

THE COMPLETE
OMNIBUS EDITION



BILLIONAIRES *in* *Disguise*



USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

BLAIR BABYLON

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Billionaires in Disguise: Rae

Complete Omnibus Edition

B ILLIONAIRES IN D ISGUISE

By: Blair Babylon

Complete Omnibus Edition

Includes all 9 Original Episodes:

Episode 1: Rae Falling

Episode 2: Into The Devilhouse

Episode 3: Secrets on his Skin

Episode 4: Rae Bound

Episode 5: Secrets of his Heart

Episode 6: Into the Fire

Episode 7: Into the Desert

Episode 8: Secrets of his Blood

Episode 9: Rae Flying

Billionaires in Disguise: Rae

Complete Omnibus Edition

B ILLIONAIRES IN D ISGUISE

By: Blair Babylon

One wild quickie with a sexy stranger will change Rae's life forever.

Rae Stone is majoring in psychology so that she can open a clinic for autistic kids, but when her scholarship is yanked because she failed an impossible statistics course, she thinks she's out of luck and doomed to return to her poverty-stricken hometown. Because she has three weeks of college freedom left, she goes to an upscale party and has a wild quickie with a stranger, who turns out to be the sexy owner of the Devilhouse, a BDSM club, but will the secretive Wulf turn out to be her Prince Charming or the Devil who tempts her to ruin?

This thrilling omnibus edition of *Billionaires in Disguise: Rae* contains all nine originally published episodes.

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## **Book 1: Rae Falling**

## Sticking Together at the Frat Party

“I was raised Baptist,” Rae shouted over the beeping, thumping dance music at the yellow-haired frat guy named Ames. He looked like a guy from Ames, Iowa: corn-fed and corn mash barrel-chested. His yellow, even teeth lined up like a corncob.

She shouted, “So that means no drinking,” Ames refilled her red plastic cup with vodka and cold orange juice, “and no dancing,” she gestured with the cup at the sophomores gyrating between the pool tables and sloshed iced screwdriver on her knuckles, “and definitely no premarital sex.”

Rae raised her cup toward Lizzy and Georgie, her dorm suitemates, who toasted her back from across the room hazy with stinking cigarette and pot smoke. The three girls had planned to stick together at the frat party because the Delta Chi house had a bad reputation. The two white girls were standing next to a black Delta Chi guy, and the girls were laughing hard. The Delta Chi guy was not laughing. His eyes grew startled-huge, like they had just shocked the hell out of him.

Next to them, a frat guy and a coed were necking hard, and the guy’s hand groped under the woman’s tee shirt. A Golden Devil, the university’s mascot, was laminated on her shirt, and his fumbling made the Golden Devil look like it was popping and locking.

“You still Baptist?” Ames asked Rae.

“Hell, no. I am so through with all that ‘Thou shalt not’ shit. I so totally shalt do any shit that I want to.” She did, too. She drank, she had smoked a joint twice, she had danced naked on stage in the musical *Hair* last year, though her family sure as heck didn’t know about *that*, and she studied psychology even though Aunt TracyJo thought that Rae was going to Hell because psychology was just another Godless way to justify sin.

Not that it mattered now. Rae drank more of the screwdriver. The orange juice, fruity and bitter in her mouth, tasted like it was turning to garbage.

“That’s so cool!” Ames said, and Rae thought he might be even drunker than she was.

Right now, even talking about religion and psychology and sex seemed

like a good idea, so she must have a serious drunk going on. Her previous screwdrivers had been strong, and this one was, too.

Good. Maybe she could forget why she had gone to a frat party on a Thursday night instead of studying, because studying didn't matter anymore.

Her eyes stung and teared up. Dang it. She wasn't going to think about all that. She was here to party away the night. She sure as hell wasn't going to cry any more.

Rae swayed to the music, feeling the drums thump in her bones. "This is a great song."

"Sure is. You feeling okay?" Ames peered at her face closely, and his eyes and nose swam in and out of view.

The people who were dancing wavered, and the couples making out around the edges of the room drifted like seaweed on the tide.

"Sure, I'm fine," she said. "Just drunk. I'm gonna get drunk off my ass tonight." Midterm reports were due out next week, and she had a bad feeling about her statistics class.

No, that wasn't right. The dread wasn't a random feeling. It was bad knowledge about a bad fact. Failing statistics meant she was going to be kicked out of college, and so she would go back to Pirtleville, and so died her chance for a degree, a chance for a better life, and her chance to build that secret dream of hers, the one that she only told people about when she was drunk.

The beer-stained walls wove up and down, up and down, up and down. She watched the walls weave up and down.

"That's good," Ames said.

"You bet it's good. S'good, it is. This screwdriver's really strong."

"You want to go lie down or something? There's a bedroom down this way." He pointed down the dark hallway.

"No. M'fine." Rae felt fine. She didn't care about anything anymore. Where were Lizzy and Georgie?

Her arm lifted into the air, like it was flying on its own.

"You look like you need to lie down," Ames said.

The walls rolled backward past her, and Rae wondered where Georgie and Lizzy were.

"M'fine," she said again. Rae knew that she should answer the frat guy's question, but she couldn't remember what he had asked.

She couldn't even remember his name.



Lying down, Rae was lying down on something soft, and the bright light overhead was bright.

The bright light was really bright, and something tugged at her waist and hips, like pants being pulled off.

Bright.

Bright white light.

It was above her and it was bright and white.

“You okay there, Rae?” she heard that corn guy ask. “You’re not going to puke, right?”

“M’fine.” *M’fine, m’fine m’fine.*

Bright light in the sky.

Bright light went away.

And soft went on her face. Bad smell like sweaty sheets. She was lying on her tummy.

Her arms and legs were heavy and soft.

“Hope you like anal,” Corn Boy said.

Goopy stuff, on her butt.

Hard thing.

Nudged her butt.

Soft, still on her face.

Hands, too heavy to move.

Hard thing again.

*Slam!*

Something slammed.

“Yeeeeeargh!”

Really loud scream.

Behind her.

Sounded like that Corn Boy.

Some girl said, “Wow. That Taser left a burn on his ass.”

Room spun.

Spun around her .

And bright light was back above her.

Bright light in the sky.

Georgie and Lizzy.

There they were.

They were looking down at her.

“Hi,” Rae said. “M’fine.”

“Rae!” Georgie said. “What’s the matter with you?”

Georgie’s brown hair reached out toward Rae like her hair was floating in water because she was a mermaid.

Mermaids were cool.

Lizzy said, “Looks like she got rufie’d.”

Georgie looked away from Rae, and Georgie’s long, brown hair swung and swung in the air.

Georgie said, “Rapist asshole. We should let The Dom have his ass. The Dom hates rapists.”

Lizzy said, “Hey! The rapist asshole is trying to stand up!”

“Tase him again. I’ll get her pants on, and we’ll get her out of here.”

Crickle, crackle, sound of electric tackle.

And Corn Boy screamed again.

# **The Wages of Sin Are About Two Hundred Bucks an Hour**

THE next morning, Rae had the supreme deity of all hangover migraines and no idea how lube got smeared all over her underwear. The dorm room spun around her pounding head and her twin bed. The posters of rock bands, Broadway shows, and some far-away beaches blurred into Rae's roommate's posters of Christian pop groups with images of crosses and thorns, doves, and scintillating rays of light.

Even drawings of light rays hurt Rae's eyes and made her head throb.

Georgie and Lizzy sat on Rae's bed, laughing at her and making her sip green sports drink, which tasted like ocean water and dead eels. Rae wanted to vomit, but puked green drink would be worse than it going down the first time, so she didn't, barely.

Light hurt her eyes. The green stuff stung her sore tongue and scraped her throat. She peeked at Georgie and Lizzy through squinted eyelids.

Georgie and Lizzy were, unfortunately, in fine form.

Georgie said, "Your ass would be as sore as your brain if we hadn't figured out where he took you."

Good Lord, Rae was still mortified that she had been rufied, and she would get around to feeling that embarrassment as soon as the stabbing in her head subsided. It was all just her luck: the one night that she tried to go out and have a wild time, be a wild woman for one freaking night, she ended up getting rufied and dang near butt-raped. She was lucky she hadn't ended up dead in the desert somewhere.

"I'll bet Corn-Fed Asshole has a Taser migraine this morning." Lizzy grinned big and fluffed her pixie-cut blonde hair. "And toasted nuts."

"I cannot believe you tased him on the nuts, Lizzy." Georgie grinned bigger.

"He so had it coming. I doubt he'll be able to have kids. You were right, though. We should have called The Dom last night."

Their voices pierced like ice picks in Rae's ears and at the raw nerves



that ran up the sides of her face, so she sipped the green seawater in her very small cup and prayed for the pain to stop.

“Yeah, we should have called him. Too late, now.”

“It’s never too late. Remember when that guy date-raped Sarah last year? The Dom lured him into the club with that special, private invitation and then worked on him for hours. I heard that guy still has a nervous tic on one side of his face.”

Too much light, too much noise, and too much pain. “Ladies?” Rae asked, and her voice hurt her throat and her own ears. “Can I have some privacy here?”

“Why? You gonna puke again?” Georgie asked.

“I just want to sleep this off.” Rae planned to sleep for a week if necessary. She had nothing better to do.

Georgie checked her phone. “Don’t you have class in an hour?”

“I’m not going to class.” Class was a waste of Rae’s valuable drinking time.

“You never miss class.”

She closed her eyes. “I don’t care.”

“Rae, what’s up with you?” Georgie asked.

“I have a hangover. A really bad one.” Her most recent of several self-inflicted painfests.

“What is *really* up with you?” Georgie pressed.

“Yeah, Rae,” Lizzy chimed in. “We’re your friends. You can tell us.”

She didn’t want to tell them. It was embarrassing and it sucked, and she wasn’t going to be around much longer, anyway. She opened her eyes enough to squint. “Nothing.”

They looked at each other like psychic twins who were deciding how to make Rae’s brain explode, but Rae’s brain was already exploding. She laid her arm over her eyes and hoped they would go away. Her arm heated her forehead, and her brain burned hotter.

She could still see the girls below her arm, and they stayed, darn it.

Georgie turned back to her and said, “No bullshit, Rae. What’s up with you?”

If she told them, maybe they would leave. “All right. I’m failing statistics.”

“So drop it and take it over next semester!” Lizzy said.

Rae admitted the bad, bad news through the metallic taste of

disappointment in her mouth. “Drop-date is way past, and it’s a core class. If I fail stats, I lose my scholarship. My parents can’t and won’t pay for college. I’m done. I’m out. I’m just partying away my last couple of weeks before I go home at spring break, get a dead-end job, and probably marry some guy in the same circumstances and pop out a couple kids who won’t have a chance to do better, either.”

It sounded even worse out loud than when it went around and around in her head.

Rae’s second-to-her-worst fear was stalking her: that she would work long and hard hours and yet still live poor like her parents, and her someday-maybe-future kids would, too. When Rae was a kid, every time she had needed to go to a doctor or to buy something out of the budget, her mother had winced, and Rae watched her mentally add up what she and Rae’s father and brothers would have to do without.

Rae’s family, however, sent their hand-me-downs over to her Aunt Alana’s place. Alana’s fourth kid Daniel had turned out to be autistic, and his medical care busted their family from uncomfortable to impoverished. Aunt Alana had tried to do therapy with him, but she had had to quit her job to do it, and more bills and less money had destroyed them.

Lizzy said, “And you’re just going to lie down and let all that happen to you.”

“I had one chance, and I blew it.” Rae had blown it sky-high. Her nose stung with the sulfur fumes from her burning dreams. Or maybe it was the vodka and rape drugs.

Lizzy was right, though. Rae did just lie down and let things happen to her. She had only gotten the full-ride scholarship when her guidance counselor had insisted that she apply for it. She had kind of fallen into her double major of psychology and drama because she took a lot of those classes.

However, during her sophomore year, on October fifth, in a Developmental Psychology lecture, while Rae was sitting three rows back and two seats over from the middle-aged professor who was expounding about her research on delayed muscle response in the pincher grasp of autistic children in excruciating detail, a thought struck Rae like a train barreling through the classroom wall .

If Rae majored in psychology, if she got a counseling degree, she could help kids like Daniel.

She could make an enormous difference in their lives and independence. All she had to do was finish her degree and open a therapy clinic. She needed to figure out how to do all that business stuff, but first, she needed the degree.

If she worked hard, if she learned it all, she could change everything for them.

She had begun taking notes on the pincher grasp toward that end, not just for the test. Improving autistic kids' pincher grasps might help neural connections form in their brains.

Since then, every note had been geared toward the children somewhere out there who would need Rae to understand how to guide them out of the darkness of autism. Her grades shot up to straight-A's.

She even doodled buildings and signs for her secret dream clinic: A Ray of Light.

Losing that chance to make a difference in the world was her biggest fear. Sometimes when she was asleep, she had nightmares about Daniel and other kids slipping out of her hands and falling down a hole because she couldn't catch all of them.

Rae was a passive shlump, and now she was going to passively go home after she failed out. She would probably take the first shop job that anyone offered her after she filled out applications at all the usual places.

Lizzy asked, "Can't you get a tutor or something so you could ace the final?"

"Nope. Final's only worth fifteen percent. Even if I aced it, I would still fail the class. I need at least a B in core classes to keep the scholarship, anyway."

"Damn," the girls both said, and then they looked at each other again.

Rae's hangover marched through her brain wearing jackboots, and she was still half-stoned from the vodka-and-Rohypnol cocktail that Corn Boy had fed her last night, but even she could see that a silent debate was going on between those two girls. "What?"

Georgie said, "Your parents won't help? You really don't have any other way to stay in college?"

"Nope." Rae just hadn't understood statistics. When she had seen that Dr. Gonder was teaching stats this semester, she should have dropped it and waited until the next semester because Gonder was known to fail three-quarters of the students who started his class, but she hadn't waited. NOVAs and ANOVAs and applied regression and multiple regression and variance



analysis were all too hard for her to just pick up on her own, and Gonder's lectures confused her more than they helped.

She had thought she was so smart, and now, how the mighty had fallen, as Aunt TracyJo would gloat when Rae slouched back into town after flunking out.

Lizzy asked, "No rich uncles who can lend you the money? Loans? Grants?"

Rae wanted to sigh, but the breath whistling through her head would hurt too much. Georgie and Lizzy never had money problems. They bought all kinds of the latest phones and clothes and went out all they wanted. Their parents were probably footing the tuition bill, the lucky ducks.

Rae wasn't jealous because she knew that such luck was not her lot in life, and she accepted who and what she was: a working-class girl with no upwardly mobile connections. "No one in my family who I could ask for help is rich or even middle-class. It's too late to apply for loans for next year, and the government has cut grants to the bone anyway. I can't even go back to community college for a semester because I'm done with my general education credits."

The front door in the study room slammed, rattling the thin walls and fluttering the posters. Rae's roommate and cousin Hester walked into the dorm bedroom, home from Bible study. Hester glanced at Rae suffering on the bed, sniffed, and flounced into the bathroom. Her calf-length, eyelet-lace skirt flounced really well.

Rae groaned. "When you guys leave, she's going to rag on me about this. That's another reason I went to Delta Chi, to get out of this dorm room. Yesterday afternoon, she got all 'The wages of sin are death,' on me when I was trying to study for my abnormal psych test."

"Actually," Lizzy leaned down, and her fuzzy blonde hair touched Rae's cheek. Lizzy whispered very softly, very near Rae's ear, "the wages of sin are about two hundred bucks an hour."

Such cash was impossible. "Yeah. Right."

Over Rae's chest, Georgie asked Lizzy, "Are you sure about this?"

"It wouldn't hurt to see if things might work out for her."

"Okay, then." Georgie leaned down, pulled her long, brown braid behind her, and whispered in Rae's other ear, "My parents don't help me out with money, either. I work ten hours a week, and I pay my own way. Everything. Tuition. Dorm. Meal plan. Books. Plus extra money left over."

Even statistics-challenged Rae could estimate that. Two hundred bucks an hour times ten hours added up fast. “That’s, like, two thousand dollars a week.”

Rae wasn’t sure what you had to do for two thousand dollars a week. She was not going to sell drugs. College was not worth that.

Lizzy whispered, “And the perks are fantastic. You should see some of the parties we go to. We only went to the frat with you last night because you seemed all nuts.”

“I was nuts.” Rae was still nuts.

Georgie’s soft voice was as seductive as whiskey, “Come with us to a party tonight. We want you to meet someone.”

Rae groaned. “I am in no condition to meet anyone.”

“You’ll be fine by tonight. Drink the green stuff.”

Rae winced at their stabbing voices and despaired of drinking any more of that vile green potion. The imaginary smoke steaming off the top of it smelled like fish sticks.

As the girls cut through the shared bathroom back to their own bedroom, shimmying past Hester, Lizzy asked Georgie, “Does she have anything to wear? She’s a lot taller than we are.”

“We can get her something from the costume racks. I’ll check her closet for her size.” Georgie called back to Rae, “Be ready at seven with your make-up and hair done like you’re going to a high society wedding.”

Sure. A high-society wedding.

Or a funeral.

Rae’s own funeral.

Her own funeral would be a relief.

The girls left Rae alone with a head full of whispering and pain.

Hester emerged from the bathroom and chanted in her shrill, high voice, “‘Wine is a mocker, strong drink is raging: and whosoever is deceived thereby is not wise.’ Proverbs, Chapter Twenty, Verse One.”

Rae pretended to be asleep and wished for death so that the pain in her head and Hester’s Bible verses would all go away.

## Squeezing into Cinderella's Dress

ONE of Hester's miracles must have occurred because by six o'clock, the pain killers and green sports drink had subdued Rae's hangover, so she scalded off the hangover slime in the shower and dabbed on make-up. With her long, coppery hair curled, she felt better, even if her legs still wobbled.

Luckily, Hester had gone to a friend's for the evening so she could neither preach at Rae nor report back to their mutual family on Rae's whereabouts or deficiencies. Rae had to take her blessings where she could.

In the adjoining bathroom, Rae found a silver-spangled dress that Lizzy and George must have dropped off for her, because it was the right length for Rae but would have been six inches too long for Georgie, and a full foot of the glittering material would have dragged on the floor behind blond, little Lizzy.

A note pinned to the strap told her to be in the northeast corner of the dorm's parking lot at seven-fifteen. No signature.

The dress must be from Georgie and Lizzy, right?

Rae had never worn anything like that dress. She couldn't even figure out how to put it on until she found a tiny zipper tucked into the seam under one armpit.

She stuffed herself into the dress, sucked in her ribs, held her breath, zipped it up, and waited for the sound of ripping fabric, but the dress held.

Another miracle.

The material stretched, and she could breathe even though whalebones cinched her waist. The dress fitted tightly from her pushed-up breasts to her knees and then flared just enough that she could walk with mincing steps. Rae decided that there wasn't enough room inside that dress for panty hose.

The dress was cut like a mermaid, and Rae remembered something about mermaids from last night but couldn't place it.

Rae turned and looked at her bare back in the mirror. The silver dress dipped behind her and exposed all that naked, ivory skin back there.

She didn't look like a small-town high school hick who had gone off to college any more. The dress made her feel womanly.



Her mother would have declared it generally impractical, and her father would have asked her how she planned to fight off a too-forward date and then outrun him in such an awkward contraption.

She didn't need to fight off or outrun a masher. Lizzy and her Taser would be there, and Lizzy and Georgie had Rae's back. From what they had told her, they had indeed protected her back-side last night.

She found some strappy black pumps in the back of her closet, and the teetering heels made her all the more unsteady. The last few wisps of her hangover were going to push her off these shoes and split open that miraculous dress like a trout being gutted, pink flesh spilling out of its tight, silver skin.

That type of gruesome scene was far more likely in her life than a Cinderella dress dropped into her lap and then being whisked off to the ball. Splitting open the dress and her boobs falling out in front of The Handsome Prince was more like Rae's luck.

Rae dared God and the universe to hand her such an obvious ill omen that she should indeed return to Pirtleville, get a shop job, and marry the first taker. She just *dared* them.

She flipped a long coat over the glittering dress—which now that she was thinking about *fish*, she did look like a gigantic fishing lure come to life,—and tottered out of the dorm room, down the sidewalk, and stood in the corner of the parking lot where the note had specified.

Rae waited for something to happen to her.

## Limousines and Sunsets

RAE stood alone in the deserted parking lot at dusk.

A black town car, its windows darkened, drove into the parking lot and rolled to stop beside her. Dust settled behind the rear tires, and the exhaust irritated Rae's throat.

Georgie and Lizzy had not shown up.

The gravel lot stretched all around her, empty, because all the students who went home on weekends had already left and those who stayed would walk to the bars that were only a block away, but not for an hour or so.

The car's windows were tinted so dark that she had barely seen the driver—a white man in a suit and tie—through the front windshield as the car had pulled into the dusty, darkening lot.

No one would see her get in the car. No one would see it drive away with her inside. No one would write down the license plate or give the police a description of the black car.

Jeez, she was a danged case study for a stupid-girl-gets-murdered class.

The rear car door opened toward Rae and she stepped back, disgusted with herself for getting caught in such a stupid trap. She peeked in the car to see what awaited her.

Georgie and Lizzy sat in the back seat of the car. Lizzy scooted to the middle to make room.

"Come on," Lizzy said. "Time to go."

Oh. It was just the girls.

Rae should really get over that paranoia at some point. You'd think that paranoia might have prevented her from getting rufied, but evidently Rae had the useless kind of paranoia.

She stepped into the car and snuggled up tight to Lizzy, who was wearing a creamy gold mini-dress that was a few shades darker than her hair. Across the car, Georgie wore crimson. Her long, brown hair was coiled into a sophisticated chignon on the back of her head.

Rae had curled her hair but hadn't thought about an updo. Maybe she should have done more. Even in the silver-spangled magic gown, she felt

underdressed.

The girls' tropical flower perfumes mixed with the smell of the leather upholstery, reminding Rae of a flower garland draped over a horse saddle.

The car pulled away from the curb.

Georgie asked Rae, "Feeling better?"

Rae smiled ruefully. The hangover had been her own fault, first for drinking so much vodka and then for being stupid enough to get rufied. "Yeah, I'm better."

They rode out of the university and onto the freeway, like the anonymous black car was speeding them away from their real lives.

Even after two and a half years, the university had never felt like real life to Rae. Real life was scraping by, and everyone you knew scraped by, and after the mine and smelter had closed and laid off everyone's fathers, the scraping got harder.

On the high overpass, the beige desert city spread under the slicing laser rays of the sunset. Riding over that bridge, Rae felt like a flying fish, but at least she was a flying fish with two other shiny fishies, packed close together in the black car.

Beside Rae, every time Lizzy breathed, her soft shoulder rubbed the skin on Rae's arm.

Georgie said, "We want you on your toes tonight. This is going to be a great party. Don't worry about what to do or anything. Just be," Georgie looked at the car's black headliner and pondered for a second, "*vivacious* . Be yourself—funny and snarky and little wide-eyed innocent at times,—but *more* of all that."

Rae was taken aback. "How in the heck am I 'wide-eyed innocent?'"

Lizzy cocked an eyebrow at her. "You're kidding, right?"

"No." Rae had been born and raised down by the Mexican Border. People in her family smuggled drugs across the Border in one direction and ran guns in the other while other family members pretended to try to catch them. She was anything but innocent.

Lizzy's other eyebrow rose. "Rae, honey, have you *met* you? "

"I've lived with me all my life. Have you met my cousin-roommate? Since when am I the *innocent* one in my family?"

Georgie dismissed Rae's defense with a wave. "Oh, we didn't say in your family. I *would* say that roommate of yours is practically Amish, but even the Amish aren't *that* Amish any more. What cult does she belong to, anyway?"

“It’s not a cult. She’s Baptist.” Like Rae was raised.

“Southern Baptist?” Georgie asked.

“Oh, no. *First Baptist*.” From somewhere deep inside Rae, the words rose up. “Those Southern Baptists are going straight to Hell, what with all that singing and shouting out in church and whatnot.”

Georgie and Lizzy laughed at her. Rae laughed, too, but she wanted to cringe at that rote line popping out of her mouth. If she had known how, she would have thrown all that gunk out of her brain.

Georgie said, “Oh, God. Wait until The Dom hears that crap. He will eat that up.”

Lizzy flinched just a little, which Rae felt because Lizzy was curled up next to her like a chilly cat. Riding in the back of the car and pressing close to Lizzy’s tiny body felt nice, like they were cousins, maybe, like holding her body and pushed-up breasts close to a girl was okay if you were cousins.

The driver drove the car down off the freeway, into the black-shadowed skyscraper canyons of downtown.

Georgie said, “Rae, honey, you just bat your eyelashes when you say stuff like that. The guys will be all over you.”

“Can’t say anything yet,” Lizzy said.

“I know. I won’t say anything until The Dom gives us the high sign.”

Snuggled against Rae’s soft flesh, Lizzy flinched again and stared straight out in front of her, watching the road through the front windshield.

Lizzy had twitched both times Georgie said Dom’s name. Rae didn’t know that she wanted to meet this guy Dom who made sarcastic, self-assured, Taser-wielding Lizzy flinch.

Georgie, however, was brisk and professional. “Rae, just remember that we’re on your side, because we like you and don’t want you to have to leave college.”

“I’m glad,” Rae said, and she was unreasonably happy that they liked her. They looked great tonight, dressed so beautifully and all done up. Rae had never seen anyone so beautiful, and Lizzy’s shoulder delicately nudged Rae’s breast as the car took a corner. “I like you girls, too.”

Georgie continued, “Here’s what you need to know. When we get to the party, you should mingle, have a drink or two and have some fun, but *do not* make an embarrassing spectacle of yourself like last night at Delta Chi.”

“Oh, heck no. I was just upset. And rufied. You guys sound tense.” Maybe their high-paying job was dealing drugs. Maybe they were the coke

suppliers at an upper-crust parties. Rae was nobody's mule. People who dealt drugs died, either by overdose or by a rival drug cartel. Often, their families were killed, too. She wouldn't risk that.

"Nope, we're fine. These parties are fun, but this isn't the job. This is just advertising. At some point, after an hour or so, if everything is going all right, we're going to introduce you to the The Dom."

"This guy's name is Dominic?"

"No. He'll ask you whether you like the party, and *this is crucial*, you tell him the truth about exactly what you like and don't like about the party, about the people there, about what you see."

Rae's nerves ratcheted up past Lizzy's little twitches. "What kind of a party is this?"

"Just a cocktail party, like the Delta Chi house but with better booze and no rufies. All you have to do is have a few drinks—they're really good, you should try a few, and I mean *a few*, —and talk to some interesting people, meet our friends, and eventually talk to The Dom, probably. He may not even have time to talk to you tonight, but he'll be watching."

Beside Rae, Lizzy flinched again, and she looked down at her hands in her lap. Lizzy had gotten a pink manicure.

Rae should have painted her nails. At least her nails were clean. Her nails had never been clean before she had moved to go to the university. At home, everyone had gray nails. "And then what?"

Georgie shrugged. "After the party, a limo will take us back to the dorm and drop us off. You can get buzzed. You won't need to drive. Geez, Lizzy. You're trembling."

Lizzy looked over Georgie's shoulder and out the darkened window. "It's just the first time that I've seen him since last week."

"Seriously, stop freaking out." Georgie settled back in the seat, nudging Lizzy closer to Rae.

Rae was finding it hard to breathe because every time she took a breath, Lizzy's arm rubbed her breasts, and Lizzy didn't seem to notice or to want to move her arm.

Georgie said to Lizzy, "After that Dom-Date I had with him a couple months ago, he was great. After five minutes, maybe even three, it won't be weird any more. You'll be fine."

Rae's curiosity got the better of her. "You dated this Dom guy?"

"Just the once," Lizzy said. She looked shy, which looked weird on her.



Rae asked Lizzy, “So, you don’t think he’s going to call you or something?”

“It’s not like that. It’s understood that it’s just the one date. I don’t even know how much money he must have spent on it. At least a couple thousand dollars, maybe more, depending on how much those concert tickets were. We met the band during the sound check and sat in the second row. Then we went out for dinner. That bottle of wine he ordered was ridiculous, and tasty.”

Rae was used to Georgie and Lizzy being brazen women, as they would have been called back in Pirtleville. She admired them, but now vulnerable, little Lizzy needed protection. Maybe Rae should be the one with the Taser tonight. Rae asked, “Are you afraid of him?”

“Oh, hell, no.” Lizzy caught her breath. Her lips plumped. Her light blue eyes went glassy, and her cheeks pinkened. “I’m not afraid of him at all.”

Rae had had enough physiology classes to see that Lizzy was either in love with Dom or seriously turned on.

Lizzy crossed her legs, rubbing against Rae’s silver dress and thigh, and Lizzy’s breath caught in her throat. Lizzy closed her eyes, but Rae saw Lizzy’s blue eyes roll upward just as her lids closed.

Pulses travelled through Lizzy’s skin, and she shivered against Rae’s arm.

Good Lord, Lizzy had just had an orgasm, one of those small throbbing ones, just thinking about the guy.

Georgie leaned over, pushing Lizzy more tightly against Rae’s side, and asked her, “What did he do to you?” Her voice suggested that she knew very well the things that Dom did to people and that they were naughty .

“I don’t want to talk about it.” Lizzy’s cheeks turned wilder pink.

With even more knowing coyness in her voice, Georgie asked, “For how long?”

Lizzy touched her own smooth shoulder and stared out the front windshield with a vague smile on her face. The sunset glowed on her skin. “Three hours.”

Georgie laughed at her.

Lizzy asked, “It’s not going to be weird, right?”

“No. If his pattern holds, he’ll pay a little more attention to you tonight than usual, and he won’t have a date with him, in deference to your feelings. Next week, though, it’s back to business as usual.”

Lizzy nodded. “I can handle that.”

Rae had to move her arm out from between Lizzy and herself, and she rested her arm on the back of the seat. With more room, Lizzy settled into Rae's side to face Georgie and laid the back of her head on Rae's bust. It was all sweet and innocent, this cuddling. It was just moral support.

Lizzy's hand drifted down and rested on Rae's leg.

Georgie asked, "You talked with The Dom about this beforehand, right?"

"Oh, yeah. And you've had a Dom-Date, and some of our friends have, so I knew. It's just, well, wow."

"Yeah. That's the problem with The Dom's dates. Like a good comedian, he always leaves you wanting more."

Lizzy's eyes widened, and she laughed and nodded. "Yeah."

Georgie's voice turned gentle. "Don't do anything stupid, okay? If you meet someone interesting tonight, go have some fun. Don't mess up your head. That's when things get weird."

Lizzy nodded, and her head pulsed against Rae's breast again. Rae was paying very little attention to their conversation, with Lizzy's soft body pushing against her side, and Lizzy's hand gripping Rae's thigh.

Rae didn't consider herself a prude, and she was certainly far removed from the blinking virgin who had shown up at college two and half years ago. She had had two boyfriends and a couple of short-term-things, enough to be respectable but not enough to be a slut. She had never touched a girl in the way that Lizzy was touching her leg right now, grabbing her thigh, holding on. She felt like she should move away, but there was nowhere to move to in the car's black leather back seat, and she didn't want to move. She wanted Lizzy's hand to move up her thigh.

Lizzy said, "I won't do anything stupid. I knew what it was. I know what *he* is. But, just, wow."

Rae leaned forward. "*What* is he?"

Georgie's smile was a little sad. "That's a loaded question. What do you think, Lizzy?"

"Damned if I know," she said.

Rae was getting nervous about meeting this guy.

Georgie asked Lizzy, "Do you know anything about him, like where he's from?"

Lizzy shrugged. "Somewhere else. He has a British accent most of the time, very Londony, but sometimes I hear French or Italian or something else. Something Asian, maybe. Not from the Southwest, that's for sure. But

he knows a lot of people here.”

Georgie told Rae, “I’ve worked for him for over a year now, and I think he’s as smooth and polished as mirror. Whatever you are or want is reflected off of his perfectly shiny shell. If you ask him a question about himself, he won’t exactly answer, and then for some reason you spill your guts about something intensely personal without meaning to, and you have this great conversation, and after you leave, you realize that he didn’t answer you, and you still don’t know anything of any substance about him. Even the things you think you know are suspect, because he might be reflecting you.”

Nerves flared in Rae’s stomach. From her abnormal psych classes, she could almost diagnose him as a psychopath without even meeting him.

“Like,” Georgie continued, “I think he likes live music and books, probably. He almost always takes a date to some sort of concert but he must choose it based on what she likes because sometimes it’s rock, sometimes pop, sometimes classical, and he took Nona to a country music concert. If you talk to him about books, either he’s already read the book that you’re talking about, or else he has you text him the name and author, and quite often, a week later, he’ll have something interesting to say about it. But I’m not sure, because most of the girls are bookish types, so it might be the reflecting thing again.”

“I don’t think so,” Lizzy said. “He’s read a lot. He’s read everything that I’m reading for class: Pope, Woolf, Tolstoy, Shakespeare, Sand, and both T.S. and George Eliot, and he can quote stuff. I don’t think you can fake all that.”

Georgie nodded. “And he has moderate, intelligent views on sports and politics, and anything else you ask him about.”

“And he speaks a couple languages,” Lizzy said.

Georgie nodded. “I’ve heard him speak some sort of Chinese and something Middle Eastern.”

Lizzy spoke over her, “I’ve heard him speak Russian. And he likes sex.”

“Yeah, the sex. He loves women, *craves* women, and likes to be with women, in the plural,” Georgie said. “He likes sex, and if you’re ever with him, it’s almost,” she looked at Lizzy, “like he gets inside your head and knows what you want, even if you don’t know it or don’t want to say it. It’s the mirror thing.”

Lizzy nodded, and her lips plumped again. She breathed deeply, and Rae felt her own breath open up as Lizzy’s back was firm against her breasts, and

Lizzy's hand braced on her thigh as the car took a corner and pressed them all back into the leather seat.

"A couple hundred years ago," Georgie said, "The Dom would have made a great sultan, and his whole harem would have all been like Lizzy here, still suffering after-shock orgasms a week later."

"I am not," Lizzy protested.

Georgie glanced at Lizzy. Her knowing smile turned indulgent, and there might have been some nostalgia in there, too. "Sure, you aren't. He's odd in some weird ways. Do you know whatever happened to that cat?"

"The black one hanging around work a couple months ago?" Lizzy asked. "I thought The Dom had someone take it to the Humane Society."

"No. He just said that he 'took care of it,' but he wouldn't say anything else."

"You don't think he hurt it."

"I don't know. No one knows."

"He's not evil like that. He's not evil at all."

"Yeah, well, we don't know what's underneath that shiny mirror-ball. Maybe there's some swirling dark secret. Maybe he's just a regular guy who lives an odd lifestyle. He might just be a really private person, though that's not likely, considering. Maybe there's nothing under the shell, and that shell is just all there is."

Rae knew that last part, about the shell being all there was, was a textbook definition of a psychopath. Killing animals, if he had killed the cat, was the textbook gateway that turned a psychopath into a serial killer. She had a lot of psychology textbooks.

Her textbooks were also full of the emotional devastation that normal people suffer after a personal or working relationship with a psychopath. A serial killer was worse. It scared the shit out of Rae, and she worried about Lizzy and her extended, possibly emotionally manipulative "date."

"What did you do afterward?" Lizzy asked Georgie.

Rae relaxed a little. Lizzy's question sounded like she was handling it well, or at least with clear eyes.

Georgie shrugged. "I threw myself into my job."

Lizzy laughed.

Rae was glad that Lizzy was laughing, even if she didn't understand the joke. Lizzy's fingers lightly trailed along the shiny material that barely covered Rae's thigh. Shivers slid on Rae's skin.

The car stopped at the curb beside one of the downtown grand hotels near Symphony Hall and the golden-domed capitol building. Rae stared out the window at the blazing light bulbs and towering buildings that she had never seen from closer than the freeway overpasses. Rae's third grade teacher had shown slides of the capitol's gleaming dome, and the dusty children had gawked at their magnificence.

Georgie opened the door and stepped out, into the dark night and shining lights.

Incandescent light bulbs, those clear-glass ones with the fiery filament inside, studded the hotel wall. Rae saw yellow, curly after-images all over the black inside of the car.

Lizzy pulled away from Rae and scooted across the seat. Rae wanted to sigh, but she didn't know why she would sigh about a car ride being over, so she didn't.

Just before Lizzy reached her leg out of the car, she turned back to Rae. "You won't say anything about this, will you?" She laid her hand on Rae's leg again.

All Rae's attention focused on her thigh where Lizzy's hand touched the sparkling fabric covering her leg. "Of course not." Rae was solid like that.

"Everyone wants a date with The Dom, and everyone is bleary for a day or two afterward, and it's embarrassing."

Rae didn't understand, but she went with it. "I won't say anything. I don't even know what you guys were talking about."

Lizzy laughed. "Of course."

Lizzy leaned over and kissed Rae smack on her lips, but her fingers tightened on Rae's leg. Lizzy's lips tasted like cherries when Rae breathed in and were soft, like her silky, white skin.

Rae couldn't seem to breathe as her blood raced to her face and her lips and she kissed back, wanting it to last, and then Lizzy was out of the car and gone.

The light bulbs glared white outside the dark car.

Rae could just see Lizzy's pale hand dangling in the bright air outside the car, inviting Rae to come out.



## A Different Kind of Cocktail Party

THE three girls rode the hotel's mirror-lined elevator way, way up, so high that Rae grabbed the handrail because her legs grew heavy and she was surprised that the elevator didn't pop out the top of the building.

The doors opened straight into a ballroom where a crowded party was swinging. The clear air smelled like expensive perfume and clean people.

A wide, tall black man in a black suit stepped in front of the elevator doors as they walked out, and Georgie and Lizzy smiled at him and nodded.

He nodded and stepped back, but he didn't smile.

They walked a few steps into the party before Rae whispered to her friends, "Was that Dom?"

"No," Georgie whispered. "That's Jeff, one of the security guys. He's nice. He just takes his job seriously."

"Okay." Rae, being tall, looked over the crowd, trying to see everyone and to find someone named Dom, as if she could figure out people's names just by looking at them. Her curiosity had made her a little stupid.

About half of the people at the party seemed older than Rae and her friends, maybe in their thirties and forties. Those men were wearing suits, and most women wore black satin formals. A few more adventurous women wore navy blue silk.

The people who were near Rae's age, however, dressed differently.

Beside Rae and her friends, one buxom, blond, young woman, surely a second wife or mistress, wore a mini-dress of shimmering pearl pink. The other young women were bright dots weaving in the dark crowd.

The few young men wore tailored, modern suits. One had an open collar instead of a tie, and Rae saw a glimpse of silver at his throat, like he was wearing a chain.

Rae asked the girls, "Is Dom here?"

The girls glanced around. Rae thought, considering the crowd was pretty dense in spots, that their cursory glances couldn't spot a red cape at a bullfight. She wondered if Dom was thoroughly distinctive-looking or if they just weren't really looking.

Lizzy said, “I don’t see him. Let’s dance.”

Lizzy’s small hand slid into Rae’s, and Lizzy pulled Rae and Georgie through the crowd. Lizzy had pulled Rae through life a lot these last twenty-four hours, but it seemed to be turning out all right, considering that she was at a high-falutin’ cocktail party instead of a smoky frat drunk-fest. Rae should just follow Lizzy and see where she ended up.

Maybe it would be something really interesting, far more interesting than the life that Rae had been falling into. She just needed to act *vivacious* .

Rae wasn’t sure how to act *vivacious* .

A crowd bopped on the dance floor. A deejay spun old, old rock songs and seventies disco.

Lizzy began to dance, and Georgie started dancing, and Rae shuffled her feet and swayed. After one song’s worth of Rae’s awkward stumbling, Lizzy told Rae, “You need a drink.”

Rae agreed. She felt like a spectacle in her flashy dress. Everyone seemed to be glancing side-eyes at her like she was making a fool of herself.

While they drank jewel-colored, pucker-sweet girly martinis, Lizzy told dirty jokes.

After Rae drank a cocktail, and then another, the jokes got funnier and funnier.

After all her dark thoughts about flunking out of college, laughing felt great, and Rae went with it. Last night at the Delta Chi house, she had pursued sex and drunkenness with angry intensity. Tonight, Rae breathed. If this was her last week of fun, let it be. She was going to laugh her way through it.

When Rae was good and giggly, Lizzy dragged them to the dance floor again. Rae found her rhythm this time and didn’t care if anyone was watching her, and she danced to the old rock music from years before she was born .

A young man dancing next to Rae shrugged off his shirt. Rae stole a glance. His chest was smooth, and he was flinging his shaggy hair in time to the beat and dirty dancing around a woman who was at least a decade older than he was. The woman reached out one long finger and hooked the thick silver torque around his neck. He turned, his eyes and his body and all his attention on that woman. She kissed him.

On Rae’s other side, a white-haired man with a flabby face danced with a woman who might have been Rae’s age. She was a wasp-waisted, blond bobble doll in turquoise sequins, and his hands were all over her, grabbing

her breasts and ass.

If Rae hadn't been so tipsy, she might have been shocked, but Lizzy and Georgie danced close to Rae because the crowd shoved them together. Their curvy bodies pushed up against Rae's shimmering dress, rubbing her back and her thighs and her breasts, and it all felt so good that she danced for an hour until the deejay called out to slow it down. The music slipped from bompity-thumps to silvery flutes and a high soprano's singing.

Rae was just reaching out to Lizzy when a man slipped into Rae's arms, and she looked *up* to see his face. Her hands settled on his muscle-bunched shoulders before she knew what she was doing.

The man stood even taller than Rae even though she was wearing heels, which meant that he had to be at least six-feet-three. His gold-blond hair was trimmed military-short, and his neck and jaw were pristine-clean. Covering up those strong cheekbones and jaw-line with any sort of beard would be a crime against nature, anyway. His eyes shone bright, clear blue.

"Um, pardon me?" she said. "I was just going to dance with my friend here," but when Rae turned her head, Lizzy wasn't standing there, and some other guy's suit back was turned toward Rae.

The blond man—for he was a *man*, not just some guy—gathered Rae in his strong arms. He wrapped one arm around her waist, and his other hand gripped her right hand firmly. He smelled like lemon tea, fresh soap, and something darker, muskier. He smiled, but the smile didn't quite reach his blue, blue eyes. "Shall we dance?"

Georgie and Lizzy's abandonment surprised her. "I guess we shall."

The man moved purposefully like he could waltz if he wanted to, and her body swayed with his. He didn't arch his back like those professional dancers, but his whole body felt like he was wrapped in steel. His strong arms held her so firmly that she felt tied to him.

"So," Rae said, casting around for conversation. "Great party."

"Yes, indeed. You dance well." His deep voice sounded impressed, like this was unusual.

"Thanks. Aren't you here with someone? It looks like most people are coupled up."

"No," the man said. "I'm stag."

Rae wasn't sure that she heard him right. "Is that your name? Stag?"

"No," he chuckled. "Not at all. I am here, alone. Stag."

"Oh, I get it." She smiled brightly at him, trying to be vivacious instead

of dim-witted, in case Dom was watching. Hey, this guy might even be a test. She grinned harder. "So, my name is Rae."

"Have you availed yourself of the bar?" he asked.

"Oh, yeah," she said, embarrassed. "My friend made me drink lemon drop martinis. They were really sweet like, you know, a lemon drop."

He spun her, dancing in a tight circle, and her feet matched his step to step. "Did you like them?"

"Yeah, they were good." She kept staring up at him. Even his eyelashes were golden. Her dad would have called him a pretty boy because no scars or lumps roughened the smooth skin on his linear jaw and cheekbones. She decided to call him The Blond Hottie in her head because she hadn't heard his name or couldn't remember it. Jeez, she hoped she hadn't gotten rufied again.

The Blond Hottie asked, "What are you studying in college?"

"Psychology. I just read a research paper that said that all men can be described as either sparkly vampires or werewolves. I almost thought it was a spoof paper, but it was in a good journal."

"That is interesting. Tell me more." His amused tone encouraged her too much.

"The paper had pretty good data, convincing associations. It seemed like most men identify quite readily with one or the other. So, are you a sparkly vampire or a werewolf?"

His smile took on a wry tilt. "I assure you, I'm neither a vampire nor a werewolf." His voice had a light accent, maybe British.

Rae decided to go with the conversation. What the heck. The high-grade alcohol running through her brain damped down the useless paranoia, the childhood church-induced shame, and her common sense, so she pointed to the older guy molesting the blonde and asked, "How about that guy? Vampire or werewolf?"

The Blond Hottie smiled with more real humor. He bent down, and his whisper tickled her ear and bare shoulder. "A vampire, at least in years."

"And that guy?" Rae pointed out the shaggy kid gyrating about the nonplussed woman.

He glanced to where Rae pointed. "A wolf cub, yeah?"

"Sure looks like it," she said.

The Blond Hottie backed up, giving her some space. "Did the psychology paper mention if women could be so easily cast into pop literary roles?"

“No, just guys,” Rae said, “but I think women can be either like Bella or like Katniss.”

“Your hypothesis sounds like it should be developed into a paper. Which are you, Bella or Katniss?”

*Bella.* Rae knew that she was a carbon copy of passive little Bella who waited and obeyed. She hated that.

Heck, for tonight, for this last beautiful night before she got kicked out of college, Rae was going to ditch her inner Bella. She lifted her chin and smiled. “Katniss.”

The Blond Hottie’s smile and blue eyes focused on her. “How so?”

Oh, dang. Now she had to come up with something. “I love my family more than anything, and I can bowhunt.”

The Blond Hottie blinked, and Rae was a little surprised that gold dust didn’t sprinkle out of his thick, shimmering lashes. He said, “There’s a surprising answer.”

“My dad taught me to bowhunt when I was nine. My whole family bowhunts.”

“You are a little Amazon, aren’t you?”

No one called gargantuan Rae a “little” anything, but this guy stood several inches taller than she did. “I s’pose so.”

“And your friends, Georgie and Lizbeth. They’re Bellas, yeah?”

Rae heard his accent again, just when he asked, *yeah*? She said, “Oh, I don’t think they’re Bellas. Georgie is going to be a litigating lawyer, and she’s going to be awesome at it. Lizzy is wicked with a Taser if you cross her. I think she’ll end up as a professor. So you know Georgie and Lizzy? Do you know their friend Dom? ”

The man’s blond eyebrows lifted with amusement, and that should have tipped Rae off, but she was tipsy and sweaty from dancing with her friends.

The Blond Hottie asked, “Should I know him?”

Rae said, “They said he would be here. This Dom guy sounds kind of humorless to me, though.”

One of his pale eyebrows twitched just a little. “Humorless? Is that how they described Dom?”

“No. They seem to like him. He sounds like he’s hard to know.” Rae didn’t mention anything they had said because she was solid like that. “They just coached me on what to say, like they didn’t want me to make a mistake if I met him.”



“Really?” he asked, as if she had said the most fascinating thing, and to Rae’s lemon drop martini-soaked brain, she was kind of fascinating right now. He smelled good to her, like sweet cinnamon and like something growing in a meadow, and like a strong, clean man.

“Yeah, they just said to tell him the truth, but they made it sound like I had to tell the whole truth and nothing but the truth, like he was a judge or psychic or something.”

“Surely that’s not the case. Perhaps we should practice your truthfulness. That would please Georgie and Lizbeth, yes?” The Blond Hottie smiled again, and his white teeth were not pointy like a vampire at all. His smile had a sweetness to it, like he was truly happy that Rae was dancing with him and that they were talking.

Rae laughed, and her body pulsed with laughter. “Sure. Why not?”

“What a wonderful laugh, you have.” His blue eyes crinkled like he was pleased.

“I used to sing in the church choir.” Rae just wanted to make him smile some more. “Singing strengthens your diaphragm, and then you get this loud, obnoxious laugh. I hate it.”

“I think your laugh is delightful. It sounds like bell choir. You said you tried the cocktails?”

“Yes! A few.” *More than a few.* “And I tried some of that blue-label whiskey, too. It was really good.”

“You like whiskey,” he mused. “Interesting. And the music?”

She babbled because she liked to see him smile. “A little, um, *classic* for my taste, but it’s fun to dance to.”

“You like to dance.” He spun her around in a circle as if to show that he was bigger and far stronger than she was, that even almost-six-feet Rae was fragile in his arms.

Rae stiffened her back and controlled the spin.

Mrs. Geerhardt had taught Rae’s seventh-grade Bible School class to foxtrot and waltz. In the cool church basement, the pimply boys and girls had held each other’s palms out in front of them and counted out loud to the classical music. Eventually, Minister Stoppard had made old Mrs. Geerhardt stop teaching them such a heathen thing as dancing.

She held her arms and back taut and didn’t let him fling her around.

The Blond Hottie looked down at her when she pushed back. His sweet smile became amused at her. “You partner well. Do you tend to lead?”

She lifted her chin because, well, she wasn't sure why she did other than that Lizzy and Georgie had been rubbing up against her, which had turned her on more than she would ever have admitted, and she liked the feel of this man in her arms. She hadn't had a boyfriend for eight months, to the point where she had gone to the frat party last night with the intention of getting laid, and she was going home to Pirtleville in three and a half weeks. No one at this party would tattle on her.

She smiled up at The Blond Hottie. "Yeah, I tend to lead."

He smiled a little more, and he inclined his head like she had said something funny and slightly outrageous. She felt awesome. He asked, "What do you think of the people here?"

Rae looked at the college-aged guy with the domineering woman in black satin and at the white-haired man fondling the young chick. "They're an odd mix. I've been too busy dancing to look around much."

"Let's look around. The woman in the black formal with the shirtless gent?"

Rae knew exactly which ones he meant and glanced over at them. The shaggy-haired young man was grinding at the woman like if he got her hot enough, she might buy him a new surfboard. "The wolf cub?"

"Yes." His pleased voice egged her on.

The woman wore heavy make-up, to the point where all the cream and powder looked like it might crack if she smiled, so her dark red lipstick didn't curve up at all. "He seems really into it. She looks disinterested."

"She will not allow him to gain the upper hand."

"Oh. Playing hard-to-get."

"Not exactly. How about the woman in the short orange dress and the gentleman in the black tie?"

One glance at the fawning woman plucking at the impassive man's shoulder and chest told Rae that story. "He's playing hard-to-get, or else he's paying her for the evening."

"Yes, there's always a power dynamic in a couple."

The Blond Hottie, and she realized that she still didn't know his real name or else had forgotten it because she was just tipsy enough to forget things and maybe make wild decisions, had waltzed Rae over to the edge of the dance floor.

The Blond Hottie nodded past the people around them, drawing her attention over the heads of the crowd to a couple the edge of the room. "What

do you think of those two screwing against the wall?”

Rae peeked around The Blond Hottie’s shoulder and found the couple he meant. The two of them weren’t even trying to be discreet. The man was one of the forty-something men wearing a black suit, and he was fucking a blond woman against the wall from behind. Her glittery hot pink dress was pushed up above the round cheeks of her tanned ass, and her thong was around her ankles. The woman threw her head back as he ground her against the wall.

“Holy Jesus!” Rae’s first instinct had been to run over and pull the man off of the woman because she assumed that it must be rape, but the woman grabbed the man’s suit coat to pull him in closer. The woman’s other hand splayed above her on the wall, and her fingers clawed the paint.

Rae whipped around, back to The Blond Hottie. Her face burned, and she knew she must look slapped-red and flustered and she thought that she should swim through the crowd and leave this party as fast as she could. “They’re fucking!”

He laughed a deep chuckle. “Yes, they are.”

“Right out here where everybody can see and everything!” Rae should leave. This party was some kind of Sodom and Gomorrah that freaked her out, and yet a less twitchy part of her brain remembered college couples making out heavily against the wall at the frat party the night before. Some of them had been getting to third base. “Isn’t that illegal? In public?”

“This is a private party,” The Blond Hottie said.

Some of the other people in the crowd stopped to watch the man fucking the woman against the wall. Some glanced over and went back to dancing or drinking.

Rae glanced back. The man’s pants and underwear had fallen down around his ankles, and his white shirt tail swung as he boned the young woman. He had wrapped one arm around her waist, trapping her on his dick. His other arm vibrated deep in her pussy in front.

Rae maneuvered The Blond Hottie around so that she could see them better over his shoulder. He didn’t move quite enough, so she used her arms and strong back to press against him, definitely leading. He chuckled again.

The woman’s eyes were closed and she looked like she was crying out, about to have an orgasm, but Rae couldn’t hear her above the thumping music. The man’s body moved sinuously, and Rae bet that he was good at it, better than an awkward college guy.

The couple shimmied together, fucking hard. Rae’s pussy bloomed and

grew sensitive, and the long months since she had last gotten laid weighed on her.

Rae realized that she had been watching them for a while when The Blond Hottie pulled her closer to his body. “What do you think of them?”

“They look like they’re enjoying themselves.” Rae’s lips felt too big, like she wanted to be kissed. She had never seen two people having sex right in front of her before. It wasn’t like her cousin-roommate Hester had ever brought a guy back to their dorm room and screwed him while Rae pretended to sleep in the other twin bed.

The woman’s blond hair fell down around her shoulders, and when she laid her head back on the man’s shoulder, her hair snared on his black jacket. Her body writhed on his, and Rae’s thighs heated. The man threw his head back, and his body clenched.

The Blond Hottie’s hand dropped down to the small of Rae’s back and pressed, tilting her pelvis in toward his. She let him.

She *let* him. She was just *letting* things happen again. Just like falling into her major and flunking out of school, she was drifting instead of making decisions.

Being seduced was *letting* things happen to her, not *doing* things .

The Blond Hottie nodded toward the couple, who were leaning on the wall, spent. He whispered, “Would you ever do something like that?”

Rae was going back to dust-choked Pirtleville in three and half weeks.

Three and half stupid weeks.

Screwing The Blond Hottie against a wall would be *doing* something.

“Yeah,” she said, “but not out here.” She had seen couples slip through a door and then emerge later, disheveled, but hadn’t really made the connection. “Back there.”

The Blond Hottie smiled again, and this time, the toothiness verged on wolfiness. “You want to be against a wall?”

“No.” Rae tossed her head and looked straight into his deep blue, hungry eyes. “You’re going to be the one against the wall.”

He smiled bigger. “By all means, lead on, Madam.”

She took his hand and led him through a door in the back of the suite into a darkened room. Light from a bathroom lit the room a little, enough that she could see that they were alone and that a mussed bed and nightstands stood against the far wall. She didn’t want the bed, though. She wanted to see what it was like to screw a man standing up.

For a second, terror flooded Rae that this man whose name she didn't even know had manipulated her to being alone with him because he was a serial killer and was going to kill her in this room where no one could hear her screams over the loud music and then the mounted posse would find her dead body out in the desert, which was yet another episode of her useless brand of paranoia.

No. She was not afraid. She was going to have this guy.

As The Blond Hottie came through the door behind her, she grabbed him and slammed the door and pushed him against the wall. She kissed him, hard. His lips were soft and smooth, and she liked the way he kissed her back. His mouth tasted like whiskey, so he liked the hard drinks, too. She fumbled with his pants, trying to figure out if they closed with a hook or a button or whatever and finally he pushed her hands out of the way to do it himself, so she started pulling out his shirt instead.

Under her palms, inside his shirt, his chest and stomach were silky, not furry like an old guy, not shaved and sharp-stubbled like a self-involved frat guy. She guessed he was in his late twenties, probably, from the mature, sharp line of his jaw and muscle. Hard muscle lumped under his skin. She grabbed his flat man-nipples and rubbed them.

His hands dove into her dress and popped her tits out of the low neckline. His head dipped down, and he took one nipple into his hot mouth, then the other. Pleasure sparked up her body, and Rae let her head fall back and just heard him say, "What a beautiful body, you have."

