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Velvet Sins



VELVET SINS

Audrey Godwin

EROTIC ROMANCE



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A SIREN PUBLISHING BOOK

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VELVET SINS

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AUDREY GODWIN

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Chapter One

The rigid mass felt good in his hand. Leaning against the wall of a shadowy alcove in back of the subway station, his cock was hard and long. He hadn't had sex—at least not real sex—in months, and he was starving. This small space was his little erotic nest. He had found an almost flat, badly stained pillow at the bottom of a nearby trash bin and threw it in there to sit on when he did his dirty deed. Now as he slid down the rough wall to the waiting pillow, he used both his hands to try and imitate a hot, tight vagina.

As usual, his thoughts went to *her*.

She was a woman—no, she wasn't just any woman. She was a beautiful, red-haired woman with blue eyes, and when her face appeared on the dark shadow of his lids, his skilled palm moved up and down—*in and out of her soft, moist cunt*.

God, he wanted to taste her—to drink her—to fuck her so hard she would cry out as his hard, rigid cock pushed up inside her. In his dreams, he could feel her writhing beneath him, and his eyes closed in rapture, his hand gently contracting and releasing slightly. It made his makeshift vagina feel like it had a pulse of its own. The feeling was so good, his hips began to move, pushing him so deep inside, he moaned out his lust with a raspy voice. Breathing heavily, he continued to manipulate it, his grip firm and tight. While squeezing and releasing, he twisted his hands slightly, a husky groan rushing past his lips when

he touched the tip, which was sensitive to the slightest touch. As the sensation grew, his hand became feverish, the hard massage causing a hot friction, his manipulation becoming more frantic. He slapped it, handled it roughly until he at last reached a place where a series of groans and a hiss filled his throat. In only seconds, a creamy liquid spewed forth so hot it fell steaming on the cold ground. At last relieved—or at least as relieved as he could get right now—Judas pushed himself back into his pants and zipped them up.

Coming out of his alcove, his eyes darted around guiltily as he picked up his sign and his tin cup and went to the spot he stood at every day. Standing there, he huddled against the raw wind, his dark hair long and stringy, his eyebrows tangled. He could feel the cold asphalt through the thin leather of his shoes and did a restless dance on the cracked, uneven sidewalk while he tried to keep warm. In hands covered with ragged gloves, he held a tin cup, and the sign he held told the passersby he'd been disabled in the war. If they'd stopped and asked him what war, he couldn't have told them. The truth was Judas Nyte was on the run for murder.

Just as he was beginning to get his life back, he'd learned that the woman he hit later died as a direct result of the injuries she received that night. He knew what that meant, and terror gripped him. Did the police wait and arrest him in the privacy of his own home? No. A flurry of dark uniforms and glittering badges burst into an exclusive club. In plain view of the escort service and aristocratic clientele, they accosted him. Realization of what was happening flooded him, and he knew he didn't have a chance. Panic filled him. He began to slowly back away as they advanced on him, feeling trapped by the foreboding wall of uniforms and the glint of cold steel on their hips. All at once, he was brutally grabbed from behind, and dark desperation spiraled within him. He fought like a wild man, risking a bullet in the back. Finally breaking free from the arresting officer, he ran at breakneck speed, knocking over carts of food while bullets

whizzed over his head. Bottles of champagne flew out of the waiter's hands, spewing and bursting as they shattered against a wall.

He knew in that moment he'd lost everything.

He'd lost his job at City Lights Escorts, his plush, high-rise apartment, and every cent that he had. All because some woman, probably high on drugs, decided to get her thrills by walking out into the traffic of a busy expressway.

Judas managed to stay out of sight at a seedy motel, but it hadn't taken him long to go through his savings and come up flat broke. At the time, he didn't think it would last long, but one day stretched into two, then a week passed—a month. Before long, he found himself living in an old jalopy he'd found in a wrecking yard or huddled with other stragglers beside a beggar's campfire. They cooked bits of food they had managed to scrounge from behind a supermarket where dented cans had been thrown, along with meat that had been on the meat rack too long and was going bad. Judas paired himself up with a wise old man who taught him the language of the street.

"They won't believe you," the man in a dark hood said as he glanced around suspiciously. "They won't buy a hard luck story like that. They'll think you don't work because you don't want to." He then leaned his hooded head close to Judas and spoke softly. "There are two kinds of poor. Respectable, and...well, otherwise.

"Otherwise?" Judas asked.

"Lazy, don't wanna work, spend everything they get on wine or alcohol. Makes it hard for those of us who are truly down on our luck. But there are ways," the old man rasped, looking around suspiciously as he took a bite of beef jerky.

"What ways?" Judas asked. "Tell me."

"It's like this, see. Respectable poor means...well, disabled in a war, that kind of thing."

"But how..."

By the time the night was over, Judas knew what he had to do. He immediately dug a piece of cardboard out of a trash bin and made

himself a sign that said he was a disabled war veteran and couldn't work. The ruse worked pretty well. He watched their faces as their change clinked down into his cup. He could almost see it in their eyes. They pictured him running through mud and rain, dodging bullets, and crawling under barbed wire until a stray bullet hit him in just the right place to keep him from working the rest of his life. He never had to worry about anyone taking time to talk to him. They didn't want to get close enough to hear his tale of woe. Sure, they'd give him a few cents to help him along, but he had to stay at arm's length. They didn't want to find out it was a lie, or that a veteran of any war would spend their hard earned money on drugs or alcohol.

By day, Judas stood in front of a subway station entrance. Even though it wasn't a good idea to stay in one place too long, Judas was reluctant to give this one up. He reveled in the warmth that drifted out with the people that poured out of the station, sometimes dropping a few cents into his cup. He knew he wouldn't get rich, but he managed to do better here than at any other spot, so he stayed.

The days were long and cold.

Nothing in his future but more of the same.

And then he saw—*her*.

She came up out of the subway tunnel, ascending the steps like a golden goddess. Red hair, bright blue eyes, and lush, red lips that had the undeniable power to keep him up at night.

But she wouldn't give him a second look.

"Could you help a war veteran?" he said as his eyes followed her.

She gave him a forced smile and mumbled a soft, "Good morning," then turned and went on her way.

He kept his eyes on her until she got lost among the scurrying crowd, his thoughts buzzing. *Yeah, maybe it's a good morning for you, bitch. You're not stuck out here on a street corner with nothing to eat and no one to give a damn.*

There was a day when Judas could've bedded one like her with little more than a wink and a smile. Now all he saw were cold looks that told him they thought themselves too good for him.

If they looked at him at all.

Rich bitches, every one.

"Have a good one," he said, before she disappeared around the corner. She'd be going to a warm office, drinking hot coffee and eating warm croissants, after which she'd do her job like she did every day. Then it would be back home to a hot dinner, a warm bed, and maybe a good fuck or two. As she gazed at the world through her burgundy-colored wine, she'd never give a thought to him and where he might be, or if his stomach was empty or full.

Sorry damned world.

While standing in front of that subway station day after day, the night that changed his life haunted him. Sometimes in his memory—sometimes in his dreams. To him the woman he had hit on the freeway had no name, no identification. She was simply a petite figure in a tight-belted raincoat, a thick curtain of jet-black hair falling down her back. He could still see her face as it loomed up before him just before he hit her. She was pale, her eyes weeping black mascara tears down her cheeks, her lips red—like blood. What had made her walk out into a busy highway, stumbling slowly toward the speeding cars, staring into the lights? Had she been drinking, too, or had she faced a heartbreak so bad she cared nothing for her life?

The chills that danced down his spine had nothing to do with the cold weather. He only wished he'd never taken a drink that night. Because of it he stood on this cold corner and watched people pass with pity in their eyes—even scorn.

Chapter Two

Contessa Kolby plodded on toward work, the feeling of guilt eating her up inside. She couldn't tell much about him, but his eyes—God, there was a *person* beneath all that facial hair and those tattered clothes. But what could she do? The streets were full of them, all sons of a society that didn't give a damn.

While these thoughts roiled around in her head, she fought gusts of ice-cold wind until she finally turned toward the entrance of a tall, majestic building made of glass and steel.

“Good morning, Ms. Kolby,” the door man called out cheerfully.

“Good morning, James,” Tess answered.

“Cold enough for you?”

She gave him a friendly smile. “Definitely.”

“Have a good day, miss.”

“You too,” she said, turning away. She hurried to a bank of elevators where a crowd of people stood. Twenty-six floors in this building, and she worked on the very top. The penthouse. The main office of the Southland Advertising Agency. She'd worked hard to get where she was and loved her—well, maybe she didn't love her job, but she loved the advertising industry. She would love her job if it weren't for one dark cloud on the horizon, and that was Parker Wolfe, the CEO. Sometimes she wondered if he was a businessman, or a member of the Mafia. He was tall and harsh looking. He had a thin mustache and dark hair with graying at his temples. A swatch of his hair would fall over his forehead when he became excited, and his booming voice could be heard beyond his office. She chilled when she looked into his eyes. They were the blackest she'd ever seen, and

he exuded a kind of dark countenance. It wasn't because of his swarthy skin. It was something else, something that didn't go away, even when he smiled. As soon as she'd come on board, he tried his flirtatious manner with her, but she didn't respond to him like many of the women did. Since then, she'd had lots of ideas, but because she refused his advances, he never used them.

As soon as the elevator arrived, she elbowed her way in. Since few people worked in the penthouse, the elevator emptied out slowly and then began a non-stop journey up to the top floor. Once she got off, she quickly made her way to the double-glass doors where the familiar logo of palm trees, sand, and a lazy ocean came into view. Beneath it, the prestigious name of Southland Advertising Agency and Parker T. Wolfe, CEO were written. Looking past the logo, she noticed a rushing figure just before the doors quickly swooshed open.

"Hey, Tess."

"Hi, Liz, what's up?"

"Emergency meeting this morning at nine."

"What's wrong?" Tess asked while walking swiftly toward her office.

"Jenna called in. Just quit on the spot."

Tess snickered. "An emergency meeting is being called because a secretary quit her job? Apparently, I underestimated her."

"No, the meeting isn't about that, I mean, that's just something that happened. What's giving old man Wolfe heartburn is Becker. She lost a million dollar account, and he's fit to be tied."

Reaching her office, Tess pulled off her gloves, punched them down in her pocket, and then hung her coat on a hook attached to the back of her door. "It'll be his usual *nose to the grindstone* speech, then. Just a little early this month."

"You got it."

Sitting down at her desk, she turned on her computer while speaking to her friend. "So what did Jenna say when she called in?"

“Not much, only that she was getting married to that guy she’s been seeing.”

“God,” Tess said, shaking her head. “What she sees in that creep is beyond me.”

“I agree. Hey, you’d better get on the phone and call around to a few agencies.”

“I’ll take care of it later. You know how I hate all the interviews, the...” Tess’s words began to fade when the picture of a grizzled face loomed in her mind. She sat completely still for a moment, then turned quickly, her chair swiveling noisily. “Say, Liz, is there anything in the rule book that says a secretary has to be a female?”

Liz snickered. “Not that I know of,” she said, perching on the edge of Tess’s desk. “In fact, a long time ago secretaries used to be male. Did you know that? Gosh,” she sighed, a dreamy look on her face. “Wouldn’t it be great having a good-looking hunk around here instead of these short, fat types? It might give the ladies something to come to work for besides their paychecks.”

“Yeah,” Tess said thoughtfully, the ragged face shivering in the cold still haunting her. And then with excitement shining in her eyes, she looked up at Liz and said, “Liz, I’ve got a wild idea. I don’t know what he looks like under all that hair on his face, but, well, I can tell by the way he looks out of his eyes that he’s sharp. I see him every morning as I’m coming out of the subway station.” She looked closely at Liz to see her reaction. “All he needs is a job.”

Liz, being forced out of her fantasy state, looked at Tess. “Who are you talking about?”

“It’s this guy. Every morning he’s at the subway station when I get there. He must be down on his luck. But if he had a job—”

“A job? You mean as a secretary?”

“All right, so it sucks. If he doesn’t work out here, we can put him in the mail room. It might not be much, but it’ll be better than standing on that corner day after day with nothing but pennies in his cup.”

“Pennies in his cup?” Liz repeated, then looked at Tess with unbelief in her eyes. “My God, am I hearing you right? Are you considering giving a job to a homeless person?” While snapping her fingers in front of Tess’s eyes, she said, “Tess, wake up, girl. They don’t want to work. They’re lazy. Chances are when you offer it to him, he’ll have some excuse why he can’t take it. He probably spends every cent he gets on liquor or drugs.”

“So what? If he doesn’t take it, fine. I’ll—”

“But what if he *does* take it? What if the bastard is a criminal? What if you bring him in here and he steals us all blind? Are you willing to take that chance? Your career will be ruined, Tess. After you’re fired, that creep Wolfe will blackball you throughout the entire advertising industry, and that’s just the beginning. If you’re not arrested as this guy’s accomplice, maybe the bastard will save you a place on that corner beside him.” She shook her head. “God, no, girlfriend, you need to think this thing through.”

Not listening, Tess continued. “Let’s have lunch today down at Nathan’s. He’s right around the corner. Maybe if you see him, you’ll change your mind.”

“Nathan’s? You mean that place where all the waitresses have rose-red hair?”

“What’s that got to do with anything? The food’s good.”

Liz shrugged and mumbled, “Yeah. Okay.”

The morning passed with Tess hardly able to sit still. Would he still be there? God, he had to be. What if he wasn’t? Maybe he was only there during the busiest times, like rush hour, or—damn, she couldn’t wait.

“Liz,” she cried out, getting the attention of everyone but her friend. Jumping up from her desk, she stuck her head out of her office, rounded the door quickly, and called out again. “Liz.” She looked around at the bustling employees. “Anyone seen her?”

Seeing someone nod in a certain direction, she looked over and saw Liz conversing with a man at the door of the break room.

Wasting no time, she rushed up to her and pulled her away in mid-sentence. "We have to go."

"Tess, Jim and I were—"

"I'm sorry to interrupt," she said, giving the man a weak smile, then turning to Liz. "We need to go now." Seeing the blank look on Liz's face, she said, "You know. The subway station? Remember?"

"The subway?" Liz looked puzzled. "I thought we were going at lunchtime."

"I know, but I'm afraid he might not be there. What if he's just there during rush hour? You know how they jump around. I'd never find him."

"So what? Hey, did you see that homeboy I was talkin' to? What d'ya think? Hot, huh?"

"Liz!" Tess shouted, tempted to shake the babbling female and make her pay attention. "Listen to me."

"Tess, I heard you. Hey, I'm sure he'll be there in the morning...or maybe tonight when you go home."

"I know, but I'm nervous. I can't do this alone, Liz."

Liz rolled her eyes. "Tess, this is just one more of your hare-brained schemes. I don't think—"

"Liz, we're wasting time," she said, glancing down at her watch. "By the way, what time is rush hour over?"

"How the hell would I know? Do I look like the Transportation Department?"

"C'mon. You'd better grab your coat. It's like ice out there."

The two women ran out of the building, one sprinting forward, the other following behind swinging her arms in protest. While elbowing through the pedestrian traffic, they jaywalked around parked cars, ran lights, and veered through slow-moving traffic until they were at last at the corner of the subway station.

Tess abruptly stopped, and Liz ran into her back. "What the hell...Why did you stop?"

"I'm scared," she said, plastering herself against the cold brick. "He's just around the corner. At least he should be if he's still there." Sliding her eyes toward her friend, she pleaded, "Liz, you look."

Liz frowned. "You're such a coward, Tess." Finally, exhaling a big sigh, she said, "Oh, all right."

"Thanks."

As if to prepare herself, she pulled at her coat, lifted the collar, then gave Tess one last glare before she rounded the corner. She immediately stopped in her tracks, then stepped backward slowly. "God, he's big, isn't he?"

"Yeah," Tess said, peeking around the corner. "That's him."

"Tess, he looks... Well, I think you should—"

"Be quiet," Tess said, then grabbed Liz's arm and quickly rounded the corner while she was still protesting.

The two took mincing steps toward him, at last coming to a halt a few feet away. They observed him for several minutes until he sensed their presence and turned to look.

"Hi," Tess said, giving him a friendly smile.

* * * *

Judas almost swallowed his tongue. God, it was her. And she was smiling. The even whiteness of her teeth made her smile dazzling, and her burnished hair had been blown into disarray by the wind. What the hell was she doing here staring at him like he was a piece of prime beef? Did she recognize him? Oh, God, he'd be in trouble if she did.

Giving her a hesitant nod, he waited for her to say something, his suspicious eyes shifting down to her hands where she was holding on to her friend for dear life. He turned back when he heard a clank of change being dropped down into his cup. "Thanks," he called out then shifted his eyes once again to the two women who kept staring at him and whispering among themselves.

Finally, the attractive, dark-skinned one, apparently the braver of the two, stepped up to him. Indicating toward her red-haired friend, she said, "My friend and I were wondering if you would...well, we want to talk with you."

A smile Judas thought was friendly dropped instantly from his face. "Why? Who are you?" Shifting his gaze to look at the other one, he said, "You don't look like cops."

* * * *

Tess's smile melted from her face. Cops? Why would he be afraid of the cops? Thinking she might be biting off more than she could chew, she hesitated for a moment, then finally spoke up. "Liz, please. You're doing this all wrong." Turning back to the man, she said, "I...my name is Contessa Kolby, and this is—"

"Contessa?" he repeated. "Strange name. Nice, but...well, strange."

"Yes, well, my friends call me Tess, or Tessa...whatever. Anyway, this is Liz, Elizabeth Ellison," she corrected, her hand clamping down on Liz's arm and dragging her forward.

"Hi," Liz said, peering around Tess.

"Uh...we were wondering if...well, the office where I work is looking for someone, and I thought—"

"Look," Liz said, again peering around Tess. "Do you want a job? It wouldn't be much right at first, but later, if you work out—"

"You're offering me a job?"

Liz looked at Tess, puzzled. "Isn't that what I just said?"

"Quiet," Tess replied softly to Liz, then turned to him and said, "Yes."

"You mean...you just come right up to me and offer me a job? I mean...just like that?"

Liz and Tess looked at each other, then looked back at him. "What's wrong with that?"

He snorted. “You don’t know? Hell, you don’t even know me. I mean, I might be anything from a hardened criminal to a lazy son of a bitch. Hell, I might even be a rapist or a killer.”

Tess cocked her head and looked at his sign. “Your sign says you’re a disabled war veteran. Is it a lie?”

“Oh,” he muttered. He’d forgotten about his sign. “Well, uh—”

“Look, I don’t care what your story is. Do you want the job?”

He gave a slight shrug. “I don’t know. Doing what?”

The two women looked at each other with knowing glances, then Tess said, “Well, it’ll require some typing. Uh...can you spell? Take dictation?”

“Type? Sp...?” He gave an incredulous snort. “You’re offering me a job as a freakin’ secretary?”

All hope went out of Tess when she saw the look on his face. “Yeah, a wild idea, huh? I just thought...well, it’s the only opening right now, and—”

“Oh...well, yeah, I can type...a little, anyway. I guess I can spell as well as the next guy, but dictation—”

“That’s okay,” Tess said, hope rising. “I won’t be giving that much dictation. You’ll get better as you—”

“You?” he said with a gasp while disbelief filled his eyes. “I’d be working for you? A *woman*?”

Her eyes closed in disappointment. “Hey, forget it. I just thought...” She turned to go away, but then decided she couldn’t let this jerk get away with it. With one hand on her hip, and the index finger of the other hand poking him in the chest, she spoke her mind. “You know what you are? A male chauvinist pig. One of those stupid men who thinks women are good for only one thing. Well, for my money, you can stand here all day and all night if freezing your ass off is better than working for a woman. Where the hell have you been anyway? Women have been in the workplace for years now, and some hold very high positions whether you like it or not.”

“Hey,” he said, his hand grabbing hers and holding it. “I know about women and how they get to the top.”

Jerking her hand out of his, she said, “Why, you bastard. You’re just like every other dumb creep I’ve ever known. You think the only way a woman can get anywhere is on her back. Well, it may surprise you to know that statistics prove that women are smarter than men in every way. Take you and me, for instance. Which one of us is working, and which one is standing on a street corner with a tin cup? It’s time you woke up, mister, and realized that this world would be a better place if women ran it. For one thing, there’d be fewer homeless, laws that make sense, and less corruption in high places.”

“Hey, lady, it was a goddamned *woman* who put me here!”

“Yeah? And nothing *you* did had anything to do with it, right? Sure, hide behind her skirts. Cowards often do.”

* * * *

Judas was seething, but he couldn’t say anything because every word she said was true. He’d been blaming the woman when the truth was, if he hadn’t been drinking that night, the story might have had a different ending, and he might still be drinking pink champagne that spurted from a fountain. What this woman offered might be bizarre, but he was tempted to take the job just to prove her wrong. Besides, if given half a chance, he had no doubt that he could make it work to his advantage.

“Did I say I didn’t want the job?” he growled.

“Well, do you, or not?”

“Maybe.”

“Look. I need a commitment. If you want the job, fine. If not, say so, and I’ll leave you to your...” she looked down at his cup, “panhandling.”

“All right. Yeah, I want it.”

"Eight tomorrow morning, and don't be late or you'll be fired before you start." Taking a good look at his tattered clothes and scruffy beard, she continued. "Use those dimes in there to get yourself cleaned up."

"Lady, if I had money for a new suit and somewhere to go for a bath and a shave, would I be standing here in freezing temperatures?"

Tess looked at him undecidedly for a moment then began digging in her purse. Finding her wallet, she dug out a handful of bills and pushed them into his tin cup.

Judas's eyes widened at the beautiful green bills he saw. He quickly reached in and took them out and held them up in front of her eyes. "You carry this kind of money around? Does the word *mugger* mean anything to you?"

"Save it, buster. I just happened to stop by the bank on my way to work this morning." Indicating to the money, she continued. "You're to take that money and find yourself a room, then get cleaned up. I'm warning you here and now. If you spend this on anything other than food and clothes, I'll call the cops. I don't know what your story is, but it's my guess that the *lady* that's responsible for you being here is now lying in the cold ground, and you're on the run for murder."

"If you're so certain I'm a killer, why would you want me working for you?"

"I keep asking myself the same question," she said, taking in his tattered clothes with a jaundiced eye. "I'm crazy, I guess." She indicated toward Liz who was standing a few steps behind her, listening to every word. "Ask her, she knows."

In concert, they both looked back at Liz and saw her eyes widen. With an embarrassed smile, she said, "As a bedbug."

"She doesn't look too tightly wrapped herself," Judas said uncomfortably.

"Liz? She's a rock. Except when there's a man around."

"Yeah?" he asked as he gaped at her, then slid his gaze back to Tess. "How about you?"

"I hate men."

Judas shrugged. "My luck."

"Tomorrow then. Come up to the penthouse of the Schaeffer Building around the corner." Thinking the matter was settled, Tess turned away.

Judas was full of doubts as he watched them getting lost in the crowd. He wanted a job, God, how he wanted a job. But a secretary? And to a *woman*, for God's sake? Why couldn't someone have come along and offered him a job as a garbage collector, or a sewer rat? Why a friggin' *secretary* of all things?

"Hey!" Judas called out before they rounded the corner.

Tess and Liz turned when they heard him and quickly started back.

When they walked up, Judas hesitated, scratching his head. "Look...I don't know. I...hell, the last thing I need is two female dingbats on my hands. I appreciate the offer, but—"

"I see," Tess said, a look of resignation on her face. "Well, I tried. Actually, Liz told me you would refuse, but stupid me, I actually believed I could help you. I guess I owe her an apology."

"What do you mean? What the hell are you talking about?"

"I'm talking about Liz. My friend. The one you just met? She said you wouldn't take the job, and apparently, she was right. I'm afraid she has a very dim view of the homeless. Says their situation is their own fault because they don't want to work, and if you offered them a job they wouldn't take it." She pulled her coat closer around her, and turned up her collar. "I guess I should have listened." She held out her palm. "My money, please."

Judas looked down at the stack of greenbacks in his hand, hating to give them back. If he didn't take the job, he'd be right back where he was, and might not get another chance.

And then it dawned on him.

Women. In high places.

Some ugly, some with thick waists and sagging skin, but all had money to throw away, and he wanted it thrown in his direction. Suddenly it all felt so familiar. It was something he knew. Cleaned up and looking like he used to, he knew he could charm the pantyhose off any woman. He wasn't this city's highest-paid male whore for nothing. With this woman's help, he could dig himself up out of this hole at last.

A chill danced down his spine when he thought how close he'd come to losing this chance. His decision made, he gave a quick turn of his wrist and punched the money down in the pocket underneath his tattered coat. "If you think I'm givin' this money back, you're crazier than you look."

"You thief!"

"Hey," was his husky reply as one naked finger nipped at her chin, "don't worry, I intend to earn every penny, only unlike you, I'll be on top."

Chapter Three

Few people know the agony—and the ecstasy—of a mind that has turned to mush, Tess thought as she looked up at the door, waiting for her new employee to arrive. On one hand, she wondered what she had been thinking when she offered the man on the street a job—hence the agony. On the other, she was proud of taking a man off the street and giving him a chance at a decent life—hence the ecstasy.

But what would it cost her?

He hadn't been at the subway station this morning, so she knew he might walk in at any moment. Or not. Before they had returned to work yesterday, she had sworn Liz to secrecy, but what if something went wrong? What if he drank the money up and came in here as drunk as a skunk and looking like he did yesterday? What if he ran off with her money, never intending to take the job at all? What if he—? Just then she jerked her head up when she heard a knock. Standing at the door was Sheila Coombs, the receptionist, with a dreamy look on her face.

"What is it, Sheila?"

"There's someone to see you."

"This early? Who is it?"

"He says his name is Judas Nyte."

"Nyte...Judas Nyte," Tess said softly then looked back up at Sheila. "I don't recognize the name. Is he a new client?"

