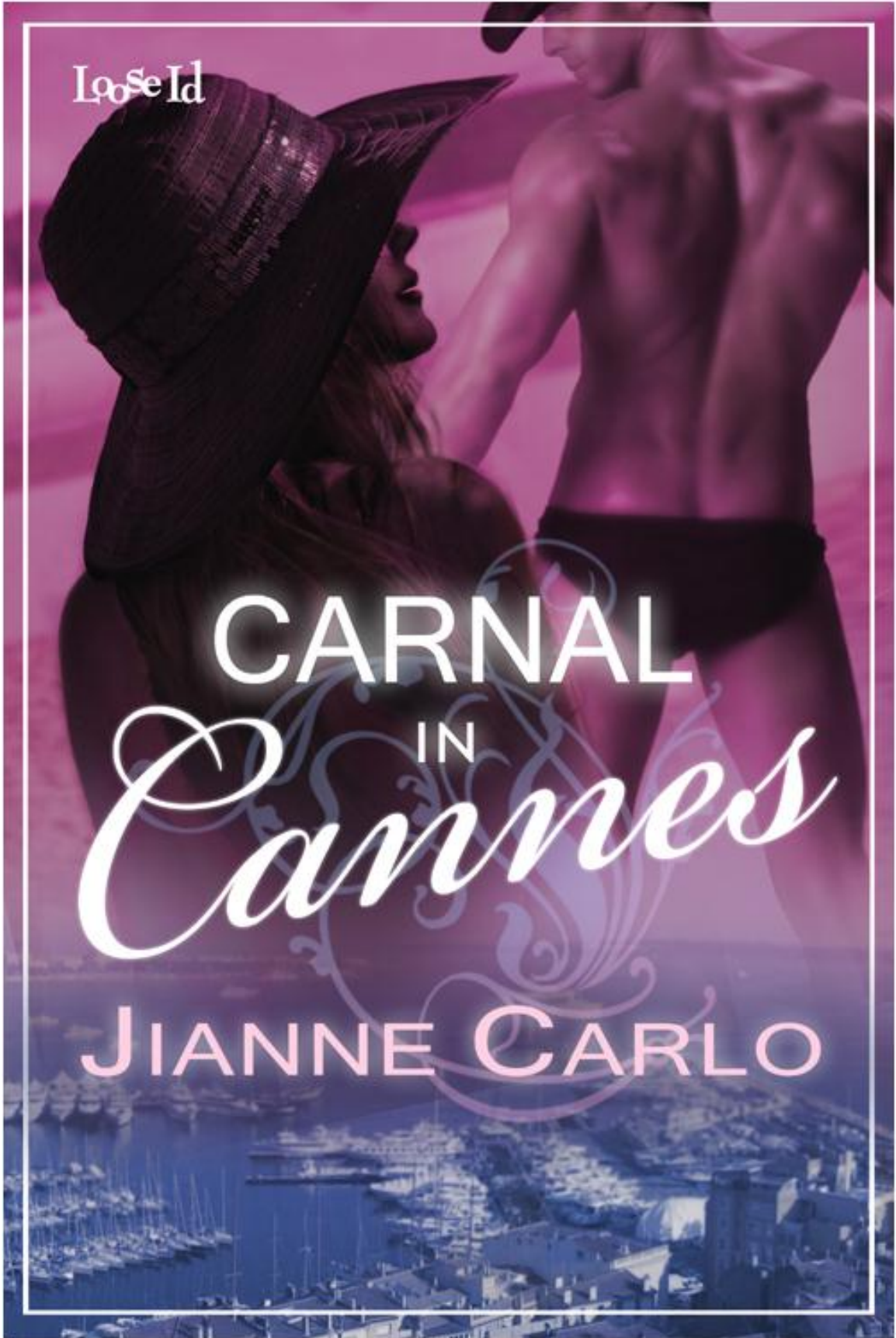


Loose Id

CARNAL
IN
Cannes

JIANNE CARLO



*Mediterranean Mambo:
Carnal in Cannes*

Jianne Carlo



Mediterranean Mambo: Carnal in Cannes

Copyright © September 2010 by Jianne Carlo

All rights reserved. This copy is intended for the purchaser of this e-book ONLY. No part of this e-book may be reproduced, scanned, or distributed in any printed or electronic form without prior written permission from Loose Id LLC. Please do not participate in or encourage piracy of copyrighted materials in violation of the author's rights. Purchase only authorized editions.

eISBN 978-1-60737-849-5

Editor: Antonia Pearce

Cover Artist: Christine M. Griffin

Printed in the United States of America

Loose Id.

Published by

Loose Id LLC

PO Box 425960

San Francisco CA 94142-5960

www.loose-id.com

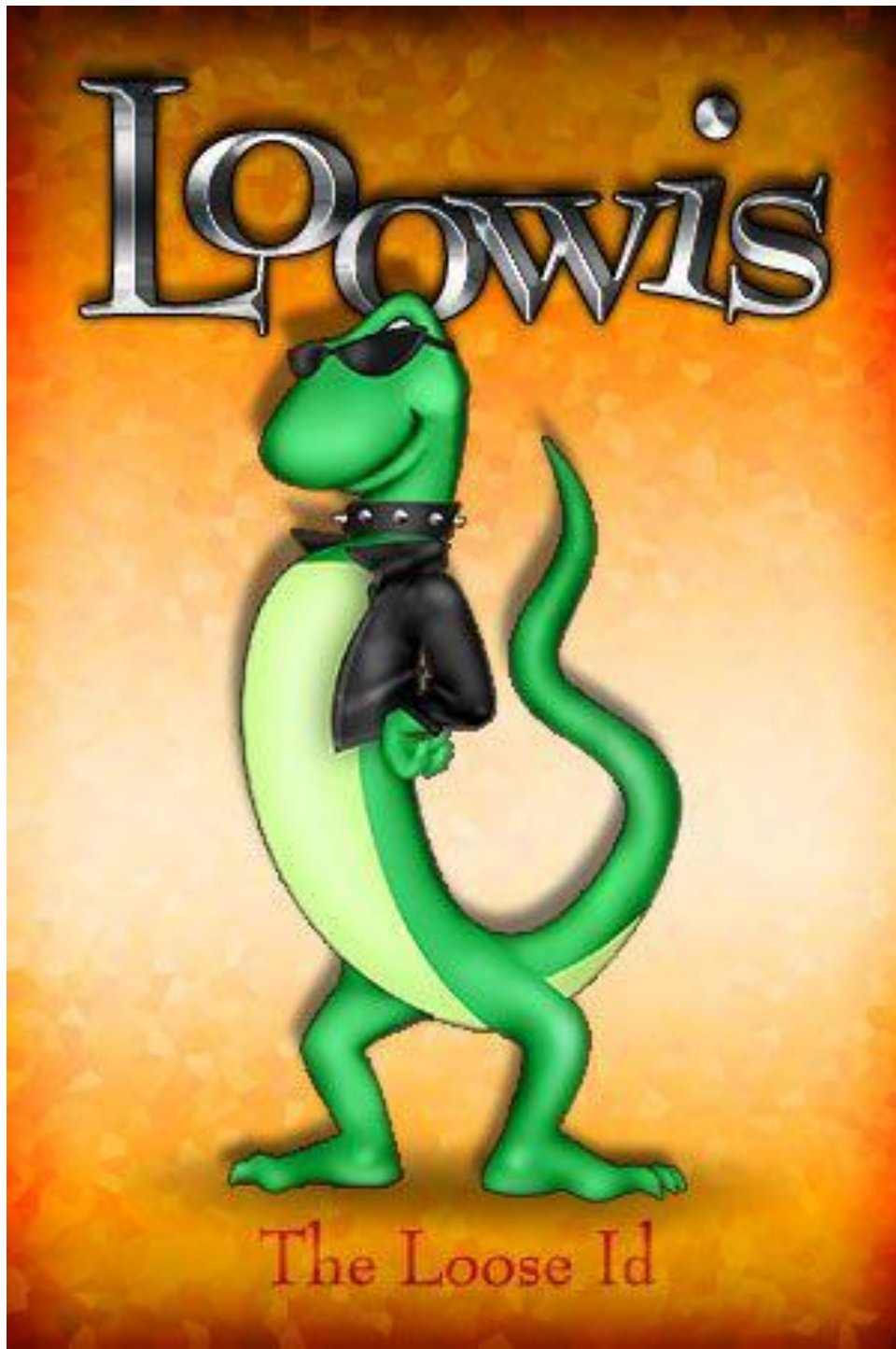
This e-book is a work of fiction. While reference might be made to actual historical events or existing locations, the names, characters, places and incidents are either the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously, and any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, business establishments, events, or locales is entirely coincidental.

Warning

This e-book contains sexually explicit scenes and adult language and may be considered offensive to some readers. Loose Id LLC's e-books are for sale to adults ONLY, as defined by the laws of the country in which you made your purchase. Please store your files wisely, where they cannot be accessed by under-aged readers.

* * *

DISCLAIMER: Please do not try any new sexual practice, especially those that might be found in our BDSM/fetish titles without the guidance of an experienced practitioner. Neither Loose Id LLC nor its authors will be responsible for any loss, harm, injury or death resulting from use of the information contained in any of its titles.



<http://www.loose-id.com>

Chapter One

The silver iPhone lying to the left of Harrison Indiana Ford's side plate vibrated. Picking it up, he checked the number, let out a snort, and slapped the cell phone onto the table.

"Not going to answer?" Suresh Singh, Internet wunderkind and his cohort for the coming weeks, asked.

"And torture myself? Not likely."

Stretching his long legs, Harrison slunk down in the restaurant chair and surveyed the glistening murky waters lining the Vallon des Auffes, a creek off the Quai de Marseille. Fish, sautéing in olive oil redolent with garlic, dominated a strong breeze, which teased the hems of peach linen covering the round tables of L'Épuiette's dockside veranda.

"It's the stepmother, I take it?"

"Hmm." Harry hooded his eyes against the sun's glare reflected in the water. Sated by an excellent version of lamb stuffed with goat cheese and several choice Bordeaux vintages, he turned to a hunger he hadn't been able to satisfy, not since Suresh's masquerade party three weeks ago.

"Who is she?"

Startled out of his musings, he glanced at the twenty-four-year-old genius across the table and shook his head. "How'd you know it was a woman?"

"The look on your face."

Harry mugged a grimace and answered, "One that got away. Wrong time, wrong place."

"I've seen women fall like stacked dominoes every time you so much as grin. Don't tell me one actually said no?" Suresh's black eyes always held a hint of amusement as if laughter framed his outlook on life.

"Never got to even ask. More's the pity," Harry muttered as the vision of the long-legged beauty who had haunted him for weeks went straight to his prick.

Down, boy.

He shot a warning glance at his crotch. For the last couple of weeks, he'd been like a bull in heat. Marseille proved fertile hunting ground for coffee-cream complexions, and he'd rocked several women's worlds, seeking an exotic beauty with odd-colored eyes—one the color of wet clay, one as blue as a cloudless desert sky.

Temporary fixes.

Wishing he could banish the image of the beauty standing by the chaise lounge from his brain, Harry straightened. So much had changed since the night of the fateful masquerade ball.

The phone did a ninety-degree spin on the table, and he shrugged, not even bothering to glance at the screen.

Suresh crossed his eyes trying to read the number upside down. “You’d better take this one. It’s the doctor.”

Harry jabbed the speaker button. “Halliday, what’s up?”

“I’ve examined all the candidates. None are viable.”

Staring at the cell he frowned, quirked an eyebrow, and mouthed, *Viable?* to his inky-haired companion. Aloud he grouched, “What the freaking hell do you mean?”

Dead silence.

“Did you hear me?”

“None of them’s a virgin.” Doc Halliday, a confirmed Confederate reprobate, was his stepmother’s representative in ensuring Harry and his future bride followed the terms of his daddy’s will to the letter.

“Let me speak to Austen.”

A few clacks and bumps, and the *Glory’s* chief steward and bosun’s voice reverberated over the phone. “Hang on, Harrison. Let me get outside.”

A car horn tooted, and he heard the scraping of rubber on gravel as his fingers drummed the tablecloth. A creak of metal on metal and leather scrunching through loose rocks followed.

“Most of these women look like hookers, Harry.” Austen’s voice held a strange tone. “I think you’ve been set up.”

“What the heck?” He twisted the phone around and barked, “What the hell do you mean by that?”

“SITREP,” Austen said, going into commando mode and using army lingo for a situation report. “The doc’s examined nine of these women and not one of them’s a virgin. Who vetted these women? Harry, you’re down to the wire. Why the frigging hell did you leave everything for the last minute—”

“Cut it, Austen. Let’s deal with the situation. None of the women are virgins?”

“Nine of them aren’t, according to Halliday.”

“So Halliday’s examined nine of the ten? What about our doc?” Harry turned thirty-two in two days, and he had to be married by midnight on his birthday and have the proof that the vows had been consummated by the following morning, or his daddy’s fortune went to his stepmother. Fingers curling into his palm, the edges of his normal sangfroid frayed, he muttered a curse under his breath. He’d become too accustomed to the *mañana* of the Mediterranean.

“Our doc says number ten’s the real deal. He concurs with Halliday on the other nine.”

“Is the virgin still there?”

“Yeah.”

“Make her sign the pre-nup. Once she does, escort her and the doctors to the Hotel de Paris. Don’t let her out of your sight.”

“Uh, there’s a slight problem.”

“Spit it out, man.”

“Halliday won’t examine the last one because she’s not white.”

Rage tempered his rising panic, and the memory of the night Silas died made his gut cramp. The hate crime had ingrained a complete intolerance of prejudice in his soul, and nothing triggered Harry’s fury more than racial prejudice. Fighting to control his rising ire, he took a deep breath and flexed his fingers, but the tic that signaled the beginning of a slow burn pulsed below his left eye. The vision of Silas’s battered body brought his current situation into complete focus.

“Call my freaking stepmother. It’s her problem. Tell her I’ll be there in an hour and I’ll be marrying my bride this afternoon.” In a deliberate move he avoided asking Austen what the lone virgin looked like and ended the call.

“He’s right, you know. You shouldn’t have left everything to the last minute,” Suresh stated.

Eyes narrowing, Harry said through gritted teeth, “This ain’t my first rodeo. I’ve been in tighter spots, and I have a fallback position.”

Suresh looked up from signing the receipt for their meal. “I took the liberty of asking for the check. From what I overheard, things are going south on you?”

Harry threw his white napkin on the table and stood. “I’ll fill you in on the way there.”

By the time they reached Suresh’s Hummer, he had the man up to speed.

“How many responses did you get to this personal ad?”

“Ten.”

“Only ten women wanted to trade their virginity for a million euros tax free?” Suresh shot him a speculative glance as the gas-guzzler’s engine roared to life. “And the number ten, awfully pat.”

“I hired the best matchmaker on the continent to find my bride. Geoff narrowed the dozens of candidates down to ten. And the amount of money involved wasn’t stipulated precisely.” Harry paused when Suresh winced. “What?”

“I still can’t get over that you chose a *matchmaker*. It smacks of medieval chastity belts.” Suresh shuddered.

“I’ve been cooped up with a virtual army of lawyers trying to prove the will Delora produced is a fake. With time slipping away I had to have a backup plan. And this matchmaker came highly recommended. She works with royalty, for Christ’s sake.” Harry stabbed his hands through his hair.

“And you didn’t have ten seconds to look over the candidates?”

“It’s a business arrangement,” Harry muttered. “I didn’t want to make it personal.”

“Harry...you’re marrying a virtual stranger and you plan to have a baby with this woman.” Suresh rolled his eyes. “Surely that’s as personal as life can get?”

“Precisely the reason I made the decision to go with the matchmaker.” Harry drummed his fingers on the leather armrest. “I made the mistake of falling in love once. Love makes a man needy. A needy man is a weak and desperate man. I won’t be suffering from that affliction again. I marry this woman. I produce a child. We divorce and go our separate ways. We’ll share custody of the kid. It’ll all be amicable because no emotion will be involved. And Delora doesn’t get a copper penny.”

“Why do you hate her so?” Suresh shrugged. “Hey, I’ve tried to not ask that question, but it’s so unlike you. I’ve never seen you get hot and bothered. Never. Yet the mere mention of your stepmother’s name makes you see red.”

They drove in silence until the SUV negotiated onto the feeder lanes for a major motorway. In the distance Marseille’s famous canals glistened and sparkled under a cloudless, brilliant azure sky. The saliva in Harry’s mouth turned acrid as memories flooded his brain.

“Before Delora married my daddy, she screwed *me*.” Harry propped a booted foot on a metal gray emergency kit lying in front of the passenger seat. “She had the best of both worlds for a while. A young stud who couldn’t get enough of her, and Daddy wound around her pinky.”

Suresh made a strangled sound, and he shot Harry a brief glance before refocusing on the highway. “That’s the most god-awful tale I’ve ever heard.”

“Ain’t it?” Harry agreed.

“I know there’s nothing in the least bit funny about the situation,” Suresh said, “but I can’t help but wonder. What are the odds of you and Terry...”

Terry O’Connor, captain and owner of the *Glory*, the yacht he had called home for the last few years, was Harry’s best friend.

“You mean the chance that two people serving in the same special-ops unit end up being friends and that we both just happened to have screwed our stepmothers as teenagers?” Harry rolled a shoulder. “And end up working together on the same boat? Been the topic of many a drunken night, let me tell you.”

“I begin to understand why you want to keep this marriage thing impersonal.”

As the vehicle merged onto the A7, Harry’s mobile rang again; his eyes crossed when he recognized the number.

“What now, Austen?”

“Delora’s changed the plans. We’re heading to the Carlton Cannes, not the Hotel de Paris.”

Most of the security team at the Hotel de Paris had served with Harry and Terry in Afghanistan, and he could vouch for them with his life. This change of venue, while not completely unexpected, was a definite setback.

“Who do we know at the Carlton?”

“Security manager’s a friend of a friend.”

“That’s not the worst of it. You’re going to be taped.”

“Taped?”

“As in there will be cameras present to record the exams.” Son of a bitch, Austen had a macabre sense of humor and chose to show it at the worst times. “That isn’t a joke.”

Jaw working, Harry managed to snarl, “The bitch can’t do that. It’s not in the will.”

“Her lawyer found some clause that allows it. I checked with Geoff, and he verified it.”

Sir Geoffrey Stanford’s legal expertise couldn’t be debated; neither could his loyalty to Harry.

He had to give his stepmother credit—she’d become street smart. Three times she’d outmaneuvered him during the legal battle over his daddy’s will. Harry couldn’t decide if given the choice of Daddy’s fortune or revenge, which Delora would choose. He might soon find out.

“I’ll get back to you.”

Stabbing the End button, he scowled at the display. “You heard?”

“Yes. I assume we’re heading to the Carlton Cannes?”

“Yeah,” Harry said and winced as all ten fingers encountered knots while combing the hair off his forehead. “If Delora’s managed to get cameras in the room...” He shuddered. “My prick goes soft just thinking of my stepmother watching me buck nekkid and screwing. I don’t know if I’ll be able to get old St. Pete to cooperate.” Harry’s gaze dropped to his crotch.

“Even at the worst of times you’re at half-mast, Ford.” Suresh shot him a smile over his left shoulder. “I don’t think that’s something you have to worry about.”

“I have issues with Delora.”

“Terry got over his issues with his stepmother.”

Afternoon sunlight flooded the dashboard and penetrated the dark tint of the SUV’s windows. Two medieval clock towers loomed as they maneuvered a four-leaf-clover ramp to the right, passing a sign labeled CANNES.

“Let’s not even go there,” Harry muttered.

Suresh winced again. “Sorry, I forgot that you’d slept with Carol Ann.”

“Yeah, my reputation was really enhanced by that smart move. If I’d known who she was, I’d never have touched Terry’s stepmother.”

“Yet the women still fall like dominoes,” Suresh said, frowning his brow as he darted a glance to the passenger seat.

Sighing, Harry shifted, and the buttery leather squeaked in protest. He took a deep breath before meeting the other man’s charcoal eyes.

“Carol Ann targeted me. She wanted to get back at Terry. Hell, I was in London and roadkill plastered when I met her. And I don’t even remember much of that one night.” Harry blew out a long breath.

“She even got to me. That night of the masquerade.” Suresh loosened a button on his polo shirt. “If I’d known, I wouldn’t have sent her after you.”

“I know, bubba. I know. Life’s a bitch, and then you die.” Harry’s lips curled. “I haven’t a fucking chance in hell of making what could be remotely described as a great marriage. I reckon I’ve dotted my i’s and crossed my t’s. It’ll work out the way I said. Marriage, baby, divorce.”

Suresh whistled. After four minutes of quiet he asked, “Did your father know? About you and Delora?”

“When Mama took sick we needed extra help. Our housekeeper said no *problema*—she had a daughter who would be happy to oblige. Delora appeared the next day, and I thought I’d won the lottery. I couldn’t keep my hands off her.”

“She was doing both of you at the same time?”

Harry shrugged. “Ninety days after we buried Mama, Daddy announced he and Delora had gotten hitched. I never could figure out if she had us both all the while. There’s no way I’m letting that bitch get his money. If I have to stick my cock into an octogenarian, I’ll do it.”

“How did you word the ad?”

After two months sailing with Suresh, Harry had grown accustomed to the young genius’s tangential conversation and topic shifts.

“Geoff insisted on doing the wording—the lawyer in him, I guess. Proof of virginity required, younger than thirty but over eighteen, in good health, free of diseases, yada yada. Significant financial reward. He handled the screening once the letters started arriving.”

“And how long did the ad run for?”

“Two weeks,” Harry said and sat straighter in the seat as another thought occurred to him. “You ever had a virgin, Suresh?”

“No. Avoided them like the plague. In my circles taking a virgin means marriage.” Suresh geared down as they crested a hilltop. “I gather from the question you’re in the same boat.”

“Yeah. I don’t draw many lines in the sand, but that’s been one.”

“I can’t say I envy you. It’s bad enough you have to sleep with a stranger, but a virgin?” His shoulder blades squeezed together. “Not my idea of a good time.”

“Mine either,” Harry muttered.

“Does it matter that she’s black?”

Catching the billionaire’s tentative cut to him, Harry shook his head. “The virgin thing matters more. I like my women experienced. Very experienced and then some.”

Suresh hit the left turn indicator. Ticktock, ticktock. They waited for the light. On the right, the famous Cannes beachfront curved in a graceful arc. Striped tents of every shape, color, and size dotted white sand. One long wooden pier interrupted a seascape of aquamarine Mediterranean.

“I presume that your father chose to locate his holding company here in Monaco because of the tax benefits?” Suresh asked.

“Yep,” Harry replied. “And those benefits have been significant. I reckon we avoided paying millions. Isn’t your principal company based here too?”

“Yes. Though some of the newer ventures are based in the British Virgin islands.” Suresh tapped a finger on the steering wheel. “My advisors wanted me to switch to Bermuda a while back, but I held off. The island’s too heavily regulated for my liking.”

Harry punched the window button. Fruity suntan lotion and coconut oil teased his nostrils. Belligerent pigeons fought each other and pedestrians for sidewalk space, squawking their territory. The hum of cars idling, broken by the occasional revving by an impatient foot on the accelerator, provided a background murmur.

“Shall I valet park?”

“Yeah. Hopefully bitch stepmother hasn’t arrived as yet.”

Murphy’s Law ruled the rest of the day.

Suresh and Harry found an anxious Austen pacing the penthouse honeymoon suite’s entertainment area. The room reeked of luxury and aristocratic heritage. Club-sized chocolate leather chairs and ottomans as soft as down were enclosed by walls of hardcover books stained with centuries of cigar smoke. Crystal decanters filled with liquids of varying hues and levels decorated a dark cherry sideboard, and the dim lighting reflected a space that oozed generations of secrets and conspiracies. The French version of an exclusive gentleman’s club, London’s White’s to the extreme.

A man who bore a striking resemblance to a caricature of a Louisiana pot-bellied politician sat on a bar stool nursing a tumbler of amber liquid. His round face contorted into a grimace when they stepped out of the elevator. Watery blue eyes flickered brief disinterest, and he focused instead on the liquor swirling in the glass he held in one hand.

“Where is she?” Harry addressed his question to Austen, who stood in the center of the room idly tossing an orange from one hand to the other.

Jerking his head to the left, Austen answered, “In the bedroom unpacking.”

“My stepmother?” Harry’s eyebrows lifted.

“Due any minute with a new doctor.”

“That bitch never told me I’d have to put my finger up a darkie’s twat.” Dr. Halliday took a swig of his liquor.

The revolting words raked memories Harry had worked hard to erase—Silas’s broken body, the skin on his face sloughed off by miles of gravel. His temper blazed.

“Shut your fucking mouth,” Harry barked, a red haze distorting his vision, rage flooding his thoughts. “Get the fuck out of here!”

His voice escalated to a roar, the pulsing veins in his forehead emphasizing the loss of any semblance of logic. When the doctor curled one corner of his mouth in a sneer, Harry lost it.

Harry grasped the fat bastard’s jacket lapels and pulled him off the stool. Bourbon splattered over the bar counter and dripped onto the carpet. The tumbler tottered at the edge of the bar, and then thudded and bounded three feet to the left, coming to rest at the foot of a coffee table.

Suresh pedaled backward and hit the down button on the elevator.

As soon as the doors opened, Harry shoved the man into the empty lift and punched Lobby. Bitterness pulled down the corners of Harry’s mouth. He stared at the elevator’s gold-mirrored finish, not seeing anything but the ugly past.

A slight movement in the blurred reflection alerted him to the present. He turned around, each movement lethargic, deliberate. The silhouette of a slender female, one hand braced on her right hip, came into his line of vision. She walked with the lithe grace of a gazelle, and his lungs faltered with each slow step she took.

Shadows dipped and danced, hiding her features from his sight. When she turned her head to greet Austen with a husky murmur, he absorbed her profile. High cheekbones, an arrogant nose so perfect it belonged in a plastic surgeon’s after catalog, and a sloped Cleopatra brow. She kept her head averted for five more strides, and his gaze slid over bare feet encased in four-inch stilettos.

Her legs went on and on, long, toned, and shaped so fine no Vegas showgirl he’d ever dated could match such perfection. Lost in appreciation of her nymphlike curves, he hadn’t yet made it to her eyes when she halted. Not in any particular hurry, he lingered on a three-inch-wide leather belt hugging her narrow waist. A twinge of disappointment caused his forehead to pucker—B-cup breasts he guessed, but barely so.

All in all, he decided, raising his eyes, not bad.

She lifted her chin, and their eyes met.

Oxygen left the room. A water-in-the-ears sensation hushed all sound. Her lips moved, but he didn’t hear a word, just had an impression of a musical throaty voice. Images bounced back and forth in his brain as the woman from Grasse blazed across his brain, her long legs encased in smoky nylons, the sexy black garter belt she struggled with, the glimpse of pouty pussy lips, and the curls of dark pubic hair.

For a second, for a hairbreadth instant, he thought he’d found the woman from Grasse, the one with odd-colored eyes. She’d worn a mask like the other catering staff, but there was no mistaking the deep blue of her left iris or the rich brown of the right. Passion and fierce determination blazed in the way she tilted her chin, and her lips curled in a sneer, as if he hadn’t caught her half-naked in an empty room, and as if she wasn’t in the wrong.

A rose hue darkened twin spots at the apex of *this* woman's cheekbones, and her eyes—Harry did a double take—her unremarkable *coal* eyes flickered down his form. Her blush deepened into a delectable cherry shade.

Mouth watering, Harry followed the direction of her gaze to his groin and knew his complexion matched this beauty's. He wore faded jeans, a brown belt with a silver buckle, and tented couldn't begin to describe how his erection strained against the tight denim.

Austen cleared his throat.

Harry jerked, and his stare collided with hers again for a hint of a second. In a rush to avoid another strained, uncomfortable ogling, he strode in the direction of the bar but halted as soon as his boot hit the floor, and swallowed an expletive.

Two zipper teeth pinched the underside of his cock's crown.

Mortification and pain stamped his skin with a fiery heat, but even though his freaking organ throbbed, he couldn't will it into flaccidity.

Harry twisted the cork out of a bottle of scotch, poured a stiff shot into a crystal tumbler, and downed the liquor using his right hand. The left he utilized to surreptitiously separate flesh from brass zipper teeth, and he closed his eyes for a brief moment as the sting subsided. Harry did a two-step spin.

"Introductions, Austen."

"Miss Martine Bellamy, Harrison Indiana Ford."

"Miss Bellamy." Harry ambled her way, hand outstretched.

Chin cocked, eyes half-hooded, she returned the gesture, and her slender fingers gripped his hand in a firm shake.

"Mr. Ford," she murmured, and she had that sexy French accent down to a purr.

"Under the circumstances I believe it best if we forgo the formalities, Martine. My name is Harry." He didn't release her palm or her gaze.

She tried to tug away from him, but his hold tightened, and he exerted enough pressure to show who commanded this scene. Martine's bottom lip jutted out, and rebellion flared ever so briefly in her half-hidden eyes before a rigid self-control batted down her emotions.

The elevator pinged.

Every follicle covering his flesh stood at attention as the ventilation system swirled Chanel No. 5 through the room. Harry fought his automatic gag reflex.

Delora.

"Miss Bellamy, would you wait in the bedroom until we're ready?" Harry shuffled about as quickly as he could within the confines of the tight pants and bruised skin.

The last time he'd seen the onyx-eyed beauty standing at the entrance to the penthouse, she'd flashed a ten-carat engagement ring with matching eternity band under his nose.

“Why, Indy in the flesh.”

The years had been kind to Delora Consuela Perez Ford. Her creamy olive complexion still glowed, and those saucer-sized black eyes blazed her Gemini nature, one minute oozing passion and love, the next flashing contemptuous, taunting hatred.

“*Como estás, mi madre?*” Harry drawled, imitating an illiterate peasant’s pronunciation, knowing she hated when he reminded her of her origins.

Austen cleared his throat.

Suresh choked back the beginnings of a guffaw.

Harry glared at both of them.

Twisting his lips to one side, Suresh shrugged, and Harry turned his attention to Delora.

At least his damned prick had calmed down. Harry exhaled, stalked to the bar, and poured a stiff shot of bourbon.

“I see you haven’t changed.”

She’d perfected her English. Not a hint of her Mexican accent remained. He downed the liquor, measured another ounce, swallowed that too, and slapped the glass on the wood.

“Let’s get this show on the road,” he said, exaggerating his native old-boy drawl. Harry shifted and braced both elbows on the bar. Out of the corner of his right eye, he caught a slight motion and realized the beauty, Martine, hadn’t moved an inch.

He squinted his displeasure at Austen.

Suresh’s mouth twitched a couple of times, his onyx eyes twinkling their amusement. Harry zinged him with narrowed eyes.

A quick sweep of the room and he’d memorized each person’s position, assessed potential reactions, and formulated a change in direction.

“What’s Halliday doing back here?” He pointed his chin at the stout medicine man standing next to Delora.

“He’ll do what he’s supposed to.” Delora hadn’t taken her eyes off him. “He says you managed to find a woman, a *black* woman.”

Her voice radiated contempt. Delora liked finding those on a ladder rung lower than her to torture. And her prejudices ran deep; she’d been the one to sic her brothers on Silas, his father’s sole black employee. The grizzled foreman of the ranch had been more of a father to Harry than his actual daddy. Forgive and forget didn’t get close to working as far as Delora’s role in Silas’s ultimately fatal injuries went.

His stepmother’s nostrils flared, and Harry realized she’d thinned them—eye wrinkles smoothed too, he surmised—and wondered how many original body parts remained.

“You’re going to screw her,” she jeered and pointed a red-painted fake nail at him. “Your daddy’ll roll over in his grave. He’d have disowned you in a second.” She snapped her fingers.

“Ground rules, Delora. If I hear one more prejudicial remark from you, I’ll have Austen gag you and tie you to a chair. According to Daddy’s will you have to be present, not vocal. I’m marrying Miss Bellamy as soon as the exam’s complete and witnessed. You leave immediately, and I get to never see you again after today.”

“Where’s the executor’s lawyer?” Suresh asked. He held a cell phone to his ear. “Geoff says three lawyers present, three doctors present, according to the will.”

A choked gasp caught his attention, and Harry’s fisted his hands when he saw Martine’s face. She schooled her features quickly, but that delicious complexion had paled, and though she stared unblinking at some spot on the far wall, he read the bleak acceptance in her rigid posture.

“Suresh, handle things out here. I need to speak with my fiancée.”

Harry stomped past Austen, who shook his head and said, his voice low, “I didn’t have time to go through everything with her.”

Freaking disastrous.

His compulsive procrastination had just bit him in the ass. If he’d placed the ad sooner, had started the search earlier, hadn’t waited till he’d almost turned thirty-two... Harry dragged both hands through his hair and halted in front of Martine. He’d been so certain he could prove the will a fake.

“We have a few things to discuss, Miss Bellamy.” He waved a hand at the bedroom door. “If you’ll step inside...”

The muscles in her slender neck worked, but she showed no other sign of nervousness, poignant features impassive, fathomless eyes unreadable. She swallowed again, and he had the urge to stroke her throat, soothe away the events that had to follow their conversation.

Until that moment he hadn’t realized how humiliating the procedure would be for this woman who seemed poised for flight. He tried to imagine having three people penetrate him with fingers in front of six witnesses, including one hostile woman and one redneck twit. A wave of nausea curled through his gut.

Martine’s sweetheart chin tilted, her bottom lip plumped, and she gave him an almost imperceptible nod before preceding him out of the room. Gaze glued to her hips swaying against the thin cotton of her long white dress, he traced the outline of her waist-cut thong and bit his tongue as his prick found zipper teeth with unerring accuracy.

Halting just inside the bedroom, Harry kept his focus fixed on her back, adjusted his cock, and then slammed the door shut.

“Exactly what did Austen go over with you?”

She stood about three feet in front of him, hands in tight little fists, and looked at something above his right shoulder. Spiky onyx lashes, so long he could almost

count them, fluttered like a wounded dove's wings, their shaky motion blaring a painful vulnerability.

"You need to marry a virgin and consummate the marriage. It is to be a business transaction. I give you my innocence, and you pay me a hundred thousand euros when we divorce."

Captivated by her lyrical, soft voice, Harry didn't register the number at first. He frowned and blurted, "A hundred thousand? The deal's for a million euros."

"I do not need a million. Monsieur Stanford has agreed to the change."

Those remarkable eyes held hints of amber, and her mouth took on a mutinous slant. Harry said the first thing that came to mind. "Why would you refuse more money?"

"If I am to whore myself out, I would set the price, Monsieur. I take what I need, no more." Her nostrils flared, and she lifted her chin as if daring him to take issue with her statement. He frowned.

English wasn't her first language, he guessed from her careful enunciation of each word. Again the image of the woman by the couch in Grasse flashed into his brain. For three weeks, every woman he'd screwed—and there'd been several different females—had had her odd-colored eyes. Every gaze he'd met, he searched for what he'd read in those astounding eyes that night—a desperation bordering on suicidal, a determination worthy of a special-ops warrior.

"What do you need the money for?"

Chapter Two

Martine Bellamy knew she had to go through this farce of a wedding, knew she had no options left. She needed one hundred thousand euros, and this was the only way to raise the money short of the virgin auction she'd considered three weeks earlier.

All her life she had fought not to become a whore like her mother. She stifled a bubble of hysterical laughter. All her Haitian hillside neighbors had predicted her outcome—born to a whore, born to die a whore.

She held her head high, lifted her chin, and met Harrison Indiana Ford's gaze without flinching. "That, Monsieur, is not part of our agreement. I do not have to answer your questions. And I will not."

"Have you signed the prenuptial?" he asked.

"*Non.*" Martine uncurled her fingers one by one, hoping the action would lessen her humiliation somehow. Deep inside she knew nothing would alleviate how small and brittle she'd become, how unworthy of living.

"Austen did go over the procedure with you, didn't he?"

"He said there would be a medical exam before the marriage." Even though the room's air conditioning blasted from the vents above, the sting of degradation fired her flesh when she remembered the doctor's words, "*a darkie's twat.*"

"I'll delay the proceedings until we can find someone to replace Dr. Halliday," Harrison Ford said, his Texas drawl taking on an almost British enunciation. The ridges of his high cheekbones stained a deep rose beneath his bronzed skin.

"Please, Monsieur, do me no favors," she stated. "I need money. You need a virgin. Emotions do not come into this business transaction."

His mouth tightened, and he scanned her from head to toe. "If that's how you want to play it, that's mighty fine by me."

"I'd prefer to get this finished as soon as we possibly can." Martine swallowed, and she glanced around the room, taking in the sumptuous intimacy of the honeymoon suite. "Where do you want me for the examination?"

All at once the temperature spiked, the room's walls grew closer, and a belt banded her chest. A flowery smell from the vent above circled to her nostrils. The aroma cloyed, and her claustrophobia, always seething through her veins, surfaced, coating her tongue with bitter saliva. Enclosed spaces made her skin tingle, made her nerves itch and want to jump out of her flesh.

“Since we’re to spend the night in this room, I’ll arrange to have the other one set up for the examination.” He cleared his throat. “If you’d care to wait in here until they’re ready for you...”

He waved his hand, indicating the sofa to the right, and the flowery aroma was replaced by the scent of his aftershave, grassy with a hint of citrus and smoke. The mixed odors reminded her of the outdoors, of trees and fires. Her jangling nerves steadied.

“*Merci*. Thank you,” she said and couldn’t prevent the relief from showing in her voice.

“I’ll give you a ten-minute warning.”

“*Merci*. Thank you,” she said again, biting her tongue on the last word.

Speak in English. Think in English. Make no mistakes.

As he turned around a dizzying realization settled into her brain—Harrison Indiana Ford didn’t make her skin prickle, didn’t make her want to disappear under a bed or into a closet. She felt no fear in his presence. Instead he made her insides grow warm and fluttery, and the golden glints in his brown eyes did strange things to her lungs, strangling the very oxygen out of the air. And her mind went into peculiar tangents when she smelled a hint of the grassy aftershave he wore, her gaze flying to the stray hairs peeking through the lapels of his shirt. She marveled at his bronzed complexion and wondered if he smelled that good everywhere.

He walked like a matador, spine rigid, eyes sweeping his path, measuring each lazy stride. As the door clicked shut and his back disappeared, her knees, locked to keep her standing, buckled. She sank into the nearest chair and buried her face in her palms.

“I can do this. I can,” she whispered aloud. The image of her *grand-mère’s* lined and weathered face, her chocolate skin taut over too thin bones, the gnarled fingers too stiff to do her beloved embroidery, calmed her galloping pulse. A hundred thousand euros would purchase Sylvie Bellamy’s passage to France and buy them a cottage in a remote French village where they could live out their days in peace.

Shaking her head she bounded out of the plush upholstery and paced a furious circle around the furniture fronting a shale fireplace. No time to wallow in self-pity, no time to drown in what-ifs, no time left for dreams and fantasies. If only... She caught her reflection in the brass-framed mirror on the opposite wall; her lips twisted, and a lone tear streaked down one cheek.

“*Merde, merde*.” She fisted one hand over her mouth, applying pressure. The sting of lips crushed against teeth sharpened her focus. She took a slow gulp of oxygen, let the sweet air fill her lungs, and shook off the last lingering hope for a miracle. God had deserted her.

She stood alone.

Squaring her shoulders Martine turned to the comfort of everyday activities. As she made her way to the bathroom, Martine extracted her hairbrush from her purse, all the while thinking of the night to come, about getting undressed in front

of him. Avoiding her reflection in the mirror above the sink, she brushed out the knots created during the short but windy walk from the bus terminal, wincing as a particularly stubborn tangle made her scalp prickle.

After setting the minibrush back in her purse, she studied the gold-plated geometric faucet and grinned when she realized the tap was one of those touchless types. *Rich people and their toys*. She shook her head, her smile widening when she remembered her first encounter with this kind of spigot and how long it had taken her to figure out how to work the damned thing.

As she worked up a rich lather, the aroma of ginger soap wafted to her nose. She drew in a long breath and slowly exhaled, and some of the tension seeped from her knotted neck and shoulder muscles. When she finished washing and drying her hands, she pulled a tissue from the box built into the marble ledge that ran the length of the bathroom, dried the oval peach soap carefully, and used two other tissues to wrap the bar before tucking it into the side pocket of her large white Dior tote. She pulled the majority of the tissues from the box, folded them into a neat square, and placed them next to the soap.

She changed into the hospital gown and bathrobe Austen Tanner had given her, after hanging her designer skirt and top, bought from a consignment store, in the closet. Martine sat on the bed, unbuckled her sandals, and walked in bare feet to set the stilettos on the floor of the closet, aligning them toe to heel.

Dry but barely clothed, she sat on a pale rose upholstered chair facing the room's entrance, spine steel-rod straight, ankles crossed, waiting. No one observing her tranquil hands, her still fingers, or her composed expression would guess at her cramping belly, the nausea roiling up her gullet.

Raised voices—one male, one female—battled some point on the other side of the closed double doors. It would give her an advantage to listen, to plot, to plan, but the thought of the humiliation to come vaporized the energy to do so.

Each day she awoke and wondered why the sun still shone, why the earth twirled, why she trudged forward. A good Catholic has faith, believes in God and that Jesus Christ guides his earthly flock. But she had never been good, never obeyed the Lord's representative, Father Baptiste, the way she should have.

Father Baptiste. Martine closed her eyes and locked the thought out of her brain. Once everything had been sorted out, she would contact Father Baptiste and make her confession. Visions of her last night in Haiti and her grand-mère's heroic struggles to help her stow away on the cargo ship bound for Marseille danced through her brain.

Only when worn cowboy boots appeared between her gaze and the carpet did Martine managed to climb out from inside her horrific memories, the blood, the pain, the filth that had taken control of her mind. She licked dry lips and stood, staring at a royal blue denim shirt buttoned midchest. Not a hairy chest, more lightly furred, and the down seemed soft, her labored breathing tickling a few strands into motion.

Non, non, do not do this, Martine. Do not picture what is to come.

“They are ready for you,” he said. “You need to sign the agreement before we go in.”

Martine avoided Harrison Ford’s gaze, certain guilt and embarrassment broadcasted from her flushed cheeks, her clutching fingers. The door opened, and a man at least four inches taller than Martine strolled into the room, carrying a sheaf of papers.

“I believe you know Sir Geoffrey Stanford.”

“*Oui*. Yes. Monsieur,” Martine said, inclining her head. Perspiration coated her palms as the two men flanked her, their stares intent and somber. She had met the English lord during the interviews required for the position, and the man never failed to ignite a hollow panic in her belly. No matter how often she tried to convince herself he didn’t know what she’d done, all her lies seemed obvious when she was in his presence.

“Miss Bellamy.” Sir Geoffrey laid five pages on a rectangular sideboard lined with fragile crystal decanters filled with liquids of brown and amber hues. He proffered an old-fashioned fountain pen with a brilliant gold nib. She accepted the writing instrument and searched the printed-paper for the familiar *X*, which would delineate where she should sign.

“Sign here.” He touched a forefinger to a series of dots. “Here. Initial here. One more right here.”

Angling her body, Martine managed to hide her trembling fingers and complete shaky scrawls where the man indicated.

“Your turn, Harry. Same spots.”

After they completed signing the prenuptial agreement, Geoff gathered the documents into one hand and stated, “I’ll make copies for both of you. The original will go to the bank safety deposit box.”

“Sit, Martine.” Harry waved at a plush lemon Queen Anne chair. “You need to know exactly what’s going to happen over the next twenty minutes.”

A throbbing started at her temples, but Martine obeyed his command. She swallowed once, twice, and a shudder racked her body.

Harry noticed. He fell to one knee in front of her.

“I’ll be in the room with you, right by your side. There’s a tent between you and the doctors and lawyers. You won’t see any of them. I’ll be sitting next to you at the head of the table. Look at me, Martine.”

Shaking her head, she whispered, “I can’t.”

Tippling a finger under her chin, Harrison forced their eyes to meet. “I won’t let them harm or humiliate you in any way, shape, or form. I promise you this. I know we’re strangers, but it’s you and me against them, understand? We have to trust each other. Can you do that? Trust me?”

“Do I have any other choice?” Moisture threatened to overflow her eyes, and Martine choked back a hysterical laugh. Trust, what a laughable concept. In her world trust equaled death.

When they put her feet into the metal stirrups some eternity later, she squeezed her eyes shut and recited the Lord’s Prayer followed by the gospel of John, chapter one, verse one. *In the beginning was the word, and the word was with God.*

The cold steel met her warm flesh, and she flinched, unable to stifle the reaction. Harry’s large warm palm covered hers, and he twined their fingers together.

Bending his head, his lips fluttered her ear when he whispered, “Easy. Easy. Look at me, Martine. We are the only two people in this room. No one else is important. No, don’t look away. Do you have brothers and sisters?”

“Non,” she replied, focusing on the way his pupils darkened and dilated to become a rich, dark molasses color. The lies came easier than truth. These days no matter how hard she tried, she lied, lied, and lied, even about the most mundane things. The urge to hide her past overwhelmed even everyday activities.

“Neither do I.” His full lips curled. “Always wanted a pack of sisters. Figured I could do without the brothers, though. What’s your favorite food?”

The abrupt question made her frown. His thumb stroked her palm, and she blurted, “Ice cream.”

“Chocolate?” The skin bracketing his brown eyes crinkled as a smile lifted his mouth.

She shook her head. “Coconut.”

Perfect tawny eyebrows rose in unison. “I’ve never even heard of coconut ice cream, much less tasted it.”

“They sell it in the Haitian sections of Marseille.” As soon as the words escaped her mouth, Martine clamped her lips together, choking back a moan. The less he knew about her the better.

