



Changeling Press

*his*  
*black pearl*

Colette Howard

# **His Black Pearl**

## **Colette Howard**

**All rights reserved.**

**Copyright ©2009 Colette Howard**

**WARNING:** The unauthorized reproduction or distribution of this or any copyrighted work is illegal. File sharing is an International crime, prosecuted by the United States Department of Justice and the United States Border Patrol, Division of Cyber Crimes, in partnership with Interpol. Criminal copyright infringement, including infringement without monetary gain, is punishable by seizure of computers, up to 5 years in federal prison and a fine of \$250,000 per reported instance.

**ISBN: 978-1-60521-269-2**

**Formats Available:**

**HTML, Adobe PDF,**

**MobiPocket, Microsoft Reader**

**Publisher:**

**Changeling Press LLC**

**PO Box 1046**

**Martinsburg, WV 25402-1046**

**[www.ChangelingPress.com](http://www.ChangelingPress.com)**

**Editor: Katriena Knights**

**Cover Artist: Bryan Keller**

This e-book file contains sexually explicit scenes and adult language which some may find offensive and which is not appropriate for a young audience. Changeling Press E-Books are for sale to adults, only, as defined by the laws of the country in which you made your purchase. Please store your files wisely, where they cannot be accessed by under-aged readers.

## **His Black Pearl**

### **Colette Howard**

**There are two cardinal rules to any contract. Artist Hallie Brandt just broke both of them. First, she didn't pay attention to what she was signing. Sure, she knows she just agreed to paint a portrait of certain dimensions. But she's too focused on the fact that, after more than a decade of paint, sweat and tears, she's about to become a name artist. So what does a little detail like the model's identity really matter? Second? She hasn't a clue in hell who her new patron is. Yes, she's met Aaron Ioannides and knows his reputation as a world-class art collector. But just who is this man with the body of a Greek god and hands as skilled as her own?**

## Chapter One

The painting was tucked into a recess along the corridor, its dark mahogany frame lit from the sides. A table of the same dark wood and bearing the weight of an ornate glass case stood beneath the portrait. Hyper-aware of Aaron Ioannides, her host, standing behind her, Hallie Brandt approached the canvas. She tucked her hands into her jacket pockets to quell the urge to reach out and touch it.

"I've never seen anything this old that wasn't behind a velvet rope." She glanced over her shoulder to find Ioannides had dropped his gaze to her ample bottom. She stole a few seconds to study him in return. He was in his late thirties, powerfully built with thick black curls crowning his head. He was about half a foot taller than her five-feet-eight, his skin a sun-kissed bronze to her deep ebony. He'd been blessed with the kind of face, body and money that would leave all but the most devout nun fantasizing about him after an up-close meeting like this.

She sure as hell wasn't a nun.

*Not even Catholic*, she thought, turning back to the painting before he could catch her ogling him. They would be talking business in a little while and he already had her at a disadvantage.

He stepped beside her and reached up to adjust one of the lights. "Are you familiar with the Carracci family?"

The painting in front of her was of Hades. He was sitting nude, Cerberus curled protectively against his side. On the god's head rested the black crown of hell; in his hands were its keys. Not her favorite of the artist's work, although she could hardly admit to Ioannides what her favorite Carracci was. Not, at least, when he was standing so close.

Biting back a smile, she cleared her throat. "Somewhat. Late 1500s. This one is Agostino's?"

"Yes." He ran his hand along the side of the glass case sitting on the table and another display light came on. "As is the engraving."

Knowing the nature of Agostino Carracci's engravings, Hallie felt a prickle of heat fan across her face before she so much as dropped her eyes to the engraving. Reaching out, she touched the glass, resting only the weight of her fingertips against the air-conditioned surface.

Ioannides had shown her dozens of museum quality pieces; this was the first to be so explicitly erotic. The engraving depicted Achilles stepping onto a bed platform. He was carrying a woman -- Briseis. Both were naked from the waist down. Achilles was already inside Briseis as he carried her, his thick cock spreading the heavy folds of her labia.

"I Modi."

"Right again, Miss Brandt." He flipped off the light. "Great skill in technical detail, of course, but the pleasure -- the passion -- it never quite reaches their faces, does it? Not that we can blame Carracci. He was painting for his times."

His voice had changed from contemplative to cold. Following him out from the recess, Hallie braced herself. She'd spent enough time at gallery showings to recognize the tone -- Ioannides had gone from amiable host to art critic.

"In some ways, his work reminds me of yours." They had reached the open door to his library -- the room they had started in -- and he motioned her to a long table. "You use a strong, rich palette. On the surface, the characters and settings are intriguing, full of promise."

*Here it comes.* She forced a smile onto her face.

"But then I look at the faces, at the way they connect to one another, to their surroundings." He stopped, seemed to pull back, and she urged him to continue with a lift of her brow.

"Well, I've seen more emotion at a Botox clinic, Miss Brandt."

"Hallie, please." She had reminded him of her first name half a dozen times during the tour of his personal collection. He nodded, just as he'd done the other times, and she went on. "Certainly you find something to recommend my work. You've purchased several pieces."

She studied his face, looking for the slightest hint that his criticism was a bargaining tactic. A self-made millionaire, he had a reputation for being a tough negotiator.

"Yes, and I've been waiting for you to put aside the cold precision, the over reliance on technical form." He had a sheet of papers in front of him -- the commission contract -- and he rifled one corner with his thumb. "Do you think you can do that?"

"It's not my first commission piece," she reminded him.

Leaning back, he folded his hands behind his head and stared at her. Her lips warmed at the touch of his gaze until she had to look away.

"I can do it."

"Are you sure? There are no nudes in your portfolio."

She looked at the sheaf of papers in front of him and the checkbook beside it. She'd already read through the contract, aside from the few details that remained to be filled in -- price, size and the model.

The money didn't matter. Well, not a lot. It was more a matter of reputation. A commission with a collector of Ioannides' reputation would make hers. After a decade of scratching out a living with her paintings, she'd become the poster child for overnight success.

She had hidden her hands beneath the table earlier and she brought them out now, palms up. "Not a problem."

Dark blue eyes sparkled at her as he picked up his pen. "It will need to be a full-length nude." He ran the fat pen through his fingers, his gaze on her once again, as speculative as it had been in front of the Carracci when he didn't realize she was looking. "Full size, too, dimensions of eight feet in height by six."

She nodded and he wrote the measurements down on the paper.

He tapped the pen tip against the paper. "As to price. Something this size from your portfolio would usually run fifteen, yes?"

Hallie nodded. Putting her hands back in her lap, she knotted them together. He was giving her statements to agree with, softening her up and putting her in a passive position. It didn't help that she knew he was doing it. He did it so damn well, his voice soft as silk over powdered skin, his gaze moving across her face like a lover's kiss.

Shifting in his seat, Ioannides leaned halfway across the table.

"Since it's a commission and I plan on being very exacting..." His mouth quirked in a smile and he tapped the pen again. "I'll double that. Another fifteen for the modeling arrangement --"

"Fifteen?" She'd hardly expect to pay a model more than a thousand. She didn't need a real beauty, just a warm, poseable body to throw light on. "You have someone in mind, then?"

"Yes. The commission is dependent on the model's availability."

"At that rate, she must be famous."

Again, his mouth quirked in a smile. He wrote the sum of forty-five thousand dollars down on the contract's first page, just below the painting's dimensions. He flipped to the second page and recorded the model's name, the first sheet of paper blocking her view. "I'd say she's known, not famous. Not yet."

He turned to the third and final page and signed his name with a flourish before passing paper and pen to her. The contract was opened to his signature. She signed the line below his name and then dated it.

Flipping to the second page, she dropped the pen and looked up at him. "You've made a mistake. The model's name is supposed to be here."

"No mistake, Miss Brandt. No mistake at all."

Hallie glanced back down at the contract. There, with the same elegant strokes he'd used in signing his own name, Ioannides had written the name of the woman she would have to paint nude --

*Hallie Brandt*



He stood up and quickly collected the contract from her. "I'll just have my assistant make a copy of this for your records."

She reached for the paper and he pulled back, smiling. "Now, Miss Brandt, it's signed. Nothing to do about it but get to work on the painting. Don't worry..." He took another step back, his dark blue gaze sweeping over her. "You'll do fine. I'll make sure of it."

Watching him disappear into the next room, she sat back hard in the chair. He'd have plenty of opportunity to "make sure" of it. The contract required preliminary sketches he had approval over. Not only did she have to deliver him a final full length nude of herself in oil, now she had to show him concept drawing after drawing until she came up with the one he would ultimately choose to have her paint.

## Chapter Two

Three weeks later, Hallie sat in the same chair. Ioannides stood before one of the library's floor to ceiling paned windows. Sunlight haloed around him, the highlights in his black hair showing a burnished mahogany. His suit from the last meeting had been replaced by a thin, granite-colored sweater that hugged his sculpted back and arms while black dress slacks seemed as if they'd been painted on his tight, muscled ass.

Hallie's gaze flickered between his body and the sketchbook he held. He'd spent the last thirty minutes moving between the pages with no hint of approval on his face.

She'd tried. Damned if she hadn't. She'd bought two full length mirrors and spent hours in front of them, first in her best bra and panties, complete with garters and high heels, before she had shed every last bit of modesty and brought out the big lights.

"Did you even look at your naked body, Miss Brandt?"

Her cheeks flushed hot and she waited a second before offering a curt "Yes."

He flipped between the first few pages and then he tossed the sketchbook onto the table. It skidded to a stop in front of her.

"Perhaps you did." He turned and looked toward her, his gaze unfocused. "Perhaps that's why you're holding yourself so far from yourself..."

"What do you m --"

Crossing the room, he leaned across the table and pushed the pad closer to her. "It's as simple as looking. Look at your arms, your legs... I didn't commission a female Vitruvian."

