



Loose Id

Beth Williamson

THE PERFECT SCORE

Widow's Weeds

Praise for the writing of Beth Williamson

The Perfect Score 1: One Night Stand

Ms. Williamson really captured my attention and held on tight with this awesome tale of love and cultural differences. Anyone who enjoys a good contemporary story should run out and buy this book as soon as possible.

-- Susan White, *Coffee Time Romance*

The pacing kept my attention and the characters were all very engaging. *The Perfect Score: One Night Stand* was an unexpected romantic delight that I will read again! I highly recommend it.

-- Patrice Storie, *Just Erotic Romance Reviews*

Beth Williamson has created a story readers will want to read many times over. *One Night Stand* contains realistic characters, squabbling teammates, a huge bowling tournament, and one sexy as sin determined man... The friendship and understanding between Babs, Veronica, and Marlene is a key factor in this story and I can't wait to see what happens with Veronica and Marlene .

-- Chrissy Dionne, *Romance Junkies*

Once again Ms. Williamson shows her talent as a writer that I can depend on to give me an entertaining read. I can't wait for the next installment of this series!

-- Talia Ricci, *Joyfully Reviewed*

The Perfect Score 1: One Night Stand is now available from Loose Id.

THE PERFECT SCORE 2: WIDOW'S WEEDS

Beth Williamson

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This book contains explicit sexual content, graphic language, and situations that some readers may find objectionable (homoerotic sex).

The Perfect Score 2: Widow's Weeds

Beth Williamson

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Chapter One

She tried. God knows she tried. Each night it was the same thing. She told herself she wouldn't do it. She resisted until the wee hours of the morning. Until she was so tired that her eyes were about to dry up like raisins. Until her body was vibrating with exhaustion. Until she gave into her cravings and gained her release.

It was two a.m. and Veronica fisted her hands to stop them from creeping down to quench the ache that tortured her. With a dramatic sigh to rival any Babs could dish out, Veronica rolled over in bed and reached for the knob on her nightstand drawer. With a cringe, she slid the drawer open. She peered into the shadowed interior lit only by the light of the moon and looked for her favorite vibrator.

It was purely psychological, she knew that. She was an intelligent, forty-two-year-old woman with a college degree and at least enough common sense to fill a cup full. Yet she was a secret masturbator. Secret because no one, *no one*, knew how much she did, or how many sexual toys she'd accumulated over the last two years. If her friend Babs found out about her collection, she would never live it down.

She could almost hear her mother's voice in her ear.

The devil dances 'twixt your thighs, so you'd better keep them closed so he has no dance hall.

Veronica didn't want to turn on the light, so she kept feeling around, sure that Big Purple was near the top. She'd already used it twice this week; it couldn't be far. When her fingers slid across a familiar bumpy rubber, she sighed in relief and pulled it out.

She hadn't intended on becoming a collector. It was quite by accident. Babs had given her a vibrator for her birthday two years earlier, and she was mortified, especially considering it was in the Sugar Shack restaurant. Veronica brought it home and one night, in the deep darkness, she reached for it, almost against her will. Thus began her path down the road of licentiousness that would make her mother have the vapors for a month if she knew.

She started purchasing online at a website that delivered in plain brown packages. At first, it was simple vibrators, and then she worked her way through butterfly vibrators, clit ticklers, nipple rings, double dongs, and simulated tongues. She must have at least fifty different devices in her drawer. She had her favorites, of course, like Big Purple.

Veronica took the warming gel from the drawer and squeezed some on the ribbed vibrator, then used her fingers to coat it. Setting the gel back, she slid the drawer closed and snuggled back into her comfortable spot on the mattress. The warming gel wasn't necessary of course, but it gave at least the appearance of something other than a rubber sex device. It wasn't human, but at least it wasn't cold.

She eased the nightgown up her thighs and spread her legs until the air conditioned air caressed her heated, hungry pussy. Like Pavlov's dog, it wept because it knew a treat was coming. A treat that would relieve its pain, its hunger.

She twisted the end until it vibrated slowly. She liked to tease herself as she turned it up. As the slick hardness made contact with her clit, a zing of pleasure echoed through her. She slid the vibrator back and forth, pulling her clit to aching hardness.

She fantasized about Orin, about the night he introduced her to oral sex. The night Veronica discovered that the mouth could be an incredible instrument of pleasure for both of them.

She pushed the head of the vibrator inside her and her fantasy changed. It was Orin's hardness pressing into her. Deeper, deeper, deeper. She felt the orgasm building so her left hand reached down to pinch her clit as she pumped faster and faster. The pleasure rolled through her and she moaned into the stillness of her room, gasping and clenching against the slicked rubber.

As the waves faded, her muscles relaxed and Big Purple slowly landed on the bed. Sleep was finally calling her name, and she breathed a sigh of relief. The languorous exhaustion that only an orgasm could bring stole over her.

She laid the vibrator on the nightstand and adjusted her nightgown back into place. She rolled on her right side and tucked her hand under her cheek. The scent from her pussy teased her nostrils from her fingers. The musk was pleasant, almost tantalizing. She moved her hand under the pillow, ignored her natural curiosity and closed her eyes.

Sleep finally claimed her.

* * * * *

Bright colors lurked in the back of Veronica's closet. Long since forgotten or worn, they sat in the shadows. She knew they were there, and promised herself for the millionth time that she'd clean them out or at least donate them to the local shelter.

She never did.

It had been five years since Orin died. Five long years that taught her what it truly meant to live without your heart beating. Life went on around her, but Veronica simply watched it go by. She stopped living the night he did.

Oh, she still breathed, slept, ate, and worked. She bowled once a week with her wonderful friends, Marlene and Babs. She read and watched TV, occasionally rented a movie, and pattered in her flower garden. It was all a sham, a face slipped on each day for the world to see. Beneath it, she simply existed. There was no life.

Her body continued to exist and crave and need. She decided it was because she was a virgin until she was thirty-three, until she'd married Orin. Her parents had ingrained a highly conservative ethic so deeply, Veronica saved her virginity for her wedding night. Unheard of, really. Orin had been a patient and amazing lover that taught her how to give and receive pleasure. He died just four years after they married, leaving Veronica alone, in her heart, her body, and her soul.

As she headed out the door of her house to the bowling alley, the wedding picture of her and Orin caught her eye again. It hung on the wall near the front window. They both looked so happy, so full of promise. Four years later, he died in a car accident and left Veronica all alone. His smiling face was frozen forever in his wedding finery.

She tried not to look at the picture anymore, but sometimes her eyes moved over the photo of their own volition. Her heart pinched every time. She wondered if a day would come when she'd look at the picture without pain.

Veronica kissed her fingers, then touched the cold glass that covered Orin's face.

"Love ya, O-man."

The ride over to the bowling alley was short and uneventful. When she pulled into the Starlite parking lot, she saw Babs's silver sports car and Marlene's pick-up. She didn't like being the last one there, on principal, and if she hadn't dawdled over Orin's picture, she wouldn't have been. Veronica hated being late, period.

It was the three days until The Perfect Score bowling tournament and there was an air of excitement in the alley. It was the biggest tournament in Texas, and it had landed this year

in the small town of Espejo at the Starlite Lanes. It was like having the Miss America pageant, the way people were acting.

Veronica stopped at the front desk to say hello to Jesse, the owner, who was lit up like high beams. He was a gray-haired man who wore overalls and print shirts. One of those people she'd known all her life because he'd been friends with her daddy.

"Morning, Jesse."

"Veronica! Hey there, sweet thing, how are you?"

"I'm just fine. How are you?"

"Oh, I am diamond fine! I cain't believe it's almost time for the tournament. Y'all are bowling right?"

Veronica nodded. "In the team tournament."

"Oh, you gotta do more than that! You're a good bowler."

She waved her hand. "Not nearly as good as Marlene."

"You have a solid average. Don't put yourself down now!"

"I'll think about it."

"You are going to man the desk for me today, right?" He hurried around the edge of the desk.

"Sure am."

"I really appreciate you helping me out."

He patted her shoulder affectionately.

"No problem, Jesse."

Veronica sat down on the spanking new stool Jesse had bought -- he didn't think the duct tape would look professional so he hid the old one under the desk. She didn't expect too much would happen at the front desk on Friday. Most folks wouldn't be in town for another couple of days. All the final preparations were happening over the weekend. She saw Babs

over at the snack bar with Marlene. She waved at her friends. Marlene waved back, and Babs blew a kiss and held up her coffee in a toast.

Babs was one of those people who was fodder for gossip. She was the only child of a Mexican mother and a Texan father, rich as hell and as bold as she was brassy. Veronica didn't know why they were such close friends; they were polar opposites. Perhaps it was the addition of Marlene, sort of the monkey in the middle. She was younger than both of them, and a nicer, sweeter, more giving person in Espejo couldn't be found. The three of them had met five years ago when they signed up for the fall league at the Starlite. They bonded quickly and had remained close friends ever since.

Veronica reached into her purse for a peppermint candy, one of her vices that she could not give up. She rummaged around a bit and something slid under her nail sharply.

"Shit!" She stuck the finger into her mouth to suck on it, as if that would relieve the pain that pulsed through it.

"Um, well, hello to you, too."

Veronica looked up to find an auburn-haired woman smiling at her. She had short hair, wavy, in a bob, and the most incredibly unique blue eyes she'd ever seen. Almost cerulean in color. She was wearing some kind of gauzy top with at least three pooka bead necklaces and dangling earrings that swayed and tinkled when she moved. Her skin was literally like peaches and cream with a smattering of freckles across her pert nose. She was absolutely gorgeous.

"Oh, my God, I'm sorry! I didn't mean to cuss at you. I hurt my finger and --"

The woman waved her hand airily. "No worries."

Veronica continued to stare at her, feeling like her tongue had twisted into a huge knot. What was it? She was just a stranger. Why did she feel like her brain had just turned to mush?

"C-can I help you with something?" She finally spit out.

"I was over at the snack bar and that blonde woman told me to come over here to talk to you." Her voice was low like Lauren Bacall. Veronica had always wanted a deeper voice, instead she sounded a bit like Daisy Duck.

"Babs sent you over here?"

"Is that her name? It fits, doesn't it?" The stranger chuckled huskily. "She said I'm your partner. My name is Patrice."

Partner.

She hadn't had a partner in five years. What was she talking about?

"Partner for what?"

Patrice cocked her head and raised her eyebrows. "The ladies doubles competition?"

Oh, hell and damnation. She'd totally forgotten that Marlene had bullied her into signing up to bowl blind with someone in the tournament.

"Of course, I'm sorry. I haven't had breakfast yet, and my brain is running on four hours of sleep."

She felt her cheeks flush at the memory of exactly *why* she'd had only four hours of sleep. She hoped Patrice couldn't read minds. Veronica would be mortified.

"I understand completely. I drove up from San Antonio yesterday, and it was hard to roll out of bed this morning. I was just about to get something to eat, but I wanted to say hello first. Can I bring you coffee and a biscuit?"

Veronica found herself smiling at Patrice. Her favorite breakfast was coffee and a biscuit.

"That would be heavenly. Hang on; let me get you some money."

Patrice waved her hand again, the bracelets on her wrist clinking together merrily. "We're partners, remember? This one's on me."

She turned and headed toward the snack bar. Patrice wore a turquoise skirt that was nearly as diaphanous as her green and yellow blouse. She also wore white Birkenstock sandals with a yellow daisy on the side. A huge macramé bag hung from her hand with bamboo handles. She looked like a modern-day hippie.

There weren't too many hippies in Texas, modern or vintage. Patrice sounded like she was a native, though, so perhaps her parents were into all that touchy-feely, make-love-not-war stuff. Veronica's parents made sure she wasn't exposed to any of that while growing up. She was only allowed to socialize with children of church members or mama's circle of friends. Good thing her mama had retired and moved to Arizona -- Marlene and Babs would not fit the profile of what she considered appropriate friends.

"Is there time to practice today with open lanes?"

Veronica shook her head to clear it. She'd been woolgathering while watching Patrice. A handsome brown-haired man in a blue shirt was standing at the counter, obviously waiting for her to find her brain and answer him.

"I expect there will be. If you see an older man in a loud, purple Hawaiian shirt with gray hair and a beard, that's Jesse, the owner. He'd be able to tell you when there is open bowling today for practice."

"Thank you." He smiled and walked away. He was a mighty fine-looking man. In fact, she saw Babs notice his rear-end and her gray eyes were practically eating him alive. Veronica hid her grin behind her hand.

"Share the joke?" Patrice was at the counter again with two cups of coffee with a biscuit wrapped in paper on top. She could smell the biscuit and breathed in the delicious scent. Marlene was an incredible cook.

"Just watching Babs work, that's all."

When she glanced back, she only saw the man's back as he talked to Babs. No doubt he'd end up in her bed tonight. They all did. Veronica tried it a few times, the one-night

stands, but she was miserable afterwards, and she was never satisfied either. She gave up after six months of messy, embarrassing “dates.”

“She’s a charmer, that’s for sure.” Patrice set the coffee cups down and peered behind the desk. “Is there another stool for me?”

Veronica was surprised, but pleased. She hadn’t expected any company at the desk today, and Patrice seemed like a friendly sort.

“As a matter of fact there is.” She stood, then pulled out the old stool and spread her white cardigan on it. As she sat down, she gestured for Patrice to join her. Patrice grinned and headed behind the desk to sit on the stool next to Veronica. She pulled the coffee cups over and they settled in for breakfast. Patrice’s perfume gently teased her nostrils. Something with a hint of vanilla. Very earthy and light.

Veronica found herself laughing as they chatted and ate. Patrice was very funny and charming. She could have drawn Helga, the German bowler from Podunk as a partner, but instead, she got a pixie. A pixie that made her smile, a feat that few had accomplished in the last five years. That made her special in Veronica’s book.

