



Lakota

Jordyn Tracey

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Prologue

"Tawni," he called as he usually did.

She couldn't help herself. Resisting his call seemed to be impossible. She had to go to him. How she knew the way, she couldn't tell. The room faded from view, and there in the distance was the campfire burning with blue flames. Sparks from it lit the night sky, blending with the stars as they rose.

Compelled, she followed a well-worn trail to the clearing where he crouched by the fire. Her gaze caught and held on his muscular thighs, contracted, stretching the sandy-colored leather of his pants. The sight brought back memories of many nights before when she visited him here, where he pleased her with all parts of his body—his hands, his mouth, his manhood. Her lips parted in anticipation.

She stopped a few feet from the fire to watch him. His eyes were closed, his hands outstretched to the heat, his lips moving with soft words. Tawni didn't know the language, but her body and soul obeyed the pull every time she dreamed this deeply.

Suddenly, he spoke in English. "Tawni, my wife, come to me." His urgent plea touched her. Heartbreak and loneliness were apparent in the tone, and Tawni wondered if that was why she had first come to him, to soothe away his pain.

"Lakota," she whispered.

He opened his eyes. She expected the smirk to break out at any second on the familiar face, but in this dream world, her lover was different. He had another personality entirely.

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Still self-assured but not from his silky black hair or the way his big brown eyes made women weep to be his, but in something less superficial, something deeper that extended from his very soul.

"Tawni, my heart." He stood and held out his arms. She hurried to him, lifting her gaze as she drew nearer. Lakota's wide shoulders seemed to block out half the sky, but she didn't mind. All she longed to do was have him make love to her.

Now that they were together, no words were necessary. He caught hold of her chin, lifting it higher. His mouth came down on hers, a mouth she had tasted time and again in the real world, but never had it set her aflame like it did now.

He groaned against her mouth, pushed his tongue between her lips and gripped her waist to squeeze her tighter against his hard body. She surrendered herself to his love, to his need. In seconds, he had her nestled in the bearskin blankets on the ground, her clothes and his discarded at their sides.

"I tell myself every time I call for you that this is the last time," he told her as he smoothed her unruly dark curls from her forehead. "But the blackness that steals over me being separated from you becomes too much. Just once more, I declare. I will lay with my wife in a dream just once more, and then everything will be fine."

She didn't know why he called her his wife when she dreamed this way, or why he was so vastly different, but she wasn't complaining. What woman in her right mind would turn away a sexy Native American lover who was all that she could ever imagine? Only in her dreams, she supposed.

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With a fingertip, she traced the half moon scar just above his left eyebrow. A tingle slid over her skin at the contact. "And I tell myself I will stop dreaming of you, Lakota. You like this, I mean." She gestured to the surroundings, the campfire and the trees, the whole area that didn't look familiar to her. "You look so hot in these native clothes. I wish I could see you like this in real life."

When she said things like that, he always frowned with confusion, like she had said something wrong or not quite right. The look reminded her of the first time he had called to her, a year ago. She had learned very quickly not to use her swear words, which flowed from her lips like water when he ticked her off in real life.

But no, this dream Lakota liked a gentler side to her, more ladylike, so she had curbed her tongue, and nothing outside had spoiled their time together since.

"Come, my heart," he encouraged her. "Let us enjoy one another for the time is never long enough."

"Yes, Lakota. Make love to me now. You're right. The night ends too soon for me too."

He lowered his mouth to hers while sliding a hand along her bare thigh. Tawni trembled, knowing her lover's skill and aching to enjoy it all night long.

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Chapter One

Tawni woke suddenly aware that her alarm didn't go off. She glanced at the clock and screamed. "Oh hell! It's ten to eight! I'm going to be late." She threw the covers back and slid her feet to the floor. A groan behind her caught her attention, and she turned around. "Lakota, did you turn off my alarm?"

He popped a head above the covers with a sheepish grin on his thick sexy lips and his eyes half shut. "Sorry, baby. Was so tired last night. Didn't want to hear a sound this morning."

She screeched, satisfied to see him give a wince in pain and place his hands over his ears. "You knew I needed to get up on time for work, Lakota. How could you do this to me again? If I get fired—"

His strong hands gripped her waist and hauled her back toward his stiff erection. "You can stay home with me, and I'll fuck you all day long."

Her stomach turned at the mixture of alcohol and morning breath from his mouth. Everything was better in her dreams. *Reality bites*. "Everyone is not as beautiful as you, Lakota. I can't stay in bed until noon, do a few photo shoots, and then party half the night."

"You used to," he complained.

"Yes, before I finished school. Modeling paid the bills. Besides, I never got the big ticket gigs like you. I'm not as pretty." She laughed.

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"Aw, someone's feeling ugly." He made a silly face and held out his arms for a hug when she had moved away again. She burst out laughing and moved into his arms. Lakota was an immature, self-absorbed slacker, but for some crazy reason, she hadn't decided to leave him. Lately, she feared it was because she thought she wouldn't dream about him as she did last night. That heaped on extra helpings of guilt she already felt for her erotic dreams. *It's always him in them*, she reasoned. The assertion meant nothing.

"You're an idiot." She chuckled. "I am not feeling ugly."

"Jealous?"

"No." She wriggled out of his arms, this time standing to move out of reach. "I didn't like modeling at all. So superficial. It makes you think about whether you're good enough twenty-four, seven. Or at least it was that way for me. Nope, I'm happy with tech support, thank you very much. As I continue to get new certifications, my pay will increase. I take care of myself, and that's fine."

The moment his mellow mood left, she knew without turning around. She had been moving about the room, gathering up toiletries, everything she would need to take with her to the bathroom. None of her things fit in there with all of Lakota's crap. She sighed over it for the millionth time.

"Why the hell can't you let me take care of you, Tawni?" he demanded, flinging back the covers and marching around the bed naked. A flash of her dream went through her mind. She bit her lip, feeling wetness gather between her legs. Damn Lakota for being so sexy. She could reenact the night

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right now and forget work. But he was in a mood, fast stirring her to one. "I can afford to keep you."

She frowned. "Keep me? You must have bumped your head, Lakota. No one keeps me. And you don't manage your own money anyway. Your father does. *He* pays the bills for this place."

"With *my* money!" he roared.

"Okay, okay. Props for making your own money. That doesn't change the fact that you're more interested in laying back and getting high every day. And that reminds me!" She dropped the items in her hands on the bed to put her hands on her hips. "Don't think I didn't smell that weed when I got home yesterday. I would have brought it up, but you were asleep, and I couldn't wake you. I asked you to do it outside. That crap makes me feel dizzy and sick."

He stomped over to her. She backed away, but he pulled her against his hard body. Her desire ignited. She tamped it down.

"I can't exactly go out on the balcony and smoke, Tawni. It *is* illegal."

She closed her eyes, sighing and laid her head on his shoulder. "Lakota, you frustrate me so much. I don't want to push you to be what I want you don't want to be. You were like you are when we got together. And if anyone knows how it is not being accepted, it's me. But can't you put yourself in my shoes for a minute? Please?" She lifted her head to look him in the eyes. She reached around to tug at his long braid down his back. His clients loved his hair, and so did she,

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which was odd because she always dreamed of him with it cut shorter.

In her dreams, he was rugged and wild, like he was one with nature or something. In real life, he would not be caught dead outside of Versace or some other designer brand clothing. In her dreams, his clothes looked like they had been sewn fresh from the animal he slayed to get them. So it was odd that the dream Lakota had cut his hair, but the spoiled model had not.

He finally nodded. "Yes, okay. I will try to do better, but I make no promises. And you try to loosen up." He eyed her with a stern expression. She swallowed and nodded. Before she could move out of his arms, he lifted her with ease and dropped her on the bed. "Now, for a little nookie before you leave."

"Lakota, I haven't even showered yet," she protested.

He winked. "Good. I'm not dirtying your clean body. Now spread 'em, woman. I've got to get inside you now."

* * * *

"I don't know, Lee. I feel so guilty," Tawni complained to her sister later. "I mean, I know it's still Lakota in my dreams, but he's so different—like night and day."

Lisa grunted into the phone. "Girl, you must be crazy. What is there to dream about when you have the hottest Indian in your bed?"

"Native American."

"Whatever, girl. Lakota is sexy! I'm going to tell you now, I fantasize about your boyfriend." She laughed, unrepentant.

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"Tawni, he's got money. They pay him, what, thousands a week? You can do anything, go anywhere. And he's caught up on your skinny tail. Life's not fair."

Tawni rolled her eyes and read what her customer typed on her computer screen. With barely a thought, she offered the solution in the small text box, all the time knowing her customer would only make more of a fuss because she wanted a technician to come out to her house.

"Don't get me wrong, Lee. I know he's hot." She thought of the sex they had that morning. Surprisingly, it wasn't as satisfying as it had been in her dreams, but then nothing ever was. Fantasy was just that—fantasy. Still, Lakota's body was perfection, and Tawni knew how to ride him until they were both satisfied. He *was* well-endowed after all. "If I don't know anything else, I know he's hot. I just don't know why I even started with these dreams. Maybe I'm not happy with him anymore. We've been together for three years."

Lisa was silent.

"Sweetie, are you there?" Tawni called into the headset.

"Yeah, I'm here." Her sister sounded angry. "I don't get you, Tawni. He's ... Lakota is the epitome of men."

Tawni laughed. "Epitome? Wow."

"Don't joke," Lisa snapped.

Tawni turned away from the screen after typing in a hold message to her customer. "Baby sis, what's this about? I know it has nothing to do with how I feel about Lakota. What's going on?"

For a long moment, Lisa didn't answer. Eventually, Tawni heard her sister's sniffles and knew what was up. Lisa's

boyfriend, the man she had claimed she dumped at least a week ago. The jerk was a loser big time, and Lisa couldn't get that fact through her head.

"Lee, tell me you didn't go back to Levi."

"I didn't."

"Lisa..."

Her sister stiffed. "Okay, I talked to him again, but you don't understand, Tawni. I know he loves me. He just has a lot of growing up to do, and if we can get past that, we'll be fine."

Tawni completely forgot about her customer. Setting Lisa straight was much more important. "That's not your job, Lisa, making him grow up. Meanwhile, you're miserable because he can't keep his hands off the girls at the office, or his eyes off other women when you two are out together. Why should you have to deal with that? Let him go grow up making some other woman miserable, while you move on."

Instead of Lisa being grateful for Tawni's advice, she only managed to make her sister madder. "You're one to talk. How come you haven't broken it off with Lakota? You always spout all that crap about taking care of yourself, and not caring about his money or his looks, but from where I'm standing, that's the only good thing about your relationship."

Tawni stood and shoved her chair back, rising above the low walls of her cubicle and meeting the surprised stares of her workmates. "I'm just trying to help you out, Lisa. What I accept with Lakota is—"

"What? Your business? Damn right, and my relationship is mine!" She cursed a few times, and Tawni heard her blow

out, the sound she made when she was smoking. She had claimed she quit months ago. "I don't know why I called you, Tawni. We end up getting into it no matter what. I'll talk to you later."

"Lee, wait," Tawni cried out. The dial tone was the only sound she heard.

With a sigh, she retrieved her chair, sat down and pressed the end call button. A flashing message on her screen drew her attention. Her customer had dropped the call, and her supervisor wanted to see her in his office.

She stood and shuffled out of her cubicle, down the hall and into her boss's office. Claudia's face was red, her hair a mess and her clothes rumpled. Tolerance had gone out the window, and Tawni was in for it. This on top of being late that morning wouldn't sit well with the department head who was already under pressure because customer service had been down that month.

"Um, I know what you're going to say, Claudia, and I'm really sorry. I had a family emergency—"

"Don't want to hear it, Tawni." She rubbed her forehead. Tawni glanced down at the desk and noticed a name scrawled on a sticky note. Detective Jackson. She remembered the gossip in the bathroom earlier. Claudia's daughter was missing. Her heart went out to the woman. Her boss's tirade rose. "Your job is simple, Tawni. It doesn't take that much effort to get in here and just do your job. From what I've seen, you have a knack for computers, especially the software, but with whatever's always happening in your life, you're just not serious."

"Claudia, I—"

"Let me finish!" She continued on for another fifteen minutes. Tawni's mind wandered to her sister. She decided she would run over to her house later after she got off and make up. They did argue a lot, but wasn't that what sisters were supposed to do?

Finally, Claudia dismissed her. She crawled back to her cube with the thought of doing better, focusing and keeping personal stuff to a minimum. That lasted all of an hour until Lakota phoned to whine about being too pretty to represent his newest client. She rolled her eyes, groaned and suffered through the next five hours.

At seven, having worked overtime, Tawni shut down her computer, gathered her things and hightailed it out of the office before anyone could try convincing her to stay later. She wanted to get over to Lisa's, although at this time, it was likely her sister had gone out with the loser. She decided to risk running over there anyway, just in case.

Half hour later, she tapped on her sister's door while studying the mural that covered the entire surface. The peaceful wooded scene with deer drinking by a stream belied the cracked wallpaper along the hall and naked light bulb overhead. Shame went through her for the umpteenth time at seeing where Lisa lived. The area wasn't safe, and having her friend, Kiara, paint a sweet scene on the door wouldn't make it so.

She knocked again harder. This time the door creaked open. Her stomach dropped as foreboding snaked over her.

Something wasn't right. She stepped inside the apartment.
"Lisa? Lee, are you here?"

Her sister didn't answer. Tawni stopped dead center of the living room. Half in the kitchen, half in the hall, a chair was overturned. A plate of food beyond it was face down on the floor. Mail and papers which had been piled on the coffee table were instead splayed on the floor. Worse of all, was Lisa's favorite trophy on the floor with a spot of red across the base, a matching spot on the carpet a few inches away. Tawni's stomach did somersaults. "No, please no."

"Excuse me."

Tawni spun around to see a heavysset man in the doorway. She took a step back away from him.

He held up a hand, beefy fingers with bulbous tips spread apart. "Now, hold on. I'm not going to hurt you. I'm Detective Jackson. He held up an ID wallet. From her distance, she couldn't see clearly what it said, but the silver badge next to the ID was clear enough.

"Where's my sister?" she demanded, although her voice came out barely above a squeak.

He didn't answer, but stepped inside and began looking around the room. She followed behind him, praying he would somehow produce her baby sister out of the air, safe and sound with a logical explanation of what was going on. Instead, Detective Jackson turned with a grim expression and an apology on his lips.

"I'm sorry, miss, but it looks like foul play here. I'll have to call in my staff to dust the place. When is the last time you spoke with your sister, miss..."

"Tawni Brown."

His eyebrow went up, but she refused to comment on the silly name her mother had slapped on her.

"What made you come here?" she asked.

He flipped open a notebook and scratched down her name, she assumed. "I got a call. Someone heard a woman scream, saw two cloaked men run out the back, she said. I checked it out before coming up here. The same informant felt she had seen them exit this apartment."

Tawni's knees buckled. She stumbled over to a chair and sat down. "We talked this morning, argued. I was coming over to make up." She held up her sister's favorite nuts as if he would know it was her sister's favorite snack from downtown. "Who would do this ... That rat! Her boyfriend."

The door opened. Speaking of the devil!

"What did you do to my sister, you freak of nature!" Tawni launched herself at Levi, her carefully manicured nails at the ready to rip his damn face off. The detective was faster than she would have given him credit for. He darted in between them to intercept Tawni. With one huge hand, he snatched both her wrists in a steel grip.

"Whoa, slow down, Miss Brown. I need to question him, and don't want to have to arrest a beautiful black woman such as yourself."

He did not just come on to her in the middle of investigating her sister's disappearance. The man had to be her father's age or close to it. Yet, his words and hold calmed her. She watched in silence while the detective questioned Levi. The model wannabe flipped the permed curls hanging

down his forehead while he spoke, striking poses at intervals. She finally had to admit that such an idiot could never have been involved.

When Detective Jackson had asked all the questions he needed to, he dismissed Levi and turned back to her. He would have taken her hand again, but she turned away rubbing her forehead. "I need to know what happened to my sister."

"And I will find out. I promise you that." He handed her his card. If you think of anyone who might have wanted to hurt your sister or any other information, please give me a ring. I'll be calling you when I have more information."

"Thank you, detective." She tapped the card against her hand, suddenly remembering the name she'd seen on Claudia's desk. "Detective, my boss had your name written on a note in her office. I saw it just today."

He paused heading out the door and turned back? "Who is your boss?"

"Claudia Lockhart, Veendorm Corporation."

His eyes widened. "That is interesting. Yes, her daughter turned up missing two days ago, along with three other women."

She shivered. "Any connection other than that she's my boss?"

He hesitated to answer. She moved to touch his hand, this time playing up his obvious attraction to her. "Please."

"As you mentioned, your sister is twenty-four. All the others are under twenty-five, all single, no children. That's

the only connection I have so far. How old are you, Miss Brown?"

She gave him a dirty look. "Just hit thirty, two months ago!"

"Hmm." He nodded, a look of disappointment in his eyes. She had to wonder if she should be insulted that he thought she was older, or creeped out that he wanted her to be younger. "Okay, well I will get back to you as soon as I can with what I learn." He seemed less than enthusiastic to contact her again. Tawni had the feeling she needed to do a little digging on her own. She would find her sister no matter what the cost.

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Chapter Two

"Lakota," she breathed out. There he was again, in the same position, crouched over the fire and sprinkling a blue power into it. A flash illuminated his face, the strong jaw clenched. He seemed less sure tonight than previously, and she wondered why.

She walked closer, wanting to get there, but hesitant. His love here in this place was so evident, so all-consuming—herself and him. The emotion swept her up in its power, pushing her toward a return of his affection where she hadn't been sure of it in the real world.

He took a moment to raise his eyes to hers. She was lost without it until he captured her gaze and held it rapt without a touch. "Tawni, my heart. Come to me." He held out his arms. She stepped closer. "I never imagined that crossing over could make you forget so much," he told her, to her utter confusion. "So tonight, I will try a new ritual, one to help you to recall our life together, how we loved, before the plague."

She frowned, wondering what he meant. What could she have forgotten? Their life together? This was a dream. And what plague could he mean? She had heard a person could suppress memories that were too painful to recall, but surely all of what Lakota was saying hadn't been buried deep in her mind.

Looking at him with his hand extended, she couldn't resist. Even if this experience was a figment of her subconscious, it

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felt real. And right now, with all that was happening in the waking world, she needed escape for just a night. In Lakota's arms—this Lakota—she would lose herself and become whatever he needed her to be.

He enclosed her in the circle of his arms. She tilted her head back to plant a light kiss on his chin. Stubble teased her lips, which surprised her as he had always been clean-shaven. The manliness of it excited her, and she nuzzled her cheek against it again.

"Kiss me, Tawni," he groaned. "And we begin."

His lips covered hers almost before he had finished speaking. He filled her eager mouth with his thick tongue, snaking it along her warm moist walls and drawing a moan from deep in her throat. She pressed tighter to him, aching for more. She wanted to forget the journey to memory and just love him. Tears escaped her closed eyes at that thought. To love Lakota ... Her heart pounded with longing. She drew back, shaking.

"I'm not sure about coming here anymore, Lakota." Her voice wavered.

Anguish clouded his eyes. "Yes, I break the ancient rules calling for you. I couldn't resist. I missed you." He touched his forehead to hers. "Just tonight, let us remember."

She agreed. "Just tonight."

They sat down side-by-side at the fire. She watched as Lakota retrieved a soft leather bag from the ground and searched inside. He pulled out another smaller satchel and tossed the bag aside. Loosening the rope holding the satchel closed, he explained. "This powder along with the words I will

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“speak, will help you to remember.” He paused. “Not exactly remember so much as see the past in a vision.”

“A vision within a dream?” she mused.

“A dream for a spirit,” he corrected, although she was no closer to understanding just what was going on.

She sat quietly to wait for the vision he would induce to begin. The fact that here in this dream, she was willing to in a sense get high with Lakota struck her as ironic. She had been forever complaining about Lakota smoking in the real world, hating the reaction her body had to it. She had always preferred to remain completely in control of her mind and body. Maybe it was her response to having grown up with an excessively controlling mother. Either way, she prayed Lakota's powder wouldn't make her ill.

He grasped a handful of red powder from the satchel and held his closed fist toward the fire. A beautiful language flowed from his lips mesmerizing her as she watched him. The dark night with moths drawn to the flames shifted before her eyes. She blinked to clear her vision, but the distortion continued until she couldn't make out anything clearly. Light from somewhere illuminated the night, so much so that she shielded her eyes against it, holding up a hand to her brow. A sensation of falling drove her forward, and for a moment she thought she would land on the fire, but the world around her was gone.

* * * *

“Hurry up, Tawni. You're going to be late for your own wedding,” her mother called to her.

She stood before the floor length mirror, a maid standing at the ready nearby to fix her hair, tweak her dress. She stared at the white silk and lace, feeling the panic attack from earlier rising inside. Her brown eyes looked bigger, the pupils dilated. Moisture gathered on her forehead, but the maid patted it away. She sighed. Looking up at the reflection of her mother in the doorway behind her, she whispered, "Am I doing the right thing marrying him, Mother?"

Her mother tsked. "How can you say that, Tawni? He's rich and powerful. He's a brilliant scientist with a corporation backing everything he so much as dreams up."

She nodded. "That's what I'm worried about. His ambitions are just out of control it seems to me. Have you heard some of his ideas, his genetic ideas? They're ungodly at best. And why would a man like him want me of all people? We're no one special. Sending over a maid to help me get ready..." She spread her dress out before her. "This dress? It's too much for a nobody."

Crossing the room in small shuffling steps because of her own clothing, her mother extended her arms. When she got to Tawni, she wrapped her in a light embrace to avoid crushing her dress. "You're not a nobody, Tawni. Ephraim Jacobson wants you, and what he wants he gets. Besides, we're not in the financial position to turn such a man down. Trust me, you're making the right decision marrying him. Yes, it's for the money to settle your father's debts, but that's not a bad thing. You always said you would never marry anyway. You didn't have someone else."

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Tawni glared at her reflection, remembering *him*. Lakota Crow. He had said he would come for her, but he didn't. For weeks she had cried over him, but now she wouldn't shed a tear. If marrying Ephraim would pay off her father's debt and save her and her mother from being thrown out on the street, then so be it.

"No," she said. "There is no one else." *Lakota ... You promised.*

She allowed her mother to lead her down the stairs of their simple home. As she descended, she reached out to touch the family photos her mother had placed at intervals along the way—uncles and aunts, cousins, nieces and nephews. Their family was extensive, girls dominating in every branch.