Eyes widening he examined her face, and his features softened. “Coconut ice cream, huh? Must admit I prefer any form of chocolate to coconut.”

I do too, but you can’t get chocolat in Haiti. I must stop lying.

“I love chocolat,” she said.

“I like the way you say that, sugar. Chocolat. Have you seen the movie?”

She frowned, and her eyebrows rose. The man was insane. “Movie?”

“We’ll rent it,” he advised. “Much easier than explaining the plot. It’s a love story about a woman who makes wickedly delicious chocolate, which makes people do extraordinary things.”

“I see.” She didn’t, but he was going to pay her a lot of money, so he should be humored. Like all men.

And so it went on and on—him jumping from topic to topic. What was her favorite color, did she like the sea, what were her favorite books, did she like the

Mediterranean climate? Martine grew giddy under his conversational assault, and it didn't seem as if twenty minutes had elapsed when one of the doctors cleared his throat and captured her attention.

"All is in order, Monsieur Ford. Madame, we are finished with the exam." The doctor stripped off cream plastic gloves as he spoke.

Even though his voice proved soft and soothing, Martine shuddered and struggled to sit up, taking her heels out of the metal stirrups. The medical men seemed to be in a hurry to leave the room, and Martine watched their white-coated backs vanish from her line of vision.

The woman from earlier, the one with long golden hair that rippled honey hues under the artificial light, came into her sight. She leaned against the door frame, arms folded across her chest, haughty chin lifted, lips curled into a sneer.

Acerbic fear rolled over Martine's tongue when she recognized the hate blazing from the woman's round black eyes. Clutching the steel gurney with shaking fingers, she tried to look away, but the woman held her gaze and paralyzed her breathing.

"Beat it, Delora." Harrison stepped between them, hands balled into fists. "Get out. Now."

"Remember how much fun we used to have when you lost that temper of yours, Harry? Getting down and dirty in the creek?" Straightening, Delora undulated her lush hips, putting one stiletto-clad foot in front of the other. Sultry red lips parted to reveal even, snowy teeth, and she swayed forward, halting when mere centimeters separated her and Harry.

"And now you're going to screw that." Delora angled a sweetheart chin at Martine. "I doubt you'll get it up. You always did have trouble separating sex and emotions."

Rage pinned Martine to the bed better than any stake the villagers had used to subdue a girl of thirteen. That first time they had shaved her hair off, she had screamed until no sounds came from her lips.

"Cat got your tongue, darling?" Delora placed a scarlet-painted square nail at the center of his collarbone.

"Merchandise's not for sale, mi madre." Harry snatched her wrist, his walnut knuckles paling to cream as he tightened his grip. "We do this to the letter of the law. Your part's done until tomorrow morning. According to Daddy's will you get to wait somewhere else until I say differently. Now, get out."

He shoved her hand away, and she stumbled back three steps, hitting her back against the door. Delora spat out a series of expletives in a Spanglish combination untranslatable to Martine's ears.

"You shit, Harry. I'm going to make you pay for this. Mark my words." She slammed the door on the way out.

Martine crimped the back of the hospital gown together and waited for Harry to explode. Her toes scraped over the thin paper covering the metal gurney.

Plowing his hands through already mussed brown hair, he grimaced and turned to face her. "You'll only have to see her one more time."

She wondered whether Harry would cringe when trying to touch her and gulped when she thought about the secrets he might discover. "What happens now, Monsieur Harrison?"

"Have you eaten for the day?"

Eat? From under lidded eyes she glanced at the fruit bowl on the coffee table and swallowed hard when she noticed the fruit's asymmetrical arrangement. She shook her head.

Cupping her elbow, Harrison urged her to her feet, then held out a bathrobe and set her purse on the gurney. Martine took the robe from him, careful to shield her back from his view, shrugged into the plush terrycloth, and belted the waist all the while staring at the Berber carpet. She had vacuumed similar rugs during her adolescence. She looped her purse straps around her wrist.

"Monsieur Ford, may we finish it now?" Martine couldn't get her tongue around the word; the thought of this man, any man, touching her skin made her want to gag. If they did it now, fast, if she could close her eyes and block out his invading flesh, maybe she would survive.

"Sugar." The way he said the word, drawing out the *r*, *making it warm and sweet so it shrouded her soul with comfort, had her mesmerized. "I can tell you're scared out of your mind. Your voice shakes, your fingers tremble, and the pulse at your throat"—he touched a forefinger to the throbbing vein—"is beating faster than a rabbit cornered by a pack of coyotes."*

"If you did it quickly, right now—"

He clamped a hand over her mouth and shook his head. "No, not like that. Come," he said. "Let's go back to the main suite. Okay, so coconut ice cream's your favorite food, and you love chocolat." He pronounced the word in the French way. "What kind of entrée do you like?"

"\$Pardon moi?" Her mind spun, and she couldn't collect her wayward thoughts.

"What do you want to eat?"

"We eat before?" The food would taste so much better if she didn't have to worry.

"Yes." He didn't elaborate.

Did she have a choice? She willed her mind to function while allowing Harrison to lead her through the penthouse suite into the main bedroom. The king-size bed made her lungs stammer. Harrison caught the direction of her gaze, and he frowned and stated, "Fresh air. Let's step onto the balcony for a while. It looks like it's going to be a spectacular sunset."

Her disjointed thoughts came up with only inane words. "Father Baptiste said the Japanese applaud each sunrise and each sunset because one will never resemble another. Each is unique."

Harrison pried open the sliding glass doors and pulled the leading string for the peach drapes. Clean, cool air flowed across Martine's shoulders, and she inhaled, relishing the tang of Mediterranean brine, the purity of the aroma. She shoved her hands into the robe's front pockets, and the dangling tote bumped her thigh.

"Unfortunately we have to spend the night here. I'll see if we can dine outside."

Touching a forefinger to her shoulder blade, he dropped a room-service leather-bound volume onto a wrought-iron circular table. "Take a look at the menu. Let me know what you want."

She swore her heart stopped, refused to supply nourishment to organs. Her brain had certainly arrested, going into full shutdown mode. Willing her lungs to fill with oxygen, Martine withdrew one hand from the terry pocket and traced the letters carved into the room service's green menu cover with her fingers. "I eat any and everything, Monsieur. S'il vous plait, please, order for the both of us."

"I'm not sure I'll be able to muster coconut ice cream," he said, and his lopsided grin tugged at her rib cage. She knew he tried to soothe her rattled nerves and yearned to thank him for the small mercy. Instead, she flattened her lips and resolved to be mute for the next few minutes.

"Martine?"

"Monsieur?"

The sun dipped below the horizon and shadows dimpled the wide balcony. "Harry, Martine. Call me Harry or Harrison."

Harrison Indiana Ford. A smile tugged at the corners of her mouth. When she'd learned his name and told the Bandoleer's wife, the woman had rented the trilogy for her, and they'd watched it together. Even thinking his name, the Bandoleer, caused Martine to shiver, the criminal overlord's reputation for cruelty and vengeance hadn't matched the mystery of his sobriquet, yet his wife had befriended Martine, and the woman clearly adored her husband.

"I saw *Star Wars*," she volunteered.

"My namesake. My mama was a big fan."

"Your nose—it broke, non?" She said the first words that came into her mind. The only feature on his face not perfect, the slight crook in the bridge of his nose, made her lungs work harder, and she liked him the better for the slight mar.

Martine's back met the balcony's rough finish as twin thoughts stunned her barely functioning brain. She liked him. Worse, she trusted him.

"I should like to shower," she stated, the declaration a bargain for time. Time to garner her defenses, time to recover from his heady charm, time to build a wall he couldn't penetrate, not even with the crooked, rueful smile he flashed at her.

"Of course," he retorted. "I'll do the same and order dinner. I'll buzz you." When she frowned he added, "There are phones in each room. I'll call you when dinner arrives. Would you like me to show you the way to your suite?"

“Non, no,” she mumbled. “I can find my own way.”

She watched him walk away, struck by the grace of his long limbs. In no time at all she found the room she’d been assigned, hurried into the spacious room, and closed and locked the bedroom door. Martine rested her head on the solid oak and let her purse fall to one side. She squeezed her eyes shut, and her mind shattered, the need for pretense, for the mask she always assumed, vanishing more with each draft the paddle ceiling fan wrought from the stuffy air of the heavily perfumed room.

Had they guessed what she’d done?

Did her guilt shine like a lighthouse torch highlighting treacherous rocks?

Martine covered her face with her hands.

I’m as bad as Jean-Claude Fournier.

I did what I had to.

Shaking her head, she gritted her teeth and shed the robe she wore, but not before emptying the pockets of the rolls and bananas she’d stolen from the opulent baskets strewn throughout the main suite. Carefully, she opened the drawer of a bedside table and laid the fruit and yeasty sesame-seed-crust bread onto a tissue already containing a heap of pilfered strawberries. Unable to resist, she popped one ruby treat into her mouth and bit into it.

She closed her eyes and savored the wonderful sweet and tart taste.

It shamed her, this habit of secreting food and stealing soap and other necessities when she no longer had to. But her mind could not control the need nestled deep inside. Stealing was a sin, she knew, but the knowledge did her no good, didn’t decrease the impulsive concealing of food at every opportunity. Would hunger ever leave her? How many times had she gone to bed with a stomach that seemed to eat at her body parts, her insides growling and contracting with cramps that made her want to die?

I am in France. I will never be hungry again.

Blowing out a long, long sigh, she stared at the drawer, at the fruits and the bread, and a muscle in her face twitched. *So be it. I am a child born of poverty and hunger. I will survive.*

But I will no longer take soap or tissues. She raised her head to stare at the ceiling to seal the vow.

In one hour she had to become a wife. Walking to the bathroom she inhaled deeply and tried to muster her tangling fears into a corner. Sex, after all, was simply that. A man and a woman joined. A physical bonding. Her feelings did not matter, could not matter. She would have sex with him. She would have a child for him. Her knees buckled, and she had to grip the door frame for support.

What idiocy made me think I could give up my own child?

C'est la vie. I made my own bed, and I will lie in it. I will fornicate with this man. I will have my child, but I will keep it. She will not know the circumstances of her birth.

A smile played at the corners of her lips.

Because she is wanted, my child, and she will never, never, ever know poverty.

Martine straightened; she squared her shoulders.

I have done the impossible. I fled Haiti. I did not sell myself on the streets.

She refused to let how she'd sold herself form as a thought.

I am marrying a rich man. I will be his wife in less than an hour. And I will have a million euros.

Glancing at the oak-engraved molding rimming the room's ceiling, she won the silent debate that had been bustling in her brain since Harry mentioned the figure he'd been prepared to pay.

A whore's price does not matter, Lord Jesus. I would be a fool to take only a hundred thousand euros when I can have a million.

The matter settled, she turned the knob on the bathroom wall and adjusted the water temperature.

When she'd run away from Jean-Claude the first time, the only way to keep clean had been to bathe in the rain. The days in Haiti were so hot and humid that when the rains came, the drops stung and chilled. And she'd dared not come out during the day, so after the rain when the winds picked up, the cold ate through her skin and settled in her chest, her whole body trembled, and her teeth chattered so loudly she'd feared recapture.

Non, do not go there, Martine. You are here now.

Hot showers. She grinned in anticipation, goose bumps forming on her forearms. A luxury she'd only dreamed of, warm water and steam, and from now on, for twelve long months, she would have only hot showers.

Her mind played over all the delicious pleasures she'd encountered since arriving in Marseille. Chocolat, strawberries, whipped cream, food—endless, wonderful, sumptuous food. Tonight she would lie in sheets made of butter. When she'd touched the magnificent cotton linen earlier, the sheer pleasure had almost done her in. That people lived like this, taking these blissful delights for granted, never served to amaze her. *Tonight I fornicate, I sell myself, but I sleep in butter. And I will not be hungry.*

Life could be worse.

Chapter Three

Harrison Indiana Ford stared unseeingly at his reflection in the bathroom mirror. He was a married man as of forty-five minutes ago.

An army of lawyers hadn't been able to prevent his arranged marriage, hadn't been able to stop the ridiculous exams required both before and after he fucked Martine, hadn't been able to prove that the will Delora had produced a scant month ago was false.

Trouble was Daddy wrote a new will at the drop of a hat. The fact that the one Delora produced had been witnessed by Judge Kinky Wilson, a descendant of one of founding members of the Petroleum Club of Houston and a scion of Texas good-ole-boy society, had made the task of proving the will false virtually impossible in the time provided.

Marriage. Not something he had ever aspired to.

Prime her hard and fast, and get the fucking over and done with.

He didn't believe his own thoughts.

No way in hell would St. Pete cooperate.

Not if his stepmother had installed cameras and bugs.

Nah, his dick was too ornery when it came to the stepmother who'd broken Harry in, in the biblical sense, before marrying his daddy.

Three of his buddies had reconnoitered the Carlton Cannes penthouse suite. The ex-SEALs had found two cameras and three microphones. The SEALs had removed the devices and declared the room clean.

So why is the back of my neck doing that sniper-in-the-vicinity god-awful tingle?

His gaze fell to his suddenly half-hard dick, and he snorted.

Shee-it.

Good old St. Pete wasn't having any problems visualizing Martine Bellamy beneath him, her butter-soft café-latte skin touching his, those Lady Godiva thighs wrapped around his waist, her dusky voice moaning in that sexy French accent. Fully engorged now, balls aching, he straightened, belted the burgundy silk bathrobe, tilted his worn brown Stetson left and back, checked his reflection in the mirror, and wondered for the kazillionth time how his mother had known he'd grow up to look like the pretty-boy version of his famous actor namesake, save for the broken nose.

Martine had certainly noted that mar.

The corners of his mouth curled into a sneer, and he flipped himself the finger. Spitting out a string of expletives, he inhaled and then opened the door.

The Carlton Cannes's penthouse suite, named for Sean Connery, oozed tasteful seduction and elegance, boasted a mansion-size square footage. A sunset riot of orange, yellow, and blue flames rumbaed in the fireplace that dominated the far wall. Piped music—he recognized the tune, “Bolero”—served as background for the rhythmical snaps, crackles, and hisses of the gas-fired blaze. The odorous taint of sweet pine burning floated on the soft swishing of the paddle fan doing a slow Rio Grande curl in the center of the ornate oak-paneled ceiling.

Room service had delivered their canapés and a bottle of champagne, but night had fallen, and the temperature on the balcony had dropped precipitously. Dinner would take place inside walls and ceilings, which probably had eyes and ears fit for a meeting between the pope and president.

A laden cart stood to the side of an intimate table for two decorated with fine china, sparkling crystal, sterling silver cutlery, and a scattering of miniature vases filled with delicate white flowers framed by emerald leaves.

Money could buy anything—a virgin, marriage, and the perfect setting for conceiving an heir.

Close your eyes, and you'd never know an army of chefs, craftsmen, architects, and electricians had created the illusion of fiery warmth, luxury, and coziness.

Illusions.

His life had been built on one after another.

Harry halted in midstep when Martine glided through the doorway of the “Her” bedroom opposite. The muted lighting, aided and abetted by the glow of dozens of ivory pillar candles scattered throughout the living area, cast a shimmery radiance over her beautiful skin. The golden almond color of her flesh had mesmerized him from the first second they met several hours ago.

Frigging hell, the woman in Grasse—she'd had skin the color of Martine's, hadn't she?

Shadows waltzed over Martine's high forehead and hid her black eyes.

Black eyes. The woman in Grasse didn't have black eyes.

Candlelight danced over incredible cheekbones, which spoke of a tribal heritage, and accented a straight, thin nose a tad too long for anything but the arrogance of nobility. His gaze dropped lower. He couldn't take his eyes off a full mouth that ignited wicked, sinful images. Rosy lips, the top one full and lush and a perfect shape, the lower an oomph thinner but plumper right in the center.

St. Pete did a soft-shoe under his bathrobe, moistening the cool fabric. Harry shot his nether parts a surreptitious peek and stifled a groan when he saw the dark, wet splotches on the bathrobe's fabric.

“Dinner’s here.” Harry did a quick about-face so the evidence of St. Pete’s eager salute wouldn’t be obvious to Martine. “Shall we?” He waved a hand at the table and took three long strides to the far chair whose back faced the fireplace.

He’d never seen a woman move with such effortless grace, those long legs sliding across the plush carpet, the only sound the supple cloth whispering against her body. Entranced, he almost forgot his manners and had to dart to the other side to ease her chair from the table and then gently shift her into place.

His chin grazed the rich milk-chocolate curls falling to her nape when he slid her chair forward, and he inhaled the aroma of honeysuckle and lemons. As he lifted his head, he caught a glimpse of small perfect ears with tiny conch earrings decorating the lobes.

“Champagne?” He let his hands rest on the back of her chair, and he allowed his fingers to brush the tempting flesh the robe’s shawl collar bared along one shoulder.

At least she didn’t flinch away from the slight caress, but her voice when she answered stumbled. “As you wish.”

Fucking hell if she didn’t have the sexiest voice he’d ever heard, laced with the dusk of just-had-screaming-sex hoarseness. St. Pete jiggled his impatience as Harry popped the cork from the bottle, then poured the fizzing liquid into two glasses. The wine had a fruity aroma, and the bubbles formed a rim of froth as he set the flute to the right of her glistening sterling knife.

The courage and pride that had kept her going during the gynecological exams required to prove her virginity dissolved during the three seconds it took for him to circle the table and take a seat. Her plump bottom lip quivered, and her nostrils flared ever so slightly. The carbonated liquor held her attention, and she didn’t look up when he cleared his throat.

Sitting, he slipped his hand under the pristine tablecloth and adjusted his erection, squeezing the head of his dick in reprimand. St. Pete wanted full speed ahead and straight to ignition.

Martine’s long, elegant fingers curled around the fragile crystal stem, but the glass made a shaky ascension to her mouth. She hadn’t noticed the magnificent one-eighty panoramic view of the Bay of Cannes, and not once had she inspected the luxurious contents of the twelve-bedroom suite. Martine tipped her head back and downed the entire glass of champagne.

Okay, if he were she, he’d get a little tipsy too.

Harry leaned over and refilled Martine’s glass when she set the flute on the table.

Evidence of Martine’s nervousness abounded. She wouldn’t meet his gaze, and her pink tongue snaked out to lick the corner of her lip every few seconds. The silence stretched to the tautness of a fishing line taken to the darkest ocean depths by an eighty-pound tarpon.

“Where’re you from?”

Martine's fingers fluttered around the crystal stem. She knocked the glass sideways, and the flute tumbled to the carpet, liquid spattering the shell pink linen and the burgundy-and-cream-patterned carpet.

"Merde," she whispered and bent to retrieve the glass. "Pardon, pardon, Monsieur." She straightened, set the crystal on the table, stared at a tulip vase filled with fresh sweet pea stems and baby's breath, and said, "Monsieur—"

"Harry or Harrison, Martine."

"This." She waved a hand at the table. "It is not necessary. We have a business arrangement, non? Can we not do the fornication and then eat?"

St. Pete collapsed like an overinflated helium balloon hit by a thirty-man buckshot squad. Harry couldn't stop the bitter twist of his lips.

Forni-fucking-cation.

How often had Daddy gone on and on about forni-fucking-cation?

Harry tipped his hat down over his forehead, effectively shadowing his features until he could force his clenched jaw and flattened mouth to relax.

"*Mon Dieu.* Pardon, pardon, pardon, Monsieur, I have offended you."

She fisted her hands over her mouth, but Harry heard the half-hiccuffed sob she tried to stifle. He shuddered, anticipating a flood of waterworks and hysterics.

Rattlesnake piss. Time for plan B.

Harry scraped his chair back and almost vaulted over the table. Her eyes widened, the white corneas making her pupils and irises Bambi-huge. He didn't have time for reassurances and had to get her out of there faster than Speedy Gonzales. He scooped her into his arms and jog-walked to the terrace doors, surprised she weighed so little for such a tall woman. Thank the almighty she didn't struggle, because her long limbs would have loosened his hold on her when he fumbled with the lock on the French doors.

As soon as he stepped onto the stone balcony, he set her down and turned to close the door. Mediterranean brine bore by an icy mistral gust, one of the famous winds of France's Provence region, sailed across the wide patio. Harry swung around to face Martine and found her hugging herself, her lips pursed, staring unblinkingly at his throat.

She froze like a desert rat mesmerized by the hiss of a rattler about to strike. She swallowed, the movement imperceptible to those not trained as an interrogator in Afghanistan to pick up subtle distress cues. The muscles in her slender neck worked. She showed no other sign of nervousness, poignant features impassive, fathomless eyes unreadable, but her toes had turned inward, a sure sign of pure terror.

Until the war he'd never known fear smelled the same from race to race, from sex to sex, from adult to child. And he could scent the dread oozing from the slight sheen of perspiration barely visible above the corners of her mouth. He had the urge to stroke her spine, to soothe the fear emanating from her still form.

She swallowed again, and the movement did him in.

“Ah shucks, sugar,” he murmured and tugged her tight against his chest.

She went rigid, knees locked, vertebrae aligning in a jerk so her stomach sucked away from him.

“Listen to me carefully,” he whispered, all the while scanning the ivory balustrades for any hint of irregular dark circles, any sign of the hidden surveillance his gut told him remained. No matter what the SEALs had said, Harry knew they’d been bugged and were being watched. “We’re getting out of here.”

Her control had been absolute until that moment; his stroking palms detected the barest hint of a quiver in her deltoids. “Monsieur...the contract? You are sending me away?”

“Too late for that. You and I are stuck with each other for the duration.”

Her rigid back relaxed a tad, and her soft exhale feathered the chest hair bared by his robe. St. Pete’s crest grew slick.

Down, boy, Harry ordered, and he squeezed his eyes shut, his brain sifting various methods of calming her.

“Just follow my lead, but no talking while we’re inside, okay?”

She nodded, and a stray curl tickled his collarbone. St. Pete twitched.

Setting her at arm’s length, Harry tipped her chin with a finger and asked, “Ready?”

Again, a slight nod. She met his gaze directly, and the fierce pride she’d exhibited before returned with a vengeance. “Yes, Mon—” She shook her head, then continued, “Yes, Harrison.”

He had no siblings, had never felt pride for another human being in memory aside from his mama, but damn he liked her style. Reluctantly Harry broke contact with her supple flesh, and he reached into the pocket of his robe for his iPhone.

Holding one of her hands loosely, he thumbed a text message to Terry O’Connor. *Plan B ASAP.*

The response came within twenty-five seconds.

I figured - 15.

Adrenaline coursed through his blood, and Harry grinned at the iPhone’s screen. He hadn’t fought an enemy, save for internal demons, in years. The future suddenly seemed brighter than the stars on a Texas plain in the middle of nowhere at midnight.

He brought her hand to his mouth and kissed the center of her palm, ignoring the way her spine straightened.

So she’d sold him her virginity. Long ago he’d sold his soul to Satan.

Special-ops mode kicked in—divide the mission into achievable, incremental goals, and proceed. “The suite’s bugged. There are cameras in there.” Harry hooked a thumb over his shoulder. “Delora, my stepmother, plans to record our, as you so

blithely put it, fornicating. St. Pete ain't going for that. We're getting out of here while the going's good. A friend and his wife are going to take our place."

Martine's breathing hitched, and her eyes dominated her face. She frowned, her lips formed the words *St. Pete*, but she said nothing aloud and stared at him like he was the Loch Ness monster. All the color drained from her complexion, and her mouth opened and closed once, twice. He'd probably confused the daylights out of Martine with his reference to St. Pete, the name Terry'd given Harry's randy cock after a particularly lewd R & R spent in a famous Thai bordello.

"Don't speak once we're inside. Not a word no matter what happens, okay?"

Tawny eyebrows lifted a fraction, and her nostrils quivered a tad, but she lifted her head and replied, "As you wish, Mon—Harrison."

The prearranged switcheroo, plan B, went without a hitch.

As they walked through the streets of Cannes, intermittent streetlights revealed the slow paling of Martine's caramel complexion, and she swallowed visibly but squared her shoulders and asked, "Cameras. Bugs—not insects, but the spy things like in James Bond? Why would she do this, Mon—Harry?"

He had a damned hunch that Delora planned to stream the tape or a portion of it on the Internet. This whole will farce was her way of getting back at him for refusing her after Daddy'd died. How she ever imagined they could pick up from where they'd left off ten years ago... He scrubbed his chin. "Yeah, like in James Bond. She's vicious." And that sex DVD would've rocked Houston oil society.

Fifteen minutes later Harry massaged his right shoulder as the yacht, the *Glory*, maneuvered from its Cannes dock, heading for a small, privately owned cay near the Italian coastline. He gulped in the familiar and soothing salty pungency of the Mediterranean Sea as the ship accelerated. Martine stood beside him, her slender fingers curled around the *Glory's* aft railing, curls ruffling when a lazy wind drifted aft to stern.

Harry glanced to her profile and caught her chewing the inside of her left cheek, more emotion in the simple gesture than she'd showed since they met.

She looked like she was about to upchuck.

"Do you get seasick?"

A fringe of spidery eyelashes fluttered three times in rapid succession.

"Non. Not even when the storms whipped the Gulf of Gonâve—" Fist to mouth she choked back a gasp, and their gazes met before she quickly averted her eyes.

The name tickled a memory neuron that refused to blossom.

"Look at me, Martine."

For a second her cheeks hollowed in and out; then she gave a side-glance to the lapping sea, lifted her chin, and stared into his eyes.

St. Pete saluted as if the commander in chief had issued a command.

"For you to get your money, I have to fulfill the conditions of my father's will."

He studied her face. She hadn't so much as blinked faster, but her jaw clenched a mite.

She nodded.

Her lashes fluttered, and she studied a spot between his mouth and his nose. Her throat worked, and when she answered, her voice had coarsened. "You need a virgin bride, a child of both our loins, and to be married when the child is born."

A child of both our loins? Who speaks that way these days?

For a second his concentration wavered; then he refocused. "Correct on all points. And what that means is that we'll be living together for at least a year. And my stepmother will be trying to break us up every second of that time. With me on this?"

Her lids descended to shutter her eyes, and she took a deep breath, her firm breasts rising and filling the ivory shell top she wore. "*Je comprende.*" Martine met his gaze directly. "We have an enemy, non?"

Harry gave in to temptation and brushed his lips on her forehead before pulling back to lock their stares together. "Dead right. We have a formidable enemy. From now on, it's you and me against my stepmother. I have to trust you, and you have to trust me. I'm not saying that's going to happen overnight. All I'm saying is that we have to have each other's backs."

The tip of her tongue touched her upper lip, and she frowned, actually frowned, three creases etching the space between her brows.

"Go ahead," he urged, splaying his palms on her backside and nudging her closer. "Ask me what it means."

"I am not an imbecile," she snapped. "It means we fight the enemy back-to-back, non? Like D'Artagnan and his *amis* in the *Three Musketeers*?"

What I'd give to see her in a full-blown temper, those obsidian eyes flinty and sparking.

Damn but she scrambled his concentration.

"Precisely. So are we agreed? We have each other's backs?"

Her hesitation had his lungs stuttering.

"Oui, Mon—yes. Yes, Harrison." She said the words in a quiet, even tone.

"Okay. Let's go eat." Sliding one arm around her waist, he sidestepped, and she mimicked his actions. They now faced the stern. Harry pointed to the top deck. "I asked the chef to serve us dinner up there. The view is phenomenal. From there you can see clear to Italy."

"Italy," she repeated, staring at the stairs.

"Ladies first," he ordered, gentling the command by bowing at the waist and waving an arm at the top tier.

By the time they reached the balcony deck, St. Pete leaked precum and fought the constraints of his pants. She had an athletic rear, and those Vegas showgirl legs

had his mouth watering, and lurid images of her naked body doing a samba hazed his vision.

“*C’est magnifique*,” she whispered, halting in the middle of the top deck.

“Absolutely,” he concurred, unable to stop gawking at the first unmasked expressions flitting across her face. Her eyes, big and round and hypnotic, inched along the vista of the Mediterranean coastline as if she were memorizing the scene. Long, muscled arms hung loosely at her sides, and she stood with her legs hip-width apart to brace against the *Glory’s* gentle rocking.

Edging forward he snugged a palm over the curve of her narrow waist, and giving her time to read his intent, he snaked the other hand into the same position and tugged her back to his chest. She flinched, but before her tension accelerated, he crooned, “Nothing’s going to happen until you’re ready. We have all night and then some.”

She dipped her chin. “I would prefer we just do it, Harrison. Very quickly. It is only fornic—”

He cupped a hand over her mouth. “Never say that word again. Not in my presence. And for your information we are going to make love, not, not *that*. Got it?”

Shee-it. Amazing how the freaking word slammed St. Pete limp.

It took every gram of training to refocus.

“How’s about we sit and have a bite to eat?” He spun her around to face him. The top of her head met his forehead.

Unable to resist he touched his mouth to her forehead, his teeth clamped together to prevent his wayward tongue from escaping.

Moving with slow-mo deliberate precision, she rested her palms on his cotton sweater, that sculpted chin jutted up, and she looked him in the eyes and answered, “I, too, am hungry.”

His testicles engorged, every miniscule pubic hair tingled, but he didn’t dare surrender to St. Pete’s sycophantic begging. Harry’s buttocks clenched hard enough to shoot bursts of the most painful daggers over every inch of his groin, he forced his hands from the ridge of her behind, gestured to the table and bench curved into one corner of the deck, and croaked, “Shall we?”

The *Glory’s* bosun appeared the minute they sat.

“Martine, you remember Austen Tanner from the hotel? He’s also the *Glory’s* bosun and a decided PITA.” Harry’d ensured he and Martine sat side by side facing the twinkling hazy streetlights doing a dot-to-dot zigzag along the steep gradient of the hills rising from the coast. He felt more than saw Martine’s automatic shrinking into the padded bench. She frowned at the acronym.

“PITA is pain in the ass,” he explained.

“The chef wanted me to ask if you have any allergies or if there are any foods you aren’t fond of.” Austen transferred a dome-covered dish from the tray to the table and then set down a carafe.

“No,” she replied.

Harry barely caught her low murmur above the slapping of the Mediterranean on the yacht’s hull.

“In that case, may I present your amuse-bouche?” With an exaggerated flourish, he whipped the silver lid off the white platter on the table, and immediately the aroma of charred shrimp and rosemary leaves enveloped the deck. “I’ll leave you two to enjoy. Harry, buzz me when you’re ready for the next course.”

Martine stared at the platter, examining each of the ten different bites displayed on the white porcelain. She didn’t seem to notice Austen’s quiet departure, her attention fixated on the food. Her pert breasts rose and fell as she inhaled, and she closed her eyes as if on the brink of gastronomic orgasm.

St. Pete tap-danced against his linen trousers; they’d changed so hastily in the hotel that he hadn’t bothered with boxers.

“You do like shrimp, then?” he asked while filling her wineglass with the sangria. A burst of orange-lemon perfume hit his nostrils.

Shifting a tad on the plush leatherette, she dipped her chin. “Oui—yes. I like them very much.”

Lifting his glass he said, “Shall we toast the success of our venture?”

Her lips tugged upward and flattened. She searched his gaze, then answered, “Success.”

Their glasses clinked.

The tinder of lust simmering in his groin sparked and ignited. Harry gulped a third of the goblet in one go.

Martine surreptitiously sniffed the wine before she sipped, and when she swallowed, her eyelids fluttered half-closed.

Harry slipped his arm along the back of the bench. He picked his favorite canapé from the platter. “Here, try this. It’s one of my favorites. Shrimp and goat cheese with basil in puff pastry. Open,” he coaxed, brushing the warm, crisp dough in the center of her mouth.

“I—”

He slid the amuse-bouche between her parted lips, and their glances bolted together. Harry couldn’t remember ever being so aware of another human being.

As she chewed, her eyelids did a little half shutter, St. Pete jumped, and Harry fell under her spell. Three flakes of golden brown pastry dusted her bottom lip.

Her eyes flew open when he lapped the buttery speckles off her lip. One fleck resisted his tongue, so he captured her lip between his and sucked gently.

Sweet almighty, she tasted like heaven and hell and spun sugar. Harry leaned in, and his tongue and St. Pete did a Fred-and-Ginger tango, the little head grabbing command of his frying brain. His palm curled around the side of her neck; her smooth, supple skin rippled under his touch. He traced her lips, learning their shape. The tang of the sea blended with her honeysuckle bouquet, she filled his

senses to overflowing, and he tickled the center of her mouth. Her nails bit into his shoulders, hard, sharp, and insistent.

Jerking up, he swept his hand away from her neck and breathed in.

Shee-it. I fucked up. Too much too fast.

Determined to set things right, Harry shifted sideways. She lay exactly where he'd left her, wedged into the bench, her head cradled in the corner. One forefinger traced the path his tongue had, following the ridge of her lower lip. Her swollen mouth glistened, her hooded eyes and the shadows concealing her emotions.

"Martine..."

Her head whipped up, she elbowed off the bench back, met his stare like an adolescent about to give a double dare, and ordered, "*Montrez-moi.*" She shook her head, and her curls swirled and twirled. "Show me."

"That was your first kiss," he muttered. "We have to slow down, Martine. I promised myself your first time would be special—"

She lunged at him, wrapped her arms around his neck, climbed onto his lap, and smacked her lips hard to his; then her little tongue stabbed at his mouth. He groaned, his lips parted, and she slid inside.

Chapter Four

“Slow down, sugar,” Harrison said, his voice husky and low.

His lips moved on Martine’s, and a wave of his wine- and orange-scented breath feathered her nostrils. Her mouth vibrated, the sound of his words echoing over her lips.

Très facile, this kissing. Why did I think it would be revolting?

He sucked on her bottom lip, his teeth grazing the length, his tongue tracing and soothing in the tingling wake.

Who knew a tongue could be so délicieux?

Martine stuck hers into his mouth. His thumb caressed her chin, tugging their lips apart, and he leaned his forehead against hers. The skin-to-skin contact spiraled warmth around her neck, corkscrewed down her torso, and coiled down her legs. He lifted his head, touched a finger to her cheek, and reached over to pick up the wineglass.

I’m doing it all wrong. He can think. When he does it to me, I can only feel.

“Have a sip.” He touched the wine goblet to a spot that throbbed and pulsed as if the flesh of her mouth had a life of its own. She swallowed a teaspoonful of the fruity liquor and kept her gaze downcast, centered on his throat, on the rope of muscle binding his neck and shoulders. He set the crystal on the table and kissed her temple. His palm cupped her bottom, and her stomach shrank and hollowed out as a heated flutter rippled across her hips and up her back.

“I like this position.”

Mon Dieu, I’m sitting on top of him, on top of his cock, my legs spread like a whore’s.

The hardness grazing her sex twitched and enlarged and expanded. She couldn’t help but gape in the direction of his cock and couldn’t stifle her gasp. Shame roasted her neck and face at the sight that met her eyes—her skirt gathered at the tops of her thighs, her legs straddling his groin, damp spots glistening on his beige trousers.

A thumb and finger captured her chin and applied gentle pressure, forcing Martine to look at him. “Relax, sugar. This time let me kiss you. I’ve got your back, remember?”

When he called her sugar, Martine caramelized like thick brown cane syrup turning molten and golden in the bottom of a frying pan. Then his mouth slanted

over hers, and her thoughts splintered and scattered, and she flew from sensation to sensation.

His tongue teased her parted lips, tickling, lapping, and licking. She opened her mouth wider, offering her surrender, willing to follow his lead, longing to follow wherever he led. In a zillion years she'd never have believed kisses came in so many varieties. Long, lingering tastes when he swept the edges of her teeth; short, hungry explorations of the roof of her mouth; a tingling suckling of one lip; a toothed sawing of the other.

When he touched the tip of his tongue to hers, she leaned full against him so they were hip to hip, belly to belly, her breasts flattened on his T-shirt-swathed chest. When his mouth pulled away from hers, she tangled her hands in his hair, her lips straining to find his, her mouth opening over the dimple in his chin as he lifted his head and cupped her jaw.

Gradually his features went from blurred to sharp as she blinked. His thumb swept the sensitive spot beneath her bottom lip, and he whispered, "Now *you* kiss *me*." His hold dropped away, and he rested his head on the padded bench.

The scent of his aftershave mingled with the wine on his breath, and the slight puffs of air emanating from his parted lips butterfly-caressed the flesh of her cheek. Martine let her instincts take command. First, she kissed his jaw, tasting the salty spiciness of him, closing her eyes at the sheer pleasure of being able to do so, of the safety of being in control. Then she nuzzled the side of his face, marveling at the way his soft stubble prickled tiny sparks from her mouth to her navel. Here he smelled of soap and cigar and man.

She laid her cheek against his and opened her eyes and caught the glint of a diamond stud twinkling on his earlobe. Tracing a kissing path to his ear, she hesitated, then touched the cold, round stone and bent to lick the smooth surface.

He made a choking sound, and she froze and glanced at him over one shoulder. Her confidence vanished like a thief in the night, stealing away in the seconds it took to bring his features into focus. His head turned, their eyes met, and she forgot about breathing, forgot to feel self-conscious, forgot to feel afraid.

"Kiss me, sugar. Put me out of my misery."

I make him feel the way he makes me feel—aching and empty and wanting.

Her lips curved, and she snaked her way across his body, her gaze still locked on to his, framed his face with her palms like he'd done hers, and touched her mouth to his. She mimicked his earlier actions, tracing his lips and then biting his flesh softly. When she grazed the tip of his tongue, his nostrils flared, searing short pants over her top lip, and a wildness took hold of her the way the voodoo spirits snared control of a mortal's soul.

Hungry to get close, so close their breaths mingled, so close their hearts would beat with the same rhythm, so close he could join their bodies together, she sucked the rough surface, her heartbeat spiking when he groaned into her mouth, the rumble firing moisture to her center. She writhed against him, her pelvis rubbing

against his groin. The lingering traces of fear and apprehension evaporated as the mad euphoria climbed to the heavens, to the stars shining above them.

His warm palm slid under her top, stroked her bare skin, and a strangled sound escaped her throat. One hand slipped between their bodies under the crepe material of her blouse, and his thumb rolled over her nipple. The caress electrified her pores and sent sunspot heat to the throbbing and pulsing folds at the apex of her thighs. He took control of her kiss, slanting his lips over hers, teasing her tongue with his, circling, sliding in and out of her mouth in tormenting slowness.

“Ahem.” In the distance, somewhere far away, a throat cleared, but the sound hovered above the reality of his torturous tasting and touching.

Harrison jerked his lips from hers, and he tucked her face into the nook between his chin and chest. “This better be good, Austen,” he growled.

“Two vessels left the bay and are headed this way. I thought you might want to take precautions. I arranged for a cold antipasto to be served in your cabin, and we’ve stocked your bar.”

“We’ll be outta here in a few.”

“I’ve arranged for us to head back around four a.m. tomorrow before the early-morning workers start heading into town. You’ll still have the cover of darkness to get back into the hotel. Want me to buzz you with a heads-up an hour before we fire the engines?”

“Yeah.”

Martine listened to Austen’s barely audible retreating footsteps, and the insane passion of moments before vanished with each hushed swoosh.

“He’s gone, Martine. Let’s set you to rights.” Curving one arm across the top of her thighs and the other midback, he lumbered to his feet and then slid her down the length of his body. Fingers curled around the sides of her waist, he pulled back and murmured, “You look much like I feel. Dazed and lust-drunk. It’s a good thing Austen interrupted us. Things were getting a mite out of hand.”

By the time they had reached the entrance to the yacht’s second level, Martine’s lungs no longer burned, and the roaring in her ears had subsided. But the aching and burning making her nipples spark when they scratched the silk top wouldn’t abate.

If I’d only known... She shook her head. *Concentrate. I must concentrate. He cannot see my back. I must keep my bodice on. But his hand felt so good.*

She pressed her lips together, fighting the small smile tugging at the corners, and sneaked a peak at Harry’s profile, the stubborn angle of his square chin, and elated relief won. She ducked her head to hide her sudden grin. *I am whoring for money, but I think I may enjoy fornicating with you, Harrison Indiana Ford.*

Martine had never been on a boat like the *Glory*, and though she tried to stay focused, her eyes darted back and forth as they ventured down a narrow corridor alighting on a burnished wooden frame decorated with glass-encased swords and

daggers and another displaying two side-by-side nautical maps of the Mediterranean.

The hallway opened into a wide space, and she glimpsed chairs and a sofa and a bar before Harry towed her to a door where he halted.

"These are my quarters," he said. "Now yours as well." He indicated a keypad to the right of the door. "The pass code is 071069." He punched the numbers as he spoke, an LED circle glowed green, and he turned the knob.

"I believe this is customary," he quipped, bent his knees slightly, and swept Martine off her feet. He carried her across the threshold, kicking the door shut behind them.

Harry set her down, and Martine curled her fingers around his forearm to steady herself. He shifted behind her and pulled her back against his chest, firming his hands around her waist. Resting his chin lightly on the top of her head, tipping her head back and left with his forefinger, he looked into her eyes, and his mouth crooked up at one corner. "Let's grab some grub."

She was hungry, but then she was always starving. Too many years of never knowing when or where she'd find her next meal left her with a mental hunger that never left her belly.

Martine surveyed Harry's quarters. A small sitting area held an alcove with a microwave, minifridge, and a coffeepot with a couple of white porcelain mugs. A flat-panel TV hung on a wall opposite a wide sofa tucked against a wall.

Through an arch to the left of the couch, she glimpsed a large bed nestled into the curve of a half circle of windows with a built-in low row of shelves acting as the headboard. On the right of the arch, a table fronted a bench nestled into a cozy corner. The table held a cornucopia of mouthwatering antipasti.

"Let's see what we have here." He cupped her shoulder as they both surveyed the dishes displayed on the table. "Stuffed miniature peppers, prosciutto with goat cheese and basil, sausages, mushroom tarts. Want to stick with the sangria? Or would you prefer champagne or wine?"

"The sangria, please," Martine replied. The champagne had tickled her nose and made the room spin. Her stomach growled silently, and saliva coated her tongue as the smell of tomato and roasted garlic hit her nose. *Will I ever feel full?*

"Dig in." Harry gently pushed her onto the bench and sat, his hips brushing hers. "Try this one. Open."

Martine opened her lips to tell him she could feed herself, and he popped a prosciutto cylinder into her mouth. The burst of intense flavor disarmed her indignation. She chewed, and each bite revealed another surprise—a hint of green olive there, smoky red pepper here—and her eyes closed automatically.

"Lord almighty, I love the way you eat." Harry's breath skipped across the side of her face.

Her lids flew open.

"Try a meatball."

She accepted the canapé from his fingers and bit into the meat and cheese.

“Like?” he asked.

“Délicieux. Delicious,” she replied after swallowing. “Now you.”

They fed each other, taking turns, Harry insisting she take a sip of the sangria after each hors d'oeuvre. Gradually Martine relaxed, and when Harry interspersed tongue-drugging kisses with food, not only didn't she object, but she anticipated his mouth as much as she did the nibbles.

Somehow, they ended up lying on the bed facing each other. The wine had warmed Martine's insides and her extremities. She arched her back slightly, relishing the downy softness of the bedcovers against her bare calves.

“Dessert?” Harry asked, reaching an arm over his head.

Martine pushed up onto one elbow and couldn't prevent her lips from lifting at the corners. The built-in headboard had three shelves, the lowest of which contained about a hundred hardback books. The top shelf displayed stacked magazines and cases of computer games.

But the middle shelf made her beam, and she had to bite the insides of her cheeks to stifle the impulse to throw her arms around his neck. Strawberries, some covered in white chocolate, some in milk chocolate, some plain, some dusted with powdered sugar—bowls and bowls of the glistening red fruit filled the space above Harry's and Martine's heads.

“Austen said you ate all the strawberries from the fruit bowl in the hotel suite.” Harry plucked one plain berry from a crystal container cradled in one palm. “Open.”

“I can *oofg*—” Martine couldn't speak around the fruit in her mouth, so she bit into it and didn't bother to choke back a soft moan as the sweet-tart liquid coated her tongue. She'd discovered strawberries in the markets in Marseille. Once a month she splurged, buying a selection of different berries; she'd yet to meet one she didn't adore.

“Good?” One eyebrow quirked up, and he shot her an uneven grin.

She nodded, chewing slowly, savoring the sour and sugar flavor of the fruit, her eyes half closing in sheer ecstasy. A sticky drop leaked from her mouth and trailed the middle of her chin. Before she could swipe the trickling juice, Harry's tongue lapped at the liquid, tickled the corner of her mouth, and when her lips parted, swept in.

Their tongues, morsels of berries, and sweet fluid mingled and merged, doing a slow waltz. Harry's palm slipped over her clavicle, curled around her nape, and his fingers tangled in her curls. A whimper she couldn't prevent welled up her throat. Hot prickles covered Martine's exposed flesh, her skin quivering under the stroking of the calloused pads of his fingertips.

His arm curved around her waist, and his open hand splayed over her ass, urging her closer, sliding her pelvis against his groin. Her breasts rubbed on the cotton of his T-shirt, and her nipples puckered, throbbing fire and ice at the same

time. His teeth captured the tip of her tongue, and he bore down softly, the burning-chill sensation echoing in the throbbing wetness of her folds. Martine canted her hips forward, and a frustrated groan escaped her lips when her mound made contact with his erection.

Her hands kneaded the hard muscles of his chest, fingers moving side to side, flicking at the small nipples she discovered, and she cried out when his thumb and forefinger pinched hers lightly and rolled it between his fingertips. He drank in the sound, his mouth eating at hers, nipping the bottom lip, holding the flesh hostage.

He captured her hand and slowly dragged her palm down his chest, over the slight hollow of his belly button, onto the rigid, pulsing head of his erection. She flinched.

Mon Dieu. So big, so very big.