* * * * *

Patrice didn’t know what to make of Veronica. She was like a little blackbird with the saddest brown eyes she’d ever seen. Her hair was reminiscent of Carol Brady, and for some reason, everything she wore was black, even her socks and shoes. She had a wonderful smile, though, and her eyes crinkled at the corners.

For the first time in a long time, Patrice found herself relaxing. The last year had been the hardest of her life, and she was damned determined to get out of her blue funk and start enjoying life again. She’d been devastated by her lover’s betrayal and the subsequent nasty break-up. Life had seemed so gray for so long, and now here she was at a bowling tournament that she had forced herself to attend. Suddenly, she felt the clouds part and the sun shine on her.

Patrice was fairly certain Veronica was a widow, what with all the black. She didn't think she was into Goth anyway. Not with that uptight little purse and her conservative hairdo. No way. She probably never even smoked or drank. She did curse, though, which meant she had at least a smidge of rogue in her. With Patrice's help, perhaps she could nurture that smidge into a streak. Moreover, with Veronica's help, perhaps Patrice could stay in the sunshine. It felt wonderful to smile again.

The morning passed quickly and she'd met just about everyone in Espejo, apparently a small town. The goddess of the snack bar was Veronica's friend Marlene. The owner was Jesse, an older gentleman with a quick grin and a sweet disposition. Patrice was a bit surprised that Veronica was friends with the sarcastic Babs, but it was a good thing. Another bit of that rogue quality that peeped out.

"I was going to have an early lunch because Jesse asked me to be here at one for the afternoon practice. Do you want to go with me? I'm only going to the Opal diner in town." Veronica seemed a bit nervous, almost as if she didn't want to ask, but felt the need to be polite.

"You don't have to invite me, Ronnie."

Veronica's eyes grew wide and Patrice noticed flecks of gold within the rich brown color. Her heart did a quick pittypat.

What the hell was she doing? This was a straight whitebread girl.

"Why did you call me that?"

"I don't know. It just sort of slipped out."

Veronica shook her head. "It's just ... my husband used to call me that, and ever since he died, it's bothered me when I hear it."

Oh, hell.

"I am so sorry. I didn't mean to offend you." Patrice reached for Veronica's hand, and she snatched it back quickly.

"No, it's okay. I'm not offended. It's just ..." She shook her head. "I don't know. For some reason, it didn't bother me when you said it."

She looked as confused as Patrice felt. "I won't call you that, I promise."

This time, Veronica swallowed and reached for Patrice's hand. "Please. I-I'd like you to call me Ronnie."

The buttery softness of her hand contrasted with the calluses on Patrice's. A shiver of suppressed longing swept through her, leaving a melancholy behind. Hoping a straight widow from the Bible belt would heal her broken heart was like wishing for the moon. There would never be anything more than a friendship between them. That was a certainty.

"Okay then, I will."

Veronica smiled and squeezed her hand. The sunshine grew a bit warmer under the pretty smile of her new bowling partner. She could at least enjoy it for what it was. Life.

Chapter Two

They rode over to the diner in Veronica's Chrysler. It had been Orin's car, and she couldn't bring herself to trade it in for a new one, even if it was ten years old and the belts squealed like a baby pig. A pair of his sunglasses sat in the glove box, another piece of her husband that she hadn't parted with. At least she'd given his clothes away to charity. Everything else remained.

Since it was early yet, only 11:45, there were only half a dozen cars in the parking lot. The Opal Diner was one of those places that everyone in town ate at. No fancy chain or singing waiters, just old-fashioned good food, most of it deep-fried.

They walked into the diner together, and Veronica realized that she was a few inches taller than Patrice. Her initial impression of a pixie was spot on. She was no bigger than a minute. Veronica waved at Erma, the hostess, and headed for her favorite booth by the window, which was luckily free. She scooted in, and Patrice sat across from her.

"It smells wonderful in here."

"The food is delicious. I especially love the meatloaf if that's something you care for." Veronica pulled the menus from behind the napkin holder and handed one to Patrice. The

sun from the window danced across her blue eyes, making them almost translucent.

Veronica blinked and shook herself.

Patrice winked and opened the menu. Veronica felt herself flush at the gesture. Today was definitely a weird day. What was wrong with her anyway? She wasn't the world's most gregarious person, but she kept staring at this poor woman like some kind of wacko. Soon Patrice was going to think she was a bit touched in the head.

Veronica opened her menu and pretended to read it. She knew it by heart -- didn't need to look at it, but it gave her something to look at besides the woman across from her.

Sylvia came by to take their orders. She was one of those girls that had made some bad choices and ended up pregnant at sixteen. They'd been in high school together. Sylvia lived in the poorest section of town, definitely not appropriate friendship material. Of course, her getting pregnant just proved that point. Her son was grown and off in the military somewhere. She'd been working at the diner for at least twenty-five years and it showed. Her peroxide-blond hair and dark roots complemented the tired brown eyes and bright red lipstick. Her gently curved young body had matured into a bulkier middle-aged one that strained the stitches of the light blue uniform.

"Hey, Veronica, how are ya, hon?"

"Good, Sylvia. How are you?"

"Oh, I cain't complain none. I got a letter from Benjamin yesterday, and he's doing fine."

"That's good to hear. I hope he stays that way."

"You know what you want, sugar?" Sylvia asked Patrice.

Patrice smiled and glanced at Veronica. "The meatloaf, please, with ice water and hot tea."

Sylvia's eyebrows rose at the request for hot tea, but she didn't say anything to Patrice about it. "The usual, Veronica?"

Dang it all. Her cheeks flushed again. Being so well known that everyone knew her likes and dislikes was embarrassing. Or maybe it was because she never changed anything, even her eating habits. Life was a routine, just the way Veronica liked it. At least, she hoped that was the reason.

“Ah, no, actually I think I’ll have the fried chicken today.”

“Iced tea?”

“Yes, please, with two lemons.”

After Sylvia left, Patrice took Veronica’s menu and tucked it with hers back behind the napkins. She folded her hands and cocked her head.

“So what do you do?”

“Oh, I’m an accountant.”

Patrice nodded and her earrings tinkled. “So you just finished tax season, then. Must be a bit less frantic.”

“You said a mouthful. What do you do?”

Patrice smiled. “I’m an art teacher at a high school in San Antonio. I’m also an artist.”

Veronica wasn’t surprised. Patrice seemed like an artsy kind of person. “What kind of artist?”

“I paint and sculpt, dabble a bit in clay and sometimes metal. I’ve focused mostly on painting, but I think I’ve tried just about everything. I’d love to paint you.”

Veronica couldn’t have been more surprised. “You want to paint *me*? Whatever for?”

This time when Patrice smiled, there was something in her eyes. An indefinable something that touched a chord in Veronica that resonated through her.

“You’re a beautiful woman, Ronnie. Why wouldn’t anyone want to paint you?”

Beautiful.

No one had ever called her beautiful. Not even Orin. Oh, he told her she was pretty or cute and that kind of thing, but never beautiful. For a moment, Veronica couldn't answer. She knew by the expression in Patrice's eyes that she was sincere about it. That in and of itself was enough to steal her voice.

"I didn't mean to embarrass you."

"I-I'm not embarrassed. I'm ... surprised." And she was. Very surprised.

Patrice reached across the table and squeezed Veronica's hand. Hers was warm and comforting, and something else. It was ... soothing.

"I can't imagine you'd be surprised that someone called you beautiful."

Veronica felt a little bit of the pinch around her heart lessen a smidge. "Thank you, Patrice. I don't know what to say."

"Then don't say anything. I brought my paints and brushes with me. Let me know if you have some free time this week."

She wanted to paint her.

It was exciting. The few times she'd even had her picture taken had been for an occasion, like high school graduation or her wedding. She'd never had anything done just because. Certainly not a painting. For the first time in a very long time, Veronica found herself really smiling, and meaning it.

She squeezed Patrice's hand. "Thank you."

Patrice squeezed Veronica's hand again before releasing it. "You are more than welcome, partner."

Before Veronica could react to the handholding, Sylvia was back with their lunch. She chatted away as she set the food on the table, oblivious to Veronica's confusion.

Patrice had squeezed her hand, twice, and the sensation of someone else's hands on her skin was indescribable. She hadn't held hands with anyone since Orin. Patrice's hands were soft and warm, almost hot, against her hand. More than that, they were intriguing.

What in the world just happened?

“Are you okay?”

Veronica nodded and looked down at her plate of fried chicken. Not what she wanted. She really wanted the meatloaf, but for some reason, she didn’t want Patrice to think she was boring. She glanced at Patrice who was just taking a bite of the meatloaf. A drop of gravy sat on her bottom lip. When her tongue snaked out to lap it, Veronica froze like a deer in headlights.

“Ronnie?”

“I’m sorry. I don’t know what’s wrong with me.” She was incredibly embarrassed. Again.

“Don’t be embarrassed. I feel it, too.”

Feel what?

“You do?”

Patrice scooped a bite of mashed potatoes and held it out to Veronica. She opened her mouth and Patrice slid the fork in. The creamy, hot texture of the potatoes and the salty gravy coated her tongue. As she swallowed, Patrice smiled.

“Yes, I do. I didn’t expect it, but it’s there.”

Veronica swallowed.

“Do you feel it?” Patrice’s blue eyes locked on hers.

Veronica’s heart was beating quickly, her palms were sweaty, and she felt the urge to squirm on the vinyl seat.

“Yes.”

* * * * *

After they finished lunch, Patrice hooked her arm through Veronica’s as they walked to the car. She stiffened a bit, but only for a moment. Patrice didn’t want to scare her little

blackbird away, but the attraction was growing every moment she spent with her. It wasn't like her to immediately connect with someone. It was obviously not Veronica's way either. She was like a skittish colt, but within the depths of her brown eyes beat a passion that Patrice could *see*.

It had been more than a year since she'd been with anyone. She had wondered if she'd ever feel that spark again, and here she was, in the middle of nowhere, feeling it for a straight woman. Patrice wasn't one to fight her natural instincts. She would follow them wherever they led.

Even if it was into the arms of Veronica.

* * * * *

When Veronica got home that night, she flipped on the light and flopped onto the couch. She stared at her wedding picture, into her husband's eyes, and wondered for the hundredth time what had happened with Patrice.

She didn't want to say it aloud, but she felt attracted to her. She was bright, sweet, and fun. She made Veronica feel good about herself and about life. Aside from all that, she was gorgeous and sensual. She had an air about her that called to something deep inside her. A part of her that she thought was dead and buried with Orin.

After a time, she got up and went into the bedroom. The drawer to the nightstand was partially open. Even in the soft light from the lamp, she could see the jumble of toys in there, taunting her.

She undressed and brushed her teeth, studying her reflection in the mirror. At forty-two, she'd never had children so any fat was just that. Fat. She could probably lose twenty pounds, but overall, she had a nice figure. Plain brown hair and plain brown eyes. She didn't know what Patrice saw, because Veronica didn't think she was beautiful at all. Not dog ugly, but certainly not beautiful.

Veronica pulled on her nightie and headed for bed. This time, she decided not to fight it. She felt antsy and hot all over. She pulled the nightstand drawer open and found her clit licker, a snazzy little toy that simulated a tongue licking.

With flushed cheeks, she lay down and wasn't surprised to find Patrice's face behind her closed lids.

Chapter Three

Apparently, many folks decided to show up early to practice on the wood lanes. There were more people in the Starlite Lanes than ever before. Marlene was nervous about achieving her perfect three hundred game in the tournament, so Veronica was trying to make her sit down and relax. Not an easy feat since Marlene outweighed her by at least eighty pounds and was probably eight inches taller.

"You're going to kick butt, Marlene."

"I've got three chances to hit my three hundred game. What if I blow it?"

Veronica took her friend by the shoulders and looked into her eyes. "You are the best bowler I've ever seen, even those on TV. You will *not* blow it."

Marlene sighed gustily. "Okay, I know I'm being a pest, and I appreciate you talking me down."

"No problem. That's what friends are for."

Veronica was in a state of frazzled nerves herself, and helping Marlene kept the edge of panic from slicing into her.

"You okay?" Marlene was looking at her with a frown.

The urge to confide in someone was strong, but she hesitated because the whole thing embarrassed her.

“I know there’s something burning a hole on your tongue, so you might as well spit it out.”

Veronica took a deep breath. “You know I got a bowling partner for the doubles, right? Well, her name is Patrice and well ... she’s really beautiful and funny and sweet.”

Marlene’s eyebrows went up. “Go on.”

“Something happened.”

“Okay, now I’m dying to know what’s going on here, Veronica. Are you trying to tell me that you had sex with this woman?”

“No, not that. I just ...”

Marlene leaned forward and locked her gaze on Veronica’s. “You have feelings for her. Itches, inclinations, urges, whatever you want to call them.”

Veronica nodded, relieved that Marlene could understand what she was trying unsuccessfully to spit out.

“And?”

“And nothing! I don’t know what to do, Marlene. I’ve never had feelings for a woman before, and I feel like I’m in a boat in the middle of the ocean with no oars.”

She was confused and desperate and ... excited. Yes, deep down in the pit of her stomach burbled excitement. Something that had been hibernating for five years.

“First thing you need to do is tell yourself it’s okay to feel the way you do. There is no wrong in that.”

“I can try.” Veronica would try, but it wasn’t going to be easy. She kept hearing her mother’s voice in her ear.

"Second thing you need to do is relax. If this is meant to happen, it will happen. Open yourself up to something new and take the ride. You've been closed up for so long, sweetie, I was afraid you'd be in that hole forever."

Veronica swallowed the lump in her throat. She knew she hadn't been living life since Orin died; it certainly wasn't news, but to hear her friend say it was something different.

