



# THE FELIG CHRONICLES

P. J. DEAN

Time: post-apocalyptic America in the near future.

Faustina *Tina* Cain and Nate Lowe each have their own reasons for fighting against a group of aliens, the life-force draining Felig, who have invaded Earth.

For Tina, it's personal—they took her mom.

Neither Tina or Nate are looking for love—just raw sex to take the edge off possibly vanishing at any moment. Joining forces makes them ponder why they are even alive.

Nate has a humdinger of a secret, but even more so is the question of what do those hot-blooded aliens want from Tina and Nate?

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The Felig Chronicles  
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# THE FELIG CHRONICLES

BY

P.J. DEAN

# **DEDICATION**

*For Pearl and Pauline*

## CHAPTER ONE

Tina contemplated the .357 magnum. She lobbed it from one hand to another as she sat on the closet floor in the den. It would be so easy. But she'd have to take Matilda with her. Couldn't leave her here alone. Who'd care for her? Pills for her Matty. Nothing violent. As for herself, she could just slip the muzzle between her lips or put it to her temple. *BAM!* She took a mental inventory of her life. Two less black females on Earth would not be missed. They had acquaintances, but few real friends. Maybe two. No family members who cared. Tina had noticed years earlier, before the madness, that supposed friends had pulled back as her mom's ailments had advanced. Unable to party hearty at a moment's notice, she had begun to receive fewer invitations. People who used to seek her out had stopped calling. They were afraid she deduced. Afraid they would be called on to possibly assist her with Matty. Afraid that illness would *rub off* on them.

Whatever. It all paled in comparison to what was going around now. At the age of thirty-nine and with the way the world had turned out, she was ready to call it a life. But was a magnum a tad much? A smaller caliber would suffice. The magnum would be overkill. "Overkill," she said into the dark. She wiped the tears from her eyes and chuckled. She returned the weapon to the holster under her right arm.

"Tina?" called a weak voice from the condo's living room.

"Yes, Mama? Be right there. You okay?" She finished drying her eyes, then ran her hands through her chin-length, wiry, dark brown spirals. She scrambled to her feet and exited their prescribed hiding place. Tina rushed into the IKEA-furnished living room. Matty liked blond woods. "Hard to hear you above the air conditioner."

Matilda had struggled out of her chair and was working her way toward the kitchen with her walker. "Time for eats, honey. I was going to ask you what you wanted."

"Mama!" Tina put her arms around Matilda, hugged her and kissed her forehead. "How many times have I told you to stay out of the kitchen? You are in no condition to hover over burners. I'll fix dinner. All your favorites. Tonight's mulligatawny stew over rice, with cornbread.

Peach pie. Umm right?"

Matilda rimmed her lips with her tongue. "With chocolate ice cream?"

"With whatever you want, Mom. Let me help you to the table." She guided Matilda over to her well-cushioned dining chair and arranged her in it.

The woman grabbed her hand and kissed it. "I love you, sweetie."

"I love you, too, Mom. I'll bring you a glass of water to take with your medicine while I heat up the food."

"Fine. Some ginger ale, too. I'll turn on the news." Matilda picked up the remote and clicked on CNN. The sudden rat-tat-tat of gunfire punctuated the early evening.

"Was that the TV or outside, Mom?" Tina poked her head over the swinging doors leading into the kitchen.

"Damned if I know."

Their cat, Tatum, ran to join them, the sound too alarming for him.

Tina set the beverages on the table and doled out Matilda's meds. She observed her mother. Bad luck had perched on this good woman's shoulder and had decided it liked the view. Fate never rushed. Why should it? It knows it's gonna get you in the end.

Only sixty-seven years of age, her mother



looked years older. Matilda had been a damned good nurse a scant fifteen years before. Her conscientiousness had all but killed her.

Possessing that Protestant work ethic—even though she was Catholic—rarely had she missed work. But being tired and rundown did not mix with a rheumatic heart. An infected valve had led to emergency surgery. A surgery that had both saved and doomed her. Blood used during the operation had been tainted with hepatitis C. And Matilda had been fighting the good fight ever since.

Tina had watched her mom morph from an active, fearless woman into one who could remain in her room for days on end if allowed. As time had passed, Matilda had become more reclusive. Years of disease, harsh medicines, disinterested physicians and a lack of control over her own life had left her depressed and apprehensive.

Gunfire erupted again. Matilda jumped.

“That was outside, this time.” Instinctively, Tina broke out the AK-47 that she kept taped under her side of the table and went to the window.

“Tina! Honey! Be careful.” Matilda shifted stiffly in her chair. “It’s not the same anymore.”

How true, Tina mused as she parted the curtain slightly with the tip of the gun.

Two black guys were running down the

deserted street, shooting randomly. Behind them was a dark SUV, beams on high, another guy riding shotgun hung out the passenger window.

No, it was not the same anymore. Not since the Felig had come.

*The fuckin' Felig*, mouthed Tina.

On New Year's Day at the start of the millennium, giant orbs of fire had rained down on Earth. Not long after the event, an alien presence emerged from the burnt out spheres. For the last few years, they had decimated the human race. They had never declared their purpose, nor had they demanded to see world leaders. They simply took.

The Felig were able to shape-shift and render themselves invisible. No one knew how to spot one or stop it because no one had ever survived an encounter. A Felig could look like your best friend or your lover because it had just assimilated them. Once close enough, it absorbed you. This total ignorance of a predator's MO had launched the world's population into permanent mass paranoia.

"It's just another patrol, Mama. Let's eat."

## CHAPTER TWO

**“T**ina, please put that thing down!” Matilda pointed to the AK-47 Tina kept perched on her knees at the table. She was still trying to assert her Momdom. Tina’s heart broke as she looked at Matilda. Dark circles under her eyes. Owner of a special type of arthritis, she was unable to get off the medicine which controlled the pain, even though it continued to destroy her bones. “Can’t, Mama. Gotta stay alert.” She tapped her fingers on the gun butt and laughed nervously.

“Honey, don’t do that. Last time, you shot a hole in one of the kitchen cabinets.” Matilda sighed and twisted her napkin in her hands.

“*Accidentally* shot a hole, Mom.”

“Lord, I wish things would get back to normal. This permanent state of emergency has me more jittery than before. Even the cat feels it.” Matilda dragged her spoon across the bottom of her bowl and popped her last cornbread cube in her mouth.

"I'm glad it hasn't curbed your appetite, Mom. You're slim enough. Dessert?"

"I'm ready. A scoop of chocolate ice cream with that pie. Thank you."

"Coming up." Tina cleared the dishes and retired to the galley kitchen. She returned with two healthy slices of peach pie and a small bowl of chocolate ice cream.

Matilda dug in as soon as the plates hit the table. She smacked her lips as she savored alternate spoons of flaky crust and cold, silky perfection. "Gurl, dis'yuh pie iz sayin' sump'n," Matilda quipped. She licked her spoon and wagged her head. "You used Grandma's recipe. How do you do it? Not just the food. Everything. Our utilities. My medicines. How?"

Tina squirmed and sighed. "Trying to get the eggs and peaches was a bitch. Haggle, haggle, haggle. Finally had to promise Leon some of the results. But you have to know certain people. I pay for it all." In this post-apocalyptic landscape, money had no value. Not unless one was hoarding it for a sunny day when all snapped back to normal. Tina had offered her services as cook, cleaner and hired gun to get and maintain necessities for them.

"Oh no! That's a high price. Leon? He's not even that good I heard."

"Mom!"

"Well, that's what's said," Matilda emphasized. "I may not get out, but I do own a phone."

"It's okay. He's not on my dance card, and at least I don't have to screw him like Regina and Peg do for extra eggs."

"Oh my! 'Gina and Peg?"

"Yep. He has always come through for us. Without the monkey business. Oh, by the by, no having the window open in your room. It's not safe." Tina waved her spoon in the air for effect.

"Tina, I need to breathe some real air for a change. After a while, the noise of the AC gets to me."

"No, Mom."

"Just for a little bit. Please?" Matilda was actually pouting and giving her best cow eyes.

"Oh no. Not the *eyes*." Tina shielded her face as if fending off invisible death rays. "Okay. Okay. Just for just a little bit. How can I refuse? Let's go in the living room. I've made coffee to go with the pie. We'll watch some of our shows on the box and act like all is right with the world." Tatum wound his sleek body around Tina's legs. "Let me feed this animal first."

They retired to the living room and sat in their pre-assigned places. A so-called reality show was on Channel Five. Some sadist of a television show developer had created a train wreck called, *Flee the*

*Felig!* Contestants consented to live in an area where Felig attacks were high. Objective—outsmart the other players and elude the Felig long enough to collect a cool million. Tax free.

"This is disgusting. If someone wins, where they gonna spend it?" asked Matilda.

"Maybe the producers will create a place," Tina responded. "And that will be another show."

"Ugh! Change the channel."

After several hours, Tina looked over at Matilda to discover her dozing. "Mama? Mama?" she called.

"Uh?" Matilda wiped her mouth.

"Bedtime." Tina walked her mom down the hall to the room they shared. Since the invasion, no one slept alone. Not that it saved anyone. But it did give a nice sense of security. Once inside, she cracked the window as promised. A shot of extremely hot air hit her in the face and she broke out in a sweat. *Oh, man this can't be change of life already!*

"Air! Air! Real air," remarked Matilda as she took her nightclothes out of the dresser drawer.

"Real *hot* air, Mom. Then again, it is summer. Let me get a roll of paper towels from the bathroom." Tina entered the adjoining room. The roller was empty. "You're out. Let me get a roll from the linen closet. Be right back."

"Fine." Matilda shrugged into her gown.

As Tina madly rummaged through the closet, she heard a muffled cry come from Matilda's room. "Mama? Mama!" she yelled as she ran in the sound's direction.

The room was at least twenty degrees hotter. Death looked Tina in the face as it enveloped her mother. While Matilda sat on the side of the bed, she was slowly being wrapped in the opaque, papery wings of what was probably a Felig. It looked like a hybrid of a praying mantis and a bird. Tina drew her magnum and pumped several rounds into the wall behind Matilda, hoping it would scare the thing away.

The creature smiled at her with a big, old, bottomless maw of a mouth.

"No! No! Not her. Me. Take me, you ugly bastard!" screamed Tina, brandishing the gun as she rushed the thing.

*I love you, sweetie,* mouthed her mother just before the bug-bird engulfed the sickly woman.

The Felig vanished as Tina reached the bed. A hot, agitated breeze whooshed past her. In her delirium, Tina did sense a soft, cool touch on her cheek as the current surged out the open window.

"Come back here, you coward! Pick someone who can fight your ass!" Tina dashed after the warm trail, shooting her gun. Only the sill stopped her from sailing out the window. She crashed into

it and crumpled to the floor.

"It can't be. That just didn't happen. Damn! Damn!" Tears blinded her. "Mom, oh, Mom!" she shrieked. "I'm so sorry. Forgive me." She looked down at the magnum. "One round left?" Anguish washed over her again. The strength of the wave toppled her. Face down, forehead to the carpet, she put the tip of the gun to her temple. And pulled the trigger.

Nothing.

"Son of a fuckin' bitch!" She sat up and sat back on her heels. "Okay, what's the plan, God?" she screamed out loud. A piece of paper drifted into the room through the open window. It landed at her feet. Tina snatched up the crumpled document. It was a flyer announcing the imminent arrival of Dr. Nate Lowe, the leading authority on the Felig.

He was to speak at a rally tomorrow. Always with tons of bodyguards, he would be hard to reach. But where there's a will...

"Okay, Mr. Expert, you don't know it now, but you gonna help me get my Matty back," she sobbed. "Clear your schedule. You don't know it, but you've got an appointment with me. You may know the Felig, but you ain't never known the likes of Faustina Cain."



## CHAPTER THREE

**T**ina! Tina! You all right?" It was Moz and Evie, the retired cop and his nurse wife from downstairs. Their pounding rattled the steel front door. "Tina?"

Tina scrambled to her feet, made for the door and opened it.

"Gurl, what was that noise?" Moz yelled.

Evie's eyes bugged as she assessed her neighbor's dishelved, edgy state.

"Tina, you sweatin' like the change came up on you just before you opened this door." Moz pushed his way in. "Where is Miss Matty?"

"Gone, Moz. It took her." Tina broke into sobs and Evie caught her as she slumped. "But I'm gonna get her back."

"Gone?" Moz said. "It who?"

"Felig took her."

"What the fuck?" Moz shook his head, incredulous. He ran through the condo, calling out to the woman he had grown to admire. "Miss

Matty? Miss Matty?"

"Moz, be careful!" Evie said as she rocked Tina.

"She's not here! Didn't you hear me? It took her."

Moz ran back to the front door. "When? How?" He glanced around. "Let's get out of here. It might come back." Evie pulled Tina as Moz pushed her.

"No, I'm not leaving. This is my home." Tina went stiff and would not budge.

"You can't stay here by yourself."

"Why not?" She tossed her spirals in defiance.

"It might come back."

"Now what are the odds of that? Hit twice in one night?" She regarded them with red-rimmed, puffy eyes. "My place is the safest place in town, tonight."

"You might be right," Evie peeked in again. Let me and Moz sit a bit with you. I can't believe it. Miss Matty gone. Oh, my God."

"Blink of a freakin' eye, Evie. Happened so fast." The trio re-entered the condo and headed for the dining room.

Ever the hostess, Tina said, "Please sit. I'll bring coffee," then disappeared into the kitchen.

\* \* \* \*

Evie worried a hole in the lace tablecloth. "Moz, she's in shock."

"Shock *and* denial," Moz shot back. "Miss Matty ain't coming back. Poor Miss Matty. Have her life end like that." Moz kept looking around. "Sin and a shame." They started when Tina burst through the swinging door with a tray.

\* \* \* \*

"Sorry."

"Reconsider, Tina. Come stay with us. At least for tonight," Evie pleaded.

"Thanks. But I was here when it came and I'll be here now that it's gone. In fact, I'd welcome it. Have a showdown."

"Tina, be real."

"This can't get any more real. In fact, it's too real." She paused. "You want pie with this?"

"No, honey. Just the coffee'll be fine."

Tina buried her face in her hands and broke into tears again. She knew she was just going through the motions, but if she didn't follow some sort of normalcy, she'd go crazy.

"What are we gonna do with you, Tina?" Evie asked. "You need to go to the hospital. We'll take you."

"No."

"At least go get evaluated. You've had a terrible shock, honey."

Tina shook her head.

"Airight! Airight!" Evie threw up her hands in frustration. "I give up."

"Evie, you still got your stash?" Moz asked. "Give her a couple of your pills to calm her." He turned to Tina. "Will that suit you?"

"How strong?" Her eyebrows went up. "Not too strong, please."

"Mild ones. They will help you sleep."

"Do one other thing for me." She pulled the Nate Lowe flyer from her pants pocket. "Take me to this rally tomorrow. Get me in to meet him. I have to talk to him."

"Tina," Moz gulped his coffee and perused the paper. "No one gets near this man. He is famous. Keeps an army around him. Why you gotta see him?"

"He's the expert on the Felig." Tina leaned back in her chair, smiling. "He's gonna help me get my Matty back."

"Get Matty back?" Evie sighed, got up and hugged her. She stroked Tina's face. "She is gone. You don't have to accept it now. Just realize it."

"Thank you, Evie." She looked past her friend to Moz. "Will you take me? You must have old ties to the police department. Some must be doing crowd control and security. Help me."

"Tina, I have ties, not miracles."

"Call in a favor, please." She watched them from under her tear-edged lashes. "I gotta see

him."

Moz and Evie thought of Tina as the daughter they'd never had. They looked at one another, then her.

"She making those cow eyes just like Matty used to. Okay. Okay. I'll try. We'll come back in a few hours after I make some calls." Moz and Evie drank up, then rose to leave.

"Oh, thank you. Thank you." A slight smile curved Tina's lips.

"Don't thank me, yet. I'll bring the pills when I come."

## CHAPTER FOUR

**T**ina came awake with a start. She observed through squinty eyes, her cat, Tatum, walking along the bottom shelf of the bookcase in the bedroom. He watched her as he kicked paperback after paperback onto the floor.

“Stop that, you furry colon!” She sensed that the poop machine wanted breakfast. “Matty! Matty? This cat—” then she remembered. Matty was gone. It had been one of the two things that Matty could still do—make coffee and feed Tatum.

“Oh, Matty,” Tina sighed. She missed the aroma of the hot brew and Matty’s familiar puttering which had always heralded each day.

Tatum jumped on the bed, meowing.

“Okay. Okay. One bowl of salmon entrée coming up and one vat of coffee for me.” Tina stood up and pulled on her sweatpants. She only slept in a tank and undies. She remembered her pants without Matty prompting her. Matty used to scold her for walking around half-dressed.

*Those guys across the alley from us are so nice to you because you give 'em a show every morning. Put on your pants before you walk past that window!* Tina recollected Matty telling her.

As she sat at the dining room table after feeding the cat, Tina felt her world right itself as coffee and a bowl of oatmeal washed away the sleeping-pill fog. Tatum thanked her for breakfast by wrapping himself around her legs.

"You're welcome, bud."

The phone rang and Tina answered.

"You did it!" Tina pranced about. "I owe ya, Moz. Okay. Okay. I'll be ready in an hour." After hanging up, she rinsed her dishes in the kitchen sink. In the bathroom, she peeled off her nightclothes and got in the shower. She chose the honey-chamomile showergel for a pick-me-up. Working up thick lather, she luxuriated in the feel of it on her skin. She tested her body. Not bad for nearly forty. Years of Pilates and, most recently, Krav Maga, had lent her form agility and strength without bulk. She liked tight skin over long muscles. Flat tummy, firm butt and boobs. Toned arms and legs. Yeah, she looked better and was in better shape than the twenty-somethings in her neighborhood who yelled *Old lady!* at her.

She squeezed shampoo on her hair and worked up more lather. Finished, she stood under the

showerhead and rinsed it away. She towel-dried her hair and finger-combed the spirals. While in front of the full-length mirror Tina slathered on body moisturizer. Five minutes had passed before she realized she been standing there massaging the lotion into her damp breasts. She snapped back to Earth because she had absentmindedly aroused herself. The aureoles of her breasts were pebbled and her nipples were hard points.

"This is pathetic." She walked into the bedroom. She wondered if she would be able to ever function with a man again. She had gotten into just focusing on her pleasure, worrying about another's pleasure would be...distracting. She tossed on her black tracksuit over her white boy-leg undies, a white racer back bra and a pink tee. The doorbell rang just as she tugged on pink socks and her black Rykas.

"Coming!" she yelled. She grabbed her leather hobo bag and raced for the kitchen. She dumped dry food into Tatum's bowl and added more ice cubes to his water—something Matty had always done. Tina opened the door.

"Mornin' honey, how ya doin'?" asked Evie in her usual jovial tone. "Did ya sleep?"

"I did. I did. Thanks for the pill."

"You ready?" interrupted Moz.

"As I'll ever be." Tina stepped into the hall and locked the door behind her.



"Girl, you strapped?"

"Moz, you know I never go anywhere without my smoke wagon." She patted her right side. The trio took the stairs.

"You won't be allowed to have it on you when you meet him."

"Then you'll hold it for me, right?"

"Will do." Moz glanced at Evie and sighed.

"Tina, kidding aside, how are you, really?" Evie patted Tina's back, then held her close.

Tina hung on. "I'm a little crazed. Angry. Numb." Her voice cracked. "Feeling like this is beyond a bad dream. Will I get through it? Only God knows." Tina snorted. "Is He still around and just not answering His phone?"

"Tina, don't talk like that!"

"He knows what I am thinking. Doesn't matter."

Once on the street, they piled into a black van full of Moz's police friends and a few patrollers.

"Hey, guys, I appreciate this. I owe you and Moz. I make mean pies."

"I was hoping for a slice of hair pie," said Teddy.

Tina surmised he was a new and very immature patroller.

He snickered like the idiot he was and cleared his throat in the silence.

Moz punched him in the arm. "Crass mofo. Apologize!"

Tina looked into the rearview mirror to apply her lipstick and to size up the smartass. She pursed her lips and chuckled, "That's all right, Moz. How old are you, Teddy? Well, however old you are, dream on. That sort of bakery item ain't in my repertoire."

The rest of the passengers guffawed out loud.

"Sorry," floated from Teddy's direction. He remained quiet for the rest of the ride.

"Let's roll," Moz suggested. "This Lowe dude is gonna give you half an hour. But we have to get through the crowds and security first. It's ten thirty AM. Your appointment is for eleven thirty. Move it."

