged at her pussy, she cried out, "Oh, my God!" She'd never experienced such arousing tactics.

"You taste good."

"I'll beg for more if I have to," she said between breaths.

"There's no need."

The tip of his tongue ran from the base to the top of her slit. He bit her mons until she whimpered an indecipherable language. He sunk his tongue into her and lapped at her clitoris. His day-old beard scratched the sensitive skin between her legs. Waves of sensation shot through her and made it difficult to remain still. An exquisite occurrence she wouldn't soon forget. His attention charged her trembling body, and his effort elicited from her a primitive, raw moan.

Sawyer stopped and backed away. An erotic chuckle left his lips.

"Are you quitting?" she demanded.

"Let's not come yet. It's too soon," he said, as if he had all the time in the world.

"But—"

"Have you ever been fucked in the ass?"

"Yessss," she answered, remembering how tight and deep he could work his cock into her. Lenore groaned with desire. "Yessss."

She tried to thrash about but couldn't move because he had her pinned.

He pulled her forward and smacked her ass, making the skin sting. He pulled the hair out of her face and asked, "Who did that to you?"

"You—once you did. Years ago."

"I know what you like."

Extraordinary tenderness entered his demeanor. He extended a finger and wiped wetness from her cheek. "But tonight, we'll get the first time in a long time out of the way. Okay?" he asked, as two fingers slid into her pussy.

She gasped. "Y-yes."

With husky tenderness, he said, "You're so tight. It'll feel good on my cock."

"You have handcuffs?"

"Yep," he said. "I don't have them with me now."

"Bring them with you when you come back."

* * * *

Just like old times, this woman Lenore turned him on. Sawyer loved the dark, sensual shade of her skin; her bright, doe-brown eyes; and her pouty lips. His heart began to pound, and he ached to have her right then, right there, mindlessly. But he didn't want meaningless sex. He wanted to draw this moment out as if he were drinking an expensive wine, savoring its taste, and making it memorable.

Sawyer bit the waistband of her panties and drew them down her legs, and her pussy beckoned him. He tossed the undergarment away,

knowing the havoc he must wreak. He kneaded the underside of her thighs and pushed them to her heaving chest. Leaning forward to her core, he lowered his mouth onto her moist hotbed, rubbed her sensitive skin with his day's beard growth, and tweaked a nipple. Upon gently biting her engorged lips and clitoris, she squirmed. Her pussy begged for penetration. Shudders wracked her as he grazed. She exhaled and moaned, moving her head from side to side.

Teasing her flesh, he ran his hands up her inner thighs until the sides of his hands touched the lips of her pussy, all the while ruminating about the moment he'd shoot his come inside her. No other woman could put him in his current state. He rose, slipped one arm under her legs and one arm around her back, and carried her over the soft carpet that sank under his feet. "Is the bedroom this way?" All these years, he wondered what it'd be like to once again enjoy her lips and have her body. He wanted to wrap her around him like a quilt and to sink himself into her.

"It's down the hallway. The first bedroom to the right."

The time had come for the evening's serious business to start. "The night is young."

Sawyer carried Lenore to her bedroom and placed her upright beside the bed. He hooked his thumbs in the waistband of his shorts and pushed them down, revealing his erection. Her eyes dropped to it. *I've wanted her for years.*

The motorcycle security alarm blared: a deafening sound that couldn't be ignored.

"What's that?" Lenore gasped. "The bike's alarm?"

"What the hell?" Shock overtook his demeanor; he stepped back. "Someone is messing with my bike! I'm sorry." He pulled up his boxers and went outdoors.

Lenore closed and tied her robe and followed him out the door. "Oh, my God."

"What the hell?" His Harley remained standing, much to his relief. It looked intact. He scanned the area and didn't see anyone or

anything out of the way. In the shadows, a female neighbor stuck her head outside through an open doorway and said, "I saw a man about your age. He tried to move your bike."

He glanced Mrs. Sutton's way. "Did you recognize him?"

She shook her silver head of hair. "No, sir. I sure didn't. I didn't pay much attention until the alarm went off."

"Thanks. I guess it's too dark."

"Hi, Tilly," Lenore said. "Thanks."

"Anytime," she said, then ducked back inside and closed the door.

Sawyer reset security, took Lenore's hand. "Come on, sweetie." He escorted Lenore back up to the apartment and locked the door. "I'm going to the police department first thing tomorrow. There's some weird stuff going on around you."

"I know."

They stopped next to the double bed in the semi-dark bedroom. "I intend to help you." He pressed his lips to the curve of her neck. "But first, we were busy doing something. Let's see...oh yeah," he murmured.

* * * *

Silver light bathed the bedspread and carpet. As she looked on, Sawyer went to his jeans in the living room. Holding them up, he removed a foil packet from the pocket, returned to the bedroom, and dropped the condom on the bedside stand.

"I'm on birth control."

"Good."

Deciding she'd let Sawyer undress her, she raised the window an inch or so, while Sawyer padded to the restroom in his bare feet. She left the night-light on, wanting to see his exquisite body.

After leaving the adjacent room, her lover stopped and began threading the strands of her hair through one of his hands. The fingers his other hand slid under her belt, pulled the end lengths, and parted

her robe to reveal her gown when the belt fell away. The silky garment slid down to the rug at their feet. She raised her hands over her head and, in a second or two, he whisked the thin garment over her head and off her body. The nightgown landed somewhere in the flickering shadows. He flipped the switch on the bedside lamp dimly lighting the room.

"I want to see you." His hooded gaze roamed over her ample breasts. Enduring his scrutiny, she stood before him wearing a tiny pink, shimmery thong that barely hid the lips of her pussy.

In a soft voice, he said, "You still have a sensual body." His tone eloquently made her understand that everything about her pleased him.

Sawyer stepped closer and caught her right nipple with his taut lips. Holding it with both hands, he gently plumped it up. An old, familiar ache curled low in her belly and egged her to up the ante. She slipped her fingers under the elastic band of his shorts, the way she used to do. With a tug, she drew them down, baring his cock. It stood high, regal, and hard. Ready and potent. An impressive shaft that could give her a lot of pleasure. Fate had deprived her of him for over a decade, but no more this would happen. Her body belonged to this man.

* * * *

Sawyer drew his mouth off her breast and whispered, "For the last day I've watched you. How you look, move and act turns me on. The last twenty-four hours, I went around with a constant hard-on. Couldn't hardly button my jeans." He swept her back on the bed into the pillows and stood on his knees between her legs. He brought the condom wrapper to his mouth, bit off the top, and tossed the refuse onto the table. He sheathed himself and touched the cock head to the lips of her pussy as she writhed beneath him.

Tense, she raised her hips off the sheets to display a clear need for

release. After readying, he thrust, burying his swollen member in her squeezing canal, sinking it in her to the hilt. Their loins conjoined, Lenore let out an elongated, shuddering breath.

"Damn. Your pussy's so tight." Thinking his balls and cock had never been this hard, he started the slow, slapping rhythm. He pushed and withdrew, eventually speeding up, bringing them to the precipice of a first-class orgasm. A cry left him when he shot his seed into her contracting pussy. Relief followed, and they tumbled into the plateau of release and pleasure. A mind-numbing sleep followed as he held her in his arms.

* * * *

The next morning, he showered, dressed, and traipsed into the living room. After she fixed him a breakfast of bacon and eggs he said, "I'm going to go to the Pleasant P.D. first, then ride home, get my truck, and drive back. All this happening around you is strange." Second thoughts about leaving her abounded. He raised an index finger when he stopped near the front door. "I think I should get someone to look over you until I return."

She raised her spread hands. "I'm fine. Don't worry."

"You work at the Tie-Dye Boutique in the mall, right?" He shrugged.

"Afternoons. I get the weekends off."

"I don't know about this."

She blinked several times. "About what?"

"Leaving you."

"He hasn't done anything dangerous. He's just annoying, though." Lenore stepped up to him and kissed his nose. "If I see anything strange, I'll call the police."

"Promise?"

"Promise."

"Call right away." He returned her kiss with a passionate, deep

one of his own.

"Gotcha," she said. "You can trust me to use good sense, you know."

"Okay, then." He kissed her again before going to his bike. *I'm in love.*

Chapter Eight

The office at Pleasant City Police Department smelled of disinfectant and air freshener. Sawyer peered at the cop who sat behind the desk inquiring in a businesslike way. "Detective Miller?" *Had he smoked and tried to cover the stink up?*

The dark-haired man looked up from his computer screen and frowned at Sawyer for a second or two. "Yes?"

"I'm Deputy Parks."

"From Williamson County?"

"Yeah. I need to talk to you for a minute."

He frowned and said in a gruff tone, "Please. Just a second."

Sawyer sucked in a deep breath and nodded. Peering through the window, he watched a cruiser that had parked next to his Harley. Another black-and-white squad car backed out of a space. In the meantime, the detective behind the desk slowly arrived at a point where they could talk.

He glanced up. "Marion, eh?" he asked and straightened his papers.

"Yes."

"Have a seat." He turned from the monitor; took a bite of a partly eaten, yellow apple; and put it down. "What can I help you with?" he asked with a mouthful.

"My friend who lives here in your city has a stalker."

"How do you know?"

"She told me. He messes with her car. She sees him but doesn't know what he looks like but recognizes his voice. He even follows her."

"So, uh, did she report him?"

Sawyer nodded, let out an elongated, frustrated sigh, and said, "She did."

"To who?" he curtly asked.

"To you."

"Oh really?" He shook his head, took another bite of apple and pointed to his temple. "Jog my memory, deputy. What's her name?"

This detective talks like such an asshole. "Lenore Mueller."

"Oh really?" His mouth opened and he nodded once.

Sawyer tried to shrug off his aggravation. "Why? Is there something I don't know?"

"I'd watch out who I got mixed up with, if I was you."

"What do you mean by that?"

"I heard this Lenore was a stripper down at Dominique's Show Bar. A two-bit whore, if ya know what I mean. Get my drift? The woman has a lot of baggage."

Anger rippled through him. Sawyer couldn't jerk the detective up out of his chair fast enough. With his heart beating in intrepid thumps, he grabbed the cop's shirt collar with one hand. He wanted to smack him hard, but he merely threw a document in his face. Three buttons popped off the man's shirt. He thought better of hurting him, so he let him go.

