

Romantic Days, Romantic Nights

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Book One:

SpellBound

Chapter 1

Say the words, Lady. Say the words.

The invisible hand was at her breast, bringing the nipple to ripe firmness.

Say the words with me.

Lania shook her head, trying to clear her mind of the drowsiness. The dream seemed so real, yet so unreal.

The voice, coming through the mist, spoke again in her ear.

Say the words. You know you want to.

The voice coaxed her, urged her, the hand returning to her breast.

Lania Mills, Princess of the Whitelings, shook her head again, fighting against the unnatural languor. The last vestiges of the dream faded and she was suddenly awake.

She looked around, trying to get her bearings. The room was dim, the furnishings in muted light. The only item clearly visible was the green blinking of a computer screen.

Far in the distance, she heard the clank of metal on metal. She searched the darkness. She could make out the outline of a stone staircase with many massive steps.

In those few seconds, a breeze teased her skin. Looking down, she saw that she was nude. It was impossible, but true. Wherever she was, whoever had brought her here, had also taken the unspeakable liberty of undressing her, and of shackling her, with arms pinned high over her head, to a brick wall.

The clanking grew louder, then stopped. At the sound of a door opening-she envisioned a skeleton key jangling from the lock-she peered into the darkness.

The room grew bright with sudden white light. At the top of the twisting staircase, a man appeared with a large hound prancing at his heels.

"You bastard!" she sneered.

Lania struggled against the chains, the handcuffs biting into her wrists.

The man in black leather ignored her, descending the stairs, taking his time, as if a nude woman chained to the wall of his home was a common occurrence. When he reached the bottom step, he lingered, his raven gaze sweeping over her.

"My coven will kill you," she said, straining until the chains snapped taut.

He ignored her. He adjusted the handcuffs, inserting cotton padding to protect her wrists. He handled her impersonally, his controlled motions indicating his anger. Turning, he strode to the computer. He inserted a diskette, and then punched in a few numbers on the keyboard. The hound raised its head, its plumed tail swaying.

"This is a new low. Even for you. Even for a warlock," she spat out the words like a curse. Uncaring of the pain, she leaned forward, her muscles tight and flexed from the effort.

Without looking up, the man in black leather spoke.

"Stop that before you hurt yourself," he said.

"I assume that's why you brought me here."

"You know better than that."

"Then why?" Lania asked. "Why risk the wrath of my coven to do this?"

"Take a good look around."

Lania did so with eyes mocking.

"I don't see anything but a foolish warlock who's going to be sitting under a mushroom real soon. I call upon my sisters, heed my wishes."

Lania closed her eyes to begin the incantation that would turn the tall, dark, and handsome warlock into the most toady toad that this plane of existence had ever seen.

"It won't work," the still tall, dark, and handsome warlock said.

"What?"

"It won't work. You cannot spellcast. You're in my realm."

"You bastard."

"You've called me that twice already. My name is Steele-Jock, if you prefer."

Lania fitted together the pieces of the puzzle. The man from her dreams was Jock Steele, Jock "Lucky" Steele, the warlock prince of the Darklings. She knew little about him except that he was rich, eccentric, and dangerous, especially to witches, especially to her, the witch princess of the Whitelings.

"Mr. Steele," she began.

"Call me Jock. We're past formalities."

His voice lingered on the last word, sounding sexy and enticing.

"We are?"

"We are," he said. "Do you think I don't know? Who you are, what we will be to each other?"

He walked towards her with the swagger of a devil's scion, stopping within a hairsbreadth. He let his eyes feast on her body, from her full breasts-high and proud, the nipples dark and tasty-to the triangle between her legs-snowy ash and intended to please a man *or a warlock*.

As if he couldn't control himself, he reached out to stroke the soft curve of her face. Her eyes spitting fire, she jerked away. He laughed softly.

"We know each other?" she asked, the skepticism heavy in her voice.

"Intimately," he said with ghost-like amusement.

His hand swept lower. She strained against the tender touch of his fingers.

"No-more-games," she gritted out. "What-do-you-want?"

"Think about it," he said. "What could I want?"

He brought his hand back to her face. He snapped his fingers like a magician. All he needed was the trademark white gloves and a handful of silver glitter or pixie dust.

A strange dreaminess crept over Lania. She was asleep, but not asleep. The languor grew until she was outside of herself, as if she were watching the rapid zip of scenes in a movie. It had begun.

Say the words. I'll give you everything you want. If only you will handfast with me.

Why torture yourself? Why torture me?

"Torture," Lania murmured.

No, not torture.

Pleasure.

He freed himself from her silken arms. She moaned at the emptiness of her world. Sweeping off his cape, he stood before her, his cock jutting proudly. It was large, yet it swelled larger, a pulsing thing that was mesmerizing and forbidden. She smacked her lips.

"Is this a dream?" she asked.

"More real than a dream, yet not," he replied.

His hands roamed over her body, enjoying the feel of skin on skin. Stretching her legs apart, he caressed her inner thigh. His movements were slow, unhurried, deliberate. He fingered her, causing her body to arc with delicious delight.

Lania shivered, rocked by the sensations.

She rubbed herself against him like a frisky cat. She wanted more of the fabulous sensations. She grabbed him, pulling him on top of her. At the same time, he thrust himself into her, ramming her.

She struggled against the enchantment, fighting as it sucked her in deeper.

He grunted, a piercing, deep grunt, a telltale sign that he was in the grip of the ultimate pleasure. He tugged her at her waist, pulling her tight against his short hairs. Rearing back, he inserted himself with all his might, knowing that she could take every slick, shiny inch of him. Pumping until he could pump no more, he flooded her to overflow, until the essence of him ran in rivers from her.

"No," she said.

He pumped her like an out of control piston, bringing her relentlessly to the brink. Their bodies were a tangle of arms and legs and tongues. The silky sheets impeded their movement. He thrust them aside and climbed her, his stiff cock foretelling his intention to mate.

"This can't be happening."

Say the words, Lady.

"No!"

Three little words, what harm can it do.

"Never!"

Lania awakened with a start, her head pounding from the pain. She knew.

Dreamcast.

For months, those dreams, those dreams that would wake her up at night, hot, sweaty, unfulfilled. She went to bed tired and woke up more tired than before. Her dreams, what she could remember of them, had been a war zone of carnal need.

At first, she suspected nothing. Erotic dreams were common for witches of her rank. As the dreams became more real, more addictive, she had fought against them. To no avail. He came to her often and against her will. A faceless lover, shrouded in the mist, who knew every one of her desires and fulfilled them all with generous passion.

The realization that she, the ruling sovereign of the High Coven of Whitelings, was the target of a dreamcast, shocked her. Who would dare to commit such sacrilege?

The answer stood before her, relaxed and at his ease, leaning against the computer table with a devil-may-care grin on his face and a lurking smile in his eyes.

"You will pay for this," Lania said. "That I swear."

He uncurled his long frame and walked towards her. He gave no indication that her threat had affected him.

"Pay?" he asked. "For what? Upholding Wiccan Lore?"

"Please!"

"Look around you," he ordered. "Are you blind? Can't you see the signs?"

"I can't believe this. You dreamcast in violation of our treaty..."

"If only you had been reasonable."

"You kidnap me..."

"You refused my troth offering."

"Hold me captive..."

"I had no choice."

"Strip me naked..."

"True."

"Chain me to the wall of your ... your ... your ... dungeon..."

"My den, actually."

"All because of some archaic myth from Wiccan Lore. *Do you want a war?*"

Jock scowled and said, "Why would I want to go to war against my future consort, the mother of my son, the heir to the Darkling throne?"

"Yeah. Right. I wouldn't mate with you if you were the last man-warlock-on this plane of existence."

He stared at her, wondering if she really didn't know or if she was bluffing.

"I don't like breaking this to you, Jock *Lucky* Steele, but the times have changed. We witches are no longer at the mercy of our biology. I know you find that hard to believe, seeing how you don't get out much. Seeing how you have to dreamcast to get your rocks off."

Jock continued to stare. His look was almost hypnotizing.

"Look," Lania tried again, speaking as if to a schoolboy. "Wiccan Lore is poppycock, a legend, like eye of newt and toe of frog. Modern witchery has advanced beyond that."

"Some things never change," he said. "The handfast of the prince of the Darklings to the princess of the Whitelings has been ordained from the dawn of time. It is your destiny. As it was my destiny to get you pregnant."

Cupping her belly, he stroked the slight roundness there.

"You *are* pregnant. The dreamcast was potent. In nine months time, you will bear the..."

He wiped the spittle from his chin. The scar at his brow quivered from his anger. From the corner of the room, the hound growled, its blue-black coat bristling.

"Silence, Sklar!" he roared. "I shall deal with this."

"Yeah! Shut up, Sklar, you ugly bitch," Lania said, wondering if her bravado was genuine when she saw the naked savagery on the face of the warlock prince.

"You have been too long with the worldly. You have forgotten our ways," he said, seizing her by her hair. He ground his hard lips against her soft ones. His kiss was meant to punish, to tame, to stamp his dominance upon her as his woman. The fierceness of his kiss brought tears of rage to her eyes until his kiss turned seductive, until he dropped to his knees before her, until she melted under his technique.

With one flick of his tongue, he was in. He penetrated her so high and so deep, she felt as if he were tickling her spine. Then, he began, setting the rhythm, the age-old rhythm. The rhythm that would bring forth her juices, the sweet nectar of her passion. The lick. The suck. The lave. His tongue darting here and there, lighting a thousand fires of desire. She was wind-blown, ripped apart, as the passion took hold of her in its tight grip. Her eyes flew wide. She ground her bud into his hot, welcoming mouth until she had passed over into the abyss of sated satisfaction.

He licked her dry, mopping up every drop.

She sagged to her knees, supported solely by the chains of her captivity. Her breathing ragged, she fought to regain her dignity, to silently enchant.

I am Lania, the reigning princess of the High Coven of the Whitelings. I rule the powerful. I rule the mighty. I am indomitable. I call upon my sisters.

"Marry me, Lania, and save the world."

"Not on your life, you ... you ... enchanter."

I call upon my sisters of air and fire and earth to join their strength to mine, their anointed ruler...

"Why do you deny me?" he asked.

"I'll do more than deny you when this works."

...to punish this wayward heretic, this oath-breaker, this bastard who has got me pregnant-damn him!-who seeks to return us to the forsaken ways of the ancient ones.

"Lady, why does *everything* with you have to be so difficult?"

Chapter 2

With a sigh, the warlock prince walked over to the computer. He punched a few keys, and when symbols flashed across the screen, and he hit the dragon icon.

At the sound of a modem, Lania opened her eyes. She looked at the roaring, fire-breathing dragon with amused scorn.

"Really, Jock," she said. "You need to move into the twenty-first century."

"A little something one of my brood thought up for my amusement." Turning, he looked at her with smoky eyes. "And yours."

"What's next?" she said. "Bubble, bubble, toil and trouble."

"Misquote."

"What?"

She examined the chains above her head. She gave a hard tug.

"Misquote," he repeated. "That's the most misquoted incantation in history. It's actually, double, double, toil and trouble." His eyes flicked hot. "Fire burn and cauldron bubble."

"Yeah. Right now, my witchery isn't what it used to be."

"You still have your powers ... unless you force my hand."

The modem sounded again. The hound crept closer to the terminal and then leaped up, pawing the images.

Against her will, Lania was curious.

"Where did you get the bitch?" she asked.

"We've been together for awhile."

"She your familiar?"

"No."

The hound looked sadder than an ugly creature had right to and whimpered.

"What ya doing?" Lania asked.

"Why so many questions?"

"You see, Lucky, I'm standing here in a very unlucky state, naked and cold and without a stitch to my name, without the power to hurl you to the deepest, darkest pit of hell that I can devise. It's kinda boring, really."

"Sklar," the warlock prince commanded.

The mangy hound padded over to a stack of neatly folded fabric. Seizing a corner in sharp teeth, she dragged it across the cobblestone tiles to Lania. With the cloth held firmly in her teeth, the hound jumped up.

The scathing sound of Sklar pawing the wall was loud in Lania's ears, and she felt the hot, canine breath on her cheek. She looked the dog over. Sklar's eyes were full of vile intelligence.

When the hound brought the fabric close to Lania's hand so that she could grasp it, Lania said, "Thanks. But do you have something without doggie spit?"

"I want you to be comfortable," Jock said. "This may take awhile."

"I can't reach it."

Without looking up from the loop forming on the computer screen, Jock waved his hand. The rich silk fabric wrapped around Lania, hugging her majestic curves. It was as if an invisible hand had dressed her with the utmost care. She even imagined that she caught a whiff of his scent on the material.

She looked down at the hound panting at her feet.

"What kind of bitch are you?" she asked.

The hound snarled with malevolent disdain.

"A wolf dog, actually," Jock answered. "I'm putting out a flash."

"What? Show and tell?"

"To form the Circle of the Brethren."

"Really."

"You may think that I am archaic, but I assure you that I'm not. The Darklings telepath using the most sophisticated technology. It helps if we can see each other, visually, when we incant." Warming to his theme, Jock continued, "The dragon program zooms in on a fixed area around us, through the computer monitor."

"Like a chat room, but with a visual."

"Right, only more sophisticated. It's a technology that hasn't yet hit the market. I'll show you how it works ... after the handfast."

"Were you behind that anti-trust suit against Microsoft?" she asked idly.

"Of course not."

"Rumor says that you were."

"Rumor lies. I do not."

"It certainly cost Bill Gates a lot of money in lawyers' fees."

"Huh."

"You're a lawyer, right? I bet it made you a bundle."

"I'm lucky," he said with a quirk of his mouth.

"Lucky, my ass."

He considered her assertion and then spoke off-handedly.

"Historically, the prince of the Darklings has always been wealthy. Unlike you, I know my duty. As required by the *Book of Sacred Rules*, I return every ninth."

"So you don't use the dark magicks?" Lania asked.

Jock shook his head. "My power emanates from the elements, storm, thunder."

"No wonder you've gone bizzaro."

"But I use whatever I need to get the job done, as you've discovered."

"Dreamcast. So old-fashioned."

"Yet you're here and my victory is in sight." Jock flicked his finger, and the wrap tightened around Lania, covering her from head to foot.

"I don't want any of my brood to get the wrong idea. We are a fierce breed, and you are a *quite* a prize."

"A spoil of war, as it were."

"Not war, Lady. Destiny."

"We're back to that."

Jock turned from the screen to look at her. "Have you so forsaken the old ways, that you can no longer see the signs? Listen. What do you hear?"

Lania turned away, rolling her eyes heavenward.

"Listen. Thunder... Lightning... Wind. The First Sign of..."

"...The Alpha," she finished. "Yeah, I know. I learned all about Wiccan Lore and Malki, the super-doom herald, when I was five. I also learned about the bogey man."

"The Twelve Turns..."

"News flash, handsome! Thunder is caused by expanding air along the path of the electrical discharge of lightning. That is, unless I get really, really, angry."

"I remember," Jock said. "Once during the dreamcast, when I pushed you a little too hard, I saw a flash of your anger. It was like lightning. You remember. You took me in your mouth as I urged you to say the handfast words. You nipped me, right at the tip. I had the marks for days. The next night, I nipped you back when I exploded all over your bush."

"They call it a nor'easter," Lania said as if he had not spoken.

"I call it passion. I'm up."

The circle on the computer screen was complete.

An Asian boy-man with fresh-faced, good looks appeared on the screen. He spoke haltingly, his words out of sync with his image on the screen.

"My liege," the lad said, "the lines here are erratic. I may not be able..."

"Understood," Jock interrupted. "Time is short. We will continue."

"Don't mind me," Lania quipped. "If you guys want to party, I'll just pack up and leave."

"I didn't understand that, my prince." The lad craned his neck, trying to see the source of the feminine voice.

"You need not be concerned," Jock spoke sharply, only to regret his temper.

TaPai was a good kid, naturally inquisitive like most apprentices. Still, he knew better than to try to look at his liege-lady without the permission of his sovereign.

"Brush up on your protocol," Jock said, softening the rebuke with a half-grin.

"A thousand apologies, O Puissant Prince of the Darklings, for my lapse. My studies here have made me forgetful of etiquette."

"Uh-huh."

"That and the fact that it took you forever to succeed in the capture."

TaPai's eyes mocked with laughter when he said, "I almost lost the bet."

There was an outbreak of laughter as an international legion of faces flipped across the monitor screen. The languages were many; some of the accents, strange.

Lania was impressed. Of course, she had heard of the might of the Darklings, but she had underestimated their strength on this plane of existence. They would be a formidable force once she was free.

Jock scowled at the masculine raillery and then looked away. He allowed them their moment. In actuality, his brood was delighted that he had finally given them an heir. For years, they had been on his back about taking a mate, but Jock had known this destiny. He had known what would happen at the turn of the millennium within Twelve Turns of the Dark Moon.

"If you're finished with the jokes at my expense," he said. "Let's begin."

Chapter 3

"Begin *what*?" the Whiteling princess asked.

"You'll see shortly, Lady. Trust me, you won't be disappointed."

Lania watched as Jock adjusted the circular window on the iMac computer. He rolled his thumb over the trackball and the window concaved until it was a pin-dot.

"That'll give us some privacy," he said.

Lania played her ace card. She could barely contain her glee.

"Of course, you know that my coven will miss me. I'm due at our corporate meeting in oh, say, twenty minutes."

"It's thirty minutes," Jock said, "and you won't be missed."

"Okay, thirty minutes. Hard to tell time with your wrist chained to a wall. When I'm not there, some of the mothers will do a mental search. They will find me."

"Not if they don't look."

"You underestimate them. And me."

"Never. I know your proficiency. Few of your race have reached the twelfth level. It makes you a worthy vessel to carry my son."

"Then you know that they *will* find me."

"They won't even look," Jock said. "I've covered all the bases. Even now as we speak, a dupleki demon is unlocking the door to your car. He'll take your place until after the handfast." He looked over at her. She was glaring at him as if she wanted to tear him limb from limb. He chuckled deeply. "If I didn't know better, I'd swear that you're trying to give me the evil eye."

A hum in the background began, growing louder, until it was the distinctive sound of a chant. The rhythm was tribal, ancient, calling forth times forgotten by the many, remembered by the few, the dark forces, who still believed in magick.

There was a sudden flash, so luminous that the light penetrated the heavy drapes. The walls shook with the force of it, and the cobblestone tiles beneath Lania's feet trembled. Then darkness.

"Ooooooh," Lania said. "Somebody forgot to pay his electric..."

She felt Jock's hands run over her body, pushing aside the clinging cloth. She felt the rough calluses of his fingertips, wondering how a man who was known for being bookish obtained them. He was so close,

that even in the darkness, she could see the intensity in his eyes and the gleam of his scar.

His hand zigzagged across her like a seductive snake. Her breast jiggled at his touch, growing firm and tempting. He stroked the nipple, then reached lower. His hand swept past her sweetly dimpled stomach, caressing her, wringing soft, reluctant moans of pleasure from her. Then, his hand swept lower, to cup her.

Lania felt her the tight muscles of her vulva contract, tightening against her will. She fought against the sensations that he was inciting, commanding her traitorous body to remain passive under the assault. She willed herself to recite the rudimentary lexicon that she learned at the knee of the coven mothers, but her body refused to obey. She bit her bottom lip when he fingered her deep. Then gave up the fight, her body no longer able to resist. With knees quivering, she fucked his hand, moving in unison with his magick fingers.

With the passion for completeness upon her, the prince plucked a few strands of her pubic hair. He cupped the treasure in his hand, growing hard-no, harder-at the pearly cum intertwined in the lock of her curly, white hair.

He rubbed the treasure against the tip of cock and let the fire build in his loins. The heat was like a furnace in his balls as they flattened against him, preparing for his cum to shoot free. He came all over her, spurting like a high-powered fire hose, suddenly activated, until he drenched her.

Resisting the urge to rest, he checked her eyes. They were glassy, her zombie-like stare gazing into nothingness.

He smiled in satisfaction, knowing that his brood had served him well. He took a moment to telepath his thanks as well as his respect. The Curse of Strange Passion required a delicate balance of cooperation and intensity. His brood had not failed him and they had not failed the people of this plane of existence.

Part of Jock regretted what he had done. He didn't want it to be this way with Lania. Although he knew the stakes-he knew that he had to marry her and that she had to marry him-he still wanted it to be right for her and for him. If truth were told, Jock was a romantic at heart. He couldn't read Merlyn's description of the love of Sir Lancelot and Lady Guinevere without getting choked up. Even though his destiny was mapped out at his birth and hers, he still wanted a courtship before the handfast.

At the age of ascension, he had sought out information about his future bride. He couldn't believe that he was so lucky. Knowing the ultimate result if he didn't, he would have done his duty and married her if she had been a valveck crone, but he didn't have to face that fate. Lania was a beauty. White-haired, of course, the opposite of his midnight dark looks for she was the twin side of the same coin, and with long, long legs that went on forever.

He had made all the right moves, sorting through the ancient text of Wiccan Lore to ensure that his courtship overtures were correct. His troth offering had been a delicate balancing of diplomacy and intimacy. It had taken him months to decide upon the right gift, and his brood had had a field day laughing at his rare indecisiveness.

And what did she do? She threw it back in his face. Rejected him, as if he were some faerie. *Him!* He was the warrior prince of the Darklings, the absolute monarch of some 600,000 strong, living on this plane of existence. Was she crazy? Stupid? Foolish?

He had to meet her.

He had mirrored into her home, only for a few seconds. It was such a tiny, insignificant act, he had told

himself. After all, he would never do anything like that to another woman. She was different; she was his future bride. Besides, she was being obstinate, refusing to accept her fate. He had stripped away the tapestry covering of the looking glass and had linked to her bedroom.

She was lying on a canopied bed, her long hair indistinguishable from the plain white sheet draped across her. She seemed sleepless ... restless ... yet excited.

Her hand touched her breast. It was a caress.

She reached under the bed and pulled out a huge, black dildo. Jock's eyes widened. He had to wonder if he was outclassed.

She pushed the button, and the head came to rotating life. She flipped onto her belly, giving Jock a delicious view of her plump ass in crotchless panties. She raised her ass up, pressing her breasts in the mattress. She inserted the dildo, slowly at first, but as her juices eased insertion, her thrusting became faster, faster, *faster*, until she humped the bed.

She slumped into exhaustion, rolling onto her back. Her expression was relaxed, vacant in repose. Jock studied her face. She didn't seem happy or satisfied.

Jock closed the link, ceasing to mirror. She would never have cause to be unhappy in his bed or to resort to devices for her satisfaction. He vowed that once she was his, once she was in his power, he would be in her often, pleasuring her often, so often she would barely remember when they weren't fucking.

Now, she was in his castle, powerless.

He checked her eyes again. The glassy stare remained, conclusive evidence that she was under influence of the curse. He propped his arm against the stonework, taking a few precious moments to enjoy looking at her. He studied each feature, trying to decide which was the most bewitching. He came to a rapid decision. It was her mouth. Full and made for kissing.

He brushed his lips across hers, starting a fire in his blood. He leaned into her, letting her take his weight, letting her know him as a man. He plundered her mouth and the kiss grew deeper, more passionate, when she responded.

She tried to wrap her arms around his neck, but the shackles stopped her. She whimpered, the chains striking against the stone from the force of her exertions.

He unlocked the cuffs and swept her up into his arms. In three long strides, he had carried her to the ancient steps of the dais of the Darklings.

The warlock prince stripped himself, then her. He rolled her under him, gasping at how soft her body was. He felt her hands busy at his hair. He raised her hips high, preparing for the deepest of deep penetration.

She was quicker.

She gripped his muscular ass, making him fill her with one cocksure thrust.

He let her pump him for several seconds, giving her a taste, just a taste, of what she desperately needed.

Then he pulled his prick out of her.

"Lania, can you hear me?" he asked.

She pumped against him, insistently.

He withheld himself.

"Lania, focus."

She struggled, squirming.

"Cease that," he said, planting his hand on her middle, holding her still.

"Lania, listen. Do you want me to fuck you?"

"Yes."

"I want to fuck you. I won't. Not until after the handfast."

His voice turned dark chocolate.

"Do you remember the words?"

She nodded her head.

"Then speak them."

"No."

He fought down his anger.

"I want to put my prick in you, Lady. I want to ride you, hard and fast and furious. I won't until you say the words."

He circled her pulsing vulva with the tip of his prick. She panted at each circle, but did not speak. He put in the tip. She panted, harshly.

"If you want more, talk to me, Lady. Talk to me."

"I will never speak the words."

"You will."

He sheathed to the hilt. Sweat popped at his brow. He gave her three, swift strokes then stopped.

A tear gathered at the corner of her eye.

"Don't cry," he said.

Her tears unmanned him. He didn't want her to be unhappy. Against his better judgment, he pumped her again.

"Lady, make us both happy and said the words."

"No."

Hell and the devil. She was one strong-willed witch.

Even in his frustration, he felt admiration for her ability to resist. The Curse of Strange Passion registered level nine, requiring three times the power of a normal witch to resist. Until now, he had never known of

anyone who could do so.

He tried a new tack.

"You are?" he asked.

"I am Lania Mills, the Sovereign Princess of the Whitelings."

"I am?"

"A bastard."

"No."

"A black-hearted scoundrel."

"Try again."

"A lying, no-good *oath-breaker*."

"Lady, you push me too far."

He withdrew from her, pulling from her cum-soaked muscles. His unexpected withdrawal left her wringing on the dais.

"Never call me that again. Understand?"

It took several moments, but she nodded. Jock could see the struggle going on inside her as her nature to dominate sought to be break free.

"I am..." he asked again.

"The warlock prince of the Darklings."

"Good. Good."

"What age is this, Lania?" He almost said, 'Lania, my truemate'.

"The age of the new millennium."

"What does that mean?"

Her face crinkled in confusion.

"Count the dark moons," he encouraged her, his hand stoking her breast. The nipple puckered to life. He bent his dark head and lathed it.

"Twelve," she said.

"The turns?" he asked.

"Twelve."

"Twelve Turns of the Dark Moon at the beginning of the millennium. What does it all mean?"

"In Wiccan Lore?"

"In Wiccan Lore. Recite it," he said, cupping her breasts together. They formed to twin globes under his gentle urging, the areolas very dark for one so fair.

"According to Wiccan Lore..." she began, like a schoolgirl reciting the alphabet.

"No, no, what does it *mean*. When she did not answer, he said, "It means *this*."

He thrust in her, sending the message not only to her head above, but also to her delta below.

"I don't know," Lania said.

Jock's thrusting stopped in mid-thrust, unable to believe what he had heard. He stared at her, checking for the glassy eyes of the curse. She really didn't know, or in every fiber of her being, she did not-could not-accept her fate.

She was passive beneath him.

"Wiccan Lore, Lady. Wiccan Lore requires that within Twelve Turns of the Dark Moon at the beginning of every millennium, the princess of the Whitelings and the prince of the Darklings must handfast."

"No."

She shook her head, denying what she should have so plainly seen.

"It has been commanded from the beginning of time, passed down from generation to generation. At Stonehenge..."

"Legend," she scoffed.

"Or the world will end."

"No."

"Yes."

He spoke harshly. The scar at his temple flexed with his urgency, his need to make her see the truth.

"The First Sign of the Alpha has already begun ... global warming in the mountains of Tibet ... tsunami tidal waves in Osaka ... tectonic quakes in Los Angeles. Do you want more people to die?"

"No," she cried out, wrapping her arms around him.

He ricocheted with passion from her embrace. He could wait no longer. He set the rhythm, she moved in tune, her body snapping against his. He adjusted her, raising her legs, opening her, exposing her, searching for the nub of her femininity. A bolt of ecstasy, like liquid energy, shot through him. White, then black.

He rested his head in the hollow of her shoulder, still in her, still hard. The locks of his coal black hair checkerboarded with her ivory strands. When he could speak, he urged her again.

"Say the words."

"I..."

The prince waited; his goal in plain sight.

"I... I..."

"Go on, Lady. You can do it."

"I..."

There was burst of loud static through the console speaker of the iMac computer. Through the crackle, TaPai's voice was heard.

"Jock..." the young apprentice began.

"Not now!" Jock roared.

"Sorry, my liege, but Houston, we have a problem."

"Not *now*!"

"What the..."

"Can't contain the connection," TaPai said.

"I ... I ... I ... I..."

"The program is designed for that," a disembodied voice broke in.

"The lines are quirky here. I did try to warn..." TaPai's voice faded out.

"Maintain the link at all costs," Jock ordered. "Reboot. Quickly. TaPai!"

"Jock, we are losing Nepal." The disembodied spoke again.

"Stay with it. Damn it."

"That kid." Houston spoke with mild annoyance.

"Hey, stuff happens..." TaPai shot back.

Jock pulled himself from the tight, contracting muscles wrapped around him. Striding to the computer, he twirled the ball of the trackman, widening the window on the screen like the reverse of a movie fade-out. Then he punched the keyboard.

"What the hell!" he said.

The Circle of the Brethren was broken.

He reached for the cell phone. It glowed red when his hand touched it and TaPai was on the line. The apprentice spoke over the mystical connection of land, sea, and air.

"We are down here. Reports coming in ... lithosphere disturbances off the charts ... centering at Everest ... and across the 28th parallel. It's bad."

"How soon before we can re-establish?" Jock asked.

"We can't. We are down, *permanently*."

"Understood," Jock said. He restored the cell phone to its cradle and turned his attention to the computer

screen.

"What's next?" Houston asked, his lined face taut with concern.

Jock felt the sharp bite of leadership. As the master of his brood, he always had to have the answers. Often, he had wanted to share the burdens of ruling with his consort. It was his nature, like breathing, to crave the balance of good and evil, of white and black.

"We try again," he said. "Without Nepal."

"That's risky," Houston said, shaking his head.

"We can re-route, bounce off an INTELSAT satellite, call in..."

The computer screen went dark.

Then the world went black.

Chapter 4

Lania stood over Jock's limp body. She held a heavy candlestick in one hand and a computer power cord in the other. She debated whether to strike again, but the warlock prince was slumped over the keyboard, out cold.

Time to upgrade to DSL. With a magnificent sneer, she twirled the computer power cord in the air. The red glow of the cell phone startled her into action.

Clothes. I need clothes.

And car keys.

She spoke a turnabout spell, forgetting that she could not cast in his castle realm.

Damn. I guess that I'll have to do it the old-fashioned way.

Lania's hands touched Jock's hunched body, marveling at the heat radiating from it. She pushed him aside-using more gentleness than he deserved for she wanted to slug him-and rifled through drawers of the computer desk.

Nothing.

Damn!

She looked around, looking for a place where he could stash the keys to his car. She suspected that his castle realm was located somewhere in remote New England. Although he was a recluse and could travel from one end of the earth to another at the snap of his fingers, he still needed wheels.

So where are the freaking car keys?

Having searched without success, she tiptoed up the winding staircase, sparing frequent looks over her shoulder at Jock.

You never know with warlocks. They're such a sneaky bunch. And this warlock is special. He's very strong, spell-wise and strength-wise. I was out of it-who uses pixie dust these days!-but I still remember how the muscles of his arm rippled when he raised up, how the muscles of his calf flexed taut when he stretched, how the muscles of his buttocks tightened when he...

At the top of the stairs, she was confronted with a heavy wooden door. Grateful that it was unlocked, she pushed it open a crack and peeped around it. There were corridors on all sides, forming the classic pentagram found in the homes of many supernaturals. Choosing one, she dashed down the long, carpeted path.

More doors.

She crossed her fingers and opened one at random. She found herself in Jock's bedchamber. She was immediately charmed by the dark, masculine elegance. Rich tapestry graced the walls, thick Persian carpeting was underfoot, and a raised, mammoth bed fit for royalty dominated the room. She was impressed. She knew that he was rich, but *this!* This wealth was scandalous.

She opened a massive wardrobe and found...

Woman's clothing. Expensive woman's clothing. An entire selection from slinky, thong bikinis to full-length fur coats. Somehow, she couldn't believe that the clothes belonged to Jock. He was many things, but a cross-dresser wasn't one of them. To the contrary, he had more machismo than any oath-breaker had the right to possess.

That bastard. All the time claiming to want me when he already has a lady of the manor. I wish I had hit him harder. I wish that I had chopped off his head. I wish that I had... Ooooooh. When I shake the pixie dust from this place...

She rained a host of torments upon Jock's head, laughing at the image of him fleeing in a cloud of bats' excrement, as she quickly dressed.

Opening the door, she came face to face with...

Sklar.

The hound sat there with a certain bored grace, except for her plumed tail. That she thumped with a pagan-like beat. As Lania stepped closer, she yawned, her tongue doling out pink and long.

Unsure of the hound's intentions, Lania hugged the wall and inched down the corridor. Reaching the end, she dashed for her freedom, bolting out as if she were made to run. She veered to the right and sensing daylight, ran faster, her feet barely touching the floor. Her legs pumped as pistons, and she concentrated solely on putting one foot down and one foot up with the quickest possible economy of motion. Her sneakers dug into the carpet, gaining traction in the softness, and she rapidly overtook the long expanse of the corridor. There, she looked over her shoulder. Sklar was crouched low, with haunches tucked in tight, loping in pursuit.

Lania bent deep into a runner's sprint and tapped into her draining reserve of energy. Victory was close. She only had to gain the portcullis to secure her freedom.

Sure, perhaps too sure, she stumbled, slamming into the carpet. She slid several feet, her skin scraping on the carpet. Still, she crawled on, ignoring the pain, disregarding the burning sensation that shot up her arm.

The hound, like a silent hound from hell, was right behind, paws muffled, gait widened, easily eating up the distance.

Whoosh!

Sklar brought Lania down to stand over her. The hound's sharp, well-defined teeth chomped at the air

near Lania's neck.

Lania had only one choice: to fight. She brought her two-handed, clenched fists against the hound's head. Yelping, the hound recoiled from the blow and changed. Right before Lania's eyes. First Sklar was there and then she vanished. A woman, a very exotic woman with coloring to match the blue-black fur of the wolf dog, was in her place.

Before Lania could recover from the shock, Sklar-or the woman, or both-curled her fingers and, with nails sharp and pointed, attacked. In Jock's castle realm of magick, an old-fashioned, run-of-the-mill catfight was underway.

Until Lania got in a good right cross and Sklar retired from the field.

Leaving Lania to get back to the important business at hand.

Disregarding the sheets of rain that soaked her to the skin, Lania rammed the portcullis with her shoulder. The gate bounced back under her assault, staying in place. She beat against it until she sensed the futility of her attack. Through the wooden slats, past the courtyard, to an atelier beyond, she could see a shiny, sleek sedan crouched against the curb.

Battering out. Hopeless. There has to be another way.

Lania spied a column staircase to her right and ran up the wrought iron steps. She leveraged her weight to crank the winch of the portcullis, never wishing more that she had the use of her witching powers. She heard the sound of scraping slabs as the gate raised, its pointed teeth slowly separating from the earth below.

She reveled in her almost-won freedom until an enraged Jock appeared to grab her around her waist.

She howled with anger, her arms striking out madly, until he seized them, pinning them behind her back.

So close. So unfair.

Tears seeped through her thick lashes to fall in profuse droplets, mixing indistinguishably with the cascading rain. She kicked out. He grabbed her shoulders, shaking her hard. She caught her breath on an angry sob.

"Stop that!" the warlock prince commanded.

"Let me go!"

"You're not getting away. You might as well settle down."

She tried to wrench free, bucking against him.

"Cut it out before you injure our son!"

He punctuated the command with a stinging slap to her backside.

His unbelievable conduct brought her up short. No one had ever treated her like that. Not even her coven mothers who had clucked their collective tongues at her headstrong willfulness as a child, but who had never dared to touch her.

Despite Lania's struggles, Jock held her firmly. His hand snaked out to flip an electrical switch. Lania watched with maddening eyes as, like a modern-day elevator, the portcullis lowered into place.

"Huh," she grunted out. "I should have known."

"Yes," he said, turning to march her into the innards of his castle realm. "You should have known."

Chapter 5

In the broad banquet hall of Jock's castle, Lania picked at her food, pushing it around on the gold plate before her. Although the Sole Almondine with a light, lemon sauce smelled delicious and the fruity punch in her crystal goblet looked cool and refreshing, she left both virtually untouched. The presence of the warlock prince holding haughty court at the head of the table was ruinous to her appetite.

She was his prisoner.

Again.

She hated him.

She was intrigued by him.

He had acquiesced to her demand that she not be chained in the dungeon. She had felt a stab of elation until he had informed her of the pentagram hex. She had the liberty of his castle realm, but nothing more. An impenetrable barrier separated her from freedom.

Jock watched through eyes, slit black, as Lania played with her food. His scar pulsed dully and he set his jaw. He had tried hard to please her, conferring with his chef to create the most delectable dishes to tempt her. Babies needed nourishment, especially babies whose parents were both at the highest end of the spellcasting scale.

"Our son is going to starve if you don't eat something," he said.

"What makes you think it's a boy?"

"The firstborn sired by a reigning Darkling prince is always a male."

"Oh. Right. I forgot. Wiccan Lore."

"Right. Wiccan Lore."

She gave an exaggerated yawn behind her hand. Jock couldn't tell whether she was really sleepy or just pretending, to piss him off. Either way, he wished that she would eat something.

She looked him full in the eyes.

"Why didn't you tell me about the bitch?" she asked.

"Who?"

"Sklar. That she's a changeling."

"Does it matter?"

"Of course, it matters. They're trouble."

"Now who's talking myth?"

"Always transmuting into stuff," Lania said. "I mean, a person should pick a form and stick with it." She flicked her fork at a slice of sole.

"Sklar is-was-a six thousand-year-old temptress."

"Well, now she's just a bitch."

"Jealous?" he asked, with a raise of his jet-black eyebrow.

"Should I be?"

Jock's eyes turned smoky.

"I know what I want."

"The way she was almost licking your crotch. Must be the dog in her."

"Why did you refuse my troth offering?" he asked. He refused to debate irrelevancies.

"That old, hocus-pocus thing?"

"That *old thing* was priceless."

"It didn't go with anything that I have."

"Funny, I thought that it went with something that I want. *Badly.*"

"The color sucked and the shape and it was sizes too big."

"Enough!" he roared.

She was pushing his buttons-besides giving him a headache. On the other hand, maybe it was the aftereffects of her candlestick slug. Regardless, he wanted peace.

She was insolent. And pregnant. With his son and heir. That made her dangerous. And vulnerable. And desirable.

He threw down his napkin, kicking back his chair.

"You look like you've had a hard day at your cauldron. Take a nap."

"I'll sleep when I damn well please, my lord." She spat out the last two words.

"And does it please you now, my lady?" He leaned his hard body into her soft one. She could almost feel the beat of his heart. She got the sudden desire to kiss him.

"Yes, it does."

She walked, with regal haughtiness, to the bedchamber.

Chapter 6

The roll of thunder startled Lania from an uneasy sleep. Glancing at the bedside clock, she was surprised to discover that she had slept for several hours. She was as exhausted as when she had rested her head against the pillow.

She had fallen asleep only after a prolonged bout of sulking. Jock was right. She could not spellcast in his castle realm. She had tried everything that she could think of, from runes to black magick to conjuration, to no avail. She couldn't break through the pentagram or mental search to her coven sisters. The only thing that she had accomplished was a pounding headache. A headache made worse by a flood of

uncontrollable tears.

It's the baby. The changes. Being pregnant. Crazy hormones. It has to be. It can't be love.

She splashed water on her puffy face, biting her lip at her reflection.

I shouldn't have been cocky. Those dreams, those damn erotic dreams. I should have suspected something. Been on my guard. I should have known, after the troth offering, that he wouldn't give up.

He says that the future of our plane of existence rests on the handfast. That's a load of crap. The coven mothers would have warned me if that were my destiny. I know my duty. I've done my duty. I've accepted of burden of ruling my people from childhood-and I have never failed them.

