

A close-up, intimate portrait of a woman with short, wavy, reddish-brown hair and striking green eyes. She is looking directly at the camera with a slight, enigmatic smile. She has dark red lipstick on. A man's face is partially visible on the right side of the frame, leaning in towards her. She is wearing a dark red, feathered garment. The background is dark and out of focus.

*Nia Little*

*The  
Wicked Waltz*



# **The Wicked Waltz**

**Nia Little**

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## Chapter One

Maggie Pearce wore her black velvet dress, the one that clung a bit and swung a bit, hoping against hope that her husband might, just might, ask her to dance after dinner. After all, they were going with his buddy and said friend's newest Young Thing, as well as the usual golf friends and their wives. Surely the Young Thing will want to dance? And maybe if said Husband drank enough? Maggie sighed in hopeless resignation. No, he couldn't drink enough to want to dance with her. He'd pass out first. Why did she still try to hope?

She pushed her sleeves up to three-quarter length and wondered if she should take a shawl. The days were wonderfully warm but it tended to cool off at night. That's the nice thing about living in a desert resort town like Scottsdale, Maggie decided. No heavy coats until December, then for only a few weeks. When was the last time she wore this dress? Oh yes, New York, last May with The Girls.

That's what they called themselves—The Girls. Fans of an up-and-coming—well, in their opinion at least—British actor named John Harrison. That miniseries he'd done five years ago about Australia's first settlers had captivated their attentions; they'd all "met" on a fan group Internet site. They'd decided to physically meet in New York when the premiere of his latest movie was scheduled, happily shocked when Harrison made a real effort to come over and sign autographs. He'd even invited them to the after-party at Club Jojo.

Only four of The Girls had gone with her, but what fun they'd had! Unexpected, lively and romantic. Maggie couldn't help smiling at her reflection in the mirror. She'd resisted the temptation, extremely flattered when John Harrison had flirted a bit with her. Okay, more than a bit. She'd felt the pull, the attraction, had seen the look in his eyes. The man was drunk, she told herself again. Even I look good to a drunk. So Husband always says. Besides, he could have any gorgeous woman and I'm... well, I'm me.

'And the dancing?' A little voice in her head spoke, sly. 'The way he waltzed with you? And what about afterwards? Does a drunken man sit gazing into your eyes, talking for four-plus hours about everything under the sun without slurring a word? The way he held you, asked for your number, kissed you goodbye?'

"Go away, devil," she muttered to herself. "Stop the torture. I'm a married woman—not happily, true, but still married. I'm just lonely, reading into an innocent evening of talk. It was best that I didn't give him my number and then sit forever waiting for a call that never came—or live terrified by the possibility Husband would pick up the phone. Besides, why the hell would a hunk like John call someone like me when he lives with a leggy blonde bombshell?"

But oh, that kiss had graced her dreams ever since. Maggie sighed and spoke to her image. "Do you really want to spend the rest of your life this lonely, living without any affection?"

"What's that?" her husband called from the hallway. "Aren't you ready to go?"

She raised her eyebrows in the mirror. Now that's what you call a loaded question.

\* \* \* \*

Hung over with jet lag and lagers, John Harrison stumbled onto the balcony in the late afternoon. Look at these mountains, he thought. This hotel nestles into the very boulders of the towering range. Such warm sun! Bakes, it does, right into the marrow of my bones, not like the watery sun of Britain in winter. He stood for long minutes, basking. Remembering the woman who had described this place to him so vividly. Maggie Pearce. John sighed. Wish I knew how to find her.

"Up at last, no?" A voice he'd once found enticing now grated on his nerves like rusted hinges on an old iron gate. A tall blonde approached. "You stay all the night with the others at the bar as though you are college boys. I hope your head feels terrible. But now you will take me to supper and dancing. You know what day this is? You owe me."

John nodded, not looking at her. "I suppose I do. I'll be in to dress soon, Brigitte."

"Make sure you wear the Versace black slacks and jacket. You must look chic. Perhaps there will be cameras."

John heard her footsteps fade and he closed his eyes. He had met Brigitte DuBois on the set of his first—and so far, only—leading role in a theatrical-release movie, *French Pastry*. He'd already done the Australian historical miniseries—the one that got his career rolling. He'd made a few guest appearances on TV series, and more BBC adaptations of classics that garnered good critical notices. Then suddenly, he had a call from a small Hollywood studio with the offer of a lead role. Heady days! He'd thought he was on his way to

American movie stardom, especially when he found out his leading lady was a French film star.

Brigitte had laughed at him, called him a naïve little boy and treated him no better than the grips. And he'd been infatuated, star-struck. And honestly, Jesus, the hot monkey sex had been incredible. The things she could do with that big wide mouth of hers...

He *had* been naïve to believe her diva act. He'd fallen hard for her, worse than any teenage swoon—blind to her faults and deaf to her critics. He'd been thrilled when his manager suggested they appear in public as a couple, become media darlings.

If only he'd listened to his mentor, his family, his mates. They'd warned him. But he'd thought he was in love. Brigitte moved into his flat and immediately, whenever they went anywhere—even to get a coffee—she made it into a damn publicity event. He suspected she hired photographers to follow her—especially that one tabloid sleezeball who delighted in goading him.

Three years it had taken to come out of his testosterone haze. He'd had inklings she was a horrible actress; the only role offers she got were for those soft porn movies made for Showtime. But he'd told himself the suits just couldn't see beyond her beauty. Christ, he'd been the one blinded, unable to see past the sex.

When *French Pastry* finally hit the theatres this past summer, four years after they'd wrapped, the critics had a field day tearing it to shreds. It tanked and dropped faster than the Titanic in the North Atlantic. Other offers of leading roles for him sank before that, though he'd had a few supporting roles in films while waiting for *French Pastry* to be released. As of now, he would have no movies in theatres next year at all.



So here he was in Scottsdale, about to start a made-for-television film he hoped would help erase what the critics had cruelly renamed *Lead Doughnuts* from his menu. Thank God Brigitte had nothing to do with this one. She was here only for the spa experience these next ten days while he worked. Her best performance had been convincing him she'd cared for him as a man. She didn't bother acting for him anymore; she knew she could get nearly everything he'd made since then with a palimony suit, and she never let a day go by without reminding him.

John straightened and took a deep breath. He had to find a way out. And if he was lucky, very lucky, he'd find a real woman to share his life. Maybe he'd find Maggie Pearce.

## Chapter Two

The resort nestled into the very boulders of the mountain, built as an exclusive dude ranch decades past; now renowned as an ultra-hip getaway for the rich and famous. If it hadn't been for Maggie holding the winning Valentine's Day Dinner raffle ticket, they would never have gone to the resort's five-star restaurant at all. Husband wouldn't have taken her anywhere for Valentine's. She just didn't matter to him anymore.

Now Maggie begged the group to go to the dance club, if only for a while.

"No cover tonight, so a table for six? I don't know," the doorman said.

"There, see? Let's go." Husband turned away.

Maggie smiled at the doorman and slipped him the only money she had—a twenty-dollar bill. "Wait, sir," the young man said quickly, "we have an opening. Come in."

They found a newly-vacant table in the back near French doors that led to a patio with breathtaking views. Saguaro cacti held the city in their arms as the night sky reflected the glow. Maggie paid no attention to the dancers on the floor, though the Latin music set her toes tapping.

Husband's friend, Tom, fawned over his much-younger ditzzy date. Upon meeting her earlier, Maggie's first thought had been *Hey kids, look! It's the all-new Gold-*

*Digging Barbie!* Unfortunately so far, nothing had changed that first impression.

GD Barbie readjusted her surgically-enhanced cleavage in her shiny red spandex dress while everyone quibbled about seating arrangements. Maggie noticed wryly how all the men pretended not to watch with their tongues hanging out.

She stepped away from the table while the others jockeyed for position, wondering why social outings always had to turn into such a damn production.

\* \* \* \*

John Harrison's embarrassment was quite clear to anyone watching the dance floor. Brigitte slithered and ground herself against him in time with the music. John backed away, bumping into other dancers and apologizing.

"Oh, Johnny. Loosen up. It is Valentine's Day, no? And this is sexy. Let me teach you how a Spaniard dances to this music."

Know all about that, wouldn't you? he thought acidly. Always bringing up that damned Spanish footy star you were living with when we met. I didn't know you played us against each other; you'd told me it was over. Only later did I learn you remained living with Rodrigo throughout the first nine months of our relationship, taking the Spaniard's money and his gifts while screwing me into a stupefied muddle in hotel rooms across Europe.

Brigitte suddenly grabbed his hips and began gyrating against his thigh while Carlos Santana's guitar wailed.

"Ooh come on, Johnny. Let's show these bumpkins how it's done, no?"

"Christ, Brigitte! Are you a poodle to hump my leg? Why does everything have to be such a goddamn production with you?" He pushed her off. "Enough! I'm getting some air." He left her sputtering angrily among the other couples trying to keep the beat.

His fellow actors and good friends, Michael and Nick, broke off their conversation as John swept his double bourbon and water from their table and headed for the patio doors, rolling his eyes in aggravation. Agitated, he didn't notice the group rearranging chairs nearby, didn't see the woman in the black dress back away, didn't see anything until he felt the impact of his hand holding his drink meet her shoulder. Ice and bourbon cascaded down the side of her neck into the front of her dress.

"Oh my God!" She gasped in surprise.

"Sorry, Sorry! Damn! Damn, I'm terribly sorry," John said. He didn't know what to do with his hands. His first instinct was to brush away the ice, but he realized as he tried to start that it wouldn't be a good idea, since it was all over her chest and into that lovely hint of cleavage there—

He looked into green eyes framed with thick, long lashes and started with recognition. "Maggie? My God, Maggie, is it you?"

"You?" She gaped at him, shivering. "What are you doing here?"

He grinned. "Obviously not holding my liquor securely. I'm here for a film, scheduled to be in town for the next three months, actually."

"And who, Dearie, is this?" Husband appeared at Maggie's side, slightly slurring his words. "What'djoo do, trip and knock some guy's drink all over yourself? Can't take you anywhere."

"No, no, it's all my fault," John said. "I—"

Maggie quickly turned to Husband. "You're right; I ran into him, my fault. This is John Harrison. Remember I told you we met in New York? John, this is my husband—"

"Dick." Husband held out his hand, eyes narrowed.

"Yes, you are," John smiled and shook hands. "Maggie told me of you."

The rest of the dinner group gathered around.

"Oooh," G.D. Barbie purred after the introductions. "I love meeting actors! Have you been on TV or real movies? Do you know Brad Pitt or that hunky guy from *Lost* or that new Bond?"

"No, sorry, I don't. And unless you're a fan of obscure British films, likely you've not seen me," he answered, politely bowing his head and giving her a professional smile.

Maggie raised her brows and ticked off a list of five decent movies he'd had supporting roles in. John noticed with gratitude she never mentioned *French Pastry*.

"You here for work?" Husband asked and put a possessive hand on Maggie's waist. She tried to slide away but he dug his fingers in deep.

"Yes we are. We're filming a mystery. May I introduce my co-stars, Nick O'Bannon and Michael Davies?" John gestured for his friends to come over.

"Johnny, dahling?" Brigitte oozed up. "Don't tell me you know someone here, too?" She blinked her eyes, smiling brightly, red lipstick rimming her wide mouth.

She reminded Maggie of those papier-mâché circus clowns from street vendors in Mexico—gaudy, thin and rather threatening beneath. She watched Brigitte slip her hand through the crook of John's elbow, hooking French manicured claws into the fabric of his sleeve.

"I have a great idea," Husband said. "Why don't we push our tables together and be one big happy party, eh? Won't that be fun, honey?" He pulled Maggie against him harder with every word.

John looked at Maggie, his dark brown eyes apologetic while everyone agreed.

"If you'll excuse me," Maggie said as she disconnected Husband's hand from her side. "I'll go to the ladies room to clean this drink from my dress."

\* \* \* \*

She took several deep breaths, willing herself to stay collected and not jump to conclusions. What do I do? She stared into the mirror at her flushed cheeks. John is actually here. I know he isn't drunk this time. She ran her wrists under the cold water, hoping to cool her blood, slow her pulse. He's real—and he seems glad to see me. My God, he's more handsome than I remembered, smells like heaven, and his eyes are so compelling. I wish I'd worn something prettier than this. Geez, I got it on sale at Ross, for God's sake. Brigitte

obviously wears designer clothes—and her face is beautiful, truth be told.

She realized her hands were shaking as she tried to redo her lipstick.

## Chapter Three

John watched as the groups got busy moving chairs and tables, purses and drinks. He slipped away, unnoticed.

"Hey man." The DJ looked up and grinned. "You signing up for the dance-off? Starts in twenty minutes."

"I beg your pardon, what?"

The DJ chuckled. "Oh ho! Brit boy, huh? Well, tonight's the ballroom dancing competition. You know—like 'Dancing With The Stars?' Valentine's Day competition, five dances. Waltz, samba, foxtrot, rumba, and jive. Winners get a weekend package for right here, whenever you want to use it within the year, everything included—two nights in a suite, gourmet dinner, golf, whole day spa with the works. It's thirty bucks to enter."

"Uh, no. I'm semi-professional, wouldn't be fair, then would it? I was only hoping to request a song." John raised his brows. "Perhaps you could play it before the contest?"

"Gee, buddy, I dunno." The DJ shrugged, tilting his head—and extended his open palm across the board.

Minutes later, John slid into the seat next to Michael as Maggie returned.

They formed a raucous group. Stories flowed and laughter echoed. The waitress nearly ran bringing drinks. Tom's numerous golf jokes vied with Nick's Irish blarney.



Brigitte and GD Barbie hit it off well, comparing shoe designer favorites. Michael had a drinking game going, too, and Husband even seemed to be enjoying himself.

Maggie glanced shyly at John to see him smiling at her with a raised eyebrow. Then she heard the beginning strains of Seal's "Kiss From A Rose," and felt her heart leap into her throat.

