



GEMINI JUDSON

Loose Id

**Genre:** Erotic Suspense

In the safety of an Adirondack addiction recovery lodge, Jasmine battled her heroin demon and won. Falling in love with the rural life, she stayed at the lodge and became part of the staff. She's also in love with the lodge manager, Adam Vianetti. However, with low self-esteem and a humble future, she's certain she's no match for a guy like him.

Fate has other ideas. On a stormy spring night, Jasmine and Adam are kidnapped and forced into each other's arms. Jasmine's not nearly as frightened as she should be. She's had a gun in her face lots of times. Instead she feels warm and wonderful in Adam's embrace. With chains on their wrists and the thunder rolling around them, they ignite a passion to keep them fiery warm.

When one of the men returns in the night to set them free, he issues a dire warning. The other kidnapper, Red, is heading east and plans to take Jasmine with him. He says he'll shoot her up with heroin--she's just a street rat to him. Jasmine thinks she has no strength left to fight that battle again.

In this prequel to *Animals*, we witness Red's cruel trail of crimes before he moves on to New Hampshire. But will he go with or without night blooming Jasmine?

*Publisher's Note: This book contains explicit sexual content, graphic language, and situations that some readers may find objectionable: Dubious consent, sex while in restraints.*

# *Night Blooming Jasmine*

*Gemini Judson*

## **Night Blooming Jasmine**

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## Chapter One

*Hypodermic needles littered the room. Hundreds of ruthless skewers caught the light and aimed their venom. Naked men milled around a dingy room, sometimes touching her, mostly ignoring her. One man bawled a hollow laugh that echoed off colorless walls. The other men looked at him stupidly and laughed too. A featureless figure approached her with a syringe dripping with liquid. "I'm clean," she protested. I'm clean, I'm clean, I'm clean.*

*Then Adam appeared among the men, pushing and shoving to get to her. "I'm here, Jas. Just let me hold you." He held out his hand to her, his brown eyes full of compassion. She reached for him and fell into his embrace, safe and warm. He caressed her hair, and she looked up at him. The look in his eyes changed from kindness to that of desire. He wanted her. At last.*

*He reached around and cupped her ass, lifting her up to grind his hard-on between her legs. When their lips met, she expected to feel ecstasy. Instead, she felt...nothing.*

*He wasn't there.*

\* \* \*

Jasmine Bly awoke from her vision of needles and naked men. She'd had that dream before. Why wouldn't it let her go? She ran her fingers through her short brown hair to help erase the clutter of the dream from her mind. Then she remembered Adam's cameo appearance. *Whoa. That was new.* She rustled her hair again and laughed. She might not share this dream with her lodge mates.

Whenever she told Dianna about her dreams, she felt better—purged. Dianna helped her understand her latent memories. In a heroin haze, her mind had unwittingly cataloged disgusting and terrifying things. Those images continued to haunt her, even

though she'd been clean for months. Jasmine felt grateful for the things that *didn't* surface in her dreams.

She reached under the bed for her cushy mat and poured herself down for a soft landing on the floor. Gradually she eased into a full-body stretch and then sat for a ritual of yoga poses. She followed with a refreshing sun salutation. With happy muscles but a burdened heart, Jasmine grabbed her robe off the chair and shuffled into the kitchen.

Dianna turned from her pan of scrambled eggs to greet her. “Morning, Jas. How did you sleep?”

“Okay, I guess.” Her response hit the floor with a thud. She'd meant to deliver it with more enthusiasm.

“Did you dream again?”

“Yeah. Needles everywhere and laughing naked men.” Jasmine poured herself a cup of hot tea and sat at the counter. She kept the lusty vision of Dianna's brother out of the description.

“I'm sorry, Jas. I believe the dreams will end eventually. For now, just love yourself for all that you've accomplished. That world no longer exists for you. Send those dreams up in a pink bubble.”

“You guys shipping off pink bubbles without me?” Adam Vianetti came into the kitchen like a breath of fresh air. The spring on the screen door screeched behind him like it always did, and Jasmine felt an unexpected tug in her heart. She loved the lodge—her first real home in a long time. Adam kissed his sister, Dianna, on the cheek and grabbed a cup for himself. “Morning, Jasmine. What's in your bubble?”

“Bad dream.”

“Ah. Anything I can help with?”

*Hold me forever?* Jasmine shrugged. She'd been brewing a crush on Adam for nearly a year, since she first came through the lodge door as a recovering drug addict. She felt certain he was the whole reason behind her success. When she looked into his dark Italian eyes, she wanted to get clean for him. She wanted to look back at him with clear eyes of her own.

“So, Adam, will you be able to map out some new hikes today? I'll bring back eight new lodgers this afternoon.” Dianna rubbed her hands together with excited anticipation. “We've got two potheads, one cocaine addict, and five meth freaks.”

“Sounds like a fun bunch.”

Dianna gave her brother a scolding tap on the nose. “All clean and sober for two months. I looked over their files last night. Only one is receiving government assistance. The rest are paying out-of-pocket.” Dianna raised her eyebrows with a smile and handed him a plate of eggs. “That's a lot less paperwork for you.”

Adam seemed unimpressed by the news and reached for the spoon to dump another big scoop of eggs onto his plate. “The money comes in either way. Jasmine, are you up for a day of hiking and flag tying? I'd love some company.”

“Let me put the finishing touches on the lodge. It won't take more than an hour. Can you wait that long?”

“For your company, you bet. I'll be at my place packing up. Stop over when you're ready.” Adam grabbed his plate of eggs and headed for the door. She watched him look outside, then back at her. “Might want to grab some rain gear. It looks clear now, but they're forecasting rain. Dianna, if there's tea left, we'll take it in our lunch. That mint stuff you make is great cold.” With a final wink at Jasmine, he was out the door.

“Oh hey, Adam, why don't I make your lunch?” Dianna spoke with sarcasm to the slamming screen door. Jasmine smiled. The brother and sister duo each had their roles in managing the lodge. Dianna was a licensed psychologist, but her responsibilities encompassed far more. She tended to everyone's needs, and that included nutritious meals. Adam took advantage of her motherly nature, but Dianna wouldn't have it any other way.

“I can make us lunch, Di. You don't have to worry about it.”

“Thanks, Jasmine, but I'll do it. You finish your breakfast. So, did your dream change this time? Did you recognize any faces?” Dianna pulled out the bread and sandwich fixings.

Jasmine quickly stuffed a forkful of eggs into her mouth to give herself time to think. Honesty? How could she lie to Dianna? She knew every dark demon Jasmine conjured and battled right alongside her to conquer them.

“The men have no faces. But last night, Adam was there.” She quickly added, “But he wasn't naked. He reached out his hand to me.”

“Really. That's interesting.” Dianna paused and reflected, slowly swiping mayo on the bread. “This is good. You've subconsciously added comfort and reassurance to a terrifying chaos.” She pointed a mayo-loaded knife at Jasmine. “I hope Adam keeps coming to you in those dreams.”

*You and me both.* Jasmine swallowed the last of her eggs with a side of guilt. She hadn't exactly given Dianna the full picture. She promised herself a tarot card reading when she got back from her day hike. Her grandmother's gypsy ways had taught her a slightly different psychology than Dianna's Freudian dream analysis and pink bubble techniques. In her recovery, Jasmine counted on them all.

She finished her tea and cleaned the kitchen. Never for a moment did she resent her job as the lodge housekeeper. She'd slept in the gutter. She'd spent nights in burned-out buildings and rat-infested motels. The Vianetti family dedicated their lives to help ensure she, and many others, would never live like that again. She'd scrub floors for them, do their laundry, and anything else they asked, happily.

But today she needed to hurry. New lodgers were on their way, and the open-concept sleeping room was almost ready for them. During the winter session at the lodge, she'd build a fire and have it snapping a warm welcome when they arrived. On this bright June morning, there would be no need. But first impressions meant so much, and Jasmine wanted everything to be perfect.

Dishes done, kitchen spotless, pillows fluffed. Jasmine rushed to her private sleeping quarters for a quick shower, then dressed for her day with Adam. She'd get to spend the day following his perfect ass through the woods. Life was so sweet.

\* \* \*

Adam stood on the porch, inhaled the fresh Adirondack breeze, and scooped the last of his breakfast into his mouth. He knew the beavers had been busy during the spring



snowmelt, and most of his mapped hikes were now underwater. Those furry little buggers could sure rearrange the landscape. He and Jasmine had a big day ahead of them.

He set his plate on the porch railing and gave it a melancholy look. His mom used to scold his dad all the time for leaving his dishes there. Her kitchen chores would be all done and her apron off before she'd find them. Adam smiled and stepped off the porch. Some bad habits were worth keeping, if only to keep a memory alive.

He crossed the driveway to his apartment above the garage. On the way over, he thought about Jasmine and what he assumed was the same old needles and naked men dream. He handled the business end of the lodge and left most of the psychology to Dianna, but he'd had enough training in addiction to figure that one out. Jas was riddled with shame about her past.

He admired her courage. The tangled weed he'd met a year ago had disappeared, and a gentle flower bloomed in its place. She wasn't like the other lodgers. She had an internal strength she seemed unaware of—a maturity beyond her twenty-something years. Maybe life on the streets did that. Yet somehow, she remained refined and beautiful.

In his apartment, Adam gathered a few essentials for a day in the woods and slid his hatchet into the loop on his Levi's. He went to his desk, where a shiny brass compass hung from a thumbtack on his bulletin board. It was his dad's, and he never went in the woods without it. He secured the leather cord through his belt loop and opened the lid. North was still there, right where it was supposed to be.

“Tell me you're not taking that old-fashioned thing.”

He glanced up to see Jasmine at his door and closed the compass with a click. “Some folks like the GPS, but I'll take a map and compass any day.”

“So where are we headed?” Jasmine sidled onto a stool and helped unfold the map on the counter.

“I think south of here would be our best bet. The national forest boundary slides up next to Lost Lake Road. There's a really cool dam at the end of the road. The lodgers might like to see that.” He leaned in and pointed out the area on the map and smelled her freshly washed hair. He loved her hair—short and sassy—and the cut exposed her graceful neck. He imagined running his tongue...

“Looks like a long way from here.”

Adam inhaled her fresh scent one last time and noticed the red bandanna around her neck. Probably a good accessory for a day in the woods, but he resented the coverage. He stood and grabbed his backpack, estimating its weight with a couple of quick forearm curls. “As the crow flies, it's not. We'll see how much water we run into. Do you have bug nets? Blackflies could be murder out there.”

“All set. And here's our lunch and Dianna's mint tea.” Jasmine waved a hand at the thermos and bag sitting on the counter.

He looked an extra-long second at the delicate flower gracing his humdrum kitchen. Jasmine had rarely been in his private quarters. Her presence felt like a perfect fit, the puzzle piece he'd been missing. Her pale green eyes set in her sun-kissed golden skin seemed to catch every ray of sunshine. What was it about her this morning? She seemed to bloom brighter than ever.

*Snap out of it.* He looked away and quickly shoved the thermos in the pack, squishing the lunch on top. With a few more unnecessary jabs at the contents, he squeezed the zipper closed and flung the unit over his shoulder. “Let's go make some trails.”

Adam led the way down the well-worn path behind the lodge. The woods welcomed them inward with dappled sunshine on new green growth and the crisp fragrance of spring. They hiked in silence for several minutes and listened to the chorus of bird songs. Finally he slowed his pace and waited for Jasmine to catch up.

“Tell me about your dream last night.”

She laughed and walked ahead of him. That sure wasn't the reaction he expected. “What's so funny?” He hurried to catch up to her.

“I think without my dreams to analyze, you would have no interest in me.”

“Now that's not true, and you know it. You brighten my days, Jasmine Bly. I just thought you might want to talk about it. You usually do.”

“What would you say if I told you that *you* were in my dream last night?”

“Really? Me? Was I naked? God, was I an asshole?” Something about appearing in someone else's dream felt out of control.

“No, not naked. Not an asshole either. You kissed me.” A soft bloom rose to her cheeks when she caught his eye.

He stopped walking. Jasmine continued for a few more steps and then turned back to him. “You held me close and kissed me.”

Adam hitched his pack a little higher on his shoulders and walked ahead, past her. “And you wanted to send this one away in a pink bubble?”

“Hmm. This one I might keep. Just for fun.” She gave him a teasing smile as she came alongside him.

No more was said about the dream, but Adam's imagination worked overtime wondering about it. He sure didn't want her to know about his crazy, horny ideas about her. She still seemed fragile, only a year into her recovery. The last thing she needed was a guy hustling her. He could be her friend and a solid part of her support system.

But not her lover.

\* \* \*

The day wore on, and they hacked away at branches and tied orange flags to twigs to mark the new trail. The underbrush was still sparse this time of year. It was a perfect time to establish some new paths through the woods. Adam appreciated the physical exertion in the moist spring air. It offered a welcome contrast to his weight-lifting routine. Luckily the blackflies were unseasonably light, so they hadn't had to drape nets over their heads. Jasmine was simply too beautiful to enshroud in bug netting.

At noon they stopped and snacked on the sandwiches Dianna had made, now malformed, and the sweet mint tea.

“Are you still thinking of school in the fall, Jas?” Adam threw a wad of bread on the ground for a red squirrel.

“Thinking about it. I'd hate to leave you and Dianna. I know I'm not a big part of the team, but I love helping with the lodge in my little ways.”

“Little? Geez, you're a great help. We'd be lost without you. But I think you're meant for bigger things than making beds.”

Jasmine sighed. "You always see more in me than there really is. I didn't finish high school, remember?" She joined in feeding the little squirrel.

"Stop. You passed your GED. You'd be a cinch. You're just one financial aid application away from your first semester at Adirondack College. You could come back to the lodge and help on the weekends."

"I have all summer to kick it around. Want the rest of my sandwich?"

"Yeah. Better me than him." He gave a nod to the squirrel and held his hand out for the sandwich.

"Our sunshine is disappearing. The rain gear was a good call." Jasmine folded her sunglasses into the front pocket of Adam's backpack. "Do you have your cell phone?"

"In the pack. Wanna order a pizza?"

She stuck her tongue out at him.

"We have two new trails." Adam pressed his arm across his chest for a soothing upper back stretch. "That'll get the lodgers started. Pretty easy footpaths."

"God, I remember how scared I was when I first came here. These woods felt like they would swallow me whole. I'd lived in the city my whole life. My grandma had an apartment with a couple of trees outside her window. I thought *that* was wild." She motioned around at their heavily forested surroundings to contrast her statement. "When she died, my home was the streets. Not a lot of nature hikes."

Adam looked at Jasmine sitting on the rock across from him. She looked healthy and strong and totally at home in her hiking boots and T-shirt. It was easy to forget the reason she came into his life.

"Are you happy in the woods now?"

"I still get a little scared if I'm alone. When I'm with you, I'm happy. I wish could live here forever."

"Then you should. You have a home here with Dianna and me." There were thousands of other things he wanted to tell her, but for now, he wanted her to feel secure. "Should we head back, or do you have one more trail in you?"

"One more. Before the rain."

Once again, Adam led the way with his hatchet swinging. He'd looked at the map, and this last loop took them far from the lodge. He wondered if it was too far for most lodgers. They didn't exactly arrive in tip-top physical condition.

Late in the afternoon, the sky threatened imminent rain, and Adam's muscles were spent. "Let's head back the way we came and finish this another day. We'll see how good your flag tying is." He winked at Jasmine. She winked back, and he stumbled on a root.

"Easy, big guy. We don't need that hatchet in your skull. I'm going to take a nature break. Wait for me." Jasmine disappeared into a thicket, and Adam put the leather sleeve around his hatchet, setting it next to his pack. He cast a wary eye to the sky, considering if he'd waited too long for their return hike. Luckily Jasmine was fit as a fiddle. It might be a brisk jog back to the lodge if the weather turned.

"You okay there, Jas?"

He heard no response. How far did she go, anyway? It's not like he was going to peek... "Yoo-hoo. Jasmine?"

In answer to his query, Adam heard the click of a gun at his ear.

"Jasmine's just fine and dandy. Now put your hands in the air."

## Chapter Two

Adam did as he was told. “Where's Jasmine?” His voice was calm, but his pulse was not. His arms hung in the air, disconnected, powerless. The world around him shifted into slow gear, and only his heart raced on.

“She's fine. Get on your knees, and she'll stay that way.”

Once Adam dropped to the mossy ground, strong arms grabbed his hands and forced them behind him. He fought to keep them free, knowing this man couldn't train the gun on him and bind his hands at the same time. His struggles earned him a crack on the side of his head with the gunstock. In a painful haze, he felt rope tightening around his wrists.

“Who are you?” He winced and hissed a breath in through his teeth. “What do you want?”

He took another blow, this one a brisk openhanded swat across the top of his head. “Shut the fuck up. You might live till morning.”

The wrenching of his arms behind his back sent shards of pain to his shoulders. Adam tried to tune into every sound, especially for some hint that Jasmine was nearby. He only heard the heavy breathing of his assailant. Finally the man stepped around and stood in front of Adam. A fat, freckled visage with a snaky red ponytail puffed fowl air into his face.

“We'll get along just fine if you do as I say. Now get up, and let's go for a walk.”

He pulled Adam to his feet and pushed him ahead. Adam gathered his thoughts and took a quick visual inventory of his surroundings. His hatchet and pack were in plain sight—a thousand miles away. This guy couldn't be working alone. Somebody else had Jasmine just like this. Or worse.

Adam knew these woods. He knew about the old logging camp ahead. Was that their destination? The clearing? The abandoned blacksmith shop was little more than a shell of rotting wood.

After a long walk with a gun jabbed into his back, Adam realized his suspicion was correct. They arrived at a small clearing in the woods where, despite the passage of years, clover and grasses still grew instead of trees. Gathering storm clouds snuffed the sunlight, and the air sagged with prestorm moisture.

His attention went to the shed, and he immediately saw Jasmine a few yards away with her red bandanna tied around her mouth. Ropes bound her tightly to a small maple tree. Jasmine's gaze collided with his, and he felt her terror. His breath came in bursts, and his heart hammered as he watched her tug on her restraints. She hadn't been harmed. At least she was alive and in one piece.

Adam was about to break and run, but the fat man must have sensed his intent and grabbed his arm. "Where are ya, Jethro?" He bellowed. "We're in business. Simple as pie."

A large, lumbering man stepped out of the doorless entry of the crumbling wooden structure that had stood since the turn of the century. "What the hell took ya so long, Red? I'm all set in there. Bring him in." He headed toward Jasmine.

"Ah, perfect." The fat man turned to Adam. "What's your name, son?"

Adam didn't answer but kept his eyes trained on Jasmine. He watched the big man push the bandana from her lips with an oddly gentle hand.

"I don't give a shit, to tell ya the truth. You're just a nice little deposit in my bank account." As he spoke, he shoved the gun into Adam's ear and escorted him into the shed.

Once inside, Adam looked around in disbelief as his eyes adjusted to the dim light. A tripod-mounted video camera angled down toward a shiny red quilt on the grimy wooden floor. A yellowing pin-striped mattress poked out from beneath the quilt. "What the hell is this?"