Lania gained heart at the thought. *I won't fail them. My mojo is back!*

With arrogance in her stride, she left the bedchamber, only to return two hours later more frustrated than ever before. She had explored every cranny of Jock's castle realm, even venturing to the tower rampart, without finding a way out. The phones were strangely static-ridden, the servants stupidly unhelpful, and the computers securely passworded. She had stalked to Jock's library where she had a temper tantrum to end all temper tantrums, threatening to spellcast over Jock's dead body. He had not paused in his study of some runic images, except to turn the page with a wave of his hand and to observe that she needed to relax.

Now, she was back in the bedchamber and no closer to freedom than before.

She gripped her bottom lip between her teeth, looking around. She smiled.

No smoke detectors. No water sprinklers. Even Jock Steele couldn't stop the fire department. Probably, wouldn't want to. He seemed quite fond of this old pile of stone and brick. Now if the rain would check a little. Here's hoping he paid his insurance premium this month.

Lania ripped an ancient tapestry from the wall. Her actions revealed an antique mirror tucked in a hidden alcove.

Heeeey! What have we hereeee? A warlock who can mirror. Snow Whiteling's evil stepmother must be rolling in her crypt.

"Mirror."

"O mirrrrr-rrrror."

"Nothing. Let's see. Jock's so antiquated what with his belief in Wiccan Lore."

"Mirror, mirror, on the wall."

"Damn. Still nothing."

A sudden vision of the portcullis flashed through her mind.

"Electrical switch?"

She ran her hands around the frame and found a hidden console with buttons like a DVD player. She pushed the voice-command button.

"Play."

"Nothing."

"Rewind."

At the low hum, she rubbed her hands in anticipation.

"Stop."

"Play."

An image appeared in the glass of her bedroom, with her on the bed, in a private, most intimate, moment.

"Rain and wind and earth and fire..." She began one of her most powerful spell casts. A blinding pain struck her, driving her to her knees. The pain worsened with her every word until she had to cease the incant. Swiveling on her heel, she tracked Jock down, still in the library, still engrossed in study.

Smack.

The warlock prince recoiled from the blow. His eyes spat fire.

"You pervert. You sleazy, slimy Peeping Tom," she said.

He bottled his desire to retaliate with extreme effort. His temper was already rubbed raw from his need to mate, from being around her without release. Fingering his scar, he spoke through clenched teeth.

"I've been patient with you, Lania. Very patient. I vowed to give you time, time to adjust, as much time as I can, but *hell and the devil, you push me too far.*"

She reared back her arm to strike again. He blocked the blow easily and sent her spinning from him.

He strode over to her, to tower over her, his legs astride, his hands at his belt.

On all fours, she back-pedaled, her hands and feet biting into the deep carpet.

"It's time you learned who is your lord and master," he said.

"My lord and master would never *mirror* into a woman's bedroom."

"It's my right."

"You disgust me." She sneered out the words, magnificent in her scorn.

"Wiccan..."

"Don't hide behind that trash."

He pounced on her.

"You will obey me," he said, "you will handfast with me, you will smile and be obeisant like a gracious consort should and, *damn it*, you will like it."

Her struggles only enraged him further. He pried open her legs, pinning her down with a hard knee to her abdomen. He ripped the silky fabric of her shirt, flinging the pieces from him. Her pants and panties were

the next target of his attack and, within seconds, her lushness was revealed to his hot, exploring hand.

She squirmed beneath him, trying to avoid the tingling sensations that he created. She whimpered when he cupped her, kicking out with a nearly successful shot to his groin. From the look on his face, she didn't know how she had dared.

"You devious, no-good, perverted *oath-breaker*!"

Grrrrr. He sounded like a beast above her when he flipped her onto her belly. With rough hands, he grabbed her about her waist, tilting her ass up until her knees hardly touched the floor. She escaped. He let her. Only to drag her back. He drove in her without mercy, but could go no further when he felt the dry roughness of her vulva walls. He pulled himself from her, pushing her away with a long-armed yet lingering touch.

Yet, he could not stand the aching bareness without her. He pulled her limp body into an embrace, cradling her against his chest. He felt her tears wet him there and let her cry it out.

"I'm sorry," he whispered softly into her hair.

"I'm gonna get out of here," Lania vowed, wiping the tears from her face with an angry, back-handed swipe. "Even if I burn this place to the ground."

Chapter 7

Jock kicked off the wall to land imperfectly on the padded mat. He did it again, this time swinging the broadsword in an arc over his head. At the end of the swing, the broadsword penetrated its target off-center. Pulling it free, he leaped, twisting his torso in midair, and back-flipped to the ground. Once there, his holographic foe quickened the pace of the battle.

For the past hour, he had been working through his routine, performing the reps with slipshod accuracy. After his behavior with Lania, he felt the need to work off his anger, to prove to himself that he didn't care that he was dying inside without her love, that she hadn't gotten under his skin, that he wasn't suffering the agony of the damned because he had hurt her. The only thing that he had proved was that she had destroyed his concentration to the point that he couldn't complete a rep without error.

Lowering the broadsword, he stood at rest and inhaled deeply.

Hell and the devil. That lady makes me crazy. She makes me lose control, to want to do things that no Prince of the Darklings worthy of that title should even think about doing. I wanted to take her by force, to use my prick like a weapon, to thrust it high and back, to deny her pleasure. I wanted to fuck her without mercy until there was a howling in my ears, until I heard her screams of pain, until I heard her screams of pleasure, until my balls rose and tightened against me and my shot was free.

He strode to the weapons cabinet and selected his favorite battle axe. He sliced the air with it, enjoying the nasty hiss as it cut through the pungent smell of the garrison. He reached for a mace and looped the strap around his left wrist.

Wyvern, his holographic foe, executed a simple attack, slashing with the heavy saber. Jock parleyed badly, his timing off, seconds before the blade would have severed his arm from his shoulder. When his foe feinted and renewed the attack, Jock failed to return thrust.

Why does she have to be so stubborn? the warrior prince thought.

Seeming to sense blood, Wyvern attacked again, pressing with bravura. Jock was forced back under the onslaught, his feet slipping from under him, awkward and graceless for a seasoned warrior.

Why does she have to be so beautiful?

Picking up the tempo, the holograph drove Jock to the wall. Jock's stop-thrust was weak. He again had to give ground, barely beating back the sabre point.

Why do I get hard just thinking about her?

There was a slicing at his chest. If this had been a real clash, Jock's blood would be spilling all over the stone slabs of the floor. This was not his best day.

Maybe it was the fire in his loins. Maybe it was the searing knowledge that he had almost raped her. Maybe it was the wrenching in his gut from knowing that the one woman on his plane of existence that he desired above all others did not want him. He stopped short, in mid-attack, at the thought. Right before the point of Wyvern's sabre pierced his heart.

"Pause program," he ordered.

He grabbed a fleecy towel from the door of the weapons cabinet. Wiping the sweat from his chest as he walked, he caught sight of himself in the garrison reflector. He was not a conceited man, but he knew his own worth. Handsome, rich, with a remote darkness that was dangerously intriguing, females had been at his beck and call from his age of ascension. He had taken many into his bed, but none into his heart.

"Come down, Lania," he ordered.

He looped the towel around his neck, clasping an end in each hand, and watched her from brows that formed raven wings.

Drawn by the clank of metal against metal, Lania had wandered into the garrison balcony. The sight that had met her eyes sent every female corpuscle racing.

Jock's body glistened with sweat, his muscles flexing from exertion in a very manly activity. That was not the only fact that had gotten her hot and bothered and had sent her blood pressure skyrocketing. He was nude-magnificently nude-except for the breechcloth, which scantily covered the evidence of his endowment.

Time had become timeless, as she had watched the interplay of his sinewy muscles. His triceps had bulged when he had whipped the weapon around. His buttocks had tensed and tightened when he had lunged. His washboard chest had rippled, his pectorals undulating to some unheard music, when he had dodged the slashing sword. At the sight, she licked her lips with hunger, biting down hard until she drew blood. Now he was asking her to enter, to see the glorious sight of his body close-up and personal.

"Scared?" he asked, as if he had read her mind.

"Certainly not," she snapped, but she did not move from the balcony.

"Should I send Wyvern for you?"

"No!"

Lania shuddered at the thought of being confronted by that beast. She had gotten a good view of its fury during the holographic battle. She had no desire to face it, even if it was a computer-generated image.

"I think I should," Jock said. "Computer..."

"But you said that you won't hurt, me. You said..."

"...Children's Wyvern One."

"Don't. Please *don't!* I'll come..."

In a twinkle of an eye, Jock's recent foe-a dragon beast of fire and sword-transformed into a cartoon playmate. Standing meekly at Jock's side, the once ferocious beast waved a pudgy hand in greeting. Jock leaped on its back and the dragon took flight, soaring to the balcony to stop there.

"Hop on," he said.

The prince held out his hand, the fingers long and well-shaped. Lania placed her hand in his much larger one. Straddling the battlements, she got one leg over when she felt his sinewy arms encircle her waist. Holding her tight, Jock lifted her onto the dragon's back. Her thin blouse grew wet from his sweat. She inhaled, smelling the pungent scent of his virility.

With a gentle flapping of its gargantuan wings, Wyvern took off again. Lania gasped, clutching at a horny spike. The garrison ground was a long way down.

"Don't be afraid," he said. "I haven't lost a rider yet. Relax and enjoy the ride."

Lania tried to do that, but how could she with Jock's chest pressed against her, the beating of his heart bold and sure? With his barely covered, bulging cock snuggled against her, recalling days and nights of dreamcasting pleasure? With his thighs, encasing her soft ones, the muscles flexing and relaxing at each swoop in the dragon's flight. The combination of sensations bombarded her as she fought to speak.

"What? I don't get it?" she said, bemused. "How..."

"That's a first. The princess of the Whitelings robbed of speech."

"First he was... Now..."

"We hold our children's parties here. The kids gave a great time."

Lania could imagine. Even Disney World had nothing like this. The realism was unbelievable from the rush of the wind on her cheek to the heaving sides of the beast.

"Speaking of kids. How do you feel about them? Not that I care," she hastened to add. She was glad that he could not see her face. She knew that an anxious frown marred her brow.

"I love kids," he said simply, and Lania knew that he was speaking the truth. She also knew, on some bone and blood level, that Jock would be an excellent father.

"I plan on having seven or eight," he said, reaching down to caress her belly, only to grunt when her elbow sharply connected with his side. "Or whatever the market will bear," he corrected hastily.

Wyvern took a final lap around the garrison, winding down, to land like a mechanical hobbyhorse in need of more quarters.

"We had to add a timer," he said, "otherwise the kids would never get off."

"You certainly have a strange home, even for a warlock."

"It's your home now."

"It doesn't feel that way. It's hard to feel at home when..."

"Salem," Jock granted her that dangerous bit of information.

"Ah," she nodded her understanding. "The warlock capitol of the world. What's the old saying? Salem is to sorcery what Vegas is to gambling."

Sensing her softening mood, Jock seized his chance. He pulled her into his arms. They stood thus, in the vastness of the garrison floor, a powerful man and a powerful woman, trying to come to grips with strange and wondrous circumstances.

"I want you to be happy here," he said solemnly. "I'd rather cut off my sword arm than to see you unhappy. About before..." He went down on one knee and encased her small hand in his much larger one. "I most humbly beg your forgiveness. If you'll trust yourself to me, then it will never happen again."

"You promise?"

"That should be good enough."

"Swear."

"No one doubts me, Lady."

"On your oath as liege-lord."

The muscle at Jock's strong jaw pulsed dully as he strove to keep his temper. "You could tempt Archangel to lose his wings. If only you'd behave like a proper Darkling consort."

"I will *never* be that."

"You understand the consequences if I break my vow?"

A devious smile curved Lania's lips as she nodded her head.

"Then, I..."

"I pushed you too far," Lania said, suddenly willing to accept her part in what almost happened, suddenly unwilling to humble him further. Her smile changed from devious to tender. She resisted the urge to stroke his face.

"I went a little crazy. An oath-breaker is a terrible slur for a warlock. As the prince of the Darklings, I am bound by the truth."

"Then why did you come to me by dreamcast?"

"Dreamcast seduction is one thing, but what almost happened is quite another. Plus you were too powerful otherwise. I'm not proud of what I did, Lania. It was the only way. At first. Later, I couldn't resist the magick. Since I got you pregnant with my son, I'm delighted at the results if not the means."

Jock rose to his feet. Silence fell and it mellowed them both. When Lania rested her head on his shoulder, he risked breaking the mood, asking, "Lady, why did you refuse my troth offering? Is the idea of handfasting with me so terrible?"

The face of the witch princess shadowed. She raised her head to stare at a point beyond his shoulder.

"I didn't know ... what it was," she said.

"You didn't? Then all those claims..."

Jock threw back his head and shouted with laughter until he got another sharp elbow to his ribs.

"I'm no expert in Wiccan Lore," the princess said with a flash of temper.

Jock snapped his fingers and the troth offering appeared in the palm of his hand.

"It is very old, rare. Open it." At her hesitation, he said again, more urgently this time, "Open it."

She lifted the jeweled lid. The eerie talisman, like nothing that she had ever seen before, came to life. Suddenly afraid, she closed the lid, but the prince was quicker.

"Trust me," he said simply.

He pushed aside his breechcloth. His semi-erect cock grew under her gaze until it was long, hard, and beautiful. She licked her lips, longing to caress it.

"Put it on me," he directed.

Unable to resist, she slipped the talismanic circlet over soft foreskin, past throbbing veins, until it was nestled in the black curls of his pubic hair.

"Turn it," he said, gritting out the words.

"What?"

"Turn it."

His hand covered hers, guiding her, showing her how, and then dropped free. Her hand, alone, turned until his moan of pain-perhaps pleasure-slipped from his clamped teeth.

"More ... more ... tighter ... *tighter* ... if you want to hurt me."

"No!" Regardless of her threats, her vows of vengeance, she didn't want to. She pulled the talisman off and put it back into its case.

"The ancient ones were right," he murmured, "the talisman does unveil the soul." That epiphany shook the foundation of his being. For the first time in his life, Jock "Lucky" Steele, the proud warlock prince of the Darklings, had been willing to be dominated by another.

"Lania, I..."

"Don't say anything." She stopped his words with a kiss.

Their lips met, at first teasing, then more determined as all of their emotions merged into passion.

Her arms encircled his neck, feeling the tension there. He was like a coiled, restive animal needing its home.

Stepping back, he stripped away his breechcloth. With arrogance he stood, a proud conquering prince before his battle maid. He stretched out his arms, willing her to come to him. On passion-quick feet, she flew into his embrace.

She felt him at her belly, like rock-hard cement, seconds before he kned apart her legs. Moving with unerring knowledge, his hand found its target. He fingered her, her clothing causing twin sensations of hot

friction and hotter desire. Sinking one finger deep, he brought forth the juices that would pave his entry and then stilled his hand. When her muscles contracted around him and she cried out in ecstasy, he lost control.

"I swear it will always be like this," he vowed, his voice low and harsh.

He reached under her skirt and, finding her panties, tore them with savage need. They hung in shreds of silk and lace. He hoisted her onto him, taking all of her weight on his mighty frame. His breathing grew hot and rapid, his lungs pumping in anticipation. Tangling his hands in her long tresses, he held her still, staring straight into her eyes as he impaled her.

"I want access," he said, darkly, crudely. "Spread. Spread for me."

She thought that she would go mad as she did as he requested, squirming against him, trying to get closer, trying to suck him in, trying to milk him dry. She screamed in agony when he separated them, only to urge him on when his hands roamed over her. Her remaining clothes ripped under his wild, questing hands until she was nude and exposed to his will.

The soft, white skin of her breasts beckoned him, crying out for his attention. He tongued the areola, until the nipple grew into plump ripeness. He nuzzled it, then when it popped into his mouth, sucked hard, sending a sharp stab of pleasure to the core of her being. She strained against him, arcing as if she wanted to shove him away. Yet, she clung to him, wrapping her legs tight. And tighter still when he grabbed her bottom to grind his cock against her. The primal nature of his act sent another stab of pleasure through her, and she felt herself teetering on the edge of an abyss.

He tore his mouth from her breasts, resting his head in the hollow of her shoulder. With controlled concentration, he started the age-old rhythm, thrusting himself into her yielding softness. She lifted herself higher so that she would cradle his slick fullness in the notch between her thighs, so that she would rub with delicious friction against her aching bud, so that she would receive the ultimate fulfillment.

He shouldered her, sending them to the garrison floor in a tangle of arms and legs, their bodies too glued together by sweat and semen for them to separate. He turned, accepting the brunt of the impact, rolling her onto her back to continue pounding out his need. And hers.

She fought against release. She didn't want the delicious sensations to end. Yet, she *wanted the end*. Her mind whip-tossed, she recoiled against the slate floor, pushing away from his relentless thrusting. It was all too much, too soon. She gripped his shoulders to buck him off. She could not. He held her securely, his body so imprinted upon hers, that she could not gain advantage.

Her mind pulled back from climax, from all that it meant. This was more than a mere coupling. This was a bonding and it frightened her.

The consummate lover, Jock sensed her withdraw. He fought for control, reaching deep into the pit of his gut to deny himself what he most wanted. With tenderness, he kissed her cheek and slowly pulled himself free.

"Someday, you will be ready," he vowed.

He pushed off her to lie at her side. When she pulled away, he stopped her with encircling arms. He held thus for a long time, giving her the solace that she needed.

"This is for real, isn't it? Our marriage?" she asked.

He grunted, wary, not willing to destroy their fragile concord. "It's simple, the handfast. After, you may

do as you please-within reason."

"Simple for you. You won't be reduced to less than nothing."

"I didn't make the rules, Lania. Don't punish me for something that I didn't do."

"So my fate is to live here, in your castle realm, without my powers."

"Unless I grant otherwise."

"Unless you, and the chances of you letting me spellcast in your realm are what? Less than a dupleki demon doing a job for tin."

Jock maintained a tactful silence.

"I thought so," she said with a sneer of her lip.

"Maybe not."

"Then prove it. Let me mental search to my coven. Please."

She tugged on the back of his neck, bringing him close for a kiss.

He yielded to her soft embrace, sucking in air when her hand swept low to bring him to hardness. His temper flared at her blatant manipulation and at his desire to please her whatever the cost. He was tempted, very tempted, to give in. If he didn't watch his step, she would turn him into an impotent faerie. He pushed her hand away.

"I don't like being on the receiving end of a control fuck."

"You bastard. You..." Her mouth formed the *O* of the forbidden slur.

"Don't say it, Lady. Don't *go* there..."

"A thousand pardons, my liege, for the interruption," a gruff voice was heard from the doorway. Houston stood in the garrison arch. His eyes were downcast, in strict observance of warlock protocol. Dripping wet, not having taken the time to remove his trench coat, his appearance indicated the urgency of the interruption.

"If you will excuse us, Lania," Jock said. With a wave of his hand, she was covered in an overlarge cloak.

She threw him a speaking glance-her eyes like haughty, twin flames-and walked out.

With Lania gone, Houston relaxed. Jock was his friend as well as his prince.

"Shit-fix needed," the elderly warlock said, his southwestern twang pronounced. "It's the dupleki demon. He's upped his price."

"Pay it. In gold," Jock commanded. "The greed of that race is infamous."

"And the coven mothers are getting twitchy. The brood and I reckon, we..."

"Let the beldams mental search until the end of time. They will never pierce the pentagram hex to invade my..." Jock broke off. "You didn't come here to tell me this."

"No, Jock, I didn't. I have bad news." Houston looked away. "There was another lithosphere disturbance at the Everest site. TaPai was killed."

Jock walked to the weapons cabinet. He fingered its carved wood. He rearranged the contents, moving the dagger, the broadsword, and his cherished morning star. TaPai had been young, full of promise, and his death was unnecessary.

Jock's vision blurred. He closed the cabinet door with quiet care. He could have prevented TaPai's death. If he had not allowed Lania time, if he had forced her to handfast, the smiling apprentice with the almond eyes would still be alive.

The Darkling prince knew what he had to do. He could show Lania no mercy.

Chapter 8

Lania had soaked away her anger in a long, hot bath. One look at the sunken tub, and she had stopped raining curses upon Jock's head. He claimed that this was her home. She had decided to treat it as such—at least for the time being.

She noted that the bathroom, larger than most apartments, was a hedonist's dream, containing every amenity from walls adorned with crystal to floating water lilies. When she stepped into the perfumed water, the encircling mirrors misted. It was as if Jock was there, in the mist, and she struggled to shake off the dreamcast memories before they became a reality.

Stripping open his shirt, he looked her over with raven-like intensity. He stood, waiting for her submission. But she did not quail before him, standing her ground, matching him look for look. He stalked her—a game of cat and mouse—until he leaped, swooping to capture her lips.

He mounted her with one fluid movement. As he rocked back and forth, his movement caused the water to wave in an undulation of desire. With each motion, she squeezed around him, coiling her legs around his Herculean torso, sucking him in.

He banged her like a sledgehammer, every plunge forcing her, ruthlessly, towards the abyss. She came and wanted to come again, wanted to pound out her release.

He flipped her over, onto her belly, and came up behind her, bringing his loins against her, close. She felt him there, at her slit, demanding entry. His short hairs were coarse, driving her crazy by their roughness. His hand searched, peeling away the full, protective folds of her bud. He jerked hard on his rod, his hand moving up and down, manipulating himself like a virtuoso, then encased himself, laying himself against her cleft, letting the friction work its magick.

She reached behind him, digging her sharp nails into his buttocks, urged on by a ripple of passion within her that threatened to shake the earth. Tension tightened her body until she thought that she would go mad without release. She warred against the conflicting desires, even as she felt her muscles clenched around him. She felt his hands slip under her belly to raise her, to angle her for each thrust, so high that her elbows just grazed the frothy water.

The waves danced on the contours of his body when he rose from the bath like an arrogant Aquarius. He dashed the water from his hair, shaking his raven locks with a toss of his head. His now spent cock, nestled between his legs, swung like the pendulum of a clock.

Later, much later, Lania bent forward with the lithe grace that only a princess can achieve. Having finished her nails, she was wiggling them dry. She didn't look up when the door opened and in the doorway stood Sklar, dripping in jewelry.

Sklar entered. No, she made an entrance, striking a pose, like a glittering beauty queen at the end of the runway. She was draped in a blue evening gown, and she had secured her long hair with a golden clasp.

Lania barely spared her a glance.

"Nice shiner," the princess said.

"Prepared for a night in," Sklar said, returning the dig. "No Prince Charming?"

Lania snorted with impatience. She did not like games for she never had to play them. The Whitelings were a direct people, business minded, blunt to a fault. As their princess, she commanded their straightforward advice.

"What do you want?" Lania asked.

"To get my coat."

Sklar reached into the wardrobe for a full-length sable. Pulling it on, she caressed the fur against her cheek.

"Huh." Lania snorted, looking her over. "You look like you're about to bark."

"I don't *bark*," the former wolf-dog snapped, with an angry lurch.

"Fur on fur. Now that, my dear Sklar, is a fashion statement."

"Call me Perséa. Lucky does."

"I guess a man can call a woman anything when he keeps her on a leash."

"I've been around a long time. I know things." Sklar walked forward, swaying.

"That explains the wrinkles about the shiner."

"You'll *never* come between Lucky and me. We're *connected*."

"Yeah, well, some men will connect with any bitch in heat."

"You'll handfast with him over my dead body."

"Cut the drama. I'm not interested. I'd rather marry a slime demon."

"We've shared things that you couldn't hope to understand."

The changeling paused, studying Lania's face through narrowed eyes. Laughing softly, she continued.
"Lucky is so good in bed."

"Yeah. *I know*," Lania confirmed, her eyes twinkling.

"He's so agile."

"Did he tongue you too," Lania said, beginning to enjoy herself.

"I thought that I would die."

"Damn, that man's tongue gets around."

"I can help you get out of here."

"What and let you have all the tongue to yourself. No way."

"That's what Lucky really wants. Only he is such a slave..." Sklar paused suggestively over the word, "...slave to duty."

"Huh, it sounds like he just got *lucky*."

Lania blew on her nails and smiled.

Sklar moved closer, wrapping herself around the bedpost. She leaned her head against it, her black hair blending with the ebony wood.

She could be Jock's twin, Lania thought. There was a sudden twisting at her heart.

"I've got a secret," Sklar said, almost singsong.

"Then don't tell me."

Sklar was taken aback. "Why not?"

"Because then it wouldn't be a secret."

"That troth offering was *used*," the changeling continued as if she had not heard. "I guess Lucky felt the desire to try it out. You were too busy being the ice princess."

"Great work, if you can get it."

"We did it all over the place. Lucky didn't want to stop. And all the time that we did it, he was saying my name."

"Spare me the details and get to the point, if there is one," Lania said.

Like most changelings, Sklar didn't want to get to the point. She thrived on mischief. It was like manna to her. Getting to the point wasn't any fun. It was the journey, the devious, crooked journey that made her existence worthwhile. She had caused eons of misery to unsuspecting mortals and still wanted more. Even those supernaturals that knew her true calling, misunderstood her, considering her nothing more than an impish puck. They were wrong. She had tempted angels to damnation.

Sklar saw before her a worthy opponent and a threat to her plans. Lania treated her with amused scorn, but the changeling sensed that the flippancy masked powers that had not yet been tapped. The ancient ones were wise to forbid spellcasting by the princess of the white witches in the castle realm of the warlock prince.

"I have a plan," the changeling said, her voice dipping low.

Against her better judgment, Lania's ears perked up.

"Do I smell doggie poop?" the princess murmured, sniffing.

"Huh?" Lania said, taking a quick look around.

"As in, something is stinky in the realm of Jock."

"Why won't you believe that I want to help you?"

"Because I don't trust you..."

"You can," Sklar assured her.

"All those centuries of morphing makes you changeable."

"I can help you and I will. There's no need for that silly ceremony."

"What about Malki and the First Sign of the Alpha? What about all the people who could die? Wiccan Lore..." Lania stopped. She had almost quoted Wiccan Lore. "What's your plan?"

"I can disrupt the pentagram."

"Disrupt a pentagram hex! Yeah, right. And I have a crystal ball in Brooklyn that I want to sell you."

"For a few seconds," Sklar said, nodding her head quickly. "Enough time for you to get out."

"Why should I trust you?" Lania asked, pondering the possibilities.

"Why not?"

"Oh. Let's see. All those centuries of changeling mayhem and misery. There was that incident with the apple in the Garden of Eden, the Helen of Troy fiasco, the Tom Cruise-Nicole Kidman breakup."

"You can trust me. We both want the same thing. You out of here. I've even brought car keys," Sklar said, dangling the keys, before placing them on the bed.

Lania eyed the key ring, marked "Jock's car," but made no effort to pick it up. She almost laughed at the preposterousness of the ploy.

"And I want you gone. Right now," Lania said.

The princess uncoiled herself from the bed and walked with menace towards Sklar. The changeling retreated before her, hugging the wall until she reached the door and safety. There, she dropped all pretense. Her shoulders hunched; her canines grew, saliva glistening on them. Her nose swelled long and pointed, before she got control over her metamorphosis.

"You foolish witch," Sklar spat. "I expected more from the princess of the Whitelings. You scream and shout and threaten terror, but what have you *done*? The Darkling warlock has used you, abused you, and made you *love* him for it."

"Really," Lania said, standing toe-to-toe with the mutating changeling. "Try this for size. Rutterkin, thy is for the air. Come to me, my servant, through the elements to smite this pox-marked transmute..."

The pain crippled Lania and she sagged to her knees.

Sklar's lips curled into an evil smirk. She pronounced the most damning insult.

"Faerie."

Lania staggered to the bed, praying for the pain to ease. It was a long while before she was able to sit up. By then, the dark silence in the room was deafening, casting a pall over her thoughts.

She knew that Sklar was right. She was foolish. How could she let the changeling bitch provoke her? Why had she taken the obvious bait when she knew it was futile?

Made you love him for it.

The changeling's words ripped into Lania's thoughts, forcing her to choke down a scream. She did not love Jock Steele. She loathed the very air that he drew into his warlock lungs.

So why had she been rather fancying herself as the lady of the manor? She was sitting on his bed, in his bedchamber, surrounded by his possessions, polishing her nails, and having a grand old time.

No. She would escape. She would leave this place and return to her realm. With the help of her sisters, she would wreak revenge. In her mind's eye, she saw Jock hanging from a gibbet, his trunk twitching in torment. She shut her eyes and swallowed hard, gripping the bedclothes tight against her mouth.

How could this happen? How could she let this happen?

She would not.

Faerie, my ass!

She would never be a trophy wife, a powerless consort to the prince of the Darklings. She threw back the covers and stood tall. She was a lady with a plan.

Chapter 9

The smoldering fire in the hearth crackled, the smoke blackening the already blackened bricks. Yet, despite the thickening smoke, Lania picked up another book and tossed it on the fire. In the past, precious moments, the stack beside her had dwindled low, with only a few volumes remaining. She picked up the largest, heaviest one. Its cloth cover was engraved in gold script and its onyx hatch lock glittered in the firelight.

She hesitated, reading the title.

It was the *Book of Sacred Rules*, the bible for warlocks. Moreover, it was *the* first edition and had been in Jock's family for countless generations. As the prince of the Darklings, his duty inviolate was to protect it from destruction.

She threw the book into the flames and immediately regretted her action. She was burning the birthright of her unborn child, a part of the Darkling regalia that was passed down in an unbroken line from father to son at the age of ascension.

At the entrance to his bedchamber, Jock paused to catch his breath. Although the First Sign of the Alpha-the beginning of the end-was intensifying, he had taken a moment to change into an oversized, snowy-white Goth shirt and snug-fitting black corduroy jeans. His bare feet and shower-slicked hair somehow made him appear sexier than if he had donned formal wedding attire. In his hands, he balanced the ornate bell and the slightly dented candlestick of the handfast ceremony. Taking another deep breath, he surged in.

"Lady, no more time for delay. We must..."

The bell and candlestick went flying in the winds.

Grrrrr.

Lania gave ground at the violence of the assault when the warlock prince soared to the fireplace, needing only a black cape to become a creature of the night. With the ancient pages curling in the flames, he snatched at the book.

"I told you I'd do anything to get out of here," Lania said, backing away.

Jock said nothing, crouching with a stillness that defied time. He counted to ten, hoping-praying-that he could curb his rage.

One. Two. Three. I can't hurt her, don't want to. She's pregnant. She's the mother of my son. According to the sacred book, the very book that she burned, it is my absolute duty to protect her.

"You have any idea," he began, stuttering in his anger. "This book is hallowed text, its historic significance is unparalleled, that's your son's birthright, for demon's sake..."

"Let me go and end this."

"Let you go?" he repeated, astonished.

"I'm clearly an unworthy vessel and..."

Jock stood and began *The Stalk*, the swaying stride of a warlock on the prowl.

He panted with each step that he took.

She tiptoed backwards, stumbling.

He came on.

She turned to run. She was quick. He was quicker.

He seized her slender wrist and dragged her to the bedpost.

"I thought you understood, that we had reached an accord," he said.

"You're a Darkling. I'm a Whiteling. I despise everything you stand for."

"I will not tolerate a disobedient wife."

"It would never work. I'm into modern witchery: nature, symbolism, the equality of man and woman. You're into the dark magicks, the primal forces. Look at you, this place. *Sklar*."

Her last statement brought him up short.

"What does the changeling have to do with this?" he asked.

"There's something between you and that ... that she-beast."

"You do this?" He cast his hand towards the fireplace. "Because you're jealous? Sklar's nothing to me. To think that I considered granting you the right to spellcast here. Lady, you are unworthy of any consideration. You are unworthy. *Period*."

He crushed her to the floor at the foot of the bed, her knees giving way under his merciless grip. When he let her go, she rolled over to look up at him.

I can still push his buttons. He could still come to love me.

From her position on the carpet, she saw him sit down on the bed. She thought that she was safe. For a moment, for only a moment. Then she looked at his scar, the deep, ruinous scar that slashed his temple.

And she knew that she had unkenneled the demon within him.

He swooped fast, so fast that she didn't see him move. One second, she was on the floor and the next she was on his lap, over his knee, and his hands were tugging up her robe.

Her butt, plump and round-unblemished virgin skin-was exposed to his view. She knew what he intended and began to fight. He stopped her, easily, his large hand jammed in the pit of her back. Her struggles ineffectual, she could only crane her head over her shoulder. Her hair fell over her face. She tossed it back, waiting and watching, her eyes as big as saucers.

He raised his left hand high.

"You bastard! You wouldn't dare!" she shrieked.

"I dare and more. I warned you what would happen if you didn't mold yourself into a proper Darkling consort."

A warlock's wand, one with a silvery dragon hilt, materialized in his outstretched hand. He flipped the flashlight-like switch. It pulsed to life, lengthening like Luke Skywalker's light saber, only much more fearsome.

He brought his hand down. The wand whipped through the air. Again and again and again. Until the ass of the princess, the haughty sovereign of the High Coven of Whitelings, was bright blush and smarting.

Lania hid her face in the strong curve of his calf. She winced at every wicked crack, the sound rivaling the crashing thunder outside, but she bit her bottom lip tightly between her teeth. Vowing not to cry, not to weep, not to even moan, she endured the pain until his cruel arm stayed at last. He tossed the wand away and caught her up in an embrace that threatened to bruise her ribs.

Holding her chest-to-chest, his movements jerky and ultra-controlled, he spoke quietly. "Lady, you will learn to obey me."

His hold tightened for a moment, and she caught her breath at it. He slanted up her head, forcing her to look straight into his eyes--no, into his soul--before he punished her anew. His kiss gave her pleasure despite the pain, and she cursed that she was such a slave to her lust.

He read the conflicting emotions in her face and laughed. He flung her from him, uncaring that she could barely stand without his supporting arms. He swept around on his heel.

Though half-fainting, she saw him prepare the altar for the handfast ceremony.

"You are wasting your time with that tripe," she said.

He grabbed a fistful of her long, white hair, pulling her to the altar.

"At another time, I would close your disrespectful mouth with a sigil. But right now, I need it working."

Pinning her arm behind her back, he pushed her forward until the stone bit into her skin. The altar sacraments swam before the tears in her eyes.

"I really wanted this to be romantic," he said, "the long version, but since..."

"Let me go."

"Not on your life."

"So I can tie my robe. I refuse to be handfast with my breasts hanging out. Besides, it's chilly in here. Maybe I could build another fire? No?"

She rucked her lips. She tied the belt with slow, intense concentration. Finally, she said, "I'm ready."

"Good," he said.

He took her hand in his, marveling how malleable it was to his touch.

"Ancient ones," he began. "We call upon you to heed our vow of devotion..."

"Huh." Lania snorted loudly.

"...De-vo-tion." He nudged her. "Say the words. Say them!"

"I ... I ... take ... theeeee ... *not!*"

"*What did you say?*" the warrior prince asked with deadly calm.

"I said no as in not, nada as in no way, Joseeee."

Swoosh!

Lania found herself on her back, on the bed, gasping for breath. He rammed open her legs, the rough fabric of his cords scuffing her inner thigh. She cried out, trying to buck him off. But he pressed her, without mercy, into the feathery mattress, his body flat against her, covering her so completely that she could feel the indentation of his belt-bucket, the rapid beat of his heart, the rustic silk of his shirt.

"Let me go. I said to let me go!"

"Lady, you're like a broken data loop. One more word..."

"Word." *Why do I insist on toying with him?*

"Hell and the devil! That's enough, enough, enough. Sigil here. Sigil there. Silence now." Jock tapped the corners of her mouth in rhythm with each hex word, then drew a stiff line across her lips. An aged ribbon appeared and rolled, like a living thing, across her mouth. Her lips were sealed.

Her mouth moved under the ribbon and continued to move even though Jock could not hear a word that she spoke.

"Sorry about the smell of the ribbon. It's been eons since a Darkling prince has had to resort to a sigil to tame his..."

Lania got an arm free and lashed out. He grabbed it, and there was a mini-war of his hand to her wrist in midair, before clamping it to the bed.

His castle realm trembled. The quake jarred the heavy bed. Then stillness.

"There is no more time," Jock said.

He eased from her. She saw her chance and fought with all of her might.

Her struggles spurred a black chuckle from him. And a flick of his hand. The bed sheets moved on their own accord, twisting like vines and took shape anew. As silken ropes, they wrapped around her limbs, her ankles, her wrists.

She was spread-eagled, pinned to the bed, her robe open yet closed. Opened enough for a nipple to peep out of the folds. Closed enough for the snowy hairs between her legs to be hidden.

When I get free, this warlock bastard is going to walk funny for the rest of his immortal life. Damn it! What's he up to now?

Jock slipped from the bed and stood between the twin posts. He surveyed his handiwork, taking a moment to feel pride in his magick prowess, for she was truly his captured prize. He frowned.

She's wearing too many clothes.

With a lazy wave of his fingers, he remedied his mistake. She was nude, gloriously nude, and he was ready. He stroked her thighs, his touch soft and gentle, then spread her legs further apart, so far apart that she thought she would split in two.

He took her feet in his hands. He examined them carefully, as if he had never seen this part of the human anatomy before, paying particular attention to her soles and the delicate area between her toes. Next, her legs and knees and the back of her inner thighs where he paused to bestow butterfly kisses. Then, her torso and navel and her firm buttocks. And more butterfly kisses. He moved on, up her body, inspecting it like a scientist looking for clues, until he reached her breasts.

No. No! He's looking for my coven mark. Lania tried to squirm away and got a stinging slap, chased away by a gentle caress, for her defiance.

Jock's examination was impersonal. He fought the waves of desire that built up in him, stamping down the desire to stick his cock in her and get relief from his thudding discomfort. But he could not resist her breasts. Her proud, sassy breasts. Not when he rolled them between his thumb and forefinger. Not when the large nipple sprang to life. Not when he knew, on some gut, primal level, that tiny orgasms were pricking through her.

The business at hand, Jock. Steady. Stay focused. We're talking about saving the world here. You'll have lifetimes to fuck her brains out.

With effort, he cleansed his mind. He turned her over and studied her smooth back. Not a mole, not a speck, not a blemish. He swept aside her long hair and checked her nape. The skin was soft there, calling for his careful perusal, but no special mark proclaimed her as a white witch.

"Where is it, Lady?" he asked. "Make it easy on yourself."

Lania shook her head, straining away. She buried her face in the pillows.

Jock searched her body again, angry at each moment's delay, at each roll of thunder, at each passing second when another lad like TaPai could die.

"I bet you're about to explode," he said, "not being able to talk."

His hand crept down her leg until it detoured to the center of her heat. He peeled back her folds and flicked her nub. He got her undivided attention for her hips flexed upward and her head stuck forward like an arrow in its shaft. She glared at him with fire in her eyes.

"I could keep you silent for, say, an eternity. But no. I'll give you a choice."

His voice turned to liquid chocolate.

"Either this." His large finger circled her nub. "Or this." His lips brushed hers through the ribbon. "Which will it be? Are you strong enough to turn down pleasure?"

He flicked her nub again and heard the moans deep in her throat.

"From the way you're wetting my palm, I don't think so."

He stroked her, long and slow and from cunt to cleft, until her body twitched.

"Had enough? No? You want to curse me? Sorry, I can't hear you. What's it going to be? Raining curses or your body betraying how much you can't resist? I'll play the gentlelock and let you surrender," he said. "Sigil begone."

The ribbon disappeared and Lania spoke with venom.

"I hate you, despise you. I scorn you, you bastard, you ... ooooooh..."

"I know my duty," Jock said, his hands renewing their search. Perhaps, the mark, the special mark, that he couldn't see, he could feel.

"You will pay," Lania swore. "Sisters of my coven unite with me ... unite ... *no!*"

"The pain worsens every time you try to spellcast in my realm," Jock said, leaning back on his haunches. He rested his great weight on the balls of his feet. His brood claimed that his mind was like quicksilver, but he couldn't solve this simple riddle. It had to be somewhere. He recalled Wiccan Lore and the tales of the white witches' coven. *Every witch, every witch, has a special mark, the mark of her coven, and when touched, it...* Suddenly, he knew. He vaulted from the bed to grab a nearby candle. Shielding her soft skin from the dripping wax, he held it close to her opening.