Detective Miller swung at air. He reached over slugged him on the jaw.

Sawyer fisted the detective's shirt and pulled him over an empty table. Chair legs screeched and they cursed and toppled onto the hard, tiled floor. Grunts, growls, and curses followed in a noisy scuffle that ensued. Papers flew and a waste can turned over. Sawyer didn't feel pain, just anger. A Styrofoam cup of coffee spilled and dribbled on the floor.

The door opened. "What the fuc—"

Cops from adjacent rooms burst into the room and pulled Sawyer off the detective. "Knock it off!"

Sawyer, his temper raw and explosive, yelled at Detective Miller. "You dirty, lowlife son of a bitch! You better show the woman some respect, or I'll report your ass to anyone who'll listen, after I ram the rest of that apple—"

Detective Miller readied a fist for another hit, but a uniformed officer stopped him by grabbing his arm.

A lieutenant pointed his finger into Sawyer's face. "You'd better get out of this fuckin' P.D. or I'll press charges on your ass!"

His warning didn't stop the fight. Their fists flew occasionally, each getting in a hit that connected to the other man's jaw.

Two officers appeared and, pulling them to their feet, separated them.

Sawyer spit blood into a waste can and brushed his shirt with his hands. "Now I know why she doesn't want to call the police. It's you. Watch your fuckin' mouth."

The chief rushed in and stopped just inside the door. "There'll be none of this crap in my department! You boys hear that? Get going, Sawyer. Get the hell out of here. And you, Miller, you're on my short list now." The police chief pointed at Detective Miller. "You sit your ass down and forget about this." He made a hurry-along motion by flapping his hands. "Everyone go back to what they were doing. The sideshow's over. Out!" Men, filing into a line, left.

Cursing, Sawyer exited the room. He felt his blood surging and his heart beating hard in his settling anger. He vowed to protect Lenore from the culprit, single-handedly, if necessary. "I want your asses on her case, Chief! Lenore Mueller. Remember that name. She may be in danger. Miller, your main man in there, offhandedly called my woman a whore! I suggest you tell him to watch his mouth."

"I apologize. Settle your act down. Come on down to my office." He patted Sawyer on the shoulder. "Give me the details."

As the chief requested, he went with him and soon gave all the pertinent information. Fifteen minutes later, he drove home, rested for a few hours, ate, and packed for the return trip to Pleasant City, being

careful to not forget the handcuffs. *She may get her beautiful butt spanked too.*

* * * *

Lenore finished marking down a pile of white T-shirts and turned to arrange a new shipment of pink tie-dye shirts on hangers. Doubting she'd get a third of them hung before closing, she checked the time on the register clock. It read a quarter 'til nine. A service man in a gray jumpsuit polished the floor outside the window. Janitorial wax scented the air.

The phone rang. She plucked the handset off the base and brought it to her ear. "Ballanger's Tie-Dye Boutique. Lenore speaking."

"Hey," Sawyer said. "What's going on?"

A grin spread on her lips. "What're you doing?" she asked, pleased that he had returned to Pleasant City. *His voice sounds so rich and masculine.*

"I'm closing up." *Did he just wake up?* "What are you up to?"

"Talking on my cell phone. To you, lovely lady."

She laughed. "You sound like you just woke up." Tension, thick and hot hung in a moment's silence on the line. "Sawyer?"

"Actually, lovely lady, I'm inside your apartment...on your bed...wishing you were with me."

The picture of him lying nude on her white, fluffy bedspread had a direct effect on her heart rate. She paused and blinked. *Wait a second.* "How'd you get in?" Waiting for his answer, she gazed out at a child who had dropped the contents of a sack of cards.

"Easy."

She turned away from the window and faced the back of the store, leaning on the counter. "I'm glad you're there, but not glad you could get inside easily."

"Wednesday, a security man is coming over to put security on your locks and a motion detector in a couple of the rooms."

She thought about possible implications regarding the stalker and cringed. "How'd you do it?"

"Call a security company?"

She envisioned his dark brow line furrowing. "How'd you get inside?"

"I hate to tell you..."

"What?"

"That the window's lock is broken."

"Oh, no."

His voice lightened. "I do have a surprise, though."

"For who?" She put some sale tags into a drawer and put six or seven pens and pencils into a cup.

"You."

She froze a moment or two and then smiled. "That's sweet."

"I bought a few candles. And a CD. Love songs."

"Mmm. That sounds so nice."

"And wine."

"What kind?"

"Rhine."

"I love that white wine."

"Madame, I'm cooking supper for you. Um, but first, where's a big skillet."

"I have a medium-size one. It's in the drawer under the oven. Will that do? I'm not used to cooking big meals for guests."

"Okay, I'll use that."

Men don't cook, do they? At least the ones I know don't. "I didn't know you cook."

"That's one of the things I now enjoy doing...as a pastime."

"That's awesome, Sawyer." *I like the idea of having a boyfriend who has culinary abilities.*

"What kind of pastimes do you have?"

She thought a moment while looking at the ceiling. "Oh, I like to sew, draw, and write poetry. Those are the main things I like. No one

knows about the poetry though."

"I want to read it sometime."

"Nah, I'm not that good at it."

"I'm so deficient in that area that I wouldn't know what's good or bad."

"I won't keep you. You'll be home soon?"

"Twenty minutes tops."

"I'll be waiting." He made a kissing sound. "Bye."

* * * *

Later, after they ate a cozy meal of steak and salad by candlelight, drinking a couple of glasses of Rhine, they took a seat on the couch. Holding the stemmed glass close, she took a sip. "I could get used to having someone cook for me." She loved the scent of his cologne and the feel of his arm behind her head resting on the cushions of the sofa.

She gazed over at his utterly adorable profile as he brought a wine glass to his lips and smiled.

He swallowed a mouthful of wine. Upon bringing the glass away from his lips, he said, "I'd love it. I have all these recipes twirling around in my head that I want to try out."

"Do you ever cook for yourself?"

"Not really." He grimly grinned. "I usually end up stopping at the Golden Arches after work."

She slanted a smile his way. "No kidding?"

"Yep."

"Their burgers are good."

"That they are."

"But nothing beats a home cooked meal." She watched him put his glass on the side table. "Did you contact the P.D.?"

"I did, as a matter of fact."

"What did they say?"

"From now on, don't hold back in calling them, especially when

something isn't right."

I need a cigarette. "I don't know. That Detective Mill—"

"He'll not be a problem again for you...ever."

"I did act stupidly when I was younger. I thought I could go out and strip and take home a lot of money. The only thing I did was attract a weirdo."

"We all make mistakes. Like me. I made a one."

"You did? What did you do?"

"After you left with your family, I got tied down. Actually, I thought she looked good so she had to be good on the inside too."

"Oh."

"We got married. Man alive, when we got over the initial sex, I discovered that our relationship sucked bad! She was addicted to gambling. Damn, if she didn't spend the bill money on slots. Ruined my credit. It's not her fault. It was mine. I settled down too soon."

"A lot of failed relationships happen when one of the spouses is on the rebound, after a breakup, I've heard."

"I was depressed as hell for a year or so. Finally, my credit is straightened out."

After an unexplained lull in the conversation, she asked, "What happened today at the police department?"

He shook his head. "Nothing much. I spoke to him. Detective Miller, right?"

"Yeah."

"He fully understood, and said he didn't mean what he said."

His words soothed her like a salve. They relieved her fears and eased her worries. "Oh really?" A bit puzzled by the outcome, but happy of it just the same, her bout of nerves quieted. "Good." She reached for the remote that lay precariously on the arm of the chair.

The phone rang. Their lines of vision intersected and held for a couple of seconds.

"I'll get it." She touched his arm. "Hold on."

When she placed the handset to her ear, she discovered Brianna,

his sister, called.

"Hey, what's happenin'?"

"Hi, Bri. Your brother is here." *As if she didn't know.* We're talkin'. He fixed dinner for me. I guess were just chillin' out."

"Real romantic, eh?"

"Yeah."

"Well, the reason I called is that Aunt Judy called. She's invited us all over for dinner the first Sunday in November. Do you two want to come?"

"Hold on." Lenore took the phone from her ear and held her hand over the mouthpiece. She whispered, "Your sister says your Aunt Judy has invited us over for dinner the first Sunday in November. Do you want to go?"

He nodded a couple of seconds. "We can ride over on the bike, if it's not too cold."

"Sure," she said. "I'd love to meet the other branch of the Parks family."

"Good. So, uh, I'll let you get back to your...conversation. Mm-hm, yeah." She made a clicking noise and added. "I'm sooo glad you two are back together. Have I ever told you that? Talk to you tomorrow."

I'm so glad Brianna looks after us. "Okay, Bri. Bye-bye."

Five minutes later, after Lenore hung up the phone, Sawyer poured each a tad more wine. "Do you want to watch TV?" she asked and took a sip of her golden bubbly.

"No. I do know what I want to do, though." His piercing gaze examined every feature on her face. "You can't find it on a TV screen." His brows rose and fell, troubling her.

"Oh really?" His sweet nature caused her to smile. "And that is..." She received a brief, white smile followed by a dark gaze before turning away.

What is he up to?

Sawyer reached into the pocket of his jacket, which was draped

over the couch's arm, and drew out and dangled a pair of silver handcuffs. He turned her way. His lips quirked a half smile, and his voice took on authoritarian undertones. "This." With his other hand, he brought her fingers to his mouth and brushed his lips across her knuckles. He chuckled into her hair as she gaped fascinated at the steel restraints.

A night a decade ago returned. At the recollection, her cleft dampened, and her mouth dropped open at the prospect of it happening again.

A shiver of thrill ran through her. She cleared her throat, removed her attention off his bondage implement, and peered into his face. "I see you remembered."

His hand that held the cuffs lowered, but his gaze stayed. "Scared?" he asked with a wicked glint twinkling in his gorgeous, dark eyes.

Lenore could confidently bet her next paycheck that his cock had been hard the last hour while he was thinking about the coming fuck involving the handcuffs.

She could already feel his muscular lower body pressing and weighting her buttocks as his shaft pushed and pulled out of her squeezing, wet cleft. He'd do it from behind...or the front. The man had it in his capability to give her exhilarating pleasure that neither a toy nor another man could begin to lavish her with.

She felt a sheepish half-smile spread on her lips. *I've worked all day. I need to freshen up.* "I'd love it." She peered into his thin-lipped, grim grin. "I'll take a shower first, if you don't mind."

