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...Arturo unhooked Clara's skirt, pulling down the zipper. The material pooled at her feet. He slipped a hand inside her panties, then shoved them and the pantyhose down over her hips. She stepped out of them. His hand cupped her smooth mound. He remembered the first time he and Samir had spread her, shaved her, then fucked her. Almost everything about their relationship had been rooted in sensual ritual. It had been so very good. So right.

Clara's whole body was smooth as silk, the perfect tapestry, the perfect woman.

He pushed her onto the wrinkled drop cloth. Then he spread her, gazing at the perfectly parted petals of her labia, the glistening core pink, a shade he'd spent hours trying to match perfectly with a blend of oils. He leaned forward to trace his tongue over her inner moist lips.

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climax after climax with just the touch of their sable brushes.

Clara screamed as a climax shattered her. She gripped his shoulders, her nails digging into his flesh. Arturo welcomed the bite of pain. Needed it to remember he was alive. There had been so many moments when he'd felt numb to the world around him.

But never to Clara. Never to Samir...

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BY

ADRIANNA DANE

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CHAPTER 1

Where are you, Samir? We need you!

The words screamed through Clara's mind as she studied the painting prominently displayed at the front of the exclusive department store.

"It's a very...riveting piece, isn't it? Do you know the artist?"

Clara couldn't take her eyes off the work of art. She felt the heat of a summer sun on her naked body. Sable brushes skimming across her skin, between the lips of her pussy. She squeezed her legs tightly together, trying to deny the erotic sensations that quaked through her.

"Clara, did you hear me?"

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“Yes, Maggie, I heard you. It wasn’t created by one artist—it was two. You know one of them.”

Spread your legs, Clara. Show us your desire. Clara shivered as the ghostly demand echoed inside her head.

“I do? Who is it?”

She felt fingertips stroke gently across her inner thighs. The warmth of a bonfire against her back. The rough texture of a flannel blanket beneath her.

“Arturo.”

Maggie turned to look at Clara, her mouth agape.

“I didn’t know he ever did work like this. It doesn’t look like any of the stuff you have on display at the gallery. Who was the other artist?”

“Samir Zahi.” Prince Samir Zahi to be correct. Samir, whose mouth had tasted her, lips hot and demanding on her breasts. Her nipples burned for him as she studied the painting, yearning to feel his mouth on her flesh once again.

“Why have I never heard of him before?”

A shaft of pain drove straight through Clara’s chest like a jagged arrow piercing her heart. She remembered the agony of returning to the cottage that long ago afternoon to find every speck of Samir erased. It was as though he had never been there. No note. Nothing. The paintings Samir and Arturo had created together had been nowhere in sight. Arturo had been seated in front of the window, hollow-eyed, staring off at the horizon. He had said little except that Samir was needed back in Razban. Even three years later he had shared little with her of that afternoon. Samir was gone, along with all of the

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paintings he and Arturo had created together.

“He disappeared about three years ago. Called back to his country by his father.” Clara marveled at how even her voice sounded. That was such an understatement as to what had happened and the maelstrom of emotions that had resulted. “This is the first I’ve seen of their collaborative work since then.”

“Well, I have to say it’s an amazing piece. There’s so much emotion expressed in it. Not that Arturo’s work isn’t fabulous. But this...there’s something so electric about it. The vivid imagery rips right through you.”

Clara knew exactly what Maggie meant. She knew quite well what those colors represented. Passion. Seduction. Lust. And freedom.

“Yes, the work they accomplished together was truly amazing. Their combined work always was...inspiring.” The words were tugged from her chest. It wasn’t easy talking about love ripped apart by circumstances. These two men had been the loves of her life and she had never recovered from the loss of Samir.

She still read the paper daily, searching for news of Razban and the new king. After a bloody battle for control, King Zahi had come out of exile in triumph and re-taken the throne. Although there was still some unrest, it appeared Zahi’s support was strong and the new regime would thrive. But Clara always hunted for some reference to his youngest son, Samir. Never a word. Almost as though Razban’s youngest royal prince had vanished from the face of the earth.

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Suddenly she felt a chill race through her and she shivered. She rubbed her arms. Skin that was still smooth as a baby's bottom. Hairless, the way her two lovers had always enjoyed her. A blank canvas to be used for their pleasure—and for hers.

It was not a relationship she had simply jumped into. For the most part Clara had always been reserved in her relationships, but something about the two budding artists had changed everything. Samir and Arturo had eased her into the role of model, then lover, seduced her into becoming a human canvas, a position she took to with sensual enthusiasm. And she had let them; loving every moment she was with them.

Clara Simms had taken a dare four years ago and had posed nude for an art class while she was in college. How could she ever have thought it would lead to the most devastating and passionate love affair she would ever have? With two men who had loved each other as much as they seemed to have loved her. At the time. Neither she nor Arturo were ever the same after Samir's disappearance. How could something so right have gone so wrong? It wasn't that she didn't still love Arturo, nor that he didn't have feelings for her. But with Samir gone, something had changed.

The painting brought it all back, a dam burst with memories, images of passion, the feel of artistic expression, the rampant desire that would not allow her to rest.

Too many times she'd woken up in absolute agony, remembering her loss, only to discover the spot next to her empty, Arturo sitting in a corner of the darkened room,

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smoking a cigarette, and gazing at a blank canvas. Understanding had not made it any easier. Samir had been so much a part of both of them.

Arturo still painted, but some of that passion was missing, and it often left him frustrated and difficult to be around. It's one of the reasons they still kept their separate apartments. She remembered the night he had walked out, and the agony in his expression as he'd looked at her. Even that memory still caused her pain. And loneliness.

She worked, she lived, she breathed, but she somehow felt distanced, living on the fringes of life. Arturo still painted, but he never used her as the model she was created to be for two men who, together, should have taken the art world by storm. That intimacy was missing and there wasn't a day that passed that she didn't yearn to reclaim it.

She so missed the intimacy of that summer three years ago. Clara couldn't bring herself to return to the site of her complete surrender. Not just of her body, but of her soul. They had owned her, bound her to them. Molded her into something more than she had been, a living piece of art who could not survive without them.

And yet, much to her surprise, she had survived without Samir, as had Arturo. And done well enough. Clara Simms, the daughter of an oil baron, didn't need to work. There was plenty of money to do whatever she liked. An only child of globetrotting parents, raised by nannies, she had never wanted for anything. Material, that is. She had never felt loved. Until Arturo and Samir.

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Money truly could not buy happiness, or love. But she'd learned that too much time on her hands was not a good thing. She'd found a job, went to it religiously every day. And then home every night. Well, almost every night.

"So you know him, Clara? Does he have anything at your gallery? I want to see more. It's as though I can't get enough. I want to climb right inside. Do you know who the model was?"

It was a personal thing. Not to be shared. The relationship she had with Arturo and Samir was not for public consumption. Few would have understood it anyway. Even Clara's best friend.

"No, we don't have anything at the gallery that was done by the two of them. This is the first piece I've seen in years. I wonder who's handling the work?"

Maggie, her friend since they'd both attended St. Mary's private school, looked at her in surprise. She worked as a buyer at the exclusive store next door to this one. Every Friday, they met for lunch. "Now you've shocked me. I thought you knew every artist there was to know in this town."