"I'm sorry."

Marlene gave her a back-cracking hug -- something she'd never done before. Veronica felt the sting of tears in her eyes. Her friends had respected her "no touching" policy without breaking it. Just when she needed it, Marlene was there to give her support.

"Oh, don't you ever say you're sorry for being who you are, Veronica."

"Thank you, Marlene."

Marlene grinned. "No need to thank me. You've already made up your mind what you're gonna do. You just needed me to say go for it. Ride the wave, girl, and see where it takes you."

Ride the wave.

Veronica realized Marlene was right. She hugged her quickly and left her with a surprised expression on her face. It was definitely a day for new things.

"Good luck! I'll be by to watch you!"

Wearing a silly grin, she walked to the snack bar to have lunch with Babs.

* * * * *

Patrice spent the morning at the hotel's pool, drinking water, nibbling on soy crisps, and keeping her distance from Veronica. She hoped it was simply the effect of meeting someone new that had caused her attraction. Giving herself a good chunk of time away from her was a way to test that.

Unfortunately, it wasn't working. Her mind kept drifting back to the color of Veronica's eyes or the way she cocked her head while she was listening or the small baby-fine hairs at the base of her neck.

Hell, she felt like a young girl with a crush rather than a forty-year-old veteran of three long-term relationships and half a dozen one-night stands. In fact, Patrice was tired of playing the game of artifice. Of wearing a mask for other people so they would be comfortable. It was bullshit and she hated it.

When she drove to Espejo, her goal was to have fun and bowl. She'd been a league bowler for a year, since she'd decided she needed to get off her ass and stop feeling sorry for herself. The tournament seemed like an opportunity to spread her wings and meet new people. She certainly didn't intend on meeting someone like Veronica. Someone that made her believe in the magic of love and lust again.

She got up and went back to her room to dress. The bowling lanes were open for tournament practice, and she knew Veronica would be there. Patrice wanted to ask her to dinner.

A tingle of excitement raced through her, and she ran the last twenty feet to her room. Time to shower and get ready. For what, she wasn't entirely sure, but it didn't matter. The sun shone brightly.

* * * * *

Veronica sat at the table behind Marlene's practice lane, giving encouragement with each ball she threw. The first game, she had a 240, the second a 235. The third game was underway and she already had three strikes, and looked good for the perfect game. There was a big cowboy sitting beside her, cheering Marlene on. He introduced himself as Buck, Marlene's partner in the mixed tournament. He had a nice smile and seemed like a nice man. He kept his gaze glued to Marlene. Veronica made a mental note to ask Marlene about Buck later.

A light touch at her shoulder and the smell of Patrice's perfume notched up her pulse until it fluttered madly. She never expected to be in this unique position, but here she was.

Ride the wave.

Veronica looked up to find a smiling Patrice in white top and jeans, accentuating her auburn hair and incredible skin.

"Hey there."

"Hey yourself." Boy, didn't she sound like a repetitious fool.

Patrice sat on the other side of her and slid a Styrofoam cup toward her. "Iced tea."

"For me?"

Patrice raised one eyebrow. "You do like iced tea right?"

"Well, yes, I do, but --"

"No buts. I got myself a hot tea, and I figured you might be parched with the way you've been running around helping folks out." Patrice sipped from her own smaller cup.

In fact, she was thirsty, but she didn't want to leave Marlene. She looked at the cup and the chunks of ice floating in the amber liquid, then smiled at Patrice.

"Thanks. I do need a drink."

Patrice's hand closed over hers and a tingle of excitement danced up her arm. "No worries. We're partners, right?"

Veronica looked down at their hands then up into Patrice's beautiful blue eyes. An invitation was there for her, only for her. If she accepted it, she'd certainly be riding the wave. She pushed aside her doubts, and her mother's voice, and smiled.

"Yes, we are. Partners."

Veronica turned her hand over so they were palm to palm. The moist heat of hers mixed with the cool dryness of Patrice's. Their fingers laced together and suddenly, they were holding hands. Patrice winked and squeezed her hand.

Veronica's body clenched as her slumbering sexuality began to waken. Something was going to happen that night.

"Will you have dinner with me?"

Veronica answered without thinking. "Sure. Why don't we have a drink in the bar and then decide where to go."

Another hand squeeze sealed the date. Once Marlene was done with her final game, Veronica excused herself to go to the ladies room to wash up for her date.

It was a date. No use trying to think of it as anything but a date. She had a date with a woman. A beautiful woman that made her feel special, wanted, and alive. The skip of excitement told her that she was looking forward to it, even if she was a little nervous. Okay, a lot nervous. She washed her hands, then splashed cold water on her face. As she dried off with paper towels, she tried to focus on one minute at a time. If she tried to imagine the entire evening, the blurry blanks put a twist in her tail that she didn't need.

With a deep breath, Veronica left the ladies room and headed for the bar. She waved at Ben, the bartender and looked for Patrice. She found her sitting in the back, in a corner table built for two, sort of behind the jukebox. Her auburn hair glowed pink in the neon. Her legs wobbled a bit but she walked toward her, determined to ride the wave.

Veronica touched Patrice's shoulder and sat down.

"Hi."

Patrice smiled. "Hi. You look refreshed."

"I just washed up a bit. Felt the smoke and grime on me and had to get clean."

Patrice played with the swizzle stick in her drink. "Would you like something?"

"No, thanks. I'm not much of a drinker."

The excitement was there, but everything felt all wrong. Stilted and unnatural. Veronica felt a moment of panic that she'd read Patrice wrong.

"Dinner right? What are you in the mood for?" Her voice was a little shrill and more high pitched than usual.

Patrice leaned forward and placed the tips of two fingers on Veronica's lips. They felt hot, like branding irons.

"You."

Veronica tried to swallow, but her throat had closed up. Patrice cupped her cheek and leaned forward. She saw her coming toward her in slow motion so she closed her eyes and waited. Patrice's lips softly touched hers in a light kiss once, twice. Her pussy twitched and her nipples pebbled.

Veronica let out a shaky breath and opened her eyes. Patrice sat back in her chair, with dilated pupils. She licked her lips as if she tasted Veronica. The charged moment would either make or break them. Veronica reached up to touch her lips, which still tingled from the brief contact.

Patrice watched Veronica's hand then her gaze slid to her breasts. Good thing the black blouse was hard to see in the low light of the bar, otherwise, her excitement would be more than obvious.

"Ronnie?"

Veronica reached out and touched Patrice's lips, which curved into a grin.

"You ready for dinner?"

"I don't think I could eat anything."

Patrice laughed huskily. "I know what you mean. How about we go to a club instead? We can dance, and nosh on vittles there."

"I think that sounds perfect. I know just the place."

Patrice stood and waited for Veronica. She slowly rose and stepped toward Patrice, their body heat mingling like waves on a summer day. She felt the pull between them and wanted more. Veronica laced her hand with Patrice, earning her a smile.

As they walked out of the bar together, no one commented on the two women holding hands, although Veronica noticed a few raised eyebrows. She ignored them with a force of will. They exited the Starlite and Patrice pulled her toward her car.

“Is it okay if I drive tonight?”

“Sure.”

Veronica climbed into the Toyota and buckled her seat belt. Patrice did the same, then put the keys into the ignition.

“I know you’re not normally attracted to women, Ronnie. I want to make sure you know what’s going on.”

Veronica swallowed. “Yes, I do. And you’re right, I’ve never been ... with a woman before, but I know exactly what’s going on.”

Before she could talk herself out of it, Veronica leaned over and kissed Patrice. Once started, it was hard to stop. Like eating a pie made of whipped cream and chocolate. She was delicious. Veronica leaned her forehead against Patrice’s and tried to catch her breath.

“Well, hell, I guess you do.”

“Yahoo, girls! Go for it! You wanna partner?” Two cowboys were walking past the car and hooting and hollering. Veronica felt her cheeks heat even more.

They both laughed then Patrice kissed her lightly and her tongue swiped Veronica’s lip as she pulled away. The bellow of arousal beat in her chest.

“Ready?”

Veronica smiled. “Ready.”

Chapter Four

The Deuce was a popular bar in Espejo. It was really the only clean bar in town. The others attracted crowds of illegals, bikers, or slimy businessmen. The Deuce was a bar you could feel comfortable in no matter who you were. Kind of like that bar in Toby Keith's song.

It was still early on Friday, so the crowd was light, which suited Veronica just fine. Not that she had anything to hide, but tonight was so different, she didn't want an audience. The slow beat of Faith Hill's new single reverberated through the bar; a few couples were dancing by the jukebox. Three tables had various people at them, and four at the bar.

Veronica took a deep breath and walked toward the table nearest the corner. She didn't want anyone sneaking up on them. A bit ashamed of her behavior, she smiled sheepishly at Patrice.

"It's okay. I understand. A small town is a small town."

They sat down and ordered drinks. Patrice wanted a rusty nail, and Veronica ordered a light beer. She wasn't used to drinking and didn't want to do anything stupid if she got drunk.

After they got their drinks, Patrice shocked the hell out of her by asking about Orin.

"Can you tell me about your husband?"

"W-what?"

"If you don't want to, I understand, but," she shrugged. "I figured I want to know if there are any ghosts in your bedroom."

Bedroom.

The mere thought of Patrice in her bedroom was titillating and scary at the same time.

"Um, sure. I can talk about Orin."

Veronica felt herself relaxing as she told stories of her husband, his funny side, his stubborn side, and his romantic side. Patrice asked questions and laughed along with her. The tension in her shoulders disappeared as she drank her beer and talked. Just talked. Most folks didn't want to talk about the dead after they were gone. In fact, it was like a taboo subject for some reason. Veronica felt a lot of bottled up thoughts bubbling to the surface, and after voicing them, felt cleansed. She felt less guilty about being with someone romantically other than Orin.

"How did you know?"

Patrice sipped her second drink. "Know what?"

"That I needed to talk about him."

Patrice shrugged one slender shoulder. "I know what it's like to grieve."

Veronica could see deep in her blue eyes that grief was definitely not a stranger. She reached over and squeezed Patrice's hand.

"Can you tell me about it?"

It felt good to listen as Patrice talked about her last relationship, how it ended badly, and how heartbroken and lost she'd felt. Veronica knew that helplessness well. It was funny how a relationship between a man and a woman, and a woman and a woman could have the same depth of emotions. She hadn't realized, actually had never thought about it. Human beings were the same deep down inside.

"I'm glad you decided to bowl in the tournament."

Patrice smiled and Veronica's arousal reawakened. "Me too."

Just then, Keith Anderson's song "Picking Wildflowers" started playing. It was one of Veronica's favorites.

"Let's dance." She couldn't believe she'd suggested it, but this was such a sexy song. She danced to it by herself at home all the time.

Patrice nodded and they walked the ten feet to the dance floor, decidedly thin with only a few couples shaking their bootys. Patrice was an excellent dancer and moved in unison to the song. Veronica lost herself in swaying back and forth, watching the sensual dance of Patrice's small breasts and hips. She wanted to touch her. She wanted to kiss her. Hell, she wanted *her* period.

The song was about escaping to "pick wildflowers," which really meant going off to get naked and sweaty. As Veronica danced closer and closer to Patrice, her body heated to near boiling. Their pussies came close to touching, and then brushed lightly. Electric sparks buzzed through Veronica. She stepped even closer, throwing one arm around Patrice's back until they were rubbing up against each other. Their breasts and pussies slowly swayed back and forth. Hardened nipples and moist heat mingled to scent the air between them like a natural perfume.

When the song ended, they were both out of breath, but hadn't really danced too hard. It was the arousal, hard and pumping. Veronica's blood rushed madly through her as she let loose the woman inside her who had been hiding in her shell for five years.

In front of God and the entire bar, Veronica grabbed Patrice and kissed her. Their tongues introduced themselves and slowly danced together, sliding and licking, tasting and testing. The sound of clapping dragged her back from the edge of no reason. She opened her eyes and let Patrice go with a huge grin on her face.

"Ronnie, you are more than I expected."

With no apologies to anyone, Veronica smiled then curtsied to the clapping folks around the bar. She looked at Patrice and took her hand.

“Let’s go to my house. I don’t want an audience for the rest of this.”

* * * * *

“Nice house. I like the chairs on the front porch.”

“Thanks. They’re Adirondack style from New York.” Veronica’s voice was a bit shaky.

Patrice didn’t know if she’d simply back out now or go through with it. Patrice couldn’t believe how incredibly turned on she was by her whitebread Ronnie, the little blackbird who wanted to fly but had forgotten how.

“Your flowers are beautiful, too.”

She was trying to put her at ease as they pulled into the driveway, but it wasn’t working. Veronica was as jumpy as an ant on a hot rock, twisting her hands together in her lap. Patrice put her hand on Veronica’s and squeezed lightly.

“You don’t have to do this.”

Veronica took a deep breath, then let it out. “You’re right. I don’t *have* to, but I *want* to.” She turned to look at Patrice and noticed the arousal simmering in Patrice’s soft brown eyes.

“Good. So do I.” Patrice leaned forward and lightly kissed her on the lips, earning a small moan.

“Let’s go inside.”

Patrice agreed wholeheartedly. Five more minutes and her panties wouldn’t be damp, they’d be soaked. They climbed out of the car and walked through the warm spring air to the front door. Veronica fumbled in her purse for the keys, but finally pulled them out. Patrice waited patiently, trying not to show her urgency, but it was there, hovering beneath the surface. She wanted Veronica. Badly.

When they finally got in the house, Veronica didn't turn the light on. The moonlight shone through the front windows, turning the room into a silver palace. Veronica set her purse and keys down on the table beside the door and then slipped her shoes off, which went on a mat beside the door. Patrice mimicked her movements and left her things beside Veronica's.