John turned to Husband. "May I dance with your wife?"

"What?" Husband peered drunkenly across the table. "Yeah, sure, knock yourself out."

John nodded to Maggie and rose to pull her chair out for her. They didn't speak. Two couples were bravely waltzing, counting their steps. He followed her through the maze of tables. She looked wonderful in that dress—the way she moved made it swirl around her. Cut with just a hint of cleavage, tantalizing without being risqué, John decided. She wore a delicate silver necklace, small silver earrings, simple high heeled pumps. Classy, marvelous, elegant.

"I don't believe you," Maggie said as they stepped onto the dance floor. "You remembered the song we danced to."

"Of course I did," John replied. "I remember everything; think on it all the time. You look absolutely lovely tonight, Maggie, the most beautiful woman here." He slid his right hand to her waist, took her right hand in his left and looked down into her eyes.

Maggie couldn't breathe. Admiration and desire blazed from his eyes to ignite in her heart. His cologne teased her nostrils and she felt her breasts respond. She turned her head to gaze demurely along her left elbow held high

in proper ballroom stance, grateful he couldn't see the blatant want that filled her now. His hands were so long that his fingers reached to the small of her back around the top of her hip, and she could feel the heat from his palm through her dress.

They stepped into the dance and reality faded. Swayed and suspended by the music, they became perfect storytellers in a tale of ethereal love. John led her slowly into larger twirls and slides, pausing, bending, leaning at all the right moments in the lyrics for dramatic effect. Maggie trusted him wholeheartedly, surrendered herself into his guiding hands. At the chorus' crescendo they whirled rapidly, gliding on air above the floor, only to slow and end in a deep backward dip with the last fading note.

They hadn't spoken since they began, yet each had anticipated the other's moves. They hadn't paid attention to anyone else, hadn't realized the dance floor had emptied to give them all the room they needed. As the song finished, wild applause startled them both, woke them from their trance, suddenly alert to how watched they'd been.

He started to escort her back to the table as she blushed.

"John, I'm so sorry," she said, "I never meant to put you on display like that."

What a contrast, he thought. "No, no. I'm the one who should apologize," he said. "Your husband—will he be angry?"

"It's just a dance—"

"Is it?" He looked into her eyes as she had to turn toward him to navigate a chair, letting her see that for him it could be more, if she wished.

And oh she wished, he could tell. But—

"It has to be. I'm married. And you aren't free, either."

The sadness in her eyes wrenched his insides. "No," he said, gently squeezing her hand before letting go as they approached the group. Everyone in the club stood applauding.

Brigitte's forced smile would have terrified a Tyrannosaurus Rex.

"All right!" The DJ's voice boomed through the sound system. "Folks, you'll be relieved to know they didn't sign up for the contest, but there's the bar to aim for. Contestants to the floor."

"You really were going to ballroom dance classes." Husband hiccupped at Maggie. "Didn't know you could move without falling off your shoes. Kind of a waste though; I don't dance." He took Maggie's hand and squeezed so hard her fingers cracked. "Time to go home, isn't it, Dearie?"

"I suppose it is." Maggie pulled her hand away. "Nice to meet you all. I hope you enjoy your stay here." She waited as Husband stood. "I'll just stop at the ladies' on the way out if you don't mind."

Maggie gasped when she emerged from the stall. Nick waited for her at the sink of the ladies' room. "Oh find the wrong one, did I?" he slurred. "Happens now and again. New place, doncha know," he said, bending down to look for feet. "Hard to read the doors, you see."

Satisfied no others were near, he pulled Maggie closer and pressed a slip of paper into her hand. His voice held no sign of drunkenness now. "Call him at this number. That's my mobile, by the way, not his. I don't normally deal in sordid matters of the heart, but he's my friend. Someone's got to save him from disaster with that Frog."

"But this isn't right—"

Bright blue eyes looked into hers. "He's miserable. And you're no picture of contentment with that Dick, either. What's 'right' about that? Leave a message when and where it's safe for you to meet unseen. To talk, mind. Just talk." He stepped back and winked. "Pretend I startled you."

Maggie blinked rapidly to hold back happy tears as she yelled. "Hey! What are you doing in here? This is the Ladies' Room."

Nick grinned and turned to stumble out the door. "Sorry, sorry, lass," he sang loudly. "'Twas just a wee bit o' the Irish, though 'tis easily mistaken for a python."

Maggie waited a moment, trying to get her emotions under control. Could she trust her gut, the magic of that delightfully wicked waltz? Was this attraction, this pull between them enough to move her past the fear of losing everything she had with Husband to end this farce of a marriage and start anew?

Or had it truly been just a dance?

## Chapter Four

"Golf tomorrow then?" Michael asked.

Filming on *Slaying Society* had progressed into thirteen-hour days, six days a week, three weeks non-stop. Everyone involved spent Sundays sleeping. But the Director had declared an unscheduled recess for a minor re-write. Nick, Michael, and John knew that meant major script changes were in the works. Not usually a good sign.

They were trying to decide what to do with their rare free day while scarfing a quick lunch on the set.

"Have you seen the prices for eighteen holes around here?" Nick said. "It's ridiculous. I don't mean to sound cheap, but—"

"Too late," Michael quipped.

"Go on with ya." Nick shook his head.

"Perhaps a local could help," John said quietly as he refolded his napkin.

"Perhaps you could get shot," Michael retorted. "We're in America, remember? The Wild West populace is armed to the teeth."

"I doubt that," John said evenly. "And our evening ended peaceably enough, eh? All three of them said to call if

we wanted to play. We're only trying to get a better rate for golf. We could offer to buy dinner in exchange."

"Are you mad?" Michael shook his head, incredulous. "Dinner?"

"Yes, the meal after tea," John said. He shrugged, eyes twinkling at Michael's open mouthed expression. "Oh shut it; that's disgusting that is, Davies. You've spinach in your teeth." He set his napkin on the table. "What harm is there to ask? And if we go to dinner with them all, well, there's safety in numbers. I just want to see her again."

"John," Michael said, "that smitten, are you? It's not just your life you're risking here. It's hers, too. She's very much married, and you're just as tied legally--"

"Don't. Don't say it." John closed his eyes a moment, then looked up, intent on convincing his friends. "I have every intention of calling it quits with Brigitte as soon as we get home. There has to be a way. But I have to find out about Maggie, don't you see? I have to know if she feels the way I do."

Nick cleared his throat. "I don't think you have to wonder, John." He held his mobile phone in his hand as it vibrated. "Here."

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"Welcome to desert golf," Husband said as Michael sliced a drive into the expanse of cactus. "No such thing as running a shot up onto the green on this hole." He smiled generously as Michael swore.

Michael shook his head. "Is golf not intended to be played on grass?"

"Supposedly," Husband agreed. "Why don't you try this club?"

"So," he said as they drove to the next hole, "you and Johnny Boy are best buds, huh? Here's the drink cart girl—how 'bout a beer? Tell me all about Brigitte. She seems like a firecracker."

Michael coughed. More like a nuclear bomb about to explode, he thought.

"They live together, don't they?" Husband went on. "How long has she been with him? When do you think they'll marry?"

Michael glanced at John chatting innocently with Tom in their cart.

God, the lies you tell for your friends...

\* \* \* \*

Maggie spent the evening avoiding eye contact with John, afraid Husband would see in her expression what her heart wanted to shout. She forced herself to prattle with GD Barbie about shopping at Neiman Marcus and The Scottsdale Borgata as if she did so all the time.

Just hearing John's baritone accent set her heart racing. Their conversation yesterday had sent her into a schoolgirl's tizzy. Knowing he cared, truly cared about her made the world a bright and wondrous place again. But she had to be careful, for John's sake and her own. John certainly didn't need to be tainted by scandal; to be publicly linked with a still-married woman could devastate his career before it really took off. And she didn't think the guilt of breaking her vows was something she could easily live with. She had to be

patient, wait until she could talk with an attorney and start divorce proceedings. Her marriage had to be in the process of being ended before she could allow herself to follow her heart.

I can wait for a time to be with John, she thought, toying with her spoon and listening to the men rehash their golf outing, hole by hole. As long as I know he wants me, I'll wait for us both to be free. I'll be poor again, but it's not like I haven't had to watch my pennies all along, the way Husband keeps his money to himself. He can have the house, never felt like a home to me anyway. Maybe I can get my old managing position back at the bookstore; the staff asks me to come back almost every time I'm there.

"So we fly into Vegas Wednesday, come back Sunday night."

"What?" Maggie's eyes widened over the edge of her coffee cup at Tom's comment.

"Nothing like that first week of March Madness, is there?" he continued. "Sixty-four teams all hoping to make the NCAA Championship Game. But this is where we can really clean up on the underdogs."

She turned toward Husband. "You're going to Las Vegas, day after tomorrow?"

He smiled, and she felt like an anaconda had just coiled around her chest. "Oh dear, did I forget to mention that?" he said, his reptilian grin condescending as he patted her hand. "Yes, Tom, Pete, and I are going for the first weekend of the college playoff tournament." He looked around the table at their guests. "Haven't done it for a few years, but it's a grand time. You all will be flying home about then, won't you?"



"No," Nick replied. "After the script changes we're about to get, we'll be lucky to finish on time at the end of April." He ignored John's painful kick to his shin under the table. "Of course, we'll each leave when our roles are finished filming. 'Tis never in sequential order, you see. You don't start at the beginning and finish with the end."

"That's right," Michael added. "And the way we've been working, we'll be on thirteen- or fourteen-hour days again right off and straight through. Pity," he shrugged, "you hardly get to see much when you're on location. Why, I was in Sydney for six months doing a film and never did get to the Opera House."

"Gee, that is downright tragic," Husband nodded. "But the pay makes it worthwhile, I'd imagine."

"If you're a principal lead," John said. "You'd think we'd have more free time then, wouldn't you?" He smiled directly at Husband. "But sadly, no. In any case, thank you for arranging the golf and this lovely dinner... Dick. I doubt we'll have the chance again."

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The rest of the evening passed in a stunned blur for Maggie. They rode home in silence, walked into the house without a word, and all she could think was, what the hell kind of cosmic joke is this?

Thoughts tumbled over and over through her mind. She undressed and readied for bed to a mantra of "Husband's gone this weekend, but John's working those long hours... is this a trap?"

I have to find a divorce attorney tomorrow, she decided as she bent to rinse cleanser from her face.

She jumped at the sudden rough pressure of hands grabbing her hips. "Ow! Let go!" Lather stung her eyes. "What the hell are you doing in here? Get out!"

"Is that any way for my wife to talk?"

She could smell Scotch fresh on Husband's breath as she tried to wipe her face. "Leave me alone."

"No, I don't think so." One hand gripped her arm hard as the other yanked her nightgown tight into a restraint. "You aren't anything close to that Frenchie girl. You're damned fat compared to her, but you're here—and you're mine."

Maggie twisted, tried to free herself but he clawed his fingers into the flesh of her arm. She rammed her free elbow backward into his ribs and stomped her foot hard on his bare toes. Husband yowled and let go. "Shit! You're a goddamn bitch!"

"Yes, I am," she said, her eyes tearing with cleanser suds, blinding her. "You don't touch me at all for two years and you think you're going to force yourself on me now? Go to Hell, Dick!"

He stared at her, angry and hateful. "You're my wife! I take what's mine!"

"I'm not your whore." She hefted her heavy lighted makeup mirror from the counter. "You've never been a husband. Even when you're here, you never talk to me, never look at me. You shut me out of your life a long, long time ago. We haven't shared anything for years. You want to feel like a man? Try again. Come on, Dick. Self-defense works for me." She assumed a batting stance with her weapon.

"You're a joke! You think he really wants a pitiful bag like you? He's got prime right now; you think he'd give that up? You're a fool, Maggie! He's playing with you—probably out of pity. Pity! Go ahead and throw yourself at him. You'll come begging when he leaves for home to marry her. He already bought the ring, he tell you? No? Oh what a shock. But I don't give a shit anymore. You be out of this house when I get back from Vegas or I'll have the sheriff throw you out, hear me?"

"Get out of my bathroom and get out of my bedroom," Maggie said. It took everything she had to speak in a calm, level tone. Her heart pounded in her ears as her stomach roiled and flipped. "Get out of my life."

"Gladly!" Husband slammed the door behind him and the pictures on the wall shivered to the tile, sending shards of glass flying.

Shaking, Maggie kept a tight grip on the mirror in her hands for a few moments before setting it down and locking the door. This surely wasn't about love, or mourning the loss of love. This was all about control. He wanted to keep her under his command, so he belittled her, humiliated her every time he was angry. With him she felt old, worthless, stupid, and ugly.

His hateful words wormed into her mind, sowing seeds of doubt. She thought about the pictures of premieres John had attended these past few years, Brigitte beside him, tall and thin and blonde—what every man fantasized having. Maggie's legs turned to rubber as she looked at her reflection: a banshee with chestnut-red hair tousled and wild above tear-streaked, red-rimmed eyes.

My God... John bought a ring? Could Husband actually be telling the truth?

## Chapter Five

Soon after dawn on Thursday morning, Maggie hiked through her favorite canyon. She loved the peaceful trail here. It was rougher than the other tourist-friendly parks nearby. No one passed her in either direction this weekday morning, for which she was most grateful. Lost in the turmoil of her thoughts, she walked for two hours before realizing the need to turn back. Heavy storm clouds hung on the jagged peaks, and Maggie knew she could be in major trouble if the storm broke before she got close to the trailhead.

A hawk cried as it swept overhead. She thought about yesterday and knew she'd been right to file for divorce right away. The papers would be waiting for Husband, possibly at the airport. The bookstore wanted her back. The owner practically drooled at the prospect of her return, willing to let her have her old managing job at the same salary she'd had when she'd quit three years ago.

I'll call the locksmith when I get home and change every lock plus the garage door opener's code. Then I'll box as many of Husband's possessions as I can and set it all outside on Sunday. The fact that he's already left on his trip counts as abandonment, and I'll look generous to the court if I give him the house later in exchange for half its equity. But it means an ugly confrontation when Husband returns.