That was the worst part. She'd spent years trying to track down what had happened to Samir with absolutely no success. She wanted to know he was safe and happy. That he had *wanted* to go. Arturo had refused to talk about what had happened when Samir left.

Heat threaded through her as memory took over. Her nipples screwed into tight beads. She remembered that first encounter. Both Arturo and Samir had been seniors, sharing an apartment at that point in their lives. Just like her, both had

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been living on generous allowances from their families...although she doubted their families knew of their intimate relationship. At least at the time. Clara so belied her name. A puritan name for a not particularly puritan heart once she got to know them.

Hard, naked bodies pressed her between them. Hands sweeping across her skin. Touching her. Fingertips brushing across her lips, her nipples.

Oh, God, she didn't want to remember. Not now. Her whole body ached.

Through the whole session, while she posed, she'd flirted silently with the two hot-looking, black-eyed young artists on the left side of the room. By the time the session was over, her body was burning up, her pussy soaking wet. And she knew there was something more going on with the two men than strictly modeling. But she'd not known how tightly woven together the art and the sex would be.

And then panic shoved all other thought out of her head. Did Arturo know the paintings had resurfaced?

"I have to go, Maggie. I'm sorry."

"But we haven't had lunch yet."

"I know, I know. But I forgot an appointment. I'll catch up with you later." Clara fled from the department store. She had to get to Arturo.

CHAPTER 2

“Your highness, are you ready to leave?”

Prince Samir Zahi watched as the young woman fled from the department store. He could go after her, had almost started to, but this wasn't where he wanted their reunion to take place. Not like this. And not without Arturo.

He had agreed to have the painting put on exhibition because his cousin's family owned the store and he'd done it as a favor. And beyond that, he'd hoped that if Clara or Arturo saw it, they would understand. Samir was back.

He'd never thought he would actually see Clara, certainly not under these circumstances.

He'd only been back in the States for a week. Three years

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kept for all intents and purposes in a cage of safety protected from his own countrymen, his country in revolution, his father in a dangerous position as he claimed the throne of Razban. A minor son with no prospect of becoming the leader of his people, Samir chafed at being forced to return to Razban. He'd made a different life and was eager to begin it with his two lovers. But at the insistence of his father, he'd had no choice. King Zahi was taking no chances with any of his children.

Samir had ached for his lovers he'd been required to leave behind. His family never would have accepted them and would have made their lives a living hell in Razban. But he was back now, having renounced all claims in any respect to his royal heritage. He couldn't stand the isolation another minute longer. He had to be free. And he had to see Arturo and Clara, even if neither of them wanted him to be a part of their lives any longer. Thank goodness relations with the United States were good and his return had gone smoothly.

Would Clara recognize the painting? Would she understand? He hadn't picked up a paintbrush since being whisked away that long ago summer. His father had finally agreed to let him return. Turning down that last marriage arrangement had apparently been the final straw. It was Samir's mother who had finally convinced Samir's father to let him go.

It felt like a weight had been lifted from his shoulders when he finally stepped off the plane onto American soil once again. Freedom had never tasted so good. And he planned to waste not another minute in attempting to locate the lovers he

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had been forced to leave behind. Had they married? Had they gone their separate ways? It felt as though his whole life had been stripped away when he'd been forced to leave the country. Had they forgotten him?

“Do you want their deaths on your hands?”

Those were the words that had finally forced Samir to obey the royal command. It was the only thing that could have made him leave America and return to the country that suffocated his creativity, forcing him into the stringent demands of royal duty.

He turned to look at the one guard his father had forced upon him. “You located them? And the invitations have been delivered?”

“Yes, your highness. Just as you requested.”

He watched Clara hurry out of the store. Would she come to him? Would Arturo?

He remembered his last time with them both. The late afternoon sunlight had streamed in through the window, highlighting her lush body, the paint he and Arturo had used still wet and shiny on her flesh. Her breasts and pussy were the only parts of her not colored by their artistry. Her eyes had been dark as she watched the two men, her labia lips wet with a different sheen than paint.

“Go to her,” he'd said to Arturo. The two men had just had passionate sex as Clara posed on the pedestal, still and beautiful. Their muse, their lover, their passionate tapestry.

He had lain back on the bed, stroking his cock as Arturo crawled to where Clara was poised. Not a sound from Clara,

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for fear of marring the landscape that had taken Arturo and Samir hours to complete.

Even now, three years later, the image of that passionate afternoon had the ability to rouse him. He had watched Arturo carefully slip his tongue between her lips, tasting her, sucking at her juices.

He'd heard her moans slip from her as Arturo pierced deeper. Crouched in front of her, ass raised enticingly, Samir had stroked his cock.

It was the game they loved playing. How long could Clara hold the pose without moving? How good would Arturo be in driving her over the edge? Arturo's hands lifted up to tweak the hardened peaks of her nipples as his tongue and teeth feasted on her sweet cream. A slight ripple of movement from her hips and Samir had known it wouldn't be much longer.

At that moment, Samir had climbed off the settee, grabbed the lube and joined them. Arturo was already opened for him, but he used more lube, sheathed his cock in a condom, and buried his cock in Arturo's hole, just as Clara screamed, her legs giving way as she crumpled to the pedestal.

Arturo had pulled her down onto the floor, grabbed a condom from the packages scattered on the floor and sunk his prick into her pussy.

The smell of wet paint and hot sex filled the room as the lust built. Arturo's hands had smeared the paint on Clara's flesh, transferring the fuchsia and sapphire, emerald and onyx to Arturo and eventually to Samir.

They had come fast and hard, buried deep, filled with hard,

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pounding flesh, covered in the tapestry of their creativity. It had never been better.

Even to the moment, at sundown, as the rich flare of burnt orange lit the skyline and they raced into the white froth of the ocean, there had never been a moment more indelibly imprinted into Samir's mind than that moment of sublime ecstasy with his passionate lovers.

Could he ever regain those moments again? Would they want anything to do with him after his apparent abandonment?

He had to try. Or he would go mad with wanting them. Nothing could take their place. He thanked Allah that his father had finally realized if he continued to keep Samir bound to the duty of the royal house, he would die, for there was no love to be found in Razban. Not for him. Nor would there ever be without his lovers. There could be no art, no passion and he would surely be lost.

A man lost and without a country was no truer a statement than for Samir without his lovers.

CHAPTER 3

Arturo inhaled sharply on the unfiltered cigarette. A bad habit, but one he couldn't seem to quit. Slowly, he blew out the smoke as he stared down at the note which had just been delivered. It couldn't be true, not after all this time.

The memory of the parting on that long ago day pushed to the front of his thoughts. When the men in the black, unmarked cars had first descended on the summer cottage, he hadn't known what to think. Clara had gone out for groceries and at the time he'd had no way to get in touch with her because she'd forgotten to take her cell phone with her. She had a habit of doing things like that.

As far as he knew, since that time, she had never forgotten

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it again. At least since moving to the city, every time he called her, she answered. It had been traumatic for all of them, even though neither he nor Clara spoke about it. Not that she didn't keep trying. But he didn't want to go back over it. It hurt too damn much.

