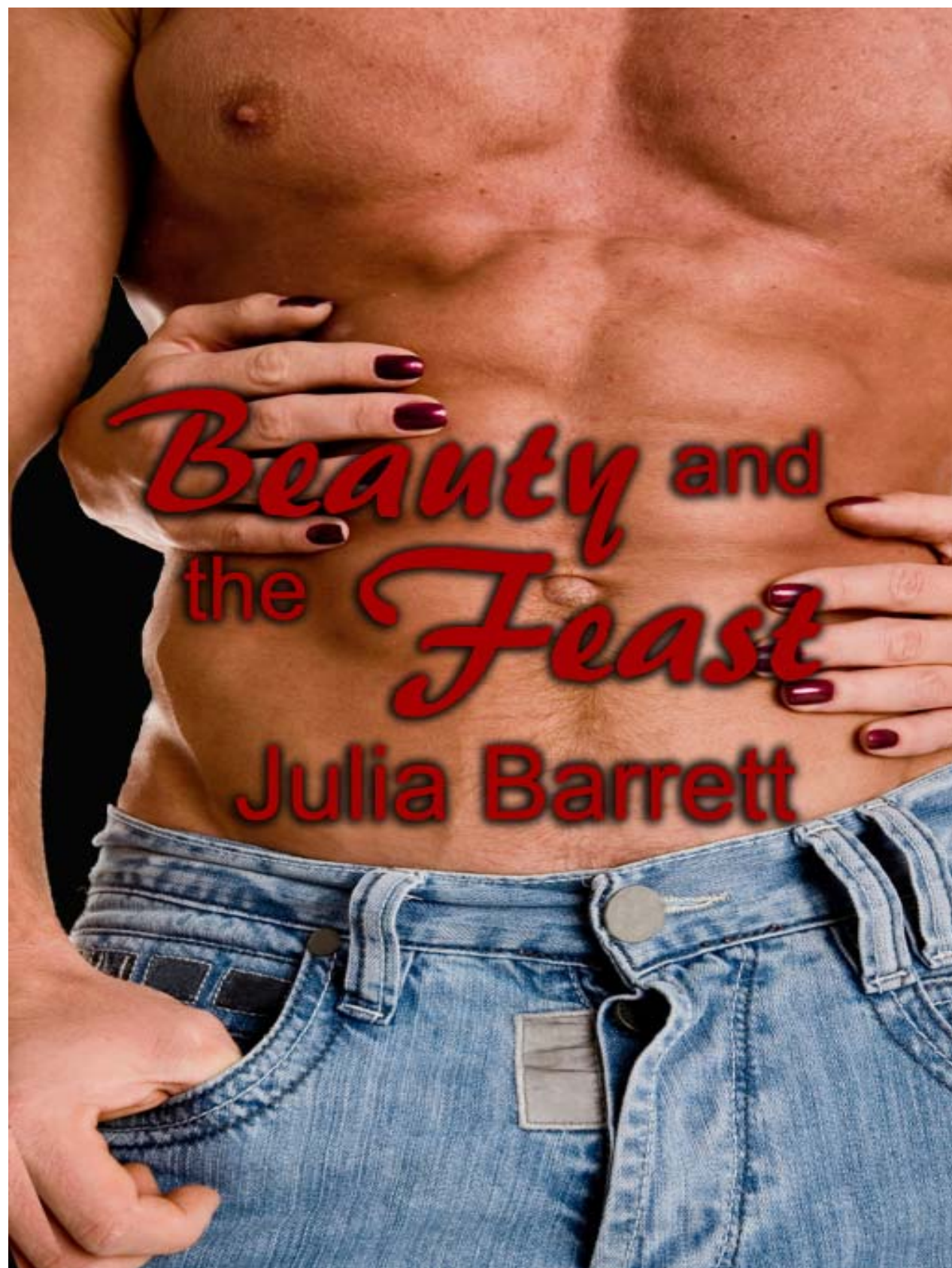




Beauty and the Feast

By Julia Barrett

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Author's Note

I believe in love at first sight. I'm convinced each of us does indeed have a soul mate. We may not always be so lucky as to find them in our lifetime, but that doesn't negate my belief in them. My husband and I knew each other for fourteen years before we married. During those fourteen years, we spent perhaps a total of five weeks in each other's company. There were two extended periods of time, one period that lasted for three years and another for six years, during which we had no contact whatsoever. Yet, when I received a phone call at 2 a.m. and the man I loved but hadn't seen or heard from in six years asked if he could come see me, I answered *yes* without hesitation.

Eight hundred miles later, he emerged from his vehicle, took me in his arms and carried me off to bed. That same day, he asked me to marry him. It's been twenty-six years and we've never looked back. Still in love, still soul mates.

Chapter One

“Jesus Christ, Jason! What the hell do you think you’re doing?”

“Ah...ah...ah...” The teenager wiggled a finger. “You know how my mom feels about cussing.”

“Who cares how your mom feels about cussing? This is the fifth week in a row you’ve gotten me wet.”

Jason stood grinning at her, a hose with a spray nozzle in his hand. He wagged his eyebrows.

“That’s not the kind of wet I mean and you damn well know it,” Eva grumbled. “What are you doing home anyway? Aren’t you supposed to be in school?”

“I’m a senior,” Jason replied with a shrug, “I’ve already got my college acceptance. I’m free to do what I want.”

“Yeah, well, why does what you want have to include drenching me every Monday morning?”

“Because it’s a wet tee-shirt contest in my own yard. I mean, c’mon Eva, you’re hot. I’m eighteen years old and horny and you’re like, my fantasy.”

“Why can’t you look at me as more of a big sister?”

Jason snorted, “I don’t think so.” He waved the hose in Eva’s direction.

Eva jumped sideways. “Look, Jason, we’re going to have to come to some sort of arrangement.”

Without hesitation Jason replied, “I’m open to that.”

Eva rolled her eyes. The kid was quick and he had a one-track mind. “Not that sort of arrangement. Do you want me to complain to my bosses about this? I will and you know what they’ll do? They’ll send out Miriam. You want them to send out Miriam?”

Jason's grin was replaced with a look of flat out horror. "Hell no! She's old and blows her nose all the time and she cleans under my bed and her food tastes like crap."

"Okay then," Eva began, "If you don't want Miriam, stop soaking me."

Eva walked into the garage and opened a cabinet. She knew where Mrs. White kept her worn towels. Jason trailed behind her. Eva noticed the young man watching her as she toweled off. He grinned at her, unrepentant. She saw his eyes focus on her black bra beneath her white, now transparent, tee shirt.

Eva pointed an accusing finger at him. "Knock it off. Don't you have a girlfriend?"

"Yeah."

"So how come you don't turn the hose on her?"

"Are you kidding? She'd smack me up one side of the street and down the other."

Eva gave the young man as stern a look as she could manage. "Then why would you treat me so disrespectfully?"

Jason pretended to consider her words for a moment. "I don't know," he answered with another shrug. "Like I said, you're hot. And you put up with me."

Eva sat down on a step to remove her shoes. Even her socks were wet. She decided it would be better to just work barefoot.

"Jason," she said to the young man, "Get out of here. Go back to school."

"Yes ma'am," he replied agreeably. "Hey, leave my bed alone and don't clean beneath it."

"I never do," said Eva with a sigh. "You want anything special for supper tonight?"

"Oh, yeah," answered Jason. "Some of that spaghetti, you know, the stuff that takes all day to cook. The red stuff."

"Bolognese?"

"Yeah, and I'll eat a salad as long as you make it with real lettuce and creamy Italian."

"Since when are you so picky about food?" asked Eva.

Jason winked at her. "Since you started cooking for us. And garlic bread. Remember the garlic bread. Like you made it last time, with lots of butter and parmesan cheese."

"Anything else, your majesty?"

Jason ignored Eva's sarcasm and he thought for a moment. "Brownies would be good. A big batch. The cream cheese kind. I can take some of those to practice this afternoon. Everyone on the soccer team is addicted to them."

“All right,” sighed Eva. “Get out of here. I have to dry my clothes and do some grocery shopping. It’s a good thing your mom’s my only client today.”

Jason headed toward his car. Eva saw him turn back to look at her. She was still drying off her feet.

“Hey,” he called. “I’m sorry for spraying you. I’ll try to control my hormones in the future.”

Eva grinned crookedly at him. “I’ll believe it when I see it.”

Eva watched Jason drive away and then entered the White’s house through the garage and stopped in the laundry room. She stripped off her wet tee shirt and tugged down her soaked jeans. She threw them, along with her socks, into the dryer. She hoped they’d be reasonably dry within thirty minutes. She figured she had at least that long before Jason would dare show his face again.

Barefoot, wearing her old black lace pushup bra and boy shorts, Eva jogged through the family room and up the short flight of stairs into the kitchen. Eva always started in the kitchen. As far as she was concerned, a clean kitchen was the foundation of a clean home. She was obsessive about it. There was nothing more satisfying than thoroughly cleaning a kitchen. After her clothes were dry, she would tackle the rest of the house.

Eva snorted as she imagined exactly what Jason had stashed under his bed. The only girl in a family of five children, Eva had a pretty good idea of what she’d find if she dared to look under there. No way. Eva wouldn’t touch that shit with a ten-foot pole. After living so closely with growing teenage boys for so many years, Eva considered herself a bit of an expert on what young men kept under their beds. At least Jason was considerate enough to throw his dirty clothes in the hamper she’d stashed in his closet.

Eva finished in the kitchen. She returned to the laundry room and pulled her clothes out of the dryer. Her tee shirt and socks were completely dry, unfortunately, her jeans were still tacky. Nothing worse than hot, sticky, damp jeans. She wriggled her way into them, cursing Jason. Eva decided she’d better get started on the Bolognese sauce so it could cook slowly while she cleaned the rest of the house, washed the linens and watered the garden. She took a quick look in the pantry and in the fridge to make sure she had everything she needed for the brownies. After taking stock, Eva headed out to her car.

Mrs. White had contracted with ATAP for Eva’s services. ATAP stood for *All Things to All People*. It was an acronym the owners of the company, Tom and Marcus, had come up with one night while soused on chokolatinis. Eva, Miriam, Byron, Jose and Ruth were contracted out to

pre-screened households to be all things, within reason, of course. Miriam worked as a housekeeper, seamstress, nanny, and she was frequently hired to provide companion care for shut-ins. She could cook in a pinch. Ruth's area of expertise was interior design, but she could also hang a light fixture, paint, paper a wall, lay decorative tile, stencil, and texturize a ceiling if the occasion called for it. Bryon and Jose were gardeners, closet specialists and handymen. They could turn a vacant lot into something out of House Beautiful, but they could just as skillfully clean up the mess from a backed up septic tank.

Because of her degree from culinary school and her restaurant experience, Tom and Marcus had labeled Eva the chief cook and bottle washer. ATAP leased her out to families who required a cook and sommelier in addition to a housekeeper. Occasionally the company provided catering services for special events. Eva led the catering team, assisted by both Tom and Marcus, her fellow employees if necessary, and if additional help was needed, she contacted one of the local temp agencies.

Eva loved her job. After six years in the food business, she'd never worked with such agreeable people. She was much more accustomed to temperamental chefs who threw a raging tantrum at the drop of a single sprig of parsley. Jason's wet tee shirt obsession aside, her assignments were generally fun, she was well paid, and the work varied enough that after nearly a year, Eva hadn't once been bored. Quite the opposite. Tom and Marcus screened their clients well. Eva had never asked to be removed from a job. So far, she hadn't received a single complaint from a client. She'd missed work only one week because she'd been sick with the flu. That was when Miriam had filled in for her, much to Jason's dismay.

Eva smiled to herself as she pushed a cart down the produce aisle at the grocery store. Jason behaved a lot like her brothers had at eighteen, full of mischief and very full of himself. That reminded her that she needed to give her mom a call. Eva had been so busy she hadn't been back to Iowa for a visit since she took the job. She'd grown up on a farm in Pottawattamie County. Her family still lived there. Her father worked hard to keep the family farm going, along with two of her brothers Asher and Levi, who owned homes nearby. Her mother worked as a labor and delivery nurse at the local hospital. Her two oldest brothers, David and Jared, had formed a partnership several years ago and they'd jointly purchased two thousand acres of farmland in southwest Iowa. They produced corn, soybeans and alfalfa, and thanks to Eva's incessant nagging, grass fed beef cattle.

It came as no great shock to her family when Eva decided to apply to culinary school. She'd stopped eating red meat precipitously at the age of ten when she finally discovered what her family had been careful to keep from her, that the steers she raised ended up in the family freezer. Since her family stuck with a pretty traditional diet, consisting primarily of meat, potatoes, bread and seasonal vegetables, Eva eventually realized she'd need to learn about nutrition if she was going to eat anything besides peanut butter and jelly sandwiches for the rest of her life. She did a lot of research about sources of complete proteins. Since the family raised their own chickens and Eva had her own milk cow, dairy and eggs weren't a problem. Like most farm wives, Eva's mother devoted a lot of space to a garden and her father kept several varieties of fruit trees, apple, plum, sour cherry and peach. Eva learned to can and pickle. She also began to bake her own bread and sneak whole grains and beans into the family's favorite dishes.

When Eva had enrolled in the California Culinary Academy in San Francisco, her family was supportive. She'd had to accustom herself to being far from everything rural and familiar. After graduation, Eva figured that as far as nouvelle cuisine went, California led the way, so she stuck around the Bay Area and cooked in a number of restaurant kitchens, ultimately ending up in the Napa Valley, working as a caterer and a personal chef. Eva met her current bosses when they'd hired her to cater a wine and cheese pairing for their marketing firm. The three had hit it off immediately, and when Tom and Marcus formed ATAP, Eva was the first person they contacted. She signed on without hesitation.

The White family was among her regular clients. For a very generous monthly fee, Eva cleaned their home, did their laundry, and she provided them with three well-balanced suppers each week. Taking Jason's prodigious appetite into consideration, she made sure to cook enough so there would be plenty of leftovers for the next day. The White's fridge was now stocked with healthy snacks and their pantry filled with ingredients for quick and easy meals. And of course, Jason and his sweet tooth got his beloved double batch of cream cheese brownies or chocolate chip cookies at least once a week. His other favorite was Eva's homemade granola. She whipped it up every Friday so he could carry a big bag with him to his weekend soccer tournaments.

Eva went through the checkout line. She used a company check to pay for the groceries. She drove back to the White's and started the Bolognese sauce. Eva had no problem multi-tasking. She left the sauce on simmer. She hummed one of her favorite songs as she beat up the brownie batter, poured it into a buttered pan, and put the pan into a preheated oven. She'd already thrown in a load of washing and stripped the beds.

While she worked, Eva mentally reviewed Tuesday's schedule. The Reardon's would be first for a quick cleaning. She'd complete their grocery shopping for the week, and then head to Sam's in the afternoon for meal prep. Wednesday she'd return to the White's, and she had another client scheduled, her once a week, Mrs. Elkins. She'd plan, shop, prepare and freeze a week's worth of suppers for the elderly woman. Stuff she could easily heat up in the microwave. Her kids paid the monthly fees to ATAP; they were hoping to keep their mother in her own home as long as possible. Miriam kept the place clean and tidy and ran errands for Mrs. Elkins. She was perfectly willing to do the cooking, but the elderly woman preferred Eva's lighter meals. Eva had a full schedule on Thursday with her repeat visits to the Reardon's for another quick housecleaning and Sam's for another meal prep. On Friday she'd make a return visit to the White's. Friday was usually a busy day, as Dr. and Mrs. White frequently entertained over the weekend and a special request was often waiting for Eva when she arrived. Usually it had to do with food and wine pairing. And dessert. Always dessert.

But it was a lot better than waking up at three a.m. as she'd done when she'd worked as a pastry chef, or working until long after midnight as she had when she'd been on the line. It was a whole lot better than having a plate of food shoved in your face like one irate chef had done to her when she'd been a new graduate and she'd accidentally overcooked a steak. Eva hurried to toss the towels into the dryer and the sheets into the wash. She heard the imaginary timer go off in her head and she knew it was time to check the brownies and stir the pasta sauce. If she was lucky, Jason would go out to lunch with his buddies. If she wasn't, they'd show up within the hour, expecting a meal. She wondered if she should get something ready to grill just in case. The boys seemed to like her specialty—shredded pork on barbecued focaccia with bread and butter pickles and lots of dipping sauce. Eva pulled open the freezer. It was best to be prepared.

* * * *

"Marcus, listen to this. Come over here." Tom pressed the number *one* on his cell phone to replay the message. He handed the phone to his partner.

Marcus listened closely, his eyes opening wide. He held the phone away from his ear and pointed it at Tom. "Is this who I think it is? Gabriel Abbott's assistant? The little lady you were schmoozing at the Wine Auction last week?" He pressed 'one' to repeat the message. "This is great," he said, his smile widening as he listened, "This is exactly what we were hoping for. At last. Finally, someone in the business is taking notice. This could open a lot of doors."

“Gabriel Abbott,” breathed Tom. “Did you hear her? A little job for Gabriel. All she has to say is Gabriel. She doesn’t even have to say Gabriel Abbott or Gabriel Vineyards. She could probably even shorten his name to Gabe and I think everyone in the wine industry would know exactly who she was talking about.”

“So what do you think?” asked Marcus. “You want to call her back or shall I? Or should we let Eva handle things from beginning to end?”

“I’ll call,” said Tom. “She left the message on my phone. But once I get the information, Eva can handle the details. God, I can’t believe it. Gabriel Abbott’s assistant. This is perfect.”

Marcus added, “You mean we better be perfect.”

Tom winked. “That’s why we hired Eva.”

* * * *

Eva finished up at the White’s a little later than she’d expected. Jason and his buddies had indeed appeared, hungry for lunch and eager to flirt with her. Eva fed them and tolerated their teasing and clumsy advances. After they’d headed back to school, she finished up the laundry, re-made the beds, and completed her housekeeping chores. By the time the house was spotless, the Bolognese had nearly finished cooking. Eva prepared the salad, with lettuce as requested, and she placed it in the fridge along with a separate container of homemade creamy Italian dressing. Jason preferred soft Italian bread for his garlic bread. Eva sliced a long loaf lengthwise, spread both sides generously with a mixture of butter, olive oil, and roasted garlic, sprinkled some parmesan cheese over everything and finished with smoked paprika. She stuck the two halves together and wrapped them in foil, ready to go into the oven. She’d already put the pan of brownies into the freezer in order to cool them quickly so she could cut them into individual squares. Now she removed the pan, cut the brownies, and wrapped each square separately in clear plastic wrap, placing them in a freezer bag. She returned them to the freezer. That was the only way she could think of to discourage Jason from eating them all in one sitting.

She left the Bolognese in the Dutch oven in which she’d cooked it and placed it in the extra refrigerator in the garage. She filled a large pot with cold water, tossed in a few handfuls of salt, and set it on the stove. She opened a big box of dried pasta and left the long, thin spaghetti in a ceramic bowl next to the pot. She grated some parmesan cheese into a plastic container, slapped a lid on it, and placed it next to the salad. Eva gave the kitchen a quick clean up. Lastly, she opened the wine cabinet and chose a medium body cabernet, something spicy, peppery, light

on the tannins. She left the bottle on the kitchen table alongside a small vase of flowers picked from the garden she'd watered. Mrs. White could take it from there.

On the drive home, Eva stopped by her neighborhood market to pick up some eggs and unsalted butter. She'd harvested three bushel baskets of lemons from her lemon tree the previous day and she wanted to make as much lemon curd as she could stand to make in one evening. The jars were already washed and sterilized. Now all she had to do was juice a whole lot of lemons. Whatever she didn't turn into lemon curd, she'd freeze. There was nothing Eva hated more than wasted food. Like the Whites, she kept an extra fridge and a separate deep freeze in her garage. Eva had learned from her mom that one could never have too much cold storage.

Eva set her bag down on the kitchen table and kicked off her shoes. The hardwood floor felt wonderfully cool beneath her bare feet.

Eva untwisted the elastic band that kept her long, dark, auburn hair out of her way. She shook her head and sighed with pleasure as her thick hair tumbled past her shoulders. The gentle waves reached the middle of her slender back. She could smell the Bolognese sauce and the roasted garlic she'd spread on the garlic bread. It was funny how cooking smells didn't seem to linger on her clothes, but her hair always managed to get itself perfumed with her main dishes. In this case, the smell was red and meaty, a bit on the piquant side from the wine she'd used in the sauce.

Eva closed her eyes and let the rich, dark fragrance drift over her for a moment before she walked to the back of the bungalow toward her tiny bedroom and bath, stripping off her clothes along the way. A meal meant so much more to Eva than merely shoveling something edible into her mouth with a fork. Food wasn't merely sustenance. Great food should be like great sex. Nuanced. Seductive. Smooth. Satisfying. The more care used in preparation, the deeper the flavor, the more lingering the outcome. To Eva, cooking was like sexual foreplay, and if done right, it could lead to...well, the results could be quite unforgettable.

It's too bad, Eva thought with a rueful smile as she stepped beneath the hot water. If only a man could be so delicious, so savory, so slow, so sensual. Eva had never met a man who could cook in bed as well as she could in the kitchen. Thanks to her big brothers, until she left home no boy had ever gotten close enough to say more than one word to her. Since then, Eva had been involved in a few casual relationships, but her experience with the opposite sex, aside from her brothers, her bosses and co-workers, and kids like Jason, was limited. The thought of being with a man, a real man, made her nervous. Still, Eva stood beneath the cascade of water and allowed

herself to indulge in a little fantasy about what kind of world hers would be if she ever did allow herself to become close to someone. Someone who tasted every bit as good as the food she prepared.

Chapter Two

Gabriel Abbott stared at his blank computer screen as IT specialists hovered over his broad shoulders. Gabe refreshed the screen, hoping his new website would appear. The techs had been working for months on the website for his charitable foundation, Abbott Industries. Just as they'd uploaded the links to his winery, the system crashed.

Gabe suppressed a quick flash of irritation. The project had taken longer than he'd expected, but the result, at least what he'd been able to see of it, was good. In fact, it was better than good. It should be. He'd paid top dollar for his web designers. Gabe wanted to make certain he attracted the attention of the right browsers, high school teachers, guidance counselors, junior college registrars, the very people who could send him promising students. Needy students who couldn't afford a college education or trade school. Young men and women who were in the same position Gabe, himself, had once been in. There were a lot of hard-working, dedicated, optimistic, ambitious, deserving kids out there. He hoped Abbott Industries could reach as many of them as the foundation could afford.

Gabe rose from his chair and stretched. He turned to his employees.

"You think you can get this running by four? I've invited Father Green by to check it out. I want him to see what we're working on. It could mean a great deal to his students."

"Yes, Mr. Abbott, no problem. We should have this bug figured out within the hour." Both men were in agreement. They excused themselves and left his office.

Gabe felt, rather than heard, his iPhone beep. He opened a text message. It read, "Looking forward to dinner. Steph."

Stephanie Lindstrom. The woman he planned to seduce on Saturday night. He'd met her several weeks before at a fundraiser for the San Francisco Opera. They'd spent most of the evening together. She was a corporate lawyer, the daughter of an investment banker. Gabe had

noticed her immediately. It was impossible not to, with as much skin as she'd been showing that night. Stephanie was gorgeous. Tall, blonde, leggy. He'd been struck with the notion that she might look good on his arm, for a while. Make an attractive accoutrement. He'd met her for coffee the very next day and taken her to lunch a couple of times. She'd accompanied him to a reception at the new California Academy of Sciences. Three days ago, he'd taken her to a highly rated, ultra trendy restaurant for dinner. He'd decided to invite her to spend the weekend with him at his cottage in the Napa Valley. She'd said, *yes*.

Gabe sent her a reply. "Pick you up at six. G.A." Don't get too familiar too soon, Gabe reminded himself. Familiarity breeds contempt. That was Gabriel Abbott's motto when it came to women. It had been years since he'd met a woman, aside from his mother and younger sister, who didn't bore him to tears within a few months. Hair, clothes, makeup. Gabe shrugged, unconcerned. Perhaps the problem lay with the crowd he associated with now.

In some ways, he missed the tough, working class neighborhood in Chicago where he'd grown up. It hadn't been all bad. When people had very little in the way of possessions, their concerns tended to revolve around more than their appearance. At least he, his sister and his mother were fortunate enough to have had each other. If there was food on the table, they said thank you and they ate it. It didn't matter what it was or what it tasted like. When some charity or another offered them second hand winter coats and boots, mittens and hats, they accepted them, pride be damned. His mother worked hard to protect her children and she did her best to raise them right.

When Father Green had taken Gabe and his sister under his wing, he opened doors for them that they'd thought would remain forever shut. Neither of them looked back or felt the least bit guilty for taking the opportunities he offered. The priest had encouraged them to keep their grades up no matter what was going on in their lives and he helped them both to apply for loans and grants to pay for college. Gabe attended the University of Chicago. He'd majored in Business Administration and he'd gone on to get a Master's Degree at the University of California at Berkeley. His sister attended Northwestern for her undergraduate studies and she'd been accepted into Emory University in Atlanta, Georgia, for medical school.

Their own father had walked out on them when Gabe had been twelve and his sister, Elise, just ten years old. They didn't hear a word from him until his mother was served with divorce papers a year later. When Gabe was old enough to legally change his name, he took his mother's maiden name, Abbott, declaring to the world in his eighteen-year-old fashion that he

was no longer the cheating, dead-beat Patrick McIntyre's son. His sister followed in his footsteps. She was now Dr. Elise Abbott, a pediatrician practicing in Skokie, Illinois.

The first thing Gabe did when he made some money was to move his mother into a co-op on Lakeshore Drive. He'd tried to convince her to follow him to California, but she refused to leave his sister and the Midwest. Midwesterners were like that. There was something about the notion of living in The Golden State that made them cringe. When he tried to discuss this issue with his mother, she simply dismissed the idea with the words, "Too blond."

California's blond reputation didn't bother Gabe in the slightest. The weather was pretty damn close to perfect. He could surf a little, ski a little, sail a little, catch a ball game. His apartment in San Francisco was within earshot of AT and T Park. Besides, he had to admit, the women were beautiful. When he'd first moved west, he'd taken a look around and it was as if someone flipped a switch and his brain began broadcasting that old Beach Boys song, California Girls. So many women, so little time. Speaking of women...

Gabe stepped out of his office to check with his assistant, Marsha.

"Marsh, you work something out for dinner this Saturday night?"

"Yes, I've hired an agency, ATAP, to provide a personal chef."

"ATAP?"

"All Things to All People. Kind of cute, don't you think?"

Gabe rolled his eyes. "Maybe a little too cute. They any good?"

Marsha clicked her pen thoughtfully. "Well, I hope so. I thought you might like to give them a try. They're a new agency based in Napa and I know how you like to support start-ups. They seem legit, at least Tom, the partner I spoke with, seems to have a good handle on marketing. He impressed me and I'm not easily impressed."

"True," replied Gabe. "That's why we get along so well. Who's the chef? Someone from one of local restaurants?"

"Um, I don't exactly know yet. Whoever it is, is supposed to get back to me today to go over the menu."

"Shit, I'd probably be better off with Chinese take-out. Get this ATAP on the phone and I'll talk to him myself. I'll decide if I want to use him."

"You're the boss." Marsha pulled a card out of a small file in her desk drawer and dialed the phone number printed on it. Gabe lounged against the open door.

"Good morning, Tom, this is Marsha Frank, Gabriel Abbott's assistant."

"Put it on speaker," instructed Gabe.

Marsha hit the button and set the receiver in its cradle.

"So nice to hear from you, Miss Frank. How may I help you?"

"Mr. Abbott was hoping to speak with the chef. Is he available?"

"She's out at the moment, but I'd be happy to have her call you back as soon as she checks in with me. Shall I have her call you at this number?"

"Just a moment." Marsha took the phone off speaker and placed her hand over the receiver. She glanced at her boss.

"Ask her to call me," instructed Gabe. "Leave my cell phone number. I'd just as soon talk to her myself, see if she's up for what I have in mind."

Marsha raised her eyebrows at him. She removed her hand from the receiver. "Mr. Abbott would like to speak to the chef himself. Here's his cell phone number." Marsha provided Tom with number. "Please keep the number private."

Marsha listened for a moment. "Thank you," she said.

She hung up. "FYI," she said to her boss. "Her name's Eva."

* * * *

Eva had just finished putting away the Reardon's groceries when her cell phone rang. She had a lot of cleaning to do. It looked as if a tornado had passed through the Reardon's house over the weekend. She was tempted to just let the thing ring but she thought better of it. She and Tom had been playing phone tag since the previous night. She managed to pull her phone out of her purse and answer it just before it went to voicemail.

"Yeah, Tom," she answered, "What's up?"

"Where have you been?" Tom asked, his voice an octave higher than normal.

"Where I always am, on the job," Eva replied calmly as she cleared the breakfast dishes. "I called you last night and this morning but you didn't pick up."

"I have a job for you. A very, very important job."

Eva gave an exaggerated sighed. Every job was a very, very important job to Tom.

"Really? What?"

Eva heard the words fall out of Tom's mouth in a big jumble. "Gabriel Abbott has hired us to cater a private dinner party this Saturday night. Here. At his place Up Valley."

Eva stopped stacking dishes in the sink. "Gabriel Abbott, as in Gabriel Vineyards? The man whose award winning Pinot is, as Jason White would say, sick?"

"One and the same."

"You're kidding."

"Would I kid about something like this? His assistant just called and he wants to speak to the chef. He, himself. Not his assistant. He wants to speak to the chef. I have his personal cell phone number for you."

Eva thought quickly. Saturday. Not much time. "Tom, do you have any idea what the occasion is?"

"None whatsoever."

"Do you know if he wants the works, you know, chef, servers, clean-up?"

"I have no idea. You'll find out when you talk to him."

Eva fished her date book and a pen out of her bag. "Okay, give me the number."

"Eva, this is a burn after reading. The number is to be kept private."

"Got it. Go ahead."

Tom gave her the phone number and a parting word of advice, "Don't make the man wait. We want his business."

Eva switched off. She would call Gabriel Abbott as soon as she found some scratch paper. She needed details. She hoped whatever he planned was small because she had a lot of work to do this week, and Saturday wasn't very far off. She found a stack of copy paper in Mr. Reardon's study. Eva grabbed the top sheet and returned to the kitchen. She sat at the kitchen table and took a deep breath. Gabriel Abbott.

Eva didn't pay much attention to what went on in the Wine Country despite the fact that she lived smack in the middle of it. But Gabriel Abbott? Gabriel Vineyards? Eva had heard a little about the man, a lot more about his wines. She remembered when one of the restaurants she worked for in San Francisco began serving his first Cab. God, that stuff had bite. And the wine had been young when she'd tasted it. She'd bet good money the wine was utterly amazing now. She adored his Pinot Noir. Unfortunately, both his reds were out of her price range. Occasionally she'd splurge and buy a bottle of his Chardonnay. The wine was a nice bright yellow-gold in color and it tasted like lightly toasted, buttered brioche. Eva wasn't much for Chardonnays, usually they were too oaky, but a Gabriel Vineyards Chardonnay was decidedly yummy. It went perfectly with her garlic roast chicken.

"Okay," muttered Eva. "Enough procrastinating. Dial the number."

Eva held her date book open to the page where she'd written the phone number. She'd written it in the Address section under 'G' for Gabriel. She flipped open her phone and pressed the 415 area code and then the number.

One ring. Two rings.

"Gabriel Abbott."

Sexy voice, crap, thought Eva, her stomach twisting. *Can't he just say 'hello' like a normal person?*

"Mr. Abbott, this is Eva Raines. I'm returning your call. I'm the personal chef with All Things to All People."

Sweet voice, noted Gabe, his mind rousing a little. *Wonder what she looks like?*

"Yes, Miss Raines."

"Eva..."

"Eva," Gabe cleared his throat, suddenly uncomfortable discussing his plans for Stephanie with the woman on the other end of the line. *Don't be ridiculous*, he told himself. He cleared his throat again. "I'm holding a small dinner party at my home in St. Helena on Saturday night. I need it catered."

"How many people?" Gabe could hear that she was all business now.

"Two."

A sharp but quiet intake of breath on her part. Gabe almost missed it.

"What time?"

"We should be there around seven."

"Do you have an idea of what you'd like? For example, would you prefer a formal dinner or something more casual?"

Gabe thought for a moment. "Something in between. Nothing too heavy, but I want the food to be elegant."

"To the eye and the palate," Gabe heard her say, more to herself than to him, in that same sweet, soft voice. God, listening to that voice say the words *eye* and *palate* made him think of things having to do with the eye and the palate that did not involve food.

Gabe cleared his throat again. "Yes."

"Will you want us there to serve and clean up? Or would you prefer to serve your guest yourself? We can arrange to clean up the next day."

Gabe chuckled. Eva, with the sweet voice, knew exactly what he had in mind for his guest. "I'd prefer to serve myself."

"Do you cook, Mr. Abbott?" She paused. "What I mean is, do you want me to start the meal and leave it for you to finish? Otherwise I can have everything ready to go and all you'll have to do is enjoy."

"The latter," he replied. Suddenly Gabe couldn't remember why he'd worried about using an unknown chef. "I think I'll leave the details up to you."

"Thank you," she said. "But I do have a few more questions."

"Yes?"

"I need your address and I'll need access to your home on Friday, if you don't mind, and then of course on Saturday morning. I assume you have a wine cellar. Are there any particular wines you wish me to use?"

"As far as the wines are concerned, use your own judgment. You've had some experience with my wines?"

"Yes, Mr. Abbott, I have." *Of course*, he thought. In his mind's eye, he could see a young woman, her features vague and misted, sipping one of his wines. His Pinot.

"The house is small, more like a cottage. The wine cellar is in a separate temperature controlled building out back beside the pool. You can't miss it. As far as getting in on Friday, my gardener should be there. His name is Luis Gonzales. I'll let him know you're coming. If he's not around, you can find an extra key stashed in the drawer beneath the bird feeder by the front entryway. Make sure to return it there when you leave. I'll have my assistant email my address and the house phone number to your office."

"I just have a couple more questions Mr. Abbott. Are there any food allergies I need to be concerned about? Any intense food dislikes I should take into consideration?"

Gabe grinned. No one had ever bothered to ask him about food dislikes. "Green peppers," he told her, "I hate green peppers."

He heard Eva laugh softly and he felt surprisingly warm. "No green peppers," she agreed. "Thank you, Mr. Abbott. I'll do my best to make your dinner a success."

"Gabe," he said. "My name is Gabe."

"Thank you...Gabe," she breathed. She clicked off.

Gabe stood still for an instant then he turned and walked to the window that overlooked San Francisco Bay. Eva Raines. He said the name quietly. It rolled nicely off the tongue. He spun around and stopped in the doorway.

"Marsha," he said. "Please email that company, All Things to All People. Send them my address in St. Helena and my phone number there. Would you mind making the financial arrangements?"

"No, not at all."

"Find out about this chef, this Eva Raines' future availability. Just an inquiry. Nothing definite."

"So, I take it you think she can handle this?"

"She seems to think she can," he replied. After a moment he asked, "Marsha, what do female chefs look like?"

Marsha snorted. "You're asking me? How would I know? My kitchen might as well be across the Pacific for as much time as I spend there. I suppose they look like male chefs, big."

"She didn't sound big," Gabe replied.

"And you could tell this through your cell phone?" Marsha raised a skeptical eyebrow.

Gabe turned the phone over in his hand. "Yes, I could tell through my cell phone."

"I hate to disappoint you boss, but cell phones can be deceiving."

"You are the consummate cynic, aren't you?"

"Only because of men like you." His assistant winked at him. "If I were you, I wouldn't waste my time wondering what the chef looks like. I'd worry about whether or not Miss Lindstrom will like her food."

Gabe laughed. He returned to his office and flipped open his phone. He pulled up Miss Raines', Eva's, number and saved it to his contact list. E. Raines. Cell.

Chapter Three

"Hey Tom, Marcus...either of you ever seen Gabriel Abbott in person?" Eva had returned to the office to check in and find out if Mr. Abbott's assistant had emailed the information she'd requested.

"No," said Marcus, "but I hear he's drop-dead gorgeous."

"I met with his assistant," offered Tom. "Marsha struck me as being extremely competent. Maybe a little protective of her boss."

"Why haven't I seen photos of him?" Eva persisted. "It seems to me that most wineries like as much publicity as they can get."

"Perhaps he's shy," said Tom, with a grin.

"Unlikely," laughed Eva. "Maybe he just likes his privacy."

"So spill. What's the big event?" asked Marcus.

"Nothing much... a quiet dinner for two in his cottage in St. Helena. That's all."

"Ooh," breathed Tom, "Any word on who the lucky guest is?"

"Nope," answered Eva, "None whatsoever, and none of my business. Did his assistant send you the information I asked for?"

"Yes. I printed it up for you. I've got it right here." Tom reached for a sheet of paper. "You need any help with this one?"

"No, it's pretty simple. Just dinner. He wants to serve. I'll go back in on Sunday and clean up."

"You'd better call first," winked Marcus.

"I'm way ahead of you there," said Eva. "You guys getting paid well for this one?"

Tom and Marcus exchanged glances. "Very well. Don't worry your pretty little head about the money. Just do what you do best and I think we'll be in like Flynn. His assistant asked

about your future availability. Eva,” Tom took her hand. “We’re counting on you. This is what we’ve been hoping for... notice from some of the big money here in the Valley.”

Eva gave Tom’s hand a squeeze. “I won’t let you down. I promise sweetie. Just remind me not to serve Gabriel Abbott any green peppers.”

* * * *

Eva fastened her helmet and took off Up Valley. She tried to bike at least three times a week, riding hard all the way from Napa to Calistoga and back. Biking helped clear her head and burn off any extra calories she’d ingested from all the tasting she had to do when she was cooking for her clients. Another couple hours of daylight remained so she decided to swing by Gabriel Abbott’s cottage. She wanted a quick look at where she’d be working, plus she wanted to make sure she could find her way there. According to the directions, the house was located in the hills above the Valley.

Eva passed through Calistoga and rode south, back toward Napa. She stayed on the main highway through the center of St. Helena, then she turned right and wound her way upward. The climb was impressive. The views of the Napa Valley even more so. Abbott’s cottage was so nondescript, the lot so heavily wooded, that Eva rode right past it, twice. She finally caught a number on a mailbox down the hill from the property. She walked her bike back up. She leaned it against a stone wall that shadowed the lane leading to the house. As Eva approached the cottage, a middle-aged Hispanic gentleman came out of a stone building.

“I’m sorry, Miss,” he said in lightly accented English. “You’ll have to go back to the road. This is private property.”

Eva was curious to see the house, but she stopped in her tracks and tried to appear contrite.

“Yes, I know, I’m sorry to intrude. You must be Luis Gonzales. My name is Eva Raines. I work for an agency called All Things to All People. I’ve been hired by Mr. Abbott to cater a dinner he’s planning here on Saturday night. I just wanted to make certain I knew how to find the house.”

The man looked at her, one eyebrow raised.

“Really. You can call Mr. Abbott if you want to confirm my story.”

“You rode a bike up here?”

“Yeah.” Eva pointed down the lane. “I left it back there.”

“You’re either a very tough young lady or *usted esta muy loca*.”

Eva burst into laughter. *“Sí, Señor Gonzales, yo soy muy loca!”*

Luis smiled warmly at her. “Mr. Abbott called me several hours ago. He told me to expect you... eventually.” Luis motioned her forward. “Let me show you the around.”

* * * *

Late that night, Eva sat on her bed, legs crossed, a yellow legal pad in front of her, concentrating on a menu for Gabriel Abbott. She could have used her laptop, but for some reason, a yellow pad of paper just worked better. Holding a pencil in her hand, the act of writing and erasing, the physical sound of the pencil lead on paper, seemed to help her visualize her dishes. Eva liked to draw a ladder. The first course sat on the bottom rung, dessert on the top. Each rung, each course, led upward in a logical progression to the next. Eva was determined to get this menu right.

Gabriel Abbott’s Napa Valley home had been stunning. Eva kept reviewing what she’d seen over and over again, hoping to come up with a menu that could complement the austerity, enhance the stark simplicity of the cottage and measure up to the exquisite craftsmanship that had gone into the building of it. The home was compact yet because of the tall ceilings and large windows it managed to feel spacious and open. It contained a sitting room, a small, intimate dining room, a large kitchen, a luxurious loft that doubled as a bedroom and two elegant baths. Aside from the entrances to the two bathrooms, there were no doorways between rooms, merely framed arches.

To Eva’s surprise, she noted that the floors were laid with rare and precious Cocobolo and Rosewood. She’d spent nearly a year in Costa Rico as an exchange student when she was in high school and she knew just how endangered the two trees were. When she asked Luis about it, he told her that Senior Abbott had overseen the collection of the wood himself, that every piece was recycled scrap lumber. No trees were harvested to make his floor. Eva was very glad she’d had the foresight to leave her biking shoes on the front porch, although she suspected Luis would have asked her to remove them in any case. The wood was rich with age. The floors felt warm and alive against the soles of her feet. The planks were creamy, satiny, sensuous, as her mom would say—soft as a baby’s behind.

Luis showed off the garden behind the cottage. Eva stepped from the kitchen onto a secluded patio made of gray slate. Double French doors from both the dining room and the kitchen opened directly onto it. Crimson and butter-yellow climbing roses draped themselves

dramatically over high stone walls. A cobbled pathway wound its way past herb beds fragrant with lavender, rosemary, a variety of thymes, basil, and mints.

Eva spotted a small patch of tiny ripe, red strawberries. She leaned over and plucked one, popping it into her mouth. Eva closed her eyes as the sweet, tart flavor spilled over her tongue and flooded her mouth. She could use these in a dessert.

Luis led her past the lovely, secluded swimming pool. He pointed out a separate stone building.

"It's temperature controlled," he said. "For the wines. The *Señor* told me you may need access to it."

Eva nodded.

Luis continued, "The key to the front door unlocks that door as well."

Luis showed her where the key was hidden beneath the bird feeder. He excused himself, asking only that Eva come and find him when she was ready to leave. Eva strolled around the property, ducking beneath the thick branches of California oaks. She was barefoot so she kept an eye out for snakes. There were rattlesnakes in the hills that she had come across occasionally while mountain biking.

Eva returned to the front of the house and sat on the stoop where she put on her biking shoes. She stood, stretched and retrieved her bike before she went looking for Luis. She found him raking near the entrance to the private lane.

"*Muchos gracias*, Luis," she told him. "I appreciate the tour. The garden is enchanting."

"*De nada*," he replied. "It's my pleasure." The older man smiled and took her hand. He brought it gallantly to his lips and kissed it. "The garden is nothing," he said, "compared to you."

"Aren't you a charmer!" Eva laughed.

Now, sitting on her bed, staring at the pad of paper, Eva smiled. Luis genuinely was a sweetheart. She hoped Gabriel Abbott valued the man because the results of his handiwork were breathtaking. A menu to match the house? Or the lush garden? Eva tapped her pencil against her lips. The house. Simple. Stark. Elegant. Clean flavors. The food would have to be served either cold or at room temperature. Mr. Abbott... Gabriel Abbott... Gabe said he didn't want to cook, just serve.

Eva wondered to whom he planned to serve this meal. A woman. *Chances are, a sophisticated woman who watches her waistline and won't want to stuff herself before retiring to the loft and... Gabe did have a nice voice...* Eva's thoughts roamed. With a rueful smile, she shook

herself out of her reverie. She remembered the herbs she'd seen in Gabriel Abbott's garden and Eva knew exactly what her theme for the evening would be. She pictured a series of small plates, starting with a chilled soup in a martini glass. She hoped Mrs. White wouldn't mind if she was a bit tardy on Friday. Eva wanted to be at Abbott's place by six in the morning. If she could put in at least six hours, she should be able to get a lot of the prep work done. Plus she wanted to see if she needed to bring any supplies—glassware, plates, utensils, from her own kitchen. Eva looked forward to the challenge. Tom and Marcus were counting on her to do this right.

* * * *

Gabe worked late into the night. He'd sent Marsha home hours ago. Fridays and Mondays were always the worst. Mondays were littered with the leftovers from the previous week and Fridays were clogged with projects that were supposed to have been finished on the previous Monday. At least the website was up and running and he'd been able to show Father Green the results before his friend and mentor headed back to Chicago. The Father's school for troubled youth would get Gabe's undivided attention when it came to scholarship applications.

Gabe heard his cell phone ringing. It took him a moment to locate the sound. He realized he'd left his phone in the pocket of his leather jacket. He reached the chair where he'd tossed it in two strides.

"Gabriel Abbott."

"Gabriel," purred a female voice. "So there you are. I was hoping to find you at the Curran tonight."

Stephanie. Christ. He'd meant to call her earlier to make sure they were still on for tomorrow.

"No darling, sorry," he said. "It's been a long day and it's looking as if it may not be over for a while yet."

"I'd be happy to swing by and help out. Maybe lift your spirits."

"That would be nice," Gabe laughed, catching the obvious double entendre, "and I appreciate the thought, but as I recall, we have plans for tomorrow and I don't want anything weighing on me, aside from you that is."

"I like the sound of that," came Stephanie's voice. "What time shall I be ready?"

"I'll pick you up around six," said Gabe.

"I'm looking forward to it. Goodnight Gabriel."

"Goodnight Stephanie."

Gabe switched off and hesitated for a moment. He glanced at the time. It was late. He really had been preoccupied this past week. He'd forgotten to talk with his caterer to make certain everything would be ready. Well, Gabe shrugged, it was a Friday night. She was probably still awake. He was paying her well. She could take his call. He scrolled through his address book and found her name, E. Raines. Gabe pressed the key. Five rings later, he heard a click.

"Mmmmm...hello?"

God. The woman had obviously been asleep and his call had awakened her. He could tell by the warm, soft, smoky curl of her voice. The temperature in his office abruptly felt as if it had risen a few degrees.

"Miss Raines, I'm sorry to wake you. This is Gabriel Abbott."

"Um-hmm?"

Gabriel found himself uncharacteristically at a loss for words.

"I just... I wanted... I was wondering if everything was going well. For the dinner tomorrow. Is there anything you need?"

The woman was silent for a moment. Gabe could hear her breathing. Finally, she seemed to come fully awake.

"Oh, Mr. Abbott... I'm sorry, I didn't realize who you were for a second."

"Gabe."

"Yes... Gabe, everything is fine. There's no problem. Everything will be ready and I'll be gone by six."

"Is there anything I should know? Any special instructions?"

"I'll leave you written instructions on the island in the kitchen, but it's really quite simple. Think of your dinner as an engineering project. Your courses will be in the refrigerator, layered from bottom to top, like a pyramid. I suggest you serve one course at a time. Your dessert will be on the top shelf in the very back. Plus you'll find a few extras in the...well, you'll see what I mean."