She felt physically sick at the probability.

I've let that stop me before. I should have left long ago but I was afraid to change, afraid to move. But not any more.

The path wound down and around a huge boulder. Maggie stopped as she rounded it, stunned.

John Harrison sat on a rock near Milepost One—hot beverage cups and a bakery bag beside him. "Good morning, Madame. Caffeine and croissants?"

"How did you—? And why aren't you working today?" Maggie cautiously approached.

Feigned sadness pouted his lower lip as he bowed his head. "Ah, sadly, I was murdered this morning. On the bright side, I only took three takes to expire in a most gruesome fashion." He lifted his face and a brilliant white smile lit his countenance. "At least I wasn't the psychotic murderer, eh? I'm staying till Michael finishes his scenes, which should be Monday."

She walked carefully down the steep trail toward him, glad she had to watch her step. The coffee smelled divine, but John's presence was an intoxicant she should avoid if she wanted to think clearly. She needed to keep her resolve and go about this the right way.

Looking up as she came to where he sat, Maggie took the cup he offered and sipped. Perfect, just as she liked it, a hint of regular cream. What a thoughtful gesture. Husband had never...

She smiled down into the steam. "What made you think I went hiking? How did you know to come here? There are tons of places I could have gone."

"You spoke of this place with such affection in New York, told me it was your favorite place to go when you needed to think. And I was pretty sure that after the other night, you would need a hike. I want to apologize for putting you in such an awkward situation. Now just wait a minute before you say anything, it's my apology to make, is it not?" He looked at her with such an endearing, charming smile—but his eyes were sorrowful. He sipped at his own cup before continuing. "He was a bastard when you got home, wasn't he?"

Maggie nodded and shrugged but said nothing.

"Did... that Dick hurt you?"

She shook her head.

"Maggie." Gentle, he reached out, lifting her chin to look into her eyes. "Tell me. Truth between us, always, all right? Did he physically harm you?"

Thunder rolled, not far off. "No, not really. He only grabbed me, bruised my arm. I threatened him and he left." She sighed. "John, this is going to get ugly. It's best if we didn't see each other until—"

"No." He slid from the rock to stand beside her, so close she could feel the warmth of his body. "We have these precious few days, Maggie. They may be all we have for a long time."

Damn, he wasn't making this easy at all. She stepped further away, drank more coffee. "How did you get to the trailhead?"

"Taxi. I hoped you'd give me a lift back." He raised his brows and leaned against the rock, watching her. "I can't help myself," he said after a few moments. "I want

to be with you. Your company, your laugh, your wit—our time in New York is always on my mind. You don't know what a relief it was for me to be free, to be myself with you that night, Maggie. Even now, we have easiness between us as though we've been friends through rain or shine for a long time. My mind tells me that we haven't but my heart is another matter entirely."

A wry smile lifted her mouth. "I know." She faced him. "I've been so very lonely. When we met and connected as we did... well, I was afraid my imagination created what I wanted to remember. But when we danced again on Valentine's Day—"

"Oh yes." He nodded. "We fit together perfectly. Perhaps it's one of those past life things, but when I'm with you, I can let go and be who I truly am—the lad who grew up in the country relishing the sounds of birds and singing in choirs and laughing my ass off at Monty Python."

She chuckled. "I always pictured you as a fan of The Black Knight."

"Come back and fight! 'Tis merely a flesh wound—I'll bite your ankles," he quoted, and took her now empty cup.

"What about Brigitte?" Maggie's voice deserted her as she asked.

John pursed his lips and studied the toe of his trainer scuffing soft dirt. "That is rather complicated."

"You bought a ring for her."

He remained quiet, staring at the ground.

Oh goddamn it all to hell! She swallowed hard. "I hate when Husband's right."

"He's not." John looked up and Maggie saw desperation in his eyes. "I bought a ring, yes. Four years ago, when I first thought—Christ, I was stupid!"

He took a deep breath and let it out slowly. "I won't lie to you, Maggie. I won't. I have a ring, but have no intention to give it to her now. My, uh, relationship with Brigitte for the last eighteen months has been strictly publicity. Looks good for the papers, for the columns, for the premieres. I haven't slept with her—or anyone—all that time. But I've been a fool." He pressed his lips together. "I signed a palimony pact."

"What?" Her heart bruised the inside of her ribcage with ferocious pounding.

John sighed, long and heavy. "I signed a contract with Brigitte back when I was totally in her thrall. I would be her official consort, agreeing to exclusivity with her only, for a five year period. I would have a beautiful, glamorous woman on my arm, and she would be seen with an actor on the rise. What a devil's bargain, eh? The fifth year doesn't end until December—but I want out now. I've wanted out since I met you."

"Then why? Why would Michael tell Husband you were going to marry? That you planned to as soon as you return to Britain?" She couldn't keep the hurt from her tone and she hated herself for whining.

"Because we knew that's what he wanted to hear." John reached out, took her hands in his. "Michael is my best mate; he was covering for me." His earnest gaze searched hers. "I need to know you believe me, Maggie."



He smelled of soap and some wonderfully light cologne. Then she looked into his eyes.

"I believe you."

She jumped a little, surprised as his arms wrapped around her. John leaned down with a light brushing of his lips against hers. "I know without a doubt—I've fallen in love with you," he whispered.

She fell into velvet fog, his kiss was so exquisite. Her body responded, heat rising, every nerve ending a-tingle. She kissed him back before she thought about it. On tiptoe, her hands crept up his back to his shoulders, moved to his thick light brown curls, fingers entwining, exploring.

His mouth slid to her ear, her neck, while his hands pressed her tighter against him. Her body responded immediately, her nipples growing hard, pressing against his chest. She inhaled his scent, the musk of male arousal lifted on heat. Her own fire flared, stealing the air from her lungs, whetting her desire and dampening her thighs.

He caressed her face, gazed directly into her green eyes. His dark browns, rich with warmth, beckoned her to fall into oblivion. "Come back with me. It's been so long since I've... Let me make love to you as I've dreamed. "

"We can't." But want filled her and she trembled, trying to fight her animal instincts.

He kissed her harder. "Then here," he said, his mouth hot on hers, his breathing rapid. "Don't deny what you feel, Maggie. We are destined to be together."

Her breasts throbbed, ached for his touch, her own breath shortened to gasps as she felt his heart pounding, his erection hard against her. "Not here, John. I want a bed... but—" She tried to push him away. "I shouldn't. I can't. Oh God." She began to cry then, tears of frustration and sorrow that she had to refuse him, deprive herself. "John, I want you... but I'm still married—"

"When has he held you like this? When did he show you any passion?" He cupped her face in his right hand, forced her to look up at him. "He doesn't deserve you. Whatever happened to the vows about love and honor and cherish—don't you see? He broke those already, long ago."

She brought her hand up to touch his face. "We connect; we truly spark together, don't we? But I can't respect myself if I..." She bent her head down against his chest to try and stop her tears.

He realized he was pushing too hard, too fast. He got himself under control with effort, nodded and sighed. "Perhaps," he said quietly as he tried to slow his breathing, "I wouldn't feel so strongly about you if you weren't such an honorable woman." He relaxed his arms; let them linger lightly about her waist. "I admire you for your honesty, your loyalty—however misplaced—and your convictions. Forgive me for pressuring you. I had morals, once upon a time. Before I met Brigitte." His smile was sad and tinged with regret.

Her smile was rueful as well. "You still have morals. You are a decent, kind man. What we feel for each other isn't evil. It's not immoral in my heart. But my mind won't let me forget that I made promises, swore solemn vows."

"How long have you been the only one keeping them? Anyone could see that right away. He thinks he's perfect. And you're merely his possession."

She shook her head, pulled away. "I hate being with him, but I'm scared to death to leave him and start over with next to nothing."

"I understand that all too well, Maggie. If I break the contract, Brigitte can sue me for palimony *and* breach. I'd be bankrupt. I've worked so hard... The easy way out is if she cheats first. She's usually with me, so that's not bloody likely, is it?" He laughed with a bitter, brittle sound.

"It sounds like we're alike in many ways, especially choosing our poisons." Maggie took his hand and squeezed. "I believe this is called a predicament."

John wrapped his arms around her in a warm hug. "The proper term is 'cock-up,' love." He wiggled his brows at her. "Which is also my personal problem at the moment. But don't worry; the swelling goes down eventually."

She chuckled. "I've heard that happens." Looking up into his face, she smiled and tilted her head. "Come on. We need to go. I'll drive you back to wherever it is you're staying. It's nearly ten-thirty and more people will be up to hike now. Besides, it's going to storm."

They gathered their trash and hiked back to the parking lot. His hand lingered on her waist as they reached the car. John kissed her with tender longing. She caressed his curls before pulling away, shaking her head sadly as a few cars pulled in. Other hikers gathered. A large group of college students grouped behind her car, forcing her to pull ahead and maneuver around other

vehicles to exit. She drove out and down the narrow road back towards the city.

## Chapter Six

Maggie drove slowly for the speed humps and traffic circles that kept cars from tearing through the residential area abutting the canyon as rain began falling in sheets against her windshield.

"Do you live nearby?"

"Yes," she answered.

"Might I use the loo?" he asked, innocent.

She waited until she had stopped at the red light at the bottom of the hill to look at him—and fell right into rich chocolate eyes that sparkled at her with blatant desire. She was doomed, and she knew it.

Mere minutes later, the garage door lowered, agonizingly slow, to close out the world when she pushed the button.

"End of the hall," she said, pointing left. He nodded and quietly walked down the carpet.

She stood in the kitchen, checking the voice mail, making notes as thunder echoed against the house. He soon waited behind her—a warm waft of that wondrous cologne teased her nose. She stared at the wall when she hung up, certain in her heart that if she faced him, if she looked into his eyes, all resolve would be lost forever.

“Maggie.”

She gripped the edge of the counter, her conscience fighting with her heart. It’s wrong, it’s wrong, you made those promises. It isn’t over yet—

But this marriage is dead, has been for a long time. Haven’t I always done the right thing, always played by the rules? And where has it gotten me? Locked into a marriage with a man who never liked me enough to hold hands. I haven’t been touched in over two years and this man, this warm and wonderful man wants me. I’m so tired of being good—and being miserable.

John’s voice was seduction itself, deep and husky. “I’ll leave if you ask. I don’t want to. But tell me to go and I’ll call a taxi.”

She couldn’t speak. Rain poured against the house in torrents that drummed on every skylight, echoing and mirroring the storm within her. Reaching forward, she lifted the phone from its cradle.

“Call,” she said, handing the phone backward without a look.

Maggie walked to the kitchen table as the tones beeped and connected him to his means of escape. Her chest hurt from wrapping her arms tight to hold her heart.

“What’s the address?” John asked. “I don’t know where I am.”

Makes two of us, she thought before stating the house number and street, then the phone number.

“Thirty-five minutes,” he said in a quiet voice. He came to the table and sat across from her.

"I'm sorry," she said.

"No, you're right." He smiled at her, a little shy. "I apologize again, Maggie. I won't compromise your values. But I want to be with you this weekend. I enjoy your company so. Could we talk, have dinner before I leave the country? Perhaps share a dance or two? I promise to be a gentleman."

"It's not right," she said.

"It's not wrong to spend time with a friend." A one-sided grin wrinkled his face. "I'm in a phony business; everyone wants something and lies to your face to get it. Once you're past your usefulness you don't exist. But with you... I've been myself, unguarded, and you never asked for a thing—not even an autograph." John reached for her hand, caressed her fingers with a light touch and looked into her eyes. "Loneliness is a terrible ache in the heart when you can't trust those around you. What I feel for you is special and strong. Maggie, this magic between us is rare, worth exploring, worth hope."

Those eyes hold inner specks of gold, she realized. A man should never be this handsome.

"I lo—"

"No. Don't say it." She shook her head. "We need more time to truly know one another." But she didn't draw away. "This could just be infatu—"

He laid his finger against her lips to stop her. "I have been infatuated before, and look where it's got me. What I feel for you is nothing like that. I know who and what I am when I am with you. I want to sit and watch a sunset with you alone, walk on a beach without a word. Hold you in my arms and dance the night away, then fall

asleep and wake with you in the morning. I want to share dreams and hopes, fears and triumphs, grow old with you, laugh with you, cry with you."

She pressed her lips together. "But this could be merely the forbidden fruit attraction, the thrill of secrecy that we're mistaking for love."

He raised that right eyebrow, and her breath deserted her lungs. "I don't believe that for an instant." He squeezed her hand. "Are you telling me you'd rather be with that Dick? Maggie, if I've learned anything at all in this life, it's to seize the moment. A soul to soul connection like ours can only come but once. If we let it go, if we each stay where we are we'll regret it for the rest of our lives."

A single tear rolled down her cheek. "Could you honestly say you would ever trust me if I now break the most solemn promises anyone can make? We need time, John. Time to get to know one another, time to be sure."

"I am sure. You're right, I understand, but I want to grab this moment and hold on for the ride of our lives. Be with me this weekend; let's learn more about each other, yes. We have this one chance, this one fortuitous chance. You speak of trust; what else can we trust but our hearts?"

He stood and walked around to her chair, never releasing her hand. Gentle, he pulled her to stand and face him. Soft warmth, sweet moisture enveloped her with his kiss. Maggie wanted to lie down and give herself to him right there.

A car horn tooted from the front drive. Thank God.

"Go," she breathed. "Go now before we ruin your life."



He sighed. "It's your life as well." He looked into her eyes. Slow and sensuous, his lips caressed hers. "Maggie, we don't have to be lonely any more."

Then he was out the front door. She stared after him from the window, watched him run through the rain to the waiting cab that swallowed him whole into its rear seat.

She stood shaking, tears streaming down her cheeks to match the rain as yellow dissolved away into the wet, grey world.

## Chapter Seven

She barely hung up after scheduling with the locksmith when the phone rang again.