When had he opened the front of his trousers?

She had not survived the streets of Port-au-Prince by having faint courage. Martine slid her finger over the crown of his cock. His organ felt smooth, like the feel of silk and satin, yet the head throbbed and pulsed against her palm. She traced the rough ridge, ran her thumb across the slit in the crown, and the pads of her fingers grew slick.

Warm air kissed her stomach as he gathered her skirt above her waist. His palm covered her belly, slid to the thong the Gypsy Bandoleer's wife had insisted she purchase, and he drew the material down, edging the fabric over her hips. She lifted her bottom off the bed, and he slid the scrap of silk off her legs. His fingers combed softly through the curls between her thighs, his touch electrifying. Only when he separated her folds did she realize she too was slick and moist and weeping excitement and desire.

"Oh," she said, the word almost a yelp, when his thumb stroked a spot that made her hips arch off the bed. "Non."

He stilled. "Did I hurt you?"

"Non. Oui. More." Her hand crept behind his head, her fingers snarling in his hair, and she tugged him back to her, opening her mouth over his, sliding her tongue to touch his, to stroke the nubby surface. His fingers moved easily as her folds grew creamier, the dampness coating the tops of her thighs.

Harry eased her onto her back. A few tugs and pulls and he had the silk bodice unbuttoned, exposing her breasts.

"So beautiful," he crooned, his fingers flickering a blistering outline of her breast, and a voice in her head screamed a warning—*Your back, your back. Do something now.*

She'd seen the whores in the allies.

Holding her breath Martine scooted onto her side, reached for his erection, and curled both hands around his cock. Mesmerized when the thing jerked and pulsed, almost singed by the heat of it, she gawked as his arousal grew thicker and the head redder. Using her thumb she traced the underside of the crown, and his

hardness swelled and burned under her touch. Harry covered her hand and showed her how to caress him, curling her palm around his engorged cock and sliding her fingers up over the head, down the damp length, and over to cup his balls, repeating the process over and over.

“Christ,” he growled as he loosened her hold on him. “I can’t hold back any longer.”

Dazed and unable to stop staring at his cock poking through his pants front as he rolled off the bed, she didn’t register his rapid-fire shedding of his clothes until his long legs settled between hers and the hard length of him massaged her bare sex, no barrier separating the skin-to-skin contact. His mouth latched on to her breast, her heels dug into the mattress, and she couldn’t stifle the sounds spewing from her lips. Didn’t know what she pleaded for, couldn’t think, could only follow his mouth, his fingers, writhing and squirming to have his hands, his lips, touch, lick everywhere all at once.

“You okay, sugar?”

He lapped at her breast, and the soft pull of his teeth on her aching nipple made the walls of her sex clench and jerk, and she murmured, “Oui, non. Please.”

Martine’s lungs stopped functioning when the head of his cock rimmed her entrance. Her legs fell open, and she went still, her heartbeat accelerating, the drumming so loud in her ears she could hear nothing else.

“A quick cut, sugar.” His mouth took hers, his tongue plunging in, his hands gripped her hips, and he lifted her off the mattress. His cock impaled her, one hard thrust as his thickness stretched her walls and he filled her to the womb.

She winced at the jagged pinch as he broke through her hymen, the sting bee-sharp intense. He froze, and from somewhere far away, Martine realized he waited on a sign from her. She opened her eyes to find him staring at her face, beads of sweat trickling down from one temple. His parted lips bared clamped teeth, and his jaw worked furiously.

The twinge of pain subsided, and she experimented, wriggling her hips.

His fingers tightened on the ridge of her pelvic bone. “Are you hurting?”

“Non. Kiss me, Harry.” She could bear anything when he kissed her.

One hand left her hip, and he cupped her jaw. Their eyes met and locked, and he kissed her mouth, a chaste touch while their gazes held. Martine couldn’t draw oxygen into her lungs, and an ache grew in her chest under her rib cage. Her lids fluttered shut as his tongue swept the seam of her lips, her bunched shoulders relaxed into the mattress, and she opened for his delicious invasion. When he tickled the roof of her mouth and explored the inside of one cheek, she arched, and her throbbing nipples scrubbed the hairs on his chest.

He smelled of the outdoors, of the Mediterranean wind, of the tanginess of the sea, of smoke and male arrogance. He tasted like fruit and wine and prosciutto. His damp, heated skin set a fire blazing through her veins.

When he withdrew slowly, his cock almost leaving her warmth, her fingernails dug into his shoulders in protest. When he filled her again, moving so unhurriedly that her inner walls burned around him, Martine wanted to beat his back with her fists. He did it again, even slower, his movements agonizing and torturous. The third time he retreated, she canted her hips off the mattress, her walls sucking at his cock, and she grabbed his bottom, refusing to let his thickness go.

“Fuck.” She barely heard his muttered curse because he started moving faster, harder, thrusting in and out, his cock growing fatter and longer and filling her more and more. She matched his movements, discovering the rhythm of coupling, of joining two bodies into one. His hand slipped between their bodies, his thumb rested on that spot that drove her insane, and pressure built inside, outside, her thigh muscles tensing, her ass cheeks contracting. Her lungs smoldered, her breath came in short, sharp pants, and she reached and reached and detonated. Bastille Day fireworks burst and exploded into glorious stars and sparks and streaks behind her eyelids.

Martine collapsed into the bed, limbs molten, spine relaxed, muscles too lazy and drained for any nuance of tension. Harry’s weight pressed her into the mattress, his heaviness both comforting and stifling; his nose settled into her neck, just below her ear. Hot air skirted her lobe as he inhaled and exhaled. She felt as if he breathed through her, his chest expanding and releasing against hers, their hearts beating in cadence. Suddenly he pushed up onto his elbows and cupped her chin. “Look at me.”

His voice sounded gruff and hoarse and growly and somehow soothing.

It took all the energy she had left to lift her eyelids. His irises had all but disappeared, and his darkened and dilated pupils had turned the color of his eyes from their normal honey to a rich, dark caramel.

Harry’s lip curled at one corner. His thumb drew a circle under her chin.

Heat crawled across her skin, and she knew she blushed all over. “Not too bad?”

She shook her head.

“Not going to talk?”

To her horror a wide yawn she couldn’t stifle captured her mouth; she ducked her head as her skin flamed. Another yawn erupted, and she clapped a palm over her lips.

“Sleepy?” His knuckles skated across her cheek.

“A bit,” she replied.

“Me too,” he said, kissed the tip of her nose, and withdrew from her vagina at the same time. Her sex clutched at his cock, trying to prevent him from leaving. “It’s been a helluva day for you.”

He snatched his iPhone from the nightstand closer to his side, then glanced at the LCD and muttered, “We don’t have much time left. The *Glory* will dock soon.”

She pushed onto her elbows. “I shall dress quickly.”

“You can’t wash. I left you some supplies in the bathroom.”

“I know, Monsieur. I understand what I must do.”

“Damn it, Martine.” His gaze trapped hers. He rolled over and cupped her jaw. “You call me that once more, and I swear I’ll tan your backside. Do you need help?” He angled his chin at the bathroom.

“Non,” she yelped. “Sacre bleu, Mother *Supérieure* would roast me in the fires of hell for that.”

Harry drew back, brows knitting together, and he scrutinized her from head to toe. Gradually the tight creases bracketing his brown eyes slackened. “Why don’t you meet me on deck when you’re ready?”

He left her then, his mouth flattened, and shot her a glare over his shoulder as he walked bare assed out of the cabin, slamming the door behind him.

Predawn bustle wafted to the *Glory’s* decks as Martine joined Harry at the stern.

Harry grinned, white teeth flashing, and then said, “We’ll be docking in about two minutes.”

Only then did Martine register the fact that he was fully clothed and that he must have changed elsewhere. “I called a cab, and you should sit until it arrives.”

“I am fine, Mon—” At his ferocious scowl she corrected her words. “I’m fine, Harry.”

Her brain barely registered the yacht’s docking in Cannes or the arrival of the taxi.

“Will we not draw attention?” She gestured to the black automobile.

“I’m done jumping to Delora’s tune.”

What did that mean? “You are dissolving the contract?”

“No.”

Her breathing stopped. “I do not understand, Harry. I have done what I was supposed to.”

They’d been sitting side by side in the back of the vehicle for three long minutes, and not once had he glanced her way. Gathering her courage, she touched his forearm. “Harry?”

“Not to worry, Martine. You’ll get your money, and I’ll get Delora out of my life once and for all.”

For all his angry words, they didn’t brave the main entrance of the hotel but went through the servant’s entrance they’d used earlier. In silence they climbed the stairs and entered the suite.

Harry escorted her through the bathroom and past her bedroom to his. She dressed quickly in the Ralph Lauren nightdress she’d purchased for tonight as she heard him speaking to his plan-B friend.

She left the lamp on the bedside table lit and crawled under the sumptuous covers of the magnificent king-size bed, her heart booming like the voodoo banga drums of her youth. Such a puzzle this man, her husband. He'd been angry but hadn't struck her. He had been patient with her even when she'd spilled the champagne. If she'd spilled a morsel of food, a drop of juice, Jean-Claude's wife had made her kneel outside in the rain, her hands up on either side of her head, her palms weighted with the heaviest boulders. How many hours had she spent like that, aching from the strain, cringing as the passing children spit at her?

Enough, Martine. You have married a man who doesn't seem to be cruel. Be grateful. And there are the million euros. She smiled and pictured all the chocolat she would buy for her grand-mère.

Harry came into the room so silently his body weight was her first realization that he had lain down on the bed. He rolled over to her side and spooned her body, his arm around her waist tugging her bottom tight against his groin. She flinched when she encountered his arousal.

"Didn't mean to be short in the cab, Martine." His lips brushed her nape, and a warm slice of air curled over her collarbone.

"And the contract?" Her pulse skipped, raced, then dipped to nonexistent.

"Don't worry," he muttered. "I have your back. Go to sleep."

Chapter Five

“Open up, Harrison. The shit’s hit the fricking fan.”

Harry shot out of bed, his GLOCK G26 in his hand, before the pounding on the door stopped.

He muttered a curse, pulled the bedside table drawer open, cocked the gun’s safety back into place, and glanced over his shoulder. Damn it, Martine had gone paler than a Texas farm in a whiteout blizzard. She looked scared sweatless.

“It’s the friend who took our place last night, Martine,” he explained, shutting the drawer after he’d set the gun on the wood.

Her eyes fixated on the drawer, she bit her bottom lip so hard Harry feared blood would spurt. “I used to be in special ops.” At her frown he added, “A division of the US Army. The gun’s for protection.”

There had to be a crisis if Terry was pounding on the doors. Gaze sweeping in the direction of the thundering, Harry said, keeping his voice soothing and calm and belying the adrenaline flooding his veins, “I need to let him in.”

A rattler couldn’t corral a hen faster than the way she scooted against the headboard. Sheet pulled up to her chin, she froze in place and nodded.

“Harry, for Christ’s sake, open the blasted door,” Terrence O’Connor barked.

He stalked to the door of the highly secured penthouse, which was designed to protect the privacy of the rich and famous, punched in the alarm code, and flung open one of the mahogany double doors to the suite.

Terry barged in, and the sheer size of the WWE-built man—forearm muscles bunched and bulging out of his short-sleeved black polo, his mouth pinched, and his long auburn hair tossing mile-wide shoulders—made Harry glance back at Martine, who had one hand cupped over her mouth.

Terry halted when he spotted Martine and did an about-turn on the spot.

Leaning his shoulder on the wall, Harry crossed one ankle over the other and said through gritted teeth, “This better be freaking good.”

Terry’s gray eyes dropped to Harry’s red-and-white-striped knit boxers. He shook his head, and matching white molars showed when he grinned.

If Terry so much as muttered a word... Harry’s fingernails dug into his palms.

They’d served side by side in a combo Brit/US squad for years, worked the *Glory* together after quitting the forces, and each knew the other’s sleeping preferences, which included nudity and a multitude of similarly unclad females of

assorted shapes and sizes. “Plan B had a fatal flaw,” Terry stated. “My wife and I took your place in the hotel suite no problem. I even wore your fricking Stetson. But your stepmother had a PI at the back entrance to the hotel.”

Crap. “I didn’t see a single person on the way to the *Glory.*”

“I had our SEAL buddies watching the hotel. The PI was stationed on the roof of the building opposite.” Terry threw a gunmetal BlackBerry onto the couch, and the phone bumped a couple of times before settling on the fringes of a large cushion. “We got his camera and phone.”

Harry glanced at the ceiling and sent a mental thank-you to his Irish mama’s pot-of-gold famous luck. Cracking his neck to reduce a sudden tension, he walked over to stand in front of the bed and spun around. Terry turned to face him. He blocked Terry’s view of Martine, who hadn’t budged a single square centimeter.

“But we’re not out of the woods,” Terry muttered. “The PI got a shot of you and Martine returning to the hotel this morning.”

That sniper-in-the-vicinity crawl did a soft-shoe from one shoulder blade to the other. Distracted when Suresh Singh waltzed through the open doorway, Harry snapped, “Getting to be Grand Central round here.”

Harry raised an eyebrow.

Suresh waved a Y shape with both hands and clarified Harry’s unspoken question. “Terry left me to tip the valet, explain why he manhandled the manager into giving him a key card to your suite, and, in general, clean up.”

Suresh spotted Martine in the bed and flashed a smile in her direction, his tanned complexion making his even teeth glisten like piano ivories. “Good morning, Martine. I apologize for the rude and unexpected interruption.”

“Can we drop the courtly manners?” Terry growled, dragging both hands through his hair. “Time is of the essence.”

“So cliché,” Suresh quipped. “But unfortunately, Terry’s spot-on.”

Terry’s seething temper about some unknown something and Suresh’s diplomatic minuet notched Harry’s irritation level to new heights. His fingers flexed and curled as he envisioned smashing both their noses.

Harry straightened, and he jammed his fist into his palm, relishing the fierce sting. “We have the camera and the phone. What’s the fricking issue?”

“The PI e-mailed the picture to your stepmother and cc’d a bunch of other people,” Suresh answered. “From the e-mails on the cc, I’m guessing the PI sent the shot to your stepmother’s lawyers.”

“So much for Irish luck.”

“Maybe not,” Suresh stated. “The SEALs caught the PI around four forty-five.” When Harry’s forehead puckered, Suresh rolled his eyes and added, “As in four a.m.”

Harry shuffled a hand through his sleep-tangled hair. “We’ve got to intercept the PI’s e-mail.”

“What we really need is your stepmother’s phone,” Suresh interjected.

“Now, that notion sits just right with me.” Harry’s mind did a few NASCAR laps. “If my memory’s anything to go by, Delora’s brain’s lazier than a blister in the morning. And those lawyers of hers are so old-school their secretaries answer their cell phones.”

“No phones, no e-mails, no evidence you left the room,” Terry mumbled.

“My thinking precisely. That Gypsy pickpocket Casmir—how can I get a hold of him? Delora and her lawyers are supposed to be here at nine.” Harry glanced at the grandfather clock visible through the master bedroom’s open double doors. “That gives me seventy-five minutes.”

“To arrange what?” Terry’s auburn-tinted eyebrows climbed.

“Casmir and his pickpockets can steal a gendarme’s gun when he’s on duty. This ain’t gonna faze them. Shit happens.” A smile played at Harry’s mouth. “E-mails can be doctored. Delora’s phone can be stolen. Better yet destroyed. I’m not dancing to her hand a second longer.”

“You came up with an idea about the will,” Suresh uttered, folding his arms and grinning widely.

“Yeah. I’ve been attacking this will business from the wrong angle. Plain as day Daddy had to be insane when he wrote the fricking will. Clearly the conditions stated in this new will contravene the right to privacy between a husband and wife. DNA testing invalidates the need for a test after I’ve proved my wife’s virginity. And what the fuck do cameras and tapes and making us stay in a hotel suite overnight have to do with proving any child that’s conceived is mine?”

“Keep going,” Terry said. “If nothing else it’ll keep the probate tied up for decades.”

“That plus the fact that your wife’s pet thug can arrange any kind of theft-related shee-it in a heartbeat ought to back Delora into a corner.”

“Casmir’s not my wife’s pet thug. He’s reformed. Remember?” Terry’s tone held not one gram of conviction.

“Yeah, tell that one to your Royal Marine buddies,” Harry retorted. “Last I heard Casmir was still operating a ring of pickpockets, not to mention his teensy foray into drug smuggling.”

Suresh shook his head. His mop of Harry Potter-styled straight black hair glinted raven in the morning sunlight. “I’ll take care of the e-mails personally. And I can guarantee my work.”

“Thanks, bubba.”

“I’ll text you Casmir’s number. If we don’t leave now, I’ll miss my flight.” Terry’s brow crinkled. “Harry, you’ve got to stop flying by the seat of your pants if you’re going to win this one. I know you’ve the luck of a zillion and one leprechauns, but it’s time you start living by that saying. Luck is what happens when—”

“Preparation meets opportunity,” Harry said through a clenched jaw. “Yeah, yeah.”

A rustling from behind drew Harry’s attention. Martine had tucked the sheet sarong-style over one shoulder, and she’d climbed off the bed. Didn’t that old-lady head-to-toe nightgown provide enough cover? How did she manage to look like Cleopatra bundled like an Eskimo? She clasped her hands together at the waist and stood as still as a chameleon waiting to strike, her long, slender neck lifting her chin in a regal arch.

“Harry, for Christ’s sake, pay attention.” Terry snapped his fingers so close to Harry’s nose the tip stung. “I have enough on my mind with Thom’s pending surgery. I don’t need to be worrying about you.”

“My bad, Terry. Go catch your flight. And tell your twin I wish him all the luck in the universe. If I was a prayin’ man, he’d be in my prayers.” Harry jammed his hands onto his hips. “Concentrate on your brother. You don’t need to worry about me. I have everything under control.”

Harry convinced himself that the skeptical expression shadowing both men’s faces was due to a sudden thundercloud and not sheer disbelief about his bland assurance.

As soon as Terry and Suresh left, Harry locked the double doors to the suite and those to the master bedroom in the faint but futile hope the obstacles would slow Delora’s entrance. He found Martine in the same position as she had been earlier, unmoving, no emotion showing on her face.

You’re a puzzle, Martine Bellamy, so passionate in bed, so ice-maiden in public.

A vision of Martine’s stunned euphoric features as her first climax tore through her danced in his brain. He’d hit the jackpot with his virgin wife.

Last night went right. More’n right.

A watershed of good cheer lifted the black haze dancing at the periphery of his vision, and Harry whistled the first stanza of the “William Tell Overture” while rocking on his heels. Martine carefully untied the sheet, revealing the don’t-touch-me nightgown printed with annoyingly stupid blue flowers. Visions of feeding the damned garment into a shredder eased the sudden throbbing behind his pupils.

“Perfect Cannes morning,” he drawled.

Martine shot him an are-you-crazy glance worthy of the sternest Texas Bible Belt Sunday school teacher

His wife had a fantastic body, and he still hadn’t seen her naked, still hadn’t licked his way up the crease of her ass. St. Pete hated the confines of the boxers and demonstrated his displeasure by poking his head through the unbuttoned front flap.

Her jaw dropped, and she stared at his dick, and Harry groaned when her lips formed an O.

She took two steps back, edging in the direction of the other bedroom.

No way, Jose. No way he'd lose the ground he'd gained. He marched over to her, caught her jutting chin between his thumb and index fingers, and kissed her soundly, tasting the minty leftovers of the toothpaste she'd used the night before. At first she didn't respond; then her breathing accelerated, and whispery pants skipped like dainty butterflies over his cheek.

He touched the tips of their tongues together, and she sighed into his mouth as her hands snaked over his bare chest, her short nails sifting through the hairs curling the borders of his areolae. The temptation to linger and drown in her essence reared as St. Pete twitched and thickened, testing the stretchiness of his cotton boxers, trying to push through a too-narrow opening.

Jerking his head so their lips separated, he squeezed his eyes shut momentarily, knowing if he looked at her she would have the lust-dazed, slightly out-of-focus pupils of the night before and he'd never be able to resist the sultry temptation of her expression.

"Good morning, Mrs. Martine Ford." He savored the way the last three words rolled off his tongue. "Did you get the gist of my conversation with Terry and Suresh?" His thumb stroked the soft, supple skin under her bottom lip, and he gazed at the picture she presented.

"Oui. You will have pickpockets steal the picture evidence of us leaving the hotel." A wandering ray of sunlight lit one of Martine's black irises to a lighter chocolate color. For a second the image of the woman in Grasse, who'd become his obsession since Suresh's charity masquerade ball, blurred his vision. Guilt surged but didn't prevent St. Pete from leaking precum and making his underwear damp.

I have a boner for Martine. Martine. Not some phantom woman in Grasse dressed in black stockings, garters, and no fucking underwear.

"Will you be able to contact Casimir in time?"

Harry tried to will all the blood to his brain and succeeded somewhat. St. Pete fizzled into a half-hard state, thank the almighty.

Martine repeated her question.

"For the money I'll pay the Gypsy thief for this job, he'll be here before the phone call's ended." Harry let his fingers fall away from her chin. "If I'm here with you when Delora arrives, she can serve me with an injunction immediately, claiming she has the proof we violated the terms of the will. If I'm not here and we get the phones, she can't do squat."

Martine's throat muscles worked, and she twined her fingers together. "Je—I understand. I will be alone for the examinations."

"My doctor will be there with you." Harry's gut cramped as if an assassin had twisted a stiletto into his intestines. "And my lawyers."

Half-shuttered lids hid her eyes, and she seemed to be staring at his clavicle. Harry glanced at her bare toes peeking from the hem of the nightgown. All ten digits curled into the carpet fibers. She lifted her chin, the movement oddly familiar after a mere night and day in her company. "When you get your money, I get mine."

I've been through the exams. I know what will happen now. Go. Do what you must, and I will do the same."

"Good." Harry took two steps away from Martine, and oxygen logjammed hard and fast in his throat and chest, and he had to work to get more words out. "I'll leave my cell number by the sink in the bathroom. Call me after Delora's left."

Grinding his teeth, Harry spun around and stalked out of the bedroom, knowing he was leaving Martine to face his stepmother's wrath. *You raised me different, Mama. I'm leaving her defenseless, and it's killing me.*

He hurriedly dressed and left the suite through a side entrance.

At first Harry decided to go to the *Glory*, but a conscience he didn't know he possessed bucked and reared, and he instead phoned the hotel's reservation desk and booked a room under Suresh's name. Then after he'd called Suresh and asked him to meet him on the fifth floor with the room key, he phoned Casmir and outlined his plans.

As soon as Harry ended the call with the price-gouging, criminal Gypsy entrepreneur, he made two other calls. Seconds after he'd completed his last conversation, Harry's cell vibrated, but he didn't recognize the number blinking on the LCD panel. He'd memorized Delora's number on her first call when she'd arrived in France, but his scheming stepmother could have picked up a disposable cell just to screw with him. After a three-second debate, he thumbed Accept.

"Harrison?"

Recognizing her sexy accent he frowned at the phone. "Martine?"

"Did you get Casmir?"

"Yes."

"*Bien. Adieu.*"

Dial tone sounded, and he was left staring dumbly at the screen.

Huh? That back-of-the-neck shiver he hated but relied on crept up two vertebrae and into his scalp, making his hair lift and raise like a brush scattering static electricity. Head down he marched through the fifth-floor hallway, puzzling about what had started his senses pinging.

"Oouf!" Suresh's hard skull cracked into the side of Harry's head, and Suresh stumbled and fell against the wall, his elbow catching the edge of a baroque-framed painting.

"Damn it," Suresh gasped. "That smarts." He shot Harry a scowl and knuckled the side of his head.

"Yeah," Harry agreed, rubbing a stinging spot. "But maybe that blow kick-started my fricking fuzzy brain. I don't want my wife alone with that she-devil during a gynecological exam."

Suresh's tanned complexion grayed. "You want me to be there for *that*?" He pedaled backward, splayed the fingers of one hand, and shook his head. "No way. That's going beyond the pale. Sorry."

“Oh for freaking sake. You think I’d let you see her naked, her...” Harry sputtered and slapped a palm against the wall. “The docs put up a tent for the exam. They’re at one end, and you’ll be by Martine’s head. All I’m asking you to do is distract her.”

“Damn, Harry. You’re asking too much.”

“I’ll give you a blank check for your soccer foundation,” Harry wheedled.

“Serve as CFO for three years, and you have a deal,” Suresh said, holding out one hand.

“Done.” They shook on the verbal agreement.

Harry blew out a long audible breath. “You’d better get a move on.”

“Sure. Here’s the key card.”

After Suresh handed him the card and pivoted in the other direction, Harry halted the other man in midstride by calling out, “If there’s the slightest hint that Martine’s uncomfortable or that Delora’s gone into bitch mode, call me right away.”

Suresh turned to face him and rolled his eyes. “I didn’t make three hundred million before I was twenty-four and accumulate a billion since then by not being able to handle myself in a hostile situation, Harrison. I’ll set the ground rules and make sure they’re not violated.”

Violated.

The word echoed in Harry’s brain as he watched Suresh stroll to the elevator.

So far he’d allowed his wife to be violated too many times. Not happening after today. Trouble was he’d never put a human face on the exams, distanced himself so entirely from the marriage that he’d never reconciled *his* wife having to undergo the humiliation of yesterday.

He slid the key card into the door slot and walked into the hotel room.

Harry prowled the length of the room, pacing back and forth in front of a burnished cherrywood dresser. He kept visualizing Martine on a cold steel gurney covered only by a thin sheet, her legs spread apart while Delora watched and gloated. By the time his iPhone jangled, he’d worn a groove in the luxurious handmade Persian carpet’s long fibers.

“Speak to me,” Harry barked into the receiver.

Casmir got right to the point. “The two lawyers’ cell phones are in my possession. Do I destroy them?”

“Yes. Delora’s?”

“Not yet. She has it with her, and she’s still in her hotel room. We’re waiting for her to leave.”

“Let’s cover all the possibilities, destroy anything electronic in her possession.” Harry leaned a shoulder on the window frame and stared down at the hotel’s front driveway. “If she has a laptop, wipe it clean. Check to see if she has any other electronic devices, PDA, backup phones, and wipe them clean too.”

Casmir's sigh turned into a static crackle. "That's going to take some time."

"I can guarantee you ninety minutes, not a second longer."

"We may not be able to get Delora's phone until she enters the hotel lobby."

"Just get it. I don't care how."

"If we get the phone from her in the lobby, you still want the hotel sweep?"

"Yes."

"You realize that it's going to look suspicious what with all of their phones disappearing on the same day," Casmir stated.

"Don't give a fucking shit." Harry glimpsed a woman with waist-length, honey blonde hair exiting a limo. "My stepmother just got out of a limo in the front of the hotel. Get to work."

Casmir's answer was lost when Harry ended the call abruptly.

When he served in Afghanistan, every skirmish had been planned in explicit detail using as many reaction scenarios as his team could anticipate. Once he left special ops, Harry had deliberately decided to abandon any semblance of planning his life's path—he went with the flow. Time to resurrect the old habits.

He walked over to the antique desk standing against the far wall, opened the single drawer, pulled out the requisite hotel pad and pen, and sat. His cell rang before he could let it fall onto the leather-topped surface, and he didn't have to check the number to know who was on the other end.

"No luck," the gypsy said before Harry could even speak. "It didn't go down as we planned. Your stepmother had one of those clutch purses with a click top. Firm grip on it. My man plucked it out of her hands, but she resisted. He had no choice but to open it and let the contents fall to the floor. The phone was there. He stomped on it. By this time she was screeching, and he had to cut and run."

Harry leaned his forearm on the desk and massaged his throbbing temples. "Tell me it's destroyed."

"Definitely. I had two others in the lobby who pretended to help her retrieve the purse's contents. The SIM card was in smithereens."

"Thank God *something* went as planned. Is the sweep of her hotel in progress?" Harry barked.

"Yes."

"Call me when you're done."

Exactly thirty-three minutes later, Casmir called and, as usual, began speaking before Harry could utter a single syllable. "All's clear. No issues. My man had time to copy the document folder on her laptop to a USB before he wiped it clean. No charge for the bonus."

"Finally." Harry was out of the chair and jogging to the door before he finished the word. "Bring the USB to the *Glory* after three today." Not even bothering to check that he'd shut the door properly, he sprinted to the elevator, stabbed the up arrow, and paced a tight circle until he heard the *ding*. Sliding the penthouse key

card into the slot, he hit his floor number, ground his teeth, and watched the numbers light one by freaking one.

He busted through the suite's master bedroom double doors less than two and a half minutes later, and each Mississippi-counting two hundred and forty-one seconds had crawled by slower than a half-paralyzed snail. His gaze swept the room, but it was empty. A muffled "Merde" reached his ears. "Martine? Are you in there?" Two long jumps had him at the arched wooden entrance to the bathroom.

"Harry?"

Sagging against the door frame, he sent a mental thank you to the almighty. The door inched open, and Martine appeared. Grabbing one hand, he tugged her into his arms and hugged her tightly to his chest. Then his palm encountered her bare, firm rump, and he pushed her away and studied her features.

Her onyx eyes sparkled, and her mouth curved. "You have the picture and the phone. I knew you would not fail."

"Sugar," he whispered, and his ego soared to superhero heights at the way she looked at him, as if she believed he could shatter any hurdle they faced. Unable to resist, he kissed the arch of one tawny brow, the tip of her nose, set his mouth over hers, and drank like a man parched from three days in the Texas desert.

Heaven and paradise and all sultry woman, she responded to his tongue's coaxing and played with him, soft, light flicks that sent lightning bolts to his balls, and her finger pads skipped across the stubble on his jaw. His palm cupped her bottom, squeezing the chilled flesh, and she made that sound in her throat she'd made the night before. She smelled of sex and honeysuckle, and his brain did a double take, his subconscious mapped everything together, and he tore his mouth from hers as his eyelids flew up. "It hasn't happened yet?"

She sighed, her hard nipples rubbed against the tight, thin cotton T-shirt he wore, and she slowly opened her eyes. "Non. I am now going in." She touched a finger to her ears and inclined her head to the open door. "Someone attempted to steal your stepmother's purse. She called hotel security, they called the gendarmes, and they have only left a few minutes ago."

Martine mouthed, *She can hear us.*

Harry nodded his understanding.

"I should like to have this done with tout de suite."

Did she realize her thumb stroked the side of his neck?

"I'll light a fire under their butts, and we'll be outta here pronto. I'll be kicked to death by a grasshopper if that ain't the truth." Harry's lips crooked up as she pursed her lips and those three little worry lines that were cuter than a ladybug formed. "That means I promise I'll make it happen. Let's get this show on the road, Martine."

He took her hand from his neck, placed a hot, moist kiss in the center of her palm, twined their fingers together, and turned to the side. Waving one hand to the suite's central area, he quipped, "Shall we?"

Martine murmured, "This grasshopper saying means I promise? Truly the English language is nonsensical."

As she took a step forward, Harry remembered her bare ass. "Wait." He went into the bathroom, snagged a towel, and draped it around her neck.

"I am wearing a T-shirt," she protested. "The rest must be bare."

A quick check revealed the white cotton fell to her mid thigh and he said, "No one but me sees your nekkid butt, sugar. Let's move."

Five men and Suresh stood in the vicinity of a gurney. Harry recognized the examination table from the ugly stirrups attached to it. His stomach churned and burned like a dryer switched to the superheat cycle.

Suresh must have heard Harry's boots on the marble, because his head whipped to the side, and his chest heaved a great big sigh Harry heard from nine feet away.

Before Harry could open his mouth to utter a greeting, Suresh stood in front of them. "Did you tell him about the theft?" He focused his gaze on Martine.

"Oui. He knows."

"Where's Delora, the devil's mistress?" Harry asked, sending Martine a quick wink.

"You fucking piece of shit!"

The screeched words splintered the murmured conversation of the five men in front of them.

Harry spun around, and only his fast reflexes saved him from a few stitches. The oriental vase speeding toward his face bounced off the side of his head as he hugged Martine and lunged right.

Delora Ford flew across the room, fingers splayed, scarlet nails aimed at Harry's eye sockets.

He shoved Martine into a nearby chair and grabbed for Delora's wrists.

Delora spit at him, and spittle sprayed over his nose and mouth. Transferring both her wrists into one hand, Harry growled, "Do that again and I will have you arrested for assault." He twisted Delora's hands behind her back and whirled her around. "Suresh, grab me one of those cords around the drapes."

"Don't you even think about it, you son of a bitch," Delora barked. "And don't for a second think that smashing my cell means you've destroyed the evidence. I can prove you wrong. I'll prove you violated your daddy's will. I have plenty of backups of that picture."

Chapter Six

Martine returned to the living area to find that the doctors, the lawyers, Suresh, and Delora Ford had departed. A grin lifted the corners of her mouth as the image of Delora's expression when Harry offered each doctor a hundred thousand euros if they completed the exam within five minutes did a little carnival dance through her brain.

Did he treat every woman like a precious gem? Martine hugged her arms and skipped the last couple of steps before halting to study the man who'd paid a million euros to take her virginity. The man who'd protected her the way a husband should. The man who'd donned a hero's mantle with that one bribe—in her eyes, anyway.

Harry lounged on the couch, his head resting on linked fingers jammed into the padded upholstery. Long legs crossed at booted ankles lay on top of a glass coffee table littered with magazines. Wearing the familiar weathered cowboy hat tilted at a jaunty angle, faded denim jeans, a charcoal T-shirt, and the brown boots with the tarnished silver buckle, he stared at the carved crown molding decorating the ceiling. Did he ride horses? Roam a range? Beat off enemies with one hand? Fight for the downtrodden?

There are no heroes left, Martine Bellamy. Stop being foolish.

Still reeling from the way he'd treated her in the bathroom and during the exam, as if she mattered to him, Martine held her breath and froze in place, hoping he hadn't noticed her presence. She studied the curve of his earlobe; the piratical earring winked in the light streaming through the open French doors. Her eyes traced a jawline as hard as the marble sculptures pictured on the Marseille Museum tourist brochures, and a scalding shiver warmed her skin from head to toe. Never had a man shattered her controlled reactions before. Why him?

It's all so confusing. Martine chewed the inside of one cheek. Do I feel I can trust you because we fornicated? Because you will pay me the money to save Grand-mère? Or because you make me feel cherished?

His head crooked her way, and he gifted her with the lopsided grin that set in flight all the butterflies no one could ever prove existed inside her belly. Heat swarmed in all directions, dissembling across her flushed cheeks and forehead, sprinting rib by rib, and splaying sideways, pearling her nipples taut.

"A Texas silver dollar for your thoughts, sugar?" His smile evened, and a hint of stubble shadowed the folds curving his mouth.

Salvia dried in her throat, all the liquid in her body streamed to her sex, and she couldn't voice a word. Her thoughts scattered and fused into one burning realization—this man could steal her secrets and own her heart. Martine stuck her tongue between her upper and lower teeth and bit down hard. As always, pain restarted her non-functioning brain. She searched for a question to put him on the defensive.

"Do you think Delora Ford has more copies of the picture as she claimed?" Martine asked as she walked over to him, her movements slow and deliberate in direct opposition to the alarm bubbling and boiling in her veins.

"I know she did," Harry answered. "What she doesn't know yet is that we relieved her of everything."

"Merde," she gasped and pinched her lips together hastily in a futile effort to keep the bolt of panic sparking her nerves into a frenzy from showing on her face. She halted at his side, relaxed her mouth, and gathered her hands over her belly.

A knowing devilish smirk captured Harry's lips. "C'mere." His hands firmed around her waist; he sat up and tugged her onto his lap. He kissed the tip of her nose. She inhaled softly, not wanting him to know how his tangy aftershave and his spicy male scent calmed the pulse hammering at the base of both wrists.

"Don't worry." His thumb smoothed the frown she hadn't realized she wore. "We destroyed every single picture. Casmir's army managed to get rid of all the cell phones. That kid could teach a veteran spy a few tricks."

"I—" *Merde, I almost said I know.*

Martine stared at his beautiful fingers, long and slender and the color of ripe walnuts, the nails short but shiny. Lifting her chin she continued, "I must say a prayer of thanks next mass."

"You're Catholic?"

"Yes."

I must speak only in English so I make no mistakes.

"Aren't you going to ask me what religion I am?" Harry raised his hand and tucked a curl behind her hair.

"Are such questions in the contract?" Martine met his stare directly.

His gaze narrowed, the white creases disappeared from the three lines bracketing his eyes, and those full, sinful lips flattened. "Ground rules. We're married. Man and wife. For a minimum of ten months unless you got a bun in the oven last night—oh hell, I mean unless you conceived last night."

"I'm not an idiot." She folded her arms. "I understood your bun reference."

"Don't lie to me, Martine. I've learned in the last twenty-four or so hours that when you don't understand a phrase, you make your face go blank."

Shock must have showed on her supposedly blank face, for he continued. "Not to worry, Martine. It's a subtle thing, and I'm durned sure no one else notices."

Martine sank her eyelids to half-mast and concentrated on the curve of his chin.

How can this be? I fooled the nuns, the priests, even the gypsies. Is he seeing something in my features even now?

“And you’re having some sort of internal panic attack right now,” he said.

It took every ounce of strength she had not to flinch, not to wring the hands clasped in her lap, not to shove off him and sprint until she had no breath left, until her legs collapsed.

“I have your back, remember? You don’t have to be afraid anymore.” His lips brushed her temple, and he said, “My mama was born Catholic, but she converted to Southern Baptist before she married my daddy. He was the son of a preacher. Why do you smell of honeysuckle and lemons?”

Harry nuzzled her neck, and his teeth grazed her skin. The slight love bite sent shivers down her spine, made her nipples bud and fight the constraints of the silk bra she wore. Her neck muscles went slack as her head fell to the one side.

“Hmm, you like that,” he whispered, and his lips feathered her throat. “Let’s get out of here. Too many eyes and ears.”

Remembering the hidden cameras and microphones, her glance swept from floor to ceiling, and she nodded. They were too alone here, his presence too overwhelming and more dizzying than champagne.

“Like the duds,” Harry commented as he guided her out of the hotel, and the sun warmed her face. His gaze trailed from the curls tickling her nape to the knitted button-up-the-front three-quarter-sleeved top and matching midcalf skirt she wore. He stroked her earlobe. “You always wear the same pair of earrings.”

So Grand-mère is always with me. Her inner cheek stung she nipped the flesh so hard. The answer had almost flown out of her mouth.

They came to the crowded noisy part of town, the jumble of different sounds, horns blaring, cars farting backfires, people laughing, peddlers shouting their wares, the odd street musicians strumming guitars and banjos, too dissonant and loud for conversation. Harry curled an arm around her waist, and he led her in the direction of the pier where the *Glory* was docked.

“You never answered my question,” he said as his fingers stroked up and down her hipbone.

“Question?” She turned to find him glancing at her, and once again his sheer maleness assailed her nostrils and made her itch to touch him, to brush the soft fuzz on the side of his jaw, to tangle her hands in his silky brown hair, though the Stetson cocked at a jaunty angle hid most of his coffee-with-cream locks.

“I’d give a million greenbacks to know what you’re thinking right now,” he murmured, his voice husky and deep.

I’m hoping you’ll make me feel like I did last night, that you’ll make my worries disappear if only for a while. I want to know if I’ll explode and shatter every time we fornicate—no, make love.

Hordes thronged the narrow wooden pier, most hurrying in the opposite direction in which they walked. She and Harry swam upstream, weaving around the tourists who stopped abruptly to take photos of the bay and a shoreline studded with tents and oiled, golden bodies lying on black-and-white-striped towels. The midafternoon sun highlighted the sparkle in the beach sand, and the brilliant rays bounced back a brightness so blinding her pupils ached and she had to blink rapidly to ease their stinging.

The aromas of different perfumes and colognes mingled with sweat faded as they neared the end of the jetty, replaced by the smell of the sea as a cool gust whisked to shore. Martine's skirt fluttered and ballooned, and she lifted her chin and closed her eyes, relishing the slight nip in the air. So different from Port-au-Prince. She didn't miss the stench of rotting food, alleyways reeking of blistering urine, or the sulfuric sweat-soaked scent of men who toiled under a relentless tropical sun day after endless day.

The Mediterranean coast smelled like heaven, like freedom, the air made fragrant by the constant sea breezes, which washed away the sins of humanity. Even on the hottest day, winds gusted, making the temperature seem balmy. She hadn't encountered a single humid day since stealing off the boat in Marseille so many months ago.

"I like when you do that." Harry's palm cupped her jaw.

Martine's eyes flew open to find him standing in front of her, staring at her, his pupils widening as their gazes met.

"I am doing nothing."

"You were in the moment," he stated. "Delighting in the way the sun and the breeze and the smell of the sea made you feel alive and safe."

"I do *not* like it when you read my thoughts." The protest came out before she snapped her teeth together.

"Tough. I do." He winked at her. "It's sexy as all hell."

Martine couldn't stop the quick peek at his crotch, and her face and neck flamed when she looked back up and realized he'd caught her.

"Oh yeah. I've been hard and aching since we left the *Glory* this a.m." He kissed her nose.

She tried to keep the surprise off her face, but her eyebrows refused to obey her command and winged up. "You purchased me," she said, saying the words aloud to force some emotional distance from him. "You can fornicate with me anytime you want."

His jaw worked. "Let's get onboard. One thing you'll learn about me fast, Mrs. Martine Ford. I only ever give *one* warning."

Her heart clamored to break free of her rib cage. Martine forgot to breathe.

I made him angry. Angry men are dangerous.

When they stepped inside his stateroom on the *Glory* a few minutes later, she stopped in midstride when she saw her suitcase on a low table to the right of the bed.

“Something wrong?” Harry bumped into her back.

Martine muttered, “Pardon moi, Monsieur,” and wanted to cuff herself. Mistake after mistake. She shook her head and took as long as a step away as her legs allowed. “I’m sorry, Harry. It’s my habit to address all adult men as Monsieur.” She darted a surreptitious glance at the bed but couldn’t determine if the luggage had been opened or not.

“What’s in that suitcase that has you all hot and bothered?” He completely ignored her apology. “Whatever lie you’re concocting right now, stifle it. I want the truth and I want it now.”

I must be brazen.

The Bandoleer’s wife had told her in graphic detail how to use fornication to her advantage. She shifted sideways, pasting a smile on her face.

“Is making love always like last night?” And she did want the answer to this question, badly. “Will I always shatter?”

The fierce expression he had worn before she spoke vanished in a blink. His nostrils flared, and the veins beating in the hollow of his throat visibly pulsed, making his taut flesh expand and constrict faster.

“Strip,” he ordered as he unbuckled his belt and then slid an engraved brass button free. “Skirt first.”

She sent a silent thank-you to the Bandoleer’s wife for making her buy the matching high-backed teddy and thong. The skirt had buttons down the front, but she only had to undo the first two, and the silk cascaded to the floor. Harry’s gaze held hers, and she knew better than to try to look away.

“You have the most gorgeous pair of legs on this earth. Maybe in the entire universe. Have you ever been to Grasse?”

Grasse?

If she didn’t know otherwise, Martine could have sworn her heart had stopped beating. Her fingers and toes iced in an instant.

A half-truth.

“I have only lived in Marseille.”

“Take off my boots.” His expression didn’t change at her admission. He strode to the bed, sat on the mattress, and extended his legs.

Boots? I’m losing my mind.

Swallowing around the coconut-sized constriction in her throat, Martine forced her feet to move. She halted between his spread legs and dropped to her knees.

“No,” he said. “Turn around.”

Her lungs stammered to a halt. "Please, Harry. I do not understand what you want."

"Come." He crooked a finger.

Martine rose slowly and edged forward.

"Closer," he ordered.

When seven inches separated her thighs from his face, he muttered, "Stop. Nice," he said in a tone that sounded like the *Glory's* engines at slow speed—dark, coarse, and so deep the sound echoed through her belly. One finger slid under the lace of the white thong she wore, and his touch forced dampness to her folds, a flickering flame to her vaginal walls, and that place he'd rubbed last night screamed for pressure. His hands rose to her waist, and he turned her around.

Martine tried to block the image forming in her head—her ass, his lips, mere inches apart. He drew her closer. "Bend over. Then take off my boots."

Her hands shook so much that the fingers curling around his leather footwear felt like a palm tree in a tempest. He bit her buttock right at the point where her thighs began; Martine yelped and lunged forward. The grip he had on her hips strengthened, and he pulled her back.

Panic scrambled her thoughts and clogged her lungs.

"No you don't," he growled, his lips skimming the small of her back. "Don't turn into that scared girl you were for a few minutes during dinner last night."

She squeezed her eyes shut as her heart stuttered.

"Yesterday and today when you had to lie on that damned table in those grotesque stirrups, you never flinched, never moved an inch. You've no idea how proud I am of you for that."

His words skittered hot draughts over her rump as one weathered boot slid off his socked foot. Martine shifted her stance to address the other boot, his finger slid down her crease, and his mouth followed their path, depositing hot kisses that scalded her skin. A strangled moan escaped her lips, and she rested her hands on his thigh as her knees threatened to buckle.

"Is making love always like last night?" He suckled the middle of one cheek, and her mind went blank. "No. There's something between us, Martine. Some spark, some chemistry that makes our lovemaking special."

His open palm connected lightly with the curve of her bottom. "Get the damned boot off, sugar. If I don't taste you today, I'm likely to die from wanting."

He spanked her again, this time harder, and though her ass cheek stung, her sex moistened and slickened. Martine snagged her lower lip between her teeth and bit hard. She wrapped her fingers over the arch of his boot and pulled. The boot slipped off, and she was thrown forward. Harrison hauled her backward.