Gabe felt a smile tug at the corners of his mouth. "And the wines?"

"I think you'll be pleased with my selections. The wines are yours except for one. That one will be in the, uh, it will be with the extras I plan to provide."

Gabe knew she wanted to say—it's in the bedroom, but she couldn't bring herself to utter the word. He grinned and closed his eyes and concentrated. He pictured a faceless Eva Raines, in

bed, burrowed beneath the covers, warm and snug and satiny, and he felt himself grow hard. He didn't want to hang up. He tried to think of something else appropriate to discuss.

He cleared his throat. "Has the house been adequate? The kitchen, I mean?"

"Oh yes," she said immediately. "I think 'adequate' would be an understatement. Lavish would be more descriptive. Your home is lovely. The kitchen is perfect. I've only brought a few items and I can pick those up Sunday afternoon, if that will be all right. Would you..." she stammered a bit, "Would you prefer that I return Monday to clean up?"

Gabe thought for a moment. Monday might be better, but then he wouldn't get to meet the enigmatic Miss Raines. Yet if she came on Sunday, he'd be occupied with Stephanie Lindstrom and for some reason, Gabe found the idea of both women in the same house at the same time disconcerting.

"Monday," he replied.

"Of course," he heard Eva say. Did he detect disappointment in her voice?

"Well," Gabe tried to make his tone apologetic, "I'm sorry to have awakened you. Goodnight Miss Raines."

"Eva."

"Goodnight, Eva."

"Night, Gabe."

Gabe closed his phone. *Interesting*, he thought with a grin. *I've never even seen the woman and just the idea of her in a bed somewhere gives me a hard-on*. He wondered again what she looked like. Something about her sounded like a redhead, or a brunet. He flipped open his phone and dialed Luis' number. Luis picked up after seven rings.

"*Hola, Señor Abbott*. What can I do for you this time of night?"

"Sorry to call so late Luis, but I wanted to make sure things are going well with the caterer I've hired for this weekend."

"Oh yes, *Señor Abbott*, Eva. Yes, very well. Very well."

Luis sounded enthusiastic. He wasn't a particularly outgoing man. It was one of the reasons he and Gabe got along so well. They both appreciated silence and solitude.

"So you've met her?"

"Oh yes, *Señor*. She's been here twice. She was here at six this morning."

No wonder his call had awakened her.

"How does she seem, Luis?" *Is she as lovely as she sounds?* "I mean, is she competent?"

"From what I can tell, she seems quite competent."

Gabe wanted to ask more about the mysterious Miss Raines, but he feared Luis would get the wrong impression. Or maybe the right impression.

"Is there anything else, *Señor Abbott*?"

"Did she... did she have any problems finding the place?"

"Oh, she rode past the house a few times, but she found the private lane quickly enough. It was a long, hard ride on a warm day."

Gabe blinked. "Eva rides a motorcycle?"

"No, *Señor*, she rode her mountain bike up here the first time. I believe she had ridden up to Calistoga and she was on her way back to Napa. Today she drove her car."

"All right. Thanks Luis. Sorry to bother you. Please apologize to your sister for me if I woke her up. Goodnight."

"*Buenos noches, Señor Abbott.*"

Well, well, well...she rides a mountain bike, thought Gabe. *Luis is absolutely right, the hill is long and steep, a hard ride even for me.* His little chef must be in very good shape. Miss Eva Raines was becoming more intriguing by the minute. The words *a long, hard ride* evoked an altogether different image in his mind. Gabe stifled a groan as he adjusted his trousers. He found his desire to bring Stephanie Lindstrom to his cottage diminishing in direct proportion to the increasing size of his erection. Gabe glanced at his watch. It probably wasn't too late to call her back, but it was definitely too late to come up with a reasonable excuse to cancel. He toyed with the notion of taking an early morning drive into Napa. Eva would probably be working in his kitchen most of the day. He could meet her and still make it back to the city in time to pick up Stephanie.

Crap. Gabe remembered he'd scheduled a ten o'clock breakfast meeting with his accountant. That would take at least a couple of hours and he'd been hoping to get in a bike ride before he had to get home, pack a few items of clothing, and clean up for dinner. Getting a look at his little chef would have to wait. Now he was left wondering exactly how far he wanted to take things with Stephanie.

Chapter Four

Eva put in her ear buds and clicked on her iPod. She cranked the volume way up. The Allman Brothers Live at the Fillmore. Jimmy Hendrix. Eric Clapton. Tom Petty. B.B. King. She'd thrown in some Eagles and Credence so she could sing along. Eva preferred to listen to the old guitarists when she was cooking. It kept her energized. She flipped the play list to random and began the task of putting together everything she'd prepped the previous day. She planned the menu to be the essence of simplicity. She wanted to keep the flavors of the food light and clean.

It seemed pretty clear to Eva that Mr. Abbott intended this to be a seduction dinner. During her visit on Friday, she'd taken the liberty of exploring the loft that doubled as his bedroom. She told herself that she was just doing her job, but at the same time, she couldn't help but give in to the curiosity she felt about the man—the curiosity that had only been increased by his late phone call. After she'd said goodnight, Eva had tossed and turned. For the first time in a long, long time, she'd felt, well, aroused. She'd wondered what the man looked like. His voice had the same rich tone as deep, dark maple syrup, and it was just as smooth. The sound of the man had actually given her an idea about an addition to the treats she planned to leave in his bedroom. She'd already wondered how often he slept in the cottage and she'd been concerned that his bedding might be a little musty. If it was she Gabriel Abbott intended to seduce, she'd want to be made love to on crisp, clean, fresh-smelling sheets.

Gabriel Abbott's bedroom was quintessentially masculine. The walls were painted a taupe, almost a mushroom, plain, stark, clean, like the rest of the cottage. His dresser was black, the hardware brushed steel. In the corner near a floor to ceiling window, sat a desk with a computer, a few pencils and a pad of paper, nothing else. At the foot of the bed was a large chest. Eva lifted the lid slightly and inhaled. Her nose was assailed by the scents of leather and wool. She lifted the lid higher and leaned over the chest for a moment. In her mind's eye, she watched a tall,

faceless man with a hard muscled frame, pull on a favorite wool sweater and toss a worn soft, brown, leather jacket over one shoulder. The idea made Eva shiver. She quietly closed the lid.

The bed, a wrought iron, four-poster queen-sized bed, looked scrumptious. After checking to make sure Luis wasn't in the vicinity, Eva threw herself across the mahogany-colored duvet. She wiggled deep into the quilt, hoping to catch the man's scent, but it didn't seem as if anyone had slept there recently. His housekeeper, if he had one, had probably washed the bedding after his last visit.

Gabriel Abbott certainly appreciated comfort. Eva figured his mattress must be top of the line. No matter which position she lay in, it felt as if the bed hugged her, supported her every curve. It was an utterly delicious sensation. She lay there a long time, imagining the man who would be using the bed this weekend. It was with great reluctance that she climbed down and stripped the linens.

Eva tried to view her work dispassionately, yet she couldn't help but picture herself as the recipient of what she imagined would be Gabriel Abbott's undivided attention. Eva wondered what, exactly, Gabriel Abbott's undivided attention would involve, and she felt a tingle slide up and down the length of her spine. She stood still for just a moment, the sheets bunched in her arms, before she decided she'd better get a move on. She tossed the sheets in his washing machine and hung the remainder of the bedding in the sun that shone on the patio. Eva hoped Mr. Abbott, and whoever his guest was, would appreciate her extra effort, but she wasn't counting on it. She was quite certain they'd have other things on their minds.

Now, working in the kitchen, she remembered remaking his bed, smoothing the sheets, turning down the quilts, plumping the pillows to make the bed even more inviting. She'd already set up a small table at his bedside. She'd covered it with a linen cloth and placed a galvanized tin bucket on top, ready to be filled with ice for the sparkling wine she'd brought. She hadn't found exactly what she had in mind among Mr. Abbott's wines, so she'd looked through her own collection and pulled out a bottle of one of her favorite French champagnes made from Rose grapes. Its color was indeed a lovely rose, the color of love, the color, when you got right down to it, of a woman. Eva thought it would be perfect. The wine was crisp, not too sweet, not too dry, with a nice, long, smooth finish. She'd already carried up two champagne flutes and she'd left room on the table for the dessert Gabriel would serve his guest.

Music blasting in her ears, Eva headed into the garden to pick the herbs she needed while the air was still cool. She spotted Luis cleaning the pool and she gave him a smile and a wave. He

waved back. She watched his mouth moving and she realized he was speaking to her. Eva couldn't hear a word he said. She pulled the ear buds out and approached him.

"Buenos días, Eva," Luis said.

"Buenos días, Luis. Cómo está?" she replied.

"Bien. Y usted?"

"Muy bien. What time do you expect Mr. Abbott?"

Luis shrugged. "Later. He called last night."

"Oh? He called me too."

Luis' eyebrows lifted slightly. "This dinner must be important to him," he commented.

Eva hesitated for a moment, then she asked, "Do you know who his guest is?"

"Yo no se. I have heard nothing."

"Well," Eva responded, "I hope what I've planned meets with his expectations."

Luis gave her a reassuring pat on the arm. "I'm sure it will be fine."

Eva found that she liked the older man very much. "Why don't you come in and taste later? I plan to make more than enough. Please, come into the kitchen, maybe around two o'clock, and taste. I would love your opinion."

"I don't know that I have much of an opinion about food, but I will be honored to taste anything you make," Luis said with a smile.

Eva laughed. Luis reminded her of a more serious version of her father. He didn't have much of an opinion about food either, but he knew what he liked. Eva had used him to test recipes when she was a teenager.

Eva picked her herbs and returned to the kitchen. She completed each course in the same order it would be served, setting aside a small portion of everything for Luis. Between the music and her intense focus, time flew by. Hours later, Eva glanced up and she found Luis standing in the open kitchen door, literally hat in hand, staring at her with an amused expression on his face.

"Oh my gosh," she exclaimed. "What time is it?"

"Three."

"How long have you been standing there?"

Luis smiled. "I looked in an hour ago, but you didn't notice me, so I went back to work weeding the garden."

Eva laughed. “All right, I’m almost done. C’mon. I’ve got a tray prepared for you and you’re going to taste, right now, before I get distracted by anything else. I’ll meet you on the patio.”

Eva opened the refrigerator and grabbed the tray. She’d replicated the entire meal for Luis. This was the first time she’d been hired to act as private chef for someone with Gabriel Abbott’s reputation. She wanted everything to be perfect. Luis may not be a gourmand, but his reaction would be telling. Eva watched his face as he tasted the first course, her chilled melon soup. She’d pureed honeydew melon, a tiny bit of sea salt, a few splashes of a light German Riesling, a squeeze of lime, half a seeded Serrano chili, cilantro and a bit of palm sugar. The soup was garnished with a sprig of fresh mint from Gabriel’s herb garden. Luis closed his eyes and rolled the puree around in his mouth as if tasting a fine wine. Eva almost expected him to spit it out.

Finally he declared, “*Exquisita*,” and he finished the soup quickly.

Eva grinned as she handed him the next course.

Chapter Five

Saturday turned out to be sunny with just a slight crisp feel in the air, perfect, especially for the Bay Area in the late spring. Gabe was very tempted to ride his Harley, but instead, he drove his SUV Hybrid. He doubted Stephanie would be up for a bad case of helmet hair. Gabe knew she expected to spend the night with him. He hadn't asked her, but neither had he disabused her of the notion. By the time he pulled up in front of her building and parked his car, he had decided to play the evening by ear. He might as well, he thought. He couldn't get out of it anyway. Maybe he would regain some of the initial interest he'd had in fucking her. When she opened her door wearing a low-cut pale peach sundress and high-heeled sandals, Gabe assessed the woman appreciatively. Not bad. Not too bad at all. Things might just work out between the two of them, at least for the night. He decided that all options were back on the table, so to speak.

Gabe kept up his end of the conversation on the drive to Napa, but as he usually did until he knew a woman well, he was careful not to disclose too much too soon. They chatted about business, family, plays she'd seen recently, clubs and restaurants she favored. Stephanie flirted, not shamelessly, but she made it clear she was interested. Gabe wondered how old she was. Thirty? He stole a sidelong glance at her face. Twenty-eight, maybe. It was hard to tell. She'd put on large sunglasses the minute they'd stepped outside her apartment building. He noticed that her dress had ridden up her thigh, exposing a great deal of skin. Gabe didn't know if that had happened deliberately or by accident, but he suspected the former. She didn't seem to be in any hurry to adjust it.

Gabe found it odd that the closer they got to his Napa Valley home, the less enthusiasm he felt for Stephanie's company. He caught himself wishing he'd decided to spend the weekend

by himself. It disturbed him. Usually a woman this attractive would kick his lust into overdrive. *Damn*, he thought, *what the hell is my problem?*

"Oh my God, your place is gorgeous," Stephanie said, stepping inside the front door. "Who did you hire to decorate for you?"

Gabe shrugged. "Most of the interior work had been completed when I bought it. I just added a few pieces and hired a gardener."

As Stephanie wandered from room to room, Gabe glanced around, curious, wondering if Eva had left any hint of herself, a stray hair, perhaps, a whiff of fragrance if she wore any. Something he could gauge her by. He was eager to check out his bedroom to see what she had planned for him. He escorted Stephanie onto the patio and pulled out a chair for her. After assuring her he'd give her a tour of his gardens, he excused himself for a moment. He took the stairs leading to the loft two at a time.

She'd remade his bed. That was the first thing Gabe noticed. She'd plumped his pillows, turned down the quilts. He leaned over and inhaled... Gabe smiled. He caught her. She'd been there. She'd lain on his bed. His little chef had lain on the duvet. He could smell her. Curious, was she? Gabe inhaled again, running his palm across the soft cover. Amber. Cinnamon. Chilies. Mint. Chocolate. Coffee. Musk. Like a fine wine. God, Eva smelled fuckable. He looked around. She'd set up a table at his bedside. On it sat a galvanized tin bucket filled with ice and a bottle of what looked like French champagne. He grabbed the bottle by the neck and pulled it up to check out the label. She had good taste. It was of his favorites. He wondered how she knew. Sitting in the ice next to the bottle of champagne was a bowl of fresh strawberries. He popped one into his mouth. The sweet-tart flavor exploded on his tongue. Just picked from his garden. She'd probably left moments before they'd arrived.

Alongside the bucket, she'd placed a plate of delicate shortbread cookies. Beside the cookies were two candles. Suspended above each candle on a metal rack sat a ceramic bowl. Each bowl was filled with something that looked like ice cream topping. Gabe assumed she intended them to light the candles and dip the cookies into the bowls or maybe spread the warm stuff on... Gabe stuck his little finger into one of the bowls and brought it to his mouth. He tasted maple, caramel, maybe a little balsamic vinegar, and the barest hint of salt. The second bowl contained a deep, dark, delightfully bittersweet chocolate mixture. He recognized the flavor of his own Cabernet. Gabe took another taste of each. He felt himself grow very erect very quickly. He knew exactly who he wanted to spread the stuff on and it wasn't Stephanie Lindstrom.

"Gabriel?" Stephanie called to him from the foot of the stairs. "Gabriel, are you up there?"

He heard her begin to ascend. He quickly adjusted his jeans and hurried downstairs to meet her.

"Sorry," he said, meeting her eyes, "Just picking up a message." He quickly steered her toward the kitchen. Gabe's initial impulse was to distract her by suggesting that they select a wine together, but he realized that wouldn't be fair. To her. Gabe wondered if he'd lost interest because he'd been so busy lately, but he dismissed the thought. Business had never before interfered with pleasure of this type. He'd lost interest because his interest lay elsewhere.

Gabe took Stephanie's arm. He turned her toward him and he studied her face. She returned his gaze, confident, poised, eager. For a moment he faltered. She expected him to take her to bed.

Why on earth, he asked himself, can't I do that? She's beautiful, intelligent, successful. And it doesn't have to mean all that much.

"Stephanie," Gabe said, "I'm taking you home."

"Wha...what?" she stuttered.

"I'm sorry. I'm taking you back to the city."

"Why? What's happened?"

Gabe ran a hand through his hair. "I can't explain," he said. "Look, I feel terrible about this, but tonight just isn't going to work out."

"Are you seeing someone else, Gabriel? That message you picked up... was it from a woman?"

"No," replied Gabe quickly. "It's nothing like that. I'm not seeing anyone else."

"I don't understand." Gabe heard the anger and the hurt in Stephanie's voice.

"Look, Stephanie, I can't explain. Something's come up. There's something I have to take care of. I'm sorry. I'll try to make it up to you." *Who knows? Maybe I will, he thought. Just not tonight.*

They drove back to San Francisco in silence. Uncomfortable silence. He grabbed the small bag Stephanie had brought and escorted her to the door of her apartment. When he leaned over to kiss her cheek in apology, he caught the resentment in her eyes. He fully expected her to pull away, but she didn't. She turned her mouth to his and kissed him with all the passion she could muster. She wrapped her arms around him and pressed her body against his. Gabe felt nothing but embarrassment as he gently disengaged himself. He wasn't quite sure who he was more

embarrassed for, Stephanie for kissing him so wantonly, or himself for his inability to respond to a beautiful woman. He wondered what in the hell was wrong with him. He squeezed her hand.

“Goodnight. I promise I will call you as soon as I get this figured out.”

Stephanie looked for an instant as if she’d tasted something nasty, but she quickly flashed him a smile. “I’ll look forward to it. I’m sorry things didn’t work out tonight, Gabriel.”

Gabe drove home and parked his car in the parking garage. He stopped in his apartment only long enough to grab his helmet, a leather jacket and the keys to his motorcycle. He headed back to Napa, driving his bike as fast as he dared.

Gabe sat in his kitchen, alone. He’d read Eva’s note several times, tracing the neat printing with his fingertips, as if her handwriting might give him some clue as to the kind of woman she was. Her note was brief and professional and left him entirely in the dark as to her character. Gabe followed the instructions to the letter, serving himself each course in the order she’d intended him to serve it to his guest. He started with the chilled melon soup in a martini glass, garnished with a sprig of his own spearmint. God, it was cold, fresh, not too sweet. The perfect opening course for a meal. He swore he could taste some Riesling in it, but it wasn’t a wine he recognized from his collection. Eva must have brought it. He searched through the fridge and he found most of a half-bottle of an expensive German wine. Gabe ignored the Chardonnay she’d selected, one of his own, and instead poured himself a glass of the Riesling and sipped appreciatively while he considered her next course. It was a salad course. Eva had artfully arranged her offerings on a narrow, lightweight bamboo plank.

On one end of the plank, she’d placed a small salad of tiny spring radishes. The radishes had been sliced paper-thin. They were almost transparent, and they’d been sprinkled with fresh chives, also from his herb garden and sea salt. At the other end was a tiny pile of bitter micro-greens, topped with a few snips of Italian parsley and cilantro. Eva must have toured his entire property. Gabe wondered if Luis showed her where to find everything or if she discovered them on her own. He was willing to bet she’d found them on her own, like the strawberries she’d left at his bedside.

In the center of the plank, she’d molded finely minced, bright red, wild salmon tartar. Nothing added. It glistened in the light from the candle he’d lit. On one side of the salmon sat a small pile of delicate pink flakes. Gabe dipped his finger into the pile, brought it to his mouth and licked it. Salt. Some kind of pink salt. On the other side, she’d mounded coarsely cracked

black pepper. He picked up a tiny white ceramic pitcher and sniffed. Toasted black sesame oil, ginger, and rice wine vinegar. Gabe's mouth watered. He wished he had someone to share this meal with, but he was glad he'd taken Stephanie home.

He picked up the small fork and took a taste of the salmon. The mouth feel was smooth, soft. Gabe savored it. The salmon tartar felt exactly like a woman, like he was tonguing a woman. The same sweet salt, the same tenderness. It seemed to him as if he was tasting Eva. He found himself growing erect and his swollen cock pressed uncomfortably against his zipper. Gabe stood up and stretched. He grabbed his glass of wine and stepped out onto the patio. The sun had set an hour before. The night was cool, as nights tended to be in the hills above the valley. He wanted to finish everything she'd prepared for him, but he didn't know if he could stand it. One more bite and he might come in his pants. Gabe laughed out loud. He wanted to meet this mysterious Eva, but there were so many 'ifs', the biggest 'if' being, what if she was nothing at all like he imagined.

Gabe listened to the night noises for a few minutes before he returned to the kitchen and his dinner. He finished the salad course and found the herb sorbet she'd left for him in the freezer. It was intended as a palate cleanser. Lemon balm. She'd used the lemon balm from his garden.

The main course, accompanied by a spicy Zinfandel, consisted of a miniature filet mignon, cooked to perfection, seared on the outside, juicy and bright pink on the inside. Eva had sliced it thin. The meat melted like butter in his mouth. He dipped one piece in the wasabi cream Eva had provided. The bite of the wasabi was nice, without the unpleasant searing sensation of true horseradish. She'd accompanied the steak by equally miniature new potatoes, oven-roasted in olive oil with fresh rosemary and thyme, and bright green asparagus spears, steamed until they were just tender-crisp. Gabe ate them with his fingers. He took a break before he tackled the cheese course. His interest in Eva Raines had once again grown in direct proportion to the size of his erection, the erection induced by the images tasting her food brought to mind.

Gabe shook his head. This was a first. Food meant a great deal to him because going hungry as a child had meant something. Listening to his little sister's stomach growl on the bus to school because they'd had nothing to eat for breakfast that morning or supper the night before meant something. Watching his mother sacrifice so she could scrape together enough money to feed her two children meant something. Over the past ten years, Gabe had come to appreciate a fine meal as much as the next man, maybe more because he'd been deprived as a child, and because by necessity he'd taught himself how to pair his wines with food. But he'd never

experienced this sort of physical reaction to anything he'd put in his mouth, aside from a woman, that is. Only a woman, the right woman, tasted this good.

Eva had scattered fresh fruit casually across the cheese tray. Cherries, raspberries, plump California blackberries. She'd poached fresh peaches in what tasted like a lemony, sugar syrup, peeled them, sliced them, and spread the slices neatly on the tray. The slices were gold as a harvest moon. Gabe ignored the utensils and used his fingers to eat his fill of the fruit, licking the sticky, sweet syrup from his fingertips. Finally he pushed the tray away, completely sated.

Gabe stretched his arms over his head and leaned back. He closed his eyes. That was the most sensuous meal he'd ever eaten. He'd heard his assistant comment that food could be as good as sex, but he'd never before believed it. Eva's food was foreplay, pure and simple. It was a build up to orgasm. She'd intended sex to be the dessert. The sweets she'd left in his bedroom were for drizzling on someone... on Stephanie. The only person Gabe could imagine drizzling them on was Eva herself. He wanted to drip warm chocolate into the hollow of her throat. Between her breasts. He wanted to watch himself pour caramel over her nipples, swirl it around them with his fingertips and then suck it off. He wanted to slowly trickle both down her belly, all the way down, to her clit. He would pour the warm toppings over her and he would bury his face in her pussy and lick her until she begged him to stop.

Eyes still closed, Gabe brought a hand forward and ran his palm down the front of his jeans. Jesus Christ. If her food could make him this hard...

* * * *

Eva was fucking some man, some incredibly hot, hard, relentless, faceless man. He bit down on her erect nipple and she felt her mouth open on a scream of pure pleasure. She was about to come when a phone rang somewhere and the man disappeared. Eva reached for him desperately, but he had vanished. Eva opened her eyes as she bolted upright. She was in her own bed, alone, her damp tee shirt clinging to her, and her cell phone was ringing. It had been a dream.

Eva pushed the button on her phone to answer. She tried to slow her breathing. She cleared her throat.

"Hello?" She wondered how hoarse her voice sounded.

"Eva."

"Gabe? What? What are you...?"

"I loved the dinner, Eva. Thank you."

"Oh. You're...you're welcome. I'm glad." Eva glanced at the clock. It read one a.m.

"Thank you for the granola."

"Of course," she replied. "It's part of my service." Eva waited to see if there was anything else. She got the distinct feeling that Gabriel Abbott wanted to ask her something.

"What you left in the bedroom," he said, his voice mellowing, "I liked the thought of it."

Eva felt herself blush from the top of her head to the tips of her toes. She realized she was wet, very wet, both from her dream and from the sound of him. *He liked the thought of it? Did that mean he hadn't used it for its intended purpose?* She wanted to hear him repeat that.

Before Eva could stop herself, she blurted out, "Did you?"

"Yes," she heard Gabe say. "Very much."

"I'm glad... I'm glad you enjoyed it."

She heard him laugh softly. "I didn't say I enjoyed it. I said I liked the thought of it."

Oh my God, Eva panicked. I messed up. Maybe this was a business dinner and I totally fucked up. I completely misread the situation. Shit.

"Mr. Abbott—"

"Gabe."

"Gabe, I'm totally sorry if I overstepped. I'm so sorry. I assumed... I made an assumption... maybe I shouldn't have..."

"You have nothing to apologize for, Eva. The dinner was perfect. That's all I wanted to say."

"You're sure?"

"Absolutely certain. I'd like to use you again, if you don't mind. How about next weekend? Are you free?"

Eva felt her heart skip a beat.

"I would need to run it by Tom and Marcus, but as far as I know they haven't added anything to my schedule."

"Then plan on next Sunday," he said. "I'll call you this week with the details."

"All right."

"And Eva..."

"Yes?"

"I'll try not to wake you up next time."

Eva laughed into the phone. "Goodnight, Gabe. I'm glad your dinner went well."

"Goodnight, Eva. Sleep tight."

Eva clicked off and leaned back onto the pillows. *What just happened? What on earth just happened? Did Gabriel Abbott call at one in the morning to thank me for helping him seduce someone? Or was this dinner something else entirely?* Eva didn't know what to think. The only thing she knew was that the arousal she felt from her dream still lingered. She closed her eyes and tried to recapture the feel of the faceless man moving inside her. She gave him Gabriel Abbott's voice. As her hand slid beneath the loose boxers she slept in, and her fingers found her aching clit, Eva fantasized that it was Gabe's hand touching her. She came in seconds.

* * * *

Eva woke to bright sunshine. It was a perfect day for a bike ride. She made herself a quick bowl of oatmeal, washed her face and applied sunscreen, then she brushed her long hair and pulled the auburn locks back into a ponytail. She donned bike shorts, a sports bra, and a green, black and red bike jersey. Eva filled up a water bottle and she rolled her bike out of the garage. She snapped her helmet into place and headed Up Valley, crossing Highway 29 at Oak Knoll Road so she could ride the Silverado Trail north. Since she'd gotten very little sleep, she decided to forgo the longer ride to Calistoga and instead turn back just beyond St. Helena. She thought it might be nice for a change to ride past Honig Vineyards and maybe stop to do a little olive oil tasting at their neighbor, Round Pond. She could cut back over to 29 and head south, maybe pay a brief visit to the duck pond at Domaine Chandon before she picked up the frontage road leading back to Napa.

Eva needed a distraction. Her late-night conversation with Gabriel Abbott kept replaying itself in her mind. She had been so certain that he'd planned a seduction dinner. She wondered what had happened. Did his guest bail on him? Did he change his mind? Was she simply so clueless that she'd misunderstood? Or had she become so horny over the past year that she had sex on the brain and she'd stupidly generalized and assumed he did too? God, she felt like an idiot. But his words when he mentioned the dessert she'd left in his bedroom—*I liked the thought of it*—made her tingle all over. His voice alone practically made her... Eva felt her hands unconsciously loosen their grip on the handlebars and she inhaled sharply, reminding herself to pay attention or she'd end up smashed on the side of the highway. She pumped her legs faster, eager to outrace her thoughts. It wasn't safe to lose focus on the Silverado Trail. Especially on a weekend in late spring with all the half-drunk crazy tourist drivers on the road.

* * * *

Gabe decided he needed a distraction. After his conversation with Eva, he'd tossed and turned all night. He'd used his fist, twice, but it didn't do him any good. He didn't want his fist, he wanted her, or at least, he wanted the idea of her. The morning was bright and he decided to take out his Harley. He'd prefer to ride his mountain bike but he'd left it in the city. It was a perfect day to enjoy the winding highway past Calistoga. Maybe he'd spend a little time in the redwood forest there. Get in a short hike. He thought he'd return the long way, via Napa, past the offices of ATAP. He'd found their address online. Gabe was hoping maybe she'd be there. Checking in or something. Working on Sunday. He could sneak an anonymous look at her. Yeah, dream on, he told himself. He wondered why he hadn't just asked Eva to stop by his cottage today. It would have been so easy.

Jesus, I'm pathetic, Gabe thought as he headed up Highway 29. Beating off because of a woman's food. Because of the sound of her voice. For all I know, she's sixty years old and a grandmother who happens to like biking. He snorted. I'm perverted, that's what I am. Lusting after someone who's probably married and has kids and a dog and a house with a white picket fence. The bike skidded on some gravel and Gabe corrected. Pay attention, he admonished himself, or you'll end up with a nasty road rash. Too damn many tourists in St. Helena. Gabe reminded himself that tourists paid his bills and made his charity work possible. He made an effort to regain his composure and just enjoy the day. The weather was great and the fresh air would clear his head. Then he remembered the feel of that salmon tartar on his tongue and he was right back where he started. *Fuck*. At least the farther north he rode, the fewer cars he saw.

Chapter Six

“Goddamn mother-fucking cock-sucking piece of shit asshole!”

Gabe burst into laughter at the string of expletives coming from a few parking spaces over. He’d just turned off his bike and removed his helmet. The voice was female and vaguely familiar, although the woman, whoever she was, had quite a mouth on her. Not since college had he run into anyone who felt so free to express such a colorful vocabulary. Suddenly a bike helmet was hurled across the Domaine Chandon lot. Quite a few heads turned in his direction, seeking the source of the temper tantrum.

Wearing a grin, Gabe retrieved the bike helmet and strolled toward the sound of muttering. He was hoping this was exactly the kind of distraction he’d been seeking. A long motorcycle ride and a hike hadn’t done the trick. Gabe wandered around the far side of a Mercedes coupe and spotted a woman wearing bike shorts and a quick-dry biking shirt. She knelt on the asphalt, bent over to look at a bicycle tire she’d apparently removed. Her sweetly curved behind tilted up in Gabe’s direction and he was glad he’d kept his jacket on. From what he could see, the woman’s legs were long and lean and her arms nicely muscled in a very feminine sort of way. Her bike shirt was soaked with sweat and it clung to her narrow waist, defining her slender back and broad shoulders. Her long, curling, auburn ponytail whipped sideways as she stood up and tossed a small wrench onto the ground.

“Fuck me,” she said quietly.

Gabe froze. He knew that voice. He’d know it anywhere. It was his little chef. His little chef could cuss like a truck driver. Who’d have thought? *Fuck me, indeed.* He shot a quick glance at the back of her left hand. No ring. Gabe’s grin widened. Now all she had to do was turn around.

“Can I help you, miss?”

For an instant, the woman appeared to have been struck by lightning. Then she whirled around to face him, her brown eyes wide, questioning. She recognized his voice, all right. Gabe stared right back. Eva Raines was everything he'd imagined her to be and more. His immediate impression was that she was quite possibly the most fuckable woman he'd ever seen, but before Gabe could utter another word, he found his eyes focused on a goose-egg sized black and blue bump above her right eye. Confused, he shook himself and took a good look at her. Blood ran down the front of both legs from knees that looked like raw meat and her palms were scraped and bleeding. Eva began to speak, then she quickly closed her mouth, but not before he'd caught a glimpse of straight, white teeth and a sweet pink tongue. He saw her eyes fill with tears as she tilted her determined chin up, daring him to say one word about her injuries. Gabe dropped the helmet on the ground and reached for her.

He gripped her firmly by both shoulders. "What happened to you?"

"It's...it's not that bad," she stammered.

"The hell it isn't!" He swung her up in his arms and strode to a nearby bench. He sat her down and knelt in front of her. He studied both knees, his gaze intent, then he reached for her hands and turned them over. Finally, he stood up and assessed the bump on her head. Eva sat through his exam in silence.

"I don't like the look of that bump," he said. "Didn't you have your helmet on?"

"Of course I had my helmet on," she said, her voice defensive. "I always wear my helmet. The rock was just... The rock that hit me was just in the wrong place."

The corner of Gabe's mouth twitched. "What happened? You get run off the road?"

"Yes," she said. Gabe could hear her indignation in that one little word. "Some jerk, who probably had too much to drink, was coming down the road the wrong way, and when I tried to swerve, he swerved with me and rode me right into the ditch. And then the asshole kept on going! He didn't even stop to see what happened. I might have been dead for all he cared. My front rim is trashed. Shit."

Eva stood on shaky legs and started toward her bike. Gabe took her arm.

"Where do you think you're going?" he asked.

"Home," Eva replied. "I'm going home."

"How do you plan to get there?"

She pulled her arm out of his grasp. "How the fuck do you think? Walk."

She's a pistol, Gabe thought, hiding his grin. "Over my dead body," he said aloud. "Wait here."

"Why?"

Gabe rolled his eyes at her. "You ask too many questions. Just sit your little ass down on that bench and wait here for a second."

Eva stalked to the bench and sat, a scowl on her lovely face.

Gabe returned to the parking lot and checked out Eva's bike. She'd removed the front tire and she was absolutely correct, the tire was ruined, the rim bent beyond repair. He picked up the bike and the tire and carried it past her, into the winery. He walked up to the woman sitting behind the information desk.

"Miss, a woman was nearly hit by a car on the lane leading to your winery. She has some minor injuries and I'm going to drive her to the hospital to get checked out. Would you mind storing her bicycle behind your desk until I can come back for it?"

The woman looked up at him with some surprise. He could tell that she recognized him. He'd attended plenty of events at the winery. "Is she all right? Do I need to call an ambulance?"

"No," answered Gabe. "That won't be necessary. Would you mind keeping the bike until I can pick it later?"

"Oh, Mr. Abbott, of course. We'd be happy to watch the bike for you."

"Thank you."

Gabe leaned the bike and the tire against the wall behind the desk and left the lobby. Eva fidgeted restlessly on the bench where he'd left her.

"Your knees hurt?" he asked, sympathetically.

Eva nodded. "I don't have a way home," she said, "And I don't have any money with me." Gabe detected a slight quiver in her voice. He'd like to get his hands on the stupid fuck who forced her into a ditch. She could have been killed.

"C'mon, I'm taking you home."

Eva shook her head. "No, I can't ask you to do that. I mean, I don't really know you well enough to impose on you."

"You cooked me dinner last night. A very intimate dinner." Gabe winked at her. "I think you know me well enough."

Eva didn't answer him, but she blushed in a most becoming way.

"Let me take you home and help get those cuts cleaned up. Do you need to go to the hospital? The bump on your head, I mean?"

"No. I never lost consciousness. I don't feel sick. I think I just need to put some ice on it."

"Let's go." Gabe reached for her.

"Please don't...don't carry me again. I don't want everyone staring at me."

"Tough."

Gabe swung her up in his arms and headed back toward his motorcycle. Eva buried her face against his shoulder. He didn't care if she was embarrassed. He wanted to feel her warm body against his, and he didn't want her knees to open up again.

"My helmet," came her muffled voice.

Gabe set her on her feet next to his bike. He retrieved her helmet.

"Here, let me help you," he said, tucking a stray lock of hair behind her ear.

Careful to avoid the bruise on her forehead, he secured the strap beneath her chin. Gabe climbed onto his Harley and lowered the passenger footrests. He started the bike.

"Hop on," Gabe instructed her.

Eva climbed on the back slowly, trying to keep her bloody knees away from his thighs.

"Don't worry about it," he said. "Lean on me." He reached back and carefully brought her arms forward, wrapping them around his waist, tucking her abused hands beneath his jacket. "It's okay, Eva. Relax. I've got you."

Gabe felt her exhale and press herself against his back. His mouth split into a grin. She felt good. She felt perfect. Blood, bumps, scrapes, dirt, foul mouth and all.

* * * *

Eva directed Gabe to her small home off Seminary. He pulled into her driveway and parked, helping her climb off the back of the bike. Eva was grateful for his assistance. Her knees were beginning to stiffen up and she knew from experience that cleaning them was going to be a bitch. She winced and bit her lower lip as she stuck a stinging hand into her pocket to retrieve her house key. She was a mess. And of course Gabriel Abbott had to be there to witness it. Eva didn't know if she'd ever been more embarrassed in her entire life. Or ever wanted a man the way she wanted him. He was exactly what she'd pictured. Tall, dark, determined. The way he'd lifted her into his arms like she weighed nothing more than a feather... my God, the man made her quiver. She hoped he thought her shakiness was due to the accident. Maybe it was, at least in part. But pressed against him on his motorcycle? Her arms wrapped around his waist, her hands

tucked beneath his jacket? Her fingertips brushing up against something that felt like...? She'd had to swallow a few moans on the ride home and they weren't from the pain in her knees or the bump on her head.

Gabe took the key from her trembling hand and unlocked the front door. He held it open for her and ushered her inside. Eva turned to him. She saw that he was looking around her place curiously and she hoped she hadn't left any dirty laundry on the floor.

"Thank you," she said, "Thanks for rescuing me and thanks for the ride home."

"I'm not leaving you yet," he replied. "You need to get those cuts cleaned up and it's going to be pretty hard to do it by yourself." Before Eva could protest, he threw his jacket on the couch and he strode past her. "C'mon. Where's your bathroom?"

Eva pointed mutely and trailed slowly behind. He was right, damn it. For some perverse reason, she didn't want him to be right. For another perverse reason, she wanted him to be absolutely right and stay all afternoon, taking care of her. She heard the water running in the bathtub. She approached the bathroom door.

"Uh-uh," she said, shaking her head. "You're not putting me in the tub."

"Nice thought," Gabe grinned up at her devilishly, "but you're going to sit on the edge and I'm going to clean off your knees. Now be a good girl and come here. Sit. I need to get your bike shoes off." He dropped the lid to the toilet seat.

Eva perched stiffly on the closed toilet seat while Gabe removed her shoes and socks. He tossed them carelessly into the hallway. He rolled up his sleeves and checked the water temperature in the tub. Eva watched through half-closed eyes. The man was an intriguing mix of hard and soft. She didn't know which portion of the mixture intrigued her the most, but before she had time to make up her mind, she was lifted bodily from the toilet to the edge of the tub. Her legs dangled into the warm water.

"All right, this part's gonna hurt. I think you've ground some gravel into your knees. I'll go slow."

Eva sucked in a breath, anticipating the initial sting of warm water against open skin. Gabe knelt beside her. With one strong arm wrapped around her for support, he dipped the other into the water and began to gently wash her knees, first with plain water and then with soap. Eva closed her eyes. She felt him pick out several tiny pieces of granite.

"Hands."

Eva extended her hands and Gabe provided them with the same gentle treatment.

"Where do you keep your clean towels?"

Eva pointed to a cabinet. She felt herself growing sleepy.

"You're not gonna pass out on me, are you?" she heard Gabe ask, concern in his voice.

Eva shook her head. "Just tired, I guess," she said. "I didn't sleep much last night."

"And the bump on the head didn't help, did it," Gabe replied.

Gabe dried her legs and hands gently with a clean towel. She watched him rummage through her medicine cabinet and pull out a tube of antibiotic ointment. He helped her to stand.

"I'm going to get these clothes off you," he said, "and spread some of this ointment on your knees and your palms and then you're going to get into bed with an ice pack. You have anything easy you can put on?"

Eva heard herself answer him, "yes." Why was she so passive? Why was she letting this man take charge? What was wrong with her?

Gabe helped her walk into her bedroom and she pointed at the boxers and old, ratty tee shirt she'd dropped on the bed earlier in the day. Eva automatically lifted her arms as her sweat soaked shirt was removed. She felt a chill as the air hit her bare breasts and she realized he must have pulled off her sports bra. Gabe muttered something under his breath, but Eva couldn't make it out. She felt him tugging at her bike shorts. She wore nothing beneath them. She really should protest, she told herself, she really should, but she'd grown so drowsy that it didn't seem to matter all that much what he did. Gabe managed to get her out of the sticky shorts without hurting her knees too much. Suddenly Eva found herself on her back in bed, wearing the old tee shirt and boxers she'd shown him. Gabe sat beside her. He delicately spread the soothing ointment on her knees and hands. He tucked her in, taking care to lift the blanket over her knees, and piled two pillows behind her head, then he disappeared. Eva heard banging sounds coming from her kitchen. Gabe returned shortly with a dishtowel and a plastic bag filled with crushed ice. He wrapped the ice in the towel and climbed into bed beside her. He leaned her against him and pressed the ice bag to her forehead.

"Gabe," Eva whispered.

"Hmm?"

"Can you take my ponytail out? It hurts."

"Sure sweetheart, I'll be happy to."

The ice bag was set aside for a moment and she felt him tug the elastic out of her hair. He combed her curls with his fingertips for a few moments before he pulled her against him and once more pressed the ice to her head.

"Eva?" His deep voice rumbled against her.

"Yes?"

"Do you want to go to the hospital?"

"No."

"Do you know who the president is?"

"Obama."

"Do you know what day it is?"

"Sunday."

"What did you do yesterday?"

"I cooked for you."

She was silent for a moment, then she spoke his name, her voice husky with fatigue.
"Gabe?" It was only the second time she'd spoken his name since he'd found her.

"Yes, sweetheart?"

"What were you doing up at Domaine Chandon?"

"Pit stop. They have nice bathrooms."

Eva laughed. "Do you still need to go?"

"Eventually. What were you doing there?"

"Visiting the ducks."

"Oh. Well, it's a nice day for that."

"Yeah," she said quietly, "It's a nice day for that."

Gabe lay beside Eva feeling the regular rise and fall of her chest against his. Her breathing was soft and even. He was a little concerned about the possibility of a concussion, especially since she'd fallen asleep so quickly. He reminded himself that the forehead was the thickest part of the skull, so she was probably all right, just shaken up. Like she said, she apparently hadn't slept much after his phone call.

This was the first time in Gabe's entire adult life that he'd removed a woman's clothes without making love to her, especially a woman he wanted so urgently. If Eva hadn't been unaware, he couldn't have faced her, not with the obvious bulge in the front of his jeans, but

she'd been pretty out of it and she didn't utter a single word of protest when he'd pulled her clothes off. The sight of her round, high breasts, tipped with taut, pink nipples, had nearly done him in. Jesus, it was pure torture not to touch her any more than necessary. Her bike shorts were sticky and he'd had to turn her around to get them down. Eva had the sweetest little rounded ass he'd ever seen on a woman. It took every ounce of self-control he could muster not to rub his swollen cock against her. When he'd pulled up her boxers, he'd inadvertently brushed his fingers against the soft, dark red hair of her pussy. Christ, he'd thought he might explode. Between the sight of her, the touch of her silky skin, and the scent of her—blood, sweat, musk—Gabe didn't know how he would get through the night, yet there was no way in hell he'd leave her alone. If necessary, he'd spend tomorrow with her too. She was his little chef. He wanted to make sure she'd be okay.

Gabe had to take a piss, but he decided to wait until Eva fell into a deeper sleep, and he didn't want to remove the ice bag from her forehead just yet. He wondered if it was even going to be possible with his hard-on. He nearly laughed when he thought about those commercials that said, *if you experience an erection lasting more than four hours, see your doctor*. Crap. He'd been uncomfortably erect since he'd laid eyes on her upturned rear-end in the parking lot. Gabe freed a hand and unzipped his jeans. He sighed with relief. Eva stirred momentarily. She murmured in her sleep and wrapped an arm around his waist, nestling deeper into his shoulder. Her hand was mere inches from the head of his swollen cock. Gabe shifted a little to give her more room. If this woman was going to touch him, by God, Gabe wanted her to know who she was touching and what. Besides, his self-control was hanging by a thread and he didn't want to risk an accident. She might accidentally push him over the edge. Eva was vulnerable, but Gabe was no heel who took advantage of an injured woman, no matter how much he wanted her. No. If he was going to make love to her, when he made love to her, he wanted Eva awake, alert and responsive. Gabe tightened his arm around her shoulders. Whether she knew it or not, she would become a lot more than his little chef. Gabe groaned in anticipation. The food Eva prepared for him would be nothing compared to the taste of the woman herself.

Chapter Seven

Eva woke just after sunset. Her eyes felt gritty and there was something cold and wet smashed against her cheek. For a few moments, she couldn't remember why she was in bed or why her knees were burning, why her palms felt raw or why her head hurt like hell. When she reached up to touch her forehead, she found a wet plastic bag filled with cold water stuck to the side of her face. As she peeled it away, her hands brushed against a hard male body lying next to her. Eva inhaled sharply. Gabriel Abbott. It hadn't been a dream. She really had crashed on her bike near Domaine Chandon, and Gabe really had found her and brought her home on his motorcycle. He'd bathed her knees and her hands and put medicine on them, and he'd made an ice bag for her. He'd taken out her ponytail and he'd stripped off her clothes. Eva could feel her cheeks flame. She was surprised she didn't catch her pillow on fire. She ran her hands slowly, cautiously, down her sides. She wore the boxers and old tee shirt she used for pajamas. Gabe had put those on her, she remembered now.

Moving carefully so as not to disturb the sleeping man, Eva reached between her legs, wondering if she'd maybe done something she didn't remember, but as far as she could tell, she hadn't. She wasn't certain if she felt relief or disappointment, but she decided upon relief. If by some miracle of fate she ever did make love to Gabriel Abbott, she didn't intend to be semi-comatose during the experience. Maybe afterwards, but not during.

Eva turned and studied Gabe's face in the half-light. Jesus, he was beautiful. In sleep, his features relaxed, softened. A thick lock of chestnut brown hair fell across his brow in a gentle wave. He had the kind of hair a woman wanted to bury her hands in while she was fucking him. Eva felt herself blush again.

Although Gabe's eyes were closed, Eva had gotten a good look at them in the sunlight at Domaine Chandon. They were a dark, deep, emerald green, wide set, with enchanting tiny laugh

lines in the corners when he smiled. His nose was aquiline, his jaw strong and masculine, with a pronounced shadow beard that she could see despite the poor lighting. Eva suspected he hadn't shaved since Friday morning. She was tempted to run her fingers along his cheek and down his jaw, but she didn't dare take such liberties. Eva rolled her eyes. Liberties. He'd already stripped her naked for Christ's sake.

Eva glanced at his mouth with longing, noting his full, sensuous lips. They were slightly parted in sleep and she wondered what he would taste like if she licked him. If she were to slide her tongue... Instead, Eva slid a bit farther away. She tried to remember when she had last been with a man, and she couldn't come up with a date. It had been a very long time.