Her sister, Lisa, waited at the bottom of the stairs, dressed in an outfit that flattered her plump figure. At least Ephraim had good taste, she thought. He had no sisters of his own, and limited family. She thought he had mentioned a second cousin in another city, but wasn't sure. Most of the time, the man droned on and on about things she had no interest in. Science had never been her forte. Computers, yes. She had enjoyed hours in the local library when she could, hunched over the computer there. The only reason why the librarians had allowed her to break the limited time rule was that she was free support for when something went wrong. Of course, she was self-taught. That was another thing her father's debt hadn't allowed for—college. She sighed.

Lisa drew her in an embrace, pride making her almost glow. "I'm so happy for you, Tawni. Ephraim is a catch. I wish

he had looked at me!" She giggled, her light caramel cheeks reddening.

Tawni forced a smile. Her little sister had always latched on to whatever boy liked her. That hadn't changed with the only two men who had shown interest in her. Lisa had followed Lakota around when he visited just as much as she now did with Ephraim. At thirteen, she was already a handful. Tawni couldn't imagine what her mother would do with the girl after she moved into Ephraim's house. Her stomach flip-flopped at the thought of leaving home.

She drew in a deep breath. "Well, this is it. The end of the road."

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Tawni jerked and gave a little cry. She felt the heat of the fire on her face before Lakota caught her. Just as she thought, she had been about to fall in the flames. He drew her onto his lap, and she bit down on her lip feeling his erection. Lakota was always ready for sex, and when he touched her, so was she.

"I don't understand," she mumbled against his neck. "You said I would remember our wedding, but you weren't the groom. It was someone else. I'm so confused. I felt like I was somebody else, but I was me and looked like me. Everyone called me Tawni." She rubbed her temple. I feel like I'm living three lives, this one here, the one in the real world and now that vision you gave me. I experienced it all like I was there."

Lakota's hold tightened. He kissed her forehead and reached up behind her head to pull her scrunchie off. She

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knew he had that confused look on his face about her wearing her hair up. He had said she never used to do that, and he found it strange now that she would appear differently than when she had been with him.

Tangling his fingers in her hair, he breathed deeply. "Your scent is the same at least. I suppose it's because the ritual is new. I had to visit my grandfather to request that he teach me. I had a hard time convincing him. I didn't want to admit why I needed to know." He found her mouth, and they kissed for a long time. Lakota's hand lowered to her breast. He tweaked her nipple, tugging and rolling it between his thumb and forefinger through the thin material of her nightgown. She arched into his touch and spread her legs in invitation. He pulled back. "I long for you to know me when I make love to you, to remember *our* time together, not *him*."

"Ephraim?" she asked.

He uttered a word that sounded like a curse. "Oh, I'm sorry, my love. I should never have said that in front of you. Forgive me."

She laughed. "I've said worse; trust me."

He gave her a curious look. She ducked and pushed up under his chin again, remembering that this Lakota didn't like her to curse. His version of her wasn't like she really was. Just like her version of him didn't match. She found that seriously odd, because she had no fantasies of being someone else. She was completely happy with who she was, and didn't feel a need to be another person in her dreams.

"Sorry," she muttered. "Can't you just tell me what you want me to remember? You call me wife, but that marriage was to Ephraim. So what happened?"

His eyes darkened and narrowed. He stared down into the fire, moving his hand from her breast to her waist. He turned her so that her back was against his chest and his head tucked beside hers on her shoulder. "I got free. After five long years, I escaped and came to find you."

She gasped. "Escaped?" She closed her eyes, remembering the vision. "She ... I mean, I remember thinking that you promised you would come for me. Where did you go? Did this place you escaped from keep you from coming? She ... I thought you didn't love me, and wasn't planning on returning."

He squeezed her. "You are my heart and soul. Apart from you, I am lost. I have said it before, and it's true. I was lost, in a dark place ... literally. Ephraim's men captured me and locked me in this old building he owned. No one knew about it. I was kept in chains half the day, locked in a dark room most of the time."

"Okay, that doesn't sound gothic at all!" Her mind must really be active tonight making this stuff up. "So let me guess. Ephraim wanted your girlfriend. Me. And since he was used to getting whatever he wants, he made it happen. I'm surprised he didn't just kill you and get it over with."

He nodded. "I suspect my grandfather prayed against that, but he was not powerful enough against Ephraim's money. Always, I thought the spiritual would outweighed the physical world. Not in this case. Not for five years. My break came

when he double-crossed one of his men. Evil always comes back on a man that sows it, and so it did for your first husband."

She would have asked him what he meant by that, to explain more, but that unsettling feeling started in the pit of her stomach. The world shifted on its axis. Her vision blurred, and she was gone again.

* * * *

Tawni sat at her vanity with her head in her hands. Even the scented lotions, which she had always loved, hurt her head. "Not tonight, Ephraim. Please. I don't feel well."

Her husband crossed the room to stand behind her, dropped his hands on her shoulders and squeezed. She winced. "If I thought your sickness was because you were finally carrying my baby, that wouldn't be so bad. But as it is, I'm beginning to think you're just avoiding sharing my bed for the last week."

She shut her eyes, swallowing hard. Bile threatened to rise, and if she threw up, he would accuse her of stuffing her finger down her throat. "I'm not. I'm just not well."

"The doctor hasn't found anything wrong with you." He squeezed harder. "Take off your dress, Tawni, and get your ass in the bed."

Glimpsing the pink layered dress that reached down to mid-thigh, backless and cut very low in the front, she frowned. She hated pink, yet all the clothing Ephraim bought her was that hideous color. She had been bold enough to use his credit card to buy other colors, but he had had a maid cut

them all and throw them away. Her life was hell. Sheer hell. No debts were worth this, but she was stuck. The man wielded way too much power.

"Ephraim," she began.

He took her by the arm, yanked her bench back and forced her to stand. Guiding her over to the bed, he untied the straps on her dress with one hand. "This body is mine, and I've indulged you long enough." Roughly, he shoved the dress over her hips and let it drop to the floor. She stood in only panties and slip-on mules in front of him. "Remove them, now!"

With tears sliding down her cheeks, she rolled the panties down her legs and pulled her feet from her shoes. He kicked everything to the side. When she would have covered her breasts, he forced her hands to her sides and bent to lick first one nipple and then the other. She hated him.

He stood straight. His sky blue eyes glittered with anger, and his harsh mouth which had kissed her too hard more than once was pressed into a tight line. She wanted to look away from his icy good looks, but she knew better. That only egged him on, to try to humiliate her more. With sensual movements designed to excite her but failing, he slid his hands up her arms to her shoulders. His palms came down over her breasts, and he squeezed.

"Watch me stroke you," he demanded.

She swallowed and looked. Ephraim never tanned. His stark white hands stood out against her coffee brown skin. Even after five years, she remembered how Lakota's bronze

skin looked against hers, a perfect blend. She missed him, but he had abandoned her to this.

Her husband pushed her back on the bed and followed her body with his. He placed a knee between her legs, inching hers apart. She turned her head to the side. He forced it back, lifting her chin to ensure she met his cruel eyes.

"You belong to me. If it takes another five years to make you see that, to make you enjoy my touch, then that's what I will do. Tawni, you will moan with pleasure when I enter you, every time I enter you."

"Not if you're rough," she told him defiantly. "I was willing to learn to love you. But all you seem to like is to hurt me, to make me cry. How can anyone like that?"

She only managed to anger him more. Ephraim wanted a wife he could control, a woman who would do his bidding and bow down to him like all the politicians did, to get at his money. Like all his staff and servants did, to win his favor. She hated him, and if she had the guts, she would stick a knife in his chest. Running away was not an option. He had people watching her every second of every day.

He positioned himself at her opening. She clenched the silk sheets beneath her that had never once brought her pleasure sleeping on them, or anything else for that matter. He pushed into her. She cried. He glided in and out while sweat rolled off his forehead and dripped on her. She gagged. He groaned in delight.

An ear-splitting crash filled the room. The door smashed against the wall. Her husband paused in his thrusts, and the two of them looked toward the entrance. Tawni didn't

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recognize the dirty, emaciated man in the doorway dressed in grungy rags, but Ephraim did.

"Lakota!" he spat.

She gasped. Shame made her convulse. She vomited on the expensive red sheets. Her husband pulled out of her in disgust, but he made no move to cover his naked body as he stood at the side of the bed. Tawni didn't have the strength to cover herself. When the sickness eased, she focused on the man in the doorway. *Lakota*.

The man she still loved with everything inside said not a word. He cocked the weapon in his hand and pulled the trigger. A shot rang out. Blood blended with the red sheets.

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Chapter Three

Tawni screamed. She jerked up in bed, tangled in the sheets. She fought hard to free herself, but tumbled instead over the side to the floor. In pain and finally free, she glanced around her dark room. "The vision within the dream," she muttered.

Lakota laughed above her. "Had a nightmare, beautiful?"

"Go to hell, Lakota." She rolled her eyes. "You could pretend to be sympathetic, you know."

He laughed again. "Sorry. You didn't fall far. I figured you were okay." He held out his arms. "Come here. I'll kiss it and make it better."

She frowned. "I fell on my ass."

His long snaky tongue crossed his lips. "Like I said, I'll kiss it, and make it better."

Despite herself, desire ignited inside. Lakota liked to taste every part of her body. His fetishes turned her on. She glanced at the clock and saw it was already ten to six. Her alarm clock would sound in ten minutes. "Can't. Time to get up." She indicated the clock and shifted to her feet, stretching.

In the shower, she stood running her fingers through her hair and thinking about the dream she had just had. It all felt so real. She could almost smell the vomit she'd spewed at seeing Lakota walk in. The guilt and shame was strong, being caught beneath the man who was her husband. None of it was real, but if it were, she had been in her rights sleeping

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with Ephraim. She'd married him, but the hurt and betrayal in Lakota's eyes negated all of that.

"And murder!" She gasped, reliving the experience with clarity.

"Huh? What was that?" Lakota leaned over the sink, examining his teeth. Tawni rolled her eyes. Like anybody's teeth on the planet were better than his. Lakota's perfection extended to every area, and the sad thing was that he hadn't had any work done, unlike his fellow models. Many a pretty boy was jealous of him, or wanted to date him.

He leaned closer to the mirror, almost touching. She let her gaze lower to the hem of his short terry cloth robe as it rose. His muscled thighs flexed and triggered a memory of his sexy ass. She would have leaned out to yank him in to join her if the phone didn't ring at that moment.

Lakota answered and quickly handed it to her. She twisted off the water and stepped out of the shower dripping on the floor. "Hello?"

"Ms. Brown?" Detective Jackson's voice slammed her back to reality. Her sister.

She clutched the phone close to her ear while reaching behind her to locate the edge of the tub before sinking down to it. "Yes?" *Please. Please don't let her be dead.*

"We found your sister's wallet down on Cazon Street. Does Lisa know anyone from that area that you know of?" he questioned. Her body shook. Lakota retrieved a towel from the rack and wrapped it around her shoulders before pulling her onto his lap. She rested her head on his shoulder with her eyes closed.

"Not that I know of. We're not as close as I would like." *Now more so than ever.* "That's not the best area to visit for any reason."

"Agreed." She heard him shifting around papers.

"Detective, did the other girls' trail lead to that area? I read up on your cases, or what's available in the media, last night when I got home. I don't remember hearing about the Cazon area. Do you have other leads?"

"Unfortunately, no and no. We don't have anything concrete. My men will be questioning residents of the area to find out if anyone saw anything. Don't worry. We'll get to the bottom of this. Just sit tight." He hung up before she could ask anymore questions or even say good-bye.

She clicked the Off button and would have slung the phone across the room, but Lakota caught her arm. He wrapped it against her body, covered with his own. She cried quietly against his neck, and for once he just held her, making no stupid comments or acting insensitive.

"He said to sit tight, but I can't do that," she mumbled into Lakota's neck. "I need to do something, but I don't know what to do."

He lifted her chin and kissed her. She let herself forget everything for a while, just enjoying his hold, his touch. She supposed she did feel some affection for him. After all, they had been together this long. But as she stared into his eyes, she remembered feeling fed up with their differences, and had come home one evening with the intention of breaking up. Lakota hadn't been home for hours after she got in. That

had been the first night she dreamed of him as being different.

"In my dreams, you're different," she told him.

"What bigger dick?" He grinned, nodding.

She slid off his lap, clutching the towel just above her breasts. "I'm calling out today. Expect me late tonight." She strolled from the bathroom with him calling behind her.

"Come on, Tawni, baby. I was joking."

She dug out a pair of jeans and a T-shirt from the dresser and dropped them on the bed. "It's okay, Lakota. I know how you are. Don't worry about it." She shook away his touch and stepped into a pair of panties, ignoring her boyfriend's ill-timed catcall. There was zero she could do about him right now, and honestly, she didn't have the energy. She had buried her head in the sand about their relationship long enough, and when Lisa was found, she would deal with it.

* * * *

Tawni handed the cab driver a few bills and opened the door. "Thanks. Keep the change." When his taillights disappeared, she wanted to run off after him. Coming to Curzon Street had not been her brightest of ideas, even if she did leave her purse home. A few dollars for the return trip, her driver's license and a recent photo of Lisa was all she had on her. She had taken the precaution of dressing in black and tucking her ponytail beneath a hat. Maybe anybody with an aim to hurting her would think she belonged. In the stark reality of the neighborhood lined with abandoned row houses and a smattering of bars, her reasoning appeared lame.

"All right, girl, pull yourself together." Her pep talk did not do a bit of good to boost her confidence. With Lisa's safety wedged in the forefront of her mind, she plodded around the streets looking for someone who didn't look too scary to approach. An old man with a whiskey bottle in his hand caught her attention. She hurried toward him. "Excuse me, sir."

He stopped and turned.

"Have you seen this woman?" She held the picture toward him. He blinked several times, and weaved back and forth on unsteady legs before trying to see again. It did no good.

"Nah." He waved his hand and shuffled off.

She sighed. "I'm getting nowhere." Standing on the corner of Curzon and Ellamont, she glanced up and down the street. Finally, she spotted a man who looked to be in his fifties. He had stepped out of a car and wore a worn but somewhat clean suit. From his bearing, she figured he was likely to be in his right mind and could help her. Cautiously, she approached. "Excuse me, sir—"

He smiled a little too brightly and handed her a card he seemed to pull from the air. "Hello, Jerry Lawson. Pleased to meet you." She frowned down at the business card that indicated he was an insurance salesman. *Damn.*

"Yes, I'm..." She hesitated to give her name. "I'm Tawni. Have you seen this woman?" She held out the picture. He took it and stared down at it for a long time.

"Pretty girl." He winked. Tawni started to think maybe she should grab it and get out of there. After all, Detective Jackson did say his men would come down to question people

in the area. She had just been afraid the police would intimidate some, and they wouldn't want to talk. Too many viewed them as crooked or as "the man", someone they should screw over as often as possible.

Jerry handed the picture back. "I haven't seen her before."

Her shoulders slumped. She began to turn away, but he touched her arm. She jerked away, and then rushed to apologize. He held up his hands.

"I understand. You were brave just coming down here. Even though you're dressed down, I can see the quality in your clothes, and you're a very beautiful woman. You need to be careful."

She blushed, nodding her thanks for the compliment and the warning.

"I wanted to say that if that girl was last seen down here, it's possible she got mixed up in the strange happenings over on Jettison."

"Jettison?" Her stomach did flip-flops. What strange things could he mean, and why hadn't the police heard about this? Maybe they had, and weren't at liberty to share the info with her. Detective Jackson had seemed to be more than forthcoming about developments so far. "What strange happenings?"

His furtive scan of the area was funny, but she suppressed her laughter. This was serious business. "There's a small shop over on Jettison, right between two buildings. You'd miss it if you didn't know it was there. Looks like a narrow alley. At the back of the alley is where the shop sits. Anyway, the four hundred block. You can't miss it."

"But what's the freaky part?" She cut to the chase.

Again, he looked around. "People going in, never coming out. People going in and again."

She crinkled her nose. "What?"

"Go check it out," he insisted. "But go at night. The shop hours start at seven at night. Ah ... you better take someone with you, a man." He tapped the card in her hand. "Okay, listen, I have to get changed, have lunch and move on to my next appointment. If you have need of insurance, give me a call."

The conversation must have spooked him, as it did her. He hadn't even made a pitch for her buy a policy, but she was relieved and tenser than she had been at the start of this foolish search. She wondered if the detective would get this information when his men questioned the residents in the area. Rather than wait or to pass the knowledge to Detective Jackson, Tawni decided to visit the shop on Jettison. This time, she'd drag Lakota with her. He had enough muscle to intimidate bad guys, if not the fighting ability. The man had never thrown a punch in his life.

* * * *

When the time came for Lakota to join her to visit the shop, he was flat on his back with a migraine and heavily dosed with medicines. Tawni leaned over him and gave him a kiss on the forehead, gently brushing his hair back from his face. "You just sleep," she told him. "I'll be back later."

He caught her wrist. "Don't go, Tawni."

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She frowned. "Lakota, I'm not just going to sit here watching you sleep. That medicine knocks you out."

He shook his head then winced. "Too dangerous. Don't go."

His concern warmed her heart. She hugged and kissed him. "Each minute I wait could be my sister's last. I can't wait. It will be okay. See?" She leaned back so he could see that this time she was dressed in more manly-looking clothes. Her hair was covered completely, and she had even stuffed a pillow in the front of her shirt to thicken her size.

Lakota squinted. "You look pregnant."

She rolled her eyes and snatched out the pillow. "I'm going. I have my cell. Don't worry." Closing the bedroom door on his weak protests, she sucked in a deep breath and prepared to leave. The doorman buzzed that her taxi had arrived just as she reached the front door. On trembling limbs, she rushed to the elevator and took it down to the first floor.

She couldn't begin to imagine what could be happening in that shop, but she was going to find out, and hopefully, she wouldn't be one of the people who disappeared in there forever. She patted her pocket where she'd tucked Lakota's knife, made with a deer antler handle and a bone blade. His grandfather had given it to him last year, but he never appreciated it. She valued the weapon more than Lakota, and hoped not to have to use it on someone tonight.

* * * *

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The alley where the shop lay had been easy to find. Tawni stood across the street from it, chewing on her lip and fighting with her courage to go over there and stroll into the darkness. She squeezed the light button on her watch. It was just after seven. Already several people had disappeared into the alley, but she figured it was too early to know if they were never coming back.

Slipping her cell from her pocket, she wondered if she should call the detective on the case and ask him to meet her there. No. She dropped it back in her pocket. He would only send her home with unwanted advice about not coming to such an area again and leaving the investigation to the professionals.

As she weaved across the street around double-parked cars—apparently traffic rules didn't apply over here—she figured the detective would be right. She should go home. But then when had the heroine in the movies done the smart thing? There would be no reason to continue with the film.

"So my life is drama-filled now?" she muttered. She stopped at the entrance to the alley. "Come on, Tawni, just do it. Think of Lisa." She took a step forward, expecting some supernatural power to sweep her away, but nothing happened.

A breeze blew stale air across her nose, making her suspect that a dumpster was nearby. She took another step, and the light began to fade. Her heart hammered in her chest. Sweat broke out on her upper lip and across her forehead. One step in front of the other and she was standing outside the shop.

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Wedged between the buildings like a giant had forced it there, the place looked like a throwback from the 1950s with its inviting storefront window and forest green canopy. A sheer white curtain blocked her from seeing too much inside. A sense of foreboding hit when she worked up the nerve to squeeze down the latch and push the door open.

Incense hit her nose. Monkey statues, books, rusted weapons and old clothes were tossed about the room haphazardly, some on hangers or shelves, some just seeming to have landed where they did. A narrow path led through the chaos toward the back. No shopkeeper was in sight. No bell had sounded over the door to alert him she was there.

"Hello?" she called. "Is anyone here?"

No one answered, but she heard voices. As she moved deeper into the store, she realized it was much bigger than the outside appeared to be. The back wall wasn't even in sight, and the sides looked to be farther away than the alley had been just outside. Possibly the other two buildings ended right at the shop, and the shop had the rest of their space.

She shrugged and moved on, still searching for someone to question. Around a wrack of musty jeans, she spotted a man glancing through a book. He didn't appear to be reading it at all, but more like waiting. Hesitant to disturb him, she inched closer, keeping herself hidden behind bookcases and more wracks. Her foot hit something on the floor, and the man looked up.

Shock cut off her air supply. "No, it can't be." Confusion clouded her mind so much that she forgot to hide. The man

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saw her. His eyes widened in recognition. He turned toward her. "Oh hell," she squeaked.

She bolted, but he came after her. "Tawni, wait. Please! Tawni!"

He knew her name. She stumbled over the junk littering the floor. When she fell face first on the floor, he caught up and pulled her to her feet. She fought his hold, punching against his strong fingers on her arms.

"Let me go!"

"Tawni, stop." His smile of pleasure staring into her face sickened her. "I can't believe it's you."

She shook her head. "I can't believe you're real. No, you can't be real. Besides, Ephraim, Lakota killed you! All in my nightmare!"

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Chapter Four

"Lakota, I need to talk to you." She twisted her hands before her as her boyfriend prepared his smokes. She sat down beside him and pulled the baggie and paper from his grasp. "This is serious. I need you focused and alert to understand what I'm saying."

He stroked her cheek. "What's up, beautiful?" She hated when he called her beautiful. It made her think he said it only because he felt she *wasn't* that attractive. "You look scared."

"I *am* scared. Something happened when I went down to that shop."

His eyes grew wide. "What?" He frowned, sitting forward. "Did someone hurt you? I told you not to go, Tawni. Let's call the police."

She stayed his hand from picking up the phone. "No, not exactly. Okay, it started a year ago," she began. At his confused look, she rushed ahead, telling him all about her erotic dreams of him with a completely different personality. As she spoke, she saw the offense in his eyes. He didn't care if she dreamed of him, but the implication that he wasn't good enough rankled obviously. "I'm sorry, Lakota. I care about you, but I don't know where these dreams came from or why they started." *Not exactly.* "But recently, my lov ... uh ... my dream you did something to give me visions inside the dream about some past he says we had. Well I just thought it was my psyche letting loose in a dream, nothing more."

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Problem is, the bad guy from the vision was in that shop last night!"

That got his attention. "What are you saying? That you're psychic or something?"