His captor put his arm around Adam's shoulder with sickening fatherly affection and shifted the gun to point under Adam's chin. "We're going to get some footage of you and your lovely friend gettin' off. Then I'm going to sell it." He motioned out a window

that had long ago given up its glass. “That big idiot out there, Jethro. He's on the run. I do the commerce.” The man stretched up into Adam's face. “You wouldn't believe the money folks cough up for suck-ass porn. The Internet is drippin' with the stuff.”

Adam didn't want to catch his eye, but it was unavoidable. “I wouldn't know.”

He backed out of Adam's face and sniffed with pride. “My productions always show nice-lookin' people. You should be flattered. Makes a big difference in sales.” He gave a head nod out the window again. “He lines up my movie stars. He's been watching you two for a couple weeks. I gotta say, you're a tough one to follow in the woods. Thanks for the orange flags.” He gave Adam a clap on the shoulder.

Jethro dragged Jasmine into the shed and threw her onto the red quilt. Adam tried to go to her, but the fat man, Red, held him with a solid grip.

“Hang on,” he huffed as he struggled with the knotted rope around Adam's wrists, still pointing the gun at Adam's head. “Son of a bitch. Jethro, can you give me a hand?”

Adam heard the *schwick* of a knife blade popping up, and his blood froze. Then he felt a seesaw on his ropes, and he was free. He stole the chance to run to Jasmine and swept her into his arms.

“Are you hurt?”

“No, Adam. Just hold me.”

“Hey, hey. Save it for the camera. You ready, Jethro? You remember how to run that thing?”

With Jasmine still in his arms, Adam cast a sideways glance at the feet pacing beside the mattress. Spiffy dime-store sneakers made the fat man appear congenial, like a weird but harmless neighbor. When his hand twitched on his gun, the weird neighbor devolved into a bastard again.

“I push the fuckin' button, Red. I think I can handle it.” Adam watched the big man raise his hands in disgust.

*Click.* A bullet slid into position. He looked up and saw Red with the gun trained on him and Jasmine.

“Give me your clothes.”



“What? You can't be ser—” The cold gun barrel touched Adam's cheek.

“You heard me. The sooner you get naked, the sooner you'll get a hard-on, and the sooner I make my first thousand bucks. Get up.”

Adam slowly stood with his hands in the air. “Don't shoot. Just—there's no way we can do this. You want us to—you can't force that kind of thing.” He shook his head in disbelief. Jasmine stood beside him and put her hands in the air too.

Red stepped even closer, now pointing the gun at Jasmine's head. “Oh, I think I can. Seems to me the guy with the Ruger always gets his way.” He circled them with a menacing, careful step. “She's a pretty one. Nice skin. Now let's see more of it.” He put the barrel of the gun directly on her cheek.

“Oh God, no. Please.” Jasmine's voice was barely a whisper. Adam's heart sank to the depths of his stomach.

“All right. We're doing it. See?” Adam pulled his shirt over his head and dropped it to the floor. Then he unbuckled his pants and unzipped them. With hesitation, he motioned to his feet. “I need to get my boots off.”

“Both of ya do.” Red motioned to Jasmine to get going. “And get this damn thing off your neck.” He roughly untied the knot of her bandanna and whipped it aside.

Jasmine joined Adam and slowly took off her heavy hiking boots and socks. Then she quickly pulled her shirt over her head. “Are we really going to do this?” She whispered, but her words seemed amplified in the heavy air.

Adam looked into her eyes. Red stood just a few feet away. Could he get that gun? Could he overpower him? His thoughts came in rapid fire. He looked toward Jethro. He was unarmed. Built like a Mack truck—but he didn't see a gun.

“Don't even think about it. Now get the show on the road.” Red's warning had no effect on Adam's decision. With no more thought, he made a quick lunge for the gun. He had the barrel in his hand and wrestled with Red, but his efforts were short-lived. Jethro grabbed him by the hair and braced a powerful arm at his throat from behind.

Red poked the gun into his cheek. “Had enough fun?” He sucker punched him, and Adam buckled forward with an *ooof*.

“Let him go. Don't hurt him. We'll do this.” Jasmine tried to pull Adam from Jethro's grip. “We'll do this. Just let him go.”

He did, and the two captives clung together. Adam pressed Jasmine's head into his chest. “I won't do this to you. I'll let him shoot me first.”

“No. No.” Tears flowed freely as she pulled away and lifted her sports bra over her head. Without letting it go from her hand, she flung her arms around Adam's neck and kissed him.

Adam heard the fat freak yell, “Camera on!”

Jasmine felt the warmth and softness of Adam's lips. She wasn't as terrified as she should have been. She'd had a gun in her face before and had been robbed by friends and enemies alike, all after the vials of heroin gold. Her heart pounded out of fear, but more for Adam than herself.

Her breasts pressed against his hard chest, and her hands explored his waves of dark hair. She pulled away and ran the back of her hand along his cheek. His eyes betrayed the depth of his fear. Would he really take a bullet before he'd give in to the man's demands? For once, she needed to be the strong one. She'd lead them through this. At the moment she saw no other way.

“Adam, if we're forced to do this, it'll be okay. I won't let them hurt you.” With one last look into his eyes, she kissed him again. This time he was there. His lips caressed hers, either by instinct or by desire, she didn't know. Didn't care. She'd protect him in her own way.

She parted her lips and received his roaming tongue, returning the exploration with her own. She felt his hands glide around her back, and a shiver danced up her spine. Did he want her? Did he find her attractive at all?

At last she felt him give in and kiss her with a genuine desire, holding her close with his strong, stony arms. She drew her hands over his shoulders and down his arms. Her touch produced a favorable response as Adam kissed her harder and reached to squeeze her ass.

“Get on with it. Not so much kissing. Folks don't pay for face suckin'.” Red's voice was an unwelcome reality check. Adam tightened and pulled back.

“Jas, I don't know what to do.” His voice cracked as he searched her eyes. “I can't go through with this.”

Jasmine pulled him close again and whispered in his ear. “Do you see a choice? Adam, he's the bad guy, not you. He's got a gun. It's not worth dying for.” She kissed his neck and hoped she had enough feminine persuasion. “Forget about them. Pretend it's just us. Just me.” She poked her tongue in his ear and blew a puff of air. She heard the breath deflate from his chest as she moved to his lips once again. He attacked her mouth with an animal passion she'd only imagined.

“Pants!” Red voice barely registered in Jasmine's psyche as she reveled in Adam's velvet lips feasting on hers. She reached inside his open jeans and touched his cock through his boxers. He was thick and long and stone hard. She felt relief, remembering times when fear dampened arousal. Or maybe it was the heroin. At least his body was with her, if not his heart. His breathing grew heavy, and when she slid her hand inside to touch him fully, he moaned into her throat.

She pulled up on his shaft and listened to his futile protest. “*Jas*,” he whispered.

With the other hand, she lowered the clothes off his round ass and down his thighs. Nothing was real. Was this another one of her dreams? Her hand caressed the warmth of Adam's skin and tasted his sweet breath. This had to be a dream.

“On your knees, girl. That's perfect.” The man's voice intruded in a fantasy she'd played out in her mind a thousand times. *I wish he'd just shut up and leave this to me. I know what I'm doing.*

She did as he commanded and slipped down Adam's legs and onto her knees. Adam was perfect. She knew his cock would be too. A thrill rippled through her, and the violent men drifted away like the men in her dreams. Whatever fear remained only heightened her excitement. She wrapped her tongue around the prominent knob, and Adam pulled back. “Jas, no.”

He tried to pull away, but she had his goods in her hand and waved him off with the other. She continued her exploration on the smooth surface and then took the length of

him into her mouth. She slid down his cock and played games with her tongue, stroking him firmly with her hand. The tip of his cock touched the back of her throat, and she sucked hard as she drew up.

“Holy fuck. Jasmine, you don't have to do this.” She knew he didn't mean it. Perhaps his mind did, maybe his heart. But at his center, he wanted her to take him to the top. Adam clutched his fingers in her hair and thrust himself rhythmically forward.

She closed her mind and focused on pleasuring him with old tricks—old, shameful tricks she'd used to get the junk she needed. Operating on autopilot, she knew he'd go up in smoke and hand over anything. But she wanted nothing from Adam but to make him come. Screw the man with the gun. She wanted to drive Adam crazy with desire. He whimpered with pleasure or remorse. She hoped it was pleasure.

“Jasmine, stop. Stop,” he pleaded with her. But he was so close. *Let it go, Adam.*

One second more and he exploded into her throat, an apology on his lips. He thrust his hot seed into her mouth, and she swallowed the load. When he was done, he reached for her with a powerful burst, and she flew into his arms.

“I'm so sorry, Jasmine. I'm so sorry.” Adam's strong body trembled as he cradled her close. Jasmine breathed heavily into his neck, her heartbeat roaring in her ears. Her body tingled. She'd pleased him. Even under such brutal circumstances, she'd turned him to mush.

“It's okay, Adam,” she soothed. She stroked his cheek and felt the moisture of tears. “I'm okay. Hold me. Don't let go.” She meant it with all her heart.

A clap of thunder split the silence. The dark shed grew darker, and rain began to fall.

“Damn it all.” Red stood in the doorway and flourished the gun at the rain. “Jethro, shut 'er down and pack up. That's six hundred dollars worth of video equipment. There's no way it'll stay dry in this place. Let's get out of this storm.” Then he wheeled around and pointed the gun at the captives. “You two. You're staying here.”

Adam withdrew from Jasmine only slightly to glance at Red's silhouetted form in the doorway. “What do you mean, we're staying here?” He stretched to grab his pants from his ankles and pulled them up.

With one quick step, Red grabbed Jasmine out of Adam's embrace and pulled her to a dark corner.

“Don't you fucking touch her.” She heard Adam's fierce warning as Red pulled her to her knees. He reached into a filthy duffel bag and produced a set of handcuffs.

“No.” Jasmine pulled back like a dog on a leash. With her hand in his grasp, Red deftly locked one cuff onto her wrist. He paused and looked at her forearm.

“What do we have here? Tracks? You a druggie?”

Jasmine didn't answer but struggled to remove her arm from his grip. She still wore no shirt and felt a strong instinct to cover herself.

“Looky here, Jethro. She's a needle freak, just like you. What's your poison? Meth? Smack?”

“I'm clean.” Jasmine couldn't help herself. This was too tender a topic to be stomped on.

“Clean? Ah, nobody's ever *really* clean. Right, Jethro?”

Jasmine caught Jethro's eye as he held Adam's arms, flexed to their full enormity, but still useless in the big man's grip.

“Tell ya what,” Red continued. “I'll make a few phone calls, and when I come back, we'll party it up. Eh? Been awhile since you were loaded?” His laugh made the hair on Jasmine's neck stand on end. He couldn't force her to do drugs, could he? That possibility struck greater fear into her heart than the videotaping. Far greater. She couldn't go through it all again.

“Leave her alone.” Adam heaved himself out of Jethro's grasp and went to Jasmine. He knelt down and wrapped his arms around her.

With a quick hand, Red grabbed Adam's forearm and clapped the other cuff on it. She and Adam were tethered together by a foot of steel. Red didn't hesitate and reached for another set of cuffs—this one chained to a huge rusty block on the floor. He tugged on Jasmine's other wrist and quickly cuffed her to the base of the block. A well thought-out plan, and she and Adam had somehow made it easy for him.

“These fuckin' things are supposed to be one size fits all. I guess the law doesn't usually apprehend little things like you.” Red slid the cold steel down Jasmine's wrist to ensure she couldn't slip out.

Adam held her against his chest, covering her bare breasts. “You can't leave us like this. We'll freeze.”

“You got the blanket there. You can bang her all night long—just leave some for morning, cuz we'll be back.” He kicked the mattress, and it inched closer to them. “You packed up, Jethro? Storm's on its way. Let's head back to camp.”

Jethro made eye contact with Jasmine once again as he walked by with the gear over his shoulder. The two men left the shed with a rumble of thunder sounding in the distance. Within a few seconds, the storm began in earnest. Jasmine could no longer see the men, but she heard Red curse the rain.

## Chapter Three

Jasmine sat with her feet under her, one hand resting on the cold, flat surface of her anchor. Her slim body shivered in Adam's arms. He reached long to grasp the mattress and pull it to them. "Sit up, Jas. Let's at least get you up off the damp floor."

He slid close to face her and held her with his one free arm, their linked wrists tucked between them. The steel felt cold against his chest. He looked down at her other arm and noticed how the cuff slid low on Jasmine's slender wrist. It looked too heavy for her to bear.

"What is this thing?" Jasmine lifted her arm with a clang of the chain secured to the base of the heavy object. A large, rusty ring at the end of the chain wore the mate to her other cuff.

"A blacksmith's anvil. Probably for a farrier. This place was a logging camp a hundred years ago. The blacksmith probably pounded horseshoes all day long." He hiked her closer. "Jasmine, I'm sorry. I should have gotten that gun. I should have gotten you out of here."

The rain on the roof sounded louder than it should have. Everything in the world seemed swollen and exaggerated, except for Jasmine's tiny frame in his arms. Adam imagined if he let her go, she'd dissolve into dust.

"It was two against one, Adam." She snuggled deeper into his embrace. "I'm cold."

Adam looked around for his shirt, but it was out of reach. He straightened the red quilt and wrapped it around her shoulders. An organic, musty smell filled his senses. "How's that?"

"Better. You don't think he'll bring heroin back, do you? Adam, I can't do junk again. I'm not strong enough."

Christ, this was a nightmare. With her nose buried in his neck, Adam ran his hand down the soft skin of her back. After a day of sweating in the woods, her hair still smelled fresh. He swallowed a lump of terror and looked at the delicate hand on the anvil. He was a powerful man, but no match for this.

The downpour found every weakness in the dilapidated roof and splashed in puddles on the floor of the shed. Jasmine stopped shivering in his arms as they listened to the thunder and the rain and the constant dripping.

“What are you thinking, Adam?”

“I'm thinking I just did a terrible, terrible thing to a girl I care about very much. I'm thinking I'm a weak man. I'm thinking if I could carry her and this anvil a hundred miles to keep her safe, I would.”

“Adam, you're the strongest man I know. And you didn't do a terrible thing. We're alive.” She shifted off her feet and nudged his shoulder with their linked hands. “Hey, what's a blowjob between friends?”

Their eyes met, and she winked. Adam laughed. “Damn you.”

Still, she couldn't joke his guilt away. He'd responded to her like an animal.

“Adam, I need to tell you something.”

He tightened his grip around her waist and noticed how far around his arm reached. “Tell me anything.”

“Take away the crazy men with guns and the handcuffs, and I'm not doing anything I haven't dreamed of doing. I love being in your arms.”

Adam's heart skipped a beat. This beautiful young woman just gave him the best blowjob of his life with a gun at her head, and now she was telling him...

“What? Jas, I had no idea. You're a lodger. You're off-limits.”

“I'm not a lodger. I'm the housekeeper. Look, I'm not telling you this to get a sympathy hug. I'm telling you now so you won't feel guilty. What happened between us—we didn't do anything I wasn't willing to do.”



Adam closed his eyes and felt her breath on his neck. She was off-limits. She was fragile, a recovering addict. How could he be so reckless to fall in love with her? But he had. A long time ago.

He lifted her chin and kissed her, running his tongue softly between her satin lips. Everything about her was sleek and warm and willing. When they stopped kissing, Adam looked into her eyes.

“I refused to let myself feel anything but friendship for you.” He brushed her hair back from her eyes. “But I swear, I’ve been watching you. It seems each day I grow closer and closer to you. This is a strange way to start something, but...” His thoughts galloped back over the past few months. He’d admired her from a distance, an untouchable gem in a store where everything else seemed second best. A cold plop of rain landed on his bare shoulder and brought him back to the present.

“Let’s start something, Adam.” She smothered his lips with liquid heat and swept flames inside.

Her kiss was an enchanting mix of softness and hunger, and Adam could scarcely catch his breath. With his free hand, he caressed her cheek. “I wish I could hold you. Completely.”

“I’m having the best dream of my life.” Jasmine tilted her face into his touch and closed her eyes. “Don’t wish anything different.”

“Lie back.” He slid down beside her and covered them both with the musty quilt, their cuffed hands useless between them. “Are you comfortable?”

“Yeah, but I wish you would kiss me again.”

He fed on her sweet lips and ran his hand along the warmth of her stomach. Daylight dissolved into a dismal twilight as the thunder rolled outside the shed, and the heat increased inside. Jasmine left a trail of fire and ice on his neck that made him crazy. His heart thundered to challenge the rumbles in the sky. Adam needed to stop this—be sensible, keep his wits. *Do the right thing*. But in their desperate situation, he felt oddly encouraged. Emboldened.

“Make love to me, Adam.”

She'd been in his fantasies for months. He kissed her lips with a burning desire to feel every inch of her slender, luscious body. Her skin was warm and soft and invited his tongue to travel over the surface. "Are you sure this is what you want? Here?"

"Touch me," she gasped.

Adam was drowning in a sea of emotions. "But how could I? It wouldn't be right."

"God, it feels right. It does." Jasmine's breath felt cool against his lips. "I want you so much." She pulsed her hips into his. "Please, Adam."

"We don't have—"

"We don't need it. You know Dianna helps all the lodgers with birth control. It helped me put weight on. I'm healthy, Adam. We're okay."

The irony—she was begging him to make love to her. Adam trembled and laced his fingers with hers on their cuffed hands. He unzipped her jeans with the other. She lifted her hips to let him slide them off.

In the cold, dim light, her naked body seemed to radiate heat and invite him—damn those cuffs.

"Jasmine, you're so beautiful." With his mouth smothering hers, he ran his hand down her body and between her legs. The creamy heat welcomed him, and she opened to his touch. When he rubbed her clit, she reflexively drew in a quick breath.

He slipped a finger inside her pussy and felt hot velvet. Finding an easy pumping rhythm, he rubbed her sensitive button with each entry while she thrust to match his movements. His large body crushed to hers, and he pinioned their linked hands above her head. God, she was totally his to devour at this moment. He wouldn't take advantage of her captivity—but he could.

Adam couldn't silence the arguments in his head. The rain and wind assaulted their shelter, and the thunder crashed in his ears. The woman of his fantasies writhed beneath him with rampant desire, and he'd never felt so turned on in his life. When the lightening flashed, he saw the angled edges of the anvil.

He continued to gently massage his fingers in her pussy until she purred into his neck. "Adam, I want you."

Ah, how those words drifted into the damp, heavy air. Could this be happening? Lightning illuminated the darkness, and a loud clap of thunder confirmed the reality.

He kept at his smooth strokes in the silken heat until she mewled and begged him to enter her. He pulled his own pants down and kicked them off. When he moved his body between her legs, he was once again struck by the vision of her in the fading light.

“It's okay, Adam.”

He grabbed his dick in his hand and swept the head across her opening. Her eyes narrowed, and she tugged lightly at her chain. With an easy glide, he parted her lips and entered her flaming hot box. Slow and hot and—*Holy fuck, that was sweet.*

“Oh, Jas.”

She moaned, breathy and low, and clasped his hand tightly.

“Are you okay? God, I don't want to hurt you.” He pulled out.

“No. No, don't stop. This is my dream.”

Her dream. To be handcuffed to an anvil with a burly Italian animal huffing in her ear? Adam inhaled deeply to control himself. He could fuck her into the next century, the way her hot pussy swallowed his dick.

Her lips nibbled at his ear with cool puffs of air. “Adam, you're teasing me. Don't be cruel. Make love to me.”