Eva's eyes traveled the line of tendons down his neck and she gauged the width of his strong, broad shoulders. She saw that he'd crossed his arms over his chest. Her quilts were pulled up to his waist, covering what Eva knew to be a very significant piece of him. Her cheeks felt on fire again as she remembered how her fingers had accidentally brushed against his erection on the ride home. At least she thought it was an erection. She supposed it could have been a very big wallet stuck in a very unusual place.

As Eva looked at the man, she was struck by the notion that he must be quite strong, both in body and in mind. When she'd heard his voice in the parking lot and turned around, she'd been aware of an intensity, an energy in the air about him despite his grin. He seemed almost hungry, like he'd been starved at some point in time. Eva bet he was a man who didn't take anything for granted. A man who worked hard, fought hard, played hard. Someone who didn't suffer fools lightly. He reminded her of an intelligent, opportunistic, predator. A wolf. That's what he reminded her of, the alpha male of the pack, the wolf who led the others on a hunt and established the pecking order. Gabe was definitely not the wolf left behind to baby sit the cubs, although Eva had to admit he'd done a pretty damn good job of babying her.

This was a first, Eva mused. She'd never before allowed a man into her bed. Oh, she wasn't entirely inexperienced. She'd had sex, just not very often and never in her house. Napa wasn't exactly hook-up city. She hadn't been with a man since before she'd moved here, and when she'd lived in San Francisco, she'd made it a point to be cautious. According to her older brothers, every single man had one goal, and that goal was to get into a woman's pants. Or under her skirt. They'd done their best to instill in her a healthy respect for her own body, even if they spent all their time trying to do exactly what they warned her about. It wasn't that Eva was afraid of men, she wasn't. She was picky. She liked to think she had discriminating taste. Not just any

man would do. Watching Gabriel Abbott sleep, she knew without a doubt that he wasn't just any man.

Eva slid out of bed, being careful not to wake Gabe. Her knees were stiff and sore, but she wanted to brush her teeth and she desperately needed a shower despite the fact that she knew it would sting. She felt about as grungy as she'd ever felt in her life. She tiptoed out of the bedroom, closing the door softly behind her.

The simple act of brushing her teeth had never felt so good. Eva turned the faucet and let the water warm up in the tub before she closed the shower curtain and switched on the shower. She decided she'd better go for lukewarm water, because hot and steamy, no matter how tempting, might be too harsh. She stepped into the tub carefully, keeping her back to the stream of water. Even so, Eva cringed when the water first hit her knees. Within a few minutes, the discomfort had subsided, and she washed her hair and scrubbed the sweat from her body. She took a good look at her knees and decided they weren't so bad. She'd had worse over the years. It would be a pain to wear shorts to work all week and the scabs were going to be unsightly, but there wasn't much she could do about it.

Eva climbed out of the tub and dried off. She smoothed her favorite lotion over everything, even the raw spots. The antibiotic ointment would have to wait until Gabe woke up. She didn't know where he'd put the tube. She towel dried her hair and quickly braided it. The only clothes she'd brought into the bathroom were the boxers and the old tee shirt she'd been wearing, so she pulled them back on and padded into the kitchen. The least she could do was make Gabe something to eat. She assumed he'd eventually wake up and he'd be hungry. It would be nice to have something ready, to thank him for his help.

* * * *

Gabe woke to singing. The room he lay in was dark and it took him a moment to remember where he was. When he smelled Eva, he knew. Gabe reached for her, but the spot where she'd lain was empty. He leaned back on the pillows, crossing his arms behind his head, and listened. It was an old Bonnie Raitt song, one he'd always loved—Angel from Montgomery. He closed his eyes and enjoyed the music. At first he thought Eva had turned on a CD player, but after listening for a few moments, he realized that there were no instruments accompanying the singing voice. It was all Eva. When she finished the song, she launched into a raw rendition of Lowell George's Dixie Chicken. Gabe found himself grinning. If Eva would be his Dixie Chicken and he would most definitely offer to be her Tennessee Lamb. Gabe reached down to make sure

he was covered in case she happened into the bedroom. He was relieved to find that she had thrown a quilt over his open fly. Maybe he'd covered himself. His memory was pretty vague.

Eva must be feeling better or she wouldn't be up and about, and singing her lungs out. Her singing voice kept a smile on his face. It was smoky, peaty, and right on key. She sounded exactly the way she sounded when he'd awakened her with his late night phone calls. Warm, cuddly, sexy as hell. Just as Gabe began to wonder what she was up to, his nose started twitching and his stomach began to growl. She was cooking. If his nose was right, she was making Reuben sandwiches. Shit, he hadn't had a good Reuben since the last time he was in Chicago and he'd taken his sister and her family to a deli.

Gabe adjusted his jeans and made sure to zip them up before he climbed out of bed. He stepped into the hallway and looked for the bathroom. When he came out of the bathroom, he ran into Eva just coming to wake him. He took a look at her long legs as she approached and he noticed that she wasn't quite as stiff as he expected her to be. Despite the scrapes on her knees, she moved with an athletic grace he found extremely appealing. She still wore the man's boxers she'd slept in. They hung on her slender frame so she'd rolled the waistband several times to keep them up. The ragged tee shirt didn't cover much. Light from the living room shone through the thin cotton, framing her narrow waist and the gentle flare of her hips. He felt himself stir at the sight of her erect nipples poking against the material. He decided to be polite and look at her face.

"How's your head?" he asked, studying the bruise on her forehead. She'd pulled her dark red hair back and braided it.

"It's all right," Eva replied. "It's just a bump."

"And the knees?"

"Sore." She shrugged. "They'll be better by the end of the week. Gabe..." she began.

"Hmm?" Gabe raised his eyebrows and waited.

"Thank you. Thanks for bringing me home and cleaning me up. I'm... I'm... I have to admit, I'm more than a little embarrassed."

Gabe felt his mouth twitch. "Why would you be embarrassed? Because I cleaned your cuts or because I stripped you naked and feasted my eyes on your beautiful body?"

Eva's mouth opened and she sputtered for just an instant before she covered her flaming cheeks with her hands. Gabe heard a muffled, "Oh crap," and he laughed.

Gabe took hold of her hands and he lifted them away from her face. "You have nothing to be embarrassed about, Eva. It was my pleasure. Truly. I would go so far as to say you are now in my top ten list of remarkable experiences."

"Really?" Eva shot back, grinning now. "How high do I rank?"

Gabe ran a thumb across her luscious bottom lip. He heard her sharp intake of breath. "Number two, maybe."

"Not number one?" she whispered.

"Give it time," he teased, "I haven't tasted you...yet."

Eva lifted her chin. Gabe stared into her eyes, asking permission without saying a single word. He could see uncertainty warring with her strong desire to challenge him to do exactly what he threatened. Taste her. Everywhere. Starting with that delicious mouth of hers. He watched as Eva's lips parted in anticipation, and he knew which side won. Before she could change her mind, Gabe slid a hand under her braid and he cupped the back of her head. He rubbed his lips against hers, as if testing the waters. Eva sighed softly in response, accepting him, but at the same time, Gabe felt one of her hands press firmly against his chest as if holding him at bay. For an instant, he didn't know which part of her to listen to, but then her tongue flicked delicately over his lips and he shut his mind up and kissed her.

The moment Gabe's lips touched hers, Eva felt like butter left too long in the hot summer sun. At the same time, a tiny voice in the back of her mind reminded her that she really didn't know the man at all. She'd been in his home, even in his bedroom. She'd strolled his gardens, picked his herbs, cooked for him, tasted his wines. Yet she truly didn't know a thing about the man. The idea of pushing him away flashed through her brain, but her body decided not to listen. Her body responded automatically to the delicate touch of his mouth against hers. Before she knew what she was doing, Eva had licked his lips. Gabe's body replied instantaneously. In fact, he practically combusted. An arm slid around her waist and Eva found herself drawn firmly against his hard chest, while the hand at the base of her skull tilted her head back to allow Gabe easier access to her mouth.

Eva had been kissed, but not like this. Not by a man this hungry. Not ever. His tongue explored her mouth liberally, uninhibitedly. It tangled with her own, tasting her as if she were a rare wine. Without realizing it, Eva dug a hand into Gabe's thick hair and pulled him even closer, while her other hand clung to his shoulder. Eva felt the wall behind her back as Gabe rubbed his

long, hard length against her, the material of her boxers moving with him as he pressed himself against what Eva considered her sweet spot. Caught entirely off guard by the strength of her desire, she heard herself whimper, feeling helpless, pleading for more.

A warm hand slid under her tee shirt and fingers moved up her belly. Eva found herself arching her back, giving him easier access. Gabe wasted no time in discovering the sensitive underside of her breast. He stroked the satiny skin with his fingertips and then, as his big hand cupped her breast, his thumb circled her nipple. Eva's legs shook when he rolled her aching tip between his thumb and forefinger. She tore her mouth away from his, and tossed her head back, moaning, while his teeth sought her neck and he nibbled his way down her collarbone. Eva knew where his mouth was headed and she nearly screamed in anticipation. Abruptly, he shoved her tee shirt up and he arrived at her breast. Gabe closed his hot, wet mouth around a nipple that had become almost painful with desire. He sucked, closing his teeth around her taut point, biting, the action deliberate yet delicate at the same time.

Eva did scream, at least, she thought she did, and her hands sought the front of his jeans. She stroked his hard length through the taut material. She heard Gabe groan, his mouth still on her breast. He sounded as if he was in agony. In one fluid motion, Eva unzipped his jeans and she moved his boxers and freed him. A single thought raced through her brain as her hand ran down his steely length, *Oh my God*, and then it disappeared as her tee shirt was torn from her and her boxers were shoved down her thighs. Gabe's fingers searched the delicate folds between her legs. She could tell she was incredibly wet and very slippery.

"Jesus Christ," she heard him grit out between clenched teeth as a finger was thrust carefully inside her. Her body welcomed the intrusion and her mouth trembled as he took her lips again, thrusting his tongue inside, matching the rhythm of his finger. Eva teetered on the brink of what seemed like either a precipice or a cataclysmic orgasm. She wasn't sure which. She slid her thumb over the tip of Gabe's big cock, finding a drop of moisture there. The image had her panting. She heard him growl deep in his throat and her boxers vanished. She felt his hands reach beneath her bottom. Gabe began to lift her off her feet and... suddenly Eva smelled smoke. She pried open her eyes and watched, puzzled, as a gray haze drifted their way from the kitchen. For an instant, the sight didn't register, then the smoke detector above their heads began to shriek.

"Shit!" Eva yelped. "The potatoes!" Her feet found the floor. She shoved Gabe backward and bolted for the kitchen.

"Fuck the potatoes!" she heard him rumble from behind her retreating back.

Eva burst into laughter. Naked as a jaybird, she grabbed a dishtowel and tore open the oven door. Smoke billowed around her. She grabbed the pan containing the charred mass and tossed it into the sink. She opened the tap and ran cold water. Nasty smelling steamed hissed upward. Eva threw the back door wide open to try to usher the smoke outdoors.

"You got a broom?" Gabe stomped down the hallway, buttoning his jeans, his eyes fixed on her naked behind.

"Over there." Eva pointed to the pantry.

Gabe grabbed the broom and returned to the hallway. The shrieking vanished abruptly as he managed to shut off the offending smoke detector. While he busied himself with that chore, Eva grabbed a throw from the couch and wrapped it around herself.

Gabe reappeared in the kitchen doorway. He looked her over, from her flushed cheeks to her swollen lips to the throw wrapped tightly around her shoulders, her arms crisscrossed in front of her to hold it in place.

"So," he said finally, "I take it you don't intend to pick up where we left off."

"Maybe... maybe it's for the best," Eva replied. "Things were getting a little out of control there."

A corner of Gabe's sinful mouth turned up. "Do you hear me complaining?"

Eva smiled shyly. She suddenly felt very exposed. He was fully clothed. She was not. She wanted to get dressed. Now.

"Sit," Eva motioned to a seat. "I made Reuben sandwiches and at least they're not burned. I took them out of the pan before I... I mean I was going to come back and get the..."

Gabe stood there, listening to her, indulging her, an amused expression on his face.

"Oh fuck. Just sit down, Gabe. I'll be right back."

Eva tried to skirt past him, but he grabbed the throw and whirled her around to face him. "You look guilty as hell," he said to her. "Like you just got caught shoplifting or something. You have nothing to feel guilty about, Eva. Nothing whatsoever."

"Sorry," she mumbled. "I didn't mean to...to get so carried away. It's embarrassing."

"What's embarrassing?" Gabe's voice challenged her. "What the hell is embarrassing about wanting someone? About what we just did... almost did?"

"Because...because I'm shy, all right? I'm shy around guys." Eva began to raise her voice. "I'm not like you. I don't have a lot of... I don't have all that much...all that much experience. I'm not like you."

Gabe kept his hand on her shoulder. He looked directly into her eyes. "How do you know what I'm like, Eva? How would you know?"

"Well that's just it, isn't it? I wouldn't know. I don't know you at all. I mean, look at you. You probably have women throwing themselves at you. You were probably fucking someone just last night. She was probably in your bed when you called me. Isn't that what the dinner was all about? So you could seduce some woman? Isn't that why you hired me?" Eva listened to her own words in shock. She didn't know why she was behaving like such a harpy. Gabe had been nothing but kind to her.

Gabe stood silently for a moment, his expression unreadable. Finally he said, "Go get dressed, Eva, and then we'll start this conversation over." He let his hand drop from her shoulder. Eva felt its absence like a wound. Tears filled her eyes and she knew he'd noticed them. Eva ran to her bedroom and slammed the door behind her. Crying, she threw herself on the bed. Behind her, the door opened and she felt the bed lean as Gabe sat beside her.

"Eva," he said, and then he pulled her onto his lap, taking care to keep her covered with her blanket, and he wrapped her in his arms

"I don't know what's wrong with me," she sobbed into his shoulder. "I'm not usually like this. I'm not... I'm not usually a weeping, screeching shrew."

Gabe rubbed her back, soothing her. "I know sweetheart. I know. It's been a long, hard day."

That's right, Eva thought, long and hard. She suddenly began to giggle despite her tears. She could feel her body shaking against Gabe's chest. He tilted her head back to look at her. She saw concern in his eyes.

"Giggling? You're giggling?" He sounded surprised. "What did I say that was so funny?"

"Long..." Eva managed to choke out, "...and hard."

Gabe's resulting grin was wide. "Hey," he protested, "Aren't you the same woman who was just yelling at me about how shy she is?"

"I am shy," laughed Eva, "but I know a big thing when I feel it."

Eva hid her flaming cheeks against Gabe's shoulder. She felt her head bounce up and down as he laughed at her words.

"I don't know whether I've just been complimented or sexually harassed," Gabe finally commented.

"Maybe both?"

Gabe winked at her. "C'mon Eva, throw some clothes on. I'm starving."

He lifted her in his arms and lowered his head. He kissed her soundly on the mouth. "And not just for a Reuben sandwich. Meet me in the kitchen and we can talk."

* * * *

"Damn, this is good." Gabe felt juice run down his chin but he didn't care. He wiped it off with the back of his hand. The Reuben was the best he'd ever eaten. The corned beef had been sliced paper-thin, the Swiss cheese had a nice, nutty tang. Eva had melted it just right, and the seeded Jewish rye was grilled to perfection, crisp on the outside, soft on the inside. She'd drained the sauerkraut before she'd laid it on the meat, but its sour juice still mingled with the sweet homemade Thousand Island dressing. Gabe licked his fingers. In Gabe's view, there was no way to eat a Reuben neatly. The sandwich was messy, sticky comfort food, pure and simple. It reminded him of home. He glanced over at Eva across the table where she picked at her Reuben minus the corned beef. She'd donned a pair of faded jeans and a short-sleeved sweatshirt.

"So how come you have corned beef in your house if you don't eat meat?" Gabe asked, curious.

"Oh, Tom and Marcus stop by a couple times a week and they like my sandwiches. I indulge them."

"You gonna eat that?" Gabe nodded at her sandwich. "Or pick it apart?"

"I'm eating," Eva replied, with a roll of her eyes. "I haven't eaten with anyone for a while. It takes some getting used to."

"You were all ready to eat with me before."

"Yes, but that was before we..."

"Nearly fucked in the hallway?"

Eva smirked at him. "Yes."

Gabe chuckled. He waved half a sandwich at her. "If it makes you feel any better, I'd rather be fucking you than eating this. And I really, really like this. In fact, this is amazing."

Eva shot him a reluctant grin. She pulled a piece off her sandwich and began nibbling on the edge. "So," Gabe heard her say, "what happened last night?"

"Nothing," he replied.

"Oh, so you mean it's none of my business?"

"No, I mean nothing. I ate supper and I called you and I tried to sleep, which was pretty damn hard after eating that meal you prepared. That salmon was something."

"You liked it?" She sounded pleased.

"That would be an understatement. It was..." Gabe searched for the right word.

"Evocative. Extremely evocative."

"Evocative? Of what?" Eva asked innocently.

Gabe looked directly into her eyes. "A certain portion of a woman's anatomy. On my tongue."

Eva's cheeks flamed almost instantaneously and she quickly looked down at her plate. Gabe loved to watch her reactions. She could cuss a blue streak, but the least little mention of sex made her blush.

Gabe finished up one sandwich and started in on a second. "Your four brothers, is that where you got your potty mouth?"

Eva grinned at him. Gabe noticed that she had a small dimple in her left cheek. He found it adorable.

"You ever hear a farmer when he's pulling the engine out of his old pickup because of a blown head gasket? Or listened to him when his John Deere breaks down in the middle of spring planting? Or heard what comes out of everybody's mouth when the bull gets loose? My dad and my brothers can use some pretty colorful language."

Gabe chewed thoughtfully. So she was raised on a farm. "Here in California?" he asked.

"No," Eva replied, still nibbling. "Back in the Midwest."

"Oh? Where?"

"Iowa," said Eva. "Near Avoca."

"I've been by there," said Gabe. "That's just east of Council Bluffs, isn't it?"

"Yeah," answered Eva. "How do you know?"

"I'm from Chicago," he told her. "I've driven through Council Bluffs a number of times on I-80."

Eva gave him an appraising look. "I assumed you were born and raised in the Bay Area. Where in Chicago?"

"My mother lives on Lakeshore Drive now and my little sister's a pediatrician in Skokie. But growing up we lived in one of the projects."

Eva raised her eyebrows. The look she gave him now was one of admiration. "Ah, so you weren't born into the wine industry."

Gabe took a long swallow of the ice-cold beer Eva had set in front of him.

"Hell no. Wine was the furthest thing from my mind when I moved out here. I stumbled into the business completely by accident. I got my masters in Business Administration from Cal. One of my best friends there became an enologist after graduation. He floated around for a while... worked a little up here, a little in Lake County, some in the Livermore area. Eventually, when I'd made some money, he made me a business proposal. The rest, as they say, is history."

"But your wines, they're outstanding," said Eva. "How did you know... I mean, I realize your wine maker, your friend, is exceptional, but how did you know? If you didn't have any experience, I mean."

Gabe winked at her. "Night school," he said. "I'm a quick study. I took some classes at the local community colleges. When I first started out, I didn't know a Cabernet from Mogen David."

Eva laughed with him. She had the most delightful laugh. Gabe noticed his cock begin to respond to the sound of it. Her laugh, her food, her foul mouth, her wonderfully round little ass and her deliciously soft, smooth, firm body. God, was there anything about her he didn't respond to?

"Gabe, the dinner last night... I got the impression... Was I really so off base?"

"No," he admitted. "You had the right idea. I just had the wrong woman. I took her home before dinner."

"I apologize if it was something I did. You know, if she was important to you."

Gabe grabbed her hand. "Why in the hell do you think you have anything to apologize for? Unless you'd like to apologize for distracting me with that beautiful telephone voice of yours?"

Eva's cheeks pinked up again. This time, Gabe reached over the table and rubbed a thumb lightly across her delicate cheekbone. "Eva, about what happened earlier between us. It's going to happen again and next time, there won't be any burnt potatoes or any screeching smoke detector."

He watched Eva close her eyes. Her chest rose as she took a deep breath. He wondered if he should push her right now. He could do it. He doubted she would stop him, but he could see the dark circles under her eyes and the purplish bruise on her head and he remembered her sore

knees. Christ, he wanted to taste her. He wanted to lick that sweet honey between her legs until she begged him to fuck her. He needed to leave. Now. Gabe cleared his throat.

“Will you still cook for me?” he asked, his voice rough. “Next Sunday?”

“Yes,” she breathed, her eyes still closed.

“I’ll call you,” Gabe said and he rose abruptly from his chair. “Thanks for the sandwiches.”

“You’re welcome,” Eva replied.

Gabe noticed that she sounded exhausted. As he walked through the open kitchen door, he flipped the lock and shut it behind him. He didn’t want her to fall asleep at the table with the door wide open, but he didn’t trust himself to put her to bed. His little chef had turned out to be much woman.

Chapter Eight

Jason White stood in his driveway. He held a squirt gun and he pointed it at Eva's car as she pulled up to the curb in front of the house. Eva extricated herself stiffly out of the driver's seat.

"Don't you dare squirt me, Jason. Don't. You. Dare. I am not in the mood."

Jason grinned like a devil in training and squirted water in her direction, hitting the passenger window of her car. As Eva stepped toward him, he got a look at her knees and the grin disappeared.

"Holy crap! What happened to you?"

"Bike wreck."

"You all right? Shit, you really got torn up. Are you sure you should be working today?"

Eva gave the young man a wan smile. "Your concern is touching. Really. I'm all right, just sore."

Jason tossed the plastic pistol into the grass and helped Eva carry in the groceries she'd brought.

"Look Eva, my mom won't mind. I'll talk to her. We can order pizza or something. I feel bad about you cleaning the house with those knees. And what the hell happened to your head? Weren't you wearing a helmet?"

"Wow, Jason," Eva teased, "I didn't know you cared."

The young man said dramatically, "Hey, I care. Give me a little credit. Your words cut me to the quick."

"Okay, I believe you and I promise not to tell anyone you care if you'll go to school and leave me alone."

"No problem. As soon as I put away these groceries."

"Jason," Eva said, "I'm grateful. Thanks. You're actually a pretty nice guy."

"I was wondering when you'd realize it," Jason shot back. "So I guess now we can jump start our May-December relationship and you can make a man out of me?"

Things were back to normal. Eva laughed. "I knew I spoke too soon."

* * * *

Jason had been so helpful before he left for school that Eva baked him a batch of sour cream chocolate cupcakes dipped in chocolate ganache. She sprinkled on tiny bittersweet chocolate curls and arranged the cupcakes on a platter. After that, she called it a day. She'd been cleaning, doing laundry and cooking for almost six hours. Her knees had loosened up during the day, but between dishwashing detergent and cleaning solutions, her palms stung a bit. The bump on her head had gone down, leaving her with a purplish bruise. At least it didn't hurt much. After what had happened with Gabriel Abbott in her hallway the day before, she wondered if she actually did have a concussion. That was the only reasonable explanation she could come up with for her utterly uninhibited behavior. It was either a concussion or the fact that she hadn't had sex with a man in over a year. Was that healthy, she wondered. To remain abstinent for over a year? She'd dated men, other men who'd obviously wanted to have sex with her. Intelligent men, attractive men, seductive men, but not one of them meant enough to her to allow them anything other than a goodnight peck on the cheek.

She'd allowed Gabe a whole lot more than that.

God almighty, the man was a riddle. A unique, ingenious mixture of a sharp mind, a killer instinct for business, a hard body and a soft heart. She'd bet anything his mother lived on Lakeshore Drive because he'd bought her a place there. And his sister probably made it through medical school with his generous financial assistance. Eva wondered if the projects he'd grown up in had been associated with Cabrini Green. She hoped not. Everyone in the Midwest had read articles talking about how hard life was in those projects, between the gang violence and the drugs. She hoped if he'd lived there, it wasn't for his entire childhood.

Gabriel Abbott was a man who knew what he wanted, a man who went after it. Apparently, a difficult childhood had honed him rather than scarred him. Eva realized he hadn't mentioned his father. That made sense. If his father had died or abandoned the family, then yes, they could very easily have ended up on public assistance. Eva shuddered. She couldn't imagine living in a world without her father and her big brothers to look out for her as she was growing up. She reminded herself how lucky she was.

Out of the blue, Eva was overcome by a desire to talk to her mom and dad. She fished her cell phone out of her purse and dialed the number. Perhaps she should talk to Tom and Marcus about some time off and head home for a couple weeks. The weather would be perfect back in Iowa. She could ride her horse, get back to her roots. Regain some sense of control because right now, Eva was feeling dangerously out of control, especially when she thought of Gabriel Abbott and his lips, his tongue, his fingers...

"Hey, Mom, how are you? How's Dad? Yeah? Mom, listen, I'm thinking of coming home for a visit..."

* * * *

Gabe worked at his computer, unconsciously whistling a Bonnie Raitt song.

"Wow."

He looked up. His assistant stood in the doorway.

"Must have been some weekend. I've never heard you whistle before."

The corner of Gabe's mouth turned up. "Yeah, I guess you could say it was."

"So I take it everything went swimmingly with your dinner?"

Gabe hesitated. "Yes, and no," he replied.

"Hmmm," Marsha looked interested. "You gonna see her again?"

Gabe started. "Who?" he asked.

"How quickly you forget... Who do you think?" Marsha rolled her eyes. "Stephanie Lindstrom."

"Oh, uh, no, I don't think so."

"Really? Because she's on her way up right now. She just called from the lobby to see if you were in."

Gabe shoved his chair away from the desk and rose to his feet. "Fuck."

"That good, huh?"

"*That* has nothing to do with *this*," Gabe replied. "*This* is not what you think. And neither is *that*," he added when he saw the look on Marsha's face.

They both heard a noise in the front office.

"Think quick," Marsha advised as she stepped out of the way.

Stephanie blew past her, looking her usual attractive self in a form fitting business suit. Her pinstriped skirt stopped a few inches above her knees and her tailored jacket showed off a pair of formidable attributes. She had no problem balancing on her expensive, silver-gray spike

heels. Already a tall woman, with the heels, Stephanie appeared quite imposing. At this moment, Stephanie Lindstrom was giving off the vibe of a woman who was not to be trifled with. Gabe sighed and pasted a smile on his face.

“Stephanie, what brings you here?”

Stephanie glanced back at Marsha. Marsha took the hint and left Gabe’s office, closing the door behind her. Stephanie strolled to Gabe’s desk and leaned against it. If Gabe *had* been interested, he was quite certain he would find the way in which her skirt hiked up her thigh very seductive. *If* he’d been interested he might have paid more attention to the way she crossed her arms, thrusting her breasts forward as she formed her rosebud mouth into what she obviously hoped would be an appealing little pout.

“I’m still a bit put out with you for hauling me back home so abruptly on Saturday night. With no explanation and no phone call the next day, I might add. I suppose,” she continued, “I could be convinced to forgive and forget.”

She uncrossed her arms and leaned back on his desk, smiling brilliantly at Gabe.

Gabe tried to figure out how to put a sentence together, a sentence that wouldn’t make her think he was nothing but a lowlife. Stephanie was the first time he’d ever changed his mind when it came to seducing a woman. Usually the kind of woman who caught his eye got at least a few months of his undivided attention, even if she was merely arm candy. Stephanie Lindstrom was far from arm candy. Despite her statuesque appearance, she was one tough cookie. She was sharp, observant, wealthy in her own right, and she could play hardball with the big boys. In fact, from what Gabe had learned about her, she relished a good fight. She could also flirt with the best of them.

“I’m sorry about that,” Gabe began. “I honestly didn’t intend to mislead you. Something did come up and—”

“You’ve worked it out?” Stephanie interrupted.

“Not exactly.”

Gabe caught a sudden flash of irritation in her eyes. It vanished as quickly as it appeared. It wouldn’t be wise on his part to play disingenuous. Gabe decided honesty was the best policy.

“So what, exactly, is going on, Gabriel? I got the impression that there was something between us, something more than a tiny spark?”

"I thought there might be too. I did, but the truth is I met someone else. I'm not involved in a relationship with her, but I didn't feel right having you over for the weekend. It wouldn't have been fair to you."

Stephanie's head jerked around as if he'd struck her. In a low voice, she asked, "Fair to me? You were trying to be fair to me?" Stephanie pushed herself away from his desk. She turned to face him. "Perhaps you should have clued me in and allowed me the option of deciding for myself what was fair. Given me a chance to politely decline your invitation before you made a fool of me."

Gabe ran a hand uncomfortably through his hair. "I agree. I should have said something, but I wasn't entirely sure of my feelings until I realized...quite frankly...until I realized it wouldn't be fair to take you to bed if I didn't want a relationship with you."

"Who is she?" Stephanie asked, her voice bitter.

"No one you know," Gabe replied.

"Did you fuck her that night, Gabriel? Did you race back to Napa to fuck her brains out after you so inconsiderately dumped me at my apartment? Is she the one who called you on your cell phone?"

"Stephanie," Gabe tried to be gentle but there was no other way to say this, "it's none of your business."

"The hell it isn't!"

Gabe waited for the slap that almost came.

"You fucking bastard!" she exclaimed.

Stephanie flung open the door to his private office and stormed out past Marsha's desk, scattering files in her haste to leave. Marsha rose from her seat and shot a quick glance at Gabe before she dropped to her knees and began to sort through her work. Gabe hurried to assist her.

"Jeez, what on earth did you do to piss her off?" Marsha whispered.

"I wouldn't have sex with her," Gabe replied in a quiet voice.

"Here? Now?"

"No, on Saturday."

"Why the hell not?" Marsha sat back on her heels. "Forgive me, but wasn't that what you were angling for?"

"Look, Marsha, what I can't understand is why this is so hard for her to understand. Not that it's anybody's business, but I met someone else. It was unexpected. It happened out of the

blue. I couldn't rationalize having sex with one woman when I wanted to be with another woman. I was attempting to be a gentleman."

"Well," Marsha rubbed her forehead, "that's a first."

"Me being a gentleman?"

"No, a man who refuses to sleep with one beautiful woman simply because he's thinking of another. I thought all you guys wanted was a warm place to stick your...uh...you know."

Marsha's face had turned beet red.

Gabe leaned back and laughed. "No, my dear assistant, that's not all I want. Well, let me qualify that statement. Sometimes that is all I want, but because of a very unusual woman, that's definitely not all I want right now."

"Wow," replied Marsha. "When do I get to meet her?"

"Sunday. Call that agency, All Things to All People, and let them know I'm hosting an all-day affair at my place in Napa to celebrate the launch of our new website. Tell them I want a barbecue. Send out invites today to our entire staff and their families. Make sure to include directions to my house."

"Aren't you suddenly the social butterfly. I'll get on it, boss."

Gabe hoisted the files and stacked them on top of Marsha's desk in a neat pile.

"Remind everyone to bring their swimsuits," he instructed her. Then he added, "Marsha, what time do you think people ought to arrive?"

"Noonish?"

"Noonish it is, then. Oh, and have them RSVP by Wednesday so Eva has enough time to prepare."

"Eva? You and your one-night chef on a first name basis already?"

Gabe winked at his assistant. "You might say that."

Chapter Nine

"He wants you back!" Tom was all smiles when Eva showed her face in the office. "He wants you back this Sunday."

"Uh... yeah, he, uh, mentioned something about Sunday," said Eva.

"You nailed it, Eva. This is a big deal, a barbecue for his entire staff and their families. All day. You're going to need us to help out. His assistant figured there could be as many as forty people there."

Tom, you have no idea how close I came to nailing it, Eva thought. Actually, getting nailed would be more accurate.

"You all right?" asked Marcus, pointing to the black and blue mark on her forehead.

"Huh?"

"You know, your bike wreck."

"How did you find out about that?"

"Gabriel Abbott's gardener, Luis, brought your bike into the office this afternoon. He said you'd been in a bike wreck."

"Where is it?"

"Over there." Marcus pointed a finger over his shoulder.

Eva walked over to her bike. She knelt down to take a look. The front tire had been replaced and the bike had been repaired and cleaned. She figured that either Gabe or Luis had taken it to the bike shop this morning and told them to put a rush on it. Maybe Luis. More likely Gabe. Luis was far too polite to insist that a bike shop drop everything and take care of her bent rim, even if Gabe had instructed him to do so. She assumed Gabe had paid for the repairs. He was that kind of guy. She'd need to reimburse him.

"Do you mind if I leave it here until tomorrow?"

"Of course not," said Tom, "Now let's talk about this barbecue. Any ideas?" Eva could tell he was eager to get down to business and excited at the prospect of meeting Gabriel Abbott.

"Let me give it a little thought and I'll have a plan drawn up for you by tomorrow afternoon. That should be soon enough. It's not until Sunday. I may have to talk to Mrs. White again. She usually has big plans for the weekend too, and that will require a little juggling and some extra prep time from me."

"We can send Miriam," offered Marcus.

Eva smiled at him. "Won't work. Jason will have a fit. Can you find out if Ruth will be available for Sunday? She makes a great hostess. And warn Byron and Jose. I'll definitely need them for set up and take down."

"Got it," agreed Tom.

"Hey, guys, I'm wondering..." Eva hesitated for a moment. "I'm wondering if I could take a couple weeks off. I haven't been back home in a year and I'm feeling a little homesick."

"When?" asked Marcus.

"The beginning or middle of June? That sound okay?"

"Should be," replied Tom. "Unless Gabriel Abbott books us for another shindig. His assistant indicated he may need you again."

"Did his assistant, um, say anything about the dinner this weekend?" Eva asked after a moment.

"Not a word," answered Tom. "Everything go all right?"

"Far as I know," she said. "Just wondering."

"I assume he liked your food or she wouldn't have called us back. Don't worry Eva. I'm sure you did a bang-up job, as usual."

Eva felt her cheeks grow warm. She turned to leave. "All right, I'll see you two tomorrow. Call if anything comes up."

"Oh, Eva," came Tom's voice, "I meant to ask you, who was the special guest? You pick up any clues?"

"Not a one," Eva answered with a smile.

* * * *

Eva headed Up Valley to retrieve the items she'd left at Gabe's house. She'd toyed with the idea of begging Marcus to run up there for her but she realized that was just plain ridiculous. For one thing, Marcus wouldn't recognize her stuff. For another, Gabe wouldn't even be there.

Besides, what was she afraid of? *I can answer that*, snorted Eva, *myself. Jumping his bones before I make it through the front door.*

As Eva pulled into the long drive, she spotted Luis pruning a rose bush that had fallen over the roadway. She pulled to the side and turned off the engine. She climbed out of the car, heading directly for him so she could thank him for arranging to have her bike repaired and the tire replaced.

“*Hola, Luis, buenos tardes,*” Eva called. “*Muchos gracias por mi bicicleta.*”

“*Qué?*” Luis responded. He pulled a pair of ear buds out of his ears.

Eva grinned at him. Even Luis liked his iPod.

“*Mi bicicleta. Muchos gracias.*”

“*Ah, sí.* It was my pleasure. *Señor Abbott* dropped it off at the bike shop this morning and he asked me to return it to you today. I didn’t have your home address so I took it to your office. I hope that was all right.”

“Yes, that was perfect. Thank you.”

“*Señor Abbott* has made a police report about the incident too, so you should expect a call today or tomorrow.” Luis’ expression grew stern. “You should have called the police immediately.”

“But I wasn’t badly hurt,” Eva protested.

“But you could have been,” Luis admonished her. “Besides, the driver was probably drunk.”

“You’re right,” Eva admitted. “That was really stupid of me. I should have called the police right away. No excuses.”

Luis shrugged and smiled in apology. He pointed to the bump on her forehead. “There’s your excuse,” he said.

“Why does everyone keep pointing at that?” Eva grumbled.

“Because it is very purple,” he said with a grin.

Eva grinned back at him. She thought of something she wanted to ask, but she wasn’t sure he’d answer her. “Luis, you know the dinner I made for *Señor Abbot*? For Saturday night?”

“*Si?*”

“Why didn’t he... What happened? Do you have any idea? He told me it didn’t work out. I hope... I hope it had nothing to do with me.”

Luis rubbed his ear, considering her question. “I only know that *Señor Abbott* arrived here with a woman and left with the same woman a short time later. Around nine o’clock he returned

alone, on his motorcycle. The lights were on in the house until very late.” The look he shot her was perceptive.

Eva was fishing and she realized Luis knew it. “Just wondering,” she answered blandly.

“*Señor* Abbott enjoys the company of many women,” Luis volunteered. “It would be good for him to settle upon one.”

Eva wondered if the man was warning her or encouraging her, but she wasn’t in the mood to hear anything more specific, especially about the *many women*.

“I’m going to the house to get a few things I left here.” Eva started back toward her car. “Oh... Luis... I almost forgot. Mr. Abbott has arranged for me to cater a party for his employees this Sunday. Can you meet me on the patio in a few minutes so we can talk about where I can set up a couple barbecue grills and I’d like a fire pit, if possible?”

“Of course,” he replied with a slight nod of his head.

“And Luis, I expect you to be there. As my guest.”

The man’s smile was wide. “May I ask *mi hermana* to accompany me?”

“Please,” Eva agreed, “I would love to meet her.”

“Thank you, *Señorita* Eva. I would be honored.”

“Just Eva.”

Chapter Ten

Gabe flew to Chicago Monday night. He'd received a call from his mother informing him that his mentor, Father Green had been rushed to the hospital over the weekend. He'd contracted a severe case of pneumonia. Gabe's mother told him things weren't looking good. Not only did Gabe admire Father Green tremendously, he was the closest thing to a real father Gabe had. He loved the man. So did his little sister. Gabe didn't hesitate to drop everything and hop on a plane.

It was early morning when Gabe arrived at Chicago's O'Hare, but he took a cab straight to the hospital. His sister waited for him outside the ICU. Elise seemed so tiny as he approached, but she wrapped her arms around him and held him tight. Gabe could tell she'd been crying.

"I'm not too late, am I?" Gabe asked.

"No. He's actually...he's a little better. I just hope this isn't the last hurrah. You know...the calm before the storm. He's been asking for you."

"Will they let me in so late?"

"Yeah," Elise answered. "Lucky for you I have privileges at this hospital."

Gabe studied his sister for a moment. She appeared puny, the same puny she'd been the first three months of her previous two pregnancies. "You planning on giving me another niece or nephew, Lise?"

"That obvious, huh?"

"To me," Gabe said. "You always lose weight the first couple months. When's this one due?"

"November."

"Mom know yet?"

"Yup."

"Sis, you are a regular baby-making machine."

“Well, big brother, somebody has to be since I don’t see any indication that you plan to settle down in the near future. Who’s your current flame? No, wait,” she added. “Don’t tell me. Let me guess. She’s tall and blond and buxom.”

Gabe opened his mouth to speak.

“Hold on,” his sister continued, holding up a finger. “She’s Harvard educated. A professional. A lawyer maybe. An investment banker. Just once, can’t you date a woman who’s not *something*? Can’t you find a nice, normal woman for a change? Do you know how happy Mom would be if you could find someone and settle down?”

Gabe opened his mouth again but he wasn’t entirely certain how to respond. “I’m not dating anyone right now,” he said, feeling self-conscious.

Elise looked skeptical.

“I’m not, Sis. I’m interested in someone but we’re not dating.”

The look of skepticism on his sister’s face was replaced by a look of genuine surprise.

Elise teased him, “Interested, eh? Not dating? A woman who can resist the irresistible Gabriel Abbott? This sounds promising. Who is she?”

Gabe laughed. “A farmer’s daughter from Avoca, Iowa. Her name is Eva Raines. She cooks for me.”

“Oh my God, I like her already. She cooks for you?”

“Yeah, I hired her to cook for me.”

“Because she’s tall, blond and buxom?”

“No Sis, I hired her because her food is out of this world. She can cuss like a truck driver, and she has a deliciously round little ass and the sweetest pink—”

Elise stuck her fingers in her ears. “TMI,” she said, waving her hands, interrupting his description. “So I take it you’ve already *bedded* her?”

“Quaint,” Gabe responded with a roll of his eyes, “No, I haven’t *bedded* her.”

“Really? Now this is interesting news. The great lothario, Gabriel Abbott doesn’t jump straight into bed with a woman? What a novel idea.”

“Sis,” replied Gabe, ruffling her hair affectionately, “give me a little credit. I’m not quite that bad.” He suddenly became serious. “I’m going in to see Father Joe. You coming?”

“No. I was with him just an hour ago. I think there’s something he wants to talk to you about. A young man he wants to make sure is taken care of if the worst happens.”

“Lise, what are his chances?”

"Well," she thought for a moment, equally serious, "as of today, I'd say better than fifty-fifty. That's a big improvement over yesterday."

Gabe started for the door.

"Gabe," his sister called after him. "Be prepared. The past few days have aged him."

Gabe quietly entered the Intensive Care Unit; it was directly across from the nurse's station. Gabe stopped in his tracks at his first sight of the sick man.

Father Joe Looked old. He wasn't. Gabe had never considered sixty to be old. But the illness had turned the vibrant, indefatigable man into a pale husk. Another priest from the school sat by his side, praying. Gabe stood still in the doorway until he finished. The priest nodded at Gabe as he left the cubicle, Gabe took his place at the bedside and knelt down. He took Father Joe's hand in his.

"Father, it's me...it's Gabe. I came to see you as soon as I heard."

The older man opened his blue eyes. Gabe could see over the oxygen mask covering the priest's mouth and nose that they remained bright as ever.

"Gabriel," the man said, speaking with difficulty, "I'm glad you came." Gabe's hand was squeezed with surprising strength.

"How did this happen?" Gabe asked. "How did you come down with this? Did you catch something on the flight home?"

The priest waved his free hand, dismissing Gabe's concern. "It doesn't matter," he said. "If I live it's by God's grace and if I die it's by God's grace."

Gabe ordered himself to speak. "You're not going to die. After everything you've done...all the good you've done...all the work you're still doing. You are not going to die. Christ, Father, without you, I'd probably be in prison. Or dead."

"Don't be silly," Father Green whispered. "You wouldn't have become a criminal. You're a bad liar, Gabriel. I could always read you like a book. You would have made a very poor criminal." The priest began to cough. Gabe reached for a glass of ice water on a nearby table and put a straw to the man's lips. Gabe noticed that it seemed to take much of the priest's strength just to sip through the straw.

"Thank you, son. Is Lise still in the waiting room?"

"Yes."

"She should go home to her family. She's expecting again, you know."

"I know. So you have to stick around to do the christening."

"If it's God's will," the man's voice was a little stronger, "I'll be there. Right now, we have more important things to talk about."

"Anything, Father. I'll take care of anything you want."

"I'm glad to hear you say that, Gabriel. What I have to talk to you about involves your father, Patrick McIntyre."

Gabe felt himself wince inwardly at the name, a name he hadn't uttered since he was eighteen years old. He struggled to keep his face neutral. "Are you going to ask me to forgive him, Father? Forgive my father for leaving us to starve? I don't know if I can, but if you ask me, I'll try. I swear I will try."

Gabe saw Father Green smile beneath the mask. "To tell you the truth, Gabriel, I wasn't planning on asking you that, but since you mention it, it doesn't seem like such a bad idea. It might be good for your soul."

Gabe felt the corners of his mouth twitch and he allowed himself a brief smile in return. "What about my father, then?"

"A young man came to my school two years ago. He'd been in and out of the juvenile justice system for several years before that. His mother is dead. His father abandoned him when he was ten years old. He's a junior in our high school. He seems to have adjusted and he's doing quite well, one of the top students in his class."

"Do you need me to find a place for him?" asked Gabe. "Whatever he needs in terms of financial aid for college, a job, anything, just ask and it's done."

"No, Gabe, what he needs is his family. His name is Quincy McIntyre. He's your brother."

Gabe could only imagine the look of shock on his face. He felt like he'd just been sucker punched. As if from a great distance, he could feel the priest pat his hand. "It's all right, Gabriel," he heard the Father say. "Quincy is a handful, just like you were at that age, but he's a good boy. He'll be a good man someday."

"Does he know?" Gabe asked, surprised his vocal cords worked.

"He knows but he asked that I keep the information confidential. He didn't want to be, as he put it, anyone's 'pity party'. Yesterday he gave me permission to tell you. He didn't want to be here in the event you rejected him."

Father Green began to cough again and Gabe helped him to sit up. A nurse appeared in the doorway.

"I think the Father's had enough visitors for tonight," she told Gabe, directing him toward the door with a tilt of her head.

Gabe kissed the back of the priest's hand. The man was as dear to him as his own mother and sister. "Get better," he pleaded. "You have a lot to do yet."

Gabe felt the pressure of a hand laid softly on his head. "Talk to Lise," whispered Father Green hoarsely. "She doesn't know. Father Murphy can arrange for the two of you to meet Quincy."

Gabe left the cubicle and waited at the desk for the nurse to return.

"How's he doing?" he asked when she finally left the priest's room.

"Are you a family member?" she asked.

"Yes, I am... Gabriel Abbott," Gabe stated.

The nurse checked the chart. "Yes, sorry, I see your name on the list of approved visitors." She sighed. "It's difficult to say exactly how Father Green is doing. The doctors added another antibiotic yesterday and he seems to have improved. But at this point, well, it's anyone's guess. Depends upon how tough he is."

"I guarantee he's tough. He's as tough as they come. I'll make sure he hangs in there," said Gabe, his voice unequivocal. He would brook no discussion. The man who had stepped into his life when his own father stepped out would survive. Gabe left the ICU to give his sister the news.

* * * *

It was Thursday afternoon and Eva hadn't heard a word from Gabe. She'd gone ahead and chosen a menu, finished with most of her shopping and started her prep work. Luis had picked out a safe spot beneath the oak trees for the barbecues and her two co-workers, Jose and Byron, had built a brick lined fire pit that could easily be disassembled. They'd piled some big boulders around it to keep the kids from falling in. She'd been in and out of Gabe's house, arranging and rearranging furniture. She'd rented chairs and tables and scheduled their delivery for Saturday afternoon. She'd hauled in several tin washtubs ready to be filled with ice, to keep the beer, white wine and soft drinks cold. But Gabe hadn't approved any of it. It was as if he'd vanished off the face of the earth. She'd tried him on his cell a couple times but it had gone straight to voicemail.

Eva wondered if he was deliberately avoiding her calls. Maybe he'd reconsidered their recent encounter. Her cheeks flamed at the thought. She hadn't reconsidered it; in fact, all she'd done since he walked out her kitchen door was consider it. The enticing, exciting masculine smell

of him, the feel of his hard body against hers, the touch of his hand. Jeez, it was difficult to concentrate.

Throwing together the dry rub for the brisket, her mind traveled to visions of other things rubbing together. Whisking the ingredients for her own sweet and spicy barbecue sauce, she imagined drizzling sweet sauces on parts of Gabe's anatomy. Large parts. And licking them off. Slowly. Very, very slowly.

