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*Even a plaything can be pushed too far...*

**Power.**

Chloe Barnes thought her marriage to a wealthy politician would be the stuff of fairy tales. Instead, he took advantage of her naiveté and used her as a plaything to fulfill his twisted sexual needs. Ten years is enough. She returns to Bellhaven Island to sell the summer cottage she inherited, hoping the money will buy her freedom—and custody of her daughters.

**Memories.**

Fisherman Dustin McDougal never forgot the childhood crush he once had on the fairy-like Chloe. The woman she's become has a haunted look that brings his feelings back, stronger than ever...with a mature edge. Along with all his protective instincts.

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Their passion blows stronger than a Maine nor'easter, awakening Chloe to the joy of true love. Yet it may not be strong enough to free her from the past...

Warning: This title contains politicians doing all sorts of nasty things and flashbacks of male domination. It also features hot sex on a boat, hot sex in an attic, hot sex on a work bench...you get the idea

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# Doll

*Juniper Bell*

# Dedication

To Scott, for all your sweet loving.

# Chapter One

As the *Island Enchantment* rounded the cliffs of Hope Island, Chloe Barnes huddled in the cabin, sheltered from the brisk March wind. As a child, Chloe had seen the shape of her beloved Bellhaven Island as two arms spread wide to embrace her. Now, instead of eagerly searching for familiar faces on the wharf, her eyes were drawn to the eastern tip of Bellhaven, where the Garwood estate lurked behind a stand of snow-covered pines. A wave of sickness passed over her, and she knew it had nothing to do with the rocking of the ferryboat.

The Garwood estate. Where all her hopes had begun, and died. Where she'd lost her innocence. And gained—what? A millionaire husband? Status? The kind of life written up in magazines? No, she'd gained only one thing that mattered. Make that two—Halley and Merry. For her two girls, she was going back to Bellhaven.

Chloe gripped the metal bench as the *Island Enchantment* slammed into the waves. Ice-cold spray splashed through a crack in the window onto the back of her neck, making her gasp. She shifted to one side, away from the crack, and saw that her tote bag had gotten sprayed as well. Maybe she should throw it overboard. Along with the document Andrew wanted her to sign, the one that would shut her up forever. Maybe she should jump in after it.

The thought of disappearing beneath the waves was so alluring, she jumped to her feet and moved to the back of the ferry, farther from the tempting ocean. She couldn't think that way. Her girls needed her. They were all that mattered.

An elderly man in a slicker, worn over a thick wool sweater, gave her a wary look. "You ain't gonna be sick, are ya?"

"No. I'm okay."

He grunted, and went back to his own thoughts. Mainers knew how to mind their own business. As a kid, she'd loved hovering nearby while the old-timers fished off the wharf, telling their tall tales. Bellhaven was the only place in her sheltered childhood where she'd had any freedom. Summer meant she could ride her bike by herself to the wharf. It meant she could watch the other kids dive into the churning wake of the ferry. It meant she could watch Andrew Garwood, a godlike five years older, lead his pack of friends on one exciting adventure after another.

And then one day, when she was fifteen, and he was on summer break from college, he'd looked up from the water skis he was hooking up to his speedboat, and asked her if she wanted to have a go. From her perch on the edge of the wharf, she'd looked behind her, certain he was talking to someone else.

"I can't," she'd finally said shyly. "I'm not allowed."

"You will be."

She'd hopped anxiously behind him as he strode down the road to her parents' door. It was a shock that he even knew where her house was.

"Good morning, sir, I'm Andrew Garwood, and I'd like to request the company of your daughter for a brief and perfectly safe water-skiing outing."

It turned out even her parents weren't immune to the Garwood name. He'd turned back to her, green eyes blazing with cocky triumph. "Let's go, doll."

From then on, he'd been able to do anything he wanted with her.

Anything.

If her parents had had any idea what twisted things Andrew was capable of, they probably would have shot him that very day. Part of her wished they had.

But then there would be no Halley and Merry.

Out the window, she saw a lobster boat motor into view. It too headed for the wharf, and the man at the wheel raised his arm in greeting as he passed. He stood in the wheelhouse, feet braced, one hand casually on the wheel. Dark hair under a blue watch cap. Yellow Helly Hansen oilskins. Tall. Strong. Free. Was there something familiar about him? She watched him wistfully. What would it be like to be captain of your own ship? Master of your own destiny? Able to steer your boat in whatever direction you liked? Obligated to answer to no one?

She couldn't even imagine it. She'd never spent a single night on her own. Never read a book that hadn't been selected by her parents. Never kissed a man other than Andrew. Her naiveté had been truly breathtaking. From the stifling shelter of her parents' home, she'd gone directly into marriage with Andrew at the age of eighteen. And nothing in the first eighteen years of her life had prepared her for the next ten.

Was that why Andrew had picked her? She'd been a blank slate. Obedient. Compliant. Dazzled. Only one time had she objected to his demands.

*"I don't want to wear that, please, Andrew," she said, in the soft, polite way her parents had taught her. Her stomach clenched at the sight of the outfit he held out to her. It was made of layers of transparent filmy fabric that would hide nothing. The scooped neckline drooped low in soft waves, and she knew it would barely cover her nipples. There would be no underwear. There never was, unless specifically selected by Andrew.*

*"Put it on. We don't have time for your childishness."*

*"But Andrew, everyone will see my..."*

*"What did you say?"*

*"They'll see my..."*

*"Wrong word, doll. Your body is mine. Everything here is mine." He walked around her, eyeing her. She was already down to bra and shorts, and he reached inside her bra to cup her breasts and finger her nipples. "I want to show you off, and you should be proud. If you weren't so sexy, I wouldn't bother. I want people to know what a tight little wife I have. What an obedient, adoring wife." He squeezed her crotch through her shorts.*

*"You know I adore you, Andrew, but please. Why do you want to shame me like that?"*

*"Shame you?" The question seemed to enrage him. "Shame is having to ask my wife twice for something so simple." He pressed the intercom button, the one that summoned his assistant.*

*"What are you doing?"*

*"Teaching you a lesson."*

*Andrew's assistant, an acne-ridden young man named Colin, just graduated from college and awestruck at being in the orbit of the Garwoods, appeared in the doorway of their bedroom suite.*

*"Colin, look at my wife."*

*Confused, Colin looked over at Chloe. Her eyes dropped to the floor. She felt herself begin to float, in the way that provided the only refuge she could find.*

*"Isn't she sexy?"*

*"Ye-es."*

*"Haven't you ever wondered what she looks like naked?"*

*Stunned silence.*

*"It's a simple question, Colin. I'm your employer, and I pay you to tell the truth."*

*"Yes-s-s."*

*"She seems to have trouble believing in herself. I need your help now, this is very important. Take off my wife's bra."*

*"No!" said Chloe. "I'll do it."*

*"Don't move, Chloe. Colin, take off her top."*

*Colin moved to Chloe's side. She could feel him shaking next to her. "Sorry," he whispered in her ear as he pushed down the straps and exposed her breasts. Floating high overhead by now, she said nothing. His breath was coming fast, hot against her neck.*

*"Pull the bra over her head." Andrew ordered. Chloe closed her eyes and obediently raised her arms as Colin eased the bra off her body. Try as he might, he couldn't avoid brushing his thumb against her right nipple, and she could hear his stifled gasp as he felt her flesh. Her breasts were always a surprise to everyone Andrew showed them off to. On her slender, delicate frame, with her pale skin, her breasts stood unexpectedly proud and heavy, with long pink nipples that responded to the lightest touch. When aroused,*



*they darkened to an erotic dark-red. And it took almost nothing to arouse them. Now they sprang free in the open air.*

*"Spectacular, aren't they?" said Andrew.*

*"Yes," said Colin in a strangled voice.*

*"If you work hard and make your fortune, you too can have a woman with tits like this. Until then, look, but don't touch. Are you turned on?"*

*"Yes."*

*"It would be strange if you weren't. Now, take off her shorts."*

*"Are you sure?"*

*"Don't question me. Just do it."*

*And Chloe stood, imagining herself far, far away, maybe in the treetops of Bellhaven, maybe in a cloud high in the sky, as Andrew's assistant stripped off her shorts. Before her marriage, no one had ever seen her naked, not even her parents. Her family was practically Amish in their modesty. Since her marriage, she'd lost count of the strangers who had ogled her exposed body. This time, it wasn't a stranger, and a weird tension vibrated between her and Colin. They were almost the same age, after all. And while at first he'd been careful and gentle, now she could feel his surging lust. Andrew had just had her waxed. Colin's eyes were fixed avidly to the sight of her smooth, vulnerable sex.*

*"Have you ever seen anything so tempting?" asked Andrew.*

*"No." The young man could barely speak.*

*"One touch, then."*

*Chloe stiffened. This had never happened before. Look, but don't touch—since her marriage she had clung to the reassurance of that refrain. Before she fully realized what was happening, a clammy young hand covered her sex, greedily feeling her up. She staggered backwards, and Andrew moved behind her to hold her up.*

*"That's enough." But the greedy hand dug deeper into her folds, and the kid's mouth latched onto her nipple.*

*"Get out, you little pervert."*

*Colin finally pulled away. Chloe could see the darkening stain on the front of his pants.*

*"Sorry, Mr. Garwood. I couldn't help—I'm sorry."*

*"You can pick up your final check tomorrow. Leave now."*

*As Colin scurried from the room, Andrew pressed himself against Chloe's back. She could feel his hard arousal against her buttocks.*

*"Did you have to fire him?" she whispered. It hadn't been his fault, after all.*

*"You liked that, you little whore? I've never let anyone else touch you before. I didn't know I'd been depriving you."*

*"No! That's not what I mean."*

*He picked up the disputed dress. "Lift your arms, doll." She did and he pulled it over her head. As she'd expected, her nipples were barely covered by the thin folds, and they shone rose-red through the material.*

*"You don't know what you mean. You don't know what you want. Anyway, that's for me to decide. At the party tonight, whenever anyone asks, you pull up your dress and show them the goods, got it? If they want to see these..." He tweaked her nipples, and an electric shock shot through her. "You pull them out and offer them up like candy on a platter. If I ever see you hesitate, I'll let the next person, whoever it is, help himself to these gorgeous breasts of mine. Got it?"*

*She nodded. Andrew held all the cards. She was a prisoner in a multi-million dollar cage. Who could help her? Not her parents, to whom she could never admit her shame. Not herself. She had no money of her own, and had never even learned to drive. Not her friends, who were all Andrew's friends.*

*Wearing the see-through dress, she floated through that night's party, displaying herself on demand and, at the end, as always, Andrew ravaged her body, the body so many had admired and desired, the body that belonged to him. The body he never bothered to satisfy.*

The *Island Enchantment* bumped against the Bellhaven wharf, and Chloe jerked back to awareness. If she didn't watch herself, the memories would drown her as quickly as the ocean waves. She gathered her backpack and tote bag, and queued up behind the other passengers.

On the wharf, Dustin MacDougal tied his boat to the cleat. Another trip into town for supplies, another eighty bucks down the drain. Fuel costs were worse than ever. It was almost enough to make him skip down to Florida for the winter. There wasn't much lobstering to be done this time of year. But still, to him, Bellhaven was at its best with no summer visitors, no camera-toting tourists, no one but true-blue islanders. Only sixty people lived on Bellhaven all year round. And those sixty people got to know each other extremely, sometimes painfully, well.

As if on cue, his cell phone rang. "Yeah."

"It's Gary. Didja get my stuff?"

"Stuff? Damn, Gary, I told you to call and remind me." Dustin balanced the phone on his shoulder while he tied the stern line to the cleat. His boat banged against the foam fenders. It sure was bumpy out there today.

"I tried, but your cell phone was off. You should keep it on, how many times I got to tell you?" Gary whined.

"I'll try to remember. From now on, I swear."

"It's too late now."

Dustin smiled at the petulant tone in Gary's voice. Then he scolded himself. It wasn't nice to tease a quasi-alcoholic. "You want to come get this box of liquor, or you want me to drop it off?"

"Goddamn you, I shoulda known you wouldn't do me like that..."

Someone caught his eye, and Dustin nearly dropped his cell into the ocean from pure shock.

Chloe Barnes. It had to be. No one else had hair that color, like gold champagne flowing down her back. Her hair had always been one shade lighter than her tawny skin, until the summer sun bleached it even lighter, into a lemony blonde. He'd always loved seeing her hair flying behind her, like a flag of sunshine, as she rode her bike toward the wharf. Always alone, always with that shy smile. The island kids were all fascinated by the quiet, stunning girl who was rarely allowed to play with them. With someone else, there would have been resentment. But not with Chloe. Everyone knew her overprotective parents were to blame. She would have loved to play with them, that's why she gave them that wistful smile whenever she saw them.

The sound of Gary's annoying voice on the other end of his phone recalled him to the present. Without bothering to sign off, he snapped his cell shut. Chloe Barnes. No, Chloe Garwood. She'd married that asshole, Andrew. When he'd first heard the news, he'd felt sick. Andrew Garwood, arrogant, wealthy, ambitious. Rumor had it Andrew was about to run for Senate down in Massachusetts. Better there than here in Maine.

Dustin stepped back onto his boat to unload his boxes. It rocked back and forth against the wharf, and only years of practice kept him from losing his footing. *Andrew Garwood*. He'd never forget the time Andrew had hired him to take a group of his friends fishing. Except all they'd really wanted to do was drink and act like jerks. When Andrew had actually caught a fish, he'd poked it around the deck, playing games with it while the bluefish flopped and flailed. Finally Dustin had thrown the poor thing back into the ocean. He'd never gotten paid for that trip, but he figured the lesson was worth the price. Moral of the story—stay away from Andrew Garwood.

The thought of the fairy-like Chloe, with her wide amber eyes and fragile air, in the hands of Andrew Garwood was disgusting.

And now here she was, walking down the gangplank, looking around her as though she'd never seen the place before. He caught her eye as it passed over him and the contact felt like a punch in the stomach. Not because she clearly didn't recognize him. But because she looked...haunted. Spooked.

Her face was thinner, which only emphasized her wide-set eyes. She looked more polished than he remembered. Her hair was pulled back in a knot, and she wore a simple, but obviously expensive, green wool coat. What was she doing here? No one had seen Andrew or Chloe on the island since their wedding. Maybe she was here to check the family silver, or inventory the china. Who knew what rich people did in those mansions of theirs? He shrugged. Not his worry.

After all his boxes were unloaded, he headed up the wharf to his truck, which he always left parked by the store. A little snow had fallen while he'd been gone. He brushed off the tarp covering the bed of his truck, and shoved aside a couple of stray lobster traps to make room for his boxes. Then he backed the truck onto the wharf.

And nearly ran over Chloe Garwood.

She was standing as if in a trance, staring at the Christmas wreaths on the shed. He got out and stood in front of her. It took a moment for her eyes to focus on him. When they did, she smiled in that shy way that had enchanted him all those years ago. He felt a shiver go down his spine.

"Dustin MacDougal," she said in a quiet, delighted tone.

"Chloe Barnes. I mean, Garwood." He watched the smile drain from her face at the name Garwood. Interesting. "Are you okay there?"

"Oh! Yes, sorry. I've never seen Christmas decorations on the wharf before. It must be fun here during the holidays."

"Yeah, well, it's practically the North Pole. Can I give you a ride to the Garwood place?" Again, that shadow passed over her face.

"No. I'm just going as far as my parents' house."

Her mention of her parents rang a bell. "I heard they passed on. I'm sorry."

"Thanks. Anyway, I appreciate the offer, but..."

She made a move to walk past him, but for some reason he didn't want to let her go. "The house is shut down, you know. Electricity's off, water's off."

"Oh, dear. I didn't...think of that."

Dustin was now convinced something was wrong. In his memories, Chloe had never been this out of it.

"How about if I take you up there in the truck, and get everything turned on for you."

She gave him a careful look, as if trying to uncover some secret motivation. He kept his face open and cheerful. Finally, she nodded. "I'd appreciate that." But when he moved to take her backpack, she flinched.

Definitely, something was wrong. He made no comment on her skittishness, just opened the door of the truck. "Hop in. Sorry for the mess. I would have straightened up in here if I'd known I was having guests."

Chloe smiled again, not her shy smile, but the wide, beaming grin that had nearly knocked him off the wharf the first time he'd seen it, when she was about six. It had a similar effect now. "I promise not to use the white glove test on it."

"Thanks, you're a doll."

Her smile vanished.

What had he said wrong? Stiff and distant, Chloe didn't say another word to him as the truck rattled down the gravel road to the Barnes' cottage. She might as well have been in another world. Then again, they were from two different worlds, weren't they? What could a lobsterman and a future Senator's wife possibly have in common?

## Chapter Two

Her parents' house, a small Victorian cottage with gingerbread trim nestled in a grove of bare-branched maple trees, looked like it was hibernating for the winter. The storm shutters were closed tight. The house looked dark and lonely. Chloe was surprised to find she was glad Dustin was with her. If she had approached the house alone, she probably would have fled for the next ferry back to the mainland. Instead, she watched as he opened shutters, lit a fire, turned on the electricity and the water. He went out the back door to turn on the propane for the stove.

"I remember when your parents winterized this house," he told her as he came back inside, hair ruffled from the wind. "My dad did a whole bunch of sheet-rocking up in the attic."

"Did he? We never came out here in the winter, I don't know why my parents bothered."

"Resale. There aren't too many winter houses out here."

*Resale.* They'd done it for her. For her inheritance. Tears filled her eyes. Had they known, after all? Had they anticipated this moment? She looked up to see Dustin's curious frown.

"Did I say something wrong?" His eyes were the deep blue of a midnight summer sky. They made her think of chasing fireflies on the lawn, or rolling down the hill, getting grass in her hair.

"No, sorry. I'm—well, I'm selling the house."