"No, he says—"

Just then from behind her a deep, husky voice said, "It's just now eight o'clock. I'd like it duly noted that I'm here on time. If I'm kept

waiting one more minute, I'll be accused of being late and dismissed. I believe that's what you said yesterday?"

When Sheila stepped back to let him through, he looked down at her and winked. "Thanks, Sheila. I can take it from here."

Sheila exhaled a big sigh, her eyes dreamy, her smile silly and youngish as she stared openly at him, and almost swooned.

Tess's eyes widened when she realized who she was looking at. Her breath became short, and she gulped loudly, understanding Sheila's reaction to this—this god. She tried to steel herself against his obvious charms, but like it or not, her eyes raked along his body, causing a heat to begin between her legs that slowly climbed into her abdomen, then to her breasts, and finally singeing the tips of her ears.

His shoulders filled the doorway, and the dark blue suit that covered his frame fit like a glove. His skin was swarthy, his blue eyes luminous as he studied her from across the room. Gone was the scraggly beard, and in its place was skin bronzed by wind and sun. His handsome face had strong features, yet was softened with a certain devilish sensuality mixed with a brooding quality that Tess had never seen outside a Chippendale Club. His features were so perfect, so symmetrical, that any more delicacy would have made him too beautiful for a man. The ratty mess that had been his hair was gone, and in its place were well-styled, glossy strands that seemed proud to be caressing his shoulders.

No fussy old-man rules of short hair would touch him, she thought. In fact, every rule in the book might just have to take a back seat to that glorious head of hair that might well glow in the dark.

My God, was this the result of a little soap and water? The man—no, the god—that stood before her in no way resembled the street rat that she'd offered a job to yesterday.

* * * *

Judas stood at the door, seeing the impact he was making on her, and he loved it, even expected it. All the women there had given him double takes, even triple takes, as he strode through the offices. They ogled openly, stepping back while he walked past them. Judas knew the effect he had on women. It was his stock and trade, after all.

Now, stepping all the way into the office, he closed the door behind him, making Tess nervous.

“What...what are you doing?”

“I just thought we might need a little privacy to conduct our business. Aren’t there forms to fill out, an interview to conduct, that sort of thing?”

“Yes...I mean the forms...I’ll have to get them from Personnel. Actually, I wasn’t sure you would show up,” she said nervously. “But it’s no problem. I’ll get them later.” She fiddled around on her desk with clumsy fingers and then folded them in a clasp. “As you know, I’ve been doing without a secretary, so things haven’t been running as smoothly as usual.”

“I see,” he said, and with an arrogant swagger, walked up to her desk. He stood for a moment and waited. Finally, he indicated toward a chair and asked, “May I sit?”

“Oh...yes, of course.” Reaching, she lifted a folder from a box on her desk and opened it. “Now, Mr. Nyte...by the way, what is your full name?”

“Judas Nyte. N-Y-T-E.”

She frowned. “What was that?”

“My last name. Nyte,” he said. “Please note that it’s not the traditional spelling, it’s—“

“Yes, I understand.” She looked up from her writing pad. “No middle initial?”

“No. My family was too poor.” He smiled, expecting her to at least smile at his attempt at a joke, but nothing, so he shrugged it off.

“Very well. Your address, please.”

“Right now I’m staying at the Blue Light Motel.”

She frowned.

“What’s wrong?”

She shrugged. “Oh, nothing. It sounds a little seedy is all.”

“It is, but since I’m not exactly rolling in dough right now, it’s all I can afford.” Looking down at the paper she was writing on, he said, “I thought you didn’t have the forms yet.”

“Oh...well...I know what the form will need, so I’ll just take down some information and then transfer it to the form later.”

“Okay with me,” he said, his eyes roaming over her. “I like looking at you.”

The suggestive remark hung heavily in the air until she lifted her eyes and looked at him closely. “Mr. Nyte, what did you do before coming here? I assume since you were hurt while serving time in the...”

“Ms. Kolby, you might as well know, I’ve never been in the military.”

“But your sign...”

He smiled as if amused. “You mean you believe all that?”

“Why shouldn’t I?”

“It’s a ruse, Ms. Kolby. It’s a way of getting the sympathy of the public so they’ll contribute. It’s almost as if they think they’re donating to charity. It makes them feel that their money’s not wasted on some lazy son of a bitch who doesn’t deserve it.”

“Well, I’ll remember that the next time I—”

“The next time you what? You never gave a dime to this poor vet.”

“Apparently,” she began as she glared at him, “it’s a good thing I didn’t since it would have probably been used for liquor.”

“So what? A man has to warm up somehow.”

“Let’s get back to the matter at hand, Mr. Nyte. She looked down at the form. “Next question. Do you have a record?”

“A record? You mean a police record?”

“Yes.”

He looked at her as if she was crazy. "I killed a woman, for God's sake. Of course I've got a record. You knew that yesterday."

She had a worried look on her face. "The police are looking for you?"

"What do you think?"

She looked down at the form, and was silent for a moment before she went to the next question. "What did you do before coming here?"

"You know what I did. I stood on a street corner."

"No, I mean before that."

"You mean a million years ago in a previous life?"

"Mr. Nyte, quit hedging. If you would just answer the question, please."

Judas began to squirm uncomfortably then looked up at her. "Are these questions completely necessary?"

Her cherry lips lifted in a sarcastic smile. "The form, Mr. Nyte. I can get around the previous question, but I have to put something down as past experience."

"But I have no past experience. I've never been anyone's secretary."

"It doesn't have to be secretarial work. It can be anything. Whatever your previous job was." Her next words reeked with disapproval. "You have worked before, haven't you?"

"Lady, you came and got me off the street and offered me this job without knowing a single thing about me, and now it's important?"

"Mr. Nyte, this is a document that will go into your file. These are not my rules, I just follow them. So, if you will please cooperate and tell me what the last job was that you held, I would appreciate it."

He lowered his head and rubbed his face impatiently, then looked up at her. "All right, put this down."

With her pen poised over the paper, she waited. A thick pause filled the room.

"I worked for an escort service. City Lights Escorts was the name of the place. If you need to call them, the number is—"

“If you’re trying to shock me, Mr. Nyte—”

“Shock? I’m not trying to shock you. It’s the truth. I escorted little old ladies for money. I picked them up, took them to parties, dinners, the theater, the opera, any place those swinging mamas wanted to go.”

“I see. So, what was your salary?” Tess asked, while writing down his responses.

“A hell of a lot more than I’ll be making here.”

Tess looked puzzled. “Could you be more specific? I don’t see how escorting women to dinner could—”

“All right,” Judas shouted, “so I fucked them. Does that make you happy? I fucked the hell out of them for money. A lot of money.” He jumped up from his chair and went to the window and looked out on the city, wondering what it would be like to jump off.

“You d-did what?” she breathed, looking up at him.

“You heard me. I—”

“No! Please don’t say it.”

* * * *

With a moan, she lowered her head into her hands. This couldn’t be happening. It couldn’t. My God, she had gone out and dragged a male whore off the street and brought him into the agency to be her secretary. She was worried about convicts, rapists, drunks, but never once thought of a male whore who was hiding out from the police.

Heavy tension filled the room. While time ticked by, her heartbeats thrashed, her erratic pulse pumped, and a throbbing in her abdomen vibrated deep and hot. Tess looked up slowly. Thinking about what he’d said, she saw him in a whole new light, and her eyes raked over him once again.

While she was staring at him, he turned around.

She turned her head quickly, but not before she saw a vague resemblance to the man she’d seen on the street. Awkwardly sliding her eyes back toward him, they lowered to the rich material of the

suit. Trying to cover her shock, she spoke, her voice shaky. “Well, Mr. Nyte, it seems my money was adequate to suit you up nicely.”

He looked down at himself, and then back up at her. “Miss. Kolby...look, do we have to be so formal? I mean, if you haven’t changed your mind—”

Tess was silent for a moment then shook her head. “No, I...I haven’t changed my mind, and you may call me Tess. Everyone else does.”

“Everyone else?” He paused for a moment then continued. “I would prefer to call you Contessa.”

“I really wish you wouldn’t. I’m very sensitive about my name. My mother...well, she had sort of a twisted sense of humor.”

“I think it’s a beautiful name. It fits somehow. A beautiful name for a beautiful woman.”

Tess expelled a breath of air she didn’t realize she had been holding and forced a smile in his direction. “Don’t begin our association by flirting with me, Mr. Nyte.”

“*Mr. Nyte*? If I’m to call you Contessa, surely you can call me Judas.”

“Speaking of names, that one is—”

“I know. It was my father who had the sense of humor in my family.”

“I believe, Mr. Ny...uh, Judas, we are getting off the subject. I would appreciate it if in the future you would...” She smiled. “Never mind, it doesn’t matter. You’re here, and you look, well, presentable.”

“Presentable? Is that all you can say?”

Tess gave him a sharp look. “You’ll find I’m not the gushing type, Mr...uh, Judas. If you expect me to go ga-ga over you like Sheila did, I’m afraid you’re in for a rude awakening. This is an office, and we will conduct ourselves in a professional manner.”

“It actually depends on which side of the desk you’re on, doesn’t it?” Judas said.

“What do you mean?” she said, looking up at the intimidating male in all his handsome glory.

“It means you’re the boss. It means that I’ve been on the wrong side of the desk my whole life. But, hey, I’ll make you happy. It’s okay. Just let me know what you want. A single, a threesome, maybe you want me to fuck you on a swing. Ever do that? I have. I’ve done it all.”

As their eyes locked, Tess felt the same burning sensation she did earlier and swiveled around in her chair so she wouldn’t have to look at him. “If you’re trying to shock me, you’ve succeeded.” After a short pause, she turned back around slowly and kept her eyes angled downward. “This interview is over. You may go.”

He looked down at the information scribbled on the sheet. “What about the form?”

“I’ll...we’ll do it another time. You may go now.”

“Go? Go where? You haven’t shown me where I’m to work.”

Moving from her chair, she hurried to the door and swung it open. “There, that is your desk. If I need you, I’ll press my intercom button and summon you.”

Judas strode toward the desk and looked down at the small box. “You mean this? How does it work?”

She walked to where he was and pushed herself into the tight squeeze between him and the desk. Leaning over, she showed him the buttons. “It’s simple. You will press the button that lights up.”

“What if I want to call you?”

“This one,” she said, closing her eyes when she got a whiff of his cologne. Turning, she found him leaning over her, their eyes and lips almost touching. She could feel his body against hers and wanted so much to press herself against him, to feel his rigid cock rubbing against her pussy. Dear God, what was happening to her? With her breath coming hard, she backed away. Slowly at first, then when she managed to get around him, she almost ran to her office and slammed the door shut.

As she leaned back against her door, she took a deep, soul-cleansing breath, and then went to her desk. Almost as soon as she sat down, she looked at the box where a soft, deep, husky, whiskey-smooth voice came whispering out. “Contessa, I’ll be here if you need me.”

Chapter Four

For the next few days, Tess tried to keep from hearing the whispers that drifted around the office and the sly looks slanted in Judas's direction. It seemed as if the gossipmongers had a new subject—the fantastic new guy Tess had hired.

Have you seen Tess's new secretary?

No, what about her?

It ain't a her, kiddo, it's a man! And what a man!

They began by peeking around corners, strolling by his desk, angling glances in his direction, and drinking water that they didn't want from the water fountain close to his desk. Finally, when they mustered up the courage to say something, Judas was so friendly they had to admit that a male secretary was, among other things, a delicious idea!

Unfortunately, the office sluts weren't the only ones affected by Judas. Tess was so aware of him, she knew when he left, when he returned, and when any of the girls tried to catch his eye. Now the water cooler and the coffee room were vacant since all the action was on this end of the building. All kinds of excuses were given as to why they needed to be here instead of in their own offices that were light-years away in another section of the agency.

Women of every age strutted up and down before him, cutting their eyes in his direction, some even stopping by to welcome him to the company—in a suggestive manner, of course. Tess knew if she had hired a female instead of the sexiest man alive, no one would have given the poor woman the time of day. Tess had clenched her teeth so much they were beginning to ache. Judas was a constant

headache that wouldn't go away, but as bad as it was, she had a feeling it would get worse.

Today had been a nightmare from hell, and as Tess looked down at her watch, she realized a meeting was about to start, and the room hadn't even been prepared yet. She buzzed for Judas, but he didn't answer, so jumping up, she rushed out of her office and hurried down to the conference room to do the job herself. This irritated her to no end. Here she was, Southland's Creative Director, a highly paid executive responsible for the quality of all creative work produced by the agency reduced to doing the job of her secretary who was very likely off somewhere giving some flighty little airhead a thrill. While checking video equipment, telephones, and making sure the water pitchers were filled and enough glasses were on hand, she happened to see someone's business card lying on the floor. Leaning down slowly, she picked it up and wilted down in a chair when she read it.

*Ladies, let me welcome you to the world of Judas Nyle.
A world of sophistication and charm, or a world of hot, lusty nights.
I invite you to let me make you fly, or make you scream.
If you seek the finer things, here I am...*

Each word leaped out at her while his voice reverberated in her mind over and over again.

I fucked them. I fucked the hell out of them for money.

She felt dizzy. What had she done? Why hadn't she listened to Liz? She had gone and brought a friggin' whore into the Southland Agency, and now he was offering himself for sex.

Looking back down at the card that was so fancy it looked more like an invitation to a roman bath, she thought of the money—her money—he'd probably spent having it made.

He had this planned from the beginning, she thought. Coming in here and selling himself like a side of beef.

She wondered just how many were lying around, and how many women had already taken advantage of his outrageous offer? She glanced down at her watch. There wasn't time now, but she would have to speak to him—to order him to stop this thing before the agency became a hotbed of raucous activity that any rag would jump on as soon as they learned of it. My God, the scandal. The agency and everyone connected to it would be ruined.

Just then, the door opened and Judas stepped in, carrying a stack of read-aheads to be placed in front of each chair. “You!” she growled.

Judas looked up, his eyes full of irritating innocence. “Huh?”

Tess jumped up and slammed the door shut behind him. “You bastard. What in hell are you trying to do to me, to this agency?”

Putting the stack down on the edge of the table, he looked at her as if she'd lost her mind. “Would you mind telling me what in hell you're talking about?”

She extended her hand where the card lay, the imagined heat so hot it almost burned her hand. “This is what I'm talking about. How could you? How in hell could you do this?” As soon as he took it from her hand, she wilted down into a chair, trying to control her rage. “I'm ruined,” she whispered, cradling her face in her hands. “All because I tried to help someone.”

“Is this what you're worried about? This is nothing,” he said, throwing the card back down in front of her. “So I'm moonlighting on the side, so what? Are there any rules that say I can't?”

“Moonlighting?” she asked sarcastically as she looked up at him. “Is that what they're calling it these days?”

“Look, lady, all I'm trying to do is get back on my feet so I can live a decent life like everyone else on the planet. Is there something wrong with that?”

“But...you're selling yourself.”

“It's what I do, okay? It's all I know.” He turned and began pacing while raking his fingers through his hair, then turned quickly

and glared at her. "I can't get along on what you pay me. Nobody could. No wonder you can't keep a friggin' secretary."

"But you're prostituting yourself. This is a reputable agency, Judas. If this gets out, this agency and everyone in it will be ruined!"

"All that just because I want to make a living?"

"Judas, it's not making a living I'm objecting to. It's the way you're doing it." She looked at him as if she were looking at a bug under the sink. "You're trash, Judas. Nothing but pure trash."

* * * *

A sudden pain caused by her thoughtless words spiraled inside him, causing his eyes to tear. He'd struggled with that side of his profession for as long as he could remember. He wouldn't let himself be thought of as cheap. He dressed well, stayed well groomed, treated his ladies like queens, and escorted them to high class establishments where they mingled with the elite of society. He was *not* trash! He wasn't!

Walking up to him, she pointed her finger in his face. "Get this straight right now. I want it stopped, and I want it stopped right now. This minute. Go around and gather up all the cards you've so conveniently given out, and make it known that you are out of business."

"And live in a place where bugs as big as my fist crawl up a wall? Where the paint is peeling or the wallpaper is ripped up in shreds? Would you live there? If you made the same salary I do, you might be laying down for some sucker right now yourself."

"How dare you say that to me!" she bellowed.

"Oh, yes. I'm beginning to see the double standard here. Because you're my boss you can deliver any kind of insult you want, but because I work for you I have to sit here and take it without saying a word. Yes, ma'am, no, ma'am, right away, ma'am. Is that the picture?"

“Insult? What insult?”

“You just called me trash, lady.”

Her lips lifted in a sarcastic sneer. “Well, what do you expect to be called? You *sell* yourself for God’s sake.”

“Are you going to stand here and tell me you have never sold yourself? Have you ever been to bed with a man after a dinner, a movie, an evening of entertainment? Well, let me fill you in, sweetheart, you paid for everything you got with your body.”

“How dare you speak to me that way? That is none of your business.”

“That’s right, it’s not. And what I do outside this office on my own time is none of yours.”

“This *is* my business!” she shouted, lifting the card crumpling it up in his face, and throwing at him. “When you bring your trashy lifestyle into this office, it *is* my business. Now, do as I say, or you’ll be back down on that corner with a tin cup in your hand.”

* * * *

She whirled around, walked to the door, and swung it open. To her surprise, a crowd had gathered. “Don’t you people have work to do?” she snapped.

“We’re here for the meeting, Tess. What’s going on?”

Tess turned and saw Liz with a questioning look on her face. “Nothing. It’s over now. The room is ready. You can go on in now.” Ducking her head, she turned and rushed toward her office. Once there, she grabbed up her notebook and her pen and turned to see Judas come in and close the door. “What the hell do you think you’re doing?”

“I just wanted to apologize. I guess I did step out of line a bit, but I never meant to endanger anyone’s job, or go against the rules.”

“Yes, well, I have to get to the meeting, so if you—”

He stepped forward. “Can’t they get along without you?”

She looked up at him. His voice was husky, suggestive, and his eyes gazed into hers as if he could see down to her very soul. An irritating twinge of arousal began and pushed its way upward as he continued toward her, not stopping until he stood before her, his body almost touching hers. “Get out of my way,” she whispered, but the order didn’t sound convincing.

His hands softly grasped the tops of her arms and squeezed. His hypnotic eyes lowered to her lips, and he spoke softly. “Every day that I stood outside that subway station, I thought of the moment you would come out. And when you did, I looked at those lips and thought about nothing but kissing them. In my imagination, they were so warm, so inviting.” With her face only an inch from his, he seemed to sway toward her until their lips met tentatively at first, and then a flame melded them together, both lips opening with the smallest utter of a moan between them.

Tess couldn’t fight. She could only respond to the fire that leapt between them and moaned lustily as he gathered her close—so very close. She loved the way he smelled, his firm body, the thickness of his cock as he pressed it against her. As her eyes drifted shut, she saw Judas with a cane and top hat strutting around in a white tie and tails. Crowded around him were beautiful women from every walk of life, hanging on his arms. Some were rich, older women, while others were young starlet types. She even saw money flying into his pocket as he stripped for them.

She suddenly began struggling. “Get away from me!” she cried out as soon as her lips were free.

Judas let her go. “You don’t fool me, Tess. You were into that kiss, and you know it. I can’t figure it out. You won’t let yourself like me. Just answer me one question. Why the hell are you such a cold fish? You’re as beautiful as a goddess, and yet, I can’t seem to get close to you.”

“I don’t hire whores,” she hissed, the words bringing Judas’s pursuit to an end.

* * * *

The familiar knife-like pain shot up inside him. He couldn't seem to move. His hands felt heavy and dropped to his side while she stepped around him and hurried out of the office. He stood there for minutes that seemed like hours while he tried to get his emotions settled, and then a small, feminine voice broke the silence.

"Judas? Judas Nyte?"

Judas couldn't speak. The hurt was too fresh, and his eyes were wet, so he pretended to be busy doing something. As soon as he managed to get himself together, he forced a smile and began speaking as he turned. "Yes, I'm Judas Nyte. I was just getting my boss off to the meeting. She's a little dis..." Judas's words faded when he saw the lovely woman in the doorway. Her glossy, blonde hair was up in a smooth French twist, and her eyes were electric gray—the color of a summer storm. Surely he would have remembered her if he'd met her before, but he couldn't seem to place her.

"I can well imagine," the woman said as she walked in. "Distracted? Isn't that what you were going to say? Well, if my secretary looked anything like you, I might be a tad distracted myself."

"What can I do for you, Ms...."

"Don't struggle for my name. We don't know each other. I don't even work here. I came in for the meeting, but I know it all by heart. Stock percentages, red, blue, and green graphs, some spiraling while others dip. I'm afraid I have my mind on other things this morning. And you seem to be one of them."

"Me?"

"Yes. You've become quite famous among the corporate set." She smiled at his questioning look. "Women talk, you know. And you seem to be their favorite subject."

“I can’t imagine why, but I’m flattered.”

Ignoring his humble attitude, she said, “I...well, I just wanted to ask if...” She lifted the card so he could see it. “This isn’t a joke, is it?”

Judas looked at the card in her hand and hesitated. “Ac...” His words halted abruptly. He was about to bring his illustrious career as a paid escort to a halt when he remembered the cutting remarks Tess had thrown at him, and said, “Not on your life, Ms....”

The woman smiled and held out her hand. “Erica Jackson.”

Judas stepped forward and embraced her hand with both of his. “Well, Ms. Jackson, what did you have in mind?”

The woman looked at him thoughtfully. “If I asked you to escort me to dinner tonight...would you?”

Judas hesitated. Being used to having City Lights Escorts screen his clients for him, he felt very vulnerable. He realized very quickly that it was a new ball game now, and from this point on, he would have to handle everything himself. The first thing he sensed was that this woman standing before him had literally no experience with paid escorts. “Ms. Jackson—”

“Erica, please.”

“Erica,” he corrected. “You do know what a paid escort is, don’t you?”

The woman chuckled. “It shows, huh?”

“What do you mean?” he asked gently.

“I’m sure you can tell I’ve never done this before.” She turned away from him and began a slow stroll toward the window and looked out. “My husband has been dead now for seven years, and—” She turned and looked back at him. “Well, it can get very lonely. I don’t imagine I’ll ever marry again. For a woman my age, all the men are either already married, or gay.” She gave a slight shrug. “So what’s left? I have money, but what can I do with it but shop, go to the movies alone, have a night out with the girls?”

“You can always travel.”

“Please,” she said with a shake of her head. “I don’t think so. I’ve seen the Coliseum and the Eiffel Tower so many times I could do a better job than the tour guides. Even Hawaii, with all its magnificence, gets a little boring after a while. None of it can be equal to having a man on your arm again. The moment I saw you I knew you were the perfect article...even if you are paid.” She walked up to him, and allowed her eyes to roam over his face boldly. “You’re handsome, young, and I’d love showing you off.” Giving him a wicked wink, she continued. “I’m not so old that I don’t like to kick up my heels once in a while.”

“You don’t seem old at all. In fact, you’re very beautiful.”

“In an older woman sort of way, right?”

“There’s much to be said for women of all ages.”

“Very good answer, Mr. Ny...uh, Judas. You do know your business.”

“If you doubt me, Erica, just look in the mirror.”

“Oh my,” she said while chuckling and nervously smoothing her hair. “How you do turn a woman’s head.”

Judas smiled at her attempt at flirting. He’d seen many just like her. With no man in their lives, they begin thinking of themselves as old even though many couldn’t be more than a few years older than he. “Nonsense,” he said huskily. “I’m simply telling the truth.”

“Well...thank you,” she said, seeming a little embarrassed. “Anyway, at this time in my life, a paid escort seems just the ticket.” She smiled up at him. “We both have fun, no entanglements, no awkward moments, no expectations. It seems perfect.” She looked down at the card she was holding. “And then I saw your card. It intrigued me so much I asked someone to point you out to me. Had I not liked what I saw, I would have let the whole thing pass, but, well, here I am. The only thing I don’t know is what an evening with you consists of. Do you have maybe a list of some kind that would give me an idea of what you are offering?”

"I'm simply offering myself," he said softly. Moving toward her, he took her hands and looked deeply into her eyes. "You tell me what you want, Erica, and I deliver. A night of dining and dancing, perhaps? Or maybe you'd like to spend a few hours parked up at Lover's Lane—" he hesitated, his next words full of suggestion, "—counting the stars?" His eyes became dark and sultry. "Or maybe you would rather go somewhere more comfortable. Home, perhaps? To your...bed?"

"And what does going to bed consist of?"

"Anything you want. We can act out a fantasy. In my day, I've dressed up like everything from Zorro to Tarzan."

Erica's eyes widened and her voice cracked. "I imagine that costs a little more."

"Yes, but it will definitely be worth it," he whispered, leaning near her ear where his breath played among the tendrils of her hair. "Knowing all that, do you still want my services?"

"Oh, yes. More than ever, in fact. I was planning a little dinner party at my home tonight, but I think maybe the first time it'll just be the two of us. I seem to want to keep you all to myself."

Judas pulled her close. "I agree," he whispered. "The two of us. Alone. Together. Anything could happen."

* * * *

"Oh, my," Erica said, her breath becoming short as she felt herself being pressed against the desk.

"Has anyone ever told you how lovely you are, Erica?"

"N-No, I guess not," she said, nervously. "Oh, maybe a long time ago when I was a girl, but—"

Cutting her off, he whispered, "Would you like a sample of what you'll be getting tonight?"

Before she could answer, he lifted her up and sat her on Tess's desk and pushed her skirt up.

"Oh, God," Erica said when she felt her skirt rising up over her hips. As he opened her thighs, she felt a delicious shiver dance up her spine. Before she knew what was happening, she felt him between her legs, and a cock that seemed as long as her arm pushed against her lace panties. She almost lost all control when his open lips began burning a trail from her neck to the cleavage of her breasts with the urgency of a hungry animal.