All right, Eva shook herself, *knock it off. I need to make certain I'm giving a paying customer exactly what he wants*. She put in a call to Gabe's assistant. The woman picked up on the second ring.

"This is Marsha."

"Hi, Ms. Frank, this is Eva Raines, with All Things to All People. I just wanted to make sure we're still on for this Sunday. The barbecue? I haven't heard from Mr. Abbott..."

"Oh, yes, Miss Raines, I'm so sorry. It's been a little crazy here with Mr. Abbott out of town. I completely forgot to call you."

Gabe had left town? "Oh... do you need to cancel?" Eva asked.

"No, no, it's fine. Mr. Abbott should be returning either tomorrow or Saturday, I'm not quite sure. There was a sudden illness in his family and he had to fly to Chicago on short notice."

Gabe's mother and his sister live in Chicago. "I hope everything is all right," she replied, concerned for him.

"Yes," she heard Marsha say. "Yes, as far as I know the situation has improved and as I said, he'll be home for the weekend. When I spoke with him yesterday, he made a point of reminding me to call you. He told me the barbecue is definitely on. Is everything going well on your end?"

"Yes, it's fine." Eva felt more confident now that she understood the reason for Gabe's absence. "Do you have a body count?"

"Let me double check my list."

Eva could hear papers rustling.

"Looks like forty-seven. Will that be all right?"

"No problem," Eva replied.

"So tell me, Miss Raines, what are you cooking up for us? I'd like a little preview because from what I could gather, you made quite an impression on Mr. Abbott."

Eva nearly choked. She covered the phone and coughed a couple times to clear her throat. She asked, "You want to hear the menu, you mean?"

"Yes, of course," said Marsha. "What else?"

"Well," Eva began, clearing thoughts of what else, "I thought we might start out with the usual suspects, guacamole and tortilla chips, but I'm baking the chips..." her voice became more animated. "There's this great Mexican place a couple blocks from my home and I've asked them to bake a fresh batch of flour tortillas for me early Sunday morning. They'll have them ready by seven a.m. I'm making a very traditional guac, not your typical green goop. This will be hand smashed, not too spicy... I think Gabe, I mean, Mr. Abbott, will like it. The guacamole and chips will be accompanied by a big batch of my homemade fresh tomato salsa with three chilies, and a green garlic, roasted tomatillo salsa."

"You've got me salivating already," commented Marsha. "Go on."

"I'm doing a dry spice rub on six large beef briskets, and I've ordered twenty pounds of short ribs from the local market. I haven't decided yet if they'll be wet or dry, but I think wet. I'm working on my barbecue sauce right now. Do you think Mr. Abbott will have a preference?"

"No honey, I don't think he cares a lick as long as you keep talking. Has anyone ever mentioned that you have a wonderful telephone voice? I can see why he got pretty excited about your food. Tell me more."

Eva laughed into the phone. She liked Marsha. "I'm making a whole maple-smoked salmon for the non-meat eaters and I'm tossing together a Cesar salad with a Western twist. I'm baking some green chili-creamed corn buttermilk cornbread... I think you'll like that. It's super moist. I hate dry cornbread, don't you?"

"Yes," laughed Marsha. "By God, I do hate dry cornbread. What else?"

"I'm using my mom's recipe for good old-fashioned Iowa farmer's chop suey, her mustard potato salad and the Raines family's famous barbecued beans and tamales."

"Eva, that sounds absolutely yummy, but what on earth is farmer's chop suey?"

"I guess you have to be from the Midwest to know what it is. You chop up baby spring radishes, the really hot little guys, peel and seed a few cucumbers, slice up young scallions and a little green garlic, toss in the smallest grape tomatoes you can find, and add a tiny bit of fresh parsley. You blend new farmer's cheese with sour cream, snip in some chives, add salt and pepper and a pinch of sugar and then stir the whole thing together. Growing up, I swear I lived on it the entire summer."

"Sounds amazing. I can't wait to try it," Marsha said. "So tell me, if it's not a big secret, what's for dessert?"

"Guess," replied Eva.

Marsha didn't hesitate. "S'mores!"

"You obviously went to summer camp," laughed Eva. "Yes, s'mores, along with frozen whoopee pies filled with a chocolate mint butter cream, and fresh grilled peaches and plums."

"Oh my God, I can't wait," said Marsha. "Talk about making a good impression."

"A good impression?" asked Eva. "On your staff, you mean?"

"Oh, of course. It's just that Mr. Abbott mentioned to me he'd invited a woman who, well, that he'd invited someone special. I'm sure she'll be as impressed with your menu as I am. It all sounds great."

The air whooshed out of Eva's lungs. *A woman? Someone special? Oh God... I am such a fool. Fucking delusional*, she thought. *That's what I am. How could I have deluded myself into believing that a man like Gabriel Abbott would be interested in a nobody like me?* "Thanks, Ms. Frank. I'm glad the menu meets with your approval."

"If I speak with Mr. Abbott, I'll let him know you've got everything under control. Bye."

Eva sucked in a ragged breath as she clicked off. She forced back a sob. It wouldn't do to cry in the sauce. Damn. Damn. Damn.

Chapter Eleven

As soon as the plane took off, Gabe reclined his seat and closed his eyes. He wondered if he looked as exhausted as he felt. He'd barely slept since he'd arrived at Father Green's bedside. Now that the man was on the mend and had been transferred out of ICU, Gabe found himself preoccupied with concern for his half brother, Quincy, and he wondered about the lousy father who'd abandoned two wives and three children. The priest was right about the young man. Quincy reminded Gabe very much of himself at seventeen. The kid was smart, he was sharp, he was tough, and he tended to push things to the limit. Like Gabe, he didn't give his trust easily and he kept people at arm's length. At least he treated Elise with respect. The young man obviously held women in high esteem. Gabe could tell he'd loved his mother very much, but it was also apparent that her death was a major sore spot and Quincy didn't want to talk about her.

When Gabe had first explained the situation to his sister, she didn't seem nearly as shocked as he'd expected. She told Gabe she figured a sibling or two would turn up sooner or later. Patrick McIntyre was a smooth talking low-life who seduced nice girls and abandoned them when things got sticky. Or maybe when the cops were closing in. Gabe wasn't certain. His mother had never been entirely clear about what her husband had done for a living. Gabe didn't know where his father was, but he hoped Quincy would be the only other kid to turn up. He hated the thought that his deadbeat dad might have fathered children all over the Midwest, but he had to admit he was intrigued by the fact that he had a little brother. Gabe had always taken his role as a big brother seriously and he'd protected his little sister when they were growing up. Now he'd do the same for his brother. He was only sorry he hadn't known sooner. Thank God Quincy had ended up with the priest.

Like Father Joe said, Quincy was reticent at first. He had no intention of being anyone's pity party, but between the two of them, Gabe and Elise somehow managed to convince Quincy

that they didn't pity him, rather they understood his hesitation. They might be blood relatives, but they were complete strangers. After much discussion and cajoling, the boy finally agreed to spend a month with Elise and her family when school ended and Gabe planned to fly the young man to California for July and August. That meant Gabe would have to take some time off to show him around the city and teach him the ropes. The boy could stay in Napa, but Gabe didn't want to leave him alone and unsupervised at his cottage. Gabe offered to help him enroll in a high school in San Francisco for his senior year, but Quincy wanted to finish school in Chicago. Gabe understood. Quincy's friends were there, Father Joe was there, and Chicago was home.

As soon as he and Elise left the school, they headed to his mother's town home. She was dressed and ready, waiting impatiently to go to the hospital. Gabe made his sister lie down in the extra bedroom and he broke the news to his mother. As always, she was a trooper. She'd gotten over Patrick McIntyre years ago. Her only concern was for another abandoned child. Gabe chauffeured his mom back to Father Joe's bedside and then to the school to meet his half-brother. It was nearly another twenty-four hours before he was able to catch a little shuteye.

Gabe felt the plane level off and he let himself drift. He heard the flight attendants moving through the cabin but kept his eyes shut and ignored them. He wondered what Eva was doing. Was she at his house, working late, getting ready for his barbecue? Or had she returned to her own little home? Was she lying in her bed, curled up like a kitten beneath her quilt, warm and soft and delectable? Her thick, waving, dark hair scattered across her pillows? Her luscious lips parted slightly as she relaxed in sleep? Gabe surrendered his mind to that picture for a few minutes, remembering the smell of her clearly, as clearly as if she'd been seated next to him. He inhaled her sweat, the musk of her arousal, the slight metallic tang from her bloody knees. Gabe felt himself stir at the olfactory vision and he shifted slightly in his seat, allowing for a little more play in his jeans.

He noticed that she'd phoned twice, but he simply hadn't found a single moment to call and there was no cell phone service at the hospital. He'd hoped to have the time to give her a ring from the airport, explain what had happened, let her know that he was on his way home and that he hoped to see her before the party, but he'd been running late. His mother and his sister had both called when he was in the cab on his way to the airport. He'd had to hustle to catch his plane and he shut his phone off the second he was seated. He'd only managed a single, brief conversation with his assistant in four days. He'd asked her to check in with Eva and he hoped

she'd remembered to do so. He felt a little guilty. He'd rushed out of the office Monday evening, dumping everything in Marsha's lap. Fortunately, she was a very capable woman.

Gabe cracked his eyes and shot a glance at his watch. He should be landing about midnight. He'd call Marsha's office line when he landed and leave her a message, then he'd catch a cab to his apartment and if he wasn't too tired, head up to Napa. He needed a day to chill. If he thought he could get away with it, he'd keep his phone off, but he'd told his sister to call him if Father Joe's condition suddenly worsened or if anything came up with Quincy. Jesus. A brother.

Gabe shook his head. A newly discovered brother, a woman he intended to, as his sister so charmingly put it, *bed* the first chance he got. A big party, the first he'd given at his home in Napa, coming up in less than two days. One thing at a time, Gabe reminded himself. One thing at a time. First Eva. Second barbecue. Third and fourth, Quincy and Father Joe. Then Eva again. Gabe closed his eyes and stretched his long body. Despite his worries, he grinned. Yes, Eva... again and again and again.

Gabe thought of how she felt inside, how hot, how wet, how silky and how close he'd come to burying himself in her sweetness before they'd been interrupted. Goddamn. There would be another opportunity and nothing as insignificant as burning potatoes would keep them from finishing what they had started.

* * * *

Eva had been fighting back tears since she'd talked to Marsha. Damn that son of a bitch, leading her on like this. Planting the notion in her head that he wanted her. Well, fuck him! Eva would do the barbecue and that was it. That was the last she wanted to see of Gabriel Abbott. From now on, he could hire someone else and she didn't care if Tom and Marcus fired her. Let them. She could find another job in a heartbeat. In a heartbeat! Bringing *someone special* to the party. Probably that woman Luis had mentioned. *I am so stupid*, thought Eva, *to read so much into the fact that Gabe took her home early, that his seduction dinner didn't work out. She probably got a call from a client or something.* Eva just knew the woman was a lawyer. She had to be. She was some kind of professional for certain. She probably didn't eat, let alone cook. Cooking would be beneath her. *Oooh! God, I am so mad! I want to smack that man from here till Tuesday!*

She'd worked her ass off at the White's on Friday, rushing to finish early so she could prep for the barbecue. Gabe still hadn't bothered to call her and Eva had no intention of calling Marsha back to ask about anything. She would give him what he paid for. In fact, she would be perfect... the perfect caterer. Her food would be to die for and she'd ignore Gabriel Abbott the entire day.

Eva threw the book she was reading across the room. It crashed against the wall with a satisfying, resounding thwack, and fell to the floor. How the hell was she supposed to sleep when all she could think about was the man who didn't want her? The man who was going to flaunt his new special friend in her face the day after tomorrow. Eva glanced at the clock. Oops...make that tomorrow. It was one a.m. and Eva needed her rest. She wanted to be at Gabe's house early to avoid running into him. The weatherman had predicted a high-pressure system for the weekend and she expected it to be hot. Great weather for a barbecue and a swimming party, not so great for her. She'd be sweating up a storm and her hair would smell like smoke and barbecue sauce, while Gabe's date would probably be cool as a cucumber and look like a Sports Illustrated swimsuit model in her designer bikini. Eva toyed with the idea of doing something utterly juvenile like putting green bell peppers in everything, but the truth was, Gabe wasn't the only one who hated green bell peppers. Eva couldn't even stomach the sight of them so she figured the only person she'd make sick would be herself. Gabe would probably be so wrapped up in his friend that he wouldn't even notice.

Eva shut off the light. She tossed and turned for a while, her stomach churning and her cheeks growing warm, and despite her best efforts, she relived the feeling of his hands on her intimately, his finger sliding inside her. Eva could feel her entire body flush. She slipped a hand beneath the quilt. She was wet just because of that one little memory. She wanted him and that made her so angry. Fuck it all, she wanted him in a way she'd never wanted anyone. She knew she'd make a fool of herself over him if given half a chance. How insane was that?

* * * *

By the time Gabe made it to Napa, it was four o'clock in the morning. He wished he could call Eva, but he knew that would be just plain cruel. He didn't have the heart to wake her up, no matter how much he wanted to hear her voice. He considered swinging by her house, and he nearly pulled off the highway, but a knock on her door at this time of the night would probably scare her to half to death. Besides, he desperately needed at least a few hours of sleep himself. He headed straight to his cottage, parked his Harley in the shed and pulled the door closed. He headed into the house, as tired as he'd ever been in his life. He washed up, leaning on the sink more asleep than awake, and finally collapsed into bed. Within a few minutes, Gabe was dead to the world.

* * * *

Eva arrived at the entrance to Gabe's property at seven on the nose. As she pulled in Luis waved to her from the cab of his pickup. She parked her car and walked over to him.

"*Buenos días*, Eva," he said, his voice friendly.

"*Buenos días*, Luis," she replied. She felt very tired, but she mustered a smile for the man. She genuinely liked him.

"Has everything been delivered, *Señorita* Eva?"

"Yes, it's all here," she answered. "There will be some last minute shuffling around, but the set up is more or less completed. I just need to finish up with the food."

Luis squinted his eyes in the morning sun and it seemed to Eva that he was giving her the once over. "You are not sleeping, Eva, I can see it in your face. You seem troubled today."

"I'm fine, just tired."

Luis appeared unconvinced.

"Will you be around today?" she asked, hoping she wouldn't be alone with Gabe if he showed up.

"Sorry, *Señorita*, no. I need to drive my sister to a doctor's appointment and then I will take her into Fairfield for some shopping. She wants something pretty to wear to the *fiesta* tomorrow."

Eva smiled again, this time her smile was genuine. She hadn't met Luis' sister, but she was willing to bet she was a proper lady. "I'm looking forward to meeting her tomorrow, Luis."

"*Gracias*. I've told her all about you and she is quite excited to be invited."

"Have you... have you heard anything from Mr. Abbott? About when he's coming home?"

"No, sorry, I haven't heard from him, but I certainly expect him early tomorrow morning, or perhaps even late tonight."

"Good," mumbled Eva. She glanced up at Luis and his look was questioning. "I mean I'd like to have everything ready by the time he gets home."

Luis glanced at his watch. "*Adiós, señorita*. I must leave you. *Hasta mañana*." He waved as he headed down the long drive.

"*Adios* Luis," Eva replied as she waved back. When he was out of hearing, she muttered, "Fuck *mañana*."

Eva flipped open the doors to her car and began to unpack. She planned to more or less finish everything today, have the tables and chairs arranged and waiting to be decorated. The food

would either be cooked and ready to be served, or ready to be cooked tomorrow. She carefully unloaded her ice chests containing the marinating meats. As she wrestled them into the kitchen, she wished she'd asked Luis to wait, but she just as quickly realized she'd rather do it alone. The man was far too discerning and she didn't want to discuss her feelings with anyone. Not yet, maybe not ever. It wasn't pleasant to be made a fool of.

Eva opened the back doors and stepped out onto the patio. She kicked off her flip-flops. The day was a perfect Napa Valley morning, cool and clear. Eva decided to leave the patio doors open and she walked through the main floor, opening all the windows wide to let the morning air inside. It would get hot soon enough. She glanced at the stairs, but she couldn't bring herself to set foot in Gabe's bedroom loft. She'd been up there only once, the day before, just to leave a check on his desk, to repay him for the bike repairs. She reminded herself firmly that any notions she'd had about spending quality time up there were mere fantasy, nothing more, and the sooner she forgot them, the better off she'd be.

Chapter Twelve

By one o'clock, Eva was hot. She was damn hot. She'd been hauling, cooking, cleaning and setting up tables and chairs for six hours. If she wasn't so stubborn, she could give Tom and Marcus a call and they'd send help or come themselves. She didn't feel like it. She hadn't even brought her iPod. It was much better to wallow in self-pity. Eva snorted.

She decided to take a break and she wandered out back to the pool. Luis kept the water sparkling. In the sun, it glowed an electric Caribbean blue. Eva stuck a toe in. Nice. She knew Luis was gone for the day, but she looked around nonetheless, just checking to make absolutely certain she was alone before she removed any of her clothing. Eva noticed a man's white button down shirt over the back of a patio chair. She'd somehow missed it yesterday when she was checking out the pool area. Eva walked over and picked it up. Bringing the shirt to her nose, she inhaled. She was hoping maybe it would smell like Gabe, but all Eva caught was sunshine and a little chlorine. However, Eva figured she could swim in the shirt. That way she wouldn't have to swim in her underwear and it would be safer than swimming naked. It was always possible that some delivery guy would stop by.

After one more glance around, Eva turned her back to the house and stripped off her tank top. Her shorts and her panties disappeared together. She tossed everything onto a chair and she pulled on the man's shirt, rolling up the sleeves and buttoning some of buttons across her chest and stomach to hold it together. She walked over to the deep end and dove in.

* * * *

Gabe stepped out of the shower. He toweled off quickly and pulled on a pair of worn blue jeans that hung low on his narrow hips. He'd heard Eva downstairs and although he was in a hurry to see her, he wanted to wash off the travel dust first. He shook the water from his hair and walked over to the window. He was about to open it when he caught sight of Eva out by the

pool. He saw her pick up one of his old shirts, one he left out there to pull on whenever the sun began to burn his shoulders. He watched as she brought the shirt to her face and inhaled deeply. The corner of Gabe's mouth twitched. He imagined she was trying to smell him, to see if he'd worn it recently. He hadn't. Gabe was about to turn, thinking he'd join her at the pool, when he saw her take a quick look around, as if she wondered if anyone was spying on her. Suddenly she turned her back to the house and pulled off her top.

"Fuck me," Gabe hissed through gritted teeth as he felt his cock swell against the zipper of his jeans.

Down went her shorts and Gabe sucked in a ragged breath. It was going to be now. He would have her right now...from behind, and it was going to be hard, and he was going to squeeze that sweet ass in his hands while he pumped into her.

He hurried down the stairs, strode through the kitchen and quietly stepped out onto the patio. He heard a splash as Eva dove into the water. As he approached the pool, he took a moment to appreciate her long, strong, athletic, overhead stroke and the kick of her smooth legs. Gabe stepped right into the pool and stood motionless on the stairs, water soaking the bottom of his jeans. He waited for her to swim close.

As Eva neared the shallow end, Gabe watched her movements slow. She pulled her legs beneath her and stood up, rising from the water like a Venus from the sea. A lovely, furious Venus from the sea. His shirt clung to her, transparent now, hugging her every curve like a second skin. Better than a second skin, because Gabe could see, yet not see. The pink peaks of her nipples pressed against the material, the auburn hair of her mound shown dark and wet beneath the white cotton. A sleeve of the large shirt had slipped down, exposing a bare, velvety shoulder. Eva tossed back her thick mane of hair as she approached him. Gabe could see the anger in her eyes, but he deliberately ignored it. His throbbing cock refused to let him attend to anything other than those rosy nipples. His eyes remained fixed on Eva's chest. He had to take one in his mouth. Now.

"Look at me," she demanded, her voice pitched low.

"I am looking," replied Gabe, his voice equally low, hoarse with desire as he reached for her arms and drew her to him.

One hand brushed her shoulder, pushing the shirt down further, exposing her breast with its pink tip. Gabe watched, fascinated, when her nipple peaked even more as a breeze passed

between them. He lowered his mouth to her and he felt her chest expand as she inhaled abruptly. She exhaled on a moan.

"Stop," he heard her say in a weak voice, while at the same time, her hands buried themselves in his hair, drawing him closer.

He shook his head, "no," in reply, as his tongue circled the hard rosebud. He took it in his mouth and sucked, rolling her nipple against his palate. Nipping at her. He heard tiny whimpers escape her throat as his free hand pulled the shirt away from her other breast. She felt delightfully cold and wet beneath his fingers, cool and tasty in his mouth. He leaned Eva back over one arm and licked his way to the other peak. She gripped his shoulders. He could feel her nails digging into his flesh as he sucked and nibbled at her sensitive tip.

"Oh, Gabe, you bastard," she groaned.

Suddenly her cool hands slid down his bare back. She reached his buttocks and she cupped them through his jeans, pulling him close, pressing herself against his steely length. Gabe growled in response and he lifted his head. He looked into her eyes and he caught the anger mingled with pure lust. The anger he didn't understand, the lust, he shared. Staring into those big brown eyes, daring her to say no, he slowly lifted the hem of the shirt. His fingers trailed along the flesh of her thigh, leaving goose bumps in their wake. As he watched, she closed her eyes and her head fell backward in a mute gesture of surrender.

"Fuck," Eva whispered.

"That's my intention," Gabe rasped. "If you really want me to stop, it's now or never."

"Damn you, Gabe," she cried out. "Don't you stop. Don't you dare stop."

Gabe tore the shirt from her slender form and lifted her naked body in his arms. He swung her around and headed toward the house. Eva offered no resistance. She molded her wet body against his hard chest, nibbling on his shoulder with her teeth, sucking greedily on the tendons in his neck. Gabe knew he'd never make it up the stairs. Shoving objects out of the way, he lay Eva down on the dining room table and he unzipped his jeans. His cock sprang free, hard, thick and long. He watched Eva reach for him. She ran the fingers of both hands up and down his length. Gabe gritted his teeth. If she wasn't careful, he'd come in her hands.

Gabe spread her legs and her folds opened to him, rose red and glistening with moisture. Hers, water from the pool. God. He had to feel her, taste her. He slid a finger inside her, then two, watching as her opening contracted around him.

“Oh my God,” he heard her utter as he went down on his knees and spread her further. He wrapped his hands around her hips and pulled her toward his mouth. He ran his tongue around her clit, over the swollen bud, circling her opening. Sampling her as if she was a tasting menu. Eva thrashed on the table. From a distance, Gabe heard something crash to the floor. He ignored it. Instead, he concentrated on her sweet-savory taste, on the satiny texture of her on his tongue and his lips. He held her quivering thighs still with his hands and he began to suck. Within seconds, Eva arched her body against his mouth and she began to convulse wildly.

“Oh God,” she cried. “Oh God, yes...yes...Gabe. Yes. Please...please...”

After a moment, when her contractions had faded, Gabe lifted his head. “Please what, Eva?”

“Please fuck me.”

“Yes, Eva.”

Gabe rose to his feet. As if she weighed no more than a feather, he flipped Eva onto her stomach and lifted her onto her hands and knees. He grabbed her bottom with one hand and spread her legs with the other, exposing her fully. Gabe heard Eva sob, a low, keening sound, and he knew he had to get inside her. Now. He wrapped a hand around the base of his cock and dipped it into her cream, spreading it over his thick head, rubbing it over her clit. Teasing her until he could tell that she was once again on the brink of orgasm.

“Gabe,” Eva begged, “Gabe...fuck me. For God’s sake, fuck me.”

He tried. Damn, she was tight. Tight as a virgin. Gabe met with fierce resistance when he tried to enter her. Eva cried out.

“Easy sweetheart. Easy...shhhh...” Gabe panted as he attempted to get himself under control. Christ, he was ready to explode and he’d barely gotten inside her. “You can take me. You can take all of me.”

He reached a hand around and found her clit. He began to stroke her, his touch gentle. A moan escaped Eva’s lips and she tossed her head back. Gabe used the fingers of his other hand to caress her opening along the side of his cock. Gabe felt her muscles relax and before she could tense again, he thrust into her in one smooth motion. Eva gasped.

“Oh...fuck yes...” he heard himself say as he pressed his stomach up against her sweet ass, buried in her to the hilt. “Yes...Eva... Yes...that’s it...that’s right. Just like that,” and he began to pump in and out of her, watching himself, watching her. My God, she was luscious. She felt hot,

she felt wet, and she fit him like a supple, skintight glove. She fit him better than any woman he'd ever had or ever dreamed of having.

Gabe didn't know how long he could last, but he wanted to feel Eva come with his cock deep inside her. He heard her cries and he knew she was close. Gabe leaned over and reached for her breast. He rolled a nipple between his thumb and his forefinger and he pinched the tight little bud while his other hand continued to caress her clitoris. He could feel her muscle contractions begin and when he heard Eva practically growl his name he stood up straight and plunged into her, hard and fast, claiming her for himself. Eva screamed as her own climax took hold of her even as her body milked him, unconsciously urging him to join her. Gabe did so with a deep, visceral groan. When his seed exploded against her womb, he felt as if he'd caught fire and he was burning out of control from the tips of his toes to the ends of his hair. Jesus. His last coherent thought was, *my little chef is some kind of woman*.

Eva felt as if she was being roughly tossed between heaven and hell. Heaven lay in Gabe's arms, his still firm cock buried in her. So did hell. How could he make love to her like that, if he didn't care? Not only had he made love to her, it was as if he'd *taken* her, caveman style. How could he be so possessive, so forceful, so powerful, if he wanted someone else? How could he make her come like that, Eva shivered, harder than she'd never come in her entire life, if he didn't have any feelings for her?

"You're cold," she heard Gabe say, and he withdrew from her.

A whimper escaped her. She couldn't help it. Her body felt almost unbearably empty without Gabe to fill her up. Eva knew tears were running down her face and she couldn't seem to stop them. Helpless in his hands, Gabe turned her around.

His hands were on her wet cheeks and he was kissing her. He hadn't kissed her before he'd fucked her. Before he'd claimed her with such ferocity. Now he kissed her as though she meant everything to him. As though she was that special woman he was seeing. His lips were soft and full and soothing. She felt him trying to kiss her tears away and she was tempted to let him. She heard him say her name in his deep sexy voice, over and over again. She had to stop him, now.

"How..." Eva sobbed, "How could you...make me...make me do this? How could you make love to me...like this...when...when...you have...you have someone else? How could you do this, Gabe?" She turned away from him and covered her face with her hands.

"Someone else? What are you talking about, sweetheart? There's no one else."

Eva heard the certainty in his voice and she lifted her face to his. She studied his eyes. They appeared guileless. Eva asked herself if it was possible that she'd misunderstood Marsha, but then she remembered her words, that Gabe had invited a woman, someone special.

"No," Eva shook her head vigorously. "Marsha told me. She said..." Eva began to hiccup. "She said that you'd invited a woman to the barbecue...someone special...that I was cooking for someone special. How could we do this? How could you make me think that..." Eva crumbled against him. She was shocked to feel his chest shake with laughter. Eva's head shot up. "You son of a bitch!" she yelled through her tears. "You're laughing! You're laughing at me. You mother fucking son of a bitch!"

"That's better," Gabe spoke, laughter still in his voice. "There's the foul-mouthed little chef I've come to love."

Eva wrenched her arm from his grasp and hauled it back to slug him. Gabe grabbed her wrist before she could connect. "You little idiot," he said, "it's you. You're the special woman I want everyone to meet tomorrow. It's you, Eva. You."

"Me?" she squealed.

"Yes," Gabe grinned, "you. Now bring that truck driver mouth of yours over here so I can kiss it again."

"But Marsha..."

"Shut up about Marsha."

"But..."

Gabe's mouth descended upon hers, effectively cutting off any further conversation. When she opened her eyes, Eva saw that Gabe had stripped off his jeans. She shrieked with surprise as he scooped her up from the table and slung her over his shoulder.

"Where are we going?"

"To bed, my dear...to bed. No more talking." Gabe bit her hip and Eva quickly reached down and smacked him on his bare ass.

"Ow," he yelped.

"Hey," mumbled Eva, her voice quaking as her head bounced upside down while Gabe took the stairs two at a time. "What's good for the goose is good for the gander."

"I'm glad to hear you say that," replied Gabe, tossing her onto his bed. "Because I can think of quite a few things that are good for the gander."

Chapter Thirteen

"Mmmmm," was all Eva could manage. She curled against Gabe's side and rested her head in the hollow of his shoulder. She felt his arm tighten beneath her, his hand stroked the curve of her naked hip.

"You are a beauty, my Eva," Gabe's voice was soft, admiring.

Eva turned her face into his chest. She knew she was blushing. "Thank you," she whispered, "but I've always considered myself average. You, on the other hand, are definitely the most amazing man I've ever seen."

"Oh," Gabe replied, "You are far from average. A word of advice, when a man... this man... gives you a compliment like that, a simple thank you will suffice. I'm not fishing."

"I didn't think you were," said Eva. "It's just...it's just...Gabe?"

"Hmmm?"

"Do you think I'm easy?"

Gabe lift his head to look at her.

"Easy? There's nothing easy about you. You are a very complicated woman."

"That's not what I mean. What I mean is...well...I let you...even though I thought you were with someone else, I let you...we...don't make me say it, please."

Gabe pulled himself up on one elbow and leaned over her. "What? That we made love? It's very simple. I wanted you. You wanted me. You don't have to pretend. If there's one person on this earth you don't have to pretend with, sweetheart, it's me."

"But, Gabe, we barely know each other."

Gabe kissed her then, a long, lingering kiss that left her lips tingling. "I would venture to say that we know each other a whole lot better right now than we did an hour ago."

Eva tried to turn her head to hide her smile, but he caught it and he shot her an infectious grin.

"Sometimes there's a connection between people, a connection they can't explain. That's you and me. The first time I heard your voice over the phone, I felt it. I'm willing to bet you did too."

Eva nodded almost imperceptibly. "Yes, I did," she admitted. "I haven't been able to get you out of my mind since that very first conversation. It's a bit of a problem," she laughed in a self-deprecating fashion. "I'm not sleeping well."

"You can sleep now, if you want."

"No," Eva yawned, "I have a lot of work to do yet. For your party."

"Our party," Gabe corrected her.

"You're sure about this?" Eva asked. "You really want to introduce me to your co-workers? Gabe, I'm nothing. I'm a nobody. I mean, I clean houses and cook for a living."

"What's wrong with that?" Gabe ran a hand down the side of her face. "My mother cleaned houses to put food on our table. You're smart, you're creative, you work hard, you say what you think. I don't have to wonder where I stand with you. God, your food would make a seasoned chef cry, and even better, you taste like a slice of heaven. Right here." He reached between her legs and stroked her wet folds. "You're soft and sweet and tight and you make the most incredible noises when you come. Christ, what more could a man ask?"

"Gabe..."

"Yes?" The fingers of his other hand toyed with her nipple.

Eva ran a palm along his thigh, weaving her way up from his knee until she cupped his heavy scrotum. She could feel the rounded sac contract in her palm as his cock began to rise. She caressed him, while she ran the fingers of her other hand along his length.

"Fuck me again."

* * * *

Eva set a bowl of vanilla ice cream on the table in front of Gabe. With a grin, she drizzled the chocolate sauce she'd warmed in the microwave over the top.

"What a pity you didn't have a chance to use this," she commented, as she sat down to her own bowl of vanilla ice cream covered with warm balsamic caramel.

Gabe scooped up some ice cream and chocolate with his spoon and licked at it, the movement of his tongue very suggestive. With a waggle of his eyebrows he said, "Well, I thought about it, but you weren't here. And I figured it would be kind of sticky on my hand."

Eva's grin widened as she replied, "Ditto."

"You minx," Gabe said with a smile as he reached over with his spoon and took a taste of her ice cream with the caramel sauce. "Damn, that's good."

"You sound like Jason White," said Eva, "I work for his parents and he loves this caramel sauce."

"Oh yeah? How old is he?" retorted Gabe.

"Too young for you to worry about. Eighteen."

"Eighteen and horny as hell. I remember very clearly what I would have thought of a woman like you when I was eighteen."

"Jealous?" asked Eva, looking up at him as she licked a dab of ice cream from her spoon.

"Depends," answered Gabe, his eyes on her pink tongue.

"Depends on what?"

"On what else you plan to do with that tongue of yours."

"Mmmm. Imagining...but your shirt's too nice."

"That's easily remedied. Take it off."

Eva wore one of Gabe's dress shirts, light mint-green in color. It accented her deep auburn hair and her peachy complexion. She'd drawn one of her long, slender legs up to her chest and she rested an elbow on her knee as she slowly ate her ice cream. She gazed at him with half-closed eyes, her expression dreamy. Gabe had pulled his jeans on. He wore nothing else. He watched Eva lick at her ice cream and he busied himself remembering exactly how that tongue of hers had licked him, when it dawned on him that Eva must be very tired. They'd whiled away the afternoon in bed and he knew she had a lot left to do for the barbecue. He rose to his feet.

"C'mon," he said, sticking a hand out to her.

"Where we going?" she asked in a very tired voice.

"Nap time. Back to bed."

"But Gabe, I've got so much to do. I can't."

"One hour. Sleep for one hour and you'll feel a lot better. C'mon."

He pulled her to her feet.

"You're not going to carry me again, are you?" Eva asked, suspicious.

"Tempting as it is, I'll let you get up there under your own power this time. C'mon sweetheart, let me tuck you in and you can give me an assignment, anything. I'll take care of whatever you want... as long as it's not cooking. I'm a lousy cook."

Eva gave in and kept her hand in his. That simple act spoke volumes. Gabe knew he'd won her trust. She was his. She trailed him up the stairs. Just like he'd done the week before when she'd been injured, he fluffed the pillows beneath her head and covered her with a sheet. It was still too warm for a quilt.

"Make sure the picnic tables are arranged away from the fire pit and the barbecues, and spread the chairs out on the deck and around the pool. In an esthetic fashion, please. Oh, and I guess you'd better pick up the platters that we knocked off the dining room table. Thanks, Gabe," Eva mumbled before she turned onto her side and closed her eyes. She folded her hands and tucked them beneath her cheek. She was asleep within seconds.

Gabe watched her for a few moments. Asleep or awake, Eva Raines was breathtaking. And she hadn't a clue. She was the least pretentious woman he'd ever met, but at the same time, she was definitely the most sensual, by far the most fiery. She was everything he wanted in a woman, more specifically, in the woman he wanted to spend the rest of his life with. He had never expected her to fall into his lap like this.

Gabe harbored no illusions about why most women were attracted to him. He knew he was considered a catch. He was thirty-three years old. He was a successful businessman, rich, athletic. He figured he was handsome enough. Some people considered him arrogant. Over the years, he'd learned that arrogance in a man could be attractive to a woman, if a man had the substance to back it up. If there was one thing growing up poor had bequeathed him, it was substance.

When it came to women, Gabe had set the bar high and until now, he simply hadn't met a woman who could come close, even in spiked heels. A beautiful woman on his arm was one thing. A beautiful woman in his bed could be quite exciting, for an hour or two. A beautiful woman in his life was a horse of a different color. He'd wanted Eva Raines before he'd even laid eyes on her, and from what she'd admitted, she felt the same about him.

Gabe realized that his sister was right. It was time he settled down, although he didn't think life with Eva would be exactly settled. She was quite a handful. Gabe appreciated that about her. The other women he cared about, his mother, his sister, and his two nieces, could all be described as *a handful*. He didn't expect any less of his woman, the woman who would be his

wife. He reached for a lock of Eva's wavy hair. Lifting it gently so as not to disturb her, he rubbed it between his fingers. He closed his eyes and held the soft tresses against his lips for just an instant. He inhaled. Eva's hair smelled spicy and just a bit like chlorine from his pool. Gabe liked the smell. He decided to pull the quilt up around her shoulders in case she got cold, then he went downstairs.

Gabe smiled as he retrieved the large plastic platters that she'd sent flying off the dining room table. He stacked them into a neat pile. He followed Eva's instructions and arranged the picnic tables she'd rented, making certain nothing was too near the temporary fire pit she'd had constructed. Her foresight and attention to detail impressed him. As far as he could tell, she'd thought of everything. Some of his employees could learn a thing or two from Eva. Like an option quarterback, she was very good at sizing up a situation and adjusting her game. She could probably make something out of nothing, Gabe mused, spin gold from straw. The important women in his life had always had that gift, which was what had allowed his family to survive after his father left them without a word.

Thinking of his father reminded Gabe that he hadn't called his sister. He entered the kitchen and picked up the phone. He wanted to find out how Father Joe was doing and see if Lise had spoken with Quincy again. He wondered if he ought to bring the boy to California sooner. A teenage boy would be a big responsibility for his sister, especially now that she was pregnant again. He still hadn't told Eva about his brother. He'd explained in a general way why he'd flown to Chicago so suddenly. Eva admitted she'd been worried something had happened to his mother or his sister, but the brother thing was very new and sounded odd, even to his own ears. He'd tell her tonight, when she was awake, if he wasn't too busy exploring her all over again. Gabe's cock seemed to be thinking along the same lines and he had to order it to stay down. Whoever claimed a man thought with what was in his pants wasn't too far off. In Eva's case however, Gabe's brain and his balls were in agreement that she was the whole package and there would be no going back. She was his little chef.

* * * *

With Gabe's help, Eva finished up around ten p.m. Everything was ready to go. The briskets and the ribs would start smoking first thing in the morning. Eva didn't have access to a real smoker, so her quick method would have to be good enough. She hoped for a nice smoke ring on the brisket nonetheless, and meat so tender on the ribs that it melted like butter in the mouth. The salmon would take only minutes. All the salads were finished, the beans and tamales

ready to slow cook, the Western Cesar salad lacked only the dressing, the ingredients for the cornbread measured and waiting to be mixed, and the desserts were wrapped and in the freezer. She'd make the guacamole and the salsa and bake the chips in the morning so they'd be fresh.

Eva watched Gabe wipe down the countertops in his kitchen. He may not know how to cook, but he followed her directions, he didn't complain, and he was tireless. The man never slowed down. Eva felt her nipples tingle and she nearly closed her eyes as she remembered what she'd done with him just this afternoon. No, the man never slowed down, especially not in bed.

Never, never, not even once, had Eva known that lovemaking could be so...so...otherworldly, so fantastic. She'd thought those sorts of feelings between a man and a woman happened only in her imagination, or books. Making love with Gabe had transported her, out of time, out of her body, out of this world. Making love with Gabe lifted her far higher than the most amazing food high she'd ever had.

She'd been concerned about her own inexperience, worried that Gabe would find it unappealing, but he seemed to, well, to take immense pride in the fact that he'd given her the very first orgasm she'd ever had with a man. Eva had previously found sex pleasant, but intimidating. The few guys she'd been with seemed to be in a big hurry to get themselves off and she'd always felt insecure and self-conscious, as if there was something wrong with her because she couldn't come in three or four minutes flat. She'd tried faking it a couple times, before she realized that faking an orgasm just didn't work for her. Maybe the guy appreciated the fact that he thought he'd satisfied her, but Eva didn't. Not by a long shot. She'd sort of become accustomed to the idea that she'd have to get off on food, and she'd put all her sexual energy into the food she made, the recipes she created, and her fantasies whenever she took the time to indulge in them. Gabriel Abbott was her fantasy come to life.

Eva practically quivered while she stacked plates in the dining room, remembering how he'd carried her in here and entered her from behind, so rough, so forceful, so... so tender, all at the same time, as if he'd been making her a permanent part of himself, or taking a part of her, Eva didn't know which. She only knew that she felt whole with Gabe. He filled her up. He soothed an ache she hadn't fully realized she'd been feeling until he'd pulled out of her. Eva felt herself blushing. She wondered how swollen Gabe's head would get if he knew that not only did she come at least half a dozen times with him inside her, she'd even come when he pulled out.

The last time...my God...the last time, she'd awakened in his bed, smelling of sex and man, feeling warm despite the fact that she was only covered by a sheet, when suddenly, as she

stretched, he was there, unbuttoning the green shirt she'd put on, his mouth tugging on her tender nipples, his stiff cock entering her, stretching her gloriously, rubbing her in exactly the right spot. She'd come violently but without a sound, her mouth buried against the side of his neck, sucking on his tender skin without even realizing what she was doing. She'd given him a hickey. Eva had never given anyone a hickey in her life. Gabe had laughed when she pointed it out and apologized. He claimed he would wear it with pride.

Eva felt Gabe's arms snake around her waist and he pulled her backward. She could feel his erection pressed against her bottom.

"You're blushing, Eva," he commented. "Thinking about what we did on this table?"

Eva could only nod.

"Me too," he said. "Stay with me tonight. Please. Stay."

"I can't," Eva replied, turning in his arms to face him. She leaned her head on his chest. "I have too many things to bring tomorrow, and I have to pick up the tortillas by seven."

Gabe lifted her chin and kissed her softly, rubbing his lips against hers, opening her mouth, running the tip of his tongue lightly along the edge of her teeth. "Stay anyway," he urged her.

"Um-um," she answered, "You come home with me." Eva was a little startled to hear the words come out of her mouth.

Gabe was the only man who had been in Eva's bed, and now he was the only man she'd ever invited to spend the night with her. He looked at her, as if checking to see that she meant it. Satisfied that she did, his face lit up with a grin and he lifted her off her feet and kissed her soundly.

"Hold on one second," he said, setting her down on wobbly legs. He ran up the stairs to his loft and returned shortly, pulling a sweatshirt over his bare chest and carrying a pair of leather sandals and a toothbrush in one hand. "Let's go," he said. "Your car or my bike?"

Eva laughed at the eagerness in his voice. He sounded like a little kid in a candy store. "My car. I'll need it in the morning." She searched for her purse and dug out her keys. She shook them at Gabe. "C'mon, big boy, let's get you to bed."

Gabe drew closer and grabbed her hand. He rubbed her palm up and down the front of his jeans. He lowered his mouth to her ear, "Big enough *boy* for you?"

“Uhhnn...” was as much as Eva could manage. “Walk...out...the...door,” she croaked, “before we end up on the floor right here in the hallway.” She felt like she was underwater and gasping for breath.

Gabe winked and he reached around her to open the front door. “Ladies first,” he said and he pinched her bottom as she maneuvered past him.

“Gabe!” Eva squealed, and she bolted to the car. She looked back in time to see him hopping up and down, trying to get his sandals on. “Just come out barefoot,” she said.

“I have tender feet,” she heard Gabe say.

Eva laughed out loud. “An imperfection. Thank God, you have an imperfection.”

“Hey,” said Gabe, joining her beside the car, “Don’t rub it in. I’ve always been tender-footed.”

“That makes me happy,” said Eva, “Now I don’t have to feel so inadequate.”

“Inadequate? You?” Gabe rolled his eyes, “Lover, you are so much more than adequate I could live off you for the rest of my life. You truly are my moveable feast. Now get your sweet ass in the car and let’s get home.”

Home, Eva thought. *Home with Gabriel Abbott.*

Chapter Fourteen

"Mr. Jamison, I'm glad you could join me."

"When one of my most important clients calls and asks me to meet her for a drink, how can I say no? How are you, Miss Lindstrom?"

"I'm fine, Eddie. How are you?"

"Busy, fortunately very busy," the man replied.

"Ah, then you haven't been hurt by recent cutbacks?"

Edward Jamison chuckled. "Whether times are good or bad, there are always cheating spouses. So yes, business is good, thank you."

"What are you drinking, Eddie?"

"Just a sparkling water for me, thanks."

"Ah, I forgot. You never drink when you're working. I take it you have a job tonight?"

"Yes." That's as much information as Edward Jamison would share about one client with another. "What can I do for you, Miss Lindstrom?"

Eddie had been sitting at the other end of the bar, watching her, for ten minutes. He'd already ascertained that there was a man involved. He also knew whatever her business was, it was personal. Over the years he'd become quite familiar with the signs of a woman scorned and Miss Lindstrom was wearing them like an overcoat. Stephanie Lindstrom had hired him on a number of occasions, generally to investigate the spending habits of new employees and potential partners, sometimes clients. Her father had introduced them. He and Jamison had maintained an association for many years. Usually Stephanie would meet with him discreetly in her father's office during business hours, occasionally over lunch at an out of the way place, if it was more convenient for her. He'd never before met her in a bar at ten o'clock at night. It had never

occurred to him he would do so. He assumed her father wouldn't know anything about this particular business arrangement.

"Do you know Gabriel Abbott?" she asked without preamble.

Eddie took a sip of his sparkling water. "I've never met the man, but I know of him. He's the head of Abbott Industries, primarily a charitable foundation and the owner of Gabriel Vineyards. If I remember correctly, his wines have won several notable awards. He seems to be quite adept at making money." Eddie paused for a moment. "He also has a bit of a reputation as a ladies' man."

"I'm interested in his background," Stephanie said, and Eddie noticed that her voice was carefully neutral, "Where he comes from, his family, who he's seeing, if anyone. Skeletons in his closet... that sort of thing."

"May I ask why, Miss Lindstrom? In case there's something specific I should be looking for?"

"It's simply a business matter," she replied. "I just like to know who I'm dealing with."

Yeah, and I'm the Easter Bunny, thought Eddie Jamison. *A business matter can be handled over lunch.*

"Where and when would you like me to start?" he asked.

"Would tomorrow be too soon? Perhaps start with his current associates? I understand he's hosting a party tomorrow at his home in the Napa Valley. I'll pay you double your usual fees if you can have the information for me by the end of the week."

Dumped for another woman and Stephanie Lindstrom wants a name. "Unless he's keeping some deep, dark secrets, it shouldn't be a problem."

Stephanie gave him her hand. "Thanks, Eddie. I knew I could count on you. And I know I can count on your discretion."

In other words, thought Eddie, *don't tell my father.* "Of course. Always. I'll get back to you soon. It's very nice to see you again, Miss Lindstrom. Thank you for the drink."

"Bye, Eddie."

"Goodnight, Miss Lindstrom."

Eddie left the bar and walked to his car. The job would be a piece of cake. From what he knew about Gabriel Abbot, he was on the up and up. He had nothing to hide. Stephanie didn't give a shit about the man's background, she wanted the name of whomever he was banging. Eddie shook his head. Women. Couldn't just take *no* for an answer. Especially an ambitious

woman like Stephanie Lindstrom. Eddie wondered exactly how tight she'd gotten with Abbott before he'd dumped her. He'd bet good money it wasn't very tight. Abbott wasn't really on Eddie's radar because he didn't poach on married women, but from what he'd heard about the man, he stuck with a woman for a few weeks, maybe a month or two, and that was it. Stephanie Lindstrom obviously assumed she would be the exception. Eddie guessed she was mistaken. Well, he'd do his job, he'd collect his money, and that would be the end of it.