He couldn't paint worth shit, and she never forgot her cell phone. How fucking stupid was that? Even worse, he couldn't even touch Clara without thinking about Samir. Yet he couldn't *not* touch her. She was all he had left. He should have known better than to get himself mixed up with someone of royal blood. It couldn't have lasted and he should have known that. But in college, none of that had mattered. What had mattered was the intensity and the passion. And the art.

Arturo had met Samir first. And when they saw Clara it was like the sun had blasted through to illuminate both their worlds. And they had both been of the same mind when they first saw Clara Simms poised on the pedestal in the classroom. There had been no question that she had to be with them.

That whole last semester of college they had been inseparable. That final summer at the beach was about making plans, talking about the future, and cementing their relationship on so many different levels.

The painting had been rapturous as Arturo and Samir collaborated together with Clara as their model. The loving had been exquisite. The relationship volatile at times, playful at others, but intensely satisfying at every corner.

A passion like that wasn't meant to last. It was too intense, too much of everything. They'd been too happy. He'd scanned

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the papers and the Internet time and time again trying to find out something about Samir Zahi. But there was nothing. Not a speck of information as the internal struggles of the small country of Razban escalated. So small a country, that even the bloody political struggle taking place inside its borders often didn't make headlines. Until three months ago when the rebels were finally quashed, Samir's father took the throne, and it looked like some stability was going to be achieved. But Arturo had to wonder what that would mean for Samir.

Three years was a long time. People changed. As much as Arturo longed for Samir to return to the States, he had to wonder. Was that even possible? The note seemed to indicate it was. But did Arturo dare hope that things could work out?

He stared out over the black tarred rooftops, thinking of Clara. Their relationship had never been the same after Samir left. They were still lovers, but not in the way it had been when Samir was with them. It was as though for three years they mourned the loss of their lover.

A knock on the door pulled him from his somber thoughts. He knew who it was. Instinct always told him when she was near. Unfolding from the window seat, he walked to the door and opened it.

Clara was just as beautiful now as she was when they'd first met. She'd matured, her curves not as sharp, having softened over the years. Time and again he'd thought of having her model for him, but he couldn't do it. The moment he thought of painting her without Samir, his creativity froze over like a mountaintop dipped into subzero January frost. He

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could paint anything—anyone, except for Clara. And yet, he couldn't let her go.

“Come in,” he stepped back.

Clara moved past him into the studio. She spun around to face him. Her expressive amethyst eyes told him everything. “He’s back, Arturo. I saw one of your paintings. One that the two of you did. It has to be him.”

He remained silent for a long time as he stepped behind her to remove her cream-colored wool coat. He inhaled her scent as he peeled it from her shoulders and tossed it onto the sofa.

“I know.” His hands rested on her shoulders. He pulled down one side of her silk shirt to reveal a creamy white shoulder. His mouth tasted the satiny texture of her skin. There was a time when her scent would have mixed with the smell of paint and turpentine, making it her own, unique scent. But now, all he smelled was the sweet, feminine aroma of Clara. Still heady. Still arousing.

She leaned against him. One of his hands slipped beneath her shirt to cup a warm breast. From the moment she'd first modeled for them she had stopped wearing bras. It was as though every discovery of three years ago, every moment was so indelibly imprinted upon both of them that there was no moving forward without Samir.

He pulled the shirt up and over her head without even unbuttoning it. Such stunning, perfect, creamy skin. He tracked along her shoulder with his mouth, sucking at the nape of her neck.

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She dropped her head onto his shoulder, arching her back, pushing her breast into the curve of his hand.

“Arturo,” she whispered. “What are we going to do?”

He unhooked her skirt, pulling down the zipper. The material pooled at her feet. He slipped a hand inside her panties, then shoved them and the pantyhose down over her hips. She stepped out of them. His hand cupped her smooth mound. He remembered the first time he and Samir had spread her, shaved her, then fucked her. Almost everything about their relationship had been rooted in sensual ritual. It had been so very good. So right.

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But never to Clara. Never to Samir.

“Arturo, what are we going to do?”

She sat up and looked at him, her pansy eyes still dark from the aftermath of her orgasm. Arturo reached up to the desk and pulled down the envelope. He handed it to her, then dragged her into his lap and leaned back against the edge of the sofa. He slipped a hand to her mound, his middle finger burrowing deep inside her moist, hot channel. When he curled his finger, she purred, her eyes going even darker, to almost black.

The note in her hand shook as she opened it. His finger slid through her juices, and another finger joined the first inside her opening. Her tight sheath wrapped around him. For one moment her eyelids lowered, her lips parted and a tremor passed through her. Slowly, her lids lifted and she stared at the white card in her hands.

Arturo watched her, noting the changes in her expression, like the sun flirting with the clouds on an autumn day. Bright and dark, cold and hot, gold turning to copper, then back again. Emotions flitted across her beautiful face.

He added a third finger and heard her catch her breath. He bit the soft flesh of her shoulder and felt her shudder.

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“Are we going there?” she asked, her voice taut and deep.

He licked the reddened curve of her shoulder where his teeth had marked her. He spread her legs wider and carefully inserted four fingers inside her. She groaned, her lids lowering as she dropped back against him, thrusting her pelvis to force his fingers deeper still.

“Do we have a choice?” he asked as he curved and twisted his fingers, expanding the walls of her vagina. Her cream drenched his hand. He pulled her down across his lap as he worked his hand inside her, driving her higher and higher.

“Oh, God, Arturo,” she screamed. He felt her release, her body engulfing him, hugging him close. He felt her softness, the wanton yielding of her body and her soul as he drove her toward the stars.

With care, he removed his hand from inside the warmth of her body and she collapsed across his lap. Gently he brought her legs together and enfolded her close against his chest, his chin resting on the top of her head.

“I think we must, my love.”

Her hand wrapped into his shirt. She sighed and nuzzled her face into the cloth.

“Yes, I think we must,” she echoed. She burrowed closer. “I’ve missed him, Arturo. More than I can say. I miss what we had.”

He stroked her back. “I know, love. I know. So have I.”

He closed his eyes and the image of Samir rose up, never far away. But today the sharp edge of their loss was even harder to bear.

CHAPTER 4

Clara pulled her BMW up in front of Arturo's building. His studio was on the top floor. When she'd arrived home after visiting Arturo earlier in the week, she'd found a note waiting for her, slipped beneath her door. It was similarly worded to the one she'd read in Arturo's apartment.

For the balance of the week memories had surged, wrapping around her like the cellophane Arturo and Samir had used to bind her. Tight and hot, leaving her breathless with anticipation.

She found it difficult to believe Samir was actually back. And that she and Arturo would come face-to-face with him in a matter of hours. She looked up as Arturo opened the door

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and slid inside.

“Seat belt,” she said automatically. He was forever trying to forget to fasten it, so it had turned into her way of greeting him when he got in her car.

He slung his bag in the backseat and frowned at her. “I know.”

“Yes, you know, but you always try to get out of putting it on. So do it now.”

“Yes. Yes. Yes,” he grumbled as he fastened it. “I hate constriction of any sort.”

“I realize that, but in this case it could save your life.”

“You are an excellent driver. I am never worried when I get in the car with you.”

