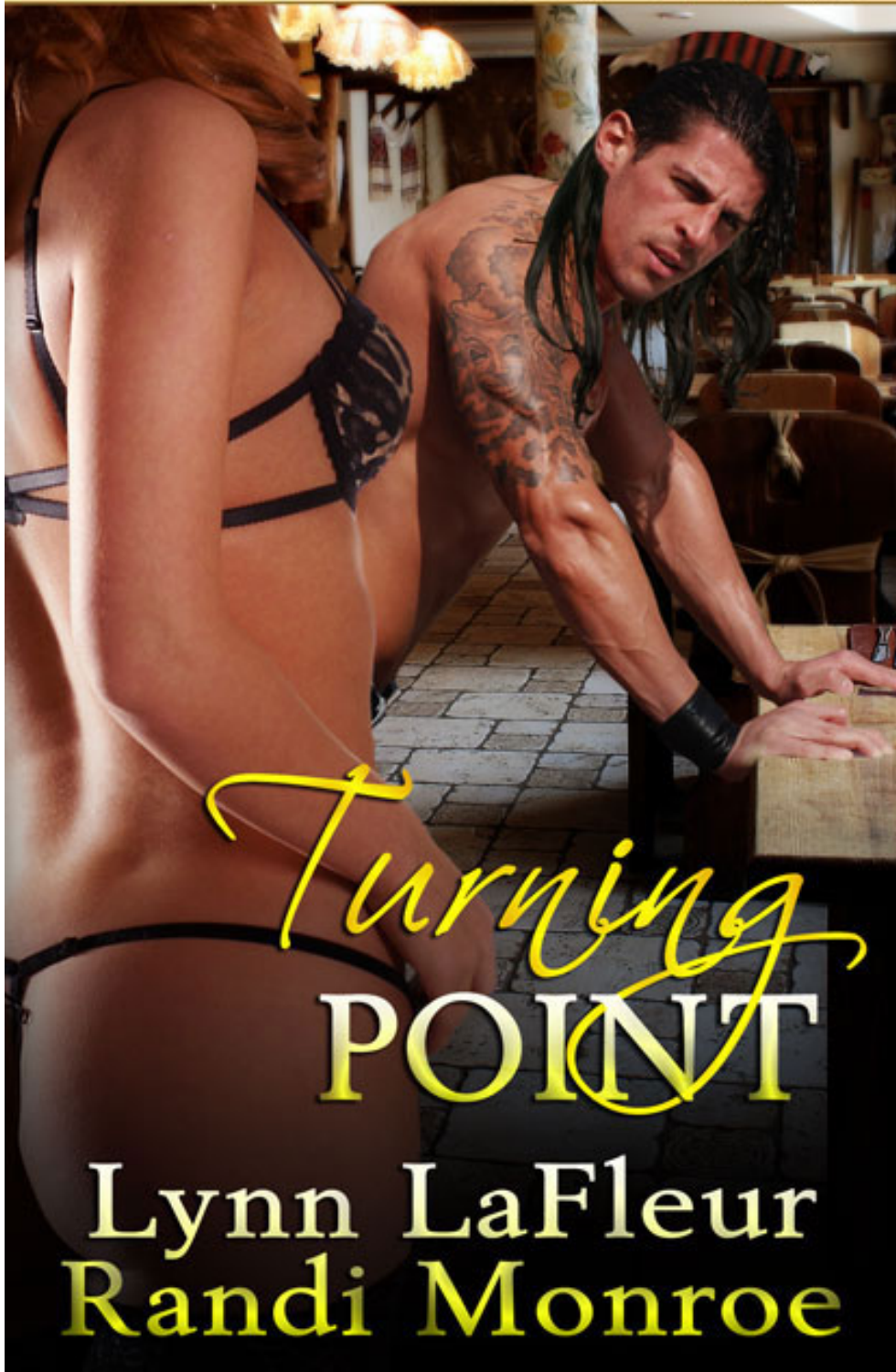


ELLORA'S CAVE *Moderne*



Turning
POINT

Lynn LaFleur
Randi Monroe

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Turning Point

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TURNING POINT

Lynn LaFleur & Randi Monroe

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Ten of Swords, Reversed
The worst is over ~ A new beginning

Chapter One

Lightning slashed across the sky. Seconds later, a clap of thunder struck with enough force to rattle the glasses hanging above the bar. Freezing rain, a few feet of snow, temperatures low enough to freeze your butt—a kick-ass storm heading right their way.

Rico Zanini stood at the front windows inside The Tarot Café and looked up at the storm clouds as dark and forbidding as the blackness in his heart.

Ten years, two months, five days. Half his adult life spent locked in a cage like an animal, all because of *her*. Soon she'd pay for every fucking minute he'd lost.

"Rico, are you out there?"

He turned at the sound of Leandra Knight's voice. She elbowed her way through the kitchen's swinging doors and stepped into the dining room, holding a large cake box with both hands.

"M.B. should be here any minute, then we're done." She laid the box on one of the tables near the door. "I don't think you've met her yet. Red hair, really cute gal. I have a couple things to finish in back. If she pulls up, just hand her the box and lock up. You're free to go after that."

Free to go. Like hell.

"That's it?"

"The storm calls the shots from now on. M.B.'s probably the only one brave enough to drive in this. Once she drops off the cake at Piney Point Elder Center, she'll hunker down too."

He tried not to flinch when Leandra touched his arm. A hard-and-fast rule of prison life—never advance on anyone unless you planned to kill them. You touched no one, and no one touched you.

"Thanks for all your hard work today, Rico. We couldn't have secured the place in time without you. I'm really glad you took the job."

He stepped back from her and jammed his hands into the pockets of his leather jacket. The job was a means to an end. He didn't need the money, but it set his plan in motion. As soon as he got what he came for, he was out of there.

"Sure, no problem. I'll wait for her." *Make that ten years, two months, six days.*

* * * * *

M.B. Hunter loved the mountains, from the bite of the fresh chill air to the freedom it gave her to live in the moment. After growing up in Queens, in a jungle of asphalt and graffiti mixed with the broken dreams of boarded-up storefronts and burgeoning unemployment, M.B. looked around her and knew she had it all. She'd never tire of the splendor and majesty of the High Sierra, no matter what Mother Nature threw her way.

She frowned, remembering it hadn't started out that way. Fresh out of law school and with her California license in hand, she'd headed straight to Southern California.

Too soon, the glamour of L.A. wore thin. Movie stars without makeup, she discovered, looked worse than she did, and drugs were so much a part of the club scene, she'd tired of that the first month.

Worst of all, she despised her job as a public defender. She worked twenty-hour days to eke out enough to cover the rent on her studio apartment at the beach. She'd come to California to soak up the sun. Instead, she spent most of her time stuck in traffic while she lived on antihistamines and overpriced coffee drinks to stay awake.

Finally, on her twenty-seventh birthday, while she gobbled down half a Black Forest torte by herself, M.B. realized she had nothing. That's when she knew that somewhere along the way she'd lost her love of the law and a damn big part of her soul.

A week later, her cell phone in one hand and ATM card in the other, M.B. caught the first plane north. There, in a frozen little village atop the highest peak she'd ever ascended, she learned miracles still happened.

This afternoon, she looked up at the sky and then at her watch. She knew she had to hurry or she'd have a catastrophe of nature to deal with if she got stuck in the snow. The perfect place to freeze to death. She shivered at the dire prospect and turned into an empty space outside the café. The Tarot Café stood at the far end of Bridge Street, in the heart of Truckee's historic district. Hers was the lone vehicle still on the road. Everyone else had been smart enough to call it a day. She looked at her watch again. She'd be home safe and warm in half an hour.

"Rico, get the door!" Leandra called out at the sound of someone banging on the glass. *Where did he go? This isn't good.* She hurried to open it.

"I thought you'd forgotten about me," M.B. said. A rush of cold air followed her inside. She stomped the slush off her boots. "Damn, it's hot in here."

"That's because you were outdoors. It's perfect."

"Maybe for you." M.B. pulled off her gloves, stuffed them in her pockets and unfastened her parka. Leandra gasped.

"My god, where's your shirt, woman?"

Beneath her parka, M.B. wore only a lavender tuft of lace that would have shredded under the weight of heavier breasts. She grabbed the lapels and pulled her jacket together. "I was at the gym. This woman came gliding by with a big ol' smoothie in her

hand. She waved to someone as I turned. Bingo, right down the front of my shirt. You can't go out in wet clothes in this weather."

Leandra raised an eyebrow. "You couldn't have borrowed a T-shirt?"

"I was in a hurry to get here."

"Shirtless is better?"

"It's warmer than wet." M.B. opened the parka again. "Besides, isn't this bra gorgeous?"

"If you're meeting someone special for a little matinee."

"Where does it say we can't wear something sexy for ourselves?"

Leandra thought a moment, then laughed. "I'm sure my mom could quote the source, chapter and verse. It's lovely, M.B., but I'm more worried about you getting home before the storm."

M.B. waved aside her concern. "I've been ready for it for three days. Kindling's laid so as soon as I get home I'll drag in the cats, pour myself a nice glass of merlot and strike a match. I'll be good 'til Sunday."

"Synda and I were telling someone about your cat sanctuary today. He took over Buddy's job as our maintenance man. I wanted you to meet him."

"Who? Why don't I already know him?"

"You might have seen him around town. He's been here about a week." Leandra sealed the lid of the cake box with a couple of pieces of tape.

"He likes cats?"

Leandra grimaced. "Hates them."

"You'd hire a cat hater?"

"Trust me, he's a nice guy...plus we were desperate."

M.B. narrowed her eyes. "How desperate?"

Leandra hesitated before answering. "Look, even ex-offenders need a break."

"What!"

"It's not like that," Leandra said. "He was wrongly accused."

M.B. dropped her head into her hands. "Oh God, I don't believe I'm hearing this." She looked up. "So what was he *wrongly accused* of?"

Leandra mumbled something.

"Say again."

"He didn't do it. We know because we Googled him."

M.B. threw her hands in the air. "But of course, if it's on Google it has to be true." She gripped Leandra's wrist. "What did he do?"

"He was convicted of rape and attempted murder."

"What?"

At M.B.'s indignation, Leandra straightened her spine and thrust out her chin. "He was exonerated by a program called The Innocence Project. You must have heard of it."

"I've heard of it. When?"

"Last year. He's perfect for the job. He's a big guy. Poor Synnda's always dragging a ladder behind her. He can reach all the places she can't."

"Do you know anything about him besides what you found on Google?"

"All that we needed to know. He's a little rough around the edges, but we can help him with that."

"Lea, I spent too many months defending people who claimed they were innocent. Some were, some weren't, but none of them was moving in with my best friends."

"He's not like that."

"I don't care if you see a halo above his aura. Every con's got a sob story. You can't take them at their word." She balled her fists. "For once, girlfriend, err on the side of safety. Before you let this guy into your lives, make sure you know him. Googling isn't enough."

"He was staying at the campground, in a sleeping bag. We couldn't let him freeze to death in the storm when Buddy's cabin is sitting empty."

M.B. sighed. "I know you keep a gun in the safe. Take it out and slip it under your pillow. Promise me you will."

"I don't like guns."

"Then tell Synnda to put it under hers." M.B. shook her head. "When do I get to meet this innocent man?"

"Why would you want to meet him?"

"So I can pick him out in a lineup later."

Leandra ran a hand through her hair. "I can't believe you were ever a defense attorney. You never think anyone's innocent."

"Not true. I defended a lot of folks who would have gone down if they'd drawn another P.D. I'm just not the proverbial cockeyed optimist that I used to be. I don't care if I sound like our mothers—it's better to be safe than sorry." She looked over her shoulder into the empty dining room. "So where is he?"

Leandra pointed to the sky. "Forget it. You can meet him later. Syn and I will be fine." She took a moment to tamp down her temper. M.B. could be so stubborn. "Now get out of here before the storm hits full force. It's not going to wait for you to get home."

"I'd feel a lot better if you and Syn came with me. Promise me you'll make sure this guy stays put in Buddy's place and doesn't come inside the café." She pulled her keys and gloves out of her pockets. "Hey, thanks for the cake. The old folks up at Piney Point get so excited when you send one over. Perfect for a dark and stormy night."

“Our pleasure, Snoopy.” Leandra held the door open, then followed M.B. to her SUV. She rubbed her arms against the cold while M.B. laid the cake flat in the footwell on the passenger’s side.

“Drive carefully,” Leandra said. “You can feel the snow’s itching to start.”

They hugged before M.B. slid behind the wheel.

“Call me the minute you get home. If you don’t, we’ll come looking for you.”

“Half an hour and I’ll be there, feet up, surrounded by fat, spoiled kitties.” She wiggled her fingers in a goodbye wave. “And put that gun under your pillow.”

M.B. threw the gearshift into drive but sat a moment before releasing the brake.

The Innocence Project. Since Leandra had said the name, so many thoughts tumbled through her mind, none more troubling than the decision she’d made when she’d been too young to deal with the consequences of a lifetime of guilt. She couldn’t make up for her past. She’d hurt someone terribly and she’d take that to her grave. But she wasn’t foolish enough to allow her friends, no matter how well-meaning, to put their lives in jeopardy.

She hid her frown until Leandra stepped back inside the café. Then M.B. pulled out her cell phone and dialed the sheriff’s office.

Chapter Two

"There you are." Leandra had walked back into the café to find Rico standing in the shadows behind the bar. *Why had he hidden?* "How long were you standing there?"

"A few minutes."

"Why didn't you join us?"

"So she could show her tits to me too? She always run around like that?"

Leandra tried not to laugh but couldn't stop herself. That must have been quite a picture M.B. painted in Rico's mind. Quite an introduction. "M.B. can be impulsive, but she usually keeps her shirt on."

"Isn't she a lawyer?" His words reeked of disgust.

How much had he heard? "She has a small practice. Mostly real estate, a little probate work."

"That's not what I heard."

A bit taken aback, Leandra quickly replayed their conversation in her mind. "She worked in L.A. for a couple of years as a defense attorney, but she won't take criminal cases now."

"Why?"

She shrugged. "I don't know, Rico. I guess she found too many flaws in the system."

"Too many guilty people going free?"

They were heading toward ground Leandra didn't want to tread. "Rico, you're going to have to ask her about that." She'd walked near enough now to see he held something in his hand. "What have you got there?" By reflex, she reached deep into the pocket of her skirt where she always kept her favorite Tarot deck. She exhaled a quiet breath when her fingertips grazed the side of the velvet pouch.

Besides five-star entrees and desserts, The Tarot Café offered complimentary Tarot readings to their customers. She and Synda had grown up together, cousins as close as sisters, and had made many life-changing decisions based on alternative forms of divination. The success of The Tarot Café told them they'd made the right decision to feature readings along with fabulous meals. That decision placed their café a cut above the other fine restaurants and bistros in this small vacationers' paradise.

Still, she frowned at the deck of Tarot cards fanned out on the bar, facedown. Apparently, one of their part-time readers had carelessly left hers behind.

She also noticed Rico's eyes looked darker than usual, and angrier. He thrust out his arm so she could see he once again held the card that had troubled him earlier, when she and Synda had done a reading to convince him to take Buddy's job.

"The Ten of Swords," she acknowledged.

He pointed to the deck of cards in front of him. "Is this the only fucking card in the deck?"

"You chose it at random?"

"You think I'd pick it on purpose?"

She took the card from him and looked at the image of a young, dark-haired man lying atop a sarcophagus beneath a stormy sky. Ten swords pierced his body. "We went over this before, Rico. The fact you chose this card again underscores how much it's reaching out to you. Don't you remember what I said?"

He didn't have to answer. She knew he remembered but was still unwilling to accept it.

"Like the man on the card, you were stabbed in the back, convicted of a crime you didn't commit."

"Tell me something I don't know."

"This morning, the card came up reversed." She looked at it again. "Like it is now. Upright, this card might mean your situation looks hopeless. You've reached rock bottom with no way to dig out. Reversed, it means the opposite—a new beginning. You've survived a disastrous situation. The worst is over."

"About fucking time."

"But..."

"But what?"

"Remember, the card is saying you have a *chance* to start over. That people will reach out to help you. The Tarot can't make you do anything. It's up to you to accept what it's telling you, or not. Synda and I have only known you a week, but even in that short time, we can see you have trouble trusting others. You feel safe as a loner. That's understandable. The Ten of Swords is telling you that you don't have to do it alone. Don't turn away from the offer of friendship...or a chance at love."

He slammed his open palm against the bar top. She stepped backward, startled by his anger.

"If you and the cards know so much about me, then you know I don't believe in this shit. 'Don't turn away from the offer of friendship or a chance at love'," he mimicked her light, melodic voice. "You and Synda gonna offer me a chance at love, Leandra? I haven't had a good fuck in a long time, especially not a threesome."

A chill crept through her. She was glad he'd turned away and not seen her wince. She almost said something harsh, but then he muttered, "Sorry. I'm not used to bein' around women. I shouldn't have said that."

His words sounded contrite, his expression unreadable.

“No, you shouldn’t have. And I don’t want to hear anything like that again.”

He waited a moment longer than she would have liked but he finally nodded.

After another pause, where only the winds whistling outdoors sounded louder than the crackling oak in the fireplace, Rico asked, “Are those Buddy’s clothes in the cabin?”

“He tore out of here rather quickly. You’re taller than he is.” *And one heck of a lot more buff.* “But if you need something to tide you –”

“He won’t be back for them?”

Her laugh sounded brittle. “The county has an orange jumpsuit...” *Hell’s bells, why did I bring up jail?* “Buddy’s probably sunning himself on Rosarita Beach, laughing his butt off at us and the storm.”

He turned and started to walk away. Then he stopped and over his shoulder said, “One more thing.”

“What’s that?”

“Fifteen dollars an hour plus room and board.”

She started to correct him. Synda had offered him twelve dollars.

His lids lowered with an icy determination he must have learned as part of prison negotiation. “Is it a deal?”

She nodded. “Deal.”

Without another word, he turned and headed for the back.

* * * * *

M.B. pulled into the five-car garage built next to her house, removed the keys from the ignition and blew out a deep breath. *What a day.* Nothing had gone as she’d planned, beginning with the smoothie shower. She’d intended to dash in and dash out of Piney Point. *That* never worked for her. She’d taken one look at the lonely faces of the elderly who had so few visitors, and her heart broke. Three games of rummy and an hour later, she still sat amid a circle of wheelchairs, nibbling on her second piece of Synda’s incredible Chocolate Decadence cake, and warm enough to explode beneath her closed parka.

Then there was the trek home and up the side of the hill on which her A-frame perched. The view was magnificent, the climb treacherous, although the panorama of the valley below usually made her angst worthwhile.

Once she’d left the village limits, her windshield wipers warred with freezing rain, and for the last hundred yards, with snowflakes the size of small pizzas.

Her stomach growled. *What a lovely thought.* Pepperoni, mushrooms, extra cheese and a winter storm. A perfect combo.

She grabbed her purse and workout tote and raced across the driveway to the covered walkway that led to her back door and kitchen. She’d brought in at least a cord

of chopped wood this morning before going to the gym, and two more stood under the shelter of the walkway. She'd even remembered to top off her generator.

Still, her conversation with Leandra and her phone call to the sheriff's department kept chipping away at her sense of well-being. She'd been in such a rush to deliver the cake to the nursing home, she hadn't thought to ask Leandra Innocent Man's name.

Deputy Tom Connors, who should have been a lot more concerned about Leandra's safety than the impending storm, hadn't been of much help either. He didn't know the gals had found a new maintenance man, and when M.B. couldn't give him a name, he sounded more annoyed than concerned.

"You've lived here long enough, M.B., to know what the first real storm of the season brings. Once CalTrans closes I-80 at the summit, we'll be up to our asses in fender-benders and pissed-off motorists. Lea's made it very clear she can take care of herself. I'm not her personal bodyguard."

"The guy served time for rape and attempted murder."

"The guy was exonerated. The courts gave him a break. Why don't you?"

"Because obviously I'm a better friend than you are."

She expected Tom's hand to snake through her cell and strangle her. If he had, it would have been worth it. He finally muttered, "Okay, I'll check it out."

In no time at all, M.B. had her house as warm as she'd complained about the temp at the café. Now it felt great. Mom Cat, six kittens, and M.B.'s favorite, Ruskie, a huge Russian Blue, were safely inside. She'd even gotten ambitious enough to throw together the pizza that sounded so good, and the first batch of chocolate chip cookies was about to come out of the oven.

She'd showered and changed into flannel sweats. With her hair tied back in a ponytail, she snuggled under an afghan a grateful client had knitted for her. She held a generous glass of merlot in one hand and petted Ruskie with the other. A paperback novel lay open beside her, but instead of reading, she closed her eyes and swallowed a sip of wine.

No matter how hard she tried to forget. No matter how many times she told herself it wasn't her fault, her mind – or maybe her conscience – refused to let it go.

"You were eighteen years old," she said aloud. "A month out of high school, too young to drink but old enough to destroy a man's life."

No, he wasn't even a man. He was nineteen, a kid just like her. Tall, gangly, all arms and legs. But it was his eyes she'd never forget. The eyes of an innocent young man who turned old in a second. She knew that look. Two years defending the guilty and the innocent had shown her the difference. She'd known it then too, and she'd never forgive herself for looking the other way.

She could still hear the judge as clearly as if it had happened yesterday.

"Ladies and gentlemen of the jury, have you reached a verdict?"

"We have, Your Honor," the foreman replied.

"What say you?"

"On the charge of attempted murder, we find the defendant, Rico Anthony Zanini, guilty.

"On the charge of first degree sexual assault, we find the defendant guilty."

"So say you all?"

She could feel her fellow jurors tense. She'd stopped breathing.

The foreman had hesitated for only a few seconds, but enough time for Rico's attorney to request the court poll the jury.

She tried not to look at Rico, but she couldn't stop herself. Her gaze shot straight to him. He latched onto it and held it.

I'm innocent, Mary Beth, her mind clearly heard him say. *I didn't do it. You know they're wrong. Tell them. Say it – "Not guilty."*

Instead, she'd turned away. Four days of intense pressure from people older and wiser than she had worn her down.

"Juror Number 9?"

She heard her number called. She'd clasped her hands so tightly her fingers ached.

"Juror Number 9, guilty or not guilty."

Her heart thundered in her ears. The juror seated next to her clamped her hand on Mary Beth's wrist and squeezed. The same signal her mother had used to bring a difficult child into submission.

She'd opened her mouth, "Not guilty," on the tip of her tongue. The pressure on her wrist intensified. "Guilty, Your Honor," slipped past her lips.

She felt Rico's gaze bore into her. Tears stung her eyes, bile rose in her throat. It was as if there was no one in the courtroom but them. His face and expression shown disbelief, the look of a man betrayed by his best friend. And then she saw the most chilling sight of her young life. Disbelief turned to hatred – deep, abiding, unforgiving hatred. From that look, she knew he'd blamed her. *You could have saved me,* it said. One dissenting vote, reasonable doubt. A hung jury, a chance for a new trial. Time to find the real perpetrator. His look said it all.

Within a few minutes, the judge affirmed the verdict, set a sentencing date and dismissed the jury. Finally it was over, yet even then M.B. knew it had just begun.

* * * * *

By five o'clock, snowflakes the size of dessert plates swirled and pummeled Truckee's streets and sidewalks. The power had gone off inside the café several times, but Leandra and Synda had managed to continue working without starting up the generator. Even more surprising, slices of street lighting still shined through what would soon be white-out conditions.

In anticipation of sheltering stranded travelers, Synda had two large kettles of soup and one of chili warming on the stove, along with an oven full of rising dough, plenty of coffee, tea and hot chocolate, and enough brandy and other spirits to warm the most chilled stragglers.

At six, they gathered at the café's back door. Rico, who'd been outside tending to the generator, looked like a snowman.

"Anything else?" He placed several snow shovels under the shelter of the back door overhang and looked longingly at his new digs. His sagging shoulders proved he'd worked himself to exhaustion.

"That's it, Rico," Leandra said. "Thank you so much."

Synda stood on tiptoes and brushed the snow from his hair. "You must be starved. We thought this might hit the spot." Leandra handed him a tray with a large pot of chili, cornbread, and two pieces of apple pie in a covered container. "You'll find beer in the fridge in your cabin and coffee in the pantry. If you need anything stronger...well, you know where it is."

"Once I go inside, I'm not comin' out again."

"Hopefully, neither are we," Leandra said. "We won't call you unless there's an emergency. We respond to those whether we want to or not."

He squared his shoulders. Enough to tell them that no matter how tired he was, he'd be there to answer their call.

"Here are the numbers for both of our cell phones." Synda handed him a little yellow sticky note. "Call us if you need anything."

Leandra placed her hand on his arm. "Thank you, Rico. We couldn't have gotten ready before the storm hit without you."

"Keep warm, and rest," Synda added. "We'll have some serious digging out when this is over."

They stood in the doorway and watched him walk the ten yards from the café to the cabin. He balanced the tray while he stepped sure-footed through the snow.

Synda leaned against the door's molding. "What do you think, cuz?"

"I think we've found a real winner."

"Me, too."

* * * * *

Inside Buddy's cabin, Rico slammed and locked the door. He shoved the tray onto the kitchen counter, grabbed a beer from the fridge and plopped down onto one of the two barstools at the counter's overhang.

Ten years. He had waited ten years for the chance to get his revenge on Mary Beth Hunter. That chance was now so close, he could taste its sweetness.

He unscrewed the top of the bottle and chugged half the beer in one swallow. For the last four hours, whenever he remembered the sight of those glorious, creamy white breasts nestled inside that purple lace, he'd been unable to catch his breath. Worse, the memory sent shock waves below his belt. He knew he couldn't walk around the café with his cock as hard as a cut of oak. He tried everything to crush the memory, but he couldn't.

Mary Beth Hunter had stood out among the jurors. She looked young for her age, and way younger than the others on the panel. Her bright red hair was pretty darn hard to miss too, even though she kept it tied back. By the end of the day, hanks had usually come loose from the clips that held it in place. Even then, he fought to concentrate on the questions the DA asked witnesses rather than fantasize what it would be like to loosen those clips, to see a mass of auburn hair spread across one of the bright white pillowcases his mother insisted hang in the sun to dry.

Picturing her naked came way too easy. Bigger tits would be nice, but tits of any shape and size suited him just fine. He always fantasized that her pussy hair would be bright red too. Or maybe she'd even shave it...maybe he'd help her do it.

Rico tossed back the rest of the beer, pulled off his jacket and threw it on the other stool beside him. He looked down in disgust. He was hard again. This time he'd do something about it. Not what he wanted, but something that would relieve the tightness in his gut and the tension that had been building since this morning.

He shucked his clothes and dropped them on the bathroom floor. Once naked, he stepped beneath the shower. The small area soon filled with steam from the hot water. He grabbed the washcloth and bar of soap and worked up a thick lather.

Mary Beth filled his mind again as he spread the lather over his flesh. He couldn't shake her from his thoughts, nor the plans he made. Soon, very soon, she'd share the pain and humiliation he lived with for ten years. Know what it's like to be wrongly accused and punished, to see "you're guilty" in the expression on everyone's face. To walk through life branded by it.

This time, though, revenge wasn't on his mind. Instead, he pictured her as he'd seen her this afternoon at the café. She'd been pretty when on his jury. Now she was striking. That curly red hair and ivory complexion, those big blue eyes...the combination was stunning. He couldn't believe what he'd seen when she'd opened her parka—nothing but her bra and her tits. Lacy, cut low, her breasts ready to tumble out and into his hands. Or his mouth. His cock responded immediately, growing hard in moments and ready to take her.

He'd had women since he got out of prison—one-night stands that did nothing except give him a few minutes of pleasure. Once he left them, he couldn't remember their names or faces.

He knew he'd never forget Mary Beth.

Rico slid his soapy hand down his stomach to his cock. It grew thicker and harder in his palm as he imagined pushing her up against a wall. He'd twist one hand into that

curly red hair while he dove beneath her bra to discover the exact fullness of her breasts. Her nipples would feel like diamonds beneath his thumb. He'd caress one nipple, then the other, while he ravished her mouth with a kiss she'd hungrily return.

This wouldn't be lovemaking. Rico had never learned how to make love to a woman. This would be sex – hard and fast and dirty.

His strokes quickened at the thought of dropping to his knees before her. He'd tug her jeans and panties down her legs until they pooled at her feet. By then she would be so hot, she'd beg him to take her.

Not yet. Not until he tasted her.

He'd part her feminine lips with his thumbs and drive his tongue inside her. He'd gone without the taste of a woman's pussy for ten years in prison. He'd savor every second of licking hers, sucking her clit. He'd bring her to the brink of orgasm with his tongue, then bury his rod inside her creamy channel. She'd come once, twice, squeezing his hard flesh with each orgasm until he wouldn't be able to hold back any longer.

"Fuck!"

Rico trembled when the orgasm grabbed his balls. He jerked his cock as cum shot across the shower stall and disappeared down the drain.

Fighting for breath, he leaned on the wall and let the water beat against his skin. It was all part of his plan. One day Mary Beth Hunter would come to him, and when she did, Ms. Lawyer would find out what it was like to be tried, convicted and fucked over by an innocent man.

Chapter Three

The lights flickered and died again as the women reached the top of the stairs and the hallway leading to their quarters.

Earlier that afternoon, Rico had delivered a second stack of wood to each of their apartments. In the darkness, Leandra had to feel her way over the stacks to find the lock on her door. “Dang it, why does this door always stick? This would be a lot easier without the wood.”

“Ram the door, like the cops do.” Synda sounded tired and annoyed. “Don’t try to move the wood in the dark.”

“I have to. It’s piled up against the door.” She grunted. “If I give an itty-bitty...damn it!” The door flew open. With a crash, oak scattered across the threshold and into her flat.

Synda stood hugging herself, trying not to laugh. “Told you so, but when did you ever listen to me?”

Leandra had to play hopscotch to keep from falling. “Thanks a lot. I’ll remember that when I’m lying in traction.”

“If we’d hung the flashlights in the hall instead of inside our apartments, you wouldn’t be tripping all over yourself.”

“You were supposed to tell Buddy where to hang them.”

Synda easily flung her door open. “Maybe I was too busy cooking and baking to chase down our maintenance man.”

“Oh please, now you sound like your mother. Got the back of your hand pressed against your forehead?”

“And you sound like yours – nag, nag, nag.”

They both stopped, and then burst into laughter. In unison they said, “When did Buddy *ever* do anything we asked him to?”

“You know, it was bad enough that we hired him in the first place,” Synda said. “But why were we so upset when he left? He only did what he wanted to, and now we know he would have stolen everything that wasn’t nailed down.”

“Does that tell us, cousin, how naïve we were?”

“Hey, *you’re* the one who read our cards, not me. You’re the one –”

“All right, all right.” Leandra held up her hands in surrender. “Let’s be grateful the police came after him before he took off with the family silver, and let’s make sure Rico always knows who’s boss.”

“You think he’ll stay?”

The lights flickered back on. Squinting after the darkness, Leandra said, "I hope he does, but..."