"Steady, steady. I got you. I'll always get you," he crooned, and she so yearned to believe him. "Will you always shatter? Damned right you will. When you climax you lose that mask you wear in public and I see the real Martine."

The edges of an arctic iceberg lodged in her chest melted with each word he spoke. The promise of tears blurred Martine's vision, and the need to be in his arms spun her about so she straddled him and looped her hands around his neck, knocking his Stetson off.

"You can wear your mask in public, and I'll support you in every way. But when we're alone together, no pretending, no shutting me out. Agreed?"

For long seconds Martine's mouth and brain wouldn't connect, her lips wanting to blurt yes, her mind calling up every word in every language for fool, idiot. She so craved to trust him, to tell him all, but she couldn't, too afraid he would despise her when he learned of her past. The hypnotic hold in his brown eyes stilled her terror, and she surrendered the battle but not the war. "I will try."

"Good enough. For now." His uneven grin chipped away the barriers she'd needed to survive. "Undress me."

"Pardon?" She shook her head.

"You heard me, sugar. Take off my clothes."

"You are not going to punish me?"

"Look at me." His thumb slid up her throat. "I'm pissed you deliberately tried to rile me by using the word 'fornicate.' So I'm gonna make you understand once and for all the difference between fornicating and making love."

A fifteen-pound dumbbell lifted off her shoulders, but the dread didn't recede entirely, and blood raced through her veins, making the pads of her fingers tingle.

"You want to believe me, but you're afraid," Harry murmured, his hot palm cupping the crook of her neck. "I've got your back, remember?" He gave her a little squeeze. "Undress me, woman. St. Pete's mighty impatient."

His asymmetrical smile and the golden glints in the halo of his irises crumbled Martine's defenses. Tension seeped away as her bunched shoulder muscles slackened, and she wanted nothing more than to lay her cheek on Harry's chest and have him hold her. And as if he read her mind, he pressed her head against his T-shirt-swathed pectorals, and his strong arms curled around her back, petting up and down her spine. His breath tickled her scalp, his fingers tangled in her hair, and he tugged her head back so their eyes met.

"Better?"

She nodded.

"Undress me."

The corners of her mouth tugged upward, and she trailed her hands over the hard ridge of his chest to the hem of his T-shirt.

"No, Martine. No hands." His eyebrows arched, and he shot her a bad-boy grin that out blasted Bruce Willis's any day.

Cocking her head to one side, she studied the fly of his jeans. "The zipper?"

"Teeth," he replied.

“Oh,” she whispered, and unbidden images peppered her brain, draining the blood flow required for logical thinking. “You have to lie down.”

“Cakewalk.” In less time than it took her to exhale, he set her on the mattress, shifted to the middle of the bed, and lay down on the pillow, head cradled in his linked hands. “Go for it.”

Martine did something she’d never done before in her entire nineteen years—she giggled, and after realizing the sound came from her lips, clamped a cupped palm over her mouth.

“Don’t,” he warned, his voice a richer coating than a tongue covered with melted dark chocolate. “St. Pete likes that little giggle.”

“Who is this St. Pete?” she asked. “I know St. Peter was one of the twelve disciples. Is that the Texas way of referring to him?”

He hooted, a loud booming sound that filled the stateroom, his arms jerked out from under his head, and he grabbed her by the shoulders and hugged her against his heaving chest. His laughter rumbled from his belly to hers, and she relaxed in his embrace. When his chuckles subsided, he rolled them over so they faced each other and said, “St. Pete’s my dick. My cock. My penis. My pecker.”

She had no control whatsoever over her wayward eyebrows; they climbed to her hairline. “You named your...” Her gaze swept between their bodies to the bulge at his crotch. “St. Pete? *Pourquoi* St. Pete?”

“Long story. Later. St. Pete’s on fast forward, sugar.” He lifted her into a sitting position. “It’s your show. Go for it.”

It’s my show. I can do or not do whatever I want.

Harrison had given her control.

A surge of emotion raced through her veins. She had control. Eager fingers pushed his T-shirt up to bare his nipples.

He grabbed her wrists. “Uh-uh, no hands.”

Entranced, Martine stared at the man lying on the bed. Studying the cutting ridges that delineated his ribs and extended past his navel, she took a deep breath, hoping oxygen would stop the giddiness invading her brain.

He’d used the hotel’s fancy soap. His belly smelled of sandalwood and almonds, the aroma contrasting with the musk emanating from the hairs peeping from his unbuttoned fly. A faint dusting of hair more gold than dark molasses circled his belly button. Acting on some prehistoric instinct, Martine scooted back on his thighs and rested her elbows on either side of his hips. Bending so her nose skimmed his stomach, she sipped the tempting strands, captured the fine hairs between her lips, and pulled lightly.

A ripple ran across his waist, and his stomach hollowed, and he hissed. “Lower.”

Martine drew back to savor the dampness glistening from the curls.

“Am I to call him St. Pete too?” She nuzzled his abdomen and her tongue discovered a sticky splotch before her mouth connected with the zipper’s metal tab. His cock jutted her nose as she snagged the brass zipper slider between her teeth and slowly opened the jeans’ closure.

Harry growled, “You can call it anything you want. Do anything you want.”

Curiosity conquered any remnants of her fear. His organ proved fascinating. Veins pulsed around his long cock, and as she stared, his penis jerked and thickened. The crown had a mesmerizing slit; she licked her lips when a clear substance oozed through the opening and dripped along the reddening head. Unable to resist the glistening drop, she lapped at the liquid. A waft of musk and spice and soap curled around her nose. She licked again, testing his taste and texture. Tacky, a hint of salt and shellfish, somewhere between the clams and oysters they’d served at the bistro where she’d worked.

“I should like to hold St. Pete,” she mumbled, lifting her face to peek at Harry. “But you said no—”

“Ah to hell with any fricking thing I said.” He hauled her up his body, and when their noses bumped, he kissed the tip of hers. “Are you sore?”

His pupils expanded, and the warm honey of his irises vanished. His bronze skin flushed a rose hue, and his harsh pants echoed in the silent room. A faint hint of the beer he’d consumed in the hotel suite remained on his breath.

“Martine?” He shook her shoulders. “Sore?”

“Non.” She couldn’t stop the heat blazing between her legs, the painful need to have him fill her, spread her, claim her. “Please. Harry.”

“Please what, sugar?” His lips skated across her face, brushing damp kisses on her cheeks and temples. “Please do this.” His fingers slid two buttons of her shirt open.

A silent alarm pierced the chaos tumbling her thoughts. Martine grasped for the remnants of the control that had saved her life time and time again. She pushed away his hands and tore the blouse open to reveal the under-the-breast teddy that bared all.

His mouth captured one peak, and he suckled with teeth and tongue.

Her fingers kneaded his skin, and she rubbed her toes over the arch of his feet.

“Or please do this?” he asked as his thumb and index finger rolled her other nipple, and she sucked in her cheeks when he pinched lightly.

“Oui. Yes. Yes.” Both hands crept to his nape, and sounds she didn’t recognize filled the air, gasped yeses, noes, and mores as his tongue and teeth tormented the moistened, fiery tip. His fingers toyed with her unattended nipple, pulling up the aching bud, squeezing the tip. Her belly contracted as a bolt of delicious sensation shot straight to her sex, and she begged, “Si’l vous plait, Harry.”

“Or this?” His fingers trailed the center of her torso, dipping into the hollow of her navel, snaking under the thong’s lace to toy with her curls. Of their own accord her thighs went slack, and she opened for his searching thumb. “So wet for me,

sugar, so hot and so tight.” He cupped her sex, two fingers parting her folds, the heel of his palm abrading that precious nub. “That’s it, sugar. Come for me, Martine.” He bit the lobe of her ear and at the same moment pinched her throbbing button, and her walls clenched and tightened when he finger-fucked her sheath.

“I can’t,” she moaned, her head lolling on the pillow.

“You can,” he crooned. “You will.” He flipped their positions, slid down her front, his hungry lips licking and sipping her skin to where the teddy met in a U, and skipped over the silk and lace to slither his tongue over her convulsing belly. When his mouth closed over her pulsing nub, the flames ignited. Dancing, burning blue and orange flares glazed her vision, her neck went taut, both shoulders dug grooves in the down, every rib threatened to break out of her skin, and her hips jerked off the mattress. When he covered her clit with his mouth, her body bowed, and his lapping tongue and plunging fingers triggered combustion after combustion.

He brought her down gently, petting her damp pubic curls, murmuring, “Beauty. You taste like paradise. You smell like nectar. “

Vaguely she registered the sounds of Harry divesting his jeans and shirt as she struggled to stop panting and ease the burning in her chest.

Martine’s blurred eyesight focused when he sipped at her upper lip and his knees coaxed her legs wider apart. A damp lock of hair touched one of his perfect eyebrows, and his forehead glistened with sweat.

The hard crown of his cock parted her internal walls, the intense pressure the sweetest combination of ecstasy and pain she’d ever felt. “You’re so fricking hot and tight. I can’t hold back.”

His fingers curled around her hips and slid to the crook of her ass cheeks to lift her off the mattress. He plunged deeper, and his testicles slapped her folds, and her pussy spasmed. His cock pistoned in and out of her contracting muscles, his pelvis impacting her nub on each thrust. Martine’s senses fractured when Harry threw his head back and roared. She wrapped her arms around his neck and he went slack in her embrace, his full weight bearing down on her breasts, her hips. A bead of perspiration dripped from his forehead to her cheek and rolled to the corner of her mouth. Martine licked his briny taste and nuzzled the soft stubble coating his jaw.

“Sorry,” he muttered, and his lips tickled her neck, his warm breath skating a shiver to the tiny hairs at her nape. Lifting onto his forearms he touched his mouth to the bridge of her nose. “I didn’t mean to collapse on you like that.”

Martine stifled a sigh and lifted her eyelids. He had the oddest look on his face, a sort of wry surprise. “I don’t think St. Pete’s willing to leave yet.”

“I don’t want him to,” Martine confessed, lacing her hands together in the center of his back. Even up close, his tanned complexion held no flaws.

At that moment the *Glory’s* engines fired, and the yacht shuddered and rolled from side to side. Martine glanced to the sliding glass doors opposite the bed.

“We are leaving Cannes?” she asked.

“Yeah. We’re heading to Marseille.”

“Why are we going to Marseille?” Martine prayed her terror didn’t show in her voice. She studied the pulse throbbing in the hollow of his clavicle and schooled her features into the relaxed pose she’d perfected so long ago.

“Curiosity,” he said, “is my abiding mortal sin. I’ve a hankering to see where you lived, sugar.”

Terror sucked all the oxygen out of Martine’s lungs.

I’m doomed.

Chapter Seven

Martine's honeyed complexion paled, and Harry heard her breathing hitch as St. Pete went flaccid and slipped from her warmth.

What lie are you conjuring up now, wife?

She shuttered her eyes entirely, and only the imperceptible working of her throat muscles gave a hint of her nervousness.

"Where I lived was not pleasant."

"Where did you live?"

"In a room."

"Where?"

"Marseille."

He turned onto his side, rose on one elbow, and studied her half-mast eyelids. Her nipple puckered when he traced the mouthwatering chocolate richness of her areola. "There's such a thing as a lie of omission. By not pleasant, do you mean the dock slums?"

She worried her lower lip between two teeth, and when he rested his thumb on the center of her clavicle, her pulse danced an erratic jig.

"I quit my room. The landlord will have already rented it."

"So all of your worldly possessions are in that suitcase?" He threw his gaze to the spit and polished Samsonite case. "There are a lot of things that don't add up about you, Mrs. Martine Ford. Expensive clothes, shoes, and luggage. No jewelry, except for your pink conch earrings, although the detail on those shouts one-of-a-kind dollars. Calloused fingers." He picked up her hand and ran his tongue over the pad of her forefinger. "Not to mention the scars on your back."

She snatched her hand out of his hold and worried her lower lip between her teeth. Her whole body shuddered, and she balled her fingers and dug fists into the comforter. "You said all you needed was my virginity. I have given that to you."

Her brows took flight, eyes widening to dominate her face as her mouth opened, and she froze like a child playing Red Light, Green Light when the stoplight spins around. She recovered within his five-second count, lips pinching to almost invisible as she swallowed and shot a glance at the teddy, the torn blouse.

"I kept my clothes on the whole time," she croaked.

"Look at me," he said, then added, "please, Martine."

For the first time, her lips trembled, and those black eyes brimmed, her pupils not pinpricks but not normal either. Turning her face into the pillow, she shook her head.

Knowing she'd reject his need to hold and comfort her, Harry splayed his fingers wide to prevent them from fisting and knew he had to change the subject before he pummeled the nearest object. Who the fuck had whipped her? His fingers had encountered several raised ridges, and his hands had only reached her midback.

"Who did that to your back?" She tried to stifle her gasp with a fist but kept her eyes hooded and didn't budge a fraction. "I'll find him."

The *Glory* must have cleared the point, because one long horn shrieked over the low humming of the yacht's engines. The boat's rhythmic cresting and dipping motion smoothed.

"One other thing you should know about me, Martine. Once a notion gets ahold of my brain, I worry it like a dog with his last bone."

Martine slanted him a quick peep, and her mouth canted into a tight, flat line, though her breasts no longer rose and fell as if she'd run a four-minute mile.

"Not going to answer?" He lifted a brow. "Then let's go shower, sugar. I want to get you all clean and shiny so I can get you messy again."

"What?" She shoved onto her elbows and shifted to face him, her lips turning down, evening out, then tugging down again. Out of the corner of one eye, he checked her feet and caught her big toes wrestling.

"We all have scars, Martine—some visible, most not." He leaned closer, captured her nipple between thumb and forefinger, and pinched. "I'm going to kill the asshole who whipped you. Those scars don't matter a frick to St. Pete. Take a look. He's more than ready for round two."

Harry couldn't suppress a chuckle when Martine gawked at his rigid tumescence, and St. Pete reacted by preening for her and weeping desire. He rubbed the worry lines forming on her forehead. "Yep. Grub first, and then we'll play Blind Man's Bluff nekkid."

Martine's mouth gaped, her eyes grew as round and big as flying saucers, and the thick fringes of lashes curling above them fluttered as she blinked rapidly.

"Cat got your tongue, Martine?" He winked at her.

"Harry." Austen's voice came from a square black intercom on the far wall. "You're needed on the bridge."

Rolling his eyes to the ceiling, he blew out an exasperated sigh. A quick cut to Martine revealed she had taken advantage of his momentary distraction and not only disappeared into the head but shut the connecting door. The *click* of the lock reached his ears.

Enjoy your temporary reprieve, Mrs. Ford.

Harry shrugged on his jeans and a T-shirt before strolling barefoot over the carpet to knock on the bathroom door. "I'm heading to the bridge. When you're done come up on deck. We should be docking soon."

"As you wish, Harry." Martine must have her ears to the door, he realized, since she answered immediately, and he couldn't hear water running.

Lips twitching, Harry exited the room, ambled down the hallway, and up to the second deck to find Austen piloting the boat. "What's up?"

"Delora's filed a complaint with the local authorities on behalf of herself and her lawyers. Claims you destroyed her laptop and cell and her lawyers' phones as well."

Harry flexed both shoulders. "She can't prove diggidity doo-doo. Water off my back. That's what you disturbed my honeymoon for?"

Austen flicked a couple of the switches on the instrument panel above the throttles. "Here's a present from Casmir." He dropped a black USB into a built-in tray to the right of the yacht's wheel.

"When did he stop by?" Harry picked up the device.

"About ten minutes before you two got here. Why would Casmir want to know our next port of call?"

"Who knows what schemes the Gypsy thug's hatching? Isn't he supposed to report for duty soon?"

"I'll eat my hat if his Royal Marine orders ever come in." Austen shook his head. "I've got that back-of-the-neck feeling that the shit's gonna hit the fan soon. Something's not right."

"I reckon he's kept a copy of the picture of me and Martine, and he'll milk me for as long as he can." Harry shrugged. "I'm heading to the study. If Martine comes up, keep her occupied, will ya? I ordered a background on her earlier, and the PI's report came in. I'll be in the study going through it."

A strident breeze tempered the heat of the midafternoon sun and whipped the sea's surface to form a series of rippling Black Forest cake frosting peaks. Wisps of translucent cumulus clouds streaked the azure sky. Harry lifted his face to enjoy the warm rays as he strolled to the stern stairs, refusing to allow his banked fury to surface until he could find a punching bag. Or a boxing partner. In the distance a line of iron cranes used in offloading cargo ships glinted a metallic rusty color.

When he reached Terry's study, Harry plopped onto the couch opposite a mahogany desk and made a face at the brown legal-size envelope lying on the coffee table. Sighing, he untied the string wrapped around a button-tab and emptied the contents—three loose sheets of white paper—onto the glass surface. European PIs were fond of old-fashioned paper.

It didn't take him long to read through the report, and by the end he had more questions than answers about his new wife. No official record of her entry to France, Spain, or Portugal existed. Three months ago she had turned up working at a bistro favored by local fishermen, dockhands, and petty criminals. The room she rented

was located near Marseille's worst dock slums. Harry memorized the address of both places.

Who had given her the money to buy the designer duds? The bistro didn't have her listed as an employee and must have been paying her under the table, which meant she received slave wages, not enough to rent even a toilet in Marseille's Quartiers Nord slums. Had she supplemented her income sexually?

Yet she'd been a virgin; he'd torn through her hymen himself. Of course, a fake hymen was a simple but costly gynecological procedure. He snorted. She hadn't even known how to kiss.

Harry squeezed his eyes shut, but that didn't stop the images of the crisscrossed welts on Martine's back from flooding his brain. He'd caught the scantest glimpse of her back as she'd entered the bathroom. The pink tinge of the tissue and the pattern were from a recent flogging. Bile coated his tongue, and he shuddered, knowing only too well the kind of pain she'd suffered.

Marseille's S&M dives boasted the depraved specialties of an international port with influences from every culture on the planet. Martine had sold him her virginity; had she accepted money for the flogging? The acidity in his stomach spiked, and he rejected the notion.

Clanks and the grinding of metal gears—the sounds of Marseille's docks and harbors—sifted through the study's open doors. Mingled aromas lingered on a sluggish waft of air. Fish, charcoal, turmeric, gas, and petroleum fumes all twisted into a disharmonious foul odor. Harry reached over and hit the switch to close the study's three portholes.

Propping his elbows on his knees, Harry considered his options for obtaining more information about Martine short of sexually torturing it out of her. Not that that wasn't an appealing idea, but Delora would have started a massive investigation of his new wife, and he needed to get the information first. Her papers had to be forged if she'd been paid under the table, but they'd passed the lawyers' inspections. Forgeries of that quality didn't come cheap.

His wife had worked in a bistro. Casmir had eyes, ears, fingers, and toes in every slum hangout in every coastal city from Portugal to Greece. Freaking hell, another job for the thug. He might as well put the little shit on a retainer.

She'd rented a room in a building. Slum property owners hated divulging information, but money loosened lips.

She'd mentioned coconut ice cream, a Mother Superior, and the Gulf of Gonâve. He stabbed the laptop's spacebar on the side table and Googled the latter. Before a map of Haiti filled the screen, his memory kicked in. The Gulf of Gonâve bordered Port-au-Prince. She was from Haiti, then. How many convents could there be in Port-au-Prince?

As he pushed off the sofa, Harry realized every time Martine'd blurted more than she'd intended, it was because he'd rattled her composure sexually. Arching

his back Harry contemplated the study's side wall—faux painted to mimic dawn rising over a shimmering Mediterranean. *I need to keep her off balance sexually.*

His mouth curved into a wry smile. Fucking born for the job. How to convince her the scars didn't matter one whit?

The image of the welts on her back made his mood grow grim. That *asshole* had beaten her. Harry visualized taking the bastard apart limb from limb. He debated the torture techniques he'd witnessed during the war, torn between fingernail pulling and shooting nails into genitals. Why choose?

I hope the fucker who whipped her is still in France.

Shit. If the fucker was still here, ten to one he lived in Marseille.

I'll have to rope Suresh into helping me make sure she's never alone.

He pursed his lips sourly when he recognized he'd have to add to Casmir's coffers and hire a cadre of bodyguards from the Gypsy. He left a voice mail for Suresh and another for Casmir and stuck his cell in his jeans pocket as he stepped onto the *Glory's* teak deck. He found Martine dressed in a shell pink jersey dress with a scooped neckline and short sleeves, leaning one shoulder into an alcove caged in by the yacht's exterior wall and the spiral aluminum stairs leading to the top deck.

She didn't hear his padded footsteps on the wooden flooring amid the cacophony of noise emanating from the piers and boats bordering the canal. Men of every nationality, shape, size, and hairiness littered the alleyways between warehouses. Half-unloaded containers abutted seedy tavern entrances and grimy office buildings. Shouts and coarse, crude bellows punctuated the chugging of luxurious boats slowed to a crawl to navigate the narrow waterway.

Her dress had a fitted waistline, and he automatically snaked his arms around her waist and tugged her back to his chest. She flinched, stiffened, and then tilted her head to the side to peek at him.

"Suresh is meeting us for dinner in about forty-five minutes. I'm going to go and get cleaned up, and then we'll head out. The restaurant's about a fifteen-minute walk."

He glanced at her feet; she wore a pair of strappy, flat Roman-style brown sandals. "I won't be long," he said, stroking the underside of her chin, marveling at the delicate texture of her skin. "Don't leave the *Glory*, Martine. This isn't the safest part of Marseille."

"I'll wait here, Harrison."

Some nuance in the way she said the words had his gut churning in overdrive. Too calm, too composed, too determined not to react. He couldn't allow her to get the upper hand.

He showered and toweled off and halted in the midst of buttoning his khaki pants when he saw her suitcase neatly tucked away between the dresser and the wall. After grabbing his shirt off the bed, he marched over to the vertical alcove, pulled out the Samsonite, and tested the combination lock. The luggage opened. He

checked the insides thoroughly, going through all the pockets and zippered bags. Nothing.

Harry scanned the room and found everything in place.

What was in this suitcase? And where the hell did you hide it?

Irritation had his teeth grinding. He stalked to the dresser and opened drawer after drawer to find the last right one held her clothing. The meager contents wrenched his gut. One dress, two matching silk skirts and tops, one pair of threadbare jeans, three faded black T-shirts all a tad on the nubby worn side, the matching bra and panties she'd worn last night, and four pairs of cotton underwear. The torn teddy and shirt lay beneath two sexy pairs of matching bras and thongs. She'd taken care to fold each item of clothing into perfect neat squares and arranged them in symmetrical rows.

In the closet he found a weathered pair of black work shoes, polished and buffed as much as the old leather allowed, and the high-heeled shoes she'd worn during the wedding ceremony. A quick check of the bathroom revealed a toothbrush, a travel-size tube of toothpaste, a miniature soap bearing the name of a hotel he didn't recognize, and a round hairbrush missing patches of bristles.

He poured a shot glass of scotch and knocked the liquor back, hoping it would burn away the gnawing in his chest. His wife needed spoiling, badly.

As he bounded up the stairs, Harry cataloged a series of actions. First, arrange an allowance—money of her own—but not enough to allow her to flee. Better yet, he'd take her shopping. Somehow he couldn't see Martine going wild in an upscale boutique.

Harry found her talking to Austen. The two looked engrossed in their conversation, Martine smiling up at the Bosun and pointing to the different buttons and LCDs on the bridge's control.

Austen spied Harry and waved him over. "I promised Martine next time we're out in the open seas, I'd let her take the wheel."

Twin spots of faint cherry stained her cheekbones.

"She's my wife. *I'll* show her how to steer the *Glory*," Harry muttered as he captured Martine's hand. "Let's head out. I have a surprise for you." Her feet shifted as her knees turned inward, and she almost stilled her sudden flinch at the word "surprise." All the women Harry knew loved surprises. Not Martine. Go figure. Repressing a sigh, he shot Austen a glance. "You're all duded up. Going into town too?"

"Nah." Austen's dark curls took on a raven hue in the sun's rays. "Yvonne's bringing dinner. Have fun, kids."

"Plan to." Harry rested his palm in the small of Martine's back, and his thumb traced the hint of an ass dimple. Not wanting to linger near the pungent aromas of trawlers loaded with baskets of catch, he kept their pace brisk until they reached the main drag; then he slowed to a lazy amble and laced their fingers together.

He enjoyed how she matched his lengthening strides automatically and the way a stray lock of her hair grazed his ear with every breezy gust. A whiff of honeysuckle teased his nose. "You never did tell me why you smell of honeysuckle."

"I cleaned rooms for a small family-owned hotel three mornings a week. They let me have the broken soaps." Her fingers, entwined in his, flexed, the slight twinge almost imperceptible. "The *maman* always ordered honeysuckle soap."

Harry suppressed the urge to whoop and holler. A truthful answer, no hesitation, no tangling omissions. He brought her hand to his mouth and kissed the middle finger's knuckle. He resisted the temptation to ask more questions. "So, are you starving?"

Her breathing went ragged, and a wave of frustration had him gritting his teeth. *Will it always be like pulling blood from a stone?*

"We can eat when you wish to, Harry," she replied and looked up when they halted at a traffic light. "I haven't been here before. This doesn't seem like Marseille at all." She wrinkled her nose. "That seems so out of place." She pointed at a modern four-story building. "So like a hospital smell. Anitipeptic? Is that right?"

What do I need to do to make you relax like this all the time?

"I think you want the word 'antiseptic.' But that's a perfect way of describing it." Harry stared at the square, stodgy outlines of the Hotel Le Pharo.

The light went red, and he led her across the street. As they rounded a curve in the road, a gusty wind laden with brine attacked Martine's curls, whirling her hair away from her face. In profile she proved hauntingly beautiful. St. Pete reared and roared, battling the confines of the cotton boxers, and he was hard pressed to continue walking. She cupped one hand over the bicep nearest the waves foaming against the beach and shivered.

"Here," he said, shrugging off his jacket and draping the navy blazer to cover her arms. To the right of them he spotted the back of a stone bench at the spot where weeds met the mottled sand of the bay. "Let's sit for a second."

When he had them settled on the concrete slats, Harry shifted sideways. "Not too cold?"

"Non. No. Your coat is very warm." She gifted him with a half smile.

"Where do you want to live, Martine? Here in Marseille? Cannes? Monaco?" His senses went on alert, searching for the first hint of her reaction. "Maybe in the country?"

Her eyes widened ever so slightly. "*Je ne comprende pas*. I don't understand. We are not living on the *Glory*?"

"We have just one cramped bedroom on the *Glory*. Wouldn't you prefer to have an apartment or a house in the country?"

She frowned; her fingers clutched one jacket lapel tightly. "We will rent a place for a year?"

“I’m going to buy you a place to live for as long as you want. The place will be yours no matter what happens between us, and the property will be yours free and clear.”

Her mouth opened and closed, and she looked more horrified than thrilled.

“I’m also going to set up a trust for you and the baby. More than enough for you to live on.” He held up a hand when she opened her mouth to speak. “And no, none of what I’m saying impacts the money we originally agreed upon. You’ll get your million euros.”

Harry could have sworn on a stack of bibles that she was dismayed. She blinked, her mouth twitched, and she wrung the hands she’d folded in her lap. She bent her head, seemingly fascinated by the thin green weeds poking through a seam in the cement slab the bench was mounted on, her toes curled into the leather sandal sole. Finally when he despaired she’d retreat into her mask, she bit her bottom lip, wrenched her head up, and blurted, “Why?”

“You’re going to be the mother of my child. I want my kid to grow up comfortably. I don’t want you worrying about expenses.” He tangled a strand of her silky hair around his forefinger. “And while we’ve known each other only a couple of days, I reckon you’re going to want to be home while the kid’s young. I have a feeling you’re going to be a very overprotective mom.”

Her complexion took on a grayish hue, and she spread a palm over her belly and stared at her fingers. “And what of you, Harry? Will you never see your child?”

The child had occupied his mind since last night. The notion of her raising his son or daughter without him had soured his mood. The last vestiges of his go-with-the-flow persona had vaporized at the notion.

He covered her hand with his and muttered a curse at the icy chill of her skin. “You’re freezing. Come on,” he said, hauling her off the bench. “The restaurant’s a few minutes away. Let’s get you inside and warm.”

Less than seven minutes later, Harry hustled Martine through the open doors of L’Epuisette, his and Suresh’s favorite haunt. A half circle of floor-to-ceiling glass doors framed a serene Mediterranean dappled with the winking lights of boats moored to an L-shaped wooden jetty. A mottled onyx and stone bridge with yellow arches shone surreally in the dimming evening light.

“C’est—it is beautiful,” Martine whispered when Harry halted at the reservation desk.

Rubbing her hands between his and feeling warmth seep back into her fingers, he glanced at the deserted room. “And the food is incredible.”

“I do not think they are open, Harry.”

“Don’t worry. The owner’s a buddy. No one’s going to kick us out.”

Extracting one hand from his, Martine pointed at the bridge. “Look how the lights from the docks make the arches look like spun gold.”

At that second a tall, thin man with a shock of salt-and-pepper hair spiked at odd angles jogged into the room. “We are not—” He skidded to a halt, his pointed

black shoes squeaking on the stone floor. "Harry! And this is the wife! Mon Dieu. *Quelle beauté.*" The man kissed his fingertips. "How do you do it?"

"Martine, meet Guillaume, owner and chief cook and bottle washer."

Guillaume bowed, captured Martine's hand, and brushed his lips over the backs of her fingers. "*Enchanté*, Madame. Should you ever tire of this blackguard of a friend, I will be waiting."

"So will your wife. She's liable to cut your throat," Harry retorted.

"Where's Suresh?" Guillaume's gray eyes cut to the restaurant's entrance.

"Had a change of plans. Some sort of business crisis."

Martine's gaze snapped to him.

"He phoned while I was dressing." Harry answered her unasked question.

"Ah, the romantic dinner, non? With the best food in France." Guillaume kissed his fingertips. "I will send out Philippe to care for you."

Philippe seated them opposite each other at a secluded round table with a spectacular view of the Mediterranean. "Guillaume wishes to know if you are choosing the wines tonight."

"Do you have any preferences?" Harry asked, though he knew her answer.

"No. Whatever you decide will be fine." The tip of her tongue snaked out to wet the corner of her mouth.

"You choose, Philippe." Harry waited until the man strolled out of hearing distance. "I know the menu well. Do you want any recommendations?"

"Please," she replied, her gaze fixed on the printed list of courses.

"I remember you said you had no allergies. What's your favorite food besides coconut ice cream?"

"Chocolat," she replied, not missing a beat.

Harry chuckled. A passing waiter lit the candles on their and neighboring tables, and a simmering radiance reflected off the windows and in the glasslike surface of the canal. It reminded him of the light in the room the night of the masquerade ball in Grasse. From under her lashes Martine's black eyes peeped up at him, and the similarity between her and the woman in the maid's uniform dissipated. St. Pete did a slow two-step, and Harry didn't know which woman he hardened for, Martine or the maid. Guilt set him to babbling.

"So I married a chocoholic," he muttered. "Tell me more. Do you prefer meat to seafood? Pork to chicken? What vegetables do you like? Which ones do you hate?"

"I...I like all food. What is your favorite, Harrison?"

She had her hands folded in her lap again, a sure sign of her mask descending.

"I grew up in Texas, sugar. A great big thick, juicy bone-in rib eye slab's my favorite." He grinned at her. "Medium rare, of course."

Philippe sauntered in their direction carrying two white triangular plates. "The amuse bouche. These are toast points with grilled salt cod topped with roe and

dressed in a *pistou* sauce.” He waved a hand at the porcelain in front of them. “Guillaume wishes to know if he should prepare a tasting menu for the two of you. Think on it as you enjoy your cod caviar.”

Harry noticed that Martine waited for him to pick up his cutlery, and then she imitated his actions, though her hands jerked a couple of times. She snagged her bottom lip with her tooth when the sterling tinkled on the china.

They settled on the tasting menu. Martine barely consumed a glass of wine for the entire five courses, but she ate every morsel on every plate. With each successive bite she wore that heavy-lidded expression of ecstasy from their wedding night. By the end of the meal, St. Pete was near to rioting against the boxers Harry wore. The khakis grew more uncomfortable, and damned if he barely kept himself in check during dessert when she ate a chocolate-covered biscuit with a red filling, drops of which dotted her plump lower lip tantalizingly.

They took a taxi to the yacht, and he had them in his quarters before Martine could blink. She did a graceful pirouette, arms flung wide, spinning on one foot and lifting her face to his. “Merci, Harry. Thank you. Thank you. Never have I had such a wonderful meal.” She hugged herself. “I will treasure this night always.”

“So will I.” And he meant every word. “Come with me, Mrs. Ford.” He crooked a finger.

She took two steps forward, set her palms on his chest, and their gazes fastened. “Is it now that we play your Blind Man’s game?”

He almost fell over his own feet he laughed so hard. “Have you been thinking about it all evening?” he asked, using the back of a hand to swipe the moisture from his cheek.

“Austen said you bluff in poker. I did not know this term. But it is like a dare, non?” She’d taken a seat on the mattress and shed her sandals. Her big toe traced the curves of the paisley pattern in the rug by the bed. “But where do we find the blind man? And who is nekkid?”

Harry didn’t know whether to laugh or cry, but he didn’t want to shatter their fragile camaraderie, so he worked up a smile to soften his words. “I’d lay Powerball odds you’re an orphan.”

“I can prove you wrong,” she said.

Harry mirth disappeared when she imitated Delora’s voice, accent, and intonation perfectly. *Probably a fluke*. “Do that again.”

A smile played with the corners of her lips, and she shot him a sideswipe. “Don’t for a second think smashing my cell... I have plenty of backups of that picture,” she said, all in Delora’s voice.

That sniper-in-the-vicinity dread raked the hairs on his forearms. “Jesus. I never know what to expect from you.” He strode to the bed and sat next to her, choking back the sourness filling his mouth. “Can you do other voices?”

“You are angry with me.” She shrank away, shuffling her feet in the direction of the headboard.

Harry changed his tactics. "I take it you've never played Blind Man's Bluff?"
She shook her head. "No."

Harry explained the game to her between kisses and stripping off her skirt, thong, and bra, leaving her blouse on but loosened to bare her breasts. When they were both hot and bothered, he retrieved a tie from the closet and wrapped the red strip of silk around her palm.

"Tie it around my eyes," he ordered.

When she had him good and truly trussed, he swung into a horizontal position, rested his head in his hands, and said, "Rule number one. You get to do anything you want. Have anything you want. Stop anytime you want. It's all about you. The goal of the game is to identify whatever you're holding or touching or kissing."

Harry made a mental note to remember to tell Austen the new rules of the game.

"And rule number two?"

"I get a turn after you."

Chapter Eight

Martine couldn't remember ever feeling like this—giddy and delirious, alive and free. All during dinner she went over his every word on the bench—the promise of a house, money each month, security.

Do you mean this, Harrison Indiana Ford?

A miniscule part of her yearned to forget all the lessons she'd learned about men, to erase the past and believe in him. The other part, the part that ruled, called her the worst sort of mark.

She sat on her haunches, all too conscious of Harry naked on the bed, of her nudity, and the ugly scars on her back.

"We don't have to do this if you don't want to, Martine," Harry said, and he turned his head on the pillow, easily pinpointing her direction despite the blindfold. "Tell me what you want."

Working up the courage to answer, she inhaled the aromas of the candles, a cleansing ginseng fragrance, and on her exhale she skittered closer and brushed her lips on the cusp of his shoulder. Admiring his bulging muscles, the sharp indentation midarm to his elbow, she ran her fingers down his warm flesh. The nuns avoided all mention of body parts and workings, and she'd reached adulthood aware mainly of how coupling occurred.

"What is this muscle, Harry?" She squeezed the thickest part of his arm.

For a few seconds he didn't answer, and her stomach went all jittery.

"That's the deltoid. Feels good when you do that."

"You have beautiful shoulders, strong, and I can see where each muscle begins and ends." She bent to kiss a taut spot near the crook of his neck. "And this?" Her exhale sifted a lock of warm brown hair curling around a vein that went all the way to his ear. Unable to resist she traced the throbbing vessel, nuzzling the damp flesh cording his throat.

"Trapezius," he replied, his voice low and husky.

"I know these," she said, placing her palms flat on his chest. "Pectorals. Men are so different here from women."

"Praise the Lord almighty," Harry muttered.

"So strong," she murmured, fingering a ridged groove of flesh extending from the middle of his torso. "This is the six-pack, non? Three here and three on the other side. This one lower than its mate."

On impulse she leaned over and used the tip of her tongue to trace each groove. Harry intoxicated her senses. She grew drunk on his now familiar Harry fragrance—soap, the CK aftershave she'd discovered in the bathroom, and a spiciness all his own. Her ears filled with his each rasped inhale, each muffled grunt, and the occasional hiss when she hit a sensitive spot.

Her tongue absorbed the slight musk and salt in the taste of him, and she closed her eyes to savor his flavor and smell, hoping she'd always be able to conjure the aroma after their year ended. She laid her cheek to his belly and ran a finger around the rim of his navel. A film of sweat coated his skin there, making the ridges outlining his six-pack glisten.

Flesh slapped on flesh, and Martine angled her head to his sex, all swollen and red, the head shiny and coated with clear moisture. She sniffed and discovered his musky spiciness came from here, from his cock.

"And this?" She brushed her index finger over the crown. "What is this called?"

"The glans," he growled. "Martine, I'm dying here."

She glanced up. His jaw clenched, his nostrils widened, he seemed to be grinding his teeth, and he had the covers clenched so tightly between his fingers she expected the cotton to shred any moment. Martine lifted her cheek off his groin, but his palm pressed her back down.

"Don't stop, sugar. If you have any mercy in you, don't stop." The slight pressure he exerted on her head receded. "Maybe pick up the pace a tad? A giant step tad?"

"St. Pete is unhappy?"

"St. Pete's insanely happy. Aching for you to touch him, lick him."

"Like so?" She licked across the swollen head. "So smooth." Curiosity spiked her veins and directed her actions; Martine slid down the mattress and crossed over his thigh to settle between his spread legs. Cupping his sac in both hands, she said, "These are the testicles. The British say bollocks, the Yanks, balls. The sperm are stored here, non?" She squeezed the taut testicles; he grunted, and his hips came off the bed.

"Gentle there, Martine. Gentle," he commanded.

Martine let go of his flesh, and her gaze flew to him.

Harry had risen to his forearms, the tie no longer a blindfold but hanging loosely around his neck, and he wore a grimace, one eye shut, his mouth twisted.

All at once she understood. "I am sorry, Harry. The balls are the things that hurt when men are kicked there. I thought it was this." She pointed to his cock. "I did what you did to me here." She touched her breast. "I liked it."

His lips twitched into a half smile; he lifted his chin, pointing at his genitals. "Kiss them better."

"But, but..."

“Soft kisses, no hands,” he coaxed. “If you stop now, it would be the most cruel and unusual punishment in the universe.”

Not completely convinced, Martine barely touched her lips to one side of his sac and then the other.

“Martine?”

Her nose brushed the base of his cock when she shifted to peep at him.

“St. Pete loves to be squeezed. C’mere.”

She skittered along the mattress, and he shifted to his side so they faced each other on the same pillow. Cradling one of her hands between his, he drew their twined limbs down their bodies and curled her hand around his cock and then cupped his palms on her shoulders. Manacling her gaze, he said, “Go ahead. Squeeze.”

St. Pete throbbed, heated, and engorged as her grip tightened, and Martine gasped and looked down. The vision brought to mind all the nuns’ warnings of the sins of carnality and a delicious, devilish shiver swelled her nipples to peaks, sent cream trickling down the folds of her sex.

“Touch the glans,” he ordered, his voice coarse and rough and low.

“Here,” she whispered, running her finger over the glistening bulbous head, and glanced up for his approval.

“There,” he agreed. Then he covered her fingers with his again and slid their joined hands down the length of his cock. “Like this.” He positioned her so her thumb rubbed the apex of the glans as she stroked him up and down.

Harry leaned his forehead on hers, his wine-scented breath fanned her upper lip, and the aching between her thighs flared and blazed. “Harry,” she muttered. “How does the game end?”

“Like this,” he replied, taking her mouth with his. She loved the sweet invasion of his tongue, the first taste of him almost as heady as the first pressure of his sex as he entered her. Kissing Harry, being kissed by Harry, erased all her worries, all her problems, all her dread of the future. Martine surrendered to his conquering tongue, moaning when he swept the roof of her mouth with a fleeting, tingling caress in the middle and then a feathering of the sensitive flesh rimming her upper molars. Her hold on his cock slackened. Her fingers skated over his damp stomach, grazing his bunched trapezius and then tangling in his hair.

Writhing on the downy comforter, she couldn’t stop a pleading whimper from parting her lips when her nipples scraped the coarse hairs scattering his chest. He cupped the curve of her rump. He dragged her closer and lifted her thigh over his waist, opening her sex to his.

All the while his tongue coaxed hers into play, plunging and retreating until she tentatively mimicked the way he’d stroked her, learning that he growl-grunted when she sucked on the tip, and that his fingers kneaded her bottom if she bit lightly. She ground on his hot, rigid erection, her folds so wet and slippery she slid up and down easily.

“Sugar, sugar,” he rasped, and his hand slipped between their bodies, and he guided his cock to her entrance.

Her neck went limp as he penetrated her, stretching her walls, and she recognized the fierce clenching and jerking of her inner muscles as the precursor to ecstasy. He thrust upward, hard and fast, grinding a circle over her mound, and she climaxed as his mouth captured hers, his kiss deep, greedy, and devouring. Harry pumped faster, his grip on her hip increasing as he pounded into her heat. Her widespread position exposed the nub normally hidden by her folds, and each thrust created a friction that sent her walls into frenzied contractions. He gave one final thrust, and she closed her eyes and bit his neck as an abyss of pleasure blasted every nerve ending in her body.

His grasp of her ass slackened, and his head collapsed onto the pillow. Harry’s audible panting subsided, and the burning in Martine’s lungs gradually eased.

Wanting to prolong the magic, she kept her lids lowered and tried to memorize the nuances of the intimate moment—the way a stray curl tickled her ear when he exhaled, the wetness dripping from his hair down his nape to dribble over the heel of her palm curved around the base of his neck.

A series of convulsions erupted into a muted climax when his cock flexed inside her, and she couldn’t choke back a faint cry. He gathered her into his arms and rolled her onto her back. A kiss on the tip of her nose coaxed her heavy eyelids to open.

Merde, she’d married the handsomest man on the face of the earth. She with the scars on her back, and hands calloused from day after day of digging soil and sand, and feet with soles the texture of rough leather from being barefoot for most of her youth.

His mussed hair only served to enhance his impossibly symmetrical, perfect features, his cultured background, and his born-to-money ease in the midst of the sophistication of L’Espuitte. How mismatched they were, yet Harry’s eyes held nothing but warmth and kindness.

“Okay, Martine?” He ran his knuckles up the side of her cheek. “I didn’t push you too far too fast, did I?”

I want to experience everything, have every moment of you for as long as I can.

Tears brimmed at the corners of her eyes, and Martine blinked fast and furiously. She *never* cried. *Never*.

“Martine?” His finger tilted her chin. “What’s wrong?”

“*Rien*. Nothing,” she replied and managed to return his intent stare. “It is overwhelming this f—Um...making-love business.”

“Thank you.” He skipped his forefinger along the seam of her mouth, and she couldn’t repress the frown forming between her brows. He chuckled. “I know what you were going to say. I told you before, Martine. What we have is special. Sex can be just that, a physical release. With us it’s more.”

I wish I could believe you.

“Before we had dinner tonight, you asked me about what happens after the baby’s born.” The severity of his gaze and the somber expression he wore caused her breathing to falter. “I’m not going to abandon either of you. And I intend to protect you from Delora.” He rolled a shoulder. “My stepmother’s vicious, Martine, and if anything happens to me, she’ll come after you with an army of lawyers.”

Panic flared, and she didn’t hear beyond the words “if anything happens to me.”

“Ouch,” he muttered and loosened her fingers, which had reflexively dug into the flesh of his shoulder.

“Pardon. What can she do to you?” Martine had no defenses left and knew her fright showed.

“Aw, she’s not likely to harm me physically, although those talons of hers missed my eyes by a cactus needle.” He brushed his lips over her chin and trailed tiny sip-kisses to the corner of her mouth. “I was referring more to a car accident or sickness.”

Her tense muscles sagged, her back burrowed into the mattress, thighs shifting on the smooth comforter, and St. Pete slid out of her, prompting a wince of regret and a slight pout.

“Not to worry,” Harry crooned as he rolled onto his back. “St. Pete’s insatiable as far as you’re concerned.”

Determined he wouldn’t repeat the embarrassing offer of last night, she bounded to her feet, sprinted to the bathroom, and locked herself in. She had the three-minute shower of the frugal poor—wet, turn off the faucets, soap, turn on the shower, and then rinse.

Her reflection in the mirror showed the splotches of pink suffusing her face when she remembered how long she’d greedily remained under the spray of the oversize showerhead earlier, luxuriating in the hot stream. The room she’d rented in Marseille after leaving Grasse didn’t have plumbing. Instead the fourteen tenants on her floor shared a bathtub, a sink, and a chain toilet. All coin operated.

Harry’d turned the covers down, and he lay naked on the bed, one knee bent, the other resting on the sheets, his skin a rich walnut against the snowy linens. “There’s no need to be a miser with the agua, Martine, especially when we’re docked.” He shuffled the remote he held in one hand to the other side of the bed. “Don’t think I didn’t notice your quick getaway. You’ll have to be faster’n a jackrabbit to pull that trick again.”

She admired the lazy, unselfconscious way he swung his legs to the side, stood, arched his back, and cricked his head side to side. As he walked past her, he chucked her chin and said, his eyebrows jerking up and down, “Next time we have a long, long shower together.”

