

Red RoseTM Publishing

Book 1 Knight Brothers Series

Wicked Knight

Tierney
O'Malley

Wicked Knight

By

Tierney O'Malley

Dedication

To my brother, Cesar Caídas

*The world will never be the same
without you.*

*I wish I could talk to you one more
time.*

Love, Sis



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Chapter One

“God damn it, Bors! That was uncalled for.”

“Bullshit!” Bors yelled back and shoved Tristan. “Learn the game, Doctor. Or quit playing. Such a fuck—”

Julie cringed at the sound of flesh hitting against flesh as the two brothers collided. Why football was such a popular game and pastime, she had no idea. They pushed, hit, and tackled. In her personal opinion, the men played the game to boast their pure macho chauvinistic prowess. And watching the Knight Brothers tackle and plow each other to the ground to gain possession of the football was all that—power showmanship.

Loud grunts and cursing that would put a drunken harlot to shame mixed with the sounds of shoes scuffling on the dusty yard with patches of green and brown grass. The spring sun beat down on them, making their sweat shine and more visible. From the doorway, Julie stood and watched the brothers use their bodies to slam against each other repeatedly. What a nutty way to show their love for the game, she thought.

But the brothers were far from nutty. They were all magnificent specimens—and a remarkable sight. As remarkable as the panoramic view of the Olympic Mountains, Peninsula, and Puget Sound. She switched looking from the

view to the men. *Yup, equally remarkable.*

Over six feet in height, physical strength and weight, rugged and powerful, dark hair, blue eyes, and oozing with sex appeal—what more could a man want to possess? She often wondered if they were gods from Olympus. Really, the only place she'd been where handsome men—nearly perfect in everything physical—was at the studio where she had a photo shoot for a GAP commercial.

Unlike the clean-cut, manicured, men with super white teeth in the modeling agency, these guys didn't mind getting dirty at all. Watching the Knights brought the same reaction to her insides as the panoramic views of the snow-capped Olympic Mountain range and breathtaking sunsets. All made her sigh.

Bors, the longhaired FBI Agent in the family, the one who looked dangerous and lethal just when he walked, let out a profanity so vulgar Julie quickly filed it at the back of her brain. The villain in her new novel could use those words.

"Fuck, you nearly broke my arm."

"Learn the game, sissy. Or quit playing." Tristan smirked at Bors before he positioned himself at the back of the line. Kirsten told her Tristan always played as a quarterback.

"Fuck you!"

"Damn it, you two. Just play the goddamn game." Percival stood in between Tristan and Bors, shoving each brother on the chest.

Julie smiled. Percival worked for the government, too, as a computer analyst. His eyes showed intelligence. Among the brothers, Percival had the face any woman would call an angel. A woman could drown in the deep pool of his blue eyes. Not her, though.

“Darlings, please play nice. Bors, your curse jar is almost full,” Katherine said smiling, without a hint of alarm in her voice.

How in the world the woman remained calm when it looked like her sons were ready to squeeze the breath out of each other, Julie had no idea.

“Sorry, Mom!” Bors apologized sheepishly to his mother, then turned around to hit Tristan on the shoulder with his own.

Tristan moved toward Bors then stopped. He shook his head at his brother, who grinned in return. “Cheap shots. You learn that from being an FBI agent?”

“I call it a smart shot, you asswipe.”

Julie couldn’t help herself as she burst out laughing. The men stopped their bickering and looked at her. All looked pleased for making her laugh. “Sorry, didn’t mean to interrupt. Carry on.” *Overgrown kids.*

“Wanna play, Julie?” Gawain asked.

“Oh no. Thank you.” *What, play with them so I can get tossed on the ground like a sack of flour? No way.* Gawain, the playful brother, touched his heart, making a big show of being hurt by her refusal to play. She liked Gawain. The youngest boy could not

only charm the pants off a female goat, he was also the funniest. Youngest maybe, but when it came to height and build, he wasn't far behind his brothers.

“All right. Let us know if you wanna join.”

The fight for the football began.

Julie watched the brothers taunt and pretend to box before properly continuing with their game. She'd known the Knight family for six months now, and learned that cursing was part of their day to day conversation. Despite their roughness, though, they were a fun bunch and without a doubt, gentlemen.

Kirsten—lucky girl—was so fortunate. Four wild and deliciously appealing brothers named after the Knights of the Round Table surrounded her. Not only did she have brothers to protect her, they doted on her like the precious little sister she was. Kirsten showed her the tree house the brothers had made for her, complete with lights, windows and a secured door so the critters couldn't come inside. She thought it the coolest and sweetest thing any brother would do for a sister.

Unlike her. An only child with a pathetic family that consisted of her drunkard father as estranged to her as the aliens from the outer space, her dickhead stepbrother, Sebastian, and the most evil stepmother, who was intent on destroying her name so she could get her mother's fortune.

Julie thought about Marla. She bet, right this minute, Marla was busy

digging for some kind of an insane accusation to throw at her. The thought of her father's third wife soured her mood.

She'd exchange her so-called family for cats and dogs anytime.

"Are you disappointed I introduced you to this family?" Kirsten tipped the water bottle to her lips. Sweat still dripped down her temples.

"Meeting your family was the best day of my life. Better than the time I received my first acceptance letter from St. Mary's Publication," Julie answered, her eyes still fixed on the men.

"You told me you screamed until you lost your voice when you got the email from your agent. I don't remember you screaming when you met my family. In fact, you were kind of speechless at first."

"Okay, fine. Maybe better than holding my first print book in my hand."

"Are you kidding me? I was ready to forget you as my friend because you acted like a lunatic while ogling the copy of your thirteenth book. Can't imagine seeing you the first time you had your very first print in your hand." Kirsten pretended to shudder. "Glad we weren't friends then."

"Whatever. Your wonderful, raucous, nice, and beautiful family is the most wonderful thing that has ever happened to me. Period."

"They say the same thing about you. They all thank you for saving me."

"Nah, I bet anyone wouldn't hesitate using the epinephrine on you. I just

happened to be sitting by you at the right time.”

“The medics said you were the only one helping me. The rest of the bus passengers were just looking while on their cell phones, as if I was some kind of a freak show. A couple teenagers even took my picture and posted my unflattering, blotchy face on their MySpace. If it weren’t for Percival, the pictures might still be floating around cyberspace. Who knows? Maybe those teens printed a copy of my picture and posted it in some dirty public toilet.”

“Why would they do that? So they could scare the rats?”

Kirsten squirted her with cold water.

Laughing, Julie licked her lips and ignored her wet top. “Well, I’m glad I was there. I got to meet the best fashion designer in all of Washington. And—here’s the best part—I get frequent invites to come and enjoy free food and lodging here, in the picturesque Orcas Islands.”

“Me, too. Even now that we all have our own places, this is still home for us. With our busy schedules, we always look forward to coming here to get together.”

“Hey. Same here.”

“Mom and Dad, too. I think they wish everyday were a holiday so we’d stay here forever, like when we were kids. They’ve been looking forward to this spring reunion.”

“Who wouldn’t want to have you all around? Love everything about you,

your family, and especially the free entertainment. Like this one.” Julie pointed at the men. “Can’t beat that.”

“I know. Aren’t they silly?”

“Their silliness is what keeps me accepting your invites. Thanks, by the way. I needed this vacation and the entertainment.”

“No problem. Carly thought my brothers were entertaining, too. She liked all of my brothers so much she tried seducing all of them, even when she was already married to Tristan. Of course, my brothers didn’t jump on the *opportunity*, if you could call it that. The nerve of that woman! She forgot we are all loyal to each other and we’d find out about her ludicrous stunt.”

Julie had heard snippets of what happened with Carly and Tristan’s failed marriage. “You all came together to help him bounce back.”

“We are his family. No way were we going to let him live like a hermit in a shell, growing his beard and missing his meal. We are all here for each other.”

Julie thought about when she was in elementary grade. There were so many nights she missed her dinner because her mother and father were busy fighting. And for a daughter of well-to-do parents, she often went to school late, and with an empty stomach. Now as an adult, she never ran out of food within an arm’s reach. Maybe her past had to do with her cravings for anything considered edible.

“He is fortunate to have a family like yours.”

“He is. We all are. Tristan went through a helluva divorce. Carly hurt him pretty badly. He turned into one surly man. Whenever I saw Tristan coming in the house not even looking at us, I would imagine myself clawing Carly’s face. She’s a bitch. Although I never call her that out of respect for Tristan.

“We stuck with him, even when he tried to push us away. But we didn’t let his gruffness intimidate us. And then one day, he surprised us. He showed up in the kitchen with a big grin on his face. The old Tristan bounced back. We tried to match him with every bachelorette in this town. He went out on dates twice, but that was it. He’s not interested in a serious relationship. After Carly, he’s been girlfriend hopping and always runs as if his butt’s on fire when he senses the woman wants more than something casual. So we don’t know if he’ll get married again.”

“He’s been burned. So he might not. Or maybe he’s still harboring hope he and Carly will get back together again.”

“Hope not. Carly is a horrible gangrene. You’ve got to get rid of it; otherwise, it’ll eat up your whole body. Tristan is only twenty-nine. Someday he might fall in love again and remarry. But you know what, I don’t care if Tristan decides not to marry again. We’re just glad the Tristan we know and love is back.”

“Carly doesn’t realize what she gave up. A united and terrific family.”

“My family is wonderful. I can’t imagine not having them.”

“I can imagine *not* having mine.” As soon as she said the words, guilt pricked her conscience. Yes, her father’s behavior made a bent tack looked useful. Still, there was no denying their blood relation. Even if the world turned upside down, Paul would remain her father. If it weren’t for his greedy nature, he wouldn’t have married her mother. So she owed him one—her life. No matter how miserable it may be.

“Don’t feel bad for saying that.”

Julie glanced at Kirsten. Her friend never failed to surprise her when it came to her insight and sympathetic understanding of her emotions.

“Your family deserves a sound kick on the ass.”

“You know, I’ve been doing that, mentally.”

“I know. And it sucks.”

“It will suck for me big time if I make a single move that Marla can use against me. You know she is only waiting for one mistake, so she can strike like a basking rattlesnake. Unbelievable as it may sound, I will lose my inheritance—my mother’s life’s work—if I do something like kick Sebastian’s ass.”

“I know. Again, it sucks,” Kirsten scoffed. “Sorry, Julie.”

“Me, too. I am beginning to believe my family is the punishment God—if He really exists—gave me for all the mistakes I’ve done in the past.”

“Like wearing your rollerblades inside the house, breaking school rules to

get your parents' attention? No, you are in this situation right now because your father couldn't keep his dick inside his pants."

"He didn't know Marla was a grabbing, greedy gold-digger."

"Stop defending your father. He's an asshole. You just didn't want to say it."

"I'm thinking it, though."

"Good."

Booming laughter brought Julie's attention back to the game. Bors and Tristan, who looked ready to break each other in half a minute ago, were now patting each other's back. Tristan looked their way. His left eyebrow raised a fraction before he looked away. It was a short eye contact, but enough to make her heart pound hard against her ribs. Of all the brothers, Tristan captivated her.

Chriminy! Her infatuation with him grew stronger every day. As it happened, she'd been dreaming about running her fingers through his dark wavy hair, feeling the muscles in his arms, and squeezing those thighs to find out if they were indeed as strong and firm as they looked. She even caught herself imagining his lips against hers, wishing for more than just a few seconds of his stares. Julie wondered what she would do if Tristan walked over and kissed her. God, she'd be mortified since his family was around, but she wouldn't refuse him either. She'd meet him halfway with her open mouth, let his tongue probe and taste, feel him breathe. *Oh, yes.* She'd welcome his kiss.

Julie felt her body respond to her vivid thoughts and tried to throttle the dizzying current racing through her. But her body was slow to respond. She felt hot, wet between her legs, and throbbing. Without a doubt, she wanted him. And if she weren't careful, she'd fall in love with him. Who wouldn't? Not only did he exude a delicious appeal as a pediatrician, his ruggedness and vital power coiled around him as he walked, making her quiver all over. He was simply captivating to watch. Although, if she were to pick one reason why Tristan won her attention, it would be the tender side of him and his love of nature. She wanted to know more about that side of him and, well, his prowess in bed.

Dang! Hold your panties, Julie. The man sees you as a sparring partner, a friend. That's all.

Still... There was nothing wrong with daydreaming about him. She would be nuts to drool over someone else when there was not a much better package than Tristan's. Those he dated—including Pamela, the woman she heard he was seeing right now—and would be dating, were lucky. When she and Kirsten bumped into Tristan's office manager at the local market one time, the woman shared gossip that stayed in her head. Single and married women talk about Tristan all the time when they brought their kids to the clinic. They said he treated women in bed the way he always treated his patients—special, precious, and beautiful. And the conversations never ended without the phrase, *“and he always leaves his girlfriend satisfied.”*

Man, she'd be satisfied just to have a sample of his taste. The way he looked and treated her though, she doubted even a sampling of his kiss would ever happen. To Tristan, she was just someone he and his brothers could tease.

No more, no less.

"Who do you think is going to win?" Kirsten nodded her head toward her brothers and father.

"Huh? Oh, hard to tell. Especially now that your dad is playing for you."

"I know." Kirsten pumped her fists up in the air. "Go get them, Dad! Yeah, touchdown! Eat your shorts, Bors. Dad kicked your butt! Isn't Dad awesome?"

"Yes, he is."

Except for signs of grey hair, Arthur could be mistaken for one of his sons. At the age of sixty-two, although his shoulders stooped a bit, he still looked powerful. He was six foot two, fit for his age, with thick hair, and possessed a killer smile that made his wife, Katherine, sigh each time he smiled at her. Kind of like when she received a smile from Tristan. But with a big difference. Katherine went to bed every night with Arthur beside her, while Julie hugged her pillow and dreamed it was Tristan.

Everyone knew Arthur Knight, especially the news media. He was the smartest, toughest, and could wield power as a judge. And as far as Julie knew, Arthur prided himself as being one. Known to be a fair judge who always played

by the rules, Arthur gained respect, inside and outside the courtroom. Even inside his home. Darn tooting bad one couldn't pick one's parents. She would have picked Arthur for a father.

Julie spotted Tristan in possession of the football. He faked a throw. Bors jumped, falling for the ruse, leaving Tristan open for the pass. With Bors out of his way, Tristan took advantage and stepped forward. He made a perfect pass to Percival. As soon as Percival took off, none of the men could catch him.

Kirsten and Tristan's team let out a loud whoop the same time the phone rang. Julie pushed off against the doorjamb and walked toward the phone sitting on the kitchen counter, debating whether to answer it or just let the machine pick up.

The phone rang again. Kirsten had told her that when someone called on the landline, most likely the caller was a woman calling for one of her brothers. Or it could be their eighty-one year old grandma who lived in a retirement home looking for her cat again.

Kirsten joined her in the kitchen when the phone rang for the third time. Julie raised her brow.

Reading her mind, Kirsten smiled. "I'll go get the cordless."

Kirsten was back before the fourth ring ended. With a nod, Julie picked up the phone hooked on the wall and answered, "Knight's residence."

“Oh, hi.” A sultry sweet voice came from the other end of the line.

“Hello.” Julie returned Kirsten’s mischievous grin, placed a finger over her lips to signal her to be quiet. Kirsten answered by pinching her lips together.

“This is Pamela. May I speak with Doctor Tristan Knight?”

Julie met Kirsten’s eyes. When Kirsten nodded, her heart thumped excitedly. *Oh baby. The game is on.* Telling the caller—especially if it was a woman—false stories about the brothers had been her and Kirsten’s game since Bors leaked the reason why the women would call using their parents’ landline—the woman wasn’t hot enough. For Julie, though, making jokes about Tristan was the best. She and Tristan had been trying to up one another since she made a joke about him liking to touch asses, hence his choice of profession, and he replied that he knew why she spent too much time in the bathroom—green apples.

Today would be her chance to get back at him.

“Pamela, hi. I’m so sorry, but Tristan can’t come to the phone right now.” She said the words in a sad tone then followed them up with a fake sob.

“Has something happened?”

“Yes. Oh God! The cops took him away.”

“Oh. You mean the cops came, put him in the cop car and drove away?”

“Yes. They dragged him in handcuffs.”

“But why?”

“Because, because he beat me up—” she sniffed for effect “—when I told him I didn’t want to sleep with him until his... I shouldn’t say this...”

“His what?”

Julie smiled when Pamela mumbled something about a pig and a bastard. “I’m sorry, Pamela. I can’t say more. I shouldn’t have said anything.”

“My God. He beat you up. I can’t believe this. He’s such a sweet gentle doctor.”

“I know. That’s what everyone is saying. But, he has a bad temper.”

“He has a bad temper.”

“Uh-huh. And his temper flared when I refused to...have sex with him.”

“You refused to have sex with him.” Pamela was beginning to sound like an annoying echo.

“Yes.”

“Why would he want to have sex with you?”

“Well, he’s my husband. But you see I can’t put our baby at risk because of his...his...”

“Husband? Baby? His what? What the hell are you talking about?”

“I just told you. Tristan and I are married, and expecting our first child.” Julie’s laughter bubbled deep down in her throat at the sound of dread in Pamela’s tone. “Listen, Pamela, I will only tell you this to spare you. But please don’t tell

Tristan it's me who told you." Julie continued with her pretend sobbing.

"I won't."

"Tristan suffers from acute gonorrhea!"

Silence.

Julie motioned for Kirsten to stay quiet. "Hello, Pamela. Are you still there?"

"Gonorrhea, the disease?" Pamela asked.

"Yes. He tried to deny it, but I saw the prescription. See, he's not only mad he contracted the disease from visiting Triple X nude bars, but he also didn't like the news that I am carrying his child. And my refusal to have sex with him finally blew his top off. So he started beating me up."

Kirsten grabbed the dishtowel to cover her mouth, her eyes watery from laughing.

"God! I knew he was too good to be true. A handsome doctor... Damn it!"

"I'm sorry for my husband's behavior. He may be a doctor, but he's a pig. Now, what did you say your message was?"

"He asked me for a date and you're telling me you're his wife."

"You're his date? Did you...sleep with him? Omigod, you'd better see a doctor. That scum! He's a warthog and..." *Sniff. Sniff.* "A disease spreader!" Julie wailed.

"If I get a hold of his balls, I'll squeeze them hard until he passes out!"

“Yes, you do that. Hello? Hello?”

Julie replaced the receiver back on the cradle and laughed so hard she felt a pinch on her side. Kirsten was in no better shape. She practically rolled on the kitchen floor.

“Oh my goodness, Kirsten,” she said, gasping for air. “Pamela is gonna squeeze your brother’s balls.”

“I know.”

“We’re bad.”

Julie forced herself to look semi-sane when Tristan, Percival, and Bors walked in the kitchen. Except for Bors, who went straight to the refrigerator, the two stopped and watched them as if they were escapees from an asylum.

“What the hell is wrong with you two?” asked Percival. He looked first at Kirsten then at Julie.

“Nothing’s wrong.” Julie swallowed and forced herself to calm down, but lost it when she glanced at Kirsten, whose face contorted from keeping a straight face.

“Really,” he drawled. “Who called?” Percival watched them with his analytical gaze.

“Don’t...know. Julie...answered the phone,” Kirsten wiped her eyes with the dishrag.

“Julie answered the phone? Uh-oh.”

“Yes I did, but I didn’t catch the caller’s name. It was a telemarketer.”

Judging how Percival’s lips twisted wryly, Julie could tell he didn’t believe her.

“Now girls, we don’t want to start a lying game, do we? Who was the call for? Not for me, I hope.”

Julie shot Kirsten a look that meant *do something*. They needed a reason to get out of there quick. Kirsten picked up the message clearly.

“Will you stop calling us girls, Percy? In case you haven’t noticed, we’re both grown women. Unlike your cold unfeeling computer chips, we are hot. And guess what, brother dear, we’ve had our shares of dates. Hot dates.”

Julie groaned. They needed a diversion, but this wasn’t what she had in mind.

“Hmm. I thought you liked to date men with brains only, regardless of what he looks like.” Bors tossed each of his brothers a can of cold Coors. Tristan and Percival caught the cans in midair. Just by looking at him, Julie knew Kirsten had his attention. A deep scowl crimped his handsome face.

Oh dear. Here comes the sibling squabble. Julie waited for Kirsten’s retort. Her friend hated it when teased about her preference in men.

“Excuse me, Bors. But men with brains, in my opinion, are hotter than brawny men. Right Julie?”

Of course not. "Right." But brain and brawn put together would be fantastic.

"I suppose Bucky could pass for a 'hot dude', despite his acne and bad allergies." Percival pointed two fingers at his nostrils then moved them down. He repeated the action, showing the sign for a dripping nose.

"I remember him," butted in Bors. "His snot dripped like water from a leaky faucet and he walked around school with his zipper down all the time."

Here we go. The subject definitely veered in a different direction. Julie angled her head to look outside, but Tristan's body blocked her view. *And what a nice view it was.* In a self-confident air, he cocked his dark head to one side and stared at her. He was studying her.

Julie was saved from turning into a puddle of nerves on the floor when Kirsten raised her voice.

"Bors, you're a dickhead." Kirsten reached out and took an ineffectual swat at her muscle-bound brother.

"Look Percival, Einstein is blushing." Bors tapped his finger at Kirsten's head two times.

Julie looked down at her feet to hide her grin. This, she told herself, was what she'd been missing in her life. Brothers to tease and brothers to punch, brothers to carry her like a sack of potatoes, brothers to protect her like a priceless gem.

Kirsten threw another punch on Bors' chest. But the big lug didn't budge or show a reaction that he felt the blow. He only smirked and flexed his muscles.

"Eww! Stop that. It's freaky."

"Check out mine." Percival pulled his sleeve way up to his shoulder then showed his muscles, too.

Julie waited for Tristan to join the muscle-bragging scene but he remained standing by the door drinking his Coors, watching her.

Gee-willykers, she wanted his gaze on her but not like this. He was looking at her as if he could see through her shirt, jeans, underwear... *Oh God.*

Gawain came in, ignored his brothers, went straight to the fridge, and opened it right away. "Want something to drink, Julie?"

"No, thank you." Julie decided to pay attention to the younger Knight.

With his arm resting on top, Gawain leaned down to peer inside. He moved things around until Julie heard a loud yes. He turned around and showed Julie the huge thigh of Rotisserie chicken. He gave her a wink then started attacking the meat without mercy.

Julie watched. The man could probably finish a whole chicken in record time. Taking her eyes off Gawain, she took a quick assessment of all of the men.

With arms glistening from a sheen of perspiration, soaking wet shirts plastered to their muscled torsos and wet hair clinging to their necks and

foreheads, the brothers looked primal and without a doubt, hot male species.

“Muscles are muscles. They all look the same,” Kirsten poked her brother’s bulging arms.

“No, brat. There is a certain muscle that can satisfy a woman by touching, looking, and feeling it in between her—”

“Bors!” Kirsten squealed.

“Oh dear,” Julie mumbled to herself, but Tristan heard. He scoffed. Julie looked at him and met his piercing blue eyes.

Up close, Tristan seemed even bigger. He towered over six feet, had his father’s dark hair and blue eyes, and possessed a nice but not freakishly muscled body. And when it came to oozing sex appeal, Tristan won top honors.

Kirsten told her that even in elementary grade the Knight Brothers were popular among girls. How could they not be? To an undeniable degree, all of them were gifted with features only the gods in Olympus should possess. Not only that, they were successful as well. But as good looking as they were, women dubbed them the *Terrible Knight Brothers*. Julie found out the reason why—they were terribly quick in dodging marriage-seeking women.

Among the brothers, though, it was Tristan who never failed to make Julie’s stomach twist into knots. Something set the man apart from the herd. There was something about his stance, movements, and smile that never failed to captivate

her. With one look from Tristan, her breath would come in a whoosh, liquefying her bones like ice cream on a hot sunny day. He'd be too big to lick all at once, but it would be damn fun to try.

Tristan was the only man who could make her body turn into a singing nightingale.

Okay, time to stop ogling the view. Stomach twisting, she moved toward the door. But Tristan shifted his weight and blocked her exit. "Please move."

"Why?" Tristan, with his arms akimbo, raised a brow at her.

"Because."

"Because what?" Tristan pried.

"Because..." A bead of sweat running down from Tristan's temple to his neck grabbed her attention. She wondered how far it would go. Another one followed. That was all it took for her attention to wander. Mesmerized, Julie imagined her fingers running down his arms instead.

"Take a picture, Julie, it would last longer. Or you could wipe them for me." Dimples showed on Tristan's cheeks as he watched her above the rim of his can with his stunning blue eyes. He was laughing at her.

Julie's cheeks grew warm. *How dare he suggest such a thing?* She may be infatuated with him, but not crazy enough to wipe his sweat. Scrunching her nose, she lifted her chin a bit then raised her own brow. "They're not worth a single

shot.”

“Really,” he drawled. “So why are you drooling?”

“Drooling? I don’t drool.”

“So what’s this?” Tristan touched the side of her mouth with the pad of his thumb before it settled on her lower lip.

Oh God. Heart beating fast, Julie looked above his shoulder to avoid the effect of his touch on her nerves, but it was as impossible as flying without wings. With him standing in front of her, covered with sweat, dusty, his unfashionable long hair—at least for a Pediatrician—hanging down his forehead, he indeed looked like a knight without his armor after fighting in a battle. *So freaking gorgeous.*

Tristan was a man who never failed to remind her she was a woman.

Among the siblings, Tristan had the most striking cerulean eyes and he was the only one born with dimples just like his mother. As far as Julie was concerned, he was the only doctor that made Patrick Dempsey look average. He could wear anything and still look sinfully sexy.

Finally recovered from her embarrassment for staring, she let her gaze roam Tristan’s handsome face. When she had her fill, she lowered her eyes to look at his cut-off sweatpants, molded to his finely toned thighs. Focusing her gaze just below his torso, she smiled, remembering how shocked Pamela sounded on the phone.

“What’s so funny?” Tristan looked down his front.

The way his frown got deeper, Julie could tell she made him feel uncomfortable. *Good. Now, we’re even.*

Last time she came for a visit, Tristan had stood outside the bathroom door while she was getting ready to shower and asked if the spider was still on the ceiling. The simple question scared her right out of the bathroom wearing just a black lace bra and matching panties. Outside the door, he stood armed with a Polaroid camera. He took her picture then walked away whistling.

“What is so damn funny?” Tristan repeated.

“You know, I’ve seen a lot of men jogging at Greenlake wearing those cut-off pants. Some prefer super tight shorts with padding on the crotch, which I am sure for the purpose of showing off what Bors called peepers.” Julie gestured towards Tristan’s front. “I call them crotcher.”

“Crotcher?”

“Yeah, Crotch Flasher. You know, I noticed most of those men are on the feminine side.”

“What are you saying?” His question sounded like a snarl.

“Am I upsetting you? Did I hit a sore spot?”

“Fu— no!”

“Not the feminine side?”

“No!” he snapped.

“Oh, the crotcher part then.”

Tristan’s scowl could send anyone running, but not Julie. She knew he, like his brothers, were all bluster.

“I am not a crotcher.”

“Well, your shorts are kind of tight. Were they the wrong size? They’re too small, don’t you think? Or did you purposely wear tight cut-offs one to show your—”

“No. I cut them off on purpose.”

“With your teeth?” Julie couldn’t contain her laughter any longer. She laughed so hard she had to hold her stomach.

Tristan’s stormy expression only made her laugh harder, until she began coughing. “Are you quite finished, or would you like me to begin CPR?”

She calmed a bit at the implied threat. Sweet revenge on Sir Tristan, she thought. Since the time she squirted ketchup on his brand new Lacoste shirt—swearing up and down it was just an accident—they’d been sparring, trying to get even with one another.

Wiping her eyes with the back of her hand, she smiled. As much as she wanted to spar with him, she really must get out of the kitchen. “Out of my way, Doctor Hot Crotcher.” Julie tipped her head up and imitated his stance, hoping she

looked intimidating enough for him to let her pass.

Tristan stepped on the lever of the plastic garbage can beside him and tossed his empty can in. “You can’t leave. You and the brat are hiding something. Tell me who called, why, and what you said.”

“I didn’t say anything, except hello and goodbye. Jeez, what’s the big deal?”

Tristan reached to pull a lock of hair that escaped her bun. “You expect me to believe you? After what you’ve done in the past, I have every reason to believe you can’t be trusted. I. Don’t. Trust. You, Julie Strawberry.”

Julie narrowed her eyes. “Do not call me Strawberry.”

“What’s wrong with calling you Strawberry? It suits you. You have red hair and freckles, exactly like the seeds on a strawberry.”

“Eeww! You just made it sound like I have blackheads all over my face. That’s downright awful. Mean! I should squash you like a strawberry.” *Yeah right. Squashing him would require a stone grinder.*

Tristan’s face split into a wide grin, disarmed Julie of her spunk, replaced by an urge to mewl like a cat with its tail up. “Bring it on, Julie Strawberry. I’m waiting.”

“Ugh! Arrogant. You think because you have Tarzan’s chest that I couldn’t?”

“Really? I have Tarzan’s chest?” Tristan sucked in his breath and looked down. “Wow, I didn’t know that.”

“It’s not a compliment. Have you seen Tarzan? He’s got a flabby, sagging old chest, rubbed with Vicks to make it shine on television. He’s gross, living in the jungle without plumbing and running water to wash his hands. Now, you better move. Last chance before I plow you down.”

Drat the man. Dollar to Oreo cookies, pushing him would be like pushing a Waste Management truck. She saw the way he blocked his brothers playing football. It took two Knights to take him down. But she really must get out. Last time she pulled the same trick on him, he dumped a pitcher of cold water inside her shirt. It would have been fine, except her white shirt was see-through when wet. Who knew what he’d do this time.

Julie glanced at her friend. Kirsten was punching Bors’s arm. Dear, Kirsten was supposed to distract the brothers from asking about the caller and help get them out of the kitchen. But by the looks of it, her friend forgot all about it. All right, she’d just leave and wait outside. Julie squeezed herself between the doorjamb and Tristan but he refused to budge. She decided to pinch him.

“Oww! Darn it, woman. That hurt.”

“Well, move then.”

“Come on, Julie. You answered the phone. Which means you pulled another one. Was the call for me? Did you spread lies about me again?”

“Doctor Knight, I didn’t. Let me—Oomph!”

Like her favorite Oreo cookie, Julie found herself flattened in the middle. She was the cream, Kirsten on her back and Tristan on the front were the cookies. Kirsten finally decided to leave the kitchen but chose the wrong time. Warm hands gripped her hips while her arms wrapped around his waist for support. Or maybe not, Julie thought.

Giggling, Kirsten disentangled herself, mumbled an apology that sounded between a snort and a 'sorry'. She pushed Tristan so she could get out the door. Tristan moved to let her pass but he took her with him. Percival and Bors followed.

"Yeah, run, you little bug. When I catch you and your peanut boyfriend, I will squash you both," Bors yelled, following his sister outside.

Julie, like a fly caught in a spider's web, couldn't move. She found herself looking into a pair of sleepy eyes that haunted her almost every night. She should move and get out, but her body refused to cooperate. Tristan's arms felt strong and hot around her. And his chest, that damn chest—firm and all muscles pressed against hers—caused sinful thoughts that brought a hot flush to her cheeks. Julie had wondered about this, how it would feel to be held by him. Now she knew—amazingly wicked.

For sure, his girlfriends felt the same way, too. Maybe most of the patients' moms took their babies to his clinic just so they could be near him. She would.

Who wouldn't want to be in the same room with hunky, sexy Doctor Knight? Julie smiled.

"Tell me what made you smile," he said, in a soft voice that caressed her skin.

Julie wanted to curl and slither around him. "I'm just thinking about your...patients. How they must look tiny when you're holding them."

"Definitely tinier than you are, and softer...but they smell like milk and burps. Sometimes dirty diapers. I like your smell better, like sweet apples. I'm surprised you don't smell like strawberries."

"I like apples, especially the Granny Smith ones."

"I know."

Sweat dripped down his temple. Julie reached up to wipe it off with her fingers. She realized what she had done, but too late to retract it. Drat, she really must do something about this crazy infatuation.

Tristan simply stared at her with his somber eyes. On the outside, he seemed controlled. Julie knew better. With his thighs pressed tight against her abdomen, she knew their embrace had the same effect on him. If his hard erection wasn't the telltale sign, she didn't know what was.

She had read many romance books about how one felt when one was in a situation like this, now she knew. *Erotic*.

But her body yearned for more—of his touch and the pressure of his body against hers. She wanted to know more. And there was only one way to find out.

Julie raised her height a bit by tipping her toes. Her pubic bone pressed against his cock. The simple movement caused little shooting sparks of thrill to creep slowly from her breasts down to where she ached to be touched, between her thighs. She should be embarrassed for her boldness, but wasn't. Instead, she felt reckless and loved it.

Tristan tightened his grip on her waist, pulling her against him. His thigh, unintentional or not, wedged between Julie's legs.

She nearly mewled from the sweetness of it. Her pussy throbbed and her clit tingled when he lifted his thigh a bit to rub it against her. Julie trembled when the smile in Tristan's eyes showed banked sensuous flames.

His finger traced little circles on her exposed skin where her Levi's and green sleeveless blouse barely met. She should stop, but the pleasure of having her body glued to his was a temptation she couldn't resist. Desire coursed through her whole body. The combination of the faint scent of beer on his breath, manly scent, and his touch made her senses spin.

As if her fingers had a mind of their own, they crept slowly up his nape to brush the hair flattened by his sweat. Julie watched his hungry eyes turn deep blue. His breathing, she noticed, turned shallow and faster.

Tristan's splayed fingers slowly moved up and down on her skin.

"Tristan."

"Julie."

His head inched down a little closer while his thumb went up to caress the sides of her breast.

"Oh, God." She shivered from pure delight.

"Julie, you have no idea—"

"Just kiss her, man."

Julie squeaked in surprise. As if a bolt of thunder had struck them, they both took a step back. She looked at Gawain chewing on a chicken breast. How could she forget they weren't alone in the kitchen? What if she had started thrusting her hips on Tristan's thigh? Or worse, Tristan cupped her breasts? Oh God! What would Gawain think of her now?

"I've been nibbling this chicken for five minutes and you haven't kissed her. Damn, you're slow, bro. See? I told you. If you get into a profession that requires wearing gloves, you become meticulous and move like a sloth. Strike at the opportunity, man—such as kissing a girl."

"You're an ass, Gawain," snarled Tristan.

"Me? What did I do? The chicken and I were just minding our own business when you two started making out."

“We didn’t,” Julie and Tristan said at the same time.

“Oh, yeah. Right. You didn’t. You were just ogling each other. For a moment there, I thought I was looking at the cover of a Hallmark Valentine card. So sweet.”

“Oh God. Uhm, excuse me. I need, want...fresh air.” Julie went past Tristan. Gawain’s laughter followed her.

Stupid. Stupid. You really are an embarrassment to your family, Julie Parrish. What a dummy.

Chapter Two

Out in the backyard, Katherine gave her the job of preparing Caesars and pea salad, while Kirsten got the easy job of dumping chips in bowls. She thought it unfair she had to cut and mix vegetables while her friend just hugged the bags of chips. But she understood. If she was addicted to green apples, the brothers were crazy about chips. She'd seen the men fight for a bag of Fritos like starving warriors gone from years of battle.

As soon as Kirsten popped the Doritos bag, the men started reaching in the bag, grabbing handfuls of chips. Kirsten—she bet from years of practice—could block her brothers' long arms using her body. At one point, she even kicked her legs to keep her brothers from getting closer.