*Beautiful?* Rae wasn't a beautiful kind of woman, and she knew it. She always felt fat next to the tiny girls like Lizzy, just because she was tall and had flesh on her, yet The Blond Hottie had called her beautiful. For a moment, she felt beautiful in her silver-flashing dress that cinched her waist and pushed up her boobs. He seemed to like how she looked, or tasted.

She still didn't even know his name. "What's your name?"

He lapped her nipple and then sucked on it.

Her nipple hardened in his mouth, and every time he flicked his tongue over it, her nipple squeezed harder. She looked down, watching his mouth on her tit. She wound her fingers into his light blond hair. "Seriously, what is your name?"

He straightened and looked down at her. Desire misted over his eyes, and his breath was ragged. "Wulf."

He was teasing her for that sparkly vampire-or-werewolf quip. "No, it

isn't."

"Yes, it is Wulf. Spelled with a 'u.'" He reached around her, sliding his hands over her waist, and then bent down to mouth her breasts again. He was rougher his time, almost biting her as he worked his whole mouth over her boob.

"Wulf *what*?" she insisted.

He left her breast and lifted his head. His serious blue eyes gazed right into hers, though his breath still panted. "Just Wulf."

She braced her arms on the wall on both sides of his head, an aggressive move, even though she was a couple of inches shorter than he was. Some guys wouldn't like it, but Wulf didn't flinch. "I'm going to screw you against this wall," she said, tapping the plaster, "so I want to know your name."

He looked pensive, not scared, not evasive, but like he wasn't sure how she was going to react. "My name is Wulfram Augustus Heinrich Ernst Georg Berthold Friedrich," he paused to take a breath, and Rae thought his faint accent strengthened, "Wilhelm Louis Ferdinand Prinz von Hannover."

Rae blinked, mentally digesting that whole babble of a name. "Well, I'm not going to be screaming all *that* when I screw you."

He grinned at her smart-aleck answer and dragged her close to his hard body. "Maybe I can make you scream part of it."

"Go for it."

He grabbed her tit with his mouth like he had something to prove. She slid her hand around the back of his neck and held his mouth on her breast, savoring his tongue and his teeth. She sighed as all those delicious feelings swam in her body, the hunger and desire and lust for him. She wanted to grab him and wrap herself around him until he melted into her.

Maybe the wild dancing or the whiskey had broken down whatever made Rae so scared, maybe it was watching that couple screwing against the wall just feet away from them, or maybe it was the knowledge that this might be the last wild night of her life, but Rae was going to fuck this man until he yelled *her* name.

He sucked her tit harder, until it almost hurt but Rae's body yearned for more, and harder, and his hands slid her dress up her bare legs.

She hadn't thought the dress's material stretched much at all, but with one smooth move, the silvery fabric bunched on her hips. His fingers dug into her thighs, straining to pull her body closer. His hard-on poked her stomach through his underwear.



She pushed him back against the wall, tugged his blond hair to raise his head up, and she kissed him again. Her lips opened, and she felt his lips part. She forced her tongue into his mouth, and he opened his mouth, sliding their tongues together. She pushed him back against the wall with her body, pressing her tits and belly against his hard torso and dick.

His hands slipped under her panties in back, and he grabbed her bare ass, squeezing and lifting her. His hands groped her everywhere, grabbing her skin like he couldn't get enough of her. He crushed her to him, his tongue deep in her mouth, but Rae pressed him back harder against the wall.

His hand slid between their bodies, reaching for her panties.

Rae opened her legs, and Wulf slipped one hand under her thigh and lifted her leg around his waist. She braced her knee against the wall beside him.

His fingers slipped down her thigh toward her panties again, and she waited, breathless, while until he touched her over her panties, caressing the fabric. Her pussy tingled from his touch. His hot breath was ragged on her neck, and his panting all but drowned out the thumping drums from the dance floor on the other side of the wall.

She held onto his neck, and he kissed and chewed her shoulders when his fingers slipped inside her underwear and began stroking her slit. He slid over her clit, and then moved into her wet center, and she was wet, soaking wet. Rae moaned as he moved his hand over and into her.

She wanted him now, and Rae shoved Wulf's hand away, found his underwear among his shirt tails because he hadn't even unbuttoned his shirt, and pushed his underwear down. He grabbed her ass again, shoved down her underwear, bent down and retrieved something from his pants' pocket, tore open the packet and jammed on a condom, and kept her leg high beside him as he shoved her down on his cock.

Wulf's head fell back as he arched his back, groaning and pushing himself inside her.

She slipped over him, taking him deep inside her, rubbing inside her all the way up and down with every thrust. Rae gasped and held onto his shoulders, already sparking inside.

"Say it," he growled. "Wulfram Augustus—"

"No," Rae said. "You say mine." She slid down his chest and took him deeper inside, gasping as he jammed all his cock deep in her. "Say it. Reagan Rose Stone."

He bucked under her, fucking her harder. “Reagan—”

“Yes!” She was sliding down his cock and then milking him hard when she pulled up. The dark room buzzed around them, and Rae rubbed her hands under his shirt, almost scratching him. He arched against her hands.

She said, “Say it. Reagan Rose.”

“Reagan Rose—” His head was thrown back against the wall behind him, his eyes shut tight. His breathing rasped as he pounded up into her.

Rae bit his neck, hard enough to hurt him and to leave her teeth marks on his skin. He gasped .

His hands clenched her ass, holding her up and digging his fingers into her flesh. Rae pumped up and down on him, working him. He was buried so deep in her that his hard body pounded her clit every time, and the screaming tension built as she fucked him harder, faster, slamming him backward against the wall. Her head bumped the wall behind him, and she panted, “*Stone. Reagan Rose Stone.*”

“Yes.” His voice was hoarse. “Oh, yes. Reagan Rose Stone. Reagan Rose Stone!”

Wulf slammed her down on his dick, hard, and that tightening ache in her pussy burst and fire traveled up her spine, bending her backward. “Yes!”

His body rippled beneath her, rubbing her clit again and again, and she heard him groan but her orgasm swirled in her. Rae cried out, and Wulf slipped a finger between them and massaged the tight bead of her clit, sending her over the edge again. “Oh, God!” Her pussy squeezed around his hard cock, and hot pulses ran through her body.

Wulf held Rae tight as her shivering orgasm subsided until, still inside her, Wulf slid down the wall, and they sat on the floor. Her legs folded beneath her, and she leaned on his hard chest.

“You are magnificent,” Wulf whispered.

Aftershocks rocked Rae’s body, and his thick dick still deep inside her felt huge, like Wulf was fucking her whole body. She laid her head on his shoulder, feeling his strength in his arms.

If this was her last wild night, she could remember it her whole life, the night when she was magnificent and fucked this beautiful stranger against a wall. Thinking about how she had pushed him back and fucked him tingled in her, and another aftershock squeezed her body around his dick.

He rubbed his hands over her bare thighs thoughtfully. Air cooled her bare ass. “Reagan. What a name. You are perfect.”

Rae felt the need to explain, even though she could scarcely move and her legs quivered. “My parents are conservative.”

“And yet you, you magnificent, powerful creature, are as sexy as any woman alive.” Wildness glinted in his blue eyes. “It has been *years* since a woman topped *me* .”

She wasn’t really sure what *topping* meant. They hadn’t actually been in the girl-on-top position. She had done that, once. She had just wanted to screw Wulf instead of letting herself get screwed. “Oh? ”

“I’d like to offer you a job.”

An offer of a job by a man whose dick still pulsed inside her seemed wildly off base. “I didn’t screw you to get a job, and I don’t even know what you do. I’m just a college student.”

“Yes. You’re majoring in theater and psychology, and your scholarship was rescinded due to an unfair professor, and you need money to stay at university.”

Rae sat back, and her pussy clenched so hard that she squeezed Wulf’s softening dick right out of her. He grabbed the condom at the base. She struggled with her dress, trying to pull it down. “I didn’t tell you that.”

“No. Lizbeth and Georgie did.” He smiled, and Rae found something predatory again in his smile, which surprised her. He stripped off the condom and knotted it. “They called me this afternoon, asking if there was a job for their friend. I have no room for just another blow job artist. You, however,” he ran a finger under Rae’s jawline, startling her with such intimacy, “my stunning auburn lioness, would be wasted on mere oral sex.”

Every bit of Bible-thumping reared up in Rae’s head, even though she had not believed in any of that dogma since a fight with her preacher when she was sixteen. She pulled her dress down over her sore, wet pussy. “I am *not* a *whore*.”

“Of course not, and by the way, you should not use the term ‘whore’ around Lizbeth and Georgie. They are Lifestyle Consultants, as far as their business cards and tax documents are concerned. In private, Lizbeth prefers ‘courtesan,’ while Georgie likes to think of herself as a geisha. Both are in high demand with excellent client lists.”

“That’s their two thousand dollars a week job? *Prostitution*?”

“Lifestyle consulting. Some of my girls prefer ‘Social Engineer.’ You can choose whatever title you want on your cards and papers. You, of course, would not be in the same division as Georgie and Lizbeth. They are general

contractors, so to speak. I wouldn't waste your special talents on their vanilla clientele."

Just because she had screwed this guy and acted like a slut once—*once!*—did not mean that she was a literal whore. She would never, *ever*, be a prostitute. She struggled to stand and tugged her dress back down her legs. Her panties were lost somewhere in the dark room. "I cannot believe what you're saying."

Wulf found a white handkerchief in his back pocket and cleaned his thighs before tucking his shirt back into his pants. "It's difficult for some people to come to terms with the idea of being paid for sexual services, yet most people do it for free as much as possible. To be clear, *you* would be neither having sexual intercourse nor performing oral sex upon the clients."

Reagan was confused and pissed off at herself that she had banged this man. She strode toward the door, ready to storm out, while she called herself a world-class dumbass. "A prostitute who doesn't have sex with men. This is all *ludicrous*."

Wulf threw the handkerchief and used condom in a waste basket by the bathroom door. "You are a natural-born dominatrix. The clients, mostly men, would come to you in my very secure facility, and you will whip them, abuse them, and find them inadequate in every way, and then you will leave them. Think of it as an improvisational scene in a private theater."

Good Lord, a *facility*? A *theater*? He managed an honest-to-God *whorehouse*?

Why would a man even want to run a whorehouse?

"If the clients are very submissive and compliant while receiving their punishment, whether it is spanking or lashes or pegging or forty minutes of dreadful anticipation before a brutal but short beating, you might give them permission to jack off after you have left the room."

Rae wanted to kick Wulf's ass for even thinking that she would do such a nasty thing but couldn't because she was wearing this danged, awkward contraption of a dress. "*Never*."

Wulf shrugged. "I would think, with your background in theater and psychology and dancing nude in the college musical last year, that you might at least consider this job, in order to stay at university."

She grabbed the doorknob to fling open the door and stomp out. His offensive, sanitized version of prostitution, calling it Lifestyle Consulting, was just another Godless way to justify sin.

Rae stopped, realizing what had just boiled up in her head.

She squeezed the doorknob, still angry, but now also upset at herself for still, *still*, being under the spell of that cult that her parents called a church, but Wulf wasn't off the hook either. She shouldn't make this decision now. She was a little drunk, too sexed up, and confused about what this all meant for her .

She said, "I just didn't expect this, not anything like this, at all. I didn't even know that you knew Lizzy and Georgie."

Wulf blinked. "That wasn't an audition?" Wonder filled his voice. "I thought you were doing a scene. That it was real, that you meant it, is even more enticing."

Rae covered her eyes with her hand and leaned against the cold back of the door. "No, that was not an audition. I thought Lizzy and Georgie were selling drugs, and I wasn't going to get involved in drugs. They never said anything about a man named Wulf, just some guy named Dom."

She was grabbed, whirled, and her back slammed against the wall. Wulf was right in front of her, his face an inch from hers, and she could smell whiskey and mint on his breath. He kissed her hard, crushing her against the wall with his body, and dragged her silver skirt up her legs again. She hadn't found her panties, and he rubbed her naked, still-wet pussy with one long finger, slipping inside her folds of soft skin. She pushed at him, but his finger was on her clit again and she froze, waiting breathlessly, and he rubbed it slowly, firmly, pushing shockwave after shockwave through her body, not like a sharp and sudden orgasm, just waves of pleasure.

Rae stopped trying to push him away and held onto his shoulders. Wulf knew what to do to her body better than she did, a thought that frightened and excited her. She had slept with a few guys during her years in college, but she had never considered that there might be limits to her imagination.

Wulf kept rubbing her, his finger slipping over her wet nub and lips, kept tossing her on waves until she was dizzy and couldn't even see the darkened bedroom around them.

He whispered in her ear, "They don't know my name."

"Who?" she breathed on his neck. Every time his hand moved against her clit, pleasure rose in her body and she couldn't remember what they were talking about.

"Lizbeth and Georgie," he said. "I have never told them my name."

"How—" Rae gasped and clung to his shoulder, "—how can they not—"

and another crest lifted her and she fell, “—know your name?” She wanted him to never, ever stop rubbing her like that.

“They only call me ‘The Dom,’ ‘Master,’ or ‘Sir.’ Like I said, no woman has topped me in a long time.” His hand slowed, pushing harder on her wet bead, and the pulses ripping through Rae’s body deepened.

Rae was drowning in the waves of pleasure, and yet she figured out who this man was who could make her come so long, so hard, and leave her wanting more.

“You’re *Dom* .” This was the man who had screwed Lizzy until she had fallen in love with him, even though Georgie had tried to talk her out of being in love with that kind of man, the kind who loved women, *craved* women, in the plural.

This man was the psychopath who was nothing but a mirrored shell.

Wulf said, “I must have you. You are the perfect dominatrix: so tall, so *zaftig* by scrawny American standards, with these beautiful curls that I could wrap my hands in all night.” With his other hand, he grabbed a handful of her hair, not pulling, but gathering it up like silk ribbons. He stroked her clit hard again, and the wave rose from Rae’s pussy to her head, and she whimpered.

“Say you’ll talk to me about it.” Wulf let her hair fall, and something sharp poked between her breasts.

His finger stroking her pussy pressed on her hard bead amid her soft, wet skin and vibrated, sending pleasure crashing through her one last time. She cried out as the wave ran up her spine and through her head, blocking out light and sound.

His lips brushed her ear as he whispered, “Say you will come and talk to me.”

Vibrations rattled her body and her head. “I will—” and she gasped again, “—Wulf.”

“Good,” he said, but it sounded more like *goot* . “Tomorrow, at two o’clock.”

He backed up, and Rae’s dress fell down around her legs. She sank to the floor, unable to stand or even see. The door closed softly.

The dark bedroom materialized around her as her eyes refocused.

Rae leaned against the wall, listening to the music thump through the plaster. Her legs shook, and her pussy quivered.

She looked down. A business card was shoved between her breasts.

The card was made of smooth, white linen. The only writing on it was an

address, which Rae recognized was on a main road and across the river from the university.

A couple years ago, an over/under dance bar called Club Tropicana had been located at that address. The huge building looked like a white Caribbean plantation house, and the palm trees lined the long driveway. Club Tropicana had closed during the real estate crash, and then the building had sat empty, waiting for someone with a lot of money and who still liked desert real estate to remodel the behemoth.

Rae had heard that someone had bought it, but she hadn't heard that it was open again.

But now she knew the club's new name, because it was written on the card:

*The Devilhouse .*



## **Book 2: Into The Devilhouse**

## Auditioning for The Dom

REAGAN Rose Stone wrote her full name on top of the application form to work at the whorehouse, then flipped through the rest of it. The Devilhouse's application form ran thirty pages long and asked a lot of questions that she didn't have answers for.

She glanced up from the application and rested her hands on the cold glass desk. The desk sprawled across the end of the office, almost as big as a conference table. She stretched her legs and could see her toes pointing, wavering through the glass. She was wearing the same black pumps as last night because they matched her black skirt suit and they were the only nice shoes she had.

Her purse sat on the desk beside her application. Inside was a box containing sparkly earrings that had arrived for her that morning, and she was going to give them back at the first chance she got, even though they were pretty.

A long window overlooked a garden outside. Sprinklers watered the grass and hedges in long arcs. Rae watched them swing back and forth, procrastinating. Sunlight glittered on the droplets and splintered into rainbows. Maze-wall hedges meandered around oddly shaped park benches.

Rae had been let into this office by the receptionist so she wouldn't have to balance a clipboard on her knees while she filled out the thick form. The young woman was wearing a silver-sequined tube top and a short-short skirt that barely clung to her butt cheeks. Her bright emerald contact lenses had stood out so vibrantly against her black skin that she looked like an alien. Her natural hair formed a diffuse halo around her slim face.

Rae wrote, *36D* on the application.

In the office, Rae couldn't find a thing to indicate whether it was someone's personal office or an extra space. The sleek desk and two square chairs were squared to each other and the walls of the long room. Leather-bound books lined the wall bookcases, and all of them braced as straight as soldiers. Rae suspected that, if she took one down, they might all be connected and hollow, like stage props.

She wrote, *Junior. Major: Psychology. Minor: Theater.*

The only thing on the shelves that was not a possibly-pretend book was a small, framed coat of arms. A line divided the blue and gray shield down the middle, and half an eagle splayed on one side and half an eight-pointed star decorated the other. French curlicue stuff tendrilled around the shield.

She wrote: 5.

A warm scent like vanilla or brown sugar occasionally wafted around Rae's nose, and she could almost taste something that she liked, but she couldn't figure out quite what the scent was.

Rae wrote her next answer on the application form: *five feet, ten inches* .

The questions on the form were printed in raised ink on thick stock, like a wedding invitation. Rae ran her fingers over the question and wondered why anyone would go to the expense. Maybe it was part of their marketing.

Her fingers shook with nerves. This job would pay her tuition and dorm fees, and it would save her from going back to her small, dusty hometown where Aunt TracyJo would insist that she had told Rae that college was a bad idea and she would just flunk out, anyway.

Just think about this like it's an audition, Rae told herself. Just another dang audition, even to the point where there might be a casting couch.

Or other sex furniture.

The thought of a casting couch and of having sex with Wulf again, so soon after last night, made her skin tingle, even though the austere office furniture didn't include a couch or anything particularly cushiony. Usually, horniness wasn't a problem for her. During the few times when she had had a boyfriend, she liked sex at the end of a date, but she hadn't wanted it every day, again and again.

That one cast party last year though, the one for *Hair* , had blown up way out of control, and she had gotten raving drunk. She had stayed in character, inside the head of a free-lovin' hippie, for weeks, and she had lived the part for that night .

After the party, when Rae had stumbled into the dorm room at five o'clock in the morning, her roommate and cousin Hester had thrown a hissy fit. Hester had preached with a desperate screech in her voice, praying on her knees to Jesus for Rae's besmirched eternal soul and hysterically trying to call her mother and Rae's parents to come that day to drag Rae away from such worldliness, iniquity, and sin.

Rae had finally mollified Hester with promises of repentance.

She had lowered her head in shame when she had sneaked into drama class Monday morning, but none of her classmates even mentioned it. Maybe they had all been blackout drunk.

Last night, when Rae had come in at one o'clock in the morning, Hester hadn't screamed and sobbed, but her scorn had bled through her lecture about keeping oneself pure and holy in this world of materialism and suffering. Rae listened and nodded while her pussy throbbed, thinking about screwing Wulf against the wall and his thumb slowly rubbing her clit until she had come again.

She couldn't think about anything except screwing Wulf again. She had written every word on this long application form while hungering for the touch and taste of his body.

She bent her head and worked on the application. Every pen stroke seemed to last forever, scratching on the creamy paper.

Her ass, where his hands had grabbed her last night to pull her down on his cock, rubbed on the chair.

Because Rae was majoring in psychology, she recognized the middle section of the form as an abbreviated version of the MMPI, the Minnesota Multiphasic Personality Inventory, a common psychological examination to detect depression, anxiety, and psychopathy.

Considering the last couple days of her life, she was kind of worried about the results. Might show that she was turning into a nympho.

The medical release required tests so personal and comprehensive that it embarrassed her just to look at it. She had no intention of taking that form to the university's Student Health Center, but someone had thoughtfully included a list of local doctors who had filled out the form before and, Rae assumed, wouldn't call the cops or the health department.

She wrote her answers carefully in neat, cramped handwriting. She would have liked to have been vague or cavalier about some of the questions, like "Why do you want to join The Devilhouse? "

She could have written: *Because on that question where it asked for all countries I've visited, I couldn't check any of them, and if I ever had any extra money, I would travel and see what other countries are like.*

She could have written: *Because when this form asked me to list sexual partners, I wrote down all of them, and I was ashamed that there were so many and ashamed that they didn't even cover a quarter of the page, and I suspect that I flubbed several of them anyway.*

She could have written: *Because when this form asked about the most exciting experiences in my life, I couldn't think of anything at all.*

But she remembered Lizzy and Georgie's admonition last night to be honest, painfully honest, as if honesty were part of the test, so Rae sucked it up and wrote, painfully and honestly, *Because I need the money for college, and I have no other way to get the money.*

Last night at the party, Rae had met and screwed the The Dom against a wall in a back bedroom without knowing beforehand that he was, indeed, The Dom of The Devilhouse.

After the party, Georgie and Lizzy had been drunk and giggly in the limo on the ride home, and Rae had only told them that The Dom had given her an audition appointment today. They had high-fived and giggled some more, sure that she was shoe-in.

Rae had avoided Lizzy and Georgie in the dorm that morning by dodging out early to study at a coffeehouse. She hadn't told them that she had screwed their Dom against a wall last night or that she knew his given name because, even though they had worked for him for over a year, neither of them had found out his real name.

On the application, a long list covered three pages and asked about sexual things she had experienced, things that she had done and would do again, things she wanted to try, things she had not tried and might be curious about, things she had tried and did not like, and things she would never try. Rae checked a lot of the *hadn't-tried* and quite a few of the *would-never-try* boxes.

Surely, being a dominatrix rather than one of the blow job artists, as Wulf had called them, meant that she could have opinions on what she wouldn't do if she didn't want to.

She hoped she was right.

Rae hesitated for several minutes before she checked one box near the end.

Even the truth had limits .

The door opened.

Rae looked up, startled, when Wulf walked in. His navy blue suit contrasted with his eyes, making his blue eyes even brighter.

She had kind of thought that The Dom of The Devilhouse should wear a black leather vest over his oiled, waxed, bare chest, but Wulf's business suit fit his athletic shoulders. A sky blue tie was knotted under the crisp, white

collar of his shirt. His gold-blond hair was cut short like he was in the Air Force though not as stubble-shaved as the Marines, and he was as clean-shaven as an FBI agent. His high cheekbones and straight jawline looked like he had peeled himself off the pages of a designer suit ad.

His surprised smile warmed her. Sharp sunlight from the long window glinted on his blond hair. "Hello," he said.

"Um, hi." She checked the last few boxes on the very last page of the form and flipped it closed.

Wulf said, "Glenda said that you were in here. Very toppy of you to take my office and sit behind my desk for your paperwork." His pressed smile seemed amused.

"I hope you don't mind." Rae managed to make it sound sturdy, like a dominatrix should sound. She had read Lady Macbeth's lines before she had driven over, trying to find a character. She stood, lifted her chin, and held out the application. "I'm done with this."

"Excellent." Wulf took the application from her and looked her up and down, obviously checking out her body. "Nice suit."

"This old thing?" Her black interview suit from two and a half years ago clung tightly to her butt, and she couldn't button the jacket across her boobs. She had worn a clingy black tee shirt instead of the white blouse with lace at the throat because she had gained her freshman fifteen and two cup sizes since she had worn this suit for her scholarship interview in high school. Just one semester in the dorm cafeteria had busted her out of most of her clothes from high school.

"It's perfect," Wulf said. "You look quite the dominatrix."

Rae grinned and wished that she had chosen the too-tight suit on purpose, but she had worn her only suit for this oh-so-important job interview. She had slicked back and tied her hair into a tight knot at the base of her neck. "I did my best." She swished in her purse for the earring box and held it out. "And, while I appreciate the gesture, I can't accept these. "

Wulf glanced at the box, then at Rae. "It's a small token."

"They're enormous, and I can't accept them." She placed the box on his desk to emphasize her point. She swore that she could hear the pebble-sized diamonds inside it clink.

His voice was mild. "I meant no offense."

"And certainly none taken. It was sweet gesture, but they're too much."

"That's unfortunate. Perhaps I can replace them with something else to

your liking.”

“The roses were pretty. Two dozen is a lot of roses, but it was nice of you. I’m not a jewelry type of girl, anyway. I never go anywhere that I’d need earrings like those.”

“That’s unfortunate.” Wulf flipped through her application, pausing only when he came to the lists at the end. He scanned down the fetishes and kinks, and Rae’s face heated as he frowned. “You’ve had no experience with any of these?”

“No. Is that a problem?” Rae was pleased with her strong answer.

“There is always some on-the-job training, but perhaps you will be a fast learner.” He flicked the pages shut. “I encourage you to come to the club on Saturday nights and watch some of the scenes that are performed and, after your medical clearance comes through, to play.”

Rae nodded and tried not to look terrified. If people performed even half the acts that were described on that application, she might gape like a schoolgirl and flee.

Running away from people who were performing consensual acts was just ridiculous, Rae chastised herself. She wasn’t running anywhere. She would be fine. Just *fine*. She nodded some more.

“Perhaps not tonight, though,” he said. “You should learn a few things, first.”

“Oh, good,” she said, glad for the reprieve.

“Yes, good,” Wulf said.

Again, like last night, Rae thought that he had said *goot*. His accent distracted her. “Are you German, maybe?”

“No.” Wulf studied her with his blue, blue eyes. His pause and stillness were deafening.

“But you’re from somewhere else, right? Your accent sounds British most of the time, but there’s something else, too. I mean, you weren’t raised here, right?” Rae babbled. Lizzy and Georgie didn’t know anything of substance about him, they had said. They didn’t even know his given name, let alone that mouthful of names that he had recited while Rae had shagged him against the wall at the party last night.

He licked his lips with the tiniest tongue motion and drew his lower lip into his mouth. He seemed to be searching her eyes for something. Finally, Wulf released his lip and said, “I am Swiss, as you Americans call us. We call ourselves Helvetians.”



“Oh, Swiss.” She felt victorious that she had dragged something out of him, and dirty that she had torn something from him when he was obviously reluctant to say anything about himself, and worried that now she needed to keep another secret from Lizzy and Georgie because Rae didn’t snitch. “That’s nice.”

He frowned by dropping one pale eyebrow. “Do I have an accent?”

Georgie and Lizzy had remarked on his accent, too. “British, like I said, most of the time, but sometimes there’s something else, too. Just a little. Not much.”

“Mortifying. We should proceed to the interview.” Wulf motioned with one finger for her to leave his desk and come around to a seat in the chairs, the applicant’s place.

Rae walked around the sharp-corners of the desk to the chairs. She hoped she was being sultry as she sat and crossed her long legs. She fit in the chair, she noticed, which was unusual. A lot of office furniture is built small, and her tall body sometimes overflowed pint-sized furniture. The chair under her rump felt solid but soft.

Wulf took charge of the desk and laid her application between them. “Let us be frank. I want you here. We must await your medical release, but I didn’t see anything in here that would preclude you working with us.”

“Great,” Rae said.

“And at least you’ve had some dominatrix experience.”

That was where she had exaggerated her experience, like many actors do when auditioning for a part. You can find someone to teach you to do anything passably in the couple of weeks between an audition and filming, so if someone asks you if you can do anything, *heck yeah*, you agree. If a director asks if you can ride a horse or speak with a Bangladeshi accent or play a trumpet, *heck yeah*, you can do that.

She smiled. “Heck, yeah. ”

“Well, good.” *Goot*. “Was it in a private dungeon or a club?”

He must know all the club people around there. “Private,” Rae said. “One of the short-term guys.”

“And you enjoyed it.”

She remembered last night, when she had slammed Wulf against the wall and he had done what she wanted him to. Her body heated, and her thighs tingled. “Yeah, I liked it.”

Wulf appraised her face, looking at her eyes and her lips. “All right.

Now,” he glanced at her paperwork, “you say that you have had only male partners, and you are not open to any sexual activity with women.”

“I’m really not interested in that,” Rae said. Shame and fear wiggled in the back of her mind.

“Yet, last night, Lizbeth said that you nearly jumped out of your dress in the back of the hired car, and I watched you dance with two of my best girls. I would have thought that you liked women as well.”

“No,” Rae said, taken aback. “I was just having a good time with my friends.”

“Just a good time, then. For employment purposes, would you do a scene with a woman client?”

“I don’t know.” She had assumed that her clients would all be men. She hadn’t considered a woman might want to be beaten up. “I guess I do have a problem with doing this kind of thing to a woman because, well,” she struggled to put it into words, “slapping a man around would be just a game. It’s almost like the action itself is sarcastic. With women, abuse happens all the time, and it’s not sexual or for fun. It’s violence.”

“Ah, it is commendable and appropriate that you think about such things. However, many women come to us for submissive scenes because, historically, the patriarchal culture denies them authentic sexual experiences. By submitting, they are *forced* to accept pleasure, even pleasure that would otherwise cause them shame or guilt. Some of them prefer a woman Domme for a variety of reasons, such that they are, as some call it, bi-curious, or they feel that they are not cheating on their partners if no man is involved, or because domination by a man is, again, an extension of the repressive patriarchy.”

Rae blinked. Okay, he had obviously thought that one through, maybe a couple of times in order to compose that thesis paragraph.

The thought of being *forced* to accept pleasure and *forced* to have an orgasm bounced around in her head. Rae sat shock-still and didn’t let anything register on her face. After three years of theater classes, she could act at least that much.

Being *forced* sounded different than *rape*. *Submitting* sounded different than *rape*. Rape was a crime, heinous and violent. Being *forced* or being willing to *submit* sounded, somehow, oddly liberating, like it was not her fault.

She could do anything, if someone else did it *to* her.

Maybe some of the things on that list.

She spread her hands over her knees, smoothing her skirt down.

The night of the *Hair* cast party, she had blamed the alcohol for what she had done. She would never have done those things if she had been stone-cold sober.

She had been buzzed at The Devilhouse party last night, too. The alcohol had liberated her to do what she wanted to.

Rae's pussy tingled. She crossed her legs over her throbbing clit.

"That's interesting," she said, finally remembering his comment about the patriarchy that had started her whole line of thought.

"So would you do scenes with women, knowing that they are absolving themselves from feeling the shame and remorse that your Puritan-derived culture forces upon them?" Wulf watched her expression, judging her.

Rae composed her face, imagining stone skin. Her childhood church rose in her thoughts. Yes, most of the women that she knew in Pirtleville, certainly her roommate-cousin Hester, would think that sex for anything other than married, procreative purposes was certainly sin. Her Aunt Enid insisted that ladies did not experience the pelvic sneeze that men spoke of.

Sex wasn't sin, though. Rae had worked through all of that, first in her psychology courses and then in the theater department. The cast party for *Hair* alone had allowed her to check three *done-that* boxes on The Devilhouse's application form.

She should take control of those stupid thoughts.

She wanted to take control of those stupid thoughts.

"I could do scenes with women," she said.

"Excellent. Expanding your horizons already." Wulf circled an item on her application. "In addition, everything that occurs here at The Devilhouse is safe, sane, and consensual. That means that the risk for any injury is minimized or preferably eliminated, that everyone is of their right mind, and that everyone has given informed consent for the proceedings. I have some reading material for you. We'll discuss that in more depth."

"Okay." Her Human Subjects in Experimental Psychology class had covered informed consent in excruciating detail. She could probably write the forms.

"Another thing."

"All right." Another too-personal question about kinky fetish stuff. Here it came.

“Are you serious about developing a clinic for autistic children?”

Rae’s jaw dropped. “How on Earth did you know about that?”

“Lizbeth and Georgie mentioned it.” One side of his mouth bent upwards, like he had almost smiled.

“Um, yeah. It’s, um, are you sure you want to hear about this?”

“Certainly.”

“All right. Well, my cousin Daniel, who’s eight, he’s autistic. *Really* autistic. And I’ve seen how much my aunt Alana tried to help him but she couldn’t because she didn’t really know what to do, and our small-town pediatrician didn’t know how to help her. He’s too busy trying to prevent a whooping cough epidemic because everyone had stopped vaccinating their kids because everyone is related to everyone down there and so everyone knows Alana and Daniel. When my professors started discussing autism and therapies, something clicked in my head. *This* is what Daniel needs. Or needed. He’s eight now, *eight* . But there are lots of kids like Daniel. Thousands. Millions. Are you sure I’m not boring you? This is way off topic.”

“Please proceed,” Wulf said again. His gaze, once quite aloof, had sharpened on her. Rae had seen lots of people with blue-gray eyes, but the blue of Wulf’s eyes was so dark that it looked sapphire.

She said, “So I came up with this idea: a clinic, one-stop shopping, a place where kids can cycle through occupational therapy and speech therapy and behavioral therapy—that’s me—and medical therapies, maybe even nutritional guidance, and get intensive help, preferably *early* help, but it would be *professional* help. I think it could help them. I think we could *save* them from ending up like Daniel. ”

“And how is Daniel now?”

Rae stopped her hands from instinctively covering her face because she didn’t want to smear her make-up at a job interview, so her hands hung in air, useless and grasping. “*Locked in*. He’s locked into this terrible place where his brain misfires and everything outside his own head terrifies him. He stims constantly because, when he flaps his hands, that kinesthetic movement feeds back into his brain, and he understands the pattern of the movement. That soothes him. Everything else is too scary and unfathomable for him.”

“I’m sorry. How far have you gotten in your plans for this clinic?”

“I have a name: A Ray of Light, spelled the usual way,” she said quickly when his eyebrows rose at the word *ray* . “I was thinking about starting off in

a strip mall. There are a lot of empty strip malls nowadays. We could expand after that as we get more money to bring more people on board.”

“Interesting.” Wulf nodded and tapped her application with a pen. He pulled his lower lip into his mouth and bit it, kind of like Rae had done to him the night before. “We have a great need right now for a new Domme. You could work one or two evenings a week and Saturday nights, ten to fifteen hours, and most girls earn more than enough to pay for university. I daresay you might save enough for seed money for your venture.”

Three nights a week was less than she was working now at the library, and that minimum wage gig barely paid for booze and books, let alone tuition and dorm.

Two thousand dollars a week, every week. “Really?”

“Certainly. Many of my girls are college students. You know Lizbeth and Georgie. Whitney has been with us for four years, the last two of her bachelor’s and, now, during her sociology PhD. She passed her doctorate candidacy exam a month ago. She has her subs sign waivers so she can use them as research subjects and gives them an insultingly small break on the price. She tried to use pseudonyms for them in her peer-reviewed papers, but they insist that she use their real names. Far more humiliating for them.”

Rae, aghast, said, “Using real names is a major ethics breach. There are strict ethical guidelines. There are *laws* about using human subjects.”

“Yes, but they insist, so the lawyers drew up forms for them to sign, and some of them have her academic papers framed in their dungeons at home. Now, as I was saying, you are expected to *not* have sexual intercourse with the clients. Indeed, if they have been a very good little sub, you may allow them to masturbate when you are done with them.”

“Okay.” She had talked herself into being a whore. Wasn’t sex the whole point of being a whore? “So what do most of them want to do?”

He shrugged. “About a third have a foot or boot fetish. That’s the most common kink we see. Another third wants spanking. After a few months or years of such treatment, most of our clients branch out, become more adventurous, jaded, and those people will make up the majority of your client list.”

Rae nodded. She still wasn’t sure what those euphemisms meant.

Wulf studied her application. “You speak French and Spanish?”

“Some. College French and Border Spanish.”

Wulf looked up. He smiled with one side of his mouth. “Border

Spanish?”

“Just what you learn when you grow up near the Mexican Border.” Like how to speak respectfully to drug lords lest you end up buried in a shallow grave out in the wide, unsearchable desert. “I can get along in most social situations, but I couldn’t hold a philosophical debate.”

“All right. Vernacular conversational Spanish. Excellent. Some of our clientele is from outside the States. Border Spanish may be just the language to use while you rough them up.” Wulf looked at her application again. He asked her, “*Comment bien parlez-vous français?*”

She replied, “*Comme ci, comme ça*, but I’ve never been anywhere that people actually speak French.”

Wulf switched back to English. “What is that accent?”

Rae wished she sounded like an elegant Parisienne. “Cajun. My French conversation TA was from Louisiana.”

“Border Spanish and Cajun French. You will scare the dickens out of your clients, and they will love you for it.”

Rae couldn’t imagine that.

“One last thing. There is no pressure in this.” Wulf smoothed her application on his desk. His studied smile became more jolly, like he was mocking himself. “Like some other male-oriented businesses, I’m not only the owner, I’m also a client. When I utilize the professional services of a consultant, she is paid her standard rate, and the scope of services is limited by this.” He pointed to her application where Rae had detailed which absurd things she would and would not do, which now felt like a contract with the Devil since Wulf, who was The Dom—who Rae had tentatively diagnosed as a psychopath from Georgie’s and Lizzy’s descriptions—had pinned it to the desk with his finger. He said, “Consultants may opt out of entertaining me as a client. Dolly has opted out, but you don’t know her yet, so you can ask Georgie or Lizbeth that she is treated no differently than anyone who has opted in. You can also opt out at any time in the future, no reason necessary.”

His professional smile was unflinching.

Rae asked, “Is that what you were doing when you took Lizzy on a date?”

“Dates are different. This would be a business arrangement, for around a half an hour.”

“No,” Rae said. She didn’t even think about it, and she should have thought about it before she said anything because he might not give her the

job and she might have to leave college. She had been ready to jump on the casting couch with him. She wanted to slam him up against a wall again or entice him to bend her over this glass and steel desk that separated them. Yet, even though she was turned on, even though her panties were damp with wanting him, she didn't want to be a whore for him. "No, thank you."

"I'll make a note of it." His smile did not waver.

Rae wondered if he was relieved, and her heart sank.

"For this next part of the interview, I need to see you in a scene. You'll be paid standard rates."

Here came the casting couch part. Rae had prepared herself for it. She thought she should steel herself but instead she stood with anticipation.

Wulf stood and held out his open hand, gesturing toward the door that went back to the reception area. "After you, Madam."

## Rae's First Scene

WULF held the office door open for Rae. She followed him back to the reception area.

Lush plants flanked blue couches. The blazing front windows must provide them with plenty of sunlight. The magazines on the coffee table were the only clue to the nature of The Devilhouse: *BDSM Aficionado*, *Submission Weekly*, and *Whips & Bondage*.

The receptionist, the girl in the silver short-short skirt who had let Rae into Wulf's office, was typing on a computer with her back toward them.

Rae stopped. Above the back rest of the office chair, angry welts crisscrossed the girl's dark brown skin. Rae hadn't noticed the marks when the receptionist had walked beside her, leading her to Wulf's office. Even though the girl's skin was chocolate brown, darkening around the welts suggested bruising.

"Glenda?" Wulf asked, and the girl turned to face him. "I assume our three o'clock guests have arrived?" He leaned over her desk and selected a file folder.

"Yes, Sir," Glenda said. Her head sank, almost a flinch, but her movement seemed more like a bow.

He nodded and walked down an office hallway, not even remarking on the wounds on that poor girl.

"Wulf!" Rae called out and trotted to keep up with him.

He turned and seemed three inches taller than a moment ago. "Don't use my given name in here."

"That girl, Glenda, the receptionist. Didn't you see her back? She's been beaten to a pulp. We need to call the police, *now*."

"Knowing Glenda, I'm sure it was consensual and that she enjoyed it."

"She has welts and *bruises*!"

"Considering the very precise lattice pattern on her back, she must have held quite still while it was being applied. I'm concerned about your level of Dom play if you are so disturbed by a few welts."

Rae could not believe that the poor girl had wanted to be beaten so



violently. “I’ll be right back.”

Rae strode back to the receptionist and leaned over the low desk.

Glenda looked up at her, her bright green eyes wide, surprised to see Rae again so soon. “Yes, ma’am?”

“How did you get the welts on your back?”

Glenda smiled. “Can you still see them? My Master used a four-foot signal whip on me last night, here at the club.” Her smile turned into a mischievous grin. “It was my first time on *the main stage* .”

Rae rubbed her forehead, feeling foolish. Of course, people at a sex club—for that is what The Devilhouse was, a sex club—would have welts. Rae should have known that Glenda was displaying those welts by wearing that low-backed, silver-spangled tube top. She sure as heck wasn’t hiding them with a turtleneck. “Okay,” she said. “I was just making sure you were okay.”

Glenda smiled. “That’s so sweet. If you think my back is marked up, you should see my ass.” She caressed her hips and thighs. “I can barely sit on this chair.”

“That’s okay, thanks. I’ve got to catch up with,” she remembered Wulf’s unease with her saying his name even in the hallway, “him.”

“Oh, hell, yes. The Dom does *not* like to be kept waiting.”

This time, Rae heard that Glenda had called him *The Dom*, not *Dom* like short for Dominic, and she realized that Lizzy and Georgie had been calling him *The Dom*, too.

Rae fought down her increasing uneasiness with this whole thing. She was supposed to be an adult. She had been in college for over two years. She had broken out of all that small-town stuff.

Yet, her abnormal psychology class had covered, in detail, the psychological havoc that a psychopath can wreak on a normal person. Psychopaths use people for their own purposes, or gratification, or just because they were there. Being a psychopath was probably part of the job description to be a sex club manager.

But Rae wanted to stay in college, desperately.

She looked down the hallway, where Wulf was waiting for her, leaning against the wall, his long legs crossed at his ankles. His broad shoulders formed a muscular triangle above his slim waist.

Her little dream of helping autistic kids like her cousin Daniel seemed far away, and Wulf held the money that she needed to do it.

He had buttoned his suit jacket. From this far away, Rae could see that

his suit fit him far too well to have been bought off of a rack somewhere.

Rae trotted back to him and decided to not mention that she had confirmed that Glenda did indeed like to be whipped. "I'm back."

"One more thing." Wulf's level gaze was serious. Rae again noticed how his dark blue suit brought out the bright blue in his eyes and the gold in his hair, even though she knew that she was supposed to be cowed by his intensity. He said, "You must not use my name."

"Okay. It's a dominance thing, right?" Wulf's eyelashes looked like they were coated with gold.

"Yes. I can be called The Dom, or Sir, or Master."

She remembered one more thing from his list of names last night, even though she had been distracted by him sucking her boob just before he reeled them off. "Not Mr. van Hanover?"

He smiled at her, a slow, small smile, but the smile touched his eyes this time, a real smile. "Not even that."

Rae felt like her remembering at least part of his name had pleased him. "Okay, Sir." She raised her eyebrows a little, just to show that she thought calling him *Sir* was silly.

His lips parted a little, like he had almost leaned in to kiss her. "Better."

Her little defiance would have angered a psychopath. Maybe he wasn't just a shiny, mirrored shell.

Wulf continued, "Also, even though Reagan may be the best name for a Domme that I have heard in years, you need a *nom de baise* for your work."

A *nom de plume* was a pen name, like for writers. A *nom de guerre* was a rebel's wartime code name. *Baise* is French for a kiss, but when it's used as slang and as a verb, it means *to fuck*. Rae suspected that a *nom de baise* meant a *fuck name*, which made perfect sense, given that she was standing the office hallway of a fuck club.

A fuck name for a fuck club. Her stomach trembled. "I hadn't thought of one."

Wulf glanced at the ceiling, thinking. "You might consider Domme Juan?"

"That's possible," Rae said, thinking it was not very good. "How about Lady Macbeth?"

Wulf nodded, looking impressed. "Not bad. Indeed, quite good. I have selected a sub for your audition. His file," he handed her a file folder, "includes his information. Would you like a moment?"

Rae flipped open the folder. A three-page list much like the one she had just filled out was stapled to right side of the folder. The name written at the top in block capitals was Curtis Cutter. She flipped through it, noting that this man had engaged in most of the activities on the list and that he would like to do more of all of them.

Rae pictured a depraved, salivating beast-man, all muscle and gristle and covered in black, goat-like hair.

The left side of the folder was a form with some other specifics, mostly billing information. "Okay. I'm good."

"This is a twenty-five minute session. Because you haven't passed the physical yet, there must be no blood play, no fluid exchange, even though our little sub here might enjoy both of those. I'll watch your audition from the security booth." Wulf opened a normal-looking office door beside him.

The room beyond the door was furnished with red leather couches and black wood tables, not standard office seats. The carved door on the opposite side of the room loomed large and black, like a door to Hell. Red velvet-flocked wallpaper covered the walls to the ceiling.

Rae resisted the urge to pun that, in The Devilhouse, even the wallpaper got flocked.

Wulf surveyed the five men assembled, all of whom sat up perfectly straight on red leather couches with their hands clasped on their tightly pressed knees. They all wore tight black pants and had bare chests. None of them looked like they had seen the inside of a gym in a while, but all were flabby in different ways.

Rae mentally tagged them as Grumpy, Bashful, Doc (who had glasses of course), Chubby, and Lumpy.

Five men.

Rae checked again, and there were indeed exactly five men in that room.

The number of men in that room, waiting to be whipped or whatever, was equal to the number of sexual partners that Rae had had in her whole life, including two one-night-stands and Wulf last night. She felt pathetically virginal and like a slut in the midst of a man-crowd.

Wulf slapped a riding crop against his knee. Rae had not seen him pick up the crop.

"You," Wulf pointed to one of the men. "What is your same, sub?"

Bashful, who was red-headed, blushed rose-pink behind his freckles, fell to his knees, and sat on his heels with his head bowed. "Curtis, Sir."

Bashful/Curtis looked like a computer help desk guy, not a depraved goat-man. She could imagine him sitting behind an IT desk eating a meat stick and vending machine chips, but she wouldn't have thought this guy enjoyed being beaten with a cat o'nine-tails with a dildo shoved up his butt, yet he had starred both those items on his form.

Rae winced as Wulf whipped the riding crop backhand across Bashful's bare back, leaving a welt.

Again, Rae considered running for the door but refrained because she wanted the job.

Wulf said to him, "No, your sub name."

Bashful said, "Thank you, Sir, for correcting me."

Rae *really* considered running for the door, but instead she struck a strong pose and stared down at Bashful like the haughty Lady Macbeth, whom she had played in The Scottish Play last year. Like Lady Macbeth, Rae didn't want to let "I dare not' wait upon 'I would,'" meaning that she didn't want her wussiness and phobias to keep her from doing what she needed to do. Lady Macbeth was not a passive shlump.

Rae wished that she had internalized a little more of the homicidally ambitious Lady Macbeth rather than the hippie dancer from *Hair*.

Bashful said, "I apologize, Master. I am called Irish Setter, Sir."

Wulf said to Bashful, "This is Lady Macbeth, one of our newest Dommies. She would like to play with you for your session today. Do you submit?"

The wide-eyed redhead turned his moon face up to Rae and said, "If you deem it so."

Wulf gestured toward the large, carved door. "My Lady, your sub awaits."

Okay, Rae was going to have to ratchet her kink up a few notches. This weird situation was not going to rob her of her chance to stay in college.

In the play, Lady Macbeth said, "Screw your courage to the sticking place, and we'll not fail."

Rae could adopt that as her mantra in here, and thinking about screwing her courage in tight might help her figure out how to do this dominatrix thing.

"Let's go," she said to Bashful, who had not moved from his kneeling position on the floor.

"Yes, Mistress." Bashful rocked up to his feet, swaying for a moment on his knobby legs. He held the huge door open for her.

Beyond the red and black waiting room, the decor got really weird.

Iron sconces cast dim light on the rough-hewn stone walls. Even though she hadn't descended any stairs, Rae wouldn't have been surprised to hear water dripping from basement cracks. A drain in the middle of the tiled floor suggested that this room sometimes needed to be hosed down. Instead of leather and sweat, the sharp scent of lemons filled the room. Rae spied a small air freshener plugged into a wall socket beside a black bookcase shelved with boxes of ball gags and blindfolds.

The door creaked behind her and thumped closed.

Rae and Bashful were alone in the dungeon.

*Drat.*

Iron bars were bolted to the walls at varying heights. Restraints were attached to the bars, ready and waiting: black leather, iron chains, shining steel handcuffs, red leather thongs, and pink silk strips. The whips—so many whips!—were stored in glassed-in cases like her father's gun safes. Rae had never dreamed that so many kinds of whips even existed, not to mention the canes and straps and staves.

Lady Macbeth would have been overjoyed.

Rae was horrified.

But Rae was Lady Macbeth now.

*Courage.*

Rae glanced back at Bashful, who was standing beside the closed door, waiting. She couldn't be the passive one here, not at all.

Rae opened the glass door of the cabinet. The door stuck for a second and vibrated when she pulled it free. She cringed, waiting for the sound of breaking glass, but the door stayed intact. The smell of clean leather and fresh wood wafted out and brushed Rae's cheeks. From the cabinet, she selected a long, stout, single-tailed whip.

Rae tried to imagine what Bashful wanted her to do. Other than the obvious, like beating him and sticking things in his screwing places, she wasn't sure what to do.

She turned, flinging the whip around in a circle for effect. "I don't like the name Irish Setter."

"Yes, Mistress?" He sounded confused.

She walked over and stood beside him. In her high heels, Rae stood at least six inches taller than the redheaded man. His head wasn't even up to her shoulder. She looked down on his orange hair, thinning on his pink scalp.

She strutted around him, looking up and down his short, stout body. “I think I’ll call you Bashful.”

“Yes, Mistress.” He sounded pleased that she had stripped away even his sub name and given him one of her own. She should remember that little trick.

His feet were bare and turning blue on the uneven tile floor. She wished she had a bathmat for him to stand on.

She brought the whip handle up under his chin and lifted his head to meet her eyes. “Do you like that name?”

Bashful blinked twice, quickly. His pale eyelashes were almost invisible. “Um, yes? Mistress?”

“Good. What shall we do today?”

Bashful blinked rapid-fire. “I don’t know, Mistress.”

“Is there something in particular that you’d like?”

“Um, no, Ma’am.”

“Maybe we should start with you standing up. Should we do that?”

“Okay. Ma’am.”

“Where shall I have you stand?” Rae mused aloud. The bars bolted to the walls might be a good choice. Hard chairs and stools and odd benches, some of them built with curves, waited in rows in the middle of the room. A huge thing that looked like a commercial loom stood in the very middle.

She would have to figure out what all this stuff was for if she was going to work here.

The papers that she could write for her Abnormal Psychology class next year might shock the hell out of her professors. They might even reinstate her scholarship if she published something.

“You can stand over there, Bashful,” she said, pointing to a row of bars near the back of the room.

Bashful trotted over there and stood, waiting.

So, evidently, Rae needed to tell him exactly what to do, every step.

“Turn around,” she said. Bashful pivoted and faced the wall. “Grab the bars.”

Loss of volition is symptomatic of a number of psychological issues, but Rae felt like Bashful was faking it as part of the game.

Well, she was here to play his game.

“What shall we restrain you with?” Rae mused, looking at all the options hanging from the bars. The manacles might hurt him, especially if he pulled at all. The studded leather seemed particularly cruel.

“Um, Ma’am?” Bashful asked.

“Would you prefer handcuffs or to be tied up?” She glanced down at him, checking for fear in his watery eyes.

Instead, he looked confused. If she didn’t know better, she might have thought he looked aghast, but she was being pretty nice to him, considering all the predilections he had listed on his form.

“Um, handcuffs?” Bashful said, and again Rae heard that questioning tone in his voice, which must be his normal cadence.

Funny, he hadn’t added the “Mistress” part that time.

Rae clipped the handcuffs around his wrists, squeezed them, but didn’t tighten them too much. She didn’t want to hurt him. “Is that all right?”

“Yes.” Bashful fidgeted back and forth. His feet must be getting cold, poor guy.

She rubbed the whip handle up his back because she really didn’t want to whip him. She was afraid that she might hurt him badly, but he was expecting some whipping. She hadn’t read his chart in depth, but the whole whip section was marked up. He had scribbled a happy face next to his “high pain tolerance.”

She had to whip him sometime soon. They only had about fifteen minutes left.

Rae pulled back her arm to lash him.

She squeezed her eyes shut, tight.

# Wulf Watches

WULF arrived in the security booth moments after he left Reagan (what a perfect name and such a shame that she couldn't use it professionally) with one of his favorite clients, Irish Setter. Irish Setter would submit to anything she dished out. Neurosurgeons occasionally need to relinquish their obsessive control.

In the security booth, a dark room where the feeds from all twelve dungeon cams glared on monitors hovering around the long desk, Wulf lowered himself into an office chair next to his Head of Security, Jeffrey Jackson.

The black man pushed his headphones off his ears and wound his muscled arms over his chest as far as he could. "Afternoon, Boss."

"And to you, Mr. Jackson." Boss was not an alternate appellation that Wulf usually allowed, but Jeffrey received some leeway. Their friendship stretched over five years, and yet even Jeffrey did not know the name "Wulf," let alone the rest of it.

Wulf asked, "How is our new little Domme doing?"

"I'm not sure." Jeffrey pointed to the screen in the upper left corner of the monitor bank marked *Play Room 1*. From the camera's high vantage in the corner of the room, they could see the two people standing near the door. The angle afforded them a great view down Reagan's beautiful cleavage.

Oh, how Wulf had enjoyed those lovely, real breasts last night. She smelled like peaches and flowers under her clothes. He could have chewed on her softness all night long. He had been disappointed when she had opted out of the usual business opportunity this afternoon. Perching her on his desk and sucking on those luscious tits until she came would have made for a memorable afternoon, if he didn't get carried away and bite her. Even so, Wulf felt sure that a gorgeous handful like Reagan could handle some biting. He wanted to leave bite marks all over her under her clothes, her inner thighs, so that every time the bites hurt her, she would know that his mouth had been there.

No, the real temptation would have been to flip her over and take her on



his desk, holding onto her scrumptious hips.

Jeffrey flipped a switch among dozens on the soundboard.

Rae's dulcet voice sounded over the speakers, "Maybe we should start with you standing. Should we do that?"

Jeffrey said, "She keeps asking him questions."

Wulf shrugged. "I'll have to remind her that she's not on *Jeopardy* . Being a Domme means never having to say 'please.'"

They sat back and listened to Rae perform her scene with Irish Setter.

The sub said, "Okay, Ma'am." Irish Setter wiggled a foot in discomfort.

Wulf frowned. He would have stung the sub for fidgeting, perhaps constructed the whole scene as a lesson around proper submissive stillness.

Irish Setter was giving her an opportunity to punish him.

On the monitor, Reagan turned around, seeming disoriented in the playroom. "Where shall I have you stand?" Her voice, tinny over the speakers, sounded tentative. "You can stand over there, Bashful."

Irish Setter, finally given an order, hurried over to where she pointed.

"Why does she call him 'Bashful?'" Wulf asked Jeff.

"She gave him a sub name of her own choosing," Jeff said.

Wulf leaned back, more confident in her dominating skills. Stripping away even the client's usual sub name was a nice touch.

"Turn around," Reagan said.

Irish Setter faced the wall.

Wulf could see excitement tensing the sub's body at her increasingly confident orders.

Reagan said, "Grab the bars."

Wulf stretched his long legs out under the security board and folded his hands across his lean middle. She needed to take control earlier, but the scene was progressing. Wulf's strategy from this point onward would have been to scrutinize the sub, finding faults that needed correcting. Subs liked to feel that they had developed in their submission during a scene .

"What shall we restrain you with?" Rae asked.

"See there?" Jeffrey said, pointing to the monitor that looked down on the two in the playroom. "Questions."

"It's not a fatal fault. At least it sounded hypothetical."

Jeffrey twiddled a dial so the sub's voice grew louder in the dark control room. "Um, Ma'am?"

"She's confusing him with all the questions." Jeffrey sipped his coffee.

Whipped foam clung to his dark upper lip.