She’d lived on an island all her life but never learned how to swim and had an irrational terror about falling overboard and the sea bubbling into her lungs. It had taken greater courage to leave the blouse in the bathroom than it had to sneak onto

the boat ferrying supplies to the cargo ship destined for Marseille. Yet he hadn't seemed to notice her exposed back, and his eyes had never left her face.

When the door clicked shut, she bolted for the bed, but the crumpled comforter and mussed sheets halted her midstride. A childhood spent in servitude had her smoothing the wrinkles and tucking the fabric under the mattress. Her palms lingered on the rich silken feel of the cotton. She felt rather than heard Harry enter the room, the grassy aroma of the soap he'd used heralding his approaching nearness, and she managed not to flinch when he curled an arm around her waist and tugged her back to his chest.

Now he will say something. The air in the cabin grew thick and heavy, weighting her shoulders.

"It's late, wife." His lips skated warm drafts of air over the whorls of her ear. He nipped the lobe and murmured, "And you must be plumb tuckered out. Let's hit the sack." He smacked her bottom.

The sharp sting made her jump, pivot, grab both cheeks, and blurt, "Why'd you do that?"

"Because the scars on your back don't make any difference to our relationship, and I want you to relax when we're together." He cupped her jaw. "I have your back—Shee-it," he hooted. "Lawd Almighty, what a time for my warped sense of humor to rear its ugly head." He jiggled her chin. "Come on, you gotta admit that was funny. Every time I've tried to reassure you by telling you I've got your back, I've been shoving both feet into my mouth. A free fall for a man whose legendary charm's the talk of all the trophy wives on the Monte Carlo circuit."

She couldn't resist the dancing twinkle spreading a trail of gold when his irises caught the light of a flickering candle, and the breath she'd been holding whooshed out of her lungs.

"Relax, Martine. All I'm interested in now is a good night's sleep. You've drained my libido with your sexual demands." He pinched one nipple.

"I did not demand anything," she protested, batting at his hands. "You were the one."

"Not so, sugar. You couldn't wait to taste St. Pete, and look what you've done." He waved a hand. "See, he thinks he's getting lucky again."

"I—" She stared at his rigid sex. "But...more?"

"Nah, the flesh is willing, but in this case the spirit is weak." He tweaked her nose. "I know you really want it, so we'll try again in the morning. But you're going to have to use all your womanly wiles."

Bewilderment spiked her submission, and she let him scoop her into his arms and settle them both on the mattress. He had his mouth sucked in hard, and then he shot her a look and hooted again. "I can't remember the last time someone tickled my funny bone the way you do. I forgot to blow out the candles. Snap to it, Martine. In Texas the wife turns off the lights." Patting the side of her bottom, he yawned. "Go on."

She rubbed her temple, but he pushed her to the other side of the bed. A glance over her shoulder showed him yawning again and stretching his hands to the headboard as he arched his back, ignoring her completely. Martine hurried through the task, snuffing the first eleven candles in panicky haste. Every two seconds she peeked at him, but he had turned to set his iPhone into a dock and didn't even glance her way once.

A muted light on the balcony allowed her to pick her way back to the bed. He threw the covers back and patted the mattress. "Slide in. Time for forty winks, wife."

"Why is it called that?" she asked as he helped her under the sheets and tucked the covers over her shoulders.

"Damned if I know." He cocked his head to the right and stroked his chin with a thumb and index finger. "I never considered how hard it must be to learn the idiosyncrasies of the English language, far less the bastardized Texas version. I'd promise not to use any more good-ole-boy sayings, but I get too much of a chuckle out of watching you try to puzzle them out."

Martine had to clamp her teeth together to resist the temptation to stick her tongue out at him. *Don't I have enough to worry about? Now I must be more confused because you think it's funny?*

She glared at him, and he winked and grinned, showing off the dimples in his cheeks that made her spine tingle. He nudged her hip, brushing his thigh along the curve of her legs.

"Scoot to the middle," he coaxed, inserting his hand under her midback and shifting her to the center of the bed. He sat up, bringing her with him, and fluffed her pillows and his, and then he stretched and shifted both of them so she laid her cheek on his chest and spooned him sideways. "Comfy?"

"Yes, thank you."

The regular outbursts of laughter and ribald shouts interspersed with the whine of scooters racing down the ancient cobblestoned alleys of Marseille had receded during their lovemaking. Early-morning tide changes set the *Glory* into the side-to-side rocking motion of a baby's cradle.

"Have you any idea of where you want to live?" Harry asked as he twirled a lock of her hair around one finger. "I'm not partial to any one city or place."

I am too scared to let myself dream.

"How can you buy a home? I thought you had to have the heir first before you got the money," she replied, unable to keep the suspicion out of her voice.

His hard chest broadcasted heat, and her palm, resting under the oak-hued swirls of hair dusting his taupe nipple, tingled. Her nipples, three times the size of his and a couple shades darker, grazed his rib cage, and she marveled at their differences.

"My mother left me a sizable trust fund, and I've been working for years. I've a considerable nest egg. Not a fortune compared to what I'll inherit, but enough to

buy a home for you and my son or daughter. Enough for you to live a comfortable life." His palm cupped her jaw and tilted her head back so their eyes met. "And just so you know, if you don't choose the place, I'll buy it on my own in your name."

"You will?" She wanted to swallow the squeaked question.

"Yeah. You're my wife, and I've discovered I intend to take care of you." Two fingers rubbed the bridge of her nose. "And my kid. On that note, country or city?"

"I should like to live near a good school." Martine spoke the words slowly, her heart beating so loudly and so hard she feared the organ would escape the confines of her body. "A very, very good school."

"You want to go to college?"

If only. For the second time in less than an hour, Martine fought back tears, and she forced her lips to curve to try and distract him. "Non. I want the child to have the best schooling. The best."

"You're going to be one terrific mama," he said, stroking the side of her neck. "I called a few friends this afternoon and got a couple of recommendations for Realtors. We're meeting with one tomorrow. First thing we'll put at the top of the priority list will be the best school districts."

"I will never be able to thank you enough," Martine murmured, and her voice shook on the last three words. *I'm beginning to believe in your promises. Lord help me to be stronger. Help me resist your magic.*

"You're beat," he said. "Close those gorgeous eyes and get some shut-eye."

She rested the side of her cheek in the nook between shoulder and clavicle. Obediently lowering her lids, she wriggled, trying to get comfortable, listening to the sheets rustling with each surreptitious move. Outside the wind whistled as if blowing through a narrow alley bordered by tall buildings. The *Glory* swung in a wide arc, dipping and rising as the mistral's strength surged. The cuffs of the sea and the yacht's splashed impact wove a rhythmic lullaby through the stateroom.

A hypnotic drowsiness turned Martine's eyelids to leaden weights and her bones to limp noodles. Harry tucked her closer—one arm around her shoulder and the other claiming the hip bent over his groin. His hand stroked her spine, the large palm gently caressing her back echoing the cadence of the *Glory's* troughs and crests.

The vision of a little cottage on a hill surrounded by a small garden diffused the images of Grand-mère frail and near death, soothed the nightmares that plagued her after the message from Mother Supérieure about the desperate need for Martine to send medicine.

In the garden a toddler stumbled and gathered white daisies, fuchsia bougainvillea florets, and white-speckled green ivy spirals into chubby little fingers, her high-pitched chortle showcasing one perfect tooth. A daughter. She snuggled closer, tucking her fists under her chin. She fell asleep adding rooms to the dream dwelling.

* * *

“Harry.” Austen’s voice crackled over the intercom, and Martine jerked awake, blinking the room into focus.

Harry grunted and hugged her closer. Accustomed to waking at the slightest belch or snore, she inched her head higher, but he seemed fast asleep.

One eyelid opened, and he peered down at her. “Remind me to switch that damned thing off as soon as we step through the door,” he grumbled. “Mornin’.” He brushed his lips to the middle of her forehead.

“Harry, I need you on deck.” The intercom went silent for a second. “Pronto.”

“Shit.” Harry untangled their entwined limbs and sat up, squishing the pillows against the bookshelf headboard.

Martine rolled onto her back, her vision blurred, and she blinked. The Bandoleer’s optician had told her she risked infection if she slept with the contacts in.

“Your eyes are all dreamy.” Harry reached over to buss her on the lips. “Go back to sleep. I’ll bring back breakfast when I’m done with Austen.”

“I can cook,” Martine protested, blinking rapidly. Her fingers itched to pop the lenses out and relieve the scratchiness. “I am no slug-a-bed.”

“Slug-a-bed?” he repeated. “Were your nuns from eighteenth-century London? First child of my loins, now this.” He gave a little shake of his head. “Go back to sleep, and that’s an order.”

Her eyes hooded, she watched him dress and leave. As soon as the door clicked shut, Martine eased out of bed, her movements hurried and sleep-fuddled clumsy. She knocked a vase on the table to the rug below, the thud sounding like an ambulance’s alarm to her ears. She set the tubular porcelain back in place. Her itching eyes glued to the door, she counted seconds.

Her lungs started functioning when the door remained closed at fifteen seconds. A fog crept across one contact, and she pulled the eyelid down over her lashes as the optician had taught her. Nothing.

“Merde,” she muttered and rushed to the bathroom, shuffled through her supplies, and found the cosmetic cloth case. Keeping up a running count, she fumbled and fumbled, trying to scoop the lens between forefinger and thumb, all the while cursing in English, French, and Creole. Sweating even through the morning chill and the remnants of the mistral’s iciness, she finally managed to pop the offending contact into a cupped palm.

Seven minutes.

Shaky fingers deposited the lens into the corresponding L and R case; she twisted the cases shut, and as she turned to race back into the room, Martine caught the reflection of her back in the mirror out of the corner of her eye. The obscene whip welts had healed, but the scarred flesh had never regained full pigment and remained pinkish white and slightly raised.

The top she'd so bravely discarded the night before hung from a hook on the back of the door. Needing to hide her ugliness, Martine shrugged into the silk blouse. One button hung loosely at her midriff, and she poked the pearl through the corresponding hole.

"Imbécile," she spat. "Wasting precious time."

Yesterday her hiding place for the precious documents and the digital camera had been hastily chosen, but Harry's curiosity about the contents of her suitcase had forced her to be proactive. Always hide in plain sight; she'd learned that trick from the months working for Jean-Claude Fournier, the aide to Port-au-Prince's chief of police.

Retrieving the forged birth certificate and the folded brown envelope from under the pile of laundry in a basket in the bathroom, she stood in the doorway, her gaze sweeping the room. Where to hide the damning evidence? All the furniture had been anchored to the floor, so no crawl spaces were available. Not the dresser drawers, not the closet... The pulse at her temple banged against her skull as she discarded one idea after another, and the sun's rays lengthened and lifted dawn's shadows from the sitting area leading to the balcony.

Under the mattress? Too obvious.

Her bedside table? Too risky.

A cold sweat coated her flesh when she heard the muted sound of two men conversing and recognized Harry's and Austen's voices.

Vite, vite, quick, quick, think, think.

The voices grew louder, closer.

Her mind refused to operate.

She ran to the dresser, knelt, and pulled open the drawer she had appropriated. Folding the envelope in half so it would fit under her jeans, she checked her clothing and sucked in a gasp. One undergarment lay slightly askew. Harry had been searching her belongings.

"We'll head back to Cannes after Martine and I get back from our noon meeting."

Merde, he is at the door.

"Anything you want to pass on to Yvonne about Martine?"

Austen's question jumbled her thoughts even more.

Yvonne?

"Tell Yvonne not to go to town on her. No fancy stuff yet."

"Will do."

Just as she remembered Austen speaking about Yvonne bringing dinner, the door opened and Harry stepped in, briefly looked her way; then his head twisted right only to whip back in her direction. He halted, his hand on the doorknob, his eyes glued to her hands.

Chapter Nine

“So? What’s up? Why the hasty meeting?” Suresh asked as he broke off a piece of a crusty roll and dabbed at the tomato sauce surrounding the last morsel of egg on his plate.

“I need info,” Harry answered. “And you’re the go-to guy for info.”

His hunger appeased by an excellent bacon, gruyere cheese, and chanterelle omelet, Harry’s mind turned to a need he hadn’t been able to satisfy this morning. St. Pete had been in a roaring erected state when Austen had interrupted Harry’s predawn fantasy.

And his aching erection hadn’t been helped when he’d returned to the stateroom and caught his wife with the most delectable bra and pantie set in her hands. The expression on his face must have told her what he wanted, for she’d gone all pink and flustered and high-tailed it to the bathroom, leaving him standing in the middle of the room with a Guinness-record boner.

Austen had paged him again, and it took Harry five minutes to settle the small matter of dockage fees. Then he’d sneaked into the bathroom intending on a prolonged shower and cleaning every inch of Martine’s luscious skin. But the sight of his wife stretching on tiptoes, face turned up under a blast of steam and spray, arching her back, and singing some French ditty he didn’t recognize had him grinning like a besotted fool. For a few seconds he wondered how much spoiling it would take before Martine felt comfortable enough to take a long shower in his presence. Just as he unbuttoned his jeans, Austen’s voice hailed him again.

All hell had broken loose. The chef had stormed out in a fit of pique because Harry’d refused to authorize the replacement of their coffeemaker with one of his preference. Terry had called from New York to give him an update on his brother’s successful surgery. And by the time he’d finished handling both matters, the only glimpse of his wife he’d managed to catch had been her orgasmic eating of a couple of strawberries while she and Yvonne planned their day in the city over breakfast in the *Glory’s* dining room.

“From that glazed look in your eyes, I assume the honeymoon’s on the right track?” Suresh asked.

If you can count waking up hard as a steel beam two days in a row with your arms around one woman while fantasizing about another, then sure, the

honeymoon's freaking steaming on the tracks to hell. Harry almost muttered the words aloud.

His wife was an exotic, sensual beauty who rocked his balls. Yet he still woke up with that vision of the waitress from the masquerade party dogging his brain, that alluring glance she'd shot him over her shoulder, his fantasy woman bared from the waist down, those long, long legs encased in black nylons, pink pussy folds exposed by her bent-over stance.

I'm a married man with responsibilities.

With a hot wife I can't get enough of.

A wife who has secrets.

"Hello, hello, anyone in there?" Suresh snapped his fingers in front of Harry's nose.

Harry shook his head. "All present and accounted for. However, as the saying goes, Houston, there is a problem," Harry replied. "Martine's here illegally. She's Haitian. I need an immigration lawyer. Know of one?"

"Delora dispatched a PI to Haiti this morning."

"Fuck. Martine's papers were perfect. Even Delora's lawyers couldn't fault them. How the hell did she cotton on to this so fast when I've only just figured it out myself?" Harry's jaw clenched as he sifted through the last twenty-four hours, hunting for strange coincidences and found two. "Austen said he thought I'd been set up. It has to be the matchmaker. Ten selected candidates, nine nonvirgins."

"The matchmaker?" Suresh asked. "I don't get it. You think she set you up? Why?"

"I don't have time to go there. I need eyes on the ground in Haiti. Today." Harry lifted his face to the sun centered halfway to a high-noon position in a cloudless sky.

"I have a friend in Miami who runs an international security company. I'll text him right now and cc your info."

"Thanks. I have a couple of special-ops contacts in Florida. I'll call in some favors." Harry studied the dappled surface of the canal, tracing a line of seaweed as the brown fronds dunked a merry hide-and-seek with the wake of a putt-putting dingy. "Geoff dealt with the matchmaker. I'll have him check into her. But it's too pat. I'm missing something."

"What about Martine? What're you going to do?" Suresh asked.

"I'm meeting with Casmir after this. Martine worked in a bistro in the Quartiers Nord. I'm putting him on her case. I want to know how she got here, and I want every move she's made since she got here."

"Good call. He has sources everywhere." Suresh pushed a morsel of tomato around his plate with his fork. "What made you come to the conclusion that she's from Haiti? It could be Algiers."

“She mentioned the Gulf of Gonâve once. And she spoke about a Mother Superior. And you just confirmed it with the news about Delora.”

“You can’t just ask her outright about how she got here?” Suresh added a cube of sugar to his café latte.

“She’s been flogged. With a whip. Recently. Within the last three months. A whipping that could’ve taken down a man my size. She’s not inclined to talk about anything.” Harry drummed his fingers on the table. “She’ll skip if I push her too far.”

He’d never seen Suresh Singh flummoxed before. The novelty once would’ve made him howl with laughter. The young technology mogul snapped the stem of the crystal water goblet he held.

“Fuck,” Suresh growled, his dusky complexion taking on a waxy shade. “Who? Why?”

“Won’t talk about it. I tried to question her this morning, but she clammed up.” A ship’s horn rang out, and Harry glanced in the direction of the blare. “It could have happened in Marseille. She could have done it for money. Hell, she married me for a million euros. Where else would an illegal woman from Haiti get the money for the designer duds she wears?”

“There’s another scenario,” Suresh mused. “Delora could have hired Martine and the matchmaker.”

“That doesn’t add up. Delora would never hire a woman of mixed descent. Her brothers dragged a black man through the back roads of Texas for five miles. His name was Silas, and he was a hand on our ranch. He made the mistake of looking too long and hard at Delora. Believe me, she instigated the whole incident.”

“More and more I understand why your stepmother’s earned your total contempt.” Suresh rolled a shoulder. “I’ll play devil’s advocate here. It isn’t stretching the imagination to consider that Delora could’ve hired Martine.”

“No.” Harry gritted his teeth so hard he expected enamel to chip at any second. “I’m going with my gut on this one. Martine’s not Delora’s pawn. You saw her at the medical exam.”

“I did, and I must admit if she faked those reactions, she should be awarded an Oscar.” Suresh set down the fork he’d been threading through a few squished olives. “You do realize her being here illegally negates the marriage?”

“Duh-uh. I’m a fricking Rhodes scholar, and I was special ops. Give me some credit.” Harry dragged his hands through his hair. “I have this waiting-for-an-ambush hunch that Martine being illegal is the tip of the iceberg.”

Suresh shoved his chair back and took a sip of his café latte before he replied, “My guy in Miami will come up with something.” His iPhone dinged, and he studied the screen. “Speak of the devil. That’s him now. He’s waiting for your call.”

Harry spent the next ten minutes in conversation with Suresh’s security tycoon.

“Well?” Suresh asked when Harry ended the call.

“He’s sending a two man team by private jet to Port-au-Prince in an hour.”

“Perfect.”

“I gotta get going.” Harry glanced at his phone’s display. “Martine and I are meeting with a real-estate agent later. I’m buying her a place.”

“You’re taking this arranged marriage more seriously than I expected,” Suresh said. “Why?”

“Beats me,” Harry quipped but then added, “I found food in the sideboard drawer after she left this morning. Rolls from the dinner we’d had here last night. Guillaume did a tasting menu for us. She cleaned every plate. And I mean cleaned, even ate the garnishes.”

And nearly had me coming at the table the orgasmic way she ate.

“Your wife sounds as if she’s known hunger intimately.” Suresh glanced at a twenty-foot schooner with furled faded blue sails trawling the middle of the bay. “I’ve seen this before.”

For the first time since Harry’d known Suresh, the other man’s gaze didn’t have the ever-present humorous twinkle he’d come to expect. Instead Suresh’s black eyes held nothing but sorrowful pity.

“I’d give you any odds that the bread disappeared into her purse during the meal. Kids who grow up not knowing when or where their next meal is coming from hoard obsessively.” Suresh leaned back in his chair and linked his hands above his leather-belted waist. “Even here in Europe I see the same habits with the kids in the foundation.”

Harry shook his head. “She didn’t have a purse—shit. She was cold, so I gave her my jacket. And the bread was replenished once.” He slapped a palm to his forehead. “Damn it.”

“What?”

“A whole lotta dice just rolled craps. Martine got real nervous about her suitcase. I figured it was because she didn’t want me to know how little she had.” Harry couldn’t prevent a rueful grin. “She’s got this amazing pride. And her courage?” He shook his head again. “Rivals any special-ops team member I’ve worked with.”

“I was there for the medical exams, remember?” Suresh twisted his lips. “I think you’ll find that she’s the type of woman who, once she gives her loyalty, never wavers.”

“The notion she’s snitching food just in case. It drives me nuts.” Harry waved at the basket of garlic toasts on the table. “I don’t want my wife feeling that she has to steal so she won’t starve.”

“That’s not why she does it now,” Suresh explained. “Street kids learn survival instincts, and ingrained habits are hard to eradicate.”

“How do you help your foundation kids understand they don’t have to worry about finding food?”

“It’s a combination of things.” Suresh took the napkin from his lap and placed it near his plate. “She needs to feel secure not just physically but emotionally too. First comes the physical. Make sure there’s always food around for the taking. Fruit, bread, cheese. With our kids, we assign them chores for which they receive an allowance. Each kid has a piggy bank built into their bedside table, and they’re the only ones with the key. We have no rules about what they can do with the money.”

“And?”

“I haven’t met a single kid who blows the money. They scrimp and save, and when they finally begin to believe they don’t have to worry about the future, they’ll splurge on something small, usually food or clothing. Occasionally their own soccer ball.”

Harry knuckled the bridge of his nose. “Does it ever leave them? The insecurity about food and money?”

“Eventually.” Suresh tapped a finger on the metal table. “You can terminate the relationship and find someone else. It’s calling it close—”

“No. I’m in this for the duration.” The words popped out of his mouth without prompting as a vision of Martine saying “*it is overwhelming this f—, um making-love business*” swamped his mind. The puzzled surprise in her wide eyes had winded him like a sacked quarterback, his hands fisted.

“Are you certain?” Suresh’s thumb traced the circumference of his chin dimple. “You do have options. And now that you’re going to attack the will from a different angle...”

“Stow it, Suresh. Like I said, I’m in this for the duration. Let’s move on.” Harry flexed his fingers. He took a deep inhale and wrestled his temper under control. “What do I need to do?”

Suresh studied him for long seconds before shooting him a wry smile. “Never thought I’d ever see you smitten.”

“Trust me, the mood I’m in—you don’t want to go there. I’m looking to go a few rounds with someone, and you don’t want to be the de facto choice.”

“Okay, okay, I get the message,” Suresh said, holding up both hands in surrender.

“Back to Martine,” Harry insisted. “What do I do?”

“You have to start making her feel secure. I’d suggest setting up a generous allowance in such a way that *she’s* in control. You have to convince her that the money is hers, that you won’t have anything to do with how she spends it. Give her all the necessities—food, clothing, travel. We give all of our kids a monthly bus and train pass—limited, you understand, not enough for the bullet train to Paris but enough to get around locally.”

“You don’t worry about them not coming back?” The notion of Martine leaving him had Harry as jittery as oil in a hot frying pan. Whatever. He’d just find her and bring her back. She belonged with him.

Fuck. Where did that come from?

“Sure we do. But the kids have to learn to trust. And you know that saying—‘If you love someone, set them free.’ It works the same way with trust.”

“This conversation’s given me food for thought, pun intended,” Harry quipped as he scrubbed a hand over two days’ worth of stubble and slumped into the back of the chair. *Damn it, I should have shaved before I touched her last night.*

“She also needs to feel useful, Harry. Is there some way she can help on the *Glory*? Maybe be your hostess or something?”

Harry remembered the expression of longing Martine hadn’t been able to mask when he’d offered her a house and mentioned the country. “No, she’s not the social-butterfly type.” The exact opposite of Delora. How could he have fallen so hard for two such different women?

Fuck. Fallen? He went from slouching to standing at attention in one second.

Suresh, facing the other direction and occupied trying to capture a waiter’s eye, didn’t notice Harry’s reaction, thank the bejesus. A portly waiter with a long white linen cloth draped over one shoulder glanced their way. Suresh tapped his water goblet.

The man dipped his chin, his bald head glistening with beaded sweat, in silent acknowledgment of Suresh’s request. Satisfied, Suresh swiveled back to Harry, who’d resumed his previous pose.

“Time for me to head out.” Harry threw his napkin on the table.

“There’s one more thing that puzzles me. Martine’s a beautiful, sexy woman.” Suresh shoved one hand through his hair. “Why wasn’t she raped?”

“Been worrying about that myself,” Harry replied. “I’ve been over everything a million times, taking apart all her reactions. She knew the basic facts of life, but no one had ever touched her before, sexually, anyway. I think it may have been a woman who beat her. Maybe one of the nuns at the convent.”

“With all the news from Rome lately”—Suresh gave a par-for-the-course shoulder lift—“I can see why all roads point to the convent.”

“Don’t matter to me. Male or female. He or she can’t do much beating if they can’t breathe.” Harry stood.

Suresh remained sitting. “I’ll take care of the check.”

“Not necessary. I have a standing account here. Later.”

During the brisk walk to the yacht, Harry debated different tactics for interrogating Martine—seduction, threatening her with the information about Delora’s PI, or the possibility of their marriage being illegal.

Damned if I do, damned if I don’t. Can’t take the chance she’ll run.

Not a crewmember occupied the main deck of the *Glory*. All Harry’s senses backfired. Fifteen minutes later, his head throbbing and pounding like a damned herd of stampeding buffalo, Harry gripped the *Glory*’s aft railings, imagining Austen’s neck under his tightening fingers. Not a single human being was on board the boat, and he couldn’t raise a soul on the phone.

I should've asked Austen for Yvonne's number. It's too early for them to be shopping. None of the stores will open for another hour.

And he'd agreed to meet Casmir at one p.m. Harry checked the hour on his cell's screen. He had enough time to buy Martine a cell phone. After purchasing an exact duplicate of his iPhone, he walked to his and Casmir's prearranged meeting place, uncharacteristically clumsy as he texted every crew member, and then, in a fit of piqued temper, he phoned the crew and left voice mails that would leave them wondering about their job security.

He'd chosen Café Diwano, a bar on the fringe of Marseille's immigrant slums, for the meeting with the Gypsy, Casmir. Walking into the bar proved akin to going from a blazing noonday sun to a midnight devoid of moon and stars. The sooty smoke haze competed with the sparse wall lamps and won. The customers seated at tables appeared as if viewed through a curtained fog.

Halting in the doorway, Harry scoped the premises. A futile attempt at classing up the seventeenth-century bricked interior made his eyes wince. Neon signs advertising beer brands were haphazardly clustered on the wall opposite the round table he chose. The angle gave him a clear view of the doorway and the ability to rapid-scan the clientele. A long rectangular bar stained a brownish-black ran the length of the wall to his right. A large mirror separated two sets of shelves, which displayed a variety of scotch and brandy bottles and a half dozen dusty liqueur bottles.

A blinking sign pointed to the alley exit. The wall below displayed gender body outlines, the universal symbols for the male and female facilities. Local residents, a mixture of dockhands, crewmembers, fishermen, and cargo handlers, comprised the bistro's patrons. He heard mainly French, not a murmur of English, but recognized the harsh guttural going-to-throw-up gurgle of a Germanic dialect, and for the umpteenth time cursed his ineptitude with languages.

Casmir strolled into the dockyard café half an hour after one. Harry had whiled away the time programming Martine's new iPhone with every blasted number she might need in an emergency in between speed-dialing Austen every ten minutes.

He almost didn't recognize the Gypsy. Casmir had been more boy than man the last time Harry'd set eyes on him. Not anymore. The unshaven young man who took the seat opposite had eyes of a shade he'd never encountered, eyes the color of a raven's feathers in the sun, the eyes of a middle-aged man who'd seen too much violence and too much depravity, the kind of eyes that viewed the world and people from a distance. Yet he knew the Gypsy hadn't seen his twenty-fifth birthday.

"Whatsup?" Casmir made the two words one, slouched into the chair opposite Harry's, and propped a booted foot on the scratched and gouged seat of the adjacent bench.

"I'm married." Harry didn't bother with niceties. "My new wife's name was Martine Bellamy." He studied Casmir's features, his gaze attuned to any nuance, any slight hint that the Gypsy knew Martine's name. A trained and seasoned

interrogator, he knew the signs to expect. The slight shift in gaze, the flicker of a finger, or a change in foot placement. Nada. Casmir didn't blink an eyelid; not a single muscle twitched; not a single appendage quivered.

"She worked clearing tables at Café Fleur de Lis in the Quartiers Nord. Know of it?" Harry waited to see if Casmir called his bluff.

Casmir's perpetual brooding expression didn't morph. "Oui."

So the Gypsy knew the Fleur de Lis. "Martine rented a room somewhere in the area. I want to see it, and I want to speak to the landlord."

"It will be double the normal rate."

Harry had expected a tripling of Casmir's regular fee. "She entered the country illegally. I need to know where, when, and how, and I want a detailed analysis of her every move since she arrived."

"That will take time and more money."

Suppressing an admiring grin, Harry signaled the waiter and pointed to the half-empty beer mug spreading a wide circle of moisture on the knotted, mismatched pine table. "Thirsty?"

A barely perceptible shake of the head was Casmir's only response.

Harry estimated a full thirty-five seconds elapsed before the other man spoke. "I will require a significant advance. Three thousand euros."

"I need the information by end of day tomorrow."

"Nine thousand euro."

They haggled back and forth and finally agreed to a non-refundable advance of forty-three hundred euros. As Harry left the tavern, he called Austen again and swore a blue streak when the phone went straight to voice mail. Traffic, both vehicular and pedestrian, snarled the narrow cobblestoned streets.

Harry zigzagged through the hordes knowing that he could get back to the *Glory* faster on foot than by cab or bus. Elderly shoppers dragging wire carts packed with paper bags filled with produce and cans, and five-deep throngs of tourists on group walking tours added ten minutes to the twenty he'd anticipated for the return journey.

He reached the *Glory* seething with fury, his hands flexing and curling as he visualized connecting with Austen's jaw. An angry line of gray clouds gathered above the horizon to the south of Marseille, whipping Harry's hair to one side and blinding the vision in one eye until he shook his head. Only then did it hit him. He'd forgotten his Stetson this morning. The realization stopped him in his tracks.

Before he could contemplate the significance of the omission, his cell vibrated, the movement so unexpected and so fricking welcome, Harry dug into his front jeans pocket and his scrambling fingers closed around the phone. He snapped the device so hard to his ear that a flame of pain blazed at the impact, but he barked, "Austen, where the fuck have you been?"

"What's wrong?" Suresh asked, and Harry wanted to holler in frustration.

Forcing a deep breath, he replied, "When I got back to the *Glory*, Martine was gone, and so was the whole damned crew, including fricking Austen, who was supposed to shadow her if she so much as looked as if she was going to step off the boat."

"Harry, you're yelling," Suresh said, and the shock in his voice made Harry do a mental double take. "I've never heard you so much as raise your voice."

"I don't suppose you've heard from him." Harry deliberately lowered his voice and didn't rush the words. He hopped onto the boat.

"Sorry. That would be a negative. I wanted to let you know that Geoff called me a few minutes ago. He's on the matchmaker as we speak."

"Finally. Fucking good news." Harry sagged against the aft railing, scrubbing one hand over his forehead.

"I'll let you go, then. By the way, I did some preliminary research, and while I can't be positive because the information is sketchy, it looks like there are only a handful of convents in all of Haiti."

"Fucking A. Thanks." He ended the call, his pulse skyrocketing at the news, and he took the stairs three at a time, then marched down the corridor to his stateroom. Although still hoping for a positive outcome, one where Martine was dozing on the bed or lounging on the balcony reading a book, his gut knew what he would find as he swung the door open.

Martine wasn't on the balcony, but in the bathroom he found evidence she hadn't left permanently, as the sample hotel soap that smelled of honeysuckle lay in the shower alcove. Harry opened the cabinet below the sink and discovered the small basket woven out of palm leaves, the familiar contents of which started an ache below his breastbone.

She wouldn't leave these behind.

His brain still needed convincing, so he checked the dresser bottom drawer and sat heavily against the bed frame when he saw her neatly arranged clothes. His knotted tendons stung, and he cricked his neck left, then right. Until his fingers encountered dampness when massaging his trapezius, he hadn't realized he was sweating.

She's mine. And any special ops protects his own.

First course of action, find Martine.

Hauling himself to a standing position, Harry froze in place as a faint clanking reached his ears. Nine seconds ticked by, and he heard the muffled sound of footsteps on deck. Sprinting out of the room while thumbing five, Austen's preprogrammed cell, he burst onto the deck before the first ring tone ended. The layer of the clouds to the south had morphed into a wide, dark band clouding a third of the yellow ball of the sun. Strong gusts slapped the sea against the *Glory's* hull, and the metal chain connecting boat and dock rattled as choppy waves rocked the yacht.

"Harry? Where the hell have you been?" Austen growled.

“Where the fricking hell have I been?” Harry rounded the stern and bumped smack into Austen. His phone clattered to the teak flooring as he grabbed Austen’s thick cotton T, hauled the man off his feet by his shirt neck, and asked through gritted teeth, “Where’s Martine?”

“With Yvonne. What the hell’s the matter with you?” Austen shoved Harry hard.

Harry lost his hold, and Austen stumbled but regained his footing quickly.

The adrenaline surging through Harry’s veins boiled, and a red haze fogged his brain. On autopilot his right fist jabbed at Austen’s five-o’clock-shadowed jaw. Austen ducked, but not in time, and Harry clipped him.

Austen’s cell phone chimed.

Harry followed his jab with an uppercut.

Austen blocked the move with an elbow and punched Harry in the solar plexus.

Harry doubled over, his lungs burning, shards of pain streaming across his belly and chest.

“Hi, doll,” Austen said, his voice a tad uneven. “It appears that Harry’s worried about his wife. I haven’t had a chance to tell him that you persuaded a couple of designers to open early for you and Martine. Tell me you emptied his pockets and bought every haute couture garment in the city—”

The rest of Austen’s words were drowned as a container ship motored through the port, and the ship’s wake caused the *Glory* to bob both sideways and vertically. Harry’s cell slid across the planked wooden deck to hit one of the railing’s vertical steel bars, and the device bounced back diagonally.

Harry dived to snatch the spiraling phone, and his forefinger connected with the plastic casing. The yacht’s rubber dock bumpers hit the pier, and Harry cursed as the iPhone hovered for tantalizing seconds before plummeting over the edge of the deck. “Fuck,” he growled. “Perfect, simply fucking perfect.”

Dusting his hands off, he rose to his feet and did an about-turn.

“What do you mean?” Austen wasn’t looking at him, and his grip on his cell was white-knuckled. “How long ago?”

Harry grabbed the railings as the boat rocked violently, his gaze never wavering from Austen’s bushy gathered brows and narrowed black eyes. “How far away are you?”

Right then Harry spied a slender, petite female clothed in skin-hugging jeans and a long-sleeved aqua tee weaving through the thinning crowd at the circular entrance to the dock. She wore a long scarf in hues of orange, scarlet, and gold, and the material fluttered on the east-west breeze that ebbed and flowed across the pier.

“I see you,” Austen stated as he met Harry’s gaze. “We’re waiting on deck.” He snapped his phone shut and, fingering the reddening slash near the left corner of

his mouth, he muttered, “Yvonne left Martine in the La Canebière district about half an hour ago. She *thought* Martine was headed straight for the *Glory*.”

All the fear he’d discarded when he found her belongings earlier flowed from Harry’s scalp to the toes flexing in his boots, his thoughts tumbling faster than the spring melt-off pounding over the cliffs of Niagara Falls, his gut churning and spiraling as he replayed the events of the last twenty-four hours. Suresh’s insistence that there were too many coincidences leading to him only having one choice of bride pinged and boomeranged to the one inevitable question he didn’t want to contemplate.

Is Martine working for Delora?

Chapter Ten

Martine ducked and slipped around the corner when she glimpsed Harry leaving Café Diwano, her heart jerking and flailing like a zombie newly arisen from the grave. Uncaring of the fleeting curious glances from passersby, she plastered her body to the cool brick walls. A group of men with grime-streaked cheeks and dirty fingernails shuffled past. Her chest heaved, and her lungs worked overtime sucking in air made malodorous by the smoke from the men's unfiltered cigarettes.

Two narrow escapes in a row. She drew in a deep breath, closed her eyes, and immediately the vision of this morning when Harry'd almost caught her red-handed replayed in her brain. She'd shoved the envelope and the camera under her jeans and grabbed a lacy, see-through black and scarlet bra and pantie set from the drawer a heartbeat before he burst into the stateroom. He stared at the garments like a man parched from a day in the desert with no water supply.

And fate had been on her side when Austen bellowed for him over the intercom and Harry had to leave. As soon as he stepped off the *Glory*, she'd retrieved her treasures and found better hiding places before grappling with the frustrating contact lenses. The morning spent shopping with Yvonne had been tedious, and when Yvonne's client called with an emergency, Martine had almost jumped for joy at the opportunity to steal away and make contact with her one friend in France, the man who had rescued her from the cargo ship, the Gypsy, Casmir.

She'd taken a chance coming to Café Diwano knowing that Casmir met with the Gypsy elders weekly here at the one site no one would expect. Counting off seconds sixty at a time, she scrutinized the crowded alleyway, knowing the Bandoleer also frequented this section of the Quartiers Nord. A pair of narrowed eyes the color of moss met hers. She hastily lowered her gaze to the dirt-crusting line between two cobblestones, unable to halt the burst of fear evaporating the saliva in her mouth. She risked a quick side-glance, caught the man's profile, and her tense shoulder muscles sagged in relief at the male's unfamiliar features. Not the Bandoleer.

Nibbling on an uneven nail edge, she sidled into the Café Diwano, keeping to the shadows of the gloomy interior. A swift sweeping glance revealed Casmir sitting at an eight-seater rectangular table kitty corner to her position. Long, lean form sprawled on the bench, an elbow propped on his bent knee, the wall lantern on the grimy brick opposite highlighting the blue hints in his shock of unruly black hair, he had his head cocked in a listening position.

Mere heartbeats later, as if he sensed her presence, Casmir's gaze locked on to hers, and his lips firmed. An almost imperceptible flick of his pinky pointed to the open doorway. Martine dipped her chin to acknowledge she understood and snaked her way along the wall and out the bar.

A layer of ash clouds dimmed the sun's rays and heat. Martine shivered as she idled in front of a neighboring window display of glass-bottled miniatures of ancient triple-masted sailing ships.

"Meet me at the trawler near the old market."

The words came from a man wearing a brown jacket with a raised hood who stood to her right. Without glancing at Casmir she fell into step alongside him until a crowd of young men and women wearing the chic tailored uniforms of the old port's five-star Sofitel hotel separated them.

She hadn't been back to the fishing vessel in over three months. The boat, *Le Wanderer*, served as Casmir's premier residence and never remained anchored in one spot for very long. Martine lengthened her stride when she realized that the trawler would be off-loading the afternoon catch, and not ten minutes ticked by before she boarded the boat.

"Are you mad?" Casmir snapped the second she ducked below deck into the enclosed, low-ceilinged room that served as his kitchen, living area, and bedroom. "Why didn't you come to me?"

"How could I ask for more?" she countered. "All those weeks you nursed me, you gave me a roof over my head, and protected me from the authorities. I need to make my own way as you do."

"I thought to prevent you from selling yourself in the streets." His mouth sank at the corners. "I must congratulate you—not many whores command the price of a million euros."

Martine didn't flinch, but the verbal blow shattered her soul. Squaring her shoulders and lifting her chin as the word "whore" echoed and reverberated in her mind, she willed her limbs to still. Hands fisting at her sides, she said, "I know what I am."

Instantly his fierce expression softened, and he dragged both hands through his hair.

"*Cherie*," he said, "I did *not* mean that. You did what you had to. We all do. But if I had known your plans, I would've imprisoned you in Grasse."

"I'll leave now. You're not in the mood to listen."

"No. Stay. You wouldn't have come without a good reason." Casmir took his hands out of the pockets of the dusty jacket he still wore and gestured to a wooden table to her right. "I met with your new husband earlier. Harry wants me to investigate you."

Martine grabbed the back of a chair but still swayed. "Merde." She pressed a damp palm to her forehead as the room swam and blurred.

Strong arms cupped her elbows and helped her into the chair. “I’ll make some Arabic coffee. Have you eaten today?”

“You will be a good papa one day,” she murmured. “Always worrying about those in your care. I’ve eaten and eaten, Casmir. So much food and such wonderful flavors. He’s been kind to me, Harrison Indiana Ford. But why does he do this now? I thought after last night and this morning...” Martine realized she’d spoken her thoughts aloud and abruptly clamped her teeth together. She watched the Gypsy shrug off his coat and gather two mugs and a stovetop stainless-steel coffee percolator. “How do you come to know him?”

“Have you the time to gossip?” He shot her a wry gaze as he emptied a teaspoonful of ground coffee into the percolator basket.

Martine shook her head.

“Quickly, then. Harry knows you’re from Haiti and that you’re illegal—”

She squeezed her eyes shut. “How? The lawyers said my papers for the marriage were fine.”

“And you didn’t get them from me, cherie.”

Martine stifled a groan. “I suppose you know all.”

“I know you went to the Bandoleer. He holds your chits and will *not* sell them to me.”

“I can pay him from the million euros.”

“Which you will not have for at least nine months. With the interest you’ll owe him, you’ll not earn half the money.”

“Half a million euros, Cas? It’s more than enough.” Martine rubbed the pulse beating behind her eye socket. “What does Harry want with you?”

This room and *Le Wanderer* held so many memories she cherished. The Lord had delivered her into the best hands when she’d set foot on French soil so many months ago. Martine’s gaze lingered on the neat built-in kitchen forming a small L in the corner, and then shifted to the three portholes above a plump two-seater couch. Casmir’s antique desk was bolted into the corner; his laptop lay on the polished walnut surface, the screen flickering a screensaver of aquatic images—exotic fish, conch shells, and geometric coral formations.

“He wants to know when, where, and how you entered country, and he’s paying me a premium to have the information by tomorrow evening. He also wants to know everything you’ve done since you arrived.”

“I had hoped for more time.” Martine hugged herself. “C’est la vie. How much will you tell him?”

The aroma of coffee tickled her nostrils and she sneezed.

“Bless you.” He filled the percolator with water, inserted the basket into the coffeepot, and closed the lid. “I can refuse the job and make him go elsewhere. It will buy you a day or two.”

Casmir turned the knob on the two-burner camp-stove on the counter, and air hissed from the holes in the metal plate. He lit the isobutane gas with an old-fashioned foot-long match he ignited by swiping it on the sole of his boot. He set the percolator on the stove, adjusted the flames, and turned to face her. She hadn't realized the despair she felt showed on her face until he cursed, and in one step he reached her side and propped a foot on the chair adjacent to hers, folded forearms resting on his bent knee so their gazes were almost level.

"Let me buy you the time," he coaxed.

"And give someone else the euros. I think not," she stated, shaking her head. Her lips quivered, and moisture hazed her vision as she remembered Harry's promise of a home and the tantalizing suggestion of a family.

I knew I shouldn't have allowed myself to dream.

"Tell him what he wants to know." She raised her eyes to the grayed and stained canvas covering the room's ceiling. Martine pulled a folded brown envelope from her jacket pocket and slid it onto the table. "I brought copies of the contracts. I want you to have your lawyer friend check them to make sure I will get the euros no matter what."

He picked up the envelope and extracted several loose sheets of paper, and his lips lifted in a sneer. "Legal mumbo jumbo. I prefer the Gypsy ways of business. I'm sure all will be in order, Martine. Harry is not a swindler."

A sharp piercing whistle blast followed by two others silenced her answer. She twisted in the chair to see the clock on the wall behind and choked back a groan before facing Casmir again. "I must go."

"Martine," he muttered and set his palm on her shoulder. "Harry served in Afghanistan. He plays the simple country boy, but he's not. He's a dangerous man when crossed. Be careful."

"I will. You think Harry will harm me?"

"No." Casmir fingered his square chin. "He's not a wife beater, cherie, but if you get in the way of him getting his inheritance..." He shook his head. "He'll be very angry."

"I see. He'll give me to the gendarmes." Martine blew out a long sigh. "I now understand the saying 'damned if you do, damned if you don't.'"

"Now go. I'll have someone follow you until you reach the *Glory's* pier." He pulled the chair back, and Martine levered to her feet. "I'm to meet Harry tomorrow around this time."

She preceded him up the five stairs leading to the trawler's deck. Jute nets lined with the carcasses of fish not purchased by the market's vendors hung from posts to the right of the gate leading to the jetty. At the first whiff of the decaying catch, Martine switched to breathing through her mouth, a habit picked up when she had lived aboard the boat. Half of a reddish-haloed sun peeked above a tall edifice that cast the entire square into deep shadows.

“Au voir,” Martine murmured, and she kissed Casmir’s warm cheek. “Merci, mon ami.”

By the time she reached the *Glory’s* jetty, only a quarter of the circle of the sun was visible. The angle of the rays shot a luminous silver beam through the center of the bay’s darkening waters, the smooth surface of the sea broken only by the occasional splash of a pelican diving to retrieve an unwary and unlucky fish.

Anxiety dampened her palms, and she wiped them on her jeans, forcing her legs to take one step, then another and another until she stood in front of the narrow bridge leading to the *Glory*. All the while her lungs labored, and the cold, brine-moistened breeze burned a path down her trachea. Martine ground her teeth and stepped onto the metal platform, her footsteps muted as she took care to tread in the center.

She’d never had to cross the bridge by herself before. Choppy waves slapped the wooden jetty and the yacht’s hull, a gusty wind pelted the sea spray high, and a fine mist wet her cheeks. The bridge shuddered. Her pulse soared.

The sixth sense that had saved her time and time again when she was a street child flared ice and fire at the back of her neck, and her gaze jerked to the bow. Harry stood there, hands jabbed into the pockets of a navy pair of trousers, the strong breeze curling his brown hair around his face and neck, eyes narrowed, normally curving lips compressed to an angry slash, and his gaze raked Martine head to toe.