"Come on, you guys! We have to wait for the hotdogs." Kirsten tried to sound upset, but ended up laughing.

"Just a handful of Fritos, Kirstie. And I'll leave you alone."

"No, Bors. Mom!"

"Boys, help your father move the tables," Katherine ordered.

The huge brothers stopped reaching for the chips at once. It never ceased to amaze Julie how the men obeyed their mother as if she was a goddess they must follow, without delay. Katherine didn't have to raise her voice. The men, and even Kirsten, respected and heeded her calls as if they were God's own commands.

Julie was never an obedient child.

The men—except for Tristan and Gawain, who were still inside the house—put two picnic tables together to accommodate the big family. She stood beside Kirsten, holding two salad bowls. She watched the whole process of moving the tables, but her mind wandered back in the house. Tristan would most likely grill her again about the caller when he came out. Or maybe he'd let the topic go. Julie tapped her finger on the rim of the bowl. The little encounter in the kitchen had left her insides trembling spasmodically. And Gawain—she bet he'd never leave her alone after what he witnessed. Lordy, he'd most likely tell the others about the way she plastered her body against Tristan's. If he did, her secret infatuation with Tristan would be out in the open.

Chips of all kinds, hotdogs, fried chicken wings, sausages, buns, a variety of salads, drinks, and condiments covered the long picnic table. One would think a big party was about to take place. But since she'd known the family for over six months, she knew better. The men could eat!

She had already found a cozy spot, sandwiched between Percival and Bors, when Tristan emerged from the kitchen.

"Hey, Doc!" called Bors. "Cook the Polish sausage. Julie won't eat the 'ole traditional wieners. She wants a big one." Bors' double entendre earned him loud responses from his family.

Everyone was busy eating and laughing, no one noticed, at least Julie thought no one did, that she only ate her salad and pushed the tiny tomatoes around with her fork. She hated tomatoes but she forced a couple of the red pulpy vegetables down her throat. What she wanted was the juicy Polish sausages Tristan was barbecuing.

Hearing the sizzling sound the sausages made, Julie's stomach rumbled loud enough for Percival and Bors to hear. They laughed again. This time Percival yelled at Tristan.

"Hurry up there, Doc. Julie's stomach is rumbling so loud I can't even hear myself talk."

"Give her more salad," Tristan yelled back, casting a glance at Julie.

Crud, can they tell I have the hots for Tristan? Is that why they tease me so much? No. Of course not. Paranoia could make one think stupid things. Yup, she was paranoid. That was all.

Down to her last tomato, thank God, Gawain appeared at the kitchen doorway. When he smiled at Julie, her heart dropped to her stomach. She didn't trust that smile at all. The hunk was up to no good.

"Someone called for you, Doc." Gawain grinned at everyone.

"Are you going to tell him who called, son, or does he have to guess?" Arthur asked, while serving his wife potato salad.

Julie couldn't imagine how the mild mannered man was able to produce four such rowdy boys. As much a gentleman as his legendary namesake, he treated his wife as fragilely as a porcelain doll. Julie's father, Paul, had ignored her mother and flaunted his young girlfriends around, even when Laura was still alive. He'd been on his third wife, Marla, since her mother died. The man was a total ass.

"Who called, Gawain?" Tristan shot his brother a ~~don't-piss-me-off-or-I'll-pound-you-to-the-ground~~ look then turned his attention back to the ~~red-hot~~ sausages. Grease-scented smoke billowed around him.

"In a bad mood, are we? Is it because I interrupted your—"

"Darn it, Gawain!" shouted Tristan, before he cast Julie a look. His mouth set in a thin line, obviously annoyed with his brother.

Julie's stomach knotted. She covered her mouth with a fist and pretended to clear her throat.

"No need to shout, man. I think you need to get laid, bro. You're easily irritated, like an old—"

"Shut your mouth, Gawain. Or should I shut it for you?"

"Son, don't irritate your brother. Just tell him who called. Come sit down and eat with us," Katherine patted a space beside her.

"It was Pamela."

Julie choked on a Dorito she was munching, but Bors saved her when he

whacked her back. The chip, thankfully, didn't fly out of her mouth. She murmured a 'thank you' and looked at Kirsten, who wriggled her brows, smiling from ear to ear. *Pamela? She called back?*

Gawain glanced at Julie. A flash of humor twinkled in his eyes and then he winked. "I told her I'd get you, but she said no. She sounded surprised to hear you're around. My ear still hurts from her screaming. She's mighty mad, bro."

Bors leaned in to whisper in Julie's ear. "Remember what I told you? If a woman called using the landline, that means she's not hot enough to make it on Tristan's cell phone list of fave fives. I'm not, although I'm hot."

Julie giggled, stealing a look at Tristan. She was nervous and at the same time, anxious to see how he would react to her latest prank. Pretending to be his girlfriend on the phone was a riot and she enjoyed it a lot. She enjoyed irritating him, period. And she'd bet her green apples the feeling was mutual.

"What's the message, Gawain?" asked Kirsten, obvious eagerness in her tone.

"Pamela said—" Gawain continued "—"Tell your brother he's an asshole"—excuse the language, Mom. I don't owe the curse jar money because I am just relaying the message here."

"I know, Gawain. Is that all?"

"No. Pamela also said Tristan deserves to be jailed—"

“What?” Tristan and his parents echoed the question.

“Yeah, she said you deserved to go to jail.”

“For what?” Tristan gripped the tongs so hard Julie could see his knuckles turning white.

“For beating your *pregnant wife*.” Gawain punctuated the last two words and ignored the questions erupting around the table.

“My pregnant wife?”

“Yeah. Your pregnant wife told her on the phone—” he smiled at Julie “—that you beat her up.”

“And this wife of mine, did she say *why* I beat her up?” The tone of Tristan’s voice sounded like rumbling thunder ready to explode.

“Yes. Because she refused to have sex with you.”

“Really.”

Julie’s uneasiness increased under the laughing eyes of the Knights. Suddenly, she felt so hungry for tomatoes.

“I can’t imagine why I would say no to sex with my wife. She’s mighty attractive.”

“Well, she told Pamela you are suffering from...”

“From what?”

Julie looked at Tristan and guessed his face wasn’t red from the smoke. *Oh,*

dear.

“Gonorrhea.”

Bouts of laughter exploded from the table. Soda pop burst from Kirsten’s mouth. Gawain bent over, smacking his thigh with his hand. Percival and Bors both shoved Julie; she felt like a smashed pancake in the middle. For the second time, Bors smacked her back none too gently. Her salad fork nearly went all the way down her throat.

“Good one, Julie.”

“Congratulations, Julie, you scored,” said Percival, his shoulders shaking from laughing.

All stares directed at Julie. They knew she did it. “Guilty,” she mumbled, then shrugged her shoulders. She looked at Tristan and saw his annoyed look break into a wicked smile. Julie bristled. Lord, she could almost read his mind. He was thinking about retaliation.

“Gonorrhea! Hey, Doc. No wonder you look flushed and are sporting an unsightly bulge down there. Nuts swollen?” Bors continued to laugh.

Tristan replied with a fisted hand behind his back, the middle finger up in the air.

Julie shook her head. Doctor Knight had a bad side to him.

It took a while before the hysteria about her prank died down. Julie was

having a great time exchanging jokes with Bors when she saw, through her peripheral view, Tristan coming toward her.

She looked up in time to see Tristan's heart-stopping, jaw-dropping, sexy strut. He was staring at her with a tight grin, holding a plate.

Her heart felt like a pair of wings flapping in her chest. The look he gave her would make any woman want to take her top off and rub herself all over him.

Suddenly the air grew thick. She couldn't breathe.

Bors stood up and left his spot. She didn't want him to leave. If she remained in between brothers, she'd be safe from Tristan and his retaliation. She tried to stop him, but by bad luck, her tongue seemed to double its size. She couldn't say anything.

With Tristan's eyes fixed on hers, he sat in the vacated spot then leaned forward until their noses touched. Julie stopped breathing altogether.

Oh God, oh God! I've wondered about him kissing me. Would he do it in front of his family? Is it going to happen now? Is he going to kiss me in front of them?

"Here are your Polish sausages, *my pregnant wife*," he placed the plate in front of her. Julie looked down. Two of the blackest, charred Polish sausages she had ever seen sizzled on the plate. She groaned. *There goes my favorite food. Such a waste.*

"What's up with the groan? Having some symptoms, love? Gonorrhea's contagious," he whispered, before standing up again to give Bors his spot back. But

not before he squeezed her side.

Julie shivered. She definitely had symptoms. Parts of her were hot and swollen, but not from a social disease. As she stared into those unforgiving blue eyes, she wondered if lust was considered contagious.

Chapter Three

Wearing oven mitts, Julie opened the oven and pulled out the baking pan. The brownies looked perfect and smelled delicious, too. She made three batches to make sure everybody got their share. Now they'd just have to wait for them to cool off.

"Your helpers deserted you."

Julie didn't have to look. She knew who just walked in. "Nah. We're done here."

"Looks like Katrina came in here and destroyed the kitchen."

Julie looked around. *Yup, the spotless kitchen is now a mess.* Three helpers should have been enough to make the whole process of baking brownies less dirty and disorderly, but the brothers were as messy as their ruffled hair when wet. Bors dropped a stick of soft butter on the floor, Percival managed to crack the eggs and dropped the yolk inside the bowl after three attempts, and Gawain...well, the man licked every spatula she used but dripped most of the mix on the counter. "Gawain said he'll come back to help clean up."

"Hmm...I wouldn't count on him when it comes to cleaning."

"Oh, I made sure he'll come back."

"Let me guess. You bribed him."

"With double chocolate chip Häagen-Dazs ice cream."

“Ah, you hit him where he’s most vulnerable—his stomach.”

Laughter bubbled in her throat when she saw amusement in his eyes. “Most men are vulnerable when it comes to their stomachs.” She wondered where Tristan’s vulnerability lay.

“You speak based on experience?”

Based on what she read in the romance books she devoured every night when she wasn’t in front of her laptop. “Yeah. Am I wrong?”

“Can’t speak for other men.” He gave her a black, layered look, which changed in a matter of a heartbeat. “Smells good. I’m surprised my brothers aren’t all over the brownies.” Tristan stood beside her then bent low to sniff the closest pan.

Soap. He smelled like fresh soap. Julie noticed the tips of his hair were still wet. Tristan showered and changed into faded blue jeans with holes in the knees. His plain white t-shirt hugged his body, emphasizing his flat as a board stomach and muscled chest. She nearly clicked her tongue in appreciation when she noticed Tristan’s toes peeking under the hem of his pants. Man, she was a sucker for jeans and bare feet.

Julie thought he was the most drop dead gorgeous species who walked the earth.

“When will the brownies be ready?”

“As soon as they’ve cooled off. Why?”

“Come with me.”

Before she could ask where, Tristan took hold of her hand and led her through the backdoor into the moonlit backyard. Soft breeze fanned her face, cooling her hot cheeks. After an hour of standing in the oven-heated kitchen, it felt wonderful to be outside where she could cool off. The spring night air felt so wonderful on her skin she just wanted to stand there forever.

Out here, the only sounds she could hear were the branches touching each other as they swayed gently, scattering of the night creatures’— most likely squirrels or raccoons—and the breaking of twigs or branches. Through the trees’ canopy, she glimpsed a star. As she stared, one by one, she saw more stars dotting the midnight sky like diamonds.

It was beautiful.

Julie took a deep breath and closed her eyes.

“Didn’t anyone tell you it’s not safe to walk with your eyes closed?”

“You’re holding my hand. I’ll be okay. Just catch me if I fall.”

“Do you think that’s wise?”

Julie opened her eyes. Intense blue eyes shining through reflective lights stared back at her. Something in those eyes made her hold her breath until her chest felt ready to explode. Hunger? Interest? Mirth? Or lust? She couldn’t tell. All

she knew was she couldn't stop staring at him. Like a moth to a light, he drew her in.

Being this close to Tristan was bad. He looked so dangerously handsome, capable of making scores of women fall in love with him. She shouldn't be out here with him, especially not in this romantic setting.

"No, falling is not wise." *Especially falling in love with a Knight who obviously doesn't want to love again.* "Where are we going? You're not thinking about pushing me off the cliff for pulling a joke on you, are you?"

Tristan's laughter ripped the quiet night. His shoulders still shook when he looked at her. "No, Julie Strawberry. I would never imagine doing anything like that. You're too beautiful to roll off the cliff."

Me, beautiful? Did he really say I am beautiful? Julie's heart reveled in his compliments. She'd been called beautiful before, but coming from Tristan, he gave the word a totally different meaning. Gah, she shouldn't make his comment into something it was not. "So if I had a wart on the tip of my nose and a chin that looked like a crescent moon, you would?"

"I'd have second thoughts for sure."

"You are one prejudiced doctor. So where are you taking me?" She knew he would never hurt her on purpose. The question was only to break the loud staccato beat of her heart that was making her ears buzz.

“I want to show you something. We’ll be back in time for you to slice the brownies.”

“They’ll be looking for us. I’m supposed to play cards with your brothers and sister. We should go back.” She tugged her hand, but Tristan only tightened his hold on her.

“Are you afraid of being alone with me?”

“Of course not. You’re not going to transform into something, are you?”

“I might.”

“Ha. Ha.”

“I think you are thinking that I’ll ravish you out here.”

Startled by his words, she tripped on her own feet. Looking at Tristan, she searched her brain for an answer. “You need to hone your mind reading skills, Tristan, because I am far from thinking that you would do such a thing. I am not saying you are not capable of doing it. It’s just, you wouldn’t.” He might not be a real knight of the round table, but he was as noble as any man could be.

“What makes you think that?”

“Because you weren’t raised to disrespect women.”

Tristan gave her a curt nod. “Keep walking, and open your eyes.”

They walked along the grass-covered path with only the bright moon as their guide. Julie tripped on a root sticking out of the hard ground but Tristan was

quick to catch her. “Are your eyes open?”

Julie pinched his side laughing. “Don’t be mean.”

“Oww! What are you, a crab or something? Damn it, woman. That stings.”

“Serves you right.” She hid her grin by looking at the shadowed figures of the mountains that looked painted flat on a white canvas.

“Should I give you a piggyback ride to keep you from tripping?”

“Yeah, right. So both of us could land on our faces if you trip.”

“I know this area like—”

“The back of your hands?” Julie interjected. She’d been writing for enough years that she knew to avoid the use of clichés.

“I was going to say a woman’s body. But yeah. Like the back of my hands.”

“Why, because this is where you run away to escape from doing household chores?”

“I don’t run away from my responsibilities—easy or not. My brothers and I used to come here to play Robin Hood, or soldiers. If we didn’t carry swords, we had guns.”

Julie imagined the brothers all wearing tights like Robin Hood then giggled.

“What’s funny?”

“The image of you wearing white tights like Robin Hood.”

“What’s so funny about that? Robin is not a ballet dancer so he didn’t show

his tight buttocks and—”

“I get it.”

“Anyway, Mom would always say ‘*go play and have fun*’, and she just emphasized that we ‘*come home together and without anything broken*’.”

“So did you manage to come home from your *thieving* without anything broken?”

“Not all the time. Gawain broke his ankle one time jumping off a tree. Percival tripped while running, landed on his face, and broke his nose. Bors ran into a tree full speed and came home with a goose egg on his forehead.”

“Aww, poor Bors.”

Tristan scoffed. “He fell backwards, bounced back up laughing, then took off running again. The man has cement for a skull.”

“Good. He needs it, especially with his line of work. Aside from their bulletproof vests, all FBI Agents should wear something like a steel helmet for better protection.”

“Mom and Dad said the same thing.”

“I bet they worry about Bors a lot. Must be hard to have a son in the service.”

“They do worry about Bors. In fact, about all of us. Watch the log. Here, let me help you.”

Before she could step over the log, Tristan had already clamped his hands on

her waist, lifted her up, then swung her over like a child that weighed nothing. His touch made her breathless, like a girl of eighteen. After putting her back down, he grabbed her hand again. Julie felt stupid. Here she was, out of breath from his simple touch when he looked unaffected. It must be the setting that made her think and feel like a nincompoop.

“What about you? Did you break anything?”

“Yeah. I think it’s impossible for rowdy boys not to get hurt once or twice.”

“So what happened?”

Tristan stopped walking and faced her. He still held her hand, rubbing her wrist with his thumb. She wondered if he was aware he’d been doing it. Aware or not though, she liked it.

“I was twelve when it happened. My brothers and I were on our way home when I accidentally stepped in a hole. I fell sideways and landed on a broken branch. The branch was as pointy as a spear. It pierced my side and nearly went through my back. My brothers told me if I hadn’t kneeled and caught myself, the tip of the branch would have broken the skin on my back. So what happened was the skin formed a tent. It was freaky, they said. I was trussed like a pig.”

“Oh no!” Horrifying images of a young Tristan formed in her head. Pain sliced through her as if she were actually seeing him. The thought of him as a young boy in pain, and maybe scared, brought tears to her eyes.

“Bors fetched Mom while Gawain and Percival stayed with me. Can’t remember who held my hand and who wrapped one arm around me to keep me from falling. You see, I passed out.”

Julie placed a hand on his arm. “I’m so sorry. No child should go through that kind of horrifying pain. And Katherine—she must have been worried sick.” With subtlety, she wiped a tear that ran down her cheek.

“She was. When I woke up, I was already in my hospital bed. Everyone was there. Mom gave me a hug and dripped tears all over my face. She told me how much she loved me, over and over. After holding me tight for what seemed to be hours, she began reciting my punishment.”

“And they were?”

“I was grounded for a month and lost my allowance. No dessert for one week, and no TV. But my brothers would always sneak in brownies or pie, or baked cookies for me. Mom knew about it but she didn’t say anything. None of my brothers—Mom told me —watched TV.”

“Aww...” Respect, love, and pride for his siblings rang loud in his tone. Tears welled in her eyes again. “You have wonderful brothers.”

“I know.” He shook his head as if in disbelief.

“And you’re lucky the branch didn’t...I mean, it was your side that was pierced, not your...”

“My heart?”

“Yeah. Or any other vital organ.”

“I know. Wanna see my scar?”

Julie wasn't sure how she'd see the scar with only the moon as their light, but she nodded her head. Tristan lifted his shirt and pointed at the straight scar about three inches long. Without thinking, Julie touched the puckered skin with the tip of her index finger. The moment she touched him, Tristan sucked in his breath. She jerked her hand back. “Did I hurt you?”

“No.” It wasn't pain he felt when she touched him. It was the opposite. Her simple touch made his body become even tauter. When he wrapped his fingers around her small waist, his body reacted swiftly and violently, and adding her touch, he was ready to unbutton his fly and whip out his cock. Standing this close to her, while staring in her wide green eyes, shining from tears, he might just do that. God, a simple touch and his dick hardened right away.

Baby, what have you done to me? What was so different about her from the other women he had dated? Well, to start with she was funny, game, beautiful, smart, and a softie. Seeing the tears she tried to hide proved how soft hearted she was.

He'd told the same story to different women in the past, including his ex-wife, Carly. The only reaction he got was laughter and nonchalance. Unlike Julie. The prankster possessed a soft heart; she continued to impress him.

Somewhere an owl hooted, taking his mind off the beautiful woman standing before him. The way his body was reacting to Julie's nearness, he'd need more than an owl's distraction. Without a doubt, he was attracted to her physically. A feeling he must rein in before it turned into something else. Last thing he wanted in his life right now was to fall for his sister's best friend.

"We're almost at the spot I want you to see. Let's go." He squeezed Julie's hand and forced himself to look away.

The fragrance of spring blossoms carried by the breeze mingled with the fresh scent of Cedar trees. Tristan forced his mind to center on the environment he had loved so much since he was a boy, but the presence of a lovely woman beside him was stronger. He wanted to stop walking and take her in his arms, feel her soft curves and taste her constantly wet lips.

Why did he ask her to go for a walk with him? *Oh yeah, my brothers wouldn't leave her alone, that is why.* And she needed a break from baking brownies.

Right. Now keep walking, Tristan, and stop thinking about your throbbing dick.

They followed the worn path until they reached the thick Rhododendrons entwined with wild bushes. Tristan looked at Julie then said, "Welcome to my private hideaway." He pushed aside a couple branches to make room for her to get through. "Go on."

Standing behind Julie, he heard her indrawn breath. He had that same

reaction when he found this spot.

Even at night, the small clearing at the edge of the property looked like a small garden with the wild tulips, daffodils, violets and dandelions scattered about, growing wildly and freely. Except for the spot beneath the old weather-battered evergreen tree—the area where he built the glass hut—this spot was untouched.

“Wow,” Julie breathed the word. “It’s like a vacation spot with a great view. And... My, I’ve never seen a glass hut like that before. Did you build it?”

“Yeah. Look inside.”

Julie gave him a sly smile before walking toward the glass door. She pushed it open, stepped inside then stood in the middle. She made a three sixty turn. “Oh, you can see the stars, the view, and not get cold.”

Holding the glass door open, Tristan watched her. She looked like a princess in a glass cage. “That’s the idea. I can spend hours here and never get tired of looking at the view. A lot of times, I’d fall asleep here.”

“Thus the bed.”

“Yup.”

“What about during summer? Is it hot in here?”

He stepped inside the hut and shut the door. “Sometimes. But this is Washington. Summer is not as intense compared to other states. But in case it gets

too hot, I had these blinds installed.”

“If you roll them down, no one can see you in here.”

“Got that right. And like the sunroof in a car, I can shut the sunlight off from beating down inside. This was supposed to be a gazebo. But squirrels camped here and made their nests up in the roof. And the spiders, man, I couldn’t even sit down for a minute without one crawling on me.”

“I hate spiders.”

“I know.” Tristan would never forget the day he teased her about a spider in the bathroom. The sound of her scream and the way she looked when she came out would stay forever in his brain. Feeling the sign of his body coming to life at the thought of Julie clad in a pair of sexy panties and bra, he focused his gaze on her collarbone. “Anyway, I thought about building a small cabin. But using wood didn’t appeal to me. I wanted to be able to see the view, the stars, and everything around me. So I came up with this idea.”

“I love it. It’s like a small cabin built for two, complete with a bed and sink, but shaped like a hut. So unique. What about a bathroom? Don’t tell me you use the bushes like Tarzan.”

Tristan grinned. “I built an outhouse just behind the Cedar tree. Not made of glass, of course.”

Julie did a pirouette, her hair flying as she did. “So beautiful.”

“Without a doubt,” he replied. But his gaze wasn’t directed at the view of the magnificent mountains and glistening water of the Puget Sound. He was looking at the ethereal beauty standing only a foot away from him. She stood like a model and moved like one, too.

Julie turned to look at him. “You come here a lot?”

She moved closer to the window, away from the bed. *Thank God.* “Before I went away to college, I used to come here almost every day.”

“Alone?”

“I’ve never brought anyone here but you.”

Her eyes widened a bit. “Not even Carly?”

“No.” He said the word so sharply, even his own ears didn’t like the sound of it. When he spoke again, he tried to soften his voice. “She never liked Orcas Island. It’s a rural area. Too boring, quiet, cold, lacking. She missed the crowd and the nightlife, her friends. Carly saw the mountains as that—a mountain. She was never warm here. Never enjoyed being here.”

“To each their own, Tristan. We can’t make anyone like something we do, and the same thing for them.”

“I know. That’s why I gave this place up. To live in busy Manhattan. That’s where she wanted to be, so there we stayed. But it wasn’t good enough. After our divorce, I spent most of my waking hours here. The view, tranquility before

sunrise and sunset, helped me clear my mind. This,” he moved his hand, palm up, in a sweeping motion, “gave me reason to enjoy life again.”

“Glad to hear that. So this place is your private solitude.”

“My sanctuary.”

“Why did you bring me here?”

There. She asked the question that had been nagging him. “I think it has to do with seeing you stare at the mountains and the Sound many times before. I figured, like me, you can see what I am seeing when I look around me.” *Bullshit.* If he were honest, he’d say he wanted her to be close to him. Closer than skin-to-skin.

“Thank you. You made me feel special.” Her voice was as smooth as the surface of the water.

“You are special.” It must have been the heater in the hut, but he could see her cheeks color, even with the pale moonlight. He tucked a loose tendril of hair behind her ear and touched her ear. Her generously curved lips parted.

Tristan’s body responded full force at the thought of what he could do with her lovely mouth. With her long slender legs, full breasts, and thick vivid lips, no one could argue that Julie was an attractive woman. But her inner person, the part of her that was kind and caring, loving and expressive, knowledgeable and funny, exciting and witty, made her a great package. The need to touch her lips was so

strong he couldn't help but press his thumb to them. "And you are beautiful."

"Beautiful enough to be kissed?"

"Hell, yeah." Tristan's arm encircled her slim waist, one hand above the rise of her well-rounded ass. He smiled at the surprised look on her face before lowering his head for a kiss.

Julie didn't resist. She moaned against his mouth, both hands on the side of his head. Since their short embrace in the kitchen this afternoon, he'd been walking with a boner. He even considered spending time in the bathroom to ease his pain. But he knew his own hand would not douse his burning need to taste and touch Julie again. As long as she was around, there wouldn't be any solution to his problem but to touch her. *Really* touch her. Having Julie in the house was worse than watching a pornographic movie. Damn, they'd be staying together for a week. That meant a week of torture from having to walk around with a stiff dick.

Julie sucked his lower lip while he enjoyed her upper plump one. When she moved her mouth, he took advantage and plunged his tongue deep inside her warm mouth. *God, she feels wonderful and tastes so damn good too.* She put her arms around his neck, pulling him in for a deeper kiss.

Tristan feasted on her mouth. He kissed her like a hungry man who spent years in isolation and was only given an hour to spend with a woman.

The appetites and passions of their bodies marked their kisses. When he

finally left her warm mouth, he buried his head against her neck and sucked hard on her skin. He moved lower and kissed the silky smooth skin just above the rise of her breast.

Julie whimpered. The sexually exciting sound urged him to continue. But he knew better. *Fuck*. If he didn't stop now, he'd take her here on the custom-made bed big enough for two. He had the bed made so he could spend hours here. Now, if let his urges rule his head, he'd use it to make love—with Julie.

“Julie, love. We need to stop.”

“Why?” Julie combed his hair with her fingers, her nails scratching his scalp.

“Because...” He hooked his thumbs on the hem of her shirt and lifted it. Through her white lace bra, he sucked her already hard nipple. It wasn't enough. Before he thought better of it, he unhooked her bra. As soon as the cups loosened, he lifted them to expose her exquisite breasts. He groaned. Just as he imagined, they were perfect. Pressing his face in between her breasts, he inhaled her scent. “Julie...”

“Yes. Please don't stop.”

Even if he wanted to, he couldn't. The moment was too good to let pass. Opening his mouth, he captured one nipple and sucked it gently while he massaged the other. Too good, he thought. And he wanted more.

Letting go of her breast, he followed the path down her belly. With his

fingers pointing downward, he snaked them inside her jeans to cup her mound. Kissing her again, he whispered, “Julie, love. We really must stop now.”

“No. I want this.”

Growling into her mouth, he thrust his tongue so deep he thought he’d spill his semen inside his pants. “Love, I want this, too.”

In record time, he divested them both of their clothes.

All he wanted to do was throw her on the bed he strategically placed in the corner and make love with her savagely. Instead, he lowered her on top like the special woman she was. Without taking his gaze off her dark green eyes, he covered her body with his.

He hardened from the contact. She felt smooth and soft beneath him. Fuck, he was so hard it hurt. Driving deep inside her pussy was all he could think of, but he fought the urge. He’d make sure Julie reached her orgasm first.

“Kiss me,” Julie whispered. Her eyes sparkled in the moonlit hut.

“Yes, baby. I’ll kiss you, every part of you.” Reclaiming her lips, he crushed her to him with shocking hunger. He had dreamed about this. Touching, kissing, and being alone with her. A dream that became his fantasy. His brain told him to end the moment, but his *other* head’s dictate was stronger. Julie’s hips grinding against him made it even harder to pull away from her. How could he resist the temptation from a willing woman? A woman he had wanted for so long? He

slanted his head to better penetrate her mouth with his tongue.

Julie gripped his hair while she matched him kiss for a kiss. Nudging her leg with his knee, he settled in between. He groaned against her neck when her long legs wrapped around his hips, locking their bodies together. The length of his throbbing dick pressed against her warm pussy. “You’re driving me crazy.”

Until today, she didn’t realize how deep her attraction for Tristan was. So deep she was one hundred percent willing to give him the honor of breaking her hymen, taking her virginity, regardless of what she had always believed in—love first, marriage second and then sex. Lord, last time she’d felt lust was during her high school senior prom. And it wasn’t as strong as this.

A warning bell sounded at the back of her head, telling her to push Tristan away, but her body wouldn’t cooperate. It was telling her to do just the opposite.

Tristan thrust his hips, rubbing his length against her while their mouths remained clamped together. Each time he moved his body, the very center of her body ached for fulfillment. She wanted more than just his cock *against* her. She wanted him *inside*.

She’d masturbated before, given herself an orgasm, but never used a toy to experience what having a man’s dick moving inside her might be like. She wanted that feeling now. Tristan wrapped his body around her like a warm blanket. Their closeness was like taking a strong cough syrup, shutting out the unpleasant

feelings, leaving only the heady sensation. Dear Lord, he was hard all over.

Tristan's kisses became urgent and probing. His lips explored her neck, throat, earlobe and finally, the shape of her breasts. The moment his lips clamped around her nipple, her body arched forward. While his mouth sucked her nipple, he lifted his body a fraction.

"Tristan,"

"Easy, love." His hand reached down to touch her clit. And then he began stroking her.

Aroused, she opened her legs wider. Julie wanted an even deeper ecstasy. She wanted to come. And what's more, she wanted him.

This is it. If she were going to give up her virginity, it would be with Tristan Knight. What was the difference between Tristan and the other men she let peck and kiss her? *Big difference.* With Tristan, her body wasn't the only part involved, but also her heart.

Her heart? *Oh my God. I'm in love.*

Julie grabbed Tristan's face, forcing him to look her straight in the eye.

"What's wrong, love. Had a change of mind?" He smiled wryly.

"No. Have I told you how handsome you are?" *Don't think right now. Face the consequences later.*

Tristan kissed her lips. "No. I don't pay much attention to my

handsomeness.”

“I suppose that is good. But just so you know, you are.”

“Thank you. Now, do you want to hear what I think about you?”

“No. Not right now. What I want is...”

As if he could read her mind and body begging for his touch, he suckled her nipple. Julie released a soft moan surging against her breast. “I love what you’re doing to me.” No one had ever done this to her before. She heard, read, and seen a XXX movie that made her hot and wet. But to actually feel a man’s tongue flicking her nipple, sucking the hardened pebble, including her areola, squeezing her breast as he pulled her flesh with his mouth—indescribable, unimaginable, wonderful.

Tristan gave her other breast the same attention. The feeling was exquisite, but her mind focused on the pressure of his erection against her pussy. She ran her hands along the length of his back, feeling the corded muscles move beneath her palms.

For a doctor, Tristan was all muscle.

Tristan ground his hips the way one would when making love. She cupped his butt and felt his muscles contract as he moved his hips. He gave her breast another hard suck then his mouth returned to kiss her mouth deeply. Wet and searching, his tongue moved inside her mouth, stroking her own.

“Love, are you certain you want to do this?” Tristan asked, breathing hard

on her neck.

Ah, what a knight. She could tell he wanted this as much as she wanted their bodies to become one, but he asked. Without a doubt, she knew he would stop if she told him to. *Such a gentleman.*

“Yes. One hundred and one percent, yes. You are the one making me mad. Tristan...Oh. My. God.” Her first reaction to his invading finger was to clamp her legs together, but his hips stopped her from doing so.

“No, love. Let me touch you.”

Heart pounding, she opened her legs. And he touched her hot pulsating pussy. “I’ve wanted to do this since I laid eyes on you, since you started pestering me, stunting my potential relationships with the women you drove away. God, Julie, you’re so beautiful.” With his middle finger, he penetrated her. “Sweet, sweet, Julie.”

Even on the precipice of plunging to a deep nothingness, Tristan’s words seeped into her mind. *I’ve wanted to do this since I laid eyes on you...* Julie smiled. Hope that Tristan liked her more than a friend floated in her mind.

With that wondrous thought, she relaxed her thighs to welcome his invasion. “I want you to touch me. Yesss...”

Tristan’s tongue dipping in and out of her mouth mimicked his finger’s movements. Getting finger fucked by a man, she thought, was way better than

doing it on her own.

“Tristan, this is heaven.” Julie shivered and bucked when Tristan pressed his thumb against her clit.

“I know, love, I know.” He licked her lips before sticking his tongue inside, moving it from side to side.

“Hmmm...” Julie couldn’t think. She could only feel. What was happening far exceeded her imagination and everything she thought she knew about lovemaking. Her breasts tingled and there was a delicious sensation in her most private parts better than the times she touched herself, which made her burn and groan. She felt at any moment she would burst into a ball of fire. Her mouth opened, giving Tristan access to probe and taste. Tristan’s tongue swept inside again and again. Julie thought she would die from the pleasure. Kisses rained all over her face, neck and shoulders in earnest. She thought she was in heaven until Tristan forced another finger inside her, jolting Julie’s senses back down to earth because of the pain. But pleasure quickly replaced the discomfort as soon as he started pumping in slow rhythm. She moaned. Never in her twenty-five years had she experienced something like this.

She felt feverish from the newly discovered joy when Tristan stopped. His body turned rigid. “Tristan, what is it?” His fingers slid out of her pussy.

He continued kissing her lips with such gentleness. “Love, I felt your

maidenhead. You're a virgin."

Heat suffused her cheeks. No doubt, she looked like a ripe strawberry with her face red from embarrassment. "Tristan, I...well, is that bad?"

"No. Virgins in this day and age are scarce. Bad is if you don't want to really give it up right now but are embarrassed to say so."

"I'm ready, Tristan."

"Are you sure?"

"Do I have to beg?"

"How you managed to stay a virgin this long, I have no idea. But I do know that I am honored to accept, to be the recipient, to be your first. I won't hurt you, Julie. Promise."

"I know."

Something in Tristan's eyes twinkled as he smiled. She loved staring at his blue eyes the way she loved watching the sunrise. They provided warmth, happiness, grateful feelings, and reminders that she was lucky to be alive.

"You will not regret this," Tristan whispered, before dipping his mouth for a scorching kiss.

Without inhibitions, Julie opened her legs wider, giving herself to him like an offering, with all her heart, body and soul. His mouth was hot on her neck, jaw, chin, and cheeks. When he finally melded their mouths together, she thought her

heart doubled its size. If his mouth was busy, his hands were even busier.

He ran his fingers along her arms, sides, kneading her flesh gently. Julie cried out when he began sucking her hard nipples again. This, she thought, must be her weakness.

Wet swirling tongue covered her nipple, replacing his expert thumb. Tristan laved and licked her. He did it over and over, like a hungry lion. Every part of Tristan was busy moving. Hands roaming, mouth caressing, hips thrusting, pressing his hard cock against her aching clit. The erotic movement teased her clitoris. It was so titillating she wanted to cry from the pleasure consuming her whole body. The feeling was so great and yet, he was just rubbing her. She couldn't imagine something better than this.

This, she thought, is better than Oreos. But as virginal as she was, she knew this was just the beginning.

"I want you inside."