She closed the cover to the sketchbook. "You're exaggerating. It's nothing like that."

"Right, there's no square, no circle, no extra set of arms and legs." He placed his palms flat against the table and stared down at her. "But does it look anything like a sensuous nude?"

Hallie answered with a diagonal nod -- half "yes," half "no." She could smell his cologne this close, a gently enveloping aroma of clove and honey. She pushed her chair back from the table, reaching for the pad of paper at the same time. He turned quickly on his heels and crossed the distance to the windows.

He looked over his shoulder at her, his gaze calculating. "Well, you made an attempt at performance. You could return the deposit and cancel the contract..."

"Not after you went and announced the commission." Her agent had sent her a copy of the *Daily Star's* art section folded to the announcement and a brief overview of her work to date. With one simple email to the newspaper, Ioannides had made sure she wouldn't back out of the contract.

Cheeks burning, she started shoving her material back into her portfolio case. "I'll do another set --"

"They'll be just as bad."

Damned if he didn't sound bored.

She stood, grabbed her case and nailed him with her best "pissed bitch" glare. He just shrugged and turned back to his multi-million dollar view of the Tucson valley and the mountains beyond. "How can you paint what you're afraid to look at, Hallie?"

His use of her first name, so long denied and so intimately spoken, was like a slap upside the head. She sank back into the chair. "I'm not."

"Are, too." He offered it sing-song, a schoolyard taunt. He turned back to face her, blinked once, like a cat watching a mouse before it pounced.

She folded her arms across her chest, bit down before the obligatory "Am not!" could escape her lips.

He laughed, the sound deep and rich like his scent. Heading toward the library door, he motioned her to him. "You don't have as much time as you think. Why don't we settle this argument now before you waste any more of it?"

Ioannides sauntered through the house. She stomped after him, fists clenched like a soldier marching off to war.

If he thought he was going to announce a premiere date, he had another think and a bitch slap coming.

He stopped in front of the recess that housed the painting of Hades and the engraving of Briseis and Achilles.

"I don't see what the Carraccis have to do..."

"Open."

His command stopped her cold, her heart freezing in her chest until she heard a click and the sound of the wall and part of the floor swinging back. She took a deep breath and then coughed it out as she realized he'd just opened the door to his bedroom.

"Just what the hell are you proposing?"

"My dressing room, Hallie, is through here." Ioannides stepped past the picture with the same easy grace he'd led her through the house and then he disappeared to the right. He called to her, his voice muffled from distance and the bedroom's wood paneling. "You are coming, aren't you?"

Standing in the hall, she stared into the room, shaking her head. So this was what a millionaire-cum-playboy's bedroom looked like. The bed was huge, the deep orange-red and swirling black of the ornately carved Mexican rosewood matched by the plush drapes and bedcovering. It seemed too refined for a rich man's den of seduction.

"Hallie."

She took one hesitant step into the room and looked right. Sure enough, he was standing in a dressing room that appeared every bit as large as the bedroom. She crossed to him slowly, her gaze picking up details from the room as she went.

She stopped at the threshold to the dressing room, her attention caught by an obsidian bust of a Grecian male, a curious winged helmet resting atop the mass of black carved curls.

She reached toward the bust at the same time Ioannides' strong, warm hand cupped her elbow and guided her the rest of the way into the room. He led her to a three-paneled mirror. His hand moved from her elbow to her shoulder, joined on the opposite side by his other hand as he stood behind her.

Catching her gaze in their reflection, he shook his head. "Don't look at me -- look at you."

He chuckled and then his chest touched her back as his arms circled her. "You're shaking. I don't suppose there's any point in telling you to relax?"

Before she could object, his quick fingers had undone the top button on her blouse. Her hands flew up to block him at the second button. "What are you doing?"

Another chuckle -- this one vibrated against her back, almost breaking her grip on button number two.

Warm breath played against her neck as he answered. "It's pretty obvious that I'm undressing you."

They played a game of hand-over-hand as he sought the next unguarded button.

"I assure you, this is artistically motivated."

She shook her head, unable to offer more than that. With the mixed scent of honey and clove thick in her nose and his broad chest hard and hot against her back, standing was hard enough. She couldn't add speech to it.

"Are you giving up on the commission?"

She met his gaze in the mirror. Blackmailing bastard!

"You need this. If you go back to your studio now, you're going to lock up in front of those mirrors. I guarantee it."

She swatted his hands out of the way and undid the second button. He dropped his hands to her waist, his fingertips trailing the band of her skirt to the back closure.

"You're fucking kidding me!" She closed her eyes tight, counted to ten. Damn it. He had her so mad she was swearing out loud. Hearing her dead mother's chiding voice, Hallie undid the third button as her skirt dropped to the floor. One more button - fingers thick and fumbling -- and then the blouse joined the skirt.

Ioannides dipped down, scooped the outfit up and placed it on a hanger before turning back to her, his gaze teasing as he eyed the rest of her clothing.

"Not on your life," she warned.

"That depends on you." He stepped up close to her again, his hands resting on her shoulders.

"Damned right," she answered.

"Look in the mirror, Hallie."

She was wearing a red silk bra edged in black lace with matching panties and garter belt. The bra held her full breasts up and out. The panties hugged the curves of her hips and ass while the garter kept the black silk stockings high up on her rounded thighs. She'd bought the sexy little ensemble a year ago for Valentine's Day, before her last break up. This morning, she'd dug it out of the back of her closet for the extra boost of confidence, not once imagining that anyone, let alone Aaron Ioannides, would be seeing her in it.

"And now you're holding yourself too close to yourself. You see?"

She looked in the mirror, saw the way she was hugging herself low, her arms wrapped around her waist. Her thighs were tense, held tight enough together that she could feel the clips on the garter belt biting at her flesh.

She wanted to run, to flee all the way back to her little home in the valley. She thought of the news reports -- crazy black woman streaks through downtown Tucson, details at nine. The laugh that erupted was half hysterical.

"Relax, Hallie. Don't be afraid of what you're seeing."

Another laugh, a little less hysterical. He thought it was her body she was afraid of?

"Mister Ioa --"

His hands dropped to her elbow, traced the length of her forearms until he wrapped his hands around her wrists. "Aaron, please. I did relent on the 'Miss Brandt,' after all."

"Maybe we should go back to that."

He was easing her arms in different directions, her right hand moving up to curl around her opposite shoulder, her left hand dropping to her opposite waist. She was still hugging herself, but as a lover might.

"Too late." Pressing against Hallie's back, Aaron slid his foot between hers and gently guided her right leg forward and to the side. It forced her left hip into a sharp cant, instantly turning the pose from fragile to seductive.

She turned her head to the side, closed her eyes.

His fingers smoothed across her thigh and then she felt the release of one of the garter's clips. Three more clips released their burden and then his palm was pressed hot against her flesh as he eased one stocking down.

She leaned into him, not sure how much longer her legs would continue to support her. The hard line of his cock pressed against her bottom.

*Artistic interest, my ass!*

Literally. She took a deep breath, trying to ignore the contour of his erection, the thick display of his arousal.

"Open your eyes, Hallie."

She obeyed him, her gaze slow to focus as her mind lingered on the bulge pressing against her backside. Her breasts began to rise and fall in quick succession. A light sheen of perspiration glimmered across her dark skin. She lifted her gaze a little higher, caught the reflection of his face. His attention was focused on her, on the way her breasts heaved, the angle of her hips, the relaxed and too-ready thighs.

"Do you see now what I want you to paint?"

"Mm-hmm." She nodded slowly, trapped in the lust she heard rumbling through his voice.

"I hope so..." Aaron pulled back, slowly enough to allow her to regain her balance. "Because there's no way in hell I'm letting you keep your dainties on the next time I bring you in here."

## Chapter Three

Dark turquoise satin cups, black lace, a garter skirt over turquoise panties. Hallie smoothed her hand across the boned skirt before she trailed one of the garter straps between her fingers.

The sales clerk, all blonde and bones, rang up the purchase. "Hot date planned?"

"Not... planned." Handing the girl her bank card, she looked out the boutique's window. "I mean, no. No hot date."

It was Friday morning, the store just open and the sun still hanging low in the eastern sky. Her car was parked on the street; her portfolio, with three new sketches for Aaron, was in the trunk.

She turned back, signed the sales slip. "Do you mind if I go back in the dressing room and... uhm..."

"No problem." The blonde smiled, the grin so knowing and big it reminded Hallie of the coyote she'd damn near hit that morning pulling out of her driveway.

She took the bag, ducked into the first stall to change. Clipping her nylons in place, she frowned at the black coat dress with its line of silver buttons she had picked out that morning. The dress had reached its tipping point. She'd worn it to one too many gallery showings and bank meetings and was sick of it now that she had it on again.

Too late to do anything about it now -- she had a meeting with Aaron in thirty minutes.

Out of the dressing room and in her car, she ran a fresh layer of pale salmon-colored lipstick across her mouth and added some fresh powder to her face. Her hair was out of braids, the soft, tight curls falling shoulder length.



Hallie slapped the rearview mirror back in place. It was a commission. Nothing more. Why did she care what she looked like?

Half a dozen reasons popped into her head and she rested her forehead against the steering wheel, trying to block each one out.

A year had passed since her last lay.

Aaron was hot, seductive, rich, insightful (in a pushy way), and, if that bulge against her backside was any indication, he was hung like Jesus H. Christ.

*Hallie Brandt!*

She bobbed her head against the steering wheel. "Sorry, Mama, but it's true."

But why the new underwear? She wasn't so desperate as to be so obvious.

Was she?

Her dead mother's voice tickled her ear again -- *And always wear clean panties...*

Ugh. So Southern Baptist. She could only imagine what her mother would say if she knew her only child was wet and ready to give a little sugar to that rich white boy in his fancy mansion. Scratch that, Mrs. Brandt wouldn't have said anything. She would have dropped to the ground in a dead faint.

