



*Melody's Song*

*By*

*jj Keller*

## **Melody's Song by jj Keller**

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### **Melody's Song**

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**Dedication**

This book is dedicated to my friends, Keri Ford, Kathleen Grieve and Ericka Scott, who provided me with hope.

## Prologue

Mikhail sprang up in bed as if a coil underneath her had broken through the mattress and catapulted her upright. As a prophet she hadn't experienced a vision so clear since she was prepubescent. She shoved her sweaty locks of hair behind her ears and quickly recalled the premonition to her mind, replaying each thought as if watching a high definition movie.

The man glanced across the room at his wife. Could she have set him up to have his leg broken? Could his wife have stolen chemotherapy drugs from the hospital and operated a ring of child-stealing criminals? His thoughts rang through loud enough Mikhail could swear others in the room could hear them. *Umm, interesting!*

Devon, his name was Devon. He was a pediatric oncologist and believed the woman, Melody, was the lady of his dreams and nightmares.

He leaned back in the wheelchair, enjoying the moment of quiet respite. A store-bought wedding cake, looked like one from Cakes-A-Plenty, so lifelike Mikhail could taste the creamy frosting and licked her lips in ecstasy. The plastic bride slanted to the side. Where was the acrylic groom? A champagne punch swirled around in a crystal china bowl. Few guests remained at the wedding reception.

Devon reached down to rub the top of his leg. Mikhail experienced the leg ache and reached down to rub her skin. He had multiple fractures, and the plaster cast created a burden for him in its disabling heavy weight.

He closed his eyes. She could clearly hear his thoughts as he recaptured some of his special moments during his and the bride's odd courtship. Melody's beautiful voice ran through his mind as she sang to the children on the oncology unit. Devon recalled them arguing over a minor misunderstanding, dancing close together with her full breasts pressed against his chest, and making love. So, why was there a controversy? Why had Mikhail received the vision if no harm was done or anticipated?

"Do you want us to leave, old man?" Another man asked Devon, a cop if Mikhail were to guess his occupation. Yes, he was a detective.

Devon's lust-filled glance shifted to his bride. No wonder, the chick was curvy. Mikhail smiled as he pictured Melody in his head and labeled the sexy image with thoughts of how he loved the way she moved with grace, rhythm, and of their bed romp a few days ago.

Melody teased him, and he didn't get it. He didn't realize she wanted him as much as he wanted her. Yet, trust and love were present. Mikhail experienced, for the first time in her life, a jolt of envy.

"No, I'm enjoying the company. It's a celebration after all, rejoicing in the love two people share." Devon made eye contact with his lovely bride, and she lifted her glass in a mock salute. "What have you discovered about the Dark Angel? I think Li is the prime suspect."

"We're tracking him. Part of the problem is he keeps clean. His schedule is set. He arrives at 7 AM and leaves at 7 PM. Usually, he'll pick up a meal in the hospital cafeteria before he goes home. He doesn't deviate." Jensen paused and turned. His eyes connected with another woman in the room.

*Mikhail couldn't see whom he stared at with such adoration. Her mind shot to different angles in the room, and she could only see the three people, Melody, Devon and Jensen. Why couldn't Mikhail see the other woman?*

"Yes, he does tend to hang around the hospital, especially the oncology units, at all hours of the day." His voice held bitterness.

*Mikhail knew the man had false jealousy, but men were like that, always thinking the worse.*

"We need you to keep an eye on Melody," Jensen said.

Devon jerked in his chair, fisting his hands on the rails. The blood drained from his face at the agony.

Jensen waved his hand, pushed it palm down. "No, don't get all riled up about it. I like you, Devon. We've become friends over the last few months, so I trust your instincts, and my wife's psychic talents reassure me Melody isn't a part of the nefarious activities. I want you to watch her to see if she makes contact with Dr. Li. He could be using her as a shield to hide his activities." Jensen slid a small button into Devon's hand.

*Wife's psychic talents? Whoa. Could the woman he stared at be her? Mikhail? She took a closer look at the man, Jensen. He had a handsome face. The dent under his lip attracted her, and his tall athletic body with a broad chest made her sizzle. But she'd never met him before. He was a cop for heaven's sake. She'd never get involved with a policeman. Then, with regret, she nudged herself to pay attention to the vision.*

"What is this?" The tiny round, thin disc resembled a silver mole in the palm of his hand.

"A surveillance camera and recording device."

"Seriously? This small?" He met Jensen's glance.

"Yes," Jensen said. Devon understood; Jensen thought Melody was guilty, whether or not she had willingly become involved.

"I'm going to prove Melody's not directly involved in the theft." Devon hissed with firm resolve.

Jensen raised an eyebrow. "You'll need to get some evidence before next Saturday. The pattern indicates the next take is likely to happen on that day." His jaw tightened, and the groove under his lip pulled farther apart. "I'll be taking someone to jail."

Devon narrowed his eyes. Different responses filtered through his head. *Mikhail laughed; some of them were humorous.*

Jensen turned to glance toward the women. "We can't talk anymore because my wife needs to rest. Can I see you alone tomorrow?"

*Christ, the woman was pregnant. Mikhail's hand drifted to her flat stomach, and she felt a momentary surge of pleasure. A baby.*

"I'll have Matt bring me by your office at ten."

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"Great, you have my cell number. Call to make sure I'm there. I'll come down and meet you, so you won't need to get out of the van."

Devon nodded and met Melody's glance. Her eyes heated with hunger and yearning. He grinned. *Mikhail grinned as well.*

The scene shifted and Mikhail connected with the bride. Melody heard the squeak of the wheelchair. She caught sight of the pristine white leg cast, and instant sympathy ran through her. Devon Siegal, husband of two hours and thirty minutes, shifted in the seat to stare in her direction.

Instead of seeking refuge in marriage, she questioned whether she could possibly come to love him? She experienced that bit of thrill as their glances met. Perhaps, she'd already fallen in love with him. The knowledge blasted her heart with intense pain. *Mikhail grabbed her own chest as the pain of loving someone gripped her. She wanted a love to transcend all disagreements and have a solid trust that was always present, regardless of any accusations.*

Melody's gaze locked onto Devon's. Piercing desire mixed with pain shot through her. She held up her glass in acknowledgment and salute, and turned to continue her conversation.

"He's the one for you. You looked beyond the color line; now see past his hard-headedness. You were meant to be together. Go, love your man." *Mikhail couldn't see the woman, but her voice held amusement and sadness. Why was she sad?*

Melody and Devon showed the wedding guests out the door. *Mikhail experienced the fear Melody had running through her at the thought of being alone with Devon. She was afraid to tell him the rest of her secrets. Afraid he'd leave her, the pain would be unbearable as Melody had truly had fallen in love with Devon.*

Devon took Melody's hand. Her knees cracked as she bent down to hear him. "You're tired. Why don't you take a hot bath then join me in bed?"

He smiled a winsome, dimpled smile.

*Mikhail could feel Melody's instant response.* Her stomach twisted, and her breasts ached with need. Her clit and womb begged to have some action. Traitorous body. Melody kissed his cheek. He slid his hand to her



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jaw and moved her mouth to meet his.

*Mikhail smiled; she knew the feeling of being caressed. Passion strong, hot, and uncontrolled ignited through her, and Mikhail grabbed her lower stomach as it punctuated her as well.*

Destiny.

*In a flash the details were gone, leaving in its wake that slow burn from rampant desire as a validation of her experience. She only recalled the woman, Melody, and her need to find hope again, to find happiness and love.*

*Mikhail held her hands to her heart, hoping the external pressure would slow the internal throb. She had to bring the couple together. Alter destiny, if necessary.*

## Chapter One

Melody opened a window. Fresh fall air entered the room, a hint of cool mist and drying leaves. Birds, winter's survivors, sung a merry little tune. Cleaning the one-bedroom apartment was a catharsis for her; purification. She hummed a song along with the sparrows, the plain brown and gray birds sitting on the ash tree outside her window, as she sprayed cleaner on the glass.

As a short round woman, she required the stools, steps, and ladders that had been placed in every room. Her roundness resulted from a love for different foods. Life, as she knew it, would not be as enjoyable if she denied herself from being a grazer. To counteract the habit, she tried all types of exercise: from jogging to speed walking with her friend Emily, Tae Bo with Billy Banks, step aerobics from the local gym, and Pilates with a very calm woman named Fleur.

The videos happened to be on sale at the local Costco. The diet hints to encourage and motivate were tacked on the refrigerator beside the color crayon drawings. Nothing worked to keep her body trim and slim. She'd finally given in and decided to like herself the way she had been created.

Slowly wiping the Windex from the glass, she noticed her reflection. Her hair was a lackluster color of a Blackwood tree, and her eyes were a deep mahogany. Her features weren't very outstanding, not drawing the attention of men or women. She compared herself to the sparrow. One of God's creatures that isn't very nice to look at but, when

they share their songs, it is a sublime experience.

Melody wasn't vain. She realized she had been granted something special, a magnificent heavenly gift of a rich singing voice. At one time she constantly created songs, using bits and pieces of hymns. She enjoyed trying out different combinations; Gavin, her son, would inevitably indicate his pleasure or dismay. A lyric combination that he felt positive about, a sweet innocent smile would appear on his face. A rough song, not nearly as pleasant sounding, he would toss and turn in her arms until she chose one of his favorites, and then he'd settled down.

Her keen sense of hearing tuned into the church bells cheerily ringing, notifying the congregation that God was in the house and it was open for prayer for all people from any walk of life. She reached over and tightly shut the window.

Later that morning, she arrived at the restaurant, Bird's Café. Birdy was talking animatedly to a blonde-haired woman in an elegant pant suit that had the look of silk about it. A flashback of well-dressed women dragging her, as a child, away from her home skittered through her mind. Why would a rich woman be talking to a diner owner?

While Melody shamelessly stared at the woman, she took her elegant fingers and ran them through her French twisted hair, promptly undoing the design.

Birdy glanced up. Melody stood ramrod straight just a few feet away, holding her handbag and coat in hand. His eyes flashed guilt and pity. She had frozen in place. He smiled at her, a slight cautious lift of the corners of his mouth.

*Oh, no, this can't be good.*

Warmth entered his eyes. "Melody, we were just talking about you. Place your things in the back and join us. I'll get you a cup of coffee." His smile broadened and reached his eyes this time. She let out a breath and relaxed her shoulders.

Spurred into action, she stowed her items. Why did they want to talk to her? Several years of working in the food service industry had honed Melody's ability to determine, when speaking to people, what type of character they had simply from the sound of their voices.

Defining fingerprints of character, through their voices, had been a part of her musical gift. Charismatic people generally had a slight tilt to their tone at the end of a word or sentence. Depressed or repressed individuals usually had a flat voice without inflection. If their personality was laid back and relaxed then their speech patterns, slower and calmer. Conceited folks talked fast and with a lot of intonation.

She scooted onto the stool. The temptation of sipping the brew Birdy placed on the counter was enticing. Instead, she turned toward the beautiful woman beside her. She held out her hand. "Hi! I'm Melody Haney."

"Nice to meet you Melody. I'm Angela Bird Flinn." The firm, smooth hand clasped her rough round one. Angela was a laid-back charismatic.

Birdy took a carafe of coffee and began refilling coffee cups along the counter, effectively leaving them alone. Nodding toward him, Angela continued.

"Michael, or Birdy as you know him, is my uncle. I'm as close to him as my father." She smiled, a similar half-grin, declaring her a blood relative of Birdy. Warmth and love sprinkled through her blue eyes creating sparks of light. Melody relaxed.

"I asked Michael to introduce us. I want you to know that I'm sorry for your son's passing. I know it's been two years since he passed, but I understand about the loss of a loved one. It never really goes away." Her pretty eyes glassed over with unshed tears. She lifted a paper napkin and smeared the mascara that had smudged.

Melody scooted to the edge of the stool. Angela rested her hand on Melody. The pressure on her forearm, meant to be a comfort, held her at the counter. "Please don't leave. I don't wish to make you uncomfortable. It's just I, or rather, the children need your help."

"What do you want?" Melody rasped, glanced into Angela's pain-filled eyes, and softened her voice. "Why did you ask to meet me?"

Angela's fingers relaxed. She withdrew her hand and took a sip of the hot coffee. "I work at the Children's Hospital of Illinois as a liaison among the doctors, patients, and family members."

"Each time I walk through the cancer unit, I'm appalled at how quiet and morose it is. I truly believe God would want those children to have some joy in their lives." Angela paused and grasped Melody's hand.

"I've heard you sing to your son more than once, and I haven't forgotten how the sweet music made me or my daughter, Sara, feel. My daughter asked me if angels were singing to her. The lilt in your voice was the most beautiful sound I've ever heard in my life."

Melody wanted to turn away at the sign of rapture on the woman's face.

"You brought joy to your son and, unknowingly, to the other children in the unit." Angela let go of Melody's hand and placed perfectly manicured fingers over her heart. "Your melodious tune eased my pain as it relaxed my daughter."

She cleared her throat, sat up straighter on the stool and tightened her grip on the coffee cup.

"I would like to offer you a part-time job singing to the children. It doesn't pay a great deal." Angela nodded toward Birdy. "Uncle Michael is willing to alter your schedule to accommodate us."

Melody stared at the woman. What was she babbling about? How could she expect Melody to face those children each day? The off-white walls of the hospital room rushed through her head. The agony of hearing other parents' cries as their children suffered. Fresh pain attacked her heart, thinking of Gavin's last breath and the acceptance of death she had seen in his eyes.

"I'm sorry I cannot help you. St. Francis has an excellent choir; ask them." Melody croaked out.

She started to rise. Angela's remorseful, grief-stricken voice stopped her. "I lost Sara a few days after your Gavin passed away." Bright tears collected in the woman's eyes. "When you sang your beautiful and sweet song, it helped to ease the pain and grief for both of us. Please, reconsider. Come to see me tomorrow."

She withdrew a business card and placed it beside the now cool coffee. Birdy moved closer to them, the frown on his face indicating his misgivings about the introduction.

"Please, Melody, try it, one time, to let the children experience the love of God through your heartfelt hymns." Angela rose from the stool, leaned over, and kissed the left cheek of Birdy. She smiled a sad smile, picked up her purse, and left the restaurant. The scent of Chanel perfume remained in her wake.

"All this time and you never said a word," Melody's accusatory voice came out stronger than she intended. Needing to keep busy, her mind and her fingers, she gathered the dishes left behind.

"You had enough to deal with. You didn't need my troubles, too." The flash of pain in his eyes became a blink of anger. He turned away from her, picked up a carafe, and poured coffee into the cup of a customer who usually hung out at the café all day.

Melody waited for him to turn around. He did, and she attacked.

"You think I'm ready now, to walk into a hospital filled with sick people. Go to an Oncology Unit and see children who will die, the way my son and your great-niece died?" Her breath caught in her throat, and the last few words were barely audible. "I thought we were friends."

The pungent scent of fresh ground coffee filtered through the air as he pushed the green button on at the machine. Melody sidled closer to him. "Why?" she whispered the question.

"Why didn't I tell you about Angela's daughter, or why have I introduced her knowing what she would be asking you to do?" His eyes pierced her with a knowing stare. An oracle of wisdom, his somber expression left her with red hot guilt knifing through her stomach and straight into her backbone.

"Both," she whispered.

He glanced at Betty, the other day waitress, and drew an invisible circle around the diner. She nodded. Melody's hand was tugged, and they went outside. The late October sun warmed the sidewalk. The temperature had been hot enough to keep the outdoor tables situated on the patio.

"Sit." He pulled out a chair for her.

She plopped down on the hard, cold iron surface and silently begged for something. Since Gavin's death she didn't believe in God, so

she wasn't sure whom or what she sought. She would listen to Birdy's comments and determine what she should do next, because she needed hope.

"You had enough to deal with having Gavin in the hospital. You didn't need to know one of my own was there as well. Your son's care and comfort was your priority, as it should have been. Two years have passed. Angela has heard many comments about the woman who sung beautiful songs to her child. The other children did benefit from your lovely music."

The warmth of his grasp should have been comforting but, instead, her stomach clenched.

"Melody, give it some thought. I know how much I appreciated your lovely voice easing Angie's sadness. Consider the sick children. And you'll get comfort from the short bit of time you spend with them."

Her throat hurt from keeping the tears lodged there. She wouldn't cry. Tears had flowed for two years, and it would be so easy to start again. No, she'd studied the stages of grief Kubler-Ross had defined and had gotten through them. Now she half-lived with her son's memory. She couldn't go back there. She refused to go back there.

It was time to create a new Melody, one who didn't care, a woman who would only take from life instead of giving.

## Chapter Two

Melody needed the bright sunlight to feel alive. She slathered on a layer of white gooey lotion then a film of makeup. Looking at her image in the mirror, she nodded her head, *yep, I'm woman'd up to search the sea of single men*. Number one goal: sex. She'd go find it, rather him. The one who would be a salve for her ache.

The phone rang, and she rushed to answer. Losing a loved one, whether from a freak accident or through long-term illness, created an urgency to grab the receiver on the first ring.

"Hi Melody! Do you have plans today?" Emily Lucent's voice chimed. Her best friend always cheered her.

"Nothing that can't be changed, what's up?" She added a tilt to the end.

"Would you like to go to a street fair in New South Wales with me?"

"Oh, sounds great. I've wanted to go to there. Rumor has it most of the town is haunted. We must stop by the fortune-teller. I want to see into the future." Melody transferred her belongings from one purse to another, a larger fair-going bag.

Three hours later, Melody dragged Emily toward the fortune-teller's establishment. The old Victorian house, green with burgundy trim, had an odd mix of gingerbread trim and clay gargoyles at the top. One of the gargoyles resembled her last date, a pointed nose and large ears.

The hanging sign in front of the building had gold letters outlined



in black: *Amazing Mikhail, Teller of Fortunes*. In smaller print: palm readings, lucky number, past, present, future, numerology, dreams and wishes.

"Do you still want to go in?" Emily asked. Melody tried to ignore her skeptical glance.

"Of course. I want to know all about my future love life," Melody said, and she could have sworn she heard the clay creature chuckle.

Emily pulled open the oak door, and they entered the dark interior. The jangling of the door's bell alerted a calico cat, tightly curled in its resting place on the window ledge. The cat stretched all of its limbs, full length, and quickly caught itself from almost falling off the window sill. It glared at them as if they had disrupted its slumber. Melody snickered.

Emily scratched her chin. "Aren't cats supposed to be black in places like this?"

"Shh. He'll hear you," Melody whispered.

Emily closed her mouth, but her eyes remained wide with suspicion.

Melody rubbed the Celtic cross on a chain around her neck. "I don't want any disruption in the karma. I hope to get some good news. Especially my love life, because the past has been crap and the present is nonexistent. I wish for a future filled with love."

They evaluated the interior of the lobby, filled with unmistakable authentic antiques. They shared a glance. Melody had been dragged to enough auctions and tag sales for her to recognize the value. Not that she could name that tall armoire that housed a TV nor the table by the window. But, unmistakably, they were priceless.

The female fortune-teller with a masculine sounding name, Mikhail, glided through the door with trickles of gorgeous thick blonde hair that fell to her shoulders. Her massive brown eyes held serenity as well as curiosity. Multi-colored purple, burgundy, and gold silk skirt draped over her legs. Mikhail was tall, young, elegant, and composed. Melody wanted to hate her on sight.

The beautiful woman had incredible, well-defined cheek bones, which gave her a natural radiance.

"Melody, don't you want to know about finding your soul mate?" Her voice matched her body, aristocratic, sexy and loaded with an aura of wisdom, as if a priest or an oracle would declare and all asunder would listen. For some odd reason, Melody couldn't focus on what the woman was saying. Emily grabbed her arm and pulled her toward the door.

No. She wouldn't leave, she needed to have...she wanted...someone to tell her there was hope. Hope she'd find love. Hope her grieving would lessen. Hope a cure would be found, so others didn't have to suffer.

Hope.

The fortune-teller's intense eyes tilted up at the corners, drawing Melody's attention away from her long, narrow patrician nose to Emily. "One hundred dollars for a reading."

"I'm staying. I want to know." Melody drew one hundred dollars out of her bag.

Mikhail pointed to a room. Melody sauntered past her and sat down in one of the Queen Anne chairs.

Mikhail breezed in, stirring up the orange scent in the room. She situated her purple robe around her perfectly shaped ankles and gracefully settled on the sofa. "Please, may I see your palm?"

Melody held out her flawlessly manicured fingers, palm up. Her goal was to find a man and have sex today, so she looked her best. Nails included. A soft finger traced around the mounds at the top, the lines in the center of her palm, and her wrist.

The prophet's eyes flooded with sympathy.

*Oh, no. Please tell me something positive.*

"You've suffered, but this will end. You'll find great joy. Your life line..." Mikhail drew her rounded nail down along a line with the curve ending at her wrist. "...is here. See the break mid-way down?"

"Yes." Melody raised her glance to meet Mikhail's.

"The break signifies a tragedy in your life. A loss."

Melody wanted to withdraw, but the look of sympathy in the prophet's eyes made her remain in control of her emotions. "Yes, I've experienced a loss. Will I be able to be with my son soon?"

Mikhail's head shot up. "No," she barked. "I'm sorry for your loss. But you've many life-changing events to participate in before your soul passes." She drew Melody's hand closer to her face. "Your life line is strong and melds into your wrist. You'll live to be ninety."

"Damn."

"No, that is good news. See the little lines on the outside of your pinky finger?"

Melody twisted her hand and noticed three tiny lines perfectly spaced wrapping around the last finger to her palm. "Yes."

"Three children. You'll have three children during this lifetime."

Melody gasped. Hope. She had been gifted with hope and will be blessed with two more children.

"Will I be married? Will I have a love partner for the next sixty-five years?"

"Yes. Come." Mikhail's husky voice crackled through the room. She pointed to the table. Melody made her way over to the round table and sat on one of the chairs. What would happen? Shivers chilled her body.

Mikhail lifted a clear crystal ball off of a credenza in front of the window. The ornate, engraved dark wood base appeared to be at least a century old. Could it be? Her fingers inched forward, desiring to touch the moon and stars etched into the timber. Mikhail eased onto the opposite chair; Melody jerked her hand away.

"Touch it. The glass is surprisingly warm when you would think the globe should be cool." She ran fingertips over the top of the orb in invitation.

Melody tentatively touched the lucid surface, warm and silky soft. The crystal flooded with a cloud as her fingers ran over the smooth glass. "Why is it doing that? Going from clear to smoky?"

"It is preparing to forecast. Your mind is clear. Your heart is set. Mystical realm, cosmos bring forth the image Melody wishes to see." Mikhail ran her palms over the now mist-engulfed surface, while murmuring a few words. Her eyelids closed, and her panted breaths increased with rapid speed.

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A swell cropped up in the otherwise stale air and settled back to where it had come. Melody waited for the table to spin or the mirror to produce ghostly images. None of this, from her vivid imagination, occurred. The vapor disappeared and blurry images formed. She leaned forward, desiring to see her soul mate.

### Chapter Three

Instead of her soul mate, Melody witnessed the image of her son, strong, healthy and happy. Her breath caught, and her stomach twisted. She pressed her hand against her aching heart.

Her heart's desire.

He stood amongst others, men, women and children. His curly black hair waved in the wind. The colors merged together, making the scene appear to be a bright multidimensional windmill, twirling around. Merriment brightened his eyes, and he bowed over in laughter, a wide, open-mouthed laugh only children aren't afraid to use. Adults tend to lose this freedom of outright laughter, restrain it so people don't look at them as if they've lost their minds. Seeing and hearing the laughter of children was priceless and especially her child.

Tears gathered in her eyes, and without thought she reached toward the shimmering globe, need tightening her gut. She had to get a better view.

Mikhail shot from her chair and stood beside her. "Melody, I need you to listen to me."

Lost in the magic, she didn't want to lose the contact. The surface clouded over. Tears drizzled down her face. That one moment of bliss had been lost. If only she could take the magic orb and hide away in her apartment, seeing only her heart's desire. The small figure disappeared.

She reluctantly dragged her gaze away from the lost image. A hot knife plunged through her heart. All the stages of grief had been

eliminated, and now she returned to the beginning. Denial. He cannot be gone.

"Melody." Mikhail's voice, soft and soothing, brought her back to the present. Shocked, she realized she held the crystal ball close to her chest. She pushed the orb toward Mikhail.

Out of the many layers of her costume, Mikhail withdrew a handkerchief and offered her the plain linen. Melody wiped her face, swallowed the sadness, the joy, and the resentment.

"I'm sorry. I snatched your crystal ball. I wanted..." *Him in my life again.* She choked back a sob.

"I understand. Look beyond the grief and try to remember the image you witnessed. Visualize the people in the setting. They are your loved ones. Your soul mate was beside Gavin in the picture." Mikhail put the globe on the table, walked around, and gave her a hug. Much later Melody questioned how the prophet knew her son's name or Melody's name for that matter. She hadn't mentioned either.

Mikhail sat back on her heels, gripping the table for balance.

"Your son is always with you. A wise woman remembers our loved ones who have passed. They are always with us and excited to be in our memories. You'll do well to focus on the positive, knowing your son remains in your heart and he's quite happy. I beg you to find happiness again. You'll find your true love, so embrace life, Melody. Don't stay hidden in your apartment cleaning windows. Get out there. Follow your heart. Go past your comfort zone and find joy. There is hope."

Melody nodded, handed the cloth to the Seer, and shuffled out of the room. Mikhail mumbled words as Melody passed over the threshold, but she wasn't turning back. A sudden and hard-hitting fatigue washed over her as she entered the anteroom. She sat on a firm, high-backed, Victorian-style sofa. Emily stared at her as if she had the head of Medusa. A quick glance at the mirror showed her to have a glazed-eye look and a dopey smile on her face. Perhaps they should leave.

"Do you want to know about your dreams and wishes? What about a past life? You do not need to know about love, because you're due to be married in a week, right?" Mikhail's brown eyes eclipsed to black and

glittered in the darkened room.

"Right. What else did Melody tell you?" Emily asked. Her voice held a large dose of sarcasm.

"I didn't tell her anything about you. One hundred bucks! I wanted to know all about me and only me." Her head began to spin, so she lay against the hard surface of the settee.

"Right, don't get your chakra out of line." Emily pivoted and stared directly at Mikhail. "For one hundred dollars, do I get a guarantee that what you say is the truth?"

"Yes. Information passed to me through the spirit world will be only the truth. What you do with the information, if you let your inner guide influence you, will be your decision. You're not surrounded by a dark aura, so you need not worry about the evil you seem to believe lurks over you." Her blonde eyebrow lifted high and comically disappeared into the turban. Mikhail sighed and tapped her expensively shod foot on the hardwood floor. It would take Melody a month's worth of tips and burning feet to buy a pair of Christian Louboutin shoes with the red soles.

Emily handed the bags and stuffed animal to Melody. Very tired, she smiled in response. What was wrong with her? Finally, the two women left the room. Melody hoisted the bags to the end of the sofa, closed her eyes, slumped over on the settee, and fell into a deep sleep. She dreamed of her lover. He embraced her as no man ever had, with love and tenderness. His person, structure or face wasn't clear to her, but the warmth encompassed her. And a fire was lit.

"Melody." Emily's voice sounded loud, but she couldn't respond, so lost in the heat of her dream of hot, passionate sex.

A ringing of bells sounded, penetrated her ears. *Wherever was that noise coming from?* It didn't stop, two more times they clanked, louder each time. She lifted off the very comfortable couch and glared at the annoying person who would create such a horrible racket.

Emily.

"You're giving me a headache." Melody puckered her brow trying to recall the dream. A wet dream. A very hot, very sexy, dream with the man of her desires. A man who would spend the next sixty years with her.

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Except his image escaped her; she couldn't bring his likeness to the front. Experiencing his unbound love and intimacy, even if it was only in her head, left her dazed. She rose from the settee and gathered their bags and trinkets.

"Let's go. I might have broken the fortune-teller." Emily said it with such a dryness to her voice, Melody almost believed her.

How could anyone break a person?

The star-sprinkled night added to her dizziness. The moon waned, providing limited light for the drive back to the city. Chicago had soot for a layer of air. The scent of hot oil from the rails as the train lumbered along the tracks, taking people to and from their special destinations, brought a sense of quiet comfort to her. She had been raised near the track.

Emily, surprisingly silent during the ride, twisted and moved from hip to hip. Was she impatient to get out of the car? What had Mikhail told her? Although they were dear friends, it appeared Emily didn't want to share her future forecast either. Would it jinx the outcome if she spouted off about how fabulous her future would be? How great the sex? And love.

Melody would find love.

Children. She wanted children. *Please, give me hope for future children.* She glanced skyward and, for the first time in a very long time, listened to the church bells.

How long would she have to wait?



## Chapter Four

Melody wished Emily pleasant dreams and exited the car. The display on her cell phone indicated it was ten o'clock as she ran up the stairs. A quick step up to the entry way, she was revved. The nap must have regenerated her energy level. She needed to go, to do something. In her apartment she slapped on a fresh coat of makeup and walked back out the door.