Her legs quailed, and she stumbled and fell forward, half on, half off the bridge. Panic filled her brain as the vision of the endless drop to the bottom of the ocean, her mouth opening, water filling her lungs, shadows creeping across her vision, mushroomed like a nuclear bomb exploding. Her mind surrendered to darkness.

“It’s okay, it’s okay. I got you, Martine,” Harry muttered. His warm arms cocooned her entire body, and she curled into a tighter ball. “You’re safe.”

“I can’t swim,” she mumbled. “I can’t swim.” She crushed the linen shirt he wore with her hands, and her fingers refused to release their hold on him, on the comforting solid feel of his hardness.

He stroked her spine slowly, relentlessly, and gradually she grew aware of her surroundings, of the fact she sat in his lap on a lounge chair on the deck. Martine remembered him glaring at her from the boat. Pushing away from his chest, she looked him in the eyes. “You are angry with me.”

“Are you okay now?”

He wore no trace of anger save the almost imperceptible clenching of his jaw.

“You’re angry with me.”

His lips pinched together slightly.

“Yes,” he said. “I’m angry that you were thoughtless and self-centered enough to disappear without letting anyone know where you were or when you were coming back.” His focus shifted, and he added, “Or *if* you were coming back.”

She hung her head. "I have nowhere else to go."

"You've been living in France for three months as far as I know. All that time and you made no friends?"

I wish I could tell you the truth.

The cloud cover was full now, and the light had grown dusklike even though it was only midafternoon. Martine peeked at him and then wished she hadn't. Shadows cast his profile into relief, and she couldn't discern if fury still gripped him. Sorrow sharper than a blade cut across her chest, and a hysterical desire to tell all, to bare her soul reared. As her lips parted, Casmir's warning jumped to the forefront of her brain.

"Look at me." He cupped her jaw and turned her face to his. He flicked a switch, and a muted golden glow lifted the gloom. "Did Delora hire you?"

Her eyes widened, and her jaw dropped open. Martine shook her head, certain she'd misheard. *That I would do that to you, Harry? I have no choice now. I must tell him some of the truth.*

Martine took a deep breath. "No. The first time I saw her was in the hotel before the exam." Folding her hands in her lap, she swallowed around the words clogging her throat and stared at a spot over his right shoulder. "Ask me what you wish to know."

"You're from Haiti?"

"Oui."

"How did you get to France?"

"On a cargo ship." She kept her eyes resolutely fixed.

"When?"

"I am not sure of the exact date, but I have been on French soil for almost five months."

"You worked at the café for three months. Where were you before that?"

"I cannot answer that without betraying someone," she replied. "I do not want to lie to you."

"I can live with that," he said, "for now."

You think you'll know all tomorrow when you meet with Casmir.

His thighs under hers radiated warmth, and his body heat combined with the now familiar scent of his CK aftershave had a tranquilizing effect on her tingling nerve endings. The terrifying images of her near fall from the bridge faded from where they had settled at the corners of her mind. Breathing in a normal, even rhythm, she waited, trying to anticipate what his next question would be.

"Why did you leave Haiti?"

"Why does anyone leave Haiti?" Martine shrugged. "To escape."

"How long did you live with the nuns?"

Merde.

Her head whipped up, and their gazes collided.

She struggled for control, but her hands twisted back and forth of their own accord. "How did you know?"

"You mentioned that the Mother Superior would roast you in the fires of hell before." He pursed his lips, and his intense stare never wavered.

"I can't be certain," she answered. "I was sick when they took me in."

"Who gave you the scars on your back?"

She gasped, clamped a hand over her mouth, and squeezed her eyes shut while shaking her head. "I cannot." The words came out muffled.

For seconds that seemed longer than the entire terror-filled trip from Haiti to France, Harry didn't speak, and her stomach rocked and roiled.

"You don't have to answer that one," he whispered and pulled her head down to his chest. His lips brushed the tip of her ear, he smoothed her hair, and she wanted to burrow into the safety of his embrace. "Where'd you go after you left Yvonne?"

I'm so tired, tired of lying, tired of hiding, tired of being afraid.

"I went to see a friend from the café." Pressing a thumb to a pulsing spot between her eye and the bridge of her nose, she mumbled, "My head aches."

An icy sea breeze curdled the skin on the back of her neck, raising tiny bumps, and Martine couldn't prevent a sudden shudder. Harry's arms tightened, and he said, "There's aspirin in my medicine cabinet." He lunged to his feet, catching her close to his chest, and headed to the stern staircase.

Nothing could've prepared Martine for the feeling when he first carried her, and no matter how often he'd done it since that first night, her reaction never varied. Her bones liquefied, the hairs covering her flesh skittered to a ninety-degree angle, and her thoughts emulsified. When he brushed his lips on her forehead, she surrendered, buried her nose into the crook of his neck, and kissed the pulse beating beneath a faint green line. "Merci, Harry."

"How is it that you've lived on an island all your life, yet you can't swim?"

They reached the cabin. He punched in the pass code, turned the door handle, stepped into the room, and automatically kicked the door shut.

"I lived in a remote village in the hills with Grand-mère when I was young." She couldn't think enough to formulate a defensive reply. "No ocean."

"Let's get you on the bed," he muttered, whipped the comforter aside, and settled her under the sheets. Pressing a palm to her forehead, he said, "You're not warm. I don't think you have a fever. How're you feeling?"

"Okay," she replied. "It's just a headache. It'll go away." She tried for a smile, but from his expression, the attempt failed.

"I'll get the aspirin," he stated.

Martine didn't protest when he insisted on getting into bed with her after she'd swallowed a couple of pills. Half sitting, half lying against the headboard in Harry's

arms, cheek resting on his chest while his fingers combed the ends of her curls, she relaxed, and the nagging drums playing in her skull waned. Dozing and half-waking, she didn't realize how much time had elapsed until her eyes alighted on the iPhone's docked display.

Harry must have realized she'd awakened, for he cupped her chin and scanned her face. "Better?"

"Much." His eyes held no anger.

"I'll cancel the meeting with the Realtor."

"Non. I am fine," she declared, rose onto one elbow, and glimpsed a pile of boxes on the far side of the room. Brows winging up she turned to Harry.

"Your shopping," Harry explained. "They arrived while you were asleep, and I had Austen bring them in here."

Horrified at the number of packages, Martine sat up and twisted to face him. "Something is wrong. We bought one skirt." She held up a finger. "One skirt and one pair of shoes. A few underwear, but I swear, Harry, we did not buy all of that." She waved a hand at the various boxes and bags.

Catching her chin between his thumb and forefinger, he forced her to meet his gaze. "I know you didn't. I told Yvonne to get you a complete wardrobe. And no, this isn't part of our deal. This is because you're my wife. I can't have you wearing the same thing all the time, now, can I? People know me. They'll say I'm treating you badly."

She hadn't considered his image and reputation. Still, hooking a glance at the pile over her shoulder, Martine exclaimed, "But there are so many."

"Come on. Let's go see what Yvonne bought for you." Harry caught her hand and tugged. Reluctantly she let him pull her off the bed and drag her to the sofa in the living area. "You sit. I'll haul them over here."

Ninety minutes later she couldn't even see the couch's upholstery, so many garments decorated the piece of furniture. "Tell me again why I need four pairs of jeans, Harry?" She lifted the denim in her lap and picked up over three dozen thongs of various colors, shapes, and decorative trimmings. "And these? I can make do with three easily."

"Sugar, then I'd be deprived," Harry said and winked. "Think about it. I can undress you every night, and I'll never know which one of these you'll be wearing." He snatched a thong out of her hand. "I'm not sure about the yellow stripes. Why don't you model this one for me?"

"Harry," she yelped and tried to grab the underwear.

He leaned back.

She followed and slipped off the couch as he sank to the floor, and she fell on top of him.

“My favorite position,” he growled, snagging his arms over her back. “You on top.” He kissed her forehead. “St. Pete goes nuts when you turn pink like that. And he’s thinking when we go out tonight you should wear the yellow panties.”

Their faces were inches apart, and his light eyes grew darker as they stared at each other. The breath puffing through his parted lips carried a hint of brewer’s yeast and mingled with his aftershave and spice. *I owe you more than you’ll ever know, Harry.* Impulsively, she brushed her mouth over his, but when he stiffened, she drew back to look at him.

“No?”

“Yes, wife.” Sparks flared in the wake of his finger outlining her lips. Martine waited, desire climbing, lungs spasming to keep pace with the heart pumping faster and faster, sending the blood speeding to her puckering nipples. “But first you need to learn how to use your new iPhone.”

“Harry,” she protested, scrambling off him and worrying her lower lip. “I don’t need an iPhone.”

“Yes you do,” he pronounced, pushing off the ground. “This afternoon proved that. I nearly went crazy wondering what had happened to you.”

Wanting to flee, to hit him, to burrow into a hole, she instead buried her face in her hands. “I don’t need a cell phone.” Her fingers muffled the words.

Harry pried her hands free and tugged her into his lap. “It’s not complicated. And it’s easy to learn.”

“I don’t want to,” she grumbled, refusing to meet his eyes.

“Tough,” he retorted, cupping her chin and forcing their gazes to connect. “I want you safe, and the phone will help. After I show you how to use the phone, we’re heading to the bank. I’ve set up an account for you. It’s in your name only. I want you to meet the bank manager. He can advise you on any purchases you want to make. Stocks, bonds, stuff like that. I put thirty thousand euros in the account—”

“Harry! You can’t,” she wailed.

He gave her a little shake. “I can and I have. The money’s your spending money for the next six months. Spend it on anything you want. I don’t have anything to do with *your* account. No one will report to me how you spent the money. Do you understand?”

“Why? I don’t understand. It’s too much. Why are you so nice to me? I am nothing but a whore. I sold myself to you. Why aren’t you like other men? Oh!” She shoved him hard. “How am I supposed to make this business? You make me so—”

“Martine. Speak in English.”

She hadn’t even realized she’d reverted to Haitian Creole until he said that.

“I haven’t a clue what you’re ranting about. Why are you mad?” He threw his hands up. “Never. Never in a lifetime will I understand the workings of the female brain. Think if I’d done this for Austen he’d be spitting French and smacking me?”

Harry looked so annoyed and confused and a little hurt too. His frown could've scared the devil, yet he hadn't knitted his eyebrows, and his lips hadn't thinned.

"I'm sorry," she whispered, rubbing the place her palm had connected with his chest. "You bought and paid for me—"

"I'm warning you, Martine. Say that once more, and you'll be very sorry."

"Oh, Harry," she said. "C'est vrai. It is the truth."

"We have a business deal," Harry agreed. "But being lovers doesn't prevent us from being friends too. I like you. I admire your gumption. And I want to do something for you. Is that wrong?"

"But so much money. A few hundred euros would be a great gift."

What am I doing? Grand-mère's medicine. I can buy it now. I can pay back the Bandoleer.

"The amount is not negotiable, Martine," Harry growled. "And it's not returnable."

"Then thank you, Harry." She flashed him a smile so wide she thought her lips would split. "Thank you, thank you, thank you." Throwing her arms around his neck, she rained kisses all over his stunned face.

He sat unmoving, his glance sweeping her features. "That was an about-turn. But why look a gift horse in the mouth? Reach for the iPhone." He jerked his head at the coffee table. "It's closer to you."

Martine's mouth canted down, but she obeyed and handed the instrument of torture and humiliation to him.

Hours later Harry tunneled both hands through his hair and stated, frustration evident in his growly tone, "I wish I could say that went better than I expected. Talk about blood and a stone. Remind me to hire a tutor the next time you need to learn something." He stood. "I'm gonna have a beer. Want one?"

Martine shook her head. As soon as he turned to go to the minifridge, she stuck her tongue out at him, knowing the gesture was childish but not caring. The iPhone in her hand clanged. She jumped; the thing fell out of her hands and clattered on the coffee table.

"Stupid beast," she spat in French and picked up the phone with both hands. Peering at the screen, she saw the red and green lines Harry had explained stood for accepting or declining the call. Gritting her teeth, she thumbed green and brought the phone to her ear. "Hello."

"Perfect. Now call me back."

She glared at Harry, his hip leaning on the sideboard, iPhone to his ear, and a bottle of lager in one hand.

Imbéciles, she muttered under her breath.

"I heard that," he called out. "And that word doesn't require translation."

Concentrating, Martine found the recent-call symbol and tapped the first line.

Across the room Harry's phone rang, playing the lyrics from Santana's "Black Magic Woman." Since the phone was still attached to his ear, his finger moved, and he said, all the while fixing her with a gaze that no longer spoke of frustration but reeked of desire, "Hi, sugar." He used the voice that wrapped magic around a woman.

"Imbéciles," Martine said and lifted her chin defiantly.

He hooted, and when he went to slap his hand on his thigh, the bottle jerked, and froth spewed from the brown bottle's mouth.

Martine chortled.

He set the beer on the side table and leaped across the dining table. She bounded to her feet and ran for the bathroom. He caught her as she sprinted through the doorway and hugged her from behind. "I really do like you, Martine."

I wish I could stay with you forever.

She sagged against his chest, the unbidden thought weighting her shoulders.

"Well?" He shook her. "It's customary to reciprocate."

Uncertain, Martine twisted around to look at him. The always present twinkle in his eyes seemed to have been placed on hold.

"I like you too, Harry." The admission triggered a fountain of panic, and she wanted to wrench her gaze away from the trance his commanded. Out of nowhere she blurted, "I was with the nuns for two years. They found me unconscious in the streets. My mother took me away from my Grand-mère and sold me to a family."

Chapter Eleven

“Your mother *sold* you?” Harry couldn’t believe he’d heard right.

Martine’s jaw clenched, and her eyes swept right to where his hands dug into the flesh above the cusp of her shoulders.

Splaying his fingers, he ground his teeth together and counted to ten, hoping the red-hot fury hazing his brain would dissipate. His wife’s pinched features and the wild pulse jumping erratically at the base of her throat sliced the edge off his rage. Swallowing the ballooning anger constricting his throat, he said, “You’ve never told anyone before, have you?”

She shook her head and then looked away, the proud angle of her chin dipping, her ramrod posture slumping.

“And you didn’t mean to tell me. And now you’re regretting it. Look at me, Martine,” he coaxed, stroking her long, slender neck.

She shook her head again and fixed her gaze on the Berber carpet.

“C’mere,” he crooned, bending to sweep one arm under her knees, and then gathered her warm, limp body close to his chest. “You’re not alone anymore. It’s you and me against the world. We have each other’s backs, remember?”

Harry walked as he spoke, knowing the next few minutes would prove critical in gaining his wife’s trust. He sat on the bed and cradled her in his lap. The deflation of her normal pride and discipline reflected in the lifeless drooping of her head, the tremulous quiver of her lips, and the humping of her back seemed absolute.

Gently he adjusted his wife so her cheek lay in the nook between his neck and shoulder, all the while stroking her spine with one hand and combing her curls with the other. “Tell me about it. Trust me, it’s cathartic—healing, I mean—to talk about past hurt. Do you know why she sold you?”

“Non,” she replied, her voice barely audible in the silent cabin.

“How old were you?”

He felt her shrug, but she didn’t answer and instead burying her face into his shirt, her nose burrowing into his chest. A sad thought mushroomed, and he said, keeping his tone even, “You don’t really know how old you are, do you?”

A hiccupped sob tore from her lips; she buried her face in her hands.

“It’s okay, Martine. Cry. Get it all out.”

“Non.” She burst out and pushed off his chest. “I will *not* cry.” Both hands fisted at her sides, and, chin firming, she met his stare. “I am almost twenty. I have a birth paper signed by the parish priest.” Her voice wavered. “I don’t remember when my mother took me away from Grand-mère...”

“What happened after that?”

She snorted, her mouth turned down at the corners, and she shut her eyes before answering. “In Haiti they call children like me...” Clenching her jaw she bit out, “Children like I *was*, a *restavek*. It is the Creole word for a child owned by a family.”

“Were they the ones who beat you?”

Turning her face to the wall so he could only see her profile, she snapped, “Why is it always the beating with you? I would have taken a thousand beatings instead of those years in Solino.”

Harry latched on to the name. “Solino?”

One side of her mouth quirked as she angled to him, nostrils fluttering, her features contorted, and the bleakness in her eyes bespoke her mental pain. “Hell. I lived in hell.”

The dam she’d erected had broken. This was the point an interrogator worked for, the puncturing of a prisoner’s shield, and he knew she was no longer aware of him but was locked in the past, haunted by the memories playing in her head.

“Maman sold all her children. I was her first child. My grand-mère took me to live with her before Maman could sell me. I was the lucky one. For a few years, anyway.” For long moments she didn’t speak. “I went with Maman when she came to get me, foolish child that I was. I stole out of my grand-mère’s hut to meet Maman to go to Port-au-Prince. I thought she loved me. Idiot Martine. Maman left me with them, the family from hell who lived in hell.”

Only by tensing every muscle in his body did Harry resist crushing her into his embrace. All external noise faded to the point where her ragged breathing sounded like thunderbolts in the stateroom.

“I waited and waited. I was so frightened. Grand-mère and I had lived on a hill a morning’s walk from the nearest village. We hardly saw any other people. There were so many people in Solino. Everywhere people, dogs, goats, cats, chickens, and garbage. Filth everywhere. I couldn’t get away from it. I stank of it. I didn’t mind the work, but only the mistress was allowed to talk to me. The children didn’t talk to me except to call me Satan’s child, tell me I had devil—”

Knocking thundered on the cabin door. “Harry, you gotta get on deck pronto. Delora’s here.”

Damn you to hell, Delora.

All the color seeped from Martine’s café au lait complexion, leaving a gray cast to the skin stretched across her cheekbones. Her eyes opened wide, and her jaw dropped. She swung in the direction of the stateroom’s entrance and muttered,

“Imbéciles,” before scrambling off the bed and rushing into the bathroom and slamming the door.

“Freaking perfect timing,” Harry spat, shoving off the mattress and then marching to fling the door open.

“Sorry,” Austen said, and he looked discombobulated, sporting reddened corneas, tousled black curls, and a two-day stubble. “I tried to stop her from boarding, but...”

“I know. She’s a fricking bulldozer.” Harry’s lips curled. “I hope you didn’t leave her alone.” Two long strides took him to the coffee table. He grabbed his Stetson, stuck it on his head, and swiveled. “Any idea as to the subject of her visit?”

“She’s got two suits with her. I’m guessing they’re her lawyers.” Austen fell into place next to Harry after he’d exited the cabin, and they strolled down the hallway. “By the way, I managed to persuade the chef to return. I left him serving them coffee and sandwiches in the lounge on the main deck.”

“Whatever Delora’s here for, it ain’t gonna be good,” Harry quipped.

His mind kept rewinding to Martine’s desolate visage and the monotone voice in which she’d recited the horrific details of her childhood. Slave. Even thinking the word curdled the saliva in his mouth. Martine had been a child slave. How had she escaped? When? He prayed she’d escaped within months of her enslavement. Living on the streets at least she’d have her freedom.

“Yo.” Austen snapped his fingers in front of Harry’s nose. “Ground control to Major Tom. No spacing out. You’ve been behind the ground ball during this will battle. Jeeves, Mary, and Jacob, you’re ex-special ops. Take control of the situation and ambush *her* for once. I’m tired of seeing you reeling.”

The scowl Harry shot Austen had quelled the most raucous man under his command in Afghanistan. Apparently the glare had no effect on Austen, as he continued, “Mark my words—she’s not here for her looks. My scalp’s tingling like it did on lookout just before that last raid that took me out of service.”

An ex-SEAL, Austen had been forced into desk duty when he’d been shot during Desert Storm.

“I know. My neck’s prickling more’n an armadillo cornered by a coyote.” Harry squeezed Austen’s shoulder. “I’m aiming to rope and hogtie my stepmother and have her squealing like the pig she is. But it ain’t gonna happen overnight or today. I have to let her think she’s sideswiped me. Play along.”

One of Austen’s bushy brows winged up. “The lion roars. ’Bout time. Want to fill me in after she’s gone?”

“Planned to,” Harry said and grinned, feeling like a wolf about to steal the only egg-laying hen from the coop. “It’s time to call in the reinforcements.”

Delora pounced the second he stalked into the lounge. “We have a court order requiring you to prove that your wife’s a legal resident of France.”

Ignoring her completely Harry ambled over to the bar and poured a shot of Señor Frogs, a deliberate taunt, as Delora had been the one to introduce him to

tequila, though back in the day they'd imbibed cheap Cabrita, intoxication, not taste, their goal.

"Still start shooting it back the minute you roll out of bed?" Delora sneered.

He downed the liquor, measured another couple of ounces, swallowed that too, and slammed the glass on the marble.

Austen cleared his throat.

Slapping a stapled together wad of legal-size papers on the striated marble counter of the bar, Delora barked, "Prove she's legal. I can't believe you screwed a *black* woman," she pointed a finger bearing a three-carat princess cut platinum ring at him.

"Ground rules, Delora. The captain of a ship has to grant you permission to come on board. This is my territory." Harry rammed a booted foot onto an armchair's footrest. "Whatever that is." He jutted his chin at the stapled pages fluttering as an air vent above sprang to life. "Your lawyers can serve them to my lawyers."

"You have eight hours to provide the proof your darkie's legal." Delora jammed one hand onto her ample hip. "If not, I'll have your father's will declared null and void, and I'll inherit everything."

"Y'all are trying to scratch your ear with your elbow," he said, exaggerating his native-old-boy drawl. Harry swiveled and braced both forearms on the bar. "Austen, throw my stepmother off the *Glory*. I'm fixing to down this bottle of Señor Frogs, and the notion of having her hogtied and duct taped is mighty appealing."

"I dare you," she spat. "I'll have you arrested for assault and battery."

"Martine." Austen's voice held a hysterical note.

Harry jerked his head up and around, and his stare collided with Martine's for a hint of a second. For a hairbreadth instant the woman from Grasse filled his brain. Thrown off-kilter he straightened, shook his head, and schooled his features into his impassive interrogator expression. "Sugar," he drawled, "you're a sight for sore eyes."

The gray skies outside coated the room in shadows, which dipped and danced, half concealing Martine's features. When she turned her head to greet Austen with a husky murmur, Harry took in the results of her shopping spree.

Barely restraining a *yes!* elbow yank, Harry drank in his transformed wife.

Thank you, Yvonne.

She wore a barely-there chiffon dress with split wispy sleeves, which fluttered and grazed her toned biceps, the primrose color enhancing the stardust quality of her coffee-and-cream complexion. Sensual elegance personified, she glided across the room, hips swaying seductively, the handkerchief hem of the dress teasing her knees and calves. On her feet she wore taupe CFM four-inch stilettos that had St. Pete rearing to attention.

Not in any particular hurry, he let his eyes linger on the three-inch-wide leather belt the exact color of her shoes. The belt hugged her narrow waist, and he salivated when his gaze encountered the heart-shaped bodice curving lovingly around her breasts. Harry ate up the distance between them, moving to stand so close their hips bumped.

She raised her head just so, at that jaunty angle he relished, and their gazes engaged. Her lips curved into a smile that drained all the blood from his brain to his cock.

“What you do to me, Martine,” he murmured, sliding his arms around her waist, cupping her ass cheeks, and drawing her belly against his erection. In the background he heard Delora hissing and sputtering, but her words didn’t register. Bringing his lips to Martine’s ear, he whispered, “Better now?”

Assiduously studying his chest, she dipped her chin twice.

Keeping his back to Delora and her coterie of legal professionals so he blocked Martine’s view completely, he said, “Austen, escort the riffraff off the *Glory* now.”

“Certainly.” Austen choked around the word and subsided into a snorted guffaw. “If you’ll follow me, I’ll show you to the pier.”

Harry waited until the room grew silent; then he nudged Martine’s thighs with his. “Got your phone with you?”

That did the trick. Her stiffness dissolved in a flash as she smacked his chest and protested, “And where am I supposed to carry it?” She raised a wrist from which dangled a velvet brown pouch the size of a large peach. “This is the purse that matches the shoes and dress. Even my brush couldn’t fit in it.”

“I surrender.” Harry reluctantly removed his hands from the small of her back and held them up in the age-old gesture of defeat. “You won’t need the phone anyway since we’ll be together all night and I have mine.”

“Harry, I *am* illegal.” With the high heels their eyes were almost level. All she had to do was hook one leg over his hip, and he could enter her standing and rock her to orgasm while he drowned in the dark lagoons of her eyes.

“I’ve got your back,” he quipped. “Let’s get this show on the road. I have a big surprise planned for you tonight.”

“I don’t like surprises,” she grouched and resisted when he linked their fingers and tugged her to the doorway.

“You will this one.” Harry winked. “Here’s the scoop. We’re heading to the bank first to sign all the documents. Then the Realtor’s picking us up. She has three properties to show us, and after we’ve seen them, we’ll have dinner in town.”

“But what about your stepmother?”

“She sent a PI to Haiti yesterday, Martine. I figured she’d show up as soon he gave his first report. Let’s wait until we’re out in the open before we continue this conversation, okay?”

Her eyes grew big and round as they strode across the deck. The sunlight hit her pupils, and Harry caught the almost translucent outline of a contact lens. She'd been an illegal stowaway who barely earned enough to keep her living from hand to mouth. How could she afford contact lenses, much less the optician's services?

At the end of the pier, a vendor selling gelato from a two-wheeled parked wooden cart blocked their way. Martine stumbled; she gripped the edge of the cart to right her balance, and the street hawker, a blond Adonis with the sculpted features and build of the Greek god Apollo, flashed her a dimpled smile.

Harry stiffened as the vendor made eye contact with Martine and pulled out an ice-cream bar wrapped in red-and-white-striped wax paper. "Mam'selle, for you a chocolate decadence bar, for the sunshine you bring to this ugly and faded jetty."

"Merci," Martine murmured, accepting the bar. "Please let me pay you for this gift."

"Ah, but then it wouldn't be one, would it?"

"Thank you, then," she replied. "Next time I will buy."

For a few minutes they strolled in silence while Martine unwrapped the bar and bit into the cold concoction.

"I've never seen that particular vendor before," Harry stated, craning his neck for a better view of the man. "And I've never seen a gelato vendor that young before."

"I saw him earlier today." The ice-cream bar oozed white goop from its chocolate shell.

"He try to pick you up?" Harry's hands flexed, but when he looked back again, the muscle-bound hawker had disappeared.

"He spoke to Yvonne." Martine dumped the bar into a circular trash container and fumbled in her purse for a tissue.

Harry noticed she was chewing the insides of her cheeks. Fighting the sudden urge to march back to the gelato seller and stomp him into the ground, he growled, "Delora could've hired him to keep a watch on you. Don't get friendly."

"I won't." Martine blotted a chocolate drop from the back of her wrist with a tissue retrieved from her dainty handbag. "The gelato was too sweet anyway."

Too sweet? He'd watched her devour a marzipan nested in a cotton-candy cloud meant as a garnish. There hadn't been a speck of food left on her plate. Too sweet? Was the vendor her friend from the café? Flesh-eating bacteria couldn't compete with the jealousy running rampant through his veins. When he met with Casmir tomorrow, he'd have the Gypsy arrange for the gelato purveyor to run into a few pairs of fists.

The matter settled in his mind, Harry managed to have a pleasant conversation with his wife on the way to the bank. A few pointed questions revealed some of the gaps in her education. While she seemed to know the alleyways and back routes of both Marseille and Cannes, her grasp of basic European geography

had glaring holes. Her knowledge of history either European or North American was almost nonexistent, and she eschewed technology of any sort.

The meeting at the bank finished without a hitch, and the Realtor met them as prearranged outside the bank. Harry had instructed the woman to concentrate on the area near his friend Terry's farm north of Nice. He drank in Martine's enjoyment of the car ride, charmed by her excitement at seeing the million-dollar mansions nestled in the hillsides between climbing bougainvillea, palms, and tall grasses.

They drove by three properties—one a two-story stone building Harry guessed to be around thirty-five hundred square feet, another a sprawling Roman-style villa, and the last a farm house with stables in the rear and a rose garden in the front. Martine clasped her hands in her lap but never uttered a word, instead simply stared at each dwelling.

Harry answered the Realtor's questions and manufactured appropriate appreciative phrases while surreptitiously studying his wife's profile. Her words from earlier bounced around his brain, and he vowed she'd never, ever have to worry about a roof over her head again.

The Realtor thanked him for the offer to join them for dinner but listed a litany of appointments and offered an apology. She dropped them off at the pier after sunset, and Harry blew out a sigh when he scanned the crowds and couldn't find the gelato cart or the stud wheeling the wooden structure.

They strolled to the *Glory*. Martine halted when she glimpsed the new five-foot-span bridge, the rough asphaltlike surface glistening like black diamonds under the light of swaying lanterns strung on either side.

She turned to face him, a tear leaking from the corner of her left eyes, her lips tugging and retreating. "You did this for me."

Her whisper floated on a gentle breeze.

"It'll make you feel safer until you've learned how to swim." He thumbed away the teardrop but another followed in its wake. "And we'll begin swimming lessons tomorrow. Now it's time for your surprise. Shall we go on board together?" He held out his hand palm up.

She nodded and gave him a tremulous smile that didn't match the sadness in her eyes.

"This way," he said when they stepped onto the *Glory's* deck. Harry led her to the stern and lifted her onto a swivel stool before ducking behind the bar. A bucket of pink Moët Champagne stood upright in a silver bucket. Plucking the bottle from its icy nest, he asked, "Remember when I said I had your back earlier?"

"About our marriage being not legal because I'm not?"

Twisting the metal tie on the cork, he replied, "Yes and no. To get married in France, you have to prove that you have forty days of legal residence. You can't prove that. But I had my lawyers go over my daddy's will with a fine-tooth comb."

When Martine frowned he elucidated. "I had them check the fine print. I have to be married before I turn thirty-two, which happens tonight at midnight. There's no stipulation as to when, where, how, or who performs the ceremony. It just has to be legal."

A low rumble heralded the *Glory's* engines' thundered ignition. The boat rocked from side to side, and the yacht edged away from the pier.

"We're going back to Cannes?"

"Nah, we're heading into international waters. The *Glory's* registered in Bermuda, which recognizes a wedding in international waters."

A broad smile crept across Martine's lips; she clapped her hands and snickered. "You are so smart, Harrison Indiana Ford. But who will marry us? Is there a priest on board?" She swiveled back and forth on the stool, peering into the ship's interior.

"The captain of the *Glory* has to marry us. Terry designated Austen the acting captain in a fax this afternoon. I had a Bermudan friend fill out the required marriage forms and pay the required fees in Bermuda this morning."

"C'est tout?" she asked. "Is that all we need?"

"Yeah, that's it." Harry tossed the wire into the trash under the counter and began twisting the cork. "Yvonne's your bridesmaid, Suresh is my best man, and they're our two required witnesses."

Because the boat had passed the port's farthest promontories and the city's background noises had faded, the cork sounded like a shotgun in the quiet of approaching open sea. Harry reached up, slid two flutes out from the overhead wineglass holder, and set the crystal containers on the counter.

"I didn't want to chance Delora questioning anything, so I also asked a few other people to be our guests." Harry tipped one flute, poured the bubbly, and righted the glass before handing it to Martine. After filling his own flute, he twisted the green bottle back into the ice bucket.

"This is the surprise?"

Martine hadn't taken her eyes off him, and he preened a little, rocking back on his heels and winking at her before answering. "Part of the surprise. Yvonne has a wedding dress for you in our stateroom. I have a tux, and we even have a flower girl and a ring bearer. The chef's niece and nephew," he explained. "I hired a small band with a singer. Chef's cooking us a wedding dinner, and we're going to have a wingding of a reception. Yvonne even managed to line up a couple who're going to shoot the wedding and do the official photographs."

"First the bridge," she mumbled, swiping the back of her hand across a moist cheek, "and now this. Why, Harry?"

"Because a wedding should be special, because our wedding *is* special." Warmth scalded his face. Harry'd never done anything romantic in his entire life. He added, his voice a tad defensive, "Because one day our kid will want to hear the story behind our wedding."

“Oui, she should,” Martine agreed.

“She?” he asked, his eyebrows scaling up. “It could be a he.”

“Non,” she replied, her arm curling protectively over her belly. “She.”

Harry grinned, pictured a miniature Martine, and found the image appealing. “Here’s to our firstborn, Martine Bellamy.” Harry lifted his glass, waited for Martine to raise hers, and clinked the crystal flutes together. “To a healthy, happy son or daughter of our loins.”

She flushed and giggled and repeated, a puckish twinkle in her dark eyes, “To a healthy *daughter* of our loins.”

They both drank, tipping their flutes back and taking healthy swallows without breaking their locked gazes.

Harry set his glass down, relieved Martine of hers, and placed the two crystal flutes on the bar. Resting his forearms on the counter, he leaned forward and growled, “Kiss me, sugar.”

Ducking her chin, she peeked up at him, her eyes enormous and unfathomable, and trailed her fingers up to his elbow. She angled in and skimmed her lips against his so softly his mouth crackled as if static electricity sparked from the flickering caress.

“Non, non.” Yvonne materialized on deck behind Martine, waving a finger. “Harry, you know better. No kissing, no touching until after the ceremony. Vite, vite,” she ordered, gesticulating to the left. “To your cabin. We have to do your hair and makeup. Non, non.” The finger did a little dance below Martine’s nose. “This time you *will* wear mascara and eyeliner and lipstick. You *will* be a proper French bride.”

The ceremony took place ninety minutes later under a full moon and on a calm Mediterranean. The chef’s niece and nephew led the procession. The dark-haired moppet, clothed in a flowing floor-length froth of pastel peach ruffles and lace, scattered confetti as far as her chubby little arms allowed. The ring bearer’s morning coat flapped in the crosswinds scurrying across the *Glory’s* stern. All solemn and cross-eyed, the six-year-old boy never took his gaze off the ring in the center of the pillow he carried.

Yvonne followed the two children, carrying an artfully arranged bouquet of wild daisies, bluebells, intertwined through yellow rose buds and ivy sprigged with satin yellow ribbons. She wore a gown of the same empire style and pastel peach hue as the flower girl’s.

Harry would later swear he swallowed his tongue when Martine appeared. She wore satin ivory. The rich color made her skin glow, and the moonlight made her complexion almost luminescent. She glided across the deck, the wind tickling her curls into motion, the yacht swaying in time to her movements. The four-man string band played a melody Harry didn’t recognize, but the jazzy notes reminded him of the Gypsy Kings’ guitar melodies.

At the edges of his mind, he noted the presence of his friend, Sir Geoffrey Stanford, part owner of the *Glory* and an MI6 adviser. Suresh bent to the ring bearer, retrieved the twin wedding bands Harry'd ordered earlier, and ruffled the boy's bowl-shaped straight brown locks.

Austen cleared his throat. "Ladies and gentlemen, we're gathered here today to witness the marriage of Martine Bellamy and Harrison Indiana Ford."

Suresh had to nudge Harry when the I-doing came around, as he and Martine hadn't been able to unfasten their gazes. "I do."

When Martine uttered "I do," Suresh passed him her wedding band, and he fumbled to get it on her finger because he didn't want to stop drowning in her eyes.

His big knuckles made her have to twist his ring back and forth before it lay nestled on his finger, but still they devoured each other.

"Kiss the bride, you dumb-ass Texan," Austen advised.

Cradling her chilled face between his palms, he grazed her mouth, sipping and nuzzling before parting her lips and melding their tongues together. Lost in the magic of her taste, mint and softness and a sweetness that brought an ache to his chest, he vowed to fill her life with luxury and comfort and to keep her by his side for as long as he could, by fair means or foul.

Horns tooting and razzle-dazzle cranking, all the sounds of New Year heralding, preceded the band, breaking into a raucous rendition of Mendelssohn's "Wedding March." Someone cuffed Harry's shoulder; he ignored the pointed cue, tightened his arms around Martine, and deepened the kiss.

"Give it up," Austen growled. "There are kids here."

Harry broke the kiss and stared into his wife's eyes. "We're married for real this time."

For a split inhale he saw in Martine's eyes what he'd read in the masked woman's odd-colored eyes that night in Grasse, a desperation bordering on suicidal, a determination built on steel and concrete, a connection he felt to his core because the mystery woman's eyes had echoed the hollowness of his soul. The memory of her contacts glinting in the sun reared, and Harry knew, knew without a doubt. "You're the woman from Grasse. The one with no panties, the one wearing the stripper garter belt and stockings. The stripper who posed for me."

Chapter Twelve

Martine hissed, “I am *not* a stripper, and I was *not* posing.”

“Delora *did* hire you,” Harry retorted. “I should’ve known better. I almost believed your crap. You really had me going there. What the fuck have I done?”

“I’ve never told anyone about what my mother did. Never.” She beat a fist on her chest. “Vous êtes un idiot, un imbéciles, Martine Bellamy.”

The last stanzas of the “Wedding March” crested, drowning their heated accusations. Martine’s shoulders sagged; she tore her eyes away from Harry’s, spun around, and bumped into a hard chest. She looked up at Casmir. “You too?”

Unable to face anyone for a second longer, she raced across the deck, down the hallway, and took the stairs to the second level, searching for a storage closet, a crawl space, any nook she could burrow into.

“Martine.” Casmir’s shout echoed in her ears, and she stumbled. The bridal bouquet crushed in one hand flew sideways as she grabbed a door frame for support, and a fingernail snapped on the metal’s edge. Losing her balance she teetered, gravity overcame her flailing arms, and her temple connected with a brass handle.

The impact sprouted stars and polka-dot circles before her pupils. Her lungs couldn’t expand, couldn’t draw in oxygen, and the room took flight, twirling and whirring. The floor rippled and rolled into waves, darkness ate away her blurred vision, and she welcomed the nausea and dizziness that shut down her mind.

A sharp, pungent smell yanked Martine alert. She jerked her head away from the source of the aroma and opened her eyes to find Harry leaning over her prone form.

“Lie still,” he ordered. “You’ve a cut on your forehead, and it’s bleeding. I need to clean it.”

Martine choked back a wince when he dabbed a damp cotton ball at the apex of her hairline. She focused on his wrists, on the tiny lines creasing the heel of his palm. A numbing lethargy stole over her limbs, and her bones sank into the planked flooring as if crushed by a slab of concrete. The wedding band she’d placed on his finger scant minutes before gleamed under the track lights, the metal a shining mockery of the ceremony, of her idiotic fantasies.

“It’s more of a graze than a cut. You won’t need stitches,” he said, his breath and words spinning warmth across her chilled cheek but not registering, not sending flutters to her belly and groin.

Behind Harry stood Casmir, hands jammed into his trouser pockets. He stared at her, and she knew he asked a silent question. Sadly she gave him an imperceptible shake of her head. She owed too much to the Gypsy and refused to add to his burdens.

For the first time in years, her nerve had failed, and she'd run to hide and cower as she had when pursued by the man who'd owned her in Solino. Cowardice meant failure, and her grand-mère deserved better. Collecting her scattered wits and valor, she took a deep breath, pushed away Harry's hand, and lurched into a sitting position.

"I would like a moment to speak to Harry." She didn't glance over her shoulder but sensed the others huddled in the hallway. "Please leave. Everyone," she added for Casmir's benefit.

The Gypsy had his fists balled, and only when she shot him a pleading glance did he flex his fingers and take a stride forward. The brine of the docks lingered on his flesh and made the air fragrant as he passed by, and the aroma of the exotic spices and unfamiliar perfumes Casmir traded cloyed her nostrils in the claustrophobic confines of the narrow hallway.

Waiting until the sounds of shuffling footsteps receded, she filled her lungs again, gathering the remnants of her courage along with much-needed oxygen, and looked into the eyes of the man who would've been her husband. "I know a Gypsy girl who's a virgin. She'll marry you. She's young and pretty, and her mother has seven children."

"That would be bigamy."

Unable to bear his intense stare, she looked down as she skated against the wall and sat up straighter. Even laces tied into the bows of his formal black shoes. The supple leather had been polished to the hilt and reflected the pinpoints of the round lights above them. For some reason his footwear had her hypnotized, and she couldn't unfix her stare from his shoes.

"We haven't signed the marriage papers."

"Are you the woman from Grasse?"

No more lies.

Martine widened her eyelids with two fingers, popped out the first contact lens, and then repeated the motion on her right eye, collecting the tinted circles in her cupped palm. She lifted her chin. Her lungs skipped a few inhales when their gazes collided, and Harry pursed his lips. Opening her hand, she showed him the lenses.

"Do you need them to see?"

"Non."

Capturing both circles between his fingers, he said, his voice calm and showing no hint of anger, "Then this doesn't matter." He dropped the lenses onto the floor, lifted one shoe, and ground them under his heel.

She linked her fingers and folded them in her lap.

“Nuh-uh. No way do you get to go back to wearing that mask, Martine.” He spoke in the same drawl he used with his stepmother, and her belly convulsed, welling bile up her throat. He separated her intertwined hands and ordered, “Look at me, Martine.”

Her neck muscles knotted, and her head felt heavier than the *Glory’s* three-ton lead anchor, but she obeyed his command. Lifting her chin she met his glance.

“What were you doing if you weren’t posing?” Not a hint of warmth or his usual humor was in evidence.

The memory of that unforgettable incident when she worked the masquerade party three weeks earlier flooded her mind. Her supervisor had read Harry’s ad to her, and she’d latched on to the words “virgin” and “substantial monetary reward,” as if they were a life raft losing a battle with a tempest. Then her damned garter unsnapped, and she’d sneaked into the library to refasten her left stocking. The memory played in her head like a DVD that was stuck on repeat.

Just as she bent over to fix the garter, she heard a woman crooning, “Harry, Harry, come out wherever you are,” but ignored the all.

The library door flew open.

Her head whipped up.

She’d locked the door.

She had.

She knew she had.

Merde, merde.

A man dressed in Regency costume—tight cream breeches, paisley burgundy waistcoat fitted over an ivory shirt ruffled at the neck and wrists—stood in the doorway. His mouth dropped open, and warm honey eyes fixated on her exposed sex.

Heat scaled her cheeks as his pants tightened over an impressive erection thickening and lengthening in time to her accelerating heartbeat.

Merde, that will hurt.

Her glance flicked to his face.

His hooded gaze snaked one millimeter at a time up her body, and Martine pictured what he saw.

Her standing by the couch, one foot encased in a strappy sandal perched on the carpet, the other propped on the upholstered sofa, her classic French maid’s uniform of requisite black skirt and snowy apron bunched at the waist, and her rear end naked because she’d worn no panties tonight.

“My stocking slipped,” she replied. “I didn’t have the time to go back to my locker to fix it.”

The humiliation of the moment their eyes first met those twenty-one days ago bounced around her brain like a ping-pong ball on autorepeat, and once again she was trapped in the past, in that moment.

Perspiration peppered her forehead, and her cheeks flamed when their gazes locked. He wore his lust like a trophy, unashamed, intense desire darkening his brown eyes.

Five seconds ticked by, and no matter how much she willed her limbs to move, they wouldn't.

"I saw you, Harrison Indiana Ford. Come out. Come out, wherever you are."

The woman's throaty shout siphoned the oxygen out of Martine's lungs. Her temporary paralysis vanished.

The ultra-feminine voice called out again, and she heard the sound of high heels clacking on the hallway's marble.

His head turned in the direction of the sound.

Smoothing her skirt down, Martine glanced over her shoulder to ensure the intruder held the man's attention.

All at once light left the room.

She froze.

Martine heard a muffled click like the sound of a door closing. Soft panting reached her ears, and she smelled smoke and the faint hint of alcohol, wine perhaps.

Squeezing her eyes shut, she clamped her lips together and sent a silent prayer to Bondyne, her grand-mère's version of God, and crossed her fingers. This must be a diabolical nightmare.

Someone tried the door handle. A stray beam of moonlight glinted on the brass handle's polished perfection as it twisted left, then right.

"I'm growing tired of this, Harrison Indiana Ford. You have to face me at some point in time."

He held his breath, Martine realized when the room grew silent. She sidled to the French doors, uncaring of the faint swooshing of her shoes on the thick carpet. Before he could make a move, she had unlocked the door, then broke into a furious sprint.

"Why weren't you wearing panties?"

Martine squeezed her eyes shut as heat scaled from head to toe. "I only had three pairs then. None were clean."

Silence dominated the deserted hallway. Harry, his eyes half-shuttered, raked her features as he digested her answer.

"And you just happened to apply to become my wife three weeks later?"

One tiny lie and then no more.

"I learned of your plans to advertise for a wife that night."

Harry's brows knitted. "You knew who I was?"

"Not then," she replied and shuttered her eyes. "I heard you and Terry speaking on the balcony."

"This is too much of a coincidence."

Harry's narrow-eyed squint made her want to explain what had happened, and she babbled more than normal, trying to make him see it was all a really, really huge coincidence.

"I was leaving the party. I'd lost my tray and knew I'd be fired or fined, so I kept to the grounds, and when I reached the balcony, a white wig landed at my feet. Then I heard Terry speak. I liked his accent, so I picked up the wig and waited. Then Terry called you Harrison. I was curious about you." *I was half in love with you even back then.* "I couldn't leave until you did."

Harry waved his hand as if the last two sentences were of no importance. "That's why you gasped when you first saw Terry the morning after our civil wedding. You recognized him."

"Non. I never saw him. I recognized his voice that morning, and I was afraid you knew all."

"Did you also overhear me discussing Madame Christen with Geoff?"

"The matchmaker? Oui, but I didn't know her name then."

The silence became absolute, and the air pressed down on her shoulders, making her joints ache. Hopelessness corroded the smoldering survival instinct that had kept her alive and burst into flames when all had seemed lost in the past. And at that instant she knew that this time she'd run out of options. Waves of exhaustion drained the last spark of fight left. Martine turned away from him unable to take the blow of the disappointment and disgust he must feel.