"Love, I want nothing else. But I want you to be ready. I want you slick, weeping, and so hot you won't feel the pain at all when I take you."

"I am ready. If I get any hotter, I'll burst like a ball of fire."

"Patience is a virtue, love." Tristan ran his tongue between her breasts then scooted down, leaving wet trails of kisses along her chest and stomach. "Hmm...so good." And then his finger dipped inside her.

Julie gasped from the excitement brought by Tristan's finger slowly moving inside her, and for finding out how good finger fucking was. "Yes." Julie writhed and clawed the sheets from anticipation. "Tristan, stop torturing me, please."

"Look at me."

Julie forced her eyes open. Tristan's chest was heaving. He looked magnificent, like a warrior on a battlefield. His nostrils flaring, he ran his hand down her thigh. "Come back to me. Kiss me again."

He kissed her knees and the inside of her thighs. "Touch yourself, Julie."

"What?"

"I want you to pleasure yourself while I watch. Use your one hand to cup your breast and the other on your pussy."

"Tristan..."

"Do it, love. I want to see you, watch you come." He moved his fingers in and out of her, changing his tempo from fast to slow.

Burning, Julie snaked her hand down until she reached her pubic hair.

"Lower," Tristan whispered. "Spread your lips. Fuck, you're wet. Now, play with your clit."

Julie moaned when she touched her clitoris. She'd masturbated many times in the past, but never while someone was watching. Inhibitions and shame gone, she began to put pressure on her distended nub using her middle finger.

The other hand covering her breast, she began pleasuring herself. She moved her hips, meeting Tristan's fingers. "Tristan."

"Yes, baby, I'm here. You can do it. Come for me, baby. Yes, move your ass."

Julie felt his fingers slip out of her, but he was back even before she took a deep breath. He used his other hand this time while he licked his juice-covered fingers. He reached for her breast and squeezed.

"This feels so good." She moaned the words.

"I know. You're almost there, baby. I can feel you contracting."

Julie was close to reaching orgasm. She quickened her movements and concentrated on the one spot that she knew would bring her to the highest peak. "Oh, oh, I'm coming. Don't stop. Please don't stop." And then she felt it—the beginning of her orgasm.

She screamed Tristan's name as pleasure built higher and higher inside her.

Tristan shifted, lowered his head and sucked her pussy. He spread her so wide she thought she'd break. Of course, she didn't. Even if she did, she wouldn't have noticed. The pleasure of having Tristan's head between her legs consumed her; she hardly cared about the rest. Only his wicked tongue, and his equally wicked fingers.

Only him.

And the rippling sensation of her orgasm.

Tristan slithered back up until he was parallel with her. “Hang onto me, baby.”

Julie obliged. She gripped Tristan’s shoulders and sucked in her breath as she felt the tip of his cock at her entrance.

“Pain?”

“No. Pleasure. Now, Tristan, please...”

Tristan groaned into her neck then he thrust. Julie felt like she was being torn apart. But Tristan soothed her pain with his kisses. “Jesus, you’re so tight. I... Don’t let go, love.”

Never, Julie told herself. *Never*. She clung to him and rode the tide of passion, savoring their union. Each thrust, nip on her neck, Tristan’s hand on her breast, took her to the highest peak, until she thought she’d die before she could reach the top.

“Tristan, oh my God. I’m going to die...”

“No, love. This is the beginning of your new life as a woman.”

Right when she felt she’d burst into a million pieces, Tristan quickened his pace, pumping harder. Then it happened. Like a leaf on a windy day, she shook from the gust of desire as she reached a shuddering orgasm.

Seconds later, Tristan grunted and jerked.

Julie may be new to this whole making love thing, but she wasn’t ignorant

about protection. They didn't use any and somehow that thought made her feel elated. So what if their union resulted to her getting pregnant? She loved him and wanted nothing more than to have a part of him to treasure forever.

Their position, their chests pressed together, gave Julie a chance to feel his heartbeat. It made her want to cry. *What a sentimental fool you are, Julie.* Maybe all women cried when they lost their virginity. *Yeah, that must be it.* And not because of her overflowing joy from having Tristan's hard body on top of her.

Up above, the bright stars winked and danced as the thin mist of clouds rolled by. Watching the midnight sky from under the protection of the glass hut felt as wonderful as the man nibbling her neck, caressing the parts of her his long arms could reach.

Tristan shifted, used his arms to support his weight and looked down at her. "You're crying. Did I hurt you?"

"No, not at all."

"Tears of regret then?"

Reaching for the lock of hair covering his left eye, she tucked it behind his ear, only to fall back again. "I will never regret this, Tristan." How could she regret sharing something wonderful with the man she loved?

Tristan grinned before kissing her forehead. "I hope the tears are not for my poor performance."

Julie shook her head as more warm tears ran down the side of her face. “You made me feel beautiful.”

“You are beautiful—inside and out. I love—we all love—everything about you.”

“Thank you.”

Tristan rolled off her but his arm remained around her midriff. “Tristan.”

“Yeah?”

“What you made me do...that was beyond my imagination.”

“Do you regret it?” He combed her damp hair back and kissed her forehead.

“No. Not at all. It’s just I, me doing *that*, was—was it normal? I mean, I’ve seen videos and read books about that kind of thing happening in bed, but porn is not normal, right?”

“Between two grown, mature people, what we did is normal.” He planted a loud kiss on Julie’s shoulder then he got up. “Lay still.”

Julie watched him walk to the pedestal-style sink—in all his nakedness. She couldn’t help staring at his back, butt and thighs. *Lord, he is magnificent.* When he turned around, Julie still stared. Her eyes focused on his half-aroused cock.

Tristan chuckled. “You like to stare, don’t you?”

“If I like what I am seeing, yes.”

“Naughty girl.”

Tristan came back toward the bed holding a washcloth. It was too late when she realized his intentions.

“What are you doing? No!”

“Let me.”

Julie groaned as he began to wipe the traces of blood mixed with his semen off her thighs and vagina. He kissed her hipbones and the tiny brown birthmark on the upper side of her thigh, close to her groin. “Interesting mark.”

“Ugly, you mean.”

“Seahorses are not ugly. Yours is shaped like one.” Balling the soft bloodstained material, he tossed it inside the sink. “Julie, thanks for the gift.”

“You mean my virginity?”

“Yeah.”

“You’re welcome.”

“Julie?”

“Hmmm...”

“I didn’t use protection. Making love with you wasn’t part of my plan. I knew it was too dangerous to be alone with you. You’re so irresistible. And yet...”

She snuggled closer to Tristan to feed on his warmth. “It’s alright.” She didn’t care if she became pregnant. Her mother was younger than she was when she became pregnant with her. She could handle raising a child.

“Julie, you know you could get pregnant.”

“Tristan, I don’t care. I love babies,” she sighed, and kept her eyes closed.

He’d had women in the past, but never a virgin. Julie responded to his touch without inhibitions, but with feelings that surpassed the strong urge to simply have sex. She made him feel more than wanting to reach for orgasm. He actually made love.

Gathering her in his arms, they stayed in that position. The scent of their lovemaking lingered, trapped in the small glass hut. Somewhere, an owl hooted. The night creatures were stirring, which meant it was time for them to go back to the house. He didn’t want to, though. He wanted to stay that way until the sun began to rise.

Lying there with Julie in his arms was the best thing that had happened to him since his divorce. Tristan wiped the thoughts about Carly away. He wouldn’t let his precious moment with Julie get stained with his ex-wife’s bitter memories.

“Something wrong?”

“Nothing, love. Julie, we should go back.”

“We will. As soon as I get my bones back. I feel like overcooked noodles. Limp.”

“I don’t.”

“I can tell. You’re poking my belly. Can we do it again?”

Nose to nose, he smiled at her. If he were to decide, he'd keep her here until she was round with his baby. But if he used his noggin instead of his throbbing dick, he wouldn't touch her again. It was bad enough that he made love with his sister's best friend, getting her pregnant would be worse, with or without her approval. "I don't think it's a good idea, Julie."

Julie nodded, but the smile on her face vanished. "You're right. I don't know what I was thinking. Sorry for asking." She tried to get off the bed, but he pinned her with his thigh.

"Not so fast, Strawberry. Look at me." He waited until Julie focused her eyes on him instead of his chin. "This is your first time. You're still sore."

"If I weren't a virgin and not sore, would you make love with me again?"

Making love with her again would only deepen his growing attraction for her. As it was, his feelings for her were nearing the fine line between physical attraction and love. If they continued with this, he would only place his heart in jeopardy again. "No. You wouldn't want it anyway."

"What makes you think that?"

"You're a decent woman. Having sex with a man you know only through your friend would bite you back in the ass—as soon as the sun rises and the magic of this place is gone. What do you say we go back to the house and share a slice of brownie?"

“You’re right. Tristan, you’ve heard the saying *what happens in Vegas, stays in Vegas*, right?”

“You want us to stay a secret?”

“Yes.”

“Why?”

“In case I marry someone you know.”

Chapter Four

What the hell was she saying? Was she interested in one of his brothers, like Carly had been? All night afterwards, he watched her interact with his family. His brothers flirted with her, but Julie just laughed at them. She didn't feed the fire by flirting back.

Tristan thought about his friend, Edmund. The two had met last Christmas. On Christmas Eve, Edmund declared he was in love, although he didn't say with whom. Was Edmund who Julie was referring to as *someone he knew*? Something invisible hit him in the gut. The pain made him release his breath through clenched teeth. *God damn it.* So what if Julie married someone he knew or not? She wasn't his.

A short night with her in his arms didn't give him right to claim her. They weren't going out or anything. Julie was free to date, marry, whomever she chose. But why did the idea hurt?

The fuck!

He stared at the small dot of water stain on the ceiling. The spot had been there since he was in sixth grade. He always stared at it until sleep came. This time though, it didn't help him. Julie's words nagged at him like a suppurating sore.

Damn it, Tristan. Kill the infatuation. Nothing will come of it.

Punching his pillow a couple times, he lay on his stomach and buried his face, shutting out Julie's image as she reached her orgasm.



“What do you mean you have to leave? It's four-thirty in the morning, Julie.”

Kirsten plopped down on the couch with her eyes half-closed.

Julie picked up her overnight bag and hitched it on her right shoulder. She felt terrible. Kirsten looked half-dead with her arms listless on her sides. “Sorry I dragged you out of bed this early, but I didn't want to take off without telling you.

Kirsten, are you listening to me?

Kirsten nodded. “My ears are open, not my brain. Don't expect me to remember anything you say tomorrow.”

She could believe that. She'd known Kirsten long enough to know her friend wasn't a morning person. Her brain, Kirsten told her on many occasions, was slow in switching from sleep to alert mode.

Unlike her. Sometimes she believed she was part rooster—awake before the sunrise, ready to cock-a doodle-doo to announce the newborn day. Her addiction to watching the sunrise started when her mother took her to Rome for her birthday present. They went to the top of Gianicolo Hill to watch the sunrise. It was a memory she would treasure forever.

There was nothing more satisfying than watching the color of the dark sky turn into different shades of purple and orange, followed by the yellow sun coming up behind the Olympic Mountains. It was like watching a new day being born. So invigorating and awe-inspiring. And it fueled her mind like grease to an engine. It

helped her write better and come up with a new premise.

Like this morning. She was wide-awake and raring to go. Sadly, not to write and watch the sun, but to face another horrible accusation her stepmother threw at her. “I don't think I'll be a good company after hearing Weatherholt on the phone. The old man called at this hour and sounded too worried. I can't ignore him.”

“Your lawyer was born worried. Let's go back to bed.” Kirsten let out a long yawn that sounded more like a groan.

“I wish. But there's no way I can go back to bed and sleep. I have to go home, Kirsten. Weatherholt said Marla mentioned something about me using a different name, a *shameful* name. I think she found out that I am a writer. You know a lot of people are opposed to erotic romance.”

“They are bigots. There is nothing wrong with contemporary romance spiked with hot sex scenes.”

“Right. But Mom was a very religious woman. Marla knew about it. So if my books are the reason why she's coming again, then I am in trouble. You know the will's stipulation.”

“I know. If your father can prove you have done something stupid that is an embarrassment to the family name, he will then have the right to claim the remaining three quarters of your mother's fortune. The whole this is obtuse.”

She wanted to agree with Kirsten. But she couldn't. The stipulation was her mother's way of teaching her to be an obedient child, a *good* child. And she would keep the promise she gave to her mother that she could be the Julie Parrish she wanted her to be.

"You know why Mom added the condition in her last will."

"Still... Anyway, you've fended off Marla's whacko made-up accusations before and you didn't even see them coming. You can do it again. You. Shouldn't. Worry."

Julie thought for a moment. If she followed her heart, she'd stay. She'd been looking forward to spending a week here. Yesterday was an example of how much fun she would have if she stayed.

But Marla was the epitome of an evil stepmother who would do anything to get her hands on Julie's inheritance. Thanks to her wino father, Marla learned about the stipulation and was now on a personal quest to prove that she broke it. And according to Weatherholt, Marla found just a reason to make her evil dream come true. His tone hinted that he strongly believed whatever bullshit Marla had told him.

Did Marla find out about my books? God, I hope not.

Depleted, Julie adjusted the strap of her overnight bag on her shoulder. "Maybe you're right, Kirsten. But for the sake of my own sanity, I think it would be

best if I go home. I am not sure if my books are Marla's reason for coming after me this time, or something else."

"Whatever. But if you stay here, we could think of a solution together. You shouldn't be alone in that humongous house anyway. What if *Cruella* shows up with her asshole son? Who would help you? Sebastian's a pervert. So stay and we'll talk about this, let's say, after five hours?"

"Sorry, Kirsten. I have a bad feeling about this."

"God, Julie. Surely, Weatherholt and Marla's lawyer wouldn't consider writing romance books besmirching your family name. Your characters are wild and horny as sluts, but you don't *act* like them. Although, I believe the horny part is based on you."

"I'm not horny," said Julie in defense.

"Yeah? Then how do you write your hot bed scenes if you're not horny? You've got to be horny to write something like '*...and with his expert fingers he stoked the fire that was slowly burning in the pit of her stomach. Heat melted her desire, turning into a sweet juice to pool in between her thighs. He suckled her—*'"

"Stop. Very funny, Kirsten. I'm a writer with a very good imagination. Being able to write a bed scene doesn't mean I'm horny."

"And I'm not a Knight. Come on, Julie. Stay. I'll vouch for you. Don't worry about it."

“Okay, maybe my books are not the reason Marla is coming, but what about the evidence Weatherholt is talking about? I don't know what it is. And not knowing is tough on my nerves. I...I have to go and think about what this evidence could be.”

“Maybe your pus-ugly stepbrother made it up. He and his mother have been trying hard to ruin your name since your dad let them in on the will's condition. Meaning, whatever evidence they have against you could be fake. You should sue them for harassment.”

And let people know how dysfunctional her family was? Drag her dead mother's name to court, have the lawyers dig into her past and show how she had lived her pitiful life? No way would she let that happen.

“You know I can't do that. Suing them would only create another problem. Marla could turn things against me. I don't want to take a probable chance.”

“I know. You have a bad rap with the law. And if it weren't for your mother's influence, you would have had ended in the juvie, blah, blah.” Kirsten yawned again.

Julie cringed at the word *juvie*. The word she didn't want to hear for the rest of her life. The word she wished unattached to her past. She regretted giving her mother grief and shame by accumulated petty crimes, including a staged burglary to get her parents' attention.

At the time, she thought it funny. But when her mother cried from frustration, the extent of what she had done came crashing down on her—big time.

Through tears, she explained to her mother why she turned from an altar girl to a pain in the ass. That she misbehaved on purpose to turn the attention back to her. Her mother was too upset to accept her apologies. That same month Laura Parrish was diagnosed with pancreatic cancer, and given only a few months left to live. Laura had spent her remaining months tying up loose ends, arranging her own funeral and added the condition on her last will—*Julie Parrish must stay out of trouble*. Any action that could be construed as embarrassing, shameful, a stain on the family's name, would be reason enough for her inheritance, including the house in Edmonds where she grew up, to go to Paul Parrish.

One might question how the condition would help Julie change her ways. Well, those who knew her father would understand why she was bent on keeping her slate clean to keep Paul away from her inheritance. The man was more disgusting than any animal's dirty ass.

Laura's funeral had been as somber as the guests' dark suits worn. Powerful businessmen and women, government officials, Paul, and Julie sat on the cushioned chairs as they listened to the priest read prayers off his worn Bible. Julie cried her heart out that day, wishing for the clock to turn back. As she stared at

the brass colored coffin, she pinched her arm until she started bleeding, hoping she was just asleep and would wake up to find her mother in her home office or in the kitchen making sandwiches. But it never happened.

At the first sign of the coffin lowering into the ground, she screamed her mother's name, begging her to come back until her throat became sore. Even after everyone was gone, she remained standing over the mound of dirt, whispering her mother's name. She distinctly remembered the loud thunder followed by a flash of lightning, the Seattle sky grayer than she had ever seen, as if it too was mourning. The whole atmosphere was a deep melancholy mood but not deep enough compared to what she had felt that day.

Before she let her father lead her away from the grave, she repeated the promise she gave her mother while she lay dying in her hospital bed. A promise she kept to this day.

Julie adjusted her overnight bag. She shouldn't bother Kirsten about her problems. Her friend was conversant, but still seemed half-awake.

"I have to go. Thanks for everything. I'll call you when I get a chance. And please don't worry about me."

"I won't. Wait! How about using your way out, Julie? It's about time you draw your ace."

"Jeez, you look half-dead, but you still want to chat?"

“No, I just thought about your out.”

“You know where I stand on that.”

Honestly, she thought about using her out. She could end the agreement and Marla's ridiculous attempt to get her money, too. The will didn't say anything about courtship or anything. Just get married and the stipulation would be over. *But marry who?* She wasn't in a relationship right now. Hiring someone to marry her in exchange for money was out of the question. Although the idea of entering a loveless marriage would be better than facing her wicked stepmother.

A paradigm of her mother's life was enough for her not to follow suit. Besides, if she hired a groom, Marla would definitely find out about it. *Damn Marla.*

“How about your friend, Armand? He's been drooling over you since you met him at the Microsoft Corporate Office. If you marry him, it wouldn't be a totally loveless marriage. And you could always divorce him after, uhm, say a month.”

“Do you think he'd agree if I tell him I just want to be married for a month?”

“Don't tell him then. Who knows, maybe after a month you'd learn to love him.”

“While I wait for my heart to beat for him, what should I tell him? ‘*Armand, I can't sleep with you yet because I don't love you.*’ I don't think that'll fly.”

“He's in love with you. It might.”

“I don’t know, Kirsten. He’s a good man. I can’t just use him or his affection. That’s just downright wrong.”

“What about Mr. Scowl? He smiles at you all the time, but scowls and ignores me.”

“Mr. Scowl. Are you talking about Tristan’s business partner, Edmund?”

“Yeah. Didn’t you notice how he scowls when I am around? As a pediatrician, he should smile all the time so he doesn’t scare his patients.”

“Ah. No, I didn’t notice.”

“I think he’s got the hots for you. Whenever he’s here, he only talks to you, even if I am sitting next to him. It’s as if I don’t exist.”

“And you think he scowls because...why again?”

“I think because my brothers tease you all the time. Maybe ask him to do you a favor. Pay him if you have to.”

Julie smiled. Her friend might be one of the great thinkers and fashion designers in all of Washington, but she could be dense when it came to something simple and obvious. She supposed the difference between a designer and a romance author was the designer could see what *was missing* in the picture, whereas an author like her was good at spotting what *was there*, what was going on between characters. And she’d bet her Cadbury candies, there was definitely something in Edmund’s eyes whenever he stared at Kirsten, when he thought no

one was looking.

“Edmund is just like one of your brothers. A teaser. But I highly doubt that he has the hots for me.”

“You don’t think so?”

“No. And I will not pay him to marry me. I’ll think about Armand, Kirsten. Is that fine enough for you to let me leave?”

“Yeah. Fine. Okay, let me make a pot of coffee. Have a cup before you go,” Kirsten offered, but didn’t attempt to get up. Instead, she let out a long yawn that reminded Julie of a lioness basking under the afternoon sun at the Woodland Park Zoo one time.

Julie felt horrible. Her friend should be back in bed dreaming about gowns and dresses. “Don’t worry about it. Starbucks are everywhere. I’ll grab a cup at the ferry terminal. Sorry, Kirsten. I hate to disrupt our weekend plan, but it’s important that I go home.”

“I’m sorry, too. My brothers will be disappointed. Percival wanted a chess rematch. Bors was still upset about losing his handcuffs in a poker game and wanted them back. Gawain saved two bags of Oreos thinking he could beat you in an Oreo eating contest he planned for this afternoon, and Tristan...hmm...I don’t know what he’s planning on doing this afternoon. Whatever. They won’t be happy when they find you gone and I’m sure they’ll all give me a hard time for letting you

go.”

Maybe not *all* of them. Last night, when she and Tristan came back to the house through the backdoor, he simply said goodnight then walked away, leaving her in the kitchen alone. He didn’t join them for a game of cards or share the brownies with everyone. She heard he retired early, which much to her chagrin, brought disappointment in her heart.

“Tell them I am sorry.”

“I think you should wait and tell them you’re sorry yourself.”

“My gut is telling me that you just want me to stay so your brothers could torment me instead of you.”

“Of course—yes. But you know I want you to stay here with me forever.”

“I know.”

“And I’ll love you more if you stay.”

“I can’t. And whether I leave or stay, you’ll love me forever. Well, have to go. I want to catch the first ferry.”

“Just stay, Julie, you’re worrying about nothing.”

“Hope you are right. That whatever Weatherholt said to me on the phone isn’t worth worrying about. But I still want to make sure. Go back to bed. I’ll call you.”

“You’d better. Oh, would you like me to go with you?”

“No. Thanks for the offer, though. All right. Take care.”

Julie gave her friend a hug, walked outside, and got in the waiting cab. Honest to God, she didn't want to leave. Being in the Knight household was like sleeping underneath an electric blanket. Warm, cozy, and comfortable.

Sighing, she rolled down the window and waved at Kirsten, who was leaning against the doorjamb with a long face.



Kirsten stood on the porch hugging herself. Her flannel pajamas weren't enough to ward off the chill. She waved back at Julie, who stuck her head out of the car's window waving her slender arm. The feeling in her stomach was comparable to how her stomach would clench whenever she heard Bors was doing undercover work. *Fear.*

It's time I help you, Julie. You needn't face your battles alone. A true friend would walk on a bed of hot coals to help another friend. Especially Julie. Taking a deep breath, Kirsten made a final decision. It was time to let out Julie's secret, to find someone who could really help her.

Kirsten waited until the car turned around the bend before she hurried upstairs. Her steps were long and purposeful.

At the end of the hallway, she stopped in front of her brother's bedroom. She read the sticker on the door that had been there since they were young kids, 'Enter

at your own risk.’ Scoffing at the sign, she turned the knob and opened the door.

The room was dark, but she didn’t bother turning on the lights. For sure, her brother slept with his boxers on, but one couldn’t be so sure. Kirsten knew the layout of the room. She slept here many times to remember where the king size bed, dressers, table and chairs were located.

Standing on the side of the bed, she shook her brother’s shoulder. “Wake up!” she whispered, and pulled off the bedspread to expose the big lump on the bed.

“Kirsten! What the hell, man. I’m trying to sleep.”

“Wake up.”

“What is it? Nightmare again? Go see Mom and Dad.”

“No, I don’t want Mom and Dad.”

“Get your sleeping bag and sleep on the floor. You’re too big now to cuddle with me.”

“Dingbat, I didn’t have a nightmare.”

“Good. If you need cash, my wallet’s on the dresser. Just leave me cash for gas.”

Kirsten felt the screams of frustrations forming deep down her throat. If she made a single peep, her brothers and parents would come running. Screaming wouldn’t be good. She punched him on the shoulder instead. “Idiot! I don’t need

your money.”

“Jeez, then what do you want?”

“I need to talk to you. Meet me downstairs.”

“What! I just finally am able to sleep. Can’t it wait? Go to back to bed, Kirsten.”

“No. This can’t wait, Tristan. Julie needs help.”

“The fuck!”

Tristan’s blanket landed on a heap on the floor. He stood up so fast one would think there was a fire in the house. Just as she thought. She guessed the right brother to wake. And she was right, too, about leaving the lights off. Even in the dark, she could make out her brother’s body—naked.

“You owe the penny jar a quarter.”

Chapter Five

“What is this about helping Julie, Kirsten? And where is she?” Tristan looked about the family room. Without the vixen, the bane of his existence, the woman he wanted to punish for ruining his dates, the one who seemed to light the room with her presence, and the one he imagined was sleeping beside him, the room was just that. A room.

It was the hair. Julie’s damn bright red-orange hair served as a beacon wherever she was. And her peridot green, round eyes...Damn, the woman was a menace and a pain in a dick.

“Julie left a few minutes ago. The cab took her to the ferry terminal.”

“She went home?”

“Yeah.”

Hope of spending the morning with Julie was dashed. All night he thought about ways to apologize to her and came up with the idea of offering an invitation to take her kayaking. “I thought she would be spending the whole week with us. Did I insult her by giving her burnt sausages?”

“Not at all. She thought it hilarious.” Kirsten picked up a pocketbook off the table then plopped down on the couch. She tucked her feet beneath her before looking at him shaking her head.

Tristan moved the small shallow basket half-full of Granny Smith green apples so he could sit on the coffee table. He noticed a couple of apples were

missing from the basket. His heart ballooned. Green apples were Julie's favorite. Every time he heard Julie was coming over, he would buy the apples. Some sort of peace offering, so she wouldn't do anything silly behind his back. Of course, the apples never worked. This time he thought she might not try to get even with him for scaring her out of her wits last time she came over. But what did she do? Told Pamela he had gonorrhea. He bet Pamela already spread the news about *his disease*. Not that he cared.

Since Julie entered his already quiet life, she picked on him whenever she got her chance. And damn him. He enjoyed every minute of it.

But he shouldn't have given her the burnt sausages, which she peeled off methodically. Julie loved Polish sausages.

Facing Kirsten, he found he was overly anxious to hear about the details of Julie's sudden departure. "So why did Julie leave? What's the rush?"

"Weatherholt. Julie's lawyer. He was Laura's lawyer"

Laura was Julie's mother. What's going on? "Why would Julie's lawyer call early in the morning?" It was a stupid question really. He'd been around lawyers and judges to know why a lawyer would wake someone with a phone call.

"Weatherholt called to tell her that the bitch is coming within a week, which undoubtedly will cause trouble again. And the asshole is coming with her, of course. So Julie went home, in case they show up at her front door early."

“You have to elaborate what you just said. I’ve been around too many bitches and assholes to know which one you’re talking about.”

“Her stepmother and her son are coming back.”

“Sebastian and Marla?”

“Yes. They thought of a new way to destroy her.” Kirsten stared at the book she was holding. “I hate them.”

“Come again? What do you mean, *destroy her*?” Tristan took a deep breath. His sister was drawn to dramatics, which he was used to, but it was early. And she wasn’t helping his growing irritation, which stemmed from learning that someone was causing Julie trouble. “Kirsten, before I strangle you, will you please tell me what’s going on? From the very beginning...please.”

“You’re going to help, right?”

“Of course. She’s your best friend, Kirsten. If she’s in trouble, I will help.”

“Good. I just want to make sure.”

“Why would I not help Julie?”

“Because you’re indifferent to her. Yeah, you two spar all the time, but you’re not Bors, Gawain and Percival. They play nice with her, not watch her every move, frowning at her all the time, as if you’re waiting for her to do something you disapprove, a reason for you to stay away from her. Julie is beautiful and men are attracted to her. But Julie’s not like Carly, you know. She wouldn’t flirt with all of

you to get attention. In fact, if I let her, she'd stay in her house, away from everyone. She doesn't want attention."

"Not carousing with her doesn't mean I don't like her, Kirsten. And for the record, not once have I thought of Julie as someone like Carly. Like you said, she's beautiful. It's hard not to look at her. If I frown, well, I wasn't aware. Thanks for letting me know, though. Next time, I'll make sure my eyebrows are not knotted when she's around. Now will you tell me why she left and what this bitch and asshole are about? I really want to help."

Kirsten broke a smile. Her eyes shone with mischief. "Cool."

Damn, he'd seen that smile many times before. Tristan felt he just signed a blank form Kirsten would use and he couldn't do anything about it. What was his sister up to? "Now, back to Marla and Sebastian."

"Okay, I'll tell you all about Julie and her family, but only because I love and care for her. You care for her, Tristan, don't you?"

More than I want to. "She saved your life, and she's been a friend of this family for, what now? Six months?" Seems like I've known her forever. And when I look into her eyes, I swear I can see her heart and soul. Julie's an open book. She laughs like an angel without pretend and a she-devil that'll capture a man's heart if he's stupid enough to lower his guard.

"...but don't tell anyone," Kirsten was saying. "She doesn't want people to know how dysfunctional her family was."

Tristan nodded. He wasn't aware of Julie's dysfunctional family, but he knew a little bit about *her*. Julie appeared three times on a Gap Jeans advertisement on television, liked green apples sprinkled with salt, and was a big fan of Jane Austen. She lived in a two and a half million-dollar house in Edmonds. She was a prankster, humble, down-to-earth, a heck of a siren, with a model figure and height any man would want to have a taste of feeling, kissing, and sucking. Just the way he did in the glass hut. God, the woman was a walking sin and until last night, a virgin, who gave herself to him without inhibitions.

Shit, his physical attraction took over his senses. God, he claimed her virginity in the hut. Julie's first time was on the extra firm mattress with flannel sheets. She deserved better than that! What had he done? "The fuck."

"You owe the jar another quarter. Mom should have made a dollar rule for each curse." Kirsten's scowl brought Tristan back to their topic.

"What were you saying about Julie's dysfunctional family?"

Kirsten let out a deep sigh. "Okay, you already know that Laura died when Julie was in high school, right?"

"Right."

"Well, in Laura's will, she left practically everything to Julie. While Paul, her ex-husband, receives only a monthly stipend, which is still big if you ask me."

"I take it the asshole is Paul."

“Yeah, Paul is an asshole, but not the one I am talking about. He’s more of a useless wart and a wandering dick.”

“I hate to imagine his dick wandering here knocking on our door. I sure hope you don’t talk like that around other people. Around us is fine, but—”

“Of course, I don’t. What do you think? I have a pilot, FBI Agent, Computer Analyst for the government, and a Pediatrician for brothers, not to mention a Judge for a father. Do you think I would do anything that would ruin our name?” Kirsten huffed.

Tristan smiled. It must have been hard for his sister to behave like a girl outside when she had been raised in a family full of bucks, who talked to her as if she wasn’t a girl, and played rough with her—practically all the time. “Just checking. Now if the father is not the asshole, then you’re talking about Sebastian.”

“Yes. He doesn’t treat her like his step-sister.”

“Why do you say that?” he asked sharply.

Kirsten’s brows rose. She stared at him for a minute then shrugged her shoulders. “How about if I just tell you why they are giving Julie trouble?”

Tristan nodded. He didn’t pry. Instead, he filed the question in his memory bank. Later, he would find out about it. “Go on.”

“Marla, after marrying Paul, found out about the stipulation to Laura’s will.”

“Stipulation?”

Kirsten took another deep sigh. “Okay, I think it would be best if I start from the very beginning. Here we go. Julie told me, from elementary grade through high school, she created all kinds of problems to get her parents’ attention. She found out that the best way to get them together was if she was sent to the principal’s office. So she created troubles at school. But after a while, her mother started sending her secretary in, if not Weatherholt, to deal with her problems. So Julie thought to devise a plan. To stage a burglary.”

“A burglary?” Tristan couldn’t believe the beautiful head contained a wicked brain. What a smart woman.

“Yes. But you know Julie. She laughs at everything. So she was found out.”

“How?”

“Julie described the burglar she claimed she saw standing in her room to the cartoonist.” Kirsten smiled. “When the cartoonist was done drawing the image based on Julie’s description, the image turned out to be Homer Simpson. You know the dad in—”

“*The Simpsons*.” He knew all about the television show. He’d seen all of the episodes and even watched the movie.

“Yeah. When Julie saw the cartoon, she started laughing.”

Tristan smiled, imagining a young Julie fooling everyone. Or trying to.

“Unfortunately, the police and Laura didn’t find the whole thing funny. Furious, Laura threatened to send Julie to an all girls’ school, but that same month she was diagnosed with pancreatic cancer. Julie said Laura was worried about leaving her troublemaker daughter alone. That she might end up hurting herself or end up in jail. So she thought of adding the stipulation to her will, thinking it would make Julie behave.”

“Did she? I mean, she still pulls pranks on me.”

“Only with you. Besides, she isn’t dragging her own name down the gutter when she pulls pranks on you guys, or when she answers the phone pretending to be your girlfriend or wife. Anyway, keeping her family name clean is part of the condition on the will. She must not do anything—petty or not—that could be considered bad for her name. If she does, then she loses her inheritance to Paul.”

“So? He’s her dad.”

“Only in blood. Julie hates him for cheating on her mom, and for ignoring her most of her life.”

Tristan nodded. At least Julie stayed put instead of running away. Abuse—physical and mental—were prime reasons for the high rate of runaway teenagers. Laura made a good decision for adding the stipulation. Even if it was now causing her troubles, the will made her stay in one place. “How long has Marla been giving Julie troubles?”

“The moment the bitch heard about the stipulation. Tristan, they’ve been creating all kinds of stupid accusations against Julie. They want the money so badly. Paul should have kept that part of the will to himself, but the man’s tongue is as loose as the skin on the cow’s neck when drunk.”

“What does Paul think about all this? Is he aware of what Marla’s doing to Julie?”

“Paul? Paul’s an idiot. He only cares about his bottles and Marla. As long as Marla keeps his bed warm, everything that the witch says, he believes.”

“So, Julie’s been on her own since her mother died.”

“Technically, since she was ten. Julie’s mom worked like a dog, leaving Julie to her father’s care. But the man would rather have nursed his bottles and cheat on Laura than give Julie his attention. That’s why Julie became a troublemaker.”

Tristan wanted to find Paul and hit him hard on the face. He didn’t deserve Julie. How someone could prefer a stranger to his own blood was beyond him. He’d seen enough children born out of wedlock, love and lust to know what the children went through when their parents deserted them.

“Laura didn’t hire a sitter for Julie?”

“Oh, she did. But Paul drove them all away. He’s a freaking skirt-chaser. A creepy old man.”

Tristan’s stomach began to sink. He felt like a cad for seducing Julie last

night. She remained a virgin to keep a clean image, not to break the stipulation. Damn it to fucking hell, if he had gotten her pregnant, she'd lose everything she worked hard for to keep because of him. He scrubbed his face with his hands. Anger simmered deep down, his gut fired by his own stupidity. *I shouldn't have touched her.* But fuckin' eh, he couldn't feel regret for what he'd done. "Son of a bitch."

"Yeah, you could say that again."

Tristan looked up. Kirsten misconstrued his meaning. He wasn't referring to Paul, but his sister had no way of knowing that he made love with her friend without protection.

"Julie's a fighter, though," Kirsten continued. "That's why she's still living in that monstrous house. To prove to her mother that she can be responsible. Everything in that house is important to her. She's not going to let Marla and Sebastian, or anyone, take it away from her, which she knows the bastards would do in a hurry. They'll sell everything Julie's mom worked hard for to collect. Julie's been working hard keeping a clean image. She avoids men who follow her like her own shadow, avoids parties and wears casual clothing all the time. So far, it's been working."