“She’ll come around. This is her first scene as a professional. She indicated that she had ‘extensive’ Domme experience in a private relationship.”

“I wouldn’t have guessed it.”

On the monitor, Reagan asked, “Would you prefer handcuffs or to be tied up?”

Wulf and Jeffrey groaned, as if watching a long golf putt slide past the hole instead of dropping in. Reagan was giving the sub far too much autonomy. Irish Setter came to The Devilhouse to relinquish his tightly wound control, not to answer a bunch of questions about would-he-like-chocolate-chip-or-strawberry?

On the monitor, Irish Setter said, “Um, handcuffs?”

“Whoa!” Jeffrey barked at the sub’s insubordination, and Wulf frowned. The sub had not used the Domme’s honorific, such as Mistress or Madam. He was begging for a beating. The sub wanted to know that this world was safe because rule infractions were punished, preferably harshly.

They watched Reagan on the monitor, peering at her from the camera above as she squeezed the handcuffs around the sub’s chubby wrists, waiting her for swift reaction to such an affront.

Instead of whacking a stripe on his back, she asked him, “Is that all right?”

Over the speakers, Irish Setter said, “Yes.”

Wulf stood, ready to intervene because this scene was spiraling into chaos. “Jeffrey, find Lena. She’s in the building. Tell her to meet me in Play Room One.”

“Yes, Sir.”

Reagan pulled back her arm to lash the sub and squeezed her eyes closed.

Wulf could tell by the awkward way that Reagan held the brutal signal whip that she had never whipped anyone with a single-tail whip, the most dangerous kind. If she lashed that sub from that terrible angle, she would flay him open to the bone.

Jeffrey stood, pointing at monitor where Reagan was posed as if he could reach through the camera and stop her.

Wulf ran.

# Holding the Whip

RAE held the long, black snake of a whip until her fist cramped.

She didn't want to do this, didn't want to do this, *really* didn't want to do this. She didn't want to hurt this poor, nerdy little man who probably just wanted a girl to talk to him because no one dated the IT guys.

Lady Macbeth would whip the heck out of this guy. Lady Macbeth told her husband that she would stab and kill the king if she were physically strong enough to do it.

Lady Macbeth must not have been nearly six feet tall and probably hadn't grown up on a ranch, wrestling calves that didn't want to be branded and gelded. Though Rae had used a cattle prod rather than a bullwhip, she was pretty sure that she could crack this whip on this guy's ginger-haired back. She just didn't want to hurt him.

Rae sucked in some air, readying herself. She peeked at Bashful, hoping to see that he was leering at her, ready for a lash.

Instead, Bashful's watery blue eyes widened with real horror. "Hippocampus!" he shouted. "*Hippocampus!*"

Rae closed her eyes and wound up to strike him.

The door crashed open. "Lady Macbeth!"

Oh, yes, *she* was Lady Macbeth. Rae opened her eyes.

Bashful slumped forward, resting his head on the bars.

Wulf stood in the doorway. He straightened his shirt cuffs under his suit coat. "My Lady, if you would do me the honor of retiring to the Dominants' lounge area, I will deal with this disobedient sub. He is beneath you." He held out his hand for the long, black whip.

Even though Wulf had been kind enough to make it seem like she hadn't screwed up royally, Rae knew that she was done at The Devilhouse. "Yes. Thank you, Sir. "

She held her head high, leaving Bashful handcuffed to this iron bar, and handed Wulf the whip, handle first.

Just as she walked past him, Wulf leaned and whispered in her ear, "My office. I'll join you presently."

She glanced up at him, dreading that she should see anger or derision or disappointment, but the expression in his deep blue eyes remained impassive. His left eyelid shuddered, almost a wink.

She strode out of the dungeon so she wouldn't embarrass him further in front of his clients. As she pulled the heavy door behind her, Wulf stood behind Bashful, right behind where the little redheaded man was cuffed to the iron bar, very close to him but not touching.

Wulf murmured, so low that Rae almost didn't hear him, "Mistress Rage will be here shortly. Shall we continue, Irish Setter?"

"Yes, Sir!" Bashful said.

Rae peeked through the door, watching.

Wulf coiled the long whip and laid it aside. Louder, he asked, "Did you think you could get away with such insubordination, sub? Lady Macbeth is a new Domme, and I trusted that you would be properly submissive. You have betrayed my trust, and you need a lesson in submission. Prepare yourself."

"Sir, yes Sir! I mean no, Sir! Oh, yes, Sir!" Bashful chortled.

"Too much talking." Wulf selected a riding crop from the glassed cabinet and then returned to Bashful. His low voice turned menacing, and his German accent strengthened. "I think you need a lesson in *silent* subservience. No more talking, or screaming, for that matter. Suffer in silence."

Bashful said, "Yes, Sir!"

Wulf flicked the riding crop, an economical move born of practice, and Bashful recoiled from the lash. Wulf said, "I said, silence."

This time, Bashful did not answer, and Rae eased the door shut.

In the red and black waiting room, Grumpy, Doc, Chubby, and Lumpy sat rigid on the edges of the red leather couches, waiting their turns in the dungeon.

Rae walked past them without speaking. She had no idea what she should say to them beyond apologizing for being a failure at what they wanted.

While she walked through the innocuous-looking office corridors and past the bruised receptionist, Rae breathed in her nose and out her mouth, controlling her emotions, or at least her appearance.

She didn't want to cry. She certainly didn't want Wulf to find her red-eyed and snot-nosed.

In The Dom's office, she sat in one of the chairs in front of the desk, the penitents' chairs, and fished her phone from her purse. Her head was starting

to ache from tying her hair back so tightly. She opened her book app.

Reading a textbook for school would make her feel worse because she had lost her dang scholarship and this chance to stay in school, too.

Looking up “how to be a dominatrix” was fruitless, now. She should have studied that this morning instead of reading her abnormal psych textbook in the coffeehouse, which seemed obvious now because, without this job, she wouldn’t be taking any more classes.

Maybe, if she had prepared like a proper actress, she would have succeeded at this audition instead of failing so miserably.

*Dang it.*

Reading a novel or playing a game seemed like an additional waste of time. The only thing that might be a useful task was inputting the navigation to drive back to Pirtleville. She should pack her few clothes and toiletries and leave tonight. Even their dorm fridge belonged to Hester. A couple suitcases and some plastic grocery bags would hold all her possessions and stupid dreams.

Her eyes and nose stung.

She held back the tears, opened an app on her phone, and downloaded free ringtones for twenty long minutes.

The door behind her clicked open, and Rae tapped the home key to hide the stupid, useless thing that she was doing. At least she wasn’t teary any more.

Wulf walked over to his side of the desk. “I took care of Curtis. Why did you not stop when he said his safe word?”

“I didn’t know what to do.” She still didn’t know what a safe word was, but she bet that’s why Bashful started yelling *hippocampus* .

Wulf explained, “The safe word means stop, always, even in mid-stroke. Everything stops. You leap to unbind them. When something goes so terribly wrong, the only thing to do is stop everything.”

Everything had gone *so terribly wrong* . Rae should just leave now and spare them both any further embarrassment.

“You should not feel bad.” Wulf waved his hand toward the window, indicating that it should all blow away. “Do not take it to heart. Curtis was thrilled to receive some time with The Dom,” Wulf rolled his eyes a little, indicating his own amusement, “and then with Lena, who is one of our most experienced Dominatrices. I used to charge two thousand dollars an hour, back when I had time to play, and most of my clients were friends.” One of

his blond eyebrows drifted up. “I had forgotten how much I enjoyed it.”

He didn’t look angry, but Rae was determined to make this right. She said, “Look, I need to apologize. I didn’t know what I was doing in there. My friend and I just played around, nothing like this.”

Wulf’s calm demeanor didn’t change but, still standing, he braced his fingertips on the desktop and leaned forward. His clear, blue eyes were implacable, and his face was as serene as still water. “Was there a friend?”

Rae felt like she was at a crossroads. Lizzy and Georgie had insisted that Rae should not lie to The Dom, not even a little bit, and yet she had padded her resume a little to try to get this all-important job.

No. She had padded it *a lot* .

Now, she either had to come clean or double-down on her lie.

Wulf had been trying to help her, and Rae didn’t lie to her friends. “No. There was no friend.”

Wulf didn’t have to ask why she had lied. Her reasons—desperation for money, pathetic lack of sexual experience—were written all over her application.

He did ask, “Is there anything else on your application that needs to be amended?”

Everything else, those sparse encounters, she had actually tried all those. “The rest is all true.”

“Even the orgy?”

She hadn’t overstated that particular night. “The cast party for *Hair* got pretty wild. At least five couples were using the bed in the back room. You couldn’t help but grope and be groped.”

“You liked it?”

The fumbling in the dark had exhilarated her in a way that no coupling ever had before. She had ended up necking with Laird while Dave had screwed her from behind and while Gennifer rode Laird. “Yeah.”

Wulf nodded. “That is a start.” He unbuttoned his suit coat and sat behind his desk. “I stand by what I said: you are a natural Domme.”

Rae thought he was mistaken but didn’t argue.

“Your lack of experience is problematic. Most consultants have more relevant life experience.”

“Um, yeah.” Before she came to The Devilhouse, she had been ashamed of having had five sexual partners, which included Dave but not Laird at the cast party and still seemed like far too many. After seeing the five men

waiting to be spanked, Rae regarded herself as more prudish than most people considered Hester.

Wulf continued, "Our consultants can separate sex from love and play from a relationship because they have had those experiences."

Rae felt compelled to give it one more shot. "I'm working on a double major in college: psych and theater. I'm an actor. I've done plays. I can act the same role every day for weeks and make the other actor and the audience believe it, and then go home at the end of the day, have a cup of hot cocoa, and blow it all off."

Wulf nodded, then stretched his hands out on his desk. "I would not feel comfortable putting you in even as a trainee at this point."

"I understand." This was going nowhere. She needed to save them both from more mortification. Rae swiped her purse from the floor. "Thank you for your time, Wulf, um, Mr. van Hanover. You've been very kind, and I appreciate it."

She tilted her head up, smiled grimly, and stood, ready to leave his office and this college town. She held out her hand across the desk to shake so she could flee. At least she hadn't been so undignified as to break down and sob.

Wulf waved for her to sit down. "Wait. Let us speak for another moment."

Rae sank down into the chair and hugged her purse in front of her like a teddy bear. Surely he wouldn't give her another chance. He had to be smarter than that.

Wulf's level gaze was businesslike. "Do you want be a Domme?"

"Yes," Rae said and, for the first time, really meant it. She wanted to stay in college, she wanted to do some of the unfettered things she had checked on that list, and for some reason, she wanted Wulf's approval instead of his disappointment.

No, she knew why, and she was fooling herself if she thought she didn't. She wanted him to like her. She wanted him to think she was strong and smart and, yes, sexy, because she thought he was all those things.

"We could try private lessons," he said.

"Pardon me?" That slipped out before she could catch it.

"Private lessons with me, so you understand the techniques of BDSM."

She could search for that acronym, *BDSM*, when she got back to the dorm. "Okay."

"You do not have to do this. We could find a way for you to stay in

college. Loans, perhaps.”

“I know. I want to. I want to learn.” She didn’t add *with you*, but those words almost popped out of her mouth.

“Very good,” he said. “We can start now.”

“Now?” She had really hoped to look up that acronym first.

“Do you have somewhere to go?”

“No, it’s just, um,” she spread her hands out in defeat, “better than I had hoped.”

“Good. I am pleased.” He walked around the desk and held out his hand to her. “I’ll find us a nice, quiet play room.”

This time, his smile was toothier, and the sharp gleam in his blue eyes was wicked.



## Play Room 2

RAE stood in the center of the dungeon, waiting for Wulf.

Play Room Two was another Spanish Inquisition-style dark dungeon, packed with undulating furniture and flickering fake candles. Lavender air freshener overlaid the sharp odor of leather cleaner.

He had taken her shoes when he left her there, and the rough tile chilled her toes. The equipment loomed over her. The Inquisition had locked people in cells with the instruments of their impending torture so they could think about what was going to happen to them in specific terms.

She didn't know enough to imagine specifically. He might tie her standing to the upright rack or down to the iron rings on the floor.

The leather straps, the canes, and the cobra-like whips stood ready. One of those kinds of whips had left those welts on Glenda's back. She must have been tied to bars or frames or furniture like these while someone whipped her.

Rae waited for a few more minutes, wishing that she had her phone to pass the time, but Wulf had taken that, too.

The door opened, and Wulf stepped in. He had removed his suit jacket and tie and rolled his white shirt sleeves up past his elbows, suggesting he was ready to work hard. Cords of muscle wrapped Wulf's forearms. Even the little vee of his open shirt collar revealed swells of muscle rounding downward. He hadn't taken off his jacket or shirt last night. She hadn't seen his arms, or his torso, or his legs. His body was still a mystery to her, but it was anything like his lower arms, he was probably ripped.

None of her previous guys had been ripped. She kind of wanted to see if his muscles rippled under his shirt, just to see.

He gestured to the ceiling, where Rae noticed a black, shiny globe hanging amid the rough tiles, and then sliced the air with his hand, indicating something to be cut. Had he turned off the videocam feed that was supposed to keep her safe?

Wulf walked over to her, then around her, looking over her body. At first, she watched him, but he said, "Don't move."

Rae stared at the heavy, black door while Wulf inspected her like she was a piece of meat. Trembling started in her left leg.

Heat warmed the back of her neck. Rae realized that Wulf must be standing very close behind her, almost touching her. "I like your hair down," he said and pulled the pins and scrunchie out of her bun. Her hair fell around her shoulders, curling from having been tightly wound. Her headache eased.

"That's better," he said, lifting her curls. Her head felt so much better from having her hair down, and her hair brushed the skin on the nape of her neck.

Wulf whispered into her ear, "First, what is your safe word?"

"Um, I don't know." Rae could barely concentrate on anything except his hands holding her hair and his breath warming her ear and neck.

"You haven't chosen one. It's not in your file."

Rae should have noticed Bashful's safe word *in his file*. That was why Wulf handed her *his file* to read and was surprised at how little she read of it. "How about 'Macbeth?'"

"Good. Our safe word is 'Macbeth.' The first rule of being a Domme in our establishment is that you never, ever have sex with the client. Men cannot submit while they're fucking someone. A man immediately feels dominant, no matter how restrained he is."

So he wasn't going to have sex with her. Her apprehension turned into disappointment instead of relief.

One of his hands slipped from her hair and stroked her shoulder. She closed her eyes, feeling him so close.

"However, as I am the Dom and you are the sub in this game we are playing, we can, if you want, if you consent."

Rae didn't trust her voice. His mouth was so close to her ear and her neck. Wanting to touch him warred with the disgust of him thinking that she was, most literally, a whore.

Dang, she wanted to taste him again. She wanted his hands on her.

She wasn't sure what to answer.

She had had sex for a lot of reasons in college, from it being expected on the third date or because it seemed like a good idea at the time, but this time, lust stirred in her body and was personal and directed. She wanted *him*, and she wanted to touch *him*.

"I will be touching you everywhere," he said, and he stroked her black tee shirt over her ribs and then cupped her breasts through her bra. "I will be

in control of you. You will be submitting to whatever I want. Do you want to add sex to that? Sometimes it can be overwhelming.”

He rubbed his thumbs over her nipples, barely pinching them through her clothes.

Her breath pushed her tits farther into his hands, and she couldn't speak, so she nodded. Yes, she wanted him. After last night, she wanted more of him. Little aftershock orgasms ran through her when she thought of screwing him against the wall last night.

“Do you submit to me?” he asked her.

Wulf's hands holding her tits commanded her full attention. He teased her, running his thumbs around her nipples, which hardened under his touch.

“You have to say yes,” he whispered in her ear.

“Yes,” she said, and her voice came out breathless.

“Yes, what?” he asked.

“Yes, I submit.”

His hands dropped to her belly and pressed her body through her suit. “You must call me ‘Sir’ or ‘Master’ in here. That was one mistake that you made with Irish Setter. He did not address you properly. You should have punished him for that infraction. He was begging you to enforce the rules.”

Calling him ‘Sir’ reminded Rae of when she was a child and her parents made sure that she called all adults ‘Sir’ or ‘Ma’am.’ She didn't want to feel like a child. “Yes, Master.”

“Excellent.” He grabbed her body and forced her hips back against his pelvis. She gasped from surprise. Through their clothes, his erection felt like a hard rod against her ass. “Let's get some of these clothes off of you.”

He stepped back and stripped her suit coat and the black tee shirt off of her, so that only her bra and skirt were left, and her panties, of course. The dungeon, or *play room* as he called it, was cooler than she had thought, and her nipples tightened under the black lace of her bra.

Wulf walked around her again. Rae looked away, ashamed in the way that all women are ashamed about *something* about their bodies, even if they hide it under bravura.

“No, no,” Wulf said. “Look up. I did not give you permission to look away.”

Rae resumed staring at the door. She pulled her shoulders back to perk up her breasts.

“Very nice,” Wulf said. “You would make a lovely sub, sitting at my

feet, wearing nothing but a gold collar.”

Rae’s face heated at that image of herself.

Wulf laughed at her blush. “You *would* make a beautiful, naked sub. Consider your breasts.” He ran a riding crop around the lace-covered swell. Again, the riding crop had appeared in his hand. Did he stuff them up his sleeves or something? “They are beautiful. Magnificent. Hiding them should be punished.”

He tucked his riding crop under his arm and lifted both of her tits again, reminding Rae of last night, when he had sucked them like he wanted to eat them. “One of these days, we’ll discuss your breasts further, in great and succulent detail.” He relinquished them gently, perhaps reluctantly.

“Today is a lesson, not play time,” he said as if reminding himself. His hand pressed her shoulder, and her knees buckled. “On your knees.”

Rae lowered herself to her knees, embarrassed at how ungainly she felt. She stood on her knees, like she was praying in church and resting her arms on the back of the pew in front of her.

“No,” Wulf said. “Back.” He touched the riding crop to her breastbone and rocked her back. Her butt rested on her heels. “Better.”

Rae looked up at him, standing over her. His navy pants rose so far above her to his silver belt buckle. His white shirt lay flat over his abs, and he glared at her from far above the bulges of his pecs. Subs felt helpless like this. Why would anyone enjoy being so defenseless?

With his toe, Wulf spread her knees apart, stretching her skirt and opening her pussy. “Better still. This is the basic submissive position. This is how a sub should rest when awaiting orders from her Dom. Understand?”

Rae nodded. The tile scraped her knees and the tops of her feet. The dungeon’s cold air cooled her panties, and she realized that she was moist down there. Her body was responding to him even though this submission thing scared her.

“In general, beginning a session in the sub position allows the sub to relax and give up control. At this time, you can leave them and select your equipment.” Wulf went over to the glassed cabinet, which was behind Rae, and glass rattled back there as he opened the cabinet doors.

Rae stared at the black, carved wood of the door, her only escape, and waited.

Rae tried to hear what he was doing behind her. She tried to see out of the corners of her eyes, but she figured that turning her head wasn’t allowed

so she couldn't see what those scraping sounds like metal on wood were.

Wulf hummed like he was considering something.

He wasn't choosing chocolate or vanilla ice cream, dang it. He was selecting a weapon to beat her with. She wished he would get on with it.

A sound like slapping echoed off the walls. She heard another slapping sound, higher and sharper this time, then something that sounded like a bunch of hands pattering.

Rae wanted to scream at him to *pick something!* so she could stop being scared of which freaking whip he was going to choose.

*Oh*, and Rae understood a little better. Suspense was good for the sub. He was drawing it out on purpose. For all her nervousness about being in a dungeon with a whip-wielding Wulf, she was beginning to understand a Domme's job: keep your client on pins and needles until you started beating them with whips.

*Crack*, and Rae knew that sound from movies. Only a bullwhip made a crack like that.

That door might be locked. If she jumped up, she might not be able to get away.

*Crack*, and the next whipcrack popped right above her head. She flinched. Sweet Jesus, he was going to use the bullwhip on her just like she had been going to on Bashful.

Behind her, Wulf said, "Perhaps not that one."

Rae sagged forward, relieved.

"Don't slouch," he said. "Slouching is unattractive in a sub."

She straightened and pulled her shoulders back again, pushing out her breasts.

"Better."

Classical music, something with sweet violins, began to play. Rae hadn't known there were speakers in the walls. Chamber music. Chamber of Horrors music. Chamber of Pain and Punishment music.

Footsteps tapped toward her. He was still wearing his shoes. "Stand."

She swayed to her feet and nearly groaned as blood rushed into her cold feet.

"Come. Stand here." Wulf was beside and a little behind her, so she still couldn't see what whip he was holding. He motioned to a wooden square frame that was taller than she was.

She stood in front of it and turned to face him. In his hand, Wulf held a

long whip with many tails sprouting from it. Her nerves jangled again, and she couldn't seem to catch her breath from just looking at that menacing thing.

"No," he said. "Turn around."

"I don't want it to hurt, Master," Rae blurted, ashamed to admit that she didn't want to partake of what everyone around here seemed to like, but that whip freaked her out.

"A sub who is ambivalent and yet consents," Wulf mused. He stroked her face as she looked up at him. "You fascinate me, Reagan. I could play with you for hours." His hand drifted lower, outlining her breasts, and his palm slid down her ribs to the waistband of her skirt. "Turn around."

She turned her back to him and held her breath, trying to stay calm. Past the frame, so close up, the rocks on the wall looked artificial. The crags stood out in a five-pointed pattern.

"We can take this off, too." Wulf popped the clasp on her bra. The lace bits slid down her arms and fell to her bare feet. Her tits swung free, and she resisted the urge to cover herself with her arms to hide them. Shame was so ingrained in her head that it felt inescapable.

Wulf stood behind her again, and his hands touched her body, gently at first, then his hands firmed and he rubbed her. A trace of warm cologne like cinnamon-spiced tea and clean sheets emanated from inside his shirt when he moved. He massaged her shoulders and arms, working out the fearful tension there, but his hands kept returning to her breasts to hold them and rub his thumbs over her nipples. Her breath caught every time he did that, and she wanted to lean against him so she could feel his cock against her ass again, but that might violate his rules, and then he might whip her.

His breathing near her ear quickened. "For most of our clients, pain and pleasure have become entangled. They both feel good." He kissed her bare shoulder, and her skin puckered where his lips sucked. He mouthed and nipped her neck. The spark of pain caught Rae by surprise, but as soon as the twinge on her neck registered, Wulf pinched her nipples harder, and she gasped twice, shocked. When he released her, a wave of pleasure washed through her body.

He ran his hands up her sides, stroking the skin over her ribs up to her breasts. The undersides of her breasts tickled when he stroked them.

He said, "Just like some people like spicy food."

Rae nodded. She could understand an attraction to fiery salsa.

His hands soothed her skin and yet made her ache for more of him, and his palms slipping over her body were so fascinating that she didn't really notice what he was doing.

He lifted her arms in the air. The sweet violin music lilted in the air, and her body swayed against his hands like they were waltzing.

Wulf said, "Ah, then you understand. Why would anyone eat food that hurts them?"

Rae traced the polished wood of the frame with her hands, and she answered without thinking. "Because it burns so good, Master."

"Yes, that's it," Wulf murmured.

Rae's fingers found cold metal handles on the frame.

"Hold them," he said.

Rae clutched the bars even though dread twisted in her stomach. Wulf stoked down her arms, around her breasts, and over her ribs, like he owned her skin. Rae wanted to turn around and kiss him, but she held onto the handles and didn't move. Her heart fluttered in her chest every time he caressed her breasts, and her pussy swelled.

"With an experienced sub, you can tell them to hold on and not let go. This requires more effort of will from them, to not let go no matter what you do to them. It leads them farther into submission."

Wulf stepped to her side. When his hands left her body, Rae's weakened knees almost buckled. "However, restraints are preferred for an inexperienced submissive. They feel bound and helpless, which is exactly what they want to feel."

Wulf wrapped tough leather thongs around one of her wrists, tying her to the frame. He slipped his finger between the cords and her skin, making sure they weren't too tight. Her skin was so sensitive from him stroking her that even those firm ties scratched.

Her last moment to break free and run out the door had passed.

Wulf tied her other wrist to the frame. "You don't want to cut off blood circulation, but the sub must feel helpless. If they feel they have no choice in the matter, in what is being done to them, they feel safe."

Rae didn't feel safe. Tying her there so that he could do anything he wanted to her made her feel more vulnerable and helpless than she ever had felt in her life. A spark of excitement ignited at the suggestion that she could not stop him from having sex with her, which she had been thinking about all day long.

Powerlessness and longing confused her and worked her up so much that tears misted her eyes. “Do they cry?” Rae asked.

Pain like a knife slashed through her back and she gasped. Her useless, too-late paranoia rang warning bells.

“You mustn’t forget to call me Master,” Wulf said. His offhand tone belied the fact that he had just smacked her with the riding crop.

“Yes, Master.” Rae blinked to clear the tears from her eyes because, with her hands tied, she couldn’t wipe them away. “I just wanted to ask, Master, do the subs cry?”

He stood close to her again, his chest brushing her back when she breathed. “Sometimes they do,” he whispered in her ear. “You’ll learn to distinguish what it means when a sub cries. Some cry easily, often at the first stroke, but their tears mean little. It is for effect, part of the game. When they wail, it sounds false. They need you to be harsher, to push the game farther for them. If you can push their real boundaries, they will become your willing slave. Curtis is one of those.”

Rae nodded. Her eyes absorbed the tears, but the stripe on her back still stung.

“For some subs,” he said, “the playroom might be the only place in their lives where they can release their tears. That cry is different, more wracking, but they must be brought to the point where they can let go. Then they need to be soothed.”

She nodded, trying to think more about what he was saying than the ebbing pain on her back. She might need the information from her psychology classes here more than her theater ones.

“New subs, however, must be coaxed.” Wulf stroked her ribcage so gently that she wondered if he was using a feather, but his fingers were warm on her skin. “I would be ashamed of myself if I made you cry.”

“I won’t cry,” she said, “Master.”

“Yes, my natural-born Domme.” He massaged her neck, and she dropped her head forward, luxuriating in his touch. His kneading deepened, working away hard knots between her shoulder blades from typing research papers on her computer.

“Pain and pleasure lie on a continuum. New subs need pleasure.” His hands smoothed the skin around her waist, and he palmed her breasts again. “Mostly pleasure.” He ran his thumbs around her nipples. Her breasts tightened again as the rest of her body relaxed. He stepped forward and



pressed his body against her, and his shirt scratched the hot stripe on Rae's back. "Almost all the time, you do things to them that feel good, that they will like."

His voice had softened because he was whispering right beside her, and his warm lips lapped her ear as his hands slid down her hips. She swayed against him to the soft violin music, lost in feeling his hands sliding over her skin. He rubbed her butt cheeks through her suit skirt, grabbing and pulsing handfuls of her flesh. His massage acquired a rhythm like waves, working her skin and body and she moved against him.

"But occasionally," he said, "when they want more pleasure, when they are *expecting* more pleasure, you do something that scares them, that makes them realize that they are at your mercy."

Wulf hiked her skirt around her waist and grabbed her panties. The lace scraped her skin as he yanked them down to her ankles. He grabbed her breasts again, holding her nipples between his thumbs and fingers, pinching.

Rae, nearly naked and defenseless, strained against the restraints, but they didn't budge. Her skin burned from his touch, and his fingers pinching her boobs hurt and yet sparked lust in her belly. She wanted to turn around and grab him and pull his clothes off, but she couldn't.

He said, "Kick the panties away." His voice had deepened.

"Master." She was breathless because his fingers held her nipples so tightly that just the slightest more pinch would cause a spike of pain, and his hands curled under her tits. She asked, "What if someone says the safe word?"

"Then everything stops," he growled in her ear, as if he were angry with her for bringing up the safe word. "I will pull those slip knots on your wrists, and we will leave the play room. We discuss what went wrong outside. Our games are over for the day, if you say it."

As much as she was afraid of the whips and what he was going to do to her, his hands on her tits grabbed her with just enough strength, and she wanted him to keep touching her, keep stroking her like he had been. "I won't, Master."

"Good. Now kick them away."

Rae slipped the silky panties off her ankles and pushed them away. A hot drip slithered out of her pussy. She might be afraid of what he was going to do to her, but her body wanted him.

He kicked her feet apart with his shoe, all the way to the wood frame, and

the swollen lips of her pussy parted. She stood with her legs spread open, wanting to close them because she was so vulnerable to anything.

His hands on her breasts gentled, and he began stroking her again. He gathered her to him, and he smoothed her skin and massaged muscles in her back and shoulders that she hadn't known were tense. His hands roamed her body from her fingers to her knees, petting her.

With every revolution around her body, he verged on slipping his fingers into the moist folds of her pussy, but not quite. Her clit began to throb in time to her hammering heartbeat. His hand went up to her breast, circled her nipple, and down her stomach over her belly button to her pubes, and then the he slowed, stopped, and his fingers veered away without sliding inside.

Sexual tension twisted in her belly.

He stooped down for a moment, running his hands down one thigh and calf and then back up her thigh on the inside, and Rae thought that he was going to keep pushing his fingers up and into her, but he didn't. He went down her other leg, held her ankle for a moment, and then stoked her flesh all the way back up, and he almost touched her pussy again but his hand swung away and over her bare bottom.

He stood behind her and pulled her hips back. His hard cock pressed through his pants against her ass again.

Rae adjusted her leg, but her ankle wouldn't move.

She looked down, startled .

He had tied her ankles to the frame so quickly that she hadn't felt him do it.

She struggled again against the leather thongs, and he chuckled at her flailing. "You can scream if you want. The playrooms have been soundproofed, though I sometimes think microphones would be better for business."

Rae didn't scream but moaned, letting the fear take over. She wanted out. She didn't know what he was going to do, but as she was just drawing a breath to say *Macbeth* , his hands cupped her breasts again, tugging gently, and spirals of pleasure wound up her even though she was scared. She let her head fall back on his shoulder.

He handled her like he owned her, finding all the soft spots on the sides of her neck and the cheeks of her ass and teasing them until she was so sensitive that his every touch shocked her.

Finally, just when she thought he never would, when her body vibrated

with frustration, he grazed the lips of her pussy with his fingertips.

She forgot that she was tied and tried to bring her arms around his head to hold him against her, but the leather straps held her spread-eagle.

His hand left her pussy, and he palmed her breasts again, tweaking the nipples. She moaned and arched her back trying to push her boobs into his hands. If he wouldn't rub her clit, she wanted him to grab her tits until it hurt.

His breathing had turned ragged, like he might lose control of himself. His breath on her neck drove her crazy with wanting him to touch her *down there*, to rub her aching nub until she came.

He stroked the outside of her pussy again, teasing her. She wanted to grind against his hand, to force it inside of her, but she couldn't move. If he had untied her just then, she would have jumped on him and clawed his pants off. She held onto the cold metal handles, futilely wiggling, trying to push his hand inside her folds.

His hand left her pussy and she thought she might sob in frustration. She whimpered, and his hands pressed harder against her body.

He stepped away, and Rae hung on the handles, so crazed with wanting him. "Why, Master?" she asked and was surprised that her voice came out raspy.

Burns sparked across her back .

She gasped, and her skin felt the sting of the whip as nine stripes of hot pleasure, like he was rubbing her back harder, rougher. The whip slapped her back and ass again, and the harsh bites tightened her breasts and pussy until she thought she was going to come. Her rasping breath quickened.

The whip clattered to the floor, and he was behind her again, pushing against her. The whip left the skin on her back raw, and his clothes scraped where the whip had stung her. Her body was so primed to feel everything as pleasure that she gasped and pushed back against him, wanting it to hurt more because it burned so good.

He grabbed one of her tits, rubbing the nipple with his thumb. With one finger, he touched the very top of her pussy, then slowly, sadistically slowly, eased his cool finger into the softness.

Rae couldn't breathe, couldn't move. Her attention was riveted on that soft invasion that she was helpless to prevent.

A small part of her mind—a very small part that wasn't consumed with the way his soft finger entered the folds of her pussy and his other hand thumbed her boob—gave up her fear of what he might do, and she wanted

him to do things to her, *anything*, and didn't want to be able to stop him because the lust and wanting and hunger for him finally outweighed her fear.

His finger reached her clit, and she moaned, arching to push her ass against him.

"At this point," he whispered in her ear, "if you were an experienced sub and we were playing, I might do all sorts of things to you. I might whip you hard for such presumption. I might take you with a sex toy, denying you my body. Whatever I did, it would be just a little different, or a little more, than you wanted."

His hand left her tit for a moment though his other hand still stroked her hot clit, pushing pleasure up her pussy and spine, and he unzipped his pants. His cock nudged Rae's ass, but he jerked away. Foil ripped.

His voice was so low, she barely heard him say, "But we agreed that you wanted this, and I cannot resist you."

His fingers spread her wide-open pussy farther and his cock slid up her wet center.

The jolt of him pushing into her bowed Rae forward as far as the restraints and his cock allowed her. She hadn't dreamed helplessness would feel so good. His finger circled her clit while his dick glided into her from behind, stroking her inside. His other arm clamped around her waist so she couldn't move her hips and certainly couldn't get away.

"God, you're wet," he growled into her neck as he shoved his cock in her.

He felt huge and stretched the soft skin inside her. Hot slip ran down her thighs. She wanted to push back, wanted more of him, but her tied wrists and ankles and his strong arm around her waist imprisoned her. She wanted to grab him and force him deeper into her, but *she couldn't move*. He stoked her slowly inside, and his finger slipped around her clit, rubbing around the edges but not pushing the pleasure in like she craved. Waves of pleasure wracked her body, but she couldn't come. She tensed, grabbing him with her pussy, trying to make him come so he would drive into her hard.

Wulf gripped her waist tighter with his arm, pushing her off and pulling her down on his cock.

Her pussy coiled tighter, ready. She leaned forward, trying to push his finger against her clit and work him deeper.

He released her waist and pushed her forward, and his finger finally —*finally!* —found her aching clit.

Rae grabbed the handles as hard as she could and held them as all that craziness, all the frustration, all the tightly wound pleasure burst in her pussy and rocketed up her spine to her head. She screamed, "Yes!" as waves pulsed through her, blinding her to everything except his cock stroking her slit and his hand rubbing waves of ecstasy into her.

Wulf grunted and threw back his head. He held her there, her limbs strapped to the frame and impaled on his hard cock as he ground against her, panting as he came.

He breathed hard for a moment and held her on him. Rae gasped for air, trying to hold herself up when all she wanted to do was collapse on the floor and shake. Even last night couldn't compare to this heart-attack orgasm.

Wulf slid one arm around her waist, holding her on his still-hard dick, and pulled the slip-knots to release first her arms and then her ankles.

She sagged back against him as the blood rushed back into her arms and her legs trembled. His strong arms kept her from crumpling.

"My God," she said.

His chest rose and fell against her back because his breathing rasped, too. His head fell forward on her shoulder, and he absently kissed her shoulder.

"*Oui*," he said. "*Mon Dieu*."

"I don't think I can move."

"You don't have to." He reached between them with one hand and pulled his hips back, sliding his dick out of her. She moaned because, even though she was sore and exhausted, his cock in her felt good. He still held her up with one arm because her legs wobbled.

After a minute, he turned back and picked her up in his arms.

"Oh my God," she said as her feet left the ground. "No one can pick me up." Rae had grown almost a foot in high school, and since her junior year, no one had even tried to hoist her into the air.

Wulf curled her naked body against his white shirt and carried her over to a chair.

He settled her on his lap and held her while she shook with exhaustion and the aftermath. Her naked ass sat on his pants. She said, "That was amazing."

His modest shrug rose around her. "An introduction."

"No, I'm serious. That was amazing. I've never done *that* before."

He chuckled. "Yes, your application was a little thin."

She laid her hand and head on his chest. His heart beat slowly under the

thick slabs of muscle. She could check three more boxes on that application form now. “What was that thing you whipped me with? It didn’t hurt, really.”

“It was a cat o’ nine tails, but the tails were made of suede. Such a soft whip is for the effect rather than to produce pain. The term for whipping with a cat o’ nine tails is actually ‘flogging,’ not whipping.”

“Wow.”

“I’m afraid your Domme training turned into play time.” He stroked her naked back. She was surprised that her flesh didn’t sting when his hand ran over her. “We’ll have to do better tomorrow.”

“Tomorrow?” Today was Sunday, and she had to study for an exam on Monday morning. The test didn’t matter if she had to leave school, but if she didn’t have to quit college and go back to Pirtleville, the test did matter. She had to pass her other classes if she wanted to graduate on time.

“Yes,” he said. His firm voice sounded like he had made a decision. “You’ll have Domme training for an hour or so.”

“Domme training with you?” She was mortified that her voice sounded stupidly hopeful.

“Yes, at first.” His offhand remark sounded like he was thinking about something else. “Sometimes I’ll put you with other Doms, too. However,” he looked back at her, and his blue eyes crinkled with amusement. “No more play time. We have to train you, not screw you, even as absolutely delightful as that was.”

Rae snuggled in against him, wondering what training was like, since this wasn’t training. She wasn’t as scared as she had been just a few hours ago.

Wulf rubbed her arm and kissed her forehead. “Rae, we should discuss something else.”

“Yeah?” She was a little sleepy.

“You should talk to the other girls about me.”

Rae wasn’t sleepy any more. Lizzy and Georgie had already told Rae all that they knew, which wasn’t much. “Why?”

“You should know how I am. You shouldn’t get attached to me.”

“Lizzy and Georgie said you ‘love women, *crave* women, and like to be with women, in the plural.’”

Wulf laughed this time, and his chest rumbled beside Rae’s head.

“They’re spot on.”

Georgie had also said that The Dom got inside your head and knew what you wanted, even if you didn’t know it or didn’t want to say it.

Uneasiness rose in Rae as she realized that Wulf had done just that to her.

Rae felt helpless in a different way, now. Being tied to the wooden frame and fucked from behind paled beside this vulnerability, that he had sized her up and known exactly what to do to her.

He adjusted his arms around her. "You can relax. It's just a natural reaction to having a naked woman on my lap. It will go away presently."

Confused, Rae glanced around, and then realized that his cock was nudging her ass through his pants again.

She took a deep breath, unsure she should do this, and asked, "What else do they say about you?"

Wulf glanced away and seemed to consider for a moment. He stoked her arm, slowly, three times. "That I'm an empty shell. Sometimes they say an empty suit."

Last night in the limo, Georgie had said that The Dom was as smooth and polished as mirror. Whatever you were or wanted reflected off of his perfectly shiny shell. "Are you?"

Beside her cheek, Wulf sat up straighter and looked toward the door. "I apologize, Reagan, but I have some things to attend to." His arms strengthened around her, *hugging her*, and then he stood and set her on her unsteady feet.

Rae tugged her skirt down over her hips, covering her pussy, as he walked away from her. The rest of her clothes was scattered all over the playroom. Her nakedness and abandonment combined to make a whole new kind of helplessness.

Dang, she felt *awful*.

Beside the door, Wulf paused. "Outside the waiting room, turn left, and there is a ladies' spa room with showers, if you like."

Rae doubted there were any *ladies* in The Devilhouse. She crossed her arms over her bare breasts to hide them and looked away.

"Reagan?" he asked.

She couldn't look at him. Shame and embarrassment blew up inside her, and her face flushed hot. She felt stupid for all that, and she wanted to yell at him.

"Rae," he walked back over to her and held her bare shoulders. She tightened her arms over her breasts. "What is it?"

"Nothing," she said. "I'm okay." Danged if she was going to let him see her cry now.

“Rae.” He took her chin and raised her face up to meet his eyes. Tears stung her eyes. “Here is some Domme training: a new sub shouldn’t be crying at the end of a session. Some experienced subs, yes, you can break them down and leave them, but not new ones. What is wrong? It seemed you liked it.”

She didn’t want to admit that, when he just walked out the door to go back to his office, it upset her. “It’s just so different.”

His arms went around her, even though her arms covered her chest. “Yes, this place is different from the vanilla world out there, and I think the experience of being a sub, the submissive one, was new to you, yes?”

She felt like he had thrown her away when he just walked out. “Do people *like* this feeling?”

Wulf lifted her chin again to look in her eyes, which still felt odd to Rae because she was used to being the same height or taller than most men.

“You are a natural-born Dominatrix, aren’t you?” His thrilled grin embarrassed her again. “You feel *used*, yes?”

“Yes!” She did, and she didn’t like it, even though just the thought of being tied up and fucked by him again, right now, sent shivers through her legs and belly.

“Then express your Domme identity.” Wulf sat down on a studded leather bench and reclined, curling down in a muscular reverse of a sit-up. He looked up at her with those startling blue eyes and surprised her with a wink. “Here is something you should never do with your subs.”

He laid back and draped his arm over his eyes. “I am spent.” His voice had risen in pitch, and his accent had changed from standard British with light Germanic inflections to pitch-perfect High British, like a bad Shakespearean actor with a little Cockney thrown in. “You ‘ave used me up.” He peeked out from under his arm and whispered in his normal voice, “So you go.”

Rae hurried with pulling on her clothes—her bra was hanging over an iron cage—straightened her shoulders, and strode out of the playroom. Just before she closed the door, she said, “Be on time tomorrow.”

She heard him chuckle through the closing door.

She stood a little straighter on the other side of the closed door in the empty antechamber, another red and black waiting room, and smiled at her little act. Maybe Wulf was right about her being a “natural-born Dominatrix.”

Rae realized that, again, just as Georgie had warned her, Wulf had gotten



inside her head and seen that she needed a bit of self-esteem and perceived control so she would come back to him.

Plus, he hadn't told her anything more about himself, not even whether or not he was indeed an empty, mirrored shell like Georgie had said he was.

Rae had diagnosed him a psychopath from Georgie's description of him when they were riding to the party in the limo last night. Most psychopaths can charm the pants right off you or, when necessary, tie you up and yank off your panties.

The memory of his hands inside her panties ran through her, and her clit throbbed again.

But Wulf had told Rae his name, his whole name, even if she couldn't remember more than a few pieces of it, and he had never told Lizzy or Georgie even his first name.

And today, Wulf had told her that he was from Switzerland.

She clung to those two tidbits, but she wondered if they were true and, if they were true, she wondered if he had told her those trivial, objective things because he was indeed a shiny, mirrored shell and was reflecting her need to know something about him.

The only thing that she knew about Wulf, really, was that he liked sex.

She remembered his hands running over her skin and, when she thought she would burst, sliding into her pussy and fucking her hard from behind. She wanted him to have sex with him again, right then, on the floor of the waiting room.

This time, the aftershock orgasm shivered from her clit and over her skin. Just like Lizzy's reaction in the limo last night.

Rae needed to figure this out. She wasn't sure that she should come back to The Devilhouse tomorrow, or ever.

## **Book 3: Secrets on his Skin**

# The Costume Closet

AGAINST her better judgment, Rae carpooled with Lizzy and Georgie to The Devilhouse Sunday afternoon.

Up front, the two girls squinted though the windshield at the blazing desert sun and giggled and gossiped about their clients while Rae fretted in the plush leather back seat, watching the strip malls and cacti whip by. The gravel islands down the center of the street blurred into an unrelenting beige stripe. The girls' perfumes steamed in the heat radiating from the windows, and Rae's nose tickled with the smells of wilting roses and baking vanilla. She rubbed her nose, trying to itch the tickle.

Rae fussed about her bad judgment when she failed to drop her danged statistics class right off and then her failure to somehow survive a class where the professor passed less than a quarter of the students who started it, and even acing the final exam would not raise her grade above an F anyway so sitting in class was futile so she had stopped going, which felt like accepting defeat.

Rae stewed about how the psychology department was going to yank her scholarship when that jerk stats professor posted her failing grade, and so Rae was faced with the choice of dropping out of college and going back to Pirtleville or finding a whole heck of a lot of money, fast.

Rae was vexed that, if she went back to Pirtleville, her know-it-all Aunt TracyJo would remind her daily that Rae was no better than the rest of them for having only half a college degree, even though Rae didn't think she was "better than the rest of them," but Aunt TracyJo thought that Rae thought that she was, so Aunt TracyJo would harp on it, daily.

The only job that would pay Rae enough money to afford tuition, books, dorm fees, and ramen noodles was at The Devilhouse, and The Devilhouse and its Master troubled Rae.

She had another jewelry box in her purse to hand back to him this morning. This one was teal and tied with a thick white ribbon, and she didn't believe for one moment that the words *Tiffany & Co.* on the box meant that it was real. If that bracelet were real, with its triple-row of colorless stones set

in silvery metal, it would be worth a fortune. Such gaudy imitations seemed in poor taste to Rae, like she was trying to ape her betters, which was insulting on several levels.

Outside the car window, Rae watched the tourist stores in the strip malls flit by, selling knickknacks and tchotchkes just like The Devilhouse sold women.

No, Rae was being unfair. The Devilhouse did not sell women. The women and the few men reported their income on their taxes as independent contractors.

The Devilhouse sold sex.

Even that was unfair. The Devilhouse sold space for freely consenting adults to bind and whip and flog and fuck each other, and money changed hands for some of those services.

Lizzy and Georgie consulted for The Devilhouse's freely consenting clients, and thus they were not whores, even though they were giggling in the front seat about the client with a thumb-dick.

Prostituting oneself raised so many questions. Rae wished that she could just turn off her brain.

Aunt TracyJo would shriek with glee if she knew that Rae was working, or might be soon working, as a dominatrix, and TracyJo would crow it to every member of Rae's family that she could find as definitive proof that too much education had exposed a mortal flaw in Rae's character and led to her damnation.

Then no one in her family, even her parents, would ever speak to her again.

Rae had to be careful to hide her possible-maybe new job from everyone, especially Hester.

Hester, Rae's dorm roommate and cousin, would narc to Rae's parents and her own mother, Aunt TracyJo, if she saw any sign of moral failure on Rae's part, and The Devilhouse surely fell on the far end of depravity. Rae's parents had insisted that she room with her cousin, lest Rae be assigned a roommate of low moral character or—sweet Jesus!—a Catholic .

Rae sighed. A girl could fight her way free of a fundamentalist upbringing, but crazy cult brainwashing never freed the girl.

Rae had been doing so well, she had thought, in fighting all that craziness. She had gone to college and majored in theater and psychology, which her childhood church would have judged as Godless methods to justify

sin, and she had slowly, carefully, transitioned into leading a free life without all that fear and guilt and shame.

Or so she had thought.

Wulf—for that was The Devilhouse's Master's name—had pushed Rae's boundaries so far in only two days that her carefully constructed stacks of psychological baggage had crashed down all around her.

He had screwed her yesterday from behind while she had been tied standing, spread-eagle, and she had screwed him with his back against a wall at a party the day before that. He had wrecked her organized towers of mental steamer trunks and emotional wheelie suitcases and reusable shopping totes of trauma, but *dang*, just thinking about those two encounters with him made her skin tingle.

Lizzy wrenched herself around in the front passenger seat to look at Rae. "So what exactly did The Dom say to you yesterday?"

"What?" Rae wasn't startled out of any reverie. She was straight stalling, and as a psychology major, she knew that transparent and pathetic attempt wouldn't fool anyone for more than a second.

Georgie had warned Rae about The Dom, as they called him, describing The Dom in terms that Rae would use to characterize a psychopath. Georgie had called Wulf an empty mirror that reflected what you wanted to see. She didn't seem to hate him at all. In fact, she sounded fond of The Dom, though wary.

Lizzy had had a "date" with Wulf a week and half ago, a date where the sex had lasted three hours and that she wouldn't talk about but had shivered with aftershock orgasms for an entire week. Georgie had been worried that Lizzy was falling in love with The Dom and had insisted that she forget him and screw someone else to make sure she forgot him.

That night, the day before yesterday, Rae had screwed Wulf before she had known that he was The Dom whom Lizzy was unwisely falling for and Georgie had warned her about, and now, Lizzy was asking Rae what she and Wulf had talked about.

Rae said, "He was nice. "

Both girls in the front seat laughed.

"Oh, yeah." Georgie glanced at her through the rear-view mirror. "He's very nice."

Again, uneasiness constricted Rae's chest.

Lizzy asked, "He must have liked you if you had an interview yesterday

and are going back today. Are you working today? Are you official?"

"I don't think so."

"Have you filled out the tax forms and stuff?"

"No."

Lizzy turned back around to look out the front window again. "Must be a second interview, then. I had three interviews before he hired me."

"What's a second interview like?" Rae asked. If Wulf was going to screw her again, she should know that in advance, and her pussy warmed at the thought of Wulf's fingers massaging her clit.

"Oh, you know," Lizzy said. "He asked a lot of questions about my sexual history and relationships. Afterward, I felt like I had no secrets from him at all, like he knew more about me than my mom and my first lover and God, all put together."

"Yeah." Georgie nodded and drove. "I think he makes sure you're psychologically healthy enough to work there. A sex addict or substance abuser would be a disaster in that place."

"Oh, yeah," Lizzy said. "A few Daddy issues help, though."

Rae blurted, "Did you have sex with him during your interview?"

Lizzy turned slowly and Georgie stared at Rae through the rear view mirror. Surprise lit up both their faces.

Lizzy said, "No. Did you?"

Rae didn't want to lie to them because they were her friends, but embarrassment rose in her. "No."

"Ah," Georgie said. "But you want to."

"No!" Rae protested, lying some more.

Lizzy laughed at that.

"Don't worry," Georgie said. "He never has sex with the girls unless they've opted in to having him as a client. Did The Dom explain that whole opt-in thing to you?"

Lizzy said, "Makes it sound like we're an email list."

"Yeah, he explained it," Rae said. "Did you guys opt in?"

"Yeah," they both said. Lizzy added, "He's a boss with benefits."

"Really?" Rae was shocked that they would fuck the boss, especially Georgie, who seemed so leery of him.

Georgie answered, "Hell, yes. Besides the fact that he's an extra client and you make your usual rate off him, he's fun, and it's just a blow job."

"Lizzy said they had sex for three hours." Any guy who could bone for

three hours without stopping frightened her. Rae's pussy would be torn to shreds.

"Oh, no!" Lizzy said. "That was a *date*, not a consulting appointment in the office, and he didn't go for three hours straight. We went back to The Devilhouse after dinner and the concert and did all kinds of stuff for three hours." Lizzy licked her lips, and her knowing, gleeful grin reached her green eyes as a sparkle. "All *kinds* of stuff."

Lizzy said that like Rae had no idea what she might be talking about. After Rae's "training session" yesterday, Rae suspected that she had a very good idea what Lizzy meant, and yet she suspected that Wulf knew so much more than what he had shown her yesterday.

Georgie added, "But it isn't always just a blow job."

"Yeah," Lizzy said. "But you discuss it first, and if it isn't just a BJ, you leave with a smile, too."

"Yep," Georgie conceded. "Giving head all day can get you hot and bothered. Sometimes, I just want to beg one of the clients to break the Terms of Service."

"So true," said Lizzy.

Georgie turned the car into The Devilhouse driveway and drove up the long road, past the barred, fenced gardens. Yesterday, Rae had driven herself over, so she had watched the road rather than try to spy past the greenery. The dry hedges just inside the imposing wrought-iron fences blocked her view. "What's in there?"

The girls laughed again, and Rae was starting to feel like a country bumpkin around them. "We call it The Garden of Good and Evil."

"You must be joking," Rae said.

"Some people like to fuck outside," Lizzy said. "With the desert sun, I'd worry about sunburning my fair ass."

"Now that's a kink I haven't heard of before," Georgie said. "Stake someone out on the ground until they're sunburned all over. In the summer, that would take an hour, tops."

"Lasting damage," Lizzy said. "That's a no-no."

"Right, the melanoma thing."

"Plus sunburn doesn't show up right away, so the damage might be a lot worse than you think. Those Dominants have to be so careful. Just sucking guys off and pounding out hand jobs is easy."

Nerves flared in Rae's chest again.

Georgie parked in a small lot off the north side. “Employees’ lot,” she explained.

Rae stepped out of the car among neat rows of over-priced BMWs and sports cars parked alongside Georgie’s Lexus. Parking her beat-up Ford Taurus in the regular lot yesterday had saved her some embarrassment, but Rae picked up her chin. Her car did not define her or her self-worth. Even if she were to make a lot of money from this venture, she would not buy a ridiculous car and become enslaved to payments that a child therapist couldn’t make.

Besides, people would ask prying questions about how she had afforded such a car. Her parents would ask worried questions. Aunt TracyJo and Hester would ask snide questions.

Georgie swiped a card through a keycard reader, and she and Lizzy led Rae through a non-descript black door into The Devilhouse.

Rae blinked at the darkness inside the short corridor, trying to accustom her eyes to normal indoor lighting after the desert glare. She removed her sunglasses and trotted to catch up with Lizzy and Georgie, who were already swiping their cards in yet another card reader. This place had more layers of security than a heroin smuggler’s warehouse. The door buzzed.

“This swipe is just so they know who’s in the house,” Lizzy explained to Rae as she leaned back and pulled the heavy door open.

“Should I go around to the front?” Rae asked.

“No, you’re fine. Once you’re ready to see clients, then you swipe a card reader in the spa room, and that actually starts your hours on the clock. Did The Dom show you around? Did you see the locker room?”

“No. We just talked.” Rae had lied to her friends more in the last couple days than she had in the nearly three years since they had met, and the wrongness of those lies weighed on her.

“This is the girls’ locker room,” Georgie said. “The boys have a smaller one on the other side, because there are fewer of them.”

“This is *not* a locker room,” Rae said. Locker rooms smelled like feet and sweat, and metal lockers clanged all day long .

Wooden cabinetry lined the walls of this room, and curved benches wound between the doors. Spa music chimed. Herb and flower scents criss-crossed the air. Rae picked out the aromas of rosemary and jasmine. Locker rooms did not have delicate silver and glass sconces that caught the light and glistened.



“Wow,” Rae said.

“Yeah, it gets you in the mood. The showers are back there,” Georgie pointed to a doorway, “and the costume closet is back there.”

“Costumes?” Rae asked and then realized that she sounded like a dolt. Of course the sex workers must dress up in costumes.

Lizzy and Georgie glanced at each other, smiling mischievously. “Yeah. Costumes. Want to see?”

If Rae had not been about to embark on a career as a sex worker, she would have refused, and yet it was stupid to refuse. Costumes were fine. Nothing was wrong with costumes.

Dang it, she had to stop being so weird about everything.

And she had to stop saying *Dang it*, even in her own head. The phrase was *Damn it*.

The costume closet was a warehouse-style room full of racks of formal dresses and the occasional period or exotic piece. The ambiance of outlet shopping permeated the place, even to the overhead fluorescent tube lights and cement floor. The chemical-dye smell of new clothes was tinged with dust and leather cleaner.

Rae picked out a diaphanous harem girl outfit that hung like a cloud on a hanger. The chiffon clung to her rough knuckles like cobwebs. “You guys wear this?”

Georgie glanced over to see what Rae was holding. “Sometimes for special requests. We usually wear the formals, which are racked by size.”

Lizzy stood by the far end of the racks, sorting through sparkly sheaths. “I’m down here in shorty land. The eights are at the other end.”

Rae’s face flushed hot, and she felt like Lizzy and Georgie’s pet elephant. “I don’t know about this.”

“We’re party girls,” Lizzy said. “We hostess wild, crazy parties, and get paid wild, crazy money to do it.”

Rae asked, “Did that party the other night turn into an orgy after we left?”

The girls laughed. “No.”

“But that couple was screwing by the dance floor.”

Lizzy said, “That was just advertising.”

“So,” and Rae almost slipped here and said *Wulf* but she stopped herself, “so *The Dom* was showing off his wares?”

“So crude,” Georgie said lightly. “Besides, our client lists are full. More

likely that he was scoping out new clientele to see if they should be invited to one of the private parties at the club, and from there, admitted to membership, and after that, offered a spot on an associate's private roster. There are a few members who are irregular clients, mostly special requests, but they're all very heavily screened."