With his arms around her, he pulled her hips close to the edge and began a slow, gentle rock of his hips. With every push, his cock pressed harder until she thought her panties would rip. He was only rubbing her pussy, but she could feel the pressure on her clit and a burning lust climbing until an orgasm flirted, taking her ever upward until she felt it wash over her.

"Ohh," she whispered while a curling heat that began in her cunt now spread through her abdomen. It washed her in wave after wave of hot lust that continued to grow. Her pussy opened slightly, and she could feel him still pressing—rocking into her and nudging her erotically while she spiraled almost out of control—and then he stopped, his slumberous eyes looking down at her.

"What's wrong?" she breathed.

"Nothing at all. I was just giving you a little taste of what you'll be getting."

"Oh, God, Judas, don't stop now."

"Erica, nothing is free."

"I'll pay, dammit, just...don't stop."

Money seemed to make a difference. As soon as Judas knew he would get paid, he didn't hesitate, but reached down and pulled her panties aside and gave the woman the taste of heaven she was pleading for.

As soon as she felt his flesh against hers, she gave a sharp intake of air. She wanted to grab him, and eat him. While her hands grasped his jacket, her nails cut into her own palm, and her hips urged forward then backward while a scream of delight pushed up from her throat,

begging to burst free. She could feel his cock enter her and plunge deep, so very deep that she had to press her face into Judas's muscled chest to muffle her moans.

She could feel his teeth nibbling. First on her neck and then up to her earlobe while he held her close and continued to plunge over and over again. She raised her legs and clenched him, her hips riding in synch with his straight into heaven. She could feel her body flushing with heat as they teetered on the precipice of an erotic sea of lust when all at once she fell, and the ebb and flow of one orgasm after the other washed over her.

After a gravelly gasping of his own breath, and his pulsing cock releasing a wealth of creamy liquid into her, he pulled himself out and whispered into her ear, "Tonight."

"Oh, God, Judas," she said, out of breath. "I'll d-die before then." She looked around as if suddenly aware of where she was. "The office is certainly no place for something like this," she said as she hurriedly got up and began adjusting her clothes. "I just wish we had more time."

"Don't worry. Tonight we'll have the whole evening to ourselves with no concern about surprise visitors."

"I can just see the girls when I tell them," she said as she gave him a card along with a wad of bills. "They may think I need my head examined, but this is easily the best money I've ever spent. By the way, be there at eight. I'll have—"

"Champagne, caviar, a meal fit for a king, soft music and soft lights. That's usually the setting."

"Oh? Are you sure you don't want satin sheets?"

"Of course. And I want you in your sexiest teddy. It has to be new. Something you've never worn for anyone else."

"Really?" she said, looking at him in amazement. "How would you know?"

"I'll know."

Her lips lifted in a slow smile. "I'll bet you would."

They heard someone coming and jumped apart.

* * * *

When the door opened, Tess stood there looking at both of them, a suspicious gleam in her eyes. She shifted her gaze to her desk that was in miserable disarray, and then to the floor where several items had fallen. Looking over at the two guilty parties whose clothes were rumpled, she said to Judas, "What's going on here?"

"Aren't you supposed to be at the meeting?" Judas asked.

"I came back for you."

"For me?" he asked. "I didn't know I was supposed to be there."

"You wouldn't ordinarily, but I wanted to introduce you. I realize it might be redundant, but there could be a woman there who hasn't fallen prey to your charms."

"Not now," Judas mumbled to Tess, and then looked down at Erica. "Erica, may I have a moment alone with Contessa?"

"My name is Tess, and you don't have to ask her, it's my office." She turned to Erica. "Erica, I believe you are late for the meeting."

"I'll wait and go down with Judas."

"I'll see that Judas finds his way." An awkward silence filled the room as the two women glared at each other. It was as if two leopardesses were confronting each other to fight for the male. With a stern look, Tess said, "You might want to go now since they're waiting for you."

Erica turned slowly, her eyes shifting from one to the other as she passed through the door.

When the door clicked shut, Tess turned to Judas. "What were you doing, and why is my desk such a mess?"

Judas folded his arms across his chest as he leaned back against the desk. "Why do you care, Con—"

"My name is Tess. Why can't you get that through your head?"

"I prefer—"

"I don't care what the hell *you* prefer. *I* prefer to be called Tess."

Judas gave a slight shrug. "Whatever."

"And I care because you're my employee. I have no say over your nights, but by day, you will conduct yourself with the utmost professionalism. Just don't get the two mixed up. Is that understood?"

"Perfectly."

Judas put out his arm, expecting Tess to put her hand through it and allow him to escort her to the conference room. Instead, she avoided his arm, and he watched as she walked ahead of him.

"Brrr, it suddenly got chilly in here."

"I'm sure you know how to turn up the heat."

Judas smiled at the double entendre.

Chapter Five

The conference room was full of chatter until Judas and Tess walked in. The voices became whispers as every eye turned to look at him. Feminine smiles became shy or bold, and each man could be seen raking his gaze over Judas's impressive build.

After indicating a seat for Judas, Tess took a seat beside him.

"Tess," Mr. Wolfe began, "I see you found your absent assistant. Why don't you introduce him?"

"Yes sir," she said as she stood, and turned to look at the others. "Many of you already know my assistant, but for those who don't, his name is Judas Nyte. This is his first week at Southland, and I hope you will all make him feel welcome."

There was a small smattering of applause.

"What did Judas do before he came aboard here?"

She stood silent, her discomfort showing as she tried to think on her feet. "Judas was...he, uh, worked with old pe...he was a social—

Judas stood quickly, rescuing Tess from embarrassment, by giving everyone a knockout smile. "Perhaps I should speak for myself. At the last position I held, I performed a service for my clients, but as in all client-firm relationships, it was highly confidential. Even though I'm no longer employed there, I would rather not give out any information that might violate the company's privacy policy. All I can say is this service was of a social nature."

"Of course, my boy. I think that is highly ethical." Mr. Wolfe's gaze skipped around the office. "I'd like each of you to remember what Judas has said. Even though you don't work for an agency any longer, you must still keep silent about divulging any secrets. I'd like

the employees of Southland to maintain those kinds of ethics at all times.” He turned back to Judas. “Proceed, my boy.”

“Nothing more, really, except I’m very happy to be here, and if there is anything I can do for any of you, you have only to ask.” He looked back at Mr. Wolfe. “And now, sir, if I may be excused, I must get back to my desk. I’m sure Ms. Kolby will be more comfortable knowing I’m out there answering those ringing phones.” His gaze skipped around to those at the table. “It was a great pleasure to meet all of you.”

“Of course. A very responsible attitude.”

During a smattering of applause, Judas exited the room very quietly and very professionally. Once the door was closed, Mr. Wolfe said, “A very nice young man, Tess. I think you’ve made a good choice. Congratulations.”

“Thank you, sir.”

“Now, as all of you know—”

His voice droned on and on in Tess’s ears. She couldn’t think. Her mind, and every sensible thought she could possibly have, walked out that door with Judas. She had made a mess introducing him. My God, couldn’t she think on her feet anymore? She shifted her gaze toward the door he had exited through. She couldn’t trust him alone. She had learned since he’d been here that he was catnip to women of all ages. She knew the moment the meeting was over what she would find on her walk back. There would be empty desks, phones ringing, and work neglected until she arrived at her office. There she would find a group of women crowded around Judas’s desk. Would Judas do anything to discourage these fawning females? No. He would bask in their admiration of him until she was forced to send them back to their offices. As a result, she was quickly getting the reputation of office villain. She glared at the door as if—

“—wouldn’t you agree, Tess?”

Hearing her name, she jerked her head around and saw Wolfe looking at her with a dark, menacing smile.

"Wha...? Oh, no...no, I'm afraid not, sir."

"No? Tess, you haven't heard a word I've said. How can you disagree with me?"

"Weren't you talking about the hair care account, sir? The new color they want to introduce would never work on the mature woman. It's more for teenagers. Now, if they want us to make up a campaign that would target that audience, sure, but..."

* * * *

Wolfe watched as she went on and on, giving an impressive overall presentation. He felt like chewing paper clips. How could she have known what he was talking about? She'd been staring at that conference door ever since Judas walked through it. He looked down at his watch. Now a half hour later after several things had been discussed and settled, she comes in with all kinds of ideas and comments regarding things he'd never even thought of. He looked around at the others. They nodded their heads in approval, scrawled out notes to remember from her presentation, and they had smiles on their faces that told him they agreed. Feeling trumped, he threw his pen down angrily and listened. When the meeting was finally over, he walked up to Tess to congratulate her.

"Very impressive, Tess," he said loud enough for everyone to hear, but lowering his voice, he whispered softly, "I'd like to see you in my office."

* * * *

Hearing those words made a feeling of dread rise like a raging tide in Tess's stomach. Was she going to get chewed out for doing her job too well, or had he found one of Judas's cards and learned about his job on the side? Tess looked around and saw the staff preparing to leave. Among the rustling of papers and whispering lips, she rose

from her chair and started out when she was stopped by several people.

"Tess, what a brilliant discussion. I think you may be on your way up."

"Oh, thank you," she said and took the time to shake the hands of those who commented on her brilliant insight into the world of hair color.

As she walked to Wolfe's office, she took a side trip to the ladies' room. In the distance, she could hear phones ringing, and in her mind, each one that came in was a possible liaison for Judas. Money would be discussed, the time, and then the usual your-place-or-mine decided on. She had no doubt that her phones were being used for his business instead of Southland's. It had been useless to tell him to keep it outside the office. Even if he did, his *customers* wouldn't. They knew where he was and would blatantly contact him even in a place of business. She'd caught him any number of times setting up some out of the way place for—whatever it was he did. She shuddered to think.

She stood looking at her overall appearance in the mirror. She tugged on this and straightened that before she finally left and continued her walk down the hall toward Mr. Wolfe's office. Even after splashing her face, smoothing her hair, and adjusting her clothes, she was still a nervous wreck. Since Judas had been here, she'd become a blubbery mass of emotions. What was worse, she couldn't confide in anyone, not even Liz. This was one problem she had to handle alone.

At last, the boss's office door loomed before her.

She stood outside for a moment and then shyly opened it to his gum-popping assistant. "Hello, Misty, is the boss in?"

"Sure is. He's on the phone right now, but he'll be off soon."

"Okay, I'll just sit here until he's through."

She watched Misty as she sat waiting. *Such a simple life*, she thought enviously. *Nothing to think about but where she would go for*

lunch, or what color to paint her fingernails. She almost wished her life was as uncomplicated as that.

Just then, Mr. Wolfe looked out his office door, interrupting her thoughts. “Sorry, Tess. That was my wife. The pool man didn’t show up today, and she’s upset.”

The pool man, Tess thought bitterly. *A fluff of blonde hair and no brains. But, being the boss’s wife, she doesn’t need brains.*

She rose from her chair and walked slowly into the office as if she were going to the gallows. She stood until he indicated toward a chair and asked her to sit.

Mr. Wolfe was the stereotype CEO. His presence was commanding, his dark hair nicely streaked with gray, and he seemed to be fond of dark-colored, pin-stripe suits. He was tall, and his stature was a little husky.

Now, as he looked at her from behind his desk, he said, “Tess, I’m very happy about your choice for administrative assistant. I think Judas will go far in our company. I’d like to give him additional responsibility.”

Tess’s eyes widened. “Additional responsibility?”

“Yes, for starters he can be in charge of the penthouse suite.”

“You mean vacuuming and dusting...that sort of thing?”

“No, of course not. They have maids for that. What I’m talking about is our out-of-town guests. As you know, we put them up at our own facilities at the Mandalay Towers. The Mandalay is not only the best hotel in town, but it’s centrally located, and it’s within walking distance of this building. Very convenient for our guests. I’ve been thinking about this for some time, and after meeting Judas, and learning about his background in social work, I believe he would be the very one to take on this responsibility. He will keep a calendar, book the rooms, pick out the best restaurants, and see that our guests are well entertained, and comfortable. Since he’s experienced at interaction with people, he is the natural choice, wouldn’t you say?”

“Well, sir, Judas is very busy. He takes his job of administrative assistant very seriously. I don’t really know if he would even want to do this.”

“That’s why I brought you in here. To discuss it. If he wants a raise in pay for these extra duties, that’s fine. I know that sometimes it takes a juggling act to be able to keep our guests from running into each other, but Judas is clearly an intelligent young man, and as I said, with his experience, I think he’ll do fine.”

“But, sir—”

Mr. Wolfe rose from his desk and skirted his desk. “You go back and talk to him and see what he says. If he wants to discuss it with me, my door is always open.”

“Sir, I—”

“I know,” he said as he escorted her to the door. “You want to thank me, but it’s simply not necessary. Now run along. I’ll be waiting to hear from you.” He had turned away from her when the bomb fell.

“Mr. Wolfe,” she spat out quickly, “he was an escort. A male prostitute!”

The CEO stopped in mid-stride, stood there for a moment, and then turned to look at her. “Did you say what I think you said?”

“I’m afraid so, sir.”

As the staggering news sank in, he literally choked while Tess helped him to a chair, and then took the chair opposite him.

“He worked at an escort service called City Lights until he had some trouble with the police and wound up homeless.”

Mr. Wolfe had his head in his hands, moaning until he heard the word *homeless*, and looked up at her. “You mean you took him from off the street? My God, what were you thinking?”

“Sir, I was just trying to help. I could tell by looking at him that he was sharp. He just needed a break, that’s all. As far as the woman, it was an accident. I hope I haven’t broken any rules.”

“Rules? Oh, no,” he said, his voice deceptively sweet. And then suddenly he raised his voice to ear-splitting level and yelled out, “Only every one in the friggin’ book!”

Tess felt as if she were dying inside.

“Tess,” he asked, pushing his face up close to hers. “Just how long have you known about all this? And what the hell is all this crap about a woman?”

“I didn’t know he’d been an escort until his first day at work. It came out when I asked him about his last job, but I learned about the woman the day I met him on the street.”

“And you still hired the friggin’ son of a bitch? I oughtta fire you both!” Wolfe’s face was so red he looked like he was going to have a stroke. “I just can’t believe after finding all this out about Judas you would put your job in jeopardy just to keep this man off the street. Anybody else, maybe, but you? What is it about him that you... Oh, so that’s it,” he said, looking at her with a leer.

“What? What are you talking about?”

“I’m talkin’ about you, your highness. The Ice Princess of Southland Advertising Agency has finally been melted by a good lookin’ male prostitute.”

“I resent that!”

“But you still know it’s true, don’t you?”

“Sir,” she said with a flushed face, “couldn’t we please get on with this?”

“All right,” Wolfe said with a weary voice, “tell me about her. What happened?”

“Well, I have only the sketchiest of details. Something about a girl in the middle of a freeway...late in the day. I mean it’s not like he killed her on purpose.”

“*Killed?*” Wolfe shouted, almost coming up out of his chair. “Oh, God.”

“I’m sorry, sir. I know I should have—”

“What we’ve got here is a friggin’ male prostitute wanted for murder!” Wolfe yelled as he lowered his head in his hands. And then suddenly he stopped—dead still—and slowly lifted his head.

Tess could almost see the cogs and wheels turning in his head. She noticed that his countenance had changed completely. No more anger or fear, but something like hope shone in his eyes. My God, was that a smile?

Finally, he said, “Let’s get this straight. He slept with women...for money.”

“Yes, sir. Usually older women.”

“What about men?”

Tess shrugged. “I don’t know.” She frowned. “Why?”

Wolfe was silent for a moment, and then he said, “No one else knows about this, right?”

Tess hesitated with her answer, but finally said, “He’s been passing his card around the office, but other—”

“Card?”

“Offering his...services.”

“Find them, Tess. Find them and bring them here to me, and then I want to see Judas immediately. Oh, and Tess, you’d better start looking for a new administrative assistant.”

Oh, my God, Tess thought. *He’s going to fire him.* “Mr. Wolfe, I wish you’d think this through. I’m sure when you speak with him he’ll—”

“This is even better than I thought,” he said as he paced around the office talking to himself. “He can live at the Mandalay rent-free. It’ll be his job to make sure our guests are absolutely comfortable. And, if they need companionship, Judas will provide that, as well. The problem is, that only takes care of the women. If we do this right, we’ll also have to find a woman for the men.”

Full realization of what he was saying finally hit her. “Oh, my God. Mr. Wolfe, you can’t be serious.”

"Tess," he began as he turned toward her. "I know I'm taking a big chance here, but if Judas intends to go back into the business anyway, he might as well do it for us."

"What? Mr. Wolfe, think about what you're doing."

"I have thought about it, Tess. A lot of companies have their own suites, and some of them have someone just like Judas."

"Mr. Wolfe, if you do this, Southland will be ruined. I can't sit by and let this happen. It's illegal, for God's sake!"

"Tess, you don't understand. Southland is about to go down for the third time. It's this or bankruptcy."

"But you can't, Mr. Wolfe. I'd rather face bankruptcy than see Southland's name dirtied up with this kind of scandal. I'm warning you now, if you do this, I'll make trouble. I can promise you that."

"Trouble?" Wolfe said, his eyes narrowing on Tess. "You little bitch, if you do, you'll be right out there on the street holding Judas's tin cup, and that's a promise."

"Threats? I can't believe it. You'd fire me for—"

"Hell yes! But it doesn't have to be that way. You do this for me, and I won't forget about you. No, your salary will be raised right along with Judas's."

Tess just stared at Wolfe. *He's not going to fire him? Tess asked herself. He's threatened to fire me instead, and he's giving Judas a raise? No, this can't be happening. I must be asleep...or crazy.* She looked around. *Am I really in Mr. Wolfe's office listening to him rattle off some hare-brained scheme...raise? Did he say raise?*

"Tess," Mr. Wolfe said over and over again until she looked up at him. "Are you okay?"

"Uh, yes, sir."

"So, what's your answer? Are you going along with me on this? You'll see I'm right, Tess. This will put Southland in the black in no time."

Judas Nyte...Judas...Judas...Iscairiot!

For the first time she thought she understood what that dark-skinned, dark-eyed traitor felt that sold out for thirty pieces of silver. As he leered at her from somewhere in hell, she thought of what more money would mean to her. Her savings would grow, bringing her closer and closer to the day she could break away from Southland and start her own agency. With that in mind, she found herself looking up into Wolfe's face and saying, "It...It might work."

"Good girl. Now, you go and do what I told you to. When that's done, send Judas to me, and we'll cement the deal."

Tess felt light, almost airy as she rose from her chair. She wondered if she was having a spell of some kind. A seizure, or a stroke. Everything seemed so unreal. She couldn't believe that when Mr. Wolfe learned the truth he wanted to actually use Judas this way. As she neared Judas's desk, she saw a group of twittering females hanging on his every word and could feel the usual anger building up inside her, but she forced it down, knowing that he was no longer her problem.

A new wave of dizziness swept over her when she reminded herself that Judas, because of his extracurricular activities, wasn't going to be fired, but was actually going to get a raise and a new position in the company. Had the whole world gone mad? As she approached his desk, she said, with all the personality of a zombie, "Sorry, girls, but break time is over. I need to speak to Judas."

She turned and walked into her office and sat down. Slowly, the girlish giggles began to fade away, and seconds later, Judas was standing in the doorway of her office.

"You wanted to see me?"

"Yes. Come in, please."

Judas stood over her, his impressive size out of place in such a small office. "I haven't been giving out my card, if that's what this is about."

"No," she said softly.

“Look, I know I’ve been a pain, but I think it’s unfair of you to fire me without—”

“Judas, please. That’s not the issue here.” She rose from her desk and began pacing. “After the meeting, Mr. Wolfe called me into his office, and we talked about you. Apparently, you’ve made quite an impression on him. In fact, he wants to give you more responsibility, along with a raise.”

“Hey, that’s great. What’ll I be doing?”

“Well...you’ll be...” She couldn’t bring herself to say it. “It will involve moving out of your present accommodations and taking up residence at the Mandalay.”

“The Mandalay? I don’t understand. A new position sounds great, but that’s the nicest hotel in town. Even with a raise, I’d never be able to swing it.”

“You won’t have to. It’s rent-free.”

“Rent-free? C’mon, you’re kidding. Who gives away free rent?”

“It’s a fringe benefit of your job.”

“My job? What job? I love the idea of new accommodations, but if I’m no longer your assistant, what am I?”

“Mr. Wolfe will tell you that. He wants to see you.”

“Can’t you give me a clue?”

“I’d rather not discuss it, if you don’t mind. I would appreciate it if you would pack up your personal items before you go.”

“What? Just like that? You’re pushing me out the door awful quick.”

“It’s been...uh, nice working...” She couldn’t finish. It sounded so plastic...so artificial...so false. It hadn’t been nice at all. She and Judas had been at each other’s throats the whole time he’d been here, and she didn’t want to pretend it had been anything else. So without finishing, she rushed over to the door, opened it, and stood there waiting for him to leave.

Judas looked at the open door as if it were the gateway to Hell and rushed over to where she stood and slammed it shut. “I don’t know

what the hell is going on, and apparently you don't want to tell me, but I'm not going through that door until I know the score."

She turned from him and began wringing her hands and pacing. "What you need to know Mr. Wolfe will tell you. It was his idea. He's the boss, so I'll let him give you the g-good news." She hurried over to her desk and began shuffling papers.

Judas caught her stutter and watched her try to ignore him. "What if I say no?"

She stopped and looked at him. "My God, Judas, what is it with you? I find you starving on a street corner, offer you a job, and you act like I'm your worst enemy. Now, Mr. Wolfe hands you the golden goose, and instead of saying thanks, you act like Satan's just asked for your soul. What the hell is wrong with you?"

"I get the idea you don't agree with Mr. Wolfe. Am I right? Just tell me why. Don't you want me to advance in the company, or maybe you don't think I deserve it because of my past profession."

"You mean your *present* one, don't you?"

"All right, so I'm trying to make a living. Why the hell do you care how I do it, especially since I'll be Mr. Wolfe's headache from now on?"

Mr. Wolfe's headache from now on.

She was expecting those words to give her an overwhelming feeling of relief, but instead she felt pain. Pushing the feeling aside, she picked up the phone and punched in several numbers. When she began talking, she looked up, and their eyes met and fused. "This is Tess Kolby. I need a secretary..."

Chapter Six

He had to hit something. He wanted to shove a fist through the wall, or someone's face, but instead he slammed his fist down on Tess's desk and then gave her a good, long glare before he banged out the door.

With angry movements, he picked up a box to begin to pack, but when he looked around on his desk, he saw nothing there. It painfully hit him that his space was cold. No personal items, no pictures, no bud vases, and no cute little gifts someone had given him. Maybe he just wasn't a personal man, or maybe he hadn't been there long enough to make his space into a second home like so many others had. Or was building a nest a woman's thing? No, it wasn't that. He'd seen personal items on men's desks. Pictures of the wife and kids, souvenirs of family vacations, a special cup with the words, *World's Greatest Dad* inscribed on the side. Those few words must have made the coffee in that cup taste like ambrosia, but he would never know. He couldn't even use the excuse that he was new. Even new employees brought a life with them. Remembrances, mementos from past jobs, special talents that made them a valuable asset to the company, but what had he brought?

He'd brought the street.

Passed it around like he was proud.

He had nothing to show for his life but a sordid past, a dead girl, and no money. No personal life, either, not even any social life. Once he had made lots of money, but he still had no friends. He might have eaten regularly, but still the hole in his stomach grew bigger.

Now, he found that he wanted more.

He wanted a night of hot, sweaty sex to be his idea, not some over-the-hill diva who was paying him to do it. He was starving for a life that didn't include a roll of bills on the nightstand at the end of the evening. He looked back at the closed door of Tess's office and knew what he wanted was on the other side, but because of his past, it was something he could never have. He had never stopped to consider how his profession might affect a life with a woman—a special woman. He just hadn't looked that far into the future.

Well, it's too late now, he thought throwing the box down.

He hurried down the hall to Mr. Wolfe's office, not looking back. When he arrived, Misty wasn't at her desk, so he knocked on Wolfe's door and heard a voice on the other side.

"Come in."

He waited a moment, trying hard to smile when he didn't feel like it. After shifting his suit around on his shoulders, pushing his tie down beneath his buttoned jacket and smoothing his hair, he opened the door and walked in. "You wanted to see me, sir?"

"Yes, I do." Wolfe rose from his chair and skirted his desk while he continued to talk. "Did Tess tell you about our discussion?"

"She told me about a new job, something about moving into the Mandalay Towers. You might as well know, I can't afford to stay at—"

"Didn't she tell you that it was rent-free?"

"Well...yes, but—"

"Then what's the problem?"

He gave a slight shrug. "I guess I just couldn't believe it."

"Well, believe it, Judas. Southland will foot the bill for your accommodations. You've nothing to worry about there."

"But, what kind of job would have that kind of fringe benefit attached to it?"

"You mean she didn't...? Well, no matter. She's probably leaving it up to me since it was my idea."

"I wish someone would tell me what's going on."

Without saying anything, Wolfe grabbed a stack of business cards from off his desk and handed them to Judas. "Are these yours?"

Judas looked down at the cards and gulped. "Oh, God. I'm dead."

"She also said you were wanted by the police. Is this true?"

Judas lowered his head as if ashamed. "Yes, sir, it is."

Wolfe indicated to a chair. "Tell me about it."

Judas's worst nightmare slowly came tumbling back. "It was late in the day, and the sun was setting. I turned onto the expressway going west, and the sun was in my eyes. I'd had too much to drink, and when I saw a woman walking in and out of traffic, I thought I was imagining it. Against the sun she looked unreal, sort of like a dream. Now I know it was probably the booze affecting me. The next thing I know, I'm in a ditch with cops clamping handcuffs on me, and she's being hauled away in an ambulance. Just about the time I was getting things back to normal, she died, and I became wanted for murder. When they came to arrest me, I managed to escape but lost everything and ended up on the street. That's where Tess found me. Since I've been working here I've been trying to get back on my feet. I didn't think there was anything wrong with passing my card around, but when Con...uh, Tess found out about it, she went ballistic."