Kevin, a cop working overtime for the event, checked the street, then pulled into traffic. They had a smooth ride until the van got two blocks from the Convention Center.

People hoping to get in to hear Nate Lowe filled the sidewalks and the roadway.

"We had better park, get out and walk the rest of the way," Kevin said. He reached into a duffle bag at his feet. He handed a bunch of passes to Tina. "Take yours and hand out the rest."

She shifted in her seat to distribute them and then put hers around her neck.

"Tina, no matter what, stick with me and Moz."

"I will. I'm not blowing this."

The group of seven waded through the sea of bodies to reach a designated entrance. Moz checked his watch. It was eleven-ten. "Good time. We'll make it." At the door, they all flashed their passes and a guard admitted them.

Once inside, Kevin took over. "Is he here, yet?" he asked a man dressed in black denim. Kevin flashed his pass again.

"Yeah," the guy said. "He's up in one of the conference rooms. The man looked the crew over. "Which one of you women need to see him?"

"Me," Tina declared, stepping forward. She flashed her pass.

"Okay. Kevin, take her up that escalator. First door on the right."

"Don't you need to frisk me?"

"They'll do that upstairs. Go on. It's eleven-twenty."

They boarded the escalator, found the room and were summarily frisked.

"What's a nice girl like you doing packing this?" The bodyguard retrieved and waved her .357 about.

"I'm not nice and it's not safe out there."

"True, but I have to take it."

"Give it to me," Moz said. "Kevin and I will wait here."

"Fine." The guy handed the gun to Moz and

knocked on the door.

"Come in," a tired voice commanded.

Tina entered.

"I'm Nate Lowe." He took her hand and shook it. "Some people call me an expert on the Felig. I call myself a guy who had bad luck. Please have a seat. Coffee?"

"No. First, thank you for seeing me. I know you are an extremely busy man and don't do —"

"Cut the chitchat, Ms. Cain. What can I do for you? Or, more importantly, *what* do you think I can do for you?"

## CHAPTER FIVE

**T**ina sized up the self-important shit before her. So, the bastard thinks he can read me. As she looked him over, she noted that he needed to get another kind of monster-fighting regalia. All his crew needed to. The all black, tactical look with the many pockets and flaps along with the combat boots—so last millennium. Even Matty had had a version of it a few years ago as a joke. Matty. Oh God! The reality hit Tina again and her knees buckled.

\* \* \* \*

“Ms. Cain!” Lowe shouted as he grabbed her around the waist. “Ms. Cain!” he shouted again, hoisting her up. The woman fell against him. A faint flowery scent wafted from her hair, her skin. He had not taken notice of a woman since... He held her a tad longer than he should have. She felt good. Just one more whiff. “Are you sick, Ms.

Cain?"

"More tired, weary and sad. Felig took my mother last night...right from under my nose." She fixed him with an unwavering hard stare. "I need you to help me get her back. If anyone can do it, you can."

"So that is what you think I can do for you." Lowe gripped her waist tighter to steady her and then stood back.

\* \* \* \*

"That's right. You are my first and last resort, Mr. Lowe." Tina really looked at him this time. He was a little taller than average, slim, fit. A straw-colored buzz cut which accentuated his deep-set, world-weary blue eyes. "Can you help me? *Will* you help me?"

Lowe took off his black leather jacket and slung it across the back of a tall conference chair. He walked to the small coffee bar set up in the room. He poured himself a cup. "Sure you won't have one? Some pastry?"

Tina felt heat escape from the top of her head. "I did not come here for a fuckin' snack!"

Nate sipped his brew nonchalantly and sampled a lemon danish. "Ms. Cain, I could not save my own wife. What makes you think I can save anyone else?"

Tina approached him and challenged that blue stare perched atop that straight nose. "Because you are *the* Nate Lowe." She poked him in the chest with an index finger. "Authority on the Felig. Maybe when your family was taken you didn't know much. Now you know more. *Seen more.*"

"No one has seen one, Ms. Cain." He put down his cup.

"I have."

"You lie."

"I've been known to embellish. But lie? Never."

"Seen one? Impossible. Hallucinations brought on by stress."

"Why? Because *you* didn't see? I have knowledge to share with you. Aren't you curious? I could end up helping you."

"Time's up, Ms. Cain. I have a lecture to give."

"Lecture? You should call them performances. I think I will have a danish." Tina scooped up the tray. The guys in the van deserved a treat. "Since I am sure you investigated me, you should know my number." Tina walked to the door with her loot. "Give me a call, Nate Lowe. *Felig expert.* I still believe we can aid one another. If you can get over yourself." Hands full, Tina kicked the door. "Okay, let me outta here!"

## CHAPTER SIX

Tina got away with one extra danish for herself after handing the excess out to Moz and the gang. She skipped Lowe's lecture, thanked her van mates and took the commuter train home. Once home, she stripped out of her tracksuit and put on her tank top and baggy cotton pants. She turned off the AC and flung open her bedroom window.

"Come on back, fucker," she commanded to the Felig. She settled down for a nap. Tina shoved her gun under the pillow next to her. As soon as she hit the sheets, Tatum jumped up onto the other side of the bed.

"Keep watch, boy, while I catch a few winks. Howl real loud if anything looks funny." She patted his head, then rolled onto her side, facing the window.

Insistent knocking on the apartment door jarred Tina awake. Tatum was already off the bed and



was trotting toward the sound. Tina looked at the clock on the bed stand.

Eight PM. She'd been napping for four hours! More knocking. Tina reached for her gun, bounded off the mattress and was at the front door in a flash. "Who is it?"

Unintelligible mumbling greeted her.

"Is that you, Teddy? Better not be. Who is it?" This time Tina put her ear to the portal and she heard the answer more clearly. She nudged Tatum back with her foot and unlocked the door. "As I live and breathe. What brings you to this part of town?"

"Something you said. May I come in?" asked a sheepish Nate Lowe. "I'd rather not discuss it in the hallway."

Tina backed up, waved Nate into the apartment and closed the door. "Coffee? Something to eat? No more danish though."

\* \* \* \*

"Yes to both questions. I am hungry." Nate assessed Tina. Nice looking woman. Not a giddy girl. Damn good looking woman actually. Fit, pretty face, quick wit. A lot like Karen. Under different circumstances, Tina would be right up his alley. But he had no desire to risk anything.

"Sit at the table and I'll go play with pots and

pans.”

Nate took a seat at the dining room table. His knee hit something hard. Reaching under the table, he retrieved an AK-47. This woman knew her weapons. A hint of a smile flashed across his face as he fingered the gun.

“You’ve discovered my little friend,” Tina said as she set the coffee service on the table.

“You favor a lot of firepower.”

“It’s useless though. I emptied my magnum into that thing and it kept on moving. Cream? Sugar?”

“Black is fine.”

Tina poured.

Nate sipped slowly. “Guns are no use. It just gives us humans false security.” He pulled out a notepad. “Tell me your story.”

“My mom had requested to keep the bedroom window open just for some real air. Just a little bit. She was changing into her nightclothes while I was in the hallway. I heard a cry, ran back to the room. It had her in its grasp.”

“What did it look like?”

“I call it a bug-bird. When visible, it had colorless, papery opaque wings. Kind of nondescript.”

“How big?” he quizzed over the rim of the cup.

“It filled the wall of the room.” Tina threw up her arms to demonstrate. “It definitely had an

intelligence."

What makes you say that?"

"When I tried to chase it away, it just grinned at me."

"Laughed?"

"Not a laugh. A grin. Like it knew my efforts were futile and it *knew* it had the upper hand." The timer dinged in the kitchen. "Dinner. Excuse me."

\* \* \* \*

They finished the rest of the stew and the cornbread. Tina rummaged in the fridge and found a bottle of Chablis. They took the bottle and two wine flutes into the living room. Tina found conversing with Nate easy. It had the rhythm of a tennis match. He was personable and she had to admit, after checking him out a bit, that he was extremely fuckable. His jeans were snug, not tight. His blue T-shirt matched his eyes. It hugged his deceptively muscular form in the correct places. He had a kind of been-there-done-that expression. It appealed to her. Tina had no time for people without histories.

"And that was my Matty and that's why I need her back." Tina swallowed the contents of her flute in one swig.

"My wife was snatched from right under my

nose. We were in a car one minute then *poof!* She was gone."

"It hurts. Leaves a void."

"Yes, a void. Tina, I think we can help each other. Would you join my team?"

"Would I have to travel?"

"Only if required."

"I have to sleep on it." She held his glass and poured more wine for him.

"Only fair. I apologize for my behavior earlier today." Nate took the flutes and the bottle and set them on the coffee table. Without hesitation, he pulled her into an embrace and kissed her without warning.

## CHAPTER SEVEN

Tina pulled back. "Is this the wine? What's this about?"

"I am not drunk." Nate blinked, baffled by the question. "I kissed you. The wine had *nada* to do with it."

"Why?"

"I wanted to. I couldn't help it. You exude a certain something. And I think you wanted it to...and possibly a little more."

"Yeah, something was rattling around the back of my mind, Mr. Lowe."

Nate grinned.

Tina punched him in the arm. "Don't be smug. It's only hormones."

Nate urgently pushed her back into the couch cushions.

"Don't think I'm such a sure thing," breathed Tina, pushing against his chest.

"Let's not play games," cracked Nate. "You were checking me out from the moment we met."

Nate already had his hands under her top, feeling her breasts. "And I was doing the same with you."

"Prick," Tina said under her breath.

"The best one you'll ever have," Nate countered as he covered her mouth with his.

They grappled desperately and ended up rolling unceremoniously with a thud onto the carpet.

"Sorry," said Nate between pants. "You hurt?"

"Takes a lot more than that." Tina chuckled. "Now where were we? Oh, yes, about to get busy." Tina decided then and there to bed Mr. Lowe. Why not? She needed to exercise her dormant libido. She'd enjoy herself and send him on his way.

"You bet your sweet ass," he quipped.

They paused briefly to hungrily kiss one another, then commenced shucking clothes. Nate's T-shirt ended up a shredded blue rag. Tina's tank top became a useless piece of cloth tossed halfway across the room. She slipped out of her bottoms and yanked at Nate's jeans.

"Don't rip these! I'll have nothing to wear," cried Nate.

Tina laughed and still tugged them off roughly. Now free of restrictive clothing, they rolled around, fondling and fingering one another. They couldn't get enough, fast enough.

"Wait! Wait!" commanded Nate.

"What?" moaned Tina just as she was about to bite his butt cheek.

\* \* \* \*

"Just follow my lead." Nate knew it was crass to rush things, but tomorrow belonged to no one. Tenderness and leisure could come later. If the Felig would let there be a later. They needed to get to the nitty-gritty right now. He pinned her on her back and massaged up and down the front of her body. He roughly kneaded her breasts and tweaked her nipples into hard brown diamonds. "Is it good?" he asked hoarsely. "Tell me." He laved and sucked the hard dots into his mouth, then slid lower to nip at her.

\* \* \* \*

"Damn yes!" Tina squirmed and melted at the sensation of his hot breath on her skin.

Nate abruptly stopped and sat back on his heels.

Tina made her move. "Now you follow my lead." She frenched him so completely that their mouths created audible suction. She pushed him onto his back, straddling his hips while she rubbed and kissed his chest. "I think this wants my attention," she remarked, referring to his

jerking penis. "It's been nudging me for the last few minutes."

"Tina, wait. Dig in my jeans pocket. My wallet. Some condoms."

She moved fast. "Some? I count about twelve. Been saving these for a rainy day?" She waved his stash at him.

"Yep. And I hope it turns into monsoon season." Nate raised up far enough to suck on one of her jutting nipples.

She took a pack, ripped it open and placed one on the tip of his bobbing penis. Nate lifted his head long enough to watch her unfurl it down his shaft. With Nate's hands on top of hers, they both manipulated him to rock hard readiness.

"Whoa, girl!" he gasped. "Slow it down a bit or it will be over before it's begun."

"Me? Who's guiding my hands, freak?"

They continued to stroke, caress, test and invade each other to utter frenzy.

"Nate," Tina declared, in a determined tone that any man would come to recognize from experience. She stretched out on her back on the carpet. "Come on."

"You ready for me?"

He obliged by splaying her thighs as wide as possible. He positioned himself between her legs and with her help, guided his hot flesh into her trembling body.



"Oh shit!" they hissed in unison as solid heat pierced wet heat.

Braced above her, Nate began pumping. He pushed in and pulled out swiftly and deeply, shuddering with every effort. Tina clung to him tightly as he worked her. Sweat seeped from their every pore. The temperature in the room seemed to soar to a thousand degrees. His scant, wiry chest hair abraded her tender nipples, but she welcomed the slight discomfort. She locked her arms around his moist back and her legs around his waist. They pistoned wildly on each other, their noisy, slick connection chasing that familiar ending.

"Oh God! Don't stop!" Tina yelled.

"You almost there already? 'Cuz I sure as hell am," Nate puffed, his sweat him and falling onto Tina's writhing torso. He closed his eyes. "So good. So good. Such a long time." He clamped his hands on her slippery ribcage and pounded her wetness even faster.

Tina scooted lower and placed her legs over his shoulders to receive even more of him. She thought they'd drown in sweat, but the slip-sliding sensation was luscious. She had missed this kind of joining. She engulfed him and held on for blast-off. "Yes. That way. A-a-ah!"

"Tina!" Nate went rigid and shook like an old amusement ride due for an overhaul. "Oh, Tina.

Oh no."

"O-o-oh!" sang Tina as Nate expanded and exploded inside her. Her sheath clasped around him and milked him for what seemed like forever.

\* \* \* \*

"Tina," Nate sighed in her ear as he savored the rippling of her core along his member. He kept pumping just to feel the delicious little aftershocks of their orgasms. A heaving Nate peered down into Tina's beatific face. He smoothed her soaked curls from her forehead. "Seems we needed that. Don't ya think?" Nate grinned.

\* \* \* \*

"Hold up! Hold up!" Tina made the time out sign with her hands. "We've been at it since ten." It wasn't that she didn't love it. It had been a long time since she'd had sex with a partner, let alone damned good sex with *this* partner. Unassuming Mr. Lowe knew how to throw down. But goodness. It was five and a girl needed her beauty sleep, some food. Besides, she was sure feeling was beginning to leave from down there. "When was the last time you had sex with a partner, man?"

"Probably the same millennium as you,

woman." He released his sweaty grip on her ribcage. He blatantly pondered those marvelous boobs. "Breakfast?"

"If you do the cooking. I'm drained." Tina limped toward the bathroom.

"Let's get cleaned up and dressed first," Nate suggested. "It cuts down on the probability that we'll bang again after we eat. I am a gentleman. I can see you are a little tender." He chuckled.

"Everybody's a comedian," mumbled Tina as she stepped under the showerhead. She jumped when Nate slid in behind her. He placed a condom package surreptitiously in an empty soap dish.

"I'm just helping you wash parts you can't reach. Okay?"

"Scout's honor?"

\* \* \* \*

"Yeah. Yeah." Nate opened a tube of wash and squeezed some on Tina's hair and onto her back. "I like this scent." He massaged the lather into her curls, letting it run down her back and over her buttocks. The sensation was obviously bliss to Tina. He noted the little sighs escaping her. They were arousing him because they sounded similar to the ones she'd been making off and on for the last seven hours. He rinsed her hair, then switched

to loofah mitts when he did her back. Same results. His touch slipped lower to caress her bottom. He tossed the mitts aside and Tina leaned against a shower wall for support. He retrieved the condom pack, opened it and unrolled its contents onto his raging hard on. He went back to washing her bottom. With each deep sweep of her flesh, his hand moved closer to her vagina.

“What’s going on back there?”

“I’m bathing you.” His long fingers glided forward. Nate scooted closer, bent his knees and braced himself.

“You promised! You horn dog!” Tina bent over to accept more of his fingers. “Scout’s honor,” she mewled.

Nate grabbed her around her soapy waist and pulled her back onto his erection.

Tina gasped. Her hot sheath enveloped half of him instantly.

“Who said I was a scout?” Nate whispered in her ear as he began to pump. “All I said was yeah. I never said that I was a scout.”

## CHAPTER EIGHT

**T**ina came back to herself, or more precisely, came to on her bed. Nate must have placed her there after their shower tryst. The familiar aroma of coffee filled her nostrils. “Ouch,” she mouthed as she got out of bed. She really was raw down there. How many times had they indulged? While not huge, Nate was in control of his equipment and had put her long unused nether regions through their paces. She hobbled to the dresser, pulled out her undergarments, a red T-shirt and a pair of gray yoga pants. She glanced in the mirror and finger-combed her spirals. She shoved her feet into black mules and followed the noise in the kitchen. The sound reminded her so much of her old routine with Matty. Once she was in the dining room, Nate surprised her by popping through the kitchen’s swinging doors with a full coffee pot and a plate of buttered wheat toast.

“Finally! I thought you were dead.” Shirtless, he wore his black jeans and combat boots. He

placed the items on the table and then scratched his blond cueball of a head. "I mean I know I am good, but I didn't think I was *that* good." He grinned. "You're no slouch either. You don't have much in that fridge that passes for breakfast food."

"Haven't had time to shop," she quipped. His bare, tight torso was making her mind wander. They had attacked each other so quickly last night that she had not had time to really, completely scope out the goods. "Nate, we have to talk."

"Sounds ominous." He filled their cups.

"Nate, we can't let this thing—"

"Don't be coy. Are you referring to the delicious time we had fucking?" He placed her own plate of buttered toast in front of her and moved the strawberry jelly jar closer.

"Yes. I'm talking about what happened last night. We can't let it take over. It can't happen again. We have more important matters going on." She picked up a piece and ate heartily.

"Can't take over? Can't happen again?" Nate's nostrils flared.

"Right! It's obvious we both needed it last night, but the fever has passed. We have to focus."

"Let me process this," Nate said. His brows were drawn down in disapproval. "Did you like any of what we did? Were we hurting anyone?"

"Of course and no."

"Then why stop?"

Tina reached for one of his hands and squeezed it. "It'll get in the way. We'll be distracted. You, us, together. It was incredible. But that was it. No more."

Nate fell silent and sipped his coffee. He slipped his hand from her hold.

"Nate, you're a warrior, too. You know what I'm saying is true. We can be great allies."

"Just not lovers?"

"You got it."

"Then we won't love. We'll just fuck."

"Excuse me?"

"You heard what I said. Don't get your panties in a twist. If we remain adult about this, it will work. Be honest. You are a smart woman. Fuck buddies. It's a perfect arrangement. No obligations. No commitment. Only sex. Raw, hot sex whenever we need it."

"That means I'll have to be at your beck and call. And how do we work it out when you want it and I don't."

"I don't count on that happening."

"Oh my. So sure of our prowess." She enjoyed this bit of sparring.

"Yes, I am." He leaned across the table. "Tina, I needed that last night. It had been ages since I'd been that fulfilled. Not since... Never mind. I felt it in your response, too. Come on, don't blow a sweet thing. Now, to fulfill the premise of the deal

you would have to accompany me wherever I go. What do you say to that?"

"Are you monogamous? I would not share my fuck buddy with others."

"Completely. No matter what the sexual situation, I am and have always been faithful. No worries there. We need this mutual itch scratching."

"I'm keeping my place, plus my own room wherever we go."

"But you'll have to move in with me in case the sex jones hits us at three AM. No running across town or hopping on planes to answer booty calls."

"And you'll still help me with this Felig thing?"

"I swear." He put his right hand over his heart.

"Fine. I'm game. If it doesn't work, we'll both walk away. One other thing, Nate."

"Yeah?"

"No more kissing."

Nate's hand came down rather possessively on one of Tina's. "But we kissed yesterday, Tina."

"That was yesterday. It's way too personal. This is business."

"No kissing? You're a hoot, but you got a deal. We'll iron out the details later. A pleasure doing business with you, Ms. Cain."



## CHAPTER NINE

Could she go through with it? She had to. It meant a chance at saving Matty. Tina stuffed her three-piece, bright, pink soft-sided luggage set with her clothes and toiletries. Tatum was already in his carrier by the front door, howling his butt off.

"Hush, Mr. T. It's all right. You'll like it. Nate may have better food for you. But will I like it?" Grandma would have said that she was going to be his concubine. Matty would have used a stronger word. No way around it. No other way to dress it up. Moz and Evie had even asked was it a wise thing to do.

"It is. It is. I'm a grown woman. It was my decision. Just keep an eye on my place." She closed the spare set of keys in Evie's hand. "Please."

"Give him a time table, honey. Make him deliver in an allotted time. Don't let him play you." She cupped Tina's chin in her hand. "He'll

use you and before you know it, you'll be out the door without the thing you entered the deal for."