Lizzy added, "Yep. The Dom is very careful about the people he lets in."

Rae asked, "Is he going to let in those two who were fucking against the wall at the party?"

Georgie laughed. "That was Lena and Frank. They're associates."

"So they were the *entertainment*?"

"No, not at all," Georgie said. "They volunteered, and The Dom was watching people's reactions to them. Fucking out in the open was a bit inappropriate, and he wanted to see who would follow suit, who would watch, who would be shocked, and who would mind their own business."

"He arranged that? Just to watch people's reactions?"

"Like I said, they volunteered," Georgie said. "Even with all the cameras around here, which are for our protection as much as theirs, The Dom vets the clients heavily. The Devilhouse's admission rate is lower than that for the Sonoran Country Club, and our annual dues are higher. He investigates everyone who works here, too. I'll bet he has a private investigator asking your family all kinds of questions right now."

"*What!*" Rae jumped back. Fearful blood raced to her head. "He can't tell my family. Tell me he won't tell my family about this!"

Rae's scolding, preaching cousin-roommate Hester had moved up to the city to go to college when Rae did, which made Hester one of the more liberal members of Rae's family. The rest of her family would really freak out if they found out *anything* about The Devilhouse. It might kill her Aunt Enid, who was frail at best these days.

"Don't worry. The guy won't blab," Lizzy said. "When he talked to my family, he told them he was a reporter or something. People will tell the press anything."

Rae like her head was floating in that huge warehouse room, and her knees wobbled. She sat down on the cement floor. The rough whorls in the cement caught on the skirt of her sundress and chilled her thighs.

Georgie appeared beside her. "You okay?"

"No," Rae said. Her family might be disapproving and judgmental and proud to be fundamentalist rednecks, but they were the only family Rae had.

Rae wouldn't trade her family for an education. That price was too high.

Evidently, however, Rae would sell her body to get an education. Did she value herself so little?

This was all so confusing.

Georgie leaned down and asked, "You didn't get rufied again, did you?"

"Nope. Once a week is enough."

From across the room, Lizzy asked, "What time is your interview with The Dom?"

Oh, yes. She had a date.

Not a date. A training session.

A get-beaten-up-and-like-it session.

It all so dang confusing.

"One o'clock," Rae said.

"It's nearly one o'clock now. You'd better suck it up and get a move on. The Dom *hates* it when people are late."

*His punctuality must be because he's Swiss*, and Rae had almost said that out loud, *holy cow*.

Lizzy and Georgie didn't know why he had a little bit of an accent. Lizzy and Georgie didn't know even his real name, which he had told Rae was Wulfram blah-blah-blah van Hanover. Rae considered herself a solid friend who didn't narc, but keeping secrets for such a secretive guy seemed beyond what a . . . *something* . . . should ask.

*Something*. What was Wulf to her?

He might become Rae's boss, if she didn't blow her chance by being late to today's interview.

"I'd better go," she said.

## A Personal Favor

SHE trotted up to Wulf's office with her phone in her hand glowing 12:59 and knocked on the open door.

Wulf looked up from his laptop on his glass desk and smiled at her. Desert sunlight streaming in the windows shimmered on his golden hair and caught the sharp planes of his face. She wanted his strong hands on her ass again so much that it took her breath away, and she recoiled from that terrible thought. What kind of a person only thought about another human being for sex? Shame flamed her face, which probably looked like a sex blush, which was even worse.

Wulf shut the top of his computer, revealing that he was wearing a black suit and a silver tie. The monochromatic colors looked a little more diabolical than yesterday when he had worn navy blue, but his hair shone more gold, and his eyes sparkled darker blue. Sitting relaxed, leaning back behind that huge glass and steel desk, he looked like he owned the world.

"Right on time," he said, and his deep voice sent shivers down her back where he had kissed her spine. "We should speak first. Close the door."

Rae closed the door and leaned on it because her knees were trembling.

"I have a bit of a problem," Wulf said.

"Okay." Rae steeled herself. He might tell her that he had changed his mind after her domination fiasco yesterday and that she couldn't work for him, so she was out of a job and college and luck.

He might tell her that he was handing off her training to someone else because he wasn't attracted to her any more. Her heart sank in her chest.

It might be that his investigator had found her family and they had proselytized at him, so she was obviously too screwed up to work at his high-class BDSM brothel. Yeah, she could see that.

The smallest part of her mind, the silly, girlie part that read romance novels when she should have been studying statistics, conjured up a scenario where Wulf dropped to his knees and told her that he loved her. That stirring in her heart scared her more than the other possibilities.

He was the sex god of the Devilhouse. He was a shiny, mirrored, empty

shell. He wasn't someone to fall for.

Wulf said, "One of my Dommies, Sonya, has called in sick. Her client is arriving shortly, and he's not difficult as a submissive but he's hell on my admins. I know that I said that you were not ready to work a scene yet, but no other Dommies are available." Wulf sighed. "We could rehearse a scene during your training, and I will watch in case it takes a wrong turn. If it does, I'll be there sooner than last time."

This was Rae's chance to secure the job so she jumped at it, even though she tried not to be disappointed that Wulf didn't say anything else. "Sure, Coach," Rae quipped. "Put me in the game."

He looked her up and down.

Today, Rae had worn a blue sundress instead of her black interview suit, which was her only suit, and she did not feel like a Domme in this girly dress. Indeed, she had kind of thought that Wulf might tie her up again, so she wore a flouncy skirt just for him, not that she wanted him to do such a thing.

Wulf said, "Let's see what we have in the costume closet for you."

"Um, can we talk a minute?"

"Of course." He leaned at her, resting his elbows on his desk. His muscled arms bunched his suit at the elbows.

"Again, this was very nice of you, but you don't have to do this." She walked through his office, past the staged bookshelves, and laid the teal Tiffany box on his glass-topped desk.

Wulf cocked one eyebrow. "I shall have to find something that suits you."

"You don't need to give me presents at all."

Wulf blinked, and his lowered eyebrow dropped farther still. "I don't know how to interpret that, Reagan. Come, let's peruse the costume closet."

He led her through the Devilhouse and, via a back hallway, to the wardrobe area. Lizzy and Georgie were gone, the gowns and costumes were hung straight and orderly, and the room echoed when her heels clicked on the floor. Rae followed Wulf past the glamorous, sparkling gowns to the far back corner, where the leather things hung.

"You'll need something like this," he said and haphazardly flipped his hand at the rack. "Pick something out." He leaned against a wall and flicked through something on his phone.

Rae finger-walked through the fetish wear. Ties bound up all of the

leather garments, and everything was silver-studded or looked like medieval armor. “Um, Wulf?”

He glanced at the door, but they were alone. “This is considered public, Rae.”

“Sorry, Sir. I don’t know what these are.”

Wulf raised his pale eyebrows. “I beg your pardon.”

“I have no clue which of these to wear, and I don’t know what to pick out, and I don’t even know how to put some of these on.”

“I assure you that I am of no help. I retain a tailor, and he tells me what to wear.”

“And yet, I have no idea what this is.” Rae held up a thing that looked like the left half of a black leather bustier with one long sleeve. Just the left half.

“All right.” Wulf went back to the wardrobe’s door and locked it. “Let’s get that dress off of you.”

“That wasn’t what I meant.” Undressing casually in front of him felt more intimidating than having him rip off her panties, like yesterday.

He glanced at his watch and then flipped through the hangers. “Everyone wears black,” he muttered.

Most of the mature women at the party where Rae had met Wulf, who she now realized were Dominants in their relationships, had worn black. She had spent a lot of time on her phone last night, browsing the internet and reading about BDSM and other sex-related acronyms, and was surprised at the end of the night to find that her panties were damp.

Wulf found a brown leather thing and tossed it to her. “Try this on.”

The soft brown thing in her hands was all straps and cups, leather panels, and ecru lace.

She said, “Turn your back.”

“Reagan Rose, surely we’re past such formalities.” His amused smirk bordered on teasing.

“Not by a long shot. Now turn around, Mister. I mean, Master.”

He laughed and pivoted on his heel.

It was nice that he remembered her middle name, though. She ducked behind a rack of dresses and peeled off the sundress.

She held up the sex clothes thing and eventually figured out which pieces were shoulder straps. If someone had told her last week that she would be trying on leather fetish wear in a sex club, she would have laughed at them,

but she wasn't laughing now. This second audition was her chance to stay in college, to have a life helping autistic kids instead of ringing up customers for minimum wage.

Stated like that, she should obviously take the job. Why was she so ambivalent about it?

An image flashed in her head: Rae herself, in church, wearing a prim, eyelet-lace skirt and long-sleeved blouse, eyes cast down, listening with an empty head.

She had fought against that bullhockey since she was sixteen, ever since she had confessed to her pastor that she didn't feel the love of Jesus in the church because every time she entered through the intimidating black doors, she felt like she lacked the moral core that stiffened everyone around her and broke out in a shamed sweat. He had blustered at her for her lack of faith and sinful nature, even though her whole life she had been trying so dang hard to be what they wanted her to be.

Finally, she had given up trying to be perfect and had gone to college, despite that they all said she shouldn't broaden her mind, but instead she should narrow her focus to Jesus and salvation.

And now it had come to this: a brown leather-and-lace teddy. Rae turned it around and considered the lace-up bodice in the back. She was going to look like a serving wench who told you what you would be having.

Well, underwear tended to bunch under a leotard, which was not attractive. She dropped her panties to the floor, too.

Rae eased the delicate garment on, thinking of it like a lace-up leotard. The soft suede clung to her curves, and whalebones stiffened the panels around her waist. Rae reached behind her own back to yank the cords but couldn't reach them. "Um, Master? Some help, here?"

"Thought you'd never ask." He strolled around the dress racks. When he saw her trying to hold the contraption on her chest and stomach, his gaze traveled the length of her body, and he smiled.

She said, "Stop laughing at me."

His bright blue eyes finally rose to make eye contact with her. "I'm not laughing."

Wulf stood behind her and tightened the laces until the teddy stayed up without her holding it on herself. His hands pressed around her waist, smoothing the leather over her hips and ribs, then he pulled the laces tight, cinching her waist.

Rae grabbed the dress rack like Victorian ladies had braced themselves with a bedpost and sucked in her stomach, letting the steel bands constrict her middle. When she looked down, the corset exaggerated her body, pushing up her breasts and binding her waist. She breathed with her chest, and her boobs swelled over the top.

Wulf smoothed the fabric again, pressing his hands over the suede and lace on her waist, then her hips. Wrinkles flattened, and Rae felt more comfortable, though it was still tight. His hands slipped around to her bottom.

Rae wasn't sure what this was turning into, but she wanted him to touch her more. His warm hands curved around her body, and he lifted her arms over her head. Her tits rose nearly over the top of the corset, and Wulf's palms and fingers lifted her breasts in the brown leather, cupping them. Rae closed her eyes and leaned back against him. His body molded to her, his muscular torso and chest hard behind her back.

All of her other acts of rebellion the last two and a half years—the drinking, the dancing, and the occasional, anemic sex—paled beside how every inch of her skin wanted to screw Wulf every time she saw him. Every time he touched her—like how his hands softly gripped her breasts and his quickening breath heated the nape of her neck—felt like blasphemy, and she craved more.

Oh, at some point, she was going to have a crisis of conscience about him, but not now, not yet, not while his body pressed against her ass and back and his breath blew ragged on her neck.

Wulf drew a deep breath and stepped away from her.

When Rae turned, Wulf's hands were in front of him, palms out, like he was warding her off. He didn't look at her. His head was down and turned to the side .

She asked, "Are you all right?"

"Yes. Fine." He inhaled again and looked up, his blue eyes bright with intelligence, as normal. He dropped his hands to his sides. "We should begin the training. Our client arrives in half an hour." Wulf handed her a thick robe. "Wouldn't want you to catch a chill."

Rae held the robe up to her chest. "Did I do something wrong?"

"Not at all." Wulf smiled, and his kind smile eased her nerves. "You are so beautiful."

Rae tried to not let her shock show on her face. No one called an elephant or a fat fish beautiful.



Wulf asked, "Was that wrong to say?"

"No. It was fine." Just weird.

"I hear all sorts of things from my girls and my clients. Nothing would shock me."

"I don't know why you said that. I'm chubby." She studied the cement swirls that chilled her bare feet and clutched the robe.

"You're a size eight. You're not chubby."

"I am around here."

"Five of my girls are size eight or larger. The costume rack includes sizes twelve and twenty."

He knew a lot about the girls' sizes for a guy. "There isn't, like, a weigh-in or something to work here, is there?"

"Certainly not."

"How'd you know that, then?"

He shrugged. "Numbers stick in my head."

"I wish they stuck in mine. Maybe I wouldn't be failing statistics."

"Georgie and Lizbeth were quite clear about that professor's teaching and grading philosophies. Appalling. Anything else?"

Rae didn't need to go into all the bullhockey that was in her head. Yet, he studied her so intently, and his unflinching blue eyes seemed forgiving.

He waited.

She dithered, unease rising in her stomach. "I'm just not used to all this."

"All this?" He tilted his head.

"Back home, I'd be thrown out of church for even thinking about some of the things that I've done in the last few days."

He chuckled. "Yes, the Devilhouse is built with bricks of religion. "

*Church, and home, and family,* and her breath caught.

Wulf's investigator was going to talk to people in her church, her home, and her family. "My church is different. My family is different."

Wulf said, "But you've been at college more than two years."

"Yes." She couldn't seem to breathe. The corset thing must be too tight. The walls must be falling in.

"And you've done some of these things before."

Rae tried to laugh, but her voice squeaked, "Yeah."

Her hands, still holding the robe against her chest, started to shake.

"Is something else bothering you?" He waited for her answer, head cocked to the side, leaning toward her. Kindness wavered in his expression.

If he had been judgmental or dismissive, she would have been fine. Her eyes squeezed out tears, and the tears caught on her lashes, blurring her view of him. “Did you send someone to ask my family a bunch of questions about me?”

“It’s standard procedure.”

“So he’s there now?”

Wulf glanced at his phone. “He should be driving.”

“If he tells them anything about the Devilhouse, *anything at all*, they’ll never speak to me again. They’ll disown me.”

With that, Rae spilled all the crazy stuff that warred in her head every day.

She told Wulf about her childhood Baptist church, and her fight with the preacher, and how every Sunday in church, every Sunday for her whole life, she had tightened up until she thought that she was going to snap.

Wulf settled his arms around her. She buried his face in the blackness of his clothes because the overhead lights glared at her like small-town scrutiny. From under his suit, she caught a whiff of oranges and clean laundry and something masculine, dark and primal. College guys did not smell like that.

Rae blathered on about how when she got to college, she had sneaked away from her cousin-roommate-chaperone Hester and screwed college boys a couple times but that had made her more ashamed and now she didn’t know what she was doing but she wanted start a clinic to help autistic kids and she just didn’t want her life to be so hardscrabble and desperate as everyone else’s, and if that guy he had sent to Pirtleville, that cloistered town that huddled in the lawless desert, if he told anyone in her family anything at all, no one would ever speak to her again and she couldn’t bear that.

Wulf cradled her to his side with one hand and dialed a number into his phone with his thumb. He told the guy on the other end of the line to come back to the city because he didn’t need to bother the Stone family of Pirtleville. “Just peruse public records for due diligence,” he said. Wulf turned to Rae, “Jonas wasn’t even there yet. He has spoken to no one.”

Rae sagged against his side as much as the steel-boned corset would allow. “Thank you.”

“I wouldn’t want to cause problems with your family.” Wulf’s bass voice sounded distant, like he was talking to the corner of the room instead of to her. “Being estranged can be difficult.”

“Oh?”

That was a standard conversational response, an invitation to continue, but Wulf stroked her side and didn't say anything more.

Rae surmised that his family must not like him being in the sex business, either. She couldn't imagine choosing the ownership of a sex parlor over one's family, though. Someone who would do such a thing would be so callous to choose sexual gratification over family ties, but she didn't want to think that Wulf would do such a thing.

Wulf said, "If we're not to keep Mr. Park waiting, we should begin training soon." Wulf detangled his arms from her, though his firm hand held her arm like he was holding her hand. "The spa area has everything you'll need to freshen up." He ducked his head to look at her face. "You'll be all right?"

Rae wiped her eyes hard. Purple eye shadow and mascara smeared on her hands. "Yeah. I'm fine."

"Excellent. I'll meet you in Play Room Two in five minutes." He strode out of the wardrobe area, leaving Rae alone in the extended closet that smelled like laundry soap and leather cleaner.

Her eyes still leaked tears, and she wiped them with the backs of her hands, feeling relieved but still a mess.

Something had happened with Wulf when he had held her, something that made him back off and raise his hands like he had felt an electric shock, the bad kind, and then she was pouring her heart out to him and knew nothing more about *him*.

The shiny man had shut off his reaction and turned the mirror on her.

But he had said something about family, that being estranged from family was difficult.

He hadn't said *his* family, just the oblique reference to estrangement.

Rae had taken enough psychology classes to know that he was hiding something inside that shiny shell.

And she had taken enough psychology classes to know that psychopaths can convince you that they are not merely shiny shells.

More worried, Rae hurried, brushed some blush and bronzer on her eyelids to replace her sobbed-off makeup, found a pair of high-heeled black cowboy boots that fit her, and set off to find Wulf.

## Secrets on his Skin

FIVE minutes later, panic was setting in because Rae was lost in the freakishly huge building that was The Devilhouse where the pristine white hallways wound around and around and then she found herself at the front desk with its lush potted plants and shining windows instead of deep inside the dungeon wing.

“Help!” Rae implored Glenda the receptionist.

Glenda giggled at Rae’s dismay and led her through some more identical corridors to Play Room Two, which was completely the opposite direction that Rae had thought she should go because she still had no idea how The Devilhouse was laid out.

Glenda cheerfully swatted Rae on the butt as Rae rushed in *late* to find Wulf waiting, lounging in the dim dungeon on what Rae now knew was a spanking couch, and reading something on his phone. The light from his phone glared on his face, illuminating his strong features from below, a classically demonic look at odds with his glowing, golden hair that should have crowned a sun god.

Around him, medieval-looking contraptions littered the stone-lined room. Some large frames were only half-visible in the shadows around the walls. The Inquisition could have rooted out all its opposition if they’d owned such a collection of floggers and racks.

Rae shucked her warm robe and laid it over a bar bolted to the wall. Cold air trickled over her skin. “Hi, um, Sir. Sorry I’m late. I couldn’t find you.”

Wulf frowned. “If you were a submissive, I’d use the occasion to spank you.” He patted the couch. “But as you’re not, so let’s get on with it.”

“What would you do if I was a client?” Rae asked, a little breathless at the idea of being spanked. Would he lay her across his thighs ?

He said, “I would double your usual charge and then spank you. Nice boots.”

Rae turned her leg out to show them off better. “Do they look okay?”

“Stunning. The high heels suit your bum.”

Rae hadn’t thought about her ass being on display in the leather teddy

thing and stifled an urge to cover her butt with her hands.

Wulf said, "Here is Mr. Park's file."

This time, Rae took the manila file carefully and leaned against what looked like a small mechanical bull to absorb every last word and implication inside.

Inside, Mr. Lando Park had detailed his wants and needs. His picture showed a middle-aged man of Asian descent. Considering his surname, Rae thought he might be Korean. His medical exam stated that he had occasional back spasms. "Seriously, his safe word is *Gun Control* ?"

Wulf's wry smile was amused. "He claims that phrase will never pass his lips, no matter what punishment he endures."

"Sounds like some of my uncles." Rae read further, noting that when Lando Park had applied to the club, he had had exactly one sexual partner, his wife. She pointed that out to Wulf. "Is that unusual?"

Wulf shrugged. "You Americans have all kinds of kinks. Much more so than we degenerate Europeans."

She laughed and went back to reading the file, though the subterranean gloom made that difficult. This time, she wasn't going to miss stuff. She angled the paper to catch the pale light from the iron fake candle sconces better. The flickering light played over the pages that looked like a medical file.

According to the file and his usual Domme's handwritten notes, in the beginning of each session, he engaged in defiant behavior, refusing her commands, no matter what the commands were, until she began to punish him in earnest. Then, he broke quickly. The apex of the session came when he submitted.

Rae had assumed that BDSM session notes would read like a shopping list of kink. These notes read like a psychologist's notations. "This seems more like performing a rehearsed theater scene than having sex."

"An accurate observation."

"And it seems more like counseling than acting. "

"Indeed, often it is. The Devilhouse can provide important mental health services for our clients as an outlet for frustrations that might otherwise prove dangerous."

That disturbed Rae. "Then they should be in real counseling."

"Many of them will not engage in formal counseling. An old friend of mine utilizes the services here several times a year, though he booked

sessions every week during the financial markets crisis. While we carry the usual BDSM implements on site—whips, canes, and such,—he brings frying pans, cricket bats, and the like. He pays an exorbitant fee to have five girls beat him until he is quite injured.”

“Good Lord! He’s not right in the head!”

“And yet, since he has been availing himself of The Devilhouse’s services, he hasn’t started even one pub fight. Before, he nearly went to prison for assault several times and ended up in the hospital with knife wounds or gunshots on three occasions, not to mention the other people whom he fought and hurt. Without this emergency valve, he would most likely be incarcerated for murder by now, or dead.”

“He doesn’t hit the girls here.” She forgot to modulate her prim, churched voice, and that came out all aghast.

“Never. The first couple of times, I kept security in the room, but it became abundantly clear that, though he blusters around and grabs at the girls a bit, he does not want to fight. He wants to be beaten.”

“Okay, then.” Even though it was consensual, it didn’t sound safe or sane at all.

When she finished reading, she asked Wulf, “So what’s our plan?”

“My plan is to stick to training you today.”

His dry tone made Rae laugh. She said, “It seems that Sonya had a usual script with him, to let him be defiant up to a point, then push back.”

Wulf nodded. “Yes. We might stick to that script unless there is a problem.”

“Okay.”

“So I’ll start out saying ‘no’ to everything you do, and you bring me around,” he said.

“What, seriously? You’re the client?”

“We have to teach you what to do.” He slapped his knees and prepared to stand.

“I thought you would show me what to do.” And she liked it when his hands were on her body.

“I’ll guide you while we’re working. Come on, then.” They stood up, and Rae tossed the file over by the door.

The file knocked against something that rattled. “What was that?”

Wulf glanced back. “The cache of riding crops.”

“Riding crops?” Rae went over to look. Sure enough, ten black crops

stood in a slim, black waste paper basket just outside the door's frame. "Is that where you've been getting those riding crops that, like, magically appear in your hand?"

He laughed. "It's not magic."

"Good Lord. I thought you had them spring-loaded up your sleeves," Rae said. "I'll be darned. Is there a whip caddy in every room?"

"Most rooms. You never know when you're going to need to punish someone." Wulf removed his suit jacket and folded it, laying it on the spanking bench.

She waited, watching, for him to take off his silver tie and shirt. His chest and back felt thickly muscled every time she ran her palms over those crisp, white shirts of his, and even now, the sparkling white cloth clung to the rounds of his broad shoulders.

She asked, "Is there a riding crop bucket in your office?"

He shrugged. "I have a few crops stashed in my desk, among other things."

"I'm almost afraid to ask." Rae rubbed her arms. The brown leather and lace did almost nothing to keep her warm. At least the boots kept her feet off the cold tile floor. She selected one crop from the identical bunch.

Wulf strode to the center of the dungeon and stood between the St. Andrew's cross and the spanking couch. "The previous injunctions about blood and fluids still apply, as we still have not received your medical release."

Rae gulped. School and all this training—or whatever Wulf called it when he tied her up and screwed her until she screamed—had kept Rae busy. She needed to do that medical exam, soon, if she was really going to work here. Not doing it might suggest that she didn't want to be hired, and she didn't want that.

He continued, "And a word of advice: start out harsh, then get harsher. "

"Really?" Rae's heart clenched.

"Mr. Park is a tough case. Don't allow him to question you. Don't allow him to fail to call you 'Mistress' or 'Ma'am' or whatever your choice is. He wants the attention. He wants to be punished for his infractions. He is such an ass to everyone in his daily life that this is the only way for him to return to civility."

"He's a jerk? Have you met him?" That might make it easier.

"A few times, I have had to rescue one of my admins from his verbal

abuse, and I know of him from mutual acquaintances. He's a prosecuting attorney for the state."

So Mr. Park did indeed like to argue. Rae wondered how a state prosecuting attorney could afford this club and the number of private sessions that were recorded in Sonya's neat handwriting in the thick file.

"Let's get started." Wulf wrenched at his silver tie, loosening the loop and pulling it off over his head. He unbuttoned the top button of his shirt, exposing his throat.

Rae stopped perusing the dungeon to watch. She thought Wulf was going to strip off that clean, white shirt and stand buck naked to the waist, but he stopped unbuttoning his shirt with just the top button, exposing again just the robust upper curve of his pectorals, *dang it*.

She had never seen his bare chest, even though she had had sex with him twice. The first time, he had barely pulled his dick out of his pants when she had her way with him in the back bedroom of that party, and the second time, yesterday, he hadn't taken off his shirt either, when she had been tied spread-eagle to a frame while he took her from behind.

He draped his tie over his jacket on the inclined bench and stood in the center of the dungeon, surrounded by equipment designed for his torture. "Proceed."

He must not be turning off the dungeoncam today because he hadn't waved to it. She had to do this right, for him and for whoever was watching in the booth. "What's your safe word?"

Wulf raised one blond eyebrow a fraction of an inch. "I'm sure I won't need one."

"It's customary."

"That is correct. We'll use," he considered the rough-tiled ceiling for a minute, "Your Majesty."

Someday, Rae wanted to know everything that went on inside that shiny, mirrored shell of his. "Do you submit to me?"

"Yes," Wulf said. His perfunctory tone suggested boredom.

She had read a lot about BDSM on the internet last night, hiding her phone screen from her cousin-roommate Hester. Despite the cool air in the dungeon, her body heated.

Rae drew herself up to her full height of over-six feet when one included the high-heeled boots, though she only reached Wulf's ear. "Get down on your knees, sub."



Wulf said, "No."

Rae knew that this was a breach of everything. He hadn't called her Ma'am or Mistress. He hadn't done what she said. He was in full defiance mode.

She knew she had to hit him with the riding crop that had felt so light but now felt like a thick oak branch in her hand.

She stepped behind him.

He didn't turn to watch her walk around him. He spread his feet and rounded his back, bowing his head and waiting for her to hit him on that broad expanse of white shirt.

She flipped the whip against her bare leg, testing. Every flick felt wrong. Every time the whip hit her own thigh, it felt like being hit with a hard piece of wood instead of a supple sting.

She was hopeless. "I can't do this."

"Of course you can. I've given you the perfect opportunity."

"I'm not any good at this. I'm not a Domme at all. I wouldn't even make a good sub."

Wulf spun and grabbed her around the waist. He walked her backward like they were tangoing and then her back touched the cold wall. He said, "Use surprise."

She spread her fingers on his chest, ostensibly pushing him away, but she could feel the muscle wrapped his chest and body with hard cords under his crisp, white shirt. Her fingers trailed down, following the heavy ridges across his sides.

Wulf took the riding crop from her hand. "Hit less with the stick and more with the end, with the leather bit here."

He raised the lithe crop and Rae held her breath as he snapped it down.

A line of pain stung Rae's thigh, though she hardly noticed it because Wulf's hard body pushed her against the wall, his rippled front to her breasts. The lash hurt, but it stung lightly and didn't feel like getting pounded on with a stick. Instead, it focused her attention yet more on her body pressed against his. Her hands itched to grab him, pull him down to her, and kiss him hard.

"See?" he said. "Snap it with your wrist."

"I understand." Desire swirled in Rae's head, making her dizzy. If she reached up and grabbed Wulf, they could tumble to the floor. When he handled her like this, every thought in her head turned to screwing him.

She reached up around his neck and started to pull his head down to kiss

him.

“No. This isn’t play time.” His insistent voice sounded hoarse, and he grabbed her wrists and trapped her hands against the wall. “You can’t go unprepared to Mr. Park.”

She wanted to beg him to touch her. His body pressed her against the wall, and he didn’t seem to want to move away. His cock poked her leg. She whispered, “Please.”

“No.” His voice was harsh, like he forced out that word, but he still didn’t back up.

Rae gulped and forced herself to calm down, which was difficult with Wulf still flattening her against the wall and her skin prickling with passion. “I don’t think I can do this Domme thing.”

“Yes, you can. That night we met at the party, you were magnificent, Rae. You wanted, and you resolved to take what you wanted. Nothing cowed you. Nothing stopped you. Do that now.”

Rae didn’t want to be a Domme for Lando Park. She wanted to screw Wulf right now, even with the dungeonteam watching them. Her body strained toward him, even though his chest and taut belly pressed her against the faux stone wall.

Wulf dropped his hand to her waist, a mistake.

She pulled her other arm out of his grip, grabbed his hands, and twisted like a fish, spinning them both and pinning him with his back against the wall with his arms flat against the stone. She kissed him hard. With the very high-heeled boots on, she didn’t even have to stretch up too far. He tasted like mint with a faint hint of chocolate.

Wulf said, “That’s my little dominatrix, but don’t kiss Park.”

“Of course not.” Rae pulled him by his hands and shoved him across the room to a long bench. If he wanted her to be rough with him, she could be rough. She wanted to touch his skin, and she wanted to screw him again. If she couldn’t do that, she could make him want it, too. She pressed his shoulders down so that he sat, straddling the bench.

She snagged a set of silver handcuffs from the collection hanging on a pegboard. “Put your hands behind your back.”

“No. I will not.” Wulf gazed at the ceiling, either bored or pretending to be Mr. Park.

She would get his attention.

Rae captured his arm and clinked the cuff around his wrist just below his

shirt cuff, then tugged it behind his back. She stood behind him and ran her hand down his other arm, over the hard bulge of his bicep, and then pulled that arm back to lock both his hands behind him in the standard perp position.

She hoped Mr. Park would be as physically compliant.

She stood across the bench in front of him. "Look at me."

Wulf watched the ceiling. "No."

With the riding crop, she stroked up his neck and along his jawbone. "I said, look at me."

"No."

She whipped the riding crop through the air and slapped his thigh.

The shock reverberated through his body, but he didn't flinch. "Good," he whispered.

"Was that right?"

"Yes. Stick to crops for today with Mr. Park. I'll teach you how to use a whip sometime."

The thought of Wulf standing over her with whip scared her, and her face flushed hot. Yet, he had teased and stroked her so much that being flogged with a soft cat o'nine tails had nearly made her come, and she wondered what he would have to do to her to make her enjoy being whipped.

She said, "I told you to look at me."

He didn't, so she smacked him on the other leg.

This time, he looked at her, and Rae thought she saw amusement crinkling the skin around his eyes, like he was trying not to smile.

His eyes slipped down for an instant, and his small smile seemed less amused and more lusty when he glanced at her breasts overflowing the cups of the leather leotard thing. He looked up at her eyes again. "Yes, Mistress."

Her pussy moistened, and the leather crotch felt rough on her sensitive skin.

She swung her leg back over the bench and strutted behind him.

He sat near the end of the bench, so Rae bent over and rubbed her breasts against his back.

Wulf cleared his throat, and his back tensed against her.

She brought the riding crop down hard on his flank. "Don't move unless I tell you to."

He whispered, "Excellent."

Holding the riding crop on the ends, she lowered it over his head and laid the stick over his chest, then pulled him back against her tits.

His breath roughened, and she felt his hands clench into fists against her thighs.

She rubbed her breasts up and down his back a few times, feeling the hard knots of muscle under his white shirt, until her nipples tightened with wanting him.

He groaned, "Mistress, you are pushing me."

Yeah, she was kind of pushing herself, too. She stood up behind him, and he leaned forward quickly to keep from falling over.

His hands were still handcuffed behind him. She sat in front of him, her legs straddling the long bench, and began unbuttoning his shirt.

His body tensed under her hands. "Rae."

"You have to call me 'Mistress,'" she said and slid the tiny buttons through the buttonholes.

Wulf didn't look down at what she was doing but stared at her face. His usual, reserved expression began to slip into something more frantic. "Rae, *stop*."

She pulled the riding crop out of her boot and slapped him on the thigh. He didn't flinch. "Call me 'Mistress.'"

He stood, but she had a solid hold on his shirt front and yanked him back down. His hands, cuffed behind his back, didn't allow him to balance, and he sat down hard.

She resumed unbuttoning his shirt and opened the front, pulling it from where it had been tucked so neatly into his pants.

"Rae, *stop now*." He leaned back, trying to escape her hands.

His urgent voice excited her.

He hadn't said the safe word, so he must still be playing the part of the recalcitrant sub. Rae flicked him again with the riding crop on his other thigh for his impertinence, because that's how the game was played.

She dismounted from the bench and walked around behind him. She took hold of his collar.

"*Rae, stop!*" He leaned forward to stand, but she grabbed his handcuffed hands and pulled him back down.

She pulled his shirt back and off his shoulders.

"*Your Majesty!*" he roared just as she jerked the shirt down his arms, baring his back.

A black and violently colored tattoo covered the right side of his back from shoulder to waist. She blinked because her eyes couldn't find the

design, other than flowers and something white and snake-like with claws.

The center of the tattoo was uninked, and pale scar tissue gnarled like a twisted tree knot. His body shook so hard that she could feel it through the shirt fabric in her hands.

Rae jumped back, afraid to touch such a terrible wound. “Wulf! What happened to you?”

She realized that he had said his safe word so she flung the shirt up over his back and fumbled for the handcuff key.

“There’s a break-button.” His calm voice frightened her more than any yelling could have.

Rae felt the tiny button on the side of one of the cuffs and poked it with her fingernail. That cuff snapped open. “Are you all right?”

“Honestly, I’m fine.” He rubbed his wrists.

“What happened to you? You didn’t get hurt doing this, did you?” The thought of some sadist mutilating Wulf enraged her.

Head bowed, he stared at the bench, and his shoulders bunched under the loose shirt. “I was shot.”

“It looks like a shotgun wound.” She clutched her hands to her chest, afraid to reach out to him but wanting to.

“No. A rifle. That’s the exit wound.”

Rae had hunted deer, elk, javelina, and varmints, and a rifle produces a distinctive wound. “The scar is too big for a rifle round.”

“It was a large caliber rifle, and the scar stretched as I grew.” His dry tone held no closeness, no intimacy.

He was relating facts that he would rather not tell her, but she could not stop herself from asking, “How old were you?”

“Eight,” he said, sounding defeated. “I was eight.”

Her mind swam with horror. “Why would anyone shoot an eight-year-old?”

“I couldn’t say.”

*“Did they get the bastard?”*

His head rose a little at her shout, and Rae thought she saw a ghost of a wry smile curve his lips. “They got the bastard.”

“Well, thank God for that. Saved the taxpayers the cost of a rope, then.” She knew she sounded like her uncles but the thought of someone shooting a child, any child but especially Wulf as a child, burned her up. She smoothed his shirt over the scar, feeling the knotted skin under the fabric that she had

thought was only muscle. "I'm so sorry."

"It was a long time ago."

It had been a long time ago, a bit shy of twenty years if she had judged his age right. His childhood had been spent in Switzerland, although he had only said that he *was* Swiss. Did they have gun crime like that in Switzerland?

The door slammed open, startling Rae, and the huge black man from the party, the security guy, stood there with his hand on the door. "Boss? You okay?"

"Thank you, Mr. Jackson. I'm fine." Wulf had composed himself and looked up at the security man with no particular emotion.

"Heard your safe word." His gaze travelled to Wulf's wrists and then up to Rae's eyes. Rae flushed with embarrassment at having blown it again.

"Yes, but everything is fine now," Wulf said, buttoning his shirt. "That will be all."

The big, burly security guy glared at Rae, then turned and left.

"It's time to end our session." Wulf's composure had returned, and his shiny shell seemed firmly in place. Rae was astonished that he could smooth himself so thoroughly in seconds. "I can have someone here in ten minutes to take over for you. Just stall Park for ten minutes, and I'll come in and take you out. Are you able to do it?"

Rae pulled her chin up, wanting to not disappoint him. "Yes. I'm fine."

"Good." He sounded distracted. "If anything goes wrong, I'll be watching, and I'll come in to help you."

"It's only ten minutes." If she screwed it up, she would be zero for two. This was her last chance.

"You were doing well, here. You just happened to hit one of my buttons, and you didn't have my file to reference beforehand."

Astonishment bubbled up. "You have a file on yourself?"

"Of course not." His faint smirk was funny.

"Oh." Maybe this trauma was why he worked at The Devilhouse. Nearly being murdered as a child might have made him grimly hedonistic.

It fit with what Rae knew about him and what Georgie and Lizzy had told her.

"In the session with Mr. Park, you can't abdicate your power as a Domme. You mustn't express reluctance. For the ten minutes until Lena arrives, you are Park's queen and his worst nightmare. Scare him. Give to

him and take away. Make every moment of rest a gift.”

That was an interesting way to think about it. Rae felt more powerful, like when she had been standing in front of Wulf and he had ogled her tits.

“All right.”

“Do your best. That’s all anyone can ask. I appreciate you stepping in to take Sonya’s place today.”

“Sure. No problem.”

An awkward moment between them stretched out. If Wulf had been anyone else, Rae might have hugged him to soothe him and make sure he was okay, but his mirrored shell had snapped in place because, even though he had nearly had a panic attack when she had exposed his scar, he now seemed fine as he settled his silver tie around his neck and slid the knot to his thick neck. Even his blond hair was unperturbed.

He said, “I’ll send Mr. Park in,” and left her standing there, shaking in her high-heeled cowboy boots.

## Wulf Watches Again

WULF stood in the dark hallway outside the door to the security booth near the back of The Devilhouse. His heart still trembled, though his hand that held the doorknob was steady.

He remembered the moment Constantin had died every day because his *memento mori* was written on Wulf's skin.

The first shot had hit Wulf and he had fallen toward Constantin, trying to shield him, but the second bullet had shattered Constantin's head.

Every time Wulf sat in a chair, the stiff scar stretched and ached.

Every time he stood, his shirt rubbed the gnarls, and it itched.

Every time he made love to a woman, he hid it.

Wulf was no longer accustomed to people knowing that it was there. Anonymity had seduced him.

Wulf took a deep breath and opened the door to the security booth.

Jeffrey sat at the wide desk, intent on watching the glowing wall of monitors and ticking switches on the sound board to listen in where necessary. He didn't turn around when Wulf entered, just muttered, "Hi, Boss."

"Hello, Jeffrey." Wulf sat in the unoccupied chair.

On the screens, people moved in several of the play rooms.

Wulf shied away from looking at Play Room Two, where Rae was beginning her session with her client, Lando Park. Jeffrey would watch for anything untoward, as he always did.

In one of the vanilla rooms, a round room with couches that reminded Wulf of the inside of a genie's bottle, Lizbeth was blowing her client with good bobbing technique. The man writhed on the couch, his whole body centered around his dick in her mouth.

Wulf smiled to himself, remembering her excellent technique .

In another room, Georgie served drinks to three Asian businessmen. He wasn't sure how she was billing that party, but she would probably make at least ten thousand that afternoon, after the house's cut. She had great business sense, that girl. Rae had been correct when she had pronounced Georgie to be



a Katniss-type, not a Bella. That insight was one of the reasons that Wulf had even considered her for employment.

Lizbeth was a different story. That young woman had complexities that she had probably never shared with her women friends. Although, the things that women would talk about occasionally surprised him. Perhaps Rae knew her better than Wulf did, though he doubted it.

Finally, Wulf turned to observe Play Room Two. He readied himself to jump out of his seat to rescue Rae from that Park bastard.

Lando Park was down on his knees with his fingers laced behind his head while Rae applied the riding crop across his back, quite expertly. She looked like a fearsome she-devil who, if a man didn't make her come, would beat the hell out of him afterward.

*Magnificent.*

Wulf admired the way she used her whole arm with the crop. He detected that she had played tennis at some time, and his thighs tingled where she had struck him.

Lena should be in the house by now, but he let Rae continue. Maybe, she might work out.

"You okay?" Jeffrey asked.

Ah, and now the questions would begin. Jeffrey was too good a friend to ignore such a fiasco. "I assure you, I am fine."

Jeffrey continued scanning the monitors, watching for early signs of trouble in all the rooms. "You used your safe word."

Wulf leaned forward in the office chair as Rae pulled Park up by his hair and the handcuffs now strung between his wrists and frog-marched him to a whipping post. *Nice.* "Indeed I did."

Jeffrey glanced at him. "With that new redhead."

"She's more of an auburnette. Her eyes are a warm brown, and she has no freckles."

"The redhead who nearly cut Dr. Cutter to the bone."

"She's improving." Wulf gestured at the monitor to draw Jeffrey's attention to Rae's rather nice crop work.

"She was whacking your legs with a crop," Jeffrey said. "You have welts? "

"My skin is thicker than that." He hadn't meant to say that.

Jeffrey paused. "Yeah. I saw your skin."

Wulf nodded. He wasn't going to encourage this line of inquiry. If he had

not forgotten to pack a tee shirt for the gym this morning and utilized his undershirt there, neither Rae nor Jeffrey would have seen that abominable malformation on his back.

Rae propelled Park to a sex chair and leaned him over it, his bottom in the air. Wulf liked her creativity, though she might be too innocent to know the correct positions for that chair. Both thoughts made his dick heavy with rushing blood.

“Your back looks like you grew up in the ‘hood,” Jeffrey pressed. “That’s a gunshot wound in the middle of that tatt, isn’t it?”

“Guns are everywhere,” Wulf said. Jeffrey should have run to the play room directly after Wulf shouted his safe word, which meant that he should not have heard the later details. Wulf should not have told even Rae so much, but he had felt flayed alive when she saw the twisted flesh.

On the monitor, he watched Rae yank down Mr. Park’s drawers and apply the crop to his haunches, laying on tiger stripes. Wulf wondered if she had learned that pattern or was, as he had thought from the first moment he had met her, a natural dominatrix.

“Why didn’t I know that you’ve taken a round?” Jeffrey asked.

“It’s never come up in conversation.”

“Not fit for polite company, huh?”

Wulf said gently, “It’s not a matter I discuss.”

“I took a bullet, too,” Jeffrey said.

This was turning very intimate. The British part of Wulf recoiled, but he did live amidst Americans now. “During your military service?”

“Naw. Suicide missions are for SEALs. Rangers do the shootin’. This was back in my misguided days.” Jeffrey stretched and pulled up his oxford shirt to reveal a small pucker on his rib. “Handgun.”

Wulf inspected his scar. “That’s quite deep. Is the bullet still in there?”

“Yeah. They didn’t dig it out. Would’ve caused more damage than leaving it.”

Wulf admitted, slowly, “I have a few fragments, but the majority of the round exited through my back.” For a man who had lived in Europe and London most of his life, Wulf considered that practically blurring.

“It’s heavy, carrying lead.”

“Yes, it is.”

“What’d the redhead call you in there? Wolf?”

When Rae called his name, Wulf had known Jeffrey would pick it up, if

he was still in the booth. Nothing slipped past his chief of security. Wulf didn't answer but admired Rae's application of stinging stripes to Park's ass.

"Why'd she call you a wolf? When you had me turn off the monitor yesterday, did you do her—"

"I do not discuss those matters, either."

"Woof, woof, huh, wolf?"

"Please don't ask."

"She's got a pet name for you? Is the mighty Boss-man falling for some redheaded chica?"

"Certainly not," Wulf scoffed.

"*Cer* tainly not," Jeffrey mimicked and then flicked his finger at screen number three. "She seems to be doing all right, this time."

"Indeed," Wulf said and leaned in, watching, uneasy.

Now that Rae had marked Lando Park's flesh, she tied him to a post at attention and, from the shamed look on his face, was giving him a proper dressing-down. Park occasionally grinned despite himself but reverted to proper humiliation within a second.

Rae appeared to be doing an excellent job. Park's session was nearly finished, and he hadn't had to remove or rescue her after all.

Wulf felt disappointment mix with his admiration. If she had not risen to the challenge, he could have not employed her at The Devilhouse as a contractor. Considering Rae's earnest desire to help autistic children, Wulf had planned to offer her a ridiculously well-paying job as an admin. He justified it to himself as altruism, even though he suspected that his real motive was to keep her luscious body around The Devilhouse.

If he employed her as an admin, no one else would touch her.

Indeed, as Rae sashayed around Lando Park in Play Room Two, Wulf was having a hard time staying in his seat. He wanted to punch Park for looking at her, and he wanted to fill his hands with her soft, silky flesh.

Disconcerting. Quite disconcerting. Wulf shook his head a little to clear those thoughts.

However, Rae knew far too much about Wulf now—his name, that he was a Swiss citizen, that he had been shot—and one internet search would tell her everything about him. She would see all the newspaper accounts and even his Wikipedia entry, which kept reappearing no matter how many times he or his personal security detail deleted it.

He was still not entirely sure why he had offered up his name that first

evening. When she had asked, when she had insisted, he had given it to her. While he would have liked to blame it on drink or lust, he could resist both those influences with aplomb. He was grown man, not a teenager who would risk anything to stick his dick in a warm place.

Now, he wasn't sure what he should do if she discovered everything.

Swear her to secrecy?

Pay her off?

Liquidate The Devilhouse and leave the US?

That last one was probably his best course. He had managed The Devilhouse from a bankrupt swindle into a business with an excellent positive cash flow, his original goal.

He should alert his household staff that they may be moving. Perhaps they would go to southern France. Wulf had grown accustomed to warm air.

It was a shame. America had surprised him, pleasantly, thoroughly. Even Wulf could reinvent himself in this bustling country. He might do so again. The northwest US might be an option, but the weather up there was far from amenable.

On the monitor's grainy image, Rae stood over Mr. Park, who now crouched on the floor. White static fell like snow over them. Wulf could just hear him begging for her forgiveness and promising to be a better man.

She presented her black, heeled boot to Park, and he extended his tongue and licked the boot from the toe up to the top, where she stopped him by bracing the riding crop tip against his forehead.

Wulf watched her lovely, creamy back, and for the first time in a decade, Wulf was inclined to remain rather than not particularly caring where he lived.

Wulf said, "She is doing well."

"Not bad," Jeffrey begrudged.

Rae reached down and lifted the man's tear-streaked face. Jeffrey turned up the volume so they heard her say, "Our time is at an end, Small Man. If I hear any more reports about you yelling at the lady at the front desk, I will never work with you again. Capeesh?"

"Yes, Mistress! I will change. I will. Thank you, Mistress!"

Jeffrey turned down the volume. "Seems she did okay."

"He promises that every week." Wulf stood and walked toward the exit. "Make me a copy of that session for later review, and delete the training session with Rae immediately."

“Yes, Boss.” Jeffrey spun back around to keep his eyes on the various sessions in the playrooms. “Range time tomorrow morning?”

“Quite. Lead therapy is excellent tonic.”

“You gonna let me play with the big gun?” His dark eyes shined with humorous avarice.

Considering Jeffrey’s continuing obsession with the Barrett fifty-caliber rifle, Wulf should purchase one for him for his birthday next month. He would task someone with the paperwork tonight. “Of course. Ten o’clock?”

“You betcha.”

Wulf strode out to catch Rae before she left the dungeon.

He had to keep her from learning anything more about him. Wulf abhorred the thought that anyone would ever again see him as the little boy who had watched the assassination of his twin brother.

And yet, and yet.

She had spoken with him, and teased him, and fucked him before she knew that he was The Dom or anything else. That authenticity was unique in Wulf’s life.

Everyone else wanted something from him.

## A Discussion with The Dom

IN Play Room Two, Rae stood in the center of the room and stretched her arms above her head, reaching for the stone-tiled dungeonesque ceiling and nearly scraping it with her still-unpainted nails, while Mr. Park hung onto his drawers and scuttled from the play room.

A feeling rose in her chest, something like victory, and she smiled.

Relief rested there, too. She had bested the defiant Mr. Park and hadn't disappointed Wulf, and she was glad as all hell that it was over and she hadn't screwed it up. Although spanking Lando Park creeped her out a little because the religious nut in the back of her head was oh-so outraged, Rae felt, just a little, like she could do this and that she might have helped Lando Park with some of his issues.

She dropped her arms and collapsed onto the curvy chaise lounge.

The carved-mahogany door opened, and Wulf stepped into her dungeon. He cleared his throat. "That went well."

Rae stretched her arms over her head and grabbed the back of the seat behind her head. Her boobs rose to the top of the leather teddy's cups. "Yeah, even a blind squirrel finds a nut sometimes."

"Glenda will escort you to our accounting madam, where you can fill out the necessary paperwork to be paid for today, after we speak privately."

"We need to talk?" Insecurity shattered her victory glow. He had said that she was to be paid for *today*, suggesting *today only*, suggesting that she had royally blown it all to heck, dang it.

"If you have the time, I'd like to have a full and frank discussion in my office about your employment."

"Did I do something wrong? I shouldn't work here, right?"

Wulf smiled. When his lips parted over his bright white teeth and his chin dropped a notch like that, his expression turned sexy and predatory. "You were superb."

The relief dribbled back, though her nerves still strummed like an over-tightened banjo. She hooked a thumb through a wide leather strap around her hips. "Should I change first?"

Wulf's eyes bobbed down, a cursory glance. "No. You're fine."

Wulf strode ahead of her through the twisting corridors, marching with purpose like he might be slightly late. Rae teetered behind him in those too-high cowboy boots that were beginning to pinch her toes and worried that she might fall off of them and break an ankle, which would truly end any hope of her getting a job at The Devilhouse. No one would want to be whipped by a Domme on crutches.

Finally, he opened a nondescript office door. Inside, sharp sunlight streamed through the long window overlooking the garden and threw harsh shadows over his spare, oversized office furniture. She was just wondering if there was such a thing as Swiss modern furniture or if it was all Swedish modern like sterile, boxy Ikea when he grabbed her wrist hard and spun her back against the wall.

She thumped the wall and said "Hey!" just as his mouth came down on hers in a rough kiss. His body pressed hers hard against the wall.

*Finally!*

The whole time they had been in the play room practicing, visions played in her head of Wulf throwing her over one of those furniture things, but he had stuck to the schedule, and then she had taken her frustration out on Lando Park because Wulf was watching.

She wrapped her arms around his neck and pulled him closer, wanting more. He kissed her harder, groping her hips and waist over those leather straps and lace, his hands everywhere at once.

His breath on her neck was ragged like he had sprinted miles. "If you don't want this, you should leave now." His body pulled away from hers a little, enough to let her slip away if she wanted to.

She twisted her arms harder around his neck, pulling him closer. She wanted his body tight against hers and to taste him. Pushing her tongue into his mouth, she tasted mint. His warm tongue wrapped hers and then pushed back into her mouth.

His torso and hips pressed against her, wedging her body between himself and the wall. They kissed, their mouths meshing together as his hands ran over her body, grabbing her breasts in the leather bustier and her ass through the straps. She wanted him to slip his fingers inside the leather and inside her body like he had that first night and yesterday, but he trailed his fingers on the tight leather over her pussy. Her body throbbed.

"Please," she moaned against his lips, trying to move so that his fingers

would slide inside her. She fumbled with the tiny buttons on his shirt, trying to press them through the buttonholes, but unbuttoning them was a lot harder when she couldn't see what she was doing. She struggled with his silver tie, but that didn't give, either.

He groaned and picked her up, cradling her. Rae yelped against his lips because she still wasn't used to anyone being able to lift her. He carried her over to his desk and set her bottom on the cold glass.

She said, "No, I'll break it," and struggled to jump off, grinding her pussy against his pants.

"Unbreakable." His low voice was harsh.

She spread her palms behind her, trying to distribute her weight on that glass, sure that she was going to crash through it and yet trying to keep kissing him because his warm, soft lips felt so good against hers. "Are you sure?"

For an answer, he pressed her back onto the cold glass and wrapped her legs around his waist. She pulled back, afraid to hurt him with the high-heeled boots, but he grabbed her hips and yanked her body toward him, nestling her pussy against his hard dick in his pants. His hands slid around her waist to the back, and he fumbled before the leather around her waist loosened and then he wrenched off bottom half of her costume, unsnapping it all the way down her sides and shoving it out of the way.

Rae gasped because she was bare from the waist down and she hadn't even known there were snaps but then his lips closed on hers again, rougher this time. He leaned down and bit and sucked her neck while his hands dipped into her top, spilling out her breasts.

Rae let her head fall back as Wulf sucked her nipples until they tightened into hard buds. Each suck pulsed through her body, from her tits to her spine down to her aching pussy. She wanted him and wiggled closer to him, but Wulf gathered her breasts together and sucked harder, driving her wild.

She couldn't get enough of him. Every time he touched her, she craved more.

The desert sun shone outside the window and glinted on his blond hair. She sneaked one hand up into his hair, gripping the fine strands between her fingers. He took this as a signal that she wanted more, and he pulled her body toward him. His cock made a long, hard lump in his pants against the inside of her thigh, so close to her sensitive bump that she tried to rub against him, but he slid his hand between her breasts, down the leather still around her ribs



and her tummy, over her mons, and into her wet pussy.

His fingers slid in her cream and were slick against her, and then he found her clit and circled it, rubbing so slowly, while he sucked on her tits. Pleasure shocked from his mouth and his hand through her and met in her belly.

Her hands slid apart on the desk and she lay back, panting. She glanced out the bright window over the garden, where thick bushes hemmed in oddly shaped benches. He hadn't even shut the window blinds. If someone walked by, they would see her, splayed out on Wulf's glass desk, clearly about to fucked.

She heard a desk drawer open and shut through the waves of pleasure running through her head, and a foil packet ripped open.

Then he was moving up her body again, and his bare chest slid against her stomach. He slithered up her body until his cock just touched her pussy, the head barely parting those soft, sensitive folds, and he held it there. He rose up a little, bracing his other arm on the desk, and looked down at her.

Her whole body hummed, wanting him inside her. She tried to scoot down the desk to take his dick into her, but his arm under her hips didn't allow her to move. She grabbed his silver tie, still knotted around his neck, and yanked, trying to pull him inside her and down to kiss her again.

Wulf's blue eyes were fiery, like he was angry, but the corners of his mouth curved upward as he panted. "Say you'll work for me. Here. At The Devilhouse."

"Yes." She would have said anything to get his cock inside her. Her body hungered for him.

He slid a little more into her, stretching her body around him. She was so wet, sopping wet, that he slid like silk into her. Just when she thought he was going to fill her completely, he stopped again.

Rae was wild for him, wanting him to take her. She gasped air and tried to grab the edge of the desk to pull herself down and onto his dick, but he was a lot stronger than she was, and he held her, half-on, just to where she wanted to scream.

"And you won't try to find out anything more about me," he said. His breath puffed like he was running for his life.

"What? Wulf, *please!* " She struggled, but he held her still.

"Promise me," he said. "Nothing more. Don't search online. Don't look up anything. Not about *me.* "

*“I promise!”*

With that, he pulled *back* and lifted her leg, flipping her over. Her cheek pressed against the cold desk, and the beige carpet wavered though the thick glass.

Behind her, he slid the head of his cock through her slit, found her entrance, and thrust deep into her with a growl and she cried out again, feeling his hard dick push up inside her like he was forcing even the air out of her.

She held onto the thick edge of the glass above her head, trying to steady herself because every time he pounded into her, she rocked away from him. Wulf yanked her back down onto his dick with his hands on around her hips, practically lifting her whole body and driving her down and onto his hard cock.

He stroked in and out of her pussy, pushing her hips against the sharp edge of the desk. Each time he slid into her, Rae thought she would come, but the pleasure wound tighter every time.