"Hell, no." She sighed. "Do you know anybody named Ephraim Jacobson? In my vision, I was married to him, but he was cruel. You came one day after years of his harsh treatment, and you shot and killed him. At least I thought you did. There had been a lot of blood, and I woke up. That was the night I fell out of bed, remember? Anyway, last night he grabbed me and called me by name. He said he thought I was dead, but should have known *Lakota* would fake my death to keep me from him. I'm so confused. He knew you and me."

Lakota stood and paced around the room. She saw the wheels turning in his head, and could almost track what he was thinking. "You know I love you, right, Tawni?" She froze, not wanting to answer. "I don't know why. Something about you. I'm drawn to you. Even though I have all these models throwing themselves at me, I want you." That wasn't flattering at all. "If this is some elaborate hoax to get me to straighten up, okay. I'll try harder. I mean, I don't want to lose you. I really don't."

His gaze fell on the weed. He rushed to it and gathered it all, then dumped it inside the trashcan in the corner. He brushed his hands dramatically, a perfect smile spreading across his face.

"There, see?"

She nodded. It was no use. This Lakota wasn't the one in her dreams. He was maybe just as devoted to her in his own

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way, but her emotions didn't respond with the same intensity. She couldn't live her life in a fantasy world. If Lakota was willing to try, so could she. And maybe she had imagined the whole thing. When she had stomped on that man's foot and run for her life, common sense told her he couldn't be the same person from her dreams. That was impossible. She was perhaps so frustrated with Lakota's lifestyle, worried about her sister, and terrified in that shop, that she had remembered his face wrong. That man might have seen her somewhere. After all Lakota's face was recognizable everywhere, and she had gone out with him plenty of times. The man had obviously felt he knew them. Not a big deal in the light of day, safely at home.

Crossing over to where he leaned against the wall, she smiled her apology. She pressed her body against his. "I'm sorry. I care deeply about you, Lakota. I promise, I won't dream about another you ever again. I want to try to work things out between us. I will tell the police what I know, and leave the investigation to them."

He held her close, kissing her eyelids. "That's all you can do. How about this? I will take you with me this afternoon on my photo shoot, and afterward you and I can go anywhere you want. We can go out to dinner and see that girly flick you wanted me to see. We can even go to the ballet."

She made a gagging noise. "Let's not get carried away. Dinner and the movie sounds great. After that"—she winked—"you and I can get it on back here."

He burst out laughing, his eyes bright without his high. "Deal!"

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* * * *

Tawni sat in a chair toward the rear of the shoot set up in the museum. With the backdrop of prehistoric creatures and wax cavemen, Lakota posed in male underwear barely expansive enough to cover his goodies. The usual fans were salivating over his body. Tawni had to admit to feeling triumph that none of the skanks were getting their hands on her man. He was right, of course. The two women that were set to shoot the next round with him put her to the shade. They were leggy, blond and had boobs that sat up a lot more than hers, which had begun to head a little farther south since hitting the big 3-0. Then again that could be all in her mind.

The women's beauty was not. Lakota's skin next to their fake tans in the middle of fall was amazing. She sighed. Her boyfriend glanced up from the women posed on his arms and caught her eye. He winked and threw her a kiss. Several heads turned in her direction. She flicked her eyebrows skyward with a silent, *Now what?* then turned away.

The shoot was nearing a close when someone walked up next to her. Something told her to look over to see who it was, and her heart stopped in her chest.

"Hello, Tawni." He made no attempt to touch her at first. "I knew my mind wasn't playing tricks on me, but now I see what didn't occur to me before. I missed the passing over last night, because I was determined to find out if you were real. I never imagined that you would be here on this side."

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She turned resentful eyes on him. "I don't know what in the hell you are talking about, sir. And I'm going to have to ask you to leave or I will get security."

He ignored her. "Who would have thought over here, Lakota would be an empty-headed model." He threw back his head and laughed. "Well he wasn't much there either." He traced a hand down her arm. "I've missed you."

She leaped off her stool to get away. At the same time, something crashed, and the camera man was screaming about his camera. In another second, Lakota stood in front of her. "Whoever you are, you don't have a right to touch my wife."

Deja vu hit hard. She heard the same inflection, the possession she had heard in her dream lover's voice when he said 'wife'.

Ephraim was intimidated by Lakota's size. At six-foot-five, he towered over Ephraim. Her dream ex took a step back, a sneer covering his face. Only when he raised a hand to his lips to blow her a kiss did she notice his arm moved funny. It appeared to be twisted slightly, and one shoulder was lower than the other. The shooting, she guessed. "Fine," he agreed. "I'll leave. But in twenty-nine days, I am taking Tawni back with me. She *will* be my wife again."

* * * *

Twenty-nine days. Tawni had reviewed Ephraim's words repeatedly in her mind, and paced the floor muttering to herself over it. Nothing she could come up with explained to her what the man could mean. He had said he missed his

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crossover the previous night because of her. Then he said he would be leaving in twenty-nine days. Why then? Why the odd number?

She paused in the middle of the living room chewing on her thumb nail, which had already been bitten down to the quick. She winced, squeezing her thumb until the pain eased, yet knowing when she let go the blood would rush back along with the ache. Nerves were a bitch.

All through dinner and the movie, Tawni had been distracted. She wanted to get back to the apartment to think about what was going on in her life rather than sit around chitchatting nonsense. One bonus had come when Lakota's friends invited themselves to the table and to the movie. She had been free to let her mind wander, and had barely acknowledged her boyfriend's whispered apology for the intrusion. Lakota loved the attention, so she didn't feel too bad.

Now that they were back home after Lakota had dragged her all over the city, determined to keep her with him, she was relieved. He had crashed on the couch, and she still wandered from room to room trying to make sense of everything.

On her fourth trip around the couch, she stopped to stare down at her real life lover. He liked clothes from the height of fashion. "But you would look so damn good in buckskin, baby."

She sat down in front of him, rested a hand on his bare chest and thought more on what she knew of the shop, Ephraim and her sister's disappearance. "Twenty-nine days.

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No. Thirty days. A month!" Whatever way Ephraim was leaving the area, he could only do it every thirty days or once a month.

He had mentioned crossing over. Could he mean crossing over to the spirit world? No, that wasn't possible. That explanation also didn't clear up how she was dreaming of him before she'd ever seen him in the real world. She remembered that he had looked like he was waiting for something in that shop. And that insurance guy had said people entered the shop and didn't return.

"Maybe they don't come out for thirty days!" she screamed, jumping to her feet.

Lakota shifted on the couch. She slapped a hand over her mouth. She leaned down and kissed him then strolled into the bathroom to take a shower. That shop was an important clue in all of this. She would tell the detective about what she had learned without question, but she was also going back there. In twenty-nine days.

After her shower, she dropped a couple of sleeping pills in some chocolate milk and downed it so that she would sleep through the night and not dream. She wanted to keep her promise to Lakota. Somehow, she suspected one sight of him in her dream and she would be lost. There would be no denying him the moment she was in his presence and he touched her. She would spend the entire night *virtually* in his arms.

She waited until her eyelids drooped before she slipped into bed, and then she struggled out of it again to drag Lakota into the room. Groggy, she undressed him, and they

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both fell into the bed together. As soon as her head hit the pillow, she was out.

* * * *

"Tawni."

No. Not again. She had been popping sleeping pills for days, and the one night she forgot, she zoomed into this dream world. She had to admit she had missed him. He stood strong and sexy, his face half hidden in shadows. Had she been blind, she could sense him, she thought. They had a connection that crossed what? Planes? Dimensions? The thought struck her as odd. Was he real? If Ephraim was real, could Lakota have an identical twin out there somewhere?

She smiled, moving closer. Impossible. This was a dream. At some point, she must have seen Ephraim in real life, and her mind had created a nightmare when she was under deep stress. Yes, that's what she would believe. She would spend this time with him, and then she'd find a way to get past this weakness, even if it meant seeking counseling.

"Hello, Lakota."

He held out his arms to her. "It's been almost two weeks. Why did you not come to me?" Before she could answer or move, he stepped forward and circled her in the most comfortable hold. Never had she felt safer from danger, safer from Ephraim and the pain he had inflicted while she was trapped with him. He rested his cheek next to hers and squeezed her gently. "Stay with me tonight. Let me pleasure you."

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A tremor rocked her body. Lakota's hands shifted to her hips and lower to her thighs. He slid around to pull her tight against his body and curled one hand on her belly while the other explored between her legs. She squeaked. Her mind screamed don't do it, while her legs spread against her will.

"Lakota," she breathed. She should be asking him more about what happened with Ephraim after he shot him. Maybe she was having psychic visions of the future. She needed details. But making love to Lakota took precedence. No other urgency existed.

She twisted around to face him and lifted her chin. His mouth came down on hers. Their tongues melded together, and she was lost. She reached around to his ass and squeezed. He broke their kiss to stare down in surprise at her. She laughed.

"Is that too bold for your wife? I like to get down to business."

"I..." He hesitated.

"Sorry, baby. While I will curb my language for you, I can't see acting like the shy violet. You're hot, Lakota, but you know that. I can't keep my hands off you. I need you now."

She stepped out of his hold and lifted her nightgown over her head. Beneath it, she was completely naked. While she had never thought she was beautiful, she wasn't ashamed of her figure either. Being a little too hippy had never turned Lakota off. His eyes locked on her as they always had.

"Your body..."

She tilted her head to the side. "Yes? What about it?"

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His eyes narrowed. He cupped one of her breasts, pinched her nipple, making the bud pebble. She moaned. "I would bow down to your sweet body, treasure it." He followed his words up with action, dropped to his knees to plant a kiss on her belly. His tongue dipped into her navel. She trembled. "Mmm," he moaned. "You taste so good, Tawni. Sweet creamy chocolate. I just want to lose myself inside you."

He trailed kisses over her skin, almost worshipping her as his mouth explored, from her stomach to her thighs, even around to her ass. He squeezed and then kissed. He parted her cheeks, pushed a finger between the soft globes to find her rear opening. Tawni cried out with delight when his finger made contact.

Slipping around to her backside, he continued to kiss her ass while reaching between her legs to palm her mound. The moisture there built to a point that she felt her cream dripping down to her thighs. He pushed a finger inside her. She rocked her hips to ride it.

"Lakota!"

She took hold of his wrist to jab him deeper, but he pushed her hands away. "No, baby. Let me pleasure you."

"Lakota, this is a two way street, and I'm on fire," she declared. He ignored her protests, driving in two fingers, then three. Each time he pulled out, he sucked his fingers clean then delved in again. Alternately, he kissed her ass cheeks.

A climax imminent, Tawni gave in to her lover. If he wanted to dominate her, so be it. At least it felt incredible. If he got off this way, she would let him. All she wanted was to explode over and over.

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Lakota braced a hand on her stomach, rested his head at her hip and pushed four fingers inside her tight tunnel. She cried out with passion at his touch, his expertise at making her feel good. His fingers driving in hard and then out, her knees gave. While her real life lover was strong, this one was stronger. Lakota balanced all of her weight, easing her slowly toward the grass. She bent on hands and knees while he continued to stroke her.

"Oh yes, Lakota. Harder!" she demanded. "Faster."

She arched her back, drove into his fingers. Aching to grab hold of his hand and guide him in and out of her, she pounded the ground. Her screams filled the night air as her hips bucked to his rhythm.

Lakota kissed along her back. He moved to her side, teasing her with nips of his teeth, sucks and licks of his tongue. He dipped lower, never letting his fingers travel far from her wetness. Beneath her, his mouth closed over a nipple. He sucked hard. The slight pain shot her into an orgasm that had her entire body vibrating.

Tawni would have collapsed to the ground, but he held her up. He flipped quickly behind her, and in one amazingly accurate movement, yanked down his pants and plunged into her. She screamed. Lakota reared back on his knees while holding onto her hips. He pounded in and out of her wetness. Her slick walls gripped his shaft, milking it for all its worth. Lakota groaned. She looked back in time to see his eyes roll into his head and his mouth drop open.

"Tawni..."

She reached between her legs to grasp his balls. He shuddered.

"Tawni, what are you doing?"

She laughed, knowing he had been taken aback at his innocent wife playing with his balls. Right then, she wanted to yank away and suck his dick until he shouted and came. The shock she knew might make him faint.

His moans escalated as she stroked him, licking her lips thinking about how she loved to bring Lakota to a head with her mouth. Her fingers trailed to his gliding wet tool. She squeezed the base. He howled, jerking wildly. "Tawni!"

She ran her fingers along the length, squeezing and tugging. He fell forward onto her back, his cheek landing against her. His pants were so loud, she heard nothing else. With one hand on his hairy thigh—something that did not grow on her real life lover's leg—she pushed him. Weak, he toppled to the ground.

Tawni swung around to climb above him. His eyes warned her not to do anything crazy, but he seemed not able to form two words. She liked it like that. Now, she was in charge. In a tight fist, she stroked him from top to bottom. His body twitched. His eyes would drift closed for a second before he forced them open.

"Don't."

"You want it," she accused with a grin.

"Tawni."

"That's my name, baby. Don't wear it out." She laughed when he looked confused at the old expression.

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His balls pinched and rose. Her eyes widened in anticipation. Lakota begged her to stop, to let him inside her. She shook her head. He could overpower her with his amazing strength, but this was something new for him. Her man wanted her to suck him. His gaze flicked to her lips repeatedly. Tawni licked them to tease.

His expression turned angry though he seemed to be fighting hard against coming. "This is something you learned from *him*."

She lowered her head to his dick and ran the tip of her tongue around the cap. He groaned. She sucked a little then eased up, sucked again until he shivered. Tawni knew his body, just as well as he knew hers. If nothing else, the real Lakota knew what pleased him, and he had had no problem teaching her. In turn, she had taken her own pleasure from him, learning about her body, her likes and dislikes with each session.

"Tawni," he groaned. "My wife should not have her mouth there. She is precious and should be treated as a princess."

With coyness in her eyes, she glanced up at him, releasing his shaft just long enough to speak to him. "*Your wife*, baby, should be willing to take you to heights of intensive passion that threaten to make you lose your mind. She should not lie on her back and let you do all the work." She gave him a lick. "Now lay back, lover, and let me explore."

Confusion clouding his expression, he leaned on his elbows but never took his eyes off her. She took him deep into her throat watching for his reaction. He clenched his jaw. She could almost see the fire raging inside him. With only a few

hungry pulls on his member, she had him convulsing. He clenched his fists in the grass, tearing it up as he fought for control.

Tawni dragged on his tool, his shooting come filling her mouth. She drank and moaned for more until he was dry. Finally, she moved off him and lay on her back at his side. He panted for long minutes. She felt his eyes on her, but pretended not to notice.

"I'm not sure what to make of that," he admitted. "No woman has ever..."

"Look what you've been missing." She laughed. "And why so shocked? You've gone down on me plenty of times. Lovers do that, Lakota. It's not so unusual."

He rolled to his side, cupped her cheek and stared into her eyes. "Well, I have to confess that it was the most amazing thing I've ever felt." A look of guilt rushed over his features. "Not to say I don't enjoy being inside you. Nothing can compare to our proper coupling."

She smirked. "I get it. Don't worry."

He bent to kiss her, looked at her lips and drew back. She suppressed a laugh. "I regret that we did not get to explore these experiences while you were alive."

Her eyes widened in shock. "Come again?"

The alarm clock went off, and Tawni sat up screeching in frustration. Her dream lover's words were too cryptic to miss, but the night was over, and already she felt the mystique of the night slipping away.

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Chapter Five

The days slipped by much too slowly. The closer to the thirty day window Tawni suspected Ephraim needed, the more she bit her nails, the more unsure of her theories she became. She had even gone so far as to share her thoughts on the subject with Detective Jackson, which had not gone over as well as she would have liked.

"Detective, if you'll just hear me out, I know this will all make sense," she told him.

He frowned. "Frankly, what you've said so far is too fantastic to believe. You think that some doorway exists in that shop to what? The spirit realm? That some guy contacted you from it? Another is trying to drag you over there, and that's where the missing women have disappeared to?"

The way he said it made it sound more preposterous. "Well, partially. I mean, you said yourself that my sister's wallet was found over that way. And I told you what the insurance salesman said." She twisted her fingers in her lap, regretting stopping by his office. "How do you explain the man who claims to know me, knows my boyfriend and gave me the impression that he knew my boyfriend somewhere else?"

His confusion at her question was apparent. She tried to rephrase, but he held up a hand. "Stop, please. You're making my brain hurt, Ms. Brown. Look, leave the investigation up to the professionals as I said before. I have several men on this."

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"Well I've managed to come up with more than you have!" she blurted out. At his look, she backed down. "I'm sorry. It's been a month now. I told you about the guy threatening to force me ... somewhere. He could have a connection with my sister. Either way, there's something to that, and others can verify that he was there at my boyfriend's photo shoot."

"Agreed." He nodded his head. "I will look into it, ask around. Meanwhile, I must insist that you to stay away from the shop on Jettison."

* * * *

Stay away from the shop? Not likely. Despite his threats, Ephraim didn't show up. Not that he would have had a chance to grab her. Lakota had stayed on her like a second skin. But Tawni was getting more desperate. News reports indicated the disappearance of twelve more women, all within the last four days. She was thinking that if that opening was there in the shop, late, that night, whoever had them was going to be visiting there, and Tawni would be there to witness what was going on. If possible, with or without the detective's help, she would pass through that doorway into whatever and find her sister.

She dressed in all black and stuffed Lakota's knife along with a few other items in a backpack. An hour or two before the shop opened, she planned to go down and stake out a hiding spot. Her cover was already in place. She had told Lakota she would be at her mother's house to comfort her regarding Lisa. He, always pushing for reconciliation between the two of them, had been excited about the idea. The man

had no clue that she wouldn't have gone to her mother's for anything, and her mother knew that. Not even Lisa's disappearance would bring them together.

Jettison was strangely quiet for early evening. Instead of going into the alley from the front, Tawni had scoped out a back way. A fire escape on the building next door led to the roof. From the roof, she was able to spot Ephraim heading down the alley. He paused and looked back just before the door and then went ahead. She was shocked to find he had a key to the shop. He disappeared inside, and she sat there wondering what to do next. Opening was in a half hour. If she was going to get inside, she needed to do it now, but going in with Ephraim there was risky.

A pole ran along the side of the building into a narrow space where the shop's wall met the next building. The space was just shadowed enough to hide her from the street and whoever was in the shop. She scurried down it, praying that she wouldn't fall to her death.

Glad there had been no bell to indicate her entrance, she peeked into the window and then checked the doorknob. Just as she hoped, Ephraim had left it unlocked. She slipped inside and rolled to a pile of clothing. She tossed a few articles over herself just as someone else entered the shop.

"Ephraim," the man called. "I have the women you assigned me to. Are you ready?"

They cannot be doing this out in the opening? Why haven't they been caught? Tawni's side itched. She fought not to move, hearing the second man just above her.

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"I'm ready. I wish I could have brought my wife, but that bastard kept her under lock and key." Ephraim grumbled.

The other man laughed. "Yeah, you didn't even make an effort. If you ask me, ever since he shot you and took her away, you've been a real coward. You're terrified of Lakota."

"No one asked you," Ephraim spat. "Get the door open. We don't have all night. The police have been sniffing around here, and if we didn't have this alternate entrance through next door, we'd be in trouble. You can bet they'll be here soon to look things over. I'd rather have crossed the women over by then."

Tawni took a chance to peek out of the clothing piled on top of her. Just as the man indicated, there was another entrance behind a bookcase on the wall to the right of the street entrance. One would never have known it was there. The man punched a button and a secret panel slid open. Inside the room beyond, other men waited. Each of them strolled out with body bags tossed over their shoulders. Tawni's stomach turned knowing what those bags contained. She knew but didn't want to think about her sister having occupied one last month.

Just as the last man exited, a blue light filled the small shop. Tawni squeezed her eyes shut and covered her lids to block out the painful illumination. The very foundations of the place seemed to shake. An energy she could never have described had she not experienced it filled the place. Almost like every particle of air was energized with life, it crackled around her. The walls, floor, the furniture—everything—trembled with the awesome power.

She knew right away why no one had ever caught the men coming and going. From her vantage point, she could see out the front window. The second the blue light passed, the energy shifted the world. At least that's how she viewed it. The alley was no longer there. The buildings next door weren't there. There was not a door inside the shop leading to this other place. The shop itself was the door! By entering the shop when she did, on the night she did, she had caught a ride to somewhere else.

The entire process took no more than a few moments. The shop settled or the world stopped spinning away. Tawni wondered what had become of the space where the shop was over on her side of the universe. She questioned whether she was in the spirit realm or some such.

Footsteps passed where she lay. A door opened and closed, and the men's voices faded. When Tawni peeked out from her pile again, the shop was in darkness. "Wow, open all of twenty or so minutes before they close again. Nice work hours."

She scooted out of her hiding place, and with outstretched hands felt her way to the front door. A stubbed toe and scraped arm later, she stood out in the alley, but it felt different.

Cars started out at the street. When Tawni reached it, she realized that Ephraim and his cohorts had openly carried the women out, not caring who saw. This bold move was not what held her attention as they drove off.

She spun on her heel, looking around. A street sign bent at an awkward angle declared this to be Jettison Street. The row

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houses and shops along the road were not just abandoned. They were in ruins. Even the two buildings which had sandwiched the transport shop were just shells of their former selves. Only the supporting walls stood.

A narrow path along the road had been cleared away for Ehpraim's cars to move through. Tawni climbed over rubble as there was no sidewalk in view. Fear gripped her in a vise tight enough to make her faint. She fought it, shaking her head to clear it.

"What's happening?" she whispered into the chilly night.
"Where am I, and how do I get home?"

She considered going back into the shop to see if she could return to her world, and then remembered the crucial element Ehpraim had said. The opening to this place was there only once a month. Lakota would be worried sick! She yanked her cell phone from her pocket and punched in his number, too terrified to realize she could have used speed dial. After she had entered the last number, the screen switched over to a message: No Service.

"Oh no. What am I going to do?" Tears filled her eyes. She spun this way and that, looking for an answer to pop out of thin air.

"No way!" Her heart pounded at the voice. She turned to see a man standing atop a large pile of rocks. His long grey coat was torn in several places from what she could make out under the dim streetlights. He grinned, several teeth missing. "A woman. Damn, it's been a while. I bet you're soft as cotton."

She took a step back from him. He moved closer. "I don't want any trouble," she told him.

He smirked. "I want to stroke you."