"Give him three months. No Matty. No more you. Plain and simple," said Moz. "I think Mr. Lowe just wants to put his cream in a little coffee," he harrumphed. "Three months no more. We'll come and get you."

"Moz, I'd sell my soul to get back Matty."

"That's what scares me. 'Cuz the path to perdition starts with the body."

"Moz, please get my extra luggage from that high shelf in the hallway."

Evie took Tina aside. "Honey, I'm a nurse like your momma was. Just between me and you. Girl talk." Evie leaned in and whispered, "Get a vibrator. Get out of this."

"Evie!" Tina laughed and clapped an open hand to her cheek. "What do you know about such things? Besides, it's just not the same. But I appreciate your concern." Tina walked her to the door. "I have to be ready in an hour. He's sending his car. I love you both. I'll be in touch. Believe me."

"If you need us, don't hesitate one second." Moz lined up the empty bags. "We'll be there in a heartbeat to get you. Love you. Bye for now."

Tina closed the door, gathered up the bags and rushed back to the bedroom to pack more items. She stuffed her train case with all of the tubes of

the honey-chamomile showergel and lotion Nate fancied. Makeup. Check. Sundries. Check. Condoms? She didn't have any. She had not needed them for so long she would be at a lost as to whom to ask. Well. Evie would help. She knew where to get a vibrator. Nate seemed to have a source. Umm. She'd definitely have to ask him. Suddenly, the bedroom got terribly hot. Just like when she and Nate were otherwise engaged. She broke out in a sweat and peeled off her white hoodie.

Tatum started howling again.

"Come on, kitty. Cut the noise." She drew her gun from the shoulder holster. "Show yourself, you bastard." She fired a round. The sound brought some faces to neighboring windows. "Why are you here now? There's no live-sex show going on. Seems you like to watch." The pocket of heat swirled around her. "Don't play with me. Show yourself." She fired again, then realized it was useless and put the gun away.

*That's right, sweetie. Put it away. Calm down,* a comforting voice advised in her head.

"Mom? Mom?" Tina slumped to her knees, tears just trembling on her lashes. As quickly as it arrived, the pocket of heat dissipated. "Matty, was that you? Please come back."

Through her haze, Tina heard voices shouting her name from the other side of her apartment

door.

"Tina! Tina?"

She got to her feet and stumbled to her hall just as Moz, Nate and Kevin came crashing through the door.

"Yo! You ripped my freakin' door off the hinges," lamented Tina, pulling at her hair. "Oh man!"

Nate looked sheepishly up into Tina's accusatory stare from the pile of bodies on her fallen front door. "I, uh, we, heard gunfire."

"And?" She looked down at him, tapping her foot all the while.

"It came from your place."

"And?"

"We thought you were in danger."

"And? This is a neighborhood where gunfire is the norm. Like the rest of the country. Folks are jumpy. A fired bullet rarely warrants a busted down door around here." She surveyed the damage again. "Oh man, my door."

"Like I said, I heard shots."

"You must frequent damned quiet sections of the cities you visit."

"Man, get your bony-ass elbow outta my back," yelled Moz from under Nate. "Sorry to interrupt your chitchat, but move that elbow."

"And the two of you are crushing me!" added Kevin. "Ouch! Get off me."

"I should get my camera," chuckled Tina, helping pull Nate to his feet, then Moz, eventually freeing Kevin. "How can I leave now?" Tina wiped her eyes. "My door's gotta be fixed before I go anywhere."

Nate whipped out his phone. "Yeah, send Jim and Ed. Tell them to bring the recon box to Ms. Cain's place. Later." Nate had a stupid look on his face. "Just call me Mr. Fix-it."

"Well, you oughta be," said Tina. "You broke it. I don't mean to be an ingrate. Thank you all for coming to my imagined rescue." She eyed Nate again. "Why are you here? I thought you were sending your car?"

"I was free this morning," he responded matter-of-factly. "And thought I'd come myself."

"How gallant."

Nate pulled Tina away from the others. "Are you going to bust my balls about this deal between us?" he whispered, indignant. "Let me know. We *can* dissolve it."

"O-o-oh. *Touchy* and gallant. Buyer's remorse?" Tina laughed. "Now who's got their Y-fronts in a twist?"

"Let's change the subject, shall we? Besides, as you well know I don't wear underwear. Why did you shoot your gun?"

"It was here, again."

"Felig?"

"Bingo. It seems to have a telltale heat signature. It got very hot in a short period of time. Same as the night we..."

"And I thought you were reacting to me," a crestfallen Nate added.

"We'll talk about it in depth. In private. I have a theory or two. Oh, you were good." She patted his hand. "More than good." Tina swore she saw Nate's chest puff out.

"Boss?" Jim and Ed called to him.

"In here."

The men introduced themselves and got to work.

"Nate, I'm taking these two bags out to the car," Kevin said.

"My door?"

"No thang, Tina. I'll stay until they finish," Moz answered. "Go on. Remember what we talked about."

"Thanks." Tina kissed his cheek and he emitted a sigh of contentment.

Nate grabbed Tatum's carrier and Tina's free hand. "We'll be in touch, Moz. Take care."

Tina hoisted her train case over her shoulder and they exited the apartment.

## CHAPTER TEN

There he was, moving that woman in with him, into his hotel room for the time being while he was in this city. Later she'd follow him. Seems this female was to accompany him everywhere. Her and a pet. He hated animals. It was a known fact. Look at him, chatting her up. Reassuring her was more like it. Wait until she discovers the real Nate. She will run screaming from whatever abode they'd be sharing. Fuck buddies indeed. How disgusting! Their conversations and antics had to be heard and seen to be believed. Thank goodness this new way of existing let her be everywhere at once. Time to look in on the happy couple for an update. Nate and Tina were seated on the neutral beige couch in the sitting area of his VIP suite.

"So, Nate, how would you go about getting my Matty back?" Tina asked between sips of icy ginger ale.

"Tina," Nate took her glass and set it on the coffee table. "The Felig covers the globe. We have

no idea if the faction who attacks here, stays here. Like us, they could travel, so the one who snatched your mom could be anywhere. That's if they are individuals. If they are a collective...who knows? How to go about it?" Nate put his arms around her.

"That's your problem to solve, Mr. Expert. I'm just added support." She shrugged off his grip and stood. "If we only knew their weak spots."

"Then what?" Frowning, Nate settled into the sofa cushions and propped his feet on the table.

"Don't do that."

"Don't do what?"

"The feet. The feet," lamented Tina. "It's a gross habit. Those boots have walked in everything. Ugh! Please take them off the table. Put 'em in the foyer."

"Okay, okay." Nate removed his feet from the table and did as she asked. "Geesh, you sound like a wife."

"Deliver me. Where were we? Oh. They may be a group mind. Maybe we could find out how to pierce it and contact an individual." Tina paced, hands on her hips. "We know one thing, they need to continuously absorb life forms. It looks like they can't *live* without stealing other species' life forces."

"That's true and believable," Nate said.

"Another thing, Nate," Tina walked over and



planted herself in front of him. "I noted that when they, it, are around, tremendous heat follows. Like I said before, I felt it more the times we'd be having sex. It's like they have extremely high metabolisms and feed off all kinds of energy."

"And that they like to watch. But really? You picked up on that?" A look flashed across Nate's face that curiously resembled the expression of a kid caught with his hand in the paranormal cookie jar. "We live in a world teeming with people. How can their energy source be cut off? There's no way."

"Look at the patterns of their attacks. I know you've studied them, Nate."

"Yes, I did discover that they gravitate toward heavily populated areas with hot weather. The tropics and other hot areas have been devastated. The States or any other country in their summer seasons."

"Then we need to watch sparsely populated areas when it's cold."

"Tina, listen to yourself." Nate laughed out loud and shook his head. "Where the hell is this place? What the hell kind of place would it be? A morgue freezer? The simple fact of existing —"

"Creates heat. I know."

"Yep, sure does." Nate looked off toward the suite's bedroom. His lips curved into that already familiar grin she had learned to read. "Heat. Like

now.”

“Again? We just engaged for hours earlier this morning.” Tina bristled. “I don’t know if I’ll survive this deal.” She unzipped her hoodie and eased out of her Rykas.

Nate stood, took the garment and tossed it over the back of the couch. “Leave the rest on. I want to take it off.” He turned her in the bedroom’s direction, hands settled on her hips. Walking close behind her, he whispered, “Besides, it’s late. We’ve been talking all evening.” He nipped and licked her ear. “I can’t help it if my business partner is incredibly desirable.”

“It’s apparent you can’t.” Tina reached a hand behind her and slid it into the waistband of his jeans. Finding his hot, growing flesh, she alternately gripped and fondled it. Keeping a firm hold, she pulled his groaning form along behind her.

“And neither can I.”

## CHAPTER ELEVEN

Unable to fall asleep after their sex session, Nate crawled out of bed quietly, wrapped a towel around his hips and padded into the darkened living room. The more he touched Tina, the harder it was becoming to stay in character. He'd almost lost all composure this last time. He walked to the bar and poured himself vodka on the rocks, then sat in the chair in front of the sliding glass door. Tatum rubbed his fat head against his free hand as it dangled over the side of the chair.

Yes, touching her was going to be his undoing. Actually fucking her would. He knew there was no love between them, nor should there be. But her smooth, nutmeg-colored skin and its warmth were maddening. The way her limber body responded and opened to take his. The way her boobs jostled when she rode him.

"God help me." Nate sipped. Just the unbridled passion she gave to him without strings. He could

have loved a woman like her if he had been given the chance. But could she love him once she knew who he was? He rolled the cool highball over his burning brow and chest. She was no dummy. He'd felt the rise in temperature tonight so he was certain she had.

The absolute, most difficult thing was keeping his wings from emerging when his or her orgasm hit. It was the pinnacle of being with her. He pulled her hair and pounded her deeper. Tina let go totally. She screamed. She slapped his butt. She cursed. He adored it. The sprouting of his wings meant he felt the same way. It hurt him, literally and figuratively, to hide them. All he wanted to do was fold her in them and rejoice. They had almost burst through his skin this time. He listened for her footsteps. Could he risk a full display? His shoulder blades ached.

"Fuck it. Gotta chance it." Nate put aside his drink, stood and walked to the sliding door. In the sliver of moonlight peeking through the slightly parted drapes, he whipped off his towel and stretched out his arms. Eyes closed, he summoned thoughts of a naked Tina. Just below each shoulder blade, a deep slit appeared. The more he conjured memories of sex, the more the slits quivered and lengthened. Nate gripped the drapes as the still folded framework of his wings began to poke through the openings.

"Oh yeah, oh yeah. Come on," he chanted, his voice sounding exactly the same as when he climaxed. "Come on, don't stop, you fuckers!" The soft, damp, bony structures shot through the openings and unfurled rapidly in all their glory. His highly arched, crimson-tinged, flesh-colored wings fluttered and flapped with a frenzy. The six-foot span created quite a breeze. Tatum ran under the couch. His wings' long stint of suppression in combination with their swift delivery and his vivid, erotic slide show of Tina forced him to his knees and made him ejaculate.

"Yes! Yes!" he cried softly, biting his lower lip. If only he could share this with her and not have her run away. Getting to his feet, he flexed and beat his delicate limbs until he felt complete. Retrieving the towel from the floor, he cleaned himself off. Nate closed his eyes again and sucked in a breath as he willed the wings to retract. He rocked back and forth as they withdrew. He knew it was just a matter of time. The more comfortable and secure he felt with Tina, the greater the possibility of discovery. "Show yourself. I know you are here," Nate demanded into the darkness. "Come on."

A faint rustling emanated from a corner, then a rush of heat.

"What do you want, Karen? Stop trailing me. You're violating the rules. We agreed to stay

apart.”

*Can't a wife watch over her husband? A Felig floated to the middle of the room. Even one who is fuck buddy to a slut? His deceased wife kept fading in and out. The pretty face of a brunette mixed with a bug-bird visage. Her smile was other worldly and had nothing to do with happiness. You and that woman are revolting. Do you two ever come up for air? Karen's wings fluttered angrily as she hovered near the ceiling now. If you had only sweated half that energy over me...*

“A side effect of being half-Felig now. Karen, I cared about you once. But it is over. All we had in common was the sex. It was over well before the accident. If you recall, we were arguing when the car crashed. Or should I say when *you* crashed it. We were an inch away from divorce. The Felig took you because you were dying. They repaired me the best they could and sent me back. I wish they would have let me die. Tina is helping me go on with my life, even in this wretched form the Felig left me with.”

*The only thing I see is you helping her in and out of bed, Karen spat. Besides, she has not seen the real you, yet. That ought to be rich when she does. You have deceived her.*

Nate rubbed his brow and grimaced. “Go away, Karen. Even in death you are a pain in the ass. We never could agree on shit. I am in limbo. I hurt.

Not fully human, not fully Felig. Not dead. I live everyday in fear that I'll be discovered."

*My heart bleeds for you."*

"Plus people think I am this grieving widower who is on a mission to wipe out all things Felig." Nate shivered as if cold water had been tossed on him. "I'm living a lie."

Karen drifted lower and came to him. *End it. Do yourself a favor. Kill yourself. Stop your whining.* Karen smirked and tossed her mane over her shoulder. *Your buddy will survive and you won't have to act like you are helping that mother who is where she belongs.*

"Still a selfish witch. Why am I not surprised? Go away! Go away! Let me alone. I can't believe I actually saw something attractive in you once."

Karen retreated to the darkness. *I'll be around. Watching. You two amuse me.*

"Bitch."

*Always,* her voice echoed before she disappeared.

Nate took a seat in the chair and let out a huge sigh. He reclaimed his highball and gulped down the contents. Tatum re-appeared and nudged his free hand again. "Life. Overrated, ain't it?" Nate said as he scratched the cat behind the ears.

\* \* \* \*

As soon as Nate left the bed, Tina's eyes opened. Oh, God, could she die from too much pleasure? Maybe she was just exaggerating because she had been inactive so long in the sex department and that Nate was good. Yeah, it could be her imagination, but she swore that when they screwed, she saw Paradise. The man was slightly oversexed, but it was the best boning she'd ever had. She lost sense of time and place. She became sensation encased in feverish skin. Mindless sensation, which if given a chance, she felt would materialize on its own whenever she came. If she'd had any shame, she'd be mortified at the way she carried on when fucking him. Tina rolled to her side and propped up on one elbow.

"To hell with that. I refuse to let convention spoil my sex life." She returned to her back and replayed the last two hours in her head. It made her blush in the darkness. Except for backdoor love, they had done everything. She had explained to Nate that she just didn't get down that way. No biggie to him. He liked the rest of their repertoire. He was one cool dude for a white guy. For a guy period. Even if he was a tired dresser. She'd have to help him with that.

That excessive heat had been present again tonight even though the AC had been on and the windows closed. She still was covered in sweat. Putting it in its place until she knew the reason for



it, it kind of added to the encounter—scorching, raw, liquid. She just did not like not knowing the origin. That fact creeped her out. She was stumped as to why this energy followed them and only manifested when they screwed. Was it Matty? Watching?

“I hope not,” she murmured out loud. “Sorry Mom.” Was it Felig watching? Alien life forms observing Earthling copulation? E-e-ew! But why her and Nate? She had not been completely in the moment at one instance during their tryst. She had found it difficult to ignore the strange rippling beneath the skin on Nate’s back. It had happened before. She always came first and she always held him tightly around his back and let it rip spontaneously. Tonight when she’d orgasmed and squeezed him, she had felt definite movement, other than muscle under his skin. It had weirded her out, but not enough to stop and interrogate him in the midst of her savory climax. What the hell was it?

Naked, Nate sauntered into the bedroom looking refreshed. “Good. You’re awake. I brought you something cold to drink. Your fav. Ginger ale on the rocks. I put a maraschino cherry in it.” He handed her the frosty highball, then went to turn off the A C and open the windows.

“How did you know I was parched?” Tina audibly gulped half the glass.

"It was logical. We'd banged it out pretty good. You need to replenish your fluids."

"I hope you replenished yours."

Coming back to the bed, he balled up the perspiration soaked top sheet and threw it on the floor. "You'll catch your death if you sleep with this and the AC on. Plus, my duty is to anticipate your every desire. Remember?"

"Our deal includes soda, too?" Tina finished her drink. She twirled the cherry by its stem between her front teeth.

Nate took the glass and placed it on the nightstand.

"Want my cherry?" Tina giggled.

"Very funny. But I'm okay with being a latecomer." He bent, plucked the fruit from her mouth and devoured it. "Move your behind over."

Tina shifted to accommodate him and he climbed onto the bed. After he settled her to face him, he dropped his head to lick up the sweat droplets still clinging to her breasts.

\* \* \* \*

"Sweet dreams," he exhaled. As he drifted off, he felt Tina's fingers running up and down his back.

## CHAPTER TWELVE

**T**ina saw a lot of the United States and a few foreign countries since she'd teamed up with Nate. He was in demand and from the responses of some of the female audience members at his lectures, he was in demand for more than talking. Nate was a hottie in any locale. Yeah, a hottie and as it turned out...a lovely guy. She'd watched him console people who had lost family to the Felig. He'd embrace them and listen to their stories. Tina had never seen him that way before, as she had not stayed for his lecture the first time they had met. To her surprise, he'd drafted her to be part of the circuit. After he gave his background on who he was and had aired the slide show of what the Felig had done since their arrival, Tina would take the stage with her story.

Now two months into their deal, Tina found herself comfortably settled in his life. If they stayed in hotels, she ordered room service for him, knowing his tastes. In the upstate N Y country

house they shared, she cooked. Lord, she felt like a wife—a fate to which she had vowed never to succumb! It was becoming scary because she was getting used to their routine. Routine. Ugh! Part of it included watching him sleep and taking that nightly shower together. Or goodness forbid, watching him do mundane chores around the house when not on the circuit. Yes, the house. She had been curious as to how he got it and when she'd first arrived, she'd asked him.

"How did you and how do you still pay for all this?" she had asked, standing on the porch of the five-acre farmhouse, most of its out buildings and landscaping in view. "Money is sort of useless now. How did you do it?"

"I barter for all my needs. This house was *paid for* by my giving a series of lectures one summer at a paranormal institute in Syracuse. The institute owned the house and *sold* it to me for my services."

"Did you furnish it and renovate it the same way?"

"Yep. Everything I have, I either bargained or bartered for."

"I know."

"That sounded worse than what I meant. Tina, please don't take it the wrong way."

"I didn't." She raised a tissue to her eyes. "Man, oh man. The pollen is high up here. Show me

where to put my stuff. The room I asked for when I need to be alone. Where is it?"

"Tina, I'm sorry." Nate softly brushed her cheek. "Don't shut me out."

"What are you talking about? I ask to be shown to my room and you start buggin'."

"I want to talk about us."

"And I want to put my crap away and let Tatum use his litter pan."

"Tina?"

"Nate?" Tina crossed her arms over her body and tapped her foot.

"Okay." He scooped up as many bags as he could carry and hauled them to her room.

They still were hammering out a theory or two that might bring anyone back who had been snatched by the Felig. Progress! Matty still communicated with her telepathically. Tina had decided that it was her mom. No one else would have called her *sweetie* or touched her cheek that special way. To break the routine a tad, she and Nate had reversed it tonight. Because of the heat, they had showered early and were already in cooling, relaxed nightwear and were seated at the dining room table in the rustically outfitted dining room. Tina eyed the deer head on the wall. She pointed to the animal with her fork. "You partial to that abomination?"

"No. It came with the house. This is the Adirondacks. It's décor." Nate chowed down on the rosemary and garlic chicken with new potatoes and broccoli that Tina had prepared. He never looked up.

"Well for as long as I am here, can we put it in storage? It makes me think of poor Bambi's mom." Tina sipped her ginger ale and crunched the ice cubes. "Nate?"

He finally came up for a breather. "Sorry, T. It's just that this meal is so freakin' good. You have to agree, the food on the road can't compare."

"Thanks. I try."

\* \* \* \*

In addition to the food, Tina looked exceedingly delicious, tonight. He'd almost gone into full display mode in the shower. Now in her peach silk teddy and matching wrap, she was distracting. They went with her skin tone beautifully and the throat of that damned wrap kept falling open, displaying that familiar smooth cleavage. Maybe it was the air up here, but he was feeling more randy than ever. The evidence—the tent in his lap his penis was making of the thin, black gauze of his pajama bottoms. "You do more than try. You actually can cook. Why aren't you married?" He patted his stomach and finished his

Chablis.