Wulf’s hands slid from her hips and up her back, and he held her by her shoulders, pulling her back and ramming himself into her. She felt like a tiny girl being fucked by a giant, so helpless, and she lay on his desk, letting him take her. His pelvis smacked her ass again and again.

Just when she thought he was going to go forever, he pulled out of her and she almost stumbled backward and he spun her around again, lifted her by her ass up to sit on the desk, and dragged her down on his dick.

She tried to wrap her arms around his shoulders—he was still wearing his shirt, though it was unbuttoned down his front, exposing hard muscle and ridges of abs—but he pushed her backward onto the desk and drew her legs up, hooking her boots over his shoulders, and he pounded deep into her.

The ceiling lights above Rae glowed bright, and she shut her eyes against the glare from them and the sunlit window. With her eyes closed, she could feel and hear nothing but Wulf ramming into her and scrubbing her clit hard with every thrust.

That first night at the party, when she had screwed him against the wall, he had held back.

Yesterday, when he had tied her up, he had taken her from behind, but that time, too, he had controlled himself.

This time, he hammered into Rae, slamming his pelvis into hers and driving so deep that it almost hurt. He had abandoned all his reserve and

forced his full length up into her, each long stroke rubbing her inside and then smacking her clit with a burst of tightening desire. She wanted to scream for him to stop because his lust scared her, but he felt so amazing that she gasped, “Yes!”

Wulf grunted with every thrust, his breathing harsh and rapid. Rae spread her arms on the desk, trying to hold on as Wulf leaned on the desk for better leverage. He stood up at the top of each stroke, lifting her and rubbing her clit and the inside of her pussy, and she cried out, not caring who heard her.

The friction built, heating her.

Tension spiraled. Her brain sparked.

He pulled her hips back and rammed into her over and over, each pounding thrust like a climax but then he kept going, harder, and Rae was helpless to even push back against him because he had her legs up so that he could stroke deeper into her. Rae arched her back and ground down on him, and she couldn’t breathe, couldn’t think, wanting him more and more, and the crushing tension blinded her.

Wulf grabbed her hips and pushed her down on him one last time, bowing backward as he gasped. Rae felt his cock throb deep inside her and her pussy burst into hot waves.

She shrieked and arched off the desk as wave after wave tossed her. She held onto the edge while he pumped her, extending the pulses that ran through her flesh. Each surge raced through her, swirling in her head, until they slowly subsided.

She was still gasping when Wulf collapsed on her stomach.

She wrapped her arms around him, clinging to him as aftershocks fluttered. His dick, still in her, pulsed in fast time with his heartbeat, and his scent, sharp citrus and wind-blown meadows and warm man, flowed over her, and she breathed him into her nose and into her lungs, filling her body with him that way, too .

He lay on her stomach and chest, his body limp. His shirt draped down over her sides, covering both of them. She combed his hair away from his eyes with her fingers, but his gold eyelashes and pale lids stayed closed.

Her other hand strayed under his shirt, and she gingerly explored the hard tangle of scar tissue on his back.

“Remember,” he whispered. His lips moved on her breasts, and sweat ran down her ribs.

He whispered, “Remember what you promised.”

## **Book 4: Rae Bound**

# Contract with The Devilhouse

*WHAT have I done? What have I done?*

Rae's chattering mind kept cadence with her stiletto boot heels clattering on the tile as she paced around the whipping post and past the red leather-upholstered, undulating sex couch. In the flickering light from wall sconces that pretended to be candles, the black shadows behind the dungeon's torture equipment looked like they were waving at her and mocking her.

*Why did I do it? I shouldn't have signed!*

Since Sunday, Rae had dithered for three days, penduluming, deciding whether she should take the job as a dominatrix at The Devilhouse and hand out punishments to sexually deviant men or change her cell phone number so that Wulf couldn't ever find her again.

Not that the latter would work. Lizzy and Georgie, her college dorm suitemates, would just barge through their adjoining bathroom and demand to know why she hadn't taken the job.

Signing her name on that paper that the accountant had slid across the desk at her just a few minutes ago had been merely Rae's hand scratching the pen on deceptively ordinary paper, but now it felt like a contract with the Devil.

*I've already done it. There's no way out.*

Rae freaked out some more.

*If my family finds out, they will never speak to me again. Wulf's private investigator almost blew it, but this is all my fault. They'll find out, somehow. My father, my mother, my brothers, and my cousins will all turn away from me. Shun me. Expel me. Strike my name from the church rolls and scratch my name out of their Bibles.*

*I'll be alone in the world, in this Godless, sinful, awful world .*

She knew that she was backsliding, becoming again that child who had shown up at college mired more in despair than defiance, but fear drove her back.

Maybe God had devised The Devilhouse as a supernatural moral test, threatening her education by challenging her virtue.

By signing the contract, maybe she had failed.

Yet, the whole point of her college education was to help autistic kids. If she gave up her plan to build her autism clinic, A Ray of Light, surely that would be wrong.

Surely, abandoning children to the darkness of autism was the most evil thing that Rae could do.

Plus, her bank account had fattened by a thousand dollars since yesterday morning when The Devilhouse's direct deposit had arrived, which meant that her account was up to a grand total of one thousand, one hundred and three dollars.

That was, like, three textbooks for next semester. Maybe four.

Maybe the Devil was tempting her to choose her pride and vanity over helping children.

The Devil was tempting her in The Devilhouse. Get it? *Devilhouse*.

Surely, even Satan himself was more subtle than *that*.

She didn't even believe in Satan any more. After that blowout with her preacher when she was sixteen, when he told her that she was a weak woman and should hold her peace in church and look to her father *and younger brothers* for guidance, she had written it all off.

She wanted to fall to her knees and pray. The thigh-high leather boots would protect her skin from the rough tile floor.

Instead, Rae paced. Her heels clicked and clacked on the tile, the shadows danced crazy jigs on the walls, and with every step of the knee-high boots, she regretted signing that danged contract.

Probably.

*A thousand dollars. For a few hours.*

Two thousand dollars a week would change her life.

Her mind boggled at the thought of not scraping by in college. She could buy a cafeteria meal plan and eat something other than oranges off the neighborhood trees, half-burned grilled cheese sandwiches made by ironing buttered bread through aluminum foil, and beer.

To steady herself, she grabbed a beam of a St. Andrew's cross, a huge capital X, with her gloved hand. The metal chilled her hand through her leather glove, and she leaned her fevered forehead against it. The metal shocked her face.

If only slinging pancakes at IHOP paid two thousand dollars a week, she wouldn't have to wonder which Devil's trap she was falling into.

The door banged open, and Wulf, The dread Dom of the Devilhouse, strode in, unbuttoning the jacket of his black suit. Even in the dark dungeon of Play Room Two, his hair glinted gold in the weak lights from the medieval sconces, and the fake candlelight flickered on the sharp planes of his cheekbones and the square angle in his jaw. Her family would disparage his strong face as “too pretty” in their envy of his unscarred skin.

Yeah, he didn’t have any scars on his face. Rae’s heart clenched.

Wulf said, “We’ll start with some basic intimidation today.” When his gaze lit on her, the expression in his bright blue eyes changed to concern. “Rae, whatever is wrong?”

He crossed the play room in three long steps and wrapped his strong arms around her. “Did something happen? We didn’t put you in with anyone, yeah?”

His alarmed tone reproached Rae for being so emotional, even while she noticed that his usually imperceptible accent seemed stronger. “It’s nothing. Just second thoughts.”

“About working here.” His flat tone chastised her. “Or was it the books?”

A box for her had been delivered to the front desk of her dorm this morning. When Rae opened it up in her room, the smell of mildew-foxed paper floated out, and she sneezed. The two volumes were bound in old, red leather, and the early sunlight picked out the worn gold lettering on the spines, *Shakespear*. It was kind of weird that they misspelled his name. She had seen nicer copies, newer ones, with bright gold leafing in the big box bookstore just off campus, but the thought was nice. At least he hadn’t bought her ostentatious faux jewelry, which she would have returned to him. Some of that jewelry that he had sent over were obviously high-end crystal and probably worth a couple hundred bucks.

Indeed, he had bought her used books. *That* was an appropriate gift and obviously not a weird sex bribe.

“No, no, no,” she said. “The books were really sweet of you. I love Shakespeare. His sonnets and long forms are incredible, and I really appreciate it. It was very thoughtful of you. Thank you.” Even though *Venus and Adonis* and *The Rape of Lucrece* were kind of scandalous for a guy to give to a girl.

“They’re the 1709 printing,” Wulf said.

“Wow. They’re that old? They’re in really good shape.”

“Fine condition, specifically.”

“I love them. They’re beautiful, and used books are an appropriate gift.”

“Used books?” He glanced at her face, his eyebrows raised.

“They’re not used?” Disconcerted, she tried to figure out what he meant.

“I guess they are. Yes, used books.”

“Well, I like the books. Thanks again. I just have qualms about working here. It’s a lot of money, but it’s just,” and she couldn’t think of how to end that without offending him, “some things about the Devilhouse, I don’t know, they kind of scare me.”

“What scares you? The clients?” Wulf thumb-pointed to the eye in the sky, the shiny black dome embedded in the rough-tiled ceiling. “If anything untoward happens, Mr. Jackson or one of the other security personnel will intervene. They’re all ex-special forces. Mostly SAS. A few Americans. They will stop anything that might occur. I consider security nearly as important as punctuality.” His knowing tone suggested self-mockery.

She didn’t think she could explain her qualms to him. If she tried, she would feel foolish, and he would be scornful, even if he didn’t show it.

“Yeah, that’s it. I’m all reassured now.”

He leaned back and studied her. Disbelief lingered in his bright blue eyes. “Really.”

“Yeah. Seriously.” She shouldn’t protest too much, either.

He released her. “All right. I won’t pry. You’re practically British sometimes.”

Rae needed to either take her acting classes more seriously or drop her second major so she could concentrate on counseling.

Probably the latter.

In the meantime, she was at The Devilhouse, she had signed the danged contract, and she needed to take this seriously. “Let’s start.”

“As you wish. Let us begin with some basic intimidation techniques,” Wulf said. “All these are within the context of a scene. We don’t seek to permanently harm our clients, so you must be cognizant of the greater influences with which you work. Mostly, we use shame.”

Rae reared back. Every psychology class she had ever taken recounted shame as a foundation of neurosis. “But that’s unethical. Shame is psychologically damaging.”

“We are not psychologists. We work with what we have, not some romantic ideal of psychological health. Shaming is our most common tactic and the one our clients find most useful. Since most of them feel shame for



utilizing our services, shaming tactics for other items divert them from their shame for their sexual proclivities. One of our doctors deemed us a ‘counter-irritant,’ which amuses me no end.”

“I’d love to talk to your sociologist Domme at some point. I can’t imagine how she rationalizes this in her own head.”

“She is here most Saturday nights. You are coming to the club next Saturday, *ja* ?”

When he said that, Rae finally heard, where she had thought that Wulf said “yeah” at the end of his sentences, he had actually said, “*ja*,” the German and Swiss word for “yes.”

Wulf had told her that he was Swiss, a secret that he had told no one else. Even his name, Wulf, was a secret.

The huge gunshot scar on his back with the dragon tattoo woven around it was a secret.

He told her too many secrets, and Rae didn’t know why.

She said, “Yes. You said I should come here on Saturdays.”

Wulf’s grin was extravagantly innocent, and his eyes were so amused. “Perhaps I will see you there.”

Rae sure as heck hoped that Wulf would be there because she probably was going to need someone to explain stuff to her. “Okay.”

“Now, back to shaming our clients. You did a stellar job dressing down Mr. Park yesterday, but you must be careful about the subject matter. We usually critique their subservience and manner of submission. We keep to non-physical aspects. For example, I would never denigrate you for your petite stature.”

Rae laughed. She was five-feet-ten when she slouched, and even though she wore high-heeled boots, her nose was lower than Wulf’s.

He gathered a fistful of her auburn curls, which she hadn’t tied back in a bun this morning, and kissed the tresses that curled out of his hand. “Or chastise you for your dull, listless hair.”

He was standing so close to her that his suit jacket brushed her sides. “You’ll notice that I’m using physical proximity to make you uncomfortable, standing in your personal space.”

“I’m not uncomfortable.” Her breathy voice betrayed her.

“Just as an example of other ways to play, you can do something that appears innocent at first, and then use that to shock them.”

Rae saw his fist tighten in her hair, and he yanked her head back and

kissed her. His lips were rough on hers, kissing her hard. His tongue pushed into her mouth, swirling with hers, and she wound her arms around his neck.

Just being near him made her body ache for him. She wanted to feel his skin slap hers and his dick hard inside of her, even though she had had sex with him three times in the last week. Every time she touched him, she wanted more, again. She pressed her pelvis against his body, craving him. He slid his other arm around her waist and squeezed her to him. Under his buttoned dress shirt, she could feel the muscle that ridged his body.

Lust had a hold on her, she realized. She wasn't longing to understand his mind or his soul. She just wanted to screw him against a wall, like that first night she had met him.

The moral danger in The Devilhouse wasn't in the clients or the work.

Rae grabbed Wulf's shoulders and shoved him away.

Wulf stumbled backward, catching himself on a beam of the St. Andrew's cross, and laughed. "Yes, like that. Keep them off balance."

Rae turned away and pretended to inspect the case of whips while she composed herself. Her heart thumped like a kicking rabbit. In the glass front of the case, Rae could see that her expression looked horrified, so she inhaled deeply and tried to make her face look like she didn't care that she was doing so many wrong things and that Wulf tempted her to worse.

"Yes, yes," Wulf said from somewhere behind her. She glanced up and could just see his reflection in the glass. "I promised to teach you whip work. We'll get to that soon."

His cell phone beeped.

"Pardon me." He turned away, touching the screen. "Hello."

She took the extra moment to cram her stupid trembling down into her stomach while she watched him, mirrored in the glass of the case. She wanted to run her fingertips over the pale skin on his strong cheekbones and jawline.

Wulf listened to the cell phone, and his shoulders slumped. "Again." His neutral tone betrayed no emotion. "Thank you for notifying me. Call Karin and inquire if she can come in for a few hours. I'll take care of it until then."

Rae watched, but he was impassive.

Wulf tapped his phone, and then he stared at the ceiling of the dungeon for a moment. He might have been calculating a sum in his head or inspecting the faux granite up there for cracks. He transferred his attention back to his phone, but his cool expression didn't change. "Rae, my Lady Macbeth, could you do a personal favor for me and step in for yet another session this

afternoon? The client is here, now. His Domme has not checked in.”

She shouldn’t do it.

She should leave The Devilhouse and Wulf and never look back.

Wulf was still pondering his phone. “I understand if you are not ready, but your session with Lando Park went exceptionally well yesterday, and I think you have a talent for this.”

His approving tone warmed her.

One more session would pay for another couple of textbooks.

Or let her buy into the meal plan for the rest of the semester.

If she didn’t quit The Devilhouse at all, if she did just one more session, then another, and then another, she could finish her college degree and open her clinic.

Oh, so slippery the slope.

And yet, that triumphant moment after Park had left buoyed her up.

But the scene had been so demanding, and it seemed like it could have gone wrong at any moment, like when Park had refused to assume the submissive position and she had put a hand on his shoulder and pushed him down to his knees.

She might screw this one up.

Her fears always showed on her face, so she scrunched her face up and then let it go, trying to release the conflict. She was supposed to be an actor, dang it.

She felt like she had mastered her expression, so she turned away from the whip cabinet to face him. “Okay. I can do it. ”

“Excellent.” Wulf looked up at her, and his head tilted slightly. Rae couldn’t tell what changed in his expression, but an emotion rippled across his face and was gone before she could figure out what it was. He asked, “Have you been on the internet lately?”

*Odd question.* “Not since I checked email a few hours ago. Why, has something happened?”

“No.” He smiled at her, but Rae thought his smile looked a little forced. “Not at all. The client this afternoon is Mr. Kyle San Jose. He’s been a client here for several years but has not progressed beyond the spank-and-wank phase. He’s almost vanilla. I can retrieve his file for you.”

Rae’s heart sank. She shouldn’t do this. She should leave now. “That would be great.”

Wulf frowned at his phone again. “This is Sonya’s third absence this

week.”

“Maybe she’s really sick.”

“She had an article in the college newspaper this morning that must have been written last night. I believe she might have reached The Hairy Arse Boundary.”

Rae had never heard anyone say “arse” unless they were mocking a British accent. “And that is?”

His wry smile suggested that he was telling her another secret. “You can only view a limited number of hairy arses before you cannot stomach seeing another one, ever again. This upper limit is different for every girl, but when she reaches it, she retires almost immediately. Sonya will graduate soon, and I assume she has been prudent with her earnings. I must have a conversation with her.”

## Lizzy in Love

RAE dodged into the spa-like Zen refuge of the Ladies' Locker Room to freshen up before her appointment with Kyle San Jose and rounded the corner to the make-up area when she high-heeled-skidded to a stop in front of Lizzy and Georgie, her dorm suitemates. It was too late for Rae to grab one of the white, fluffy spa robes out of the stack to hide what she was wearing.

Hey, they might not even notice. The Devilhouse was full of girls wearing weird costumes.

"Um," Rae said. "Hi."

The girls' heads—Lizzy the blond who came up to Rae's chest and Georgie the brunette who stood near Rae's shoulder—dipped and rose, surveying Rae from her made-up face to her black leather bustier and stiletto-heeled, thigh-high boots and back up to her face as the spa music tinkled in the air and the waterfall bubbled. Rae waited for them to be pissed off at her.

Georgie asked, "*Rae?*"

Her questioning tone was weird. Recognition shouldn't be the problem. Rae looked down at her shiny boots and the polished wooden floor. Did she really look so different? "Yeah?"

Lizzy asked, "What are you wearing?"

Yeah, they had noticed.

Rae's bustier and tight black skirt clung to her curves, and the outfit was a far piece from the jeans and square tee shirts she had worn to class when she had given up the prairie dress look after a week at college. She didn't look anything like herself, not even to herself. "I got it from the costume closet."

Georgie asked, "Rae, are you dressed like a Domme?"

Lizzy brightened and asked, "So you're hired? So you can stay at school?"

Rae decided to answer Lizzy because that seemed like the answer that was the least likely to offend her friends. "Yeah. Um, that guy? Um, The Dom?" She had almost said *Wulf* because his name was so sweet on her tongue but she caught herself. "*The Dom* hired me. I signed the contract and

nondisclosure agreement just now.”

She didn’t mention her misgivings. Georgie and Lizzy had taken a chance to introduce her to The Dom. If she turned down the position, it would be like throwing away all their effort.

Lizzy squealed and bounced like a pale, blond puppy, but Georgie’s brown eyes widened. “Did he hire you as a Domme?”

“Yeah. As a Domme.” She winced, waiting for Georgie’s reaction when confronted with Rae’s good luck.

Whenever something good happened to Rae—scoring high on her SATs, earning a slot in the honors program, being awarded the college scholarship—someone from her family or church was always there to put her in her place by pointing out how it was really a burden for her family and to make sure that Jesus took all the credit.

“That’s great! That’s great!” Lizzy chanted.

Georgie cocked her head to the side. Her wry smile soothed Rae. Georgie said, “You have to teach me how to be a Domme. I’ve been trying to work into that for six months, and I’ve gotten no traction.”

“I’m just figuring it out. I’m kind of in training,” Rae said.

“Who’s training you? Sonya?” Lizzy asked.

“No,” Rae said. “The Dom is.”

They both goggled at her, open-mouthed.

Georgie snapped her mouth closed and then asked, “The Dom is training you? The tall, blond guy you waltzed with at the party?”

“Um, yeah.” Rae’s foreboding crept back. “I didn’t know who he was at the party. I just kind of called him The Blond Hottie in my head.”

Lizzy’s wide-eyed astonishment faded into hurt.

Rae would have done anything to take her comment back, even though it was the truth. “Lizzy, I’m so sorry. I don’t know why he’s doing this. I think it’s just a casting decision, because I’m tall and stuff. I look the part of a Domme.”

Lizzy swallowed hard. “How is he training you?”

“He’s just telling me stuff. Like what to do in a session. What to say.”

Tears welled in Lizzy’s eyes. “Are you sleeping with him?”

Her hopeless tone broke Rae’s heart. Rae shouldn’t lie to her friend. Lizzy had seen Wulf first, had dated him first, had screwed him first, even though his “dates” were understood by all the girls at The Devilhouse to be extravagant one-night-stands.

Rae should back off because she was Lizzy's friend.

"He just shows me what to do. How to use a riding crop. What to say. That sort of thing. I'm not anything special to him. Like Georgie said, he likes women, lots of women, and he's nothing but a shiny shell. And I opted out of 'the arrangement.'"

Even though all that was true, and yet Rae hoped that, maybe, after she finished the session with this Kyle San Jose, maybe she would see Wulf again.

Maybe like last weekend, in his office, on his desk.

But she shouldn't.

Rae knew that this job and Wulf were wrong for her.

She would just have to work and save the money to go back to school later. Lots of people did that. She could figure it out.

Lizzy's feelings were the final reason why Rae would have to extricate herself from this whatever-it-was with Wulf and quit this danged job.

# Kyle San Jose, and Yet Not Kyle San Jose

RAE waited outside the door to Play Room Five with her hand on the brass doorknob, steeling herself.

The door to Play Room Five was not a forbidding edifice of carved mahogany and designed to look like a door to Hell, like the other dungeon doors in The Devilhouse that Rae had seen. This six-panel door was painted white, and the waiting room had three recliners facing a wide-screen television on the wall, which was tuned to a college basketball game. The unassuming door projected the illusion that they had left The Devilhouse, but Rae knew better. No matter how much this door pretended to exist in the sane world, the sex-crazed madness of The Devilhouse was all around her. The insanity clung to her as tightly as the black leather bustier that girdled her ribs.

Rae turned the knob and opened the door.

The blue living room looked like Rae's grandmother's house, decorated in what had been fashionable in 1958. A blocky couch was slung low against the back wall. Brass stand lamps flanked it. The pleated lampshades glowed like white truncated triangles against the sky blue wall. A vanilla candle burned on a sideboard.

This play room reeked of normalcy, except for the shirtless, tubby man wearing a black leather hood, kneeling in the center of the low shag carpet. The eyeless mask only had one hole cut out, for his nose. He leaned to one side, favoring one of his knees. Ginger hair sprouted all over his body.

Sonya's notes in his file detailed that, in general, Kyle San Jose liked to argue, made up excuses for everything, lied at every opportunity, but he didn't like to be punished for it. He wasn't a good little sub. He just wanted some girl to spank his ass and to be on his way.

His safe word was "Yes-yes-yes."

Sonya had hand-written in the margin: *ODD*.

Yeah, well, all The Devilhouse's clients were a little odd.

"Good afternoon," she intoned as she stood above him.

He didn't answer.



Rae selected a wooden paddle from the umbrella stand near the door. Three golf-sized umbrellas mixed in with the riding crops and thin paddles. Nice to know that she could borrow an umbrella from here in the rare case of desert rain.

The long wooden paddle looked like the one her grade school principal had had mounted on the wall above his desk, painted with the motto “The Good Old Days.” She whacked the paddle against her palm, testing it. The sturdy plank slapped instead of pounded. She could work with that.

She noticed Kyle San Jose fidgeting. “Sit still, sub.”

“I can’t. I have a knee problem. I can’t kneel like this.”

And the excuses started. His knees even rested on shag carpeting, a luxury that other subs did not enjoy. “I did not give you permission to speak.”

“You’re not my usual girl.”

“No, I’m not.”

“You haven’t worked here long, have you?”

“I didn’t give you permission to speak, sub.” She smacked him on the butt cheek with the paddle.

“Hey! Why did you do that!”

Rae glanced up at the white, drywall ceiling and found the black orb almost directly above her. Wulf might be watching her, or one of his ex-special forces security guys might be the one protecting her and looking down her cleavage. Waving was probably unprofessional, not that Kyle San Jose could see it through his eyeless mask.

Rae walked around the hooded man, stomping on the carpet so he could hear her. So that was why the dungeon play rooms were tiled, so that the sub could hear the clicking of high-heeled boots. That, and it was easier to hose down tile if needed. “What is your name, sub?”

“Foxhound.”

Another dog name. Interesting.

She paced around Kyle San Jose, stomping some more on the carpet. Brown hair curled out from under his hood on the scruff of his neck. Neck stubble met his weedy back hair. Rae was glad that she wasn’t going to see Kyle San Jose’s hairy arse. She just had to spank it over the leather pants that bound his pudgy hindquarters. “Stand, Foxhound.”

He lumbered to his feet.

The furniture in the living room didn’t include a proper spanking chair. Rae wondered how she was supposed to paddle him. She stomped around

him again.

He said, "The other girl always leads me over to the chair to spank me." The leather mask muffled his whiney voice. "Aren't you going to do that?"

Wow, this one was mouthy.

Because she was a good seven inches taller than San Jose in her high-heeled boots, Rae bent down to whisper near where the hood covered his ear. "No. I'm going to make you wait for it."

"I don't *want* to wait for it," he said. His tone turned ugly. "The other girl *never* makes me wait for it."

Probably because Sonya wanted to get away from his nasty attitude as soon as possible. No wonder she hadn't come in today.

Rae whispered near his leather-covered ear, "Wait."

"Why are you *making* me wait? I don't *want* to wait! I'm a *paying* customer here, and I don't *want* to wait for my *spanking!*"

His shrill tantrum was so ridiculous that Rae laughed at him. Her strong laugh rang like a bell from years of singing with the church choir.

San Jose stopped complaining, and his black, eyeless hood swiveled toward her. "Rae?"

She backed away. She didn't know anyone named Kyle San Jose. She would have never agreed to the session if she had. "Who are you?"

The man pulled the black hood off his face.

Rae recognized the man's round jaw and broken nose as the hood stretched, even before it popped free of his face. Years of rage and alcohol abuse had popped spidery blood vessels around his nose. Sweat darkened his orange hair.

Her cousin Jim Bob Mulligan was ten years older than she, had inherited a couple warehouses in Pirtleville, and was a deacon in her family's church.

Why had the form said that his name was Kyle San Jose?

Making a run for the door would be useless.

His gloating smile was cruel. "Rae Stone. It's been, what, three years since you left for college?"

Jim Bob grabbed her by the waist and dragged her against his flabby body. Even though she was taller, some of that height difference came from her high-heeled boots, and he outweighed Rae by a good fifty pounds.

"What're you doing in a whorehouse?"

Rae pushed back on his shoulders and answered before she thought about it. "I needed money."

He leered at her from an inch above her boobs. “Your parents would be crushed if they found out. What’re you going to do for me so’s that I won’t tell ‘em?”

“Stop it, Jim Bob!” She wiggled, trying to push him off of her without starting a brawl.

He grabbed Rae’s shoulder, spun her, and slammed her against the wall. She felt his hands pulling at her skirt, trying to hike it up on her hips.

Like hell she was going to let her jerk cousin rape her. She had grown up with four brothers and knew how to knock people around.

Rae pushed off the wall and jammed her elbow back, catching Jim Bob in the ribs.

She whipped around with her fist balled up ready to sock him, just in time to see Jim Bob’s surprised face spin away from her. Wulf’s expression was as calm as if he were about to sip tea as he punched Jim Bob’s lights out.

Jim Bob crumpled and flopped to the carpet. His limp dick flopped sideways because he had pulled it out of his pants.

Wulf shook his hand like he was flinging something nasty off his knuckles. His calm question was as even as if he were inquiring about her health after a sneeze. “Are you all right?”

“He knows.” Rae tugged her skirt down. Terrible fears spun in her head. “He’s my cousin Jim Bob Mulligan, and he knows about this.” Rae was undone. He would tell everyone about her and The Devilhouse. A sinner could be forgiven, but the temptress could never be redeemed. What use was it to go to college if she couldn’t go home?

Wulf stepped over her cousin’s unconscious body. “I’ll take care of it.”

“Why did it say his name was Kyle San Jose in his file?”

“Many of our clients use pseudonyms for their working files. Their real names are listed in the business files.”

“He’ll tell my parents. He’ll tell everyone. They’ll disown me.” Her life stretched in front of her, long and lonely and alone.

“I’ll make sure he won’t tell anyone.” Wulf cradled her face in his hand, and his touch was gentle. Blood ran down his pale hand and soaked into his white shirt cuff.

Rae wanted to sob but she held it together. “He’ll tell them all anyway, just to watch them get all upset. He likes scenes and chaos.”

Wulf smiled, and his calm smile was so ordinary that it scared her. “You can watch from the security booth, if you’d like.”

## A Freakishly Good Head for Numbers

IN the dark, dusty security booth, Rae sat on the swivel chair beside Jeff, the big black guy who had run security at the party when she had met Wulf. On the wall, eight monitors took the high-definition video feeds from the security cameras in all the play rooms and the silent, still night club. Empty tables dotted the balconies that hung over the dark dance floor. It must take hundreds of people to fill such a space. Maybe thousands.

Beside her, Jeff the Security Guy glowered at the monitors, watching each one in turn with stern, dark eyes.

Georgie and Lizzy had said that Jeff was nice and that being gruff was just part of his job, but Rae got the feeling that Jeff didn't like her. It wasn't like a psychic thing, like she was picking up telepathic hate vibes from him. It was more the way that he stared at the television screens on the wall, even the ones that showed empty rooms, rather than acknowledge her timid hello.

Her arms and legs were still shaking.

She was being ridiculous. Jim Bob Mulligan—who was her second or third cousin or great uncle once removed or something but she wasn't sure because generation lines blurred in her family like a desert-wind twisted scrub brush—wasn't even near her right now. She could see him on the monitor in one of the dungeon play rooms, bound spread-eagle with nylon rope to a St. Andrew's cross, facing the metal X. He had cranked his head around and was silently raging at Wulf. A shiner on his left eye marred his chubby face.

Wulf jerked Jim Bob's pants down around his ankles, stepped back, and idly flipped a whip near Jim Bob's head. He had removed his suit coat and tie and rolled his shirt sleeves up again. His white shirt blazed in the darkness and sometimes strobed on the monitor when he moved too fast, like he was an avenging blond blur.

Jim Bob Mulligan's arse looked like he was wearing horsehair pants.

Two burly men stood at parade rest on either side of her cousin and a step back. Their black fatigues reminded Rae of a paramilitary outfit rather than a security guard's pseudo-police uniform. They were even wearing combat

boots.

“Um, sir?” Rae asked Jeff the Security Guy, who was wearing a very wide, very large suit, not fatigues. A baby blue tie was knotted around his thick neck muscles below his chin and ears.

“Yes?” His voice was so deep that rumbled.

“Could you please turn on the sound in Play Room One?”

The security guy flicked a switch.

Through the speakers, they heard a whipcrack pop the air, and Rae pushed herself back in the chair. Mulligan’s enraged screaming didn’t falter each time the signal whip broke the sound barrier near his head.

Jim Bob Mulligan had tormented Rae while she was growing up, teasing her and knocking her off her bike because she didn’t have any older brothers to defend her. When he was fifteen and she was five, he had been riding his bike inside their grandmother’s house and blamed Rae for the muddy tire tracks and broken china. Rae had been crying too hard to defend herself, and her father’s spanking had been brutal.

Her cousin Jim Bob flailed against the ropes and screamed, “You can’t do this to me! I’m a paying client! I can do anything I want to these girls! And that bitch is my cousin!”

The whip cracked again, louder.

Wulf’s calm voice was so low that Rae could barely hear him on the security booth’s speakers. “You signed the contract, James. Poor behavior may be punished in any way that we see fit.”

“I didn’t do anything wrong! She did! She didn’t spank me like I wanted!”

“I don’t like rapists, James.” On the monitor, while they watched from above, Wulf reared back.

“Oh, no,” Rae said.

With one muscular cast of his arm, Wulf laid the whip across Mulligan’s bare ass.

Jim Bob Mulligan screamed more in fury than pain. “You can’t do this to me!”

Rae said to the security guy, “Jim Bob is my cousin. ”

Over the speakers, Jim Bob screamed, “I didn’t sign your contract!”

Wulf laid another stripe on Mulligan’s ass.

The security guy beside Rae snorted. “Oh, he signed the contract, all right.” Jeff turned to Rae. “This is your cousin?”

“Yeah,” she said. “We’re not on good terms.”

“I got folks like that.” His voice seemed warmer.

Over the speaker, Mulligan yelled, “Son of a bitch! I’ll call the police! This is assault!”

She leaned over and plucked futilely on the security guy’s sleeve. “Could you please tell The Dom to stop? I don’t want this.”

Wulf’s mild voice with that faint Germanic accent sent shivers down Rae’s back as she remembered Nazi movies. He said, “You should have read that contract more closely.”

“Do you know who I am?” Jim Bob hollered. “I can have you arrested and this whole whorehouse closed down with one phone call!”

Over the booth’s speakers, Rae heard Wulf chuckle and say, “I doubt that.”

Rae patted the security guy’s arm to get his attention. “Please. The Dom needs to stop. *Please* tell him to stop. Jim Bob means it. There are a lot of police and politicians in our family. I don’t want you guys to get into trouble.”

The security guy looked at her and grinned. Maybe he didn’t hate her after all. “Don’t you worry. That pissant can’t do a damn thing. This place is all legit. The Boss has some seriously fancy lawyers, and I never met so many politicians since I’ve been working here.”

Rae shook her head. “He’s my cousin. I don’t want him to be beaten any more.” Family was family, even if it was Jim Bob.

The security guy snorted. “The Boss will decide how we’re going to handle him. He seems like a garden-variety jackass to me. The Boss will get through to him, given time.” He reclined in his oversized office chair. “You just watch the Boss do his work.”

Rae watched Wulf whip her cousin, and her hands clenched around the office chair’s arms. Every time Jim Bob said something obnoxious, belligerent, or threatening, Wulf flicked the whip and let him have it again.

Why didn’t Jim Bob just shut up?

“I’m going to go ask him to stop,” she said to the security guy.

The security guy’s jubilant grin crushed her hopes. “I wouldn’t bother The Boss while he’s working. He takes his job seriously.”

On the screen, Jim Bob squealed, “I’ll call my uncles! They’ll find your dead body out in the desert! We have connections with the—Ow! Stop that you asshole!”

“That’s it.” Rae stood and rushed out of the room.

She sprinted the hallways, looking for Play Room One. The Devilhouse’s twisted passages conspired against her. What kind of drunken architect designed this office space?

She slipped around a corner, skating on those high-heeled boots, and found the back hallway for the Play Rooms. The doors were labeled Five, then Four, and she turned on a burst of speed to reach the far end of the hallway.

The gothic door for Play Room One loomed just ahead. She slammed it open and dug her heels in to stop in the dungeonsque chamber. Her eyes widened, trying to see Wulf and Jim Bob in the darkness.

Wulf glanced up, his arm cocked to deliver another vicious blow to Jim Bob’s striped back. The cold expression in his blue eyes unnerved her.

*Decorum*, she had to observe decorum and say this right. Her eyes were so wide that the corners hurt. “Um, Sir? May I beg a favor, Sir?”

“Of course.” Wulf unfurled his arm and lashed Jim Bob one more time. Her cousin howled like a redheaded werewolf.

Wulf strode over to her, and she held the door open for him to exit into the lobby area. After she dragged the heavy door shut behind them, Wulf stretched his whipping arm as if he had been exercising and asked, “Yes?”

“Please stop,” she pled. “Please don’t beat him any more.”

“Whyever not?”

“He really does know police and politicians, and he’s my cousin. Even if we don’t get along, I don’t want you to hurt him.”

“He was planning to rape you.”

“Oh, he would have stopped. It was just the shock, or something. And he didn’t actually rape me.”

“I do not like rapists.” His measured tone made that pronouncement all the more menacing.

“This’ll blow back on my family. Just don’t whip him any more.”

One of Wulf’s golden eyebrows rose .

Sure, he was skeptical, but Rae meant it. “Please.”

“All right. I’ll only speak to him.”

“Okay.”

“Please continue to watch from the security booth. I will defend any of my girls, but you,” he ran a finger under her jawline, sending shivers down the skin on her back, “you, I will never allow anything to happen to.”

Wulf walked back into the dungeon.

Rae trotted through the hallways back to the security booth. She trusted Wulf to keep his word, but she worried about what else he would say to Jim Bob.

Back in the swivel chair next to the Jeff the Security Guy, she watched the monitor for Play Room One, clutching her hands together.

Jim Bob was screaming at Wulf, "I'll get you for this! My uncle is the mayor of Pirtleville, and you may not understand what that means because you're some damned foreigner, but you'll find out! You'll find out!"

Wulf coiled the whip and placed it in the cleaning bin near the door. "James, I'll be frank with you. You attempted to sexually assault one of my women."

"She's a bitch! She led me on! She said she wanted it! And she's not just one of *your* women. She's *my* cousin!"

Wulf raised his hand and continued in his nonchalant monotone. "We have video footage of that session. It was quite obvious that you were trying to rape her. Beyond that, the warehouses that your father left you, the ones at 593 D Street and 32 Bueno Gato Drive, are mortgaged for three times in excess of what they are worth, and you report only a small fraction of the exorbitant rents to your government for taxes. It seems to us that those extortionate rents from Mexican corporations conceal the true nature of the business that is conducted in those warehouses."

"You don't know anything! My uncle will shut you guys down!"

Rae's fingers cramped on the chair's arms. She asked Jeff, "How did The Dom know about Jim Bob's warehouses?"

The security guy shrugged his massive shoulders. "Once The Boss reads something, he never forgets it."

On the television screen, Wulf said to Rae's cousin, "Again, you must stop making these uncivilized threats, or I shall be forced to return to our previous method of instruction."

Jim Bob fell silent, and Rae exhaled.

"You will leave here," Wulf told Jim Bob. "Your membership is terminated. Reagan Stone is under my protection. If you disclose these events to anyone, whether within your family or not, I will have the mortgage company call all three of your mortgages due at once and your questionable taxation practices will be examined, in depth, by your government. Do you understand?"



“Fuck you!” Jim Bob screamed.

“I’ll take that as an affirmative.” Wulf strolled over to where Jim Bob was bound spread-eagle to the X-cross. Wulf grasped Jim Bob’s jaw in his hand and forced him to look directly into his eyes.

Watching in the security booth, Rae leaned in to hear what Wulf said.

“Listen to me. Listen to me,” Wulf whispered, and his Germanic accent became guttural. “If you try to hurt her, I will utterly destroy you. I will take away everything that you own, and then I will come for you. Do you understand that?”

Jim Bob’s weak eyes were wide with shock, and he nodded.

Wulf released him by twitching Jim Bob’s face as if trying to flick dirt off. He seated himself on a wide chair and spoke to the black-clothed security guys standing beside the St. Andrew’s cross. “Lancaster, Jock, give him his clothes and show him out of the establishment.”

The two security men unwound the cords around Jim Bob’s arms and legs. When Jim Bob took a swing at one of them, the man twisted Jim Bob’s arm and frog-marched him out of the room. The other guard swiped a pile of clothes from the floor and followed. Jim Bob tripped on his leather pants, which were drooping around his ankles, and then Rae couldn’t see him on the monitor.

Wulf pulled his cell phone from his pants pocket.

Rae turned to ask a question, but Jeff the Security Guy’s malicious grin unnerved her. He said, “You think your cousin was screwed before? Watch this.” He twisted a dial on the board to increase the volume from Wulf’s dungeon.

Wulf held his cell phone up to his ear, and Rae watched through the security camera as if she were hovering on the ceiling of Play Room One .

Wulf said, “Mayor Harding. Your nephew, James Mulligan, the one you vouched for, attempted to rape one of my girls and threatened me with your influence.”

He paused, and his dry tone became derisive. “I found it less than humorous. I trust you will take care of the problem?”

After another moment, Wulf said, “Your membership remains in good standing then. Your appointment next week may proceed as scheduled.” He tapped the phone to hang it up.

In the booth, Rae turned to the security guy. “He has my uncle on speed-dial?”

“Nah. Scrolling through contacts slows him down. He memorizes every phone number he sees. All the girls. All our clients. All our vendors. He has a freakishly good head for numbers. By the way, I’m Jeff. Head of Security.”

“Hi,” she said. “I’m Rae. I’m new here.”

He chuckled. “Yeah. I know.”

Wulf’s voice came over the speakers, “Rae, may I see you in my office?”

“You better go,” Jeff said. “The Boss does not like it when people are late.”

Rae had to ask Jeff one more question, since he seemed to be warming up to her. “Do you know The Dom’s real name?”

“Nope. No one ‘round here does. And don’t go asking. He takes his privacy real seriously.”

“How seriously?” She wanted to know just how far that shiny shell extended.

Jeff glanced at the monitor as if Wulf might hear them through the screen. “After work, he has our security guys here drive him a ways or else follow him in his car, and then they pull over, and another big, black SUV driven by other security guys escorts him the rest of the way home, I assume. We never knew why he was so paranoid, but maybe getting shot as a kid will do that to you. You didn’t tell anyone ‘bout that, right?”

Rae shook her head. “No. Not at all.”

“Good. The Boss is funny that way. I’ve known him for five years, and that was the first I’d heard of it. I didn’t even tell my wife what we saw.”

# Keep Calm and Carry On

WULF reached his office before Rae and sat behind his desk, flipping through bright bands of email on his phone screen.

One of Wulf's great uncles, a German who had married an Englishwoman, had spouted the WWII-era maxim "Keep Calm and Carry On," as if he, himself, had originated it, and Wulf allowed that phrase to cycle through his mind while he tapped his phone screen, reading the banal emails that appeared in his account every day.

The desert sun shone in the window and glared on the phone's screen. Wulf angled the phone away so he could see the small type.

Most of the emails originated with accounting firms and detailed his and his family's other business holdings, which he tracked. His family knew nothing of The Devilhouse. Wulf had been misled about the business model when he had become a silent partner five years ago, believing the club was meant to be a dance venue. When his old friend, an alumnus of the Swiss boarding school where Wulf had been raised, had absconded with a substantial portion of his initial investment, Wulf had taken over and had planned to manage the property until it produced a profit.

The Devilhouse had turned an excellent profit for the last three years, and yet, he still hadn't divested himself and moved on. Perhaps a genetic weakness for extravagance and indulgence was to blame.

The second to the last email was from his father. He chatted in German about problems he was encountering in the state parliament and his Grand Prix race next week. Wulf marked it to follow up.

The last email, from his sister Flicka, concerned her wedding plans, which he skimmed. He would concoct some excuse at the last minute. From her effusive detailing of the bouquets and décor, he suspected that even she did not believe he would attend though, as always, they kept up appearances. He would visit her and Pierre sometime soon after, somewhere private.

He paused for a moment and glanced at the gardens just beyond his window. Spring flowers bloomed at the bases of the hedges. He tried to appreciate the desert spring, but rage still seethed in his head.

When Rae did a scene with another man, it perturbed Wulf.

Any attempted rape of any of his women would have been dealt with harshly.

After what Mulligan had attempted, that jackass was a lucky bastard that Wulf hadn't lost his temper in Play Room One and flayed his mottled skin from his fat body with the signal whip.

Wulf still wanted to destroy the puny man. His hand itched to dial his mobile phone, call the state's attorney general, another Devilhouse client, and alert him about the warehouses full of drugs in Pirtleville.

One of Wulf's old school chums worked in US Attorney General's office, too. Networks of *Anciens Roséens* reached into most governments around the world.

Wulf could crush Jim Bob Mulligan as flat as he desired.

He must control his emotions. He must not lose control. He must not send a Panzer battalion against a lone horseman.

*Keep calm and carry on.*

## More Convoluted than the Plantagenets'

RAE peeked through the doorway into Wulf's Devilhouse office. He sat behind his desk, languidly reading on his phone. Sunlight dappled him through the leaves of the garden outside his window.

She might be able to breathe if she sat in his lap and rested her cheek against his suit just one more time.

If Wulf fired her for yet another debacle session, Rae could look Lizzy in the eye while she packed to leave college. She wouldn't have to worry about her family finding out anything because, even if Jim Bob said something, she would have been at home for a while and would have no money. No one would believe his illogical accusations.

Rae wouldn't have to worry about her sweet, stupid dream of a clinic for autistic kids any more, either. Her planned-out life would be simpler, less stressful, and require far less effort.

Wulf glanced up from his phone and saw her peeking around the door frame. His bright blue eyes seemed calm, as always. "Come in. You may close the door behind you."

Rae pressed the door closed with her palms and then sat in one of the chairs in front of Wulf's desk. "I'm sorry," she began.

Wulf waved her apologies away as if brushing away smoke in the air. "There was no way you could have known. The pseudonyms in the files are for our clients' privacy. You should peruse the business files, which include legal names, to ensure that you are not related to any of our other clients. There is one more relative of yours here, as I'm sure you've figured out."

"My uncle. The mayor."

If she wasn't fired, then she either had to quit or figure out some other way to stop poaching Lizzy's guy.

"He utilizes the very vanilla side of the business." Wulf smiled, and sympathy spread through his eyes. "I would like to apologize to you. I had forgotten that this corner of the United States has as many familial relations as certain areas of Europe."

"Yeah," Rae said. She held her breath with conflicted emotions and blew

it out with relief. "Bloodlines around here are more convoluted than the Plantagenets'."

Wulf's face hardened, and he reared up behind his desk to his feet. He leaned over the glass, bracing his hands as if to vault it. Rae pushed back in her chair even though the glass desk separated them.

Wulf asked, so quietly, "I beg your pardon?"

Rae didn't know what had set him off, but he stared at her as if she were a heretic during the Spanish Inquisition. "The Plantagenets? Like Richard the Third? Shakespeare?"

"I know who the Plantagenets are. Why did you reference them?"

"Because, you know, everyone was their own uncle. Their family tree doesn't so much branch as tangle in upon itself." She'd heard that phrase a thousand times growing up. "My family is the same way. Second cousins marrying each other, you know?"

Wulf straightened and adjusted his shirt cuffs under his suit jacket. He inhaled through his nose and regarded the garden outside his window for a moment. "Yes, the Plantagenet line does evince consanguinity."

Rae picked apart that last word into *con* , which means *same* , and *sang* , which means *blood* , so he must be agreeing with her. "Right."

Wulf sat in his office chair and rolled himself in. "The business files are in our accountant's office," he said, as if he had never leapt out of his chair. "You should make use of them."

"Right," Rae said. "Just in case I'm related to any more of the spank-and-wankers."

Humor returned to Wulf's blue eyes. He adjusted his tie knot with a practiced tug. "Yes. Can't have that."

"You know, Wulf, maybe I shouldn't work here." Rae stared at her hands. She turned them over and flexed her rough fingers. She really needed to paint her nails, whether she was going to work at The Devilhouse or not. "I'm too much of a liability. I mean, girls like Lizzy and Georgie, who are both from Back East, they don't know anyone around here. I'm connected to half the state, and they're connected to everyone else, even politicians and police chiefs and judges and drug lords and coyotes from across the Border. I don't want to cause trouble for you."

"You don't have to worry about The Devilhouse or me, Reagan."

She looked up when he used her full name. Usually, she didn't like it when people called her that, but Wulf tended to use more formal names, and

on his lips, it sounded different, more polite.

He continued, "This establishment has special licenses from the state for its operation, and our clientele is our best asset."

"Evidently. Man, I thought you were going to kill Jim Bob."

"Oh, I never think about killing people."

Rae glanced up at his icy eyes. That was a whole lot of denial for such an exaggerated cliché. It didn't take a psychology major or a Shakespearean actor to notice that Wulf doth protest too much. However, maybe his reasoning came from having been on the wrong end of a rifle. "Um, well, I can't believe you called Mayor Harding," Jim Bob's uncle and her uncle, too, "and that *he* comes here."

Her family had never been on the best of terms with the Hardings, which is why Rae could never have asked them for the money for college. They would have laughed at her for her presumption, just because her mother's sister had married one of the Harding brothers.

"Yes, and that's another reason why you should remain employed at The Devilhouse. I told your cousin that I would protect you. If you return home, Jim Bob might not be so tractable. He might try his assault again."

"I didn't think about that." Crud. She was kind of trapped, at least as far as working at The Devilhouse was concerned. However, Lizzy's feelings were still foremost in Rae's mind. "There's another problem, though."

Wulf leaned in and rested his forearms on the desk, the very image of a concerned employer. "What is that?"

She couldn't narc on Lizzy crushing on Wulf, either. "This seems wrong."

"What does?"

"The way that we always," and she wasn't sure what to call it because neither *making love* nor *screwing* seemed right, "can't help ourselves."

Wulf smiled a little more. "Well, then," he said, "we will refrain."

No !

Dang it, her brain couldn't decide what it wanted.

Yet, if she and Wulf could just have a business relationship, then Rae wouldn't be betraying Lizzy at every opportunity. "Okay."

"Do you have any other reservations about working here, other than our lack of self-control?"

"Just that, well, I don't know." Again, she always seemed to be on the verge of saying something obnoxious and judgmental. "I just don't get why

these guys would want to be spanked.”

Wulf’s smile betrayed nothing but calm amusement. “I believe that we were just about to have a training session.”

“Um, yeah. But we just talked about that.”

Wulf licked his lips, and even though his expression barely changed, Rae had the uncomfortable association of a wolf about to rush a wide-eyed lamb. He asked, “If I spank you and you like it, you’ll stay here and work for me, *ja*?”



## Rae's First Spanking

RAE had changed back into her street clothes—a sundress with a billowy skirt—because Wulf told her to.

She waited on the blocky couch in Play Room Five, which Wulf had called the Blue Room. The stand lamps threw light on the ceiling and glared off the marble end tables, exposing everything in the room to harsh light. The fake candle sconces in the medieval dungeon rooms were more forgiving of a person's flaws.

Rae's skirt had drifted up when she sat down, and the scratchy couch upholstery irritated the backs of her thighs.

Her leg trembled at being back in the same room where her cousin had tried to assault her, but she admonished herself that the *room* wasn't the problem and to stop being silly.

The vanilla candle had half-melted in its jar. The flame cast a shimmery glow up the far wall, and the room designed for sexual deviancy smelled like cookies.

The candle flicked, and she couldn't check her phone for the time or play a game to pass the time because Wulf had once again forbade phones, so she sat on the couch and waited.

She scratched at the nubby fabric, waiting.

The candle sputtered, and its glow on the blue wall above it sparkled. The flame settled back down to a steady burn.

*Still waiting.*

Maybe Wulf was trying to turn her into a Bella.

During some particularly stupid drunken banter at the party last week, the night she had met Wulf, Rae had insisted that she was not a Bella but a Katniss because she loved her family more than anything and because she could bowhunt.

That had gotten his attention. She was pretty sure that their conversation had interested him more than her screwing him against the wall in the bedroom with only inches of drywall separating them from the partying crowd.

Wulf seemed to be trying break down Rae and turn her into someone who would interest him less. That manipulative tendency to damage and dump, if that was what he was doing, suggested that smoke and emptiness swirled under his mirrored shell, just like Georgie and Lizzy had told Rae, and the very definition of a psychopath.

You know, maybe it was a really good idea that she had stopped having sex with Wulf. Besides protecting herself, Rae suspected that her opinion of the girl in the mirror would change fundamentally if she betrayed a friend. Lizzy was already in thrall to Wulf.

If anything, Rae had to rescue Lizzy from his influence, though she had no idea how to do that.

The brass doorknob clicked, turning, and Wulf strode in. He had taken off his suit jacket and was rolling his white shirt sleeves up to his elbows. Even the man hair on his arms was blond.

Rae hadn't seen his chest, just his back, when she had stripped off his shirt in the training session last weekend, she realized. She had been standing behind him and pulled his crisp shirt down around his elbows, revealing that terrible, twisted gunshot scar on his back, perilously near his spine, and the tattoo around it, but she hadn't seen his chest.

From across the room, he asked, "Do you submit?"

She knew this routine. "Yes."

"Safe word?"

"Macbeth."

He waved up at the black security sphere in the ceiling then flicked his hand like he was dismissing it. Had he told them to turn it off, like he had when he had screwed her from behind that very first "training" session? If he teased her again until she was desperate for him, Rae was not confident in her willpower to say no.

Wulf kicked the door closed behind him and twitched one pale eyebrow, a nifty trick. "Have you been a bad girl?"

Rae wasn't going to be a Bella for him. "No."

Wulf's blue eyes flared, and his smile turned ominous. "You know what you've done wrong."

Oh, Rae had done so very many things wrong, and guilt sat on her shoulders for all of them, starting with screwing a guy who her friend already had feelings for. She stared down at her sandals sinking into the blue shag carpeting.

He said, "Yes, you do. Come here."

Rae plodded over to him, still not looking up.

"How naughty have you been?"

Rae was betraying Lizzy right at that moment, though he had said they would stop having sex. She had lost her scholarship due to her own negligence. Working in The Devilhouse opposed every one of the values she had grown up believing.

She whispered, "Very naughty."

She heard him chuckle low in his throat. "That's better," he whispered back.

It wasn't better.

He stepped toward her and reached around her to her back, pressing himself against her body. He flipped her skirt up in back and grabbed her ass. "Since you've been very naughty, you'll need a bare-bottom spanking." He snapped her underwear elastic and then shoved them down. The cotton fluttered around her ankles.

"Remember," she said. Her lips were near his shirt collar. "We shouldn't."

"I won't," Wulf whispered. His breath trembled on her temple. "No matter how much you want me to."

Rae stepped out of her underwear, and they lay crumpled in a white lump on the carpet.

"Better." Wulf grabbed her bare ass again and pulled her against him.

Rae jerked her arms to her chest, and her arms ended up wedged between their bodies.

"So naughty." Wulf whirled her around, and she was startled with how easily he twirled her because she was no frail little girlie-girl. He ended up perched on the edge of an overstuffed paisley armchair, with Rae standing before him.

He pointed to his lap. "Down."

Rae bent her shaking knees and lowered herself over his thighs, her ass in the air. Her stomach rested on his hard legs. She grasped the arm of the chair and held on, ready for it to hurt.

Wulf tossed her skirt up to her waist, baring her ass. Cool air drifted over her butt cheeks .

Her thighs started to shake, and she lowered her head onto her arms.  
*Here it came.*

“Such tension,” Wulf said. “How shall we relax you?” His left hand rested on her spine and warmed her back. With his other hand, Wulf touched her ass cheek, and she jumped, thinking that this was it.

His one finger glided over her haunch. His touch almost tickled because Rae had been so ready for a slap. She grabbed the round arm of the chair and held on.

He stroked her other ass cheek with just one finger, slowly, just a feathery line over her backside.

On her spine, his hand massaged her lower back, kneading the tension away.

He brushed the skin on her butt, one cheek and then the other, alternating. “Such a lovely bum you have.”

That was pushing it. “It’s fat.”

He laughed. “Utter rubbish. Your bum is velvety, like a luscious peach.”

She’d never thought of her ass that way before.

However, he was going to bruise that peach in just a minute, and she tensed again.

The soft brushes of his fingers strengthened, and he caressed her backside.

Rae held onto the tapestry-upholstered chair arm with her fists, ready for his first strike.

His caresses with both hands deepened, pressing her flesh on the small of her back and her ass. He worked the stress out of her body. Considering her behavioral psychology exam yesterday, her childhood development test tomorrow, the cognitive dissonance invoked by signing that dang Devilhouse contract a few hours ago, and her cousin discovering her here and then trying to rape her, stress tied all her muscles in BDSM knots.

His hand dipped behind her, and he massaged the backs of her thighs.

Rae turned her head to sneak a peek. The look on his honed face seemed interested, like he was studying her skin, and intent, like he was playing a cello. She laid her forehead back on her arms.

His hand rubbing her back slipped farther down, past the small of her back and to her bottom. He stroked her backside with both of his hands, grasping and palming her ass and thighs.

Rae sighed, relaxing into the massage. Her legs sagged, and her body rested on his thighs.

His thumb grazed her pussy, sliding just inside the soft folds and sending

a wave of pleasure up her spine.