She gagged, turned and ran for her life. He was fast, but she was desperate. She had run nearly a block and a half before he pounced. They landed on the ground together. Tawni kicked and bit. He grasped her around the waist dragging her over to her back. He had appeared to be thin on the hill of rocks, but on top of her, his weight increased tenfold.

He pinned her arms above her head and licked the side of her face. She screamed. They had landed in the darkness outside of the streetlights. Somewhere on the run, she'd lost her hat and her hair fell down on her shoulders.

Before the man that smelled like puke could do any more damage, someone hauled him off her. Tawni rolled to her hands and knees to do a bit of retching of her own.

"Are you okay?" She heard her rescuer through a haze, her head spinning. He lifted her roughly away from the mess she had made and carried her into the light. She fought to get her hair out of her eyes.

Beneath a lamppost where he let her stand and lean, she caught her breath while he waited. She brushed her hair back and looked up. "Thank—Lakota!"

He gaped, stumbled back away from her and came close. He shook his head, disbelief plain in his handsome features. She threw herself into his arms holding on as tight as she could. She molded her body to his and rained kisses on his

hard chest. He seemed hesitant to hold her, but she barely noticed.

"I'm so glad you followed me, baby," she cried. "How did you get over this side? Is the shop energy still working? I want to go home. I don't like this place. It looks like a war hit it."

"It did," he said simply. "Who are you, and why do you have my wife's face?"

"Your wife?" She backed off to examine him. He looked just like the Lakota from her dream. Short dark hair, buckskin clothing, moccasins on his feet and a leather satchel tossed over his shoulder. He didn't fit this stone graveyard of a city. This man belonged in the wilderness hunting for his next meal. "You look like the man in my dreams. I thought you were Lakota, my boyfriend. You and he could be identical twins except for that scar above your eyebrow." He raised a hand to it at her words.

He seemed about to make a comment, but instead, he glanced around and took her arm to pull her forward. "We cannot stay here. It isn't safe. Come with me."

Moving with speed and grace, he traversed the rubble with her stumbling behind. Soon they were out of the worst of it and moving along an even darker road. But at least here, she noted that there were less ruins. Behind a building, a horse was tethered.

"You're freaking kidding me," she blurted out.

He gave her a look of disdain. She rolled her eyes at him.

"This is the best way I have found to get around. Most of the roads are blocked or destroyed. Sticking to open areas

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where my horse can run free works out better for me." He leaped up onto the saddle and held out a hand. She stood there looking. "Come now!" he demanded. "I will not be caught here tonight. There is too much negative activity."

"Negative activity?" she wondered aloud. "What do you mean? And who are you? What's your name?"

He leaned down, his eyes narrowed. "Get on this horse now or stay here to be raped. You should know, there are no women here. Every one is dead. The few men left are desperate. They have not laid hands on a woman in a few years."

She swallowed hard, grabbed his hand and was hauled up to sit in front of him. The movies made it look more sensual. In real life, it wasn't so. The knob on the saddle pressed painfully between her legs. Her rescuer reached in front of her to grab it. His thumb brushed her nub through her jeans. She nearly fell off the horse.

"I apologize." He scooted back a little and pulled her back some too, relieving her discomfort. A whole new set of problems arose with his erection pressed against her ass. She clamped her mouth shut.

They rode a good hour before stopping in a copse of trees that appeared to be untouched by the horror of whatever war they had. He slid to the ground then lifted her down.

"Are you going to tell me your name now?" she asked.

He raised an eyebrow at her. "You already know it. My name is Lakota."

She gasped. "Well you're in for a shocker. My name is Tawni."

"Liar!" He gripped her arms to drag her against his chest. "Ephraim has put you up to this, didn't he? You had some type of surgery to alter your face?"

"Maybe *you* did!" she spat. She wrenched herself from his hold. "Touch me like that again, and I'll cut your dick off!"

His disgust at her language gave her satisfaction. To prove she would do just what she said, she retrieved her boyfriend's knife from her pocket and held it up threateningly. His eyes went wide, and he searched his person, pulling out the exact same weapon.

"What are the odds?" she whispered.

He shook his head. "We need to have a talk."

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Chapter Six

Half hour into their time together, Tawni came to the conclusion that the spot where Lakota had taken her was the same spot where she had met him in her dreams. Although her whole attention had been on him during those times, she recognized the positioning of the trees. One in particular had a limb parallel with the ground. A few times, they had sat in it curled against one another after they had made love half the night. He caught her looking at the spot and turned to glare at her as if she had done something wrong.

"You don't have to look at me like that," she told him with a frown. "I haven't done anything wrong except get myself stuck in this horrible place." She glanced around. The area was actually nice. She had enjoyed a camping trip when she had been in a writing program as a teen, a treat midway through the course. Her family had never been into it so the opportunity had never risen. Her Lakota wouldn't be caught dead.

This man handed her a toothbrush, mouthwash and other toiletries in a small satchel. *Way to rough it.*

"This will be useful after being sick back there," he suggested.

She went still then put a hand to her mouth. He was saying her breath stunk. "You're a real gentleman, aren't you? What happened to treating me like a princess, something to be cherished? You've been nothing but rude since I met you here."

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"I don't know you. I can't imagine where you came from or what you were doing in the middle of that city when no woman has been seen around here for along time. I still believe Ephraim is behind your appearance. That's all that can explain it." After that little speech, he stood and led his horse over to the stream that ran nearby. She was thirsty but wasn't going to ask him if he had a cup. She watched as he cupped his hands to drink not far from his horse. She swallowed hard.

After she had freshened up, she sat down near the fire he built. The night was chilly. Lakota tossed her a rough blanket she suspected would be itchy if she let it touch her skin. She wrapped herself in it, keeping her clothes on. "So you want to tell me why you look like my boyfriend, what city this is and why it looks just like my city?" She shivered. "Is this the land of the dead or something?"

He looked at her like she was an idiot. "No, this is the real world."

"Says you." Obviously, he wasn't planning on offering any information until she was forthcoming. He thought she was in league with Ephraim. Who knew what he was up to. "Okay, listen. A year ago, I began having dreams of my boyfriend, only he was different." She pointed at him. "He was like you, dressed exactly the same. I would have said same personality, but you're not that friendly. This copse of trees is where we met each time. We..." She stopped. There was no need to admit they had been lovers.

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When she began to speak, he had frozen in place, not saying a word or moving. His lips barely formed the words, "Go on."

Resentment toward him filled her. "Recently, my sister disappeared. I had heard from the police that her wallet was found near this particular shop, in a not so great area of town. I went there, confronted a man who was also from my dreams—"

"Your boyfriend must not be very good if you find escape in other men's arms in your dreams."

"You know what you can do for me." She narrowed her eyes and flared her nostrils. He fell silent. "I did not have any relations with the other man in my dreams or otherwise. I had never seen him outside my dreams. As far as I knew he wasn't real. But, he knew me. Just like you, he made accusations about me and said you had taken me away to that side. I didn't know what he meant by *that side* until I ended up here."

Lakota stood and retrieved his saddlebags from where he had tossed them after removing the saddle from his horse. He opened a flap and pulled something out. She watched, curious. Soon he was cooking meat she couldn't identify over the fire. Her stomach growled. If he offered, she'd eat it in a heartbeat.

"I admit that there are striking similarities to my situation," he said at last. "I still think this is some kind of trick. However, Ephraim could not have known what I do out here. He could not manipulate a ritual known only to my people."

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"Your people?"

He nodded. "Yes, the Hopi." He hesitated. "I have called on the Great Spirit to return my wife to me each night for the past year. I know I should not have. I..."

She swallowed, her hands shaking. "Where is your wife?"

His answer only made her more afraid. "She is dead. Like all the other women here."

Tawni stumbled to her feet. She walked over to the water's edge, her mind spinning like a top. She couldn't be this man's wife. She had a boyfriend named Lakota. She wasn't dead, was she? A movie in which a woman who was dead came to mind, a woman who did not realize ghosts weren't invading her home. She was invading the home, because she and her children were the ones who were dead. This could not be something like that. Lakota couldn't be calling her back from the spirit realm.

Her knees gave out, and she fell down to the ground. Tears flooded her eyes. His strong arms surrounded her, drawing her back to his chest. He was too familiar. Even his scent made her think of home, of safety. She spun toward him and buried her face against his neck. Sobs shook her body. "Tell me this isn't real, Lakota? I'm not dead. I don't remember dying or being married. I don't understand, but how can I be here?"

His mouth found hers. He dragged her tighter into his arms, their bodies fitting together from habit. He laid her on the ground and slid atop her. She spread her legs, and he settled between them. His hand found a way beneath her

blouse to cup her breast and pluck at her nipple. The tiny bud came to life under his ministrations, and she moaned.

He drew back. "You're not her."

"W-what?" She drew in a shuddering breath.

He moved off of her. His hands shook as much as hers when he ran them through his hair. He didn't lift his eyes from ground as he moved away. "You're not my wife. I suppose I knew all along. Something went wrong with the ritual. Grandfather advised me against performing it. He said it was better to let go, to move on. How could I?"

She had no idea what he was talking about. Was he saying she wasn't dead? Sitting up, she flicked her bra back in place and smoothed down her blouse. "I don't understand."

"Don't you?" His look was resentful, as if this was her fault somehow. "I thought I was calling for my wife to return to me. Wires were crossed, or your energy was stronger. I called you instead inside your dreams. You visited me all those nights. We were lovers, and I was untrue to my wife with a false copy."

"I am not a copy!" She jumped to her feet. "Your wife was the copy."

"Do not say anything against Tawni. She was perfect!"

She put her hands on her hips. "Well don't say anything against me. She can be good without you insulting me!"

His anger drained away as quickly as it rose. He moved to stand in front of her. She longed to fall into his arms again but held herself still. "I apologize. You are right. This isn't your fault. I was the one who made the mistake. Possibly the

Great Spirit was punishing me for my arrogance, my selfishness."

She smirked at him. "Yes, the last year was serious punishment."

That might have been a grin flitting across his lips, but it was gone too fast to be sure.

"Are you saying that I am real, that my world is real just as this one is?" she questioned him.

He nodded. "I believe so. I had never heard of it, but perhaps there are parallel Earths. Possibly millions with all the same people, making different choices and having different experiences, but all with the same names. In theory it's fascinating."

She laughed. "Yes, that is interesting." He led her back to the fire and served some of the meat to her. She thanked him quietly before digging in. The salt was a bit much, but still it was delicious. She remembered salt was used as a preservative, so maybe that's how he kept it from going bad not being in a refrigerator. "You know what my Lakota does?" she asked.

He shook his head, but his eyes widened with interest. "No, what?"

"He's a model."

"A model what?"

She chuckled, tearing off a bite of her meat before answering. "A model. You know. He puts on clothes—or takes them off—for money. Companies pay him big bucks to do it. He's all about his incredible body." She let her gaze travel from Lakota's reddening cheeks to his massive chest. She had

run her hands over that body many times before. She knew him physically as well as she knew her boyfriend.

Lakota cleared his throat, embarrassment plain on his face. "That's not a very honorable profession." She shrugged, not apologizing in any way. Life on her side was different, she guessed.

"Lakota, are there models over here? Television? Movies?" she wondered.

"There used to be, before the war."

"Tell me about the war, please."

He didn't appear to want to remember. A sadness came into his eyes as he stared into the fire. "Ephraim is a scientist. He and his cohorts were determined to better the human condition." He frowned. His sadness turned to anger. "They experimented with genes, trying to find a way to take out all the imperfections so that they could produce a better, stronger person."

"Hmm, seems like I've heard that desire voiced in my world too."

"Yes, well they seemed to be successful until the side effects began." A storm raged in his eyes. "The women who had volunteered for testing began to get ill, seriously ill. Many died. Ephraim, refusing to give up so easily, recruited new subjects for more experiments. That meant more deaths."

"Where does the war come in?" she questioned impatiently.

"He moved on to the males." The words were cryptic. They set her heart to pounding. "Male subjects went into rages inexplicably. One night one of them escaped from Ephraim's

laboratory. He told his family of the horrors he experienced there."

She shivered. The story reminded her of Frankenstein movies and others like it. The darkness of this world was the perfect setting for such things. Hoping Lakota didn't notice, she glanced around them then slid closer to his side.

"To make things worse, the man who had escaped went into the rage I mentioned. He killed all of his family and several others before he was captured and ultimately killed. Citizens, including myself, stormed the lab. We were determined to put a stop to what was going on there." Pain clouded his eyes. Tears spilled down his face, but he tightened his jaw, wiped them away and shook off the hand she had placed on his arm. "We didn't know there were other experiments at work. We set off bombs, which released something into the air."

She gasped. What could they have released into the air with their actions?

He nodded. "I see you realize the seriousness of what we'd done. The rage, the plague that killed the women, you name it. We had it. Still the fighting spread like wildfire. Pretty soon we were fighting and didn't know why. Countries against countries and then cities against cities, brother against brother. All of the prejudices below the surface, all of the intolerance, whatever it is that keeps men apart—all of it came to the forefront, and we were no longer bound by morals or codes. We killed or were killed. Our population is extremely low. The mutation of whatever process Ephraim had used on the women killed off every single one of them,

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including Tawni." He closed his eyes. His hands tightened on the mug he held until his knuckles were stark white in the dim light. The thin metal caved a little under the pressure.

"I'm so sorry, Lakota. I see why you wanted to call to her, and I'm sorry I got in the way of that. It must have felt impossible to live with your loss in the face of how it happened." She imagined he blamed himself. She tried touching his hand again. He let her, clutching her fingers not so tightly as he had the mug.

Before she knew what she would do, she leaned in and kissed his lips. He returned the gesture, placed a hand behind her head and pulled her close. His tongue pushed in between her lips. She melted into his arms, ignoring everything else around them.

Lakota pushed her blouse up. He broke the kiss to follow a path across the swell of her breasts. His full lips closed over her nipple through her bra, and she arched up to him. "Mm, Lakota."

He stiffened and pulled away. "I'm sorry. I shouldn't have." She wanted to protest, but he pushed her gently away. "You've forgotten you have a boyfriend in your world." His tone told her he hadn't forgotten he had a dead wife.

"Why didn't I notice your superior attitude in my dreams?" She retrieved her blanket from the ground and slid over to the pallet he laid out for her. "Tomorrow, if you don't mind, I would like you to point me in the direction of the populated areas. In my world, several women have gone missing. I'm thinking they were brought here."

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He stopped arranging his things in neat little corners that somehow annoyed her. "Why do you believe that?"

"Because I saw Ephraim tonight, with some other men. They were carrying body bags over their shoulders. They loaded them into cars and drove away from where you found me. Just a few days ago, more women disappeared." She wrung her hands fighting tears. "I'm guessing—praying—that those women are all alive, and my sister is among them somewhere. I'm going to break in and free them."

His expression showed doubt. "You expect to do what we did? History here shows action without knowledge is dangerous."

"So what, I'm supposed to leave them there?" She frowned. "You said yourself that the men here haven't seen women in years. They could be ... raped."

"What makes you think they haven't been already?"

"Where's my sensitive lover?" she blurted out. "I mean..." Running a hand over her eyes, she sighed. "You would have comforted me, offered your help or tried to stop me because you cared."

"Is that what your boyfriend would do?" His expression was unreadable.

"My Lakota recognizes my independence, and he would complain. But it would get him nowhere, because I do what I want, like it or not. However, I was referring to my dream lover." She bit her lip, looking away. "In my dream, you would have behaved as if I was too precious to do anything that dangerous."

"In your dream—"

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She held up a hand. "I know, I know. You loved *her*." She tried to hide how much that hurt. He was right. She belonged to the Lakota from her world, not him. Tell that to her body, her heart. All that she had experienced with him was not real or meant for her. He resented the wasted time. "I would like your help, but understand if you are hesitant to get involved. Thank you for rescuing me tonight."

The sounds of the night should have disturbed her being a city girl, but she was worn out. As soon as her head hit her curled arm and she turned on her side, she was asleep.

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Chapter Seven

Expecting sunlight, Tawni was disappointed to see an overcast sky when she woke the next morning. She sat up to find herself alone. Lakota had gone off somewhere. His horse was also missing.

Shaking off the rough blanket she had been right about, she rubbed her sore neck and stood. She found the satchel with toiletries nearby by, visited the water and the woods and then returned to the camp site. Still Lakota hadn't shown up.

"Fine! If he feels that way, I'll make it on my own. I don't need him." She had twenty-nine days to locate the women, defeat a bunch of sex-starved men and get back home.

She searched through Lakota's pack for the meat he had put away after he'd cooked it. Retrieving a few pieces that wouldn't fill her stomach for however long she would have to walk, she picked a direction and started out.

Toward the south, smoke filled the air in the distance. She picked her way through the trees toward it. Where there was smoke, there was fire, or in this case, there had to be people. Maybe she would just stumble across Ephraim's lab. She twisted her long hair into a tight braid and wrapped it up on her head. Regret that she had lost her hat the night before went through her. The fact that she had curly lashes and girly eyes, so she had been told, would be too obvious in the daylight annoyed her but couldn't be helped.

An hour and a half of walking still found her too far from the smoke she had seen. To make things worse, she could no

longer see it above the tree line. The only positive was that she had come alongside a road in halfway decent condition. The edges of the asphalt were a crumbled mess, but the middle of the road was mostly smooth except for a spider web of cracks. She followed along the middle hoping to run into civilization.

The rumble of a vehicle sounded around the curve in the road. Tawni scooted to the side and waited. When a truck hove into view, she waved her arms. "Hey, please stop. Hey!" A hand covered her mouth, and she was dragged backward into the trees. She fought and kicked at her assailant to no avail. The man's arms must be made of steel. Wedged against his body, she could do nothing but watch the truck roll by. Soon its noise faded into the distance. Then the man holding her let her drop to her feet. She whirled around to find Lakota standing there.

"You!" she screamed. "Why did you do that? I've been walking forever."

"You don't want that ride, trust me."

"I don't trust you." She spun away to continue along the road. "Go back where you came from. You obviously don't want to help me. I don't need you."

"That was one of the trucks from Ephraim's lab." He reached out automatically to grasp her arm when she stumbled over some rocks. "If they had gotten close enough to see that you are a woman, this place would be crawling with his men. You would be taken to the camps."

She stopped walking. "Camps?"

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"Had you stayed put this morning and waited for me, I could have told you about the information I was able to gather while I was scouting." His expression reprimanded her in silence. "Ephraim and others in league with him have set up a camp, possibly more than one. They have decided to take the matter of decreased population into their own hands."

"By abducting able-bodied women from my side!" She moaned. "They have a virtual smorgasbord over there. Every thirty days, they can run over, gather women and come back over here. I can only imagine what they're doing in that camp." She fought not to lose it. Lisa and she hadn't gotten along, but she didn't deserve this.

Lakota rested a hand on her shoulder. "I will help you."

They moved into the trees to where he had tethered his horse. Lakota opened his saddlebag and offered her water. Not until she unscrewed the cap did she notice just how dry her throat was. She had gulped down half the bottle before she thought about whether they needed to conserve.

"Oh, I'm sorry." She held out the bottle. "I don't know if you have more."

He pressed it to her chest. "Keep it. Come, get on. We have a ways to go. The information I have is that the camp is farther south."

"Then I was headed in the right direction." She put a foot in the stirrup. Lakota rested a hand on her ass, but pulled it back as if he'd been burned. She glanced up at him and winked.

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With his arm around her waist, Tawni could barely think of anything other than the feel of his body brushing hers. Just as the night before, he was hard as a rock, and his shaft was wedged so tight against her ass, she longed to reach back and stroke it, or rip his clothes off and ride *him* instead of the horse.

To help focus her mind, she decided to make conversation. "So Lakota, do you have any family?"

"A grandfather."

"No brothers or sisters? What about your parents? Where are they?"

He remained silent. She began to wonder if he would answer. He blew out a breath she bet was full of frustration with her. "My parents have passed. Thankfully, long before this war. I had a brother who lived with Grandfather higher in the mountains. Neither of them had the patience for city life. After I met my wife, I stayed close, for her sake."

Tawni wanted to ask more about how they met and learn more about what happened the day he shot Ephraim, but she was afraid to ask. If she brought it up, she would only remind him of how he had called for her instead of his wife during his ceremonies.

"I never knew my father. My mother and I never got along." She rolled her eyes at the understatement. "Actually I reminded my mother of my father. I hear I am the spitting image of the man, with longer hair." She forced a laugh. "Whatever resentment and hurt he dealt her during their relationship, she took out on me growing up. I say that

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without self-pity. I just stay away from her so I won't be eaten up with hatred and bitterness."

He squeezed her gently in sympathy. She rested a hand over his, wanting more. Lakota lowered his head, touching his cheek to hers. She glanced up and his lips touched hers. "I shouldn't kiss you," he muttered against her mouth.

"We shouldn't," she agreed. "But there's no denying what we're feeling, what we felt in my dreams."

His expression was that of her throwing cold water at him. The man remained faithful to a woman who had been dead she didn't know how long. No one could compete with that. Besides, she shouldn't be competing. If her Lakota were to find out her dream man was real, and that she felt a closeness to him, a draw, that had never been between the two of them, he would be hurt. She didn't want to hurt him.

At some point, she must have fallen asleep, lulled into comfort against Lakota's shoulder. He shook her awake gently tapping her belly. She sat up almost falling off the horse. Lakota caught her, his arm steel around her waist. Annoyed, she muttered her thanks as he lowered her to the ground.

Endless trees had given way to rubble, crumbled buildings. In one direction, Tawni noticed white columns standing, above them a roof all but collapsed. Next to the columned building were smaller ones in various states of destruction. All together, they formed a semi circle with a broken fountain in the middle. This had been a town square, she guessed.

With no one about, she took the risk of exploring. The building with columns looked most promising. As she neared, the crooked plaque at the side of the entrance came into

clearer view. It read: Central Library. Someone had scratched away the city name above it, but Tawni had no doubts about what had been there. This whole area mirrored her world. Not exactly, but close. In her world, there was this central library, but the building didn't have columns and the fountain in the middle of the square wasn't a fountain, but a work of strange art. She had always hated it.

Fires burned in sconces inside the library, yet even with the gaping hole in the roof to let in more light, the place was semi-dark. Books sat in piles along the walls and on unsteady tabletops. Like nothing was out of the ordinary, a man stood at an information desk as if waiting for a patron to come by to check out a book. The long hair, the narrow shoulders and overall pretty boy look to him was familiar. She picked through the stacks to take a closer look.