Checking traffic, she pulled away from the curb and headed for the freeway. “I don’t suppose you remember that time I tried to navigate through that suicidal traffic in Madrid? When we went back to see your parents last Christmas?” He’d come close to ending up in the windshield on more than one occasion when she’d had to slam on the brakes in order to avoid a crazy driver intent on merging into a compacted space where he wouldn’t fit.

“But that was Spain and this is the United States. Which is why I never learned to drive. I do value my life.”

“Yes, and I’ve seen you behind the wheel of a car. The world is a much safer place without you driving in it.”

He gave her his usual why-should-I-care shrug. “I tried to tell you that. But you insisted on trying to teach me to drive.”

“Well, I learned my lesson,” she said as she turned onto

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the ramp. “You almost got us both killed. And that poor mailbox.”

“I paid the owner for the damage,” he said in a wounded tone of voice.

Clara merged into the heavy weekend traffic heading toward the Pacific coast. She was silent for a long time, her thoughts in turmoil over the coming reunion. She glanced at Arturo and saw the lines etched into his face. She reached out for his hand and twined her fingers with his. Neither of them wanted to admit the magnitude of this trip.

“It will be all right,” she said, hoping it was true. “Did you bring a jacket? It will be cold.” November wasn’t exactly the best time of year for a jaunt.

“I brought the scarf you made me.” He touched the blue scarf encircling his neck. She’d crocheted it for him last Christmas with some specially dyed wool she’d purchased from a friend of hers. She reluctantly pulled her hand from his, needing both hands on the wheel in the crazy traffic.

The sky blue of his thick cable-knit sweater only seemed to highlight the handsome aristocratic lines of his face. He was almost too beautiful for words. His thick, black curly hair looked like he’d forgotten to run a comb through it before he left his apartment. Her womb tightened with an all too familiar spasm. The rush of need bloomed and her nipples pushed painfully against the front of her shirt.

“Arturo.” Even she could hear the need drenching his name.

“Pull off at the rest stop,” he said.

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They'd hardly been on the road thirty minutes and the anticipation of seeing Samir again made the ache too unbearable. She had a feeling it was the same for Arturo.

She pulled into the most deserted area of the rest stop she could find. Arturo already had his seat belt off and his cock freed. As she released her seat belt she looked at the thick erection. Watched as his hand slid up and down its length, his beautiful long fingers teasing at the slit.

"Anyone might see us."

He yanked her toward him. "When has that ever mattered?"

He was right. It never had. It was a surprise that they hadn't been arrested for indecent exposure before this.

She opened her mouth and took him inside. She heard his groan. The wind surged against the car, rocking it slightly, the whistle of cold air undulating around them, the splatter of raindrops hitting the windshield.

Arturo's hand slid inside the waistband of her pants, cupping her ass cheek. The tips of his fingers dug into her flesh.

"You should have worn a skirt," he said. One of his fingers slipped into the shadowy crevice of her cheeks, brushing over the opening of her anus. "And this car is too small."

It didn't matter. They managed. As they always had done. Nothing had ever stopped them from enjoying each other. But over the last few years the loving had been bittersweet.

Clara licked up over the stiff length of his prick. She dipped beneath the flared head, sipping at the pre-cum.

CAUTION: WET PAINT

Arturo's finger slipped inside her hole and she pushed against him, the tight friction of her unprepared orifice dowsing her in the bite of sensation, dark and stinging. She shoved back, forcing his finger deeper, as she bathed his balls, sucking them into her mouth. He arched up, driving his cock deep into her mouth, thrusting his finger farther into her anus. His cream poured into her mouth, the taste of his cum flooding her senses. The sharp sting of his penetration driving her toward her own precipice. She pushed upward; he withdrew, forcing her to follow, as she licked at his softening dick.

He slid his finger through her cream and then drove it into her anus once again. And then again. Finally sending her careening over the edge.

Ten minutes later she was refastening her seat belt and Arturo had straightened his clothing. One hand on the steering wheel, the other on the ignition key. She couldn't seem to get the images of the past out of her mind. Her body still hummed from the climax Arturo had just given her.

He leaned toward her and she couldn't help staring at his full, sensual lips. She remembered them wrapped around Samir's prick. Samir pumping his hips, his cock wet from Arturo's saliva. So wet and glistening, thick, skin stretched, veins prominent. So close to a climax.

Arturo's lips wrapped tightly around Samir's erection, eyes closed as he concentrated on Samir's dick. And Clara, poised above them, the two of them at her feet, Samir's hand on her thigh, sliding over the wet paint, smearing it, merging colors, blending, pumping.

CAUTION: WET PAINT

“We have to go,” she said abruptly, dragging her gaze from Arturo’s mouth. It took all her concentration to get the damn car going again. They had to get to Samir. Nothing was complete until they were together once again.

Arturo tipped her head to look at him. His eyes studied her. For the first time since Samir left, it felt like he was trying to reach inside to touch her soul.

“I love you, Clara. You know that.”

Her heart stopped in her chest. He hadn’t said those words in a very long time.

“I-I know. I love you, too.”

“He’s a part of us. One neither of us can cut out. We need him.”

“I know that, too.”

He released her and returned to his seat and fastened his seat belt. “Let us go to him then.”

Clara started the car and pulled out of the parking spot. Would the lover they had known be the man waiting for them at the cottage? Or would a stranger be waiting for them?

CHAPTER 5

Samir gazed around the cottage. He was flooded with the memories. This was the place the reunion needed to take place. It was the best of what they had been together. He paced the front room. He checked the easels, the oil paints, the body paints, and brushes. Everything was as he last remembered it.

It was a different season in more ways than one. All of them older. He didn't really know if they would show up. He based everything on what had once held them together as lovers.

He looked out the window and sighed with pleasure as he gazed at the ocean. Razban was a landlocked country and it

CAUTION: WET PAINT

seemed like forever since he had last walked barefoot on the cool sandy shores of a body of water like the Pacific Ocean.

“Samir, you’re a fool. Painting is not a career. You can’t make a living at it. And those people. They will use you. If you leave now, you will not be welcomed back. I wash my hands of you and your foolish dreams.” His father’s words echoed inside his head.

Samir felt he had been slowly dying since the war had begun. Razban was a young country torn apart by hate. In the end he’d decided he would rather wait tables than stay in Razban with a family who could not understand him, nor wanted to. They were a people of old traditions, with no wish to move forward into the modern world...their women hidden, his brothers forced into political marriages, his sisters molded into obedient wives and mothers with no say in their futures. Children who always acceded to their parents’ wishes, right or wrong. He couldn’t stand watching it any longer, being a part of it. There was no room for discovery, no place for individuality. His time in the States had changed him and he couldn’t go back. Nor did he want to.

As demanded, he had returned to Razban, but he had made it known at the time it was only temporary. Only until the war ended and his father’s position was secure. He did what he could in the times of uncertainty. But the last three years had been a time when he felt totally sucked dry of all emotion, of all passion. An uneasy peace had finally come to Razban and it was time for Samir to find his way back to the people and life he loved more than anything.

CAUTION: WET PAINT

“Is there anything else, your highness?” Ali stood at attention waiting for instructions. It made Samir crazy to have the man following him everywhere he went. But his father had been insistent. A condition of allowing him to return to the United States.

“No, that’s everything. You can go. Take the rest of the weekend off. Go find something fun to do.”