From her position on the bed, Lania craned to see what he was doing.

Damn it! No, he wouldn't, her mind screamed. He wouldn't take away my powers.

Jock opened her gently. With the tip of his callused pinkie, he searched her inner walls with meticulous care. Drops of sweat clung to his brow and his eyes were focused black dots. He found it, the tiny brand at the inner crest of her vagina, which proclaimed her the princess of the Whitelings. He stopped, paralyzed by the thought of what he was about to do to the woman he loved.

"Jock... Lucky," Lania spoke compellingly.

He looked up and directly into her eyes.

"Don't do this," she said.

"If there was any other way, I wouldn't."

"You don't know what this will do to me."

"I do, Lady. I do."

"Anything, but that. I couldn't live without my powers."

"I'll make it up to you. Somehow, I will. I promise."

"You promised not to hurt me."

"I have no choice."

"Stripping me of my powers. How can you?"

"There's no other way."

"Please, Jock."

Lania's eyes filled with tears. She began to weep, softly weep.

"Please, don't. Please don't make me beg."

"Lania... Lania... Try to understand. With our rank come sacrifices..."

"Wiccan Lore..."

"Yeah, Lady, Wiccan Lore..."

"You were never like this before ... cold ... unreachable."

"TaPai is dead."

"I'm sorry."

"I'm sorry too. Some things are bigger than both of us."

"I'll do anything," she said. "Don't take my witching powers from me."

"It's the fate of the world versus you. Those lives. More people can't die."

"But if we handfast... If I agree... If what you say is true, I'll do it. I surrender."

The warlock prince studied her face. He wanted to believe her.

"I'm sorry, my love-my truemate-so sorry. I can't-don't-trust you."

"You can!"

"I'll make this right. Somehow, I swear, I'll make it up to you."

"Taking away my powers? You can *never* make it up to me."

Jock knew that Lania spoke the truth. He could never make it up to her.

Hell and the devil! This is my destiny. In a few moments, with a few words, I'll strip her of her powers and the woman I love will loathe the very sight of me. And I always thought I was so lucky.

Lania no longer tried to stop the hot tears from falling. She tensed, preparing herself for the inevitable.

The bastard! The cold-hearted, vengeful bastard! He can't love me. This isn't about saving the world. It's about his ego, his massive ego as the prince of the Darklings and his need to always master.

"Forgive me," he said softly, almost whispering.

"I will never forgive you," she said shouting, her eyes shut tight.

They spoke at the same time, at the same time that he touched the mark of her coven and telepathed the sacred incantation that would render her impotent.

"It's over," he said. "Done."

He cradled her in his arms, rocking her, her wet cheek resting against his strong chest. He felt an indomitable sorrow at each sob that racked her, at each shudder that tore through her. He had destroyed her to save the world, but he felt no triumph as its guardian hero. He felt the indomitable sorrow, only. Sorrow that ate at his soul.

Chapter 10

The Darkling prince raised Lania's tear-streaked face, steeling himself to see the rage in her eyes. His words of succor froze on his lips. Instead of grief, her face radiated raw, sexual desire.

Lania threw her arms around his neck and pulled him into a kiss that was scorching in its intensity. Her hands skimmed over the corded muscles of his neck, over the broad girth of his shoulders, over the smooth plane of his chest. Taking his nipple into her mouth, she sucked until she heard him groan from the pleasure.

She ripped his fly open, the zipper giving way under the rapacity of her hands. She yanked his cord jeans down over his taut buttocks. When he popped free, she seized him, manipulating him to rock-hardness. From her labor, from her skilled, sensual labor, his cock stood tall and erect, a massive oak springing from its root. She flipped onto it, taking him in one downward push, pushing all the way down, her juice-soaked muscles stretching and contracting, until he disappeared inside her. She sat on him—he was like a heaving oak—her legs bent and curled close to his body to set a pace he was hard-pressed to meet.

Her grunts rent the air, air filled with the smell of fucking, until they grew louder into a guttural scream.

"Hell and the devil, Lady!" the warlock prince said. "What has come over you?"

She neither answered him nor responded in anyway, except to swat his hip and to pump him faster, to urge him to slam into her as hard and as fast and as furious as she was slamming into him.

"Slow down!" Jock ordered, his voice ragged and hoarse. "Give yourself a chance to enjoy it."

She was oblivious to his pleas, never missing a stroke, her face closed and rigid, and her mind solely on one object: to use him to sate her lust.

"No, you're liking this too much," he said. "I like this too much. It shouldn't be this way. Don't *do* this."

He couldn't stop her. He couldn't stop it. The lust. The seductive lust-rush for fulfillment. Against his will, he was propelled onward toward the end, the inevitable climax, for her lust was flaming him, consuming him, forcing him on.

"This should be a tender mending after all we've been through ... after all you've lost."

She cupped his balls and squeezed.

He gave up the struggle, shoving aside his noble intentions.

He jerked away from her clawing hands, listening to the whimpering emanating from deep in her throat. He wanted to be naked, wanted skin on skin sex. He paused in tugging off his shirt—his pants hung to his hips, freeing him enough so that his bulging cock stuck out between the steely teeth of the zipper—and brought his hot, questing lips to hers. It was a kiss, just a kiss, but when his lips slanted over hers, all the

heat, all the passion, all the desire culminated into a lustful bolt that nearly blew his mind. He shook his head from the daze, not believing that a kiss alone could send him over the edge. He wasn't even in her, but he felt the oozing of his semen and felt the trickle down the length of his cock to nest at the flexing juncture between his legs.

With his mouth locked to hers, he flung off his shirt, grunting in pleasure when her hands pulled and yanked at it in assistance. From the force of their combined efforts, his shirt whipped through the air. As it landed in a rustle on the carpeted floor, he pulled her hips against him, his large hands spanning her waist, his thumb playing with the velvety skin around her navel.

To the sound of rain pattering on the castle battlements, they knelt on the bed, their knees sinking into the downy softness of the mattress, their bodies upright and tight against each other while their tongues continued to dance to silent music that generated wave after wave of pleasure.

He frisked his body against her softer one, lurching as if struck when her hands went to his nipples, only to give himself up to the sensual sensations. He threw his head back, rumbling groans deep in his chest, as the tips of her fingers circled his nipples, teasing the beady areolas, puckering them until they became devil's points. Palming them, spreading her hands wide, gripping the firm, muscular flesh of his pecs, he felt her mouth replace her hands and she bathed each nipple until it was shiny and liquid-smooth, a tiny, mirror image of his protruding cock.

Lost in the strange lust, he let her make love to his body. With her lips and her hands everywhere, she feasted, tracing a hot path down to his middle. Her kisses caused his skin to quiver and ardor was telegraphed to each nerve ending.

His mind cleared for a moment, for only a moment, and he snapped his fingers. The troth offering, glowing eerily in the candlelight, appeared his outstretched palm. He took her hand, and with his fingers woven with hers, tried to glide it on.

"No, no, Lucky, not yet," she said, her voice nothing more than a whispery growl. "Not yet."

"When, Lady, when? I've waited so long, wanted so long, for you to give yourself to me."

With a finger under her chin, the prince lifted up her head. His dark eyes bored into her light ones. He saw lust there, certainly. He thought that he saw affection, too and, perhaps, something more. But not trust. No, not trust. Then, he knew that he had destroyed that coveted tie when he had destroyed her witching powers.

He rested his head against her temple.

"Soon, someday soon, soon." He murmured the words like a sacred chant.

She pressed her body, eager and fierce, against him, bellying him. She began a slow grind, the bump and grind of frantic foreplay, her gyrations forcing the insertion of his cock, his big, large, long cock. Once he nested there, her thighs contracted, her muscles tightening then easing to draw in every inch. The dreamcast, the spell that had gotten her with child, became reality. She felt the same delightful fullness, the same massive bloating of his thick erection, the same burning fire.

"Yeah, one day soon. Until then, we have this," she said rubbing her vulva against him. He was such a colossus that her thighs were stretched achingly apart. Yet, she intertwined her legs, closing around him, increasing the friction, to stroke the full length of him.

Her actions sent him reeling and shut out every thought. He functioned on the primitive, on the visceral,

on the blinding need to pump out his release.

He hurled her onto her back and hoisted up her legs, letting her ankles dangle over his shoulders. With one fluid motion, he was in her to the max, trembling violently, when she clamped down on the thick reef of his cock, constricted her muscles, and pumped his essence from him.

"This feels so good, so right," he said. "It shouldn't."

"Just fuck me. Just fuck me! All I want is for you to fuck me."

She intertwined her ankles around his neck, meeting him, matching him beat for beat. He pumped heavily into her, over and over, until she sobbed for release. At last, the coil of lust that locked them tightened for the final time and sprang free, ricocheting tingling sensations of the purest pleasure through every fiber in their bodies.

Later, much later, Jock rested his damp brow in the nook of her shoulder. Although he barely raised his head, his words resounded clear and distinct.

"What the hell just happened?" he asked.

"It didn't work," Lania replied. "I still have my powers."

The Whiteling princess burst into tears.

"It's all true," she said between sobs. "What you said-the handfast-the First Sign-the end of the world."

Jock gathered her in his arms, knowing that her understanding would shake the foundation of her being.

"I'm gonna have to..."

Chapter 11

"...marry you," she ended in a wail.

Jock expected her epiphany to be different, for her to be awed that she would be a savior of this plane of existence. Instead, she was crying her eyes out because she was destined to marry him. He knew that she didn't think of him as a maiden's desire, but did she have to weep as if she were to mate with a valveck troll?

"It must be *impossible*," she said through hiccupping sobs, "for a Darkling prince to strip a princess of the Whitelings of her powers within the millennium's Twelve Turns of the Dark Moon."

"What?"

"Otherwise, she wouldn't be a witch and the handfast *couldn't* take place. Don't you see? If a warlock prince could ... it defeats the whole purpose..."

"...The whole purpose of Wiccan Lore."

"Right. Prince-Expert-On-Wiccan-Lore."

"Huh. I didn't think ... uh, see ... it that way."

"Ob-vi-ous-ly," she said with a curl of her lip. "What's more, the sex, the intensity of the lovemaking, must encourage the handfast, if there's an attempt to strip powers during the Twelve Turns."

"It all fits together. You've got to admire..."

"Admire! Easy for you to say. You lose nothing."

Her fresh bout of angry tears cut Jock up inside. He didn't want his true mate to be unhappy or come to him with a broken spirit. In quintessential male fashion, he fell back on platitudes.

"Lania, don't cry. It won't be so bad."

"Don't *tell* me not to cry."

"It'll work out. The handfast will be a formality ... a marriage of convenience ... in name only. You can go your own way... I won't interfere."

"What?" she asked.

"You can live wherever you want."

"What!"

"The baby too," the Darkling prince continued as if she had not spoken. He saw his dreams of a true marriage dissolving before his eyes. He busied himself by folding the bed sheets, restoring the troth offering to its box. "After we're married, do anything you want."

"Is this another hobgoblin game?" the princess asked.

"However, I *insist* on seeing my son."

At that, Lania knew that Jock was serious. The prince loved his unborn child. Of that, she had no doubt. She studied his closed, set face as he struggled with the buckle of his belt. His hands trembled. She couldn't believe it, but his hands trembled.

She rose from the bed to stand straight and still, prepared to bask in her victory. She had won! What had she won? "Why are you doing this?" she asked.

"My choices are limited right now."

"And spellcasting. Can I spellcast in your realm?"

"Since you won't be living here, it's not really an issue, is it?"

"So that's it."

"Yeah. That's it. Let's get it over with."

He adjusted the altar sacraments-the handfast bell clanging ominously-in preparation for the ceremony.

She jerked on his Goth shirt. The garment floated around her knees. She marched over to him. One of her hands snatched the dented candlestick. The other hand reared back.

Smack. Smack. Smack.

He fingered his cheek where her palm had landed with stinging accuracy.

"What was that for?"

"You kidnap me, hold me captive, get me pregnant, and then discard me. Tell me to leave like a quick toss from a one-night-stand. Do you know who I am? I am Lania, the reigning Princess of the High Coven of the Whitelings. You get me pregnant against my will, you marry me, and you *like* it."

"I didn't say... I'll never understand you."

"Fine," she snapped.

"Fine," he snapped back.

"So we'll get married."

"Right."

"And you'll like it."

"And I'll like it." The warlock prince was shouting.

"You're damn skippy you will." The witch princess was shouting too.

"...Because I love you."

They were standing toe-to-toe, nose-to-nose, glaring at each other through eyes that were spitting flames.

"What did you say?" she asked, unable to believe her ears.

"I said that I love you, you termagant."

"Oh! Well, I love you more, you half-wit."

"Fine."

"Fine."

"Here's my troth offering," the Darkling prince said.

"Thank you," the Whiteling princess replied.

"You're welcome," the prince said, determined to get the last word.

They stood silent. The storm diminished, fading to a mild roar.

"Now make love to me," Lania said, "before I cream all over your shirt."

"Like hell you will, Lady. That cream belongs all over my prick."

They grabbed for each other at the same time, two pairs of hands wildly questing for naked flesh. They bore each other back to the bed, landing there with a loud plop. They twisted and turned until she was under him.

He climbed her, nudging her open, making a place for himself. Although it was foreplay, the imitation of his favorite sexual position set a burning under his skin, and he was awed, again, at how quick and how fast she could blow off the top of his head.

"This time, we do it right, take it slow," he said.

"Yeah. Slow," she said.

She was willing to agree to anything as long as he didn't stop. She bit her lip, burrowing her face into his shoulder when he whispered the low, sexy words of love.

"I'm going come in you deep," he said darkly. "Bury myself. Pump into you so hard that you'll scream and keep screaming, but I won't stop until I drench you."

His promises excited her as much as they excited him. She felt him between their bodies, growing larger, the fat head of his cock swelling over the top of his jeans.

His mouth traveled from her ear to the sloping hollow between her breasts. He pressed kisses there and then took her mounds into his mouth, suckling each in turn. He continued to his journey until his tongue was lapping at the soft, curling hair at the base of her hips.

She opened her eyes to the vision of his dark, close-cropped head buried between her legs. His tongue was busy there, bringing forth her essence. He let it seep around his lips to gather at the corners of his mouth. He stuck out his tongue, rimming his upper lip, and dug again into her. When he rooted her deep, she shot up in the air and clasped him tight, her fingers raking across his back.

"Don't stop," she howled, not knowing if it was a command to him or to the orgasm rippling over her.

She stormed through her climax with thuds to his back, and he answered her persistent call. He positioned at her opening and stabbed upward. Her walls constricted and sucked him in. She adjusted herself, angling for deep, long thrusts. Her movements unmanned him and his hot sperm flowed free to coat her womb. With his body tensing for the final strokes, he ground out his completion in one long, slow grind.

The aftermath was soft, melting kisses.

"I love you," she vowed.

"I *love* you," he vowed too.

"Let's handfast now, get saving the world part over with," Jock said with a grin. "I want you all to myself. You, the baby, and me."

He kissed her brow. Over the top of her hair, now slick and ash-white with sweat, he saw the castle wall in front of him flicker and change until it was no longer solid. It became every color of the spectrum, swirling immaterial, only to take the shape of a portal, but no ordinary portal. This portal churned with a vortex tunnel, a tunnel leading to another plane of existence—a tunnel leading to the Netherworld, to the realm of Malki the Doom Herald.

"The hell and the devil, now what?" Jock said.

"Is this possible? It can't be happening."

"Get out of the way!"

At the snap of his fingers, the warlock prince was in full battle mode, the blade of his broadsword gleaming in the candlelight. He gave his war cry, the base, glottal watchword of the mighty Darkling race, and charged into the vortex to battle the doom herald who had been summoned to bring forth the end of this plane of existence.

The warlock prince went on the attack, but he was forced to retreat when Malki slashed and pushed him back with a swat of its great wing. Jock recouped and issued several sharp jabs to the herald's gargoye face. The doom herald bellowed and took flight. As the herald soared past, through the tunnel, the prince leaped onto its horny rump. It whipped him off, slamming him hard with a switch of its spiked tail.

Fighting for breath, the prince dashed to the entrance, arriving bare seconds in time. At the portal entrance, he managed to beat Malki back until the herald seized him in its enormous claws, lifting him off the tunnel surface. The claws pierced deep and the prince's blood flowed. Helpless in the overpowering grip, too close to swing his broadsword, the prince struggled to free himself. He gasped and cringed in pain when Malki sunk its fangs into his shoulder.

On this side of the portal, Lania stood transfixed as the events unfolded before her eyes, her horrified gaze only broken at Sklar's gleeful laughter.

"You changeling bitch!" Lania said. "You made this happen."

"You're *so* right. You and the warlock were so concerned about the handfast, I guess you forgot that Malki is a herald. He can be summoned ... if you know how."

"Are you crazy?" Lania asked. Her eyes were white slits of light.

"I don't think so."

"Do you know what will happen if Jock can't stop it, if that creature reaches us."

"I've got a pretty good idea," Sklar said with extra-heavy sarcasm.

"You *want* the world to end?"

"Who cares about this miserable place? There are a million planes of existence."

At that, the changeling pushed past Lania, racing headlong into the vortex.

In the whirling tunnel, Jock fought to break Malki's grip. He struck out, issuing chops to the herald's neck and throat. The doom herald flinched under the blows, briefly slackening its grip. Jock wiggled clear. Gaining momentum, the prince bounced off the tunnel surface to end his flip with a wide swing of his broadsword. Although his execution was flawless, the blade barely penetrated the herald's reptilian underbelly.

In the battle of these two supernaturals, the Darkling prince was surviving. Nothing more. A seasoned warrior, the paladin of this plane of existence, he knew when his number was up. He knew that he would eventually tire. He knew that he would eventually misstep when the blood and sweat clouded his vision. He would slay the herald and save the world-yes-but the battle would end in his death. With a pang of regret, he thought of all that he would miss: his son's birth, his son's first steps, his son's first words ... Lania's love.

At the entrance of the tunnel, Sklar lurked. In her hands, she held a vial, open and ready. She bided her time until she smelled blood, the rich oxygenized blood of a warlock prince about to lose his life. That was her chance and she seized it. She joined the fray. At the same time, Malki ripped the broadsword from Jock's hands and drove him to his knees.

Lania screamed as she imagined Jock's agony.

Bloodied and helpless, Jock withered before her eyes.

Sklar had tossed the contents of the vial, dousing Jock with holy water.

"Ancient ones, I beseech you..." The princess began the magick words.

Always black, never white.

Always twin, alike, alike.

She fought through the pain, the blinding, crippling pain.

Mirror image, mirror twin.

Neither family, neither kin.

The warlock prince nodded, uniting his hoarse voice with her straining one. It was their final test, the hardest one, not of love, not even of faith, but of trust, for he was granting her the right to spellcast in his realm.

Together they recited the last refrain.

Blend together, lacking sun

Shadow to substance, one to one.

"Noooooo!" Sklar howled seeing all of her mischief turn to dust.

The spellcast was successful. Jock was a specter, a shadow form. It was the edge that he needed to renew the battle against Malki. Sklar knew it, sensed it, that the battle tide had turned. Intent on escape, the changeling fled the tunnel.

Lania snapped her fingers, affecting Jock's favorite warlock-warrior technique. In her outstretched hand, a dagger, shiny and bright, materialized.

"I could get into this Darkling stuff," she said, smiling as she met the changeling at the tunnel entrance. "But first, I have to deal with you."

"Don't..." Sklar said. "I didn't mean any harm."

"Funny," Lania replied. "Changelings never do."

Lania flipped the dagger until the blade pointed outwards. She stalked forward, her purpose unmistakable in every step. The blade was inches from Sklar's neck when the changeling yelped and transmuted to her original form. Lania chuckled at the sight of the wolf dog loping from the bedchamber, tail tucked firmly between her legs.

Turning quickly, Lania set up the altar sacraments: the ornate bell, the sacred book, and the slightly dented candlestick.

"Jock! Now!" she yelled.

The warlock prince broke off battle and bolted down the tunnel. Once he had leaped through the vortex, he grabbed Lania's hand. Together, with hands clasped, they raced to the altar stone.

"I take thee," the Darkling prince said.

"I take thee," the Whiteling princess said.

They spoke at once, the three, simple words of the handfast, the words that were destined to avert the apocalypse. They heard one last bellow from Malki before the vortex closed upon him, trapping him eternally-until the Twelve Turns of the Dark Moon at the beginning of the next millennium.

Chapter 12

Nine months later, the Steele-Mills castle was a realm of magick and mystery, of sorcery and witchcraft. And, *love!* Nothing symbolized that love more than "bath time" when the haughty prince and princess left the pressures of protocol and ceremony behind to engage in the mundane task of bathing their son.

Recently, Prince Montgomery Darkling had discovered his toes. At the sight of them, he gurgled and grinned and kicked, especially when soapy water splashed everywhere, soaking him, the floor, and his doting parents.

"Let's have another, right away," Jock said, in his boldest bedchamber drawl.

"You must be kidding," Lania scowled, rolling her eyes.

"Nope."

"No way. I need time."

"Time? For what?"

"To recoup. A new baby is exhausting."

"Recoup? It's not as if you did anything. I did all the work."

At the fire in her eyes, the warlock prince smiled. He would love teasing his princess to the end of his days.

"I still remember how to dreamcast," he said. "Let's see..."

He never finished, for, with a snap of her fingers, Lania had their son dried, dressed, and snug in his cradle, and Jock in bed and on his back. Before Jock could protest her copycat of his technique, her hands were already at the fly of his jeans and her tongue was already flaming the fires that were never quite extinguished.

She mounted him, easing herself down, all the way down, until she swallowed him. She began the rock, the tiny strokes that she knew would blow his mind.

"Lady," he groaned, when he could groan at all, "you've got me spellbound."

Book Two: Love on the Top Rope Chapter 1

"But I don't know anything about newspaper reporting," Anne Seymour said as she brushed away centuries of dust from the statuette of Ramesses II.

"It's not really reporting. Just go to the press conference for Valkon of Aesir. Please, Anne. You got to help me. I'm in a real jam."

How many times had Anne heard her sister say that? How many times had she bailed her out? She had lost count. Once again, Angel needed her help.

"I'm in the middle of a difficult Coptic translation, and the Egyptian Museum sent over additional

mummies for radiocarbon. I don't have time to play reporter."

"You have to. I didn't want to tell you, but I'm on probation. If I don't cover this story, I'm toast."

Anne put aside the statuette, pausing to look around her laboratory. It was quiet and peaceful there, surrounded by the artifacts of the past. In the quietness of her lab, with its protection from the commonness of urban life, she could lose herself in solitude. Now, her irresponsible twin sister demanded that she enter the turmoil of modern life in Philadelphia.

"What is it, exactly, that I have to do?" Anne asked.

"It's simple. I promise. Show up at the sports dome for the press conference. There will be loads of reporters there. You don't even need to ask questions. Hold up a recorder and blend in..."

"Hmm," Anne said, carefully nonjudgmental. From experience, she knew that Angel would promise anything and rarely follow through.

"...just in case my boss, the king of the jerks, checks up on me."

"When is this press conference?" Anne calculated the time that she would be away from the joy of her life.

"At seven, tonight," her sister mumbled, pausing. "Now, Annie, don't scold! Don't say no. Are you there? You haven't gotten lost in one of your dusty catacombs, have you?"

"I'm here," Anne said, looking, with loving eyes, at the life-size replica of the mausoleum for Ramesses II. It was reproduced in stunning detail. She had received her doctorate for her work as well as for her theory that the pharaoh's sons and high priests were entombed nearby.

"Angel, I'd do anything for you, but I can't tonight..."

"Yeah, yeah, yeah. I know about your big presentation, but covering for me won't interfere with that."

"But..."

"You'll have time for the press conference. Your presentation is at eight, right? No problemo. Get to the sports dome at seven, out by eight. It'll work."

Perhaps, it would work for Angel who always did everything at breakneck speed. Anne, however, was different: cautious, careful, considering.

The older of the Seymour twins, Anne had never refused her sister. Tonight would not be the first time, regardless of the inconvenience. Better to give in, for once Angel dug in...

"Stop by my apartment around seven," her sister said, knowing that she had won. "You'll need to change your clothes. I can't have my twin posing as me in those dowdy suits you wear."

"But..."

"I owe you, Annie. Thanks. Oops, I'm late. Got to go. Love ya."

"But, how do I..."

The telephone line went dead. For a few seconds, Anne paused, listening to the buzz. She replaced the receiver on the cradle and sighed.

Anne looked down at her brown linen pants-suit. It was not flashy, but she would hardly call it dowdy. No, not dowdy. It was serviceable. And the cream blouse, with its ruffled collar, gave her an air of professionalism. She frowned. It could hardly be considered dowdy either. She examined her shoes. They were sturdy, brown Oxfords. Not the fad pumps worn by her students, but her shoes served their purpose. She could hardly traipse around in heels at desert excavations, could she?

Anne tucked Ramesses in the lab storage drawer. She checked her watch. It was set for Cairo time, a quirk of hers. She calculated the seven-hour difference, realizing that she was late. Grabbing her battered briefcase, she dashed to the laboratory door. Before she ventured into the modern world, she gave one long, loving look at the old.

Chapter 2

Anne got out of her beat-up Ford, locked the door, and immediately shrugged into the full-length overcoat. She buttoned it right up to her neck, pulling the belt tight. She was already sweating on this hot summer night in the middle of August, and the bulky coat was stifling to the max. She longed to take it off, but didn't dare. Angel's short skirt and even shorter top made her feel exposed, uncomfortably exposed, showing more of her flesh than she had ever showed before.

She picked up the heavy, old-fashioned tape deck, grimacing at the weight. At the last moment, she had found herself scrambling to locate a recorder. As usual, Angel had not bothered with troublesome details, like lending her microcassette or giving directions. To the contrary, her sister had fired back a flippant retort before dashing out to the popular disco, Pier Xanadu.

Anne trudged through the parking lot, her thoughts centering on her sister's foolish decision to risk losing her job for a night of dinner and dancing. Reporting for the *Intruder* was Angel's third job in as many years. Anne couldn't afford for her sister to lose it. The last time that Angel was out of work, Anne had had her on her hands, financially and emotionally, for months. Anne groaned, remembering how she had been coerced into the task of finding Angel a job while Angel had managed to suck the life out of her life.

The tape deck banging at her leg broke through Anne's thoughts. She entered the chrome and glass lobby of the sports dome, giving silent thanks to the Nile gods that she knew where the IWC press conference was held since the building sprawled several city blocks. When she had attended a cultural symposium there last year, she had gotten lost in the maze of shops and cafes and the many freestanding stalls.

At the elevator, she set down the recorder and wiped the perspiration from her face. She longed to shed the overcoat, feeling silly for being inappropriately dressed. Instead, she punched the elevator button in rapid succession and checked her watch. It was always the same with these monuments to modern architecture: slow, crowded, over-utilized elevators.

She checked her watch again, gave up the wait, and headed for the distant sign indicating the stairs. She took the corner and charged straight into an obstruction placed solidly in her path. The force of the collision made her stagger backwards. She steadied herself, her hand coming into contact with warm, firm flesh. She had not collided with a solid brick wall, but with a man. She looked up, way up. He was the largest man-a pyramid among men-that she had ever seen.

"Oh. Sorry," the man said, his voice rich and deep. Anne felt his arm wrap around her waist, setting her on her feet. She saw him glance down, way down, and a brief flash of recognition registered on his face.

"Ms. Seymour," he said coldly with a curt nod, before striding on down the long expanse of the lobby corridor.

Anne stiffened at the chill in his voice. A chill so unlike what she was feeling. From that moment of contact, she felt burned. She fingered her skin where he had touched her. She looked for him in the crowd, finding his tall form easily.

She stared at him while he waited for the elevator. Although he was in the center of a boisterous group of people all seeming to want his attention, her eyes locked with his. Her world faded away until she shook herself from the daze.

Get a grip, she thought, a phrase picked up from one of her students. Nevertheless, she stared on, studying him, until he pointedly turned his back. At the ding of the elevator, he stepped through the doors and disappeared from her view.

Wiping perspiration from her face, Anne pulled herself. She craned her neck, relocating the exit sign. She sprinted over and up the stairs, her legs performing automatically, without direction, for her mind was daydreaming of the gorgeous man with the hair of gold.

Chapter 3

The press conference had only been underway for several minutes. To Anne, it seemed like an eternity. She was over-warm and uncomfortable, the wool of the overcoat scratching her skin and the noise in the press box hurting her ears. When a burly, overweight reporter brushed against her, his breath smelling of onions and sauerkraut, she prayed for the appearance of this Valkon of Aesir.

There was a sudden eruption when the doors to the crowded conference room were flung back with a crash. The reporters quieted, their shouts ending in mid-yell. All eyes, except Anne's, turned in anticipation to the entrance.

"Ladies and gentlemen," a telecaster sung out from the makeshift stage. "I have the privilege of presenting to you, the Nordic lord of sports entertainment, The Golden One, the five-time champion of the International Wrestling Conference, *Valkon of Aesir*."

"Thank the Nile gods," Anne muttered, reaching for the microphone to the tape deck. The cord was trapped under the fat man, along with a good portion of the tail of her coat. She jerked at them both, pulling hard, until they were freed. She reached down to push the button on the recorder. Just then, the fat man rose to his feet, in a surge of flesh, knocking her over. She was shoved forward to bang her head on the seat in front of her. She turned around to look at the portly culprit. He was clapping his hands madly, excitement making his flushed face redder.

Anne picked herself up, adjusted her overcoat, and squirmed back into her seat. From her tiny, cramped cranny, she craned her neck and looked around, her eyes fixed on the stage.

It was the man from the lobby-yet not the man from the lobby. She saw before her now a man with a body so perfectly proportioned that an Olympian would have wept from shame. She watched as he stalked across the stage, his bronze skin reflecting in the spotlight, lavishly exposed. Although normally prim, she did not look away. To the contrary, her eyes roamed over the perfection of his body, lingering on the revealing tee-shirt, the bulging trunks, the huge belt of silver and gold.

Valkon of Aesir snatched the microphone out of the hand of the telecaster and pushed him aside. When the telecaster stumbled back, Valkon sneered with contempt.

"Joey Flex," Valkon roared. "Know this. I am the IWC champion. I am The Golden One, the best in this business. You want a title shot. I'll give you a title shot. I'm gonna whip your ass like it has never been whipped before. Right here! Right now!"

He flipped the mike back to the telecaster, who barely had time to catch it, before Valkon strode away into the arena, his hair fluttering like a sail in the wind.

The crowd of reporters pushed forward, following Valkon like a herd of noisy cattle. Anne turned to exit, but she was caught up in the stampeding humanity. She struggled against the surging bodies, but her strength was no match for the tide. She was pushed and shoved into the arena of the sports dome, where a screaming maniac of a fan packed every seat.

In the semidarkness, fireworks exploded everywhere, dazing Anne and obstructing her view. In the clearing smoke, she watched as Valkon entered the ring. Despite herself, despite his unbelievably rude behavior, she was drawn to this man. There was something compelling about him. She analyzed it and realized that it was his raw, sexual power. As Eve was drawn to Adam, as Cleopatra was drawn to Anthony, as Female was drawn to rutting Male from the beginning of time, so was she.

For once, Anne was glad that she was pretending to be her sister. She could let her imagination run free. She stared openly at Valkon's broad chest, firm pecs, his even firmer nipples-pointy and hard, erect and proud. She could almost feel them pressing against her, tempting her. She ached to wrap her tongue around them, to tease them until the man beneath her was tortured with passion, and took her with equal torture.

She had never felt this way before, the desire to touch and to feel, to make this man know her as a woman. The desire was like potent lava, generating heat between her legs. She felt her upper lip, the sweat there. She was hot, restless, unable to sit still.

This is what it is like to be horny, she thought. She wanted to have, needed to have, a man on her and in her, letting his essence permeate her entire being.

"IWC fans are in for an unexpected treat tonight at the sold-out First Union sports dome in Philly," a sportscaster at ringside said. "What started out as a VIP press conference has turned into a knockdown-showdown between the champion, Valkon, and the challenger, Superfine Joey Flex. I'm Shane Esposito, here with partner in crime, Victor Victorious. Vic, your thoughts about Valkon's surprising decision to rumble with Joey Flex tonight."

"Oh! Oh!" Vic hooted out. "Shaney, my thoughts are these. Joey the Flex-Man has bitten off more than he can chew by challenging The Golden One. Val's a fighting champ. He's got the scars to prove it. I predict that Val's gonna take Joey Flex apart, bit-by-bit until there ain't gonna be enough left to send to the Undertaker."

"The action is set to start at any moment," Shane said, leaning over the microphone. "The crowd's getting impatient, waiting for Joey's entrance into the squared circle. Wait! I see yellow boa. I see silver lame. I see the rainbow feathers. Joey's on his way. Vic, he's not waiting for the bell. He's going right after Valkon. Look at that shot to the head."

Anne sat stricken by the scene playing out before her eyes. To her, this was Roman bread and circuses at its most ugly--two gladiators fighting to the death to thrill of the crowd.

"The fans are seeing a spectacular show tonight," Victor Victorious said. "Val's in great shape. Oh! Oh! Look at those muscles rippling. Uh-oh, a headache is a-coming."

Anne watched in horror when Valkon whipped Joey into the steel stairs. Blood spurted from Joey's mouth, staining his face, to drip down his gaudy tunic. Valkon circled and then went in for the kill. He gripped Joey's thinning hair and sent him, face first, into the turnbuckle.

"This match has turned nasty," Shane said, pumping up the crowd. "It's gotten personal with a capital P. Valkon has obviously, totally, lost it. Wait! He going to the top rope, setting up the Thunderlock. Like the Sharpshooter, the Pedigree, and the Rock-Bottom, Valkon's Thunderlock is IWC legend."

"Val's the only pro-wrestler who can execute it," Vic said, throwing up his hands. "But can he lock it in? Oh! Oh! He can. Ugh. I bet that hurt."

Anne tried to follow what was happening, but it was all happening too fast. She sensed that Joey was no match for Valkon, that he would soon be a victim of Valkon's brutality. Was this the real world? Were such things really permitted? She shook her head, craving the civility of ancient times. The pharaohs married their sisters, slept with their daughters, poisoned their rivals, and buried their architects alive, but they had also ruled great civilizations.

Anne's eyes widened when Valkon picked up a metal chair. He folded it with a slam, returning to where Joey was lying, helpless, on the mat.

"Someone stop him!" Anne shouted, jumping to her feet. No one stepped forward; no one moved to help. To the contrary, the roar from the crowd grew louder as if the fans wanted blood.

In fear and in hope, Anne looked at the referee. Surely, he will end this, she thought. But the man in the black-and-white stripped shirt merely stood by when Valkon held the chair high over his head and brought it down hard, very hard, on the back of Joey Flex's head.

Valkon circled the ring, his timber-like arms outstretched. The pose caused the muscles along his ribcage to undulate. He vaulted to the ropes, bouncing on them and pointed at the crowd. They booed. He leaped down. With ultimate disdain, he wiped the sweat from his brow and flung it in the direction of his defenseless opponent.

When he picked up the chair, intending to strike again, Anne could stand no more. Throwing all caution, all reserve, all *sense* to the wind, she threw off the overcoat, jumped over the press box and into the arena pit.

"Oh! Oh! What's happening?" Vic said. "It seems like fan interference."

"I'm not sure what's going on." Shane flipped the pages of the script in front of him. He shook his head at Victor Victorious, the frown lines in his face deepening.

"I don't know, either. What was up with that coat? Oh! Oh! This fan, whoever she be, is T&A material."

Shane flipped through pages of script on the announcer's table. He covered the mic with his hand and leaned over to Victor. "Why don't they tell us these thing?" he whispered. "I don't see it in the script." He checked with the control booth overhead. The stage manager gave him the thumbs-down sign.

Anne stumbled through the ropes in the high-heeled pumps. She circled Valkon like a brown mouse sniffing around a baited trap. When she faced him, she saw shock, confusion, and then puzzlement pass over his handsome face, to cascade into astonishment when she snatched the chair.

"Oh! Oh! This is unbelievable, Shaney," Victor Victorious said, incredulous laughter in his voice. "This T&A babe is standing up to The Golden One. How do you figure? Is she Joey Flex's new squeeze?"

"We all know that Joey is quite the ladies' man. They don't call him The Sex Machine for nothing."

"Stop it, you barbarian!" Anne shouted. "Can't you see that this poor man is hurt?" Anne flung herself in harm's way, throwing her body across the prone Joey.

Valkon walked towards her. He was a walking mountain. No, that was not strictly accurate. He was 275 pounds of walking mountain.

From Anne's position on the mat, Valkon looked larger than ever before, his super-broad shoulders and his ultra-wide chest blocking her view. He stalked towards her, his entire body radiating arrogance. He lunged, faking, teasing her with his power. He was in control and he knew it. He lunged again, enjoying the fear on her face.

Tears filled Anne's eyes. No one was going to help her. She looked at the referee who was counting, ticking the numbers off with his fingers. From far away, she heard the clang, clang, clang of the ringside bell.

Valkon seized her arm in an iron hold, his fingers like bands of steel. Anne looked down at them, noticing how pretty they were. She imagined his fingers under different circumstances-stoking her back, holding her tight in the rush of passion.

Valkon pulled her up and towards him. He raised his fist, a fist formed by those pretty fingers, high.

"Oh! Oh! The T&A babe is in primero trouble." Victor rubbed his chin, quirking his eyebrow. In sotto voce, he said to Shane, "This ain't gonna be a good thing."

"No way," Shane disagreed, but he covered his eyes. The mic barely picked up his voice when he said, "Even Valkon wouldn't hit a helpless woman who was only coming to Joey's aid."

"The fans want to see it," Vic said. "The fans want to see it. Oh! Oh! The fans *want to see it*." The ring announcer did not know who this woman was or what was her game, but she had electrified the arena. She and Valkon were like liquid steam. He felt their energy. The fans felt their energy. They were putting on one hell of a show. Scripted or not, he would go with the flow.

Anne trembled and closed her eyes, not wanting to see Valkon's fist as it slammed into her face. Tears seeped through her eyes. She hung her head.

"Please don't hit me."

To Valkon, her voice was soft, dreamy, like the purr of a kitten.

It went straight to his heart.

He raised her to her feet and wiped away her tears. Her face was warm. Her skin was flushed. Her lips were like two rose petals, kissing. He leaned closer, bewitched by her scent. His mouth was inches from her. He swooped down. His lips brushed hers. He rejoiced in the contact. He wanted more. He pressed harder, intensifying the kiss. The fans in the arena faded into nothingness. There was only him and her-a man and a woman-and a kiss.

He wrapped his powerful arms around her tiny waist, encasing her. He felt her swift heartbeat and the rise and fall of her breasts. Her breathing was shallow as if she wanted to pant like a she-wolf in heat, but was ashamed to do so. He deepened the kiss, sucking her top lip. He gave the same treatment of her bottom one, soothing with his tongue where he had once sucked. He felt a bolt of electricity and the voltage was high enough to start a fire.

She shivered in passion, arching her body into his. He explored her mouth thoroughly, and then expanded the kiss, sliding his lips across her cheek, down to her neck. He nibbled the skin there. He inhaled deeply, once again intoxicated by her scent. Cinnamon and roses went straight to his head and nearly drove him out of his mind. He gripped her buttocks, marveling in the firm, ripe roundness of her ass. He

gripped her, pulling her into his hardness. Perching her there, he pumped and pumped again.

He broke the contact, shocked at what had happened. He felt drained, out of place. And, in pain. Pain caused by the stiff, steel rod in his trunks. And, wet. He had never been more embarrassed by the so, so, *so* apparent evidence of his excitement. He retired to the ropes, his legs moving as if mired in cement.