"I'll be waiting."

On a scale of one to ten, he is a definite eleven. "I'll be back in five minutes, tops."

Chapter Nine

Leaving the living room, Lenore padded toward the bedroom. Halfway down the hall, she stopped, bent down, and pulled off her pumps. A second before stepping into the darkness, she had an urge to look at him one last time.

Sawyer sat with his long legs stretched out, his stocking feet propped on the cocktail table. *And to think he's here to protect me.*

A devilish look gleamed in his eyes. "Take your time," he said in a sultry tone.

Shuffling backward, she answered, "See you in a few minutes, then," and turned forward, without falling over her feet and making a fool of herself. *Why do I let this man have such influence over me?*

A couple of minutes later, the medium-hot, jetted water pounded her shoulders and back. It relaxed and loosened her muscles. Soon, she emerged from the bathroom, her towel-dried hair hanging to her shoulders. A white, chenille robe covered her damp body. Under the robe, she wore a camisole and a white, silky thong.

After switching off the bathroom light, she stepped into her bedroom, discovering that darkness blanketed the room, except for a lone, vertical streak of light that provided very little illumination. The night-light that plugged into a wall socket usually emitted some light, but it was not on. *Sawyer turned it off. Where is he?*

"You were in my sexual fantasies when we weren't together," he said, his tone subdued.

"Sawyer?" She stepped farther into the room. "Are you playing a game?"

Something behind her clicked. Cold, metal objects tickling her

upper arm caused her nipples to shrink into tight buds.

"What's that?"

A pause, then, the gap between them closed. She could feel the heat of his body burning through her robe.

"Behind you, Lenore." His voice sounded raspy, reminding her of the tines of a fork scraping over sandpaper. *So husky, hot, and sensual.*

She bit her lip. "I can't see you."

The shock of the steel cuffs touching her back caused her to gasp and flinch.

"Cold?"

"A little. I just got out of the shower."

"I like you like this."

"You do?"

"Of course. Go along tonight or I may have to blister your ass," he suggested in a wicked tone. He tied a cloth over her eyes. His shoulder brushed by her damp skin. His lips, at least she thought it was his lips, brushed the curve of her neck.

"Nice," he said. "You smell of flowers." His hands roamed along her curves, readying her. His breath tickled her skin when he spoke. "It's a long time 'til morning."

"Mm. Sounds good."

"Can you see anything? Light?"

"Not a thing."

"Good."

"Sawyer..."

"Shhhh. I'm going to get you in the mood."

From behind, Sawyer slid his hands under the lapels of her robe and began cupping and releasing her ample mounds through the fabric of her camisole. His palms agitated the ends.

Under his ministrations, her knees weakened, and he transported her to a wicked fantasy.

"Let's get this thing off you." He plucked the robe from her

shoulders. "You've not been spanked lately, I take it?"

"No." Inner needs that lie dormant suddenly enlivened. "Mmmmm."

His voice pierced her thoughts. "You like this, don't you?"

Silly, silly question. "You know the answer." She envisioned how they looked that moment and her heart beat quickened.

The travels of Sawyer's calloused hands drew moans that bubbled from deep within her soul. As though he worshipped her, he kneaded and plied flesh that hadn't been touched by a man for years. Her head dropped forward like that of a rag doll. His clothed shaft pressed into her buttocks as he leaned into her backside. His breath tickled her nape, where fine hairs rose in response. The breast treatment continued.

"Very nice, Lenore," he whispered.

No other man can make me feel this way.

"That's it, baby. I see you're getting into this." Still reaching around, up and under her camisole. Her nipples ached for his pinches.

One of his hands burnt a path down and over her crotch, nudging her pussy's lips under her thong.

Her ragged breath caught and her heart rate quickened.

"You've been a naughty woman, haven't you, Lenore?" he asked, withdrawing from her.

She answered a mindless, "Yes." *He's going to punish me.*

"You're very responsive. It's almost as though you've been waiting for this night. You have, haven't you?"

The bed lamp switched on with a click.

He's looking at my naked body in the full light—and up close. I know he is.

"Come closer."

Lenore managed to step forward without tripping.

He grasped her arm and guided her the rest of the way, stopping when her breasts touched his shirted chest. Fabric scratched her sensitive nipples. His open, rough hands glided down over her tender

skin and back to her ass. He grabbed her buttocks, and lifted her, crushing her lower body into his bone hard erection.

"Mm-hm. Nice," he said in a quiet tone. She felt his hot breaths on her lips.

"You've gone silent on me." His brutal tongue engaged hers.

Sawyer withdrew and said against her lips, "I'm going to take care of you tonight." He resumed the kiss. His tongue plunged down and to the back of her mouth, sliding and dancing. She wasn't surprised when it began simulating fucking. When their lips parted, he removed his hands from her ass.

"Raise your arms."

Once she complied, he whisked the camisole over her head, and she felt his eyes taking in her body.

"Beautiful."

Sawyer cupped her breast and plumped it up. His lips closed over the nipple and he deeply suckled. He withdrew and blew a puff of cool air over its leathery end, which sent raw, tingling sensations shooting through her, rallying hunger.

"Mm nice," he said and began giving her other breast equal treatment.

"It feels good," she murmured during a windy exhalation.

He touched an index finger to her lips. "You like me doing this."

She mounted a feeble protest. "I do—" A tormenting ache that reared low in her belly grew.

"Let's go slow," he said. "The night is young."

* * * *

Sawyer ached for release, but he vowed to use restraint—something new to him. The truth was that he got more aroused by the minute thinking of the many things he might do to her. He soaked in her curvaceous form, felt the tight confines in which his jeans housed his cock. Wildflowers scented her raven hair. The tiny, silk thong was

a definite draw. It barely covered the V at the apex of her thighs. It'd be so easy to pull it off her. Leaving it there turned him on. Since she left the bathroom, it'd slid an inch to one side, baring plump, engorged lips and a beckoning slit. *I'll control myself.* He unbuckled his belt and put it on the night stand.

"I see you trim your pussy. I like that. That way, I taste only you."

Realizing each movement and word had an impact on her experience, he reached for the handcuffs, touched them to her warm belly causing her to shudder. "It's handcuff time." His eyes locked on her ample, heavy breasts with their deep rose ends and large thick nipples. They rose and fell with each breath, enticing him to taste them.

"Give me your wrists, prisoner."

"Prisoner?" She muttered an incoherent word or two and held her wrists up.

"Tonight, my dear woman, you'll get the punishment you've been needing," he said, his tone uncharacteristically gruff.

Click!

* * * *

Lenore jerked at the sound of the metal bracelets locking around her wrists.

"Am I ready for this?"

"Such a beautiful woman. Mm. I'm so lucky." A rich chuckle left his lips. "Let's see. What should I do first?"

After a short hesitation, she asked, "Maybe without this thing over my eyes?"

"Lenore, Lenore, Lenore." He clucked his tongue. "We'll leave it on for now. Maybe later I can take it off. That is, if I see fit, it'll come off."

I like seeing her hot. Face it, I like her vulnerable. His hand dipped to his cock, rubbing it a couple of times. He relished its degree

of rigidity. "For tonight's fantasy, I'm the deputy, and you're my captive. Right?"

She shuddered and admitted, "Y-yes."

"Now for the shakedown." He knelt before her, curled a finger around the band of her thong, and drew it down her smooth, brown legs to expose her sex. "I'll get these out of the way."

Her trimmed pubic fur, hovering inches from his mouth, needed his attention. With his hand curled around her ankle, he raised her leg and propped her foot on the seat of a chair for better oral access. The tiny garment at her feet, he leaned forward and nibbled on her core, which caused her volatile distress.

A growl rumbled in his chest. His hands wrapped around her hips and pinned her in place. He stuck his tongue deeply into her to give her an inkling of the fuck to come. Using light strokes, he flicked the tip over her clitoris and knew he hit his mark, because her breasts above heaved.

Assenting to his assault, Lenore lunged her hips forward. She squirmed and cried out, "Oh, Sawyer." A few tugs at the cuffs followed, and then she stilled.

Tilting his head, he raised his line of vision. It shot between her breasts to her blindfolded face. Leaning away from her, he said in a gruff tone, "Prisoner, spread your legs more."

"What are you going to do?"

As if she doesn't know. "A little erotic torture maybe." He raised a hand and soundly smacked her ass and continued licking her folds. Pubic curls tickled his upper lip and nose as he teased her. He withdrew his mouth from her V and slid a finger into her slick hole to test her wetness. Unable to resist, he pumped a few times, which made her wetter and left her more troubled than before.

A moan and a gasp erupted from her lips when he slid a third finger into her tight pussy. *Perfect.*

"Sawyer, please," she whined as he finger-fucked her.

"Ple-eeze, Sawyer," he mimicked. "Learn to have patience,

grasshopper." He withdrew his hand and looked around wondering what to do next. *I hope I don't overboard with aggressiveness.* He grasped her lower leg and guided her foot back down to the floor.

"Get on the bed. You'll get the rest of your punishment there."

Once there, he ordered, "Undress me, prisoner." Somehow, he managed to keep his lust under wraps, but the real threat existed that he'd lose it. "Make me naked."

"But, I'm blindfolded." Protesting feebly, Lenore pulled at the restraints, but her palm wouldn't let her shed them. "I don't know if I can." Raising her hands, she added, "Handcuffs...see?"

Sawyer unleashed a wicked laugh. *Lenore loves her predicament. God, I love her.*

Fate, their parents, and unwanted relationships had separated them for over a decade. More than anything, he wanted her now as his own. He'd offer her marriage. They'd spend the rest of their lives together, if he had his way. *I won't ever let her go this time. I want her for keeps. I'll give her what she wants in bed.* He left his thoughts for the here and now.

"You *can* do it." Considering the possibilities that lie ahead that evening, he paused, grinned, and softly said, "Start by unbuttoning my shirt, prisoner." *My crotch seam will bust if I don't get them off soon.*

Chapter Ten

"The best is coming, spelled with a *u*," Sawyer mused as he grasped her shaky hands and brought them to his chest. "Pull my shirt over my head."

Lenore obliged, pulled the blue polo shirt off him, and tossed it to her left, in the general location of the dresser. An image of his hard pecs and abs entered her mind. The sound of his deep voice thrilled her to the bone.