He continued to frown at her. For some reason, it didn't bother her. It wasn't like Andrew's frown, which made her quake in her shoes. Dustin's frown was thoughtful, as if he were trying to figure things out. She braced herself for more questions, but he let it go. He kneeled by the wood stove, took a poker, and moved the crackling logs around. A spark flew onto the stone hearth, and she took a quick step forward to stamp it out. Then she realized that would bring her right next to him, so she stepped back. The spark burned itself out. Had Dustin noticed her absurd skittishness? She let herself look at him fully, for the first time since he'd faced her at the wharf.

He was not a particularly tall man, but obviously he was strong, with the broad back common to lobstermen, who spent so much time bent over the side of their boats, hauling up traps. No coat, just a well-worn black flannel jacket open over a thick gray sweater. Work pants, Carhartts, she thought they were called. There was an air of proud independence about him, like an ocean storm wind, a sense of freedom that she envied from the bottom of her soul. No one told Dustin MacDougal what to do.

As he poked at the flames, she could see only his profile, but the firelight made his cheekbones stand out and emphasized his stubborn jaw line. No doubt about it, Dustin was a gorgeous man. But then, he'd

always been a heartbreaker. All the island girls had been after him. There'd been plenty of gossip about him, and her ears had always perked up when she'd heard his name at the post office or the little general store.

"How's Lisa?" she asked. He'd married young, she knew, and had a child almost right away.

"You're asking the wrong guy."

"Oh. You didn't...?"

"Last? Nope. Only until Brian got to school age. Then she couldn't take it anymore. Long, lonely winters out here. Not much going on." He added another log to the wood stove, and closed the door. Behind the glass, the orange flames leaped and danced. He moved to the wood box and began sorting through it.

"It must be beautiful, though."

"Not enough for Lisa. We moved into town for a while."

"Did she like that better?"

"Oh, yeah. Turned out she liked her trainer better too. That was the end of that." He dumped a pile of split wood next the stove. "This should last you through the night, until the furnace kicks in." He wiped his sooty hands on his Carhartts. "Sorry, I guess I'm making a mess in here."

"Oh, no, don't think about that for a second! Thank you so much for helping me out. I feel like a bit of an idiot. I should have known it wouldn't be all set up for me."

"I bet things usually are, for the wife of Senator Garwood."

"He's not Senator yet," she said, with a sharpness that surprised her. It didn't seem to faze Dustin.

"Not yet. But I've never seen Andrew Garwood miss out on something he wanted." Again, his midnight-blue eyes held hers, and she felt a flush come over her face.

"You don't sound like you like my husband very much."

"Let's just say I've had my run-ins with him over the years. So, anything else I can do for you here? I should get my boat to the mooring."

"No, no, I'm sure I'll be fine. Thank you so much, Dustin." Should she pay him? She dug into the pocket of her coat for her wallet, but when she looked up, his frown was back.

"Out here, we help each other out."

She turned red again. "Right. Well, thank you again." She offered him her hand. He took it, and the warmth of his rough palm sent a flood of feeling through her. A memory flashed through her mind. At age thirteen, she'd climbed onto a pile of lobster traps so she could watch Andrew race one of his friends across the channel. Her foot had gotten stuck, and Dustin, who must have been about seventeen, had freed it. His hands had worked so cleverly, maneuvering her foot from the tangle of string. They'd felt warm on her skin, and as he'd lifted her leg free, a thrill had shot through her. Of course, as soon as she was free, she'd hopped back on her bike and taken off for Hook Point, for a better view of Andrew's race.

“Did I ever thank you for the lobster trap?”

“What?”

“You freed me. That time I got stuck.”

“Oh, that. Your parents sent me a note.”

Of course they had. She smiled, and saw the answering twinkle in Dustin’s eyes. “Well, here’s my chance to thank you in person. You were very sweet to me that day.”

“My good deed for the year, probably.”

She doubted that part, she thought later as she boiled water for instant hot chocolate. That twinkle in his eyes kept popping into her mind. So did the feel of his warm hand shaking hers. How long had it been since she’d felt any kind of attraction for a man? Wariness, fear, humiliation. That was all she felt for Andrew any more. To him, that translated as frigid. Ice princess, that’s what he called her. Was she frigid? She’d certainly never gotten any pleasure from him. But sometimes, late at night, when her nipples still burned from his relentless teasing, and something pulsed in her lower belly, she used her own hand to release the tension. Didn’t that mean she wasn’t frigid? Maybe she could only enjoy sex by herself. With no one else there to make her do things she didn’t want to do.

Gary was waiting at Dustin’s fish house for his box of liquor. Thin, hunched, dragging on a cigarette, he lurked at the door of the small cedar-shingled shack. His face, wrinkled as a prune, lit up when he saw Dustin’s truck pull up.

“‘Bout time you got your ass back here. Wanna glass of rum? It’s on me.”

“Sure, Gary. Help me unload this stuff first.” Might as well make him work for his liquor.

Inside the chilly fish house, Dustin started a fire in the ancient cast-iron wood stove. Ice gathered at the corners of the single window, which dated from a time before double panes and insulation. Gary cleared a space in the clutter of junk—coffee cans filled with screws, cribbage boards, old fuel receipts—and plopped two old coffee mugs on the tiny, weathered table. He wiped them with a paper towel and sloshed rum into them, not bothering to get ice from the mini-fridge in the corner.

After settling onto a work stool, he took a long drink of rum and smacked his lips. “Heard Miss Barbie High-and-Mighty got off the boat today.”

“Who?”

“You know, Chloe what’s-her-name.”

For a moment, Dustin was surprised Gary even knew Chloe’s name. He’d only come to the island a few years ago, as a stern man, hiring himself out on various lobster boats. But he’d always been a gossip. He must have heard talk of the Garwoods.

“Chloe Garwood. Yeah, she’s here.”



“What’s she doing back? You talk to her any?”

“A bit.” Dustin poked at the fire one more time, then grabbed a stool and pulled it next to the stove. Until it got going, the stove only warmed the area within a six-inch radius.

“Well? What’d you find out?”

“I didn’t interrogate her. You want to give her the third degree, you’ll have to do it yourself.”

Gary bumped Dustin’s arm with the second mug of rum. “Don’t get riled up. Not often we get a stranger out here, is all. Have a swig o’ this.”

Dustin shook his head to the rum. His days of drinking the night away in the fish house were long over. “She’s not exactly a stranger. She’s been coming out here since she was born.”

“Cute little thing, was she?”

“What do you care?” Suddenly Dustin was intensely irritated by Gary’s presence. He got to his feet. “I gotta get some work done. You should too. You need to get that firewood under cover.”

“Yes, boss. Jay-sus. Nobody got time for socializin’ no more.”

After Gary had taken himself off, Dustin puzzled over the conversation. Why had it seemed so strange? Gary usually wandered from one topic to another. But he’d seemed so focused on Chloe Garwood. After a moment, he shrugged it off. Like Gary said, it was unusual for anyone to show up mid-winter. He went to stow away his supplies, and thought no more about it.

Hot chocolate was only going to get her so far, Chloe thought as she sat in the cozy attic and confronted the boxes stacked in the corner. At some point, she’d have to go search out some food. The only other possibly edible item in the house was an ancient can of A&M Baked Beans. Hadn’t that company gone out of business years ago? That can probably belonged in the Smithsonian. She’d have to be pretty desperate before she opened it.

She took another sip of the soothing chocolate, and pulled an old crocheted afghan around her. The attic was the warmest place in the cottage. It had one small, circular window that looked toward the ocean. With the maple trees bare of leaves, she caught a glimpse of gray waves. Even in winter, Bellhaven had a special quality. The island was in a different mood, a slow, mournful kind of state, which certainly suited her. She found it comforting. On Bellhaven, she didn’t have to pretend. She didn’t have to plaster a smile on her face. Or stare up at Andrew with fake adoration. If only she could keep this place.

But, no. She needed a divorce lawyer. A real lawyer would know what to do with that sickening document lurking in her tote bag. The *confidentiality agreement* that said if she ever spoke to anyone about her life with Andrew, she’d never see her kids again. Could he really do that? She had no idea. But she knew enough to know she needed a lawyer. But in order to afford one, she was going to have to sell the

house. Before she sold the house, she had to go through all the stuff her parents had left here. Which meant that, if she wanted to be free, she had to tackle these boxes.

The first box was stuffed with papers from when she was in third and fourth grade. Or rather, the equivalent of third and fourth grade. She'd been home-schooled all her life. Looking at her childish handwriting on her essay—*Why Does Anyone Need Math?*—she shook her head sadly. What a sheltered bubble she'd been raised in. Her elderly parents, fifty-one and sixty when they'd adopted her, had adored her, protected her, and generally treated her like a precious baby doll.

Doll. She shuddered. There was that word again. She didn't want to be a doll anymore. Certainly not Andrew's kind of doll.

She quickly went through the boxes from her school years, and stacked them in a corner. No need to throw them away, she could put them in storage. Maybe someday Halley and Merry would get a kick out of seeing her old school work. Sitting back on her heels, she eyed the wardrobe that stood in the corner, under the eaves. Her mother's clothes were probably stored in there. All those flannel dresses and Laura Ashley prints. Andrew would have thrown a fit if she'd worn clothes like that.

On her knees, she shuffled over to the wardrobe and opened the carved wooden door. And there it was.

The Dress.

She fell onto her hands and knees, dry heaves wracking her body. Eyes closed to block out the sight of The Dress.

She'd wanted that dress out of her sight. Out of her life. Her mother had been visiting, and she'd given her the dress and asked her to donate it to charity. She'd never realized her mother had kept it.

It wasn't her wedding dress. It was the dress for afterwards, the one meant for getting into the limo with the balloons on it, and the shaving cream spelling out "just married". It was a lilac-colored silk sheath with a slit up the back of the tight skirt. In it, she'd felt grown-up and sophisticated. And she'd felt nervous but excited about what was about to happen. She and Andrew had done nothing more than kiss up to that point. Sheltered as she was, she had only the vaguest idea of what came next. But she was certainly looking forward to it.

Now, crouched in the cottage attic, with the wind whistling through the eaves, the moment came back to her as if it were happening all over again.

*"I love you," she whispered to Andrew, snuggling against his side in the limo.*

*"Me too, doll."*

*"I can't believe how lucky I am. Mrs. Andrew Garwood. Why'd you choose me, Andrew?"*

*"Because you're mine. I've always known you were mine, even when you were just a little brat following me around."*

*She pulled away. "I didn't follow you around!"*

*"Oh, yes, you did. You didn't think I knew, but I did. Don't worry, I liked it." He pulled her back against him and ran his hand up her side, his hand settling on her breast. She shivered.*

*"Why'd you like it?"*

*"Because I knew you'd do anything for me. Right?" He snuggled his nose into the side of her neck and she squirmed. "Right?"*

*"Of course I would."*

*He fondled her breasts through the lilac silk. She looked at the rearview mirror, and saw the reflection of the driver's mirrored sunglasses. There was a clear plastic barrier between the front seat and the back. He probably couldn't hear them, but he certainly could see them. "Andrew, can't you wait until...we're alone?" she asked timidly.*

*"Why should I? You're all mine now. I want the whole world to know it. Don't you?"*

*"Ye-es, but..."*

*"I'm going to unzip your dress now."*

*"No, Andrew. Please."*

*But he was already doing it, the cold metal racing down her back. She clutched the front of her dress to her body. Behind her, he unfastened her bra. "It's about time I got to see your tits. Come on, let go."*

*Again she looked toward the rearview mirror. The driver was studiously looking straight ahead. Maybe he was unaware of what was going on in the back seat. And Andrew was her husband, after all. She didn't want to start her marriage off on the wrong foot. She dropped her hands and the dress fell away from her body.*

*"Ahhh." He lifted her breasts, rubbing his thumbs across her nipples. "I knew they'd be spectacular."*

*"I'm...glad you like them." This was such unfamiliar territory. And then the territory changed from unfamiliar to surreal.*

*"Burt, check it out." He turned her body so she faced the driver. Andrew's hands were under her breasts, holding them up for the driver to admire. The man looked up and gave a long whistle.*

*"Nice."*

*"Burt's hard to please. When he says 'nice', that means the best he ever saw." Andrew chuckled, and so did the driver. Chloe felt dizzy. As if she'd stepped into some kind of rabbit hole, where nothing made any sense.*

*"But Andrew..." she whispered. Even though she had little idea of what wedding nights were supposed to be like, this kind of scenario had absolutely never entered her mind.*

*"Don't worry. Burt's an old friend. We've seen our share of strippers together, right, Burt?" The man in the sunglasses chuckled again. "Let's see the rest of the package now."*

Andrew began pushing her sheath down over her hips. This time, she struggled, pushing hard against him. “No! Not like this!”

“Don’t I have a right to see what I just bought with that diamond wedding ring and half-million-dollar reception, Mrs. Andrew Garwood?”

“Yes, but...” She began crying, which sent him into an irritated rage.

“Are you really going to make this difficult? I won’t stand for it, Chloe. You’re my wife, and you have to know your place. Burt, pull over.”

The limo swerved to the side of the road and jerked to a stop. As Chloe watched in horrified bewilderment, Burt got out of the driver’s seat and slid in next to her on the back seat. His mirrored sunglasses and chauffeur’s cap made him look expressionless and intimidating.

“Hold her arms still,” said Andrew. Burt took her arms in a strong, unyielding grip and held them over her head. Even though she twisted and kicked at him, Andrew managed to pull the sheath off her body. Underneath, she wore flowered panties. These too quickly disappeared. Andrew ran his hands over her hips, over the blonde tuft of hair that was now the only thing shielding her innocence. He tried to pry her legs apart, but she held them closed in a death grip.

“You really want to play it this way,” he said. “Fine. You can leave right now. Okay?”

Crying, shaking, she nodded.

“Take her outside, Burt.” And before Chloe knew what was happening, Burt plucked her up and lifted her from the car. He stood her by the side of the road. A car zoomed past. She immediately dropped to her knees, hugging her arms around her. Burt pulled her back to her feet. He held her arms behind her. Exposed, naked, she stood, the world spinning around her.

“You got some body on you,” said Burt. “I thought you was kinda thin, but without your clothes, you’re freakin’ hot. Those boobs are world-class. And your ass is curved just right. I’d sure love to bend you over right now. But the boss don’t take things that far. Stick with the boss, you’ll be all right.”

Another car sped past, and gave a long honk of its horn. A rush of wind followed, and she felt it brush her nipples. They rose into hard points. Part of her felt completely disconnected from what was happening. She floated overhead, looking down at herself. She saw her vulnerable body, pale and shapely, adorning the side of the road like a statue of a nymph. She saw her nipples, dark-rose and erect, proclaiming a sexual readiness that seemed to have nothing to do with her.

Another part of her felt intensely present in the moment. She felt the hot asphalt against her feet. Burt’s scratchy uniform against her back. The buzzing of a gnat lazily circling her head. The universe would go on, no matter what happened to her helpless body. Something inside her melted and surrendered.

Burt continued. “That guy in the Chevy can’t believe he just saw what he saw. Guaranteed he’ll be back for that fresh little body of yours.”

*Andrew called from inside the limo. "You know what'll happen if we leave you here, Chloe. The first asshole who sees you will pull over and jump you. You don't want that to happen, believe me. And I don't either. If you come back in here, I'll be nice and gentle. I'm not going to hurt you. I just want you to understand that I know best. I know what I need. I need you to do what I say. I'll never harm you, I promise you that. But I'm a proud guy. I like showing off what belongs to me. I want Burt to see your beautiful body, and know it's my property. You understand?"*

*Slowly the world steadied around her. He wasn't going to hurt her. She clung to that promise. He was going to be nice and gentle. And she wouldn't be harmed. From his tone, she knew he was telling the truth. Behind her, Burt stood impassively. What was he thinking? Maybe he didn't think. He just did what he was told. That's what all Andrew's followers did. And that's what she was expected to do too. She was Mrs. Andrew Garwood now. Her parents had raised her to be an obedient wife.*

*She pulled her arms from Burt's hold, and slowly, holding herself with as much dignity as she could muster, walked back to the car. As Andrew waited, arms folded, she sat next to him. "I'll do what you want. But, this time, let it be just you and me, Andrew. Please."*

*After a long pause, he reluctantly nodded. "Since it's our wedding night, doll. We'll do it the way you want. Burt, take a walk," he called to the driver, before reaching over her to close the door.*

*"Now, lie back, and let me see that luscious pussy." Wincing at his crudeness, she did as he asked. As he spread open her legs, her head fell to the side, and she found herself looking at the crumpled pile of lilac silk on the limo floor. For the rest of that first encounter, as every inch of her body was explored and invaded, as she was turned every which way, posed in every possible embarrassing position, as her mouth was introduced to the thrusts of his penis, as her body was taught to relax and allow him inside, as she knew the first inklings of arousal, but no hint of release, she clung to the lilac silk as if to a lifeline.*

*By the time Burt got back into the limo, she was a new person, with a new role in life. She was Andrew's possession. Andrew's perfect little doll.*

## Chapter Three

A knock on the front door made Chloe jump and knock over a lamp. She looked around, dazed. It was almost a shock to find herself curled up in the safe cocoon of the cottage's attic, not standing naked by the side of a dusty road in suburban Massachusetts. A spotlight of pale sunshine filtered through the round window, lighting up a column of dust motes. The comforting scent of lavender and cedar rose from the wardrobe. Her mother had always loved cedar to keep away the moths. As if moths were any kind of real threat.

Another knock on the door brought her up to her knees. Who could it possibly be? Probably a neighbor wondering why the lights were suddenly on. Well, they could keep wondering. She was in no shape to deal with nosy islanders. One more knock, and then the sound of footsteps striding down the front walkway. It was so quiet here. She heard the visitor's feet crunching against the snow on the path, kicking a pinecone to the side. The quiet suited her, but it had always driven Andrew crazy. He needed noise, action, excitement. No wonder they hadn't come here a single time since they'd gotten married.