"It never happened. When I was ready, no one eligible was around. Then Matty got sick and my focus changed. I was not gonna put up with some triflin' fool just to have a dick in the house that would take out trash and occasionally fix things. If something ain't happening, you don't push it. Besides, at the moment, I'm some guy's fuck bunny."

"Buddy," Nate corrected through his last bite of potato.

"Pardon me." Tina rose and began stacking empty dishes and Nate helped. They filed into the previously little used gourmet kitchen. Stainless steel appliances, gray granite countertops, matching travertine floors. Tina had only seen this stuff in magazines. She put the leftovers away while Nate filled the dishwasher.

"Okay, so what's it tonight?" Nate asked while he scoped the contents of the fridge. "Pudding? Ice cream? Pie and coffee? Popcorn?"

"I'll take a pear and some Port Salut." Tina watched his sinewy back ripple and his compact little butt flex as he stood in front of the cool space.

"That's not a proper dessert."

"It has to be. My ass is getting big. What you gonna have?"

"Some of your peach pie and coffee. You'll just have to get back on your routine. Tomorrow we'll

do the Krav Maga workout. Get you sweating another way. I must say more ass to palm is not a bad thing."

"Yeah. Yeah. Until it drags the ground. Okay, move. I'll set it up and you go get the papers for tonight's work." She retrieved the pie pan and grabbed the coffeemaker.

"Heat up the slice please, and plop a scoop of vanilla ice cream on top. Be right back." Nate went to his study, rummaged through the files and returned to the living room just as Tina entered carrying a large, treat-filled tray.

"That was quick," they said in unison, then laughed.

Nate cleared a space on the table, and then he took a seat and arranged the files on the burgundy sectional.

Tina handed him his pie and pushed his filled coffee cup across the table in front of him.

"Okay." Nate chose a paper and started reading. "Heat draws Felig to highly populated areas because mankind radiates heat." He dug into his dessert.

"Right." Tina munched cheese. The throat of her robe fell open again.

She ignored it, but Nate's gaze shot to the spot. "Delicious, babe." He watched her and slowly licked his spoon. "What else draws them?"

"Situations which expend high energy."



"Or intense sensation," he said hoarsely.

"Right again." Tina sucked a slice of pear into her mouth.

"Hey, we are on the ball." Nate stared as the fruit disappeared into her mouth.

"We do make a good team."

"Types of intense sensation could be," he leafed through the ream again. "Grief. Happiness. Pain."

"So all actions which release intense sensation. It could be the satisfaction felt from a good meal. Getting a promotion or top grades. Hearing bad news." Tina crossed her sleek, toned legs.

Nate cleared his throat, reached over and stroked one of her calves. "Or the deep pleasure derived from making love," Nate said.

"Having sex, you mean?"

"No." He inclined his blond head, running his hand higher. "Making love."

"Nate, sex and love are different." Tina's face took on the look of a teacher trying to explain a new concept to a pupil. "When it comes to fucking, the sensation is the same."

"I disagree strongly. The sensation experienced, the energy expended, has to be greater when fucking while in love than when not in love." Nate put down his papers and sighed. "Why won't you kiss me?"

"You know why," Tina replied, returning plates to the tray. "Not tonight. Let's keep this business."

She removed his hand from her thigh.

"I can't. My business and personal life are combined. Look at me."

Tina stopped fiddling with the napkins and raised her eyes to him. "Yes?"

"Tina, why won't you kiss me?"

\* \* \* \*

She swore his blue eyes were on the verge of tears. "Because tonsil hockey is not my favorite sport. Okay? End of evening. I'll sleep in my room tonight." She rose to leave. "You're too worked up."

"What are you afraid of?" He stood and grabbed her by the shoulders.

"Nate, we've been through this...many times before. Up. Down. Sideways. Inside-out. It's part of our bargain. Let it go and let me go!" She pulled away from him. "Goodnight."

## CHAPTER THIRTEEN

The next week was rough on Nate. In actuality, Tina was rough on him. Their workouts now substituted for sex and their frequency increased. The level of aggression in their Krav Maga routines escalated to menacing.

"Son of a bitch!" Nate's hand shot to his mouth. He tested a side tooth and it wiggled in its socket. "That wasn't necessary, T. I know this is a contact sport, but you need to take it down a couple of notches."

Tina, in her black spandex catsuit, circled him, punching the air like a boxer. She bounced from one foot to the other. "Come on, Lowe. Defend yourself. Full throttle. Besides, I'm sure you've got a deal with a dentist somewhere."

Nate surprised her by rushing her, grabbing her by the throat with one hand and pinning her to the wall.

Tina sputtered and flailed, trying to grasp his singlet.

Nate observed her in smug delight. "Well, honey," he puffed. "I'm full throttle. What's next?"

\* \* \* \*

"Asshole!" she choked out. Tina tried to pry his fingers from her windpipe. Finally, she remembered. She thrust her left arm straight up, twisted sideways and broke his hold. She then planted a swift knee to his crotch. Tina turned and walked away.

\* \* \* \*

"Yow!" Thank God for the cup, Nate instantly thought. He still crumbled to the studio floor. "You're overreacting!"

"Kiss my ass, Nate!"

He coughed and heaved. "You mean that big, fat thing dragging the ground behind you?"

Tina slammed the door as she exited the mirrored studio.

"You haven't let me see it in a week, let alone kiss it," Nate shouted as he rose.

*Smooth operator.*

"Go away, you."

Karen appeared, cackling her head off. *Your dog and pony show is worth a gander, but you could do*

*better. She is an ingrate and you are a fool. Come be with me. As Felig, we'd live forever with all the humans we could absorb.*

"Just what I want—an eternity with you." Nate rubbed his jaw and his crotch.

*You two aren't going the distance. It's just sex. Face it.*

"I care deeply for her."

*Oh please. Karen flapped her wings wildly. No trace of human touched her features. She resembled a talking bug. She has no finesse. She was living in her own Mad Max movie until you found her. Maybe I'll absorb her.*

"Do that and I'll find some way to make you regret it. Bye, Karen. Go flutter someplace else."

\* \* \* \*

Tina stripped off her sweaty garb. *Bastard!* she mouthed under the shower spray.

*Tina, you love it.*

"What?" She shook water out of her ears. A gush of heat hit her. "Mom?"

*Tina, there is only one reason you treat him that way.*

"Did you see what he did?" She rubbed her neck. "Choked me."

*Admit it. That's love you're feeling. Or at least a deep case of like.*

"No, Mom. We work together to get you back."

*If I came back, I'd be in constant pain. My body had had it. Here, I am whole and perfect. Help others. There are others here who should not be here. Help them.*

*"You don't want to come back?"*

*Only if I could be completely well. Otherwise it hurts too much. I miss you, but I am with you, always. Help others.*

*"I can't believe you don't want to come back. In fact, I'm hurt. I think Nate and I are onto something and you don't want to return."*

*Don't take it personally. If I could return as my old self, I would not think about it. But that won't happen. Go help others, honey. You'll figure out how. You almost have. Remember I love you. Another thing. No matter what, Nate is a good man.*

*"Mom, stop being cryptic. Nate a good man, no matter what? What does that mean?" Tina turned off the shower, wrapped a towel around herself and stepped out.*

*Just have an open mind. I'll be around. I love you, sweetie.*

\* \* \* \*

"Boss? Boss? You okay?" Avner banged on Nate's bedroom door. "I heard a tiff between you and Tina." Avner was part of his security team. They had met in Israel when Nate had spoken at Tel Aviv University. Rumor had it he was ex-Mossad. Avner was just an ex-cop looking to make a

comfortable living in the US. He was a carbon copy of Nate except he was beefy. Though married, he practically lived at the house. In fact, he lived there when Nate went on the circuit.

Nate opened his door and greeted Avner with a fat lip.

"Boss, what happened?"

"Tina decked me."

"No kidding. What did you do?"

"I should fire you. Some bodyguard you are. You weren't anywhere around. What if she'd been an intruder?"

"Nate, I knew you two were working out. With your arrangement, I gave you two space and privacy."

"Avner, come in." Nate backed up to let him enter. "I have to ask you something."

Nate led him to a chair, where the man perched on its edge. "Avner, we share the same secret. How did you break the news of your *uniqueness* to Iris? How did she take it?"

"I don't have a secret. I was honest with her. I loved her and did not want to keep on deceiving her." Avner shrugged. "I guess she really loved me."

"I don't want Tina to flee. She thinks she's fighting Felig when in truth, she is sleeping with one."

"Half a one."

"How is Iris? How's the pregnancy?"

"Great on both counts. Seven months gone. Big as a house."

"Come to dinner tomorrow night. It's been a while."

"Thanks, Nate. She'll love getting out."

Nate stroked the furrow in his brow. "Once Tina finds out, she will leave."

Avner patted his forearm. "All I can say is...be honest. It's the best policy."

"I'll have to pick a good time to tell her."

"No such thing. Just do it. And make sure you give me ample warning. I don't wanna be here when you do."



## CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Tina and Nate made up, but kept their distance from each other for a day and a half. She had not even told him of the conversation she had had with Matty. It still smarted. Matty did not want to come back. Tina was torn because part of the reason she was with Nate was *because* of Matty. Their brainstorming over how to find a way back for Matty was for naught. As soon as her mom had revealed that coming back to the real world was out of the question, Tina felt she should vacate Nate's life. *Why am I still here?* "Because I am a slut," she said out loud while perched on a stool at the gray breakfast bar.

"Slut?" repeated a barefoot Nate as he stood on the kitchen's threshold. He had an extra spring in his step as he dished up the scrambled eggs, turkey bacon, toast, cantaloupe and juice that Tina had prepared.

"Just thinking out loud." Tina pulled her pink flannel robe tighter around her and tied it. She had

to promote a serious demeanor when confessing. He came to sit next to her at the bar.

"What's with the granny flannel, T?" He tugged at a sleeve. "I'm used to seeing more skin."

"Up here in the mountains, it seems to get cooler earlier than in the city. I'm glad I packed it."

"I'll keep you warm, babe." His left brow raised a fraction. "No attire required. Umm. What's in the eggs?"

"Garlic, onion, thyme. Dash of pepper."

"Needs hot sauce." Nate grabbed the bottle and drenched his plate in the liquid.

"That works, too." A half-smile crossed her face, but then disappeared when she turned to him. "Nate—"

"Oh, T, I forgot. Don't hit me again. I forgot to tell you. I invited Avner and Iris over for dinner tonight. He's a good guy and really works hard for us. Do you have a recipe to wow them?" Nate made a sucking sound to dislodge some bacon from his teeth and rubbed his bare chest.

Tina vacated her stool and went to the fridge. "We have chicken, steak, shrimp. All kinds of veggies."

\* \* \* \*

Nate watched her butt intently as she bent to forage deeper in the fridge.

She straightened quickly, whirled around to face him. "Quit watching my butt." She paused. "Iris is preggers?"

"Seven months. I like your butt." He cleansed his palate with some water.

"We should keep it simple. Her stomach is delicate. I think we should do grilled steaks, some chicken, grilled veggies and a rice pilaf. Nothing spicy." She closed the fridge door.

"Sounds good to me." Nate stood and closed the short distance between them. "Tina, I have missed you this last day and a half. I'm used to you being at my side." He pulled her sash. The robe popped open, exposing one of his gifts to her—a cream lace trimmed La Perla bikini underwear set in pale pink. "Oh man!" Nate dropped to his knees on the spot and nuzzled her flat, tight tummy. Holding her by the bottom, he poked his tongue into her navel and wiggled it, then guided her over to a stool.

\* \* \* \*

"Nate, what are you doing?" She knew by the way his gaze raked over her, she was going to lose command of the situation.

"S-s-sh!" He pulled her panties down and off in one move, then lifted her up on the seat.

"Wait." She pushed at his bare torso. I have to

tell you something."

"Me, too, but later." On a mission, he ignored her. He wrenched her robe away and undid the front hook on the bra.

"Nate!"

Without missing a beat, he opened her legs, tossed them over his shoulders. In an instant, his lips met her lower ones.

"Not here!" Tina tried to escape him, but he held her firmly by the hips. "Someone may come in."

"Fuck 'em." He locked eyes with her and proceeded to lave her.

Tina felt the heat and pressure and pleasure build. Her own hands claimed her boobs and fondled them as he licked and sucked at her noisily. Tina started to rock back and forth. He leaned her against the counter. Eyes now closed, Tina moaned and drummed her lower legs on his back. "That way. Yes. Oh yes. O-o-oh!"

Nate came up for air. "Don't be harsh on yourself. Since you refuse to let me kiss you one way, I'll do it another. Keep on touching yourself. Yeah, like that. You know how I love it." He dove back in.

Tina twirled out of control with each lap. She grabbed his head to keep from falling and to ensure constant contact, the situation out of her hands now. She looked down at him, smiling that

I'm-going-to-heaven-smile. "You are a bad, bad boy, Nate Lowe," she chanted while caressing his now Caesar-cut hair.

"And you like it," he breathed against her moistness while inserting his two middle fingers as far as they could go. He worked her vigorously and increased his assault on her senses when he alternated between fingers and tongue.

"A-a-ah! A-a-ah!" Tina quivered, shook. "Oh God, Nate!" Suddenly, her whole being convulsed and her core clamped down on his deeply imbedded digits as her thighs locked around his head.

Nate pried them open to tongue and poke her until the last squeal. Grinning like a Cheshire cat, he kissed her inner thighs and disengaged her limbs from him. Standing her up on shaky legs, he dressed her in her robe.

"If you're a slut, I'm one, too." Cleaning them up with several napkins, he remarked, "Damned good breakfast." He tossed the cloths in the trashcan and turned to leave. He turned back, remembering what she'd said earlier. "Sorry, T, you had something to tell me?"

Cocooning herself in her robe, she climbed, wobbly legged, up on her stool. She smoothed her curls and said, "I can't recall now, but it will come back to me."

"I'm sure it will." Nate tried to whistle his

favorite radio tune, but the triumphant smirk on his face interfered.

## CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Tina greeted Avner and Iris at the farmhouse's front door. "Hi, guys! Come to the living room. Drinkmeister is in there making his magic." Dressed in a lavender tracksuit with a white, three-quarter-length sleeved crew neck again, Tina was sticking to the conservative as her mind raced ahead to tonight's talk with Nate. Tina kissed them both on the cheeks as they filed in the door.

"Looking good, T," Avner said.

"You don't look half bad yourself, Av. Iris, you must be good for him." Tina put her arm around Iris' back and steered her down the hall.

"Tina, I try to keep him happy, in turn I'm happy. He's a good man."

"Not too loud, Iris." Tina cupped her hand around the young woman's ear and announced in a mock whisper, "You'll spoil him."

"Hey, dude!" yelled Nate from behind the bar. "Take a seat. The usual, Avner? Iris, I've made some iced tea for you."

"Yeah, just a beer for now," Avner responded.

"Iced tea, lots of lemon for me," his wife said.

Nate turned to Tina. "And you?"

"I'll have your famous hard lemonade. So, folks, you're gonna have a new addition in a couple of months," Tina began between tastes. She sat next to Iris on the sofa.

Iris beamed. "Tina, you're the only female for miles around that I know. I hope you'll be here for the birth." The sedate redhead saw Tina as a friend, an advisor.

"What about your mom? Isn't she coming?"

"She'll be here the end of next month, but I need you, too."

"Well to coin a line from a famous film, *I don't know nothing 'bout birthing no babies.*"

"Tina, in a pinch, I think you'd do fine."

"Maybe after a few of these." She lifted her glass and shook it.

"Why so hesitant, Tina? Don't you think you'd be up to the challenge?"

"Avner, anything could happen. I may not be here. A Felig could snatch me up." The room fell silent. "Well, I guess that's my cue to start dinner. Come help me, Iris or I should ask if you can help me?"

"Yes, I can."

"Follow me to the deck."



Iris placed the olive oil-rubbed, sliced eggplant, zucchini and carrots on the hot grill. Tina followed with the marinated steaks and some chicken cutlets for Iris. The men filed out to the space. "Nate, watch the meat while I check the pilaf." She handed him the tongs and tied the apron around his waist.

"Okay, June."

"Thanks, Ward."

It was their inside joke to call each other after the Cleavers from television famed show *Leave it to Beaver*. Specifically because they were so unlike the celluloid pair.

Forty-five minutes later, everyone was eating in the dining room.

"Try this, Iris." Avner cut off a portion of his steak for her.

"Honey, is it done? You know the thought of bloody meat makes me gag."

"It's well-done, hon. Open wide." He placed the slice in her mouth.

"Yum. Try my chicken." Iris placed a piece on his plate.

Tina and Nate watched the couple. It was obvious that they were deeply in love. They doted on each other. The child would make them inseparable.

"Nate should keep you, Tina. I've seen the

skanks he's been with."

"Avner!" Iris said with a sigh.

"I'm just saying that she's cleaned him up somewhat, given him a...I don't know what."

"A certain *je ne sais quoi*," Nate said as he looked at Tina.

"Whatever you want to call it, boss. Yeah."

"Oh my." Tina clutched an imaginary strand of pearls. "I did all that. And in another language, no less." She rose. "Who wants dessert?"

After devouring the glazed mixed fruit tart and the dark roast coffee and more shop talk, Iris and Avner bid their friends a good evening.

"I'll see you soon, Tina," Iris said. "Thanks for the invite. Everything was so good." The two women hugged.

Avner took Nate off to the side. "Remember what we talked about. She's one of a kind. Don't lose her."

"What are you two in cahoots about?" Tina asked.

"Nothing," Avner replied. He took Iris by the elbow. "Night, guys." They exited and slowly made their way down the road to the carriage house.

\* \* \* \*

"Dinner tonight was out of this world, T."

"Avner and Iris are good people. They deserve the best." They each sipped a hard lemonade and sat at opposite ends of the couch.

"Thanks for making it so. I'm beat," Nate said. He placed his empty glass on the coffee table and stood.

"Me, too. Those dishes can wait until the morning."

Nate looked back at Tina and extended a hand. "Will you sleep in my room with me tonight?"

"Yes," Tina replied. She took his hand as she rose and they retreated to his bedroom.

Once Nate closed the door, he hugged her to him. "Tina, I don't like it when we fight," he murmured into her hair. "It sucks and it's counterproductive."

Tina looked up into his face. "I don't like it either, but it's part of our life."

"Our life? Thinking *us* instead of *me*? I like that."

"Nate, we have to talk," she replied in a small hesitant voice.

"Oy. Now what?"

Tina disengaged from him. "Nate, I haven't been honest with you."

"Oh really?" He began shedding his clothes—shoes and shirt first. "How so?" Whatever it was, he mused, was nothing compared to the

humdinger he needed to air.

\* \* \* \*

Tina walked to the other side of the room. She wanted to put as much distance between them as possible when she dropped her bomb. "Nate, Matty and I have been talking to each other." She paced. "There, I've said it." Her stomach churned.

"What?" Nate peered at her through the neck opening of the polo shirt he had been pulling over his head. "You what?"

"We speak."

"She's back?"

"Not really. We do it telepathically."

"How long has this been going on?"

"For some time now."

"I see." He drew the shirt off completely and slipped out of his jeans. "You don't need me anymore, Tina. You're just a step away from getting Matty back."

"She doesn't want to."

"Pardon me?"

"She said that she is content and well where she is. Coming back would cause her to live in constant pain. She told me to help others who want to come back."

"You've known this for a while now?" Nate advanced on Tina.

"Yes."

"And you still are here, knowing the reason for our *arrangement*?"

"Yes." Tina backed up, very aware of the closed door behind her.

"Why?"

"Because." Tina lowered her gaze, feeling very confused.

"Because? That's not an answer." Nate tossed his clothes on the seat of a nearby chair. "Why are you still here with me if the reason for our business no longer exists?" He was inches from her, staring her down with those penetrating baby blues. He reached out and stroked her face. "Tell the truth, Tina. Why?"

"Because I like you. You're fun to be with."

"Tina. The truth."

She found the courage to meet his stare. "Because I have fallen in love with your simple ass. Unconditionally. That's why. Is that what you needed to hear?"

"Yes. Yes, it was, you feisty piece of ass." Nate pulled her against his nude body. "Yes, it's what I needed to hear. Now brace yourself."

"Why?"

"Because I love you. Unconditionally. You complete me. You challenge me. Tina, I love you."

Tina draped her arms around his neck. "I suppose this means I have to kiss you now?"

## CHAPTER SIXTEEN

**F**uckin' A!" Nate quickly responded, with the thumbs up motion and all.

"Oy," Tina shot back.

They inclined their heads and frenched each other until they were breathless.