Synda followed Leandra into her studio. "'But' what? Did he say something?"

"It wasn't Rico, it was M.B. She stopped by for the cake. She warned—" Leandra spun around. "Oh my god, Synda, M.B. was supposed to call us the minute she got home. I told her we'd come looking for her if she didn't. That was hours ago."

The two women almost stumbled over each other in their rush to find their cell phones. Leandra used hers to try M.B.'s land line while Synda tried M.B.'s cell.

"Oh hell, no signal on the cell." Disgusted, Synda snapped the cover shut. "What about her—"

Leandra looked relieved. "Phone's busy. Maybe she's trying to call us."

"*Busy* busy, or that fast signal when the line's down?"

"What are you talking about? Busy is busy."

Synda grabbed the phone. "There's a distinct difference in the sound. Here, let me try it." She pressed speed dial then listened a few moments, concern increasing on her face with each *bzzit, bzzit*.

"Is our land line working?"

Lea grabbed the phone. "Dead. The snow must have snapped some lines."

"Now what do we do?"

"I don't know." Leandra started pacing. "Search and Rescue probably has their hands full. But if there's any chance M.B.'s in trouble..."

"Let's don't waste time standing around guessing. We spent half our savings on two snowmobiles. M.B. doesn't live that far. We can be there in ten minutes. If she's okay, and I know she is, we can—"

"We can't both go," Leandra interrupted. "Someone has to be here in case they need the café as additional shelter."

Without hesitation, Synda said, "Call the cabin. Rico's about to get his baptism by fire."

"Ah, no, I think that would be his baptism by snow."

* * * * *

Ten minutes later Rico walked out of the cabin dressed in ski pants three inches too short, a jacket that hung loose at his waist and strained at his shoulders, a ski cap smelling of detergent and softener—nirvana compared to the scent of the detergent used at the prison—and a ski mask that hid his identity as well as covered his face.

Leandra had prepped the snowmobiles and made him watch while she ran through a quick inspection—full tanks, working headlamps, all the bells and whistles ringing and sounding at her command.

He'd stopped listening after the first few minutes, squinting instead into the snow that had slowed a little since he'd walked to the cabin.

Keep your eye on the prize – freedom, the chaplain had urged him once they learned The Innocence Project had accepted his case. Yeah, freedom was the biggie, but so was revenge.

And so was the memory of Mary Beth's breasts spilling out of her bra. He couldn't get the picture out of his mind, or maybe he didn't want to. He'd jerked off twice since settling in for the evening. That wasn't enough. He didn't need another hand job, he needed a warm, wet pussy...*her* warm, wet pussy.

By nineteen, he'd had sex with only two girls. Both of them knew more than he thought he'd ever know.

Rico scowled beneath the mask. Prison changed all that. He'd gone almost eleven years without a woman and seen the worst side of sex. He gritted his teeth against the acid rising from his stomach. His initiation into prison life had been swift and brutal and taught him tricks of survival no one should ever have to learn. Five years later, he'd established himself as a bigger badass than any of them, in spite of the scars he'd carry for life and the countless days spent in the prison infirmary.

"Rico, are you listening to me?" Leandra's voice cut through his thoughts. "Unless you can drive this thing, you're going to stay here and keep an eye on the stove while Syn comes with me."

"I can do it." The sharp tone of his answer lost some of its force through the filter of the ski mask.

"Good, because if..."

And so the inspection continued while his thoughts drifted back to Mary Beth. If he whipped off the mask, would *she* recognize him? He was thirty pounds heavier than when she'd made sure the "justice" system had put him away.

Had she even thought about him again?

It takes only one juror, one person with reasonable doubt, his cousin Tony and his attorney had assured him. They'd chosen well during jury selection. Juror No. 9, a perky young redhead, would be the one to set him free.

Rico had connected with her the second their gazes met across the courtroom. At that moment, and for the first time since his arrest, he'd relaxed and started to believe what his lawyer had said. "Wouldn't make any difference if you're guilty or innocent, Rico. That redhead's hot for you. You're going to walk on this one. A slam dunk."

Slam dunk, my ass.

He exhaled and unclenched his fists. He didn't want Leandra to see the fury that churned inside him. To his relief, she still yammered on about the differences between her snowmobiles, too busy to notice the tension in his hands or the tremor in his leg that bespoke his anger.

Tonight he'd play it cool. Let Mary Beth wonder about the face behind the mask.

Maybe he'd say something only she'd understand. Drop a hint, or a name. How long before she began to remember?

She couldn't do anything to him now. He'd been exonerated, thanks to Tony badgering the attorneys at The Innocence Project. They'd forced the state to reexamine the evidence, to admit in open court that there was no chance in hell the DNA extracted from the semen found inside Pia Marie Sarantella belonged to Rico Zanini. And lastly, forced Pia to recant her previous testimony and admit she never saw the face of her attacker. He could have been one of thousands of men of the same height and weight as Rico.

And now his time had come. Revenge had kept him alive every fucking hour of the 3,717 days he served. Kept him sane and inside himself when a lesser man might have crumbled.

Now he'd see how perky Juror No. 9 acted when she came face-to-face with the worst mistake of her life.

"That's it, Rico." Leandra pulled the snow goggles down over her eyes and motioned for him to do the same. "We're ready to roll."

* * * * *

Rico and Leandra bounced along while the light from their headlamps fell on animal tracks in the fresh snow. Some he recognized as deer tracks. He had to guess at the rest, especially the prints the size of his boots and the stride of a jaguar. No way he wanted to meet that one up close and personal.

They both kept an eye out for anything that resembled a vehicle that might have gone off the road. They didn't see any, nor prints that would have indicated someone was lost and disoriented. With each mile, he noticed Leandra's posture, tall and rigid at the start, began to show signs of relaxation in her shoulders and spine. Once his body adjusted to the cold, Rico relaxed too.

They were twenty, maybe thirty yards away when he first spotted the shadow of a structure. Narrow spears of light seeped through tiny cracks in the wooden shutters protecting the front windows and storm door. Light snow had begun to fall again. The flakes shimmered in the glow of the lights. Smoke billowed from a chimney at the rear of the house and swirled and dissipated on the winds.

Rico slowed his vehicle in time with Leandra's and nodded when she pointed. It wasn't until the light of their headlamps fell on the front of the house that Rico's breath caught. The place was a fucking alpine mansion.

Leandra made a sidearm motion before motoring slowly along what Rico guessed was a driveway leading toward the rear of the house. Snow had piled up enough that he would never have recognized it, but would be easy to follow for someone who had visited many times in the past.

When they crawled to a stop in back, he saw a covered entryway led inside. Several cords of wood, now covered in snow, were stacked outside the entry. Rico wondered who had chopped the wood. The owner of the house? A live-in lover?

Leandra pulled within a foot of the entry and stopped. Rico followed suit. When the door opened a crack, she raised her mask and called out, "It's Leandra, M.B."

The door swung open all the way. Light from the entry poured onto the snow.

"What in the world are you doing here?"

Rico saw she was dressed in a pair of baggy sweats and running shoes.

"You didn't call. We were afraid something had happened."

M.B. pushed the door open wider and beckoned, "Get in here, you two, before you freeze to death."

How long Rico had waited to hear that invitation. His heart pounded in his ears. In a few moments, he'd read either recognition in her eyes or the polite gaze of a stranger who recalled nothing.

He was prepared for either reaction.

Rico didn't remove his mask. He'd seen her from the shadows earlier. Now he wanted to see her in full light before she had a chance to see him.

The three stood in the kitchen, a room almost as large as the dining room at The Tarot Café. Heat from a wood-burning stove warmed it. The aroma of baking cookies perfumed the air. An oversized armchair and ottoman stood alongside a low table and lamp. On the cushion, a tiny, fluffy ball of fur was curled up asleep. In seconds, he saw two more, and then what must have been the mom cat, a sleek, short-haired calico—the kind his mom favored, too.

"Why didn't you call?" Leandra stood between them.

"I tried as soon as I got home. No signal on your cell. No one answered your land line."

Rico stiffened. He could read a lie from a thousand feet and Mary Beth was definitely not telling the truth.

If Leandra noticed, Mary Beth didn't give her the chance to say so. Instead, she shot past Leandra with her hand outstretched. "I'm M.B. Hunter. You must be..."

Rico still wore his gloves. He accepted her hand without removing them. "Rico, Rico Zanini."

And with that, he whipped off his mask.

The moment Mary Beth looked into Rico's eyes, she recognized him.

"Rico?" His name slipped past her lips, part breath, part croak.

She didn't know how, but she managed to keep smiling, never mind that her hand had turned cold and damp in his gloved one, and that the room seemed hotter now than it had when she sat beside the wood stove.

No amount of time would blur the memory of those almond-shaped dark brown eyes. She'd know Rico Zanini anywhere, whether across a crowded courtroom or in her kitchen. A year ago, she'd seen the defiance in the still-young face with ancient eyes staring into a television camera at the media conference the day of his release. There was no mistaking eyes the color of bittersweet chocolate, with long thick lashes any woman would die for.

Like a whirlpool sucking her in, the years zoomed backward and she was eighteen-year-old Mary Beth Hunter again. A young woman who'd entered the courtroom idealistic and determined to see justice done, but who'd left a crushed and broken child.

Now her knees weakened under the hammering of her heart against her rib cage. Much like the last time she saw him. Thank the gods Rico still held her hand or she would have ended up a puddle at his feet.

Out of the corner of her eye, Mary Beth saw Leandra staring at them with a mixture of curiosity and amusement. Did Lea think this was some kind of Kodak moment, when two soul mates discovered each other? This was one of the worst moments of her life, one Mary Beth had dreaded for more than ten years.

Her mind raced. How had he found her? She remembered Leandra saying they had Googled their new handyman before hiring him. How easy for Rico Anthony Zanini to Google her. Or visit her Facebook or MySpace pages.

Finally, from wherever it had hidden, Mary Beth found her voice again. "You must be the new maintenance man at the café."

"That's right, *M.B.*" His tone seared her initials.

Do something, say something. If the tension between them thickened, she might explode.

"Where are my manners?" She yanked her hand from his and took several steps farther into the room. "Lea, Rico, I'm sorry. Dump your boots in there." She pointed to a large plastic tub where two pairs of hers were drying. "And come warm up by the fire. I can make a fresh pot of coffee in a minute. The cookies will be coming out of the oven as soon as the timer buzzes." She knew she was babbling, but couldn't stop the words from tumbling out of her mouth.

"M.B., please!" Leandra took her hand. "We're fine. We came by to make sure you were all right."

"I'm fine, I'm fine."

"Then breathe, for heaven's sake. Your face is as red as your sweatshirt."

Mary Beth's gaze flew back to Rico and then down to the floor and up at Leandra. "Honestly, I'm fine."

Leandra folded her arms. "This may sound like a dumb question, but do you two know each other?"

Mary Beth's and Rico's voices rose together then clashed.

"Yes," Rico said.

"No," Mary Beth insisted.

"Huh?" Leandra looked from Mary Beth to Rico and back again, obviously confused.

Mary Beth hurried to explain her and Rico's conflicting answers. "I've probably seen Rico around...town."

"Yeah, maybe me too."

Mary Beth doubted if Leandra bought their story, but she said nothing. She pushed back the cuff of her jacket sleeve and squinted at her watch. "Sorry to say hi and run, but we have to get back in case Synda needs us."

"You can't stay for even one cup of coffee? The snow seems to have let up."

"For now." Leandra zipped her jacket and pulled the ski mask over her face once again. "I wish you'd come with us. I don't like the idea of you staying out here alone in a storm."

"Leandra, we go through this with every storm, every year. I'm fine." Mary Beth cast a loving glance at the kittens and Ruskie, who had strolled in to join them. "They'll protect me. They always have."

"You're like that little boy who stayed up all night with his finger in the dike, M.B. Somewhere between hero and nut! Rico, come on, we have to get going."

Mary Beth hugged Leandra then turned to Rico. She almost offered her hand again, until she read the message in his gaze—*this isn't over yet*. The same message she'd seen the day she filed out of the courtroom so long ago.

* * * * *

Later, when Mary Beth had time to recover from the shock of seeing Rico and quell the unanswered questions swirling in her mind—how and why he showed up in this tiny hamlet so far removed from New York and his life there—she pulled a nightgown from her dresser drawer. A long hot shower and she'd be ready to curl up in bed with her book and at least two of the kittens.

Nightgown clutched in her hand, she sat on the end of her bed. She still couldn't believe Rico Zanini had found her, had stood in her kitchen less than an hour ago...tall, broad shouldered, muscled and so incredibly handsome, even with the scar on his cheek.

She wanted to believe it was by coincidence, but she knew better. He'd looked for her, found her, and now what? She shivered at the prospect. It certainly wasn't to thank her for ten years of free room and board.

She remembered so well how he'd looked sitting at the defense table the day the pool of jurors filed in for jury selection, so scared, so unsure of himself. Their gazes had met and held for several long moments before she forced herself to look away. In that short amount of time, she'd known in her heart that he was innocent.

Mary Beth lay back on her bed. Every time Rico had come to mind in the past, she'd pushed thoughts of him away. They brought unbearable pain. Now, since she'd seen him again, she couldn't stop the memories nor his effect on her.

Every night during the trial, she'd gone home and fantasized about him. She'd imagined him in her bed beside her, lips pressed to lips, bare skin touching bare skin. Still a virgin at eighteen, she could only guess how it would feel to have Rico's cock inside her.

She tunneled her hands beneath her sweatshirt and cradled her breasts. She remembered caressing her breasts, thumbing her nipples, and imagining it was Rico touching her. She'd slide her hand down her stomach to her pussy, wishing it was Rico's hand instead of hers.

Her nipple beaded beneath her thumb. She closed her eyes and pictured Rico lying beside her, caressing her skin. It was *his* thumb and forefinger urging her nipple to hardness, *his* hand sliding down her stomach to dive beneath her sweatpants and inside her panties.

Warm, slick cream covered her fingers. Mary Beth groaned and arched her hips as she drove her fingers into her tight channel. She pumped them in and out, in and out, plucking at her nipples with her other hand until they were hard and sensitive.

"Rico," she whispered.

She spread her cream over her clit. With each swirl of her fingertips, she thought of him watching her pleasure herself. They'd lie naked on her four-poster bed, a fire crackling in the fireplace. He'd drop soft kisses on her lips, but wouldn't touch her in any other way. He'd whisper gentle encouragements to her, tell her to keep touching herself for him, tell her he wanted to watch her come.

Mary Beth writhed on the bed and rubbed her clit harder. The orgasm began to build. She stopped moving her fingers, wanting to draw out her pleasure a little longer. She took several breaths to calm her racing heart, then touched her pussy again. It was even wetter now, her clit harder. It wouldn't take much more for her to reach the summit.

This time, she didn't stop. She pinched one nipple and quickly rubbed her clit. The orgasm built even faster this time, rushing through her body and leaving her weak.

Breathless, Mary Beth rolled to her side and drew her knees to her chest. Her throat tightened with unshed tears. She'd needed the climax, but it left her feeling empty. Instead of her own hand, she wanted Rico to touch her, slide inside her. She wanted to clutch his shoulders and cry out his name at the height of pleasure. She wanted their lovemaking to absolve her of guilt and wipe away the pain of all they'd both suffered.

It will never happen. She'd seen anger simmering in his eyes tonight. He'd rather have snakes crawl all over him than have anything to do with her.

Chapter Four

Synda looked out at the sunny day and blue sky. Thirty-six hours ago, they stood in snow up to their knees. At noon today, the temp hit seventy-two. Only puddles of slush along the sidewalks and curbs remained from the recent storms.

"What a day, what a day." She flopped into a chair and put her feet up on the short kitchen ladder.

"I'll say." Leandra slid onto the bench across the table from her. "If one more person asked me why we didn't do a Tarot spread for the TV weather folks in San Francisco and Sacramento, I'll have had to hurt someone."

"Did you tell them *they* should have had a reading before *they* ever left home?" She blew several times across the top of a mug of steaming tea to cool it. "Hello, Halloween was last week. The storm came early."

"You call that a storm?" Mary Beth stood in the doorway between the dining room and the kitchen. The waitstaff, while setting up for the dinner service, always propped open the swinging doors.

"Hey, M.B., what's going on?" Synda asked. "Whatcha got there?"

Mary Beth carried a gift bag in her left hand. "What's this sitting around with your feet propped up like you own the place? Aren't there cakes to be baked, fish to be poached..."

"Former best friends to be found dead next to the fishbones?" Synda propped her feet even higher. "Besides harassing two real working women, what brings you to town on this sunny, slushy day?"

Mary Beth plunked the gift bag into Leandra's lap on her way to the cupboard for her personal coffee mug. "I picked that up in Sacramento during the Bisbee trial. It's supposed to be your Christmas present, but what the heck, you defied wind, snow and sleet to make sure the kitties and I were safe. You deserved more than a spoken thanks."

Leandra peeked into the bag. Synda swung her feet to the floor and leaned across the table.

"Aren't you sweet," Leandra said. "You would have come looking for us if we'd been stuck out there alone." She glanced at Mary Beth from her head to her feet. "Don't you look fetching today, as my granddad used to say. What's going on?"

Mary Beth wore a plaid wool skirt that fell to mid-calf and hugged the curve of her bottom with exactly the right tightness, a V-neck pullover that emphasized her breasts and allowed a tad of peekaboo, and a pair of leather boots she'd received from a client, an Italian designer. "I do own something besides baggy sweats."

Synda snickered. "At least you're wearing a shirt." To Leandra, she said, "Come on, Lea, open the present." She looked over her shoulder at Mary Beth, who poured a second heaping teaspoon of sugar into her coffee. "The gift's for both of us, isn't it?"

"Of course."

"Oh, M.B., they're lovely." Leandra had unwrapped a set of three meditation candles. The fragrances of frankincense and myrrh drifted up from the tissue. "Yum." She handed them to Synda. "Mmm, smell them, Syn."

"Reminds me of Christmas."

Mary Beth shrugged. "It's the least I could do."

"What did you bring for Rico?" Synda asked. "He was shussin' through the mush alongside Lea the other night."

Heat rushed up Mary Beth's neck and into her cheeks. She cursed her Irish heritage, the fair skin and freckles that let every emotion inside her shine in true scarlet.

Synda slapped her knee. "Look at her, Lea. She's all dressed up because she's hoping to see Rico. Aren't you?"

"No! I had lunch with a client at Chez Jacques. Which I might add, Ms. Synda, sprinkled something into their crême brûlée that made it taste divine. You should check it out."

"When pigs fly."

"Ladies, ladies, enough."

"Syn knows I'm teasing. Coffee's great, as usual."

"So which client?"

"Marty Trinidad."

"Do you have any other clients?"

"More than you can count," she shot back. "Sometimes I think Marty's the visionary from hell. He can find more hot deals to poke around in, leaving me to put out his fires."

"Doesn't that make you the devil too?"

"Synda!" Leandra scolded.

"All right, all right. So how's Eve?"

"She's great but like any good father, Marty worries about her."

"She's not sick, is she?"

"Her fiancé asked for his ring back."

Synda grimaced. "Ouch."

"Let me guess," Leandra said. "So now Marty wants to drive over to the Bay Area and kill him. And like a good attorney, you talked him down."

"I'm sad for Eve," Synda said. "She's a great gal, even if her father's a windbag."

“Marty’s not that bad.” Mary Beth sipped her coffee. “By the way, Syn, Marty and I both thought Jacques’ crème brûlée tasted like curdled milk compared to yours.”

Synda folded her arms. “Thank you for that. Since one good turn deserves another, you’ll find Rico out back chopping wood.”

Leandra put the candles back in the gift bag. “He won’t stop. He’s supposed to clock out after lunch, but he’s still working alongside us when we close up for the night.”

“It’s the prison mentality,” Mary Beth said. “For years he did the same thing, day in and day out. Unless you tell him to stop, he won’t.” She leaned back against the counter. “By the way—and don’t get mad at me, Lea—I talked to Tom about Rico. That’s before I knew who he...” She stopped suddenly when she realized she’d said too much.

“You met him before the other night, didn’t you?”

Mary Beth shook her head. A fresh surge of heat crawled up her neck. “No, not really. I’d seen...”

Synda swaggered over and looked up into her face. “For an attorney, you sure don’t lie worth a damn.”

“It’s not what you think. We *might* have met before—and I’m not saying we did—but it was a long time ago—if, in fact, we did meet.”

Synda rolled her eyes, and Leandra smiled. “It’s okay, M.B. We know he’s gorgeous. Synda would be all over him if our employee manual didn’t forbid it.”

“In a flash. That man is *hot!* Especially with the tats. I love the way that cobra crawls up his arm and neck when he flexes his muscles.”

“And if you’re not the horniest gal in Truckee, I don’t know who is.” Mary Beth put her cup in the sink. “Sorry, I have to run.”

“Without saying thanks to Rico?”

“Oh stop it, you two.” With that, she draped her purse over her shoulder and hurried out. She could hear their laughter halfway through the dining room.

* * * * *

Mary Beth almost lost her courage at the sound of an axe striking against wood. No sense in postponing the inevitable. Rico had found her. Now it was time to clear the air.

She looked up at the sky, as blue as Donner Lake, with a single fluffy white cloud that reminded her of a smiley face. The fragrance of fresh damp pine mingled with the smoky remnants of last night’s blazing fireplaces. Even the scent of the world’s most expensive perfume paled in comparison to what Nature gave away to anyone who stopped long enough to take in its beauty.

This is the reason I moved here. Dark looks and mistakes from my past are not going to drive me away.

Mary Beth turned at the path that led around the back of the restaurant. She could have gone straight out the kitchen's back door but refused to give Synda the satisfaction of knowing she'd guessed right. Yes, she'd dressed up for her meeting with Marty Trinidad, but it was important, too, to approach Rico on her terms. To show him who she was now. To put the past behind them and move on.

Her good intentions melted like the slush at her feet when she rounded the corner and saw Rico raise the axe high over his head and send it crashing into a round of oak that had no chance of surviving intact.

His shirt lay carelessly thrown across a wooden sawhorse. A pair of worn jeans rode low on his hips. His skin glistened in the sun and the muscles in his upper back and arms strained when he raised the axe again. The sight took her breath away, in spite of the tats or maybe because of them. A tingle of forbidden possibilities raced through her. *Me Jane, you Tarzan, Boy gone for the day!* Her nipples hardened against the lace of her bra and a fluttering in her pussy told her it had been way too long since she'd been with a real man.

The second blow struck. The tie that held his long hair in place let go, and a swell of lush dark waves fell to his shoulders. Mary Beth's knees grew weak. *Snap out of it*, she scolded, as surprised by her strong reaction as she was delighted. How long had it been since a man made her hormones rage? She stood at least a hundred feet from him, yet the distance did not dilute his effect on her. What if they stood side by side, or better still, with their arms and legs entwined? Their mouths would meet, over and over, before he slid his hot cock into her wet pussy.

Mary Beth whimpered and ran the back of her hand across her mouth. Perspiration broke out on her upper lip. Last night's fantasy flashed through her mind. She cleared her throat. When she did, Rico spun around. What she saw did nothing to calm her heart rate or quell her libido.

His forehead and cheeks glowed in the light of the sun while beads of sweat rolled down his face. The scar on his cheek was a white rib against the thick dark shadow of his beard.

The muscles in his chest rippled against black hair and the narrowest waistline she'd ever seen on a man, with shoulders as wide as a tree. How many hours a day had he worked out in prison?

He looked surprised, then scowled, as if smelling the odor of rancid meat. His eyes went dead and his expression bland, except for the set of his jaw.

"Hey," she said and dared to close some of the distance between them. "Pretty day, isn't it?" A stupid remark, but she couldn't think of anything else.

He unlocked his jaw. "Whatta you want?"

She swallowed the verbal slap along with the lump in her throat. This was starting out tougher than she expected.

"To thank you for coming out the other night with Lea. That was so nice of you."

"It's my job. I'm paid to do it."

A few steps closer. Now she smelled his scent. She wondered if wolves found their mates the same way.

"Would you have come if you'd known it was me?"

"I told you, it's my job."

She buried her fists in the pockets of her skirt. As an attorney, she was accustomed to cool receptions. On the way over, she practiced what she'd say to him, much the same as she practiced her closing arguments. This time, she was the defendant.

Keep it brief and professional. Tell him you're sorry for what happened, but that was a long time ago when you were both very young. Now it's time he got past it and on with his life. Point, set and match.

"Rico..." she began. "I'm really sor... Would you like to come to dinner?"

Good grief, what have I done?

The invitation had spilled out of Mary Beth's mouth, like a ventriloquist's dummy speaking someone else's words instead of her own.

For a second, he looked almost as shocked as she felt. Then he nodded and said, "Yeah...okay." With that, he set his jaw and the scowl slipped back in place.

"Like maybe tonight?" she asked. "Seven?"

Still holding the axe in his right hand, he wiped the sweat from his forehead on his arm and grunted something that sounded like yes.

"Great." She dug inside her purse until she found the little stack of cards she carried with directions to her house from town.

He snapped the card from her hand without bothering to look at it and stuffed it in his jeans pocket. Then he turned his back and swung the axe in a mighty arc.

Thwack!

She winced at the sound of the sharp blade whacking into the huge piece of oak on the stump. Her breath caught at the force of the blow. "Well...all right. I guess I'll see you at seven."

She knew better than to wait for an answer.

Chapter Five

The light changed to green. Mary Beth eased her foot off the brake and turned in the direction of the supermarket.

What do you serve an ex-con who's lived on bologna sandwiches and chipped beef on toast for the last ten years? It had to be something hearty – maybe spaghetti, garlic bread and a salad.

Not for an Italian. She'd bet his mother made the best spaghetti this side of Palermo, handmade pasta that she cut with a razor-sharp knife about two feet long, and sauce she simmered for hours. He'd know in a second that Mary Beth had doctored up a jar of sauce she plucked off the shelf. She couldn't compete with that.

Hell, she couldn't compete with anyone because she didn't cook worth a damn. She'd inherited that dubious honor from her mother. A paralegal and a single mom, she'd nurtured a love of the law in Mary Beth and a disdain for anything domestic. With delis, Italian and Chinese on every corner in Queens, Mary Beth had grown up on takeout and frozen dinners.

She pulled into the lot and threw the gearshift into park. If she had any brains at all, she'd turn right around and head back to The Tarot. Synda would throw together a fabulous dinner for two, including an amazing dessert. If anyone knew what Rico liked, the gals would.

Not on your life. No way she'd admit to them she'd invited Rico to dinner. She'd rather serve him gruel than watch that smirk turn up the corners of Synda's mouth and see Leandra finger that deck of Tarot cards she always kept in her pocket. This was no big deal, but they'd read an entire book into one little dinner.

Steaks? Everyone liked steak...unless they were vegetarians. She hadn't defended any vegetarians. Most in prison went meatless for religious reasons. Rico didn't strike her as the type, and he sure as heck didn't get that amazing body from brown rice and soy milk.

Steak, a huge baked potato with all the trimmings, fresh salad, and some French bread right out of the oven. No one could resist that. If he was still hungry, she always kept ice cream in the freezer and Oreos in the pantry.

* * * * *

The café was jumping. Every table filled, and a bar full of people waiting to take the first empty place. They'd done a brisk business in carryout too, but as always, Synda had everything under control in the kitchen. She ran the line like a drill sergeant, and made sure no dish left without her approval.

They had three readers working tonight in the alcoves, and two diners had asked Leandra to read theirs personally. After the readings, she stepped outside to let the cool mountain air clear her head.

Behind her, Leandra heard the crunch of footsteps on the gravel that separated the back of the café from Rico's cabin. She turned quickly, sure she had heard him drive off on his motorcycle a while ago.

"Who's there?"

"Me," Rico answered.

"I thought I'd heard you —"

"I forgot something." He stepped into the light spilling through the kitchen window.

Leandra sucked in a breath. "Oh my..."

He stopped in mid-step. "What?"

"You look so different." She'd never seen him dressed in a pair of slacks and a sweater. He still wore boots. Not the old worn leather ones, but black ones shiny enough to show his reflection. He wore his hair tied back and had trimmed his beard. "Where are you headed?"

"Out."

He obviously didn't want to confide in her. "I'm sorry. I shouldn't have asked."

Rico lowered his head. "No, it's okay."

The wind had picked up enough to penetrate Leandra's wool sweater. She shivered. "It's getting chilly. Break time's over."

She'd stepped inside the kitchen when he called after her. "Can I ask you something?"

She turned back to him. "Of course. Anything."

"Your friend..."

"M.B.?"

He nodded. "She..." He looked down again.

"She what?"

"I'm supposed to have dinner at her place tonight," the words rushed out of him. "Kind of a thanks or something for the other night."

"What fun." Leandra took a step toward him. "Do you need directions?"

He shook his head, and after a false start, said, "My ma always brings something when people invite us over. Something she cooks to go with the meal. I'm..." He shoved his hands in his pants pockets. "I'm not good at this. People don't invite ex-cons over unless they want something. Whattaya think she wants?"

"First, let's get out of the wind." She waited for him to join her in the shelter of the porch. Once he stood beside her, she noticed he wore an aftershave that she

remembered her dad and brothers had worn – about fifteen years ago. She bit her lip to keep from smiling.

“You’re talking about two different things here,” she began. “I’m sure your mother’s a great cook and makes things all her friends love. That’s a wonderful gift, but people who invite you over aren’t looking for anything other than your presence. M.B. doesn’t stand on ceremony. She doesn’t invite people over because she feels she has to. She does it because she wants to do something nice, or to get to know them better.”

He looked doubtful.

“If you feel you can’t go empty-handed, let’s fix that. Follow me.”

“I don’t wanna make a big deal out of this with...” He nodded toward the kitchen.

“With Synda?”

He nodded again.

“Trust me, Rico, she’s so busy cracking the whip on the line, she won’t even notice you.” She opened the door. “Pastry chef’s our first stop. If he can’t spare a couple of desserts, we can always raid the wine cellar.”

A few minutes later, she and Rico slipped outdoors again. This time he carried a plastic container with two slices of Black Russian cake and a paper sack with a bottle of M.B.’s favorite Napa Valley merlot.

“Thanks,” he said. “You guys are great.”

“Hey, none of that. Synda and I appreciate what you’ve done the last couple of days. I have to warn you, though, M.B.’s a good lawyer, not such a good cook.” She tapped on the cake box. “This may be the one decent thing you eat tonight.”

His shoulders relaxed. He even smiled.

When he headed toward his bike, Leandra called to him. “Wouldn’t you rather take the truck? It’s going to be a lot colder at midnight than it is now.”

“I’ve been cold before.”

* * * * *

Mary Beth poured her second glass of wine and took one final glance at the cavernous living room and the formal dining room. Tonight, she’d entertain Rico in her kitchen sanctuary. No need for him to check out the place. She had no plans to invite him back again.

With her wineglass and bottle of merlot in hand, Mary Beth shot an anxious glance at the digital clock on the stove. 7:13. She had the steaks ready to pop on the indoor grill. The baked potatoes had been in the oven since six thirty, the salad tossed and French bread warming. Cabernet breathed in a decanter on the table and chardonnay waited in the fridge, depending upon Rico’s taste in wine. If he preferred beer, she also had a six-pack of Bud chilled.