“That’s not spanking,” she gasped.

“I’m the spanker, here,” Wulf said. His bass voice rumbled. “I’ll decide what is spanking and what’s not.”

“We said that we wouldn’t.” When he slipped one finger delicately along the lips of her pussy, her voice squeaked.

“And we won’t,” he said. “But you should enjoy your first spanking.”

So he was still going to spank her. He just hadn’t yet. Rae put her head down on her arms.

He kneaded her flesh more, palpating her bottom, and he slipped his hands between her thighs and eased her legs apart. She felt her legs open, and she wanted him to touch her there again. She knew that she shouldn’t let him touch her, shouldn’t allow him to get her all sexed up until she couldn’t help herself, but she shifted her weight, and her legs parted. It felt like her mind had no control over her thighs opening to him.

His hands gripped her, and his fingers slowly explored her plump butt cheeks. He neared her center again, and one of his hands continued to massage her hips and thighs while his fingers just grazed the lips of her pussy.

This wasn’t spanking at all.

A small part of her brain that wasn’t reeling in desire for him wondered if he had ever intended to spank her or if his plan had always been to drive her mad so that she would screw him again. She started to push up on her elbows—whether to run out of the play room or to unbutton his pants and straddle him, she wasn’t sure,—but he shoved her back down, and that was when he slapped her ass.

The sting shot through her, and she gasped.

“Don’t move,” Wulf said pleasantly. His hands caressed her sore flesh, kneading the hot skin.

She clutched the rough arm of the chair, bracing herself for another spank that must be coming, but his hands massaged her thighs and ass cheeks as if he had never spanked her.

His fingers drifted inward again, and he traced the soft folds of her pussy as if deciding what to do.

Rae breathed hard, controlling the desire to run or to turn. She lifted her head and stared at the stainless steel St. Andrew’s cross, silver against the blue wall.

If he tied her up, she would be able to relax, but only Wulf's strong arms and the threat of spanking held her across his knees. She clung to the armchair's upholstery with all her might.

One of his fingers glided between the lips of her pussy, stroking her sensitive nub. Rae arched her back as pleasure tightened. He smoothed his other hand down her thighs, and she opened more to him.

He slipped his thumb inside her wet center, and her body squeezed around him. She wanted his cock to pound into her like when he had taken her hard on his desk last week and, without thinking, she pushed herself up.

He smacked her again, harder this time, and pain sparked through her body. "Ow!"

"I said, don't move." He massaged her stinging skin with one hand. His other fingers brushed her clit, tracing slippery lines down her center, and his thumb slid inside her.

"I want to move. I want you," she admitted.

"Stay where you are." His thumb pressed inside her, pressed down on *something* there, and drove another shock of pleasure through her.

Her arms slipped off the chair and she grabbed the chair arm to keep from falling off. "I'm sorry. I was wrong. Please let me sit up."

"That's my naughty girl." He spanked her again, and he grabbed the sore skin of her ass cheek and rolled it under his palm so that her core rippled around his thumb, rubbing her inside. She revolved around that spot of pleasure between her legs.

Another spank, and he slid his fingers over her clit, and pleasure rippled up her spine. The skin on her ass was so sensitive from the slaps that every brush sent a jolt through her.

Another sharp slap, and he pushed his thumb deeper inside her, rubbing the tender rim and stroking her clit with his other fingers.

Rae's body squeezed, clenching his hand. Her vision of the candlelight flaring on the wall narrowed. She gasped, and he circled his thumb around that nub.

One more sharp slap stung her.

The tight need in her body vibrated and burst .

The pain of the spank got all mixed up with the pleasure that ricocheted through her body. She clung to the arm of the chair as wave after wave of frenzy rolled through her. Every time he slapped her ass and stroked her clit, a pulse rose and roiled from her pussy to her head, rocking her, and she cried

out. He did it again and again, spanking her and grasping her pussy and clit as he squeezed another and another *and another* burst of fire through her.

Then he was massaging her again, and running his hands over the trembling muscles of her pussy and inner thighs. Cream ran out of her pussy and down her legs.

Rae gasped for air. “*What did you do?*”

Wulf flipped Rae over on his lap, juggling her until he cradled her in his arms.

Tremors shook her body. Her pussy clenched like a heartbeat, and aftershocks pulsed through her.

She hadn’t known orgasms came in so many forms. Before the last week, the only orgasms that she’d ever had were a kind of half-hearted throbbing. She said, “If that’s how I’m supposed to spank the clients, I’ve been doing it *all wrong* .”

“The particulars are not the lesson. The point of today’s training is that the Dom’s will is paramount. Yes, we established parameters and a safe word; however, I took control. When you resisted, you were punished. Your decisions, your will, were irrelevant. Do you understand that?”

“Yeah. Yeah, I do.”

“Now,” he said, “this part, afterward, is what about half of our clients come here for. We have finished the contractual obligations, and many of the clients enjoy talking with the girls for the rest of their time.”

Rae could barely concentrate on what he was saying. His body warmed her, and she slipped her arms around his neck. “Oh?”

“For the half of our clients who are low on the Scoville scale, so to speak, I suspect that the real attraction of The Devilhouse is a girl who will listen to them. The fact that many of our girls are half-naked or clothed in fetishwear while they listen only adds to the attraction.”

“Yeah?” Rae curled up and burrowed her face into his chest. Inside his white shirt, his chest smelled like cinnamon and a wild meadow and clean, warm man. She wasn’t really listening to what he was saying. Her body hummed.

“But we can discuss that another time,” Wulf said. He rested his arms around her and leaned back in the chair.

If Rae were a good friend to Lizzy, she would stand up, thank Wulf for the training session, and leave.

She really should do that, any minute now.

Under her weight, Wulf heaved a sigh, and his strong arms tightened around her. His lips moved against her hair.

Yep, any minute now, Rae was going to stand up and leave.

Her hand sneaked inside his shirt, and she could feel his strong heart beating under his soft undershirt and the heavy muscles of his chest. She wondered how close the bullet had come to his heart.

Small hairs peeking from the top of his undershirt were soft under her fingers. As she played with them, the candlelight glinted dark gold on them and his skin. She traced the strong cords that ran from his jaw down to his chest. His scent—like exotic tea and springtime and natural man,—*that* rose out of his shirt, and she turned her face inward.

She wasn't planning anything. He just smelled so good, and breathing him in made her head spin.

The tip of her nose brushed his neck. Wulf stretched just a little, exposing more of his throat.

She took advantage and kissed his neck, then lower.

Wulf shifted in the chair under her, adjusting his legs.

She lipped his neck, tasting his warm skin. The faintest tang of salt touched her tongue, but the scent of cinnamon and tea from his cologne filled her mouth.

He cleared his throat. "One of us has *not* just had a spanking."

She slid her hands around his torso, pressing her breasts against him. She pushed her face against his neck and opened her mouth, sucking on his neck. Tasting his skin on her lips and tongue and feeling his body, even through his clothes, under her palms and fingers quickened her breath.

His hands gripped her arm and hip more firmly. His muscles hardened with tension. "You're learning cruelty quickly, aren't you?"

Rae mouthed his neck, following his bulging tendons to his chest. She tucked her chin into his undershirt and kissed an extra inch of his skin. His scent was muskier there, filling her mouth and nose .

His strangled sigh breathed on her hair. "I am an adult man. I do not lose control."

Making him lose control, someday, might be incredible, and a shiver rushed through her, even though they weren't going to have sex any more. She slid one arm around his trim waist, running her fingers over the ripples of muscle under his clothes.

He shifted again in the chair and cupped her head with his hand, pressing



her harder to his neck.

She tucked her legs under herself and slid down his body to the floor. Her face pressed his white shirt, which was so smooth that it felt like silk on her cheek but so crisp when it rustled that it must be cotton. She kneeled between his legs, still breathing in his scent through his shirt, and began unbuckling his belt.

Wulf covered her hands with his. “You said that we shouldn’t indulge. You should stop.”

“I don’t want to stop.” Her voice broke when she panted.

“You said we should not indulge in such things.”

“This doesn’t count. It’s just heavy petting, right?”

He gazed down at her, and his tortured blue eyes belied his calm expression. “I don’t want to argue with you.”

“Then don’t.”

“I desperately do not want to argue with you. I want nothing more than to sit back and not argue with you. Every fiber of my body is insisting that I not argue with you, but I think you’ll regret this.”

“I won’t regret it.” He was as tempting as a big slice of blond cheesecake on a white plate, and now that she had nibbled his neck, she wanted another bite, and another, and she wanted him in her mouth, on her tongue, and in her throat.

“Must I say my safe word?” His strained voice seemed squeezed.

“Please don’t.” She splayed her hand on his chest and nudged him back in the chair. “Let me do this.”

He stared at the ceiling like something up there would rescue him, and he inhaled a deep, measured breath like he was preparing to lift something heavy.

Rae glanced at the white, popcorn ceiling, but the security camera was mounted on the other side of the room, and Wulf was only staring at a recessed light bulb.

He said, “I don’t have a condom. ”

She unlatched his belt and slid the leather strap out of the buckle. “I don’t care.”

“I can find one.”

“Don’t move.”

He clenched his hands around the chair’s armrests, but he didn’t stand up. “You’re telling a Helvetian to disregard rules.”

Maybe she could make him late for his next appointment, too.

Since he had said that he was Helvetian, which was what he said when he meant that he was Swiss, so the security camera must be off.

She unhooked and unzipped his suit pants. His cock strained against his underwear, pushing it up.

Okay, Rae had never actually done this before, and the haze of desire in her mind parted to let just a little of that insecurity pierce through. She should have done an internet search on how to blow a guy.

Yet, he had teased her plenty. She should be able to figure this out.

Her mouth was hungry to taste him, and she rubbed his thighs just to feel his strong legs with her hands. His pants' fabric caught in the calluses on her palms like it was spun from spiderwebs, though it felt like wool, only thinner, finer.

She pulled out his shirt tails and pushed them out of the way. Her hand strayed over his underwear, and she ran her fingernails over the tented cotton.

He sighed and closed his eyes.

She peeled back his underwear, tugging the elastic down and under his dick.

Freed, his long cock bobbed with his heartbeat. No wonder it felt like he slid inside her forever.

She trailed her fingers over the top, and it jumped like it was trying to get her.

His shaft was paler pink than other ones she had seen, but Wulf was lighter than most guys. Long veins ran like purple cords up the sides to the rosy cap.

A bead of precum emerged from the top and shimmered in the lights. She touched it, and the sticky drop clung to her finger. It tasted a little salty, a little sweet, and almost like nothing.

She slid her hand down the length of his cock, and Wulf shifted in his chair. His knees bumped her shoulders on both sides.

The curly fuzz at the base of his dick was a darker shade of blond. Skin gathered near the head.

She leaned forward and slid her lips over the head of his cock, taking his velvety hardness into her mouth a little at a time. The muskiness from his body was stronger as her face neared his groin, more like the dark scent of chocolate or coffee, though the cinnamon and cloves from his cologne still wafted around her.

He gasped and arched under her.

She sat up. "Did I hurt you?"

His eyes were closed, and he pressed himself back in the chair. "No. Your mouth is so hot. It surprised me."

Okay, she knew that Wulf had had blow jobs before. Lots of them. From women whom Rae knew. Nothing should surprise him.

She dipped her head and lowered her mouth over his dick again.

He reached for her hair, his fingers grasping her ringlets.

She sucked his cock in, filling up her mouth, sliding it over her tongue to her throat. Inside her mouth, his cock pulsed, pushing against her tongue. He tasted like a hint of salt and the warm scent from his body.

Above her head, Wulf groaned again. His hips moved under her, like he wanted to thrust but held back.

She wrapped her hands around the lower part of his cock that she couldn't take into her mouth and pushed him farther down her throat. She didn't gag, but his cock pushed everywhere in her mouth, stretching her jaw open.

*She was doing it.*

Inside her mouth, she licked him, undulating her tongue against his shaft.

Wulf's body was so coiled so tight that it felt like he was going to spring out of the chair.

If she teased him a little more, she bet she could make him groan again.

She licked up his cock, pressing the flat of her tongue to the hard ridge up the front, and then sucked it into her mouth.

He grunted, and his body flinched.

That was close to what she wanted him to do, but more stimulation might make him actually cry out.

She pressed down, taking as much of his cock as she could into her mouth. Rearing up, she ran her tongue around the plump head and then plunged down on him again.

Wulf grabbed fistfuls of her hair and, without hurting her, guided her head up and down a few times until his whole body went rigid and his cock pulsed hard in her mouth. He shouted a wordless cry, and his fists clenched in her hair. The salt of his cum ran over her tongue and down the back of her throat as he spurted. She swallowed it all.

He was gasping for breath as she sucked up the shaft, releasing him. Her lips felt raw, and her throat, stretched. She arranged his clothes over him

because he wasn't even sticky or anything. That was a pretty cool benefit. She crawled up his body to his lap and curled up in his arms.

That had probably gone okay. He didn't seem injured. If he had liked it as much as it looked like he had from his half-closed eyes and ragged breath, she must have done a halfway good job.

Under her hand that lay on his chest, his heart hammered through his shirt.

It was silly of her to be so proud of herself, to feel such an effusive glow for forcing him to lie back and then doing something so wild to him.

Yeah, *to* him. Not *with* him. *To* him.

It was kind of Dommish of her, and she kind of liked it, if she were to admit such a thing.

She snuggled in closer to his warmth, feeling his heartbeat and listening to his breath in his lungs. She could lie here for hours.

"Dine with me," Wulf whispered. "Saturday."

"Okay," she said, sleepy with afterglow. "After Saturday night here?"

"Yes."

"Should I meet you at the restaurant?"

"No," Wulf whispered over her head and settled his arms around her, cradling her to his chest. "We'll go to my place."

"Okay." Rae yawned and rested against him, admiring the muscular curves and toying with the soft blond hairs that peeked through his unbuttoned shirt collar.

It was only later, when she was lying in her narrow dorm bed, listening to her cousin Hester snore, that Rae's eyes popped open in the dark because Wulf had invited her to his *home* .

## **Book 5: Secrets of His Heart**

## Lizzy in Love, Again

RAE Stone sat on the hard carpet in her suitemates' bedroom between their twin beds, her back resting against their nightstand, while they sat cross-legged on their beds and craned their necks down to talk to her. She drank burnt, black coffee, careful not to slosh any because the coffee's heat had softened the plastic party cup until it flexed in her fingers. The coffee tasted like the plastic was leaching into it, but Rae wouldn't complain about coffee offered in friendship, even though she was sleepy, still wearing her fuzzy pajamas, and was not a good friend.

Rae's suitemates Lizzy and Georgie had pounded on their adjoining bathroom's door at ten o'clock Saturday morning, insisting that they hadn't seen Rae for *days* and they needed to talk to her *now*.

Of course they hadn't seen much of Rae lately. She had been dodging them with decent success for almost two weeks. Guilt had driven Rae right underground. She had finally found the courage to tell Wulf no more sex just a few days ago, and she had honored it.

Sort of.

Technically.

"So you're official?" Georgie asked Rae, staring down at her like a perched hawk that could see all of Rae's failings. "Lock, stock, and W-2 forms?"

"Dropped off the medical release yesterday. Signed all the paperwork." *Signed away my soul.* "I'm officially a Domme." Rae sipped the bitter coffee and wished the girls had offered her some milk or sugar, but she wouldn't be so impolite to ask when they probably didn't have any. The rules of poor, polite society were different, and Rae had grown up with a deep appreciation for her childhood classmates overlooking patched clothes, free breakfast and lunch passes, and skimpy donations at church.

"That's awesome," Lizzy said. "Domming is so much better than being a blowjob artist. Sometimes, I can't get the taste of latex out of my throat for hours."

"Vodka," Georgie told Lizzy.

“Vodka gives me a headache,” Lizzy said.

Rae wanted to cover her ears, but she held her hot plastic tumbler with both hands. “Iced tea?”

They laughed at her innocent idea.

Georgie said, “Long Island Iced Tea might do the trick.”

“Yep,” Lizzy said, “Long Island Iced Tea will knock the taste of just about anything out of your mouth.”

“Or your brain. Did it work?” Georgie asked.

Lizzy looked at the rough carpet near Rae’s feet. “Not really.”

Georgie turned to Rae. “Lizzy’s still mooning after The Dom. We went out last night to get her laid, but it didn’t take.”

Oh, *The Dom*. Lizzy and Georgie called Wulf *The Dom* because he ran The Devilhouse, which employed all three college girls. Georgie had warned Rae and Lizzy not to fall for him, and her description of him as gossamer smoke inside a mirrored shell had made Rae diagnose him as a psychopath before she had ever met him. Psychology majors can diagnose most mental illnesses with seemingly inadequate, second-hand information.

“I know I’m being stupid,” Lizzy said, sipping her coffee from a Golden Devil mug. “His Dom-Dates are always one-night-stands. It was never meant to be more than that. I’m just being stupid.”

“You’re still wearing those after-date earrings he gave you.”

“Yeah,” Lizzy sighed. Large, sparkly solitaires glinted in Lizzy’s ears.

“But those aren’t real diamonds or anything,” Rae said.

“Oh yeah, they are. Certificates and everything.” Lizzy tossed her head. Her bed-flat blond hair didn’t move, but the diamonds threw points of laser light over the twin beds and Lizzy’s row of lush plants spilling over the window sill near the ceiling.

Georgie said, “Some less-scrupulous girls might go on a first date just for the jewelry, but everyone goes on the second date for the *date* .”

Wulf had tried to give Rae a pair of earrings right after she had met him and screwed him at a party, but those had been three rhinestones with a dangling sparkly thing on a white metal chain. Rae hadn’t felt right about the gift and had given them back. Then she gave him back the crystal-encrusted bracelet in the Tiffany box that she was sure was fake. If those had been real diamonds, they would have been worth a fortune, and that was nuts, and relief sighed through her that she had given them back no matter what they were. She wasn’t the type of girl to wear crazy-fancy jewelry, anyway. Rae

was blue jeans and barbeque, not fancy linen napkins and sparkly rocks.

Finally, Wulf had given Rae a set of two used books, a proper gift for a college student. Rae thought it was odd that he gave her really old books when brand new copies of Shakespeare's sonnets and epic poems were available at bookstores or online, but she liked them.

Georgie regarded Lizzy with sorrow in her brown eyes. "We can go out again tonight."

"We're supposed to go to The Devilhouse tonight." Apprehension tightened Lizzy's voice, even though her gray-blue eyes filled with tears.

Lizzy had been fighting this adoration for weeks. Such devotion was more than just a crush.

Lizzy's heartbroken expression was more than Rae could bear, and Lizzy had had him first. "Maybe you should tell The Dom how you feel."

"Oh no, she shouldn't," Georgie said quickly.

"No way," Lizzy said. "No fucking way."

Was there a raging side to Wulf that Rae had never seen? Would he make fun of Lizzy? Or fire her? "Why not?"

Lizzy sighed. "Because he'll think I'm an idiot, even if he would never say anything so uncultured. He might not ask me out for another date, and I don't even want to think about that."

Georgie said, "Look, I like the guy. There are lots of benefits to hanging out with The Dom, and he's generous with them. His dates are nights to remember. He helps all us girls get into top-tier graduate programs or get amazing jobs after graduation, international jobs, if you want them. Lizzy, you don't know what he'll do if you spill the beans because you don't really know a damn thing about him. Not where he grew up. Not where he lives *now*. Not who his *friends* are. Not his even his *name*. He hides so much that it has to be calculated. We don't even know what he did with that poor cat that was hanging around The Devilhouse."

Rae stared at the wall that some previous dorm resident had wallpapered with teal stripes and paisleys and tried not to let her expression change as she thought: *Wulfrum something-something van Hanover. Switzerland. I'm supposed to go to his house tonight. And he has an old gunshot scar on his back that I don't think they've seen, either.*

But Lizzy should know where The Dom lived. After their date, surely they hadn't gone back to Lizzy's dorm room for the finale. Rae would have heard every thump through the eggshell walls.



Rae shouldn't ask. "Lizzy?" She really shouldn't ask. "If you didn't go back to his place on your date," she should shut up right now, "where did you guys end up?"

"Oh, back at The Devilhouse, on the main stage, though the ballroom was empty. It was actually kind of creepy at first. It echoed."

"Oh. Okay." Tonight, Wulf had invited Rae to eat supper with him at his home. Rae wasn't sure if he was letting her into his heart or if she was walking into the belly of the beast, and she couldn't even discuss it with Lizzy and Georgie because it would break Lizzy's heart.

And he had even made her promise not to try to find out any more about him.

Jesus, this might be the trap. She might end up dead out in the desert. Rae's paranoia was kicking in, hard, even though she felt stupid thinking it.

No, Wulf had never been anything but nice to her.

Yeah, and psychopaths were some of the nicest guys around, right up until they revealed themselves as serial killers or sadistic rapists.

Yet, The Devilhouse was such a closed environment that, if he was a demon in a mirrored shell, the girls would know and react to him differently than the odd combination of sexual frisson, sexual submissiveness, and fondness from every last one of them.

Rae's head could not hold any more sides to that argument.

"*I don't care,*" Lizzy said. "I don't want to know all that if he doesn't want me to know. I'm content to just call him The Dom or Sir," she sighed, "or Master."

Lizzy's reaction was purely that of a normal empathic person who was under the spell of a psychopath. Rae watched Lizzy's light gray-blue eyes shift from her coffee to the ceiling and back.

"Lizzy, this isn't healthy," Georgie said.

*Dang straight.* Rae shifted on the hard carpet, trying to not look like she was fidgeting.

Lizzy insisted, "*I like it when he ties me up and makes me beg.*"

So now Rae knew what had happened during their date. She wished she could pour bleach in her ears and scrub it out. Her hand stole toward her head, a transparent attempt to cover her ears.

Georgie said, "You're thinking with your pussy, Lizzy."

Rae's hand neared her ear, but she still held the bitter coffee in the red cup, so she couldn't press both hands around her head. Rae's own bedroom

was just through that closed bathroom door, where she could jam her pillow over her head so she wouldn't have to hear this.

Lizzy continued, "I *want* to sit at his feet wearing nothing but his collar."

Which was what Wulf said that he wanted Rae to do during their first training session, and Rae had balked. She scratched her head behind her ear, trying to camouflage her unease.

Lizzy said, "I just want him to fuck me again. I want to feel helpless like that."

Rae clapped her hand flat over her ear. She kind of did know what Lizzy meant there. When Wulf had bent Rae over his desk, even gargantuan Rae had felt like Wulf was overpowering her, though she was entirely complicit. Just thinking about the time that he had tied her up, spread-eagle, and taken her from behind sent a zing to her clit.

Even though Rae had liked it, a lot, that helpless feeling had scared her. Evidently, Lizzy liked all of it.

A hollowness grew in Rae's stomach because she could not be what Wulf wanted, but Lizzy could.

Rae said, "You should listen to your heart."

Georgie snapped, "You shouldn't listen to your heart or your pussy, Lizzy. Think with your *head*. Falling for him is a bad idea."

"I just want to do what he tells me to," Lizzy said.

The teal stripes on the wall started to drift in Rae's vision, climbing over each other, kind of like how Rae would have to clamber over Lizzy's bed to beat feet out the door to get away.

Georgie shook her head. "Lizzy, he's not the type to take a sub or a slave. He likes women, in the plural, *craves* women, in the plural. He'd never commit."

Everything that Wulf had said to Rae suggested that what he really wanted was a submissive woman, and Rae was anything but that. She had argued with her *minister* when she was only sixteen, for Heaven's sake. She had defied most of her family to run off to college.

Lizzy, however, was exactly the type of girl that Wulf wanted. They were made for each other. The Dom and sub. The Master and the slave girl.

"Lizzy." Rae wished she didn't have to say this, but she did. "You should tell him. Tonight." Lizzy should go home with Wulf tonight, not Rae. Rae stared into the dark depths of her coffee, feeling like she had just dived into a dark, hot hole. "You should go to The Devilhouse early, so there's no time

pressure, and you should tell him how you feel.”

“I couldn’t,” Lizzy said.

“And she shouldn’t,” Georgie said.

“Why not?”

“I told you. He’ll think I’m an idiot. I won’t ever have even another date with him.”

Rae knew the answer to this one. She used it a lot when her family told her that she just *couldn’t* do something. “Risk it. Tell him. Make the leap of faith.”

Georgie insisted, “You don’t know what he’ll do.”

Rae shook her head, dispelling the stupid heaviness between her ears. “Why don’t you guys know anything about The Dom?” Rae asked, and it felt weird to not use Wulf’s name. She was dangerously close to slipping. “Why don’t you just do an internet search on him?”

“How can we?” Georgie asked. “We don’t know his *name*. One of the girls, Sonya, is a journalism major, and she tried to dig up something on him. The Devilhouse is owned by a private corporation, the shares of which are owned by other offshore corporations, which is run by a trust set up in Switzerland, and it was all this endless spiral of legal walls. I think he’s in the Mafia.”

Lizzy said, “He’s kind of blond to be in the Mafia.”

“Northern Italians are blond,” Georgie said.

Lizzy shook her head. “He doesn’t have an Italian accent.”

“Okay, what kind of accent is that, then?”

“English.”

“It’s not just British. There’s other stuff in there, too.”

They went round and round about Wulf’s pronunciation of various words with French, German, British, Irish, and other accents as if they were English Lit majors dissecting *Finnegan’s Wake*.

Rae pulled her phone out of her bra strap and considered the browser button. If she had opened up a laptop in front of them, they would have been all over her just due to idle curiosity. Her phone, however, was more subtle.

Engaging in a little casual cyberstalking wasn’t exactly wrong, these days. Everyone’s life was an open webpage.

She had promised Wulf that she wouldn’t pry into his life, but that was a sex promise. Guys made all sorts of sex promises. *I just want to lie in bed together and snuggle. I don’t have a girlfriend. I’ll pull out.*

Heck, they weren't having sex any more, not since Rae had put the kibosh on it because Lizzy had seen Wulf first, and they certainly wouldn't have sex after tonight when Lizzy told Wulf about her feelings for him. Sex promises should end when the possibility of more sex ends.

*Right?*

Besides, there might be a *real* reason why Lizzy shouldn't confess her feelings for him.

Rae's paranoia, usually useless and too late, reared its head and demanded that she find out what he was hiding from everyone. She knew his name. Not doing due diligence was stupid of her.

That enormous scar on Wulf's back testified that he was no stranger to violence.

He might be a serial killer, acquitted on a technicality.

He might be a KGB assassin, gone to ground.

He might be the third generation of a secret Nazi Aryan eugenics experiment and survived when the Nazis tried to wipe out the evidence.

She touched the browser icon on her phone and opened a search engine. She tapped the screen with her oversized fingers, delicately tracing words on the screen keyboard, until she had typed in *Wulfrum van Hanover* .

A bunch of garbage results came up, but a link on the top of the list suggested, *Did you mean Wulfram von Hannover?* which looked to Rae like it could be the correct spelling for Wulf's name. She had never seen it, after all. He had only said it the one time.

Rae tapped the top link and then desperately wished to God that she hadn't.

Lizzy and Georgie whipped around and stared at her. "What's wrong? "

"Nothing." Rae tapped the home key on the phone screen. Icons lined up in neat rows, hiding the horrible picture that would reappear if Rae opened the browser.

"Bullshit," Georgie said. Lizzy nodded.

"Really. Nothing." Rae composed her face to be blank as stone, acting with all her might.

Georgie said, "I call bullshit. You jumped and gasped like you stuck your finger in a light socket. Give it up."

*Never.* Her eyes burned with tears.

Rae said, "Just remembered that I have homework due tomorrow morning in Abby Psych. I've got to get on it or I'm toast. Can't fail two

classes.” She plastered a grin on her face and tried to breathe but her nose was clogged so she sucked air through her teeth.

“Tomorrow’s Sunday,” Lizzy said.

“I mean, Monday morning. It’s due Monday morning, but I need to do it right now.”

Lizzy and Georgie glanced at each other then turned their suspicious faces back to Rae.

Lizzy said, “We’re here for you, if you need to talk.”

“I just need to go back to my room and grab some books before I head over to the library. I think I’ll study in the library because I’ll need the bigger table to set out all my books for my homework,” she babbled. “And it’ll probably take a couple hours, so I probably won’t see you guys at dinner. Maybe later. Maybe tonight.”

Georgie asked, “Are you going to The Devilhouse tonight?”

Saturday night. Wulf had said that she should go to The Devilhouse that Saturday night.

If she saw him, she wouldn’t know what to do. She didn’t think she could hide her horror. “I’m supposed to.”

“Then you’d better go. Do you want to ride with us? It’s Lizzy’s turn to be the designated driver.”

Lizzy bobbed her head cheerfully. The blond pixie spikes of her bedhead hair didn’t move, despite the vigorous nodding.

“I think I’d better drive myself, and Lizzy should go early, anyway. What time are we supposed to show up?” Rae stared at her phone. She had to see the pictures again. She had to be sure.

“Like, nine,” Georgie said.

“Okay, like, nine.” Rae fled, gripping the phone and its terrible images in her hand. She ran through the bathroom to her own bedroom and locked the door from her side.

In the small bedroom, she slid down the door and opened the browser on her phone because she needed to see it again, needed to see if somehow, possibly, *please dear God*, she was wrong, and the child in the photo wasn’t Wulf.

In the formal portrait beside the news picture, *both* boys looked like a child version of Wulf. Baby skin plumped their faces, but Wulf’s deep blue eyes stared out of the little boy on the right. The other little boy had gray eyes, though his hair was just as blindingly blond. The gray-eyed boy’s face

was a little longer, a little thinner, than Wulf's. They weren't identical twins, but the one on the right with the strong cheekbones and jaw even through the baby fat looked so much like Wulf.

The expression of the blue-eyed boy in the picture didn't look like Wulf, though. The little boy looked stiff, almost haughty, as haughty as a child of seven or eight can look. Neither of the boys smiled, like the picture had been taken in the 1800's, but it was in color, and their little-boy suits looked like they were tiny, modern CEOs.

Rae could see Wulf in that child as clearly as she could see herself when she looked at her own baby pictures.

But the other image, the news picture, drove a terrible arrow through Rae's lungs.

Grotesque red smeared the child Wulf's screaming face as he clutched his brother's shattered head. The words around the picture made no sense, just random jumbles of letters, and it took Rae a second to realize the article was written in some other language.

Rae wished she hadn't seen it. Wulf had been right to tell her not to search for anything about him. No one should have to endure such horror, and she couldn't bear that Wulf had been nearly murdered and that his brother had been killed in front of him.

Sweet Jesus, she wanted to hold Wulf and make it all go away, and she couldn't imagine the terror and pain when he was a boy, such a little boy, crumpled in the street, bleeding on his murdered brother's body.

She sobbed out her horror, gulping and dripping, holding the phone screen to her heart. The posters of island beaches and Christian pop bands tacked on the walls blurred into incomprehensible smears .

The door to the small study room opened, and Hester peeked into the bedroom. "Reagan? Are you all right?"

Rae reached out for her cousin, hysterically grasping the air because, even though they had such different views, they were flesh and blood and Rae couldn't imagine Hester lying dead in the street, let alone one of her own brothers.

"Lord in Heaven, Reagan. What happened?" Hester settled beside her on the floor and set her arms around her. "Are you all right? Should I call your mom?"

"It's not me," Rae squeezed out, though her voice was strangled. "A friend of mine, a guy I know, I just found out something terrible happened to

him when he was a kid. He was shot, and his brother was killed in front of him.”

Hester held Rae closer. She whispered, “Drug connections?”

Rae shook her head. “He’s not from the Border.”

“I’m sorry, Rae.” Sitting there on the floor, Hester held her and rocked her.

Rae couldn’t think of anything to do so long after it had happened. “Will you pray with me?”

Hester pulled away and surprise lit her face. “Seriously?” but she composed herself. “Yes. Of course.”

Hester adjusted so she was kneeling, rearranged her skirt, and steadied Rae while she pulled her pajamaed legs under herself. They kneeled together, and Rae leaned on Hester.

“Dear Jesus,” Hester said, strong and sure. Rae wished she could pour her heart into it, too. “We come to You today in pain. Our friend,” her voice dropped, “what’s his name, Rae?”

*Another choice.* “Dom.”

“Short for Dominic?”

“Yeah.”

Hester’s voice rose to ring from corners of the low ceiling. “Our friend, Dominic, has suffered a grievous loss, and he needs your grace and peace, Oh Lord. He needs to be healed. We come to you, Oh Lord, Sweet Jesus, to offer ourselves as Your vessel, to bring Your love to him, so that he can believe in You, and come into Your Light and be healed. In the name of Our Lord, Jesus Christ, Amen.”

“Amen,” said Rae, even though that wasn’t what she wanted to say. She had wanted to pour out her grief and to rage at God for letting such a terrible thing happen to a child, but Hester’s way must be better.

“Now,” Hester turned her gaze on Rae. “Where did you meet this Dominic?”

Rae was so wrung out that she couldn’t even figure out a decent lie. “At work. They yanked my scholarship. I had to get a job to stay in school.”

“Hmmm. Is that where you’ve been late at night the last couple weeks?”

Rae nodded.

“What are you doing?”

If Rae said she was a waitress at some restaurant, every member of her family including Hester would show up to be waited on to show their

support. “I’m serving drinks at a bar.”

Hester sniffed. “Reagan, you shouldn’t subject yourself to being in the presence of alcohol and drunkards.”

“It’s the only way I can stay in school.”

“Some things aren’t worth it, Rae. You should avoid sin and sinners and keep yourself pure. A college education isn’t worth tainting your immortal soul. I would never degrade myself so. God would send someone else to be a teacher in Pirtleville.”

Steel filled Rae’s spine because she was doing the right thing: humbling herself at The Devilhouse so she could build an autism clinic.

It would be worth it.



## Georgiana's Gossip

WULF lounged behind his desk and scanned through email on his phone, scrolling quickly with his thumb.

His office door was ajar, and it creaked open.

Wulf's thighs tightened, ready to leap. Sneaking up on him was a singularly bad idea.

Georgiana sidled in the open door and pressed it closed behind her.

Georgiana was a bright girl with a blazing independent streak, and she now reminded him of his sister, but that was odd because olive-skinned and brunette Georgiana in no way resembled honey-blond Flicka. Georgiana was still wearing jeans that clung to her slim hips and a tight Golden Devil tee shirt over her athletic body, so she hadn't dressed for tonight yet.

Georgiana asked, "Sir? Can we talk for a sec?"

"Of course." Wulf thumb-clicked his email closed and laid his phone screen-down on his desk. If she was submitting her resignation, losing two contractors in the same week would be difficult to manage. Sonya's retirement had produced a hole in the schedule that his office manager was scrambling to fill.

Georgiana fidgeted by twisting one toe of her sandal into the carpeting, an unusual gesture for her. Wulf had seen her fidget three times in the past few years. Once was after their first date, and the other two times were when she had problem clients and needed help dealing with them.

Georgiana said, "You've got two girls in love with you."

Not a problem client then, which was the predicament Wulf had been hoping for. He sat back in his chair and tapped his desk once. "I never tried to lead you on."

Georgiana looked up at him, and the serious gaze of her brown eyes caught his attention. "I'm not one of them."

"Then I don't discuss personal matters. Thank you for your concern."

"You don't have to talk. You just have to listen, but *you do really need to listen to me.*"

She wasn't fidgeting anymore, and she had leaned forward as if her next

statement might be a shout. Her distress alarmed him. "Please sit down. Please continue."

Georgiana sat in the chair on the left in front of his desk, and she braced herself with her arms on her knees. "Lizzy took the let-down after your date really hard."

His innate sense of privacy would not allow him to gossip in return. "I see."

"She thinks she's in love with you. She wants to sit naked at your feet and be your slave girl."

He should have been able to predict that. Failure rankled him. "Go on."

"She's on her way here now to confess it all to you and beg you to take her on as your sub. I don't know what you want to do about that, but I thought that you shouldn't be caught unaware."

Wulf slowed his breathing and his heart rate. It wouldn't do for Georgiana to see him react badly to that news because he would not want to embarrass Lizbeth. He had thought that he had been forthright with Lizbeth about the nature of their evening, but evidently, he hadn't.

Georgiana said, "She's really fragile right now. She had a break-up a little while ago over the Devilhouse, when the guy found out what she did for money, and she's really hurting. She just wants acceptance."

"Thank you for bringing this to my attention. I'll handle the matter."

"Be careful with her."

"I will. I never meant to hurt her." To Wulf's consternation, he had not meant to be so forthcoming. America must be influencing him.

Georgiana said, "Some girls can't handle The Boyfriend Experience."

"Understood." Wulf touched his phone, a nonchalant gesture that suggested he might pick it up, even though crawling over the desk to obtain the next piece of information was uppermost in his thoughts. "And the other girl is? "

"Rae."

Despite his practiced suppression of adrenaline, Wulf's heart jumped in his chest. "Reagan?"

"This morning, Lizzy was telling Rae and me about how she felt about you, and I thought I was going to have to take Rae's coffee away from her before she crushed the cup."

She *paused*.

Georgiana *paused* just when Wulf's heart was blocking his throat and he

could not draw air into his lungs.

He said, "Go on."

"Rae told Lizzy to tell you how she felt, and then Rae ran back to her own room, and we could hear her crying. Those dorm walls are about as thick as construction paper."

"She was crying?" Wulf's voice rose, and he swallowed hard to modulate his reaction. Rumors had started on less.

Georgiana said, "Sobbing her heart out, and you haven't even taken her on an official Dom-Date."

"That's correct." He picked up his phone. The corner of it oscillated in time with his pounding heartbeat. When she had stripped his shirt off him last week and seen the grotesque on his back, her pitiless anger when she had demanded whether they had shot the bastard had allowed him to retain his dignity, a small mercy. Her righteous outrage at injustice had been a wondrous sight to behold.

"Maybe those private Domme lessons are getting to her, but she really fell apart."

Those lessons were certainly getting to him. "I see. Thank you for bringing both of these to my attention."

Lizbeth was not in love with Wulf. She was in thrall to The Dom, a wholly owned subsidiary of Wulf at best and a shell company at worst. Lizbeth wanted to be a sub, not to love him. He had no pity for himself, only for her.

An option presented itself to Wulf, one that would solve both the problem of Lizbeth and mitigate a problem client of Lena's. It would have to be done carefully, gently, on both sides, but it might work.

Wulf stood as Georgiana took her leave of his office, and then he picked up his cell phone and slid his thumb over the numbers, dialing.

He ignored the exultation swelling in his chest and mind.

## Overheard in the Costume Closet

AT seven-forty-five that evening, Rae parked her humble Taurus in The Devilhouse employee parking lot, which was half-full of shiny, proud cars and trucks.

As she shoved open her car's squeaky door, the boiling plastic aroma of new car smell rose from the other cars in the warm night. She might have pitied her car, if she had anthropomorphized it so much that she believed that it would be ashamed of its dings and peeling blue paint, but instead she resolved to save every penny of her earnings for college and her clinic. This job was a means to an end. She was trading her pride for tuition and seed money, not selling her soul and her body to Mammon.

A streetlamp poured light down on Lizzy's sports car that was parked in the second spot near the employee's entrance. The license plate read *WHIZZY*.

Georgie's Lexus occupied the first spot, which meant that Georgie had probably arrived before Lizzy. That was weird.

Rae had had hours to compose herself after seeing those terrible photos. She had read *Ecclesiastes* and had drunk hot herbal tea that Hester had made, but it wasn't enough. Her eyes still burned with angry tears every time Rae thought about what had happened to Wulf.

She had tried to distract herself by studying and writing up five- and ten-year plans for her life. She planned to work at The Devilhouse for the money for her education, but she would leave Wulf alone because he and Lizzy were perfect for each other. As much as her heart bled for Wulf as a broken child, Rae knew that she was the wrong woman for him, and she had a purpose in life beyond him. She was going to build her autism clinic, even if she had to lay the bricks herself.

The problem was that she probably could lay bricks, but she couldn't draw up the incorporation papers or negotiate a building lease.

Maybe she should take a couple business classes next year.

Because, contrary to what she had feared just a week and a half ago, there would be a next year of college for Rae. A smile grew on her face.

Rae swiped her new Devilhouse identification card, just a plain white card with a magnetized stripe, and the metal door clicked open.

After a stop in the ladies' locker room/ high-end spa to shower and apply make-up to her puffy eyes and emotion-ruddy nose, Rae donned a fluffy pink bathrobe incongruously monogrammed with a flaming *D* and scouted the costume closet for something suitable for Saturday night at The Devilhouse. Overhead warehouse lighting bleached the glittery gowns. The unfinished cement floor scraped the bottoms of her bare feet, and the faint whiff of dry cleaning solution and leather cleaner tasted metallic on the back of her tongue.

As she was a Domme, anything subby wasn't appropriate. The leather-and-studs leotard-things left too much of her skin bare, and she tended to get chilled.

While Rae was dithering, two other girls came in. Rae peeked over the loaded racks and waved to the Asian girl wearing glasses and the black girl with a fluffy, lemon-yellow weave, but she didn't go over to talk.

The Asian girl waved back at Rae, then said, "And Sonya hasn't been to work for, like, a week."

"I saw her at school this mornin'. She's fine. She ain't coming back."

Rae smiled. Wulf said that Sonya had reached The Hairy Arse Boundary and probably wouldn't return.

"She can't afford that."

"That girl said that she saved her money, and she's just going to finish her degree and leave town."

Leaving the fetishwear rack, Rae examined the rows of formal gowns that shimmered when she brushed them with her fingertips. Several of them were her size and looked like the length might be appropriate, practically a miracle. Rae's towering height made it hard to shop even for jeans, and having a whole selection of nine glamorous gowns to choose from nearly made her skip around the harshly lit wardrobe room.

"I'll bet The Dom is going to go ballistic," the Asian girl said.

"Nope. Sonya said he was calm as anything when he called her, and that man told Sonya that she should call him if she needed a reference after she graduated. Said he could hook her up with the grad program, too, if she wanted."

"Speaking of The Dom, has he called on you lately?"

"Nope. He hasn't called on anyone for two whole weeks."

“That’s got to be some sort of record.”

Rae stopped rasping and clicking the hangers on the metal rack. Her fingers held a beaded dress, and she waited for them to say something else.

The black girl said, “I asked Sonya this morning because it was weird, and she confirmed that it was weird. She said that he never goes more than forty-eight hours without getting head or tapping some on his desk.”

Rae’s cheeks flushed. Evidently, word hadn’t gotten out that she had been screwing Wulf, which was good, because then word wouldn’t get back to Lizzy.

Something else wiggled in her head, something kind of smug and kind of glad, something that giggled and hid under a soft blanket. Rae wasn’t sure what-all was hiding in the back of her skull, so she didn’t look at it too closely.

A white, strapless gown on the rack looked too bridal, so she flipped past that one. The silver-spangled mermaid dress that Georgie and Lizzy had liberated for Rae to wear to the party, that first time she had met Wulf and screwed him against a wall in a back bedroom, hung innocently on a padded hanger. Rae checked the hem in back. She had imprinted a gray footprint on the inside while peeling it off after the party. The footprint had been laundered away, thank goodness. Rae had felt guilty about it, though Lizzy and Georgie had laughed at her dismay.

Seven gowns remained for her to consider, an embarrassment of riches, a giddiness of beauty.

Ruby red, gold, blue, teal, copper, navy, and black.

Rae wanted to try them all on, but the clock on her phone showed that it was almost nine o’clock, so she closed her eyes and plunged her hand into the line of dresses, hoping that she would have many more Saturday nights at The Devilhouse to wear the other ones.

# Lizzy and The Dom

RAE paused, holding the handles to the Devilhouse's main club room and gathering herself before she went in. The borrowed beaded dress hung heavily on her shoulders, and the structured bodice constricted her ribs and back.

The steel double doors loomed above her. Heavy dance music pounded the metal like a demon horde trying to escape.

"Don't be shy," Glenda said. "You look fabulous. Every eye in there will be on you." Glenda was wearing a shockingly micro-short silver skirt and teensy silver pasties that shone on her dark breasts like double moons in the night sky. A silver collar around her neck matched her shimmering clothes. Her emerald contact lenses glowed.

Rae said, "I think everybody's going to be looking at you."

Rae would rather have slipped in unnoticed and clung to the walls, but she screwed her courage to the sticking place one more time, lifted her chin, and summoned the character of Lady Macbeth, Domme of The Devilhouse.

The Lady Macbeth character didn't manifest itself very well, so Rae faked some confidence and swept open the doors.

A wave of music blared out the open doors, and Rae blinked, trying to focus in the dim cavern. The huge room had been converted from a warehouse and was at least three tall stories high. She stood on a balcony in the middle of the space, looking down on the main floor. Smoke filmed the air, and Rae caught an acrid whiff that reminded her of the Manzanita college dorm.

Below them, the dancing crowd writhed on the main floor. The whole population bounced and bopped to the beat played by the DJ in the booth set against one wall. Most of the people down below wore fetishwear to some degree, bare chests or leather vests for the guys, serving-wench corsets or tiny bikinis and miniskirts for the girls. They surged around raised stages, where dancers dressed in scarlet unitards flung themselves around.

Glenda leaned on the railing beside Rae, surveying the packed dance floor. They had entered onto one of the dining balconies. White-covered

tables were staggered on the wide catwalk around them. Silverware and stemmed glasses glittered in the candlelight.

“Have you eaten?” Glenda asked.

A shirtless white man with dozens of tribal tattoos scrolling over his burly arms and chest pushed past Rae and glanced at her without really seeing her. His pants, driving gloves, and ski mask were black leather.

Rae said, “I don’t feel like eating.”

“The food is really good. The guests pay through the nose, but we eat free.”

“I’m fine.”

“Just mingle tonight, honey. You can watch me, if you want. My Dom is performing on the main stage at eleven.” She pointed to a large stage by the DJ booth.

“He isn’t going to whip you again, is he?” In the brightly lit hallway, Rae had seen that faint bruises still marred Glenda’s bare back.

“No. My Dom wouldn’t do that two weeks in a row. He gives me time to heal up before he puts his marks on me again.”

“That’s good, I guess.”

“I’m going to watch while he whips his other sub, Jalinda.”

“Oh, well, okay then.” Rae stood her ground and refused to allow herself to sprint out, not that she could sprint in her strappy high heels, anyway. A brown woman barely wearing a gold lamé bikini twirled by them. The guy following her was thoroughly clad in tight black leather from his high collar to his motorcycle boots and gloves.

Glenda pointed across the empty air. “Oh, there’s The Dom. You know, the manager guy. That term gets a little fuzzy on Saturday nights. Lots of Doms around here tonight.”

Wulf stood on the balcony across the room from them with one foot braced on the railing, scanning the dancing crowd below through the swirling specks of light. As always, he wore a dark suit with a white shirt and—his one variable—a gray tie. Flickers from the spinning disco ball glinted on his bright blond hair, so clean-cut that Rae still couldn’t believe that he was the head sadist in a sex club. Anywhere else, his meticulous grooming might lead people to think he was an FBI agent or an Air Force officer. His cheekbones and jawline cut ruler-straight planes on his face that looked like he had never lost a fist fight in his life.

No, he hadn’t lost a fist fight. Wulf had been on the wrong end of a rifle.



Wulf glanced up and saw Rae standing beyond the pit of the writhing dancers. He smiled.

Half the crowd turned with him, gawking at what Wulf was looking at, like his attention was magnetic.

Glenda said, "We should go over and say hello."

Rae didn't want to talk to him. Between that photo of him as a screaming child flashing in her head and Lizzy's confession of her feelings, Rae couldn't think of anything that she should say to him. "Is that what everyone does?"

"Oh, yeah. I suggested once that he should get a throne so people can pay homage more efficiently, and he actually sputtered. It was the funniest thing!"

They shimmied through the spectators ogling from the balcony at the wriggling crowd below. People shouted to each other, and their hollers mixed into the thumping music blaring from the speakers hanging from the ceiling and bolted under the balconies. The floor under Rae's feet vibrated through her shoes.

It took them a while to squirm their way through the crowd, and Wulf was talking to another man when they arrived.

The other man, a buff blond guy, was also wearing a suit, but Rae was pretty sure that he was neither Lancaster nor Jock, the two burly security guys who had watched Wulf smack around her cousin. Rae heard only isolated snatches of their conversation over the stomping dance music and shouting crowd, but she wondered just how big The Devilhouse security department was.

Wulf said, "But there isn't any direct evidence."

"No," the security guy said.

Rae held her breath and tried to look normal.

"See what you can find. Call me if you need to."

"Yes, sir." The man clicked his heels, turned sharply, and strode away .

Had he actually *clicked his heels together*? Rae wasn't sure that she saw that right. Only Nazis and science fiction stormtroopers did that, right?

Wulf turned back to the railing, then caught sight of Rae and Glenda waiting beside him.

"Ladies." Wulf looked Rae up and down, taking in her long dress and wide neckline that bared her throat all the way to the points of her shoulders and curved down to her cleavage. "Such a bold choice for your first night

here. You look beautiful in red.”

Rae flushed nearly as ruby red as the dress. At least The Devilhouse lighting was dim enough to hide it. “Thanks.”

Glenda giggled. “Just saying hi, Sir. I’ve got to go find my Dom.”

Wulf stepped toward Glenda and glared down at her. Glenda’s emerald eyes widened.

Wulf asked, “I trust he’s not going to mark you up this week?”

“No, sir. I’m just assisting tonight.” Glenda inched backward.

“Good. I’ll be watching.” He turned away from Glenda, dismissing her.

Glenda scurried into the crowd, and Rae noticed that half the people around them were eyeing her and Wulf.

Wulf turned to Rae. “You look every inch a Domme.”

They were all still watching her. Their eyes took in her dress and her hair, judging her.

Wulf captured her hand. His soft lips brushed her knuckles, and he looked down and into her eyes. His bright blue eyes were crinkled in amusement, mocking himself for kissing her hand. He tugged her fingers toward him, and she stepped forward reflexively. His arms went around her, and he held her in his arms as if they were going to waltz, his thighs pressing hers, just like that first night when they had met. “I’m glad you came tonight.”

She couldn’t tell him that she had seen those pictures. “What about Lizzy?” she asked.

“Lizbeth?” One of his blond eyebrows dipped in question. “What about her?”

“Didn’t she talk to you?”

“Yes. We spoke.” He smiled a tight, calm smile, as if that were the end of the conversation. “If you have any questions about what you see here tonight —”

Rae interrupted, “But she had something important to say to you. ”

Wulf told Rae, “We spoke privately.”

“You two belong together!”

“That refers to a private conversation.” Wulf’s firm tone admonished Rae.

Rae looked over the balcony, trying to spot tiny Lizzy in the crowd below. “Is she okay?”

“She’s fine.”

Lizzy must be frantic with grief if Wulf had treated her so cavalierly.  
“Where is she?”

“In a private session.”

Which meant that she was in one of the playrooms, probably crying her eyes out over his rejection. Rae shook off Wulf’s arms with every intention of going to her friend. “Where?”

“Play Room One. You shouldn’t interrupt her session. You may observe from the security booth.”

“Fine.” Rae would start there, then go to her friend to console her. She turned away from Wulf, the man of smoke and mirrors who hadn’t even shown a flicker of emotion that Lizzy had bared her soul to him, and hustled through the crowd to the exit.

The security booth was just down the hall, and Rae knocked quietly.

Jeff, The Devilhouse’s head of security, answered her knock, still seated in his rolling chair and linked with a headphone cord to the sound board and bank of monitors. He had pulled the headphones back from one of his ears, and the strap crossed the top of his bald, black head. “Yeah?”

“May I come in?”

“Sure thing.” Jeff left the door open and scooted across the tile to the main desk, which had so many controls and screens that it looked like he could launch a rocket into space. Lemon air freshener almost covered the smell of hot male in a closed space.

Rae pressed the door closed behind her.

Jeff flipped switches to rotate cameras, working while he asked her, “What’s up?”

“I’m worried about my friend Lizzy. Can I check up on her?”

“Right there.” He pointed one huge finger from his fist at the monitor labeled *Play Room 1*, one of the dungeon-style sex rooms. Most of the other monitors were trained on the dancing crowd or the dining balconies, where people sat at the tables and ate or drank .

On the monitor, a man stood over Lizzy, who was tied to a gothic-looking bench.

The man was naked above his black jeans, and his broad, muscled shoulders tapered to his trim waist. His shoulders and arms were rounded like he was smuggling volleyballs under his skin. Black tribal tattoos contrasted with his pale flesh.

The guy leaned over her, murmuring something. His tidy, black ponytail

slipped over his shoulder and dangled above Lizzy's face.

White nylon cord bound Lizzy like a sex fetish cocoon. She was immobilized, trussed up, except for her tits and pussy. She lay on a bench on her back, legs folded up and tied back to open her up, her arms bound above her head. Intricate knots knitted the ropes together and curved across her rib cage like a designer gown, albeit a crotchless gown with boob cut-outs. Her blonde pubes were groomed into a pale landing strip.

Rae looked straight at Jeff and shielded her eyes from the screen. "Can she breathe?"

"Yeah, it only looks like they're doing breath play. I was keeping a close eye on them, but she was screaming like mad a little while ago, so she's getting plenty of air."

"*Screaming?* Good Lord!"

"Not in pain."

"Then *why*?"

Rae cringed while Jeff laughed at her naïve question.

When Jeff finished laughing at her, he said, "He held her in orgasm denial for about an hour, then he let her have it."

"What's," Rae stopped herself before she sounded like a dolt again. Instead, she asked, "Would you please turn on the sound?"

"Yeah, it looks quieter in there now. I didn't want to blow out my eardrums." He flicked a switch.

The man's very deep bass voice said, "Don't come."

"I can't help it," said Lizzy. Her hoarse voice was exhausted.

"If you do, I'll whip you."

In the booth, Rae said to Jeff, "That's diabolical."

"Don't you feel sorry for her. She's had hers. Several of 'em. That's not orgasm denial. That's a normal refractory period. He's been holding back."

Rae noted all the bulges and crevices of the man's muscles and was afraid for tiny, delicate Lizzy. "He's really ripped."

"Yeah. He used to be a football player. Offensive linebacker. Now he's just in business."

The man positioned himself between Lizzy's tied-back legs and unzipped his pants.

"I can't watch," Rae said. Yet, she didn't look away from the man holding his cock at Lizzy's pussy, just holding it there, not moving.

Jeff said, "Well, I have to watch, to make sure everyone's safe. If you

don't want to, you better exit."

Rae stood shock still, as still as the muscle-bound man and tiny, helpless Lizzy.

Jeff asked Rae, "Who was that guy that the Boss was talking to?"

"Pardon?" She couldn't seem to breathe because the man was still touching the lips of Lizzy's pussy with his cock. He opened her pussy, pressed himself against her opening, and stopped again.

Jeff said, "That guy. He looked like a security guy, but I'm the head of security here, and I've never seen him before. He's not one of mine."

"I don't know," Rae said.

On the screen, the man inched his cock into Lizzy. Her back arched as much as the ropes would allow.

Rae gripped the arms of the chair, watching the muscular man slowly fuck her friend.

On the monitor, Lizzy closed her eyes and moaned.

Even though Rae was still comparatively inexperienced, she could tell that Lizzy's whimpers and abject pleading disguised her delight.

## Saturday Night at The Devilhouse

AFTER getting lost in the Devilhouse's meandering white hallways again, Rae found a door that led to the main dance floor.

Music blared so hard that the beat reverberated in her lungs. Dancers packed the dance area and swayed like a prairie of thick grass buffeted by wind. Their bodies fumed with heat. As Rae finagled her way through, she had a lot of questions for Lizzy, but seeing as how Lizzy was otherwise occupied, literally *occupied*, Rae would have to wait to ask them.