"I'd forgotten how much fun kissing could be," she remarked as she followed the pattern of his chest hair growth with an index finger. "Now let's celebrate by wearing each other out."

"By making love, Tina. I want to make love to you, but first...I have something very important to tell you."

"Nothing else is more important, Nate. Time to party." Tina broke his hold and started to undress.

"No. This can't wait."

"It will have to. I'm horny as hell. Come on." She tossed aside the last of her clothing. "So this session is gonna be different than others?"

"You bet."

"I'm impressed." They laughed. Nate took her by the hand and led her to the bed. He hoped that

he was doing the right thing. He'd decided in a flash that he'd love her softly and well and take it from there. He got into bed and pulled her down on top of him.

\* \* \* \*

Their open mouths met and their tongues darted back and forth. Tina felt the familiar heat invade the room. Nate kept Tina on top and rubbed her from her ample bottom to the top of her curly head. Tina kept kissing him. She kneaded his chest and biceps and sighed into the crook of his neck when he slapped her butt. Tina rolled off him and sprawled on her back, spread eagle. "Come on, Nate," she whimpered, reaching out to him. "Ram it home."

"No. No banging it out, babe. A slower pace. I wanna love you."

Panicked, Tina sat up sharply. "I don't know if that is possible. I don't know if I can do that."

\* \* \* \*

"You can. I know. It's scary." He gently pressed her back down on the mattress. "I'm scared, too." Nate sat back on his heels next to her, drinking in the sight. That heart-shaped face with the high forehead, nestled in a head full of corkscrew curls.

The nutmeg hue of her skin always got him. The shade darkened to chocolate when it came to her nipples. He sighed.

"What are you doing, Nate Lowe?" Tina adjusted her arms behind her head, displaying her assets more.

"Enjoying the view. Shut up while I meditate." He placed both hands on her slender neck and then traced the firm muscles of her arms with his index fingers.

Tina flinched. "You're tickling me."

"S-s-sh!" He claimed both of her breasts. Nuzzling them, he reveled in their satiny texture. He massaged them softly until the nipples stood out. Tina squirmed. "Be still."

"How? You're torturing me, you bastard."

Nate only laughed. His hands slid to her trim waist and followed the curve of her hips. He bent one of her legs and caressed the toned thigh and calf and palmed a buttock. Unable to resist, he kissed her closely shaved mons.

\* \* \* \*

Tina felt his tongue delve between the lips and hit the hot spot. She almost bounced off the bed. "Please, Nate," she panted.

"No."

"Okay, Nate." She flipped him onto his back.



"Remember, payback is a bitch." Tina straddled him and started her journey. She traced the arch of the brow he liked to raise in mock indignation. That straight forehead and that nose with the slight bump in it were etched in her memory. He really was quite ascetic-looking, but Tina knew firsthand of his sensual excesses. Settled against pillows, she felt him both watch her and what she was doing to him. Tina leaned forward and ran both hands down his broad shoulders. She dipped her head and nibbled at his nipples as she wriggled against his burgeoning erection.

"Stop, Tina. You're cheating."

"How?"

"You're moving."

"You mean like this." She circled her damp crotch around the head of his penis.

"No fair."

"Nothing is fair in love and war. Do you want me to stop?"

"No. No." He gritted his teeth and his thigh muscles flexed involuntarily.

She chuckled as she followed the path of his sparse, blond, happy trail with her lips. Scooting down his body, she lifted his penis from its coarse, dark blond nest and darted her tongue tip around the bulbous, glistening head.

"Good gravy!" Nate couldn't help himself. He rose up and clamped a hand on the back of Tina's

head.

She maneuvered into a crouch as her mouth and hands now pumped him.

"Oh God!" Nate yelled. "You did this. You've earned what's coming next."

Tina raised her head, smiling. "I hope."

Nate pulled her up by the waist and positioned her over his crotch. "Sit," he gasped. "Take it."

"Wait, honey, we need protection."

"No. I don't want anything between us tonight."

"Just this once." Tina quivered as she sank down on him. He held her by the hips. They locked eyes and savored every wet rush and tug of their flesh on one another.

"Oh Lord, Nate. I don't think I can hold it." Tina braced her palms on his sweaty chest and leaned forward as she rode up and down like a jockey.

\* \* \* \*

"Slow down. No rush, baby." He moved his grip to her ribcage and rolled until she was on her back. Still embedded snugly in her, Nate rained kisses on her lips, face and torso. "I love you, Tina. Believe me." With one hand and on her waist and the other around the base of her throat, Nate puffed and moaned as he slowly slipped in and

out of her. With each new penetration, Tina cried out, the liquid sound of insertion and extraction highly stimulating.

"This is agony, Nate," Tina barely got out between contorted lips.

"Sweet agony," he grunted, not missing one stroke.

They went on for what seemed like an eternity, their lovemaking noises, familiar, but really heard for the first time, unhurried.

Nate felt that subtle change in Tina's rhythm and breathing which signaled her point of no return. Suddenly, she screamed, then wrapped her legs around his waist, locking her ankles.

"Nate!" It always felt like he was touching her soul. Eyes closed, she hugged him as her orgasm flooded her. Seconds later, he groaned in her ear, pumped her uncontrollably and flooded her with his liquid heat.

"Remember, Tina, I love you. I'm a man. The same man." He gathered her limp form in his arms. From somewhere near, a source of moving air rushed over Tina's sweat-dotted body.

\* \* \* \*

She heard movement, too. Curious, she opened her eyes to find a set of very large, delicate wings flapping above her. They were attached to Nate.

## CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

“Holy shit! Holy shit! Get outta me and off me,” wailed Tina. Screaming at the top of her lungs, she unlocked her legs from around Nate. Feet together, she braced them just below his waist and pushed with all her might.

“Oomph!” exhaled Nate, her kick painful and jarring.

Tina scrambled off the bed and grabbed up her clothes.

Nate watched, helpless and speechless, on his stomach, as the air she had knocked out of him had not returned yet. If the situation had not been so pathetic, he would have found it hysterical because Tina was a sight, ripping around with just her sneakers on, collecting her stuff. “Tina! Tina,” he gasped. “Wait, I can explain.”

“Explain what?” She stopped and hastily pulled on her underclothes. “That you’re a Felig? That you’ve been lying to me all this time? That you’ve been getting your jollies both ways?” She pushed

damp hair from her eyes and face with both hands. "Oh God. a Felig. I've been fuckin' a Felig!"

Nate's wings had retracted and he had finally recovered from her kick. He rolled onto his back and tenderly tested his stomach. He swore his balls were located there now. He saw that she was completely dressed and heading for the bedroom door. "Tina, if you just give me a chance. Please."

"No, freak."

"Have an open mind. There's a reason for this." He motioned toward his body. "The way I am."

"If my mind were anymore open, my brains would fall out." She shook her head and shivered. "A Felig." She backed out the room, gathered up a startled Tatum and stuffed him into his carrier. She also gathered up her purse.

Nate staggered into the living room.

"Stay away from me," she warned, waving the pepper spray at him she had fished from her bag.

"Tina, this is ridiculous." He started walking across the carpeted room.

"Stay where you are." She aimed in his direction and pushed the button and hit him square in the chest.

"You sprayed me!" He coughed and inhaled sharply.

"I'll aim higher or lower if you come closer. Just get back, Nate. Forget me." Tina slung her bag over her head, across her body. She bent and

picked up the carrier by its handle, reached behind her and opened the door. "I'll send some folks for my things," she cried as she ran for one of his cars. "Second thought, keep 'em."

"I'll never leave you alone, Tina," yelled Nate from the front door of the farmhouse.

Tina tossed the cat carrier into the Highlander's passenger's seat. Shaking, she climbed in, turned the ignition key, gunned the engine and raced down the driveway, kicking up gravel.

\* \* \* \*

"He must have told her," remarked Avner as he heard and saw a Highlander tear pass the carriage house's bay window.

"Told her what—wow!" said Iris as gravel scattered as far back as their driveway. She had come to stand behind her husband, resting her belly in his back. "Who was that?"

"Tina."

"Speeding like that? Why?"

Avner closed the blind and turned from the window to Iris. He patted her late-term load. "Nate told me he loves Tina."

"Is that a problem?" Iris brushed her bangs from her eyes.

"Nate didn't tell her that he is like me. Part Felig."

"Oh man. Does she love him?"

"I don't know for sure. I know they have a great, um, affinity for one another."

"This is serious, Avner." She elbowed him in the side. "Her mom was taken by them not to mention Tina's a tireless fighter to rid Earth of them. Nate knew what was going in. How could he not tell her?"

Avner gathered Iris into his embrace. "He was very lonely. Do you regret your decision to be with me, Iris?" Avner's concentration lines deepened under his eyes.

"No."

"Iris, we are having a child. It could be part..."

"S-s-sh!" She put her index finger to his lips. "This baby will be part you, part me."

"I hope they can work it out if what I think happened happened." Avner hugged his wife closer.

\* \* \* \*

Tina's mind hit imaginary medians as the car careened down I-95. "I can't believe it! I can't believe it!" She beat on the steering wheel with a fist. "Was I so desperate, so needy, so...horny, that *that* slipped past my radar."

*Seems you were,* that voice said.

"Not now, Matty. I really do not want to talk to

you. I'm pissed that you knew all about Nate and did not give me a head's up. I feel so stupid."

*You should.*

"I didn't think I'd ever say this to you, Mom. Go away!"

Her mom left, but not before she laughed raucously.

"Thanks, Mom." Hunched over the wheel, tears streaming down her face, Tina sped toward her apartment.



## CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

**“W**hy me? Why? Bastard!” Tina railed as she roamed the rooms of the condo she had shared with Matty. In the living room, she kicked an ottoman and Tatum took cover behind a red club chair.

Tina heard her front door open and close softly. Instinctively, she drew her revolver from her shoulder holster. She rushed to hide just around a partition the intruder would have to pass to enter the living room. The armed trespasser crossed the barrier. Tina jumped, training her gun on him and cocked it. “Halt!”

The figure whirled around, dropping the Louisville Slugger and fell to his knees.

“Moz!”

“Tina!” He clutched his chest. “You trying to give me a coronary? What are you doing here? You said you’d call me and Evie when you wanted to come home.” Poor Moz panted like a horse after a race.

Tina returned her gun to its holster. "Forgive me, Moz." She bent to help him up. "Everything happened so fast, I didn't even know *I* was coming home."

"Everything? What everything?" Moz walked her over to the noon sunlight streaming in the window and checked her out. "Did that Lowe man beat you? Cheat on you? Hurt you? I'll kill him."

"I'm hurt, Moz, but not how you think." Moved by his concern, she pecked his cheek. "You and Evie will come up for dinner, right?"

"No, you come down. You ain't got a thing here to cook. We just haggled for some pork chops. Good, meaty ones. You'll come on down."

Tina was about to cry.

He took her hand. "What happened?"

"Everything. Nothing. She looked around forlornly and changed the subject. "I saw more missing person posters than ever on my drive into town."

"Yeah. The Felig is grabbing folk left and right. Just snatching up people everywhere, anywhere. When Evie ain't with me, I make her go out in groups."

A half-smile danced across Tina's face. "Moz, that just means she'll have lots of company if she ever got taken."

"It's silly. I know. I can't explain it. I just feel

better about it. When she's home, I follow her around. I figure if anything happens, we'll go together."

Tina patted his forearm as she led him to the door. "We'll talk. Thanks so much for watching my place. Six o'clock? It'll give me some time to rest and wash off the road dirt."

"Six is fine. Evie will be so happy to see you."

Tina handed him his Louisville Slugger. "And I'll be so happy to see her."

"Girl, didn't we say to call if something didn't feel right?"

"Evie, I'm here. As soon as it wasn't right, I left. I'd still be there on the front stoop waiting for you to pick me up if I had called you. It's a long trip."

"Okay. Okay. Just glad to have you back," Evie said.

"Those chops were yummy." Tina patted her stomach. "Sorry to be such a pig and eat two."

"Don't apologize. Food is to be enjoyed," added Moz. "Besides, we got a mess of them and some chicken and eggs in exchange for a job I did."

"Nate liked the way I cooked for him." New anguish dug at Tina's heart. "I'm gonna have to line up some jobs now, too." She pushed gnawed bones around her plate.

Evie stayed her hand.

"Honey, what do *you* want?"

Moz took that as a cue to clear the table, go make coffee and let girl talk ensue. He excused himself.

"What, Evie?"

"That's right. This is Evie you talking to. It's obvious you care for this man."

"He's a Felig, Evie!"

"And a man. Bet he acts just like the one out in the kitchen now. "How is he a Felig? Why is he one? Did you ask? Did you give him a chance to explain?"

"No. Evie, he lied to me."

"His story may be unique. Yeah, I'd be pissed and hurt, too, but I'd want to know. Let him talk. You can always kick him to the curb after."

Moz returned to the table. "Even I agree and you know how I feel about him. You let him in your life. You didn't have to. It's only fair to hear him out. Shucks, I'm curious."

"Just listen to his tale," Evie insisted.

Back upstairs, Tina put the plate of leftovers away in the fridge. In her bathroom, she stripped, answered nature's call, then got in the shower and wept under the spray.

*Stop it, silly woman.*

"Mom, please. I feel bad enough."

*Crybaby!*

"Mom, stop being mean." Tina turned off the water, wrapped her hair and body in towels.

*What? Mean? When? Tina? Tina?*

Tina slathered herself in the honey-chamomile scented body lotion that Nate loved. She began crying again.

\* \* \* \*

"Hold on. Hold on," yelled Moz in answer to the banging on his door. "Tina, you'll wake everybody up on this floor with that noise." With Evie close behind him, he pulled the door open wide.

"Well, well, well," chanted Moz.

"Oh my God," mouthed Evie.

A wild-eyed, disheveled, clearly disconcerted Nate stood on their threshold. "Is she here? May I come in?"

"Yes and no, Nate. Tina told us everything." Moz eased his baseball bat from behind the door. "Try anything and I'll beat you senseless before you flap a wing."

"Moz, put that down." Evie returned her attention to Nate. "I think Tina should hear you out."

"Thank you, Evie."

"But you have to realize the Felig thing is a bit much to handle."

"I know. I know. But, but..."

"But what white-boy-who-happens-to-be-an-alien-too?" Moz still gripped his bat.

"I love her, Moz. That should beat all."

## CHAPTER NINETEEN

A groggy Tina shuffled down the condo's hall to the sound of polite, but persistent knocks at her door. "Who is it?"

No reply.

"Who is it?"

Still no reply.

Tina stood with her arms crossed, staring at the door. "If you don't answer me, you'll stand out there forever. I hope you like loitering in hallways. Whoever you are."

"It's me, Tina," a spent Nate finally answered.

"The freak. I do hope you like the hallway 'cuz that's where you're gonna stay."

"I'll bang on this fucking door until it falls off the hinges! Your neighbors won't like it."

"You've broken it before. Be my guest."

Nate shouted and banged until the door shook.

Majorly pissed, Tina flung the portal open. "What the hell is wrong with you, Nate?"

"I love you," he said firmly in a quiet, desperate

tone. He looked her up and down. "God, you're beautiful."

"Don't change the subject." It took all Tina's might not to scream and flee. "Love me? Who the hell are you? I don't know you." Tina attempted to shut the door, but Nate blocked it with a shoulder. She ran back into her apartment.

Nate slammed the door closed and locked it. "Who am I?" he screamed at her back as he chased after her. "I am Nathaniel David Lowe. Son of Fran and Abraham. The Lowes of Boca Point. That's who. You have even spoken to them."

"Such nice people. Do they know their kid is an alien?" Tina hurled herself the last few steps into her bedroom and wrenched her gun from the holster on the dresser. She whirled around with a bead on Nate. "Get out," she said calmly, the gun giving her a comfort.

"Whoa. Whoa." Nate threw up his hands in surrender and stopped in his tracks. "The last thing you wanna do is kill me. You love me."

"Get out. Get out. How could you have deceived me?" Tina kept the gun trained on him.

*Good! You've come to your senses. Using your head instead of your groin.*

"Not now!" cried Tina. "You said he was a good man. Make up your mind."

"Who are you talking to?" Nate advanced.

"Stay away." Tina's hand shook. "I'm warning



you.”

He walked right up, stared into Tina’s eyes and gripped the gun barrel. “Pull the trigger. Your problem would be solved. The freak, gone.”

“Please, Nate, please.” Tina dropped to her knees.

He caught her sweaty hand and pried the gun from it. He tossed it on a chair. “Phew! That was close. I think I need to change my undies.”

Tina managed a small smile as she turned her face up to him. “You don’t wear undies.”

“Oh. I forgot in all the excitement.”

“Don’t joke. You just stopped me from shooting you. If you don’t explain those, those...fuckin’ wings, I still may do it.”

*I am so disappointed in you, Tina.*

Nate pulled her to her feet and steadied her. “I’m so sorry that I kept it from you. I’ll tell you everything, honey.” He tilted her face up to his. “But kiss me first.”

## CHAPTER TWENTY

When Tina did sleep that night, it was fitful. She tossed and turned and dreamed of arguing with her mom. Over Nate. Except Matty wasn't cheering him on. Confusing. She woke to find him gone. Out in the kitchen. Nate had become part Felig because he was found by Felig, twisted and broken at the scene of a terrible car crash caused by his soon-to-be-ex. Was this the case with Matty? It still hurt. Her girl was gone.

"Matty? Matty? Are you proud of me? I gave him a chance to explain." And it had been a spectacular recounting. Tina knew now that she did love him if she was able to sit through that narrative. But she had more questions—and would ask them. Right after breakfast. She scooted out of bed, did a fast shower run and rubbed lotion all over to tease Nate. Tossing on a wrapper, she followed the aroma of coffee.

Tina watched Nate move around the kitchen as she peered over its swinging doors. Clad only in

his jeans, combat boots and shoulder holster, he looked like a dancer from one of those all-male revues. She did like his *Bruce Lee* body, particularly his tight narrow butt. But her other appetite was calling now. He filled up a serving tray with scrambled eggs, rye toast, butter, apple jelly, hash browns and hefted a pot of coffee with the other hand.

"Breakfast coming through!"

Tina skipped back to the dining table and sat down.

Nate spread the bounty out on the table.

"Good morning! How are you? As if I need to ask?"

"I've been royally loved." She blew her breath on the nails of one hand and buffed them on her robe front. "I am being served food cooked by the man responsible for said royal loving. Half-naked no less." She munched on a piece of toast slathered in butter, smiled and nodded. "Yeah, it's a good day. How about you?"

"I'm much better. I have you back. I'll never lie or withhold important information from you ever again." He leaned across the table, took her face in both hands and kissed her deeply.

"I know, honey. I know. I believe you." Tina kissed his eyelids, cheeks and nose.

"Since you cooked, I'll dish it up. She piled his plate high and poured his coffee just the way he

liked it. She then served herself and moved to sit next to him.

"I cut back on the oil since you are worried about your butt dragging the ground, T." Nate licked his fingers after stuffing a hash brown into his mouth. He trailed a hand down next to her and pinched her bottom.

"Thoughtful of you. It was also thoughtful last night that you did not go into full display when we made love."

"Well, I figured that would still creep you out."

"Thank you. I ain't ready for that yet."

"I hope some day it won't." He shifted toward her.

"So, what do we do today, hon?"

"We really need to formulate a theory about how the Felig function. I think it would be helpful to others around the world."

"Are you ready to expose yourself like that, Nate? It could backfire." Tina rested her head on his shoulder

"Avner always said to be truthful."

"Avner?" She lifted her head. "What's he got to do with this? Don't tell me he's— he's...Felig, too? Iris is pregnant. Does she know about him?"

"I'll explain that today, too. Now, eat up."

A stranger to the scene would have thought them truly perverse or truly in love. Nate and Tina could not keep their hands off each other between

bites of food.

"Okay. Okay. It's getting hot in here." Tina removed Nate's hand from inside her robe. "Stop."

"It's the lotion." He sniffed her neck. "It has to be. It gets me going every time."

"I'll give you a bottle and you can go be alone with it. We have to start the day, Nate. Let's get dressed. Maybe our libidos will simmer down."

Tina stood inside her walk-in closet. She reached for her white yoga pants and a white tee. "New beginnings," she said out loud and slipped into them.

*Shame it won't last long.*

Tina felt the familiar gush of hot air and heard Matty as if she had spoken to her in the flesh. "Mom, what's gotten into you?" Tina pivoted and then screamed loud and long.

It wasn't Matty. It was Karen. Fully materialized. In full display. She hovered and beat her wings as swiftly as a hummingbird's. Tina thought she looked like a helicopter as she advanced, cornering her in the closet.