Chapter Fifteen

Eva was glad she had napped because sleep seemed to be the furthest thing from Gabe's mind. She wondered just how many times a day the average man could make love because as far as she could tell from everything she'd read, Gabe was way ahead of the curve. And to her embarrassment, that fact didn't bother her in the slightest. On the contrary, it thrilled her.

Gabe's hands never stopped moving over her body. It was as if he couldn't get enough of her. Eva had never before been the object of such focused attention.

"Do you mind?" Gabe asked. "I can't seem to control myself when I'm this close to you."

"Um-um," Eva murmured. "How could I possibly mind?"

When they'd arrived at her door, Gabe had already begun stripping her of her clothes before she even had it unlocked. He sat her, naked, on the couch, spread her legs, and buried his face between them, licking her greedily until she'd come against his mouth, trembling, whimpering, nearly purring like a cat. He'd just as quickly laid her down and buried his rock hard cock inside her. God, if she remembered correctly, she may have cried with pleasure. When Gabe climaxed, deep inside her, she'd felt the muscles of his buttocks contract beneath her hands as a raw sound, almost a roar, tore from his throat. He'd cried out, "Yes, Eva... fuck yes." She'd felt the head of his cock press against her womb, hot, hard, thick, and oh-so heavy inside her.

After his breathing slowed, Gabe had tried to hold himself above her, but his arms trembled. Eva pulled him to her. He'd kissed her, his lips warm, his tongue searching, before he'd curled his head against the side of her neck and promptly fallen asleep. Reluctant to wake him, Eva had wiggled beneath him, trying to find a position that was comfortable and allowed her to breathe beneath his weight. She'd carefully scooted his chest off to the side on the narrow couch, most of him still on top of her, his cock still inside of her. It had been a long day. Eva closed her eyes and let sleep take her.

Now she was wide-awake and in her own bed. Gabe must have carried her into her bedroom and she'd been so out of it she hadn't even awakened. It was still dark in the room so she knew they had time to do whatever. Gabe's fingers traced the contours of her breast, slid up over her collarbone, and finally slipped along the line of her jaw and stopped at her lips. She kissed his fingers tenderly.

"Do you mind if we just talk for a while?"

Eva laughed. "As opposed to...?"

"Fucking for the tenth time."

"What do you think I am?" asked Eva, still laughing, "Insatiable?"

"No," Gabe grinned at her, "but I'm beginning to think I am when it comes to you." He laid his face against her chest and inhaled deeply. "You smell so damn fuckable, woman. But I don't want to make you sore and quite frankly, I'm not one hundred percent certain I can get it up again. At least not for another few hours. Maybe not until tonight."

"I'm all for talking...with you," Eva answered him. "What's going on? Is it something serious? Are you worried about Father Green?"

"No...well, yes," Gabe replied, "but he seems to be holding his own. It's about what he told me when I went to Chicago. It came as a bit of a shock, and I haven't wanted to discuss it with anyone outside of my family, but I'd like you to know."

Eva turned over and propped herself up on an elbow. "What is it?" she asked, both curious and a little concerned.

"He told me I have a half-brother... my sister and I have a half-brother."

"Really..." Eva responded.

"You know that my father left us when I was twelve."

"Yes?"

"His name was Patrick McIntyre. I took my mother's maiden name, Abbott, when I graduated from high school. So did my sister. Patrick McIntyre remarried and had a son, Quincy. He abandoned Quincy's mother when she got breast cancer. She died five years ago and Quincy was left homeless. He spent time in and out of foster homes and juvenile hall until a social worker finally hooked him up with Father Joe. He's been in his school for two years and he's turned himself around, doing very well."

"Why didn't Father Green tell you before now?"

"Quincy wouldn't let him. He didn't want anybody's pity. Believe me, I know the feeling."

Eva stroked Gabe's arm. "So how come he changed his mind? Or did Father Green change it for him?"

"No, Father Joe was willing to keep his confidence. I think it was that Quincy realized he was in danger of losing the one man he considers family. He didn't want to be all alone in the world, so he agreed that Father Joe should tell me."

"Did you meet him?"

"Yes. My sister and I went to the school as soon as we found out. It wasn't all warm and fuzzy, believe me. Quincy's pretty standoffish. He's a lot like me at that age. Proud, independent, stubborn, tends to wear a big fat chip on his shoulder."

"I can only imagine with all he's been through. What are you going to do? Bring him out here?"

"He doesn't want to move to California, at least not now. He's a senior and he wants to finish up school in Chicago. I'm encouraging him to come out for the summer though. I wanted you to know what's going on, because I intend to be with you, Eva. I want you to be a part of this."

Eva was silent for a moment, considering the implication of his words.

"You mean... Gabe...do you mean you want me to be a part of your life? To get to know your family? Is that what you're saying to me?"

Gabe reached over and his fingers brushed away a lock of hair that had fallen across Eva's face. He searched her eyes, his own hopeful.

"Yes, that's exactly what I'm saying."

Eva smiled at him. "Yes, I'd like that. I'd like to get to know your family. On one condition."

"What's that, sweetheart?"

"Turnabout is fair play. You'll have to pass muster. Remember, I have four big brothers and they've yet to meet a man they thought was good enough for me."

Gabe grinned right back at her. "I guarantee I'll be the first."

And I hope the last, Eva added silently, right before Gabe kissed her.

Chapter Sixteen

The barbecue was a tremendous success. Most of the time when Eva catered, she remained behind the scenes, but today she joined Ruth and helped serve the guests. They wore what passed for ATAP uniforms, short black jeans shorts, a bright green polo shirt with ATAP embroidered across the breast pocket and black sneakers. Both she and Ruth had the legs to make it work. Tom, Marcus, Byron and Jose wore black jeans and the same green polo shirt. They all worked their tails off. Eva paid special attention to Luis and his lovely sister and she made an effort to include them in everything. Gabe seemed grateful she'd remembered to invite them.

Eva watched *her* man welcome his guests to his home, hand out drinks, pass around platters of food, supervise the pool area, pat little kids on the head and hold babies. When he wasn't otherwise engaged and she happened to be paying attention, he'd wink at her. Once, when he thought no one was looking, he pulled her behind a big oak tree and surprised her with a kiss. When Gabe let her go, Eva stumbled away, right into Tom who stared at her open-mouthed for an instant, before his face split into a knowing grin and he mouthed the word, *later*.

Finally, after the sun had set, the guests gathered around the fire pit and the bright bonfire Byron and Jose had built with Luis' help. Eva brought a chair for Luis' sister and made her a s'more. The woman never had one before and Eva could tell she was delighted with the s'more and the attention.

"*Muchos gracias*," Luis murmured in Eva's ear. "*Mi hermana* does not get out much. This is very good for her. And you, *mi amiga*, are very good for *Señor Abbott*." He gave her a nod.

Eva realized Luis knew very clearly what he was implying, and she blushed.

"No need to be embarrassed, little one. *Señor Abbott* has been looking for someone like you. He just didn't know it until he found you." With a pat of her hand, Luis vanished into the darkness.

Eva was headed back toward the kitchen to bring out another tray of frozen whoopee pies when Tom caught up with her. He threaded his arm through hers.

"So," began Tom in a whisper, "you've looked like the cat who swallowed the canary all day, girl. Spill. Tell your Uncle Tommy all about it. Is Gabriel Abbott as good in bed as they say?"

"Oh my God, Tom!" Eva blurted out. "I can't believe you just asked that!"

"Hey," interjected Marcus, tiptoeing up behind them, "Inquiring minds want to know. I hear he's the whole package. A very, very big package."

Eva covered her face with her hands and her words came out muffled.

"I...am...not...answering...any...questions...about...Gabriel...Abbott."

"He is," said Tom to Marcus over her head.

"I would guess she's given him a thorough tasting," replied Marcus, "and he passed with flying colors."

"Arrgh! Go away!" Eva gave them both a shove.

"Are these two louts bothering you?" said a woman's voice.

"Marsha," said Tom. "How are you? I haven't had a free moment to speak with you all day."

"I'm good, Tom." The woman shook his hand. She turned. "And you must be Marcus, his better half."

"That would be me," answered Marcus with a smile.

"You put on a fabulous barbecue," said Marsha. "Eva, your food was incredible. It was to die for. I've never eaten ribs so tender. And those beans... oh my gosh, you are going to have to tell your mother how much I love her family recipe."

"Thank you," they all replied at the same time.

Marsha put a hand on Eva's arm. "Would you gentlemen excuse us for a little girl talk?"

Tom and Marcus exchanged glances. "Of course," said Tom, "as long as your intentions are honorable. We don't want anyone stealing Eva away from us."

Marsha chuckled. "I wouldn't dream of it. But if there is anyone thinking of stealing Eva away, I believe your culprit would be standing by the fire licking burnt marshmallow from his fingers."

Eva's head automatically swiveled toward the fire, seeking Gabe. She saw his tall, strong profile outlined in the glowing light. She watched him stick a finger in his mouth and despite her best efforts, she grinned.

"I believe I'm guilty of sticking my foot in my mouth," came Marsha's voice. Eva turned back to the woman.

"You're referring to our phone conversation," Eva replied.

"Yes. I'm sorry. I can't imagine what you must think of me. I had no idea Mr. Abbott was seeing you."

Eva gave Marsha a warm smile. "Oh," she laughed, "don't apologize. He wasn't seeing me...not exactly. I guess he is, now. I don't know. Has he made it official?"

"He doesn't have to. I've known the man for ten years. I was his mentor at his first job. I can read him like a book. Every time he looks at you, well, let's just say he looks at you a lot. And you...you're positively glowing."

"You know, this is getting really embarrassing. Tom just said almost the same thing. I didn't think I was so obvious."

"Hey," said Marsha, laying a gentle hand on Eva's arm, "A woman in love." she shrugged. "It's your prerogative. Just be careful. My boss is, how do I put this, my boss has a big heart, but he's always guarded it. If he gives it to you, do me a favor, don't drop it."

Eva felt tears sting her eyes. "I don't... I don't know what to say. I'll do my best." She stared at the other woman for a moment. "You love him, don't you."

"Always have, always will," Marsha stated, her voice matter of fact. "But it's not quite what you imagine. He's like a younger brother to me. I watch out for him even though he thinks he's old enough to watch out for himself. You know, all his life, he's taken care of his mother and his sister. His foundation, Abbott Industries, sends hundreds of needy students to college or to a tech school. He wants to do for others what Father Green did for him. Gabe... Mr. Abbott is firmly convinced that without Father Green, he'd be in prison, or dead, and his mother and his sister would be on the streets. It would be nice if he'd let someone take care of him once in a great while. I'm thinking you may be just the one to do it. Let's go for a walk and you can tell me a little about yourself."

"Wait a moment, please" said Eva. She flagged down Ruth and asked her to grab another tray of desserts out of the kitchen. Ruth nodded and she trotted off toward the house. Eva rejoined Marsha and together they strolled into the darkness.

* * * *

At the end of the evening, before the guests said their goodbyes, Gabe called Eva to his side.

"You all know I'm not much for public speaking. But I would very much like to thank you all for coming to the first annual Abbott Industries barbecue." cheers went up from the crowd. Gabe waited until they'd subsided before he continued, "And I'd like to thank the woman," Gabe paused while he tugged Eva forward, "Who prepared the amazing feast you enjoyed today."

Eva listened to Gabe's employees applaud.

"Great food!" someone shouted out.

"Thank you," mumbled Eva, embarrassed.

"I'd also like you to know her name, because you're going to be seeing a lot of her," Gabe's voice boomed out over the crowd of people, "With me. This is Eva Raines, and she is a very, very special lady."

Without any warning, Gabe flipped Eva over his arm, leaned her back, and kissed her in front of everyone. Caught off guard, Eva resisted for a moment, but then, her arms went around his neck and she was kissing him back, hoots and hollers ringing in her ears. When Gabe finally set her on her feet, she stumbled, dizzy from the quick movement and the unaccustomed attention. Gabe caught her and held her to his side as everyone approached to say their goodbyes. Marsha came last. She gave Eva a wink and asked Gabe if she'd see him in the morning. Gabe shot Eva a wicked grin and asked if she minded if he walked Marsha to her car.

"Go ahead," said Eva, as she gave Marsha a quick hug. She'd discovered that she liked the woman very much.

Eva turned around to gaze at the fire for a moment. It had died down to embers and she watched as Luis, Byron and Jose walked off together to grab shovels. Luis' sister had retired into the warmth of the house.

"I seem to have lost my cell phone."

Clutching at her chest, Eva whirled around at the sound of a man's voice right behind her. She forced herself to exhale. The man seemed harmless enough. She assumed he was one of the guests, but she didn't recognize his face.

"I'm sorry, Miss Raines, I didn't mean to startle you, but I seem to have lost my cell phone. Has anyone brought one to you, or to any of your co-workers?"

"Nobody has given me a cell phone," replied Eva. She fished her own phone out of her pocket. "Do you want me to try calling yours? Maybe someone will hear it. What's your number?"

"That would be great, thanks. It's 415-555-5555."

Eva dialed the number. Both of them listened carefully but heard nothing other than the usual night noises. Eva listened as her phone connected to an automated voicemail and she hung up.

"Sorry," she said, "I doubt you're going to find it in the dark. I'll keep an eye out while we're cleaning up. Maybe I'll run across it tomorrow. If we find it, is there another number where I can reach you?"

"No, don't worry about it. Who knows? Maybe I left it in my car. If you do find it, you can give it to Mr. Abbott and he can bring it in to work. Just tell him it's Sam's phone."

"All right, I'll do that. Bye, Sam. I hope you find it."

"Goodnight, Miss Raines, thanks. And thanks for the barbecue."

Eva watched the man walk away. He exited around the side of the house, avoiding Tom and Marcus and Ruth, who were carrying trays in through the back door. Eva shrugged as she went to help them with the cleanup. Sam probably did leave the phone in his car. She'd done that a time or two herself.

* * * *

Eddie Jamison picked his way up the dark road until he reached his car. He'd parked beyond the property, knowing that everyone else had parked along the private lane leading to the house. It had been easy to walk right onto Gabriel Abbott's estate in the dark and blend in with the crowd. He'd observed the group of people for quite a while, unnoticed in the shadows before he'd done a bit of cautious mingling, assuming the other guests would think he was someone's date. He'd graciously accepted a frozen whoopee pie from a young woman carrying a tray and he'd listened to Abbott's pretty little speech and watched him kiss Eva Raines. Eddie had bided his time in the shadows until he'd seen the Raines woman standing by herself near the fire pit. It was so easy to manipulate her into calling his cell phone, set on silence in his pants pocket. He didn't even have to ask, the woman had helpfully volunteered. Now he had her cell phone number should his client want it for any reason.

He could give Miss Lindstrom the name of Gabriel Abbott's new lady friend. He could tell her what she did for a living and for whom she worked. He'd even gotten a business card from her boss, Tom. The man was eager to pass out a business card to someone he assumed to be one of Gabriel Abbott's associates. People were very trusting, especially when they were relaxed and happy. Eva Raines and Gabriel Abbott appeared to be very relaxed and very happy.

Miss Lindstrom wouldn't care much for the fact that Eva Raines was an exceptionally pretty little thing. She looked damn good in those short shorts. She seemed quite genuine. Very nice. A little shy. Not like the women he usually encountered in his line of work. He was willing to bet anything she'd grown up on a farm. She had that wholesome, unpretentious look about her. He'd toyed with the idea of getting a photo of Eva, but he decided he didn't want to rub Miss Lindstrom's nose in it. He wasn't certain what she planned to do with the information he'd gleaned, but he hoped she was merely curious. He wouldn't want to see a decent person like Eva hurt in any way.

Eddie usually investigated scumbags and scammers, liars and cheats. Once he turned over information about them to his employers, he didn't really care what happened, but Eva Raines was no scammer. Every instinct he had said she was exactly what she appeared to be. He could also see that she was a woman in love, and what was more surprising, Gabriel Abbott looked equally smitten. Eddie decided he'd better keep very good records of everything he'd been asked to do and everything he did, just in case Stephanie Lindstrom pulled some stupid woman-scorned stunt, something that got him into trouble. Eddie wouldn't want to run afoul of a man like Gabriel Abbott.

* * * *

The White's expected Eva the next morning at eight a.m. sharp, but Gabe expected her to join him upstairs in his shower momentarily. She stowed the last of the perishable items in his fridge and locked the back door. She headed toward the stairs, switching off lights as she went, deciding that a few sleepless nights spent with Gabriel Abbott were well worth it. As her body began to tingle in anticipation of his touch, she concluded that a night with Gabe was worth anything. She knew he had to be out the door by six so she didn't want to keep him waiting.

Eva kicked off her black sneakers and removed her shorts and polo shirt as she approached the bathroom. She opened the door and entered, still wearing her dark blue lace bra and panties. Gabe stood, gloriously naked, beneath the stream of water, his head thrown back, eyes closed, water running over his lean, sculpted body. Eva stopped and stood still for a moment, admiring the view. As she watched, he opened his eyes and extended a hand. She began to remove her bra, but he said simply, "Leave it on."

Eva smiled then, as she stepped toward him, kicking the bathroom door closed behind her. Gabe took her hand and pulled her beneath the water, bringing her hard against his chest. She was immediately soaked to the skin.

“Your breasts are glorious,” he said in a low voice, palming them roughly through the lace. “God, I love the way you look in anything. You could be wearing shapeless overalls and a filthy work shirt and I’d still want to fuck you senseless.”

With Gabe’s hands busy on her body, Eva found that her mind had nothing intelligible to say. She moaned as one of his fingers slipped beneath her lace panties.

“Um...wet...” he murmured in her ear, sliding a finger inside her while his teeth tugged on her earlobe.

Feeling utterly boneless now, Gabe easily maneuvered her against the shower wall. His mouth moved downwards and he sucked on the sensitive junction between her neck and her shoulder. Somehow, that spot seemed to run in a straight line directly to her clit. Between the sensation of his mouth on her neck and his finger between her legs, Eva became so aroused she found herself unable to move a muscle. She heard herself whimper like a little kitten. She felt Gabe pull the cups of her wet bra down. She knew the pressure of the straps had thrust her breasts forward, directly into his waiting mouth. He sucked hungrily on one nipple while he rolled the other nipple between a thumb and forefinger. As he pulled his mouth away from her erect tip, he bit down with just enough pressure to make her squeal, thrusting two fingers into her at the same time.

Eva would have fallen then if Gabe hadn’t leaned into her, pressing his erection against her stomach. Eva ached to take his length into her hands, but her hands wouldn’t seem to cooperate. Despite her admonition, they stayed glued to the shower wall while his mouth explored her face, finally finding her lips. He pressed his against hers. She parted her lips in response, allowing him to enter. Gabe’s kisses were so sensuous, so full, so generous, that every time he kissed her it was as if she’d never been kissed before in her entire life.

“God, you taste good,” he murmured, lifting his head. “You taste like smoke and marshmallows and chocolate and barbecue sauce. Tell me, Eva, do you want to come? Do you want me to make you come now? Right now?”

“Mmmmm,” she managed to reply.

“That’s not good enough, lover. Say it. Tell me to make you come. Tell me.”

“Gabe... I... I...”

“You what? What? Say it.”

“Oh God, Gabe, make me come,” Eva exhaled.

“Please? You forgot please.”

"P...p...please...please make me come, Gabe. Please...make...me...come."

"Yes. Of course."

With a firm hand on her shoulder, Gabe kept her pinned to the shower wall. He kissed her, long and slow, and lowered his mouth to an aching nipple. He moved his fingers so that they slid beneath her panties along her thigh. He rubbed, slow and deliberate, through her slick folds, skimming his fingertips over her clit and into her opening. Eva began to shake and she wondered if her legs were about to give out.

Gabe lifted his head. "Stand there," he ordered her, his voice firm, and he dropped to his knees.

Eva desperately pressed her back to the dripping stone wall, while Gabe spread her legs. His fingers thrusting inside her, he laid his mouth against the front of her panties and bit down, right onto her clit. Eva screamed as she felt the beginning of an orgasm. Gabe didn't stop. He sucked against her panties, taking her nub into his mouth, his fingers thrusting, sending her over the edge again and again, until exhausted, Eva finally dropped, the shower spraying over her head and shoulders. Gabe caught her in his arms and sat her gently on the wet floor. He stripped her panties from her and pulled her toward him. He lifted her up and supported her above his erect cock. He felt hard, thick and hot against her opening.

"Shall I fuck you?" Gabe asked.

"Yes...please..." Eva said in a small voice.

"When?"

"Now."

"You're sure? Now? You want it now?"

"Yes...oh...yes... Please God, yes..."

Gabe slid his entire length into her in one motion.

"Oh, God," Eva gasped.

"No, my sweet and tasty Eva," Gabe whispered, "Oh, Gabe." And then he laughed huskily.

A semi-hysterical giggle escaped Eva as Gabe stretched her out on the floor of his luxurious shower, holding her arms above her head with one hand, the other hand playing with her up-thrust breasts.

Completely oblivious to the water pouring over them, firmly in control of her, Gabe rocked his hips against her, deliberately bumping against her clit with every thrust.

"Oh fuck," Eva cried, whipping her head back and forth against the shower floor.

"That's right, that's right...damn..." Gabe bent his head and slowed his movements, trying to remain in control.

"Don't," Eva cried. "God, don't stop. Come, Gabe. Come for me now."

"Say please," Gabe gritted out through clenched teeth.

"Please..." Eva wailed as she felt her own orgasm begin.

"Yes... Eva..."

Gabe's thrust into her, hard and deep. His mouth pressed roughly against hers and she opened for him, parting her lips even as she spread her legs wider to allow him deeper access. As her inner muscles began to contract around him, Eva could feel Gabe's cock shudder within her, and then she felt the heat of his ejaculation against the mouth of her womb. An involuntary cry tore from her lips, only to be swallowed by the sound of Gabe's deep, raw, guttural growl.

For a brief moment, Eva forgot where she was. When she finally opened her eyes, Gabe lay over her, panting, spent. His eyes were closed. Water poured over his head and ran down onto her cheeks. She wasn't certain that the water all came from the shower. It was possible that she'd been crying.

Gabe opened his eyes and grinned at her. "That's never happened to me before," he stated.

"What?" Eva asked, wiping some of the water away from her eyes.

"I don't know... Whatever that was," he replied.

"Me neither," she admitted.

Gabe withdrew from her with a groan. He got to his knees and reached up, turning the water off. He pulled Eva up with him.

"What do you say we sleep on it?" He asked.

"Sounds like a good idea to me," Eva answered him, with a matching grin. "But you'll have to help me to bed. I think I've melted."

"C'mon, we can help each other."

Chapter Seventeen

Eva anticipated a busy week, for both of them. Gabe had already forewarned her that he would need to stay in the city to catch up on everything he'd left undone while he was in Chicago. That actually worked out well for her. Dr. and Mrs. White had hired ATAP and Eva to cater Jason's graduation party on Sunday. They wanted a deli-style buffet and a big, decorated sheet cake. Eva had already discussed the menu at length with Jason. She figured he and his friends were the ones she really wanted to please, and his palate had grown more sophisticated since she became their part-time cook. She could get his cake completed and in the freezer early and then concentrate on the buffet all day Saturday and Sunday morning. She'd already arranged for Miriam and Ruth to serve.

Jason and his parents had considerably invited Eva to attend the reception as a guest. She'd wondered aloud if she could bring a date. Dr. and Mrs. White thought that was a fine idea, but when she and Jason were alone, he bristled at the notion that she was seeing someone. Eva reminded him that his girlfriend would have a field day with that one. He eventually simmered down and asked her about the guy. He was quite impressed to learn *the guy* was Gabriel Abbott. Eva laughed when the young man demanded that she divulge every detail. She deliberately kept her description of all events relating to Gabe spare and as vague as possible.

"Don't worry," said Jason, patting her thigh, "I'll talk to him on Sunday. I'll make sure he treats you right. Has he taken you on a private tour of his vineyard yet?"

"Actually... no," Eva said. Visiting the vineyard hadn't even occurred to her. The corner of her mouth twitched. They hadn't really had the time, what with all the sex and so on and so forth.

"What are you grinning about?" asked Jason.

"Oh," laughed Eva, her cheeks coloring. "I was thinking about what I'll write on your cake."

"Like hell you were!" Jason accused her. "You were thinking about him." The young man clutched at his chest. "I feel so betrayed."

"Jason," Eva rolled her eyes, "Don't be such a drama queen."

"A drama queen? A drama queen? I've bided my time for an entire year and the minute I graduate from high school, you throw me over in two seconds for some rich dude. Hey, you think he can get me some money for a start-up?"

"You little jerk!" Eva gave Jason a shove off the couch.

"What can I say?" winked Jason. "I'm an opportunist. So remember, three layers, two chocolate, espresso in the middle, chocolate mousse in between, and I want that chocolate glaze over the top, not butter cream. No flowers, no sprinkles and no writing. No girlie stuff. Got it?"

"Yes, master."

"Is that what you call *Gabriel*?"

"Jason, you shit! Get the hell out of here."

"Ah...ah...ah, potty mouth."

Eva tossed his soccer bag at him. "Get," she said.

Jason sauntered out the front door, leaving Eva to her cleaning. Five days without Gabriel Abbott. Well, she'd spent the previous week without him, and the week before that, and the week before that, and the week before that, ad nauseam. But things had changed since their initial phone conversation. Was it really only three weeks since she'd first spoken with him? God, that was hard to believe. Eva felt as if she'd known him far longer than that. It seemed like the man had been in her life for many years. Gabe had managed to become an integral part of both her inner and outer worlds. How weird was that?

* * * *

Despite the fact that he had Eva on his brain, Gabe concentrated on his work. The sooner he wrapped things up, the sooner the week would be over and he could return to Napa and her bed. There was a big backlog on his desk and in his computer's inbox. After several hours of answering email requests and returning phone calls, he asked Marsha into his private office. They needed to begin scheduling interviews for promising high school juniors and seniors. Most years, Gabe traveled to interviews during the month of June. His first stop, as always, would be

Chicago, provided Father Joe felt well enough to participate. If not, he'd put his visit off until early July. Gabe had printed up the list of students who had been referred to Abbott Industries.

"Marsha," he said, holding a stack of paper in his hand, "I'd like to go over this list with you. Maybe we can whittle it down until it's manageable, but I'd also like to help as many of these kids as we can. Even if it's just with a partial. Do you mind spending a few hours with me this afternoon?"

"No problem," Marsha replied. "I can spare as much time as it takes."

Marsha stood at his desk for a moment. Gabe looked up. It seemed as if she wanted to ask him something.

"Yes? You got something on your mind, Marsha?"

"Eva," she said simply.

Gabe raised his eyebrows. "What about Eva?"

"I like her," said Marsha. "I like her a lot. If she's just another cog in your wheel, Gabriel, then...well... I think you know what I'm getting at."

Gabe wasn't angry at her inference. He'd known Marsha a long time. They were good friends. Most of the time, no matter how uncomfortable it made him, she addressed him as Mr. Abbott. That was for public consumption. When they were alone, she always called him Gabriel or, as in this case, when something was important to her and she wanted to remind him of their long association.

"Yeah, I know what you're getting at," he said, walking out from behind his desk. He leaned against it and crossed his arms. "She's a lot more than a fling. She's... Eva's... I'm not sure I can explain how I feel about her, other than to tell you that I think I'm in love with her. And that is for your ears only. I need a little time to digest this. It's a brand new feeling for me. Why? She say something to you?"

"We talked," Marsha admitted. "She's a private person and she kept her end of the conversation pretty noncommittal, but I got the distinct impression that she cares for you, quite a bit. Not only that, but she seems surprised."

"Surprised?"

"Yes. Surprised that a man like you would be interested, seriously interested, in a woman like her."

Gabe looked confused.

"She feels a bit...well, I guess a bit undereducated for you. Do you understand? Like she's not quite the sophisticated sort of woman you'd want to show off at the symphony. She's pretty down to earth. There's nothing pretentious about her at all. With Eva, I'm guessing that what you see is what you get."

"That's one of the things I find so attractive about her," protested Gabe. "There's not a dishonest or disingenuous bone in the woman's body."

Marsha looked at him with what he thought was doubt in her eyes. "In all the years I've known you, that's not been high on your list when it comes to who's in your bed."

"Since I met Eva, it's become very high on my list."

"She's why you turned down Stephanie Lindstrom." Marsha wasn't asking a question.

"Yes."

"Well, I've got to give you credit for that. She's a pit bull, that one. She's been asking questions, you know."

"Stephanie? About what?"

"You. Who you're seeing."

"You're kidding?" Gabe was taken aback. "I don't think anyone here would discuss my personal life with her. I don't even discuss my personal life with anyone aside from you."

"No, nobody here. Some of our business associates. Obviously, until yesterday, nobody had any idea you were seeing Eva. I just heard that Miss Lindstrom has been asking about you. A few people thought it was worth mentioning to me. They'd seen you with Stephanie several times and of course assumed the two of you were an item."

"I'm surprised it matters to her," Gabe stated flatly. "Nothing happened between us."

"Maybe in your mind, nothing of any consequence happened, but women sometimes make certain assumptions, read things into situations that aren't there. With luck, she'll come to her senses and drop it soon enough," added Marsha. She nodded at the papers in his hand. "Shall we take a look at these students?"

* * * *

"Hey, lover," said Gabe, "What are you doing up so late?"

"Just working on the buffet for Jason's graduation." She sounded a bit distracted.

"Damn. I was hoping you were curled up in bed, naked, warm, thinking of me. Thinking real hard about me."

Gabe smiled when he heard Eva laugh into the receiver. "Well, I may do that, curl up in bed, in a few minutes. And maybe I'll think of you, a time or two. Maybe."

"Can I stay on the phone while you think of me?"

"Gabe! Now you're embarrassing me."

Gabe wondered if her cheeks were burning. "I can't imagine how you could possibly be embarrassed after everything we did this weekend, but I think it's fetching nonetheless."

"Fetching?"

"Yes, fetching. Attractive. Appealing. Sexy."

"I know what fetching means, Gabe. So how are things looking? Any chance you'll be able to come back to the Valley before Friday?"

"Doubtful. But we can spend the entire weekend together."

"I will need to prep for Jason's party, and by the way, I'd like you to come. Dr. and Mrs. White invited me and I asked if I could bring a date, so, if you don't mind, you're it," Eva said.

"I'd be honored. In fact, I was wondering if you'd attend an event with me this Friday. It's right up your alley. It's a catered dinner to thank the major donors for the Ride for Sight. One of the sponsors is hosting. Will you come with me?"

"Um... You mean like a date?"

"That's exactly what I mean."

"I'd like to, but Gabe, I guess I'm kind of a jeans and flip-flops girl. Do you know what everyone will be wearing?" Eva sounded a little nervous.

"Got a little black dress? You know, that proverbial little black dress I always see discussed in women's magazines?" Gabe would offer to buy her a dress but he knew she'd be insulted.

"You read women's magazines?"

"Only when I'm stuck in a waiting room," Gabe said defensively, a hint of laughter in his voice. "It's not like they have The New Yorker or The Wall Street Journal in dentists' offices."

"That's true. Although my dentist here in Napa actually has a bookcase filled with novels. The last time I was there, I became so engrossed in one that she gave it to me."

"Which one?" Gabe asked.

"The dentist or the novel?"

"The novel."

"The Persian Boy. It's a good book. I finished it in two days."

“What’s it about?”

“You can read it for yourself. It’s sitting on my dresser.”

“So I’m invited back into your bedroom?”

“Yes,” answered Eva, “I can’t seem to say no to you.” Eva was silent for a second. “I really should be playing hard to get, Gabe. I don’t know what’s wrong with me. I can hear my mom’s voice now—*Why buy the cow when you can get the milk for free?*”

“Don’t start listening to your mother,” said Gabe. “Listen to me. You don’t come free and you’re not easy. I want to be with you for a lot of reasons, the joy of fucking you just happens to be one of them.”

Gabe could hear the grin in Eva’s voice when she teased, “Is that kind of like *The Joy of Cooking*, because I’m looking for a first edition?”

“Honey, it’s better than *The Joy of Cooking*, although I have to admit that your food comes in a close second. Remember the salmon tartar you made for me?”

“Yes,” Eva answered.

“That was out of this world, but the taste of you is so much sweeter.”

“Gabe...I can’t concentrate when you do this to me.”

“Do what?” he asked, keeping his voice innocent.

“Make me think about you.”

“That’s the whole point, sweetheart. But if you need to concentrate, I can let you go,” Gabe offered helpfully.

“No, stay. I like the sound of your voice.”

“All right, but I’ll change the subject to something productive. Tell me what you’re making for Jason.”

“Really? You want to hear what I’m making?” Eva sounded surprised.

“Yes, of course. I love the way you cook...food, I mean.”

The passion in Eva’s voice when she talked about her culinary creations thrilled Gabe. It was almost like listening her talk about sex. She exuded that same enthusiasm, the same sensual energy and fire. He half expected to hear her to whimper with pleasure simply discussing the menu. He had remind himself to pay attention to Eva’s words because the mere sound of her voice over the phone was so arousing, so mesmerizing, that he ended up with a hard on regardless of what she was saying.

“Hmm? What? I missed that? Gabe commented.

"I'll tell you what, just come on Sunday and you can taste it all. I promise you won't be disappointed."

"Only on the condition that you attend the dinner with me on Friday. Quid pro quo."

"What time will I need to be there? And where is this dinner?" Eva asked, doubt evident in her voice.

"You don't have to worry about driving into the city. I'll send a car to pick you up around six."

"But Gabe..."

"No buts. You can do this. You've met my staff, this is no different. Piece of cake, Eva. And I know you'll look beautiful whatever you wear. Even prettier if you wear nothing..." he added, hopefully.

"All right, all right, I'll come. Just don't expect me to know what everyone is talking about."

"Don't sell yourself short. You are well-read, you're observant, you're perhaps the smartest woman I've ever met and you're utterly charming. Marsha is enamored of you. And you've cast a spell over Luis. He's besotted. Besides, we'll be talking about biking and you can relate the story of how we met, you know... your colorful vocabulary and your little ass up in the air."

"Uh, I think not, Mr. Abbott. I think we'll keep that just between us."

"As you wish," said Gabe, gallantly. "Sweetheart, I hate to leave you, but I'm stuck in the office for at least another hour and I want to get some sleep tonight. I seem to be accumulating quite a sleep deficit."

"That makes two of us," replied Eva. "Goodnight, Gabe."

"Night, Eva."

Gabe clicked off.

Five days without her. This was going to be rough.

Chapter Eighteen

Eva stopped into the ATAP office first thing in the morning.

"I need help," she announced to Tom and Marcus.

Tom rose to his feet and came around the black table he used for a desk. He pulled a chair over and sat her down.

"What is it, darling? You look worried."

"I'm invited to a dinner in the city on Friday night. With Gabriel Abbott. It's a *little black dress* kind of dinner. You have to help me, guys. I don't even know where to look. I don't know what to do with my hair, with my toes, with my fingernails. Look at them." Eva thrust her hands forward. "They're so short. Help me. Please. Help me."

"Oh," said Marcus. "Honey, you have come to the right place. Pygmalion redux." He walked around her, appraising her from all sides.

"You mean *My Fair Lady*? You're going to transform me from Eliza Doolittle into a Hungarian princess?"

Tom laughed. "More like you're Cinderella and we're your fairy godfathers." He lifted her long hair off her neck and twisted it up onto top of her head. He considered his handiwork. "You just leave it to your uncle Tom and your uncle Marcus. We'll have you looking fabulous."

"He's sending a car for me on Friday. It's supposed to be at my house around six. Do you think I can beg off from the White's? Miriam could clean the house for me and I can make their dinner the day before, on Thursday. I've already started on Jason's graduation party."

"We can arrange that. It's the least we can do. After all," said Tom with a knowing smile, "We did bring the two of you together."

"Maybe we should branch out, start a match-making service," suggested Marcus. "You know, Rent-a-Yenta."

Eva burst out laughing.

Tom pointed a long finger at Marcus. "You know," he said with a grin, "That's not a bad idea. Not bad at all. I like it. I can see the shirts... pink and blue... R.A.Y. across the chest. It fits right in with our theme, All Things to All People."

"We'll brainstorm over the weekend," said Marcus.

Eva started to rise from her chair.

"Sit your little self back down, darling," Tom directed Eva. "We have some calls to make."

* * * *

Gabe waited at the curb. He stood, chatting with his wine maker, Adam, when the man suddenly stopped in mid-sentence and stared over Gabe's right shoulder. Gabe turned just in time to watch a shapely pair of bare legs in stilettos emerge from a limousine. He heard his companion whistle under his breath. The woman bent her head down, appearing demure, and leaned against the side of the vehicle, discreetly flexing one of her long legs to the side as she adjusted the strap of a high heel. She wore a body hugging short black dress, which showcased her high, pert breasts and her rounded bottom to perfection. Her deep auburn hair was piled on top of her head, her neck and shoulders bare, except for a long scarf draped around her naked, slender arms. It slid down her back as she leaned over. Her skin gleamed, pearlescent in the evening sun.

"Who is that stunning creature?" Gabe heard his companion ask in a low voice, "And can I have her?"

Gabe turned back to the man. "No, you can't," he said, "She's mine." He strode toward the limo.

"Hello, lover."

Eva straightened up at the sound of Gabe's voice. She colored nicely, her cheeks and neck flushing a tender pink.

"Hello." She looked directly into his eyes and smiled a small, self-conscious smile.

Eyes on her taut breasts, Gabe's mind was busy pulling off the dress. He wondered if she wore anything at all beneath that tight black getup. He leaned close to her hair and inhaled. "God, you smell good," his voice pitched low. "You smell good enough to fuck. Right here. You're dressed like the most delectable little morsel on a buffet table. I could eat you in one bite."

"Gabe!" The blush deepened.

Gabe laughed as he kissed her on the cheek. He offered his arm. Eva took it gratefully.

"Stilettos aren't my strong suit," she admitted.

"You'll do fine," Gabe reassured her. "You'll do better than fine. You'll have everyone eating out of the palm of your hand." Gabe nodded at his gaping acquaintance as they passed. "Just watch out for Adam over there. He's already in lust with you."

Ignoring Adam's open-mouthed stare, Eva grinned up at Gabe as she said, "It's good to see you. I'm beginning to think that five days without you is five days too long."

"Well," replied Gabe, his mouth against her ear, "Try to look at it this way, absence makes the cock grow harder."

Eva burst into laughter, attracting the attention of several couples standing nearby.

"I don't know about that," she winked at him, keeping her voice equally soft, "If last weekend is any indication, I don't think you can possibly get any harder."

"You do know how to make a man feel good," Gabe teased. "But I'm serious when I say that you look absolutely stunning. Remember, this dinner is just for fun. No pressure. You can stay with me all night or you can mingle. Whatever you feel most comfortable with."

They strolled into the reception hall. Discreet eyes glanced in their direction. Gabe knew that his newest escort would quickly become a topic of discussion. He intended to find a way to let those who mattered know that Eva wasn't a fling.

"When I first attended these events, I had no idea what to say. Marsha tutored me. I'll admit I'm not entirely comfortable with this crowd, but you will meet some very nice people here. Don't worry. You'll be fine."

"Did you check out my toes?" Eva interrupted him.

Gabe glanced down. He studied the gold polish on her long toes as she displayed her feet for him. She'd obviously splurged on a pedicure for the occasion.

"I have to say," he admitted, "That your toes weren't high on my list of body parts to attend to, but I think I may have to reconsider. I might be tempted to pop one in my mouth later."

Gabe watched as a smile lit up her entire face.

"That wasn't my intention," she said. "I just think they look pretty. I'm not a girlie-girl, Gabe. This is all new for me."

"One would never know," he replied, smiling in return.

"By the way," Eva added, "you fill out that tux extremely well." Her bright eyes wove their way up and down his body and he felt himself grow even harder beneath her gaze. Time to get moving.

“C’mon, sweetheart,” he said, stepping forward into the room. He forced himself to swallow the urge to back her into a corner and rub himself all over that luscious little body. “There are some people I’d like you to meet.”

An attractive pair of cold blue eyes followed Eva’s every movement as she wove her way through the room. A blond head of exquisitely coiffed hair turned whenever Eva turned. Bare, white, shoulders shifted as Eva shifted. Stephanie Lindstrom squeezed a lime into her third gin and tonic, feeling her anger grow exponentially each time Eva Raines smiled. The woman had big, straight, white teeth. They annoyed Stephanie no end. Gabriel was just as bad, his stance proud and possessive. He kept a protective hand moving between the woman’s back, her neck and her arm, as he introduced her to the people who really counted. God, it seemed as if he couldn’t stop touching the woman. It was enough to make Stephanie gag.

Her own escort, Paul Rupnik, shifted at her side, restless. He was a bright, young lawyer from her firm. He had hopes of making partner within five years. Right now, he was eye candy, pure and simple. Stephanie shot a glance at him. Her eye candy was eyeing Eva Raines.

“Why don’t you go get another glass of wine,” Stephanie commented, her voice dry, suppressing the urge to smack the back of his head.

He nodded, grateful, as he ambled off toward the bar, detouring a little too close to Gabriel and Eva for Stephanie’s liking. As she watched, Gabriel worked his way near her, heading toward a group of winery owners, a hand on Eva’s lower back. Stephanie moved out of his line of sight and headed to the far corner of the room. She smiled and nodded absently to her acquaintances, business and otherwise, as she passed. She’d known Gabriel had been invited to the dinner. She assumed he’d make an appearance, but to bring his housekeeper? And make her play dress up, no less? It was like putting lipstick on a pig. Stephanie wondered if he’d personally taken Miss Raines shopping and to a salon and told them exactly how to make her over. She snorted. He’d probably given the assignment to Marsha, his miniature pit bull.

She’d met with Eddie Jamison over breakfast and he’d filled her in on Miss Eva Raines. Eddie was no dummy. Despite her more general instructions, he didn’t waste time investigating anyone else. He knew exactly who she was interested in, although he was able to provide her with a juicy tidbit about Gabriel. She learned Gabriel had just discovered a half-brother, apparently the abandoned child of his deadbeat father. Although he was still a juvenile, the kid had a rap sheet and he’d been placed by the state in a school for troubled teens. Gabriel hadn’t

publicly acknowledged the boy yet. Stephanie wondered if he intended to. Perhaps a rumor dropped in the right ears could cause him a little embarrassment. It was worth considering.

As far as Eva Raine's background was concerned, unfortunately there was no such drama. She was merely an uneducated housekeeper. She worked for an agency in Napa, idiotically named ATAP, All Things to All People. The woman cleaned houses for a living, for God's sake. She cooked bland meals for old people. Eddie mentioned that she'd graduated from the California Culinary Academy, but as far as Stephanie was concerned, the woman obviously hadn't been able to cut it in any of the Bay area restaurants she'd worked in. Gabriel, or more likely, Marsha, had hired her to cater the dinner he'd planned for her. Stephanie suspected that was how the two met and she was willing to bet good money that the woman saw dollar signs and had hopped into bed with Gabriel at the first opportunity. Maybe she even wore a maid costume. Considering the dress and the shoes and the hair, so far, her gamble appeared to have paid off. Stephanie wondered if Eva made a habit of this kind of thing. Who knew? Maybe she was a working girl who really worked it. Cleaning woman slash whore. Maybe she was good with a blowjob. Men liked that, didn't they? Someone who could perform like a pro? How else could a farm girl make it in the big city?

Stephanie took a sip of her gin and tonic. She grimaced, annoyed to find that her ice had melted and the drink tasted like water. A server walked by with an empty tray and Stephanie set her glass aside, seeking out the closest bar and ordering another. Where had her date gone to? Stephanie scanned the room, looking for his dark gray suit. She didn't spot him, but her eyes lit on Gabriel. She watched him laugh out loud, probably at some stupid Napa Valley inside joke. She noted with interest that Eva had left his side. She appeared to be wandering the room in the company of a doctor's wife, checking out the hors d'oeuvres. More likely cruising for potential customers. Stephanie chuckled as she watched the woman pop a wild mushroom turnover into her mouth. Eva wouldn't fit into that dress for long. Poor Gabriel. What a sap. Stephanie decided that this was an opportune moment to say hello. She patted her hair and smoothed down her already smooth skirt, grabbed her drink and sauntered in his direction.

Gabriel Abbott felt an arm slip beneath his as a voice purred in his ear, "I'm delighted to see you, Gabriel."

Stephanie Lindstrom. Fuck.

He released his arm from her grip and turned to greet her politely. Gabe kept his voice neutral. "How are you, Stephanie? You look beautiful, as always."

"Aren't you the charmer," she said with a seductive smile. "I'm absolutely fine." She gave him an appraising look, starting with his toes and working her way slowly up to his head. "I must say, you're looking well. Apparently that little girl you came in with agrees with you."

Gabe struggled to think of a reply that wouldn't embarrass Stephanie in front of the couple he'd just been speaking with. He stared at Stephanie for a moment, as if daring her to say more, and then he excused himself to find Eva.

"I always say," came Stephanie's voice from behind him, "There's nothing like a good housekeeper. Reliable help is so hard to find these days, don't you think, Gabriel? Especially someone who provides full service. I understand Miss Raines does... provide full service, that is."

Gabe felt the blood rush to his head, but he didn't want to confront Stephanie at a social event. If she'd been a man, he would have decked her. He stood frozen for an instant and he heard another voice behind him, Eva's.

"Did I hear you mention my name?"

Gabe was afraid to turn around. While he would never hurt a woman, a riled Eva was perfectly capable of tossing the taller Stephanie Lindstrom on her ass. He backed up and faced the two women, wondering if he'd have to intervene.

"Why, yes," Stephanie purred again. She offered her hand. "I'm Stephanie Lindstrom. I was Gabriel's date the night you were hired to cook for us."

Eva stared at the extended hand like it was leprous. Gabe watched as she looked directly into Stephanie's eyes. "Too bad you didn't get to stick around and enjoy it," she countered.

Gabe stood, fascinated, as a blush crept up the back of Stephanie's neck.

"Yes," Stephanie replied, her voice sticky with venom. "What a shame Gabriel was called away."

"What a shame for whom?" asked Eva.

"Oh, well, for you, of course. All that hard work, gone to waste."

"I wouldn't say it went to waste," said Eva. "I believe Gabe found my tasting menu to be quite pleasurable."

Gabe nearly choked at that one. He noticed that a young man in a dark gray suit stood nearby, listening to the exchange.

"I'm sure he did." The chill in Stephanie's voice couldn't be any more obvious.

Adam suddenly appeared at Gabe's back. "Are we about to witness a girl fight?" he asked. "Because my money's on your date. The woman's got cojones."

Gabe leaned back and deliberately stepped on his friend's toes.