Until he came along. Tristan groaned inwardly. Marla's arrival must have been a heavy load on Julie's dainty shoulders. His actions last night made it double.

Ah, crap. What if Marla had Julie followed and saw them...no. He would have known. The hut was hidden from prying eyes. Unless someone was on the other island and used a powerful telescope, like the scientists used to look at the moon, no one could spot them in the hut from the distance.

“Did Julie say what evidence Marla has right now?”

“There are two things that worried Julie. She suspects Marla found out about her books.”

“What books?”

Kirsten held up the book she was holding. “This.”

Tristan directed his gaze at the cover of a woman in a white revealing gown with its neckline lowered, showing the rise of her breasts. She looked as if getting ready to get in bed. “*Secret Desires of a Duchess* by J. McAllister?”

“Julie McAllister. Julie used her mother’s maiden name instead of her father’s Parrish.”

“Julie wrote that book?” He’d seen Kirsten and Julie with their heads together, looking at the books written by the same author many times. *No wonder.* Julie wrote them.

“And other titles. All of them made it to New York’s best selling romance book list. If you read one, you’ll know why Julie is worried.”

Tristan nodded. He picked up the book one time and thumbed the pages. He

remembered reading a scene so explicitly detailed and well described he had to close the book right away because his cock reacted to the words fast.

“What’s the other one that worried Julie?”

“She doesn’t know yet. She said she’ll call me. But I have a feeling that’s not going to happen. She’ll face Marla all by herself.”

“So how can I help?”

Chapter Six

The line of cars at Friday Harbor waiting for the ferry to Anacortes Ferry Terminal was so long he wished he'd ask Gawain to fly him to Edmonds. Or Bors. At least Bors could use his badge to let him get in the ferryboat without waiting in line. *Damn!* If he was lucky, he'd make it on this trip, otherwise, he would have to wait here for another two hours.

A female voice came from the speaker. The ferryboat would be loading in thirty minutes. Crap, he hadn't even bought his ticket yet. He was still five cars away from the tollbooth. Tristan opened his wallet and took out his debit card. He rolled down the window and waited as the cars ahead of him moved with the speed of slugs.

Julie should have consulted his dad about her situation. Dad would know what to do. He could have helped her. Who would have thought the easygoing and beguiling Julie was hiding a secret? Whatever baggage she was carrying, she hid it well. Tristan checked his watch. Julie's ferryboat left two hours ago. It would take an hour and a half for the ferry to reach Anacortes terminal. From there, Julie would have to drive ninety miles to Edmonds. She must have reached her home by now.

Times like these he wished his parents didn't live in the Orcas Island. He couldn't blame them, though. With a place like theirs, anyone would bear the long ferry ride. Many people would spend a fortune just to get a small condominium in

one of the San Juan Islands so they could relax and appreciate the scenery. Including him. His parent's property—an inheritance from his grandparents—sat on a prime lot. Dense redwood forest surrounded the area. They could hike, ride a bike or just drive around the islands to visit the rocky promontories and the tiny fishing villages. There were inlets to visit and the water offered bountiful schools of Salmon and Lingcod.

But his favorite things to do were kayak early in the morning and watch the sunrise. There was nothing like watching a new day being born. Like delivering a baby to the world. And the water. Not everybody was fortunate enough to experience gliding on the water while in the midst of cavorting mighty Killer Whales. Many times, he explored the coastal cliffs with rookeries of wildfowl and spied the majestic eagles soaring above.

With all of its greatness, though, there was a downside to it. To reach the Seattle Children's Hospital, he must take the ferry or ask his brother, Gawain, to fly him to Seattle in one of the seaplanes. Carly hated that one fact. She hated anything that required staying hours in the car or ferries or airplanes. Although she once said to him that she didn't mind being in the airplane if their destination was Europe.

The car in front of him crossed the tollbooth. Finally, it was his turn to pay. The booth was manned by a sour woman, who Tristan guessed wasn't happy to

get up this early took his card. She puckered her lips and read his name aloud.

“Tristan Knight. You related to Judge Arthur Knight?”

“It depends.”

“Aren’t you a smart aleck one?”

Damn, he shouldn’t ask, but he knew this woman would bug his conscience all the way to Edmonds and back. “Why are you asking if I’m related to Judge Knight?”

“Heard he’s a good judge and is not partial to rich people. My husband and I have a foster kid and want to adopt her, but the system won’t let us. The kid’s been home hopping. Poor thing.”

Crap. Why did he pick this line? He noticed the cars started boarding the boat. *Don’t fucking get involved. Just say sorry and get your damn ticket. Hell.* “How old is the child?”

“Four. The social service found out Nikki has family in Boston. They’re rich, you see. And they want our Nikki because she’s their cousin’s daughter. They’ve been coming to my house trying to get her. But I’m not letting them see Nikki. I am Nikki’s mom now. We’ve been together since she was barely two years old. I can’t bear to be parted from her.”

The woman’s eyes misted. Obviously, she loved her foster child. Unfortunately, she must have to go through the whole rigmarole of adoption

before she could lay claim on the child. “Uhm, Judge Knight would probably tell you this. The system—”

“Ello!” A curly haired girl with a small upturned nose poked her head out the window.

“Hey there, princess.” The girl giggled. Dammit, what was she doing here inside the booth? Tristan gave the woman a reproachful look. “What is she doing here?”

“It’s “Bring your Daughter to Work” day. Isn’t that right, Nikki?”

“Uh-huh,” the girl replied.

Shit. Dad would kill him if he gave his direct line to this woman. Well, he’d face him later. Taking a business card out of his wallet, he gave it to the woman. “Call him. Tell him Tristan gave you his number.”

The woman’s jaw dropped. Her eyes were as huge the pretty girl’s eyes peeking through the window. “I don’t know how to thank you.”

“No need. Just give me my ticket. I’m going to miss this boat.” He looked at the rearview mirror. The line was backed all the way to Timbuktu.

“No. You’re not gonna. Lucky you. You’re the last car to board. Go to lane one. It’s open. Someone will meet you.”

Hot damn! I made it. “Thank you.”

Tristan took lane one. Sure enough, a man in uniform waving an orange flag

was there. The man was smiling. As he got closer, the man motioned for him to lower his window.

“Mornin’”

“Hey there. Good morning. I was told to take this lane.”

“That’s right, Sir Knight. My missus and I thank you for your help. Go on straight ahead.”

Ah, the woman’s husband. Tristan nodded to the man and drove on. He was sure Dad would help the couple. Maybe the result wouldn’t be to the couple’s favor, but Dad would offer help.

Minutes later, Tristan sat in his car facing the water. When the boat started unloading passengers, he’d be the first to leave.

As soon as the ferry employee jacked the block behind his wheel to prevent it from rolling, he called his friend. Edmund answered after the third ring.

“What’s up, man? It’s fucking early.”

“You have to cover for me next week. Tell Cindy to call my patients. She knows what to tell them.” Tristan actually cringed hearing Edmund’s string of curses.

“What’s going on? Finally fucked one of your patient’s mothers and now you’re running away?”

“Didn’t know you’re such an ass early in the morning.”

“Well, you forgot I’ve been an on-call at the hospital.”

“No, I didn’t.”

“Then why did you fucking wake me up, bro?”

“To ask you to take my calls this week.”

“No way.”

“I have a very important thing to do in Edmonds that can’t wait, Edmund.”

“Shit, man, what’s going on?”

“Can’t tell you the details yet. Come on, man, just give me a day or two.” The ferryboat’s foghorn tooted.

“Fuck! Are you already in a ferryboat?”

“On my way to Edmonds.”

“So I can’t say no then. Aren’t you gonna miss the family spring reunion? Hot Julie’s at your house, right?”

“No. She just left.”

Edmund laughed. “And you’re in pursuit. Okay, I get it. This *important business* is about a very important woman named Julie Parrish.”

Tristan looked at the brightening skyline. Yeah, this woman was too important to him, to his sister, to his family. “It’s not what you think, jackass. You know what Julie is to my family. So, yes or no?”

“Fine. I’ll take your calls.”

“Thanks, bro. By the way, Kirsten’s lonely now that Julie went home. You might wanna keep her company.”

“You have other brothers. They can keep her occupied. Besides, your bratty sister doesn’t like me.”

Tristan disagreed but kept his mouth shut. “It’s up to you, man.”

“What about Hot Pamela, bro? Saw her in town yesterday. Thought you guys have a date?”

“No.” Pamela was hot, all right. Hot to castrate him because of Julie. Tristan shook his head. Any woman would be furious if she found out the man she planned to sleep with was married to a *pregnant wife and carrying a contagious disease*. Gonorrhea. Except for the venereal disease, ‘the joke’ that he was married to Julie, who was pregnant with his baby, left him smiling all day and night.

“You still there?”

“Yeah.”

“The redheaded beauty changed your mind? Can’t blame you.”

He knew whom Edmund was talking about. “She’s a pain.”

Edmund snorted. “Pain in your dick, you mean. You talk about her every day, doodle her name on your prescription pad and you have her picture on your desktop wearing just a lacy—”

“How’d you know about her picture?”

“Bro, we work together. Same office, same building.”

“She’s Kirsten’s best friend.”

Edmund yawned loudly on the phone. “And you’ve been having wet dreams because of her.”

“Shut the fuck up.”

“I’ll tell your mom you need to drop a quarter in your curse jar. Okay. I’ll take your shift. But you owe me, man.”

“Thanks, bro.” He ended the call then dialed his dad’s family line. Arthur picked up in one ring.

Tristan could hear the coffeemaker grinding. Dad was up. *Good*. In three short sentences, he explained about the ferry workers’ situation and why he left.

Arthur sighed on the phone. “Bring that young woman back here, son. I’ll talk to her. Don’t worry about Mrs. Belfry, I’ll see what I can do.”

“Belfry?”

“Yeah. The ferry terminal employee. She called already.”

Hot damn! “Sorry, Dad. I didn’t know she’d call you right away.”

“It’s okay, son. I’m up anyway. Mom wants her coffee.”

Tristan smiled. If Arthur Knight’s friends could only see him in his light blue pajamas, fluffy slippers, hair tousled, carrying a tray upstairs, they’d strip his tough judge suit in a hurry. He said his goodbye and tossed the cell on top of his

overnight bag.

Through his windshield, he watched the sunrise slowly paint the horizon. What a great view. Too bad he didn't have anyone to share this view with. His mind drifted back to Julie. She'd appreciate nature's magic like this. A smile tugged each corners of his lips. What a lovely brat.



Julie stepped out of the shower and reached for the green towel she hung on the rack. The tenderness between her legs was gone now, as if what had happened in the hut was but a dream. Her first time though, was real. She had sex with Tristan under the stars. She couldn't have asked for a better time to give up her virginity. When she would experience sex again, only time would tell.

Right now, she had a bigger problem to face. Feeling sluggish from her hot shower, she dried her body and forced her mind to focus at the task at hand—Marla, the evil stepmother. She wondered what she would lay on the table this time. Most likely an outrageous accusation. She pressed the towel on her eyes. Her head throbbed from thinking too much.

Good God! She hoped her books wouldn't cause her troubles. Writing was her only way to express herself freely, without leaving her house. Through writing, she could do things without fear, without inhibitions. Using her imaginations, she could live the life of a free woman.

Marla's insane obsession of ruining her just to get a hold of her mother's inheritance must end. This had been going on for far too long. She was tired of counting her steps, of making sure she wouldn't make any mistakes. But how to end this? By marrying someone like Armand? But the idea of marrying him without love was too bitter for her taste. She believed marriage should be bound by love, not money or a dire situation. Although, if she were honest with herself, the idea of marriage seemed plausible. It would be a one-sided marriage, yes, but she would be free from the will's binding.

Maybe Kirsten was right. If she gave Armand a chance, she might fall in love with him. She liked him already. During their meetings to talk about her mom's Microsoft shares, she found him pleasant company. He'd been an enjoyable coffee date, gentleman, polite, and with fantastic money market brains. And he loved her. He said so at least a couple times. But should she tell him the reason why suddenly she decided she would marry him? She should. If he loved her enough, he would understand. And if he didn't, perhaps he might agree to marry her and stay together for a month. After that, they would divorce and she would pay him handsomely.

One phone call *could* solve her problem. *Call Armand. Give him a try.* Julie glanced at the clock on her dresser. It was almost ten in the morning. Armand must be glued to his computer right now.

Eenie Meenie Minie Moe. Should I call Armand and tell him my dilemma or jump off the Aurora Bridge?

No. Jumping off the bridge wouldn't be good. Her death would mean hitting the jackpot for her father and Marla.

Dammit, why couldn't I be like Elizabeth Bennet of the famous Pride and Prejudice? Elizabeth was so lucky to find a man she loved and who loved her in return. Wouldn't it be nice if she ended up like her? But how? Her love life was shot. No prospects, with only one suitor she liked and saw as a good friend. Of course, there was one she wouldn't hesitate to marry if he offered his help. *Tristan.*

Dream on, Julie. The man was allergic to the word *marriage*. It would be a miracle if he showed up at her door ready to marry her. *Gah!* Of all the men to fall in love with, she fell for a man who was obviously still in love with his ex-wife, despite the pain she had caused him. He talked about Carly as if she were a goddess on a pedestal.

Julie took her cell phone from the dresser, composed a short text then pressed send. Armand would call her back. He would probably come running here if she asked him to come over. But he couldn't. Having a man—visitor or a friend—could jeopardize her inheritance.

She would be honest with Armand. If he still wanted to marry her, despite her reason, they'd do it right away. Julie was deep in her thoughts when the

doorbell rang. It must be Teta or the UPS guy she nicknamed Brownie. She bet Brownie was wearing his tight brown shorts and shirt again today. Brownie was a real Crotcher. Unlike Tristan. He didn't have to wear tight shorts to show his...

For the first time since Weatherholt called, a smile crept on her face.

The bell rang again. She hoped it was Brownie delivering the final copy of her manuscript. She could use a diversion. The only way to forget Marla was to immerse herself in her story.

Julie rewrapped the towel around her then left her bedroom.

Only a woman so desperate would enter a loveless marriage. And she was desperate. The will's stipulation clearly said if she married, she'd be free. The sound of the word *free* was as tempting as double chocolate fudge ice cream. Yes! All she had to do was convince Armand, get a ring on her finger and a marriage contract. It would be that easy.

The doorbell rang again.

Julie ruffled her hair and combed it with her fingers. Forgoing the slippers, she headed downstairs.

Yanking the door open, Julie flashed a bright smile. "Hey! Got my manuscript—" Her next word died on her lips. "What are you doing here?" She felt the gap on the towel open and quickly grabbed the edges to pull it together.

Tristan's eyes grew wider as he looked her up and down. "What the hell are

you doing answering the door wearing only that?” He pointed at the towel.

“Well, I thought, uhm, normally I—”

“Are you entertaining someone, or you’re expecting someone?”

“No to both. I thought you were Brownie, the UPS guy.” *Lord, what is he doing here?*

Tristan came in and kicked the door shut. “So, you normally answer your door with barely anything on when the UPS guy rings your bell?”

“No. This is the first time. I just got out of the shower when you rang the bell. I was in a hurry and didn’t think about putting any clothes on.”

“In a hurry to grab a shirt?”

“Well, you rang the bell as if the house was on fire.”

Tristan stared at her like a bull with its nostrils flaring. “Well, next time think about it first. Where can I put these?” Tristan asked, holding up three plastic bags, a six-pack of Diet Coke and a tray with two Grande Starbucks coffee cups.

“That way is the kitchen. Are you...” She noticed the duffel bag slung on his shoulder. “What are you doing here?”

“We need to talk.”

“About what?”

“Your fight with Marla and your mother’s will.”

“Oh, no. Kirsten told you? I told her not to tell anyone about—”

“Yeah, she told me about your stepmother, but she forgot to warn me about your habit of opening doors naked.” He stormed off to the kitchen.

Julie followed, getting annoyed at his sarcasm. “I already told you, I am not in a habit of...never mind.” Actually, at home alone, she wore something comfortable all the time. Like underwear and a shirt or a long t-shirt without anything else on, especially during summer. But never around other people. Not even when Kirsten stayed overnight for their *Pride and Prejudice* marathon. “I’ll strangle your sister for sending you here.”

“Get in line, Strawberry.”

Julie watched Tristan open the plastic bags. She could smell a mixture of breakfast—donuts, muffins, pancakes—and Chinese food. The delicious smells made her stomach growl. She was so busy thinking about Marla that she hadn’t even thought about eating.

“Did you eat breakfast? If you want lunch, I brought Chinese food also,” Tristan asked, without looking at her.

“I had coffee. Tristan, we have nothing to talk about,” she said, while keeping her arms around her to keep the towel from coming undone and to silent her rumbling stomach. Her eyes focused on the overnight bag. He didn’t plan to stay overnight, did he?

Her heart skipped a beat at the thought of Tristan in her house—all night.

Your thoughts are running away with you, Julie.

“Yes. There are things that we need to talk about.”

“What exactly do you think we’re going to discuss?”

“How I can help you.”

“Help me? I don’t need your help.” She sat on the table with half of her butt cheek hanging and one foot dangling. Another habit she acquired from being alone all the time.

“Don’t be so stubborn and proud. I made a promise to Kirsten to help and you’ll accept it.”

“How exactly do you think you’re going help me?”

“By marrying you.”

Stunned, Julie just stared at him. She couldn’t think quick enough to protest his offer. *Did he say ‘marrying me’?*

“Uhm, did you say you want to marry me?”

Tristan was looking at her with intensity so strong she felt like going to a different room. Not with his usual kind, almost attentive look. From head to toe, he assessed her. Slowly he walked toward her. “Kirsten said getting hitched is the only way to release you from the will’s binding. So I am here to marry you.”

She should be happy. Here was a handsome man whom she shared her body with, offering the very thing that would put an end to her problem. The man she

was in love with. But he was also the man whose aversion to marriage was known in the whole Orcas Island. So why offer to make a promise to marry her?

“You want to marry me. But why? Do you want to get married?”

“I made a promise.”

“Did Kirsten beg you to?”

“Julie, she was worried about you. We all are.”

“You all are? Meaning your whole family knows about my problem now.”

“My whole family? Wait. Well, let’s see. It’s not two in the afternoon yet. So, Bors and Gawain are most likely still in bed. No not the whole family—yet. By the way, Dad asked me to take you back to the island. He wants to talk to you.”

She groaned her irritation. “If I didn’t love your sister, I would put a curse on her right this minute.” Kirsten had been half-asleep when she left her. Had her friend misheard when she said she’d think about Armand, and thought she said Tristan? But... Whatever. Tristan shouldn’t be here. “I am sorry you had to come all the way here, but I think your sister heard me wrong. When we talked this morning, I told her I would consider—”

“Armand, your avid suitor? Kirsten told me about him. Have you made a deal with him yet?”

“Well, not yet. I am still waiting for his call. I just texted him before you—”

“Good. Then you’ll marry me.” His blue eyes darkened as she held his gaze.

Julie noticed Tristan said the word *marry* heavily, as if it weighed a ton. She knew why. He didn't want to get married. "Why you?"

"What?"

"You have other brothers. How come Kirsten forced you to make the promise of helping me and not Bors, Gawain, or Percival."

"Maybe because I'm the easier brother, the one she could boss around." Tristan let out an aggravated sigh. "I didn't get a chance to ask her. The sun wasn't even up yet when she came in my room to tell me you left. There wasn't any time to flip the coin on who would want to marry you."

"Well, Marla's not here yet. You still have time to think this through—somewhere else. This house is not open for male visitors."

"I already did a lot of thinking on my way here. Besides, I already made a promise."

"But as far as I know, you don't want marriage. You're done with marriage."

"I am."

"So don't do this."

"Can't. I made a promise."

Julie gritted her teeth. If he said the word *promise* one more time, she'd flick his straight nose. "Promises are made to be broken."

"Not in my book. You want Marla to stop pestering you, right?"

“Tristan, I do want to stop Marla. But—”

“So, I’m here. Let’s stop her.”

“Will you let me speak?”

Tristan faced her with his arms akimbo. “Speak.”

“I am desperate, okay. Tired of dealing with Marla and her viciousness. But I wouldn’t ask a man to give his help knowing the help is the thing he hates most. I am talking about you. Now, Armand, I could ask him. He wants to marry me and—”

“Well, you can forget him now. You are marrying me, not Armand, not anybody else. And I am not going home without you wearing my ring.”

“Oh, that easy, huh?”

“Yes. We say *I do* and the deed’s done. We’re husband and wife.”

“For a month.”

Tristan looked at her. His face clearly expressed the sign that her words baffled him.

“A month,” he repeated with a scowl.

“If we marry, you’ll be stuck with me for a month. After that we can get a divorce.”

“That’s part of the condition?”

“My condition. Nothing on the will says I have to say married forever. So a

month is good.”

“No problem. We’ll get a divorce.”

“That’s okay with you?”

“Done it before. I could do it again. Just show me the papers and I’ll sign them.”

“Tristan, you don’t have to do this. I know you are here, offering your services, as a payment for what I did for your sister. You feel obligated. You shouldn’t.”

“I’m in, Julie.” Eyes smoldering from suppressed anger, Tristan stood in front of her and tilted her chin up. They were standing too close to one another. Julie could see his jaw muscles twitch, the slight flare of his nostrils, and perfect brows marred by his ferocious scowl. “I’m not leaving until we are married.”

“Now who’s stubborn? Don’t look at me as if you want to eat me alive. I already apologized for telling Pamela you have gonorrhea. Are you still upset about that?”

Tristan ran his thumb on her chin. Back and forth, back and forth. “No. I want to eat you alive for keeping me, my family, in the dark. We could have helped you sooner. I want to help.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yes.”

“Are you expecting anything in return?”

“You mean, like to be able to exercise my rights as your husband? No. Not if you don’t want to, that is.”

“But you do.”

“Only a blind man would not want to make love with his beautiful wife. But I am not a sycophant, Julie. I am here to help, not to take advantage of your situation.”

“You won’t ask for a wedding night?”

“No.”

“Well, that’s good, I think. If we live like husband and wife, it would only make the wedding more real than it ought to be. I know. I assume you already know everything about the will?”

“Yes.”

“Good. Then you’ll understand why I want you out of here now. As long as we are not married yet, you cannot stay. I don’t want Marla to find you here. Stay in a hotel or somewhere, but not here. We can discuss this over the phone. That way it’s safer.”

“So you’re accepting my offer?”

“Yes. Thanks for coming. Now leave.” She pushed her tush off the table, but twisted her foot when she stepped on the floor. “Oww! Damn it.”

“Take it easy, love.” His hand wrapped around her waist and the other cupped Julie’s bare bottom.

In a heartbeat, she found herself enclosed in Tristan’s warm embrace. *Chriminy, ignore him. Push him away. God, this feels so good.*

Tristan held her so close she could smell his licorice scented breath. Each time he breathed out, his breath fanned the spot on the side of her neck. The same spot she discovered was sensitive the night they made love. Just a tiny bit, Tristan moved his hand, but it was enough to start the delicious pleasure to ripple beginning from her neck, to her throbbing pussy, and down to the tip of her toes.

Of their own volition, her hands tightened where they rested on his shoulders, gave her weight to him and leaned heavily on his chest.

“Julie.” Tristan cleared his throat.

“Yes?”

“You should go to your room and put your clothes on.”

The underlying sensuality in his voice made Julie’s blood heat up. She stared at him and recognized the same obvious desire she saw in his eyes last night. Julie felt a rush of heat, like a hot shower, trickling down her whole body. Her tongue darted out to lick her lips in anticipation of what the hot water would do when it reached her belly, her thighs and her hot pussy.

She wanted his lips against hers, his tongue inside her mouth and his hands

all over her again. A repeat of last night.

“Need to dress...” Julie’s breasts grew heavy with her hard nipples pushing against the soft cotton towel begging to be touched. She curled into the curve of his body, seeking what her body yearned for.

“Julie...” In a heartbeat, his head lowered and he crushed her mouth with his.

Oh, it is heaven. Julie moaned in his hot mouth. Like an ice cream on a hot sunny day, her body softened against his arms. Tristan tightened his hold on her and gently pushed her butt back on the table. His body followed. Wedging his knee in between her legs, he made room for his hips.

“Julie, love...,” he murmured, between hungry kisses.

With a quick flick of his wrist, Tristan removed her towel and cupped her breasts with both hands. In her position, she felt open and exposed. And she loved it.

Julie arched her back, jutting her breasts further. Tristan answered. He squeezed her breasts. But he didn’t stop there. He rolled her nipples in between his fingers and, to Julie’s delight, he lowered his head. She cried from the pleasure that surged the moment his wet tongue made contact with her aching tit. His mouth sucked and pulled her nipples with tantalizing possessiveness, making her squirm from delight. And when his fingers lowered to squeeze her thigh, to press on her pubic mound, she felt like getting roasted on a fire pit. Hot. Burning.

“Tristan.”

“Yes, love.” Tristan inched his fingers lower to comb her bush.

“Tristan, more...like last time...” She felt Tristan smile on her breast and then he continued with his lapping. With one last pull of his lips on her nipple, he captured her mouth again for a searing kiss.

“You’re a sin walking on earth, did you know that? A beautiful woman meant to make a man go *loco* on you. Like you’re doing to me right now,” he said, breathing heavily.

Julie, with her frantic fingers, found her way inside his shirt. She wanted to take it off, feel his body against hers, and kiss him all over. “I want...don’t stop.”

“What do you want, love? Tell me?”

“More, more of you.” God, she wanted to come, to climax while his fingers were buried deep inside her pussy.

Tristan slowed his fingers’ tempo. “More of me? Be specific.”

“You know what I want. Stop torturing me.”

“Ah, you don’t like being tortured.” He bit her chin then kissed the skin. “But you, you never failed to torment me with your wicked ways.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about. Please, touch me,” she pleaded, moving her hips, urging him to continue his magic. But he didn’t. “What are you doing? You’re killing me,” she said, her voice raspy.

“Promise not to open the door again while wearing only a towel, that you will come to me when you need help and—”

“Yes, yes, I promise.”

Tristan gently eased her down onto the table. “You are a goddess on earth.” He kissed her cleavage while pushing her breasts higher.

Through his jeans, Julie felt his hard dick pressed against her cunt. The feeling was so delicious she began to see stars. When Tristan ground his hips pressing his cock on her pubic mound even harder, she gripped his butt. “Tristan, please...”

“I’ll give it to you, love.” He left her mouth burning with fire to trail more kisses along the length of her body.

Julie, getting impatient, pushed on his shoulder, hurrying him to go down on her. “Oh my God, I’m going to die...”

Tristan chuckled. “You’ll reach heaven, love, as a hot sweet woman.” He nuzzled her springy curls. “Open wider, yes. You want me to touch you here?”

“Yes.”

“Show me your pussy. Oh, yes. Beautiful. Fucking beautiful.”

Julie bucked as Tristan’s lips pulled her clit out of its nest. He sucked it hard until she thought she’d lose her mind.

“Hmm...sweet. I love kissing you here.” His mouth covered her wet cunt.

Wrapping his arms around her thighs, he ate at her. He sucked, laved and kissed her pussy until Julie's orgasm racked her body.

"Tristan!"

Heart thundering as if she had jogged over her limit of three miles, Julie stared at the dining room ceiling, reveling on what had just happened. Now that her passion left bringing her back down to reality, embarrassment took over. Lord, she begged him again.

Julie wouldn't—couldn't look at him. Her mind, though, told her that she must. Julie waited until her quickened pulse subsided then forced herself to meet Tristan's gaze. He was above her, staring at her with a smile on his face.

"You're amazing." Tristan kissed her lips with sweet tenderness.

Julie tasted something unique. Shivers ran down her spine when she realized what it was. She tasted her own juice.

Tristan started nipping at her nipples again when the doorbell rang. "You're expecting someone aside from the UPS guy?"

"No."

"Go get dressed...please." He wrapped Julie again in her towel and helped her get off the table. "Go slow. Easy on your foot."

"Tristan, it could be Marla and Sebastian. I don't want them to see you here. Please, leave. You can use the back door."

“I’m not going anywhere.” Tristan’s lips grazed her ear, jaw, chin and lips. She kissed him back. “Get dressed, Julie. I’ll get the door. Love, if Marla is ringing the bell, I suggest you go upstairs and change.”

“But if she sees you, she’ll make wrong assumptions. She will go to the— hmmm...” Tristan stopped her with another searing kiss.

God, this man can make my mind turn into mush with a simple kiss.

“Let me handle Marla. Go.”

“Tristan—”

“Go.”



Julie limped as she rushed upstairs to put on some decent clothes. Her mind, still foggy from her another paroxysmal excitement—her second orgasmic explosion.

She heard and read about women needing long foreplays to get them excited. Not her. All it took was Tristan’s mouth on her breasts and clit to explode. Gosh, he didn’t even penetrate her with his fingers. Tristan simply used his mouth and tongue.

Was she oversexed? Or was her body’s reaction the result of a long period of procrastination, of keeping herself pure, of denying herself with a man's touch, for staying a virgin? She stopped in front of the full-length mirror and dropped her

towel on the floor. Julie bit her lip. Her body still held the rosy tint of spent passion. “My God, just one touch and I turn into a slut. Julie, Julie,” she said to her own reflection. “Shame on you.”

It was Kirsten’s fault. If she wanted to help, she should have sent one of her other three brothers. Not Tristan. He was the brother who considered marriage a bitter pill. Hard to swallow. *Ugh!* If she put what was happening right now in writing and someone read the story, that person would have a serious migraine.

Julie rubbed her temples. She loved Tristan. Marrying him would not only set her free but she’d be the wife of the handsome Knight. At least for a month. After that, she’d free of him, to do whatever she wished.

Unless Marla got a whiff of him staying here. Then she’d be in trouble. Marla had eyes everywhere and would soon find out a man was staying in her house. She couldn’t let that happen. She must convince Tristan to leave. *Soon.*

Julie opened her drawers to grab a pair of underwear. She sincerely hoped it wasn’t Marla at the door. *Oh dear.*

Chapter Seven

Tristan paced the floor while he waited for the woman responsible for

losing his sixth potential good date to come downstairs. *Shit!* His dick swelled just thinking about her. What had she done to him?

He never should have let his dick rule his mind and touch Julie the way he had dreamed of touching her. Last night, taking her virginity was bad enough. To follow it through with sucking her pussy until she came only put him in the position of wanting her again. Fuck, right now, he wanted her so bad he nearly ejaculated in his pants. She responded to his touch like a lit match to a wick—fast. She may not be a virgin anymore, but she was still an innocent in many ways. He liked that.

The sound of bare feet pattering on the hardwood stairs took his mind off his hardening dick. Well, not really, since seeing Julie in her tank top and jeans, showcasing her curves, only made his cock become painfully thicker.

Julie ambled her way downstairs.

Damn. I forgot about her ankle. Without waiting for Julie to reach the bottom steps, he quickly went up to meet her. “Stop.” He hooked an arm behind her knees and lifted her. With his other hand supporting her back, he carried her down.

“What are you doing? Put me down.”

“I am sorry, love. I forgot about your foot.” *You make me forget everything.*

“If we tumble down these steps, I would break more than my foot. Just put me down. You’re not Tarzan, you know.”

“I know. I would hate to be him. Pounding my chest, covered with Vicks, screaming in the jungle.”

Julie snorted and buried her face in the crook of his neck. “Thanks, but I am fine. No need to fuss over me. I am capable of taking care of myself.”

Tristan kissed her forehead on impulse. Why? Well, it was what he wanted to do after she convulsed in his arms while laying on the dining table. But Armand, not the stupid UPS man, rang the doorbell. He supposed he should thank Julie’s besotted beau, because he was a heartbeat away from making love with her—again. Damn, being married to her for a month without touching her would be as impossible as flying to the moon. He would be in the toughest time of his life.

“You may be a grown woman, but you still need help.”

“Right. And the best help you can give me is to leave me alone. This is not a game, Tristan. I want you out of the house until the wedding,” she said softly.

Tristan could feel her warm breath. He knew instantly that it was a mistake holding her again.

One step at time, he took the steps with a speed of a turtle. She was so soft and smelled like a woman, and he wanted to savor the moment. He knew Julie was staring at him, but he forced himself not to turn his head, otherwise, he would end up kissing her. And he was old enough to know where kisses could lead to.

“Who rang the bell?”

“It was Armand.”

Julie craned her neck to see the living room. “He left? Didn’t he want to talk to me?”

“Yes.”

“But he left?”

“Yeah. I told him you weren’t available.”

“You should have told him to wait. I texted him to ask him to come over.”

“Uh-huh, you mentioned that. But you don’t need him anymore.”

“Right. Because my knight in shining armor came to rescue me.”

“Do you love him?” Tristan asked again. Julie’s reply was to rub her forehead in the crook of his neck. “If you do, what’s the holdup? Marry the guy and end your freaking misery.”

“Hey!” Julie bit his neck. “Don’t snap at me.” She pulled the hair on his nape.

“Stop being violent. I might drop you here. God, going up and down these steps is as good as running downtown. No wonder you have a nice shape.”

“Really, I hadn’t realized,” Julie said dryly, then flicked his ear.

“Brat.”

Julie sneezed. “Excuse me. I think I’m allergic to you.”

“Ha. Ha. Are you allergic to flowers?”

“Yeah. But I don’t have flowers in the house.”

“You do. Armand brought them.”

“Achoo! He did? Sheez, it will be Christmas time before you make it downstairs.” Julie finally rested her head against his shoulder, bringing an instant feeling of possessiveness all over him.

“I just want to make sure I don’t miss a step.”

“Tristan, please understand. You really have to leave now.”

“I understand, love.”

“Then put me down and leave.”

“Can’t. I promised Kirsten that I would make sure before the week is over that you will be free from Marla’s claws.”

“I know. You’ve already said that, many times. But you don’t have to stay to keep your promise. We’ll talk on the phone.”

Julie’s soft sighs tickled his neck, resulting in his dick pulsing. *Damn*. He was in for a long week of punishment. For sure, he’d be walking around with a huge erection twenty-four seven. Maybe he should heed her request and just get a room at the Harbor Square Lodge. But Kirsten mentioned that Marla always arrived unannounced, with Sebastian at her feet, armed with a digital camera. To surprise Julie. To catch her doing something ‘bad’ when she least expected it.

When Marla arrived, he wanted to be here. An overwhelming desire to kiss her senseless, to tell her everything would be okay, was so strong and powerful he

had to stop his descent to kiss her forehead again.

Of all people, he should be the one protecting this woman, even if it would cost him his hands and legs. He and his family owed her that much. Tristan thought about Armand. The guy was nearly his height and with a face that could be on magazine covers. When he answered the door, he recognized Armand from the picture that Kirsten showed him. If Armand was photogenic, he looked even fucking better in person. Armand had that sly smile on his face, too, and he wanted to slam the door on his face. But he was neither Bors nor Gawain. He was a pediatrician sworn to help those who in need and not jump someone because... Because what?

Tristan scowled. Why was it that whenever Julie was around uncertainty often clouded his brain?

“Am I that heavy?”

“What? No, you’re not heavy. Why?” *You’re freaking gorgeous and I could hold you like this forever. You won’t hear me complain.*

“You’re mumbling and scowling, and grunting.”

“Was I? I didn’t realize it.”

The leather couch groaned when he lowered Julie down. Tristan knelt in front of her then lifted her sore foot. A bit of redness around her ankle told him it was bruised, but not broken. “Well, looks like I won’t have to amputate your foot.”