\* \* \* \*

Tina's shriek bounced around the apartment and almost made Nate choke on his coffee.

\* \* \* \*

Karen descended, retracted her wings partially and fluttered into the closet.

Tina threw hangers, climbed up and jumped at her from an upper shelf.

*That won't deter me, slut.* She grabbed Tina by the ankle and pulled. *I'm new and improved.*

Tina kicked with her free leg. Kicking Karen was like assailing marble.

*Why are you fighting me? We're going to go see Mommy.*

"Nate! Nate! Help!"

Karen exited the closet with a battling Tina.

\* \* \* \*

Nate entered the bedroom. He had the AK-47 that was kept taped under the dining room table. "Let her alone, Karen. Don't be a jealous bitch."

Karen's wings went into full display again. *Watch your mouth.* She picked up Tina like a rag doll and positioned her as a human shield.

Tina struggled against her grip.

Nate aimed.

*Shoot and you'll kill her. You want that on your conscience, lover?*

"Don't use her to dig at me. Deal with me

directly."

*I'd liked your dog and pony show, but it has grown tedious. Nate in love. Ugh!* Karen moved her hold on Tina to her throat.

Tina sputtered and jerked.

"Karen, please." Nate felt his stomach perform a nauseating flip-flop.

*Ooh! I like that groveling tone. Wish I could stay and hear more, but I gotta go. Say bye, Tina.*

"Love you!" croaked Tina.

Nate dropped to one knee and fired, alternately hitting the high arch in each of Karen's wings. He knew that that area was the most sensitive. It was on his. He kept firing.

Wounded, Karen screeched. She shook Tina cruelly, then tossed her across the room. Tina hit the opposite wall with a revolting thud.

*You win this time, Nate. But it's not over.* Karen's features morphed into that bug-bird mien and then she disappeared.

Nate scrambled over to an injured Tina. She wasn't breathing. He started CPR on her. "Wake up, honey." He blew in her mouth and compressed her chest. Tears were starting to blind him. "Please wake up."

## CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

“**W**hat the hell is going on in there? Nate? Tina?” cried Moz. The ruckus from the apartment had brought him and Evie to Tina’s front door. Plus a slew of others from the building. They made a motley crew. Clad in nightwear and slippers, they congregated outside her door, taking turns pounding on it and trying the knob.

“Moz,” remarked Calvin, a regal looking, elderly black man with gray hair and beard and a long time owner in the building, “your friend always got gunfire going on in her crib. What’s with her? This is recent. She never was like that.”

“Long story, Calvin.”

Calvin stroked his beard and pivoted to peruse his neighbors. “Moz, we all like Tina.” The crowd nodded in affirmation. “But this here extra mess gotta stop. We all jumpy enough with the Felig.”

“Okay. Noted and filed, Calvin,” Moz responded. He returned his attention to the more urgent matter before him. He resumed banging on



the door. "Tina? Nate?"

"Calvin, you jumpy?" inquired Evie, earnestly. "I got some nerve pills if you need 'em."

"Naw. Naw, Too old to become a junkie. Can't afford it." He scratched his head. "Besides, is that how you sleep through all this madness?"

"It helps sometimes, Calvin."

"Thanks, Evie, but I'll live with it. However long that is."

Moz finally heard footsteps on the other side of the door, then locks being unlocked.

Nate flung open the door. "Help, Moz!"

He and Evie rushed past Nate into the apartment.

The others rubbernecked until Nate shut the door. "In the bedroom, quick! I didn't want to leave her."

They hurried behind him to find Tina face up on the floor. Evie knelt down beside her, evaluated her and picked up the CPR where Nate left off.

"Did you call 9-1-1?" Evie quizzed.

"Yes. Oh God, Evie. It's bad." Nate felt useless and stood helpless for the first time in a long while.

"What did you do to her?" Moz grabbed Nate by the throat with both hands and squeezed.

"Nothing. Nothing. It was Felig. Felig!" Nate choked out.

"Well ain't that you?" Moz let go.

Nate sucked in air and slid to the floor. "Evie, please. She can't die. She can't. We just...just reconciled."

Evie was tiring. Thankfully, a siren closed the distance. "Nate, get over here. Take over 'til they get up here."

He crawled over, wiped his face and relieved Evie.

Moz let the police and EMTs in. After they all discovered who Nate was, no energy was wasted. They worked on Tina, stabilized her and transported her to County General.

Having tossed on his shirt, Nate rode in the back with her. Moz and Evie secured her place, then followed in their car.

\* \* \* \*

Nate explained everything to Moz and Evie and about half that to the police and the doctors. He arranged to stay with Tina in the ICU. He also stayed with her when she improved to breathing on her own and got moved to a space in a step down unit.

One evening, her attending physician, Dr. Chan assembled Nate, Moz and Evie in Tina's area to discuss her condition. The space suddenly got very warm.

"Mister Lowe, Mister and Missus Quarrels, it's a waiting game."

Nate found himself focusing on the ballpoint pen sticking out of the breast pocket of the doctor's scrubs.

Having just spent six hours in a delicate brain surgery, Dr. Chan was clearly tired, but she wanted to speak with them. "The good news is that Ms. Cain is breathing on her own. Her vitals are excellent." Dr. Chan's beeper went off. She sighed. "The bad news is she is not awake." She shuffled through the chart. "Tests also show slight brain damage. The longer she remains unconscious, the worse it will be for total recovery."

"What if she wakes up later rather than sooner?" asked Nate.

"She'll have some motor problems. Some comprehension problems."

Evie wept softly as Moz held her.

Nate sagged into a chair by Tina's bed. He dragged it closer, took her hand and rubbed it. He leaned over and kissed her. "No she won't," Nate said.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

Moz and Evie had played host and hostess to all of Nate's entourage. Avner and Iris were the first to show up. They picked up the slack for the Quarrels and stayed in Tina's apartment, taking care of Tatum. The rest of Nate's road crew filed in and out of the apartment for food and relief. They also filed in and out of Tina's hospital room, heaping their condolences on their boss.

Nate grew the beginnings of a beard and his hair grew longer. He developed dark circles under his eyes. Their usual brightness had dimmed and they were continually red-rimmed. Due to not having Tina's good cooking to devour and plain old loss of appetite, he had lost a few pounds.

He agonized everyday over Tina's predicament. He pondered over whether or not to revive her and how to do it. If he did, would it make her Felig? Should he let her alone and let her wake up on her own? Would she ever forgive him if he accidentally made her Felig? Would she ever

forgive him if he let her languish and wake up impaired and he could have aided her? He sat in the darkened hospital room after sending everyone away. He rested his head in his hands and sighed as he considered Tina's fate. Suddenly, heat filled the room.

*Help my baby,* said a voice.

Nate lifted his head. "Matty?"

*It is. Sorry to have taken so long to introduce myself, Nate. But as you know, when one is initially absorbed, one is powerless and weak for a time. Matty materialized and hovered very close to Tina's side. My baby! Unlike Karen, Matty resembled an angel whereas the former resembled a demon when she appeared. This, she waved her hand over Tina, happened because I had no strength to help her. Believe me if I had been one hundred percent, I would have clawed Karen to pieces. She drew closer to caress her daughter's face.*

Tina smiled faintly and tried to turn her head in the direction of the touch. *Look! Look! She's trying to move. Matty trained those cow eyes on Nate. Help her. You love her. I know that being Felig would devastate Tina, but isn't there something you can do just short of transforming her? Please, Nate, I beg you.*

Nate stood. He paced the room, wracking his brain as to what he could do. "I don't know how to control my power. Matty, she'd never stay with me if I turned her."

*Then don't. Just a boost.* Matty perused her still

child. *My girl does not deserve this. You two belong together. You're a good guy, Nate Lowe.*

"You've convinced me. Medicine is moving too slow." Nate went to the door to see if the coast was clear. He returned to Tina's bedside and drew the curtain around them. "Matty, you'll have to spot me. Like in the gym. If my glow goes supernova, I'll have turned the juice on too high and she'll be Felig. If I don't light up enough, she'll stay the same. Ya got it?"

*I do. Just get going before someone interrupts.* Matty moved to flutter above the scene.

Nate took off all his clothes. He bent over and gathered Tina in his arms. He smoothed her curls from her eyes, inhaled deeply and kissed her. Without any effort, he went into full display mode. Continuing the kiss, his chest took on a soft, orangey glow. He blew into her mouth. The inner glow changed to a brighter orange and flickered, his wings flapped rapidly.

*Hold up, Nate, cried Matty. I think you're getting too bright. Pull back a bit.*

Nate found a steady balance in his breathing, light emitting and movement. In a trance, eyes closed, he began to rock back and forth.

*Nate, you all right?* asked Matty.

He shook nodded. He lifted Tina out of the bed and cradled her completely in his arms and wings. All the while, he firmly puffed into her mouth. All

at once, a faint, orange glow appeared through Tina's hospital gown.

*My girl is shining! I think you did it.* Matty hugged herself.

Tina's glow increased. She then began squirming and moaning in Nate's grasp. He pulled in his wings and modulated his breathing. He placed Tina back in the bed.

Matty glided over and softly brushed Tina's face. *I'll go now.* Matty kissed Nate's forehead. *Thank you, son. I'll be around.* She dissolved on a warm breeze.

The glow in Tina's chest vanished. She sucked in a loud breath and opened her eyes immediately. "Nate?"

## CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

**“I’m here. I’m here, honey.”**

Tina sat up on her own and grabbed him. “I’m not dead. I’m not dead,” she chanted in his ear. She pulled back to stare into his eyes. “Right? I dreamed Mama was here.”

“Right.” He hoisted her out of the bed and twirled with her in his arms. Sobs of joy escaped him as he held her tightly.

“Nate, you are scaring me. How bad was it?” Tina poked him. “Answer me. Stop twirling and tell me. I want to know. Did I die?” She succeeded in lifting his chin so she could be at eye level. “How close was I to being an ingredient in a salad?”

Nate quit moving and sat Tina on the edge of her hospital bed. “Honey,” he whipped out a handful of tissues from a box on her nightstand. “For all intents and purposes, after Karen injured you, you did die.”

“Bitch! One ass-kicking pending.”



"I took care of that." He patted her hand. "Trust me. Listen. We got you here. They worked on you, got you to the point where, yes, you were going to be part-vegetable."

\* \* \* \*

"Oh God." Tina shook at the possible scenario she could be living. He had told her more than she cared to have known. She got back under the covers.

"I'm taking you home."

"Wait until the doctors give me the thumbs up."

"You're fine. Tomorrow. Out of here. I don't trust Karen. Back to the farmhouse."

"What's wrong with my Philly condo?"

"Your condo is a crime scene combination way station. No place for you. Don't argue with me. Back to New York."

"Yes, Daddy."

"That's right." His face split into a huge grin. "I'm your Daddy. And you love it."

"Nate," Tina awkwardly cleared her throat. "I still have your Felig nature to accept. That's the reason I ran."

"Babe, all you need to know is that this man loves you."

"Nate?" Tina had a puzzled expression on her

face as she rested against the pillows.

"Yeah?"

"Why the hell are you naked?"

\* \* \* \*

Nate told Evie and Moz what happened and confessed his part in Tina's rapid recovery as he dined with them.

"Man, she's gonna rip you a new one," quipped Moz as he dug into his gravy and mashed potatoes.

"That's what I'm afraid of," Nate lamented.

"You have to tell her. Don't make the same mistake twice," Evie said as she piled ribs on Nate's plate.

"I know, but how?" Nate tasted the meat sauce.  
"Are these beef or pork?"

"Plain and simple, man. Tell her what was in store for her. Then ease in the love part." Moz nudged Nate in the side with an elbow. "I'm sure you're good at that. Beef!" He wiped his mouth, belched and winked at Nate after shoving a roll in his mouth.

\* \* \* \*

"But I want to stay here for my rehab!" Tina was standing at the hospital room window when she

pivoted to face the trio of familiar faces.

"No way, Tina," Nate said, the conviction in his voice palpable.

"Why not? I'd be close to the hospital and you guys for a while."

"Because fall will be upon us in a few weeks."

"So?"

"Your rehab is going to last for two months. That's gonna take us into, what, Halloween?"

"You got something against Halloween?"

"Tina, stop being facetious! It's better to do the rehab at the farmhouse. We have a studio, a gym. The docs can give us your schedule."

"You gonna be my coach?" Tina hoisted herself up on the windowsill.

"That's right. Besides, the season sets in early up there. I think we should settle in before the weather turns. What do you say?"

"Sounds logical." She scratched her head. "I don't know why."

"Plus, Iris wants you there for the baby."

"Me?" She poked the middle of her chest.

"Yep. She needs another female around until her mother arrives."

"Let her Mother get there early."

"Tina! That's not nice," Evie retorted.

"Folks, you may have forgotten, but I have said that I'm no good in that kind of crisis."

"It's not a crisis, the girl's simply having a

baby."

"Same difference if you ask me." Tina rolled her eyes.

Nate came over to hold her. Evie and Moz gathered around, too. "We all think it's best that you go back to New York."

Tina began laughing. "What is this? An intervention. I know what y'all trying to do. You're trying to keep me safe. It's not possible. I'm not afraid of Karen. I'm gonna kick her ass. Wait and see."

"I got first dibs," said Moz.

"Okay. Down girl," cautioned Nate. "I'm putting you back to bed." He lifted her from the sill and tucked her into the hospital bed. "Too much excitement. Bringing on delusions."

"Just let me outta here. I'll show you delusions. I'll go back. I don't want you all to worry."

Evie and Moz took turns kissing her goodbye. "We'll be here tomorrow."

"No. I get out the day after. I'll see you two then and we'll spend the day together before Lord-and-Master sweeps me away to the castle." Tina glanced at Nate and stuck her tongue out at him.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

Life at the farmhouse returned to normal. Nate treated Tina like a queen and hardly let her out of his sight. Today, after having made lunch for them, he propped her up on the couch surrounded by a truckload of pillows and throws. The tasteful neutral décor of beiges, tans and roses mixed well with the changing hues outside the big, bay window.

"Nate, this is our theory. Listen." Tina flipped pages studiously. "Felig have an aversion to cold. We have to rig some sort of apparatus to chill or freeze those suckers."

"Oh, yeah, like a portable fridge." Nate sat on the floor by the couch. "Tina, how are people gonna be able to lug something like that around, let alone afford it? Not feasible, hon."

"How about everyone moving to cold places?"

"Very funny. Not feasible."

"How about not showing emotion?" She prodded him with a foot. "You know, be Spock-

like."

"Not feasible. We're talking humans here. Tina, be serious. We have a huge problem. Felig feed off human energy of any kind."

"Okay. Okay. How about an aerosol? Like Mace or pepper spray?"

"A can of cold? Liquid nitrogen?"

"Yep."

Nate scratched his head and turned to face her. "As nutty as it sounds, it may be the answer. You could carry it with you. It won't kill a Felig, but it sure as hell would slow one down. Give a victim a chance to get away. It could work." He jotted down more possibilities. "One problem."

"What's that?"

"We'd have to test it. But on what? We don't have a captive Felig."

"How about you, Nate? Or better yet, I piss Karen off enough to have her pay me a visit, we capture her and I try it out."

He stroked her leg. "Too dangerous."

*Please don't try any of it.*

"Matty? Is that you?"

*You bet your britches.*

"Mom!" Tina leapt from the couch, spilling pillows and throws.

Nate smiled and got to his feet. "Do your thing, Matty."

Matty materialized.

"Oh my God! Oh my God!" Tina hopped from foot to foot, hugged Nate, then approached her mom.

"May I hug you?"

*Sure, baby. You can now.*

Tina broke down when Matty embraced her. She'd been missing that for months. "Mom, how are you?"

*I'm just fine, girl.* She stroked Tina's hair and cheek, then went into full display mode and hovered a bit.

The sound of Matty's wings unfurling made her jump. Tina stood back to get a good look at her mom. Matty's color was robust. No more dark circles under her eyes. No pained, bent posture. Her salt-and-pepper hair was thick and shiny again and in her favorite pageboy style. She was the picture of health. And with those wings, which were a deep lavender at the high arch and faded to a pale violet at the ends, she looked like an emissary from Paradise.

"Mom, you're gorgeous. Never thought I'd say that about anything Felig." She glanced at Nate. "Except him."

Matty drew in her wings and stood on her feet. She embraced Tina again with all her might. *My child. My child. I am well and getting better everyday. The same with you I hope.*

"Yes, Mama. Nate told me you came to see me.

I knew it. I felt it." Tina pulled him over by his belt loop to stand with them. "This is Nate." Tina giggled in a childlike tone. "We keep company."

Matty laughed. *More than keep company. I know all about you two. Been there since the beginning. Besides, we've met already.* She smiled at Nate.

"How? When?"

*Like I said, in the hospital, Tina. You got a sieve for a brain? I saw how much this man cares for you. I had to meet him and check on you. I'm glad you have him. I told you he was a good man.*

"Missus Cain, you making my head swell." Red spots appeared on his cheeks.

*It's true. Anyway, I'm here to volunteer for your test.*

"Our test? No, Mom. It could hurt you."

"We don't even have a prototype yet, Matty. I forgot to ask. May I call you Matty?"

*Yes. Get on with it. Whatcha waiting for? You're right about the energy thing and the emotion and heat thing being linked. Whenever you get that prototype, I'll be here. She kissed them both. I have to go now.*

"So soon?" Tina felt her Matty's absence already. "You just got here. Don't go."

*I'll be back, honey. Nothing could keep me away.* Matty dissolved on a breeze.



## CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

**I** forgot to tell you, Nate.”

“What, babe?”

“I love your new look.” Tina ran her hand over his Caesar-cut and then rubbed the close-cut beard he now donned. “A little itchy though.”

They were in the giant shower in the master bath adjoining the master bedroom. They were giggling and wiggling as they lathered each other up after a painting project in one of the guest rooms had turned into paintball fight.

“I told you to get a pro, Nate. We have more paint on us than on the freakin’ walls.”

“But you gotta admit, it’s more fun trying to get it off. We haven’t touched each other like this in a while.” He held her arm a little longer than usual as he scrubbed higher and higher, finally brushing her breast as he gazed into her eyes. His touch jumped to her breasts completely. He discarded the washcloth, cornered her and massaged creamy body wash over them.

"No, Nate."

"No? Tina, it's been almost a month since we last made love."

"I don't know when we will again. I do love you. I do want you. My body is screaming yes, my mind is saying no." His dejected expression killed her as his hands dropped to his sides.

She had always savored his attentions in the shower. In fact, the shower had been the scene of many satisfying lovemaking sessions. Now, she felt unsure, unsteady. She did not feel that way during their therapy workouts in the large studio. She only felt this way in smaller spaces. She needed Nate as her protector. She had not told him, but the whole harrowing episode with Karen, her occasionally fixing on his Felig side and now Matty dropping in whenever, had dampened her libido.

"Tina, I miss you. I miss our connection."

"I'm so sorry, Nate. Maybe we shouldn't do this together until..."

"Until? Until when, Tina?" He grabbed her arm.

"Nate, just don't." She shook off his hold. When it came to touching him, she had become reticent. Not always, but in the past, just a few caresses would put them on the road to several hours of delicious sex. She had not wanted to rebuff his advances, but her mind was twirling all the time

and scarily, sex with him was not on it. Had she stopped caring for him and not faced it? No. She knew she still loved him, it was simply that for the time being, however long that was going to be, she just needed him to be there and be platonic. She rinsed off, reached for a towel, wrapped it around herself and left the enclosure.

\* \* \* \*

“Please, Tina.” Nate had felt inadequate only once before. He sensed that Tina still cared for him and he was being patient and understanding, but he felt she needed more. She needed to talk something out, cry something out. Something. He knew that the encounter with Karen had shaken her, but whenever he attempted to initiate conversation about it, Tina turned it into a joke. If he pushed, would she leave him again? He’d have to chance it. He wanted to help her so much and get back what they had established. He turned off the water and stepped out of the shower. As he wrapped a towel around his hips, he went into full display. Even though it was a sizable bathroom, the tips of his wings almost touched opposite walls. He stood grooming his beard as he flapped his wings absentmindedly.

“Nate, hand me my—” Tina just stared and stammered as she backed out of the doorway.

"No! No! No!" she chanted, eyes locked on the wings.

Nate dropped his clippers in the sink. He drew his wings in swiftly and ran to calm her. "Honey? Honey?" He caught her by the shoulders. "It's me. Not her."

"Go away! Go away! You ain't gonna get me," she responded, not really seeing him. She flailed, landing random blows on his chest.