"How're you doing?" He brushed a stray curl from cheeks dampened with a thin sheen of perspiration.

"I'm okay now. You don't have to worry about me any longer," she stated and braced a palm on the cool wall of the corridor.

"Wrong." He corrected her. "We're heading back on deck where we'll both sign the marriage certificate, and then you and I are going to have a long, honest conversation."

She focused on him, searching his face for a clue, any hint of what he felt. Only when his long finger tipped her dropped jaw closed did she register the shattering of the last vestiges of her armor against him. She hadn't even thought about concealing her shock and surprise but had let her naked emotions show.

Remorse and guilt lodged a soccer-size ball, or so it seemed, in her throat. He didn't deserve the violence and mayhem bound to occur once Jean-Claude Fournier knew she still lived. She made a final attempt to put an end to everything and protect him, struggling to get the words past her strangled vocal cords.

"Harry, it will not work. A marriage between us." Martine hung her head. "I lied about everything else but not about what my mother did, not what I was during those years in Solino. Your stepmother, she will use that against you."

"Again wrong," he said and swept his knuckles across the line of her jaw. "On all counts. I lashed out at you because I was angry. D'you know why I was angry, Martine?"

“Because I deceived you.” She glanced up at him.

“Wrong again.” Harry flashed her one of his crooked smiles, and a wave of pain squeezed her ribs.

“Because I couldn’t get the woman from Grasse out of my head. Yesterday morning I woke up with my arms around you, but I had been fantasizing about her. I had a boner that could set Guinness records, and I didn’t know which woman had done it to me—you or the woman from Grasse.”

“I didn’t think you’d remember,” she mumbled. “I’m so confused.”

“English, sugar. Tell me what you said,” Harry directed as he hugged her close and lifted her off the floor.

Had she spoken in Creole?

“I can walk,” she protested and buried her nose in his shirt, savoring his scent.

“What did you say just now in French?” he asked again.

She translated her words.

“Not remember? The image of you in those stockings and garters and no panties standing next to that couch is tattooed on my brain for all eternity. I’ve never seen anything more erotic in my life.” Harry carried her effortlessly as he strolled down the hallway. “You’ve no idea how I’ve berated myself over the last two days. As hard, pun intended, as I tried, I couldn’t erase the woman in Grasse,” he said, looked down at her, and he quirked his lips. “*You* from my memory. It was driving me loco.”

He crossed onto the main deck, and a mistral swept aft to stern, skipping the fabric of her sleeve over her arms. Martine shivered as the chill in the breeze lifted the hair from her nape.

The group of witnesses and the small bridal party, save the flower girl and the ring bearer, stood huddled in a semicircle around a pub-height table opposite the bar. The chef’s niece and nephew lay curled asleep and swathed in blankets on the padded bench seat opposite the adults. Band members lounging in chairs kitty-corner to the bar lurched upright when Harry set Martine on her feet.

Austen disengaged from the group and walked over to meet them in the center of the deck. “Bout time. We ready to sign the legalese?”

“Ready and roaring, right?”

She nodded.

“You okay?” Austen asked.

“Oui. I’m good,” Martine answered, mimicking Austen’s turn of phrase.

“You sure you want to be tied to this selfish bastard for the rest of your life?” Austen probed.

Martine flinched, and warmth crawled up her throat to suffuse her cheeks. “The contract’s for a year.”

Shaking his head, Austen rolled his eyes. “Yeah, yeah, and I’m a monkey’s uncle.”

“Harry?” Martine faced her spouse-to-be.

“We’ll discuss that later. Austen, shut the frick up. Let’s get this party started,” Harry commanded. “Where are the documents?”

“On the bar.”

Yvonne’s hips swayed like a siren as she approached. She wagged a finger in Harry’s direction. “You are not spoiling my reception plans. You and Martine will dance the first dance, and then we will have dinner and speeches—”

“Speeches,” Harry interjected in groaned complaint. “Who’s going to give a speech?”

Suresh and the rest of the group had ambled over to join Harry, Martine, and Austen.

“Actually,” Suresh said as he pulled out a couple of sheets of notepaper from his inside jacket pocket, “I am.”

“So am I.” The English man who’d interviewed her brandished an index card. “And Terry e-mailed his speech.”

“Can you believe it?” Harry grunted the rhetorical question. “Terry’s almost four thousand miles away, and he can still finagle a way to torment me.”

Yvonne said, “Excuse us, boys. We have girl stuff to do.”

A thousand and one questions plagued Martine as Yvonne repaired the damage to her makeup and reapplied perfume to Martine’s pulse points. What was Harry doing? What was he thinking? Why was he going through with the wedding? What did he want from her? How much did he know?

The Mediterranean didn’t part, locusts didn’t swarm, the skies didn’t flood the earth, and no matter how she searched and searched her brain for answers, none materialized.

When they returned to the main deck, Yvonne hustled Martine and Harry to the bar. Suresh joined them, and the others huddled around in a semicircle to witness Martine and Harry sign the marriage certificate. Two strangers, a young man and woman, the photographers Harry had mentioned before, recorded the whole event on a digital camera and a camcorder.

Martine’s fingers shook so much that her signature came out wobbly even though she’d practiced her new name assiduously for hours only days before. Yvonne and

Suresh added their John Hancocks, and Austen stamped the document with two different seals before rolling the certificate into a tube and tying it with a yellow satin ribbon.

“Should I put it in the safe?” he asked Harry.

“Yeah,” Harry agreed.

While the band retuned their instruments, Harry guided Martine over to Casmir and the English lord.

“Martine, I’d like to introduce you to Casmir.” He paused, and one eyebrow winged up. “D’you know I haven’t a clue as to what your surname is?”

“Bayer,” Casmir stated as he inclined his head and tilted forward from the waist. “A pleasure, Mrs. Ford. Congratulations on your marriage.”

Guilt scalded a path across her chest and face, and Martine couldn’t meet Casmir’s eyes. “Merci,” she said, staring at the cusp of his shoulder, noting the severe cut of his navy blue jacket. She’d never seen Casmir dressed formally and hadn’t expected him to be so comfortable wearing the trappings of civilization.

“And you remember Sir Geoffrey Stanford.” The man Harry presented wore aristocratic hauteur not as a second skin but as first flesh, as if his pedigree couldn’t be separated from his character. “He and Terry actually own the *Glory*.”

“Sir Geoffrey,” Martine murmured and extended her hand. “It’s good to see you again.”

“Geoff please, Martine. Despite my title and my stuffy appearance, I much prefer the informal American approach to life. Harry tells me you two are looking for a home.”

Martine glanced at her new husband.

“I’ve given my notice,” Harry explained. “Geoff and Terry need to have the time to replace me.”

His statement dizzied her brain. As if he read her mind, Harry murmured, “That long talk, remember?”

At that moment the band struck up the tune “Lady in Red,” and the lead guitarist sang the first line of the lyrics as Harry snaked an arm around her waist and clasped her hand in his. “Relax,” he whispered as if he knew she’d never danced a step in her life. “I’m going to do a one-two, one-two-three step. Just follow my lead. Close your eyes and savor the moonlight, the stars, the mistral, and me.”

Martine surrendered to his gentle persuasion, to the magic of the night, to the heat of his embrace, and nothing had ever felt so right, so perfect, so much a bubble of a dream that she held her breath, waiting for the inevitable puncturing ugliness. But Mother Nature seemed determined to ensure the bubble persisted.

The moon, a ball of shimmering snow against the coal night sky, turned the rippling Mediterranean into the silver of spreading mercury, all radiant, all moving. The icy mistral receded, and warmer winds swept in. Yvonne had decorated the deck with swinging lanterns, which exuded warmth and danced like fireflies in the slight sea breeze. No other boat was in sight; no sign of civilization marred the perfection of the setting.

Harry and Martine danced cheek to cheek, puffs from his parted lips tickling her ear and skimming her nape. Halfway through the song he began humming along. “There’s nobody here, it’s just you and me, it’s where I want to be, but I hardly know this beauty by my side. I’ll never forget the way you look tonight.”

Moisture brimmed her carefully made-up eyes, and the pain she'd worn as a shield all her life cracked and splintered, and she turned so her mouth met the faint stubble on his cheek. "Thank you, Harry."

"No," he said, "thank *you*, Martine Ford. We're not going to be able to disappear for a few hours. Hang in there, Martine. Trust me—we'll work things out."

The warmth and twinkle had returned to Harry's eyes, and Martine smiled and said the first thing that popped into her head. "You didn't wear your hat."

"No, I didn't," he agreed. "The Stetson belongs to a different era, a pre-Martine era."

What did that mean? Didn't all Texans wear cowboy hats?

The song ended, and Suresh intercepted them as they strolled hand in hand to the railings. "Might I beg a dance from your bride?"

She danced with every male present, as did Yvonne, while the chef and his assistants set the tables with linen, china, cutlery, and flowers. Near midnight a sit-down four-course dinner was served to the accompaniment of three prepared speeches and multiple toasts. After dessert Harry rose, introduced Martine as Mrs. Ford, thanked each individual for their help and for the evening, and bid everyone adieu as he led her from the table.

Yvonne bounded to her feet and yelped, "No, you can't leave yet. We have one more thing to do."

"Not another speech," Harry protested.

"Non. Martine has to throw the bouquet," Yvonne insisted as she pressed the flowers she'd retrieved from their spill in the hallway into Martine's hand.

Martine couldn't see the point, as Yvonne was the only other eligible female on board. "Why don't I simply give it to you?"

"Non. It is bad luck. You must throw it."

So Martine turned her back and tossed the bouquet. She heard a wail and then a splash and whirled around. The flowers had landed in the Mediterranean.

"I don't think Yvonne's ever going to forgive you." Barely ten minutes had elapsed after her disastrous bouquet toss and Harry sequestering the two of them in their stateroom. "And Austen will forever be in your debt. I have a feeling something's not quite kosher between those two."

Harry unclipped his bowtie and threw it on the dresser.

"She should have let me give the bouquet to her," Martine muttered as she wandered over to set the circlet of flowers she'd worn in her hair on the bedside table. Noticing a large box on the pillows, she asked, "What is this?"

"Open it," Harry's voice rumbled from behind her, his breath tickling her neck.

She twisted around to find him standing five inches away, his mouth curving. "I've seen these before in the fancy stores in Cannes. Chocolat, non?"

“Coconut-chocolat bonbons,” he replied, and she smiled as his drawl changed the French pronunciation into a strangled Texas word. “Twenty-five different kinds. I had planned to get you a ring and some other jewelry, but Austen pointed out that you’d probably want to pick those out yourself. Not exactly a thrilling wedding present.”

Willing back the tears threatening to spill down her cheeks, she croaked, “I wish they could last forever. I almost don’t want to eat them. Merci, Harry.”

“No way, missy. I’ve been looking forward to you feeding me a couple all night long. No hands, of course.” He winked at her. “Let’s get nekkid and eat them in bed.”

She reached around for the zipper of her dress.

“No you don’t,” he griped, batting her hands away. “You’re not depriving me of the pleasure of undressing you on our wedding night.”

“You did that already,” she reminded him and straightened so he could have better access.

“And I’d do it every night if I could,” he retorted, pulling the zipper down.

As the material on her dress parted and the cool air in the cabin skittered up her spine, Martine couldn’t prevent a shiver.

“You’ve goose bumps on your shoulders.” Harry rubbed the cusps of her shoulders. “Let’s get you under the covers right away.”

“But I thought I would undress you tonight as well,” she protested.

Harry choked when the dress fell to the floor.

“I didn’t have the uniform, but I kept this,” Martine whispered, gesturing to the black garter belt, the nylons, and her lack of underwear. “I changed into it after Yvonne repaired my makeup.”

He just stood there raking her from head to toe with his gaze, his nostrils almost breathing fire, his hands fisted so tight the skin over his knuckles seemed stretched to splitting.

“Harry?” Her impulsive donning of the garments he had said were the most erotic he’d ever seen all of a sudden appeared to be a glaring mistake. “Thank the Lord I did not wear the mask. I’m sorry you don’t like it.”

“You have the mask?” he growled. “Fuck. I’m going to expire from sheer pleasure tonight.”

She blinked. “This is good, then?”

“This is paradise.” He shrugged out of his jacket and tore his cummerbund off. The Velcro snap screeched in protest, and the satin material spilt down the middle of a row of pleats. “Under the covers, wife.” His eyes never left her as he peeled his shirt open and buttons took flight. He grabbed a shoe and yanked it off, balancing on one foot. The other shoe went next, followed by his pants and black silk boxers.

St. Pete stood tall and proud, jutting toward Harry’s navel.

“Covers,” he ordered, and she turned around, picked up the box of chocolates with one hand, and drew the comforter down with the other. “Lose the chocolate. Sorry,” he muttered when she pouted. “Later.”

* * *

Three times later, Martine lay on his chest, barely able to keep her eyes open.

“Martine?”

“Harry?” She opened one eye to find him staring at her.

“That was the best wedding present a wife could ever give her husband. You are never to throw that garter belt out. Or the mask. I’ll order you a supply of those nylons myself.”

“You should have let me save one chocolat,” she said, her tone a little plaintive. “For a memento.”

“I needed all for the pattern.” He shrugged, and the movement scraped the underside of her breast over his chest hair, sending a tingle of delight over her skin. “I’ll buy you another box.” He rolled a lock of her hair around the finger. “Why did you wear the contact lenses?”

She focused on the spot where his breastbone rose and fell. “I thought it might offend you. The mambo in Solino said I had the devil’s eyes. That I was Satan’s spawn and his evil was reflected in my blue eye. “

“Asshole,” Harry growled. “Mambo?”

“A voodoo priestess. The woman who owned me.”

“How long were you with them, this family?”

“Five years, but I ran away many times. Once I stayed away for a whole rainy season. Then I got sick from the malaria, and I lived with the nuns for a while. But when I got better, Jean—”

“Jean?”

“The master of the house. He came to get me.”

He rolled a little on the pillow and scooted down so their faces were aligned. “No one will ever hurt you again. I have lawyers working on getting you a permanent visa in France. If you want to, you can also become a US citizen since we’re married.”

“I was a restavek.”

“The operative word is *was*. And that makes no difference to anything, not being legally married, not citizenship nor visas.”

“I cannot erase my past.”

“But you can let it go.” Harry captured her hand and brought it to his cheek. “Delora was my girlfriend before she became my stepmother. She was my first woman. Even after Mama died and she married my daddy, I didn’t believe it was her fault. I convinced myself he’d forced himself on her.”

Martine's jaw dropped. She laid her hand over Harry's, sandwiching his big palm against her cheek. "I'm sure your papa was in shock and grieving for your maman."

"No. Mama took a long time to die, and by the end she and Daddy had no love for each other. I found out later that Delora told him about her and me. She taunted him about it, and he spent the rest of his life punishing me for being her lover."

"When did your papa die?"

"Six weeks ago."

"I thought it was long ago."

"We haven't spoken in years, so it may as well have been. I've lived for revenge since I was sixteen. Now it's within my grasp, and it doesn't seem that important anymore. Right now you could be pregnant." He dropped his free hand to her belly. "I want my kid to have a mom and a dad. To be brought up in a home filled with love and laughter. Want to give it a try?"

Yes bubbled up her throat. Yes giddied her mind. Yes spiraled the beginnings of happiness low in her belly.

I have to tell him.

"There are so many things." She began and then clamped her lips together. Trying another tack she said, "I am so ignorant in so many ways. When we went to L'Epuisette, I didn't know what to do, what knife or fork to use. I will shame you, Harry, through my ignorance."

"Never," he growled, shaking his head. "Never, Martine. Knowing what knife and fork to use is something you can learn in an afternoon. Knowing right from wrong instinctively is something that comes from deep inside. Being strong in the face of overwhelming odds is character. It's what makes you, you. And I could never ever be ashamed of you. In fact there are times when you shame me. There isn't a single aspect of your personality that I don't admire. That you're not bitter after such trial of a childhood speaks volumes about your courage, your pride, and your goodness. I am proud to call you my wife."

He hauled her into his arms and hugged her close before pulling back to scrutinize her face. "You're exhausted." Glancing at the iPhone's dock, he grunted. "It's almost dawn. Delora's lawyers will be here before noon requiring proof of our legal union."

Martine didn't realize how tired she was until her head hit the pillow. Harry spooned her, and for the first time in her life, she didn't care that her back was exposed. His chest warmed her spine, and her eyelids grew weighty. Before a minute ticktocked by, sleep claimed her overtaxed brain.

* * *

"Time to wake up." Feathered kisses on her neck followed Harry's low rumble. His forefinger traced the whorls of Martine's ear, tickling her flesh, and she nudged

his hand with her shoulder, not willing to surrender slumber's hold on her mind. "It's near eleven, and Delora will be here by noon."

She shot up off the crumpled bedsheets, her blurred vision clearing as she knuckled her eyelids and scrubbed a hand over her face. Dressed in jeans, a white shirt, and his boots, Harry half lounged, half sat on the mattress with one elbow propped on the headboard and his Stetson cocked at a rakish angle on his head.

He caught her staring at his cowboy hat, slashed her a devilish asymmetrical grin, and tipped the hat a tad to the left. "It'll irritate the daylights out of Delora," he said by way of explanation. "I've a few surprises for my stepmother, and I want her distracted before I sic 'em on her."

"Today you're not allowed to sink into the background. I want you wearing high heels and subtle makeup. Delora tarts up like a whore working a Tijuana plaza. Wear something with clean lines that broadcasts quiet elegance. Like that Ralph Lauren shirtdress you and Yvonne bought the other day."

Martine blinked and shook her head, trying to dislodge the sleep fuzzies from her brain. "Surprises?"

"Mmmm." He winked. "The doo-doo's gonna hit the fan today."

Only when he tugged her against his chest did Martine realize she didn't have any clothes on. She struggled to free herself from his embrace.

"Wondered when you'd cotton on to the fact that you're buck nekkid," he drawled and stroked a broad, warm palm down her spine, tracing one of her scars with his forefinger. "You know I'm going to kill whoever did this to you." Harry said the words in a pleasant it's-sunny-today tone. "Tell you what, though. If you give me the son of a bitch's name right now, I won't draw his last moments out too long." Two fingers trailed over her collarbone, and he rested the pad of his thumb for a few seconds on the pulse throbbing in the center of her throat. Tipping her chin up and locking her eyes to his, he asked, "Care to share?"

"You mean it," she whispered, reading the banked rage in the twin pinprick-size pupils staring at her intently.

"He's a dead man walking," Harry stated. "It's a question of when and how."

What have I done? What will Jean-Claude do when he finds out about Harry?

Chapter Thirteen

“Everything ready?” Harry asked Austen.

“Yeah. I have our surprise guests in the lounge off the small dining room. Delora and her lawyers are in the library, and everyone else is in waiting in the bar area.” Austen’s grim tone didn’t surprise Harry.

“Let’s get this done,” Harry said.

Together he and Austen walked to the bar area to find Geoff, Suresh, Martine, and Yvonne waiting for them. Geoff and Suresh sat on bar stools, long legs dangling, while Yvonne and Martine sat side by side on the sofa in front of a glass coffee table. A muted flat-panel plasma screen hanging on the wall behind the bar flashed the latest headlines in stock-quote white titles across the bottom of the screen. The closed-captioned words depicting the announcements of a female reporter with gaunt features and pixie-cut brown hair flashed above the ticker-tape news.

A continental breakfast graced a sideboard under the window kitty-corner to the bar. Glistening silver platters bearing apple turnovers, croissants, Danishes, strawberries, raspberries, blueberries, slices of cantaloupe, and bunches of green and purple grapes crowded the sideboard. Diamond-cut crystal bowls containing marmalade, ginger preserves, and softened sweet butter crowded the spaces between the trays.

Harry grinned when he saw that the plate Martine had in front of her was piled high with mounds of fruit and pastries. Since his discussion with Suresh, he’d arranged for their cabin to be stocked daily with a basket of fruit, a cheese plate, and a selection of breads. At first she’d hadn’t eaten in front of him, but the baskets and platters steadily declined.

Then a persimmon appeared in a basket. A fruit Martine had obviously never encountered, as she kept staring at it. Coming out of the bathroom, he found her holding the orange fruit and sniffing it. He’d taken a step back, cleared his throat, and faked a craving for the fruit when he reentered the cabin. Together they’d eaten the sweet, firm flesh, and she’d immediately demanded to know all about it, declaring the fruit her favorite—after berries, of course. Harry looked up persimmon on the iPhone and read her all the Wiki information. Figs had caused a similar rapture.

Yet that morning he’d found food stashed away in her hiding place.

It’s only been days. I can’t expect miracles.

Martine wore a Ralph Lauren powder blue shirtdress nipped in at the waist by a wide brown belt. As she crossed her legs, he glimpsed her footwear and missed a step. Knee-high boots of a soft buttery cocoa shade tasseled at the top Indian-style with at least five-inch pointy heels. Immediately he pictured her in the boots, the belt, and a bra and thong of a matching color.

Catching his eye, she flashed him a smile so wicked, so full of sensual promise, St. Pete had conniptions, and when she winked at him with her blue eye, his wayward prick attempted a high jump.

I'm never letting you go.

He winked back at her and then turned his attention to his duties.

"Morning," he said, greeting everyone. "This meeting shouldn't last long. Thanks for coming. Geoff, Austen, want to escort our guests here?"

"Be my decided pleasure," Geoff replied.

Harry couldn't resist the allure of the aroma of strong Espresso-injected coffee, a favorite of Austen's always served on the *Glory* throughout the day, and he poured a mug. The midmorning sun lit the room, and through the glass windows the azure sky held only the wisps and swirls of white clouds. That the wind blew strong was obvious as the Mediterranean Sea hosted dozens of unfurled sails of all colors whisking travelers and tourists to different destinations.

He drank his coffee while sifting through the meeting agenda for the zillionth time. The team had decided unanimously on all points save one. Harry had wanted to "do the dirty" and handle the details, but he had been outvoted on that point.

Harry sat in a high-backed chair in a corner opposite the bar, which gave him a clear view of the mirror on the far wall and the arched entrance to the room. He didn't intend to miss the reactions of any of the players involved in the farce about to be enacted.

Austen brought in Delora and her two lawyers first. Her gaze swept the lounge and settled on him, one corner of her lip curling into a sneer. He read the triumphant glint in her black eyes.

Deliberately not standing, he said, "Delora, gentlemen, thank you for coming."

Her chin crooked side to side. "*I called this meeting.*"

Ignoring her attempt to control the proceedings, he waved a hand at the sideboard and said, "Help yourselves. There's food, coffee, tea, juices, and a full bar, of course, should you feel like indulging."

The two suits blanched, and Harry figured they'd never had to fetch their own beverages before. Delora's mouth tugged down. She glanced at the urn, wet her lips, and Harry remembered how she loved strong coffee. "I'm certain we won't have time for food and drinks."

She sashayed to the obvious power position, took a seat in the chair adjacent to the couch, and crossed legs bared to mid thigh as she snuggled her back into the upholstery. She sat in king stance, hands draped on the armrest, one foot doing a jaunty circle with the scarlet tip of her CFM pump.

"I'm looking forward to this, Indy," she commented, placing a small, flat clutch on her lap.

As am I.

Harry declined to respond but smiled and sipped his coffee.

Low voices, a mixture of male and female, preceded the sound of soft footsteps. Harry fixed his gaze on Delora, rewarded by her widened eyes, the pinch of her nostrils, and the slackening of her mouth as his first surprise visitor, Judge Kinky Wilson, entered the room followed by his wife, Honey.

Wilson froze in midstep; he turned to Geoff and growled, "What the fuck's going on? I thought we were meeting with the acting CEO of Barclays." His head whipped around; his narrow-eyed gaze scanned the room. When he fixed on Harry, his weathered complexion darkened, and his Adam's apple bobbed like a buoy in a hurricane.

"I *am* the acting chief financial officer of Barclays," Geoff replied.

Kinky Wilson had been a frequent visitor to Daddy's ranch, but the last time Harry'd seen him years ago at the funeral service for Mama, he'd still had a somewhat athletic build and almost a full head of hair. Not anymore.

Wilson hadn't aged well, now jowly, thick-necked, and flabby, even about the ears. The last strands of his follicles had given up the ghost without a fight; he was as bald as a newborn.

Kinky turned to Geoff. "There'd better be a damned good explanation for this."

"There is. And it will all be apparent in a few minutes," Geoff assured the man. "Allow me to introduce you to everyone else."

Harry studied Delora surreptitiously.

Delora'd recovered quickly, fixing her gaze on a triangular pink depression bowl filled with chocolate kisses on the coffee table. Her top leg betrayed her appearance of calm, as the red pump jerked in fits and starts.

Harry's lips twitched, but he didn't allow his internal grin to form as his gaze intersected with Honey Wilson's. He inclined his head in greeting. She dipped her chin, but her blue eyes held the grim intensity of a woman bent on finishing a repulsive task.

Married to Kinky for thirty-nine years, Honey wore the financial pants in the family. Chair of the Daughters of the Republic of Texas for several years, she wielded a political and social influence few men or women enjoyed in the Lone Star State.

Honey's glance flickered to Delora, and her mouth flattened.

Harry languidly pushed out of his chair as Geoff finished the introductions. "Welcome, Judge, Mrs. Wilson. Thank you for coming. We have one more guest who's just arrived. Then we'll begin the proceedings."

"I'll take care of that," Geoff stated. "Please, sit, Judge, Mrs. Wilson. Martine, would you do the hostess honors?"

Shooting Geoff a squint of displeasure when his wife visibly blanched, Harry started to walk to her when Martine's voice stopped him. "But of course, Geoff." She turned to the newcomers and inquired about their beverage preferences.

Harry relaxed his fisted hands but remained standing and changed direction, heading to the bar. Martine fixed a mug of coffee for Kinky and poured a glass of sweet tea for Honey. While she did this Austen escorted the Wilsons to the couch where Yvonne sat.

Martine shot Harry a puzzled glance after serving the drinks to the Wilsons, who took up the entire couch, leaving her no place to sit. He angled his head to the bar stool closest to him, and she obeyed his silent command by gliding to the stool. Sitting, she adjusted her dress, smoothing the fabric to fall evenly, and then folded her hands in her lap.

"You did that on purpose," she whispered. "Why?"

"You'll see," he whispered back. When she frowned, he rubbed away the lines on her forehead and said, "Don't worry. Trust me."

Yvonne attempted to draw Honey into conversation, and the two women exchanged brief murmurs before retreating to the safety of sipping their beverages.

For several minutes no one spoke, the void of silence broken by the occasional horn from one of the larger cargo ships that could be seen in the far distance through the lounge's wall-to-wall window, and the cracking of the ice in Honey's glass.

Harry relaxed when he heard the creaking of the anchor being raised and scanned the room as the *Glory's* engines roared to life. Everyone present save the team members cast startled looks in Harry's direction.

"We're taking a short cruise around the bay while we conduct the meeting. After we conclude, everyone's invited on deck for cocktails and canapés," Harry explained jovially.

The *Glory's* route had been designed so they could dock within ten minutes if necessary, if the authorities needed to intervene, or if Harry wanted to eject a participant.

Delora glared at him, and one finger tapped unrhythmically on the chair's armrest.

Judge Wilson cracked a knuckle, and Honey hissed, "Stop."

Geoff cleared his throat.

A startled gasp drew Harry's attention from his wife's graceful posture.

He didn't have to wonder about the source but focused on Delora. Her olive complexion had mottled, her fingers curved, and the red talons she called nails bit into her palms.

Geoff stood poised in the archway entrance to the bar area, a woman beside him.

Delora stared at the woman Geoff waved into the room.

The two dramatic appearances, the Wilsons and Madame Christen, the matchmaker, both designed to throw Delora off balance, had paid off like a Texas oil gusher.

This time Harry let his grin form.

Gotcha.

The pulse working like a donkey pump above the three-carat diamond nestled in the hollow of Delora's collarbone made Harry's smile widen. He followed her cornered-rabbit stare to Madame Christen.

The matchmaker's glamour picture on her Internet site had been Photoshopped to soften the taut features of a woman who knew a surgeon's knife intimately. According to the dossier Geoff had compiled, the elegant chignon-coiffed blonde was in her early fifties, claimed to be related to the oldest lines of royalty in Europe, and had run a successful matchmaking business for more than two decades.

Trim, dressed in one-of-a-kind haute couture, requisite pearl necklace, and earrings, she didn't falter once when she surveyed the assembled group and offered a soft-spoken "Bonjour" to the room at large.

Martine stiffened, and she shot Harry a side-glance. Only the slight working of her throat gave any evidence of her emotions. Harry had deliberately not told Martine of the events he'd planned today.

Am I wrong to test her?

"Madame Christen, I believe you know Martine, Austen, and"—Geoff paused—"Delora Ford."

Delora clamped her scarlet lips together, and her gaze darted around the room as if seeking a bolt-hole, but Harry paid her only a brief examination as Martine had muttered "Merde" under her breath.

Geoff caught the sound. He frowned and darted a glance their way.

"Please, sit." Geoff gestured to the only empty chair in the room, opposite Delora.

The seating arrangements had been preplanned by the team. Madame Christen complied with Geoff's request.

Geoff cleared his throat. "The subject matter of this meeting is to outline a conspiracy to defraud Harrison Indiana Ford of his rightful inheritance."

Kinky Wilson shot to his feet. "Conspiracy!"

"Kinky, sit down and shut up," Honey ordered in a tone that brokered no opposition. "Sir Stanford, I intend to be on time for a breakfast meeting in Houston, so make this snappy."

"Of course." Geoff cleared his throat again. "We have proof of the following."

"One." He lifted a finger. "The will produced by Delora Ford and witnessed by Judge Wilson along with his secretary was in fact signed by Samuel Austin Ford,

but both Judge Wilson and his secretary knew that Samuel Ford was not coherent when he signed the will.”

“That’s not true,” Delora spat.

Geoff held up his hand. “No interruptions, please. Two, Samuel Ford was dying of liver, lung, and kidney cancer. His wife, Delora, hired private nurses to administer to him during the last weeks of his life. We have sworn testimony from the nurses involved that the mixture of painkillers and pharmaceuticals administered would’ve affected his brain function significantly. We also have affidavits to the same effect from his primary care doctors and several experts in the field.”

“Three. Judge Wilson was a frequent visitor to the Ford ranch during Samuel Ford’s last days.”

“Sam and I’ve been friends since we were knee-high to a grasshopper. Of course I visited often. The man was dying.” Wilson looked apoplectic, his cheeks ruddy, his fingers wrapped white-knuckled around the chair’s armrests. A line of sweat dripped from one temple.

“We provided your wife with a history of the texted communications between you and Delora Ford this morning, sir. The texts clearly indicate the nature of your relationship.”

The texts had been obtained from Casimir’s USB copy of Delora’s hard drive. Harry winked at Delora, and when her face fell, he knew she’d clued in.

Wilson collapsed into the couch and hooded his eyes with one hand.

“Sir Stanford, the agreement I signed earlier indicates that my husband and I can leave the meeting at this point.” Honey Wilson took a last sip of sweet tea from her the crystal tumbler and placed the glass on a nearby table.

In one lithe movement, she rose, dropped her gaze to the sweaty, bald head of her spouse, said, “Kinky,” and strode to the center of the room. Clutching her alligator handbag in one hand, she passed through the archway without a backward glance, followed thirty seconds later by her heavy-footed husband.

Again silence ruled the room.

Delora no longer sat cross-legged but instead had shifted into one corner of her chair.

The two lawyers behind her had been furiously scribbling notes during the proceedings.

The older of the two rose to his feet. “Mrs. Ford, we advise you to say nothing and to leave this meeting immediately.”

Harry spoke. “She leaves now, and I’ll bring charges against her immediately, freeze her assets, and have her credit cards revoked. I’ll also petition for a postmortem of my father’s body in lieu of the suspicious circumstances under which he died.”

The lawyers exchanged glances.

“Besides, we’re in the middle of the ocean. No one can get off the *Glory* for at least the next ten minutes.” Harry gestured to the chairs. “Please, sit. Occasionally we encounter rough waters, and the ship assumes no liability if you’re standing.”

The two pasty-faced legal counselors resumed their seats hastily.

“I don’t have to stay in this room and listen to you.” Delora half rose.

“By all means go. We’ll dock immediately where gendarmes will be waiting to take you into custody. Do remember in France you’re guilty until you prove your innocence, and custody is almost always mandatory.”

Not exactly the truth, but not exactly all fabrication either. Harry’d banked on Delora’s ignorance of any laws other than Lone Star State laws.

Delora blanched, and her bottom connected hard with the chair. “And if I stay?”

“We work out an agreement, and nothing goes public,” Harry replied.

“Money?” Delora asked.

“Part of the agreement.”

Delora waved a hand at her lawyers. “I’ll stay, but I’m not answering any questions or admitting to anything.”

Harry directed, “Continue, Geoff.”

Austen immediately lurched to his feet and stalked out of the room.

Yvonne stared at his retreating back, her hand worrying the end of the long scarf dangling from her neck.

Martine, whose head had been bobbing from person to person as each spoke, looked at Harry, eyes so wide he figured her corneas must hurt, brows arched so high she seemed frozen in bewilderment. She shook her head.

He held her hand and squeezed. “Too much to explain. Trust me. It’s okay.”

She chewed the insides of her cheeks and lifted both shoulders.

Geoff cleared his throat.

“Yvonne d’Artagnan,” Geoff said, turning to face the woman. “You and Madame Christen have colluded for years, using each other for referrals. You suggested Madame’s matchmaking services for Harrison Ford, albeit surreptitiously, by mentioning the service to me and to Austen Tanner.”

“A business arrangement,” Yvonne sputtered, her fingers plucking at the pastel-shaded silk scarf. “A common business arrangement. I have done nothing wrong.”

Geoff and Harry exchanged glances.

Harry shrugged.

Austen had predicted Yvonne’s response earlier.

“Delora Ford, you colluded with Madame Christen to defraud Harrison by knowingly providing him with marriage candidates who didn’t meet the

specifications provided. In addition, you ensured that the sole remaining candidate could be used to invalidate the subsequent marriage.”

“You vetted all the candidates I provided for Mr. Ford, Sir Stanford, and approved of them.” Madame Christen sat spine straight, and her nose quivered like that of a dragon about to snort flames.

Martine stiffened, and she tugged her hand from Harry’s.

He had figured this part of the proceedings would make her uncomfortable.

“The preliminary exams for the candidates you provided said they were all virgins,” Geoff retorted.

“The girls were examined by a reputable medical firm. All were sanctioned.” Madame Christen jutted her chin. “While I admit to stacking the odds in the favor of Martine Bellamy to assist Mrs. Ford, I provided the services required by my firm. And I stand by that. I will go to court to prove it.”

“May I speak with you privately, Harry?” Martine didn’t look at him. “It is tres importante.”

Harry’s stomach clenched as if he’d been sucker punched when he saw the gray cast to her complexion. “What?”

“Please,” she begged, staring intently and directly at him. He noticed her clay-colored eye had darkened to wet mud, and both irises shimmered.

Fuck, what now?

All eyes were on them, including Delora’s, whose had a gleam Harry didn’t like one bit.

Shit, had Martine really been involved with the three women?

Without saying a word, he cupped his wife’s elbow, virtually lifted her off the bar stool, and stalked out of the room. The first available doorway was the study.

Harry slammed open the door, hurried into the room, kicked the door shut, and without loosening his hold on her, he barked, “What the hell’s going on, Martine?”

“I made sure I would be the only candidate,” she spoke softly to his throat.

“How?” He folded his arms across his chest, certain she felt guilty about something negligible. “By being the only virgin left standing?”

“Non. By being the only virgin. I knew the others would not pass the test.”

“What?” He couldn’t see her face clearly because of the drawn curtains in the room, so he flicked on the desk lamp.

She hung her head for a few seconds. “After I saw the advertisement in the magazine, I decided to do what my master had always done when he wanted something in Port-au-Prince. Eliminate the competition.”

Eliminate the competition?

He shook his head. A niggle of doubt formed in the corners of his mind. “Explain what you mean.”

She blew out a long sigh, did that lift of her chin he'd come to treasure, and met his gaze. "Do you know of the Bandoleer?"

Harry slumped against the desk, hitting the sharp edge midhigh. *How does my wife know of the Bandoleer? Casmir's rival without the scruffy ethics.*

"What do you know about the Bandoleer?"

"He is a Gypsy who can arrange anything for a price."

Nuts and bolts rolled into place. "He gave you the forged papers. The clothes."

"For a price," she agreed.

"The flogging?"

"It's always the flogging with you," she griped. "Non. Thirty thousand euros. The amount doubles every month it is not paid."

His mind reeled. Did he know her at all? "I know his rates. The amount doubles every week."

"I am a good negotiator." She lifted a shoulder. "When you have only so much money but must feed a family for a week or be beaten, you learn."

"The truth," he growled. No one was *that* good a negotiator with the Bandoleer.

"I have something he wants," she said, looking over his shoulder at some unidentified fascination.

Not her virginity.

Fuck.

"Damn it, Martine, you were going to give yourself to him while we were together?" The concept couldn't begin to resonate through his brain. He grabbed the edge of the desk because the urge to shake her silly raged within him.

"Harry, how could you think such a thing?" She shoved at his chest. "Non, I am the way he can bend Casmir to his will."

"This is getting fricking insane," he growled. "What possible way could he use... You and Casmir?"

"Not what you're thinking," she retorted. "Casmir is my friend. He rescued me from the boat I stowed away on. I would've died on that boat if he hadn't stolen me and taken care of me."

Two and two added into ten. "You were whipped in Haiti? By this Jean, your master."

Throwing her hands up in the air, she yelled, "Fine, the flogging it is." She snorted. "His wife, the mambo, she had me whipped because my blue eye hexed Jean-Claude, her common-law husband."

"Harry," Geoff bellowed and banged on the door. "Are you two going to be done anytime soon?"

"It's fricking open," Harry roared and wished to God he had something to pound. He had an about-to-kill-someone grip on the mahogany wood. "Not fricking likely."

Geoff opened the door and poked his head through. “The witches are getting restless. I’m expecting hissing and clawing any minute.”

“Let ’em go,” Harry barked. “One conniving woman in my life is more than enough.”

Geoff’s eyes widened. “Ah, your first marital discord.” The door snapped shut.

Harry heard Geoff snicker.

Jamming his hip half onto the desk, he pointed at the leather sofa. “Sit. Start from the beginning.”

“The cargo ship sold boys and girls, rum and spices. Casmir bought the sick children, and they told him about me, that I was in the hold hiding but too sick to walk.”

“Begin with what happened in Haiti.”

She stared at her boots, and her lips pinched tight before she took a deep breath and rushed out, “Jean-Claude Fournier is one of the many assistants to the chief of police for Port-au-Prince. The police in Haiti, you understand, control everything. Whether you have water or electricity, such that there is.” She sniffed. “Only now do I know water and electricity are supposed to be on all the time.”

“Stay on topic,” he ordered.

“The police control who can sell in the market, who can get a government job. The shop owners pay the police to stay open.”

“I get the picture, Martine. Stop stalling.”

“I do not like you like this,” she said.

“Tough.”

When the quiet in the room made their breathing sound like waves crashing in a storm, she muttered something in French Harry didn’t catch, pouted like a two-year-old, and shot him a narrow-eyed scowl. “I took Jean-Claude his lunch when he met with the chief in Port-au-Prince once a week. Many times I had to wait in the office for a long time because he and the chief had gone out. The other policemen knew what the mambo had said about my blue eye. They didn’t want me to look at them, so they would lock me in the closet next to the chief’s office until Jean-Claude came back. Sometimes they forgot to let me out. I could hear everything the chief and he said. I—”

Her mouth pinched, and she stopped speaking.

Harry studied the way Martine twisted her fingers together. Then she squared her shoulders and stared into his eyes. “Harry, you must promise me you won’t do what you said before. The chief and Jean-Claude, they have eyes everywhere. If you try to kill the mambo”—she fisted a hand to her mouth, and a tear leaked from her blue eye—“they will kill you. They will hunt you down and kill you. Life is cheap in Solino. Not even worth four American dollars.”

The tear washed away his anger at her, but he was too into interrogator zone to stop.

Harry eased off the desk and settled beside her on the couch, locking their gazes together. Carefully he gathered her onto his lap and brushed away the drops streaming from both eyes. "Who has your back, Martine?"

A tremulous weedy smile failed to lift her lips. "You do," she whispered. "But I have your back too, Harry."

"Trust me on this one, wife," he whispered back. "Tell me the rest."

"I heard something I shouldn't have." She licked the corner of her mouth. "That many of the orphanages run by foreigners in Haiti sold boys and girls to men and women all over the world. Jean-Claude recorded the meetings with the foreigners for the chief on a camera. I heard him say where he kept it."

Harry ran his palm up and down her spine but never looked away, and he knew she didn't know her tears had dampened her cheeks, neck, and the shirtdress.

"The next week one of the boys in the village told me when I was on the way to take Jean-Claude his lunch I was going to be whipped the following night in front of all of Solino. I thought if I stole the camera, I could make Jean-Claude make his wife, the mambo, stop the whipping."

She flashed him a sad smile. "Idiot Martine. Why did I believe the boy who shaved my head and threw stones at me would tell the truth? I stole the camera that very afternoon. But my whipping wasn't the following night. They grabbed me on the way home. I do not remember past the first five blows, but, Harry, I shed not one tear before I passed out."

She lifted her chin, and that pride and courage and determination he'd seen that first time in Grasse glinted in her odd-colored eyes. And in that single instant, Harry knew he not only loved Martine Bellamy Ford, he needed her like he needed oxygen, like he needed water, like he needed food. He needed her, for only Martine Bellamy Ford nourished his soul.

Chapter Fourteen

The vivid images in Martine's mind crumbled when Harry's blurred image became sharp. Her ears no longer heard the crack of the whip but his voice crooning, "That's it, sugar, cry. Get it all out."

She blinked and found she had to swallow three times before she could speak. "I never cry." But the "never" came out wobbly, and a sob muffled the word "cry."

"Of course not." He wiped her cheeks with a tissue, held another to her nose, and ordered, "Blow."

Sending him a squinted glare, she blew.

"Here," he said, "drink," and brought a glass of water to her mouth.

I am thirsty.

Very parched, as she drank the whole glass and half of another. "I'm better."

"Do you have any idea how long you were out?"

There went the hope he wouldn't force the rest of the tale from her. She sighed, leaned over to snatch another tissue from the box on the coffee table, and dabbed at the damp splotches on her cheeks.

"Someone took me to the nuns. They fixed me up as best they could and sent someone to find Grand-mère. She arranged for one of her friends to get me to the cargo ship. We were two days in port. Grand-mère nursed me. I made her send for the camera." Martine smiled. "I learned well from Jean-Claude. Hide in plain sight. No one would ever have found it."

Harry circled a finger over her ear, and his brown eyes held a golden glint. He smiled his one-sided grin and said, "I'd lay lottery odds on that one. Where?"

"There is a tree next to the Port-au-Prince police station that bears brown fruits." She cupped both hands. "This size. I had brown sacking. I made a fruit, put the camera in two plastic bags, then into the sack, and hung it from the seventh branch. Twice my height from the ground."

"Clever wife," he said. "Clever, beautiful, and brave."

A hot blush ripped from toes to scalp. "I was not boasting."

"You should be. You scammed an entire police force." Harry's expression grew somber, his grin flattening. He closed his eyes and blew out a long breath that fluttered the lapels on her dress. "That's what you had in the suitcase." When he looked at her again, his mouth had that slant fast becoming familiar. He'd worn it

the entire time he showed her how to use the iPhone. “And just where is this camera?”

Martine’s mouth yanked down so hard her neck went taut and she dropped her gaze. “I ruined one...no, two of your books.”

“Two?” he snapped and groaned loudly. “What’s in the other book?”

“My birth paper.” She twisted her hands together.

Harry tipped her chin up with a finger. “You have a birth certificate?”

“Why is it so surprising?” She squared her shoulders. “My maman was the daughter of one of the most famous mistresses of her time, my grand-mère. My grand-père was a rich, important man, and he had Maman christened. By the time I was born, my grand-père was sickly, but he made sure the birth was recorded.”

Harry shook his head and muttered, “Just when I think the onion’s peeled, you add another layer.” He sighed again. “Okay. You and your mother are illegitimate. But your grandfather took care of his children and grandchildren.”

“Oui, he was of the old school.” She shook her head. “But his sons were not. One of his sons was my papa. He raped my maman. She had me very young, fourteen. Then my grand-père died, and his wife threw all of us out of the house we lived in. My maman had a taste for the rum.” She stared ahead unseeing. “Grand-mère told me the story often so I would know I came from quality. Grand-mère taught me my manners, made me balance a jug on my head so I would walk like a lady.”

“What happened to your mother?”

“No one has seen her for many years. She had many children after me, but none of them has birth papers. And I’ve only seen three of them once. But so long ago I don’t remember their faces.” She had never said any of this aloud, and the force of the words made her stop breathing for a second. Biting down hard on the inside of one cheek, she forced herself to stop talking.

Tell him only what he wants to know.

“We left Haiti and were at sea forever, or so it seemed. Sometimes storms would make the boat pitch until I thought we would go under. Grand-mère had left me food, but my wounds burned, and I ate little. I didn’t know there were children on board until one was sent down to the hold to get bottles of rum. Then I became sick, and I remember little until I was on Casmir’s boat. I stayed with him for some weeks before he thought me able to travel. Some of my cuts were not healing well, so he took me to a Gypsy healer in Grasse.”

“Where we first met,” he stated. “How long were you in Grasse?”