With only an ounce of control, he surged his cock inside her and felt her hot cream glide him deeper. He groaned at the sensation as he pleased himself in the heat. He planted his free arm on the mattress and wished for the freedom of his other. He wanted two hands to make love to Jasmine properly.

“Oh, Adam,” she cooed, so warm and sweet, lying helpless beneath him.

He went crazy with passion and sank deeper into the circle of her thrusting hips. Cries of surrender escaped her lips with each entry, and they drove him on even harder. He couldn't believe her tightness and wanted the feeling to last forever. But it wouldn't. The locomotive had climbed the hill and—

“Oh, sweet Jesus. *Jasmine.*” The train crashed through his senses, and he came inside her, hot seed pulsing forth in an unending release. He whimpered and shook from the pleasure.

Lying on top of her with the quilt on his shoulders, Adam couldn't comprehend what just happened. What the fuck was the matter with him? Did he have no self-control? He took complete advantage of this woman, his friend. *She's wearing handcuffs, for Christ sake.*

“Oh Adam, I don't understand any of this, but that was wonderful.” She burbled breathy kisses into his ear.

“Are you warm?”

“I'm warm. But I might need to fill my lungs sometime soon.”

“Oh geez, I'm sorry.” Adam slid to the side and pulled her close. “How's that?”

The rain kept on, and the thunder rolled. Adam's heart beat an uneasy rhythm as his fingers made little circles on Jasmine's stomach. They were in terrible trouble, and he'd nailed her like an animal in rut. *Good one, Adam. That's what you do in a crisis.*

## Chapter Four

Darkness swallowed them as Jasmine snuggled into Adam's chest with her hand angled behind her. Nothing made sense. Her dream had come true. Adam held her close and breathed into her hair, their fingers still interlocked. No one had ever made love to her the way he just did. So powerful, so perfect. He'd gratified himself, and she didn't feel resentful—because she loved him. The handcuffs? Lord help her, they made it even more delicious.

Yet when she opened her eyes, she saw blackness, and the musty smell of wet wood hung in the air. Who knew where the red quilt had been. The funny thing was, her surroundings were not so disturbing. In fact, they felt familiar.

She felt Adam's hand glide lazily along her abdomen. This wasn't how it was supposed to happen. She'd imagined making love to him in her cozy sleeping quarters—how he'd sneak into her bed early one snowy morning. Now she listened to the rain and knew the mattress was getting wet from the leaking roof.

Those men. Pornographic videos? So what. She was more frightened by the possibility of the man with the red ponytail injecting her with drugs.

Her withdrawal had been wrenching. She'd gone cold turkey and had felt certain at one point she would die. She'd trembled and sweated and vomited and cried. Her limbs had curled in pain, and if she'd had the means, she'd have taken her own life. After two weeks of hell, she'd come out on the other end, weak as a newborn kitten—and clean. There was no fight left in her for that demon. She'd rather die.

“Beautiful Jasmine. Are you okay? Did I hurt you?” The quiver in Adam's soft voice sent a spear of sadness to her heart.

“You didn't hurt me.” She swallowed, unsure how much of her dignity she'd risk. Then, with an inner chuckle, she reexamined her situation. Naked, in chains, with Adam's

glorious sperm doing the backstroke inside her. *Where's the risk?* “Adam, I’m in love with you, and I have been since the first time I saw you. Tell me”—she shifted, and the mattress creaked—“do you regret what we just did?”

“God, Jas. Anywhere but here.” Jasmine lay on her side with Adam’s hand drifting along her skin. “I’m responsible for you, and so far, all I’ve managed to do is ejaculate.”

Adam’s words bounced all over the gloom, and Jasmine cracked up. “First of all, you’re not responsible for me. And second”—she paused to belt out a laugh—“if I’m not mistaken, your *ejaculations* were my fault. I couldn’t be happier.”

Adam joined her laughter and nuzzled into her neck. His body felt so warm and comforting next to hers, and the pelting rain had a soothing rhythm. The lightness of the mood had little chance to last, but it felt good for a minute or two. Thunder rolled and echoed as the wind subsided. The night seemed satisfied with its stormy tantrum and would now settle in for a gentle rain.

Snuggled in the darkness, hours ticked by, and Jasmine felt warm. The rain continued with an occasional bluster of intensity, but the chilly spring air couldn’t penetrate their glove of body heat. She thought about her life. Aside from a few encouraging years with her grandma, Jasmine had never been as happy as she’d been this past year at the lodge. She’d even felt hopeful at times.

“Adam?” Her whisper roared into the veiled stillness. She continued anyway. “No matter what happens, I feel blessed. Blessed to have met you and Dianna and to be a part of something as wonderful as the lodge. But most of all, being this close to you.”

“It sounds like you’re giving up.” He rose to hover over her in the darkness. “We’ll be okay. We’re gonna get out of this.”

In the smothering gloom, nebulous thoughts refused to come clear. But Jasmine had already made up her mind that if that man, Red, came back with heroin, she was done for. She’d grab his gun and pull the trigger herself. She wouldn’t go down that road again. Thunder rumbled in the distance, and the wind huffed against the weary shed walls.

“Sounds like we’re in for another round.”

His lips brushed her skin, and Jasmine’s heart swelled. Yes, she was so grateful for this time. “Love me, Adam.”

He drew in a long breath. “Jas, you're more beautiful than I ever imagined. This new closeness—it's blowing my mind. But look at us.” He squeezed their entwined fingers.

Unexpected tears welled in her eyes, and she blinked them back. “Adam, we might not come out on the other side of this.” She sniffed and struggled to keep her emotions under control. “I've never made love to a man and let go. Do you know what I'm saying? If I'm going to die, I want to know the feeling.”

A noticeable silence settled in the shed as the wind inhaled for its next blast, and the thunder stayed at bay. “You want me to bring you to orgasm?”

Jasmine didn't know how to answer. She couldn't say why she'd never climaxed before. She figured she never felt safe enough, or loved enough. “I want it to be with you.”

Without another word, he pushed her onto her back and melted onto her lips. She knew he could fulfill her desires, and she felt his long cock rub against her stomach. She wanted him inside her. At twenty-five, she'd never trusted anyone enough to surrender that last thread of control. “Take me all the way, Adam.”

“You're hard to say no to.”

“Then don't.”

Adam shifted his body between her legs, and she spread for him, feeling his cock nudge against her opening. She cooed into his lips, wanting it all. A river of hot lubricant flooded her pussy, and her tiny muscles flexed for satisfaction. His mouth ravaged hers, and his weight pressed down upon her. She felt him surge long fingers into her pussy and sweep over her clit.

“No more teasing, Adam. Enter me.” Jasmine thrust her hips to urge his cock inside, but his fingers kept at their task, gently toying, gently driving her wild.

He slid from her lips and down her chest to pull a hardened nipple between his teeth. His hot tongue licked and circled and then pulled up again with a hard suck. The breath swept from her lips.

“Adam,” she begged.

In response, he slipped a longer finger inside and massaged her with hot, wet strokes. She wanted to touch him so badly, wanted to wrap her arms around his broad shoulders and dig her fingers into his muscles. Instead she clung to the hand bound to hers, pinned with passion to the mattress.

His fingers inside her seemed to know every secret spot and pleased each one. But she longed for more, bigger, thicker, harder.

“*Please,*” she whispered into the darkness.

Adam knelt between her legs, leaving her nipples throbbing and tingling in turns. She saw his shadowy form grab his dick and rub it in her cream. Finally he lifted her hips and slid inside, long and slow, still wobbling gently on her clit. The sensation was at once beautiful and tormenting, and she tugged on her chain. In the darkness, she created his handsome face—she'd studied it enough in her fantasies to know every detail. His hips rolled smoothly, surging his cock into her depths.

“Trust me with this, Jasmine. Give in to me.”

*Oh yes.* His body united with hers. This was what she had waited for. To feel Adam's cock touch her magical spot. Jasmine closed her eyes while her senses zeroed into the rhythm of his entry and the stimulation of her sensitive bud.

“God, you're perfect. Wrap your legs around me, Jas.” His thrusts increased, and his breath exploded with each push.

“Take me with you, Adam.” Her breath quickened, and her spine tingled. She felt like there was something she wanted desperately, *just out of reach*.

“Relax,” he soothed, his cock gliding deep inside her. He felt long and thick, and each entry sent a shock wave into her pussy. She was so close...

“Hey. Quit humpin' her. It's time to go.”

Jasmine screamed at the sound of another man's voice in the shed.

Adam jumped at the voice shattering their privacy and felt a kick to his ass. He scurried to his haunches and tried to adjust his eyes against the flashlight blazing at him.



“Who's there?” He saw nothing beyond the bright light. Then he saw the large man, Jethro, moving toward Jasmine's arm and the anvil. “Get away from her.” Adam grabbed for the tree stump that was the man's arm and thoughtlessly yanked Jasmine's cuffed hand as he lunged at him.

“Easy. I'm not here to hurt ya. I'm gonna turn ya loose.”

Jethro held an ax in his hand and knelt down next to the anvil. He pulled Jasmine's handcuffed wrist away and examined the chain that tethered her to the heavy block.

“Jesus, you can't be serious! You'll slice her arm right off!” Adam pulled Jasmine into his arms.

Jethro set his flashlight on the floor to lift the length of chain encircling the base of the anvil. “I won't be able to get through the cuffs, but this chain's as old as Moses. It's about ready to rust through. Two swings, three at the most. I couldn't get the key from Red.” He picked up the ax. “This is the best I can do.”

“Why are you doing this?” Jasmine's words were soft, not burdened with fear. Almost trusting. Adam covered her naked body with the quilt.

Jethro looked only at Jasmine. “Red's a son of a bitch. Mean. He's been jacking me around for a while now. But he keeps money coming to me. What's a little pornography?” He reached for Jasmine's wrist cuffed to Adam's. “If you're clean? You gotta stay that way. I don't wish that fuckin' detox on anybody. Not twice.”

“You're really letting us go?” Adam was doubtful of Jethro's noble intentions. He reached for his jeans, not knowing what to expect from this hulk.

“I break this chain, and you two run. Run like hell, and don't tell a soul about this. I'm warning you. Red'll kill ya like dogs in the street and take out your kin too if he finds out you went to the cops. He's crazy—but he's clever as a fox. He'll know.”

“What about you? What will he do to you?” Jasmine sounded far more concerned for her captor's well-being than Adam felt was warranted.

“You run one way, I'm runnin' the other. He'll be after my head too. But he's moving outta here anyway. Says he has relations farther east.”

Here he paused and looked at Jasmine with what could easily be mistaken for affection. “Watch yourself. He likes you. Says the little ones are easier to handle. He

might be lookin' to take you with him.” He pointed a massive, dirty finger at Adam.  
“Don't let that happen.”

Jethro stood and prepared the ax for the first swing. “Ready?”

Adam still reeled inside from the dire warning but then absorbed what Jethro was about to do. “God, man, what if you miss? Jas—are we going to trust him?”

“It's our only way out. I trust him.”

“I can't read or write, but I'm good with an ax. Turn your head away. She'll be fine.”

## Chapter Five

The rain had ended, and the woods wept in soggy silence. Jasmine stood in the doorway of the shed and held her T-shirt to cover her naked body. She just needed to see. Strange emotions ripped through her heart as she watched Jethro walk across the clearing. The moon clung to a veil of clouds and offered little light, but she saw him well enough. He was about to disappear into the woods with the ax swung over his shoulder when he looked back at her. She thought she saw him put his finger to his lips in a *shhh* gesture, but she couldn't be sure.

Adam gently grabbed her arm to pull her inside. "Here, slip these on. We have to move fast." He held her underwear to help her dress. With one hand still linked to Adam's and the other dragging a set of handcuffs and twelve inches of chain, she had limited mobility. But they were free. Jethro had set them free.

She continued to hold her T-shirt in front of her. The cuffs made it impossible to slip anything over their heads. Adam gave her a puzzled look and seemed to be sizing her up. Then he reached for his own T-shirt and ripped it open. "I don't know what I'm doing here, but... Try this."

Jasmine stepped into the shirt, and they worked it over her hips. Then he tied a knot at one shoulder and stepped back to assess his handiwork.

What a bizarre effect. She burst out laughing. "Wow. Amazing lover and fashion designer."

He gave her a quick kiss on the lips. "I'd love to explore that first one, but I think we need to hustle. Ready to run?"

Tramping through the woods had a new dimension of difficulty with all the metal dangling from her wrists. Plus, she was damn cold and soaking wet. They bushwhacked

for home. In the darkness, they hoped to find the ties that marked the trails they had established earlier that day.

Jasmine lagged behind Adam's powerful strides, exhausted but refusing to slow them down. When he stopped and looked at her, she made a futile attempt to look robust.

"Climb on."

"What?"

"I'm carrying you." Adam stood with his back to her, their linked hands at his waist. "C'mon. Piggyback. You need a break."

"Then let's take a break. You can't carry me. Not in these woods."

"Like hell." He glanced over his shoulder at her. "I'll get my way. And it would be fun to throw you over my shoulder, but I think you'd be more comfortable on my back."

With a heavy sigh, Jasmine climbed onto his back. He gave a powerful hoist and lifted her high, and she clung around his waist with her legs. As if she were a mere bug on his back, he powered his way in the dark woods. She had to admit, it felt wonderful to be off her feet. She held his broad, bare shoulders and rested her head against his neck, their linked hands tight against his chest. He smelled like man.

He covered a lot of ground. Every now and then, he gave her a boost, but she got the impression this was not a big effort for him. She swooned on the inside.

"Adam, we need a plan."

"We need to get home safe; then we'll plan. I don't know when or where that ugly red ponytail is going to pop out of the woods."

"We can't tell Dianna. Jethro said Red would know. He'd come after us—maybe her. The minute we walk in the door, Dianna's going to see our handcuffs. Don't you suppose that'll raise some questions?"

He stopped and let her legs ease to the ground and turned to look at her. She watched thoughts fly through his mind as his eyes searched hers. As untimely as it was, all she wanted to do was run her fingers over his sweaty, hard muscles and feast on his lips. His strength turned her on so much.

He sighed. “You're right. We can't go home like this. How are we going to get these damn things off?” Adam fell silent, lost in thought. Then he pulled her into his strong chest, and she listened to his heartbeat.

“Jas, do you remember exactly where we were when they grabbed us?”

“Maybe. Kinda. No.” She shrugged. “You're the navigator.”

“My phone is in the backpack. We have to get that.” He turned for her to hop on again.

“I can walk. Thanks for the break.”

They hiked farther and finally arrived at the fateful spot. Adam's backpack rested on the ground, right where they'd stopped. He rummaged inside for his phone and flipped it open. Everything else in the pack was soggy, but he'd buried the phone deep in a pocket. He nodded to Jasmine. It worked.

“Are you going to call Dianna?”

“Yeah. She's probably pretty worried. What's our story?” He looked back at the phone. “It's just past midnight. We got lost.” He shrugged. “That's the best I've got. Can you come up with anything better?”

“We've been taking shelter at that logging shed.” She giggled. “Tell her we've been making love in the rain.” Then with silly enthusiasm, she added, “Tell her we were trying to shake loose my first orgasm.”

Adam looked at her in stunned silence. Then he shook his head and laughed. “God, you're weird. How can we be out here in a life-or-death struggle, and you make a joke—about *that*, of all things?” He shook her in playful frustration. Then he leaned down and kissed her hard, holding her head and driving his tongue inside.

Jasmine's knees went weak, and she reached her hand around to feel his ass. The cuffs and chain weighed her down, but she'd wanted to feel that ass for months. Yeah, it was as wonderful as she'd imagined. She slid her hand up and toyed at the waistband of his jeans.

He pulled away. “Jas, girl. We'll get our chance. But let's get out of this little pickle first.”

Little pickle. *Hot damn*, he was cute. In the darkness, the screen of his cell phone illuminated his chest. She leaned in and kissed his rock hard pecs, sculpted and defined perfectly.

“Ah, Jas.” Adam pulled her up to his lips for one more deep, hot kiss. Then he backed away with the equivalent of an *aha*! “I know how to get these off.”

He called Dianna. Jasmine heard muffled yelling when Adam pulled the phone away to protect his eardrum.

“We just got a little lost, Dianna.” He pulled the phone away again—more muffled hysterics.

“She's fine.” A long pause. He held the phone out to Jasmine. “She wants to talk to you.”

Jasmine took the phone and heard Dianna's soft voice. She'd vented the worst on her brother. “Are you okay? What the hell did Adam do to you out there today? You must be frozen. Can you make it back all right?”

“Ah, we're—I'm fine—we just—we're—I'm not cold.”

Adam took the phone again. “Dianna, we're real close to the Emmetsburg Dam. We called Bruce Bastian, and he's on his way to pick us up. He'll give us a ride home. Oh, here he is now. We're fine. Talk to you in the morning.”

Jasmine heard Dianna's objections as Adam closed his phone. She glanced around in bewilderment. “Here *who* is?”

“Geez, it's hard to lie to her. But this is just the beginning. Now I have to call Bruce and ask him for some handcuff keys.”

Adam punched the numbers and waited. “Bruce. This is Adam Vianetti. How's it going?”

Jasmine listened to half the conversation and got a pretty clear indication Bruce, whoever he was, was in bed.

“I need your help tonight, Bruce. Kind of an embarrassing situation.” Adam raised his cuffed hand in the air, and Jasmine's arm went with it.

“Well, ah, *he he*. You don't happen to have a skeleton key to open handcuffs, do you? *He he*.” A long pause. “You might say that.” Another long pause. “I was wondering if you could meet us at the Emmetsburg Dam?” He rolled his eyes at Jasmine. “Half an hour is fine.”

Adam closed his phone and rubbed his eyes with his handcuffed hand. “How in the hell am I going to explain this?”

“Who's Bruce?”

“The cop in Emmetsburg. He went to school with Dianna.” He stooped to pick up the backpack and slung it over his shoulder. “Let's get to the dam. On the way, I need to come up with one helluva story. In my wildest, kinkiest dreams, I can't think of why I'd have you bound with chains.” He leaned in and kissed her quickly. “Let's go.”

They slogged in silent darkness toward the Emmetsburg Dam, soaked to the bone from the dripping canopy. Owls hooted back and forth from distant corners of the forest, and Jasmine wondered if they were watching them—two weird, wet creatures wandering around at midnight.

“Would you like me to carry you again, Jas?”

“Sure.” She climbed onto his back and noticed how warm his skin felt, despite being wet. No matter what happened next, she felt so safe up there on his shoulders. She kissed his neck and tasted salty sweat.

“Beautiful girl, you're gonna have to stop that. If I have to ask Bruce to remove handcuffs from my girlfriend, it might come off better if I don't have an erection at the time.”

Jasmine giggled in his ear and loved hearing him use the word girlfriend.

“Have you ever been to the dam, Jasmine?”

“Course not.”

“It's beautiful, especially in the fall. And now after the rain, I bet it's roaring.”

Long before they arrived at the dam, Jasmine heard the rushing water. Then Adam lowered her feet to the ground, and they stood downriver from a twenty-foot cascading

wall of water. In the brooding moonlight, Jasmine only had a hint of the powerful, swirling pools at the bottom, but she could tell it was awesome.