"I won't give up. I won't let you go." Nate clutched Tina to him until she ceased fighting.

She looked up at him. "What's wrong with me? I've seen Mom go full display. Help me."

"I will. But will you let me?"

"Nate, am I losing my mind?" She clung to him so tightly she left half-moons where her nails dug into his torso. "Is this how it starts. I've never acted like this before."

"No to all your questions." She was shivering and he squeezed her closer. "As I asked before...will you allow me to help you?"

"Yes. Yes. I don't want to go on like this."

"Get into bed with me."

"Nate, I'm not ready for...that."

"I wasn't proposing that. Just lie with me. Talk. Cry. Scream. Cuss. Whatever you want. Okay?"

"Okay."

They walked over to the bed. Nate pulled back the covers, shucked his towel and peeled off

Tina's. He got into bed first, then arranged her naked form to rest next to his. He covered them, cocooning the material around them. "Let it rip, T. Everything. I'm here."

## CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

The humidity and temperature would have been unbearable to a human, but Karen luxuriated in it. Since Nate had wounded her, she had spent time in the restoration chamber everyday. In the beginning, she stayed there all the time. Her wing wounds necessitated constant care. Other Felig tended her by gathering around and inserting their fingers into the lacerations. The places they touched always glowed bright red, pulsed and hurt terribly as they transferred their healing energy to her. A deep hum could be heard as they hovered and mended. Now, she was just here for maintenance.

*Fired on me! Asshole.* She opened a huge container, which emitted a great shaft of light when she popped the lid. She stood, looking down into the receptacle with a bored expression on her face. With the other hand, she rummaged through its contents.

*Oh, that's right. I had been squeezing the life out of*

*his latest squeeze.* Karen chuckled at her own bad joke. Her wounds and their healing had been agonizing, but it had been worth it. She had sensed that Ms. Cain had expired, but had come back to life. Seems Ms. Cain was having a hard time accepting that.

*Too fuckin' bad. Let her try being totally Felig.* She shed her robe, then plucked a shining globe from the box and closed its top. She rubbed and rolled the transparent orb over her body. It was filled with human energy. It gave off delicious healing heat. Karen ignored the faces pressed to the orb's surface in Edvard Munch, *scream*-like poses. When the inhabitants became visibly more agitated, she hugged the sphere even more. Faces disappeared one by one the longer she held it. Karen tossed the globe, now cold and dark, aside. She closed her eyes and savored the fever coursing through her.

*Come near Tina again and I'll crush you.*

*What?* Karen's eyes snapped open.

*You heard me.* Matty was in a holding pattern over her.

*Well, well. If it ain't Mama Cain. You Cains don't know when to quit.*

*Whatever. I'm new to this, Karen, but I'm a fast learner. I swear I'll annihilate you if you come near them again. That's my family.*

*Family? You are delusional. Your family is Felig, or haven't you noticed all the neat, new things you can do*

*that humans can't?* Karen performed a somersault, glided over a pile of used globes and landed on her feet in front of Matty. She then flew up close to her. Her sarcastic, but playful, tone vanished. *Old lady, I'll bring you pain the likes of which you've never experienced when you were living as a human. Understand?*

*You don't scare me. As I stated before, I may be new at this, but go near them again and I'll get old school on your ass.*

*Don't get sanctimonious. What are you called? Oh yeah, Matty. Don't get up on your high horse, Matty. How have you been surviving since the change hit you? I'm sure you have taken human life.*

*Let's not get chummy. I'm Missus Cain to you.*

*Personally, Matty, Karen felt bold, her body vibrated with renewed vitality. I like to stalk my prey. See its shocked expression. Hear it scream and scuffle to escape. Just like Tina. Nothing like it. What's your style, Matty?*

\* \* \* \*

Matty clenched and unclenched her hands to keep from grabbing this simple creature by the neck. *I've never killed anyone if that's what you mean. There are ways to survive without murdering humans.*

*Please, Mama Cain, I refuse to suck cats and dogs and such. Yeech!*

Matty, having had enough, retreated. *Let them*



*alone!*

\* \* \* \*

"Honey, I have something to confess." Nate held Tina as he stressed his need.

"Please, please wait until I've finished. It's taking all I have in me to say this."

He ran his hand over his face to mask his exasperation. "Go on."

"I've always had faith in myself, Nate. But this whole episode with Karen. In fact, the past four months have made me doubt myself and everything I've ever believed in or cherished."

"How Tina?"

She bit her bottom lip and stared at the ceiling.

"Tina, it's only natural. Logical. You come from tough beginnings. You've fought all your life. This fuckin' invasion happened, makes life even tougher. It claims your mom. Then you meet me, of all people, and we hook up. I'd say the baggage area is full."

Tina rolled on top of him and raised up on an elbow. "Nate, my life is what it is. Ups, downs. Joy, heartbreak. The one thing it has never been is a lie. It's always been upfront, straight up. I want it to stay that way." She drummed her fingers on his sternum.

"Are you politely saying that you're living a

lie? With me?" Nate sat up and Tina slid off his chest. He punched pillows and reclined against the headboard. He arranged Tina across his body again. He felt a mother of all headaches coming to roost on his furrowed brow.

"Honey, no!" Tina stroked his face and traced that mouth she loved. He pursed his lips and kissed her finger. "You are one of—no—the only man I have said the words, *I love you* to romantically. I want this to endure, Nate. Everything we have. Everything we have built. But I can't continue if I doubt me."

"So what's the solution?" Nate scratched an ear. "You gonna run again?"

"No, babe. I'm staying put. No matter what." She ripped the covers off them and drank in his body from foot to face and licked her lips. "Besides, when I'm me again, I want this close enough to celebrate. Try to understand."

"I am. You see I haven't tried to force anything on you. That's just not me."

"I'll keep to my own room. I won't tempt you or me." She noted his sad sigh. Tina leaned in and clamped onto his mouth until he was gasping for air. "I love you, Nate Lowe."

## CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

**“Hit the juice!”** yelled Tina.

Adorned in protective over-alls, goggles and gloves, Nate, Avner, Iris and all the staff at the farmhouse watched as Tina sprayed liquid nitrogen from a stainless steel hose attached to a canister. They stood inside a tent which Nate had erected for these tests. She trained the spray on lined-up soda bottles and bouquets of flowers. Soda bottles shot like rockets into the air and exploded in fragments. The flowers crumbled into bits. The audience clapped.

“Off, Nate. Turn it off.” She waved her arms as she approached the crowd. “This ain’t gonna work, people. Too dangerous. Too cumbersome. Regular folk can’t afford this and they’d probably hurt themselves trying to use it. The can of cold idea is good, but I don’t know how we could do it.” Tina removed her goggles and gloves.

“It could take years.” The crowd gave a collective sigh.

"We'll have to consult more authorities, Nate," Avner added. He looked at Iris and a chill ran through him suddenly. All he could think of was the safety of Iris and his child. Avner moved to stand behind her and placed his arms across her any-day-now belly. "We need a better delivery system."

"Airight! My head is starting to twirl. Too technical," Tina said gingerly putting down the nozzle.

"Babe, we need to get something out to the public, but fast." Nate walked over and kicked the canister. "The Felig have not let up. Still going strong. Mankind has done nothing but run, hide and huddle."

"Whoa! Don't do that. We'll all be popsicles," quipped Iris. "Pardon me, but when you live in fear of basically being food for something, it kinda stifles your creativity."

"Yeah, Nate, chill," Tina advised. "I see one of your headaches coming. Iris is right." Tina shucked her over-alls and placed them in a hamper. She crumpled up her goggles and gloves and tossed them in an adjacent bin. "We need more brains on this."

After one of Tina's great dinners, Iris and she found themselves in the farmhouse's living room. Their men were off in that tent again, trying to

invent ways of making the liquid nitrogen concept feasible. They had promised to come back in for dessert. Iris rubbed her belly as the ladies stood at the bay window.

"Oomph!" escaped the mama-to-be.

"What is it, Iris?" asked a slightly alarmed Tina.

"Just a real hard kick. This baby wants outta there."

"Come on." Tina guided her to the sofa in front of the fireplace. Nate had set a nice crackling fire before going outside. Late October in the mountains was always chilly and warranted one. "Sit. Get off your feet."

"Tina, my mom comes in a week." She grabbed Tina's hand. "But to be truthful, this baby is gonna come before then."

"Oh God."

"Help me, Tina. I'm afraid. I know there is more to this than *push*."

Tina patted her hand, then threw hers in the air. "Honey, you have Avner."

"He's a good guy, but he'll crumble like feta if this kid comes at home." Iris stirred uneasily on the couch, trying to find a comfortable place. "I need you to help me."

Tina swallowed audibly. "How? I'm not a midwife or a doctor."

"You are a jack-of-all-trades. I've seen, heard about, you in action. You can pull through

anything. So much is going on. Things have become crazier than usual." Iris placed Tina's hand on her abdomen with a hopeful glint in her eyes. "Say yes."

Tina melted. "Did my Mom visit you? Teach you the *cow eyes*? Okay. Okay. Turn 'em off. I'll help if you need me when the time comes."

Iris forgot and squeezed Tina to her.

"Easy. Easy, girl. Not too hard. You'll pop now. Iris, I have to ask you something." Tina got up, then turned to look at her with a furrowed brow.

"Shoot, T."

"How did you take, accept Avner being part alien?"

"So, you know."

"Yes. And I'm asking you to help me now. I suppose you know about Nate?"

"Yes."

"How did you let him into your life with his...specialness? I mean you're having his kid."

Iris settled back into the couch and attempted to cross her legs, then gave up. "Tina, Avner has back hair. I accepted that, too. Except he has to shave it. I insist. He is such a charmer. Like Nate. When he began to have feelings for me, he told me about his *specialness*. He laid it all out. Let me decide. I loved him more after that."

"But Nate didn't give me that choice. He reeled me in. In the end, he showed me in that way of

his."

"Hold it right there. Now you two were not even supposed to make it this far. You had a deal as sex partners, not lovers. Right?"

"Right – wait a minute, who told you that?"

"If all had gone as planned, you would have never known about his secret." Iris responded sharply, no pretense whatsoever. The redhead's frankness came to the fore. "In my opinion, you didn't need to know. By the way, Avner told me."

"What?" Tina remarked, caught off guard.

"Think about it. And for what it's worth, you are still with him."

"I love him."

"You've answered your own question, dear. And he definitely loves you. When he visits us, he can't stop talking about you." Iris arranged a pillow at the small of her back.

"Really?"

"Really. Ouch!" She grabbed her belly. "Another kick."

"What about this child, Iris? You have no idea how it will turn out. Will it be like you or like Avner?"

"You mean will it be all human or part alien?"

"Doesn't that bother you? You've chosen an unknown path for your baby."

"I agonized a long time over that, Tina. What right did I have to do this, knowing the possible

outcome? My choice to be with Avner was mine, but a child born to us would have no say in its fate. I lost a lot of sleep."

"You should have."

"Then it dawned on me one day that *no* child asks to be born. *No* child asks to be brought into any situation. They happen." She gazed at her swollen belly. "This baby is a symbol of our love, possibly hope for the future."

"Where did this philosopher come from? And I thought you were just some love struck little girl."

"Tina, find a way to accept *all* of Nate. If you can't, then learn how to live with it. I have exposed how Avner's back hair was the deal breaker. His *specialness* did not bother me, but...the mundane about him did. Find out how to conquer your preconceived notion of Nate. Then conquer Karen or whatever name you have given your demons or walk away. It's only fair to him."

Nate and Avner burst into the room. They gathered at the fire to warm their hands and behinds.

"Time for dessert!" yelled Avner as he scooped Iris off the couch and headed for the kitchen.

Nate offered his hand to Tina. "It's time."

Tina took it, and Nate folded his arm over hers. "Way past."



## CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

“What the fuck!” screamed Nate.

“What is it?” Avner and Tina yelled back at they rounded the house’s garden shed and entered the tent. It was obvious Nate was having a conniption.

“The nitro’s gone! Everything. Canister. Hose. How the hell did someone get on the property let alone steal the nitro? I’m gonna cook those watch dogs.”

“Boss, I was up late last night with Iris.”

“Are you okay, Iris?” asked Tina.

“Yeah. I had Av re-arrange the guestroom for my mom. We saw no one pass the carriage house. No alarms were tripped.”

“I just can’t believe this.” Nate walked around the empty area where the machine had sat. “This tears it.” He began tossing goggles and gloves everywhere.

“What’ll we do now?” cried Tina. “This sucks. Back to square one.”

"Very unsettling," Avner added. "Someone got on the property and we didn't catch it."

\* \* \* \*

"Avner! Avner!" Iris called out.

"What, honey?" He hurried from the kitchen of the carriage house to meet Iris in the foyer.

"It's time!" She held the base of her swollen belly.

"Oh God! Not now. It's too early."

"No it's not. I was any day now."

"I mean your mom's not here yet. Let me call 9-1-1."

"Do that, too! O-o-oh!" A stream of water wet the floor where she stood. "Get Tina in the meantime."

"I'll call up to the house." Avner whipped out his cell and swiftly made both calls. In a flash, he took Iris back up to their room. In less than ten minutes, Tina and Nate were knocking at the door. Avner ran back downstairs and threw open the door, sheer panic contorting his features.

"What's wrong, man?" Nate grasped Avner's shoulders and shook him back to Earth.

"They can't get here for two hours."

"Who?" asked Tina, shucking her jacket.

"The EMTs. Four emergencies happening at once. They're spread thin."

A scream from Iris cut the air.

"Let me go upstairs," Tina suggested. You two boil all the water you can. Clean towels. All. Any you can find. Spread thin? Lame ass excuse."

Another scream escaped Iris.

"Coming!" Tina pushed up her sleeves as she took the stairs two at a time. She burst into the bedroom.

Iris, still fully dressed, was lying on the bed, breathing hard, legs bent.

Tina swallowed and approached. She stroked Iris' hand. "You just had to do this now, didn't you, missy?"

"Tina, please don't make me laugh."

"Easy. We're all here. For what it's worth. Honey, I need you to lift up a bit. Gotta get these pants off. Pregnant women and pants." Tina clucked her teeth. "Why do y'all wear them when you're late in your term?"

Avner hurried into the room with towels.

"Good. Good. Help me put some under her." He lifted as Tina arranged them. "Avner, please get the rest of her clothes off and put a sheet over her. I'm going to check on the water."

"What if it comes when you're out of the room? Don't take too long."

Tina patted his back and Iris' leg. "Then it comes." Tina found Nate in the kitchen with all burners going under all stockpots. "We need a

pair of scissors or a straight razor."

"Check." Nate had them in a pot already. Boiling the hell out of them. "I knew you could do it, Tina."

"It's not done yet," she pushed hair off her face and wiped her brow. "This is the beginning. We can only hope Iris gives birth quickly or slowly. No in between." She watched Nate transfer the instruments from a pot to an alcohol and water-filled basin.

"I'm gonna be sick. Oh Lord." Tina ran to the trashcan and Nate held her head as she heaved. "I can't do it," she gasped as she tossed her head back. "I can't do it. Blood, or the mere thought of it, makes me queasy."

Nate handed her a damp dishtowel for her face. Nate guided her back to the breakfast bar. "Avner will do the rough stuff. You just do the...supervising."

She dropped her head into her hands. "I still have to look."

"I'd help, but I have to bring water and towels."

"Just stay near, babe."

"Nate, Tina, where are you?" yelled Avner.

"Be right there. Check the dumbwaiter in a few minutes." Nate covered one of the stockpots, took pot holders and transferred it. He placed the basin on it, too, and let it go. He and Tina grabbed more enameled basins and took the back stairway to the

second floor. "Powers that be, be merciful," whispered Tina.

Tina woke to find herself on the bed in the room she and Nate shared when she was in a better frame of mind. She remembered that she had seen more than she had wanted to of Iris as Iris had labored to bring little Akivah Ryan Ben Sadoun into the world. He had a mess of red hair and a pug nose and to quote Avner directly, *That profile is not to be found in my family*. Red. She now hated the color. Maybe Akivah was proof of a new future. All Tina knew was that the kid's timing was as bad as the paramedics. She had recalled moaning, "Fuckers!" just before she had fainted as the ambulance had pulled into the driveway, madly tooting its horn, not ten minutes after Akivah's arrival.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

Tina had taken to gardening to a small degree at the farmhouse. The house was bathed in a brown wash, which made the building blend nicely into the forest. It claimed its ground at the end of an overgrown drive, which could be called natural at best. The front view of the house was obscured by fall foliage, some of which were gigantic willow trees. When one viewed it at first glance, it was through those jittery lenses of leaf, bush and bough. Because of this innate camouflage, Nate was still floored that someone had breached it. For small snippets each day, Tina could be found trying to tame the wildness and puttering around the garden shed. Tina glanced down at herself. Barn jacket, sweater, jeans, apron, gloves, shears, clogs. "I'm freakin' Martha Stewart!" she muttered out loud.

"Sure are," chuckled Nate as he blocked the door to the shed. "Come on, Martha, let's go check on the new parents and give them that gift."

Tina slipped off the garden gear and washed up in the shed's sink. Nate grabbed the huge vase of orange mums she'd been fussing with. They exited the little room and trekked over, hand in hand, to the carriage house.

Avner opened the door. Iris was right next to him. Little Akivah Ryan's squeals trailed in from the living room. "Come in. Come in. I thought you two had disowned us.

"You look great," Tina remarked as she hugged Iris. ""We didn't want to crowd you."

"How's it been?" Nate asked.

"Sleepless," Iris answered, yawning.

Tina handed Iris the vase.

"Oh, they are beautiful. Look, Avner." They went into the living room where Iris' mom was rocking the baby in his cradle. She stopped abruptly, rose and embraced Tina and Nate.

"Thank you so much for being there for my daughter," Missus Haverty stated. "I don't even want to think about what could have happened without you."

"And what am I...chopped liver?" Avner quipped.

"From what I understand, the poultry variety," Missus Haverty retorted.

"Mama, please."

"It was second nature, really," Tina said. "It went smoothly."

Nate stifled a laugh and fingered his beard.

"Comment?" Tina quizzed as she shot him a withering glance.

"Me?" Nate poked his own chest. "No way. You were grace under pressure, sweetheart." He leaned in and pecked her cheek.

"Smartass," Tina whispered so only he could hear.

Nate straightened and took on a serious tone. "Really though, everything turned out fine. Tina and I are late giving our formal congratulations. But we are here now." He pulled out an already chilled bottle of champagne from an inner pocket of his jacket. He bestowed it on Avner.

"Oh man, thanks, boss." Avner rolled the bottle of Veuve Clicquot in his hands.

"You got a fridge in there?"

"I snatched it from one just before I came down here."

"Where's the usual ripple?" Tina asked. "That kind of pricey stuff makes me nervous. I never know whether to drink it or anoint someone with it."

"I'll get the glasses." Iris exited, then returned with a tray of crystal flutes and an ice-filled bucket.

Avner popped the cork and poured.

"Just a taste for me, honey. I'm someone's food source now," she reminded.



"A toast! A toast" proclaimed Nate. They all raised their glasses. "You are my family. I hope to never lose you. *Mazel Tov!*" Nate turned to Tina. "That goes double for you, smartass."

She blushed and gulped her bubbly. "Showoff!" She playfully elbowed him in the side, then smacked her forehead. "Oh no, Nate. We forgot. The other thing. The most important thing. Where's the envelope?"

Nate had decided to give the new parents the carriage house as a gift. The papers were in the envelope.

"Up at the house. Damn. On the dresser in our room. I'll go get it."

"No, babe. Let me." Tina drained her flute, set it down and spoke as she backed out of the room. "I need the exercise. Be right back."

Tina raced up the walkway. Even though fall had descended upon the land, she felt invigorated, full of life and purpose. Maybe it was due to her helping to bring into the world the tiny being Avner and Iris had created against all odds. Maybe it was because as precious and fleeting as happiness and life in general were nowadays, she was happy.

Content. In love. And loved. A fog had lifted and she was ready to commit to Nate. Completely. No deals, no bargains. A full-on, warts and all

commitment. Hell, she might even let him put a pool in the backyard. In-ground only. Yeah, she was ready.

Entering the bedroom, Tina spied the envelope on the dresser. Picking it up, she glanced in the mirror. Seeing her lips, she deduced they were badly in need of lip balm. She located a tube and smeared away. She opened the envelope to make sure it was the correct one. As she began to finger comb her curls in the glass, she froze.

From out of nowhere, Karen appeared behind her.

Too surprised to scream, Tina spun around and futilely tossed items from the dresser at the Creature.