"Oh! Oh!" Victor Victorious hooted, once his mouth had stopped dropping. "I can't believe my eyes. Will you look at that? The fans don't like. The fans don't want it. Val's machismo just crashed fifty points. He won't recover. Stick a fork in him because he's been shot, skinned, and fried."

"It's not often that the champ cops," Shane said, with a speaking glance at his co-announcer. "I guess Valkon of Aesir, The Golden One, can be tamed by beauty."

"What's gonna happen next?" Vic asked.

"I wish I knew," Shane said.

They looked at each other and then looked at the ring, as caught up in the unfolding story as any fan.

Anne stood there, dazed by bombarding emotions. The arena became a blur of faces, of signs, of sounds. She could only stand there, just stand there, until Joey suddenly and miraculously sprang to life. He hustled her out the ring.

"Are you all right?" Anne asked, breathless, when they had reached the safety of the pressroom. She padded him down, checking for broken bones. "I was..."

"What were you doing, you dumb broad?" Joey spoke in a nasty hiss.

She shook her head. She had saved his life. She expected thanks, not insults.

"I should call security," Joey said. "Stupid, dumb-ass broad. I hate groupies."

He turned to walk away.

"What!" Anne had never been called stupid in her life. Boring. *Yes*. Stupid. *No*.

She ran after him and, tugging on his arm, pulled Joey Flex around to face her.

"I'm sorry. I was trying to help..."

He stopped dead. He looked her up and down to snort.

"You thought it was real? This is sports *entertainment*. It's fake. Got that? Fake!"

At his words, Anne's eyes widened and her body recoiled from the shock.

"Dumb broad doesn't know when something's fake."

Chapter 4

In the messy disarray of her sister's studio apartment, Anne folded Angel's skirt and top into a neat pile. She placed the clothing on the nearby table and then looked around the room. Her eyes stared at the wall for a long moment while she fought back hot, angry tears.

What a fool I made of myself in front of millions of people. I should have never let Angel talk me

into it. I should have stayed where I belong, where I fit in.

If she had stayed in her world, then she would have never met him. She would have never experienced his kisses, felt his body pressed against hers. She would have never known passion. Maybe it would have been better that way. Now. *Now!* How could she live the rest of her life knowing what she had missed?

Pushing aside a jumble of newspapers, condom foils, and pizza boxes, she placed her carefully edited notes from the Valkon interview on top of the clothing. She grabbed a piece of paper and a pen and wrote a short note.

At the apartment door, she picked up her briefcase and threw her suit jacket over her arm. She opened the door to come face-to-face with one very angry man.

Valkon of Aesir.

"Okay, Angel," Valkon said. "Spill it. What did you mean by pulling that stunt?"

To Anne, he was Osiris in the warm, desirable flesh of a man. The look on his face-like a visit from that ancient god of the underworld-would have made a weaker woman quail. But Anne was too embarrassed to quail. Sports entertainment indeed!

She sought to intimidate, raising herself to her full height-5'3" in her stocking feet. She looked up, past a barreled chest, past muscular shoulders, past a razor sharp jaw to finally see his face. She tilted her head back and met his gaze.

His eyes were an even darker blue than she remembered, a midnight azure, like the sparkling of the Blue Nile. His eyes did not have that tranquility, however. Instead, they spat a fire hotter than the sands of the Sahara.

A pain shooting up her arm broke off her thoughts. He had captured her wrist.

"Let go of me," she said, giving him a withering look. She affected her best professor's demeanor, the demeanor that she used when dressing down a student.

"Tell me what you are up to. I'm betting a scoop for your newspaper. Right? If you wanted an exclusive, Angel, you could have..."

His accusation trailed off. He stopped to look at, really look at, her.

"You're not Angel," he said.

In the excitement of the ring, he had failed to notice the subtle differences. This woman looked like Angel, like a minted duplicate. The hair coloring was the same tawny shade. The facial structure was the same too, the delicate fineness of white porcelain. The eyes that looked back at him were the same, dark, smoky brown. Nevertheless, she was not Angel. Of that, he was certain. This woman was different. There was a certain sweetness about her face, especially in the curve of her jaw and in the upturned corners of her mouth. And where Angel's eyes were bold and brazen, almost greedy, her eyes held intelligence and a tantalizing mystery.

"No, I'm her sister, Anne, Anne Seymour. Sorry about what happened. I... I... I'm ignorant sometimes." She hung her head. "I didn't know that it was all fake."

"What?" Valkon said, frowning.

She rushed on, her words clipped. "I was covering for my sister." She slid towards the open door, wanting to close it in his face before his mind took it all in, before he knew the entire truth and figured it all out: that it was she, not Angel, who had engaged in that sexual exhibition with him. "I had to cover for her. I'd never been to an event like that. You see, I didn't know that it was fake."

She shut the door, or tried to shut it. She glimpsed a bulging forearm, then well-developed biceps reaching around. With a push and a nimble two-step, he was in the apartment. No, he took up the apartment. Anne, who had excavated in the near-airless tombs of the pharaohs, felt smothered by his largeness.

"We have a situation here," he said, "which you created, intentionally or not."

"Situation? Look Mr. Valkon, I said I was sorry. It seems to me that..."

"You really don't know, do you?" He read the puzzlement in her face. "It's all over the Internet. It's the lead item on the TV spots. Even the mags and the cable shows have picked it up. *My God!* Everyone thinks that Valkon of Aesir has turned wuss."

He let out an exasperated moan.

"Woman, you have *emasculated* the IWC champion."

Chapter 5

Anne surveyed her surroundings with interest. The Rittenhouse Square restaurant was cozy, quiet, and exclusive. Weston Myckale-Valkon had told her his real name on the drive over-must come here often. Rather, he was probably recognized as a celebrity. The pretentious maître d' had seated them at once, waving them past a long line of elegantly clad diners. In the twinkle of an eye, they had been escorted to a secluded table in a corner of the restaurant.

She fingered the oversized menu. Weston had mentioned a plan for what he called 'the restoration of Valkon's machismo'. She wanted no part of any more schemes. If Weston's-Valkon's-machismo needed restoring, he would have to do it without her help.

The wine steward, the accouterment of his profession hanging from a wide ribbon around his neck, rushed to their table. With an extravagant flourish, he presented Weston with an engraved wine list. Anne pressed her lips together. She studied Weston while he reviewed the selection.

Poor man, she thought. He probably has difficulty reading English, let alone a wine list.

She was proven wrong when Weston ordered in fluent, faultless French. He passed the list back to the steward with a smile of thanks.

"As always, Monsieur Myckale's choice is *distingué*." The steward beamed his approval, before bowing off.

"Mr. Myckale, about this plan," Anne began, needing to address the subject at hand. She was learning too many intriguing facts about this man. Like he could speak French. Like the melodic inflection of his voice when he spoke in French. Like the way his golden blonde ponytail danced about his sinewy nape. She wanted to learn more. Like whether he spoke French in the heat of passion. Like whether his golden blonde hair would tickle when he...

"Call me Wes."

"Huh?" Anne said, fascinated by his lips. They were just ordinary lips, she scolded herself. But the way

his lips sucked that oyster from its half-shell. His *technique!* The comparison brought warmth to her face. She resisted the urge to fan herself, wishing that she could turn up the air-conditioning or turn down the heat. Strange, she was both hot and cold.

"Call me Wes. There's no need to be formal. We've been pretty intimate."

Her temperature shot up at his pointed reference to their kiss. She hoped that her face did not reveal her turmoil. She gave a silent thanks to the Nile gods, when a waiter appeared with an assortment of breads. To hide her confusion, she dallied over the selection.

*

She really is a flustered little lady and so tiny, Wes thought. He was not usually attracted to petite women. He went for the tall, statuesque type to complement his build. But there was something special about her size. It made him feel protective. He wanted to carry her around in his pocket like his private sex toy.

His prick stirred and rose. He shifted, uncomfortable.

Down, man! Down!

Damn! He had never wanted a woman this badly or this strongly. He had always been able to restrain himself. Now, he was like a randy buck, craving it and out of control for it. He wanted to sweep everything off the table. Scatter dishes, plates, glasses with a stroke of his arm, clearing a place for him to take her. He wanted to pull her out of that overstuffed chair and onto the table. He wanted to flop her onto her belly, his hand planted firmly in the hollow of her back. He wanted to lift up her skirt, peel down her panties. Her sweet, plump ass would be bare, exposed to his desire. She would be at his command. He would raise her high, stretching apart her legs. He would insert his hand, cupping her, bringing forth her juices to run down her legs.

He crushed the nectarine in his hand. The fruit juice ran through his finger, wetting his pants.

He cursed, dabbing with his napkin. The last thing that he wanted to do was scare her with his passion. Seduction had to be done right, with first things first. He had to court her, win her, and then *bed* her.

"Are you in communications, too?" he asked to distract himself.

Anne had been asked that question so many times. For once, she wished that someone would ask her, "Is Angel an archeologist like you?" She reined in her irritation, not wanting to alienate him until she found out about the plan.

"No. I'm an Egyptologist," Anne said with a smile.

"Really," he said, showing interest. A cleverly posed question here and there was all that it took to put her at ease. He sat back in his chair, enjoying her animation, enjoying the way her hand fluttered as she emphasized her point, enjoying just looking at her. Her half-glasses were perched on her pixyish nose. With her short, curly brown hair and her petite daintiness, he felt as if a Lilliputian had pranced into his world.

"...and, of course, the 1995 find is a treasure trove," Anne gushed. "I suspect that it is the burial site for some of Ramesses' children. Probably not all of them. He fathered 162 children, 52 sons. History does not acknowledge him as the greatest of the ancient rulers without cause."

"One hundred and sixty-two children." Wes nodded. "That's a lot of sex."

"Uh-huh. But he had eight wives, not including concubines. If you think about it and do the math..." She

stopped, perplexed. How did they get on the subject of sex? And how had he drawn her out? She was usually reserved. With Wes, her tongue had been running on wheels. She changed the subject.

"That's enough about me. What are your interests?"

"I have a passion." He paused over the last word. "A passion for philately."

"Stamp collecting!" She could not imagine him pouring over albums of stamps, magnifying glass in hand, giddy over a rare specimen.

He read the skepticism on her face. He pushed aside his entrée to spread his hands on the table.

"I am nothing like Valkon of Aesir. He is a persona, part of my job. Valkon is arrogant, egotistical, a cocky S-O-B. I'm nothing like Valkon and he's nothing like me."

She had to ask.

"How does one become a sports entertainer?"

"Lot of ways. For me, weight training, body building, fencing. I met some guys in the biz at Gold's Gym, and it all sort of fell into place."

"Valkon fences? Did you ever live in France?" she asked, still confused by his unusual, dual lifestyle.

"Valkon wouldn't know an *appuntata* from a *passate sotto*. I do. And, yeah, I lived in Caen for two years after I graduated from UCLA."

The waiter returned to place the dessert, a flaming compote, in the center of the table. Looking at it, Anne's heart dropped at the realization that her time with this intriguing man had ended. He seemed to read her thoughts.

"We need to deal with the media fallout," he said.

"Ah. Yes. Valkon's emasculation," Anne said, laughing softly.

"You don't realize it, but you put on quite a show. You're an overnight hit. And no, this isn't going to blow over," he said, anticipating her response. Lucky for you, I have a way out."

"If your way out involves me..."

"Actually, it doesn't. It involves your sister since she got you into this mess."

Of course, it doesn't involve me, Anne thought. When will I learn? If this gorgeous hunk of a man had the opportunity to be with one of the Seymour twins, he wouldn't pick me.

"Tell your sister to show up for *Backfire* this Sunday. I'll have it all arranged. She'll slap Valkon. Valkon will take her down with the Thunderlock. We'll choreograph it, practice a few times before broadcast. That should silence the fans and the critics."

"Take her down with the Thunderlock," Anne said, concern creasing her brow. "Th ... that ... that sounds dangerous."

"Don't worry. I'll stabilize her back through the somersault, all the way down."

Anne was not so sure, but held her tongue. "Angel will love it, but..."

"She'll be fine."

Wes gave her a rakish wink. A little of Valkon peeped out.

"I stabilize my woman when she's on top, especially when she goes down."

Chapter 6

For days thereafter, the feel of Weston's kisses lingered on Anne's lips.

After dinner, he had driven her home. They had accomplished the drive to her rustic farmhouse in Blue Bell in companionable silence. Wes had tooled the car through the winding, twisty roads, and Anne had followed the movement of his hands on the steering wheel with fascinated eyes.

Some men are better at handling the steering wheel than others. Wes had elevated steering to an art-form. His large, beautiful hand spread over the center of the wheel. He had turned it effortlessly, the big black Lexus responding to his every movement as if there was a mating of man and machine.

She had imagined the circular movement on her back-right before he pulled her into the grand finale kiss. They would have just finished making love. The bed-sheets would have fallen in disarray to his waist, concealing his flaccid manhood. His chest would be sweaty; a rivulet would run down to tease his nipple, making it hard and firm. She would climb on him like a seductive snake. Her breasts would jiggle ever so slightly with each movement. He would take one breast in his mouth, sucking, as he pulled her close, with that circular rhythm, his hand sprawled across her back. They would be a tangle of legs and limbs as they fell asleep in each other arms.

Her eyelashes had felt like lead. Somewhere in the distance, an owl had hooted. She had listened to the sound until it had faded. Her eyelids had fluttered, fluttering again, and had then closed.

Anne was jarred from her daydream by Mrs. Z's familiar huff-puffing at the door. Anne smiled when Mrs. Z managed to maneuver her largeness through the narrow space. Mrs. Zsarnovszki, fondly known as Mrs. Z, was a determined woman. Nothing stopped her from reaching the top step of the steep stairs to Anne's attic apartment. Nothing stopped her, *period*. Whether it was turning out the best baked breads and pies on this side of the Susquehanna River or surviving the Nazi death camp at Auschwitz.

"Childie," she said between gasps, "those steps get worse every day. Can't you put some of that book learning to good use? Build me a slide like you showed me in one of those pyramids."

"Mrs. Z, I wish you wouldn't take those stairs."

Anne braced herself when the old lady lumbered into her arms and supported her to the nearest chair. Mrs. Z collapsed into it, adjusting her overhang with a loud whizzing sound.

"Let me catch my breath." She smelled of fresh baked cookies and jelly donuts. There was a smidgen of flour on her ample cheek. "I'd come up those stairs a thousand times to find out what you're going to do." She fanned herself with her copious, white apron. The smell of cookies and donuts grew stronger.

"I know, but I wish you wouldn't," Anne said.

"Imagine you and Valkon going to dinner together."

"So we could make plans."

"And on television too."

"Even my students saw it. Thank God, people thought that it was Angel."

"I take it that she's loving the attention."

"Hmmm. I guess so. I haven't spoken to her."

"You haven't." Mrs. Z watched Anne out of sly, knowing eyes. "I saw it all on a rebroadcast, on that cable show. How many times *did* he kiss you?"

"I don't know. I lost count. Mrs. Z!"

The old lady's mind was like a steel trap, and Anne moaned at how easily she been tricked.

"I never want to see him again." She folded her arms across her chest. "I'm not pretending to be Angel tonight."

After brooding-Mrs. Z had called it sulking-all week long, Anne had finally disclosed Wes' plan to her. Mrs. Z had liked it, with one change. That Anne take her sister's place.

"Oi, childie. Why not?"

"Because it's wrong. It's deceitful. It's ... it's ... it's..." Anne faltered under Mrs. Z's watchful glare.

"Besides, it wouldn't work."

"Then why haven't you told your sister?"

"I honestly don't know. I did try, but... No good can come from tricks," Anne said, as if she were quoting one of the Ten Commandments. "Wes is a nice man. He doesn't deserve to be deceived."

Anne meant that. Wes was a gem. He was so sweet on the drive home, smoothing over her embarrassment about falling asleep, escorting her to her doorstep with old-world courtesy. He had even kissed her, French fashion, on both cheeks.

Mrs. Z said nothing, biding her time. Like a skilled general, she knew when to attack and when to retreat. She watched as Anne paced across the wood floor.

The silence grew until Anne broke it.

"He wants Angel, not me," Anne said.

"He wants somebody, a pretty thing, to play this character. You can do that as well as your sister. Better even. Didn't he say that you did a good job before, that you were an overnight sensation?"

"Oh, Mrs. Z, tell me that I shouldn't do it. Tell me that it's crazy. Tell me to forget the whole idea and to go back to my work."

Mrs. Z smiled and shook her head. "No, I won't, because you've been bitten by the love-bug and about time too. Long past time for you to realize that there's something more in life than your musty Egyptians. Now, you have to trap him. Never met a man who couldn't be caught. By hook or by crook. But you need the right bait."

Mrs. Z eyed Anne's serviceable shoes and long, droopy skirt.

"And that's not it," Mrs. Z said.

"First Angel, now you. What's wrong with..."

"Now, Childie, what you're wearing wouldn't entice a sailor who hadn't had the scent of a woman in his snoot for months-let alone a man like Valkon."

Mrs. Z twisted herself in the chair, part of her stand up ritual. She heaved herself upright, panting from the exertion.

"I've brought my curling iron and some rouge," she said, fishing in the copious pockets of her housedress. "Let's see what we can find in that closet of yours."

Chapter 7

Anne looked in the mirror, to look again. She was neither Anne nor was she Angel. Angel never looked this good, this fabulous, this erotic. Anne peacocked with pride, choosing to ignore the uncharitable thought about her sister.

All her life, she had been second to Angel. For once, she was going to be first, even if she had to be her sister to do it. What could it hurt? She would have some fun, some excitement. It was all a game anyway. And, maybe, just maybe, Wes would kiss her again.

Anne twirled before the mirror, stopping in mid-twirl to study her reflection. She liked what she saw.

Mrs. Z had slicked back her hair from her forehead with a ruthless hand. From a generous application of styling mousse, her riotous curls were now straight with a lone curl at her brow. Mascara made her eyes look more vibrant which, in turn, accented her high cheekbones. Her lips looked fuller too, with the pouting fullness hyped in all the glamour magazines. However, her body had undergone the greatest transformation.

Anne never knew that her torso had the shape of an hourglass. She turned and twisted in the full-length mirror. What difference form-fitting clothing made.

"I'm not sure that I can go through with this," she said, taking a practice walk in the spiked pumps. She turned too fast and stumbled. "Wes is expecting Angel."

Mrs. Z sniffed. She had never liked Angel.

"Men don't know what they want," Mrs. Z said with age-old wisdom. "It's up to us women to tell them. You run along. Keep your head up and your shoulders back."

Through the attic window, the old woman watched Anne navigate the cobbled courtyard. The combination of the tight jeans and the spike heels altered her walk, turning it into a sexy sway as her hips moved from side to side. Mrs. Z was reminded of the bump and grind of that classic Doris Day movie, the one with Clark Gable.

I'm the dame, the dame to blame. I'm the girl who invented rock 'n' roll...

Mrs. Z whistled the refrain. Weston Myckale would never know what hit him.

Chapter 8

In the sports dome arena, Shane turned to Victor Victorious, who was again sharing ringside duties with him. The two men were huddled over their microphones, ready to puff up the event that had sports fans talking all week long.

"Vic," Shane said, "the hot topic on *Backfire* is Valkon and the T&A babe. Can you believe the

controversy that has surrounded this young woman's appearance?"

"Shaney, I've been in this biz for thirty years. Oh! Oh! I have never seen such a firestorm. This chick appears out of nowhere, screws up the Valkon-Flex match, and then leaves, and that's all people can talk about. Frankly, I don't get it."

"You never do," Shane said. "Fans will learn more about what's being called Valkon's neutering before we're through. First, let's take you to the highlights from..."

Backstage, Anne was trembling like a malaria victim. She had already gone to the bathroom five times and needed to go again. The poised professor, who had calmly plotted the military exploits of Ramesses, had disappeared. In her place, was a nervous, queasy, counterfeit who would probably humiliate herself. Or rather, Angel.

The pit manager, a scrawny kid with a headset and a lot of equipment suspended from a thick belt, had spoken with her. Anne could barely hear him over the noise in this area, called the "Gorilla Position" for the well-loved wrestler, Gorilla Monsoon.

The manager had talked fast, so fast that Anne hardly understood his instructions. In addition, everything that he said to her was interrupted by shouted commands, either to him or from him. He had promised to send over a stuntwoman to practice the moves. So far, no one had appeared.

Anne peeped around a partition, trying to catch his attention.

He rolled his eyes as if to say '*prima donnas*'. He clearly thought that she was an unnecessary drain on his time. He walked towards her, his equipment clunking with each step.

"Sorry about leaving you hanging," he said. "Wes has been delayed at a meet-and-greet. Come on out when you hear your cue." He espied several crewmembers carting generators. "Hey, where the heck do you think you're going with that?" He was off at a dog-trot and was immediately engulfed by technicians.

The evening dragged on. Anne paced, made bathroom trips, watched bits and pieces of the show on the TV monitor. She thought that she had been forgotten until someone sent over coffee and donuts.

About 10:45, the pit manager reappeared and escorted her to a set of tiered, black curtains. She could hear the roar of the crowd. This was *it*! She clutched her stomach, doubling over. She was forced upright by unknown hands. The hands touched up her face and misted her hair. Another pair of hands adjusted her clothing, poking here, pulling there. On a bank of overhead monitors, she saw the action in the ring. Valkon was pounding Joey Flex in a repeat performance from last Thursday.

"Cue the T&A babe," someone said, a disembodied voice out of nowhere.

"T&A. T&A. *T&A*." Another voice was heard, insistent, through a radio mike.

"That's you." The pit manager pushed her through the black curtains and into the arena.

Anne froze. The proverbial deer caught in the headlights.

After the darkness of backstage, the arena was unusually bright. She blinked. A deer caught in the bright headlights of an oncoming car.

"Go! Run to the ring!"

She heard the disembodied voice in her ear. At first, she thought that the voice was part of some crazy

dream. It took her a moment to realize that she was wired.

She refitted the earphone, scanning the arena. She focused on the ring. Valkon was there, strutting his stuff.

"Bring it here," he commanded, with the imperialism of The Golden One.

Anne gathered her courage. Taking a deep breath, she sauntered to the ring. Her walk was the classic roll of a seductive siren on the prowl.

"The T&A babe is *back*!" Shane said. "All week long, we've heard stories, commentaries, theories about this lady. We don't know what to expect. What's going on between her, Valkon, and Superfine Joey?"

"They've got some sorta triangle going," Victor said. "I'm not sure that I like it. Oh! Oh! This is sports entertainment, not *Young and the Restless*."

"You can't deny that some people in the IWC are questioning Valkon's machismo. What he does now, right now, will be the test of his phallus-prowess."

Shane continued to puff up the story by way of voice-over. The fans could not hear what was being said in the ring, which added to the suspense. The flamboyant gestures, the overboard posturing, the bad acting had the fans in the arena on their feet in pitched anticipation.

"Okay, Angel," the disembodied voice spoke again in Anne's ear. "We're running long. Let's wrap it up. Slap Wes."

Anne heard the command in that voice. As cued, she stepped forward. She reared back her arm.

"Make it look good," the voice said.

She was postured to strike. She hesitated.

"Go ahead. Slap him. *Slap him!*"

She tried. She tried hard. Her hand would not obey the direction of her brain.

She could not slap the beautiful, handsome face of the man she loved.

Valkon whispered, "Slap me. I'll roll with it."

"Do it!" the voice shouted in her ear.

She tried again. Her hand halted in midair.

"*Do it!*" The disembodied voice screamed in her ear. She saw naked fury in the face of Joey Flex as he circled around her. She noticed Shane Esposito and Victor Victorious at ringside. Shane scowled, soldiering on with his voice-over, flipping the pages of the script. Victor put his hand to his forehead, his face screwed up in question.

Time stood still as everybody waited for her to *do something*. She backed away, fleeing as fast as her spiked heels and tight jeans would permit.

When she reached the ropes, she looked over her shoulder at Wes. This would be the last time that she would see him. Her eyes studied his face, committing each line, each feature to memory. Her gaze lingered on the crescent scar near his mouth and the dimple in his chin. She wanted nothing more than to

wake up every morning to that face. Suddenly, she was in his arms. And kissing his face.

Without counting the consequences, she had bounced off the top rope to leap into his arms. He took her weight as if she weighed no more than a flea. He raised her high. She wrapped her legs around his slim waist. He held her with one arm, bouncing her, tossing her. Their private parts touched. She humped him.

Valkon paraded with her around the arena pit, his clenched fist raised, stiff-armed. He was a warrior, a glorious conqueror, returning triumphant from battle. She was his welcoming maid. He let her slide down his body. When she broke the embrace, he gave her a playful swat on her rear end and pulled her back into his arms.

Valkon commandeered Shane's microphone. Anne felt the rumble in his chest when he spoke. "Valkon rules!" He struck the classic Mr. Universe pose.

The arena turned dark, then bright white. Valkon's theme song came up, loud, blaring. He flexed his pectorals in time to the music, oscillating them like a drumbeat. The fans went wild. Even Shane and Victor were caught up in the moment.

Valkon hoisted Anne over his shoulder, caveman style. For her, the world turned upside down. She blinked when the floor rushed by, her vision blurring. Within seconds, Valkon's powerful legs ate up the distance to the tiered curtains. Surging, he strode from the arena and into the darkness of the August night.

Chapter 9

Wes carried Anne through deserted, cobblestone streets to his home in the Old City sector of Philadelphia. From the lantern light, she got a glimpse of an address and three marble steps. He took the steps with grace, skipping, her added weight a nullity.

As he strode through a large foyer, she glimpsed the masculine elegance. Dark, smoky paneling covered the walls. Thick, brown carpeting was underfoot. A huge fireplace, its appurtenances of gleaming brass, called forth images of cold winter evenings before a roaring fire. There was something appealingly *male* about a fireplace. Perhaps it was the logs, rough and firm, or the heat, fierce and flaming, or the poker, prodding and jabbing, its sole intention to rekindle the fire.

In the bedroom, Wes tossed Anne into the center of a king-size bed. She pushed aside her hair, pillows, bed linen, reaching across mattress and more mattress. Sinking deep into the cushiony softness, she struggled to sit up.

Wes was standing by the bed, his eyes boring into hers. He pulled the string tie from his hair. With a toss of his strong neck, his blonde locks fell to his shoulders. He assumed *The Proud*-the haughty, arrogant carriage of pure Valkon of Aesir.

He unsnapped his denim shirt.

One...

Two...

Three...

Ripping it open, he trod towards her.

Anne panted with each step that he took. She closed her eyes. She heard the bed sag under this weight.

She waited for what was coming next. She did not have to wait long. He swooped down and took her lips.

He plundered her mouth, his tongue firm and agile. She threw her leg around his hip, and with womanly strength, pulled him close.

"Whoa, woman," he said. "Slow down."

He stood up and kicked off his loafers. Unbuckling his belt, he slipped out of his pants. He was naked except for the briefest of briefs. Anne wondered how so little material could cover so much. That thought-indeed, all thoughts-left her, when he slid into bed.

He kissed her tenderly, only to grow greedy. He cupped her head, deepening the kiss. His hands went to her shirt, and he fumbled with the silver buttons there. He removed her spiked pumps to wiggle her out of her skin-tight jeans. With fingers caressing the soles of her feet, he slipped her pumps back on. She was a strange, desirous sight. The quintessential Victoria's Secret in lingerie and high heels.

His hands roamed over her body. He enjoyed the feel of the silk bustier against her skin and against his skin too. He used the tassels like a feather, stroking her with them. He stretched her legs apart, caressing her inner thigh. She waited, anticipated, as his hand approached the core of her passion. His progress was unhurried, deliberate.

He would soon reach it. He did. Through the slit of the bustier, his long, large, middle digit fingered her. She shot up, her hips arching. She rubbed herself against it, increasing the friction. She grabbed his hand, jerking hard. Release was close.

"Oh no. No yet," he said, huskily. "I'm going to draw this out until you're begging me for it."

He flipped her over, onto her belly. Slowly, ever so slowly, he unzipped her, punctuating the strip-tease with light kisses. She tried to turn over. He held her in place, his hand at the pit of her back. As if he were unwrapping a gift, he pulled the bustier down. The silk clung to her curves, but he tugged and then lifted her derriere high.

Her sweet ass was exposed to his view. He kissed her plump buttocks, taking his time, enjoying the feel. He fingered her again, this time with intensity. Her juices ran down from within her. He licked her dry.

She was ready. She tried to slip out of her heels. He restrained her.

"I always wanted to make love to a woman in high heels."

He rose to his knees, pulling her ass up. She was face down, helpless, her breast sinking into the softness of the bed.

"Experience," he said, rubbing her, cupping her.

He brought his hips up against her, close. She felt him there. His hairs, short and frisky, teased her. He swayed back and forth, pumping rapidly. She turned her head. She wanted to see him put it in. She wanted to see each splendid inch of him when he rammed her. He pulled back, gave a few jerks on his cock, and sprayed all over her ass. The bed linens were soaked. She slumped on the bed, feeling cheated, so cheated.

"Foreplay," he said. "The prelude. I'll give you everything you want."

He tossed her onto her back. He climbed her, jutting. He was *still hard*.

He kissed her. She savored all the facets of his kiss. Tender and hot. Sensual and sexy. Sweet and demanding. As much as she wanted his kisses, she wanted more. She wanted fulfillment. She reached down. She seized him.

"Determined little thing, aren't you," he said.

With one sure, certain thrust, he filled her.

The tightness was unbearable. He was so big. She was so small. She wiggled, trying for a comfortable position. She felt as if he were ripping her apart.

"I guess I should have warned you. There is a lot of me down there."

"It's not going to work." Fear and frustration pitched her voice high.

"Yes, it will. We've got to work at it, that's all."

Gradually, not wanting to hurt her, he withdrew, then rocked. With each rock, she took a little more of him. She swelled, stretched, and accepted. He was a magnificent, marvelous stud. Yet, he was patient and gentle, encouraging her with love words, with kisses of assurance.

"That's right. Take me," he whispered. His voice was like soft velvet. "Take all of me. Don't be afraid. Want me to stop? No? Then take me. I'm yours. I'm always yours."

With one final rock, he was in. Completely. They were mated. He was so high and so deep, she felt as if he were tickling her back. There was no pain but the painful anguish of completion denied.

He set the rhythm. She followed. She knew nothing, wanted nothing, except to climb the staircase of passion. It began. The push. The pull. The thrust. The grunt. The grind. This was *mating!* This was what it was like. This was what she had been missing. And craving. And repressing. She could never go back to her half-life now. Not after knowing the white light of release, the strong, sweaty smell of sex.

The age-old desire was upon her. It took her like a whirlwind, possessing her, flinging her here and there. Wind tossed. Wind beaten. She was serrated, broken pieces, flying apart as if ripped by a storm, for there was a storm. Her mind let go. Her body followed. Then the abyss of sated satisfaction.

Wes felt her fulfillment. He knew that he had taken her to the pinnacle and beyond. That knowledge sapped his willpower and pushed him over the edge. He reared his head back, baring his teeth. He pistoned her with all of his might. His body was straight like an arrow just released from its bow. In the throes of his own passion, his balls rose, flattened against him. He felt the rush of his sperm. He filled her, filled her, until he could no more. He was drained. Wet. Drained. He howled out his release until he collapsed on her, letting her take all of his weight as well as his heart.

Chapter 10

Anne woke up hot and sticky. Sometime during the night, Wes had pulled her into his arms and tucked the sheet around them. She pushed the sheet away and off them, exposing his body to her view. In the dim light through the slanted blinds, she studied the contours of his chest, the strong column of his neck. Odd how, to her, that something as mundane as finely detailed muscles could make her realize how deeply she had fallen in love.

She slipped from his heavy, sleep-laden arms, tiptoeing to the bathroom. The dawn of a new day would arrive soon-too soon-and her masquerade would end. She would return to her world, he to his. She could see the old loneliness stretching in front of her, before unknown, now unwanted. She gulped hard. Before she returned to her world forever, she would experience all of his.

In the bathroom, she showered quickly. The water washed away the vestige of make-up, and the steam returned her hair to riotous curls. The end had begun.

She slipped into the bedroom. Wes had stirred, but had not awakened. His large body was still sprawled across the bed, the sheet barely covering his nakedness.

She wandered through the darkened rooms of his home, pausing often to inhale the masculine scent of wood and smoke. She lingered in one room, the room that blended Wes and Valkon into one man.

His gym had every up-to-date piece of equipment that she could imagine. A well-used, well-oiled Bowflex took up one corner and exercise mats were neatly rolled in another. She ran a hand over a leather bench and played with the free-weights until she saw the fencing swords in a glass display case. She was studying the differences between the foil, the épée, and the sabre when Wes entered.

He had not bothered to put on a robe. Nor should he have. A body like his should never be hidden from his lover's eyes. He strolled towards her in unabashed, unashamed glory. He was such a large man that the old colonial should have shook with each step, but he was remarkably light-except in the aftermath of making love.

She resisted the urge to look at him, studying the swords instead. She found it difficult not to look, for one thought demanded an answer. *Just how big was he? Large? Extra-large? So large that he could...*

"I used this foil when I took the bronze in the '92 Olympics," he said, pointing to a sword decorated with a red, white, and blue ribbon. He pulled her into his arms. "And this one, the sabre, is a keepsake. I used it in my first competition." With one hand, he pointed to a heavier sword, fragile with age. With the other, he swept aside her shirt to cup her breasts. "The dagger-it's not used in fencing-is a gift from an old instructor." He continued to fondle her breasts, preoccupied with his discourse. Yet, he brought her nipples to hardness, to tight little berries for picking. Or sucking.

He was close. No. *It* was close. All she had to do was to reach around. She wanted to, needed to, find out. Curiosity had killed the cat, but Isis would certainly smile upon one of her kind-she who had lovingly restored the treasures of Egypt.

She could not resist any longer. Nor did she want to. She groped. She found it. It was massive. Long and thick. She could barely wrap her hand around it. And warm. Pulsing. She stoked the distended veins with her thumb. She had to see it. She turned in his arms and stared with audacity.

"Woman," he chuckled. "You are a handful."

He was iron hard and erect, his prick like an extension of the fencing weapons that he loved. He eased her to her knees before him. He raised his eyebrow.

Anne knew what he wanted. Egyptian hieroglyphs recorded the sexual exploits of its rulers. Cleopatra had once lowered herself on 106 Roman legionnaires in one night. Unlike Cleopatra, she was untutored, unskilled. She let nature take charge, following her instincts. Her technique, such as it was, combined artless and earthy with success. Success measured by his low groans of pleasure.

She caught sight of herself in the mirror. She was resting on her knees, piled high on mats so that she could reach him, willingly subservient. Her hair, falling forward, added a mysterious allure. He was towering over her, his eyes closed, his head thrown back, his legs spread.

"That feels good," he grunted. "That's right. Take all of me, all of me."

His climax approached. He shouldered her onto her back and entered her in one fluid motion. Three quick pumps in fast succession and he was done.

She was stunned by the raw intensity of his lovemaking. Before she could recover, he carried her to the pommel horse. He bent her over the soft leather of the horse, so far over that her ass was high and her back was tilted like a steep hill. He fondled her, making sure that she could take him again. Her wetness soaked his hand. He knew that she was ready. He entered her from behind. She drove back. Both actions happened at the same time. Ecstasy. She wanted to scream from it. Prolong it. Never let it end. She reached around and grabbed his legs. She propelled him closer, faster, setting a brisk pace. She was she-wolf, no longer staid professor. All the education, the degrees, the intellect faded into insignificance as her thoughts cascaded into one aim.

She was almost there, so close. Wes reached down and gave her ass a sudden, playful slap. Shocking her, it was like a stab to the heart of her femininity. He did it again, flicking, not too hard, just hard enough to make her hips thrush forward against the soft, yielding leather of the horse. The contact made her want more. She humped it, pumped it, shamelessly bringing herself to climax. She heard him chuckle, lowly, at her gyrations, before she shuddered to dissolve into a thousand pieces.

"Woman, I'm not finished with you," he vowed. "I promised you everything."

He kneeled down. She whimpered, her cycle of passion renewed.

"Please, Wes," she said, her speech ragged.

"Are you begging for it?"

"Yes!"

"Let's finish in bed."

The quintessential Alpha male, he swung her off her feet and into his arms, carrying her to his bedroom.

While she was gone, he had lit scented candles and had repaired the bed. The silk sheets were turned down and strewn with rose petals. Strains of low, melodic music wafted the air, mingling with rose-hued incense.

"I'm a romantic at heart," he said, low and sexy.

Throwing back the sheet, he helped her onto the high bed. She was lost in its vastness until he joined there, until he pulled her to him, his hand sweeping low, exploring the lines of her shoulders, to sweep even lower to her soft, smooth belly. He snuggled her close, intertwining their legs, sinking into her. She welcomed him and held on tight as the mating measure marked by ageless time begun. He was flame. She was ice. Although nature had designed them complete, nevertheless they merged into one, the whole oddly sweeter than the sum. And, at the final moment, when his climax was upon him, he gave her one final stroke as a testament of his resolve to love her forever. He could do no more for the rein on his passion was sliced by an invisible sword. He crushed her beneath him, lying on her, his body moist and flexing and heavy in repose.

They made love again, the edge to their lust dulled. There were many kisses and the lightest of touches this time as they worshipped each other with their mouths, with their hands, and with their hearts.

It was much later, after the fires had finally died, that Wes stirred. He sat up, bunching the pillow behind his head. Through half-closed eyes, he studied his woman, curled up at his side. He swept back her damp hair. She opened her eyes.

"Hmmm, Anne," he said lazily. "Why're you pretending to be Angel?"

Chapter 11

Her eyes flew open. She was suddenly wide awake.

"What?" she faltered, refusing to trust her hearing.

"You heard me. What are you up to?"

"How long have you known?"

"From the moment that you walked through the curtains."

"From the..." Anne shot up in the bed. "Why didn't you say something?"

"Because I wanted to give you a taste of your own medicine."

"You knew ... you knew. You made love to me and you knew!"

"You can't fool me," Wes said. "You're nothing like your sister."

"Nothing like... How could you?" she said, wrath darkening her brown eyes to black. "Make love to me ... ohhhh!"

Whack!

Her hand flew to her mouth, stifling her *O* of shock. In the past, she had never lost control; she had never struck anyone, hurt anything, before.

Wes' head pivoted from the stinging blow. He fingered his face where her hand had left a bright red fingerprint. He watched as she leaped from the bed.

"Woman, you wanted a fantasy with Valkon. I gave you one."

Hunting for her clothes, she overturned sheets and pillows and a jumble of clothing. Spotting the blue of denim jeans, she picked them up only to discover that they were far too large.

"Yours," she hissed, throwing them in his direction. The jeans hit him squarely in the chest. He flinched and then tossed them aside.

She continued the search, throwing things everywhere. She finally found her jeans and top. They were wrinkled and she turned up her nose in distaste, but put them on anyway. She would have to go bra-less and panty-less.

"Anne, let's bring the volume down, okay." How could such a little lady get so angry, so fast? he thought.

Anne's eyes turned on him, blazing.

"How dare you make love to me, knowing that I wasn't Angel, that I was Anne, I mean, that I was me!"

"How dare you make love to me thinking that I thought you were Angel!" he shot back.

She blinked. She was getting side-tracked. She focused on the only indisputable fact. He had tricked her in the worst possible way. He had proven that even when she tried to be like Angel, she could not measure up, that she would never equal Angel in looks, in love, in how to please a man.

Why can't a man like Wes love me? Am I so undesirable, so repulsive?

For Anne, the inescapable conclusion smacked her in the face. She pulled together the shreds of her dignity. At the least, she would leave with her pride intact.

"Mr. Myckale," she began formally, "I was happy to be the *sports entertainment* last night. I bet my antics-in bed and otherwise-were the height of amusement. However, the show is over. You'll have to find another way to get your laughs. Maybe with Angel or one of your groupies." She walked over and ran her fingers across the bedpost. "No notches. It must be new."