Deciding she'd done enough traveling down memory lane for the moment, she shoved aside the boxes and made her way out of the attic. As she climbed the ladder into the faded living room, a feeling of peace came over her. The pale pinks and greens of the flowered couch, with its matching ottoman, the ubiquitous throw rugs her mother had crocheted were all so comforting. She remembered hopping from one throw rug to the next, as if they were lily pads. And—the fairies!

She walked over to the green hutch where her mother's collection of white statuettes was displayed. The delicate girl fairy nestled in a lily. The man with a conch shell balanced on his shoulder. The mischievous boy with a trumpet. How could she have forgotten about the fairies? As a child, they'd been so real to her. She'd truly believed that the fairies came to life, but only on Bellhaven. As the only child of elderly parents, she'd spent hours playing with those statuettes as if they were dolls, giving them names, personalities, histories. And she'd always believed they watched out for her. They had magical powers, she was sure. She used to beg them to make sure she got strawberry ice cream for dessert, or to make her mother let her get her ears pierced.

Maybe they could conjure up a meal for her, she thought, trailing a finger across one of her favorites, the winged nymph perched on a clamshell. Lasagna would be nice. Or a burger and fries. Just then, something caught her eye. A note on the floor. Her unknown visitor must have pushed it under the door. She picked it up and read, "Saw you had no food in the house. Didn't want you to starve. They're fresh

today, Bellhaven's best. D." Outside the front door was a tin pail containing several fish fillets, layered with seaweed. It looked like mackerel.

Dustin had left her fish. He didn't want her to starve. It was the sweetest thing anyone had done for her since her daughters had brought her French toast in bed on her birthday. She gave the shining white fairies a suspicious look. Had they been looking out for her after all? Had they whispered in Dustin's ear? The fairies looked back at her with innocent blank faces.

She picked up the pail and brought it into the kitchen. The mackerel gleamed indigo and silver in the dim depths of the pail. They'd been filleted by an expert hand.

Dustin MacDougal. A quick series of encounters came back to her like one of those old flipbooks. The time he'd saved her from the lobster traps, of course. And then there was the time when she was six and she'd crashed her bike, gashing her leg. Dustin's father was on the island's volunteer paramedic crew. Dustin had tagged along while Bunk MacDougal bandaged her leg. Dustin had been very sweet, and hadn't made fun of her for crying. After it was over, he'd dug an old Bazooka bubble gum from his pocket and shared it with her. She didn't tell him she wasn't allowed to chew gum.

She could still remember her mother's appalled face when Bunk and Dustin had brought her back to the cottage. Dustin's cheerful chatter in the truck had made her forget about the pain in her leg, and at first she'd thought her mother was shocked by the sight of her daughter chewing gum. Quickly, she'd stuck it behind her ear. Later, she'd parked it behind her headboard. She liked having it there, a reminder of the kindness of the boy with dark blue eyes.

Now, kind as ever, Dustin had brought her fresh fish. She looked through the cupboards for something to cook it with. No breadcrumbs. No spices. No lemon. It didn't take much to fry fish. Just a little oil in a pan. At the back of a cupboard, she finally located a small, dusty bottle of safflower oil. She had all she needed for a tasty dinner. In five to ten minutes, she could be eating fried mackerel right here in her lonely, still-chilly kitchen. Maybe she could bring in a few fairy statuettes to keep her company.

On the other hand, at his house, Dustin probably had lemons, or at least some salt and pepper. Maybe some potatoes or salad greens. It would be a perfectly nice, normal gesture to show her appreciation by sharing the fish with him.

Before she could think better of it, she pulled on her coat, grabbed the pail of fish, and marched out of the house. Instantly the wind whipped her ponytail hard against her cheek. The sun had set, and darkness was taking over the sky. Big clouds raced overhead, and the temperature had dropped a good ten degrees. The wind made the pail clank against her legs as she bent into the gusts and headed down the road.

The gravel road was deserted. On either side loomed thick stands of pine trees. When she was little, she'd always held one of her parents' hands when she'd walked around the island at night. Funny. The woods didn't scare her now, even though the rising wind made the trees sway and whistle eerily. On Bellhaven, she felt safe. For the first time in a long time, she felt safe.

The MacDougal house, one of the oldest on the island, stood out with its cedar shingles and widow's walk. The small turret was famous on the island for its spectacular three-hundred-and-sixty-degree views of the island and surrounding ocean. As she drew closer, she wondered what this oncoming storm would look like from that vantage point. The house faced the ocean side of the island. The only thing between it and the open Atlantic was a lighthouse smack in the middle of the bay. It was a big house, built for the extended MacDougal clan who had first settled Bellhaven over a hundred years ago. She wondered if Dustin was lonely, living in it all by himself. He probably had a girlfriend, she told herself. He'd always had girls after him, with those amazing blue eyes and that dry sense of humor.

When he opened the door, those amazing blue eyes were the first things she saw. They had a strange effect on her, an effect she didn't recognize. She felt slightly dizzy.

"Chloe. Is everything okay?"

Dragging her eyes away from his, she saw he wore a black cable-knit sweater and jeans. Stocking feet. Dark hair that seemed to have some twigs stuck in it. And was that pinesap?

"Something wrong?" he asked, his hand darting to his head. He found the sap, and made a rueful face. "I've been out in the wood shed. I see you found the fish. Let me guess. You're vegetarian now."

"No, no. I was just...well, I couldn't find any decent cooking oil." Just a little white lie. "I thought it would be easier to cook it here, if you wouldn't mind. I mean, for both of us. If you haven't eaten." She winced. Was that the most awkward invitation ever issued? "Oh, and my girls get gum stuck in their hair all the time. If you want me to get that stuff out, I'll see what I can do."

"I'm not too worried about it. Come on in." He stepped aside to let her into the house, which was filled with flickering warmth from the big stone fireplace. Chloe took a few steps inside and looked around, dazed by the sudden quiet, away from the blustery wind. The house was cluttered with the accumulated décor of generations. Lamps made of shells, old lobster buoys as doorstops, framed needlework on the walls and, everywhere, handmade quilts.

"My grandmother was a champion quilter," explained Dustin, clearing a pile of fishing magazines off the armchair for her. "She terrorized us into promising never to throw any of them out. Come sit by the fire. You look frozen. It's really picking up out there, isn't it?"

"This wind is wild. A big storm's coming, I guess."

He looked amused. "It's pretty typical March weather, actually. Blowing about twenty knots. If we get up to forty, you can start talking about a storm. Glass of wine? Hot cocoa? Anti-freeze?"

"Just water, thanks." She perched on the armchair, and let him take the bucket from her cold hand. He walked into the kitchen, and she found her gaze wandering to his backside. What was she doing, ogling him? The thought shocked her. She never did that sort of thing. And yet, she watched him move into the kitchen. With his long stride, it took only a few steps for him to reach it. He bent over to set down the bucket, and Chloe's mouth went dry.



What was going on? She couldn't remember ever watching a man in this way, ever feeling this kind of spark of response. Not since—no, not even with Andrew when she'd first fallen in love with him. That had been a rosy-eyed, schoolgirl crush. Was this how normal people felt when they were attracted to someone? She tore her eyes away and fastened her gaze on the picture window that looked out over the bay. By now, it was too dark to see anything, but at least she wasn't making a fool of herself.

"Have you been over here before?" She jumped. He'd returned from the kitchen and was standing next to her, handing her a glass of water.

She cleared her throat. "I don't think so. I've been by here about a million times, of course. But never inside."

"Year-rounders and summer people. Apples and oranges. Oil and water." Dustin settled into an armchair kitty-corner to hers, and stretched his legs toward the fire.

"Not always. I remember when we were little, one afternoon on the beach, we built sandcastles together." Chloe smiled at the memory. "There were a bunch of us, and only a few were summer kids."

"Right. You put yellow and purple flowers all over yours. And pink sea glass."

"You remember that?"

Dustin snorted. "I remember thinking I'd never set foot in a pink castle. Especially one with flowers."

She giggled and ran a finger around the edge of her water glass. "You were always such a boy. Didn't yours have a big wall of rocks around it? And some kind of gangplank?"

"Sure it did. Every sandcastle has to be able to defend itself. I had a moat, an outer wall, towers for the archers. I even had a stockpile of clamshells to dump on anyone who messed with me. I was ready to rumble. There was only one thing I forgot about."

"The tide?"

"Pretty lame, for an island boy. My dad ribbed me about that one for weeks." He leaned forward to throw another log on the fire. Chloe watched the way his sweater pulled away from the waistband of his jeans, revealing a tempting ridge of muscles along his spine. She had a sudden, head-spinning urge to put her hands on that patch of bare skin. How smooth and hard would his back feel against the palm of her hand if she slid it up under his sweater? Would his skin shiver at her touch? Would he freeze in surprise, and let her hands roam where they wanted? Her hands began to sweat.

She drained her water glass, and set it on a rickety little end table with a click.

"Thirsty?"

*You have no idea*, she thought. "I didn't think so, but apparently I am. Don't worry, I'll get it." She went into the kitchen and turned on the faucet. There was a window above the sink, and in it she could see the living room reflected. Which told her two things—first, that Dustin's head was turned to watch her. And second, that he must have seen her checking him out before.

She could feel her face turn pink. Being visually explored and devoured was nothing new to her. But the way Dustin was looking at her, with friendly speculation tinged with lustful appreciation, was different. Exciting. And she certainly wasn't used to checking men out. After all, the divorce process had just begun. And even though her marriage had been a painful farce, she'd taken her vows seriously.

But now, she was almost free. It had been a full year and a half since Andrew had so much as touched her. She suspected he'd acquired a mistress. It would explain why Andrew had agreed to the divorce. They just had to work out the details. So there was nothing wrong with these strange new feelings running through her body.

"So, how's the future Senator doing?"

She jumped at the question, as if he'd read her mind. Walking back to the living room, she saw the suddenly reserved look in his dark blue eyes. While checking out her ass, he must have suddenly remembered she was married.

"Polling very well. He should have a good chance." She perched back on her armchair.

"I'm sure he does. What could possibly stop him?" Dustin shook his head and gazed into the fire.

"Divorce."

His head snapped around. "Seriously?"

"If you're a tabloid reporter, no. If you're my childhood friend, then yes."

"I won't say anything. Except, I'm glad. Not exactly the polite response, but there it is. I never trusted him."

"You were wiser than I was." The glass in her hands gleamed in the firelight. The glow softened as tears came to her eyes. Why hadn't anyone in her life given her one word of warning about Andrew Garwood? What if she'd had a big brother, someone like Dustin, to tell her exactly what he thought of the golden boy everyone admired?

A sudden flash made her blink. "What was that?"

"I don't know. Do you have any paparazzi following you around?" Dustin rose and peered out the window.

*Paparazzi.* For a moment, Chloe froze. At certain society events, she and Andrew had been the focus of flashing bulbs. They were often mentioned in the gossip pages of their local newspaper. And then there were those other photos...

"No one there. It was probably a reflection from the lighthouse," said Dustin, still at the window. "Maybe light caught a boat window." He turned back toward her, silhouetted against the dark picture window, and Chloe felt a sudden flush of desire that made her sway in her chair.

She had to get out of there, before...before she didn't know what. She jumped up from the armchair. "Can I...well, I've always wondered about your widow's walk."

If he was confused by her unpredictable behavior, he didn't show it. "The MacDougal claim to fame," he said easily. "Tell you what, why don't I show you the way, and you can enjoy the view while I fry up these fish."

"You don't have to do that." For a split second, she tried to imagine Andrew frying fish so she could enjoy a view, but her mind boggled.

"Old family recipe, I'd be proud to show it off. See those stairs? Just head straight up. I'll come get you when the fish is ready."

It was a fine plan, but as soon as Chloe started up the stairs, she realized leaving Dustin's presence did nothing to diminish her mysterious newfound desire for him. *Get a grip*, she scolded herself. *This is ridiculous*.

The widow's walk was a cozy little octagonal room with window seats under wide picture windows. Eight windows, looking out in eight different directions. Chloe stood in the middle and turned in a circle. The view, even at night, was breathtaking. She felt like an eagle perched on a high branch, surveying wind-whipped trees, storm clouds, a dark road, a few lights winking through the trees, and, far out on the ocean, the blinking lighthouse. A little door led to a balcony, but with the wild wind, Chloe didn't dare open it. The wind battered against the windows, making the entire widow's walk shudder. She sat on one of the window seats and listened to the symphony of moans and whistles. Far below, she heard the ocean swells crashing against the rocks.

Strange how the wind seemed to be flinging itself at the windows. As if it wanted to get in. To get to her. It sounded like a bitter roar, like Andrew when she'd screwed up every ounce of her courage and told him she wanted a divorce. *You'll never get the kids. You'll never survive without me. You'll never find a man who will put up with a frigid ice bitch like you*. She shivered. If Andrew really wanted to keep the girls, how would she fight him? She would have to go public with her side of the story, which would bring humiliation not only to her, but also to her kids. Would it be worth it?

A gust of wind rattled the door to the balcony. She rose and went to it. When she turned the knob, the door flew open with a bang. With the salty ocean air full on her face, she stepped onto the balcony, into a world of wild darkness. The wind howled and swirled around her. Instead of attacking her, it filled her with a strange, primal strength. Andrew didn't have the right to keep her a helpless sex doll her whole life. She'd done enough. Gone along with his strange needs. Until he'd pushed her too far.

Again, she saw the back room where he'd brought her and his biggest fundraiser, a fat man who always managed to grab a feel whenever she greeted him. She knew he wanted her, Andrew knew he wanted her. This wasn't one of their usual secret parties, where her face was hidden behind a mask. This was a political party, where their friends and other power brokers were socializing over cocktails and crab cakes. But Andrew had told her to unzip her jacket so the man could feel her breasts. And then he'd pushed her to her knees and left the room. The fat man had unzipped his pants hurriedly and thrust his penis at her

mouth. He'd grabbed at her nipples and she'd cried out in pain, but he didn't notice, or care. Enough, she'd thought. No more. Her parents hadn't raised her to prostitute herself. She'd jumped to her feet, slapped him in the face, and that night, still riding the adrenaline of anger, she'd told Andrew she wanted out.

He couldn't stop her. Just like no one could stop the wind that whipped against her legs and made her hair flap crazily against her face. She raised her arms into the air as if she were a sail catching the wind. Energy raced through her. It was exhilarating. It made her laugh out loud. It made her feel like a hundred-foot-high force of nature.

"Hey," came a voice behind her. Dustin caught her waist from behind. "Don't do anything crazy now."

*Crazy.* She turned and threw her arms around his neck. With the wind now at her back, pushing her toward him, she yanked his head down to hers. In the dark, his eyes gleamed, startled. Maybe he said something, but the wind snatched the words away, and she didn't want him to talk anyway. She wanted his mouth next to her, on her, and as soon as his lips touched hers, a current of something thrilling scorched through her body. Promise and excitement, as powerful as the storm winds, took her breath away. Strong, warm hands on her back snatched her closer to him. She was pressed into a hard chest, every line of his body melding with hers.

Shaking, she opened her mouth under his and moaned as his tongue entered her. So this was passion, this was desire. This was what it was like when a woman wanted a man. Nothing in her life had ever felt this good.

The swell of his arousal pushed against her thigh. She wanted to push him to the floor, roll on top of him, and fuck his brains out right there in the wind-battered tower high above the cliffs. But suddenly Andrew's voice was loud in her head. *Frigid ice princess. What a disappointment you are. It's a good thing you're so hot, or I'd dump you right now.*

What if she disappointed Dustin too? What if she really was frigid, like Andrew said, and this crazy lust was just an illusion, fickle as the wind?

She pulled away. "I...I can't."

Dustin immediately took his hands from her back. "Is it Andrew? The divorce?" He ran his hands through his hair, as if to keep from reaching for her. She longed passionately for his hands to be on her body again.

Instead, she stepped back. "No. I'm just...not like that."

Still breathing fast, he stared at her blankly. "Like what?"

"Sexual. Normal. You wouldn't understand." She ran to the stairs leading back to the house. "I'm sorry." Without looking back, she stumbled down the stairs and ran back to her little cottage under the maples.

## Chapter Four

“How’s Barbie doing?” In the back of the dinghy, Gary blew on the end of his cigarette to keep it lit. Dustin pulled on the oars and scowled at him. The last person he wanted to discuss Chloe with was hangover-ridden, shaky Gary. Too bad he needed his help on the boat this morning. He would have much preferred being alone with his confused thoughts.

“I don’t know who you’re talking about. And put that thing out.”

“Aw, come on. With this fog, nothing’s gonna catch fire.”

The storm had blown over late last night, and today a thick fog blanketed Bellhaven. “I don’t care. It goes over the side, or you do.”

With an evil look, Gary flicked the cigarette over the side. It hissed as it hit the water. “You seeing her?”

“What?”

“Just asking. People are talking.”

“No. And if anyone says anything, you tell them no.” He pulled up alongside his lobster boat, tied up the dinghy, and climbed onboard. The familiar smell of diesel and tar surrounded him. Gary climbed after him, shivering in the chilly fog.

Dustin lifted the hatch that covered the engine. He’d heard a knocking sound yesterday on the way back from town. As he’d suspected, a bearing was loose. “Hand me the wrench,” he called to Gary.

“You going to see her again?”

“Leave it alone, Gary.” Was he going to see her again? He wasn’t sure his sanity could take it. Last night he’d gotten about two hours of sleep. He kept remembering the way she’d looked on the balcony, her delicate body balanced against the wind, as if she’d wanted to launch herself off into it. Pure terror had shot through him. When she’d thrown herself at him instead, it had seemed like some kind of drug-induced hallucination. Chloe Barnes, in his arms, her body hot against his. Not fragile as he’d always imagined. Fiery. Wild. Incredible.

But then she’d suddenly frozen up and said those crazy things. She wasn’t sexual or normal? What did that mean? Probably that she regretted her impulse and said anything that came into her head.

He sure didn’t regret it. Even if he never saw her again. At least he’d had her sweet body in his arms, and her burning lips under his. She’d tasted of wild raspberries.

“Gary, get me one of those hoses from under the seat.” No answer from Gary. Dustin pulled his head out of the engine hatch. Gary was squinting toward the shore.