"Hey Chiquita! *¿Qué pasó?*" Her best friend's voice was a welcome rich alto.

"Lupe, I'm so glad you called." Maggie leaned against the counter.

"Did your *pendejo* husband leave yet?"

"You shouldn't call him an asshole, Lupe, even if he is one, but yes, he left last night."

"Good. You can actually relax and enjoy tomorrow then."

Maggie frowned, puzzled. "What's tomorrow?"

"Jeez, don't tell me you forgot? Ballroom class? Bring-A-Partner Dinner Dance? Sheesh girl, we've been looking forward to this all winter and you forget?" The voice on the line lowered with concern. "All right, what's happened? What did that bastard do? I keep telling you, I make a call to my cousin Chuy down in Juarez—"

Maggie couldn't help but smile. "Lupe, I don't need a hit man from the Mexican Mafia, okay?"

"Hey, he'd be in Vegas in no time. Nobody pays attention in Vegas, happens every day up there."

Maggie laughed.

"Okay, so maybe not. What are you doing right now? You sound like you need to talk and I got some fresh tortillas from my aunt. I'm over by your place, be there in, oh..."

A different car horn sounded, echoing from the front of the house through the phone.

"Hey whaddya know? I got here sooner than I thought. You got coffee?"

\* \* \* \*

The rain stopped. Turquoise sky held wisps of cloud remnants. Funny how it does that in the desert, Maggie thought, sitting with Lupe on the back patio. Rains like hell and then quits completely. A deep breath filled her lungs with delicious freshness, the air cleansed and scented with the tang of chlorophyll.

"So, you really did it, huh? Really filed for divorce at last?" Lupe sipped dark liquid. "About goddamn time. And you say that John guy is still in town for his movie?"

"Yep."

"Did I tell you I saw that one of his? What was it? Oh yeah, *French Pasties*."

"*French Pastry*, Lupe. 'Pasties' are what strippers wear."

"Yeah, well that girl's acting in it was worse then a geriatric stripper. He's pretty nice to look at, but I'm sorry, that movie sucked donkey dicks."

"Don't mince words," Maggie chuckled. "Tell me what you really think."

Her friend gazed down into her mug. "See him yet?"

A long moment passed. "We hiked Lincoln Canyon this morning."

"Good."

"Nothing happened."

"Not good. You need to let him hike *your* canyon. Ask him for tomorrow night."

Maggie almost choked. "Are you nuts? I can't go out with him in public like that!"

"Why not? It's just a dance. I'm taking my cousin Tavo from Apache Junction."

"Tavo? Where's that from again?"

Lupe rolled her eyes. "Don't be such a *gringa*. 'Tavo' is short for Octavio. Anyway, he and I dance at all the weddings and nobody thinks anything of it. C'mon, you've met him."

Maggie nodded and shrugged. "Yes, your cousin is a teddy bear. But I can't jeopardize—"

"I would think it's the safest place for you and this John guy to get together. Lots of people, innocent fun, you know?" Lupe batted ebony eyes. "Just dancing."

Maggie shook her head at her petite friend. "I'm married."

"A mere technicality—and a temporary one now." Lupe looked out over the back yard at the cactus garden. "It's a freakin' dance, *Amiga*. Who the hell's gonna be there but people from class and their friends? It's not like The

Cattlemen's Balls or whatever that big shindig is at The Phoenician. Nobody will take our picture and put it in the paper. Especially if you slip out the back door."

"You are incorrigible."

"Yep. You deserve to spend some time with someone who will treat you right. And God knows you could stand a good lay."

"Lupe!"

"I'm just being honest. Where's he staying? You want Tavo to pick him up?" Lupe tilted her head. "Hey, is that your doorbell?" They rose and went back through the house.

"Maggie Pearce? These are for you. Just sign right... here."

An electronic clipboard protruded from beneath a massive bundle of daffodils, tulips, and fern fronds. The voice behind them was muffled. "I can set them wherever you want, Miss. It's too awkward to try to hand over."

Moments later Maggie and Lupe stood staring—a huge vase easily thirty, maybe forty inches tall now sat on the glass coffee table, bursting with bright yellow, pink, and shades of green. Perfume of spring filled the room.

"Ooh, yeah, I like this guy's style," Lupe nodded. "Can you find the card?"

A search ensued, and Maggie soon held the small white envelope in her hand. Smiling, blushing, she opened it.

"What's it say?"

"I'll copy it down for your cousin." Maggie looked up, eyes sparkling. "It's the address to his condo."

## Chapter Eight

John changed outfits four times before he was satisfied. He readily acknowledged his weakness for quality clothing. The feel of a well-made shirt in a sensuous fabric gave him a sense of accomplishment. He hadn't had money growing up; hadn't known it at the time. But like many actors, vanity had a strong grip on his ego. Once he'd had a taste of success with his career, he thoroughly enjoyed visiting London tailors. Then Brigitte had introduced him to couture fashion shows and he'd become addicted to designer clothing.

So, he wondered, what should I wear tonight? The Armani suit? No, too formal, too much. She's seen the Versace. Brigitte chose the Prada; to be honest it's ugly as sin and I've always hated it. Dolce and Gabbana? Too... what? Oh yes, Las Vegas Lounge Lizard.

He finally settled on a cobalt shirt, a loosely-knotted, dark cherry skinny tie, navy blue tailored slacks and sport coat with Italian loafers. A London friend just starting in design with Stella McCartney had shyly asked him to try his new creations.

Slide, step, twirl... Johns practiced his moves, pleased with the way the fabric moved. He'd tell Warren he'd wear his line, absolutely.

A musical horn sounded. Ah, here's the chauffeur. John smiled at himself in the mirror, scooped his wallet and mobile into a pocket, and turned out the light.

He froze as he closed the front door, gaping at a low-slung classic model Monte Carlo. Blue metallic-sparkle paint glittered in the waning sunset above shiny, spinning wheel covers.

"Hey man, you John?" A young man with raven hair, brown skin, a thin moustache, and a brilliant white smile came toward him, held out a hand. "I'm Tavo Robles."

"Yes, I am." He recovered his surprise and grinned. "John Harrison. Nice to meet you."

"*Con mucho gusto.*" They shook hands and Tavo turned, proudly gesturing toward the vehicle. "You like? I worked almost a year restoring this baby to her glory. Those dudes on 'Pimp My Ride' got nothin' on me. She's pretty cherry now. She prowls, a *pantera* on the street. Come on, we better go. Man, I hope they feed us something good, not like that cafeteria food you get at most banquets."

John cautiously eased his tall frame into the passenger seat. If this car rode any lower he'd be sitting on pavement. He grinned. Quite a difference from riding in a stretch limo to a premiere. But he could see it was immaculately clean, lovingly tended.

Tavo drove out of the complex at a sedate speed, nodding in time as Los Tigres blared from the speakers. "I like to let people get a good look," he explained. "Show her to her best advantage. Being seen *is* the scene, man."

"What? Are you in PR?" John asked. "You sound like a Hollywood handler."

"No." Tavo grinned. "But if you need one, dude, I got a cousin in East L.A."



John laughed and bobbed his head to the catchy beat of the music right along with Tavo as they cruised.

\* \* \* \*

La Posada Hotel and Resort squatted at the base of Camelback Mountain where Scottsdale and Paradise Valley merged with the city of Phoenix. Once a beautiful and secluded retreat, the burgeoning city now had it surrounded and besieged. The lobby sprouted signs of chic shabbiness with sun-faded draperies, out-dated furniture with weary cushions, and slightly worn carpeting.

Nerves frayed nearly to match, Maggie waited with Lupe near huge windows facing the hotel's arched entrance. Couples strolled through, some obviously on a jittery first date, most arm in arm. She adjusted her dress's sweetheart neckline again.

"Stop that," Lupe said. "You look gorgeous. Quit picking or I'll smack you." She widened her eyes and pressed her lips together as Maggie opened her mouth. "No, it's not too low-cut and no, you don't look like a skank. Now would you please relax and enjoy the evening?" She turned back to the window. "Here they come."

Maggie stared. Tavo drove slowly, the Monte Carlo majestically rounding the half moon entrance and stopping at the valet's station as if it was a Bentley. Glass shuddered in the window frames with the pounding bass emanating from the car. John emerged exactly the way she'd first seen him stepping out from a fancy limo at the New York premiere: elegantly dressed, proud, comfortably confident with a wide grin. He clapped Tavo's shoulder as they approached the doors.

"Your cousin picked him up in a low-rider?" Maggie shook her head, incredulous. The nerves kicked in with an onslaught of giggles. "Oh my God! A classically trained British thespian arriving in a *cholo* car."

"Hey," Lupe responded. "It's cleaner than most limos. And I thought you said he was straight?"

The men entered the lobby. "You two look mah-velous," Tavo deadpanned and bussed Maggie's cheek. He introduced John to Lupe with an exaggerated bow.

Maggie was pleased to see Lupe blush.

"You, Maggie, look absolutely brilliant. Green is an exquisite color for you," John said when he turned to her. "It sets off your eyes and hair." He took her hand and kissed it with warm lips. "This is going to be a wonderful night for us, one we'll never forget." He flashed his eyes at her, offered her his arm. "Shall we go in?"

The lobby may have seen its better days, but the Grand Ballroom sparked with chandeliers of crystal prisms glowing warmly above a hardwood floor. Tables hugged the walls, cozy and intimate for no more than four people to share, perfect for private conversation. It wasn't long before their meal was served. A small orchestra began warming up when the plates and silver were efficiently removed.

"Lovely dinner," John said.

"Wasn't enough of it," Tavo groused.

Lupe rolled her eyes and punched his arm, only half-mockingly. "That's because you're a pig. They don't want

people to be so full they can't dance." She shook her head.

Maggie remained quiet, smiling at John. She hadn't been able to take her eyes from him. Gracious and funny, he seemed to truly enjoy the company, raving about Tavo's car, laughing at Lupe's jokes, and squeezing Maggie's hand under the table.

The orchestra played continuously. Tavo did the rumba with Maggie, showing off with madly swivelling hips and daring her to keep up.

Breathless with laughter and more than slightly perspiring, they returned to their table as John and Lupe joined them.

"Rumba's not my best, I'm afraid." John held out Lupe's chair.

"You did good," she teased. "Nobody whips their pelvis around like Tavo and walks normally. That's why everybody calls him '*El Culebro*' – 'The Little Snake.'"

"Yep, Shakira should be calling *me* for lessons," Tavo nodded.

The strains of a waltz began.

John remained standing, held out his hand to Maggie. "Now this is our forte, I believe."

"I know, but I'm so hot," Maggie protested.

Leaning down to her ear he whispered, "Yes... yes you certainly are." The devil laughed from his eyes. "Come on."

She didn't keep her head in proper position. She couldn't tear her gaze away from his. The warm tickle of his breath against her cheek as he guided her around the floor kissed her skin like a butterfly's wing. That cologne of his lifted her on a cloud of desire, intoxicating and thrilling her more with each inhalation. And those warm, soft, leading hands—firm in their control yet suggesting, not commanding her movements as he held her sinfully close to his body. His long thigh brushed between hers with certain steps, sending delicious electrical waves through her pelvis.

But those eyes... the dark promises those eyes made—longing, hopeful, wishful, and desirous. Then his nose touched hers and she let her lids fall, shutting out the sight of his deep brown orbs and breathing him into her as they shared the very air between. Maggie knew they still danced, the orchestra continued playing, but the universe shrank into the overriding sensation of his lips on hers as they whirled through space.

Don't stop, don't stop, her mind begged. Don't let the music stop. We could make love right here and now in front of everyone and I wouldn't care.

Then he was away from her, that tiny fraction of air caressing her chin as their lips broke contact. But his nose lingered against hers as the melody faded and slowly, slowly ended.

"How can you make an innocent waltz so wicked?" Maggie opened her eyes. Jesus, her heart was pounding and her stomach fluttered. She couldn't remember being so sensuously aroused.

"Whatever gave you the notion the waltz is an innocent dance?" John smiled down into her face. "It was quite scandalous when first introduced to society, you know.

Besides,” he wiggled his brows, “you inspire me.” They reached their table. “Now we’ll rest, sip some water, and dance again, and again, and again. At least until they kick us out.”

Oh yes, she thought. Oh yes.

\* \* \* \*

Elsie’s Diner buzzed with the hubbub of wee hour patrons. Taxi drivers off shift, teens out so far past curfew that they dare not go home, a few lost souls, and revelers not willing to end their evenings filled the seats at the counter and nearly every booth.

“Ah,” Tavo said, setting his fork down. “Now that’s the way to make a man happy. Fill his belly and give enough to fix a plate for home.”

John laughed and wrapped his left arm around Maggie’s shoulders. “Tavo, you must have an extra stomach to eat so much and look so thin.”

“He swallows it whole,” Lupe chided. “That’s another reason he’s The Little Snake. Gee, wonder why else?”

Everyone laughed. “I’ve never stayed until the band begged to go home before,” Maggie said.

“We do it all the time.” Tavo waved his hand and reached for his coffee. “Remember that cousin’s wedding in Hermosillo, Lupe? They went out and grabbed a street band to play so everyone could keep partying.”

Lupe smiled, wistful. “Yeah, that one lasted three days. We’d eat, dance, go nap, eat, dance, go nap...” She turned her head quickly at a little flash of light. “Hey, did the bulb flicker or is that me?”

"I'm so tired," Maggie sighed. "But I still don't want the night to end."

"It doesn't have to," Lupe said. "Stay up. Sleep later."

"Eat and nap," Tavo advised.

"Sounds like a good idea when your time is limited," John said, eyebrows raised. "Unfortunately, Michael called before I left tonight. Our flight leaves Sunday." He checked his watch. "Since it's now early Sunday morning, that means I have about fourteen hours."

A long sigh escaped Maggie's lips. "Good times never last long enough, do they?"

"That's why we must savor and cherish every moment," he replied and kissed her hairline.