"And my jeans. Undo those," he ordered.

Lenore touched the metal button below his navel.

He's probably watching me fumble, getting a good laugh.

"Let me. You do the rest." His nimble fingers had his jeans undone in an instant. He left the job of unzipping for her to complete.

With relative ease, the zipper slid down to expose his crotch area that constrained his phallus. At his waist, she grasped each side of the gaping jeans and gray boxers and at once drew them both down his strong, hair-dappled legs. The shedding of his clothes released his potent shaft from its confines. Although she couldn't see it, she felt his erection as it brushed against her cheek and forehead. She held it out of the way while she grabbed and tossed the garments toward the dresser with her other hand.

Like a river, heat flooded her entire body because he stood before her naked.

"Damn, Lenore, I like you like this. Cuffed, blindfolded, and you...all hot for me."

She took her hand off his sex and wished she could view his face.

"This is going to be good." A ragged breath left his lips. "Get on

your knees, prisoner. As much as I hate it, this must go." He untied the eye covering and let it slip to the floor.

"Open your eyes, Lenore. I want you to see me."

Lenore grew accustomed to the light and discovered that his throbbing member filled her vision. It rose high, mere inches away, to just below his navel. Her pussy ached for its entry. Small waves of desire fluttered in her stomach. A pearl of come formed on its head at the slit.

Sliding his hands to each side of her head, Sawyer whispered, "Touch it. Do things. Please."

Mesmerized, she pressed a flattened hand against his stomach and felt his muscles contract. "You feel so good," she cooed while sliding her hand down his taut body. She fondled him with her hands still cuffed. She leaned in, drew wet circles around his navel with the tip of her wet tongue. Licking a trail down to his loin region, she smelled his erotic, musky scent. Near the base of his phallus, she teasingly nibbled in an attempt to drive him to a higher state of arousal. Gazing into his face, she discovered that she'd achieved her goal. His head dropped back. *He loves my mouth on his body.*

Sawyer bent down, and their lips met. Lenore coaxed him to deepen the kiss with a foray of her tongue into his mouth. Their kiss turned rough yet tender and she marveled that she accomplished her short term goal.

"Lick me more," he requested.

After a long pause, she blinked. "Okay." She grasped his shaft, raised it, and slathered her tongue over his scrotum. Her pulse spiked, and her mind swirled into a frenzy as her tongue brushed along the veined underside of his cock and swirled over the seeping crown.

"Ahhh," Sawyer said, during what seemed a moment of intense pleasure. "There aren't words to describe—" The sentence remained unfinished. He rested his hand on her head. "Take it in your mouth all the way."

Lenore slipped her lips over the end, pleased to give him

gratification.

He slipped spread fingers into her hair while she cupped his balls and massaged them with her nimble fingers. All the while, she licked and sucked him up and down and relished the feel of power she had over him while doing it. His cock seemed a perfect fit, not too big. With the flat of her tongue, she teased him by sliding up from the base to the tip. She rimmed the touchy ring below the head, causing him to flinch, and finally pushed her mouth down the shaft and stopped just as he had requested. His erection slid back, into her throat as she hugged it with her lips and throat. The quest commenced. She continued going up and back on him hoping it drove him wild.

"That's it," he said. "You're good at this."

She withdrew and gazed up at the out of place, twisted grimace shaping his face. It appeared he ached with pain, but in actuality, pleasure riddled his mood and body.

"You're showing me how needy you are."

Her need for release kindled, raw and urgent, in her yearning for him to take her. She removed her mouth and pumped him with her hand, hoping to build his arousal to its highest point.

He cried out her name and said, "Yeah. Ahh. I'm ready to explode. I don't want to come. Not just yet."

After a silent moan, Lenore withdrew her hand, her attention held by the spell he'd placed on her. Her damp body sweltered from her fiery desire.

"It's too early," he whispered.

He took a seat in the middle of the bed and pointed at his thighs. Once again, his voice turned harsh. "Lay across my lap." He reached for the belt and placed it beside him on the spread.

Did I hear right? "Across your lap?" She blinked, glimpsing his erection, between his thighs.

He sounded stern. "Do it now."

Sawyer's gaze stayed with her as she climbed onto the bed and across his lap. She stretched, situating herself over his upper thighs. It

felt like silk sliding over concrete. The side of her face rested on the soft bedspread and his cock pressed into her pubic bone. The closeness grew sensual and erotic as he caressed her shoulders and back for a few moments.

The relaxation was short lived. A finger slid into her clenching wet passage and wreaked all kinds of havoc. Gasping, she squirmed with need and rode his finger. He withdrew his finger and slapped her ass then resumed stroking her cunt.

"My God, you're so wet. Mm."

Lenore looked back and gasped. "I need you."

Sawyer's hand fisted the folded belt as he raised it overhead. "Bad girl." The resulting slap connected with her ass with a loud snap! He fingered her pussy as the first of several stinging smacks commenced.

Her body stiffened between each moment of pain although she ached to ride his finger. Between each of the lashings, she heard heavy breaths heaving from his lungs. He slid a second finger and then a third into her juicy hole. Her heart hammered as he administered two or three more blows and put the belt down.

He slid his hand under her heaving breasts and pinched her nipple at the same time he finger fucked her. "You'll learn to never show your body to other men. Do you hear, prisoner?"

"It was a mistake. I told you that." With her mind whirling like a tornado, she thought for sure that her burning ass had turned scarlet. "Damn it!"

"I'm not done with you."

He grasped a key off the night table and, unlocking a cuff, freed one wrist. Working with swift determination, he flipped her over onto her back, crosswise on the bed, and attached her to a corner post by bringing her arms over her head.

Sawyer positioned himself between her spread legs and slid down, so that his mouth touched her engorged lips. He nuzzled her inner thigh before touching her pussy.

Trembling with anticipation, she said a shaky, "Lick me. Please."

After a long hesitation, she repeated the request.

"Hmm. Do you think you deserve it?" He extended his tongue, touched the end to her clitoris, stalled, and then withdrew it.

"Yes, damn it!" In desperation, she raised her hips. "Oh, yeah. Do it more. Please."

Again and again, his tongue lashed the most sensitive organ in her body. Her skin quivered and her body ached for release. With each raspy, grunting breath, her chest rose and fell. Burning tears spilled down her cheeks and she cried out for mercy as the tortuous lashes against the most private spot on her body continued.

"I am yours. Nobody else's, Sawyer. Forever, we're one. Just...don't...stop." Her body expelled a massive orgasm, one larger than she'd ever experience. It wracked her through and through, and she rode the clouds and soared in ecstasy.

Sawyer again positioned himself between her legs. This time, he rose onto his knees and fit the head of his cock into her pussy. To the hilt, he pushed himself inside and stretched her to the max. Joined as one, they stilled, enjoying the union.

In and out of her damp hole, he began pushing and withdrawing. He picked up speed. Over the edge, he tumbled and joined her in their simultaneous orgasm. She shuddered as she came. It was fireworks on the Fourth, confetti on New Year's Eve, and snow on Christmas morning all rolled into one. In several pumping streams, he met his peaking experience, groaning all the while. Bursts of pleasure erupted from his lips. Forms of loving praises and incoherent groans followed. He dropped to her side on the bed. After a short rest, he caressed her cheek then set about unlocking the handcuffs from her wrists. His voice weary, he murmured, "You're free to go, prisoner," and let out a throaty chuckle.

Their gazes softly locked, and she said, "I'm going to stay right here." She laughed, though her bottom was sore.

"I have this uneasy feeling that I was too rough tonight," he said, reached over her, and snapped off the bedside lamp. His voice was

soft and very sweet. "Was I?"

Lenore blinked up at the dark ceiling where shadows danced. "No, I loved it."

"You know Lenore, I've been thinking."

"What?"

In a sincere, gentle voice, he answered, "I know I won't leave your side until the weirdo is caught. If I have to, I'll take a leave."

She raised and fluffed her pillow. Her heart constricted with emotion. "I hate for my problem to interrupt your job."

"It's all right."

"You're sure?"

"I've saved some money for emergencies." He pulled her close and slipped an arm around her shoulders—a loving embrace. "I consider this problem serious. Tomorrow, I'll talk to the sheriff while you're at work. I'm going to set a fire under their ass on this shit."

"I didn't know I was in *that* much danger."

"You're probably not." He rested his arm on her waist. "It's better to be safe than sorry."

Chapter Eleven

On Halloween evening, Sawyer drove Lenore to the mall and parked outside the entrance. The cool night air the weatherman promised had started rolling in.

They climbed out of her SUV and glimpsed the sunset in all its crimson glory. As he pressed the auto-lock button, she glanced at him, nodded toward the western hills, and said, "It's beautiful, isn't it?"

Grinning, he put the keys into his pocket. His gaze shot to the magnificent sky. After surveying the colorful palette, they rounded the car and met by the trunk. He brushed his hand down the side of her cheek. "You're prettier." With his fingertips to the small of her back, they began walking toward the mall. "Here're your keys."

"Oh, okay. And thank you," she said, dropped the keys into a side pocket of her purse. She was thrilled he'd complement her looks. He paid her special attention in and out of the bedroom, unlike so many men did to their woman.

Smiling, in a jovial mood, Sawyer escorted her to the north doors of the mall.

How long has it been since I thanked him? "I appreciate your doing this."

"Number one, I wouldn't have it any other way. Number two: I'll do it until they catch that damned pervert."

She laughed. "Until the cows come home, eh?"

His words make me feel safe. "You betcha."

"Maybe this guy isn't a pervert." She shrugged. "Maybe he's just...*Twilight Zone* strange. You know the type."

"Until we find out for sure, you need to be careful."

Out the corner of her eye, she glimpsed a motorcycle as it sped off down the highway, which momentarily set her back in time. Memories replayed. He sat on a motorcycle in front of the grocery store. *The stalker. Dangerous. Now he lurks in my mind.* Her body stiffened. In fact, the motorcycle sounded much like the one she'd seen the stalker riding at the grocery store not so long ago. She stopped.

Sawyer seemed to notice her fear. "Who is it, Lenore?"

Open-mouthed, she gazed at the quickly disappearing cycle. After pouring more thought into the situation, she shook her head getting rid of the negative thoughts. She decided the rider worked slapping sandwiches together at The Subway, just across the mezzanine floor from Ballanger's.