"Shit, man," Adam hissed in his ear. "It's a compliment."

"Excuse me, Miss Lindstrom." Gabe watched Eva pass Stephanie and head in his direction.

"Gabriel Abbott must have a lot to offer a girl like you, more than I imagine you ever dreamed of having," Stephanie called after her.

Eva froze. She turned and faced the woman. "Oh, yes," she said, her voice equally frosty. "He certainly does. In fact, I think I'll let you imagine exactly *how much* a man like Gabriel Abbott has to offer a woman like me."

Stephanie's face turned beet red and she stared over Eva's head, directly at Gabe. He stared back. The corner of his mouth twitched, despite his best efforts to keep a straight face.

"Perhaps a better question would be," said Stephanie, "What can a housekeeper from Hick Town, U.S.A., possibly offer a man like Gabriel Abbott? I mean, other than a temporary diversion."

Gabe bristled at her words and was about to interrupt when Eva straightened her shoulders.

"You know, Miss Lindstrom, I may have grown up on a farm, but I'm not the one standing here with a corn cob stuck up her ass. Excuse me."

Gabe had to turn his back to hide his laughter while Adam began to cough. The man sounded as if he was about to choke to death. When Eva reached the two men, her smile was strained.

"Don't you dare say a single word. Just kiss me," she demanded, taking his hand. "Kiss me right now like you mean it."

"Yes ma'am."

Gabe took Eva in his arms. He leaned down and slanted his mouth over hers. She opened for him and his tongue quickly found hers. Her mouth felt warm and silky and she tasted like his Pinot Noir and wild thyme. By the time he lifted his head, he was hard as a rock and aching to bury himself inside her, reception or no reception. He gazed at her lovely face. Her lips were red and moist. Her eyes closed. She appeared as aroused as he'd ever seen her.

"Hey," interrupted Adam's voice, quietly. "Maybe you two should get a room. You're attracting quite a bit of attention. She's gone, by the way."

Gabe and Eva glanced at him.

"Stomped off with her boy toy in the gray suit. What did you do to piss her off like that?"

"Long story," groaned Gabe. "Adam, do you mind? I need to stand here for a moment." He continued to hold Eva close.

"No problem." Adam winked at Eva. "I'm Adam Grossman, by the way." He stuck a friendly hand in her direction. "Nice to meet you."

"Eva Raines," answered Eva, sounding breathless. She shook his hand. "You're the wine maker."

"That would be me. Look, you two need me to run interference for you, or something? You need to step outside for a moment to cool off?"

"Might not be a bad idea," replied Gabe. "Do you mind if we go outside for a few minutes?" he asked Eva.

"No, I think we should," she said. "Besides, we need to talk about what just happened."

"C'mon, then," answered Gabe, with another groan, "Let's get it over with."

Gabe ushered Eva out the door and around the corner into a dark alcove surrounded by thick shrubs. The evening light was soft and muted, the air chilled. Eva realized the sun must have just set. San Francisco was not known for warm summers. She shivered. Gabe opened his suit coat and wrapped it around her, drawing her back against his broad chest. Eva had to admit that the man gave off a lot of heat. She assumed he must still be uncomfortably erect because he tried to keep that particular portion of his anatomy away from her bottom.

"Is she right?" she asked, her voice soft. "Is there any truth to what she says? Am I merely a diversion? Are you slumming, Gabe?"

Eva felt Gabe jerk, as if she'd given him a jolt of electricity.

"Slumming?" Gabe turned her around and stared into her eyes. "I can't believe you listened to a word that came out of Stephanie's mouth. Surely you can see that she's pissed off and she wants to get to me by hurting you. Slumming... I can't believe you just said that. You know my background. You know how I grew up."

"But Gabe," Eva fought back tears, "Some of what she says is true. You're, well, you're experienced. I have to assume that you've been with many other women, beautiful women, sophisticated women, educated, professional women. Women any man would be proud to be seen with. Why me? I don't have what they have. I can't offer you what they can. Gabe, you're

the first man..." Eva's throat closed on a sob. She struggled to get herself under control and she managed to continue, her bottom lip quivering, "You're the first man to spend the night at my house. The only man...the only man I've ever let into my bed."

Gabe gathered Eva into his arms. He held her close. She tried hard not to cry, but the tears flowed nonetheless.

"Do I mean anything to you, Gabe? Do I?" she mumbled, her mouth pressed against his jacket.

"Eva, do you remember when I telephoned you the night before the dinner party? The dinner party I'd hired you to cater for Stephanie?"

"Um-hm."

"I didn't want to click off that night. I kept trying to think of things to say so that I could keep talking to you. I wanted to cancel with Stephanie as soon as I'd hung up with you, but I couldn't come up with any legitimate excuse. I tried not to hurt her feelings. I thought, maybe I'll just have dinner with her and then take her home. But when I got her to my house, when she walked in the door, I knew I couldn't go through with it. She didn't belong there. I knew I didn't want to be with her. Not in any way, shape or form. Within five minutes, I hustled Stephanie out the door and had her on the road back to the city. I didn't want her, Eva. I've never truly wanted to spend more than a few nights with any woman I've been with, until now. Until I met you. It's the honest to God truth."

Eva looked up at him. She'd listened to his words, but she needed to see his eyes. Gabe didn't turn away. His gaze remained steady. His face, sincere.

Her voice still quivering, Eva asked, "Cross your heart and hope to die?"

"Yes," answered Gabe with a grin.

"Stick a needle in your eye?"

"Yes," he chuckled.

"Eat a cow manure pie?"

"Yes." Gabe burst into laughter.

"Good," said Eva, "I believe you. But I don't think I can handle it if I run into any more of your former or would-be lovers."

"I don't know about that," Gabe said as he began pulling the pins out of her hair one by one. "You got in some pretty good jabs. Adam had already bet on you to win."

Eva smiled. She closed her eyes and dropped her head onto Gabe's chest, allowing him to undo the updo that had taken the stylist two hours to complete. He continued to remove hairpins, running his fingers through her long tresses to free them, draping her hair across her shoulders, curling it about her neck and ears. Eva sighed with pleasure as she discovered that there was no sensation quite as relaxing as Gabriel Abbott's fingers playing in her hair.

"Gabe," she murmured.

"Yes?"

"Those wild mushroom turnovers were amazing."

"I'm glad you liked them," he said, his mouth against her ear. She felt him nibble his way down her neck.

"They were seasoned with fresh marjoram and thyme and Grains of Paradise."

His lips traced the line of her collarbone. "What are grains of paradise?" he asked, his voice vibrating against her skin.

"It's an..." His mouth slid lower, onto the slope of her breast. "It's an ancient...ancient spice used..." He carefully lowered the top of her dress, exposing a nipple. It contracted sharply in the cool air. Eva whimpered.

"Used for what?" Gabe asked, and his tongue began to circle the erect rosebud. He nipped her.

Eva gasped.

"Used for what?" he asked again.

Eva struggled to organize her thoughts, to concentrate on what Gabe was doing to her body while he tried to distract her mind. "Used for..." He sucked her. "Used as a...as a substitute for..." He sucked harder, tugging on her nipple with his teeth while his hand pulled the bodice of her dress down further, exposing her other breast. "Oh God!" His mouth moved to her other breast while his fingers toyed with the hem of her dress. Her body had already betrayed her. She was wet and ready for him, on the brink of orgasm.

Gabe lifted his head for a moment. "As a substitute for what?" His fingers slid beneath the tight sheath.

"A s-s-s-substitute for..."

"You're not wearing any panties, Eva."

"Gabe," she cried. "Oh, Gabe..."

“Tell me.” He thrust a finger inside her. “I want to know.” Two fingers. “A substitute for what?” His mouth descended to her breast again while his fingers plunged in and out of her creamy center. Eva thought she might faint.

“Black...black...pep...pep... Oh my God...” Eva’s head arched back as she came, writhing wildly against him. Only Gabe’s arm around her waist, his two fingers inside her, and his mouth on her nipple kept her upright.

Gabe’s mouth was once again against her ear. “Black pepper,” he whispered. “Eva, pull up your dress.”

“Yes, Gabe.” Her voice quivered. She heard the sound of a zipper being unzipped. She slid her dress up her hips and Gabe lifted her onto his hard, thick shaft. He reached for her thigh and drew one of her legs around his waist. Eva had to stretch onto the very tips of the other toes in order to accommodate him. Gabe pressed her against the stone wall, his arms behind her back, cushioning her. He plunged into her swiftly, thrusting again and again, driving deep inside. Eva felt as if she had been transported outside her body, where she watched through lowered lashes as Gabe roughly took possession of her. Deliberately. Definitively. Eva could hear their heavy breathing, but otherwise, neither of them made a sound.

“Eva,” Gabe growled low in his throat, “Eva, come with me.”

Eva could tell that he’d gritted his teeth. His mouth was buried in her hair. God, she was close.

“Fuck...lover...come with me,” he ordered her. “Fuck... Now...”

Eva bit his neck, hard, to stifle her scream. Her hands clutched desperately at his shoulders. She shattered. Gabe held her body still as he thrust into her, growing impossibly harder and thicker, as he came. Eva felt his heat deep inside. She heard him make a deep, guttural sound, perhaps he said something, but Eva was beyond understanding. She leaned her head against Gabe’s chest, panting, spent.

“I didn’t know that,” Gabe whispered, his voice hoarse, “About Grains of Paradise.”

Eva began to giggle. Within seconds, she was helplessly whooping with laughter while Gabe struggled to straighten out their clothing and untangle her hair from the buttons of his tux.

Even in the dim light, Eva could see Gabe’s smile as he whispered, “Help. I can’t get you off me.”

Eva took a deep breath and tried to stop laughing long enough to untangle her hair from Gabe’s jacket. She finally succeeded, but a few long strands had pulled out and were caught in his

buttons. She carefully removed them and brushed his jacket with her hands. "I smell like you," she said with a grin.

"That's the whole idea. I'm marking you so everyone will know to whom you belong and nobody will mess with you."

"Oh really?" commented Eva. "To *whom* I belong, eh?"

"Yes," said Gabe, looking wicked. "I wanted to rub my scent all over you the moment I saw you in that dress."

"Why didn't you just lift your leg and pee on me?"

Gabe grinned at her. "I'm more of a cat than a dog, don't you think? Cats rub themselves on their people."

Eva looked him up and down. Gabe did indeed look dark, sleek and trim. A bit like a jaguar. "Well, if you're a cat, what am I?"

"Prey," he replied immediately, "Delicious, delectable, utterly irresistible prey," he replied. He pulled his cell phone out of the pocket of his jacket.

"Who are you calling?" Eva asked.

"The car, unless you'd like to go back in with *me* dripping down your bare legs. Not that I mind."

Eva was more than a bit sticky. "No, calling the car is a good idea."

Gabe gallantly removed his jacket and wrapped it around Eva. They walked to the curb to wait. Adam joined them briefly.

"You two all right?" he asked.

"Yes," they answered in unison, laughter in their voices.

"Do you need a ride to Napa?" Gabe asked. "We're going to my apartment, but I can send the car back for you."

"No, no thanks. I drove tonight. Did you forget, Gabe? We have a tasting tomorrow morning."

"Shit, yes. I completely forgot."

"I'm not surprised," replied Adam, with a glance at Eva.

"We'll go back to Napa then," Gabe said, "and I'll meet you in the cellars tomorrow."

"You're welcome to come with Gabe, Eva," offered Adam.

"I wish I could," replied Eva, "I really do. But I'll be spending the entire day prepping for a catering job. Sorry. I would so love to taste your young wines. I got to taste your very first release, your cab, when I was working here in the city. It was damn good."

"I'll make sure Gabe brings you a bottle then. You'll like it even better now. It's grown very smooth with age. Like this one." He nodded at Gabe.

The black limousine pulled up to the curb and the driver got out. He opened the rear passenger door. Adam took Eva's hand.

"Eva," he said, "I'm hoping you make an honest man out of my old friend."

Eva's blushed. "By the way, I need to thank you," she said.

"For what?"

"For betting on me." Eva smiled warmly at the man as Gabe helped her into the car.

"See you tomorrow, Gabe," said Adam.

Gabe shook his friend's hand. "Night, Adam."

* * * *

Eva sat silently beside Gabe until they'd crossed the Bay Bridge. He held her hand folded in his own.

"Could you please ask the driver to raise the window between the front and the back?" Her voice was quiet.

Gabe called up to his driver and the man quickly complied. Gabe made sure to flip off the intercom.

"Gabe... I've been... I haven't been completely up front with you."

Gabe looked at her lovely face. He couldn't imagine Eva lying about anything. He raised one eyebrow in response.

"This is hard for me, so try to be understanding."

"All right," Gabe said.

"As I pointed out, you've been with other women..." Gabe began to interrupt. Eva held up a hand, "No, let me finish," she said. "And I admitted that you are the first man I've ever let into my bed... the first man who has ever spent an entire night at my house."

"I can't say that I'm unhappy about that," Gabe spoke up. "On the contrary, I'm flattered."

"Gabe, I'm not experienced. I grew up with four overprotective big brothers who wouldn't let a guy within ten feet of me. It's not that I'm, well, it's not that I haven't been interested since I moved away from home. I have been interested and I've acted on that interest

on more than one occasion. But I'm... I'm picky. Maybe selective is a better word. I'm selective. It's like food. I won't waste my calories on crap. Do you understand what I'm saying?"

"That I'm not crap?" Gabe stifled a laugh.

"Well, that," she grinned, "and, well, Gabe, I've noticed that you haven't worn a condom and I've noticed that I haven't asked you to and... I'm not on the pill," she said in a rush. She continued, just as hastily, "Until now, I didn't have a reason to be. I know it's irresponsible of me on so many levels and I don't want you to think that I'd trap you or force you to be responsible for my mistake in any way, shape or form. It's just that when you touch me, I lose all perspective and everything flies out of my head and..."

Gabe leaned over and pressed his lips against hers. "Shut up, Eva," he murmured. "It will be okay."

"A man should never tell a woman to shut up," Eva murmured against his mouth.

Gabe lifted his head. "I think in this case it's warranted. If a mistake has been made, we are both responsible and I have no intention of walking away from you or from any *mistake*. Not now, not ever. Are we clear?"

Eva searched his eyes, her gaze penetrating. Gabe could tell she was trying to read him. "No, we're not clear."

"Then let me further clarify the matter. I love you, Eva Raines. I want to be with you for the rest of your life, if you'll have me. Clear enough for you?"

"But, Gabe, you...you barely know me."

"I know enough to know that you are what I want. You and only you. If you need more time, it's all right, take as much time as you want, but I'm not going away."

"Gabe... I don't... I don't know what to say."

Gabe smiled. "Don't say a word. Just kiss me. Kiss me right now like you mean it."

Gabe watched Eva's face break into a dimpled grin. She laughed at hearing her own words tossed back at her. Beneath his hopeful gaze, she undid her seatbelt and climbed onto his lap. Her thighs pressed against his. He closed his eyes and enjoyed the feel of her slender fingers in his thick, dark hair. She mussed it playfully. Finally, when he thought he couldn't stand anymore, she lowered her lips to his and kissed him, a kiss filled with promise, with warmth, tenderness and ferocity, a kiss tasting of desire and sweet dreams.

She pulled her mouth away from his long enough to utter the words, "I love you, Gabriel Abbott."

Chapter Nineteen

"Eddie, I'd like that cell phone number we discussed."

There was a pause as Stephanie listened for a moment.

"I don't care what you think. I paid you good money and I've been paying you good money for five years. My father has practically financed your daughter's college education single-handedly. Give me the number. Now."

Stephanie leaned over her desk and wrote down the number. She clicked off without another word.

"You know, Miss Lindstrom, you may be overreacting just a bit."

"Shut up, Paul. You heard her. She humiliated me in front of my friends and business associates."

"Well, just playing devil's advocate here, it's not as if you didn't provoke her."

Stephanie tossed her clutch onto the desk. She'd dragged her escort back to her office. "C'mon, Paul. Get real. She's nothing but a gold digger. Anyone with half a brain can see that. A poor girl who wants to make it big. She'll take Gabriel for everything he's got and break his heart. She's probably already gotten herself pregnant. Why are men so damn stupid?"

Stephanie's associate rolled his eyes. He hadn't noticed anything of the kind. The young woman was very attractive. Farm girl or no, she was obviously intelligent, and she and Gabriel Abbott seemed quite well matched.

"Are you in love with the man?"

Stephanie sighed. "I don't know. I just know I don't want him with her. I had a chance with him until she showed up. I've had my eye on him for years."

"What exactly do you think you can do about it? Pretend you're in high school again and talk behind her back? Start a slam book? Really, it seems like a pointless exercise. They're a couple. Let it go."

"No, I don't want to let it go." Stephanie sounded like a petulant child.

"Miss Lindstrom, Stephanie, you are a very successful, accomplished, beautiful woman. You could have practically any man in this city panting at your feet. Why waste your time on Gabriel Abbott? Sorry to be so blunt, but he obviously doesn't want you."

"But he did, Paul. He did. I didn't imagine that. What does this... this Eva Raines woman have that I don't have?"

"I have no idea and I don't care. I don't think it matters. There's such a thing as chemistry. Maybe the two of them have it. I advise you to drop it." Paul walked to a sidebar and helped himself to a bottle of sparkling water.

"When you become a partner, you may advise me. Until then, keep your mouth shut."

Paul sipped his sparkling water. "Yes, Miss Lindstrom."

Stephanie paced in front of her desk for a moment, staring at her cell phone.

"What are you planning to do?"

"I'm going to figure out a way to make her crawl back under the rock she came from."

"Well, Miss Lindstrom," said Paul as he set tossed his now empty bottle into a recycling bin, "I'll say goodnight. I'm going home. Would you like me to send my cab back for you?"

"Wait. Paul, when do you expect to make partner? Six years? Seven years?"

Paul gazed in silence at the woman, careful to keep his face neutral.

"I can make it happen by the end of this year, if you'd like. If you'd do me a favor."

"What kind of favor, Miss Lindstrom? I'm not a hit man."

"Of course not. Don't be silly. I have no intention of hurting the woman. I'd just like to push her a little. Encourage her to show her true colors. You wouldn't even have to go anywhere near her. At least, not immediately."

"When you come up with something, let me know and I'll consider it, but I won't do anything illegal and I won't hurt her. Right now," he waved dismissively, "I'm going home. Do you want that cab or not?"

"No thank you," replied Stephanie, her voice sweet.

Paul strode from the office and hit the elevator button. *What a fucking bitch.* He was concerned that anything Stephanie came up with could backfire big time and land him in hot

water. He'd graduated number one in his law class and he'd worked hard to get where he was. Paul was quite certain he'd make partner within three to four years without her help. The problem was, if he didn't cooperate, she could get his ass fired and impugn his reputation. Who was the man she'd talked to? She'd called him Eddie. Probably the private investigator she hired from time to time. What was his name? Eddie Jamison? Edward Jamison, that was it. He glanced back over his shoulder. Stephanie's office door was still shut. He walked quietly to her assistant's desk and pulled out her rolodex. Edward Jamison. Several of his business cards were stuck on the little ring. Paul quietly removed one and slipped it into his jacket pocket. The elevator door opened and he hurried to get inside before it closed.

Chapter Twenty

The White's had given Eva the day off. She'd decided to go for a long overdue bike ride and stop by Gabe's house. She strolled into Gabriel's garden where she found Luis working in the herb bed. He rose to his feet when he saw her.

"Buenos días, Señorita. Cómo está usted?"

"Muy bien, gracias. Y tu, Señor, y su hermana?"

"Bien, gracias. Y mi hermana? Ella esta muy feliz."

Eva thought Luis was looking very well. He seemed at peace in the garden, with bees buzzing and butterflies fluttering around his head.

"You and *Señor* Abbott are together, *sí*?" he asked, a hopeful note in his voice. "It's very good for him. You are very good for him, *Señorita*."

"I think it works both ways, Luis. He's very good for me too." Eva smiled at the man. "I just stopped by to say hello and to tell you that Gabe has given me a key. I wanted you to know so that you wouldn't think I was taking advantage of the situation. Will it be a problem for you in any way?"

"No, *Señorita*, I am always happy to see you, but I do think, well, I do think the man should marry you. It would be the proper thing to do."

Eva sat down on a low stone wall and Luis joined her. "He hasn't asked yet, Luis, and I think it would be a little sudden if he did. We haven't known each other all that long."

"Es verdad, pero, yo pienso que..."

"You can say it in English."

"I think it would be better for him and best for you. It is always best for the woman. Even in this country. It is better to have a man to look after you. And I think *Señor* Abbott would look after you very well." Luis winked.

Eva laughed. "You are quite a gentleman, Luis. And very old world."

"Sí, yo soy viejo sabio."

"Sí, sí señor, mucho, mucho viejo sabio." Eva squeezed the man's hand. "So, Mr. Wise Man, I'm going to check out the kitchen and see if there's anything I can make us for lunch."

"Justa lo que necesitaba, Señorita Eva. Gracias."

"Me too. But first I guess I better find out if Gabe has any food in his house or if I should do a little grocery shopping."

Luis nodded and returned to his pruning. Eva pushed herself off the wall and headed to the kitchen. Foraging through Gabriel's fridge and his cabinets, she managed to find a carton of eggs, some mayo, a jar of capers and a loaf of frozen whole wheat bread. Eva put six eggs on to boil while she drained and chopped a couple handfuls of capers and searched for a pepper grinder. When she'd catered for Gabe, she'd brought her own fresh ground black pepper. The water in the pot with the eggs began to boil so Eva shut off the stove. Her mother had taught her when she was a kid that if you want hard boiled eggs to have nice, bright, yellow yolks without that greenish ring around them, you should shut the stove off the instant the water begins to bubble and leave them to sit, covered, for exactly ten minutes. Eva had done that ever since. She checked to see if Gabe had any fruit or even a head of lettuce, but he had nothing in his fruit and vegetable bins, so she walked out into Luis' vegetable garden and picked a handful of tangy arugula. While the eggs sat, she brewed some black tea, added sugar, and poured it over two glasses of ice.

In ten minutes, Eva ran cold water over the eggs and peeled them. She chopped them coarsely and added a couple tablespoons of mayo, the capers and ground some fresh pepper over all. She tossed a couple slices of frozen bread in the toaster to brown while she mixed the egg salad. Retrieving the bread from the toaster, she spread each slice lightly with mayo, placed a few arugula leaves on the bottom, scooped on a big spoonful of egg salad, and spread it around on over the green herb. She covered the salad with the second slice of bread and cut the sandwich in half, trying not to squeeze all the egg salad onto the plate. She made two sandwiches and then she called to Luis. While he washed up, she carried both plates onto the patio, returned for the glasses of ice tea and scrounged up a couple napkins. She and Luis ate in companionable silence, listening to birdcalls and the hum of insects. When they finished, Eva refused Luis' offer of help. She insisted that he sit for a few moments while she cleaned up.

“Gracias por la comida, Señorita Eva. The sandwich was muy delicioso. I must get back to work. A tree fell down in back and I must begin to cut it up. Señor Abbott can use it for firewood.”

“De nada, Luis. I’m glad you’re okay with me having a key.”

“Don’t worry,” replied Luis with a smile, “I have faith in Señor Abbott. He will do the right thing. He’s already met the right woman. That’s a good first step.”

Before Eva could answer him, the man had walked into the garden. Eva had ridden up here today for Luis’ sake, to tell him and get his permission. She knew Gabe was a very private man and he wouldn’t discuss his personal life with Luis. Eva, on the other hand, wanted Luis to think well of her. She didn’t like the idea that he might lose respect for her if she became Gabe’s mistress in his eyes. Luis had lived in the States a long time, but his values were still very old world. She could tell that in his mind, if a man and woman were, well, intimate, it meant that they were either married or getting married. Gabe hadn’t said anything about marriage, although he had said he wanted to spend the rest of his life with her, and he’d torn up the check she’d left him for the bicycle repairs and told her to drop the matter. Eva smiled at the memory. As Marsha warned her, Gabe did like to take care of people. Well, his words would have to be enough for now. She had her job in Napa. He had his company in San Francisco. Besides, she loved the man. She could wait.

Eva made a short list of kitchen essentials, committed them to memory, and left by the front door. She locked up and tucked the key into the pocket of her bike shorts. She sat on the stoop to put her bike shoes back on. She hadn’t heard from Gabe today and she didn’t know if he’d be able to get away, but if he could, she wanted to have something ready for him.

* * * *

“Mr. Abbott,” called Marsha, “Your sister’s on the line. She says she’s been trying to reach you on your cell but it’s gone straight to voicemail.”

“Crap.” Gabe pulled his cell phone out of his pocket. He’d forgotten to switch it on when he left Eva’s bed this morning. “Put her through.”

His desk phone rang. “Lise, what’s up? How are you? How are the girls?”

“The girls are fine, Gabe, they’re good. It’s me. I’m spotting and the doctor says I need to stay in bed.”

“Well, if the doctor says you have to stay in bed, then sis, you have to stay in bed. What about the girls? Can David handle them?”

"Mom's coming to stay with us for a while," said Elise. "Besides, it's not the girls I'm worried about. I've already enrolled them in day camp for the summer."

"Quincy," said Gabe.

"Yes, Quincy. He gets out of school at the end of this week and he's supposed to be staying here. It would be okay with me, but Gabe, it won't be any fun for him. He'll feel like he's a babysitter. That's no way to start a relationship. Father Joe says Quincy can stay with him for a few weeks, but the man is still recovering."

"Sis, I don't want you to worry about it. Quincy can fly out here. I'll make the arrangements. I'll pick him up at the airport and he can stay with me in the apartment or we'll go to the house in Napa. It's not a problem. I'll talk to Eva."

"Eva?" his sister asked.

"My...my..." suddenly Gabe didn't know exactly how to describe her.

"Gabriel," sang his little sister, "You have a girlfriend. Eva... Is she the woman you were talking about?"

"Yes, we're...we're together."

"So spill, are you in love with her or is this one of your seven-week flings?"

"I'm in love with her, Lise. Does that ease your mind?" Gabe smiled despite his worry for his sister.

"Very. All I can say is, it's about damn time. I was afraid you were going to become one of those lecherous old bachelors who always has a blond bimbo on his arm."

"Not a chance, sis. Just waiting for the right woman. This one is about as far from a bimbo as you can get."

"And she's the right woman?" Elise asked.

"She's the right woman for me," answered Gabe. "So I'll call Father Joe and set this up."

"There's another tiny problem," Elise interrupted.

"Yes?"

"Quincy's not a ping-pong ball and I don't want him to feel like we're bouncing him around. He's never flown before, Gabe, at least not as far as I know. I don't think he's ever even been out of Illinois. I spoke with him and while he tried to hide it, I could tell he's pretty nervous about making the trip by himself. You think you could come out here next weekend? You know, find a legitimate reason to come to Chicago? He could fly back with you and it would all seem on the up and up."

"Possibly," Gabe said. "Let me talk to Marsha and to Father Joe. I'll see if we can get the interviews set up a little early. It would be good for Quincy to sit in on them anyway. He could learn from what his fellow students have to say, watch how they handle themselves. Might work out best for everyone concerned."

"What about Eva? Can she come with you? I'd like to meet her. She must be very special to have my big brother publicly proclaiming his love for her."

"I'll ask, but if I know Eva, she'll say no. It would be short notice and she takes her responsibilities very seriously. Don't worry, Lise, you'll meet her. I believe she has plans to fly back to Iowa in a few weeks to see her family. If I'm still in the Midwest, I can probably coax her into taking a little detour."

"Sounds good. Thanks, Gabe. I really appreciate this and I'm sure Quincy will too, even if he doesn't admit it."

"Don't worry, sis," Gabe reassured her, "I'll handle everything. You rest and keep your chin up. Give David my regards and kiss the girls and mom for me."

"I will. Love you, big brother."

"Love you too, Lise." Gabe clicked off.

"So we need to go to Chicago earlier than planned, huh?" asked Marsha from where she stood in the doorway. "Is Elise all right?"

"She's pregnant. Four months. The doctor wants her to stay in bed. I think they're worried she might lose the baby. My brother...the boy I told you about, Quincy, he was supposed to stay with Elise for a month and then come out here for the rest of the summer. He's going to be coming here instead. I need to fly out there and pick him up, only he can't know I'm picking him up."

"Then I guess we'll need to combine the trip with our interviews," said Marsha.

"You read my mind," Gabe replied. "Can you make the arrangements? Talk to the families? I'll get on the phone to Father Joe's secretary."

"When will we be leaving, boss?"

"Friday. Early."

"Okay, guess I better get my ass moving then. We have a busy week ahead of us."

Gabe dialed the school in Chicago. He was able to reach Father Green's secretary, but the man had already returned to teaching part time. Gabe shook his head, it figured that Father Green wouldn't stay down for long. The secretary said she'd have Father Green call him back

when he was free. Gabe doubted the priest would be able to make much time for him during the last week of school, but if Quincy was willing, he and Gabe could spend a little time together. Gabe could show him some of his favorite Chicago haunts.

He wondered if there was any chance Eva could go, but he dismissed the thought. She would never leave her bosses and her clients in the lurch like that. He called her cell anyway, but there was no answer. She had the day off today, now that the graduation party was over. Gabe had had a surprisingly good time at the party, even though the only person he knew was Eva. He'd tossed a football around with the boys, chatted with Dr. and Mrs. White. Sampled Eva's fantastic buffet. Had a long talk with Jason about Eva.

The corner of Gabe's mouth turned up. Despite the fact that the boy had a steady girlfriend, he obviously harbored a serious crush on Eva. He'd taken Gabe aside and warned him that if he didn't treat Eva well, he'd have to answer to him. Trying to look equally serious, Gabe reassured the young man he'd do right by her. Gabe shook his head. Eva had that effect on men. Made them want to protect her although she was perfectly capable of standing up for herself. Perhaps it was the big brown eyes, her innocent smile and sweet voice. Eva managed to rouse those innate protective instincts in almost every male she encountered. Luis had succumbed. Adam had been immediately smitten. Jason and his friends had her back. It seemed as if her bosses watched out for her like guardian angels. Gabe doubted she had any clue as to how the male sex reacted to her. He actually couldn't believe his luck. A woman like Eva should have been off the market a long, long time ago. Fortunately for him, she was, as she described herself, selective. Talk about boosting a guy's ego, among other things. And man, that woman could cook.

Even Marsha had nearly swooned when she ate the piece of chocolate cake Gabe brought her. "Oh my God...marry her... I'm telling you marry Eva," she declared after her first bite, "For this cake if for no other reason."

When Gabe tasted the cake himself, the flavors had exploded in his mouth. The texture was like chocolate velvet poured over his tongue. Tender, moist, creamy, rich, deep and dark. No wonder Jason had requested it. The silkiness alone kicked Gabe's imagination into overdrive and he'd stood there, barely chewing, imagining some pretty intriguing things. When he had asked Eva how she did it, she merely shrugged.

"Oh, dark cocoa powder, sour cream, hot water...a few family secrets. It's not all that difficult. My grandma taught me how to make this cake years ago. If you like this, wait until you

try my whiskey cake,” she winked at him, “Another family secret. It’s how my mom caught my dad.”

Gabe believed every single word. If her mother was half the cook Eva was...

Gabe had brought her two bottles of wine, gifts from Adam, and he’d watched some of her prep work for Jason’s party. He’d asked her how she knew what flavors went together. How much salt to use? How much pepper? How she could get away with blending two such diverse ingredients as walnuts and cream cheese in her tuna salad and manage to make the stuff so addictive? Or mixing crushed pineapple and toasted almonds into chicken salad? How she could include habanero peppers in her fresh fruit salsa yet somehow meld them with other the other ingredients so that they became background hot and not just *mouth-scalding, can’t taste anything the rest of the day* hot? How did she know when enough of any one spice was enough?

“I don’t know,” she answered, “I just do. It’s like this...and I don’t think I can explain it any better...since I was a kid, I’ve been a very oral person...” she smiled in answer to Gabe’s grin before she continued. “I can put something in my mouth and deconstruct it. It’s like working backward from the finished product to the original raw materials. You know, like time-lapse photography, only backward. I guess it’s the same way a sommelier tastes wine. Take M&M’s for example.”

“The candy?” Gabe asked.

“Yeah, the candy. Each color has a unique flavor.”

“They all taste alike to me,” he said.

“Not to me,” Eva replied. “When I was a teenager, we used to do blindfold taste tests with M&M’s. Probably more than ninety-five percent of the time, I could guess which color I had in my mouth. It’s become a little harder since they added some new colors—the new ones all taste alike to me—and they got rid of my favorite, light brown. Those were the yummiest, followed by green, yellow, red, and then dark brown. Orange brought up the rear.”

“Okay,” he said, “I’ll give you that, but how do you know what seasonings go with what? Trial and error?”

“No, not at all. First, I know what I like. Second, my goal is to bring out or enhance the underlying flavor of whatever I’m working with, not hide it. If I’m working with something I want to hide, then I shouldn’t be using it in the first place. You would be surprised at what goes together. Sometimes it’s very unexpected, like salmon and maple syrup.”

“You’re kidding?” Gabe interjected.

“No, I’m not. I love salmon, but not the way most restaurants prepare it. Salmon is a very oily fish, very rich. And if you take that oily fish and then add more fat, like, say, you cook it in butter or olive oil. For me, the fish becomes so rich that I find it inedible. I actually get sick, really sick, when I eat it. I think that the fat in the salmon alone is enough. That’s why I never add fat when I cook it, and in fact, I actually like to dry my salmon out just a little, pull some of the fat out, maybe with a sweet, spicy, smoky marinade, and then grill it or pan sear it just as it is.” She looked up from her work. “Have you ever eaten salmon candy?”

Gabe laughed. “Can’t say that the thought has ever occurred to me.”

“It’s wonderful. I can eat a whole big bag in one sitting. I’d be happy to make you some,” she offered.

“I’d like that,” answered Gabe, still smiling. “But is there anything you don’t want to work with? Any food you won’t eat?”

“You already know that I don’t eat red meat,” replied Eva, tossing a pasta salad. “I have a rule—I refuse to eat anything that plays when it’s young. Won’t do it. I eat fish. I’ll eat a little chicken or turkey, if that’s all there is, but for protein, I mostly stick to eggs and dairy products. We raised cattle and pigs, my dad still does. I loved those babies. To me, eating them was like eating the family dog. I couldn’t bring myself to do it.”

“But you cook meat.”

“Because that’s what my clients want. I don’t cook it for myself.”

Gabe was curious. “So what else don’t you like?”

“I detest tarragon.”

“Tarragon?”

“Yeah,” Eva replied. “It’s an herb that everyone, and I mean everyone, says you should pair with fish. The stuff gags me. As far as I’m concerned, if you use tarragon with fish, all you taste is the tarragon and to me, it tastes way too sweet. I can’t stand it.” Eva thought for a moment. “Call me crazy, but I don’t like Portobello mushrooms, either. Everyone else seems to think they’re a great meat substitute so I get offered grilled Portobellos a lot. I like them fine when they’re young, you know, criminis, Italian brown mushrooms? That’s all Portobello mushrooms are, old criminis. I like intense flavors, but the flavor of a Portobello is too intense for me, especially when they’re grilled. Oh, and I’m not all that fond of lobster mushrooms, too fishy. Fishier than fish, in my opinion. A bad lobster mushroom tastes like a nasty fish that’s a week too old.”

Eva looked up from her cutting board. She grinned at Gabe. "And I hate green peppers. Red are fine, orange and yellow are fine, and just about any hot chili is better than fine, but a plain old green pepper? Sometimes I can't even be in the same room with them...them and old-fashioned breakfast sausages. Ugh. The smell of either green peppers or breakfast sausages cooking makes my stomach turn. My mom is always careful when I go home for a visit because my dad loves breakfast sausage and one of his favorite meals is veal with green peppers and onions. She won't make either when I'm around, poor guy."

"I hate green peppers too," said Gabe. "You asked me about food dislikes the first time we talked."

"Yeah," replied Eva, "I remember. I figure if I'm ever pissed off at you, I'll hide green peppers in something."

"Eva," Gabe pitched his voice was low, "What do I taste like? If you were blindfolded, could you recognize me?"

She stopped what she was doing and walked slowly around the counter. She wrapped her arms around him and pressed her chest to his. Eva laid her mouth against his ear.

"Of course," she said softly, her breath tickling him. "You, Gabriel Abbott, are a sprinkle of *Fleur De Sel de Guerande*," she whispered, her voice husky, and the front of his jeans grew taut. "Fresh *maitake* mushrooms sautéed in raw, unsalted butter with just a bit of marjoram." She ran a hand along his hard length. "A slow swallow of *Nonino grappa* that I can feel all the way to my belly button."

Eva slid down his body and dropped to her knees. She ran her fingers up the front of his jeans, drew down the zipper and freed him. Her palm stroked him, her fingers winding their way up his hard cock. She licked him, using just the tip of her tongue, savoring his taste, his feel, like he was her favorite flavor of ice cream.

God... Gabe groaned and closed his eyes, trying his best to remain upright. It took every ounce of control he had not to throw her on her back and bury himself inside her sweet heat. He wanted to let Eva take charge for a change. When he felt her lips slide around the head of his cock and her mouth close over him, he thought he might explode right then. Her hands slid around his backside. The muscles of his buttocks contracted beneath them. She pulled him closer. Eva began to suck. Gabe's head dropped forward. He grabbed the edge of the counter and held on tight, thrusting into her mouth carefully, the movement of his hips matching her rhythm.

Moments later, Gabe pushed Eva away with a growl. He dropped to the floor with her, lay her down, quickly stripped off her shorts and her panties, spread her legs and impaled her in one motion.

“Jesus Christ...” he muttered.

“Gabe,” Eva cried out his name as she came.

Damn, she was wet and hot and tight.

Gabe pulled himself out of his daydream and he found himself staring out the window of his office, still thinking about what they’d done. He knew Eva’s taste. He’d know it if he was blind, deaf and dumb. He couldn’t describe hers with as much detail as she could his. But he knew the nuances of her taste like he knew the taste of his favorite cabernet. She tasted of musk and amber, brown sugar, a bite of black pepper, and just a hint of vanilla.

He felt, more than heard, his cell phone ring. He pulled it out of his pocket automatically.

“Gabriel Abbott.”

“Hello, Gabriel, this is Stephanie.”

Gabe paused for a moment. Stephanie was the last person he expected to hear from. Why was she calling him? Before he could ask, she spoke up.

“Gabriel, I’m calling to apologize for my behavior on Friday night.”

“I don’t think I’m the person you should be apologizing to,” he replied.

“Yes, I know, but I feel like I owe you an apology as well. It’s none of my business whom you date. We hadn’t made any commitment to each other.”

She sounded very contrite. Gabe decided to be conciliatory. “No, we had no commitment, but perhaps an apology on my part is in order as well. I didn’t mean to lead you on and I’m sorry if I did. However, if you’re angry, be angry with me, not Eva. She didn’t know about you.”

“Yes,” Stephanie replied, “I believe that. I just wanted to tell you that I intend to put everything that’s happened behind us. I imagine we’ll be seeing each other from time to time and I’d like our relationship to remain cordial.”

“I’d like that too, Stephanie.”

“No hard feelings?”

“No hard feelings, Steph.”

“So how about I take you to coffee sometime this week, just friends. To make it up to you.”

"Not necessary," said Gabe. "You don't have to worry, I'm not one to hold grudges against friends and business associates."

"No, really, Gabriel, it would make me feel better."

"Sorry, Steph, but I'll be leaving town later this week and I have a lot to do."

"Maybe I can have a rain check?" she asked. "When do you get back?"

"Not for three or four weeks. I'm not quite sure. Frankly, Steph, it might be awkward. I don't want to give you the wrong impression and I'm with Eva now."

"Yes, of course," Stephanie replied. "I didn't mean to pressure you."

"No pressure, just the facts. Sorry. It's never been my intent to hurt your feelings," added Gabe.

"You haven't," claimed Stephanie. "Don't worry about it. Have a nice trip." Her voice sounded a bit clipped.

"Thanks. Goodbye Stephanie." Gabe clicked off. *Well, he thought, that's one way to get rid of an inconvenient hard on.*

Marsha entered his office. "I'm holding plane reservations for this Friday and I've arranged for six interviews on Monday and Tuesday. Over the next few days, I can try reach the rest of the students and their families. Between the schools in Chicago, those in Minneapolis, Milwaukee, and in Omaha, we should be busy for several weeks."

"That's about what I figured," replied Gabe. "Sounds good. Go ahead and purchase the tickets."

"Will do. Why was Stephanie Lindstrom calling?"

Gabe rolled his eyes. "Do you hear everything that goes on in my office? I'll have to remember to close my door."

"It's my job. Why was she calling?"

"To apologize." Gabe explained to Marsha what had happened between Stephanie and Eva on Friday night.

"Good for Eva," she replied. She said, "Don't trust the apology. She's working some angle."

"Why do you say that?" asked Gabe. "Seems pretty straight forward to me."

"That's because you're a man," Marsha replied. "An apology from a man is likely to be exactly that, an apology, because men aren't big on apologies, so if a man says he's sorry, then he's sorry. An apology from Stephanie Lindstrom? That's another animal altogether. I don't trust her," she repeated. "She's up to something."

"Marsha, I think the cake has gone to your head. She's all talk. A woman like Stephanie isn't going to go after someone who doesn't want her. I made that clear."

"Well," said Marsha, "She may not go after you directly. She may try a sideways approach."

Gabe laughed. "I think you're reading too much into this, Marsha. She's not going to waste her time. Besides, I have nothing to hide."

"No," agreed Marsha, "But you do have someone to protect. Eva."

Gabe stared at his assistant for a moment. "You're letting your imagination run away with you. Even if Stephanie was vindictive, what do you expect her to do? Hire a hit man?"

"I wouldn't put it past her."

"Marsha, you don't think much of members of your own sex, do you?"

"Oh," said Marsha, "On the contrary, I think very highly of members of my own sex. I just know the difference between a pit viper and a harmless garter snake."

"You have nothing to be worried about. Eva will be fine. Stephanie's a lawyer, for God's sake. She knows where to draw the line. She wouldn't risk her sterling reputation over something so petty."

"Depends upon her definition of petty."

"Marsha, you overestimate my charms. I doubt I'll hear much of anything from Stephanie unless it's about business. Which you and I need to get back to if I'm going to spend time with Eva before we leave."

"You're the boss," said Marsha, as she strolled to her desk. "Don't say I didn't warn you."

Chapter Twenty-One

"Hey, Marcus," Eva called as she walked into the office, "When are you guys leaving?"

"Shortly," Marcus replied as he struggled to unplug his laptop. "Tom's packing the car now and I need to get out of here. Will you be okay?"

"Yeah, we'll be fine. It's slow. The Whites are gone for another week. The Reardons have taken off for a month so I just have Sam and Mrs. Elkins, and I'll manage the office. Ruth and I can handle the wedding this weekend. There are only thirty guests. We might have to decline any major last minute catering jobs, unless you want me to call you two to come back."

"No cell phone service up there," said Marcus. "We'll be camping on the river. I'll try to get into Guerneville a couple times to check in with you. Is lover-boy still out of town?" came Marcus' voice from beneath his desk.

"Yes... yes he is," said Eva, her cheeks turning pink. "You just asked me that this morning. Here, let me get that for you." Eva crawled under the desk and untangled the cord. She handed it to Marcus.

"You miss him?"

"What do you think?"

"I think you've got it bad, Miss Eva. Very bad."

"Yeah, well, it's only been a week and I'll see him when I go back to Iowa. He's bringing his brother to the farm for a few days."

"Oh, so your family can put him to the test?"

Eva laughed. "Something like that. They'll probably make him run the gauntlet. I'm hoping they don't beat him with farm implements."

Marcus stuffed his laptop into its carrying case. He rose from the desk and slung it over his shoulder. "I doubt they'll be that hard on him," he said. "Besides, Gabriel Abbott strikes me as the type of man who might enjoy running the gauntlet. Perhaps even naked."

"Marcus!" Eva shrieked.

"Hey, I may have my favorite cake, but that doesn't mean I can't enjoy looking at the different flavors of ice cream." Marcus grabbed his car keys and tossed the office cell phone in Eva's direction. "Be good." He headed for the door. "Oh, here's the portable credit card unit, but Tom locked the business check book in the safe and he has the key, so do you think you can you cover if anything comes up? We'll reimburse your expenses of course.

"No problem," Eva called after him. "Have fun."

* * * *

Friday afternoon, as Eva put the finishing touches on the two-tier wedding cake, her cell phone rang. She glanced at the number, wondering if it was either Tom or Marcus. Neither. The area code was 415.

"Hello?"

A man's voice asked, "Is this All Things to All People?"

"No, this is a personal cell phone number, but I work for All Things to All People."

"Is this Miss Eva Raines?"

"This is Eva."

"Just the person I wanted to speak with. I hear you're a fabulous caterer."

"Oh," said Eva, "that's very nice of you. But if I may ask, how did you get this number?"

"A friend of mine, Gabriel Abbott. Listen, I'm having a little get-together at my home in Yountville on Sunday night. I know it's last minute, but I hear you're a genius when it comes to putting something on at the last minute."

"Thank you again for the compliment," said Eva. "May I ask with whom I'm speaking?"

"This is Jerry Harding. I'm with the firm of Harding and Harding in San Francisco. I have some out of town guests and I'd like to bring them up to the Napa Valley for the day. I thought we might finish off with a small buffet, you know, appetizers, cheeses, desserts, that kind of thing."

Something about the man's enthusiasm seemed a little off. Eva couldn't quite put her finger on it, but she didn't want to turn down a job if it could mean more exposure for ATAP.

"I don't usually take work related calls on my personal cell," Eva stated. "How did Mr. Abbott happen to give you this number?" She asked, keeping her tone matter of fact.

"Oh, Gabe and I go way back. We've worked on projects together for years. He's spoken so highly of you. He said you're always up for a last minute event, especially if the money's good."

That didn't sound like Gabe at all.

"Mr. Harding..."

"Oh, please call me Jerry."

"Jerry, I'm acting manager until next Wednesday. I'll be happy to take some information from you and see what we can do, but I will need you to use our office number from now on."

"No problem, Miss Raines. May I call you Eva?"

"Sure," she replied, trying to keep the uncertainty out of her voice. *Why would Gabe give my personal cell phone number to anyone?* "I'll need a few more details from you before I can decide whether or not to accept this job."

Eva reached across the counter and grabbed a pen and a sheet of paper. The man, Jerry, answered all her questions without hesitation. Within five minutes, Eva knew the date, time, place, number of guests and the amount of money the man was willing to spend. It was an exorbitant amount for eight people. But then, he did insist upon one very specific caviar to go with a very specific wine. Eva would have to interrupt her prep for the wedding in order to make a trip into the city on Saturday morning to purchase the caviar and she'd personally have to contact the small, boutique winery to get the wine. They didn't sell to retailers.