"Levi!" she shouted, her voice echoing off the dead zone of a room. He jumped, sent a pile of books flying and turned accusing eyes her way.

"Do I know you?" he demanded.

Interesting. This Levi apparently didn't know the Tawni from this world. "Tawni," she offered in explanation. He remained blank. An idea struck her. "Did you go out with a girl named Lisa?"

He rolled his eyes. A thump sounded beneath the desk where he stood and a man stood up, just as pretty as Levi. The looks on their faces said it all. No, this Levi hadn't gone out with Lisa. He may not have gone out with any girl.

"Tawni," Lakota called behind her. "We need to move on. There is nothing here."

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The look of interest on the two men's face behind the counter mirrored the same longing inside of her. Lakota was all a woman and a gay man could want. Under their scrutiny, he shifted and gestured for her to follow him outside. She hesitated.

"Do either of you know where the secret camp is?" She didn't feel a need to elaborate on just what camp she meant, and they didn't pretend to need her to.

"I heard it's this old dairy farm," Levi offered.

She tried remembering if there had been a dairy farm past this location in her world, but couldn't remember. She hadn't been out this way much, and didn't think she'd gone farther. And this was the city. If there was a farm somewhere, it would be much farther. She sighed. "Thanks. Have a good day."

Outside, Lakota took her hand and hurried her down the broken steps. She tried pulling out of his grasp, but he held on.

"Ouch, slow down," she complained. "What's the rush?"

"The rush is—" He didn't get a chance to finish. From nowhere a dog bigger than she'd ever seen came charging for them. His bared teeth showed he wasn't in the mood to play. Lakota shoved her behind him and pulled out his knife. What had seemed so cool, so handy when she packed hers, seemed so inadequate now.

The dog leaped on Lakota's chest. They both crashed back on top of her. Her dream lover rolled with the beast, and Tawni scrambled over the rocks to get away. Her rear ached from landing on rocks, but she ignored the pain.

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She searched for a big enough rock to smash the dog's skull, but nothing nearby was more than plum sized. The dog's growls and Lakota's cries of pain fueled her panic. "Help, please somebody help," she screamed.

Falling to her hands and knees every so often, she scrambled back into the library, but the two men there were gone. She did locate an old bust of someone important and hefted it outside. The dog had pinned Lakota down, and the knife was several feet away coated in blood.

Her heart pounding, her stomach roiling, Tawni stumbled toward them with the bust held securely between her legs. How she was going to lift it high enough and come down with enough accuracy to kill the dog, she didn't know.

Finally in position, she raised the bust. Her arm muscles quaked. Fear that she would injure Lakota made her hesitate. The dog sensed what she was going to do and turned to leap on her. The bust smashed onto the ground, and the beast met with her chest sending her backward.

She screamed when the sharp teeth tore into her blouse, ripping it to shreds. From the corner of her eye, she saw Lakota grab his knife and tumble in her direction. He shook his head like he couldn't see his way to her. Having shredded her blouse, the dog turned to her face. Visions of being maimed for life with hideous scars on her face when through her mind.

A shot rang out. The impact of the bullet sent the dog's body to the right of her. It lay there unmoving. Hiccupping and crying, Tawni looked up through tears when a man stood over her. His wild black hair allowed only piercing blue eyes to

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peek through from his face. They flicked over to Lakota who had collapsed and then back to her. She knew the moment he took notice of her bared breasts and fainted.

* * * *

"I've never had me a black woman before," he said, knowing she had awakened.

Tawni opened her eyes. She glanced around the room to find she was inside another of the shell-like buildings. This one was in a better state. Apparently, in this area, there was no electricity, unlike the part of the city where the shop was.

A candle burned on a desk near the bed she lay in. The man who had rescued her sat in a chair at the foot of her bed. The bare room held only a gaping hole in one wall. Everything else seemed secure. Worry for Lakota made her sit up, only to fall back and scramble for the blanket which had slid to the floor. She was naked.

"Where are my clothes, you piece of shit?" she demanded.

He stared from the midst of the knotted hair. "I've never had me a black woman." He licked his lips. "I wanted you to be awake, but it was hard waiting. I satisfied myself with looking."

She clutched the blanket tighter and searched the room again for her things. If he had killed Lakota or he touched her ... The man was thin, but he would be stronger than she was. She had never been in a fight in her life, knew less than nothing about wielding the knife she had brought with her, but she'd find a way to end his life if necessary.

"Where's Lakota? Please," she begged.

"That guy with you? Oh, he's dead," he said without emotion. Tawni sobbed.

The chair creaked when he stood. A rough hand curved around her blanket and yanked it away in one movement. She aimed a kick at his balls, but missed. He pinned her to the bed, licking his lips, smacking them together like she was his afternoon meal.

"Going to be so good."

He forced her legs apart and lay down over her body. She fought with everything in her but could do no damage with her arms and legs pinned. He avoided the bites she tried to land on his shoulders, his neck and face.

His privates made a connection with her. She howled in disgust and fear. "Please, don't." Her cries were pointless. He was desperate, horny after years. His plight had doubtless turned him into a rapist. All rules had fled.

He pushed forward. The door flew open. A rebel yell filled the room. Her attacker died on the bare dirt floor. Tremors took control of Tawni's body. Lakota, looking almost as weak as she felt, climbed up on the bed. He eased her body close to his, wrapped the blanket around her, and they both fought to regain their strength and breath.

"I took too long?" he asked, desperate hope in his voice.

"Almost," she whispered.

He kissed her. A shudder went through her at the memory of what happened just a minute ago. He touched the side of her face. "Forget him. He's dead."

"Almost," she sobbed.

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He kissed her again. He drew back and quickly removed his clothes. She stared in shock. When he was naked, he eased her onto her back, arranged the blanket above them and pressed his body on hers. His shaft was thick and hard between her legs, but he made no attempt to enter her.

Where she had been dry for her attacker, wetness made the connection slick between them. "Feel me," he encouraged her. "Think of only me. I would never hurt you. Remember me in your dreams, how it felt to have me inside you."

She groaned. "Lakota."

Her fingers curled in the blanket, resting against his back, she wanted to beg him to put it in her, to make it real. But she hesitated. Lakota wasn't ready, and maybe she wasn't either. In many ways, they still belonged to others. She to her Lakota, and he was still devoted to his wife. How could they become lovers in real life? The complications didn't stop her body from desiring him or her mind from remembering. Yet, that had been his goal, to wash away the experience of a moment ago.

The move worked. She was consumed with him, needing him, wanting him. "Lakota," she cried from her heart.

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Chapter Eight

He had slipped out of the bed long enough to look for her clothes. They were nowhere to be found. He dragged the body out of the room and, she guessed, buried it somewhere. A leash and dog food told them the animal had been the man's. Apparently, he had been willing to put down his pet to get a piece of her. That made her shiver, but the sobs were past. Lakota's body was healing ointment as far as she was concerned.

"What are we going to do?" she wondered. "I can't search for my sister naked, wrapped in only a blanket. That's just asking for trouble."

He nodded, the intensity of his gaze telling her the trouble wasn't all from strangers. She sighed. They should just do it and get it out of their systems. Problem was, she didn't think it was possible. Her world didn't revolve around sex. Sure, she had a huge appetite for it, and she and Lakota back home had made love three or four times a week, sometimes more. But it was more sensual for her, the caresses, the feeling of being cared for. That had been her biggest bone of contention with Lakota. He was insensitive. She had been able to satisfy that craving for gentleness only in the bed.

With this Lakota, he breathed love and care. The problem was it was directed at his wife. What they had enjoyed together had been an accident and an illusion. Knowing it made her want to cry all over again. Instead, she swallowed down the self-pity and sat up.

He shook his head. "It's getting late. Our best bet is to stay here and start out again in the morning. I promise I will find you something to wear."

She grunted but knew he was right. Lakota stepped out of the room again. She heard something scraping and a door shut, followed by more scraping. In a few minutes, he entered the room dragging a huge slab of stone with rusty metal bars sticking out of it.

"What are you going to do with that?"

"Bar the door." He shut the door as best he could. It hung haphazardly as he had damaged it in kicking it down to rescue her. Her heart warmed in memory. With a shove of the stone against the door, he stopped. "I should have inquired if you needed to ... relieve yourself."

She laughed. "No, I'm good. Thanks."

He finished securing the door and moved closer to the bed. She tried turning her eyes to the wall while he undressed, but couldn't help herself. Her eye returned to his hard plains and sinewy muscle. His chest bare, he tossed his shirt on the chair and began to unbutton his pants. She willed him to remove everything, to be as naked as she was beneath the blanket. Unfortunately, he left his boxers on. She had been surprised to see those, having no idea what the Native Americans from days gone by wore beneath their clothing. She didn't imagine they had soft cotton undies.

His eyes narrowed on her, catching her look. "I cannot be all natural. The cotton is comfortable," he explained and smiled, showing even white teeth.

Her heart picked up its pace. "Of course."

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Lakota moved to the chair and rolled his clothing together before placing it at the head of the bed. "Better to keep it close, just in case. Would you like to sleep against the wall or on the end?"

Beneath you.

"The wall is fine. It will be a little challenging though because you're a big man. As it is, your feet will hang off the bottom. This bed seems to have been made for a child."

He shrugged and lifted the blanket as she scooted over. She did notice that he avoided looking at her body. Lakota didn't make a big fuss about the circumstances. He just dealt with what he had to and moved on. She had to admire that.

His arm brushed her breast while he was settling down making the nipple harden. The sharp intake of breath told her he wasn't as unaffected as he pretended. They shifted around, trying to figure out how not to touch.

"Can you turn that way?" He pointed, and she frowned at him. When she was facing the wall, his thigh brushed her ass. She fought not to poke it out more. He grumbled. "This isn't working. I'll turn this way." She glanced back to find him facing the door. The feeling of being abandoned was unnecessary, but she still beat it down inside.

Staring at his back, she resisted stroking the pale skin. In the candlelight, she made out jagged scars snaking every direction. She sniffled. He spun around to pull her tight against his chest.

"What's wrong?" Concern in his warm brown eyes sapped her last bit of strength.

"Your back." She lifted a hand around his body to brush the rough skin. "What happened? How did you get those scars?"

He pressed his lips together. "Get some sleep." Rather than push her away as she expected, he leaned up, pinched out the candle and settled their bodies together again. She nuzzled her face into his neck and sighed.

"Good night." Her voice echoed around the silent room.

His pinky teased the top of her rear, and a tremor went through her. She bit down on her lip. He pressed harder, like he was fighting with himself. Finally, his hand slid higher, but he didn't move his chest away from her breasts.

"I was whipped," he blurted out. "When Ephraim found out Tawni was waiting for me to return to her after a trip to see my grandfather, he had his men grab me, and he locked me in a room in one of his buildings. For five years, I was treated like an animal there. Between the whippings he showed up to administer himself and the little food, I kept myself sane with the thought of coming back to her."

She closed her eyes remembering that scene when he burst in the door and shot Ephraim. "What kind of backwards world is this where people get away with this kind of thing? Don't you have police? Why isn't Ephraim rotting in jail for what he did?"

"You're telling me people with money don't get away with crimes every day where you're from, that they don't buy off those who have the authority to punish them?"

"Hm, yes," she admitted. "I guess you're right. They do. But how did you get away with shooting him in return? I

would think they would throw the book at you, and you'd still be in jail."

"Someone took my place."

"Who?"

"*Someone*," he insisted.

That was cryptic, but he seemed unwilling to share who it was. Not that she would know the person anyway. "Well I'm glad you're not in jail. I'm glad ... you're here with me."

He didn't respond. She guessed he was probably longing for his Tawni, the woman who wasn't abrasive like she was, didn't curse or shun his treating her like a delicate flower. On one hand, she wanted to be treated like that. On the other, she knew she was who she was, and nothing this Lakota could do would smooth out her rough edges.

"Get some sleep," he commanded. "We don't know how far we'll need to go tomorrow or what we will face." To her surprise, he pressed a chaste kiss to her lips and settled her once again in the crook of his neck.

* * * *

This time when Tawni woke, Lakota was still in the room. He unwrapped torn cloth, dingy with blood and dirt, from around his fingers. The dog had torn the skin on his fingers, and there was a distinct bite mark in his palm. Her stomach hurt looking at it. She prayed the animal didn't have rabies.

The door sat open, and the candle was lit. On the chair were a pair of pants and a shirt. Both looked too big, but she wasn't going to complain. She pushed off the blanket and quickly dressed, not bothering to cover her nakedness. She

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grinned with her back to Lakota when she heard his intake of breath. As she was, he was probably remembering the times he had curled her into his body and taken her from behind. She longed to be filled with his massive staff right now.

"Any leads to where we go from here?" she asked nonchalantly.

"S-South," he mumbled. "The farm that guy in the library mentioned, remember?"

She nodded. "Okay, I'm ready. Just have to visit the little girl's room." Lakota supplied her with toiletries and a small bucket of water she wasn't too sure was clean, but she used it and was soon sitting in front of him on his horse.

He encircled her waist, squeezed and nuzzled her neck. "Just one small kiss," he said, a touch of desperation in his tone.

She glanced up at him in shock. The desire was plain. Where had it been when she was naked in his arms last night? When he locked on her mouth, she figured he was past the point of solid control. She lifted her chin and parted her lips. He swooped in. His tongue filled her mouth, and his light sucking sent a tingle of need straight down to her apex. When he broke the connection, his breathing was ragged, and so was hers.

"We could go back inside for a little while," she suggested.

"No. We must move on."

She let her shoulders slump and turned away. Lakota tapped the horse's sides and clicked his tongue. At a steady gait, the horse made their bodies rock side to side, sending Tawni's desires into overdrive. She reminded herself that the

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man behind her wasn't hers, and that her Lakota loved her deeply. She'd do nothing to hurt him, but temptation was a cruel beast. Weeks in a man's presence whom one had made love to in dreams was just too unfair, too hard for a person to deal with.

Glancing over her shoulder, she wondered if Lakota was having the same trouble. He appeared to be unaffected by the friction between their bodies. His expression remained emotionless, making her want to slap him.

"How much farther," she whined like a child.

He flicked an eyebrow up, and she turned away to watch the scenery passing by. Trees and more trees. At least amid all the destruction, they still had the pleasure of greenery. She was pretty sure that on her side, all this had been paved over. The area where the shop was, the library and as far as she knew out here was all concrete jungle back home.

An hour and a half of riding brought nothing but more grass, a few burned out places and flat ground stretching for miles. Even as far as they could see, there was no farm. Lakota slid down from his horse and looked out over the land. "I believe we've been lied to. I doubt Ephraim's camp is farther than this. That means we missed something back where the library is. We'll have to double back."

She sighed. "Double back?"

"Yes, and we'll need to pick up the pace. We want as much of the day as possible to search." Her stomach growled, and he paused before slipping into the saddle. "You're hungry. I'll get you to a safe place and then find some food."

"I doubt there's a McDonald's." She smirked, but he ignored it. *No sense of humor. Check.* "It jus boggles my mind how different you are from my Lakota."

He shrugged. "Just as you are different from my wife."

"Yes, I know. She didn't cuss, right?" She laughed, despite his serious face. He probably thought she was making fun of his precious goddess of a spouse. "Don't worry, I'm well aware that I could not possibly live up to the sky-high pedestal you've put her on."

"What's that supposed to mean?" His lips tightened. She wanted to kiss away the frown lines around his eyes.

"I was there." She eased her aching body to the ground and leaned her head on the horse's side. "I think it's odd that when you used that powder stuff on me in the dream, I gained her memories. I knew what happened on her wedding day, and you weren't there. You said the powder was to make your wife remember, but since I'm not her, I should not have *remembered* anything."

Her rationalization obviously made sense to him. He stood staring into the distance, deep in thought. "You could be her reborn? What is the year in your world?"

She told him, and he looked disappointed. "Same here. No, you are not my Tawni." He didn't appear happy about that. It would give him the excuse to touch her. He ran a hand over his hair. "Maybe our counterparts are all connected in some way. You have the ability locked inside you to channel my wife, and—"

"Maybe you can channel my Lakota!" She pressed close to him, allowing her breasts to flatten on his chest. She felt the

shiver that went through him. "Tell him, I lo ... care for him, and miss him. Tell him I'm safe so he doesn't worry. Please."

Compassion filled his brown eyes. "I'm afraid it does not work that way. The ritual I used opened the way across space and time."

"Then do it," she pleaded.

Gently, he put her from him so their bodies weren't touching. His ragged breath indicated her impact. "It's not that simple. I have to prepare my mind and body for the ritual. I need to have meditated and cleansed myself." He cupped her chin. "I promise, I will make an attempt tonight if we have not made any progress."

"Deal." She fully intended to hold him to it.

The journey back to the city seemed to take twice as long after Lakota had caught something for them to eat. The meat had been tough, and she could have used some Season-All on it. The worst part was that now the sun was high in the sky, making up for its absence earlier. With the heat beaming down on her, she had to wonder if the people over this side didn't destroy the ozone layer. That had to be impossible given the living plants. Still she baked in the shade.

At last, they arrived back at the small stretch of city where the central library lay. Tawni dropped to the ground and almost kept going down until Lakota caught her around the waist, pulling her against him. "You rest. I will look for inhabitants and see if I can gather more information."

She shook her head. "No way. There might be another dog out here. I'm going with you."

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"Crawling?" She narrowed an angry look on him which he didn't respond to. "You'll wait inside the room where we slept then. Seal yourself in, and I'll come back for you."

"Fine," she grunted. "But if you get killed out in this wild place, I'm going to hunt you down."

He carried her into the room and laid her on the bed, kissed her lips and was gone.

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Chapter Nine

Lakota sat with his legs crossed in front of him, his eyes closed and deep in meditation. Tawni's mouth watered at his bare chest and five o'clock shadow from not shaving all day. Slipping his shirt off seemed unnecessary as he hadn't removed it in her dreams, but she wasn't about protest against it.

After twenty minutes of him mumbling his native language beneath his breath, he finally opened his eyes. In the reflected moonlight and the fire, his eyes seemed to glow, spooking her. She fidgeted, considering whether he was about to attack.

"Lakota?" She cleared her throat and tugged at the too big collar of her shirt.

He didn't answer. Unfolding his body, he balanced on the balls of his feet and swayed side to side. Soon he stood and danced around the fire, at intervals tossing the red powder into the fire. The flames leaped toward the sky. Tawni scooted back, mesmerized. Her imagination might be in overdrive, but she could have sworn she saw his hair long and flowing about his bare shoulders, just as her Lakota wore his. Her heart thumped in her chest, her breathing becoming shallow and noisy.

For nearly an hour, her dream lover danced, his muscular limbs moving with fluid grace. She found it impossible to take her eyes off him and longed to be closer, to understand what he was saying. At some point, he turned to face her, and the

music she only now realized she had mentally supplied, stopped cold.

"Tawni?" he called out.

She swallowed. "Lakota?"

"Hey, baby." He grinned like her man always did. "I've been worried about you. Tawni, if I did something wrong, I'm sorry. Please, come home."

She burst out crying and threw herself into his arms.

"Lakota, I'm sorry. I've ... I've..." How could she admit to desiring the man whose body her boyfriend spoke through?

"Lakota, I love you," she whispered and knew it was true. For whatever reason, even with his hang-ups, she loved him. But she loved this Lakota also.

Pressing herself closer to him, she rested her head on his shoulder. His arms came around her. When her tears subsided, she looked up into his eyes. They were softer than before, but still held that strength, the wildness of his double. Right then, two men occupied this single body. She was sure of it.

"Tawni," he breathed. He lowered his head to kiss her. She tried turning away, but he held onto her chin and captured her lips with his. "I've missed your flavor."

"This isn't a dream, Lakota. This is real." She wriggled in his hold, but he only tightened it. "I'm in another world, sort of parallel to ours. The way between where I am and you is only open every thirty days." Her voice broke. He kissed her again. This time, his hand covered her breast, and he pinched her nipple.

"Let me make you feel better, baby."

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She told herself to pull back, to push his hand away, but she couldn't do it. Arching into his touch, she moaned.

"Lakota, tell him," she begged.

He didn't listen. Lakota helped her to the ground and leaned over her. He kissed along her neck, caressed her belly and squeezed her inner thigh. "Tawni." Had she heard two voices? Maybe none of this was real, and she was still at home sound asleep. Her dreams had taken a bizarre turn.

Two men wanted her, their desire firing together in one body. The force of it overwhelmed her, lit her on fire. She wasn't thinking straight, imagining the two of them together making love to her.

He unbuttoned her blouse, exposing her breasts. His mouth was at once on her nipple and then over her navel. He pushed his tongue inside the little hole, and she whimpered, tangling her fingers into his hair. "Lakota, we shouldn't."

"Do you want me?" He captured her face between his hands and forced her to look into his eyes. "Tawni, my love, do you want me?"

Tears spilled down the sides of her face. She sniffled. "Yes, so much. Lakota. Bo ... both." He snatched her shoes off, her pants following. Through a lust-filled haze, she watched him tear out of his buckskins. In seconds, he lay atop her naked. The cool night air did nothing to lessen the combustion their bodies made together.

Lakota pulled her legs apart, running his hands over her skin. "We should take it slowly," he mumbled between kisses and licks at her jaw line and neck. "We want you so much." His use of 'we' scared her, but she was too far gone.

"Take me now," she demanded.

He spared a millisecond to check that she was wet, and then he plunged deep in her moist tunnel. She cried out, wrapping her legs around his waist, shoving with her heels on his ass cheeks. If they were one, the ache, the desperate need would lessen, surely. Their bodies worked in a delicious rhythm, his long shaft gliding on a curved path to tease her hot spot before he pulled out.

She pushed, and he rode in again. "Deeper!" she all but shouted.

"You're so tight." His ragged voice coming out in bursts, warmed her breasts when he explored lower. She tugged him up again, demanded his tongue with her lips. She sucked it into her mouth. *Mm, his tongue is so thick, like his dick. More! Please, more!*

"Tawni, let me lean back." He panted. "I can push deeper. You want it deeper, don't you, my heart?"

She turned her head away, fighting her desire. "Lakota!"

"Baby, I know how you like it," he encouraged. "Let me give it to you hard."

Ugh! They were like multiple personalities. This could never work. Surely, Lakota realized—both of them!—she couldn't have them both. And yet, she tried. She disentangled her fingers from his hair and raised her arms above her head. She watched him watching her as he leaned up. His thrusts deepened. His pace increased.