Adam stood behind her and spoke into her ear. “Let's come back here some night when the moon is full—and we don't have iron on our wrists.” His words and his whispers sent a delicious shiver up her spine.

They climbed the sloppy trail to the top of the dam. A quick hike through the woods brought them out in the open, where Lost Lake Road ended in a gravel turnaround.

Adam checked the phone. “Might be a few minutes before Bruce gets here. Are you cold?” He straightened the soaking wet shirt on her shoulder and gazed at her breasts. Jasmine felt her nipples come to attention under the scrutiny.

“You're so sexy.”

“You don't think I'm scrawny?”

He continued to eye her chest with his hands on her hips. “You're perfect. Absolutely perfect.” He kissed her lips gently, and Jasmine fell another ten thousand feet more in love with him.

He shook his head. “Let's sit and rest.” He led her to the edge of the gravel, and they sat in the moist grass.

“Adam, you know how I came to Lost Lake Lodge. How did you and Dianna come here?”

“My parents ran the lodge as a hunting and fishing getaway. They struggled constantly to draw business out here. When they died, Dianna and I knew we had to make a change or say goodbye to it forever. I'm just following her lead with the addiction retreats. She thinks I have business savvy, but I'm winging it all the time.”

Jasmine didn't believe it. He was the most capable, constant man she'd ever known. “What happened to your parents?”

“They died in a plane crash. Small Cessna about thirty miles north of here. My dad was a pilot.”

“How awful. How old were you?”



“I was in college. Dianna was working as a psychologist down in the city. She'd always dreamed of doing something like this. And so far, so good.”

“A lot of good. You guys help so many people. You must be proud of that.”

He shrugged. “I just pay the bills and keep the doors open. Dianna does the real work.”

\* \* \*

Headlights illuminated the road, and Adam questioned whether they were hidden well enough. He remained vigilant of Red and Jethro, although Jethro seemed to have been in earnest in his desire to help. For safety's sake, he pulled Jasmine into the trees, out of sight.

A police vehicle pulled into the turnaround, with Bruce Bastian's unmistakable bushy blond head in the driver's seat. When he stepped out of the car, Adam saw he wore plainclothes—he was off duty and had surely been in bed. For better or worse, Adam led Jasmine out to meet him and hoped he would produce a key with few questions.

Fat chance. Shirtless and handcuffed to a beautiful young girl was bound to draw questions.

“Jesus, Vianetti. What kinda games are you into?” Bruce looked at them with a mix of shock and admiration.

“Bruce, this is Jasmine Bly. She came to us as a lodger a year ago. Lucky for us, she decided to stay on and help. Now she's part of our team.”

“Nice to meet you.” Bruce scrutinized the hardware dangling from Jasmine's limbs and then turned to Adam. “A part of the team. So...you chained her up?”

“Ah, all in good fun. *He he he*. Right, Jas?”

“Oh, sure. In fact, it was my idea. I didn't know there were no keys.”

“How could you not know?” Bruce looked incredulous.

“What she means is, she assumed we had them, but they fell out of the bottom of our backpack. Some raccoon is probably enjoying the heck out of 'em right now.”

Bruce gave Adam a long, uncomfortable look.

“So, do you have a key? Can you help us?”

“No promises, but one of these should work.” The officer held up a Barney Fife ring of keys. “Those cuffs don't look like police issue. Not much more than toys. Let's see...”

They stood in the headlights of the squad car, and Adam watched Bruce slide keys over the ring, eliminating this one and that one. He pulled one out and tried it. Nope. Tried another. Nope. After twenty or so keys, Jasmine gave Adam a “now what?” look. Then they heard a *click*. Her wrist slipped out of the cuff, and with another *click*, Adam was free as well.

“Oh, man. What a relief.” He looked at Jasmine and had the strangest, fleeting feeling of regret. Now she could slip away from him.

“How many cases of beer are you willing to ante up for hush money? Stories like this are fun to tell at the poker table.” Bruce jingled his keys at Adam.

“Bruce, consider me your personal beer delivery boy. But you're not quite done.” He gently raised Jasmine's other arm with the cuff and attached chain.

“Holy crap, Vianetti. You're one kinky bastard.” He gave Adam another long look that made him want to shrink to the size of a bug.

Jasmine came to his rescue. “Hey, this is my fetish. He was just playing along. I'm lucky he's even speaking to me after this.”

Bruce used the same key to open the cuff. She was free. Adam's instincts told him to grab her and hold her snug in his arms. Instead he ran his hand down her slender arm.

“I suppose you need a ride home?” Still wearing a look of amusement, Bruce took a few back steps and slung the heavy key ring through the squad's open window and onto the front seat.

They climbed into the squad car and rode in awkward silence for a few moments. “So, is this a Tarzan and Jane fantasy or what?” Bruce motioned to Adam's bare chest.

“Something like that. You should try it sometime.” Adam looked out the window and saw his own stupid reflection in the glass. He looked over at the speedometer—what, was Bruce only doing twenty?

“So the chains don't get in the way? Did you chain her to a tree?”

Adam shifted in his seat. "It really didn't work out the way we thought. Let's just leave it at that. Hey, ah, you might want to skip over this situation the next time you see Dianna."

"I understand. Awkward. But you tell that lovely sister of yours to call me sometime. She works too hard." They pulled into the lodge drive.

"Will do, Bruce. And thanks." Adam shook hands with the officer and clapped him on the shoulder. "I'm your next beer run. For sure."

Jasmine waved demurely as they watched Bruce drive away, and the two former captives stood free in the silent, early morning darkness. Finally he pulled her close, no chains, no cuffs, no anvils.

"Jasmine. Is it really you in my arms? Safe?"

"I have such vivid dreams. I think this must be one of them."

Adam leaned in and inhaled her scent and remembered how amazing it felt to sink inside her. Suddenly the image of Red poisoned the moment.

"This isn't over. You know that, don't you?"

"What do you mean?"

"What Jethro said. About keeping this quiet. It doesn't feel right." He still held her tight in his arms with her head on his chest.

"We can't tell, Adam. I believe him. Jethro is no saint, but he set us free. He knows what he's talking about. Red's moving on. He has to."

Adam gave Jasmine an intense look. "And he wants to take you with him."

## Chapter Six

At six o'clock the next morning, Jasmine was wide awake. The bustle of the lodgers had not begun, but she heard the clink of pans in the kitchen. She knew it wasn't Dianna. When each new session began, she turned the cooking duties over to another helper so she could focus on her caseload. It was probably Lois, the yoga instructor. Jasmine had no desire to bump into her—or anyone else, for that matter.

She pulled out her yoga mat and began her morning ritual. Everything felt different, from her fingertips to her toes. But the core of the newness beat straight from her heart. She couldn't believe Adam had held her in his arms and made love to her. Was it even real? Had they spawned a love affair out of such twisted events?

It was because of that awful man. Adam would have never allowed anything to happen between them. He said so. She wasn't sure what to expect when she saw Adam—that awkward first meeting. Would he be attracted to her without the thunder and rain and handcuffs? She'd been so honest with him. Nowhere to hide now.

“Ah, this could be complicated.” She stretched to her full five feet four inches and released. “Gram? What do you suppose the cards say?”

Jasmine padded across her small room and grabbed a tattered black leather purse from her nightstand. Coiling her legs beneath her, she sat on the rug and pulled a creamy white satin cloth from the purse and spread it smoothly in front of her. Then she pulled a deck of tarot cards from the purse and sat in silence with them clasped between her folded hands.

She inhaled several deep, cleansing breaths to center herself and imagined a river of energy flowing into her head and down through her spine. *Please guide my intuition to the truth and meaning of this situation.*

She felt the familiar warmth in her right hand. With another deep breath and eyes closed, she shuffled the cards slowly. Then one by one, she dealt eight cards face up, in the shape of a wheel. She smiled. Her wheel was dominated by the suit of Cups. This showed promise. In the southern position at the bottom of the wheel was the Major Arcana card of strength. This represented the harrowing path she and Adam just traveled. Triumph over adversity. Clear enough.

In the north, her future, the Knight of Cups sat boldly and damn near winked at her. That was Adam, a messenger of love. In the east was The World, the card of learning. Sure—on her pathway to a future with Adam, she would need to better herself. Expand her mind. Like her plans to attend Adirondack College.

“I know, I know,” she chided aloud. “Objectivity is crucial in reading for yourself.” But really, this spread was a no-brainer. Cups and happy cards. The west and in between cards, all leading to her future with Adam, indicated love and harmony.

Another deep breath, and she put a single card in the middle. Her destiny. She furrowed her brow. Okay, this one was more complicated. Or it could be. The Wheel of Fortune. This represented a situation out of her control—in someone else's hands. Adam? Fate? The next card would tell...

With an uneasy feeling and a hand that trembled for no good reason, she flipped the final card in a crossed position over the last. Her heart flumped as she stared at the Eight of Swords. That's not the card she wanted to see. The Wheel of Fortune was not in good hands. The Eight of Swords meant *watch your back*.

\* \* \*

She showered and dressed for the day, still feeling uneasy about the card that crossed her destiny. Her grandma had warned her about readings for herself. They could easily be misinterpreted, clouded by wants and fears. She hadn't taken enough time to clear herself. Simple as that.

Jasmine slipped out the door and into the laundry room. With thoughts of Adam's perfect kiss and her *almost* orgasm, she sorted the big basket of dirty laundry into piles. When she happened to glance out the window toward Lost Lake, she saw Adam standing on the dock in the morning sunlight. She couldn't help herself and hurried out the side

door and ran down the slope to the water's edge. His broad shoulders stretched his T-shirt, and his tight little ass looked so grabbable in his faded Levi's. Stepping lightly to avoid shifting the dock, she managed to get close before he turned to her. A smile softened his face.

“Good morning, beautiful. God, I'm happy to see you.”

Jasmine stepped close to him and wanted to hold and kiss him. Instead she inhaled him. “I woke up this morning wondering if you would be.”

“Happy to see you? Why wouldn't I be?”

“I thought maybe you would have some regrets. Or maybe you're hoping I won't make a big deal out of it.”

He laughed. “Make a big deal out of it, Jasmine. I'm crazy about you. It's a struggle not to throw you down on this dock and make love to you right now.”

“Really?”

“Really.” He ran his hand through his waves of dark hair. “I'm not sure what to do about Red and Jethro, though. They can't go around chaining people up. We need to report this.”

“I'll do whatever you think is best, Adam. But consider—maybe silence puts the whole thing behind us. I'll stay close for a while, until Red leaves town. His plans were foiled. His partner ditched him. He'll move on, just like Jethro said.”

“We're responsible for a lot of people here at the lodge.” He looked out over the lake again. “After sleeping on it, despite Jethro's warning—we have to go to the police. And just be more vigilant from now on, until they're caught.” He looked back to Jasmine. “But we should tell Dianna first. Let's catch her after breakfast. Then I'll make another call to Bruce.”

Jasmine tried to muster a smile. She trusted Adam's judgment and knew in her heart he was right. But she also felt she had the inside track on men like Red. She'd learned on the street that rats didn't live long. As far as she was concerned, she and Adam were safe and unharmed, and nowhere near a man with a needle. In her world, there were some things law enforcement didn't have to know. In her *former* world...

She caught Adam studying her. “Did you shower this morning?” He pulled his hands from the pockets of his jeans.

What a strange question. “Of course I did. Why?”

“Then this bath will be a little redundant.” He picked her up in his arms and tossed her into the lake. Jasmine squealed and plunged into the water. She stood on the sandy bottom and blinked up at him.

“What the fuck is your problem, Vianetti?”

Adam didn't answer. He took a few steps back and ran to the end of the dock, then leaped into the air, grabbing his knees in time for the entry. He landed with a huge *splooosh*. He didn't surface but swam to Jasmine underwater and grabbed her around the waist, pulling her under. She came up gasping and clung to his arms.

“Adam, what in the world are you on this morning?”

“I needed to hold you, just like this. Nobody can see us down here. And I can kiss you.” He crushed his mouth onto hers and folded her completely into his embrace. With breathless passion, Jasmine moaned and tasted the cool lake water in their kiss.

“I'm not going to be able to be in the same room with you without touching you, Jas.” He nibbled at her lips and her ears and down her neck.

“Oh.” That little word swept all the air from her lungs.

Adam's hands roamed her body under the water while his mouth roamed her neck. She wanted to rip the shirt right off his shoulders. What was the point of keeping muscles like his under wraps?

“You know, now we'll have even more to explain to Dianna.”

“This will take the focus off last night.” He kissed her again.

## Chapter Seven

Jasmine sat alone in her room and pushed a soggy pancake through a puddle of syrup. The first breakfast with the new lodgers always stressed her nerves and spoiled her appetite. Everyone was subdued and suspicious—she remembered the feeling so well. One year ago, she'd sat alone at a table full of people and pushed pancakes around then too. She'd felt like a bug under a microscope. From her current vantage point, she knew that was a poor comparison. They weren't bugs, but cocoons. Everyone in the room was taking care of internal business, and Dianna was there to help, when they were ready.

She jumped from a knock on her door. Assuming it was time to clean up, she grabbed her tray and opened the door to Adam's soft smile. “We have a problem.” In contrast to his dire announcement, he drew his gaze down her body and back up again, punctuating his travels with a wink. The five-second trip made Jasmine feel sexy as hell.

Jasmine stepped away from the door and put her tray back on the table. Adam slipped in and shut the door, pausing to look around briefly. “Hey, it's nice in here. I like the color. When did you paint?”

“Last winter. Adam, what kind of problem?”

“Lavender. It suits you.”

Jasmine huffed.

“I wouldn't go out there right now.” Adam motioned in the direction of the great room. “The place is nuts with TV cameras, and there's a reporter here from KUNY.”

“Reporters? Has something happened? Is it Red?” Jasmine's heart rate accelerated.

“No, no. Nothing like that.” He put his hands on her arms and slid them warmly downward to grasp her hands. “The lodge is going to be in some feature story on the public television station. Dianna's pretty fired up.” He shrugged. “We knew they were



planning this at some point. They called yesterday and arranged to come out for the start of the new session.”

“Adam, that's wonderful!” Jasmine's hands froze after one clap. The worried look on Adam's face told her this was no time for celebration. “What's the problem?”

“This can't be a good time to tell the world that the lodge manager is making sex videos and dragging women around in chains.”

“Adam Vianetti, that's not what happened, and you know it.” She feigned an angry shove to his shoulder.

“I know. But still, it might kinda overshadow the warm fuzzies. Know what I mean? A bright happy spotlight on the success of the lodge, followed by a searing interrogation lamp.”

Jasmine cocked her head to one side, puzzled by Adam's words. “Adam, you have nothing to be ashamed of. You've done nothing wrong.”

Adam continued his gentle travels on her arms and looked absently at her lips. “It's just bad press. I should have protected you. What kind of man—”

“Stop.” She hushed him with a finger, then ran her hand tenderly over his cheek and forced his gaze to her eyes. He really did feel guilty about this. Jasmine considered her next words and studied his face. “Dianna deserves this moment in the sun. We'll wait to report this crime.” She emphasized the last word. “But Adam, Red's not a lousy neighborhood punk. He's an evil man, and there was nothing you could do to stop this.”

“We'll wait,” Adam repeated. “A day, no more.” He inhaled and blew an anguished cloud from his lungs. “This story will air tonight. We'll talk to Dianna first thing in the morning, and then the three of us will go see Bruce.”

\* \* \*

Jasmine hurried to make the morning beds and finish the laundry, trying to stay far, far away from any reporter. Dianna had poked her head into the kitchen and asked her to make a grocery run before the noon meal. Jasmine hoped maybe, *just maybe*, she'd have time to swing into Adirondack College for some application materials on the way home. She felt more enthusiastic this morning about that prospect. After all, her card in the east was The World—a thirst for knowledge. She felt damn thirsty.

Who was she kidding? Her enthusiasm came from only one source, and he walked around in faded Levi's and had muscles of steel. Everywhere she turned, her mind's eye saw Adam's gorgeous brown eyes winking at her. She wanted to be somebody—for him. With her street-rat history, she wasn't good enough for Adam Vianetti.

She scraped some yuck off one of the bathroom sinks and caught a glimpse of herself in the mirror. She wasn't skin and bones anymore—not like when she first came to the lodge. Her cheeks had plumped out a little. She smiled broadly at herself and checked her teeth. Was that the good thing about mainlining? She'd spared her teeth. They were still in good shape. With a sigh, she swiped once more along the sinks.

Midmorning she grabbed the car keys and the grocery list and headed down the porch steps. She glanced to the garage and saw Adam leaning like a cowboy against the door frame, watching her. He motioned with his finger for her to come over.

*Walk calmly, Jas. Don't bolt up to him like a maniac.* Holy cow, he looked handsome with his dark waves tousled and the sleeves of his plain white T-shirt stretched to their limit. She noticed the muscles of his arms bulged out—for no reason at all. It's not like he was in the middle of a log toss. He was just standing there. He was just that damn buff. All her thoughts tumbled over one another as she strode across the parking lot to the garage, hoping her own skinny limbs weren't swinging like an idiot.

"Hi." That was all she could muster. This was Adam. Her friend. Why was she suddenly back in sixth grade?

"Hi. Are you heading into town?"

"Dianna needs some last minute things for lunch. Makes me happy to think even *she* forgets stuff sometimes."

"Would you be offended if I told you I'd like to make love to you tonight?"

Jasmine swallowed. "I'm sorry, Adam, but you're too late. Another guy just asked me the same thing, and I already said yes."

He grinned. "Yeah?" He stepped closer to her. "I'd like a word with this guy." He stood just inches from her and put his hands on the door frame above her head. She looked up into his eyes and felt his hot breath.

"I suppose I could cancel." Was she melting?

“You're mine, Jasmine. I want you in my arms under real sheets. Tonight, after lights out. I'll knock.” He winked at her and stepped back. “We have unfinished business.”

Jasmine walked away on wobbly knees.

“Oh, and Jas?”

She turned to him.

“Your ass drives me crazy.”

\* \* \*

Jasmine returned from her trip to town and was happy to see the KUNY van gone. She entered the kitchen with an armload of canvas bags. Dianna greeted her with a broad smile.

“Jas, thanks. Let me help you.” Dianna grabbed the bags from her arms and set them on the counter.

“So? How did the interview and stuff go? Are you happy with the story, Di?”

“I am.” Dianna giggled and held her clasped hands to her lips. “I think it's going to be a good bit of promotion for us. Even if it *is* only shown locally. I think there are folks who think Adam and I still run a hunting lodge out here.”

Jasmine saw the pride in Dianna's eyes. Rightfully so. She was a hero.

Dianna began to fish items from the bags one by one. Yogurt, vanilla, M&M's. Then she pulled out the application packet for Adirondack College.

“What's this?”

Jasmine's heart tumbled to the floor. “Oh. I stopped by the college. Just to see what they offer. Did you need almonds? Because I saw on the menu you were making those smoothies everybody loves, but you didn't have almonds on the list. I bought some anyway.” She shrugged, hoping she had diverted the conversation.

“I didn't even know you were thinking about this, Jas. This is great! Come sit.”

Dianna grabbed Jasmine's hand and the packet and screeched a stool up to the counter. “Have you talked with anyone in admissions? I know lots of people up there. What kind of classes are you interested in?”