"Shit." She turned the engine's motor over, checked her side mirror for traffic. Now she was going to be late -- another sin in the departed Mrs. Brandt's long list of unladylike behavior.

\* \* \*

Aaron met her at the door as he walked two men out. Both were old and shriveled, one pale as the moon, the other a deep, sun-baked brown. They walked closely together, as if joined at the hip and shoulder. Aaron looked angry; the old men seemed ecstatic.

"Ah, Miss Brandt..."

It was the dark one who spoke. Hallie jerked her head in his direction, surprised by his use of her name. She peered more closely at his wizened face, sure she didn't know him. Had Aaron mentioned her to them?

"So nice to see her again," he said to his odd twin.

"So like her mother," the pale one agreed.

She stepped back, a cool mask falling across her face. Her mother was six years dead and a generation younger than Heckle and Jeckle, here.

"Enough of that." Aaron forced them down the steps. "You would not give me what I want -- you can leave."

"Careful, my boy -- we could accelerate the timeline..."

"Oh, indeed, we could..."

Their heads bobbed like freakish twins. Hallie looked from one to the other, unsure which had spoken first. Each had a voice like dry wind over rice paper. Definitely unpleasant old coots.

Aaron grabbed Hallie by the elbow and ushered her inside. The door slammed shut, cutting off the two as they started chittering in some foreign-sounding language. She freed her elbow and turned so that she could see Aaron.

He was biting at his bottom lip, his mouth as pale and bloodless as the old man he'd just shut outside.

She couldn't help herself, even if she had no business asking. "What were you asking them for?"

What she really wanted to know was how the one knew her name, and why the other had mentioned her mother.

His response was short. "An extension."

Whatever he needed more time on, it must have been important. His blue eyes were dull for the first time since she'd met him.

She moved closer. "Are they your bankers?"

"My uncles." He offered a grim laugh and reached for her portfolio. "But enough of that -- what did you bring me?"

Dodging his hand, she turned toward the library.

He called her back, his tone regaining a measure of playfulness. "I thought we might as well start in the dressing room -- to save time."

She turned, cocked her head to the side, and tried to stare him down.

Grinning, he mimicked her stance, right down to putting his hand on his hip. "The lighting in there is excellent, as you may recall."

She patted the portfolio's side. "We won't need another trip to your dressing room."

"That confident, eh?" He was staring at her body, his gaze so intense she could have sworn he was able to see through her dress to the satin and lace confection she'd purchased that morning.

Aaron started toward her, his natural, swaying grace replaced by something more predatory. On instinct, she backed up until her shoulders and ass pressed against the wall. The utter silence of the house surrounding her, she pulled her portfolio case up to shield her torso.

She wasn't going to have a repeat of last week.

She didn't want a repeat of last week.

Damn, that walk of his was pure sex.

Aaron stared at her face, making her feel self-conscious. He tucked a lock of her tight curls behind her ear and then he dropped his gaze to the first button on her dress and the peek of satin and lace from her bra. "You don't know what you want, do you?"

"Those men --"

He choked on his reply -- a coughing laugh that brought tears to his blue eyes. "I don't think I can assist you on that one."

She shoved the portfolio at him. "What I was trying to say was that Heckle and Jeckle freaked me out a little. No offense, but your uncles are..."

"Yes, very." He took the portfolio and held it behind his back before closing the distance between their bodies. "Heckle and Jeckle?"

"Two magpies... didn't your parents let you watch cartoons when you were a kid?"

He shook his head. "No, but magpies seem rather apt." He pushed closer, his head angling to the side as if he might kiss her at any second. "Anything else 'freaking' you out?"

She didn't have to think hard on that one. "Your staff..."

"My staff?" The double entendre exiting his mouth in a slow glide, Aaron molded his hips and chest against her.

She could feel his erection through their clothes. It ran in a hard line from up over her belly button down to the top split of her thighs. She shook her head, pretending it was just one of the garter skirt's steel bones -- just longer and thicker and generating a flutter of muscles in her thighs and cunt.

"It's just I've never seen them -- it's a little like Dracula's castle. Everything's perfect, but where the hell are they?"

"Around. I like my privacy. You could go a whole day without seeing them."

She'd gone two whole visits without seeing them. Weren't rich people supposed to pay someone else to answer their doors and show their crazy old uncles to the stoop?

He tilted his head back, his sharp blue gaze dissecting her expression. "Are you sure you're not just worried about being alone with me?"

Dropping his lips to her throat, he licked a line from her shoulder up to her earlobe. Shivers spread out across her body from where his tongue had touched.

He pulled back a little, leaving her an inch of breathing room between their bodies. "I could fuck you right here, Hallie. But that's not what I want."

Raising one brow, she pressed her palm against his erection. "All evidence to the contrary?"

Clearing his throat, Aaron shifted in her hand until the weight of his balls filled it. Heavy and thick, their size made her want to give them a rough squeeze and beg him to lift the skirt of her dress. Hell, she had two hands -- she could give them a proper tug and lift her own damn skirt. She leaned toward him, fingers curling, thumb and pinkie smoothing against opposite sides of his cock.

Sighing, he lowered his head to her throat once more. But, instead of another kiss or bite, he offered only a question. "The sketches?"

"Right, the sketches." She fell back against the wall, shoulders flexing in disappointment as she tucked her hands behind her back and nodded in the direction of his dressing room.

The long walk was a challenge. An exquisite sensitivity possessed her body. The rub of her thighs, the slightest shift of her nipples against her bra -- these were delicious tortures that had her biting back moans. He'd caused this, invading her space, pressing the long, thick line of his cock against her, filling her hand with his heavy balls. She imagined the slap of them against her flesh and wondered at their flavor -- whether they would be all honey and clove like his scent.

Taking short steps, her thighs tensing with need, Hallie crossed the threshold into his dressing room, hoping that Aaron was hurting every bit as sweetly.

She stopped mid-step, her face crinkling up in an annoyed moue. Apparently not. Sitting on the padded bench, Aaron already had the sketchbook open and was studying the third image. "This," he said, "is very close."

She had a thing or two she could teach him about close right now. Close to coming, close to slapping him upside the head. She pressed her thighs together and sat down, almost collapsing onto the bench. "Close?"

He put the pad down and motioned for her to wait while he went into the bedroom. He returned a few minutes later carrying a wooden case. "It's off contract -- but, seeing the new prelims, I want it in the painting."

Inside the wooden box was a fat black pearl mounted on a platinum setting and chain. She bit back a whistle. One hundred eighty degrees away from a choker of diamonds or something equally gaudy, it was probably half a mil worth of breathtaking.

She reached for her portfolio case. "I can sketch it in right now."

He wrinkled his nose. She let the portfolio drop back to the floor. "Something else?"

"There's still a lingering hesitation in what you've sketched."

She drew a deep breath. Wasn't this what she'd been hoping for? Another adjustment, another excuse for him to have his hands on her?

Aaron put the wooden box down and pulled Hallie up and in front of the mirror. Standing behind her, he began to slowly undress her.

At the second button, he kissed her neck. "I love the way you tremble."

Was she? Damn, yes. She tried to remember the last man who'd made her tremble. Dark and light revolved in her memory. Not a lover, not from desire. The last man who had set her to trembling had been her mother's doctor, reporting test results showing not that her mother was suffering from a urinary tract infection but stage III cervical cancer. He had given her a forty percent five-year survival rate. Mrs. Brandt hadn't made it through year two.

"Where are you?" His touch along her cheek was gentle, more the caress of a comforting angel than a lover.

She turned against his touch, her lips grazing his knuckles before she answered, "Here."

Aaron kissed her temple. His hand trailed back down, the line of buttons quickly surrendering to him.

Just as she had.

At the fourth button, when the front of her bra was exposed, he groaned and cupped the underside of her breasts. He squeezed them once, roughly, before he hitched the skirt of her dress up to attack the next button. The top of her nylons showed and he stopped at the last button, grabbing the hem of the dress and bunching it in his fists. His lips found her throat again. A kiss followed by a light bite.

The last button flew across the room.

"Sorry, didn't mean to do that."

He sounded almost sheepish and she tried to turn in his arms but he forced her to stay facing the mirror. "Close your eyes," he whispered against her cheek. "I won't last with you looking at me like that."

Letting him slide the dress from her, Hallie obeyed. The bra was a front clasp and he unhooked it, his thumbs circling her nipples before he stripped the lace and satin from her.

Warning her not to peek, he slid the necklace over her head, one hand caressing her breast while the other positioned the pearl between her cleavage.

"I found this diving in the South Seas." His hands were at the garter clips. The quiet snap of each clip opening punctuated his syllables. "It's my favorite gem -- a perfect symbol of creation."

Bending, he ran his hands down her right leg, then her left, as he removed the stockings. "Round, with all the promise of a woman."

Standing, he cupped her ass, spreading her cheeks and letting his fingertips graze her sex. A second later, the garter skirt was on the floor and he had gathered the sides of her panties in his hands. Instead of pulling them down, he lifted, letting the seam of the crotch rub hard against her clit as he spoke.

"I always think of sex and creation when I see that pearl." His words, rough in his throat, ended with the tearing of fabric, and then her panties were gone. He moved his hands to her exposed mound. "I still have the shell it was created in..."

He held her labia apart, the tips of his middle fingers toying with the plump head of her clit. "... black lipped."

Gently pinching the flesh with his fingers, he ran a line from the top split of her pussy to the dangling hood, trapping and tugging at it until her whole body trembled.

"Look in the mirror."

She opened her eyes slowly, half-ashamed at her complete surrender to his touch. She saw her pussy first, swollen and glistening in its readiness. The pearl hung between her breasts, as black and round as if it were part of her own body.