“There’s your girl now. I think she’s headed your way. Yup, she’s turning into your yard. She’s hot for you, all right. You should see what she’s wearing.”

“The hose, Gary. Or you’re fired.” It took all Dustin’s strength of will not to jump back in the dinghy and row like a demon back to his house before Chloe disappeared again. But no matter what, he didn’t want to spook her. Something deep inside told him she needed gentleness and patience—kind of like his quirky engine.

Gary handed him the hose and Dustin set to work on his engine, which was easy compared to figuring out Chloe Barnes.

Disappointed, Chloe walked through the fog back to her cottage. Her speech to Dustin, which would try to explain her bizarre behavior, would have to wait for another time. She’d go back to her lonely house, with only the fairies to talk to. And more boxes to rifle through. They seemed to be endless.

The house was so quiet this afternoon. She was used to having her girls around, and servants, and other hangers-on. The girls were in school right now, so she couldn’t even call them. This was the first time she’d been away from them since Merry was born, nine years ago. It was painful, how much she missed them. She tiptoed up the stairs to the attic, where the boxes waited.

Sighing, she kneeled next to a box full of books. Instead of opening it, she stared out the window into the fog. It created a soft cocoon around the house. All of a sudden, instead of feeling lonely, she felt safe. Here in this dusty attic, surrounded by her mother’s boxes, hidden by fog, no one could hurt her.

Even a knock on the door didn’t destroy that peaceful feeling. Instead, it sent a quick thrill through her. So far, only one person had knocked on her door. She peered out the attic window and saw the now-familiar dark blue watch cap. She knocked on the glass, and called, “Come on in. I’m up in the attic.”

He must have heard, because after a pause the front door opened, his footsteps crossed the room, and the stairs to the attic creaked. And then, there he was, crouching under the crossbeam with a wry smile. Droplets of fog clung like silver beads to his black hair. Another sparkled on his eyebrow. He looked wonderful. Slightly hunched, he stood at the center of the attic. She stood too.

“I went to your house,” she said.

“I know. I wasn’t there.”

“I know. I wanted to—”

“So I came to your house.”

“I know.”

They both smiled at the silliness of this exchange. Chloe felt slightly giddy, like a balloon about to float free.

“I was worried about you last night,” he said.

“I must have seemed nuts.”

“No. Well, yes, but...I’d like to understand.”

She looked away, out the fogbound window. More than anything, she wanted this fresh new feeling that Dustin inspired in her. Would she soil it by talking about Andrew? Or would ignoring the past keep her chained to it forever? But she wanted Dustin to understand.

“I shouldn’t have thrown myself at you like that.”

He shook his head. “It’s not like I minded.” But still, a question simmered in his midnight blue eyes.

If only she could explain it right. Ribbons of fog caressed the window. She was in a warm cocoon, and the man standing in front of her was quiet and still, waiting for her to speak. Kind, strong Dustin. He was a man, not a bully. Again, that feeling of utter safety came over her. At the same time, excitement sparked to life inside her. Finally she looked back at him. “Andrew...didn’t treat me very well. S-sexually.”

His face changed. Not in the way she’d feared. He didn’t look judgmental. But right now, she was glad she was Chloe, not Andrew.

She continued. “I was like a doll to him. A prize to show off. He didn’t care about my feelings at all. My—satisfaction. I didn’t know any better. I was so young, so incredibly naïve. I thought it was my duty to make my husband happy. I came to think I wasn’t very sexual, like other people. Not normal.”

“Andrew’s an ass. He always was. He didn’t know how to treat a fish, let alone a woman.”

That made her giggle. The sound lightened up the serious atmosphere inside the attic.

“Look, I want you, Chloe. I probably always did. You were like this fairy child dancing around Bellhaven.”

“I’m not a child now.”

“No. But I don’t want to hurt you. I can leave right now, leave you in peace.”

“I don’t want you to leave.” But that wasn’t the full truth. Something more welled up within her and spilled from her lips, before she could stop it. “I want to make love with you.” She flushed pink at the sound of her words in the quiet air. But she couldn’t take them back now. Nor did she want to.

Dustin stared at her, like a curious seal watching from the waves. “Why?”

“Because...” She searched for the right words. “I want you. And I haven’t felt that way—well, I never got a chance to feel that way. I want to know what it’s like to have sex because *I* want to have sex. Do you understand? Only if you want to too, of course.”

“I think I understand,” he answered slowly. He frowned, as if debating with himself. “If we make love, it’s only on one condition.”

“Condition?”

“If you change your mind, if you start feeling bad in any way, you tell me, and we stop.”

“That’s your condition?” She took a step forward, and his eyes darkened. With one finger, she reached out and touched the drop of moisture on his eyebrow. She brought her wet finger to her tongue.

“Yes,” he said in a strangled voice. She saw his hands twitch, but he kept them firmly by his side. What a delicious feeling, to be in control. Dancing her fingers up his chest, she pursed her lips.

“What if I don’t agree to that?”

“Then I walk out of here right now. I’m serious, Chloe. I don’t want to hurt you.”

“Okay.”

“Okay?”

“I agree. I don’t want to talk anymore. Are you going to just stand there all day?” She poked him in the chest. He caught her hand in his.

“I wouldn’t mind. But we could stand a little closer.” He pulled her against him. Her insides melted into a pool of heat. She nestled her head between his chin and his chest, so the flannel of his work shirt rubbed against her cheek. The smell of salt air and diesel clung to him.

“Have you been on your boat?” she asked dreamily, as he ran his hands over her back.

“Had to fix a bearing. That engine’s always making some noise or other. Sometimes I think it just wants my attention.”

“I don’t blame it.” He found the lower edge of her sweater and snaked his hand under it. At the feel of his work-roughened palm on her skin, a shudder went through her. Immediately he stopped.

“Are you okay?”

“Yes! You’re not following the rules. If I want you to stop, I’ll tell you. I don’t want you to stop. As a matter of fact—” She drew away from him. “Let’s take off our clothes. Together. At the same time.”

He looked amused. “On the count of three?”

“One...” She stepped out of her skirt. Underneath, she wore woolly leggings for warmth. “Two...” She started to pull off the leggings.

“Hang on! You’re getting ahead of me.” He unbuttoned his jeans, revealing boxers and a huge erection. She felt the breath leave her body.

It was a good feeling.

She put her hands to the hem of her sweater and slid it over her head. It was quickly followed by her turtleneck. She stood in front of him, wearing only her pink lace underwear, while he unbuttoned his flannel shirt. Under it, he wore a “Save the Whales” T-shirt, which she found so endearing, she laughed.

“Am I that funny-looking?” he asked with a wounded look.

“I didn’t know you were a tree-hugger.”

“Some of my best friends are trees.” There was a twinkle in his deep blue eyes that put her completely at ease. “The rest are whales.”



“I think that might be a whale in your pants.”

He waggled his eyebrows lasciviously, then laughed, an infectious chuckle that made her answer with one of her own. Never before had she laughed during sex, or the buildup to sex. Never before had she even smiled. Or joked. Or teased. If they stopped right now, this would still be a groundbreaking experience for her. But she had no intention of stopping. “You’re still wearing boxers and a T-shirt.”

“And you’ve got the bra and panties. Not that I mind the view.”

For a moment, she stiffened. Fearfully, she raised her eyes to his. Would she see that same calculating hunger she was used to? That greedy look that reduced her to a thing, a possession, a trinket? But no. His expression was the opposite of that. Happy appreciation shone from his eyes. His smile had a touch of the devil in it, and a promise of delicious fun.

“What’s wrong?” he asked.

“Nothing. A ghost. We haven’t said three yet.”

“If we don’t do it soon, I’m going to forget how to count.”

Giggling, she put her hands behind her back, on the fastening of her bra. He grabbed the bottom of his T-shirt, poised for take-off.

“Three!”

Clothes flew into the air, a flurry of underwear. Surrounded by discarded clothing, they stared at each other. Chloe felt her rib cage rise and fall with quick breaths. Without looking down, she knew her nipples were already at attention. As was his erection. It rose from a thick nest of black curls and pointed straight toward her, as if it had eyes only for her.

Suddenly, desperately, she wanted to know what he saw when he looked at her. “Do you think...do I seem like...a...” she whispered, “doll?”

“Oh, no. You’re no doll.”

What did he mean? Did he think she was ugly? Maybe he was used to a different type. She crossed her hands over her breasts.

“No! Don’t hide.” With one quick stride, he was in front of her, holding her face in his hands. “You’re beautiful. Wonderful. But you’re no doll. You’re too alive. Too sensitive. Look, I can feel the pulse beating in your throat. I can feel your skin warming under my hands. You’re a living, passionate being. How could anyone think you were a doll?” He ran his thumbs over her cheeks with a touch that seemed to treasure the very shape of her face. When he bent his mouth to hers, the depth of his kiss brought tears to her eyes. His tongue searched her mouth, as if he wanted to track down whatever sadness remained in her and soothe it away.

She let herself sink into the comfort of that kiss for a long moment. But then she moved restlessly against him. Enough gentleness. She needed heat. Fire. Stepping back, she put her hands on his and drew

them to her chest. As those warm palms encircled her breasts, she let out a long moan. Already stiff, her nipples hardened even more as he filled his hands with her flesh.

“That feels nice,” she heard herself say. In the past, she’d never said anything during sex. She’d become that mute doll Andrew had demanded. Never once had she asked for anything. “Can you lick my nipples, please?”

“No need to be polite, sweetie. I’ll do anything you ask.”

“Lick them, then. A lot. Don’t stop until I ask you to.”

“I wouldn’t think of it.” He tilted her face up one more time, and smiled into her eyes. Then he bent his head to the rosy nipples begging for attention. As soon as his mouth enclosed her right breast, her head fell back with a groan. Her nipples were used to being tweaked, fondled, squeezed, displayed in provocative lingerie, teased and tormented—but this was what she’d always longed for and never gotten. Long strokes of a loving tongue. Moist nibbling that sent electric jolts to her lower belly. A heated mouth tugging on those sensitive points, pulling moans from her.

And Dustin’s mouth didn’t stop. Not when her nipples had swelled to the size of rose hips. Not when she shuddered from the pleasure. Not when his erection jerked against her thigh. She wasn’t at the mercy of his mouth. No, that mouth was at her service. She could ask it to do whatever she wanted.

“Dustin,” she said in a whisper. “Go lower.”

His mouth left her breasts and his tongue swirled a path down her skin. He took his sweet time on the journey, sampling the tender skin of her ribcage, the quivering flesh of her belly. A scent rose into the air, a sharp smell that made her nose tickle. The aroma of her arousal. She heard him breathe deeply as he nuzzled his head into the triangle between her legs. Kneeling in front of her, he planted his hands firmly on her ass.

“You smell so sweet. I could stay right here for the next week or so.” As he spoke, his mouth moved against her, making her squirm and bite her lip.

“What would you do, if you stayed right there?”

“Well, first I would breathe you in for a while.” He took a deep breath then let it out. A current of warm air stirred her curls. Her lower lips swelled, and she moved her legs wider apart. “Then I would say, are you comfortable, sweetie? Would you prefer the prone position, or you happy staying upright?”

“Upright,” she said in a croak that made him laugh.

“Then hang onto those rafters. Right over your head.” He gave her sex a hard nip, and she yelped as the pleasure shot through her. She reached up and grabbed the beam that ran across the whole attic. Through her haze of excitement, she saw again the round window, and the fog drifting outside. The boxes, the wardrobe, the dusty surfaces. It was safe up here in the attic, and quiet. The only sound was their heavy breathing and those excited grunts. They were coming from her, she suddenly realized, and he hadn’t yet

done anything more than playfully lap at her sex. Playfully—that was the difference. There was no threat here, no fear. Just pleasure turning her limbs to jelly.

His tongue got down to business. It flicked against her clitoris, shooting little darts of sensation through her sex. Moisture gathered under his mouth, which seemed to excite him. He lapped it up with his tongue and shook his head between her legs, like a puppy with a toy. With his lips, he surrounded her clitoris and tugged. Her hips jerked toward him uncontrollably. An approving groan vibrated against her sex. All of a sudden she knew she was close. She gripped the rafter and pressed against him.

“More. Please. Faster.”

His tongue began a rapid-fire rapping against her clitoris, and with his hands, he pressed her lips together, thumbs rubbing the underside of the swollen kernel.

“Oh!” she gasped. “That feels incredible.”

In response, he flicked his thumb against her, and she let out a cry. Moisture dripped from her. She had no more control over herself. Spreading herself open for him, she felt the room spin around her. She barely knew where she was anymore. All she knew was she couldn’t let go of that rafter, and if he stopped before she came, she’d die.

“Don’t stop,” she begged. “Please don’t stop.”

Deep in her crotch, he shook his head, setting off more fireworks in her belly. Looking down, she saw his dark head nestled between her pale legs, like a perfect yin and yang. They were together in this crazy fever dream, partners in the stoking of her desire. For every stroke of his hot tongue, a jerk of her hips. For every moan from her lips, a tweak with his thumb. He wanted her to come as much as she did. And even though never before had she come with another person, there was no stopping this freight train. Bucking against him, feverishly hanging onto the rafter, she let herself fly into the oncoming hurricane.

“Here I come, here I come...” The words came out in a feverish babble. “Don’t stop, don’t stop. Do it, do it, just like that.” His tongue, his thumbs, his velvet mouth, his iron hands. Together, they played her like a free-styling jazz band. When the tongue drew back, the thumbs pressed forward. When his grip on her hips tightened, the touch of his lips softened. With a grateful sigh, she surrendered to his mastery of her body. As the first wave hit, she threw her head back and yelled to the rafters. Still he nibbled and sucked, and another wave came, this one an intense rush of brightness. Closing her eyes, she gave herself over to the endless explosions of pleasure, like the grand finale at a fireworks show. She twisted and jerked against his head, and heard her own voice scream with bliss. Time stopped and she sailed through a new universe of bursting stars and dancing comets.

After an unknown amount of time, her body still twitching as the waves finally subsided, she let go of the beam and collapsed into Dustin’s arms. As he hugged her against him, emotion overcame her, and she cried. At the age of twenty-eight—after ten years of marriage and two kids—she had her first orgasm with a man.

## Chapter Five

Dustin held the quivering Chloe in his arms. Something momentous had just happened, but he wasn't entirely sure what it was. She was crying, but he knew it wasn't from pain. He knew an orgasm when he saw—and heard—one. There was no doubt she'd achieved satisfaction. On the other hand, he himself was in a state of near-agony from his bursting cock. It kept bumping against Chloe's leg like a heat-seeking missile. He shifted his weight so it wouldn't be snuggled against her quite so intimately. She was crying, after all. The last thing he wanted was to traumatize her further.

But when he tried to move away, ever so slightly, she tightened her hold around his neck. Curled on his lap, her silky champagne hair drifting over his shoulders, she felt like an armful of sweet temptation. He gave a sound somewhere between a sigh and a groan. That hardened penis of his would have to deal with the torment.

"Are you okay?" he finally asked when Chloe showed no signs of removing herself from his lap.

"Yes." Her voice was muffled in his chest, her breath warm on his skin. His erection gave another painful jump. "I've just...never done that before. I mean, come. With a man."

"But with a woman?" *Hey, you never knew.*

"No! Never with another person. It wasn't on the agenda."

"The agenda was seriously fucked. That was just about the sweetest thing I've ever witnessed. I hope all your doubts about yourself are gone." He stroked her long hair and wondered why it never seemed to get tangled. It always fell flat and straight, like a waterfall.

"But what about you?" She lifted her face from his chest, and he felt the full impact of her wide honey eyes, heavy with satisfaction. "You want your turn, don't you?"

"If you're asking Buster, you know what he'll say." He looked down at his eager cock, bumping against her leg like a puppy.

She climbed off his lap and stood in front of him. A strange, distant look came over her, as if her spirit had drained from her body. As he stared, flabbergasted, she turned in a circle. "How do you want me? I can do any position. You can come in my mouth if you want. Or in my ass. Or anywhere you want, really. It doesn't matter to me." Even her voice sounded different. Passive, helpless, like a little girl.

"Chloe."

She didn't seem to hear. Instead she ran her hands over her body. Despite the robot-like quality of the gesture, he found himself responding to her sheer gorgeousness. She truly was out of this world. At first

glance, or even the millionth—he'd known her all his life, after all—she seemed tiny and fine-boned. Naked, she was the most erotic thing he'd ever seen. Every part of her was soft and sensuous, as though her flesh were covered with a layer of thick cream the color of pale golden sunshine. Her skin seemed to respond to the slightest current of air, now flushing, now pebbling with goose bumps. From her tiny waist, her torso rose in an elegant line, and her hipbones flared like two curves on a perfect heart. And on her chest, her hidden glory, the most astonishing breasts he'd ever seen. They'd taken his breath away before, when she'd begged him to lick her nipples.

But now, as she turned, displaying herself, arching her back to give him a better look at her protruding breasts, he could barely believe his eyes. They were perfect, and shockingly large for such a tiny figure. They graced her chest like two plump goddesses, and those long, red, gorgeous nipples—he wanted to bow down before them.

But he didn't want *this*. He didn't want that blank look in Chloe's eyes. He didn't want a mannequin posing for his pleasure. He wanted that other Chloe, the one who had dug her fingers in his hair while he sucked her to screaming release. The one who'd cried real tears as her body collapsed into his arms from pleasure. What had Andrew done to make her act like this?

"Chloe, stop."

She stopped, arms akimbo, a startled deer. "You don't want your turn?"

"Honey, I want you. But only if you want me. There's got to be joint participation."

She was quiet for a long moment. He watched a wave of rosy red wash over her throat.

"I don't know how to do that," she finally said in a soft voice.

"We're in the same boat here. I've never made love with you, and you've never made love with me. We can figure it out together."

That seemed to make her relax, just a little. "But you've made love, well, the normal way."

"Don't you know that when it comes to sex, there is no normal? There's just what makes two people happy. You make me happy already, just talking to me. And you seemed pretty happy before."