"Yes, Tess is like that, isn't she? Very honor bound. Follows the rules religiously." He grimaced. "God, all that sweetness makes my teeth ache, you know?"

Judas looked at Wolfe curiously. "Do you have a problem with Tess?"

"Oh, no. Not really, but have you ever seen someone that was so perfect that you just wanted to do something to get dirt on them? That's the way I feel about Tess. I'd love to know what secrets she has." He looked at Judas. "She has to have some. I mean, nobody can be that perfect." He chuckled. "God, I'd love to melt that little icicle."

"Sir," Judas said, "I believe we were talking about—"

"Oh, yes." He paused, getting his thoughts together, and then turned to Judas. "You realize, of course, that the right thing to do would be to call the authorities and have you arrested."

"So that's it," Judas barked angrily. "You don't have a fuckin' job for me. It was all a trick."

"Just calm down, okay?"

"Calm down nothing. You get me in here by offering me a great job, and then wham, I'm lookin' through bars. Well, no thanks," he said as he jumped up and ran for the door.

"Judas, sit down!" Mr. Wolfe commanded loudly.

Judas pulled on the doorknob, but it wouldn't open. "Damn, what's wrong with this thing?"

"It's locked," he said calmly.

Judas ran to a window, tried to open it when he remembered he was about thirty-five floors up. "I hear you're afraid of heights. If that's so, why the hell did you go out and rent a fuckin' penthouse?"

"Height means prestige, that's all. I'm fine as long as I don't look out the windows."

"Well," Judas said nervously, backing away from the large gaping window, "you're just damn lucky I'm not in the mood to commit suicide."

Wolfe, still sitting in his chair, watched as Judas ran from one door to another. "Judas, there's no way out. Just sit down, and we'll talk about this."

"No way, you bastard, I'm also not in the mood to be locked up for the next twenty-five years."

"Judas, you're in no danger, okay? I'm willing to keep your secret, but only if you do something for me."

"Something for you?" He paused, letting his words sink in. "Oh, I get it," he said pointing at him. "You want me to kill someone."

Wolfe chuckled. "No, it's nothing like that." He indicated toward the chair Judas had been sitting in. "Please take your seat, and let me explain."

Judas sat down slowly. Relaxed but still alert.

"That's better. Now," Wolfe began as he leaned toward Judas to explain. "I've hit upon something that I think will revolutionize Southland Advertising Agency. I'm not sure, but as far as I know, only big businesses provide their clients with this kind of thing. Right now Southland is small, but with this kind of fringe benefit it'll grow by leaps and bounds."

"I don't understand what you're talking about."

"Judas, I'm talking about companionship." When Judas just stared at him, he continued. "You know, *companionship*?"

"Oh, you mean—" Judas paused, thinking that surely he was mistaken. "—do you mean what I think you do? You want to hire me as your own personal whore?"

"Not in those words, no, but I do want to put you on Southland's payroll as the company...uh, whore, as you so crudely put it. I don't know how much you know about advertising, but in order to get a client's business we provide them with anything they want. Accommodations at the Mandalay, a night on the town wining and dining, anything that pleases them. I'm just taking it a step further."

"A step further," Judas repeated as if he were trying to understand.

"Why not? I happen to know that a couple of our women have even slept with certain clients. It's understandable. The men are away from home, lonely, a warm body in their beds will make them sleep better. After that, they're almost obligated to give us their account."

"I think we've got a problem here," Judas said, "I only service women. What about the men?"

"A small glitch, but nothing I can't handle. Anyway, haven't you ever noticed how many women are in the workplace today? Even CEOs. That's how you make your living, isn't it? Women in high places? It'll be the same here. As far as the men go, I'll find someone for them. Don't worry."

A heavy silence permeated the room while Wolfe looked closely at Judas. Finally, he said, "So, do you want the job?"

“What if I say no?”

Mr. Wolfe looked pointedly toward his telephone, and then back to Judas.

“You know this is blackmail.”

“Judas, I'm simply trying to help you resume your lifestyle. Hell, you'll be making more money here than you would on your own, and certainly more than you would at the escort service. I mean, to stay in business they'd have to take a certain percentage of your pay, wouldn't they? This way you keep it all. The only thing I get from this is the client's business.”

Without answering, Judas rose from the chair and thoughtfully began to pace. “But what if you're caught? Aside from running a prostitution ring, you could be charged with aiding and abetting a criminal. You could go to jail.”

“You let me worry about that. The truth is, if any employee of mine would have done something like this, I would have fired them on the spot. Hell, I almost fired Tess for her part in this. I wish now I had, but—”

“I'll do it,” Judas said quickly.

“You will?” Wolfe said. “You already made up your mind?”

“You heard me. I said I'd do it, but only if you do something for me.”

“Do something for you? Hell, I'm doin' something for you. I'm keepin' the cops off your tail. Ain't that enough?”

“You mentioned firing Tess. That's a deal breaker. If you fire her, you'll lose me as well.”

“You mean you'll walk?”

“Straight to the police.”

“You can't do that. They'd...”

“I'll risk it. I swear I will if you don't agree.”

“You're bluffing. You wouldn't—”

“Try me.”

Wolfe said nothing for a moment. He only stared at Judas for several seconds and then said, "All right, but you'd better do one hell of a job because if you don't, you'll find yourself buried so deep in a jail cell you'll never see the light of day again. Is that understood?"

"It is."

"Good. Now, as I said before, you will have free accommodations at the Mandalay Towers, a big salary, and you can come and go as you please. You don't have to come to the office at all, and the only person you will answer to is me. Oh, by the way, get rid of those cards. You're employed by Southland Advertising Agency. No moonlighting on the side."

"One thing I need to mention. City Lights used to screen my clients—"

"Don't worry about that. Before a job you'll receive a dossier on those that we send you. Read it. It will tell you everything from what kind of food they like to why they hate their mother. Besides, they're all clients of ours. We know what kind of people they are."

"Very well. When do I start?"

"Immediately. You can move into the penthouse suite today."

"Isn't that where your clients usually stay?"

"Yes, but now it's where you stay. As for the clients, we'll put them in another room. Don't be concerned, they'll be taken care of."

"A suite usually has adjoining rooms. Why can't they stay there?"

"They can as long as it's not occupied, but that won't be long because I'm already looking for the second half of your little duo."

Judas sat there feeling strangely unhappy. No more street corners in sight, just easy money in his pocket, living in the penthouse of the most expensive hotel in New York, and like Mr. Wolfe said, *anything he wanted*. But somehow his world wasn't quite as sunny as he expected it to be. There was one dark cloud on his horizon, and that was Tess. She plainly didn't go along with this little scheme of Mr. Wolfe's, and from the looks of things, she hated him, as well.

When Judas arose from his chair, he and Wolfe shook hands on the deal. The moment their hands clasped, Judas felt like drawing his hand back quickly. Wolfe's flesh felt cold and clammy, and gave him the feeling that he'd just made a deal with the devil.

Chapter Seven

Moving day came and went. Judas was surprised to learn that the suite had everything he needed. The furniture was top of the line, modern, with a fifty-two-inch screen TV, a stereo, a wet bar, the best china, silverware, a mountain of linens, and even a maid three times a week. He was also presented with the keys to a long, low sports car, and enough money to finance a lavish spending spree to outfit him in the best clothes that money could buy.

"I don't mind telling you this has cost the company a pretty penny," Mr. Wolfe said as he showed Judas around the penthouse.

"I'm sure it has," Judas replied. "I was as surprised as hell with all this. Especially the advance."

"I think of it as an investment in Southland's future. I hope you don't let me down."

"By the way. How does Tess fit into all this?"

"Tess? What makes you think she fits at all?"

"She knows all about it. I thought it was supposed to be on the QT?"

"Tess only knows about it because you were her secretary. Other than that she has nothing to do with it. With her sense of ethics I can't afford to have her involved. Besides, I've given her a little incentive to keep her mouth shut.

"I see. Hush money, right?"

"You can call it hush money if you want, but I call it a generous raise for a very promising young executive. As far as the others, it's common knowledge that we have a penthouse suite at the Mandalay, and that's all they need to know."

“By the way, does Tess have another secretary yet?”

Wolfe’s attention was elsewhere but turned back to Judas and said, “What was that?”

“Nothing,” Judas replied, “just...nothing.”

“So, how do you like it?”

“What’s not to like? It’s exquisite.”

“Good. You’ll be contacted regarding your assignments. In the meantime, get comfortable and enjoy.”

Later on that night, Judas received a gift basket of fruit along with a bottle of champagne from the management of the hotel. Feeling as if he’d just died and gone to heaven, he poured himself a glass and strolled out on his balcony. The view was breathtaking as the night sparkled up at him from the city below. It spread out for miles, it seemed. Extending his glass, he made a toast to the—to *his* city—and then put the champagne flute to his mouth and drank the juice of the most expensive grapes in the world. Just then the phone rang, and Judas turned to see a telephone on the balcony.

He couldn’t help smiling. *My God, a phone on the balcony*, he said to himself. *This has got to be the ultimate in fine living*. Still amused, he picked it up. “Yes?”

A voice on the other end was a soft hiss. “You’ll entertain the CEO of Carlson Industries and his wife tomorrow night. A dossier will be delivered to you. Read it. Learn everything you can about him.”

“What about his wife?”

“You’ll be entertaining both of them. Three on a seesaw, get it?”

Judas looked down at the receiver when he heard a sharp click in his ear. Was that it? A mysterious phone call from a stranger with a rasping voice? He had wondered how he would receive his assignments but never expected this. He replaced the receiver slowly and then turned back to the twinkling city.

Somehow the lights seemed a little less bright.

* * * *

The President and CEO of Carlson Industries sat comfortably while running a finger around the champagne flute he held in his hand. His eyes followed Judas as he mixed drinks, made everyone comfortable, and led them in light conversation. He was sophistication right down to the tips of his fingers. He had a flirting smile, twinkling eyes, and a pair of lips he knew his wife Millie must be fantasizing about. And now, as Judas strode around the room in a short, slinky silk robe, he wondered where the hell Wolfe had found him.

He just fell in my lap, he remembered Wolfe saying. *One day he was a man on the street, the next he's serving my clients Oysters Rockefeller, champagne, and the hottest sex they've ever had.*

"After all those blinking bright lights, a little subtle lighting is called for, don't you think?" Judas said, interrupting his thoughts.

How the hell did he know my eyes were hurting? This guy's right on the money. My God, can he read my mind, as well?

"By the way, did you like La Gabarre? The restaurant's a little out of the way, I'll admit, but only the crème de la crème of New York know about it. A bit pretentious, but that's something you have to put up with when you dine with the elite." He looked over at Millie and asked, "Are you cold, Millie?"

"No, not at all," she said as she wandered over to him and pulled at the tie on his robe. "Enough talk, don't you think?" she whispered. "Felix will join us later. He's funny that way."

"Whatever you say," Judas whispered as he slowly slid her robe from her shoulders.

* * * *

Each touch of his lips was a delicious sensation. His kisses were slow, thoughtful, but powerful enough to steal her breath. She gasped

as his searching lips seared a path down to her breasts until he found her nipples hard and ready to be loved. All at once, she felt his tongue, hot and moist as he sucked one and then the other. It was as if heaven had burst open, sending shivers of desire through her. The heat rolled down through her body until her groin felt its mischievous flirting. Almost as if her cunt lived, it reached upward, wanting something—anything—kisses, tongues, a cock so long and hard it would fill her full of its hot, scorching flesh. She wanted to be covered with a rippling chest, muscled arms, and a cock that plunged into her over and over again, sending her on a rapturous journey to completion. She wanted to ride him, to bounce upon his hard body and scream out her lust while he fucked her, and they exchanged the carnal juices of delight. She wanted to roll in them, to eat his cock and drink his cum. And then she found herself on her back, Judas between her thighs, and his cock long and heavy between them. It was the most beautiful sight she'd ever seen.

"You want it in your cunt or your ass?"

"God, my cunt. Hurry!" She could feel her juices dripping, her clit pulsing with anticipation, and her cunt practically begging for a firm rubbing of his cock on her dark, sensitive, velvety flesh. Her hips urged upward as the tip of his cock touched the cleft of her pussy, and when she felt his fingers pull her open, a deep, guttural moan escaped her lips.

At last he plunged, his hips rocking in and out, his cock pushing, rubbing, and pulsing as he plunged deeper and deeper into her cunt. The passion of this carnal act was mounting higher and higher until her ecstatic state was such, she could feel the hysteria of delight rising inside her. It brought to the surface the deepest and wickedest longings she had ever experienced, and she didn't want to let it go.

* * * *

Carlson lounged in a chair with his hand buried inside his robe, fucking himself as he watched them. God, how he wanted someone to eat his cock. He'd been watching Judas all night, knowing he wasn't gay. It didn't mean a thing to him, he wanted him anyway. More, maybe. Now, as he sat and looked at Judas's ass moving up and down over his wife, he began to long for it—for Judas's hot, succulent, tight flesh that would surround his cock with fire until he exploded.

With his cock as hard and long as it was going to get, he rose from the chair and walked over to the bed. Oh, God, it was a picture. Two people fucking their brains out, and he wanted some of it. He crawled on the bed and put his hands on Judas's muscled ass. He salivated as the juice began slowly dripping down his cock in anticipation. He expected Judas to object, but when he didn't, he crouched over him, his hands stroking his butt, and pushed his cock against his anus until he was inside. Desire whirled in his groin as he pushed deeper and deeper into him. He almost cried out in ecstasy when he felt the virgin-like tightness pressing, rubbing, and bringing him to such an erotic high, he could do nothing but gasp as he plunged, withdrew, and plunged again and again.

* * * *

Sweat fell from Judas's face as the familiar smell of sex and a hot, moist atmosphere gathered in his red velvet bedroom. Whimpering moans, groans, and slapping flesh against flesh sounded as he led the three of them in his most dangerous carnal dance of debauchery. Only half way through, one orgasm after the other exploded, stiffening the three bodies one by one until each wilted. But Judas knew the night wasn't over. Cocks again became hard with desire, and cunts throbbed with a dark, wanton need. They went from sex toy to sex toy. They were whipped, hung, tied down, and tormented as they experienced new and even more dangerous exploits. Finally, they became so

exhausted, they couldn't last another moment, and finally fell headlong into the leaping tongues of hell's fire.

* * * *

The next morning, Wolfe's pants were down around his ankles, and his secretary was sucking his cock when the phone rang.

"Let the damn machine get it," Wolfe said as he languished beneath his secretary's sucking mouth, his chair making a rhythmic bumping sound against his desk.

"Wolfe," Carlson said in a teasing manner, "get off your damned secretary and get on the fuckin' phone."

Wolfe's eyes flew open, and he quickly pressed the speaker phone. "Felix! Where the hell are you?"

"You sound out of breath, Wolfe. What's goin' on there?"

"Enough of the jokes, Felix. Where the hell are you?"

"I've just finished breakfast, you old coot, and I'm ready to talk business."

"Oh, yeah? What changed your mind? If I remember right, you were threatening to sign with another agency."

"I think we both know what changed my mind. You were a little vague when you told me where you found him. How about letting me in on it?"

"Oh, let's just say he walked in off the street."

"He's a friggin' goldmine. After last night, I think my wife would follow him into hell itself. Let's get those papers signed before I decide to do the same thing."

"Okay, just get your lazy butt up here, and I'll have 'em ready."

When Mr. Wolfe pressed the disconnect button on his phone, he turned to his secretary and smiled. "Misty, I think we just struck gold. Get me Judas Nyte."

* * * *

A cunning smile broke out on Misty's face as she adjusted her clothes and then bounced out to her desk. After connecting Wolfe and Judas, she called Tess. "Tess, it looks like Judas Nyte has just secured Southland a multi-million dollar account."

"Really," Tess said, trying to sound uninterested. "How did he manage to do that?"

"With his ass up, that's how. All I know is when Mr. Carlson called in this morning, he was ready to put his John Hancock on anything we gave him."

"Misty, someone just came in. I'll talk to you later."

"Sure. Don't forget to congratulate Judas." She put the phone down, knowing she'd hit Tess where it hurt.

* * * *

Tess was in shock as she placed the phone back in its cradle. She quickly grabbed up the phone to call Judas, but it just didn't seem like enough. What she had to say to him had to be said in person, so she slammed the phone back down, turned, grabbed her coat, and rushed out of the agency. She walked, ran, even raced to the Mandalay Towers where the door was opened for her by a smiling uniformed doorman.

"Ms. Kolby, nice to see you, ma'am."

"Hello, Riley," she answered without stopping or even offering a glance in his direction. Almost sliding on the newly waxed tile floor, she found herself at the elevators. With a stiff finger, she angrily pushed the elevator button and fumed as it began to hum. "You'd think an elevator in a building as fancy as this one wouldn't hum," she mumbled to herself. "You'd think it would creep down without making a friggin' sound," she said louder. "You'd think—" All at once her words stopped. "This is what he's brought me to...talking to myself."

When the elevator door opened, she hurried in, turned, and pressed the *P* button. She stood silent as she rode up, people getting on, and getting off. When she felt as if she had been riding in that damned box forever, it finally stopped, and the doors slid open, but she just stood there.

She had butterflies in her stomach.

Oh, God, what the hell am I doing? Why am I here? Oh, he's a rat's ass all right, but what he's doing is with the full approval of the agency, and none of my business. If Mr. Wolfe finds out I'm here, he'll fire me for sure.

She heard something and looked up when Judas's door opened.

"Hello, Tess, what the hell are you doing here?"

"Never mind. If you're leaving—"

"No, I'm not going anywhere. I just heard the elevator door open up. Since my suite is the only one on this floor, I expected the doorbell to ring, but it didn't, so I thought I'd better investigate. Come in, and have a drink."

"No, I don't—"

"Tess, get off the damned elevator. Someone might want to use it."

Feeling foolish, Tess got off and allowed him to usher her inside.

"Is anything wrong? I talked to Wolfe this morning, so I know we landed the Carlson account."

Being reminded of it, Tess began to fume and whirled around for the confrontation she'd come here for. "You bastard. You sleaze ball. I've never seen anyone as low as you, Judas Nyte."

"Hey, hold on. What's this all about?"

"It's all over the office how you got that account. I know you said that was your business, but I just couldn't believe it. I didn't think anyone could sink so low."

"Just stop right there. I do what I have to do. It's called making a living." He leaned over to grab a cigarette from a porcelain cigarette box on the coffee table. "I suppose you'd rather see me standing in

front of that damned subway station with a tin cup until I'm sixty." After lighting his cigarette, he began to pace. "Well, no thanks. Been there, done that."

"At least it would be respectable."

"Respect, my ass. Respect won't feed me when I'm hungry, and it won't keep me warm when I have to stand out in the snow. Listen, Ms. High and Mighty, I don't give a friggin' damn what you think of me. I'm just trying to stay out of the gutter."

"You may not be living there, but you're there all the same."

"If I am, I have a lot of company," he said, blowing smoke noisily as he paced. "In case you don't know it, your Mr. Wolfe is one of them. So is Mr. Carlson. If these rich old geezers want to throw their money around, let them. I'm not too proud to take it. Pride, my little innocent, was thrown out with the friggin' garbage."

"It sure was," Tess whispered. She turned and walked toward the door feeling as if her insides were crushed.

He whirled around and hurried after her. "Tess, don't go. We can talk this through. I'm not the snake you think I am. Please—"

He heard the door slam, cutting off his words with a finality that made a chill dance up his spine.

Chapter Eight

It had been weeks since she'd seen Judas.

She missed him. She missed seeing him sitting outside her office even for the short time he'd been here. In spite of his socializing with the fawning females, he did a great job, and now since he'd left, the area was noticeably empty. Sure, she'd interviewed others, even seen some male secretaries hoping another Judas would walk in, but none even came close. Was she nuts? He drove her crazy when he was there, and now that he was gone, she missed him like crazy.

Brrrrrrng.

Thankful for something to break the silence, she picked up the phone. "Tess Kolby."

"Tess, Mr. Wolfe would like to see you."

"Do you know what it's about, Misty? I was on my way out."

"Sorry, he didn't say."

"Okay, I'll be right down."

It was late, so she turned off her computer and grabbed her coat. When she got to Wolfe's office, Misty was gone. It was unusually quiet, no visitors, no secretary, and no ringing phones. She tapped lightly at Mr. Wolfe's door and waited but got no answer. Taking a chance, she opened the door slightly and looked in. The office was empty except for a package laying on Wolfe's desk with the words, *Mandalay Towers* written on it. She knew anything to do with the Mandalay Towers was off limits to the employees, but she couldn't seem to keep her eyes off of it. There was no information on the front, so her gaze darted around guiltily before she touched it lightly and then picked it up.

Looking inside, she could see that it was a dossier on the famous Londoner, Caswell Massey. Being careful, she took it out of the envelope and looked at it. She had heard he was coming to New York, and knew he would be staying at the Mandalay Towers. Southland had been trying to get his business for as long as she'd been here, and now she assumed Judas would be wining and dining him. When she thought of everything that included, her fingers almost sizzled with the imagined heat she felt coming from it.

Hearing sounds coming out of Wolfe's private bathroom, she hurriedly put it back in the envelope and laid it down. She was jittery as her gaze kept creeping back to the envelope. She knew Wolfe must be waiting for the courier, but what if she did it herself? She'd be saving him a little money if she dropped it off to Judas on her way home tonight. It would be an excuse to see him, to take a tour through the magnificent suite everyone was talking about—the one Wolfe was protecting. She knew she shouldn't touch it without Wolfe's permission, but she knew what he would say, and that wasn't what she wanted to hear.

She looked down at her watch, wondering what to do when suddenly she made a snap decision and snatched it up and hid it in her coat. While she still had the nerve, she turned and ran out of the office and out of the building. She was hurrying down the street toward the Mandalay when it suddenly dawned on her that she had forgotten to leave Wolfe a note. This was bad since the man used any excuse he could find to make her life miserable, and this little fiasco just might turn out to be one more nail in her coffin.

* * * *

Every night, Judas had the same nightmare.

He was driving down a long, endless road at twilight, when suddenly he saw a woman wandering in and out of the traffic. Her body was a silhouette against the dying sun. Slowly, as the sun sank

below the horizon, her body shimmered in the headlights, and Judas could see her wandering from one lane to another. Horns honked, tires skidded, and angry voices yelled out insulting words, but she kept coming until she leaned over his car and looked at him through the windshield. Her face was something out of a nightmare. Her eyes bled black blood, the horror in them spoke to him, telling him she wanted to die. Was she heartbroken, or was she under the influence of some kind of white powder that promised her relief from her miseries for a night?

He never knew because suddenly her face began fading into the headlights that became a strip of New York's most famous night spots. Their lights glittered all around him—Ace of Clubs, Birdland, The Black Cat, Bourbon Street, Bowery Ballroom. He danced and danced until he looked down at the woman he was holding and saw her face. She had the same long dark hair, the raincoat, the same misery showing through dead eyes, the same pale, death-like face, and the same black tears.

He had been escorting a corpse.

Fear ripped through him, and he began to yell.

His own echoing voice woke him up to a ceiling mirror where he saw himself splayed out as if he were ready for slaughter. Reflected in the mirror was a plush hell full of sex toys. He'd never seen so much red velvet. The walls, the carpet, and even a swing that hung from the ceiling were made of red velvet. The only thing that escaped was the glass in the large bay window.

With sweat popping out all over him, he lunged forward, staring into a wall of mirrors that reflected a spanking horse, a whipping post, whips, chains, floggers, crops, and paddles. Burying his fingers in his hair, it all came back to him.

This was the bedroom of a whore.

It never really bothered him that much before, but now with Tess in the picture, he began seeing himself through her eyes—eyes that haunted him. They followed him wherever he went. The most

beautiful blue eyes he'd ever seen filled with rage, hurt, disappointment, and repulsion. That one day in his penthouse sealed his fate. He'd never have Tess. He knew that now. It was time he faced that fact and got on with his life. Luckily he had no appointments for tonight, so he stayed in his penthouse all day and got drunk that night.

By the time the city was coming alive with twinkling lights, he was seeing double and was spread out on his chaise with a martini glass in his hand. Extending his glass, he said, "To the woman with the blue eyes. Long may she look down her nose at me and others like me." Bringing it back to his lips, he drank it thirstily, and then looked at the olive skewered by a toothpick. "Dinner," he said as he picked it up and ate it with a flourish.

Tap, tap, tap.

Judas didn't budge.

Tap, tap, tap.

Is someone at the door? Judas thought. *Why don't they use the doorbell?*

He made a move to try and get up, but the room began spinning around. He grabbed hold of something to steady himself with one hand while the other flew to his head. "Oh, my. Why does the room keep moving?" He finally managed to reach the door and opened it. What he saw magically washed the alcohol from his system, and he became as sober as a judge.

"I took the chance that you weren't...*busy*...tonight to bring this over." She extended a package for him.

"Tess...I'm...why did Wolfe send you? They usually just call, you know, with special instructions, and then lay it in front of my door."

"I don't know. It's on my way home, I guess. Wolfe doesn't need a reason. He's the boss, after all."

"Won't you come in?" He was surprised when she stepped inside, looking around.

"Can I fix you a drink? I was sitting here all by myself getting drunk on martinis. I have just about anything you might want."

"I'm sure. You have to keep the clients happy...and all that."

"Well...it helps." He rushed over to the bar. "What'll you have?"

Thinking she would stump him with her drink order, she said, "I'm kind of partial to White Russians."

"White Russian it is."

She gave a slight shrug. She should have known better than to try and stump him—the guru of social behavior. She looked around while the glasses clinked and liquid poured. She wandered into every corner, looked for dirt under every rug, and snooped until he finally caught her.

"What are you looking for, Tess?"

"Oh...nothing, I guess." She was just about to go into the bedroom when Judas quickly jumped in front of her. "Going somewhere?"

"It's a nice suite, I was just looking around."