It was quiet in the house except for the hum of a refrigerator somewhere, and the frantic beating of her heart. A heart that hadn't beat for some time, until the last two days, since Ronnie had landed in her life. Patrice knew it was up to her tonight, to make this special for her new friend, to bring her with her along the journey of discovery. It was her first time, in essence, a virgin. Patrice understood the magnitude of her role and prayed for the strength to go slowly, to savor what would happen.

Patrice took Ronnie's hand and laced their fingers together. She must have understood, because she started walking through the house. They walked through a moonlit hallway until they reached a darkened room. Ronnie let go of her hand and walked into the velvet blackness. In a moment, curtains opened and the silver moonlight joined them once again.

Patrice walked over to her and touched her cheek. Her thumb trailed across Ronnie's soft lips and she shivered. Patrice stepped closer and kissed her. Slowly and deliberately, she teased and nibbled at her lips, licking lightly until Ronnie's breathing grew rapid. Only then did she close the distance between them and wrap her arms around her, pressing their bodies together. The heat between them rose ten degrees as the kiss deepened. On and on they kissed, learning each other's mouths, teeth, and tongues.

Patrice's hands roamed up and down Veronica's curves, feeling the dimple on her behind and the hardened bud of her nipple, weighing the feel of her breast. All enticing and arousing as all hell.

She broke the kiss and let Ronnie catch her breath, then started pulling off the black clothes one by one. She wasn't surprised to find that Ronnie wore black underwear, too. There wasn't anything on her that wasn't black, except for her incredible nipples that stood

straight and proud in the moonlight. She wasn't sure of the color, but they looked to be dark, like raspberries.

Her mouth watered to taste them. She reached out and cupped the ample breasts, weighing them, loving the softness in her hands. She bent down and pulled one nipple into her mouth and felt a shudder course through Ronnie's body.

"Sweet." Patrice whispered. She let the nipple go, then suckled the other until they were both standing proudly, begging for more. She backed Ronnie toward the bed. When her knees hit the mattress, she sat down and Patrice kneeled in front of her on the floor.

"I'm going to go slowly, but you can say stop anytime, okay?"

Ronnie nodded, her brown eyes luminous in the moonlight. Patrice was hanging onto her control by a thin thread, aching to touch her new partner. She ran her hands down her smooth shoulders and arms, then down her legs. After she reached her ankles, she started kissing her way up. Alternately kissing, nibbling, and licking her legs until she reached Ronnie's hips. By then, she was shaking, and Patrice stopped to let her gain control.

"Lay back."

Ronnie did as she was bade; then Patrice spread her legs, inhaling the musky scent of arousal. A throbbing between her own legs reminded her of how much she truly wanted this woman.

Patrice leaned forward and nuzzled her pussy, the soft hair lightly tickling her nose and cheeks. She used her thumbs to spread her lips then blew on the heated skin.

"Oh!"

Patrice smiled and licked her from top to bottom, one long, wide lick that coated her tongue with juices. Ronnie moaned and Patrice was pleased to see her tweaking and pinching her own nipples.

She nibbled on Ronnie's clit while her fingers and thumb started their own rhythm, sliding in and out of her wetness slowly. Patrice's hand crept down to start stroking her own

clit. As she picked up speed, she sucked on Ronnie's clit, swirling it with her tongue and bringing it to a throbbing peak. Ronnie tightened around her fingers and Patrice knew she was close. She added another finger to the mix and sucked on her clit hard until the rush of sweetness and the clenched muscles subsided. Her own orgasm followed closely behind.

"Oh, God, Patrice, I ..."

"Shhhh ..." Patrice climbed up on the bed and lay beside her, stroking her hair, allowing the passions to run their course. She still throbbed and needed and wanted so badly to simply continue, but knew Ronnie had just "popped her cherry" with a woman and needed some time.

After a few minutes of calm, Ronnie leaned over and kissed her. Patrice's heart started beating rapidly again, and her blood sang as it zinged through her. She knew Ronnie could taste her own essence and she deepened the kiss, sharing everything.

"I want to pleasure you, too. Tell me what to do."

Ah, God, how she needed to hear that.

"Touch me."

Ronnie was clumsy, but she was gentle. Her hands skimmed over Patrice's body, touching her nipples, her pussy, and everything in between. It was as if she were touching herself, and that was good. *So good.*

Patrice spread her legs and took Ronnie's hand beneath her own. She showed her how to touch, how to tease, and how to please. Without prompting Ronnie suckled her breast as her hand moved over Patrice's clit in an age-old rhythm that she'd likely used herself thousands of times.

She was too aroused, too close to exploding, and within minutes, an orgasm ripped through her. Her body shook with the pleasure of simply giving and receiving, of having someone to touch in body and in spirit.

After she caught her breath, she wrapped her arms around Ronnie and kissed her again. They snuggled spoon-style and pulled the quilt around them.

* * * * *

Veronica grinned as a soft hand trailed up and down her skin, back and forth, leaving a trail of goose bumps. She savored the feeling of having a warm body beside her, touching her. She wasn't alone for the first time in a long time, either physically or emotionally.

She rolled over and pressed her breasts against Patrice's. Their nipples budded immediately.

"Hi."

Patrice chuckled. "Hi yourself."

Veronica's heart raced as she leaned forward and kissed Patrice's pink lips. She opened her mouth immediately and their tongues danced together, rubbing and stroking. Veronica didn't think it was possible, but she was wet with need already.

The shrill ringing of the telephone nearly sent her catapulting from the bed. Brown eyes met blue and breaths mingled. The answering machine picked up on the second ring.

"Veronica Marie Avery! You pick up the phone this instant!"

Veronica's entire body stiffened, and Patrice pulled back.

Oh, my God. My mother.

"I heard you were KISSING a woman! How dare you? You pick up this phone *this instant!*"

How could she possibly know what Veronica had done from a thousand miles away? Oh God, her stomach roiled and the back of her throat burned.

"What were you thinking? That's just disgusting. Veronica ... I know you're there. You had better pick up the phone."

Patrice was off the bed and pulling on her clothes while Veronica sat and rocked back and forth, trying to block out her mother's voice. Tears pricked her eyes and the full impact of what she had done, what she was about to do, hit her. Hard.

"Veronica! I expect you to call me the very *second* you get this message!"

The phone abruptly cut off and the silence thundered through the house. Blood rushed in her ears, and her mouth was as dry as cotton.

What have I done?

A movement caught her eye and she looked up to see Patrice walking out of her bedroom.

"Patrice ..."

She stopped and her chin dropped to her chest, but she didn't turn around. "No worries, Ronnie."

Without another word, she left. Veronica started crying, great gusting sobs that burst forth like a dam bursting. Five years of grief, heartache, and loneliness refused to be contained any longer.

She fell over on her side, and the sheets absorbed her tears.

* * * * *

Veronica lay in her puddle of self-pity for an hour. She was completely confused and feeling as if a mule had kicked her in the stomach.

What had she done?

She'd had sex with a woman for God's sake. What the hell was wrong with her? She felt odd, itchy, and just completely out of sorts. She'd had sex with men since Orin had died, but *a woman*? Veronica never, ever expected to do this, much less enjoy it so much. God, she felt so ... not herself.

Veronica hopped out of bed and pulled on a skirt and top, minus her bra and panties. Without bothering to brush her hair, she grabbed her purse and the keys to the old clunker in the garage and left the house. The other car was still at the bowling alley, and she needed to get out.

Veronica knew where she was going, even if she didn't admit it. Somehow, some way, she needed validation. She needed to feel that she was still a woman.

When she pulled up to Dean's Den, it was eleven-thirty, and the music thumped against the wooden walls. The parking lot was full of pick-up trucks, motorcycles, and Chryslers like Orin's. The Toyota she was driving was a leftover from her single days, another something she'd never gotten rid of.

She got out of the car and headed inside, determined to find herself a man and have some hot monkey sex. A man, not a woman.

It didn't take long for men to start hitting on her. It was late, and there weren't too many women alone in the bar. She had her pick of five prospective fucks. Two of them she knew and passed over. One had teeth that might give her nightmares. That left two more. They stood beside her at the bar, buying her drinks, helping her to sink into the dark pit of drunkenness.

"C'mon, honey, you wanna dance?" asked the blond one with the green eyes and nicely bulging package in his faded jeans. He was big, perhaps a bit too big, but good-looking in a rough sort of way.

"She ain't dancing with you, Skeet, so go get yourself another girl." The dark-haired one had chocolate brown eyes and an air of menace, like a pirate. His five-o'clock shadow was sexy, too. He was more her size, about five-foot-eight, with just a little beer gut. He would be perfect.

"Fuck you, Brian," the blond one said.

"That's the only action you're getting tonight." The dark-haired one snickered.

Veronica held up her hands, the argument was too much to her over-stimulated mind.

"Enough. Brian, right?" The dark haired one nodded. "You and I need to get to know each other better. Skeet, right?" The blond one nodded. "Maybe next time, okay sugar?"

Skeet shot Brian a look of pure venom before he grabbed his beer and stalked away. Brian's hand trailed up her shoulder and cupped the back of her neck.

"You won't regret this."

Little did he know. She regretted it before she'd even left the house, but it was something she had to do. She pulled him toward the hallway to the restrooms, heat pooling between her legs already. A whole lot of tequila and shattered inhibitions could do a lot to loosen a girl up.

When they got to the dark corner beneath the broken light, Brian grabbed her and pushed her against the wall. He pulled up her legs until she straddled him. A nice firm erection pushed against her pussy and she wiggled against him. His mouth landed on her neck as his hands pulled her shirt up and started kneading her breasts.

I want this. I want this. I want this. Veronica kept a running chant in her head as Brian realized she was going commando.

"Oh, shit, baby, no panties? I gotta get in there."

His big fingers probed inside her, and she was surprised to find herself respond. A zip, a rip, and a snap and Brian was wearing his rubber raincoat and poised at her entrance.

"Wait, I --"

Whatever she was going to say was lost as Brian started fucking her hard. He was all cock and no finesse, banging her against the wall so hard that her head started to hurt. Despite the pain, Brian's cock filled her and it felt good. It should have felt good, anyway. Veronica felt detached from the whole thing, as if she were watching herself have sex.

Brian pulled her bra down and started suckling her nipple. It pebbled in his mouth as it should and Veronica tried so hard to feel something. Anything.

It was over as quickly as it started. With one final grunt, he reached his peak, then leaned his forehead against hers.

“Damn, baby, that was good.”

Veronica didn’t answer. He withdrew and set her down on her feet. He kissed her quickly then ducked into the bathroom. She stood in the shadows, throbbing and wet, until she realized she was half-dressed and standing there like a moron.

Veronica fixed her bra and pulled down her shirt, then quietly left the bar, not caring who saw her, perhaps even hoping they would.

Chapter Five

Patrice drove around for several hours after leaving Ronnie's house. She wasn't sure how she felt, other than hurt and disappointed. She hadn't expected it, the panic and fear in Ronnie's eyes, the crawling sensation on her skin that she'd made a horrible mistake in following her heart instead of her head. The look in her eyes earlier had been devastating. To both of them.

But, alas, she hadn't. Instead, she let her heart take over and ended up getting hurt. She pulled over to the side of the road and rummaged around in the glove compartment until she found what she was looking for. A stale cigarette. Patrice held the cigarette up and stared at it, wanting it so badly that her hand shook.

It had been a year since she'd had a cigarette. A long year, the longest of her life. Now here she was, like an addict, ready to suck on her crutch because of a little heartache from her whitebread Moe.

Patrice broke the cigarette in two and let the tobacco sprinkle all over her jeans. The brown was similar to the color of Ronnie's eyes.

"Dammit!" She punched the steering wheel, then cursed again when she almost broke her finger.

Patrice had always been controlled by her passion and finding an outlet for it was usually easy. Art, in some way, shape, or form. Out here in Podunk, she didn't feel the creative spirit, instead she felt frustrated. She needed to focus on something else. Patrice accessed the GPS and started hunting.

* * * * *

Veronica stood under the hot spray of the shower for over half an hour after she got home. The water washed away her tears, her self-pity, and her anger. Her regret remained. She had spent a lifetime making mistakes, and living with her regrets. She had done it all over again.

The worst thing was, tomorrow was Saturday and she had promised to practice with Patrice at two. How could she? It was going to be so damn awkward. For Pete's sake, she'd had sex with her. How awkward to run into your one-night stand intentionally.

She scrubbed herself clean and washed away all the evidence of the night's sexual adventures, but it didn't matter. She could still feel everything, like ghost's hands and lips on her body. Veronica tried not to freak out about it, but she was having a hard time *not* remembering how Patrice felt.

Even though it was relatively warm, she pulled on her flannel nightie and crawled under the covers with wet hair. She didn't care if it looked like a rat's nest in the morning, she was exhausted. That's when she realized the other pillow on the bed smelled like Patrice's perfume. She pushed it off the bed onto the floor, rolled over, and forced herself to close her eyes.

After a restless night, Veronica woke with a pounding headache and scratchy eyes. She made a face at herself when she saw how crazy-looking she was in the mirror. She ran a brush through her hair, sprinkled some water on it and considered it done. After brushing her teeth and getting dressed, she headed out for a jumbo coffee down at Starbucks. If there was ever a morning she needed it, it was this one.

Veronica passed the hotel Patrice was staying at and kept her eyes focused straight ahead, although something compelled her to turn and look. At the last moment, she glanced over and saw Patrice's SUV. Her heart thumped and her palms grew damp. God, would she always feel like this? Her skin broke out in goosebumps, and her empty stomach roiled as her anxiety came back full force.

Shit.