"What's wrong?" he asked again, while holding the handle and allowing her to enter the mall first.

"Oh, nothing." An elongated sigh of frustration left her lips. "That bike caught my eye is all." *I can't be reacting with fear to every motorcycle that rumbles by or to every stranger I meet.*

"It wasn't him, eh?"

Embarrassed, she breathed a calm and quiet "No."

"His presence is driving you up a wall, isn't it?"

"Yeah, sometimes."

They traipsed farther into the shiny, ivory building. It bustled with shoppers, delivery personnel, and walkers. Elevator music blared from speakers, and a bird frantically flew near the ceiling. *The sparrow feels trapped by circumstances beyond his control...like I feel at times.*

He cut into her thoughts speaking in his unique, gentle tone. "So, uh, have you thought about going back to college? You were majoring in business administration when you dropped out, right?"

She smiled and then frowned. "Yeah. I'd love to. But...and it's a big but..."

"But what?"

"Well, working at Ballanger's doesn't pay much. I guess I could apply for a student loan and attend as an adult student and go that route."

"Okay..."

"Since I've had this stalker, I haven't felt like applying. I've thought about moving, though, to where he couldn't find me."

"If he's serious about finding you, he'll do it."

"Hmmm. I'll have to think about this."

"Think about what?" she asked, surprised.

"You. Returning to college."

For a couple of seconds, she blinked, mystified by his comment.

"You're kidding, right?" Her heart fluttered with the prospect of finishing her education.

"No, I'm not."

During a pause, she heard the heels of her own pumps clicking on the tiled floor. Kids screeched up ahead catching their attention. They oiled and smiled at a frustrated woman's comical efforts to lead several children who were decked out in Halloween costumes. The kids followed across the floor, some crying, some falling down, and one spilled his candy. They approached the door that Sawyer and she had just come through.

As Sawyer and Lenore passed Lane Bryant's Boutique, he said, "I'll pick you up about nine-thirty."

"Okay."

"Don't go anywhere. Just wait. If I'm not here, I'll be here shortly." He lowered his head and whispered out the side of his mouth, "Or, I'll have to turn you up and spank you." He winked.

She grinned. "Here?"

He laughed. "Uh, no. I guess that wouldn't be such a good idea in the mall."

She bit her lip, but couldn't stop belting out a laugh.

"At home, maybe."

"Sounds delicious."

When their smiles subsided, he held her wrist, stopping her. Very gently he lifted her head with a forefinger to her chin and said, "Cheer up. This idiot'll soon be arrested and out of your life. They think he's doing this to others. He fits a profile the experts don't like. Like, he's getting more brazen. You'll see. He'll trip up. His kind always does."

She swallowed hard. "I sure hope he's caught soon." *Maybe there is hope.* "His capture would end all my worries." She shrugged. "Well, most of them."

"They won't let me get involved. Anyway, I'm on leave."

She refused to let him minimize his importance. "You're with me, and I'm so glad. But I can't keep you from your job."

"That's another thing I have to think about and get squared away."

In front of Ballenger's Tie-Dye Boutique, as Beth Anne and two customers stole glances at them, Sawyer wrapped his arms around her and gave her an expected, but loving, goodbye-for-now kiss.

Their lips parted and he said, "Call me."

"Wha'cha going to be doing tonight while I'm gone?"

"Security. I'll be hookin' it up."

"For my apartment?"

"Yeah."

"Great."

"You have my cell number, right?" he asked and began leaving.

For a couple of moments, she enjoyed the manly sway of his nice ass in his tight jeans. He went in a more westerly direction. With his hands stuffed in the pockets of his black, leather jacket, he winked, strolled down a corridor to the left, and suddenly was out of sight.

A few feet away, a group of olive-skinned men who wore fancy sombreros and south-of-the-border clothing started singing and playing mariachi music. Their tune drowned out the elevator music, but she barely noticed. She watched Sawyer until he disappeared around a corner and then stepped into Ballanger's Tie-Dye Boutique. An orange sign with creepy, thick black letters stood in the center of the store. It read, "Halloween Madness 24-Hour Sale."

Beth Anne stopped pecking keys on a cash register long enough to push her glasses farther up on the bridge of her nose. She mouthed, "Oh my God. What a gorgeous hunk. The day girl told me he was. Nice, is all I can say."

Lenore smiled and rolled her eyes as she strolled back to the employee's room. She mouthed back, "I know."

Beth Anne made a clicking noise with her mouth as Lenore passed a line of customers who each held some colorful t-shirts.

"I'll clock right in so you can leave, Beth Anne." *I wonder what this night will bring.*

"Not a moment too soon, either. I've got a hot date at the club. Oh..." She pointed a manicured finger at a rack of shirts. "They put the new line of shirts on sale yesterday, and I haven't stopped. But the craziness ends in a couple of minutes, so it should slow down."

Lenore fastened her name badge onto her shirt pocket, checked her hair in a mirror, and took her place behind the register. She began checking the next customer's items. "Have fun," she told Beth Anne as she stepped into the back room. Lenore returned her attention to the customers who were still shopping. "Better hurry," Lenore said to a lady at a nearby rack. "Halloween Madness Sale ends in two minutes."

Chapter Twelve

The brisk sales from Halloween Madness slowed during the next hour. At eight p.m., the blonde, elderly store manager arrived, saying, "I have to do some end-of-the-month inventory tonight. Since it's the thirty-first, it's going to be slow. Lenore, if you want, leave early. Or stay. Either one. The choice is yours."

After checking out a couple of customers, she gave her offer a little thought and went to her. "Thanks, Mrs. Janson. I'll leave early since I'm supposed to come in early tomorrow."

"You can clock out now, if you want, then."

"Thanks."

Within minutes, she had clocked out, ambled out of the store and went to a row of pay phones. The Mexican band had taken a break, much to her relief. She tapped Sawyer's cell number onto the keypad, but got no answer. *He's probably at the library working on his resume, at the store picking up a personal item in Marion.* She remembered that he mentioned it the previous day. She called a couple of friends, but no one answered.

Disturbed by her inability to contact someone, after the third attempt, she decided to walk the nine blocks back to her apartment. "Crap," she muttered. She slipped on her jacket and left the mall. *I don't have enough money for a cab, again. Everyone I know is gone. This sucks.*

She walked down a relatively empty hallway with intentions of getting a ride from a guard. *Maybe he knows someone who can give me a ride—someone reliable.*

A woman stood near the security office. She wore a Target name

tag that read Barbara. Lenore stopped near her and asked in a friendly tone, “Do you know where the guard is?”

In a bored tone, Barbara stopped chewing her gum and said, “He’s chasing a shoplifter.”

Lenore blinked. “Really?”

“Yeah. A kid ran out with some C.D.’s a few minutes ago, setting off the alarms. Management had me wait here for some reason.”

“I see.”

“Cookies, Inc. needs him down there for something too.”

Lenore nodded. “Looks like he’s busy tonight.”

“Yeah.”

Okay.” *Crap.* Lenore left the door, frowning. “Thanks.”

“Is everything okay?”

Lenore stopped and looked back at the auburn haired woman and shrugged. “Not really.”

Her plucked brows drew together, giving her a look of concern. “Can I help?”

“Well, it looks like I have to stay here until nine-thirty when my ride comes. I got off early and wanted to stop at the store and go home, instead of waiting. I’d walk, but—”

In the distance, a burly man approached grasping the arm of a young man. “I get off in five minutes. Where do you have to go?”

“To the corner of Twenty-second and Oak. It’s a convenience store that’s just a block to my apartment. I can walk that part of it okay.”

“It’s no problem at all. Wait til I clock out.”

“Thanks. I appreciate it.”

* * * *

Once she bid the woman goodbye, dashed into the market to get a bag of uncooked pasta for a salad later, just a block from her apartment building, outside the convenience market, the darkness and

cold air surrounded and chilled her to the bone. She glanced at a form of a man nearby when it was time to turn the corner and cross the lot of her apartment building.

A man in the shadows sat on a parked motorcycle by the sidewalk.

She gasped. *What if it's him?*

A quaver shook her voice. "Oh no."

"Jeez." *Should I turn back? If it's him, will he stay away like he has in the past? It's probably not him. I'm almost home.* Experiencing dread and helpless anticipation, she drew in a fortifying breath and strode along the sidewalk with her wrapped her fist around the paper weight and bag of pasta.

I am strong. I am invincible. I am Woman. Yeah. "I'll protect myself," she muttered to herself. She kept her chin tilted upward, determined to not fear the ever-present man in the shadows. *It seems as though he knows I don't have any call minutes programmed into my phone.*

He hopped off his motorcycle and lunged for her. She screamed, dropping the pasta. He forcibly wrapped his curled his hands around her shoulders, then her throat and said, "This way, bitch. Shut up."

"No! Get away."

"You're gonna get yours, honey."

"Help!" she yelled, swinging her hands at his face.

He deflected her slaps. "No one is around here, you stupid whore."

Lenore tried to pull away, but lost ground. She tripped and fell to the rocky soil. With strong hands, he grabbed her arms, but somehow the strap of her purse stayed on her shoulder. Kicking him hard in the groin, with the toe of her pump, she managed to escape his hands for a second or two.

He caught her and pulled her back, cursing. After a second and third yank of her hair, he settled his hands around her throat. "You're mine now."

I'm no match. Subdued, she quit fighting, fearing he'd knock her unconscious...or worse. *It's like I've been swallowed by a nightmare!*

She considered what she could do to save herself, to stop the assault and made her body into a dead weight. Her hand fell out of her purse as he attempted to drag her to a row of thorny bushes. *I'm dead.* She screamed and kicked at him again, but her action drew his fist.

He slugged her in the jaw. Shiny stars floated in her vision. Like the bird on the ceiling of the mall, she flitted at the edge of consciousness.

A shiny blade, maybe of a knife momentarily caught a bit of light. *He'll stab me.* A streetlight appeared and darkened as he pulled her to the shadows.

I must fight. Breaths rasped from his lungs as rocks dug into her back. *Move. Fight.*

Realizing she could soon die without anyone hearing her cries, she thrust her hand into her purse and tightly grasped the paperweight when he stopped dragging her. She fisted the hard object, hoping that when she swung it'd hit him in the face. *It's my last chance for survival.* Waiting for the perfect chance, she watched and waited as he unzipped his pants. *He's going to rape then kill me.* When he leaned down reaching for her, she smelled his repulsive, whiskey breath. Despite the foggy daze that tried to take her mind over, she raised her arm and brought it down hard. Once, she struck him in the face with the paperweight.