She turned on her heel to leave.

"Wait, Anne."

Wes bounded from the bed. What had happened? Events were veering swiftly off-course. Instead of this bitter fight, they should be enjoying breakfast in bed.

He caught her at the door. She stared straight ahead, her eyes focused on some distance spot.

"Anne... Annie." He took her hand in his. "I didn't mean to hurt you. What's this about? Talk to me. You pretended to be your sister. I pretended that I didn't know."

Anne said nothing for she was not listening. She had closed her mind. He could see it in the stubborn line of her body, in the disdainful tilt of her head.

Her hand grasped the doorknob, viciously turning it. Before the door was open an inch, he reached over and shut it. He slid his big body in the cramped space between the wall and the door.

"Mr. Myckale, the fun is over."

She turned to face him, her cold rage fleeing. She dashed a hand across her face.

"Please, let me go. Haven't you hurt me enough?"

"You can walk out that door, Anne, or we can talk. Regardless, it isn't over between us. Last night, you gave yourself to me. You're my woman. Whatever else happened, you're my woman."

Wes wanted to push harder, make her acknowledge his ownership. But she was too brittle, blown too thin, like fragile glass. He bunched his hands into fists, coiled from the effort that it took to let her go. He stepped aside. Within moments, she was down the steps to disappear in the mesh of morning commuters.

Wes returned to the bedroom. He stood in the middle of the room for a long time, taking in the emptiness. He noticed her bustier, balled and crumbled, in the corner. He picked it up, rubbing the silky fabric between his fingers. A candle burned low. He blew it out.

He wanted to kick himself at how he had mistreated her. He would not intentionally hurt a hair on her elfish head, but his actions must have seemed the height of insensitivity to her. She had overreacted, though. She *had* tricked him as well.

He had been with other women. His celebrity status attracted them like a magnet and they fell easily into his bed. For those who were cool to him, he turned on the Valkon charm. None of them had mattered to him, but he had still managed to sweet-talk them into sex. But, with Anne, he had screwed up. Royally.

He rubbed his neck. It had been a wicked week. First, Anne's interference with the Joey Flex title match,

next dealing with the resulting fan and press fallout, followed by a grueling east coast tour. He jerked a kink out of his shoulder. Then, he fell head over heels in love, capped by a marathon round of robust sex. The thought of the latter brought a brief grin to his face. She was one hot lady. They went together, fit together, like sword and sheath, like tempered steel in lush velvet.

After the Joey Flex rematch, he had planned to clear his schedule. He had been going nonstop for two years straight as the premiere draw for the IWC. He needed a break from the noise, the round-the-clock touring, the chaotic speed. He knew it before he had met Anne. Meeting her had merely cemented his resolve to take a long vacation, his only work to woo her into his bed.

What was she doing at the match anyway? Angel was supposed to play the T&A babe. This was the second time that Anne had taken her place. His eyes narrowed with anger. He did not like the idea of exposing his woman to the coarseness of sports entertainment. He loved his running buddies in the biz, but some of them were crude and many of them were weird. She was such a sheltered, little thing. She would not know how to handle the seamier side of his profession.

You could have knocked him over with a feather when she had entered the ring, all dolled up in that revealing top and those ass-gripping jeans. Like the other males in the arena, his blood pressure had shot up as well as other parts of his anatomy. He had wanted to hide her away from the leers, to lock her up from other eyes. He had known what every man wanted from the T&A babe, and the primitive urge had risen in him to kill every man because of it. Somehow, he had managed to hold on to his temper and to proceed with the script. For he had wanted to proclaim to the entire arena that she was his and his alone, to publicly stamp his dominance upon her as his woman. He had also wanted to punish her, a little, for showing other men that side of her which was his hidden treasure.

He reviewed his schedule. He had the mid-west tour and a couple of promos to do, too. Damn! He had forgotten. He had agreed to a charity event on Friday. It would be Saturday, at the earliest, before he could begin the serious campaign of courting her.

Soon, but not soon enough, she would be squirming beneath him. She may have pulled away, but her withdrawal was only temporary. No way in hell would he let Anne Seymour, the sexy professor of Egyptology, slip from his life.

Chapter 12

The delivery girl's chiming of the ancient bell to Anne's attic retreat and the rectangle-shaped box tucked under the girl's arm had sent Mrs. Z stomping up the stairs. The combination of the girl's persistent ringing and Mrs. Z's puff-huffing had awakened Anne from a restless sleep, a sleep that she had achieved only after a long crying jag. Bone-tired and miserable, she had finally closed her eyes and nodded off.

Peaceful sleep had been denied her. Tears slipped from her eyes at flashing, disturbing dreams. Even though she could not hide her puffy face from Mrs. Z's inspection, she still forced a smile and mumbled about having work to do.

She did try to work, going through the unnecessary formalities of sharpening pencils, stacking books, straightening photos. Her eyes kept straying, though, to the white carnations. Their pleasant scent teased her, destroying her concentration. Maybe if she moved them away from her desk. Maybe she could then forget that Wes had been the first man, the only man, to send her flowers.

For the next twenty minutes, she was absorbed in the task of moving them from one location to another. She placed them finally on her favorite cedar chest. The sunlight from the large window caught the crystal of the vase, making it sparkle. She stroked the creamy-white petals and then plucked the card from their fragrant midst. Her pulse quickened when she read the handwritten message.

Anne, receive these flowers as pure and ardent symbols of my love, of my heart, of my intentions. Forget me not. Forgive me always.-Weston

Gosh-darn-it! The man really was a romantic!

In the quiet of the room, the click of the answering machine made her jump. She turned to glower at the machine. She knew it was him.

Since she had walked out of his home and into the brightness of the morning light, her phones had rung off the hook. He stated that it was not over between them, and he meant it. He telephoned her at the university and left messages at her lab. He bombarded her with calls at her home until she firmly shut off the phone. Just as firmly, Mrs. Z punched the button to the answering machine, saying that there was no reason why she could not at least listen to his explanation.

"Anne, are you there?" The dark timbre of his voice floated through the speaker. "I want to see you again. No, I need to see you again. I can't tell you how sorry I am. Did you get the flowers? I hope you like carnations. Damn! I wish that I could see you. I need to be with you, to hear your voice. Pick up and talk to me."

"If it weren't for my contract commitments, I'd be there with you, and we'd be in bed making love. Trust me, baby, I'd make all your hurts go away."

The line went quiet. She thought that he had hung up until his voice-silky, sensual, and persuasive-came through the speaker anew.

"I shouldn't have tricked you. I was an insensitive jerk. I'm sorry. You can slap my face again, if that will make you feel any better... You should see the mark you left on my jaw. I wouldn't let the make-up people cover it. It reminds me of your passion."

She wanted to stick her fingers in her ears like a bratty five-year-old. Her walls, so carefully constructed around her, began to crumble. She tried to whip up the hurt, but he was speaking. Against her will, she listened.

"They're signaling for me. I have to go. I'll get to Blue Bell as soon as I can. We'll get this all sorted out. Don't hide from me. If you put me to the trouble of tracking you down, you'll be sorry."

The answering machine beeped, then blinked. She did not move, paralyzed by that blinking light and by what he had said-like a veiled threat.

In spite of how Wes had deceived her, Anne knew that he was a gentleman. He had been patient with her, persistent enough to show that he was sorry, but not so persistent that she felt hounded. Now, it seemed that his patience was wearing thin. She did not relish an irritated Weston Myckale, all 275 pounds of him, on her doorstep.

The quick knock at her door interrupted her thoughts. Mrs. Z had returned, treading in with the peculiar gait of the weight-challenged.

"If only he had not tricked me," Anne said. There was no reason to explain who "he" was. Mrs. Z had picked and probed until Anne had told her the whole story.

"Oi! You tricked him, too. All's fair in love and war."

"I had a good reason. I was trying to help him."

At Mrs. Z's eye rolling, Anne's voice faltered. "My ... my ... my trick didn't hurt him."

"You don't know that. You won't know until you talk to him."

Mrs. Z spied Anne's work laid out in neat stacks on the desk. Her pug nose twitched in disapproval.

"Work!" the old woman exclaimed.

"I need to get this translation done," Anne said, opening a book at random.

"Childie, are you crazy? You have a red-blooded American man chasing after you and you're worried about some dead Egyptians."

A silence between them grew until Mrs. Z broke it.

"Do you know why I call you childie?" she asked.

Anne buried her nose in a book, but her bluff was futile. Mrs. Z was like the charge of a rhino-a rhino that couldn't be turned, not even with both barrels from a rhino gun.

"I call you childie because I've wanted to chide you."

Knowing that Anne was listening-she had yet to turn a page-Mrs. Z continued. Her heavy accent grew thick with remembering.

"When I was a young girl, I promised myself that if I survived Auschwitz, I would live every day, *every day*, to the fullest. I did just that, came to this fine country, made a life for myself. I married three times, to three good men. May they rest in peace. I founded Zsarnovszky bakeries and my cakes are eaten in homes throughout the state. Enough of that," she said, realizing that she had digressed.

"My point is, Anne, that you can't live in the past. There's more to life than work. The chance for happiness doesn't often come around. Grab the brass ring, childie. Grab the brass ring."

Mrs. Z paused, hoping that her message would sink in. She heard the wheels of a car spin on the gravel of the courtyard. Peering down, through the curtains of the window, she saw a convertible zip into a parking slot. She sniffed.

"Seems like we're gonna be treated to a visit from your sister."

Angel took the stairs at a dead run, entering the attic in a cyclone of perfume and flesh. At her sister's entrance, Anne felt the usual sadness as if her twin had once again sucked up all the brightness in her life. Yet, she managed to paste a smile on her face when Angel rushed towards her.

"Annie! Annie, I had to stop by..."

"Oh ... hello," Angel said, spotting Mrs. Z standing next to the window. She smirked at Mrs. Z and then promptly ignored her to gush, "I'm so excited I can't thank you enough, Annie. This is so big!"

Anne did not respond. There was no need. From experience, she knew that Angel never wanted or needed a response from her.

"So big!" Angel continued, waving her hand. "I'm going to be the T&A babe, I could have died when I found out, I've been signed for several guest appearances, starting next week on *Backfire*, now I can quit my job and go to Hollywood."

At that, Anne's usual reserve wavered.

"W-w-what?" Anne sputtered.

But Angel wasn't listening.

Mrs. Z moved closer to the carnations.

"Of course, I'll stay on at the *Intruder* for a few weeks, just to show them what they'll be missing. Umm. You'll have to fill in for me. I'll be way too busy, that's no problemo. I'll email you my schedule. I'm supposed to cover a golf tournament for a bunch of dreary senior citizens next week. Yuck."

Mrs. Z snorted and fingered the carnations.

"The best part of being the T&A babe is that I get to work with that hot hunk, Weston Myckale. That hair, those eyes, that bodddd! Divinely delicious." Angel giggled then jiggled her man-made breasts.

"What!" Anne said.

This time, Anne did not stutter, the fangs of green-eyed jealousy biting deep. Nevertheless, Anne's exclamation barely pierced Angel's self-absorbance.

Mrs. Z sniffed the flowers, loudly, with mocking exaggeration. Two pairs of brown eyes-the same, but so different-turned in her direction. Anne's eyes were thoughtful, understanding; Angel's eyes were selfish, greedy, never understanding anything except her own need to be indulged.

"Flowers," Angel said, pouncing on the vase. She snatched the flowers from Mrs. Z's hands and headed for the attic door. Anne met her there.

"Put those *down*," Anne said. She circled her sister like a gunfighter preparing for a showdown and blocking the only road out of town. Wes was *hers*, and the flames of damnation would go cold before she surrendered him or any part of him to her sister.

Angel was not the sharpest knife in the drawer, but even she realized that she had gone too far. She stepped back from the blaze in her sister's eyes, her mouth forming a silent *O*. Carefully, she placed the carnations in Anne's outstretched hands.

"Wes gave these flowers to me," Anne said, choking back her anger. "They are mine. *He* is mine. I made him mine each time that I made love to him."

Angel's eyes widened in disbelief.

"You heard right. We made love in his home, in his bedroom, in his bed."

Anne let go of her anger, as she let go of the yesteryears of insecurities.

"Angel-Angelique," Anne said, reverting to her sister's true name. "You're my sister. I'll always love you, but I'll no longer be your dogsbody. I'm stepping out of the shadows of the past and into the light of the future." Anne gained courage with every word and rallied on. "I'm twice the person, the woman, that you are and that you'll ever be, and don't you ever forget it, *because I never will*."

From the corner of the room, as a new morning light streaked through the window, Mrs. Z's old eyes misted and her applause shook the rafters.

Chapter 13

At the door to her attic apartment, Anne fumbled with the lock, shifting the bulging shopping bags from one hand to the other. She shoved the door open with her hip and tripped into the room. She wanted to swear at her new shoes, but she felt so good in them and looked so good in them that she refrained. She now understood that the age-old adage about women sacrificing anything for fashion.

She dumped the bags on her bed. Her shopping spree with Mrs. Z had been quite an adventure. The old woman had excellent taste and a sharp eye for bargains. Anne was now the proud owner of more clothing, *trendier* clothing, that she had ever owned in her life. She had purchased a completely new wardrobe, from skin out.

Rummaging through the smaller bags, she pulled out lacy panties and bras and a plastic-and-metal contraption that promised "to lift, separate, and conquer". From another bag, she pulled out jeans and skirts with matching tops-tops that were sort of tops since they were so flimsy that she wondered how so much money could be charged for so little. She pushed them aside, looking for the Victoria's Secrets bag. She upended it and silken lingerie spilled across her bed. She tingled all over. Never before had she shopped with a man's wants in mind. Like her new shoes, that was another first for her ... selecting clothes wondering whether Wes would like to see her in it, or run his fingers over it, or take her out of it.

She sorted through the mountain of clothing, trying to decide what to wear. She chose a slinky hip-hugging skirt and teddy top with spaghetti straps and matching pumps-classy and elegant-so unlike the chunky boots worn by her students.

She had found the shoes after an exhaustive search. Mrs. Z had remembered a discount store in a cul-de-sac of the mall. The tiny boutique carried re-sales and store overruns and had a large selection in size 5. Anne had purchased several pairs, each time thinking of Wes' desire to make love to a woman in high heels.

She stripped down and ran her bath. As she threw handfuls of strawberry salts into the water, she realized that she had never been this happy. She tested the water, anticipating a long soak, even a nap. The idea of a peaceful sleep, after so many nights of disturbing images, made her smile. Perhaps she would have an erotic dream or two. She gave a low chuckle, feeling downright naughty.

She reached for the alarm clock, setting the snooze. The clock was set to Cairo time. She turned the hands back. From now on, she lived with her man in *this* time.

She let the frothy water work its magic. Closing her eyes, she made a wish. Often wishes come true, even if only in fantasy. It was so for her.

She was a slumbering beauty in the land of disenchantment. She had been asleep for ages when her prince charming arrived on a magnificent white steed and wearing wrestling boots. Shocked to find her in the snowy recess of the forest, he trod up the icy steps to her rose-laden altar. She was the most beautiful maiden that he had ever seen, her ruby red lips-like her dawn-blushed cheeks-fashioned for kissing.

He kissed her.

She awakened and reached for him. She had anticipated his kiss during her long, lonely sleep. He was her destiny, for he was destined to open her eyes to the exciting world beyond. She flung her arms around his strong neck. He carried her to the pine-sown carpet below. Behind them, far away in a distant glade, she saw his castle shimmering in the warm, summer sun...

Anne awakened from her dream refreshed and renewed. She dressed carefully, applying the cosmetics with an understated hand. She stood back from the mirror to survey the results. She was no longer

pretending to be the T&A babe. *She was the babe!*

The slinky skirt made her appear to be taller, sleek, and sexy. Her chiseled body, firm and lean from years of archaeological digs, molded the flamboyant top like a second skin. She recalled a snippet from an old classic: "If you like what you see, tell me." She hoped-no, she knew-that Wes would like what he saw.

She stuffed lingerie into a tote, tossing in a toothbrush and toiletries. Out of habit, she picked up a volume on the recent excavations at El Giza, only to throw it aside. Her plans did not include studying tonight or, at least, not that type of studying. She did plan to study Wes' face when she brought him to climax after climax.

She finished packing, then glanced around. This was her life. This would still be her life. Her life and so much more. She left her home, not looking back. She thought only of the future and how she would captivate the man of her dreams.

Chapter 14

In the bowels of the Philadelphia sports dome, Weston stared at the AT&T logo. His face turned to chiseled stone as his temper mounted. He let the phone ring, cursing when he got no answer. He slammed down the receiver, then punched in Anne's number again. During the wait to be connected, he debated whether he should call the phone company. But he knew that her service had not been interrupted. In spite of his warning, his little Lilliputian was hiding from him.

He continued to listen to the rings, silently counting along. At the tenth ring, his eyes could have scorched anything in their sight. At the twentieth, his teeth could have chewed nails. He wanted to rip out the receiver and wallop the console with it. He counted to ten to immediately count again.

She was treating him like a nothing, like a ninny. He would show her that she could not toy with him, ignore him as a man, disregard the ancient compact that forged Man to Woman.

As a man, he expected his woman to show a little respect for his wishes.

As a man, he counted on some forgiveness from his woman.

As a man, he liked to know that his woman trusted him enough to make everything right.

He was not a chauvinist. He placed the highest regard on women's rights. But, *damn it*, when a man tells his woman, in no uncertain terms, that she is to stay put, she is to stay *put*.

On his way back to his dressing room, he nodded curtly to Shane Esposito and Victor Victorious, who were huddled in a corner and going over tonight's script. If he were not obligated to do a "run-in," he would be on the road to Blue Bell and standing on Anne's doorstep. There, he would shake her senseless, then kiss her senseless, not stopping until she knew that she belonged to him. He cursed again. His lovely lady would learn what it cost to make him run her to earth.

He undressed, pulling the sleeveless sweatshirt over his head. He stopped, standing straight and still in the center of the room.

She would not do anything foolish, would she? Their relationship was so rushed. He had planned a nice, long courtship before he got down on one knee and asked the most important question of his life. But his well-laid plans had gone ominously awry.

She had been very angry that morning. She was still angry. He had lost count of the telephone calls that she had not returned.

He had not used a condom! How many life-altering mistakes could one man make in the space of a few weeks. He was always careful to protect any woman who slept with him. But with Anne, protection had not entered his mind. He had been too caught up in the fantasy to think about the consequences of their lovemaking.

He was positive that she was not using any form of contraceptive. She wasn't a virgin, just not a lot of men. There was no man now. There better not be, not after she gave herself to him with such sweet commitment.

Maybe she was no longer angry with him. Maybe there was a different reason for her silence, a more serious reason. Maybe she had disquieting news. Was she pregnant? Had she taken one of those quickie, home pregnancy tests and found out that she was with child? The idea of his lovely, little Lilliputian, all firm and plump with his son or daughter, made him testy with agitation.

Damn it! He needed to talk to her.

He was thinking about phoning again when Joey Flex walked in.

Wes hid his irritation at Joey's entrance. Flex was not one of his favorite people. Flex lacked professionalism, often balking at a story line or refusing to push another entertainer to the next level. Moreover, he took his superfine persona too seriously, causing Wes to wonder if Flex realized that sports entertainment was an illusion.

Joey had once tried to potato him by throwing real punches. Wes had fought back and things had turned nasty-real fast. Later, Joey had apologized in a rambling speech about intensity and integrity. The whole incident had blown over, but there were still those ugly rumors that he had assaulted Mink in the women's dressing room.

"Valkon of Aesir," Flex intoned now. "I would speak with you about *Backfire*."

That was part of Flex's peculiarity. Unless it was a promo or a match or an interview, sports entertainers dropped their professional personas, used real names, and talked like real people.

"What about it?" Wes asked.

"Valkon, I have a problem with the T&A babe. It must be addressed. This woman does not follow the rules for match resolution."

"Huh?" Wes rubbed his neck and looked over at Flex.

"She is not main event material," Flex pronounced as if issuing a royal decree. "She lacks the gladiator integrity to bring Superfine Joey to his full potential."

Wes shook his head. "Joey, you're losing me here."

"I do not think that this should continue," Flex concluded, his voice solemn, his eyes clouding over. Wes wondered if he was on drugs.

"Look, Joey, if you are unhappy about the SL, speak to the front office."

"Hell no! I'm happy. If that dumb-ass broad doesn't screw up, I'm good."

Wes fought down his annoyance when Flex winked at him and then walked out.

Wes shook his head. Creeps like Joey Flex gave sports entertainment a bad rep.

Chapter 15

Anne eased her spanking new Beetle into a parking space at the sports dome with an exhilarating feeling of rebirth. She grabbed her purse and locked the door, all the while humming Mrs. Z's tune about the girl who invented rock 'n' roll. She was sauntering through the parking lot, her hips swaying in time to the tune in her head, when a swarm of excited fans surrounded her.

"Yes, it is. It is *her*. It's the T&A babe," a teenager shouted, shoving a glossy photograph in Anne's face to beg for an autograph.

Anne took the pen, enjoying her newfound celebrity status. Before she could scribble her name, another fan grabbed her arm.

"Hey!" the girl said. "What happens tonight? Does Valkon get his ass kicked?"

"Duh! He ain't even wrestling tonight," the girl's friend replied. His hand strayed to Anne's backside. She jumped to stare in open-mouthed astonishment at the youth. She had just enough time to take in his purple-streaked hair and pierced nose before someone grabbed her around her waist.

"Take my picture. Take my picture." Another fan pulled Anne close, and she was swallowed by the jostling bodies, all squeezing to get into the shot. Caught in the middle of a mini-riot, she gave a silent thanks to the Nile gods when security appeared with a couple of police officers.

"I hope tonight's good," one of the officers said, taking off her hat to wipe her forehead. Her brown hair was lank from sweat. "I'm taping it." She escorted Anne to a private, hidden door and, with a nod of farewell, returned to work crowd control.

The door closed behind Anne with such an ominous clang that she jumped in her skin. She quickly turned to open it, but the door was rigged for security without knobs or panic bars on the inside. Faced with no place to go but the long tunnel in front of her, she wished that she had called ahead for directions to the IWC staging area.

She sighed at the cheerless walls surrounding her and then began the long trudge down, into the bowels of the sports dome. The tunnel-branching off to other tunnels that all looked alike and all led to dead ends-was deserted. By the time that she took a fifth turn and another corner and ended back where she started, she knew that she was lost.

She paused, cursing her confusion, thinking that for someone who had found hidden tombs in the middle of the Sahara Desert, getting backstage should be child's play. The other times were so easy, she thought, but those times she had come in through the mall entrance or the pit manager had met her at the door.

She retraced her steps. She quickly realized that walking up was not as easily as walking down it, especially not in high heels. She stopped to dab at the perspiration at her brow, careful not to smear her make-up. She opened her purse, digging for her compact and lip-gloss.

Whoosh!

She was slammed, face-first, against the wall. A hand clamped over her mouth. Another hand yanked her arm, pinning it. She tried to break free, but she was held so tightly, with such overpowering strength, that she could not move.

With terrified eyes, she looked around, but the scope of her vision was narrow. The only thing she could see was a beefy arm, matted with hair and a hideous tattoo.

Death.

She read the word, like a prediction of her future, and stiffened.

"Don't scream." The voice of her attacker was low and raspy. "I'll take my hand away, if you promise not to scream. You're not going to scream, are you?"

Anne shook her head, her cheek scraping the rough stucco of the sports dome wall. The hand slackened its grip to twist her around. Anne sucked in air, preparing to scream, a scream that would shake the walls, shake the building's very foundation.

But she did not scream.

She was looking into the acne-scarred face of Superfine Joey Flex.

"M-r-r-r. Flex?" she stammered. Wild, improbable thoughts raced through her mind. She looked around for the cameras. Was this an IWC event? If so, where was Wes? It was as if she had wandered into some twilight zone of reality and illusion.

The pressure at her throat was no illusion.

"I have spoken to Valkon of Aesir about you," Flex said.

"You spoke to Wes?"

"Don't play games! Who's Wes?"

"Wes. Weston Myckale. He's plays Val..."

"I told you not to play games. You never follow the rules. Punishment is due."

"Listen Mr. Flex," Anne said as she tried to edge away.

"That's Superfine to you!" Flex shoved her back.

"Listen, Mr. Superfine..." Anne said, obedient to the renewed pressure at her throat. For the first time, she noticed the pink boa dangling from his brawny neck. Under other circumstances, she would have giggled at the bizarre contradiction.

"I know I've made mistakes..." she began.

"Mistakes!"

He gave her a hate-filled look. Spittle had gathered at the corners of his lips.

"You have conspired to shame Superfine Joey Flex, the sex machine, three-time IWC champion, two-time holder of the CCW belt, before the legions and the legions of his fans."

She stared into his face. He looked so strange. Realization struck her.

He's insane.

"No, no, I would never do anything like that," Anne said in what she hoped was a soothing voice.

"You have and you must be punished."

In a world of his own, Flex pumped his hips against hers, thrusting against her cleft. He kneed her legs apart, rubbing the scratchy fabric of his jeans against the soft skin of her inner thigh. He pushed her skirt up, around her waist, and squeezed his hand between her legs. At that, she sagged in his arms, doubling over, and he jerked her upright as if she were a rag doll. Her sudden scream of pain seemed to excite him for he kissed her with spit-coated lips, all the while pushing his hand deeper into the V between her legs. Succeeding, he moaned in her mouth and bile rose in her throat.

He was seconds from raping her. This Anne knew. She only had one chance. She had to take it. She refused to give up her new-found life without a fight. She had fought too hard, effacing too many demons, to be defeated by the likes of Joey Flex.

She brought her spiked, high-heeled shoe down with all of her might, and Flex howled with rage. In the ensuing struggle, her head hit Flex's chin and sent him reeling. She followed up her advantage with the women's historic defense weapon: the tried and true knee to the groin.

Free, she kicked off her heels and ran for her life, bolting out as if she were born to run. She turned left and right, back and forth, trying to lose him. She veered sharply, and spotting some stacked boxes, threw them in his path. She heard his running footsteps behind her and then the sound of him hitting the ground with a solid thud. Her lips turned up in a brief smile and she ran on.

She saw an exit sign overhead, its red letters like a beacon of salvation. Gathering her strength, she sprinted up that long, dark tunnel, running fast, her breathing shallow, shallower. She wiped sweat from her eyes, or was it tears? She no longer heard the sound of Joey's footfalls. She prayed that he had given up.

She followed the exit signs and the tunnel grew bright with light. She saw a large arrow, marking the exit to the parking lot.

With a final burst, she took that turn and ran straight into...

No! He had her. He must have doubled back, circled around. He had her trapped and she no longer had the strength to beat him off.

Her arm flailed, crazily. She was like a bug caught in a sticky spider web.

He grabbed her shoulders, shaking her. She caught her breath on a sob.

"Let me go!"

"Anne! *Anne!*"

He said her name, urgently, and perhaps he said more. But she did not hear him. There was a fog in her ears, a loud roaring, and everything swam before her eyes. She glimpsed the handsome features of Wes' face before oblivion claimed her.

Chapter 16

In Wes' dressing room, Anne woke with a start. There was burning in her throat and a dull roar in her ears. She sat up, gripping her head in her hands.

"Lie still," Wes said. He pushed her back into the soft cushions of the sofa.

"Joey Flex! He..." Anne muttered, her mind flashing the scenes before her eyes.

"He's in custody. Lie still. An EMT is on the way."

"I'm okay. Just a little woozy."

"I said, lie still. Here, drink this."

She let him put a glass to her lips. The liquid was cold and soothed the rawness of her throat, but it tasted terrible.

"What *is* that stuff?" she asked, pushing the glass away.

"Sports drink," he answered. He straightened her high heels, which security had retrieved from the corridor, with unnecessary care. "Finish it. You're still a little shocky." He eyed her from narrowed eyes until she did as he directed. A silence, tense and piercing, fell.

"What happened to him?" Anne asked, pushing herself up against the pillows. For the first time, she looked directly into Wes' eyes. Blue flames were burning there. She knew, from the look in his eyes, that the next few minutes would not be pleasant.

"Like I said, he's in custody. Damn it! You were lucky. The closed-circuit cameras picked it up and security nabbed him before he could grab you again. Otherwise..." His voice clogged with fear. "Otherwise, he would have raped you or worse."

The flame in Wes' eyes burned bright and he seized Anne by her shoulders. He shook her until she whispered a sob. At that sound, at that soft sound, he crushed his lips against hers. His kiss was meant to punish her, to tame her, to make her understand what she had almost cost him. He poured his anger out in that kiss until it turned seductive.

She threw her arms around his neck and kissed him back, skimming her hands over the corded muscles of his neck, the broad girth of his shoulders, the flat plane of his belly. Seeking skin on skin, she grabbed a handful of his sweatshirt and tugged.

"Woman, do you know how much you mean to me?" he muttered between kisses. He brushed his lips against her temple, then rested his head in the hollow of her shoulder. They stayed thus until the EMT arrived.

Anne protested, but Wes insisted that the tech check her out. He sighed in relief that she had only suffered a few bruises. He thanked the tech, pumping her hand as if she had saved Anne's life, and shepherded her out, locking the dressing room door behind her.

He returned to face Anne, standing before her, his legs astride.

"Don't get me wrong," he said, "I love that you're here. But, *damn it*, what are you doing here?"

"Being the T&A babe," Anne said, flippant until she saw the look on his face.

"I don't know," she backtracked. "I guess I got caught up in the excitement."

"My telephone calls. Why didn't you return them?"

"Don't know. I guess it took me a while to get the courage."

"You put me through hell!"

"I know."

Her agreement drew him up short. He turned thoughtful.

"So I'm forgiven?" he asked.

"You're forgiven," she said.

Her lips formed a sultry smile. He felt his cock twitch in anticipation.

She stretched out her arms. She wanted him to climb her, to knee open her thighs to find his nesting place, to blot out the ugliness of Joey Flex.

"Wes," she spoke his name with sweet satisfaction. Gone were all doubts about herself, about him, about their future together. "I love you," she said.

"Can't you ever follow the script?" he chided. "I'm supposed to say that." He grinned, a teasing grin, before turning serious. "I love you. You are my life, Anne. You are in my heart and in my head, in my very soul. Marry me and share my life. Wake up every morning with me and to the squeals of a houseful of children."

"Yes. Yes. Yes! I'll marry you. On one condition."

"Name it." He knew that look. His mischievous little pixie was up to something.

"It's not a very hard condition," she said, "considering the state you're in." She pointed to his erection, bulging against the fabric of his pants.

"Hmmm," he moaned, "I'll do anything."

"I want that in me. Now. I've been without it for far too long." She lowered her voice, whispering in his ear. "I want you to screw my brains out."

Wes shouted with laughter. "Wherever did you hear that? No, don't tell me," he said, when she rolled her eyes with exaggerated drama.

"Huh. I guess if that's what it takes to get you to the altar, I'll do it."

With lightning speed, he stripped his clothes off and then hers. He tumbled her onto her back, gasping when her tongue darted around his ear. He felt her hands at his ponytail, freeing his hair to fall about his shoulders like a wild mane. He raised her hips off the floor, tilting her softness high, preparing her for his deep penetration.

He was quick, but she was quicker. She gripped his muscular ass, completing the union, forcing him to fill her with one sure thrust.

"Careful," he said. "Don't encourage me. You're so small. Sometimes I feel like I'm ripping you apart."

"Remember my condition," she said, pumping him. "I won't marry you..."

"But I've other ideas about who's in charge. You see, you're going to marry me, regardless, and before we deal with your conditions, I've got questions."

"Questions?" she exclaimed. "You've got questions now?"

"Yeah. Stop that!" He planted his hand firmly on her middle. She struggled, squirming, but she could no longer move. He held his hand in place until she was still.

"Who do you belong to?" he asked. He wrapped his hand around his prick.

"Easy," she said, "You. Okay. Put in it and fuck me until..."

"Not yet. Next question. There's been no other man, right?"

"Right."

She felt his throbbing tip, close. She wiggled.

"And there won't be, right?"

"Right."

She felt him enter her, using the velvety tip to trace the outline of her slit.

"And, you understand," he slid the tip back and forth, "I'm not like Valkon."

"Not like Valkon. I got that."

She wanted him in her. She would say anything to get him in her.

"Good answer. Something tells me you're going ace this test." He pushed in. She sucked in. It was sexual dominion in the worst way, but she wanted it in the worst way.

"From now on," he commanded, "Angel plays the T&A babe."

"Angel. T&A. Do I get a gold star?"

"How about a little more of me?"

He was almost in her, almost sheathed to the hilt. He felt his control slipping, but he had to make sure that she understood. "You'll never, ever, do anything so crazy like you did tonight. Repeat after me. I will never..."

"...never ... do ... anything ... like that," she swore obediently.

He punctuated each word with a thrust, inserting a little more of himself each time.

"For a new student, you learn fast. Don't forget or I'll have to punish you." He withdrew himself, pulling free from her sodden muscles. His unexpected withdraw left her wringing on the carpet. "But I won't have to. When we're married, you'll be such a good little elf, I'll give you all of this whenever you want."

He put this prick back in, his insertion made easy by the slippery wetness oozing around him. He wanted to prolong the verbal love-play, make it last for an eternity, but he could not. His thrusting unmanned him. He lost the thread, ricocheting on a storm of passion.

She caught his rhythm, matching it, and their sweaty bodies snapped against each other in perfect accord. He adjusted his position, opening her wider, reaching down, searching for the bud of her sexuality. He pressed it. She went out of her mind, her body recoiling from the sudden, exquisite shaft of pleasure.

She screamed, a piercing shrill that signified that the height of her climax was upon her. Her scream pushed him over the edge. He reared and bucked, and when he reached the pinnacle, she wrapped her legs around his slim waist to milk him dry. He flooded all over her, filling her to overflow, her channel unable to hold all of his essence. It ran in ripples down her leg, to dampen the carpet beneath them.

His down-strokes slowed. Now it was her turn for love-play, for her to show him that she was not only

student, but teacher, too. She reached for her high heel. His firm, muscled ass was still pumping like a sluggish jackhammer after the power was cut. She gave his ass a swat with the sole of her shoe, a flicking sting, causing him to bore down, to penetrate deep, to almost split the juicy walls of her vulva in two.

Later, resting in the afterglow of contentment, he snuggled her close.

"Woman, married life with you is gonna be very interesting."

Chapter 17

In the smallest Queen's Pyramids near Khufu, Anne walked up the maze of burial chambers and passageways to reach the surface. At the stone-slab exit, she stopped to unclip the sun goggles from her waistband. Her hand brushed her belly and she caressed the slight roundness there. In six months, the slight roundness would be the son or the daughter that she had created with Wes.

Adjusting her goggles, she walked into the sunlight. She had only taken a few steps before she was shaded by her personal shadow.

"You're not doing too much, are you? How are you feeling? Do you want some help? Water? Juice? What about the baby?" The questions tripped off Wes' lips, without giving her a chance to reply. He sat down on the stele and felt her forehead.

"I'm fine," Anne said. "Don't worry. I've excavated under worse circumstances."

"Yeah, but then you weren't carrying my baby."

He frowned, lowering his hand from her brow to caress her stomach.

She leaned into the embrace, resting her head against his strong arm. In truth, she was feeling out of sorts. The daily rounds of morning sickness left her weak and drained, and the desert heat seemed more oppressive than she remembered.

"We'll break off early," he said.

"Eh?"

"Now, don't argue. This valley has been waiting for thousands of years. It can wait a little longer. I promised Mrs. Z that I would take care of you. I don't want to screw up. That old battleaxe of a woman scares the hell out of me."

Anne laughed, recalling how Mrs. Z had doted on Wes. She dubbed him her *yung mit bainer*-in loose Yiddish-her powerhouse. Her doting turned to worship when he put his career on hold so Anne could supervise the excavations at the Valley of the Queens. Not that his decision was a hardship for him. He was enjoying himself. He kept his body in shape by hauling sandstone and his mind sharp with books on ancient weaponry. He wondered if IWC fans would ever again see the cocky, swaggering Valkon of Aesir. Perhaps, he needed a career change. He was keeping his options open.

Of course, Mrs. Z did not know how right she was. Wes was a *powerhouse*, a randy, potent stud who took Anne three and four times a night until her legs were weak and her crotch was sore. Her pregnancy seemed to increase his appetite, especially when he imagined her large and round and weighed down with his child. He planned to get one of those books on making love in the late stages of pregnancy. He suspected that some of those positions were highly pleasurable and intended to investigate every one.

In the meantime, he improvised. The Egyptian nights were long, but no matter how long, he made Anne lust afresh in heat of the desert wind.

Book Three:
Risking All
Chapter 1

When Drake Smith strode into the lounge of the Silver Dollar Casino, he saw her in the bright lights. She was sitting alone in a large booth, sipping sherry. He first noticed her because her alabaster skin reflected off the mirrors and strangely illuminated the lounge. But on second glance, he saw that she was beautiful. Staring, he stopped, dazed, feeling as if someone had kicked him hard in the gut. He was in pain from the vision that she presented and from his sudden desire.

He saw that she was tall and slender. Her face was ethereal. Her brow was porcelain. Her mouth was wide, but her bottom lip was full and made for kissing. Her eyelashes were long and thick, like dusters, so long that they brushed her face. She was small-breasted, no floppy abundance there, but he knew instinctively that she had enough sweetness to keep a man occupied on the coldest, winter night.

He looked lower, searching for her hips, but they were hidden by the shadows of the table. The shape of her legs was hidden too, but he could see that they were encased in tight, black stockings. He immediately wanted those stockings off and her out of them. Then her panties, which he would try to gently remove, not rushing, not ripping them, but with slow, soft strokes. As he pulled her panties down, he would cover her and push, seeking entry. And she would want him and take him.

As she raised the glass to her lips, Drake realized that he was not the only man staring. Every man in the bar was looking and having sinful thoughts. His thoughts were equally sinful ... satin skin and deep penetration, touching and join climax, sweat and coming again and again, filling her with the essence of him.

He surveyed the room, checking every man's eyes with his eagle-like gaze. She belonged to none of them, but they all wanted her-in the worst way. He had an almost uncontrollable rage, a primal need to lock her away, to keep her for him and him alone. To make sure that she was his and that no man would dare to lust after her. He had never felt this way before-the urge to stake her as his woman.

When he looked at her again, an image of Beth appeared. In his mind's eye, Beth was a faint shadow, which flickered and then faded away. As she disappeared, he was free. He could love again, unhampered by his ghostly love for his ex-wife.

Watching Beth fade from view, Drake felt no regret. He felt no urge to call her back. She had taken her rightful place in his life. She represented what could have been, but never was. This unknown woman, this true vision with hair the color of brushed rosewood, was his future.

He wondered how long he had been standing there. He spotted Jessie Dane, the casino's owner. He knew that she felt the sexual tension in him and in every other male in the room. He knew that, in a more primitive time, there would have been trouble, gunslingers loading up their six-shooters, prepared to fight and to die to eliminate rivals for this woman. The survivor would stand alone after the gun smoke cleared, to grab her, kiss her, seal his right to possession, and then drag her from the saloon. Out in the dusty streets of Carson City, he would fling her upon his stallion-whether she was willing or no-and ride off into the Black Rock sunset. The long ride would be filled with even longer stops for persuasive seduction, deep, passionate kisses, warring tongues, and eventual fulfillment.

But Drake was a civilized man of forty-five, no young, randy cowboy controlled by raging hormones. He was a lawyer and a gentleman and, moreover, a gentleman of the new millennium. Drake Smith didn't behave like a desperado of the 1890's. Or did he?

He stepped further into the room, glaring at each man in turn. Male eyes dropped into beers or suddenly

became interested in the tacky Elvis memorabilia being sold on the local home shopping network. Ted Peterson, the bartender, finally put down the beer mug that he had been wiping for the fourth time and served his customers. Several women grabbed their escorts and hurried out, but not before one disgruntled bottle-blonde slapped her gawking husband.