The sidewalks were filled with revelers of all ages. Street musicians played guitars, bass, and saxophone. The decadent scent of pizza came from Little Sicily. Music filtered through her body, and she was determined to find joy. Tossing a few bills into the open guitar case, she made her way down the street.

"Thank you," the baritone voice sang out.

Out of the corner of her eye she glimpsed a man, same height and square facial structure as her son's father. Roget Jones. Chills skittered across her skin. She had sent a notice to him, in California, of Gavin's death. He didn't have close family in Chicago. Why would he be here? The sighting had to be her imagination and a result of seeing the image of Gavin. Mikhail's prophecy still weighed on her mind. Melody would find happiness and love.

She skipped into the Chinese Market. Her gaze skimmed the display case, and she mentally chose a fresh-baked brownie. Roaming down the aisles, she spied a can of Chinese Pine Nuts. It had been such a long time since she'd eaten the delicate treat. Crap, they were on the top

shelf, three feet above her shoulders. She glanced around for an employee or the owner Mr. Guan Lee. The clerk was busy typing numbers into the cash register. Damn.

She climbed onto the bottom shelf and reached. Oh, so close. Lowering her bag, she dug around to find an ink pen. She climbed onto the shelf, used the ballpoint to move the can and, within inches of the can falling off the shelf, it slipped.

"Here, let me help," a masculine voice said.

A dark hand caught the container as it plunged downward. A tingle of awareness shot through her body. His fingers pressed against her lower back, preventing her from tripping off the ledge. She turned in his arms and stepped down to the floor.

The man was rich coco. Dressed in a black or midnight blue pinstriped suit, cyan shirt and a matching tie, he smelled like sex. His scent, floral mixed with musk, reminded her of samples the sales attendant gave her at the cosmetics counter the last time she purchased her tiny glass urn of *Pleasure* by Estee Lauder. She wanted Chanel No 5—the same scent that had swirled around Angela at the diner—but could only afford the quality earthy summer smell of flowers, *Pleasure*.

"I believe this is what you were trying to get." He stared at her with a question in his eyes, as if he knew her from somewhere.

"Lenny Kravitz?"

He chuckled with a smooth, rich, deep-throated laugh. "No, but I get that a lot."

"I'm sorry. Thank you for helping me. It's the curse of being short." She nodded toward her legs, aware that his hand held her waist. He released her, and she retrieved her handbag.

"I'm a fan of Chinese Pine nuts, too. Would you like to get a cup of espresso at the Coffee Shop next door and share recipes?" His smile spread, and bright white teeth were exposed. The kind of teeth only obtained through thousands of dollars for braces, whitening, and perfection.

"Yes, I would enjoy that. My name's Melody Haney." Her thoughts started to jumble together. Could he be the one Mikhail had forecast? Did

he feel the attraction? Her waist still had heat he generated through a simple touch. She shoved the can into her other hand and reached out to shake his.

"I'm Kurt Chapel," his deep voice vibrated through her lower region. He could have been from the poster of Lenny Kravitz she had in her bedroom as a teenager. Strong jaw, short cropped hair, dark, dark eyes that held the mysteries of life. Those very eyes whipped little licks of pleasure along her body. Would he be willing to share those mysteries with her?

His voice slid over her like liquid fire. She needed this attention, this hope, this possibility for a family. It had been three years since she'd been intimate with a man. Sex would be required sometime in the near future, and lucky Kurt Chapel was her candidate of choice.

She paid for the can of kernels, and they walked next door to the Coffee Shop. If things went her way, her craving for chocolate would be more than satisfied by her gorgeous escort. His perfectly manicured nails dug into her arm. His shirt had been pressed at a dry cleaners and his suit tailor cut. The man had money, from the other side of the tracks as her mother would have said. Regardless, she wanted him. He could have been the man in the crystal ball. Was he her soul mate?

He pulled out a chair for her at the tea table. One single red carnation, lush in bloom, held firm in a bud vase, in the middle. The waiter sidled up to the table; she decided on decaffeinated tea. She'd come down off her high. Caffeine would only make her more anxious to rock this man's world. She wanted to pursue him and make the connection meaningful.

In route, she'd blathered on and on about the Chinese Pine Nuts. The tree had to grow fifteen to twenty-five years before a crop produced, and that's why they were so hard to locate. Thank goodness the Coffee Shop was just a few feet away, or he wouldn't have continued to be interested in her. *Chatter!* Good heavens, she needed to think of more interesting conversation topics.

The waiter left with their orders; she glanced over at her impromptu date.

"Tell me about yourself, Kurt." She batted her lashes, while questioning if women still did that to attract a man.

He smiled, a half-smile lifting his right cheek up. "I'm an investment banker over on South La Salle Street. Never been married. Currently unattached. I'm thirty-five years old. Have an apartment a few blocks from my workplace. On weekends I like to relax, sometimes go to my parents' beach house on Lake Michigan. How about you?"

"I'm a Scorpio. Never married, would like to be. My apartment is two buildings over from this one. Low rent, and I don't charge the bugs for living with me. I work as a food ambassador." She smiled.

The waiter arrived and served her tea, his coffee.

"Scorpio, huh." He sipped the brew. "Um, black, strong and by the scent from Brazil."

Interesting, of all the comments about her apartment being in the lower end of the city, the bugs, and her job, why wouldn't he question the food ambassador? Instead, he'd focused on the fact she'd been born a Scorpio.

"Yes, intense, emotionally perceptive," she flung her hand about the room with only three other customers, "like now, the waiter is going to give us our drinks and hover because it's close to closing time." She waved her arm over the table. "I tend to gesture a lot. Occasionally I sting, but I'm very creative." She drew circles over the top of his hand. Goose bumps covered her in the tingly little reminders of why she wanted him. Scorpions yearn for emotional intimacy.

"Creative stings." He hissed out a breath. "What more could a man want?"

The church bells announced midnight, and some of the lights turned off in the Coffee Shop. How long had they been sitting and staring into each other's eyes? They were the last two people sipping brew. Their conversation had been limited, but the time passed by very quickly. Crap. She should have bought the chocolate.

"The café is closing. It's late, and tomorrow's a work day. Perhaps we could go out tomorrow night and discuss our shared interest in foods and creative endeavors?" He opened his wallet and scanned the bill, the

silent, hovering server nearby.

"I'd like that," she said.

"I'll walk you home, so I'll know where to pick you up. About eight?"

"Perfect." She gathered her bag from the arm of the chair. He laid money on the table while the waiter bade them good night.

The air had turned colder while they'd been inside. Tomorrow, she'd continue with the fortune-teller's advice. All too soon, they arrived at her place. A cheaper version of a brownstone, the mud-colored paint had peeled, exposing red brick in the patchwork fashion. The layered pieces of the chipped remnants littered the ground in abundance. Mrs. Hent feared to let her child play outside, worried she might swallow a piece containing lead.

"I'm sorry I've been so quiet on the way here. I guess I'm tired. I do look forward to seeing you tomorrow night. What would you like to do?" She hoped he'd bought the quiet statement. After her earlier jabber, she didn't want to put him off.

"Dinner. Let's see, how about Japanese? Do you like sushi?" He wrapped his arm around her waist and drew her close to his body.

"Love raw meat, I mean fish," she whispered. Heat rushed to her face.

"Japanese it is then. Komo's." He kissed her lightly on the mouth.

She wanted more, but didn't want to give the impression she was fast and easy. Better to play the dating dance out. The stages, eye to eye, hand touch to body, mouth to face, body to body. Yes, body to body. Mouth to mouth. Chest to chest. Hip to hip. Yes, the tingle of anticipation made the need all the stronger. She wanted every nuance of the romance tango. The time of celibacy was over.

"I'll see you tomorrow then. Good night, my faithful knight, Kurt." She curtsied by pulling out the loose material on the thighs of her legs, and bending over enough so he could get a good glimpse at her large endowment slipping out the square cut of her blouse.

He coughed.

She straightened and jogged up the steps. Not wanting to turn

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around to see if he had been a figment of her imagination, she opened the ante-door and ran up the five flights of stairs to her apartment. Huffing and puffing, she collapsed on the sofa and closed her eyes to recapture the day, the night and Kurt.

## Chapter Five

The next evening they went to dinner. Melody had dressed in her borrowed finest—a sleek red dress, with emphasis on her abundant breasts, and a narrow ribbon floated down the front. She hoped to draw his gaze to her attributes and not her opulence. Kurt phoned from the ante-room. She grabbed her small bag and jogged down the stairs to meet him. Finding the right dress, shoes, and handbag created chaos in her apartment.

“You look beautiful.” Kurt licked his lips. His tongue resembled one of the band members from Kiss, long and creepy. His eyes gleamed with a feral brightness. This made her queasy and slightly put off, but he was perfect in every other way. She could ignore that one little flaw.

“Thanks. You’re quite handsome.” Ugh, when would she learn not to say everything in her head? He wore a gray suit with a bright white shirt and gray, black and red striped tie.

He chuckled. “Still want Japanese? We could order food in, if you wish.” He wrapped his arm around her waist and culled her close to him, their hips bumped.

“Hate to waste the hour of getting this hair wrapped into a pretty knot and not show off the dress.” She backed up and pulled at the dress to show him her knees and the fabulous high heels she’d forced her feet to pinch into.

Kurt kissed her neck and ear, sharing the earlobe with her long prismatic earrings shaped like harps. She turned her face to him and

kissed his pouty pink lips, smearing her dark rose lipstick. His tongue joined hers, and he sucked. The long tongue, although creepy, had its advantages. She considered throwing the hours of preparation out the window and get it on.

His cell phone rang, and her desire stopped. Her muscles tensed. He dug the phone out from under his suit jacket and stared at the number. A quick peck to heated lips, cooling them a little with his tongue, and then he turned away from her to talk. She hurried down the five steps to the sidewalk and straightened her dress and retied the bow. Drawing out the lipstick, she fixed the gloss. He joined her, his pleasant woody scent filtering into her being.

"Sorry, business. Where were we? Oh, yes, ready to go upstairs and spend some quality time in the bedroom." He grabbed her hand.

"You're quite funny. I'll add that to the pro side of my list. We were going to the Japanese restaurant, Komo's I think." Melody watched his face to see how he'd take the news; disappointment flashed over his countenance. She stashed her lipstick tube into her purse.

He sighed and opened the door of a Lexus ES sitting in front of her building. The two-door, sleek silver sedan had black leather seats, and she melted into them. She had ridden in a limo after winning a singing contest, but that spin around Chicago didn't compare to the comfort of this little vehicle. She snapped her seat belt in place. He slid behind the steering wheel. *What should I order? Something that won't get on my dress.* Too soon, they were at the restaurant, and she had to leave the security of a comfortable warm ride.

Kurt ordered her food as well as his without looking at the menu. Since she had that big worry off her mind, she glanced around the restaurant. Very few couples were in the establishment. One woman seemed to be sitting on top of a man's lap. Melody had been raised around hookers, so she could tell this woman wasn't a hooker.

She glanced at each couple, trying to catch the thread of conversations, she determined this restaurant could be a place for rendezvous.

"Melody, am I boring you?" He had taken a chopstick from the



napkin and banged the wood against the crystal water glass.

She jumped at the noise, turned her gaze toward him. A frown crossed over his face.

"Sorry, no, I'm not bored. Do you know any of the people in this restaurant?" She nodded at the slim young blonde climbing onto the portly, bald-headed man's lap.

"Not really. Different types of people come here. The food is quite good. I assume you like tasty food?" His brown eyes scanned her arms, her chest and down to her stomach.

She nodded and held back the frown. Was he insulting her? Telling her she was fat?

"I've got something large and tasty to share with you later." He winked at her.

This wasn't going as well as she thought it should; the man slid between a pleasant, respectful guy to a slimeball. She didn't know how to take him or what was expected of her.

Their food arrived, and she kept her comments to a minimum. He enjoyed talking about himself, his childhood, young adulthood and waterskiing on Lake Michigan. The self-centeredness didn't bother her because she learned about him through his memories, his likes and dislikes. Except, if this continued each time they were together, she'd reconsider.

Dinner ended, and she refused coffee. She had exhausted her energy and needed to reevaluate her needs versus wants. Traffic wasn't as congested on the return trip to her apartment. The ride was silent except for classic music playing from a CD.

He walked her to the door. "You've been very quiet. Have I said something to offend you?"

"It's just you talk about sex, and I'm not ready for it yet. I'm the kind of person who needs to know her sexual partner and feel the connection."

Kurt nodded, and she thought she saw his jaw tighten. Was it anger or simply the light playing with shadows?

"I'm sorry. I thought we had a *connection* already. Did you not

experience a zing last night in the market? Your touch made my heart race with excitement. I wanted you, and I thought you wanted me as well. I apologize for my behavior." His cell rang to the beat of one of Akron's songs. He frowned but ignored the call.

His words surged her into thinking he might not be Mr. Right.

"I did. I like your kisses, but I'm cautious with sharing my body." She looked down at her feet and fumbled with her purse. Her heart beat a fast rate. Damn, before the last poorly worded comment, she had determined him to be her next sexual partner, too.

"Give me another chance. Dinner and dancing on Friday night. We can stay out all night getting to know each other."

"All right. My best friend's getting married next weekend. I'd like for you to go with me." She cocked her head to see his reaction.

"Who is your best friend?" He glanced over at her then at the bumper to bumper traffic.

"Emily. I talked about her earlier. Emily Lucent. She's a curator at the Museum and specializes in swords from Scotland. She's marrying Jon Hart."

"Yes, I remember. She comes into the diner where you work." His eyes glazed over, as Birdy's did when she and Betty talked about fashion.

"Yes, servin' people, that's what I do." At least he'd listened to her few sentences. She needed to make sure he understood; they didn't come from the same social group.

"Have you considered getting a job singing?"

"Yes, but it's so very difficult to get roles with so many talented musicians opting for the same position. If the director doesn't like my appearance, I don't get a chance to open my mouth."

"Do you want me to help you? I know people." He stopped the car at a traffic light and caressed the top of her hand.

"I appreciate the offer, but—"

"Why are you so damn independent? I could help you get out of that greasy spoon you seem to love."

She jerked her hand out from under his. "I love the people I work with at the diner. If you would come in, you'd see they have *the best*

hamburgers in all of Illinois." Rage fired inside her. She shifted to sit straight in the seat, instead of leaning toward him, and wrapped her fists together in her lap.

When had she talked about her work? She remembered mumbling Emily's name and how she worked around the corner from the restaurant. How did he know? Greasy spoon? She resituated in her seat, uneasy with how much he seemed to know about her with such limited conversation.

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean to insult your job. I can see that you deserve something better, and I want the best for you. You've a beautiful voice, and you should be able to use it. Do something you enjoy; utilize the talent gifted to you." His voice sounded sincere. He had a puppy dog look on his face.

His sad brown eyes made her reconsider her unkind thoughts of him. Softening her voice, she relaxed again. "I know. I guess I'm insecure. Well, I agree. If you set up an appointment, I'll show up and *strut* my stuff."

His kiss had less passion than when he arrived at her door. She touched his lips with her tongue, wanting to feel the thrill of pleasure, but the rush of joy or lust wasn't there.

They didn't make it to the wedding. Emily broke off her engagement. A month after Emily met Zachary Connery, they were married in Scotland.

Melody continued to fluctuate in her assessment of Kurt's character as they dated over the next few weeks. Frequently he would slip, making the sexual innuendos and his touches demanding, removing more and more of her clothing at the end of the evening.

Melody questioned if she had lost her skill to read people. Kurt had a light and dark side. He charmed her. She wanted to lead him into her bedroom and seek the release she sorely needed, but some nagging doubt held her back. As a result, she'd needed to replace her magic wand with a new model. The vibrator got slower each time she'd used it.

The doubt could have been a result of the phone calls. He'd answer, walk away, and talk. After that first night, he never ignored a phone call. She doubted he had the same commitment to their fledgling of a

relationship, if there were one. She'd let her calls go to voicemail.

For the next date they were going to the opera. She was already sweating in her evening gown thinking of the music score. He had tickets to the West Monroe Street. She'd questioned why he'd take her to an out-of-the-way theater. Maybe he wanted that off-Broadway feel.

Kurt arrived in a black tux, and her breath disappeared. The man could carry himself like the King Mongkut of Siam. Tonight, she would be Anna Leonowens and *give it up*. All people had flaws. On a positive note, dating him helped her to drop twenty pounds. He'd guided her through the weight loss by ordering the food, and they walked almost everywhere.

"Hi," she whispered and coughed to clear her throat. She pointed to her hip-hugging long black dress. "You look terrific. We match."

His glance traveled down the length of her in slow perusal, making her yearn for intimacy, togetherness, for a bond.

"That dress is a killer. Not sure I'll be able to keep my hands off of you tonight."

"You better try, because the little spaghetti straps are all that's holding up the girls. One snap and they'll fall right out." She regretted the comment the instant the utterance flew from her mouth. His suggestions were sometimes offensive; yet, she made a statement which would encourage his lewdness. Her vagina was talking for her. She needed sex, and her body worked against her common sense.

He hissed and drew his finger from the edge of her chin, down her neck and onto one breast, ending inside the valley between. "I can see straight through..." A black eyebrow lifted. "Those are Prada shoes, right?"

She sizzled with awareness of him as a sexy man and her, a woman in need. Resisting the urge to lean into him or shove him down to the carpet, she focused on a response.

"Yes, a gift from a friend. The purse, too." She held up the slim evening bag that would only hold a credit card, lipstick and cab fare, if needed. The purse was small, but oh so adorable, with a silver snaked clasp and luxurious material on the inside. The dress, purse and a wrap were from Emily.

"Ready to go? Lots of traffic at this time of night."

"Sure." She grabbed her fox-trimmed wrap from the sofa and slid it across her shoulders.

Snug under the seat belt Melody racked her brain, trying to think of something to say. So far, she'd dodged that bullet of casual conversation when they were together because they walked, fast strides, to get to the destinations. She needed to breathe more than talk. He was only trying to help her lose weight. She looked better, and her clothes fit loose.

"The University of Chicago gave me a free publication from the Center for Italian Opera Studies. I selected The Works of Giuseppe Verdi. The edition of Verdi's sacred songs, chamber music and juvenilia, will be completed in 2015."

"Really." He squinted his eyes and tucked his fingers around the steering wheel.

"I can't wait to get it. The titles will be printed in intaglio and gold leaf." Her voice lifted in happiness.

"Which piece is your favorite?" he asked. She caught the merriment in his voice.

"*Il Corsaro*," she whispered, "with Macbeth as a close second." She glanced out the window to see the night traffic, bumper to bumper. Not wanting to share her intimate thoughts with him, yet. Maybe she wasn't as ready for him to be her lover as she had assumed.

"I don't know *Il Corsaro*. Did the opera come to Chicago?"

"No. Verdi was in a battle between two publishers, and this was given to the one who lost. It's only three acts and wasn't very popular. He didn't even go to opening night at the Grand Theatre in Trieste. The play's based on Byron's poem, *The Corsaire*. Got to love a good pirate theme."

"Huh, which character would you be if chosen to perform?"

"Medora. She was Corrado's, the captain of the pirates, young lover. Soprano is the voice type for the part." Her voice escalated at the end, she was so excited to be talking about the love she had for music. The length of time for mourning was long and now over. She'd rejoice being alive through music.

"Tell me the story line." He grinned.

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Melody stifled the few bits of hesitation over their different backgrounds. She ignored the hot and cold sensations she picked up from him. And, she fell a little more in love with him.

"Picture a Greek island controlled by pirates. The leader received a letter with info about the Pasha. He decides to sail and rallied the troops. His girlfriend, Medora, is anxious, doesn't want him to go. She has a sixth sense it's not going to go well. He arrives; they sing together. Their love and the uncertainty of their future come out. He leaves to confront the Pasha." Melody got caught up in the thought of two lovers on a tropical island, sharing heartache and romance. The passion in her rose, needing to be filled and wanting the human connection more than the true love she sought.

"Sounds a lot like Shakespeare." His unwelcome comment intruded on her romantic thoughts.

"A little. It is the 1800's after all. In the second act Gulnara, Pasha's favorite of the harem, isn't happy. Corrado disguises himself and enters a banquet. His comrades set the Pasha's fleet to burn. Corrado reveals himself to the Pasha. A mistake. The harem is set afire; he tries to rescue Gulnara and the women. He's taken prisoner." Melody switched around in her seat to look at him.

"Is this where your big song comes in?"

"No. It's in act one." She hummed a bit of the music score.

"I like the song. Later, maybe you can sing the entire aria, and we'll act out the scene?" Melody leaned over and kissed the side of his mouth. "I think that would be a lovely idea."

"In the final act, Corrado is sentenced to death. Gulnara kills the Pasha, and she and Corrado escape to the pirate's island. He finds Medora near death. She drank poison thinking he wouldn't be returning. She dies, and he leaps from a cliff into the sea."

They had arrived at the theater, and a valet drove Kurt's car to the parking lot.

"I'm not jumping off a cliff later." He chuckled, and they made their way to the theater entrance.

The box seats were exceptional. During intermission, she stole

glances at him. He was beautiful: perfect square jaw, short hair, dark eyes and very large shoulders. Yes, he was a keeper. Tonight, she'd give the magic wand a rest and have some natural vibration.

Each act made her more engrossed in the play, the music and the triangle of love, hope and sympathy for the masked man. The opera finished, and she clapped with great enthusiasm. Kurt grasped her arm. She lifted the wrap from the chair, electing to keep the warm, soft material with her in case she became chilled.

He leaned down to her ear. "Do you want to go to dinner or sing for me?"

She looked up and smiled. "I'll sing for you."

Her heart raced as fast as the feet tapping across the entry floor. She'd waited long enough, but she wanted to be sure. In today's society, random sex was risky and, considering her insecurities with her body shape, it wouldn't be easy to strip off the clothes.

He smiled, a broad white-toothed smile, and helped her put on the wrap. Returning to her apartment in half the time, he parked by a meter out front, instead of a nearby garage. So, he didn't plan to stay overnight. Melody wasn't sure if she should rejoice she'd get the hook-up without the overnight or if should she take the stance she had become a paid companion, by the metered hour.

Inside her apartment, she slid out of the sleeves, removed the fox-trimmed wrap and turned into his arms. He had already removed his tie and coat. The studs on his shirt would take time, but she wanted to enjoy each step.

"Sing." He grabbed her rear.

He kissed the round portion of her breasts, her neck then whispered into her ear, "Sing."

His pleasure was evident in his seductive tone and his cock as it pressed against the front of his pants, pushing against her thighs. She tingled with need and a desire to explore.

Melody sang the song as the lyrics were intended. Part of her channeled the character, Medora, and with each musical note came a sense of fear. *Fear it wouldn't go well. Damn insecurities.*

"Do you have any accessories?" His shaking hands moved from her waist. He unfastened his own pants and unzipped his own zipper. The rush of excitement, the frantic need to view the object of her desire rushed the last few words of the song.

She had unbuttoned the shirt to his waist and gave the cloth a yank. "You mean condoms?"

She leaned forward and kissed his warm skin. He lifted the straps off her shoulders. As expected her breasts, released from their hold expanded and fell downward, with the nipples perked upright begging for action, satisfaction.

"Oh," she moaned as he lifted a breast, suckled, and teased it with his tongue. He moved his mouth to the other and gave equal time. His firm erection so tight against her lower stomach, her pre-cum liquid flowed.

"I mean whips, chains, and handcuffs." He pinched her nipple, hard.

She yelped.

"That hurt," she accused, and backed away, lifting her dress to cover her breasts.

His face raged with anger. Lips so tight she was surprised words came out.

"I've got more where that came from. I've played it slow. I didn't touch what I wanted to, didn't talk, and you wiggled your bootie in front of my face. You let me twiddle with your beautiful breasts. Now it's finally time my Wally gets to enter your way, and you're not closing the street." He pushed into her, pressing his stiff penis into her cloth covered stomach. His desire and anger were evident in each sharp, harsh, and fast movement.

"No, it's my choice. I don't want to do S & M." She took a deep inhale. A flashback of Roget, her ex-boyfriend, batting her, twisting her arms and slapping her face shot through her mind.

"I do, and I've waited long enough." His fingers clamped onto her bare shoulder.

Melody jerked away from him and with a trembling hand opened



the door for him to leave. She was a stronger woman today than she was seven years ago. No dependence, strong self-worth, and she'd fight this man if needed.

"You don't know what you'll be missing." He smiled the now not-so-cute smile.

"I don't need to know. I'm happy with simple, mission-style sex."

He jerked his pants up and fastened the belt. The quick movements radiated the tension in the atmosphere, and she jumped in fear. He noticed and laughed, an evil laugh, reminding her of the Phantom. His teeth clicked together as he controlled his anger, but his steps were menacing. She slowly moved one of the straps onto her shoulder, wincing at the cut his fingernails had made, and reached for Gavin's baseball bat in the umbrella stand. Clutching the hard wood in her hand, she waited. Kurt glared at her, clenched his coat in his fist, and slid through the door.

She shut the door and secured all three locks. Falling to the floor, she released the breath she had been holding. She refused to cry. Tears were reserved for her son and only her son.

Melody needed to see Mikhail again. She had misunderstood the forecast. She'd clearly made an error.

## Chapter Six

*Amazing Mikhail* was unreachable. Her business phone gave an out-of-office message. Her house remained dark and empty. Several weeks had passed. Melody stood at the hospital entrance. Why had she come? She didn't need the vivid reminder of how precious life was by walking into the cancer unit; the knowledge always stayed with her.

She came because of Kurt. He had not been the man she hoped he would be, and she needed hope. Depressed and feeling lonely had landed her in front of the hospital. In reality, she was doing this out of respect for Birdy, or Michael as Angela called him. He had helped her during Gavin's illness by providing her with time off, financial assistance, and a shoulder to cry on. Birdy had given her unconditional love.

She would give the singing gig a shot today, in gratitude, then never go back. As prearranged, Angela warmly met Melody at the information desk.

"Do you need any instruments or do you want to sing *a cappella*?" The exuberant hug Angela gave was sincere, which reaffirmed Melody was doing the right thing.

"I have a flute in my purse; if I need something, it will provide a peaceful and soothing sound." The first step into the building would be the worst, and then she'd be fine. The hospital was where she had the happiest day of her life when she delivered her baby and the saddest and her worst nightmare as his soul had been reclaimed.

The scents in the hospital were unique to that environment. She

didn't know if she felt repelled because of the cleansers they used or the scent of illness mingled with sterile metals, but the smell created a strong desire to shoot back outside. She clutched her fat bag; the flute in its small hard-sided case stuck out the top.

They arrived at the entrance of the cancer unit. A set of sterile, white doors was the only thing to block her from children with terminal illness. From death. She had become cynical, believing there wasn't a future for any child stricken with cancer. Very untrue, because she couldn't help but follow some of the cases of children who were in the hospital two years ago with her son. All of them were alive. She had a few short years with her baby. He had been stolen from her; now she lacked trust and faith. Her heart had hardened, because God had taken her child.

The doors opened, and the bright colors with fun Dora and Diego exploration characters on the walls didn't lighten her anxiety. A nurse approached them. She had the air of a military sergeant, square faced with shoulders stiff and thrown back. Her uniform, despite having Scooby Doo wearing a green hat and his tongue hanging over the side, was starched with sharp perfect creases making her appear stiff and unapproachable.

"Melody Haney, I'd like you to meet Nurse Kathy White. She's new to the staff, but I've told her about your singing voice and how much the children would enjoy hearing you," Angela announced.

Angela must not have told Ms. White about Melody's son. It was best to go into the engagement, if there would be one, without a lot of sympathetic glances all the time.

Nurse White held out her hand and shook Melody's. A short firm shake. "I want to thank you. The children are excited about a visitor who wants to sing to them."

Melody choked, her throat closed off with dryness, so she nodded. All of the familiarity and emotions came rushing to her in one blast of pain. As she started to turn and offer her excuses, the doors opened. A boy of about five years old was sitting in a wheelchair equipped with an IV pole. Plastic tubing provided fluid through a needle in his arm. His black eyes looked bleak; the dark curly hair was almost completely absent from his head. A side effect of the steroids administered made him appear

puffy. He could have been her son.

"Melody, this is Jared. He has been with us for..."

"Three weeks, Nurse White," Jared slowly and sweetly replied. He whipped his sad dark gaze toward Melody. "Are you the lady who is going to sing songs to us?"

In the eyes of this child, she caught a glimpse of hope, and her heart melted a little. She nodded, cleared her throat. "Yes, I will sing songs, and today they will be dedicated to you, Jared," she whispered.

"I'm going to tell Thomas the songs are for me." With renewed energy, he graced them with a smile and rolled his wheelchair down the hallway.

Nurse White and Angela exchanged silent messages. Yes, Melody silently agreed; the children would have beautiful music to help them through the pain and transition. She, in turn, would be surrounded by the heart-healing goodness of love.

Melody was escorted to a common room with five children in wheelchairs scattered about. Older ladies in pink hovered near enough to help or wheel the children to their rooms, if they wanted. Melody had prepared seven songs. She met Jared's glance, to make sure he understood how important he was. Her last song came from Peter Pan, "*You Can Fly*".