"Ahh!" He reeled, his hand on his jaw. The white man's face appeared in the light and then blurred.

I hit him hard, but it isn't enough.

Again, he reached, and his head lowered. "You're in for it now. Bitch, you're gettin' the blade."

He's going to kill me now! Ready to do it again, she whacked him twice more in quick succession, hitting his chest. *I ain't going to let you kill me.* "Oh, no, you don't."

He backed away, holding his injured, bleeding jaw. "I'm not done with you!" In full retreat, he stumbled to his motorcycle, climbed on, and started it.

I've seen him. But where?

Relieved he left, she watched him speed west. Tears streaming down her cheeks, she got up and walked toward her apartment.

I have to get home to safety, fast.

Fearing his return, she abandoned several items that had fallen out of her purse and began running home.

Once she arrived at her apartment building, the neighbor woman, Mrs. Sutton, appeared in the doorway. She gasped and brought her hands to her chest. "What happened, Lenore?"

"I was attacked! Call the police!"

Sawyer's truck sat parked in its space. "He's home!" Holding onto the railing, gasping for breath, she saw him. "Sawyer!" Her world turned more wonky than a moment ago.

I'm so dizzy. I'm going to pass out! "Sawyer! Oh, my God!"

"Who did it?" he asked, suddenly at her side, holding her so she wouldn't fall.

"He's the maintenance man. He cuts weeds here."

Sawyer sprinted toward her just as she collapsed at the base of the stairs. "The stalker is? Lenore?"

"Yes, yes." Her world darkened, and she felt herself falling into unconsciousness.

* * * *

In a state of helpless turmoil, Sawyer stood behind the ambulance and watched two male attendants load Lenore into the back while he talked to an investigating officer of Pleasant City P.D. Tenants stood out in the cold night air in various states of dress and were discussing the flashing ambulance and police cars.

"Who are you?"

"Sawyer Parks. Deputy Sawyer Parks. She's my girlfriend." His jaw clenched as hot, angry tears threatened to spill down his cheeks. He got a grip on his emotions and turned his attention to an attendant.

"Is she okay?" But the man didn't answer. It shook Sawyer because her eyes remained closed. He felt guilty. *Why didn't I hang around the mall?*

Finally the attendant said, "She's coming to, it looks like."

"Will you step back, please?"

Aware that Lenore's blood stained his shirt, he agonized over her battered face. *Was she stabbed?*

"We're taking her to Heartland Memorial," the attendant told Sawyer. "In case you want to come by."

"Stand back," a policeman said.

"All right." His heart ached. *Why hadn't I been there? Why wasn't she at work? Did she get off early?* Once the ambulance drove away with its red lights flashing, he hurried to the apartment manager's office and knocked on the door, determined to find the man who battered his woman.

A white-haired, red-faced man peered up at him over spectacles through the open doorway. "Yes?"

"Do you have a maintenance man?"

"Yes, sir. I do."

Sawyer's voice quaked in his anger. "What's his name?"

"Does this have anything to do with Lenore going to the hospital?"

He nodded once. "I don't know. I need his name."

"Oh dear," the old man said. "His name is Crebbs, Arthur Crebbs. What else do you need to know?"

"Where does he live?"

Two minutes later, Sawyer called the Pleasant City P.D. on his cell phone outside the landlord's office and gave a detective all the pertinent information. Since he was on leave from a different department, his hands were tied in an investigation.

He returned to Lenore's apartment, locked up and went to his truck. After checking and loading his service revolver that he'd kept in a lockbox under his seat, he slid under the wheel, stuck the key in the

ignition, and started the engine. Cursing, he drove off down the dark streets of Pleasant City. At a parking lot, he stopped and called the chief of police to let him know the latest, possible details of their case.

Outside Arthur Crebbs' apartment building, he waited in his truck a few dozen feet away. He occasionally glanced at the time on the LED readout on his dash. The P.D. arrived with plenty of cop power. Wielding a search warrant, they took control of the perimeter. Standing near the back of his truck, with binoculars to his eyes, he watched as members of SWAT rapped on the door. No one answered.

"Police! We have a search warrant. Open up!" an officer commanded.

A dog in what seemed an otherwise quiet neighborhood barked, and neighbors peered out their windows.

At the go-ahead signal of their captain, the team battered down the door. Before too long, it evolved that Arthur had skipped out. A few minutes before nine, he received official word from the chief that the apartment had been vacated.

An hour passed, and Sawyer decided to drive to the hospital. *Arthur Crebbs won't be caught this go around.* An elongated, frustrated sigh left his lips as he put the spy glasses back into their case.

Detective Miller approached and stopped four feet away. His tone contained urgency...and a measure of friendliness which took Sawyer back. "It's against rules, but since you're a cop, come in and take a look," the chief said. "Tell me what you think. He has two or three women he's got a thing for, looks like."

"Sick-assed bastard," Sawyer lashed out.

He received two firm admonitions from the cops to not touch anything.

"Damn it, alright!"

Soon Sawyer stepped just inside the door and looked around the small, dingy living space. He peered into the only bedroom and the kitchen from his vantage point. Ragged curtains hung from a window.

A closet held a pole full of empty metal hangers. Beer cans and old newspapers littered the floor and tables. Cockroaches hustled across the wall, cabinets, and counters.

The horrendous conditions in which Arthur lived defined his mental illness. It took Sawyer back, when he saw pictures of Lenore and two other women. Rows of images decorated a bedroom wall, photographs that the pervert evidently took with a telephoto lens. "He's a photographer." Sawyer felt deep in his soul, the man would strike again.

"We'll do everything in our power to get him." Detective Miller said when they left the apartment door.

He guided Sawyer back to the yard, out into fresher air.

In the distance, he spotted several jack-o'-lanterns that lit up a front porch. Kids wagged buckets up some steps—a stark, happy contrast to the home where a sick man lived, the home of Arthur Crebbs.

"He's hidden now." Sawyer welcomed Detective Miller's friendliness.

"Yeah, but he's left a wealth of evidence. We'll get this guy's mug broadcast on the air right away. Media will have a field day with this. In the meantime, go on to the hospital and take care of your woman. You're on leave, deputy. Relax and take care of her. We'll do our job here."

They stopped near a police van. "Listen...let me know if and when you find this joker. I don't care what time of day it is."

"Just as soon as we have something, we'll get to you. You left your numbers at the P.D., right?"

"That I did."

"I need to get over to the hospital and apologize to Lenore when she's well enough. Man alive. I didn't mean—"

"She felt bad. Didn't want to see cops let alone confide her problems to them."

Detective Miller gazed at his shoes for a second. When their lines

of vision intersected he said, "Yeah, man. I'll apologize to her for what I said. To you, too." An elongated sigh left his lips. "They hired another detective to lighten my load, thank God. I'm the first one to admit I have job burnout. My wife's left me. My family won't speak to me. I've been hitting the bottle when I don't work. I work so many hours. I dunno...I get impossible to be around. No one can live with me. I get mouthy."

"Don't worry about it." *Maybe I'd like working at this P.D.*

He held out his hand, and they shook. "I've been shook up, too, since I found out Lenore has a stalker." He released Miller's hand.

"We'll catch 'em. We need to get him off the streets before he kills someone. We know who he is now. We have a face and a name. It's a matter of time 'til he's caught."

Chapter Thirteen

Lenore awoke, and spent a few seconds, maybe minutes, she didn't know, trying to focus on the blurry figures who stood over her. It was as though she viewed them through rippling water. *Where am I? It hurts to talk.* "Ohhhhh." *My head aches.* Muscles pained her as she moved her hand up to her temple. *I'm so weak...and tired. I want to sleep.*

An echoing voice gently said, "She's coming to."

I can't remember...what happened? Images didn't make sense.

A second male voice said, "The nurse said she'll be in and out for a while."

Her surroundings silenced and darkened.

* * * *

Because she slept in a private room with a guard posted at the door, he felt free to ride back to the apartment and grab some sleep.

Worried about Lenore's condition, he set security and the alarm for six the next morning, stripped and fell onto the bed. In no time at all, it seemed, the shrill chime drew him out of a nightmare that he couldn't remember, but knew his experience had been scary as hell. He quaked, and perspiration dampened his face and body. He rolled over under the fabric softener scented sheets and hit the alarm off button to end the noise. Yawning, he rose from the bed and groaned. The pillow and covers opposite him remained neat and untouched.

"Damn it."

The need to be with her made him achy. The previous night in all

its horror started coming back. *I hate that bastard. I wish I had a chance to get him.* He knew that, unfortunately, his department existed in a district beyond Pleasant City P.D.'s jurisdiction.

In fresh gray boxers, jeans and black T-shirt, he dressed and went to the kitchen hungry. A local newsman's account of the attack held his attention while sipping black coffee. *I miss her. A mere night separated us and I feel like I'm gonna die.* He put a sausage, egg, and cheese biscuit into the microwave and zapped it for forty-five seconds. *I need her in my life but I need to get back to work, too.* He retrieved the paper from the front door mat, brought it in, and began reading about Lenore's ordeal.

* * * *

A few minutes before seven, he entered her hospital room. She still slept. Voices in the hallway caught his attention. Gazing at the door, he tried to swallow the sad lump that had formed in his throat, but failed.

A nurse stepped into the room and informed him, "The doctor says she's going to be fine."

"Great."

"She's going to be sore for a while. Maybe she'll get to go home tomorrow," the nurse said before disappearing down the shiny corridor.

Harsh sun sliced between vertical blinds behind her bed. White daisies on light blue wallpaper decorated the walls. The room smelled of the usual hospital scents—antiseptic and medicine. She wore a blue-speckled gown that tied in back. She looked fragile.

Holding her hand, he studied the bandages that covered one side of her face. In silence, he shook his head in anger. *What kind of animal would do that her, a kind and sweet woman?* "I won't rest until they have that guy," he muttered to her and left the room with tears welling in his eyes.

He ached for clues to Crebbs's whereabouts, as he drove to the general area of her attack. It surprised him to find cops scouring the area. He wondered if they'd found anything, but didn't stay to ask questions, because a police van pulled in and needed the spot where he parked.