“Whoop-dee-doo.” Julie covered her nose with her arm then sneezed.

Tristan stood up. “Damn flowers. Stay put. Be right back.” He strode towards the kitchen. The bouquet consisting of orchids and white roses sat in the sink half filled with water. After unplugging the sink, he used the plastic bag he brought from the store and stuffed the bouquet in it. He chucked the bag in the garbage can with satisfaction. “There. Gone.” He smiled without feeling the humor.

He looked back at the long and wide hallway where he could see Julie sitting on the couch rubbing her ankle. Without second thought, he dug in his duffel bag to grab his Hanes cotton shirt then searched the freezer. He was glad to find a blue ice pack jammed at the back of the freezer, buried among the frozen TV dinners.

Julie’s sneeze echoed in the Tudor ceiling.

“Apparently, your Armand didn’t know you’re allergic to flowers.” He kneeled in front of Julie and started wrapping her ankle.

“That was so sweet of him to bring me flowers.”

“Stupid if you ask me.”

“He is a nice man, Tristan. And I like him. We’ve been friends for a long time.”

For some reason, that simple fact served as a punch in his gut. He didn’t like

the idea that Julie liked another man. *What the fuck!* Checking the colors of her toenails, he made sure they were still pink; a good sign the wrap wasn't too tight. Satisfied with his work, he pushed himself up. "Hungry?"

"Uh-huh."

"Good. Let's eat and then we'll talk about your situation. Hang onto me. Don't use your sore foot."

"It's not that bad. I've had worse."

"Do you get hurt a lot?"

Julie gave him a smile that made Tristan's waning erection grow harder again. "Always a doctor, eh. To answer your question, yes. I do get hurt a lot. Mostly from tripping all over the place. I think it's because of my big feet and long legs. They don't go together. I don't know how to use them properly."

Oh, girl, yes you do. "Could be you just don't pay attention to where you are going, or you have a habit of walking with your eyes closed."

"Ha! I did that only one time, when we were going to the woods." She scowled and threw him his balled napkin, which landed two inches short, in front of his feet.

"He-heh."

"You're mean."

Tristan took her hands and pulled her up. He anchored his arm around her

waist. “Let’s go, gimp.”

“Oh, my God! You are a bad doctor.”

“Only with you. Hang onto me.”

“I’m not an invalid, Tristan. Maybe a klutz. Got a silly sprained ankle, that’s all.” She wrapped around her arms around his neck, sighing. “Although, it’s kind of nice to be doted upon.”

“And I don’t mind doting on you. I kind of like touching you.”

“Pervert,” she whispered.

“Minx.”

Tristan helped Julie get settled in her chair. “Breakfast or lunch? You choose.”

Julie frowned and continued to nibble on her lower lip. “Well...”

Watching Julie lick her lips, he could tell she was hungry, but she didn’t make a move. “Well, what? Don’t like Broccoli Beef, Fried Rice and Chow Mein anymore? I’ve seen you eat like a hungry peon before so don’t be shy now.”

“I’m not shy. It’s just...”

“Didn’t like these? I could call Chopsticks to have them deliver—”

“No, I love Chinese. It’s the tab—le.”

Fuck. The dratted dining table must have looked different to Julie now. Why wouldn’t it? Only moments ago, she was on top, legs spread apart, screaming her

release. For the love of humanity, she had an orgasm while on top of it. How could he be so insensitive? Tristan leaned forward to level his eyes on Julie, lifted her chin and kissed her nose.

“Look at me. Would you like to eat somewhere else in this humongous house so you don’t have to look at this table?” He touched her pinkish cheeks with the pads of his thumbs. “Love?”

“I’m fine.”

Tristan smiled. His eyes focused on her lips, hypnotized. His head dipped a little. One more kiss and he’d keep his distance. It wouldn’t be fair for the both of them if they continued this affair, or whatever it was called. As it happened, he was already having a hard time staying away from her. He wondered if they would remain friends after their bogus marriage. He hoped so. He angled his head for a kiss, but Julie’s fingers covered his mouth.

“Tristan, our marriage is going to be temporary. Do you think it’s wise to have this, this kind of relationship? I mean, we’re going to be divorced after a month. Your sister, your family, you—are important in my life. And if we continue with this, staying in your house would be awkward knowing that we’ve been intimate. What if someday you married someone and I visit your family, and you happen to be there, imagine how ill at ease we’d be.”

“Or how uncomfortable it would be for you if you see me while strolling

with your husband and you're pregnant with a baby," he replied sharply. An oddly primitive feeling akin to jealousy at the thought of Julie pregnant, married to someone else, poked at his heart.

"Yes."

"Fine. No more kisses and touching. I'm sorry." He held out his hand, offering an apology. "It's just you're so damn beautiful. Even a saint would be tempted to touch you." He served her food on a plate. "Eat."

"You don't have to live with me or me with you. I won't stop you from dating also. If you tell Pamela the gonorrhea bit was a joke, she might take you back. Or I can tell her, as my way of saying thank you for helping me."

"You won't care if I see someone while married to you?"

"No, of course not. Our marriage will be on paper only. You can do whatever you want and I won't say anything."

"And as soon as our month is up, based on your condition, we'll file for a divorce."

Julie heard annoyance in his voice. Suddenly she felt like a burden that was dumped on his lap. She'd kill Kirsten for this. "If after an hour you decide you don't want to go through with this, I'm okay with—"

"Because you could always ask Armand?"

"Yes."

“Say you two married. What if Armand decided he didn’t want to end the marriage because he loves you? You’ll find yourself facing another problem. Loveless marriage is not the answer to your problem.” Tristan stood up and started gathering the dirty dishes. “I’ve seen enough couples try to bite each other’s head off because they thought marriage was a solution to their problem. And most of the time, when they realize their mistake, babies are already in the picture.”

“Well, my babies would be made out of love not lust. Someday, I will have kids—with the man I love. You love babies, don’t you? That’s why you became a Pediatrician?”

“Yeah. I love babies and will someday have my own. But it wasn’t the main reason why I became one.” He put the plates in the sink then ran the hot water. “It was the time when I went with my sister and mom to India. The children’s gaunt faces, sad eyes, and poor health haunted me. I couldn’t do anything to help them. So I took this profession and I loved it since then.”

“Tristan, a knight in his shining white doctor’s robe. Rescuer of little babies and damsels in distress like me.”

“I’m not a knight. Just doing the right thing.”

Just doing the right thing.

“And you think marrying me would be the right thing?”

“Yes. Like I said, I promised Kirsten. I will abide whatever conditions you

throw at me.”

“Do you think this marriage idea will work? Marla had me followed before, that’s how she learned I’ve been to a gay bar.”

“You’ve been to a gay bar?”

“Kirsten and I went one time. I just needed to know what it was like to be inside, know the smell, what kinds of noises there were. The kinds of conversations people normally had.”

“Because you needed an idea for your book?”

She stared at him, unsurprised. Kirsten told him about the will, why not about her books? “Yes. So if Marla’s eyes are pointing here right now, she’ll know you are here. And we are not married yet. She could tell her lawyer that I am cohabitating.”

“We’ll apply for the license today. That way we can have proof that we are planning on getting married. Dad will perform the marriage ceremony.”

“Your dad would be great.” Like any woman, she dreamed of a grand wedding, of walking down the aisle wearing a gown designed by Kirsten, and the pearl crown her mother gave her. Oh well, not all dreams were made to happen.

“Unless you want a priest or a minister to wed us.”

“I said your dad can marry us.”

“Why the long face then?”

“Nothing. You won’t understand. It’s a woman thing.”

“Ah, you want the whole shebang. Gown, flowers, bridesmaids, cake. Etcetera.”

And a proper proposal, and a groom who actually loves me. “If you apply for the license today, when can we get it?”

“Eager to marry me, huh?” Tristan flashed a smile that made him look ten years younger. “There is a three-day wait period before we can get the license, which is good. It would give my brother’s time to square their schedules.”

“They’ll be in the wedding?”

“We operate as one, love. They’ll kick my ass if I marry you without them present.”

Julie watched Tristan dry the dishes. He had long fingers. She remembered how those hands felt against her skin, how they made her feel so alive. She wanted to ask if Judge Knight could pull some strings and get the license for them now, but she wouldn’t dare put a blemish on Arthur’s name. He’d been known to be just, fair, not a crook, and she wouldn’t ask him to use his power to fix her problem.

“Okay. We’ll get married, but I don’t see why you have to stay?”

“I’ll stay for a while, until we get to know each other, learn each other’s habits, likes and dislikes. If put to the test, then we’ll know what to say. How we

met is easily answered—through Kirsten. We could also tell them it was love at first sight for both of us. We'll make it believable. Besides, I want to know my wife-to-be. Don't worry, I won't be in your way. You do have a spare room in this humongous house, don't you?"

"Yes. You can use the blue room. It's the only guest room ready. But I still don't think you should stay. You make me nervous."

Tristan hung the dishtowel on the oven's handle then walked toward Julie. He pulled a chair and placed it in front of Julie. With his back on the chair, he stared at her. "Are you worried of me because of what—"

"No! Of course I am not worried about you. It's Marla." *What I am worried about is myself.* How was she going to control her hormones knowing he'd be in the house? She was proud of herself for avoiding any male contacts, whatsoever. At the age of twenty-three, she kept herself *intact*. But now, now that she knew how pleasurable it was to be held and touched by a man, by *Tristan*, she wasn't sure if she'd be able to abstain from having sex with him again.

"How come you didn't hire an attorney to defend you?"

"I thought about it. But I've dragged Mom's name in the mud many times in the past. I don't want to do it again. Besides, I want to prove I can be good. That I can stay clean, the way Mom wanted me to be. But not like this. Now, I'm staying out of trouble to keep Mom's money away from Dad and Marla."

“Hmmm... So if I tell Marla about your telephone pranks, you’d be stripped of properties and stocks and bonds?”

Julie stood up abruptly, ignoring her sore ankle. “You wouldn’t dare, Tristan. I swear I’d kill you if you did.”

Tristan stood also. “Hey, love, I’m only kidding.”

“Well it’s not funny.”

“I’m sorry, it was a low joke. I promised Kirsten to take care of you, not throw you with the sharks.” He moved closer to Julie and rubbed her arms, up and down. “You can count on me. I wouldn’t do anything to put you in any harm.”

His fingers laced with hers. Julie knew it was a sign of reassurance, but to her it was fuel to a fire quickly spreading inside her stomach. She closed her eyes, afraid to reveal the passion in them.

Warm soft lips touched her forehead and eyebrows. She leaned in to him and he let go of her fingers to wrap his arms around her.

“I wish you had come to me right away. I could have helped you. You don’t deserve this, love.”

“You’re here now. I feel fine already.”

“Do you?” His voice husky, he ran his finger along her jaw and tilted her chin.

“You’re going to kiss me again? I thought no more kisses and touches.”

“I know. But I am not a saint, love. Forgive me.” He lowered his head to kiss her ear.

Julie squealed with delight, tickled by his breath. She felt her butt contract from the tickling sensation. “I guess a kiss would be okay.”

“I won’t kiss you without permission, love. Let me know—”

“Stop talking. Just kiss me.” Julie moaned when Tristan took her mouth and kissed her hungrily. It was hard at first then turned soft and leisurely.

His hands went inside her blouse to cup her breasts. “I love this. Do you like it?”

Julie nodded. She couldn’t speak if she wanted to anyway. With one hand squeezing her breast and the other tugging her nipple with his fingers, she couldn’t think or talk, only feel. “You have my permission to do this anytime.” Julie was in a haze. She clung to him like a lifeline. She returned his kisses with ardor, curled her tongue with his and pressed her hips against his arousal without shame.

“Hmmm...good. Oh, God, you’re so smooth, so beautiful. Love?”

“Yes?” she answered

“Forget about the no kiss and touch rule. You’ll have to tie me up to stop me from doing this.”

Julie gasped for breath. “We could still kiss. There’s no harm there, right?”

“Julie, love. Kisses leads to something else.” Tristan cupped her face, moved

an inch away from her so he could look into her eyes. “I can’t promise not to make love with you. You should know that,” he said, in a husky voice simmering with checked passion. Tristan raked his hair, leaving it standing on end like Harry Potter’s. “I need coffee. Do you mind if I make some coffee?”

“Not at all. But Tristan, I am really worried about Marla.”

“It is time you stop worrying. You are a friend of my family. I am here visiting. Marla can’t just nail you for me being here.”

“I hope you are right.” Tristan turned around and busied himself in the kitchen, leaving Julie still toasty from his hot touches.

How had her infatuation with Tristan skyrocketed to the highest level? God, she was so in love with him. Too bad, the feeling wasn’t mutual. Tristan might be physically attracted to her, but that didn’t mean he loved her. When all of this was over, he would go back to the Orca’s Island. What would happen to her then?

The coffee pot started gurgling, taking Julie’s mind off the questions that were running in her head. The aroma of freshly brewed coffee wafted in the kitchen. Yeah, she could use a cup.

Tristan was opening the cupboards, his back to her. He looked so great in jeans. She had seen him lots of times in his slacks and long-sleeved shirts with ties; he looked great in semi-formal clothes. But in blue jeans, he was simply ruggedly

gorgeous. Like a dangerous cowboy. Julie licked her lips. She'd seen lots of male models, but they didn't have the same effect on her Tristan did.

Tristan reached for the coffee mugs in the cupboards, giving Julie a tantalizing view of his flexing muscles through the white shirt. And his butt...hmm...she could look at it all day. She had felt those muscles when he pleased her. Strong and powerful. She wondered what he was looking for in a woman. Beautiful like Carly, of course. What else?

"You're done looking. Do you want coffee now?"

"I wasn't looking, I was just thinking," she started, realizing she had been caught staring at Tristan's butt.

"Thinking about what?" Tristan brought the two mugs and gave one to her.

"About what Kirsten told me."

"Oh, boy. What did she tell you?"

"Why you're floundering."

"Floundering?"

"Yeah. You're a Pediatrician, established and so handsome, single and married moms take their babies to your clinic for as simple as a scratch on their knees. Women have been after you since sixth grade. Are you really serious about staying a bachelor again forever?"

"Hmm...guess not. I'm getting married again in three days, right? With you?"

“Ours is different.”

“If you want to know if I would settle down and have kids and a dog, a backyard with a picket fence, and a minivan someday, it depends.” He took a sip of his coffee.

“Depends on what?”

“Love. When I fall in love again, I will settle down again. Right now though, my chance of finding the right one is nil.”

“Why?”

“Because before I could go out on a second date with a girl, Julie Parrish would sabotage my name, sending her running as if her ass was on fire.”

“I did not sabotage your name. They are all gullible. They wouldn’t believe me if they trusted you.”

“Well, you see, they didn’t get a chance to get to know me. Trust comes after more than three dates, love.” Tristan chuckled.

Why, oh, why does he keep calling me love? “What’s funny?”

“You always blush.” He placed the coffee on the table then bent down to level his gaze with her. “And this here,” he touched the base of her neck, “the pulse there always jumps. So fascinating to watch.”

Julie flinched, scorched by his fingertip. She forced herself not to lean into his hand and rub her cheek like a mewling cat. She sipped her coffee, when all she

wanted to do was suck his finger. *Good grief! Suck his finger. What in the world is wrong with me?* He would drive her insane, she thought. By the time Marla and her beady-eyed son arrived, she'd be a roasted pig. She felt like being barbecued every time he was near her. Not good. Not at all.

All the thoughts of sucking and rubbing her body made her knees go soft on her. She decided to sit down before she collapsed on the floor. She propped her foot on Tristan's chair and continued to sip her coffee.

"How's the foot?" he asked, and sat beside her.

"Still attached," she answered.

Tristan placed his coffee cup on the table then lifted Julie's foot with care before sitting on the chair. He placed Julie's foot on his lap and started massaging her toes.

"Why cold suddenly? You really want us to continue kissing, huh?"

"I'm not giving you a cold shoulder and I definitely do not want your kisses. Like you said, it leads to something more...uhm...intimate." The word rolled off her tongue the way his rolled on her nipples.

Coffee spurted out of her mouth. She couldn't believe where her line of thoughts were going. Never in her life had she thought of such carnal things, unless she was writing. Now Tristan hadn't even been in her house one day and she was already thinking like a wanton, sex depraved woman. She groaned so loud

from embarrassment Tristan laughed at her.

Tristan pulled a handkerchief out of his pocket, surprising Julie. She didn't know anyone who still carried that piece of material anymore.

He dabbed at her chin and mouth. "You said you tripped a lot of times because you have big feet and long legs. Now tell me why you couldn't drink coffee without burning yourself? Got cow tongue?"

"I do not have a cow tongue." Julie flicked his nose and stuck her tongue out at him.

"Oww, God darn it, woman. You're aggressive." He swatted her next attempt to flick his ear, laughing. "Hey, guess what?"

"What?"

"I heard on the news about a cow missing her eyelashes. You stole them, didn't you?"

"Ha.Ha."

"So, are you up for a little drive in downtown Seattle?"

"What for?"

"To apply for our wedding license, of course," Tristan's eyes twinkled before cupping her face for a deep, long and arousing kiss.

Chapter Eight

Julie sat on the passenger's seat watching buildings and stores they passed by. For the first time in two years, since her dad married Marla, she felt gloriously alive, happy, and free. She knew the cause of her excitement was the man sitting beside her. It was like he somehow lifted the dark veil off her head and unbuckled the heavy chain Marla had attached on her.

Downtown Seattle, as a funky metropolis, was as busy as always. She spotted the red sign for the famous Pike Street Market, Seattle Municipal Government and the City Hall, where they were heading. Artists or wannabe artists played their instruments to showcase their crafts on the streets. Rich cultural scenes, from museums to art galleries to the performing arts, were everywhere. Julie loved Seattle's professional symphony, ballet and opera houses.

They passed the Pacific Northwest Ballet Theater. Julie had been there many times. Every year, her mother would take her to see the *Nutcracker*. She liked watching the little German girl who dreamed of a Nutcracker prince who battled the fierce mouse king, so she took ballet. She liked the role so much that she begged her mom to give her ballet lessons. Laura succumbed to her relentless pleas. But watching ballet and dancing it were two different things, she learned this quite late unfortunately. Her legs were too long and she couldn't move them as gracefully as the other ballet dancers could. After two weeks, she quit.

They stopped at the stop light. "The city hall is between 4th and 5th Avenue.

I'll park underground. Finding a parking spot on the side streets is a pain."

"Underground is fine."

Tristan revved the engine of his Targa 911. The sound attracted the attention of women standing in front of the modeling agency building. One woman—to Julie's irritation—motioned for Tristan to lower her window. Tristan shook his head and anchored his arm around her shoulders. The woman smirked then looked away.

"Why did you pass the chance? She's beautiful," Julie asked, still irritated at the woman's boldness. Didn't she see her sitting here? Such a bitch.

"Not as beautiful as you."

"Uh-huh."

Tristan grinned. "Don't tell me you're jealous."

"Why would I be? I don't even know her," she snapped.

"Don't worry, love. I'll be yours soon."

"For a month. Lucky me." She mumbled the last two words then looked out the window.

"Wanna do some sightseeing while we're here? I'm hankering to walk at Alki Beach."

"A walk at the beach sounds good. But—"

"Forget Marla. Don't worry. We'll have the license before we go out there."

There is nothing wrong with celebrating an engagement, right?”

“Okay.”

Five minutes would have been enough to get the license. But with the teller flirting her life away with Tristan, the whole process of signing—and unnecessary interview—took forty-five minutes total. The teller in grungy look, with nose, lips, and brow piercings boldly suggested that Tristan change his mind. *The nerve!*

But Tristan just laughed, thanked the teller and pocketed the license.

They picked a perfect day to walk. The sun was out, the spring air was cooler and no threatening dark clouds up above. The long beach strip that ran from Alki Point to Duwamish Head on Elliot Bay was busy with joggers, beachcombers, bicyclists, moms pushing strollers and even sunbathers. Julie started walking, but Tristan grabbed her hand, forcing her to face him.

“You don’t want to walk anymore?”

“Oh, yes I do. I just want to kiss you first.”

Right where people were walking, he kissed her. It was tender and light as the spring breeze. She kissed him back, savoring the moment.

When their lips finally parted, she leaned against him and buried her face in his shirt. Tristan wrapped his arms around her. “What was that for?”

“The kiss?”

“Uh-huh?”

“I’ve been wanting to kiss you since we left your home. Now is the chance to do it. Let’s go while the sun is out.”

Hand in hand, they walked along the beach. Once in a while, Tristan would pick up a rock to toss in the water then he would seek her hand again. “Tristan, thanks for doing this.”

“My pleasure.”



With the wedding license burning inside his jeans’ front pocket, Tristan climbed the stairs two at a time. He knew he would wed Julie under the condition of ‘helping her solve her dilemma’, but the license was real.

Signed by both of them.

When he watched her sign her name, something glowed inside him. He wanted to shout with joy right there in front of the registrar. But when he remembered Julie’s condition, cold dread quickly doused the fire within him. Worse than what he felt when he and Carly ended their marriage. *Odd.*

His marriage with Julie would be her first and his second. And like the first, this one wouldn’t last.

One month. Julie’s condition was they would stay wed only for thirty days. After that, they’d part ways. And he got the job of filing for a divorce. *Damn, why couldn’t she do it?*

He turned left on the first landing and walked the long hallway. He stopped at the third door on the right. The blue room. His room for the duration of his stay. True to its name, the room was blue. The comforter, curtains, rugs, and pillows were all blue in color. He wouldn't be surprised if he found all the washcloths and towels were in blue. *Hmm...* Maybe the toilet paper, too. He quickly discarded the last thought.

Tristan dropped his duffel bag on the desk. Took out his change of clothes and started undressing. It didn't take him any time to do it. He needed a cold shower, pronto. Taking his things up to his room was a made up excuse. He needed a few moments of time away from Julie. The whole time they were walking at the beach, his mind was focused on stripping her naked and driving into her hard and fast. It was as though he was possessed with a lust spirit—if there was such a thing.

He had been attracted to Julie for quite some time now and hid his feelings from everyone, especially his family. They would have teased him mercilessly if they knew. His parents liked and treated her as their own daughter. His brothers enjoyed her company, too. She was witty, beautiful and smart. And they all agreed with one thing—Julie was a kind, tenderhearted person so tender that she would cry at the story of a boy that had happened a long time ago and rescue a total stranger.

It was one of those scary nights. He was at another wing of Swedish hospital doing his rounds when he received a message in his pager. Apparently, his sister was in the emergency room. Receiving emergency calls was a constant thing if you were a doctor. It was part of working in a hospital—no sweat. But it was different when the call was about a family member. Edmund, who happened to be on duty that night, met him in the hallway and assured him that Kirsten was okay. The danger had already passed.

When he finally made it to Kirsten's room, he found the woman Edmund mentioned holding Kirsten's hand. The one who saved his sister's life because she didn't hesitate to plunge the syringe in his sister's thigh to help her breathe. Julie.

Both Kirsten and Julie were asleep. He remembered waking her up. When she did, she all but ignored him. Instead, she looked at Kirsten and then he saw it. Tears.

Julie was crying for his sister, a woman she hardly knew. How someone could care for a total stranger was beyond him.

Since then, he felt an instant admiration for her. The feeling turned into an attraction when Kirsten brought her to their house to stay for a weekend. Without telling anyone, Kirsten traced Julie and thanked her in person. The two hit it off and became friends.

Now, here he was. Because of Kirsten's forgetfulness to check the food labels for peanuts, he'd been walking all day with an erection. He wasn't sure if he should

thank his sister for his discomfort or not.

Tristan stood underneath the cold shower. An effort to freeze his brain and forget about Julie's pink tongue, pink nipples, pink...*Fuck!* He smacked his hand flat on the tiled wall. Even with a cold shower raining on his back like pellets, his blood still pounded in his groin with the mere thought of Julie. He turned the shower to full blast and faced the spray.

Thinking he already emptied the water tank, he hopped out of the shower, feeling a mighty bit better. With his hair still dripping wet, he went back downstairs.

The house was eerily quiet. He wondered how Julie could stay in the house without any music on to accompany her. He grew up in a big house full of boys that seemed to make every room small, but he preferred it anytime to living in Julie's cold, quiet, and lifeless mansion. He even liked the one bedroom condo his brother, Bors, let him use.

Even with its upper class appliances and furniture, the house looked dreary, except when Julie walked in the room. The house needed only the minx to make it look like a home.

She was the opposite of the house—warm and passionate, full of life and vibrancy. She had that effect on anything, anyone, on him.

Someday her children would probably fill this house, their voices bouncing

against the Tudor ceiling, crayons and markers would stain the pristine white walls. They would be like Julie—a prankster, a brat, silly, passionate, with green eyes that flared when angry like her flaming reddish-orange hair. Her daughter would be beautiful like her and the sons would look like...

He rubbed his face with his hand, feeling the anger bubbling inside him. *Fuckin' eh.* Every time he thought about Julie with another man, his stomach would twist into knots. Why? *God knows why*, he thought. He didn't have the answer to it, just as he didn't know the answer to why he felt a strong urge to protect and hold her forever.

Forever. What a strong word to throw around.

Wearing only his white *Churidar*, cotton knee-length pants he bought from India, he prowled around the house.

At the end of the long hallway, he found a room that housed Julie's family portraits. Baby pictures covered one wall. One customized frame held elementary school pictures from Kindergarten through sixth grade.

Tristan smiled as he looked at Julie's picture. She must be seven, smiling, showing her missing two front teeth.

"Terrible, huh."

His heart thudded hearing Julie's voice. *Damn.* Tristan kept his back on her. "No. I think you looked cute." Moving to the next frame, he read the caption aloud:

“*Julie M. Parrish age seven. First communion. Pretty dress and veil. You looked virginal. Who would have thought you’d grow up to be a prankster?*”

“My mom. She said the moment she saw my flaming hair she knew that I would turn out to be a hellion.”

Tristan looked at Julie. She was smiling at him, unaware of the captivating picture she made when she smiled. Quickly he looked away before his mind started wandering again. “*Hmm...Julie M. Parrish, Altar Girl, Holy Rosary Church, Edmonds.*” Tristan felt her beside him. A scent of lavender assaulted his senses. Man, scent of a freshly showered woman was his weakness. His dick stood at attention.

Down, boy.

Dark green pajama pants printed with frog heads and an old University of Washington shirt two sizes smaller than her size, showing all her womanly curves, completed her ensemble. The shirt was old, but on her—sexy. He throbbed. Jesus, the woman would kill him before the weekend was over.

“You were an altar girl?”

“Yeah.”

“Did you give the priest a hard time?”

“All the time. I drank the wine and snacked on the wafers. I stole the chalice, too.”

He pulled a strand of her hair. “You’re joking, right?”

“About the chalice, yes.”

He raised an eyebrow. She lowered hers and punched him in the arm.

“I wasn’t as bad as you think.”

“Tsk. Tsk. Testy, aren’t we? By the way, I like the pajamas.”

“I like yours, too. They look comfy.”

“Yup. I have another one. It’ll be big for you but you can have it if you want.”

“Aww...thank you. I’ll find it when I run out of clean pajamas.”

I’d rather you stay naked. He quickly shook the image off his mind. “Hope you don’t mind me looking around your house.”

“Not at all.”

“So, is this supposed to be a Julie Shrine?”

“Parrish shrine, I suppose. My Mother was a catholic. She raised me like one, or at least she tried. She had these pictures put up here as a reminder, I imagine, that we were once a happy family, that I was once an obedient altar girl.”

“I could see you had a good childhood life. Lots of memories here.”

“Yeah, I would add my own someday. I meant to keep this house for my future children. So, what have you seen so far? You want a night tour of the house?”

“Sure.” *And a tour around your body.*

“Do you have other family other than your dad, Marla, and Sebastian?”

“Yeah. Mom’s family. They’re all in Canada. Don’t have any contacts with them. Saw my aunt during Mom’s funeral, but that was it. Mom was a cast-out, you see, because she got pregnant before she was married. Dad, as far as I know, has family in Florida. Never met them, though. He came here to work for Seattle PI, but lost his job after a year because he missed work a lot.”

“Because of his drinking habit.” Kirsten told him that.

“He met Mom in one of the conventions they both attended. Mom fell in love with him, Dad saw Mom as a lifesaver. They got married when Mom got pregnant.”

“How come no pictures of the wedding?”

“Mom told me they went to the city hall in the morning and got married. That same day she went back to work. So unromantic.”

Tristan followed Julie around the house. She showed him every room, telling fun and sad memories each one held. He was fascinated by the way she spoke with enthusiasm and animation. He noticed Julie’s mannerisms, like tapping her fingers on her arm and chewing her bottom lip. And things about her, like how her long hair reached the middle of her back. She made him laugh and feel comfortable, but a tension like a tight bowstring hum around them. He could feel it. The way she would jump as if fire licked her skin when he brushed against her, he knew she felt

it, too.

He listened to everything she was saying but truth be told, all he wanted to do was pull her in his arms, bury his fingers in her hair and make love with her—downstairs and upstairs.

“What about upstairs?” *Cool it, boy*, a warning voice whispered in his head. He couldn’t believe he voiced what he wanted.

“What about it?”

“Nothing. I thought maybe you have rooms up there other than bedrooms.”

“We do have a library on the west side. And an office that used to be my Mom’s. I use it now. There is nothing worth seeing up there.”

“Ah,” Tristan said. Really, what else could he say? *I want to see your bedroom? Feel your sheets on my back while you ride... Fuck.*

Their long tortuous round in the house ended in the kitchen. Tristan let out a deep sigh of relief. Finally, he didn’t have to stand too close to her and smell her heavenly scent, bump into the arms he so wanted to wrap around him. Now he could just look at her and see how her breasts... *Damn it to purgatory, she wasn’t wearing a bra.*

“You want some milk and Oreo cookies?” She reached in a cupboard. Her shirt rode up, exposing the small of her back. “Earth to Tristan, you want Oreos?”

Hmmm... I’d rather snack on those breasts. “What about real food like...dinner?”

“I thought about calling for pizza.”

“Pizza sounds good.”

“Or we could just share this bag of Oreos.”

“That is not dinner.”

“To me it is.”

“Your grandchildren will love you someday. Bet you’d feed them Oreos for breakfast, lunch and dinner.”

Julie turned around, shaking her head. “With milk.” She reached in the box and before Tristan figured out what she was up to, an Oreo whizzed past his ear.

Tristan laughed and ducked when another Oreo flew and hit him square on the chest. He caught the cookie and popped it inside his mouth. “Geez, you wasted one.” He bent down to pick up a broken piece, blew on it and put it in his mouth.

“You still believe in the two second rule?” Julie poured milk in two tall glasses and handed him one.

“In my house, it’s a two minute rule. For Gawain, an hour. The man’s a pig.”

She laughed again. Tristan felt elated. He liked making her laugh.

“I love all of your brothers. I think they’re all wonderful. You’re lucky. Having brothers like them would be like hitting the Washington Lottery.”

Tristan drank his milk. She didn’t say she loved him, too. He didn’t know

what to think of that.

“Most of the time they’re wonderful.”

“Your parents are sweet and your sister, well, no need to tell you how much I love her. She’s the sister I never had.”

“She’ll be your sister-in-law soon.”

“Oh yeah! And brothers-in-law, too. Neat. There is something good about this wedding other than shutting Marla off.”

“My sister would love to hear you’ll be her sister-in-law. I’m not sure about my brothers.”

“Why? They like me, I know that.”

“I didn’t say they didn’t like you. I am sure they love you, too. What I am saying is I don’t think they would like the idea of me being married to the woman they wish they could kiss...”

“Awww...Well, they could kiss me on the cheek.”

“If they could get past me. I would beat all of them if they even tried to kiss you. Bors is a good punch, trained. So it might take me longer to drag him away from you. Gawain, so long as you stay away from his planes, he won’t be able to kidnap you. Percy—I could probably lure him with computer software to make him leave you alone,” he said, taking an Oreo from a pack.

“Well, who’s going to beat you away from me?” She smiled and an Oreo

lodged in his throat. God, that smile was a definite turn-on. He took a sip of his cold milk, wishing he could pour it on his dick instead.

“I have full control of my situation.” Who was he fucking kidding? His dick throbbed like a headache—painful and blinding. He needed a diversion. On the floor, he spotted the other half of Oreo, picked it up and took a bite.

“Do you tell your patients about your two minute rule?”

“Of course not. The kids I see every day have enough germs on them; they don’t need to know another way to get more.”

“Someday I’ll have a dozen kids.” Julie sighed, her eyes focused above his shoulders turned dreamy.

“You are?”

She split the Oreo in half and licked the white cream. “Uh-huh. Hmm...this is good. You got to try licking the cream.”

Tristan took a big gulp of his milk and look up the ceiling. He’d do anything to avoid looking at her sensual display. He doubted though, that she knew the effect of what she was doing to him.

“Here, try it. I don’t have germs.”

The cream on the Oreo glistened, wet from Julie’s saliva. Tristan looked at it for a second then took it from Julie’s outstretched hand. Sticking his tongue out, he licked the cream. Sweet Jesus, he nearly exploded. The taste of cream and Julie

wrapped around his senses. Images of Julie began forming in his head. Her lovely head bent low in front on his erect cock, licking the engorged head with her pink tongue the way she did with the cream. Slowly and with apparent delight on her on face. But she didn't stop there. Opening her mouth, she wrapped her plump, shiny lips around his dicks head and began sucking him.

Sweet pain in his groin made Tristan groan low in his throat.

"You don't like it?"

"I do."

"You can have that one. See, if I have two dozen kids, I won't have to eat a whole bag of Oreos.

"Well, you have a house big enough for two dozen."

"Yeah. You should eat more of these, otherwise, I'll finish the whole pack. I'll look like a cow before I turn twenty-six."

"Hmmm...that's all right. Your figure will match your cow tongue."

Smack! It happened so fast. Julie whacked his head with a package of Oreo.

"You are a dead man, Doctor. And no one here will save you." Another smack. "I do not have a cow tongue, ewwww!"

"Quit it!" Laughing hard, he tried to dodge another blow. "You're pulverizing your favorite snack."

"I don't care. As long as I pulverize your head first."

Thunk. Oreos flew all over the floor and the counter. Tristan took pity on the pack and grabbed Julie's slender arm. Julie's free arm managed to hit him on the side of the head.

"Oww! You witch. You will pay for that!"

Grabbing her free arm, he pulled her against him. The moment their bodies made contact, Tristan knew he was a goner. Lust surged through his entire body. He stared at Julie's eyes and stared some more.

She'd be his wife soon. The idea brought convoluted feelings he couldn't sort out. The wedding would take place because he agreed to help her, but searching his heart deeply, he said yes to Kirsten as fast as he could say hell because of Armand. His attraction for her was stronger than antibiotics killing microorganisms and curing bacterial infections. Like right now, he wanted to make love with her again. But she wasn't really his fiancé, just a friend he promised to help. This, what they had right now, would end in a month. In a fucking month! That too, muddled his thinking. Now that he knew how magical it was to be with her, how in the world was he going to walk away from her? And, she spoke of babies. She could be carrying one already. Damn it, wasn't fate done playing with his life?

Tristan touched his forehead against Julie's. "Julie, Julie." Gathering her into his arms, he held her snugly, burying his face in her hair. Julie needed help, not

complications in her life. He was the more experienced one in this situation, therefore, he should take the steps to prevent it. And she deserved respect, for crap's sake. Touching, fondling, taking her anywhere, was so wrong. "If we continue on like this, I'll be exercising my husbandly right before we are even married."