She'd orchestrated the evening in her mind a dozen times. She'd heat up the broiler when he walked in, offer him a beverage, and make small talk while the steaks grilled. After dinner, she'd serve coffee, maybe some brandy, and send him on his way. On that timetable, he'd be out of there and the dishwasher loaded by eight o'clock.

Then why had she been fighting a fluttering in her stomach for the last two hours? Why had she taken such special care with her appearance? And most of all, why did she find him so damn attractive?

He was gorgeous, that's why. Fabulous brown eyes, a mouth made for kissing, and a physique that would cause a nun to rethink her final vows.

"We have nothing in common," she said to Ruskie, who'd turned up one evening on her doorstep and refused to leave. "Just one horrible mistake."

She took a deep draw of her wine and plunked down on her desk chair. Rico deserved an explanation and an apology. She'd made amends in a far more important way than anything she'd say to him tonight, but he'd never know about that.

She should be rehearsing *that* conversation in her mind instead of remembering the way his muscles rippled when he raised the axe and sent it crashing against the wood. Her clit buzzed each time she thought of that so kissable mouth. He'd looked ridiculous in his ski mask, yet amazing too, in an odd sort of way. She'd found temporary satisfaction with her hand, but no way did that replace a hot, thick cock.

She groaned and chugged her wine. For good measure, she chased the wine with a tall glass of iced water. The heat faded from her cheeks. Her breathing became easier. Now she was ready to face Rico.

* * * * *

Nothing prepared Mary Beth for what she saw when she opened the door. She didn't see the attitudinal badass who'd stood in her kitchen the previous night. Nor did she see the annihilator of tree trunks. For one long, paralyzing moment, she saw Rico Zanini, defendant, confusion and despair written in his face, eyes sad and disbelieving.

The vulnerable man she'd betrayed so long ago.

The moment passed but not without leaving its mark. Her heart raced, her knees trembled. She clutched the doorknob and leaned against the frame for support.

"Rico, please come in."

In one hand, he carried a bottle of wine. In the other, a plastic container with two slices of cake. Beyond him, she saw his motorcycle parked in the middle of the sidewalk, under the shelter of the walkway. How improbable—a motorcycle, cake and wine.

They both looked down at his boots and the thin layer of mud clinging to the soles, then at the plastic tub that held hers from earlier in the day.

"No, no, don't bother. That's for snow days." She toed the entrance mat nearer to him. "Just wipe your feet on this."

Thank God. It gave her something to say and do besides gape at him.

She took the cake while he tended to his boots. Oh, yum-yum, Synda's Black Russian—also one of Mary Beth's favorites. She wondered if he'd gone to Leandra for counsel, or if she'd coached him unasked.

"Where do you want me to put this?" he asked, lifting the bottle of wine.

She started at the sound of his voice. She hadn't realized he'd followed so closely behind her. Yet she should have known—the fragrance of his leather jacket and aftershave told her he stood near.

"Um...on the counter. We can open it later."

* * * * *

Rico had stopped halfway to Mary Beth's house, taken off his helmet and stared up at the moon. A clear fresh night, cold but not killer cold. A night that made him think. He knew why he was here and what he had to do.

Except...except he hadn't thought Mary Beth would grow into the woman she did. He'd expected red hair, he'd expected freckles. He never expected someone who pushed all of his body's buttons. He'd spent half his adult life hating her. That hatred defined him. Out of nowhere, slam! His body responded to her the way it had when he was sixteen and the only guy on the block who was still a virgin. Sex was all he thought about then. Making love to Mary Beth Hunter was all he thought about now.

He knew she didn't share his feelings. Why would she? She was a successful attorney and could have her pick of men.

But this afternoon, just for a moment, he would swear he saw desire in her eyes in spite of sweat pouring off him and an axe in his hand.

With that thought he pulled on his helmet, gunned the engine and drove the last miles to her house.

He had no trouble finding it, even though the windows were still shuttered. Why in the hell did she need such a large house? She lived alone, except for those fucking cats. From the look of the kitchen, bigger than the house he grew up in, she lived in that one room. Maybe his ma and aunt had been right—women who didn't marry ended up crazy old ladies who collected cats.

When Mary Beth opened the door, Rico almost dropped the wine and cake. Instead of baggy sweats, she wore a pair of snug, faded jeans that emphasized every curve of her tight little bottom. Her turtleneck sweater had a diamond-shaped opening about the size of his palm smack in the middle of her chest, exposing two mounds of flesh so white and soft-looking, his fingers itched to touch them.

His cock stirred. Suddenly he realized that while he stared, she talked. He hadn't heard a word she said until she toed a worn rubber doormat in his direction and pointed to it.

He'd been too busy soaking up the scenery and the light, flowery fragrance she wore. The scent tossed a rope around his senses and urged him to follow behind her.

"What would you like to drink?" she asked after he'd put the wine on the counter and took a step back.

He'd stood this close to her the other night, but it hadn't sunk in that she wasn't as short as he remembered. She came about to his shoulder. His gaze dropped to her sweater and the diamond cutout. Her tiny nipples pushed against the front. He groaned inside and clenched his teeth. He didn't know how he'd make it through dinner without finding a way to touch her.

"There's red wine on the table and I have white chilling," she said through a tight smile. A blush spread from her throat to her cheeks, proof that her thoughts mirrored his.

She turned and hurried toward the grill sitting on a low table between the oven and a door he guessed led to a deck.

"There's beer in the fridge too," she said. "Help yourself."

Mary Beth heard the snap of the bottle cap behind her while she fussed with the steaks. And Rico's footsteps while he walked around the kitchen and peeked through the closed French doors separating them from the rest of the house.

"Lea told me you aren't a cat person," she said. "I'll be glad to give you a tour but I've locked the furry side of the family in there. Ruskie's a terrible pest, especially if he senses someone doesn't like him."

She heard him mutter something that could have been "good" or "I'm sorry" – she couldn't tell which.

"What do you like on your salad? I have ranch, bleu cheese and Thousand Island." She thought it best to keep it simple. She doubted he'd eaten many gourmet dressings while enjoying the hospitality of the State of New York.

He surprised her by answering, "Got lemon juice and sugar?"

She stopped slicing the mushrooms. "Sure, in the pantry. Is that all you use?"

"That's all I need."

Ten long, silent minutes later, they sat down to the plainest table Mary Beth had ever set. No candles. Everyday plates and flatware, and wineglasses she'd picked up at a discount store when she first moved in. He made no comment, just dug in.

The steaks turned out amazing, the best she'd ever served, and the baked potatoes light and fluffy. She noticed that he sprinkled lemon juice and sugar on his potato as well as his salad. How odd. Poor thing, prison food must have been worse than she thought.

"Did they serve lemon on all of your food in...in, you know?"

He'd been eating almost without pausing for breath. His head shot up at that. She felt a flush rise under the scrutiny of those dark, deep eyes.

Why, oh why, had she brought up prison? And worse, the cats were lined up on the other side of the glass in the French door, watching every bite they took and begging with silent meows.

“My mom did. I grew up eating this way. Something wrong with that?”

Mary Beth reached for her wineglass to drain it. The evening was going worse than she dreaded. Her glass stood empty beside her plate. She’d had three glasses of wine...maybe four. No wonder things were coming out her mouth she didn’t mean to say.

“I’m sorry. I’m sure lemon and sugar make a delicious dressing.”

“Not really.” He went back to his plate. “You get used to it.”

He’d said it as if it were an inevitable fact of life. She wondered if that was something he learned at his mother’s knee too. Or perhaps he’d learned to accept the things he couldn’t change to survive.

Suddenly she wasn’t hungry anymore.

Over another glass of wine, she watched him clean his plate. She still had no idea whether he liked what she’d served or not.

She stood and reached for his plate when he laid his fork on the napkin he’d never opened. He stood at the same time and reached for hers. Their hands collided midway across the table.

Reacting without thinking, she pulled her hand away and grabbed at the edge of the table. She felt warm and a little dizzy, or maybe a little too buzzed. “It’s warm in here, don’t you think?”

“You better sit down.” He guided her with a gentleness she found startling.

“I’m fine,” she protested.

“Let me get those.” He picked up his plate and silverware, and hers, and headed toward the sink. He wrapped the bones and potato skins in the aluminum foil in which she’d baked them, rinsed the dishes and put them in the dishwasher.

“I owe you an apology, Rico. I’ve had too much wine.”

After a moment, his expression softened. Maybe he’d been there and done that too at some time in his life, and understood her embarrassment.

“I know I saw a coffeepot the other night,” he said before handing her a fresh glass of iced water.

She pointed to the pantry, although coffee was the last thing she wanted. Her nice soft bed would feel heavenly. “It’ll go well with Synda’s cake.”

Mary Beth sipped her water while Rico prepared the coffee and set out mugs and plates. She wanted a piece of cake like she wanted a sock in the jaw, yet she didn’t refuse the plate he put in front of her. “We’d be more comfortable in the other room, but we have to feed the cats first. If we fill their bowls, we can close them up in here. They’ll like the warmth.”

“Where’s the food?”

“See that little plastic trash can? Right next to their bowls? Their food’s inside.”

He lifted the cover. “At least it’s not that god-awful canned stuff.”

“Fill all of the bowls about a quarter full and set them in a row near the wood stove. They’re good about eating together.”

At the sound of their bowls touching the floor, the cats rose to their hind paws and started scratching at the door.

Eight meowing cats, tails high in the air, raced across the kitchen. They were nose deep in their bowls when Mary Beth closed the door behind Rico. “That way.” She pointed toward the hall that led to the family room. The dim glow from a small table lamp signaled the way.

At the threshold, Rico’s mouth dropped open. She watched him look around the room, taking in the high beamed ceilings, the stone walls and the wood plank floors. A large bar made from a slab of redwood burl dominated one end of the room, while a billiards table held court at the other end. In between, groupings of hide and leather easy chairs and couches stood in clusters around low tables. The stone fireplace rose three stories, with a twenty-foot-long hearth and an opening tall enough for an adult to stand in comfortably.

He said nothing, just shook his head slowly. She knew as if she’d read his mind, he had to be comparing this room to the tiny cage he’d lived in for years.

What had she done, what had she done?

“Rico, I’m sorry. You have to understand —”

He turned on her. “Whatta you sorry about? That you’re rich and successful? That you have a house as big as a fucking hotel? I got my hog. It’s paid for. I don’t apologize about that, why should you apologize for this?” He hitched his hands on his hips. “Or are you so fucking embarrassed about what you did to me — or should I say *didn’t* do — that you can’t even stand yourself?”

If he’d slapped her, it couldn’t have hurt more. Worse, he was right and she knew it.

She backed away from him. She could turn tail and run, as she had from that courtroom. Or she could face him, beg him to forgive her, or at least understand why.

“I owe you so much more than an apology,” she said. “Please give me a chance to help you —”

“Help me? You’re about eleven fucking years too late for that. Whattaya gonna do? Offer me some money? Hire me to come by and wash your windows, maybe shovel your walks or clean up cat shit?”

He strode over to her, close enough that the toes of their shoes met. He bent low, until he stood level with her eyes, mouths scant inches apart. “Do you know what it’s like to live in the joint? To spend twenty-four hours a day with someone watching you? Never a single minute alone? Whether you’re pissing, shitting or jerking off, someone’s

always watching.” He raised his arm and pointed to the billiards table. “I shared a cell smaller than that fucking table with a goddamned pervert who raped and damn near killed six women. He didn’t know any of them. If they let him out today, he’d rape and try to kill six more.”

“Rico, please...” She tried to back away from him again. He grabbed her wrists and held on tight.

“Can you even start to understand how hard it is to sleep on a metal slab with a mattress only two inches thick? Stinking with the sweat and piss of ten of those animals before you? Knowing that if you fall asleep there’s a fifty-fifty chance the motherfucker sharing your cell’s gonna slash your throat or stick a shank in your gut. D’you know what it’s like to sleep no more than ten or fifteen minutes at a time because if you ever let your guard down, you’re gonna wake up dead?”

Rico tightened the pressure on her wrists. “I did, Mary Beth, I did it for ten fucking years that I’ll never get back. And you – with your fucking cats, and your bar and pool table, and a house big enough for twenty people – could have stopped it. Did that ever bother you? Did you ever think about what was happening to me in those ten years? Or were you too fucking busy picking out paintings and furniture and yuppie cars to think twice about the *innocent* fucker you sent to prison?”

She knew he wanted to say more, but the emotion had drained out of him. She saw it in his face, in his eyes that lost their dead look and now shined with tears too long unshed.

“Rico, please –”

“Don’t even try, Mary Beth. You had your chance and you looked the other way. There’s nothing you can say I want to hear.” With that he pushed her aside and strode past her toward the hall.

This time, anger trumped guilt. “God damn it, Rico Zanini, you stop right now!” she shouted across the room.

He stopped and turned to face her, his body taut with rage.

“I listened to what you had to say. By God, you’re going to return the favor.” She pointed to the couch. “Get your ass back here and sit down. Don’t even think of leaving until I’m through telling you the rest of that story.”

Mary Beth stood there, fists balled, her nails cutting into her palms, frightened and yet angrier than she’d ever been in her life. Everything he said was true. Every rotten thought he’d had of her well deserved. Yet he wasn’t the only one who’d suffered over what had happened in that courtroom. He wasn’t the only one who lived with sleepless nights. What she’d done to harm him ten years ago had made her the woman she was today. She’d made amends a hundred times over for her lack of courage, for her cowardice in bending to the wills of those older and more experienced.

She’d paid a dear price. She’d gone from one bad relationship to another because she never believed she deserved to be happy, not after what she’d done. So no, she knew nothing about metal beds and shanks and sounds and smells of evil incarnate,

but the devil had visited her far too many times. Now it was her turn to put those devils behind her. If she and Rico had to stay locked in this room until the next quake hit and they were swallowed up by the ocean in order to lay their devils to rest, she'd make sure they did.

Chapter Six

He straightened his shoulders and slowly clenched and unclenched his fists. She'd seen hatred before. She'd looked into the eyes of murderers who'd kill again without a thought. They frightened and pissed her off at the same time, like now. But she'd never seen such depths of hurt and sorrow mingled with that anger. She'd righted the wrong she'd committed against Rico and had almost moved on. Rico had not. He'd allowed the injustice to fester and control him, to define him.

He'd thrown up a wall too high for anyone to climb. She might fail, but she had to try.

The anger seeped out of her. "Please, Rico. You've been through hell and I did nothing to stop it. I was young and I was wrong. I accept that, and I apologize. But won't you at least let me tell you why?"

Silence hung between them. The wind picked up outdoors and whistled through the cracks in the shutters. In the kitchen, the cats stood again on hind legs, pawing at the closed door, meowing to be set free.

He narrowed his gaze, his body still and rigid. "What the hell can you say that will give me back my life? You want to apologize? Pardon me, but big fucking deal. I spent ten years, two months and five days in hell—because you were young and you were wrong? Saying you're sorry is supposed to make it all go away? Lady, that might work better than the dog ate my homework, but it sure as shit ain't cuttin' it here."

"Fine," she snapped back. "There's the door." He started to turn away again. "But if you walk out that door before we're through here, you'll never be more than an ex-con, guilty or not."

"What do you know about—"

"A hell of a lot more than you think. You're so busy feeling sorry for yourself, you can't see beyond it. What did you do when you got out, Rico? Look up an old girlfriend, try to reconnect with your friends, think about what you want out of life? Or have you spent the last year hunting me down?"

Mary Beth knew she'd struck a nerve. The color drained from his face.

"What are you going to do to punish me, Rico? Tell the world that it was *my* vote that sent you to prison? That I made you stand mute when you could have defended yourself?" She held her ground, toe to toe, her head thrust back so she looked him square in the eyes. "That at eighteen and three weeks out of high school, and ten years younger than the next youngest juror, only I had the power to set you free?" She grabbed the front of his sweater and shook him. "If that's your story and you're sticking with it, God help you. But if you want to grow up, if you want to be Rico the man, not

Rico the victim, then for heaven's sake, face the truth. You'll never get on with your life if you can't forgive."

Tears stung her eyes. Pain seared her stomach and her voice trembled, but she couldn't stop now.

"Listen to me, Rico." She let go of his sweater. "Hate me if you like. Do whatever you need to do to get it out of your system. If you came here tonight to punish me, then do what you came to do and get the hell out."

She turned her back. She didn't think he'd harm her, but if that's what he was bent on, she didn't want to see the blow coming. "I can't undo the past," she said. "I *can* help you find peace, and you can help me to do the same." Mary Beth turned enough to see his face. He hadn't moved but stood less rigid. Some of the anger had gone out of him.

She walked to one of the leather loveseats and sat down. She patted the space beside her. "Come talk to me. Make me understand. Free us both."

* * * * *

Rico wanted to blind his eyes, cover his ears. There were too many sights and sounds racing through his mind, too many memories. The call from his cousin at three that morning. No details, but he'd heard the panic in Tony's voice. "I'm at Pia's." And after a gut-wrenching silence that dragged on forever, Rico heard tears in his cousin's voice. "Someone's hurt her, Rico. Bad."

Rico had caught his first glimpse of Pia Marie Sarantella when he was thirteen and saving seats at Shea for Tony and Tony's new squeeze. The sun shined so brightly, Pia's hair glistened like diamonds and black onyx. She wore cutoffs that hugged her ass and pulled his eyes straight to her crack, and a halter top that turned a thirteen-year-old's wet dreams to fire. He fell in love with her that instant. For the next six years, helpless and broken-hearted, he watched his cousin and Pia abuse each other in a relationship straight from hell.

That awful night Rico had sped through the dark streets. He reached Pia's apartment, found the door open and Tony gone.

He'd never seen so much blood, not even in a movie. He'd thrown off his jacket and rushed to her. Knelt down to listen for any sound to prove she might still be alive. Her eyes had already swollen shut, although she must have felt his presence. She'd raised a hand to push him away. He took hold of her wrist. "Pia, it's Rico. Who did this to you?" He saw her lips move. Once more he leaned closer to her mouth, listening for a name, fearing she might say Tony, never dreaming the nightmare that followed.

Then chaos erupted around him. Sirens, the police, paramedics. And the words he would soon hear over and over—in the hospital, in the courtroom, in prison—"He did it. Rico did it."

Now another voice called his name. "Rico...please let me help you."

Even after new DNA tests proved with a 2,000,000,000-to-1 certainty that the semen found inside Pia did not belong to Rico, and a shitload of forensic evidence the police ignored that pointed to at least two other men, Pia still insisted Rico was the man who had raped and savagely beaten her.

“Rico?”

Maybe it was the tenderness in Mary Beth’s voice, or the way her cheeks still shined with the blush of her anger, or that he saw she fought tears. Or because she’d had the guts to turn her back on him while he silently raged. Something inside him changed in that moment. He didn’t know how to explain it, but for the first time since those awful early morning hours, he dared to believe there might be life forces beyond hatred and fear.

“Please come sit here.”

He shook his head, turned on his boot heels and in long determined strides, walked toward the kitchen. He knew she must have watched him with surprise and curiosity.

When he opened the kitchen doors, the cats ran for freedom. All but one raced toward the family room. The silver gray with the thick coat Mary Beth called Ruskie stayed behind. He wound in and out of Rico’s legs while Rico poured coffee into two mugs and slid the pieces of cake onto plates.

Carrying the mugs in one hand, and the plates and forks in the other, Rico found Mary Beth standing in the hallway, watching him. She held a kitten in each hand. “I see you’ve made a couple of friends.” She pointed to the kitten at his feet and Ruskie, who followed closely behind. “And what about these guys?” she asked.

“What about them?”

“You let them out. Do you want me to lock them up again?”

Hair balls with fish breath surrounded him. Instead of thinking of a hundred ways to rid the earth of them, Rico realized he was smiling. He felt his lips curve upward, his lids and the skin at the corners of his eyes crinkle, and his cheeks tighten. He stood two feet from a woman he’d sworn vengeance upon, surrounded by the nuisance of the animal kingdom, and for some damn reason, he was smiling.

“Nobody should be locked up,” he said. “Not them, not me. Not anybody.”

Mary Beth opened the sliding glass door that led from the family room to the small concrete slab where she stored her firewood. Led by Mom Cat and Ruskie, all eight felines trooped outside. While she saw to their freedom, Rico placed their dessert on the coffee table in front of the loveseat and flopped down on the cushion.

“Thanks for tolerating my family.” She sat down beside him.

He shrugged it off by handing her a piece of cake.

“And thanks for this too.”

He drove his fork into his piece and muttered something like, “No big deal.”

“Most of all...” She paused until he rested his fork on the plate and looked at her. “Thanks for staying.”

They ate quietly. Although she loved Synda’s Black Russian cake, she sipped her coffee more than she ate. Rico scarfed down his piece, and dumped what was left of hers onto his plate. It was gone in seconds. She made a mental note to remember he liked sweets.

How silly. She’d promised herself that when they’d said all they’d had to say, and the taillights of his motorcycle disappeared into the night, she’d make it a point to avoid seeing him again.

She smiled at him. “Looks like you’re a member of the Clean Plate Club.”

Rico shook his head. “My ma used to say that.”

“Mine, too.” Mary Beth grinned. “My aunt used to pay her kid to eat—a quarter for each piece of toast.”

“Sounds like a con to me.”

“Too bad I wasn’t smart enough to think of it first.”

“I think you’re plenty smart.” He reached for her hand. That should have startled her. Instead she slipped hers in his.

His hand felt warm to the touch, the palm calloused, but gentle. Mary Beth didn’t think of herself as short, although at five-seven, she wasn’t a giant either. She had slender fingers. If she splayed them against his hand, she knew his would be a full inch longer. In spite of the size difference, the fit felt right.

Too right.

Rico spoke quietly at first, his words coming out in bits and phrases. He spoke about Tony, and the day he’d met Pia. About his Ma and Pop, as he called them, and the shock and joy of the first moments they learned The Innocence Project was taking his case. And the day he left court with an apology and a full pardon.

Mary Beth listened without interrupting him. Healing, forgiving words he needed to say and she needed to hear.

Later she got up to let the cats back in. He struck a match and set fire to the kindling she’d laid earlier. She kicked off her shoes and curled up alongside him, resting her arm on the back of the loveseat while he sat with his legs spread, his fingers laced and his arms braced on his knees.

She didn’t know how long they’d talked when it seemed so natural to let her fingers brush against his shoulder. She felt him stiffen, and then his muscles relax.

He leaned back, shifted sideways and ran a finger along her cheek, a touch as soft as the caress of an angel’s wing. She knew she should pull back, but it felt so good. A hint of aftershave lingered on his fingertips. She closed her eyes and leaned her face into his open palm.

She felt his weight shift again, onto the cushion beside her. She knew what was coming next. He leaned toward her. In a moment, if she didn't do something to stop him, they'd kiss.

Too late, those wonderfully full, soft lips brushed against hers. Gently, gently at first, no more than a wisp of silk, but enough to raise gooseflesh on Mary Beth's arms.

Stop him, now... Ohmygod.

She leaned into his embrace and slid her hands along the front of his sweater. She'd been kissed many times before, starting with hard, sloppy kisses from her high school sweethearts to the most sophisticated lovers, like Marty Trinidad. No one in her memory, except maybe her first kiss, ever affected her this way.

The stroke of his fingers when he caressed the side of her throat...a whisper of a tickle from his mustache...the lingering taste of chocolate and Kahlúa on his lips from Synda's cake...a trace of aftershave that took her back to the scent the boys in school used even when they didn't have enough of a growth to shave daily. All of it struck her at once, not as a jumble of fractured images but as a warm and safe place to start their journey.

"Rico, are you sure you want to—"

He deepened the kiss. That was answer enough. This might be the most foolish thing she ever did, and she'd probably—no, definitely—regret it in the morning, but their train had left the station and nothing was going to stop it now.

A soft caress. The gentle slide of wet flesh. A flick of tongue. Warm breath on her cheek.

Mary Beth immersed herself in all the sensations that Rico's kiss sent racing through her. Mewling softly, she gripped his upper arms and parted her lips.

Rico inhaled sharply and slipped his tongue along the inside edge of her lips, alternately nipping at her bottom lip, then licking away the sting with soft strokes that sizzled.

Good god, where did he learn to kiss like this?

Mary Beth moaned when Rico covered her lips again. Slowly she let her hands travel over his shoulders and chest. Broad, firm, muscled. Her fingertips wandered down his flat stomach and around his waist. Muscles rippled beneath her touch. Most men would kill for a body like his, and women would jump at the chance to lie naked beside him.

This was her chance. Tonight was tonight. Tomorrow be damned.

Mary Beth leaned back against the side of the couch and abandoned any other thoughts except for the pleasure washing over her. Rico kissed her jaw, her cheek, the side of her neck. She tilted her head, giving him better access to the sensitive area beneath her ear.

Holding her waist, he pulled her closer. Her breath caught when he used his knee to part her thighs. There was no mistaking where things were headed, not once she felt his hard cock straining against his slacks.

“You want some of this?” he breathed into her ear as he shifted his cock from side to side. Each movement brushed her clit.

She didn’t get the chance to answer before he shifted his weight again. Mary Beth glanced down and watched him slide his hand under her sweater while his mouth headed straight for the diamond-shaped cutout in the front. She’d worried it exposed too much when she looked in the mirror. Now she was glad she’d worn the sweater. Even before the first graze of his fingertips, her nipples hardened.

He ran his fingers up and down her sides. “Do you want me to stop?”

She shook her head.

Again Mary Beth held her breath until Rico unlatched the little piece of lace and fluff.

His warm palm cradled her breast.

She sighed and shifted to give him more room, although she’d rather he just ripped off her sweater and gave her breasts the attention they begged to receive.

His lips sought hers again instead. He sipped at them, his tongue caressing while his thumb and forefinger continued to tease and taunt her firm nipple.

She loved his kisses, and his playful attention to her breast drove her higher. She wanted more. The damp spot spread between her legs. She couldn’t wait for him. She tried to sit up and when he made no move to allow it, she whispered, “Take off my sweater...please.”

Mary Beth didn’t wait long. In a moment the sweater lay on the floor with the wisp of lace and fluff following close behind. The coolness of the room and the soft grazing of his lips sent shivers all through her.

“You have great tits,” Rico said and pulled her under him. He stayed on his knees while he straddled her. She glanced down and gasped. Maybe it was the position in which he knelt, but she’d never seen a bulge so thick, nor one that ballooned the front of a man’s trousers that much. She licked her lips and gulped. The thought of it set her nerves on fire. She had to touch it, couldn’t wait to taste it.

A small grin lifted the sides of Rico’s mouth. “Not yet.”

“Why?”

“You’re not ready.”

“Are you kidding?” She grabbed his hand and shoved it between her legs. “Do you feel that? I’m sopping.”

Rico leaned back and in one deft move pulled Mary Beth onto his lap. Her crotch landed exactly where she wanted it. He placed his hand on the small of her back and began undulating his cock firmly against her mound. “Do you feel *that*?”

She rested her palms against the back of the loveseat to brace herself. "Oh yes. Mmm."

"I didn't bring any rubbers." His voice sounded ragged.

"I have some in my room."

"Feels better without a rubber." He looked directly into her eyes. "I'm clean, Mary Beth."

"So am I."

"Then what's the problem?"

She'd promised herself long ago she'd never make love without protection unless she was in a committed relationship. Tonight could not have been less committed.

"We can argue, or we can have fun." She kissed him soundly. "I'll be right back. Don't go away."

Rico stood, adjusted his fly before his cock strangled, and watched Mary Beth hurry from the room. He wondered if she'd come back still dressed or naked. He raised his hand and drank in the smell of her pussy that lingered on his fingertips. Even through her jeans, the musky fragrance of a woman ready for sex came through.

He walked to the fireplace and piled two fresh logs on top of the ones smoldering in the grate. A few pieces of kindling would send the flames leaping, and the new pieces burning hard.

Just the way he planned to fuck Mary Beth.

He'd been such a naïve jerk when he'd entered prison. He'd lost that naiveté within hours. He had to be a realist to survive. He learned to fight dirty, took whatever he could, and gave back only what he was forced to return.

He knew Mary Beth wanted him. He'd seen the desire in her eyes this morning, and again tonight. She had a great body, and he didn't doubt she'd feel great beneath him. That's where he'd keep her. Let her think he was just some lowlife on a hog. He didn't have her education, he didn't live in her mansion, but he'd grown up tough and strong enough to survive in conditions she couldn't begin to imagine. If it made her feel good to apologize, fine. If she intended to throw him a bone—dinner and a good fuck—all the better. He'd leave satisfied, leave her wanting more. And that, he promised himself, would never happen.

He turned when he heard her footsteps approaching. She'd shucked her jeans and had thrown on an oversize T-shirt that skirted her pussy. His body responded immediately, his cock swelling again. In her hand, he saw the edge of a foil packet, or maybe two. She dropped them in his open palm.

"Three?" he asked, surprised she'd brought that many.

"You can't be too prepared." She tugged on his sweater until he moved closer. She rose up on tiptoes and whispered into his ear, "My pussy is dripping."

The next instant, Rico's lips swooped down on hers in a ravishing kiss. He held her jaw while his tongue dove into her mouth. She drew it deeper, sucking it the way he'd make sure she soon sucked his cock.

"My god, you're hot," he growled.

With his mouth still plundering hers, he nudged her backward until she met the resistance of the loveseat. She slid onto it, hitched the heels of her feet on the edge of the cushion and spread her knees wide. Her pussy glistened with anticipation.

Unable to resist the lure of her wet flesh, he stooped between them and leaned forward to smell her pussy. He inhaled, drawing her scent deep into his lungs. His cock jerked. God, he wanted to fuck her, had wanted to fuck her for ten years.

Ignoring his needs, he slid his thumb over the slick folds, her clit. She shivered and stifled a moan by biting her lower lip.

He moved his thumb faster over her clit and added his fingers to the foreplay. "Is this what you need?"

"I need... Oh!" She gasped and arched her hips. "I need you inside me."

"Didn't some dude named de Sade say there's a fine line between pleasure and pain?" He dropped to his knees, slid his hands under her buttocks and pulled her forward. He knew by her trembling that she felt his breath, warm and demanding, against her pussy. She was where he wanted her, with a need so great she could no longer stop herself from moaning.

He draped her legs over his shoulders and tunneled his hand beneath her T-shirt. He blew soft little breaths along her labia while his fingers tugged and squeezed her breasts and pinched the sharp little pebbles her nipples had become.

"Rico, please..."

"You invited me to dinner, Mary Beth. Now I'm going to eat some nice fresh pussy for dessert." He lapped at her clit. Her taste exploded on his tongue...that sweet-salty taste of an aroused woman. She threaded her hands through his hair and snapped the cord that held his ponytail in place. She was trembling so hard, he thought she might come before he took a second taste. "Do you want me to stop?"

"I want more."

"I'll give you more than you can handle, but don't you fuckin' come before I say you can."