Sawyer returned to the hospital a little before nine and discovered she had awakened. A sight for sore eyes, Lenore was sitting up with a pillow wedged under her back, sipping on a cup of broth. She watched the morning news on a local channel on a television set that hung down from a stand.

"I feel like I got run over by an Amtrak train."

He took her hand. Although he smiled, his voice quaked. "I'm glad you're okay."

She raised her tousled head from the pillow, and the skin between her brows rumped. Her voice raspy, she asked, "Are you crying?"

A large lump formed in his throat. He wiped away a flattened hand of tears from his cheeks, smiled, and flashed her a big smile. "Yeah."

"Really?" Reaching out, she touched his wet face. "Sawyer. No man's ever wept for me."

More tears welled. He couldn't stop them. "I did last night, too."

Leaning toward her, he sneaked in a kiss. "You're a very special woman. I want to keep you around for a long time. I've got some things to figure out. I wish that creep was gone."

"I hit him with a paperweight. I can't believe I did it. I'd been thinking about using it in case he got the nerve to come for me."

"With a what?"

"A paperweight. It has sharp edges. I lost it, I guess, where he did it."

"What happened?"

"Near the convenience store. He dragged me into some sticker bushes. I remember... sharp rocks, I guess, dug into my back. I've got scabs all over my body. He stunk really bad. And talked dirty. I saw

his face. He cuts weeds around the yard. Oh, and fixes lawnmowers. He had a knife." Tears filled her eyes.

Moved by her story, he said, "You're lucky to be alive." He drew a Kleenex from a box and handed it to her.

She dabbed her eyes.

He leaned close and stroked her hair. "I'll not let it happen again. Promise." He let his lips lightly brush hers and tasted her salty tears.

When he backed away, he asked, "I take it the police came by and talked to you?"

She nodded once and took another sip. "Detective Miller did. He apologized three times. I guess this whole thing is my own fault. I mean those strippers are just there to earn a living, but I should've known about the risks when I—"

"Sh. That's in the past. It's over."

Lenore put the Styrofoam cup of broth onto the bed table, lifted her head and tried to adjust the pillow, but failed.

"Let me." Sawyer grasped the pillow with both hands, fluffed it, and put it back under her head. *I just wish I could be around for her full time. I have a job in another town.*

"Thanks, Sawyer. I just wish it was over."

Knowing what she meant, he said, "I'm sure it will be shortly. Cops have a face and a name now. It won't be long."

"I saw the story on television this morning," she said. "Can you believe it?"

Sawyer chuckled lightly. "Yeah. You're a celebrity."

Behind him, a nurse cleared her throat. A half smile registered on her thin lips. "Excuse me."

He noticed, stepped back, and straightened.

"We're going to take you down for some x-rays. Ready, Lenore?" the nurse asked and then let down the bed's side rail.

"Okay."

When the nurse helped Lenore into the wheel chair, the back of her gown opened, and he saw her cut up back and cringed. The guilt

returned.

"We shouldn't be too long. They're going to take some blood too. She'll be back by lunch at eleven-thirty." The nurse wheeled her out of the room.

Lenore wriggled her fingers and blew a kiss. "Bye, Sawyer." She faintly smiled as the nurse lowered the side rail.

"I'll be back later," he told her and left, upset.

* * * *

The next day, during a rainstorm, the doctor released Lenore from the hospital. A nurse wheeled her to the door and he pulled the SUV up under the overhang. Sawyer drove her home where her Aunt Corrine waited with plans of caring and keeping company with her for a couple of days.

The windshield wipers slapped down. He got out, rounded the car, and helped her climb into the cocoon. He clasped her seatbelt, closed the door, and rounded the front end again. The dark sky flashed bright when electricity streaked across it, and the environment rumbled as he pulled forward and headed toward the road that would take them to her apartment.

"It's bad." Chilled and shivering, she raised her collar.

He turned off the fan. "I'll say. I'm going to park until this shit blows over." Sawyer pulled over to the side of the road and waited. More cars stopped. Wind rocked the truck.

His leather jacket crunched as he leaned from under the steering wheel. His strong hands grasped each lapel of her denim jacket. *He's going to kiss me.* He gently drew her close and stopped until their lips met. She felt his warm breath and breathed his lemony scented masculine aftershave.

"I love you," he said. "I'll come by on my days off. Promise."

Sensation and emotion stirred her soul. *He cares.*

"I—uh, this was my fault." Inner pain caused tears to well. "I

walked home from the convenience market. Until Halloween night, I really didn't think he was capable of hurting me." She raised a hand and let it drop on the knee of her jeans.

"Don't blame yourself."

"At times, I do."

"Don't." He cleared his throat and shook his head. He let go of her jacket, sat up straight and peered outside. "It looks like it's slowed down. Let's go home."

Within five minutes, he pulled into lot. She craned her neck looking for his bike. "Where's your motorcycle?"

"In a storage unit."

"Oh."

"I figured Arthur would have a more difficult time damaging it if it's hidden away."

"That's true."

He parked, got out, and escorted her inside.

Her muscles ached, but not as much as they had the previous twenty-four hours. Within the week, the bruises and swelling on her face quit hurting and faded. The scabs on her back dried up and left without leaving scars. The fear remained, though.

God, I love him. I know he has to go back

* * * *

In the days that followed, Lenore returned to work and told him goodbye when he returned to his job in Marion. In a sullen voice, he apologetically said to her, "I'm sorry." He sucked in a shaky breath. "I have to stay in Marion. I've got obligations galore—work being one. I'm hoping one day we can be together. This being apart is temporary."

Co-workers, the security guard, and neighbors watched as she got safely to her car, at work and home. The police patrolled parking lots and Lenore walked and grocery shopped during daylight hours.

“Right now I’m safe. Don’t worry,” she told him over the phone one evening after she got off work. “We can still see each other on our days off. I mean, it’s not like we live a hundred miles apart.”

“I know.” After a pause he added, “I’ve submitted my resume to a few places around the area.”

The next Saturday afternoon, while sitting on the stairs outside her apartment, they watched the cars and trucks drive by on the highway. Enjoying his day off, he sat beside her and had just come for a visit, but had to return to work the following Monday.

“This living apart—I don’t care for it.”

She smiled warmly and said, “Me, too. We’ll get our lives squared away.”

To her, their short time together on weekends proved precious to her.

She reached over and patted his hand, giving him comfort. “It’s okay. Corrine stays overnight once in a while. She said she’d keep on doing it until I get good news. I have good neighbors here.” She gave his hand a squeeze. “I’ll be fine. This coward will think twice about doing anything stupid.”

“I sure as hell hope so. And you’re right. He is a coward.”

Lenore noticed that when he visited, he brought his gun, bulletproof vest, and ammo in and hid it in the back of her closet. However, he put a pair of binoculars near the front window on an end table. It seemed as though he made a commitment not only to deepen and nurture their relationship but also to protect her from Arthur Crebbs on visits. Although they didn’t discuss the threat, she believed he’d try to harm her again.

Chapter Fourteen

I want this to be fun and special, oh, and don't forget hot, Lenore thought early one December afternoon. I'm over a bad experience with the stalker and I'm optimistic about my...our future.

Now, for my wicked plans...let's see. Lenore took a box out of the closet, nabbed her stilettos with six-inch heels, and slipped them on her bare feet. In front of the full-length mirror, she turned first one way and then another. Nice. Opting for the sexiest look she could find, she dressed and studied her reflection.

Sawyer peered out the front window through his binoculars, but as she approached and passed, he glimpsed her attire and put the spy glasses down. After looking away, he did a double-take.

With a come-hither flair, she swayed her ass on her way through the apartment. Dressed in a low-cut black top, no bra, and upper-thigh-length blue skirt, she hoped he'd take notice. Glancing his way, she smiled. *He's noticing.* Her heart fluttered in her lust.

In fact, giving her his full attention, he followed her path to the kitchen.

"Care for a Pepsi?" she asked, when she stopped in front of the china cabinet.

Sawyer gave her a you-look-good expression, and she stepped into the kitchen. He soon leaned on the door frame and looked deliciously enticing, his arms crossed over his chest. His black, silk shorts lined his knees. He wore black thongs on his feet. A day-old beard shadowed his cheeks and chin. A crooked smile quirked the corners of his taut lips. His short raven hair had grown out a bit since he quit the deputy sheriff job.

"Are you having one?" he asked.

"Sure." Lenore brought out a tall glass and flashed him her most sexy smile.

"I'll join you. Need some help?"

Lenore brought out a second glass. *I know what I need.* She retrieved ice from the freezer and filled the glasses, all the while enjoying his scrutiny. Her nipples were enlarged and she was sure he could see their outline.

"What are you looking at?" She drew her fingers down the low cut neckline. "You don't like this outfit?"

"It looks...good. I wouldn't think you had an outfit like that. But I'm afraid my heart'll stop."

"It's been in the closet for ages."

He grinned and ran the flat of his hand over his gray shirt that read Property of the U.S. Navy. "Are you wearing a bra?"

"Just my purple thong."

He bit his finger and clenched his teeth, jesting. "Argh. O-kayyyy. Mm. You're really hot today, aren't you?"

She changed the subject, enjoying teasing him. "What were you doing at the window?"

"Looking through the binoculars."

"For what?"

He shook his head.

He doesn't want to bring it up. "You're looking for him, aren't you? Crebbs, right?"

A heavy sigh left his lips and he shrugged. "Yeah."

She glanced his way while going from the range to the refrigerator. "I thought so. You expect him to return."

"Forget the Pepsi. I want you."

As she worked at the counter, Sawyer stepped up to her and pressed his lower abdomen into her buttocks, while standing behind her at the kitchen table. "You feel so good to the touch—your skin...it's smooth as silk." He began feathering kisses along the curve

of her neck.

"You feel good yourself."

"Mm, come here." A male growl formed and sounded in his throat.

"I am here."

His hands slipped under the hem of her black midriff top, skimming over her flesh. "Such lewd clothes. You're asking for it." The flat of his hands slid up to her ample breasts and over the pebbled skin on their ends. His cool fingers touched the sensitive flesh just above her nipple and circled them. Each one received a pinch that caused nerves to twitch in the center of her core.

"I need it," she said.

"My pleasure," he said in suggestive tone.

"No, it's mine."