Ali’s expression darkened. “That would not be proper.”

Samir sighed in exasperation. “Ali, I do not want you here. And that is an order. We are not in Razban now. And I want some privacy. I promise you, I’m not going anywhere. And no one even knows I’m in the country except for my cousin. Nothing has been in the papers. If I had my way, you would not even be here.”

“But I am here, at your father’s orders. And it is to him that I must answer if something should happen to you.”

“He said you must stay until I am properly settled. I agreed to that much.” Samir swept a hand around the room. “As you can see, I am settled. Now you can leave and report to him that you have completed your task to my satisfaction.”

“But, your highness.”

Samir held up a hand. “No. You are to leave. Stay in town if you wish, but you are to go back to Razban. I no longer need you here. That is my final command as a prince of Razban. Please. I must be alone.”

Ali bowed. “As you wish, your highness. But your father will not be pleased.”

“He was not pleased when I left Razban. Why should now

CAUTION: WET PAINT

be any different? You have helped me greatly since we arrived. But now everything is settled. It's time for you to go.”

One last bow and a last-ditch argument and finally Ali departed, much to Samir's relief. He didn't know if or when Arturo and Clara might arrive and he didn't want Ali hanging around when they did. If they did. He wanted their reunion to be a private matter. Just the three of them. As it had always been in the past.

The clock on the wall ticked the minutes away as Samir waited, remembering their time together. Flashes of his first introduction to the young Spanish student, an import much like himself. He remembered the first night Arturo had come to his room after the midnight hour. At the time Arturo's room had been just down the hall from his. He remembered the feel of his hot skin rubbing against him as he slipped beneath the covers. He remembered the first time they'd made love.

There had been no words between them that night. Only kisses and touching and pleasure. Whispers of desire and need. After the passion, they had risen and by the light of candles they had created their first collaborative piece of art...there in Samir's room, with the scent of sex clinging to them, the smell of paint and turpentine in the air, the thrill of creative expression.

They had been practically inseparable from that point on. And then they had met Clara. And a relationship that they thought couldn't get better—soared.

He swung away from the scenery in front of him as he heard the sound of a car door slamming shut. Was it Ali

CAUTION: WET PAINT

returning? Or was it the two people he'd been waiting for, yearning to see again after three long years of separation?

Samir held his breath as he watched the door open. Tears sprang to his eyes as he saw first Clara, and then Arturo step through the doorway. The sight of them almost drove him to his knees.

They stood like statues just inside the door when they saw him. It was like a dream finally come true. This wasn't a dream—they were real.

“Samir, it's really you,” Clara said.

As he walked toward them on shaky legs he held out his arms. They met at the center of the room and he knew no moment would ever be so bittersweet as this one. His arms wrapped around them both. Finally, he had come home.

CHAPTER 6

Arturo looked back across the room at Clara lying on the couch, her head resting in Samir's lap. The three of them had barely stopped touching each other since he and Clara had arrived at the cottage the previous afternoon. Samir's head now tilted back against the rear of the sofa, his eyes closed. One hand possessively cupped one of Clara's breasts.

Arturo looked out the window and watched the coppery reflection on the water as the sun began to rise. He walked over to the table where the brushes and tubes of paint lay. He picked up a palette. He looked back at the couch and at the couple resting there. It was too much to believe this wasn't just another fantasy, that they were really together once again.

CAUTION: WET PAINT

Their relationship might seem strange to most people. The fact that Arturo felt no jealousy right now as he looked at his two lovers would have amazed some people. Few would understand their relationship. To him, they looked beautiful. His heart was full to bursting at the moment and what he needed most right now was to render the images and splashes of colors he saw in his mind. The poignant, silent serenity of this moment.

They had talked all the night through of the paths their lives had taken, the yearnings, the pain. At least he had Clara and she had him. But Samir, even though he'd been with his family, had missed the love, passion, and understanding only his lovers could give him. Of the three of them, Samir had suffered the most, unable even to paint because the loss had been so keen. He'd revealed to them that he'd hidden the paintings here in the States because if his father had his way, they would have all been destroyed. Every speck of his life in America erased. Arturo felt great respect for Samir, and an even deeper love, knowing the courage it must have taken to stand up to his father against all odds.

After mixing the paints, Arturo turned toward the easel with the blank canvas. For the first time since Samir had left, Arturo would use Clara as his model. And it felt so right. Just as he was about to touch brush to canvas, a strong hand wrapped around his. He stilled.

"It's been a long time, Arturo."

He allowed the reality of Samir's presence to soak into him. The warm, hard body pressed against his back.

CAUTION: WET PAINT

“Paint with me, Samir.”

“I saw some of your work. You were featured in the college alumni newsletter. The paintings are good. Very good. You don’t need me.”

“You have no idea how much I need you.” He swung around to face Samir. “Why didn’t you try to contact us? Somehow. Even if it was just to let us know you were okay.”

Arturo saw the darkness descend over Samir’s expression. The suffering etched in that look. “You have no idea how much I wanted to. But your lives were at stake. It was brought home very forcefully to me exactly how dangerous knowing me could be to you.”

“What do you mean?”

“I didn’t want to go with them when they came for me. I didn’t care about the danger to myself—I was willing to take the chance. As far as I was concerned I’d left Razban behind me. It was you and Clara I cared about.”

“We could have taken care of ourselves. You should have given us the chance to make the choice.”

Samir stroked the side of Arturo’s face. Then he cupped his jaw. The expression on his face gentled. “I knew what you would say.” His eyes went from chestnut brown to onyx black. “And I couldn’t take that chance. They would have used anything—anyone—to get to my father. And they could have done it through me. They had spies in the palace and they had the technology to track my movements. If I had even so much as made one simple phone call to either of you, my father’s enemies would have known of it. Once my father made

CAUTION: WET PAINT

several key alliances, the danger was quelled and his position strengthened. Only then could I return.”

“We might not have waited. Three years is a long time with no word from you.”

“I knew that. I had to take the chance.” Samir leaned forward and kissed Arturo. His lips hard and demanding. The kiss filled with longing and passion.

Arturo dropped the palette and brush and wound his arms around Samir’s neck. The men fell to their knees, pushing at clothing, yanking and tossing it away. Until they were both naked and hungry for a connection that had been lost to them for so long.

Samir spread Arturo beneath him. His dark gaze roving over Arturo’s body. His hands slid up the muscular thighs, sifting through the triangle of dark, curling hairs, moving upward. Arturo arched into the touch.

“I need you,” he said. “I don’t want to paint without you.” He reached up and latched onto Samir’s forearms and yanked him down on top of him.

He gripped the back of Samir’s head, forcing him closer, possessing his lips, thrusting his tongue deep inside. He undulated his hips, his rigid cock rubbing again Samir’s erection, wiry black hairs twining as legs and arms locked together. Hot male flesh melded close as though the years intervening had never existed.

Samir fastened his lips to one of Arturo’s erect nipples. He tugged with his teeth and Arturo groaned with the hot sensation of Samir’s possession.

CAUTION: WET PAINT

Samir licked his way down Arturo's body, his tongue delving into his navel, sucking at his skin. Arturo felt Samir stiffen. He opened his eyes and looked beyond Samir. He smiled and leaned back when he saw Clara, a bottle of oil in her hand.