Or was she an extension of the pearl, with its metal girdle and chain? She looked at the way Aaron held her, his strong arms around her, his hands holding the lips of her sex open, lust seizing her body.

"Do you see what was missing now?"

She nodded, unable to put words to what it was but knowing she could capture it with paints and canvas. The pearl and Aaron's caresses had brought with them a huge sense of power and sensuality. The look on her face wasn't in any of the pictures, nor was the telltale swell of her body or the lush glow of her cunt.

He had stopped stroking her while she examined her reflection. Now he started again, one set of fingers teasing the length of her clit while the other slid behind her, finding the wet center of her pussy and slowly invading her.

"Have you ever watched yourself climax?"

She turned her head, hiding her expression.

"No, then?"

"No," she agreed.

"A lover's climax, perhaps?"

"No."

He nudged her with his chin until her gaze returned to the mirror. "When I look at the picture, I want to see you coming, Hallie."

She shook her head. She'd never be able to walk into the same room with the painting if she did that. And when he grew tired of it and sold it or, heaven forbid, gave it away to a gallery?

"You can't live afraid of the future." He took the flesh of her shoulder between his teeth, his lips and tongue sucking at her while his fingers slid in and over her. "Just live for the next few minutes, for the night..."

Hallie moved against him, the pearl bouncing between her breasts as she found the rhythm that matched his. Her cream coated his hand and she squeezed her thighs against him as her orgasm started to claim control of her body.

"Don't stop looking, Hallie."

She sucked her bottom lip in, trying to concentrate on what she was seeing as slow waves of climax rolled through her. He stroked her harder, faster, his fingers penetrating more deeply. Her climax intensified, doubled in on itself. She leaned forward, planting her hands against the mirror as she pushed her ass toward Aaron.



She could no longer see what he was doing, but she could feel it. His fingers abandoned her clit. He placed his thumb against the tight hole of her ass. She clenched her pussy, her knees threatening to give as she felt the curve of his fingers inside her. He had cupped his hand, four fingers worth, inside her and was stroking her with a little come-hither motion.

Tears rolled down her cheeks. She contracted around him, felt his thumb take possession of her ass. Her face and breasts pressed hard against the front mirror for support, she watched herself in the side mirror. What she had viewed as too much ass and hip and thigh a month ago was a rolling wave of pleasure as she released an unstoppable jet of cum.

*"Moro mou, I want my cock in you so bad."*

"Yes." She wanted to see him undressed, to gaze on and fondle the hard body and proud cock he'd only pressed against her so far. "Yes, Aaron."

*"No, kardhoola mou."* He withdrew gently, leaving a trail of kisses up her spine. "Not yet."

## Chapter Four

Sipping hot tea spiked with brandy and wrapped in a thick terry robe, Hallie sat on a couch in her new studio. The room was stocked with everything she needed -- canvas, paints, her favorite brushes. Late afternoon light filled the room, dappled from the leaded panes in the floor-to-ceiling windows.

She wondered how many artists Aaron had housed in his mansion -- and how many of them he had slept with.

Finished with her tea, she got up and paced the room. She bent over the table next to the easel and checked to make sure she had all the colors she could possibly need. As she bent, the black pearl slid from the folds of her robe and swung on its chain like a pendulum.

Taking the necklace off, she hung the chain from one finger and waited for the pearl to stop its swinging. Concentrating, she tried a test question.

"Is Aaron Ioannides hot?"

It took only a few seconds before the pearl was swinging in a circle. She brought the pearl to a stop and asked, "Am I the first?"

The pearl began to swing back and forth, offering her a big "hell, no." Hallie let out a puff of air and looked around the room again before focusing on the pendant and chain. When it stopped, she formed her next question.

"Am I the last?"

The pearl started to move in erratic lines until its path smoothed into a circle. Smiling, she slid the chain back over her head and pressed the cold metal against her chest.

Taking a fresh sketchpad with sheets twice the size she had used for the preliminary drawings, she sat down on the couch. She thought of the pearl between her

breasts -- black organic. Black dirt, black mountains, a woman -- her -- in the throes of ecstasy. Creation released in a torrent at the exact moment of climax.

This time, when she took the piece of charcoal in hand, the lines didn't fight her like they had all month. She knew what he wanted, knew what would please them both.

She worked until two in the morning, stopping only once when she answered a knock at her door to find a tray full of food waiting and an empty hall. Once the sketch was done, she managed to place it on the easel and stumble back to the couch.

When she woke, Aaron was leaning over the back of the couch, a strand of her hair between his fingertips as he stared at the sketch. A blue robe that matched his eyes hung open, giving her a glimpse of his chest. Hairless, sculpted. She wanted to reach up and run her fingers across it but touched his wrist instead.

"Can I pull out the paints now?"

He looked down, his eyes slow to focus. "Not yet."

*Not yet?*

She looked back to the easel, searching for the flaw he had seen. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing. It's perfect." Releasing the strand of her hair, Aaron reached for the belt to the robe she had fallen asleep in. It was already loose and the knot gave way with a short tug. He pushed the sides apart, exposing her body. "But aren't you stiff from working all night?"

His smile was playful and sensuous, but at the same time something dark and dirty danced in his gaze. He touched the pearl for an instant and then trailed his fingertips down her stomach.

She could feel surprise widen her features. Was he proposing sex without a lesson? "You're --"

"Serious? Insatiable?" His fingers traced the line where her pressed thighs met. "'Yes' on the first... the second? Well, I did manage to let you work last night."

He slid over the back of the couch, across her body and onto the floor. Looking down, she saw that he had on silk boxers matching the blue of his robe. The lightest dusting of hair covered his powerful thighs. He rested an arm across her stomach, his hand teasing one nipple until it was swollen and the flesh colored a darkening plum.

"But just so you don't think I'm uncivilized..." He nodded at the end table next to the couch. On it was a tray loaded with fruit and a carafe of coffee. "And I ran a hot bath for you in the next room."

She turned to see steam floating out from the half-open door. "How did you manage that without my hearing you?"

"I could have brought a marching band through here; I don't think you would have so much as turned over." He stood and picked up the carafe. "Now, which do you want first? Breakfast? Bath? All three?"

She sat up and pulled the robe around her. "All three?"

He picked the tray up, smiling. "Excellent choice."

"That was a question, not a choice." It didn't matter. She was already following him into the bathroom.

"That's what you say." He put the tray down and took hold of his robe's edges. "Sounded like a choice to me."

She grabbed a plump strawberry from the tray and took a few steps back until she could see him from head to toe. "Okay."

He gestured at her robe. "Aren't you..."

She smiled and took a bite of the strawberry before answering. "After I watch you undress." Her tongue darted out to snatch a fat drop of juice from her top lip. "For purely artistic reasons."

She would have thought it impossible, shameless as he seemed, but Aaron's cheeks colored. She felt a matching rush of heat fan across her own face as his robe slipped from his broad shoulders. He caught it mid-fall and placed it on a hook next to the tub. Hands at the waistband of his boxers, he sucked his bottom lip in. His whole face colored pink as he started to slide the boxers down.

And then she wasn't looking at his face, however beautiful it was. She was looking at the muscled stomach as he inched the boxers lower. A curl of black hair started at his navel and thickened to a silky nest framing his erect cock. Veins, gloriously thick, stood out along the shaft. The same network of veins patterned his balls.

He took a step back, raised one perfect leg, and then he stepped into the oversized tub that centered the room. He pulled the second leg in, slowly descended to his knees and then all but his upper body was submerged. "Your turn."

"Right." Making him go first instead of the two of them together had been a slight miscalculation, but watching him disrobe had been worth every second.

Forcing herself to walk slowly, she hung her robe next to his and moved to the tub. He held his hand up, steadying her as she stepped into the water. With her back to him, she sat down. His fingertips lightly on her shoulders, he guided her until she rested against his chest.

Reaching out to the tray, he lifted the carafe, poured a cup of coffee and handed it to her. Strong. No sugar, no cream.

She took a sip, her body feeling like melted chocolate by the time the hot liquid hit her stomach. "Were you guessing?"

"It's how you took it at your last gallery showing."

"You're a little scary."

He had taken a sponge and was soaping her leg in slow circles from her knee down to where her thigh left the water. He stopped and placed his lips against her ear. "Just a little?"

"There's a closet full of clothes my size..."

"I read the tag the first time you were here."

"All the right supplies..."

"Your interview -- you plugged your art supplier." He switched the sponge to his other hand and followed the same slow route. "Time was, finding out what a woman wanted, what pleased her -- it was an integral part of courtship."

*Courtship?*

"They call it stalking now." She took another swallow of coffee and then placed the cup back on the tray as Aaron let the sponge fall into the water between her open thighs. "And the commission? Was that an integral part of your plan?"

He was slow to answer, his words only confusing her when he did.

"It is my gift to the millennia, Hallie." Shifting against her back, he slid an arm across her stomach and cupped one breast. "There's nothing artificial in my admiration of your talent, your potential. It's what I first noticed about you." He thumbed her nipple, his touch warm and soapy. "The rest came later."

She offered a slight nod and then closed her eyes. She turned her head, her face against his neck as his hands started their lazy exploration of her body. When he'd made his way down to her thighs, he curled a hand beneath each leg and lifted.

She felt his cock, still hard, bob forward, the thick head poised to enter her pussy.

He pressed his lips against her forehead. "Are you ready for me?"

"Always."

She curled an arm up, wrapped it around his neck. Feeling him breach the ring of muscle as he eased her down onto his cock, she gasped.

She moaned as more of him pushed into her. "There should be a warning on this tub."

"Hmmm?" Seating Hallie firmly on his cock, he had released her thighs and was tracing the outline of her cunt.

"That objects in the water are bigger than they appear." Sighing, she squeezed her perineum, her body contracting around the thick shaft and head.

They moaned in unison, his fingers alternating between teasing the length of her clit and pulling roughly at her lower lips.