Trying to make eye contact with each child, she noticed the man leaning against the door frame. She didn't know how long he'd been standing there. His presence outstanding: not because of his height, topping off at five-eleven at the most, nor his unquestionable chest span as his green dress shirt pulled tight against his chest, rather due to his facial expression. He didn't smile, but his face was soft and happy. She caught him watching her, staring.

His eye color unknown to her as his eyelids were half-shut, and the feather-like brown lashes, most females would give an appendage to be endowed with, stood out stark against his white skin. His smooth face was more pronounced in its roundness. His smile, relaxed with tiny dimples mere millimeters from the corners, pulled her into his serene web.

"According to my watch, it's lunch time, so I'll say good-bye. I want to thank all of you for listening and making me feel welcome. I hope

you'll have a nice afternoon." Children clapped, if able, making Melody's smile all the wider.

The aides and nurses wheeled the tiny patients to their rooms. Jared held back, his chair steady. Melody glanced at the man, his eyes, deep emerald green, brilliant as he moved inside the room, allowing the children to exit.

She leaned down in front of the child. "Did you like your serenade, Jared?"

He nodded his nearly hairless head. "May I have one more?"

The man with gem eyes stopped and talked to Nurse White. His legs were solid against the floor and his smile gone. His light brown, almost blond, hair was a little long for a man in the health industry. The sleeves of his shirt were rolled to three quarters, and his muscular forearm hairs sprung out in tight curls.

Jared rolled closer. "Melody?"

"How about if I hum to you while I help you to your room? You need your strength to get better. You need to eat and rest." She rubbed her hand up and down his arm.

"One song, just for me?" A whine flew from his little mouth. He must be feeling better. Desperately ill children do not whine. It was the one time a whiney child was a good sign.

"Jared." A smooth masculine hand rested on the boy's shoulder.

"Hi, Doc...tor Devon." Jared's attention stuck on the man then dashed to Melody. "One more. A whole song."

"Jared." She shot her glance to Dr. Devon and returned to Jared. "I'll help you to your room, and then I need to leave."

"What is it you want, Jared?" he slowly asked, with a tilt to the end. Great, a charismatic.

"A song," Jared replied.

"Why won't you sing one more song? Isn't that what you're paid to do?" Dr. Devon's heavily accented voice shot through her like a needle sting.

"I believe it's best for him to eat lunch and rest. A song will delay..."

"I'm not hungry." Jared frowned with a pout.

"Ms..." the good Dr. Devon looked directly at her left hand, wedding ring finger.

"Haney." She supplied, clasping her hands together.

"Ms. Haney, would it be possible for you to sing one more song to my patient, or do you need to get to the beauty salon or a charity luncheon?"

His voice, now snide, rocked her straight into fury. She looked down at her simple blue dress, quality but not rich, charity-function quality. Her jaws clinched together; she took a deep breath and smiled. The man ticked her off. Her anger was irrational and unexplainable. Maybe being in the cancer unit, the place where she lost her son, caused her to take it out on this man, but she couldn't help herself.

"I'll come to your room, Jared, and, if you've eaten a portion of your meal, I'll sing a song just for you." She caressed his cheek.

"Okay." He glanced between her and Dr. Devon and wheeled with less energy than he'd exhibited earlier. Dr. Devon turned to watch him.

Melody believed Jared to be out of ear-shot and yanked Dr. Devon's arm. Wheeling round, he wore a surprised expression on his face.

"Now, Dr. Devon, I'll not be dictated to by you. I'm a volunteer. I'll come and go as I please. If I have a previous commitment, not you or anyone else will manipulate me into altering my timetable. Sick children need a schedule, something they can depend on. Something they can control, because they don't have any power over their health or how they feel. They aren't able to manage where they go or if they'll ever be able to feel the sun on their face while playing ball outside. They need a fixed plan and to keep to it." Her breaths came out in little unrealistic pants. She had the capacity to swim under water for three solid minutes, so why was she out of breath. Melody caught her image in the mirror on the wall. Her face had flushed as hot as it felt.

Crap.

"Is that clear, Dr. Devon?" She enunciated each vowel, drawing the breath from deep down in her stomach.

The tick in his jaw could have adequately shaken her *Slim-Fast*

meal. Oh no, what had she done? Doctors were put on a high pedestal, and visitors certainly shouldn't talk to them with such a tone.

"Ms. Haney, it is very clear. It was my understanding you were a staff member paid to sing to the children to boost their spirits. I apologize for thinking otherwise and for your selfishness. Have a good day." He pried her hand off his arm.

Her hand had gripped his skin for at least two minutes, and at one point her bright pink fingernails dug into his flesh. The contrast from her light, coffee-tinted skin to his freckled, white skin drew his attention more than the pain caused by the crescent grooves she'd left behind.

Despite the anger he experienced as a result of her tone of voice and the tinges from the minor injury, his skin tingled with excitement. He had been unattached for nearly a year and swore to stay firmly and solidly single. Miss Melody Haney with her sexy angel-like voice and razor-blade tongue shook his platform.

Devon Siegal, pediatric oncologist, walked out the door in route to the nurse's station before he changed his mind. His selfish ex-wife had left residue, which continued to upset his ego. She couldn't have had an affair with another man; no she left him because she didn't love him any longer. He could have taken the abandonment a lot easier if she'd declared she had found someone new. She walked out, leaving him alone, and he had become quite happy with his newfound introspection. He didn't need a short, sharp-tongued, beautiful angel to do further damage.

Noting in charts and writing directions for treatment didn't take his mind away from her. It took a good deal of willpower to pry her fingers off his arm instead of running his hand up her soft skin to cup her delicate chin. Her pixie nose had wrinkled as she'd caught sight of the grooves created by her nails. Her chocolate brown eyes had twinkled with humor when she'd sung the Peter Pan song. At moments, briefly, he spied a hint of sadness instead of a happy glimmer.

Damn, thirty more days until he finished his contract and he could enjoy the scents of a woman. He could resist a female for a few more days. As he'd walked past Jared's room, her glorious voice rang through the halls. She looked up at him, grinned like a wicked witch, and loudly sang

## Melody's Song by jj Keller

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*Beauty and the Beast.*

*Well done, Ms. Haney, game on.*

*Did he say selflessness or selfishness?* Melody strained her mind to think about which word he'd used and knew he had said selfishness. Not that it'd made a difference on how she would think of him. Physicians were arrogant, pedestal-tipping people who postulated they could create a life, maintain a life, or destroy a life. They believed they had the power to manipulate health.

As he'd walked by the room, she'd tipped her nose into the air and sang *Beauty and the Beast*. Loud enough, the words had to have reached his ears. Maybe he'd get the message. Not that she was a beauty, but he certainly fit the beast role.

Jared had fallen asleep. She left him a note to tell him she'd return and walked out of the room. Immediately, she ran into Dr. Li, her pharmacist.

"Ms. Haney, it has been a very long time since I've seen you. You've returned to visit the nurses?" Asian in heritage, his shortness made him on level with her at five-foot-five. He nodded to her, instead of taking his hands out of his pockets. One pocket bulged. Inside, he carried a bag of dark-red-tinted fluid in an IV bag.

"Hi, Dr. Li. I wouldn't have imagined seeing you here. I thought you transferred to the outpatient pharmacy."

"I have been. I offered to make a delivery since I wanted to see if any of my old patients are on the floor. I keep coming back, hoping to see children in remission." His voice was low and monotone the way a funeral director's would be.

"Yes, I understand about hope." She glanced beyond the short, impatient man to see hunky Dr. Devon staring at them. Odious man, what does he want? After a quick nod in his direction, she focused on Dr. Li.

"I'd like to take you to dinner sometime, to talk about how you've been the last couple of years." Dr. Li smiled, but it didn't reach his eyes.

"I'd like that Dr. Li, but my schedule is quite full." He was an odd man, but he'd consoled her when Gavin had been a patient.

He nodded, sharp, bird-like movements, with disappointment



etched his face. "I see. I'll continue to ask, of course."

"Of course." She shoved her flute into her oversized bag. "Good day, Dr. Li."

"Have a nice afternoon, Ms. Haney." He slipped through the door, leading to the staircase.

Nurse White's fingers pulled out drawers and moved plastic packages, searching through the meds cart. She lifted her head. Melody walked forward.

"Thank you for allowing me to visit today." Melody said.

"It is we who thank you. The children enjoyed your songs. I know Jared was able to eat more today than he has all week." She slipped her hand inside her uniform pocket.

"If possible, I'd like to come once a week. It might not always be the same day." Melody situated her handbag over her shoulder, preparing to leave. The items inside had shifted, and the bag bulked more than when she'd arrived.

Nurse White reached out and touched Melody's arm. "Angela said you wanted to volunteer your time. The Department of Social Services has funding in its budget to pay you."

"No, thank you. I'll volunteer my time. It's the least I can do." She shocked herself as the words flew from her mouth. Yes, she'd commit to helping these children.

"I understand. Let us know when you can come, so we can make arrangements."

"Thank you." Like the fog lifting off the ground and floating away as the sun burst strong into the sky, Melody moved through the halls.

## Chapter Seven

Melody tapped her pencil against the countertop; the fresh-baked apple pie scented the air. She propped the cell phone against her ear as she opened the refrigerator to see if they had enough whipped cream.

"Mikhail, pick up," she said and let the ringtone chime three more times. She took the phone away from her cheek, moved her thumb over to disconnect, and heard a husky breathless voice say *hello*.

"Mikhail?"

"Yes, this is she."

"This is Melody Haney. I came to you some time ago for a reading. I need another. My love life isn't flowing the way I had hoped it would."

"Yes, I remember you, but I'm not practicing at this time."

"I need to have some... hope. Please."

"I'm sorry, I've been, ah, ill. I'm not going to continue the business."

"I apologize, I didn't realize. Feel better, soon." Melody wrapped a dishcloth around her hand.

"Melody, you have signs of hope all around you. You just need to see them." Mikhail paused.

"Most of all follow your heart." She whispered good-bye and hung up.

She heard him behind her before he spoke. Closing her eyes, she wished for patience.

"Melody, I heard you went to the hospital to help the kids," Birdy

said.

"Do you remember that director, Ross something? He came by a couple of weeks ago and invited me to audition for a part in a musical?"

"Yes, I do. Short fella, balding, long nose. Nice person. Tipped you a hefty amount if I remember correctly." Birdy passed a food order through the opening to Pedro, the chef.

She clanked a saucer and coffee cup together and filled it with the pungent fresh brewed coffee. "Do you recall where his theater was located?"

"Outside the city, not as far as New South Wales, but close. Why?" He removed the pie from the warming unit and sliced through it. She slid a dessert plate over to him, and he expertly lifted the apple wedge without dropping a single morsel.

"I'm going to try for a part."

The pie server fell to the metal surface with a clang. "May the saints be praised."

She smiled. He was adorable. She fluffed his pure white hair. "No saints involved here. I decided I want to sing."

"Aye and you will, my friend. You will." He sprayed a dollop of whipped cream onto the pie and with a jaunt carried it over to table one.

"I hope so," she murmured.

"Miss?" A tiny dark-haired woman, wearing a dark purple sweatshirt, waved to Melody.

Melody grinned at Birdy, wiped her hands and hurried to the table.

"I have limited funds. Do you have any specials?" The soft spoken girl, a teen, glanced around, her jaw tight with pride. Her eyebrows were a lighter brown than her unwashed hair. She had a stench of dirt and night air. Homeless.

"Sure. How about a bowl of soup, hamburger, milkshake and warm apple pie for three bucks?" Melody would use her tips to cover the other seven dollars. The girl needed nourishment.

"Perfect. No onions," she smiled. Perfectly straight clean teeth. She hadn't been on the street for very long.

"I'll get it right out."

Melody served her a bowl of fragrant cream of chicken soup. A large hamburger, vanilla milkshake, and followed with a warm slice of apple pie. All the food had been consumed within twenty minutes, attesting to the waif's hunger.

Resisting the urge to write free on the ticket, Melody penciled \$3.00 and slid it onto the table. She refilled coffee cups, picked up dirty dishes and wiped tables down with disinfectant. The tiny teen sat at the table. Would she explode from eating so much food at one setting? Melody glanced over at Birdy who lifted an eyebrow.

She stowed the container and towel under the shelf and started toward the booth. The girl had disappeared. Melody glanced out the window, not seeing the dark hair or dark purple sweatshirt. She picked up the three dollars and shiny silver quarter. On backside of the ticket the teen had drawn an insect. The detail of the butterfly with its shading and fine line drawing could have been framed and displayed in the Smart Museum of Art.

Melody added seven dollars to the ticket, changed the number to ten and slid the money into the cash register. Betty and Birdy stood quietly talking at the counter. She wanted to laugh at the odd combination of Betty's bright green hair and Birdy's white. Betty held strong at sixty years old but attempted current day trends in hair and clothing. She proudly had four piercings in each ear and wore grunge clothing. She sometimes got her time warps mixed.

"Do either of you know what this means?"

"Looks like a butterfly," Birdy laconically said.

"I know that. What does it mean, symbolize?" Maybe a butterfly meant thank you in some current day language.

"Hope. It's the symbol for hope," Betty said while reaching into her blouse. She pulled out a silver chain and, at the end, was a medallion with a butterfly-shaped cutout and hope written in bold writing underneath. "Butterfly means hope, primarily has a religious meaning."

"And you're wearing it because?" Birdy asked, his eyes twinkling as bright as Christmas lights.

"I'm hoping to win the million point five dollar lottery," she

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snapped at him then laughed.

Melody's shift ended at three that afternoon. She immediately went over to the library to find information about the theater and a man named Ross. A few searches later, she had an address and a phone number.

Mikhail's prophecy proved to be correct. Pay it forward and hope lands in your lap.

\* \* \* \* \*

Melody decided to sing Medora's solo, *Non so le tetre immagini*. The profoundness of Medora's perception about their love and the future being so uncertain made Melody even more aware of how true to life this notion was in her own world. She had become Medora. Her heart raced as fast as the clicking of the footsteps backstage. The theater was fairly new and smelled of pine. Inhaling the scent of glossy wood protection, shellac, she tuned out the other people. There were a number of them—at least twenty—whom she could count in the audience and backstage.

She handed the sheet music to the conductor and stood straight. The dark theater gave her the strength to perform without hesitation. A soft filtered light shone down on her head. She nodded toward the conductor, and he strummed the first cord. Her aria rang through the theater. The song ended, the spot light flicked off, and only the glow from the aisles illuminated the director of the play, a tall thin woman, the music producer, and Ross Lantern. Ross neither smiled nor frowned. He didn't speak a word. Crap. She'd put herself out there and taken a risk.

She nervously flipped her hair behind her shoulder and bent down to pick up her handbag. It was over. Maybe she should have chosen a score more contemporary or better known. She had given it her best shot and lost. Okay, she could deal with rejection; another opportunity might come along. It would get easier each time.

Could it be her weight? She had kept most of it off. That damn infamous apple pie Birdy made caused her to gain a few. Damn pie.

She hoisted the strap of her bag over her shoulder, placed her hand palm out on her forehead to allow her to see farther in the distance.

"Thank you. I'll be going now."

"Ms. Haney. Are you free immediately?"

"She only has a high school production background. What about time? It'll take time to acclimate her," the black-haired woman with a beak nose said over Ross' shoulder.

Melody wanted this role, and she'd do whatever it took to get it. Her purse fell to the wooden floor with a thud. "Yes, what song would you like to hear?"

Yeah, she had a second chance. She'd belt out *Beauty and the Beast*. It was playing on Broadway. Instantly her thoughts flew to Dr. Devon. A smile formed. Yes, she could add her own little inflections to change it up.

"No, Ms. Haney, you don't need to sing another song. We want to know if you could join the cast today and start rehearsals now."

"What?" She must have misunderstood.

"We want you to be in our musical, *The Phantom of the Opera*. Can you start tonight?"

"*The Phantom of the Opera*?" They must have thought her an idiot, because they all looked at each other with questioning gazes.

"Yes. I can begin immediately. Just let, please excuse me for a few minutes." She picked up her purse and headed toward left stage, in route to the dressing room and the bathroom.

Ross shouted, "Ms. Haney, there's a rush. Our Carlotta has taken ill, and her understudy broke an arm yesterday and won't return for several months. We open in one month. No time to waste. Polly will talk with you about the paperwork."

"Okay, I'll be back shortly."

She shot into a dark corner of the hallway and ran the back of her hand across her forehead. *Gavin, Mommy did it*. She hugged her arms across her stomach and gave a little giggle. *Mommy did it*.

She pushed away from the wall and headed toward the restroom. A pretty blonde-haired woman, slightly out of pigtails, touched her arm.

"Your aria was beautiful, so sweet. I didn't recognize the score. Oh, I'm Pep. Really, Peportina, but most people call me Pep." She flung out a hand.

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Melody clutched Pep's tiny hand and gave a slight squeeze. "Nice to meet you. Thank you for the compliment. What character do you play?"

"Meg, mezzo-soprano. I need to get to rehearsal. Welcome aboard." She flipped her skirt and ran off toward the center stage.

Melody rushed into the restroom, took care of business, fingered her hair and started out the door. A short woman, wearing a bright blue polyester pantsuit waited outside the door.

"Ms. Haney, I'm Polly." She had pale skin and bright red hair. Melody wanted to laugh at how she resembled a parrot wearing the blue suit and green shoes. "Come with me, and we'll get the paperwork out of the way. Long hours, sore feet and throats at times, but ah, the applause is worth it. Right?"

"Right." Melody glanced around the theater, with its oil paint smells and wood boards, metal levers and ropes everywhere. She hadn't been in one since high school and, for the first time in over two years, she felt at home.

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Birdy didn't appreciate the comparison. "What do you mean you can't work evenings, for the next year, starting today?"

She huffed and puffed while she walked with a quick pace to her car. The parking lot was nearly empty and dark. She had to stay an additional hour to review the songs. It would take a while to memorize them and perform them to her satisfaction. In addition, she had to act out a role.

"I got a job offer to play Carlotta in *The Phantom of the Opera*."

"One year. Yeah, wicked."

"I know. Can you believe it?"

"Melody, I'm happy for you. Now, I want..."

Melody had trouble getting the key into the door's keyhole. She kept the phone at her ear and turned to glance behind her. A vague sensation of being watched sent eerie tingles along her skin. Alone, late at night in a foreign area scared her. Had she heard footsteps? She pushed

her cheek against the cell and dug around in her bag for mace.

"I want you to do this, okay?" he commanded.

"Yes, I need to go. It's dark here, and I'm shakin' in my shoes."

"I'll stay on the phone until you get inside your car," he bellowed.

The key slid in, she tossed her bag onto the passenger seat of the Toyota Corolla. As she dropped into the seat, bits of rust fell onto the black pavement. Slamming the door, the mirror shook on its loose base. She peered into the glass, seeking the outline of the man or a presence.

"I'm in and on my way home. I'll see you tomorrow. Early a.m."

She shut the cell and dropped it into her jacket. She tapped her pocket, *keep the phone close by*. Glancing behind her, she noticed a shadow, under the streetlamp. It didn't move. The body stood solid, the apparent dark apparel blending into the night. Chills ran down her spine, like fingers running down a keyboard.

She shook off the sensation, put her foot to the pedal, and sped out of the parking lot.



## Chapter Eight

Melody leaned against the medicine cart, gathering her nerve to walk into the room filled with sick children. She had been singing to the children for several weeks now, and each time her anxiousness didn't lessen. Once she got inside, she would be fine, but it all came down to walking over the threshold. The quivers in her stomach rose, making her hands shake to the extent some of the containers fell off the ledge and onto the floor. Out of the corner of her eye, she glimpsed the tight skirt of Nurse White. Crap. She scrambled to pick up the items.

As she bent over to pick up the vials and bags, she noticed a set of size eleven shoes. Same size as Birdy's, but different brand. Elegant. Her glance moved up as she lifted from the crouched position. Crap.

"May I help you, Ms. Haney?" Dr. Devon stood inches from her, with a serious frown. He had a scar, needle thin along the right side of his eye. Barely noticeable, but his breath flowed across her face, spearmint scented. He was close enough that she could see a couple of chicken pox scars.

"No, thank you. Just nudged the cart." She stacked the items on top and brushed her hands together. Her large brown leather handbag shook back and forth, bumping into her side and against the locked box, rattling the stock.

His glance ran down her, heating her in its wake. She smoothed out her silk orange blouse and straightened the belt on her brown slacks. The man made her nervous. Under a lab coat he wore black pants and the

emerald shirt again, the green that made his eyes appear as sparkling gems.

"Are you here to sing to the children?" He touched her arm and drew her away from the cart as the nurse returned.

"Yes, I come one or two times a week. Is that okay with you, Dr. Devon?"

She didn't want to be nasty, but his touch sent tingles down her skin. She didn't like the man, so why did his closeness make her want to jump his bones?

At first his face held an expression of shock, and then he smiled, as if he knew a secret. She removed her arm from under his. He repositioned his hand on her waist and pulled her close, avoiding a collision with the large silver lunch trolley. Her right breast bumped against his side. It zinged and perked. Crap, she desperately needed sex if she got all excited about a simple brush against an arrogant doctor.

"Thank you." She pulled away, despite how much her body resented the idea. "I'll need to go...sing...now."

She practically ran into the room. Devon Siegal could hear her greet the children and wondered why she'd seemed so flustered. He had found her twice now hovering around the cart. Odd behavior for someone who sings, he'd check to see if she had a medical background or a drug-related record.

"Dr. Siegal?" Devon pivoted around to see a man dressed in a three-piece suit. He ran his fingers through his blond hair, stood over six feet, and weighed one hundred and fifty pounds. Clear gray-blue eyes gave him a direct stare, and a cleft on his chin softened the stiffness of his jaw.

"Yes, I'm Devon Siegal. How might I help you?" Devon shot out his hand.

The guy clasped Devon's hand and held out a Chicago Police Department badge in the other. "I'm Jensen Palmer, a detective with the Chicago PD. I'd like to talk with you about a delicate situation. If you have a moment?"

Why would a detective want to talk to him? Mr. Palmer had a

British-made suit, if Devon read the markings correctly, and Italian leather shoes. The PD paid very well here. "I'll be more than happy to talk to you. It's not about the international driver's license, is it? I know I've been here almost a year, but I just haven't had time to get it switched from UK to American."

"No, it's not. You shouldn't have a problem since you're from Indiana. Although, you still have a slight British accent."

Devon nodded and started walking to the room reserved for meeting with parents. "Yes, I am. The accent comes and goes. We'll step in here for privacy." He held the consultation door open.

Once seated, he waited for the mystery to unravel.

"This is all confidential." Detective Palmer began and tapped the groove under his lip.

"I'm good at keeping confidential information, part of the oath."

"Good. There is a ring of child kidnappers who are going by the moniker, Dark Angel. They steal a certain type of child, bright, young, with some known psychic abilities. The children are being injected with chemotherapy drugs." Detective Palmer flipped open his PDA and referenced a screen.

"You're not serious?"

"Unfortunately, yes, Cyclophosphamide might have been used. They had hopes of altering the children genetically, and they surgically implanted a behavior control device. In addition to altering their DNA, the Dark Angels brainwashed the kids using electronics, sound and vision."

Devon shook his head in disbelief. "What kind of madman would use toxic drugs on small healthy children? Yes, chemotherapy medicine does alter the genetic makeup of children and adults, but to what extent isn't really known. What do those animals plan to achieve by giving chemicals to children?"

"They enable the children with precognition or foresight. Mere babies are able to talk to each other through telepathy. And they have the ability to read minds. We believe their ultimate goal is to overtake the government, subliminally and effectively." Detective Palmer withdrew a

stylus and prepared to enter information into a PDA.

As if Devon could give him information. What could Devon possibly ask of Detective Palmer?

"How would they achieve this?"

"The children, when they become adults, will be put in government positions. In the White House, high-ranking military positions and in the justice system. At the right time implanted devices will be activated, and destruction will occur. Massive, violent destruction. That is our hypothesis anyway."

"Detective Palmer, I'm not sure what you need from me." Devon's pager went off. He glanced down at the number.

"Call me Jensen. Hopefully, we'll be working closely together to get this resolved."

"Then how can I help, Jensen?" Devon reached into his white lab coat pocket and withdrew his cell phone.

"We're certain some of the medicines are being stolen from this unit. Three months ago we tracked some unusual ordering from this hospital's in-patient pharmacy. The doubled orders stopped as the investigation started. In the past few weeks, several units of drugs from this floor have been lost or damaged. Not enough to warrant an internal investigation but enough to make me curious."

"I know a couple of treatments were started late due to the delay in delivery of meds. I'll need the charts to find out what happened. How soon do you need the information?"

"Today. From what the staff claimed, you're here 24/7." Jensen's eyes twinkled with humor.

Devon frowned. Hospital gossip was at an all-time high if a detective from the Chicago PD knew his schedule. "Right."

"Haven't connected with some of the fairer sex? Thought the nurses would be all over a new doctor with a British accent." Jensen was a likable guy.

Devon didn't mind the personal comment. He did spend all of his free time in the unit. Some of his old mates lived just south of his house. It'd be easy to have a get-together. Still recovering from the divorce, he

hadn't made the time or the drive to put anything in motion.

"I'm still adjusting to Chicago, and I don't want to be fixed up with your sister." Devon grinned.

Jensen chuckled. "What I would like for you to do is keep an eye on unusual behavior. You know, the staff, the visitors to some extent. If you see something out of the ordinary, please let me know." Jensen withdrew a card from inside his pocket. "Here's my card." He flipped it over and wrote on the backside. "My cell phone and home phone. I don't generally give those out, but this case is top priority to me."

Devon accepted the card, glanced at the numbers, and slid it into his coat pocket. "I must ask why? Why is this case a priority, more important than others to you?"

Jensen rifled his fingers through his hair, the gesture of a man with something important on his mind.

"My wife is a psychic." He frowned as if it were difficult for him to accept. "She intervened in a kidnapping. The drug, and how we found out about the chemotherapy portion, was used on her. I want to track down the instigator of these heinous crimes and bring her to justice."

Woman! The police, the FBI, thought a woman was behind the Dark Angel Squad?

Devon wanted to tell Jensen about Melody and her penchant for hanging around the meds cart, but hesitated. He didn't have proof. There might be a logical explanation. From now on, he'd trail her like a dog would liver. "I'll keep you informed as I see quirks in habits. Are there other hospitals under surveillance?"

"Yes, but I can only disclose information about yours. By the by, your CEO thinks very highly of you." Jensen stood, jotted a note. "How can I reach you?"

Devon wrote down all of his contact information on the back of his business card from his pocket and handed it to Jensen. Together they walked out of the unit.

"I'll be in touch." Jensen opened the stairwell door and took off.

Devon reentered the cancer unit; his sight became more acute. Instead of focusing on seeing the patient, evaluating and entering

directions for care and treatment, he noticed the activity. Who did what? Went where? Talked to each other? Looked suspicious? He would help Jensen catch this thief. The drugs would not be stolen and used on innocent healthy children.

"Dark Angel," he muttered. What kind of monsters are out there? And the very woman he wanted to watch strolled past him shaking her rear.

Melody came out of the activity room as Dr. Devon mumbled what sounded like "Dark Angel" and walked past her. The man was overworked. She straightened the belt, which continued to slide around, situated her bag, and went in search of Nurse White or Angela. Angela stepped into her line of sight. Melody turned to the right and clasped her arm.

"I have some news," she said.

"You got a significant role in *Phantom of the Opera* as Carlotta; you're ditching night duty at the diner and cutting back on your volunteer days here." Angela smiled the sad smile of an adult who had suffered a tragedy.

"You took the wind out of my sails." Melody dropped her arm from Angela and frowned, not knowing what to say next, what excuse to make.

"Don't worry, I'm excited for you. This is a dream come true. Michael didn't tell me, have you been auditioning often?" Angela clicked her pen, down, up and up, down.

"Not for a few years. I've always dreamed of singing on stage, but Gavin became ill, and I stopped going to auditions, contests and walk-on parts. A serious coincidental connection? The director came into the diner over a month ago. I was so lucky to get the role."

Angela slipped the pen into her pocket and grabbed Melody's hand. "Luck might have convinced the man to eat at the diner, but your talent got you the role. You must continue to believe you have a gift." Her smile widened. "Just keep sharing it with us."

"Thank you." Melody gave her hand a squeeze then snatched a tissue from her bag.

"You need to go. It's quite a drive." Angela's eyes looked glassy as she pivoted and with a fast clip continued down the hallway.

"I will. I'll come by as often as possible," Melody shouted. She turned and charged into him. "I'm sorry, Dr. Devon. Didn't see you."

Her bag loaded with a flute, bells, and a harmonica snapped against his side, clanking as two metal objects hit each other. He pulled her snug to him, and the purse stopped flapping.

"Please, if we're going to see each other, and this close, you need to just call me Devon." His jewel eyes glimmered with humor.

She nodded, her throat unable to function as it had dried out. She was hot. Her nerves crackled, and her sweat glands generated enough to put a mist on the plants around them. Her purse fell off her arm and bound their wrists together.