At the very least, Lizzy didn't seem to be helplessly mooning over Wulf anymore. She had moved on.

*Really* moved on.

Rae didn't consider Wulf free game, but she felt less like a danged horse thief than she had that morning.

Rae looked over the bouncing crowd and up to the balcony and saw Wulf talking to a gorgeous platinum-blond woman. Her exaggerated figure bobbed. Her impossibly tiny waist linked her huge breasts and bubble ass, and she wore a strappy, skimpy gilt dress that looked like a gold necklace had been wrapped around an alabaster vase.

The woman bent over, pushing her boobs out at Wulf, and he glanced at her full breasts before he wrapped one arm around the woman's waist.

Ah, yes. Wulf liked women, *craved* women, in the plural. Rae shouldn't forget Georgie's warning.

Now Rae felt more like a stolen horse than a horse thief.

She should just leave.

But she told Wulf that she would come back. He expected her to leave with him that night. Rae couldn't just dash. Not to tell him would be rude.

One shouldn't be rude to one's boss. Rae had just put together her life plans. She didn't want to get fired.

Even if, every time Rae saw Wulf, the bleeding, blond child screamed in her head.

Before that morning, every time she saw him, all her skin had felt like waving fern fronds, reaching and longing to touch him, shaming her.

This was not an improvement.

Rae watched Wulf clasp the blonde woman around her curvy waist and speak to her. The blonde giggled. Her whole body jiggled.

That vacuous woman was manipulating Wulf by shoving her fat boobs in his face. Rae swam through the crowd faster, pushing pint-sized people behind her as she struggled through the mob flailing in time with the pounding music.

Wulf dropped his hand away from the woman's waist and kissed her on the cheek. She stretched their arms between them as she slinked away, letting his arm fall only when the crowd swallowed her up.

Wulf watched where the people had closed around the woman, then turned back to the balcony railing, braced one foot against the lower rail, and leaned on the upper rail to survey the crowd as if an animated doll hadn't just tried to seduce him. He rubbed his palms together like he was washing his hands.

Rae watched him from the seething dance floor.

Wulf turned to look at the DJ booth, and Rae could have sworn that half the club turned with him to see what he was looking at.

When Wulf gestured to a man standing a ways down the rail, beckoning him to come over, the crowd turned to see who Wulf was looking at and watched the space between them close.

When Rae was in high school, a girl in her class who had fancied herself a witch had told Rae about ley lines, lines of magic power that ran along the Earth. The way that the crowd followed Wulf's movements looked like he was wielding some sort of magic or dragging them all with ley lines, but that was impossible and crazy.

Rae fought her way through the melee of dancers to one of the metal stairways that led to the balcony level above.

At the base of the staircase, a wide, Hispanic man in a suit stood at parade rest, like he was guarding the stairway. He said, "Let's see your wrist band."

"I don't have one," Rae said, flustered. She hadn't noticed any wrist bands. "The Dom expects me up there. I work here."

The man peered at her face. "Never mind, Miss Stone. I apologize that I didn't recognize you." He moved aside.

"I'm new," she said.

"Yes, ma'am." He gestured to the stairs, allowing her to pass.

Rae climbed the rough metal steps that clanged with footsteps to the first balcony level. Her spiky high heels nearly slid on the metal, but she caught herself. She found her way between the dining tables to Wulf. The kitchen must be through one of the double doors that lined the wall behind them because the smells of baking bread and sizzling meat sailed through the smoky air.

She swallowed and tried not to think about the terrible picture. "Um, hi."

Wulf turned and raised one of his blond eyebrows above his half-smile. Spotlights swirled behind him in the darkness, and she could see the posed little boy in his face. He leaned in to ask her over the loud music, "Did you satisfy yourself that Lizbeth is all right?"

Well, Lizzy had certainly looked satisfied. "Yeah," Rae said. "How did she end up with that guy?"

"I'm sorry," he said, demurring.

"Man, you really don't kiss and tell, do you?" she asked.

Wulf inclined his head. Disco ball light flakes glittered on his golden hair. "One of my very few virtues."

"What are your other virtues?" Rae knew she was treading perilously close to asking him a question about himself, but what the heck, she figured.

"I couldn't say. I prefer my vices," he brushed Rae's curling hair away from her ear, "which are beautiful women, good whiskey, and chocolate."

"*Chocolate?*" The other two, she had figured out.

He leaned in, keeping his hands behind his back. His voice dropped to a whisper, and his breath tickled her ear. "At school, we had a hot chocolate break every morning at ten o'clock."

"You're kidding! Not coffee?"

"Not for children."

"Wow, you guys had it made. No wonder you Europeans beat us American public school kids on those math and science tests. If my mom had packed me a thermos of hot chocolate every day, I'd've done better in school, too."

"Not my mother," Wulf murmured beside her ear. "I matriculated to boarding school at six years old. The dining room served chocolate."

Wulf had looked eight or nine years old in those news pictures, the one with his twin brother and the one where he held his dead twin brother. Rae's face flushed hot.

She stood beside Wulf, his breath brushing her neck, close enough to feel



the warmth from his body radiating through his suit, and held her face still. Even though the image of him as a screaming, bleeding child flashed through her head *again*, she couldn't let her knowledge of it show. She didn't want him to know that she had betrayed his trust. He had been hurt enough in his life.

"Six years old?" she said. "I can't imagine sending such a young child away to a boarding school."

Wulf bent his neck and kissed her bare shoulder, though he still hadn't wrapped his arms around her. "It's common practice in Europe."

Wulf had been shoved out of his home and dumped at a boarding school when he was only six, and then his brother had been murdered in front of him.

Rae put her arms around his neck and buried her face in his broad shoulder.

"Now, now." His deep voice sounded confused. "Everyone does it."

Rae cleared her throat to make sure that her voice was steady. "That's terrible, to send a child away when they're so young."

"You are a tender-hearted thing, aren't you?"

She felt his hands tug her arms. He wanted to see her face, or maybe this was too much PDA for him, and yet she wondered what the owner of a sex club would not do in public, and then she regretted such a vicious line of thought.

Rae scrunched her face into something resembling concern. As he pulled himself out of her arms, she said, "I suppose so."

"You would like a drink?" he asked.

"Oh, yes, please." Maybe a little intoxication would wash the crazy out of Rae's head so she could think straight.

Wulf offered his elbow, and Rae slipped her hand through the crook of his arm. Under his suit, his biceps muscle bunched. Wulf wasn't overbuilt like the guy who was screwing Lizzy, but hard muscle rounded his chest and arms. Most of his body was still a mystery to her, even though she still wished that she hadn't exposed that scar on his back.

Wulf steered her to a table at the narrow end of the warehouse overlooking the dance floor and stages. Rae leaned over the metal rail for a moment. On the second floor, they were high enough for a wide view but close enough to see the men and women wearing red unitards, obviously professional dancers, gyrating on each of the five stages. Their smooth

costumes clung like their bodies had been dipped in scarlet wax.

“What would you like to drink?” Wulf asked while signaling a waiter.

“Um, whatever you’re having.” She sat beside him. The sturdy dining chairs seemed like they should be in a high-end restaurant. She had expected rickety folding chairs.

Wulf said, “I’m having whiskey.”

“I like whiskey.” Rae wasn’t faking. She had heard that most people took a while to warm up to whiskey, Rae had liked the taste the very first time she had tried it a year ago. All that habanero salsa while growing up must have killed her taste buds.

“We’ll have two of the Middleton Very Rare,” Wulf told the waiter. He asked Rae, “Have you tried that one before?”

“I don’t think so. I’ve tried Chivas Regal.” And that fancy whiskey at Wulf’s party a couple weeks ago, whatever it was. The label looked like Johnny Walker, but she had never seen Johnny Walker with a blue label before.

“I think you’ll like this. It’s an Irish whiskey, so it isn’t smoky like Scotch whiskeys, though I admit a fondness for a peaty Scotch.”

“Me, too.” She sounded like she was sucking up, but she meant it.

He tilted his head and smiled at her sideways. “Most women don’t enjoy Scotch. I have some interesting bottles that we’ll have to try some time.”

That sounded weird. “Sure.”

Talking about whiskey had distracted her from the image of the bleeding child in her head. Staying in the moment might keep her from thinking about it.

A bell’s toll shook the building.

The dance music faded away, and the crowd on the floor applauded.

“What’s going on?” Rae asked Wulf.

He sighed. “It’s ten o’clock. Time for the show.”

The scarlet-clad dancers clambered down from the round stages and blended into the crowd. One woman leaped from her podium and floated on top of the crowd like a red X before she sank into the milling people.

Other people carrying duffel bags climbed onto two of the stages via small steps on the sides. Soft music played from the overhead speakers. The people looked like carpenters, which surely couldn’t be the decadent entertainment that Wulf wanted her to watch. The carpenters held flashlights that blazed in the semi-darkness. They assembled scaffolds and equipment in

under a minute, then climbed down.

Rae said, "That was quick."

Wulf shrugged. "Theatrical props."

"Right." Rae had seen quick scene changes in the theater department.

The music died, and the bell tolled again, each peal slamming louder until Rae reached to cover her ears.

People rose from the crowd, climbing the steps onto the stages. Most wore variations on Dom and sub clothing, but one girl on the stage nearest to Rae's vantage point wore a flowing pink sundress that swished below her knees. Her partner wore black leather fetish gear studded with brass spikes.

"To be clear," Wulf said, "this is for entertainment purposes, and it is not an example for your work."

"All right." Rae looked down at the people taking their marks. On the main stage, a burly man stood in the center of a circle of five curvy women who spanned the human skin spectrum from milky to cocoa, each wearing a different candy-colored leotard. On the stage farthest away from their table, two medium-brown women wore black bikinis and nothing else.

Stage lighting flared over the crowd, lighting the people's faces below Rae. Some looked eager. One man in the crowd stripped off his shirt, revealing his skinny chest.

With a harsh downbeat, hard rock music blared through The Devilhouse, and the lights blew out.

White spotlights picked the five stages out of the darkness. The performers began moving to the music, strutting like magicians about to do a grand illusion. The five women on the center stage circled the one man like a spinning rainbow. The two women began kissing, each sinewy caress more grandiose than the last. The woman in the pink sundress skipped around the man in brass and black leather, who stood with his burly arms wound tightly across his chest, seemingly unaware of her. Over on the left stage, a woman bound a man to a chair with brutal knots.

Rae reached for Wulf's hand in the dark warehouse. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw him glance at their hands, then up at her.

The crowd around the stages seethed and bounced to the music. Several hundred people must be down there.

Georgie had said that the party last Saturday night was part of the client selection process. "You've vetted all those people?" Rae asked.

"The performers? Yes, certainly. The employment regulations in this

state make it easy to ascertain that all are of age. Indeed, since alcohol is served here, they must all be over twenty-one.” He rubbed the back of her hand with his thumb.

“I meant the crowd. Georgie said that you check up on everyone who comes in here.”

“Ah, pardon me. The main floor crowd must produce identification, like any pub, and pay the entry fee. Only clients are permitted on the upper floors. There is an extensive application process for clients.”

“Upper floors?” Rae stuck her head out past the balcony rail and looked up. Another balcony level was suspended above the dining level where they sat. “What’s up there?”

“I believe you Americans call them sky boxes.”

Rae found a drink on the table in front of her. She peeked sideways, over their hands on the white tabletop, and saw through the gloom that Wulf had a drink and was sipping his.

Their whisky had arrived without her noticing the waiter bringing it. The people sashaying in the follow spotlights below must have distracted her. She sipped, too.

This fiery drink cascaded into her mouth like a numbing, syrupy waterfall. She stared at the amber magic in the glass. Regular whisky was harsh and had an aftertaste of formaldehyde, so this delicious, wonderful drink could not be whiskey. “Oh, my.”

“You like it?” Wulf smiled at her, still rubbing his warm thumb over her hand .

“It’s *amazing*.”

“I thought you might enjoy it.”

She sipped the glistening firewater again, savoring the sweet burn.

“That’s fantastic stuff.”

Wulf leaned back and watched the show, sipping his drink.

Down below, on the main stage, the big man in the center of the spinning circle of rainbow girls flopped his rubbery cock out of his pants.

“Oh, my gosh! He just exposed himself!” Rae blurted.

“Yes. It’s not so different than the party a few weeks ago.” Wulf regarded his drink instead of the show.

She whispered to Wulf, “This is the entertainment?”

“It is what people come here for.”

Rae knocked back the rest of her drink and tried, in vain, to look

sophisticated. “You don’t want me to do this, do you?”

“No.” A finality in his voice suggested that he might have added, *not even if you wanted to*.

Wulf beckoned a waiter and pointed to Rae’s drink. “With still water, this time.”

“Yes, sir.” The waiter meandered around the other tables, taking orders. Through the dark, Rae saw other couples at dinner tables necking or scrutinizing the entertainers over the railing.

The two women had untied each other’s bikini tops, and the bits of cloth and cord lay at their bare feet. One of the women was sucking the other’s tits. Rae’s own boobs grew heavy in her bra.

The rainbow girls kneeled around the man in the middle. He shoved his cock into each girl’s mouth in turn, thrust a few times, then moved on to the next girl.

The girl in the pink sundress teased the immobile man, who stared straight ahead. She fluttered her hand over the bulge in his pants and caressed his chest. His crossed arms twitched.

The crowd roiled around the stages like storm-tossed water, dancing and cheering.

Another drink had appeared in front of Rae. She asked Wulf, “Are you having another?”

He gestured with his glass. “Still working on my first.”

His other hand still held hers. His warm palm and fingers wound around her hand, and the knot of their hands rested on the table between them.

Over on the left stage, the man roped to the chair stared at the ceiling as the woman lowered herself over his dick. She inched down, then lifted herself as the crowd around her shouted.

Rae sipped. The whiskey was the same, but the dilution separated the flavors. Caramel and fruit flavors, maybe apricots, slid over her tongue. She held up the glass. “Wow. This is great.”

Wulf squeezed her hand. “I’m glad you like it.”

Rae peeked over the balcony again. Just as the stage below them came into view, the girl in the pink sundress struck a pose with her back to the burly man she had been teasing.

He snatched her and threw her across a triangle contraption. The girl’s skirt fell over her head, hiding her top half and her face. Her naked ass was perched in the air. The man wrenched his pants open, spread her butt cheeks,

and crammed his dick into her ass.

“Oh my gosh!” Rae said and hopped up to look. She grabbed the railing with both hands and realized that she had unclasped her hand from Wulf’s, which she hadn’t meant to do.

Rae watched the man drag his dick out of the woman’s butt, then force it back in again.

Wulf stood beside her. “While this is all choreographed,” he told her over the music, “there is a safe word in case any ad-libbing occurs. You’ll notice several security men around each stage.”

“This is insane,” Rae said. She stared at the man anally fuck the woman. “This is like Tijuana.”

“No, they do entirely different things down there.”

“I can’t believe this is legal.”

Wulf shrugged. “Permits for anything may be obtained, if you know the correct people.”

The burly man slapped his hips against the woman’s pink-skirted ass, fucking her ass deeply.

Rae wasn’t sure if she was horrified or turned on, but watching the man slide in and out of the woman’s ass made her pussy heat. Even her backside grew sensitive. She asked, “Do you watch this every week?”

“Not often anymore.” Wulf’s bright blue eyes lingered on her face. “Let’s get out of here.”

“Already? It’s only been, like, an hour. And they’re,” she gestured helplessly at the orgy on the stages, “clearly just getting started.”

Wulf stood and reached for her hand. “Let’s go.”

Rae took his hand, and Wulf led her between the people dining at the tables, out a side door, and through the corridors of The Devilhouse toward the parking lot. Rae dodged into the ladies’ locker room to grab her purse and bundle her street clothes together. Hester would have a fit if she caught Rae coming home in the wee hours, wearing an evening gown.

## Out of The Devilhouse, Into the Fire

RAE met Wulf in The Devilhouse's parking lot. Lampposts spilled cones of light into the night, barely illuminating the lot. All the shiny cars that had gleamed in the sunlight now huddled near the lampposts. Shadows played between the cars and near the walls.

When she had talked to Jeff the Security Guy a couple days ago, he had mentioned that black SUVs usually flanked Wulf's car while he drove home. She waited for one to drive up, but Wulf tugged her hand toward the darkness. He reached for her squashed clothes and carried them for her, even though she felt silly letting him do it.

They walked through the cool spring night toward the back of the parking lot, where Wulf clicked a remote to unlock a low-slung silver sports car.

Rae looked down. The top of the car came only to her hips. "What is this tiny thing?"

"A Tesla Roadster. It's a bit tricky for us taller people to enter." He opened the long passenger-side door for her.

Rae bent over to peer inside. The seat was so low that looked like it must be bolted to the asphalt under the car. "You fit in there?"

"It's bigger inside than it looks." He smiled wryly. "The perils of peer pressure. Come on, then."

Rae stuck one leg in the car, folded at her waist, tried to tuck herself through the door but then pulled back. "You're sure?"

"I'm five inches taller than you are, and I have the pedals."

Rae touched one foot to the floor inside, bent sideways, and slithered into the car. Good Lord, she did fit. "Okay. I'm in."

He shut the door. Inside, the car smelled like Wulf's cinnamon and lavender cologne, so, like sex. The skin between Rae's thighs heated.

Behind her, there was no back seat, just shield-shaped plaque mounted to the wall behind the seats. It read, *Founder's Series, 6 of 27*.

Wulf slid in the driver's seat like he had melted into the car.

The leg room for both seats extended so far under the hood that Rae's long legs stretched comfortably, which meant the engine up there must be

tiny. The car was obviously built for show, not performance.

Around them, the car was still. Traffic from the road in front of the Devilhouse purred.

“Aren’t you going to start it?” she asked.

“It’s on.” Wulf put the car in gear.

Rae had expected an engine roar, but the car silently pulled out of the parking space, like it was coasting with the engine off. Gravel crunched under the tires.

“It’s electric,” Wulf explained and drove out of the dark parking lot and past the long garden area.

The seats were almost as stiff as the suspension. The ride kind of felt like her cousin Craigh’s souped-up Mustang that he, no kidding, dirt track-raced for pink slips.

Wulf turned the car onto the nearly deserted main street. The streetlights ahead shone green like a string of Christmas lights receding into the darkness. The sports car was so low that Rae felt like her butt was dragging on the street.

She asked Wulf, “So it’s like a Prius?”

Wulf glanced at her and twitched one eyebrow.

Gravity slammed Rae back in her seat, mashing her chest and arms. Hyperdrive whooshed. The sodium streetlights blurred together and became a glowing yellow stripe like stars at light speed and Rae held on for dear life. “Holy-Jesus-what-are-you-doing!”

Wulf smirked just a little as he let off the accelerator and coasted down to the speed limit. “It’s not like a Prius.”

Rae was still holding onto the seat behind her head. “It sounded like a spaceship! Like a fighter-plane spaceship!”

“It does produce a distinctive sound,” Wulf agreed.

“It felt like a roller coaster! I think I have a headache.”

Wulf nodded. He was still smirking.

“Who peer-pressured you into buying it?” Rae unclenched her fists from the leather seat.

Wulf glanced at her. “A friend.”

“A girlfriend.” She could not seem to help herself.

“No.” He dallied a moment, then said, “My housekeeper.”

Of course he had a housekeeper. Rae wondered if she was a hot young housekeeper sex slave from Columbia or something. “Oh.”



“Rosamunde has been the head of my household staff since I lived in the *Confoederatio Helvetica* .”

Rae felt stupid but she asked anyway. “Is that Switzerland?”

“Yes.”

“Okay, then.” Yeah, she still felt dumb. She should have looked that up, too. She had never heard of a Tesla car, either. Must be one of those European cars, maybe Italian.

Wulf said, “Rosamunde has taken an interest in the environmental movement. Quite a few of our vehicles are at least hybrid. We have several all-electric cars like this one. Rosamunde meant for me to drive some matchbox of a car, but I bought this Roadster instead. The roofs of the house are lacquered with solar panels. She insisted on installing a kitchen garden in the courtyard. Also, if you would be so kind, please compliment the salad greens tonight.”

“Okay.” Rae could barely listen to him because, now that they weren’t speeding toward certain flaming death anymore, images of that brute fucking that pink-dressed woman’s ass replayed themselves in Rae’s head, which was a welcome change from what had been replaying in her head. “I don’t mean to change the subject, but you said that I should ask questions about the show.”

“Of course.”

“This sounds stupid.”

“Please proceed.”

“Okay.” Rae swallowed, and her mouth still tasted like that smooth whiskey. The whiskey had sped straight from her empty stomach into her blood stream, and she was a little drunk. “Was that guy having anal sex with that woman?”

Wulf’s pale eyebrows rose even though he watched the road while he drove. “Yes.”

Rae wasn’t sure what to follow that up with. “That’s,” she cast around for a word, “unusual.”

“At least one of the stages usually incorporates anal intercourse.”

That wasn’t what Rae meant, but she should not pursue the subject. “Do you usually watch the anal one?”

He glanced at her, then resumed looking at the road. Streetlights illuminated his face as they passed overhead. “I don’t usually watch the shows.”

“Why not?” Rae wanted to crawl under the seat and she couldn’t believe where the conversation was going, but she could not seem to leave it alone, and there probably wasn’t more than half an inch of clearance under her seat anyway. “Men are supposed to like porn. Visual stimulation, and all that.”

“That’s true, but The Devilhouse has been in business for over five years, so that’s two hundred and eighty-one Saturday nights, though I travel, so I have missed sixty-four of them.”

“So, it’s all, ‘Been there, seen that,’ for you now.”

“That’s accurate.”

“Even anal sex.” Which was definitely on Rae’s *will-never-try* list. She hoped it wasn’t on Wulf’s *deal-breaker* list.

Wulf spun the car around a corner, and Rae leaned into her seat belt. “Yes.”

“Even like that guy being tied up and the woman screwing him.”

“Yes.” His tone lowered and became more reticent.

“Even like the guy in the middle getting a blow job from the rainbow girls.”

Wulf nodded. “After one has been exposed to a place like this for some time, such as over some years, the sex act loses its emotional intensity. One seeks extreme physical experiences because common ones become routine. One doesn’t feel anything, any more.”

So he didn’t feel anything emotional during sex? Not even with her?

She sure as heck felt all kinds of stuff.

Maybe she shouldn’t.

Rae glanced at him. Yellow streetlamp light flashed over his face. The expression in his blue eyes seemed serene, as always, but Rae thought a bit of sadness lurked behind his resignation.

“It is like a chef preparing food,” he said. “Yes, he is aware that the purpose of food is to allay hunger and nourish the body, but after years of mastering the basics, one either loses interest or delves more deeply into the art of the experience. Have you tried molecular cuisine?”

“No.” It sounded like something she would need a prescription for.

“We’ll have to remedy that. The first time that you have a liquid pea spherical raviolo, the experience is astounding. After a few times, you realize that it is not much different than, and in some ways inferior to, eating peas.”

“Okay.” Rae watched the strip malls slip by. They had entered the northern, better part of the city. No gauche signs obstructed the view of the

glittering shops. She couldn't even tell what any of them were.

Evidently, she had a lot of problems reading signs of things that she really ought to know, like whether someone had no emotional involvement.

"In our example, sex becomes art," Wulf said, "an intellectual challenge, but it is intellectual, and thus a cold pleasure." Wulf paused. The muscles on his angular face didn't move, and he didn't seem to be searching for the correct word, just gathering himself. "I had not *felt* anything, for years."

"You don't feel anything with *me*?"

Wulf didn't look away from the road stretching beyond the windshield in front of them toward the black mountains on the horizon, but his lips parted and he inhaled a quick breath like the first faint gasp after a gut punch. He held it, held it for too long, and the air sighed out of his body.

He took a normal breath and said, "That's not what I meant. I meant, before."

"So you do." Oh, she so wished she could shut up. If she couldn't shut her mouth, she should just open the door and crawl away into the night.

"Yes. I do." His voice sounded like something was sitting on his chest and he couldn't draw a proper breath.

She was twisting the emotional knife here, and she needed to stop. "I'm sorry. I shouldn't have asked that."

"The comment begged the question."

Which kind of let her off the hook.

She said, "I'm sorry that you've felt like that. It sounds lonely."

He glanced at her. "It's not a complaint. That would be disingenuous." Wulf watched the long, dark road, driving carefully enough, though fast, but he seemed to be musing. "I had never planned to open a sex club."

"What, all that was an accident?"

"I invested in it as a silent partner. I joked with friends about intimately managing my investment, but I assumed that I would never set foot in The Devilhouse after it opened. I was living a quiet life in Chicago, managing investment portfolios and indulging in sport and past-times."

Rae watched the houses slipping by outside the car window. "But then you saw the benefits of being an owner-operator."

"That's good. I'll have to use that. No, the scoundrel who had pitched the project absconded with a good portion of the initial investment, and then the real estate market declined. The building was already prepared and the opening date set, so we cast the contractors and opened on schedule rather

than abandon the project.”

“So it was just a financial decision.” The neighborhood they drove through became more residential, though the houses retreated farther from the road. Fences rose around them.

“Originally,” he said. “I had never managed anything like a nightclub before, so I assumed that I would go out with guns and trumpets, but it’s doing quite well. I probably should hire someone to manage it at this point.”

Wulf turned onto a side street. A steel gate blocked the road. Wulf pressed a button on his visor, and the gate slid aside.

“You live here?” she asked.

“This is the community entrance to the Apache Tears Ranch development.”

“Oh.” The city was divided up into districts based on the old cattle ranches that had once divvied up the valley. The Apache Tears Ranch District was high-falutin’, as everyone knew. Rae hadn’t even heard of a gated housing development in there.

Wulf drove the low sports car down a road lined with prison walls out of a dystopian movie, but Rae was too polite to mention it.

Wulf spun the wheel and pulled the car up before another steel fortress gate. He pushed another visor button, and this steel gate slid back just like the first one.

Surviving a murder attempt when you were eight years old must mess with your head. The screaming blond child flashed in Rae’s head again, and she winced. Good Lord, their poor mother must have been frantic.

They drove up a long driveway. Floodlights cut through the night, and the blazing lights pouring down made it seem like a sky-blocking spaceship had appeared above them. Between the spaceship-car, the dystopian walls, and what looked like the blinding lights from a mothership hovering above them, Rae’s world had been jolted from under her feet.

They pulled up to a single-door car garage. Wulf pushed one last button on his visor, and the garage door swung up. The commonplace garage door was a moment of normalcy in Wulf’s alien world.

When they pulled in, fluorescent lights flickered on. Five identical black SUVs stared down at the little silver sports car in the huge garage.

Rae had sounded like a rube enough for one evening, so she resolved not to say anything else stupid.

The garage around them fell like it was descending into a sinkhole.

She grabbed her flipping heart. “Oh, my gosh! The floor is moving!”  
*Oops.*

Wulf smiled at her again, and Rae smiled back weakly.

He said, “Just wait a moment.”

The floor rose under the Tesla sports car, *lifting it*.

Rae tried to look sophisticated and bored with such extravagance, but she ended up peering out the side window at the insanity of the car elevator.

The car floated through a circle cut in the low ceiling. When they were even with the next floor, the elevator swiveled ninety degrees. Rae grabbed the handhold on the door. A green light above them flashed. Wulf drove the car straight ahead into a parking spot on the second floor of the garage.

“That was cool,” Rae said, like a country hick.

Rae must have had some astonished expression on her face because Wulf said, “Perhaps I should have parked in front of the house.”

“No, really. It was cool.”

“One more thing,” Wulf said. “I don’t discuss the office at home. A few men in my personal security detail go between the house and the office, but most people here are unaware of my hobby.”

“All right.” She could keep his secrets on this end, too, though she wondered just who she would be keeping them from.

Rae’s door opened without her touching it. She jumped. If the inside of that sports car hadn’t been so cramped, she would have ended up in Wulf’s lap.

A burly man wearing a black suit stood outside the car. “Madam,” he said, holding the door for her .

“Oh, sure.” She swung her legs out of the car, ducked her head, and tried to emerge gracefully. She teetered on her stiletto heels and tugged her bunched-up dress down her hips. Her underwear had gathered into a wedgie, but that would have to wait. “Um, thanks.”

From the other side of the car, Wulf said, “*Danke*, Dieter.”

When Rae turned, Wulf was standing beside a man who was almost as tall and blond and buff as he was. That was the guy who Wulf had been talking to in the club, the one Jeff the security guy had asked about. He must be one of the go-between guys.

“Rae, if you will.” Wulf gestured toward a door on the far wall.

Their footsteps clacked and echoed on the steel cars and concrete walls. They walked past several hybrid cars and other low-slung sports cars, all

monochromatic silver, dark gray, or black.

Now they were in a dystopian black-and-white movie, with spaceships.

A door at the end of the garage led into an enormous red brick and dark wood kitchen, bigger than the house Rae grew up in, where three people wearing white chef uniforms clattered and cooked. Humming freezers lined the back wall. The skinny woman at the stove nodded to Wulf, who held up a hand in greeting as they passed through.

Wulf's arm circled Rae's waist as they went through a door into the main part of the house.

Rae's first impression was that the horizon and sky had turned to honey-colored marble. Wulf's arm bumped her butt as she stopped short. A curving grand staircase rose from into the middle of the room to the parapets above. A chandelier dripped crystal from the vaulted ceiling.

People, all wearing black, lined up from the kitchen door to the stairs, at least ten of them, maybe more. They stared straight ahead, at attention. The men wore black suits. The women were dressed in identical black frocks and black stockings.

Above and around them, violins sang a serene melody. A string quartet might be hidden on one of those balconies above them, but maybe it was just a stereo somewhere.

Rae turned to Wulf, who was conversing in what Rae assumed must be Swiss with an older woman. Her gray hair was knotted in a freeform bun. Wulf looked serious, though not angry. Her hands were spread open in the universal hand gesture that meant helplessness, though her I-told-you-so grin suggested that she had no fear of any wrath.

Wulf sighed and turned back. "Rae, may I present Ms. Rosamunde Keller, my head of staff. Rosamunde, may I present Ms. Reagan Stone, a friend."

Behind her, Rae heard a giggle like three hiccups that was quickly stifled and worried about what about herself was so ridiculous.

Rae asked, "How do you do, Ms. Keller?" and held her hand out to shake.

Ms. Keller hesitated for just an instant before she unclasped her hands and stepped forward to shake Rae's hand. Her hand was warm and dry, and she smiled first with her eyes, then with her mouth. "Pleased to meet you, Ms. Stone." Her accent was German ... ish.

Wulf, who had been standing aside and watching, held his hand out

toward the line of people and said, "And my staff."

The line of people turned to look at her.

Rae wasn't sure what she was supposed to do, so she waved. "Hi?"

Several smiled. Most continued their bland expressions.

They all leaned back in line and then filed away and into the house.

Wulf asked her, "Shall we sit down to supper?"

"Sounds great." Rae wondered what Swiss people ate at home, and she wondered if anything served in this mansion remotely resembled normal food. Perhaps she was going to eat her first atomic pea ravioli, or whatever Wulf had called it.

Wulf waved Rae down a hall to the right, toward the front of the house.

She walked beside him, between rows of urns sprouting ferns. Picture windows lined one wall overlooking a lit swimming pool. Beyond the pool, another floodlit wing of the very same house sprawled into the night.

Rae knew how to be polite around poor people, how to not embarrass them by pretending to not notice their poverty. Being polite with somebody who obviously had more money than horse sense was a mystery to her.

They continued to walk down the hallway, past ferns in urns. The pool sparkled in the moonlight. The carpet underfoot softened her footfalls, and lemon oil wood polish permeated the air. The violin music followed them like ghosts.

Through another set of double doors, the dining room stretched far and away. Gold-rimmed china and gold-rimmed crystal packed the table. A setting was arranged before each of the twenty chairs. Huge candelabras looked like golden trees on fire.

"Is someone else having dinner with us?" Rae asked.

"No." Wulf sighed. "I believe my staff is trying to impress you and simultaneously sending me a subtle message that I am under-utilizing their talents."

Two men of Wulf's staff entered through a rear door, carrying an ice sculpture of blooming irises between them on a stretcher. They positioned the silver bowl of icy flowers in the center of the long table. Light from the chandelier above shimmered on the sweating ice.

Wulf lowered one blond eyebrow. "Perhaps not so subtle."

Rae stared at the opulence. "Don't you have people over much?"

"About once a month, old friends visit me, though generally not in the summer."

“No one comes here in the summer. It’s too hot.” But it was only early spring.

“This house has the security amenities to host some friends of mine who require such. I had thought my staff exercises their talents sufficiently during those visits, but evidently, school chums do not inspire such Herculean efforts. I’ll have to make sure Yoshi knows that he does not rate.”

“They didn’t do anything special for me, did they? I thought we were just going to have a bite to eat. I assumed I’d help you cook pasta or something.”

Wulf glanced at her sideways. His startled look suggested that he had not considered such modest plans. “It seems that we both underestimated. Shall we sit down to what, I am sure, will be an extravagant repast?”

“Okay.” Rae surveyed all twenty-odd place settings. “Do you have a usual place that you sit, or should we change seats every five minutes?”

Wulf laughed. “I’m afraid doing so would only encourage my staff to more displays of excess. I usually sit at that end, near the kitchen.”

They walked past the table. Rae’s reflection looped through the gold chargers on the table. She imagined him at the head of this enormous table, eating a solitary supper for one. “So you usually eat in here?”

Wulf took the head of the table and motioned to his right for Rae to sit. “I may scandalize my staff if I admit such to you, but no. I only eat in here when we have guests. I eat with the staff at the kitchen table.”

Rae had watched enough PBS to know that she should gasp and clutch her pearls—if she had been wearing pearls over her bare throat and down the wide and plunging neckline of this red gown that now seemed so trashy—even though her estimation of Wulf had just risen.

She fluttered her eyelashes in mock dismay. “Why would you do such a thing?”

“It took years, if you must know.” Wulf glanced down at his plate, and he pulled his lower lip into his mouth, a habit that Rae thought meant he was about to divulge something that he considered secret. “I engaged Rosamunde when I was fifteen and lived in a small house in Helvetica, in Rolle.”

Fifteen years old and living on his own with servants and what Rae suspected must have been far too much money for a teenager was a recipe for all kinds of disaster. Rae’s brother Amos was fifteen, and he could hardly babysit for Rae’s two younger brothers for a few hours while their mother went to a church ladies’ group. “Oh?”



Wulf said, "Because it was a small house, we often dined with the staff rather than in the dining room."

His idea of a "small house" must be something entirely different than Rae's, because this house went beyond her idea of what a "house" was and straight into her concept of what a mansion or a castle was supposed to be.

He continued, "When I moved to London for graduate studies, I lived with my cousins, so I only needed Rosamunde and a few minders, and I dined with the family there, formally. When we moved to the States after that, Rosamunde insisted that we keep up appearances and that I dine in the formal dining rooms, so first I had to coax some of the gentlemen staff members into conversation in the dining room, then goad them into sitting down to ease conversation, then follow them back to the kitchen to discuss matters further, then cajole the rest of them into setting their supper with me in there. It took almost a year of scheming to get back there."

"Sounds exhausting." It sounded weird as all heck, and filing away all the secrets that he had just told her made her head ache: that he had lived in Rolle, Switzerland, alone, when he was fifteen and then moved to London, that he had cousins in London and had lived with them while he studied *something* in graduate school, and that he liked to eat with his staff instead of being served like a spoiled lordling.

"There's still the occasional mutiny to deal with, but the routine seems to have settled in during the last few years."

It was funny: in *The Devilhouse*, Wulf was The Dom, and everyone scurried to do his bidding and serve his every whim. His slightest grimace incited panic.

In Wulf's home, he negotiated with his staff to gradually get what he wanted.

"Well, that's good," Rae said. She laid her hand on the table between them, reaching but not grabbing. She needed to broach a delicate subject, and she whispered because, for the first time in her life, there might be *staff* lurking behind the door to the kitchen. "Um, you know I can't spend the night, right?"

Wulf cocked his head to the side, and his so-blue eyes twinkled at such a thought. "I thought that side of a relationship was not an option for us."

And yet he invited her to his home anyway. "Well, I just can't stay all night. My roommate will freak if I'm out all night."

"So, it is staying the entire night that is a problem."

“I can, um, stay for a while. Before, it was Lizzy. She’s my friend. She was in love with you. She thought that she was in love with you. I thought that she thought she was in love with you.” Rae was making precious little sense. Nerves did that to her.

Wulf smiled. Rae couldn’t read a thing into that smile, other than he was encouraging her to keep talking.

“But she seems to have gotten over you,” Rae said.

Wulf was still smiling. He *really* didn’t kiss and tell, but his kind expression soothed her.

*Leap of faith time.* “But I haven’t gotten over you.”

Now, surprise changed Wulf’s face. He leaned toward her and took her hand just as two of his staff breezed through the doors, bringing salad. A third guy carried an enormous pepper mill. A fourth man carried wine wrapped in a towel.

Wulf sat back and looked to his staff.

*Dang it.*

The men—Waiters? Butlers?—slid salad plates in front of Wulf and Rae. The third man hovered, offering fresh pepper. Wulf signaled him to grind some pepper over his salad. The fourth gentleman poured white wine into one of the glasses surrounding Rae’s plate. A fairy ring of crystal goblets surrounded her plate. Rae had the urge to pour a little water in each of them and make the crystal sing.

She wondered what Wulf would do if she started playing the glassware like a harp.

She wondered what his so-proper staff would do.

The dark, delicate salad leaves on Rae’s salad plate looked as unfamiliar as Martian food. When she was growing up, her family ate iceberg lettuce because it was cheap and kept well. At the student cafeteria salad bar, the one semester that Rae’s parents had had the wherewithal to spring for a meal ticket, the students grazed on iceberg and romaine littered with a few shreds of the expensive stuff.

This salad looked like a red, purple, and green rainbow chopped and served on an ethereal cloud of china. She whispered, “Wow.”

Wulf smiled at her.

“This is beautiful.” Rae gazed at the delicate greenery, afraid to shove a fork in it.

Wulf tucked into his salad.

Rae scooped some of the foliage with her fork and tipped it into her mouth. The salad was crispy and spicy and tender and tasted like springtime someplace cool. "Oh my gosh. This is so good."

The staff exited into the kitchen. The man who had served the salad winked at Rae as he left.

"Thank you," Wulf whispered.

"I'm serious. This is *good*."

"It's all right. They're gone."

"No wonder rich people are so skinny if their *salads* taste like *this*!"

Rae ate as fast as she could without looking like she was gobbling the salad and sipped the white wine. The greens were gone in a few minutes. Asking for seconds seemed gauche.

Two of Wulf's staff, different tall men wearing suits, came in. They handed long cards to Wulf and Rae.

"Menus?" asked Wulf and then continued speaking in Swiss, which sounded like German but Rae didn't really know what German sounded like, either.

The closer man responded with the prim air of having already won the argument.

If anyone at The Devilhouse spoke like that to The Dom, Wulf would have taken a riding crop to them, or flogged them, or something, but here, he was suppressing a wry smile.

He turned back to her. "It seems that we have menus to choose from."

Rae examined the menu, afraid that she would find blood sausage or horse meat or gizzards or the whole thing in Swiss. She had eaten rattlesnake and quail plenty of times, but who knew what foreigners ate?

Instead, she found listings for ginger and scallion-crusted trout on a cedar plank, filet mignon with whiskey-peppercorn sauce, chicken pie in puff pastry, vegetarian spring risotto, and currywurst with spätzle. Because she had no idea what the last one was, she resolved to ask for whatever Wulf did unless it was that one.

No, she would have whatever Wulf was having, *especially* if it was currywurst. Time to expand her rural world.

Wulf motioned the man over and said something in Swiss or whatever. Rae wondered if all his staff spoke Swiss and whether any of them spoke English.

The man turned toward her, obviously waiting for her choice. His hair

was shoe-polish black, but his gray eyebrows straggled toward the smile lines around his eyes.

She smiled. “Um, I’ll have what he’s having?”

The waiter’s mouth pulled to the left, a grimace. “That is what Mr. von Hannover said.”

So now she got to choose for both of them. No pressure, there. Rae glanced at Wulf, who smiled back. “In that case,” she asked the waiter guy, “would it be too much trouble to ask for the steak?”

The waiter bowed from the waist. “No trouble at all, Miss Stone. How would you like your steak prepared?”

“Medium rare?”

“Excellent. Thank you, Miss.” He collected their menus.

“Good choice,” Wulf said, when the guy was gone.

“Oh, good. You like steak?”

“I like all of them, but after the whiskey at the club, I am in the mood for something substantial.”

Rae worried that, if she ate too much, she was going to pooch out in the form-fitting red gown, and then she wondered if Wulf meant that he was in the mood for *her* .

After that, the conversation swirled back and forth between them, touching on her classes, her thoughts on music and books that she had read, and amazingly he had read most of them, too. Wulf’s arms rested on the table, and all his casual gestures seemed like he was beckoning to Rae.

“One of my professors assigned a paper on neuroplasticity this week that was really fascinating,” she said.

“Neuroplasticity?”

“Basically, if you use your brain, you build it up. It seems like the brain is more like a muscle than a gland. A gland can be exhausted by overstimulation and burn out. A muscle just gets stronger. Ever since they discovered that you make new neurons your whole life, it’s been an interesting area of research.”

“Fascinating.” His bright blue eyes scanned her face, watching her.

“This is pretty specialized stuff. You must be bored.”

“Not at all. You’re passionate about it. I find it fascinating.” He asked about her hypothesized autism therapy clinic, A Ray of Light.

So Rae told him everything she could think of, about the different types of therapy that A Ray of Light should offer, how she would structure the time

slots so that kids moved from one section to the next and from basic to intensive levels, and how the caregivers would have a special area for training and socializing to reduce stress.

Wulf smiled the whole time and sipped wine, as if she were being entertaining instead of blathering on about particulars that bored her family to dismissive hand-waving.

When she was thoroughly sick of talking about herself, the staff guys delivered the steaks with suitable flourish, and the delicate beef and that creamy sauce tasted better than the salad had. She tried to hold up her end of the conversation, but the steak that fell apart under her fork and those scalloped potatoes oozing cheesy cream and the white asparagus—*white asparagus!*—all seemed to jump into her mouth every time she tried to talk. She washed it down with two glasses of red wine, and even the wine tasted good and she didn't even like red wine.

Wulf filled the time between his bites with small talk, mostly observations about their common books but also a few comments about A Ray of Light, mostly about the business structure that Rae had never thought about, and she nodded while she chewed.

When both of them fell comfortably silent, they listened to the music drifting from the ceiling and walls.

Rae had grown up eating her mother's cooking because eating out more than a few times a year blew their budget. Her mother had been grown from austere Norwegian stock, so she boiled a hunk of beef in water with salt, dehydrated onion bits, cloves, and a bay leaf. Throwing in a couple potatoes and a carrot rounded out the meal for the six of them. The dorm cafeteria hadn't been much of an improvement, the one semester that she had had a meal plan. Since then, she had subsisted on cheese sandwiches grilled in foil with an iron on the cotton setting, oranges, and vitamin pills.

The door to the kitchen rattled and cracked open. A black cat pushed its face through and then slid the rest of its body after. It trotted two steps and leapt onto Wulf's lap.

"Oh! You have a cat? He's so cute!" Rae said.

"She. Her name is Brunhilde." He stroked the cat, who kept trying to nose its way toward the steak on Wulf's plate.

One of the waiters rushed out, jabbering in Swiss or whatever, and tried to remove the cat. Wulf said something, and the man argued but returned to the kitchen, then came back with minced steak on a small plate, which he set

on the ground at Wulf's feet. The cat hopped down and nibbled at the steak.

Obviously, the staff weren't the only ones who ate with Wulf in the kitchen.

Rae turned back to her food, though she watched the cat out of the corner of her eye. Every now and then, Brunhilde arched her back and rubbed Wulf's leg, then resumed her supper.

Yeah, that cat was no stranger to eating at Wulf's feet.

The steak on Rae's plate parted under her fork as she ate it. Sopping up the creamy sauce only made it better.

Wulf smiled as he watched Rae devour the food, and he said something else about *Orlando* by Virginia Woolf. She nodded again.

She squeegeed a last smear of whisky-peppercorn sauce off her plate with her fork and licked the fork clean. "That was so good."

"I'm glad you liked it. My staff will be gratified by your appetite. I hope you saved room for dessert," Wulf said, just as the waiter guy reappeared holding, dear Lord in Heaven, *yet more menus*.

"I'm so full. I couldn't." The red whalebones were cutting into her bloated belly. Other waiter guys cleared Rae's embarrassingly clean plate.

"Do try something, even if it is only one spoonful. Yvonne is an excellent pastry chef and chocolatier."

Rae knew that wine made her stupid, which is probably why she turned to the waiter guy who was waiting for her to say something and said, "Maybe the chocolate mousses?"

"The same," Wulf told him and handed over his menu.

He was obviously mirroring her choices, so Rae asked him, "Do you want something else? We could have the Bavarian cream or one of the things that I can't pronounce."

The waiter turned his impassive face toward Rae. Gray stubble grew in the deep wrinkles around his mouth like grass sprouting in sidewalk cracks. "Mr. von Hannover, the chocolate, he prefers. If you would prefer something else, you should say."

Rae glanced at Wulf, but he merely shrugged and said, "They know my tastes."

"The chocolate is fine, thank you, sir." Rae shrank in her seat a little.

The waiters filed out, leaving them alone again. Brunhilde the cat had wandered off some time that Rae hadn't noticed.

"Do you eat chocolate for dessert every night?" she asked.

“It is often fruit and cheese with a little chocolate, but yes.”

The dessert came within a minute, suggesting that it had already been made, and Rae resolved to eat just a little taste of each of the three chocolate layers in the tall flute, a little from the white chocolate froth on the top, a bit from the milk chocolate layer in the middle, and just a taste of the deep chocolate silk down in the base.

Of course, she ate the whole thing and drank a glass of the sweet white wine, which was called *Riesling*, that another waiter poured in another glass among the cluster of glasses that stood around her plate.

Between the wine and the chocolate and the enormous amount of food, Rae felt on the verge of falling asleep and dreaming about flying through clouds. She slouched and rested her head on the back of her chair. “That was amazing.”

Wulf’s smile was kind. “Sometimes I forget that my people are all excellent at their jobs.”

“I have never tasted anything like that.” Her eyelids drooped.

“Yvonne trained here in the States, at the culinary institute in the north of the city. When my previous chef decided to open a restaurant, she wanted to try her hand at the kitchen, so we sent her there for classes.”

“Is his restaurant here?”

“No. He located it in Los Angeles. It’s worked out well for him.” Wulf’s voice was getting kind of far away.

“That’s cool.” *Really cool. Dang nifty.* She yawned.

“Quite.” Rae felt his warm hand slide around hers. “Shall we go upstairs?”

She sat up in shock, and the twinkling dining room glared before her eyes adjusted. She whispered, “No! We can’t. Not *here*. They will all *know what we’re doing*.”

He chuckled. His thumb rubbed the back of her hand, and a wisp of desire rose like smoke through her. “They are all adults, as are we.”

“Oh my God. I would *never*. That’s like *doing it* in your parents’ house.”

“I assure you, they are not your parents, nor mine.”

“They’ll laugh at me. They’ll *talk*.”

“Rae,” and Wulf pressed her hand between both of hers, calming her, “if everyone thought that way, the nobility would have died out generations ago.”

“Still, it’s not like we’re married or something.” That should make him

back off.

Instead, Wulf stood and tugged her hand gently, pulling her to her feet. His fingers wound around hers. She bobbed as the wine rushed to her head.

He said, "Let's go."

She scooted out from around the chair and snagged her purse from where it hung on the back. Dizziness spun her head. "I couldn't."

"Come on." He snagged the half-full bottle of Riesling and two clean glasses by their stems, and he led her through the dining room. The candlelight slanted one way through the glasses, then the other, as they walked beside the long table.

She followed him. "Everyone will *know*."

"We'll sneak upstairs. No one will notice us."

"I so doubt that."

He tugged her arm. She followed.

The wine and chocolate sang in her head. She wanted to press against his skin and feel him under her palms. Her body followed where he led her, even as her brain protested that *everyone would know*.

He stopped at the door to peer around the corner, and Rae didn't see and bumped him from behind. When he turned to shush her, lest the staff hear them, she couldn't help herself and kissed him.

His other hand slipped around her waist and drew her closer. The whalebones in her dress poked her ribs and hips as she fit her body against him.

He pulled back and grinned at her. "Careful. Given an opportunity, I will sweep all these table settings to the floor and have you on that table."

She couldn't breathe for wanting him to do just that, but Wulf looked out the door again and led her down the hall of ferns and urns to the main room. He paused at the base of the staircase to glance around them, scrutinizing the conversation groupings of satin couches and chairs and peering at the supersized grand piano for lingering servants.

Yeah, he was definitely mocking her.

Rae wanted to scurry away from all the eyes in this house, so she gathered up the skirt of that red-beaded girl plumage and led the way. Wulf chuckled all the way up the stairs behind her.

At the top, she waited for him to climb the last steps because she didn't know which direction to go. She looked back, and the enormous chandelier hung like a crystal sun suspended at eye-level.



Wulf bounded up the last step and tugged her hand again. “This way.”

“All right.” She followed him to the left and hoped like mad that no one had seen them go upstairs.

The balcony skirted the chandelier and the entertaining room below. Rae wanted to hug the wall, but her scarlet dress was worse than useless as camouflage. She felt like a flag snapping in the wind.

After far too long a walk down a beige and gold hallway with too many doors in what must have been the house’s other wing, Wulf opened a door at the end of the hallway. Rae dashed in, and he closed the door behind them.

Rae had almost expected to find herself in a dungeon, a Black Room of Despair and Punishment kind of place, but the blue comforter draped over the oak four-poster bed looked more nautical than naughty. Blue stuffed chairs grouped around a coffee table .

The bookcases on the walls—three of the walls, carpet to high ceiling and corner to faraway corner—*those* caught her attention.

The books on them weren’t stuffy leather-bound volumes that might have been hollow stage props but bright books of fiction and biography and nonfiction and essays. Three doors and a television were cut into the shelves.

The unsettling thing was that the books, instead of being a crazy quilt of colored spines splattering the walls, were shelved by color.

The wall they had come in was coated in red books, and books in the near corner shaded from red to orange, and then a meticulous rainbow of book spines flowed down the walls. Violet merged into black at the far corner, and monochrome shades of black lightened to gray and then white on the far wall. “Good grief, don’t you have an e-reader?”

Wulf hauled her toward him and caught her in his arms. She was still trying to take it all in when he kissed her and pressed her against the door with his body. His hard muscles under his suit crushed her, and her heart jumped. The smoky wisp of desire sparked.

On the long wall on Rae’s left, plate-glass windows overlooked the pool. Across the blue water and rocks, the other wing of the house spread out, and Rae could see, down on the first floor, through the windows to the fern-filled urns that led to the dining room. “Can they see us through those windows?”

“That, I can fix.” Wulf grabbed a remote from his bedside nightstand and pressed a button. The windows darkened like enormous light-detecting sunglasses. The lights dimmed to something like candlelight.

Without Wulf holding Rae up, her knees buckled, and she sagged against

the door.

He stood the wine bottle and glasses on the nightstand.

He crossed the room in three long strides and Rae's feet flipped off the ground as Wulf swept her up in his arms. "Now, where were we?"

Rae grabbed his neck to take some of her weight off his arms. Even though she giggled at the thought that he could pick her up like she was a wispy doll-girl, she shouldn't let him hurt himself. Her skirt fluttered around her ankles and all that wine she had drunk discombobulated her. "Wulf, you're going to throw out your back or something. You can't keep doing this."

He carried her to the bed without staggering. "You are far too concerned about that."

"I'm not some tiny-little thing that you can just toss around!"

He grinned. "You certainly are not. I don't prefer tiny, fragile, little things. They might break." He hefted her closer and kissed her.

The kiss warmed Rae's lips and zinged through her body. He dropped her legs and she ended up kneeling on the bed, still kissing him while he shrugged off his suit coat and yanked off his tie.

He unbuttoned all those too-many buttons that ran down his shirt. Even though Rae had half a mind to yank those buttons off to get at his chest, she unbuckled his belt and unhooked his pants, pushing at them. She wanted to roll on that bed with him, his body tight against her skin.

Wulf's white shirt opened, and he flipped his shirt tails behind him and stripped his pants off. He was already hard under his black briefs.

Rae spread her hands over his chest, rubbing his blond fuzz under her palms. His breath warmed her face, and she could smell the wine and chocolate they'd had.

Her own head spun from too much wine. Wulf dragged her closer to him, crushing her to him, and his tongue forced her mouth open. She whimpered, wanting him inside her right then, but her dress was still on and she knew that he would make her wait for it. She wrapped her arms tight around his neck and held on, pushing her tits against him and feeling his breath rush into him. His hands roamed over her back and then rubbed down to her ass, squeezing her flesh.

At The Devilhouse, during the show, that man had parted that woman's butt cheeks and then rammed his dick up her ass. Rae's backside heated from Wulf's strong fingers groping her butt, and her asshole felt sensitive as her

cheeks rubbed together.

She shoved his open shirt back from his shoulders, but Wulf tugged it against her hands, pulling it back on.

She ran her hands up the front of his body, from his lean waist, over his muscled chest, and up to his shoulders. The soft blond fuzz on his chest between his pectoral muscles tapered to line separating his abs and disappeared into his pants. "Let me see you."

"Rae, no." He kissed her, trying to push her back onto the bed.

Rae slid her hands around his waist toward that terrible scar in back. "Does it hurt?"

"It is rather inflexible," he admitted .

Her fingers found the twisted skin on his back. The skin knotted around the old wound. She whispered, "Please, all of you."

Wulf hesitated, then yanked his shirt off his arms behind him. He pushed her back on the bed, his teeth raking her neck.

Rae fell back and closed her eyes. The world spun around the bed. "Good Lord, I'm tipsy."

"What?" Wulf pulled away from her.

"No. Don't. Come back." She reached for him.

"Are you drunk?" His flat tone sounded like all the passion had been leeched out of him.

She didn't open her eyes because the bed looped around them like they were flying. "Your staff kept pushing the wine. They kept pouring new glasses, and I had to drink those, too."

His tone turned distressed. "Reagan, are you drunk?"

His unspoken question finally woke her up, and she opened her eyes to see him looking aghast. "Drunk? No! Not drunk. Just tipsy. Just wobbly because I drank more than usual." She locked her arms around his neck. "Not impaired. Not making bad decisions. Don't stop!"

Wulf released his breath and lowered his head to kiss her again.

"Wait," she said seriously, and his blue eyes opened near her face, also serious. She asked, "Are *you* too drunk? Am I taking advantage of *you*?"

He laughed and grabbed her wrists, holding her down on the bed. "Yes, I am impaired, and I might make rash decisions." He kissed her hard then, and to Rae, his hard tongue probing her soft mouth felt like what was to come. He growled, "Sometimes, I get wild when I'm drunk. Sometimes, I can't control myself."

Rae's panties were hot with the idea that Wulf wouldn't be able to control himself.

He pulled back and grabbed her, flipping her over. She rose to her hands and knees, and he grabbed the heavy, beaded fabric over her hips and forced her back against his crotch. "Someday, I will have you like this." His voice thickened with lust.

Rae's butt cheeks rubbed against his hips, and her ass felt as hot as her pussy.

Wulf leaned over her back, and his rough voice whispered near her ear, "And I will make you like it, even more than you liked being spanked. "

Rae's pussy spasmed with wanting him, and her arms trembled.

He grabbed her arms and pulled her up straight to kneeling. His body pressed all down her back and ass, and his hands roved over her belly and down her thighs.