"Some other time," he said as he gave her a glass of strong smelling liquid.

She rose up on tiptoes and looked over his shoulder. "What are you hiding in there?"

He looked down at his skimpy robe and said teasingly, "Do I look like I'm hiding anything?"

"You know what I mean. I want to get a look at this little web of yours."

"Tess, why don't you just relax, and drink your White Russian like a good little girl?"

"Oh, no," she said smiling up at him. "I understand you don't like...*good little girls*."

Judas took a deep breath. "Tell me, dear, is this going to turn into another night of slinging insults at each other?"

"I'm curious as to what a whore's suite looks like, so sue me. Any chance you might take me on a little tour?"

Judas was silent.

Don't start anything, he told himself. She's hurting right now. She feels as if she's been trumped, and if she feels any attraction to me at all, she's struggling with that, as well.

"Sorry, Tess. No tours today."

"Oh, I forgot. Please forgive me. I just assumed, as with most men, you'd be proud of your profession, but I forgot for a moment what your profession is."

"Tess, why are you trying to start a fight with me? So I'm a whore. I'm sorry I can't live up to your idea of what a man should be, but that's the way it is."

She whirled on him. "I'd be ashamed to introduce you to any of my friends, and certainly my family."

"Now why in hell would you want to do that? We're nothing to each other."

"You're right," she said, a hurt tone to her voice. "We're almost strangers."

"Of course. You've already told me what you think of me, and I can only say...so what? It's no skin off my nose. Why should I care?"

She was quiet, and then spoke. "You're right, of course. So why..." She turned and picked up her purse. "I have to go."

"But you haven't finished your White Russian."

"I'm not thirsty anymore. Thanks for your hospitality. It's getting late."

Judas watched her sadly as she walked toward the door. "Goodbye...Tess."

* * * *

Goodbye... Tess.

The words echoed hauntingly through her mind—the sound and inflection of his words so final. She moved like a mechanical zombie as she stepped up to the elevator and pressed the button. She wanted to believe he had just meant it for now, but she knew. Only two words, but they said so much. He was telling her that he never intended to see her again, would never again invite her into his suite, never put up with her insults, her— She buried her face in her hands. She couldn't believe her own stupidity.

God, she had called him a *whore*.

To his face.

She couldn't blame him. No one would have put up with what she was dishing out. What was wrong with her? Every time she opened her mouth it was an insult. Why couldn't she put her emotions aside, deal with what he was, and put it all behind her? And then a thought from nowhere occurred to her. *Someday he'll meet a woman who will do all that—a woman who will love him, a woman he will love.*

Bitch! She thought, and felt a pang of jealousy cut through her.

She thought about all the mornings she'd seen him in front of the subway station, his sign in one hand and his tin cup in the other. Who knew that under all that was a god! From the first day she saw him on the street, there was something in his eyes. They were sharp, appraising. Even then she sensed that he wasn't the usual hobo on the street, that somehow he was different. She was aware that his eyes lingered on her a little too long. She knew now, as well as then, that he wasn't thinking about the money in her wallet, but what was beneath her dress.

Oh, God, why didn't I leave him there?

And then the elevator was there to take her far, far away.

* * * *

Judas sat reading the dossier on Caswell Massey, the famous exotic fragrance guru at Trafalgar Square in London. His perfume line had become stagnant, and he was looking to open up the American market. He needed an advertising agency with a little imagination to put a sexy new slant on his product.

His gaze dropped down to *Sexual Preferences* and noticed he liked kinky sex with women. "My God," Judas mumbled, and picked up the phone. When Wolfe answered, he said, "Wolfe, this is Judas. I just received Massey's dossier. Have you read it?"

"Of course. What are you doing with it?"

"Tess dropped it by on her way home."

"Tess? Why would she...? My God," he said, after putting two and two together. "She must have come in while I was in my bathroom and swiped it off my desk. I thought I heard someone in here. Damned bitch. She's sticking her nose in where it doesn't belong again. Judas, you can see what I have to put up with. Why won't you let me fire the little cunt?"

"No, Wolfe, don't forget our agreement. If she goes, so do I. Besides, no harm has been done."

After a short silence, he said, "Okay, but courier it back to me, and I'll handle it."

* * * *

Wolfe slammed the phone down, his anger at Tess reaching explosive levels. So that's what happened. After coming in and finding him not here, she had brazenly taken the friggin' package from his desk and dropped it off to Judas herself. She wasn't supposed to be in that suite, and she knew it. Any other time, she would have saved him the price of a courier service, but this time all she had done was screw things up. He was damned sick and tired of Tess Kolby sticking

her nose in his business. As usual, she's barging in like she owns the place.

Her trickery in this situation made him suspicious. What reason would she have to go over there? Suddenly a chill danced down his spine. My God, could she be gathering information to take to the authorities? Shit! How the hell did he get himself wedged between a rock and a hard place? He had to figure some way out, dammit. He couldn't just sit here and do nothing. And then he seemed to remember a quote from an old college text.

Chaste as the icicle that is curdled by the frost from purest snow, and hangs on Dian's temple.

That's what she was, a chaste little icicle. He'd built this temple from the ground up, and he wasn't about to let a cold fish like her come in and tell him how to run it. He'd had enough of her fucking moralizing. So what if he wanted to entertain their clients with a little sexual activity? Other companies did it. Why not him? The idea had floated around in his mind a long time, and when Judas showed up, it seemed the perfect opportunity to get it started. He didn't like to admit it, but the truth was Southland was in bad trouble, and if he didn't do something fast, there wouldn't be a Southland Advertising Agency. Now was the worst time for a little bitch like her to come in and upset everything he'd built. Well, by God, he wasn't going to let the business he'd given his life to die just because some little icicle wanted to freeze him out.

Besides, dammit, it's time the woman got out of the Middle Ages and caught up with the rest of the world. Everyone was doing it these days. You couldn't go ten feet in this city without being propositioned by some hooker, so why shouldn't he cash in on it if it was available? He knew he might run up against opposition, but he hadn't counted on Tess and her *attitude*. Ever since that first day in his office, a day didn't go by that she didn't make it blatantly clear what she thought about his illicit little web. Any other time he would have fired her ass,

but he'd made a promise to Judas and couldn't go back on it, or he'd end up losing him.

But what if she quit?

A plan slowly began to evolve. He'd have to handle the situation very carefully. This little icicle had as sharp a point as any knife, and so far he'd had to sit back and take it. But no more. So what do you do with an icicle that you can't break or you can't smash?

You put it over a flame—and watch it melt.

Chapter Nine

Slow, Judas told himself. Slow and careful. Her ass may be young, and able to take the sting of a thousand lashes, but she's tight and must be carefully coerced into embracing the fullness of my cock.

His breath stopped when her butt rose high, inviting him to bring her into submission by inflaming her with a Dom's spanking.

He was tempted but knew he must draw her into it slowly. To beat or draw blood now would rob them of the heated pleasure he had planned for later. The longer he waited, the more eager she would become, and then when the final moments arrived, they would both reap the rewards.

Judas reached down and drew her well-rounded butt up against his cock to further tempt her, and noticed a rhythmic pulsing coming from her cunt when he pressed himself against her pussy. He reached around her and took his time squeezing and rubbing her until he could feel an erotic flame beneath his sensitive hand. Finally, after long moments of flesh rubbing against flesh, he was sure she was at the melting point, but he wanted to have her in degrees. He could feel the juices dripping from her pussy that wet both her thighs and his hand as his two fingers probed her. As he carefully fanned the flames of her desire, he could hear her erratic breathing, and her body becoming frantic beneath his touch. She moaned, her hips still pushing and rubbing against him until he thought his cock would burst. It must be soon. He opened her gradually while she wiggled beneath him. Finally, she was open and waiting, and his cock was almost too hard to bear.

It had been hours, it seemed, of wallowing passionately in this sinful debauchery, but now the moment was upon them. So, with pretended anger in his voice, he yelled, "You filthy little harlot, you tempt me beyond any man's ability to resist. If I fucked you now, I could hardly be blamed! Do you hear me, you nasty little trollop?"

"You wouldn't dare," she yelled while struggling with the ties on her wrists. "Let me go, or I'll tell my father!"

"Tell him what, wench? That you are an ass-twitching little whore? I happen to know you spend your days tempting all the men, driving them crazy with your promises of a hot cunt for their taking."

"It's not true! I'll have you flogged for those words!"

"Threaten me, will you? Well, you will pay, you little whore!"

Judas quickly reached over and abruptly loosed her from the ties on her wrists and yanked her up. "A time on the spanking post will teach you to obey your elders." After lifting her arms up and tying her wrist to the monstrosity that in ancient days served as a whipping post for young virgins, he ripped at her ancient peasant clothes violently, tearing them from her body. He quickly turned then and grabbed a whip with multiple leather strips and began to thrash her. After spending hours, it seemed, whipping her into submission, he saw the evidence of his beating in the blood-red stripes streaked across her ass. *Only one thing left*, he thought as he grabbed a paddle with barbs.

One whack after the other brought screams of delight. And then when her bottom was as red as blood, her breath came in bursts, and her struggles and screams became moans and gasping breaths. Whimpers and ungodly sounds of passion filled the room. The air was hot and sultry, and Judas could feel her creeping desire surge to life. At last. The ebb and flow of her passion was loosed, and her body went into seizures as one powerful orgasm after another washed over her.

Now, Judas thought, his passion as feral and untamed as a wild jungle cat. With enough desire roiling around in his cock to begin a forest fire, he untied her and threw her back down on the bed and fell

on her. He brutally opened her up and plunged over and over into her quivering ass.

With a growl escaping her throat, she came alive again and screamed for mercy. She bounced as he plunged. Moans and whimpers filled the room, and the bed rocked while the two of them tumbled together. And then it happened. Their passion burst, causing his cock to release a liquid inside her that was so hot it almost singed her flesh.

* * * *

When the mystery of night slowly turned to early morning fog, Judas awoke, and looked over at the woman who looked as if she were exhausted after an active sex-filled night. She had pale skin and a cloud of black hair that seemed to try and cover her breasts, but two naked nipples managed to peek out at a tempting angle. He snuggled up to her, trying not to wake her as he leaned over and covered her nipples with his hungry mouth. As he suckled, his cock slowly became stiff and then as hard as a rock. While moving gently, he reached for her hand and wrapped it around his dick and began to rub it up and down, faster and faster until his passion was at its height, and a creamy liquid burst forth.

Just then, she opened her lazy eyes, saw what he was doing, and crawled on top of him. After their lips met and feasted on each other, Judas began massaging her breasts and chewing on her delectable nipples. While he buried his face between them, she reached down and fingered his cock until he was hard again. When Judas was ready, her breath became heavy and labored, and her eyes lazy with passion. With a swift movement, she pushed his cock inside her, and Judas moaned and moved his hips beneath her. Their moans drifted around the room while she began to ride him, her dark hair and bouncing breasts sending Judas on a passionate journey into the darkest regions

of primal lust. He bucked beneath her until at last the two of them once more shattered, and lay wilted in each other's arms.

He had rested only a few minutes when he heard the doorbell. He rushed to get up, shrugged into his robe, and went to answer it.

"Good morning, sir, I hope I haven't disturbed your sleep."

"No," Judas said. "I was just getting up." Surprised by the concierge's visit, he asked, "Is anything wrong?"

"Oh, no, I just wanted to inform you that the adjoining suite is now occupied, so if you hear any movement or activity coming from there, don't be alarmed."

"Oh...well, thank you for the information."

"Not at all." Before he turned to leave, he said, "Have a good day, sir."

Just then the panels of the elevator opened, and the boy with the room service cart stepped out.

"Good morning, sir," he said as he rolled the cart past the door that Judas held open for him. While fussing over the table, he lifted up the silver domes covering each order so Judas could see, and said, "Eggs Benedict for two, marmalade and toast, coffee, orange juice, and a morning paper." He turned to Judas. "Have I forgotten anything, sir?"

"No, it looks like it's all there," Judas said while signing the bill and handing it to him.

When the boy took it, he clicked his heels together, and said, "Bon appétit, sir." After taking his generous tip, the boy nodded toward the bedroom door. "Looks like your leopard needs to be fed."

Judas turned to where the boy was looking and saw the woman wrapped in a wild leopard skin sheet. "Yes," Judas said wearily. "Would *you* like the job?"

* * * *

Drenched in sweat, Wolfe gave a lusty groan with every plunge he made.

"Ohh, God," he rasped out as he rode the ass of his secretary like a rodeo star. She was dressed only in her garter belt and silk hose, her delicate panties lying in a silken pool on the floor beside him. With sweaty, grasping hands, he reached around her and grasped her pussy, holding her steady as he squeezed and rubbed. While surrounded by her sexy heat, he pressed three fingers into her cunt, causing her to groan. Both were totally caught up in the carnal euphoria of the moment and unconcerned about the noise.

Sounds of sex filled the office, and pungent odors wafted around the room. It was hot, and Wolfe was sweating through his wrinkled shirt. The two of them grunted and groaned through several wild and scorching thrusts, and then tumbled into a sea of multiple orgasms together. The explosions were like bursting firecrackers. When it was finally over, Wolfe didn't move, but lay wilted against her soft, round body.

Finally, she managed to wiggle from beneath him, and stood by the door, looking at him accusingly while she dressed.

He noticed her granite look and said, "What is it now?"

"What have you done about Tess?"

"What the hell can I do?"

"Get rid of her, Parker. Get her out before she spreads her poison to the other employees."

"Hey, bitch, I'll decide *when* she goes, and *how*. Besides, it ain't that easy."

"What the hell is that supposed to mean?"

"It's Judas, dammit. I'm afraid..." Suddenly he looked at her and said, "What the hell am I telling you for? You'll find out in due time. Your business is to take dictation and keep me happy. I'll take care of Tess...and anything else that needs taking care of."

"But when?"

"When the time is right. Now shut up."

"Well, you'd better not wait much longer. Every time I look at Southland's declining bank balance, I get worried. If it wasn't for the accounts Judas has landed for us, we'd already be out of business."

"Hey, I know it's bad," Wolfe replied, "but give me a little credit, okay? I know what I'm doing."

"Look, I've just managed to make myself comfortable here at Southland, and I don't want no cold fish ruining it for me. I don't like standing in unemployment lines, and I don't like bankruptcy."

"Trust me. It won't come to that."

"How the hell do you know she'll quit? She just may surprise you, you know."

"Are you kidding? I'm talking about that iceberg, Tess Kolby. I may not be able to fire her, but Judas didn't say anything about her quitting. All I've got to do is give her a reason, and what I've got in mind is a doozy."

Just then the phone rang, and Misty wiggled to her desk.

Within only minutes, Misty buzzed Wolfe. "It's the Dream Mist CEO, Clifford James. He said he's heard about Southland's hot little nest, and says he'll consider us for a new line he's introducing if we'll get him a woman." She hesitated a moment. "A woman, Parker, the man likes women. The last time I looked, Judas was a man."

"I'll take care of it. What line is he on?"

"I didn't patch him through, I handled it myself."

"Handled it yourself?" Wolfe yelled into the receiver. "What the hell made you do that? I'm the fuckin' boss around here, not you. Now, put down your stinkin' nail polish, and tell me what the hell you said to him."

"What could I say? I lied through my teeth. I told him we'd make him very comfortable. Parker, what the hell are we going to do about this?"

"Something I should have done a long time ago." Like a venomous snake, his voice dropped to a hiss. "Call Tess and tell her I need to see her."

"Yes sir!" Misty said enthusiastically.

Misty was right. He had dragged his feet on this, but now it was over. He was about to set a plan in motion that would get rid of Tess once and for all. As soon as she quit, he'd find a professional for the CEO, and Southland's money problems would be over.

Within only minutes, it seemed, Tess was walking through his door, her cold, superior attitude making him feel small in her presence. He hated that feeling. He was the owner of this agency, and yet this iceberg never failed to make him feel as if he should be working for her.

"Hello, Tess," he said, while working hard to keep his anger in check.

"Mr. Wolfe."

"Please take a seat." He rose from his chair and began pacing around his office. Finally, he turned to her, and said, "Tess, I have just learned that your job performance has been suffering. Unfortunately, I'm faced with the decision of what to do with you. I don't want to fire you for sentimental reasons, so the only answer I can come up with is to place you in another job that's not quite so demanding."

Tess stood and glared at him. "That's a lie, and you know it. And what do you mean, *a new job*?"

"I simply mean that you've been with Southland a number of years, and because of our long tenure together, I'm trying to save your job by giving you something else to do."

"I don't know what you're trying to pull, Wolfe, but if this is another one of your tricks, you won't get away with it."

As if he didn't hear her, he continued, "It just so happens that I do have something available that I think you might like. It's easy, pays good money, and if you let yourself, you might enjoy it very much."

"I can't believe you, Wolfe. To keep me quiet about this whole thing you've given me money, gifts, pie-in-the-sky promises, and now a plush job? Why do you persist? I've told you a thousand times that I

have no intention of saying anything to anyone about this little love nest."

"Well, I appreciate your loyalty."

"Save it, Wolfe. It has nothing to do with my loyalty to you. I just want to protect the employees here. If Southland shuts down, it would put a lot of people out of work, and it isn't fair to let these people suffer just because you can't see beyond your zipper. But a word of advice. I can be pushed only so far."

"You're threatening me? Damn, Tess, I brought you in here with the best of intentions, and you stand there and threaten me."

"Don't act like this is some noble sacrifice you're making. I know what's behind this. The only thing I don't understand is, why me? There are lots of other people around here that don't approve of what you're doing. Why are you zeroing in on me?"

He gave her a dark look and chewed his words as he mumbled through clenched teeth. "I'll tell you why. It's because you're a fuckin' thorn in my side. Every time you look at me with those cold, chaste eyes of yours, I feel a chill in my cock. I'm tired of living with that holier-than-thou attitude of yours. Well, this is it, Tess, I've had enough. Every time I try and talk to you, you act like a nasty bitch that's better than everyone else. Are you so narrow-minded that you can't see how this would benefit Southland *and* its employees?"

"You don't give a damn about the people at this agency. It's *you* that you're concerned with. You and that slutty secretary of yours. Everyone knows what goes on in this office." She looked at him in amazement while shaking her head. "My God, do you think we're all idiots?"

"I don't give a fuck if you hear a bomb going off in here. It's none of your stupid business. I've tried to be as patient as I can, but you make it so damned hard. This job is to get you out of my face and out of my office. Take it or walk!"

"I'll tell you why you don't like me, Wolfe. It's because I'm smarter than you are, and everyone in this agency knows it. So are a

lot of other people out there if you'd just listen to them. You're a joke, Wolfe, a sad, *unfunny* joke."

"You've just sealed your fate, lady," Wolfe said.

"All right, just for grins, tell me. What is this *job* you keep mentioning?"

A few seconds of heavy silence hung between them, and then he let the bomb drop. "Tomorrow you will take up residence at the Mandalay Towers. You, Tess Kolby, will be working with Judas, as our new female...whore."

Chapter Ten

The shock was so great she could almost feel her senses shattering, the words whirling about her head like a haunting echo. Each syllable was as sharp as a double-edged sword that stabbed deep into her soul. She could vaguely hear Wolfe as he continued his threats.

"I can't afford to keep you in a job that you can't do, so I'm giving you another job. A job you can do on your back. A job any hooker on the street could do. Now, if you refuse to accept this offer and quit, I'll make damn sure you never work in the advertising field again. In fact, the only job you'll be able to get is a fry cook at McDonald's, and that's a promise."

The words—she'd heard them somewhere before. Where—who—and then she remembered Liz's warning.

"...that creep Wolfe will blackball you throughout the entire advertising industry, and that's just the beginning. God no, Tess, you need to think this thing through."

With those words still whirling about in her mind, she looked over at Wolfe and saw the glitter in his snake-like eyes. It was a look that told her he was paying her back for every disagreement they'd ever had, and for all the times she'd dared to voice any opinion that was different than his. Maybe that was his reason, but deep in Tess's heart, she knew that there was more to it than that. Some people would say she deserved it. It was payback time. Fate was making her pay for every unkind word she'd said to Judas. The name calling, the insults, the pain he must have felt every time she called him a whore. The real twist of the knife was, if she took the job, she would be living in his

world, playing with his toys, receiving the same insults, and feeling the same pain he had felt. A fitting retribution.

"Be out of the building by five o'clock."

Be out of the building by five o'clock.

The words woke her up. He just assumed she would quit. Oh, sure, she wanted to. After his dirty, immoral proposal to her, she wanted to run out of this building and never come back—but suddenly, she couldn't let him win, even if it meant she would sink down to his level. Wolfe was a snake, everyone knew it, but no one ever called him on it. Southland was an ass-kissing society full of employees that let Wolfe walk all over them. The fact that she refused to be one of them gnawed at his gut. Well, she didn't intend to let him have his way.

A thorn in his side?

She smiled. *How about the whole rose bush?*

That meant she'd have to stay and play. Could she pull it off? She had to try, but first she had to get into character. In only seconds, it was as if a curtain had come down over her face and someone else had taken over. Her eyes softened, the imagined chastity belt fell off, and the bombshell dropped. "*Parker*," she began, using his first name as she spoke in a chilling whisper. "Quit a plush job like the one you've mentioned? Please! Use your head, man, I'm just the woman you need."

Watching Wolfe, she saw his eyes widen, and disbelief spread across his face. His turmoil was beautiful. The use of his first name changed the atmosphere of the whole room. If she could just maintain this change in character a little while longer, she might see Wolfe crumble.

"What do you mean?"

"I mean," she said with a shrug, "I accept."

Wolfe's eyes widened at her remark. "You *what*?"

"You heard me," she said, a certain sexy swagger to her walk as she hiked her hip up, sat on his desk, and lit up a cigarette. "I said I

accept. Now, as for the so-called fringe benefits, I don't require much, so I'll just make this short and sweet." After taking a few puffs and blowing smoke in his face, she crushed it out, got up, and swaggered up to him as if she were the highest paid hooker on the street. Standing close, she began to finger his tie as she looked into his eyes. "I want the same deal you gave Judas."

Tess had thought she wouldn't be able to get the words out, but she surprised herself. Suddenly she felt strong—hard as nails. There was nothing she wanted more than to beat Wolfe at his own game, and if that meant she had to become as low and deceitful as him, so be it. Without a stumble, or a hesitant move, she swayed her hips as she walked toward the door. At the last moment, she turned and said, "I'll move into the Mandalay first thing in the morning." She gave him a wide, sparkling smile as she took one last peek around the door as she was leaving. "And Parker," she added with a wink. "I can't wait for my first client."

Wolfe said nothing. He just stood there with his mouth hanging open. *What had just happened*, he asked himself. *He had turned the heat on, but the icicle wasn't melting!*

* * * *

As Tess walked to her desk, she was still holding her breath. She had just done battle with the head of the company, and won—or had she? She wasn't sure. If nothing else, she had knocked the wind out of him. She didn't know how this would play out, but she knew war had been declared, and it was either him or her now.

By the time she arrived at her office, she was numb. She quickly grabbed a box and began packing up her personal items. It seemed that every moment it took for her to get her things together was another moment she hated Judas for what he had done to her.

Liz approached Tess's door quietly and watched her. "You can stand there hating him, but he wasn't the one who did this to you, Tess."

Without a hesitant move, Tess continued packing. "I wondered how long it would take you to say I told you so."

"You know that's not my style, but dammit, Tess, why couldn't you see this coming? I'm not half as smart as you, and I saw it. Hell, it couldn't have been plainer if it came tappin' on your shoulder wearin' bells and whistles."

"Say whatever you came to say, Liz."

"He's a murderer, Tess. Wanted by the law for God's sake and a whore to boot. If it were any other man, you would have booted him out the front door. I think what's turned your head is his resemblance to a Greek god."

Her words hit a sore spot, causing Tess to whirl around. "That has nothing to do with it."

"Yeah? You learned the truth on the first day. You could have turned him right around and threw the bastard out, but you didn't because of his looks. Hell, Tess, I don't mean you shouldn't have helped him. Of course you should, but somewhere else, for God's sake. Away from you, away from Southland. You could have prevented all this, Tess, but you didn't."

Tess visualized Judas as he looked on that first day, her mind focusing on his soft, lush lips, his magnetic eyes, and his tall, magnificent physique that filled her office door. Liz was right. She could have stopped this before it ever started, but she didn't want to. Even when she found his cards spread around, she ranted and raved out of jealousy, not professional outrage, but she never once considered firing him. She wouldn't admit it to herself, but she wanted to be the one in his arms. Now, because of her stupidity, she'd lost both her job and Judas.

"I guess you're right, but it's too late now," she said as she continued packing.

"Wait. How do you know it's too late? How does Judas feel about you?"

She remembered the last time they were together, and his painful words rang like a demented bell through her mind. *Goodbye, Tess...goodbye, Tess...goodbye, Tess...*

"Oh, I don't know. He'd probably like to see me tarred and feathered, or left in some hot desert without a drop of water." She looked up at Liz and gave her a thin smile. "And that's on a good day."

"Well, girlfriend, looks like you've been busy burning bridges."

"It's what I do best."

"So, what happens now?"

"Oh, it's not so bad. Mr. Wolfe found a place for me. It's a great job. Tomorrow I take up residence at the Mandalay Towers. I'll make good money, have all the comforts, and lay on my back until hell freezes over. Couldn't ask for anything better."

"Oh, my God!" Liz cried. "You mean, you're..."

Tess nodded her head. "It's either that or the pavement. Ordinarily, I'd take the pavement, but I intend to somehow make Wolfe eat dirt."

"Oh, so you've got a plan."

"Well, it's not fully formed yet, but I'm working on it."

Liz angled a look at her. "Does that plan include, uh...well..."

Tess shrugged.

"Tess, what's going to happen when a client comes and wants to...?"

"I don't have that figured out yet. I've just come from Wolfe's office where he told me to stay and play, or go and be ruined."