Despite his harsh command, her body bucked against his mouth. "I can't stop... Ohhhhhhhhhhh."

Rico watched Mary Beth's eyes drift closed. He loved watching a woman climax, the way her chest rose and fell with her heavy breaths. He saw the flush of satisfaction spread on her skin in the light of the fire. Her clit retreated back inside its hood.

Rico had listened to a sixth sense that told him underneath the toughness, Mary Beth was a woman who at times craved domination. She'd reacted just as he hoped she would, with a climax stronger than any he'd ever coaxed from a woman.

He watched until her breath slowed to normal. He wasn't done with her. With one hand still under her shirt, he began drawing light circles around her tummy. She grimaced at what he knew tickled and tried to push his hand away.

"You came before I said okay." He took her wrist in his other hand.

She opened one eye. He saw a hint of curiosity as well as fear mixed with renewing desire. "You knew I would. You made me do it."

"What am I supposed to do about that?"

Her eyes opened wide. He grabbed hold of her ankles and pulled her legs farther apart. "If I ignored what the guards told me to do, they punished me."

She didn't answer, but he felt the shiver that ran through her.

"Don't you think you deserve to be punished?"

She lowered her gaze and shook her head. "No...well, maybe—just a little."

"What type of punishment do you think you deserve?"

She gnawed on the tip of her thumbnail. She looked so damn sexy with her hair in tangles and her beautiful pussy sending the message that she was eager to play this little game, he didn't know if he had the strength to keep from coming in his pants.

"Maybe...um...a spanking," she said in a tiny voice.

"I didn't hear that." He pulled her thumb away from her lips. "Tell me what you deserve."

"Maybe...you know, if you spa—"

It happened so quickly, Mary Beth didn't know how to react. One moment she lay with her legs draped over Rico's shoulders. The next, and with as little effort as turning a pillow, he'd lifted her and turned her over his knees. She couldn't believe it. She shook again...not with fear this time, but eagerness to see what he'd do next.

Whack!

The slap stung, but there was no real pain. Her pussy thrummed. She wanted more.

"Tell me you're sorry you didn't obey me." His words sounded controlled, but his voice had gone hoarse. He held her with one hand resting lightly on the small of her back while he massaged her tingling cheeks with the other.

She looked over her shoulder at him. Her breath caught. His hair had fallen in gentle waves to below his shoulders. He shook an errant hank out of his eyes without taking his hands off her. Even dressed he was the sexiest man she'd ever seen. The thought of where this could go frightened her. She'd never had the courage to do this before.

"Tell me you're sorry, or..."

"No!"

"No?"

"You heard me."

Whack!

This time, it stung a little more. And her pussy thrummed even harder. If they kept this up, she'd come again...in seconds.

She held out through two more strikes before she apologized for coming too soon. She dropped her head to the cushion and lay there, so many thoughts racing through her mind. She'd just trod into the dark side. And she loved it.

She closed her eyes and went with the mellow feeling of his hand massaging the sting away. She smiled, and if he continued to do what he was doing...*ohmygod!*

He'd slipped a finger into her channel while he bent over and began to lick her cheeks. Heat built inside her, cream oozed from her pussy. She felt his finger gently pry her cheeks open and his tongue circled the delicate opening of her anus.

He pushed a finger farther inside her pussy. She whimpered and spread her legs a bit more.

A second finger joined the first, then a third. Rico drove them in and out of her channel but it wasn't until he licked her anus again that she thought she'd come apart.

She moaned as he fucked her with his fingers yet never missed a stroke with his tongue. A powerful release began building inside her. It exploded into a shower of fireworks and stars behind her eyes when Rico thrust his tongue into her ass.

She didn't think she could take more until she heard his strangled words, "My turn."

He set her on her feet and as quickly as he'd turned her over his knee, he'd unzipped his fly and pulled his shaft from his shorts. He pushed her onto the cushions of the loveseat on her hands and knees. Mary Beth barely had time to inhale when he thrust inside her to his balls.

She clutched the loveseat and moaned. "Oh, yes, yes! That feels *so* good." She arched her hips and pushed back, trying to get even more of his cock inside her.

"Fuck, you're so tight and wet."

"And you're huge."

"Are you complaining?"

"And risk another spanking? Hell no."

Mary Beth gasped and her body jerked when his hand delivered another stinging smack. "Rico!"

"You want more?"

Pleasure built and threatened to take over her body. "If you spank me again, I'll come."

He moved faster, thrust harder. Mary Beth clutched the loveseat tighter. She was close. One more slap, one more thrust, and she'd...

A hard smack landed on her right cheek. She tensed, the walls of her channel contracted around his rod. Her climax rushed through her as Rico released a fierce growl and dug his fingers into her hips.

Seconds passed as their breathing slowed. Finally Mary Beth asked, "Are we still alive?"

"You're askin' the wrong guy."

He lay beside her and tugged her into his arms. Neither spoke until the fire began to die and a chill settled over the room. When gooseflesh broke out on Mary Beth's arms, she pushed up on one elbow and swept away the hair that had fallen in her eyes.

"Are you awake?"

Rico nodded.

"I think I'd better throw on some clothes. It's a little chilly in here."

Rico stood and helped her to her feet. "Should I let them in?" He pointed to the door where the cats sat in a group.

"If you don't mind."

Mary Beth heard the door open as she walked away. She pulled a pair of fresh underwear from her bureau and took it in the bathroom with her.

She was brushing her teeth when she heard the unmistakable sound of a motorcycle roaring to life. Her stomach turned. In the cold light of the bathroom mirror, she saw an apple-red spot above her shoulder, in the curve of her neck. She ran her hand through her hair. She not only *looked* like she'd been through a war, she *had*. *To the victor go the spoils*.

But who won tonight and who lost?

Chapter Seven

Mary Beth woke with a pain in her head, a love bite that looked even bigger in daylight, and enough regret to keep the best Jewish mother wringing her hands for a year.

It was our catharsis. Their relationship had started with a bond formed across a courtroom, grew and festered into hatred through Rico's years in prison, and culminated in the world's most misunderstood act – on the one hand, an act of supreme love and the survival of mankind, on the other, an exercise of power and revenge.

She'd allowed him to dominate her in order to assuage her guilt. He'd had to subjugate and punish her to rid himself of the demons that drove him. Last night they'd healed themselves and each other. Now it was over.

Bullshit!

Her reflection in the mirror above her sink showed eyes puffy from too much wine and a love bite that shined like a Christmas tree light. She looked like hell, and yet the face that looked back at her had the unmistakable glow of a woman who'd had incredible sex and enjoyed every minute of it.

The ache between her legs would turn to desire in an instant if she let herself remember what had happened between them. She ran the pads of her fingertips across her butt cheeks, as if touching them might bring back the sting that had started her on a path to a place where she'd never been.

How could she, Mary Beth Hunter, a trial lawyer who fought like a she-wolf in her clients' behalf, enjoy the role of a submissive? To a man who made Adonis pale in comparison, but who couldn't come within a mile of her intellectually?

That was a question that would take more than one morning, and the cup of coffee she couldn't wait to taste, to answer.

She threw a sweatshirt over her head, pulled on a pair of sweatpants, and in a pair of woolen socks, headed into the kitchen wondering what sort of mess awaited her and which part she'd start on first.

Instead, she stopped dead in the doorway. The kitchen sparkled. How much wine *had* she drunk? Then she remembered how Rico had made the coffee and taken time to clean away the dinner dishes because quite frankly – and she winced at the memory – she'd been a little too tipsy to do it herself.

Fine! He's well trained. Big deal!

She stood at the sink slapping freshly ground coffee into a cast-iron coffeemaker Marty Trinidad had brought her from Greece after his last film. It made coffee so strong it could remove rust from the *Titanic*. Marty loved the rich yet bitter-tasting blend and

insisted she make it every time he stopped by. Fortunately he didn't visit *that* often. She'd brew a pot of coffee, toast a bagel and slather it with cream cheese, and wonder what the hell she'd do next.

While the coffee hissed its way through the cast-iron, she drifted into the family room where her cats lined up, begging to go outdoors into the sunny morning. On her way to the French doors, she saw the plates Rico had used to serve Synda's cake. And the coffee mugs with just enough cold coffee and cream to start a science project. At least he hadn't tried using Marty's coffeemaker. With a novice at the helm, they'd be dead now.

She picked up the plates and forks, and scooped up the mugs. As she passed the end table, something shiny caught her eyes. She stopped and looked again. A chill began to creep up from her toes. Her stomach churned. She set the mugs down and walked to the end table.

"God help me," she murmured while she separated the three foil condom packets that lay on the tabletop—the three *unopened* condom packets. She'd had unprotected sex with a man who'd spent ten years in prison. She dropped her head in her hands. "What have I done?"

* * * * *

Rico had managed to avoid his bosses all morning, but he knew they'd be waiting. His dad, a long-haul trucker, had let his ma raise him with the help of an aunt and his two older sisters. He knew what women were like—a bunch of clucking hens. Cluck, cluck, cluck as they picked away at your business.

He had one last chore before his day was done—refilling the ice in the bar. He carried a huge canister on one shoulder and another tucked in the crook of his arm. If his luck held, Leandra would have her back to him while she visited with a table of diners, and Synda would be in the pantry taking inventory.

He stepped into the kitchen from the shed where they kept the ice machine. No such luck. Both of them stood at a table with their noses buried in a crate of oranges.

"Hey," he said and picked up the pace of his steps. If he made as far as the swinging doors that led from the kitchen to the dining room, he could duck out the front.

"Hey, Rico," Synda cooed. "That's quite a load you're carrying. Don't go straining anything. We need you in one piece."

"No problem." Only three feet to the doors.

"When you've emptied the ice, come on back. We've got some really good oranges to share."

Shit. No way he'd spill his guts for a couple of oranges.

"Okay?" she persisted.

“Yeah,” he muttered. How in hell had he ended up with a raspberry the size of a golf ball on his neck? He’d hidden it with one of the canisters. They’d see it if he came back. But if he didn’t come back, then what?

He tried not to disturb the folks dawdling over their coffee. He refilled the freezer off the bar, stacked the canisters and hoisted them on his shoulder.

Leandra had breezed into the dining room behind him, busy now with the last of the diners. If he moved fast enough, he might make it through the kitchen before Synda noticed.

He still didn’t know himself how last night happened. Wasn’t the wine. He’d had one, maybe two sips with dinner. He’d waited too long to wring the truth from Mary Beth Hunter to dull his brain with some sissified yuppie merlot.

Even without the wine, he’d found he couldn’t concentrate on anything but the diamond-shaped cutout on her sweater, the soft white flesh he saw when she moved, a tiny trace of a flowery cologne when she stood beside him, that gorgeous tight ass in even tighter jeans.

Then things started happening.

He’d never raised a hand in anger at a woman in his life, but there he was, smackin’ the hell out of her ass with her lovin’ it. The more she loved it, the harder his cock grew. He was thirty years old, and maybe he’d had four or five women in his life. He and Mary Beth had done more in ten minutes than he’d done with all the others combined.

He didn’t even know where all that dominance shit came from. Something unknown took over and drove him. What should have been ten minutes turned into three hours.

Worse, he’d wanted to stay with her all night, to wake up lying beside her, and instead of just fucking her, he wanted to *make love* to her.

Rico shivered and ran his hand through his hair. Make love to Mary Beth Hunter? Not in a million years. He hated her. Someone had to pay for what he’d lost, and they both knew who.

He wanted to punish her, yet for some damn reason he couldn’t explain, he didn’t want to hurt her. That’s when he knew he had to get the hell out of there, quick.

“Hey, Rico, don’t forget your oranges.”

Startled, Rico looked up to find Leandra falling into step alongside him. He’d been so deep in thought, he hadn’t sensed her presence. Quickly, he lowered his head and raised his shoulders, still hoping she wouldn’t notice what Mary Beth left on the side of his neck.

“The oranges are so fresh, you’ll be able to enjoy them all week.”

“Ah...yeah, thanks.” He pushed open the swinging door and stepped back for her to walk into the kitchen ahead of him.

"In fact, if you're not doing anything later, say about six, Syn and I will be heading to Pietro's for pizza. You're welcome to..." Her voice trailed off. Rico cringed. He guessed what had made her stop.

"Um...you're welcome to tag along."

Synda still stood at the crate, separating the oranges. He saw she stopped when he walked in, and watched her gaze follow Leandra's. She bit her bottom lip and cleared her throat. "How was dinner?"

"Fine."

"What'd M.B. serve?"

"Steak."

Synda nodded. "Good?"

"Yeah...great."

"What else?"

His head shot up. "Whattaya mean, what else?"

"What else did she serve? What did you think I meant?"

If she were a guy, he knew what he'd do about that shit-eating grin.

"I'm sure she didn't just plunk a hunk of meat on your plate and shove it in front of you."

"Baked potato, salad, you know, the usual stuff."

"I sent some of your Black Russian cake with him," Leandra said.

Much to Rico's relief, Leandra managed to slide between Synda and him, blocking Synda's view of that side of his neck.

"Rico, why don't you put the rest of the oranges back in the pantry and head out? I'll make sure the front door's locked so we can call it a week."

* * * * *

Leandra and Synda told Rico about The Blue Riff while the three of them stuffed themselves with a Pietro's pepperoni and sausage pizza. On Sunday evenings, the jazz club catered to local restaurateurs and retailers who managed to squeeze in a few hours of fun on their one free night a week. Tonight was no exception. Tourists stood out like the proverbial sore thumb in a place like this. This evening they numbered less than a handful.

"How about that table?" Leandra pointed to an empty four-top near the small stage at the far end of the room.

Synda shook her head. "Too near the speakers. What about over there?"

"Too near the bar."

"Oh for heaven's sake." Synda raised her arms and flopped them at her side. "Rico, you choose."

“What’s wrong with right here?” He pulled a chair out from the table next to where they stood.

“Too close to the door,” the women answered in unison.

He’d rather sit close to the door for a fast getaway, if necessary. If a cop walked in, he was out of there. “What’s wrong with the one by the bar?”

“Hey, you’re The Man.” Synda high-fived him. “Lead the way.”

Members of the band straggled in behind them, a quartet of trumpet, piano, bass and drums. By nine thirty, the place rocked.

Halfway through the first set, a man walked in carrying a trombone, and by the end of the set, a sax player made it six. They’d started hot and kept getting better. Rico tapped his fingers on the table in time to the beat of the drums. The band was good. Really good. For the first time in years, he let down his guard and relaxed.

Every part of him tensed when someone bumped into his chair. He whipped his head to the left. Mary Beth stood behind him, her lower lip clasped between her teeth. He stared at her mouth, remembering how it had softened beneath his. His gaze flashed over her body. She wore the same jacket she’d worn the first time he’d seen her at the café. He wondered if she wore that skimpy purple bra again.

His fingers itched to open her jacket and find out.

“M.B., glad you could make it,” Leandra said. “Sit down.”

Glad you could make it, Leandra had said. So she’d known Mary Beth would be here. He looked at Leandra, then Synda. They both gave him smiles he assumed were supposed to be innocent.

Yeah, innocent like a cobra.

Mary Beth slipped off her jacket and sat in one of the three empty chairs at the table, next to Synda. He couldn’t drag his gaze from where her V-necked sweater draped low enough to show a hint of her breasts.

He didn’t need hints about her body. He’d tasted every curve, every hollow, every dip.

His cock roared to life. Rico shifted on his chair, searching for a more comfortable position where his balls didn’t feel squeezed. He and Mary Beth had one night of hot sex. That’s all it would be. The need for revenge still clawed at his soul. He couldn’t forget that she could have saved him ten years in hell. No matter how much he wanted her, he had to push aside that desire and make her pay.

It was time she had a taste of what he’d experienced.

The second set started with a woman Mary Beth recognized from one of the casino lounges, a scat singer rumored to be the next Ella Fitzgerald if she managed to kick her cocaine habit.

Three empty chairs stood between Mary Beth and Rico. Leandra had left with Tom Connors a few minutes ago. Then one of the guys at the bar, who’d been drooling over

Synda, caught her eye and beckoned her over. Now she and Rico sat alone among four empty chairs.

From time to time, Mary Beth glanced in his direction then quickly looked away.

He was dressed in black and leather again, she noticed. Like last night, he wore his hair drawn back in a ponytail. She didn't want to remember how their tussling had loosened the band that held that lush wavy hair in place. How it had fallen in soft waves to his shoulders.

Her breath caught at the memory and her hormones kicked into high gear. She had to turn away. There was something about him—not his mind or his manners, but something that drew her like a magnet to metal.

She closed her eyes. They had nothing in common. He had a high school education, she had a master's degree.

He'd worked in his uncle's auto repair shop at the time of his arrest, then spent the next ten years making license plates. She had a thriving law practice, billable hours that grew each month.

He was a beer-and-brat kind of guy. She'd worked hard to acquire the knowledge and palate to glance at the most elaborate menu and order any entrée with a perfect accent. Superficial differences, but differences nonetheless.

She'd come from the neighborhood, just like Rico, but she'd pulled herself up and out of the dead-end life she'd have known if she'd stayed. She wasn't going to go back now, not for a lifetime, or even another night, of incredible sex.

Mary Beth shook away the gloom, opened her eyes and noticed a wave of people had piled into the club. They craned their necks, looking for places to sit. Soon they'd drift over and ask to sit in the empty chairs at their table. Ordinarily that was fine with her. Tonight she'd wanted to spend the evening with friends, not with someone she hardly knew, and definitely not with Rico. She'd wait until the set ended then make her move.

Even loaded, the scat singer did a phenomenal job. Still the set went on a little too long for Mary Beth. Not only had a party of four non-locals plopped into the empty chairs at their table, Rico had moved over to accommodate them and now sat right beside her. He rested his forearms on the table and kept his fingers laced. That did nothing to hide the tension she sensed he had bottled up inside him. She had to get out of there. She'd have to move fast to get away before he caught up with her.

Synda left the bar and stooped in a crouch on Rico's far side. He leaned down to hear what she said. From the corner of her eye, Mary Beth saw first Synda, then Rico, turn in her direction, nod and look away. Why did they bother to whisper? A blind man would see they were talking about her.

A waitress nudged Synda aside to make room to deliver a pitcher of beer to the newcomers. She placed a fresh glass of wine in front of Mary Beth.

"Châteauneuf-du-Pape," she said. "The best we have." She placed the corked bottle between them. "Marty ran in for cigarettes, saw you and sent it over."

“Marty Trinidad?”

The waitress nodded. “He threw down a couple of Benjamins and walked out. My lucky day.”

Mary Beth smiled at that. Marty, always the showman. She knew him so well, knew he’d return near closing time and offer to see the waitress home. A couple of “Benjamins” didn’t come without strings attached.

In the meantime, she saw Synda had walked back to the bar and disappeared in the cluster of men who’d gathered around her stool.

The moment the music stopped, while the crowd still applauded, Mary Beth grabbed her purse, jacket and the bottle of wine. She jumped to her feet and headed for the door.

She’d almost made it outside when a hand clamped on her arm. She didn’t have to look to know whose.

Rico.

“Let go of me.” She snapped her arm away. She kept her voice low, still several heads turned. One man she knew pushed his chair back and started to stand. She smiled at him, a smile that reassured him things were fine.

“Where are you going?” Rico demanded. “Home?”

“Where I’m going is none of your business.” She pushed through the door and walked into the chill night air.

“It is my business. Synda told me to see you home.”

“Why? She doesn’t think I know the way?”

“I didn’t ask. She’s my boss. I do what I’m told.”

In the moonlight, Mary Beth saw he’d shaved more of his beard, exposing more of the soft smooth skin she’d loved touching last night. She shivered. The nearness of him started her hormones racing and sent tremors through places already hot and wet.

Except for the scar that told a different tale, and the tattoo that peeked out from the top of his turtleneck, Rico looked like a clean-cut, well-toned athlete. That wonderful mouth, those soft generous lips. They made her mouth water, in spite of the danger they meant. She willed herself to look away, to say something smart-alecky, maybe even hurtful, anything to make him leave her alone.

She could think of nothing...except how much she wished he’d take her in his arms and press that beautiful mouth against hers.

The wind kicked up and sent an empty soda can on its way. The sound of the aluminum rubbing against asphalt raised the hair on Mary Beth’s arms, much like nails on a chalkboard. It broke the mood as well.

“If I agree, how do you plan to see me home?” The Tarot was so close, Synda and Lea always walked over. “Do you plan to walk behind my SUV?”

He reached inside his jacket pocket and pulled out a set of keys on a chain bearing the Harley insignia. "We'll drive to Pea-arrow's and get my bike."

"Pietro's," she corrected.

"Whatever. It'll only take us a minute."

She rolled her eyes, and hoped the look on her face sent the message that this was the dumbest idea she'd ever heard. Either her look hadn't been condescending enough, or he couldn't tell the difference. "Where'd you park your car?"

"It's an SUV."

"Where'd you park it?"

"In the lot in back."

He took her elbow. She tried to swat his hand away. He tightened his grip. "You're not going back there alone."

"That's ridiculous. I've done it a million—"

He stopped short, put both hands on her shoulders and shook her, hard enough to get her attention. "I'm going to see you home. I can follow behind you, or you can ride on the back of my bike, but it's going to happen. You got it?"

She stared back at him. The annoyed look in his eyes that did little to hide his hunger, the thrumming in her pussy...they frightened her and thrilled her at the same time.

Do something. You're a smart-ass. Say something. Instead she tilted her head back and closed her lids. If he didn't kiss her in the next two seconds, she'd kiss him.

"Let's go!"

She almost fell backward when he released her. Her eyes snapped open. How could he ignore an invitation to a sure thing?

Her face burned. He had to know what she was thinking, had to see how much she wanted him to kiss her. Instead he'd strode away from her.

Mary Beth yanked the lapels of her jacket together, chilled by the night air and Rico's rejection. She jammed her purse under her arm and holding the wine bottle by the neck, stomped after him. No way in hell he'd forgotten last night. None. He was a guy. All guys thought with their cock.

Rejection was new to Mary Beth and she didn't like it. *I'm not going to forget this Rico Zanini. Not ever!*

At Mary Beth's vehicle, Rico held out his hand. "Give me the keys."

"I will not." She pushed past him on her way to the driver's side.

Without a sound, he jumped in front of her and blocked the door. "I got a job to do, M.B. Stop screwin' with me and give me the damn keys."

Inside, Mary Beth steamed. She also knew that losing her cool over a drive of a block or two wasn't worth the effort. She'd let her guard down seconds before. Showed her vulnerability. Allowed him to take her power. *Ain't happenin' again.*

“Here.” She slammed the keys into his open palm. *But I’m kicking your ass out as soon as we get to your bike.*

In Pietro’s parking lot, Rico pulled the SUV up alongside his bike. As he slid out of the driver’s side, he took the keys with him.

She leapt out of the vehicle. “Hey, what do you think you’re doing?” she shouted after him. She came around the back and stood between him and the bike. He’d left the driver’s side door open.

“Get inside. I’ll give you the keys in a minute.”

He did, after he’d painstakingly checked out the bike, zipped his jacket, slipped his hands into black leather gloves, started the bike, and pulled on his helmet.

Watching each deliberate move, Mary Beth’s blood boiled hotter. *He thinks he’s showing me who’s boss. He doesn’t have a clue whom he’s dealing with.*

When they both saw he had nothing left to stall their departure, he tossed her the keys and inched up alongside, frowning until she buckled up before starting the engine.

Oh, what she wouldn’t give to burn a long patch of rubber and lose him. Impossible. She knew a good bike would meet and pass her in seconds.

She shrugged, threw the gearshift into drive, coasted out of the lot and onto the street. He followed close behind. Maybe he’d outsmarted her so far, but once they were on her turf, she’d call the shots. No invitations for a nightcap or a cup of coffee. She’d park the SUV, dash inside and bolt the door shut behind her. If he hung around expecting more, he could damn well freeze to death for all she cared.

Rico followed at less than a car length behind her all the way. Even on the bumpy lane leading to her drive and into the space cleared for parking at the back of the house.

In the time it took to cut the engine, Mary Beth popped out of her vehicle and hurried along the covered walkway that led to her door. She didn’t look back, wave, say thanks or goodnight.

Inside, after she threw the deadbolt, she yanked off her boots and jacket and leaned against the door. The satisfaction of the moment faded into an annoying sense of guilt. She’d thrown herself at him. He’d acted like a gentleman. That pissed her off. She didn’t know why Synda had asked him to see her home. Synda knew she wasn’t afraid to drive alone.

And hadn’t Rico made it more than clear that he did only what his boss had told him to do? She’d wanted him to kiss her and he’d walked away. Did he have to hit her with a brick to get his message across?

Leaning against the door, she tried to sort her thoughts and the cross-signals her body was sending. She’d never reacted to a man this way. Not a man who, if she’d met him under different circumstances, wouldn’t have interested her enough to remember his name. Now she couldn’t put him out of her mind.

Or the fact that several moments had passed and she hadn’t heard the bike’s engine start up again. What was he waiting for?

Turning Point

The seconds ticked by. They turned to minutes. She listened for the sound of his footsteps. She heard nothing. Her pulse quickened.

In your dreams if you think I'm coming out there to say goodnight. Or worse, to say thanks.

From the living room, she heard the chimes of the grandfather's clock strike the hour.

Oh crap. Unable to stand the suspense, she turned and unbolted the door.

Chapter Eight

Without her boots and jacket, Mary Beth shivered at the slap of cold air that met her in the open doorway. Outside, twenty feet from where she stood, Rico still straddled the Harley, helmet off, arms folded, one foot planted on the ground. Unlike her, he appeared immune to the cold, a man who'd stay in the exact spot until spring if he had to in order to get what he wanted. He looked almost content.

She narrowed her eyes and squeezed her lips together. He *knew* she'd change her mind, sat there until she realized it. How annoying. Unfortunately, how true.

"Would you like some coffee before you head back?"

"Why not?"

Was that a smirk? Damn him!

At the sink, Mary Beth stood with her back to the door. She heard Rico step inside the kitchen, heard the zip of his jacket, the rubbing sound of boots toed off. She rinsed away the coffee left in the odd cast-iron pot and began filling it with cold water. She sensed Rico now stood a few feet behind her, watching her work. He claimed to hate cats, but he moved like one. A panther on the prowl.

"That's some coffeepot."

She glanced over her shoulder. "My friend Marty picked it up in Greece."

"Did he pay two *Benjamins* for that too?"

"Quite a few euros, I imagine." With deliberate movements she placed the cover on the pot and flicked on the gas jet. "Marty Trinidad is a good friend. He started out with nothing. He knows how to appreciate wealth. And he doesn't apologize for his generosity."

Rico spun her toward him and wrapped his long fingers around her upper arms. She winced when his thumbs pressed hard into the soft flesh above her elbows. "What else is he generous with? His dick?"

His words stung more than his grip. "Let...go...of...me." She uttered precise words with points as sharp as daggers.

He tightened his grip.

She tried not to grimace.

"I asked you a question, lady. One of those damn cats of yours got your tongue?"

"I'll tell you what I've got—the sheriff's department on speed dial. If you don't let go of me right now, you're going to be spending the night in very familiar surroundings."

She saw both doubt and wariness in his eyes. She pressed ahead. "If you think I'm blowing smoke, keep it up."

Rico released her so quickly, she had to catch hold of the counter to keep from stumbling backward. "I want you out of here, right now."

He opened his mouth as if to say something else. Shaking his head, Rico crossed the kitchen in quick strides and drove a foot into one of his boots. His jacket dangled from his arms, a sleeve dragged across the floor. He grabbed the second boot and didn't look back.

Mary Beth watched his retreat. He'd looked almost comical hopping out the door on one foot, but there was nothing funny about what happened between them. In prison, he'd pumped his body into a weapon. His strength frightened her, and his quiet temper frightened her even more. He held such rage inside him, so much directed at her. She'd thought last night had been their catharsis. That it was over. Now she wondered if it was just beginning.

She kept an eye on the clock. She counted the ticks of the second hand, listened for the sound of the Harley's engine. Like before, it didn't come. Instead, Mary Beth heard the outer door creak open slowly. Her pulse doubled while she waited for Rico to speak.

"Rico?"

No answer, except the sound of the kitchen door opening wide.

He stood outside the threshold, hands jammed in his pockets, head down.

"Did you forget something?"

He shook his head.

After a silence, he looked up. "I'm sorry, Mary Beth. Sometimes I say things I don't mean, and sometimes I want to say things I mean but I can't. I was out of line about Trinidad."

The breath Mary Beth had been holding since she'd heard the door creak open seeped out of her.

"Rico, at times we all say things we don't mean. I'm sorry too. Why do we keep fighting? Why can't we forgive each other?"

He still made no attempt to step inside. Cold air poured into the kitchen from behind him.

"The coffee's almost ready."

He shook his head.

"Please." To underscore her words, she hurried across the room and took his hand. "Come in, before we both freeze to death."

Mary Beth knew Rico kept his eyes on her and every move she made. Whether she bent over to turn the flame lower under the coffeepot, take silverware from the drawer,

or divvy up the last of the chocolate chip cookies she'd baked during last week's one-day storm.

She felt his eyes boring into her, the heat of his desire at the way her jeans hugged her ass, looking beyond the seam that divided her cheeks to the soft flesh between her thighs.

Things were churning inside her, little signals that told her she and Rico would end the evening in bed, signals that her body picked up long before her mind noticed.

She already felt the telltale dampness between her legs. If Rico dared move closer, and she listened to her body's urgings, she'd end up in his arms.

"I'll get the cups," Rico said.

The coffee mugs sat on the shelf above the stove. Before she had time to say she could reach them, he'd closed the distance between them and plucked the mugs off the shelf. He stood less than an inch away, a mug in each hand. If he closed his arms, he'd encircle her.

She could lift the pot but if she did, she might burn him. She could tell him to step back. She knew he would. Or she could give in and do what she wanted to do—lean back and feel the length of him pressed against her.

She released the handle of the coffeepot and turned. "Put the mugs down, Rico."

He brushed away a strand of hair that had caught on her eyelash, then ran his fingertip gently along her cheek. "Are you sure?"

"About...what?"

He slid his finger across her lips.

God help her, she couldn't stop herself. Her resolve melted, like a marshmallow over an open fire.

Her lips parted.

Rico accepted her silent invitation and kissed her softly.

He didn't deepen the kiss, didn't press for entry into her mouth. Instead, he cradled her jaw in his hand and moved his lips ever so slowly over hers. He kissed her with tenderness and care, a tenderness she never dreamed he possessed.

One kiss wasn't enough. The second set her aflame. She didn't care what he did to her tonight, as long as he did it soon.

She inched away from the stove and took his hand. "Bring the matches," she said.

To his puzzled expression, she answered, "You can't appreciate a winter sky until you've seen it by candlelight."

One step inside her bedroom and Rico understood what Mary Beth was saying. The room was twice the size he'd expected, with a four-poster king-sized bed, and above the bed, the largest skylight he'd ever seen. It was as if someone had peeled away half the ceiling and opened the universe to him.

Candles stood everywhere—in sconces, on candlesticks, in jars, bowls and candelabras.