"I was. I am. Oh, Dustin." With that, she curled herself back into his lap. "Can we...can we just snuggle like this for a while?"

*Shut up*, he told his protesting cock. "Of course, sweetie. Whatever you want."

"It's a lot to think about." She nestled her head against his chest. "So different. Such a delicious feeling, being so drowsy and happy..."

After that, she was quiet. Her breathing became soft and even. He figured she was probably falling asleep. The pale early afternoon sun filtered through a cloud of dust. It tickled his nose, but he was afraid to sneeze in case he woke her up. Although the minutes ticked away, his erection refused to go down.

After some time had passed, he eased her off his lap and settled her into a nest made of her clothes. She stirred and murmured, "A lot to think about..."

"I understand." *I'll never see her again. Not naked. When she wakes up, she'll regret this.* Fighting to hide his disappointment, he got to his feet. "Ignore the embarrassing stiffie. I am."

With an obvious effort, she opened her eyes. "Not embarrassing. Beautiful."

"Don't flatter him, it'll go to his head. Puff him up. Even more than he is already." He pulled on his jeans, wincing as the zipper squeezed over his arousal. "There, that'll shut him up. I can find my way down the ladder."

Absolutely convinced it was his last chance, he took one look back at her before he stepped onto the ladder. She was curled on the dusty floor like a nymph on a lily pad, her long hair rippling over her shoulders like a cloak. Rosy nipples peeked through the veil of thick blonde hair. A dreamy smile graced her lips. The look in her half-open eyes, the color of clearest honey, told him he was doing the right thing, even though it physically hurt to leave her. She looked content. The ghosts were gone. At least for the moment.

Even though he knew it was right, that didn't stop him from cursing himself the whole walk home. To have a woman like Chloe in his lap, in his arms, on his tongue, and then to walk away. What kind of man was he? He'd be kicked out of the locker room, the frat house, the fish house, or any other house where men gathered. Then again, he despised frat boys, of whom he considered Andrew to be a prime example. And he'd rather shoot himself than do Chloe any harm.

Besides, he had work to do. Inside his fish house, with a first-things-first attitude, he tossed back a shot of rum. That felt better. Finally his erection began to subside. At least he wouldn't have to go to the emergency room with one of those *it's been hard for three days* stories. Although, if Chloe stuck around, he'd probably come close. Even though it was toasty warm in the fish house, he stoked the fire in the wood stove and pinned his hat and gloves to the rope that hung above it. One of these days he should throw out half the junk in this fish house. Among the paint scrapers and coils of rope and fish knives were tools so ancient, he didn't even know what they were for. Some had to do with ice cutting, back in the days before refrigerators. He wondered what his ancestors would have thought of his handy mini-fridge.

He took out a can of paint and opened it with a screwdriver. His lobster buoys needed a new coat of paint. In past days, Lisa had painted his buoys. Back then, they'd been purple and pink. Her choice. As soon as she'd left, he'd ditched the girly color scheme and gone for Halloween colors, orange and black. This year, he was going to set double his usual number of traps because Brian would be with him all summer long, helping him on the boat.

The familiar task relaxed him. He was sitting on his work bench, smiling to himself, thinking about how smart Brian was, how hard-working, what a great kid, much greater than two fuckup parents like he and Lisa could ever deserve, when he heard the door open.

He groaned. "I don't need help today, Gary. Take the bottle, and I'll catch you later."

There was a pause then he felt a warm breath on the back of his neck.

“How much later?”

He whirled around on the bench. Chloe stood behind him, wearing her green wool coat and slim rubber boots.

“I thought you were Gary,” he said stupidly.

“Are you glad I’m not?” She came around the bench, and he swung back around to face her. She took the paintbrush out of his hand, and leaned the half-painted buoy with the others against the wall.

“How’s Buster?” Standing in front of him, between his knees, she undid the top button of her coat.

“Intrigued.”

She unbuttoned the next one, revealing the creamy curve of her breasts. Apparently, he realized as Buster leaped back to attention, she was wearing nothing under the elegant coat.

“Fascinated,” he added. The next three buttons went, and sure enough, naked Chloe peeked out at him. “Coat and boots, I guess that’s all you need on a rainy day.”

“Yes, but this wool against my nipples...it’s been driving me crazy.” She drew the lapels of her coat apart, and he saw that her nipples had been teased into reddened peaks.

“You poor thing. You came to the right place.”

“I did?”

“Absolutely.” He got up and went to his mini-fridge. Once he came back, he lifted one nipple and pressed an ice cube against the tip. She gave a shocked yelp, and he saw the questions racing through her eyes. *Does it feel good, or bad? Or a little of both?* He applied the ice to the other nipple, while holding the first one in the warm cocoon of his fist. Now she definitely liked it. She swayed toward him with a moan. Then she caught herself.

“Oh, no, you don’t. This...” she pushed him back down on his bench, “...is about you.”

“It is?”

“On one condition.” She drew the coat off her shoulders, and her golden skin glowed in the dim light of the fish house.

“I’m not going to change my mind,” he said, remembering the condition he’d given to her.

“The condition is...” She dropped her coat onto the floor and stood in her rubber boots. How could rubber boots be sexy? He had no idea, but they were. The brown rubber made her skin look like smooth ivory. The boots were muddy, and a splotch of mud had splashed onto her thigh as well. All it did was accentuate the softness of her skin. He wanted to lick it off, like chocolate. She continued, “I get to do whatever I want.”

“Whatever?” He experienced a flash of nerves. Was Chloe about to make him pay for everything that had been done to her?

“Whatever.” Amber eyes, glinting with excitement, lit up the dingy fish house like the beam of the lighthouse. Did he have a choice? Did he want a choice? This was gentle Chloe, transformed into an avenging goddess. If she chose him to work out her demons, he’d count himself lucky. He’d go wherever she led.

“I’m all yours.” He raised his hands in a gesture that gave over all control to this stunning apparition. For a crazy moment, he wondered what his great-grandfather, who had built this fish house, would say. Then again, what red-blooded man could resist? Already his cock surged.

Chloe, naked but for her boots, strolled around the bench to stand behind him. He tried to turn to face her, but she stopped him. Instead, she pulled at the lapels of his flannel work jacket. He shrugged it off his shoulders to make it easier for her to strip him. Once he was naked to the waist, she ran her hands down the front of his chest, and pressed her breasts against his back. The tips were like hot diamonds, hard and alive. He felt her rubbing them back and forth against the ridges along his spine, and his hands twitched with the need to touch those aroused points. But she moved her hands to his arms and held them against his side.

“Whatever I want, remember?”

“Oh, I remember. What can I do for you, my goddess?”

“I’m going to unzip your jeans now,” she murmured in his ear.

Her tiny hands danced over the front of his jeans. There went his button, and the zipper. And there went her hand, latching onto his springing cock. He groaned.

“You like that?”

“Oh, yeah.”

Immediately her hand withdrew. Disappointment swept through him, and he closed his eyes in misery. Apparently she was going to torture him. A sweet sensation on the tip of his cock made him jump. He opened his eyes to see Chloe’s pale head nestled between his legs. She was kneeling on his jacket. And her mouth, that beautiful pair of full lips, caressed the tip of his penis.

“Oh my God,” he heard himself say.

She drew back. “You have to let me do whatever I want, remember? I never got to just, explore, you know?”

“Ex-plore. A-way.” Had it ever been this hard to get two words out? They were going to be the last words out of him for a while. If she needed to explore, he was all for it. But he would need all his concentration to keep from bursting into her mouth like a popped water balloon. She drew down his jeans and boxers. He sat bare-assed on the bench while she settled between his legs. Like some kind of curious archeologist, she began with her fingers, letting them wander over his cock and along the skin of his thighs. As if weighing them, she lifted his heavy balls in her hands. The sight of her white hands against the dark red of his balls almost made him lose it right then and there.



Gritting his teeth, he decided the visuals would be too much for him, so he fixed his gaze on the window that looked out over the bay. *There's Billy out on his boat, probably pulling up crab pots for his dinner.* Two curious fingers were now walking up the underside of his penis. It jumped about a foot in response. *Billy really ought to fix that stabilizer sail. Next time I see him, I gotta remember to...* Oh God, now her fingers were probing the tip of his cock. Something warm and wet licked at the tip, where he knew moisture seeped out. He risked a look down. There was Chloe's pink tongue lapping at his cock, like a kitten at a bowl of cream. She licked her lips with an innocent look.

"Does this feel good?"

A strangled moan was all he could muster.

"Your penis is wonderful. It's so clean and straight. And such a pretty color. It has a personality, you know."

"Yeah?" A word. He mentally patted himself on the back. The fact that she just held him, no longer teasing him with her tongue, helped matters.

"Just like you. A stand-up guy. Straightforward. Direct. Trustworthy." She squeezed her hand around him, while he tried to focus on her words.

"Someone else would have attacked me by now. You'd like to come, wouldn't you?" With one hand, she cuddled his balls, and with the other, fisted his cock.

Digging deep, he ground out an answer. "Someday, maybe."

"But you're holding yourself back, so I can explore."

He nodded, as she put her mouth to his cock again. The holding back part was getting a little dicey right about now.

"You don't have to hold back. I want you to come." And those were her last words before she wrapped her lips around the purple, bursting head of his cock. One hand still held him, and that hand worked in tandem with her mouth. Rhythm and suction sent the blood draining from his head, and a drumbeat pounding through his body. The thick silk of her hair fell against her cheek and cascaded against his penis. He thought of all the times he'd watched that hair flying in the wind, as Chloe rode her bike, or stood on the wharf on a windy day. The scent of it, like sweet apples, rose into the musty fish house.

Could this be happening? Was Dustin MacDougal really sitting bare-assed on his work bench, thighs apart, jeans around his ankles, surrounded by buoys, coils of rope, and broken lobster traps, while the fragile fairy Chloe Barnes sucked him off? Her mouth sure wasn't fragile. It tugged at him greedily, while her little fairy hands fondled his balls. He wanted to dig his hands into her waterfall of hair, but he was afraid of ripping it out by the roots in his frenzy. Instead, he gripped the rough wood of his workbench and thrust his hips forward into that hot cave.

Harder and harder she sucked at him, the walls of her mouth urging him on, her tongue swirling around the burning tip, calling for the volcano to erupt.

And when it did, when red-hot lava exploded into her mouth, she didn't hesitate. He made a move to pull out, but she held onto his buttocks with a grip that wouldn't let him go anywhere. So he let himself go, let that powerful geyser burst out of him. Spasms wracked his body as smooth throat muscles gripped his penis and swallowed the endless stream of liquid. Dustin felt his hips vibrate, his cock suspended in midair, pulsing its load into her beautiful lips. A primal cry echoed through the fish house. His own voice, wrested from his throat, divorced from any control he'd ever had over it.

After she sucked his cock dry, to its very roots, he slumped back on the bench. Chloe still knelt on his jacket, her skin gleaming against the forest green of her open coat. He closed his legs just enough to cuddle her between them. She lifted her head, and he thought he'd never seen anything as beautiful as those wet lips smiling shyly at him.

"That was exactly what I wanted to do. Thanks."

He stroked his hand down the cascading champagne of her hair, and lifted her chin to look into her eyes. "Do you mind if I ask you why?"

"I wanted to know what it felt like to choose. And your penis is beautiful." She held it in her hand like a seashell she'd gathered. Still half hard, it twitched in her hand.

"He likes you too. He's thinking of ditching me and hanging around with you from now on."

"Oh no, that wouldn't work at all. I want the hands that go with it." One of her hands left his crotch to travel up his body. "And this strong chest, with that odd scar. Fish hook?"

"Yep."

"I want to know your whole body. Everything about it. Does that sound weird?"

Did he care? "Nothing you could do or say would seem weird to me. I figure there's a method to your madness."

"All I want is a man's body that I can play with, that will give me pleasure, that won't scare me or hurt me. That's it." She took his hands and placed them on her breasts. The nipples teased the palms of his hands. His cock rose again, and he looked down in amazement.

"You seem to have a willing volunteer on your hands. Your orders, ma'am?"

"Oh, no. This time, I'm putting myself in your hands."

He stared down at her, into the darkened depths of her honey eyes. The expression he saw there rocked his world. Trust. This beautiful, wounded goddess trusted him.

## Chapter Six

Still snuggled between Dustin's legs, Chloe looked into his midnight-blue eyes. She noticed how black his eyelashes were. Everything about him was so definite. Strong cheekbones, firm lips. Creases at the corners of his eyes from squinting over the water. And from using that dry sense of humor. Straight nose. Sturdy, powerful body, his muscles earned the hard way, by hours, months, years of labor. This was a man who didn't hide who he was. He was a fisherman, a working man, and proud of it. She couldn't imagine Dustin pretending to be anything he wasn't. Not like Andrew, who presented himself as the gilded child of destiny, hiding the twisted needs inside. And not like her, who pretended it didn't matter what was done to her body, when inside she was dying.

But when she was with Dustin, that strange thing that used to happen, when part of her separated from her body and floated above, never did. She felt at one with herself, strong, healthy...lusty. And she saw an answering lust flame in his eyes. He stood up and refastened his jeans. After pulling her to her feet, he closed her coat.

"I'm going to recommend that we get out of here and continue this somewhere else," he said. "It's getting close to cocktail hour, which doubles as Gary's wake-up call."

"Gary?"

"My occasional stern man. That occasion being when he's low on cash. Or low on liquor would be another way to put it. Anyway, I'd rather not risk a run-in with him, not with you around. Everyone on Bellhaven will have a full report by dawn tomorrow. The safest place is probably on my boat. You game?"

Chloe nodded. What would Andrew think about what had just happened with Dustin? What would he do if he found out? She shivered at the thought.

Dustin picked up a hooded sweatshirt and handed it to her. "You'll need more layers out on the boat."

The sweatshirt was dark gray, with white letters reading *Maine Maritime Academy*, and it smelled like Dustin, ocean-fresh and salty. She breathed in its fragrance as she pulled it over her head.

"It's a good thing I have clothes on hand for the naked ladies who show up on my doorstep," he said as her head reemerged. And then, quickly, "Not that it's ever happened before."

"I can't imagine why not. You're a hunk, you know. When we were little, all the girls liked you."

Rummaging through his gear, he surfaced with a set of oilskins and a skeptical look. "Yeah, right."

"You didn't know? We all had crushes on you." The flabbergasted look on his face amused her.

"Chloe Barnes had a crush on me? You couldn't have given me a clue?"

She giggled. “There is a clue. It’s still there, parked behind the headboard of my bed. Remember that Bazooka gum you gave me?”

“When you hurt your leg? Sure. You saved it?”

“You were so sweet to me.” Her face warmed with a blush. Had she told him something too embarrassing? That gum had made her trust him back then, and helped her trust him now.

“Sweet *on* you is more like it. My father teased me for a month after that. Look.”

He kneeled to peer under the bench, and she followed. There, chiseled into the old wood, was the name Klowee, surrounded by a heart. “I didn’t know how to spell it. But I knew how I felt.”

Tears sprang to her eyes as she looked at the word. So innocent, so boyish. No way had Andrew ever carved a heart around anyone’s name. She turned to Dustin and threw her arms around his solid body. “Thank you.”

“For being a lovesick kid?”

“For showing me. For being here. For being who you are.”

She felt him stroke her hair. “What I am is a lucky bastard.”

Dustin rowed her to his boat in a weather-beaten dinghy that had only a few traces of its original blue paint. She’d left her wool coat at the fish house and instead wore a complete suit of oilskins over the sweatshirt and sweatpants Dustin had found for her. The rhythm of the oars was so soothing, she almost hated for the ride to end. She loved watching him row, patiently dipping the oars into the water over and over, pulling against the current so the little boat skimmed across the surface. So many people in her world were in such a hurry. Dustin took his time, giving each stroke of the oars his full attention. Just as he had given her his full attention. She began to feel the rhythm in her own body, her blood surging, and desire building with each stroke.

As they reached the boat, she frowned at the name painted on the stern. “Lisa May?”

He shrugged. “She’s the mother of my kid. And Brian likes it.”

“You’re on good terms? How did you handle custody?” This was her biggest fear about the divorce.

“The best we could. He’s better off in town for school. But he loves it out here in the summers. Let me help you up.”

Summers. If Andrew won custody, could she handle only seeing the girls during for summers? No. The thought was unbearable. She pushed it aside, and took Dustin’s hand. He helped her climb on board the *Lisa May*. Now that she knew his reason, she loved the fact that he hadn’t changed the name. It showed loyalty to his ex—to the mother of his son. Andrew would probably try to wipe her existence from his life. And maybe that’s how she wanted it.

While Dustin tied the dinghy to the mooring, she admired the orderly deck of the *Lisa May*. All the ropes were neatly coiled, five-gallon buckets stacked upside down, not a speck of fish gore anywhere to be seen. Inside the cabin, a watch cap hung neatly from a hook in the wheelhouse. Dustin had been wearing

that watch cap when she'd seen him from the ferry. On impulse, she sniffed it. Salt, diesel, fresh air, and that indefinable scent of Dustin. Seaweed, or brine. The way the god of the sea must smell.

As Dustin ducked through the opening of the wheelhouse, she turned to him and staggered slightly.

"Careful, there," he said, grabbing her arm. The boat rocked gently back and forth. The motion reminded her of the stroking of the oars, and the same rhythm began deep inside her.

"I want you, Dustin," she said. "Where can we go?"

"Why go anywhere?" He looked amused. "No one can see us in here. And I'm so hard right now, I don't think I could take another boat ride. Feel." He put her hand on the front of his oilskins, and the lump sent a thrill through her. She squeezed it and saw the fire in his eyes. Crowding close to her, he pressed her against the wheel. "You know, there's something I've always wanted to see. Will you let me?"

"Yes."

"Don't you want to know what it is?"