She wanted his mouth -- a kiss, their first. Knotting her fingers in his hair, she tried to pull him to her. He shook free and placed his lips to her ear, his whispered words raw and foreign.

Was he telling her she was his?

"Yes," she whispered back.

Her body, her cunt, her mouth. All of it. His. Is that what he was saying?

"All of me," she agreed, her hips grinding against him as her mouth still quested for that first kiss. She let her voice match his in its energy, in the raw emotion squeezed from her throat as her pussy locked around him in climax. "Take me, all of me."

He'd stopped talking; the only sound coming from his throat was a growly purr. Running his hand along her calf, he lifted her leg until her heel rested on the edge of the tub. He placed her other heel on the opposite side. Her pussy was exposed, her ass and thighs taut. The position left her cunt wrapped around his cock like a velvet-covered iron glove. She couldn't move, couldn't grind, could only grip him, the muscles of her sex contracting in a mad turmoil.

And then he started rubbing her. First her thighs, then the thick, pouting lips. Her clit. Oh, God, her clit.

"Yes." Little breaths. All she could manage.

Flutter and kick. Her cunt went crazy.

"Oh, God, oh, God, oh, God."

He nibbled at her ear, his fingers stroking her slow, then fast, then slow again as his cock remained locked in place. She threw her arms up, locked them around her head, her fingers knotting and pulling at her hair as he continued to rub. Circles. Lines. Everything tight and thick.

No air in the room. No air.

The pulse and jerk of cum through his cock as he climaxed.

"Let yourself go, Hallie."

She couldn't. Couldn't breathe. No air. Just him, just his cock and his fingers, his teeth against her throat. He rolled the hood of her clit between his thumb and index finger -- teasing her, driving her over the edge.

And into darkness.

## Chapter Five

Wet and sore in all the right places, Hallie opened her eyes. She was back on the couch in her studio, a heavy blanket covering her from her toes up to her shoulders. She lifted her head long enough to see that the tray was back in the room with her, the carafe replaced and more fresh fruit on ice in the bowl.

No Aaron.

Pouting, she rolled onto her side and saw the first rose petal on the floor. Half a foot away was its perfect twin. And then another, all leading a path to the studio door.

She sat up and looked around for her robe. He had folded and placed it on the arm of the couch and topped it with a note card.

*When you're ready.*

Smiling, Hallie poured a cup of coffee. She drank it slowly, in between bites of chilled mango and pineapple. From the couch, she eyed the sketch she'd left on the easel the night before.

If she were in her real studio, she'd be working instead of contemplating another round of pleasure at the skilled hands of Aaron Ioannides. Still, as her mama used to say, "Sister earned herself a day off."

Not that her mama would approve of what she was doing on her day off.

Putting her cup down, she walked naked to the wardrobe that had been brought into the studio. Aaron had filled it with clothes in her size, but in a more daring style than she was used to. There were lightweight stretchy sweaters to cling to her breasts, sexy wool skirts that wrapped around her ample thighs and hips. Leather boots stood tall next to a pair of tortoise-shell t-strap sandals with a four-inch heel.



Picking a dark crimson sweater and skirt set and matching silk underwear and bra, she headed into the bathroom for a quick shower and a little makeup. Dressed and wearing the tortoise-shell sandals, she followed the rose petals.

The trail led to the Carracci painting that guarded the entrance to Aaron's room. She took a tentative breath. "Open."

The door obeyed, prompting a grin to break across her face at the thought he had programmed the door to recognize her voice. She stepped into the room, the only illumination coming from a fire burning low and a row of candles along the mantle.

She looked at the bed -- empty. The door to the dressing room was closed. She opened it. No Aaron.

Damn. She'd waited too long.

Turning, she scanned the dresser and nightstands looking for something to write a note on. Nothing. Pouting, she completed her turn to find Aaron leaning against the wall, the flicker of candlelight reflected in his gaze.

"*Omorfi*." He moved into the room, slow, almost threatening.

"*Omorfi*? Are you going to translate or do I need to buy a dictionary?" She walked backwards until her knees hit the bed's massive frame.

He grinned, feral and seemingly sharp-toothed, as he gripped her shoulders. He slid his leg between hers, pushing her skirt high up on her thighs. "It means, *moro mou*, I want to eat you."

Closing her eyes, Hallie let him ease her onto the bed. The man was off the hook. He only had to look at her and she was wet. She had to get a grip. She put her arms up, slowing him as he came over the foot rail.

She placed her palms against his chest and lifted her head toward him. "Kiss me." He dropped his head toward her neck. She caught his chin, guided his face upwards. "On the lips."

He lifted a brow, nostrils flaring and his tongue darting out to rest against his top lip. She brought her other hand up, knotting her fingers in his dark curls. She wanted to give him a good shake but then he smiled.

Damn, that grin was going to be the death of her. "You know what I'm talking about."

They'd been intimate twice -- amazingly so. But he'd yet to kiss her on the mouth.

*"Kardhoola mou..."* Hesitating, he chewed at his bottom lip. "It's a family thing."

Now it was her turn to lift a brow. "You mean a Heckle and Jeckle thing?"

Aaron sighed, the sound chipping away at her resolve. He bent toward her throat again and this time she let him. "In my family, you only kiss your wife on the mouth."

Feeling a small flare of temper, she turned her head to the side and stared at him. "That is fucked up!"

He tilted his head, enough that she couldn't see directly into his eyes. His hand at her throat, he stroked her jaw line and offered no defense.

"You can fuck a girl until she passes out, but you can't kiss her?"

"Some traditions you don't break." He'd been holding his weight off her the whole time. Now he slid possessively onto her, the hand at her throat moving to capture her face. He ran his lips along the side of her face, along her earlobe. At the same time, he wedged his leg between hers, forcing her to spread them. "And, as much as I want to kiss you, I don't think you're ready to hop a flight to Vegas."

Was he serious? She closed her eyes, afraid of what he might see if he looked in them. She wasn't sure what it would be, but she damn sure didn't want him knowing before she did.

With the soft whisper of his mouth against her skin, he asked, "So I'm not wrong?"

"Aaron... I..." Damn, he was serious. Or he was seriously playing her. "It's... just..."

Complicated? Hell if it was. She wanted that kiss, wanted him to want her that badly. But marriage two days after hooking up? Hallie drew a shaky breath, looking for something to say. He placed a fingertip to her lips.

Okay, he was telling her to shut up, to let it go. Damned if she'd ever let a man do that before and get away with it, but he was the first to ask with such a look of pain on his face.

Nodding, she closed her eyes. "Just don't let me get wild all by myself."

Sliding her up the bed, Aaron chuckled. He pushed the red skirt up over her bottom to expose her panties. Sensing how wet the fabric must be, a new wave of heat flared across Hallie's body.

Could he see it? Smell it?

Hands on her thighs, he pushed her legs apart and growled. "And if I drive you there first?"

"That would be just fine," she answered, voice shaking as he kissed the inside of her left thigh.

He ran his tongue down to the edge of her panties, then hard against the fabric to tease her through the silk.

She reached down, stopping him as his tongue moved to her right thigh. "I want to see you come," she whispered.

Aaron groaned and bit the flesh of her thigh. He bit again, his finger slipping beneath the silk barrier at the same time to circle her clit.

"Please, Aaron."

Another groan and then he was up the bed, steadying himself with one arm as he leaned over her and unzipped his dress slacks. In less than a heartbeat he had the panties pushed to the side and was burying his cock inside her all the way down to its base.

Propping herself up on her elbows, Hallie spread her legs wider and braced the soles of her sandals against the bed frame. She let her head loll back and gazed up at him through half-slitted eyelids.

Aaron put his hand against the small of her back and then up under the sweater. She was wearing a strapless demi-bra and he unhooked it. He slid his hand around

front and pulled the bra out, leaving her hardened nipples unprotected against the sweater's coarser weave.

He dropped the bra to the floor and brought his hand back down against the sweater and her breast beneath it. She whimpered at the rough press of fabric and then he squeezed, elongating her cry.

He dipped his mouth to her ear. "*Wider, moro mou.*"

Keeping her feet braced, she scooted closer to him and, placing her hands on her knees, pressed them closer to the mattress. The position made her cunt even tighter around him. She gasped and arched her body closer to his.

"Such a sweet pussy," he whispered, giving another rough pull on her breast.

"Aaron..." Hallie fought to keep from thrashing beneath him. He had driven her into a slow, hard climax. Her cream slicked her labia and thighs. She could feel it pearling beneath the silk fabric, her hair down there thick with moisture. And still she kept contracting around him, squeezing out more juice.

Wet as she was, she found him pushing deeper into her, pumping harder and faster.

"With me, Aaron, please."

Her begging unleashed something in him. She saw it flicker across his face and knew she was lost. He was going to do exactly as he pleased because, secretly, it pleased her. She screamed, an intense wave of pleasure crashing against her.

Okay, not so secret. She begged him again, with her eyes.

"No, love." Still inside her, he was backing up, his arms wrapped around her hips to bring her with him. He kept going until he was off the bed and had pulled her ass up where it rested on top of the footboard.

Pulling out for a moment, he peeled her panties away. Using both hands, he pushed the sweater up over her tits. He grabbed them so that each nipple was pinched between a thumb and index finger, while the other fingers dug into the flesh of her heavy breasts. Bucking against the footboard, Hallie threw her hands up over her face.

She felt his hand fall heavy onto her mound and squeeze. At the same time, he pulled his cock all but out, just the fat head making short thrusts inside her. He lifted his hand, brought it down again.

With just enough air left in her to whisper the word, she pleaded, "Again."

He gave her mound another slap, harder than the first two. When he squeezed the flesh, his thumb slid between her labia to rub at her clit. All the while, he kept moving his hips in tight circles, the cap of his erection just inside her cunt. She could feel the bulbous tip knocking against her, increasing the internal pressure on her clit.