"And you don't want that," Julie mumbled in his shirt.

"Julie, can't you feel me right now? I want you so badly. You'd be scared if you could read my thoughts about what I want to do with you and how to do it. But making love with you—"

"Is not like making love with your wife."

"Don't bring up Carly. You are different, Julie. Remember that."

Julie stepped out of his embrace. "I will."

He tried to reach for Julie again, but she stepped back and swatted his hand.

"Now wait a minute. You don't understand."

"What is so hard to understand about you holding back because you are still thinking about your wife?"

"Julie, I am freaking holding back because...because you are not a whore I can use whenever I want to. My whole body is shaking with need to have you. But you are neither my wife, nor my girlfriend. This whole thing between us would only replace your problem with Marla once we're married. " Tristan raked his hair

with his fingers. Even to himself his words didn't make sense. *God*. The only thing clear to him right now was the fact that he'd face hell again once this whole arrangement was over.

"I know." Julie wiped her tears away with the back of her hand. "Forgive me. I don't know what came over me. I didn't mean to take advantage of your offer. It's hard enough that you'd be married again, albeit temporarily, but to tangle with a woman—"

In one swift move, he reached for her arm and pulled her roughly against him.

Chapter Nine

Julie pushed against Tristan's chest, but he didn't budge. Instead, he tightened his hold on her. "Let me go."

"No."

"I see your point, Tristan. In fact, for the first time, I can see clearly what's ahead of me. You and your family decided you should come here because you all care. And what do I do? Open myself like a slut born in a gutter. No, don't shake your head. I am not an invalid incapable of blocking your wiles. What happened was as much my fault as yours. You are right. We are just creating a totally different problem by being close. One is ruining our friendship. We are just friends, and this physical affair is just that. A physical affair. After the marriage, I don't think I'd be able to look at you as my sparring partner." Tears blinded her eyes and choked her voice. But she didn't care. It hurt too much to think Tristan considered their intimacy as another problem.

"Love, I don't think you understand anything."

"Oh, now I am stupid?"

"That's not what I mean."

"Whatever. You know what? While we wait for the marriage license, you should stay away."

"Why, because you're afraid Marla would find me here? Guess what? She'd need strong evidence to prove you didn't follow the terms in your will. Now, if you

want me to leave because you are tired of my company, I'll leave."

"Don't turn the table on me. You clearly indicated that you regret—"

Tristan stopped her with his searing kiss. "Obviously, you're as confused as me. So stop talking for a minute and kiss me."

Like the burning edge of a paper, the fire quickly spread from her mouth to the tips of her toes. She leaned on him for support. He gave it right away. Tristan encircled his arm around her waist and back.

With eagerness, she returned his kisses, eliciting a groan from him. The sound was so alluring she had to grab his head to have more of him, more of his taste and heat.

Without breaking their kiss, Tristan reached down and lifted her. She instinctively wrapped her legs around his waist. The intimacy was achingly sweet. Julie's mind went wild with desire.

"Julie, love. What do you say we make the best of what we have right now until we sort things out?"

"What do you mean?"

"You want me and I want to exercise my right as your fiancé. We'll have to forget about the 'no honeymoon' deal. I want my honeymoon. I want you. Now."

After this, he'd move on and start dating again. Julie winced at the rippling pain that struck her heart. She'd probably die after their split. Right now, though,

she had him, so why not make the best of it? “Me, too.”

“Oh, thank God!”

“Make love with me.” She raked her fingers on his back, shoulders and neck.

Tristan hissed. “Take it easy, minx. Your nails are sharp,” Tristan said in between kisses. He headed toward the stairs.

“Sorry, sorry...” She kissed the skin where she raked her nails.

“Keep that up and we won’t make it to the bedroom.”

Nuzzling Tristan’s neck, Julie laughed and clung to him, feeling his erection pressed against the very center of her.

“This damn house should have an escalator.”

“Turn left,” Julie whispered in his ear, when they reached the landing. “Third room on the right. My bedroom.” She licked his ear. He turned his head and bit the skin below her chin.

“You’re driving me insane, woman.”

“Glad to hear that. I want you crazy for me,” Julie replied.

Tristan kicked her door open without breaking the kiss. He laid her down on the bed, his body followed. In one swift movement, he pulled her shirt off. Warm strong hands cupped her breasts while he buried his head in between.

“Do all men do that or you just have a breast fetish?” She wriggled, tickled by his rough chin.

“Don’t know about other men. All I know is that I love...your breasts. Julie, you’re beautiful.”

“You are, too.” Julie shifted voluntarily. Her body was burning, wanting more pressure from him.

Tristan swiftly moved and sat back on his heels. With their eyes locked together, he slowly tugged her pajama pants down. Julie knew what to do. She lifted her butt to make it easier for Tristan to pull her pants down. Dressed with nothing but a white thong, she laid there, exposed like meat in the market for him to peruse.

Heat, either from embarrassment or from excitement, warmed her whole body.

“You are one magnificent creature.”

“Thank you.”

Julie’s heart thundered inside her chest as she watched Tristan remove his shirt and the white pants he called *Churidar*. His boxers followed. Good heavens, he was all meat and muscles. As curious as a kitten, she stared at his long, thick erection. Shiny transparent liquid emerged from the tip. Lord, she wrote about a man’s penis releasing pre-cum, but to actually see it happening sent heat rippling under her skin. Julie was totally entranced by his stunning virility. She knew he filled her the first time they made love, but now, seeing how long he was, she

couldn't believe how her body had managed to accept him.

Tristan lowered his body to cover hers. This time, when their bodies touched, Julie swore she died and went to heaven. Because this—lying in bed with the man she loved—definitely felt like heaven.

Kissing his way down, he didn't stop until his head was above the very spot he wanted so badly. "Spread your legs wide, love."

"Tristan, what are you— Oh my God! Oh..."

He flattened his palms on her thighs and caressed her soft skin. He smiled at the seahorse shaped birthmark and kissed it. Slowly his hands moved toward the vee of her legs and then down again to her knees. With little force, he urged her to open her legs for him.

"Tristan."

"Beautiful." He stared at her pussy. She was already hot and wet. Tristan's intense sexual desire pounded the blood through his heart and head. In front of him was the small door he wanted to enter, to feel, to fuck. Using two fingers, he spread her folds. "Julie, you're mine, baby. You're mine." And then he licked her. "Fuck, you taste so good."

Julie's legs clamped around his head and she tried to scoot up. Gripping her hips, he prevented her from escaping. With his tongue, he switched from teasing her clit with its tip to lavaging her. Soft sounds of pleasure came from Julie as she

began to relax her legs. She even opened for him wider.

“That’s it, love.” Soft and beautiful. Her pussy was plump and ripe.

Tristan dipped his thumb inside her. Hot damn, juice oozed out from her. Taut as a string, his body screamed for release. He couldn’t let this foreplay last. His dick throbbed so badly, two minutes was all he could handle without ejaculating on the bed. Reaching for her breast, he pinched her hard nipple while his other hand continued to finger fuck her. His mouth concentrated on that one part he knew would help reach her peak—her clit.

“Tristan, don’t stop. Good, so good. This is wonderful. I want you, please.”

“Hmmm...I want you too, love. Come for me. Now.” He formed his mouth to an O shape and sucked her clitoris. Julie writhed beneath his mouth. She moved her hips in a thrusting motion. She was close to coming.

Growling low, he sucked hard on her clit the same time he pumped two fingers inside her weeping pussy.

“Oh, oh...God. I’ll die if you stop.” Her voice was raspy.

“I’m not God, baby. But I won’t stop.” Inch by inch, he pushed his fingers deeper inside her vagina. She was so tight, just like the first night he took her virginity. With Julie’s pleasure in mind, he gave what her body asked for. He ate her pussy, sucked her juice, reveling at the sexy moans she was making.

Julie gripped his hair and moved her hips in a thrusting motion. *Oh yeah, fuck*

my mouth. Faster and faster, she thrust. Finally, she screamed his name. But Tristan didn't let go of her clit or pull his fingers out. He waited until her body stopped convulsing before he slowly crawled back up.

Chapter Ten

“Can’t believe a pediatrician could be so wicked.”

“You must have confused us with priests.” In truth, he was surprised at the consuming lust that nearly drove him wild. He wanted to do all the wicked things he imagined doing when he was in high school. How was it that making love with Julie far exceeded the pleasure he had experienced in bed with other women, including his ex-wife? Was it her uninhibited side that made him try unconventional ways to please each other? God damn, he made love with her as if he wanted to consume her, like a man who hadn’t touched a woman in years. He pushed himself up, propped his elbow and looked down at Julie. Her eyes still held the glow of a satisfied woman after making love. The knowledge that he pleased her doubled the size of his heart. At least it felt that way.

“I’m not surprised that you are wicked.”

“What?”

“Uh-huh. Your eyes show the sensual side of you. And these,” he touched her lips, “are just begging to be kissed. The way you move, talk, and smile speaks sensuality.”

“Maybe because I’m a writer. I write bed scenes, read books, particularly the romance genre and the sub-genre—sensual, erotic, you know.”

“From now on, I want you to live in the real world, not just in your books.”

“I’ve been living my life.”

“Yes, but not as a free woman. When was the last time you made a decision for yourself, the last time you did something without worrying about Marla? Baby, living is pleasing yourself, without worrying, and doing things because it is what you want.”

“The way you made love with me. Did you make love with me to show me how to live?”

“No. I made love with you because I wanted to. Why did you give yourself to me?” *Please don't say it was a mistake.* He stared down at Julie as he waited for her to say something. To hear her say what any man would want to hear from the woman he loved, to...

He loved her. *Good god, I love her.* So this was why he immediately agreed to Kirsten's idea of marrying Julie to help her end the will's stipulation without question, without thinking, without second thought. Julie's soft hand cupped his cheek. He closed his eyes and turned his mouth to kiss her palm.

“It's what I wanted, Tristan. I wanted you to be my first.”

Tristan opened his eyes and grinned at Julie. “Welcome to the real world.”

“I like your real world.” Julie waggled her brows, grinning like a cat that had a big bowl of milk.

“Keep smiling like that and we won't be able to leave this room for a week.”

“Promise?”

“You are a naughty girl.”

“Growing up, I began to believe ‘naughty’ was my middle name.”

“There are times when naughtiness is good, especially when applied at the right time and the right place.”

“Such as in this bedroom, you mean.”

“And the rest of the house.”

“Hmm...can we start now?”

“Careful, love. You might get what you wish for.” He nuzzled her neck and moved to suckle her collarbone.

“I’m tired of being careful. I’ll do whatever I want and get whatever I want, including the stars and the moon. From now on, I’ll live my life.” Julie ran her hands on his shoulders, down his back then smacked his butt. “But right now, I want more of what you showed me.”

“And you’ll get it, babe. First, let me get up.”

“Why?” Julie yawned.

Tristan stared at Julie. She woke up early this morning, and most likely stayed up thinking about what to do with Marla. Seeing the dark shadows beneath her eyes, she could use a little bit of a nap. “Be right back.”

Julie was half-asleep when he went back to bed. Her eyes opened wide when he touched her thigh with the warm, wet, face towel. “I didn’t know

washing away traces of sex was the man's job. What I heard was, after sex a man would either leave the bed or turn his back to go to sleep."

"You heard wrong."

"Thanks for coming here to save me from Marla." She took a deep breath and closed her eyes.

Moments later, Julie was asleep.

Tristan watched her sleep. She had smooth skin dusted with freckles, bright red hair, full soft lips and long lashes that tickled his cheeks when she kissed him. She looked so vulnerable and beautiful. Poor thing, he thought. *Poor beautiful wild thing*. Tristan smiled, thinking how she scratched his back, wild with passion.

Tristan's chest tightened. Julie made it clear she would marry for love. She'd build a life of her own with the man she'd love forever. If Kirsten hadn't come to his room, Julie might have been engaged to Armand now, not to him. Didn't she say she liked him? *Was like* only one step away from *love*? Julie liked him, and was physically attracted to him, but he saw wariness in her eyes when he first mentioned his intention. She didn't want to marry him. The only reason the signed marriage permit was in his pants pocket was Marla, and because he insisted. Julie would be his wife, but only on paper. And it would be over in a month—whether he liked it or not—because she wanted it to end in thirty days.

He'd been on a married path and didn't want to go back there again. After

Carly, he wouldn't dream of getting into that one hell of a mess called marriage. He loved Julie, that he knew now, but he and Carly loved each other, too, and it didn't salvage the marriage. Julie would want a family, a kitchen busy with kids wanting chocolate chip or Oreo cookies, a man she loved. He shouldn't have made love with her. But he did. And there was no turning back. Only to move forward.

Julie sighed and scooted closer to him. He wrapped his arms around her slender waist. She fit so perfectly inside his embrace. For some odd reason, he didn't want the moment to end. A soft sigh escaped Julie's lips. She looked content, no worries.

But he knew as soon as she woke, troubles about Marla would put a crease on her brow again. He'd put an end to Marla's viciousness against Julie. He'd make sure of it.

Julie moved. Her butt pressed against his half-aroused cock. He wanted her again. With her leg wrapped around his thigh, he could made love with her again, but he wouldn't violate her like that. Adjusting the covers against them, he kissed her neck and the back of her head one more time and then he went to sleep—at least he tried. Julie's soft bottom tormented him. If he didn't do something, he'd make love with her again while she slept.

He got up and adjusted the sheet around Julie. Earlier he spotted a laptop. Julie wouldn't mind if he used it to check his email.

Sitting on the chair facing the floor to ceiling glass wall, he admired the view of the Puget Sound. The moon was already high in the midnight sky, providing subdued light on the private sailboats dotting the water. Outlines of the majestic Olympic Mountains added to the spectacular view. The Kingston Ferryboat tooted its horn, bringing his mind back to why he was standing there.

Latest model of Mac laptop with its blue screen welcomed Julie as Tristan pressed the return button. He had never used a Mac before. Surely, he could find out how to check his emails from work using this one. He read the shiny little sticker on the left side of the keyboard. *13.3-inch glossy display, 1.83GHz or 2.0GHz Intel Core 2 Duo, 2GB memory, 200GB hard drive, Apple Remote with Front Row Built-in iSight camera.* Whatever those things were, they surely sounded good and expensive. Tristan whistled low on purpose, making sure not to disturb Julie. He looked at the bed where she still lay sleeping and his blood started pumping in his head—both heads.

“Down, boy, wait ‘til she wakes up,” he mumbled. His body refused to listen. Focusing on the screen, he willed himself not to think about the woman sleeping six feet away from him.

After a minute of navigating, he found his work site and read his emails. A short letter from his partner, Edmund, appeared on the screen, telling that he found someone to help in the clinic.

Julie stirred in bed, her hand sweeping the side of the bed where he laid. He stood up and walked back to bed.

“I thought you left me,” Julie mumbled in her sleepy voice, her arm reaching for him.

“No, love. I’m still here. Go back to sleep.” He kissed her hand and leaned to do the same with her upturned face. She kissed him back. And that was all it took for Tristan to lose his control.

This time though, he made love with Julie slowly, and again, without protection.

Chapter Eleven

The kitchen was messy and in the midst of it all was Tristan—cooking. She

liked seeing him in her kitchen, in his butt-hugging jeans. Damn, he looked so yummy. That same butt brought her to an apex last night and early this morning. Never in her life did she ever imagine how magnificent it would be to wake up in the middle of having an orgasm, with a lover's hand on her skin, lips, and on every part of her body that screamed to be touched. Tristan made her feel special, wanted. At one point during their intimacy in bed, she felt *loved*. But then it could be her mind playing tricks on her. Tristan was in the process of pouring eggs in the pan when he noticed her. The look he gave her brought warmth all over her. Giddiness rippled throughout her body. In two days, they'd be wed. Who would have thought she'd snag a doctor? Yeah, their marriage would not last. Only a bit longer than Britney Spears' first marriage. Not a very long time, but she'd make the best of it. She would deal with the consequences later—the emotional part—when she grieved for their short lived marriage.

“Breakfast is almost ready. Have a seat.”

“Where did you get all this? I don't remember having pancake batter in the house or hash browns.”

“I went to QFC while you were sleeping.” He dumped the stainless bowl in the sink then walked toward her. “Good morning.” He gave her a kiss. It was a long, wet, erotic, toe-curling kind. Tristan wrapped his arm around her waist when her knees suddenly lost their strength to support her weight.

Julie clung to him. She had to. It was all she could do to keep upright. Good heavens, just a kiss and she felt hot all over, wet in between, and throbbing inside. Just like last night, she returned his kisses with ardor, like a woman trapped on an island who was now only getting a taste of bottled water. She sampled and curled her tongue around Tristan's.

Tristan cupped her ass and lifted her. She could feel him thrusting his hips, rubbing his cock against her pubic bone.

"Tristan," she whispered in his mouth.

"Julie, tell me to stop or breakfast will go to waste."

"I don't want you to stop. Love me again like last night."

"Baby, I want nothing else. The whole time I've been down here thinking of nothing else but making love with you again."

"I'm here now. Do it. I want you deep inside me."

"I'll show you ways to please yourself, love."

"Stop talking. Just show me."

Tristan lifted her silk pink tank top, including the built-in bra and suckled her. While his mouth loved her aching breasts, his hands pushed her sweatpants down. His mouth left her breast to pepper her stomach with kisses as he lowered her pants until they pooled around her ankles. Julie kicked her sweats away.

"Spread your legs, Julie."

“Tristan...” she whispered and spread her legs.

Tristan ran his fingers along her folds then dipped his thumb inside her hot pussy. Even before she could blink, Tristan’s mouth covered her pussy.

He sucked and laved until Julie felt the beginning of her orgasm. Looking down at Tristan’s head moving while he pleased her quickened her pulse. She wanted to come, to feel heaven again between her legs. But Tristan stopped and lay down on the marbled floor.

“Come, love, and sit.”

“Sit?”

“Yes. Come here.” Tristan patted his chest.

Julie straddled him and lowered herself.

“Higher,” Tristan said, in a tone that told her he was on the verge of losing his control.

Julie moved higher, but Tristan kept telling her to move up until her pussy was directly above his mouth.

“Better,” Tristan murmured, and then he held Julie’s ass where it met her thighs. With his thumb spreading her pussy wide, he lowered her to his mouth.

Julie moaned from the intensity of the pleasure his wicked tongue and mouth were doing to her. She moved her hips to center his tongue right where she wanted it most. In her position, she took control. She rocked her hips, taking turns

aiming his mouth on her opening and her throbbing clit. Until she couldn't take it anymore.

“Suck my clit, Tristan. Don't stop. Ohh...ohhh...yes, harder.”

Tristan moved his hands away from her ass. Using her knees, she kept her balance. Even with her load moaning, she could hear Tristan's zipper. The thought of him inside her again...

She rocked her hips.

“Hmm...so fucking good. You taste so good.”

“I'm coming, Tristan, I'm—ahhh...” Her body convulsed. Tristan gripped her ass again, preventing her from moving away. He sucked her pussy until she felt boneless.

“Don't fall asleep on me, baby. Now you'll sit lower. Ride me.”

Yes. She would love that.

She scooted down until Tristan's rigid cock bumped her ass. Reaching down, she wrapped her fingers around his shaft then guided him to her entry. With Tristan's hooded blue eyes piercing hers, she impaled herself in one swift move.

“Fuck!” Tristan's eyes closed. His hips thrust up, meeting her.

“Oh God...”

Closing her eyes, she lifted her ass then slowly went down again, repeating

the action over and over, until Tristan gripped her round butt and took control. He held her in place as he pumped his hips upward hard and fast. Until he groaned and his body turned rigid beneath her.

Tristan pulled her on top of him and hugged her tight.

They were in that position when she smelled something burning—the same time the smoke alarm went off. Julie sat up. Still straddling Tristan, she looked at the stove in horror. Smoke billowed, quickly covering the entire ceiling.

“Your eggs!”

It happened so fast. One minute she was being lifted then she found herself standing naked in the kitchen watching Tristan throw the—most likely unusable—pan in the sink. He turned the kitchen faucet on the scalding hot pan that hissed and produced more smoke when the water hit it.

Julie stepped back. The smell of burnt eggs was horrible. She stepped back away from the smoke. Quickly she picked up her clothes and put them back on. She was just pulling her shirt down when the doorbell rang. *Once*. Seconds later, she heard the sound of the door opening and closing, followed by the familiar sound of nails clicking on the floor.

Cinnamon, her three-year-old Golden Retriever who visited her friend, Teta, while she stayed with Kirsten skidded on the marble floor as she tried to make a turn. She slipped and landed on her nose one time before she made it to Julie.

“Hey there, baby. I missed you.” With her arms wide open, Julie immediately went down on her knees and hugged her overly excited dog.

“Who’s the puppy?” Tristan asked from behind her.

“Cinnamon, meet Tristan. He’s a friend of mine and he’s here to help me get rid of Marla. Right now, he’s my fiancé.” Julie hugged Cinnamon, laughing, trying to avoid the dog’s tongue.

“What in God’s name is that smell and who is this fiancé you’re talking—oh, it must be you?” Teta walked in, her clogs clunking on the floor. Like always, she carried her knitted purse with her. Teta wore bright red lipstick and her fake lashes looked longer than the ones she wore last time.

“Teta, this is Tristan Knight, Kirsten’s brother.” Julie stood up, pulling dog hair off her pants.

Teta patted her shocking white beehive hairdo. “So, this is the famous Knight. I heard all about you, mister. Now, why is he here, Julie? You know you can’t entertain anyone, other than Kirsten and your hyper dog.” Teta looked at Tristan with her perpetually pursed lips.

Teta had been her friend, cook and a housekeeper for four years now. Now it looked like Teta added mother hen to her role.

“Teta, Tristan offered his help to solve my problem with Marla.”

“Oh? And what did he ask in return? Any man eager to marry a young,

beautiful and rich woman on such short notice must have a hidden agenda.”

Julie bit her lower lip. Tristan was scowling at Teta like a little boy being scolded. “Teta, Tristan didn’t ask anything. His family knows about this.”

“What happened to Armand? He’s not as handsome as this Knight, but at least I know he loves you.”

“Want to talk directly to me, Teta?” Tristan asked, obviously annoyed at being the subject of discussion as if he was not around.

“You got to have a purpose for doing this, Knight, and don’t tell me you love Julie. Do you?”

“Teta!”

“It’s okay, Julie. Glad to hear you have a friend looking after your well being. Teta, Julie is a special friend of my family. If it weren’t for her, my sister wouldn’t be with us right now. So when Kirsten asked me if I would be willing to help, I said yes. Now, to your question of if I love Julie. Yes. I do. We all do.”

The glowing happiness from Tristan’s admission that he loved her faded when he added the last three words. Tristan loved her—*as a friend*. So her mind wasn’t playing tricks on her. She felt loved while in the comfort of his warm embrace because it was what she wanted. Julie forced a smile. “See? No need to doubt Tristan, Teta.” She nodded at Tristan then quickly dropped her lashes to hide the hurt and disappointment. “Teta, Armand loves me, yes, but like Tristan

said, if he agrees to marry me, he might not want to end it. Whereas Tristan, he gave his word that he will end the marriage after a month.”

“That’s not part of the will’s condition, is it?”

“No, Teta. The one month part is my condition.”

“And can you depend on his word?”

“You have my word. I will not bind Julie to a relationship she’s against.”

“Good to know.” Teta patted her purse. “One thing you need to know about me, boy. I know how to shoot. And my favorite target is a man’s balls.” Teta walked in the kitchen briskly, her round rump bouncing with each step she took. “Now, what did you do to my kitchen? I told you, Julie. You do not step in my kitchen without me here. Look! You burned the pan. What were you,” she glared at Julie and Tristan, “doing to let these poor eggs turn into dark lava?”

“Nothing,” Tristan answered, slowly backing away from Teta and out of her turf—the kitchen.

Julie forced not to laugh. Her friend, round and plump had made Tristan, tall and lithe, look like a boy caught stealing cookies from a cookie jar. “We were just, uhm, discussing how to pull the wedding off before Marla gets the whiff of it.”

The look Teta gave her proved she believed nothing that came out of her mouth. “You were supposed to be gone for a week and call me to let me know when you’d be back. I came by to see if I could do some cleaning here and this,”

Teta looked Tristan up and down, “is not what I expected to see.”

Julie looked down to hide her warming cheeks. “Sorry.”

“Don’t be. I don’t care what you two have been doing here. If you were doing what I think you were doing before I came, it’s good for you. It’s about time you lived like a normal—well, you’re not a teenager anymore—like a normal young woman.”

Julie felt her smile turned into a grimace. She pointed her gaze on Cinnamon. Her face must have been as red as Teta’s lipstick.

“Bravo, Teta. Julie, you should listen to Teta all the time and you’ll have a jolly good time.”

“Hush. Do not patronize me, boy. Hurt my girl, I will fry your ass. You’ll look like those eggs you two burned.”

“I won’t hurt Julie, Teta. That I promise you.” Tristan’s voice turned serious, his smile wiped off his face.

“Good. Now, you didn’t say what you expect you’ll get in return for marrying Julie?”

“I’m not expecting anything. I’ll do what we can to help Julie. It’s too darn bad we didn’t hear about her problem until this morning.”

“I assume you heard from Weatherholt again?”

Teta looked at Julie questioningly. The old spunky woman knew her inside

and out, it would be best to tell her about Marla's forthcoming visit. "Teta, Marla is coming. Weatherholt warned me she is armed with new accusations. This time it's bad."

"I'm going to blast that bitch to kingdom come. You just let me shoot her and her stupid cow for a son with my Magnum .38 and I tell you, she will not come here again."

"You carry a gun?"

"Yes," answered Julie. "So don't mess with her. See how heavy her purse looks?"

"Why do you think the witchy bitch is coming?"

"I suspect she found out about my books, Teta."

Teta she shook her head and wagged her finger at her face like a windshield wiper. "I knew those books would cause you trouble. Have you read Julie's books, Knight? This child was a grade-A brat growing up. Now she is one good spanking writer. So good that I sizzle and turn hot all over, especially right in my—"

Julie grabbed Teta's arm none too gently. Not a nice thing to do, considering Teta's age. She could be her grandmother. "Go clean the kitchen, Teta, please. And check the cupboards to see if we need anything." She gave the woman a not very gentle shove.

Julie turned to look at Tristan, who was grinning from ear to ear. She

punched his arm as she walked past him. Tristan followed her.

“So you write *hot* stuff. Was it as hot as what we did last night?”

Julie rolled her eyes. “Shut up.”

“I heard that. I hope what you did involved a bed. God knows this girl needs some loving in her life,” Teta huffed, then clonked her way around the utterly disordered kitchen.

Too bad Julie wasn’t insane. She could probably wring Teta’s neck and get away with it. Tristan, she saw, was smiling cheekily. The blasted man was having fun on her account.

“Teta is a sweetheart—forward, but super nice,” she said, more to herself than to Tristan.

Tristan chuckled. “You think you’ll write in your book what you did before Teta came, minx?” he whispered.

Julie shivered involuntarily. “I did?”

“Fine, we did.”

“Maybe. I need new material anyway.”

“Before this whole marriage thing is over, you’ll have enough material for your books.”

Julie shook her head at him, all the while ignoring how her nipples hardened beneath her shirt. *Drat*. How could the scent of a man make a woman hornier than

ever? Right now, if he kissed her again, it wouldn't be her fault if she started clinging to him like a hungry leach. She was new to this kind of thing. Like taking a bite of double, creamy chocolate Oreo cookies for the first time, she wanted more. She must be nuts. Clearly, Tristan was physically attracted to her, but nothing more. *Love sucks.*

She spotted the doggie bag on top of the console table. She opened the bag and took out a carton of doggie biscuits. Like an illusion, Cinnamon, with her tongue lolling, appeared at her side.

"Is it you who is allergic to animal dander?" She broke the biscuit in half and fed half to Cinnamon.

Tristan pulled her against him and squeezed her waist. "No. I am not allergic to dogs or cats. My brother, Bors, is the one. He couldn't stand them."

"Don't mind me being here," Teta yelled from the kitchen. "I'll be gone as soon as I check everything. It's fine with me if you're standing too close to Julie, Knight. Like her Oreos stuck together."

Both Julie and Tristan took a step back.

"Kirsten is allergic to nuts, Bors to dander. Allergies must run in your family. Are you allergic to anything?"

"Berries, especially strawberries.

"What?"

Tristan laughed. “Yup. I get hives when I eat them and I swell when I’m near one.” The underlying meaning of his words aroused her.

Julie covered her body’s reaction to his double entendre with a laugh. With his admission to his weakness, her respect for him grew. It must have been hard, especially for a man like him, to admit to something like allergic reactions to berries. Her father would never admit anything that would show his weakness.

She looked at the man in front of her. Dear, she wanted to hug and kiss him.

“Well, don’t worry about getting those berries in here, Knight. Julie’s diet consists of milk, Oreos, doughnuts, and Chinese food,” Teta said from the kitchen.

God. Old maybe, but Teta’s hearing seemed to have sharpened over the years. Wasn’t it supposed to be the opposite?

“By the way, girl, there’s something wrong with your refrigerator—it’s full of veggies and other nutritional stuff.”

She turned to look at Tristan. “Forgot to tell you, I stocked up your fridge with greens and orange juice. And pies. I love pecan pies, so you’ll find two in there.”

“Trying to fatten up this girl like a turkey, are you? Good, maybe she’ll look like me —tough and strong looking.” Teta stood in front of them. “Well, Julie, while the dishwasher is running, I’ll go upstairs and see if you two managed to burn the sheets. I just hope I won’t find used condoms in your room. That I

wouldn't tolerate."

Julie swallowed. They never used protection. *Not once*. "No, you won't find one."

"Because he flushed it away, or you just didn't use one?"

"Teta, I'm not going to answer your question. That's too personal."

"Fine. I just hope you don't end up like that girl in the movie *Knocked Up*. Come on, you dog, follow me. Let's leave the lovers alone."

"We're not lovers," Julie said after Teta.

Teta turned around and speared both Tristan and Julie with a sharp look. "Girl, don't think for a second because I'm old that I am a fool. Your doctor here, I bet, let his Mr. Johnson loose and you caught it."

"Mr. Johnson?" Tristan and Julie asked in unison.

"Yeah, Mr. Johnson. You know, a man's little pecker or penis, peeper, love handle, dick, rod, wo—"

"Enough, Teta. We get your point. Thank you." Tristan raised his hand to stop Teta.

"See, that's why I use Mr. Johnson. Even Doctor here is embarrassed to hear those names."

"Slang," corrected Tristan.

"Whatever. Anyway, sparks are all around you both, and I'll be damned if

I'm wrong that you two are in love. By the way, I want to be invited to your wedding. When is it going to be?"

"Soon," answered Julie. Her mind was processing what Teta said. She hoped the old woman was right about Tristan being in love with her.

"We have the license already. We'll be wed in two days."

"Good." Teta nodded. "Cinnamon, come with me, girl. I doubt if those two will even remember you're around."

Julie stood rooted to the floor. *Oh, God! If Teta can tell I'm in love with Tristan, can he see it, too?* Embarrassed by her own thoughts, she watched Teta and Cinnamon climb the steps.

"I like her," Tristan said. "Where did you find her?"

"QFC Store in Edmonds."

"I want her to work for me."

"Not a chance, she's mine."

"How long have you had her as a housekeeper?"

"Long enough for her to butt in and talk as if she's my mother."

"And you love her."

"And I love her. Very much."

"Without a doubt, she feels the same way. Did you notice her shoes? I didn't know they make those kind—as big as Ronald McDonald's."

“You are terrible. Teta is a nice woman.”

“How did you meet her?”

“I saw her every time I went shopping. One day, I talked to her.”

“While shopping? You saw her shopping and you thought, hmmm... She’s as big as an old Cadillac, can lift my dog, and with her legs bigger than the trunks of Cedar trees, she could manage to go up and down my stairs, so I should hire her to clean my house. Yeah, she’s perfect.”

Julie swatted his arm. “No, while standing by the books and magazine isle. She was reading a book. I was there, too, browsing, when she started crying. I asked if she needed help. She said no, but the character in the book does. We talked about the book she was reading and she gave me her honest opinion about the story.”

“I see, so Teta gave you her honest oral critique about your book and you thought of hiring her. She could clean your house and at the same time, critique *your* book.”

“I didn’t say she was reading my book.”

“But she was.”

“Yeah. She was.”

“How long have you been writing?”

“Since I stopped modeling.”

“Is my sister involved in your writing?”

“Yes. She’s my critique partner. A terrible one. To her everything I write down is good. Not really helpful when it comes to creating the plot or making the hero an unforgettable character. That’s why I like Teta. She’s honest.”

“If you need another pair of eyes, I could look at your manuscripts.”

“Chick flick stories. I doubt you’ll make it through the second page. But you could help me with the bed scenes.” Julie blushed. It was too late to take her words back. She meant to say the words mentally, but they flew out of her mouth so fast...

“Sure, love. We could start right now.” He took her hand and kissed her wrists. With a grin that turned her heart into watery oatmeal, he pulled her against him until she was flat on his chest—again.

“You have a dirty mind for a doctor. Oh, dear...”

“Hmmm...Was that an, ‘oh dear, I like it’ or ‘oh, dear, it feels good?’”

Julie hissed when he nibbled her ear. “Those mean the same thing, silly.” Her head tilted to the side, silently begging for more kisses.

“I love kissing your neck, ears, lips, and these,” he cupped her breasts and gently squeezed them. “I love them.” Tristan squeezed her butt cheek, pressing her against his hard *Mr. Johnson*. “Julie, wanna hide in your bedroom?”

“Do you have to ask?” Julie couldn’t say anything after that, but could only

writhe in his arms. She mimicked his every move, bringing out masculine laughter from him.

With her eyes closed, his touches and hot kisses heightened. She clung to him, melding their bodies together. “Aren’t you hungry?”

“We can eat later. I’m hungry for something else right now.”

Tristan saved her from begging when he dragged her upstairs, muttering something about an escalator. Julie giggled, both from excitement and anticipation.

Unfortunately, their company was going down. Tristan halted in his tracks.

Julie, not expecting his quick strides to stop abruptly, bumped his back.

“Looks like you two are in a hurry. Mind if you tell me where you’re going?”

Teta wagged her brows and focused her eyes on Tristan’s obvious arousal.

Julie winced from the hard grip Tristan gave her hand.

“We are going to talk about Julie’s manuscript. Please see to it that no one disturbs us—including you, Teta. Thank you.”

“Hmmpth. You talk to me as if I’m your nurse. Fine, but I’d better see an award winning script or you’ll be out of the critique group.”

The sound of Teta’s heavy feet smacking on the hardwood stairs joined Julie’s laughter.

They reached her room in a hurry. Tristan closed the door none too gently.

Eyes wide and heady with what was to come, Julie leaned against the cool door and watched him as he removed his shirt. Muscles flexed, abdomen tightened, and his eyes hooded, heavy with passion, were too much to take all in. She couldn't breathe.

Tristan leaned his hands on both sides of her head then bent down to kiss her softly. Her toes practically curled from the sweetness of it.

His kisses covered her face while whispering senseless words when his lips weren't in contact with her skin. Maybe his words were senseless, but inside the bedroom, they were as erotic as they could get.

"Do you like what I am doing with you, love?" His voice was strained.

"Yes," Julie answered, in her own mewling sound.

"Good. I want you to think only of me and no one else. And I will make sure you think of no other man but me. Only me."