"I can't wait to see." It was true, her heart was beating fast, and her knees felt weak. With Dustin, whatever it was, she knew she was going to enjoy it. He put his hands to her front and removed her bright yellow jacket. Underneath, suspenders held up her oilskin trousers. These he slipped off her shoulders in order to remove her sweatshirt, leaving her naked from the waist up. He pulled the suspenders back up over her breasts, which pushed against the webbed fabric. One suspender covered a nipple, which immediately rose into a peak.

"Oh, yeah. Your skin against the suspenders, and the way they push your breasts together...mmm. You have no idea how sexy you are right now." But she could hear it in his voice, and see it in the appreciative way he gazed at her body. Moisture sprang between her legs. It felt good to know she was turning him on. He wasn't looking at her like an object, but like a woman, desirable and sensuous. She ran her hands up her torso, and hooked her thumbs under the suspenders. One of them slipped from her grasp, and snapped against her nipple. The thrill of it shocked her.

"Did that feel good?" he asked. She gave a slight nod, amazed that it was so. He took both suspenders and pulled them away from her chest. With his thumbs, he rubbed her nipples until they stood like proud soldiers then let go of the suspenders. This time, the sensation was so intense, she nearly came. Swaying against the wheel, she cried out.

"You're killing me, Chloe." He shoved the suspenders aside to feast on her nipples, grunting as he attacked with mouth and fingers. Chloe leaned back against the wheel and let the waves of electric pleasure take over her body. Little moans filled the air. Relentlessly, he sucked her breasts, tugging so deeply at the nipples she thought they might burst. Gripping his thick hair, she thrust her breasts forward in avid invitation, urging him on. She couldn't get enough of his urgency, his strength.

"Fuck me, fuck me," she whispered. "Fuck me hard."

The words sent him over the edge. He pulled the suspenders off her shoulders and yanked the oilskins down her body, so they pooled at her feet, along with her sweatpants. The same with his own oilskins. His cock jutted straight and hard. For a moment, he gazed at her. Chloe looked down, and saw the blonde curls at her sex glisten with moisture. He parted the curls with one finger and exposed her red, swollen clitoris.

“More than anything in this world, I want to make love to you.” He fingered the burning knob and she moaned and spread her legs further apart.

“Me...too,” she breathed.

“Are you sure? So far, we’ve used only our mouths. We don’t have to go any further than that. Putting my tongue on your sweet lips isn’t exactly a hardship.”

His thumb circled and pressed. It was hot, that thumb, especially compared to the chilly air wafting through the opening of the cabin. Her clitoris swelled against him. She felt hot and ready to burst. For a moment, she imagined him kneeling on the boat deck and licking her until she screamed. But she wanted more. Inside, she felt empty and itchy. She wanted to be filled up. She wanted to take that thick, purple-headed pole of flesh inside her body. Hot and primitive, it would banish the ghosts like nothing else could.

“I want you inside, Dustin.” She reached for his cock and pulled him toward her.

“Hold on.” He rummaged in a side pocket made of netting, through papers, pencil stubs, and, lo and behold, a condom. Once it was on, he put his strong hands on her ass and pulled her body against his. A slight shift of his muscular thighs, and suddenly he was inside her, his enormous erection filling her up. She felt the impact all the way up to her throat. Waves of warmth sent tingles to her fingers and toes.

For a moment, they paused there, testing the feeling of this new connection, awed by the rightness of it. And then he thrust into her, pressing her back against the wheel. She had no room to maneuver. All she could do was corkscrew her hips, which she did, following the path of the pleasure that built inside her. The intensity of that pleasure made her eyes fall shut. In the darkness, the rocking of the boat, and the rocking of his cock inside her, made her lose all equilibrium. The animal scent of their excitement mingled with the salt air and the hint of diesel. She was lost in a world of buffeting sensation. Up and down had no more meaning.

But it didn’t matter, because her body was anchored by his, by his hands on her ass, by his penis piercing her against the console, his mouth latched to her nipples. There was only one way she could go—toward the mind-blowing storm gathering inside her. It was coming, it was coming. She babbled the words out loud as she held onto his broad shoulders and twisted her hips against that maddening pole of hard flesh. *Coming, coming, don’t stop, please, fuck me, fuck me...* And then it was there, and the thunder burst through her, shaking her body in unstoppable waves. *Yes*, she sobbed, *yes, yes*. And he was shouting something too. She had no idea what the words were, but she knew what he meant. How could anything on this earth feel so incredibly good?

That evening, Chloe danced alone in the cottage living room as the fairies looked on, smiling and silent. She called her girls, and even they heard something different in her voice.

“Is it nice there, Mom?” Halley asked.

“Very nice. We’ll have to come out here sometime, maybe this summer.”

“And we can see where you grew up? The little house with the fairies?”

“You’ll love it here...” She remembered she was selling the cottage. “But all the houses here are wonderful. We’ll find a nice little cabin to rent.”

After she hung up, she wandered around the little cottage, wondering who would buy it, and if they would get rid of the crocheted throw rugs, and choose a color scheme other than pink and green. If she owned it, that’s what she would do. She’d paint the walls a cheerful lemony cream, with bright blue trim. She’d knock down the wall that closed in the tiny kitchen. Let the light flood in. Suddenly it occurred to her that she did own it. But never before had she thought about changing any part of it.

Lost in her ideas for redecorating, she nearly jumped out of her skin at the sound of a knock on the door. A happy smile spread over her face. It could only be Dustin, hungry for more. As, incredibly, was she. She flew to open the door. And felt the blood leave her face.

Burt.

At first the sight of him didn’t even make sense. He still wore his driver’s uniform. Who would need a driver on Bellhaven? She didn’t move when he pushed the door open and walked in. His mirrored sunglasses were gone, replaced by tinted aviator glasses. She’d never seen his eyes before, they were as blank as a dead fish. He scanned the cottage like a secret service agent looking for hidden assassins.

“You alone here?” he asked in that flat voice of his.

“What are you doing here, Burt?”

He shut the door behind him and turned the lock. “I asked you a question.”

“Did Andrew send you?” She could play the same game he could.

With that security guard swagger of his, he went to the kitchen, peered around, then returned to the living room. “Is your boyfriend here?”

She stared at him. “What are you talking about?”

“You think you can take off and nail another guy behind the boss’s back, and he ain’t gonna find out about it?” He flicked a look of contempt down her body.

“But how...” The words escaped in a whimper.

“His workshop. The boat. The attic, for Chrissake. You been a busy little whore.”

Chloe’s heart stopped. Someone must have seen her and Dustin. But how could anyone have seen them in all three places? It was impossible. And the attic—the attic was totally private.

Dustin. He’d betrayed her. Played her for a fool.

“Fishermen,” said Burt. “Don’t know how to keep their mouths shut. Cheapest squeals on the block.”

Her cell phone rang. Chloe gave Burt a panicked look. He nodded for her to take the call, and she flipped open her phone, feeling disgusted with herself. How quickly she’d returned to her old habits. Obedient, passive.

It was Dustin. “Hi, sweetie.”

“Hi.” It took all her strength to answer without the primal scream that wanted to come out.

“I thought I might mosey over there and take those oilskins off your hands.”

“You need them?”

“Yes, I can’t survive the night without them.” His voice was playful, but she couldn’t bring herself to play along.

“I’ll leave them hanging on the front door.”

“I put that wrong. I meant, I can’t survive the night without seeing you.” The lying beast, he actually sounded sincere.

“Goodbye. Don’t call again,” she said, clicking off the phone. She turned back to the beefy man who’d been her driver and Andrew’s enforcer for all the years of her marriage. “What do you want, Burt? Or should I say, what does Andrew want?”

“You know good and well. Sign the papers, Chloe.”

“Or what?”

“Or, thanks to you and your lover boy, he’ll make you look like a tramp in front of the judge. You’ll lose anyway.”

God, she was stupid. How had she let this happen? She’d thrown away her only piece of leverage against Andrew. Once she signed the confidentiality agreement, she would have nothing to hold over him. He could do whatever he wanted, and she would have to accept it. It didn’t matter how many houses she sold, how many divorce lawyers she hired. He would always have more. He would always win.

Andrew held all the cards. Again. Always.

Slowly, she walked to her tote bag and withdrew the document. When Andrew had presented it to her, a tiny flame of hope had sparked within her. It meant he was afraid of her, afraid of what she could reveal. She’d delayed signing it, hoping to get herself into the best possible bargaining position first. But now, that plan was ruined. By her own insane behavior.

The document was in formal legal language that had taken her a while to decipher. But she knew what it really meant. It meant that all her suffering, all her humiliation, all her silent submission, never existed. She couldn’t complain about it, she couldn’t commiserate, she couldn’t tell a friend, or even a therapist. By signing her name, she would be agreeing with Andrew that it had never happened. And she would be throwing herself on his mercy with respect to the kids. She would be saying, I have no cards left, but please be nice anyway and let me see my girls.



But if she didn't sign it, he would dirty her reputation so badly, she might never see her daughters again.

She dug a pen out of her purse. Her hand shaking, she held it over the signature line on the document.

A meaty hand dropped onto her arm. "Hold on. I can help you."

Oh God. Burt didn't have an altruistic bone in his bruiser body. Dread seeped through her. She snatched her arm away. "Don't touch me. I'll call Andrew and tell him I'll sign, but only if you leave me alone."

"You don't wanna do that."

"Yes, I really do."

"Then I'll start spreading these around. What do you think your boyfriend will think of this?" He dug in his pocket and flipped a Polaroid toward her. "Rest of the island might like a peek too."

In the Polaroid, Chloe sat tied to a chair, arms behind the back, legs spread apart. She wore a black leather bustier, and nothing else. The bustier was cinched tight around her waist and cupped the undersides of her breasts so they sat high on her chest, nipples protruding. Below the bustier, her clean-shaven sex was exposed. Her face was clearly visible, staring at the camera with a glazed look. No one else in the photo could be identified, but there were plenty of other body parts. One hand pinched her right nipple between thumb and forefinger. At the other nipple, a pierced tongue lapped. A mask covered the face that the tongue belonged to. Someone was standing behind her. The face couldn't be seen, but Chloe knew it was Burt. He held a whip, and the handle was at her crotch, pulling her lower lips apart. Chloe also knew who was taking the photo. It was Andrew, who had enjoyed directing the scene.

*"Barb, get that tongue on her nipple. Tilt your head so we can see your piercing. Flick it against her nipple. That's hot. Bite her nipple if you have to, that always works. Oh yeah, that's good. Burt, get that whip handle right in there, I can't see anything. We have to show off the goods. Chloe, don't move, or I'll let him fuck you with it. Barb, get her bustier tighter, I want her boobs to really pop. And get those nipples big and juicy, suck 'em hard, yeah, like that. Yeah, baby. That's it, doll."*

The Polaroid had been a test shot. After that, she'd been given a mask, and they had done a more professional photo shoot for a website. And, at the end, after everyone had gone, it was Andrew who had fucked her with the whip handle. The whip had gotten him so turned on, he had to use it somehow, without getting any marks on her skin.

She flipped the Polaroid back at Burt. "So?"

"So I got more of these, so if you don't want them to get out, you'll do what I want. And 'cuz I'm a nice guy, I'll still help you."

She gave him a skeptical look.

"After I get what I want, of course." And he hungrily rubbed his crotch.

## Chapter Seven

It doesn't matter, Chloe repeated to herself, as the old numbness turned her body to lead. It's only a body. Skin, covering flesh, covering bone. They couldn't touch the essential part of her. But as the sick tears gathered in the back of her throat, she knew that Dustin had touched that deepest part of her, and she would never be the same. Now she knew what it was like to give herself freely. How could she go back?

But Dustin had betrayed her. He was just another man who'd used her.

Drawing her spine straight, she told herself she couldn't think about that now. Her girls were all that mattered any more. "How will you help me?"

"Don't put the cart before the horse. You do what I want, then we talk."

She gritted her teeth. "No. First you tell me how you're going to help me. Then I'll decide if it's worth it."

She thought she saw a flicker of respect in Burt's dead-fish eyes. "I'll give you the big picture. Details, you leave to me. Fact is, the boss don't really want the brats. He's just trying to get you to shut up. But if I go back to him with that piece of paper, and tell him I got you good and scared, and make him see the best way to keep you quiet is to hand over the girlies, you got a good chance."

"A good chance? That's all you're offering?"

Burt shrugged. "You know the boss. About as predictable as dynamite. But I know him as good as anyone."

Chloe was silent. What Burt said rang true. Of course Andrew didn't really want the kids, and of course that had never occurred to her. He put on a loving front with the girls most of the time, because most of the time there were other people around. But he barely noticed the girls when they were alone. They were part of the pretty picture he wanted to present to the world. Divorce wasn't part of that picture, but it wasn't fatal. If he already had a mistress, maybe the two of them would get married and have more kids. She and Merry and Halley could simply fade out of his life. They would become a footnote in the brilliant career of Senator Andrew Garwood. Which was exactly how she wanted it.

But to get there, apparently she would have to go through Burt. "Deal."

"Smart girl. You'll do whatever I want?"

"Unless it's going to cause permanent harm."

He looked offended. "I don't want to hurt you. I just want some of the action. I spent enough time on the sidelines."

That was some relief. “Whatever you want then.”

A smirk of satisfaction twisted his face. “One other thing.”

What else could he want, besides unrestricted access to her body?

“This never gets back to the boss. Or anyone else.”

Apparently anyone could do anything they wanted to her, and no one would ever hear about it. With a sense of sinking despair, she nodded.

Unzipping his pants, he brought out his long, flaccid penis and sat back on the pale green couch. “This is going to take a while, so I’m gonna make myself comfortable. I got myself a front row seat here. Now I want my money’s worth. You’re gonna start with a striptease, and I mean the real raunchy kind, I want you twisting all over the floor, shaking those tits, spreading that ass. I want you to end up right in front of me, on your hands and knees, that sweet little hole of yours ready for action. I got some other ideas after that, but that’ll do for starters. Got it?”

The sight of beefy, uniformed Burt sitting on the couch her mother had upholstered, fingering his limp cock, was so surreal it took a moment for Chloe to answer. Her eyes drifted to the white fairy statuettes, and she imagined them turning their eyes away in horror. *You don’t understand*, she wanted to tell them. *Life isn’t a fairy tale. Life is doing what you have to do, no matter how degrading. Is there another way?*

But the silent statues had no alternatives to offer. Chloe raised her shaking hands.

“Lift your top up. I want a sneak preview.” Burt was starting to get hard from his fondling. Chloe lifted her pink cardigan to expose the bra underneath. “Pull down your bra.”

She did what he said, and her breasts bounced free from the restraint of her bra. He let out a long sigh, and his hand moved faster on his cock. “I gotta tell you, I missed those babies. I like how that looks, with your nipples sticking out between your top and your bra. Now put your hands behind your head and stick your tits out. Sweet.” He pumped harder on his erection. “Now dance.”

Of all times for Gary to go on a bender. Dustin wanted to get drunk all by himself. He wanted to curse his luck with women, curse himself for falling for an unattainable fairy princess. He wanted to get sloppy drunk and howl at the moon and torture himself with the memory of sweet, passionate Chloe. Instead, he realized as he opened the door of his fish house to the bleary-eyed Gary, he was going to have to baby-sit his drunk stern man.

“Go away,” he told him.

But since this was his standard greeting, Gary ignored it. “C’mon, lemme in. I got something impor’t say.”

“Oh, Jesus. Out of all the fish houses on all the islands in Maine, why do you have to pick mine?” But he held open the door, and Gary staggered in.

“Got any rum?”

“No.”

Ignoring him, Gary went straight to the stash of Captain Morgan’s Dustin kept in his toolbox. He took a long swig straight from the bottle. “I’m here ’cuz I love you, man. And it’s eating me alive.”

“What is?” Dustin took a step back. Was Gary confessing to some secret homosexual crush? What the hell was he talking about?

“The guilt, man, the guilt. You’re my friend, I’d do just ’bout anything for you, but I needed the cash.” Gary gave a dramatic sob. “Turns out, it ain’t worth it. If I could give it back, I would, but I drank it all up.”

The slight buzz Dustin had been enjoying before Gary showed up vanished. This sounded serious. “What are you talking about?”

“Barbie. Her hubby wanted her followed. How was I to know she’d go fer you?” Gary raised the bottle for another swig, but before it could reach his lips, Dustin was in his face. He swatted the bottle aside, and it crashed to the floor. Dark liquid seeped into the floorboards.

Dustin shook Gary by the shoulders so hard the man’s teeth rattled against each other. “What’d you do? You tell me everything, exactly as it happened, or I swear I’ll beat you bloody.”

“You wouldn’t. You’re my friend. Gimme that.” Gary stretched a hand toward the bottle.

Dustin kicked it further out of reach. “You talk, you can have it back.”

“But that’s what I’m tryin’ to do! Clear my conscience, man.” He gave a slobbery sob.

Dustin felt revolted. “Who came to you?”

“Some bodyguard type named Burt. Said he worked for Barbie’s husband, and he wanted to know what she was doing. He wanted pictures too. Tol’ him I didn’t have a camera. He gave me one, said I could keep it, like an extra bonus. Wanted me to call him every coupla hours with a report.”

Dustin remembered the flash outside his house, that first night with Chloe, and felt sick. “What’d you tell him? In your reports.”

“Whaddya think? Why d’you think I feel so rotten? Even climbed a tree to see into her attic.”

By now, Dustin couldn’t care less about Gary’s feelings. The sense that Chloe was in danger, and that he’d unwittingly put her there, was growing stronger. Not to mention his outrage that Gary had taken pictures of his private moments with Chloe. “When was your last report?”

“I dunno. A couple hours and a bottle of rum ago. He said he had enough now, and I could stop. Gave me more cash.”

Dustin froze. “You mean he’s here? He gave you cash here?”

“He was holed up at the Garwood place. Came the same day she did, on a water taxi. Didn’t want anyone to see him.”

Dustin pushed past Gary with a growled, "I'll deal with you later," and ran out of the fish house. He'd called Chloe about half an hour ago. Her voice had been so cold and strange. Of course he'd figured she was giving him the brush-off. But what if something else was going on? As fast as he'd ever run in his life, he hurtled down the gravel road that led to the Barnes cottage.