Why is it that things really seem absolutely the best choice when you do them, but afterward you want to slap your head like Homer Simpson and kick your own ass? She gripped the steering wheel tightly and concentrated on reaching the strip mall and Starbucks. One thing at a time. One minute at a time.

Veronica pulled into the parking lot and was relieved to see Marlene's pick-up parked there. She hopped out and ran inside, looking around for her friend.

"Josie, where's Marlene?" she asked the girl working behind the counter.

"Restroom, I think." Josie was a sweet, dark-haired teenager with a ring in her nose and a tongue stud. She wore dark make-up and way too much jewelry, but she was a nice girl.

"Okay, thanks. Could I get an extra large today?"

As Josie made her coffee, Veronica noticed her hands were trembling.

"Hey." Marlene's voice startled a yelp out of her.

"Sorry! I didn't mean to scare you."

Veronica clutched her chest and closed her eyes. "You have no reason to be sorry, darlin'. I am an absolute wreck." Tears pricked her eyes and when she opened them, they trickled down her cheeks. There must have been something in her eyes because Marlene immediately grabbed her and hustled her over to the corner table.

"Sit there. I'll get your stuff." Marlene went back over to Josie and returned with Veronica's coffee and a chocolate muffin. She grabbed her breakfast from a nearby table and sat down across from Veronica.

“Now, what’s wrong? You look like you just lost your best friend.” Marlene’s green eyes were brimming with worry.

“I just majorly screwed up my life.”

“It can’t be that bad. Here, have some chocolate; it’ll help.” Marlene opened her muffin and pushed a fork into her hand.

Veronica wasn’t hungry, but she took a bite. After a few fortifying gulps of the wonderful coffee, she felt slightly calmer.

“I had sex with her.”

Marlene’s eyes grew as wide as saucers. “You did what?”

“I know, I know. You can’t believe it. Neither can I. I feel so ... weird. Then I went out and screwed some strange guy in a bar.”

Impossibly enough Marlene’s eyes grew wider. “Jesus, Veronica, I thought you were uptight and prissy. What you just told me goes far beyond any backseat fumbling I’ve done.”

Veronica chuckled shakily. “I thought I was uptight and prissy, too. Until I met Patrice ... I never thought I’d, you know, but we did it. Right in my house, in my bed. God, that’s the bed I shared with Orin!”

Marlene held a finger to her lips. “No need to shout it to Dallas, girl.”

“I’m sorry. I just ... I don’t know what to think or feel.”

Marlene squeezed her hand. “I’m sorry, sweetie. I wish I knew what to tell you.”

Veronica took another few swigs of coffee, comfortable in the silence with her friend.

“Did you like it?”

Marlene’s question made the experience explode like a movie in her head. The sensations, the feelings, the pleasure, and the yearning. All over again until her throat closed up and her heart was beating a mile a minute. She took short breaths until her muscles relaxed and she could speak again.

"That's the thing. You see ... I, well ... I did."

"Are you sure we're not on some reality show here? Holy shit, Veronica!"

"You're telling me."

"What are you going to do about it?"

Veronica shook her head. "I don't have any idea. And there's something worse."

Marlene planted her hands on the table. "Okay, I'm prepared now. Shoot."

A laugh burst from Veronica at Marlene's antics. "My mother knows."

"What?" Marlene's shout echoed around the coffee shop earning them at least a dozen stares.

"Shhhh. I don't mean she knows about the sex part, but she knows I kissed her. Somehow." Veronica whispered.

"How the hell would she ... wait a minute, where did you kiss her?"

Veronica's cheeks grew warm. "In the bowling alley bar ... and in the Deuce on the dance floor."

"You know, I think I'm going to hero worship you soon."

Veronica smiled and shook her head. "I have no idea what possessed me to act like that. Now I have to deal with my mother ... and I'm supposed to meet Patrice this afternoon for practice."

"I'm meeting Buck, too. Why don't we go together and bowl next to each other? Would that help?"

Veronica expelled a huge breath. "Yes, that would be great. I wouldn't feel so odd about being alone with her."

Marlene squeezed both her hands. "No problem. I'll be there for you."

* * * * *

For a Saturday afternoon, the Starlite wasn't much busier than normal. The tournament started in less than two days, and the only folks bowling were those getting ready for it and a few teenagers.

Veronica asked Marlene to pick her up so she could get the Chrysler from the parking lot. She didn't want to admit to her *why* the car was still there, but she had a feeling that Marlene knew exactly why.

They pulled up just before two and Marlene's big cowboy partner, Buck, was sitting on the bench outside. He was an enormous man with hands the size of dinner plates and a ready smile. His blue eyes filled with warmth as they walked up to him.

"Lookee here, two beautiful women and only one of me. What ever am I gonna do?"

"Fool. Don't you know Veronica don't even like you? And me, pshaw, you're gonna have to pay me to take me out." Marlene teased.

Buck laughed, a deep, booming laugh that made Veronica smile. He was a nice man, and it seemed that he and Marlene liked each other, which was great news. In a small town like Espejo, it was hard to find someone who didn't know everything about you, including who you slept with.

Veronica's heart beat like a trapped bird in her chest as they walked into the bowling alley. She was beyond nervous; she was scared. Exactly what she was scared of, she didn't want to know, or refused to acknowledge. She barely listened while Marlene and Buck spoke to Jesse, then followed them like a puppet as they walked toward the lanes. Her bag felt like an anvil in her hand as they grew closer and the unmistakable form of a petite redhead came into view.

Patrice looked beautiful. Her black capri pants and red top accentuated her natural beauty, but her eyes were pools of dark blue.

"Hey y'all," Patrice said as she stood to greet them.

Everyone said hello and Veronica mumbled something. She sat down and yanked open her bag, when Patrice's hand touched her, she practically leaped out of her skin.

"I'm sorry, Patrice. I was just startled." Veronica looked into Patrice's eyes and saw her own lie sitting there like a turd in a punchbowl.

"You don't need to be embarrassed or ashamed or even avoid me, Ronnie. I just wanted to tell you that."

Veronica felt shame burning her cheeks as the honesty in Patrice's words cut into her. She was acting like an ass. Patrice straightened and headed toward the alley, but Veronica grabbed her wrist.

"Wait. I ... I'm sorry, Patrice. My behavior has been really shitty, and I've treated you badly. I am an adult and responsible for my own decisions and actions. I've no one to be blaming but myself. You have every right to be angry with me."

Patrice gently extricated her wrist. "I'm not angry, just disappointed. I really like you, Ronnie. I can settle for being friends if you are okay with that."

Tight lines of stress radiated from her eyes and mouth. She was just as upset as Veronica was. She was being a lady about it though, not an idiot.

"Yes, please, since we're a team for the next week, let's be friends. I really am sorry for my behavior, Patrice."

Patrice nodded. "Apology accepted. Now let's see how we bowl together, okay?"

"Sounds good. Let me get my shoes on, and we can start."

A huge weight lifted off Veronica's shoulders. She had been so afraid of how Patrice would act, and yet it ended up being Veronica who acted badly. Now the air was clear between them, yet underneath it all, *something* lurked. A connection that happens when you've been intimate with someone. It can't be broken or removed, but it could be forgotten.

Veronica would try her damndest to forget it, although something told her it would not be easy. In fact, it might be impossible.

* * * * *

Patrice felt brittle. As if the slightest event would crack her into a million pieces. Seeing Veronica again was hard, but being treated like a leper was painful in the extreme. Patrice accepted the apology and offered friendship. What she really wanted to do was head back to San Antonio with her tail between her legs and weep her way through another heartache.

That was what she wanted to do, but she told herself it wasn't going to happen. She was a strong woman, a woman with more backbone than that. It was a one-night stand, nothing more, nothing less. There weren't any feelings to be smashed. It was *nothing*.

That nothing was her partner for the next five days. God help her get through it.

Chapter Six

After the first afternoon of bowling together, the tension between Veronica and Patrice seemed to lessen. Veronica still felt weird, but not scared or nervous, just ... odd and unsettled. They went for ice cream with Buck and Marlene and laughed and talked again. That indefinable connection between them was still there, as if they'd known each other for a long time.

Veronica didn't experience that with anyone else but Marlene, Babs, and Orin. That meant something, she just didn't know what, or she didn't want to know it. As she sat and watched the bees drone around the trash can, Patrice sat down beside her.

"Do you have plans for tomorrow?"

Veronica's stomach clenched and something akin to fear raced through her. Why would she be afraid?

"I don't think so." Veronica didn't meet Patrice's gaze. She kept her eyes forward, but she could *feel* her next to her on the bench.

"I don't know the area, and I thought maybe you could be my tour guide."

Veronica snorted a laugh. "There isn't much to see, Patrice. There's nothing in Espejo but what you probably passed on the way into town."

There was a silence only broken by cars passing by and the murmur of Marlene and Buck behind them.

“Okay, I’m going to be honest,” Patrice sighed. “I thought maybe tomorrow I could paint you.”

Veronica shook her head. “I’m not ready for that, Patrice.” She didn’t want to admit it, but a small part way down inside wanted to pose for her.

“I appreciate your honesty. The offer is still open if you change your mind.”

They rode back to the alley in the backseat of Marlene’s pickup without talking. Veronica could still feel Patrice there, and the sensation was as odd as the last few days. She didn’t want to be aware of her, but she couldn’t seem to stop herself. The next week was going to be the hardest six days of her life.

“Same time tomorrow?” Patrice asked when they climbed out of the truck. “We should practice more.”

“Sure. Sounds good.”

As Veronica headed inside to get her bowling ball from behind the desk, Patrice’s presence continued to walk beside her, even as she was driving away. Like a stubborn little auburn-haired spirit that refused to leave her.

* * * * *

Sunday’s ritual involved visiting Orin. Veronica had done it faithfully, no matter what the weather or how she felt. This Sunday was no exception. Actually, she felt the need to talk to him. She’d been avoiding her mother’s calls, avoiding Patrice, avoiding life. Again.

She drove into Park Ridge Cemetery and parked near the entrance. The walk to Orin’s grave always gave her time to think, both before and after her visit. She walked slowly, remembering everything from the last three days, most particularly the time spent with Patrice.

Veronica didn't understand it. By the time she reached Orin's grave, she was still confused. She'd never thought of herself as "gay" or even having any kind of lesbian fantasies. Yet, here she was, still thinking about a one-night stand with a woman that she had never intended to have happen.

Veronica spent a few minutes pulling up the weeds near Orin's headstone, then set the bouquet of daisies down. He loved daisies, said they reminded him of her. She had a standing flower order with Melissa down at Potpourri Flowers and they were always delivered to her doorstep on Saturdays.

Veronica sat down on the bright green grass and stared at the inscription.

Orin Patrick Avery

Born June 15, 1960, died May 1, 2001

Beloved husband and son

My heart, my soul, my life

Veronica barely remembered ordering the inscription. Somehow she'd put on there her thoughts and feelings instead of a fitting epithet for him. She hadn't realized how selfish she'd been. Monday she would contact Bernard at the monument place to see if he could change the last line. It should read something like "He brightened the world."

He was a very upbeat man, always smiling, always tickling her or kissing her neck. Her throat closed up as she remembered how much she missed him, how much she loved him, and how dark the world had been since he left.

Until now. Until she'd met Patrice. Somehow, some way, she'd brought life back into Veronica's world.

"O-man, I've really screwed things up this time. I don't know what to do about this. I ... I like her a lot but the thing is, I can't imagine myself having a relationship with a woman."

She sighed and pulled one of the daisies out. "I treated her like shit, and it's no one's fault but my own. My mother won't stop calling, and down here, way down in my chest, I miss her."

After she said it aloud, she gasped. "Did I just say that? How could I miss her? I mean, I barely know her."

Veronica started pulling the petals off the daisy. "I mean, it's like when we met. Kaboom! There it was, heart pounding, palms sweaty, butterflies in the stomach. All of it. It was all there."

As the realization hit her, Veronica started weeping silently. She had found something special, something other people never find once, much less twice. Was she going to be a small-minded ass and let that chance slip away? Or would she find the courage to try something new? Something others would shun her for?

As she pulled the last petal off the daisy, Veronica made a decision. Her head said no, but her heart said yes. And her heart had done enough aching in the past five years for a lifetime. It didn't matter if people didn't approve. It didn't matter if she didn't know what the hell she was doing. She wanted a few minutes more of happiness. She meant to have it.

It took another two days of soul searching, but Veronica finally realized she didn't regret what she'd done with Patrice. She regretted what happened afterward, when she froze like a deer in the headlights. Veronica was so incredibly stupid. She had the smallest bit of something special, something rare, and she'd let it go because of her stupid prejudices and her mother's influence.

The quick fuck in the bar did nothing but reinforce the fact that she had made a huge mistake. Not in having sex with Patrice, but in doubting it.

Veronica had spent the last five years living in the shadow of her marriage, protecting her heart from anyone that dared come near her. She wore her black clothes like a suit of

armor. It worked; oh, how it worked. It worked too well. She was so alone that the first time she wasn't alone, she ran like a scared rabbit back into her hole.

The hole was a lonely, cold place to be. Even the heat from the hot shower couldn't alleviate the cold. Veronica stood in the shower until the water turned tepid and she started shivering. She toweled off in the steamy bathroom and padded naked to her bedroom.

In the large cheval mirror, she studied her reflection. Not bad for forty-two. Her breasts were still sort of perky, with deep pink nipples that stood proudly in the air-conditioned room. She was round, not too round, but curvy as a woman should be. There was nothing wrong with her physically. All the shit resided in her head and in her heart.

Veronica picked up the pillow Patrice had used. She picked it up and held it to her nose. It still had a faint scent. It smelled flowery, but not like perfume, more like a shampoo. Sweet and enticing, like Patrice.