She gave a tight little whimper and then cried out at the next slap.

Grinding her hips, she whispered for another, repeating the word in a quick, breathless string until he responded with the sharpest slap yet.

"Open your eyes, Hallie."

She shook her head. Now that her inner freak had just escaped, no way in hell was she opening her eyes.

"No?" His tone was teasing and she just knew he planned on tormenting her more.

Aaron put both hands beneath her and lifted Hallie's ass high off the bed like she were a rag doll. She felt him locking his fingers along the small of her back and then he thrust into her.

"I thought you wanted to watch me come?"

Her hands still covered her face and she pulled them slowly down, her eyes just as hesitant to open. When her eyes finished adjusting, Hallie drew a sharp breath. She'd managed in her thirty-plus years to walk some of the finest galleries in the world. And he was still the most beautiful thing she'd ever seen -- even with his damn sweater still on and his pants falling halfway down his legs.

The face was inescapable -- the eyes fierce, the mouth sensuous. She wanted to kiss him, lick him, smother him with her flesh only to revive him and start all over again.

She shook her head. "I do," she answered.

Aaron widened his stance and pulled her more snugly to him. "Touch yourself."

Pulling her bottom lip into her mouth, she blinked at the request. "Where?"

"Anywhere." His gaze caressed her exposed breasts and the slick hair covering her mound. "Everywhere."

Hallie started slow, trailing her fingertips down to her nipples. She circled the hardened tips, her hips squirming as she did so. She pinched them and felt his cock swell inside her. He moved his hips, left to right, right to left. Deep thrust.

She bit down hard on her lip, forcing herself to keep her eyes open, to keep the groan buried at the back of her throat. Still pinching one breast, she moved the other hand lower. With her index and ring fingers, she spread her labia and slowly started to stroke her clit.

"Like this?" she asked in a whisper.

He nodded, too entranced for words. Light from the fire and candles pulsed across his face and throat, its rhythm matching the flow of blood through her body. With the full strength of his arms and hips, he started fucking her again, lifting her up while he thrust into her, lowering her back down, only to repeat the cycle an instant later.

She kept fingering her clit, her eyes locked on his face and its subtle contortions. She continued watching as he threw his head back, eyes shut tight, and cried her name.

Only then did she surrender to her own climax.

## Chapter Six

Gnawing on the end of an already chewed brush, Hallie stared at the finished canvas. It was dark, disturbing, and, worst of all, it wasn't the piece Aaron had commissioned her to do. Neither were the other six finished pieces.

She turned, dropped the brush into a can of cleaner, and walked to the couch. Plopping down onto the soft cushions, she stared at the commissioned piece. She had completed about seventy percent, with just the finer details remaining -- the pearl, her face, shadows and veining.

No longer allowing Aaron into the studio, she had given him a progress report last night. To say he had been displeased would be an understatement, even if he never said anything directly. He seemed to be on some kind of timeline now -- one he had no intention of communicating to her.

Hallie rolled onto her back and stared up at the blank ceiling. A strand of hair fell across her cheek and eye and she blew it away. Slowly she turned to look back at the easel and the canvases around the room. The prepped but otherwise blank canvas she had started yesterday bothered her the most, particularly with Aaron's unvoiced deadline.

She rolled into a sitting position. "Damn men."

She stood quickly, hands on hips, fingers strumming along her pelvis.

"Damn, damn, damn men." Looking around the floor next to the couch, she found a pair of low-heeled mules. She put them on and then stood there, arms around her chest, gaze flicking between the commissioned piece and the studio door.

It was closing in on two in the afternoon. Aaron would be in his office, which was just as closed to her as her studio was to him. Neither of them seemed capable of getting any work done in the other's presence.

She marched to the door and flung it open. She wasn't going to wait until evening to talk to him. By the time night rolled around, any conversation she started ended with her on her back and moaning.

She strode down the main hall, past the library, her steps as fast as she could make them with the heels of the mules slapping against her foot. Aaron had a sixth sense about when she was approaching his office. He'd never told her flat out that she wasn't welcome to visit him there. But he always managed to meet her just outside the room with the door closed.

Not today.

She closed the last few feet to the door and turned the knob without knocking. Just inside the threshold, she froze. He was sitting at his desk, its surface clear but for a few small pieces of sculpture. There was no computer, no printer -- no indication whatsoever that there was work going on in the office. He was just sitting there, staring back at her.

"Have you finished, then?"

It didn't matter that he'd kept his tone casual. The question annoyed her. She took another step into the room, her gaze narrowing in the low light. "I'm hardly here to tell you I'm done. The remaining detail work sure as hell takes more than the six hours since I left our bed this morning."

"Then why are you here?"

All right, now he was getting a tone. Not quite peeved, but hurried. She looked away from him, her gaze falling on the stone wall to the right of his desk. Drawing a sharp breath, she moved to the wall and put her hand on the carving in the center. It was smooth as glass, but the room was too dark to pick out the details.

"Is this all one cut?"

"Yes." He had moved from behind the desk and was standing beside her, his hand on her elbow.

She didn't budge. "Turn a light on."



He moved back to his desk, opened a drawer and the room's recessed lights brightened. She took a few steps back. The carving was monstrously huge, its theme playing off that of the Carracci painting with the three-headed dog. She smiled, wondering how she'd fallen in lust with the Armani version of a Goth Boi.

"Obsidian?"

"Yes, from Lipari."

She returned to stand in front of it, her hands exploring the contours of the dog's heads. All three had their teeth bared, the fangs razor sharp. It was amazing -- the size of the stone, the workmanship. And he'd kept her from it by keeping her out of his office.

Glancing over her shoulder, she frowned at him, but he just lifted his brows, as if to repeat his earlier question.

"I'm here to tell you that if you think you're stamping a deadline on the commission all of a sudden, you can eat it."

He had moved closer to her again and she flounced away, her gaze in search of the room's next extraordinary curiosity. She noticed it a second later on a table at the opposite end of the room. She approached the piece and knelt in front of the table to study it. A cast iron set of scales, the plates held a black feather on one side and a carved heart on the other. Only, somehow, the carved stone balanced equal to the feather. She lifted each plate separately and tested their weight.

"How does it work?"

"Magic."

Hallie responded with a hiss. She had researched enough about Aaron before their first meeting to know he had a truckload of patents to his name across more than one branch of science, although most were in engineering and mining processes. She lifted the carved heart off the scales and the plate holding the feather slowly lowered. "C'mon. How do you get it to balance? I'm not going to run out and file a competing patent or anything."

He had followed her over to the table and he took the heart from her. "It doesn't always balance."

Aaron put the heart back on the scales, its plate sinking as it should. "It depends on the heart."

She pointed at the heart at last weighing heavier than the feather. "Oh, and whose heart is that?"

"A thirty-six-year-old investment banker on the upper east side of Manhattan. He overdosed on ecstasy this morning while sexing up the family's nineteen-year-old au pair."

"Ooo-kay. You're kinda cute when you're being weird." She gave him a side glance and asked, "And my heart?"

He put his finger on the plate holding the feather and slowly pushed it down so that the feather balanced heavier than the heart. When he took his finger away, the plates remained in place.

"Nice trick." She turned to him and studied his expression. She put her hand on his chest. He was an odd one -- not as eccentric as some millionaires she'd read about, but he certainly had a taste for the darker side of existence as long as it was beautiful and mysterious, like the scales or the obsidian Cerberus.

She gently tapped his chest. "And yours?"

He shook his head, his gaze darkening. "I'm all out of magic for the day, Hallie."

He turned, his steps quickly taking him to his office door.

Shit. He had to be headed for her studio now that she'd invaded his office. She followed after him, trying to read the set of his shoulders, the way he held his hands close to his hips despite the long strides. His mood seemed to have done a one-eighty after her last question. Not that she was sure -- a month in his bed and the only sure thing she could read was his passion.

"You can't put a timeline on creativity," she reminded him as his hand came down on the door handle to her studio. "And..."

She trailed off as he entered the room and turned a slow semi-circle.

"I suspected as much."

"I'd be painting other pieces at my home studio."

Approaching the piece Hallie had finished that afternoon, Aaron gave her a side glance. "And your point is, what?"

She opened her mouth then quickly shut it. She didn't have a point and sure as hell didn't want to be back in her home studio -- or her old bedroom. She was the most productive she'd been since her mother had passed. Even with the freakishly invisible staff, the accommodations were amazing, and the entertainment...

That was to die for.

"No point," she admitted.

He put his hand near the canvas, his fingertips a few centimeters from the top layer of paint. "Dry?"

She nodded. "Acrylics."

His touch light, he outlined the painting's foreground. "How do you know what it looks like?"

She frowned. "Google images. You stocked the room with a Mac Pro."

He shook his head, his eyes flicking to her again before he bent down for a closer look at the oyster shell. "You didn't see one that looked like this."

He was right. She had looked at resource photos online but all the shells were too razor-edged or spiky along their lips. She'd made the edges as softly rolling curves, just like --

She tried to shake the image out of her head. The image of the oyster shell that could have held Aaron's black pearl was meant to be dark, not sensuous. But the instant his fingertip had touched the canvas, the picture was transformed.

His face an inch from the canvas, he murmured something like, "Closer than I thought."

"What?"

His head snapped back, his blue gaze narrowing. "I didn't say anything."

*The hell you didn't* ran through her head but she only shrugged.

Aaron turned to the next canvas and Hallie thought she detected a slight jerk.

"Hired hands," she offered. It was something of a self-portrait -- her sitting in front of a vanity mirror while disembodied, skeletal hands ran a brush through her hair, placed heavy baroque rings on her fingers and applied mascara to her lashes. While she had stopped teasing him about his invisible staff, the painting played on that theme, only the skeleton hands were freakier than the voices over the intercom, or their owners, who always managed to show up and clean the room when she had just left it.