"Clara," Samir murmured.

"Does this feel good, Samir? It's been so long since we've been together like this."

Arturo heard Samir grunt. And then a long, drawn out sigh.

"Is he ready for me?" Arturo asked.

Clara leaned over Samir's shoulder. "Oh, yes." She shifted away. "I want to watch." She leaned back against the couch, spread her legs, and Arturo watched her drop a hand to her pussy, slipping a finger inside.

He turned his attention to Samir. He shoved him back onto the wrinkled white drop cloth. The smell of turpentine rose up to greet him. He pushed Samir down and spread his legs. As he centered his prick at Samir's opening, he looked up at Clara who was directly in his line of sight. Her pupils dilated and her expression burned as she watched the two men. She now had three fingers pressing into her vagina. He saw her thumb brush over her stiff little pink bud. How he wanted to taste her.

Instead, he leaned forward and nibbled at Samir's firm tit. He tugged as he allowed the head of his dick to slide past Samir's ring of muscle to lodge just inside.

He looked up at Samir as he pushed deeper, and then deeper still. Samir's channel was hot and tight, gripping Arturo's prick so close. He glanced at Clara, saw the wet

CAUTION: WET PAINT

sheen of her cream coating her gorgeous thighs as he began to thrust slowly inside Samir's channel.

Samir arched up. His hands were fisted into the white sheet beneath them, eyes closed, mouth stretched into a tight, grimace of passion.

Arturo watched Clara climax, arching, breasts thrust upward, nipples dark, drawn tight. He slowed his momentum as she opened her eyes and fastened her gaze onto the two men. She crawled over to them. One hand wrapped around Samir's prick as she pressed the fingers of her other hand to Arturo's lips. He sucked at her sweet cream as he increased his rhythm.

"Now, my love, now," Clara said. Arturo leaned back, giving her room, and Clara bent forward engulfing Samir's prick in her mouth. Within moments both men were crying out with their orgasms just as the sun's bright golden rays captured the room.

This was how it was meant to be, was Arturo's first coherent thought after the explosive climax. He slid his softened cock from inside Samir's channel and leaned back against the shelf behind him.

Clara released Samir's prick, licked her lips, and then leaned forward to kiss the man lying prone and boneless on the tarp. If Arturo weren't so exhausted, he would have joined them once again, but he was content just to watch. It was enough that the three of them were once again together.

Finally, Clara pulled back; she reached up to her hair. And pulled the wig off and tossed it across the room. Arturo

CAUTION: WET PAINT

couldn't help smiling when he saw Samir's eyes widen. Samir reached up to tenderly stroke the bald pate of his lover. His hands cupped her head and he rose onto his knees.

His fingers brushed across the shorn head, and Arturo knew exactly what he was feeling. He was so used to seeing Clara with her false locks of hair over the last three years, he'd almost forgotten how beautiful she was without them.

"You didn't let it grow back," Samir said in wonder. "By the heavens, you are so beautiful, Clara. Just as I remembered." He glanced at Arturo. "We must paint her. I can't wait another minute."

Arturo laughed. It had been a long time since he'd felt this free. Clara turned to look at him. Her eyes were so huge and lustrous, attention drawn to them by the stark, simple contrast of her exquisite body. She looked wild and strong, the purest form of femininity he had ever known.

"I know what it shall be," he said as he rose to his feet. "I know exactly what it must be."

CHAPTER 7

It was so amazing to have these two men with her. The two men she loved above all others. She almost laughed when she saw the look on Samir's face, his taste still in her mouth, her orgasm still tingling inside.

She recalled the first time she had asked them to help her shave her head. She'd thought about it for a long time and parts of her were afraid to do it, that she'd lose her femininity along with her long hair, just like Samson had lost his strength.

It was visiting the small pawn shop that first gave her the idea. An odd addiction of hers, browsing through the minutia of second-hand items, curious as to their owners and how the

CAUTION: WET PAINT

orphaned items wound up on the cast-off shelves. She tried not to think about why she felt so at home surrounded by things abandoned. But that was where she'd discovered the clippers and decided what she wanted to do. A spur-of-the-moment decision that was fully realized a week later.

She had handed the scissors to Arturo who had been hesitant at first. But at her insistence he had begun to carefully cut away the longer portions of her hair.

“You are certain?” he asked.

“Quite.” At the beginning of the summer they had helped her shave her pussy, and later they had helped her remove the rest of the hair from her body. It marred the painting, the tapestry of her flesh should be soft and smooth, unblemished by tiny hairs that might serve to jar the perfection of their art upon her body. They hadn't asked it—she had offered. She had wanted to do this for them. She had loved them so much. And their art was as important to her as it was to them.

Each step had been by her choice, but when it came to the hair on her head, they had balked. They all knew it would be a major step.

What she hadn't realized was how freeing it would be for her. Without Arturo and Samir she never would have considered doing it. While Samir had shaved the remaining hair from her head, she had watched Arturo pick up the discarded locks, carefully locating each strand, and placed them reverently in an enamel box.

“You don't have to keep it,” she had said.

When he'd looked at her, the expression on his face was

CAUTION: WET PAINT

hard to describe. A mix of emotion drenched with love and awe.

“It is a gift neither Samir nor I would ever toss carelessly away, Clara. It is the most precious gift anyone could offer us.” She couldn’t swallow past the lump in her throat. In that moment she felt the love, a tangible thing, wrap around her, warm and strong.

She’d felt so light when it was finished. So free. When she’d first looked in the mirror she had to admit she was shocked. But standing there for a long time she realized things about herself she’d never seen before. Never more feminine. Never more powerful.

Samir had pulled her away from the mirror, his lips fastened onto hers. Arturo approached from behind, his hands sliding over her hips and down to her mound. Samir turned them to the mirror and she had caught her breath at the erotic image of the three of them reflected back. The two tall men with their overly long dark hair—Samir’s completely straight, Arturo’s with a wave to his tousled locks. A scattering of dark hair on their arms and chest. Arturo’s hair darker...thicker. And her pressed between them, smooth skin, clean lines. Amethyst pupils looking larger than before, fringed by thick dark lashes. A mouth red and engorged from Samir’s kisses.

They represented images of stark contrast—male and female, dark and light, furred and smooth. Almost the deeper contrasts of shadows in a black and white photograph. The heat of their bodies had warmed her, their hands sifting across her flesh, burning her up.

CAUTION: WET PAINT

Arturo's fingers had burrowed between her smooth lips, sliding through her cream. Samir's mouth had claimed hers once again, his tongue rimming her lips, his hands sliding over the smooth, clean roundness of her head, his fingers kneading her skin.

She'd felt Arturo drop to his knees, his fingers still buried inside her pussy. And then his mouth tasted the round globes of her ass. He spread her cheeks and his tongue was at her anus. The sensations running through her mixed and collided. She wasn't certain she'd ever felt so much, so deeply. Arturo's finger brushed across her clit and she exploded with her orgasm. A powerful surge that poured through her like hot lava claiming ever speck of her body.

Their past had been so passionate and filled with adventure and sensation. These men had given her the feminine power she doubted she would ever have found on her own. Not to the degree that she had done so. She was so elated to have Samir back with them. She stretched like a cat as she looked up at him and smiled.