Lupe blinked rapidly. "My eyes must be going," she murmured. "These lights keep flickering." She shook her head. "Okay then, let's get the check. Where do we go from here, Tavo?"

"Bowling," he said with authority.

\* \* \* \*

The Internet hummed with excitement as a new fan posted on The Girls' site later that morning.

<Hey, I think I saw John Harrison.>

<No way!>

<Well, they're filming here. Give me a few minutes and I'll post the pics from my camera phone.>

## Chapter Nine

"My ribs hurt from laughing," John said. "I never knew bowling could be so entertaining." He slipped his feet into his shoes. "Tavo is absolutely insane."

Lupe sat beside him. "Yes he is. So am I." She handed a small key ring to him. "Here. Take my car. The neighbors won't think anything of it since I'm always visiting." Ebony eyes met his. "I don't know what your situation is and I don't care. All I know is she's my friend, and you two... you belong together. I've never seen her look this happy. She has a real bad time coming and will need all the support she can get. But don't you dare break her heart."

John folded his fingers around the keys. "Thank you, Lupe. You're a good friend for her."

She looked up. "Maggie needs you to be worth the fight. Are you?"

"I'd like to think I am." He helped Lupe to her feet.

"You better be," she said. "Or I'll come over there and kick your fine *nalgas* myself."

\* \* \* \*

The rising sun glazed the mountains in soft tones of peach and pink as John drove to Maggie's house. Sunday newspapers lay wrapped in plastic in each driveway,

waiting for drooling retrievers or boxer-clad husbands to tote them inside.

"We're not going to do anything," she said for the fourth time.

"Yes, we are," he said and shifted into park. He turned to face her. "We're going to talk. Maybe we'll nap on the sofa. I will take you to lunch. And then we will deal with reality as best we can."

Maggie gave him a wan smile. "Nap first, then."

\* \* \* \*

A heart beat strong and rhythmic beneath her cheek. Maggie woke slowly, warm within an arm's embrace. Sudden recall jerked her upright.

"Wha—?" John stirred, tried to move. "Ow, my shoulder's numb."

Relief flooded through her to see they were both still fully clothed. "I'm sorry. Go back to sleep."

John's tie and jacket sprawled across the coffee table, now bathed in bright sunlight. Shoes skewed across the carpet, like a wild map of a chaotic dance. She looked down at her dress. Completely and hopelessly wrinkled, it had twisted, one breast nearly exposed but still safely contained by her bra.

He lay on his back, one arm raised above rich, golden brown curls. Maggie could see he was already asleep once more.

We sat down together on the sofa, she recalled. Turned the TV to a classic movie—Gregory Peck and Virginia Mayo in *Captain Horatio Hornblower*. I remember seeing



the part where he kisses her in the corridor, but then, obviously, we fell asleep. I must've turned it off.

John could play that part, she decided. He has that heroic air about him. He is beautiful for a man. Cherub lips, those thick toasty-gold curls, a tinge of ginger to the light stubble on his chin. It's totally unfair that a man has eyelashes that thick. A nice straight nose, not too big or too small. Just right.

Maggie rose carefully so she wouldn't disturb him, determined to take the coldest shower she could manage.

\* \* \* \*

Yes, that helped. A little. Maybe.

Maggie sighed, stepped into jeans and threw a knit sweater over her head. She went into the kitchen to make coffee.

She jumped to see John already there. "I thought you went back to sleep."

"I did. Isn't this the most delightful dream?" He ran one hand through his curls, his eyes heavy-lidded—and sexy as hell. He came to her, nuzzled her neck. "Mmm, you smell absolutely enticing." His warm tongue licked the sensitive skin over her carotid.

How much could a woman be expected to resist?

She was in his arms, kissing him, pressing against him. Wanting... dear God, she wanted him so badly.

He lifted her, his mouth on hers, embracing her tightly against him as he walked back to the sofa, lifting her into his lap as he sat. One hand reached beneath her

still-damp hair to cradle her neck while he kissed her deeply.

Maggie returned in kind, sure her heart would explode from her chest. He pressed his weight against her as she pulled him down to lie on top, hugging him to her, tasting the salt of the skin of his neck. His hand slid beneath her sweater to find her braless. His fingers caressed the side of her right breast, traced the arc upward in a tantalizing tickle even as his mouth and tongue moved south to the dip of her throat.

Her nipple seemed to jump into his hand, distended and begging. He pushed the sweater out of the way, exposing her to light and the soft fabric of his shirt against her skin.

Maggie sought refuge in his thick soft hair, eyes closed, breath shortened. She could feel how hard he was against her thigh and she knew in her mind she should stop.

But the warm wetness of his mouth on her, tasting, licking, and suckling, oh my, Jesus yes, yes... She arched her back, rubbing against him with her pelvis and wrapping one leg over his hip, one hand in his curls as the other stroked his back. Wet, holy cow, she was sopping wet, hoping he would touch her, move his hand down under her jeans, caress the soft hair covering her mound, feel her want with his fingers, probe—

Stop before it's too late, her mind screamed. Before he finds you repulsive and disgusting, like Husband—

"No!" She gasped and opened her eyes.

"What?" He continued kissing her breast, throat, ear—

"John, stop." Maggie wriggled out from beneath him and sat up, pulling her sweater back down. "Shit. I'm sorry, I never should have let this happen." She shook her head, fingers combing through her tangled hair. "I can't. It's unfair to you—unfair to us both."

He rose on an elbow. "Why? We were just—"

"No, it was getting hot and heavy and I—" Maggie smiled ruefully, "—I couldn't control myself much longer. I don't want to regret anything about being together tonight—today."

John pushed to sit beside her, touched her face with his hand. He sighed and put his arm around her. "Then we'd better go to lunch soon."

Nodding, she turned, looked into his eyes, and kissed him softly. "You need time to pack, don't you?" She glanced at the clock and gasped. "Oh my God, it's almost one already."

They shared another soft, clinging kiss. "John, this will have to do," she sighed. "Until..."

John stood, pulling her to her feet with him. "Yes. Consider this a promise of things to come when next we meet." He hugged her tight.

She squeezed his hands when he released her. "I'm so sorry our time together is over."

"Only this visit," he said, cupping her face. "Our time to be together forever is coming soon."

"Just not soon enough," she sighed and gave him a wistful smile.

The sunset painted craggy mountains cinnamon red as they taxied down the runway. John sat by the window in business class on the British Airways non-stop flight from Phoenix Sky Harbor to Heathrow.

Two minutes after he'd walked into the condo, the phone call from his London agent came—great and horrible news at the same time. A wondrous role had been offered, the last to be cast, complex and challenging, with an audition already set for Thursday. But if John got the part it meant six months filming on locations in Eastern Europe—if there were no delays. That was always a big if. At the earliest, he wouldn't finish until mid-October. Production was scheduled to start in less than two weeks.

There has to be a solicitor who could work on that damned pact. I simply have to find and hire a very good one within ten days.

A generous amount of whiskey melted the ice in his glass, Maggie's face as he'd left her filled his mind's eye, and more than a ton of lead weighed heavy on his heart.

Michael and Nick flanked him, silent sentinels.

I must find the means to get out of this arrangement quickly, short of murder, John mused. How do I get Brigitte out of my life?

"What if Frogger gets flattened by a lorry?" Michael whispered, reading John's mind. "Hell, I'd pay a driver to do it just to shut that damned gob of hers most days."

John smiled slightly and downed his glass. "Might swallow the truck, mate, if he hit her whilst she assumes her usual pose." He signaled the steward for another

drink, knowing he could only hope for temporary numbness at best.

\* \* \* \*

The Internet discussion picked up steam.

<Where did you get these? Who is that with him?>

<I went hiking the other day and thought the guy looked familiar so I took a couple of pics. They were just getting into a car. Then last night I saw them together again, sitting across from our booth. It was really late, like three AM. I have no idea who she is, but when I checked your archives, I knew the guy was John Harrison. God, he's gorgeous! I wish I'd been close enough to listen to his voice.>

<Omigod! Is that a wedding ring on her finger?>

<I think so.>

<You didn't get a clear picture of her face?>

<No, there was always someone in the way. But she has real pretty hair, sort of reddish brown.>

<Do you think he's having an affair with a married woman?>

<Omigod! John Harrison is having an affair with a married woman?>

<Looks that way.>

<Whoa! He's a prat? I never would have believed it. He always seemed so honorable.>

<Do you think he'll dump The Big Mouthed Frog?>

<That Brigitte's such a selfish, conniving witch; at least a married woman wouldn't be hogging his limelight, would she?>

<Stop right now.>The webmaster deleted the posts. <There will be no idle speculation on this site, rumors, or disparaging remarks about the people in John's personal life. Take it offline.>

But the pictures remained on the site.

\* \* \* \*

Brigitte DuBois paced across the hardwood floor of the London flat, sucking hard on a cigarette, her mobile phone to her ear.

"Where? On his fans' website? *Oui*, I'll call you back." She stubbed out the butt.

"Aren't you coming back to bed?" A naked man emerged from the bedroom and came to stand behind her.

"*Oui, mon petite*. Soon." Brigitte sounded distracted as she accessed the Internet.

Warm wetness slid along the nape of her neck before the tip of a tongue reached her ear. "Ah, c'mon Brigitte. That can wait." His hand reached forward and pulled hers back to touch his hard cock. "My friend here is impatient—and cold. He needs a place that's hot and damp."

Brigitte turned around. "Rene, soon I will return to bed and suck you into oblivion." She lifted a long, perfectly manicured fingernail to trace the length of the stiffened penis in front of her. Battling her eyelashes, she watched his expression while she bent forward and flicked the

velvety softness of the head with the tip of her tongue. "Ooh, you like that, yes? Right now, I am busy securing a future for us. Be patient; all will come to fruition." She chuckled and squeezed him in one hand while she tickled his scrotum with the other. "You keep taking lovely pictures of me and I will keep you happy. Now give me five minutes and I'll soon have what I need to take everything that boring little man owns."

He frowned but shrugged. "This better be worth waiting for." He padded back through the dark to the bedroom.

"Oh, it is," Brigitte muttered, turning her full attention to the computer screen once more. "*C'est si bon.*"

## Chapter Ten

Jet lag wasn't as bad from west to east. Until you slept, John decided. Then your brain crashed and wanted an entire week's sleep to recover.

Well, five hours is going to have to do me for now. John willed himself to focus as he sat in the overly warm, plush, solicitor's office. He felt as though he was swimming underwater with weights on his legs. "Do you think you can help me?"

Christian Sloane looked at him over rectangular reading glasses. "I should be able to, Mr. Harrison. You are aware of my retainer fee?"

Gulping, John nodded.

"Then we are agreed." Christian Sloane stood. John realized he was being dismissed. "Leave contact information with my secretary."

He went straight from the solicitor's to his audition. He knew it went well when they asked him to wait. John tried not to get his hopes up.

The director came out. "The producers want a screen test. But I want you to know, you're my choice and I'm going to hold out for you." He held up a hand as John started to thank him. "Here are your pages. The scene is where our hero realizes his actions have ruined a good woman's life. Think you can put yourself into the moment?"



John nodded. "Yes, sir." More than you know, he thought and pictured Maggie's face.

\* \* \* \*

Boxes lined the driveway and marched along the sidewalk of the cul-de-sac, ending beside the sheriff's car. Maggie watched from the window, her stomach clenched into a basketball-sized knot as Husband and Tom loaded parcels into a rental truck.

"You need me to stay, Ma'am?" The deputy asked again. "He seems peaceable enough."

"Because you're here, Officer." Maggie's lawyer spoke from Maggie's right. He turned to her. "I still think you gave him too much. You are entitled to fully half of his assets, including retirement plans. We need to research those."

Maggie swallowed her nausea. "I'd rather give him all his junk now to keep him from coming back. He said he won't contest it, but I don't want to take any chances. I'm not greedy. I just want him out of my life."

"No, you aren't greedy, but don't give away what you justly deserve," the lawyer said. "I'm sure his lawyer and I will come to an agreement. The divorce will be final sixty days from filing. A quiet one would be a nice change of pace for me."

Me too, but don't hold your breath, Maggie thought.

\* \* \* \*

She heard the phone through a dream fog of John's arms around her, his lips warm against her neck. It kept

ringing and ringing and ringing. Maggie fell out of the bed to stagger to the kitchen.

"Hello?" she whispered, half asleep, and looked at the clock. 12:30AM? Her feet cramped from cold ceramic floor tiles.

"Are you there, Maggie?"

"John?"

"I know it's a terrible time but I wanted to tell you. The director just rang—I got the part! A great role, a fantastic and amazing role—because of you."

"What?" Maggie blinked. "What are you talking about?"

"A big role in a new movie, Maggie. Third lead. You're my lucky charm, my inspiration."

She smiled to herself in the dark. "That's great! I'm so happy for you. What's it called?"

"The working title is *A Raider's Countess*, but that's subject to change. It's a pre-World War Two piece. I leave for Romania tomorrow, read-through and wardrobe pre-production fittings. We start filming almost right off. Are you well?"

"Yes—no! Oh shit!" Maggie dropped the receiver to the tile as a brick smashed through the front window, shattering the big flower vase and her glass coffee table.

She ran to another window, trying to see through the dark. Two forms loomed in the faint starlight, swaying and stumbling.

"Ha! I cut the phone line!" One of the silhouettes waved an arm at the house. "Goosh shot there, buddy!"

I know that voice, Maggie thought. That's Tom.

"Hope yer happy, you bish!" Husband yelled.

Holy Jesus, they're drunk. Maggie let her breath out and slowly stepped back from the sill. There was one set of golf clubs still in the house, in this very room, a set he'd bought for her when they first married. He quit inviting her to play when her handicap went lower than his.

She reached for a long iron and hefted it expertly in her hand. If that Dick tried to come in she'd defend herself.

"Keep the fuckin' house!" She heard him shouting again. "You're a bish, always were a bish, and now you're a limey's—fuck!"

Blue and red lights flashed through the house, reflecting ahead of bright white headlights.