The man apologetically offered her double their usual fees and he made a deposit of half the amount via his wife's credit card. His wife spoke with Eva directly and gave her the okay. The deposit would more than cover her costs. Eva ran the number through Tom's portable credit card unit and the amount cleared. She informed Jerry that she would charge the remainder to the card after she'd set up his buffet. She also requested a fax number so she could fax him the ATAP contract to sign. He said he didn't know the fax number by heart so he'd have to call her back as soon as he got it.

"Oh," the man added before he hung up, "I won't be there until around six-thirty, so I'll arrange to have the housekeeper let you in. She's there twenty-four-seven. Her name is Louise. She'll clean up. That way, you won't have to make another trip, so feel free to buy any serving items you might need and just leave them."

“Would it be possible for me to drop by tomorrow? It’s better for me to get a look at the dining room and the kitchen, just to get an idea of what you have on hand, to see how I’d like to arrange the space, that kind of thing.”

“Oh...sorry, no, that won’t be possible. Some of my guests will be staying at the house and I’ve promised them complete privacy. I’d prefer that they not be disturbed. I’m sure you understand. But you don’t have to be concerned. My kitchen is fully stocked and as I said, if there’s anything out of the ordinary you need, buy it. Add it to the final bill.”

“I’m not entirely comfortable with that, Mr. Harding. I’d really like to get a look at the space.”

“Eva, please call me Jerry. You know, Eva, I have a lot of confidence in you. If you can satisfy a man like Gabriel Abbott, I’m sure you won’t have any problem satisfying me.”

Eva bristled at the implication. She told herself to calm down. *Don't read too much into what he says. He obviously has a flair for the dramatic and he's a bit socially inept. Chill, Eva. But he doesn't seem like the type of person Gabe would speak to about me... ATAP, maybe, but not about me. I just can't see him giving a man I've never met my number.*

“All right,” Eva agreed. “Please call me back with the fax number.”

She’d have to drive over to the office to use the fax machine. At least she wouldn’t have to meet the guy. She’d be long gone before he and his guests appeared. Eva clicked on her lap top computer while she waited for his call. She googled Harding and Harding. Sure enough, they had a law office off Market Street. She tried to look up a phone number for Jerry Harding in Yountville, but she couldn’t find anything. Well, it wasn’t unusual for people to be unlisted and if this was a second home, the guy probably just used his cell. The office cell rang this time. It was Jerry Harding. Eva relaxed a little. He gave her a fax number. Eva told him she’d fax the contract to him within the hour. He assured her he’d watch for it and fax it back to the ATAP office.

Eva finished up with the wedding cake and slid it carefully into the oversized refrigerator at the church. She drove to the office, her stomach churning, hoping she’d done the right thing in accepting this job. It was a lot of money and exposure was exposure, but something about the situation made the hair on the back of her neck prickle. She was tempted to call Gabe and ask him if he actually knew Jerry Harding, and if he did, why on earth he’d given such her cell phone number to such an odd man, but she knew Gabe was tied up with interviews and his brother. It was even possible he was on his way to another city right now. She hadn’t spoken to him today. He’d called yesterday morning and awakened her. Eva smiled. He said he just wanted to hear her

morning voice. Thinking of Gabe made her feel better. He would never give her number to someone who was dangerous in any way. Maybe he'd meant to give the guy the ATAP number and inadvertently given him her cell. Whatever. It would be fine.

* * * *

"I need to get a fax number from Kinkos," said Paul. "She wants to fax me the contract and I can't use our fax."

"No, you can't use Kinkos either," replied Stephanie. "It will say Kinkos when you fax it back. Here's my father's personal fax number," she handed him a sheet of paper. "Use that. I'll give him a call and go pick up the contract at his office. I'll sign *Jerry Harding* and fax it back to her."

"You know, I feel like a louse, Miss Lindstrom. Don't ask me to do this again. I told you before, I don't want to be involved your scheme."

"Oh, c'mon Paul, have a sense of humor. It's a joke. I'm not going to hurt her. I'm just going to inconvenience her, make her doubt her boyfriend a little bit. That's all. Make her show her true colors."

"And those are?"

"I don't know," shrugged Stephanie. "What color are gold diggers? That's the point. Women like Eva Raines don't come with a caution flag. Guys fall for these women and by the time they know what they've gotten themselves into, it's too late. I should know. I handled enough nasty divorces before I went corporate."

Paul picked up the disposable cell phone Stephanie had given him to use and dialed the number for ATAP. "Quiet," he said, "I'm calling her back. And Miss Lindstrom, this is it. This is as far as we go."

"I'm thinking partner by the end of the year," Stephanie said, sounding like a fisherman baiting a hook with a new lure.

Paul hesitated. Finally, he replied, "No, this is it." He pointed the phone at her. "After this call, you're on your own." He pressed the call button.

Stephanie glared at him. "Be careful, Paul. I might say the same to you."

Stephanie stepped to the other side of the room and listened to Paul give Eva the fax number while she used her own cell to call her mother.

"Hi, mom. How are you? ...Oh, that's good. Listen, mom...you know that credit card you loaned me? Yes, the new one... Well, so sorry, I lost it... Yes... While I was shopping... No...

No... I'll call the bank and cancel it... No, don't worry... It's not any trouble... I'm so sorry I lost it when you were so sweet to think of letting me pick out a birthday gift... Yeah, don't worry... I'll see you this weekend... Bye, mom."

* * * *

Eva rushed into San Francisco early Saturday morning. She was back in Napa by ten. She tossed the caviar in her refrigerator, wondering if she should put a padlock on the stainless steel door, since the stuff was almost as expensive as gold. She left to pick up Ruth so they could finish the prep and set up for the wedding. Eva was in charge of the food, Ruth the bar. The bride and groom had chosen a simple, elegant tasting menu. Eva enjoyed making the small plates for the intimate affair. Nonetheless, it would probably be a late night. She and Ruth would have to stay until everyone had gone home in order to clean up the church kitchen and pack everything away. The bride's mother had hired a janitorial service to clean the reception area, so at least she and Ruth wouldn't have to be on garbage duty.

Eva had already spoken with the winery and they'd set aside six bottles of the wines Jerry Harding had requested. Eva would run up the Silverado Trail in the morning to retrieve them. She'd pay for it out of her own pocket, as she had the caviar, knowing she'd be reimbursed when Tom and Marcus returned. The rest of the set up would take three, four hours, max. The job should be quick and easy. Not a whole lot of work when you considered the money Harding was putting out. Eva figured the man wanted to make a big impression on his guests. She hadn't heard from Gabe. She'd kept her cell phone shut off during the wedding and the reception, but she'd left him a message before the ceremony began. She simply told him she loved him and missed him. She didn't want to bother him with the Jerry Harding business. She'd bring it up when he got home, or maybe if something like this happened again. It had to be a mistake. Gabe would never have deliberately given out her private number. At least Harding had signed the contract and faxed it back almost immediately. She'd left it sitting on Tom's desk.

Eva checked her watch. Ten p.m. in California. Midnight in Chicago, and she had another three hours to go, at least, before the wedding guests departed. She was about to switch on her cell and discreetly check for messages when she saw the maid of honor motion to her. The bride and groom were probably getting ready to cut the cake. Eva stuck the phone into her back pocket and followed the young woman into the kitchen to discuss logistics.

Chapter Twenty-Two

Gabe had rented a two-bedroom suite for himself and Quincy. Marsha stayed in a room next door, but she had a key card to his room so she could use the fax machine. Gabe rolled over in bed and checked the clock. One a.m. Eva was probably still working at the wedding, and even if she wasn't, he didn't want to phone her this late. Damn, he missed the woman. He'd replayed her message at least ten times. *I love you and I miss you. Can't wait to see you.* If he didn't have another week of interviews scheduled, he'd just say screw it and fly home to her. But these kids needed him and they needed the college education or the technical training his money could provide. They'd worked hard and they deserved his full attention.

Quincy was holding up better than Gabe had expected. The young man had been quiet and reserved at first, but put a Cubs game on TV and he was all about baseball. Gabe talked to him about the Giants, but Quincy couldn't see how anyone could be loyal to two teams at once. Gabe told the boy that while he would live and die a Cubs fan, he loved AT&T Park and those splash hits. Quincy was impressed to learn that Gabe lived within walking distance of the ballpark and Abbott Industries owned a luxury box on the third base side. Gabe promised to take him to every game the Cubs played in San Francisco.

Gabe was beginning to feel some optimism. Maybe he and Quincy would be all right. Becoming an instant family was a difficult adjustment for both of them, not to mention coming to terms with the fact of a shared deadbeat father and bad memories.

Quincy had had a couple years to accept the existence of Gabe and Elise. Gabe had only one month. Quincy had taken to Elise and her family immediately. Although Gabe knew the boy was disappointed he couldn't spend as much time with them as he'd like, he proved to be quite adaptable. Gabe was beginning to wonder if adaptability was an inherited McIntyre trait. Gabe and Quincy stopped in to check on Elise and the girls at least every other day. They took their

nieces out for ice cream and once to see an animated feature. Besides, Gabe got to spend a big chunk of time with his mother, which made her supremely happy, and Quincy benefited from her home cooking. Otherwise, with Gabe, it was hotdogs, deep-dish Chicago pizza and barbecue. Marsha never stopped complaining about the food. Gabe teased her that she was all California, all the time.

“We need us a little Eva,” she’d said.

Gabe couldn’t have agreed more. God, he missed his little chef. He missed her taste. He missed her smell. He missed the feel of her satiny skin beneath his fingers. He missed the gasp she made every time he thrust himself inside her. He missed her voice, her cheekiness, her infectious laugh. The more he thought about Eva, the more convinced he became about the need to make their arrangement permanent. As soon as possible.

Gabe flipped over and took another look at the clock. One forty-five. No, he was not going to bother her now. He’d talk to her when she woke up. His would be the first voice she heard on Sunday morning.

* * * *

“Fuck!”

Eva flew out of bed. She’d overslept and the clock on her bedside table read nine-thirty. She’d been scheduled to pick up the wine at nine. Where was her damn cell phone? Fuck... fuck... fuck.

Eva ran into the kitchen and grabbed her house phone. She had to stop and search for her phone book to look up the number for the winery.

“C’mon...pick up....pick up...”

“Hi, Maryanne, this is Eva Raines. I am so sorry. I overslept. If I head up there right now, can I get the wines? Thank you. Thank you so much. I’m in your debt. I’ll see you in a few.”

God fucking damn it. The wedding reception had lasted later than Eva had anticipated. She and Ruth hadn’t left until three a.m. Where the hell was her cell phone? She knew she’d had it when she was packing up the car. If she dropped the sucker, she was dead, just dead. That cell phone was her lifeline. She threw on a pair of sweats, slipped on her flip-flops, and grabbed the office cell. She checked it. No messages. Thank God for small favors. Now if the traffic gods can only keep the cops busy elsewhere.

* * * *

One eighty-dollar speeding ticket later, Eva had the wines packed in the backseat of her car. She still hadn't found her cell phone. She'd tried calling her own number with the office phone, but she heard nothing. On the way back to her house, she stopped by the church and carefully searched the parking lot and the entrance to the kitchen. Since services were going on and the lot was full, Eva hoped that if someone had found her phone, they'd be kind enough to leave it in the church office. She'd check first thing in the morning, before she went to the White's. Not a good start to her day, but then, she should know better than to leave her cell phone in her back pocket while she repeatedly bent over the trunk of her car to load boxes.

Eva got home as quick as she could while still staying under the speed limit. She unloaded the bottles of wine and stored them in her small, countertop wine cooler, removing her own wines. She carefully set her own wines off to the side, making sure they stayed out of the sun. She jumped into the shower, toweled off quickly and tossed on her ATAP uniform. She ran a comb through her thick hair, yelping at the nastier tangles. She braided it wet and stuck her feet into her black tennis shoes. She quickly loaded the car with everything she needed and headed over to the ATAP kitchen to prepare the food for Jerry Harding's buffet. She left the wine and the caviar at home. She could swing by and get that last, on her way up to Yountville. Unless she encountered the unexpected, set up should be a breeze. As she drove down Jefferson, she wondered if Gabe had been trying to reach her. She should have thought to call him from her landline before she left the house. He probably would assume she'd gone out on a bike ride. Stupid to lose her cell phone like that. She'd come to depend upon it so much that she felt practically naked without it. Like she was on a deserted island, cut off from civilization. How crazy was that? It was just a piece of technology. The world would continue to spin regardless of whether or not she had her cell phone.

Chapter Twenty-Three

Paul Rupnik called Eva's cell phone for the sixth time, and for the sixth time, there was no answer. He'd decided he simply couldn't go through with it. He had no beef with Eva Raines, but he found his beef with Stephanie Lindstrom growing by leaps and bounds.

Damn it. Why the hell didn't the woman pick up? He supposed he could try her business line. He searched the internet for ATAP. He'd handed the disposable phone back over to Stephanie, but while she'd been talking to her mother, he'd punched Eva's cell number into his own contact list and saved it. He wasn't using his cell phone today, though. He'd been trying to reach her from his home number. Paul's home phone number was unlisted so it would simply show up as *Private Name Private Number* or *Unknown* on her caller ID. He'd prefer to remain anonymous, if he possibly could.

He tried the ATAP number listed online. He got a voicemail. Paul didn't leave a message. What kind of message could he leave? Sorry I fucked with your life? Sorry you're going to be stuck with the bill for a thousand dollars worth of caviar and eight hundred dollars worth of wine? Sorry you may get involved in an investigation for credit card fraud? Sorry your bosses are going to be pissed as hell and I've just jeopardized your career and your reputation? Jesus, he was an idiot. How had he let himself get roped into this?

Paul opened his wallet and pulled out Edward Jamison's card. He stared at it for a few minutes and then he decided to call the man. What was the worst that could happen? Jamison could tell him to fuck off. Or he could call him a fuck up. Big deal. He had fucked up. From what Paul could tell, Edward Jamison had seemed reluctant to give Stephanie Eva Raines' cell phone number. Good God, the woman thought she was on a righteous crusade, but Paul figured Stephanie had caught a bad case of the green-eyed monster. She was suffering from jealousy, pure and simple.

Paul dialed the number. He was immediately connected to voicemail.

"Mr. Jamison, this is Paul Rupnik. I'm an associate with Smith, Lindstrom and Peck. I need to talk to you. This is important. It's regarding Eva Raines and Stephanie Lindstrom. Please call me at home as soon as possible." He left his number.

Paul wondered if he should drive up to Napa and try to intercept Eva before she showed up at the retired Mr. Harding's home, but he couldn't bring himself to do it. He felt too ashamed.

* * * *

Where in the hell was Eva? Gabe had been phoning her since eight a.m. her time. He and Quincy were hiking along the shores of Lake Michigan and he was supposed to be enjoying himself, but all he could do was worry about Eva. She should have picked up. She should have picked up first thing this morning. Certainly, once she realized she'd missed his calls, she would have called him back. Even if she'd gone out biking or to run some errands, she would have called him. This wasn't like her. Last he'd heard, she had the wedding on Saturday, but she'd said she'd be free all day today. Unless a job came up. Maybe that was it. He hoped it was a job because otherwise he had to assume she was lying in a ditch somewhere or she'd been mugged in the parking lot late last night, or goddamn it, who the hell knew what had happened to her. He couldn't even call Tom and Marcus because they were camping on the Russian River until Wednesday. No cell phone service even if he'd had a number.

Quincy was saying something. Gabe tried to focus on the young man.

"What's up with you, Gabe? I've been talking for five minutes and you definitely haven't heard a word I said."

"No, sorry," Gabe ran a hand through his hair. "What were you talking about?"

"Seriously, what's up? You worried about your girlfriend?"

"Actually, yes, I am, a little," replied Gabe. "She should have called back by now."

"Yeah, well, maybe she's out biking in a dead zone. Could be a lot of things."

"A lot of things are what I'm concerned about. Eva's very reliable. This isn't like her. She wouldn't leave me hanging like this."

Quincy thought for a moment. "You know what probably happened... she left her phone on all night after that wedding you told me about, and it's out of juice but she hasn't noticed yet. I bet as soon as she notices, she'll charge it up and give you a call. She's got a landline, right?"

"I suppose," replied Gabe. "I've never paid much attention. I guess she does."

"She unlisted?" asked Quincy. "Most women living alone would be unlisted."

"How would you know?"

"My mom," Quincy replied, his voice quiet.

Gabe winced. "Sorry. That was inconsiderate of me. I should know better."

"Yeah, it's okay. I'm glad you have your mom and your sister. I guess one of us should have some family."

"Hey, you have family, Quincy. Elise and I are your family. Her two beautiful little girls are your nieces, exactly the same as they are mine, and this new baby will be your niece or nephew. My mother will be your family, if you'll allow it. You're not alone in this world, understand? I was twelve years old when our father walked out on my mom. He left us with nothing, just like you. Except for losing your mom, I know what you've been through. Honest to God, sometimes I wish I didn't know what it's like, but to tell you the truth, it's made me a better person, a better man. Because I will never do to my wife and my children what our father did to us."

"So you do plan to get married? Elise has wondered about that," Quincy asked with a grin similar to Gabe's.

Gabe was silent for a moment. "Until I met Eva, I wasn't certain. I guess she's made up my mind for me, in a hurry."

Gabe pulled his phone out again.

"What are you doing?" Quincy asked.

"Texting her."

"If she's not receiving calls, she's not going to receive a text either."

"Yeah, well, I don't give a shit. I want her to call me back. I'm going to phone Luis, see if she's been up to the house."

"Luis?"

"My caretaker. He lives on my property in Napa. He has kind of a father, daughter thing going on with Eva." Gabe dialed the number and stuck the phone to his ear. "*Hola, Luis. Buenos tardes. Cómo está usted?*"

"*Ah, muy bien, Señor Abbott, muy bien. Y ustedes?*"

"*Estamos bien, Luis.* Listen, I have to ask you, have you heard from Eva today?"

"Ah... *Señorita* Eva... She was supposed to stop by for breakfast, but I have not seen her," Luis answered.

"Has she telephoned?"

"No, *Señor*."

Gabe felt his insides twist just a little. "When was the last time you spoke with her?"

"She called me Friday afternoon, while she was working on the cake for the wedding. She said she would bike up here today and make biscuits. So sorry, *Señor* Abbott, I hope this is not a problem."

"No, Luis, no, of course that's not a problem. I just... I can't reach her. I've been trying since this morning."

"*Señor*, I waited for her, but she has not come."

Gabe could hear the worry in Luis' voice and his gut twisted a little tighter. "Luis, would it be too much trouble to ask you to drive by her house, see if she's all right? If she's there, could you ask her to call me? If she's not there, would you please let me know if her car is gone, if her bike is there, if she left any clue as to where she might be?"

"Certainly, *Señor* Abbott. If you'll give me the *Señorita's* address, I'll leave right away."

"Thank you, Luis. *Muchos gracias*." Gabe provided Luis with Eva's cell phone number, her address and direction to her home. He clicked off.

"Shit," commented Quincy.

"Something's wrong," said Gabe. "I can feel it. There's something very wrong."

Chapter Twenty-Four

Eva finally found the house. A lot of the more upscale homes in Yountville were set back off the street on heavily wooded lots and many of them didn't have visible street numbers. Eva had driven up and down the block for fifteen minutes, searching for the correct house. She cautiously pulled into a blind driveway, hoping nobody was coming out the other direction. Since the drive appeared empty, and Eva didn't plan to stay long, she pulled right up to the side door.

Eva climbed out of the car, grabbed the closest canvas bag containing supplies, and trotted up the steps to the door. She knocked and waited for the housekeeper to open up. There was no response. Eva knocked again and waited, and again, she didn't hear anyone or see anyone moving about. She decided perhaps she should try the front door and ring the doorbell. Maybe the woman was napping. There was no doorbell. Great. Eva banged on the front door. No one answered her knock.

Eva wondered if the woman was out in the yard somewhere so she walked through the property. She covered the yard from one end to the other, even looking over the embankment into the creek in the back. No one.

"Shit."

Eva pulled out the office cell and dialed Mr. Harding's number. She was immediately connected with a computer-generated voicemail that simply told her no one was available to take her call. She left a message as she wandered back to the front porch to check the door. She wasn't surprised to find it locked, however, she thanked her lucky stars when she discovered that the side door had been left open. She figured the woman had run an errand and wasn't certain when Eva would be coming by. Eva stepped directly into the kitchen. She gaped, open mouthed, at the mess in front of her.

“Jesus Christ! How the hell am I supposed to set up a buffet in this...this...garbage dump?”

The kitchen looked like it hadn't been cleaned in at least a month. There were food-encrusted dishes stacked on every counter. The sink was filled with unwashed pots and pans. Eva took a step forward, right into something sticky. She backed up hurriedly, hearing a disgusting noise as she pulled her foot away. Eva looked down. The stuff felt like honey or syrup. Eva stood still, gazing around, forlorn, wondering what on earth was going on and what she was going to do about it. She had over two thousand dollars worth of food and wine in her car and she couldn't bring anything in until the place was presentable. More than presentable, spotless. If Mr. Harding had a housekeeper, if this Louise person actually existed, then she was one lousy housekeeper. Either that or his houseguests had let her off and they'd made this mess, but Eva didn't think so. The food on most of the dishes was too caked on. Eva would bet good money that those dishes had been sitting there for quite a while.

Eva walked into the dining room, to see if she could possibly set up there. That room was only marginally better. Old newspapers and unopened mail sat scattered about. Some of the newspapers had turned yellow with age. Books and magazines were piled high on the dining room table, and the buffet, or sideboard, appeared to be used as a catch-all for rubber bands, paperclips, pencils and pens, thumb tacks, nails, various tools and even rocks and sea shells.

Eva was steaming. If this was someone's idea of a joke, it wasn't funny. She pulled out the cell phone and tried Mr. Harding's number again. Once more, it connected to voicemail.

“Mr. Harding,” Eva began, “This is Eva Raines again. I'm inside your house in Yountville, and I've found that the situation to be untenable. Quite frankly, sir, the house is a mess and I absolutely cannot set up a buffet here. You haven't paid me for cleaning and in any case, there isn't time to get the place picked up, let alone presentable enough for what you have in mind. Unfortunately, since I've already purchased everything, you will forfeit your deposit. I'll leave the food and wine in your kitchen. Feel free to return my call on this line or if you prefer, you may speak with the owners of All Things to All People when they return from their vacation on Wednesday afternoon. I'm sorry, but this will not work out.”

“What won't work out?” came a male voice from behind her.

Eva flew around, nearly dropping the bag on her shoulder.

“Who are you?” she asked the unkempt elderly man who glared at her.

“I own this house. Who the hell are you and what are you doing here?”

"I'm... I'm... I'm the caterer, the caterer hired by...by Jerry Harding for a party...a party he's supposed to have here today. Who are you?"

"I'm Jerry Harding, and I have no recollection of hiring a caterer. Look around you," the man said, "Do I look like I'd hire someone to cater for me? Get the hell out of my house before I call the cops."

"But...but Mr. Harding...you called me, or someone pretending to be you called me and hired me to..."

"You think I give a goddamn who called you? Get out." The man raised a hand as if threatening to grab her and throw her out the door. "Get the fuck out of my house."

Eva scooted past the man as quickly and as carefully as she could, doing her best not to touch him. She tossed the bag she carried into the passenger seat and started her car. As she backed out of his winding driveway, she felt a lump grow in her throat and tears stung her eyes. She'd just been taken for a ride. A big, long, fucked up ride. She was willing to bet anything that the credit card was either fake or it had been canceled and she'd have to eat more than twenty-five hundred dollars worth of food and wine. There was no way she'd ask Tom and Marcus to cover her expenses and there was no way she'd ruin her relationship with the winery by asking them to take the wine back and refund her money. The Iranian caviar was a total loss. The supplier had given her a discount, but it had still cost her nearly a thousand dollars. No, this was all on her. She'd messed up, badly. If she wanted to keep her job, she'd fess up and pay up. There went her savings.

As Eva approached the office, the tightness she'd begun to feel in her chest during the drive, increased. She parked, making sure to lock up her car, and she entered the office. She headed straight for Tom's desk. She glanced down at the contract, searching for the credit card numbers. She punched the numbers into the portable credit card unit. The card was refused. Why wasn't she surprised?

Eva sat down heavily in her boss's chair. She rested her elbows on the desk and dropped her head into her hands. She was so screwed. Why on earth would anyone do something like this? Was this someone who had a grudge against Tom or Marcus? Maybe both of them? Or was this someone who had a grudge against her? It had to be her, because whoever it was had called her cell phone number. Her suspicion had been correct. Gabe hadn't given out her cell phone number. Then how the hell had this guy gotten hold of it? This fake Jerry Harding guy? Eva wished she could call Gabe to talk things over, but she didn't want to involve him. The first thing

he'd do would be to offer to pay for her mistake. He'd try to cover her expenses and she wasn't about to let him do that.

With a sigh, Eva pulled out the Napa Valley phone book to look for the church's phone number. Hopefully someone had turned in her cell phone. The church's office was closed. After six rings, voicemail clicked on. Eva left her home phone number and her office number and asked the secretary to call if she had any information for her. If no one turned in the phone by tomorrow morning, she was going to have to cancel her cell phone service and buy a new phone. Great. She could add that to her growing list of expenses.

Eva looked up at the sound of a loud knock. The office door had automatically locked behind her. Two Napa police officers stood framed in the glass doorway. Shit. The real Jerry Harding probably wrote down her license number and did call the cops.

Eva found herself reluctant to rise from her chair, but she knew she didn't have a choice. She walked to the door, wondering exactly which shoe was about to drop now.

"Can I help you?" she called through the door.

"Do you work for this agency, ma'am?" one of the officers called out, also through the door.

Eva nodded her head in the affirmative.

"Can you please unlock the door, ma'am? We'd like to talk to you."

Eva looked at the officer. "About what?" she asked.

"Ma'am, please open the door. We just want to ask you some questions."

Eva decided she'd better put a good face on things. She pushed on the door with her hip and it opened outward. The two officers moved out of the way.

"What can I help you with, officers?"

"I'm Officer Scott. This is Officer Whitson. May we come in, ma'am?"

"Of course." Eva ushered them inside. She pointed to the available chairs but both men preferred to stand.

"Are you the owner of this agency?"

"No, sir, I'm an employee, but I'm in charge at the moment. The owners are out of town until Wednesday. They're camping on the Russian River and they don't have cell phone service."

"And you are?"

"Eva Raines."

Officer Whitson pulled out a pad of paper and wrote down her name.

"Do you live here in Napa?"

"Yes."

"May I have your address?"

Eva gave the man her address and home phone number. "I lost my cell phone yesterday at a catering job," she said, irritated with herself for sounding as if she was apologizing.

"Where?"

"The little Catholic church up in Yountville. Somewhere in the parking lot, I think. I don't know. So far I haven't been able to find out if anyone has turned it in."

"Ma'am, did you go into San Francisco yesterday?"

Eva shot him an odd look. "Yeah, why?"

"Why did you go into San Francisco?"

"To purchase some items for a catering job that fell through. Are you here to ask about that? Because if you can help me, that would be great."

"No, ma'am. We're here because a credit card belonging to a woman who lives in San Francisco was reported stolen Friday night. The bank traced a rather large amount charged on that card to this business."

Eva rubbed her chest. The tightness was increasing again. "Yeah, well, that's what I'm talking about. A gentleman called me and hired me to do a last minute catering job. That's the credit card number he gave me. Actually," she thought for a minute, "now that I think about it, he put his wife on the phone and she said it was her credit card. I ran the card number and it went through." Eva reached behind her. "Here's the contract I faxed to him. The credit card receipt is stapled to it. You can see that he signed the contract and his wife signed for the credit card charge. There's a time and date on the top of the fax."

The two officers looked over the fax.

"Did you ever see these people face to face?"

"No, but they sent me to a bogus address today. When I got back here and tried to check the credit card number to see if I could cover my expenses, the card was refused."

"Where did they send you?"

Eva pulled up the address and what she assumed was a phony cell phone number. She handed the sheet of paper to the officers. "The address is actually correct...well, what I mean is, a man named Jerry Harding does live there, but not the Jerry Harding who ordered our services. I

met him. There's no way he's involved. He kicked me out of his house. He didn't know anything about this. And nobody is answering the cell phone."

"This is a 415 area code," one of the officers pointed out.

"Yeah, so?" asked Eva.

"Are you sure you didn't meet with this person when you went into the city yesterday?"

"No, of course I didn't meet with him. I went to buy the caviar he ordered. It's in my car, sitting on ice in a cooler, if you want to see it." Eva pointed. "Right out there, the blue Toyota. Why on earth would you think I met with him?"

"So you could get the stolen credit card, and maybe go on a shopping spree?"

Eva was taken aback. "Surely you don't believe that? Why would I do something like that?"

"Because your bosses are out of town. You have a friend in the city, you saw an opportunity and you ran with it."

"Sir, I would never do that," she protested. "I'm the victim here. This guy, whoever he is, scammed me and now I'm stuck with over two thousand dollars worth of food and wine that I'm going to have to pay for myself. I don't have a stolen credit card. If I did, I certainly wouldn't be stupid enough to use it to buy caviar and wine."

"What would you use it for?"

"Nothing!" Eva exclaimed. "I didn't steal a credit card."

"Then you won't mind coming down to the police station to answer a few more questions and give us an official statement."

"Yeah, to be honest, I do mind. I didn't do anything wrong, officers. I'm the one who got screwed."

"All the more reason to come down to the station, Miss Raines. If what you're saying is true, then somebody decided to play a pretty nasty joke on you and it would be in your best interest to find that person."

Eva sighed. She didn't want to go to the police station. She wanted to climb into her bed, pull the covers over her head, and have a good cry. But in the immortal words of the *Borg*, Eva decided that resistance was futile. She hoped to God Officer Scott would let her sit in front. If he made her sit in back, the day's humiliation would be complete.

Chapter Twenty-Five

Gabe grabbed his ringing phone. "Eva?"

"No, *Señor* Abbott, this is Luis."

"Luis, did you find Eva?"

Gabe and Marsha were in Gabe's hotel suite, distractedly discussing their interview schedule for Monday. Quincy was half-watching a pay-per-view movie. Some action flick. Gabe wasn't entirely certain what the movie was, but regardless, it contained a lot of gunfire. The sound didn't help settle the roiling in his gut.

"No *Señor* Abbott. I haven't found her, but I do know where her phone is."

"Her phone? What? Where?"

"*Sí, Señor*, her cell phone. It is at the church. I called the phone number and a woman answered."

"A woman?" asked Gabe. "Not Eva?"

"No, *Señor*, it was the secretary from the Catholic church, the church where Eva worked last night. She said someone had found the phone in the parking lot early this morning and they'd turned it into the office."

"Has she seen Eva? Has she spoken with her?"

"No, *Señor*. She has not seen her, but then, she was out of the office most of the day. She said she merely answered my call because she was hoping it was the owner of the cell phone."

"Did you go by Eva's house?"

"*Sí, Señor*. I drove to her house, but her car was gone. I waited for an hour to see if she would return, but she did not. I left a note on her door."

Gabe felt like he'd been kicked in the chest. He could barely breathe. He rose to his feet and began to pace. Quincy appeared in the doorway, listening to the conversation, as Gabe

continued. "What about the church? Did you go by the church? Did you check to see if her car was still in the parking lot?"

"Sí. Her blue car was not there."

"Her car wasn't there?" Jesus. Gabe had a ticking time bomb inside and if he didn't hear something about Eva soon, he was going to explode. Something was very wrong. He knew it.

"Tell him to call the cops," he heard Quincy say. "Tell him to find out if there's been an accident... or better yet, you call them. You're Gabriel Abbott. They'll take you seriously."

Gabe decided his brother was right. He told Luis he would contact him the minute he had any word about Eva.

Just as Gabe clicked off, Marsha's cell phone rang. She grabbed it, trying not to disturb her boss. Marsha listened in silence, then she stared, wide-eyed, at Gabe.

"Gabe, it's Jennifer, from the office. She went in today to check messages. She picked up a message for you. I think you need to listen to this yourself."

"Marsha, I can't think about work right now. Can we do this later?"

"No, Gabe, the message is about Eva."

"Mr. Jamison, this is Gabriel Abbott. You have information for me about Eva Raines?"

"Yes, Mr. Abbott. I'm sorry to bother you and I'm sorry to leave such a cryptic message, however, I have a responsibility to protect my client's confidentiality."

"I don't really give a flying fuck about your client's confidentiality," Gabe said impatiently. "My concern is only for Eva. Where is she?"

"First let me reassure you that Eva's safe. According to one of my contacts, she's being held at the Napa police station," Eddie Jamison replied.

"Being held at the Napa police station!" Gabe exploded, "Why the hell is she at the Napa police station? What the hell is going on? Is she all right?"

"Please Mr. Abbott, I swear that Miss Raines is unhurt, but she was the victim of a very dirty trick and I'm on my way to Napa right now to try to rectify the situation."

Gabe sputtered for a moment. "Jamison, you'll have to forgive me, but you aren't making any sense. I don't know what the hell you're talking about. What reason could the Napa police possibly have for holding Eva? What kind of dirty trick? What the hell is going on?"

Edward Jamison sighed. "It's complicated, Mr. Abbott."

"I don't care if it's brain surgery, Jamison. I want to know what's going on. Now." Gabe motioned to Marsha. He put his palm over the receiver. "Call Luis. Tell him to get down to the Napa police station and make sure Eva's okay. Tell him to get there as quickly as he can. Then call Ted Rose at home. Say it's an emergency. I want him at the Napa police station in case Eva needs a lawyer. He can send the bill to me. And get me two seats on the next plane home. I don't care what it costs."

Gabe removed his hand from the receiver. "Mr. Jamison, I want you to explain, right now, in plain English, exactly why in the hell my woman is at the police station."

* * * *

Eva sat in a hard, cold, metal chair beside Officer Scott's desk. He'd gone to get a cup of coffee. He asked Eva if she wanted one and she'd gratefully answered, yes. She leaned an elbow on his desk and rested her head on her hand, closing her eyes. She was so bloody tired, and she had no idea how much longer they'd keep her. She'd answered every question she could, given them all the information she had. There was nothing else she could do but hope they believed her story. And why shouldn't they? It was God's honest truth. The big question in her mind was, why would someone do this? Pretend to be Jerry Harding, hire her for an expensive catering job, use what was apparently a disposable cell phone and give her a stolen credit card number? She'd never done anything to anyone, at least, nothing that would deserve this kind of retribution. Unless... Eva lifted her head and opened her eyes... unless the credit card wasn't stolen but whoever did this reported it stolen after they'd already gotten her to spend her own money.

Officer Scott returned with her coffee. "It's not the greatest," he said, "But it's high octane and you look pretty beat."

"Thanks," Eva nodded. "Officer, whose credit card was it?"

"Hmm?" the man replied as he sat down at his desk.

"Whose credit card was reported stolen? The credit card this guy used to hire my services."

"Oh, some woman in San Francisco."

"What's her name? Can you tell me her name?"

"Yeah," the man shuffled through some paperwork. "The card was reported stolen sometime Friday night by a woman named Lindstrom, Karen Lindstrom."

Eva sat very still, staring at the floor, trying to control her temper. Trying to breathe. That woman. That awful, horrible woman. She should have known. Damn it. She should have known she'd try something like this.

Eva raised her head. Officer Scott was looking at her, an odd expression on his face.

"You know this person?"

"No. I don't know Karen Lindstrom," replied Eva, trying to keep her voice even. "I know her daughter or her sister or her niece, Stephanie Lindstrom. She did this. She's responsible for all of this. I promise you, Officer, that card was not stolen. Stephanie Lindstrom did this. She's the person who set this whole thing up."

"Why would she do that, Miss Raines?" the police officer asked, one eyebrow askew.

"Do you know who Gabriel Abbott is, Officer?"

"Yeah, sure, he owns Gabriel Vineyards."

Eva took a deep breath. "Well, I'm seeing him. I've been seeing him for a while. The woman he was seeing before, the woman he had been dating, is named Stephanie Lindstrom. She's a lawyer in San Francisco. She and I had an incident a week or so ago."

"An incident?"

"Yes. I embarrassed her at a party in San Francisco. In front of her friends. I know she did this. This is payback, pure and simple. I can promise you that credit card wasn't stolen. She merely reported it stolen after she caught me. She baited her hook and she reeled me in. Jeez! Could I possibly have been any more dense?" Eva shook her head. "What an easy mark. She stuck me with twenty-five hundred dollars worth of food and wine. God, I am so stupid."

From over her right shoulder, Eva heard someone clear his throat.

"Officer Scott, may I have a word with you?"

Eva turned around and looked up. She recognized the man from Gabe's barbecue. What was he doing at the Napa police station? "Sam? Right? Sam, what are you doing here?"

"I'll explain in a moment, Miss Raines, but first I'd like to speak with Officer Scott."

Eva watched, perplexed, as Sam handed his open wallet to the police officer. Officer Scott checked the man's ID and rose from his desk. He motioned to Sam and the two of them vanished into another room. The door closed behind them. *What the hell is going on now?* Eva didn't think she could take any more surprises today. Her stomach began to twist, her head to whirl, and she felt a little nauseated. She set the coffee aside. She hoped to God Gabe was all right and Stephanie hadn't somehow managed to involve him in this mess.

"Miss Raines, you're free to go."

Eva lifted her head from the desk. She'd dozed off, her cheek against a manila file folder. She felt as if she was in a fog, and for a moment, neither the speaker nor his words registered.

A semi-incoherent *huh* seemed to be the only response she could come up with.

Officer Scott spoke to her again. "You are free to go, Miss Raines. Mr. Jamison has explained everything to us and we won't be needing any further information from you. I'm sorry for the inconvenience."

"I don't understand," Eva replied. "What's going on?"

"I'm going to let Mr. Jamison tell you the whole story. After you hear what he has to say, if you want to pursue the matter further, you come back and see me tomorrow. I'll be happy to help you. Right now I think you could use a little sleep."

"Honestly, Officer Scott, I don't understand..."

Officer Scott looked at Mr. Jamison. "Eddie, I think you better do some fast talking."

"Eddie?" Eva blurted out. "His name is Sam. He works for Abbott Industries."

"Miss Raines," Eddie Jamison extended a hand. "Let's get out of here and we can talk."

"Uh-uh," replied Eva, "I'm not going anywhere with you until I know who the hell you are and what the hell is going on."

Officer Scott and the man named Eddie exchanged glances.

"All right," said the police officer, "You can use my supervisor's office. He's not here tonight. Feel free."

Eva rose to her feet. She nearly keeled over as a wave of dizziness engulfed her. Both men grabbed for her and eased her back into her chair. Officer Scott put his hand on the back of her head and quickly lowered it between her knees.

"Have you eaten today?" asked the man who was named either Sam or Eddie.

"Can't remember," Eva mumbled. "I don't think so."

"Scottie," called out Officer Whitson, "There's an attorney on the phone. He says he's on his way in for Miss Raines. He says Gabriel Abbott instructed him to call. And I've got a gentleman named Luis Gonzales asking about her. He says Gabriel Abbott sent him to make sure Miss Raines is all right. What do you want me to do with them?"

"Tell them she's coming out," said Officer Scott, "Before this turns into a circus," he muttered under his breath. "C'mon, Miss Raines, let's get you home."

"I'll drive her," said Eddie-Sam.

"No," said Eva, standing carefully as if testing her legs. "I don't know who you really are and I'm not riding with you. Anyway, I need my car and it's still at the office. Luis can drive me. You can follow us and whatever you have to say to me, you can say in front of Luis and in front of the lawyer and in front of anybody else who wants to be present." She turned to Officer Scott. "Excuse me," she said, "Where's the women's restroom because I think I'm going to be sick."

The man pointed down the hallway.

"Thank you," said Eva politely. She turned on her heel and vanished behind a swinging door.

Chapter Twenty-Six

Eva, Luis, and Edward Jamison sat together in Eva's living room. Mr. Rose, Attorney at Law, had stayed behind at the police station to glean whatever details Officers Scott and Whitson were willing to provide. He'd written down Eva's home phone number and told her he'd call her first thing in the morning. Luis had chauffeured Eva to the ATAP office. She'd climbed into her car without a word to anyone, started up the engine, and driven home. Two vehicles had followed hers. She'd walked through her front door, grabbing Luis' note. She left it open.

"Make yourselves comfortable, gentlemen," she'd said, before she'd vanished into her bedroom. She'd brushed her teeth and taken a long, hot shower. She'd finally reappeared in the living room, barefoot, her hair wet and braided, wearing an old pair of baggy, comfortable sweats. Luis and Eddie Jamison rose to their feet.

"Señorita..."

"Miss Raines..."

Eva held up a hand and disappeared into the kitchen. She reappeared shortly with a tray containing a pitcher of sweet ice tea, three glasses, and a plate of chocolate-dipped shortbread cookies. She set everything down on the coffee table, poured two glasses of ice tea, handed a glass to each man, poured a third glass for herself, and sat down in an oversized chair, folding her legs beneath her.

"Sit," she said.

Both men sat.

"Luis," Eva motioned toward him, "you first. How did you know where to find me?"

“So sorry, *Señorita*. *Señor* Abbott phoned me today. He was very worried about you. He had not heard from you and he was afraid something had happened. He asked me to come by your house—”

Eva interrupted, “Yes, I grabbed the note when we walked in.”

“Sí. I waited for you at *Señor* Abbott’s home. Do you remember? We had planned to have breakfast together?”

“Oh Luis, so much happened that I completely forgot. I’m so sorry I left you waiting.”

“It is of no consequence, *Señorita*. I was at the home when *Señor* Abbott called me. He asked if I had heard from you and of course, I told him that you had not arrived as planned. He was very upset, *Señorita*. He had been calling your cell phone for hours.”

Eva interrupted again. “I lost my cell phone yesterday, after the wedding.”

“It is in the church office, *Señorita*. I called and the secretary answered. She is keeping it for you. I came here, to see if I could find you and when I could not, I went by the church and checked the parking lot to see if your car was there. *Señor* Abbott was very distressed, *Señorita* Eva. I think he was prepared to call the police.”

“Is that how you found out where I was?”

“I don’t know how he knew where you were, *Señorita*. He called me and told me you were at the Napa police station and said I should drive there to make sure you were all right. Are you all right, *Señorita*? A young woman like you should not be in a police station. It makes no sense to me. *Yo no comprendo, Señorita*.”

“*Pero yo comprendo, Luis. Soy bien, muchos gracias*.” Eva turned to Eddie Jamison. “Now, Mr. Jamison...is it Eddie or Sam?”

“Eddie Jamison, Miss Raines.”

“All right, Mr. Jamison, first of all, let me say that your means of getting my cell phone number was quite creative. I commend you. Second, does your client intend to reimburse the expenses I incurred just so she could get her kicks? Twenty-five hundred dollars may be pocket change to her, but it comes close to cleaning out my savings account.”

“I haven’t spoken with my client, Miss Raines. And I’m sorry. I was paid to do a job. I did it. I want you to know I had no idea something like this would happen. The minute I learned what my client had done, I contacted an old colleague of mine in the Napa Police Department and I phoned Mr. Abbott and informed him of what had happened. I doubt my client plans to reimburse you, at least, I doubt she will reimburse you without some incentive. I advise you to

do as Officer Scott suggested and speak with him tomorrow about filing a complaint against Miss... against my client. I've given him the name of a gentleman who is willing to come forward and give a statement to the police."

"The man who contacted me? The fake Jerry Harding?"

"Yes."

Eva shifted restlessly in her chair. Both men remained silent as she stared out the window into the darkness for quite some time. Eva reached a decision.

"Luis," she said, shifting in her chair again, "Thank you for riding to my rescue. It means a lot to me. Could you please do me an enormous favor and call Gabriel to let him know I'm all right?"

"*Señorita*, I think you should call him yourself. He wants to hear your voice, to speak with you."

"I'm tired, Luis, I want to crawl into bed and I can't talk about this anymore tonight."

"But *Señorita*, he will be upset if he does not hear from you."

"Then he'll have to be upset." Eva turned toward Eddie. "Mr. Jamison, despite everything, I want to thank you for intervening when you found out what had happened. You didn't have to do that. You could have hidden behind the rules of client confidentiality and nobody would have blamed you."

"I would have blamed me," Eddie replied.

"Well," Eva said, "as my Jewish grandmother would say, that means you're a *mensh*." Eva looked toward Luis. "A good man," she explained.

Luis nodded his agreement.

"Well, gentlemen," Eva unfolded her legs and rose from her chair. "I can't say that it's been fun, but I'm exhausted, so if there's nothing else, goodnight. I'm going to bed."

"Goodnight, Miss Raines," Eddie took her hand, "And again, I apologize."

"Thank you," Eva replied.

"*Buenos noches, Señorita*," said Luis. "Sleep well."

"Goodnight Luis." Eva leaned over and kissed the older man on the cheek, "And thank you."

"I still think, *Señorita*, that you should call *Señor* Abbott. He will be beside himself," said Luis.

"I can't right now, Luis. Tell him I'm sorry, but I just can't talk to him right now."

“All right, *Señorita* Eva. Goodnight then.”

The two men left together. Eva locked the front door behind them. In a daze, she carried the pitcher of ice tea into the kitchen and placed it in the refrigerator. Eva walked through the house slowly, turning off lights. She sat on the edge of her bed for a moment, nibbling on a piece of shortbread, hoping the dry cookie would settle her stomach, but it didn't seem to work. Eva finally gave up and crawled under the covers. She switched off the light on her bedside table and curled into a ball. The tears she'd held back for hours finally spilled out and her body was racked with sobs. Eventually, exhausted beyond measure, Eva quieted and fell into a fitful sleep. She had a lot to do in the morning.

* * * *

Eva picked her cell phone up from the church secretary at six forty-five a.m., just before early Mass began. She drove back to Napa, to the ATAP office, where she met with Ruth. She gave her the office cell phone, the credit card unit, and the extra set of keys and asked her to cover for her until Tom and Marcus returned on Wednesday. When Ruth asked why, Eva told her something unexpected had come up and she would be gone for a while.

After Ruth left on her assignment, Eva put in a call to Ted Rose, the attorney Gabe had sent to the police station the night before. When she finished her conversation, she checked to make sure everyone's schedule was set for the week. She replied to the voice mail messages left on the landline over the weekend, aside from Gabe's multiple messages. She checked the faxes and responded to anything that required immediate attention. She flipped on the computer, checked the emails, and starred the emails she wanted Tom and Marcus to pay special attention to, then she opened the word processing program and wrote a letter of resignation and an itemized statement. She printed up two copies of each on official ATAP letterhead, one copy of each for her bosses and one copy of each for herself. She signed the letter of resignation, slipped it into an envelope and wrote Tom's name in bold letters with a Sharpie. She left it front and center on Tom's desk beneath his seashell paperweight along with the itemized statement. There was no way he'd miss it.