"Where do you want me or maybe I should ask how do you want me?"

Samir just stared at her for long moments until she became uneasy beneath his dark gaze. She lifted a hand and smoothed her fingers over her head.

"Is something wrong? You don't like it?" That was something she hadn't expected. Maybe he'd changed. Maybe she should have let it grow out the way she had started to just after he left.

CAUTION: WET PAINT

He reached up to grab her hand and brought her fingers to his lips. “I was just thinking how very blessed I am. How right I was to fight to come back here even though I had no idea what reception I would get after the long silence.”

Her fingers locked around his. “Love doesn’t just disappear, Samir. It’s not that simple an emotion. It might go into hibernation for a time, but we knew it wasn’t your fault. You wouldn’t have left if it wasn’t important.”

Arturo joined them. He leaned forward and kissed Samir. “We didn’t stop living, but both of us knew, when the time was right, you’d come back to us. Somehow. It hasn’t been easy without you, but we weren’t going to let your memory go.”

Clara saw tears sparkle in Samir’s eyes. “Come,” he said. “I’ve missed painting. Let us begin.”

There was a flat lounge on the other side of the room and they led her toward it. She lay on her back. Arturo spread her legs; Samir lifted her arms so they were stretched out above her head.

“Perfect,” he said. “Don’t move.”

Clara knew the routine. She had done it so many times before. She could hear them rustling around on the other side of the room where the paints were. She knew she might be here for a half hour or hours, depending on what they might want to do to her body. For her, it was soothing and peaceful. She waited in anticipation for them to return. Two artists, two men who were her lovers, for whom she was their muse—their woman. There was no place she would rather be than right

CAUTION: WET PAINT

here—like this.

The men came back to her, murmuring, discussing how they would proceed. And then she felt the first touch of two sable brushes, one lightly sifting across her nipple, and the other sliding over her pussy lips. She inhaled sharply. It had been so long since she'd felt the touch of the brush on her skin.

She felt her cream drip from between her labia lips; she shuddered at the touch of the soft bristles on her flesh. She knew she shouldn't move, her breathing shallow, her jaw quivering, and then the roll of her orgasm swept through her.

In that moment she knew she'd come home.

CHAPTER 8

Arturo was asleep on the floor, a soft snore emanating from him. Samir was too wound up to sleep. The mural of the snow leopard couldn't have been more perfect for Clara. It fit the dips and roundness of her body. And when she moved. My God, how the animal came alive on her skin. No two days had been more perfect than these.

He walked out onto the porch. Clara was bundled in a blanket, curled up in a deck chair. He was surprised to see that she wasn't sleeping, her gaze on the gentle ripples of foam licking at the sand.

He walked over, scooped her up and sat back down with her across his lap. She cuddled closer. The pre-dawn air was

CAUTION: WET PAINT

cold, the thick fog stretched across the water. It was as though they were the only two people in the world.

“I love this place,” she said as she stroked her fingers through the exposed pelt of hair on his chest. He welcomed the cold, damp air, so very different from Razban, with its hot, arid climate.

“I think I am a changeling,” he said.

“Why is that?”

“I don’t fit in the Zahi family. Ten siblings and none like me. Or maybe I should say I am so different from them. They all know their duty and do as my father demands. I alone have rebelled. Like fitting a round peg into a square hole. I don’t belong there.”

“What’s it like to have so many brothers and sisters? Being an only child, I always wondered. When Arturo and I visited Madrid, I enjoyed spending time with Arturo’s family. It was so loud and busy. Laughing and arguing. So wonderfully spontaneous and...different. It was like being caught up in a spectacular tornado.” She looked up at him from beneath the folds of the blanket. “Is that what your family is like?”

“Not exactly. My father comes from a very traditional background. He expects perfect obedience. I continually frustrated him with my inability to do as I was told. I did not want to return to Razban. I enjoyed my freedoms here. Maybe it is selfish of me. But only with you and Arturo could I be myself and not the son of the king of Razban. It was not I who would one day be king and I was thankful for that reprieve. But they expected me to marry a woman with political

CAUTION: WET PAINT

connections.”

“Did they have a girl picked out and everything?”

“Oh, yes, very proper, with the correct connections and heritage.”

“Was she pretty? With beautiful long black hair and a figure to die for?”

Her words gave him pause and he looked at her. At the beautiful, flawless lines of her face. He smoothed his fingers over the rounded, bald beauty of her head. “To me, there is no woman in the world more beautiful than you, Clara.”

Her expression cleared. “I just wondered. Most days I’m okay with myself and who I’ve become. I’m doing what I want with my life. My parents are too busy gallivanting all over the world to really notice. I have a few friends, but you and Arturo are the two people I find it hard to live without. How long will you be here, Samir? How much time do we have before you have to go back?”

He was silent for a long time. How did he explain what he had done in order to remain in America? Even if he hadn’t been able to re-connect with his lovers, he couldn’t go back.

“I have given it all up, Clara. My title, my heritage, everything. Except this house. That still belongs to me.”

She twisted around to look up at him, her eyes going wide. “Everything? But what will you do?”

He shrugged. “I’ll paint. Or wait tables if I need to eat. I have not picked up a brush since leaving America. My father has washed his hands of me. My brothers and sisters tell me I’m crazy. My mother cries. I am a disappointment.”

CAUTION: WET PAINT

“Is it worth it, Samir?”

He had a feeling she meant, were she and Arturo worth the cost. He pulled her closer and kissed the top of her head.

“When I came to the States to attend college, I had no idea what I was going to do with my life. I knew what my parents expected, but it never seemed the right course for me. I was rootless. I’d always dabbled with drawing and then I met Arturo. I’d never felt such a kinship with anyone. A man attuned to my inner soul. And then we saw you on that pedestal and we both recognized how important you were to our lives. Everything fell into place. It may not be what is accepted or understood by any of our families, but being without you over these last years... It’s like buying an imitation of art when you know exactly what the real thing is. Can we do this thing that is between us, Clara?”

“I feel it, too. And I know Arturo does as well. Do you realize he hasn’t allowed me to model for him since you left? Here, at this cottage, is the first time it’s actually felt right again.”

“How do we do this? Make this work?”

“One day at a time,” another husky voice interjected. They both looked up and saw a sleepy-eyed Arturo standing in the doorway. One corner of his mouth quirked up in a sexy grin.

Arturo stepped forward and he reached out for Clara. “Come on. Model for us. I want to see our creation before we go any further.

“It’s cold,” Clara protested as she tried to pull the blankets closer.

CAUTION: WET PAINT

Arturo pulled her up from Samir's lap and tossed the blanket away. The snow leopard slowly awoke. He slid his hands over her body, molding and shaping her, watching as she rolled her torso and the leopard stretched.

"We must call Lance and have her photographed. She is so beautiful," Arturo said. He reached out for Samir's hand and threaded his fingers through his own, drawing him up from the chair.

She spun for them, displaying her back and exquisite derriere. Arturo folded Samir into his arms, against his hard body as they both looked at Clara.

She lifted her arms high above her head and the leopard stretched with her. "Is it everything you hoped?" she asked.