Maggie grinned. God bless the local Neighborhood Watch group. Someone on the street had called the sheriff.

Still, it saddened her to think their marriage was ending this way. She had loved him once, or thought she had. Enough to marry him, at least. But he'd killed that long ago.

And the beautiful vase John had sent lay in pieces on the carpet.

John! Maggie ran to the phone, but it, too, lay shattered.

\* \* \* \*

"You're very amiable today, Brigitte. Get the new Prada catalogue? Or are you just happy I'm leaving tomorrow?" John finished packing and zipped his suitcase shut.

"No, I am happy for many reasons." She unfolded her long legs from beneath her and rose from the sofa. "First, you have work you will be paid nicely for, *non*? So yes, I placed orders with Prada and Jimmy Choo. But I think what makes me most happy is to know you have a new friend."

John realized she was smiling like a predatory feline. His stomach flipped. "What are you talking about?"

"What was her name, from Arizona? Oh yes, Margie." Brigitte walked slowly toward him. "This Margie, she is the reason you are going to propose."

"What?" Every ounce of blood left his face. John felt it cascading down into his feet, anchoring him to the floor.

She came to him and put her arms around his neck. "You will ask me to marry you, John Harrison. Tonight, in front of everyone at a chic and expensive restaurant—down on your knee." She looped a curl around one finger and pulled, hard. "You will put the big rock on my left hand."

"I'll do no such thing!" He jerked away.

"I think you will," she said. Still smiling, she went back to the sofa and retrieved the tabloids she'd been leafing through. "See why?"

"Bloody hell!"

Fat black headlines screamed, *John Harrison in Desert Tryst*. Fuzzy pictures graced the front pages. John with his arms around a woman as they kissed beside a car. John walking with his hand on her hip. Another picture, obviously in a restaurant, showed John's profile with his lips pressed against her hair. It certainly indicated an

affectionate embrace. There was never a clear shot of her features, but the magnified view of her left hand clearly showed a wedding ring. *Her identity remains unknown*, the caption read. *Harrison's Married Mystery Mistress*, read another. The papers named the locale and the movie he'd been filming.

He felt sick. "Fuck me," he whispered. "How—?"

Brigitte lit a cigarette with great care and deliberation, inhaling deeply before exhaling a long, thin plume of smoke. "You should look at your Internet fan sites more often, *mon cher*. These girls, especially the Americans, they are so naïve. They think they are the only people who look at their idiotic postings. Anyone can read what they put there—including tabloid editors who know where to look." She nearly finished her cigarette with a single long drag. "Get dressed. Our reservations at Gordon Ramsay are at nine."

"I think not." John crossed his arms over his chest. "This was an innocent encounter between friends. We did nothing wrong. I won't be blackmailed into a proposal, Brigitte."

"No?" She snuffed out the glowing ember. "It's called 'mortal embarrassment' in our contract. I am greatly ashamed of my boyfriend cheating on me so publicly. So, you will propose and we will remain engaged until our contract expires. Or I will not only call and tell the tabloids her name, but send copies of all these pictures to her husband." She raised an eyebrow. "You must admit, innocent or no, they are compromising. Americans don't accept infidelity as normal as we French do, they are so... Puritan. This gives the husband, what do you call it? Leverage, yes, in a divorce. Some American men, ooh they have the temper. Don't all Americans own assault rifles?"

John couldn't speak. He'd been frantic with worry after his call to Maggie abruptly disconnected, had tried to phone again and again. She'd finally reached him on his mobile the next day and told him what had happened. Her drunken husband had thrown a goddamned brick through the window. A brick! What if it had hit her in the head? What else would have happened if the police hadn't arrived? John thought of the ugly bruise he'd glimpsed on Maggie's arm. 'He only grabbed me,' she had said. How far would that Dick go after seeing these pictures? What would it mean for her divorce? Did the bastard own a gun? If he was angry enough—or drunk enough—would he use it?

No. I can't put Maggie in danger. I won't.

He swallowed hard. "For Christ's sake, Brigitte, I'm leaving for Romania tomorrow. I need time."

Brigitte came and kissed his cheek, smearing a bright red stain. "Wear the Prada tonight. You will propose when you have a filming break—or I will sue you for everything you have. And have such fun ruining your little bitch."

## Chapter Eleven

The tabloid stories were all over the Internet. The Girls went crazy trying to figure out who the “Mystery Mistress” was, despite the webmaster’s repeated admonitions.

But Maggie hadn’t gone online. Reality had kept her from checking in with The Girls. Filing the insurance claims to get her window fixed and her table replaced, meetings with her lawyer—where she declined to press vandalism charges against her husband because she didn’t want to enrage him any further—and starting back at the bookstore all kept her away from her computer for weeks.

She logged on to The Girls’ site on a mid-April Sunday morning and gasped. The less dedicated fans had turned on him, called him a cheat, a liar, and worse, tearing him to shreds. It killed her to read such venom. And when she’d read all the posts, had seen all the scanned tabloids, and read all the comments, she was physically sick for days.

A few online friends emailed, asking her where she was, if she was all right, if she had been able to get near the set while they’d been filming. Maggie tried to answer them but couldn’t say anything without feeling like a liar or a traitor. She cried herself to sleep, worried for him, fearful that their one night of innocent pleasure had ruined his life.

Lupe came to her house with tortilla soup that Maggie couldn't eat.

"Call him, Maggie. You have his number." Lupe shook her head as they sat on the patio. "You're losing weight, *Amiga*, and that's not good. Call him."

"I can't—he's working. I can't disturb him on location. And writing is out of the question—his manager gets all his fan mail and Brigitte lives in the apartment."

Lupe gaped. "What? You kicked your *pendejo* husband out; why can't he do the same to her?"

Maggie explained about the palimony situation. "John has someone looking into breaking the pact, but while he's in Romania, how much can he do about her in London?"

"What about email? Text messaging?"

"I don't know. I don't know if she can access his email or not. I don't want to give her any more ammunition against him." Tears of frustration spilled from Maggie's eyes. "All I can do is wait for him to contact me, tell me what's happening, how we can talk." She wiped her eyes, sniffed loudly. "God, I'm sorry, Lupe. It's all the stress."

"Hey, it's okay." Lupe came and hugged her. "Has the *pendejo* bothered you any more?"

"No. I think spending twenty-four hours in the county jail scared him pretty damn bad. Played into our hands, my lawyer said. He's not contesting a thing. The divorce will be final at the end of May. I'll keep the house and have enough to live on for a good long while. Thank God



the bookstore's keeping me from losing my mind, and I'll get a raise in three months."

Lupe nodded. "Yeah, it's good you went back to work. But you need to eat. You don't like my soup, so I'll take you to my cousin Berto's."

"Lupe, no offense, but I just don't feel like Mexican food right now."

"Naw, he married an Italian. You need pasta. And wine. Lots of wine."

\* \* \* \*

The phone rang at one o'clock in the morning. I have to get a phone put in the bedroom, she decided. Scuttling into the kitchen, she tripped over the rug and stubbed her foot against the dishwasher. "Shit! Ow! Damn! Yeah?"

"Maggie?"

"John?"

He sounded tinny, and there was that weird pause as the connection bounced off satellites, echoing in the line. "Maggie... so chuffed to hear you."

She wanted to cry with joy at the music of his baritone. "John, where are you?"

"Not much... moving... a new location today." The echo made it hard to know when to speak. "Heading further into the mountains. Won't... mobile service—have you seen the tabloids? I'm so sorry."

"No, John, it's not your fault, but I hate what's being said—"

“Don’t worry, it’ll die down... miss you... wish I could—”

Then the connection was gone. She was left alone in the dark, standing on the cool tile floor, staring at the buzzing receiver.

Michael saved her sanity a few days later with a phone call. “Maggie, I have only a moment. John got one call out to me this week and he has no access to email either. They’re really filming in the remote back woods. Are you all right?”

She assured him she was. “Michael, are the tabloids as bad as they look on the Net?”

“Yeah, sorry to say they are. I’m thinking Frogger keeps it going—”

“Frogger?” Maggie couldn’t help but giggle. “That’s what you call her?”

“Spot on, isn’t it?” Michael chuckled. “That big gob of hers... But try not to worry, Maggie; Nick and I are on a mission. John has a week homecoming soon, and we’re hopeful the solicitor will have a solution by then. But whatever you do, don’t believe one word Frogger says. I can tell you not to look, not to read, but I know it’s nearly impossible. Chin up, then. Here’s my email.”

She hung up soon after their exchange of addresses, hopeful.

A letter arrived two weeks later:

*My Dearest M,*

*I would have rung back, but my mobile has quit, and in any case, I understand it’s easily listened in on. The regular phones here are dodgy at best and certainly not*

*private. Ring Michael or Nick with messages. We did nothing wrong, so have nothing to answer for. I know I'm taking a chance by writing, but I need to let you know I miss you terribly. I begged one of the crew to post this for me, said it was to my cousin. (With a nod to Lupe.)*

*My solicitor has told me to play along for now; he's working on a solution. So if you see pictures of me with her during the break, please understand it's not my choice. I'll ring you as soon as I'm in London and have some privacy. Believe me, anything that may happen with her is not real. All this ado will calm down as soon as Britney does something more sordid.*

*Surely, if there is any justice in this life, we will be together soon. My heart and my soul and all of my love are yours.*

*J.*

But things didn't calm down throughout the month of May. The only good thing about any of it, Maggie decided, was that John was still fairly unknown outside the U.K.—so none of the U.S. papers carried a word.

The frenzy on The Girls' site grew when he returned to London on a week-long break and escorted Brigitte to two trendy fashion shows, a chic bar grand opening party, plus an art house showing of her latest acting endeavor. Brigitte posed, smiling broadly in a hideous outfit that was the newest trend for the under-twenty set—but all the photographers had their lenses on John. They shouted for him to tell them more about the "mystery mistress." John remained silent, stoically staring into space, his hands in his pockets. He gave no interviews, made no comments.

Brigitte's face contorted into a grotesque mask. Flashbulbs burst like fireworks, illuminating her clenched jaw and furious eyes.

Maggie couldn't look and yet couldn't stop as picture after picture appeared on the Internet. It was like driving past a particularly nasty car wreck—you didn't want to gawk but your head turned toward the scene automatically. She kept to herself, responding to emails with minimal words and neutral remarks.

There was only one cryptic line from Michael: "Nick and I are on a mission. Chin up, old girl."

Miserable, she held her breath each time the phone rang, hating telemarketers and windshield repair salesmen with every call.

\* \* \* \*

Maggie found herself alone the day her divorce became final. Lupe was out of town but due back soon from an aunt's funeral in California.

Two big glasses of red wine went down quickly with Maggie's lonely lunch. She thought about not answering the phone at all when it rang, sure it was the Fraternal Order of Police only wanting money, but she gave in and picked up on the fourth ring.

"Hull-low," she slurred.

"Maggie, are you well?"

She couldn't speak right away. Her heart seemed to have jumped into her larynx. "Uh, hey, John," she finally managed. "Whassup? No purse party today?"

"Oh Maggie..." He paused, and she heard him sigh. "I don't blame you for being upset. I hated being there. I hate being here." He paused and she heard his breath echoing through the line. "I don't know how to say this."

She closed her eyes with unknown dread. "Just do it."

"There have to be concessions for all the negative publicity. I—oh hell! Maggie, I am to propose to Brigitte tonight, for her to save face."

Maggie felt the world shift sideways. "This is a joke, right? This is that wickedly droll British humor, isn't it, John? You'll have to explain it to me though. I'm a dumb American—I don't get it."

"I'm sorry." She heard his voice break over the line. "The solicitor, my publicist—they tell me it's the only way. I have to propose. But it isn't real, Maggie. It's not real."

She leaned against the wall. Slowly, slowly, she sank to the floor, gutted, numb. Had Husband—no, he wasn't that anymore—that Dick—had he been right all along? No, John wouldn't play her for a fool. Would he? What she'd felt, what she'd seen in his eyes, what they'd shared was true, wasn't it?

Wasn't it?

"Maggie, this is killing me. Say something, please."

She heard his voice, far away from the other end of the phone, from the other side of the world. She blinked groggily at the receiver in her hand, wondering how his words came so easily from across an ocean and a continent to wound as deeply and as quickly as a knife plunged into her heart.

"It's a face-saving measure for her. I caused her 'mortal embarrassment' when those pictures were published, at this latest event. It's all a sham. Maggie, say you

understand. I need to know you believe me. This proposal, this engagement means noth—”

She pushed herself up from the floor and slowly, carefully, hung up.

For two and a half hours the phone rang. Five rings, then the voice mail kicked on; moments later another series of rings would start.

She stared at the ceiling, lying on the bed, listening to the rings become fewer and fewer and eventually stop as tears soaked into her pillow. Bitter chuckles escaped between sobs as she realized she hadn’t mentioned her divorce.

John didn’t know she’d been freed on the very day he’d become shackled.

## Chapter Twelve

The Ivy Restaurant hummed with celebrities, gossiping celebrity watchers, and celebrity wannabes as Brigitte DuBois was shown to a prominent table. "Mr. Harrison will be arriving shortly," she told the *maitre d'*. She snapped her fingers imperiously at a waiter. "Bring me a cosmopolitan." She smiled at faces she recognized as she sipped her drink, waiting with triumph in her eyes.

Heads swivelled when John entered the room. He looked exceptionally handsome, dressed in Dolce and Gabbana from head to toe, perfectly groomed. Brigitte nodded with approval as he came to their table and sat.

"A bottle of Crystal, please," he told the waiter.

"My! How extravagant you are this evening," Brigitte said. "Is tonight a special occasion?" She batted her eyes.

John simply smiled.

\* \* \* \*

"Maggie? Are you all right? Maggie, open this door." Lupe pressed her face against the window. "Maggie!"

"Okay, okay, I'm coming." The door opened onto a disheveled, red-eyed woman in a rumpled jogging suit.