Chloe was naked from the waist up, and her jeans were unzipped. Following Burt's rough-voiced instructions, she squeezed her breasts together and pinched her own nipples into erect peaks. She bent forward and shimmied her shoulders, making her breasts swing back and forth. Burt was reaching greedily for them when a pounding on the door interrupted.

Burt grabbed her by the waist and sat her onto his lap, a heavy arm anchoring her around the middle. "Make them go away."

"Who is it?" she called.

"It's Dustin. Let me in."

"I'm busy. I don't want to see you." Burt moved one sweaty hand to her right breast and squeezed until tears came to her eyes. "Go away!"

"I'm not going away. Either you let me in, or I'm breaking in."

Burt growled in her ear. "If he gets in, he's going to get an eyeful."

"Dustin, please. I'll call you later, I promise." Burt wormed his other hand into her jeans and spread her legs apart with his knee. He shifted his position so he faced the door, with Chloe, half-naked, splayed on his lap. "Please!" She nearly shouted the word through the door.

One strong kick at the old wood, and the door swung open. Dustin stood outside, like a firefighter ready for battle, legs apart, arms swinging. She saw him take her in, in that humiliating position, one breast filling the rough hand of the beast under her, her other breast exposed, its nipple standing erect. The beast's other paw was working deep inside her jeans, and her legs were far apart. It probably looked like she was enjoying this. She closed her eyes and prayed a hurricane would sweep them all into the ocean.

Dustin felt the sight of Chloe scorch his vision. It enraged him to see her delicate skin in those grubby hands, and her body twisted in that uncomfortable way. But what he hated most was seeing that glazed look in her eyes. She'd given him some idea of what Andrew had done to her, and now he was seeing it firsthand. This creature worked for Andrew. Maybe he'd been sent to debase and demoralize Chloe. Well, he, Dustin MacDougal, wouldn't allow it.

"Let her go," he ordered the man.

The man with the dead eyes sneered back at him. Dustin knew the type. Bullies who took out their frustrations on anyone weak or vulnerable.

“Who the hell are you? Oh right, the boyfriend. Didn’t recognize you with your clothes on.”

Dustin saw something flicker in Chloe’s blank gaze. “Let her go,” he repeated. The rage he was struggling to contain must have shown through. The man let go of Chloe and pushed her off him. She didn’t leap away from him, as Dustin had expected. Instead she walked slowly, with her head ducked, toward the pink sweater that lay on the floor. Dustin seethed. Where was his vibrant, passionate goddess?

“You got this all wrong, buddy,” said the man, zipping up his pants. For the first time, Dustin noticed he wore a chauffeur’s uniform. What was he, straight out of the mob? “This one’s no innocent. She might look all pure and clean, but I got pictures that show different.”

“I don’t care about that. I want you off this island before I call in the constable. He’ll file a police report.”

“Constable?” The chauffeur laughed. “Who’s that, the little drunk I paid off? He got some good shots, by the way. Persistent little fucker.”

“It so happens that I’m the constable.” The man’s smile disappeared. “And I’d rather not file a police report, but if I have to, I’ll make sure Chloe looks lily-white, and you look like the criminal you no doubt are. And I doubt the Garwoods want their good name tainted by the likes of you. If I remember Andrew right, I bet he still worries about what his old man thinks.”

An expression of uncertainty crossed the man’s face, and Dustin knew he’d struck a chord. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Chloe put her bra back on, and her sweater. His heart ached at the way her head drooped. She looked like all the life had been drained out of her.

“Lily-white? You ain’t seen these pictures. You file a police report, you better include these.”

Dustin held out his hand, and the man slapped several Polaroids into his palm, while holding onto the bulk of them. Dustin didn’t want to look, but he knew he had to. He had to know what he was dealing with. Quickly, he flipped through them. They all showed Chloe in various provocative poses, either naked or dressed in outrageous outfits. In one, her nude body was crisscrossed with shiny black-lacquer bindings, leaving only her nipples and sex exposed. Her hands were tied behind her, her head yanked back by a gloved fist twisting her hair. In another, she was on her hands and knees, arched like a cat, chains on her nipples, while a masked man entered her from behind. He may have been wearing a mask, but Dustin would have recognized Andrew’s wiry build anywhere. In a third, Chloe was lashed to a long table, her long hair spilling to the floor. Around the table sat several men, all masked. One was pouring a bottle of tequila over her belly, while the rest drank it from the concave hollow of flesh before it spilled out. Salt was being licked off her nipples, limes were piled on her sex. One big body shot. The absurdity of it reminded Dustin that Andrew was, at heart, nothing more than a cruel frat boy. And as he looked closer, he saw an opening. Andrew’s mask had slipped, just a bit, as he poured the tequila.

“Andrew’s not going to like this,” said Dustin, holding the photo up to the light. “I’m surprised he let himself get caught on camera. I thought he was smarter than that.”

“He is. That’s a mask. You can’t see anything.”

“Wrong. Anyone who knows him would recognize him here.” He held the Polaroid so the man could see it. That pale, sweaty face shifted as he saw what he had obviously missed before. “I suggest you hand over all the photos, unless you want me to go public with this one.”

“You wouldn’t. Chloe would...”

“Andrew has a lot more to lose than Chloe. No one’s going to vote for him after they see this. You want to be responsible for the end of his Senate campaign?”

The chauffeur spat at him, but Dustin stood his ground. With a grunt of disgust, the man finally tossed him the rest of the stack of photos. Dustin didn’t look at the others. He went to the wood stove, opened the glass door, and threw them in. As the edges curled and blackened, he looked over at Chloe. She was now fully dressed, but shivering from some combination of cold and shock.

“Why don’t you come warm up by the fire, Chloe?” Dustin said gently. But she shook her head, and stayed where she was, rooted to the floor in the corner of the room.

“You’re stepping in something that’s none of your business.” The chauffeur swaggered, obviously trying to regain the upper hand. “This little lady and I made a deal. I didn’t get what I wanted, so it looks like the deal’s off. She can kiss her kids goodbye.”

If possible, Chloe turned even paler.

“What deal?” asked Dustin.

“Like I said, none of your business. But you just ruined any chance she had of getting her kids. They’ll stay with Andrew, and good luck to them.”

Dustin’s stomach tightened. He looked over at Chloe. From her burning eyes and white face, he knew the man was telling the truth. That’s why Chloe had gone along with his demeaning demands. Because that was, somehow, her only hope for negotiating with Andrew. What had he done? Had his urge to ride in to her rescue made things worse for her?

“Chloe? What’s he talking about?”

Chloe didn’t answer. Almost as if she hadn’t heard him. As if her mind had completely drifted off into some other world, leaving only an empty shell behind.

“Chloe? Chloe!”

Chloe heard Dustin’s voice as if from very far away—from another time, another place. Her body felt weighted by numbness, but her mind floated free. This was a familiar state, but usually her mind occupied itself with pleasant images, clouds and fairies and memories of favorite places. But now her thoughts were taking a different direction. Coldly, analytically, she went over everything Burt and Dustin had said. Andrew didn’t want the girls. Andrew was afraid of what his father would think. Andrew had more to lose than she did. And suddenly it was all clear.

Andrew didn't have all the cards. She did. As long as she had a voice and a memory, she had power over Andrew. Unless, of course, he decided to get rid of her entirely. But Andrew was no killer. He was weak, cruel, twisted, but he wouldn't murder her. All he wanted was for her to go away so he could advance his career. Find a wife more suited to his political ambitions. That was why he hadn't argued too much about the divorce. It had become clear to both of them that Chloe, shy and dreamy, was the worst possible choice for the next stage of his life. No one could be more ill suited to life in the public eye. He'd probably already found her replacement. Andrew would be happy if she took the kids and retired from the spotlight, as long as she never talked about what she'd been through.

Well, it was a small price to pay, as long as she was the one setting the terms.

Yes, it was all clear now. She knew how to handle Andrew now. But what to do about Burt? Drifting down from her pleasant haven, she faced the bully who had witnessed so many of her most humiliating moments. "Burt, I'm sorry, but the deal's off."

Burt and Dustin both looked stunned by the firm tone of her voice.

"What you are blathering about?"

"I've decided I don't need your help. It was very kind of you to offer, but I will deal with Andrew by myself."

His fish-eyes turned an uneasy shade of pale blue. "What are you gonna tell him?"

"What he needs to know. Please leave now."

"You heard her," said Dustin. "She owns this house, and if she doesn't want you here, you're trespassing."

"Stay out of this." The man turned on Dustin with a look of pure hatred. It didn't seem to faze Dustin a bit, he didn't even shift his stance.

"I'm afraid you'll have to complain to the good people of Bellhaven. I'm just doing my job. I didn't even want to be constable, but you can't argue with an eighty-one to zero vote."

"Shut up, you son of a bitch." Burt lunged toward Dustin, who braced himself. Chloe saw Burt's hand sneak toward his back pocket. At one point during her striptease, she'd seen him move something from his front pocket to the back. Something bulky that was getting in his way. Gun or knife—she didn't know what it was. It didn't matter. He was going after Dustin, who had stuck up for her even after seeing her at her most degraded. Dustin, who hadn't betrayed her. Dustin, who had brought her back to life. Without thinking, she put a hand behind her, grabbed a familiar smooth shape, then raised her hand high. Two long strides in Burt's direction, and she hurled her weapon down on his head with all the force in her body. All the force of ten years of buried anger.

Burt crumpled to the floor. The statuette shattered over his fallen body in a shower of shining white fairy dust.



## Chapter Eight

Chloe, wearing black sunglasses and a pink sun hat, waited at a tiny table in the back of the Cool Beans coffee shop in Northampton, Massachusetts. It was several towns away from the home she and Andrew had shared. She'd never been there before, and neither had Andrew. Neutral territory. Nervously, she checked her watch. Andrew was already ten minutes late. Probably a power move on his part. Once he arrived—most likely in the next two minutes—she could already predict his next moves. He would send his driver/assistant/bodyguard for a short walk, but only after making sure she knew he had brought one. He would demand they change tables, choosing one that would put her in a corner. And he would charm the waitress so anything unpleasant would appear to be Chloe's fault.

Exactly two minutes later, Andrew's limo pulled up outside the coffee shop and stopped in a clearly marked No Parking zone. The driver got out, opened the door for Andrew, and then followed him into the shop.

"Hi, gorgeous." Andrew greeted the young waitress with a two-handed handshake and a blinding smile. "You mind if I leave the old wreck out front for a minute?"

The waitress, freckled and wide-eyed, blushed and shook her head. Chloe smiled into her iced tea. She knew Andrew's moves all too well. The driver was someone new. Perhaps Burt was still recovering from the bump on his head. Or maybe he was too embarrassed to face her.

Andrew strode to the table and loomed over her. Chloe had to admit he looked good. His face was tanned—lots of tennis at the country club, probably—and his green eyes gleamed at the sight of her. "Back of the bus, huh?" he said. "You're always hiding in a corner. Haven't you learned anything from me?"

"Oh, a thing or two. How about that table over there?" She pointed to a table where one chair was wedged between the bathroom and a wall. It had the added advantage of being fairly isolated from the other tables. The café was almost empty, but it was still better to be as private as possible.

"Fine. Sikes, go ahead and find a spot for the jalopy. If you see a car wash, go wild." Andrew handed the driver a couple of bills, while Chloe smiled to herself again. It was all going exactly as she had predicted. Maybe it mattered to Andrew where he sat, it sure didn't matter to her. Let him think he could still get the upper hand with such cheap tricks. She had her eye on a bigger prize.

Gathering her tote bag and iced tea, she made her way to the other table, and sat in the chair next to the bathroom. Andrew signaled the waitress, chatted her up for a few minutes and ordered a coffee. Chloe

waited patiently. Finally he settled down and looked across the table at her. He looked ready for battle. “So? You called the meeting. That means you start us off.”

“Fine. I think you’ll be happy with what I have to say. I’ll sign your document. I’ll promise never to speak to any public person or media outlet about anything regarding our marriage. If I choose to share something with a friend or a therapist, I will make sure they never speak of it publicly, and if something somehow does become public, I will disavow it.”

“The confidentiality agreement forbids you to talk to anyone, even a friend.” Andrew stirred non-dairy creamer into his coffee. He seemed taken aback by her businesslike tone.

“I consulted a lawyer, and that clause is unlikely to hold up. It might even jeopardize the whole agreement. It’s in your interest not to insist on it. Andrew, what happened is part of me. You can’t keep me from ever mentioning it. But that doesn’t mean I think it’s the public’s business.”

“Maybe you don’t want to be shamed in public.” His eyes dropped to scan her body. “I wouldn’t if I were you. You were a consenting adult, after all. It’s not like you ever resisted. I was just trying whatever I could to turn you on. I should have given up on that when I first saw how frigid you were.”

White rage made the world shimmer around her. She leaned forward, not caring who could hear. “You think I’m frigid? Maybe Burt didn’t tell you, but I found a man who made me come over and over, with his mouth, with his fingers, with his big, beautiful cock.” Andrew, looking over his shoulder, tried to shush her, but she wouldn’t be stopped. “I found out what it’s like to be with a man who knows what to do with a woman’s body. You have no clue. You’re a twisted bastard, and a terrible lover. And that’s what I’ll tell the world if you don’t sign my papers.”

The blood seemed to drain from Andrew’s tanned face. “That fisherman?”

“Yes, that fisherman. He’s ten times, a hundred times, the man you are.”

She watched him struggle with himself. Calculation seemed to win out. “Then you won’t want him to know your sordid little secrets. This is an empty threat. You’ll never go public, unless you want lover boy to see you splashed over every tabloid in the supermarket.”

The image sent a chill down her spine, but she ordered herself not to react. Be honest, that’s all she had to do. The truth was, she held all the cards, and Andrew just wasn’t ready to admit it.

“No, I don’t want to be in the tabloids, and neither do you. That’s why we’re sitting here right now. But Dustin already knows what happened. I told him, and Burt showed him those filthy little Polaroids. Kind of careless of you, Andrew. You’re lucky Dustin got rid of them. He doesn’t blame me, he doesn’t think worse of me. There’s nothing you can do that will change Dustin’s opinion of me. And the people who love me will understand, even if they see a few salacious headlines. Then the media will move on, and no one will remember anonymous little Chloe Barnes. But senate candidate Andrew Garwood—that’s another matter. They’ll remember your name.” She switched to the voice of an imaginary voter. “*Andrew*

*Garwood, wasn't he the one in those photos, doing all those nasty things? And he seemed like such a nice guy. I can't believe I was going to vote for him."*

Andrew's hand tightened on his coffee mug, his knuckles whitening. "You little bitch."

"Names aren't going to solve this. Face it, Andrew, I have nothing to lose. The only thing I care about is the girls. They will always love me, and when they're grown up, if I have to, I will try to make them understand. But you—you have everything to lose. Your political ambitions, your good name, your public standing. The country club will ban you. You'll no longer be welcome in the best homes."

Andrew no longer looked tan, now he looked sickly.

"But none of that has to happen. All you have to do is sign this custody agreement, and you can continue on with your brilliant future." She pulled the document from her tote bag and pushed it across the table to him.

He quickly scanned it. "Full custody."

"Full legal and physical custody. You can see them at predetermined times, but no more than two days a month."

"Five."

Why did he bother? Maybe he didn't want to make things too easy for her.

"Two. This is not negotiable. You don't want them anyway, Andrew. To you, they're just a bargaining chip. You're getting what you really want. Let's put an end to this farce."

Watching him closely, she could see the exact moment he decided to concede. But it went against the grain for him to end up on the losing end of things. Especially to her.

"I'd had my fill of you anyway," he said. "I hope Dustin doesn't mind getting spoiled goods. Does he know how many men have touched you? How many men have seen every inch of your body? You'll always be my little slave doll. If I wanted, I could get you back right this second. I could make you pull your tits out, get up on this table, strip naked and touch yourself. I could make you get into the back seat of the limo, spread your legs, and charge tickets for every guy in Northampton to get their turn with you. I could..."

Chloe plunked a pen on top of the custody agreement. Still spewing his nastiness, he signed. She placed the document back in her tote bag, took the pen, signed the confidentiality agreement, and pushed it toward him.

"...make you serve that couple over there wearing nothing but an apron, I could bend you over this table and fuck you silly, I could..."

"Goodbye, Andrew. You may not have noticed, but there's a clause stipulating that any breach of the custody agreement voids the other one. So watch your step." She got to her feet. At the cash register, she saw the young waitress listening, openmouthed. "You know, there's one more thing I'm going to pray for every night."

“What?”

“That voters see you for what you really are, since I can’t tell them myself.”

She shouldered her tote bag, and walked toward the door. As she passed the waitress, she stopped for a moment. “Take my advice, and stay very far away from that man.”

The waitress snapped her jaw shut and nodded. Chloe stepped into the bright sunshine and headed for the cab waiting around the corner for her.

Next stop—pick up her girls.

Dustin kissed the inside of Chloe’s right ankle. It was the kind of detailed intimate caress with which he’d been tormenting her for the last two hours. He mouthed the little knob of her anklebone, pinning her thighs to the floor so she couldn’t wriggle away from the shimmering sensation. Not that she wanted to. She’d already come twice, and he still hadn’t even put his mouth on her sex, still hadn’t given in to her pleas to fill the empty space inside her. He dipped his thumb into her wetness then flicked it over her burning clitoris. She bucked under his touch. Throwing her head back, she saw the wooden dome above her slowly spin in a blissed-out blur. They were on the floor of the widow’s walk, nested on a pile of quilts. Dustin’s grandmother had no doubt never intended her work to be used for this purpose. Then again, maybe she had. Chloe couldn’t imagine a better one.

She squirmed as Dustin’s tongue flickered over the back of her knee, across the inside of her thigh. The soft fabric of the quilt added to the feeling of being cocooned in pleasure. The first real warm breeze of summer drifted through the doors that led onto the balcony. It seemed to coo in her ear. Her own breath joined it in a rising rhythm that matched the swirling pace of Dustin’s tongue.