“Light the candles,” she whispered. “I’ll be right back.”

He struck the first match and watched her duck into her dressing room.

Mary Beth returned moments later, a vision that left him breathless. Gone were the jeans and sweater that set his imagination soaring. Gone were the woolen socks and the barrettes that held her wild, kinky, sexy red hair in place. Now loose curls surrounded her face, giving it a touch of innocence that her dark blue eyes belied.

Two skimpy swatches of lace cupped her breasts and a matching triangle covered her mound. Nothing had prepared him for the way she looked, or the fact that for more than ten years he’d fantasized about a woman who’d come to him like this. She’d been faceless in his fantasies. Now he knew why. His dream goddess had always been Mary Beth Hunter.

Mary Beth had held onto her virginity until the grand old age of nineteen. Her first time satisfied her curiosity and little else. That changed after she entered into more serious relationships. She liked sex, liked the urgency and passion, and the heightened sense of contentment after a night of lovemaking.

But right now, she felt scared—knee-jerking, butterflies-racing, pulse-pounding fear. She wasn’t afraid of Rico, she was afraid of herself. Physically, he affected her more than any other man she’d ever known. The sound of his name made her palms dampen. Seeing him shirtless, her knees grew weak. Last night she abandoned the warnings her mind sent and lost herself in pure undiluted lust and a couple of mind-blowing orgasms strong enough to rock the Richter scale.

“You look...” She saw he struggled to find the right words. “Damn, you look amazing.”

She felt amazing too. Her nerve endings had leapt to attention at the first glimpse of the desire she saw in his eyes.

Tonight, she didn’t see anger. His need for her came through so strongly, she felt bathed in it. He looked at her as if she were a fine wine. She’d seen that expression once or twice in her life, and neither time made her feel the way she did now—giddy, sensuous, and so ready, she wondered if she might come without him touching her.

Best of all, gentleness had replaced the anger she’d seen before. Hunger, yes. Passion, yes. The need to hurt—gone.

Their shadows flickered in the light of the candles. The scent of lavender surrounded them, and the wind sent the branches of a pine scraping against the window.

He walked across the room, never taking his gaze off her, staring now into her eyes. She mewled when he took her upper arms and pulled her against his chest. Through his jeans, his erection pressed into her. “I want to be inside you.”

His warm breath ruffled the wisps of curls and raised goose bumps on her skin. Her nipples peaked against the lace of her bra.

He pushed aside her hair and nipped at her earlobe. "You're always on my mind, no matter what I'm doing." His hand slipped low on her back and grazed cheeks left bare by her thong. She shivered and moved closer. If she stood on tiptoes, maybe then his cock, as hard as granite, would find the spot that had begun weeping the moment she realized they'd soon be making love.

Mary Beth moved one hand between their bodies and caressed his cock. Rico jerked and groaned. "Don't do that. You're going to make me come in my jeans."

With a husky chuckle, she squeezed his firm flesh. "No way. I wouldn't dress like this for two minutes and a cloud of dust."

"Two minutes?" He grinned. "How 'bout two hours?"

"For the first time."

He slid his hands up her body to her breasts. "Only twice?"

She looked down at his hands, trying not to purr with the pleasure from his kneading her soft flesh. "I can take anything you can gi..." Her breath caught when he plucked her nipples. She closed her eyes. "As long as it keeps feeling this good."

"You ain't felt nothin' yet."

A gentle bite on her neck. A soothing lick of his tongue. Mary Beth sighed. "I'll give you an hour to quit that."

This time, he answered with a carnal chuckle. "You won't last five minutes."

A challenge. She'd always loved a challenge. "Oh, yeah? Let's see who comes first."

With that statement, she tore at the button and zipper of his jeans. Grasping the waistband along with the top of his briefs, she quickly tugged both to his knees. Once free, Rico's cock sprang up toward his flat belly. Mary Beth whimpered. His cock was long and thick, his balls tight and hairless.

She dropped to her knees and took his cock in her mouth.

"*Marone!*" he cried in Italian and hissed out a breath.

Rico drove his fingers into her hair and twisted the bright red curls...not wanting to hurt her, but unable to control his fingers. If she didn't stop, he'd come, but the pleasure was so great, he didn't want to stop. He moved his hips, fucking her mouth while she continued to suck him. Her tongue circled the head of his cock again, then she darted the tip into the tiny slit. He had to push his pleasure aside. "No...no more," he sputtered between sharp breaths.

She pulled her mouth away. Her eyes sparkled and with a hint of a dare, she smiled. "First one to come's a rotten egg."

Rico didn't need to hear anything else. In seconds he'd shucked his jeans and briefs, hoisted Mary Beth over his shoulder and carried her to the edge of the bed. "That's it. You're going to pay for that." He flipped her over his knee and without bothering to

lower the elastic that held the lacy thong in place, sent the palm of his hand stinging against her cheek.

“Ouch!” She turned to him and stuck out her tongue. “I dare you to try that again.”

When he raised his hand to accommodate her, she jumped up and scampered away from him. He could see she tried to look stern, until a hint of a grin turned up the corners of her mouth. “You think you’re so tough. Catch me if you can.” She took off running, showing her grace and quickness, as well as how really large the room, and bed, were.

A few turns and he managed to close the gap between them. They were both laughing and breathless when he tackled her and tossed her into the middle of the bed.

He straddled her, locked both her wrists with one hand, and with little more effort than it took to strike a match, ripped her thong in two.

“Hey, that cost me a lot—”

His lips cut off her protest as he claimed her mouth. Teeth, tongue, lips, he worked every part of her mouth with his.

Mary Beth returned his kisses with no hesitation, her tongue driving deeply to mate with his. He caressed her head, her back, her ass, as they kissed. Then hitching one of her legs on his hip, he rubbed his cock against her pussy.

“Let go of my hands.” She tried to jerk her wrists free. “I want to touch you.”

He wouldn’t last three seconds if she did. Her mouth had almost driven him to a climax. He needed to bring his desire back under control and concentrate on her.

“Maybe I was wrong,” he rasped and turned his attention to her earlobe and the soft part of her neck below it. Gooseflesh covered her.

“About what?” she said between raspy breaths.

“First time might not take two hours.”

She leaned into the pillow and closed her eyes. “Whatever it takes, I’m there.”

Rico thumbed her nipple through the lace of her bra, but that wasn’t enough. He needed to feel that hard nub with his skin, his tongue. One sharp tug and the lace fell apart in his hand. “Your tits are fuckin’ fabulous.” He tossed her bra to the floor and rose to his knees between her legs. He palmed both of her breasts then skated his thumbs over the peaks.

Her breath hitched. Rico suspected Mary Beth liked the crude sex talk. Her next questions proved it.

“You like my tits, Rico? You like my nipples? Taste like candy, don’t they?”

He groaned, almost unable to get the words out. “Better.”

“You want to bite them, suck them?”

He’d already taken one in his mouth.

“Is that the way you’re going to fuck me too?”

He nodded, and teased and taunted the hard little peak.

She arched her back and wriggled beneath him. "Fuck me, Rico." She cradled his jaws and brought his mouth back to hers for a ravenous kiss. "Condoms on the nightstand."

He groaned and reared back. He grabbed one of the foil packets, ripped it open and slid the latex along his shaft.

His shirt sailed to the floor just as he pressed her legs open wider.

He slid his hands under her hips and lifted her almost off the bed, until her heels caught on his shoulders, and buried his face in her pussy. A small red tuft covered her mound, but she didn't have any hair on her labia. In the flickering light of the candles, he saw her wet and swollen lips. Rico swallowed. "I'm going to eat you until you come so many times, you won't even remember your name." With that, he parted her folds and began long, slow licks from her clit to her anus.

She buried her fingers in his hair. "Rico!"

He suckled her clit and licked her again.

"Rico, now. Fuck me now. *Please.*"

He laughed, slid her knees from his shoulders and hooked them in the crook of his arms. "Only because you said please." One thrust and he glided into her hot, weeping sheath.

"Oh yes!" Mary Beth dug her fingernails into his shoulders. "Mmmm, deeper, Rico, deeper."

He shifted positions. Now each thrust brushed her clit.

"Right there. Oh yes, right there!"

God, she was so tight. Each thrust of his cock into her silky pussy sent a whiff of her scent to his nose. He watched the way the feminine lips gripped his shaft every time he pulled back, as if her body didn't want to let him go.

"Harder, Rico." She gripped his arms, her fingernails digging into his skin. "Fuck me faster."

If she wanted faster, she'd get faster. He leaned over her body, her legs still hooked over his arms. Damp flesh slapped against damp flesh as he pumped into her. He buried his face in her neck, breathed in the subtle scent of her perfume...a light flowery fragrance that tightened his balls every time he inhaled. "Damn," he groaned. "I don't think—"

"Shut up and fuck me faster. Damn it, *faster!*"

Rico picked up the pace until he pounded into her. Sweat dripped off his face and pooled in the small of his back. Still he plunged his rod into her channel, again and again.

Mary Beth arched her back and wailed with pleasure. He continued to pound his cock into her pussy. With a final surge, he went rigid. He bit her shoulder and shuddered. "*Fucking A!*"

Chapter Nine

“Woo-hoo!”

Rico heard the exclamation when he walked through the back door of the café. He recognized Leandra as the one who had made all the noise.

“Synda!” she called out. “Syn, where are you? You’ve got to see this!”

Rico stepped up to the doorway of the small space off the kitchen the gals used for an office. “She tore outta here about ten minutes ago. Said she’d be back in half an hour.”

“Oh. No problem.” She smiled. “Then I’ll share my good news with you.” She waved him inside the office. “C’mere.”

Rico hesitated to step into the small space. Too many memories of small spaces.

That part of your life is over. You’re free now.

Rico took the chair beside Leandra’s desk. “What’s up?”

She turned the laptop toward him. “See this?” She pointed to the bottom rung of a brightly colored graph. “That’s where we started.” With her fingertip, she traced a jagged line upward—a few down spots, but always a quick recovery. “This is where we are today.”

She watched his gaze sweep over the numbers, once, twice and then back again. “You started showing a profit right there.” He pointed to a date two weeks prior to where Leandra indicated they’d turned the corner. “Not there.”

She rolled her chair closer to his for a better view of the screen. “No way. I’ve run these numbers several times.”

“Look here, and then at November. You transposed the amount. You’re doing better than you thought.”

“You’re right. How did you catch that with one look?”

“Rico’s Rule of Sevens.” He pointed to the two columns. “Any time a number’s off, and if it can be divided by seven, it’s probably a transposition.”

“Whoa.” Leandra leaned back in her chair, rested her chin on her palm and stared at him. “How did you come up with that?”

“Doesn’t matter. Change that forty-nine to twenty-one in column B, and you’ll see how much more you’ve earned.”

“I’m impressed, Rico. No pocket protector, but you’re a fellow numbers nerd.”

Heat spread across his face. “Not everyone in prison wants to be a jailhouse lawyer. I like numbers.”

“What did you do about it?”

"Got a degree in accounting."

"What a godsend!" She clapped her hands. "At last, someone whose eyes won't glaze over when I talk about this. I'm sure if you want to find some accounting work here, there'd be a lot of folks who could use your help."

He allowed himself a moment of hope before it quickly dissipated. "Yeah, like somebody's going to put an ex-con in charge of their books. Especially someone with a cobra crawling up his neck or the rest of these." He shoved his sleeves high, exposing the tattoos that covered his arms. "They helped me survive in prison. Now they're going to keep me from having a life."

"You'd be surprised, Rico. Body art's hot right now. M.B. told me one of her clients got a couple of tats the other day. I know he's looking for some part-time accounting help."

"Who? Marty Trinidad?"

He couldn't keep the growl out of his voice. It must have startled Leandra because she flinched. "Why yes. I didn't know you'd met him."

Rico stood and began pacing the small space. "I haven't met him, but he's all Mary...M.B. talks about."

He saw her eyebrows shoot up, but Leandra's voice never changed. "He's one of *Mary Beth's* clients."

"He's more than that. He gave her half the stuff in her house, and paid two hundred bucks for a glass of wine the other night."

"He sent over a bottle, not a glass."

"Bottle, glass. What the hell difference does it make? Motherfucker probably bought her that damn house too. No way she'd make that kind of bread up here."

Leandra closed the accounting program and took Rico's hand. She led him into the kitchen. There, she pushed him into a chair at the small table where she and Synda ate breakfast or snacks after closing. "Sit!"

He obeyed her as a child would obey his mother. He sat still and waited while she left the room. She returned a few minutes later with two Irish coffee cups and a bottle of brandy. She poured a generous shot of an aged Napoleon in each.

"You want to know about Marty? Here's the story as I know it." She blew across the top of the coffee to cool it before beginning. "Marty's part of the Hollywood set. He started out as a stunt man. He was only fifteen. He's a genuine tough guy."

Rico slurped a sip of coffee, then added two teaspoons of sugar. "Yeah, so?"

"Do you know who Missy Ryan is...was?"

He thought a moment. The name seemed familiar, but he couldn't place it. "Maybe. I don't know."

"Missy made her bones on Broadway at eleven. She was the first Annie—you know, Little Orphan Annie and Daddy Warbucks. She had beautiful red hair and blue eyes. Could sing like an angel. At eighteen, she headed for Hollywood, where she fell

hard for the first guy she met, a young stunt man named Marty Trinidad. Aside from Jodie Foster, Missy would have been the most successful child star turned seasoned actress, ever."

"What happened? Marty do something to her?"

"Oh, Rico, stop it. Of course he didn't. They married and had a daughter a couple years later – Eve."

"And?"

"At twenty-eight, Missy was diagnosed with breast cancer. She died two years later. Marty never got over it. He sunk way low after that – lots of drugs and alcohol. According to the grapevine, Marty came to after a weekend binge and found his little Eve standing over him. She was only four at the time, and a mess. During his binge, the nanny robbed the safe and took off. This was Marty's come-to-Jesus. He cleaned up his act and did so well over the years, he went from stunt man to director and producer. Now the guy could buy a small country with his pocket change.

"Marty lives in a dozen places and has his fingers in a dozen new deals every day. M.B. keeps him honest – at least with his northern California holdings." She ran her spoon through her coffee. "He owns a piece of Tahoe Towers on North Shore. Loves their dice tables."

Rico found himself interested, though he didn't want to be. "So how come he never married again?"

"According to the grapevine, Marty married again and it didn't work. Others say he loves Missy so much, he'll never remarry."

"That sounds like a chick flick."

"I think it's part true, part myth. Women love wounded men. I've never seen him with the same gal twice."

"Except for Mary Beth?"

"I think Marty sees Missy when he looks at M.B. That makes her too special to mess with. He also knows he'd lose a heck of a good attorney if he did. M.B. knows better than to date a client. His business represents a huge chunk of her practice."

"You mean, they never..."

"I don't know. She doesn't confide in me about that part of her life. And I don't ask."

"So you don't know. They could be..."

"She's his attorney, he's her client and they're friends – period."

"But you don't –"

"Stop it!" She walked to the pantry for a plate of leftover cookies. The woman seemed to think food was the answer to everything. "When we met M.B., she'd just left a job in L.A. as a public defender. The pressure had gotten to her and she kind of melted down."

“What does that mean?”

“The first time we met her, she looked like a dazed, lost little waif. She was standing on the ledge of the safety barrier at the Donner Pass vista point on Highway 80—sort of weaving in the wind. Syn and I had pulled in to take a picture of Donner Lake for the website. Let’s say we got there in the nick of time.”

A chill passed through his body. “No shit. You mean you think she would have...”

“I shouldn’t be telling you this. It’s stuff M.B. needs to tell you herself. She doesn’t talk about it much, so I wouldn’t hold my breath waiting.”

He waved his hand to brush aside her worries. “I’m not much for talkin’ either.”

Leandra smiled. “We’ve noticed.”

“Then what happened?”

“She stayed with us for a few days. Told us she didn’t want to go back to L.A. Guess she’d burnt too many bridges.”

“I know what that’s like.”

“The last night she stayed with us, one of our local attorneys stopped by. Said he was heading home to Chattanooga for a few months. Wanted us to spread the word that he was looking for someone to take over his practice while he was gone. We told M.B. and the rest is history. He never came back. She bought his practice a year ago.”

“Thanks to Marty?”

“I don’t know the details.” Leandra took a cookie, passed it under her nose like sampling the bouquet of a fine wine, then tucked it next to her coffee cup. “Marty keeps a lot of irons in the fire. The other day M.B. told me he was looking for a part-time accountant, someone local. Good way to get to know him. You can judge for yourself whether he’s a huckster or a stand-up guy.”

Rico shifted in his seat. He wouldn’t work for Marty Trinidad if that was the only job he could get. “Sorry, not interested.”

Leandra grabbed the cookie again and this time, shoved it whole into her mouth. After she chewed and swallowed, she took a quick sip of her coffee and said, “Okay, Rico, I’ve told you all I know about M.B. and Marty Trinidad. Now you tell me why you want to know.”

If he’d learned nothing else in prison, Rico learned never to show weakness. He’d gone too far a minute ago. He liked Leandra, trusted her. That didn’t mean she had to know everything about him. Especially not how he and Mary Beth met.

“I...uh...I...”

“It’s obvious you like M.B....Mary Beth.”

“What’s not to like?”

“She’s a great gal, a good friend.”

He nodded and looked away. Leandra *knew* things. Maybe because of the deck of cards she carried in her pocket, or some kind of other psychic shit. If he let her look into his eyes, she'd know exactly what he was thinking.

"I was awake when you came home Sunday night," she said.

He still wouldn't meet her gaze.

"Rico, look at me."

Reluctantly, he did so.

"I may be a woman, but I still appreciate beauty in other women. When M.B. wears her hair down and dresses in something nicer than sweats or jeans, she's clock-stopping gorgeous."

He couldn't argue with that.

"There's nothing wrong with consenting adults enjoying each other's bodies."

He groaned, enough that he knew she understood.

"What's so hard about admitting you're attracted to her? I've seen you two together. Neither of you can keep your eyes off the other."

He wanted to believe Mary Beth cared for him, yet couldn't shake the feeling there was more to the Marty story. "What about her and Trinidad?"

Leandra slammed her hand against the table, causing the thin gold bracelets she wore to tinkle against each other. "Rico Zanini, listen to me. Read my lips. Business partners, friends, *not* lovers. How much clearer can I say it?"

"You said you didn't know for sure."

"I said she never told me. I didn't need to *hear* it from her. I can tell by watching them together. Now stop trying to talk yourself out of what you're feeling. It's okay, it's natural, just make sure you're careful and that you don't stomp on her heart."

"Ha!" The word flew out of his mouth before he could stop it. "Me stomp on *her* heart? Shit, she doesn't even know I'm alive."

"Oh pul-leese, enough with the angst. If she slept with you, she knows you're alive."

"I can't give her the things Trinidad can. She's a lawyer. What am I, a handyman?"

"A handyman with an accounting degree."

"Shit, I don't even know what half the stuff on the menu is or what fork to use if I ordered it."

Leandra placed her hand on his wrist. "Those are small things, Rico. Easy to fix."

He relaxed under her gentle touch.

"You were locked up when most guys learn that stuff. But if you really want to know what a Béchamel sauce is, or which is the salad fork and which is for dessert, we can go over that any time you like. You'll be amazed at how simple it is."

Rico pointed to the cobra's head. "What about this?"

“Um, I don’t suppose you’d consider heavy makeup?”

He heard a smile in her voice and ground his teeth. “Yeah, right.”

“There’s a laptop in the pantry. We never use it. Take it with you and surf the ‘net. I know there are docs out there who specialize in tattoo removal. Might be expensive and hurt like crazy, but...”

For the first time, Rico realized that he was leaning forward in his chair, not pushing away, or using his jacket or shirt as a protective shield to hide the physical scars he could not hide as easily as his emotions.

“I got money,” he muttered. He knew Synda and Leandra had checked him out, but maybe they didn’t know he received a settlement from the State of New York.

“Syn and I like you exactly the way you are. But if *you’d* feel better without the body art...”

Rico started when someone shouted from the dining room, “Hey, anyone home?” He didn’t recognize the voice.

“In here, Tom.” Leandra was on her feet and heading for the door before she’d finished her reply.

Tom Connors. The deputy sheriff. A too-familiar ugly feeling gripped Rico’s gut. Just seeing a black-and-white on the highway had the same effect. He shot to his feet and headed for the back door.

He didn’t move quickly enough.

“Hey, wait up, Rico,” Tom called to him. “I came by to see you.”

He turned to Tom, and his nerves calmed. Tom wore jeans and a golf shirt, not his deputy’s uniform. A social call, not official business.

“Yeah, what can I do for you?”

“A bunch of us from Search and Rescue are getting together to look at some equipment we’re thinking about buying. Afterward, we’ll kick back and BS for a while. Thought you might like to join us.”

The hackles rose on the back of Rico’s neck. A guard had “befriended” him once. Suggested a game of one-on-one in the yard.

Instead Rico learned the hard way that the rumors about gladiator games staged by the guards were more than rumors. He’d endured the worst beating of his life while the guards stood by betting on who would go down first. Even though his eyes had been swollen shut, Rico saw death heading straight at him.

To his amazement he woke up in the infirmary the next day, still alive but broken in so many places every part of him throbbed or bled. He found out later, after thirty days in the hole for fighting, that another inmate had stopped the fight before they killed him, not one of the guards.

“What do you say, Rico?” Leandra walked over to him and took his hand. “You have to learn to trust again. This might be a good time to start.”

She said it in a voice so soft and gentle he almost didn't hear every word. He looked into her face, at her eyes and saw the depth of the friendship she offered. And a plea for trust. At some point, things had to change in his life.

Perhaps this was the turning point.

He looked over her shoulder at Tom. "Hey, sounds good. Let's do it."

* * * * *

Leandra waved and watched them head up the street. When she was sure they were not going to return because they'd forgotten something, she whipped out her cell phone.

Mary Beth answered on the second ring. "Hey, girl. What's going on?"

"The Tarot's talking to me. About you."

"Me? Why me... Wait a minute." Suspicion oozed from her words. "This wouldn't have something to do with your Director of Maintenance, would it?"

"I dunno," she fibbed. "Could be. Only a reading will tell."

"Uh-huh. I'm not falling for that one. If you want to know something, ask."

"It's not that simple, M.B." Leandra knew she had to proceed with caution. "You haven't had a reading in a while."

"I told you before, Lea. I love you and Syn, but I'm not a believer."

"But I am, and I know the cards have a message you need to hear. I'm free until four. You either come here, or I come to you."

Chapter Ten

A grumpy M.B. Hunter, no makeup and her wild curls held mostly in place by a bright green scrunchie, banged on the locked front door of the café. Leandra heard her drive up and opened the door before her knuckles rapped a third time.

"This better be good," M.B. grumbled. She walked past Leandra without a greeting. "And it better not be about Rico Zanini and me."

"The cards will take us where they want us to go."

M.B. whirled around and shook her finger at Leandra. "No, they'll take us where *you* want us to go." She looked around. "If I have to do this, I need wine."

"After the reading. Not before."

M.B. scowled and blew out a loud, irritated sigh. "Fine. Whatever."

Leandra led her to the table nearest the fireplace, the one where she'd read for Synda and Rico the day they formed their partnership. "Please take the seat facing me."

Once again M.B. grumbled but plopped into the chair, slouching much like Rico had that day. "Let's get this over with. I'm meeting Marty in a couple of hours. We're going to North Shore—the P.J. Kendall Band's opening at Tahoe Towers. P.J. invited us to the party afterward."

Hmm. Leandra tried not to raise an eyebrow. She knew Kendall was one of Mary Beth's favorites. Too bad Marty had arranged it. "I know how much you like the band."

"I had the wildest crush on P.J. I'll probably puddle up when Marty introduces us."

They could engage in small talk for the next hour. That would solve nothing, so instead of answering, Leandra reached inside her pocket for her favorite deck, the worn Rider-Waite she had used to learn the Tarot as a child. She kept it in her nightstand and had fetched it specially for M.B.'s reading. She knew the powers it possessed. With care, she slid the cards from their velvet pouch and placed them on the table between them.

"Pick them up and hold them with both hands, a palm on either side." She wanted M.B. to draw on their power.

Mary Beth rolled her eyes but did as asked. "Now what?"

"Close your eyes and let your thoughts run free. Don't think about the cards, don't think about anyone or anything you ought to be doing instead of sitting here. Clear your mind, let your thoughts roam."

"We didn't do it this way the last time." Mary Beth closed her eyes and leaned back in her chair. "I asked a question, you answered it."

"I didn't answer your question, M.B. You did and found the answer in the cards. We will again."

"Well, you're out of luck this time, girlfriend. I don't have any questions, and I'm not seeking any answers."

"Because you're afraid to face them. The questions will come, Mary Beth, and the answers too."

Mary Beth's eyes sprang open. "What did you call me?"

"That's your name, isn't it?"

"You've never called me Mary Beth before. Only Rico..." She cleared her throat. "Don't think you're going to lead me in meditation." Mary Beth went on as if she'd never made the gaffe. "I think it's boring and it sucks."

Leandra glanced down. She didn't want Mary Beth to see her smile. The attorney who sat before her found it impossible to let go. The woman inside wanted desperately to free herself.

"What are you afraid of? We all have questions. Knowledge helps, not hurts."

Leandra sat quietly. Mary Beth held the cards tightly, a grimace on her face. How she struggled inside. "You have to ask the questions, whether you say them aloud or not."

Two long minutes dragged by. Mary Beth fidgeted, sighed several times, and only moments before Leandra decided it was time to stop the session, she saw a change in Mary Beth's expression. Her cheeks now shined with high color.

"When you're ready, shuffle the cards and pass them back to me."

Once she did, Leandra took the cards and cut them into three piles. "Choose the pile you want me to use."

Mary Beth folded her arms across her chest. "Marty always plays the three horse. Let's do pile three."

Leandra picked up the third cut. Resistance didn't bother her. She'd faced it in readings many times. Seldom by anyone she knew so well and cared about as much.

"The first card represents you."

Usually sure-handed, Leandra slid the card from the top of the deck with her thumb and index finger. Not one card, but a second hitched itself to the first.

Mary Beth sat up straighter. "Now what?"

"Looks like the Tarot's giving us a qualifier." She placed the first card facedown in the center of the table. "These two cards go hand in hand. We'll put the second right next to the first, a bit lower."

Mary Beth watched without commenting.

To the left of the first, Leandra placed the second card. "This is your dilemma."

She placed the third card to the right of the first. "This is what's clouding your judgment, what's keeping you from making the right decision."

The fourth she laid beneath the first card. "This is what you know is right."

The fifth card, and the last of the reading, she placed directly above the first.

"This is your answer, M.B." She tapped the card. "You know it in your heart. Now it's time to accept it."

Mary Beth had inched forward in her seat and teetered on the edge of her chair. She propped her elbows on the table and rested her chin on the heels of her palms. "Isn't this where you turn the cards and show me how I screwed up?"

"The Tarot's not judgmental."

"Oh right. They *speak* to me."

"If you're willing to listen."

"Do I have a choice?" Mary Beth leaned back in her chair, rolled her eyes and waved her hand. "*Que sera, sera*. Go for it."

Leandra took a deep breath and turned the first card.

The Queen of Swords. A queen sitting alone on her throne. In her left hand, she held a sword with strength and great determination. The fingers on her right hand were splayed in an attitude of authority.

"Look what we have here," Leandra said. "Majestic, commanding, powerful...and a redhead."

"Isn't that just too convenient? You expect me to believe you didn't rig the deck?"

"You shuffled them and chose the cut."

Mary Beth looked away.

"The Queen of Swords represents a woman with a strong will and business sense. She's sharp, witty, and has a bit of a problem with sarcasm – the perfect attorney."

"Ha-ha, very funny."

"Besides knowing her own mind, she's an idealist – which is a great combo, I might add. The Queen of Swords represents someone who plays fair and is willing and ready to fight to the death to right a wrong. Again, wonderful traits in an attorney."

"With a tongue mightier than a sword?"

"On the downside," Leandra continued, "she may be so career-minded she looks the other way when a chance for love presents itself. She has to guard against putting success and all its trappings ahead of what she knows in her heart."

"You're making this up as you go along, aren't you?" She pointed to the card that hitched itself to the first. "Shall I guess what that's going to say? Someday my prince will come, or maybe an appointment to the Supreme Court."

Leandra ignored her sarcasm and turned the card.

The Ace of Swords.

"Goodness, I didn't expect this."

"What?"

"Are you thinking of making a career change?"

"Me? Of course not. Why?"

"This card usually portends a radical change in business affairs. Coupled with the Queen of Swords, this card tells me that you'll soon face a decision about a business opportunity that will change not only the status quo, but your life long into the future."

"That's nonsense, Leandra. No way I'm giving up my practice or choosing another career. Heck, I'll be paying off my school debt for another ten years. I can't afford to go back and start over."

Leandra shrugged. "I didn't say you will make that choice, but an opportunity will present itself that might make you reconsider. Or it could be something from your past that makes the choice for you."

"Oh pul-leese. Isn't that standard fortune-telling gobbledygook?" She lowered her voice and added a thick Gypsy accent. "Soon you vill face *big* decision about your future...or vait, maybe vill be from your past."

Leandra did not return her smile. She put the card down and looked into Mary Beth's eyes. When Mary Beth looked away, Leandra continued, "The Ace of Swords is a powerful card coupled with the Queen, M.B. Don't be too quick to brush its meaning aside."

"Okay, so if opportunity knocks I'll listen carefully before saying aye or nay."

"Good."

"Now turn the next one. I have stuff to do today."

"This card signifies your dilemma."

Mary Beth chuckled at that answer. "I didn't have a dilemma until you told me I'm changing careers."

The Two of Swords. A woman sitting blindfolded on a throne. With her back to the sea, she held two swords crossed over her heart.

"That looks like Blind Justice without any scales," Mary Beth said. "And another Sword. Don't you have any of those other cards? You know, the Cups, Wands, and that other one I can never remember."

"Pentacles," Leandra reminded her. "In a way I'm surprised, and in a way I'm not. Swords are appearing for a reason. They represent your career, your intellect, your need to control where you're going, to place the practical over the emotional. The woman in the Two of Swords wears a blindfold, not to signify Blind Justice, but to block out distractions, to give her a chance to chill out, you might say. A chance to think with her heart and emotions as well as her intellect and more practical side."

"I'm very comfortable with practical, thank you very much."

"Then maybe it's time you leave your comfort zone."

"Why? My practice is growing, business is good. Okay, I'm stubborn and smart-mouthed, but there's no way I'm leaving law to pursue another career. And I'm not interested in knights seeking the hand of this fair maiden. Unless it's P.J. Kendall, and I promise he won't look at me twice if I don't change into something scintillating." She

pointed to the remaining cards. "Obviously I have a lot of work to do, so let's get this over with."

Leandra touched her fingertips to the third card. "This represents what's clouding your judgment, what will keep you from making the right decision." She turned the card.

The Emperor. An older man, powerful, rich, considered royalty in the circles he traveled. Dashing, sensual, unfocused.