“Six weeks. Then I went back to Marseille, and Casmir found me work in the bistro.” Martine examined his face, relieved when she found him not frowning or his lips banded into a tight line. “The bistro closes for two weeks at the end of the season, so Casmir found me the work with caterers in Grasse.”

“Round about then was when Geoff suggested Madame Christen to me.” Harry leaned back on the sofa. “If it hadn’t been for Carol-Ann chasing me, we might never have met.”

“Carol-Ann?” Martine’s hackles rose, and she imitated the Texas accent that had played in her mind for weeks. “Come out, come out wherever you are. Harrison Indiana Ford, you can’t escape me forever.” Jabbing her hands onto her hips, she asked, “Another lover?”

“I’ve never lived with anyone for six weeks on a boat,” he retorted, the color high on his cheekbones. “Like I said before, you can technically be a virgin but still have done everything else.”

“Casmir is my friend. Was Carol-Ann *your* friend?” Through sheer force of will, she’d blocked all images of a naked Harry with a naked Delora, but the thought of this Carol-Ann was too much to bear.

“Martine, the past is the past.” Harry scrubbed his face. “Let’s stay on track. Why would you go to the Bandoleer? Why not get the forged papers from Casmir?”

“I owe him too much, Harry.” That he could even ask the question shocked her. “It made sense. You pay me, I pay the Bandoleer, and then I find a way to pay back Cas for what he has done. A way to make him happy. He’s not a happy man.”

“Cas?” Harry asked.

“His people call him that.” She waved both hands. “And that is the story.”

“Not quite, missy,” Harry drawled. “How did you know you would be the only virgin?”

“Oh that. Not so hard.” She shrugged and rushed out. “I *am* shocked about Yvonne. That’s why Austen left the room, non? Poor man.”

“Martine,” he growled, sounding just like the bears she’d seen on the television.

Why did he want to know about all her lies? Her lips pinched tight as she searched for a way to tell yet not tell.

“The Bandoleer’s wife knows Madame Christen—they grew up in the same village. She suggested me to her. Then she wrote many responses to the advertisement. Madame interviewed the girls on the telephone.” She waited for him to understand. “A woman from Germany. One from Geneva. From everywhere.”

When the lines on Harry’s forehead grew deeper, she did her imitation of Marlene Dietrich as Shanghai Lily in the *Shanghai Express*.

His mouth slanted the familiar exasperation of earlier. “You did all the interviews using different accents and voices.”

“Oui.” She grinned. “Madame never suspected.”

“Why would the Bandoleer’s wife deceive her friend?”

“Madame has scruples, or so the Bandoleer’s wife said,” Martine replied. “The list came down to twenty-five. We sent Gypsy girls to the doctors knowing all nine were virgins. On the last day we substituted nine girls we knew were not virgins.”

“I’ve been played by pros,” Harry muttered. “I never thought you capable of such scheming.”

Martine’s belly wrenched into tight knots, but she refused to be cowed. “My grand-mère is sick. She has the malaria. I owe her everything. I did what I had to. With the money I can bring her to France and make sure she gets well.”

Harry’s cell phone jingled, and he jerked the vibrating instrument out of his front shirt pocket. Examining the screen he said, “It’s your friend, *Cas*. I paid that little shit forty-three thousand euros for info he already knew.” Thumbing Accept, he barked, “I expect my deposit refunded in full.”

She heard the faint murmur of Casmir’s low rumble, and Harry’s bronzed complexion paled.

“When?”

His face had taken on that blank expression he had when questioning her.

“Thanks.”

Returning his iPhone to his pocket, he said, without meeting her eyes, “Pass me that remote.”

Martine blinked. The change of subject and his grim mouth made the hairs on the back of her neck tingle. Reaching to grab the silver tool, she asked, “Is something wrong?”

Finally he met her gaze, and she flinched, at once knowing disaster had struck. She stopped breathing.

Framing her face with both palms, he said, “There’s been a massive outbreak of cholera in Haiti. Thousands have died.”

Non, not now. Not when I am so close.

Nails digging into her palms, Martine swallowed, and the bitterness coating her gullet raced to her mouth. A shudder racked her body, and the tears she never shed pooled in the corners of her eyes. Biting the insides of her cheeks until the stinging forced her splintering thoughts into submission, she inhaled and exhaled.

“We have diseases all the time in Haiti,” she said. “Cholera, malaria, the yellow fever, dengue—”

“Shush,” he crooned, touching two fingers to her mouth. “This is not like those, sugar. It’s bad.”

He removed the remote from her hand and switched on the plasma TV mounted on the wall behind the desk. CNN blared to life. Harry turned up the volume.

“The pictures you are about to see are not recommended for children and the easily upset,” the male anchor stated. “Massive epidemics have devastated the population of Port-au-Prince and its environs within the last three days. One in three persons in the capital is a victim of cholera, typhoid, or dengue. The authorities do not have the drugs necessary to stop the spread of these diseases, and the government is appealing to international aid organizations for immediate help. Dead bodies are

turning up in the hundreds, hospitals are turning away victims because they have no room, and looters are targeting the few drugstores left standing. Medical clinics, including those being run by nuns and priests, are the targets of both criminals and citizens desperate for medicine. Areas where clinics have been destroyed include Carrefour, Petit Goave, Leogane..."

The rest of the announcer's words jumbled in Martine's brain.

Two hours away from Grand-mère. Please, Lord Jesus, please keep her safe. I will never lie again. I will be a good Catholic. I will stop stealing food.

A coldness descended over her with the dankness of a funeral shroud, and her hands and feet grew icy with each word the announcer spoke, with each shot of Port-au-Prince flashed on the screen. Martine flinched as familiar yet not familiar images jerked her soul apart.

Harry stroked her spine, massaged her hair, and murmured soothing phrases she didn't comprehend. Burying her nose in his shirt, she inhaled, and his familiar scent took the tension out of her knotted muscles. Her fingertips traced the line of hairs at the V of his neck.

"I've got your back, remember?" he asked over and over, and the words sank into her head. "We'll find her."

She let him say the two phrases until she began to believe in them both and in her grand-mère's strength.

Finally, he asked, "Ready to talk?"

Lifting her face from his chest dampened from her crying jag, she replied, "Oui."

He kissed her forehead, each brow, the tip of her nose, and brushed his lips gently over hers. "You've gotta be strong for her, Martine. That's what she wants."

"I have her back, Harry," she said.

"Clever, beautiful, brave wife." He kissed her mouth again, a soft smack, drew back, and swiped away the tears on her cheeks. Harry grabbed the half-empty water glass and brought it to her lips. "You know the drill. Drink."

After she'd emptied that glass and a third of another, he placed the tumbler on the table and handed her the box of tissues.

"Did you recognize anything on the CNN reports?"

"Oui. Non." A hiccupped sob stopped further speech. "The river at the end. It looked like the river where I lived as a child. The mountain villages could be anywhere. Oh, Harry, what if they attacked the clinic where my grand-mère is?"

"She'll be okay," he said, tipping her chin up. "Look at me."

Martine stared into the eyes she'd come to love.

"Your grand-mère survived being thrown into the streets. She saved you from your mother. She rescued you from Solino. She survived the earthquake. Do you really believe a mere disease could best her?"

I so want to believe you.

“Il est très mauvaise, Harry.”

“English, Martine.”

“It is very bad. There are so many bodies. So many women and children left to rot in the sun.” Martine drew strength from the determined glitter in his gaze. Her lips trembled. “There’s no one stronger than Grand-mère. Save you, Harry.”

“Geoff works with MI6, Suresh has connections all over the world, and I have two private investigators already on the ground in Port-au-Prince. We’ll find your grandmother. I promise.” Harry clicked the remote, and the screen went blank. “I need your help, Martine.”

Though he said the words, Martine knew he asked her a question. “I am not going to crumble, Harrison Indiana Ford. Tell me what you need.”

“All I need is for you to stay calm and focused. Right now I want you to go and have a long hot shower. Then meet me in the bar area. I’m calling in Suresh, Geoff, and Casmir. While you’re showering, I want you to remember everything you can, particularly about your last few days in Haiti. Can you do that?”

“Yes,” she said.

“Go and be quick. I need to make sure my PIs have been inoculated and have the medical supplies necessary to survive.”

“I hope they are all right,” she said.

Martine didn’t know how much time passed in the shower. After toweling off, she found one of Harry’s discarded T-shirts thrown on the bed, picked the soft fabric up, brought it to her nose, and sniffed, closing her eyes. Images of Grand-mère revolved through her mind—going to market together, cooking together, setting the table together with the broken china rescued from the house she’d occupied as Grand-père’s mistress. A smile tugged at her mouth.

You will survive.

She dressed in a fog, pulling on her old jeans and impulsively shrugging on Harry’s T-shirt. Resolutely she lifted her chin, walked to the armoire, opened the door, and picked up a pillowcase. Martine turned around, took a deep breath, then marched over to the sideboard, sat cross-legged on the floor, and opened the last drawer. She’d hidden the food under the napkins and in the covered stoneware bowls stored there. One by one she emptied each bowl into a pillowcase.

It’s a sin to throw this out.

She stared at the contents of the pillowcase.

I’ll give it to the Bandoleer’s wife. She’ll know who needs it the most. And no one else will know my shame. This one, anyway.

Martine stored the pillowcase in the empty minifridge in the guest quarters closest to the stern of the boat. No one ever entered any of the unoccupied staterooms. The cheese and bread would keep until she could get it to the Bandoleer’s wife the following day. Her conscience appeased, she headed forward, or to the stern, as Austen termed it.

Only Harry was in the bar area. She stood for a moment in the doorway drinking in his every feature, loving his easy grace. Stacks of paper flanked either side of a laptop on the coffee table. His concentration was absolute. His gaze strayed from the sheet in his hand to the screen and back again. Something must have alerted him to her presence, for he lifted his head in her direction.

Their gazes met and held, and he smiled.

Dropping the sheet he held, Harry lurched to his feet, catching his knee on the edge of the table, and his lips moved. She recognized the curse he muttered under his breath, and her mouth curved.

He ate up the distance between them, tugged her into his arms, and asked, “Better?”

“Yes,” she replied. “Kiss me, Harry.”

For a few seconds he didn’t comply with her demand, but then his lips sipped at hers, testing, soft, tender, slowly sliding back and forth. Closing her eyes she returned the caress, touching the tip of her tongue to his upper lip. His palm cupped her neck, the other curved around the small of her back, and he tasted her, and she him.

They stood there together for an eternity, for a pin drop, the world not penetrating their tender oblivion. When Harry abruptly broke the contact, she blinked in bewilderment.

A throat cleared behind them.

Austen said, “For crap’s sake. You can clear your throat a zillion times, Stanford. They’re not going to hear you.”

Martine grimaced and squeezed her eyes shut as a fiery blush swept up her neck.

Harry ran his finger along her jaw, and she opened her eyes. He searched her face, seemed to find what he wanted, and gifted her with a crooked grin.

“Time to get to work,” he said.

“I’m ready.”

“We’re all here.” Martine recognized the slight British clip of Suresh’s voice.

The temperature in her cheeks climbed.

Harry’s hand dropped from her jaw. He raised his head and quipped, “Let’s get this show on the road.”

Shifting, he guided her to the couch, and the two of them sat side by side. Harry twined his fingers with hers as the others filed in—Suresh, Austen, Geoff—and she turned to look at Harry after Casmir’s lanky form followed.

“He can help.” He worked his jaw. “And he’s on a retainer.”

“She’s under my protection,” Casmir stated. “Your money’s been refunded.”

“She’s *my* wife,” Harry growled. “*I* protect her.”

“Cut line, Harry. Stop acting like a jealous fool.” Geoffrey stood in front of the coffee table, legs wide apart, his arms folded over his chest. He shot a scowl at the Gypsy. “If you care a whit about Martine, you’ll stop this BS and cooperate. We’ve no time to waste. The situation in Haiti is dire. I fully expect it to worsen exponentially over the coming days.”

Casmir’s cheeks shaded to a cooked beet’s hue. His eyetooth tugged at the edge of his lower lip, and he shrugged as only a Frenchman could, the gesture more a statement of arrogance rather than indifference. “I am here for Martine. I’ll do whatever’s necessary and more.”

“We’ll find your grandmother,” Suresh assured her as he took a position in the chair on the left of the couch. “I have two of my best Web guys mining for information.”

Austen crammed his bulky form into the other chair flanking the sofa. “I’ve called in all my favors with my army buddies. Anyone who may be deployed to Haiti is on watch.”

Martine’s eyes watered dangerously, and gratefulness coated her vocal cords too thickly for speech. She smiled at each one of them in turn—grouchy, gruff Austen; supersmart, suave Suresh; and confident, caring Geoff. Not one of these men had known her scant days ago, yet here they were assembled for the sole purpose of helping her find Grand-mère.

I owe every single one of you.

“Shall we call the meeting to order?” Geoff asked.

“Yes,” Harry replied. “Take anything you need as you need. Food and drink’s on the sideboard. All the tech tools are here.”

A flurry of activity transpired as Harry spoke, the other men grabbing beverages, but they all ignored food for the time being. Harry, unmasked, brought Martine a cup of peppermint tea and a bowl of strawberries. She set a mug of steaming black coffee in front of him.

Martine noted each man had some sort of computer, Casmir his Dell laptop, Suresh an iPad, and Geoff a tablet she didn’t recognize. Only Austen didn’t brandish a technological tool; instead he slouched down and stretched tree-trunk-thick legs under the coffee table, his fingers laced over his belt.

“Before we begin getting into details, let me bring everyone current on a few salient facts.” Harry then summarized the events Martine had described to him, glossing over the details of her flogging.

“I want to see that camera,” Geoff stated.

“As soon as I have,” Harry growled and he and Geoff locked gazes. Geoff rolled his eyes in concession. “Right now we focus on Martine’s grandmother. Do you know where she is?”

“Sainte Marie,” Martine replied. “That’s where the nuns who took me in are. They have a hospital.”

“How far is that from Port-au-Prince?” Suresh typed as he spoke.

“Three hours if the bus doesn’t break down,” Martine replied.

“I’ll bring it up on a map later,” Geoff stated as he wedged his lean hips into the space between Martine and the end of the couch.

“SITREP, anyone?” Harry demanded.

“Pardon?” Martine searched her brain for such an English word.

Harry explained the term.

“Merci.” She sipped on her tea, relishing the zing of the mint in her mouth.

“The WHO, the Salvation Army, and the US Army are restricting the inflow of visitors to the island.” Geoffrey cupped Martine’s shoulder and met her stare directly when she tipped her head back. “For the next few days, maybe even a week, only WHO workers and medical relief personnel will be allowed to land in Port-au-Prince. That means no private expeditions.”

“I was going to hire a jet to take us there,” Harry explained.

“The reports I have indicated no private expeditions for an indeterminate period of time.” Geoff shifted. “We need to evaluate other options.”

“Noted. Let’s move on. The PIs your friend sent to Haiti on my behalf?” Harry directed his question to Suresh.

“I checked with my Miami colleague. His men on the ground have given the green light. Both are current on inoculations, and they have a more than adequate supply of oral rehydration and antibiotics. Dengue is spread via mosquitoes, and the two men are both using protective suiting as well as the mosquito repellent used by SEALs and special ops. In any case my friend has dispatched a jet to Haiti. The plane and two pilots will remain in Port-au-Prince while the PIs try to find Martine’s grandmother. However, if anyone becomes ill, they’ll be transported to Miami immediately.”

“And?”

“Nothing else. The leader of the PIs is Haitian, and he will also be looking for his relatives. I’ll give him the name of the convent right now.”

Suresh’s fingers worked furiously for a few minutes on his iPhone. Bells indicating texts being sent and received penetrated the quiet of the room. In the background, CNN journalists broadcasted updates.

“Well?” Harry dragged his hands through his hair.

“He knows where Ste Marie’s located and will head there right away. He also filed a report with the police on Martine’s behalf and left the *Glory’s* contact information with the authorities. I believe he even managed to bribe someone to put it on top of the chief of police’s priority file.”

“Get him to recant that ASAP,” Harry snapped. “The chief of police is the reason Martine fled Haiti. The man’s one of our secondary targets. By the way, his assistant’s wife’s the one responsible for Martine’s flogging.”

She flinched as everyone stared at her, but the kindness in their eyes softened the impact the words usually evoked, and the shame no longer flamed her insides.

“Geoff, any other updates?”

“They’ll target the easiest marks. You know that,” Geoff retorted. “And unarmed nuns with young pupils, sick patients, in a rural area. Is there a police force in Sainte Marie, Martine?”

“Such as it is,” she replied. “There are three of them. Cruel men, but they leave the nuns alone.”

“The PI said that Ste Marie is near the southern coast. The location will delay the looting and rioting until international help arrives to bring the situation under control.” Suresh shrugged when Harry glowered. “I’m trying to take a positive tack.”

“Turn up the volume. I’ll find out the latest information and tap into our secure news base,” Geoff ordered.

For long minutes, Harry and Suresh alternated between scanning CNN, the BBC, CBS, and a couple of direct satellite feeds, and glancing over Geoff’s shoulder as he scrolled through a database of time- and date-stamped encrypted paragraphs.

The thoughts flooding Martine’s brain proved overwhelming, so she busied herself by refilling everyone’s drinks and then sat back down.

“I’m going to superimpose a map of Haiti over each city or province on the screen, focusing on the areas involved. What’s the terrain like, Martine?” Geoff asked.

“Terrain? I do not know this word,” she answered.

“I can show you where her grandmother is, and I can describe the terrain.” Casmir’s deep voice made Martine start.

She said, “I never told you about Grand-mère.”

“You’re under my protection, cherie. I have contacts in Port-au-Prince, so I made some inquiries after taking you from the ship.” Casmir tilted his head and stared Harry right in the eye. “Put the map on the screen.” When Geoff arched one eyebrow, he added, “If you please.”

Harry pressed a couple of buttons on a remote, blinds descended over the windows, and a screen slid down from the ceiling on the wall opposite the couch. Geoff’s fingers worked over his laptop, and seconds later a map of Haiti and the Dominican Republic flashed onto the screen. A few clicks, and the map narrowed to Port-au-Prince and the surrounding areas.

Casmir accepted a laser pointer from Geoff and focused the red dot on the city of Musac. “Musac is approximately fifty-five miles directly south of Port-au-Prince. The terrain is hilly, the roads rough. Mudslides make travel difficult in the rainy season.”

“What else do you know that can help us?” Harry asked.

“The police station was virtually destroyed in the earthquake.” Casmir checked his watch. “The three policemen now operate out of the leader’s home.”

“Two UK medical relief planes dispatched yesterday are on the ground, and another’s scheduled to land as soon as we’re given clearance,” Geoff interjected. “I’ll

be able to obtain more information now. I suggest we adjourn, each of us works our contacts, and we reconvene over a late dinner.”

“Agreed,” Harry replied. “If the marines are there, I can call in a ton of favors. Special ops will be represented heavily.”

“The chef’s off duty,” Austen said. “I’ll arrange dinner to be catered. Buzz me if you need anything.” Two seconds later he left.

“It makes no sense for me to go and come back,” Casmir stated. “It will take too long. Is there some place I can work until we meet again?”

“You can work in the study. It’s down the hall.”

“I’ll take him to it.” Suresh lurched to his feet. “I e-mailed you a copy of all the text communications with Haiti.”

“I’ll go through them.”

“Don’t worry, Martine. We’ll find your grandmother,” Suresh assured her. “I have a couple of conference calls, so I must dash.”

Busy typing on his tablet, Geoff didn’t look up when Suresh and Casmir departed. “I’ll be done in a sec. Don’t go, Harry. You and I have to talk.”

When he finished, Geoff looked up, and one brow arched. “This is about the transfer.”

“I have no secrets from Martine,” Harry replied. “Go ahead.”

She stifled a wince at his emphasis on the “I.”

“Are you going still going to transfer all your assets to Martine?” Geoff asked.

“I gave the banks’ lawyers the go-ahead before the meeting with Delora started. It’s done. My wife has control of my fortune.”

Chapter Fifteen

Harry cupped Martine's elbow and escorted her out of the room. A dull pounding behind his eye sockets sputtered and faded as they walked down the corridor.

"Harry?" Martine's soft question captured his attention.

He glanced at her and automatically smoothed the frown lines between her brows.

"Is it true?"

"Is what true?"

"You gave me everything?"

"Mmm," Harry murmured, taking a deep breath as the full force of the noonday sun warmed his face. "I surely did."

"Why, Harry?"

"Delora can't touch the money this way."

"She wanted you to be her lover again after your papa died, non?"

As always Martine managed to surprise him with her insights.

His neck ached, and Harry rolled his head from side to side. "Yes."

"I am so sorry, Harry," Martine said, touching two fingers to his cheek. "That the woman who took your virginity wanted to hurt you. The memories must hurt your heart. I wish your deflowering had been as wonderful as mine, for I will treasure my memories always."

The knotted tendons in his shoulders slackened, and a surge of adrenaline sent the blood racing through Harry's veins. Halting he looked into her eyes and growled, "It doesn't matter now. I replaced them with memories of you."

His wife's frown reappeared, and she opened her mouth, shook her head, seemed to think the better of whatever she had been about to say, and smacked her lips together.

Go figure—I say pretty words, and she frowns. Women. Martine. Wives. All crazy in the head.

"What's the frown for?" Harry guided Martine over the bridge and onto the pier.

"What happens now?" She shot him the cutest peek, and her odd-colored eyes proved enchanting.

“Now the lawyers clean up.” Harry laced their fingers together.

The afternoon sky held a puzzle-piece collection of mottled smoky clouds all dangling and trailing around the brilliant globe of a Dijon-hued sun. The ever-present Mediterranean breezes whooped and swooped helter-skelter, sending women’s skirts into undecided flurries and men’s shirtsleeves into undecided flapping. The last catch of the day was being unloaded upwind, and the scent of salty crustaceans combined with the sharpness of iodine from seaweed entangled with fish ran rampant across the jetty.

“Will Delora have no place to live, really?”

“Nah. I’m all bluster and no spine.” He brought Martine’s knuckles to his lips and kissed them softly, the caress more autopilot response than deliberate, he realized, as he sniffed the faint honeysuckle tang left on her skin. “I’ll let Delora keep her American Express credit card. Geoff’s going to give her a spending limit of ten thousand a month until we settle everything.”

“And your father’s money? What will happen?”

“We’ll offer her a lump sum of ten million if she agrees not to contest the will,” Harry replied. “Otherwise we charge her with conspiracy. It’s a done deal. Delora’s all about image, and she’s worked her way into Houston society. She won’t want to jeopardize her position. And believe me, she won’t risk jail.”

“You do not need to be married,” Martine said, her hand curving protectively over her belly. “Nor do you need a child of our loins.”

He stopped in midstride and turned to face her, oblivious to the hosts of tourists and natives thronging the jetty, not hearing the hawker peddling gelato flavors in a chalk-on-the blackboard singsong, uncaring when a zephyr lifted the hairs dampening his neck, able to focus only on the sadness pulling her mouth down at the corners.

“I need you,” he said, meaning every word, his gut colliding and convulsing with the admission. He curled an arm around her waist and pulled her to him, sandwiching her hand between their bellies and manacling her gaze to his.

“I need you, Martine Bellamy.” He covered the hand on her stomach with his. “The question is do you need me?”

“I am not from your world,” she whispered, and a tear skated from the corner of her blue eye to be joined by a host of drops leaking out of her brown eye.

“You are my world. My entire universe. But do you need me, Martine Bellamy?” he persisted as his muscles spiraled and looped, twisting and wrenching daggers around his rib cage, and piercing his faltering heart.

“Oh, Harry,” she breathed and cupped his jaw, and he sank into her gaze. “Yes. I need you. But—”

He pressed two fingers on her lips. “Say it again.”

“I need you,” she repeated, her mouth tickling the pads of his fingers, a soft puff of air stealing across his palm.

The sky could've crashed to earth, the Mediterranean's waves could've ceased to lap at beach sand, the universe could've imploded, but nothing, no force in heaven or hell, could've prevented Harry from claiming Martine's mouth. Drunk on the nectar of her lips, Harry sipped and sipped, drowning in the sweetness of her taste, savoring the essence of his woman, his wife, his Martine.

While the world imploding couldn't disturb his absorption of Martine, his cell phone's insistent vibration managed to penetrate his lust-dazed brain. Slowly he pulled his lips from hers.

His mouth curved. He loved the glazed look in her odd-colored eyes when he had her all discombobulated. Firming his hands around her waist, he fumbled for the cell phone and touched it to his ear.

"Yeah," he muttered.

"Jean-Claude Fournier found the complaint the PI filed," Casmir said.

Fuck.

"Where are you?"

"I haven't left the *Glory*."

"We're on the pier. We'll head back right away." Harry ended the call and stared at a pelican rubbing his long, nubby beak through the damp brown feathers on his chest.

"Harry." Martine tugged at his lapel. "What's wrong?"

Tell her or not.

No secrets.

"Jean-Claude found the complaint the PI filed. We need to go back to the *Glory*."

She flinched, and her hand tightened on his shirt. "He knows I am alive. C'est la vie. I have the camera. He cannot harm us—"

"The minute we get back to the boat, you hand over that camera to me. I want your birth certificate too. Both go into the bank's safe deposit pronto." Harry grabbed her hand and reversed their position.

"What will you do?"

"What's best," Harry replied.

They rushed back to the yacht without speaking another word.

Austen and Casmir waited for them in the bar area, which had become the de facto meeting venue. Both sat on bar stools; neither looked happy.

"Any updates?" Harry asked.

"No," Casmir replied.

"Martine, go get me the camera and your birth certificate." Harry didn't glance her way, but his peripheral vision told him she'd obeyed his order.

"Geoff and Suresh should be here any sec." Austen shifted, and the bar stool squeaked in protest. "I called them."

“Appreciated. What news of the police chief?”

“I can answer that one,” Suresh said as he breezed into the room. “The chief’s basically persona non grata with all of the relief organizations and the US Army. Basically our guys have given the government an ultimatum—relieve the chief of his position or we pull out and leave only a bare-bones presence in the country. Word is that he’ll be on the next plane to Venezuela.”

“Chavez’s kind of man,” Casmir mused.

“It boggles the mind,” Suresh quipped. “One PI found both Jean-Claude Fournier and his wife in the hospital. They contracted dengue and are in critical condition. Obviously the PI’s not hanging around, but he’s bribed an attendant to keep him updated.”

“Fucking A,” Harry growled as he slumped onto the sofa. Dragging his hands through his hair, he glanced up to see Martine in the doorway. “You heard?”

“Oui.” She carried a brown legal envelope and an older digital camera. “Justice. It would have been best if the chief had the dengue too. He is *not* a good man.”

Harry smiled internally but kept his expression blank. Spoken like a special ops’ wife. “Martine’s grandmother?”

“Because of the rainy season and the recent hurricane, the roads to Musac are impassible and likely to be so for months.” Suresh met Martine’s gaze directly. “I’m sorry to give you such bad news, Martine. The estimates of the dead have risen exponentially. We’re talking over two thousand deaths so far.”

“Why’s everybody standing?” Geoff asked as he materialized beside Martine in the doorway. Glancing at her hands, he angled his jaw and asked, “That the camera?”

“Oui.”

“Geoff, hook the damned thing up to your laptop and play it for us. Martine, come here.” He patted the upholstery.

When she complied with his command, he curled an arm around her shoulder and tugged her close. “It’s going to be okay,” he whispered against her ear.

She had assumed the mask he hated, hands folded in her lap, features devoid of any expression save for the slight widening of her nostrils. *What’s in that head of yours now, wife?*

“It’s coming up now,” Geoff announced.

Expecting to see still pics, Harry sat up straight when a recording began to play. The blurred images didn’t provide what he needed—a clear photograph of the worthless scum he intended to see breathe his last breath. But it was damning evidence of children being bought and sold by the heads of two foreign-run charities.

When the recording ended, Geoff said, “I know who to get this to.”

“Do it, then,” Harry directed. “As far as I’m concerned, that’s all we need for the day. Martine, give Austen the birth certificate. Austen, take it to the bank ASAP. Martine and I are going to retire for the night.”

“Martine can go, but I need you to sign a couple of documents,” Geoff interjected.

Harry’s eyes crossed. He needed to make love to his wife so badly he was certain his balls had gone beyond blue to black. “Go, sugar. I’ll be there as soon as I can.”

She twisted in the seat and met his gaze. “I love you, Harry.”

A normal man would be happy to hear the fatal three-word declaration if he reciprocated the emotion. Harry felt as if a sharpshooter had a sniper rifle aimed straight at his heart. No way could he deliver the expected response, not in public.

He kissed her forehead. “I won’t be long.”

“Take your time,” she said and stood, her gazelle liveness arresting, almost haunting. “Thank you for everything, Geoff.”

“We’ll find your grandmother.”

“I know.” With that she squared her shoulders and glided out of the room.

Both men watched until she was no longer visible.

“It all worked out well.”

“Yeah,” Harry said, rubbing his hand over his eyes. “What did you want me to sign?”

“Delora’s agreed to our terms. She negotiated a new car every two years. I gave in to that one. She wanted to double the settlement. I offered to do so with the stipulation that the entire amount would be paid over a period of twenty years.”

“And?”

“As we anticipated she refused point-blank. We settled on a 12.5 million dollars lump sum, the current house in Houston, and the condo in London.” Geoff placed two sets of stapled sheets together. “I’ve highlighted where you need to sign and initial.”

“I owe you.” Harry stated, adding his John Hancock to each page.

Fifteen minutes later both men left the room, heading in opposite directions.

Harry knew the second he stepped into the room. He went straight to her drawer, the original one that she had never rearranged. All her new clothes went into the armoire, all neatly folded and aligned per Martine. Every day he checked each area, waiting for her to meld her old life with her new situation.

Empty.

Fuck. Why?

The balcony doors weren’t quite closed. Martine didn’t know they couldn’t be shut from the outside, a safety precaution built in to all the cabins. Each balcony bordered the other all the way down to the last.

Harry raced out of the cabin down the corridor. Damned woman was going to try to climb to the bridge from the last cabin's balcony. It could be done.

Martine, Martine, you can't swim.

The haze of dusk lit the *Glory's* exterior, and the automatic lighting hadn't kicked in as yet. He dared not retract the bridge, instead wedged himself into the corner nook between the last balcony and the bridge. The nook was designed to hold a man and was used for cleaning the portholes on the last cabin. As such it was two feet above the cabin's balcony railing. Sure enough, five minutes later she climbed over the divider between the cabins.

She carried a knotted pillowcase slung over one shoulder.

All her worldly belongings.

Martine twisted and glanced back, and he heard her mutter something in French.

His heart couldn't stop spiking and stuttering, and his blood congealed as he studied her staring up at the bridge. It would be only seconds before she noticed the nook and him.

He jumped onto the balcony, landing less than three feet away from her.

She dropped the pillowcase, her eyes widened, and she spun about.

He grabbed her from behind and wrapped his arms around her tight.

"Why?"

She shook her head.

"I told you I need you. I've only ever needed two people in my life—my mama, and for a while, Delora. Why, Martine?"

All the stiffness went out of her, and she sagged against him, her head drooping.

Seconds later she straightened and rested her head on his chest.

Hope flared and burned in his gut.

"I have one secret left, Harry. It is one that has shamed me all my life."

He waited as time drew on at a pace too agonizing for any man to endure.

"I cannot read or write," she said so softly he thought he hadn't heard correctly. Relief surged through his blood, his lungs, his hearing. He buried his face in her hair and inhaled her honeysuckle scent, unable to stop his arms tightening even farther.

"I'll teach you," he said when he could speak.

She tensed again.

"What if I can't learn?"

He almost let the laugh burst out of him. "How long does it take you to learn to imitate someone's voice?"

"Pffgh," she muttered. "Il est facile."

“English, Martine.” He loosened his hold on her.

She spun around, her palms on his chest. In the twilight her eyes were hauntingly beautiful as they shimmered with unshed tears. “Voices are easy. Numbers are easy. The letters confuse me. When I was with Grand-mère, the priest, Father Baptiste, he tried to teach me. It didn’t work.”

“We’ll make it work. I have your back, remember?” He trailed a finger up her throat, making sure he had a firm grip on her waist. “And you’re supposed to have mine. You can’t do that if you’re not here.”

She blinked, spiky lashes thickened by moisture making her eyes even more mysterious. “I hadn’t realized... I didn’t mean to betray you by not having your back. I didn’t want to shame you.”

“Never in a million years could you shame me, Martine.” His heart had returned to normal. St. Pete reminded him of where they should be. “Tomorrow you start learning how to swim. If you ever scare me like this again, I *will* tan your backside raw.”

“You spanked me before. When I took off your boots.” She kept her head bent and peeked up at him, looking so adorable he wanted to eat her up.

“Oh, I remember,” he replied, grinding his erection into her mound.

“It was like it is when you bite my nipples. Pleasure and pain together making the pleasure—”

He thrust his tongue into her mouth, and she wrapped one leg around his waist. Her words had him primed for overdrive. She matched him stroke for stroke, and he shoved her T-shirt up to find her braless.

His fingers closed over her nipple, rolling the hard point.

She moaned, and he liked the sound, absorbing the rumble.

“Oh my,” a woman cried out. “Look, Sam, are those people having sex right in front of the whole pier?”

He had jet-lag hearing, and the woman’s words penetrated before his traveling lips reached Martine’s breast. Immediately he shifted so his back faced the dock, curving his arms to shield her from view. Laboring to breathe, he said, “Let’s take this inside.”

“Oui, yes, yes,” she agreed.

They barely made it inside the cabin before clothes started flying fast and furious until they were both undressed.

“Buck nekkid,” she whispered, assuming their earlier position, one leg wrapped around his waist, both arms looped around his neck.

Harry bit her earlobe.

Her hand flew to the spot.

“Aren’t you gonna ask me?” Harry whispered as he licked an outline of her lips.

Martine held her breath and tried to puzzle through his words. "Ask you?"

"Hmm, I thought you'd be as curious as the worst village gossip," Harry murmured as he nuzzled her nape. "Come on, sugar. I've a buck riding on this."

"On what? You bet about doing this?" She arched her neck as his mouth sipped along her collarbone.

"Doing what?" His tongue swirled the hollow of her throat.

Martine touched a finger to Harry's chest. "Kissing me?"

"Nah, on what I first said."

She flicked his nipple, and he grunted.

"Harry, what *are* you talking about?"

His other hand firmed around her breast, and all fingers on both hands went into play, alternately tugging and rolling, then kneading. "Think, Martine, think."

"I can't when you're doing that." She moaned and then tweaked both his nipples.

St. Pete slapped her belly, and she ground on him.

"Kay, I'll give you a hint. Tan."

"Mmm."

"Backside."

"Backside," she echoed.

He nipped her lobe again, harder this time.

"Sure, you only have to ask once," he crooned and gave her butt a light smack before sweeping her off her feet and up into his arms. "Reckon I'm tanning your backside again, Mrs. Ford."

"Because I was going to leave?"

"You can understand why I'd be a mite upset, but that's not why your ass cheeks are gonna be on fire."

"On fire?"

"Pain-pleasure," he growled.

"Because I'm a criminal?"

"Kay, that's two reasons your ass is grass," he growled. "No kin of mine's a criminal. And since lightning don't seem to be striking a spark in that brain of yours, the reason I'm spankin' your behind tonight is because you didn't tell me you were leaving."

"I don't understand," she mumbled. "Why does that matter?"

"Martine, how am I supposed to keep you safe if I don't know where you are?"

"You will drive me to the madhouse," she grumbled. "I should tell you when I plan to leave you?"

“Always,” he answered. “One, so we can have persuade-you-not-to-leave sex, two, so we can have more persuade-you-not-to-leave-sex, three, so we can have more persuade—”

She cupped a hand over his mouth. “Are you still angry?”

“A mite,” he growled. “Look at me, wife.” When she did as he said, his voice a vow, his words a declaration, “We have each other’s backs, remember?” He shook her and demanded, “Say it.”

“We have each other’s backs,” she repeated.

“I need you,” he said. This time the words didn’t almost strangle his vocal cords.

“I need you.”

He leaned closer and slanted his lips over hers.

Her hands slid up and around his neck, she opened her mouth, and his tongue stroked the length of hers. She tasted of strawberries and figs, and the spicy taste intoxicated him. Drunk on love and visions of happiness, he surrendered to need and pillaged her sweet warmth.

The *Glory’s* engines roared to life, splintering the quiet of the night.

He broke the kiss abruptly.

“Harry?” Her fingers kneaded his chest, and she cuffed him lightly.

“Martine, what’s wrong?” He cradled her face.

“Why’d you stop kissing me?”

“Because if I continue kissing you, I’m liable to talk myself out of your first swimming lesson,” he replied, tracing her lower lip with his finger. “You scared me spitless when I realized you planned to jump from the balcony to the bridge. After all”—he winked—“we didn’t have a honeymoon night. So swimming lesson first, honeymoon night right after.”

* * *

They never did get to the swimming lesson.

“Harry?” Martine asked close to dawn.

He grunted, rolled over in the bed, and leaned on one elbow. “Sorry we didn’t get to the swimming lesson. You plumb tuckered me out.”

“What if I truly cannot learn? What happens then?”

“I know you can learn to read and write,” he murmured and hauled her into his arms, tucking her head under his neck. “You’re the smartest woman I know, Martine.” He tipped her chin up and leaned back on the pillow.

“I want you to be proud of me, Harry.”

“I am proud of you,” he said.

“But I am illiterate,” she protested. “It’s shameful.”

“The shame lies with the government of Haiti,” Harry said. “They failed you, Martine. Let’s make a deal. If you ever want to use the word ‘shame’ in connection with yourself again, I’ll use the word ‘fornicate’ to refer to us making love.”

“Agreed,” she said.

Harry laced their fingers together and brought her knuckles to his mouth.

“When can we go to Port-au-Prince?” She moved her head and skipped a finger over his bicep.

“Don’t know. It’ll depend upon when we can get permission, and I’m not sure you’ll be going, not if cholera, typhoid, and dengue are rampant. What if you’re pregnant? We can’t take that chance. I want you to prepare yourself for the worst-case scenario, Martine. It’s possible that your grandmother is not alive.”

She rose on one elbow and lifted her chin and met his gaze. “I know what you’re saying, but here”—she pointed to her heart—“I know Grand-mère’s alive and well.”

“She can live with us if you’d like.”

“Truly, Harry?” Her face lit up like fireworks exploding on the darkest Fourth of July. “You will not mind? She will not be any trouble, I promise.”

“I promise not to mind, even if she turns out to be a nagging mother-in-law once removed.” Harry slid his palm over her belly, and one finger traced her navel. “Why do you think it’s a girl?”

“I saw her in a dream.” She rolled a shoulder. “In the garden at the farmhouse.”

“Your grandmother can babysit her when we go out for dinner,” Harry remarked as his hand wandered to cup her breast. “Sugar, you know it may take a long time, maybe months before we find her.”

“Oui, yes, I know. I waited four years to be free of Jean-Claude. I have learned to bide my time,” Martine assured him.

Another thought occurred to Harry. “How did you waitress? What about the bills? And the menu?”

“We had no menu. Every day the chef told us the dishes. They wrote it on the blackboard, but I listened and I memorized what he cooked. I know the colors and sizes of the bills and coins, and I can add and subtract.”

“How many times did they tell you the daily specials?”

“Once,” she replied. “I am not stupid, Harry. I listen and I learn.”

“I’d take any odds that when they test your IQ you’ll qualify for Mensa membership,” Harry muttered.

“Pardon?”

“Don’t look like that, Martine,” Harry said as he sat up and hauled her onto his lap. “Mensa membership is open only to people who have a very high IQ.”

“IQ I know.” A smile played with her lips. “How smart you are, n’est pas?”

“N’est pas,” Harry concurred. “And you, wife, are a very, very smart woman.”

“A smart woman with a pink backside,” she said, wriggling and contorting to try to see her rear.

“Your bottom’s not pink anymore,” Harry commented, “but St. Pete’s suggesting I should make it pink again.”

She smacked his chest. “St. Pete cannot make suggestions, Harry.”

“Oh,” he quipped, arching an eyebrow, and shifted their positions so his cock lay nestled between her legs at the very base of her mound. He tugged her skin to his. St. Pete twitched. “What do you call that, then?”

She giggled, and St. Pete made another suggestion, one she found most intriguing.

Epilogue

Nine months later

“Harry, stop pacing.” Suresh, who was also pacing but in the opposing circle to Harry’s furious circular stalking, halted and scowled at the other man.

“I’m not pacing,” Harry protested. “I’m walking a circle.”

“Sit,” Sylvie commanded. “Martine is a strong woman. And your son is a warrior.”

Harry glanced at his wife’s grandmother. They hadn’t found Sylvie on their first trip to Haiti, nor the second, but the third time had proved lucky.

Before their second trip Harry had hired a computer-generated-image expert to work with Martine to develop a facial composite of Sylvie. Then he’d had the resulting picture distributed to every aid organization, hospital, convent, and church with an office in the country. He and Terry had also sent copies of the CGI photo to their special-operation team members who in turn had distributed to friends in the forces.

An army-officer colleague and his platoon doing a stint in the northern part of Haiti came across Sylvie. Martine’s grandmother had been wandering the country on foot looking for her granddaughter, certain she was alive. She hadn’t been in the convent during the epidemic but had traveled to the village where they used to live to recuperate from her mild bout of malaria.

The memory of Martine and Sylvie’s reunion would always rank as one of the highlights of Harry’s life. He still found it hard to believe that Sylvie had been living with them on the farm for almost five months now. He didn’t know where Martine’s genes came from, but clearly Sylvie’s had skipped a couple of generations.

Barely five feet, dainty and petite, she shared only one physical trait with Martine—not an ounce of body fat. Sylvie ate like the proverbial horse and yet never seemed to gain weight, though her gaunt cheeks had filled in during her months living in France. The two women, his wife often joked, had never met a food they didn’t love.

Sylvie had refused to live under their roof, insisting that couples needed their own private home, so Harry had purchased a mobile home and situated the bungalow within ten minutes’ walking distance from their house. Construction of a permanent crofter-style cottage was due to be completed the following spring.

While Martine had a difficult time spending money on herself, she loved buying furniture and fixings for both residences. The resiliency both women showed in picking the best parts of their pasts to remember never failed to humble him. During her pregnancy Martine, aided by a village tutor, learned to read and write, and had decided to go for the French version of a high school diploma. Harry had a nagging feeling that Martine would be contemplating college courses in the not too distant future.

Harry understood his wife better for knowing her grandmother. Sylvie could neither read nor write, yet her manners were flawless, and Harry didn't doubt she could take tea with Queen Elizabeth without batting an eyelash. She could whip together a five-course menu for thirty people in less than ninety minutes, and had the conversational skills of a seasoned diplomat. Sylvie also possessed a few pieces of exquisite conch-shell jewelry her lover had commissioned exclusively for her. The conch earrings Martine wore were part of the collection, and Martine would inherit the whole if no granddaughters appeared on the scene.

Harry glanced down the hallway and checked the clock on the wall for the kazillionth time. He scrubbed a hand over his face. "How in thearnation long does this damned birthing take, anyway?"

"Sit, Harry. The time is not yet upon us," Sylvie remarked, nonchalantly losing stitches on the lacy hat she had started crocheting for the baby. "I see your Geoff has called for an investigation of the orphanages in Haiti. I saw Martine's camera pictures on the television last night."

"You'll be happy to hear Geoff thinks they'll be able to prosecute everyone involved."

"Including the police chief?" Sylvie's needle clicked unrhythmically.

"Yes. Damn it." He paced faster. "Something must be wrong."

"This panicking is the reason Martine would not have you in the birthing room."

"I'm not panicking. It's taking too long."

Sylvie stopped knitting and stared into space. She smiled. "Your son is coming into this world within the hour, Harry. He's doing fine."

Harry gulped. He'd heard Martine's grandmother predict their child would be a son a zillion times. "How do you know it's a boy?"

"The way I knew you would find me." Sylvie lifted a shoulder, and damned if he couldn't see the endless siren built into her aged limbs. "I have the sight."

"Yeah, yeah," Harry muttered. "What's his name, then?"

He knew Martine intended to name the baby after him, and though secretly he was prouder than the sole rooster in a record-breaking egg-laying chicken coop, he also worried about his son thinking he'd have to live up to the family name.

Sylvie must have swallowed a whole canary, Harry knew, because he swore he saw the remnants of the bird, a flutter of tiny yellow feathers, tickle the woman's cheeks when she smiled. "Casmir Harrison Indiana Ford."

THE END

Loose Id Titles by Jianne Carlo

Valentine Voodoo
White Wolf

The HADES SQUAD Series
A Paratrooper in a Pear Tree

The MEDITERRANEAN MAMBO Series
Manacled in Monaco
Notorious in Nice
Carnal in Canne

Jianne Carlo

Jianne Carlo knows multi-cultural romance. Born to an Indian father and a Hispanic mother intent on becoming a nun, she met and married her Dutch-bred immigrant husband in her last year at college. Their children check off the majority of the boxes under the category, Ethnic Origin.

Add to this the fact Jianne grew up on a sixty by forty Caribbean island where the population mixture represents the world's religious, cultural, and ethnic diversity (and some mixtures no one's dreamed up) and you have a multi-cultural woman who believes the word "Mutt" represents the best of human nature.

She's lived and worked in Canada (Ontario, Vancouver), the United States (San Francisco, various small cities in southern California, Miami, and Parkland) and the Caribbean (Trinidad and Tobago, Jamaica, Barbados, Puerto Rico, Dominican Republic, Tortola) and South America (Guyana).

Her passions in life center around her proudest achievements: a happy marriage (measure of happiness varies with level of irritation), and three grown sons of the finest caliber she's proud to call friends, although they're never allowed to forget the mom factor.