“Jesus, Dustin. I need you inside me. Please.” Her voice was a croak of desire. His cock was so far away—if it couldn’t be inside her, she wanted it in her hand, or her mouth, somewhere. Instead, it stayed out of reach, bobbing against her shin as he crouched over her. Well, if all she had was her shin, so be it. She nudged her knee against that burning velvet pole, and had the satisfaction of hearing him groan.

“You want me?” He nuzzled the words into her sex.

“Yes!”

“How much?”

She showed him how much with a thwack on his head. The vibrations of his laughter sent little wavelets of sensation through her body.

“You’re a mean man.”

“Take that back.” He nipped at her swollen lips.

“No.” Her voice was shaky with desire.

“What did you call me?”

“Mean. No, worse. Cruel!”

“Cruel, is it?”

Chloe felt herself being flipped over onto her stomach. She cried out at the cushiony teasing of the worn fabric against her stiffened nipples. Then a strong body was on top of her, a determined hand under her sex. Fingers probed until they found her burning clitoris, then rubbed. At first she tried to twist away from the relentless arousal, but his hips kept her firmly in place. He rubbed and pinched her as she bucked her hips hard against his hand, and beyond it, the quilt.

Then her ass was lifted slightly into the air, and finally the massive cock she’d been longing for sank into her. She ground her hips back into his, while his hand kept its teasing grip on her sex. Oh God, it was too much, too much. Moisture dripped down her thighs. The rhythms were different, his body thrusting against hers, his hand circling, and it was driving her crazy. She didn’t know which felt better, she wanted both, she wanted it to go on and on, she wanted to climb the peak...no, she wanted to draw it out...no, she wanted that finger to rub harder. But first she wanted his cock deeper, and now his other hand was under her breasts, gathering her nipples together in one work-roughened hand, and she couldn’t think anymore. She could only fly as the bliss exploded from every direction and her body spasmed around his, her inner muscles pulling at him until he too jerked and shouted and came, a jet roaring inside her.

Long moments passed, the only sound their panting as it gradually slowed. It was the breeze that spoke first. It whispered of seagulls darting over incoming fishing boats, kelp washed up on the beach, the first wild roses setting their blooms. It roused Chloe, and she shifted under Dustin’s weight. Immediately, he rolled off her.

“Are you okay, love?” he said anxiously.

“For a dead woman, just fine.”

“At least you died happy, I hope.”

“Very happy.” She sighed. “I’m almost embarrassed to say how happy.”

“Are you excited? Nervous? Chilly?” He pulled one of the quilts from under her, and draped it over her. She sat up, cross-legged, and wrapped it around her. This was one of the things she liked best about being with Dustin. After sex, he would lie, or recline on one elbow, while she sat and gabbed. Since she often spent the time telling him what an amazing lover he was, he didn’t seem to mind. But he also didn’t seem to mind when she talked about whatever else happened to be running through her head. Bits and pieces of her life with Andrew had come out. Someday he would know it all. And he talked too. She loved hearing him talk, even if it was just about Gary’s latest misadventure.

“All three, I guess. I mean, I know the girls are going to love summer on Bellhaven. At least I think they will. I hope they don’t think it’s boring here. Compared to mainland life, it’s a little slow.”

“Yeah, we move at a second-grade pace out here, and what are they, third-grade?”

She laughed. "Third and fourth. And their school is so sophisticated. Their friends are all going to camp or Europe this summer."

"What's Europe compared to Hook Point at low tide? You don't find starfish like that just anywhere."

"Good point. I know they'll love it here. Did I tell you about their rooms?"

She had, but he let her tell him again. All spring, she and the girls had gone back and forth from their new apartment on the mainland to Bellhaven, spending Andrew's alimony money freely to renovate the cottage. Now summer was here, a long, luxurious summer with Dustin. The girls were enjoying one last slumber party with their friends, and then they'd all be together on Bellhaven.

The distant whistle of the ferryboat made her jump to her feet. "That's it! That's them! Help me, hurry." She flew around the room collecting her clothes. But when she tried to put her shirt on, it seemed to be inside out and buttoned wrong. She couldn't even tell the top from the bottom. Placing firm hands on her shoulders, Dustin made her stand still.

"I'll take care of it. Lift your arms."

For one horrified second, she heard the echo of Andrew's voice. "Lift your arms, doll." She froze. In Dustin's midnight-dark eyes, she saw puzzlement, followed by realization. He took a step back, and dropped the shirt as if it were on fire.

"Sorry. Sorry."

The worry on Dustin's beautiful face brought her back to her senses. "No. I'm sorry." She stepped forward, and lifted her arms. Gently, respectfully, he pulled the sleeves of her shirt onto one arm, then the other, then buttoned the front.

"Thank you," she said, and leaned in to give him a tender kiss.

Outside, Dustin emptied his truck in order to load it up with all the stuff two girls would need for the summer. With an embarrassed look, he tossed a stray bottle of rum into the trash. He'd given up rum the same day he'd told Gary to dry out or get a new job. Sober, Gary seemed to spend a lot of time apologizing.

Dustin and Chloe drove the truck to the wharf and ran down to wait with the others. The ferryboat was just rounding the tip of Hope Island. Halley and Merry were on that boat. Chloe knew what they were seeing right now. The two arms of Bellhaven spread open to welcome all visitors. The high cliffs on one end, the blanket of pine trees, the white curls of waves foaming against gray rock. The homey little wharf nestled in the middle. She could imagine the excitement coursing through them at the thought of everything to be discovered during a summer on Bellhaven, all the adventures to be had. And she thought of all the dangers they didn't know about, that they didn't have to know about yet. When the time came, she would prepare them. Warn them, arm them with knowledge. But for now, let their innocence shine.

When she was their age, she'd known absolutely, one hundred percent, that Bellhaven was a magical place where fairies watched over her. Now, at this moment, with this man beside her and her beautiful daughters sailing toward her, she knew absolutely, one hundred percent, that she'd been right.

## About the Author

To learn more about Juniper Bell, please visit [www.juniperbell.com](http://www.juniperbell.com). Or, you can send an email to Juniper at [juniper@juniperbell.com](mailto:juniper@juniperbell.com).

Look for these titles by Juniper Bell

*Coming Soon:*

Training the Receptionist



*With her life on the line, can she protect her heart?*

## Protecting Phoebe

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### *A Chances Are Story*

Phoebe's work at Second Chances, a women's shelter, has gone a long way toward her own healing after surviving an abusive relationship in college. She's moved on in every sense—except when it comes to dating.

Everything changes when Craig visits the shelter. The hot, young cop sets her pulse racing in a way that makes her consider making a move—and moving him into her bed for a casual fling. The first step: ask him out. Subtly, of course.

Craig has been attracted to Phoebe for months, so he's more than happy for the chance to get to know her better, in bed and out. His interest goes way beyond casual, but convincing her to think long term is going to take some time.

When it becomes clear her violent ex has come out of the woodwork, though, time is the one thing they don't have...

*Warning: This book contains hot lovin' between an older woman and younger man, the threat of a violent ex, and a woman learning to trust a cop whose desire to serve and protect goes way beyond the badge!*

*Enjoy the following excerpt for Protecting Phoebe:*

Damn but if he didn't want to just cup her face and run his thumbs over the cheeks, before taking her lips in a hard kiss.

What would she taste like? What kinds of sweet sounds would she make when he sank his tongue deep into her mouth?

Phoebe shifted next to him, as if sensing his sensual thoughts. Her thigh scratched against his.

A hint of desire flashed in her eyes, pushing his primitive side further to the surface.

Wanting to test her limits, he gave a slight smile, still holding her gaze, and let his right hand rest on her knee.

A small, visible tremble ran through her and he heard the shift in her breathing.

Never mind if the band sucked, the idea of getting her on the dance floor and pressing those sweet female curves against his body held entirely too much appeal.

"Dance with me?" His words were soft, and though he'd meant it to be a question, it sounded far more like a command.

He half expected her to turn him down, instead she tilted her head and gave a slight nod.

“Why not?”

Setting his beer on the table, he slid out of the booth and held out his hand to her.

She took it and he curled his fingers around hers, tugging her to her feet and onto the dance floor.

Finding a space in the crowd of dancers, Craig slipped his hand low on her hip and pulled her close.

God, she was so completely in over her head. Phoebe swallowed hard, but didn't protest when he pulled her body snug against his.

Their bodies ground together, moving to the snapping bass of the funk song. She felt the thick curl of his cock—which had to be semi-erect—just above her pelvis.

He moved his hand behind her hip, almost cupping her ass cheek, his other hand on her upper back, pressing her close.

She bit back a groan as moisture gathered heavily between her legs, her nipples tightening under her shirt.

The way they danced wasn't particularly dirty, almost every couple on the floor danced in a similar fashion. But the way he moved against her had to be a promise of what he'd be like in bed.

And she wanted him there. All too much. This was crazy. She closed her eyes when he nuzzled her ear. Absolute insanity.

She wrapped her arms around his neck and pressed her body closer to him, grinding her hips against his.

His breathing grew heavier and his cock stirred against her, grew harder.

He caught her chin with firm fingers, lifting her head. He gave her no warning before his mouth slanted softly across hers.

Heat exploded in her belly at the first light caress. The second pass of his mouth over hers came firmer, his tongue sliding easily between her lips to flick against hers.

Phoebe's head swam, the room tilted and she had to tighten her grip on him to stay grounded.

He lifted his head with a groan and pressed her head back against his shoulder.

“Sorry,” he muttered.

“Don't you dare apologize.”

He laughed and the hot rush of air from his mouth against her ear almost made her legs weak.

“Okay. Then I won't.”

His tongue slid along the curve of her ear and she stumbled with a gasp.

He gave a husky laugh and she flushed. He knew exactly what he'd done to her with that little tongue trick.

“Easy, baby,” he murmured and then lifted his head a bit.

Disappointment stabbed that he'd put another inch between them. Just when things were getting good.

She was at the point where she didn't care. She'd gone far too long without a man, and here was Craig, ready to make her feel like a woman again. Make her feel alive.

Maybe it was because he was a cop, and it made her more inclined to trust him. That he wouldn't hurt her and he'd never be the type to abuse a woman—even as her logical side knew that theory was crap. Statistics had long proven that police officers had a high rate of abusive behavior. But somehow, on a gut level, she knew she had nothing to worry about with Craig.

She trusted him. Even if she had no reason to, she did. And it scared the hell out of her. But at the same time, she wanted him. Wanted to do spontaneous, crazy things she'd never done in her life. Had been afraid to do after Rick.

Or maybe it had something to do with the fact that Craig was younger. He was sexy, confident, and endearing. Plain and simple, he made all the bells and whistles in her body come to life. So why the hell *shouldn't* she take this step? It didn't have to be serious. It didn't even have to be a relationship. It could just be one night of sex if she wanted. And right now? She wanted.

She lifted her head from the curve of his neck and leaned back a bit, meeting his heated gaze.

"Come home with me tonight."

Surprise flickered in his eyes before they burned even hotter and his nostrils flared.

"You sure you know what you're asking, Phoebe?"

"I know damn well what I'm asking," she fired back and gave him a slow smile. "Do you know what your answer will be?"

His gaze lowered to her mouth. "My answer would be...whose place is closer?"

*Pushing the sensual limits can set off all kinds of alarms...*

## Turn It On

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### *Turner Twins, Book 1*

Inheriting her grandmother's home is a dream come true for web designer Maxine Turner. She's looking forward to a little freedom from the constant demands of her beloved, crazy mob of a family. When vandals expose just how vulnerable she is living alone, she seeks help.

Ryan Claymore's well-thought-out life was wrenched out from under him when responsibility for his special-needs stepbrother landed on his shoulders. Going from military man to business man hasn't been easy. He counts himself lucky he's found Maxine to trade his security-system knowledge for her website expertise.

The red-hot chemistry that sizzles between them comes from out of the blue, and they both fight a losing battle to resist. Even the secret Ryan hides isn't enough to keep Maxine from working her way into his heart—and his bed.

But something else might tear them apart. Whoever seems determined to destroy her home, and her sanity along with it.

*Warning: Realistic multiple orgasm sex scenes, men getting in touch with their emotions, brothers being—well—brothers, and a very tempting back-porch swing...you have been warned.*

*Enjoy the following excerpt for Turn It On:*

He slowly removed the cork from the wine, using the time to breathe deeply and calm his overactive body and mind. Spending the whole evening in Maxine's presence triggered the desire to do much more than simply sit on the giant porch swing and share a glass of wine as they admired the view of the lake. Ryan was pretty sure the wine would taste far better if he got to lap it off her skin, especially the warm scoop of her belly. And lower.

The dinner invitation had been an impulse. He'd puzzled over it as he walked away from her earlier. Yeah, she was hot enough to ignite a missile, but the timing sucked. Maybe after they'd finished working for each other, maybe after shit settled with his brother, he'd arrange to meet on a nonprofessional basis. But with her taste still in his mouth, the look in her big eyes egging him on, he'd spoken without thinking.

He'd considered the situation the whole drive to the nursing home before coming to a decision. Fine. They'd go out, have a simple meal together. He'd drop her off at the end of the evening and that would be all—at least for now.

Sometime during the visit with his brother, he'd changed his mind. There in the small room, with a relative he barely knew, the message of the past months smashed into him with the weight of an anvil. Life was short. There was no reason for him not to reach out and clasp hold of something special.

Maxine Turner was something very special.

She sat curled up in the corner of the swing leaning on a pillow. She had her long legs tucked under her while she focused on the lake. Her rich auburn hair draped over her shoulders and her eyes sparkled. His body tightened and he longed to stroke her skin to see if it was as soft as it looked. After handing her a glass of wine, he settled in the opposite corner to admire her better.

"The view is spectacular, isn't it?" Max spoke quietly.

He sat mesmerized by the sight of her. The arousal pounding through his blood shouted for him to hurry up, while his instincts warned him to move with caution. They both fell silent, sipping their wine and staring at the dark lake reflecting twinkling lights from a distant house.

"When I was little I always wanted to sleep on the swing. We'd come for family dinners, and there would be major chaos, with the cousins and aunts and uncles everywhere. I'd get tired of the noise after a bit and come here and curl up with a book. In my imagination I was on a pirate ship and this was my hammock, but no matter how much I begged at the end of the evening, Mom and Dad always insisted it was time to come home and sleep in my proper bed."

She played with a curl as she spoke, seeming not very much older than the child she would have been all those years ago. She took a deep breath, and his gaze was riveted by the sight of one open button too many, the curve of her breast visible under the light fabric of her blouse. He was suddenly very aware she was no child, and his body tightened with desire.

He put his wine glass away and took hers from her fingers. She stared at him, puzzled, until he reached for her and pulled her into his arms. He cradled her, nestling her body into his and adjusting until they were half-reclining, half-leaning on each other. Her head rested against his chest, the warmth of her body sizzling into him but he kept his touch gentle. The swing swayed and she sighed, a long, low sound of pleasure. Her body relaxed against his and he stroked her arm slowly until her breathing settled as well.

Small noises in the air created a lullaby. The wind stirred the trees, leaves rustling, branches rubbing on each other. The sound of cars and the city faded to nothing, and the quiet of the country surrounded them. They lay quietly and Ryan realized it was a long time since he'd known peace like this.

Maxine stirred in his arms, rolling to face him. Her eyes were bright and she snuggled closer, her torso melting into his as she wrapped her arms around his neck and drew their mouths together.

The kiss started gentle yet the desire was there underneath. Tongues caressed, lips and teeth feasting on skin soon heated to boiling. Ryan loved how she tasted, loved how she felt under his hands that had taken a life of their own and now explored the full curves of her body. He stroked the swell of her breasts and she moaned, pressing into his touch. He didn't stop, continuing the journey down her waist, over her

hip, circling the flesh of her ass before returning up her body once more. All the while he kissed her, feasting on the flavor and softness of her mouth.

She combed her fingers through his hair and tugged, wiggling upward until his lips met her neck. She dropped her head back, offering him a clear path down the pale skin, the pulse in her throat beating time with the pulse in his body. He rolled her, pleased to find the swing had an extra-wide seat to allow the room they needed. Ryan nibbled and licked his way down her throat, pressing her sweater and blouse to the side to allow him access to her collarbone. He unhooked one button after another, slowly revealing the creamy swells of her breasts above the pale yellow of her bra. She quivered under him, a small whimper escaping her throat that made his blood race. He dropped kisses over her heart, enjoying the scorching heat of her skin under his lips.

Ryan lowered his face to the valley between her breasts and breathed deeply. As much as he wanted to consume her completely, as much as he wanted to continue nibbling the length of her whole body, he needed to proceed carefully. She'd responded enthusiastically to his touch, to his kiss, but from hints she'd let slip during their dinner conversation, and her current full-body blush, he knew she wasn't very experienced. She needed more than a rush to the bedroom.

Yet he had no intention of letting her get away. He knew how to take his time, make it good for both of them. He rose over her, staring into her passion-darkened eyes. "I want you, Maxine." He kissed her lips tenderly. Her tongue teased his and the pressure built.

Damn, if he was inside her in ten seconds it wouldn't be soon enough.

Pulling away, his desire reflected back from her eyes. "I'm going to make love to you, Maxine. I'm going to remove every stitch of your clothing and touch every inch of your skin. I'm going to spend hours learning what your body needs, learning what you enjoy and then hours more giving it to you."

Her eyes widened, her face flushed crimson, her mouth open in a circle of awe as he spoke. Her tongue slipped out to moisten her bottom lip, and he nipped at the plump wet surface, the burst of her flavor sending his arousal even higher. He lowered his torso on top of her slowly, his rigid cock pressing against her yielding body. Their lips were mere inches apart and she continued to stare at him, her eyes showing desire and panic in equal proportions.

The porch boards creaked to their left. "Maxy? Are you out here?"

*Fuck.*



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