He caught hold of her heels and lifted her legs high to pound harder. She screamed, her voice echoing above the trees. Lakota nipped the insides of her knees. He pulled out,

flipped her over and entered her again from the back. She pushed back into his shaft, reaching between her legs to find his balls. Teasing the sensitive orbs, she smiled when he shouted his own pleasure.

With an arm about her chest, he shifted them again so that he reared back on his heels and held her against him. She rested her head on his shoulder. They kissed hungrily, sucking, licking, nipping, each moaning with need. Lakota pinched her nipples then moved a hand down between her legs to tease her swollen nub. He parted her folds to get a better hold of her button, pulling and pinching until she came with sobs and moans she couldn't control.

"I love you," he whispered in her ear. She wasn't sure which man had uttered it, but just knowing Lakota loved her was enough for now. "I need you," he whispered, his voice and words too simple to identify him. "Any way I can have you, I will. Any way necessary."

She looked up to stare into his eyes, but they were closed. He nuzzled her face, the prickly hairs tickling. "I love you, too. I'll do whatever I need to do to be with you, to stay with you." She didn't dare say anymore.

He tightened one arm around her, stroked her bud with the other. Her desires began to build again with each pump of his long tool. She moaned and arched her ass into him. He pushed harder. She gasped. He growled. "Tawni!"

"Fill me, baby," she demanded.

She would be sore in the morning, but he pumped faster and rougher. Fighting to catch her breath, she bounced off his

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solid thighs. Her cream coated his member, the tops of her thighs and his fingers as he stroked.

Her strength left her the moment he shot his load into her womb. He shouted her name, gripped her too tight and pounded too hard. Her head spun. She could have sworn that she fainted once or twice, and then she climaxed a second time. Weak and spent, she hung from his arms, her head dipped before her.

He carefully eased out and lay her down before following with his body above hers. "Are you okay?"

She didn't answer.

"Tawni?"

"I'm okay."

Lakota put a blanket over them. Tawni stared at the fire, resting her head on her lover's arm. The flames leaped a few times then settled, and she drifted off to sleep.

* * * *

Lakota was no longer lying on top of her when she woke. Sunlight shined through the trees. She pushed the blanket off and rolled over with a wince. Just as she knew it would happen, she was sore between her legs.

Two buckets of water sat near a tree, one warm. She stumbled over to the warm one and used it to wash. Then she used the other to brush her teeth and have a drink. Dressed finally, she looked up to see Lakota walking toward her, leading his horse along with another one.

"Everything okay?" she asked.

"Fine!" He appeared angry, but she couldn't figure out why. He put a hand to her neck and pushed her gently but insistently to the tree beside the buckets. She waited to see what he would do. Flicking her chin up with his thumb, he pressed his length to her body. This early in the morning, and the man was rock hard. He covered her mouth in a searing kiss that would have made her spread her legs if her muscles weren't so contracted. But he wasn't asking for anything more. He stepped back. "Let's get this over with."

They rode in silence back to the town square. Twice, Tawni began to ask him why he was so angry, but each time the dark scowl at his brow put her off. She could only assume he regretted taking her the night before, that he was blaming her for what happened.

"You weren't cheating if that's what you're worried about," she blurted out.

If possible, his countenance darkened even more.

"If anything, it was me." A lump rose in her throat. She battled it down before speaking again. "I was the one who cheated on my boyfriend. I've never done that, and I don't want to make a habit of it. It happened. We can move on."

He grumbled. "Maybe you didn't notice, but he was there. He knew what was happening, and that he shared my body to enjoy yours." This time she heard the regret. "He consented."

"Yes, because he thought he was just dreaming. Your voodoo..." His nostrils flared, and she fell silent.

"I do not do voodoo. My family's rituals are passed from generation to generation. When I have a son..." He stopped.

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She saw grief in his eyes, and then his gaze slipped to her belly. "You had protection?"

She smiled. "Yes, don't worry. I get a shot for it." His question put visions in her head, wondering what their baby would look like if they had one together. *Same as mine and my boyfriend's would.* She sighed. This situation was complicated. Lakota had the right idea. It might be best to simply put this behind them and move on as if it didn't happen. Then again, he had kissed her this morning before they started out. "Where did you get this horse?" She patted the animal's neck.

"Not far."

Okay, conversation apparently over.

In the town square, Tawni searched the library for Levi, but he was nowhere in sight. Neither was his lover. This time, a few people milled around in spots or headed in and out by the only clear road, riding in wagons or on animals like they were. All of them were men. Tawni's heart went out to the devastated residents until a man who had drawn close enough to see she was a woman tried to grab her breast. Before he could open his mouth to alert others, Lakota did some weird move on him, and the man went down. No one looked up to see what happened.

She tugged the wide-brimmed hat Lakota had found for her lower on her head and followed him. At his insistence, she stood several feet away from anyone he questioned. No one was forthcoming about the camp. Frustration made her want to bite the head off of the next man who passed by.

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Seeing it, Lakota took her by the arm and pulled her into the library. He brushed a seat clear and invited her to sit. She dropped into it with her arms crossed. "Why am I being banished to this dusty place?"

He frowned. "Because I see the fire in your eyes. You're about to go on the attack, and there are too many men out there for me to fight them all off with just my knife." He had a point.

When he went back outside, she decided to explore. She had always liked to read, and it would be interesting to find out if the people from her world had become authors in this world or if they wrote the same types of books. James Patterson as a romance novelist would be funny as hell.

Strolling around the edges of the room, she ran her hands over the smooth marble columns at intervals. Someone had had a love for columns and onyx. The floor reflected the ruined room clearly. That was how she spotted the man up there, staring down at her. *Levi!*

On the pretense of not seeing him, she picked up a book and flipped it open while watching Levi from the corner of her eyes. He crouched, she guessed, to keep anyone on the street from spotting him. When he reached the far side of the hole in the ceiling, he disappeared. She dropped the book and ran toward the back wall on tiptoes.

A fist sized hole allowed her to peer outside. Rubble stretched nearly to the roof on one side of the space between the buildings, but on the other side, the ground was clear. A worn path in the grass led to what looked like an outhouse. Levi hurried to it and slipped inside.

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"Maybe he's just going to the bathroom," she whispered.
"Who is?"

She jumped at Lakota's voice. The warmth of his body so close behind turned her on. She fought the feeling. "Levi. He was on the roof, and he ran around that hole up there to somehow climb back behind the library. There's an outhouse back there. He went in."

Lakota slid a hand to her waist and didn't allow her to move. His body curved over hers so he could reach the hole to look. Tawni rested her forehead on the wall and closed her eyes.

"Hmm, worth checking out," he muttered. His voice was as thick as she imagined hers would be if she spoke right about now. She wouldn't. She didn't want him to know how affected she was by his touch. Her efforts were pointless. He nuzzled the side of her face until she turned her head, and their lips locked in a sweet kiss. The sound of their soft kisses echoed in the hollow room.

"To each his own," someone said behind them. "Could find a room or something though. Nobody respects the library anymore."

Tawni bit her lip to keep from laughing. She was pretty sure the man referred to Levi and his friend.

"Let's go," Lakota told her. "We'll wait until nightfall."

She protested. "Every hour we wait, my sister could be hurt more."

"And if you are caught?" he demanded. "Ephraim will reverse in some way that shot you took, and you will find yourself pregnant within the next few weeks. Somehow, I

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doubt in vitro fertilization would be the method to getting you there."

She pressed a hand over her mouth and nodded. He led her out of the library. This caution was killing her, but she had no choice. She just prayed her sister would be okay when she found her.

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Chapter Ten

Tawni had fought Lakota over him wanting to leave her in a safe place while he checked the outhouse, but only her threat of following him after he was gone made him bring her with him. They stashed the horses in the trees where hopefully no one would find them and returned to the library.

Darkness having fallen and no street lights outside, no one ventured out. Tawni was able to slip her hat off and loosen the hot shirt Lakota had found for her to wear.

Toward the left side of the library, almost to the back of the building were grooves in the stone. Lakota ran a hand over the smooth surface and glanced at her. "Not made during the war."

She wrinkled her nose. "Are you telling me that those men climbed up to the roof with women hanging on their backs? I don't believe it."

"Maybe not. Maybe there's another way into this area, but takes some special gadget to open. I can imagine Ephraim would not trust it to Levi."

"Hm, he might let him take the hard way in once the main entrance was sealed."

"Exactly."

She moved to begin the climb. "He sounds like an evil man, and I'm glad I never met his counterpart on my side."

Lakota touched her arm. "Be careful. I am right below you. I will catch you if you fall."

"And who will catch you?" She sucked in a deep breath. "Let's do this. The night isn't getting any younger, and we don't know if he has someone watching the area at night." She began to climb with him behind her.

Soon they were on the roof. Lakota held her back so that he could take the lead. They traversed the hole in the roof with ease, and the descent to the back of the building on the right side was uneventful. There were stairs on that side since no one from the street would see them.

Tawni waited in the shadows for Lakota to take a peek inside the outhouse. He reappeared shortly after clicking off his flashlight with a sigh of frustration. "It's not a toilet, but I can't find any mechanism to a secret passage either. Maybe it's a decoy."

"No, I won't believe that." She snatched the light from him. "Let me try."

"Tawni."

"Trust me, Lakota."

He stepped aside, gesturing for her to enter. Cobwebs filled the corners, and while the place wasn't used as a facility, it still stunk. The square of stone the wooden house stood on was damp with what she didn't want to know. Small round holes were at intervals in the dark wood of the walls.

Swallowing hard, Tawni poked her fingers into the holes, shoved at grooves and wiggled supportive joints. Nothing happened. The house was just a big wooden phone booth with no phone, she thought angrily.

Her eyes widened. She grinned and reached out to Lakota to jerk him into the tight space. With a struggle, they got the

door shut. As soon as the latch dropped into place, a shifting started. Something they couldn't see in the darkness moved across the ceiling, and then a strip of metal, like a car antennae dropped down between their faces.

"Pass?"

Lakota gasped, but he said nothing.

"Ain't got all night," the voice grumbled. "Password or get lost."

With the flashlight off, she couldn't see Lakota's face, but Tawni had an idea. If this was some system Ephraim had set up, just maybe she could figure out the password. She cleared her throat and hoped for a deep voice. "Uh yeah, uh Tawni."

Lakota's anger at her password was almost tangible. At first nothing happened, and then the entire building shifted, or felt like it did. The back wall clicked. Something behind it opened, and then the wall slid down into the ground.

"Damn!" She slapped a hand over her mouth. Lakota held her back and moved out into a dimly lit passage. He tried to indicate she should stay back, but she ignored the command. She had been the one to figure it out, and she was going forward, whether he liked it or not.

With a low grumble, he took her hand, lacing his fingers with hers. Pleasure suffused her body. For a moment, she couldn't think straight. Once all this was over, she would return to her own world, and leave him behind. That thought hurt. Too much to bear right then, she pushed the thought away and moved forward.

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At the end of the short hall, they came to a turn. Lakota stopped. "I'm guessing this is the area behind the library. To the outside, it looks like it's all rubble. No one ever accused Ephraim of not being clever. I only wonder at what point he had it all built."

"Maybe it was an alternate location for his work all along, and after the war, he arranged for it to look ruined like everything else."

He nodded. "You're probably right. Either way, he should have died the time I shot him. The world would be a lot better off without him." The determined look in his eyes told her he intended to rectify this as soon as he laid eyes on him."

Tawni inched closer to his side glancing around at nothing but more hallways, dim, but with electricity running in them. Ephraim had robbed the people outside of energy to light his hell hole of a camp.

"Lakota, what happened? Why weren't you charged with attempted murder?"

He hesitated. "This really isn't the time to ask about that."

"Please tell me."

She saw grief in his eyes. "My brother, the one I told you about who lived with my grandfather. He gave his life for mine. He confessed to the crime, and since Ephraim was too long ill from his injuries, by the time he recovered, my brother had already been put to death. I would have told the authorities that it was me and not my brother, but I was also weak from my ordeal. My grandfather took Tawni and I away. He kept me drugged for a long time until my brother was

gone. When I woke, he pressed onto me my responsibility to take care of her and not seek to die with my brother."

Tears streamed down Tawni's face. "Why? Why would they do that?"

He looked at her like she was nuts for wondering why a family would give up so much for their loved ones. She admitted her mother had only hurt her, not physically, but emotionally. Her mother deliberately showered love and attention on Lisa, causing her to resent both women for years. But she was here. That showed she loved Lisa, didn't it?"

"I had suffered only loss in my life with Tawni," he explained. "Remember the five years of abuse, locked away from the woman I loved. My brother was twenty years older. He had spent years with his wife, loving her, only to lose her to childbirth after they had waited so long. He had always wanted to follow her to the land of rest, but ending his life at his own hand was forbidden. This way, to save me, he could join her. Grandfather went along with it to give me the future he saw for me in the fire."

Her heart broke for him. His family sacrificed so much only to have Lakota's wife die soon after from Ephraim's horrible plague. The poor man should have lost his mind. She touched his arm. "I'm so sorry, Lakota."

"Well, look what the cat dragged in." At the cruel laugh and the distinct cocking of a gun, Lakota and Tawni turned around to find Ephraim at the end of the passage. "Lakota, I never thought you would bring my precious wife to my doorstep. I have to thank you."

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Tawni frowned. "I'm not your wife, jackass. Your ex-wife is dead. Where the hell is my sister?"

Both men's eyes widened at Tawni's language. She could have laughed if the situation wasn't so serious.

Ephraim wiggled the gun. "Come here, Tawni."

"Kiss my ass."

He pulled the trigger. Lakota cried out in pain and dropped to his knees. Tawni screamed, threw herself in front of Lakota and put her arms around him. "No, please!"

"Yes, you're singing a different tune now, aren't you?" Ephraim spat. "Obey me. Come here!"

She looked into Lakota's eyes. He held his left arm. The bullet had only grazed him there. Fear gripped her that if she went to Ephraim, he would kill Lakota. She clung to him, wishing on one hand that she had listened and not come with him. On the other, she would not have known what happened to him. Maybe they would die together here. Ephraim had several men around him. They should have had a plan or not have been distracted talking. This was her fault.

"Lakota," she whispered in his ear. "I love you."

He said nothing, but he kissed her lips.

Ephraim growled behind them. "Bring her to me now!" he shouted.

Someone yanked her away from her lover to drag her over to Ephraim. He snaked a hand around her waist and tried to kiss her. She turned her head. "If you kill him, I will murder you in your sleep," she promised. At her words, he looked terrified.

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"Take him and put him in one of the cell rooms. I am going with my wife to my room. We are not to be disturbed. I've waited a long time to enjoy her body again, and I will do it at my leisure." He tossed a cold look toward Lakota as he was marched by them.

Tawni tried to break free, but Ephraim, as scrawny as he was, had a strength she couldn't combat. His long fingers dug into her hip, squeezing her too tight. The memory popped into her head of that time in his room when he forced his wife. He would do the same to her in real life if she didn't think of a way out of this mess. Now she had two people she loved depending on her to get them out.

* * * *

Ephraim's room was so nicely decorated one would have thought they weren't sealed inside some secret lab or camp. The decor was similar to what his room had looked like in his house in her memory, or the other Tawni's memory.

Silk sheets graced a huge bed. A vanity sat against one wall with a window to the left complete with a fake scene of a beautiful unmarred world beyond it. He led her inside and pointed out the negligee thrown over the side of the bed. Had he placed it there every day in preparation for her, or had he known they were coming? To think he had been tracking them, just waiting for the chance to get her made her sick to her stomach.

"Put this on, darling." He held up the see through garment with a lecherous smile on his face. "I can't wait to get my

hands on your soft brown skin. I've dreamed of it. Mm, sucking those deep chocolate nipples again."

She pressed her fingers to her mouth and stomach. If he laid one hand on her, she would hurl. She was sure of it. "I thought I told your crazy ass before to go to hell, Ephraim. I'm not your wife. I am the Tawni from the other world. Your experiment that killed off all your women killed off your Tawni too."

He shook his head. "No. No, I don't believe that."

"Believe it. You murdered your ex-wife."

"She was never his wife!" he screamed. "Tawni didn't divorce me. She wouldn't!"

"Why? Because you were such a great husband? Because she loved you? Get a grip. I saw it in her memories. You took pleasure in forcing yourself on her. You liked hurting her and making her cry. I bet she would have run off with a bum from the street to get away from a man like you."

His stride closed the gap between them in a second, and he slapped her hard across the face. She threw her arms up to shield herself from another blow, but he pulled back. "I'm sorry. I don't want to hurt you, Tawni. I love you."

You don't know what love is!

"Lay with me willingly," he whispered. "Touch me like you enjoy it, like you've missed me as much as I've missed you. And I promise I will let him go."

She stared in shock at him.

"You said something about a sister back there in the passage." He stroked her face. She fought not to pull away. "Tell me who she is. I will let her go along with Lakota, if you

promise to stay with me as my wife. We'll take our vows and live here." He indicated the room around them that was already making her feel claustrophobic.

She hesitated. "Can I see her? My sister? If you let me speak with them both, I will think about your offer."

"I'll let you see your sister."

She let her shoulders slump. "Agreed."

"Her name?"

"Lisa Johnson." She twisted her fingers together when he let her go and moved to a phone on the side table. Wracking her brain, she fought to come up with a plan of escape, but couldn't think of a thing. She had no idea how big this place was or how many men worked here with Ephraim. She had no weapons and didn't know where they were keeping Lakota. Worse of all, she didn't know Ephraim well enough to know if he would keep his word.

He hung up the phone after speaking for a few minutes. "It's arranged. I will take you to her after you and I have dinner together." His gaze moved down over her body, the lust in the depths of his eyes plain.

What choice did she have? With a sigh and blinking away tears, she nodded. "Okay, fine. Lead the way."

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Chapter Eleven

Ephraim, the bastard, was holding all the women he had snatched in a sort of dormitory, a section of the building with one entrance—a gated and guarded entrance. As he led Tawni to the door, she wondered for the millionth time, how she would ever get her sister or anyone else out of there. Two locks kept the door secure, used to get in and to get out. There was no knob on the inside to just turn and exit.

Besides that, an armed guard sat at a desk outside the door. From the look of lust he turned on her, she'd be a fool to venture far from Ephraim's side to tempt him.

"Open the door," Ephraim commanded. "And get your filthy eyes off my wife."

She rolled her eyes. Being sure he believed her when she said she was from the other side, it annoyed her all the more that he was still claiming she was his wife. And he had shown no remorse at all for causing so many deaths. Lakota had been right. This man deserved to be killed. She wished she had the guts to run the knife she had hidden on her into his black heart. He had been a fool not to search her.

They passed through the door to find another long hallway with doors all along the way. She peeked in as they passed to see neat rooms with full sized beds and a few other furnishings. All lights were off, and the hallway light was dim enough not to disturb the sleeping women. Relief flooded her mind when she didn't see any men.

Ephraim guessed her thoughts. "Mating is always under strict supervision, and only men who have earned the privilege by way of physical health and other assets are allowed to do it."

She glared at him. "So crazy isn't a plus."

He laughed and lifted a hand to stroke her cheek. She ducked it. The scowl that lowered his eyebrows promised retribution for that move, making her shiver in fear. "Lisa is in the last room. I sent someone ahead to wake her."

When she entered the room, tears seemed to spring from her eyes. Lisa ran to her and wrapped her arms around her in a bear hug. "Tawni. I'm so sorry to find you here," she sobbed.

"I'm glad I finally found you!" Tawni countered.

They sniffled, kissing and hugging before dropping to the love seat in the corner of the room. Tawni glanced up to find Ephraim staring at her.

"Can't we get some privacy? After all, where the hell will I go?" she snapped.

He stared a little longer and then slammed the door shut. She listened for the lock, but it didn't come, and she turned back to Lisa.

"Somehow, I have to get you out of here. Did they hurt you? Are you okay?" As she fired off the questions, she examined her sister's body. Her nightgown was plain, not sexy. Tawni found herself thankful for at least that.

Lisa shook her head. "Now that you're here, Tawni, there's no getting out." She looked hopeful. "Unless you brought an army?"

"No, I only brought Lakota, and he's already been captured."

She frowned. "You brought a model, Tawni. Really, what did you think he could do?"

"Not..." She let it go. No sense explaining that he wasn't the same man. "You're okay, Lisa? They didn't beat you?"

Her sister's lips compressed. Tawni's stomach did a somersault, and she tried not to imagine the worse. Her sister's unhappy expression transformed to shame. "I have been assigned to two men. In the short time I've been here, I've been with them three times. For all I know, I could be pregnant."

Neither of them said a word for a long time. Tawni wrapped her sister in a tight embrace and rocked her with their heads together. She had to face the fact that she was in for the same experience if she didn't think of something.

She kissed Lisa's forehead. "I don't know how, but I'm getting you out of here." She paused and swallowed hard. "Even if I have to share his bed long enough to stab him in the back."

Too soon Ephraim returned. He never said a word, just came up to her, forced her to stand and searched her from head to toe. When he found the knife, she had to wonder if the room had been bugged. He cast a dark look on her holding up Lakota's grandfather's weapon before tucking it into his pocket.

"Let's go. I've been lenient enough. We'll have something to eat in the dining room, and then you will spread your legs for me."

Lisa jumped to her feet screaming, "No! Let her go, you asshole! Let her go!" She kicked and beat Ephraim with her fists. Twice he was about to hit her away, but he stopped. Tawni's stomach turned. She knew what that meant. He was being careful, because he thought Lisa might be pregnant. It was early still to know, but maybe he had some early detection method.

Another man ran into the room and grabbed Lisa around the waist to haul her over to the bed. Tawni stared in horror when he shoved her down and pressed a button she hadn't noticed before. Two braces came out from under the bed and clicked together over Lisa's body. In an instant, she had been strapped down.

Ephraim dragged Tawni toward the door. "That's what you get for your actions," he spat at Lisa. If you don't calm down, you will be fed like a baby as you are for the next few days. You will wear a diaper and be given sponge baths. Do I make myself clear?"

Lisa nodded, silent. Tears flowed down the sides of her face. Tawni bit her lip and stared at the bare wall to keep from crying. She wouldn't give Ephraim the satisfaction any longer. If he thought he would enjoy her body, he would have another thought coming. He needed Lisa. He might humiliate her, but he wouldn't harm her as long as she was pregnant. She couldn't face thoughts of Lakota right now. She had to plan.

* * * *

She sat spooning watery soup into her mouth. The crap was tepid at best with little taste. Ephraim had said this was the first course.