He lifted the strap, allowing the bag to open slightly. "This is quite a bag. What don't you have inside?"

"Kitchen sink," she blurted. Enough said, she pulled the strap from his hand, placed it on her shoulder, and stepped back. His hand lingered on her hip a moment longer than necessary. She glanced into his eyes, his mouth formed a smile, and his eyes twinkled with merriment. The tiny scar on the outside of his left eye formed an "S" ending right above his ear.

He dropped his arm from her hip and shoved his fisted hands into his pockets, puffing out his pockets. What an absurd man. First, he was up close and personal then withdrawing. His smile was nice though.

"I need to go." She turned to walk through the doorway, stopped, glanced at him. "Good bye, Devon."

Behind her, he chuckled, whistled a merry tune, and appeared at her side.

"Ms. Haney, I'm afraid we got off to a bad start. I'd like to begin again." He smiled a sincere, let's-be-friends-instead-of-opponents smile.

"It could be a result of your arrogant assumptions." She kept her voice monotone, waiting to see how he would he react. His temper might flair, or he'd take it as it was intended—a gentle humorous jibe.

"You should have tried to resist the laughter sparking in your

beautiful eyes, because I know you're teasing me." He grabbed her arm. "Come on, I'll buy you a cup of coffee."

She chuckled and glanced down at her watch. Twenty minutes. She had twenty minutes to spare before she had to be at the diner. "Coffee would be great. I need a jolt before I drive through the horrible afternoon traffic."

She waved to the kids as she passed by. The elevator doors were open, and they stepped inside. Devon pushed lobby on the button panel. She glanced at him during the ride down. The silence, typical to elevators, didn't bother her. Scanning his body, she determined he was well shaped; his shoulders were broad like a football player, his waist trim, and his legs muscular as his black pants fit snug against his thighs. Yes, he was very well formed. His face had boyishness, being pale and round. Only the scar made him look dangerous. If it wasn't for his arrogance, she could imagine a relationship with him.

Melody berated herself. Her sexual needs continued to be high if she contemplated having a hookup with this man. Yes, his nearness made her sizzle, and his green eyes looked at her as if she were a prize that he sorely desired. He coughed, and she glanced into those very dreamy eyes. His face had flushed a warm rosy color. Crap. Had she been staring at his body the entire ride? By the pouch on his pants, she must have been focusing on his nice endowment.

*Could I be any more embarrassed?* The elevator stopped, and people climbed aboard. Devon moved behind her and held her steady as the lift bumped to a start. Yes, a very nice endowment. Her body fit perfectly against his.

They exited the elevator at the next stop, and he led her to a table near the oversized palm trees, shrouding them in semi-privacy. "Sit. Tea or coffee?"

"Although I'd love a cup of coffee, I'd better drink tea." She placed her bag on an empty chair and situated her bottom on the hard wooden surface.

"Be right back," he said close to her ear and sauntered over to the coffee bar set up in the corner of the cafeteria.



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The scents of fried food, steamed broccoli and the sight of wobbly Jell-O made her queasy. All the memories of a quick meal between CT scans came flooding into her mind, her heart. *This was not a good idea.*

She rose from the seat as he set the cup with the green tag hanging over the side. The scent of fresh bitter tea leaves filtered through the air. He smiled, but a vacant look appeared in his eyes, as if he had known she prepared to leave and he was hurt because of it. She pushed the chair more to the left instead of centered with the table, sat down, picked up the cup and blew tiny waves across the brown surface.

"Ms. Haney, that's a mighty big bag for a little thing like you to carry around." He grinned and his ears moved slightly. Not in an ugly goofy kind of way, but a cute clownish kind of way.

"Call me, Melody, please. I carry all the necessary items to get through the day. Sometimes I start out at five and return to the apartment around midnight." *Did he mean short or small? I'm not little by any means. Was he being sarcastic?*

"That's a long day. Is that why you've been dizzy a few times, exhaustion?" He sipped his coffee. Pure black, with no obvious signs of condiments.

"Dizzy?"

"Yes, a couple of times I noticed you held onto the meds cart." He stared at her. "Do you take drugs that could be altering your balance?"

"I'm not ill. Nor would I come into the unit if I felt the least bit unwell." She pushed the tea away. "The only drug I take is caffeine in my coffee."

"I don't believe you would. I was concerned for your health. What do you do that makes you get up so early and not arrive home until midnight?"

"Why do you feel the need to know?" She cocked her head.

"Curious about your day. What you do with it."

"You mean minute by minute?" Her powerful voice took on a sharp intonation, as she had intended. Did he think to interrogate her? She glanced down at her watch. Time to go.

"I'm wondering, do you know what the drug Cyclophosphamide

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is? How do you have time to come here and sing?" Again with the stare.

"Dr. Siegal, please just write out all of the twenty or so questions you have for me and leave them at the nurse's station. I'll answer them next time I'm in, and I'll make sure you get it." She rose from the chair and grabbed her bag. He jumped and shoved his hand into his pockets. His voice sounded accusatory and questioning at the same time.

"No need, my little Dark Angel."

"Clearly, you cannot remember my name. Perhaps it's you who should consider getting home at an earlier hour." She marched out of the cafeteria, before she said something she'd regret, like screw me and don't talk while doing it.

## Chapter Nine

She sprinted out of the cafeteria. Devon took off after her, his lab coat flying behind him like the caped avenger. She wasn't the one stealing the drugs. He knew it deep within his soul. Melody Haney simply didn't have the evilness in her system to do anything to hurt children. She didn't even have the aplomb to accuse him of being a racist with the Dark Angel comment. As a man of science, he had to rule her out of the line of suspects. She hadn't been pretending.

It wasn't a pretense. But obviously from her expression she didn't know what he was referring to. Her innocence made his heart rupture with bliss at the knowledge.

Despite the woman's short stature, she had a great deal of energy and nearly reached the parking lot by the time he caught up with her.

"Melody, I beg your forgiveness. In my defense, I haven't, ah, courted a woman in nearly a year, and I clearly have forgotten how to present my best side."

She repositioned her bag on her shoulder, looked down at the pavement, and walked a few feet. He kept pace with her. The woman didn't make rash decisions. Would she accept his apology? He squirmed, the longer the silence prevailed. Would she forgive him? She finally stopped and gazed at him.

"How quaint, you want to date me?" Anger made her face pink or was it a result of the afternoon sun glaring into her face? She squinted her eyes, making it appear as if she were furious.

He shoved his hands into his lab coat pockets and spread his feet wider apart, braced for the rejection. "Yes, do you mind?"

The edges of her pink shiny mouth moved up and down, as if she restrained a laugh. Her cheeks flushed from pink to red. Damn, he acted like a lovesick schoolboy.

"I have to tell you." The woman of his nightly fantasies coughed, almost as if to restrain a chuckle. The laughter broke through and erupted into the cool evening air. "So far I'm not impressed with your technique."

She raised her hand to cover her mouth, but her shoulders lifted and lowered with laughter.

His stomach was in peril of dropping straight through to his feet.

*Idiot! She's thinks I'm a bumbling idiot.*

"I'm glad I can bring some amusement to your day. So, do I walk away and leave you to your laughter, or do you want to go out with me on Friday night?" Summer flowers infused the air as he lifted his hair bringing it to cover one side of his face. He allowed it to rest there, hiding his embarrassment.

"I do...like your fortitude. I'll give you a chance to let me see the true Dr. Devon Siegal." She wiped the tears from her eyes.

He smiled. Less than a month. He'll impress her and, at the end of the month, his abstinence contract with his brother would be over, and he'd enjoy the charms of a woman, this woman, to the full extent!

"I can't Friday night though."

As quick as a flicker of an electrode his smile disappeared. "Why?"

"I'm part of the cast of *Phantom of the Opera* in a theater near New South Wales. We rehearse every night except Sunday and Monday."

Today was Monday. Tonight or five more days.

He placed his hand on her wrist, touched the soft skin of her hand. "Tonight then." Hope infused his voice, and he widened his smile.

She turned her palm over and entwined her fingers with his. "I'm sorry. Tonight I promised to work." She sounded regretful.

"Where do you work?" He had her pegged as a society girl. She had the grace and the speech patterns of *an haute monde*.

"Bird's Café."

"I know where that's located. I had an excellent hamburger there when I was meeting the couple who sold me their house." He pulled her hand to his chest.

"Sunday then," his voice came out husky, thinking of how long a wait.

Her gaze lifted to his, and her eyes glittered with amusement. "Or if you don't mind waiting, Thursday night we're ending rehearsal early. We could go to a late dinner?"

"I'd like that, and on Sunday we'll go to the museum or a movie?"

She giggled deep in her throat sending waves of yearning through him. Her beauty, although great, made him desire her, but he wasn't a man of lust. He'd wait and get to know her. When the time was right, he'd act on his longing. Maybe she didn't think he was a bumbling idiot after all.

"Let's play it by ear, Casanova." She withdrew her fingers from their knotted hands and dug inside her bag. She handed him a flute, a harmonica, cell phone, a plastic container of santi-wipes, and finally a set of jingling keys tinkled through the air. But no drugs.

"Explains why you need the suitcase." He teased as he lifted the items seated unbalanced in his arms.

"I never know what song the children will request, and I try to prepare for any event."

She had obtained a coveted parking spot near the front of the hospital. Her white Toyota had a sagging mirror, a rusted bottom, and the trunk had a dent the size of a crash cart, three feet deep. She must have seen his frown.

"Doesn't look like much, but it faithfully gets me where I want to go. The insurance is economical, and the gas lasts for a long time. Can't get rid of it, even if I wanted. Karma."

She accepted the items from him and tossed them into her bag. The purse flew over to the passenger seat. Inside, the car was clean and well organized.

"Tell me where to find the theater and what time to be there?"

"I'll just meet you at a restaurant." She settled into the driver's seat,

lowered the window and inserted the keys in the ignition. Time was running out, and he hadn't secured the date.

"I've been told there is an English Pub in the town of New South Wales, could we go there?"

"Ah, missing the old country are you?" She grinned.

"A little."

"Okay, since you're not from here, if you give me your cell phone number, I'll call and give you detailed directions."

"To the theater, right?"

"Sure. I need to jet." She turned on the ignition and, much to Devon's surprise, the engine rolled over immediately.

He relayed the number, shut the door, and she drove off. She'd call him. His stomach jumped in excitement. He'd get to talk to her again.

Her taillights winked as she rounded the corner. He removed his cell phone from the keeper attached to his belt pressed speed dial number two. He got an answer on the second ring.

"Siegal here."

"Siegal here." It was an old game he and his brother played and brought a flood of happy memories.

"What's up, bro? Haven't heard from you in months. Did you get settled into the new digs? Did the housekeeper decide to stay?" Nick asked.

"Some boxes still taking up garage space, but not bad. The housekeeper didn't stay, so I've hired a new one. A man by the name of Wong, no first name no last name, just Wong."

"References?"

"Checked. Rated very high. Lucky to get him." Devon shifted the phone to his other ear. "I need to know if I can get out of the contract early?"

"What the hell? You're the only one I knew I could count on. You understood how important this thesis research is to me. Can't get the doctoral without it. You only have what, twenty-some days to go. Is abstinence that hard even for an old man like you?"

"Being your older brother doesn't mean I'm an old man, just older

than you."

"Dev, please, it's only a few more days. Take some time from the hospital and visit me. We'll pal around. Get your mind off women and sex. I'll take you to some of the high schools. You can talk to the kids who had the misconception that one time wouldn't affect them. The thirteen-year-olds who are pregnant or have STD blisters on their mouths—"

"Don't! I know how important your study is, and I'll keep it under wraps."

"Thanks, but I want to meet her. Please tell me she isn't like Heather."

Devon snickered. "No, she's not. Remember when we went on holiday to France and I met Celeste?"

"Ah, so she's dark and sultry?"

"She's more than that." Devon continued to paint his picture of Melody. A pharmacist he'd seen on the oncology unit snuck out the side emergency exit. The man glanced around and rushed behind an enormous fir tree. What odd behavior? Devon shifted a few feet to the side, allowing him a better view. The man's hand shoved a bag into the open window of a car.

"Nick, I could bore you all day with her attributes. I'll set up a dinner at my house in a few weeks, on a Sunday. Bring your cute assistant. I'll call you later."

"Okay. Stay away from sexual intercourse for at least twenty more days." Nick reminded him before he clicked off.

"Yeah, easy for you to say," Devon muttered.

Devon hurried to the edge of the sidewalk as the white Crown Victoria pulled away from the curb. The windows were dark. It slipped in front of the city bus before he could catch the license plate number. Glancing back, the pharmacist bypassed the front entrance.

Devon glanced up at the security cameras pointed toward the front of the hospital. Would the massive fir hide a man and a vehicle? He strolled around the tree searching for other cameras. Nothing. He'd place ninety to one this was a blank spot.

Twists and turns inside the building led him to the emergency exit.

He opened the door. No alarm sounded. It must have been tripped. He'd report the problem. He pivoted, started down the hallway, and finally reached the pharmacy. There the man stood, five-seven, about one hundred and twenty pounds, with black hair. Devon made his way up to the counter, reached down and picked up a bag of cough drops.

A technician snatched the package and held out her hand for payment. He couldn't see the pharmacist's name badge. As Devon withdrew his wallet he asked, "I heard we're going to open a satellite pharmacy near New South Wales. Is that true?"

Her ponytail flipped as she shrugged. "Dr. Li, do you know anything about a satellite pharmacy?"

Dr. Li turned around. Devon got a clear view of his face, small beady eyes, tight lips, and his name badge. Dr. Guy Li.

"Not that I know of. Rumor." Dr. Li focused on filling a bottle with pills.

*Jensen, we have a suspect.*



## Chapter Ten

Thursday, Melody danced around the set. She hit the high notes every time. She cursed, under her breath, as delays mounted and the night beckoned. The cast and crew discussed a set piece being damaged and how the bridge had come to be broken. Suspecting foul play, the chatter lasted longer than needed. She ignored the conversations around her and focused on Devon. Excitement over the date later created nervous tingling fingers in her stomach. To see him on a personal basis was like opening night for love.

Luca, the sound director, claimed they had their own phantom due to the number of broken set pieces, sick people, and accidents. He went on and on, with his hands fluttering in many directions. She pictured a bee buzzing around a flower.

She just wanted the rehearsal to be over. Rumors had already been started about having an undereducated, although talented, woman singing the role of pale and Italian Carlotta. Did it truly make a difference? She tried to convince herself it didn't matter, but she focused and practiced to make sure her performance would be perfect. They could speculate all they wanted but at least listen to her voice. Hopefully, they'd only hear her music, especially the introduction of the *Misery Song*.

Ross shouted a command, and she glanced out into the shaded auditorium. There, at the back, sat Devon. He had arrived early, or they were very late. His light brown hair appeared to blaze under the spot light.

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Her heart beat a quick cadence; surely it could be heard over the chains lifting the curtain, unveiling the setting for her solo. She wanted him. Could it be due to the abstinence she forced on herself, or because there was a chemistry mixing between them? Her stomach muscles quivered at the thought of his kiss. He'd touched her hip, and she sweated like a tennis player. When she felt his penis rise behind her in the elevator, her womb clutched in ecstasy. How would her body respond if he kissed her? She licked her lips in anticipation. At the end of the night, she'd surely find out.

"Melody," Ross shouted.

"Sorry. Lost in the moment." She stepped up to her mark. "Ready?"

"Ready," Ross growled, "when you deem to give us your attention."

Melody shot him a broad smile and nodded to Luca. She focused on her character and the song. Ross and Luca decided to add another solo for Carlotta, deviating from the program. It was a combination of various Verdi's scores with Luca's own lyrics. It was the perfect piece for Melody's soprano voice with the sad, woeful tones she had acquired due to her loss. The two had dubbed the song *Melody's Song*, but in the program it appeared as *Canzone da Infelicità* or *Misery Song*.

Melody sang with all the pent-up anger, frustration and heartache inside her soul. She sang with enough emotion the aria would surely reach God, if there truly was one. The last note vibrated through the theater, and nothing but silence followed. Stillness invaded for several minutes. She glanced around. *What happened?*

"Did I forget a line?" She asked anyone but glanced at Luca. He wiped the corners of his eyes with the tail of his shirt. She pivoted around. Everyone stood staring at her. Not moving, not complaining, and just gazing at her as if she were a rare animal. Her heart beat a fast cadence. She licked her lips. Her mouth was dry, and the liquid didn't help much.

She turned around and screamed at Ross. "What's wrong? What happened?"

Hands slapping together came from the rear of the theater. She

glanced through the dim lighting to see who made a mockery of her performance. Devon rose and walked down the aisle, clapping. Suddenly, everyone applauded.

Melody darted off the stage, grabbed her bag and a rose that had appeared in her dressing room, and rushed out the door. The embarrassment was too much. They shouldn't have clapped. Why did they? She rushed to her car, leaned against it. She threw the red rose onto the car hood. The thorns tore her fingers, but the sweet floral scent remained in the air. She dug around for tissues in her leather handbag. Not finding any, she withdrew the plastic tub of wipes, but the container slipped through her fingers.

A large hand snagged the falling container, and an arm wrapped around her waist, pulling her snug against him. Devon's unique male fresh sea-spiced scent wafted over her, creating a yearning amidst her misery.

"Christ, you have a beautiful voice. The angels stopped to listen. I had to applaud. We all applauded for you because of the obvious anguish you had experienced. The song touched each one of us, Melody. Your singing is magnificent."

She sniffed back the liquid ready to run out of her nose. They liked her song. They clapped in joy, not to get her off the stage as the eighth-graders had during the school pageant.

"Need a tissue?"

She nodded.

He popped one from the container. "I've seen *Phantom* a couple of times, and I swear I don't remember that song. What is the name of it?"

"Luca, the music director, altered the base of a couple of Verdi songs and created his own lyrics. They added it to the program as *Canzone da Infelicità* or *Misery Song*." She crushed the wipe in the palm of her hand and met his gaze. "So you like it?"

Devon kissed her. Not with the tentative searching type of kiss she envisioned while she'd been on stage, but a deep, full, head-on kiss. He gave her a lip-lock which sent her mind to spinning and her knees to lose all ability to hold her upright. His arm remained around her waist,

thankfully, or she would have fallen to the ground like a 1950's actress.

He softly whispered, "Whoa."

"I take that as a yes." She kissed him, a questioning type of kiss. She didn't like this man's personality, but they had a connection. A type of chemical bond that drew them together, and they mixed very well. "Is your house nearby?"

She wanted to take the words back, because it was an assertive statement. No, she had become the aggressor. She liked him. His body turned her on, and she wanted sex. Her glance met his.

"Ah luv, if only. Come on. You're ready to topple over. Let's go on our first date and celebrate your success."

"How do you know it'll be a success? They're taking a risk by altering the program." His words said no, but she saw longing in his eyes, and his desire pressed against her.

She snatched the black ribbon, tied to the red rose, and carried it to his car. Had Devon sent the rose?

He opened the door of a black Jaguar parked next to her car, and she slid in.

"Because, luv, I'm a good judge of character and have an odd aptitude to predict a good song. You, my dear, are going to be a success." He handed her the tub of wipes, smoothed her flowing gold and black striped skirt inside the car and shut the door.

A few minutes later, they arrived at the restaurant. The pub, new with an aged atmosphere, had elbow-to-elbow people. The crest on the wall looked familiar to him. He had a shield in his house with a similar emblem. Fitzgerald. It was a family crest of the Fitzgerald clan. The waiter appeared beside the table, and Devon ordered a dark beer. Melody requested a diet coke.

"Tell me why you're able to sing a song about misery so very well."

She shrugged her shoulders. "Life. The choices I've made and fate. Some of it good and a lot of it very bad." She paused; the waiter placed her glass of soda on the table. "The combination has created a sad, woeful tone in my singing voice."

"It does have a certain quality, makes the song you sang tonight

powerful but, when you sing to the children, your voice has lightheartedness. It puts a smile on their faces. Makes me smile." He watched her eyes lose that moroseness and take on a gleam. The children made her happy. He didn't think they knew each other well enough to talk about why she sang at the hospital, and the nurses were keeping the information close to their stethoscopes. To find out her motive, he'd have to get closer to her. Until then, he'd enjoy her company.

"What's your favorite color?"

"Yellow. And yours?" She drew circles on the table with her perfect pink fingernail.

"Black." He smiled.

"Not a color. Which one of the primary tints do you like?"

"I'd have to say red. What else does one cover in conversation on a first date?" he asked and sipped his beer. The brew was quite good, rich and thick.

She lifted an eyebrow. He could see a question forming. He hoped she wouldn't ask, because he didn't want to explain about his abstinence contract.

"Tell me about England. Did you grow up there?"

The knots in his stomach unraveled, and he relaxed. "I grew up in Indiana, at least for the first fourteen years. My father taught philosophy at a university, and we went to England each year for a semester. My mother and father live there now, in Surrey. How about you, where did you grow up?"

"Chicago, near the Gary border. Do you have brothers, sisters?" She lowered her glance.

"One younger brother. He's working on a doctoral in Sociology at Ball State University in Muncie, Indiana."

"It's nice that you have family close by." Her voice carried a wishful tone to it.

"Do you have brothers or sisters?" He reached out and stopped the constant circular motion of her fingers on the table.

"No." A sharp burst of air shot out. She lifted her trembling hand and fiddled with the scarf tied around her neck. His eyes focused on her

breasts, when the sharp heel of her shoe gouged him.

"Oops, sorry." Her legs shifted under the table.

"Are you nervous?"

"Are you, Casanova?" Humor and desire sparkled in her eyes.

He had to chuckle. "A little. I want to make a good impression. I sense you don't really like me very much."

"I'm drawn to you." A flash of heat entered her eyes before she lowered her gaze to the table.

The kiss in the theater parking lot indicated she was *drawn* to him. He wanted her. Sixteen more days and she'd be his. An image of the red rose shot through his mind. A twinge of jealousy made his heart lose pace. *Could she have another admirer?*

He handed over a menu. "What do you think you want to eat?" *Ask her.*

"Certainly not haggis." She twisted her nose and pulled her lips inward.

"Don't want stuffed pork stomach?" *Get it over with; ask her instead of letting the jealousy grow.*

"Maybe another day when I know you better." She winked at him. He laughed, the way he hadn't laughed in years. The covetous nervousness subsided. This was his chance and he'd make her his, regardless of how many admirers she had.

The waiter arrived and placed a basket with a loaf of bread in the center of the table. He stood, hands clasped behind him, and, after taking Melody's order of Cobb salad and Devon's order of shepherd's pie, he left.

"What was the best thing that's happened to you in the last five days?" Devon didn't believe she was the Dark Angel, but she could unknowingly help the criminal.

"I got a full solo to sing in *Phantom*." She sighed.

He leaned forward. "You mean the song you sang was just added to the program in the last five days."

"Yes. Apparently Luca had been working on it for a few weeks. The deviation will be noted in the program, but I just got a copy what seems like minutes ago. In the book there's a chapter where Carlotta is ashamed

about her singing voice and hides from everyone. Ross, the director, and Luca thought to be creative. Carlotta's embarrassment over her cracking voice gave them the opportunity. They wrote in a scene with her apartment as the backdrop. She belts out the song you heard. They're taking a huge chance on adding the *Misery Song* to the program."

"You're amazing. I can't imagine going on stage a few days before opening night and have a new song introduced." He picked up the loaf of fragrant bread and set a section on her bread plate. Tearing off another piece, he took a bite. Soft, yeasty, delicious, just like her.

"Tell me the best thing that happened to you in the past five days?"

He chewed on it for a moment. "Outside of getting a date with you, white blood counts were good for eight out of ten kids, which mean they're feeling better."

"Oh, Devon. That's wonderful news."

Their plates of food were placed on the table at the same time a violinist began to play on the tiny stage close to them. Conversation lagged as they ate. The shepherd's pie exceeded his expectation of British food in an American setting. He made a note to come here more often. Except for the music, it was too loud. He'd had enough. Standing, he pulled his chair around to touch elbows with her. He shoved his plate over and sat down.

"This is better. Want a bite?" He held a forkful of pie out to her.

"No, thank you. Personally, I think it's a nasty combination with the mashed potatoes, vegetables and meat layered like that. I need my food separated." She wrinkled her nose in distaste.

"So you don't like messes? Everything in perfect order?"

She set her fork down, squished her face in thought. "I suppose you could say that, but I'm not OC or anything. I just like order."

"You work at a diner and share your amazing voice with the people of Chicago and the kids. What do you like to do in your free time?"

"Read, exercise and sleep." She sipped her glass of soda and glanced into his eyes. "At least I try to sneak in some good shut-eye whenever possible. What do you like to do in your free time?"

"Outside of work. I like to go up in my Cessna, to soar on a

## Melody's Song by jj Keller

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cloudless sky with tiny plots of land, houses and cars below. There's nothing like it; hovering above the skies gives me a sense of freedom and relaxation. Do you like to fly?"

"Only been on an airliner with one hundred other people."

"Never been inside a single-engine?"

She shook her head. "No need. Have a car, can take a train and big plane for the distance."

He touched her hand then her cheek. "Will you go up with me someday?"

He waited; she raised her glance to meet his. A soft smile formed on her face. The firelight from the candle reflected and warmed her brown eyes.

"Is that what you want to do on Sunday?" she asked.

The excitement at the thought she'd spend time with him again made his heart pound like the piano player's fingers on the ivories. Fast and hard.

"Yes." He grinned.

"I'd like to do that also," she whispered, with that raspy sexy voice.

The waiter silently appeared and removed the dinner plates. Dessert had been refused. So enchanted with her he hadn't recalled ordering coffee, but the cup had been placed in front of him and a steaming brew of tea in front of Melody.

"Will I see you at the hospital tomorrow?" he asked, touching his fingers to her hand.

"No. I'll be in on Saturday." She sat back in the seat and crossed her legs. "Do you have a special request?"

"I'd like to hear *Beauty and the Beast* again."



## Chapter Eleven

Melody's nerves jolted and jingled through her body; opening night was scheduled in forty-eight hours. Could she do it? Stand on stage in front of hundreds of people and sing? Her aspirations spread out before her; all she had to do was to get up there and belt a couple of songs. She had watched many divas in the past, so she had no worries about acting as one. She'd do it in her son's memory. She'd give a performance that would knock the phantom off his gold chair and into the tunnel water.

With this firm resolution in mind, she threw open the door of Birdy's Café. Only a few regulars sat at the tables or bar, being ten in the morning. The new waitress he had hired to help cover nights grabbed the coffee pot and poured the black fragrant brew into cups. Melody couldn't wait to finish with the play so she could drink coffee again. The beverage, harsh to vocal cords, had been replaced with a variety of herbal teas.

"Hi, Michelle, where's Birdy?"

Her red-haired ponytail bounced as she turned. "Hi, Melody. He's in the kitchen talking to some guy."

Melody turned.

"Oh, by the way a guy came looking for you yesterday. Tall, black, nice face." Michelle scurried off to take an order.

Had Kurt tracked her down to ask about her role in *Phantom*? Although he'd sent Ross to meet her, she had no intentions of talking to Kurt again. Melody stuffed her bag and light-weight coat into a locker. She went to search for Birdy. She hadn't seen Angela in a couple of days

and wanted to know why she hadn't been at the hospital or if they'd simply missed each other.

Melody came around the corner and slipped on the freshly mopped floor. She lost control and squealed. A familiar hand flew out and caught her arm. Steady, she stared into Devon's beautiful green eyes.

"Devon," she breathlessly said. Glancing beyond him, Birdy had a mile-wide smile on his handsome wrinkled face.

She retied her tennis shoes and pulled down the T-shirt, straightening the image of Ace Ventura, Pet Detective. "What are you doing here?"

"He came to ask you to go on a picnic with him. I said yes," Birdy said.

The sweet old man was in for a surprise. He would not make decisions for her or tell anyone what she'd be doing with her time. If she had the day off, she'd get a haircut, nails done, maybe a wax, which was sorely needed.

"What?" she angrily asked. Her trained voice raised the slightest octave and could be heard throughout the building.

"Now, Melody, it'd be good for you to get out and ah, socialize. I've talked with Dr. Siegal for the last thirty minutes, and he seems like a fine fella. Go on, it'll be good to give the new girl some experience flying solo for a couple of hours." He touched her arm, urging her to walk.

She snuck a peek at Devon. There was odd expression on his face. Light and dark, unease and silent calm, stay or go. Confusion, as if he couldn't decide if he should make a comment or wait and see how the scene played. Her shoulders tensed in preparation to say her piece.

She inhaled, a deep strong wind, in order to provide herself with enough power to correct the false ideas of the men. Devon touched her hand, and her anger died as suddenly as it brewed. He gently rubbed his finger over her palm. Her body relaxed. His fingers moved the circular motions up to her wrist.

"And of course since you're giving me time off, I get vacation pay." A frown instantly formed on Birdy's face. As difficult as it was, she held the laugh inside. Birdy's glance shot to Devon. Devon didn't smile, didn't

frown, and just patiently waited. The man had fathomless bottom of patience.