“Dianna, really. I'm just thinking about it. You know I'm not very smart. It would probably be a waste of time.”

Dianna closed her eyes and took a deep breath. “Do you know how much it breaks my heart to hear you say things like that?” She opened her eyes and looked squarely into Jasmine's. They were just like Adam's. Brown, almost black, with thick, dark lashes. Today she wore her curly dark hair pulled back in a clip.

“Jasmine, once you open up that first textbook, you'll start a fire. I know you will. You should do this. Bring this stuff up to my room later, after lights out. I'll help you figure it out.” She grabbed Jasmine's hand and squeezed. “Now, what do you say we make some lunch? You saved my dessert plans with the almonds. Good thinking.”

\* \* \*

Adam sat on the hearth of the stone fireplace and slurped his almond smoothie. He couldn't take his eyes off Jasmine, although he tried not to be obvious. He watched her bustle around and grab dirty dishes and hand out drinks. She wore a simple blue sundress that showed off her slender arms with the tiny muscle bulge. He knew she'd been working on that little bulge. He often saw her on her evening runs with her one-pound hand weights. Whatever she was doing, it was working beautifully.

“Did you and Jasmine get some new trails made?”

Adam jumped at the sound of Dianna's intrusion into his horny thoughts. “Ah, yeah. We did pretty well—two new trails and part of a third. Then the rain came. I'm sorry if we worried you. I think I'm getting rusty at reading Dad's compass.”

He caught her eye and watched hers narrow. “I get the feeling there's something you're not telling me, Adam.”

“Dianna, are we having a group session right after lunch?” A voice from the dining table saved him from his sister's powerful intuition.

She got up and blew a frustrated puff of air into his face. On her way over to the table, she stopped and turned, pointing a commanding finger at Adam. “You have to tell me about this. I mean it.”

He sighed and caught Jasmine's eye and gave her a quick wink. She floated over to him with a pitcher of frothy white liquid. “Refill?”

“No, thanks. Do you have any idea how beautiful you are?”

She smiled bashfully, and his cock went from zero to sixty in his jeans. *How did she do that?*

“Dianna wants to talk to me about college at lights out. Can you come to my room when we're finished?”

“Count on it.”

“Are we going to tell her about us?”

“I suppose. Although this clandestine stuff is fun.”

Jasmine didn't laugh. “Will Dianna be okay with us, Adam? Maybe she has higher hopes for her little brother.”

“Are you kidding? She'll be thrilled. She loves you. That part of the story I'm not worried about. She'll flip her lid when we tell her how it all came about.”

Dianna came over to the two of them with a handful of papers. “Jasmine, would you mind helping Lois in the kitchen? If you ask me, her daily meditations don't do a thing for her disposition. She's in a snit.”

Adam watched Jasmine float away and mentally cursed the flouncy sundress that tented her perfect ass from his view.

“I noticed you managed to avoid any on-camera interviews this morning. Since when is my little brother so bashful?”

“You're the main attraction out here, Di. My job is behind the scenes.”

“That reminds me.” She held up the papers. “A couple of the lodgers agreed to be interviewed. I quickly printed up an 'I'm agreeing to this' form for them to sign. Does that cover us?”

“Hmm. Good question.” Adam grabbed the papers and looked them over. “Let me talk to Roger. We pay him a legal advisory fee and rarely ask him anything.” He gave his sister a tap on the arm. “What time does this air? Are we all gathering to watch?”

“Eight o'clock on the 'Adirondack Update.' We'll probably have it on in the great room, but I don't want to showcase it.” Dianna paused to study the rocks in the fireplace

behind Adam. “This is a really quiet group, and everybody has walls up a mile high. I don't think a bunch of bravado will help me at this point.”

Adam saw her wheels turning and wondered what approach she'd take for high walls. “Well, I know I'll be watching. And I'll record it too.” He waved the papers loosely to indicate his next move. “If you see Jasmine, tell her I had to go to town. I'll see—I—we made plans for later. Just tell her I'll see her tonight. Okay?”

“Whatever you say.” She gave Adam a sanguine smile that made him realize he probably wasn't keeping much of a secret where Jasmine was concerned. *Wait till she hears the rest...*

\* \* \*

At lights out, Jasmine's heart fluttered, and she sure didn't feel like talking about college planning with Dianna. She'd spent the last hour of the evening sweeping and folding and washing and dusting. Hadn't she? She could barely recall anything but the feeling of Adam's delicious lips and his rock-hard muscles.

She blew a heavy sigh and tapped lightly on Dianna's door. When she opened it, Jasmine swallowed a pillow of guilt. Dianna looked exhausted and probably would much rather curl up in her own bed than hold Jasmine's hand through the mundane college catalog.

“Di, we can do this another time. You look tired.”

“Are you kidding me? I've been thinking about this all day. This is so exciting.”

Jasmine softened. She loved Dianna with all her heart. She wanted to be somebody for her too. She wanted to make her proud.

“What are you thinking of studying? Anything in particular?”

The words on Jasmine's lips were more of the usual, lamenting her own stupidity, but she caught herself. With a humble glance at her hands, she said, “Counseling. I think I'd like to help others, like you've helped me. Do you think I could do that? I might have some insight—”

Dianna's arms swept around her neck, and she pecked Jasmine's cheek. “You'd make a terrific counselor. I really think so. People respond to you, Jas. I've seen it.”

They spent the next hour mapping a path, taking baby steps at first, to a four-year degree. In Jasmine's estimation, the whole thing seemed like a road map to the moon. She had as much likelihood of getting there.

But she had to admit, it sounded exciting. A counselor? She liked the idea of battling her familiar enemy on others' behalf, armed with education and new skills. More defeatist voices stampeded over her excitement. *Maybe I could be the gal who sharpens the counselor's pencils.* She looked over at her warrior friend.

“Thanks for your encouragement, Dianna. It means everything to me.”

“You always have my support, Jas. I hope you know that.” Dianna rubbed her arm warmly as they walked to the door. “Good night. Sleep tight.”

“You too, Dianna.”

\* \* \*

Adam stepped to the threshold of Jasmine's door and tapped. When she didn't answer, he opened the door quietly and walked in.

“Jas?” he said softly. A jar candle burned on her nightstand, and he inhaled—*jasmine*. Of course. Then he heard her shower running. His dick responded to the sound like a divining rod sensing water. He smiled to himself and opened the bathroom door.

Through the shower door he saw her perfect body, obscured by the water running down the glass. Ah, that wasn't good enough. He quietly slid the door open and saw her backside—holy fuck, that was a nice ass. Perched up high and narrowing at just the right...

“Adam!”

“Was this supposed to be private?”

She turned to face him and covered her breasts with her arms. He indulged in a delicious drink down her flat tummy to the totally edible bush of hair.

She reached to turn the shower off and slicked the water out of her hair. With her arms over her head, he saw her in all her glory. Every last inch of her beautiful skin, soaking wet and ready to be licked.

“Can you hand me a towel?”

Yeah, right. Adam reached his hand to help her out of the shower. “You don't need a towel.”

Her grabbed her wet body and crushed his lips to hers. She was hot and slippery, and he thought he might come in his jeans. He lifted her into his arms and carried her out of the bathroom and over to the bed. They stood in the candlelight, and Adam fought his urge to thunder ahead. *Take it slow.*

Jasmine slithered her arms around his shoulders and toyed with the spools of hair at his neck. She licked her lips and looked into his eyes. *Holy shit*—one simple movement, one little look, and his dick hardened farther and throbbed for attention. She melted his spine with a delicate tap dance of kisses on his lips and down his neck. He swallowed and ran his hands along her silken waistline, fighting every impulse to throw her onto the bed and fuck her silly.

Adam's shirt went over his head, and Jasmine smiled with approval. He'd never felt so hard in his life and loved the way she ogled him. It was worth all those damn bicep curls and bench presses. He tightened when she ran her fingers over the surface of his chest. He almost blew his wad when she followed her touch with wet lips.

Jasmine licked butterflies on his skin and made her way down his abdomen. He felt the heat followed by a cool breeze as the air evaporated from her wet trails. When she unzipped his jeans, the breath escaped his lungs and would not reenter. He forced himself to inhale.

Jasmine made his blood boil with her smooth, buttery touch and turned him into a wild animal. Had he fallen that hard? Why did she have such power over him?

His pants slipped to the floor, and Jasmine draped scorching hot lips on his dick and sucked up hard on his knob. “Ah, fuck.” Because she was so good at *that*.

He closed his eyes and let her go. How many damn times could he come tonight? This was supposed to be her night. But she was so good...

Her hand held his cock and pumped perfectly, the tip bathed in her hot mouth. Her tongue had a million moves, and she wasn't sparing any of them. He rolled his hips gently but let her find her rhythm—a damn fine rhythm.

“Oh, Jas. You're amazing.”



The action of her hand went quicker, and the flick of her tongue got hotter. The heady scent of the candle wafted into his mind, and his hands caressed her hair. All that existed for him was the smell of jasmine and the feel of her on his dick.

He shot his seed into her throat and called out her name. She'd done it to him again. He was an animal. He whimpered as the last of his hot juice pulsed into her mouth.

Enough. He lifted her to him and threw her onto the bed. This girl was going to come like a freight train before the night was over. He planted his lips over hers and tasted his own cum on her tongue. He was hard again—or still. With his body pressing into hers, he grabbed her hands and pinned them above her head. He was so fucking turned on at the moment he didn't know where to go first. He smothered her harder with his mouth and ground his dick against the rise of her pubic bone.

“Adam.”

Her small voice sifted out through his hot breath. His heart thundered, and his dick felt like a serpent.

“Please slow down. I'm not going anywhere.”

He breathed in deeply. Slow down. He let her hands go and slid off her. She drove him nearly mad with desire. *Slow down.*

“I'm sorry. I can't control myself. I want you so much.”

“I love your passion. But we have all night.”

He slid his hand down her flat stomach and rested it on the soft, spooly hair of her mound. He was a second away from touching her hot folds, but he stopped.

“Tell me what you want, Jas. What turns you on?”

She shifted onto her side to face him. The lovely curve of her small waist rising to her hips did nothing to ease his desire. He swallowed. It was her turn.

“No one has ever asked me that.”

“Well?”

She made tiny circles on his chest with a delicate finger. “I want to feel you inside me again. Your manhood is so perfect—it fills me up.”

“My manhood?”

She smiled and batted a thousand dark eyelashes at him. “Adam, I get the feeling you're nervous about this orgasm thing. Don't be. You thrill me just by walking into a room. The feeling of you inside me is all I need. No heroics. No calisthenics. Just make love to me.” As she spoke, she walked her fingers down his chest and spread the wet puddle of precum on the tip of his dick. *Ahhh.*

She pushed him onto his back and straddled her legs over him and sat with his cock waving a salute between them. She held his gaze while her hand pulled up on his shaft. Then she lifted and ran the round tip in her wet pussy.

Adam rested his head back in anticipation. His ability to restrain himself had been pretty lousy so far. He felt the flames teasing his swollen dick and wrestled with his need to flip her over and take her hard and fast. When she began the slow, sweet descent and swallowed him into her tight space, he was glad he waited.

He watched her eyes shine as she slid up and down on his meat, a little smile curling at her lips. She rode him slowly with a fire that was beyond hot. He grabbed her hips to feel them stretched wide over his and her strong leg muscles flexing.

“Does this feel nice, Adam?”

He moaned in response and closed his eyes, thrusting up inside her. She lowered her body and kissed him, driving her tongue into his mouth and fucking him with greater energy, rising and falling in rhythm with her exhales into his lips. *Oh Lord, she was good at this too.*

But this was supposed to be hers. With that kind of heat and that kind of tight and that kind of gorgeous, he was a gasp away from losing it.

“Oh, Adam.” She was breathless and working hard. Too hard, in his estimation. With a powerful sweep, he lifted her and spun them both, still buried inside her. He grabbed her legs behind her knees and pinned them back, penetrating to new depths.

“Oh God. Yes, yes, yes.” Her arms went over her head, and her hips thrust upward. He felt the spasm of muscles clutching his cock and caught her gaze. This was her first orgasm, and it was beautiful. So beautiful. He kept pumping hard into her, and she trembled beneath him. He let her legs go and sank down onto her.

Now she panted into his ear and buried her fingers in his hair. “Adam, I love you.” Her words were ethereal and far away, yet spoken directly into his heart. His next push sent his seed spilling out with a cry from his lips. She received his pulsing juice with her arms spread over the bed. “Give it to me, Adam.”

The release inside her was ecstasy. He was the luckiest man alive.

## Chapter Eight

*They walked hand in hand in a misty, sun-sprinkled forest. The early morning rays angled through the trees with a cathedral-like perfection and seemed to vaporize the dewy ground it touched. Adam's hand was warm and strong. The handcuffs linked their hands and gave her a sense of security. He would be with her forever.*

*They stopped and looked out over Lost Lake, calm and peaceful.*

*But in her next breath, Adam was drifting away in a boat. Red sat in the boat too. Neither man paid any attention to her as she screamed to get Adam to look at her. What happened to their cuffs?*

*“Adam, where are you going? Come back. Don't leave!”*

*But he sat in the boat and stared ahead. Her screams made no noise, no matter how hard she tried. Finally he looked at her and shook his head. He put his finger to his lips. Shhh.*

\* \* \*

Jasmine awoke in Adam's arms and blinked back tears. He was everything she'd ever dreamed of. Last night, he'd loved her completely. Oh, she wanted to do that again and again. She must have fallen asleep and cursed herself for not staying awake the whole night.

She drank in his features as he slept. His skin was tan, and a delicious dark shadow covered his strong jaw. She ran a finger down his cheek. He looked so sweet with his eyes closed. Normally when he looked at her, she saw intelligence and fun and a passion for everything. Now he just looked content.

He stirred and ran his hand down her back. “Good morning, beautiful.”

“Hi.”

“God, I’m a lucky man.”

“How old are you, Adam?”

“I’ll be thirty-one this August. Why? Are you thinking of kicking me out for a younger guy?”

“Not a chance. I just don’t know why you haven’t been scooped up already.”

“I haven’t made myself open to *scooping*. Not until you.”

Jasmine’s throat tightened, and she felt tears welling again. There had to be a catch. The other shoe would drop any minute, and her life would go back to sucking. Things like this didn’t happen to her.

Adam shifted up and supported himself on one elbow. “Tell me more about you. I know very little of your life before you came to the lodge.”

She blinked hard. “It’s not a happy story.”

“C’mon. Do you have other family besides your grandma? There had to be some boyfriends, stuff like that. I want to know.”

“I have an older brother. In fact, he’s the one who shot me up the first time. Kept me loaded for a month. Then he split.” She rolled over onto her stomach and perched on her elbows, still snuggled under the covers.

“That’s awful.”

“Yeah, my loving brother. Hope I never see him again.” She paused to consider the finality of her words and realized she meant them wholeheartedly. “I’ve had boyfriends. But you know? They always seemed to screw me over in the end. On the streets, it becomes every girl for herself. You don’t get too close to anybody. At least I didn’t.”

“How did you end up with your grandmother? Where are your parents?” Adam brushed her hair behind her ear, and his touch sweetened the bitterness. These were not good memories.

“Don’t know. I didn’t understand at the time, but now I realize my mom was a hooker.” She gave Adam a sheepish smile. “Maybe even a good one. She’d leave my brother and me alone at night behind a locked door. One morning, she never came home to unlock it. Finally somebody realized there were two kids starving to death in a closet.

The next thing I knew, I met my grandma for the first time.” Jasmine played with the fringed edge of the bedspread, replaying a history she rarely thought about anymore. “It actually opened up a good chapter for me.”

“Living with your grandma?” Adam played with the fringes too.

“Yes. She made us go to school and made learning seem important.” Jasmine arched her back for a cobra stretch. “She used to do card readings on the street corner. I loved watching her. Everybody called her Gypsy Bly.”

“You and your cards...” Adam inched closer and took a tiny nibble of her earlobe. Jasmine felt the blankets slip from her back, and the cool morning air kissed her skin, spawning a million little goose bumps. Adam's hand slid slowly down her back and over her bare ass. “This is the most delicious part of you.”

She let her head drop and rest on her arms. Her gaze drifted lazily over to him. “My butt? Here I thought you were crazy about the way I folded your shirts.” She watched his eyes feast on her body.

“You fold my shirts?” His hand continued its languid journey up and over her mounds.

“Of course I do. Who else did you think did it?”

He didn't answer but slid down behind her and out of view, still feeling her butt with his big hands. Then she felt his tongue leave wet trails along the surface.

“Hmmm. That's—ouch! Did you just bite me?”

“Maybe a little.”

Jasmine giggled. It felt darn good.

His hands slid between her legs, and she spread for him, feeling his fingers sweep the length of her slit. His hands were hypnotic, and he continued to nip and spill cool puddles on her butt.

When his fingers slipped inside, she cooed and arched her back to present more of herself to his touch. His strokes slid like butter over her clit and then reached deep into her pussy. She'd come for him in a second with moves like that.

He pulled his hand away long enough to shift between her legs and slip a pillow under her hips to lift them higher. She felt his hands glide along the roundness of her butt, and his fingers slipped back inside. *Oh, yeah. More.*

When his lips touched her for the first time, she moaned and invited him in. He plunged inside her with a rigid tongue and fluttered somewhere in her depths while his fingers gently pulled and milked her clit. The combined heat and stimulation roiled her senses, and oceans of her own juices flowed for him.

Her arms trembled beneath her head, and she mewled and begged for more and less and faster and slower. “Adam, Adam...” His name spilled from her lips with desperate need, and a wave of electricity rippled over every cell. His tongue blazed in her pussy, and she wished she could grab it with her muscles and hold it.

He pulled his mouth away and drove his fingers in its place with a rapid, relentless pulse that made her gasp. He'd found that special spot, and her senses exploded. His rhythm intensified, and Jasmine lost control. She screamed out something. Anything. *Don't stop.*

Her fingers clenched the sheets when she came, and she felt a gush of emotion erupt from some hidden source. She released everything to him with a satisfied coo, her heart beating wildly, her limbs weak. “You're amazing, Adam.”

She felt him leave the warmth of her loins and wished him back there. He grabbed her hips to lift her up, and she rose on her hands and knees. “We're not done, Jas.”

When his cock slid into her slippery pussy, she cried out. “Oh yes, Adam.”

He held her hips and crushed into her, touching a thousand secret spots deep inside. She bucked back toward him and tightened around his perfect cock. His breathing exploded into the room. He was lost in his desire, and it made her crazy to please him. She wanted him to feel the greatest pleasure, unlike anything he'd ever known.

“Harder, Adam. Take me. Take what you need.”

He was reduced to whimpers, still thrusting hard and deep and holding her firmly in his hands. “Come with me, Jas,” he pleaded.

He had no need to beg. Her body quivered in his hands as a wave of new life shot through her. She came with a euphoric shudder that shook her core. She whimpered into

the ethers, feeling Adam come hard inside her, forcing his seed into her, still thrusting, still reaching to claim her.

Jasmine's arms collapsed beneath her, and Adam draped forward onto her back, his cock still buried inside. She didn't want him to slip out. He filled her perfectly. The third orgasm of her life sent her into orbit, and returning to earth was too hard.

She listened in the silence to Adam's breathing with his arms coiled around her body, the weight of his chest on her back. She hoped he felt like she did. Blissfully replete.