"Then why didn't you go? You're smarter than Wolfe. You could've left town and started your own agency. You made good money here. Surely you saved some for a rainy day." Liz cocked her head and looked closely at Tess. "Does it have something to do with Judas? Maybe you're hoping there's still a chance?"

"It's hard to let go, that's all."

"And what is it you don't want to let go of? Judas? Your job? What?"

"All of the above," she said with a thin smile. "Oh, I don't know, Liz. After my brilliant performance in Wolfe's office I find myself in the middle of a war, and it's a war I've seen coming for a long time. Hell, we all know what a sleaze bucket Wolfe is. Why is it when we go up against someone like him, we give up and run away? Well, I'm tired of running. I don't know, Wolfe might win after all, but I'm sure as hell not going to make it easy for him."

"Well, I guess I can understand that, but girl, someone's gotta take you aside and teach you how to play the game. No more of this *whiter than snow* thing you got goin' for you. Get out and get a little dirt on you."

Still throwing things into her box, Tess said, "I think this new job will make me dirty enough."

Liz came in and picked up another box and began helping Tess. "Can I come to see you sometime?" Suddenly, she began laughing. "Oh, I don't mean for..."

Tess laughed. "I know what you mean, and I'd love it. You're about the only friend I have left."

"Hey, don't be so down in the mouth, girlfriend. We'll figure this out together, right?"

"Right," Tess replied, and with a misting of tears in her eyes, she said, "Thanks, Liz."

Chapter Eleven

The next day, Judas woke up to the smell of freshly brewed coffee and thought he was dreaming. He got up and walked like a zombie to the phone to call room service when he got another whiff of it and realized it must be coming from the suite next to his. He'd had a restless night and was groggy. He couldn't wait for room service. He needed something to wake him up now, so he pointed himself toward the bar and looked at the bottles of liquid through red-rimmed eyes. None of it looked good to him. Once again, the smell of freshly brewed coffee teased him, leading him to the door of the adjoining suite.

He wanted some of that coffee—he needed some of that coffee. Maybe he'd be lucky enough to be invited in for a cup. Whoever this gal was, they had to get acquainted some time, and now was as good a time as any. So, with a soft rap on the door, he stood there until he heard someone on the other side unlocking the door.

He watched as the door opened, slow and uncertain.

She stood in an early morning shadow, but from what he could tell, she had a body to die for. And why wouldn't she? She was the female half of this plush little nest. He smiled.

"Hi, I'm Judas Nyte. I heard you moving around and thought I'd intro—" His eyes widened as the woman came into the light.

"Hello, Judas."

"Oh, my God," he breathed and looked beyond her to the suitcases, boxes, and clothes. "What the hell are you doing—?" And then it dawned on him. "Y-You're the new—?"

"I've been promoted," she said simply and turned away from him.

"You mean—?" he began as he followed her in.

"Mr. Wolfe made it very clear. I had two choices. Quit and be ruined by him, or become his female company whore. So, voila!"

"But...have you ever been...I mean, have you ever—?"

"Oh, Judas, grow up. I'm twenty-six years old. Of course I've..."

"Promotions are fine, but this is not the job for you."

"Why? Because I'm too...clean?"

"You know what I mean, dammit."

"I was on my way up, Judas. Now would have been the perfect time to break away from Southland and start my own agency. I've been saving my money for years and had just about made it when all this had to happen."

"What? What happened?"

"You happened."

"Me? What did I do?"

"Never mind," she murmured. "I'm sorry I keep blaming you. It's my own fault for letting it go this far."

"Tess, I never have understood just what is it about this apartment that bothers you anyway? A lot of companies provide their clients with free accommodations."

"If that's all it is, fine, but you know how Wolfe is. He's as corrupt as they come. It all started when he found out that his clients were using the hotel call girls. This irritated Wolfe. Why should the hotel get the money that rightfully belonged to him? So he began hiring professionals. Last year, when one of our clients took a shine to one of the staff, Wolfe encouraged it, even promised her a bonus if she'd go out with him. I don't have to tell you what an office scandal that was. Slowly it began to grow and turned into what you see now," she said, indicating around the room. "An investment, Wolfe calls it." She gave a derisive laugh. "An investment. A guarantee. A sure way to get their account." She looked at him. "That's always the way it starts, you know. A little trickle at first, and then before you know it, you have a flood."

"I still don't know why you cared. Even if it's against the law, Wolfe is the one who has to answer for it."

"I cared because Southland's reputation was being slaughtered. I don't know. Maybe it's the professional in me that just won't let this happen." She got up and began pacing. "And then to make it worse, you came. That's when all hell broke loose. Wolfe started changing so fast he didn't even resemble the man he used to be at all. I've been a thorn in Wolfe's side ever since I came here, but when this started, it became worse. We can't seem to agree on anything. I made no secret of how I felt on many occasions, and now this situation here is the proverbial straw that broke the camel's back. Wolfe thought he could buy me off, so that's when the hush money started coming. He promised me raises, bonuses, trips, cars—everything and anything I wanted. I kept my mouth shut all right but not for that. It was because I didn't want to put the rest of the employees of Southland out of work. But, when he put you here, I finally threatened to turn him in for keeping a professional at the Mandalay. That's when he realized that the gifts wouldn't work.

"I knew it was all over when he called me into his office and accused me of not doing my job. But, instead of firing me, he offered me another job. Not just any old job, but the very job that I objected to. I'm sure he thought I'd quit, but I didn't. I knew the minute I walked out that door he would blackball me, and I couldn't let that happen. But it's still his ballgame because now if I turn him in, I'll be putting my own neck in the noose as well." She sighed. "It seems I'm damned if I do, and damned if I don't."

"That bastard," Judas said. "Well, he's not going to get away with this. Listen to me, Tess. You're not going to do this. You don't know what you're getting into here. He's trying to humiliate you. A job like this is the lowest, dirtiest, and filthiest thing you could ever do with your life."

She looked pointedly at Judas. "You do it."

"I do it because it's the only thing I know. I've got no education past high school. No formal training at all, not even business courses. It's this or the street, and as you know, I've had a little of that, too. I don't want to go out there again."

"You seemed to do very well."

"*Very well?* Do you know what *very well* is? You live in holes. You have to be around people that are not people, but animals. Tess, I don't want you to know what it's like out there. For what Wolfe is trying to do to you, he ought to be skinned and hung out to dry."

"But what'll I do? I can't quit."

"Why not? The worst that'll happen to you is you'll have to leave advertising. There must be hundreds of jobs out there for someone like you."

"But advertising is my dream, Judas, and I was so close."

"All right, Tess, if advertising is your dream, then go after it. Get this scum where he lives. Go to the police, yell it from the rooftops, call a news conference and tell them everything you know."

"That's a little drastic."

"Yes, it is, but if you want to cook his butt in oil, you have to make a splash."

"But why?"

"Because you can't beat men like Wolfe without fighting dirty."

"There's that word again."

"What word?"

"Dirty. All right, so I get dirty. I'm tired of being so fuckin' clean."

"Well, hallelujah."

"Judas, I want to fight Wolfe. I simply can't let him get away with this. The only problem is, if I do, I'll go down with him."

"Why? You haven't done anything." He looked around at the boxes. "You haven't even unpacked yet." He grabbed her hands and squeezed them. "Tess, if you don't want to go all the way with this, for God's sake, go back home. Now."

She lowered her head. "I can't," she whispered. "I've already given up my apartment."

"Oh, God," he muttered as he wracked his brain trying to figure out what to do. After a while, he turned to her and said, "What about moving in with me?"

"With you?"

"Sure, I've got another bedroom. It's rarely used. It's meant for those who want to stay overnight, but they usually have another room in the hotel and just come up here for a good time."

"But what about the...sounds?"

"I'm sorry, Tess, that's just something you'll have to put up with. It won't be so bad, I promise. "When he saw her indecision, he grasped her shoulders."Tess, don't worry, it'll be handled."

Tears gathered in her eyes, and she lowered her head.

"Tess, you're not alone," Judas said, pulling her close. "I'm here, and I'm going to help you. Do you understand?"

* * * *

She nodded as the tears fell down her cheeks. As she cried on his shoulder, she could feel his strength. His body was so sturdy, so fragrant and warm. She wanted to hold on to him to keep from crumbling under the pressure of what her life had become. She couldn't help but think that, in spite of all the hateful things she'd said to him in the past, he was willing to forget it all and help her. No knife could have ever stabbed her so deep as hearing those awful words spill out of her mouth being replayed in her mind.

"...you're a whore, Judas."

"I'm curious as to what a whore's suite looks like..."

"I don't hire whores."

"You're trash, Judas. Nothing but pure trash."

Any insult she could throw at him, she did. And now, when she needed him, he threw it all aside and swiftly came to her rescue. She

looked up at him. Gone was the man who blatantly sold himself, the hobo on the street, and even the secretary that drove her crazy, and in his place was a bright and shining knight. When did he change in her eyes? Was it when she needed him? When she thought she had lost him? Or when she realized she was falling in love with him?

Judas seemed to be deep in thought when suddenly he snapped his fingers and looked at her. "I've got it," he said. "The first thing we'll do is make you disappear."

"Disappear?" she said, moving away from him. "How? Why?"

"We'll stage your death. I have this friend—"

Tess's eyes widened. "Oh, my God, Judas."

"He's a little unsavory, but he knows this stuff like a baby knows its mama. For a price, he'll set up the scene just right. Planting evidence, blood—"

"You mean, they'll find me...dead?"

"No. We'll just set up the scene to make it look like someone killed you. The evidence will be there. All your things, your blood—"

"My blood?"

"Sure. We'll just take a little of your blood, and Reed will use it to make it look like someone...I don't know, stabbed you, or shot you. I really can't say. I'll leave that up to Reed." Judas smiled. "We'll scare the hell out of Wolfe. First of all, everyone knows you and Wolfe didn't get along, so the cops will zero in on Wolfe as the killer."

"Oh, no, Judas. I don't want to—"

"Tess, don't worry. We're just gonna scare the hell out of him. When he's facing a murder charge, he'll show everyone just what kind of coward he is. He'll have to talk, and that's when all this will come out. Wolfe will be ruined, and this place will be nothing but a memory."

"Uh, well, yes, I know I wanted to do that, but what about you? Where will you go?"

"I have a little money saved. We'll be fine."

"We?" she whispered.

"The good thing about this whole setup is, since everything's provided for me here I don't have to spend anything."

"But it was only a few short weeks ago that you were on the street. I don't understand."

"Wolfe might have a lot of faults, but he is generous."

"You know why, don't you? This is his pet project."

"Yeah, I know. If he had any idea how much I've managed to squirrel away, he'd probably lower my salary. He's not the kind of man that likes his employees to get rich off him."

"Still, it can't be much. You haven't been here that long."

"Well, it's not a fortune, but don't worry. We're not destitute."

"You keep saying...we."

"Right. I'm sorry. Just a manner of speaking, I guess, since we'll both be without jobs."

"No...we is all right."

"Look, the bottom line is, we're going to be fine. I'm the boss now, okay? You do what I say."

She smiled. "Yes, Judas."

"All right. The first thing we do is move your stuff to my spare bedroom."

When Judas got another whiff of coffee, he said, "Oh, yeah. I forgot why I knocked on your door in the first place."

"Oh? What was that?"

"I smelled your coffee."

She smiled. "Coming right up, sir. Coffee for two."

* * * *

Coffee for two, Judas thought as he sat at the kitchen table and looked at her over the rim of his cup. *There's something about that phrase that sounds so right.*

Chapter Twelve

The streets were crowded. Leather shoes scraped the sidewalk, and people tried to avoid bumping shoulders at intersections as they anxiously waited for the light to change. Judas hurried through the streets, the odor of cooking coming from restaurants and delis. The liquor stores were doing a booming business, evident in the plain paper sacks the drunks wrapped around their whiskey bottles.

He knew Reed had once had an office in this area somewhere, but where the hell was it? He was looking for an alley. He seemed to remember the deli on one side, and a...

There it was.

He rushed into the alley and turned, looking everywhere until he saw what he thought used to be the door to Reed's office. He'd almost missed it because it was hidden behind some dry, scraggly bushes that seemed to be growing through the cement. He rushed up to the door and knocked but didn't get an answer. He carefully turned the knob to open it, and a painful squeak sounded. Stepping in, a deep darkness stabbed with thin shafts of light greeted him. He immediately tasted grit and mold. When his eyes adjusted to the darkness, he saw that parts of the ceiling had fallen through. Judas knew he couldn't still be there, so he left and wondered around on the street for a while.

What would he do? He had no telephone number for him and no idea how to get in contact with him. He tried to think. Apparently Reed had to find another office. Another one like this one? Not if he wanted to face another disaster. As he stood at the edge of the alleyway, he looked around at the other buildings and saw a hotel and a bank. He began walking until he found himself in front of a building

of large white stones. The gold plaque on the front read, Sussman Building.

He knew it was a long shot, but unless Reed was out of business, he would have to find another one, and this was convenient. He entered the building slowly, and then rushed over to the building directory. He searched for several minutes before he saw Reed's name. When he found it, he expelled a breath of air that seemed to gush out in relief.

As he looked at the name, a picture of the man came pushing through the shadows of his mind. He was a seedy looking character that just didn't seem to fit in with shining tile floors, dark, glossy wood, and inch-thick carpet. The Reed he knew never combed his hair and always had stubble. No matter what time of day or night it was, he always had a beer in his hand. He would go to a local laundry and wash and dry his clothes, but would wear them without bothering to get the wrinkles out. He looked like a bum, but Judas knew he was as far from that as he could be. Reed was a serious business man, but he was undisciplined. He gave up being a cop when he married and went into investigative work for his wife's sake, but she died in the first year they were married, and he took it hard. Since then, he didn't seem to care what he looked like. But he was as sharp as a tack and knew the law as well as any judge.

"My God, is that Judas Nyte standing there?"

Judas turned around and almost fainted dead away.

It was Reed Tanner.

Judas's gaze worked its way down from Reed's expensively styled hair, to his wing-tipped feet. He was perfectly suited and carried a brief case. "Where in the hell are all your wrinkles?"

Reed laughed. "I guess they just outlived their usefulness. What the hell are you doing here?"

"I'm looking for you, Reed."

"Well, here I am. Hell, what's it been? Six years?"

"Something like that. All I know is I was a young squirt that thought I had the world by the tail. Remember?"

"Sure do," Reed said smiling. "We're both a little older and a little wiser now, but we had a ball, right?"

"We sure did. You still doing investigative work?"

"Nah," he said and then looked down at his Rolex as if he remembered something. "I'm sorry, Judas, but I can't talk long. I have a court date."

"A court date?"

Reed's smile widened. "Yeah, I'm a lawyer now."

"A lawyer?"

"Yeah, I finally went back to college and got my law degree. Passed the New York Bar just six months ago." He looked Judas up and down. "So, how's it been with you?"

"I've got a lot to tell you, Reed, but I can't do it in a few minutes. How about coming to my place tonight, say, around seven?"

Reed whipped out a day planner and flipped through it. "Yeah, I think I can make it. What's your address?"

"I'm at the Mandalay Towers, the penthouse."

"Whoa! That's a classy neighborhood. You must be doing well."

"Depends on how you look at it, I suppose." Judas hesitated. "I'd take you out to dinner, Reed, but what I have to talk to you about is rather personal, so if it's okay with you, I'd rather order room service."

"Hey, that's fine with me," he said, again looking at his Rolex. "Jeez, I wish I could stay and talk." He waved as he turned and hurried out. "See you at seven."

"Lawyers," Judas said smiling. "They're always in a hurry."

* * * *

Judas paced along the balcony, looking at his watch. Tess was in her room getting dressed, and who the hell knew where Reed was? Seven had come and gone, and Judas was afraid Reed's court gig

might have run late. He looked over at the phone, willing it to ring. When it finally did, he grabbed it up.

"Hello?"

"Judas, man, I'm sorry I'm late. What can I say? Complications arose, and the judge wouldn't let us go until they were smoothed out. Hey, I'm just now driving into the underground parking garage, and as soon as I get this baby parked, I'll be right up."

"It's okay, Reed. See you soon."

Judas got busy and ordered room service and then went to check the liquor at his bar. Clean glasses, full bottles, lemons, limes, olives, it looked like the bar was fully stocked. God, why was he so nervous? He shouldn't be this nervous. Reed was an old friend. He couldn't quite get over his new look, though. Hell, he was even handsome. Judas never knew that. For the first time, Judas knew what the phrase, "demand respect" meant. It's hard not to respect someone that pulls himself up out of a pit to chase after a dream. Reed had absolutely reinvented himself, and this new self demanded respect. Reed was quite a guy.

He heard a noise and looked up to see Tess standing there. She almost put his eyes out. She was wearing a black after-five dress that glittered in the lights. There was a slit on each side all the way up to her thighs, and the silver chain she wore lay comfortably along her cleavage, but couldn't lay straight for falling between her delicious breasts that looked as if they wanted to fall out of her dress.

"My God, Tess, you look beautiful...but there's one thing wrong."

She looked down at herself. "Oh, no, did I miss something?" She reached up and stroked her hair. "Is it my hair?"

"Just a little color," he said and smiled as he reached behind the bar and brought out a single red rose.

"Oh, Judas. How beautiful." She took it and smelled it and then gave him a reprimanding look. "You shouldn't have, you know." She looked back down at the rose and smiled. "But I'm so glad you did."

* * * *

That night Judas, Tess, and Reed sat in a tight little knot discussing Southland, its CEO Parker Wolfe, and everything that had happened up to now.

Reed smiled at Judas. "Judas, this brings back the good old days. You and I both know that I can make that man wish he'd never been born. I can point fingers at him from every direction." He looked over at Tess. "Ms. Kolby, by the time I get through with Wolfe, you may own that company."

"Reed, I realize this isn't your line anymore," Judas said, "and I know how busy you are now. Are you going to have time to do all this?"

"All this? Hell, Judas, setting up a scene, and planting a little evidence? I could do it in my sleep." His gaze jumped from one to the other. "Where do you want her to die?"

* * * *

Tess got a chill as she sat and listened to them discuss her death. She sat there as long as she could, and then rose from her chair and went over to the bar to mix herself a drink. With the ice tinkling in her glass, she stood there thinking. God, what had this turned into? Was she doing the right thing? It's true that she didn't want Wolfe to get away with this, but this scheme seemed so out there. Taking a stiff drink, and coughing a little from its burning strength, she turned back to the two men making the plans and thought of Liz. She had to call her. She could trust Liz. Liz wouldn't tell a soul. Putting her drink down, she silently made her way to her own bedroom, and while looking over her shoulder, she picked up the phone and punched in Liz's number.

"Liz," Tess said as soon as she answered. "Oh, God, Liz, I—" Suddenly she saw a hand punch the disconnect button and looked up and saw Judas.

"What in hell are you doing? Tess, you know you can't tell anyone about this. It would ruin everything. If our plan gets out, we might as well forget it."

"Judas, it's too risky. If we can't talk about it, doesn't that make it dishonest, or against the law?"

"Do you want to get that son of a bitch or not? Are you going to lie down and let him roll over you like a steamroller? Hell no! Not as long as I've got breath in my body."

"But can't we...I mean...all this seems so—"

"I know it does, but would you rather..." His words stopped abruptly and he sat looking at her for a moment. After making up his mind, he quickly grabbed her by the hand and pulled her with him toward his bedroom.

When she saw where they were going, she pulled back. "No!" she screamed, looking at a red door covered in velvet getting closer and closer. She resisted, her feet pushing against the carpet as he pulled her along.

"Yes, Tess. You wanted to see it, so I'm going to show it to you."

"Judas, please. No. I can't."

"You're going in there, Tess, and you're going to get a good look at what your future is unless you let us go on with this plan."

"I can't, Judas, I just can't!" she cried out as she saw the door looming before her.

"You wanted to see it, Tess, so I'm going to show it to you."

She continued to fight, knowing everything he said was true. She'd wanted to see Judas's bedroom for a long time. She'd heard things about it, things she couldn't believe. He'd stopped her from going in many times, but now he was forcing her to look.

"The doorknob," he shouted. "Turn it."

"No!" she cried, looking down and staring at the knob as if it were on fire.

"Do it, Tess. I want you to see what's in your future if you let Wolfe get away with this."

With tears falling down her cheeks, she hesitantly reached toward it with a trembling hand, but quickly drew it back, and wailed out, "I c-can't!"

Her sobs stopped when suddenly—the door opened.

Red! The garish color covered the walls, the floor, even the ceiling. Sins so ghastly she couldn't believe they existed were committed here—here in this cage of red velvet! Mirrors everywhere, even the ceiling! Boxes of sexual toys she couldn't believe, a whipping post. Was that a trace of blood? She looked up and saw something hanging from the ceiling. A swing? Or was it something you bind someone up with and hang them from the ceiling? Oh, God, she couldn't stand it and quickly hid her eyes behind her hands as she turned and ran out.

Judas caught her and held her close. He dried her tears, and said softly, "Is that what you want, Tess, because that's exactly what you'll get if Wolfe has his way. I just can't sit by and watch Wolfe turn you into some filthy prostitute who is worn out and turned hard and old by the time she's thirty."

She allowed him to lead her to the living room where Reed was pacing with a drink in his hand. "Is she okay?"

"I think so. It was a shock, but I think she'll be all right."

"Judas, regarding the bad luck you've had, and this...this...well, your so-called profession I would never—"

"You don't have to say another word, Reed. That's why I went to you, I knew you could keep your mouth shut."

"Judas, you're a smart guy. Why the hell don't you take all this money you make and do something for yourself? You don't have to do this. Go back to school, or take some business courses at the local college."

"Thanks, Reed, I'll think about it."

Reed glanced over at Tess who looked sick. "We should have done this in private, Judas."

"No way, Reed. Tess is the central figure here. She needs to know what's going on."

"Yeah, but if she freaks out again, it could complicate things."

"She just needs to get used to the idea. I mean, you can understand why she might do this. Hearing her death being discussed and then seeing that room. She just panicked, that's all."

"Judas," Tess said, interrupting, "If you don't need me anymore I think I'll go to my room."

"Can I trust you to stay off the phone?"

"Yes. I'm sorry. I don't know why I...it's just that I feel so alone in this."

"You have me," Judas said.

"I know, but Liz...we tell each other everything. She's just someone I've always been able to count on."

"I know, and I understand, Tess, but this is different. The slightest leak could ruin the whole thing."

"I know. What can I say? I'm sorry."

"It's okay. You get some rest, and I'll check on you later."

She turned to Reed and put out her hand. "Mr. Reed, it's been a pleasure...well..."

Reed smiled. "I understand."

"Remember. No phone calls, okay?" Judas said.

"No. Again, I'm sorry for all this. I'm okay now."

When Tess left, Reed walked with Judas to the door. "This friend you mentioned. You know, the one she called? What was her name?"

"Liz. Liz Ellison."

"How close are they?"

"They're best friends. Tess trusts her completely."

"Okay, here's the deal. Tess feels all alone in this. She needs someone right now, and this Liz might just fill the bill. Invite her for

dinner, see how they are together, and while we're at it, we can tell if this Liz can be trusted."

"You mean tell her everything?"

"Sure. We need all the allies we can get, and if she's the kind of friend I hope she is, when she sees Tess in trouble, I think she'll want to help."

"I can't say I understand it, but you're the expert. I'll see what I can do."

Reed took his coat from the coat tree and laid it across his arm. "Invite her for dinner tomorrow night, but don't tell her anything except that Tess needs her."

"You're free tomorrow night? Don't you have to look in your day planner?"

Reed smiled while putting on his coat. "For this kind of action, I'm free. I can't wait to get started, actually." He put out his hand and shook Judas's. "Judas, thanks for thinking of me on this."

"Who else would I go to? I sure as hell can't trust anyone else with this kind of information. Besides, you're the best. I mean, that's what you told me."

Reed chuckled. "You always were an easy sell. See you tomorrow night."

Judas turned and saw the closed door to Tess's bedroom. He hated to disturb her, but she needed to be informed about the latest development in their plan.

Chapter Thirteen

As Tess lay on her bed, chewing on the corner of her pillow slip, she thought about Liz. She wanted to call her so bad, but she couldn't. Still, she knew Liz so well, she could just imagine what she would be saying to her right now.

Don't be a weenie, Tess. Carry this thing through to the end. Get Wolfe where he lives, him and that ding bat of a secretary.

Yes, this is exactly the kind of thing Liz would be in favor of. She'd like to see Tess stick it to Wolfe, even if it meant she might not have a job tomorrow. She looked up when she heard a rap on her door. She got up and sat on the edge of her bed.

"Come in," she called out.

Judas opened the door gently and came in. The smile on his face told her he had something on his mind. "What are you smiling about?"

"I was just wondering if maybe you wouldn't mind a little company tomorrow night. You know, dinner, pretty much the same thing as tonight."

"Who's coming?"

"Reed," he answered as he sat beside her.

"Oh, I see. Another discussion about how you're going to kill me off."

"Tess, we can forget this now, or we can—"

"No, no. I'm sorry, it's just...too many things happening at once. I'm not even sure if we're doing the right thing."

"How would you like to get Liz's opinion?"

"Liz? But I thought—"

"Reed and I have discussed it, and he thinks it would be beneficial to your health to see Liz, but only if you promise you won't mention any of our plans, at least not right now. Reed wants to check her out first. He wants to make sure she can be trusted with all this." Judas hesitated a moment, and then said, "She does know you're here, doesn't she?"

Tess nodded. "We talked about it the day I left." Tess looked up at Judas curiously. "Are you saying we might tell her everything? My so-called death, and all?"

"We might, but only if Reed thinks it's okay. I don't want to promise you something I can't deliver. Tomorrow night is just a kind of test run." He took her hand. "I want your solemn promise you won't mention it until I do...*if* I do."

"Oh, I won't," Tess said with an excited smile.

"Okay. But now I think you need to go to bed and get some rest."