He took a seat, directly opposite her, in one of the recently vacated booths. She gave no indication of his presence or of the stir that she had created. She seemed calm, cool and collected, as if a dozen lusting men was quite ordinary. Ignoring everyone and everything, she signaled Peterson over for another sherry. Having done so, she dismissed him as if he were nothing more than a troublesome puppy.

Drake's temper rose and he ran his hands through the strands of his white-gold hair. He didn't like being ignored. He was the famous lawyer, Drake Smith, who commanded the attention of everyone whenever he entered a room. She had to feel his eyes upon her. He was staring openly, but she refused to acknowledge his presence. He didn't like the game because it was a game that he rarely had to play. He wanted to shake her, to force her to look at him, to make her know him as the man who wanted her and would have her.

He had to play his cards carefully. She was daring him to make the first play. He suspected that she was a skillful poker player who would play her cards close to her breast. He laughed silently at how he had garbled the old saying. *Vest*. She would probably hide a couple of aces in her vest pocket. In vain. Tonight, he planned to search her-inside and out.

It turned into a waiting game with each trying to outlast the other. He stared. She ignored. It was late now, after two o'clock. Peterson had shouted last call and the final few customers had downed their drinks and left until there was only him and her.

She took the last sip of her sherry and rose, her face averted. She reached for her small evening purse, easing her shoulder muscles as she did so. The strain of ignoring him for the past two hours had worn her down. He only needed to push his advantage.

With the romantic: "You're beautiful."

With the sexual: "Your room or mine?"

With the non-threatening: "Hello, I'm Drake."

The man who was known for thinking on his feet couldn't think of a thing. She was leaving and he had to act. Without thinking, without being aware of his actions, he strode over with the stiff-armed stride of a knight carrying his shield. She turned to leave; he grabbed her wrist and pulled her towards him. She raised her face to his. Their eyes locked. He suffered a shock. She had violet eyes. And she was blind.

"Release me," she said, her voice was low, husky, sexy.

Those two words brought back every ounce of his sexual wanting. Drake, the gentleman who had never been impolite to a woman, who had never been disrespectful to a woman, who had never mistreated a woman, said, "Never."

They stood in the doorway of the lounge, warring combatants, face-to-face, neither retreating nor advancing. For how long they would have stood there is anyone's guess. Probably until time stopped. But Jessie Dane rounded the corner of the bar, intent on locking up for the night.

Drake gave Jessie *The Look*-the fierce, hard gleam that turned scheming negotiators into blubbering idiots, which cowed bitching stockholders, which convinced doubtful investors to empty their pockets.

Jessie respected that look and skirted around the air that he had emphatically claimed as his own.

Chapter 2

Drake shifted his eyes back to the woman whose wrist he held in a firm grip.

"Release me," she said again in that same low, husky voice.

He paid no heed, his eyes lingering on each soft feature of her face, stopping at her mouth.

The full, rich redness of her lips was hypnotizing, and he wondered what it would be like to steal a kiss. Acting on that thought, he leaned forward, beckoned by a will that was not his own. It was as if a war raged within him with rivals fighting for control. One was appalled at his disgraceful behavior, but the other-the more powerful antagonist-urged him on.

As he came closer, her warm breath touched his face. He remembered the way her lips had pressed against the glass. The memory aroused him and he wanted to taste her sweet lips on him.

"Don't you dare kiss me." She said the words through those sweet lips, but instead of sweetness, there was haughty anger.

"Why not? I want to." He leaned in, bringing his lips close to hers.

"Cash," she said, the corners of her mouth curling up.

Her demand stabbed Drake with remorse and the muscle pulsed in his strong jaw. She was one of Jessie Dane's backroom girls who provided favors of the sexual kind for cold, hard cash. He understood the looks of the other men. They knew that she was a whore who would lie down on any man's sheets and spread her legs for money.

No matter, her occupation was immaterial; her immorality was irrelevant. He would have her, regardless of her price even if he had to empty his pockets, cash out the ATM, and liquidate his portfolio.

"How much?" he said. "Whatever, I'll pay."

"Two hundred," she said.

"Fine."

"Three hundred."

"Deal."

"Five."

"Up it to a grand," he said, his jaw pulsing again.

"Why?"

Drake threw caution to the wind.

"Because you're the most beautiful woman that I've ever seen and I want you."

"Cash," she said. "My *name* is Cash."

Her eyes were alive with silent mirth. She had turned the tables and he had lost another hand.

"Where did you learn to play poker?" he asked.

"I don't play poker. Blind people can't play poker."

"Weak ploy," he chided. "Too obvious a lie."

Her smile widened and she grinned despite her best efforts not to do so.

"Now we've been introduced, let go of my wrist."

"What?" His eyes were again drawn to her lips.

"Let go."

He dragged his eyes away. She wanted to be released. He wanted otherwise. To pull her chest-to-chest, until all parts touched, until he lost himself in her.

He looked down at his hand wrapped around her slender wrist. When his fingers released her, one by one, he saw the slight, red marks. He'd had no idea that he was holding her so tight as if he would never let go. He did not intend to hurt her, to mar her beauty. He leaned down and kissed the offending marks.

Her skin was like satin-smooth and very soft. He caught a trace of her scent, and the combination of her taste and her smell tempted his control. He planted tiny little kisses on those red marks, nursing each one in turn. The kisses aroused him and he wanted more. He nipped where he once kissed, trailing light kisses down her arm to her elbow and over to her navel—that erotic spot where forearm meets upper arm. There, she had applied a touch of perfume. He sniffed, kissed, and then licked with just the tip of his tongue. Becoming bolder, he teased the entire length of that inner sanctum, using his tongue with jabbing strokes.

She sucked in air at his boldness, standing quite still like a mare receiving a rutting stallion. She knew that they were standing alone in the doorway of the casino lounge and that it was quiet, dark, intimate. She knew that he was aroused and that he was moments from leading her into the deserted room, to the nearest booth, to the soft, leather cushions, to pushing up her dress, to taking her. Despite this knowledge or perhaps because of it, she reached down to caress him.

"Don't do that," he said, pushing her hand away. He shook his head against the clouding passion. "Don't touch me unless you want to be taken. Are you ready for that? *Are you?*"

The war, which was once inside him, was now inside her. As with his battle, her factions—the conservative cautious versus the reckless—clashed for control.

Her uncertainty was apparent on her face. He took the decision out of her hands.

"You're not," he said, "and neither am I. Sweetheart, let's get out of here."

"Okay, but don't call me that." She stuffed her folded cane inside her purse and felt for her shawl.

"Why the hell not? I've tasted you. You *are* sweet," he said, struck by how the endearment fit. Sweetheart ... yeah ... sweetheart. She was already sweetly in his heart. In the space of a few short hours, he had fallen for her—hard.

"Because I don't like it," she said. "Sweetheart, baby, honey, all those pet names that men shower on women, not using their names; they don't see women as equals."

"Fine, but I refuse to call you *Cash*, so we'll have to compromise. What about your real name...?" He let

his voice trail off, inviting her to grant him this small victory.

"It's *Cash* or nothing," she said, as if issuing a royal decree.

Her childish pout enchanted him. She was a mix of queenly woman and saucy minx. Unable to resist, he placed a quick kiss on her sulky lips.

"Tell me," he coaxed, giving her arm a little shake.

He wanted to know everything about her, her likes and dislikes, her hopes and desires, and, most importantly, how to please her in bed.

"It's Alexis," she said simply. "Alexis Claremont."

Chapter 3

Alexis Claremont. She said her name formally, like an introduction to a stranger. Her formality was absurd given that they had almost been as intimate as possible between a man and a woman.

"Hello, Alexis Claremont. I'm Drake Smith, *the* Drake Smith."

"You're famous?" Alexis questioned. She sniffed loudly. "Why do famous men always wear Armani? I read in *People* that Armani makes Harrison Ford feel horny."

"Uh-uh," Drake said, shaking his head. "Harry is an Old Spice man."

"You know Harrison Ford. You're joking, right?"

"Why? Are you planning to sniff him too? He's an old client of mine."

"Well, if I met him at the Silver Dollar and he..."

"So you always sniff strangers in casino lounges?"

"Uh, no. Only strange strangers who strangely stare stimulate sniffing."

Damn! She's quick, he thought. How did she know I was staring? Before he asked the question, he caught himself. He wouldn't fall into another one of her traps, instead choosing to bide his time before employing the element of attack.

"You're not one of those," he said with an exaggerated groan.

"One of those, what?"

"A punner."

"Yep, that's me. Every chance I get, I make with the punning."

"Why do I get the feeling this relationship is gonna be more than I bargained for?"

"We're *in* a relationship?"

"I'd say yes considering that you've already felt up my prick."

"But that was through your pants. It's not a relationship until it's skin on skin."

"I'll keep that in mind," he said, taking her purse and shawl. "Should I lead?"

What was PC? Should he guide or let her trail? He sensed that she was fiercely independent. It was a measure of how hard he had fallen for her that he was prepared to walk on eggshells around her.

"Of course," Alexis said, taking his arm. "I don't know where we are going."

"To my car."

His car was the only place where they could be private, but not so private-like his place or hers-that he would lose control. After all, he would have to keep at least *one* hand on the steering wheel.

He led her to his black Jaguar XJ8 coup, a cherished gift from his foster son, Johnny. He helped her into the rich leather of the bucket seats and tried to buckle her seatbelt, but she pushed his hands away. He circled to the driver's side and started the engine. The Jag vroomed to life and, in minutes, they were speeding away to the mountains of Nevada.

It was a beautiful night. It was a night for lovers. Crisp but not cold with a gentle wind. As they hit the open road and left Reno behind, a thousand stars appeared in the sky. The full moon glowed, leading Drake to fancy that the gods were smiling upon them. They even had their own music as the waves of a nearby lake lapped the shore in perpetual rhythm.

It was a night for lovers and for sharing.

She was on the shady side of thirty and originally from New Orleans. She had earned her B.A. from the Mass. Institute for the Blind and her MBA from Columbia. She was considered a financial wiz, hence the nickname, "Cash." New to Nevada, she moved from New Orleans to take over the CFO slot at McCord Diversified.

"How long have you been, um, uh...?" Drake asked. He sought the right word.

"Blind?" She finished his question. "You can say it. It is not a dirty word."

"Okay. How long have you been blind?"

"Since I was seven. I have retinitis pigmentosa, RP for short. It started when I was five. My father noticed that I couldn't see snowballs thrown to my left or right. My last sight memory was of the tigers at the circus. I woke up the next morning and I couldn't see a thing. I kept thinking that my sight would improve, at least a little, but it didn't. I still have memories of colors, of course, so I guess that's something."

"You get around well. I mean, I haven't noticed other blind people, but..."

"It's my SUE."

"Pardon?" Drake asked, quirked one silver eyebrow.

"My SUE, short for Sightless User Emulator. It's a visual sensor that bounces radio waves off objects so I know how close I am to them."

"Like radar."

"Yep, but far more sophisticated. The visual sensor then transmits the info to me in the form of beeps. Loud, I'm close. Soft, I'm far. I hear the beeps in this receiver, see."

Alexis drew back her hair with a sweep of her hand and craned her neck towards Drake. He saw a tiny device that looked like a hearing aid tucked in her ear. He also noticed the soft line of her cheek and

neck, made for kissing. He imagined his head buried in the hollow of her neck in the morning after sex, her smooth, silky skin so different from the rough stubble of his day-old beard. He would raise his body from hers, look into her violet eyes, and...

"It's cutting edge tech," she said, letting her hair go. Drake felt cheated when her hair fell back in place as if closing a curtain on his fantasy, just when it was getting hot.

"Isn't it risky? I mean, if something went wrong, if it malfunctioned," he asked, trying to concentrate. He patted the sweat at his brow and wondered if the air conditioning was working.

"You know what they say about no risk, no gain. Actually, that's why it's not available to the public. You'd be surprised what you can get with the right connections and if you grease the right palms. This visual sensor is a marked improvement over the old prototypes. Five years ago, it was the size of a ZIP disk and almost as heavy. Today, it's smaller than a watch and I can wear it under a headband or on a piece of jewelry."

"But you still use a cane."

"I cane when I have to, when it's a new place, when I'm nervous. If I don't have to, then I *don't*. That's why I stick to the same places, my usual haunts, and Jessie's been great about not moving the furniture."

"Wouldn't a seeing-eye dog be safer?"

"A sight dog? I suppose so, but no. Nothing screams *blind person* like a German shepherd and a red-and-white cane. I have my SUE. That's enough. It has to be."

Her voice trailed off and she turned her head as if to look out of the window of the car. Drake sensed her discomfort and something more. It was almost as if she were going to cry. He felt a tug at his heart, causing him to make a quick decision.

He took the next turn, wheeling the car smoothly down a shaded country lane. The headlights from the Jaguar danced across the trees and mingled with the moonlight. When the woods grew dense, the yellow-and-white flowers of sagebrush drooping over the road, Drake pulled the car over and cut the engine.

"We have been driving for hours," he said. "Let's stretch." He reached across her to open her door. Her hand was already at the handle and she shooed his hand away. Before he could round the car, she slid out of the seat and shut the door. She reached into her purse for her cane and whipped it open. "I'm ready," she said, tapping the tip of her cane against the ground. "There's no need for that," she scolded, when Drake took her elbow as if to guide her.

They wandered slowly through the woods, kissing and touching like young lovers. They didn't get very far because they couldn't keep their hands to themselves. They nibbled and sucked and grinded against each other until they broke apart, panting and breathless, only to grab for each other again.

When they did walk, it was like walking a tightrope for Drake. The narrow footpath was rough and uneven, treacherous for a sighted person let alone a blind one. Many times, he wanted to reach out a hand or take her arm. He watched her each step with fearful eyes as her cane tapped and rapped around protruding rocks and tree roots. When she tripped, almost falling, he caught his breath and froze with indecision, so torn was he between helping the woman he loved, and letting her maintain her willful independence.

Finally, when he could take no more of the tightrope walk, he led her back to the parked Jag. When they

reached it, she put out her hand to feel the cool metal there.

"I bet it's sleek and very fast," she said.

"It's fast. When Johnny gave it to me on my birthday, we took it out to the track. He floored the accelerator, and my baby went from zero to eighty in three seconds. Drake grinned and cocked his head to one side. "John has a real *yen* for road rage."

"Who's John?"

"My son," Drake answered, watching her experience the contours of the car by feeling with her hands. "My foster son. I met him in Saudi Arabia when I was serving as a special liaison for our women troops stationed there." He watched her stroke the hood, caressing its smooth, curved lines. She seemed to enjoy the slickness of the metal, using her imagination to visualize the glossy, polished finish.

"He sounds important to you."

"Yeah, he is. There's no one like Johnny Wheelwright."

"I hope I get to meet him someday. This is the grill, isn't it? I can tell. It's still warm and the metal is hard and firm. Like you?"

She asked the question with a seductive lilt in her voice. Her question, like her caress of the car, was a blatant invitation. He didn't refuse. He took her in his arms and kissed her.

Their mouths met with dueling tongues and deep-throat pants. As the kiss deepened, he pressed his body closer, leaning into her, prodding her. His hands roamed over her body and he reached up to fondle her breast. He tempted and teased it until the ancient male urge to complete the union overwhelmed him. He needed her. He needed to mate. The urge was making him hot and uncomfortable, like his skin was itchy and too tight. Touching her through layers of clothing was not enough. He needed more. He shed his jacket and pulled down the bodice to her dress, seeking flesh on flesh.

Caught in her own web of desire, Alexis pulled his jacket off and pushed up his shirt, but that was not enough. She wanted him out of his clothes, stripped naked, and her hands went to the buttons of his shirt. She fumbled with them, finding them too difficult, too bothersome. She felt his hands cover hers to help, but before he could, she grabbed a handful of the soft fabric and ripped down. The costly silk, not meant for such treatment, surrendered and the buttons flew into the dark corners of the night.

She buried her face in his curling chest hair, circling his areolas with her tongue. Her hand wandered to his belt. She unbuckled it and edged the zipper down, careful of the bulge that she found there. The zipper gave way and the bulge sprung eagerly into her hand. She caressed him, feeling the wetness at the tip.

When he pushed himself in and out of her tight hand, her legs went weak.

"We need to be careful," he said between kisses.

"Tell me you have a condom."

"In my pocket."

He released her to find his jacket where he had thrown it in his haste to be free from the clinging leather. It wasn't easy given the state of his arousal, for his prick was hard and jutting and begging for a home. He finally found it where it had landed and searched the inner pocket. He pulled the sealed foil out, threw the

jacket down, and returned to her, protected.

She was standing by the hood of the car. Her hair hung in thick waves, curling madly from the humidity, to brush her shoulders. In one hand, she held her stockings and her panties. In the other hand, she held up her dress, carelessly, and one plump, ripe breast peeped through. Her nipple hardened at a sudden breeze, and his cock responded in kind.

"Ready?" she asked.

"More than," he replied.

Reaching for her, he pulled her dress up to her waist and then lifted her to the hood of the car. The metal was cold to her exposed ass, but it excited her, and she felt a delicious pang as juices flowed from her swollen vulva. She quivered and squirmed against the metal, ready, wanting release.

Drake lifted her again, placing her, with purposeful calculation, on the Leaper, on the silver hood ornament of the Jag. Her legs straddled it. Her inner core touched it. He grabbed her by the waist and rocked her once ... twice ... three times against the cold, stiff metal until her pink folds sucked it in, until her mind exploded with white light.

Before the savage waves of her climax subsided, he gripped her legs and pulled her towards the grill. He pushed her down, until she was lying on the hood. The warmth from the Leaper caressed her naked cleft and the cool smoothness of the fender teased her feet. He raised her knees high. She was open and exposed. She reached for him, wanting him. He mounted her, sheathing himself. Their mating was a fast, furious climb of desire. When they reached the top, they fell, joined and as one, only to climb again and again.

Later, reality returned and he eased himself out of her for the last time.

The sun was warring with the clouds in the sky-top Bristlecone Pines when they arrived at her home.

"What happens next?" Alexis asked. Uncertainty slipped into her voice as she wondered if their "relationship" would consist of a one-night stand.

"Next," Drake said, pulling her into his arms, "we spend time together."

Chapter 4

In the Silver Dollar lounge, Drake was waiting for Alexis to arrive. He glanced at his watch, idly spinning the stem. It was after seven. She was late, as usual, but he knew that she would be well worth the wait. He hoped that she would be wearing that little black number, the raven black dress with the tiny straps. It was one of his favorites. He planned to go dancing after dinner so he could nestle her in his arms, rest her head on his shoulder, stroke her naked skin, her bare...

He abandoned those thoughts, as the fantasy was as dangerous as the reality. Daydreaming made him hunger for her, made him want to seek her out, and there would be no dinner and no dancing or, at least, no dancing of the vertical kind.

Drake reached into the inner breast pocket of his suit jacket and pulled out Johnny's letter. It was wrinkled, crumbled, and in pencil. He smoothed out the pages, read it again and, when he reached the end, sighed with relief. Johnny still had a long way to go, but at last-at long last-Johnny was facing the demons of the past.

Drake's thoughts drifted back to that ugly time in Loving, Arkansas.

After Delta Force pressured Johnny into resigning his commission, the young man had turned bitter and resentful. Drake urged him to get help, but Johnny refused, electing instead to wander the back roads of the south, hitchhiking and sleeping in shanties. Tired of traveling on foot, he rented a car in Little Rock and headed west. He ended up in Loving, a jerkwater outback, pretentiously calling itself a county seat.

The state troopers stopped him for speeding. He should have taken the ticket and driven away, but he went ballistic instead. He provoked the troopers, egging them on, committing every insolent act to enrage them. Calmer heads prevailed-one of the state troopers must have realized that John was ill-and the former war hero ended up in a psych ward in four-point restraint.

Drake had gotten the call late at night from a Johnny in trouble.

"Drake, I need help. Will you come?" John asked. His voice was frail and thin, not sounding like the voice of a soldier of countless engagements. Drake had gone, dropping everything for the troubled younger man he loved like a son.

"Helloooooo!"

Drake's thoughts were interrupted by the purr of a female voice. He looked up to find his ex-wife standing by the table. She had a drink in one hand and a cigarette in the other. She cocked her head to one side before taking a long drag.

"Drake. I called your name three times. Where were you?"

"Uh ... thinking about Johnny."

"Johnny! What's that lunatic done now?"

Drake looked Beth over, wondering how he could have ever thought that he loved her. He should have known the difference between being *in love* and *being in love with love*. He had been a young and ridiculous romantic when he met and married Beth. He knew now that what he had felt was not real, that it was nothing more than an illusion. All of it dissolved into nothingness from the moment that he saw Alexis.

As if on cue, Alexis walked in. In her mind, she had mapped out the floor plan for the lounge. With the help of her visual sensor, she could walk through the lounge without using her cane. It took her hours to memorize the location of each chair, each table and each booth, but with Jessie Dane's help, she did so.

Drake watched Alexis pause at the lounge door, and he knew that she was confirming her location. While he appreciated this fact, he was more appreciative of how she looked and how much he wanted her out of her clothes and his bed. He would rip off that scarlet tiffany dress, uncaring that it was right out of *Vogue* and cost a mint. He would pull the scraps down, past her waist, to her hips, to her delta below, and his tongue would go to work while her drop-dead gorgeous legs, so recently flattered by that flaring skirt, were draped over his shoulders.

Alex walked to the table, her hips swaying to some unheard music, and every male head in the lounge turned to follow the beat.

"Hello, lover," Alexis said in her husky voice. She sniffed and then smiled. "Armani!" She turned her face up for a kiss. Drake complied, slanting his mouth across hers in a kiss that shot the temperature up in the lounge by twenty degrees.

"How you doing, Cash?" Beth said. She reached around Drake to grab Alexis' hand and pumped it, squeezing hard. A sneer curled her lip, and she threw back her head as if to say that she had tested

Alexis and found her lacking.

Although Beth's behavior irritated Alexis, she didn't let her irritation show. She did wonder though if Beth was jealous. She knew that Drake had loved Beth once, but she was too self-assured to be threatened by that long-dead marriage.

Alexis *was* jealous, however.

And her jealousy was unique.

Alexis felt cheated. Beth could see Drake and she could not. The more time that Alexis spent with him, the more she hungered for just a glimpse.

If Alexis could see Drake, she would not be disappointed. His white-gold mane, brushed back in a peak from a wide brow, shouted of a man who was assured, confident, and at the top of his game. His slim, athletic body boasted the stamina for robust sex and screamed *lover take me!* In short, he was a man who worked hard, but who also played hard and who would certainly include his woman in the fun.

Drake seated Alexis, oblivious to the female attention that followed his every move. They sat close, whispering, their faces so close that they could touch lips.

"I'm glad that I ran into you, Drake," Beth said, giving him a look that she hoped would siren song him back into her bed. "Things are so terrible with the business right now." She leaned forward until her breast brushed his arm.

"Huh, well..." Drake said, moving his arm away.

"You always gave me such good advice. Did you know that about him, Alexis?"

"That was a long time ago."

"But I bet you're *still good at it*."

"Is KrazyKat in trouble?"

"You could say that."

"If anyone could help, it would be Alexis."

"No," Beth said. "I want you."

"But Alexis has the expertise."

"I don't want *her*. I want *you*. No offense, Cash," Beth purred.

"None taken," Alexis purred back.

"I don't know, Beth." Drake ran his hand through his hair. He disliked Beth's air of ownership and her rudeness to Alexis wasn't helping either. "I have other..."

"Perhaps I should leave you two alone to work this out," Alexis interrupted with a smile. Her smile widened, like the smile of the cat that ate the canary, a smile that never warmed the coldness in her eyes.

"Could we meet tomorrow?" Beth asked, as if Alexis had not spoken. "I hate to pressure you but..."

"*Tomorrow?*"

"No time like the present. In the morning."

"It's that serious."

"Oh yeah."

Drake leaned back into the leather cushions of the booth. He had formed KrazyKat Incorporated right out of law school, and the company had made him his first million. It had a special place in his memories of those days, and he'd hate to see it go under.

"Sorry, Beth," he said, shaking his head. "I can't. Alexis and I have plans..."

"Plans that can't be broken."

"A breakfast-in-bed followed by a little R & R."

"Oh, c'mon, Drake. I'm sure Cash can spare you for one morning."

"Nope, sorry. Alexis *can't* spare me."

"Whoa, wait a minute. I can speak for myself," Alexis said. "If Beth needs to *borrow* you, then you go. I *can* do without you."

Even as Alexis said this, her private fears assailed her. Part of her felt that she was growing too attached to Drake, always thinking about him, wanting him, and missing him, as if she were cold inside without him.

"Like I said, I am sorry, but Alexis and I *do* have plans."

He pulled back Alexis' chair and assisted her to her feet. With a hand around her waist, he escorted her from the lounge.

Beth was left standing there, dismissed and rebuffed. She couldn't believe it. There was a time, in the years after the divorce, that she had Drake at the drop of her handkerchief. All that had changed when Alexis came to town.

Beth finished her drink, then stood. She adjusted the scarf at her neck and flattened out a crease in her skirt. She assumed the mantle of a woman scorned perfectly.

"You'll pay, Drake Smith," she said. "You will pay."

Chapter 5

The Silver Room was Reno's premier restaurant. Located in a snug corner of the sprawling Silver Dollar Casino, it was one of Jessie Dane's best investments. The French cuisine was excellent, the atmosphere romantic, the music the hottest jazz licks this side of New Orleans. It was Drake and Alexis' favorite place, and they had just settled in for an evening of dinner and dancing, to be followed by sex all night long, when Beth walked in on the arm of Ted Peterson.

The months since Drake had last seen his ex-wife had not treated her kindly. Her company, KrazyKat Incorporated, had indeed gone belly-up, and he'd heard rumors that she was drinking heavily because of it. He had even heard that she blamed him for the lost of her company since he had refused her renewed requests for help. Whether the rumors were true, he did not know, but he knew that pay-back was her style.

From his seat in a secluded corner of the restaurant, Drake saw Beth scan the room. Her eyes locked with his arctic-blue ones. She nudged Ted with her elbow.

"Here comes trouble," Drake said to Alexis.

"How so?"

"Beth *and* Ted Peterson."

"The *bartender*? Oh damn!"

"Oh damn is right. They're on their way over."

Drake knew that Beth would take her time sauntering over because she loved to play the game of cat and mouse. When she finally steered Ted to the table, Drake rose to extend his hand. Ted did not make a move to take it.

"Well, if it isn't my special public defender," Ted said.

"Yes, it's Drake and Cash," Beth said, giving what she thought was her best condescending smile, but it was spoiled by the lipstick coating her bottom teeth.

"I bet you can't believe I'm here and not pouring," Ted said.

"I hope you both enjoy your evening," Alexis said. "Somewhere else," she added, speaking so low that only Drake could hear her.

"Oh, we will, we will," Ted said. His line of sight was at Alexis' breasts. He clicked his tongue. "I hit it big at the slots and Beth and I are gonna celebrate. Imagine if I'd hit years ago. Then I could have hired myself a real lawyer." Ted threw up his hands, palms out. "Just kidding. Just kidding. I know it wasn't your fault, Smith, that I got five years in a federal penitentiary."

"No, it wasn't. It was the fact that the feds convicted you of stealing money from your company's pension fund that got you the five."

"Yeah, well, that's ancient history. All's forgiven."

"Ted has such class," Beth said, running her hand down the lapel of Ted's jacket. "I wish I could be like that, but I can't help myself. I hold grudges."

"We all have our gifts," Alexis replied, heavy on the sarcasm.

"Ah, Cash. You were sitting there so..."

"Don't let us hold you up," Drake interrupted.

"...so quiet, like a little brown rat ... rabbit," Beth amended. "I was wondering when Drake would give you permission to speak."

"What?" Alexis said.

"Drake can be quite the dictacrat."

"Autocrat," Alexis corrected, a frown marring the porcelain of her brow.

"*Whatever*. My point is that Drake is-what's the psychological term-an enabler. Which is really great

since he collects things, broken things, things that need fixing."

"I think that you had better leave," Drake said, stepping forward.

"You and what army, pretty boy," Ted replied.

"Drake and his broken toys," Beth sneered out the words. "If there's somebody in need of a fixing within a hundred miles, he's Johnny-on-the-spot. Speaking of Johnny..." She let the sentence linger, the implication clear. "If ever there was a man who needed help."

"I don't need Drake..."

"It must be tough for him though, with your illness and all. He put his lunatic son in an asylum, but he can't fix you." She bunched her lips together, mocking. "There's no cure, right, for your condition. What do you have again? Retinitis..."

"That's enough," Drake said. "*Leave!*"

"But I haven't finished talking to Cash. We're bonding. No one bonds like a man's wife and his new girlfriend."

"Ex-wife."

"Let her talk," Alexis said with an outwardly complacent smile.

"Leave now, Beth! Take Peterson with you."

"Yeah, Beth, let's leave," Ted said, noticing that Drake had taken his hands out of his pockets and that his fists were balled tight, so tight that the blood had rushed from them. "We've done enough damage for one night."

Drake took Alexis' hand and pulled her to her feet. He wrapped his arm around her slender waist and steered her to the dance floor. "Don't let them get to you," he whispered, close to her ear.

"Of course, not," Alexis said, but a closed, shuttered look had captured her face.

"Isn't Drake *simply* a charming seeing-eye guide dog?" Beth said. She could not resist planting one last barb, and her tongue practically dripped with black malice.

"I'd certainly screw her if she were my bitch," Ted muttered. When Drake's head whipped around, he pulled Beth away. The two of them disappeared into the crowd around the roulette wheel.

Drake chose to let Ted's taunt go. He pulled Alexis deeper into his embrace, tucking her head into the nook between his neck and shoulder. The tempo of the music was slow, the strands haunting. Although Alexis' blindness prevented them from doing any fancy footwork, they rocked and rolled nevertheless, moving their bodies so seductively, so much a public fucking of hard body to soft flesh, that all eyes in the Silver Room followed them around the dance floor. The band picked up on the heat that they were generating and changed the rhythm so that they swayed to the music in perfect time.

Their thoughts were not in perfect accord.

Drake gritted his teeth at his jealousy. He knew that his jealousy was irrational, that Alexis was not interested in Ted Peterson. Still, he couldn't help himself. He was jealous of any man who cast his eyes in the direction of his woman. She was naïve in some ways, not realizing the shockwaves that her mere presence generated in men. When she walked into a room with her natural sashay, men got real hard,

real fast. And, somehow, the fact that she could not see notched up the heat-like a blindfolded lover in foreplay.

For her part, Alexis was too wrapped in her rage to consider Drake's feelings. Only Beth's presence had stopped her from ripping Drake apart. He had dared treat her as if she were a hot-house flower who needed his protection. She could handle Beth and a thousand like her. She didn't need Drake to...

Her thoughts ruined her concentration on the dance steps. She stumbled and fell. In front of all those people, Beth and Ted included, she stumbled and fell, landing on her derriere with a loud thud.

"My fault. I should have..." Drake said, reaching down.

"Hey, Smith!" Ted shouted from across the room. "You better buy your woman a stick and a tin cup. Or maybe your bitch needs a better guide dog."

Drake turned, intending to silence Ted Peterson. *Permanently.*

"Get me out of here," Alexis pleaded.

Only the plea, the soft plea, in her voice stopped Drake. He had never heard her sound like that, so frail, so broken, and so in need of his help.

He gathered her shawl and her purse and shepherded her from the restaurant. They drove to her Lincoln townhouse in deafening silence. Knowing that the storm was about to break, Drake threw off his jacket and loosened his tie.

"Alexis," he said. "Let's get this over with. What did I do wrong *this* time?"

Her sightless eyes skewered him and she needed no further provocation.

"How could you treat me like that?" she said.

"Wait a minute."

"No, *you* wait a minute."

"If I was out of line..."

"If!"

"Okay, okay. I screwed up."

"You humiliated me," she accused.

"Humiliated? Let's take this down a few pegs, okay?"

"Don't ever, *ever*, create a situation in which I can't choose."

"What are you taking about?" Drake racked his brain. "The dance?"

"Exactly."

"We've danced before."

"But you didn't ask me. You made it impossible for me to refuse."

"Well, you could have said no."

"Yanking my hand, dragging me along, steering me around..."

"I thought... Look, Beth can be vicious. I don't want you in her line of fire."

"Beth! *Fuck* her! *Fuck* Beth Bledsoe and the white horse she rode in on. This is not about her. This is about you and me. When will you learn that I don't need your help?"

Alexis spat out the last words, her sightless violet eyes flashing. When she spun around, giving him her back, he ran his fingers through his hair, pulling at his ash-golden locks until one curl fell forward to grace his broad brow. He didn't want to argue with her. He only wanted to love her. He spread out his hands, the muscle at the line of his mouth beating with a dull rhythm. He sought the right words.

"It won't happen again," he vowed.

At the solemnity in his voice, she reached for him. Within the space of a heartbeat, she was in his arms. Their kiss was a sweet affirmation of their love.

Drake's lips slanted across her mouth, begging for entry. She took him in, welcoming him, and their tongues dueled, exploring the recesses, the slick, hot, hungry recesses of each other, until they merged into one. She whimpered then, a throaty sound emanating from deep within her, that hailed the flow of her juices, that her tender, slippery, *wanting* vulva was ready to take him in.

"I'm spending the night?" he asked. His hand was at the base of her spine. He cupped her ass, lifting her high, grinding her against his erection.

She nodded, her mind too misted by passion to speak, as she led him into her bedroom and pushed him onto her bed.

They kissed and caressed, hands tearing at clothing until they were both nude. She climbed on top of his powerful body, snaking over him, roaming her hands over the sleek hills and hard valleys of his body as she went, low, lower, lowest, until she wrapped her hand around the thick, broad head of his prick. She stroked it, petted it, until the crystal clear glisten of his essence shot into her hand. At his gasp, at his buck, as he spun her under him, she reached over to the sideboard, feeling for a square foil.

His reach was surer.

"There's some things a man prefers to do himself," Drake said. His voice was deep, husky as if whiskey-coated.

"A man's got to do, what a man's got to do," she quipped, her lips busy kissing that warm, honeyed indentation near his navel.

He opened the drawer and found a condom. His hand was near the phone when it rang with a loud, piercing squeal that threatened to destroy the moment.

"Let it ring!" he said. He ripped open the foil with his teeth.

The ringing persisted as Alexis' hand returned to his cock, stroking him from his root, where his balls nestled in the white-gold glory of hair, to his bulging tip.

Drake pushed her hand away and rolled the condom in place.

Ring. Ring. *Ring.*

He wedged his knee between her thighs, making room for himself.

Riiiiiiiiiiiiing!

"I can't," she moaned. She scooted under his arm, past his broad chest and shoulder, to hit the speaker button on the phone.

"Who the hell changed the contracts?" The voice of her boss, Randolph McCord of McCord Diversified, barked through the line. Then, the line went dead with the abrupt slam of the receiver.

"Changed the contracts? *Changed the contracts*," Alexis said.

She turned to Drake.

She heard him curse, violently, darkly, profanely.

She knew-she *knew*-that he had changed the contracts.

"I can explain," Drake said, circling the bed to walk towards her. He took her by her shoulders, holding her to his chest, until her head tilted back, and her long, rosewood tresses brushed his arm.

"Get out!" Alexis said.

"Let me explain. Trust me."

Crack!

Drake's head jerked from the force of her blow. He glared at her with reproachful eyes.

"Get the *hell* out."

"Okay. I'll leave. But I'll say this before I go. For months, I've been walking on tiptoes, tipping around you, trying to prove myself. I've bitten my tongue, *damn it*, to hold back my anger, to let you flaunt your arrogant independence, doing anything to make you happy. For you not to trust me..." He stopped, shaking his head. His face was a compelling blend of anger and of sadness. "Why did I ever think that you could come to love me when all you love is your false pride?"

He slapped on his pants, found his jacket, and walked away. When he padded, barefoot, to the door, a vase sailed past his head, crashing against the wall, landing as shattered glass at his feet. He did not pause. He did not look back. He opened the door and closed the door, quietly. There was silence in the townhouse, and then, the sound of raw, aching tears.

Chapter 6

In the two weeks since Alexis had slapped his face and kicked him out, Drake's mind had replayed every moment that he had spent with her, from their first kiss, to their passion, to the phone call from Randolph McCord. He had remembered every detail of her face, of her walk, of her soft moans when he brought her to climax. He had remembered, yearned and wanted.

How could she think that I would betray her?

I'd be damned before I pulled a Martha Stewart on my woman.

He had not anticipated the speed of events. McCord's telephone call had caught him off-guard. Before he could marshal his thoughts, she had ordered him to leave.

She didn't even give me a chance to explain.

But, damn it, did I try? Did I really try? No, I accepted defeat, left to lick my wounds like a whipped puppy. He focused on that last thought. Well, that's gonna change. Most definitely, change. It's clear that my woman needs a few lessons in trust.

Drake grabbed his jacket and headed for the door.

Chapter 7

Within moments, Drake was standing at the entrance to Alexis' Lincoln townhouse. Before he could activate the intercom, the door was thrown open.

Alexis froze, sensing someone's presence. When the scent of Armani reached her, she thought that the misery of the past weeks had pushed her over the edge, to the shady side of crazy, until her hand encountered solid, warm flesh.

"Alexis, I..."

"Drake, I..."

"I'm coming in," he declared in a voice that brooked no contradiction. "We will talk. No, I'll talk, you'll listen, and we'll get past this."

"I was on my way to your office," Alexis said, softly. She stepped back from the doorway, gesturing with her hand for him to enter.

She led the way through the spacious foyer to the living room. Drake strode close behind her, and his eyes strayed to the switch-sway of her round buttocks in the tight skirt. He barely restrained himself, controlled himself from caressing her lush ripeness, from reaching out his hand to bunch her skirt around her waist, from shoving her against the wall, face-first. He would rip down her panties, open her pink slit, enter her from behind, ignoring her slight gasp of pain, to assert his rights as primitive man.

His eyes swept the space, taking in the patio windows, the sunlit study, the gauzy curtains separating the bedroom, to linger on the canopied bed. He'd always loved her place. *Goddamnit!* He had missed it. Unbidden, his thoughts turned to her body lying upon the bed, naked, hot, sweaty, writhing as the sunlight bathed her private parts. The imagery brought forcibly to his mind an Arabian night and a captive maiden, a desert sheik and a bacchanal feast, complete with a dancing slave-girl.

"Please sit down," she said with stilted formality, gesturing to the sofa.

He hesitated, waiting to see where she would sit. When she chose the chair, he ignored the sofa and grabbed the footrest, pulling it close to her chair.

"Okay, the *first* thing you're going to get straight..."

"I'm sorry, so, so sorry," she stammered, taking his hand in hers. When their fingers intertwined, palm-to-palm, his anger melted.

He placed his hands on either side of her face and pulled her towards him. Their mouths were close, but not touching. The moment was a million moments in time as salty tears trailed down her cheeks to land as teardrops on her blouse. Their kiss was a tender mending that turned passionate, until she gently freed herself. He released her, but not before his tongue darted out to lick away her few, remaining tears.

"Look only!" she scolded, smiling.

"Impossible!" he said, and took her back in his arms.

The chair became their haven of love. Finding the footrest too restrictive, he swept her up, cradling her in his lap. Their mouths plundered. Their hands caressed. They were lost in a world of sensation, losing track of time, only her moans of passion and his grunts of pleasure breaking the silence of the room. Until the telephone rang.

"Whatever you do, don't get that," Drake ordered, as he pressed kisses along the soft satin of her neck. His hand crept up her leg, finding its way under her skirt to her inner thigh, to that secret place where her leg and hip joined. He teased her with light, little spirals, his fingertips barely brushing her skin.

"I ... learn ... from ... my ... mistakes," Alexis said disjointedly, her thinking bewitched by the motion of his hand, the circular pattern becoming wider and wider. She followed each rotation with her mind, waiting for its conclusion, anticipating the next.