Marty Trinidad.

Mary Beth stared at the card. The color seeped from her face.

Leandra had watched Mary Beth tense when she turned the last card. She frowned at the image of the man wearing a crown and holding a scepter. Marty definitely had a huge hand in Mary Beth's professional success.

Was Rico right? Did I miss something? Does Marty control her emotions as well?

"This card represents –"

Mary Beth waved her hand. Leandra noticed a slight tremble. "No, I don't want to hear about him," she said. "Forget that one. Show me the next."

"The next card represents what's in your heart, M.B. It's not a who, it's a what. *What* will make M.B. Hunter live happily ever after, both personally and professionally?"

Leandra turned the card. *The Lovers.*

"Sexuality and attraction. Romantic love, a new relationship."

Mary Beth didn't answer. She kept her gaze trained on the card, as if she expected it to disintegrate unless she kept watch.

"This card is no stranger to the readings I do here at the café," Leandra said. "We seem to draw people who are facing a crossroads." She smiled and placed her hand over Mary Beth's. "You've seen the other cards, M.B. The Swords, then the Emperor and now the Lovers. The first three acknowledged your intellect and ambition. These two are telling you to give your heart equal time, create a balance between the personal and the professional."

One card remained. Leandra saw tears welling in Mary Beth's eyes.

"I can't," she whispered. "I can't do this."

"Do what?"

"*That.* That's supposed to be my answer, isn't it?"

"It is."

"I know where you're going with this, and it's not true."

"The cards are talking to you through me. I'm the conduit for their message. You chose them because you had questions and needed answers."

In all the years Leandra had practiced the Tarot, she'd never dealt a spread that so clearly expressed what the querent sought. She'd also learned through experience when to speak and when to let silence speak for her. No matter how long M.B. took to come to

terms with what she saw, and what she knew lay facedown on the table, Leandra would be there for her.

The sun set while they sat across from each other. The room grew dim. Leandra sensed a silent storm building in Mary Beth.

“Do you want to talk about it?” Leandra kept her voice soft, soothing.

Mary Beth shook her head. At some point, she’d pulled the scrunchie from her hair. Hanks of titian curls now shot out in little corkscrews, others brushed her cheeks in soft ringlets.

“Can I get you anything? Water? Maybe that glass of wine?”

Mary Beth shook her head again. Leandra eased back in her chair, steepled her fingers and waited.

The explosion came quickly after that.

“Turn the goddamn card!”

The Knight of Cups.

The Knight of Cups, someone new with whom a Queen could fall in love. A man to share an impossible dream. Sensual, sensitive, empathetic. The Sir Lancelot of the Tarot.

“No!” Mary Beth cried. She jumped up from her chair and began pacing. “I can’t do this.”

“Do what?”

“That!” She pointed at the five cards as if they were a cauldron of boiling rats.

“What about *that*?”

“Do you know what it’s telling me?”

“No,” Leandra fibbed. “What is it telling you?”

“That I have feelings for Rico.” She balled her fists. “It’s not true. I don’t!” She paced the aisle between the entrance and the bar, then headed back to Leandra. “It’s craziness. There’s no way I... We can’t—” Then she broke into tears.

Leandra rushed to her friend. “It’s okay, M.B., it’s okay.”

“No, it’s not. We have nothing in common, except—”

“Except what? A physical attraction?” she prodded. “There’s nothing wrong with that.”

“You don’t understand, Leandra.” She snatched one of the cocktail napkins off the bar and dabbed at her eyes. “I don’t give a damn what the Tarot says, Rico and I wouldn’t work as a couple.”

“Because he’s a handyman and you’re an attorney?”

Mary Beth shook her head.

“Because he’s not a rich entrepreneur?” She latched on to Mary Beth’s gaze. “I hope you’re not foolish enough to give your heart to someone just because he’s rich.”

“Stop it, Lea, there are things you don’t know.”

"I know there's a lot more to Rico Zanini than a hog, a few tattoos and a prison record."

Mary Beth pulled her hand away. "Drop it."

"Do you think I need the Tarot to tell me there's history between you two?" Leandra jammed her hands on her hips. "I met an angry, confused, lost man when Rico walked into the café. He's not the same man anymore, Mary Beth. *You've* made the difference in him. You can't just walk away."

"Stop it, Leandra. This is none of your business."

"I can't let two people I love blow off a second chance."

Mary Beth headed for the door. "Do us all a favor?" she called back. "Read the cards again. You'll see there are no second chances."

* * * * *

Angry at herself and disappointed, Leandra still sat at the table in front of the fireplace staring at the cards she'd laid. One of the bartenders turned on the lights when he clocked in. Otherwise, she would have sat in darkness.

She started at the sound of laughter. Moments later, Rico and Tom burst through the front door. They were laughing and for the first time, Leandra saw Rico's eyes sparkled and a broad smile creased his face.

"Looks like you two had fun today." She met them halfway. "What's going on?"

"I thought I was good," Tom answered. "This guy is phenomenal." He thumbed in Rico's direction. "Saved Search and Rescue five grand in about five minutes."

She saw Tom's praise embarrassed Rico, but she saw pleasure in his face too.

"What did you do?"

Rico shrugged. "Checked out a few things under the hood. No big deal."

"No big deal?" Tom burst out laughing. "I should have arrested the sonofabitch for trying to hustle us."

"I don't think he knew the engine was that trashed," Rico said.

"Wrong. He knew exactly what he was doing." Tom poked Rico in the chest. "Let me tell you something else, big guy, humility doesn't cut it around here. Not with these two." He pointed to Leandra and then in the direction of the kitchen. "On the days you've got it, flaunt it. Otherwise, these women will eat you alive."

Leandra planted her feet. "'These women'? What have you told our Director of Maintenance? You'd better start explaining yourself, bud."

Rico backed away from the couple, hands raised, palms out. "Hey, I'm getting out of here before plates start flying."

"Don't let her scare you," Tom said. "She's mad because we had fun without her."

"If you think I'm taking sides, you're nuts."

Tom laughed on his way to the front door. Rico waved and headed for the kitchen. Leandra stood alone, watching them go in different directions until Rico stopped and turned.

"This may sound kind of crazy, but do you think you could show me how to, you know..." He gestured toward the dining room.

Leandra blinked back her surprise. "Work the dining room? Rico, your day's done at noon. Why would you want to?"

He shrugged. "Maybe I could help out on days you're really busy."

"Have you had any experience in a dining room, bussing, anything like that?"

He shook his head.

"Let me think about this." She walked to and fro, her chin in her hand. "How about we try this? You shadow me tonight."

"Okay."

"I greet the guests, seat them, and if their server's busy with another table, take their drink order."

He nodded.

"If the bussers are falling behind, we clear plates as soon as the diners finish. But don't rush them. We want them to enjoy their meal, not feel like we're trying to get rid of them."

"Got it."

"We'll go over the seating chart, but first we have to find you something to wear." She looked at her watch. "Do you have a white dress shirt? I know you have black slacks."

"Shirt might be a little wrinkled."

"No problem. There's at least six irons in the storage closet. Grab one on your way out." She looked around. "Come on, let's start at the host's stand."

Chapter Eleven

By the time the rest of the waitstaff, bartenders and readers had checked in, Rico stood beside Leandra at the host's stand watching the last-minute rituals each used to prepare for the customers who'd soon line up outside the doors no matter the weather.

Leandra and Synda decided on a black turtleneck for Rico, black trousers and his spit-shined boots. Synda thought that with his olive complexion and Mediterranean features, Rico added that touch of panache The Tarot had been missing.

Leandra sniffed at the suggestion yet she agreed that at six-two, with broad shoulders and a narrow waist, Mr. Rico Zanini improved the scenery. Even the cobra's head seemed less menacing and one heck of a lot more sensuous than they'd expected. One of the gals who worked only dinner asked about the "new eye candy" and one of tonight's readers made it clear she "saw" a place for Rico in her future.

Leandra nudged him. "Fifteen minutes 'til showtime. Nervous?"

He fidgeted and checked the list of specials Synda had written on a sticky note against the items he'd printed on the chalkboard near the entrance. "Maybe...yeah."

"Good. If you weren't, *I'd* be nervous." She patted his arm. "You'll do fine. This crew's especially good with new folks. They'll keep an eye on you too."

He started to say something when a loud banging sounded on the front door.

"Pretend you don't hear it," Leandra said. Seconds later, the banging started up again, louder and more insistent. "Probably needs to use the restroom." She rolled her eyes and headed for the door.

Leandra barely had time to turn the deadbolt when a man in his mid-fifties, tawny-skinned, and wearing enough gold chains and diamonds to glow in the dark, hugged her and air-kissed both her cheeks. "I have to talk to you and Syn," he said. "Now."

"We're opening in a few minutes. Can't it wait?"

"No, it can't. Get her right now."

Leandra turned to Rico. "This is Marty Trinidad. Marty, Rico Zanini."

Marty waved without looking at Rico. "Send him for Synda."

Rico's first impression of Marty Trinidad was that he looked like someone from thirty years ago with all the gold and diamonds draped around his neck. Maybe he was trying to be impressive by flashing his wealth. To Rico, Marty looked ridiculous.

"Hurry it up, Zanini, I need to talk to the girls."

Leandra did not bother to hide her exasperation. "Syn's a little busy right now, Marty."

“Five minutes is all I need, five minutes.” He turned a huge smile on her. “I promise, darling, it’ll be worth your time.”

Leandra sighed. “Rico, would you please get Synda while I open the doors?”

Rico wouldn’t walk across a street for the pompous asshole, but he’d never deny Leandra anything. With a nod, he headed for the kitchen.

He looked over his shoulder before entering the kitchen. Trinidad didn’t look that bad for an old dude. He and Marty stood about the same height and without the bling, Marty probably looked pretty good to the women. Even if his teeth blazed almost as brightly as his jewelry.

Rico didn’t want to think about Mary Beth and Marty together. He couldn’t stop his mind from going there. Acid burned in his gut. Shit, the guy probably swallowed Viagra by the shovelful.

On the other side of the swinging doors, Synda, all five feet of her, stood with hands on hips, barking orders at a line of subordinate chefs and helpers. She wore checkered cotton pants like the rest of the staff, a white chef’s jacket, and held her hair back with a white bandana. Rich, spicy fragrances swirled in the warm air, at least ten degrees hotter than in the dining room. Shouting didn’t get her attention. Rico waved his arms until she noticed.

“What?” she yelled over the din of two metal trays clanging against each other.

“Leandra wants to see you.”

“She what?”

They each took several steps and met halfway.

“Marty Trinidad’s here. He says he has to talk to both of you.”

“Excuse me, but does it look like I have time to talk to Marty Trinidad?”

Rico raised both hands. “Hey, I’m just the messenger.”

“Then deliver the message that he can come back after ten.” She didn’t wait for an answer but picked up a knife that probably could have sliced through steel with one swipe and began annihilating an onion.

Rico saw Marty still stood at the host’s stand, now jiggling something in his jacket pocket. Leandra had seated a party of four near the fireplace, while a man waited outside one of the reader’s alcoves.

He shook his head no when he caught Leandra’s eye. He saw her lips moving, muttering something he couldn’t hear. She passed him on her way to the kitchen, and before he could blink, emerged with Synda in tow.

“Rico, take over while we figure out what Marty’s up to. Good luck.”

To his own amazement, Rico sailed through the next twenty minutes as if born to food service. Between customers, he’d glance at the corner where Synda, Leandra and Trinidad huddled. Alternately, Marty and Synda seemed to argue and then agree. Both

were chopping at the air with their hands while Leandra wrote notes in a little spiral notebook she kept in her skirt pocket. Synda kept shaking her head no while Marty continued to spread his arms up and out, as if he needed to make room for his thoughts by clearing the space around him.

With diners seated at every table, drink orders taken, and waiting diners seated at the bar, Rico leaned against the host's stand to catch a breath. He glanced over at Marty and saw he'd finally wound down and now embraced both women. He caught Synda's glance on her way back to the kitchen. She rolled her eyes with a look that said, "Can you believe him?"

Rico stepped aside to allow Leandra and Marty to pass.

"Be right back," she said and handed him the notebook. To Marty she said, "M.B. stopped by this afternoon. Told me P.J. Kendall had invited you backstage after the midnight show."

Marty grimaced. "Don't even get me started on P.J. Kendall."

"Oops, is something wrong? M.B. can't wait to meet him tonight."

"Yeah, M.B., and about eight hundred other people."

Leandra slowed her pace. Rico leaned closer.

"What do you mean?"

"Kendall's got some kind of bug up his ass. I talked to him at noon—he's feeling fine, life's good. Two hours later, his manager calls and says poor P.J.'s got laryngitis and won't be going on tonight."

"So you're not going."

"Naw. She seemed a little under the weather this afternoon too. Kind of down about something. Maybe it's that time of the month."

Rico clenched his fists at Trinidad's rude remark. How he'd love to shove all those gold chains down Marty's throat.

"Or maybe there's a bug going around."

Marty shrugged. "Maybe, but day after tomorrow it's a new day, a new life, new opportunities." He turned to Rico and pointed to the notebook. "I just remembered something else." Without asking, he snatched the spiral notebook out of Rico's hand. "Hey, kid, get me a pen."

Rico handed him one of the pens he'd used to write down the waiting diners' names. Marty ran his finger down the list of things Leandra had written earlier, scratched through one and added another in its place. "Good, good. Got any questions, you call me, you hear. Everything has to be perfect on Wednesday, everything."

Leandra handed the notebook back to Rico. "You worry too much, Marty. Have we ever failed you?"

"Never!" He pulled her close and hugged her. "Don't start now."

"What's that all about?" Rico asked once the door closed behind Trinidad.

"Mr. Entrepreneur has some big deal up his sleeve. He's reserved the café for Wednesday night."

"The banquet room upstairs?"

"The entire café, with a menu about as excessive as anything I've ever seen." She took the notebook from him. "He's planning on a hundred, folks worth enough to finance another moonwalk."

"Really?"

"You'll hear jets flying over all day Wednesday. Some of his guests will fly out after dinner, weather permitting. Otherwise, they'll head to Reno and North Shore. There'll be more action at the tables than they've seen in a while, and trust me, a lot higher limits."

"Did he invite —"

"Mary Beth is his attorney. Someone has to keep Marty honest."

"What do you mean?"

"I told you, Marty loves making deals." She looked over the list again. "This one must be bigger than most." She glanced up at Rico. "Marty's a little over the top, but I don't think he'd involve M.B. in anything questionable." She pursed her lips then smiled brightly at a couple who'd just walked in. "Can you handle this by yourself?"

"Sure."

"Good." She flipped through the notebook. "If I don't order some of this right now, we'll never get the shipments in time. I shouldn't be more than half an hour."

* * * * *

At eight thirty, Rico seated the last of the waiting dinner guests and removed the dishes off the table next to them. The dining room closed at nine on weeknights, with the bar serving until eleven from a small menu for late diners.

Synda and Leandra tried to clock out each night no later than ten.

"Hey, hey, wait up, fella," Synda called to Rico. He had raced in from the dining room, carrying the dirty dishes rather than using one of the carts, then turned and started heading back. "Let the bussers get the dishes. That's their job. You don't need to do everything." She sat across the table from Leandra with a mug of something cold. Leandra sipped hot tea. "Sit down, please. We need to talk to you."

They looked so stern. Suddenly that high he'd been running on for the last couple of hours faded. He thought he'd done so well. Obviously he'd screwed up and someone complained. Bracing himself for bad news, he pulled up a chair.

Leandra looked away. Synda just stared with an eyebrow raised.

"Is everything okay?"

She narrowed her eyes. "Okay? I don't think I'd call it *okay*."

His throat went dry. Did someone stiff a waiter and blame him? Did he mess up without knowing it? *Shit!* He fought the urge to bolt. Today went too well—hanging out with Tom and the guys from Search & Rescue, admitting he'd earned a degree to Leandra, tonight—all of it had been too good. It had to turn to shit. It always did. *Damn it.*

Suddenly both Synda and Leandra burst out laughing.

"I wouldn't call it okay either," Leandra said and clapped her hands. "I'd call it spectacular!"

"You did it, Rico." Synda reached across the table and high-fived him. "You shined out there like Marty's bling. I've worked in restaurants for years, but I've never seen anyone so at ease in a dining room on his first night. The staff gave you rave reviews, and—"

"And..." Leandra picked up from her. "You're going to find a big fat bonus in your pay this week. Usually the waitstaff gives a share of their tips to the bussers. It wouldn't be fair to take that away from them, so we're going to make up what you should have earned in tips."

Rico realized he was laughing too, and his cheeks hurt from grinning. "Hey, it was great."

"That's the problem," Synda said. He saw concern in her eyes. "You're too darn good at this to be our maintenance guy, but you're too darn good at maintenance to lose you to the waitstaff. Unless you want to do both, which would be a killer, I don't know what to tell you."

Rico blew out a relieved breath. He hadn't had this many options in a long, long time.

Leandra reached in her pocket for a wad of something. She unfolded a fifty-dollar bill. "Remember that table of six cougars who were driving over to North Shore for the late show at the Tahoe Towers?"

He nodded. Six middle-aged women who'd made it clear they thought he ought to be listed among the desserts.

"One of them handed me this on her way out. Said to give it to you, and no one else."

"Wow."

Synda winked. "She wrote her cell phone number right across Grant's face."

"Fortunately for Syn and me, we don't have an opening on the waitstaff. That'll give us time to look for a new Director of Maintenance if you'd like to switch over."

He scratched the back of his neck. He couldn't believe what he was hearing.

"There are still some things you need to learn, so I thought you might want to fill in from time to time."

"Sure, any time."

"How about Wednesday night?"

“Trinidad’s party?”

“You could work alongside me again,” Leandra said. “Would you like to do that?”

“Hell, yes,” he answered, but not because of the experience or the money. Two weeks ago he didn’t know a dinner fork from a dessert fork. Mary Beth knew it too. Now he’d show her he could move as easily in her world as any other man.

“You’re on,” Synda said. “Now get out of here. You’ve worked two shifts today. That’s enough.”

Chapter Twelve

Even with exhaustion tugging at every bone and muscle, Rico couldn't rest or sleep. He was too keyed up from what happened today – the *good* things that happened today. Things you share with someone special.

Mary Beth.

Every time he closed his eyes, he saw her. Sometimes Marty Trinidad hovered beside her. Other times she stood alone, a sad expression on her face and tears on her cheeks.

He threw the covers aside. He had to stop hanging around Leandra. He was beginning to think like her, actually *see* images of things he knew weren't there. Next he'd start carrying a weird deck of cards to answer people's questions.

Rico shuffled from his bed to the refrigerator. Alongside the covered bowls Synda kept sending home with him, he found a couple of beers and a few bottles of a sports drink. Neither appealed to him. He turned on the kitchen faucet and cupped his hand. The cold water chilled his palm but tasted fresh against his lips.

He glanced at the clock on the stove. Almost midnight. Did he dare call Mary Beth this late? Would she answer? Or Marty? Did the old dude show up every night, once he'd finished his wheeling and dealing?

Rico clenched his fists and swore. What the hell did she see in him? He wasn't bad looking, but he was old, for crissake, way too old to satisfy a woman as passionate as Mary Beth Hunter.

He didn't want to go there. Even *thinking* her name sent a wake-up call straight to his cock. He'd spent half his adult life hating her, and now he couldn't wait to see her again. Wanted to hear her begging him to fuck her, his lips on hers, his tongue darting into her mouth, his hard cock sliding into her sweet, wet pussy...

"Fucking A," he groaned. His shaft stood at attention, pressing up against his flat stomach. He palmed and slowly stroked...up to the head, down to his balls, back to the head. Slowly, he let his fingers graze the underside.

"Oh hell, no!" He pulled his hand away. He'd jerked off enough in prison to be blind for life. He didn't want to do that anymore. Only a few miles separated him from the hottest woman he'd ever known. He wanted Mary Beth, needed her.

Loved her.

His mind spun. Did he really think what he just thought he did? Did he really admit that he *loved* her?

He'd arrived in Truckee an angry, vengeful man, ready to cause Mary Beth Hunter as much pain as she'd caused him. Now he couldn't wait to tell her he loved her.

He blew out a long, confused breath. Tonight he'd proved to himself that he could blend into her world. On Wednesday, he'd prove it to her when he worked Marty's party.

The hardest part was convincing himself to wait until Wednesday when he wanted her now, right this minute.

He opened his cell phone. Shit! He didn't know her phone number. He'd probably find it in Leandra's office, but he'd seen the café go dark before he went to bed. He paced awhile, then finally pushed one of the chairs out of his way and headed for his closet. If Marty's fancy car was parked in her drive, he'd go to Plan B—not that he'd even made up Plan A yet. He had to see her tonight. This couldn't wait.

His leather jacket zipped tightly, Rico took off into the night. He knew all the shortcuts by heart, and that the wildlife that lived in Mary Beth's forest would scamper away at the sound of his bike.

A few days ago, he'd found a rise several hundred yards from her place with a bird's-eye view of the back entry. He cut the engine when he neared it and coasted toward the highest point. He checked his watch. Twenty past midnight, yet light still poured through the cracks in the shutters on the windows.

The weather forecast said no new snow until the weekend. That must be why she'd left her SUV at the walkway instead of pulling it into the garage.

Rico climbed back aboard the bike and wound his way down her drive. Didn't matter to him whether Trinidad was there or not. He had to see Mary Beth, and he had to see her now.

* * * * *

Mary Beth was used to her family of cats signaling visitors were on their way. A few minutes ago, they'd awakened from deep slumber and now sat like statues, alert, ready for whoever dared near their door.

"What do you hear, Ruskie?" she asked the Russian Blue who sat the tallest, his tail whipping back and forth.

Seconds later she heard the sound of an engine. Not Marty's smooth purring luxury car, but something and someone much more in-your-face.

Rico.

Her hands flew to her hair. She ripped off the scrunchie, bent from the waist and flipped her hair forward and back. She'd cried off her makeup hours ago and knew she looked a mess in her baggy sweats, no bra, and an old pair of striped woolen leg warmers. But damn it all to hell, it was *his* fault. Maybe if Rico saw her this way, looking like a rode-hard raccoon, he'd hop on his hog and head back to Queens tonight.

Mary Beth tugged on the bottom of her sweatshirt, fluffed her hair one last time and headed for the door.

She'd spent the afternoon thinking about the cards Leandra had laid out for her, and the two men who stood most prominently in her life. She couldn't quite put her finger on it, but she saw something changing in Marty. He looked at her differently...not the kind of lusty signal he'd sent when they first met, but something deeper, more meaningful. The kind of look she'd expect from a soul mate, not a client and casual friend.

The look she wanted to see from Rico, not from Marty.

The cards had said it all this afternoon. Leandra knew it, and Mary Beth knew it too, even though she'd run out denying it.

The first time they were together, when their lovemaking was urgent and violent, Rico had hooked her. Day or night, when she least expected it, the desire to make love to him overwhelmed her.

They had no chance as a couple. Were miles apart in everything. To cut their ties, now, tonight, would be the kindest thing to do for both of them.

Would she? Could she? Rico Zanini owned her body...and her peace of mind.

She heard his footsteps crunching on the snow and gravel leading toward the walkway. He hesitated a few feet from the door. She wondered if he'd turn around and go back.

A moment later, his fist tapped lightly against the metal storm door. She stood as still as the cats, until he began pounding on the metal.

She opened the door only wide enough to see his face. "It's late."

"I'm sorry. I had to see you."

"About what?"

He moved a step closer. "Can I come in?"

She hesitated. Letting him in meant she'd not only opened the door to her home to him, but to her heart as well. Her stomach churned and her heartbeat quickened. He held her gaze. As the moment grew longer, she saw his confidence waver.

"Please, Mary Beth."

Finally Mary Beth stepped back and opened the door all the way.

She walked ahead of him, listening to his boot heels strike the plank floor. Her mind spun with a jumble of thoughts. They had so much to say to each other. Neither one of them seemed to know where to begin.

"Mary Beth, stop—"

"There's coffee from dinner." The words flew out of her. "I can reheat it, or would you rather—"

He clamped his hand on her arm. Shivers and gooseflesh hummed on her skin. He was forcing her to look at him.

"Stop talking, please? Just listen to me."

She'd made it as far as the stove, turned slowly, and leaned back against it. "I'm listening." They stood a few inches apart. She saw how the bright lighting in the kitchen emphasized the worry on his face but also the resolve in his eyes.

"Mary Beth, you know me better than anyone."

"I don't," she whispered. "I don't know you at all. I know the man I met in the courtroom, and I know the man my friends hired." She reached up and touched his cheek. His skin felt soft beneath her fingertips. "You're not either of them anymore, Rico."

He nodded. "You're right."

"Then who are you? Show me the man you are now."

Mary Beth slid into the warmth of his arms. The leather of his jacket felt cool to the touch, its fragrance a mixture of the outdoors and the scent of a male. She pressed against him. His cock responded instantly, much like the murmur of desire that pulsed in the soft spot between her thighs. She stood on tiptoes and laced her fingers at the back of his neck, the tip of her tongue eager to taste the thin sheen of sweat forming on his upper lip. There'd be time for talking later. They needed to talk to each other with their bodies now.

To Mary Beth's surprise, Rico released her and took a step back even though the fly on his jeans tented enough to fill the space he'd left between them. He buried his hands in her hair and rested his forehead against hers. His voice sounded husky, his words urgent. "I'm sorry, Mary Beth. We can't make love. Not until we talk."

She didn't believe what she heard. What man wanted to talk when he held a ready and eager woman in his arms? Only Rico Zanini. Until now, she didn't know it was possible to be thrilled and disappointed at the same time. She sighed and nodded.

Resigned, she took his hand and led him to the table. In a gesture she thought had died with chivalry, he held her chair while she sat down. He dragged another chair to within inches of her. He didn't bother to turn it forward, just plopped into it and sat with his chin resting on his fists on the chair back. She could almost see the wheels spinning in his mind. His eyes sparkled with new confidence. She didn't dare smile although she wanted to.

"Mary Beth..." he started, stopped, then started again after clearing his throat. "It took nearly seven months to find you. I couldn't get here fast enough. I didn't care how long it took, or what I'd have to pay for doing it, I came here to hurt you. I planned to set you up so you'd be accused of a crime. I wanted you to know what it was like to have your reputation trashed, your career ruined. I wanted you to suffer just like I did, and I wanted you to know I caused it."

Whoosh! She'd guessed as much. Hearing him say it left her breathless. She went cold inside and her head spun from the sudden drop in her blood pressure. "Whoa!" she managed.

With the chair back between them, he reached for her hand.

She hesitated.

“Mary Beth, please let me finish.”

Reluctantly, she met him halfway. For the first time, she noticed the contrast in the color of their skin. She’d always been fair, the consummate redhead—pale-skinned, freckled, quick to blush, easy to sunburn.

Rico’s hand was twice the size of hers and several shades darker. Her hands were soft, his fingertips and palms calloused. She kept her fingernails short and natural. His were clipped, and even though he worked with grease and oil, his fingernails were scrubbed clean.

As different as they were, their hands fit perfectly. Holding his, she felt safe and protected. For one insane instant, an image flashed in her mind of a curly-headed toddler with red hair, blue eyes, and the dark olive complexion of her father.

A shiver of pleasure raced through her body.

“You okay?” he asked.

“I’m fine. You threw me for a minute, but please go on.”

He laced his fingers through hers. “I don’t remember anything the judge said after he read the verdict and the door of a cell slammed shut behind me. If I could have killed you that moment I would have.”

“Rico, don’t.” She tried to pull her hand away from his. He held steady.

“We were both so young. I’d only had one girlfriend because I was in love with my cousin’s girl.”

“Your...your cousin’s girl? Pia Sarantella? The girl who...”

“Yeah, Pia, the girl who accused me of raping her, of almost killing her.”

“Did she...? You were in love...? Ohmygod.”

“That’s what made it worse. Pia knew I worshipped her. I would have killed to protect her.”

“Why did she accuse you?”

He shrugged. “I don’t know. The guy who attacked her boogied long before I got there. My cousin found her first, went a little nuts and took off. I guess after a while he tried to get help.”

He released her hand and rubbed his eyes. The fatigue of years spent wondering showed in his face. “I’ll never understand why he left her alone. If he’d stayed until I got there, things would have been different.”

For years, Mary Beth had wondered about that too. A familiar unease came back with the memory. If his cousin had stayed, Rico never would have been charged. “Did you ask him why?”

“About a hundred times. Said he didn’t know why.” Rico ran his hand across his brow. “I was so fucking scared Pia was dying. I picked up the knife and tossed it away from her, then I held her in my arms. I didn’t want her to think no one cared about her.”

“That’s when the police came in?”

He nodded again, and his eyes welled with tears. "I wanted to hold her until help came. I was covered in her blood. The paramedics did something and she woke up. That's when the cops asked her if she knew who did it."

"And she said you."

"I couldn't believe what she said. I couldn't talk, I couldn't do anything but stare at her. She said it again and again. I knew I was fucked. I started yelling at her to tell the truth. Next thing, the cops were hauling my ass to jail. Like a nightmare I couldn't wake up from."

"Why do you think she said that?"

"I don't know." He stood and began pacing. "My cousin knew I didn't do it. Tony told the cops he'd called me at home, that I couldn't have done it and gotten back to my place before he called. They wouldn't listen. They said the lab proved the semen inside Pia came from me, and that my fingerprints were the only ones on the knife and the flashlight."

Another reason she believed in his innocence. It seemed odd to her that only his prints were found when no one had ever seen him with a knife or that flashlight. "I remember that, and wondered why your attorney didn't raise the possibility that you'd been set up."

Rico pushed back the strands of hair that had come loose from the band that held his ponytail in place. "Neither did I."

"You should have testified, Rico. Everyone in the jury room said that if you were innocent, you would have taken the stand."

"My attorney said no. Said the DA would chew me up and spit me out. That I was too young and too dumb, and would have ended up looking even guiltier. My cousin told me that was good advice, so I listened."

"You listened to them and blamed me."

He stopped, shoved his hands in his pockets and gave her a weak, sheepish grin. "Who else could I blame?"

"How about your cousin? And your attorney?"

"I couldn't blame Tony. He paid for everything, and it was his girl, for crissake. They even broke up over it."

She stood too and placed her hands on her hips. "Rico Zanini, if you tell me you thought it was your fault they broke up and you felt badly about that, I'm going to have to hurt you. No one can be that dumb."

He walked back to where she stood. Gently, he put his hand on her shoulder and then caressed the side of her neck. "I wasn't the smartest guy in the world, was I? I blamed you because I couldn't make myself blame the people I should have."

"I'm glad to hear you say that."

"I let it eat at me for almost eleven years. Now I know the truth. It was never you."

"What about your cousin?"

“Tony’s a stand-up guy. He did what he could, and hey, if it wasn’t for him talking to the suits at The Innocence Project, I’d probably still be rotting in my cell.”

Mary Beth took a step back. “Your cousin convinced the attorneys at The Innocence Project to take up your case?” She rubbed the tip of her chin. “Tony must be quite a guy. The Project receives thousands of petitions every year.”