Tess looked up at Judas, seeing him for the first time without all the sordid sins of the world on him...without the dark imaginings of his profession clouding her eyes. Now, instead of a devil, he looked more like an angel.

"Thanks, Judas," she said with the glint of a tear in her eyes.

"I believe you've already done that. Thanked me, I mean."

"I'll never be able to thank you enough, especially if all this works out the way we hope it will. You will have saved me from ruin." She looked up at him shyly. "I don't deserve it, Judas. Not after the way I've treated you. I'm very ashamed."

"Tess, don't get the idea I'm anything but exactly what you always thought I was. You called it right. I am a whore. Cheap inside and out. You deserve so much better than I'll ever be." He hesitated, struggling with what he had to tell her. "I hate to tell you this now, but I've got a job tonight. It's something a little different. You know, of course, that most of Wolfe's accounts are of a cosmetic nature such as make up, perfume, hair color, that sort of thing, but Wolfe is venturing into something a little different this time. The woman's name is Cleo

Danby, but she's known as 'Miss Cleo'. Anyway, she's just inherited her father's vineyards, Grapes Devine, out in California. It's a booming business, but the advertising is from the old school. She wants to work from the ground up and put a new and exciting edge to it. It's a bold move, a whole new way of thinking for her company, and she's being very careful who she chooses to handle it. Needless to say, Wolfe is fit to be tied. He wants me to give her carte blanche. Dinner, dancing, Broadway play, the works. I know it's coming at a bad time, but I can't refuse."

"Why? Can't you tell him you're sick? Everyone gets sick once in a while, even...well, you know."

"Tess, not with an account like this hanging in the balance. Besides, I can't do anything that will make him suspicious. The last thing we need is for Wolfe to come snooping around here asking questions. Everything has to stay as normal as possible." He took her hands in his. "Tess, I have to ask you to stay in your room tonight. I've already booked Ms. Danby another suite in the hotel, so hopefully she won't be here all night. Now, I need your cooperation in this. Will you do this for me?"

"It's against my better judgment, but, well...all right."

* * * *

Later that night Tess tried to sleep, but when she couldn't, she gave up, grabbed up a magazine and began flipping through it. She had only gotten a few pages into it when she began to hear sounds coming from the living room. Laughing and tinkling glasses told her that Judas and the Darby woman were there. She sat there listening to the light-hearted banter between them until it finally stopped and a heavy silence took its place. That told her more was going on than just conversation. She crawled from her bed, went to her door, and put her ear up to it, but couldn't hear a thing until she heard voices in the hall, and the sharp click of Judas's bedroom door as it closed.

She turned as a deep sadness slowly crawled up from the pit of her stomach and closed around her heart. She might have wondered before, even guessed, but now she knew. She was in love with Judas. She walked slowly back to her bed while tears crept down her cheeks.

Love was supposed to be a wonderful thing. It should make the birds sing sweeter, and the colors of the world more vivid. If that's what love was, why did she feel like crying?

The answer was simple.

The man she loved belonged to every woman.

As the night wore on, and the darkness got deeper, she finally fell asleep, but something awakened her. What was it? She lunged forward, looking around the dark bedroom. She listened, but all she heard were the sounds of the city. She got up from her bed and walked to her door. Slowly she opened it and looked out into the dark hallway.

She had been there only a moment when she saw something emerge from out of the darkness. She gasped when she saw what looked like a vampire. His red lips matched the red lining of his cape and he had one side slung up over his shoulder. As he came closer, her eyes widened. It was Judas!

"My God, Judas, is that you?"

"My name is Viktor, Lord of the Night."

She watched as he came closer, his large frame filling the small hallway. His long hair was full and dragging his shoulders, his eyes were glittering from some faraway light. His impressive stature, the costume, even his makeup was done so well she felt goosebumps cover her arms and climb up her back. Suddenly she felt like she was in a drafty old castle with cobwebs hanging from the ceiling. When she felt one graze her neck, she jumped and swiped at it.

When he finally loomed before her, he said, "Do not be afraid. I want only to make you happy." He then took her hand and brought it up to his fanged mouth and kissed it.

"Your accent...it's perfect."

“Accent? What accent?”

A chill crawled up her back.

He reached up with his hand and touched her chin. “Your lips look...delicious. The color is the same as the dark wine that flows through your veins.” He then reached down and caressed her neck. “Your pale skin shimmers in the night even more beautiful than the stars that send their light.”

She moved backward. “Judas, why are you doing this?”

“Judas? Who is this...Judas?” he said as he leaned down and touched her neck with his red lips. “I am Viktor.”

She could feel his fangs as they scratched her, and a thrill rose from the pit of her stomach and flamed. “Jud...Viktor,” she whispered, the sound of surrender in her voice.

He slowly began undressing her. When she was completely naked, he leaned down and swept her off her feet and put her on her bed. Instead of laying her down, he leaned her against a mountain of pillows and produced a pair of velvet ties.

When he had her secured, he moved to undress, but she cried out, “No!” Her voice lowered, becoming husky. “I want Viktor.”

In answer to her request, Judas stopped undressing, and in full costume and makeup, came nearer and nearer until he loomed over her.

She was afraid—no, not afraid, excited. The kind of excitement that made her jump inside. What was going to happen? She could feel her cunt pulsing, her body growing restless, her heart thrashing.

“Oh, Viktor. I’ll do any—”

Her words were abruptly cut off with his lips. “I am here to make you happy, Tess...”

“Call me Contessa,” she whispered. “You are Viktor, I am Contessa.”

“Contessa,” he mumbled as his hot, moist breath played upon her face, his lips and tongue delving deep into her mouth. He leaned forward, his fangs subtly scratching along her neck, his body a

delicious heaviness against hers. She'd always had a sensitive neck, and now a spear of electricity quickened her as his hellish vampire mouth made a feast of her body. His hands stroked her, inflaming her, and then she bucked with pleasure when his tongue darted into her ear.

Oh, God, he was making her crazy. His hands were magic. They made her body vibrate with liquid fire. She struggled against the ties, her breath coming fast, her breasts trembling, her belly full of heat that melted into her cunt. His fanged mouth sucked her, his fangs piercing her as if he were trying to extract all of her womanly juices. His bloody, wayward kiss traveled down her body. With every kiss, every suckle, and every touch of his mouth on her body, she could feel the dark danger of his fangs. With every nip or scratch they made, her passion skyrocketed, making her moan and arch her body with desire. Now, with his hands on her breasts and his fanged mouth on the small mound of her belly, she could feel her cunt come alive, reaching, wanting. His lips seared a path from her abdomen to her thighs. Every inch he conquered, her desire surged to new heights. Slowly his hands left her breasts and crept downward, pressing, rubbing, grasping until he reached beneath her and squeezed her butt. She moaned when his hands grasped her, his fingers sending currents of desire through her.

Finally, his tongue reached out and licked her cunt, teasing, reaching, opening her up, little by little until he was touching her clit. She moaned as he played sensitive little games. He tweaked her, sucked her, and when she was at a height of pleasure she couldn't believe, his tongue, stiff and long, thrust into her. She wanted to grind her hips, but his hands held her so firmly she could hardly move. As she struggled, his tongue thrust, and thrust again until she was crazy with delight.

And then when she shattered only once, he withdrew his tongue and climbed her body until he reached her lips. She could smell the exotic, dusky odor of her own sex on his lips. His tongue thrust into

her mouth, and the taste burst upon her tongue as he shared the deep, dark flavor of love with her.

He raised himself up on his knees and lifted her legs, exposing her pussy where he slowly brought her into a new realm of exhilaration. Pleasure mixed with unrest, thrill after thrill spearing through her until she could hardly stand it. Finally, his hands caressed the area around her pussy. Loving it at first, and then he began a gentle spanking. With each and every strike, she could feel a vibration slightly titillating her clit. The thrill speared upward, but never enough. She stretched, reached to attain that satisfaction, but when she didn't make it, she looked forward to the next slap, and the next, and the next until her pussy was red with whippings.

And then Judas fell on her and plunged his cock inside her reddened flesh, thrashing in and out and sending her on a journey of maddening sex. In her excitement, she pulled on the ties, her body bucked, and her legs surrounded him. She wanted to cling, to climb him like a lusty mountain. And then she felt her hands being released. Moving quicker than she ever had, she grasped him, and clung to him like a life saver on a stormy sea. Yes, she was swimming in an erotic ocean being thrashed from one place to another and riding the waves of lust as never before.

Finally, with an exhausted sigh, she felt an explosion—a flood of warm sensations—overtake her. As good as her satisfaction was, it was twice as sweet when she felt Judas jerk and twitch and moan, the gushing of his love mingling with hers.

* * * *

The next morning, Judas lay looking at Tess. As he leaned over her, he watched her breasts heave as she breathed and noticed the outline of her nipples through the silk sheets. Without uncovering them he leaned down and licked, feeling a series of hot, moist thrills pass through him as he lapped.

When she moaned and turned on her side, Judas cuddled up to her back, his hips pushing against her, causing his hard cock to push in between her butt cheeks and rub. As his desire grew, so did his cock until he could barely feel the hair on her pussy tease him. He could feel her cleft parting as if inviting him in from the back. He pushed, lifting her round, little ass as much as he dared without waking her up. Finally, he could feel himself entering, the tip of his cock pressing against her clit.

She came alive.

Her hands grabbed the pillow and squeezed. Her hips pushed back against Judas as he entered her from the back, his cock going deeper and deeper. Tess crouched on her hands and knees while Judas's hands covered her breasts and squeezed.

* * * *

She felt the raging desire within her climb as his fingers squeezed her nipples. Her sleepy moans got louder, her sleepy-eyed, vampish eyes saw clearly as his body bucked behind her. She could feel herself climbing again into the stratosphere of lovely desire where an orgasm taunted her. She reached and bucked, moaned and reached again until at last, like a sex-starved wanton, she felt it break upon her. The warm waves came again and again until her bones were rubber, and she could no longer move.

Judas embraced her, turning her to him and almost consuming her with his hunger. He worked his way between her thighs, his hands squeezing and loving her every place he laid them. She felt his cock enter her again, reviving her to a sexual frenzy. She lifted her legs to his shoulders as he rode her like a bucking bronco. Her lips opened onto his broad, rippling chest, kissing and nibbling him as she clung to him. And then they both stiffened as the waves of an erotic sea broke upon them, time and time again until Tess felt painfully empty of her juices, and laid back in total surrender.

Their limbs twined around each other as they lay twisted up in the sheets, each one falling back into a beautiful, satisfied slumber.

Chapter Fourteen

Judas popped something in his mouth from the room service cart on his way to opening the door when the doorbell rang. "Hey, Reed," Judas exclaimed. "Welcome to my little corner of hell."

Reed stood there for a moment, looking at Judas. "Something's different here."

"What do you mean?" Judas asked.

"You look...I don't know...satisfied." As he took off his coat, he kept looking at Judas as if he were trying to figure it out. "You must have had a job last night after I left. What was it? The beautiful CEO of some company come by and let you take a bite out of her? What did you do, introduce her to...?" His words were interrupted when he saw a beautiful, dark-skinned beauty standing by the bar with a drink in her hand. "Well, who have we here?"

"Reed, this is Liz Ellison. She's the friend of Tess's I told you about." He turned to Liz. "Liz, this is Reed Tanner."

Liz reached out and said, "I'm very happy to meet you, Mr. Tanner."

Reed's eyes scanned Liz's body a moment before he took her hand and kissed it. "Very happy to meet you as well."

"Very continental," Judas mumbled to Reed teasingly.

Judas's gaze jumped to Tess's bedroom door when he heard it open. He smiled when he saw her standing there in a dress of varying shades of blue with spaghetti straps. His eyes immediately became soft with wanting. "Contessa," he said softly. "Reed is here."

"Yes, I thought I heard someone come in. Hello, Mr. Tanner."

"Good evening, Contessa."

"I do wish you'd call me Tess." Her eyes just naturally shifted toward Judas who shared the fact that only he could call her Contessa. After last night, it had become something of a pet name between them.

Judas returned her secret look with a smile and a wink.

As the evening progressed, the three of them were sitting around the fireplace with their drinks, and Reed was sharing with Liz everything they had planned. The conversation seemed to naturally swing toward Wolfe when they began telling Reed about him and his secretary Misty. Everyone was laughing uproariously when the doorbell rang.

Judas frowned at the interruption. "I wonder who that could be." Pulling himself away, he hurried to the door and opened it. On the other side was Parker Wolfe. "Mr. Wolfe," Judas said, the joviality in his voice turning morose. "What are you doing here?"

"Why shouldn't I be here?" he growled as he pushed his way in and handed Judas a large envelope. "A man visits his investments once in a while, doesn't he?" His gaze scanned the guests, and stopped at Liz. "Ms. Ellison, I'm surprised to see you here."

"Since this is Tess's new address, you might see me here quite often."

"You might want to rethink that."

Liz faced him unafraid. "It's after five, Mr. Wolfe. I'm on my own time."

Wolfe looked around at the food and drinks, and then at Reed. "What have I walked into here?"

"A simple little dinner party," Judas gritted out, his dislike for Wolfe showing in the sound of his voice.

After picking up a *hors d'oeuvre* and eating it, Mr. Wolfe looked at Judas. "Where can we talk?"

"The bedroom," Judas said softly as he looked around at the others who were unusually quiet.

"Fine," Wolfe said and then chuckled. You know, of course, that we got the Grapes Devine account. Miss Cleo, my God, she had this wild story about a vampire—"

"Wolfe!" Judas barked. "I believe we agreed to keep this conversation private?"

"Fine," he said and then looked over at the bar. "Got any gin in that bar of yours?"

Judas quickly poured him a glass of gin, handed it to him, and watched as he heaved the glass upward and drank it in one gulp.

Wolfe bared his teeth. "Nothing like gin to give the old ticker a boost."

Judas grabbed the glass from Wolfe's hand and set it down noisily on the counter. "Are you through?"

"What's the matter? You seem agitated."

Without answering, Judas said, "The bedroom's this way." As soon as the door was closed, Judas whirled on Wolfe, and said, "What's the idea of turning Tess Kolby into Southland's own personal whore?"

Wolfe gave an evil sounding laugh. "Pure genius on my part. Besides, she's the best one for the job."

"Yeah? How about your fuckin' secretary? Or is she there just to make *you* happy?"

"What I do with my secretary is none of your business."

"I don't give a damn what you do with your secretary. All I want is for you to give Contessa her job back at the agency. If you don't, I'll walk, and you won't have your little home away from home anymore."

"Look, ordinarily I wouldn't give a rat's ass if you walked or not. There are a million more just like you out there, but the clients happen to like you. You've got the looks, the charm, and the experience. You charmed me along with the entire agency, and now you're charming the clients. You just remember I hold all the cards here. You won't walk 'cause if you do, I'll have the cops after you so fast it'll make your fuckin' head spin."

"You don't scare me, Wolfe. Not anymore. I just now realize how sick you are. Nothing but a snake would put a woman like Contessa in a job like this."

"I didn't put her here. She chose it. It surprised the hell out of me, but she chose it."

"What kind of choice is that? Be ruined or be a whore. I'm warning you, Wolfe. You're digging your own grave here. You can push people just so far before they start fighting back. If you've got an ounce of sense—"

"Enough, dammit! We didn't come in here to talk about Tess." He indicated toward the envelope in Judas's hand. "This is a big one. Ever heard of the co-founders of Mystic Beauty? Claude Trent and Sharon Foster. The only twist is they're both gay. She wants Tess, and he wants you. They'll be here Friday, but they'll spend part of the time settling in their room and then visiting the agency which means they won't show up here until it's time to go to dinner. If they have a good time, they may turn it in to a weekend gig. I don't need to tell you Southland's future is set if we make these two happy. Do it or else."

"I told you, I'm not gay."

"So pretend, dammit! For this kind of money, it'll be worth it."

Judas hesitated for a moment and then said, "Sure, we'll make your clients happy, but you just remember...you asked for it."

"I asked for it? What the hell does that mean?"

"You'll find out soon enough." Judas opened the bedroom door and indicated that Wolfe go before him. "Now, I'd appreciate it if you'd leave. I'm having a dinner party, and you're not invited."

"Hrump!" Wolfe grunted as he left the bedroom and hurried through the living area without saying a word. He left with a jarring slam of the door.

"Whoa," Reed said. "What did you say to him to get him that hot?"

"Never mind that," Judas said worriedly. "Reed, we'll have to do it this weekend. Can you get everything ready by that time?"

"Why?" Reed asked.

Judas looked at Tess. "Because this little fiasco is Tess's first job." He saw Tess's face become pale with fear as he continued. "She's gay, and wants a woman for the night, or the weekend if everything goes all right."

"Oh, God," Tess breathed as she looked at Judas with fear.

"It won't happen, Tess," he whispered. "I won't let it, I promise." Finally his gaze shifted to the others. "If we can pull this off, it'll be ideal. We'll have witnesses."

The rest of the evening was spent in planning each and every incident. "When are they due in?" Reed asked.

"Friday, around seven."

"Tess," Reed said, "when you guys get back from dinner, you'll develop a headache and have to go to your room to lie down before the fun starts. Judas, you do whatever you have to do to keep them away from Tess. That night, just before the fun..." Reed paused for a moment, and then said, "Hey, I've got a great idea. Why don't we have a dress rehearsal tomorrow night? It'll be like putting on a play. I'll come by early enough that I can go over your parts with you, and then we'll go into action." His gaze jumped from one to the other. "Agreed?"

Judas gave a slight shrug. "It's fine with me. You girls okay with that?"

"Liz?" Tess asked, and Liz said, "Sure."

"Great," Reed said as he grabbed up his coat. "How about tomorrow night around six. Not too early is it?"

"Not at all," Judas said as he walked Reed to the door.

"Hey," Reed said. "No more room service tomorrow night. I'll bring Chinese." He looked at the other two. "Everybody like Chinese?"

"I love Chinese," Liz said with a big smile on her face.

"Say, Liz," Reed began, "you leaving now? I mean, I could take you home, if that's okay."

"Yeah, that would be great." She grabbed her coat and purse, looked back at Tess, and said, "Tomorrow night at six."

The minute the door closed, Judas looked at Tess and laughed. "He didn't even ask where she lived. She could be living on the moon for all he knows." Judas raised his eyebrows suggestively. "I think Reed is smitten."

Tess got up, approached Judas, and played with his tie shyly. "Too bad someone else around here isn't smitten."

"If you think I'm not smitten, Ms. Kolby, you haven't been paying attention."

She turned around and leaned her back against Judas and looked at the balcony. "You know, that's the most beautiful balcony I've ever seen."

"Really?" he said as he slid one of her spaghetti straps off and kissed her shoulder. "What's so fascinating about it?"

"It turns me on. I mean, it's not just a regular, every day balcony. It has style. It says, 'make love on me.' Can't you hear it?"

"No, my mad little girl, I don't hear it. I think the first thing we're going to have to do once this is all over is get you a therapist. But until that day comes, I suppose I'll just have to humor you." He touched her nose teasingly and said, "You stay here. I'll be right back."

* * * *

Tess wandered out on the balcony, looked up at a sky full of stars, and realized for the first time that in one short week, her life had radically changed. The odd thing was, she wasn't sorry. A whipping wind pushed against her and made her feel a bit chilled. Just then, she felt the deep pile of a very expensive blanket being wrapped around her and a smooth, whiskey-like voice whispering in her ear.

"Why would two perfectly sane people make love on a cold balcony when they have a warm, inviting bed inside?"

Tess smiled, feeling the warmth of the blanket and the love of Judas surrounding her. "I think they call it kinky."

"You want kinky, do you?" Judas said, throwing the blanket down on the tiled floor. He gave a few jerks of her dress, and threw it aside. The only thing she was left wearing were her garter belt, hose and bra.

Her eyes were wide as she watched Judas tie her wrists, and then secure her at the waist to something that looked like a lattice. Her wrists were high above her head, her feet barely touching the floor. He reached up and tore at her bra and her panties, flinging the soft lace to the floor. And then he knelt before her, nibbling on her belly, and the inside of her milky white thighs. She arched her body while calling out his name in moans. His teeth continued to nibble at her soft flesh, tasting the lovely elixir that coated his tongue.

* * * *

He couldn't get enough. He wanted more and more of her, so he reached around her and squeezed her firm little ass, and pulled it so close to his face he could smell her flowery fragrance.

Their passion reached such heights that she climbed him, laying her legs over his shoulders as his tongue played along the lips of her pussy, teasing and sucking until she began to writhe with desire. Opening her slightly, he slipped his tongue in and flicked it around until she was almost crazy with need. The heat that radiated from her pussy almost singed his skin, his tongue surrounded by the moist warmth of her cunt. He could feel his cock rising with want.

"Oh, Judas, I want it so. Make me come over and over again."

His tongue played, it flicked, it plunged over and over again as Tess struggled at the restraints. He was taking her higher and higher, his tongue a magic wand of lust as it held her bound. When she was almost at the summit, Judas loosed her ties, and they slowly sank to the tiled floor of the balcony, the cool wind whipping about them as the blanket surrounded them. Inside the coiled up blanket, the flames

of passion leapt and burned between them. Judas caressed her lovingly, the heat of his breath blowing softly upon her skin as his lips kissed her face and then her neck. Each moment he loved her was better than the last.

"Take me, Judas," she whispered. "I want to feel you inside me."

* * * *

Judas made a feast of her neck and breasts as he took her hand and led it downward to his cock. Surprisingly, he didn't have to coax her. She grasped it, and rubbed it lovingly.

"Push it in, Contessa."

The next thing he felt was the hot tip of his cock being surrounded by her cunt like a warm, moist glove. Inside her velvety softness, she was pulsing, her juices flowing. Her cunt was almost breathing with life as she urged her hips upward to get all of him inside her.

"Oh, God, Contessa," he murmured as he lifted her legs even higher and began a wild ride. He felt himself plunging to the very depth of her soul. He knew she was his as the two of them rode wave upon wave of sexual delight. She clung to him, her passion growing, her knees reaching higher and higher, her hips pushing, pushing, pushing, her breath coming fast and hard as she breathed words of love into his ear that actually brought tears to his eyes.

* * * *

Tess screamed when a flood of sensations burst upon her, leading her up into a starry wonderland that she realized was the sky twinkling above her. She finally wilted, feeling Judas grab her and stiffen. She could feel his juices spew out of him like a lusty fountain and then relax.

They lay there for a while, and when the wind became colder, she felt Judas pick her up and take her into the penthouse with the blanket wrapped around her, her head on his shoulder.

Chapter Fifteen

The night of the murder

"Judas," Sharon said. "Tess is feeling all right, isn't she? Her headache earlier seemed really bad. I hope she's okay."

"Oh, sure. She's just excited about your visit. I'm sure she'll be in soon." He indicated her glass. "Can I freshen your drink?"

"Thank you," she said as she handed it to him. "I'm very impressed with Tess. She's a real beauty, isn't she? Wolfe said some really great things about her."

"Really?" Judas said curiously. "Just what did Wolfe say?"

"Oh, he says she's..." Her words stopped abruptly, and she was silent for a moment. She turned her head toward Tess's suite and cocked her head as if she were listening for something. Finally she turned to Judas and said, "Did you hear that? I'm sure I heard a scream."

"No, I didn't hear a thing." He turned to Claude. "Claude, did you hear anything?"

"I'm not sure. There was something, although I'm not sure it was a scream. It sounded more like..." His words were interrupted by the sounds of a struggle.

Sharon turned to Judas. "What was that? Do you think someone should go and see about her?"

"I'm sure she's all right...I..." His words stopped abruptly when he heard something fall—like heavy furniture being knocked over.

"Oh, my God," Sharon whispered. "Judas, you need to see about her."

Judas put his drink down and started toward the door. "Tess," he called out, but was stopped by other sounds—strange sounds—unidentifiable sounds that trigger the imagination. A door opened and closed, and then they heard a muffled sound in the hall. It sounded like something heavy was being pulled along the carpet.

"What the hell is that?" Sharon said, and ran toward the front door. Just when she threw it open, the elevator doors came to a close. In the center of the hall, the thick nap of the carpet had been crushed, as if something heavy had been pulled across it. She whirled around. "Judas, something's going on, and if you're not going to find out what, then I will." She quickly ran toward Tess's suite door and threw it open.

There was blood everywhere!

Sharon screamed.

Furniture was turned over, broken knickknacks lay everywhere, and a mirror held someone's hand print in blood. "Claude!" she screamed as she stood there transfixed, unable to move.

Claude went running and looked in with Judas peering over his shoulder. "Oh, my God! Judas, call the cops!" He disappeared inside and looked around. "There's no body here. That must have been the sound we heard in the hall. I think someone must have been dragging her body out!"

Judas grabbed the phone and called 911, his voice raised in panic. "There's been a murder! Send the cops to the Mandalay Towers, the penthouse!"

In only minutes, Judas heard sirens screaming from far away. He ran to his bedroom and looked out the window. There he saw squad cars, unmarked cars, and an ambulance bumping up into the parking lot, followed by media vans with their logos emblazoned on the side. Within minutes, the penthouse was crawling with uniformed cops, and a granite-faced man dressed in a trench coat. There were voices yelling, people pushing, shoving, no one listening to the orders given by those who were trying to bring order into chaos. Judas knew this

moment would come, and began sweating. As his gaze jumped around to make sure no one was watching him, he slowly backed up into a corner, leaving Sharon and Trent to talk to them. Thinking they could answer their questions as well as he could, he carefully backed up into the darkness of his bedroom and closed the door. He looked around for a place to hide, and quickly ran to his closet where he hid behind his mountain of clothes. He had purposely put himself in danger, but he would do it again in a minute to help Tess. All he needed was to get through this night without being recognized.

* * * *

Word went out all over the agency that Tess had been killed. Detectives had gathered hair samples, made a blood match, and took statements from those at the crime scene. This took them to the Southland Agency where they began questioning the employees. The volatile relationship between Tess and Wolfe came out, taking them a little closer to naming Wolfe the killer. With every passing day, they got closer and closer until they had everything they needed to make an arrest. Taking only enough time to pass it before a judge and get a warrant, they finally burst into Wolfe's office for the arrest.