Samir smiled. "So much more than I had hoped." He turned to Arturo. They stared into each other's eyes for long moments. Slowly Arturo's lips moved closer until they fused together. Even the cold dampness of a November morning could not lessen the heat that raced through Samir. This melding of bodies and minds without the clutter of protocol was what it was all about for him. Whatever the cost is was more than worth it.

CHAPTER 9

Home meant something different to Arturo. He did not consider it so much a place as marked by the people who populated his life, who meant the most to him. And these two people sitting here with him were an important part of his family. This cottage felt like home even though he didn't actually own it, nor had he been here in three years. But still it was home in a sense. Because of the people in it.

Clara sat across from him on the sofa. Legs crossed beneath her, she was eating her favorite food. Popcorn, heavily buttered. The tips of her fingers were slick and shiny with butter. She wore a pair of loose-fitting beige pants that tied at the waist and an old navy blue sweatshirt of Arturo's.

CAUTION: WET PAINT

Samir sat in a chair on the opposite side of the room, a contented smile on his lips.

Arturo had just built and lit a fire in the stone fireplace. This was another of those perfect moments.

“Tomorrow we need to head back to the city, Arturo. There’s that showing we need to prepare for.”

Samir shot a look at her, his expression suddenly darkening. “You’re leaving?”

“Samir, we can’t stay here forever. We have work to do. We’ve missed you, but time hasn’t stood still.”

He looked a bit abashed. “No, I...of course not. I am sorry. I should not have assumed.”

Clara leaned forward, looking intently at Samir. “You’re coming with us.”

“I don’t know.”

“Of course you are,” Arturo said. “You can stay in my studio with me. I refuse to pick up another brush unless you do so as well. It hasn’t been the same without you.”

“And Clara? She will be with us as well?”

Arturo noticed that the expression on Clara’s face had shuttered. “I have my own apartment,” she said evenly.

Arturo saw the look of surprise on Samir’s face. “You do not live together?”

A brief shadow of pain crossed Clara’s face and Arturo knew it was his fault. He had distanced himself when he shouldn’t have. He was the one who’d moved out of Clara’s apartment, unable to handle the loss of Samir. And every time he looked at Clara, Samir’s ghost seemed to hover.

CAUTION: WET PAINT

“I-it’s best this way,” Clara said. But Arturo knew that wasn’t true. He had been selfish.

“That’s not true, Clara,” he said quietly. He looked at Samir. “It’s my fault. I moved out. It was too difficult without you.”

“You left Clara alone? Because of me?”

“No, Samir. Please, there’s no reason to get upset.” She glanced at Arturo. “He needed space to paint. The apartment wasn’t right. Look, I love you both. But this really is the right way to have things right now. Maybe later—”

Arturo saw the look of stubbornness he was so familiar with cross Samir’s face. And he had a feeling he knew what was coming.

“No more,” he said. “First thing, we will find a place that will suit all of us. We must be together. We have been separated long enough.”

“What if your father calls you back to Razban?” Clara asked, her voice barely above a whisper.

It was only the same thing that Arturo wondered himself. His own family had welcomed Clara, but they didn’t know about Samir. And Clara’s parents—well they had shown a decided lack of interest in what relationships Clara had formed. It was unlikely anyone was going to be able to understand the close bond that stretched between the three of them, even one that lasted through the years of separation.

Samir rose from his chair and went over to kneel in front of Clara. He pulled the bowl of popcorn from her hands and set it on the floor. He then threaded his fingers through hers.

CAUTION: WET PAINT

“I’m not going to leave again. I have effectively distanced myself from my family. Even if more problems develop in Razban, I should be of little consequence. I have signed away everything. My father has even publicly denounced me for my disloyalty to Razban. Partly for my protection and partly because he is angry at my decision. But nonetheless it should be effective enough. And besides, it is your protection I worry about, not my own. Your safety is what mattered and why I left until it was safe enough to return.” He cupped her face. “And even if I must leave this country again, you and Arturo will go with me. I will not leave you again.”

Clara sighed and closed her eyes. “I just can’t believe it’s real.”

He pulled her down onto the floor and into his arms. “It’s going to be all right, Clara. I’m not going anywhere without the two of you again. Whatever that may mean.”

And then to Arturo’s horror, Clara completely fell apart. All this time, she had been the strong one—or so he thought. Her arms clasped Samir to her, her fingertips white as they pressed tightly against his back.

“I-I’m tired of having the people I love leave. I can’t do it again. My parents, you, Arturo. I know what you feel for me isn’t the same as the way you love Arturo. Or what Arturo feels for you. I-I can’t bear to be left alone again.”

My God! Arturo had never realized. Samir met Arturo’s gaze over the top of Clara’s head. How had they not seen what they were doing to her? Had they been so wrapped up in their art that they hadn’t realized she misunderstood her importance

CAUTION: WET PAINT

to them?

He jumped up from his chair and joined them on the floor, wrapping his arms around Clara and Samir. “This is my fault,” he said. “I didn’t realize what I was doing when I moved into the studio.” He stroked her head. “Why didn’t you tell me? Why didn’t you let me see what you were feeling? I love you, Clara. Samir loves you. Don’t you see, we can’t have one without the other? We must have it all? Kind of like your Three Musketeers, I guess. I never meant to hurt you, but I have been selfish. You have never been second in my affections. Not for one moment.”

“Nor in mine, Clara.” Samir tipped her head up. Arturo wiped away the tears. “We will never abandon you. You are too precious to both of us.”

“I was selfish. And I am so sorry,” Arturo said. He should have been more open about what was going on inside his head. When Samir left all they’d had was each other. “We are not your parents. Circumstances separated us, but it won’t happen again.”

A smile trembled on Clara’s lips. “I’m sorry I broke down like that. I’m just so happy to have us all together and I know how fragile this moment is.”

“It will only grow stronger, my love. Now that we are back together.” Arturo looked at Samir. They pulled Clara closer between them.

And he knew the ties would only strengthen from this moment on.

* * *

CAUTION: WET PAINT

They had come full circle to that moment three years ago. Clara's grip tightened on their hands. The wind whipped across their naked bodies as they stood on the beach beneath the full moon, one last ritual before they left.

She turned to Arturo. "I love you. This bond will not be broken whatever comes."

She turned to Samir. "We may have been separated by years and heartache, but the love will always remain. No matter what." And these were her vows to the men she loved most in her life.

As one they walked toward the frigid ocean, a means to cleansing the pain of the past and a renewed vow for a future together, whatever might come.

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ADRIANNA DANE

Theresa Gallup uses the pen names of Tess Maynard and Adrianna Dane. Theresa has been writing since the age of 10. A legal secretary for 30 years, she is currently working on another erotic romance, as well as a full-length romantic mystery/suspense. She has been married for 30 years and has three grown children (a daughter and twin sons), and is a new grandmother.

Writing as Tess Maynard, her first published short story appeared in the ezine, *The Whispering Forest*, in January of 2004. Writing as Adrianna Dane, where adding sensual heat to romance is her motto, *Esmerelda's Secret* was her first foray into the erotic romance genre.

Having traveled and lived from the East Coast to the West Coast, Theresa receives inspiration for her stories from a variety of sources, including music and poetry, and her tastes are eclectic.

For more information about current projects,
visit Theresa's websites at:
www.tessmaynard.com or www.adriannadane.com

* * *

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