Birdy nodded. "Have a good time."

She smiled and released Devon's hand. She went to the lockers, gathered her bag and coat.

"Bye, Michelle, have a good day." Not waiting for a response, she flew out the door and managed to get half way down the block before Devon caught up with her.

"Melody, my car's over there."

She stopped, glanced at the Jag then at him. "Great, you probably don't want to walk much farther. Have a nice day and thanks for freeing my afternoon. I'll use the time wisely." She hustled down the sidewalk again. A bit of guilt washed over her. The time off was a surprise, but she wouldn't allow someone to make decisions for her. Never again.

He kept pace with her. "Wait. What about our date? Picnic? Time together?" He did look confused. The man apparently was used to getting his way with everything.

"Ask Birdy to go with you. He likes dark beer, too."

His face lit up like a church on Sunday evening.

She resisted the smile, ready to pop out, as the glimmer of understanding crossed over his face.

"I get it. I took liberties with you by not asking you first. You probably wanted to be asked. I'm sorry." He pivoted into her path, halting her forward progress. "Melody, would you go on a picnic with me? The sunny, warm days are numbered since we're getting into the winter months."

"No, thank you. Since I've the day off, I'll use it to take care of some personal things I've been neglecting." She sidestepped him and increased her stride. Another block and she'd be at her hairdresser's. Maybe they could fit her in.

She heard his heavy breathing before he spoke. "Fair enough. May I spend the day with you, helping you with your personal tasks?"

It might be good for him to see the flip side of a female, and she wouldn't mind having him accompany her. "If you dare."

"I'm sure I can handle whatever you put in front of me."

"Okay. I'm getting my hair cut and styled. Your mane could use a trim." She held open the door of *Style and Profile*. Pam rushed up and hugged her while keeping her gaze on Devon, devouring him. A tiny bit of jealousy ran through Melody. He was a handsome man, if you like tight, large muscles, and she did.

"I thought you'd changed hairdressers, but looking at your hair, it's clear you didn't, girlfriend."

"Hi, Pam. This is my friend Devon Seigal. We both need a cut and style. Do you think Carla's free to cut his hair?"

"Sur 'nough." She flashed a smile at Devon and winked at Melody. "Come on, Devon, have a seat right here." She led him down the row of beauty shop chairs and, after he plopped down into the last one, she wrapped a black nylon cape around his neck. His expression reflected in the mirror was wary. She patted him on the shoulder.

"Now just a sec, hon, and I'll have Carla fix you right up." Pam wiggled through the curtained area shaking her large tush in the process.

Melody unbound the knot at her head and closed her eyes. This tiny bit of heaven would be good for her.

"Should we change it up a bit? Go with the straight hair again?" Pam's sweet musical voice chimed into her ear.

"Yes, I'd like to have short and simple. Maybe a page boy with bangs? What do you think?"

"Well you've lost a bit of weight since I've seen you last, so the short cut could work for you. You clearly haven't been conditioning your hair." She lifted strands of dry and frizzy hair. "I'll throw in a conditioning treatment if you tell me all about the white hunk-of-fun down at the end of this line. Um, um. He's a looker."

An hour later while Pam curled the last section of hair, Melody ended the story with Devon asking Birdy to give her a day off to go with him on a picnic.

"Sounds like he cares about you, Melody."

Melody shot her glance in the mirror to see Pam's expression. Wistful. She meant what she said.

"You don't think he's trying to manipulate my time? Get into my good graces?" She lifted and lowered her eyebrows.

"I'm sure he wants some of that, sugar. I've known you for a long time, and you could use some grindin'. You hold your privates as tight as Midas, the miser, did his money."

The door clanged open. Devon walked in with a tray filled with coffee cups. Carla had whacked off his locks, and then he'd gone in search of beverages. The cut, close to his head, lay in waves, beautiful light brown shaggy edged waves. It made him appear all the more innocent.

"I brought mocha for the ladies and tea for my lady." He walked over and handed a coffee to Carla who giggled her response. Carefully, he set a cup on the right side of the counter for Pam and handed the cup of tea to Melody.

"Thanks, Devon. Very sweet. Melody tells me you're a pediatric oncologist. Why did you decide to go into that type of medicine?" Pam asked.

Crap. Good question. Why hadn't she ever asked him?

"I always wanted to be a medical doctor, but I knew I wanted to be a pediatric oncologist when my fourteen-year-old cousin was diagnosed with Hodgkin's Lymphoma. I went with him to his treatments a couple of times to keep his mind busy and off the chemicals they were shooting into him. I decided I wanted to help others." He sipped from his cup of coffee, while keeping his gaze on Melody.

"Too bad you couldn't have been Melody's son's doctor. He was an ass." Pam put her scissors away.

Melody nearly dropped the cup of tea. With a shaking hand, she set it on the counter. She glanced at him to see how he would take the news.

"Me, too." Although he smiled, his green eyes held a hint of sadness. Like Melody hadn't trusted him enough to share this type of information and it hurt him. Her stomach twisted into guilt-riddled knots.

"You're done, missy." Pam whipped off the cape, being careful to not spill hair on Melody.

"The hair style is very nice for you," Devon said; the sadness in his eyes filtered through his voice.

She hurt, deep in her heart, for the sadness she'd put there. Although they had been seeing each other during most of her free time, an opportunity never came up for, *by the way, my son died of cancer*. Not true, she had many opportunities. She didn't want to share her secret with him. It was best kept hidden. The anguish wasn't as painful that way.

Melody opened her bag and withdrew her wallet. He touched her fingers clasp the brown leather.

"I took care of it." Within a few strides he was out the door and down the sidewalk.

She nodded, said thanks to Carla and Pam, and ran to catch him.

"Devon," she shouted. He kept walking. She didn't know what to say, how to approach him. His wide stride put him several feet in front of her.

She came along side of him and placed her hand on his arm.

"Devon." She panted.

His jaw was tight; his eyes continued to hold that lost-my-puppy expression. Her breath caught in her throat as he looked down at her. Under her fingertips she felt unleashed tension.

"I'm sorry I didn't tell you. There wasn't a good time."

He lifted one side of his mouth, and his eyes narrowed. She had only known him as a gentle, patient man. She'd never seen him other than happy. Now, he sneered at her. Displeasure made his body tense, not pity or ruefulness as she had expected. In the past when people found she'd lost a child to cancer, their expression was sorrowful, and then they quickly left her presence as if her grief could be transferred to them.

"I understand about loss. I see it every day. You're claiming there wasn't time? Something this important happened in your life, and you didn't have time to tell me? It's obvious I want a trusting relationship, but I don't know what you want." His voice was raspy, like hers after several hours of singing. The words came out slow, clearly enunciated and no charismatic tilt at the end. His jewel-green eyes held anger, sharp enough to cut through her heart.

He pivoted and walked away from her.

"We should talk," she shouted. He backhanded a wave at her.

Melody continued down the block, choking back sobs. She held her hand to her heart. It ached. She had hurt him. Shaking off the guilt, she brought the tears under control by the time she arrived at *Korean Nails and etc.* Later, after he cooled down, she'd find him, and they'd talk. He just needed time to adjust.

"Hi, does anyone have time to do a manicure and a pedicure?"

"Yes. Please sit," the tiny Korean receptionist said. The room painted a bright white had four stations for manicures and four chairs for pedicures; a closed door led to an unexplored area.

Melody sat in the lounge chair and propped her hands on top of the arms. Kamila, according to her gold name badge, shaped, buffed, and shined Melody's nails. There were several occasions Melody could have told Devon about Gavin. Probably should have shared with him after he'd started meeting her every night at ten o'clock in the theater parking lot.

Kamila, with her petite body and tiny fingers, massaged and prepped Melody's toes. While they were shaped and painted, she considered the situation. They had only known each other for three months. She didn't really care for his personality. He was arrogant, determined and self-assured.

They had been seeing each other outside of the hospital for two weeks. Okay, over two weeks, but still. As the fan dried her nails, she counted off the number of times they had discussed family and personal relationships. It equaled the four foam pieces separating her toes on one foot. Who did he think he was?

"Kamila, you do waxing here also, right?"

"Yes. We even do the new Stealth Wax." She grinned, as if she anticipated Melody asking the next question? As others had before?

"What is a Stealth Wax?" Her legs tingled with anticipation of being smooth and hairless.

"We sneak in fast. Quick in and out, leaving only a bit of sting." She laughed.

"Sign me up. The full Stealth."

"Okay." She checked the dryness of the polish. "Come. Wear separators for a bit longer."

Kamila led her to the previously unvisited separate room. She lit candles, flipped on the power button of the wax pot, and handed over a light blue sheet. "Take off all clothes from waist down. Macky will be in."

Melody looked at the sheet, the table and the tray of supplies, wax, tape, wooden flat sticks, beside the table. Why did she have to take off all her clothes? She removed her jeans. Maybe the full Stealth meant they removed the hair on her upper thighs as well. It wasn't necessary, as the clothing she wore in the play covered her legs. Yet, why not?

The air wafted around as she whipped off her underpants, spreading the vanilla scent from the candles. Risqué! She climbed onto the sheet-covered table with nothing on but an underwire bra and thin Ace Venture T-shirt. The garment should have been riddled with holes years before. Torn or shredded, she wouldn't part with it. The movie had made her son laugh. She'd bought the shirt to remind her that laughter was the best medicine, indeed.

She tapped her hands on the top of the sheet. Waiting. In two nights the show would open. She had to ignore all thoughts and focus on her performance. It would take all of her effort to walk on stage at the opening and intentionally sing in the wrong pitch, lack of tune, which was how the opera begins.

"Hello. I'm Macky. I'll be doing your wax today."

Melody lifted her head and stared at the deep-voiced woman. Great, flat tone. A depressed or repressed character, that couldn't be good for someone who planned to rip waxed tape off her legs. Even more shocking was a woman that stood at six-foot in a Korean shop. She had shoulders as wide as the doorway. Her beefy hands twirled the wax around in its pot.

"Hi, Macky, it's great to meet you. I'm Melody. Here for a wax."

"Let's get to it. Relax, this will be quick and...well quick." Her surprisingly warm hands separated Melody's legs. "Wow, you have let yourself go."

Melody frowned. No need to wax the snatch since there hadn't been any action. Her thoughts flew to Devon. She wanted him to spend time down there. Rubbing his naked legs against hers and touching her as



she hadn't been touched in over two years. The need was great, the opportunity limited. Why couldn't she let her heart accept him? Why did she crave him as a man and reject him personally?

Perhaps because he presented himself as an oxymoron. The warm wax slid onto her leg and the pressure of the strip of cloth next. Devon was kind and sweet one moment, arrogant and demanding the next. Why did he think she owed him the knowledge of her personal life? The waxed strip tore from her skin. The sharp burn made her tense.

His kindness and concern for the children drew her to him. The warmth from the wax entered her pores. He was angry because she wanted to keep Jared on schedule. The strips continued to pull the embedded hairs. The pain was bearable.

So he met her each night at the theater and followed her home. Considerate and touching. When had those few minutes of conversation, those few kisses started to mean more to her than she anticipated? But, who asked him to meet her each night at the theater?

Her thoughts were punctuated by ripping sounds. *Yikes, wasn't she done yet?*

"I'm ready to Stealth you. Spread your legs."

She separated her legs anticipating the inner thigh waxing.

"I'm going to trim this back a little since it's so long," Macky said with a long sigh mingled in.

"Fine." The razor snipped and pulled a bit. Her inner thigh hair hadn't grown that much before. The pulling felt closer to her privates. Maybe she had let it go too long.

What right did Devon have to ask Birdy for a day off and make arrangements for her free time? For a picnic in October. Granted the day was warm. The wax ran down her curls at the junction of her thighs. Crap. Macky must have lost direction. This was getting close and personal. Was she taping her off to strip her pubic hair? She asked for the Stealth and assumed it meant quick in and out...then she was too embarrassed to ask if it was a full hair removal. Her head pounded in anticipation of what would come next.

Devon did matter. She made him angry. No, she lost his respect,

which was more important to her. Okay, so Devon cared for her. Tape wrapped around her mound. He wasn't in love with her.

He hadn't made overt gestures. He often placed his arm around her waist to guide her. Yes, his kisses were nice. Occasionally, he massaged her breasts, bringing them to peak, to ache, making her desire him all the more.

Reflecting back, he had touched her as often as possible. Why was she focusing on this now? The warmth of the wax created a tingling to add to the desire she felt for Devon. He made her hot, and she tingled inside.

"Ready?" Macky asked.

The woman didn't wait for an answer.

Rip, rip, splintered the air, like tape being pulled off a dry surface.

Melody bolted up with a shriek. Her legs fell to the side, straddling the table.

"That hurt!"

The pain was intense, and it wasn't the good let's-have-sex ache.

"What did you do?"

"Finished." The woman smiled evilly.

"Then leave, please." Melody's pants came out in harsh little breaths. Macky nodded and walked out.

Melody held the sheet to between her legs, applying pressure. Her skin vibrated with heat and pain. Crap. What had she agreed to? She reached over and grabbed a mirror from the cart. She lifted the cloth, spread her legs, and held the mirror. Reaching down, she touched.

## Chapter Twelve

The last rehearsal before opening night went flawlessly. Tomorrow night they would be free to relax. As Melody removed her makeup, she questioned if Devon would be outside, waiting for her. She had squashed down the instinct to find him and explain again, rationalizing she had apologized, in a way. Glancing down at her perfect manicure and touching the short locks, she was thankful he had provided her with free time yesterday. Even if it had been out of anger. Would he forgive her?

"Night, Melody. Have fun on your day off." Pep threw a cloak over her shoulders.

"Night, Pep. Be careful, you'll need to be in top performance."

Pep winked and opened the door. "No doubt I'll be in top performance for the next two nights."

"Ready, Pep?" Ian, her new boyfriend asked as she exited with a flounce.

Melody smiled. At least one of them would be getting sexual relief tonight. Her clit tingled and warmed as the silk of her panties rubbed against the bald skin.

She changed into her street clothes, bade the others good night, and left the dressing room. Her hand held on to the exit door. Would he be outside? Had she made him so disappointed in her he would never see her again? There was only one way to find out.

She threw open the door and glanced around outside. Her car, parked under the light, looked alone, empty, and abandoned. He hadn't

come; it was over. Would he forgive her if she found him and declared all of the truth?

Why did she care? She inhaled the scent from the recent rain.

She did, because she had fallen in love with him.

Who did he think he was, making her care if he came to see her home? She marched over to her car. Why had he made her expect him to be there, to lean on, to talk to, and to share her concerns?

She didn't need him. Shaking her head, she admitted the truth. She enjoyed his company. He was smart, sweet, and he *had* cared about her. He wanted to spend time with her. Carrying around anger for the past two years had made her a spiteful shrew.

Yes, she did need him to make her whole again.

She shoved the key into the lock of her car door and jerked it open. A dark shadow encompassed her. Her heart beat as fast as the remnants of rain dripped off the streetlamp, a quick drip. She tugged the key from the lock and turned to face the evil in the black night.

"Devon," she whispered. She didn't know if she recognized him from instinct, or because she loved him, or due to his cologne.

"Yes," he walked out of the shadows.

She threw herself into his arms.

"I'm sorry." She kissed his neck, his cheek and locked onto his mouth. She broke the kiss. "Forgive me?"

"Yes." He kissed her with passion, a vow of togetherness regardless of how she'd angered him. Her tears pressed against his cheek.

"We're getting wet; come with me. We'll come get your car tomorrow." Forgiveness radiated from his voice.

Fraught with need, she nodded. He secured the locks on her car, and they walked over to his. Thirty minutes later, they arrived at her apartment building.

"Do you want to come in? We'll talk?" Her voice held a hint of fear.

"Yes, I think we do need to talk," he answered.

"Park in my garage spot then."

Devon parked the car. They climbed several flights of stairs and arrived at her apartment. Tonight he would find out why she kept herself

at a distance. And determine if they had a future as a couple or if he'd end the dream. He took the keys from her trembling fingers and unlocked the door.

She threw open the metal entry. "Would you like a drink?"

"Do you have brandy?"

"I'll get it for you." She hung her coat on the hook behind the door and with a thud her purse dropped to the floor.

Tonight she wore a jewel tone, teal blue pantsuit. He touched her back; the soft silk of the fabric moved under his fingertips. She leaned into his hand. Her scent, a mix of jasmine and vanilla, drew him closer. He nuzzled the nape of her neck. She twisted around and touched her lips to his. It was a kiss of fervor. A kiss of promise. A kiss of unity.

"I want you so much, but we need to talk." He held her tight, not wanting to let go.

She nodded, and her shortened hair slid across her shoulders. He touched the locks. "I like your new haircut."

"Thanks." She left his arms, walked into the kitchen, and withdrew a bottle of liquid gold from a cabinet. The brandy looked cute in the Tony the Tiger juice glass. She handed the small container to him.

Securing the glass in one hand, he grasped her hand and led her over to the sofa, a comfortable blue, green, and beige plaid seat. They sat side by side. He released her hand and placed an arm around her shoulder. He took a sip of the brandy and set the tumbler on the coffee table.

"I didn't think you'd come tonight. I thought you'd given up on me." She coiled the fringe on a lap blanket.

"I don't give up that easy." He kissed the side of her face at the temple.

"I haven't had much faith in relationships, Devon." He caught her gaze. "I never knew my father. My mother worked two jobs, so I seldom saw her. I excelled in the arts and obtained a scholarship at Chicago University but fell in love at eighteen and became pregnant." She placed her hand on his cheek. Her voice changed, lowered with what sounded as if deep regret had been embedded in each word.

"I had to drop out after the first year, to work and take care of my son, Gavin."

"The father?" She dropped her hand from his face.

"He didn't want the responsibility of a family, went to California. I haven't heard from him since."

"Tell me about Gavin."

"He was my joy, my hope, my life." A single tear slid over her dark eyelashes.

Devon lifted his finger and caught it. She placed her cheek against his chest.

"Gavin had extraordinary ability with music. He could hear my off-key notes and at three years old correct me. At five, he could sing the entire first scene from *Emperor's New Clothes*."

She sniffed. "He was precocious and precious. He was a gift to me, and I miss him so much my heart aches for him each and every day."

"Ah, luv. I'm so sorry." He held her while she quietly sobbed into his chest. Her nails gripped his shirt, and her shoulders vibrated against his arm. She sat back and snatched a tissue from the box near the sofa.

"You're a brave woman to go into the oncology unit and sing your beautiful songs." *Melody please let me into your heart. Let me share the rest of my life with you.*

She explained how the man who owned the diner she worked at introduced her to his niece. He recognized the name but couldn't place a face. He cringed in sympathy at her sad story of how Angela had heard her as she sang to her son. Angela, Birdy's niece, wanted her to sing to other sick children. She talked about how much it hurt yet made her happy to see the children in the oncology unit. Devon understood her a little better after listening to her story.

Melody told him it took months to come to the decision. In the meantime, she dated a man who had different ideas about relationships. He'd sent Ross, the producer of *Phantom*, to see her, and later he hired her to sing. He experienced a twinge of jealousy as she'd described the man she'd dated last. And behind it all, he was sure she continued to keep something from him. A secret she didn't trust him enough to share. It was

instinctive, and he could have been wrong, but she held something from him.

"You forgive me then?" She straddled his lap. His cock rose and throbbed.

"Yes, luv. I forgive you."

She kissed his lips, bringing her tongue over the top and bottom. "Great, could we have sex?"

"I'd like nothing more than to make love with you. Right here, right now," he whispered, his voice was scratchy and barely audible.

She unzipped his jeans and rubbed her hand over the extended length of him. He threw his head back, so fast and hard, it cracked against the wall. Pain ricocheted all the way down his neck.

"I'm sorry. Let me see." She leaned over to look at the injury. Her breasts pressed against his face; he inhaled with his last breath.

He would die. A sexy vamp rubbed her breasts against him, and his head ached.

There'd be no tomorrow. His cock would explode, and he'd die an embarrassing death two days before his freedom to act on his lust for the woman he'd come to love.

She slid off his lap and ran a few inches into the kitchen. Withdrawing an ice bag from the freezer, she rushed to his side.

"I'm sorry. I guess I'm enthusiastic about being with you." She pushed the ice bag onto his scalp. "Better?"

"Not really," he moaned. He lowered her hand, holding the ice bag. She held one hand to his chest the other to the side with the cold solid liquid.

He unbuttoned her blouse, revealing a black bra underneath. Unsnapping it, he eased both off her shoulders and down her arms. She dropped the ice bag on the table. He wanted it to be on his cock because he could not have sex with her and, as delectable as she was, he would embarrass himself.

He stood holding her by her rear. She clasped her legs around his waist. "Where?"

"Other side of the kitchen."

He carried her. Her mouth constantly moved over his face and neck while her fingers unfastened his shirt and tweaked a nipple. Her naked chest rubbed against his shirt. His cock pulsed and rocked begging for release. Stumbling into the bedroom, the decor resembled the woman, simple and elegant. The white comforter stood stark against the mocha colored walls. He lowered her beside the bed and unfastened her trousers. They slid down her legs. Her panties followed, making a slithering sound as they traveled. He tossed his shoes, and his unfastened jeans fell to the floor.

Her rounded nails lowered his tight, dark blue underwear. He juttied out as if it were the first time his erect penis had ever been released and the fullness pained him. She turned down the covers and reclined like a coveted courtesan from centuries past.

"Sorry, bro. Can't do it," he whispered and threw off his shirt.

"What? Come here. I'll make you escape your solitude, and you can help me overcome my darkness." She flipped her hair behind an ear.

He lay on his side and stroked his fingers over her beautiful breasts, so large his hand didn't fit over one. Her skin was soft and smooth. She touched his hand guiding him to the point of her pleasure.

He touched, tweaked, inserted a finger, and she rolled onto her back. She lifted one leg giving him clear access, clear view of her hairless, smooth womanhood. Her womb sucked his finger inside. Liquid formed with such velocity his finger became embedded in the warm fluid and tight muscles.

*I'm counting on you. Do you want to go to the schools to see thirteen-year-old children with STD sores on their mouths?*

"Get out of my head," he mumbled.

"What," she whispered as her hand stroked his back, giving him an urgency to carry his body on top of hers and give both of them the pleasure they sought.

"I'm helping my brother with a study, and I can't break the agreement, but I will give you pleasure." She deserved some satisfaction having been aroused this much. He kissed her closed eyes and her cheeks.

"Study?"



“Yes, later I’ll explain.”

Her hips moved in rhythm to his finger, he inserted a second. He kissed her full lips with such passion he knew he’d explode at the slightest touch from her. She convulsed around his fingers and screamed out in ecstasy.

## Chapter Thirteen

"Your cell is ringing," Melody whispered, surprising herself that she could talk after the release.

He kissed her lips, withdrew his fingers and slipped off the bed. The ring tone from the cell stopped as he pulled it from his jeans pocket. A quick press of a button and Nurse White's voice came from the small pocket-sized device.

Melody tugged the covers over her now cool body. He jerked his underwear and jeans up over his buttocks, leaned over and kissed her again. Grabbing his shirt off the floor, he threw his arm through a sleeve.

"I need to go. I'll call you. Sleep, my beauty, I'll see you later tonight." He grinned, his gaze holding warmth and love. What a foolish thought, he couldn't possibly love her.

Her prince, her light in the gloomy obscurity, left her sated and sleepy. Like a fat, full, sated cat, she turned over to sleep as the door shut.

He'd intimately touched her, and he wanted her. He'd pulsed full and strong because of her. Perhaps tonight they'd experience the union destined to be theirs and connect.

The noon rays brightened her room; she rolled onto her side and caught his sea-breeze fresh scent on the pillow. She cuddled it closer, dreaming of his sweet smile and fantastic body. Refreshed after a quick shower and application of a thin layer of lotion, she checked her cell phone; no call was in voicemail.

She grabbed her bag and walked to the diner. Birdy and Michelle,

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worked with frantic speed. Rush hour and at noon, the noise of customer chatter pierced her eardrums.

"What's going on?"

"Don't know. Must be a convention. Been busy all day." Birdy filled a cup with coffee.

"I'll help." She stuffed her purse under the counter and pulled on an apron. Grabbing the coffee pot, she went around filling near empty cups.

For the next two hours, she worked side by side with Birdy and Michelle. At the lull, she checked her cell. No message. When had she become one of those women who lingered by the phone waiting on a man to call?

\* \* \* \* \*

Devon scribbled notes in the chart. He had visited the last patient for the day. His next task, no, his pleasure, would be to telephone Melody and see if she could meet him this afternoon. He'd explain Nick's study of abstinence and reassure her it was only for a few more hours.

"Dr. Siegal, there's a man to see you. Said his name's Palmer," the nurse's aide said.

Devon signed his name and walked out of the dictation room. "Detective Palmer, what a surprise."

"Dr. Siegal, do you have a moment to talk?"

"Yes," he glanced around to see Nurse White avidly watching them. "Come on, I'll buy you a cup of coffee."

Devon led him to the doctor's lounge. The coffee was fresh and strong. The room absent of people provided them with a quiet, confidential atmosphere. "What's happening with the case? Did you follow up on the pharmacist?"

"Yes, which is the reason I'm here. I have a tape I want you to review and tell me if you recognize the woman.

"Sure."

"Come with me to the station."

Devon glanced at his phone; the afternoon would quickly get away. Should he take a minute and call her, just to say hi? "Okay if I follow you in my car?"

"Parking's a problem. Especially downtown is a zoo right now, conventions."

"Okay, I'll ride along with you." Devon caught Nurse White's attention and signaled he was leaving. If she were keeping tabs on him, he'd make it easy for her.

Jensen led Devon to the parking garage and used a remote to click open the doors of a white Crown Victoria.

"Do all the detectives drive a car like this one?"

"Yes."

"All are white?"

"Yes. Tell me whatever it is you seem to be holding back." Jensen strapped in and turned on the ignition.

"The day I saw Dr. Li hand over a pharmacy bag to someone outside. The car looked exactly like this one. It pulled out into traffic before I could see the license plate number." Devon hesitated and then plowed forward. "Do you think someone on your force is involved in this?"

Jensen frowned. "Suspicious isn't it. Did you get a visual of the driver or passenger?"

"Sorry. The windows were shaded." He twisted around to face Jensen. "The security at the hospital will have video, but a pine tree shaded the interaction. Maybe the cameras picked up the license plate as it entered or exited."

Jensen dialed his cell. "Gomez, call the hospital and ask for tapes from the front entrance for the last two weeks. Oh, don't let anyone in the pen hear you." He switched lanes, traveling at breakneck speed. "Watch the clips. You'll see a Crown Victoria. That's right, might be one of ours."

Jensen disconnected and slid the cell into his pocket.

"Got an insider?"

"It certainly looks that way." His grim expression confirmed Devon's suspicion.

"Damn, it's going to be hard to solve the case if you have a guy in your squad working against you." Devon slid his phone out of his pocket.

"Excuse me." He dialed Melody, and the call switched to voice mail. "Hi, I got delayed. How about a late dinner? Let me know."

"I see you took my advice." Jensen grinned.

"Ha. The right woman just happened to come along. Her name is Melody Haney. She's playing Carlotta in *Phantom of the Opera* at the new playhouse near New South Wales," Devon said. His phone vibrated against his waist. "Excuse me. I need to answer this call."

Jensen nodded.

He answered the call to hear his brother's happy voice chime through. "Seigal here. Don't worry, Nick. I know I only have twenty-four hours. I'll make it." Devon twisted to look at Jensen. "Yes, give me a few weeks, to ah, relieve and enjoy my renewed skills." He laughed. "Right. You, too."

Devon disconnected and slid the phone onto its belt clip. "Sorry. My brother. I'm helping him with a project."

Darkness overtook the car as they entered the parking garage. A few minutes later, they entered an office. Jensen shut the door then the blinds. He flipped on a DVD player and pushed play.

"There is Dr. Li. He's with a woman. Can't see her face. He walks with her to her car." He pressed pause. "There, do you know her?"

"It's not very clear. Do you have more?" Yes, he knew her, but he wanted to be sure. What else would he see? Was she having an affair with Li *and* him?

Jensen fast forwarded and stopped. The scene was in the hospital cafeteria. According to the clock behind the two, it was at ten o'clock in the evening, as the sky was black outside the windows. Dr. Li leaned over and caressed her cheek. The camera man zoomed in on her face. She closed her eyes. Had she pulled away?

Devon's heart rocketed to a halt. He rubbed his chest to relieve the indigestion he experienced. The burning didn't cease.

"Yes, I know who she is." His voice cracked with disappointment, anger and remorse.

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Jensen's glance pierced him, but the shards of pain came from Devon's heart.

"It's Melody."

## Chapter Fourteen

The night of the opening, Melody twisted her hands and paced as much as possible in the small dressing room, muttering to herself. The full dress brushed against the sides of the makeup stands. There were a few critics in the audience. *Phantom* was playing in other locations. The reason their little theater received a lot of promotion was due to the new building and the unusual circumstances surrounding many of the actors. A mischievous someone or common day phantom had been visiting their set. Due to illness and accidents or terror, many of the main roster names were replaced with understudies.