The telephone continued to ring until the answering machine clicked on.

Randolph McCord's voice came through the speaker.

"Girlie, there's no fool like an old fool," McCord barked. "I can't believe I doubted you. I'm sitting here at the breakfast table-Jessie just gave me a sugar tit-and I opened the *Financial New and World Reports*. I can't believe it. Huh-huh-huh. You did a mighty fine job with those contracts after all-you must've had an inside source. No, don't answer that. Well-well-well ... huh-huh-huh."

The line went dead with the sound of McCord's yahoo and with the slam of his newspaper against the table.

Alexis sat up, shaking herself free from Drake's arms. McCord's telephone call, that one word, *contracts*, had renewed her pain and anger, her uncertainty and fear, and had ripped open a wound that had only begun to heal.

Drake let fly a crude curse, wishing that he had a dark hole to stuff McCord in. He didn't want to waste time with explanations. He wanted to make love to his woman, to plant himself so deeply in her that his body would be imprinted upon hers.

Drake let Alexis slip from his arms, before saying, "About the contracts, I changed them because, well, you know why now."

"Yeah."

"I did it because I love you."

"I know that. I *know*. But when I brought you in, when we agreed..."

"We defined our roles..."

"I was to handle the negotiations," Alexis said, pointing to her chest. "You were in charge of the legal-stuff, the whereases, the aforesaid, the heretofores."

"That was the deal," Drake concurred, nodding his head, very lawyer-like.

"So what happened?"

"Did you expect me to just stand by..."

"I can take my own licks when I negotiate a bad deal..."

"...let you take a hit?" he finished.

"So you what? Used your sources, not all of them legit? That's your rep, right?"

"Uh-huh," Drake grunted, noncommittal. "I regret that you got hurt."

"You could have told me."

"No way I'm gonna involve my woman in insider trading."

"Maybe you wanted to take me down a peg."

"Do you think I'm that petty, that I would betray you like that?"

He tried to take her back into his arms. She pushed his hands away and stood. His eyes followed her as she walked across the room.

"You did betray me, Drake. Oh, I'm grateful. How could I not be? But you took the decision out of my hands. Beth was right. You *do* want to fix everything."

He strode over to stand behind her as she rested her head on the glass of the patio windows.

"You claim that I'm overprotective," Drake said, "but I'm not. I..."

"No, sometimes you're simply Neanderthal. You sprout sensitivity to women's issues, but you worked against the feminists in Saudi Arabia."

"That was business. You don't know that whole story, so don't talk about it."

He turned her to face him. They were face-to-face, breast-to-breast.

"Don't you understand?" he said, giving her a little shake. "I *love* you! I would do anything for you. Risk everything. I'd set the world on fire, destroy every living thing, to spare you one moment of unhappiness, one moment of pain."

The poignancy of his words moved her. Not what he said, but how he said it. She could dislike it, rail against it, but his desire to protect her had made him intervene with the McCord contracts, an act that could cost him plenty.

Her reflections brought her closer to understanding the breadth of his love, love that she had to accept in its entirety. She could not pick and choose for that would be false pride-as he had claimed.

"I want your love," she said, sighing. "You risked everything. Jail..."

"Sh-shhhhh. I shake the law, not break it."

"It's so much to accept when I've spent my life not accepting anything."

His arms tightened around her, like iron bands of love.

"Don't you think I'm scared too? If we're committed, really committed, we can make this work. I know we can, Alexis."

"I want it to. I don't want to be without you ever again. I've been miserable these past weeks. Not to hear your voice, not to feel your touch, not to kiss you."

With every word, she leaned closer, her lips seducing him. She expected him to seal their mending, the new beginning, with a kiss and was surprised when he did not. Then she realized, with woman-wise wisdom, that he needed to know-had to know-that she wanted him.

She brushed her lips against his, then her tongue. She nibbled and gnawed, urging a response. She got none and his detachment baited her. She ran her tongue along his angled jaw, pausing at the corner of his mouth, to press kisses there. She returned to lick his lips, to taste him as she ran her fingers through the glorious strands of his hair.

He jerked away from her probing tongue, feigning displeasure. But she would not be denied. She clutched two fistfuls of his hair and pulled him into the kiss. Her lips became insistent, her tongue impetuous, demanding to mate with his.

He refused and his refusal enflamed her.

She ran her hands across his chest, enjoying the feel of his steel-hard body through the bulky fabric of his sweater. Her hands lingered on his nipples, hard and pointy, and she knew that his pretend indifference was crumbling. She stroked the hollow of his stomach, then downward to the bulge between his legs. She gripped him.

Her tactic surprised him and he caught his breath at it. With difficulty, he maintained the pretence. But when her hand unbuckled his belt and he heard the metallic hiss of his zipper, he could not prevent a gasp from escaping his lips. She took advantage of her small victory and inserted her tongue. She plundered his mouth, leaving no haven unloved.

He yielded to the pressure of her hand on his chest, letting himself be pushed to the gauze curtains of the bedroom. Step by step, with each step accented by a kiss, he walked backwards until the canopied bed stopped his progress.

Obedient to her shove, he tumbled on his back, allowing her to crawl on top.

"Our roles should be reversed, considering the decor," he quipped. "I should be the masterful sheik and you the submissive slave-girl."

"Change is good."

"You're going to undress me?"

"That's my plan."

She suited action to words, pulling off one boot and then the other. Each fell with a careless thud. She paid little heed, intent on the next article of clothing. She seized his sweater, giving it an upward yank.

"Can I help?" he asked.

"No! I want to do this all by myself."

She gave the sweater another yank, succeeding this time in pulling it over his head. She threw it like a jettisoned Frisbee to land in a heap in the corner of the room.

Next, she struggled with the clinging corduroy of his pants, jerking it roughly over his hips until the zipper

cut low, where his flat stomach blended into the coarse, hairy delta between his legs.

"Careful," he said, as he popped free. Long and free.

"Hush!"

She searched for his stiffness, finding it standing proud.

"It's amazing how it stands up like that," she mumbled, stroking the full length of him. She fingered the swollen tip. Drops of his pearly wetness flowed and she felt a similar rush of her juices.

"Enough! Finish it, sweetheart, *finish it!*" he shouted. His hips made pumping motions, obeying the command of his brain to mate.

"Lie still! No further until you stop moving."

She paused, listening. She found a sealed foil and ripped it. Keeping him aroused with her tongue, she rolled the condom down, delighting in every jerk of his cock. She flipped her body like an experienced courtesan, to land on his erection, taking him in one full, downward thrust. She impaled herself to the hilt.

"Damn!" He grunted the words between gritted teeth.

"Damn is *right!*" she gritted too, as she settled herself around him.

She placed her hands on either side of him and using the bed as leverage, she raised and lowered herself. She took the entire length of him in strong, sure, quick strokes, riding him, moving and quaking, her knees pressed taut against his waist. Her full breasts jiggled, as she rose and lowered herself, her fingers curling into his backside, her vulva thrusting against the short, frisky hairs at the root of his prick. She could hear the friction, the scraping of flesh against flesh; she could feel the white, pearly essence of her coiled in her middle fly free to rush down the sides of her walls, drenching the bed beneath. She was bouncing, arching, and reaching the pinnacle, she collapsed-exhausted, depleted, sated-as he sought his fulfillment.

He tossed her on her back with such speed that she gasped from it, her body recoiling as he plunged down. He bracketed her thighs with his hands, his large, square hands, separating her, opening her, widening her until her legs were a perfect V. He dug in deep, deeper, pumping, pumping, the muscles in his firm ass flexing with each thrust. His head fell forward to find its rest in the soft swan of her neck. His entire body pressed her into the mattress, his long frame covering her, so close, so *pasted*, that their sweat married. He grabbed her ankles, pulling them around his waist, grunting when she moaned, when she burrowed her heels into his back, when she lifted her hips to welcome him anew. She screamed his name, causing him to bang into her with the fierceness of a mighty piston, screaming too as he fell, exhausted, depleted, sated.

They were a tangle of bodies in twisted sheets, so intertwined that there was no beginning and no ending. In the heavy, thick mist of the aftermath, he placed a kiss on her damp curls. They caressed, dream-like, as the final waves of passion receded.

"You called me *sweetheart*," she murmured. She glared at him, her bottom lip the classic pout. "I liked it. I love you, Drake Smith."

"Marry me, Alexis. Spend your life with me."

She went still, her body stiffening. Her hands fluttered like the gentle flapping of white doves, and she turned her head to bury her face in the hollow of her shoulder.

The silence grew between them, broken only by the ticking of the alarm clock.

"You know," Drake said offhandedly, as if he had not asked the most important question of his life.

"When a man asks a woman to marry him, he usually gets an answer." He bunched the pillow behind his head, letting his arm rest there. The muscle in his upper arm flexed and flexed again, the only evidence of his unease.

"Alexis, I utterly refuse to talk to your hair, no matter how beautiful it is." He rubbed the rose-flecked strands, so like silk, between his fingers. He turned her over and tilted her face up to look at him. What he read in her violet eyes made his heart hammer against his rib cage.

"Hey, hey," he soothed. "I know that you're not ready to marry me yet. But I wanted you to know how I feel and where I want our relationship to go."

"I love you, *I do*," Alexis vowed. "Marriage? No ... out of the question."

"It can't be. I love you. You love me. We get married. Men and women have been doing it for centuries." He tried for a light touch. "Come on, make an honest man out of me."

"I'll be with you in any other way, but..."

"We've something very special. I don't want to lose it."

"I can't marry you," she said, her voice a whisper. "I couldn't do that to you."

"What are you saying? Do *what* to me?"

"I can't marry you ... because I may die."

Chapter 8

On this mid-week evening, the Silver Dollar Casino was deserted, except for a smattering of couples and the usual drunks and regulars. Business was so slow that a few of the backroom girls had wandered out, bored or hunting for prey. Jessie Dane, the ever-efficient madam, had already picked up the receipts for the night and was in her office, working on her accounts.

The last customers left, but Drake did not leave with them. Instead, he hunched further over a table in the dark corner of the lounge, not ceasing the contemplation of his drink. He was oblivious to everyone and everything, except the bottle at his elbow and the Chivas Regal in his glass. He searched for answers there. As if by the power of suggestion, the whiskey swirled, changing into gloomy shadows that suited his mood to perfection.

He swallowed the rest of his drink, giving the impression of a man who had swallowed a few too many. But he was quite sober. He was not at the Silver Dollar to drown his sorrows, but to get a final glimpse of Alexis before she caught her plane and flew off to her death.

Drake did not cease the contemplation of his now empty glass when Ted Peterson sauntered over, tray in hand. Standing in front of Drake's table, the bartender assumed a stance that he thought commanded respect.

"What's the matter?" Ted asked, dropping the tray on the table with a resounding clang. "Trouble in paradise? Oh, that's right. Your honey's getting herself fixed tonight."

Drake looked up. He poured himself another drink and took a gulp, letting the liquor roll around on his tongue. With silent, yet speaking eyes, he looked Ted over.

"You won't hold on to a chick like Cash," Ted said, taking the bait. "Once she gets herself fixed, she'll see the handwriting on the wall. You'll be history. She'll move on to the next man, someone just as rich but younger, a high performance stud who'll keep her coming, give it to her rough, right up the ass. Hey! Is your son busy?"

He laughed, his laughter nasty and cruel, as he turned away. In his amusement, he did not see the fury leap into Drake's eyes, but he felt it when Drake's five fingers, more like twisted tendons of iron than of flesh, wrapped themselves around his throat.

Drake squeezed tight, cutting off Ted's air, making him gasp for breath. He increased the pressure until Ted's eyes popped, until Ted fought the dark edge of unconsciousness. Before the darkness overtook him, Ted felt his feet leave the safety of the carpet and felt cloudy water seep from his eyes. His life flashed before him. He knew death. In the very last seconds of his life, he was released to fall in slow motion to the floor, to rest there, too tired, too defeated, to do anything more than to clutch at his windpipe and to bellow his depleted lungs.

Drake wiped the sudden perspiration from his temple. The heavy, gold signet ring on the fifth finger of his left hand flashed with evil intent.

"Get up!" Drake ordered, kicking Ted's leg.

Ted staggered to his feet, taking more time rising than Drake thought necessary, for Drake helped him with a sharp elbow to the ribs. From the impact, Ted swayed but found his footing. He heard Drake's voice as if from a distance.

"I owed you that, Peterson," Drake said, grabbing Ted's shirtfront. He backed Ted up, jacking him up against the lounge wall. "Pay attention 'cause I intend to say this once. Don't ever let my woman's name come out of your mouth again. Don't even think about her, and if you see her on the sidewalk, you cross the street *and* you walk the other way."

Drake punctuated his order by slamming Ted against the wall and then let him slide to the floor. He stepped around Ted's crumpled body to return to the table. There, he reached for the Scotch bottle and tossed down a slug. The liquor burned through him, from his fingertips to the pit of his gut, calming him. No one looking at him would have believed that he had almost committed a murder.

But Ted Peterson knew that only Drake's forbearance had let him cheat death. This knowledge was strangely liberating. Ted's feet no longer felt like lead weights; his eyes were no longer foggy and unfocused. He shuffled to the bar to splash cold water on his face. Looking in the glass over the counter, he straightened his collar, noticing as he did so, the purplish palm print at his windpipe.

Drake leaned his head against the cushions of the booth, his eyes shuttered to slits of blue light. The rage that he just felt made him think of his foster son, Johnny, and those days in Saudi Arabia. Though Drake would never hurt Alexis-as Johnny had hurt women and children in the name of patriotism-he had been sorely tempted to shake some sense into his woman.

"I can't marry you ... because I may die."

Her words returned to him, plunging his thoughts back to that evening.

* * * *

"What are you talking about?" he had asked. "Retinitis pigmentosa isn't fatal."

"This doesn't have anything to do with RP," Alexis said. "That's not true. It does, sort of, but then it

doesn't. I don't know where to start... I can't explain it if you're going to scowl."

"I'm *not* scowling, but I *want* an answer."

"Yes, you are. Just because I'm blind doesn't mean I don't know when your face gets that rugged, lined *I plan to kick ass* look-a look that I love by the way."

"Don't deflect, Alexis," Drake said, with a wag of his finger. "It won't work with me. *Explain!*"

"I'm going to. Give me a second. Jeez. There's no need to yell."

Drake bit back the acerbic response on the tip of his tongue. In his opinion, yelling was perfectly acceptable given the circumstances.

"Get dressed," she said, reaching for her robe. "I'll fix us a snack."

Drake sensed that she was stalling and threw on his clothes. Within seconds, he was standing in the entrance to her walk-in kitchen. He watched her place crusty French bread and slices of Gouda on a serving tray and opened a bottle of wine. To him, she seemed to dawdle over every action. He took the tray from her hands and led the way to the living room. He waited, as tense as an arrow in a bow, for her to begin. When she picked at her bread, he set his wine glass down with a snap.

"Okay. Talk. What's going on? Good God," he added when she rushed into his chest and circled her arms around his waist. Like a child with a plush toy, she snuggled her nose in the soft fabric of his sweater.

"Tell me," he coaxed. He ran his hand along her shoulder to lock her to his heart.

Her hair fell forward, shading her face. She bit her lip, pausing, and when she spoke, her voice was flat and faraway.

"It all started long before I came to Nevada, when I was working at Seung-Tell International. I heard about RIC, the Retinal Implant Center. Of course, I knew about the research underway, but a marketable implant wasn't expected for another ten years. RIC, however, seemed to be making breakthrough after breakthrough."

"Wait. I don't understand," Drake interrupted. "Are you saying that this RIC has found a cure for RP?"

"No, there's no cure. RIC has developed experimental surgery..."

"Surgery. *Experimental surgery...*"

* * * *

"You just gonna sit there, staring into that shot glass," Jessie Dane said. She stood before Drake's table with her head thrown back and her broad feet far apart. "Or are you going to stop Cash from making the biggest mistake of her life?"

"What do you expect me to do?" Drake asked, slowly pouring himself another drink. He trickled the dark liquid into his glass, upending the bottle until the final drops plopped out.

"So you're giving up."

"Jessie," he said, slapping the bottle on the table. "Alexis told me it's her body. It's her choice. Unless I lock her in her townhouse, there's nothing I can do."

"You're *not* gonna fix it by sitting there," Jessie snapped.

"What do you expect me to do?"

"Talk to her. Make her listen."

"I have tried. Tried! TRIED! I gave up. Okay, I give up. I couldn't convince the woman who claims to love me not to kill herself."

Drake knew that his statement was not an exaggeration. Deep down inside, he was certain, call it a frightening hunch, that Alexis would not survive the surgery.

He shook his head in disbelief. He had never felt so helpless or so frustrated. He had used every argument, but nothing had swayed her. In the end, he had wished that he *were* a desperado of the 1890's. That he could kidnap his woman, tie her up, force her to do what he wanted.

"You can choke my bartender. Yeah, I saw you."

"No kidding."

"What time's her plane?"

"Soon. I don't know."

"Damn it, Drake! Do *something*!"

"I'm a gentleman or, at least, I have the trappings of one. Gentlemen support the decisions of their ladies. Alexis chose this surgery over me, over us, over my love. There's not a damn thing that I can do about it." At those words, he felt a primal urge to track his woman down, to bend her to his will, to break her if necessary. To kiss her until she was so overcome with passion that no thought of defying his wishes would ever enter her head.

Jessie opened her mouth, a scathing retort on the tip of her tongue, but Drake brought the palm of his hand down so hard on the table that the Scotch bottle jumped.

"I can't push any harder," he said. "I would be pushing her away. I can't do that. It hurts too much. It all just hurts. I *hurt*." He swallowed hard. His next words came out through clenched teeth; low words, spoken so softly that Jessie had to strain to hear them. "It hurts to know that she doesn't love me as much as I love her."

He slumped into the leather cushions of the booth. There, he had admitted it. When the ultimate decision was made, she had chosen to risk her life on the slight possibility of sight over an unseeing life with him and his love. In some ways, her choice baffled him, for short of restoring her sight, which was beyond his power, he would have done anything to make her happy.

Jessie glared at Drake with brown eyes that held no sympathy. Just then, one of her backroom girls walked by the table. Jessie's next act was not considered and was not done for drama. It was mere reflex. She snatched the Perrier bottle from the girl's hand, shook up it, and dashed it-full-in Drake's face. She turned sharply on her heel, so sharply that she didn't see him wipe the water from his cheek or flick the droplets from his shirt.

"Men and their pride! Their stupid, pathetic pride!" she said, storming back to her office. Once there, she reached for her car keys and checked her watch. She knew that traffic would be light at this time of the night, but it was still a forty-minute drive to the airport. She found her purse, making sure that she had

cash and credit cards.

Walking to the closet, she quickly changed her shoes and grabbed her coat. As she shut the closet door, she heard the tapping of Alexis' cane.

"Jessie, are you there?" Alexis asked.

"Yeah," Jessie said, throwing her purse and coat on the desk. She twirled the executive chair and sat down with a flounce. She kicked off her pumps, propped her stocking feet up on the desk, and waited while Alexis navigated the doorway.

"I just popped in to say goodbye," Alexis said, standing there. She folded her cane shut and held it in a tight grip. "I'm heading out to Denver."

"Ah-huh."

"I couldn't go without thanking you."

"Ah-huh."

"You've been a peach from the moment I arrived."

"Ahhh-huh."

"So ... thank ... you," Alexis stammered, unnerved by Jessie's coldness.

"Wow! A thank you. That's more than I expected from a spoiled little bitch like you." Jessie swung her feet off the table and leaned across the desk. "No! Don't say a thing, not a damn thing. Sit down! There's a chair in front of you and to your left."

She waited for Alexis to obey, noticing that the blind woman looked like a child whose mama had caught her with her hand in the cookie jar and was braving herself for a scold.

"The limo is waiting. I don't have much..." Alexis began.

"Just what the *hell* do you think you're doing, Cash?" Jessie shot the question at her. "Has it ever, *ever*, occurred to you to think about anybody but yourself?"

"You don't think I should have the surgery, but..."

"Don't think! No, I don't think. This thing is jackass stupid, but you won't listen."

"I have thought about it, studied all the angles."

"You don't care about nobody but yourself."

"That's *not* true."

"It *is* true. All you care about is proving to the world that Cash Claremont can take care of herself, that she don't need nobody." Jessie paused to suck in breath before she renewed her attack. "You've turned this surgery into some big war-waging war against your man-to prove something."

"I'm doing this for him."

"Bullshit!"

"But if I could see..."

"Blindness is your issue, not his."

Jessie squinted her eyes, giving Alexis a look that was razor-sharp.

"Do you love him?" Jessie asked.

"Of course!"

"Are you willing to risk losing him over this?"

"It's a chance to see. You don't know what it's like to be blind. Never to see the changing of the seasons. To hear birds chirping, but to never see the red of the robin's breast. To walk into a public library, but to never be able read any book. To feel snowflakes on your face, but to never know if the sky is blue or white or gray. *Never to see my lover's face.*"

"We all have our crosses to bear, some heavier than others."

"Oh, well, that makes me feel *a lot* better."

Jessie grunted. "I never said it was easy. I said don't lose what you got."

"I run risks, always take chances. That's the only way I know how to live."

"Yeah, that's your rep and you wear it like a big, fat, *ugly* dress. But when you start hurting people, you're like the little sister I never had."

"I didn't know. I..." Alexis frowned and then bit her bottom lip.

"You think that because I sell flesh, I can't care."

"Of course not."

"And what about old Randy McCord and my girls?"

"Randolph McCord? He's doesn't even *like* me?"

"The hell he doesn't. Beneath that thick, gruff exterior is ... well ... more thick, gruff exterior, but that's beside the point. He's crazy about you and not because you make money for his company. He could hire anybody to do that. Never seen him so smitten."

"I didn't realize," Alexis said.

"The hell you didn't."

"I don't know. For once in my life, I *don't* know. If I back out now..."

Alexis fiddled with her cane, looping and unlooping the strap from around her wrist. She looked up as if to study Jessie's face. Although she could not see Jessie's expression, she had heard the emotion in Jessie's voice. The same emotion that was in Drake's voice these past weeks. Only then, she had refused to listen. Would she now?

"How *can* I change my mind?"

"Don't test your man's love."

"After I've made such a big issue with Drake ... with *everyone*."

"Men don't like it," Jessie said. "It's like you're testing their manhood."

"Huh. I can't believe that you'd say something like that."

"If there's one thing I know, honey, I know the men." Jessie winked broadly.

"But what would Drake..."

Chapter 9

"Think?" Drake finished, speaking from the doorway. "He'd think that his woman has finally come to her senses. And, he would love her for it."

He took Alexis in his arms.

She curled into his chest, rubbing her cheek against the soft fabric of his shirt.

"I see you dried off," Jessie said, taking in his white-gold hair in all its tousled glory. In the dim light of the casino lounge, she hadn't noticed the shadows under his eyes or the stubble on his face or the leanness of his cheeks. She glared at Alexis, planning to let her have it for the misery that she'd put him through, but stopped when she noticed the strain on the beautiful features of her face.

As if a rough hand had written it on Alexis' face, Jessie saw that the past weeks had not been easy for the younger woman. In that short time, Alexis had struggled to come to terms with her blindness, engaged in a battle royal with Drake, and fought to maintain her bravado. If she made the wrong decision, she made it without the support of the man she loved. And paid for that decision with many lonely nights.

"You two, get out of my office with that necking," Jessie ordered, smiling, a smile of a weary, world-wise woman who had experienced true love only to lose it. She knew that the journey of Drake and Alexis would not always be easy. They would have their painful entrances and exits, but their love foretold a sweet merging, a poetic completeness, which most people only dream about, few experience, and all crave.

"I've got work to do," Jessie said with another crooked smile. "Go on, git! People pay for sex around here. Go into the lounge and neck. I'll buzz that lazy bartender of mine, tell him to cash out. Champagne! You might need it. Hey! Who's gonna to pay off that limo driver?"

Locked arm in arm, Drake and Alexis ignored her rapid-fire questions. When they entered the lounge, Alexis spoke with sudden determination.

"Drake, I've got a confession to make. I came here hoping that Jessie would try to talk me out of the surgery."

"Hmm. You needed an out," he said.

"I needed to save face," she said.

"You backed yourself into a corner without a backdoor. Gutsy, lady, gutsy."

"Uh-huh. You'd think I would have know better."

"You were thinking with your heart, not your head."

"Yeah, I guess so. In the end, I didn't want to go through with it. I wasn't afraid, I was willing to take the

risk. I wanted to make you happy. I would have done anything to end this bitterness between us."

"I wasn't bitter," he denied, but there was a flicker of pain in his blue eyes.

"You were so quiet. When you stopped arguing, I thought ... I thought ... I don't know what I thought except that you were tired of it all ... that you stopped loving me."

"Never. I could *never* stop loving you."

As if to seal his vow, Drake kissed her several times, quickly, in rapid succession, making her giggle. She responded by ruffling his hair and jerking on his tie. Together, they waltzed into the dark recess of the lounge, practically prancing on air.

"I love you. I love you. I love you," Alexis said, her voice childishly singsong.

She grabbed his shirt and pulled, intending to place a hot kiss on his lips. She missed, kissing his nose, his eyes, and his cheeks instead. At that, he lifted her high in the air. They twirled together, until she shrieked for him to stop. He set her on her feet, sliding her body down his, to let go. She landed with a thud on her derriere. He burst out laughing, a rip-roaring laugh that chased away every vestige of pain.

"I thought that you were going to hold on," he said, amusement crinkling the corners of his eyes.

He bent down to help her to her feet. But she stopped him in midair.

"My cane, lover."

He handed her cane to her, watching in puzzlement as she clicked it into place. Using it for support, she rose to her feet, then curtsied with a sweeping gesture, fluttering out her skirt, her cane transformed into a ceremonial staff. Her curtsy was so low and so graceful that a dauphine would have envied it.

"Drake Smith," she began formally. "Will you do me the honor of accepting my hand in the holy state of wedlock?"

Most men would have been dismayed by such a romantic display.

Most men were not Drake Darius Smith.

Without a flicker of an eyelash, he clicked his heels, bowing.

"Alexis Marie Claremont. The honor would not be yours, but mine."

He worked off his heavy, gold signet ring and took her hand in the traditional clasp of courtship. He glided the ring past her fingertip, over the knuckle, into the sacred spot. It was sizes too big. Despite that fact, he raised her hand to his lips, kissing the ringed finger and sending tinkling jolts of love and lust through Alexis' body.

"Congratulations!" Jessie said. She was leaning against the doorjamb of the French double doors, an arm resting across her chest, a hand hidden at her hip. When she straightened her squat frame, a wicked smile of salty sin danced across her face.

"Time to celebrate!" she declared, pulling a bottle of champagne from behind her back. She tossed it at Drake, who barely had time to catch it, before she shut the door and bolted the lock.

Chapter 10

The lounge went dark.

"I think she locked us in," Drake said. "Ouch."

"What?" Alexis asked.

"I banged my knee. Damn that ... that ... that..."

"Don't say it."

"I wasn't. I couldn't. I can't think of a name graphic enough for Jessie Dane."

His eyes adjusted to the dim light. Tucking the champagne bottle in the crook of his arm, he felt his way to the double doors. He rattled the knob and yanked the handle. Although paned glass shook from his efforts, the doors didn't budge. "She *has* locked us in. What's up with that? Jessie. *Jessie!*" He slapped his palm against the wood.

"Why would she do that? She can't be serious." Alexis tucked the signet ring in her pocket, patting her skirt to make sure that the ring had sunk to the bottom.

"Who knows with *that* woman? She threw Perrier in my face."

"She never!"

"Yes, she did. Her idea of a wake-up call, I guess." Drake was making his way to the bar, feeling for tables and chairs along the way. "Damn!"

"Now what?" Alexis questioned, a frown marring the beauty of her face.

"I tripped." He bent down to rub his ankle. "Ouch! And hit my head."

Thump.

"Sh..."

"What the hell is going on?" Alexis stepped forward, straining her ears. "Drake!"

"Give me a moment," he said between gritted teeth. He was crouched over, sucking in air. Slowly, he rose to his knees and then to his feet. "I dropped the champagne bottle."

"And it fell on your foot?"

"Not exactly."

"What exactly?"

"It struck something."

"Your big toe?"

"No, something *else* that sticks out."

"Oh. Your..."

"Yeah. My..."

"Come to mama. She'll wrap her lips around it and kiss it and make it better."

"Don't tempt me," Drake chided. "I get hard from just thinking about that and this is serious. We need to get out of here. If there were a fire..." *Crash.* "I'm okay."

"Gosh, my marriage proposal must have really shaken you. I didn't know that the unflappable Drake Smith, the veteran of millions of business deals and litigator extraordinaire, could be such a klutz."

"It's a little hard to function when the lights are out."

"Huh?"

"Jessie turned off the damn lights."

"All of them?" Alexis giggled, rolling her eyes.

"Yeah, all of them."

"So, you're in the dark."

"Yes, you could say that. Yes."

"Wow! I knew sisterhood was powerful, but..."

"But what?" Drake asked. He reached the bar and with one hand on the counter, circled behind it. He found the bar phone and picked up the receiver.

"When Jessie told me off-thank god she didn't throw anything at me-she said I was like her little sister. I didn't know that she loved me so much. McCord likes me, too." Alexis shook her head in disbelief.

"You find that hard to accept?" Drake asked. "I fell in love with you from the moment I saw you. I wanted you out of your clothes, in my bed, under..."

"Now, she's turning the tables on *you* for *me*, leveling the playing field."

"By putting me in the dark..."

"So we're..."

"Dead."

"Jeez, no," Alexis denied. "Nothing that drastic. Equals. So we're equals."

"No, the phone is dead," Drake said. He returned the receiver to the cradle. At the bar, the moonlight streamed through the windows, reflecting off the mirrors, casting distorted shadows across the wall. The light in the lounge was much brighter there, and he was able to make out the cabinets and drawers under the counter. He opened one and then the other, letting each door close with a loud bam. "So Jessie thought locking us in, with me in the dark, was a good thing?" he said. "Hmm. Keeps me off balance, from exploiting my hand after your ... your..."

"My capitulation."

"I was going to say decision about the surgery," Drake finished.

"Yep. Jessie's smart *and* tough," Alexis said. She had weaved through the tables to reach the bar. The moonlight caught the flecks in her long, untamed tresses and made her skin appear like the pink and white

petals of a China rose. "What a racket you're making."

Drake was rummaging through the last cabinet. Finding a corkscrew, he kicked the door closed with his foot. There was the clinking of fine stemware against fine stemware as he walked towards Alexis with two wine goblets dangling from between his strong fingers and with the bottle of champagne tucked under his arm. The corkscrew bulged from his pants pocket.

"Who am I to undermine the plots and ploys of Jessie Dane," he said, taking her hand to lead her to the ornate windows, to the sensual shadows of semi-darkness. There, he settled himself on the carpet, then tugged on her hand, bringing her to her knees in front of him, her skirt fanning out around them. He uncorked the bottle with a pop and a wisp of effervescent curled in the air. "I propose that we celebrate our engagement with the champagne that Jessie gave us."

He poured out two glasses and placed one in her outstretched hand.

"To us and to our life together," he said, clicking his glass against hers.

"To us," she said, smiling, a smile brighter than a thousand suns.

They sipped in silence, savoring the moment. Then, their lips met. Their kiss was the sweetest satisfaction, the purest pleasure, embodying their love and their future.

"Do you know," Alexis lied boldly as she seated herself on Drake's muscular thigh, "that in medieval times, alcohol was used as a perfume?"

"Really?" he said.

"Uh-huh."

"Considering that knights didn't wash, I guess ale smelled better."

"Nonsense. It was erotic. The lady would dab wine at the pressure points."

She swirled her finger in the champagne and then dabbed it behind her ear.

"Take a whiff," she said.

"Hmmm. Did they put it anywhere else?"

"The inner wrist was considered a very sexy place."

She dabbed a touch there, holding out her wrist.

Drake inhaled both the scent of her and of the wine and the weighty combination went right to his head. His tongue darted out to lick where he had sniffed, his lips trailing butterfly kisses on her satiny smooth skin.

"Let me try," he whispered. With his forefinger, he stroked the champagne along the long column of her neck to that sexy area at the beginning of her breastbone to her deep, voluptuous hollow where the buttons of her blouse stopped him. He fingered her there, making abstract patterns of the senses, only to replace his finger with his lips. Enticed by the delight, she shifted slightly in his lap, curling into him, until they lips met.

"Anywhere else?" he asked, between kisses. He brushed his knuckles across her breasts, rejoicing when her nipples pointed and warred with the fabric of her shirt.

"The shoulders," she said. "Medieval garb could be quite revealing."

"Show me."

With fingers that were all thumbs, she unbuttoned her blouse and wrapped it, sarong-like, around her chest. Her breasts were pushed high, like pump cushions, and teased him with their fullness. She took another sip of champagne. The amber liquid blended with her tawny lipstick and he watched, fascinated, as she slowly licked the contours of her mouth.

With a gentle shove, he shouldered her onto her back, his body covering her completely. His lips grazed hers, brushing back and forth, to then slant across her mouth, seeking penetration. His tongue was wet and firm, yet feathery too, as he explored the contours of her mouth, circled the rim of her white teeth, nibbled at her bottom lip.

"Did knights also use alcohol as perfume?" he asked, kissing the delicate curve of her jaw. Already, he was hard and rigid and wanting her, his prick curled up, hugging his stomach, the tip threatening to peep out over his waistband. He felt a tiny sliver of his essence slip forth and he grunted from the pain. These past weeks without her in his bed had played havoc with his sex drive, and he had been forced to ease the rock in his pants with spit and one hand. But, no longer. She was there beneath him, her legs open like scissors, her skirt bunched up around her hips. All he had to do was pump her, pump her, and let his manhood find its nest.

"Did knights use alcohol?" he asked again.

"You don't need it," Alexis said.

She breathed in deep, inhaling the fruity scent of Armani. If she lived for a thousand years, she would never tire of that scent. It *was* Drake. Strong, potent, and romantic. The scent struck at the heart of her womanhood, struck at her sex organ, urging her eagle-spread for him.

He ran his hands up and down her legs, sweeping along her stockings and past her panties, to finger her lace garter belt. He got harder thinking about the dual sides of her: the risk-taking CFO and the loving, wanton woman. Both matched his sexual desire thrust for thrust, took all of him in push for push, rivaled him stroke for stroke.

He removed her stockings, trying not rush, but the combo feel of their silky smoothness and her skin pushed him to the edge. He ripped them down and tossed them away. He dipped his head low, past the curve of her stomach, past her delta-he placed kisses there-past her dimpled knees, to her feet. He took her toes into his mouth, nursing each one. When his tongue drove into a tiny crevice, a shaft of desire struck her.

At his caress, a blaze of white-hot heat ripped through her, and she cursed his pants that still covered his hips, that prevented flesh on flesh. Reaching her hand between their sweat slick bodies, she kissed him and continued kissing him, her tongue thrusting deep and sure, as her hand slid downward to the hard, tremendous bulge that rested, restlessly, under his fly. She unbuckled his belt and the button of his pants and eased the zipper down a crack, enough for him to spring forth, wet and large and slippery, into her hands. She slid her hands along the length of his cock, exploring every thick inch of him. Her thumb massaged the ridges, where the veins pulsed with energy, to the engorged head. She jumped as if scalded by the white heat when he moved in her hand, pumping himself briskly, seeking the friction. She knew that he was ready and she wanted him. Yet, he pulled away, pulling free from her hand. She wrapped her calf around his, to draw him back to her. Yet, he held himself aloof, lifting himself, lifting his weight, from her.

She squirmed beneath him, gripping the carpet. She raised her pelvis high as if to buck him off and to suck him in too, until he quieted her with a large hand sprayed at her middle. He toyed with her navel and then reached lower, finding her inner bud. He flicked it and she almost lost control, her hips gyrating in a loud, unspoken message.

"Shhh, shhh," he murmured. "Not yet. Answer the question. Did knights ... use ... wine ... like perfume?"

"Yes... No... I don't know," she said, interested only in reaching climax.

"Here," he said, ripping off his shirt. "Place some here."

But she was too ensnared in the whirlwind of her hunger to comply. He took her hand, swirling her fingers in the chilled champagne. He brought her fingers to his chest, dabbing the wetness there. The cold wine touched his heated chest firing up the heat of his lust. "Suck," he commanded, "suck." He grabbed her head, guiding her mouth to his nipple.

She laved one then the other, the coarseness of his chest hair teasing her nose.

He grabbed the glass of champagne and dashed the contents on his chest.

"Dry me, sweetheart," he said. His eyes nearly shut, he saw her tongue dart out to obey. He threw his head back as she feasted, her tongue going lower and lower, finding the salty places around his navel, until his clothing hindered her.

Quickly, he shed his pants and briefs and heeled off his boots. With a wave of his hand, he poured the liquor over his erect cock. The wetness ran down, seeping over his balls, soaking the carpet beneath.

"They must have put some there," he said, anticipating the feel of her lips on his cock, the movement of her tongue, the touch of her soft cheek. "See if you like this better than Armani."

But she was otherwise occupied. In the few moments while he was undressing she had flopped onto her belly. The plush carpet created a delightful friction and she had ceased to wait.

He got a view of her sweetly rounded ass, going up and down, as she brought herself to grinding satisfaction.

"Perhaps, now?" he said with silent mirth when her carpet-fuck slowed and then stopped. He led her hands to his cock, still standing tall and proud, growing like a tree from the root of his hips.

"What? You put champagne on that?"

"Uh-huh. Come over here and experience your lips, champagne, and me."

"I couldn't," Alex said. "I mean, I've never done anything like that."

"Al-ex-is. This is no time for games."

"I just couldn't, Drake. Nice girls don't do that. I couldn't give you ... head..."

"Enough!" he roared, then pounced.

But she was quicker, feigning blindly to dodge his lunge. Though he was able to grab her foot and held onto her shapely ankle, she easily kicked free. She was on her feet and running within the space of a heartbeat.

"If you want me to do that," she said, "you will have to catch me."

"Come back here!"

He was hot in pursuit, but at a disadvantage when she ran into the dark recesses of the casino lounge. There, she was in her element, for she had spent most of her life in darkness. She ran between the tables and around the booths and chairs, bumping into them, crashing into them, uncaring that tomorrow she would be black and blue, only her laughter giving away her location. She teased him without mercy, overturning a chair or a table then dancing away. He was a comical figure: buck-naked; wet from champagne and semen; his cock jutting in the wind.

He stopped, planning his strategy. The primitive male hunting instincts returned.

Dropping to all fours, he sneaked up behind her, getting a gorgeous view of her derriere, cocked high in the air. She was on her knees, behind the bar and poised for flight, crouched like a sleek cat, needing only a long, twitching tail.

He moved closer, without a sound. Somehow, she sensed his presence. She leaped, intending to run to another hiding place. Fortune did not favor her. She tripped over a storage box, falling as he lunged. He timed his jump flawlessly and caught her in midair, cushioning the force of the fall. They had barely touched the floor before she was fighting like a wildcat. But she was no match for his overwhelming strength.

He held her captive, a wolfish smile of triumph touching his lips.

"Where were we?" he asked. He wrapped one hand around her upper arm, holding her in a secure grip. "Oh, yes. You're going to take care of something."

"If you insist," she said, allowing Drake to take her hand.

She was the mistress of dissemination. As a child, she had excelled in 'let's pretend'. As an adult, in her career as a freewheeling financial wiz, she often feigned defeat before moving in for the kill.

"Come with me, sweetheart," Drake said in the classic voice of a cartoon villain. All he needed was a stovepipe hat and a Snidely Whiplash moustache to twirl.

"If you say so."

"Oh, I *do* say so."

"But wouldn't it be better if I did it here?"

"Nope, I want to be..."