"You look like hell." Lupe hurried inside. "I got your message just as I got home, couldn't understand a word. You scared the shit outta me... What happened again?"

Maggie squeezed her eyes shut tight. "God, my head hurts. I should know better than to drink at lunch, especially red wine."

"Jesus." Lupe peered at her friend. "This is about more than you getting drunk and leaving a garbled message. He called with bad news, didn't he?"

Maggie nodded, carefully. "I need aspirin. And a shower. I don't want to be alone, Lupe. My divorce is final today and—oh hell." She put a hand against her temple as hot tears burst forth. "I'm sorry," she sobbed, wiping snot from her nose.

Small brown hands steered her toward the master bedroom. "Go shower and get clean clothes on. I'll make coffee and we'll talk. Go on."

Lupe listened for the shower to start. Then she started searching Maggie's kitchen for John's number.

\* \* \* \*

"I love beef Wellington," John said as he laid his knife and fork down properly. "Absolutely superb. Damn, we're out of champagne. Should we get another bottle, or are you ready for brandy?"

Brigitte raised an eyebrow. "Louis XIII?"

"That sounds lovely. Order them, would you? If you'll excuse me?" He rose and gave her a little nod before heading toward the restrooms.



A knot of well-heeled businessmen near the entrance prepared to leave. John casually slipped in among them. He kept his head down, adjusting his jacket collar against the night chill as the others did. The gaggle of dark suits swept onto West Street as a single group, ignored by bored paparazzi waiting for young, brash, hopefully drunk and panty-less female celebrities.

John turned the corner smiling. He surprised the nearest fellow by bidding him a hearty good night. Trotting quickly up the block, he hailed a taxi.

His mobile rang just as he turned it on, settling into the seat. Maggie's number glowed from the screen. "Maggie, love, I—"

"What the hell did you do to her, *pendejo*?"

"Lupe? Lovely to hear from you. Where's Mag—"

A string of Spanish epithets blasted his ear. "I told you not to break her heart, you goddamn shit." Her voice growled like a jaguar. "You're lucky my cousin Chuy doesn't live in England. I am going to kick your ass so hard you'll sit on the back of your head for the rest of your life. I'll cut your tongue out and feed it to—"

John held the phone out and held up a hand as if she could see. "Lupe. Lupe, wait. Where is Maggie? All right, tell her I didn't do it. Yes, those exact words. She'll know it means good news for us."

He listened a moment, eyes closed. "Lupe, I'm sorry. Tell her I didn't think I had a choice, didn't know I had a spine until... well, she inspires me to be more of a man. Please tell her that I'll be very busy the next few hours but I'll ring before she goes to bed tonight. Yes, yes... While I have you, could you give me Tavo's number?"

\* \* \* \*

Brigitte sipped her expensive after-dinner liqueur, swinging one foot impatiently under the table. Definitely taking his time in there, isn't he? Still, he's gone above and beyond what I'd expected, ordering the most expensive dishes and champagne, really doing it up. And soon he'll be on his knees, in front of everyone. But he'd better hurry; Joss Stone is having dessert, Madonna and Guy already left, and Sting is paying his tab. Rene is waiting outside to snap pictures of us; I must be sure to flash the ring.

The waiter approached. "Madame? Will there be anything else?"

"I am waiting for Mr. Harrison's return. Bring me coffee."

\* \* \* \*

John ran up the steps to the flat, pleased to see Michael and Nick waiting with a workman.

"Come in, gents, come in. We've loads of work to do in a short time."

\* \* \* \*

Where the hell is he? There are very few people left in the dining room—and not one of them a damn celebrity. Which, of course, means most of the paparazzi left as well.

The waiter circled the table like a shark, offering more coffee with disdain in his eyes.

Her mobile vibrated in her chic clutch bag. She hurried to check the caller's number as the insolent waiter

glared. She knew the rules of The Ivy and wouldn't dare pick up at the table.

John? How the hell—?

The waiter placed the leather folder discreetly encasing the bill before her, his expression carefully neutral.

\* \* \* \*

Maggie returned to the kitchen, chagrined. "God, Lupe, I've been throwing myself a helluva damn pity party all day. I'm sorry about your aunt. How was the service?"

Dark eyes met hers above a steaming mug of coffee. Lupe tilted her head. "*Gracias, Amiga*. She was sick for a long time; she's better off now. Let's go on the patio, okay?"

\* \* \* \*

Brigitte flipped open her mobile and hit last call, illuminated with blue light in the back of the taxi.

"*Bon soir, mon chien*," John answered on the first ring. "How was dessert?"

"You goddamn fuck. You will pay."

"No, you did. By the way, you might want to check into hotel vacancies. You don't live here anymore."

Brigitte laughed. "A gallant try, John, but you're bluffing."

"Your things are piled on the stairs. I've informed the neighbors and the manager. The locks are changed and a new tenant moved in. I've also informed the proper

people that I am no longer responsible for any of your debts.”

“You bastard.” She nearly growled, and the cabbie checked his mirror wide-eyed. “I am going to ruin you. I’ll have everything you own, and I’ll drag her through the—don’t you hang up on me!”

She yelled at the cabbie. “Drive faster, you imbecile!”

## Chapter Thirteen

Maggie jumped from where she slept on the sofa with the first ring of the phone. "Hello?"

"Lupe gave you my message?" He spoke softly.

"Yes. And I'm glad, but I'm sorry."

"Sorry? Why should you be sorry?"

"John, she'll take everything you've worked so hard for."

"Let her have it all, I don't care anymore," he said and the smile came through his voice. He paused. "None of that matters. You gave me heart, courage to let it all go. I need only you. May I see you? Is it safe? I don't want to put you in jeopardy—"

"John," she interrupted. "My divorce was final yesterday."

"Really? Then we're truly free to be together?"

Maggie nodded, forgetting he couldn't see. "When?"

"I'm scheduled to land in Los Angeles in six hours."

She realized he was whispering. "You're calling from the plane?"

"Yes, and I spotted someone who is very likely following me. I've seen him often, the bastard. He's one of the

paparazzi I think she pays to tag after us. Well, me now. I don't want him to find your house, love. I have a marvellous idea for us to meet, but don't want to say where and possibly be overheard."

"If I name places, you can say yes or no."

"All right."

"Somewhere in California?"

"That would be a no."

"Still in the West?"

"Yes."

"Seattle?"

"No."

"Las Vegas?"

"Yes, you bright, lovely thing."

"I can get there easily, but how can you without being followed, John? If he's tailed you to LA from London—"

He chuckled, deep and soft. "No worries. I'm meeting a cousin."

\* \* \* \*

Brigitte blew smoke through her nose. "Well? Have you found him?"

"Yes. He's on a flight to Los Angeles."

"And where are you now, Rene?"

"Six rows behind him."

"Good. Don't lose him and you'll find her. Think of the scoop you'll have getting the face of the Mystery Mistress. Don't fuck it up."

"Yeah? Well, I love you too, Brigitte."

"Love is bullshit," she said, and lit another smoke. "Get those pictures."

\* \* \* \*

John hurried up the aisle, weaving into groups and families in a hurry to deplane.

He walked quickly to Customs, desperately resisting temptation to look back over his shoulder as he calmly answered their questions.

"Welcome to the United States, Mr. Harrison." The agent handed back his British passport. "Enjoy your three days."

"Thank you," John nodded politely. As he turned the corner, he saw his pursuer still waiting in line behind ten senior citizens on a tour group.

Good, that'll slow him down a bit, he thought jogging toward the ticket counters.

He spotted a young man standing by Southwest Airlines holding a piece of cardboard with "Tavo" scrawled in black marker.

"*Hola*," John smiled, extending his hand. "You must be my cousin."

\* \* \* \*

Rene tried not to panic. At last Customs released him. He ran around the tour group blocking the hallway. He noticed Harrison had carried only one bag—a Louis Vuitton tote—through Customs. He walked briskly into the main thoroughfare of the terminal.

There! He spotted Harrison's blue sport coat and the distinctive Vuitton logos weaving between bodies beyond the domestic ticket counters. He followed at a distance through the crowd to the restaurant pavilion.

\* \* \* \*

It was a rare gray day in the Nevada desert. Heavy dark clouds hid the mountains all the way down to the foothills, shrouding the city. The place teemed with travellers these last few days before Memorial Day weekend. Easy to get lost in the shuffle, Maggie reflected as she stood just outside security. Hundreds of them could even be named Harrison. That should buy him anonymity. No one would think he would come here—they'd be looking for him to meet her near her home.

She hoped he would know her, dressed down as she was in a red tank top, chambray shirt, capri jeans, ballet flats, and big sunglasses. She wore an Arizona Diamondbacks baseball cap over her hair.

Two planes landed at the same time. A flood of humanity came toward her, surging toward baggage claim.

A slender man approached carrying a beat up tote, dressed in baggy chino pants, a wild Hawaiian shirt, RayBan Wayfarer sunglasses, and a Blues Brothers porkpie hat. Something wasn't right... the shoes. Maggie noticed he wore beautiful Italian loafers. Wow, are those Armani?



He stopped in front of her. "Hey, Chiquita, you busy? My cousin told me to ask you about little snakes."

Maggie laughed, long and hard as John slid the sunglasses down his nose to peer at her with eyes bloodshot with fatigue.

"Where in God's name did you get that outfit?"

John smiled. "Tavo's cousin from East LA met me. We traded clothes and bags in the men's room. I'm lucky no policeman mistook us for George Michael and friend, eh?"

She shook her head, chuckling. "The shoes gave you away. No self-respecting *cholo* would ever be seen wearing those."

"Ah, well, yes." John looked down. "I love these far too much to give them up. They're quite comfy." He looked at her over his glasses once more. "So, I'm an Anglo *cholo*."

She laughed, enfolded him into her arms, and closed her eyes. They stood entwined, an isle in a river of travellers flowing past. Warm, dear God he was warm against her. She breathed in the light fragrance of his cologne, his skin, his hair, drinking him in and becoming intoxicated—addicted—to him all over again.

They were alone, the tide of people ebbed, when he straightened and stepped back a bit. He didn't release her completely; his hands slid down to take hers, skin to skin at last. "You're so beautiful," he sighed. "Seeing you makes life worth living."

"You're delirious with exhaustion," she said, smiling, "but thank you. Let's go; we have a room reserved and very little time together."

Two minutes later, she smiled as John fell asleep in the cab with his head resting against hers.

## Chapter Fourteen

It was a cute little suite with a sitting room, table, kitchenette, a small refrigerator, mini-bar and a king-sized bed. Heaven could not have looked more inviting.

John leaned against the wall in the steamy shower. The heat on his skin and the moisture in his lungs were such a comfort that he nearly fell asleep. Damn jet lag. He didn't have time to sleep... but this felt luscious.

He hadn't realized he'd been in there so long. But Maggie had the table set with food and wine when he emerged, dressed in his own jeans and shirt.

"How did you—?"

She smiled. "There's an advantage to staying off The Strip and out of the big hotels in Vegas. There's a wonderful little deli half a block from here. I walked over and got dinner, then this bottle of Riesling at the shop next door. Hungry?"

"Starving!"

"Me too!"

They attacked the roasted chicken and mashed potatoes, each moaning with pleasure at the flavorful meal.

"Did you ever see *Tom Jones*?" John asked with a drumstick in his hand.

"Oh, yes! Albert Finney and—who was the girl?"

"Susannah York."

"Yes! That scene—the way they ate staring at each other was incredibly erotic."

"Like this?" John ripped into the drumstick while he gazed into her eyes with blatant wanton desire. He licked his lips, then his fingers, slowly, sensuously, never looking away.

"Oh God yes, just like that." Maggie smiled. "I don't even remember the rest of the movie. You're a fine actor, John."

He set the stripped chicken bone on his plate and took a sip of wine, never breaking eye contact. "Thank you, but I wasn't acting." He wiped his mouth and hands with the linen napkin, rose, and came around the table to her. "I'm keeping a promise."

His long fingers took her hand, enticed her to rise and step into his arms, into a kiss of fire. She felt his tongue teasing, fluttering to coax her to reciprocate. No words were spoken as he danced her away from the table, those long hands sliding down to her hips to gently caress her buttocks and pull her closer, his hardness against her, urgent and hot.

Maggie let her head fall back as his mouth moved to the hollow of her throat, drawing air like a goldfish fallen from its bowl. John trailed his tongue along the muscles of her neck, nuzzling under her jaw with heated breath.

He lifted her and she was falling, falling through his kisses to the bed. He leaned on an elbow and teased her, his free hand tracing the roundness of her breast

through her top as he used his lips to caress her cheekbones, nose and eyes. Maggie worked his shirt buttons free of their holes, exposing a smoothly muscled chest. Fine, the hair was so fine there, golden brown tinged in red. His skin radiated musk mixed with his delicious cologne.

"You look so lovely. May I watch you take off your bra?" he asked.

"If you let me watch you take something off first," she replied.

He obliged her and stood, tossing his shirt off his back, slowly unbuckling his belt, the button of his jeans.

"That's enough. I want to do the rest," she said. She sat up, unzipped her jeans and wriggled them off, leaving her in cornflower blue panties and bra. Then she unhooked that, letting each strap fall down her arms before freeing her breasts.

John knelt on the bed and reached out with a long finger, tracing each nipple taut before gently pushing her to lie back. His lips moistened her skin as he moved his mouth to the side of a globe, teasing her. When he latched on to suck, the universe exploded between her thighs. She ran her fingers through his hair, groaning softly with pleasure, arching her back to offer the other to him as well.

He was gentle and demanding at the same time, suckling hard one moment, then tickling her with his tongue.

She lifted his head, green eyes glistening. "My turn."

He needed no other encouragement to slide to his feet and stand before her.

Maggie sat up and reached for him, running her fingers around the tops of his hip bones, pleased at the goose flesh that appeared. She peeled the denim away from his pelvis to see—

“Boxers. I knew it.” She looked up to see him grinning wickedly at her. “Ooh, silk. Love the red foulard on blue.” His jeans dropped to the floor and he was quick to step out and kick them backward.