She glanced into the mirror. The gold dress, tight against her stomach, pushed up her breasts. They were so full the large, double-medallion necklace fell between the mounds. The red feathers attached to the spaghetti straps tickled her face. The headdress was heavy. Would she be able to hold her head straight with the enormous crown ordained with glass rubies and turquoise? She touched the sparkles surrounding her eyes; she was simply playing dress-up while singing songs.

She wanted to perform with such desperation she'd do whatever it took to keep this part. None of the actors could afford to be out of work and especially because of health or injury. They left to play other parts in downtown theater. Scared of the shadow that watched her before, Melody tried to walk out with a member of the cast or crew, and then Devon had started meeting her at the theater door. She hadn't seen the shadow again. The evil presence could have been there, but unnoticed, because she only

saw Devon.

Her dressing room door opened. She could hear the string orchestra playing in the background. The percussion rarely used in this opera could not be heard over the other instruments. She loved the woodwind and brass sections. Her stomach nerves bounced around like a piece of lint in a furious wind because of her impending début.

"Melody, flowers." Pep's long-legged stride brought her close, and she handed a large bouquet of yellow roses to her. A new single red rose with a black ribbon sat bare on her dressing table. It had an air of creepiness. She wanted it to die.

"Oh, yellow, my favorite. How many do you think are in this massive bouquet?" Melody asked.

"Twenty-five."

Melody lifted a recently plucked eyebrow.

"I counted." Pep shrugged her shoulders. "I wanted to know." She flipped over the envelope holding the tiny card. "Who are they from?"

"Let's see." Melody grabbed the paper and extracted the card. "Break a leg, luv. Devon."

"Oh, Devon, lovely name. Is he the one who jumped up on stage the first night you sang *Canzone da Infelicità*? How do *you* have time for a boyfriend?"

"He was here the first night, but I don't have a boyfriend. No boyfriend. He's just a doctor at the place I volunteer." She plucked a flower and handed it over to Pep. Devon had left her a voice mail asking her to dinner then later called and said he couldn't meet her as he was still occupied. And she hadn't heard from him since.

"You make all of us look bad. You work at the diner, have the voice of an angel, and volunteer." She sniffed the flower. "Why twenty-five? Two dozen equals twenty-four."

"They're playing the opening number. We'd better scurry out to the stage." She stood, got a bottle of water from under the counter and poured the liquid into an empty Big Gulp cup. Removing the tissue, she dropped the yellow roses into the life-extending H<sub>2</sub>O.

Pep, dressed as Meg, flounced toward the door, stopped to give a



backward glance. A clever look shimmered in her eyes. The perceptive girl was as mischievous as a cat let loose in a yarn store.

Melody plopped down on the stool in front of the mirror. She knew why twenty-five roses had been sent. Today marked the twenty-fifth day they'd shared time together. At first it was coffee for Devon, tea for her twice a week after she sang to the children. Three weeks of tea time and he asked her for a date, including gentle touches, hand-holding and kissing at the end of the night. She rose from the stool, exited the dressing room, and played through the remainder of their relationship.

He had been consistent, appearing at the theater every night and waiting, regardless of how late the hour. He escorted her to her car and followed her home. She parked, and he walked her to her door.

His kissing and touching had worked her into a panting frenzy. Nothing she had done had relieved the sexual frustration she experienced. Even her vibrator had been stored in the sweatshirt drawer. Cold showers following a workout with Billy Banks didn't do it for her. Some unseen force had an odd sense of humor, making her desire a man who annoyed the hell out of her.

"You're very pretty, but I'm not a man of lust," he had said, and her desire to strip him naked fell to the wayside. Yet, he continued to touch her with his soft strokes. Had he meant he needed to love the person in order to have sex?

Briefly, she wished she were Media, a mythological woman skilled in sorcery. Devon would fall instantly in love with her. Instead, she suffered through the push and pull of sexual attraction. He wanted to be with her. It wasn't until he grew angry that he finally went beyond the kisses and gentle touches. Had he fallen in love with her then? Her breasts perked in the gown just thinking about him and her bliss as his sensitive hands catapulted her into ecstasy. Her clit pulsed in needful anticipation of his fullness taking her to complete satisfaction.

How much more of this could she take? She had arrived at the stage and peeked at the audience. Was he among the spectators? Why hadn't he contacted her before sending flowers? Did he expect to meet her after the show? Opening night? She hoped he did.

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Melody stood at the edge of the stage, waiting for her cue. She could do this. It'd be a snap. *Pretend you're going to sing to the kids. No one's in the audience but sick children who need to hear a pretty song to make them smile.*

"Melody," the stage director snarled. The girls behind her giggled then cleared their throats and hummed, preparing to début.

She walked onto center stage, and the nervousness, the flutter in her stomach, fell away. Swallowing the hitch in her throat, she stepped to her mark. Once in character, she focused on her role instead of the audience, the other actors, or the stage crew. The time passed so fast, it was almost as if she blinked and the entire cast was standing on stage bowing to the applause.

The show was over. She had performed on stage and couldn't remember a damn thing. Had she done well? Had she forgotten a line? Had she missed cues? Marks? She didn't have a clue as to how she had performed.

The curtain closed, and cast and crew scurried around with as much excitement as if Christmas had been scheduled early. She spotted Ross. She lifted the edge of her long, blue gown and skated through the rush of people.

"Ross," she shouted. He had his arm wrapped around a man carrying a mini-tape recorder.

She glanced around searching for Luca. No luck. With a sigh, she opened the dressing room door. She had taken so much time looking for someone to tell her how well the production had gone that the other actresses had already changed into street clothes.

"Melody, get changed and join us for the after-party," Pep shouted.

"I've exhausted all my energy. I think I'll just go home and sleep."

"No, you must join us. We wait for the reviews and read them as a group," Pep said, and three of the chorus girls nodded their heads.

"Pep, I need to know—"

"Hey, Melody there's a hunky guy outside asking to see you," Sarah, the stage hand shouted.

"I don't—"

"Change and I'll find out who it is," Pep said, flipped her hair, hiked her short, black skirt a little higher, and glided to the door.

"Pep, send him away." Melody shouted and removed her black pant suit off the clothing rack, the black blending in with the checkered hound's-tooth patterned wallpaper. She started toward her nook.

A couple of minutes later she had dragged a brush through her short hair, reapplied her lipstick, and hung the dress on the rack. Ready to leave, she contemplated the thirty-minute drive to Chicago and made a quick stop in the ladies room.

The scent of cheap powder and expensive floral perfume assaulted her nose when she came out of the restroom. She could hear tinkling of cymbals as the orchestra packed up their instruments. A sharp glance around showed the changing room to be empty. The other women had left for the party. Sighing, she grabbed her stomach as the spasms continued to clinch and tug her heart lower and lower. Devon! Was her great love affair over? Were they over? She snatched her coat off the rack. The sound of glass hitting tile caused her to pause. She pivoted. A slight wind blew across her face. Shivers ran over her skin.

She spun away from the dressing table; her scope encompassed the closed doors of the bathroom stalls and the clothes racks. "Hello? Is somebody there?"

The sensation of being watched continued to send cold chills over her skin.

Melody gathered her bag and rushed to the exit. Flipping off the lights, she firmly shut the door. And turned into Devon's open arms.

"Whoa," his spearmint-scented breath rushed across her face. "The others left only minutes ago. We can catch up with them."

He rubbed his hands down her arms, catching her hands into his.

"I don't want to go to the party. I just heard creepy sounds in the dressing room and felt someone staring at me, behind me." She shook with chills.

"I'll protect you." He kissed her cheek.

"Good to know. Well, good-night." She wanted to get home and sleep. The reviews could wait. Crap, she hoped she hadn't made a mistake

that would bankrupt the sponsors.

She released her hands from his grasp and started past him.

Devon grabbed her arm and swung her around into his embrace. "I hoped we could celebrate with the rest of the cast down at Mulligans or alone, whatever you want. But I'd like to share in your success, if you'll let me."

"Share in my success?"

"Yes. The play was exceptional. Perfect. Your solo brought the crowd to their feet."

She raised her questioning glance to meet his eyes. "They liked it?"

Devon continued to be amazed she lacked the self-confidence to believe others appreciated her voice, her songs. She had an amazing voice but, when it came to trusting others to value it, she had lost her faith. He doubted she was in league with Dr. Li, cooperating in a drug steal, and he'd prove her innocence.

"Yes, luv. I'm sure the audience thought your performance brilliant. Your solo made the woman next to me cry. Melody, feel my arm. My skin." He dragged her arm from its tight position beside her hip and placed it on his chest.

"You said arm." She squinted her eyes.

"Okay, if you insist." He unfastened the cuff of his shirt and lifted his jacket and shirt. His heart beat as quickly as the clock ticking on the wall nearest to them. She had to sense it as well, her stiff fingers softened and pressed lightly against his muscles.

He latched onto her hand and moved it to his arm. "Feel this?"

She nodded and licked her lips.

"Goosebumps. The strength of your voice and the powerful meaning the *Misery Song* has to you will have a profound effect upon people." He placed his hand on top of hers. "Even now, two hours later, I get chills thinking about it."

He drew her forward and kissed her lightly. She moaned deep in her throat. His lips met hers and added as much passion as possible in a public place, knowing they would likely be going to a party instead of his bed. A desperate man needing the love of a woman, a special lady,

shouldn't rush into the bedroom. Their union would be all the sweeter as a result of the wait. The need would continue to build and eventually relief would be theirs.

"What's it going to be? Party or my house for a bit of celebratory champagne?"

She placed her head against his chest and took a deep breath. He waited, wanting to celebrate the end of the contract. He'd either have additional sexual misery or be rewarded with lovemaking. He hoped to God it would be a merging of their bodies in celebration.

"Your place," she whispered.

"Let's go then." He wrapped his arm around her waist, and together they went to the parking lot. "Okay if we leave your car here and get it later?"

"Yes."

The majority of the patrons had left. He opened the car door; her outfit matched the night as she settled onto the seat.

He climbed inside. "Not very many stars tonight, probably rain tomorrow."

"If you're talking weather, you're as nervous as I am." She twisted her fingers in her lap.

"I'd have to answer yes. Excited and nervous."

Several minutes went by. He flipped on the radio, with soft rock playing light and quietly in the background. Rob Thomas sang, *Lonely No More*. He didn't want to be angry at her any longer. There had to be an explanation why she had a meeting with Dr. Li. He hoped she would tell him the truth.

"Where do you live?" Melody asked, crossing one leg over the other. She then placed both feet flat on the floor.

"Just a few minutes away. Relax, we'll be there before you know it."

"Devon, we've been going out for a couple of weeks now." She spoke softly and with hesitancy.

"Twenty-four days and eleven hours." He shot her a wide grin.

"Okay, almost a month. I should probably tell you a little about

myself."

"Married?" He jerked his head to look at her. Could this be her secret?

"No. It's just that..." No, was a hard answer.

"Didn't shave your legs?" He laughed and navigated between cars.

She chuckled. "I certainly did shave my legs, and then some, since I was changing in front of ten model-type women."

"You know how to excite a man." He glanced over at her.

"Yes, well. The chorus girls are at Mulligans if you're interested."

"Here we are." He pushed a remote button on the console of the Jag. "I'm only excited around you."

She smiled, twisted in her seat, and glanced behind her, to the left and to the right.

"You live at Emily Lucent's house?"

"I bought the house from an Emily Connery. Know her?"

"Best friend. I knew she sold it to a friend of Zach's, but I didn't think it was you. How do you know Zach?"

"We attended the same med school. He studied surgery, and I went the oncology route. Small world, isn't it?"

He drove the Jag into the pristine white garage. She flew from the car, before he could open the door and walked into the mudroom. He followed.

Wong had left a kitchen light on. As Devon got a bottle of champagne from the wine cooler and collected glasses, he watched her on the security monitor move through the house. He caught up with her in the foyer.

"It's different," she said as she glanced at his brown leather furniture.

"Different good or different bad?" He propped the wine under his arm, removed her large bag from her shoulder, and dropped it in the foyer.

She shrugged. "Different, because I miss my friend." She swallowed and inhaled a deep breath, drawing in the scent of the room.

He wrapped an arm around her shoulders, the glasses clinked

together. "Come, it'll be fine. We were meant to be together."

She nodded. "Yes, I think we were meant to be together."

He gave her a squeeze and they ascended the stairs. She knew the layout of the house, so he wasn't surprised she swayed her cute fanny to his bedroom.

He lowered the glasses and the champagne to the table. Easing out the cork, he poured the flute full and offered her a stem. With the other hand, he pulled her close so they touched chest to chest.

The clink of their crystal rang through the room. "Congratulations, Melody. You've a beautiful voice and will be a great success."

He kept his gaze locked onto hers.

"Thanks, Devon." She raised the crystal to her lips and sipped the clear bubbly champagne.

"It tickles my nose." She crinkled her face.

"And I'll be tickling other body parts," he replied, his hoarse voice defined his lust.

"I hope so. All the way right?" She smiled and winked.

"Yes, the study is over." He took the glass from her and set it down on the table. With gentle care, he wrapped his hand around hers and led her over to the bed. Pulling down the covers, he urged her to sit. He knelt in front of her and removed her black high heels, caressing her ankles.

He leaned forward, and his lips touched her soft, glossy mouth. He tasted the alcohol, experienced the rush of pleasure. She leaned her head to one side, and he continued kissing down her neck, to the V of her black silky top. Her breast seemed to swell as his tongue laved the tender flesh, exciting him to a painful new level.

Her heart beat a fast rate, pounding against his mouth as he slid his tongue over a nipple. Touch, he had to get rid of the cloth separating their skin. He clasped her waist and lifted her. At the rate of an inchworm, he caressed the skin under her top, lifting it over her head. He kissed his way down her soft skin; he sucked and nuzzled while he unclasped her bra. The sheer black lace quickly fell to the floor.

He suckled a breast; the bud pearled under his mouth. Moving to the next one, the nipple instantly awakened at his touch. She moaned, and

his penis pulsed against the cotton of his briefs.

Her hands instantly went to his shirt. The tux jacket and tie had been removed while he watched her walk through the house. With quick dexterity, she unfastened the T-bar studs from the button holes. A couple of jerks and the shirt had been freed from inside his belted pants. Painfully slow, she eased her fingers down his arms; the cuffs stopped her sweet caress. She lifted his left arm, allowing his hand to caress and mold her breast.

"I like the cuff-links. Cute with the black background and tiny gold stars," she whispered into his mouth.

"I wore them for you."

She fumbled with the clasp. He lifted his hand and, in a second, the cuff link plunged to the floor. The other followed, as well as the undershirt. His chest was bare; hers begged to be touched. He drew her forward. The immense satisfaction of having their bodies touching set his cock to throbbing. He needed more of her soft fragrant wantonness to be exposed.

His hands moved from her back to unfasten the clip and the zipper of her slacks. A few nudges and they dropped to the floor. She kicked them to the side. Now, the underpants. He kissed her with the passion of a man denied sexual promiscuity for one year to date. No, he had never been promiscuous; he waited for the right woman and, now, he had found her.

Rampant passion took his mouth down a vibrant path to her belly. His fingers inserted in the sides of the high-cut, barely there underpants. The lace allowed him to see skin...all skin. His fingers touched, circled, enjoying the soft smooth skin.

"You're so beautiful."

"You, too. Please help me get your clothes off so I can touch you."

His lips massaged her womanhood with a promise to revisit, and then he removed her panties. She stood naked before him in her glorious splendor. Her dark hair, straight with pieces surrounding her cheeks, drew his attention to her coffee-colored eyes.

Her nimble fingers unfastened his belt, unsnapped and unzipped



his trousers. They floated to the floor. Within seconds she had his black boxer briefs joining the trousers. He eased off his shoes, kicked away the clothes, and leaned down to remove his socks.

"No, no," she whispered.

Before he knew it, she grabbed his waist and threw him onto the bed. She kissed and suckled her way down his chest, focused on the head of his penis; his semen threatened to go off all over her face.

"Please, it has been awhile, I'll explode if you do more."

She smiled a wicked dangerous smile, and her eyes shone brightly in the dark. Giving his erection one final lick, she moved and removed his socks.

Like a sleek cat, she climbed on top of him and within seconds impaled herself onto his pulsating cock. He grabbed her waist and held her as she started to pump up and down.

"Can't, too fast. Let's take it slow. Enjoy the experience."

"Devon, I understand you want it to be special, but I need to have you now. Please forgive me."

She tightened her muscles around him, sucking him into her warmth. Her sweet juices flowed over him. He grabbed her hips and led her through the dance of ages. He guided her in anticipation of the leader becoming the follower, and she took him to sexual satisfaction.

## Chapter Fifteen

Melody pulled open the door to walk out of the oncology unit as Dr. Li flew through the portal. He held it for her.

"Excuse me. Oh, Melody, how are you?" He closed the door with a snap, shutting them outside the unit.

"Fine, Dr. Li, you seem occupied."

He bobbed his head. "Quite busy."

"I have a question if you have a moment."

"Sure, I always have time for you." He said it with a smile on his face, but the emotion did not appear in his eyes; although, she had never been able to read his facial expressions.

"Your friend, Zelda, she owns a New Age store, right?"

"Yes." His eyes darted back and forth.

"Do you know if her store has crystal balls?" She rubbed the edge of her leather bag and shifted her feet.

"Like in fortune-telling, mystic mumbo?" His blank stare switched, as if a light blinked on inside his head.

"Yes, I'm looking for a fortune-telling, crystal ball." *Please just tell me and go about your way.* She had tried to keep her distance since he touched her face in less than a fatherly way a few days ago. Uncomfortable with his invasion of her space, she had backed away and hadn't talked to him.

"Zelda has tools of the magical realm, cards, stones, and oracles. Not sure about the crystal ball. If you go today, will you take something to

her for me?" He glanced around, touched her arm, and edged closer to the wall.

"Sure, I plan to go now."

"Great. Come with me then."

She kept up with his short, fast stride. Down two flights of stairs and several twists and turns, they arrived in front of the hospital pharmacy.

"Wait here, I'll be right back." He scanned his badge in the security bar and slid through the side door.

Melody rummaged around in her bag and drew out a lipstick and a pack of mints. She popped a sugar-free treat into her mouth. As she applied the deep rose gloss in the reflection of the tiny mirror of her case, she could see a tall man in a gray suit reviewing the brochures. He glanced up and back down faster than the flavor loss of a gumball. His behavior was odd; typically visitors at a hospital do not stand around and gawk at others.

What could possibly be taking Dr. Li so long? What did he want her to take to his friend? A prescription? A love note? She had been thinking about love lately. Would she ever find love? That's what the crystal ball was going to tell her. In her mind, she instantly visualized Devon, his flat brown hair, round face, and romance book-cover body. The past few weeks had been wonderful. Every spare moment she thought about him. She enjoyed their lively conversations, kisses and the sex that made her reach heights—sweet, hot, sweaty, passionate sex. He made her forget her loneliness. Her sadness.

Dragged from her contemplations, a cigar-case-size metal box appeared in front of her.

"Here it is, Melody. Can you carry it?" The container looked like a child-sized makeup kit. The cover boasted a dark-haired teen with hair spiked out in all directions. The blue of the character's eye-shadow, overdone, shone in the bright hallway lights.

"Give this to Zelda or whoever is working?" She shoved the case into her handbag. It clanged against the harmonica and flute.

"Only Zelda. I called and told her you'd be dropping it off," he said

and shifted his eyes to the right then to the left.

"Did you ask her about the crystal ball?"

"No, sorry, I knew you were waiting."

"No problem." Her purse, burdened with the added weight, was too heavy for her shoulder. She lowered it to carry by the straps.

They parted, and she walked the half mile to her Corolla. She removed the case and gently placed it on the passenger seat. As she belted up and checked the rear view mirror, there he was, the tall man who had watched her apply lipstick. He was in a long white car two vehicles behind her. She started her Toyota, ground the gears into reverse, and slowly drifted into the lane. Melody pressed hard on the pedal. Despite driving as fast as possible through dense traffic, the man kept pace with her.

Why would anyone tail her? Could he be the shadow from the theater? Her nerves, already on edge, set her stomach to quivering.

Melody stopped in front of *New Age, New Thoughts*. She searched through coins for the meter and dallied, the driver parallel parked five cars down from her. Sliding on sunglasses, she snatched her bag and the funky makeup case from the passenger side, making sure to lock the door behind her.

Zelda stood behind the counter twisting a black leather wrist band. Today her fuchsia tinted hair sprouted out from her head; several knotted tails were held together by hair bands. Her purplish hair was in direct contrast to her yellow pant suit. The bottle-cap-sized buttons went down the front of her garment, matching her hair.

"Hi! You must be Melody." Her voice chimed as loud as the bells on the door.

"Hi, Zelda. We met before, at Dr. Li's housewarming party."

"Oh yes, that was a fun time." She reached over and twisted the tail closest to her face. The scent of patchouli wafted through the air. Melody didn't see a candle flame or smoke. She couldn't decide where the putrid odor came from.

Melody didn't consider the party a fun time. Many of the guests had gotten drunk and puked all over. Recreational drugs were used that

night as well. She'd only stayed five minutes.

"He asked me to give this collectible to you. I also wanted to know if you have crystal balls."

"For meditation?"

"Yes, to divine the future." Melody held her fingers to her nose.

"We don't, although I noticed one in an antique store down the street. Mr. Cassada thinks it's a paper weight. You could probably get it for a good price."

"Love a bargain." Melody glanced at the window to the front street. No sign of gray suit. She glanced at Zelda. "Where is this store?"

Zelda pointed to her left. Melody would be traveling in the same direction as the car of the stalker.

"Thanks, Zelda." She walked out; the bells and Zelda's greeting chimed as she shut the door.

How important was it for Melody to know the future? She might not be able to get a vision in the crystal ball without an oracle to guide her.

She wanted to try, even if she couldn't get it to work. If not, it'd make a nice gift for Mikhail. Melody strolled past the now empty car. She stood in front of *Old and Used Antiques* and glanced around. Gray suit wasn't anywhere in sight. Crap.

She entered the store, and the scent of musty, earthy wood assaulted her nose. A white-haired man came out from a curtained area, his back hunched over as if a permanent formation.

"May I help you find anything?"

"Yes, looking for a glass sphere. Do you have anything like that?"

"Got just the thing." He placed his right hand on the shelves to balance while he walked down the aisle. Coming to a stop, he stood as straight as he could. "Is this what you wanted to find?"

He pointed to a crystal ball, resting on a dark pedestal. A little spit shine and it would resemble Mikhail's.

"Yes. Have you tried to use it?" There was no denying; it was a crystal ball with the shiny glowing moon and stars embedded in the wood.

"No, but my wife, God rest her soul, scyred into the future quite

often."

"Did she see anything?"

His faded brown eyes pierced her with a stare. "Yes. She saw you. Maggie said you'd be in one day to buy it."

Taken aback, her breath hitched. "How do you know?"

"Is your name Melody?" His scratchy voice barely made it from his throat.

"Yes, my name is Melody." She glanced down at the orb. Could it be real?

"It's yours then, for fifty dollars."

She frowned. "Okay, but for thirty, that's as high as I'll go."

"Sold."

Mr. Cassada picked up the ball, blew off the dust and handed it to her. She carefully carried it to the counter. He wrapped the sphere and the base separately. Melody hadn't realized they were two pieces. No wonder Mikhail came over the table after hers.

"I don't have a bag hefty enough to hold it as one." He glanced around the store, searching for a replacement bag she assumed.

"No worries, I'll just place it in my bag. It's leather. Trust me when I say it'll hold all levels of weight." She winked and brought a wide smile to his face. The yellow teeth he exposed in his return smile were slightly cooked, the front two bending to look like a pretzel.

He handed the paper-wrapped ball to her. "Here you go, my dear."

She dropped it into her bag, expanding the outside several inches.

"And here is the base." The wood clanked against the glass as she settled it snug against the other.

She gave him three crisp ten dollar bills and a hearty good-bye. Leaving the store, she checked right then left. No sign of the stalker. With a slow gait, she meandered to her vehicle. Settled inside the car, she started it and selected radio station 99.5 FM, WUSN, hot new country. A little country would relax her, and Carrie Underwood sang, *Before He Cheats*. The girl had a great voice.

Melody checked her cell phone, no missed calls and no text messages. What happened to Devon? He brought her to climax two times

during the night. The next morning a note rested on the pillow where his head should have. *I'll see you later. Emergency at the unit. Luv, Devon.*

Had he meant *luv* as the British friendship word or *love*, American I need you, want you, must-be-with-you kind of love? She hoped, in the deep recess of her heart, he meant love, as in forever.

Devon hated to leave the warmth of Melody's body when the hospital rang him, but once he arrived he was thankful that he had. The seven-year-old child had shortness of breath and dizziness. Devon's sensitive fingers touched enlarged lymph nodes. He talked to the parents; finding out the boy had been kidnapped and recently returned. They rejoiced in his return only to find out he had an incurable cancer.

He reassured the parents and the child that he would take care of him, promising to discuss his condition in detail after all the tests results came through. The parents and child were settled in a private room. From the limited information Jensen had provided, the child fit the profile of a victim of the Dark Angel.

Devon telephoned Jensen, who said he'd be right over. He visited other patients, charted care directions, and talked with the nurses regarding particulars of a patient's health status and adaptation to the unit. He noted the time. Three hours had passed. He wanted to return to Melody and her charms.

"Hi, Devon. Sorry for the delay. I have something I want to show you. First, let's talk about the kid." Jensen quietly appeared beside Devon, placing his hands on the countertop at the nurse's station. He removed a PDA from his jacket pocket. "Do you have somewhere private we can chat?"

"Come. We'll go into the conference room." Devon led the way and shut the door.

Jensen sat on an upholstered chair, and Devon paced. He relayed all of the information gathered.

"I'll take you to see him. His parents are there as well. They might have some information." Devon sat on a chair on the opposite side of the table.

"This will help. An FBI agent will be in later today to talk to the

child if I find enough evidence to validate he is the victim of the Dark Angel." Jensen extracted a cell phone from his jacket pocket and moved his fingers across the surface. "I have a video I want to show you."

"Is it important, because I have a hot woman waiting for me?"

Devon ignored Jensen's scowl. What did that look mean? Jensen handed the phone to him.

"Press ok," Jensen rose from the chair and held his hands behind his back as he walked to and fro.

Devon pressed the button; Melody's image came onto the screen. She was outside the pharmacy downstairs. Dr. Li came out of the side door and handed her a box. He said a few words undetected by the phone. She stuffed the package into her bag and smiled. He knew her well enough by now to recognize it was a fake smile. The smile ended as she turned to walk away.

"What was in the case?" He furrowed his brow, while processing the details, and was relieved Melody had no interest in Dr. Li.

"I don't know. She passed it off to a clerk at a New Age store twenty minutes from the hospital. My detectives are tracking the clerk now. The problem is Melody. We didn't get words on tape, so we don't know if she's willingly involved. Zelda, the woman she transferred it off to, had moved it by the time my unit picked her up. So, we don't have evidence. We need to get facts, substantiation. That's where you come in. You're close to Melody Haney, and you can get her to confess or lead you to the one who is." Jensen's penetrating stare unnerved Devon. He couldn't determine if the intensity was a characteristic or a skill learned as a detective.

Devon crossed his arms on his chest. "She's innocent. I'm sure she volunteered to take something to this woman and didn't realize what she carried."

"Until we have proof, she's the link," Jensen commanded.

"What happened to innocent until proven guilty?"

"Devon, each time a theft occurs, Melody happens to be on location." Jensen fiddled with the screen on his phone.

"She's innocent, and I'll prove it." Devon's teeth were clenched so



tight he thought his jaw would break.

"That's what I'm counting on, your cooperation."

"She didn't do it." Devon's heart rate picked up at the thought. Innocent, she had to be innocent.

"I understand. Last I knew she was headed in this direction and—" Jensen held up a finger to silence him and took the phone into his hand. A quick punch of a number.

"Where is she?" Jensen disconnected and rose from his chair. "She's driving through the parking garage. She'll have to park on the top level, as no other spots are available."

"I'll resolve this now. Excuse me." Devon marched out of the room, leaving Jensen to find his own way out.

Devon ran the ten flights of stairs and caught his breath as she parked the car five feet from him. Their glances connected, and her face lit up. She hoisted her enormous handbag over her shoulder and locked the door. Within a few steps, she threw her arms around his neck. She kissed his lips, a feather light brush. He didn't return it.

"Hi," he said, sure of her innocence, but skeptical at the same time.

"I miss you. Did you get the child taken care of?" She smelled of jasmine today and a hint of something odd. Marijuana?

"Yes, he's now in good hands." He pulled her closer to shield her from traffic.

"Melody, I need to talk to you. I'm going to jump right into the heart of the matter." The profound truth was, she had changed him. He'd never second guessed himself before now.

"What association do you have with Dr. Li?" he demanded.

She appeared to be thunderstruck, as she stared into his eyes with a question zipping from hers.

"What?" She lowered her arms from around his neck and backed up a step.