"But I could get on my knees." Alexis' hand searched for the sink sprinkler. "You'd like that, wouldn't you? I could get on my knees, kneel down in front of you." Her hand crawled along the counter, feeling the cold metal of the sink. "You could stand over me, so-so-so-proud, with your legs apart, with your hands on your hips, like a conquering hero." She only needed to find the faucet, find it before he realized that her surrender was far too easy.

"So you want to be my slave-girl."

"Oh, oh yes, in-deed-y, more than anything."

"Hmmm. I don't know."

"But I'd love to be your slave-girl, like Jeannie for Major Nelson."

"I sense that you have a rebellious streak."

"No, no, I'm here to service you, you-you-you *magnificent stud of a man*."

Drake chuckled, a rich laugh that crinkled the corners of his eyes.

"I'd do anything, just anything, to please you," Alexis said, reaching up, grasping the faucet tap.

"Then come here and kiss me like a good slave-girl should." Drake slackened his grip, letting go of her hand, allowing her to inch away from him.

She had to be quick, her timing perfect. She couldn't fumble, botch it. She would have only one chance. She was so nervy from anticipation that her hand trembled.

"A kiss, of course, my lord and master..."

Now was her chance. Drake leaned into her and towered over her, rubbing his day-old beard against the smooth skin of her cheek. She reached her hand down, casually, as if to caress him.

Instead, her hand took an abrupt detour.

She snatched the sprinkler, turning on the faucet with one fluid motion. By chance, her aim was on-target, almost stellar. He yelped when the icy water struck his face and chest.

Free, she dropped the sprinkler and pranced to the end of the bar, her movements haughty and supreme. "Nah-nah-na-nah-naaaaah."

Drake tossed the wetness from his hair, slicking the golden-ash strands back from his face. "Ahhhh, so my slave-girl wants to play in the water." He picked up a discarded bottle of Miller Lite. His fingers wrapped around the neck of the bottle and he shook it up, hard, with long, sure strokes as if he were jerking himself off. The beer exploded, striking her at her waist. He watched as the liquid trailed down, mingling with her fine hair, leaving a foamy path. He had never been more envious as he imagined the erotic taste of her juices mixed with the sharp tang of the beer.

Alexis retaliated immediately and the water war of the century was on. They spared no item on the counter, using every bottle, every cup, and every glass as a weapon, hurling wet missiles with deadly yet harmless accuracy.

Running out of ammunition, Alexis threw the only thing at hand-a beer bottle.

"Alexis, don't throw that! Don't! *Ugh!*"

There was silence in the room and no return fire.

"Drake... Drake... *Drake!*"

She felt her way in the chaotic jumble of furniture and overturned boxes and bottles. Her hand came in contact with leather-his discarded boots-then warm flesh. She frisked his body, wondering if he had been struck unconscious from the blow.

"My God! Drake, are you alright?"

He grabbed her.

"Gotcha!"

"You cheat!"

"Truce." He held her firmly in his arms. "I surrender."

"I'm sorry. If I'd hit you..."

"You weren't even close."

"Drake... Drake..." She could only say his name. In her fear, she needed the affirmation of life. "Make love to me."

He saw her fears and understood.

He lifted her onto the table-top of the bar. He swung his torso over to join her there, climbing on top of her. Their legs intertwined. Their bodies glimmered in the moonlight, their shadows dancing across the ceiling in surreal shades of dark and light.

He kissed her, drinking deep from her lips, nuzzling the cleft between her breasts, drowning in the scent that was uniquely hers.

"I wish that I could see us," she said.

The quiet discontent in her voice twisted his heart.

"I'll tell you what I see. How's that?"

She nodded and he lifted his weight from her, shifting slightly. He crooked his elbow to rest his head on his hand, so that he could look into the depths of her violet eyes, and whispered.

"I'm looking in the mirror at our reflection. We are cloaked in shadows, and I can see only the white contours of our bodies. You're lying on your back, your hair brushing the bar-top. Your hair is like burnished redwood, sweetheart, blending into the polished mahogany so that there is no beginning and no ending."

"Your skin ... your skin was the first thing that I noticed ... on that first night. It's pearly white and so soft. When we lie together like this, with me between your legs, it makes me cement hard."

"Our bodies are the perfect fit like Venus mating with Mars. I'm luckier than the mighty God of War. Your body would make the love goddess weep with shame."

"Your face is so expressive, but never more than when I enter you-like so-when you take my entire length. I rock and you give that little jerk. I push harder and your face shouts your need for fulfillment."

"Lift up your legs, sweetheart, and wrap them around me, skintight..."

Throughout the night, they sated themselves, devising new ways to reach climax after climax. When he was incapable of pleasuring her further, the long neck of the Miller Lite bottle was put to a gratifying, if slightly unusual, use when he rubbed it against her clitoris. When she was too dry to take him again, he reached cum the personal way, with saliva and balled fist, while she whispered sensuous sweet nothings in his ear.

Too tired for more, they eventually drifted into a sex-drugged sleep.

Alexis woke up first and rubbed herself against him like a lazy feline. She stretched and her breasts came conveniently close. He gave her nipple a quick flick of his tongue, thrilled when it transformed into a hard little berry. Her hand wandered to her feminine core, her middle finger purposely posed.

"No more of that," he said, pushing her hand away.

"Now you want to stop."

"Until we find a bed or at least a sofa." He stretched, flexing his back, causing the muscles in his thighs and calves to ripple. "Speaking of which, let's get out of here."

With her hand clasped in his, he felt the way to the door, tiptoeing around broken glass and patches of wet carpet. At the French double doors, a faint light filtered through the colored glass. Crouching down, Drake peered through the space where the two doors almost met. He could just make out how the bolt was slid in place.

"Did you bring a hairpin ... barrette ... fingernail file?" he asked.

"Drake, I'm naked."

"Hmmm. Delightfully so," he said, running his hand along her ass. "Stay here. I'm going to jimmy it."

Minutes later, he had found his soggy blazer in the jumble and returned to the door. "How're you holding up?" he asked when she leaned against him.

"I want sex."

He pulled a credit card out of his wallet. "You and me both, sweetheart. You and me both. Just gimme a sec." He inserted the credit card in the space between the double door, jerking the card up and down. "Not working. Stand back. I'm going to have to break the glass."

"Maybe we should try Jessie again on the bar phone?" Alexis stifled a yawn behind her hand, idly wondering why the male of the species always resorted to brute force before exhausting other options, and why women loved them in spite of it.

"She'll never show up. She's too busy counting her money." He wrapped his hand in the wet fabric of his jacket. "Look away. I'm going to break it." He jabbed one of the smaller panes. The glass shattered, breaking easily. He flicked the shards away, reached his hand through the hole and around the door, to unbolt the lock.

"I'll sneak upstairs to find you something to wear," he said.

"Uh-huh."

"It'll be an indecent exposure charge unless I'm covered."

"Wait a minute. Why can't I come with you?"

"Because you have too many things to cover... That Jessie Dane!"

"What? What did she do now?"

"Towels ... robes ... another bottle of champagne ... liquid soap..."

"Soap! Was she expecting us to take a bath?"

"Not a bad idea. I love you, sweetheart, but you smell like a distillery. C'mon over to the sink. After medieval aphrodisiacs, I really do feel like a knight of the bath."

"Funny. Remember, puns are *my* province."

At the bar, he washed her with unhurried fingers, fingers that massaged soap over the havens and valleys of her body, leaving no place untouched. He lingered over her shoulders and her back, caressing the smooth planes, turning her bones into rubber. He lathered her long, silky tresses, marveling at how the golden flecks and darker strands intertwined. Shielding her eyes, he used the sprinkler to rinse the foam free and then buffed her hair dry with a thick, fluffy towel.

All while she stood.

Barely.

She was almost overcome by his callused hands and the warm, pulsating water.

He leaned her over the counter top. Hunkering down, he washed her legs, kneading the muscles of her calves, trying not to recall his pleasure when she wrapped her legs around his waist, trying not to let his mind stray from the task at hand for her femininity was close, so close, so invitingly close. He only had to turn his head...

He could not resist. He nudged her legs apart. She stood over him, her slit in his face, her legs spread wide, giving him access. He pleased her in the most natural way, his technique coaxing wetness to run like rivers down her inner thighs until he mopped her up, until he lapped her dry, until he brought her to mind-blowing passion.

Later, much later, two very well washed people left the lounge.

"What will Jessie say," Alexis asked, "when she sees that place? I know she runs a brothel, but..."

"I trust her insurance's paid; that place's a wreck."

"Her fault, though. She should have never locked us in. She'll have to stand the consequences of locking Alexis Claremont..."

"Soon to be Alexis Claremont Smith," Drake clarified with a smile.

"...alone in a dark room with the man that she loves."

Chapter 11

The Castle Tahoe was one of those theme hotels for which Las Vegas and the casino industry are so famous. According to the hotel's promotional brochure, it was a genuine fourteenth century castle brought over, brick-by-brick, by the descendants of Sir George Edward Rockendale and rebuilt by his noble family at the edge of the waters of Lake Tahoe. In reality, that was so much media hype. The structure was, in actuality, fiberglass and pressured wood over a modern steel frame and the slabs of sandstone were a façade over American ponderosa pine.

Whatever the hotel lacked in historical authenticity, it made up in atmosphere—an atmosphere carefully crafted by a large marketing staff's conception of what the average person would expect in a medieval castle. The hotel staff, decked out in Georgian dress from their powdered wigs to their paste diamond shoe buckles, oozed pretentiousness and performed every task with the pomp and circumstance due to a reigning monarch. To round out to this palatial artifice, a moat with a working portcullis bounded the grounds and all transportation over the rather sprawling complex was by horse-drawn carriage.

In this lair of pretension, Johnny Wheelwright, Drake's foster son, was running from a balding man in a scarlet frock coat and silver-trimmed breeches. The balding man in scarlet, who seemed to have lost his queue wig in the chase, was still several yards behind, but he was gaining.

Up ahead, at the end of the lavishly appointed lobby, Johnny faced a sea of staff footmen in scarlet. They were circling, blocking the exits, cutting off his escape, except his victory in the footrace was ahead in the shape of his wife and daughter.

The balding man in scarlet, known only as Gothel, huff-puffed to the alcove where Johnny stood with Sara and Nikki. The footmen joined him there. Between gulps for air, Gothel planted his wig on his head and said, "Mr. Wheelwright. Mis-ter Wheelwright! I have told you before, sir. All guests of the Castle Tahoe must wear evening apparel in our public rooms." He snatched the jacket from the hands of one of the footman and held it out like a tailor performing a fitting. Johnny inserted his arms into the sleeves and brushed the fabric over his slender frame. He seemed to enjoy the feel of the hand-woven linen under his fingers until he froze and turned.

Drake and Alexis arrived at the scene at this opportune moment. Before Drake's natural air of command, Gothel bowed off, his nose almost touching his knees. His staff footmen, having a Regency servant's knack for merging into ornate bric-a-brac, quickly followed him.

Drake put a hand on Johnny's shoulder and searched his face. The therapists warned Drake about the pressures that Johnny could experience as he re-entered society. Perhaps this second furlough, in a social setting, was too soon...

"Thanks for asking me to escort Alexis down the aisle," Johnny said.

"You'll do fine," Drake assured him.

"I hope I don't screw up." Two dimples flashed in his cheeks then disappeared.

"Of course, he will," Alexis said, folding her cane. She gave a warm smile in the direction of the young man who had been broken in the service of his country.

Once again, Alexis mystified Johnny. She was so *nice* to him, closing her mind to the horrors that he had committed, giving him unconditional love. With the innocent blood of women and children on his hands, Johnny felt unworthy of love from Alexis, almost a stranger to him, from his wife, Sara, from his tiny tot of a daughter, Nikki.

"Isn't it late?" Alexis asked. She hit the talk button her watch. "We should find Jessie so she can turn me into the most beautiful bride that Nevada has ever seen."

"Ah, I guess so." Drake pulled back the French cuff of his shirt and frowned.

His watch had stopped; the crystal was broken.

"You guys better go," Sara said. "You can't be late for your own wedding. John, we need to pick up a few things." She took her daughter by the hand. Johnny grinned goodbye, rather bashfully, before following Sara to the concierge's rooms.

Drake escorted Alexis in the opposite direction, to their private elevator in the Villard Tower. Their tower suites, part of a romanticized turret, were only reachable from the hotel lobby through a garden-lined pathway. The tower itself, some twenty storeys high, was wide and circular, its floor-to-ceiling glass windows and spacious balconies affording an unobstructed view of the cobalt blue water of Lake Tahoe. All parking was underground, the designers deciding that rows of cars and buses

and mobile homes spoiled the atmosphere.

When the elevator doors closed behind Drake and Alexis, it gave them the privacy that they wanted and needed. In the past week, the last-minute wedding preparations and the hectic pace of their respective schedules had left them scant time for intimacy. They were hungry for each other, for the touch and for the taste.

Drake backed Alexis into the marble-walled corner of the elevator. He slanted into her, shifting his weight, letting her accept his heaviness. From the days without attention, his cock grew heavy, big and heavy, and uncomfortable, telegraphing a message about the pain of abstinence.

Alexis felt as if she were sinking in the desire to have him in her. Throwing all caution to the wind, she lifted her skirt. The chill from the air conditioning teased her. The cold from the marble excited her. She felt a sharp contraction in the pit of her belly. The ecstasy was so strong and so intense that she could only rest her head on his shoulder like a broken doll.

Lost in passion, Drake let his hands stray between her legs while his lips feasted on her neck. Her panties, a thin barrier in his quest to give her satisfaction, easily gave way. The ripping sound and the moans of passion were the only noise that disturbed the cavern of their pleasure until the elevator doors opened on the wrong floor.

"You can't do that in there," a fellow guest said, sneering her disapproval.

"This is a private elevator," Drake retorted, jabbing at the elevator button. When the door closed in the face of the disgruntled woman, he picked up Alexis' panties and stuffed them in his pocket. He looked at her, standing in the corner, her eyes brimming with laughter.

"Not funny," he muttered. "Wait until people read about this in the *Enquirer*. I can see the headline now: *Corporate raider caught in elevator sex act with McCord CFO.*"

"Live dangerously."

"In my opinion, we're already living far *too* dangerously. I reserved ground floor rooms. I don't like the idea of you being way up here..." He escorted her down the long, carpeted corridor. "This is insane. If you needed to get out in a hurry..."

"Stand the touch!" she said. That had become Alexis' quirk, her watchword. She was asking him, gently asking him, to back off, to let it go. Months before, his concern would have earned an angry rebuke from her and tense silence from him. It was a measure of how far these two had traveled.

When they reached the gleaming oak door to their suite, a footman snapped to attention. He pulled out an outsized brass key, but discreetly withdrew when Drake pulled his lady into his arms and locked her in a strong embrace.

Drake's lips had just touched hers when, to his left, out of the corner of his eye, he saw a something move. The footman hovering or...

"What the...?" he said.

"What?" Alexis asked. She turned her face up for a kiss, her thick eyelashes brushing the porcelain rose of her skin.

"I could have sworn I saw something, a shadow, someone move. Funny, but it looked like Peterson."

"Ted Peterson? Get out. What'd he be doing here?"

"Nothing, funny, I guess. I could have sworn..."

"No Ted Peterson, just me. Kiss me, lover."

"Hmm, yes. Where were we?"

"Where the *hell* have you two been?" Jessie Dane had thrown open the door to the suite and blocked-barricaded-the doorway. She wagged her finger under Drake's nose. "No more of that! You'll have plenty time for kissing after this wedding."

When Drake was slow to end the embrace, Jessie whacked his hand.

"What a fishwife!" he said. "We're ditching you as soon as we're married."

"That's as it may be. Till then, I've got work." She stepped back, allowing Alexis to slip inside. She made sure that the door was shut before grabbing Drake's sleeve.

"Wait! I didn't want to say nothing in front of Cash, but I'm scared, Drake. That balcony's broken, the tiles loose. What kind of hotel is this we're staying at anyway?"

Drake blinked and stared hard, ruching his lips. He brushed past Jessie.

Alexis sat at the dressing table, a dreamy smile on her face.

"Alexis! Stay away from the balcony."

"Uh-huh."

"Hear me?"

"Yep. Every word. My lord and master told me to stay away from the balcony."

She tossed a handful of rose petals in the air. "Like I'd fall when I'm floating."

"That's it," Drake said. He closed the door and was off at a brisk walk down the hall. Rounding a corner too fast, he bumped-literally ran into-his son.

"I need help," Johnny said. He fingered his mangled tie.

"Straighten your cummerbund."

"My what?"

"Your cummerbund. That thing around your waist."

"Oh yeah." Johnny peered over Drake's hands. "I can't get this right. Why..."

"Lift your chin. Remember what your doctors said, that sometimes the simple stuff would be the most difficult. Great, you look great, Johnny." He smoothed the satin of Johnny's lapel, brushing the shoulder of his tuxedo jacket.

Johnny stopped him, grabbing his hand. "I can't ... I ... why do you *help* me?"

"Saudi Arabia was a long time ago," Drake said.

"It seems like yesterday."

"People forget, John. And forgive."

"I wish I could."

Drake put his hand over his heart. "I have."

"I put a MK23 to your head. I would have pulled the trigger, too."

"I don't think so. Not in the end."

"All those women and children ... a mission ops gone crazy."

What could Drake say? There was nothing to say. It *was* a long time ago.

"Come talk to me while I'm dressing."

Drake tugged his tie free and undid the top button of his shirt. With a hand at the small of Johnny's back, he stewarded him down the hall and into the dressing room.

Chapter 12

Despite Jessie Dane's best effort, the midnight ceremony started forty-five minutes late. The wedding took place in the Villard rotunda, a charming, old-world chapel that Gothel's staff had decorated with cascading garlands of white lilies intertwined with peach love knots and dozens of flickering candles.

At the altar, Drake stood straight and tall, looking like a fairy tale prince for a modern day Cinderella. With one hand on his hip, he had thrown the jacket of his shawl tuxedo open, revealing a snow-white shirt and a cummerbund slashed with peach and silver threads. The silver in his matching bow tie and the white-gold of his hair caught the sparkling light of the crystal chandeliers. His eyes sparkled too from a daydream of the erotic kind.

In a few hours, he would be on a plane with Alexis, flying to the Isla de Cisne. He had rented a converted lighthouse there, on a secluded corner of the island. He looked forward to twenty-one days of sand, surf, and wild, hot sex with the woman that he loved. No phones, no faxes, and no clients. Just sex. Sex in all ways imaginable. He would be in her, on her, rarely off her.

After he was sated-fleetingly sated-he would let her frolic in the warm Caribbean water before dragging her back to the sandy beach. She would be under him when he removed her skimpy bikini, the one that she had teased him with before they left Reno, the one that made his blood pressure rise, as well as a more intimate part of his anatomy. He would get hard, rock hard, like flesh cement and he would...

He ended the daydream, giving silent thanks for the fullness of his trousers.

The small orchestra played the first chords of Mendelssohn, and the guests turned to face the rear of the chapel. Two footmen in the rich dress of Villard livery opened the sliding doors, and Jessie Dane stepped onto the white runner.

Jessie had elected to grace the occasion by wearing a two-piece suit in her favorite shade of hot, hot pink. The beaded jacket of the suit, with its schoolgirl's collar, was demure and was primly buttoned to her neck, but the full skirt was ultra-short. To the skirt, she had added a touch of her own personality, gathering the silk together in front and pinning it at her hip with a large, ruby brooch so that the material fell, draping like a theater curtain, across her ample thighs. She completed her ensemble with a tall shako, minus the plume for this was a church-going occasion, and its bird's beak brim was perched at a

dangerous angle over her left eye.

If another woman in silver showgirl shoes had two-stepped down the aisle, the entire congregation would have risen as one person, pointed, and shouted, *Girlfriend, what were you thinking?* But this was Jessie Dane and no one would have dared to or wanted to. When she winked broadly at the very rich Randolph McCord, standing as proud as any father of the bride, everyone merely grinned and thought, *You go, girl!*

A few heartbeats later, the orchestra began the strains of the wedding march, and Alexis appeared, her gloved hand resting lightly on the sleeve of Johnny's tuxedo.

Throughout history, there have been beautiful brides, but *none* of them rivaled her. She was a vision in a Gwynvere gown of peach satin. The gown bodice was tight with capped sleeves, showing off her bare neck and shoulders. At her waist, the gown was pleated with an over-skirt of crinoline net seeded with pearls. Her hair was caught under a satin cap, also seeded with pearls, under which her visual sensor was concealed and from which a nearly transparent veil sprang. She did not carry a bouquet, preferring to keep her hands free to aid her movements under the heavy weight of the gown. Instead, she wore a diamond bracelet on her arm, the one that rested on Johnny's sleeve, and it danced with the candlelight at every movement of her wrist.

In the doorway, Johnny took a breath so deep that his slender form shook. "Here we go," he whispered. When he stepped into the chapel, the flickers of so many candles startled him. He scraped a lick of his shaggy hair behind his ear as his eyes searched and found his wife and daughter standing in one of the pews.

"You'll do fine," Alexis whispered back. "Just get me down the aisle."

"You're depending on me?"

"Oh, big-time."

That was all the confidence he needed. With military precision, he paraded her to the altar and into Drake's waiting arms.

Chapter 13

The wedding reception ended with fireworks over the Nevada skyline, but Drake and Alexis were not there to enjoy the festivities. They left the reception early, sneaking back to the Villard Tower right after the cake was cut. Old Randolph McCord saw them slip out a side exit and his face split into a knowing grin at their impatience to hit the horizontal sheets.

Outside the door to their suite, with no footman in sight, Drake was forced to struggle with the magnetized lock. He had an armful of Alexis, and his mind was distracted by her tongue tracing his ear and by her fingers creeping under his shirt. He bounced her, juggling her enough so that he could slip his hand under her slim hips to swipe the card. When the door opened a crack, he maneuvered them inside.

Once there, he let her body slide down his, stopping before her feet touched the floor. Her toes were inches from the carpet, supported solely by his strong arms, when he kissed her and grew hard. He wanted entry. *Now!*

He bunched yards of peach satin to reach under her gown. He found her panties under several petticoats, a frilly garter, and skin-tight, silk stockings. He put his finger under her panty waistband. Alexis giggled and then wiggled in his arms.

"Not yet," she said. "I want to change first. *Stop!* You'll get cum on my gown."

"I'll be careful, promise." Then, in a guttural voice, "I've one in my jacket."

She nodded as if intending to search, but pushed him away.

"I'll change. I'll be quick, I promise."

"Hurry," Drake said. He let her go, but his eyes followed the sexy sway of her hips. With effort, he resisted to urge to follow her. Instead, he took off his tuxedo jacket and loosened his bow tie. Restless, wanting sex, he wandered about the room, pausing before the closed balcony doors. He stepped back, craning his neck as if he could see into the bedroom, hungry to cut the edge to his lust. He wondered how many husbands had waited for their brides to ready themselves on their wedding night. He tapped his foot on the carpet, commanding time to pass.

"C'mere lover," Alexis called to him.

In the bathroom doorway, his eyes feasted on the sight of his new wife reclining in a sunken bath, her rosy breasts teasing the bubbly froth. She had piled her hair high, but had allowed a few curls to slip free to rest on her shoulder.

"Slip into a condom and join me."

Within seconds, he was nude, sheathed, on top of her.

"What? No foreplay? Clark Kent couldn't have undressed faster."

"You've kept me waiting too long." He fingered her slit; her juices flowed.

She felt his fingertips separating her slick, puffy folds, and a spear of desire shot through her. She grabbed his hand, rubbing his fingertips across her swollen bud. The friction at *the spot* raised her in the water. She threw back her head, savoring the rising heat, the tingling in her toes, the tightening of her nipples. She braced herself for the onslaught, her mind rushing to the flaming, white light.

He mounted her, inserting himself with one perfect thrust. He rocked back and forth, each motion causing her a wave of desire. She contracted around him, tighter and tighter, biting her bottom lip against the sensations, each one more powerful than the next. She was being ripped in two by the opposite sensations. She wanted it to end. She wanted it to go on. She wanted to go higher. She wanted to fall. Coiling her legs around his slim waist, she had no choice but to move with him, to let herself be torn apart.

He sensed her resolve and increased his thrusts, pounding into her, driving into her, pushing her to the ultimate bliss. He impaled her again and again, each long, sure thrust like the stab of a savage stiletto. She quivered. He felt it. She screamed. He heard it. She arched. He matched it ... and drove her further to the sweet death.

The fury was upon them both. Their bodies shook. He was suspended in air when the final spasms depleted him. She was shattered from the stabs of the savage stiletto, screaming his name. They bucked and bucked against each another, the perfumed bathwater sloshing and wetting the tiles from the potent force. His sperm flowed. The condom was full, wet, dripping. They were drained. A final few twitches wracked their bodies and merged their souls before it was over.

Alexis relaxed against the padded headrest, her eyes half-closed. The violence of her orgasm had dissipated, leaving her sleepy and limp. She brushed back a stray lock of her damp hair with a lazy hand.

The diamonds of her bracelet captured the light.

The sound of splashing water broke through her languor.

In her mind's eye, she saw her husband step from the bath.

Water ran in ripples down his body, playing on the contours of his buttocks as he strode to the sitting room. There, he would remember the now-useless condom, torn and ripped from the might of his thrusts, and strip it from him.

The image excited her and her imagination went further.

His flaccid manhood swung like a pendulum with each step he took as he returned to her. His balls peeped from between his legs, hanging low. When he returned, she would take them in her mouth, roll her tongue around them, feel the coarse hair, and inhale his musky scent. She would bring him to stiff and swollen hardness and rejoice when his cum splashed all over her face. Later, she would...

She let her fantasy slip away when she heard the firm footfalls of her husband padding back into the bathroom. She felt a small, plush-covered box being pushed into her hand.

"No gift on earth can show how much I love you," he said.

"Drake, I love you so much..."

"No more than I love you. Without you, sweetheart, I'm incomplete. Open it."

She fumbled with the latch. He helped her, guiding her hand to the cool, heart-shaped metal.

"It's a charm for your bracelet. It says..."

"...together forever," she finished, reading the Braille inscription.

She caught her breath on a sob and he understood. He covered her mouth with his hand and then replaced his hand with his lips. As they kissed, a single tear weaved a path down her cheek.

"Take me to bed." Her voice was hushed, her arms outstretched. She felt herself being lifted from the tepid water and enfolded in a soft towel. With her head pillowed on a heart powered by love, she was carried to the marriage bed.

He flipped off the lamp, and she curled against his chest. In the darkness, the bedroom transformed into a shadowed, private haven with only the stars, flashing through the balcony doors, to disturb the peace. They made love again, this time slowly with sweet kisses and velvety touches, bringing each other to a climax so serene that it rivaled the gentleness of a summer breeze.

They were basking in the quiet, calm solitude when the world intruded.

"God-damn-it!" Drake swore long and hard and crude.

"Ignore it, probably wrong room. Nobody would call us on our wedding night."

"Why does this always happen to me?"

"Lack of clean living, I guess." Alexis re-settled herself on his shoulder.

"I wouldn't put it past Jessie to call. Thank God, she went back to Reno." He snatched at the hideously ornate receiver. "This better be *better* than damn important."

"It's me ... Johnny. I'm sorry, but..."

"What's wrong?"

"I'm sorry."

"No, no, what's wrong?"

"Drake, my little girl's sick..."

"What?"

"We had the hotel doctor check her out. She's okay, running a fever, probably too much excitement. She practically sugar-OD'd on all that punch and wedding cake."

"I'll be right there."

"The problem is Sara doesn't want to leave her and we can't take her with us, not when she's so sick..."

"But, you say she's okay."

"What is it?" Alexis asked, frowning. She raised herself to her elbows.

Drake covered the mouthpiece. "Johnny. Nothing serious."

"Sara said I shouldn't ask, not on your wedding night, but..."

"Ask."

"I need a lift. You know how my doctors feel about blown furloughs."

"I have to drive him to Fallon," Drake said to Alexis. "He can get military transport there." He waited, seeking her approval. It was their wedding night. She had a right to ask him not to go. She flung back the sheet and swung her legs to the floor.

"Want some company?" she asked.

"John, I'll be down in ten minutes. Meet me at parking area 2B."

"I hate to ask..."

"Ten minutes-2B."

"I'm sorry about this," Drake said, returning the receiver to its cradle. "But, his treatment is critical right down, a set-back..."

"Don't be ridiculous. He's *my* son now, too."

Drake smiled and said, "John's older than you are. No, don't get up. No reason for us both to go. Stay here and keep my side of the bed warm."

He pulled a black tee-shirt over his head, shaking his hair free. He zipped up black jeans and picked up his car keys, glancing up when she rose and walked to the foot of the bed. He went to her and took her

in his arms. He studied the soft lines of her face as if to memorize each detail. He pressed her slim body to his, cherishing her.

"See you in a bit," he said. "Go back to bed; we've an early flight."

He turned to leave, and she hugged as much of him as she could, hiding her face in the solid harbor of his chest. For some reason, for some absurd reason, her heart lurched and she wanted to cry.

"I love you so much," she said. "Farewell, my love."

"Hey? What's all this? I'll be back before you miss me."

"Nothing ... nothing."

She could say no more. The tightness in her chest had won.

He estimated the time, silently cursing that his watch was broken. The ten minutes were up. Johnny would be waiting. He pulled from her embrace. "I have to go." He walked to the door with a certain strange reluctance.

There, he blew her a kiss, forgetting that she could not see.

Chapter 14

Alexis crawled under the sheet, snuggling on Drake's side of the bed, but she couldn't fall off to sleep. After fruitless minutes of tossing and turning, she gave up. She called the front desk to confirm the time, later wishing that she hadn't given into the temptation. Drake had only been gone for half an hour. It seemed like a lifetime.

She resisted the urge to pace--she would just bump into furniture and the last thing that she wanted was a bruised body in a bikini--and considered catching up on her work. Her secretary had translated the last McCord quarterly into Braille, and she could make some last minute projections.

She lugged the financial binders from her briefcase and pored over them, but the data was a jumble of meaningless nonsense. She tossed the binders aside, wondering how she could pass the time until Drake returned. Somewhere was packed an audiocassette copy of Linda Howard's latest novel, *Cry No More*. Could she find it? She sensed that the suite was in a state of disarray with clothing and suitcases tossed about. No, the book would have to wait until tomorrow.

What she really wanted, what she solely wanted, was Drake.

His presence, his thoughts, and his body--preferably--on hers and in hers.

She leaned back on the pillows, letting her mind drift, returning to the fantasy.

He was on top; she was under him. She liked the missionary position best for it allowed him to give her strong, sure G-strokes. With his blue eyes locked with her violet ones, he would start the rhythm, moving in and out, his thick shaft grinding hard against her swollen bud. He would vary the pace. Slow. Quick. Give her satisfaction. Greedy.

She writhed under him, urging him to give her release. He would refuse, teasing her, tormenting her, ceasing the teasing torment until she was completely still. Greedier.

He reached down, inserting three fingers then four, filling her so tightly that she thought that she would pop. The tightness would be ecstasy and she would want more. Greediest.

He held her legs together, constraining her movements, to ride her like a galloping bronco on a drawn rein. He asked her whether she liked it. She would be too engulfed in passion to reply, only answering by digging her heels in his ass until twin rosy spots appeared. As he rode her faster, flicking the rein, she chanted two words and two words only. Fuck me ... fuck me...

She blinked open her eyes, hot and bothered by the fantasy. The smell of Armani lingered on Drake's rumpled pillow, making her want him even more. She resisted the urge to recheck the time, to try to reach him at the base, refusing to pester him when all this attention should be focused on his son.

She needed to walk off the sexual energy. Feeling her way, she carved a path, shoving aside furniture and luggage. Making that path was a slow, tiring job, and she wiped the perspiration from her brow. The cool night air beckoned her.

She walked to the balcony doors, letting the light breeze be her guide. At the doorway, she paused, and the breeze bathed her face and neck. She could sense the beauty of the night. In her mind's eye, she saw the midnight sky streaked with puffy clouds, the glitter of the stars, the full moon. She could see so far ... the Canadian mountaintops scraping the constellations, the northern lights envious of their beauty.

Her imagination made the night real for her, enchanting her. She imagined that she could see and she wanted more. She left the safety of the doorway, taking a step onto the balcony. Then another step, then another. Stretching out her arms, she searched for a wall, for the security of a railing.

Her hands came in contact with something. She reached higher, and her diamond bracelet clanked against metal. She walked towards it, hugging it. She leaned out and over. She was suspended in air, only her lower body resting safely. When a rush of air whirled around her, she felt like a bird. She need only stretch out her arms and the air would lift her and she would fly.

She let go. She outstretched her arms. Her entire body was supported solely by her feet on the lowest rung of something. She was free, not tied to the earth, not bound by human concerns, not restricted by her blindness. She waved her arms, recalling a childhood memory of a raven.

She was that raven, soaring high.

She was bewitched by her own imagination when she heard the first *crunch*. She thought that she was mistaken, that the sound was the soft, bristling of the wind through the Ponderosa pines. Then she heard another *crunch*, louder than the first.

And she knew that she was not mistaken.

The balcony was giving way under her.

Her first reaction was fear. Her second was reason. Reason told her not to struggle, that her thrashing would only increase her danger. She let go, inching closer and closer to the safety of the doorway. She heard another *crunch*.

Her first reaction prevailed, for in her fear, she tripped on a loose tile. The weight of her body threw her forward, away from safety. She clawed air. She clawed brick. Her fingernails chipped under the strain, drawing blood, as she tried, desperately, to pull herself up, make headway, maneuver, crawl. But what was left of the balcony was not enough to support her weight. There was another *crunch*, louder than the others, and the balcony disappeared.

She screamed in terror.

Her legs dangled in midair. She was supported solely by a strip of something. The balcony doorway was

only inches away, but that safety, that haven, was denied her. The night air, so teasing before, now savaged her robe. The gentle breeze, so light before, now rocked her in the wind. She held on for dear life and screamed a primal scream that came from her gut, passed through her lungs, ripped from her mouth.

She felt tears stain her cheeks.

Her life passed before her, rapidly, like selected scenes on a TV screen.

She didn't want to die.

Chapter 15

Drake barely touched the brake when he drove his Jaguar into the underground parking garage at the Castle Tahoe. He waved over a liveried attendant and then took the stairs, two at a time, to the main complex. Once there, so impatient was he to resume his wedding night that he ran through the hotel lobby-much as his son had done a few short hours before-and down the garden path to the Villard Tower.

As he approached the solid, heavy door to the suite, he thought that he heard a faint cry, a crashing sound. He wasn't sure; maybe it was a back-firing car, the night and the mountain ranges playing tricks with the sound.

He fumbled with the computerized lock, swiping the magnetized card.

"Where *is* that footman when you need him?"

Alexis screamed in midnight air.

The card finally worked, the red light changing to green.

He pushed the heavy door open and strode in.

"Did you miss..." He never finished.

He raced to the balcony, crouching low, reaching into the dark void. He grabbed her hand, wet and sweaty from fear, but he could not hold on. Her palm, then her fingertips, slipped from his and only the belt of her robe entangled with the broken railing saved her from death below. He grabbed again, straining, snaring her bracelet, the diamonds like a beacon in the night, almost successful, when the remaining ledge cracked and fell in jagged splinters of cement and brick.

"Nooooooooo!" Strange, even as death claimed her, even as he denied death, he saw minute details like the color of her one, dangling slipper, the flush of her cheeks, the sparkling tears in her eyes.

He leaned over, like a broken spring, his great weight anchored solely by the splintering balcony. One hand grasped crumbling cement. The other slapped the air.

With sure aim.

He caught her moments before she disappeared into the night.

In the safety of his embrace, she tottered to the bed, only his strong arms preventing black oblivion. When he loosened his hold, she clung to him and wept.

"Let me get you a drink," he said.

He placed the glass in her hands, feeling the cold of her fingers and the wet of her tears. Her violet eyes were wide open, staring straight ahead, and their dark vastness evoked in him the image of the dark vastness of the balcony pit.

He clamped down his impatience, the muscle throbbing at the sharp corner his mouth. He did not ask why she was on the balcony. He did not ask why she had not heeded his warning. He wanted to ask. He wanted to do more. He wanted to shout at her, to shake her until her teeth rattled, to spank her until she begged for mercy.

Instead, he counted to ten and then counted again.

"I almost died," she said later. "The balcony gave way. I tripped ... fell."

He recalled Jessie Dane's words, and his lawyer's mind sifted through the evidence. He rejected the improbable. This was not an accident. Someone was responsible for switching the suites, for sabotaging the balcony, for making sure that he was away.

He had enemies. He had crossed the rich and the powerful. But who craved revenge so much that they would strike at him, with a veiled hand, through Alexis?

The answer was chilling and simple.

Ted Peterson.

And Beth Bledsoe.

Chapter 16

Drake and Alexis postponed their honeymoon while the authorities investigated. Out of respect for Drake, the detectives at the Tahoe PD gave him free access to the case file and let him sit in on the interviews with the hotel staff. It was only a matter of time before the department issued an APB for Ted Peterson and Beth Bledsoe and brought them in for questioning.

When Peterson saw Drake stalk into the cramped interrogation room, he wet himself. Not a lot, just enough piss to dot the front of his fly and to make the officers hide smiles behind their coffee cups. Soon after that and in the face of Drake's relentless questioning, his bravado failed. He started lying, badly, losing himself in half-truths, contradictions, and prevarications. Nobody believed him, not when they found his fingerprints on the balcony doors and a hacksaw in his pick-up, not when his alibi did not hold water, not when the footman Beth had bribed, rattled on them.

Beth took the easy way out and confessed all. Confronted with her signed statement, Peterson knew that he faced twenty years unless he cooperated. So, he plea bargained out and spilled the ugly tale.

Their plan had been sinister in its simplicity. He had sneaked into the tower suite and tampered with the balcony railing, doing such a botched job that Jessie Dane had noticed the damage. Later, at the wedding reception, Beth had befriended Johnny's daughter and then had poisoned the little girl's slice of wedding cake.

Together, they had created a chain of events in which Drake was forced to leave Alexis alone. Whether they planned to push her off the balcony and got cold feet, or to merely scare her, Drake would never know. He didn't care. It was irrelevant now. Since they were both given long prison terms, they would never threaten his family again.

A year later on their anniversary, Drake and Alexis returned to the Isla de Cisne. The sun-flecked island was serenity personified, peaceful and calm, except for the rush of a faraway waterfall, except for the

sound of...

"Hmmm. That's nice. Very nice," Alexis said, her eyelids drooping closed.

"On your stomach," Drake said. He held a bottle of sunscreen in one hand and a rolled condom in the other. His head dipped low, down to her secret, honeyed place.

She was suddenly wide-awake and quivering. The white-hot heat of their love returned, as it had so many times before, as it always would. For Drake and Alexis had risked all and risking all for love is never a risk.

The End

About the Author:

Lynn Jae Marsh started reading romance novels when she was fourteen. One of her fondest memories is hopping the "T" Green Line to downtown Boston to buy an armful of Georgette Heyer paperbacks at Macy's Department Store. In 1991--when she fell in love with Macintosh computers, web design, and the Internet--her writing and publishing was the natural result.

Lynn lives in a tiny apartment in central New Haven, Connecticut, surrounded by books and more books and Macintosh computers and more Macintosh computers. She is a proud owner and cofounder of Lightning Strikes--a select critique community at groups.yahoo.com/group/lightning_strikes_writers/--and is the proud publisher of Lynn Jae Marsh--OnLine (with open cyber-doors at www.lynnjaemarsh.com). Recently, she won several Romantic Times writing contests and her ezine, which enjoys acclaim from many readers, receives over 4000 hits per month.

"Romantic Days, Romantic Nights" is Lynn's first commercially published novel. She loves receiving email from her readers at ljmarsh@lynnjaemarsh.com.

Lynn Jae Marsh--OnLine merchandise may be purchased at www.cafeshops.com/lynnjaemarsh

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And many, many more!!