Veronica sighed and set the pillow down. She was pitiful, just pitiful. Sitting there on the bed sniffing a pillow. Instead of doing nothing but regretting her actions, she needed to do something to correct them.

She went out to the living room and found her cell phone on the table by the door. She flipped it open and found Patrice's number that she'd stored in there four days ago.

Had it only been four days? Seemed more like four months.

She closed her eyes and pressed Talk on the phone. It rang twice before Patrice's voicemail answered.

"Hi, this is Patrice. I'm either on the phone or in the studio. Leave me a message, and I'll get back to you."

Beep.

Veronica pressed End.

Coward.

She didn't know what to say, truth be told. What could she say? "I was an idiot, please forgive me?" That was lame and leaving it on her voicemail was even lamer. Patrice deserved respect not bullshit.

Veronica stood there staring at her phone, trying to figure out a way to make it up to Patrice, how to salvage the mess she made of things. Inspiration struck, and she dashed into the bedroom to get dressed and dry her hair and plan what she wanted to do.

* * * * *

It was Wednesday afternoon and almost time for the team competition in the tournament. Veronica pulled her bowling ball out of the trunk of her car and hurried inside. She was late and knew Babs would be on her about it. More than likely, Marlene had been practicing for an hour already.

The last three days, she'd practiced each afternoon with Patrice. Twice they even had lunch together beforehand. Veronica was getting to really know Patrice and knew that her decision had been the right one.

Veronica walked quickly inside the Starlite, surprised by how many people were milling around the lobby. There were literally hundreds of people in their little bowling alley. Most were team members, grouped together in their colorful matching shirts. She didn't hear any bowling, which meant she was in time for practice.

She waved at Jesse, who stood behind the counter, watching the crowd with dollar signs in his eyes. Jesse waved back with a huge grin. Good for him. He deserved something special, and this tournament was his shooting star.

She knew they were bowling on lanes thirty-two and thirty-three, so she made her way through the crowd, nodding and saying hello to the people she'd met or whom she knew. Marlene was standing in the corner, very close to Buck who nearly blocked the view of her completely. Veronica stopped and looked at Marlene with her eyebrows raised. Marlene finally noticed her and shook her head.

"It's okay," she mouthed.

Veronica wasn't sure it was okay, but figured Marlene, who was twenty-six-years old, knew what she was doing. She made it to their lanes and sat down to pull her shoes on. When the flowery scent teased her nostrils, she closed her eyes and inhaled.

Patrice.

She turned to find the auburn-haired pixie sitting next to her at the table.

"Hi."

Patrice sighed and set her elbows on the table. "It's been a long couple of days."

Veronica wanted to touch her, but knew she'd screwed things up royally before and wanted to make it right without acting like a lovesick ass.

Lovesick?

"For me too. Patrice ... I'm sorry for any hurt I've caused you. I've acted like an ass."

"No worries, Ronnie. I told you."

"Bullshit."

Oops. Well, she hadn't meant to let that pop out.

Patrice's eyebrow rose. "Bullshit?"

"I mean, it's not 'no worries.' I hurt you, and for that I have been kicking my own butt since Sunday. You are the first, well, person in a long time who touched my heart, and I pushed you away as quickly as I could when adversity stood in front of me."

Patrice's blue eyes softened slightly. "I'm listening."

"I --"

"Time to bowl, Veronica. You're going to have to talk to your friend later." Marlene appeared next to her, already wearing her wrist brace and her hair back in a ponytail. She looked fierce, like an Amazon warrior about to do battle.

The lanes turned on and the pins dropped into the setters. The sound was like an army getting ready for battle.

Veronica looked at Patrice, then took a chance and reached out to touch her hand. “I want to talk later. Please.”

Patrice nodded. “Okay, we can talk later.”

“Will you stay and watch?”

Please stay and be here for me.

“Sure. That’s why I’m here.”

Veronica couldn’t stop the wide grin from spreading across her face. She leaned down and gave Patrice a light peck on the cheek. The surprise in Patrice’s eyes was immediate. When Veronica stood up, she bumped into the Japanese man who had been flirting with Babs earlier that week. She excused herself and he smiled. Veronica grabbed her ball from her bag and headed down into the alley for practice. The knowledge that Patrice sat there watching her bowl made a warm spot deep inside her, giving her strength, courage, and what she needed most, hope.

* * * * *

Marlene bowled like a tiger, pulling their team to a smashing victory over the other team. They had no idea who actually won the team competition, however, since there were eighty teams bowling. The jubilation over their victory, and watching Babs kiss the Japanese man, Jimmy Tanaka, made the mood even more celebratory.

Veronica pulled off her bowling shoes and tucked them into the pockets in her bowling bag when she sensed someone standing near her. She glanced up to find Patrice with a beer, leaning against the table.

“Good games. Y’all bowl well together.”

"Thanks. We complement each other, I think. I'm the wussy girlie-girl on the team, but my high handicap can help sometimes."

Patrice chuckled. "You are not a wuss, maybe a girlie-girl though."

Veronica's heart stuttered when Patrice smiled at her. She was such a beautiful woman, and Veronica knew what lay beneath the orange top and white capri pants. She was surprised to see a butterfly tattoo on her ankle. She had the insane urge to kiss it.

"Can we have dinner together? I really do want to talk to you. And I have something for you."

Patrice nodded. "I want to talk to you, too. Do you know a nice quiet place, no jukeboxes or rednecks?"

Veronica laughed. "I can't promise no rednecks, but I know a nice quiet place. I can drive."

"Sure. Are you ready or do you have to do anything else?"

"I'm ready."

Yes, indeed, Veronica was ready.

Chapter Seven

Patrice took a plastic bag out of her car, then joined Veronica for the ride over to her house in the Chrysler. She left the Toyota at the bowling alley. Veronica was nervous, butterflies-in-her-stomach nervous. She wasn't scared of the unknown anymore, more like she was scared of Patrice's reaction. Veronica knew she was taking a chance and hoped that tomorrow she wouldn't regret it.

There was an awkward silence in the car. Veronica hadn't felt any kind of awkwardness with Patrice up until that point, and it felt unnatural.

"You and your team bowled well."

Patrice's voice was like a shotgun in the quiet car. Veronica squeaked in surprise, which made Patrice laugh.

"I didn't mean to scare you."

"Sorry, I'm just ... nervous."

Patrice touched her knee. "There's nothing for you to be nervous about."

"Says you." Veronica took a deep breath. "Are you still angry with me?"

"No, I was never angry with you. Just ... hurt and disappointed."

Veronica felt a pinch at the truth in her words. She was hurt and disappointed, too. In herself, and her choices. She meant to make better choices so she wouldn't be disappointed in herself anymore. And perhaps find something she'd been missing for a while.

She pulled into the driveway and turned off the car. "Can you wait here one minute?"

"Sure."

Veronica dashed into the house and lit the candles, then went back out for Patrice. She found her leaning against the car with her plastic bag in hand, staring up at the star-filled sky.

"Beautiful night." Veronica's heart was lodged somewhere up near her throat.

"Yes, it is. Is it safe to come in now?"

"Please."

As Patrice walked toward her, Veronica noticed again how lovely she was. The curve of her cheek, the gentle sway of her walk, the very air around her was sensual. A trail of goose bumps marched up Veronica's body, pebbling her nipples and pushing her hunger to the forefront.

Maybe it was because it had been so long since she'd been close to anyone, or maybe it was because she was so damned lonely. Maybe it was neither of those things. Maybe it was just time to find someone special again.

They walked into the house together and Veronica watched Patrice's reaction carefully.

"Holy shit. What did you do today?"

Veronica closed the door behind her and grinned. "I went shopping."

"I can see that. You've gone from frumpy gray to an explosion of color. I can't believe it."

Veronica looked around, pleased with her transformation of the room. Burgundy satin drapes, colorful pillows, a leather ottoman, dozens of candles, and a bunch of carefully placed

decorations made the room warm, almost hot, whereas it was cold before. She'd known it was boring, but hadn't realized how lifeless it was until recently. Until Patrice. Thank God there was a HomeGoods nearby, or she never would have found everything she wanted in one day.

"It's incredible. Lovely. You should be proud of yourself."

"Thanks. I am pretty proud of myself."

Patrice felt the pillow nearest to her. "You surprise me, Ronnie."

"I think I surprised myself."

Veronica went into the kitchen and came back with a bottle of white wine and two glasses and a platter of fruit and cheese. "Would you like some wine?"

"Yes, please." Patrice sat down on the sofa, still running her hand up and down the soft pillow. Veronica's eyes followed the movement, and she forced herself to tear her gaze away. Now was the time to talk, the rest might come later. Patrice nibbled on some cheese and waited.

She poured two glasses and handed one to Patrice. After taking a fortifying gulp, she squashed the butterflies in her stomach and started talking.

"Most of my life has been controlled by others. My mother told me what to say, who to be friends with, what to wear, and who to be. I never realized that people lived differently than that. I went to college at a Christian school, again very controlling. When I finished school, I came home and lived at home and worked as an accountant for my father's company."

Another gulp of wine.

"I didn't meet Orin until my parents approved of him. We had exactly six dates before he proposed, then a year later, we married. I never even went beyond a goodnight kiss until our wedding night. I was very blessed ... Orin was patient and wonderful. He taught me how

to love, how to be affectionate, and open. When he died, I felt like my life had ended, too. Everything was so dark.”

Veronica finished her glass of wine and poured another.

“I forced myself to work, to eat, to bowl with my friends, but I wasn’t alive. Does that make sense?”

“I can’t say I’ve felt that depth of pain and grief before, but I understand.” Patrice’s blue eyes were full of sympathy.

“I didn’t realize how dark my life was, how low I had sunk, until I met you. You showed me what it’s like to live again. For that, I hurt you, treated you disrespectfully, and I can’t tell you how sorry I am. I also disrespected myself and the experience we shared.”

Veronica took a deep breath and let it out. “Wow, that was hard.”

They both laughed.

“Can you forgive me?” Veronica didn’t realize she was holding her breath until Patrice answered.

“Of course, Ronnie. I think perhaps you were more confused than anything. I know you didn’t mean to hurt me.”

Veronica’s heart leapt. “Oh, my God, I’m so glad.”

Patrice smiled. “Me, too.”

“There’s something I need to do. I’ll be right back, okay?”

Patrice nodded. Veronica leaned forward and kissed her quickly, then dashed from the room. It only took her a minute to change into the slinky red lingerie, then she walked back into the living room and watched Patrice’s reaction carefully. She wasn’t disappointed.

Patrice’s eyes widened and her tongue snaked out to swipe her lips. “You keep surprising me Ronnie.”

Veronica smiled. “I never had anything like this before. I ... wanted to feel sexy.”

Patrice set her wine glass on the leather ottoman and stood, then walked toward her. Veronica's heart beat like a jackrabbit. When Patrice reached her, she slowly stroked her hand up and down Veronica's bare shoulder. The caress notched her arousal that much higher.

"You look sexy. And beautiful."

Veronica never felt sexy or beautiful, but to hear them spoken so honestly made her feel them for the first time in her life. She stepped forward and cupped Patrice's face. As she lowered her lips, she closed her eyes and felt the softness, the suppleness of Patrice's lips. She licked back and forth across her lips, tasting the wine, the excitement, the essence of Patrice. She throbbed low and deep in her belly.

"Teach me."

Patrice smiled against her lips. "Never thought I'd be anxious to be a teacher."

"Mmmm, I want to learn."

Patrice took her by the shoulders and looked her in the eyes. "Yes."

They walked into Veronica's bedroom, hand in hand, and Veronica smiled again when she heard Patrice whistle. She had transformed her bedroom into a pasha's palace. Complete with a circle of cushions on the floor, flickering candles, and gauzy drapes on each bedpost.

Veronica pulled off Patrice's shirt, then cupped her breasts, rubbing her thumbs along the erect nipples. Veronica reached behind Patrice and unhooked her bra, slowly slipping it off her shoulders.

"They're the color of peaches."

Veronica leaned down and slowly licked each nipple, surprised by how addictive the soft skin was.

"I don't think you need many lessons, Ronnie. You're doing just fine." Patrice's voice was breathless. Veronica felt a surge of excitement that she had caused it.

Veronica unbuttoned and unzipped Patrice's pants, then slid them down her hips, revealing a pair of pink lacy panties. She pressed her mouth against Patrice's heat and breathed in her scent.

"Teach me."

Patrice pulled her up and kissed her deeply, tongues dueling and twisting, so sensual, so hot. Veronica's heart beat so hard against the red satin she thought it might burst from her chest. Together, they managed to pull off the red negligee, and they were both nude in moments. They lay back on the bed, still kissing, rubbing, and feeling each other from head to toe.

With Patrice's soft hands guiding her, Veronica touched her partner all over. She kissed and nibbled her way around Patrice's neck, down her soft shoulders, then her nipples. Patrice told her what she liked best, and Veronica listened and learned. She bit lightly, earning a moan from Patrice.

"You're a quick learner."

Veronica smiled and switched breasts, pleasuring Patrice until her nipples were proud and as hard as diamonds. Veronica slid her hand down Patrice's belly until she reached her downy curls. She knew how to pleasure herself, so she did the same to Patrice, sliding and rubbing her clit, then pushing her fingers up inside her while her palm continued to circle her clit.

"Oh, yeah, that's it." Patrice pushed her heels into the bed and Veronica was inspired to continue. In for a penny, in for a pound. She lowered her head and tentatively licked Patrice's pussy. She almost came off the bed and knocked her leg into Veronica's shoulder.

"You keep surprising me."

Veronica laughed. "I'm trying to. Please let me."

Patrice nodded and Veronica lowered her head again. The musky smell and the tang of Patrice's pussy inspired Veronica to lap at her while her fingers slid in and out of her slick hole. She suckled her clit and drew another moan from Patrice.