"Listen, the police will be here in a moment. Answer me honestly. Are you seeing Dr. Li? Having an affair?" Devon hated himself for asking this question, but he had to know.

"Affair? Dr. Li?" Her eyes widened, and a frown formed on her

lovely face.

He grabbed her shoulders and drew her forward.

"Yes. Are you having an affair with Dr. Li?" He hoped she answered yes, because if she wasn't, she was helping Li steal drugs. Life-altering chemicals had been used on children. And he desperately wanted her to say no, telling him that he was the only one for her.

"No. Of course not, maybe lack of sleep has affected your thinking, but I'm having an affair with you." She poked her index finger into his chest. There in a flash of time, guilt along with a healthy dose of anger appeared in her eyes.

Fuck. There had to be more to the story, yet, his heart rejoiced by the statement.

"Melody, are you stealing drugs from the oncology unit? And giving them to the Dark Angel to use on children?" He glanced behind him expecting to see Jensen's athletic form appear at the top of the stairs.

She jerked free of his hands. "What are you talking about?"

He caught her arm as she took another step back. She held tightly to her purse and jerked free.

"The police have you on video, taking a package from Dr. Li and giving it to a partner. They might be involved in using the drugs on children." He reached out toward her; he needed the connection. The coffee in his stomach rumbled, and his chest hurt as if he had pneumonia.

"Knowing everything about me, my son, you ask me this?" she spat and pivoted.

He clutched her arm. With a furious red face, she twirled around and her bag smashed into his thigh. The leather opened and the crystal ball flew down onto his lower leg. He stumbled and fell against the step bumper of a silver steel Jeep. The crack of a bone breaking reverberated off the tin of the cars nearby. He pressed his hands against the vehicle to keep from falling. Sharp pain radiated up his leg, making him dizzy.

Her bag fell to the concrete, the orb rolled close to the opening, as if seeking its other half.

She scooped it inside and turned to run.

"Just let me love you," he whispered.

Melody stopped, her back heaved as though she was sobbing and, as she turned to face him, he witnessed the suspected tears.

"I'm so sorry. I didn't mean to hurt you."

"I think my leg's broken...need...to get wheelchair," he moaned, the intense points of pain radiating from both sites.

"Broken? Are you sure?" She took a step closer to him.

A man in a gray suit, with a silver police badge on the outside of his jacket pocket, grabbed her from behind. Jensen leaned over and helped Devon to his feet.

A small blue car squealed tires as it rounded the corner. A woman flung open the door and jumped out. The radio blared, spreading Celine Dion's voice from the song, *Taking Chances*, through the air.

"Mikhail, what are you doing here?" Jensen asked.

"Wanted to warn you, Jensen, about..." Her glance traveled over the tableau, met Devon's stare and lowered to his leg. "Too late. This baby's messing with my timing." She rubbed her hand over her flat stomach and glanced at Melody. "Hi, Melody."

"Hi, Mikhail. I've a gift for you." Melody reached out to take the purse from the man holding her. He pushed it farther away, his gray suit creating a sharp contrast to her red blouse.

"We'll need it for evidence and, since we have it on tape, Ms. Haney will go to jail for assault." Jensen propped Devon's arm around his shoulders and started walking to the elevator.

"No. Wait. Stop," Devon shouted. His emotions were chaotic: anger, fear, sadness and now hope. Melody didn't struggle against the man holding her. She stood silent, with her head bowed.

"She won't be going to jail. No charges will be pressed, because she's going to marry me." Devon waited for Melody to raise her head, to look at him with innocence gleaming in her stare. As she did, he witnessed acceptance, empathy and remorse in her beautiful brown eyes. He would marry her, and she'd come to love him. God willing, they would create a family together.

Released, she stumbled forward. Devon grabbed her hand, and she sank to the hard pavement.

## Melody's Song by jj Keller

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"Melody, are you all right?" he shouted.

"Let her go." Jensen's flat tone of voice brooked no argument.

## Chapter Sixteen

Seven days past getting his leg set in a cast, Devon glanced across the room at his wife. *Could she have set him up to have his leg broken? Could his wife have stolen chemotherapy drugs from the hospital and operated a ring of child-stealing criminals?*

Devon, despite being a doctor specializing in pediatric oncology, could not believe his stupidity and his luck. Melody was the woman of his dreams and nightmares. He had rushed her to the justice of the peace, who legally proclaimed them to be husband and wife.

He leaned back in the wheelchair, enjoying the moment of quiet respite. China dishes were scattered throughout the room with remnants of wedding cake. He spotted the store-bought white confection. The plastic bride slanted to the side. Champagne punch sat untouched in the crystal bowl. The impromptu party at one time had twenty guests, now only four remained.

His leg ached. The multi-fractures would heal in six to eight weeks, but the full plaster cast created a burden for him in its disabling heavy weight.

He closed his eyes and recaptured some of their special moments during his and Melody's odd courtship. Her heavenly voice ran through his mind as she sang to the children on the oncology unit, arguing with her over a minor misunderstanding, holding her close with her full breasts pressed against his chest, and making love to her for that one blissful night before the wedding. Centered in the back of his mind, picking away,

hovered the question, was she the person stealing chemotherapy drugs from the meds cart?

"Do you want us to leave?" Jensen stood at his left side with his back facing Melody. Jensen still considered her a suspect in the theft of the drugs. *Could she be? Had he married a criminal? Someone who would harm others?* Devon's gut clinched at the thought. He rubbed his chest as the indigestion created a burn.

She moved and placed her hand on her hip. The V of her white dress exposed a fair amount of her malleable breasts. The side view of her full-sized buttocks drew Devon's attention. He loved the way she moved with grace and rhythm.

Damn lust! If it wasn't for his involvement in his brother's research, he might not be in a situation where he desired a woman who had nothing but disdain, maybe even hate, for him. A woman who could be a part of, and/or leading, a gang of child-stealing criminals called the Dark Angels.

"No, I'm enjoying the company. It's a celebration after all, rejoicing in the love two people share." His stare connected with his lovely bride's. She lifted her glass in a mock salute. "What have you found out? I think Li is the prime suspect."

"We're tracking him. Part of the problem is he keeps clean. At work he always wears gloves or opens doors using the pockets or sleeves of his white coat. No physical evidence at this time. His schedule is set. He arrives at 7 AM and leaves at 7 PM. Usually he'll pick up his meals in the hospital cafeteria." Jensen paused, and his head turned toward the women.

Devon followed his stare and noticed Mikhail holding her hand on her belly while adamantly talking to Melody. Melody appeared to be happy, giggling and waving her hands in the air as she chatted. Devon thought Jensen's wife was a very beautiful woman, statuesque, blonde hair, and light brown eyes. A twinge of envy ran through him at the look of love and togetherness they obviously shared.

"Yes, he does tend to hang around the hospital, especially the oncology units at all hours of the day." His voice held bitterness. Jealousy

had raged through him when he'd found out Dr. Li and Melody had shared a late night dinner. Deep down, he knew his resentment wasn't the root of the problem. He didn't trust the sly, non-blinking man.

"We need you to keep tabs on Melody," Jensen said.

Devon jerked in his chair, fisting his hands on the rails. The blood drained from his face at the agony.

Jensen waved his hand, pushed it palm down. "No, don't get all riled up about it. I like you, Devon. We've become friends over the last few months, so I trust your instincts, and my wife's psychic talents reassure me Melody isn't a part of the nefarious activities. I want you to watch her to see if she makes contact with Dr. Li. He could be using her as a shield to hide his crimes." Jensen slid a small button into his hand.

"What is this?" A tiny, round thin disc looked like a silver mole in the palm of his hand.

"A surveillance camera and recording device."

"Seriously? This small?" He met Jensen's glance and knew the truth. Jensen considered Melody a part of this case, whether or not she knew it.

"Yes." Jensen's blank facial expression made Devon question if Jensen continued to think Melody was guilty, even though he'd voiced the contrary.

"I'm going to prove Melody's not directly involved in the theft." Devon hissed with firm resolve.

Jensen raised an eyebrow. "You'll need to get some evidence before Saturday. The pattern indicates the next take is likely to happen." His jaw tightened, and the groove under his lip pulled farther apart. "I'll be taking someone to jail."

Devon narrowed his eyes, while different responses filtered through his head.

"We can't talk anymore because my wife needs to rest. Can I see you alone tomorrow?" Jensen asked.

"I'll have Matt bring me by your office at ten."

"Great, you have my cell number. Call to make sure I'm there. I'll come down and meet you, so you won't need to get out of the van."

"Appreciate it." Devon twisted to look at Melody; her head bobbed a quick acknowledgment, her eyes glinting with something. Humor? Fear? Happiness? "Jensen, where do I put this?" Devon held up the tiny recorder.

"Does she carry the same purse every day?"

"Used to, but not now. She uses different ones."

"How about necklace or earrings?"

"Nothing stable. Since she put me in this damn wheelchair, I have the guilt element working for me. I'll have Matt take it to a jeweler I know and have a pair of earrings created and work the camera into it. She'll wear it whether or not she truly wants to, simply because I gave it to her. Guilt." He frowned knowing that was how he'd engaged her and how he would continue to keep her around.

"Call the jeweler and see if it'll work out. If not, I'll have one of the art guys come up with a brooch or something. I could probably get something from Mikhail's father. He owns an antique shop on Michigan. Think she'll wear it each day?"

Devon nodded, met her glance and watched her eyes heat. The gleam was lust, not humor or anxiety as he'd feared. He grinned. Even if she didn't truly love him, she wanted him as much as he wanted her.

Melody heard the squeak of the wheelchair. She caught sight of the pristine white leg cast, and instant sympathy ran through her. *Damn*. Her husband's shorts covered the top of the cast, but not quite. Devon Siegal, husband of two hours and thirty minutes, shifted in the seat to stare in her direction.

Instead of simply seeking refuge in marriage, she truly loved him. She always experienced that bit of thrill as their glances met. The affirmation blasted her heart with intense pain. No! She needed time to think. She was scared to love him. The heartache when he left would be too much for her.

He craned his neck. Her gaze locked onto his. Piercing desire mixed with pain shot through her. She held up her glass in acknowledgment and salute, and turned to continue her conversation.

She glanced at the decorating in the room. She'd need to soften the



atmosphere. The blues and browns were too masculine. Maybe replace the leather sofa and chair with fabric ones. Melody glanced out the French doors to the garden area. The night, blissfully warm in late October, had stars sparkling, and a full moon had provided a natural light for any of the wedding guests if they had chosen to wander. Her attention was drawn by Mikhail's husky voice.

"Tell me again the circumstances. Ah, why *you* happened to cause Devon's accident?" Mikhail grinned, exhibiting perfect, white teeth.

"You know why," Melody swiped a sweaty shaking hand through her hair. "I'm not thinking coherently since so much has happened in a seven-day span, but I blame you."

The end result of the *vision* Mikhail had predicted a year ago was far different from what Melody anticipated. Her stomach muscles vibrated with fear, and her heart raced with excitement, causing a flutter in her throat.

A husky chuckle came from Mikhail. "Your destiny was determined before I helped you glance into the future. Witnessing the potential always has ramifications. As you know, *Mrs. Siegal*, if you change the course of events through purposeful intent, it alters destiny."

"The first time I peeked into the future through your crystal ball and saw a guy, I almost liked him better." Instantly her vagina clutched in resentment, rebellion. She shot her glance over at her husband; yes, intimacy with him shattered her world. Glorious hot sex had occurred a few days before, and she still experienced mini-orgasms.

Mikhail placed her hand on top of the tiny lump of her pregnant belly. Melody suffered a bit of envy. She'd love to have a baby. She shifted her gaze toward Jensen, a handsome detective and traitor. He currently perched beside Devon's chair, discussing the conclusion of the case no doubt. Now, Melody stood guilty of a crime and married to the man who could send her to jail.

"Destiny sucks," Melody exclaimed. She'd witnessed her soul mate in the crystal ball; however, he was among several men. Understandable confusion occurred. The first man she'd met, post-divination, had been a mistake. Kurt Chapel. She'd thought she had found the man of her future;

instead, she'd found a scum bag. In the meantime she rejected and argued with the man whom she'd married. Devon had a dreamy body and the soul of an angel. She loved him, and she certainly *couldn't* part from him. She could, but then in all likelihood she'd go to jail. Melody smiled at Devon and in her heart rejoiced in the lustful bond that bound them together.

"Not always, Melody. You can make the outcome meet your expectations. It's all in how you approach the situation. Have faith, it'll all work out. Devon shouldn't have been attracted to you because his desires conflicted with his obligations, but here you are, married to a great man. Now, I have to rest. This baby is kicking like there's a soccer game in progress, and he's not old enough to be shaking things up."

"Did you know Emily's pregnant, too? She's decorating a tiny bedroom in Scotland with hopes she does get a soccer player," Melody wishfully said.

She swung her gaze to Mikhail, rushed her glance past Devon, and noted Jensen's nod. His loving stare remained on Mikhail. No words were passed, but his eyes shone with joy and devilment. Was there an instinct a married couple shared, to communicate by a stare or a body movement, or was the connection a result of Mikhail's amazing abilities as a fortune-teller? Had she sent him a subliminal message or was it telepathy at play? Moreover, would Melody and Devon ever share a bond such as theirs?

Envy spurt up from her heart. Would she and Devon ever have that connection, love connection? One intense stare and the other partner understood exactly what needed to be conveyed. Would Melody experience true love?

"I'm so happy for Emily. She's found her love, her soul mate, long overdue. Congratulations on your marriage. I must go." Mikhail's lips tightened, and little breaths puffed out. Was she in pain; did her stomach catch with very premature Braxton-Hicks contractions? Again, that smidgen of envy flooded Melody.

"Thank you for coming to the reception," Melody mechanically stated, as her wary gaze shifted over to her husband. His broken appendage was an accident, she told herself for the hundredth time. She

didn't realize the impact her handbag would have when she hit Devon in the leg.

Her goal had been to escape him. Run away from his lack of trust in her. Blatant doubt shot from his green eyes, while he accused her of stealing drugs.

"Are you sure?" Mikhail asked.

Melody whipped her gaze to Mikhail. Her brown eyes glowed with what Melody classified as an inner knowledge. "Excuse me?"

"He's the one for you. You looked beyond the color line; now see beyond his hardheadedness. You were meant to be together. Go, love your man."

The color line, Devon never mentioned their color difference, her being mocha and him as white as a lily flower.

Melody and Mikhail strolled toward Jensen and Devon, who halted their intense conversation as the women drew closer. "Thank you both for coming to the reception. It was a pleasure to talk with you. Darling, I'll escort Jensen and Mikhail to the door."

"I'll join you." His pupils were dilated, either from the pain drugs or because of his sexual interest. He grinned and snatched her hand from her side and squeezed. A simple reassurance. Yes, she needed that boost of confidence. Going behind his chair, she wheeled him over to the door.

"Let me know if you need anything, Devon. You as well, Melody," Jensen said with a slight edge to his voice. So he didn't believe her story. How could she make him trust her? Did her husband continue to doubt her as well?

The last few guests left, and she was alone with *him*. In conjunction with the heart beating as strong as a bat's wings and her stomach hopping like a toad, her vagina clenched in anticipation of what was to come.

Would he make love to her? She had certainly sullied his reputation and altered his life. Devon didn't seem to mind. He always had a smile. Not once had he complained about the leg-breaking incident.

Devon took her hand. Her knees cracked as she bent down to hear him.

"You're tired. Why don't you take a hot bath then join me in bed?"

He smiled that winsome dimpled smile, and her breasts ached with need. Her clit and womb begged to have some action. Traitorous body.

She kissed his cheek. He slid his hand to her jaw and moved her mouth to meet his.

Passion, strong, hot, and uncontrollable, ignited through her. Destiny.

"I'll help you get settled," she murmured. She longed to just jump on his lap, right then and there, or pull him to the floor, rip off his clothes and enjoy his stiff gorgeous cock.

"Luv, I'll have Matt help me into bed. That's why he's here, to help me get my strength back." Her hopes of a night of marital bliss were dashed by Devon's emotionless response.

Matt, the ex-football player turned therapist, appeared. For such a large man, he made no noise, creeping about on silent feet. Melody glared at his back as he wheeled Devon to the office, which for his convenience had been converted into a bedroom. Something wasn't right with Matt. He acted more like a cop than a therapist.

Disappointed, Melody looked up the long flight of stairs that separated her from her husband on their wedding night. This wasn't what she had envisioned when she said yes to his proclamation of marriage. She sighed, trotted upstairs to the master bedroom suite. With contempt, she eyed the California king bed dominating the room.

A few minutes later, covered to her chin with bubbles in the decadent spa tub, she replayed how she came to be married to a man she wanted to have sex with, certainly loved, but could barely abide.

## Chapter Seventeen

Startled, she jerked straight up in the tub.

"Melody, are you all right?" Devon's voice filtered through her mind as he pounded on the bathroom door.

"Yes, sorry. I must have fallen asleep in the tub. I'll be right out."

"Open this door now," he demanded, with a hint of worry behind the bark.

She released the catch on the garden tub and climbed out. Emily told her the bath had mystical properties, bringing on dreams and the sense of being watched over. Melody believed her, according to the clock she had been soaking for one hour while she reviewed several months of time in her head.

She wrapped a large white towel around her and threw open the door. White faced, Devon, wearing only black and blue plaid boxer briefs, held onto the frame with one hand and balanced with the crutch. He'd extended a good deal of effort climbing the stairs. She questioned his sanity.

The man was gorgeous. Perfect in every way. Why did she feel as if she resented him? He tried to help her from being arrested. Could it be a tiny piece of her heart hoped for the romantic gesture of pronounced love, presentation of a ring, and the big question? Yes, she wanted that and more.

"What are you doing up here? How did you get up here?" she barked.

"Climbed the stairs, need to sit down though, could you help me to the bed?"

She glanced behind him. "Where's Matt?"

"Sent him home. Ready, Melody," he growled and pointed to the bed with his crutch.

She placed his hand on her shoulder and slid her arm around his waist. Only a few steps to the bed, they could make it. Without heels she was significantly shorter than him.

His hand, weighing heavy on her shoulder, slipped. The towel dropped to the floor. She glanced into his face. His lips were tightly pinched in pain, so he couldn't have dropped her cloth on purpose. He had to be hurting from hopping up the stairs. The guilt continued to rack her with tiny spasms, causing her heart to slip as well.

She kicked the decorative pale blue pillow off the bed. Her breasts swung to and fro as she leaned forward to pull the earth brown covers back. He inhaled with a sharp catch.

"I'm sorry it's taking so long," she said. He clutched her waist, his fingers slipped up to grasp her right breast.

"Here sit." She turned in his arms and eased him to the bed.

His eyes were tightly closed, and his breath came out in tiny, minty pants.

She took the light-weight metal crutch from him and laid it on the floor beside the bed. She kneeled in front of him. "Devon, I'm sorry. I didn't mean to hurt you."

His eyelids popped open, and his bright green eyes searched hers. She had been stripped naked, all of her power extinguished. She glanced around for her towel to provide a thin shield. The cloth was underneath her foot, and she moved to reclaim it. The diamond ring, he'd placed on her finger earlier in the day, gleamed brightly in the filtered light from the bathroom.

Vows were spoken. Trust and commitment established. All the things she had promised her son and had not been able to give him. Could she hope for love and trust again? Was she deserving of trust, love, and happiness?

He placed two fingers under her chin and lifted. Her gaze met his.

"Melody, I know you didn't. I used the incident to get you to marry me, because I love you." There was sadness in his eyes; she had put it there. The heartache hadn't been present before seven days ago.

Tears gathered behind her eyes, and she tried to shake her head from his hand.

"No, don't pull away again."

She stilled.

His hand caressed her face. "I'll borrow a phrase from your play, 'Say you'll love me, that's all I ask of you'."

"I do love you." She leaned forward, balancing on the tips of her toes and touched her lips to his. The playback of the past few months made her realize how much she'd always care for Devon, even if he left her.

"Ah, luv, I'll make the darkness go away." He tugged her close, her breasts smashed against his chest, skin to skin. His kiss had a new level of passion, strength without pressure, movement without preciseness. She kissed him without the inhibitions she had always held before this night. He said he loved her.

He moaned, and she shifted, releasing some of her weight from him. "I'm sorry, too much pressure?"

"Not enough," he hissed.

"Excuse me?"

"Not enough pressure in a certain area." He closed his eyes, and his mouth appeared to be a straight line.

She glanced down. He had a full erection pressing against his briefs, the soft cotton stretched taut. She licked her lips. "It's my turn to pleasure you."

Melody tingled with excitement. There would be a consummation of the marriage. She helped him recline, removing his briefs in the process. Hoisting one leg onto the bed, she eased the broken one onto the mattress. Gently, she stroked her fingers over the hairline fracture in his femur and touched the point of the cracked tibia, or was it fibula? She placed pillows under the knee and the ankle.

"I was to be my friend Emily's maid of honor and had arranged a guru of the sensual arts to teach us, *How to Pleasure Your Man*. I don't have a great deal of experience in the art of seduction, so I learned a lot." She grabbed a plastic, eight-ounce container of gel out of the side table. Illogically, it had come in a wedding gift box delivered that day from Scotland. Emily's sense of humor, knowing how embarrassed Melody would be to use such an aid. Melody would have the last laugh, because the lubrication would provide her with enjoyment.

She knelt beside the bed and heated some of the oil between her hands.

"Smells like sandalwood."

"Yes, the scent of sexual congress." She rubbed her hands over his penis lubricating and smoothing the oil up and down. "Now, I haven't ever done this, so if you feel pain you'll need to let me know."

*Please let me do this properly. I care about him, so smooth, steady strokes.*

He nodded and moaned. His cock raised and lowered as her hands pressed the liquid, heating his shaft and her hands.

"There are certain pressure points on a man's body, as with a woman, which give him instant pleasure." She cupped his sacks and applied a tiny bit of force. His good leg jerked to the side, but his eyes remained tightly closed.

She kept one hand in place and moved the other up over the head of his penis, drawing around the skin. He hissed and moaned.

"If I do this correctly, you'll find a bit of pain and enormous amount of pleasurable satisfaction." The more he moaned and wiggled on the bed, the more confidence she had in her ability to please him.

She massaged, tugged and smoothed, rolled and pulled. A spot of semen appeared at the tip of his cock. His hands gripped the covers at his sides, and his butt lifted and tensed with each stroke.

"Can't wait, so much pleasure," he murmured and lifted his head. She held his gaze, increased the speed, the rhythm. He burst into the palms of her hands. The salty, musty scent of his semen encompassed her hand and spilled on the sheets.

She sat crouched on her heels and wiped her hands on the



discarded towel. Yes, she could be a seductress. Sex can be a powerful tool.

"Kiss me," he said.

A sated and dreamy smile appeared on his face. She wrapped one arm around his waist and the other around his head. Leaning into him, she pressed a kiss to his lips with as much love and passion as she could gather.

"I'm so glad you're a quick study."

"That makes two of us."

Several hours later, Devon awoke with tiny nutcrackers playing havoc with his muscles. He needed to get up but couldn't get the leverage to do so. "Melody."

He nudged her shoulder. "Melody, I need your help."

She remained unclothed, and her body was like a thermal insulator. His leg throbbed as if the little nutcracker beasts couldn't stop.

"Melody," he said a little louder.

She popped up and glanced around. He could see the confusion on her face then the reality as it set in. She glanced at him and smiled.

"Good morning," she yawned and stretched.

She would kill him. The woman of his dreams was naked in his bed. Her magnificent breasts shook and rose as she lifted her arms over her head. He would die from lustful desire.

"I need to use the restroom and take some pills. Could you help me?"

"Yes, of course." She bounced off the bed, causing more pain to his leg. The clang of the dresser drawers being jerked open made his head ache. He focused his gaze on her, toward the noise. She had found one of his T-shirts from a Rugby match. Sliding it over her body, thank God for the simple things, she ran to his side.

She shifted the crutch to the side and propped it against the night stand. With great care, she lifted his casted leg off the bed, and he swung his other leg over.

"Now, which side do you want me on, good leg, broken leg?"

"Good leg, since you're shorter."

She handed him the crutch and grabbed him around the waist to get him upright. They hobbled to the bathroom. Situated in front of the commode he glanced at her.

"You're not staying."

"How will you stay upright?" Her face had tinges of red on her cheeks.

"I'll sit. I can't do this in front of you. Probably not in fifty years either. Not something I'm comfortable doing." Now her entire face was flaming red.

"Good to know. Same here." She lifted the lid and helped him to lower down. "When will Matt arrive?"

"Melody, have you seen Devon? He's not in his room." A knock pounded on the hallway door.

"Guess I have my answer." She turned toward the sound. "Matt, I'll be right there."

"Will you go to the guest bathroom?"

"Sure and what about Matt?" She gathered bath towels, electric razor, toothpaste, and placed them on the counter between the sinks.

"Tell him to give me five or ten minutes," he said, trying to create a please leave expression on his face despite the pain radiating through his leg.

"Okay." She pivoted.

He took a hold of her hand and tugged her down to be eye level with him. "What do you have planned for today?"

"Taking care of you."

He kissed her, a sweet peck on her lips. "I need to go see Jensen at the station. Why don't you go see Birdy? Last night, he seemed concerned."

"I'll do that. Do you want to meet for lunch?"

"Not sure. I'll call you. See me before you leave?"

"Yes, I will." Another, louder, knock sounded on the door.

"Go. Maybe we'll nap later, before we head out to the theater." He wiggled his eyebrows and lowered the crutch to the floor.

"You're not going to the theater."

## Melody's Song by jj Keller

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"Yes, I am. I've already missed two performances, I'm not missing anymore."

"Stubborn arrogant ass."

"That's right, luv, and I'm not going to change." He winked, and she shut the door to the bathroom. Another level of intimacy bound them together.

## Chapter Eighteen

"I know you don't wear a lot of jewelry, but I'd be honored if you would wear this brooch. It's been crafted with you in mind." Devon held out a jeweler's box to her.

Melody snapped open the lid and sucked in her breath.

Her expression sifted through an array of emotions. Surprise and joy rushed over her beautiful features. She hadn't received many, if any, gifts from a lover in the past, and the guilt of this brooch riddled his heart with pinpoints of pain.

"I've never been given anything so beautiful." She hugged him and kissed him on his betraying mouth.

She admired the delicate piece in the foyer mirror and fastened it onto her blouse. Devon glanced over at Matt. His face remained impassive. He wished this mess were over.

"I need to see Jensen," Devon said. Matt came behind him and pushed his chair closer to her.

"Thank you, Devon, I love the brooch." She tapped the diamond-encrusted shell, with her perfectly manicured nail, kissed him again and picked up a tiny square piece of leather off the table. Her dour smile made him laugh.

"What is that?"

"My purse."

He quirked a brow in question.

"Since I broke my husband's leg by carrying a large bag, I thought

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I'd start carrying a small purse with only the bare necessities."

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Jensen climbed into the van carrying a large computer-type bag. "How are you feeling today?"

Devon snarled. "Great, married for one day and already outfitting my wife with a tracking device. How do you think I feel?"

Granted, she thought he married her to save her from jail. Devon told Jensen she didn't need to be interrogated. He took her for questioning, but they must have received the anticipated answers.

"Cranky?" Jensen opened his case and removed a large metal box. "This will show us, with sound by the way, what she is doing."

Melody walked into Birdy's Diner. He hugged her close. The mic crackled and hissed.

"How's it going? Need me to get an attorney yet?" The man with hair the color of snow stated, his voice warm with love.

Devon winced at the sound of his voice. The man cared about her and, as Devon knew, would do anything to help her.

"It's fine. I've found I love him." She twisted her hair behind her ear.

Devon smiled.

"No. For real?" Birdy shuffled receipts.

"Surprised me, too. I've always had feelings for him, and it's certainly strange to say it aloud. I'm ready for the trust and commitment thing."

"You're not just protecting yourself because he could send you to jail?" He plopped a tea bag in a cup and added steaming water.

"Nope. Love him, like in forever." She smiled.

"Did you tell him about your past?" He placed the tea on the counter.

Devon and Jensen both leaned closer to the monitor.

She looked down at her shoes and wiggled her purse to and fro. "No, I will tonight. There's plenty of time. How important do you think it

is?"

"If you love the guy, as you claim, do you want to start out the marriage with doubt between you?" He lifted a black and gray eyebrow.

"I know you're right." She tapped him on his arm with her bag.

"What is that you keep flipping around?"

"My purse."

He laughed. "Don't trust yourself with a big bag now?"

She shook her head.

"How will you survive?" he quipped.

"I don't know. Pockets? Belt pack? Backpack? Load my car with every item I think I'll ever need?" She laughed.

"Birdy, order up," Pedro shouted from the pass-through.

"Are you coming back to work?" Birdy asked.

"I don't know. I want to take care of Devon and sing to the kids. There's the theater."

"I got a date for tonight, and I'm taking her to see you as Carlotta." He nervously rushed his words. Birdy must not date very much.

Melody plopped down on a stool, as he carried a plate over to a table and refilled cups with coffee.