"I prefer this over Pepsi." He turned her around to face him and then he knelt.

As though she was royalty and he worshipped her, he kissed the tiny scrap of purple silk that barely covered her pubic mound. As his raven head of hair swayed at her crotch, she grasped the counter at her hips and held on. His wonderful tongue stroked, parried, and poked places that were known to rapidly turn women on.

It looks like an all-nighter. Oh yeah.

Her pussy clenched, and the tender flesh below her navel quivered.

"Make me whole again."

"I intend to."

Wonder-working, stubby male fingers slipped under the tiny band of her panties and furrowed through her pussy's trimmed beard. Over and over again, he massaged her pliant lips, which elicited another moan. A couple of times his digits veered off course, and slid into her slick folds.

A gasp left her lips and her breathing rate increased.

"Spread farther for me, Lenore," he requested and then dipped his

tongue into her. His nose and lips pressed against her labia.

Minding his request, she further parted her thighs in hopes that his mouth would find its way back to her pussy. He grasped her panties and pulled them down to the tile floor as he nuzzled and bit erogenous places on her inner thighs.

His splayed hands journeyed up from her knees to the V at the top of her thighs, to her weeping slit. For several long minutes, he licked those needy spots that she'd long forgotten. Humming vibrated in her throat as he continued. The ravishment continued beyond the point of no return. Using his forefinger and thumb, he flicked her clit while he bit her mound in what seemed a maddening quest to drive her wild. It worked, and she shoved her cunt forward. Cupping her mound, he pushed one, two, and then three fingers into her, giving her body notice that his cock would soon follow.

"Mm, Lenore."

Twinges shot through her body like fireworks. Her knees gelled like Jell-O, threatening to buckle. She visualized how they must look—a picture perfect front page for a porn-zine. Exquisite, sensual, his effort was giving her nothing short of pure, impassioned joy. Her yen for an orgasm spiked through her like flowing electricity. "I need your cock." Already, she felt the thrust of his shaft.

Sawyer stood, slipped out of his shoes, and guided her to the table. With his hands to her waist, he lifted her up so that she sat on the edge. Standing between her legs, he pulled his shorts down a few inches, climbed on the table. Sweeping her back, he thrust himself into her at the same time. *Deep. Hard. Breathtaking.* Once, then twice, he pushed as her cunt squeezed his engorged shaft. "Yesss." Her body was slick with sweat, and her heart thundered in her chest. With frenzied shoves, he pounded her pussy, and she arched into the source of pleasure. She cried out, "Sawyer...yesssss!" She was coming, and she wanted him to join her. During her world-class orgasm that followed, he obliged and shot his juices deep into her body. She shuddered against him.

"Don't get up." He brushed her hair out of her face and said, "Lay with me a second or two."

"Okay."

Their tongues and mouths met in an intimate kiss. Lying motionless on the kitchen table, their bodies and surroundings returned to normal. She heard the clock ticking, a game show on TV and a distant neighbor's lawn mower. In each other's arms, they relaxed, saying words of love and administering affectionate caresses to each other's body.

"I'm so glad you've gotten better."

"Me too," she said.

They traipsed to the shower, cleaned up and dressed. Refreshed and satisfied, they retired to the kitchen, chatting about politics as they prepared lunch.

* * * *

The next day about the same time, during the afternoon, she prepared to make lunch, shower, and leave for work.

Knocks hammered the door, surprising them just as they began slicing vegetables for the salad. Through the wood a woman shouted, "This is Mrs. Sutton, your neighbor. I think I saw Arthur Crebbs. Please. Open up!"

Sawyer hurried across the room, unlocked and opened the door. "Where?"

"He's gone now. I saw him over there, near that line of trees when I came home from the grocery store."

"Did you call the police?"

"No. I don't have a phone."

"Call now! Use ours." he told her and bolted after the man. "Lenore. Show her the phone."

Mrs. Sutton said, "Arthur stood across the street. I know it was him."

Sawyer went the wrong direction. "What the fu—" I *don't understand!* Her heart hammered. "Where are you going, Sawyer?" she called after him.

"The back way. Both of you. Stay here and lock the door. Call 911."

* * * *

His heart thumped like a snare drum. Sawyer hid behind bushes, ran to a metal building, crossed the road in order to get closer to the man who stood twenty feet from the highway, and photographed the apartment building. *I hope it's him. 'Cause I'm going to get him.*

A tree trunk partly hid the subject's activity. Needing to see if his face matched that of the man in a police photo, he took a few covert steps toward and stared. The man held a camera with its telescopic lens. A silver photography case and red chopper parked nearby.

Bingo.

In a skittish, suspicious move, the man ducked behind the tree. *He saw me. Crap, it's him.*

Arthur took three steps back. His mouth dropped open.

When Sawyer stopped within five feet, he called out, "Hey. I need to talk to you."

The man jerked his head. His facial features scrunched, and he frowned. He spun, tripped over his case, dropped the camera and scrambled to his feet.

"Hey."

The man didn't stop. Arthur's arms pumped as his tennis shoes hit the ground. His breathing rasped from his lungs.

"Crebbs, you're under citizen's arrest." In pursuit, Sawyer broke into a full run. People stepped off the sidewalk and let them pass.

After veering off the walk, Arthur darted between two houses and into a street where a pickup truck swerved to miss him.

Beyond a red brick house, he ran twenty feet down a street and

into a sandy lot near where kids played baseball. Dust rose with each step.

Sawyer caught up, dove, and landed on his back. He wrestled him to the ground. Grunts and curses erupted from both their mouths. Arthur's right fist connected with Sawyer's jaw. They wrestled on the ground. Arthur pulled his arm loose from Sawyer's grasp just when police car pulled up.

The patrolman climbed out. From behind their door, one held a handgun on them and yelled. "Freeze."

"The one on the right is Crebbs."

Another cop approached, holstered his gun, and took custody by cuffing him and telling him his rights.

Bent over with his hands pressed to his knees, Sawyer laughed. He couldn't wait to tell Lenore that her days and nights living in fear just ended.

Chapter Fifteen

Two hours later, he returned, beaming with happiness and sporting a bruised eye.

Open-mouthed she shut the door behind him, her pulse quickening in anticipation. "I was worried. I heard sirens and you didn't come home..."

"Want to go with me to buy a bottle of good champagne?"

"Your eye. What happened?" His head dropped back and he chuckled. "Unbelievable."

"What is?" *He's injured and he's happy?* After waiting in anxious anticipation, she suspected he wore a positive, elated expression for a good reason, but she wasn't a hundred percent sure if her hopes had come true. "Talk to me, Sawyer."

After a pregnant pause, belted out, "Holy crap."

"Are you going to tell me, or not?" She put the binoculars back in their case and went to him.

"I can finally relieve you of your problem." A slow, intimate smile spread over his lips when he told her, "Arthur Crebbs..."

"What about him?" She bit her lip.

"The son of a bitch is in jail."

Her heart skipped a beat. *It's the news I've waited for.* "Oh my God. Are you sure?" she asked, realizing her voice sounded choked and unsteady.

"Yep." He stepped up to her and peered down into her eyes.

"I saw you go behind some bushes and then I didn't see you again. Who caught him? The police?"

"*Moi.* I, uh, tackled him two blocks over. Several cops came at the

right time. The chief seemed impressed. I saw him photographing someone or something, maybe us or our apartment, using a camera with a special lens. That in itself revealed his identity."

In glee, she squealed with delight and kissed Sawyer full on the lips, her hands curled around his neck. "Awesome."

Nodding, he slid his arms around her waist, pulled her to him, and said, "To top things off, he admitted stalking you. Detective Miller may contact you later to talk to you some more. It's nothing major. The media is clamoring to talk to the police chief now. It's big news."

"I can't believe it!" It seemed as though an anvil had been lifted off her shoulders. "Thank God." Overwhelmed by the outcome, she sunk into a nearby chair, her hands in her lap. *I can come and go without fearing him.*

"Now we can concentrate on getting you enrolled. Business administration, right?"

"Yeah?" she said, and brought her hand to her throat.

"I'd like you to come and re-meet my family, Lenore."

"When?"

"The next warm weekend. We can take the bike."

"I'd love to." He walked to the sofa, plopped down, and placed his stocking feet on the cocktail table with his hands behind his head. "There's another item of good news."

She turned her head and narrowed her gaze onto his happy expression. "And that is..."

"According to Detective Miller, they want me to begin training for the Pleasant City Police Department next month. The chief was so pleased and impressed that he offered me a job."

"Well, are you going to—" Excited, she sucked in a breath.

He grinned and nodded. "And I accepted."

Now we can live together full-time. With her face streaked with tears, she abandoned the chair and plopped down beside him. Relieved, she nuzzled against him as he held her in his embrace. Putting his hands on either side of her face, he wiped away the

moisture on her cheeks with his thumbs. Feeling secure, her fears melted away. A soft brush of lips over her cheek followed. *No longer am I in danger. We're safe and together. Sawyer has a good job.*

"I look forward to us. If I had a glass of bubbly, we'd toast."

Lenore wound her arms around his neck and turned in his arms. Her words came out breathy in her excitement. "Sawyer, let's get married." Kissing his lips, she felt his smile.

"The entire last decade I'd wished I put up a bigger fight and never let you go." He seemed shaken. "I don't want to ever let you go again. You're my woman." Between kisses, he said, "Yes, I'd...love...to. How about doing it outdoors...on my favorite holiday. Fourth of July? While they're shooting off fireworks maybe."

She laughed. "It sounds wonderful."

He pointed at her chest and then at his chest. "It's not just for sex, you and me. I need you as a support beam in my life."

Thrilled with his words and Arthur's timely capture, she sighed. "I feel the same way."

"Let's go get that champagne. Let's just enjoy each other this evening."

THE END

www.carol-mckenzie.com

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Carol McKenzie was born and raised in Illinois. Through her twenties, thirties and part of her forties she lived in California, Texas, Montana, Washington and Colorado. She then she moved back to her home state of Illinois. She plans to stay there with her husband and Jack Russell terrier.

She enjoys rendering artwork, sewing, quilt making and playing Civilization IV. On any given day, she dutifully works at her computer typing up a new erotic romance story. She writes interracial, contemporary, historical and alternative lifestyle fiction. If she's properly accomplished her goals, all her stories contain hot, sex scenes.



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