"You're beautiful," he whispered into her hair. He slid his hands up around her waist and pulled his cock away, easing her hips back to the planet.

He melted down beside her and fell onto his back, bringing her with him. She had to ask.

"Did you like that?" Her voice was soft, just barely a whisper.

He chuckled deep inside his chest. "Jasmine, I've never come that close to blacking out during sex."

She smiled. *Good*. She lifted her head and looked at him. "Can we do it again?"

He chuckled again. "Give me a few minutes." He drew his hand down her back and over her ass again.

"You really have a thing for butts, don't you."

"I have a thing for *your* butt." They lingered in silence until Adam spoke again. "Jas, in case you don't already know, I love you."

"I love you too, Adam."



## Chapter Nine

“Adam! Adam, come quick!” Lois poked her head into his office. “Dianna needs you right away.”

Jesus. Adam flopped the cover of his laptop down and followed her out and across the parking lot. He hadn't even had breakfast yet. Lois had already bounded up the steps and into the lodge. *Spry little thing. If that's what thirty years of daily yoga practice will do for ya, I'm changing my workout.*

Adam walked into the kitchen and saw Dianna with her arm around one of the lodgers. He suddenly felt less put out and realized something serious was up. “What's going on?”

Dianna looked up, her face white and eyes frightened. Jasmine stood behind them with her arms folded over her chest in a hug.

“Tell me.” He went to Jasmine and ran his hand down her arm.

Dianna spoke. “Adam, this is Bonnie. She was out for a walk this morning around the lake.” The woman buried her head deeper into Dianna's shoulder. “She found a body floating in the water. A dead man.”

“What? Who was it? A lodger?”

“No, no. It's not one of us. But it was terrible. We were cleaning up after breakfast when we heard her scream. Jasmine and I ran down to her. Oh, Adam. The poor man had handcuffs on.”

Adam's heart flumped, and he instinctively pulled Jasmine closer. “Did you call the police?”

“Yeah, they're on their way.” The woman in Dianna's arms sobbed.

Jasmine trembled in Adam's. She looked up into his eyes. *Jethro*, she mouthed.

\* \* \*

When the police cars pulled into the parking lot, Adam was not relieved to see Bruce Bastian hop out of one. He waved up to the porch. “Hey, Adam. Never a dull moment at Lost Lake Lodge, eh?”

Adam wondered if anyone would notice if he and Jasmine disappeared into her room for the next couple of hours, or days. Maybe the whole damn year. Despite the cool morning temperature, sweat trickled between his shoulder blades.

A handful of officers approached, and Dianna pointed them toward the lake where the body floated in the water. Bruce stood on the bottom step. “Dianna, are you okay?”

“I am, Bruce. Thank you. The man was facedown—we didn't see his face. It was one of the lodgers who saw him first. She's inside with Jasmine if you want to talk with her.”

“We'll get statements from you guys in a minute. I just wanted to see how you were doing. It's not a nice way to start your day.”

“It's not a nice way to start a retreat. The lodgers are freaked out.”

“I'm going to run down and talk with the sheriff and get a look. I'll be right back.”

A few minutes later, law enforcement flooded into the lodge kitchen, and Adam felt the room shrink. Every man carried an arsenal of heavy gadgets on their belt. He tried to fill his lungs but found no oxygen available.

The women gave their statements. Adam stood back and occasionally caught Jasmine's eye. The sheriff asked them collectively if they knew the man. Of course everyone said no. Adam fiddled with a paper clip and kept an eye on Jasmine.

The coroner came to take the body away, and the mass of heavily armored humanity went back outside. Dianna took the distraught lodger to the great room, and Jasmine and Adam were left alone.

Jasmine looked across the room at him with fear in her eyes. “Jethro's death is no mystery. Red killed him. He's coming after us.”

Adam went to her and held her, feeling her warmth against his hammering heart. “We'll tell Bruce about Red. They'll find him.”

They went outside and found Bruce and the other officers gathered by the squad cars. Dianna had rejoined them, and she reached for Jasmine's hand as they approached. Adam wanted to avoid eye contact with anybody and found a welcoming swarm of gnats to make it easy.

“Seems he was handcuffed and shot, then tossed in the lake. That's my guess. We'll wait and see what the medical examiners says.” The sheriff crossed his arms in front of his barrel chest. Adam swung his hand in the air at his gnat buddies.

“That is how it looks.” Bruce stepped away from the car. “Seems to be a lot of handcuffing going around. Don't you think, Adam?”

Adam winced and said nothing, but continued his aerial assault on the insects, which were now, for the most part, imaginary.

Dianna caught Bruce's dig. “What do you mean, a lot of handcuffing? This isn't the first you've seen this?” The agitation in her voice tore at Adam's conscience.

“Oh, a couple of crazy kids had some cuffs on a few days ago. Couldn't get them off.” Bruce jingled some keys hanging from his belt.

Dianna softened. “Oh. Do you think we should keep the lodgers inside? Is there any reason to assume we're in danger?”

The sheriff answered Dianna's question with a serious tone. “I'd keep 'em close. Stay out of the woods until we know more. Sound reasonable?”

“Yes, whatever you think. Will you guys be able to figure out who he is? With no identification on him?”

“Oh, I think so.” The sheriff pursed his lips. “Might take some time, but somebody will turn up missing. Officer Bastian knows the locals, so it's clear the man wasn't from around here.”

The group of officers disbanded, and Dianna hurried away to give the lodgers an update. Adam and Jasmine stood lost and alone in the driveway. His cell phone vibrated in his pocket, and Adam quickly fished it out. “Yeah?”

“Adam? It's Bruce. I think you know what I'm going to ask you.”

“I do, Bruce. Jasmine and I will be at the station in half an hour.”

“I’ll be waiting.”

\* \* \*

Jasmine looked around the tiny interrogation room, which clearly doubled as a break room. She wasn't familiar with police procedure, but she was pretty sure the letter opener and cake-cutting knife wouldn't be found in the big city police stations. She sighed, and Adam grabbed her hand.

“Are you nervous?” he asked her.

“I know we have to do this. It makes me sad to think of Jethro. Maybe if we had gone to the police right away, Red wouldn't have gotten to him.”

“Jethro lived his life outside the law. I'm pretty sure he wasn't going to want police protection.”

Bruce came in and poured himself a cup of coffee. “Want one?”

Adam and Jasmine declined.

“So, you guys know the dead man in the water?”

“We don't exactly know him. He went by the name of Jethro. Don't know if that was his real name.”

Jasmine sat quietly and let Adam tell their story.

“All right, Adam. Start at the beginning.”

“Sunday, Jas and I spent the day blazing trails in the national forest behind the lodge. It was early evening by the time we headed back...”

Adam related the details of their capture and, as he and Jasmine had agreed, he told Bruce about the videotape. Bruce's eyes were wide, and Jasmine watched him shift in his seat.

“These guys left you there in the storm? Chained up? In that old shed?”

“Yeah. But then Jethro came back. He let us go. Broke the chain with an ax. We ran through the woods and then called you.”

“And you haven't seen either of these two men since?”

“No.”

“And none of these activities seemed like reportable crimes to you, Vianetti?”

Adam closed his eyes and pushed his fingers to the bridge of his nose. “Jesus, Bruce. We didn't know what to do. Jethro said this Red—he was moving east, and if he found out we went to the cops, he'd kill us for sure. That night, we were just shell-shocked and not thinking clearly. We fucked up. We should have told you right then.”

“All right, all right. I understand the fear and shock the first night. But that was Sunday. Today is Tuesday. What? Did you forget?” Clearly Bruce resorted to sarcasm when he was pissed off. Jasmine was really starting to like this guy.

“Bruce, the delay is my fault. I asked Adam to wait, just one more day. The lodge was in the news. It was a special day for Dianna.” Jasmine's voice trailed off. “We didn't want to ruin it for her.”

Bruce's pale blue eyes smiled behind a stern face. “Let's move on. Tell me every little detail about Red.”

They spent the next hour reliving everything they remembered about Red and Jethro. Jasmine remembered Red's dull gray eyes, and his teeth that seemed unable to fill the large space they were given. His lips puffed out like a blowfish, and she shuddered to think of his sinister smile.

Bruce gave Adam an ominous warning and pointed a finger at Jasmine. “Keep her close. No hikes in the woods. No solo strolls around the lake. Got it?”

They got it.

“I take it Dianna doesn't know any of this?”

“She will. We're going to tell her right now.”

“Tell her to call me. I want to help her through this.”

\* \* \*

They arrived back at the lodge and hurried up the porch steps but saw through the screen door that Dianna sat with the lodgers in the great room. They were having a group session—*do not disturb*.

They walked around to the side entry, and Jasmine sighed, realizing she'd missed the lunch duties. The dishes were done, food put away, the kitchen was spotless. "Are you hungry, Adam? I can make us something."

"Na, not really. Are you okay?"

"I think I'm dazed. It's been a weird couple of days."

"Some good, some bad." He winked at her.

"The good outweighs the bad by tons." She winked back.

"At least now they will be on the lookout for Red. We can relax a little. Hey, I have to meet with the State Licensing Board in Utica this afternoon. Would you like to come? I'd love to take you out on the town. Mmm. Let me buy you a sexy dress."

Jasmine's heart fluttered at the thought of walking arm in arm with Adam on the streets of Utica. She'd feel like a princess, new dress or not. But then she remembered the lunch duties she'd just missed and the pile of laundry she'd stepped over earlier. Not to mention the bathrooms that didn't get cleaned.

She draped her arms around Adam's neck. "Please, please tell me I can have a rain check. I'm behind on my work. I may be sleeping with the boss, but I still need to keep up." She kissed him softly.

"Okay. A rain check it is. Can I come to your room tonight?"

"Yeah. I've been looking forward to that since we shut the door this morning. I'm going to put some clothes in the washer and go for a quick run. Clear my head before I start cleaning. I'll be back before Dianna is done with group."

"Hang on there, sweetheart. You're not going anywhere. Not alone."

"Oh yeah. I forgot. Come with me, then. I'd love to see you try and keep up with me."

"Is that right? Sounds like a challenge." He reached around her waist and looked into her eyes. Jasmine was struck by the newness of this sensation, the lightness, the freedom. Despite the fear that weighted her footsteps, she felt happier than she'd ever been in her life.

She and Adam went for a run on the lodge road. Jasmine flitted around him like a bird and playfully punched at his muscles. By the time they slowed their pace for a cooldown, she felt pretty sure she could outrun him—at least in a distance race. She smiled to herself, happy to meet this new little competitor inside her.

They climbed onto the porch to do some stretching and noticed that the group session was still underway. Maybe a dead body gave them more things to talk about.

“Join me in the shower?” Jasmine could think of nothing more perfect than warm water tumbling over the two of them. “If we hurry, we’ll still catch Dianna.”

“Hurry? Yeah, I get you in my arms in the shower, and I’m gonna *hurry*. Let’s go.”

\* \* \*

Adam’s hands were all over her ass before she even closed the door. Her sweaty running clothes fell to the floor, and she savored his touch as he explored every inch of her naked body. She felt like a plaything in his arms, and that notion raced her heart and excited her senses. He assaulted her mouth with beautiful hunger, and she wanted all of it, all of him. His hand slipped between her legs, and she gasped into his lips with longing.

When his fingers wobbled on her clit and glided inside, she moaned. “Mmmm. I thought we were going to take a shower.”

Her words vaporized between them, and she wasn’t sure they were spoken at all. No matter. His fingers played inside her pussy, and she curled one leg around him. She clung to his neck and sucked on his lips, pumping her hips in rhythm against his fingers.

Oh, Lord, he was going to send her. With just his hands, he was going to make her come. A wave of desire washed through her body, and she whimpered as Adam’s fingers alighted on her most sensitive spot. His strong arm curled around her waist, and she wanted only to give herself to him completely. She arched her back and rolled her head to the side, letting the veil wash over her.

“That’s right, baby. This one’s just for you.” Adam’s words purred into her heart. His lips caressed her neck, and she cooed. Her orgasms were still such a new sensation, and she had a fleeting feeling of regret, wondering if she blew her chance to come with Adam in the shower.

When she looked into his eyes, he smiled with satisfaction. "You're so beautiful when you do that. I'll send you up any time, any place."

Liking the sound of that, she pulled him into her small bathroom and turned the water on.

"You're overdressed, Vianetti."

Adam stripped his running clothes off, and Jasmine's feasted on his delicious muscles. So what if he wasn't much of a runner. A chest like that should be handled with care. She looked down his six-pack abs and smiled a naughty smile when she saw his cock, long and hard and waiting for her. She caught his eye, and he smiled back.

They stepped into the shower and felt each other anew, arms entwining in the warm water. The sensual feeling of his slippery, hard muscles had Jasmine on fire. She puddled some soap in her hands and lathered it over his body, spending an extra-long time on his arms that seemed to be sculpted from marble.

A minty fragrance filled the small space, and Adam's tongue felt wetter and hotter, his breath bursting into her throat. He turned his back to the showerhead, and Jasmine dropped to her knees, pulling the wet knob of his cock into her mouth. She tasted the mingling of man and minty soap. The water made him silkier than ever, and she sucked hard on his shaft and gently cupped his balls.

"You're mine, Jas." Adam pulled her up and lifted all one hundred pounds of her off the floor. She wrapped her legs around him and felt his cock penetrate fully with one push. Pressing her body against the shower wall, he thrust inside her with a heavy groan. She swooned in his arms and reached for purchase along the slippery walls. She would need no support. He held her hips, impaling her, grunting and groaning with his increasing surges.

She felt branded. She felt taken. She felt so hot and turned on, she could scarcely breathe. Jasmine grabbed at his shoulders and called out breathy screams of passion with each full-penetration thrust. With the length of his cock buried inside her, Jasmine saw stars. When Adam blasted his hot seed into her core, her stars exploded. The steamy, minty scent and the heat of his chest pressing against her were all that existed in the universe.



“I’m yours, Adam.”

## Chapter Ten

Adam dragged Jasmine to the threshold of Dianna's office door. She was blooming bright as a daisy, and he couldn't help but smile, feeling pretty sure it was the awesome sex that did it.

"I'm totally in love with you, if that helps," he whispered in her ear.

"It does help. But Dianna's my hero. I don't want to disappoint her."

"What? How come she's your hero and not me?" He was working on a full-blown pout when Dianna opened her door.

"I can hear you guys, you know."

"Hey, Dianna. Can you spare a few minutes to talk with Jasmine and me?"

Dianna went back to her desk and sat down with a smug look on her face. "Sure. You guys have a secret?" She leaned back in her chair and folded her arms in a "let's have it" pose.

"Does that mean you have an idea about us?" Adam slipped his arm around Jasmine's waist.

"Well, your usual stupid behavior has been replaced by genuine flirting. I think I have some idea, yeah."

"Dianna, we weren't trying to keep anything from you. It just took us by surprise—we've been meaning to tell you." Jasmine's words came out as an apology.

"No worries, Jas. I think it's wonderful. Now that you're standing here, arm in arm, I wonder what took you so long. Just remember to keep the squirrely stuff to a minimum in front of the lodgers. Otherwise, have fun! Maybe we can double date sometime. That's assuming I ever have another date." She screwed her mouth into a funny shape.

“Gosh, it sure seems like Bruce Bastian has a fondness for you.” Jasmine spoke with enthusiasm for this prospect.

“Ah yes, Bruce. We sure go way back. I was glad he came out to deal with this drowned man.”

Adam blew a giant puff of air from his lungs. Now the hard part. “Di, about that. We have more to tell you. Jas, you ready?” He looked her way, and she nodded. “Here we go.”

They told Dianna about being escorted to the logging camp and about the videotape. They left out the blowjob, saying that a storm came up, and the men cuffed them to the anvil. They left out making love in the thunder and rain. She could fill in the blanks on her own. They told her how one of the men returned and set them free.

A bucket of cold water went *splish* on the glad tidings of their budding new relationship as Dianna's features tightened. “Where are these men? Were you hurt? Did you call the police?”

“We called Bruce to get the cuffs off for us.” Adam tried his best to sound like he had everything under control, cool as a cucumber. Sweat dribbled down his temple.

“So you went to Bruce but didn't tell him about being kidnapped? That detail didn't come up? Did it slip your mind, Adam?” Dianna's cheeks were crimson, and the pencil in her hand trembled.

“We didn't tell him because of Jethro's warning.” Without thinking, he ran his hand behind his neck to ease the fisted knot developing in his muscles. His words were asinine in his own ears, and he caught Jasmine's eye. She pursed her lips and returned a sympathetic furrow of her brow.

“And who is Jethro?”

“He's the man who broke the chain. And he's the man who was found floating in the lake.”

Now Dianna lost it. Concern for Adam and Jasmine's well-being gave way to wrath. Adam heard some Italian words he hadn't heard in a long time and some he didn't even recognize. “How could you not tell me? Or Bruce?” Dianna reached for the phone.

“Bruce already knows. We talked with him this morning. We were going to tell you, then go to the police. When Jethro was found, the order of things got flipped around. But it's all out in the open now. And they are looking for Red.”

“And Bruce wants you to call him.” Jasmine added that last plug on Bruce's behalf.

“Ya think?” She was already punching the numbers.

They left Dianna to talk with Bruce in private and stood on the front porch. Adam held Jasmine's hand. “Don't worry, Jas. She'll come around. Just avoid her for a while. I've done stupider things. Well, not really.”

“Do you have to leave for your meeting?”

He saw the concern in Jasmine's eyes. “Are you sure you won't come with? Give Dianna a chance to settle down?”

“Hmm. She may need me. I better stick around.”

“Don't work too hard. I'll be back late. Leave your candle burning for me. Okay? And don't go anywhere alone.” He left her with a quick kiss and a promise of another special evening.

\* \* \*

Jasmine caught up with her work and sipped a glass of ice tea on the porch, staring at the pinks and purples of the setting sun. Dianna was a whirlwind all evening, adjusting her calendar and rearranging outings. No more day hikes in the woods and certainly no overnight camping trips for the lodgers. She still seemed pissed, although she assured Jasmine her anger was not directed at her. They'd watched the evening news together and were surprised and grateful that they only mentioned the grim discovery of Jethro's body. Nothing about Red and the abduction. Not yet, anyway.

Poor Adam. He'd been right all along. His timing just sucked. Red wasted no time getting his revenge. A chill ran down Jasmine's spine, and she went into the lodge and flicked the outside light on—to light Adam's way.

Alone in her room, she did a few leg stretches and thought about her run with Adam. His body was meant for strength, not running. She never took her own regained health for granted, knowing how fragile she was a year ago when she came to the lodge.

And she never forgot her luck in avoiding needle diseases. Luck, determination, and just plain street smarts. Needles had been a precious commodity, and one she guarded closely. She laughed. “Yeah, Jasmine, you're one smart junky.”

She lit her candle and slipped on a cool, summer nightgown. She couldn't wait to feel Adam's arms around her.

\* \* \*

Jasmine heard footsteps outside her door. Her limbs felt light as a feather, and she popped a Tic Tac in her mouth and slowly opened the door with a seductive smile. The smile slid to the floor when she saw Red's fat face grinning back. Her world warped into slow motion. He grabbed her arm and tugged her into the hall, quickly slapping his hand over her mouth. His coarse fingers reeked of gasoline and cigarettes, fused with the acrid scent of body odor.