"Hell, girl, you are going to make me come."

Veronica's juices were running down her leg as her own excitement built. She suckled, nibbled and lapped at Patrice. She felt her tighten around her fingers and then she shouted "Ronnie!" as she convulsed and quivered, coming into Veronica's mouth. The sweetness of her come surprised Veronica, and she continued licking her pussy until Patrice put one hand on her head.

"Come here, you."

Veronica climbed back onto the bed and into Patrice's arms. They kissed while their hands roamed.

"That was incredible." Patrice's blue eyes were full of languorous arousal. "I want to pleasure you, too."

Veronica smiled. "We've got all night."

"Do you have any toys?"

Veronica felt a blush creeping into her cheeks, but she responded honestly. "A drawer full."

Patrice's auburn eyebrows rose. "Another surprise. Can I see?"

Veronica nodded. They crawled over to the nightstand and she slid open the drawer. Patrice whistled appreciatively.

"My, my, what nice toys you have."

"Thanks. I, uh, started collecting them and well, now I have a lot."

Patrice grinned. "Let's see how many we can use in one night."

Veronica's heart soared right along with her arousal. Her pussy throbbed at the thought of what lay ahead. Together, they would explore each other, their bodies, their hearts, and regain something they'd both lost. Life.

Chapter Eight

The warm sunshine spilled all over the bed and the two women sleeping within it. When Patrice woke, she snuggled deeper into Veronica. It was nice to wake up with someone, especially someone that you really liked. She had been completely surprised by Veronica the night before, by her actions, her new nightie, and especially her newfound courage in bed.

The sex toy collection was especially surprising. Who would have thought her little whitebread straight girl had such a hankering for naughty things? She grinned into the pillowcase and rolled over. Veronica was still sleeping, her brown curls mussed on the coral sheets, like a mermaid on an oyster shell.

She kissed her cheek lightly then hopped out of bed, determined to find some way to make coffee. Fortunately, it only took five minutes to locate the coffee and filters. She started the coffee maker, then looked in the fridge for something to cook for breakfast. Veronica's refrigerator was like her lifestyle until now, Spartan and extremely organized. Eggs in the little egg thingy that no one ever used. Cheese and milk lined up like soldiers and fruit carefully set in the fruit drawers. Patrice grabbed the eggs and cheese, and a grapefruit and closed the fridge.

She yelped when she found Veronica standing in the doorway with a pink robe and a smile.

“Good morning.”

Patrice grinned. “Good morning.”

“Do you always make breakfast in the nude?”

Patrice looked down and laughed. “I forgot I was nude. Do you want me to change?”

Veronica stepped forward and cupped Patrice's breasts, her fingers tweaking the nipples into points and sending shafts of arousal to her pussy.

“No, I like this outfit.”

“You're getting awfully brave, Ronnie.”

Veronica took the food out of Patrice's hands and set it on the counter, then drew her into her arms and kissed her like no one else on the planet existed. Patrice moaned and kissed her back, loving the feel of the nubbies on the pink robe as they rubbed on her bare skin.

“We'll never get to breakfast this way.” Veronica chuckled against her lips.

“Mmmm ... I want you for breakfast.”

Before Veronica could react, Patrice knelt between her legs and nudged them open. She could smell her arousal and her own pussy heated. Patrice fastened her mouth on Veronica's clit and gave her the ride of her life on her tongue. She didn't let up when Veronica tugged at her hair and grabbed the refrigerator door. She suckled and bit and tasted until Veronica came like a tornado, clenching and gasping, shaking against Patrice's mouth. Patrice gave her gentle licks until the storm had passed then stood and kissed her.

“God that was incredible, Patrice. I can't ... it was ...”

Patrice hugged her tightly. “No worries, Ronnie. I understand.”

Veronica was trembling when she pulled back and looked at Patrice with her soft doe eyes.

“I think I like waking up with you.”

“Me, too.” Patrice hoped there would be more mornings together, but she wasn’t ready to say it out loud.

Veronica smiled. “Let’s eat so we can get to the alley and practice before the competition. I’ve got quite an appetite.” She waggled her eyebrows and Patrice laughed.

“Okay, you crazy girl. Make some eggs while I get some clothes on.”

Veronica squeezed Patrice’s ass and her tinkling laughter followed Patrice as she went back to the bedroom for her clothes. The sound made her smile that much broader.

* * * * *

They ate omelets and drank coffee in the sun-filled kitchen nook. Veronica couldn’t remember the last time she’d done that. Most days she ate in front of the TV or in the car. The table sat unused, as had most of the rest of the house.

“I have something for you.” Patrice wiped her mouth on the napkin and grinned mischievously.

“You do?”

“Yes, and it’s a surprise so you’ll have to close your eyes.”

Veronica grinned back. “Oh, I love surprises.” She closed her eyes and held out her hands. A soft kiss landed on her lips. “Nice surprise.”

“That’s not it. Hang on.”

Veronica heard the rustling of a plastic bag.

“Okay, open your eyes.”

Veronica opened them to find Patrice holding a shirt and capri pants on a hanger. The shirt was dandelion yellow with turquoise and orange beads sewn in a circular swirl in the middle. The pants were bright orange.

"Wow."

Patrice grimaced. "You don't like them. I bought colorful clothes because the black makes you look ... well, sort of like a little blackbird. With your coloring, bright colors would look so wonderful. See, I wanted to give you something that you didn't have."

Veronica stood and took the hanger from Patrice's hands. "I love them."

"Don't say that to patronize me."

"I'm not patronizing you, Patrice. I love them. I sort of got into the habit of wearing black and ... it became a crutch. I wanted to wear colors, but it seemed like the longer it went on, the harder it was and ... well I just kept hiding in my widow's weeds." Veronica hugged Patrice tightly. "Don't worry. You gave me something I didn't have."

Patrice stepped back after a moment and wiped her eyes. "Whew. I need to go back to the hotel to shower and change."

"You don't want to shower here?" Veronica's pulse jumped as soon as the words left her mouth.

The moment hung between them, suspended. Patrice's eyes darkened and she licked her lips. Veronica followed the movement with her eyes.

"Are you sure?"

"Yes."

"I still don't have any clean clothes." Patrice was already following Veronica out of the kitchen and back into the bedroom.

"You can borrow something black."

Patrice laughed and Veronica's chest lightened. She was making fun of her own widow's weeds, her prison for five years. It felt like an oppressive weight had just been lifted.

When they got to the bathroom, Veronica went in first and turned the water on. She turned around and unbelted the pink robe, letting it pool at her feet.

Patrice slipped off her clothes and stepped toward Veronica. "I love the color of your nipples. They're like raspberries."

Veronica checked the water temperature, then turned the shower head on. She held open the curtain. "After you." She followed Patrice into the tub then pulled the white curtain into place. Patrice stood under the spray, her arms hugging her middle, staring at Veronica.

"I've never taken a shower with anyone before." Veronica admitted.

Patrice grinned and opened her arms. "Come here and get warm."

They cuddled together under the hot spray, stroking and tantalizing each other. After wetting their hair, Patrice took shampoo and washed Veronica's hair. Her strong fingers and light scratches felt wonderful. Veronica purred and leaned back into Patrice's touch.

"Feel good?"

"Mmmm ... heavenly."

"Turn around and rinse."

While Veronica rinsed her hair, Patrice quickly shampooed hers, then they switched places, with a few bumps and a nervous giggle from Veronica.

Veronica watched Patrice rinse her hair, the soap and water sliding down her perfect body like a lover's hands. Veronica put some shower gel in her hands, eager to be that lover and those hands. Patrice opened her eyes and smiled knowingly at Veronica, then moved out of the spray of the water and took a handful of shower gel herself.

Veronica started soaping Patrice's body, letting her hands roam up and down while Patrice did the same to her. Soap soon covered both of them as they rubbed against each other, moaning, caressing, and teasing. Slippery fingers teased equally slippery nipples while thighs provided a slope for eager pussies to ride.

They kissed, tongues dancing as their bodies did. It was the most sensual moment of Veronica's life. She was aroused to a point that an orgasm would probably make her black out. Her nipples were so sensitive that even the bubbles felt like a caress.

She'd never known. *She'd never known* this passion, this soft, all-consuming passion existed. She would get on her knees and thank Marlene for making her sign up for the doubles tournament. For giving her the key to unlock the door to life.

They moved back under the water and used their hands to continue to tease as the water sluiced off the soap. Soon slippery skin was slightly tacky and the hot water was turning warm.

Veronica sighed and looked Patrice in the eye. "Looks like I need a bigger water heater."

Patrice laughed. "Next time, we'll do it at my place."

Next time.

Would there be a next time? Or was this going to end as quickly as it had begun? Did she want it to end? Or did Veronica want to continue down the road to see just how far she would get?

Veronica switched the water off, then reached out to grab two peach-colored towels from the rack above the toilet. They dried each other off slowly, licking and nibbling at each dry spot they made. By the time they were dry on the outside, Veronica was wet with need. Patrice seemed to understand. She backed Veronica to the corner of the tub and nudged her legs apart. She positioned her thigh on Veronica's throbbing pussy and lay her hot pussy on Veronica's leg.

"Let's take a morning ride."

Veronica cupped Patrice's breasts and pinched the nipples while Patrice laved and suckled at hers. They rocked back and forth, pleasuring each other, clits rubbing back and forth until they were erect nubbins of pleasure. Veronica felt her orgasm rolling in.

“Oh, my God, I’m coming, Patrice.”

Patrice bit down on her nipple and increased her rhythm, bringing them both to a crashing climax. Moans of ecstasy echoed around the room. Veronica was breathing heavily, and Patrice leaned against her, limp as a noodle.

“Boy, am I glad I could take a shower at your place.”

Veronica laughed. “Me, too. I’ll never think of the morning shower the same way again.”

Patrice lifted her head up, droplets of water clinging to the wavy ends of her auburn hair. “Neither will I.” She stood straight and kissed Veronica deeply. Finally pulling away with one last kiss while leaving a piece of her heart with the brunette in her arms.

* * * * *

“Do you want to meet back here in an hour?” Patrice got out of the car at the Starlite lanes by her car. She needed to go back to her hotel and change.

“Sure. I’ll wait outside for you on the bench.”

Patrice kissed her, then whistled as she headed to the car. Veronica grinned and waved as Patrice headed off down the road.

Veronica had an hour. She meant to make the most of it. She turned the car off and pulled her cell phone out of her purse. First things first; she had to talk to her mother. After dialing the familiar number, she waited for her to pick up.

“Hello?”

“Hi, Mom.”

“It’s about time you called, young lady.”

“Mom, I’m forty-two years old. I think you can stop calling me young lady.”

"I will never stop calling you that. Now, what in tarnation is going on out there? I heard from no less than three people that you were kissing a woman. Tell me it's a short man without facial hair?"

Veronica took a deep breath. Now or never. The rest of her life was waiting.

"No, it's a woman. Yes I was kissing her. I really like her, Mom. She's a sweet, funny, smart lady and ... I really like her."

The silence on the other end of the phone went on forever, broken occasionally by the crackle of the phone lines.

"That's disgusting. I can't believe you would call me to tell me that you have turned lesbian!"

"I'm not 'turning' anything, Mom. I am simply following my heart. It tells me that Patrice is the next stop in my journey."

"Ha! What kind of drivel is that? You sound like a greeting card."

Veronica sighed long and hard. "Mom, I've spent most of my life letting you push me around and telling me what I needed or didn't need. Now I'm taking back control, and it starts here and now. If you can't accept the fact that I want to be with Patrice as a lover, then so be it. I hope you can, because I'd hate to lose you over this. I'm going to hang up now. When you're ready to talk, call me. I'll be waiting."

Veronica pushed the End button with a shaking finger. She'd done it. Holy shit and crackers. She'd just told her mother exactly what she was thinking without hedging, or lying, or denying. She had freed herself from the yoke of Eunice Bernard! A small part of her mourned for the tear in the relationship that she had made, but an even larger part of her rejoiced. She was long past the age where the apron strings should have been snipped.

Veronica got out of the car and did a silly little dance and whooped like a little kid until she was breathless. She climbed back in the car in time to hear the phone ringing.

"Hello?"

“I just wanted to say thanks.” Patrice’s sweet voice came through loud and clear.

“What are you thanking me for?”

“For taking a chance on me, on us. For stepping outside your comfort zone and seeing what would happen.”

Veronica smiled out the window. “The same goes right back atcha, Patrice. I think we both took a chance.”

“See you in a while.”

“Okay.”

This time when she hid the End button, Veronica was grinning like a lunatic. She had a few errands to run before she had to meet Patrice, so she turned on the car and headed out.

Chapter Nine

Veronica sat on the bench outside the alley waiting for Patrice. It was a beautiful day and the birds were chirping. Squirrels ran around the trees like mad-cap adventurers, and all seemed right with the world.

She wore her new clothes, the orange capri pants and the yellow top. She had also gone and bought a pair of strappy sandals that were presently cupping her feet nicely. She also bought some dangly earrings and a new purse. A mini-bag that fit right under her shoulder. It was bright green with a Hawaiian flower print on it.

It was an explosion of color for her. More color than she'd seen, worn, or owned for five years. It was almost blinding, but it was also comfortable. Like something she'd been missing and had just found again.

Veronica saw Patrice's SUV pull up and she stood up. When Patrice got out, Veronica laughed to see her wearing the exact same outfit. Bowling uniforms! Patrice must have hunted to find a matching outfit for Veronica in the right size. The magnitude of that particular piece of information made her heart clench. No one had ever gone out specifically to shop for her like that. Oh, Orin had given her flowers or a nice bracelet or some other sweet gift, but not like this. It was special.