"Sooo selfish for a doctor." Julie ran her toes all the way up to Tristan's thighs.

He grabbed them. "Better believe it, minx."

"Well, better work harder if you don't want me to think about other men." Julie bit his earlobe.

"Yes, ma'am. I'm on it." He lifted her by the waist and threw her on the bed.

Bouncing on the bed, Julie screamed. "Ohh...the doctor's playing rough."

“You want something good to write in your story, don’t you? Well, you’ll get one right now.”

Tristan pulled Julie’s legs together. He lay down beside her with his hands running all over her.

“But we’ll start with slow...sweet...passionate and unforgettable sex. How’s that?”

His smile reached Julie’s insides. Her stomach quivered when his fingers pulled on her waistband and lowered her pants, inch by achingly sweet inch.

“A good plan.” She smiled and closed her eyes when Tristan sucked on her nipple, and kissed his way down to her throbbing and still wet pussy.

Everything around the room disappeared, leaving only Tristan’s kisses, touch and words of promises.

When he finally joined her, she opened her eyes and whispered, *‘I love you’*.

Chapter Twelve

Satiated and tangled in sheets, Tristan stared at the ceiling while Julie’s warm body wrapped around him like a blanket.

I love you. Julie said those words. *What made her say them?* Was it passion or she really loved him? She said the words only one time. It must have been her emotions. Other women, including his ex-wife, had whispered *I love you* while in the throes of passion. But the three little words didn't mean a thing to them. They were hollow. Coming from Julie's sensual mouth, the words sounded meaningful, and she looked him in the eye with her eyes dark green, almost the color of a lagoon. He wondered if he would hear those words again. Damn, he wanted to hear her say them again.

If she did, then what?

He'd been in a real marriage and it ended bitterly. This, whatever was between him and Julie, would end soon. This time, he even knew when. Theirs was an unconventional relationship. They didn't have a strong foundation to hold. No courtship, no dating, no falling in love. What they had right now was pure physical attraction so strong they made love on the kitchen floor and forgot about the eggs on the stove.

"What are you thinking about?" Julie asked, using her elbow to lever herself and looked at him.

"You."

"What about me?"

Tristan took a handful of hair and tugged so he could kiss her. Her taste

stoked his cooling heat until it flared. He pulled Julie on top of him so her whole body was parallel with his. He lifted one knee to separate her legs.

“About how wonderful you are.” He watched Julie bite her lower lip, unspoken question in her eyes.

“That’s it?”

“I’ll think of something else later. Right now, I want to continue making sure you think only of me and no one else.” He reached down in between them and hardened at the feel of her slick opening.

Julie closed her eyes, her mouth slightly open. “Hmm...Ohh...I, I, and you’re succeeding. Tristan, hmm...”

“And I was thinking about this.” He lifted her hips and then slowly lowered her again, plunging himself deep in her womb. He repeated the action over again mumbling, “And this, and this...”

“More.” Julie pressed her palms against his chest, eyes closed, and mouth slightly parted. Tristan reveled at the sight.

How he loved looking at her.

The first time they made love, protecting her against pregnancy didn’t cross his mind. The second time, he thought about it. This time though, he purposely ignored the package of condoms still unopened in his bag. He was one fucking nut to have sex unprotected. But with Julie, he didn’t care.

Julie moved in synchrony with him. He let her ride on her own tempo. And when he couldn't hold himself anymore, he laid her down on her back and fucked her missionary style. His body grew hotter as he made love with her. He brought her to her pinnacle and then he let himself go.

"You're insatiable," she whispered.

Tristan turned to look at her. Hair plastered on her cheeks and neck, she was breathing hard. She got a good workout, like last time.

"You're an aphrodisiac. I know what else I want to say about you."

"Uhm, what else?" Julie asked. She looked tired and happy.

"I was thinking how lucky I am to be your first, and my sister to be your best friend. Not only that you're beautiful on the outside, you're also good inside. You have such a good heart." He placed a hand on her chest and felt her heart. The rhythm flowed through his hand, all the way to his own.

He had heard many heartbeats. Through the mother's womb, and through infancy to adulthood. Each time he listened through his stethoscope, there was an inexplicable feeling of happiness that overcame him. A heart beating was a wonder to him and right now, he wondered if Julie's heart was truly beating for him.

"I do?"

"Uh-huh. Only a good person would see a woman as big as a Cadillac, who talks like a machinegun firing, wears make-up as if she's an old porn star, befriend

and trust her to clean your house, for what she truly is. Just as you don't know my sister but you helped her and stayed with her in the hospital like some relative. And, only a good hearted person would cry over a silly boy's story about getting hurt in the woods because he wasn't looking where he was going."

"Are you trying to make me cry or you're just preparing for another round?"

"No. I'm telling you the truth. But another round sounds good. Just give me a moment."

Julie smacked his arm. "Well, I think we should try getting some breakfast first. I can't believe you've been here short of two days and we've spent most of those times exploring each other's body. You made me forget about Marla and her spies. I should worry. Been doing it for years, but with you...don't know. My life, Mom's life's work, is at stake and I let my guards down."

"Do you regret sharing your bed with me?"

"No. I finally learned how to live, Tristan—thanks to you. I don't regret spending my days with you."

"Glad to hear that. About Marla, please trust me when I say everything will be all right."

"I trust you."

Tristan gave her a loud openmouthed kiss. "We don't have to stay cocooned here, you know. We could spend time in Edmonds Marina for a short walk,

exercise a bit, eat and then we can come back here for another exercise.”

“Do you think I’m some kind of a sex machine?”

“More than that, love.” Tristan pressed his hardening penis on her thigh and laughed at the reaction Julie gave him.

Julie groaned then laughed. Her laughter, so pure, so unadulterated, touched his heart. He would definitely miss having her beside him. Naked or not. He hoped they’d remain friends after this.

“If my mom was still alive she would probably die from a heart attack if someone told her in less than an hour of being with a man I had my morning orgasm, after lunch another orgasm, followed by more spectacular sex. Not to mention that I gave up my virginity the first opportunity I got alone with you.”

“Your mom would probably say, ‘Good girl, Julie. Smart of you to pick Tristan, a pediatrician with a breast fetish and so addicted to your scent he walked around your house with his heart throbbing just for you, whether you’re near or far, with his mind covered in cobwebs, unclear because of you’.”

“And something else throbbed, too.” Julie sighed and closed her eyes.

Tristan felt a prick somewhere. It could be in his heart, but wherever it was, it hurt like hell. He practically told her he loved her and her response was a sigh.

“Do you wish you hadn’t given up your virginity to me?”

“You’re a silly goat. Of course, I don’t regret it. Tristan, I am glad you’re the

one who took it. I couldn't imagine anyone else touching me the way you did."

"So, you're saying, you have no plans of finding another man?"

"For now, yes." Julie looked him in the eye. Her eyes danced from laughter.

She was kidding. Tristan breathed again. "I think I should just tie you in bed while I eat all of your Oreos, pour milk on your breasts, lick them off and suck hard—the way you like it. That way you won't be looking for another man."

"Sadist. What about you?"

"What about me?"

"You lost your first love, Carly. It seems you lost your heart, too."

Tristan stared at the white ceiling. Since his breakup with Carly, he never opened up with anyone, not even with his family. For months, he buried himself with work and went home tired, mentally and physically. There wasn't even room in his mind to think of anything else. Slowly, he began to accept what happened to his marriage, how the woman he thought he'd spend his life with showed her true colors—a bitch, shopaholic and an obsessive dreamer. So obsessive she had to sleep with his manager to get a longer time on the runway.

"I loved Carly. The first time I saw her in the cafeteria, across the room from me, I fell for her. One of the smartest, and definitely the most beautiful, woman in the room. Maybe on the campus. When she smiled at me, I knew right then, I wanted her to be my wife, mother of our future kids. After we graduated, I

proposed to her. She said yes, crying. During our first six months, things were great. I was totally and hopelessly in love. And then I noticed she was getting restless. She didn't like this place. I understood. She's a city girl, after all. We moved to LA and things were great there. I thought we could start a family. She said yes. But I later learned she was taking birth control pills. I talked to her about it. That was when she told me kids were not part of her plan. She wouldn't put her figure at risk. And pregnancy would definitely ruin her. I thought it through, about what she said, about her dream of making it big in the modeling business, instead of working in a clinic. In the end, I went with her plan. I loved her enough to support her, make her dream come true.

"But six months after that, I saw her less and less. She said she was busy with her modeling lessons. I was so fucking blind to not notice the signs. We made love only two or three times in the course of five months. One day, I had a cancellation at the clinic. I decided to visit her to ask her to have lunch with me. That was when I learned she was cheating on me."

"Tristan, I'm so sorry." Julie sat up and looked down at him

"Me, too. Like I said, I was foolishly in love with her to even give our relationship a chance."

"You mean you took her back even after you learned the truth."

"Yes. I wanted our marriage to work. But in the end, Carly left. But she left a

wreck behind her.”

“Your heart.”

“Yes. And a ridiculous demand. She wanted money. She knew about my stocks with Microsoft and Starbucks, and the money from the computer chip patent Dad gave to all of us. I refused to give her what she wanted. We fought. But I got tired of talking to her, seeing her. So I gave in. At the time, I wanted to do anything just to get rid of her.”

“I’m sorry. You deserve someone better. Someone who would walk with you through thick or thin, someone who would help achieve both your goals. Someone who’d love you forever.”

“My family didn’t waste time finding that special someone.”

“Well, maybe if you help by telling them what you are looking for then maybe your success of finding *her* will be easier.”

I think I already found her. “You’re right.”

“I cannot imagine loving someone and losing him the way you lost Carly. No wonder you didn’t want a serious relationship, more so a marriage. Thank you, Tristan.”

“For what?” He pulled a lock of her hair and twisted the silky strands around his fingers.

“For taking the task of marrying me. It must have been hard. What with

your experience with Carly. I'm sure you didn't want to go through this again."

No. It wasn't hard. When Kirsten had told him her plan, he accepted it as if it was the natural thing to do. "I don't mind marrying you."

"Really?"

"Not at all. If I didn't I wouldn't be lying here with you right now. And I'd never know how to make love with a virgin."

"Ah, free sex. Okay. Well, Doctor Knight, remember the deal. After the wedding, we'll be over. So this," she pointed her finger back and forth between them, "is going to end also."

"I know. Believe me that fact's been in my head since we signed the wedding license. I forgot to tell you; last night I got an email from Dad."

"Yeah?"

"We can get married today. The clerk at the city hall recognized me. Dad prosecuted a street drug dealer who killed her brother and put him behind bars. So she called Dad and told him about the license. Gawain and Bors are flying in today."

"Okay."

"Okay? Too soon?"

"No. It's just—I'm surprised."

"Getting cold feet? Or you wish you were having a grand wedding with five

bridesmaids?”

“No on both. We are only doing this because of Marla, not because we planned this or anything. Good. If we can wed today, you can go back to work right after and I can begin living again. Let’s just hope Marla won’t show up today. She knows my out and might suspect something. She might grill us.”

“I’m ready. I know enough about you to pass as a real fiancé. Right now I’ll show you everything about me is real.”

“Oh, I could believe that.”



They were both still panting from the aftermath of another ‘round’ when a rapid knock on the bedroom door sounded.

“Hey, Doctor! This is your Nurse Betty. The bitch and the asshole are at the door. The bitch is the woman who looks like a million dollars in her suit and the asshole is the man with an inner tube around his middle.”

Like a Jack-in-a-box, Julie bolted off the bed. “Marla and Sebastian! Omigod! They’re here?” She grabbed a pair of jeans in her closet, a green and brown striped blouse, and tied her hair in a bun. “Damn it! We’re not married yet. Damn, damn.”

Tristan watched her from the bed, wondering if she owned other clothes that weren’t green or without a tint of it.

“What are you doing? Get up! Use that door, you’ll find yourself in a

different room. And... Where the heck are your clothes?”

“Stop, Julie. Breathe. Take a deep breath. There’s nothing to worry about. Didn’t you say you trust me?” He languidly got off the bed and pulled Julie in for a hug, but she shrugged him off.

“Yes, I trust you. And no. You don’t know how vile Marla can be. We’re not married yet. She’ll use you against me, and she’ll get this house and everything else my mother worked hard for.”

Another knock. “Should I let them in?”

“Yes. Tell them I’m coming down, Teta. Please, Tristan, get dressed and hide in there. Let me handle this and then we’ll think of something later. There is so much at stake here and I can’t afford to lose everything. Go, now. Please.”

“Look at me, Julie. Haven’t you heard anything I’ve said in the past day and half? When I said ‘*I’ll help you*’, I meant every single word. Trust me on this. We’ll go down there together and face Marla. We’ll achieve your goal *together*. Together, you hear me?”

“I know, but I don’t want to take a chance. Mother’s memories are all I have left, Tristan. And these people will take them away from me the moment you give them an inch.” Julie tapped her arm rapidly.

She was nervous, Tristan thought. It made him mad to see her this way. She didn’t deserve to be treated as if she was still a teenager.

“Tell me what Sebastian has done to you. Kirsten told me he’s an asshole and has never treated you like a step-sister.”

“Whenever they stayed here with Dad, he would come up with something—to come near me. Like sneak behind me to grab my butt, jump in front of me so we would collide on purpose and he would grab my breasts or my thighs, anywhere. Marla always pretended not to notice.”

If he gritted his teeth more, Tristan thought he would crack them. *Damn.* He’d better hold his temper, otherwise Julie would definitely lose everything if he blackened Sebastian’s eyes. “All I ask is you trust me. Can you do that, Julie Knight?”

“I’m not a Knight yet.”

“For me you are already.”

Julie nodded. A sigh of relief came from the pit of his stomach. In truth, he didn’t know the people waiting downstairs, but *whatever* they were, Julie would not be facing them alone.

Teta knocked on the door again.

“Let them in, Teta.”

Chapter Thirteen

Not a smoker himself, Tristan knew if someone had been smoking. And he

found out the culprit who desecrated the clean air in the house. Julie's nemesis.

Mother and son were waiting in the living room. Marla was sitting with her legs crossed, a cigarette in between her fingers. On her lap was a white long tube, the kind draftsmen used to keep their blueprints inside.

Sebastian cradled a white bag with a Dunkin Donuts logo on the front. While looking at him with a nasty smirk on his face, Sebastian's meaty hand went in the bag and took out two donut holes. He popped them into his mouth, then the hand went back inside the bag again. Tristan wondered if he could beat Gawain in a hotdog-eating contest. He bet it would be a neck and neck race.

Teta was right. The man looked ready to jump overboard, with his potbelly for a lifesaver. The two looked up when Tristan, hand-in-hand with Julie, came down the long stairway. Tristan squeezed Julie's hand. "They look like normal people to me," he whispered, trying to relieve Julie from nervousness.

"Just wait. They can transform into vapid rats before your eyes. Believe you me."

True enough, Marla's nose flared and her eyes glinted with malice. Not bothering to look for an ashtray, she jabbed her cigarette butt on the glass coffee table and stood up so fast it was as if someone poked her ass with a needle. Sebastian followed, chewing with his mouth open.

"Finally came out of hiding to show the world that you're not what you

want us to think you are?” Marla said with derision.

“Hello, Marla. What brought you here?” Julie asked, without wavering.

“Oh, got fangs now, do you? Is it because of hotshot here?”

“Who the hell are you?” Sebastian asked, still chewing with his mouth open.

Tristan avoided looking at his masticated donuts.

“This is Dr. Tristan Knight, my fiancé. Tristan, this is my stepmother, and her son, Sebastian.”

Tristan saw Marla’s shock reaction, but it was brief. Sebastian concerned Tristan most. The man’s color turned into a fried lobster. He was afraid he would keel over. If he suddenly had a heart attack, Tristan would call 911, but would not perform CPR. He flexed his muscles. He didn’t like the two, not even a bit.

“Nice to meet you both.”

“Fiancé? Since when did you start dating real men? A week ago, you were in a gay bar with your girlfriend and few weeks before that you played bingo with your bassoon for a housekeeper. No man was around, so how did you manage to get engaged? Unless he’s only a man who sees you to scratch your itch. And not really your fiancé.”

He’d give it to her, Marla was smart. Tristan thought it was time to step in.

“Marla, would you like to sit back down? We can talk about this like civilized people. You’re probably not happy about being out of the loop about

Julie's recent engagement. Which I understand, you, after all, are her stepmother."

Marla eyed him from head to foot before she went back to sit on the sofa. She searched her purse for a smoke.

"If you're thinking about smoking again, please don't. Second hand smoke is a killer."

Marla smirked. "Why, is she pregnant? I know she's a whore pretending to be a virgin."

"Watch your tongue, ma'am."

"Whatever," Marla said sardonically.

"Julie, should I bring out snacks? Looks like your stepbrother is deflating. He needs more food. Oh, I have a better idea. Why don't I serve them bullets?"

Everyone's gaze pointed at Teta. She was holding Cinnamon's collar, trying to stop the dog from running. Cinnamon could smell the bag of donuts on Sebastian's lap. Tristan wished Teta would let the dog go.

"You. Why don't you go back to the Amazon forest?"

"I will. But not without your baboon for a son. His kind misses him so much."

"Fuck you, hag!"

Teta huffed then let go of Cinnamon's leash. Cinnamon's paws slipped on the marble floor in her haste to run. Sebastian thought it funny but stopped

laughing when he realized the dog was running toward him.

“Stop that dog!” Sebastian yelled.

To Tristan’s dismay, Julie grabbed Cinnamon’s leash.

“I hate that dog!”

“And I hate both of you.” Teta reached in her purse with a glint in her eyes. No doubt she was happy to find the opportunity to use her Remington. “Let see what’s in that ugly head of yours. I bet it’s empty. Just as this bitch’s chest is. No heart, no soul.”

“Teta, no.” As much as he wanted to see Sebastian’s thick, big head explode, he didn’t want his brains on Julie’s couch and floor. Besides, he wasn’t worth a bullet—if Teta indeed put bullets in her gun’s chambers.

“Can’t believe you’re letting your housekeeper talk to us this way.”

“What way, Marla? Like you two are unsightly scabs?”

“Fuck you and your beehive hair.”

Before Sebastian even blink, Cinnamon lunged on Sebastian’s lap and grabbed the bag with her mouth. Based on Sebastian’s howl, Cinnamon must have nipped his crotch.

“Take your blasted dog out!” yelled Marla. “And stop your howling, Sebastian. You idiot.”

“Teta, please take Cinnamon out.”

“Are you sure you don’t want me to use my Remington with these two? I’m sure I’ll do this country a favor if I get rid of two more scabs. God knows we have lots of them around.”

“I’m sure, Teta. Thank you.”

Teta harrumphed, placed her two fingers inside her mouth and let out a high-pitched sound. The sound bounced around the walls and hit Tristan’s ear. Cinnamon went to Julie’s side and wagged her tail.

“Go to Teta, Cinnamon. Good girl.”

“One word, Julie, and I’ll pump my bullets on these two. Come on, dog.”

As soon as Cinnamon and Teta were out the door, Julie faced Marla. “Why are you here, Marla?”

Her voice didn’t shake, but Tristan knew she wasn’t as composed as she let on. Julie gripped his hand as if it were her lifeline.

“You know why I’m here. It is time for you to pack up and leave.”

“That’ll never happen. You have nothing against me.”

“Oh, yes, I do. Your mother—as feeble as she was—was right about adding the stipulation in her will. Because you cannot be trusted, cannot behave, and were born to disgrace your family’s name. Right now, I have the strongest proof that you are what I thought you were the moment I met you. A whore. You’d better give it up and leave, Julie. Or do you want this to go to court?”

“No.”

Tristan could feel Julie’s body tremble beside him. He hoped she wouldn’t crumble. He squeezed her hand to remind her that he was there to help. Un-fucking-believable. He could not believe he’d actually meet the fucking bitch in person. The woman was as greedy as *Cruella Deville*, mean as Cinderella’s stepmother. And Julie fended her off all by herself for years.

“Well, then, I have a prewritten form you need to sign.”

“What form?”

“Form that says you broke the condition. Sebastian,” Marla snapped her fingers. “Show your stepsister the pen and form. Come on!”

Sebastian grinned, showing his crooked teeth. He opened his black leather briefcase, took out a white sheet of paper and shook it in the air. “We finally got you.”

Tristan took a step forward. “Hand me the paper, Sebastian.”

“Why? You’re not part of this.”

“Oh, yes I am. And if you don’t give me that paper, my fist will leave an imprint on your face.”

Sebastian blanched. He practically threw the paper at Tristan.

“Ha! This intimidation will go to court also, Julie. I say you tell your Rottweiler here to back off.”

“Tristan, please...” Julie’s voice was barely a whisper but he heard her.

Glancing back at Julie, he gave her a reassuring smile. “Julie will sign the form.” Behind him Julie let out what sounded like a gasp and whimper. Patience, Tristan thought. A good stratagem was all he needed to trap the snake in its own pit. “But first, we need to see your proof that she indeed has broken the condition.”

“It’s a waste of time, if you ask me. Just let her sign the paper to save her from further embarrassment. This is what I’ve been trying to tell her lawyer. She’s such a bad girl, her own mother created her daughter’s invisible noose. Imagine that.”

“Show us your proof, Marla.”

“This is the reason.” Marla pulled a picture out of her purse and threw it on the table.

Tristan picked it up and did a double take. Seeing Julie’s naked body in the bedroom was un-fucking-believable. He stared at the glossy picture. It was Julie, all right, lying on a plush sofa, as naked as the day she was born.

She looked beautiful. Her hair pinned up and tied with a blue ribbon. The style gave her a look of princess. She was coiling a lock of hair around her finger while her other hand was flat on her midriff. Her left leg was bent and leaning against the couch while the other leg...dangling with her toes barely touching the floor. The position provided a great view of her exquisite body, luscious breasts

and pussy. The picture was so clear he could see her clitoris.

Good God! Fucking Sebastian must have looked at this picture a million times. He'd bet his medical license the dirty slime ball masturbated while staring at Julie's nudity.

"Where did you get this?"

"Someone gave it to me."

Julie's loud breath intake took his eyes away from the picture. "Oh my God, that's me," she whimpered, covering her mouth with her hand.

"Got that right, bitch. See? She admitted it was her." A cackle as loud as if she finally found a deadly potion erupted from Marla's mouth.

Peering closely at the picture, he could feel his heart ready to explode. Whoever did this to Julie would pay. "Julie?"

"Tristan, I...I remem—," her voice broke in mid sentence.

"Julie, relax."

"No! This is wrong. I would never do anything like that." She took a step back, shaking her head in disbelief.

"Yeah, right. Here is the proof. How can you deny this?"

"I don't know where you got this picture, Marla, but that's not me. Tristan, I remember posing like this—for Gap. But not naked. I swear."

"You couldn't remember? Why? Were you on drugs or drunk when you

posed?”

“I don’t do drugs and I’ve gotten drunk only one time.”

“Whore! Men probably took turns having sex with you.”

“Marla, do not talk to—”

The door opened. Teta’s head peaked in. “There’s a Smith here. He said he’s the shark representing the bloodsuckers.”

“He’s my lawyer. Send him in.”

Teta’s face turned bright red. No doubt wishing she could blast Marla with her Remington. “Thanks, Teta.”

Tristan wanted to wipe the victory smile off Marla’s face. But this wasn’t the time. At least not yet. “Smith’s your lawyer?”

“Of course. Oh, we told Weatherholt to come, too. He needs to see this. You know what? This time that old lawyer of Laura won’t be able to defend you now.”

“Do not speak my mother’s name, Marla. Mom maybe dead, but she wasn’t your equal.”

“What-eveeerr.”

“I should have told you this long time ago, Marla.”

“What?” Marla snapped.

“You are one ugly bitch.”

“Well, this bitch will kick you out of this house with nothing but that shirt

you're wearing."



Whatever Julie wanted to say was interrupted by Smith's greeting. Smith flashed her a smile then he stood beside Marla. Julie noticed the mustached lawyer silently appraised her home. Teta was right. This man was a shark. His brown hair, the same shade as mud, was perfectly combed. The tasseled black shoes he wore shone like his black as coal, piercing, untrusting eyes. The man didn't smile but sneered. He reminded Julie of a viper waiting to strike and devour his unsuspecting victim. Instant dislike grew quick inside her chest.

There was no need to know the man. Just one look at him she knew he and Marla were alike. Both were greedy, nasty, and evil.

She wanted to kick Marla and Sebastian out of her house, including the shark. Deep inside she knew the picture was a fake. She would never pose naked for anyone, not even for a million dollars. But how did Marla get it? What about the headshot? Was it one of those shots the Gap photographer took that didn't make it in the magazine? Marla planned all of this. She held the ace or she thought she did. But she'd get to the bottom of this. Never in this lifetime would she let these sleaze balls get near her mother's fortune.

Think. Think.

Weatherholt arrived five minutes after Smith. Julie gave Weatherholt a

reassuring smile. Although she thought, it should be the other way around. He, after all, was her attorney. Her mother's old friend wiped his forehead. *Lord, he was nervous.*

"Excuse us." Tristan grabbed her hand and pulled her toward the kitchen.

Julie had to run to keep up with Tristan. Otherwise, he'd end up dragging her. "Tristan, what are you doing?"

In the kitchen, he surprised her by cupping her face for a quick kiss. "Be strong, baby. Before the day is over, this whole thing will be over. I promise." With both his hands on her hips, he lifted her up and sat her on the kitchen counter. "You need to eat. If you want to face these monsters, you got to have something in your stomach. Sit there."

"What about them?"

Tristan scoffed. "Do they look like they're starving? Let them wait. Let Marla squirm."

"Do you believe me?"

"I believe you, love." He kissed her again then went on to preparing Bologna sandwiches. He placed a can of Diet Coke in her hand. "Eat and drink. This will be a long fight, love."

"What about you?"

Tristan opened her legs and stood in between. He wrapped his arms around

her waist, staring at her intensely. “As long as you’re strong, I will be, too. Eat. I need to make a phone call.”

Julie ate her food, half listening to Tristan, and half listening to the murmurs coming from Marla, Sebastian and Smith. Weatherholt was quiet. Only the breadcrumbs were left on her plate when the doorbell rang.

“Stay here, love. I’ll see who it is.”

Good God, her doorbell hardly rang. *Who could it be this time?* Crotcher?

She was wrong.

Bors and Gawain walked in the kitchen like two models walking on a ramp but with the swagger of cowboys. Both brothers wore faded jeans that hugged their lean waists and long legs. All four brothers were partial to boots. While Gawain wore brown, Bors’ were black. She thought the only things missing on the brothers’ ensemble were gun belts, and they’d be the cowboys she imagined for her next book. Seeing the brothers in the house was like having reinforcement, more ammo to beat Marla. Although she didn’t know exactly how the brothers would help her cause.

She sighed—she couldn’t help it—when both brothers smiled.

“Hey there. We heard you’re in some kind of trouble. Are you okay?” Gawain reached her first. Just as Tristan did earlier, he walked in between her legs and gave her a tight squeeze.

“I’m alright, Gawain.” She felt him kiss the top of her head. He didn’t release her right away. The simple gesture touched her deeply; she wanted to cry.

Gawain mumbled something about *kicking asses* and *come to us* before he let go of her. As soon as he stepped back, Bors took his turn. He touched her cheek with his big hand, shaking his head. “Girl, didn’t we love you enough? You know you’re one of us, right?”

Gosh, did she hurt their feelings by hiding the truth from them and their family? A big lump suddenly appeared in her throat, making it hard to breathe. Afraid she’d cry all over him, she nodded her head.

“Good. Next time, you come to us. This isn’t just your fight, Julie. And whether you are married to Tristan or not, you will remain a part of our family. We love you that much.”

“Thank you,” Julie whispered.

Like Gawain, Bors kissed the top of her head and whispered in her ear. “But my brother loves you more—in a different way.”

“I don’t think so.” *God, I hope you are right, Bors.*

Bors kept his hands around Julie. “Is he looking?”

Julie peeked around Bors’ arm and almost gasped at the intensity of Tristan’s gaze. He looked like a bull seeing red—ready to charge anyone, anything. “He’s looking and he looks ready to kill.”

“See what I mean? Maybe he hasn’t realized he loves you, but we know. We’ve known a long time now; that’s why Kirsten went to him to ask for help.” Bors let go of her and leaned against the counter. “Gawain and I will stand witness. Dad, Mom and Kirsten are only a few minutes late. Percival won’t make it. But he sends his congratulations.”

Julie took a minute to digest what Bors just said. The Knight family suspected Tristan was in love with her. She glanced at Tristan, whose gaze was still fixed on her face. Her heart began beating against her ribs, making it impossible to hear her own thoughts. Did Bors say that except for Percival, the whole Knight family was coming to witness her wedding with Tristan? “Why?”

“Dad will officiate. Kirsten will kill us if we don’t wait for her, Mom stomped her foot and said she didn’t want to be left behind.”

“Your mom stomped her foot?”

“Uh-huh. Now what are we going to do about those three? Tell me if you want me to break the son of a bitch’s neck, throw Marla out to the Sound, and I’ll do it.”

“We’ll do this clean and right, Bors. Believe me, all I am thinking right now is to shove all of them in the garbage compactor, but that’s not how they will go down,” Tristan said. His tone was low and even, but anger was evident in his eyes. His left eyelid was visibly twitching and he stood as if he was ready to draw.

Cinnamon's nails clicked on the floor, interrupting them. Teta followed. Her lips were drawn tight and she was clutching her purse. "How long are they going to be here? I don't want them contaminating this house with their diseases. Weatherholt looks like he took a dive in the pool with his sweat—good Lord. What is this? A convention of tall, dark and handsome men?"

"Oh, I like her." Gawain grinned at Teta.

"Teta, this is Gawain and Bors. They're Tristan's brothers."

"Only a blind person wouldn't see that they're all related. So what did your mom do? Offer a goat to God so she could have perfect sons?"

"Don't know about the gods, but I do know she offered herself to our dad—body and soul."

"Well, I'll try to remember that. Now, what are we going to do with the jerks?"

"Let them wait, Teta."

Teta pouted. "Jeez. It would be easier if I just blow their heads off with my buddy here," she patted her purse. "I'm a good shot."

"We're not shooting anyone, Teta. Thanks for the offer though."

"You're so nice, Julie. Always nice. Fine. I'll stay with Cinnamon outside."

Teta gave the brothers her approving look then left the kitchen.

"Did I hear her say she's going to blow up heads?" Bors frowned.

“Teta owns a Remington.” Julie didn’t elaborate. She didn’t have to. The brothers understood.

“Damn, I like her, too. So, what’s the plan?” Gawain crossed his arms around his chest. Julie had never seen him this serious.

“We wait for Dad. I think Smith should meet him,” Tristan answered.

“What have they got against you, Julie? Kirsten mentioned something about your romance books.”

“That’s what I thought. It’s about a picture this time.”

“A picture? Of yours?” Asked Bors.

“Yes.”

“So?”

“Bors, I was supposed to be naked in the picture.”

“Supposed to be?”

“Well, you see, the face on the picture is really mine, but I am not sure about the body. I would never pose naked for anyone. And the body looks so perfect with long legs, slim waist, and flat abdomen. Such a beautiful body. But not mine. ”

“Beautiful, eh? We’d better take a look then. ”

Gawain stopped eating the potato salad he found in the refrigerator then grinned. “Yup, we’d better.”

Chapter Fourteen

Julie felt like a prisoner walking to meet her maker—in her own home.

Facing Marla made her stomach cramp so bad she had to bite her lower lip to suppress her groan.

Flanked by three of the most caring and handsome men she'd ever known, she lifted her chin high then walked back in the living room.

"Well, look carefully at the woman you've been protecting all these years, Weatherholt. Surrounded with men. Did you hear she's engaged with one of them?" Marla's eyes narrowed as she spoke each word.

"You are, Julie? I didn't know. When did you decide to—"

"When and how is not the issue here, Weatherholt. The stipulation is... Stipulation, which she," Marla pointed her finger at Julie, "broke."

"Now, Marla. Don't be hasty with your accusations."

"Weatherholt," Smith started. "You saw the evidence. Julie broke her mother's wish—Julie was to remain a *good girl*."

It was deliberate. Smith punctuated the last two words. Julie felt her face burn. Smith had already begun to paint her black. "I didn't break my mother's wish."

"And what do you call posing naked with your legs spread for everyone to see? Ha! Weatherholt, you saw the picture. Now it's time you start doing your job."

"We need to see the picture," Bors interjected.

“Who are you?” Sebastian inched behind his mother.

“Bors Knight, FBI agent.”

Marla’s eyes grew big while Sebastian visibly gulped. “You are not part of this. This is between the lawyers, Julie and me. You and those two better step back.”

“Wrong. Julie is part of our family. Her battles are our battles. Now, you better think about what you are accusing Julie of, Marla. What you say against her also affects us. If I prove that you are tormenting her just to get her inheritance, I will make sure you, your shark of a lawyer, and your doughboy son will rot in jail.”

Julie thought she heard Sebastian whimper. A little bit of hope crept inside her chest; she actually felt like smiling. But when she glanced at Smith, his intense stare doused her like a cold bucket of water.

“Sebastian, you’d better show these people the bigger picture.”

“Bigger picture?” Julie didn’t like this at all. Not one bit.

“We came prepared, Julie. We have the picture blown up. I think your friends here will appreciate looking at a poster size picture of you.”

“Oh my God.”

Sebastian took the tube from Marla. He popped the lid, tipped the tube upside down and out came the poster size picture.

If she had a history of heart disease, she’d think she was having a heart

attack. *Good God, this is horrible.* Weatherholt, Smith—she didn’t care if they saw her naked. But Bors and Gawain... How was she going to face them if the body was indeed hers? If not, how did they do it? Nothing about the picture showed that it was a fake. But how did Marla get the head shot? Her manager at Gap came to her mind. *Could Rick have something to do with this?* She stopped modeling for Gap because of him. Damn him if he did this to her because he hurt his ego by refusing to date him. “Do we have to do this?”

“Oh, yes. This is it for you. Sebastian, show them.”

Julie held her breath when all she wanted to do was bolt. She took a step back and felt a hand on her shoulder, one in the middle of her back and one—she suspected was Tristan’s, the way he was kneading her flesh—wrapped around her waist. The brothers were supporting her.

With malice written all over his face, Sebastian unrolled the picture.

“What the fuck!” Bors roared. “Where the fuck did you get that, huh? I’m going to wring your fucking fat neck, Sebastian.”

“Take it easy, bro. You know about this, Tristan?” Gawain asked. His breathing was fast, obviously trying to contain the urge to leap at Sebastian.

“Yes. I want everyone to see it.”

Julie’s head whipped around to look at Tristan. He wasn’t looking at her but at Marla. What was he doing? The soft squeeze he gave Julie told her he was

planning something.

Marla laughed, sounding like a shopping cart with a broken wheel. “You are so stupid. Here you are, announcing you two are getting married and he just sold you to everyone here, including his brothers. If this man loves you, he wouldn’t want everyone to see your picture. Pathetic.”

“I’m not stupid.” Julie forced herself not to stomp her foot.

The front door opened. Kirsten came walking in and stopped dead in her tracks. Katherine and Arthur following her stopped too. “Oh my God. Julie?”

“What the hell is this? Take that picture down,” Arthur ordered.

“No. So are these your future in-laws, huh, Julie? Well, take a good look, Julie’s future in-laws. This is the kind of woman your son plans to marry. She’s as good as a whore.”