Misty and Wolfe jumped apart, Misty running to a corner, trying to hide herself. "What the hell is this?" Wolfe yelled. "Can't a man have a little privacy?"

The detective grabbed Wolfe, turned him around, and put cuffs on him. "I'm arresting you for the murder of Contessa Kolby. You have the right to remain silent. If you give up that right..."

"Misty, call my lawyer!"

She nodded in answer. While putting on her clothes, she followed Wolfe, trying to stay in the background as he was led out. She melted into the crowd, everyone stretching their necks to see as they swarmed through the halls. Finally, the crowd spilled out into the

agency's lobby under the sound of Wolfe yelling out his innocence and threatening to sue the entire police force.

* * * *

As he sat in the interrogation room, he leaned his head down, combing his hair with his fingers until he looked up at the squinty-eyed little creep that kept asking him the same questions over and over again.

"Look, what the hell do I have to say to convince you? I never laid a hand on the bitch. I will admit that we weren't the best of friends, but damn, I wouldn't kill her. Sure, I might try to make her a little uncomfortable, but murder? My God!"

"We searched your house, Wolfe." The man leaned toward Wolfe, his squinty eyes sparkling like a snake. "We found plenty."

"Look, I told you before, that stuff must've been planted there. It's the only way it could've got there. Don't you understand? Someone's tryin' to frame me! I did not kill Tess Kolby!"

"I'm not asking you *if* you killed her. We already know the answer to that. What I want from you is where the body is. I want you to tell me the whole story from beginning to end. First of all, who was Tess Kolby to you?"

"She was just an employee of mine."

"Yeah? How did she come to live at the Mandalay Towers?"

A tiny spear of fear spread through Wolfe. "How do I know? She liked it there, I guess."

The man angled a suspicious look at Wolfe. "Who's Judas? Is he another employee that likes to live at the Mandalay Towers? What the hell do you pay your people that they can afford to live at the best hotel in New York?"

"Look, after five, they can do anything they want...live anywhere they want. How they pay their hotel bill is their business, not mine."

"What does Judas do at Southland?"

Wolfe fidgeted. "He's a...he's a..."

"Come on, spit it out, Wolfe."

"He's a...secretary. We prefer to call them administrative assistants."

The man snorted. "A secretary? A *male* secretary?"

"So what's wrong with that? We don't discriminate. As long as they can do the job, we don't care if the secretary is male or female."

"Has anybody questioned this...Judas? This...*male* secretary?" He snorted again. "You know, I can just picture him."

"Picture him? What do you mean?"

"I mean he'll probably be the bookish type. You know, wire-rimmed glasses, a slight build..." The interrogator thoughtfully rubbed his chin. "The only thing is, I can't see this kind of man living in the plush surroundings of the Mandalay Towers. That is, unless he's the preppy type." He looked at Wolfe. "Is that it? Is he a preppy?"

"I don't know what the hell a preppy is."

"You know. Went to Harvard or Yale. Uses big words no one has ever heard of. Sprinkles his speech with French-sounding words. A real pain in the butt. That's a preppy."

Wolfe snickered. "Nah, this guy barely finished high school." He paused, picturing Judas in his mind. "Looks good in a suit, though."

Chapter Sixteen

BLOODY BEDROOM BRAWL ENDED IN DEATH!

*Parker Wolfe, CEO and founder of Southland Advertising Agency,
suspected in the slaying of former employee, Contessa Kolby*

The paper fell from his hands. Murder. That would mean a good, long stay in the big house. It might even mean death row. Did he dare chance it? He wanted to go back. He wanted to be surrounded by those cement walls again. Out of the cold, the weather. He wanted to curl up in his bunk and not have to think about a friggin' thing, but he didn't want to die. He walked to the dirty window of his slummish, one-room hovel and looked out into a city swarming with people that wouldn't give him the time of day. All he needed was a job, but would anyone give him one? Hell no.

At first, being locked up drove him crazy, but after a while, he got into a routine. He had a nice, dry cell, a job he did eight hours a day, and a place to come back to. He did things. Entertained himself. And then the day came when he'd served his time, and they kicked him out. It was great at first. He figured he'd pick right up where he left off, but it didn't happen that way. Going into this new world was like going into a different country. He didn't speak the language anymore. Nothing was the same. Where the hell was his gang?

He needed money, but he couldn't find a job. He ended up on the street until he found this little empty hovel with one window that looked out onto a street where all he could see were people's feet. They walked for miles it seemed. Going to, coming from, crossing the

street, hailing a taxi. Life was going on out there, but inside this tiny, little water-stained hovel, he was dying. Did they care? Hell, no.

The truth was, he couldn't make it outside the joint. He wanted his nice, dry cell back, and three squares a day. He didn't have to worry about work there, or lying through his teeth just so he could take home a meager salary that wouldn't feed a tiny baby, much less a grown man. They'd give him a job he could do for eight hours and then he'd come back and putter around his cell until lights out. They wouldn't have a problem with him. He'd be the perfect prisoner. He looked down at the headlines again. Someone was accused of murder. God, he almost wished it was him. My God, was that jealousy he felt eating him up inside? Did he envy the poor sap who was getting blamed for this murder? It would mean a nice, dry cell...

It could be me, he thought as he walked over to a dim, broken mirror and looked at himself. Danny Quinn, Red Turner, Turk Diamond, take your pick. He was a career criminal with more names than a telephone book. He stared at his stringy brown hair, his dull, listless brown eyes, and his face that blended in with the crappy wallpaper and knew it was no use. With this face, he was trying to get along in a world full of hot shots, a world full of pretty faces and con men. He'd been out of touch so long he simply didn't fit in anymore. He picked up the paper and looked at it one more time to boost his courage—and knew it was now or never. Before he changed his mind, he threw down the paper, quickly slammed out, and made his way down to the nearest police precinct. He had to try.

* * * *

Danny Quinn, two-bit criminal, small in stature, and a little dirty and ragged, stepped into the twenty-fifth precinct of the New York City Police Department looking a little lost. His gaze darted around, taking in the hustle and bustle of uniforms. He was sensitive to the smell of sweat and pencil lead and the scraping of old shoe leather on

cracked tile. He heard raised voices trying to be heard over ringing phones as they asked question after question to those sitting at their desks. The forms flew from one in-box to another until they finally made it up to the captain who assigned the duty.

He felt like he'd come home as he made his way up to a sort of booth where he knew the desk sergeant sat. He stood there for a moment looking at the door he knew would lead to the holding cells.

"Can I help you with something?" the frowning sergeant asked.

Danny turned, and with a deeply drawn breath, he said, "My name is Danny Quinn, and I-I, uh, killed Contessa Kolby."

Chapter Seventeen

The word spread around the city like a virus. Someone had confessed to the murder of Tess Kolby. Danny, being a career criminal, had all the answers. First of all, he'd read all the accounts of the murder, and what he didn't know, he could think up on his own.

The questions came fast and furious.

"Why did you do it?"

"How did you know her?"

"How the hell were you able to sneak into the Mandalay?"

For the first time, he was glad about his record, his experience. They couldn't shoot a question at him that he couldn't answer—that is, until they finally asked him the key question—where was the body? That's when he clammed up. How the hell did he know where the body was? He'd have to stay quiet until he could think up something. In the meantime he remembered another murder he'd read about once similar to this one, so he looked the interrogator in the eyes and said, "You'll never find her! Know why? Because I cut her body up in little pieces and spread it from here to Kalamazoo! I hated the bitch! Every strand of hair, every fingernail. Even her friggin cunt!"

"Yeah? How did you know her?"

"We met in a...club...yeah, that's it. In a club. She shot me down, the bitch." A cunning half-smile lifted his thin lips. "Well, I showed her, didn't I? She won't never do that no more, will she?"

When they asked him why he had come forward and confessed, he told them he couldn't sit by and let someone else take the rap for something he'd done.

"After all, I ain't no animal. I planted the stuff to make it look like Wolfe did it, but as soon as I did, I started feelin' bad about it, ya know? Jeez," he said, looking innocently at the interrogator, "what a time to find out I got a conscience, know what I mean?"

"Yeah? So how'd you know Wolfe? Did you work for him? Meet him somewhere?"

"No," Danny said. "The bitch, she told me. Said he was a fuckin' bastard. I figure he ain't as bad as she said, so I decided to come clean and confess. I'll take my punishment."

He knew what they wanted to hear, so he continued painting a picture of guilt and remorse until the steel cuffs fell off Parker Wolfe, and Danny Quinn was taken into custody. Danny was feeling no pain because he finally had his cell back. It might have been a little different, but it was just temporary, at least until he made it back into the big house.

* * * *

It was somewhere around midnight when Tess and Judas were out on the balcony enjoying the city lights in their skimpy night clothes.

"They say this is the city that never sleeps," Tess said as she laid her head on Judas's shoulder.

"It's true, you know. That's one thing I love about it. You can look out any time of night and see the lights of the clubs blinking, taxis taking sleepy passengers home, and the picturesque carriages still clip-clopping along on their route through Central Park. I'll be glad when..."

His words faded when the doorbell rang. The sound was jarring and sudden.

"Who the hell could that be?" Judas mumbled as he quickly threw on a robe and started for the door.

Tess had just made it to her bedroom to hide, and was peering around the door watching when she gasped, her hand covering her mouth.

Standing there with a dark smile and glittering dark eyes, was—Wolfe! "Well, well, well," he said as he looked beyond Judas to Tess. "Nice robe."

Tess suddenly felt her nakedness showing, and began pulling on the robe she had haphazardly thrown over her shoulders.

"You're supposed to be in jail," Judas said.

"Yeah, I know. Some creep came in and confessed, so they let me go. Some luck, huh?" He looked over at Tess. "You know, you look remarkably well for someone who's supposed to be dead."

"Wolfe..." Judas began.

"Shut up, crud!" Wolfe commanded. "I'll take care of you later. Right now, I'm more interested in the lovely Ms. Kolby here." Quick as lightning, he pulled out a gun and pointed it at her. "You know, I'm in a dream situation here. I could kill the fuckin' daylights out of you, and no one would ever know it. You know why? Simple. Because you're already dead." He began laughing insanely. "I don't know why the hell you did this to me, but I don't really care. I only know one thing. Once I pull this trigger, I'll be rid of your high and mighty attitude for good."

"How did you know she was still alive?"

He looked at Judas as if he had asked a stupid question. "I got people, that's how I knew."

"People?"

"Yeah, people. People that see things. They creep around and hide. They take pictures..."

"But we haven't been out of the apartment. How—?"

"You think I'm some jerk? I hire only the best. They could hide in a friggin' mouse hole if they had to. They got their ways. I don't ask how, I just look for results."

"But if you knew she was alive, why didn't you tell the police?"

"What, and hang myself twice? They're already suspicious about what goes on here. If they found out about you, and the pictures I been takin', they'd want to know every detail, and I'd have to tell them. Don't you know that taking pictures like this is an invasion of privacy? Jeez, what a dummy."

Wolfe began laughing. "Oh, I got a doozy of a video of you and this one fuckin' like sixty. I had intended to put it on a website, but since you'll both be dead, you'll be beyond carin', so it won't be much fun. Actually, I don't know which would be more fun, lettin' you live so you could be humiliated, or killin' your sorry ass." He scratched his head. "Decisions, decisions." Suddenly, his laughter stopped, and he pierced them with a deadly gaze. "I decided dead is the way to go on this one."

"All right, so we're both dead," Judas said. "Maybe you won't be prosecuted for Contessa's death, but what about me? They'll throw away the key."

"Not if I do it right, they won't. Besides, who the hell cares about a fuckin' whore?"

"That's right. The truth will come out. They'll find out what you've been running here. The only way to keep it under wraps is to let us live." Judas kept talking, the look on Wolfe's face telling him that he was actually listening. "We'll go away," Judas continued. "You'll never see or hear from us again. All I ask is that you give us a fair shake."

"Like you gave me," Wolfe said, sarcastically.

Judas looked down at himself. "Look, I'm a little chilly here, and I'm sure Contessa is, too. Let us get dressed, okay? Then you and I, we'll sit down and talk about this."

"Like old friends, right?" Wolfe snorted. "I'm holdin' a gun on you, and you want to sit down and talk like old friends? Whoa! What's wrong with this picture?"

"Wolfe, we've got a problem here. All right, so we're not friends, but who says two sensible men like us can't sit down and figure out

how to solve it, right?" He indicated to the bar. "Go ahead, fix yourself a drink. I'll just be a minute."

Wolfe looked at him suspiciously. "If this is a trick—"

"Hey, you're the one with the gun."

"Yeah. If I were you, I'd remember that."

The minute Judas got Tess into the bedroom, he grabbed her, sat her down, and looked right in her eyes. "Contessa, listen to me, and do everything I say. While I'm talking to Wolfe, go into the broom closet and turn off the lights, and then while Wolfe and I are stumbling around, slip out the door and go for help."

"But...what will they do when they find out about all this? Won't I go to jail?" Suddenly she became frightened. "And what about you? Judas, they'll take you away!"

"We can't worry about that now, Contessa. Keep in mind that we're the victims here, and we've got a story to tell. Besides, when they hear about why we did it, I'm hoping the enormity of it will cover a lot of sins. Besides, when it all comes out, you'll be a hero to a lot of people."

"But what'll you do? The darkness. You won't be able to see."

"Neither will Wolfe. I know the apartment, and I can get out, but he doesn't. By the time he gets through stumbling over things, I'll be out on the building's ledge."

"The ledge? What are you going to do out there?"

"I'm going out on the crosswalk between the buildings. I have a plan to lure him out there, and if my plan works, it's goodbye Wolfe."

"But that crosswalk is...well, it's kind of narrow...and high."

"Yeah, and Wolfe is afraid of heights. Get the picture?"

"Judas, I don't know what your plan is, but it scares me."

"Contessa, trust me. I know what I'm doing."

"Hey!" Wolfe shouted. "What the hell's goin' on in there?"

"I've gotta go. Do what I said, Contessa. Okay?"

"Okay," she said, giving him a half-hearted nod.

After he slipped into his trousers and a sweater, he hurried back out to Wolfe.

Wolfe looked around. "Where's Tess?"

"She's in the bathroom. You know, putting on makeup...that sort of thing. She'll be right—"

Suddenly, the lights went off, and Judas jumped up, leaving Wolfe to fend for himself.

* * * *

The apartment was as dark as sin.

"What the hell...?" Wolfe said. "What happened?" He looked around, his eyes squinting. It gave him an eerie feel. It seemed that the darkness was hollow. No one there. "Judas!" he called out. "Tess?" And then it dawned on him that he was the only one in the room. "Damn!" he shouted, getting panicky. Grabbing his gun, he pointed it and began firing. Small bursts of flame and smoke leapt from his gun barrel. With every shot he fired, lamps fell and broke, glasses and bottles on the bar shattered. Going a little mad, he kept firing until his gun was empty. When he realized it, he threw it toward a wall that happened to be the fireplace. "You goddamned fuckin' son of a bitch, where are you? If you think you're gonna get away from me, you're wrong. I'll find you, and I'll kill your sorry ass. By the time I get through with you, there won't be enough left to feed to my dog! Got that?" He looked around in the dark. "Did you fuckin' hear me?"

The silence hung heavy in the room. Slowly, Wolfe began feeling his way through the apartment until he got to Judas's bedroom. The city lights from outside didn't give him much light, but he managed to see a little. As he looked around the room, he saw all kinds of equipment, big and small shapes that in the shadows looked like monsters lurking in every corner. He pushed past them, looking for Judas, when suddenly he heard something.

"Wolfe!"

He turned to where the voice was coming from and saw the wide bay window. Lights from the street streamed upward, covering the sides of the building with blinking brightness. He didn't want to go to the window. It was high, and he was afraid of heights. But the voice kept calling him.

"Wolfe!"

He edged toward the window, wanting to look out, but was terrified of what he would see. And then he saw movement. It was like a siren song to him. He had to see who and what it was, so he kept edging toward the window. His eyes widened when he saw Judas out on the narrow cat walk over the Mandalay's courtyard. He was holding onto to the rail that seemed weak in the buffeting wind.

"You know what you are, Wolfe?" the small, taunting voice said. "You're a tiny little bug in the great big metropolis—a little fish in a big pond, and you'll never be anything more."

Wolfe began sweating.

"You want to walk with the big guys, don't you? The ones in this big, dark city you call Gotham, but underneath you know you'll never be a part of it. You know why? You're a loser, Wolfe."

"Damned son of a bitch," Wolfe said through clenched teeth.

"The men in the dark suits and bright ties won't even give you the time of day. When you push your weight around, it's not intimidating, it's a joke, and everyone's laughing at you. You're a small time hood that won't ever hit the big time."

"It's not true, you smart ass!" Wolfe yelled. "You'll see. I'll get there, and bums like you will bow down to me. You'll see!"

"Bow down?" Judas laughed. "Why don't you show me how tough you are, Wolfe. Come on out here where I am. If you can do that, then I'll just have to change my opinion of you."

"C-Come out there? But..." Wolfe looked down and quickly squeezed his eyes shut, and fell back against the wall. "I-I c-can't."

"I thought so," Judas said. "I guess I was right all along." Judas's words became mean and nasty. "You're a coward, Wolfe. No damned balls at all. Even less of a man than I thought."

"Just wait 'til I get my hands on you. I'll—"

"You'll what? Kill me? I doubt you got it in you, Wolfe. It takes guts to do something like that, just like it takes guts to crawl out here and face me."

Wolfe began sweating. What was he going to do? He looked around. Someone was missing. Tess. Where was she? He pushed himself away from the wall and ran to the living area, the other bedroom, but she was nowhere to be found. With a gasp in his throat, he almost choked when he heard Judas yelling from the crosswalk and made his way back to his bedroom.

"You want to kill me, Wolfe? You'll have to come out here to do it. I can leave this catwalk anytime I please. You see, I'm not afraid of heights, and I can get over to the other side."

Determination rose like an angry stallion inside him. Tess might be gone, but he was determined that Judas wouldn't get away from him, so he slowly began to climb.

Chapter Eighteen

As Judas struggled in the wind, he watched as Wolfe fought to overcome his fear and climb out the window. Each step seemed to take a million minutes crowded into one. With sweat creeping down his face, he grunted and groaned as he slowly made his way to the ledge. Judas held fast to the weak rail as he felt his body being pushed by the strong, violent wind. He watched as Wolfe trembled visibly, and could only wonder at the hate he must feel—the driving force that made Wolfe cast aside his fear of heights, and replace it with an insane determination to kill him.

He was like an animal.

And then Wolfe stopped. Judas watched him closely. Had he given up? Did he decide he couldn't do it? "You'll never make it, Wolfe," Judas taunted. "What'll the big guys think when you turn tail and run?" He hesitated, his voice getting more urgent. "But what would they think if they saw you face me down in the middle of this catwalk, huh? Quite a man, they'd say. How did we overlook him? The next thing you know, you'd be giving the orders, right?"

* * * *

Wolfe only saw Judas. He didn't know that down below, revolving lights, sirens, and a crowd had gathered. With each step that Wolfe took toward Judas, Judas took a step backward until Wolfe was standing in the middle of the catwalk.

"Wolfe!" Judas called out. "Look down!"

Instinctively, Wolfe looked down and saw a street full of people, and revolving lights. It unbalanced him. He could hear voices coming through a megaphone but couldn't understand what they were saying. The buildings stretched upward to an alarming proportion. He felt dizzy, frightened. He looked back toward Judas and saw him standing perfectly still on the ledge of the opposite building. Slowly, he turned. When he saw the window he came out of, a chill danced up his spine. It was closed. Who was that—oh my God, he could see someone through the glass locking the window so he couldn't get back in. He had no choice. He had to go toward Judas, to try and—

But when he looked again, Judas wasn't there.

He saw closed windows everywhere.

No way to get back in.

He was alone with only a narrow catwalk that now seemed to be swinging. Was it real or was it his imagination? Suddenly, everything went black, and he felt himself falling. Down, down, down, a ribbon of windows rushing past, the sides of the building, the wind pushing at his back, his hands and legs flailing until he finally hit...

He awoke, finding himself on a hospital gurney that was rushing through the people to get to the ambulance. He lifted his head and looked around. He felt his chest, his head, his arms. He was alive. He'd been rescued. He looked up at the medical attendant. "What happened?"

"Well, if it hadn't been for your friends, you'd be a greasy spot on the concrete right now."

"My friends?"

"Yeah, the guy...I think his name is Judas and the lady with him, I didn't catch her name. Anyway, they led the team up to the catwalk where you were hangin' on for dear life."

He remembered seeing Tess at the window and realized she was opening it instead of closing it.

The attendant frowned. "What the hell were you doin' out there? The way that wind was blowin', I'm surprised it didn't blow you off that thing."

"I guess I went a little nuts," Wolfe said softly.

As he lay there, he noticed he didn't feel anything. The deep hatred he'd felt for Judas and Tess seemed to be gone, and a strange numbness replaced it. What had killed it? The fact that they helped save him? No, he didn't think so. As the strange events of the night shuffled through his mind once again, he wondered if any of it had actually happened. Had he actually gone out on that catwalk when he had an insane fear of heights or had he just imagined it? He couldn't see himself doing anything that crazy. He did remember the threats he threw at them and the determination to kill them, but after it was all over, he was actually the one who died, or at least that part of him anyway.

Buried under six feet of numbness, never to be seen again.

* * * *

Judas and Tess sat among all the confusion with blankets wrapped around them, talking. "I hear Reed and Liz are an item now."

Judas smiled. "Yeah. Well, I'm happy for them."

"Me too," Tess said then looked closely at Judas. "So...why didn't you do it?"

"Do what?" he said as he turned and looked at her.

"You didn't have to save him, you know. A few more minutes out on that catwalk and he would have gone over the edge just like we planned. No one would have ever known."

He looked at her, a certain sadness in his eyes. "I would have known."

She shook her head. "And they call me squeaky clean."

"Good grief, Tess, that's murder. I couldn't do that. Besides, I felt sorry for the guy. Hell of a time to find out what a wimp I am."

"A wimp? Judas, you're hardly a wimp. The only thing wrong with you is, you're a good guy, and good guys—"

"—finish last. I know."

"No, not at all. You're sane, Judas. You got your head on straight, that's all. You should be proud, actually." She squeezed his arm. "In case you're wondering, I'm glad to see this side of you. I wouldn't have you any other way."

Judas smiled. "Well, that's something, anyway."

She hesitated, angling a look at him. "You know, I've been thinking."

"Yeah? About what?"

"What happens now? I mean, now that it's all over."

"Well, don't laugh, but I've been thinking about what Reed said."

"Oh? What was that?"

"He told me I should take some business courses. They teach those subjects at night school, don't they?"

"Sure."

"Well," he said as he looked at her hopefully. "I figured I could work during the day and spend my evenings learning how to run a business. How does that sound?"

"Why would I laugh? I think it's a great idea."

"I clearly can't go back to my old profession, and I have to do something."

"Well, we still have the agency to consider."

"The agency? Tess, darling," Judas said patiently, "to hell with the agency. We don't work there anymore. I mean, we tried to kill the owner for God's sake. Don't you think they might frown on that?"

"Judas, I know we won't be made Employee of the Month, but looking at this realistically, we don't know what's going to happen to Wolfe yet, and in the meantime, the agency is just sitting there. Now, if we don't want some big conglomerate to come in and take over, we have to appoint someone to run things until Wolfe gets back."

"I guess you're right," Judas agreed. "Well, if someone has to take over the helm until all this is over, I can't think of anyone better qualified than you."

"Me?"

"Sure. Clean up the place. Run it like it should be run. By the time Wolfe gets back—" He hesitated. "Well, who knows what he'll do, but he can't be anything but grateful when he considers the alternative."

As she looked at him, she shook her head. "You are amazing."

"Thanks. That's usually the reaction I get from women."

She hit him. "Oh, you."

"So you'll do it? I mean, run the place for Wolfe?"

"I'm not as nice as you, and for two cents, I'd..." Her words faded when she saw the pleading look in his eyes. "Oh, all right."

He looked at her with a mischievous grin on his face. "You've just been named CEO of Southland Advertising Agency. How does it feel?"

"Not bad at all," she answered, and looked at Judas with a teasing gaze. "You know, of course, that I'll be needing a secretary—"

"Say no more, I'll get right on it."

"That's not necessary. I happened to see this guy down on the corner—"

"Not on your life."

Tess laughed. "Not quite that nice, huh?"

"Let's just say I know where to draw the line."

"You also know how to make the boss happy," she said seductively. "Report tomorrow at eight, or—"

"Can't do that," he said, giving her a quick peck on the lips. "You may be the CEO, but I've just appointed myself the Chairman of the Board."

"All right, Mr. Chairman, I think the first order of business is—"

Suddenly her words were stopped with his kiss. "You know what? You talk too much."

As she melted against him, she suddenly heard a sound that was so out of place in this city of concrete and steel, she could hardly believe she'd heard it. "Listen," she said, looking at Judas.

"What?" he asked, and looked around at all the confusion.

"It's a bird," she answered.

Just then both of them turned and saw a small tree that seemed to grow out of the asphalt, and within its branches was an innocent little bird that still had a song in its heart. Did it mean that Spring was right around the corner, or was it the sound that Tess had been searching for all her life...the sound of love.

THE END

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Audrey Godwin is fast becoming the hottest writer of erotic romance in decades. Her style is both unusual and daring, her books the most controversial in ebook history. She writes horror and suspense and has been compared to Ann Rice in her lush descriptive phrases and Jackie Collins in her daring sexual exploits. While keeping company with the best, she pushes sexual boundaries to the limit and beyond, and reaps the rewards. If you dare to read her books, remember... *the hotter the sex—the sharper the blade!*

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