“I missed you.” His arms held her from behind, and she felt like she was squished into a tight, rubbery vise.

She scanned her surroundings, but there was nothing to grab, nothing within her reach. Just the smooth, empty walls of the hallway. She lifted her feet in the air and kicked at the wall, making loud thuds. Surely Dianna would hear that. Red's response was a brutal tightening of his hand over her mouth. The flow of oxygen stopped. With instinctive self-preservation, she ceased her kicking and clawed at him, struggling instead to fill her lungs.

“Stop your damn kicking, or I'll break your neck.” His hot breath singed into her ear, and his voice rasped like a venomous snake. Her only hope was to escape his grip, and she thrashed and scratched at his arms. The second his hand left her face she would scream. Scream with every ounce of life in her.

She never got the chance. Red removed his hand and quickly replaced it with a piece of heavy tape. Jasmine never got so much as a yelp from her lungs.

“This tape is a gift from your lover boy. He left the garage door open just for me.”

She watched and struggled as more tape went around her wrists. The unwinding on the roll made a loud ripping sound that she thought Dianna or someone might hear. In her own ears, the sound was deafening. She tugged like a stallion in his grasp, unable to

break free as Red forced her to the ground and held her feet. More ripping of tape. She was bound and silenced with Adam's duct tape.

Red threw her over his shoulder and quietly walked out of the lodge and into the twilight. She assumed he would head for the trail, but he didn't. He carried her like a sack of feed down the driveway, staying close to the encroaching woods along the side. When he stepped onto the road, Red stopped abruptly and hurried off the road and back into the cover of the trees.

"There's your Italian hero now." Red slipped her off his shoulder and let her feet rest on the ground. Jasmine saw Adam walking around an old truck parked on the road. She squealed through the tape and wiggled like a worm. She tried so hard to make noise, but it was useless. Adam could not see or hear her. Red held his hand over her mouth and nose as an extra precaution, but he seemed largely unconcerned.

They watched Adam peer inside the truck, then get back in his car and back up toward the lodge. Jasmine felt her life slip into a vortex. She'd never see him again.

Red carried her onto the road and deposited her into the front seat of the truck. In the dim light, Jasmine only saw the simplicity of the dash and felt the torn, hard vinyl of the seat through her flimsy cotton nightgown. He fired up the engine with a sputter and slowly drove off.

*I'm done for.*

\* \* \*

Adam ran a frustrated hand down his face and looked at his watch. *Damn state agencies. Nothing's ever as simple as they say it will be.* He'd been left in the waiting room far past his appointment time, only to learn that his paperwork was incomplete. He'd plowed through several reams of red tape and spent heavy pockets of change at the copy machine. Finally, with a handshake and a "we'll be in touch," he was free to go. He had a long drive ahead of him and looked forward to Jasmine's warm greeting. He slid in a Van Morrison CD and headed back to the lodge.

On the road he thought about the night he and Jasmine were thrown together in the old blacksmith's shop. Would he have ever made a move on her if it hadn't been for that

bizarre night? Could it be this life-changing love affair with Jasmine would never have happened? His heart had never been this full. He pushed the speedometer over seventy.

He had some fences to mend with Dianna. It would help a lot if Red were behind bars. Their worries would be over, and he and Jasmine would have the whole summer...

God, he wanted to take her to so many places. An elegant night on the town, maybe go all the way to the big city. Hell, even the carnival in Watertown would be new and exciting. He remembered last summer, when her retreat ended. It was the end of August, and he didn't want her to go away. It was his suggestion that she stay on. He'd asked Dianna to hire her.

As he drove down the gravel road to the lodge, he grew more excited to slip under the sheets next to his beautiful girl. His headlights illuminated a vehicle on the road about fifty yards past the lodge driveway. Adam slowed down and puzzled at the sight. With the dead end at the dam, the lodge road didn't have much traffic. He looked at the big FORD letters on a rusty, once-white tailgate. "What the hell?"

Curiosity or gut instinct caused him to drive ahead and pull up behind the Ford. He hopped out and looked at the crumbling mess. The windows were open, and when he glanced inside, he saw nothing short of a garbage dump. Candy wrappers and fast-food containers covered the floor of the cab, and ruined lawn chairs and charcoal bags littered the back end. Satisfied there was nothing more to see, he went back to his car and was about to jot down the license plate number when he noticed there wasn't one. Someone was trying to fly beneath society's radar—and the law.

Adam's stomach hurt, and he felt like throwing up. With his hand on the smooth knob of the gear shifter, he stared ahead at the tailgate and shook his head. Slowly he clicked into reverse and backed his car up to the lodge drive and went home.

Dianna caught him in the kitchen as he made a beeline for Jasmine's room.

"How did your trip go? Are we still licensed to operate?" She poured herself a glass of water.

"Ah, yeah. Of course, they kept me mired in red tape until damn near five thirty. I spent at least an hour printing reports and photocopying shit. Then the battery on my laptop pooped out."

“Adam, I'm sorry I was so angry with you earlier. I've been thinking all night about what a jerk I was. Here you were kidnapped and could have been killed.” She touched his shoulder warmly. “I know those men threatened your life if you went to the cops. What a terrifying predicament. I'm just glad you're safe.”

Dianna was in the middle of a heartfelt apology and a potentially tender moment, but Adam really wanted her to save it for another time. He needed to see Jasmine. And it wasn't his hormones screaming at him.

“We just need to get Red behind bars. Then we'll all feel more at ease.” He grabbed her hand from his shoulder and gave it a squeeze. “When's the last time you saw Jasmine?”

“At lights out, I guess. I think she had some tea on the porch. She must have been rearranging some things in her room, cuz I heard some banging.”

Adam was about to turn and run when Dianna caught his arm. “You and Jas don't need my permission, I know that. But can you be a little more discreet? Jasmine's shower backs right up against Lois's room. She gave me an earful at supper about the walls being too thin and how she could hear Jasmine cheering in her room today. I have a hunch Jasmine wasn't cheering.”

Adam felt a rush of heat rise to his face and smiled, despite his anxious feelings. Jasmine was *sort of* cheering. “Sorry, Di. We'll be more careful. But I've got to go. I promised I'd stop in and say good night.” He kissed his sister on the cheek and hurried out the side door of the kitchen and down the hall to Jasmine's room.

When he got to her door, he noticed the roll of duct tape on the ground. That was all—just a roll of tape. He knocked and heard nothing inside. When he turned the handle and entered, the smell of jasmine filled his senses. The candle danced to welcome him, but Jasmine was not there. His palms felt wet, and his mouth went dry. *Don't jump to conclusions. But where the fuck is Jasmine?*



## Chapter Eleven

Jasmine watched nighttime bugs swirl in the beam of the headlights. She wrestled and wrenched against the tape at her wrists, but the effort only caused pain. Her chest heaved for threads of air as she rode with a surreal leisurely pace toward the end of Lost Lake Road. She and Red were on a joyride. She stole a glance across the seat and saw his belly rubbing on the steering wheel. His button-down shirt was unbuttoned to reveal a once-white T-shirt. Fat legs stretched to the accelerator as he smiled at the bugs splattering to their death on the windshield.

Before they arrived at the turnaround at the dam, Red veered off the road, and the thick trees swallowed them inward. Jasmine closed her eyes at the screeching of branches against the doors. Her head swam in a fog, and she drew in a deep breath through her nose, feeling her heart thunder in her ears.

When Red finally stopped the engine, the only remaining sound was Jasmine's terror-sticken gasps for air. A dim yellow dome light flickered for a moment but snuffed out when Red slammed his door. He pulled her out of the front seat and she heaved double-fisted pumps at his head. With barely a flinch, he hoisted her over his shoulder like a rag doll. Jasmine watched the dark woods whirl by sideways with an avalanche of tears obscuring everything. She realized she hadn't been crying. But now she was, and it clogged her nose and made breathing damn near impossible.

Suddenly the world spun once again, and he lowered her to the ground on a familiar red quilt. Standing above her, he pointed his fat finger in her face. "Now I'm going to take your tape off. Just cuz I'm such a great guy and you're nice to look at." He ripped the tape from her mouth in a single rapid, painful motion.

She gasped and put her bound forearms to her burning lips. "What do you want me for?"

"I got the feeling we parted on bad terms," Red answered casually. He squatted down next to her with a grunt.

"You killed Jethro."

"So what?" He snapped. "He double-crossed me. I'm pulling up stakes and heading out. I think you should come with me. We're cut from the same cloth. Don't cha think?"

"Go to hell."

"You don't think that clean-cut Italian is gonna want you forever, do ya? He'll fuck ya real nice, but when it's all done, he'll find a high-class girl. Not you, sweetheart. You and me. We have similar interests." He waved a syringe in her face.

"No. Please. I'll do anything you want. I'll go with you. Anywhere. Just don't make me do that." Jasmine looked with terror from Red's cold gray eyes to his hand. Her world rested on the pointed end of the syringe.

"C'mon. What's the point of trying so hard? Try easy. Slide down the hill."

"No. I've worked so hard. I made it." She pushed back frantically with her feet to slide away, getting nowhere on the slippery surface of the quilt. Red grabbed her ankles and tugged her back to him.

"Nah. I watched you suck your friend's dick that night, and I said to myself, now here's a girl who's had to sing for her supper. Know what I mean? Eh?" He ran the back of his hand down her cheek, and Jasmine turned her face away. "If I had a dime for every man you sucked off just to get to his vial of smack, I bet I'd be a rich man. Wouldn't I?"

"No. I didn't do that." Much. He'd have a handful of dimes, but that would be it. She'd tried damn hard not to work that angle. Steal? You bet. But she knew that's how women really got hurt—sex for drugs. She'd done it when she was desperate. Her lowest of low.

"Sure. Whatever you say, sweetheart. But we better finish up here, cuz I gotta get to choir practice." His belly shook as he laughed at his own stupid joke. He held her arm tightly, and she twisted in his grip. She'd break her arm if she thought it would help.

But it wouldn't. Red jabbed the needle into the muscle of her upper arm. Jasmine buried her face in her duct-taped arms and sobbed. *This is my destiny. The Wheel of Fortune is in his hands.*

Red stroked her back and soothed her. “You'll be glad you came with me. New Hampshire's a nice place to spend the summer. Forget the Italian. You ain't good enough for him, and you know it. You're my kind of girl.”

Jasmine coiled down onto the red quilt and cried and felt her cares slipping away. Red cut the tape from her hands and feet, and she watched with listless interest. He was right. She was his kind of girl.

\* \* \*

Adam stepped out the back door of the lodge and looked toward the trail leading into the woods. His heart beat in his ears, and his fists were clenched and ready. For what, he didn't know. Jasmine left her candle burning and went—where?

The truck. That rusty white garbage dump he'd seen on the road. He pulled his car keys from his pocket and ran to the garage. When he drove onto the road and saw the truck was gone, his fears mounted. *That son of a bitch. I'll kill him.* He sped ahead and came to the end of Lost Lake Road. It was the direction the truck was pointed, and his gut told him it was Red's destination.

Quietly Adam got out, lifting the handle of the car door as he shut it to stifle the noise. He heard the rushing water over the dam and was about to head down the footpath when a clamor through the trees stopped his feet.

Silent as a deer, he stepped through the underbrush with an occasional snap of a twig. The sounds continued—banging and clanging. Careless packing. He pulled a few branches down low and saw him. Red gathered a hodgepodge of belongings around a well-trodden campsite and tossed them into the back of the rusty white truck.

There was Jasmine. She sat quietly on a fallen log and stared at a fire pit with no fire. No ropes bound her, no cuffs, no chains. She was high as a kite.

Adam's fury boiled over, and he bounded into the campsite and grabbed Red by the shirt. With a powerful fist, he leveled a blow to his face. And another. Red oofed and stumbled back with blood streaming from his nose. Adam picked him up for more, his fist drawn back and landing with a *smack*. Even if he could, Red had no chance to throw a punch. Adam knocked him on his ass and jumped on him. He could kill him. The fat man had no fight and no gun.

Adam stopped his pummeling when Red was senseless. He turned his attention to Jasmine. She was gone.

“Jas?” He called out her name. Nothing. He looked with panic into the woods, then launched on Red one more time. “What did you give her?”

The man mumbled something, then his eyes rolled back in his head. No information would be forthcoming from him. Adam set out into the woods and called Jasmine's name.

A little voice in his head warned him. *Don't let her go to the dam.* He headed back the way he came, following the sound of the rushing water. When he got within view, his worst fear was realized.

Jasmine walked along the top ledge of the dam, with thousands of gallons of water carving through the troughs below her feet. One wrong step, one slip—

The clear, bright moon illuminated her figure, and her white nightgown billowed ghostly with the breeze. The flat water glistened as it approached the dam and bubbled behind the cement berms. He couldn't see what was over the dam, but he knew. A twenty-foot wall of water crashed to the rocks below.

He heard her humming as she paced along the narrow cement ledge. He watched in horror as she dipped her bare foot into the water and pinwheeled her hands in the air.

“Jasmine.” He called out with an artificial ease, loud enough to be heard over the rush of water. “It's me, Adam. I have a present for you.”

“Adam? What are you doing here?”

“I brought you a present. I need you to come off there, and I'll give it to you. Can you do that?”

“But I'm happy here.” She spun a circle on her tiptoes and lost her balance momentarily. She planted her foot hard on the cement to set herself straight. Adam's heart stopped beating.

“Jasmine, please. I love you. And I need you to come to me.” Tears misted over his eyes as he stood at the edge of the dam. He considered walking out to get her. Would that accomplish anything? She was twenty feet or more out in the middle.

“Adam, snap out of it. Please. That fat, ugly man with the ponytail was right. I'm not good enough for you. I'm a street rat. I'll keep doing what I do best.” She sang the word “smack” in a high-pitched voice and gave another spin that made Adam sick inside. She landed this one cleanly.

“Where is he anyway? The ponytail? He said he would take me with him.” Jasmine gazed at the water rushing toward her as if she'd already forgotten she'd asked Adam a question.

“He's been asking for you, Jas. He's waiting over by the road. C'mon. I'll show you.”

Jasmine walked with uncanny confidence across the cement beam, and with one final spin, lost her balance. Adam reached and caught her by the arm and pulled her into his embrace. He exhaled a cloud of relief into her hair and held her tight, unwilling to risk letting her go for one second.

“I wish I was different for you, Adam. You're the most wonderful man I've ever met, and I won't forget you.”

“You won't have the chance to forget me.” This he muttered to himself as he lifted her up and carried her like a child away from the dam. Jasmine was in there somewhere, but her eyes were dreamy and glossy. He needed to get her to the lodge. Dianna would know what to do.

“I'm going with the ponytail. He's taking me to New Hampshire. I've never been to New Hampshire. Where is that?”

Adam secured her in the front seat of his car, and Jasmine began to protest. “Wait a minute. You're not taking me to the ponytail, are you. Let me out of here.” She unbuckled her seatbelt and got out of the car, trying to push him out of the way.

“Jas, no. You're coming with me. Dianna is worried about you.” Adam grabbed her and held her easily. She thrashed and fought, but her futile punches felt like the play of a kitten. Holding her wiggling body in one solid arm, he rummaged in his trunk and found some rope. As much as he hated to do it, he tied her hands in front of her and set her in the seat once again. The seat belt across her chest sealed her fate.

“I’m getting tired of having my hands chained and taped and tied. Seems that’s all anyone wants to do these days.” She tried to pout but gave a loopy laugh instead.

He drove her back to the lodge, listening to her lazy, languid protests. She didn’t seem to give a shit where she went anymore. Adam watched her and the road and dialed Bruce.

“The man you’re looking for—the man who kidnapped Jas and me and killed Jethro. He’s lying in the woods near the Emmetsburg Dam. I roughed him up. He tried to take Jasmine. But I’ve got her, and I’m taking her to Dianna.”

When he brought Jasmine into the lodge, he carried her to Dianna’s room and knocked. When Dianna opened the door with sleepy eyes, Adam pushed her aside and sat on her bed with Jasmine quiet and resigned in his arms.

“Please, Dianna. Help her. She’s had some heroin. I’m sure that’s what it was.”

Dianna’s face went white. “What? How? I can’t believe she’d do this.”

“She didn’t. It was Red. He forced her—probably stuck her.” Adam choked up.

Dianna tried to talk to Jasmine, who had gotten even dreamier in her ride in Adam’s car. “Jasmine, honey. What’s going on? Can you tell me what happened?”

“Dianna, I’m just sliding downhill with the ponytail. It’s easier.”

Dianna looked back at Adam. “Let’s get her to the hospital in Emmetsburg, and on the way, you’ll explain how this happened.”

\* \* \*

“Fortunately it was low-quality heroin. A lot of starches. She wasn’t in any danger of overdose. But with her history, I’m glad you brought her in. She’ll be fine, I think. By morning, she will have metabolized everything. I’d say the best place for her is with you, Dianna. Her cravings might come back. Might not. It all depends on the individual.”

The doctor’s update should have been welcome news, but Adam still reeled inside. Jethro had warned him. Red would take her with him. He saw the big man’s finger in his face. “*Don’t let that happen.*” He’d let her down.

His phone vibrated in his pocket, and he recognized Bruce’s number on the screen. Did he have Red?

“Yeah, Bruce?”

“Adam, we didn't get him. He wasn't there.”

“What do you mean? He was out cold. I beat him to a pulp. You're saying he got up and ran?”

“I'm saying the truck was gone, and there was no sign of him. Except for some pools of blood in the dirt. We saw where he drove out—looks like he'd been camped there for a while. I'm going to need to talk to Jasmine. Are you guys at the lodge?”

“No. We're at the hospital in Emmetsburg. She won't be able to give you any information until morning.”

## Chapter Twelve

“Dianna, I'd made it. I was free. Clean. Never going back. Adam, he—we—He must be so disappointed.” Jasmine's voice trailed off to a whisper.

“Jasmine, listen to me.” Dianna scrunched in close on Jasmine's bed and put her arms around her shoulder. “First of all, Adam is not disappointed in you, and why would he be? But forget about him for now. This wasn't a relapse. Not in the true sense. You didn't seek heroin because of weakness or craving. It was forced upon you. It was out of your control.”

“Someone else was spinning the Wheel of Fortune.” Jasmine said this to the June rain pelting the hospital window. “The terrible Eight of Swords.”

“Your tarot cards?”

“Yeah. Right on the mark again.”

Dianna sighed. “Maybe. But the cards can't lock you into a fate you don't want. You're in charge of this. The doctor says you are free to come home with me, and your strong, healthy body has completely forgiven the heroin punch in the stomach. We need to get your head and your heart to do the same. I'll help you.”

“I know you will, Dianna.” Jasmine swiped some willful tears away from her cheeks.

“Tell me. What was it like? Did it feel good to be high again?”

“No, no. Not at all. I remember being so nauseous at first.” Then a new memory came clear in her cobwebs. “I barfed on Red's shoes.” She cracked up. “That must have been one horrible mixture, because that's never happened to me before.”

Dianna laughed too. “See? Your body said 'no.' Sweetie, I'm not worried about you.” She gave her another shoulder squeeze. “You'll be fine, Jas. Just fine.”



\* \* \*

Red slipped between their fingers. Patrols were set up at the state line, but it was as if he and his rust trap vanished. Bruce said he most likely left the area, but nobody wanted to take any chances. Not Adam, not Dianna, and certainly not Jasmine.