"The dress looks beautiful on you, my love," he called down the long table. They looked like idiots at opposite ends in a room set up to feed twenty to thirty people. "I'm proud to see you kept your figure and that I remembered your size."

Not looking up from her bowl, she muttered. "Don't play games, Ephraim. You know damn well, I'm not your wife. I told you she's dead. I'm from the other side, and trust me, I would never have married you given the free will. Your dick's not big enough."

If she wanted to shock him, and she did, that did it. He choked and coughed so hard he turned red. She struggled not to laugh. Insulting Ephraim was fun.

"Let me ask you," she began, "in what world would you ever think you could compare with Lakota Crow? He's sexy as hell, and making love with him is more than any woman could ask for. He's had me in so many positions, making me scream his name so many times, I lost count."

Common sense should have told her when she had taken it too far. Ephraim's chair smashed against the wall. He sent his bowl after it and stormed around the table. Tawni scooted from her own place to bolt toward the door. His long strides caught him up, and he grabbed her by the nape, his fingers digging into her flesh. Black spots danced before her eyes.

"Get off of me," she screamed. She flailed about making no connection with her swinging fists. He forced her out into the hall, letting her go only long enough to shove so hard she

fell. She scrambled along the floor, but he hauled her to her feet again. Shouting and fighting, they made slow progress down the passage.

Men ran out from rooms along the way to watch. Tawni bit back tears. She stomped a heel into Ephraim's foot. He howled. That's what he got for forcing her to slip on those stupid stilettos. She never wore heels because of weak ankles.

"You'll pay for that," he yelled. She ran. Someone tripped her down. When she glanced over her shoulder, Ephraim had pulled the knife he took from her from his pocket and plunged it into the man's chest.

She vomited on the floor. He was obsessed. He could hurt her all he wanted, but let another man touch her ... Horror knocked her to her knees when she had struggled up again. Ephraim would not blink twice about killing Lakota.

"No!" she pleaded, as if he could read her mind.

Ephraim hauled her up bodily and took her to the bathroom he had escorted her to earlier. He stood over her like a sentinel while she washed. She shook from head to toe, all fight having left her after what she had witnessed. Daring a glance in the mirror in front of her, she met his gaze.

"You see what you made me do?" he asked, blaming her for his insanity. "That man would be alive if you hadn't provoked me ... or him."

"Killing him was all you," she croaked. "Not my fault."

He stepped up behind her, pressed his body close to hers and rested his chin on her shoulder. When his hand slid

between her legs and squeezed, she cried out. "Stay with me, Tawni," he begged. "Don't fight me. Just stay."

"Why?" she cried. "Why are you so obsessed? I'm no one special. Back before this disaster, you had money and good looks. You could have had any woman you wanted. Half those around would come running at the snap of your fingers. Why me ... *her*?"

His nostrils flared, and he panted for a while before speaking. "Because she didn't want me. It's the age old conflict," he spat. "The second she laid eyes on Lakota, she wanted him, and as sweet and sexy as she was, he wanted her too. But I saw her first. She had agreed to go out with me! She cancelled after he came to town, the lowlife half breed!"

She frowned. "He's not a half breed."

His lips turned white, he pinched them together so tightly. "No matter. Lakota will not have Tawni twice! I may have lost her, but I will keep you. And killing him is the best way I know to make sure nothing goes wrong this time."

"Ephraim." She let her anguish fill her eyes as she watched him in the mirror. He was not without feeling for her. She saw it in his expression, but he closed it away, shutting his eyes at the same time.

He guided her back into the room, and she tried to ignore him while she slipped into a clean dress. He had deliberately not given her any underwear, and she turned away from his lust-filled eyes, hating him.

Closing the last button on her dress, she glanced down to slip her feet in flat baby doll shoes Ephraim had provided. She

rolled her eyes. Whoever had come up with the style for women hadn't been thinking of her.

He held out a hand. "Come on. Let's go. We'll get this thing over with. The sooner, the better. Then we can get on with our lives."

She yawned. "Do you have any idea what time it is?"

Flipping back his shirt to examine his watch, he frowned. "I usually work through the night. I had no idea. Don't worry. I will take you to bed soon."

Still too numb and terrified to react, she followed him to the hall. He hooked a hand around her elbow and led her to a stairwell. Four flights down and they came to another door. Once through it, she heard unmistakable calls of animals. What else was he up to down here? Apparently, Ephraim had not learned his lesson when his experiments caused so many deaths. She knew it was selfish, but at least he was in this world and not over in hers. The fearful part was, at any time, he could decide to move his camp over there where the pickings were much better.

"Ephraim, how did you learn about the shop, and the way it opens to my world?" she asked him.

He grinned like a schoolboy, the evil killer persona slipping away for the moment. "I didn't discover it. That honor goes to a brilliant scientist I once knew. He explored theories on alternate universes or alternative histories. I don't pretend to know all that he understood to be true. But according to his journals, there are holes—no, doorways—all around our world which lead to other worlds."

She stared. "You're telling me there's more than just mine and yours?"

"Walter Proctor seemed to think so. I have his journals."

The name rung a bell. "I think I've heard of him. On my side." She stopped and closed her eyes trying to recall. "A flyer. I saw a flyer in my sister's house the day..." She swallowed. "The day she turned up missing. He was going to be speaking at a local university in my city."

Ephraim's eyes glittered. "Is that so?" He rubbed his chin. "I have the journal from my Dr. Proctor, but perhaps the one on your side knows more. There may be no limit to the number of worlds I can explore."

With his words, she suddenly had a bad feeling. Ephraim wasn't just trying to repopulate his own world. He had other plans. A man like him wouldn't limit himself. This was just his base of operations.

"Ephraim, what are you planning to do? I mean, what are you doing down here? I hear all the animals and things. What are you doing?"

"Building my empire." He winked. "Building *our* empire. You will stand by my side. Nothing evil will touch you."

"Does that include you?" She could have smacked herself for her smart mouth. "I'm sorry, I didn't mean to say..."

"No matter, my love. Come." He took her arm. "You just need your spirit calmed, to learn your place. In no time at all, you will be as you were before—docile, sweet."

She raised her hand. "Wasn't me, remember?"

He went on as if she hadn't spoken. "Even if I have to punish you, I'll do what's necessary. It's the best way to drive

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out the influence of that Native American scum you were stupid enough to let touch you. And after I've enjoyed you alone"—He rubbed a hand over her stomach—"I'll give you my baby. I want a son, to follow in my footsteps."

Smothering a cringe, she shuffled along beside him until they came to a bolted door. He pulled out a huge ring of keys from his pocket and sorted through them. She noted that each was labeled as to which locks they went to. Filing that information away, she waited in silence.

Inside the room beyond was a cell similar to the Old West jail cells in movies. A narrow cot was the only furniture inside it other than a dirty bucket she guessed was for going to the bathroom. Her heart leaped into her throat when she saw Lakota laying flat on his back, stiff with eyes wide open.

"Lakota!" She screamed and ran to the bars. "You son of a bitch, you already killed him. Lakota! No, please!" Anguish ripped her apart. She slid down to the floor, her head spinning. She laid her forehead against the cold cement in the sparse room, waiting for death to take her too.

What an arrogant fool she had been to think she could help anyone. Now Lakota was dead. Ephraim opened the cage with a disbelieving look on his face. Tawni shoved past him to get to her lover. His body was still warm, but too cool. He wasn't breathing. She wept.

"I hate you. I hate you, Ephraim," she cried. "I loved him so much. Why did you have to do this? Why couldn't you just leave us alone?" She buried her face against his neck, kissed him and whispered words of love. "I'll avenge you, baby. I'll kill this asshole if it's the last thing I do. I promise you."

Ephraim grumbled. "Well this takes the wind out of my sails. I did not kill him. He must have committed suicide in fear of me."

"He wouldn't do that!" She pointed a finger at him, barely in control of herself. "Just shut up! I don't want to hear you!" Her mind snapped. She flew at him scratching and biting. Blood poured from his lip when she broke the skin, the same for his earlobe.

"Tawni, stop it!" he yelled.

"I hate you! I hate you!" Her knee connected with his groin. Together they crumbled to the floor. Ephraim yelled for help, and footsteps sounded in the hall. But Tawni never stopped. She tore at his skin, dug her nails in his face while tears clouded her eyes and snot ran down her nose. "Die!"

A sharp prick in her arm distracted her for only a second, but the medicine someone had filled the needle with worked fast. Her world spun away, and her eyes closed. She sniffled lethargic. Between heavy-lidded blinks, she tried to focus on Ephraim's horrified expression. The effort became too much, and she black out.

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Chapter Twelve

The only positive in Tawni's life following Lakota's death was that she was so closed off from everything around her and so violent if anyone touched her, that Ephraim stayed away. She had been stuck in his camp for two weeks, and he had not bothered to visit her bed. This was a good thing, because her mind was still close to the edge of insanity that she was sure she would bite his dick off if he came near. Her grief was so deep, he had trouble figuring out what his next move should be. Punishing her, beating her or even threats would not work. She didn't respond to him or anyone else.

A woman she didn't know had been assigned to help her dress, to lead her around the facility, to be sure she ate to keep her strength up. When Deena arrived at her room early one morning, Tawni sat on the side of her bed hugging herself. The pain of losing Lakota still hurt too much to function normally. What made it worse was that she had no right to love him to that extent. Lakota from her world was her boyfriend, and he must be worried having heard nothing from her. She did love him still, but the feelings inside jumbled all together. The intensity confused her.

"Tawni," Deena said. "Come on. Let's get your clothes on." She held up a simple dress. After figuring out a way to slip her nightgown off without touching her skin, Deena helped Tawni into her dress.

Dresses were all she had in the closet. Still no underwear, and definitely no pants. Two rows of baby doll shows lined the

bottom of the closet. Deena chose a matching pair and slipped them on her feet. Together they went to the dining room.

Tawni sat in a chair staring down at the scratched wooden surface. Deena sat a few chairs away and read a book. When a plate of eggs and bacon were put in front of her, Tawni ate. She sensed the man who had served her hadn't moved away. In fact, he appeared to have moved closer.

"You smell so good, miss," he whispered. "I will help you, if you let me ... you know."

Tawni shoveled another heap of eggs into her mouth.

"It's been so long," the man went on. "Years since I touched a woman. I feel like I've been in prison. I can't get assigned to one of the ones on the first floor, because of my genetic thing. I have a history of leukemia in my family. So I don't get to touch a sweet soft body just because of that. It's not fair. Please. I'll let you go, lead you out of here, right after you let me fuck you."

His hand inched out toward her arm. Not far away, Deena turned a page in her book. Without looking up, she said, "Don't be a fool."

The tip of his finger barely made the connection with her skin. Tawni let out a war cry and leaped at him, her fork held as a weapon. The man went down, Tawni on top of him. She jammed the prongs into his arm, and he yelled. Deena screamed for help, standing a good half dozen feet back. Tawni yanked out the fork and lifted her hand to come down again, this time in his eye.

Someone hauled her up and pried the fork from her fingers. The dreaded needle entered her arm and soon she went limp in whoever's arms she was in. Through a haze, she saw Ephraim enter the dining room.

He frowned. "What happened?"

Deena spoke up. "That idiot thought he should proposition Tawni. She'd have sex with him in exchange for him getting her out of here. He then made the mistake of touching her."

Ephraim grumbled. "How can I get any work done with these interruptions?" He bent down to Tawni and reached out to take her chin but thought better of it. "Tawni, please come back. I can help you heal from your hurt. Come back to me."

"Lakota," she murmured.

Defeat crossed his face, and he ran a hand over his short beard. "Take her to her room. Get her sister. I want them to have a visit together now!"

Tawni didn't have the energy to fight, but this time, she didn't pass out as before. Ephraim had ordered that she be given only enough medicine to calm her. She sat propped in a chair by her makeshift window when Lisa rushed in.

Her sister crossed the room in a few strides and gathered Tawni in her arms, kissing her cheeks and her eyes. "Tawni, baby, are you okay? I heard," she whispered in her ear. "From one of my lovers. He's not so bad, I guess. He said they had driven you out of your mind." Lisa's tears wet Tawni's face. A million thoughts ran through Tawni's mind to share with her sister, but she couldn't get past the wall of hurt to speak, even for Lisa.

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Easing in the narrow space at Tawni's side, Lisa gathered her close and rocked her. She sang a lullaby Tawni had never heard. "I know you're hurting," she murmured. "And it feels like you'll never get past it. But I believe that good can be found in everything, in every place."

Tawni didn't believe the words her sister spoke, but the fact that she said them made her think in the short time of her captivity, her little sister had grown up. She fought to find words. "He killed Lakota," she managed to get out. "I can't ... I can't live without him."

"Oh baby." Lisa tugged her closer. She kissed Tawni's temple and stood pulling her with her to the bed. "Maybe if you lay down a little while..."

"I just got up." Tawni sat down on the bed, and at her sister's guidance laid down. She couldn't fight anymore. She didn't have the mental clarity or the physical strength. As long as Ephraim let Lisa stay, she wouldn't be alone. Maybe she could make it.

She had always thought she was the stronger of the two of them. Lisa had been coddled by their mother, while Tawni had to push through petty meanness. She had used it to be independent, to leave home early and make her way in the world. One lousy job after another because she hadn't finished school had been the norm until she buckled down and went back to school. Then came Lakota.

Her body tensed at his counterpart's memory. She had brought him into this. He had suffered tragedy and cruelty worse than she had, and yet he had never grown weak. He'd survived. A few days in her presence and he was dead. She

began to cry. Lisa curled against her, wrapping her arms around her.

Again, she sang the lullaby while she stroked Tawni's hair.

"What is that song, Lisa?" she whispered.

"It's the song I used to sing to you. Don't you remember?"

Tawni frowned, struggling to remember. Now that she thought of it, the tune did seem to haunt her, in the far reaches of her mind, but she couldn't recall Lisa singing it.

"*You* sang to *me*? I'm five years older."

"Yes, when..." Lisa hesitated. She reached to the table at the side of the bed, tugged out tissue from the box and handed some to Tawni. "When I was five and you were ten, I loved this one video where the mother used to sing that lullaby to her baby. I would sing it to my dolls when I was alone. That year, on your birthday, our neighbor—I forgot her name now—she wanted to take you to the park with her little girl to fly kites. Ma wouldn't let you go. And you ran up to your room and cried. I snuck in there and sang my lullaby to you. It helped to calm you down, and you stopped crying."

Tawni sighed, rubbing her nose. "I don't remember that. You and I never got along. We always fought."

"Not as much before you left home," Lisa told her.

"I'm sorry, Lisa." Tawni turned over in the bed to face her sister. Lisa's eyes were red. "There have been times when I was almost as mean to you as our mother was to me, because you had a different father, so she didn't hate you. Yet, here you are helping me to move past some of this pain." Fresh tears spilled. She sniffed up hard. "I wanted to save you."

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They interlaced their hands. This Tawni remembered. Lisa did come into her room and laid on her bed to try comforting her. When Tawni felt like her sister got all their mother's love, and all the good things in life while she got nothing, as an immature teen, she had yelled at her, pinched her, chased her. But when Tawni cried, Lisa was there every time.

"I want you to close your eyes, baby," Lisa told her while stroking her hair. "Think of a peaceful place where nothing hurts you, and there's only joy."

Tawni tried not to smile as she did as her sister told her. She did feel a little bit groggy from the drugs in her system. She yawned once before Lisa's soothing voice and the softness of the bed lulled her into that sweet place.

* * * *

"Tawni, my wife."

She gasped and turned toward the voice in the darkness. Her heart seemed to reach out to him wherever he was.

"Lakota? Where are you? I'm sorry I got you in this. It's my fault that you're gone. Please forgive me. I want you to know how much I love you."

There he was. She saw him now, his handsome face, strong jaw just visible in the firelight. She ran to him and wrapped her arms around him before offering her mouth for a kiss. He held her tight, making soothing sounds. When his lips touched hers, an explosion of pleasure raged through her body. She cried and moaned, greedily taking all he offered.

After some time, he put her back from him a little to stare down at her face. "And I love you. Being separated from you

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is torment. In this imaginary place"—he glanced around at the trees and the fire, a duplicate of the place they had first met here in the ravaged world—"I waited for you every night. But you didn't come."

She broke down again, and he crushed her to his chest letting her cry it out. Not since she had left her mother's house had she cried so much. It was some time before she was able to speak again. "This is different. This dream. Not like before when you were calling me to you. We were both alive then. I guess my mind is dealing with this the best way it can. Before I was so unsettled that Ephraim commanded that I be drugged at night to help me sleep. I have to give him that at least. He hasn't touched me since I pretty much lost it."

Lakota led her closer to the fire. He dropped down and pulled her onto his lap, his arms encircling her. "Listen to me carefully, my love," he began.

But she didn't want to talk. She had missed him. Her mind had been broken. Too soon, she might wake up, this still being early morning. For just a little while, she needed to be lost in Lakota lovemaking. She needed it as dearly as oxygen.

Twisting around in his arms to face him, she ran a hand down over his chest to his shaft and squeezed. He groaned. She pulled at the button on his jeans and laughed. "Jeans, Lakota?"

He shrugged but did lean back enough to get them open. With hunger threatening to take control of her body, she reached inside. Even as her fingers closed around his tool, he thickened, and she licked her lips.

"I want to suck you," she told him.

"My love..." he began.

"Please, let me taste you, Lakota. I need you."

He stroked her cheek and kissed her before he put her off his lap to slip out of his clothes. She quickly followed suit.

"Far be it for me to ever deny you anything again," he told her. "Besides, your mouth is amazing. I had never felt such a sensation before. The warmth of your mouth, the teasing of your tongue down there." He seemed about to come just talking about it.

On her knees in front of him, she took his shaft in her hands and ran her palm over the quivering surface. With the tip of her tongue, she circled the head. He jumped. "There is so much more I can show you, Lakota, if you will get that good girl image out of your head." She smiled. "Maybe I will stay here in this dream with you, and then I won't have to face Ephraim."

His expression turned sad. "Don't worry, baby. Everything will work out fine."

"Nothing else and no one exists but you and I," she told him before guiding his rod deep into her mouth. Pressing down with the roof of her mouth on him brought a howl of ecstasy from her lover. She sucked hard while massaging his balls. When he was caught up in her rhythm of sliding him deep into her warm mouth and out again, she eased a hand across his muscled thigh around to his hip and finally to his ass.

Pushing the tip of her tongue into the tiny hole at the top of his shaft, she parted his ass cheeks and fingered his entrance. He gasped. "Tawni!"

His shock didn't stop her. She dipped a finger down between her legs quickly to coat them with her already flowing cream and then found her way back to his entrance. He took hold of her wrist to stop her, but she shook him off.

With his staff down her throat, she held his ass cheeks apart and plunged a finger into his rear. He howled, shouting her name. "What are you doing to me, Tawni? I can't hold it. I'm going to come!" She shoved harder, deeper. Her rhythm in sucking him increased to match her finger strokes.

Come, baby!

He protested, tugged at her hair with no real strength. He denied it was good to him, but she kept sucking, kept gliding her slick fingers in and out his tight ass. She longed for her toys back home, one in particular, long and slender she had used many times on her Lakota. As she thought of it, she began to wonder if that's what made her boyfriend so devoted. A laugh bubbled inside.

Soon Lakota's balls tightened and rose. He begged her to draw back so he wouldn't hurt her, but she held on, keeping a firm grip. She loved his flavor, loved to drink from him. Pulling him forward, she sucked harder. With a cry, his control shattered. He pumped his hot seed into her mouth, and she greedily drank it all before sucking every stray drop.

Releasing him, she stared up into his eyes. Never had a man looked so embarrassed to be so satisfied. He ran a hand through his short hair. "I don't know what to say, Tawni."

She shrugged, leaned back and spread her legs suggestively. "Say you will give me the same pleasure." How happy she was here in this secure place, safe from hurt. She fully vowed to make love with Lakota again and again. Here they could last forever. Her confirmation of that thought came in his erection extending from his body in readiness for round two.

He ran his hand along it watching her. "This can wait. It's had its turn." He pointed to her dripping box while licking his lips. "I will live between your sweet thighs, my heart."

Following his sexy words, he dropped down to his knees in the grass and grasped her ankles. A shiver ran over her body in the warm night air. A picture of those full lips of his curved over her moist intimate area had her at the brink of an orgasm. When he made the connection, licking and eating the cream that had already spilled from her, she couldn't help herself. She came right away.

"I'm sorry, Lakota," she whispered when the waves passed.

"Don't be sorry, Tawni. I'm just getting started."

In imitation of what she had done, he coated his fingers in her come and traced a path to her ass opening. He leaned up to watch her while he entered. She squirmed. Her Lakota had pierced her there many times before, so she was used to it, but each time sent her over the top. She loved to be full of her lover in all ways.

"Deeper, Lakota. Push deeper." She rocked her hips to guide him in. When she would have taken his hand, he brushed her away. Closing her legs and turning her to her

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side, he slid two more fingers inside her so that there were three. She cried out. His rhythm kicked up a notch. Her heart pounded. She wanted to keep rocking to his strokes, but all strength left her.

Lakota placed a hand on her hip and braced himself on his heels. He pushed his fingers inside her up to his knuckles and pulled out again. He slapped at her ass cheek and pounded into her hole. Her eyes widened in shock, but closed soon after when her orgasm was imminent. Never would she have imagined that Lakota would be so rough or to spank her. She liked it and wanted more.

"Again, baby. Again!" she cried.

He banged harder, slapped her ass and rubbed it to soothe the sting. Her creamed flowed anew. Tears splashed down her cheeks as she whimpered through her climax. "Yes! So good. It's so good, Lakota."

"I know, baby," he whispered. He eased his fingers free and bent down to kiss her hip. She lay on her side gasping for breath as the orgasm passed, leaving only rippling aftershocks. "My love?"

"Yes?" Her voice was almost inaudible.

"Shall I eat your sweetness, suck your button until you come again?"

"Yes, please," she begged.

He rolled her to her back and planted a kiss to her belly. "Okay, and then you will tell me about the entrance from your world to mine."

She barely registered his words as his mouth connected with her nubbin.

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Chapter Thirteen

Tawni slept fitfully and remembered someone coming in to give her another shot after a few hours. By the time she woke to reality, the day was far gone, and Lisa had been returned to her room. While she felt stronger, in her right mind, she pretended to be lost still to keep Ephraim from acting out on the lust she saw his eyes. Not that he hadn't tested her.