*You never learn.* Karen weaved and bobbed at the items pitched at her. She flew up close to Tina.

Tina threw the envelope on the floor and landed a good punch to Karen's torso.

"Bring it, Bug Bitch." Tina put up her fists and hopped from foot to foot like Mohammed Ali. She evaded all of Karen's attempts to grab her and landed a few punches to her jaw.

*Not the face!* Karen knocked Tina down with a sweep of a massive wing.

Before Tina could regain her composure, Karen swooped in, grabbed her battling form and exited out the open bedroom window.

## CHAPTER THIRTY

Nate could have sworn he heard Tina's voice, for more precisely, her scream as he raised another glass of champagne in honor of Akivah's birth. "Excuse me." He downed the contents of his flute and then walked to the carriage house's living room window. "Holy shit!" he hollered.

"What is it?" asked Avner as he approached the window.

"You wouldn't believe me." Nate watched in horror and disbelief as Karen had his woman in her embrace and was flying over the main house's rooftop. *Don't drop her*, he chanted inwardly.

"What the fuck?" Avner blinked and rubbed his eyes. "I'm here for you, boss.

What do you want to do?"

"Truthfully? Collapse."

"What are you two gawking at?" Iris started over.

"A hawk grabbed a small bird, honey. You know us city folk. Always astonished by nature."

He waved her to stay put. "No reason to come over. It's gone."

Nate gripped Avner's forearm and kept searching the sky. Had Karen won anyhow? Just when he'd come alive to love.

*No, she hasn't. Don't panic. I know where Karen's taking her.*

"Matty?" He looked up and around like a blind man. "Where? Lead me there."

*She's taking my girl to one of those restoration chambers. Matty's voice sounded liquid, as if she had been crying. I sense it. I know where it is. Go get in the car.*

He turned to Avner. "Will you drive me someplace? Now?" His fear gnawed at his confidence.

"Of course. Come on." He placed his and Nate's flutes on the window ledge. Avner turned Nate toward the front door. "Iris, we have to go out just now. We'll be back."

"Now? Where?"

"Hon, please." Avner walked over to Missus Haverty and pecked her on the cheek. He turned to Iris and kissed her, too. He picked up Akivah and hugged him. "Walk us to the door, Iris." Avner pulled her along.

Nate stepped on out the door and got in the Highlander. He was on cruise control.

Iris reached out and turned her husband's face

to hers. "What the hell is going on? I insist you tell me. All this moose-and-squirrel shit is making me nervous."

"We just saw Karen fly over the main house's roof with Tina in her arms. Matty knows where they are going. We're going there."

"Holy Mother of God!" Iris' breath caught in her chest. "But where is there?" She paused. "Just save her. Bring her back alive. She's my friend. Go. Be careful."

"I knew you'd understand. Take Akivah, please." He noticed his wife's eyes fill with tears. He kissed her again, slowly and thoroughly. "I love you." Avner exited, got in the truck and drove away.

\* \* \* \*

Iris mouthed a prayer and re-entered the living room.

"What was that all about?" Missus Haverty asked.

"Business, Mom." She undid her blouse, freed a breast and arranged Akivah to nurse. "Unfinished business." She sighed.

\* \* \* \*

Nate and Avner sped out of the driveway, the

black Highlander's wheels spewing gravel in all directions. They turned onto the main road, which was about sixty yards from the house. The highway was dotted with entrances to other farmhouses. From the road, one could see them through the thinning fall greenery. Nate had seen it all before as his driver would take him to the airport or on a day trip. Now he watched the sky instead.

"Floor it!" He punched the door and banged on the dashboard.

"Nate, I can't go any faster. We'll crash and then where will that leave Tina?" Avner leaned over and plucked on a soothing CD. "Breathe, Nate." Avner sped along, but was careful. He wanted to rescue Tina, too. He just wanted to do it alive and in one piece. He didn't know if the Felig would repair them again in case of an accident or just absorb them. He wasn't taking any chances.

"Sorry, Avner. Wait! Take this exit. What?"

Avner jerked the wheel sharply to the right and barreled onto the exit ramp.

"What Matty? What?" Nate with head bowed, tapped, then pressed his ear with one hand as if he was wearing a headset with static. "All right. I read you." He raised his head. "Did we make it, Av?"

"Barely." Nate's three-way conversation was distracting. "Tell Matty that us still corporeal

beings need time to react, to anticipate the turns and exits." He kept his gaze glued to the road and the cars. "Like I said...no crack ups. What next?"

"We're almost there. Take the next left. Matty said keep on." He perused the sky. "Where the hell is that witch?"

"Should we check the police scanner?"

"No. She's too clever to be seen. She saved that little show for me."

Suddenly, Avner was riding the edge of a long, deep ravine. At the end was a dark hole of a tunnel.

"Stop now, Av. Matty says here."

The spot was of course deserted. The ground was black. Scorched actually. It was a crash site of one of those fiery Felig orbs from years ago. They parked and hopped out. The land crunched beneath their boots still. They gingerly made their way down the embankment and froze in front of the opening to what could only be described as a cave.

"This leads to a restoration chamber. I remember. They're all camouflaged this way," Avner remarked.

"I recall, too. Feel that heat."

*She's in there. She took her in there, Nate.*

Nate grabbed Avner by the shoulders.

"I know I pleaded with you to come, but use your brain, man. You have a wife. A new baby. As

Tina would say, *You ain't got a nickle in this dime.* Go now. You've come far enough." He pushed his friend away.

"Nate?"

"I'd never forgive myself if something happened to you. Iris wouldn't forgive me, either. Go."

"No can do, buddy. I gotta see how this plays out." They embraced, took a deep, long breath and entered the darkness.



## CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

The best word that Tina could find to describe the murky space in which she had been dumped, would be a womb. Hot, humid, close. From a corner of the dark room, she could make out trunk-like containers and empty, clear spheres strewn about the floor. She didn't know if she was imagining things as a result of shock, but she swore the walls were pulsating. She also sensed that she wasn't alone. She was being watched and quantified. And she heard rustling. It made her skin crawl. Back braced against the wall, she pushed herself to her feet. Something approached and brushed her hand.

"Go away! Oh God. Please not like this. Not like this." Tina's voice was in the stratosphere. It only happened when she was deathly afraid.

*Yes like this. Why not like this? Any exit is as good as another.*

Karen appeared and light filled the room. She was carrying one of the human essence-filled orbs.

Tina raised an arm to shield her eyes from the brightness and to quell her rising nausea at seeing the orb. Other Felig floated behind Karen.

"Just get it over with you flying rats. Don't bore me."

*No. Nothing quick. I have something special planned for you, Ms. Cain.* Karen lobbed the orb from one hand to the other. She settled above Tina in a holding pattern. *I'm going to let each of my new friends touch you. Each touch will drain a little of your energy until you are a lifeless husk only good for kindling. No absorption for you. How do you like that?*

Funny, Tina thought she didn't note any change to the spot on her hand where she had felt the touch. Maybe more had to touch her. She stifled a scream. "No. Damn you." Tina sprang from the corner and landed a high kick to Karen's middle. Its force sent Karen flying backward across the room, hitting the opposite wall. Tina shed her tracksuit and got down to her workout wear. At least it would make it harder for one to grab her. All she had was her body and her skills. Lord, she missed her firearm. It must have been taken when the witch brought her here.

*That wasn't smart.* Karen snapped her fingers. The others advanced. *Fight all you want, but today you die.*

Tina retrieved empty globes from the floor and prepared to zing her encroaching assassins.

\* \* \* \*

Nate and Avner followed the warmth down another corridor. They chucked their jackets and shirts for ease of motion in anticipation of a fight.

"No!" insisted Tina.

"She's still alive," beamed Nate. "That's my girl. Come on." They raced down the hall, which opened directly into the restoration chamber. To Nate's dread, a Felig dangled Tina by an arm while another attempted to grab a leg. "Put her down, you bastards!" Both he and Avner went into full display. Startled, the creatures dropped Tina and she landed like a cat. She got her bearings quickly, tucked into a ball and rolled behind one of the large containers.

Nate and Avner grappled with Karen's accomplices. Thuds. Crashes. Groans. Screeches. The sound of fists connecting with body parts, alien and human. The combatants careened into each other like disoriented birds. They tussled in midair, wings beating at a mad pace and changing color according to mood. It took everything the friends had to hold off the attackers. Tina ventured out from her safe spot to toss more spheres. One hit Karen in the back.

"Tina, get out of here, now!" cried Avner.

Karen whirled around and narrowed her eyes

on the woman who dared fight back. She glided over and both swatted at and tried to get a grip on Tina.

\* \* \* \*

Tina stayed in a crouch and made herself as small as possible. "Mom! Where the hell are you?"

*Right here, sweetie.* Matty appeared from a far corner with the liquid nitrogen canister.

"Mama! On time as usual."

Matty directed her discourse at Karen. *Didn't I tell you I'd kill you if you came near them again. Now who is the one who never learns?* Matty hoisted the hose, pressed the nozzle and let it rip. Karen flew straight up to the ceiling, eluding the spray. *Damn.* Wasting no time, Matty turned to Nate and Avner's attackers next.

*Watch out, boys.* She hosed the other Felig. They froze in the air, some popped seconds later, others exploded immediately. Shards rained down on the floor.

"Give it to me, Mama." Tina risked apprehension by Karen and dove head first for the canister. Nozzle in hand, she trained it on Karen. "How do you like this?" Tina sprayed Karen, but only one of her wings.

Karen plummeted to the floor and her tear-stained face completely morphed into the bug-bird

mien. Karen writhed in pain.

Tina stood over her. "I should kill you because you sure as hell would do me. But that's where we differ. I can't kill a monster who had no say in its making. But come after me and mine again and I will enjoy watching you burst into pieces. Now get the fuck outta here before I start feeling less merciful."

*Tina, this is –*

"I don't want to hear it. Shut up and get out, Karen, or I'll spray your face."

Karen moaned as she dragged her wounded body to her feet with one arm. She shot parting glances at the people in the room and then staggered out the one entrance into the chamber.

Tina dropped the hose and slumped to the floor.

Nate ran over and enveloped her in his arms. "Are you okay?" He patted her down, checking for wounds. "Are you hurt?"

"I thought you'd never find me," gasped Tina between kisses. "I just knew my ticket was punched this time." She looked at him and gasped. "Nate! Your temple is bleeding."

"It's nothing." He wiped at the side of his head. "Matty guided us. Saved the day." Nate totally forgot Matty and Avner were there. His hands roamed over Tina in a more than casual manner. Their kisses became more intense.

"Oh, get a room you two!" quipped Avner.

*Let's get you out of here, Matty said, and back to that wife and baby.*

Nate pulled Tina up from the floor. "Yes, let's go home."

## CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

“Avner! Thank God!” Iris raced out of the carriage house just as the Highlander turned into the drive. Missus Haverty stood in the doorway, holding Akivah. Iris made a running tackle and jumped into Avner’s arms, bracketing her legs around him.

“Love, I’m fine.” Avner nuzzled her neck and cheek. “I’m dirty, honey. Slide down. Tina and Nate are fine, too.” He indicated by pointing to the couple. “You remember them. The reason I left so fast.”

“Oh guys. I’m so sorry,” Iris responded sheepishly. She unfolded her legs from around her husband and got down. “I lost it completely when I saw him.”

“It’s understandable,” Tina said. “No need to apologize. You were worried about your man.”

“But are you guys, okay? Really okay?” Iris asked as she took Tina by the forearm. “Come have a drink.”

"I'm good." Tina looked at Nate. "We're good. Right?"

"Right."

Akivah fretted at a range only dogs could hear and nothing Missus Haverty did consoled him.

"Naw," Nate said. "Not tonight. Tend your husband. We'll talk tomorrow. Thanks. Thanks for coming with me, Av. Thanks for letting me borrow him, Iris."

"Anything for Tina," the couple said.

"Goodnight all." Nate took Tina's hand and they walked to the main house.

Once inside, Tina rested against the locked front door and just stared at Nate. This man had come for her. He had risked all to rescue *her*. Heady stuff. "I'm a grimy mess, Nate." She shrugged out of the tracksuit jacket and let it drop. "Wanna help me get clean?"

"Thought I'd never hear that request again." A lecherous grin cracked Nate's face in half, then disappeared. "Tina, are you positive? After all that has happened, you should rest. I don't want to take advantage of you. Think it over."

"Nate, I've thought it over. After a day like today, I can't think of a better way to reaffirm my life than by us banging each other's brains out." She eased out of her sweat pants.

Nate's grin returned. He whipped off his jacket



as she passed him. "If we start, I'm not stopping. I'm warning you."

"I hope you won't stop. Being half-fucked is no fun." Standing on the threshold to their bedroom, Tina ripped off her bra and wriggled out of her undies. "Why are you still dressed?"

\* \* \* \*

Nate had been watching the striptease, mouth wide open. He hadn't needed to push her. She was coming to him of her own accord. "This is gonna be delicious," he assured.

Tina came back to the doorway, wet from the shower. "Nate, honey, I know you're good, but you ain't so good that you can fuck me from there. You'll know where I'll be." She walked away again.

Nate came out of his trance. By the time he reached the bathroom, he was nude and had an erection like a flagpole. That scent he loved filled the huge granite enclosure. Tina, covered in lather, turned to him and instantly looked at his crotch.

"Oh, baby, is that for me?" She reached out a soapy hand and grasped his penis. She slipped behind him and eased her free arm around his waist.

"What are you doing?"

"You'll see. Watch." She worked his slick

stiffness from base to tip. "I wanna see what you guys see when you do this."

Nate rocked on his heels.

"Such a big boy," she praised as she peeked around his heaving body. Leaning into him, she whispered, "You like this, don't you?" She rubbed a finger along the tip's sensitive underside.

"Yes-s-s."

Tina dropped her free hand to his sac and gently massaged him. She kept steady rhythm on his penis.

Nate threw his hands behind him to make contact with any part of her. He grabbed her by her hair gently and drew her around to face him. "I want us to both see when we pleasure each other. Don't stop what you're doing." He backed Tina into a corner of the enclosure.

"Payback?" she asked.

"No, hon. This is *paid in full*." Nate rubbed and cupped her crotch with one hand. He used three fingers to part her lower lips and to slowly play over her clit.

"Oh. Oh." Tina closed her thighs on his hand and almost lost her grip on him.

"No. Open for me."

Tina obeyed.

Nate inserted three fingers inside her and timed their invasion of her flesh to what she did to him. Nate ran his free hand over her responsive body.

It was becoming difficult to concentrate as pleasure was pushed to the next level. Heads down, they watched as they gave each other gratification. Time stood still or rather didn't matter. Water rained down as their moans and cries bounced around the bathroom.

Tina lifted a leg and wrapped it around Nate.

"Oh! Oh!" Tina groaned and bit her bottom lip.

Nate felt her center clench and unclench on his digits. She pumped her hips as he glided his fingers in and out as swiftly as possible. "Let it flow, Tina. Like you always have. I love it when you let go."

"Your turn," she panted. She disengaged from him and returned to pumping him in earnest.

"Oh, yeah." He humped her hands without reservation, faster and faster, building to that familiar moment. His fingers curved around her shoulders like talons.

"Give it to me, Nate. Let me see. Give it up."

He let out a huge, long groan as his own personal waterfall exploded in her hands. The warm, pearly jets fell to the shower floor to mingle with cast off suds. "You're trying to kill this old man?" asked a breathless Nate.

"Only with love. How old are you?"

Nate lifted her off her feet as his demanding lips covered hers.

\* \* \* \*

Tina sank into his comforting embrace. As she surrendered, she felt their weariness sluice down the drain with their fears.

## CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE

**A** naked Nate plopped face up on their king-size bed. He had that silly look on his face. The look he always wore after he would dry Tina off after a shower and slather his favorite scented lotion all over her. Toned, tight, tan. Sensuous, mischievous, his. Words which described her. Now it was his turn to be pampered.

"Nate, I know you like my scent, but it's too girly for you. I've discovered something from the same company. I think you'll like. I like it." Tina perched on the bed next to him. She retrieved a jar from the nightstand drawer.

He raised up on his elbows. "What is it?"

"A line with a clean, fresh just-from-the-bath scent. With a hint of ocean." She passed the jar under his nose. "I could get into this on your skin. Subtle. Calm, but with a kick. It's pretty good. Right?"

"Like me. I like it." He pulled himself up to rest against the headboard. "Okay make me moist."

Tina laughed. "You're so serious in public. No

one would ever guess that you are so whacked in private."

He nudged her with a knee. "You like it. That's all that counts."

Tina scooped out the thick, rich body butter and started with his extremities. "You need to start exfoliating, hon."

"That'll be the day." He rolled his eyes.

As she moved up his body, she straddled him.

"My favorite view of you." Nate reached out to caress her bareness.

"You just massaged me less than half an hour ago." She swatted at him.

"So." He stuck his tongue out at her.

Tina proceeded and leaned over him to concentrate on his chest and shoulders.

Nate grabbed her breasts and squeezed them together in order to lick and suck both nipples at once.

Tina faltered and almost dropped the jar as a tingle shot through her. "Nate, I'll never get through this if you keep that up."

"So again." His lips tugged on her nipples once more, then released them. Nate exhaled in a great sigh of contentment and settled Tina over him. "I'm happy for the first time in my life in a long time. All because of you."

Tina bowed her head and blushed. "I feel the same way." She planted light kisses on his taut

pectorals and pressed an open mouth to his.

"I received some wise advice from Iris."

"What was it?"

"Girls' secret. Nate, you once told me that when you are happiest, you need to do one thing. So roll over and do it."

He patted her leg. "I don't wanna scare you."

"Are you kidding me?" she asked defiantly. "Don't wanna scare me? Have you noticed the crap that has gone down the last few years? Months? Weeks? If that hasn't scared me, nothing will." She rubbed his smooth torso, then slid off it. "Come on. Over for Mama."

He rolled over and in less than thirty seconds, was in full display. The temperature jumped by at least twenty degrees in the room.

Tina jumped at the quickness of the action and at the sound his wings made when they popped out. Like an umbrella unfolding. She steeled herself and poked at them. They flapped gently.

"Really touch them. They won't bite."

Without feathers or scales, they were just cartilage and skin. Still only using her fingertip, Tina traced the fine veins and noted the crimson hue, which darkened at the high arch. "Sensitive, aren't they?"

"Very. They are an extension of emotion. My emotion."

"So they are like tofu? They take on the flavor

of the moment?"

Nate laughed out loud. "In this situation, they add to my pleasure with you."

"You mean they are an extension of your dick?"

"What a way with words, Cain."

Tina was having fun now. She poked, prodded and blew on his wings to see how they would react. "I'm curious. You mean if I rub these suckers, you'll have an orgasm?"

"Yeah. Especially the arched places." Nate looked over his shoulder at her. "If *you* rub them."

"Ain't that an unfair bitch."

The wings quivered and danced.

"I gotta test this." Tina spread body butter on them, working it in as she moved toward the curved tops. With each sweep, the crimson hue deepened and Nate jerked.

"That feels incredible, Tina. You don't know how long I have waited to be able to share this with you. Come here." He pulled her around to rest under him.

Tina observed in amazement as a scarlet canopy fanned her lovingly.

"What are you thinking, Cain?" he murmured into the steady pulse at the base of her neck.

Tina pressed her lips to the top of his sandy pate and relished the feel of his bare skin on hers. "I'm thinking that thank goodness they don't have any hair."



## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Born to a hardworking, single mother on a tight budget who believed pursuing the things which make life fun were just as important as the necessities, Anita-Louise Johnson was exposed to fun things which would entertain her and enrich her life, not just clutter it up. Her mother believed fun did not have to cost much and sought out what Philadelphia had to offer. Libraries, museums, free city-sponsored concerts, etc. She was also raised an only child in a household of adults, so she was a tad precocious. Their neighborhood, South Philly, was, and always has been, a mix of different cultures. She grew up hearing many languages and witnessing the customs of the immigrants who had settled there. As a child, she learned to observe people, developing an eye for detail and an ear for the unusual. This inquisitiveness led to her affinity for research and a desire to write. Her love of other places led to a semester in France and a B. A. in French Civilization, with a minor in Spanish. Her interest in history and her penchant for romance novels directed her to write her first historical romance, *FAITHFUL*. It was named a 2005 Independent Book Awards Finalist in the Romance category. *KINDRED* was her next logical step after recalling a snippet of information her maternal grandmother had related to her about them possibly having American Indian ancestors. She decided to spin it into an historical romance under her pen name. Anita, who uses the pseudonym, *P. J. Dean*, lives in NJ now with her very demanding cat, Bart.