He shrugged. “What can I say? He was the only one who ever believed I’d get a new trial. When I told him I’d heard about The Innocence Project, and that I’d written to them, he said he’d make some calls, that he knew some guys. It took awhile, but about a year later, one of their attorneys showed up and said they were willing to take a look at my case.”

She smiled then. “That’s some cousin you have.” She remembered Tony Zanini as a two-bit punk who swaggered around pretending to be connected simply because one of their relatives had been a low-level mobster. Even at eighteen, she saw right through his façade.

“Hey, he was there for me when no one else was.”

“Okay.” She left him standing in the middle of the room. She walked to the wood stove, picked up a piece of oak and tossed it in with the others. She closed the door on a rainbow of sparks. “Why was it so important for you to tell me this tonight? It’s not like I didn’t know most of it already.” She walked to the pantry where she kept a bottle of Jack Daniel’s and a couple of shot glasses. At the table, she turned his chair around so that they’d sit knee to knee and face-to-face.

“Sit.” She pointed to his chair and poured straight shots for both of them. “I want an answer. No bullshit, just an answer.” She touched the rim of her glass against his. “*Mazel tov.*”

He tossed back the shot as if it were water and pushed the glass aside. “Are you in love with Marty Trinidad?”

The shot of sour mash hit the pit of her stomach like a ball of fire. That was nothing compared to the way Rico’s question hit her. “What?”

He narrowed his eyes. “You heard me. If you’re in love with Marty Trinidad, I’ll get the hell out of your life right now.”

She licked her lips and shook her head. “Where in the world...” What a ridiculous idea. “Why would you think I was in love with Marty?”

“Because he’s in love with you.”

She sat up straighter. “No way. He’s my client, my friend.” She laughed softly and poured another shot into each of their glasses. “Marty needs my brain far more than the rest of my body.”

Rico pointed to the odd cast-iron coffeemaker on the stove. “He buys you presents, doesn’t he? The coffeepot, the wine the other night. He was going to take you to Tahoe tonight too.”

“Marty buys everyone presents. He’s a generous guy. He’s got a lot of money, Rico, enough to spend any darn way he feels like spending it.” She tried but couldn’t stifle her annoyance. She leaned forward, close enough to poke his chest for emphasis. “Number one, do you think I’m so shallow that I’d fall in love with a man only because he was rich and bought me gifts?” She poked his chest a second time. “And two, even if I were, it’s none of your business. You have no right to come here at midnight and say that.”

“It’s not like that, Mary Beth. I just... I just...”

He looked so sincere, a part of her wanted to hug him. Another part wanted to smack him until he woke up. “You just what?”

“I don’t have the money Marty does. I never will.”

“Few people do,” she snapped back.

“But I’m not only a handyman either.”

“I know.”

“You know? You know what?”

“That you have a degree in accounting, and that you were quite the star tonight at The Tarot. Seems some cougars found you pretty hot.”

His face broke into a huge smile, flexing the deep dimple in his left cheek. “News travels fast.”

She smiled too. “You’re not in Queens anymore. Get used to it.” She leaned back in her chair and folded her arms. She sensed there had to be more. “Asking me about Marty could have waited ‘til tomorrow.”

They both looked toward the living room, at the sound of chimes from the grandfather’s clock striking one.

Rico bowed his head, laced his fingers and rested his arms on his thighs.

Mary Beth saw he struggled to answer and wondered what he was thinking. What he said left her speechless.

Chapter Thirteen

"I love you, Mary Beth."

He said it so quietly, she didn't think she'd heard right. She moistened her lips. "Y-you... What did you say?"

Their gazes met and held. In his, she saw a depth of love so profound that if he'd shouted it across the canyons, she couldn't have heard it more clearly.

Rico's gaze never wavered. "I've loved you since the first day I saw you."

"I don't know what to—"

"You can't tell me you didn't feel something then too."

She licked her lips again. Her pulse pounded in her ears. Was she shouting, or speaking as softly as he? "Yes, we connected on some level, but..."

Slowly, as if he feared a quick movement might jar her, he rose and pushed his chair aside. He held out a hand to her.

Mary Beth didn't trust herself to speak. It was time—now.

She had to say something strong and final, something to erase what he'd said from both their memories. *Where is the damn delete key when I need it?* The litigator who hadn't found herself at a loss for words in five years couldn't think of a thing to say.

"This isn't about the trial, Mary Beth," he said. "This is about us now, not back then."

She should have said, "There is no us *now*." Instead she nodded, rose from her chair and slid her hand into his.

His fingers tightened around hers. "Are you willing to try?"

Mary Beth touched his face, and with a fingertip traced the scar that went from his lip to his eyelid. She couldn't bring herself to think who and what had caused it. How unfair, and how strong Rico had been to survive the injustice done to him. "Yes," she whispered "I'd like to try too."

For the first time since he'd seen Mary Beth from the shadows in The Tarot Café the afternoon of the storm, Rico breathed without the boulder that had somehow lodged itself inside his chest. "Are you sure?"

Her smile wiped away any doubt that she meant it. They weren't the same kids who'd met under the most unbearable circumstances. If nothing good ever happened in his life again, Rico had this moment. He wrapped his arms around Mary Beth and held her in a fierce hug. He'd never loved before, and now he loved her more than his own life.

Several moments passed before he sought her lips. He kissed her slowly, tenderly, with all the love in his heart. His body responded to her nearness, his shaft grew longer, thicker. He tried to ignore it. Mary Beth's soft breasts pressed against his chest made that impossible.

She kissed his chin, his cheek, his jaw. "Isn't this the part in the movie where the hero and heroine make love?" She nuzzled against him. "Rico, show me how you feel with your body. Make love to me."

He felt something brushing against his leg and looked down to see Ruskie and one of the kittens marking the legs of his jeans with their scent. He frowned. "Shouldn't they be chasing mice?"

"Are you kidding me? That's their way of saying they're going to try too." She tweaked his chin. "You got off to a pretty rough start with them."

He released Mary Beth long enough to open the sliding glass door and free the cats. "Leave it open about that much." She held her hands six inches apart. "They like to come and go at will."

Rico nodded. Everyone and everything deserved the right to live free.

As the last ball of fur left the room, Rico saw the lights dim. He turned to find Mary Beth waiting at the entry to the short hallway that led to her bedroom. She watched him and in her gaze, he saw a touch of the innocence she'd brought to the courtroom that first day, as well as the wanton desire of a woman who knew exactly what she wanted and from whom. His breath caught. She wanted his body to tell her what he felt. Tonight he'd make it sing.

Without hesitation, he crossed the room and took her hand.

Inside her bedroom, Mary Beth nodded toward the bed and reached for a fireplace lighter that sat on the edge of the mantle. "I want to watch us make love, Rico, by candlelight."

He sat on the edge of the bed marveling at the grace with which she drifted from candle to candle. After she'd lit half a dozen or so, she doused the flame on the lighter and laid it back on the mantle.

Rico had toed off his boots while she lit the candles. Now barefoot, he walked soundlessly across the floor. The light of the quarter moon, coupled with the glow of the candles, cast a perfect light. Standing before him, Mary Beth looked like an angel—an angel with a mischievous gleam in her eyes and a sweatshirt that belonged in a rag bag.

"I've never seen anyone more beautiful than you look right now."

She slid her hands across his chest and over his shoulders. Her arms encircled his neck as she rose to her tiptoes and kissed him. In his arms, she felt so tiny, so vulnerable.

Her lips moved over his, her tongue swept into his mouth. Rico pulled her body close. He shifted his hips from side to side, brushing his cock against her mound.

She moaned...a soft sound of surrender.

He loved that sound. He gripped her cheeks and drew her closer to his rod. Her ass was round and firm and filled his palms perfectly. He tightened his grip and dropped kisses down her throat. He could spend a lifetime tasting her skin and never tire of it.

He loosened his grip, long enough to grasp the bottom of her sweatshirt. "You are so hot – even in this thing."

"Hey, it's comfortable."

"Hey, it's gone. Raise your arms."

Once he tossed her sweatshirt on the floor, she reached behind her back and unlatched her bra. He whisked that out of her fingertips and dropped it alongside the shirt. The soft skin of her breasts shone ivory in the flickering light, with firm little cherry nipples and tantalizing pink areolas surrounding them. Like two small bowls of whipped cream topped with maraschino cherries. Her breasts were art, small in his hands, perfect in his mouth.

He ran his fingertips lightly from the nipples outward, and then back again. Mary Beth's heart pounded against his thumbs, gooseflesh rose. He knew she held her breath. Was she anticipating what would come next?

"What's down here?" He loosened the ties on her sweatpants. They fell from her waist to her knees. Under them, she wore a pair of bikini panties. "Hmm, these have to go too."

She sucked in a deep breath. "Good luck getting them over the leg warmers."

"No problem there." He swept her up and into his arms, carried her across the room and laid her on the bed. "Now you see them." He grabbed the bottom of each pant leg, along with the leg warmers, and zipped them off. "Now you don't." He flung them over his shoulder and onto the floor.

She giggled. "Just like magic."

No, seeing her lying on the comforter, dressed only in her panties and goose bumps – that was magic.

He'd seen her naked twice before. Each time, his sight had been clouded by anger and jealousy. Tonight he saw her with only love in his heart. His eyes feasted on those luscious breasts so ready for his mouth, the flat stomach, flared hips.

A moment later, the bikini briefs landed next to the leg warmers. Naked, Mary Beth was a goddess.

His goddess.

His gaze swept from her eyes, the irises dark with desire, the lids half closed. He took in every inch of her, all the way to her toes before journeying back up her body, past a mound of bright titian curls, and the fragrance of her desire. His throat tightened, his heart banged against his ribs, his cock grew harder.

How easy it would be to take her fast. He knew if he entered her now, he'd come in seconds. He had to push aside his own need and take care of hers first. He'd promised

himself he'd make her body sing. This was only the first verse of a song he intended to play all through the night.

"Are you comfortable?"

Mary Beth lay on her back, her head resting on a pillow. "What do you think?" She spread her legs to give him a glimpse of what lay ahead. "But it doesn't seem fair."

His mouth watered at the thought of parting the pink slit she'd flashed at him, of driving his cock deeply inside her. He couldn't drag his gaze away. "What's not fair?"

She squirmed a bit, then ran her hands along her breast and over her stomach. "That I'm lyin' here nekked as the day I was born," she drawled, "and you're still wearin' your jacket. Talk's cheap, cowboy. Gonna put your money where your mouth is?"

He knelt beside her before his jacket and sweater had time to hit the floor. "Hell no, I'm putting my mouth where your treasure is." With that, he pushed her thighs apart and lowered his mouth to her pussy.

She was already wet and swollen. Rico inhaled deeply of her scent. He loved the fragrance of her arousal. Slowly he teased her clit with the tip of his tongue. Like Ruskie and the kitten, he marked her as his own.

Mary Beth buried her hands in his hair and held his head close to her. He licked her folds in slow and gentle circles. He heard her breathing quicken. Her fingers wound tighter in his hair. The more her desire grew, the more he teased. She squirmed beneath him, rising up on her heels and spreading her legs wider.

"Oh god, that feels so good!" She pushed on his shoulders. "I need you inside me, Rico, now."

"Not yet. Not until you come at least once first." He spread her lips with his thumbs and speared his tongue into her slit.

She arched her back and pulled his hair. He didn't care. She could pull out every hair on his head as long as she came.

Rico wet his thumb with her juices and circled her anus. Mary Beth spread her legs another inch. He concentrated on her clit—licking, sucking, nipping—as he worked his thumb inside her ass.

A keening moan signaled the start of her climax. She bucked her hips as he pushed his thumb all the way into her ass and suckled her clit.

"Rico!"

Her anus contracted around his thumb. He continued to softly lick her folds until her body relaxed. When she finally released the death grip on his hair, he rose to his knees and unfastened his jeans.

"Turn over, babe."

She obeyed him instantly, rising to her knees and spreading them wide. Rico didn't take the time to remove his shorts. He couldn't wait any longer to be inside her. He

tugged down the front of his underwear and let his cock spring free. He slipped one arm beneath her, lifted her and drove his shaft into her pussy with one thrust.

Tight, wet heat. He almost came the moment he entered her. He took a breath and rested his forehead on Mary Beth's shoulder—a time-out to gain control. He had only tonight—now—to show Mary Beth no other man would ever satisfy her. He couldn't do that by coming too soon. Not until she'd come for him over and again.

Her nails dug into his thigh. "Why are you stopping? Is something wrong?"

"Nothing's wrong. I want to touch every inch of you, inside and out."

"Oh, Rico, that's what I want too—every inch of you."

"I'm afraid I'm going to hurt you. That I'll be too rough."

Her chuckle, low and throaty, almost sent him over the edge. "You won't hurt me, Rico. You know I like it a little rough."

Her words made him groan. Later, he and Mary Beth would make love to music as soft as the clouds. Now, he needed to fuck her slick pussy, rough and fast.

He began to pump his hips, driving his cock deep inside her. "Raise up a little. Yeah, like that."

Her whimpers urged him to thrust even faster. Soon he was gripping her waist and pounding his shaft into her pussy so hard, he pushed her up against the headboard. Mary Beth braced her hands against it and spread her legs farther.

Raw. Earthy. Incredibly hot. All those words came to Rico's mind to describe their fucking. His orgasm built in the base of his spine and grabbed his balls. He fought it, trying to draw it out as long as possible. He wanted Mary Beth to come again before he did.

He licked his thumb and pushed it into her ass.

The walls of her pussy milked his shaft. The sensation urged him toward his own release. Rico groaned as his climax tightened his balls. With a final lunge into her wet heat, he came deep inside her.

Despite a powerful orgasm, his cock remained hard. He withdrew his shaft from her body. "Roll over, babe." He took both her wrists in one hand and held them over her head. Then he surged into her again.

Her eyes were wide and tear-filled. They sparkled like sapphires.

"You're crying. Did I hurt—"

She shook her head. "Hurt me? Oh god no. You took me someplace I've never been."

Rico knew then he'd never understand women. When did tears become a good thing? He stared into Mary Beth's eyes as he pounded his shaft into her over and over. Tears slowly fell from the corners of her eyes. He licked each tear away from her temples, then covered her mouth with his. Parting his lips, he accepted the play of her tongue. He nipped it lightly, then sucked it farther into his mouth.

Mary Beth responded with a loud moan. She arched her back and wrapped her legs around his hips. Rico released one of her wrists and slipped his hand beneath her bottom. He lifted her higher and thrust even deeper while he trailed kisses up her neck to her ear. "Come for me, babe. I need to feel you come again."

He'd barely said the words when her body began to shudder from her third orgasm. Rico's own climax raced through his body. Holding her tightly, he rode the wave with her.

He didn't want to open his eyes. An explosive orgasm with the woman he loved, dreamt about both awake and asleep, meant he'd died and gone to heaven.

Mary Beth was the first to break the spell. She unwrapped her legs from around his waist. "Wow."

"Wow, back atcha," he answered. "You're amazing."

She slid her hands down to his behind and squeezed his cheeks. "You're not so bad yourself, sailor."

He nuzzled her neck. "We're good together, aren't we?"

"Hoo-boy. Think we just proved that."

Rico reluctantly pulled out and rolled on his back. Mary Beth wrapped one arm around his waist and rested her head on his shoulder.

Content to simply hold her, Rico stroked her back. "Are you cold? I can light the kindling, throw on a log."

"Or we can crawl under the covers."

"That's easy."

"Or..." She began by drawing light little circles on his chest and working her way down.

"I don't think I can... Oh jeez, Mary Beth... Holy shit!"

Chapter Fourteen

“If you believe in a higher power, Rico, start praying.” Synda stood on the walkway between the kitchen and the storage shed. Sweater drawn close to protect her from a gust of wind reeking with the smell of snow, she frowned at the darkening sky. “That’s all we need—a hundred prima donnas marooned in our dining room by a snowstorm.”

Inside, Rico turned to Leandra and shrugged, his face a question mark. “Who’s she talking about?”

“Them.” Leandra handed him the list of RSVPs for Marty’s party. “You don’t strike me as starstruck, but if you are, get over it...quick.”

“Holy shit!” From among a hundred or so guests who’d phoned, texted or e-mailed their acceptance, Rico recognized at least a third—Clooney, Nicholson, P Diddy, A Rod, Leno—the list went on with the names of actors, athletes, comedians, producers and directors. All with huge dollar signs after their names. The second page contained names he didn’t recognize and couldn’t pronounce—Asian, Arabic, Russian. Dinner promised to be a frickin’ United Nations.

Leandra pointed to names on the list. “A couple of these guys are driving up from the Bay Area. Most are flying in, to Reno and Lake Tahoe. Marty’s putting them up in suites at the Towers, but they still have to get here and back. The last thing we need is CalTrans closing Highway 80 in both directions at the summit.”

Throughout the day, delivery trucks had pulled up to the front or around back to unload crates packed in dry ice, glass and metal containers, and cases of wine, champagne and liquor.

Trinidad had seen to every detail, including faxing over a floor plan and a seating chart. Rico also found several boxes waiting on the porch when he got home from Mary Beth’s this morning.

“Apparently he’s feeling very patriotic,” Leandra said once they’d unpacked boxfuls of tablecloths and napkins Marty had sent up from the city. All red, white and blue. “He doesn’t want that last box opened until just before the guests arrive. It’s some kind of surprise.”

The box, about two feet square, sat at the foot of the bar.

“I can’t imagine what it is. But let’s move it into one of the alcoves. The readers aren’t working tonight.”

By four, they’d changed the linens and laid flatware, crystal and charger plates at each place. The florist arrived with the centerpieces and stayed to help. Now they dealt with the last task, distributing the engraved place cards according to the seating chart.

Rico tagged along behind Leandra while she walked from table to table. She held a clipboard and ticked the names off the list as Rico positioned the place cards according to Marty's precise directions.

"Guy's a little anal for a stunt man."

"How long do you think a stunt guy would last if he weren't? Would you jump off a ten-story building if you didn't have a good grasp of physics?"

Rico snorted. "I wouldn't jump off a ten-story building without at least three parachutes. Those guys are nuts."

Leandra tilted her head to one side. "Maybe that's why women find Marty so attractive, that little hint of lunacy along with those sexy Latin looks, and —"

He cut her off. "And piles of money."

"That, too." She moved to the next table. "Come on, we're almost done."

Marty had also requested a wireless mike and asked Leandra to hold on to it until he asked for it. She'd tucked it in the top drawer of the host's stand. "Two things," she said to Rico. "There's a package of batteries and the mike in the drawer of my stand. Put in the new batteries, then grab that last jacket and shirt from the coat rack. I pinned your name to it."

He'd just set Mary Beth's place card between Marty's and his daughter Eve's. Seeing her sitting next to the old fart might kill him, but it was better than sitting in his cabin wondering what was going on. "I'm on it."

She put her free arm around his waist and hugged him. "Marty's such an idiot. He knows Synda and I have a million things to do to make sure everything goes as planned. So what does he do? Invites us as guests. I'd rather not, but no is never an option with Marty."

Rico didn't want to go there. He and Mary Beth had spent the last two nights together making incredible love, sharing stories and getting to know everything they could about each other. He even admitted Ruskie and the kittens were starting to grow on him.

Every minute he was with Mary Beth, he loved her more. He saw she was changing too. He'd left this morning, hopes soaring higher than ever.

But they both knew, no matter how much Mary Beth denied it, Marty Trinidad still stood between them.

"Tonight we're paying your hourly rate and a share of the gratuity. Marty told us to add forty percent to the tab."

"Hey, stop it. With all you've done for me, you don't —"

"Rico, don't sell yourself short," she scolded. "Syn and I are so lucky to have you as part of our family." She hugged him again. "Go get ready. You have about twenty minutes to shave, shower and change."

"You're sure we're done?"

"I'm following right behind you."

* * * * *

The first guest arrived only minutes after Rico came back on the floor wearing the uniform of the day – dark blue slacks, a white dress shirt and a red jacket. Fine if it were the Fourth of July and not November eighteenth.

The champagne corks starting popping with the first guest.

“Oh, look, Rico, there’s M.B. Her dress is amazing.”

He turned to the door, where Mary Beth stood beside Trinidad, her left arm looped through his right.

She wore her red hair up, with a loose tendril on each side framing her face, and showing off her lovely ivory neck. She wore a dark green leather dress with a slashed neckline in the shape of the letter Z. It exposed parts of her creamy flesh that Rico thought only he had the right to see. The hem, a slashed Z in the opposite direction, showed way too much thigh for him too, but as Leandra had exclaimed, made Mary Beth look amazing. And hot. His cock immediately stirred. He was glad he stood at the host’s stand, until he could breathe deeply enough to quell his body’s reaction.

The hem ended several inches above her knees. She had slender legs, shapely and strong from running. In the spiky, strapped sandals she wore tonight, they looked like they’d been sculpted.

He sucked in a deep breath. He didn’t want to share her with anyone.

When he’d left her this morning, she was raiding her closet and moaning that she had nothing to wear tonight. He felt an unpleasant stirring in the pit of his stomach. Had that dress been a gift from Marty Trinidad too?

“That’s Eve, Marty’s daughter,” Leandra said about the woman who stood on the other side of Marty. She looked a few years older than Mary Beth, and several inches taller.

“Whoa.”

At six feet, Eve Trinidad met her father eye to eye. She had his dark skin and hair, and eyes an incredible shade of bluish-green, like Russian amazonite. Her dress looked completely different than Mary Beth’s, but he saw something similar in the way it flowed from her shoulders to a few inches below her crotch.

No one else seemed to notice, but to Rico, she looked like she was posing, as if she expected photographers to jump out of the wings and snap her picture.

“Eve was a runway model until her late twenties,” Leandra said. “She owns a boutique in San Francisco now, Eve’s Apple. She carries only her own designs. Each garment is an exclusive. I’m sure she designed Mary Beth’s dress too.”

Rico’s heart and hope crumbled. Not only was Marty Trinidad rich, successful, and in Leandra’s words, had “sexy Latin looks”, his daughter designed clothes that made every head in the room turn.

How could he possibly compete with them?

* * * * *

By Marty's precise schedule, the waitstaff served the salads at seven. Rico and Leandra were still coaxing the guests to take their seats at seven fifteen. A truckload of Cristal champagne, at three hundred and ninety-eight dollars a bottle, had warmed the crowd, along with the caviar, raw oysters, and lobster everything.

Synda and Leandra slipped into their seats at the table next to Marty's, while Rico and four of the regular waitstaff and two from the Tahoe Towers served a light Sauvignon Blanc to complement the plates of green stuff that looked like a pile of weeds topped with tomatoes and anchovies. Not anything he cared to eat.

He'd never tasted Beef Wellington, nor sipped Châteauneuf-du-Pape. He wouldn't tonight either, but if it tasted even half as good as it smelled, he would have gladly chowed down. Synda and her crew had made individual Wellingtons for each guest, a feat the more seasoned waiters found amazing. The guests ate with gusto. The din grew louder as the wine flowed.

By eight thirty, the dinner dishes had been swept away, coffee and brandy served, and lazy Susans bearing platters of individually sized pastries placed on each table.

Rico stood at the far side of the room. He kept a sharp eye out for any signal from Leandra when he wasn't watching Mary Beth and the other guests at Marty's table.

He kept track of how much Marty drank. Not a lot, but as the evening wore on, Rico saw him lean more intimately toward Mary Beth, touch her. Even now, while she tried to eat one of Synda's confections, he had stretched his arm across the back of her chair and slowly inched his hand onto her shoulder.

Rico's blood boiled. Marty had seated Mary Beth between himself and his daughter, as if she were a member of the family, a spouse. Now his hand rested on her shoulder, his gold and diamonds sparkling in the candlelight. Until that moment, Rico didn't know jealousy ached. The pain was real. All he had to do was ask his gut.

He stood with his fists balled, his feet planted, and his brain overriding the message from his heart to rush the table and threaten to break Marty's arm if he ever touched Mary Beth again. In a New York minute, he'd toss the old fart out on his ass.

Leandra signaled him, breaking his trance and forcing him to look away. He walked to her table and stooped beside her chair.

"Remember the box you put in the alcove? Open it and set it on top of the host's stand. Marty wants the mike now too."

"Got it."

Rico had tried to catch Mary Beth's eye throughout the evening. Each time he did, she looked away quickly. That did nothing to ease the churning in his stomach. He wondered if something had happened between the time he left her this morning and tonight, something to change their relationship.

Trinidad's her client, Rico told himself over and again. *This is a party, but it's a business meeting too.* She was Marty's attorney. Rico knew he'd have to learn to live with it if they had any future.

Rico moved swiftly and quietly. Still he heard the room quiet and felt the guests watching him. He set the open carton on top of the stand, pulled the mike out of the drawer and headed for Trinidad's table.

"From what I hear, tonight's Marty's swan song," Rico heard one of the guests saying to his table partner. "Going to leave his single days behind him."

Rico slowed his step. Had he heard right? Did it mean what he thought it meant?

At Trinidad's table, Rico watched him tug Mary Beth closer and whisper something into her ear. They both laughed until she saw Rico stood there. Immediately she stiffened and tried to pull away from Marty.

"Excuse me, Mr. Trinidad. Leandra said you wanted this now."

Marty looked up at him as if he'd never seen him before. Long enough for Rico to see his eyes were glazed from too much champagne and wine. In his right hand, Marty held a snifter of brandy.

"Yeah, yeah, just put it down."

Mary Beth still refused to look at him. Her face was flushed, probably from the wine, or from whatever Marty had just said to her. Rico fists tightened around the mike. "Do you know how to turn this on?"

Marty looked away from Mary Beth and let loose a bawdy laugh. "Don't you worry about me, boy. I've never had trouble turning anything..." he paused and brushed one of the tendrils from Mary Beth's cheek. "Or anyone on." Then he laughed again.

Rico was pretty sure no one in the room knew as much about prison as he did. At that moment, he didn't care if they sent him back for life. All he wanted to do was smash Marty Trinidad's gloating face into his dessert.

"Whattaya waitin' for?" Marty slurred. "Put the damn thing down. You'll get your tip later."

Rico clamped his jaws together and laid the mike on the tabletop beside Marty.

The room had quieted even more. Although Marty had not raised his voice, Rico knew the folks at the nearby tables had heard him.

Rico looked away, at a spot a few inches above the crowd and walked back to his place at the far end of the room. He was turning to stone inside. More than a few tables separated him from Mary Beth. It might as well be an ocean. He saw that clearly now.

Chapter Fifteen

Mary Beth stared at the half-eaten pastry now broken and crumbling where she'd dropped it on her plate. Her cheeks burned and what felt like a lump the size of a volleyball kept her from swallowing.

Marty Trinidad had no right to speak to Rico that way, to humiliate him in front of a roomful of people. If he weren't her client, and their host for the evening, she'd have cheerfully dumped her glass of iced water in his lap.

One positive – most were strangers. Rico would never have to see them again.

So many emotions roiled inside her, many she didn't understand, including the new feeling of protectiveness toward Rico. When Marty said those things to him, they stung her too. She knew the day Rico arrived in Truckee, he thought a charger plate was part of a battery. Today, he'd helped set the dining room, Leandra told her, each place setting precise and correct. He'd grown in so many ways in such a short time.

She saw Leandra heading their way. She dreaded what Marty might say next.

"Is something wrong, Marty?" Leandra hushed him with the touch of her fingertips. She nudged the mike closer to him. "Probably time to start the show."

He glanced up at her. "Right as always."

Mary Beth inched her chair aside enough for Marty to stand. He took the mike from Leandra and headed toward the host's stand. Mary Beth relaxed. At least he didn't stagger.

The room quieted.

Flamboyant as always, Marty tugged at the cuffs of his sleeves, adjusted his tie, and began. "Good evening, ladies and germs."

Mary Beth closed her eyes and shook her head, grateful that at least some of the guests had laughed at one of Milton Berle's most famous one-liners.

The chuckles died and Marty continued. "I know you're ready for the dice tables, so I'll keep this short."

Applause and a few hoots.

"I can't tell you how pleased I am that you came tonight. This is a very special night in the life of Marty Trinidad."

Oh brother. Mary Beth's skin crawled whenever he referred to himself in the third person.

"A little over two years ago, I had an epiphany."

"More like a brain fart," one of the men at a table near the fireplace called out to a round of laughter and more hoots.

Marty laughed too. "None of you thought it smelled bad enough to walk away. You put your money and your trust in this old racehorse, and made this all possible. Tonight I thank you for your love, your friendship..."

"Our money..."

"That too." Marty laughed again, this time with a little less mirth. "And your support. Especially my beautiful daughter Eve." He pointed to her. "Eve, honey, stand up. I want everyone to see what a beauty you are."

Mary Beth admired how gracefully Eve handled herself. She didn't get tangled in the chairs that were so close together, as Mary Beth knew she would have, or turn three shades of scarlet. She stood, smiled to everyone, and blew a kiss to her father before sitting down again.

"Tomorrow while you're on your way home, our project will be going public." Marty recapped his latest venture. Mary Beth's mind wandered during the spreadsheet portion of his speech. She'd worked alongside of him for the last eighteen months and almost around the clock last summer. Top secret, high risk, high yield. Everyone in the room had ponied up at least half a million, some two or three. Two days ago, Marty had signed on the dotted line. A done deal. If they were in Hollywood, tonight's celebration would be the cast party.

"Only a few things more," he said.

Marty sometimes tended to windiness. She thanked the gods not tonight.

"You've all seen the logo of our new corporation." He dipped his hand inside the box Rico had opened and pulled out a piece of shiny material. He shook it twice before it ballooned into a bunting. To a loud round of cheering and applause, he hung it from the edge of the podium.

"It's a beauty, isn't it?" He held up his hands to quiet them. "But in case you've forgotten, and so that you'll remember tonight always, we have a little something for each of you."

He signaled the waitstaff lined up near the back wall to come forward. Each carried a carton in their hands. "These nice boys and girls are going to give you your little something." A murmur swept through the crowd, along with the sounds of chairs scraping aside to make room for them.

Mary Beth had helped pack the cartons according to the seating chart. The waitstaff needed only to check the place cards in order to distribute the gifts—solid gold pendants engraved with the logo of their new business and tonight's date.

As soon as the crew had swept through the dining room and returned to their places at the back of the room, Marty raised a hand again to quiet the crowd. "One last thing and then we're done." He looked over at Mary Beth, who hadn't bothered to open her gift as the others had.

"You've probably spoken to M.B. Hunter dozens of times in the last year. Some of you have met her before, some for the first time tonight." He crooked his index finger at her. "M.B., would you come join me, please?"

Oh god. Now what?

She wasn't used to walking in shoes with heels as high as these, supported by only thin straps. How did Eve do it? With luck, she might make it to the host's stand without tripping over her own feet.

Marty met her halfway, draped an arm around her and pulled her close against him. She knew she had to smile, to look charming and relaxed, and yet she felt daggers hurling across the room from where Rico stood. Like the swords that pierced the blindfolded woman in the Tarot cards Leandra read the other day.