When Dianna brought her home from the hospital, Jasmine hid away in her room and refused to see Adam. Days passed with the staff working double duty to cover all the tasks Jasmine did every day, quietly and unnoticed. Dianna assured Adam that Jasmine was not in any danger but only wanted to make sure she was strong enough, and that her cravings would never return.

Adam was distraught and just plain sad, wondering what was going on with her—in her head and in her heart. Finally after breakfast one morning, Dianna came into his weight room while he hoisted his bench press with an uncommon fury.

“Jasmine wants to see you.”

He quit his press and hurried across the parking lot with butterflies in his stomach and stood in silence outside her door, drawing composure into his lungs. He knocked.

When she opened the door, a cool breeze blew across his senses. She wore a feminine white sundress and a sweet smile. Damn, she looked like an angel. He closed his eyes and inhaled. Jasmine.

She surprised him. Somehow he expected a weak, sick, fragile woman. She was robust and glowing—and smiling. Her warm arms wrapped around his neck, and he held her. At last.

“You're sweaty.” She held him loosely and looked into his eyes.

“I was lifting weights. God, it's good to see you.”

“I've been dreaming about your strong muscles.” She ran her hand across his chest, and Adam's cock responded inappropriately. He felt her small waist through the light fabric of her dress and fought the urge to ram his tongue down her throat. *Don't be a pig. For once in your life, don't be a pig.*

He didn't wrestle with his thoughts long, because Jasmine stretched tall and kissed him with a warm, sweet tongue. Yeah, this was better. He shut the door behind him and lifted her in his arms, letting her take what she needed in her kiss. He sat down on the

bed, and she sat on his lap, still feasting on his lips. He had no control. He'd come here to talk to her. Now he wanted to lay her out and make love to her like an animal.

Finally he swallowed and pulled her back. "Jas, how—how are you?"

She giggled. "Fine. How are you?"

"I'm serious. Dianna says this wasn't a relapse. No withdrawals. Are you okay?"

Jasmine became serious too. "Physically, I'm fine. I'm sorry to say, I know what good heroin feels like. That was not good heroin." She smiled apologetically.

"Dianna assured me you were fine, but I wanted so much to see you." He searched the pale green eyes that he'd missed so much. "You've been alone in here. I've not seen you out, not once."

"Not alone. Not always. Your sister's taken good care of me. And we've gone out in the early mornings to sit on the dock."

Adam reached for her hand and pulled her into him, kissing her lightly. She pushed on his chest to stop him.

"Adam, I'm thinking of going back to the city."

His heart fell to the floor. "What? You can't be serious. Why would you do that?"

"Bruce thought it might be best if I left the area—go someplace else until Red is found." Jasmine ran a gentle finger along his arm.

Adam quickly imagined throwing Bruce up against a wall. "There's no place safer than right here. With me. And Dianna. Does she know about this?"

"No."

"Jasmine, you can't leave. I'm in love with you—" He stopped. This wasn't about him. "Where would you go?"

"I don't know. Bruce asked if I could stay with family, but we both know that's not an option." She gave him a soft smile. "I thought I might try to get a job at a hotel. It's kinda like what I do here at the lodge, I suppose."

Adam felt his world careening off its axis. "Have your feelings for me changed? Cuz if you're angry—maybe you feel I should have protected you. You're right." She hushed him with a finger on his lips.

“Adam, Red said he and I were cut from the same cloth. That I wasn't good enough for you. I was *his* kind of girl. I'm afraid he's right, ya know?” She glanced down at the scars on her arm.

Oh God. Red messed with her head. Her self-esteem was so fragile, and he'd crushed it like a bug.

Adam wrapped his arms around her with new resolve. She was so damn little, he'd use force if he had to. Not a problem. “No. You're not going anywhere. When I said you were mine, I meant it.” He loosened his grip and glanced down at her to see how this new tack was being received.

“I'd do anything for you, Adam. If it means walking away so you can have the life you're meant to, without a needy heroin addict on the sidelines, then that's what I'll do.”

“*Former* addict. And the life I'm meant to have is with you. Not on the sidelines, but by my side.” He kissed her soft lips and wanted more. But first he had a detail he needed to clear up. “Come with me.” He grabbed her hand and led her out the door.

“Where are we going?” She trailed behind him with quick, light steps. “You're not going to throw me in the lake again, are you? Adam?”

He pulled her across the parking lot, through the garage, and back to his office. The next room down was his workout room, and he had a surprise for her.

“Close your eyes.”

He left her standing in the doorway while he straightened a big red bow on the console of a shiny new treadmill. “Well? What do you think?”

Jasmine opened her eyes with astonishment. “What is this? For me?”

“You aren't going to be able to run on that road anymore. This way, you can run and be safe. And this thing is *not* portable. I guess you're not going anywhere.”

“You did this for me?”

“Well, for me too. I can watch you run. The shorter your jogging shorts, the better.”

Jasmine slipped into his arms and looked up into his eyes. “And I can watch you too.” She laughed.

“What's so funny?”

“I just had a vision of myself flying off the back end of this thing as I watch you flex your muscles. Seems like a safety hazard.”

\* \* \*

Bruce came to the lodge that warm June evening to tell them they'd identified the body. Donald Bates, or Jethro, was wanted for armed robbery, drug possession, and a few other felonies. But he'd never harmed a flea as far as Bruce could tell. Jasmine felt deep remorse and agonized over his death. At least the medical examiner said he'd not been tortured or roughed up. Just cuffed and shot in the head, then thrown in the lake where he was sure to come to the attention of Adam and Jasmine. Payback.

As they sat on the porch, Dianna wrestled with what to do with the lodgers, whether to send them away or even close down the whole damn place. “We certainly can't have them spend any time in the woods, away from the lodge.” She twisted a dishtowel in her hands. “Wouldn't you say, Bruce? Until we know for sure where Red is?”

“I have to agree with you, Di. But that doesn't mean you have to send them away. You do so much good here. It's not like they're children. Explain to them what happened—at least some of it. Tell them their outings will be limited, or just different. More lakeside barbecues.”

“I agree. They've all settled in, and of course they've paid for a recovery experience.” Adam tapped a pen on a ledger book. “We can still give them that.”

Jasmine looked at the group with hesitation. She felt it wasn't her place to weigh in on business decisions, but she had something to add. Damn, she had something important to add. She sighed.

Adam grabbed her hand. “What's on your mind, Jas?”

She looked at Dianna through a veil of tears. “If you send them away, a lot of them won't make it. I guarantee it. They need this place, Dianna. They need you, they need the lodge, and they even need those damn early morning yoga sessions with Lois. This maybe isn't the last leg of their journey, but it's the most important one. It's here they learn to trust themselves again and know that friendship and hope and love are available to them.” She ran her fingers over her eyes to smudge away the tears. “I know.”

Adam still held her hand while Dianna wrapped loving arms around her.

“Well, that's it, then. The sixteenth rehab session at Lost Lake Addiction Recovery Lodge is ready to plow ahead.” Dianna ended her bold announcement with a funny look on her face.

“Is there more?” Bruce waved his hands in the air to draw her out.

“I feel like drinking a beer. Adam, do you have any?”

“Wow, I know it's a big day when my sister wants a beer. C'mon. I have some at my place.”

The four tramped across the yard to Adam's apartment. Jasmine drank a glass of juice and chuckled at the sight of Dianna enjoying a beer. Despite the uncertainty of Red's whereabouts, she felt a rush of optimism. She watched Adam closely, and her heart fluttered, knowing he truly loved her. Her thoughts drifted back to the tarot card reading. The Eight of Swords that crossed her destiny—he didn't win. The Wheel of Fortune was in *her* hands.

## Chapter Thirteen

Jasmine peeked in the door and saw Adam lying on his back on the vinyl-covered bench, hoisting a massive pile of weights in an overarm press. The muscles of his arms tightened as he grunted another repetition into the air. She looked down his body to the bulge in his sweats where his goods were waiting, not busy at the moment.

*Not for long.* She felt a puddle of cream seep into her own shorts. To hell with the run.

She walked silently into the weight room and crossed the stream of sunshine from a bank of west windows. He was involved in more reps of the bench press and jumped when he noticed her.

“Jas. How long have you been standing there?”

“Long enough to get totally turned on.” She swung one leg around and straddled him, pinning him on his back. Where she'd take it from here, she didn't know, but the bench had some definite possibilities.

“Is that so?” He shifted and sat up to face her, swinging around the suspended irons. “Turned on looks good on you.” He reached his hand behind her neck and pulled her in for a kiss. A deep, sensual kiss that had Jasmine's pussy tingling and feeling toasty warm. She pulled his sweat-dampened shirt over his head and leaned in to bite and nip and kiss his pumped muscles.

“Oh, man. What's got you so hot and bothered?”

“If I'm interrupting, I'll go away.” Jasmine continued her liquid journey over the vast, sweaty real estate of his chest.

He reciprocated and pulled her T-shirt off, followed by her jogging bra.

“Yeah, Jas. You're interrupting. I think I'd like you to leave.” His lips latched onto her nipple, and she cooed.

“Kiss my ass, Vianetti.”

“Gladly.” He circled his tongue and sucked hard, and Jasmine gasped and giggled, holding his head close. The feeling of his hands gliding down her back and his tongue working over her hardened pebbles drove the breath from her lungs.

He stopped and lifted her up, off the bench, and tugged at her shorts. “Get your clothes off. Let me look at you.”

She stepped out of her sneakers and stripped her shorts down. Adam took only a second to look and then reached between her legs. Oceans of hot juices waited for him, and he licked his lips. He massaged his fingers in her pussy and squeezed her ass with the other hand while he kissed and swirled his tongue on her stomach.

Jasmine ran her hands in his hair and let him have his way with her body. His touch felt like heaven, and his fingers knew every sweet spot inside her. When he was ready, he'd send her up like a rocket. His call. But he stopped and reclined back down on the bench. The idle bulge in his sweats was now a mountain of a hard-on, and she reached for his cock and squeezed. He lifted his hips and slid his sweats to his knees and off.

“Come 'ere.” He gently invited her to climb on top of him. She stretched her legs wide over his hips—not what he had in mind. He pulled her hips toward his face.

“What are we doing?”

“I'm gonna eat you. And you're gonna scream and beg for more.”

Her chest heaved at the thrill of his words, and his confidence drained the strength from her limbs. She spread her legs over his face and felt his hot tongue in her pussy. And she damn near screamed. His tongue fluttered and flattened on her clit and drove inside. With her legs braced on the floor and Adam's strong arms guiding her hips, she stood in the goddess pose and rolled her head to the side, draping her arms over the bars of the bench press.

Little licking noises danced in the silence, and Jasmine added a chorus of soft moans, surrendering gentle thrusts to his sucking, hot lips. He pulled on her clit, and she felt out of control as her tiny muscles contracted in desperate need. His hands held her hips hard in place and, “Adam! Oh God...stop.”

He did.

“Oh no. Please. Don't stop.”

His delicious massaging continued, and her body and lips begged for more. She clutched the bars, and every muscle tightened as she gasped for oxygen to feed her lungs. A mind-blowing wave of euphoria washed through her, and she felt totally loved. This was better than any drug. “Adam,” she moaned, “you're the king.”

When she slid down his form, she had only a second to relish in the afterglow when he pulled her to his face, gasping into her lips. “You're everything to me, Jas. You make me feel powerful.”

He held her to his hungry lips, and Jasmine felt his cock grind hard against her. Her pussy still hummed from his feeding, but she was eager to feel him sink deep inside her. She reached for his cock and beat him loosely for a few strokes and spread the slippery puddle around the knob.

“Ride me, Jas.”

Slowly she slid down onto his cock, inch by inch, arching her back to sink to the limits. When she looked at him with his eyes closed, she knew he was in ecstasy. She clenched hard on his meat and pulled up again, watching him get off. Her only objective in life at this moment was to send him to the moon. With her feet planted on either side of the bench, she rode her stallion. Adam shot up inside her, but this one was hers to control. *Take it slow, take it deep, make it last.*

She didn't bounce on him like a jackrabbit but guided her pussy with solid, strong legs and sucked back up the length. Adam thrust with stamina and opened his eyes to meet her gaze. “Jasmine, what you do to me—”

He was close to liftoff, and Jasmine went at him harder and faster, still holding his gaze. They'd come together. When he reached for her clit and wobbled it vigorously, it overwhelmed her. She screamed his name and came with an explosion, like water bursting over a dam. He shot his seed inside her and groaned with each upward surge, still stroking her clit and feeding the watershed of her orgasm.

She collapsed onto him and felt his chest rise and fall. Their breathing huffed into the silence.

“I like your weight-lifting bench.”



Breathless, Adam stroked her hair. "It's never gonna look the same to me, that's for sure." She felt him reach for something on the floor and looked to see a remote control in his hand. He pointed it at his stereo with a *click*. Soft music filled the room, and Jasmine thought her heart would explode. Could she love this man any more?

Slowly, sweetly, he pumped his still-hard dick inside her. No hurry, no rush. The music carried his hips as if there was no particular goal in mind. He just enjoyed being there. They'd run a marathon, and this was their victory lap.

Their eyes were locked in love until his closed with a wash of pleasure. Jasmine reached for the weight bar again and felt his hands circle her waist. Yes, this was heaven, and she'd love him forever.

When the song ended, they continued to make love in silence. Adam came with only a whimper at his disposal, and Jasmine kissed his soft lips. The last glimmer of sunlight disappeared from the room as Adam stroked down her back.

\* \* \*

After an energizing run on her new treadmill and a shower, Jasmine slipped under the sheets to wait for Adam. He'd gone up to the lodge to talk with Dianna. His bed felt like a hug, and she hadn't realized how tired she was. She wanted to stay awake until Adam got back...

*Needles poked up and out and into every surface. She needed to be very careful not to accidentally poke herself. With a light step, she crossed the room, which just kept getting longer and narrower. No matter how many steps she took, she couldn't seem to get to the door on the opposite side of the room. Then she realized what kept her from reaching her goal. A big, black anvil was tethered to her ankle. She tried to drag it along, but it wouldn't budge.*

*Then Adam appeared. "I'll carry this anvil for you a hundred miles, Jasmine."*

*He struggled to pick up the heavy object and managed to hoist it over his shoulder. Now they walked in the woods, and Adam struggled to carry the load. He continued to trudge forward with sweat beading on his brow.*

*They stood on the crest of the dam, and Jasmine held an ax in her hands. She knew if she didn't free them from the anvil, the water would wash them both over the edge.*

*With all her might she swung and hit the anvil, shattering it into a million pieces. They watched the fragments wash over the dam, gone forever.*

*She was free.*

## Epilogue

Another successful retreat came to a close at Lost Lake Addiction Recovery Lodge, and Jasmine was busy with cleaning. They had a one-month hiatus to regroup and plan for the next session. When she turned the calendar page to September, she swallowed hard. The big day was at hand. She'd enrolled at Adirondack College and would start her first freshman English and algebra classes. No matter how many yoga poses and sun salutations she did, she could not calm her nerves. The tarot card deck was frustratingly vague on her likelihood of success on this one. She just didn't want to make fool of herself.

Adam escorted her to class the first day and kissed her before she went in. "This feels like we're back in high school, going steady."

"I never went to high school, remember?"

"Well then, for your information, we're going steady, and you better not let any college guys hustle you." He raised a warning finger. Like he had anything to worry about. But it was fun to see him jealous.

The winter passed with two more recovery retreats, and Jasmine did her duties and studied for classes. She was having the time of her life, and Dianna was right. From the moment she opened her books, Jasmine ignited a flame. At times she'd actually go through the motions of pinching herself as she sat in class—a college student. Her grandma would be proud.

Bruce came by one spring morning and caught Jasmine in the great room cleaning up after breakfast. "Where's the boss lady, Jasmine? I have some news. Is Adam around too?"

Jasmine rounded up the Vianettis, and they gathered in the kitchen. When Adam walked in, he carried his laptop tucked to his side, and Jasmine thought it looked like a toy in his beefy arms.

“Hey, Bruce. This better be good. I've got a state auditor coming next week.”

“They got Red. He's behind bars.”

“Where is he?” Adam sounded anxious to beat the hell out of him again.

“He headed to New Hampshire and found a new partner. They abducted three people and did more videotaping. Must have messed with the wrong bunch, cuz he ended up with a knife in his side.”

“No kidding?” Dianna put her hands to her lips in surprise.

“I don't know all the details yet. I'm waiting on a full report, but I thought you would all be relieved to hear that much. He'll be put away for one murder. Who knows, maybe more.” Bruce cast a nervous glance out the kitchen window, as if considering a quick dive out of the room. “They, ah, they confiscated a bunch of DVDs. Footage of all sorts of—um, carnal acts.” He drew his eyes back into the room and looked at Adam.

Jasmine's heart rate accelerated. Did she want to know? Were hundreds of police officers watching the video of her and Adam? Without thinking, she folded her arms across her chest.

Adam put his arm around her shoulder and spoke softly. “Let's hear it, Bruce.”

“Yours was there, I guess. I didn't see it. And I won't. No way.” He motioned with his hands to show finality. “They let me know, just to confirm. The website where he sold the stuff has been shut down. But nobody will ever know what's out there already.”

\* \* \*

Jasmine and Adam went to her room to digest the news. The end of their ordeal. As they reclined on her bed, she rested her head on his chest and listened to the timbre of his heartbeat. Safe in his arms, it was her favorite place on the planet. She diddled her fingers on Adam's chest and thought about Red's capture and his videotaping enterprise.

“Adam? Do you ever wonder about the video of us?”

“I sure do.”

“I wonder about it too. What it looks like.” The truth was, she got a little hot thinking about it and wouldn't mind taking a gander at it herself. Adam was such a fine physical specimen, and she was pretty sure she was damn good in her starring role.

“I guess we'll never know though.” She increased the circumference of the circles on his chest.

“Yeah, I'm sure it's police evidence now.”

“And the website is shut down.” Her thoughtful finger circles spiraled down his abdomen.

Adam groaned. “I could maybe ask Bruce if we could get a copy.”

Jasmine sat up and gave Adam a sly, horny look. “Or we could just make more.”

“Damn, girl. Are you serious?”

“Why not?” She ran a playful hand over the prominence in his jeans.

With new enthusiasm, he slipped her off to the side and got up. “I feel like a hike. And an afternoon nap in the old blacksmith's shop.”

“I'll get a blanket.”

“I'll get the video camera.”



## Loose Id(R) Titles by Gemini Judson

*Animals*

*Night Blooming Jasmine*





## Gemini Judson

Gemini is a biologist by training and an artist by heart. She's spent her career studying fish, birds, bugs, and many other critters, all providing a colorful tapestry for her stories. She writes contemporary romances with varying degrees of heat, but the common thread is a natural setting or a scientific twist.

Her first love was painting and came to writing romances only recently. "The similarities in the process amaze me. When I write, I lay down a background wash first and gradually add form and structure, just like I would with a blank canvas. The last step is adding nuance and balance. There's nothing more satisfying than a finished manuscript and a finished painting."

She makes her home in Minnesota with her husband and daughter and a pile of cats and dogs and horses. When she's not writing or attending assorted youth sporting events, she's painting, on canvas or digitally.