“Excuse me! Don’t talk to Julie like that,” Kirsten yelled.

“Why not? It’s about time you learn what she truly is.”

“You are Marla, right?” Arthur stepped forward. “And you are Attorney Smith.”

“Right,” answered Smith. “And you are? Oh! Judge Knight?”

Julie couldn’t believe it. Smith’s jaw dropped. His Adam’s apple bobbed up and down.

“Yes.”

“The Judge Arthur Knight.”

“Last time I checked. You know another one?”

“No, sir.”

“This kind of picture is not what a father in-law wants to see. It’s definitely inappropriate and obscene. But, we are not going to turn our backs on one of us because she made a mistake. Julie is one of us. Through laughter and hardships we are going to stand by her.”

Julie felt hot tears run down her cheeks. She looked at Arthur without bothering to wipe her tears and gave him a big hug. “Thank you.”

“Touching. Well, you go on ahead and stick together. I don’t care. The reason why I am here is to claim what belongs to Paul.”

“Julie,” Weatherholt started. “I—”

“That picture is a fake.”



Tristan had enough. He thought maybe there was a way to avoid this, but he just couldn’t stand Marla anymore. For sure Julie would be embarrassed with what he was about to do, considering his whole family was here watching the whole scene. Although they would never hate Julie—they loved her too much to feel that way—he knew his brothers would never leave him and Julie alone.

Should he do this? Should he point out what was missing in the picture?

Tristan weighed his options.

“My brother is a computer graphic artist and analyst for the government. He could tell me if this is a real picture or a computer simulated one. If this is a fake, Gawain will be able to trace who made this. It’s a crime, I’m sure you all know. And we’ll make sure the person who did this spends time in jail.” He watched Marla’s face turn ashen. Now he had the upper hand and snow would cover hell before he gave them any chance of getting away with this preposterous accusation.

“Of course it is not a fake. Julie’s manager gave this copy to me. And didn’t Julie say she remembered posing like this?”

Smith cleared his throat. Marla immediately stopped talking to look at him. If Tristan wasn’t looking at Marla, he would have missed the look she gave him. The kind one would give to her lover. *Son of a bitch.*

“As Marla’s lawyer, I would like to say that it is clear Julie has lost all her rights to Laura’s properties.”

“Fortune,” Marla corrected.

Smith’s nostrils flared. Evidently he didn’t like to be corrected. He pasted a smile and then continued, “Yes, fortune. With this evidence,” he pointed at the picture, “as you all can see, I say we end this conversation so Weatherholt and I can proceed to transferring everything to Julie’s father, Paul.”

“Not so fast, Smith. Son,” Arthur turned to look at Tristan, “what made you

think the picture is a fake?”

“Marla, you said you got this picture from Julie’s manager. Did you pay him?” Tristan’s voice was controlled, even though inside he was fuming. This was it. Julie would just have to face everyone.

“I didn’t pay Rick. He was more than willing to give me this copy. Apparently, Julie brushed his proposal aside and hurt his ego. So, he wanted to get even.”

“What a prick,” Julie mumbled low, but Tristan heard her.

“Who is this Rick, Julie?”

“Mom, he’s Julie’s manager and photographer at GAP. He’s also the reason why Julie quit modeling for that company,” Kirsten answered Katherine.

“Rick is a photographer. He must be good in computer graphics also. All he needed was a program and he could put Julie’s headshot on someone else’s body. The result would be that.”

“I don’t see any sign that the body doesn’t belong to Julie,” Marla huffed. Although her voice missed a little bit of its bite.

“Well, Doctor Knight. To end this lunacy, why don’t you tell us what you saw in this picture to doubt its authenticity?”

“It’s not what I saw, but what I am not seeing.”

He heard Julie’s indrawn breath. She finally caught on. She knew exactly

what he was talking about.

“Well, what aren’t we seeing here?” Marla snapped.

“A birthmark.”

Julie groaned beside him. He hoped she’d forgive him for letting the leaches know —especially Sebastian—about her mark. Damn, it would have been easier for him to tell them about it if the mark was somewhere lower. Above her knees or in the middle of her thigh. Sadly the seahorse shaped mark wasn’t.

“If you look below her Tensor Fasciae Latae, you’ll see the femoral triangle. Below that is Sartorius. On the right side of the Sartorius is Adductores. Move up a bit and there should be a birthmark.”

It took a few minute before everyone started talking at once. Julie looked up at him and he thought he glimpsed a smile. Using the scientific term for the parts of her thigh was all he could do to soften the blow of her embarrassment.

“Could you tell us again where this birthmark should be?” Smith said, smiling as if he knew exactly where the birthmark was and why he avoided saying the exact location in layman’s terms.

“Where exactly the location of the mark is, is not important here, but the fact that this body is not Julie’s. She will prove it if necessary.”

“Show it to me,” Marla demanded.

“Only if there’s a request from court will I only show you my birthmark.

How dare you come here accusing me of posing nude? Will nothing stop you from going after my mother's money? You are one greedy, shameless bitch, Marla."

"Ha! Me? Whose picture is that? You are the fucking bitch, just like your mother."

Slap! Marla staggered backwards from the blow. She looked at her lawyer, but he seemed unconcerned about Marla.

"Don't you ever talk about my mother again! You don't even deserve to say her name. Next time, I'll pull your hairpiece out and burn it in the fireplace."

Priceless, Tristan thought. His Julie Strawberry, standing tall and determined, made him so proud. His Julie. *Man, this feels good*, he thought.

"Smith," Arthur started. "I am sure you are aware of defamation, libel and slander law?"

"Of course, sir."

"Well, you'd better brief your client because you'll face me, us, in court."

"Fine. Sue me. I will make your life miserable, Julie. You will never get a penny when I am done with you. I don't care if your mother— Nooo!" Marla's cry echoed around the house. She was looking at her hairpiece Julie was holding with a shocked look on her face.

"I warned you, bitch."

"Yeah, I am shameless greedy bitch and you can't do anything about it."

“But I can.”

Chapter Fifteen

Everyone turned to look at the man standing by the door except for Julie. It

had been eight months since she'd heard his voice. Rough and ravaged by long years from drinking, Julie would recognize that voice anywhere, anytime. What was her father doing here? Julie forced herself to look where her father stood. Paul wasn't looking at her, but around the house, most likely taking inventory of what would be his or he wished would be his.

But when he spoke, Julie thought she was looking at a totally different man. She blinked but Paul was still there. The man who tormented her mother emotionally by coming home covered with the scent of a woman's perfume. The man who was short-tempered and quick to land a blow on her mother's body whenever she asked him about where he had been. The man Julie couldn't recall giving her a hug instead of a sneer. The man who never paid attention to her, except when he needed her to get his bottle of whiskey because he was too drunk to get up from his chair.

He aged, Julie thought. He wasn't the handsome womanizer anymore. Dark bags under his eyes made him look older. His cheeks were gaunt and his hair thin.

"What are you doing here, Paul dear? I thought you were sick."

Paul ignored Marla and walked straight until he was standing close to the poster size picture. "You did this." He didn't asked Marla, but said the words as a matter of fact.

"Well...Paul, your daughter did this unspeakable thing. Not me. I just

showed the proof of her indecency.”

“Stop, Marla. It’s over.” Paul shook his head with his shoulders slumped. A sign of resignation Tristan recognized right away. “Dragging my daughter’s name would be the last thing I wanted to happen.”

“What the hell are you talking about? Are you drunk again? Didn’t you see what happened? Your daughter disrespected me.”

“Enough. No more of your lies, Marla. I’ve had enough of your evil tricks.” Paul shook his head from side to side, his face in obvious agony.

Tristan felt the bite of Julie’s nails against his arm and hand. If the room temperature was below twenty degrees Fahrenheit, Tristan would understand why Julie was shaking so badly. But it wasn’t. In fact, the room was warm, generated by everyone’s body heat. He looked down at Julie and he understood why. She shook from controlling to show her emotions. She looked as stoic as a statue could be.

“You’re drunk!”

“Shut up, Marla. I have had enough of you and your vile son, and your lawyer.”

“Don’t shut me up, you imbecile. All I’ve been doing is help you get your hands on your dead wife’s money and you’re talking to me as if—”

“You’re doing more than chasing after Laura’s money. I know about you and

Smith.”

Marla sputtered. Smith’s face turned blotchy; he suddenly looked like he was suffering from some kind of a bad allergic reaction. Julie didn’t move from where she stood. The Knights still flanked her and they were all quiet. She’d never been around the Knights so quiet like this.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about, Paul. You’re sick and shouldn’t have left the house. My, you’re probably hallucinating. You should go home.”

“I will, as soon as I settle this issue once and for all. But you and your son aren’t stepping back in my house.”

“The hell I can’t. Your house—”

“Is mine. And what’s Julie’s will remain hers.”

“Not until she gets married. Until then, you and I have the right to—”

“Not anymore. I am filing for a divorce.”

Marla squeaked the word *what*. She looked at Smith, obviously waiting for his help, but the lawyer simply shrugged his shoulders. “Imbecile!” She snatched her bag then snapped her fingers. “Let’s go, Sebastian. We are not over, Paul. As your wife, I am entitled to get half of everything. Make no mistake, I will make your life a living hell unless I get what I want.”

Teta had already opened the door for Marla, Sebastian and Smith. Marla was still yelling something to Paul when Teta slammed the door in her face—with

a big smile.

Without Marla yakking about, the house fell silent again. Julie broke the silence. "I didn't expect you here."

"Why would you?"

"How did you know Marla was here and what she was up to?"

"Weatherholt told me." Paul ran his fingers through his graying thin hair. His fingers shook. "Julie, I know what I've done to you and your mother is unforgivable. Nothing I could say or do right now will make things right. I was never a father to you. Probably for as far as you could remember, I was just a figure in the house. And you have the right to think that way. I have no right to you as your father and I have no right to your mother's fortune as her husband. But we cannot change the fact that I am your father. As one, I want to exercise my right to intervene."

"What are you talking about?"

"I know about your plan to marry to stop Marla from coming after you. You don't have to do it now. Julie, you have another way to sever the will's binding."

"What?"

"Yes. I kept it to myself because truthfully I want what Marla wants." Paul coughed. The sound told Julie her father was sick. It was an ugly sound, almost like a thunder inside his chest.

Julie waited until her father's hacking cough stopped. "Why now, Dad?"

Paul shook his head. His face had gone bright red from the exertion. "The whys don't matter, Julie. What's important is that no one would bother you now, married or not. I signed the papers relinquishing everything to you and ending the will's condition."

"You are my other out."

"Yes. You're not the only one your mother put to test when she added the stipulation on the will. She knew that someday I would step in like a father should to help his daughter. Weatherholt will give you the papers." Paul looked at the Knights surrounding her.

"Sir, my name is Tristan Knight, and this is my family."

"Paul Rhodes. Julie's father." He extended his hand.

The men shook hands. "Glad to meet you, sir."

"Glad my daughter found someone to protect her and by the look of it, a new family too." Straightening his shoulders, he walked towards the door. .

"Dad?"

Paul stopped and turned to look at her. "What?" he asked gruffly. His brows were furrowed, as if in deep thought.

"Thank you." Julie waited for his reply but what she got was a short nod and her father was gone.

His father had set her free and she didn't know what to make of it. Marla wouldn't bother her anymore and she didn't have to marry Tristan either. Bors said Tristan was in love with her. Be that as it may, he probably didn't want to go through with the wedding.

The thought of not marrying Tristan felt like her heart just dropped all the way down her toes. The tiny hope that began to flicker in her heart when Bors mentioned Tristan loving her died. She loved him, but heart-breaking as it may seem, she must tell Tristan marrying her wouldn't be necessary. *God, what a day.*

Facing the Knights, she flashed them a quick smile. "That went pretty well."

The Knights began to talk all at once. They were all happy for her and she was beyond ecstatic to have them behind her.

Bors held the picture and stared at it, tilting his head to the left then to the right. "So, Tristan, could you tell us again where Julie's birthmark is supposed to be? I took anatomy in college but I can't remember where Sartorius is located. Is it somewhere..." He pointed his finger on the left knee and started tracing a path upward. But before his finger reached the juncture between her thighs, Tristan was right in front on him. He grabbed the picture and tore it into little bitty bits.

Bors and Gawain laughed. Kirsten smacked Bors on the back while Arthur and Katherine watched.

Everyone was in a jolly mood except for Julie. She didn't want to end the

fun, but suddenly she grew tired. One sandwich wasn't enough to handle all the excitement for today. She needed to rest—to move on. Taking a deep breath, she thanked the Knights.

“I appreciate you all coming here. Your offer of support, kindness, and love is overwhelming. I am so lucky to know each one of you. Having said that, I will not take advantage of your kindness further.”

“What are you talking about, Julie?” Kirsten was frowning and she kept glancing at Tristan.

“Dad released me from the will's binding; therefore a wedding is no longer necessary.”

Chapter Sixteen

Finally, it was just the two of them. After her declaration of no wedding, the

Knights surprised her by acquiescing, and then they all said their goodbyes. Each one gave her a hug and murmured something that made her want to cry all over again. Teta and Cinnamon disappeared somewhere around the house.

With just her and Tristan around, the house once again turned sepulchral. She realized she wanted it full of people—laughing, chattering. Not like this.

She watched Tristan spread tuna mixed with mayonnaise on bread. He placed the sandwich beside the other two he had already made. Diet Coke sizzled as he poured it into two tall clear glasses. He would be a good father, she thought. His kids would be popular at school with their yummy lunches and snacks. They'd be playing football with Tristan and their uncles. It would be wonderful to have him around.

“You like making sandwiches, huh?”

“Sometimes. But I figure I have to make you sandwiches, otherwise you won't eat,” he answered, without looking at her.

Julie wondered if he would start looking for another date since she already drove Pamela away. Oh god. She shouldn't care, but her love for him ran so deep a bitter jealousy stirred inside her mixing with the acute misery of losing him. She held her breath, her heart aching with pain.

Breathing out through her mouth, she tried not to cry. What had happened between them would probably change everything. She would not be comfortable

hanging out with Kirsten at their parents' house. The Knights were too smart to not know something happened between her and Tristan. As it happened, the men already teased her about sharing her secret mark with Tristan. And most likely believe that she was in love with their brother. She was sure they'd stop the teasing if Tristan started dating another woman. But she couldn't imagine how awkward it would be being in the same room with him, the Knights, and his girlfriend. Would she be able to look at him again without remembering what they had shared, how much she loved him and how she desperately wished he held her heart instead? Would the Knights show their pity toward her for failing to snag Tristan's heart?

No, being uncomfortable around him would be an understatement. She'd be wretched, dying inside, and regretful over the loss of love and life that could have been wonderful. She felt the burning in her eyes and tried to stop being melodramatic.

Tristan turned and pulled a chair out, motioning for her to sit.

"You're supposed to look cheerful, not as if someone died. You are free, love."

Love. It should be Julie Strawberry. There was no need to call her that. "You can stop calling me love, now. You can call me Julie Strawberry again and I won't get mad at you."

"Cheer up, loooovee! You can party now. Marla won't trouble you anymore."

Come sit down and eat with me. We need to talk.”

She did. *Here we go. We’ll probably talk about how we should forget what happened and thank each other for a wonderful time.* “Thanks. It’s tuna fish, right?”

“Uh-huh. Teta said I should offer you a chair before you eat because you might pass out from the smell. You’re not used to it.”

“Well, it has been years since I’ve had a tuna sandwich, or any fish for that matter. Driving to Costco to buy a Polish sausage with sauerkraut and onions was a lot less tiring.” She nibbled on the corner of the sandwich. “What’s in it?”

“Tuna and mayonnaise, and a bit of pepper and salt. Nothing fancy.”

“Right.” *Gah!* The taste and smell of the sandwich made breathing difficult.

“Julie, it’s just tuna fish.” He wiped the side of her mouth and kissed her.

“I know. But a peanut butter sandwich is much appreciated to this. So what did you want to talk about?”

“I want to tell you that I am leaving today. My clinic—”

“Go. Right now. Fine with me.” *God, I sound like a shrew.* “I mean, you want to go, right?”

“Right.”

She bit a big chunk of the sandwich and tried to chew. But her throat suddenly closed up. She wanted to cry. *Boy, love hurts and pain sucks.*

Tristan reached down and picked up his duffel bag. Why hadn’t she noticed

it earlier? Julie looked at the duffel bag slung across his shoulder. Darn man was leaving and didn't even ask her to come. Dammit, he couldn't wait until he was out of here, out of her life. Kirsten was right. Whenever Tristan felt he'd gotten too close to a woman he would shoot out like a bullet. She, on the other hand, was the opposite. *When Mom died, my heart shriveled from her loss. Now it's happening again. Facing another day without Tristan is going to be hard. What did I do to suffer like this? Don't I deserve happiness?* She should have stayed a virgin. Maybe it would not hurt as much.

"Is there anything else you want to tell me?" Julie heard herself say over her screaming heart. *So that was that. No hugs, no goodbyes.* She put the sandwich back on the plate and took a deep breath. No way she'd cry in front of him.

"You don't like my sandwich?"

Julie stared at the delicious food gone bland. "I guess I wasn't hungry after all. I'll save it for later."

"What's wrong? Was it about your dad?"

Do I have to spell it? I'm sad because of you! "Yeah. I think he loves me after all. Glad he finally saw Marla's true colors and intentions. Dad's a selfish and uncaring man. But I think there's a bit of goodness inside of him. He wouldn't come forward and tell us about my other out if he was one hundred percent evil."

"People change, Julie. He must have."

Like how I changed in the two and a half days we've been together, Julie told herself.

She was used to living alone, sleeping alone. She liked her house quiet, but not anymore. The bantering, fight for the blanket, and warm body beside her, changed her simple life. It would be hard, but oh, well, she could revert back to her old dull life of writing and eating Oreos. And the sooner the better.

“Well, I have another deadline to meet. Just close the door when you leave? I hate to sound like an ungrateful host, but I need to get back to my writing. I’ll call Kirsten as soon as I get the chance to tell her how the plan went. Thank you, by the way, for the wonderful time, and for offering to save me. Now you can go back to your doctoring again. Go back to dating,” she sighed. Even the energy to talk was gone now. She felt drained and unbelievably sad.

Tristan pushed his chair out. Julie read his action as eagerness to leave and followed suit.

“Why would I go back to dating?” He followed her upstairs and into her room.

“I don’t know. Isn’t that what you want to do now? Just go on dates?”

Tristan grinned. “Jealous, are we?”

Julie spun around to face him. “Of course not. Why would I be? And why are you following me? I need to be alone. So please leave now.” Julie bit her lower lip. She was jealous, all right. Insanely jealous of the women he would date. Man, she wanted to smack Tristan on the head to make him see how much she loved him.

How smacking would prove her feelings, she had no clue.

“You love me.”

No need to smack him after all. Julie snorted. “So what? Just go and leave me alone.”

“Okay, I’ll go.”

“What?”

“I’m leaving.” Tristan grabbed her and wrapped his arms around her. He leaned down and kissed her. His mouth took absolute possession of her lips. When he finally let her go, he smiled then went back down the steps. “Lock the door. Remember, make sure you’re dressed before you open this again.”

Julie watched him open the door. She blinked. When she opened her eyes, he was gone.

Rooted on the step, Julie stared at the closed door. Hot tears fell on her cheeks. She cried until her sobbing turned into little hiccups. Feeling dejected, alone, and miserable, she walked up the steps. She didn’t stop until she reached her bedroom, then practically dove on her bed where she continued crying. Her admission that she loved him didn’t have any affect whatsoever on Tristan. He just left. *Left!*

Tristan’s scent clung to the sheets and pillows, a reminder of how great it was to have him on her bed. She turned around and looked at the ceiling.

Julie couldn't tell how long she stayed in her room. All she knew was when she woke up it was already dark.

Then misery began to take hold of her emotions again.

Chapter Seventeen

Two days later

Oh God! Not again. What was Kirsten thinking? She came close to dying last time she ate a Nutty grain bar. Couldn't she understand that anything with nuts would kill her? When she saw her, she would scream at her until maybe, just maybe, she could get into her thick skull that she was severely allergic to nuts.

If she didn't love her so much, she'd call her on the phone and say... no she wouldn't castigate her for being nuts. Nobody was perfect, including the Knights.

Without bothering to fold her clothes, Julie threw everything into her overnight bag. When she received Percival's text message, she was meeting with her editor, Russ, at the Space Needle Restaurant for a fancy brunch. She wouldn't have met him there, but because her manuscript was a day late, she thought offering to pay for brunch would help sooth his aggravation. She wore her green silk dress to better show off her slim figure and tied her hair up in a messy bun. The matching emerald earrings and necklace her mother gave her complimented her eyes. Russ, a very professional man, hated authors who couldn't meet their deadline. By wearing her nicest dress, she hoped her shape would take his mind off her late submission. Of course, she wasn't dressed to the nines to get her editor to ask her out. The dress was her hope to soften Russ. Would it work? She darn hoped so.

She was making progress in making Russ smile when her cell phone rang. Percival texted Kirsten 'had it bad this time' and 'she must come to the Island in a

hurry'. She tried calling him but he didn't answer. In fact, none one of the brothers did. No replies on her texts and voice messages. She thought about calling Tristan. They hadn't talk since he walked out her door. She should call him. This wasn't about her and him. She dialed Tristan's phone, but even he didn't pick up.

God, she hated not knowing what was going on. Was Kirsten taken to the hospital? She didn't know any hospitals in Orcas Island. Well, she'd just have to go there. *Darn it!* Why didn't Gawain come here to pick her up? She could be there quicker if she flew in one of his seaplanes or airplanes.

Still wearing her stilettos, she hitched the overnight bag on her shoulder and took off running downstairs.



The weather was unusually pleasant today. No rain and the clouds were high up in the sky, where they should be. She could actually see the outline of the Olympic Mountains. What was bad was the line to catch the ferry. Lucky for her though, the lady at the booth told her to get in lane one, which kind of surprised her, considering no one was in that lane. And then, as she drove slowly, a man in an orange vest stopped her. He told her if she needed anything, '*don't hesitate to holler*'. She thought she heard him talking on his radio, too, saying that she was on her way. She wondered if the state employees received a hefty raise this year to be so friendly.

Watching the ferry's bow break the water, creating white foam floating around, she wished she brought her laptop. She could write here while onboard the ferry, instead of worrying about Kirsten. *Oh, who was she kidding?* She'd been worried since she left home.

Julie reached in her purse for her cell phone. She checked her messages. There were three. The first was from Armand, asking if he could take her out to dinner. The second was from her editor, giving his praises on her latest book. And the third, was from odious Marla, threatening to drop a ball of fire on top of her house so she could burn alive. *Hell on earth*, she added.

If she were still bound by the will's stipulation, she'd fret and worry about Marla's message. Julie scoffed. Marla couldn't hurt her now, or touch her mother's money. Thanks to her father. Well, if Paul hadn't come forward, Tristan would have married her and...he would have been miserable.

The ferry tooted its horn, signaling they were only a few minutes from the dock. Julie picked up her purse then headed below deck to where her car was parked.

As soon as she left the ferry terminal, she speed dialed first Gawain, then Percival. But no answer. She was about to call Bors when she noticed a police car on her tail. Afraid she might get pulled over, she tossed her cell on the passenger's seat. Maybe if she went to the Knights' house, she'd find someone there, or a note

about where they took Kirsten.

The Knights' house, located on the bayside, loomed before her. The lovely eight-bedroom, farmhouse style, waterfront home made her heart ache. She hoped her friend was okay; otherwise, this house would lose one of its foundations. If Katherine was the flower in this family, Kirsten was the bright light. And without her—this house, this family—would never be the same again. She knew that because after her mother died, the world she lived in changed its colors.

Julie left her bag in the car and practically ran on the cobbled path in a hurry to get to the house. She rang the bell but no one came to the door. Testing the knob, she was glad it turned.

Without a moment of hesitation, she walked inside. Wood and beamed ceilings, hardwood floors gave it a warm, homey and comfortable feeling. The thirty-foot-long, glass sunroom offered a dramatic view of Mt. Baker and the nearby islands. But something was missing. *Laughter.*

Oh no! The Knights were not home. She headed toward the kitchen. There was always a message posted on the refrigerator door. It was the Knights' message board. Maybe someone had left a message about Kirsten.

She had just walked in the kitchen when the door that led to the backyard opened and in came Cinnamon.

Cinnamon? "Hey, what are you doing here? You were supposed to go to Scrub

A Pup with Teta.”

Cinnamon barked then ran back outside. “What the heck.” Julie followed.

The moment she stepped out, loud yells of, “Surprise!” came from all directions, startling her. Arthur and Katherine came out from behind the Cedar tree. Bors from behind the trimmed Rhododendrons, while Gawain and Percival appeared on each side of her. And her friend, Kirsten, who she thought was in the hospital and near death, came out from behind the hedge laughing while Cinnamon tried to hump her leg. Teta tried to pull Cinnamon off Kirsten’s leg, but failed.

Julie took it all in. Everyone looked happy and...what the heck was the surprise for? “Kirsten, I thought you were...what happened?” she asked, not understanding what was happening and why they were all looking at her as if she was a bearer of a good tiding.

“You happened.” Tristan came out of his hiding. Unlike his family, he wasn’t smiling. He looked rugged, unshaved. One look at him and one would think he hadn’t slept in days.

“What do you mean, *I happened?*” A tumble of confused thoughts and feelings assailed her.

Tristan approached her slowly. *Chriminy!* How she missed seeing his magnificent body and the face she dreamed of touching again. He stood close to

her, so close she could smell his faint cologne. She was familiar with that scent now. It was on the pillowcase she hugged every night.

“Hello.”

“Hello to you, too, Doctor Knight. What is this all about?”

“A surprise for you.”

“That’s what they all yelled when I walked out here, but I don’t understand what the surprise is about.”

“I know you believe that I lost my heart to Carly. That’s not true. Carly broke my heart, but didn’t take it away when she left. My heart is still here beating...for you.”

“What?”

“I love you, Julie. I asked my family to be here to back me up. In case you refused to believe me.”

“He’s been in love with you since the first day, when you dumped ketchup on his shirt,” said Bors, grinning from ear to ear.

Everyone laughed. Julie wanted to laugh, too, but she was too nervous to do so. For two nights she had done nothing but wish Tristan loved her, and of course, for Kirsten’s safety. It was only last night that she began to stop wishing and focused her mind on writing. Now, here he was, holding her hand so tight. Unable to believe what she had just heard, Julie blinked her eyes like a fan, fast.

Tristan kissed her nose. “Hello, anybody home?”

He *loved* her. Tristan said he loved her. She wanted to dance, scream, and puke. *Omigod!* Julie covered her mouth and breathed through her fingers.

“Are you okay? You look pale.”

She shook her head no, but continued to breathe fast; she was hyperventilating. After a couple more deep breaths she felt better, albeit a little woozy.

“Like my romantic way of declaring myself so much you feel like throwing up?”

“No, it was romantic. The most romantic declaration of love I have ever received.” She laughed at his scowl. “Because I hid inside my home doesn’t mean I didn’t get proposals from other men. You surprised me, that’s all.” She cupped his face with both hands and looked at him tenderly. “If you’re saying you love me because you think it’s the right thing to say after what happened between us, for taking my virginity—”

“What?”

“Did she say she was a *virgin*?”

“That’s how Tristan knew about her mole.”

“Birthmark, you dufus.”

“I’ll be damned.”

“Lucky bastard.”

Julie bit her lower lip while listening to the comments flying all around them. She spoke too loud. When everyone quieted, she continued. “Don’t worry about what happened. I’m fine.”

“Oh, Julie. I love *you*, *love* you, and *love* you. Only it took me time to realize it.”

“Because you’re a doctor. Meticulous. Slow.”

It was Gawain. He never failed to tease Tristan about his given profession.

“That night, when we—ehem, you said you love me. Once. But do you mean it or you just said it because—”

“Of course I love you. How could I not? You’re my knight who came to my house to rescue me, a knight who never got mad at my pranks but only laughed at them. I thought of how lucky Kirsten is to have someone like you. I wished to have you, too, to love me not as a friend, but as a woman you’d take in your arms. The way you did in the glass hut and in my home.”

“I didn’t get mad at you for your pranks because I was in love with you, Julie. I didn’t realize it then, but now I know. Whenever a weekend was coming up, I would always call Kirsten to ask if you were staying here or not. She would ask me why, and I would tell her I’d make sure the phones were unplugged so no one could call while you were here. But the truth was I was always looking forward to seeing what you would come up to. I particularly liked the time when

you told Erica that I was in the hospital because I dumped boiling water down my front and damaged my balls. And the time you told Cindy that I wouldn't be able to see her because I lost my toupee."

"Kirsten thought that one out." Julie heard Kirsten laugh.

"I wanted to see you really badly; I would make up excuses to call Kirsten just so I could ask her about you. I think Kirsten guessed what I truly feel about you, too."

"Got that right, Tristan," Kirsten said. "That's why I sent you to Julie's house."

Tristan laughed and hugged her tight. "I love you, Julie. I love everything about you."

"And I you."

"Hey, Doctor Knight! The food's getting cold. Get on with the plan now, would you? I ain't got all day. Bingo Night at the Senior Center tonight and I have an appointment with my gunsmith."

Tristan turned his head to nod at Teta. "Thanks for the reminder, Teta."

Before Julie could ask what *the plan* was, Tristan went down on one knee. *Oh God!* Her heart stop beating altogether, at least at that moment it felt like it. She daydreamed about this, about Tristan proposing to her. *Lord, it was finally happening.* The knight she loved with all her heart went down on his knees.

“Uhm, bro. Do you need the box? I still have it in my pocket,” asked Percival.

Tristan nodded and held out his hand, palm up. Percival reached in his pocket and took out a blood-red box. “Sorry for the interruption, Julie.”

“No problem, Percival.” Really, what else could he say?

Percival handed Tristan the small velvet box, gave his brother a pat on the shoulder then took a step back.

“He went to Jared?”

“Teta! Don’t spoil the moment, please.” Kirsten gave the old woman a reproachful look then turned to smile at her.

Tristan took her hand. “Julie Parrish, as my family bears witness, I pledge my heart, trust, loyalty, life, and love to you. So long as I live, I will cherish, provide, and fill your house with children, the way you dreamed it to be. Julie, will you marry me?” He opened the box and showed her the ring.

“Oh my God.” It was a Tiffany Novo. The engagement ring she and Kirsten admired in the catalogue. She told Kirsten it was the kind she’d like to have for an engagement ring. Kirsten must have remembered and told him. Julie looked up to see Kirsten. Her friend’s smile brightened when their eyes met. Kirsten gave her a thumbs up then blew her a kiss. “Julie, before you answer, I want you to know one thing.”

Julie directed her eyes at Tristan. “Yes?”

“If you marry me, you’ll be married to my family as well. They’ll tease you, Kirsten will call you sister, Mom already told me she’ll cook healthy dinners just for you, and Dad promised never to let anyone bully you. But my brothers—they will never ever leave you alone.”

She couldn’t help it, she laughed aloud. “In that case, my answer is yes.”

Noise like thunder erupted. The Knight men were high fiving while Kirsten and Katherine stood side by side with tears in their eyes. She couldn’t believe it; she found a family she knew would love her unconditionally.

Grinning, Tristan placed the ring on her ring finger. As soon as he was on his feet again, he pulled her against him for a tight hug before giving her a kiss that made her forget they had an audience. Julie laughed and cried while Tristan spun her around, also laughing.

Love is All Around Us by the Troggs, her favorite, floated in the air. She heard corks popping and saw bright lights flashing through her peripheral vision while Tristan kissed her with sincerity and devotion.

When her blood flowed back to its normal rate, she turned and thanked everyone. The three brothers and Arthur made a sweeping bow that made her laugh.

“Oh my God! Julie, finally, you’re my sister. I knew this would happen.”

Someone grabbed her from behind then lifted her up. “You’re stuck with us

now, Julie.”

“Put her down, Bors. You’re gonna break her ribs. Hey, new sister. Do you think we could have our Oreo eating contest today?”

“Jesus, Bors. Leave the lady alone. She just got engaged. Hey Julie, I had a talk with the son of a bitch who created the nude picture. He said he’s sorry. If you want to file charges against him, let us know.”

“Thanks, Percival.”

“Okay, boys. Move the tables. Time to start celebrating.” Katherine walked toward Julie and enveloped her in her arms. Julie felt like crying all over again.

“You’ve been a part of this family for not even a year and yet you captured our hearts. Tristan only made it official. Welcome to our family.”

“Thank you. I promise I won’t break your son’s heart.”

“Oh, you two will have squabbles, just like any other normal relationship. My son loves you so much. He’d give you the moon if he could. And you, I know you wouldn’t hurt my son deliberately. You are too good of a person to do that. All I ask from you is to give me my first grandchild. I miss having little feet running around here.”

“Darling, what are you telling our Julie?” Arthur winked at her then wrapped his arm around Katherine.

“I’m just telling her how much we missed having little kids around.”

“Ah, yes. Well, let the kids talk about when they’re going to give us grandchildren. Soon would be nice, but it’s their decision, darling. Now, why don’t you two find a spot so we can all eat?”

Tristan caught her on her way to sit with Kirsten. With her fingers tangled with his, he took her behind the cedar tree, away from the bustling crowd. Once they were hidden, Tristan captured her mouth for another searing kiss. Lordy, she’d never get tired of this. Kissing Tristan felt like standing in front of her floor to ceiling glass window while the sun shone through it, warming her from head to toes.

Right at that moment, everything else dissipated, leaving just the two of them on the wide-open backyard. Julie could only hear him, see him, feel him. Tears rolled down her cheeks.

“I love you, Julie.”

“I love you, too. Why didn’t you tell me when you were with me? You made me believe you didn’t—that’s why you left in a hurry. I was miserable.”

“I’m sorry. It’s just, I told myself that the next time I made love with you, it would be because you’re my fiancé and with the blessing of your father. You see, I know it’d be hard to keep my hands off of you, if I stayed. Because filling your belly with my seed, moving inside you, is constant in my head. You’re a temptation that’s impossible to ignore. Believe me, it took all the strength I have to walk

towards the door and close it behind me. Love, I want to be the one to fill your house with screaming little Julie look-alikes, I want to be the one to bring you our first tabby cat. I want to be the one you see when you wake up in the morning and before you close her eyes at night. I wanted to be *the* one. I love you, Julie Strawberry.”

“And I love you, more than words could ever mean, more than you’ll ever know. You know, I always envied Elizabeth Bennett of *Pride and Prejudice* for finding the man she loved, who loved her in return. Now, I don’t have to. I finally found my own, my own handsome and wicked knight.”

“Hmm...would you like to run for the woods?”

“But wouldn’t they miss us?”

“They didn’t last time we spent time together in the hut.”

“Well, I kind of miss the hut and the view.”

“I’ve missed the view you’ll provide.”

Julie laughed. “You’re such a wicked knight. And I love you.”

“And I you.”

The End

<http://tierneyomalley.com>

Author Bio

Tierney O'Malley graduated from PATTS College of Aeronautics and worked for an airline company. She also worked for a non-governmental organization dedicated to the conservation of natural resources. Her debut novella, *To Trust a Wicked Man*, is published by Cobblestone Press. She resides in the Pacific Northwest with her husband, their two daughters and a golden retriever.

Red Rose Publishing

Wicked Knights: Tristan

Where My Heart Is- coming soon

Wolf's Soul

Cobblestone Press:

To Trust a Wicked Man

eXtasy Books:

Three Christmas Kisses