When Patrice came toward her, blue bowling bag in hand, Veronica realized her bowling bag was even black and vowed to buy a newer, brighter one, and new bowling shoes. There were some perky lavender ones in the pro shop. She smiled at Patrice while her silly heart did a pitterpat.

“Nice outfit.”

Patrice laughed. “I wanted it to be a surprise.”

“It is.” She pulled Patrice into a hug and whispered. “Thank you.”

“You are more than welcome, sweetie.”

Veronica kissed Patrice lightly, but it turned into a deeper kiss. Lips slid softly against each other, suckling and rubbing.

“Well, I have never seen anything of the like in all my life!” Melissa’s screeching tones scratched at Veronica’s ears. She looked into Patrice’s blue eyes and silently told her she’d handle it. Patrice nodded and stepped back.

Melissa was one of the elite in Espejo. One of the perfect people with blonde hair, perky boobs, a nice tight ass, and all the money to keep it all like that for the rest of her life. She was younger than Veronica by about ten years, and once upon a time, Veronica even babysat her. Melissa never grew out of the brat phase.

“You have no call to be disrespectful to me, Melissa.” Veronica felt a power surging through her, giving her the courage to not accept any shit thrown at her.

“Humph. I don’t call that disrespectful, I call it honesty. I am going straight inside and calling your mother.”

That’s when Veronica knew who had called her mother a couple of days ago. It was as obvious as the white enamel on her teeth.

“Excuse us, Patrice.”

Veronica grabbed Melissa’s arm in an iron grip and forced her to walk fifteen feet away.

"Let go of me, Veronica."

She gladly let Melissa's arm free.

"You listen to me, without interrupting."

Melissa's mouth opened but Veronica raised her hand and magically, Melissa shut up.

"You are not the pillar of society you'd like people to think you are. You cheat on your taxes. Don't even bother to deny it. I've done your taxes for at least four years and both you and Bob lie like cheap rugs. A nose job is not medically necessary no matter how you try to twist it."

Melissa blushed furiously and touched her nose.

"And writing off the ten thousand dollars you lost in Vegas on your girls' weekend as a business expense? Please don't even bother to try to explain that. You don't even have a job, so you can't possibly have business expenses. Melissa's Meanderings, right? Your so-called travel journal? You've probably never written a word of it."

"Just because it's not published doesn't mean I didn't write anything," Melissa whined.

"I said, don't interrupt! You were disrespectful to my friend Patrice and to me. Whom I choose to like or kiss is none of your damn business, and I don't appreciate you judging me. You are in no position to judge anyone. Everyone has skeletons in their closet. You owe both of us an apology, and if you choose not to, don't forget that I know where your skeletons are hidden." Veronica pointed her finger at Melissa and was surprised to find herself trembling with anger.

"I ... fine, then. Let's get it over with."

Veronica could have fallen over in surprise. Not only had she told someone off for the first time in her life, she felt good about it.

They walked back to Patrice, and Melissa stood silently as Patrice rose from the bench. Veronica poked Melissa in the arm and she jumped a country mile. Her cheeks were blazing with fire and she stared at the ground beneath her perfectly white shoes.

“Okay, fine. My apologies to both you *ladies*.” After the not-so-heartfelt apology, she gave them her back and went into the alley with her nose in the air.

“What did you say to her?” Patrice asked.

Veronica shrugged. “I helped her see the error of her ways.”

Patrice snorted. “I’m sure you did. That one reminds me of a piranha.”

“With sharp little teeth.” Veronica was glad Melissa hadn’t fought her on the apology. It really was none of her business; however, Veronica didn’t like threatening anyone. She felt a bit like a lioness.

“Are you ready to go inside?” Patrice asked.

Veronica took a deep breath and willed her quaking nerves to relax. That confrontation had surely heated her up some. “Yes, I sure am.”

They linked their arms and walked into the alley together. Veronica spotted Babs at the registration desk so they got on the line to register for the doubles tournament.

When they registered, Babs was her usual self and exclaimed up and down about Veronica’s colorful clothes. She told Veronica she was beautiful and hugged her. It was Babs’s way of telling her she loved her, and it made Veronica’s throat close up with emotion. She’d never realized how much her friend meant to her, how much she had supported her and put up with her widowhood quirks.

After they registered and showed their sanction cards, Patrice and Veronica headed to the snack bar to see Marlene. The great big cowboy with the curly light brown hair and blue eyes was leaning against the counter with a soda. Marlene was smiling at him, and Veronica was surprised to see that she was flirting, too. The last time she’d seen them, they’d looked ready to tear into each other. Interesting development.

“Hey, Veronica!”

“Hi, Marlene. I wanted to come by and say hi.”

Marlene came around the counter and was grinning from ear to ear. She went up to Patrice. "I'm glad to see you two together again."

Patrice smiled. "Thanks. I'm pretty glad, too." She winked at Veronica.

Marlene turned to the man at the counter. "You remember Buck Miller, my mixed partner for the tournament?"

"Ladies." He inclined his head and tipped an invisible hat.

Veronica smiled and said hello.

"Of course we do. I meant to ask, where are you from, Buck?" Patrice asked.

"Up near Wichita Falls."

"Ah, a flatlander, then," Patrice teased.

Buck chuckled. "Guilty as charged. What about you?"

"San Antonio."

While Patrice and Buck discussed the best restaurants in San Antonio, Marlene pulled Veronica aside. She looked her up and down and grinned widely.

"You are wearing colors!"

Veronica grinned. "I know."

"You look beautiful. You're ... glowing somehow. Sparkling from the inside out! I take it you worked out your dilemma about Patrice?"

"I followed my heart, Marlene. I think I've decided that love sneaks up on you, and it doesn't care what shape or size or even gender you are. It just ... happens." That was as close to the truth as she could be. The rest was still somewhat blurry and she wasn't sure what was going to come next.

"Love? Are you in love with her?"

Veronica shrugged. "I don't know, honestly. I do know that I like her, a lot. I hope that we can see each other again after this week is over, but I don't know. We haven't talked about it yet."

Marlene hugged her tightly. "I'm just glad you followed your heart. You look ... happy."

"I am happy. For the first time in a long time, I'm no longer in the shadows. I discovered something I'd been missing ... Life." That was exactly it. She felt alive.

"It agrees with you, sweetie. Are you coming to my party tomorrow night? And bringing Patrice, I hope."

Veronica squeezed Marlene's hand. "I'll be there."

* * * * *

Patrice and Veronica bowled as if they'd been bowling together all their lives. Like a well-oiled machine, they slapped hands to share good luck, and bumped their fists to get rid of the bad luck. They weren't the best bowlers in the world, but they worked well together. As a team.

It was obvious to everyone that there was a personal relationship between them, but no one said anything. Patrice noticed a few raised eyebrows, but chalked it up to ignorance and not malice. That blonde, Melissa, seemed to be the only bitchy one, and she kept her distance from them down on her lane with an equally blonde goddess named Maya. Small towns or big cities, there were always people like Melissa and Maya who passed judgment on others.

After the bowling was over, Veronica invited her to go for ice cream. They jumped into Patrice's truck and headed down to the Dairy Queen. They laughed when they discovered that Veronica loved chocolate, but Patrice liked vanilla. Patrice thought she'd rip a seam she laughed so hard when Ronnie teased her about being a vanilla girl.

They sat on a bench under a red and white umbrella and ate their ice cream cones. Bees droned around them, and traffic whizzed by on the road, but it was peaceful. Very peaceful. Patrice felt so comfortable with Veronica, it was a bit scary. She didn't want to jinx it or push too hard for something that would never go beyond a week long fling, but she didn't want to say goodbye either.

"I plan on going back to San Antonio Saturday."

Veronica froze in mid-motion, a drop of her chocolate ice cream dripped onto her hand. Her brown eyes were wide with surprise. "What?"

"I'm sorry. I should have told you earlier, but ... I honestly didn't expect this thing between us to develop."

"Is there a thing between us? Truly?"

From any other person, Patrice would take that as a snide comment. From Veronica, it was a simple question from her heart.

"Yes, there is. Can you feel it?"

"I can. I was hoping it wasn't one-sided or that I was imagining more than what there was."

Patrice bit her ice cream cone. "No, you weren't imagining things, and it's definitely not one-sided."

"Good. So what do we do about it?"

Patrice felt unsure of that herself. "For now, I think we just play it by ear, you know? We have each other's numbers and e-mail. We will not lose touch with each other. I promise."

Veronica nodded, but her eyes were as uncertain as Patrice felt.

* * * * *

They ate Mexican food until they couldn't move, with margaritas to wash it down. They giggled and swapped stories about their childhoods and deepened the bond between them. Underneath it, Veronica felt the pinch of Patrice leaving Saturday. She tried not to think too hard about it, but it lurked back there.

"Are you okay?" Patrice stood beside the table as they got ready to leave.

"Yeah, I'm okay. Just ... thinking."

Patrice held out her hand and smiled. "Don't think too hard. We'll see each other soon, right?"

Veronica felt like what they had was slipping through her fingers, and she didn't know how to grab on to it. Patrice sat back down and pulled out a folded paper from her bag and handed it to Veronica.

Veronica looked at the paper with confusion, so Patrice gestured with her hand. "Open it."

Veronica opened the paper and read it twice before she looked at Patrice with a spark of hope and something else in her heart. "Is this a map to your house?"

"Yep. I used that map site online this morning to create a route from your house to mine."

There was a moment or two of silence while Veronica stared at the paper again. "You're giving me a map to your house because you want me to visit you?"

"Is that so hard to believe?"

"Well, yes. I was hoping we wouldn't say goodbye forever, but I wasn't expecting ... this. I'm overwhelmed." Veronica's eyes began to tear up.

"Don't cry, honey." Patrice wrapped her arms around Veronica and simply held her. "Will you come visit me?"

Veronica pulled back and cupped Patrice's face. "Are you kidding? Is next weekend too soon?"

"No, it's not too soon."

Veronica felt a well of relief and joy surge through her. She didn't like to put her heart on the line, which is one reason she didn't do it very often. Patrice's reaction was unexpected but welcome. "Fantastic! We can go shopping for new clothes."

Patrice laughed. "It's a long drive though."

Veronica smiled. "I'm not worried about it. I've already come a long way, a few hundred miles, or even a thousand miles is a short trip. Thank you for giving me this, for inviting me."

Patrice kissed her softly. "You're welcome."

The unknown was still gray, but Veronica knew that Patrice had put her heart on the line the same as she had. They'd explore the relationship that had built over the last week and, hand in hand, find out where it led. Together.

They made it back to Veronica's house without tearing each others clothes off, but it was close. Veronica felt an urgency, a need to be with Patrice, to touch her and be touched. They closed the door and immediately slammed together with their lips exploring, sucking, and kissing until Veronica was nearly breathless.

They stumbled into the bedroom, removing clothes as they went until by the time they were by the bed, they were nude. The heat of Patrice's skin was hot enough to scorch Veronica's hands as they roamed up and down her body.

"God, you feel good." She whispered against her collarbone.

"Not as good as you're making me feel." Patrice chuckled as her hands caressed and tweaked Veronica's nipples.

"Same here."

They laid down on the bed together, a tangle of arms and legs. That night there was something different about their loving. Perhaps it was because there had been a promise made in their hearts. Veronica knew there was something special about their relationship,

and to know that Patrice felt the same way was enough to send her heart soaring. She'd never expected to feel this way about anyone again, and certainly not a woman. Yet here she was, in her arms, more aroused than she could ever remember being.

Patrice fastened on to Veronica's breasts and started licking, nibbling, and sucking while her hand slowly circled her clit. Veronica could only reach Patrice's breasts so she pleased those peach nipples while she floated in the sea of rapture.

"Oh, God, that feels so good." Veronica was surprised that her voice was so husky with need.

"Mmmm ... tastes good, too." Patrice switched nipples and two fingers slid into Veronica's wetness, pumping in and out of her at a maddening pace.

"Faster."

"Pushy, aren't you? You'll just have to be patient."

"I don't want to be patient."

Patrice chuckled. "Too bad. Anticipation heightens the pleasure."

Veronica didn't know if it were true or not, but her pleasure couldn't get much higher. She pushed against Patrice's hand and clenched at the wave of pleasure that shuddered through her.

"Would you like to try something new?" Patrice bit her nipple and she jumped.

"Yes. Oh, God, yes."

"It's called a sixty-nine. Do you know what that is?"

Veronica nodded while her heart beat madly. She knew exactly what a sixty-nine was. She'd never tried it, but the thought of doing that with Patrice made her that much wetter.

Patrice climbed on top of Veronica and kissed her deeply. Then with a grin, she turned herself around so her glistening pink pussy was directly above Veronica's face. Ronnie spread her nether lips and reached out to lick her clit. Patrice twitched. Veronica could not believe

that she had the power to make someone twitch. She settled in and began pleasuring Patrice in earnest.

While her tongue lapped and nibbled at Patrice's clit, she put two fingers in her pussy. Patrice must have a double-jointed tongue because the way she was working on Veronica's clit seemed impossible. It was difficult to concentrate on what she was doing. She closed her eyes and just let herself feel the pleasure doubly, from giving and receiving. She felt her orgasm coming and changed to suckling and biting.

"I'm coming." Patrice said breathlessly.

Veronica used three fingers and an extra flick of her tongue to send Patrice over the edge. While she clenched around her, Veronica's orgasm started somewhere near her toes and flowed through her. She screamed against Patrice's pussy and bucked as the intensity made her see stars behind her eyes.

After the last wave receded, she lay back and spread her arms. Patrice climbed off and lay beside her. They kissed softly and then grinned at each other. Veronica hugged her tightly, then they crawled under the covers and drifted in the drowsy state only achieved by those well pleased, and well loved.

 THE END 

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