Eva opened a storage closet and assessed the ATAP uniforms. She searched until found one that appeared to be the correct size. Leaving the trousers and the polo shirt on the hangers, she walked out to her car and laid them on the passenger seat. She grabbed her own uniform and returned to the office, changing out of her jeans and tee shirt in the bathroom. She pulled her long hair back and arranged it into a neat ponytail. Eva slipped on her black tennis shoes. She

opened the storage closet and removed a wheeled cart. She hoped it would fit into the back seat of her car, because the trunk was filled with her carry-on bag, six bottles of wine, caviar on ice, and the remainder of the food and supplies she'd purchased for the phony Jerry Harding. Finally, Eva retrieved her purse from the office, turned off the computer and the lights and left the office, checking to see that the door locked behind her. She climbed behind the wheel of her car and headed to the White's house.

Chapter Twenty-Seven

"What the hell is wrong with that woman?" asked Gabe for the hundredth time.

Quincy glanced at his brother seated next to him in First Class. He shrugged. "I don't know much about women and how their minds work," he said. "Maybe it's like your man, Luis, said. Maybe she's just exhausted."

Gabe rolled his eyes. "You're right. You don't know much about women. Eva may have felt overwhelmed last night, but if that's all it was, she would have called me. Luis told her how worried I'd been. It's not like her."

Quincy shrugged once more. "She's probably pissed off."

"That's an understatement. She's probably ready to kill Stephanie."

"No," said Quincy. "She's probably pissed off at you."

"Me? Why on earth would she be pissed off at me?"

"For getting involved with a woman like this Stephanie Lindstrom in the first place. Look what she dragged Eva into."

Gabe sat silent for a moment, mulling that statement over. He turned to his brother. "I thought you said you didn't know anything about women."

"Well, I don't, not really. But let me put it to you this way. Your girlfriend is probably wondering exactly what kind of man you are that you would be interested in a woman like that."

For an instant, Gabe was tempted to punch his brother in the face. Quincy caught the look.

"Hey," the young man said, "Don't blame the messenger. You asked. I answered."

The flight attendant came around with warm towels.

"You fly First Class all the time?" Quincy asked. "Because I could get used to this real quick."

"These were the only two seats left," replied Gabe absently.

"I've only flown once before and I didn't like it."

"Oh?" commented Gabe, his voice polite. "Why not?"

"A local organization paid for my mom and me to fly to Cleveland so she could get some special kind of chemotherapy at a hospital there. It didn't work. She died two weeks after we flew home."

Gabe turned toward Quincy. "I'm sorry," he said, regretting his insensitivity. "I'm very, very sorry about your mother. I wish I'd known. I wish to God I'd known about the two of you."

Quincy glanced at Gabe. "Do you think you could have made things turn out any differently? Do you think my mom would be alive today if you'd known about us?"

"I don't know," replied Gabe, "I don't know. But at least you wouldn't have been alone. At least your mother would have known that you had family to look out for you. Maybe that would have given her some peace of mind."

"Yeah... maybe." Quincy was silent for a few moments. "Gabe," he said, "you ever think about our dad? You ever wonder where he is? If he's left another kid somewhere? If he's even alive?"

"I didn't before," answered Gabe. "Before I found out about you. I hated the son of a bitch and I tried my best to forget that he ever existed, that he was ever a part of my life. Now... I don't know. I guess I'd better try to find him. Make sure he hasn't screwed up anyone else's life."

"He ever do anything nice? I mean...you have any good memories of him?"

"He used to take me to Cubs games," said Gabe. "He'd take me to Cubs games and buy me a hotdog and an ice cream."

"Yeah? Me too."

"What side you sit on?"

"First base side. Fifteen rows back."

"You're kidding," replied Gabe. "That's where we always sat."

"Weird," said Quincy. "Why'd he leave? I mean, why'd he leave you and Elise and your mom? Why'd he leave my mom?"

"We never knew," Gabe answered him. "One day he was there, one day he was gone. We didn't hear a word from him until the divorce papers showed up. At first, my mother thought he'd been the victim of foul play. She had the cops looking for him for months. He ever say anything at all about being married before?"

“Nothing,” replied Quincy. “You think he’s running from something?”

“I suppose it’s possible,” Gabe replied, considering the question. “I hadn’t really thought of that, but if he was, I think it’s unlikely he’d keep the same name.”

Quincy nodded. “Yeah, guess you’re right.”

The flight attendant brought their breakfast. Despite his anxiety about Eva, Gabe found it hard to suppress a grin as he watched Quincy dig into his food with relish. He wasn’t hungry himself. He passed his tray over to his brother. He glanced at his watch. Two and a half hours before they landed in San Francisco and then they had to catch a cab to his apartment, get his car and drive up to Napa before Eva did something stupid like leave him because he’d been a complete ass about Stephanie.

Gabe had never been in a situation like this before. He’d never given any serious thought as to what motivated a woman, to what a woman really wanted. Eva had changed him. His own feelings for her had changed him. No way was he going to lose her now. No fucking way.

* * * *

“Jason... Jason...wake up.”

The young man lay on his stomach, snoring lightly. Eva stood at the foot of his bed.

“Jason...wake up.”

“Whaaa...?”

“Jason, wake up. I need your help.”

“Huh?” Jason rolled over and pried his eyes open. He shot Eva an unfocused look. “I’m dreaming,” he announced, and he flopped back onto his stomach.

“No, Jason,” Eva knelt beside the head of his bed. “You’re not dreaming and I need your help with something.”

Jason raised himself up on his elbows. “You need my what? My help? What are you talking about? You need me to lift something? I’ll do it later.”

“No, Jason, this is serious. I want you to go into the city with me today. I already called your mom and got her permission. I need you to run an errand with me and then drive me to the airport.”

“Drive you to the airport? What the hell you talking about?”

“I’m leaving, Jason. I turned in my resignation. There’s just this one thing I need to do before I leave and I need your help.”

“What the shit? Leaving? Eva, you can’t leave. You’re crazy. Why would you leave?” Jason ran a distracted hand through his hair. It stood straight out from his head.

“Because I have to leave. Don’t ask why, just help me, please. Will you?” Eva shook her head. “You’re the only person I know who would be willing to do something really insane and I’m going to do something really insane today. C’mon, Jason, please.”

Jason grinned crookedly at her. “You had me at insane. For you, Eva. Anything insane for you.”

Despite the anxiety she felt, Eva couldn’t help but grin back. Thank God for Jason. Luis would never be a party to her plan and she wouldn’t risk involving him anyway. Eddie Jamison couldn’t be. If she knew Gabe, he’d insist upon paying for everything just to make it all go away. It wasn’t Gabe’s job to fix her lapse in judgment or to bail her out. This was something she had to take care of herself. Besides, if she didn’t bring this issue to a head now, it would rise again and again.

“Thanks, Jason. You’re a good friend. Here,” Eva handed him the ATAP uniform. “This should fit. I’ll make some breakfast while you shower and do whatever you need to do. And wear some running shoes. Something you can move in if you have to.”

“We’re not robbing a bank, are we?” asked Jason.

“No, we’re not doing anything illegal, but if I tell you to go, then you go. Got it?”

“Sounds interesting,” the young man said. “Uh, Eva?”

“Yeah?”

“You break up with Abbott?”

“Not yet.”

“You planning on it?”

“Depends.”

“Depends on what?”

“Depends on how bad he wants me. Especially after what I’m about to do.”

“You want a fall-back guy? Because I’m it.”

“Jason, if I were five years younger, you would be it, I swear.”

“Thanks, Eva. That means a lot.”

Eva went down the stairs and quickly chopped up some potatoes and onions for hash. By the time Jason appeared, his hair neatly combed back, wearing the ATAP uniform and dark sneakers, the potatoes and onions had caramelized nicely. Eva fried three eggs and served them

over easy on top of the potatoes. She sprinkled on some sea salt, black pepper and just a pinch of smoked paprika before she placed the plate in front of him. She poured Jason a glass of freshly squeezed orange juice. She joined him at the table and sipped a cup of black coffee while he ate. Her stomach was no better this morning than it had been the night before.

“So what are we doing?” Jason asked, pointing his fork in Eva’s direction.

“Somebody owes me a lot of money and a big apology, and we’re going to get both.”

“So it’s a shake-down, huh?”

“Kind of. It’s more like a lesson to be learned,” Eva said.

“Like, don’t mess with you, or something like that?”

“Something like that. I’ll explain on the way. There’s just one really important thing you need to remember.”

“What’s that?”

“No matter what I say, no matter what I do or what happens to me, don’t interfere. Do you understand?”

“What if you’re getting killed? Am I allowed to interfere?”

Eva laughed. “Yes, Jason. If I’m getting killed, you have my permission to interfere.”

“Why isn’t Gabe going with you?” Jason asked.

“Because Gabe’s the reason I have to do this. If he went, it wouldn’t work anyway. It will work with you. All you have to do is play dumb and be my witness.”

“No problem,” replied Jason, his mouth full of potatoes. “One thing...why’d you quit your job?”

“Because after today, Tom and Marcus would have to fire me, so I’m saving them the trouble and sparing them any embarrassment my actions may cause. You don’t mind driving my car back to my house, do you? After you drop me off at SFO?”

“No, not at all. I can have one of my friends pick me up, or I can walk home. Where you going?”

“Iowa. Listen, I borrowed a dolly from ATAP, so I need you to return that too. When you get back to Napa, just drop it off at the office. Ruth should be there. You remember where the office is, right?”

“Yeah, sure.” Jason picked up his empty plate, rinsed it, and set it in the dishwasher.

“Ready,” he said.

“All right. Let’s go.” Eva poured her coffee down the sink and followed the young man out the door.

Chapter Twenty-Eight

Quincy whistled through his teeth. "Sweet." He turned around, trying to take in Gabe's entire apartment at once.

"Go look out the front windows," Gabe said as he tossed Quincy's suitcase into the guest room. "I've got a great view of Pac Bell... I mean AT&T Park, out the front."

"No shit?" Quincy walked over to the windows and stared out. "So this is San Francisco, huh? Never thought I'd end up here."

"This is the nicest part of San Francisco, at least in my opinion," commented Gabe. "I like being near the water."

Quincy's eyes followed his brother as he headed toward his bedroom. "She pick up yet?" the young man called after him.

"No. It's going straight to voicemail."

"Then she's not ready to talk to you," said Quincy.

"Well," called Gabe, "she goddamn better talk to me because I'm going to ask her to marry me. I picked out a ring when I was in Skokie."

"Hey, let me see." Quincy followed after Gabe. "Nice bedroom," he commented as he entered Gabe's room.

Gabe tossed his leather carry-on bag onto the bed and unzipped it. He opened an inner compartment and pulled out a small black velvet box. He passed it to Quincy. The boy cracked it open and stared.

"Jesus! How much you spend on this?"

"Enough so she'll know I'm serious."

Quincy closed the box and handed it back to Gabe. "Hey, big brother, you got some kind of internship job at that foundation of yours I could work for the summer? You know, make a little money? Put something away for the future?"

Gabe had been headed toward his chest of drawers and he stopped in his tracks. *Big brother?* He turned toward the boy.

"Yes, Quincy. I have several summer intern positions open and I'm sure one will work out just fine for you. Jennifer could get you started and Marsha can pick up where she leaves off as soon as she gets back."

"Are you going back to Chicago?"

"I need to finish up the interviews. It's important for these kids. In fact, it means the world to them. Abbott Industries is their ticket out of poverty. I can't let them down."

"So, would I stay here?"

"We'll figure something out."

"What about Eva?"

"Well, I guess just like Abbott Industries is to those kids, Eva means the world to me. She's my ticket. I can't let her down either. But this is new territory for me. I'll have to play it by ear. I'm going to get out of these clothes. You can put on jeans or whatever you like. You're in Cali now, little brother," Gabe grinned, "Get comfortable."

* * * *

"All right, Jason, you ready?"

"Ready as I'll ever be. We got everything we need on the dolly?"

"Yup." Eva turned toward the young man. She gave his arm a squeeze. "Thanks, Jason. You are a true friend. And I think you may be as crazy as I am."

Jason grinned at Eva. "Well," he said, "Us crazy folk gotta stick together, right? We'll be okay. You can do this."

"Right. I can do this. C'mon, bud. Let's go see Miss Lindstrom."

Eva, a manila folder tucked under her arm, followed by Jason pushing a loaded dolly, marched up to the information desk in the office building off Market Street.

"Hi. I'm with All Things to All People Catering, and I have a delivery for the law offices of Smith, Lindstrom and Peck?"

The elderly gentleman behind the desk glanced up at Eva and Jason, checking their uniforms and the neatly stacked containers of food and wine.

"Sixth floor." He pointed toward the elevators and returned to his paperwork.

All business, Eva and Jason headed to the bank of elevators. Eva hit the 'up' button. Neither of them spoke until they entered the elevator and the double doors closed behind them. Eva pressed the button for the sixth floor.

"What if she's not in?" whispered Jason, staring at the floor in hopes the security camera wouldn't pick up his face.

"We went over this. There's no need to panic now, Jason. I called first thing this morning. She's in all day. Just chill. It will be all right."

The elevator doors opened. Smith, Lindstrom and Peck leased a suite of offices at the end of the hallway. Eva strode determinedly toward their door. Jason trailed her with the dolly. Eva held open one side of the double glass door for Jason. She stepped up to the receptionist's desk and flashed the young woman a lovely smile.

"Hi. I'm with All Things to All People. I spoke with Angela this morning. Miss Lindstrom's assistant? We have a delivery for Miss Lindstrom from her father."

"Oh," said the young woman, rising from her seat. "Of course. She told me to expect you. This way."

She led them down the hall to a small office. "Angela, this is the surprise you mentioned."

"Oh, hello," said Angela. "You're the woman who called me this morning?"

"Yes, I'm Myriam Watts with All Things to All People."

"Wow, that's quite a delivery," commented Angela, looking at the cartons.

"Mr. Lindstrom has good taste," replied Eva. "These are some of the best wines produced in the Napa Valley and the caviar he chose is quite difficult to get hold of. He wanted this to be a very special gift."

"Well, I guess you can leave it here and I'll take it in to Miss Lindstrom." The woman sounded uncertain.

"Oh, so sorry, Angela," Eva said politely. "Miss Lindstrom's father gave me specific instructions to deliver his gift myself and answer any question Miss Lindstrom might have. He gave me a card for her." Eva flashed her manila envelope. "Besides," Eva pointed out, "the cases are quite heavy and we need to take the dolly back with us."

Jason nodded his agreement.

"Um, okay... I guess that's all right. Just let me check to make sure she's finished with her client and you can go in."

"Remember, don't say anything." Eva smiled as she put a finger to her lips.

"Oh, I won't." Angela knocked quietly on the closed door across from her desk. She opened the door just a crack and disappeared inside. She reappeared shortly and motioned Eva and Jason inside.

Eva took a deep breath. "Here we go," she muttered.

"Amen to that," Jason mumbled, tilting the dolly and following right behind her.

Angela held the door open for them. Eva saw that Stephanie was seated behind her desk, her head bent over a file. A young man stood beside her chair, leaning over her shoulder. He was the first to look up when Eva and Jason rolled their cargo through the door. He did a double take when he saw Eva's face. Jason leaned back against the door, effectively shutting Angela out of the room.

Eva stepped forward. Stephanie had yet to look up from her paperwork.

"Jerry Harding, I presume," said Eva to the young man.

Stephanie's head flew up. "What the hell are you doing here?"

"I brought your order...the wine...the caviar...the cheeses...everything. Here's the receipt." Eva tossed the manila envelope onto Stephanie's desk. "You'll note that I included my mileage and bridge tolls, plus an additional two hundred dollar delivery fee," Eva nodded at Jason, who began to unload the boxes. "Oh, I added a ten percent surcharge for the canceled credit card. I wouldn't wait too long to eat that caviar, by the way. It will only be good for another day or two."

Stephanie reached for the phone. "Get that shit out of here now or I'm calling Security."

Eva stepped up to the desk. She smiled without amusement. "Call away, Miss Lindstrom. This morning I spoke with the District Attorney in Napa County. I believe this is a law office, isn't it? And I'm correct in assuming you're a lawyer? So you probably already know that I can file a civil case against you, and if he so chooses, the District Attorney can bring criminal charges against you for credit card fraud. So by all means, call Security and have me thrown out. The choice is yours."

"You're blackmailing me?" Stephanie's voice sounded shrill.

"Of course not. You purchased my services, or more specifically, the services of All Things to All People, and I'm simply fulfilling your request. This," Eva motioned toward the cartons, "is what you ordered. A personal check will be acceptable."

Stephanie grabbed the manila envelope and ripped it open. She read through the itemized list quickly. "This is outrageous!"

"Yes," said Eva, keeping her voice cool, "I couldn't agree more."

"Do something," Stephanie ordered Paul Rupnik.

The man shrugged and backed away. "You're on your own," he said.

"Bloody coward."

Eva stared at the floor for a second, trying not to laugh. She looked up and met Stephanie's furious gaze. "As I said, a personal check will be fine. Make it out to ATAP."

"Oh...not to you?"

"No. My managers will reimburse my expenses and pay my usual salary."

Stephanie reached beneath her desk for her purse and ripped out her checkbook. Her pen flew across the paper. Finally, she tore the check and tossed it at Eva. It fluttered to the floor.

"There you go, bitch. Fetch."

Without a word, Eva bent down and retrieved the check. Her eyes locked on Stephanie's as she handed the check to Jason. He folded it and put it in his wallet, then he stepped out of the way. Eva approached Stephanie without hesitation, deliberately invading her personal space.

"I know why Gabriel wouldn't fuck you," Eva said, her voice loud enough for the two young men to hear.

"What did you say?"

"I know why Gabriel Abbott refused to fuck you," Eva repeated.

Stephanie rose to her feet. Her voice shook as she said, "You know nothing of the sort."

"Oh," said Eva, "but I do. Gabriel Abbott has exquisite taste. In food, in wine, and in women. He'd never fuck a manipulative, lying, frigid, blond worthless piece of trash like you."

Eva saw the blow coming but she made no move to avoid it. She didn't intend to throw the first punch, but she definitely intended to have the last word. Stephanie's palm connected with Eva's cheek with a resounding thwack. Eva stumbled a few paces to her right. She heard a gasp from Jason and a shouted *hey* from the fake Jerry Harding as she moved quickly and tackled a shrieking Stephanie, taking her down to the floor, being careful to roll with her so the woman wouldn't be too hurt. Eva allowed the taller woman to struggle for a few moments, keeping her head away from the elbows Stephanie thrust in the direction of her face. Using her greater strength and flexibility, Eva wrapped her bare legs around the wiggling woman and held her in a

leg lock while she controlled Stephanie's torso with a move her brothers used to call *the guillotine*. She squeezed.

"Do you give?" rasped Eva, holding on for dear life.

"I can't breathe...let me up..." hissed Stephanie.

"Do you give?" Eva repeated in Stephanie's ear, squeezing harder.

Eva could hear loud voices in the hallway. There was pounding on the door. Jason had locked it. "Miss Lindstrom... Miss Lindstrom... Are you all right?" came a female voice.

"Last chance, Stephanie. Do you give? No more insults... No more expensive practical jokes?"

"Miss Lindstrom, I'm calling the police..." came the voice again.

"I give... I give...please...let me up... I can't breathe."

Just like that, Eva released her. She rolled off the woman and sprung to her feet. Stephanie began sucking in air. Like a helpless child, she lifted both hands toward Eva. Eva grabbed them and hauled the woman to her feet. She helped her into her chair.

"You're... you're bleeding," said Stephanie. Her hand shaking, she pointed at Eva's face. "Your mouth...your mouth is bleeding."

Eva wiped her mouth with the back of her hand. She saw bright red blood. "Yeah, well, you have a mean right cross, girl. I think I bit my cheek when you slapped me."

"What was that hold you put me in?"

"It's called the guillotine. At least, that's what my brothers called it. All four of them wrestled for the University of Iowa."

"The guillotine," Stephanie began to giggle. "I've never... I've never been in a fight before. It was...it was...sort of scary...and sort of exhilarating at the same time."

Eva grinned at her. "It's the adrenaline rush. You'll come down soon and you'll be back to hating my guts."

"You have four brothers?"

Eva laughed out loud. "Yes, I have four brothers."

The pounding on the door grew louder and more insistent.

Eva heard Gabe's voice. She was in deep shit.

"Man, that was sick," said Jason, standing next to Paul Rupnik. "Did you see that take-down? It was awesome, man. Fucking awesome."

Paul began to laugh so hard he had to sit on the floor. “I think...” he gasped, “I think someone better unlock the door.”

Gabe stood in the doorway, keeping the office crowd at bay. He glanced from Eva to Stephanie and back again. A purplish wheal marred Eva’s left cheek and he could see blood in the corner of her mouth. Stephanie’s clothes were in disarray and her hair stood up on her head, making her look like a scarecrow. Paul Rupnik lay sprawled on the floor, whooping with laughter, while Jason White—what the hell was Jason White doing here—stood above him, wearing an ATAP uniform and grinning like a devil.

“What the hell is going on in here?” Gabe bellowed.

“Nothing...” said Eva and Stephanie simultaneously. The two women looked at each other and both began giggling. Stephanie collapsed forward onto her desk, her shoulders shaking, while Eva tried her best to remain standing. Eventually, she gave up and sat down on the floor at Stephanie’s feet. Stephanie reached over and patted Eva’s head, causing them both to laugh harder.

Gabe stared at the scene, unwilling to believe his eyes. What on earth? When he’d had enough, he strode into the room, picked Eva up in his arms and carried her toward the door. She was laughing so hard she offered no resistance whatsoever.

“Jason...you coming?”

“Oh, yeah, sorry.” Jason grabbed the dolly and followed Gabe.

“Gabriel,” Stephanie called after him.

Gabe turned.

“Marry that girl, you ass.” She waved him away through her laughter.

“Quincy,” said Gabe, “we’re leaving.”

The parade wound its way through the gathered office personnel, two security guards and a hallway full of curious tenants. They stopped at the bank of elevators.

Quincy pushed the button. They waited silently, feeling all eyes on their little group of four. The elevator doors opened and they entered. The doors shut.

Jason pushed the button for the first floor.

“Anybody care to tell me what happened in there?” Gabe said as soon as the elevator started to move down.

“Just making a routine delivery,” quipped Jason.

"Sure," muttered Quincy with a grin, "and I'm Salvador Dali."

"Who?" asked Jason.

"Nothing," replied Quincy. "We missed a girl fight, Gabe. Damn. Who won?" he asked Jason.

"Who do you think? God, it was so sweet," Jason replied. "I'm Jason White, by the way."

"Quincy McIntyre, Gabe's little brother," said Quincy.

"Wow. Since when do you have a brother?" Jason asked Gabe.

Gabe ignored the boys. He held Eva tighter. He felt a tremor run through her. He leaned his head against hers. "Are you all right?" he asked in her ear.

"Put me down, Gabe," came Eva's muffled voice.

"Hell no. Not until you tell me what happened."

"You're not the boss of me, Gabriel Abbott."

"Watch it, Mr. Abbott," laughed Jason. "She might put you in a guillotine."

"Quincy, hit the stop button."

Quincy did as Gabe ordered. Gabe lowered Eva to the floor. He backed her into a corner, using his body to control her movements. He looked her over from head to toe, caressing the reddened cheek, running a gentle thumb along her bleeding lip.

"Do you have any idea what you do to me, Eva Raines? Do you have any clue how terrified I was when I couldn't reach you? How frantic?"

Eva shook her head. Her wide brown eyes stared into Gabe's own.

"Do you know how fucking much I love you, woman?"

Gabe lowered his head and he took Eva with his lips, careful not to hurt her. Eva reached up and threaded her hands through his thick hair. She moaned against his mouth, her lips parted, Gabe tasted blood, and then he was lost in the warmth of her.

"Go big bro," whispered Quincy.

"I can't watch this," said Jason, and he turned his back to the couple.

The elevator alarm sounded and Gabe lifted his head. Eva appeared dazed, her pupils dilated, eyes unfocused.

"Can you walk?" asked Gabe.

She shook her head yes. "Can you?" she laughed.

"Probably not," he replied with a grin.

"TMI," called Jason, sticking his fingers in his ears.

"You want me to pull the stop button?" asked Quincy.

"Yeah, let's go," said Gabe. He stuck a finger beneath Eva's chin and lifted her head, studying her face. The corner of his mouth twitched. "You really put her in a choke hold?"

"Not exactly. I used a leg lock and then, well, I merely restrained her torso so she couldn't elbow me."

Gabe laughed out loud. He looked at Eva with a newfound respect. "How the hell...how do you know how to wrestle?"

"Uh, four big brothers? Iowa? Wrestling? Dan Gable? Ringing any bells?"

The elevator doors opened. Eva walked out in front, followed by Gabe and Quincy. Jason, pushing the dolly, brought up the rear. The four stepped outside onto the street.

"Did you drive, Jason?" Gabe asked.

"No, Eva drove, but I was going to take her to SFO and then return this dolly and drop off the check at ATAP."

Gabe turned and held Eva by the shoulders. "SFO?"

"Yes. I was going to try to get on standby back to Iowa."

"Why?"

Eva lifted her hands in a mute gesture. "I quit my job."

"Why would you do that?"

"Because I figured there was a good chance I'd end up in jail for assault. I'd not only embarrass my bosses, I'd damage the reputation of their company. Ow."

Eva brought her fingers up to feel the side of her mouth.

"Your lip hurt?"

She nodded.

"C'mon, let's get you home. Hey Jason, you think you can drive Eva's car back to Napa?"

"Yeah, sure. She already gave me her keys and money for the toll."

"You mind taking my brother with you? I think Eva and I could use a little time alone."

"Yeah, why not?"

"Sorry, Quincy, you don't mind, do you?" asked Gabe. "You got your cell?"

Quincy nodded.

"Call me as soon as you get to Eva's house and I'll pick you both up."

"You can wait inside if you like," added Eva. "Jason has the key to the front door. By the way, Quincy," Eva grinned, "it's really nice to meet you." She stuck out her hand.

Quincy's grip was firm. "Nice to meet you too, Sis." He winked at her then he followed Jason down the block.

"Sis?" asked Eva, casting a suspicious glance at Gabe.

"Later," replied Gabe. "We have some catching up to do. My apartment's only a couple blocks away."

Eva shrieked as Gabe swung her back up into his arms. "Put me down. I can walk," she protested.

"Fuck no," said Gabe. "You're wounded and I've been waiting for an opportunity to play doctor again ever since your bike accident. All you have to do is lay back, relax, and enjoy the ride."

"A long, hard ride? Eva asked.

"A very long, very hard ride," Gabe replied, with a wink.

"I like the way your mind works, Gabriel Abbott."

"I like the way you look in these shorts, Eva Raines," said Gabe.

"By the way, how did you know where I was?"

"Ruth. I called the office and she told me about the receipt you left on the desk. I figured Stephanie's was the first place I should look."

"You're a smart man, Gabriel Abbott."

"So I've been told."

Chapter Twenty-Nine

"Is the blindfold really necessary?"

"Of course. Otherwise you might cheat."

"Me? Cheat? I would never cheat, Gabe."

"Just controlling all the variables. If this study is going to be scientific, it's important to control all the variables."

"You gonna tie me up too?" Eva asked, her grin wicked.

"Hmmm," said Gabe, rubbing his chin thoughtfully, his green eyes lazily perusing her naked body. "It's worth considering. Maybe after we complete the taste test."

Three weeks had passed. Tom and Marcus had returned from their camping trip and immediately shredded Eva's letter of resignation. Stephanie Lindstrom had sent Eva a formal note of apology, along with an orchid. Quincy had decided he liked the small town atmosphere in Napa and he and Jason both got jobs with ATAP. They were helping with the summer wedding season. Quincy turned out to be quite the cook and Eva put his skills to good use. He'd stayed in her extra bedroom while Gabe finished up with his interviews. Gabe had finally returned to the Bay Area, and he would be staying for the time being, at least until he and Eva headed to her parents' farm for the Fourth of July.

"How much time do we have before Quincy gets home?" asked Eva.

"Hours and hours," replied Gabe. "He's out with Jason and his friends. We have the entire evening to complete our study." He stroked the side of her breast. "God, you are a beauty. I may have to fuck you first." His voice had deepened with desire.

Eva watched his cock rise to the occasion. She teased him with her fingertips. "Blindfold. Taste test. Now. Let's get this over with while I can still concentrate."

"Mmmm...if you say so, lover."

Gabe folded a silk scarf and used it to cover Eva's eyes. He tied it at the back of her head. "Too tight?" he asked.

"No, it's all right." She felt his mouth on her nipple. "Hey," she protested, her voice shaking. "Taste test."

"I am tasting," mumbled Gabe against her breast. "And you're so fucking sweet."

Eva shoved his head away. "Now," she insisted. "If you keep touching me, I won't be able to do this."

"All right, all right," agreed Gabe. He sat up.

Eva heard a small, tearing sound.

"Okay, first one. Open your mouth."

Eva complied and Gabe dropped a small, round, hard candy onto her tongue. She sucked it briefly. "Easy. Dark brown," she said.

"Correct," came Gabe's voice. "But that was too easy. Try this." He waited for Eva to swallow, then he dropped another one.

Again, Eva sucked. "Yuck," she said, "blue."

"Right again," said Gabe. "You know, you look very cute with that blindfold on. I think I should take advantage of you."

"Oh?"

"Definitely. Spread your legs, Eva."

She laughed. "Yes, master."

"Lean back."

Eva leaned against the headboard of Gabe's bed.

"Give me your hand."

"Which one?"

"Right," said Gabe.

Gabe took her hand and spread her fingers. He laid her hand between her legs, running her own index finger through her very wet, very swollen folds.

"Touch yourself while I watch. Touch yourself."

"Gabe... I..."

"Yes, sweetheart, you can do it. God, you're so gorgeous. So red and ripe. Like a strawberry."

Eva began to move her finger across her clit, in small, slow circles.

“Mmmm...like that. God, just like that. Open.”

Gabe popped another candy in Eva's mouth. She stuck it against the roof of her mouth and sucked, trying to concentrate on the taste of the candy and the sensation of her own finger at the same time.

“Y...y...yellow,” she stuttered, a catch in her throat. She gasped as Gabe slipped his own finger inside her.

“That's right,” he said. “Keep up the good work. Here comes another one.”

Eva opened her mouth and tried to remember to suck, as Gabe's finger worked its way in and out of her, and his mouth descended on her nipple. He bit her.

“Huh...another...another yellow,” Eva breathed. She could feel herself begin to flush as her skin warmed. Her toes flexed and pointed and she felt herself moving toward orgasm.

“Right again.” Gabe removed his finger and wrapped his hand around hers. He pressed his index finger against hers and slid them both into her.

“Oh God, Gabe...”

“That's right, just like that. C'mon Eva, open for me.”

Eva parted her lips and Gabe dropped a candy on her tongue. His mouth followed and he flicked his tongue across her teeth. His fingers swirled hers around her clit.

“What color is this one? Hmm? What color?”

“R...r...red...”

“That's right. Red. Red like you. That's one hundred percent so far. Keep it up, lover, keep it up.”

“Oh fuck Gabe... I can't...”

“Yes, you can. You can do it. Here's another one.”

Eva could feel Gabe's erection press against her thigh. Jesus, he felt hard as steel. She sucked on the candy, trying to keep just a small portion of her brain functioning. She was close, so close to orgasm.

“What color is it? What color?”

His finger was inside her again. She heard herself moan as she said, “Orange. It's... it's orange. Oh fuck... Gabe...please...”

“Please what?”

“Please make me come.”

“Uh-uh. You have to do that all by yourself. While I watch. You’re right, by the way. It’s orange. Very impressive.”

Eva’s body grew so tense she felt like screaming.

“One more, get one more right and I’ll help you come.”

“Oh yes...yes...”

“Open.”

Eva quickly opened her mouth. She started. The object Gabe dropped into her mouth wasn’t a piece of candy. She felt it carefully with her tongue for a moment. It was a ring, most definitely a ring with a rather large stone. Eva stopped moving. She reached her left hand up to her mouth. As she popped the ring out, Gabe grabbed it from her and quickly slipped it onto her ring finger.

“Gabe...”

“Did I say you could stop?” was all he said.

“Gabe...”

Eva felt him move over her. He spread her thighs farther apart and he buried his face between them. His mouth replaced her fingers and he began to lick her.

“Damn, woman, you are the sweetest thing I’ve ever tasted,” he murmured, his mouth against the inside of her thigh. He shoved Eva onto her back and his hands found her breasts as his lips closed around her nub. He began to suck.

Eva did scream then, and she came, hard and fast. Gabe lapped up her tremors greedily, like she was a caramel flan. Before her orgasm ended, Gabe lifted himself. He rubbed the head of his swollen cock through her moisture and he entered her in one motion, impaling himself to the hilt. Eva arched toward him.

“You fit me so perfectly, Eva,” he murmured in her ear, thrusting deep. “Like a tight, wet, hot glove made for me and me alone. Marry me,” he whispered. “Marry me and stay with me forever.”

Eva ripped the scarf off and met his gaze.

“Yes, Gabe. Yes.”

Gabe reached for something out of Eva’s line of vision. “Close your eyes,” he demanded.

Eva did so. He dropped another candy into her mouth. She sucked briefly. Her eyes flew open.

“Where did you... how did you...?”

"I have connections," Gabe said, with a grin, moving inside her, filling her. "I have very deep..." he thrust, "very big..." he thrust, "very high connections."

Light brown. Gabe's mouth descended upon hers and she sucked the candy and his tongue together. He lifted his mouth from hers for a moment.

"You're right," he said, his voice husky. "The light brown are the best. Just like you."

Appendix

Grains of Paradise: Now rare and expensive, hundreds of years ago Grains of Paradise were used as a cheaper substitute for the much more expensive black pepper. Grains of Paradise are the seeds of a leafy plant that grows in West Africa. The name comes from Medieval spice traders who wanted to inflate the price—they claimed that the spice grew only in the Garden of Eden and had to be collected from the rivers that ran out of Paradise. The flavor of Grains of Paradise is similar to black pepper and has a nice bite, but the spice also has a hint of floral, with a bit of coriander, citrus, cardamom and even mild chilies.

Fleur De Sal de Guerande: A finishing salt, not intended for cooking, harvested by hand from the salt marshes in Guerande, in Brittany, France. The salt is considered by some to be the finest salt in the world. It has been harvested and traded since the ninth century. The salt tastes like the sea. It's rich in minerals, especially magnesium, lower in sodium than table salt and without the bitterness of commercial salt. It enhances the flavor of fresh vegetables and brings out the sweetness in fruit. The salt is amazing on caramels or even on milk chocolate.

Maitake Mushrooms: Native to the mountains of northeastern Japan, this mushroom is also known in the United States as the *hen of the woods*. Not only are the health benefits of the maitake substantial, the taste is sweet and delicate, yet meaty and nutty at the same time. It's considered by many mushroom aficionados to be the best flavored mushroom on the market. In ancient Japan, this mushroom was valued as highly as silver.

Nonino Grappa: Grappa is produce by the distillation of the pomace, or leftover juice and skin of the grape, following wine production. Nonino was the first distiller to produce grappa from single vineyard, a single grape, the Picolit. Grappa is a clear liquid. It is usually served chilled, but the

warmth it induces is quite pronounced, even fiery. In Italy, it's commonly added to espresso to make a Café Correto. Try it, you'll like it!

Recipes

Eva's Wet Sauce

1 cup tomato sauce
1 small can tomato paste
½ cup dark balsamic vinegar
½ cup dark brown sugar
¼ cup molasses
¼ cup Worcestershire sauce
¼ cup soy sauce
1 tsp. granulated garlic
1 tsp. kosher salt
1 tsp. fresh ground black pepper
1 tsp. smoked paprika
2 tsp. Tabasco

Whisk together and store in fridge. Use as a marinade or dipping sauce.

Eva's Rub

½ cup light brown sugar
1 tsp. coriander
2 Tbs. cumin
2 Tbs. ancho chili powder

1 Tbs. paprika
1 Tbs. garlic powder
1 Tbs. onion powder
½ tsp. dry mustard
1 tsp. fresh ground black pepper
¼ tsp. cayenne
Few pinches dried lime zest
Pinch allspice
1 tsp. kosher salt

Mix together and store in airtight container in fridge. Rub on meat 24 hours in advance of cooking or smoking.

Eva's Chocolate Cream Cheese Brownies

1/3 cup granulated sugar
1 egg
1 large package cream cheese
Beat together until light and creamy. Reserve.
4 squares unsweetened chocolate
¼ cup unsweetened cocoa powder
6 oz. semi-sweet chocolate, chopped
2 cups butter

Melt the above ingredients together in a double boiler. While they are melting, beat together:

3 eggs
2 cups granulated sugar
1 cup flour
2 tsp. vanilla

Gradually add in chocolate mixture. Beat until just mixed. Do not overbeat. Pour into 9"x11" ungreased pan. Spread cream cheese batter on top. Sprinkle on chopped walnuts or pecans if desired. Bake at 350° for 35-45 minutes. Brownies will be wet. Do not cut until completely cool. Refrigerate.

Eva's Lemon Curd

1 cup lemon juice
Zest from two lemons
3 sticks butter
1 and 1/2 cups sugar (1 cup if you like your lemon curd very tart)
9 eggs plus 9 egg yolks

Mix all ingredients together in a bowl over simmering, but not boiling water in a double boiler. Stir constantly until mixture is very thick and coats the back of a spoon. Pour into a bowl and cover surface with plastic wrap. Refrigerate. Or may spoon into jars and store in fridge. Spread on anything.

Eva's Wholegrain Granola

8 cups rolled oats
4 cups rolled wheat flakes
2 tsp. kosher salt
4 tsp. cinnamon
2 cups walnut halves
2 cups pecan halves
1 cup sliced almonds
2 14-oz. packages sweetened flaked coconut
1/2 cup canola oil

- 2 14-oz. cans sweetened condensed milk
- 2 cups dried fruit (blueberries, cherries, strawberries, raspberries)

Mix the above ingredients together – you may need to use your hands. Line 3-4 large baking sheets with aluminum foil and spray with nonstick cooking spray. Spread the granola in an even layer in each sheet. Place no more than 2 baking sheets at a time in a pre-heated 300° oven. Bake for approximately 1 hour, stirring every 15 minutes. Granola should be a light toasty brown. Remove from oven and let cool just until you can handle it. Break into bowl and toss in dried fruit to taste. Dried strawberries are especially nice.

Eva's Turkey Bolognese

- 2-4 Tbs. extra virgin olive oil
- 1 large onion, minced very fine
- 3 med. carrots, diced fine or put through a food processor
- 3 med. stalks celery, diced fine or put through a food processor
- 6 cloves garlic, minced very fine
- 2 lbs. ground white meat turkey
- 2 12-oz. cans tomato paste
- 2 cups red wine, like a petite syrah, a pinot noir, or an Italian red (not sweet)
- 2-4 tsp. kosher salt
- 2 tsp. granulated sugar
- Fresh ground black pepper to taste
- 12 thyme sprigs
- Water as needed
- 1 cup grated good parmesan cheese
- 1 large package egg noodles or tagliatelle

In a large Dutch oven, add 2-4 Tbs. olive oil. Sauté the vegetables on medium heat, until vegetables begin to caramelize. Add sugar, and salt to taste. Continue cooking slowly until vegetables are very soft.

Add ground turkey. Brown the meat with the vegetables, allowing all the water from the turkey to evaporate. Stir frequently, making certain the turkey becomes very finely minced. After turkey has cooked completely, taste and salt if needed. Add black pepper to taste. Add thyme sprigs.

Stir in the tomato paste and heat through. Add the red wine and stir. Allow the sauce to cook slowly, uncovered, for 20 minutes or so, until the wine has reduced by about half. Add water until the meat and vegetables are entirely covered, leave lid on loosely and allow to simmer slowly, adding water as needed to keep meat covered. Stir frequently and taste. Adjust seasonings as needed. Allow to simmer for 1 and ½ to 2 hours.

When sauce is cooked, turn heat down to low, remove thyme stems, and prepare pasta as directed on package.

Drain the pasta and add to sauce, using a little pasta water if needed to thin sauce. Add ½ of the parmesan cheese. Toss gently until all is combined. Pour into large serving bowl and sprinkle on remaining parmesan.

Eva's Chocolate Sauce

1 cup sugar

½ cup water

4-oz. semi-sweet chocolate, chopped

4-oz. unsweetened chocolate, chopped

¼ cup unsalted butter

4 Tbs. heavy whipping cream

¼ cup of your favorite red wine

Bring sugar and water to simmer in a small saucepan. Cover and simmer 5 minutes. Remove from heat, uncover, and cool to room temperature.

Melt the chocolate, butter and cream over double boiler with hot, not boiling water. When chocolate is melted, slowly whisk in sugar syrup. Whisk in wine. If not using immediately, store in fridge. Serve warm. Spread on. Lick off.

Eva's Salted Maple-Caramel Sauce

1 cup sugar
6 Tbs. butter
½ cup heavy whipping cream
¼ cup dark maple syrup
1 Tbs. white balsamic vinegar
sea salt

Heat sugar in a heavy, thick, deep pan (this will foam up as it cooks), over medium high heat, stirring with a wooden spoon or whisk as sugar melts. When the sugar is amber-colored, immediately add the butter and stir until butter is melted. When butter is melted, remove from heat and slowly whisk in cream, maple syrup and balsamic vinegar. Let cool to lukewarm and pour into a jar. If not using immediately, store in fridge. Serve warm and sprinkle on a little sea salt. Spread on. Lick off.

Eva's Salmon Candy

2-3 lbs. wild salmon filets or ½ salmon
1 cup dark maple syrup—the cheapest kind works best
½ cup soy sauce
1/4 cup water
2 heaping Tbs. brown sugar
1 tsp. cracked black pepper
1 Tbs. red pepper flakes

1 tsp. kosher salt
Few shakes of Tabasco

Slice salmon into $\frac{1}{4}$ inch thick slices or chunks. Remove from skin.

Mix remaining ingredients together and whisk until smooth. Pour into large zipper bag. Add salmon. Make sure bag is closed and shake around so all salmon is coated with marinade. Leave bag in fridge for 24-48 hours. Turn bag every once in a while. Set up food dryer. Arrange salmon on dryer shelves and dry until well-done and chewy, 2-6 hours depending upon your dryer. Store in a plastic bag in the fridge.

Eva's Extremely Wet Cornbread

1 and $\frac{1}{2}$ cups unbleached flour
1 and $\frac{3}{4}$ cups yellow cornmeal
1 tsp. baking soda
 $\frac{1}{2}$ tsp. salt
2 large eggs
 $\frac{1}{2}$ cup light brown sugar
1 cup buttermilk
1 can creamed corn
1 small can green chilies
1 stick melted butter

Mix the dry ingredients together and set aside. Beat the eggs and sugar, add the buttermilk and mix well. Stir in the creamed corn and the chilies. Add the dry ingredients. Stir in the melted butter. Mix until just mixed together, do not over mix. Pour into a greased 9"x13" pan. Bake at 350° for 25-30 minutes. The cornbread will be very moist.

Note to Reader

Light brown M&M's were replaced by blue in 1995. The light brown definitely tasted the best.

About the Author

Julia Barrett has lived many lives, but the one central theme of each is her writing. She's written prose and poetry since she was a child. Her grandmother was a playwright, an uncle a noted journalist, another uncle wrote college textbooks, and her father acted as an advisor to the Iowa Supreme Court. She's had articles published in various medical and nursing magazines and poetry published in various literary journals.

Julia has a degree in Creative Writing from the University of Iowa and a second degree in nursing from the University of Utah. She's been a hospice nurse for ten years. Between the time she graduated from The University of Iowa and became a hospice nurse, Julia has been a bartender, a caterer, a private chef and a restaurateur.

Julia and her lovely husband live on the West Coast with an entire food chain of animals and three children who come and go frequently.

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Ambitious and beautiful Athena Lakis has one simple rule... *No romance with a Greek.*

In theory, this tenet should be easy to keep. After all, reaching for her lifelong dream to own and operate a prestigious hotel on prime seaside property in Greece, she has her hands full. The major hurdle being her drop-dead gorgeous competition: Greek tycoon Alexandros Strintzaris.

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***Trouble With the Law* by Tatiana March**

Arrested for soliciting during a wedding in rural Pennsylvania, Justine Whitmore spends a steamy night with the local sheriff who clears up the misunderstanding and releases her. She never expects to see him again, but when an interfering busybody makes a complaint, Justine agrees to pretend a whirlwind romance in order to protect her reputation and the sheriff's job.

Embittered by a divorce from a scheming city woman, Sheriff Mark Taylor has sworn to avoid her kind. No amount of cursing will change the fact that he fell for the wedding guest hauled into his office dressed in nothing but expensive underwear.

A country hick and a high maintenance PR executive—can they tolerate each other long enough to make it look real? But sometimes people are not what you believe them to be...

***The Summer Deal* by Aleka Nakis**

Samantha Mallone is a smart, beautiful redhead who is oblivious of the magnetic affect she has on her charismatic boss.

International billionaires don't lie to get a woman, but Demosthenis Lakis does just that to lure his assistant to Greece.

Unaware of her employer's true motivations, Samantha eagerly prepares for a summer in the Mediterranean when her psychotic-ex calls and threatens her, prompting Mr. Lakis to arrange for her to leave New York immediately.

Abroad, Mr. Lakis changes the ground rules: they're in Greece where formalities are foreign. Samantha becomes Sammy, and Mr. Lakis becomes Demo. Sexual tension burns as the big-eyed Sammy tours the ancient ruins on Demo's arm and discovers his intent to show her there is more to their relationship than business.

Proving to be unlike other men from Sammy's past, Demo puts their passionate summer deal to the test of a lifetime...

***A Brief Moment of Pleasure* by Fran Lee**

Lisa Hampton is serious about her martial arts career...but a woman in the traditional Japanese martial arts is seldom taken seriously. At least, not until one hunky and hot man takes her...very seriously.

James Rhee runs his own high-profile brand of martial arts studio...teaching advanced martial arts moves and techniques to movie stars and competitors who want to impress a director or win a tournament. Something Lisa genuinely doesn't want any part of.

Being a serious teacher of serious stuff, she finds it damn hard to swallow his methods. But she soon finds it's damn hard to refuse the maddening man anything...including her body. He's exactly the kind of man she has always avoided like the plague. Except that this particular kind of plague is highly infectious, and once you come in contact with it, there's no cure.

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