Not looking at the other images, Aaron walked to the couch and sat down with his hands in front of his face. Hallie joined him on the couch, her fingertips gently resting on the back of his neck. She curled her other hand around his biceps and waited for him to stop hiding.

It was confusing as hell. His main collection was full of life, including the four canvases he'd already bought from her. But his room, the dark corners of the house, his office -- all of the truly personal spaces were filled with somber, foreboding pieces. The pieces in front of him were nothing like her usual work, but she had thought he would like them.

"Aaron, what's wrong?"

He lifted his head from his hands, his gaze going back to the paintings. "You need to finish the commi --" Staring at the blank canvas, he stopped and pointed. "And that one?"

That one she didn't want to talk about.

He looked around the studio again, his gaze seeming to unerringly track the progression of her themes. "You were going to paint your mother?"

Lying in Aaron's arms one night, Hallie had told him about the cancer, the surgery followed by months of chemo, and then the last few days when her mother had demanded to be released from the hospital so she could die at home.

"That first visit to the doctor..." Hallie stopped and brushed a tear from her cheek. "I showed up at the house to start her portrait to find that she couldn't even get out of bed."

She brushed a second tear away and then slammed her fist on her knee. "I had twenty fucking months --"

Aaron wrapped his arms around her. Cradling her head against his chest, he stroked her hair and shushed her. "Do your mother's portrait first. There's still time for the commission."

"I can't see her like she was, only what the chemo turned her into." She pushed him away and wrapped her arms around herself. "I just don't know how."

"I do." Aaron's voice was firm, and so was his touch at her shoulders. He pushed Hallie down onto the cushions until she was prone on her back.

Leaving her on the couch, he walked over to the cart next to the easel. Facing away from her, he stripped, leaving his clothes folded on her stool. He opened the cart's top tray and pulled something out, his hand tucked slightly behind him as he returned to Hallie.

It was maybe six feet from the easel to the couch, but watching him walk back, sunlight from the window behind her playing over his powerful body, relaxed her. With his deep tan, he looked like he'd been cast in bronze, his muscles perfectly sculpted by a master. Except for his cock -- a master sculptor would have left that small and flaccid. Aaron looked like a real Titan in every respect, with his broad shoulders, ripped abs and corded arms and thighs balanced by the centerpiece of his erection. Watching it bob toward her, she loosened her arms, ready to reach out to him, to curl her fingers around the thick rod and pull it to her mouth.

He caught her hands with just one of his, his strong fingers trapping her wrists in an iron grip. He pushed her arms back onto her chest and then covered her with his body. That quickly, he had immobilized her.

His face had lost its usual playfulness. It seemed replaced by a casual menace. Feeling it, she tried to free her hands, but he had them locked tightly between their bodies.

He nuzzled her cheek. "You're afraid that you're going to die like your mother. That's why you can't hold any part of her clearly in your mind. You're afraid of the

surgery." Metal flashed as he brought his other hand between their lower bodies. "It's why you hid your sensuality for so long -- afraid the doctors would come along with their scalpels and take it away."

She could feel the back of his hand against her thighs, up under the skirt, and then there was the sound of fabric shearing.

*Boxcutters. He's got the boxcutters.*

He ran the handle along her panties, following the line of her clit. "It's never been your mother's death you were afraid of..."

Still holding the boxcutters, he slid his hand inside her underwear. The back of his finger stroked her pussy while the blade slashed through the silk with heart-stopping precision and speed.

When she couldn't free her hands, Hallie grew still. "Aaron, I'm not ready to let you --"

He pulled his head back, his gaze sharper than she'd ever seen it. "Let me?" Shifting his weight, he made her twist at the waist until her arms were jammed against the sofa's backrest. He managed, despite her squirming, to get his hand up under her blouse and the tight line of her bra. Again, cutting the bra and top from the inside out, he repeated, "Let me?"

Freeing a leg, she brought her heel down on his calf, but he didn't flinch.

"Yes. Let you. So far you've just ruined clothes you paid for. You're even keeping your hand between the blade and my skin. The lesson's ov --"

Feeling the tip of the blade against her nipple, Hallie froze. Aaron stared at her for a long second before he lifted the blade. He dipped his head, his mouth closing over the areola to suck at it. His tongue ran a slow circle around the perimeter and then he held the nipple tight between his lips as he lifted his head.

"Aaron..." She fought to keep the pleasure out of her voice. He knew exactly how to tease her breasts, to bring out every ounce of sensitivity despite their heavy size.

He released her breast and slowly shook his head at her. He dropped the boxcutters to the floor. With another twist of his powerful body, he had her on her

stomach. He bent low over her, his erection sliding against her bottom as he retrieved the boxcutters.

She kicked at his back and felt her heel connect with his spine. "I'm not enjoying this."

"Didn't expect you to." There was the sound of more fabric being shredded and then the boxcutters flew over her head and bounced off the wall. It took him maybe five seconds more before he had her hands bound behind her back.

Leaving her on the couch, he walked into the bathroom. She twisted into a standing position, then looked around for something to cut away the silk straps from around her wrists. Seeing only the boxcutters, she headed toward them, but Aaron was out of the bathroom too soon, tossing her effortlessly over his shoulder and carrying her back to the couch.

She kicked at his face -- missed. "Untie me. Now!"

The bastard laughed, caught her foot and kissed it center sole. She jerked her leg back and saw what he had gone into the bathroom for -- lube. He would need it if he planned on fucking her. She sure as hell wasn't wet.

With his big hands wrapped around her thighs, he kept her legs forced apart. Instead of entering Hallie, Aaron placed his cock against her mound and slowly rocked in place as she twisted beneath him. He brought his mouth close to hers, his lips tracing its edge. He still hadn't kissed her mouth in all these weeks. Now he was trying to blackmail her with the promise of it.

"You can walk out," he whispered. "Leave. I'll send you a check for the commission. You can take it with you -- the check and the canvas."

She tried to head butt him but he was too fast for her. He circled her lips again, his tongue licking slowly at the sides of her mouth.

"But you'll always have that block. You'll go to your grave with your mother's picture unfinished."

Tears rolled down the side of her face. She twisted far enough that she could motion with her bound hands. "And what is this supposed to teach me?"

"You're too afraid of dying." He kissed her eyes closed and brought his mouth directly over hers, his breath warm against her lips as he spoke. "Leads to too much ego control."

God, she'd given up all ego control in his bed -- on the head of his cock and the tip of his tongue. Did he really think she was still holding back on him?

Kissing everywhere but her mouth, he continued to rock against her, the pressure of his cock against her clit building. Her legs tensed and she tried not to push against him or rock her hips in unison. His hands closed over her breasts. He squeezed, knowing just the right amount of pressure that would make her moan.

He'd always made it about getting her off, bringing her pleasure at heights she'd never experienced with any other lover.

"Aaron." She kept her voice calm. "You don't want to hurt me."

"No." He slid lower down her body while his hand reached up. His fingers curled around her throat. "It's just something that has to happen."

"No. It doesn't."

His only response was to pop the cap open on the lube. She felt the cold squirt of jelly against her labia. He kept her pinned by the throat, the pressure only increasing when she tried to move.

Slowly, he spread the lubricant between her lips, around the opening to her cunt. He slid a finger or two inside her, his body oddly angled so that he could hold her throat with one hand and finger-fuck her with the other while he kept his mouth against her clit and gently rolled the hood between his lips.

He stroked the inside of her pussy, his fingers finding the sweet spot he knew so well and gently rubbing against it.

"What are you going to do?" Her body started shaking from the effort of resisting him.

He met her gaze, his tongue taking long, hard swipes at the spine of her clit while he pushed another thick finger into her pussy. He curled his tongue around the sensitive ridge, rhythmically stroking and sucking the line while his thumb rubbed a



tight circle against the bottom of the hood and the rest of his hand possessed her cunt. Forgetting the hand at her throat, Hallie melted against the cushion. She pressed her eyes tight, unwilling to witness her hips' rolling surrender as he fucked her with all four fingers.

"Not yet, Hallie." He shifted forward so that his head rested against her chest as he listened to her little gasps and moans and sucked at her lush breast.

She wanted her hands free, wanted to grab him and hold on tight as she felt the whole of his hand stretching her. Her chest rising and falling in a pant, her cunt closed around his wrist. He started to pump and then, with the hand at her throat, he tightened his grip.

Squeezing, he whispered her name, his words carrying with them the unmistakable sound of ownership. She turned her head, tried to twist free. Her pulse pounded low and hypnotic through her head, each beat matched by a contraction of her pussy around his fist.

The floor moved around them. She threw a leg up over the back of the couch, opening herself to him. He relaxed his hold on her throat and her head lolled to the side. He stopped the thrust of his hand, easing her back from the edge of climax as he did nothing more than clench and unclench his fist inside her.

Slowly, he returned to alternating between his fingers tight around her throat and his hand flexing and pumping inside her. She knew -- her life, her pleasure, were completely at his command. The knowledge only intensified her climax.

Colors bled to gray at the edge of her vision. Shadows took shape and fell like a blanket over her face, blacking the world out, leaving her to the sound of her breath squeezed through her throat, the wet thrust of his closed hand as she trembled around it.

She was coming, had been doing so for what seemed like minutes. Every time she thought she would lose consciousness, he pulled her back from the edge, the rhythm of it submerging her in an orgasmic trance.

Letting go of her throat, he moved his head down to her cunt. His fist still controlling her sex, he rolled his tongue around the hood of her clit then gently suckled the tip. She was jerking uncontrollably, her thighs pressed tight around his arm and wrist as she rode her climax. When he started to pull out, his slow, teasing withdrawal unleashed sobs from Hallie.

Aaron reached beneath her and untied her hands. Then he kissed and massaged his way up her body until he had his big arms wrapped around her, her head cradled against his chest.