"We can review this later; it seems like idle chat," Jensen said.

"Yes, I'd like to see it again."

"What was on her schedule today?"

"She just mentioned the diner." He flipped his phone over and over in his palm.

"What secret could she be hiding?" Jensen insisted.

Devon rubbed the edge of his leg at the cast. "I can't imagine."

"She doesn't have a record. Attended one year at Chicago University, excellent grades the first semester, the second she came in at average."

His heart, previously expanded with love, experienced spasms similar to the ones in his legs earlier in the morning. She was keeping something from him. Thirty minutes passed, and Devon hadn't heard a word.

"Where is she going?" Jensen asked.

"I don't know. I blocked out their conversation."

"She's going to see the kids at the hospital," Matt piped up from the front seat.

"Follow her," Jensen demanded.

Was she going to see Dr. Li? Could she possibly be involved with the theft of the drugs? Matt sped through the streets, weaving and rushing through yellow lights.

The laptop monitor sizzled and crackled as they pulled into the hospital parking lot.

"The complex technology equipment of the hospital is creating static, I'll need to go in," Jensen said.

"I understand." Devon tried to convey his understanding, but he was disappointed. He needed to know.

"I have a video cam I'll take with me and leave the laptop in the vehicle with you." Jensen handed the laptop over, and it clanked as Devon set it on his lap.

Jensen exited the van with an athletic bag in his hand. Devon focused on the screen. Although he couldn't hear the conversations, he knew her. He could identify her thoughts by her facial expressions, her body movements.

Melody went from room to room and talked to the children. The patients who knew her asked her to sing, and she did *a cappella*. As she was exiting the unit, Dr. Li grabbed the arm of her sheer white blouse.

Devon wanted to climb out of his chair and rescue her. She pried Dr. Li's hand off her arm and turned to run away. He caught up with her, and it appeared as if he apologized. Reaching into his pocket, he withdrew a pharmacy bag and pointed to the south. She shook her head and looked around. Devon could see Jensen in the corner as he dialed a number on his cell.

Devon's phone rang. He flipped it open to see Jensen's name slide across the face. "Yeah."

"Call her and tell her to do it, make her understand she needs to drive slow and take her time in handing over the bag."

"Got it. Will my wife be in danger?" Click. *Damn.*

He dialed her number. "Melody?"

She backed away from Dr. Li.

"Hi, honey." Her voice chimed over the line.

"Please listen carefully. Hold up your finger to Dr. Li like you'll talk with him in a minute." She did as he instructed and glanced around. Her eyes widened. She'd spotted Jensen.

"Tell Li you'll do it. Jensen will follow. Drive slow. Give over the drugs to whomever and, at the transaction, he or she will be arrested."

"Okay, honey. I think pasta for dinner will be great. Later, love." Her words betrayed her facial expression. Her jaws clamped together, and her lips became a thin red narrow line.

"Be careful—" Before he could finish his endearment, she disconnected the call.

She slid the phone into her pocket and took the bag from Dr. Li, listening to his instructions and nodding her head. Moments later, she was in her car heading away from the hospital.

"Do we wait on Jensen or follow her?" Matt asked.

"Follow. I'm not letting anything happen to her." He pulled the phone out of his jacket pocket and pressed Jensen's number. "We're following her. Get another ride."

"Devon, wait, I'm almost there," he replied.

"Get another car to take you. I don't want her out of my sight."

"And what will you do? You're in a wheelchair."

A knock sounded on the side of the van. Jensen stood outside. Matt opened the door.

"Idiot," Jensen admonished and climbed inside.

"And you wouldn't do the same for Mikhail?" Devon held on to the door brace as Matt pressed the accelerator, jump-starting the van.

"Yes," Jensen responded.

Melody drove to a park near their house. She didn't get out, but shifted items from the front seat of her car to the back, a notebook, flute case, and large black bag. A white Crown Victoria pulled beside her. Devon glanced at Jensen.

"Damn." Jensen pressed a button on his cell. "Lucent Park.



Detective Sam Lowenzicky, drug operator. Backup now."

When Melody looked behind her, they could see their van on the monitor.

"She knows. She's telling us we're visible. Matt, move the van to that outbuilding," Jensen ordered.

Matt shifted the vehicle into reverse; its black exterior blended in nicely with the dark colors of the building. Devon placed the monitor on the floor and positioned his crutch under his arm.

"You're not going anywhere." Jensen withdrew a revolver from under his jacket.

"Matt, make sure he doesn't do anything stupid." Jensen slid from the van and ran over to crouch behind a fir, near Melody's car.

She was scared, but she knocked on the window of the Crown Victoria. Her reflection showed through the brooch. She licked her lips and, as the glass lowered, she babbled. Devon couldn't hear her, but he knew she was worried from the way her mouth narrowed. Her hands fluttered. She tossed her head and laughed, but her eyes held terror.

"It doesn't feel right, Devon," Matt said.

"I agree. Help me out. Where's the other crutch?"

Matt climbed from the van, carefully shutting his door, and opened the sliding panel. He handed Devon the other crutch and helped him out. The ground was uneven, and Devon took slow cautious steps.

"Go ahead. Help them," Devon whispered. Matt removed a gun from his shoulder holster.

By the time Devon made it to Melody's car, she was on the ground and Jensen was holding the deviant detective at gunpoint. Jensen had been able to subdue the man without gunfire.

Devon hobbled forward as Matt helped Melody to her feet.

"Why didn't you tell me I'd be the hen in the fox hunt?" she grated, her focus on him. Her monotone voice reached Devon but carried to the others.

"We didn't tell you to protect you. If you said too much, he wouldn't have trusted you with the drugs," Devon replied.

"How'd I do?" She brushed off her blue jeans, a slow hard slap of

her hands to the dust. Devon could not determine if she were angry.

"You were terrific!" Jensen exclaimed. Four squad cars surrounded the vehicle, eliminating all chances of conversation.

"Come on, we're going home," Devon said, relieved it was over and she would be out of danger.

Devon turned toward Matt. "Will you drive Melody's car, and we'll take the van? I don't want her to leave my side."

Matt glanced at the car. "That piece of rusted sheet metal held together by weak bolts?"

"No way to look at it differently. I can't imagine how it stays together," Devon said.

Matt frowned, nodded, and took the key ring from Melody's outstretched hand. The keys clinked together in the wind that suddenly picked up. The air smelled as if rain was coming, and the overcast skies proved it to be accurate.

"See you later, Jensen," Devon said and started the trek to the van.

"Wait, I need the laptop," Jensen shouted. He said something to a small Hispanic man then jogged up to them.

"Great job, Melody. I knew you were smart." Jensen patted her shoulder.

She gave Jensen a look of disdain. Devon smothered a chuckle.

"I'll need a statement," Jensen said and stuttered as Devon glared at him. "Tomorrow will be fine."

"Tomorrow afternoon, I have a late show tonight," Melody demanded.

"I'm aware. Mikhail and I have tickets." He smiled.

"I'll see you later then," Melody replied.

Jensen winked at Devon, retrieved his laptop, and rejoined the other police officers. Now, Devon had to find out if Melody were angry and would demand a divorce.

## Chapter Nineteen

Upon arrival at their house, Devon drank milk, ate a bowl of whole wheat cereal, took some of the pain killers, went into the downstairs bedroom and slept. Melody didn't have the heart to wake him in order to prepare for the play. He needed rest more than seeing her perform the same songs he'd witnessed for the past month.

She showered, styled her hair, and dressed in a midnight blue silk pantsuit. Opening night had been a blur, but since then she remembered her lines, her marks and how much she loved singing. It had become her salvation. All of the past didn't exist when she acted as Carlotta. Only the present.

Her foundation was solid. She refused to let this new reality shake it. Devon cared about children. Dr. Li, a criminal, stole drugs. Dr. Li used her to get the drugs to others. Devon planted the camera in the form of a brooch to help catch an evil man. She could accept all of that.

She picked up the brooch, it was beautiful and her first gift from a man who loved her. He did love her and failed to tell her about the setup to protect her. *Okay, keep repeating that litany, and maybe you'll convince yourself. For better or worst.*

He did want to protect her. She had given the crystal ball and its wooden stand to Mikhail two nights ago. Since that time, the passing of the oracle and touching of hands, Devon started watching her. Mikhail must have told Devon something terrible would happen, and now he guarded her as the sentinel did the gold bullion at Fort Knox.

She came down the stairs to leave. Devon dressed in evening garments was sitting in a chair by the large arched window. Twilight sun filtered through the window, providing him with a halo. Sweat covered her palms, and her heart beat a quick tandem just by seeing his smile. The man was a saint.

"Matt will drive you to the theater. Jensen is going to give me a lift." He grabbed her hand and tugged. She leaned down, her knees pressing against the soft side of the brown wingback chair, to be eye level with him. "I love you, and I want you to be careful."

"Why, I'm not going to be used as a mule anymore." His nearness made her breasts ache and her womb pound in need. She stood and placed her fox-trimmed wrap over her shoulders.

"We don't know how many are involved. Jensen said there is a squad of these evil creatures."

"Sounds so Gothic, but I understand. I'll watch my back."

He grabbed his set of crutches and situated them under his arms. As he rose from the chair, he grunted with the effort. His black wool suit jacket bloused out from the position, making him look like a winged avenger.

"You don't have to walk me to the car. I'm quite capable," she said.

He raised an eyebrow as if she had stated the undesirable and illogical. He hobbled forward and opened the entrance, eight-paneled, oak door. In the circular driveway stood Matt, in front of the van, with the passenger door held open.

"What? I don't get to be Miss Daisy?"

"I had to sit in the backseat because of a full leg cast, not because I enjoyed being driven around, Carlotta."

She chuckled. "All right, Casanova."

He winked, and she outright laughed.

"Don't, you'll strain your voice." He shifted both crutches to one side and held out his arm. "Come, give me a kiss."

She slid between his legs letting him fit his arm around her, unbalancing him, but obviously bringing him joy as he let out a satisfied moan. Inhaling his cologne scent, sea breeze, orchids and spices, she

relaxed for the first time in several days. It would be all right. She'd settle into living with this man, loving him and God willing, having two children with him. Once again, she started to have faith in love, belief in God and hope for a tomorrow.

"I love you, Devon Siegal." She kissed his lips.

"And I love you, Melody Siegal." He released his arm from around her waist, and his fingers dug around inside his jacket pocket.

"What do you need? Are you losing balance because I'm leaning on you? Just wanted to feel what I'd get to occupy myself with later."

He gave a slight chuckle. She shifted and gazed into his eyes. Moments later, he held out a dark midnight blue velvet box. She switched her glance from the container to meet his stare.

"The brooch was from the Chicago Police Department, and we'll need to return it. This is a true wedding gift from me. I give it to you with all of my heart."

Crap, he was going to make her shed tears. She took the box and a step back. He switched one crutch to be under his other arm and leaned heavily on it.

"One moment, Matt," Devon shouted.

Melody opened the beautiful velvet rectangle, and inside was a gold bracelet with two, tiny, gold charms. One had a child, a boy with arms outstretched and face upward, as if he enjoyed the sun and life as a healthy child. The other had a man and woman entwined in a hug, clearly in love.

She recalled the day they met and she told him sick children should keep a schedule, because they don't know if they'll ever get to go outside and play.

"You remember everything," she croaked out.

"I wish. You'll find that I don't, but so far I've remembered every word you've voiced."

"Devon, I'm so very lucky to have you love me." Her heart, near to bursting, caused her breath to come out in tiny gasps. The tears hovered at the corners of her eyes. She had hope. Melody Haney had been blessed with a second chance.

## Melody's Song by jj Keller

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His eyes had glassed over; he nodded and pointed a crutch to the car.

"I'll see you after the show? Backstage? They have a handicap ramp." She carefully snapped the bracelet onto her wrist, securing the safety catch so it wouldn't go anywhere. She touched the charms with gentle care.

"Yes, now go," he huskily whispered.

She handed him the box and ran to the car. She slid inside, Matt shut the door, and she waved to Devon through the window. He nodded and pivoted.

Taking a deep breath, she rubbed her heart, the charms glinting in the evening light. She should have told him.

\* \* \* \* \*

Melody thought this performance had been the best to date. The actors were on cue, the stagehands moved the sets with ease and timeliness, and joy permeated the house. The reviews had been exceptional, the house was full, and the sponsors smiled as if a great stress had been removed from their lives.

Melody was in love. No harm or foul could destroy her happiness.

They encore-bowed twice, and then the cast and crew split to various areas of backstage.

"Melody, please join me for a moment," Ross requested. Beside him stood a short, heavyset man with blond tufts of hair lying like sticks of straw on top of his head. His black acrylic-rimmed eyeglasses gave him an air of intelligence, and the gleam in his eyes gave him charm.

"This is Terry Crawford. He's a reporter for the *New South Wales Times*. He's interested in talking with you. Wants to know why your *Misery Song* is so sad." Ross nodded at them and turned around to talk to one of the sponsors, a tall thin man dressed in a tux, with a silver, falcon-head, knobbed cane in hand.

Melody blinked at the reporter. Could she possibly tell him why she had so much pain when others in the world had more?

"Mr. Crawford, what kind of questions do you have?"

"I talked to your friend, Michael Bird," Crawford nodded to the end of the hallway. Birdy held the hand of an older lady, nearly as tall as he. She had gray hair and a beautiful smile surrounded by layers of time. He waved and motioned, an imitation of signing the billboard he held in his hand. Melody nodded.

"Mr. Bird told me about your son. Losing a child must have been heartbreaking."

She nodded, tears choking off her throat, and the happiness she had felt suddenly lost some of its luster.

"Is the father available to get a comment?" Crawford stuttered.

"No, I'm sorry he's not. Could we do this another time?" A tear dripped. She knew the salty liquid made a track in her white face paint.

"Sure, sure. No problem. I'll call tomorrow and set up a time before the show." He flipped over the notepad, made a couple of notes, and scurried away.

Birdy and his friend rushed forward. "Melody, I'd like you to meet my lady friend, Kathleen. Kathleen this is—"

"No need. Mrs. Siegal you have an amazing voice. I used all of my tissues and started weeping on Michael's sleeve as you sang the song in your apartment scene. It was...I can't really describe it. Will you please sign my billboard?" The woman, a charismatic, lifted her voice at the end. The way her blue-eyed gaze went to Birdy created urgency in Melody to sign as many pieces of paper Kathleen would put in front of her. She cared about him.

Melody glanced up at Birdy as the woman handed over her billboard and a marker. He met her stare with happiness in his eyes and drew his gaze down to his date. Birdy was in love, for the first time in fifty years the man had fallen face down, gooey-eyed in love. Melody wanted to sing in joyful rhythm with the clanging of the instruments as they were stowed away. She removed the elbow-length white gloves.

"I'd be more than happy to sign your program, Kathleen." She smiled a wicked half-tilt-lip smile at Birdy. He coughed and took the woman's hand into his. Melody scribbled her name across the front of the

shiny billboard cover depicting *Phantom of the Opera* and handed it and the marker to the woman who murmured thank you.

The stage lights shut down.

"I'll see you at the café tomorrow?" he asked.

"You can count on it. Egg white omelet at seven." Melody winked and, as they walked away, Kathleen's feet hardly touched the ground.

Melody picked up her full skirts, the luminescent blue cloth sparkling like a diamond in the bright fluorescent lights.

She pushed open the door of the dressing room, and rambunctious laughter came at her in waves of heat. The chorus line swept past her, wanting to start their night life.

"Where's Pep?" Melody asked.

"She left a few minutes ago. We're going to Mulligans. Do you want to join us?"

"No thanks, I have a man waiting for me." Melody smiled.

Various lewd comments were made about having a man, wanting a man, and the anatomy of a man.

"Hey, could one of you unfasten this dress before you run off? I don't want to be stuck in a Victorian gown all night."

"Sure." Faiola, with her petite nimble fingers, unfastened the clasps and skittered out of the room.

"Thanks, Faiola," Melody said.

She had the space all to herself. A tiny bit of pleasure went through her as she imagined being a star and having her own dressing room. She fluffed her dress and twirled around, feeling the all-encompassing joy of love. The charms of her bracelet flew out to the side. She refused to take it off and didn't have to, because it fit rather nicely under the white gloves or muff required for most of the scenes.

How strange to have a man love only her and to give her a gift. Granted Roget, Gavin's father, had given her the Toyota and her son. The Toyota needed to be put to rest, and her son had been. She inhaled a sob, dropped the dress, and stepped out of it. Sitting down on the bench in front of the mirror, she swiped a cloth loaded with cream to remove her makeup across her countenance. Her face clean, she dropped the cloth and



picked up the charm, an exuberant boy. She smiled, knowing Gavin had been with her the entire time. He was the tiny, joyful boy resting on the pulse of her wrist.

She lifted the charm of the entwined couple and glanced at the clock. Where was Devon? Billy Banks would be praising her for her speed. She hung up the dress, giving a quick sneer at the ugly houndstooth wallpaper behind the clothes rack. Who had decorated this dressing room? She threw on her street clothes, grabbed her little bag from her locker and skipped toward the door.

"You're not going anywhere tonight, Melody," a dark, angry voice roared.

She reeled back in acknowledgment and fear.

## Chapter Twenty

"Roget," Melody cried out.

"I'm surprised you recognized me, since it's been eight years and I've changed drastically." The father of her son stood poised before her like the devil coming out at night to claim a soul. The clothes rack behind him had been tossed to the side, and the wall had an opening a foot wide.

"Gavin looked exactly like you. I hadn't realized how much until now." With slow steps, she retreated. Dressed in black turtleneck, jeans and long overcoat that reached mid-calf, he resembled a raven perched for flight. A raven on hunt. His coal black eyes pierced her with a glare as he stepped forward.

"Yes, my son Gavin. The one you killed." He snarled. His handsome face had become the mask of a psychopath. She needed to delay, wait for Devon.

"My first instinct is to call you a demented psychopath," she calmly replied and glanced over at the exit door, "but you'd only go berserk, and there is a bit of truth in what you say." She stepped closer to the portal.

"Don't move."

"Just wanted to open the door for my husband; he's waiting. I'd be afraid if I were you. He has a massive chest, the size of that travel trunk in the corner. And his hands would fit nicely around your neck."

He cackled. His irrational chortle perplexed her.

"Considering you're insane, I'll just leave now," she said. He caught her hand, she twisted, and he jerked her to the opening by the

clothes rack.

"And what do you think I should do with this body?" He slid a panel, once hidden in the graphic contours of the wall. Devon sat on the floor, hands and ankles tied in front of him. His face so pale the scar around his eye appeared to be new, bright and pink.

Although his mouth had been gagged, his eyes shot messages. He wanted her to run.

How could she escape? Roget was twice her size and much faster than she. She needed a crystal ball and her large handbag.

"Is this the linebacker you thought was going to rescue you?" he mocked. "Not likely to happen."

A knock. Her heart beat as fast as the taps on the wood door. Someone would help them. Devon would live. She hadn't had enough time to tell him. Would he forgive her, again?

"Don't answer it," Roget exclaimed.

"They will walk in. Before the theater is closed down, the custodians check each room. All the nooks and crannies." She smiled a got-you-now smile.

He glanced toward the exit, down at Devon and at her.

"You must have an exit. I assume you're the one who's been shadowing me, you tricked the actors, cut the wires, altered the boards on the stage?" she asked.

"Not the past two weeks, I've been busy getting things arranged." He cackled like the lunatic he'd become.

"You've lost too many brain cells to the meth, Roget." The door pushed inward.

"I started building an empire with the intent to bring my son to California. But you killed my boy. Now, I will be taking a life. Yours or the linebacker?" He taunted.

"Mine. Take me. Kill me." She allowed her voice to carry, but the creak of the door made her heart punch. "Let him go. We've only seconds, Roget."

The clatter of cement from Devon's cast against wood directed her attention to him. She had almost believed they'd escape. Someone would

walk in, and Roget, being a coward, would hurry out his rat hole.

Instead, footsteps vibrated off the wood planks in the hallway. The door had been left ajar two inches. Whoever opened it might have overheard Roget. Hope existed.

Devon widened his eyes and darted his pupils to the left. Was there an exit from this little closet?

"Do you think you should shut and lock the door?" she asked and nodded toward the portal.

Certifiable-Roget ran to the door, his coat trailing behind him like the wings of the raven. Melody slammed the patterned sliding door, knelt down beside Devon. She removed the duct tape from his mouth. She slapped the tape on the wall, half on the door, acting as a weak barricade.

"Go, there's a door to the left. Get help."

"I'm not leaving you." She tried to untie the nylon cord wrapped around his wrists, breaking two fingernails in the process. The door rocked and banged on its hinges.

"Luv, be sensible. I cannot run with a broken leg. There's a pocket knife in my cast. Cut the rope around my hands and go."

Melody ran her fingers along the cast, separating the split material of his dress pants and found the knife. She sliced through the rope as the door jerked open. Roget crept toward her.

Devon moved his arms beside him, levering his body.

She slid the blade around and jabbed the knife into Roget's knee. Roget hit her hard enough to make her land on her backside. The dagger dropped with a clang onto the cement. Devon twisted to reach it. She shoved her hand, grasping around to touch the steel.

Roget dropped down on his haunches. Melody stood and kicked Roget in the face.

"Come on, I dare you to kill me," she screamed and took off at a jog down the corridor.

No footsteps.

She pivoted around.

Roget limped toward her.

Her breathing ragged, she considered her next move. She could

burst through and knock him down for at least a moment and see if Devon survived or keep running. If she tried to see Devon and he remained uninjured, she'd be putting him at risk.

"I'm going to kill you, Melody. Your death will be slow and painful."

She pivoted and ran, skidding to a stop at the end.

She used her fingertips to search the plain gray surface. If the other door had been worked into the wall, so could this one. Finally, she felt a crack.

Fingernails bit into her forearm and jerked her around.

"Let's take a little walk outside." Roget grinned like Anthony Perkins in *Psycho*, teeth totally exposed, eyes narrowed and that crazy pupil movement.

He shoved open the door and pulled her down a dank, dark, underground tunnel. It was too fresh, too new to have bats and spiders, but it had water seeping in through the pores. The scent of decay made her blow air from her nose instead of in. She slipped on a damp stone, and her leg gave out.

He snapped her arm. She screamed as pain radiated through it. He slapped her face.

"God, I've missed that," he chuckled.

She bit her lip to keep from crying, which would get her another hit.

At the end of the tunnel, he flung open a metal door, and fresh cool evening air filtered into the musty passageway.

"There is a sidewalk by the light near the tree." He pushed her in front of him and squeezed her head to point west. "See it?"

"Yes."

"My car is parked there. I'm going to place this gun at your side, and you'll walk with me like a couple out for a night at the opera. No funny business or you'll die in the parking lot. Got it?"

"Yes." She glanced over to see five cars. Matt was here! Would he be in the vehicle? Would he recognize her and question why she walked away from him? Maybe he'd questioned the delay and gone to find

Devon. The thought took root in her head, and her heart eased a little, her chest was not so tight with pain.

"Move."

She tripped. He jerked her into an upright position. As he dragged her across the dew-laden asphalt, she kept looping, *Matt will find Devon*.

They made it to the sidewalk in seconds. In front of her sat a shadowed Hummer, H3, four by four. The streetlamp had been shot out, and bits of glass were scattered across the ground. Crap, she'd never be able to escape.

Roget stopped in front of the car. She smelled the fear on him. Sick vinegar-scented sweat.

"Scared, Roget?" Her heart beat as loud as the train blast, warning people of its crossing a few miles away.

"Bitch, I should put a bullet in you right here instead of taking you to the stockyards."

"Nobody's going anywhere." Jensen's voice came out of the black of the night.

"Throw the gun to the side," Matt said. His solid body appeared in the bright lights of a vehicle. The clank of metal hitting cement sounded in the misty air.

She took a deep breath and exhaled.

"Melody, are you all right?" Jensen asked.

"Yes, fine. Please have someone go to the women's dressing room to get Devon."

"Done. Come here to me," he ordered. "Matt, keep your gun on him."

Melody ran forward.

She understood better than most that in an instant a life can be lost: through poor health, accidents in the home, on the street, in the air, or simply from one person choosing to end the life of another. She sensed a danger as she ran toward Jensen. The pistol lay on the ground, but in the past Roget had always had a backup plan.

There would be another piece and an escape route as well. A shot was fired.

Jensen shouted, "Drop!"

She pivoted to look behind her. All noise around her stopped. No train running on the track, no horns honking into the darkness, no night birds calling to others, only silence. The bullet came toward her.

In slow motion, the deadly lead curved from a direct hit to her heart to the right, where it impacted the wooden light pole and the symphony of the night returned.

The roar of a gun screeched then another, louder pop. Roget fell to the ground.

Melody twisted around to see Mikhail standing outside a dark, four-door sedan. Matt was running toward Melody, and Jensen slid his revolver into his shoulder holster.

Melody dropped to the ground, her butt sinking into the wet, mucky grass. She placed her head between her knees.

"Mikhail, I told you to stay in the car," Jensen shouted.

"Not this time, Jensen. Destiny had been altered. One who should not have died would have," Mikhail calmly replied.

"It could have been you. How many times do I have to tell you?" Jensen shouted the question.

"Melody, are you all right?" Matt asked as he ran toward Roget.

"Yes, I'm fine." In the background she could see Jensen holding Mikhail to his chest. He rubbed her back with soothing, circular strokes.

"Devon," she whispered. He was in a wheelchair rolling at a quick clip with a blond-haired man running behind. She stood and on unsteady feet ran to meet him.

She dropped in front of the wheelchair and pulled him into her arms. "I thought he'd killed you. Thank God, you're alive."

"Gunshot. Are you hurt?" he uttered on panted breaths.

"No, missed. Roget is," she said but glanced at the unmoving figure, his black evil soul melding into the ground, "hopefully dead."

"This is over," he said, with a firm, flat tone of voice.

"I understand. It's a bit much. I'll stay the night and move out tomorrow." She wiped her dripping nose on the tail of her tunic.

"What the hell are you talking about?" Devon bellowed.

"Devon," the man behind the chair said. Melody glanced at him then at Devon.

"Melody, this is my younger brother, Nicholas. Nick, my wife, Melody." He tilted his head to look at his brother.

Melody raised her mud-encrusted hand to wave a greeting. "Hi, Nick. I've heard a lot about you."

"You as well, Melody. Your voice is amazing, and clearly non-stop action surrounds you." He smiled. Nick stood at six-foot-one and had a linebacker's body; he was an image of Devon.

Police cars squealed to a stop, and men wearing badges surrounded the group.

\* \* \* \* \*

Devon held her close, to his unencumbered side, in bed. She smelled of jasmine and woman. Her wet hair irritated his arm skin, but it didn't matter. She was safe and with him. He had thought her to be asleep, but she glanced at him.

"Why are you awake?" Melody asked.

"Keep replaying the events of tonight."

"I know."

"Why did you think I was telling you our marriage was over?" he asked. He picked up a lock of hair and separated the pieces.

"Because you heard what Roget said, and I thought you didn't want me."

"Cancer isn't something you can give to a child. You didn't kill your son." He kissed the side of her temple. Except through genetics, but he didn't believe that was the case.

"I've been keeping something from you. I should have told you a long time ago." She entwined her fingers with his. "Birdy, wisdom in a large package, told me to tell you, but I wanted you so much. I still want you, but I don't want to keep a lie between us."

His heart pounded so hard he could hear it outside his chest. Unable to answer because of his throat being closed off, he waited.



"I did kill my son," she declared.

"Explain," he whispered.

"When my son was an infant, I left him alone with my mother, so I could attend classes at the university. A class had been canceled. I surprised Gavin, planning to take him to the park. We were poor, Devon. You need to know that you and I come from two totally different classes."

"In my world there aren't classes, just people who are similar or not."

She snuggled closer to his chest. His heart continued to rage with fear, fear of the unknown.

"My mother didn't work two jobs as I stated before. We lived in the poor neighborhood on the wrong side of the tracks. She always tried to find a way to make easy money. When I walked into the apartment, I discovered she had taken my scholarship funds and set up a meth lab. The fumes probably gave my son cancer, Devon. I left him with her, knowing she wasn't reliable. I killed him."

His heart rate returned to normal sinus rhythm. Although her tears dripped onto his naked chest, he knew she had carried a needless guilt. He lifted her face, waited for her to maintain eye contact with him. "Listen to me and listen well, Melody Siegal. You were a young mother trying to get a better life for your son. You did what you had to do—"

"But—"

"No. I don't know your son's case, the type of cancer, but limited exposure to the fumes might cause a stroke or heart failure, not cancer. Do you understand?"

"Thank you." With the edge of the sheet, she wiped the tears from her cheeks.

He kissed her long and hard. "I love you. Let's start another son or daughter."

"Really?"

"Really." He embraced her and chased away the darkness, leaving only hope and the greatest of all—love.

The End

**Author Bio**

jj Keller is an author of paranormal, urban fantasy and suspense novels.

She enjoys reading and crafting. Traveling and meandering in her herb garden are her favorite pastimes. She lives with her husband, sons, and dog on a small oasis in the Indiana countryside.