"I met this little gal..." Marty glanced down at her and squeezed her shoulder. "What, about two years ago?"

She nodded. "Something like that."

"I knew after the first hello that working with M.B. Hunter at my side, I couldn't fail." He nudged Mary Beth away from the podium, so that everyone had a bird's-eye view at what happened next.

To Mary Beth's horror, Marty dropped to one knee and grasped her left hand in his. He still held the mike in his right hand and spoke into it so no one missed a single word.

"Sweetheart, you're my good luck charm. I want you with me always."

She tried to twist her hand free. He tightened his grip. Perspiration shined on his forehead and upper lip. Without releasing her, he tucked the mike under his arm and fished inside his jacket pocket for something.

Mary Beth felt faint, the room started to spin. He held a circle of gold between his fingertips, an engagement ring with a diamond the size of a maraschino cherry. Worse, he was slipping it on her finger.

Her heart thudded and her head pounded. *Oh my god, what the hell is he doing?* "You don't want to do this, Marty," she whispered. "Get up. This isn't... I-I can't...we can't."

"M.B. Hunter, I love you," he said into the microphone. "Will you honor me by being my wife?"

Mary Beth didn't believe in out-of-body experiences, yet she felt like she was drifting somewhere near the ceiling, watching Marty slip the ring on the hand of a stranger. This couldn't be happening. They were friends, colleagues, not lovers.

A flash of blue and red caught her eyes and sent her crashing back to now. Across the room Rico stood staring, lips parted in shock. The pain in his face went straight to her heart. She looked down at her hand. Why couldn't she speak? Why couldn't she cry out, "It's not true, Rico."

Instead she said nothing. He turned and strode into the kitchen.

"Marty, I-I..." Too late. A crush of people surrounded them, nearly smothering the life out of her. She stood numb. Around her, people congratulated Marty, pounded him on the back. They did the same with her, kissed her cheek, hugged her, saying the things people said at times like this. Yesterday a hug and kiss on the cheek from George

Clooney would have been a tale she'd one day tell her grandchildren. Tonight it left her joyless and hollow inside.

"Hey, I have an idea," one of Marty's cronies from the movie industry said. "Why don't we all go over to Reno and you and M.B. tie the knot tonight? We can all be your witnesses."

That hit Mary Beth with the force of a bucket of ice water, a blessed bucket because it snapped her out of her trance. "N-no," she cried, and then in a stronger voice. "No!"

She pushed Marty out of the way, past the people who had gathered 'round her, and began running toward the kitchen.

* * * * *

How many times did life fuck you over before it finally killed you?

He'd been right about Mary Beth from the beginning. She'd played him in the courtroom and she still played him. She'd given him her body, done things he didn't know women did, things that made him believe she loved him.

She never said she loved him. That should have been his first clue. Instead, he'd been blinded with hope, with possibilities.

After he left her this morning, had Marty come to her place? Made love to her in the same bed where Rico had opened his heart and bled his guts?

Shit. Prison was nothing compared to this. At least there he knew his enemies, both among the guards and the other inmates. Knew which alliances to make, which to avoid. He'd never been anyone's bitch, but he had his protectors too—thanks to his cousin Tony and his family connections.

And none of them hid behind a pretty face.

Rico groaned. He'd been whacked around pretty good his first few weeks in prison. Bones broken, shanked a couple of times. Nothing hurt like this. None had ripped out his guts or carved a hole in his heart. He'd never fall in love again—ever. If he even thought about it, he hoped someone killed him first, before the misery started.

Snow fell lightly on the road. Soft, wet snowflakes the size of his hand. They fell soundlessly and piled up quickly. The temp had hovered in the low forties all day. Now he felt it dropping. Soon the snowflakes would conceal the slick spots the locals called black ice, transparent and deadly.

He revved the engine on his hog and with a burst rounded a corner. He had no idea where he headed. He had to get away from The Tarot Café, from Mary Beth, from the looks of sympathy he'd seen in Leandra's and Synda's faces.

Synda had run after him until he gave her that death stare he'd perfected in prison, the one that said, "Cross that line and you're dead." She'd backed off immediately.

They weren't like Mary Beth. They were honest and caring, the only friends he'd made in years. He loved them like he might a sister. He didn't want their pity.

Turning Point

Tomorrow, he'd leave. They wouldn't try to stop him. They knew better.
He gunned the engine. If he lived until tomorrow.

Chapter Sixteen

"What the hell happened tonight?" Synda asked.

She and Leandra had been sitting quietly on the floor in the hallway between their apartments for nearly half an hour. Neither had spoken nor even moved except to add more brandy to their china cups.

Leandra shrugged and waved an arm in a useless gesture. "I wish I knew."

"How did we miss it? I still can't believe Marty did that. Anyone who knows M.B.—"

"They were lovers once."

Synda ran a hand through her hair. "They drank too much wine and did the nasty. One time and one time only."

"Was it that good, or that bad?"

Synda laughed. "Probably a little of both. Marty ought to know women better than a lot of men because he's had so many. The old blessing or a curse?"

"Quantity does not always ensure quality." Leandra tried to stifle a yawn. "I'm so tired I can barely move, but if I go inside, I know I won't fall asleep."

The candle flickered. Ten minutes from now, the flame would dissipate into a thread of smoke.

"You hungry?"

Synda thought a moment. "Maybe." She yawned too. "What time is it?"

Leandra looked at her watch. "After eleven."

"Must still be snowing. Not much traffic noise."

"Or the sound of a motorcycle pulling in across from us."

"That too."

"I'm worried about him, Syn. He took out of here like someone had filled him full of buckshot."

"I couldn't hear what Marty said to him."

"It wasn't so much what he said, but who he was. Rico's come a long way in a few weeks, but..."

"He's still carrying a load of baggage."

Leandra nodded. "I'm afraid Marty added to that baggage tonight."

Synda tossed back her last drop of brandy, drew her legs in and pushed up onto her feet. She offered her hand to her cousin. Leandra blew out the candle, took Synda's hand and stood too.

"Do you..." Synda shoved her hands into the pockets of the chef's coat she'd thrown on over her dress.

"Do I what?"

"Do you have your cards with you?"

"No pockets," Leandra answered. "They're inside. Why?"

"Maybe they can tell us what's going on. Get them and meet me in the kitchen."

A few minutes later, with a fresh pot of tea and some crackers and warm brie, Synda sat down across the table while Leandra shuffled her deck.

"Any question in particular you want answered?"

Synda barked a laugh. "Yeah right, like we aren't both thinking the same thing—what the heck's going to happen?"

Leandra cut the deck. "Need to ask something a little more specific?"

"Okay. Will Mary Beth marry Marty?"

"For heaven's sake, Syn, I don't need the Tarot to answer that. Of course she won't."

"Okay, okay. What about her and—"

They both started at the knock on the door.

"Whatever you're selling, we're not buying," Synda shouted. She stood slowly and headed toward the door. "Oh jeez."

Mary Beth stood in the cold. Synda saw her teeth chattering through the windowpane. She wore no jacket, her hair hung wet with the snow, and mascara ringed her eyes. "Get in here." Synda pulled her inside. "Where is your coat? You look like hell."

"Give her a break, Syn." Leandra pulled a fresh tablecloth out of the kitchen closet and wrapped it around Mary Beth, covering her from neck to ankles. "M.B., what's going on?"

"I c-can't find R-Rico." She pulled the cloth more tightly around her. She still shivered, despite the warmth of the kitchen.

"Pour her some tea, Syn. I'll get her a sweater."

"And grab another brandy bottle off one of the tables."

Once her teeth stopped chattering and she'd stilled her shivers, Mary Beth looked up from her cup filled with half brandy, half tea. "I've called the cottage a dozen times. And the cell you gave him. He didn't answer at either." Her eyes filled with tears. "I never told him I love him. I thought he knew it. Now I've lost him."

Synda's jaw dropped. "*Our* Rico? You *love* our Rico? How did I miss that too?"

Leandra shushed her with a stern look and turned back to Mary Beth. "He's upset, sweetie." She raised Mary Beth's hand. She still wore Marty's ring. "What's the story here?"

"I swear to you, I had no idea Marty planned to do this tonight." She pulled the ring off her hand and shoved it into Leandra's palm. "I don't want it."

"Marty keeps calling. You need to talk to him."

"I can't. Not tonight."

"I'll keep this until tomorrow." The ring sparkled in her open palm—garish, extravagant, totally Marty. "Then you have to deal with it, M.B. Marty's a good man and a good friend. This isn't fair to him."

Mary Beth sat up straighter. Anger replaced the forlorn look in her eyes. "Do you think what he did tonight was fair to me? We've never dated or talked about us in that context. He should have said something to me before he announced it in front of all of his business partners and friends."

"No shit, Sherlock." Synda poured herself a heavy hit of brandy and tossed it back.

Leandra sighed. "Timing's everything."

"His sure sucked," Synda added.

"And now there are three of you nursing broken hearts. Call Marty, M.B. He's worried. At least let him know you're safe."

Mary Beth took a deep breath. "You're right." She looked around, as if she just noticed she hadn't worn a jacket or carried a purse. "I left my cell in my jacket, but I don't know where I left it."

Synda handed her the café's portable phone. "Probably in your car."

Before Mary Beth had time to punch in the number, the phone rang. Startled, she dropped it. Synda caught it before it hit the floor.

"This is Synda." She listened, and after a moment, frowned. "Hold on a minute." She handed the phone to Mary Beth. "It's Tom Connors. Your alarm went off. Someone's broken into your house."

* * * * *

Rico had no idea how he ended up in the little clearing above Mary Beth's house. She was the last person he wanted to see again—ever.

The outdoor lights shined brightly through the falling snow. She'd probably turned them on before she left for the party—her engagement party. They'd made love three times last night and once this morning. Tonight she'd spend the night in her *fiancé's* arms. *Bitch!*

Several inches of fresh snow had piled up on the walkway. More was expected before dawn. Flakes fell in slow, steady, mesmerizing silence. He didn't know how long he'd sat there, his mind blank except for the pain in his stomach and the burning at the back of his eyes. He looked at the pine branches now bowed with snow. He should move from under them. At any time, a branch could break.

He didn't care if every branch broke and buried him in snow.

He looked back at Mary Beth's doorway and that's when he saw movement. He blinked to clear his vision. The snow was moving, not swirling. Hell, there was barely any wind. The snowflakes fell in a straight line.

When he looked again, his stomach lurched. Not swirling snow, but a couple of the kittens. How did Mary Beth leave without taking a head count?

He saw the little lumps huddled together, with only a small piece of the walkway's overhang shielding them. Reacting rather than thinking, he kicked back the stand and headed down the hill.

By the time he reached them, the lumps had stopped moving. From inside the house, he heard the caterwaul of a mother cat who knew her little ones were in danger.

"Don't worry," he shouted at the door, knowing that somehow she'd understand. "They're going to be okay."

Frantic scratching met his assurances.

He picked up the two little kittens. He felt their weak heartbeats and knew they were still alive. He looked around. Mary Beth had given him a key that morning, but he'd left it in his jeans. He'd stopped in the cabin only long enough to grab his leather jacket and the keys to his bike.

Rico brushed the snow off the kittens, unzipped his jacket and tucked them inside. He shivered when their freezing-wet fur soaked through his shirt right to his skin. In a few minutes, his body heat would warm them. That trumped the chill he felt now.

He looked around again. Mary Beth's car was gone, the garage locked. She always threw the deadbolts on the doors, and the wooden shutters closed from the inside so she could open them on a sunny day without climbing through snow drifts.

He knew he had to do something with the kittens. They'd slip out of his jacket if he tried to take them back to his cabin at the café. Besides, if he took them home, he'd have to see Mary Beth when she came to get them. He shook his head. *Ain't gonna happen.*

With his hand pressed against the front of his jacket to secure the kittens in place, he walked around the house. He tried every door and window, even the sliding glass door Mary Beth left open when she was home. Nothing. Then he walked around to the side again, the one that faced the summit and stood on pier and beam. The window to the bath in Mary Beth's bedroom, ten feet above him, was open a crack.

He glanced over his shoulder. No ladders, nothing to stand on, and he couldn't jump ten feet straight up.

Several pines grew close enough to climb. From there he could swing onto the roof. How stupid was that? The house had a metal roof that was slicker now than the highways. Besides, he couldn't climb a tree or swing like Tarzan while he held a couple of cats inside his jacket.

He walked back to his bike and removed the metal flashlight from the small storage compartment behind his seat. He'd soon know if it was sturdy enough to break a hole in the sliding glass door. He'd shove the kittens through and take off.

As if the rest of Mary Beth's feline family read his mind, they stood waiting at the sliding glass door, lined up like choirboys. He had to whack the safety glass several times before it broke. When it did, a large chunk popped, sending shards inside the house and out. He swore loudly, reached through the hole and opened the latch.

While he swung the flashlight, the kittens dug their claws into his stomach and started wailing in squeaky voices. He couldn't tear his jacket open quickly enough. Once free, they shook their tails indignantly and ran. The rest of the herd followed. "You're welcome," he called after them.

Rico rubbed the sting they'd left with their claws, then tucked the flashlight in his waistband and looked around at the mess he'd made. Even if they were cats, he didn't want them to cut their little paws on the glass. Muttering in Italian, he walked to the kitchen and grabbed the broom and dustpan. He'd clean up the mess, and then he was out of there for sure.

He stepped on some of the glass and drove it into the carpet. It took longer to free the shards than he thought it would. He also thought he remembered Mary Beth saying the doors were alarmed. He glanced back at the snow steadily falling. He doubted a SWAT team was headed his way.

In the kitchen, he dumped shattered glass in the wastebasket and hung the broom on its hook. Yeah, he'd left his fingerprints on the broom handle and dustpan, but so what? He didn't plan to take anything, and how likely would she report the break-in, let alone inspire the cops to dust the broom for prints? That only happened on TV.

At the sink he washed his hands, dried them on some paper towels, then took a bottle of water from the fridge. He'd been working since four thirty this morning and could barely think straight. He pulled out a chair and stretched his legs.

Mary Beth had left the newspaper on the table. An article caught his attention on the open page. A man who owned a fishing camp in Alaska was offering a deal that seemed too good to be true. The article was in the middle of the page, not in a corner that could be torn off and not missed.

He turned the page. On the backside, Mary Beth had started to work the crossword puzzle. *Shit!* Reluctantly he pushed himself to his feet and out of the chair. He opened all the drawers and cupboards. No scissors.

He walked to her desk. She kept pencils, pens and sticky notes but no scissors there either. He glanced around the kitchen. She wouldn't store scissors in the fridge or the oven, so he headed for her bedroom.

Nothing on the dresser top. He opened a drawer—some jewelry, a letter opener, a couple of envelopes, but no scissors. He pushed the envelopes aside. Under them, he found a small, polished wooden box. When he lifted the lid, he saw an expensive-looking fountain pen and pencil set, probably a gift she received when she graduated from college or passed the bar. He picked up the box and examined the pen and pencil more closely. They didn't look like they'd ever been used. He closed the lid and started to put them back when he saw the corner of an envelope tucked under a tablet. He

wouldn't have looked twice, except he recognized the return address: *100 Fifth Avenue, 3rd Floor, New York NY.*

He sucked in a breath. A chill settled over him. He'd sent dozens of letters to that address before he received the first response. He'd never forget it.

With his fingertip, he pushed the tablet aside and lifted the envelope. It was addressed to Mary Beth and postmarked almost a year ago.

She'd slit the top of the envelope. His hands shook as he spread the envelope's sides and pulled out the letter.

Dear M.B.,

Hope life is treating you well out there in God's Country. Manhattan's still the jungle it always was, but you know me, I keep sticking with the gal I brought to the dance.

For once, I'm sending happy news. For three years you drove us all crazy pleading your case for Rico Anthony Zanini. I think we finally agreed to take it just to get you off our backs.

Turns out you were one hundred percent correct. Two months ago, we received the info we'd been hoping for – to a 2,000,000,000-to-1 certainty, the blood and semen found on and inside Ms. Pia Marie Sarantella did not belong to Rico Zanini. He and Ms. Sarantella's attacker had the same blood type, B Negative, and that's where the similarities end. Apparently, Forensics cut corners and Rico's attorney never bothered to pursue it once Sarantella identified him as her attacker.

Since June, we've been firing on all cylinders trying to wrap up Rico's case. I'll spare you the details. You interned here long enough to know all the steps and time it takes to make this happen.

It's my pleasure to inform you that one week from today, we'll be going before a judge who will commute Rico's sentence and release him. We're petitioning for a full pardon, and that they expunge his record.

I know you asked us never to identify you, but this man owes you a huge debt of gratitude. I'm sure he'd like to thank you personally. If not for you, he would have spent the next thirty years in prison.

We can't give Rico Zanini back the ten years he lost, but we can give him back his future.

If there's any chance you can arrange your schedule...

From there the letter continued with the time and date of his hearing. Rico recognized the signature in spite of the author's illegible scrawl. The lead attorney on his case, the man who'd worked miracles in his behalf.

Rico's knees grew weak. He stumbled back and sat down heavily on Mary Beth's bed. Tony had convinced him he'd been the one to urge The Innocence Project to take his case. Tony had lied to him. Mary Beth, the woman he'd set out to punish, to seek revenge against – she'd been the one to set him free.

Suddenly ten years of anger and hatred poured out of Rico, along with tears he should have shed long ago. His whole body shook, and a keening sound he didn't recognize came with it. "Oh my god," he cried, "oh my god."

He flopped back on her bed, covered his face with his arms and sobbed.

Chapter Seventeen

Over Synda and Leandra's protests, Mary Beth raced out of the kitchen. "It's Rico," she cried over her shoulder. "He's the one who broke into my house."

"How do you know that?" Leandra shouted after her.

Synda grabbed her parka and threw it over her shoulders. "Don't worry, Lea. No way in hell I'm letting M.B. out of the car 'til Tom gets there."

Even in the snow, Synda drove like a maniac. Leandra cursed all the way, but managed to keep up and pulled in behind them only a few seconds later.

They parked the two vehicles fifty yards from the house, hidden by a stand of pines. Somehow Synda had convinced M.B. to stay put. Leandra guessed she used the child safety locks to keep M.B. inside.

Not five minutes later, Tom pulled up alongside them, siren wailing, lights flashing. He jumped out of his county-issued four-wheel drive and walked over to Mary Beth's car.

Leandra stood outside, shivering.

Synda rolled the window down a few inches.

"You stay right here," he told them. "That's an order. Even if it is Rico, we still don't know what he's up to. He could be armed. I don't want anyone getting hurt."

Leandra knew when to argue and when to stay quiet. Especially since Tom had unbuckled his holster and had his fingers wrapped around the handle of his gun.

He held out his hand to Mary Beth. "Gimme your keys. No sense in breaking down the door."

Mary Beth passed them to Synda, who handed them to Tom.

"I'm going to look around first. Don't move." He turned to Leandra. "Get in with them."

"But—"

"I don't tell you how to read cards, don't tell me how to do my job."

Synda released the safety lock. Leandra climbed into the backseat.

"If you see Rico, slouch down in the seat."

"Tom, for pity sake, he's not going to hu—"

He pointed his finger and silenced her with a look.

"Be careful."

He drew his weapon and starting walking cautiously toward the house.

The minutes dragged by. Leandra kept checking her watch. After five that seemed like fifteen, she inched opened the door and climbed out.

"Where are you going?" Synda cried in a harsh whisper.

"Shhh."

"What's Tom doing?"

"Probably looking for evidence of a break-in."

Mary Beth had dried her tears, harnessed her hair with a scrunchie, and gone into attorney mode. "I gave Rico a key this morning. He didn't have to break in."

"Maybe he lost it," Leandra suggested.

"Maybe that's not Rico inside."

"Synda, don't say that."

"It could be a real burglar."

"That's a pleasant thought."

"Maybe not," Mary Beth said. "Look."

They looked where Mary Beth pointed. The back door opened. Tom, with his gun holstered, waved his arms, all clear.

Mary Beth threw open the door and ran as if hounds nipped at her heels. She slipped and slid, but managed to reach Tom's side before Synda and Leandra made it halfway.

Tom put his hand on her shoulder and said something. It looked to Leandra like Mary Beth pushed him aside and hurried inside.

When Leandra and Synda caught up to Tom, he blocked their way.

"Is it...?" Leandra started.

He nodded. "It's Rico."

"Is he okay?"

"His pride's a little busted up. Other than that he's fine."

Leandra released the breath she'd been holding. "Thank goodness." She moved close to Tom, who opened his arms to her. She slid inside and hugged him. "Thank you."

Synda seconded that with a thumbs-up.

* * * * *

"Rico's in your room," Tom had said to her.

"He's okay, isn't he?"

"He's not armed, and he's not hurt."

Mary Beth had never fainted in her life. Spots popped out in front of her eyes, her legs felt like she walked on sponges, and if she hadn't braced herself on the wall of the covered walkway, her knees might have buckled.

"Don't go all girly on me." Tom squeezed her shoulder.

She shook him off. "You're sure he's okay?"

"Physically, yes." Tom looked up at the falling snow. "He's pretty upset, M.B. He needs to see you."

Mary Beth took off running and barely heard Tom say, "We'll be out here building a snowman. Shout if you need us."

Rico heard footsteps. Light steps, not Tom's. Mary Beth.

He glanced at his reflection in the mirror above her dresser, grimaced and looked away. No wonder she preferred Marty Trinidad. At least he didn't sit around feeling sorry for himself and crying like a baby.

Rico watched the doorway. His heart jumped when she stopped short of entering the room. They looked at each without saying anything. Mary Beth opened her mouth, then clamped her lips shut. He looked down at his hands.

A moment later, she crossed the room and sat down beside him.

"Hey," he muttered, unable to look at her.

She reached for his hand. That's when she saw the letter. She stiffened. He'd been riffling through her things. "How did you find this?"

"I was looking for scissors."

She shook her head. Surely she hadn't heard right. "You broke into my house because you wanted a pair of scissors?" She snatched the envelope away from him. "Tom could arrest you for tampering with the U.S. mail."

Rico almost smiled. Not a huge smile, a little upward turn of his lips. "A good attorney would know that's a federal offense. Not his jurisdiction."

She didn't smile back. "Answer my question, Rico. Why did you break into my house?"

He gestured backward with his thumb. "Because of them."

She whirled around. Two kittens slept curled around each other on her pillow. "What? I don't understand."

"You forgot to do a head count when you left to meet your..." He stopped. "To go to the party."

"What?"

"They were outside, buried in the snow. Check the door, Mary Beth. The other cats almost scratched through it. I picked up the kittens, dusted them off and tucked them in my jacket. Your doors and windows were locked. I had to break in."

Mary Beth dropped her hands in her lap, the letter between her palms. She locked gazes with Rico. So many things, so many questions, so many emotions raced around inside her, she didn't know where to begin.

He squirmed under her gaze. "What? Do I have piece of lettuce in my hair?"

In answer, she folded her arms across her chest. "Let me get this straight. You, Rico Zanini, hater of cats, rescued two little freezing kittens?"

"I swear. Look." He opened his jacket and unbuttoned his shirt. The kittens had scratched him in a dozen places. "I couldn't let them freeze to death."

Exasperated, Mary Beth shook her head and reached for his hand. "Rico, what am I going to do with you?"

He narrowed his eyes. "What does that mean?" Then his gaze fell on her left hand, her *ringless* left hand. "What does *that* mean?"

"It means exactly what you think it means. Marty pulled his little stunt without my knowledge or my consent. I've told you a dozen times, he's my client and a friend. Apparently I hadn't told him that often enough."

"You mean you're not going to..."

"Marry a man I don't love?"

"Yes."

"Instead of telling the man I *do* love that it took someone doing something as silly as Marty did to make me realize that man was my soul mate?"

Rico seemed dumbfounded. "You're talking about me?"

"I'm not talking about George Clooney!" She raised the letter and waved it like a flag. "I screwed up at your trial. This was the only way I could make it up to you. I made the guys at The Project promise they'd keep my secret. I never thought I'd see you again, that you'd never have to know."

He grimaced. "And I kept telling you it was Tony."

"He knows the truth. No one can hurt you anymore."

Neither spoke for several moments.

"Mary Beth, I love you."

"I know that," she whispered.

"Is there any chance for us?"

"We're soul mates, Rico. Stubborn, pigheaded, impulsive soul mates. It's not going to be easy, but I'm willing to try if you are." She brushed his lips with a quick kiss. "Let me tell Tom and the gals that everything's okay, then we'll talk."

* * * * *

Kindling and oak crackled in the grate, candles lit the room, and Mary Beth, who hadn't felt so free in years, rolled to her back. She was naked beneath the covers. Rico

stood beside the bed. He was naked too, and aroused as he'd been every night in her dreams.

"Tell me that I'm not dreaming, Rico, that the nightmare's over and you're really here."

He lifted the covers and slid into bed beside her. "I plan to stay as long as you'll let me." He cradled her jaw and kissed her gently. "I love you, Mary Beth."

She touched his face, slid her fingers over the scar on his cheek, his lips. "We have a lot to talk about."

"I know, but let me love you first."

He palmed her breast, fingertips grazed her nipple.

"Mmmm, I love when you do that."

He nipped at her lips, until she parted them and invited his tongue inside. She could lie like this forever.

And then he plucked at the tip of her breast until it hardened to a point. Her pussy clenched with each tug of his thumb and fingers. No man had ever made her as hot so quickly.

"How do you want me to love you?" he whispered against her lips.

"Your tongue," she said without hesitation.

He gave her a rakish grin. "I was hoping you'd say that."

Mary Beth closed her eyes at the whisk of his tongue across her nipple. He paid special tribute to the right peak...a long lick, a nip of his teeth, a tugging with his lips. After several moments of attention, he switched to the left one and repeated the process. She arched her back and tunneled her fingers into his hair, holding him close to her breast so he wouldn't stop.

"That feels so good."

"To me too." He suckled her right nipple again. "Your body is beautiful, Mary Beth."

She would've told him the same thing about his, but he kissed her again. His tongue drove into her mouth, over and over, the way his cock would soon drive into her pussy.

Rico licked each nipple once again, then dragged his tongue down the center of her body to her mound. Lying between her legs, he inhaled her scent and parted her labia with his thumbs. Her lips were swollen and shiny with her juices.

"You're always so wet for me. Where do you want my tongue? Here?" He caressed her clit with his thumb. "Or here?" Using her juices, he lubricated his thumb and circled her anus. "Ask me for anything. I'll do anything you want."

"Lick my clit."

He obeyed her request, running the tip of his tongue across the sensitive nub. She lifted her hips, pushing her mound closer to his mouth. "Don't tease me, Rico. *Lick me.*"

Rico smiled to himself at her sharp command. Mary Beth knew what she wanted but so did he. He liked that she wouldn't make him guess. He especially liked that she hadn't set boundaries. She wanted to explore her sexuality. He wanted to take her where she wanted to go.

Placing his lips directly over her clit, he suckled.

Her breathing grew ragged, labored. Rico lapped at her clit, then suckled again. He watched her eyes drift closed. She caressed her breasts, tugged on her nipples. Shifting on the bed, he rubbed his hard cock against the sheet. He desperately needed to be a part of her, but not until he met her needs first.

She jerked and mewled loudly, signaling her orgasm. Rico's cock grew even longer, harder. When her body stopped shuddering, he rose to his knees. Holding her hips, he thrust deep.

Silk. Heat. The wet glide of his flesh into hers. Rico savored every sensation of loving Mary Beth. She slid her hands up his arms to his shoulders, then around his neck. She pulled him forward until he lay on top of her. A gentle smile touched her lips.

"That's better."

He chuckled, despite the hunger lapping at his senses. "You like me on top of you?"

"I like you touching me."

Rico slipped one hand beneath her buttocks to hold her tighter to him. "I like touching you too."

His thrusts picked up speed, his own climax mere moments away. He kissed Mary Beth's lips, her chin, the curve of her jaw. He thrust harder, faster. "I love you, Mary Beth. I love you."

She tunneled her fingers into his hair. "I love you too."

He stopped. She'd said it. The words he'd never tire of hearing.

Her words came out low and breathy. "What's wrong?"

"Do you really love me? Enough to marry me?"

She arched her hips and began moving against him, taking his cock deeper inside her. "I do, sweetheart, but this is no time to chat. I love you very much, but right now, I'd love you fucking me even more."

Rico began to move again, driving his cock deeper. The pleasure of being one with her sped down his spine and into his balls. In seconds, he tensed and exploded inside her.

Once he could breathe without panting, he propped up on his elbows and looked down into her face. "Are you all right?"

Her satisfied smile made him think of a woman who'd just found her favorite shoes on sale. "I'm wonderful."

"You only came once."

"Sometimes once is enough."

"I want you to be completely satisfied."

"I was. I am. Always."

He kissed her, slowly, deeply.

Her eyelids began to droop.

Rico caressed her cheek with his thumb. "One time and you're worn out?" He kissed the side of her neck, then licked his way to her earlobe.

"No way. I'm recharging my batteries."

"How?"

"By lying here fantasizing about all the wonderful things we'll do to each other with an entire day off."

"That's right. The café's closed tomorrow.

"And I'm pretty sure I lost a client tonight."

"Shhh, I don't want you to think about Marty Trinidad, or ever say his name while we're in bed."

"Jealous?"

"Maybe...a little."

She sat up and leaned back on her elbows. "Trust me, you have nothing to fear." She brushed his lips with a kiss. "Not here." Then circled his nipples with her tongue. "Or here." The tip of her tongue found the tip of his cock. "Or here."

"Oh god, Mary Beth..."

"Or here." She squeezed his balls.

His chest heaved. "I'll give you an hour to quit that."

"How about a lifetime?"

Rico smiled. "Deal."

The End

About the Authors

Lynn LaFleur was born and raised in a small town in Texas close to the Dallas/Fort Worth area. Writing has been in her blood since she was eight years old and wrote her first “story” for an English assignment.

As well as writing at every possible moment, Lynn enjoys reading, scrapbooking, photography and learning new things on the computer. She’s a software junky and loves to try out new programs, especially anything to do with graphics.

After living on the West Coast for 21 years, Lynn now lives 17 miles from her hometown in Texas. She’s a romantic at heart and can’t imagine ever writing anything but romances. A full-time writer, she spends her days creating stories of people who find their happily ever after, sometimes with the help of an alien or psychic or vampire.

Randi Monroe is part of that rare species—a native Californian. Born and raised in Southern California, she makes sure she never strays far from the ocean, which she considers essential to balance the fire in her Aries soul.

A romantic down to her toes, Randi wrote her first romance at thirteen, a short story based solely on her imagination since she wasn’t allowed to date until she was sixteen. As a Sweet Sixteen gift, Randi’s aunt treated her to her first Tarot reading. From the turn of the first card, she knew the metaphysical would always be a part of her life and her stories.

When Randi’s not writing scintillating tales of erotic romance, she enjoys painting and sculpting, jogging on the beach with her Great Dane, Shazam, and living happily ever after with her own Prince Charming of twenty years.

The author welcomes comments from readers. You can find her website and e-mail address on her author bio page at www.ellorasCave.com.

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