"I can't think."

He chuckled, his lips against her throat. "I'd be insulted if you could."

Ignoring the deep throb between her legs, she forced her arms up and around his neck. She grabbed a handful of hair, tried to knot her fingers in the thick curls but her fingers wouldn't obey.

"You'll be lucky if I don't Krazy Glue your dick to your stomach," she warned.

He reached between her legs, a quickly inserted middle finger revealing the deep muscle contractions that still pulsed through her cunt. He nipped at her ear. "You'd miss my cock too much, *moro mou*."

Biting at her lower lip, she looked away. True as it was, Hallie didn't want to admit it.

## Chapter Seven

Two more weeks passed in a creative fugue. Hallie finished the portrait of her mom, paint breaking across the canvas in a splash of rich, sunbaked colors and not the institutional gray that had marked the last months of Mama Brandt's life. With the image done, she was finally able to sit down and finish the piece Aaron had commissioned.

He'd placed it on the wall opposite their bed last night, the canvas unframed to give the oils time to cure. With the picture up, he had fucked her senseless -- in the bed, at the edge of the bed, on the floor.

He'd spent an hour eating her out -- his lips, tongue and fingers teasing her cunt every which way possible until he had taken her head in his hands and held her still as he locked eyes with her. They'd fucked like that, lips open, tongues touching, so close to taking that forbidden kiss. When their climax came, it came hard, draining them so that they had quickly fallen asleep, her secure in his arms, him still buried deep inside her, their bodies nestled tight together.

Falling asleep in his embrace, the last thing she had expected was to awaken alone in his big bed.

Hallie snatched a robe from his closet and headed to her studio.

The door was open. Sheets draped the furniture. The easel was gone, as was the paint cart. Crates filled the room -- one for each of the other paintings she had completed.

Hallie walked over to the intercom, pressed the call button and released.

Silence.

She pressed the call button again.

Still nothing. Not that she could blame them. Must suck to kick your boss's lover out.

She marched to his office, heart sinking at the wide-open door until she saw the dark curls.

He looked up -- and her heart sank all over again.

Not Aaron, but Heckle.

Or Jeckle. It was no use trying to think of them separately. They walked as a unit, talked as a unit. Hell, they probably even breathed as a unit. If they bothered to breathe at all.

He looked to his left and she followed his gaze. Standing in front of the stone wall was his pale, bloodless twin. Next to him, a wide section of the slate floor was missing. Rough-cut stairs descended into pitch black.

She cinched the robe tighter, her gaze darting between the stairs and Aaron's uncles.

Was that it? Had he left Heckle and Jeckle there to break the news that he was kicking her to the curb now that the painting was done and he had no more lessons to teach her?

Well, she sure as hell had a few to teach him. "Where is he?"

Like old women, they turned to one another, ignoring Hallie as they talked in faintly thrilled voices.

"He'll try to keep her."

"They never stay, do they?"

Hallie jabbed her finger in their general direction. This time she yelled her question at them. "Where is he?"

They pressed closer together, the dark one pulling a pocket watch out and checking the time. "Tick tock, my beauty. You don't want to wait for one of us to answer that question."

She eyed the opening in the floor. She couldn't see more than four steps down.

"Not afraid of the dark, are you?"

“Claustrophobic, perhaps?”

She bent toward the stairs, ready to call his name. Her throat seized. If he was down there, he wouldn’t answer. She knew it low in her stomach. If he had any intention of answering her, he wouldn’t be down there in the first place. She glanced suspiciously back at Heckle and Jeckle.

Maybe they’d stuck him down there?

They smiled, showing her the one feature they shared completely -- gray gums.

Might as well be goddamn mummies, she thought and hiked the robe a few inches with one hand.

She headed down the steps, slowly placing one foot down at a time. When her head was level with the floor, she placed her palm flat against the wall. The texture was all wrong, not like the bedrock she would expect in the valley floor. Instead, it was smooth like the carved wall she’d just left behind.

The stairs curved. She counted each one as she went. Christ had descended a thousand steps into the underworld -- the ground below Aaron’s house leveled out at one hundred thirty-eight.

Arms outstretched to touch both sides of the passage, she kept walking, her count starting over from one as she felt for any breaks in the wall that indicated a side passage.

Cold and moist, the air wrapped around her like an embrace. She forced herself to keep the same pace. She didn’t want to run face-first into a wall or a low overhang in the ceiling. If Aaron had needed to leave without waking her, only Heckle and Jeckle knew she was down here.

Hallie comforted herself with that thought until a blue light flared ahead of her, showing that the passage opened onto a chamber a few feet ahead. The light brightened as she approached and Aaron’s body slowly took shape in front of her.

More blue flames flickered to life along the wall. Aaron turned away from her and walked into the next chamber, the folds of his black robe billowing behind him. He

came to a stop in front of a black sarcophagus. The piece was huge and topped by a carved angel.

She walked past him and ran her fingers over the familiar features. "Your face."

She glanced once over her shoulder, but he kept silent. She ran her hand along the head, across the strong neck to the rising expanse of wings. She thought back to the scales, still placed on the table upstairs. Leaning her head against the statue, she asked, "Your feather?"

What the hell was she thinking?

Aaron answered with the brush of his fingers against the back of her neck. "You're not crazy, Hallie. Neither am I."

He turned her until she faced him. Parting the edges of her robe with his finger, he stroked the skin just over her heart. "Your deadline for the painting was today. I didn't know it until..."

He looked to the dark passage that led back up to the house.

"Until Heckle and Jeckle showed up at the crack of dawn?"

He offered a slight nod, his gaze never leaving the line he'd traced down her breast.

Hallie wrapped her hand around Aaron's. "You really expect me to believe that shit? How many lovers have you fed this line of bull to?"

He lifted his gaze, just a second's worth, to the wall. She looked and saw three vases topped with lids. She pushed him back from her and took a step closer to the wall.

Not vases.

Urns.

And more than three. She turned, counting until he interrupted her.

"Before you? Sixteen."

She came to the sixteenth urn and saw, next to it, the pearl shell.

Her shell -- just as she had painted it.

"Only the Green River Killer had that many."

"I don't kill, Hallie. I judge. I rule... I..." He approached an urn -- seemingly the first and the largest. "These are the women who have ruled with me -- who weighed each heart until their own grew too heavy from the task."

For a moment, she felt sorry for him.

Until she remembered that he was crazy as a bed bug.

She took a step back, and then another. He lifted a hand as if to halt her and the lights dimmed. When she turned to run back up the passage, the walls and door were in shadow. Trailing her hand against a wall, she tried to remember; had there only been one doorway into the room?

He followed, stopping when she stopped, his hand out and ready to touch her but never bridging the gap between their bodies. "It's your heart, Hallie."

Bright light flared and died in an instant, leaving heavy black shadows dancing in her vision so that every wall looked like it had a door or two in front of it.

Turning sharply, she ran into Aaron.

"Let go!"

For once, he obeyed her.

If only he would stop talking.

"You can feel it." He reached out, just far enough to stroke a fingertip down the inside line of her breast. "Not enough blood coming in. Just a small area of the aorta stretched thin right now."

Taking a step back, Hallie fell to her knees.

"A few minutes at most, and it will tear." He dropped to his knees with her. "Before then, your brain will begin starving for oxygen. You'll begin to see things..."

She was seeing things now. She reached out and gripped his forearms while shadows danced behind his back like raven's wings.

He inched closer, reversing their position until he was holding her by the back of her arms. "You don't have to die, Hallie. I cannot give you life. But if you stay with me, I can give you afterlife."

She was sinking to the floor. Aaron's words grew fainter. He sat down and pulled her onto his lap, his whole body cradling her.

"Stay with me. You can sculpt deaths, conduct last breaths..."

Hallie thought of the studio, the draped furniture and crates. She rested her head against his chest, struggling to fill her lungs with enough air to speak until she managed a weak "But not create?"

He tilted his face to hers, his lips, for the last time, not quite touching hers in a kiss. "You can create beautiful deaths for the innocent, move the world to action with it --"

"But not paint," she pressed.

"No, not that, *kardhoola mou*." He put his hand over her heart, pressing as if he could slow time. His other hand cradled her head. Tears fell, as dark and brilliant as the rest of him. "Just a kiss, Hallie. That's all I'm asking."

*You only kiss your wife.* Was that it? To kiss him was to become Hell's Mistress?

The words wouldn't come. She tried, but cold crept over her chest, freezing her lips. He would have to take it, reading her consent in her gaze if he could.

Aaron dipped his head, his tongue gently prying at her lips. His thumb pressed at her chin, coaxing her mouth to open. He sealed his lips to hers, his every exhalation thawing her frozen limbs and filling her with something that was neither life nor death.

He wrapped his arms around her, kissing her more deeply. He explored Hallie's mouth, his tongue stroking and wrestling with hers before he took her bottom lip between his teeth and tugged at it.

She looked at the urns that lined the wall. Would their failure be hers? Dismissing the idea, she wrapped her arms around Aaron's neck and pulled him back into the kiss. Above them, doors slammed as the uncles left, disappointed.

It was time those old birds learned a new trick.

And she was just the dark queen to teach them.



## **Colette Howard**

Born and raised on military installations across the U.S. and Germany, Colette Howard finally met the man of her dreams (a sexy Greek Ram!) five years ago and settled down in his hometown -- America's Motor City, where she misses being close to her sisters but loves Detroit's energy.

New to fiction, she has spent the last nine years writing and editing business content for a national audience. A blue-collar girl with a white-collar education, she's grown into a first-rate chameleon, equally at home in the boardroom or down on the softball diamond, ordering up caviar or hot wings, Dom Perignon or Dos Equis. She brings the same variety to the sensual romances she pens late at night, after the Ram has collapsed into an exhausted but oh-so-satisfied sleep.