“Oh my,” Maggie teased, “setting up camp? I see you’ve already pitched your tent.” And what a tent it was! Suddenly nervous, her touch became tentative over thin silk as she placed her palm against the hardness beneath, then quickly withdrew.

He could see apprehension in her face. “Maggie, love, what’s wrong?” He knelt before her, amazed at the blush in her cheeks that endeared her to him even more. “You don’t have to do anything you don’t want to, all right?”

“I... have a confession to make.” She put her hand on his chest, caressing his clavicle and shoulder. “I’ve only been with one man, John. I’m afraid I don’t know enough, maybe I won’t please you—”

“Nonsense.” He cupped her face in both hands, softly kissed the tip of her nose. “That’s what love is about, my darling Maggie. Finding out what makes each other happy. Here.” He stood and brought her to her feet in front of him. “Follow my lead.”

He put his hand on her waist and took her right in his left. Maggie giggled as he began to hum a Strauss waltz and dance with her through the suite.

"Da da, da da, da *dum* da da..." He grinned as she laughed.

"Do you know how ridiculous we must look, waltzing half-naked?"

"Ah but that's remedied easily enough." His right hand inched down beneath the waistband of her panties as he continued to hum and dance. He had them below her buttocks in seconds, pulling them to her ankles as he dipped her sideways.

"Now kick," he instructed. "Da *dum*—"

Cotton sailed across the room like a bluebird over the white cliffs of Dover.

"—da da!" He twirled her with one hand as his other stripped his boxers off to fly in the same direction. He resumed proper hand position.

"There. Fully nude is far more proper, isn't it?" Flashing his eyes, he moved closer, slowing his steps, his erection hard against her tummy.

Maggie blushed again. John was bigger than her experience in every aspect; so hard, he felt like a tree trunk extending against her abdomen.

He ended their vertical dance with a passionate kiss that melted her legs, and she realized they were lying on the bed though she had no notion of getting there.

"Maggie," he said, his right hand brushing chestnut hair behind her ear. "Let me show you how much I've wanted to love you."

His hand worshipped its way down her body on a pilgrimage, his mouth following, lingering at each breast

and her navel, way stations to the holiest of shrines. Ready, oh dear God she was so ready for him when he slid his hand between her thighs, his fingers exploring musky wet that conducted electricity throughout her being.

He had moved himself out of her reach and breathed on her open mouthed, magic emanating from his hand. She gasped at the warmth of his breath on her. The tiniest flick of his tongue sent her reeling.

"Mmm..." He started a long, slow caress, tongue trading places with his fingers, back and forth, up and down the length of her sex. Tender and reverent, sucking, licking, lapping, nibbling into an explosion she'd never thought possible.

Maggie squirmed and moaned aloud with her orgasm, shaking uncontrollably as everything inside her erupted. She squeezed her eyes shut, flashes of light like fireworks flickering against black.

John bestowed a final lingering lick before pulling himself up to lie beside her, enthralled with her beautiful expression. She slowly opened her eyes; green emeralds glowed beneath thick auburn lashes.

He leaned forward and took her lower lip between his, then the upper, finally melding his mouth to hers fully as he rolled onto her. She could taste her own sweetness and marvelled in surprise at her lack of shame while she hungrily returned his kisses.

Slowly, he slid his entire length into her, not stopping until she felt his public bone against hers. He watched her face with a loving smile, mischief flashing from those golden flecks in his eyes. Exquisite agony, Maggie thought. It had been so damned long since—it was



almost like losing her virginity again. But oh, this was far, far better. Sex had never been such an intense experience.

They moved together and apart, dancing within each other, breathing each other in, straining to please, holding on for just a little longer. He thrust into her again and again, slow and then fast, gentle then hard, pressuring and teasing her into another wave of gasping, moaning pleasure.

He was close, so close. She could tell the way he held his breath, paused his movements. His skin shone with a thin sheen of sweat, salty and sweet on her tongue. Maggie squeezed herself around him and drew her fingernails down his back with a light touch.

He surrendered—eyes scrunching shut, a groan growling up from his throat. She could feel his spasms as he came and peaceful satisfaction filled her, knowing she had pleased him.

He relaxed against her for a moment, slid his weight off without disengaging himself, and cradled her to his chest.

She stroked his sweat-dampened curls. “I don’t think I’ve ever felt so complete.” She kissed the tip of his nose.

He smiled into her eyes. “Nor have I. Told you we’re soul mates, Maggie.”

Each wanted this moment to last forever—sharing warmth and breath, no one else in the world to bother them. Bittersweet it was, knowing it couldn’t, knowing reality would be waiting for them all too soon.

## Chapter Fifteen

Midnight rain punished the streets of London for flirting with the sun in the afternoon, purging them of warmth and light.

"You got them? And when? Tomorrow's TattleTale? What about The Reflector? Uh-huh, yes... online by six AM? Oh, what fun this is! Yes, of course. I can hardly wait to see the reactions."

\* \* \* \*

John blinked, disoriented. Bed? Where? Warm, mmm, I smell that musky tang of sex... or did I merely dream again of Maggie?

He opened his eyes. Faint light. White hotel-grade sheets, rumpled and tangled around him contrasted with a hideous paisley bedspread. Which is it—dusk or dawn? Damn this jet lag—how long have I been asleep?

A slow turn of his head brought to his eyes the lovely vision of Maggie, serene and smiling in sleep beside him. He shifted to lie on his side and propped his head on his hand to see her more clearly.

Thank you, God. I hope I never forget this moment. Beautiful, adorable, her hair stuck out in all directions on the pillow. When I'm old and senile and can't remember my name, I want to remember her smile. Particularly this smile.

Her eyes fluttered open, illuminating her face with happiness.

"You look most gorgeously dishevelled, milady," he said, reaching over to tuck a strand of hair behind her ear.

"As do you," she responded. "Very sexy."

"Do I?" He moved closer, slid an arm over her waist and gazed at her. "I told you before, you inspire me."

She touched the tip of his nose, peace still lighting her eyes.

"What time is it, love? What day?"

"Should we care?"

"Unfortunately, yes. I leave Los Angeles for London on Sunday evening, and I'm off to Romania again five hours after arrival. I'm due back on the set at six Tuesday morning."

She stretched like a cat before raising herself onto an elbow to look over his shoulder at the digital alarm clock on the night stand. "It's 6:30 Friday evening, John. We checked in five hours ago." She looked into his eyes. "I've never had jet lag, but I hear it's awful. You need to sleep."

"No. We have so little time. I'll sleep on the flight. May I take you out, Maggie? Shall we go somewhere to eat, walk along the Strip? Then come back here and make love again and again until neither of us can walk?" He kissed her hand. "Or shall we start with that part first?"

The way she pressed herself against him was all the answer he needed.

\* \* \* \*

Brigitte DuBois brushed her blonde hair vigorously before angrily twisting it into a French knot at the back of her head. Her clothes lay scattered across the bedroom, tossed on chairs, piled on tables, vying for space with discarded hangers and boxes.

How can I possibly look my best living in a hotel? This light is horrible for makeup.

She took a deep breath to settle herself and reached for her cigarettes. This luncheon party for Jimmy Choo's new line is exactly what I need. I'll be the sophisticate, cool and calm without a care. Then when the paparazzi take my picture and ask about John, I tell them I left him. He'd prefer to cavort with his married tramp. I will be the wronged woman and everyone will shower me with sympathy while I tell them don't worry, I am strong.

She chuckled low in her throat at her reflection in the mirror before taking another puff. Like I ever cared. True, John has the cock of a young horse, but his moralizing and mooning about love sickened me. His money was always his best feature—and soon I will have it all.

A knock on the door interrupted her thoughts. Ah, the maid with the morning tabloids as ordered... "Set them on the coffee table, yes, there," Brigitte commanded with a wave of her hand.

She turned back to the mirror with a barracuda's smile.

Her coffee was cold, the cream congealed into floating scum when Brigitte stood with her red-rimmed mouth

open, stunned with The TattleTale in her hands, The Reflector crumpled on the floor.

The telephone rang. The sound barely registered in her brain. Everything seemed to move in slow motion.

"Yes?" she said into the receiver.

"Like the pictures, did you?"

"You goddamned bastard!"

"No, actually my parents were married for some time before I was even conceived. Not like yours, I hear. I believe your friend, what was his name? Oh yes. Rene. Lovely chap. I believe he was quite willing to sell you out for a mere few hundred pounds. You might want to check the Internet for the streaming video. The man certainly had a way with hidden cameras. Nice touch having them all dated with shots of the daily newspapers. You should be proud of your incredibly brilliant technique on the fellatio, by the way. I knew there had to be something that kept John from thinking straight. I must admit, I had to have a right good wank after watching that."

"I was always nice to you, Michael—"

"Were you? When? I didn't seem to notice. Besides, this isn't about me, Brigitte. It isn't even about John. It's about you. It always has been, hasn't it?"

She held the phone away from her, shaking her head in disbelief. "What do you want from me?"

"Nothing." She heard Michael speak calmly. "You can decide whether to drag this out in all the tabloids or end it now. I personally don't care. But I will tell you that

Nick bought the rest of the video diary. I only acquired the stills. Rene did all right for himself, wouldn't you say? He told me we purchased everything; I hope we can believe him... don't you?"

Brigitte slowly sank to the edge of the nearest chair as Michael continued.

"I know this is no real damage to your reputation—if you ever had one. But these pictures and especially the video record of all those liaisons... well, they rather blow that contract, pardon the pun. You may want to withdraw your lawsuit and walk away with what John's solicitor offers. It may be all you get."

The buzz of the dial tone as the call disconnected echoed around the otherwise silent hotel room.

\* \* \* \*

John held Maggie's hand as they watched the dancing waters outside the Bellagio Hotel. Soon they slid their arms around each others' waists, oblivious to the rest of the world—like so many of the other couples standing alongside them.

"A fabulous dinner, a lovely stroll, and now this," John said. He looked down into Maggie's face. "What a wondrous day this has been."

"It's not over yet," she smiled. "Want to go through Caesar's Palace?"

"Actually..." He led her to a park bench facing the street. "I would like to talk for a few minutes."

"Oh-oh. This sounds serious."

"It is." John took her hands in his and faced her squarely. "Maggie, I first thought to meet you here because of all the wedding chapels. I wanted to ask you to marry me."

She looked down at their hands, then back up. Trying to keep the fear bubbling in her stomach from reaching her voice, she said, "You're using the past tense."

"Yes."

The evening breeze, cooled by the afternoon's rain shower, lifted the curls from his forehead, exposing a small pockmark above his right eyebrow. The oddest little details burn into your brain while your heart stops, Maggie decided. She couldn't trust her voice to speak again, merely raised her eyebrows and tilted her head.

John caressed her hands, never breaking his gaze. "Maggie, I love you. During the long trip here, all I could think of was standing with you in one of these little chapels and promising to cherish you for the rest of my life."

He leaned forward in earnestness, wetness glazing his eyes. The gaudy lights of Las Vegas glimmered in their reflection.

Maggie felt hot tears sting her cheeks.

"Darling, I realized that I can't marry you right now. Not until I get this legal situation settled. I fear she might take your assets as well. Then there are the London tabloids. You have no idea, and there's nothing I could say to prepare you... How could I think to subject you to that gauntlet?"

He slid closer to her. "I want to marry you, Maggie. But I cannot ask you with this dark cloud looming over me."

Words stuck in her throat. Maggie swallowed hard. "John, I—"

"Please don't hate me." He cupped her right cheek with his hand. "For once I'm trying to think ahead. The other problem is this film. I won't finish for months. I'd want you there, and I don't have the pull to demand your presence on the set. And," he smiled, touching his nose to hers, "you would be an incredible distraction."

"John—"

"October. Maggie, if we can wait until I finish in October, I might have something figured out by then, at least an idea of what she could or couldn't do to you if we—"

"Shut up for a minute, would you?" Tears dripped from her face and she kissed him. "I understand, John."

"You do?"

"Yes, you silly man." Maggie chuckled and leaned back, wiping her eyes. "Are you always going to monopolize our conversations?"

"Maybe." John tucked her hair behind her ear. "God, I love your hair. It's so thick and shiny."

She shook her head. "Don't go changing the subject." Rummaging in her little purse, she fished out a tissue and tried to be dainty about blowing her nose.

"You could come visit for a week now and then, love—"

"No, I can't."



Now it was his turn to look puzzled. "No?"

"Besides the fact that I just started working again at a place I love, I don't have a passport. I can't meet you anywhere but here in the States."

"How do you not have a—?"

"Most Americans don't. You don't get one unless you plan to leave the country. And now that a passport's required to for travel from Canada and Mexico, the processing wait is horrendous."

They looked at each other for a few seconds before both chuckled at the irony. "We're screwed either way, aren't we?" Maggie said.

"No. No, love." John wrapped his arms around her. "It's a temporary setback. An intermission between dances." He touched his lips to her cheek. "Come on then. Let's enjoy our interlude tonight and tomorrow. Harsh reality will have to wait. You see about a passport when you get home and I'll see what the solicitor has to say in London. We'll get everything started to be together by autumn."

They rose to leave. Maggie hugged him, looking up into his face. "Thank you."

"For...?"

"That's the noblest way I've ever had a man not ask me to marry him."

"Wait till I can honestly propose, Maggie Pearce. I'll knock your socks off."

She grinned at him. "I'm hoping you'll knock my knickers off long before that."

“I’m certainly willing to give it a go, love.”

His kiss electrified her again.

They walked quickly through the crowds to return to their suite, arm in arm, smiling.

***The End***

**About the Author:**

Nia Little is an evil twin who started writing when her child went off to school. Her past lives seem to involve British ties. Most likely she was a Celtic witch of some power who revelled in drugging and seducing Roman tribunes at Beltane... well, any time, actually.

She currently lives in Arizona and enjoys watching people and birds flock to the desert and then complain about the heat.

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