"I'm tired of this, Tawni," he declared a few days later. "The thirty days will be up soon, and I have so much I want to take care of on the other side, but I wanted to have you in a position to go with me."

She knew what that meant. He had wanted to have her spirit broken by now, broken *his* way where she would obey everything he said and let him put his filthy hands on her body whenever he wanted. Staring at the floor with her fingers locked together and her shoulders raised in defense, she said nothing. Her muscles ached from holding the position as long as she was in his presence. But she had behaved just that way, she remembered, when the pain threatened to snuff out her sanity. Lisa and dreaming of Lakota had helped her find the way back.

"I wanted us to spend every moment together," he continued. "I wanted to show you my creations on that floor where—" He dared not remind her of finding Lakota's body. She whimpered, closing her eyes. Heat from his hand above her head made her duck. He drew back quickly. "I'm sorry. I

didn't mean. Tawni, you must know I didn't do it. I swear to you I didn't."

Whether he did it, or one of his men, she didn't give a damn. Ephraim was responsible. His hideous nature was the cause of so many people's pain, not just hers. Now that she was stronger, she would find a way to punish him if it was the last thing she did. Unfortunately, after that incident in the dining room, she hadn't been given anything but plastic utensils to eat with. All of the men were terrified of her. She almost laughed at the thought.

Ephraim dropped his hand to his side. "Okay, well we'll pick up when I get back. I will bring someone who can help you, a psychiatrist."

You mean abduct him.

"We'll be good together again. You'll see." He gave an order for her to be watched. The three men present played rock, paper, scissors to see which would do it. The loser grunted and inched closer to her as Ephraim left the room, the two others hot on his heels.

* * * *

The next few days passed too slowly. No matter how hard Tawni tried to stay asleep to dream of Lakota, Deena kept waking her to get her ready for breakfast. No amount of screaming, throwing tantrums, crying or breaking things changed the fact. Ephraim had given the order to force her to live as normally as possible to help her on the road to recovery, and Deena followed orders.

When she wasn't wrapped up in her own world, Tawni noticed the curve to Deena's belly. "You're pregnant!" She covered her mouth, knowing if she was so crazy, she wouldn't have commented on such a thing.

Deena grinned. "So you're not so off after all, huh?"

Tawni sighed. "I was. My sister and ... something else helped me to find my way back." She sat still while Deena brushed her hair and began to braid it. She desperately needed a visit to a salon. "I'm surprised they would risk you in with me when you're carrying a child, repopulation so important."

The woman shrugged. "Well, you seemed only resentful to the men, violent toward them. As long as I didn't touch you, you were okay with me helping you."

"I'm glad I didn't accidentally hurt you," she confessed. "Deena, how can you seem so content? You're a prisoner, a baby machine. And if your situation is like my sister's, you have more than one man who pleasures himself with your body whether you like it or not."

The woman agreed. "You're right. It seems dark. But you see, I just happened to have worked as a prostitute for a few years."

"What?" Tawni turned to stare at her. "For real?"

Deena placed her hands on Tawni's shoulders and forced her back around so she could finish her hair. "Yeah, it was a way to make ends meet. I'm not proud of it. I ran away from home at a young age and saw it as my only option at the time. Either way, I'm used to having strange men between my legs."

Tawni frowned. "Does Ephraim know this?"

She shook her head. "No, I hadn't done it for a year. Had gone legit with a boring little job where I barely made above minimum wage."

An idea popped into Tawni's head. "Deena, you're in a great position to help the women. Ephraim trusts you. You can go almost wherever you want."

"With an escort. Remember, there's a guy outside the door waiting for us to take us to the dining room. I don't have keys to anything or special privileges other than to take care of you."

When Deena finished with Tawni's last braid, she jumped to her feet and paced around the room. "So you're going to do nothing? You're just going to accept what they're doing? Having some man's baby who you don't even know? What do you think will happen, Deena?" Tawni struggled to keep her voice down.

The stubborn set to the other woman's jaw remained. "At least this place is secure. I don't have bills to pay, or have to work hard. I have a decent meal each day. The baby makers, as you call us, are fed well. Maybe you don't know what it's like to have so little and to be worried each day about basic needs being met."

"Have you been to the lower level?" Tawni asked her.

Deena frowned. "What does that have to do with anything?"

"That's where Ephraim houses his special projects. His experiments. Tell me how you'd feel if he decided your baby would be perfect for one of his experiments. Do you know

that he has animals down there, animals that have strange calls that are not natural?"

Eyes wide, Deena stroked her belly. "No. You're lying. Tawni, he wouldn't. He wants to repopulate this horrible world."

Tawni pressed. "Why should he care about that? This world has become his massive laboratory. He can manipulate the citizens, desperate broken people who barely have anything to live for. He's only allowed a few loyal men know the details of the crossover to our world, where there's a smorgasbord of women. Now with you and the other women, he can just produce new subjects as often as he wants."

The horror of Tawni's words seemed to hit Deena hard. She wavered, putting a hand up to her head. Tawni rushed to help her to a chair. "You seem to know a lot about it," she murmured.

"He felt no reservation in speaking in front of me when he wanted me in his presence at all times. Who knew my mind was able to retain everything I heard even when I was out of it." She took Deena's hands in hers. "I don't pretend to get that man. He's crazy and obsessed with me. But I do know he won't stop. He won't have a problem running roughshod over us all. Please, Deena, help me. Help all of us."

Deena tapped her fingers on her narrow lap and sucked her teeth. Tawni could imagine how she felt. While all of the women considered this a nightmare, Deena was pretty much dulled to the horror of it. Appealing to her mother's instincts to protect her unborn baby was the only way to go. All she

could do now was hope. No one else would help them. They had to help themselves.

"Okay," she said. "I'll do it. If not for me, at least for my baby and for the other women. I will meet with you at lunch time and tell you what I've come up with. We need to move fast. The crossover is open tomorrow night."

* * * *

Tawni inched along the darkened hall. She had no idea how Deena had done it, but the power was out. Maybe she had bribed one of the men. She couldn't imagine why they hadn't made a move against Ephraim all this time anyway, but knowing him for the short period she did, he could instill fear in a person, and if that didn't work he'd probably make them disappear. Kill a few, torture a few, and the men were his to command she didn't doubt. Still, what the body wants, the body wants. The few men who hadn't been chosen to mate might have gotten seriously desperate.

She drew up a picture in her mind of the layout of the facility, trying her best to make it over to the dorm area where the women were kept. The most fearful part of the journey was that where Ephraim had kept the animals, the locks were electronic. With the power out, the locks didn't work. She would have thought he would have a backup generator, but since no lights had come on, that wasn't likely.

A sudden growl not far from her position made her stop cold. Sweat broke out on her temple, and she tried to hold her breath, but fear made her pant. "Nice whatever you are," she squeaked. "Ephraim's the one who hurt you, not me."

Rhythmic tapping against the linoleum floor that was coming closer made her shake. She closed her eyes, swallowing. When she opened them again, she saw it or rather its eyes. Although there had seemed to be no light anywhere, there must have been for its eyes glowed in the darkness.

"Please, oh please," she squeaked. The creature was right up on her. The growling increased in decibels that seemed to echo off the walls just to scare her more. No other sound permeated the area.

Just when she thought her life was over, another sound reached her. The noise repeated like someone had snapped their fingers. She turned to look behind her but saw nothing. When she looked back toward where she figured the creature had been, it was gone. Breathing a sigh of relief at her close call, Tawni continued her journey.

At the end of the hall, someone grabbed her hand. "Tawni, is that you?"

She nodded, rolled her eyes and then spoke. "Yes, how did you know, Deena? What do you have night vision?"

"No." She chuckled. "That stinky perfume he makes you wear. It's lit up the hall. We don't need light to find you."

"We?"

"The ladies are with me. Come on. We have a guide." She tugged Tawni's hand. "Everyone keep the person's hand in front of you. We don't want to have to slow down or turn back."

"Wait," Tawni cried out. "Where's my sister? Lisa are you there?"

People around her shuffled about until Lisa's hand slid into hers, and her sister gave her an awkward kiss on the cheek. "I'm here. Let's go."

The progress toward the exit was slow. After a half hour, the line stopped. Warnings to be quiet rippled down the row.

"What's happening?" Lisa whispered.

"What the hell's going on in here?" a male voice yelled. "What's happened with the lights? Joe, where the fuck are you?"

They stood quiet, hoping the man would pass them by. But it was too much for one woman. Tawni felt her brush past. "I've got to get out of here. I won't wait another minute!"

"What the hell?" the man muttered. The woman screamed. A scuffle began. Soon other women jumped ahead, fighting to get free. Tawni squeezed her sister's hand, not wanting to be separated, but at the same time, she wanted to fight too. Another thirty days while Ephraim was away was just too long. She needed fresh air. She needed the sunshine!

"Lisa?" she called.

Her sister kissed her fingers. "Let's go for it." Together, they ran forward. Shouts filled the hall. More men were there, but Tawni didn't doubt the women had resorted to kicking and biting, even grabbing balls just like she was doing. In the fray, she got turned around, not knowing which way the exit lay.

A fresh burst of air hit their faces. The women gasped. The men growled in anger. Someone restored the lights, and Tawni saw that she was in a wide space where Ephraim must

drive his vehicles straight into facility. The wall lifted up like a concrete garage door.

A crowd of men with weapons blocked the exit. The women on seeing them began to cry, and Tawni couldn't hold back her own tears. They were defeated. At this rate, Ephraim would double his efforts to keep them contained. Deena wouldn't be allowed to mingle with Tawni, and Ephraim would have his proof that she herself was fine now. She would be looking at being forced to share his bed before long.

"No," Deena sobbed, the stress of the situation getting to her. "We came so far. We were almost there. It's not right. It's just not right. I don't want my baby hurt. This can't be!" She charged at the men, wobbling as she ran. One of the men stepped forward to catch her as she tripped over a groove separating the outside from the inside of the building. "Easy, ma'am," he told her. "We're the good guys."

Tawni pushed through the crowd of women, taking Lisa with her as she went. "What? The good guys? Who are you? You're from ... the other side?"

He nodded. "Yes, we are with the police, actually. The tip we got about crossing over was hard to believe at first, but since all the clues we had regarding the missing women pointed to that little shop, we had no choice but to check it out."

"E-Ephraim Jacobson?" she asked.

The man scratched his head. "As far as I can figure out, when a person enters on this side and on that side, they don't cross paths. I was thinking of it like a revolving door. While we swung this way, he swung that way."

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Lisa spoke up. "Well we're happy to have you rescue us, but the fact is we're all stuck over here now for thirty days."

"Not necessarily." A familiar voice came through the crowd of plain clothed policemen. Tawni's heartbeat increased. She stood on tiptoe to see above the taller men's heads. One who stood head and shoulders above the rest stepped through.

"Lakota!" she screamed. Without a second thought, she threw herself into his arms and squeezed as hard as she could.

He laughed. "Hey, baby, you're going to crush my ribs."

She kissed his mouth hungrily. "I'm sorry, Lakota. I have so much to confess to you, and I love you. We have a lot to talk about."

"Whoa, slow down." He pressed his forehead to hers. His long silky hair caressed her cheek. "I have a lot to share with you also. We'll wait until we have you women safe." He kissed her again. "Especially you."

Tawni had no intentions of letting him go. She nuzzled tight into his arms. "What did you mean when you said we aren't trapped here for thirty days?"

"Well," he began. "I met a very interesting man a few days ago."

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Chapter Fourteen

Her man, Lakota, who had cared for nothing but clothes, getting high and partying, led the way with the police and women trailing behind. Tawni stared up at him with a new respect, a swell of love in her heart for him. He encircled her in his hold as they walked out to the cars waiting to shuttle them back to the area where the shop sat.

"Ah, here he is," Lakota said. He stuck his hand out, and Tawni turned her head to see who he was greeting.

An old man with stooped shoulders, a scruffy beard and mustache and rumbled worn clothing stood to the side of one of the vehicles. He smiled, revealing a missing tooth. "Hello, I am Dr. Walter Proctor."

Tawni's eyes widened. "I've heard of you. You're the man with the theories."

He grinned, preening. "So you've attended my lectures?"

"No. My captor killed your double from this world for his knowledge. From what I can guess, he's planning to find you on the other side to get you to show him more." She paused. "That's it, isn't it? You know how to open the way counter to the thirty day wait. And do you know other locations that might lead to other worlds?"

The scientist, who had frowned in annoyance when she told him she hadn't been to his lectures, now paled at the prospect of Ephraim hunting for him. "I-I..."

Lakota, looking like his old self, flipped his hair over his shoulder and pressed a heavy hand on the man's shoulder.

"No worries, bud. I'm sure the police will keep an eye on you. Can we get going though? I'm eager to be alone with my girl."

Tawni ducked into the car followed by Lakota. He took her hand in his and kissed it. "Lakota, there's something I need to tell you," she whispered, terrified. "I ... uh ... Lakota, I haven't been faithful." Tears filled her eyes and spilled down her cheeks. The thought of losing him along with his double was too much, but she couldn't keep it from him. He had stuck by her side though all the times she had harangued him to change when he could have been with someone who was more like him. "I'm so sorry, baby. I know you want nothing to do with me now. I feel like I've lost everything in a short time, and I ... how do I handle it? How do I get through this?"

"Tawni, Tawni!" He pulled her onto his lap and held her although she fought to get free. "Stop it. I'm not letting you go. I came all the way through what? Space? Time? Whatever it is, I'm here to get you, and I'm not letting you go, baby, so stop pushing me away."

"You don't understand," she sobbed. "He ... he ... I loved him with all my heart. I feel like I can't..."

"Shh." He kissed her lips and stroked her face. "Later, I promise."

They rode the rest of the way in silence, Tawni with her face turned into Lakota's neck. If she was to lose him too, maybe she could memorize his scent. She could soothe her tormented emotions remembering his warmth and how his hard muscles felt beneath her body as she sat on his lap. She

was being morbid and was full of self-pity, but rational thought seemed to be beyond her ability at the moment.

They pulled up to the shop. Tawni heard car doors slamming as people filed out, but she didn't move. Lakota opened their door and gathered her in his arms to lift out of the car. She kept her arms locked behind his head.

"Don't you want to see this, baby?" he asked her with his chin tucked against her head. "The doc's got some kind of gadget or something in his hand. Maybe he'll zap the opening."

"What I want to know is how we'll all fit inside the shop," Lisa added. She rubbed Tawni's back.

With a low moan, Tawni lifted her head and signaled for Lakota to put her down. He did, but didn't take his arm away from her waist. The three scooted up to the front of the crowd.

Dr. Procter aimed what looked like a wristwatch at the little shop where Tawni had come through to this world. He twisted a tiny knob, and a bolt of blue-green light like a laser shot out of the watch. At first nothing happened, and then the air in front of the windows wavered, becoming like heat waves on a hot day. Soon a small hole appeared. It grew wider and wider. The shop behind the hole looked different. Tawni gaped when she realized the shop behind the hole wasn't the crumbling one from this world, but the old yet strong one from her world.

"It's our world," someone shouted. The women began running to the hole while the police tried to keep order. Shouts filled the air. Tawni took hold of Lisa's and Lakota's

hands and moved into the line walking into the hole across dimensions. Without incident, they passed through.

When everyone had made it over, a detective raised his hands for quiet. "If everyone will follow me, we can all go to the station for questioning."

"Like hell," Lisa shouted. "I'm going home. I'm exhausted. You can ask me questions in the morning." The other women agreed.

Having no choice, the police agreed. "Fine, but we will send someone to pick you, if you are not in the twenty-third precinct by eight in the morning. Am I clear?" The detective pinned a firm look on Lisa. Her answer was a roll of her eyes.

Tawni took her hand. "You can't stay at your place, Lee. That's where they grabbed you. I saw the evidence of the struggle over there. You're coming to Lakota's place."

"Yes." Lakota moved to his Mercedes parked at the curb, and Tawni wondered what had possessed the man to leave it in this neighborhood.

When she glanced around, she took in the literal crowd of police and media. The reporters had tried breaking past the barrier to get to the rescued women, but they couldn't get through. Spotting Dr. Proctor already in front of a camera, Tawni sighed. She wondered how a man could be that brilliant and that attention needy all in one package.

Lakota stroked her back. "Come on, baby. Let's get you home."

Too weary for anything but compliance, Tawni stepped into the car with dread of what was to come.

* * * *

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Tawni opened her eyes the next morning to a heavy arm crushing the life out of her stomach. She shoved only to produce a groan at her side. Turning her head, she wasn't surprised to find Lakota staring at her. "Good morning, my love."

She squinted at him. "You let me sleep instead of us talking last night."

He shrugged. "Yes, and I enjoyed taking your clothes off. I missed your body." A thought seemed to occur to him. "You don't mind me seeing you naked, do you, Tawni? Have your feelings for me changed?"

A shudder went through her. She stared up at the ceiling, too afraid to look him in the eyes. "I love you touching me, seeing me, wanting me. But..."

"But?"

She blew out a breath. "I'm not sure what was real and what wasn't over there. I felt like one night when I was with the Lakota from that side..." She bit her lip, blinking hard to keep from crying. She'd done enough the night before and when she was alone in the room at Ephraim's facility. "I thought you were there with us," she blurted out.

When she scooted away from him, he reached out a hand to pull her close. He tucked her against his side and leaned over her with his head propped up on his hand. "You are my life, Tawni. You don't have to be afraid of using me."

"I have." She wept. "Lakota..."

He stroked her hair. "One night I had a dream, Tawni. In it, a man that looked just like me came and asked how much I love you, what I would do to be sure you stayed in my life."

She frowned, not understanding.

"He was dressed in buckskins like an Indian and looked exactly like me, except for this little scar above his eyebrow." He gestured, and her heart skipped a beat. It was real? Couldn't be. She named the date she had slept with Lakota on the other side. Her boyfriend nodded. "Yeah, that's the night."

"What happened?"

Lakota kissed and brushed a strand of her hair from her forehead. He stared down at her for a while before speaking. "I told him I would do anything to keep you. I would become a better man. I went on and on." He laughed looking embarrassed. "His answer shocked the hell out of me, let me tell you right now. He said 'would you share her?' What kind of question is that? Would you share her."

She nodded. "We-um-You were there in him when we..."

He grinned. "I admit I felt kind of jealous thinking about it, but at the same time it was like it was me, like I was making love to you while watching myself make love to you, but we were together in his body. While I was home sleep."

Tawni burst out laughing despite the seriousness of the situation. "Okay, okay. I get it. Kind of. Remember I told you I was having those dreams about you, and you were different in them. When I went over there, I found out there was another Lakota, same name, same looks. He had a wife with my name. He had been calling to her using his family's rituals

or something. Instead he got me. Isn't that hard to believe? I went through in my spirit to him."

Lakota touched his nose to hers and brushed her lips with his. "Not so hard to believe."

"Why?"

He sat up and looked away out the window. The sun was too bright for her to see him. She shielded her eyes against it, but Lakota remained in a shadow.

"You thought he died, or someone had killed him back there in that cell, Tawni. But his grandfather came to him."

She gasped. "His grandfather?"

"Yes. He always knew when he was in trouble. He seemed to know his destiny before Lakota did. Grandfather said he would perform another ritual that he hadn't taught him. One to pull him out of his body and send it to another. Permanently."

"What?" Tawni slipped from the bed and threw herself against her boyfriend's chest. "Tell me, Lakota. Where did his grandfather send him? I need to see him, to speak to him. *Please.*"

"He sent him here, my love." Lakota slipped her onto his lap. "It's me, Lakota from the other world. And your boyfriend. We share the same body."

Her eyes bugged until they hurt. She saw no difference in him, but then why would she. They looked the same. No, the personalities weren't the same. Her man called her baby while the other Lakota said my love or my heart. "For how long?" she whispered.

"Forever. Can you love use both, Tawni?" he queried.

She only blinked. Two men together sharing his body. One minute Lakota would be easygoing, the next he would be brooding. They would drive her insane before the week was out.

"Maybe you should call your wife back to stay in my body," she joked. "We could bully you back like I know you two will do to me."

"If I could, I would," he said.

She looked into his eyes. "You're still tormented with losing her. I can't take her place. I want you to be happy."

"No, I'm not tormented." He squeezed her. "I have my Tawni meant for me. I won't let her go again. I love you, my heart ... and I love you too, baby. We both do."

She blinked. "No, that's not going to be weird at all. Okay, well at least I have the both of you forever. I don't know how we'll distinguish. How about L1 and L2?"

He frowned. "Shall I be L1?" She knew that was her new lover.

"No, Mr. Arrogant, you will be L2 since my boyfriend was first in my life. So L2"—she grinned—"what do you think about male modeling?"

* * * *

Tawni rocked Lisa's baby boy in his basinet while simultaneously rubbing her own rounded belly and reading the newspaper. "Oh goodness, I can't believe it!"

With her lips simulating chewing to her daughter, Lisa spared Tawni a peek. "What's up?"

She waved the paper at her sister. "They finally caught him. After all this time, they caught that son of a bitch, Ephraim."

"Good! We were lucky in that his counterpart had been killed in that freak lab accident," Lisa exclaimed. "Where was he hiding out?"

"A new world."

"Hmm?" Lisa slipped a spoonful of applesauce into her daughter's mouth. "A new world? You mean they discovered yet another parallel Earth?"

Tawni nodded. "Yes, I'm beginning to think they'll never end. And it scares me. What if L2 finds another Tawni he'd rather be with?"

Lisa reached across to pat her hand. "Don't worry. He adores you. And remember, the worlds come in pairs. They haven't found another Earth like ours and the twin. Every two worlds have been identical with people. I doubt it's triplets."

Tawni lifted her hand to make her wedding band catch the light. Lisa was right. Her men loved her. Even while they fought with each other, they had always been devoted to her, and she to them. She would go to the ends of the Earth and crossover a millions times to be with them. With their little one on the way, she couldn't be more happy.

Speaking of her lovers, they walked in the door with one sexy body. Her heart pounded just looking at them.

"There's my wife," Lakota declared. "I think when I come from a hard day's work"—Lisa snorted—"I would like to find the love of my life at the door waiting for me." He gave Lisa a nasty look.

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Tawni fairly floated into his arms. "I was just helping Lee with the twins. I missed you."

"Not nearly as much as I missed you. Come home with me, Tawni," he begged. "I need to prove to you yet again how much you mean to me ... uh ... to us."

With her lover's sweet words, her fears ebbed away, and Tawni prepared to be pleased for the rest of the day and night.

The End

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