She lifted her arm to run her fingers through his close-cropped hair, rolling her head to the side to bare her neck. His mouth came down on her shoulder, biting her. The pain of his bites got all mixed up with the pleasure of his hands moving up her body and grasping her breasts. Even through the red dress's beads and satin and her bra, she felt him slide his thumbs over her nipples.

She moaned and pressed herself backward against his chest and hips.

Wulf grabbed her hips and stepped back from her, then wrapped her long curls around his hand. He still had her by the hair as he yanked her zipper down her back. Her dress, barely clinging to her shoulders, fell. Rae grabbed the bodice and held it over her chest just as a reflex, but Wulf grabbed fistfuls of the fabric and pulled her backward off the bed by the dress.

The scarlet dress, weighed down with glass beads, plummeted to the floor.

She caught her breath at the cool air rushing over her skin, but Wulf shoved her back onto the bed and was on her back before she could flip over. Peach- and yellow-spined books covered the wall beyond the bed. He grabbed her wrists hard and pinned her arms by her ears as he nipped the back of her neck, sending lovely shocks down her spine. Rae's cheek pressed against the soft comforter, and she groaned, wanting more, wanting him *now*.

He twisted her arms around and held her wrists together at the small of her back with one strong hand. Rae's shoulders strained, but her body felt

ready to burst with wanting him. He popped the hook on her bra. The lace fell over her arms as he chewed his way down her back. His bites scraped her, but she felt his other hand slowly, driving-her-crazy slowly, sliding from her knee up the inside of her thigh.

The foreplay was taking forever, and she tried to sit up to whirl him around and push him underneath her, but he stood beside the bed where she lay across it, holding her down. His breath warmed her spine and then her ass cheek, teasing her. His lips brushed her skin. He trailed his fingers up her inner thigh, pressing her soft flesh there, and she waited breathlessly for his fingers to reach her panties.

Just as his fingers were almost there, *so close*, and all her attention was focused on whether he would touch her over the silk or shove her panties aside and stroke her, he bit down on her ass.

She cried out just as his fingers slipped inside her panties and her folds and stroked her deeply from clit to her hot center. The long slide through her pussy reverberated up her spine. She gasped, and her pussy quivered.

He grabbed her panties and hoisted her ass up in the air. The thin cloth folded and pulled up tight between her lips, tweaking her clit as she got her knees under her. He still held her wrists behind her back, so her face was buried in the mattress. She couldn't see what he was going to do, and her pussy clenched hard with excitement.

She was tipsy as heck, but his rough breath panting against her back was sexy as hell. He *wanted* her. She could feel how much he did.

He wrenched her panties down to her knees, grating her skin. He slid his hand up the inside of her leg so fast that her breath rushed in as she knew that his fingers were speeding toward her pussy again.

His fingers slid inside her. She was wet, so wet, and so open to him with her ass in the air. The sluttiness was exhilarating, and stopping didn't cross her mind.

He stroked her inside with his fingers and rubbed her clit with his thumb, dragging his fingers over her skin. Desire built in her and became an ache.

He switched his hand around. Instead of rubbing her clit with his slick thumb, he slid his thumb over her asshole, rubbing the sensitive skin there as he stroked her center inside. Her pussy fluttered around his fingers. Pleasure sparked up her spine, and she cried out into the darkness of the mattress. She couldn't believe that such a naughty thing would feel so good, but all the naughty things that Wulf did to her felt incredible.

He let go of her arms, and she rolled over on the bed, reaching for him and kicking off her panties that bound her legs together. Desperation for his body crowded out all her thoughts. Her skin was on fire where he had bitten her and grabbed her skin.

Wulf leapt on her. His knee shoved her legs apart.

She wrapped her arms around his neck, almost crying with need.

## Secrets of his Heart

WULF kneeled, poised between Rae's legs, ready to have her. Her coppery hair flowed over his pillows as she tossed her head, nearly mad with wanting him. "Wulf!"

*Him!* Not just sex. Not what he could do *for* her, or *to* her, but she wanted *him* .

Because Wulf was The Dom of The Devilhouse, the women expected a night of debauchery with him. Sometimes, figuring out what they actually wanted but were too afraid or ashamed to ask for required his entire attention and much time. That date with Lizbeth a month ago had nearly been a disaster. Her self-assurance at The Devilhouse masked a deep fascination with submissiveness. Once he understood that she wanted complete domination, that she would never utter her safe word because she wanted to experience being so heavily submissive, the night had descended to disturbing levels.

With Rae, Wulf didn't feel like he was manipulating her or putting on a show. He felt *real* . He wanted to shove his cock inside her and fuck her until she screamed his name. He wanted to ruin her for other men, to take her so completely for himself that she couldn't even look at another man.

He ran his hands up her velvety thighs again, feeling how she trembled, and stroked her through her clit and pussy again. She was sopping wet and hot inside. Yes, she was ready for him, and he was so hard with wanting her that his balls tightened just thinking about taking her.

He reached for his night stand, where he had stashed several condoms that morning, just in case. He never kept condoms in his bedroom because he had never brought a woman to his home.

His business manager at The Devilhouse had alerted him the previous afternoon that Reagan's medical release had been submitted and was clear. Wulf had had his own physical the month before and, as always, was clear.

He hesitated.

Her fingers plucked at his chest, making his skin tingle. He thumbed her clit again, watching desire fog her eyes. Seeing her out of her mind with

passion made his mouth wet.

When she had given him a blow job without a condom, her mouth had been so hot, so wet, and his balls squeezed again.

“Wulf, please!”

He didn’t open the nightstand drawer.

Wulf held his bare cock to the heat of her pussy, felt her warmth and wetness on the head of his dick, and sank into her.

She was so warm, so slippery as her body closed around his cock, and he slid through her. He gasped with shock of it, then remembered her. He brought his mouth down on hers as he slipped in and out her, every stroke so much *more* than anything he had felt before.

He had always used condoms. At *Institut Le Rosey* where he had grown up, condoms were freely available and considered mandatory. One virus could have wiped out an entire generation of the world’s elite.

His first time, he had used a condom.

Every time since, he had used a condom.

Every blow job until last week, he had used a condom.

A protective carapace had been stripped away from him, and his vulnerable body shuddered for the first time. His uncovered scar felt cold on his back.

Another stroke, and he was buried deep in her again. He lifted at the end and rubbed against her clit, and she gasped.

Her breath came hot and fast on his shoulder. Her voice held a note of panic as she asked, “Did you put on a condom?”

“No.” His voice was hoarse with emotion, shocking him. “We’re both clear, medically.” He dipped into her heat again, and his balls tightened. He controlled the urge to come.

“Wulf, I’m not on the Pill. Oh, my God! Yes!”

He pierced her with his cock, pressing in deep and grinding up at the end. She gasped and wound her arms around his neck tightly so that he couldn’t have pulled out .

“Oh, God, yes! Please, yes!” she cried.

He would have thought that such an admission would have driven him back and away, but he drove himself more deeply into her. His skin on hers felt so natural that he wanted all of her, and he wanted to bury himself in Rae. His strokes were slow and deep so that she couldn’t think, but every time he thought about her, her pussy was so hot, so wet on him, that his balls



clenched.

He conjured up the Black-Scholes equation in his head using Friday's option prices for Altria because his control was tremulous, but he reined himself in.

Under him, her breathing rasped, and her arms held him close. The last of her perfume mixed with the heady scent of woman and, if he closed his eyes, Wulf would have thought they were making love on a bed of jasmine. His imagination could not stretch beyond this moment, and he held her in his arms, pinned to the bed with his body, and his heart was full of her.

He worked her body, listening to her cries at the top of his stroke. Her body writhed under him, and her soft, soft arms and legs wrapped him.

"Yes!" she begged in his arms. "Wulf, yes!"

Their lives were balanced on a knife-edge. She knew only his present life, and the future was open to them. His life before he had met her faded into mist. With her, he could start over, and all the violence and pain would fall away.

He reared up and looked down at Rae while his body moved in hers. Her hair glinted red, and her eyes were closed. Her body pulsed as he rocked into her.

He said, "Look at me."

Her eyes fluttered open, drunk with desire, and he could see himself reflected in her lovely brown eyes.

He wanted her to see him, to know him, to know that he, Wulf von Hannover, was about to leave himself inside her. "Reagan, look at me."

She focused a little on him, but at the top of each long slide into her, when he rubbed her clit, her gaze blurred, and she gasped and whimpered with need. "Wulf," she whispered. "Yes."

He drove deeper into her, waiting for her to climax. He buried his dick deep in her with every thrust.

She cried out and arched off the bed. Her body clenched around his cock. *There.*

He pushed into her one last time and let go. His balls squeezed against his body, and the energy pulled in from his limbs and turned to firecrackers up his spine and into his head. He heard his own hoarse voice shout as he shot his seed deep into her.

He fell, and he lay on her body, in her arms, as the last spasms pulsed. "Oh, Reagan."

“Wulf,” she said, and his name in her lovely mouth was more than he could bear, so he kissed her, gently this time.

Still buried in Rae, holding her in his arms and kissing her, Wulf drifted.

# So Many Secrets

PIECES of Rae floated inward to coalesce.

She gasped for air.

Wulf's skin warmed her body.

Her vision refocused, and the tiny light bulbs embedded in the ceiling glowed like an array of suns.

Wulf kissed her, and she kissed him back, her arms draped around his neck. Her hand drifted toward his back and his scar. Her fingertips grazed the tangled skin. He didn't flinch, so she explored it with her fingers. Tough ridges surrounded the gouge.

Wulf braced himself on his forearms while he kissed her. His languid kissing seemed like he was trying to prolong being inside her, like he hadn't had enough of her yet. Her body shivered at the thought, and her pussy gripped his dick.

He chuckled, and his lips pulled away from hers as he smiled.

"What?" she asked.

"If you keep doing that, you might not leave tonight at all. What would the staff say?"

She slapped his shoulder. "I should leave. They're going to talk."

"It doesn't concern us."

"Oh, my Lord." Rae covered her eyes as if trying to block out the thought. There was something so embarrassing about people not just suspecting but *knowing* that they'd been having sex and then, *horrors*, talking about it.

He rolled off of her, and she felt empty as he pulled out. He slid one strong arm under her shoulders and pulled her close to him. With the other hand, he flipped the blue comforter over them both.

Rae hadn't even noticed him pull back the covers. Wow, she must be really tipsy, or just really into him .

Really into the ways that his hands stroked her.

Really into how his body slid between her thighs and into her.

Desire smoked in her again.

That was ridiculous. She couldn't just hop on and ride him every five minutes.

Rae laid her head on his strong shoulder. She traced the ridges of muscle banding his chest and stomach. Black tattoo ink shrouded his other shoulder.

"Are they really going to talk?" she asked, even though she was ashamed that she was so ashamed.

"Probably," Wulf said. "They discuss anything that amuses them."

"Why are we even here? Why didn't we just go to a restaurant and a hotel?"

"I wanted you to meet Rosamunde and the rest of my staff."

"Because they're your friends."

"It's a different relationship than friendship. It's more like family, a series of reciprocal obligations."

"But they're not your family, really."

"No, they're not. They know their place, and they certainly keep me in mine."

Rae ran her fingers over his chest, still shying away from that black ink blotch on his shoulder. "I can't imagine living so far away from my family."

"My mother died when I was fifteen."

Visions of gunfire and spraying blood played in Rae's head. "I'm sorry."

"Breast cancer," he said.

"I'm so sorry." So prosaic and lingering a death seemed worse.

Maybe someone who had seen his brother shot to death would have a different opinion of a death that allowed time to say goodbye.

He said, "Most of my staff have been with me for years or are the grown children or younger siblings of previous staff."

"So, their whole families serve you." The feudal overtones crept Rae out.

"They aren't obligated to."

"Are you going to ask them what they think of me?" She asked it as a joke, but if they hated her she would just die, and it would be worse if they despised her, and not just because of what that might mean for this whatever-it-was with Wulf. She hadn't behaved like a snooty lady should. She had probably embarrassed Wulf in front of them by being the backwater country girl that she was.

Wulf's smile turned wry again. "I don't need to ask."

Rae's heart seized up. "How do you know?"

“They have been with me for years, day and night. Rosamunde will feel a need to polish you a bit, to which you may acquiesce or not, but they liked you quite well.”

“She trains up all your girlfriends, huh?”

“She’s never met one before.”

Rae wasn’t sure what to say to that, and she still felt stupid-needy. “Are you sure they liked me?”

Wulf glanced at her with sardonic side-eyes, like he wasn’t sure how she was going to take what he was about to say. “I was being a bit facetious when I was scouting for staff on our way to the bedroom.”

“I could tell you were poking fun at me.”

“Not at all. Doubtless, they heard your qualms and did not want to cause you discomfort. The living areas of the house had been flushed of staff. I have never seen this house so empty.”

“Oh.” So they *all* knew Rae was a tramp. Splendid.

“Had we gone to the garage, a line of staff would have said their goodbyes. You may well brace yourself for that in the morning.”

“Oh, good Lord.” Good thing that Rae was lying down, or else she might have swooned at the thought of his whole staff witnessing her walk of shame. “I can’t stay the night, anyway. I have to get back to my dorm. Hester will flip if I’m out all night.”

“Surely she wouldn’t.”

“Oh, surely she would.” Rae snuggled closer to Wulf’s lean body and rested her hand on his muscled chest. His heartbeat pulsed under her palm. She curled her fingers through the light blond fuzz on his chest and trailed her fingers down his rippled belly.

She peeked at the black tattoo ink that crept over his other shoulder.

When Rae had dragged Wulf’s shirt off his shoulders in The Devilhouse, she had exposed that terrible scar. A tattoo framed it, though she hadn’t had a good look at the tattoo because Wulf had bellowed his safe word and Rae had tossed his shirt back over his shoulders, horrified at what she had done.

Rae touched the tattoo ink .

Wulf didn’t say anything.

She ran her finger over the feathered edge, where the pool of dark ink met his pale skin. Not all the ink was black. Violent pink and white peeped over his strong trapezius muscle.

Rae rolled half onto him, engrossed in trying to see more. She stroked the

black ink. “Does that hurt?”

“No.” He ran his hands down her ribs to her waist, stroking her skin. She asked, “Did it hurt when they did it?”

“It stung a bit. There appears to be some nerve damage on my back, because I didn’t feel parts of it.”

“The ink is really dark.”

“It was engraved in the traditional Japanese method. Would you like to see the whole thing?” The calm in his voice seemed practiced.

“It’s okay if you don’t want to.” Rae scooted back.

Wulf rolled onto his stomach. Heavy muscles wrapped his back and tapered to his narrow waist.

On his back, draped over his right side, dark blacks and blues scrolled around flowers. “What kinds of flowers are these?”

“The white ones are chrysanthemums,” Wulf said. “The pink are cherry blossoms.”

Twigs of pink cherry blossoms separated the white chrysanthemum bursts. A long, snake-like creature wove through the flowers. Blue and green highlights tinged its white scales, almost opalescent on his pale scar. “And a dragon.”

“Yes.”

The whole design was encased in a black cloud that became the background. The flowers vined around the white dragon, which was actually his own pale skin showing through. The grotesque scar where the bullet had burst out his back was the body of the dragon. “You decorated it.”

“An attempt to incorporate the scar into my psyche. Perhaps not entirely unsuccessful. My school chum Yoshi suggested it when I visited him in Tokyo quite a few years ago. It took three months of weekly visits, directly before I took over The Devilhouse, as I recall.”

Rae didn’t like needles or pain and didn’t ever want to get a tattoo that took three months. “Do the things mean something?”

“The cherry blossoms represent the fragility and transience of life.”

Her heart hurt for him. “And the dragon?”

“Strength. Endurance. Mythological connotations of magic. Yoshi has a similar one.”

“That’s quite a commitment for school chum.”

“Yoshi dragged me under a car when that madman shot at us. When Yoshi was reaching for me, he was winged on the arm. He maintains that we

both had blood all over us, and so we are blood brothers.”

Rae had to be careful, here, talking about the shooting, and blood, and brothers. “That’s awful.”

“It was not ideal. Have you seen enough?”

“Yeah.”

He rolled onto his back, and Rae slid down to lay beside him. The wine and exertion made her sleepy, and she felt her eyelids blinking. This room, lined with the spectrum of books, was a cozy enclave in Wulf’s castle.

Still, she noticed, there were books, relics of intellect, but there weren’t any pictures.

She twined her leg around his thigh, snuggling up to him. His arm tightened around her, holding her close, but he stared up at the bright LEDs in the ceiling.

“Were you all right with me seeing that?”

“Yes.” He didn’t even blink. “Give me a moment. It might have been disconcerting.”

Wow. That was quite an admission for the man with the shiny, mirrored shell. Rae rested her head on his shoulder and wound all of herself around him. She arched her back to press her body all down his side.

After a moment, something nudged her thigh.

“I know,” she wanted to giggle but she didn’t know how he would react, so she just mimicked his accent. “‘It will go away presently.’” Her accent came out as more cockney than his standardized British, but what the heck.

“No, it won’t.” Wulf whirled with her and she was under him again. His knee between her legs surprised her but she opened to him. He didn’t indulge in foreplay this time, and he took her.

“Wulf! We shouldn’t. The condom. I’m not—” but his mouth came down on hers. His body rocked between her legs, driving his cock into her and she couldn’t think any more. He did *something* at the end of each long stroke that felt so good inside her that she wanted to scream. She grabbed him around the shoulders and held him tight.

Wulf pushed into Rae again, and her breath caught in her throat. With every movement of his supple body, waves rushed from Rae’s pussy to her head, driving her breath out. Her hands traveled down his body. Her right hand caressed his smooth skin, feeling the heavy muscles on his shoulder and side. Her left hand gingerly touched that terrible scar.

The image of the screaming blond boy flashed in her head again, and she

shuddered. She held him as he slid in and out of her.

He pushed himself up on his forearms and gazed down at her. His intense gaze unnerved her, and she reached for his neck. He thrust into her, still watching her eyes. Rae moaned and arched, unable to keep her eyes open as each wave overcame her.

“Wulf, oh my God. Wulf!” She grabbed him and pulled him down to kiss him because she could see the pain in his eyes. His lips sucked her mouth as his cock pumped her.

She knew that she must be irrational or drunk or something because she wanted him to come in her. All that condom-wrapped sex that she had ever had seemed like playing around compared to this skin-to-skin heat. She wanted every bit of him, to wrap him in herself and drink him in.

His body tensed. He pushed into her one last time. That last grind on her clit threw her over the edge. Her body undulated with waves of pleasure that rushed through her and she cried out. Her body rose, pressed against his, flying. His lips never left hers, but his arms shook where he braced himself above her.

“Reagan,” he whispered against her lips.

“Oh, Wulf.” She couldn’t seem to get enough air because even her lungs trembled. The last of the waves rippled in her pussy and her spine.

She opened her eyes, expecting to see his usual self-contained expression on his face, but he looked so vulnerable. His blond hair flopped over his forehead, and his blue eyes searched hers. He sucked air in and his lips parted, verging on saying something that was going to come out in a rush.

If he told her about his brother, she might react wrong, and he would know she hadn’t kept her word. Hurting him was the last thing she wanted to do .

A faint beep peeped from her purse, which was lying next to the door.

She asked, “What’s that?”

“Nothing.” He kissed her, and she savored his silky lips and soft kiss.

Her phone fweped again.

“Ignore it,” he said.

She didn’t want to move. She didn’t think she could stand up, anyway, so she held onto his kiss. His tongue slid into her mouth and stroked her tongue for a moment, and then he backed off, still brushing her mouth with his.

Her dang phone cheeped again.

“It’s probably just my cousin-roommate, wanting to know where I am,”



she whispered against his lips.

“Is she that forward?”

“Oh, she keeps tabs on me. She’s terrified that I’m going to Hell.”

“Don’t move.” His breathy voice sounded so unlike him.

“I have to. She’ll freak. She’ll call my parents because she’ll think I’ve been raped and left for dead in the desert.” She patted his arm, asking him to move.

He rolled off her.

Her muscles felt wrung out, as if he had sapped all the life from her, but he didn’t look like he could move either, stretched beside her.

“I just have to text her back that I’ll be home soon.” Rae pulled a sheet to cover herself as she stood to go get her purse.

Wulf opened a drawer beside his bed and tossed her a thick robe.

She stuck her arms through the sleeves and belted it. “Oh, shoot. I forget to bring my clothes up from the car. I’ll have to wear that red dress back to The Devilhouse. I can still get inside to change clothes, right?”

Wulf cleared his throat like he was trying to cough up something. “Since I was planning to drive you home in the morning, I asked the staff to take your backpack and launder your clothes.”

“When did you tell them that?”

“While we were dining.”

So she had no street clothes. Going home in a ball gown was less horrific than staying out all night in terms of the haranguing that Rae was going to get. “Oops. Oh, well. Thanks, anyway. But I do have to go home. Probably soon.”

Rae plodded over to the dark doorway. A green light blinked inside her purse.

“My phone doesn’t usually beep like that, that constant beeping.” Her useless, too-late paranoia joined in with its stupid alarm bells.

She fished her phone out of her bag and went back to the bed.

“Yeah, it’s a text,” Rae said. Her phone message light blinked green and kept blinking. “More than one. Lots of texts. Holy cow.”

Wulf rolled over and raised himself on one elbow. “Is everything all right?”

“I don’t know.” Rae traced the pattern on her phone to unlock it. The text icon had a 15 next to it. “Oh my gosh.”

She thumbed the text icon. Hester’s name was on top, but a list of six of

her cousins and her brother Ezekiel ran beneath Hester's. "My family's been trying to get a hold of me." Rae tapped Hester's name.

The top text read, *You didn't answer your phone. Aunt Enid is in the hospital. I'm leaving now. I'll text if you should come home tonight.* The time stamp said that it was sent at eight o'clock that night.

A moment of worry crossed her mind for her Aunt Enid, who was nearly ninety-seven and suffering from dementia.

Hester's last text, sent just a few minutes before Rae had opened her phone, read, *Aunt Enid is with Jesus. Celebration of Life will be next weekend at the church.*

At least Aunt Enid wasn't in such pain any more.

A text from Craigh, her screwball cousin, asked her to come over for supper after they all planted Aunt Enid next weekend.

Grief and relief warred in Rae. The last time she had visited her Aunt Enid in the nursing home, her aunt had sobbed the whole time, asking for her own mother.

Oh, Lord. Rae didn't want to go home. They would all show up for the service: her cousins, her aunts and uncles, Minister Stoppard, everyone. Aunt Enid was related to the Hardings, too, and Jim Bob Mulligan would certainly attend and insinuate stuff just to watch her squirm.

"My great aunt passed away." She met Wulf's eyes, and they were so blue that they matched the comforter over his waist and legs. "The Celebration of Life is next weekend. I have to go home. Jim Bob will probably be there, darn it."

Wulf raised up and braced himself on one elbow. The sheet slid down his body, revealing more of his muscled stomach. "I'll go with you."

"Oh, good Lord, Wulf. You can't."

"Whyever not?"

*Why not?* Because her whole family would give him the third degree and it would come out *where* she was working to pay for college and at the very least they would harry him like a flock of hawks after a rabbit to find out what his *intentions* were. "Please don't."

"That cousin of yours will not dare anything while I am present. Of course, I will come. Text me the details."

She cringed because this was going to sound needy. "I don't have your cell phone number."

Wulf's easy laugh made her feel silly. "Give me your phone, and I'll call

myself so you have it.”

“Sure.” Rae handed him the phone, and he thumbed a number into her phone. His pants, on the floor by the bed, chimed.

He asked, “The funeral is when?”

“Celebration of Life. It’s next weekend. Just let me check my email to see if my mom sent me the details or anything.”

“*Ja*. Here.” He extended the phone toward her.

Rae reached for it, intending just to lift it from his hand by the edge, but her thumb brushed the internet browser icon on the screen.

The browser opened.

The news photo of the screaming, blond child that was Wulf flashed on her phone, beside the formal portrait of Wulf and his twin brother.

Rae’s heart stomped.

Wulf’s face was as pale as porcelain, and his blue eyes were as emotionless as clear water as he stared at the phone screen and then looked up at her.

Rae’s futile swallow hurt her dry throat.

He knew.

## **Book 6: Into the Fire**

## Wulf: Aftermath

WULF paced the corridors of his house, past the long windows overlooking the pool that glowed alien green in the darkness, past ferns in tall pottery urns, past the dining room and back. He stalked through the empty kitchen, trekked through the garages, and walked the balconies above the main floor.

Rae knew.

She knew too much, and she was one “translate” button away from knowing everything.

After he had taken her home, he returned to his house in the quietest of cold rages. He pulled Dieter aside and tasked him with once again deleting those damned Wikipedia pages because they had risen again like goddamned vampires, especially the one on the de.wikipedia.org site that summarized his life in thirteen excruciating paragraphs.

Then he paced.

His staff kept out of his way. They respected his privacy.

If Rae didn’t know who he was yet, she would soon. The Wiki pages summarized, but all the information was available.

He paced all that night, until the brilliant desert sun rose over the back section of the house.

Once she knew, others would, too. Even if Rae told no one, her demeanor toward him would change, and Jeffrey Jackson would pounce on such a change.

Then more people would know, and then the wrong people would hear, and then they would find him.

*Almost*, he raged as he lowered himself into the cream satin chair, watching gold and scarlet streak the sky. He stretched his legs and leaned back. The sunlight shone on his serene face.

*Almost* .

He turned his hands over, trying to feel the sunlight. The thick windows blocked the warmth, and it felt like the sunlight passed entirely through his flesh.

He had *almost* fallen for her. She had *almost* fallen for him before she

realized what that meant.

It was better this way, this *almost* .

He could leave before she broke his heart.

He should let her go rather than place her in danger.

*Almost*, damn it. This indulgence of his had *almost* hurt them both.

Ms. Keller came down the stairs, wearing her housecoat. "Herr von Hannover."

Doubtless the evening people had roused her when they saw him pacing. "Frau Keller."

"I heard you were watching the sunrise," she said in German, the language of his childhood and the one they used together. She glanced at his rumpled slacks and creased shirt, confirming he was still wearing his clothes from yesterday.

Wulf shrugged.

She settled herself in the chair beside him and leaned back, watching the sun's rays crest over the rooftop. The peach light shone on her face, smoothing the lines that had accrued in the last seventeen years.

Over half Wulf's life.

"Up all night?" she asked lightly.

"Yes." Lying was futile in a house full of whispering servants.

She reached over and took his hand, something she hadn't done in a very long time. "You are all right, Wulfram?"

Wulf paused at her intrusive gesture, then he turned his hand over and held her fingers for a moment. "I'm fine. Thank you, Rosamunde."

"You seemed happy last night."

Wulf felt seventeen again, when Rosamunde had unsuccessfully attempted to dissuade him from flying to Saudi Arabia to chase after a Saudi princess, Reem, whom he had had fallen for like only a motherless teenager could.

"I was mistaken. I was trying to have a normal relationship. She doesn't know about all that." He gestured to an empty wall where a darker caramel shadow of a rectangle suggested something large was missing .

"There is nothing normal about your life. It's unfair, to her, to not tell."

He had been trying to have a normal *life*, as normal as it could be, or at least different from his life before. "It doesn't matter now."

"I'm sorry." She patted his hand twice and then pulled her hand back. "Would you like some hot chocolate?"

“If you wouldn’t mind.”

“I don’t mind.” She shuffled past the stairs. Her slippers shushed on the marble floor. “I was up anyway.”

A bald-faced lie, but she was stoic in all things.

She said, “I will have the boys hang the portraits back up. The house looks dour without them.”

“Frau Keller.”

“Yes, Herr von Hannover?”

He swallowed, hating to say it, but she had a need to know. “We’ll be moving the household. Probably within a few weeks.”

She paused, which was an admission of astonishment for her, then nodded. “Very good, Herr von Hannover. I’ll begin preparations.”

Wulf had found Reem at a mall in Riyadh and announced that he had come to rescue her. She had sobbed in desperate terror, her tears soaking her black niqab below her eyes, at what her father would do if he found Wulf, and she begged him to leave and not try to contact her again.

He was, again, utterly helpless to protect someone he loved.

Within a few years, Wulf could list dozens of reasons why their relationship would never have worked—from their religions to their priorities to her vicious temper,—but he had stalked her from Switzerland, demanding assurances from mutual school friends that her father hadn’t murdered her, until he heard Reem was married and had children, only two years later.

When he knew that Reem was happy and safe, he let go, relieved.

Wulf wasn’t going to find that peace about Rae any time soon.

He stood and paced.

## Back to the Dorm

RAE lay in her bed in her cramped, solitary dorm room, curled up under the scratchy pink and purple afghan that her Aunt Enid had crocheted for her in better times, eyes open, refusing to cry.

Aunt Enid had always been kind enough to Rae when Rae was a kid, but her passing was no shock. Enid had been almost ninety-seven. She was longing for Jesus, everyone said. The last time Rae had visited her, she groaned from osteoporosis pain in her spine, stared at the decrepit nursing home through a milky fog of incomprehension and cataracts, and cried for her mother to come and take her home.

Rae wouldn't cry about Wulf, either. That was her own doing.

Wulf had been polite while he drove her home through the dark morning. Even his electric car gave her the silent treatment.

At one point during the uncomfortable ride out of his floodlit fortress, through the sleeping city, and into the university's dorm district where the drunks straggled home, Wulf had asked her, so quietly, "Do you know who I am?"

His British accent seemed so strong, like his jaw wouldn't move.

She knew too many things about the secretive Dom that no one else at The Devilhouse knew: that he was raised at a boarding school in Switzerland, that he liked chocolate, that he had a fearful scar on his back where he had been shot when he was a child, and that his brother had been killed in the same attack. A tattoo of cherry blossoms and chrysanthemums camouflaged the twisting scar, which had become a pale dragon amidst the ink.

Rae said, "I looked up your name. I couldn't even breathe when I saw that picture. The article was in some other language, Swiss or something. I couldn't read it."

Lamplight swung over Wulf's impassive face, glinting on his blond hair. His strong jaw bulged, and his teeth didn't open when he said, "I imagine that seeing such a picture was upsetting for you."

"Um, yeah. I got pretty upset," she admitted.

"Ah."



Rae wasn't sure what to make of that, and she couldn't seem to fold her hands into a comfortable position. She kept clutching them together, and then twining her fingers, but nothing felt right.

He drove methodically back to her dorm, wished her a good morning, and stayed in his car until the lobby door closed behind her. Through the glass door, she watched his car drive silently away.

The dorm assistant on duty, Leo, leaned over the front desk. He pulled his brown dreadlocks off his face and asked, "What on God's green Earth kind of car was *that*?"

"A Tesla," Rae said. She considered getting her mail, but her hands were shaking too much to insert the miniature key into the lock. "It's electric."

"Jesus, Lord, I thought that was a Tesla Roadster, but I've never seen one in real life. Righteous."

"Yeah. I'll see you around."

He looked her up and down, just noticing her scarlet, beaded ball gown sweeping the asbestos tile floor. "Nice dress. Want to study together for Abby Psych this week?"

"Sure." She still needed to pass her tests, now that she was back in the normal world of dorms and classes, having left behind Wulf's silent cars, garage elevators, and walled mansions with hot and cold running servants.

Since Hester was still in Pirtleville and wasn't home to judge, Rae fell into bed still wearing the red ball gown and listened to dorm around her. Behind her headboard, someone on the other side of that wall, either Krista or Deborah, was listening to soft music. One of her suitemates, either Georgie or Lizzy, flushed in their shared bathroom. Rae wondered if Lizzy had gotten home all right or was still with the tattooed Dom.

Rae curled up hard, trying to not cry.

*Do you know who I am*, Wulf had asked her.

No, she didn't. None of them knew who he was. Rae knew a few incidentals, but she didn't want to pry into his life any more.

He was too wounded to strip away any more of his shiny, mirrored shell.

## A Moment Alone

RAE stood in the pharmacy, holding the box, cupping her hands around it so that other students milling around her couldn't see what it was.

Her childhood church told her this box was a sin. When Rae's friend Baptista had used it when they were in high school, she had been disfellowshipped. Her family had sent her to live with an aunt in New Mexico rather than risk being thrown out, too. Baptista never even visited her parents.

Her childhood church told her that premarital sex was a sin, too, but she had done that.

Her childhood church said that birth control was a sin. They hadn't used a condom, and she had been so crazed for Wulf and tipsy that she hadn't been thinking straight.

No, if she had learned anything from Wulf and The Devilhouse, it was that wine or passion or handcuffs merely gave her permission to do what she was starving to do. Blaming passion or the booze was a lie.

She had been mad for the feel of his skin. When he had plunged into her last night, she had managed to look at him once. *Something* had transformed his face so that he looked younger, sweeter. She had been transfixed until he had slid into her again, and then she didn't want to stop him because she felt the same—*something*—on her own face.

It had scared her. The Dom should have his shiny shell. She shouldn't fall for this guy. It could only end in broken hearts because he wasn't that kind of guy.

When her phone had fweeped for the texts, she had chosen to go pick it up rather than stay in the bed with him.

That morning, she would have done anything to feel the weight of Wulf's hand in hers .

She put her hand to her stomach.

Her own mother had used the rhythm method all her life and had explained it to Rae, even guided her through it a couple months, just to show her, not that Rae had needed it in high school. She hadn't cashed in her V-

card until she got to college.

Rae figured that last night was dicey. It was close but probably okay. In, like, one day, she would be safely in the post-ovulatory phase, and then it wouldn't matter. She would get a prescription for The Pill for next month from Student Health Services, but there wasn't going to be a next month anyway, not after Wulf had seen that picture on her phone.

She was probably fine. She probably didn't need to buy this expensive pack of pills that would make her sick for days.

If it happened, she could just leave the city and go home to Pirtleville. Her church would cast her out for being pregnant without being married, but her family would take her in or at least help her by finding a relative somewhere for her to live with.

She wouldn't tell him, of course.

The ache in her heart spread to her stomach.

If she took these pills, she would destroy even a little spark of life that they had created, if there was one.

Maybe.

Probably not.

She set the box back on the shelf.

## Once More into The Devilhouse

RAE caught a ride over to The Devilhouse with Georgie the next afternoon because she had left her car in the parking lot overnight. The spring sun cascaded through the windows, warming her arm on the armrest, even though she felt like she should curl up and weep.

Georgie drove Rae to work in her Lexus. “What, did you go home with someone last night?”

“I got tipsy, and Glenda drove me home.”

“Yeah, you don’t want to take a chance with that.”

And that was all.

Georgie drove quietly but far too fast, and she jammed the car around the corners.

Something must be terribly wrong.

Rae had been all wrapped up in her own misery. “Something wrong?”

“Nope.”

Lizzy hadn’t been in Georgie’s dorm room when Rae had knocked on their adjoining bathroom door that morning, and her bed was still made.

“Where’s Lizzy?”

“She quit.” Georgie’s voice sounded grim.

“What?”

“This morning. The Dom hooked her up with some Dommy-Dom, and she quit The Devilhouse. She’s moving her stuff out of the dorm this weekend.”

Rae had watched from the security booth while the man bound and fucked Lizzy, but she never thought that Lizzy would lose her mind. “Did she drop out of school?”

“Not officially, not yet. I’ll bet that she won’t be back for senior year, though. ”

Rae dropped her purse on the car’s floorboards, and she leaned forward to press her face into her hands. Dang, this was so her fault. “Can we talk to her?”

“She texted me this morning and that was it. She isn’t answering her

phone. She won't even reply to my texts."

"I don't know what to say."

"It's the dark side of The Devilhouse. Some of the girls here, maybe a third, don't really want The Dom to find them an international job after graduation or go to grad school. They want to find a sugar daddy and sit at his feet for as long as they're young and pretty and compliant, until their Dom finds himself another, more malleable, younger sub." Georgie turned the car violently into The Devilhouse's long driveway, and Rae leaned from the force.

Rae said, "That's sick."

"It's the way of the world. I just didn't think Lizzy was the type. You don't think of the girl with the Taser in her purse as the one who becomes a slave girl."

Shock bashed through Rae. "A *sex slave*? Is that what she is?"

"She is now. If he gave her a contract, I wish she'd have a lawyer look over it first. Some of those slave-girl contracts have punitive clauses if she has sex with someone else or doesn't put out often enough, or if she refuses to have sex with someone her Dom loans her to, or if she gets an opinion of her own into her head, or if she gains five pounds. Subs get a safe word. Slaves don't."

Rae's heart slowed a little. Lizzy had decided to enter into a Master-slave relationship, which is a lot different than the kidnapping and human slavery that went on near the Border.

Good Lord, Rae had been ready to go home, arm herself to the teeth from her family's gun safes, press her cousins into service as a posse, and mount a rescue mission before the human trafficker sold Lizzy and she disappeared into the maze of slum whorehouses where they would have beaten her until she was broken and then sold her to rapists.

Rae's voice was still a little shaky with adrenaline. "I'll bet you can't get that contract on Legal Room dot com."

"Nope." Georgie She screeched into a parking place. "That's a specialty item."

"Could you draw her up a proper one that would protect her? "

"I'm just pre-law, Rae. I don't know how to draw up a watertight contract." She turned over the steering wheel to Rae, and her brown eyes brightened. "I'll bet Dr. Blaise," her independent study professor at the law school, "would do it *pro bono*, though."

“Oh, yeah. Your internship.”

“He might think it was an interesting case. I’ll call him.” She smiled at looked over at Rae. “Thanks.”

“I feel responsible. I told her to go to The Dom and tell him how she felt.”

“It’s not your fault that she got herself into a bizarro relationship. The Dom—you know, *our* Dom—would have been a better situation for her. I haven’t seen him mindfuck anyone, at least not on purpose. All we can do at this point is try to keep her safe.”

“Yeah. It would be terrible if she did something stupid and screwed everything up.” Tears scratched at Rae’s eyes, but Georgie was busy wrassling her purse out from behind Rae’s seat, so she didn’t see Rae blink them away.

Rae stepped out of the car and led the way to the white door on the back of the building.

Wulf’s silver Tesla was already in the back of the employee’s lot, parked in the back against the white wall.

*Once more into The Devilhouse*, Rae thought. The sun heated her scalp as she slid her employee card through the card-reader, and belatedly she braced herself for it to not work.

Georgie stood behind her, fidgeting.

The green light on the door’s card reader flashed, surprising her. Rae had kind of suspected that Wulf would summarily fire her butt. It worked to unlock the second door, too.

No other girls were in the ladies’ locker room, and the rows of wooden cubbies echoed with emptiness.

Rae’s phone buzzed, and a text from Glenda read, *Rae, honey? The Dom wants to see you in Play Room 3 as soon as you clock in.*

Rae tapped the screen on her phone. *Thank you. Be there as soon as I’ve changed.*

If he wanted to see her in a play room, he probably wasn’t going to fire her, unless he wanted privacy for it.

No, he would fire her in his office.

Her body heated despite her misgivings.

## Play Room 3

RAE hadn't been sure what kind of outfit she should choose from the warehouse-like costume closet, so she wore basic Domme-wear: a black bustier corset and skirt that fell to mid-thigh. Georgie cranked the laces on the corset so tight that Rae could barely breathe, but the tight whalebones did curve her waist in.

The tall door to Play Room Three looked like it was off of a Spanish bordello, all honey wood and Moorish rococo adornments. Rae peeked around the cracked-open door.

Play Room Three looked like a jungle, except the hanging vines were ropes, and the air smelled like jute and salty iron instead of rotting leaves. The air conditioner hissed a cold breeze. No music played in this room of silently swinging rope ends.

Some of the ropes were skinny, snaky tendrils that curled from the ceiling. Others were thick, coarse cables that looked like severed elephant trunks. Chains hung from the ceiling, too. Evil silver links glittered in the bright lights. Black rings looked like cruel cast iron. Occasionally, one clinked.

Most of the hanging bonds ended in some kind of link: a loop, a shining metal hook, or shackles.

Wulf sat in the middle of the room in a huge wooden chair, *a throne*, a battle throne like Henry the Fifth might have taken to France on one of his campaigns, wearing black pants but stripped bare to his lean waist. The black tattoo crept over his pale shoulder. The overhead lights cast shadows under the defined bands of his chest and abdominal muscles. His blond head was bowed as he stared at the green rope coiled in his fists, and he didn't even look up at her.

Rae almost backed out of the room, but she screwed what remained of her courage to the sticking place and stepped inside. The air conditioner blew cold on her bare shoulders. She closed the door behind her. "Sir?"

Wulf raised his head. The cold expression in his blue eyes looked like he could slash her throat without blinking, and then it was gone and he was as

implacable as wind-smoothed desert sand dunes.

Maybe, instead of firing her, he was going to make her beg to quit.

Her heart clenched, but she didn't turn and run.

Wulf let a length of the green rope fall from his hands. He looped one end of the rope into a noose and began tying hangman's knots up the length of it.

Because he had taken his shirt off and exposed that dark Japanese tattoo and blown-out gunshot scar, Wulf must have told whoever was in the security booth to turn off the overhead cameras. She glanced at the black globe above her. It never made any sound, so she couldn't tell if it was on or not.

They might be alone.

Her useless paranoia sounded the alarm claxons, but she ignored it. She wasn't going to cut and run on him. If he fired her, fine. If he told her that he never wanted to see her again, fine.

She had violated his trust, but she wasn't going to walk away from him.

Wulf finished fashioning the noose. "Come here."

His voice sounded normal.

Rae walked across the dungeon to him, brushing aside ropes that snagged on her shoulders and hair.

"Take off your shoes and the skirt," he said.

"And the corset?" If she was going to be mostly naked, she would like to breathe.

"No," he said. "I'll take that off you." He spun the rope with each turn, coiling it at his feet.

Rae had grown up on a cattle ranch and could rope a steer from horseback. Wulf had coiled that lariat correctly, an unusual skill.

The noose had a tidy row of seven knots above the loop.

Rae didn't move to take off her clothes, yet. "Why are we here, Sir?"

"Training," he said. "Regular Domme training session. Today you will gain experience with *kinbaku-bi*, a Japanese term that means 'the beauty of tight binding.' One uses a slim rope for it." He gestured toward the rope on the tile floor, which was indeed a thinner, more supple rope than Rae had used for roping steers. "It utilizes simple knots but complex patterns. Now take those clothes off."

His British accent clipped his words, stronger than ever, but she could hear the Germanic inflections, too.

She was not going to leave *him*.



Rae unzipped the boots down the backs of her calves and used her toes to pry them off. Even after only a short walk through the office hallways of The Devilhouse, the boots' seams had pressed red creases into her feet. She shucked her skirt but delayed taking her off her panties until Wulf's pale eyebrows rose a fraction of an inch.

She dropped her panties.

"Turn around," he said.

She pivoted and wrapped her coppery hair around her wrist to pull it aside. She felt Wulf move in close behind her. Whether it was warmth from his bare chest on her shoulders or air displacement brushing her naked ass, she couldn't tell, but she knew he was there, and close.

Her skin blushed hot, thinking that he was standing right behind her. He had dropped her off at her dorm less than twelve hours ago, but desperation at the thought of never seeing him again, never touching him again, filled those hours.

The corset loosened around the tops of her boobs, and she could breathe a little freer already. The soft ribbons whispered as they slid through the metal loops down her spine. The bustier slid over her ribs, and she caught it with her hands, not so much out of modesty as reluctance to let go of that last bit of protection.

The dangling ribbons brushed her bare ass cheeks.

"Drop it," Wulf said, and she did. The black satin fell to the floor. Steel whalebones thumped on the tile.

Wulf walked around in front of her, surveying her body again, just like he had that first time in a play room just a couple weeks ago.

That time, he had tied her up with sophisticated enthusiasm and teased her until she thought she would go nuts, and then he had taken her from behind.

This time, he had a rope, and he was angry.

At least, she thought he was from that flash she had seen in his eyes.

He should be pissed as heck at her. He'd asked for one thing from her, to not pry. She could rationalize the crap out of it, and if she'd found something despicable then it would have been better for her and Lizzy to know, but in looking, she'd crossed his line.

He didn't look mad anymore, but his default expression was a detached calmness and controlled predatory gaze like a slightly hungry lion.

He hung the noose around her neck with the hangman's knots dangling

between her breasts. The soft rope felt like braided ribbons, like it was made of fine cotton or even silk.

He asked, "Have you ever seen *kinbaku-bi*?"

"No." Her shaking voice betrayed her nerves.

"I thought not." He didn't sound like he was chiding her for her inexperience nor disappointed in her lack of research. He was just stating a fact. "The experience is in the tying, the process, not the final product of knots and binds. Usually, the rope master finishes the knots, admires his handiwork for a moment or displays it for the audience, and then releases the woman."

"And it's always a woman being tied."

"Except in homosexual situations. I don't believe I've ever seen a woman rope master tie a man, but that may be an artifact of Japanese culture." He walked around behind her again. "Your arms will be like this."

He turned her arms and held them behind her—both thumbs up, palms out, and forearms stacked together—like she had crossed her arms over her chest but behind her back. Her boobs pushed out when he folded her arms.

The position was more extreme than a straightjacket. If he tied her like this, she would be helpless. If he strung her up on one of those hooks, he could kill her, easily. A drain was cut into the tile floor, just like in Play Rooms One and Two.

When one's brother was savagely cut down only a foot away, what kind of psychological damage did that cause? Maybe she should have let the browser translate those newspaper clippings under the pictures or looked up more about early childhood trauma in her psychology textbooks.

Those crazy, too-late paranoid sirens screamed in her head.

No, Wulf wouldn't hurt her.

She trusted him to not hurt her, so she ignored the crazy, too-late paranoia screaming in her ears. It was usually wrong, anyway. It hadn't gone off when Corn Guy rufied her. It felt more like a fear of change than an actual warning system.

Her shoulders strained from Wulf holding her arms crossed behind her back, but not too much.

He said, "When I say to, you fold your arms this way."

Rae nodded. He released her arms, so she let them fall to her bare hips.

Wulf walked around to the front of her and picked up the rope from between her breasts. "Arms out."

She raised her arms, trying to keep them from shaking. The shakes were a biological reaction, nothing more.

The hangman's knot dangled around her neck like a necklace. The rope brushed the back of her neck when he snaked it under her arms and then threaded it through a loop at the center, then back around and under her breasts, framing her boobs with rope. The jade green loops down her sternum looked more like jewelry than a restraint, and Rae tilted her head to see it better.

Wulf threaded the rope three times around her waist, lacing the cord together down her ribs and stomach. He yanked it tight until it indented her skin. Her tan flesh plumped around the green rope.

Since *kinbaku-bi* meant the beauty of *tight* binding, she assumed that the tightness of the rope was part of it.

The last loop settled around her hips, and he pulled it tight. Except for how terribly naked she was, the green cord looked like the structural parts of a ball gown, and against all odds, she felt *pretty* with the rope cinching her waist.

He glanced down at her abdomen, tied a knot in the last length of the rope, and let it dangle in front of her.

He picked up another coiled rope, scarlet this time. "Turn around."

Trepidation crawled up her spine, but she turned.

"Position your hands like I showed you."

She wound her hands behind her back and tried not to flinch when he eased the silken rope around one of her arms.

Wulf threaded her whole arm through a loop, pulled it tight around her biceps, and then wove the rope around her arms. Though he was behind Rae's back, she could feel the intricate pattern that laced her arms together. Her arms' position jutted out her breasts, and the jade rope girdling her waist and encircling her boobs made her feel unconscionably sexy. It felt like he was adorning her with jade and ruby jewelry.

Rae wanted to dance in this sexy get-up.

Her paranoia must have finally broken, like a bad fever.

Wulf finished tying the red rope around her arms behind her back, and he bent down, reaching between her calves for the long green rope dangling in front of her. He snagged it and dragged it up. It rubbed her skin between her knees and all the way up her inner thighs, until the rope nestled between the lips of her pussy. A knot rested on her clit and sent a shock of sexual heat

through her.

He wound the rope through her arms in back, and she felt the noose hugging the back of her neck shift backward. The ropes pushed down on her shoulders, now more like a harness than a noose.

He pulled it taut, and the knot pressed her clit like a man stroking her.

Wulf stepped away from her, but she couldn't see him back there.

She asked, "So how do I look?"

"Beautiful." His voice was huskier than before.

She pivoted, turning toward him so he could see all the results of his handiwork.

He looked down her body to her legs and her feet, then back up. Rae could see the fire in his eyes. His breath was shallower than it had been.

She leaned toward him, feeling like a femme fatale. If he hated her, he could have tied her up in some hideous knot job, but he hadn't. This was a little kinky, but it was beautiful. Every time she inhaled, her boobs strained in their ribbon harness. Every time she breathed out, her arms behind her back lowered, pulling the rope between her legs up and tightening the knot against her clit.

Lord, if she didn't quit breathing, she was going to come.

Her rising passion made her breathe faster, and the rope ground harder against her clit, rippling her with pleasure.

He must see what it was doing to her. Surely he would make it stop. The ropes around her boobs felt like a man squeezing them, and her nipples hardened. Her eyes began losing focus with every time she exhaled, when knot lifted and rubbed her clit.

Her wet pussy soaked the rope, making it slippery.

Now, her every breath moved the knot, sliding back and forth across her clit. Her body began to tighten.

She fell to her knees, unable to stand when all the energy in her body was flowing down to her pussy, condensing and ready to burst.

Oh, she couldn't come with him watching her like this. She bit her lip and wiggled her arms, trying to free herself, but that made the knot gyrate in her pussy, nearly sending her over the top but she held her breath to stop it.

"Are you going to leave me here, like this?" she gasped.

"Leave you here alone, so helpless, so vulnerable? No, I'm not that cruel."

He walked around behind where she kneeled on the stone floor and

yanked, unraveling the rope that tied her arms and releasing the rope between her legs. Her arms tingled as blood rushed into them. That intimate rope fell away from her clit and she nearly orgasmed as the slippery pressure came off, but passion made her crazy for him.

She jumped to her feet and grabbed Wulf around his neck, needing to touch him and his body. Pushing her bare feet to stand on tiptoe, she kissed him hard.

Just for a second, his lips didn't move under hers.

Horror boomed in her head because she had made a hideous mistake and he was finished with her, but then Wulf's lips opened and his strong arms crushed her to him, even tighter than the jade green rope still strapped around her breasts and waist.

Her breasts pressed against his bare chest, and their skin heated together. His hands were grabbing her bare ass and the ropes cinched around her waist, and he held her pelvis to him. She stroked up his neck and felt his short hair on her palms.

They kissed, their mouths fitting tight against each other and tongues sliding. She was already so close to coming, but she wanted him inside her. She plucked at his pants' waistband, wanting him to take them off so she could have him, but his body was pressed so hard against her stomach that she couldn't reach his belt.

Instead, he swiveled in her grasp and his arms lifted her behind her shoulders and knees. "Don't," she said yet again, like she did every time he picked her up.

His bare shoulders were hot under her hands. He kept kissing her while he carried her against his wide chest over to the huge wooden chair and sat down with her on his lap. The bulge in his pants pushed against her thigh, then her pussy. She gasped and almost came, but she twisted in his hands and straddled him, kneeling on the wide chair.

Sitting beneath her, he seized her boobs, lifted them in his hands, and sucked one nipple hard. She threw her head back and cried out. She ground her pussy against his pants, still trying to figure out his belt, and finally she managed the buckle.

He flicked open his fly and pushed his underpants down. His cock sprang out, a drop of pre-cum already glistening on the top. His hands roamed over her, squeezing and lifting her ass, and she tried to position herself over his cock but he pushed her back, denying her.

“Please!” she gasped.

His hands grasped her hips, then his fingers wiggled under the ropes woven across her stomach and between her breasts. When he gripped the bindings down the center of her chest with both hands, he held her over his cock with the head just poking into her.

He didn’t let her move, even though she struggled to press herself down on him, holding onto the heavy cords on his shoulders. She could barely open her eyes. “Please, Wulf!”

His face was close to hers as he leaned forward, holding her with his fists knotted in the ropes.

Rae wiggled, trying to take him in, but he held her off for another agonizing minute.

He squeezed the rope in his fists and jerked her down onto his cock. The rope bit into her breasts and waist as he used the rope like handles to muscle her, controlling her body. She could have gone limp and he still could have lifted her off him and rammed her down again.

His cock filled her as she came down on him. She arched her back and cried out. She was frenzied for him, and she tried to pump faster. Using those ropes, he levered her up and down his cock, harder but slower than she wanted, coercing her to accept his rhythm, his need.

Her ass slapped his thighs. She writhed, trying to take him faster, and the energy twisted inside her, compressing. Her fingernails dug into his shoulders as his cock breached her body so deep that he pushed a shriek from her lungs.

Her pussy clenched hard one last time, coiling tight like a spring. He dragged her down with the ropes.

Her orgasm ripped through her. She clung to Wulf’s muscled shoulders as he worked her twice more, each thrust zooming blinding pleasure up her spine, and then he gasped and arched under her.

His cock throbbed inside her as he came, sending her over the edge again. She grabbed his neck and held on as the orgasm quaked through her flesh.

The orgasm subsided, but she still twined her arms around his neck, not wanting this to end because she had thrown herself at him and he had resisted at first. She didn’t want him to stalk out, leaving her shattered.

Her vision cleared, and she turned her head, nuzzling him. His neck smelled like citrus and spiced tea.

Wulf pried his fingers out of the rope bindings and wrapped his arms

around her. His biceps strained, holding her tightly, and his hands were bunched into fists. His voice was so hoarse that it sounded like he was forcing the words out as whispered near her ear, “All this, you let me do. Why couldn’t you have trusted me like this before?”

She took as deep a breath as the ropes around her ribcage would allow. “Lizzy was going to tell you how she felt. No one knows anything about you. I was the only one who could find out if there was a real reason to warn her off.”

“And now you know.”

“I saw the pictures. That’s all.” Her throat clenched around her voice. “Why did you tell me your name if you didn’t want me to know?”

His arms tightened around her, and she squeezed her arms around his shoulders, holding him close. His breath trembled on her bare shoulder. His voice didn’t quaver. “That first night, you didn’t know I was The Dom or Wulfram Augustus or anyone. You didn’t know anything, and you didn’t want anything from me. You saw *me*, as a man, and I could not stop myself.”

Rae didn’t understand, not really, but she held him close and stroked his neck.

“I don’t make mistakes like that. I don’t let information slip, and I don’t accidentally divulge things.” The harsh tension in his voice sounded angry, not mystified. “I don’t lose control.”

She stroked the back of his head down to his broad shoulders, trying to soothe him. Her hands shied away from that soul-rending scar.

He said, “You were funny, and bright, and ambitious, and aggressive to the point of recklessness. I knew you were struggling to stay in college and build your clinic.”

She nodded to let him know she was listening.

“I lied to you that night. I said that I must have you for the Devilhouse. Even then, I wanted you for *myself*.”

But she had ruined all that because she hadn’t trusted him.

Inside, her whole body trembled, on the verge of tears. “But you should want someone like Lizzy, not me.”

“Why would I want *her*?”

She summoned all her fears and laid them out. “Because she’s pretty, and thin, and blond, and she would kneel naked at your feet and call you Master, and I won’t.”

His derisive tone surprised her. “Submissive women are as common as

muck.”

“Because she wouldn’t pry. Even when she was mooning after you, she didn’t even try to find out anything about you.”

Wulf pried her arms from around his neck and lifted her off of him, standing her on the cold, stone floor. He arranged his pants and walked over to his white shirt hanging like a ghost from a hook by the door.

Rae covered her breasts with her arms, trying not to look naked and pathetic.

Pulling his shirt over his shoulder and the black tattoo around the deep, twisted scar on his back, Wulf said, “A submissive woman wouldn’t pry, that is true. Perhaps I should not have fallen for a natural-born Dominatrix.”

Wulf’s flat tone had been filled with regret, not sarcasm, and it struck Rae cold in the heart even as she latched onto his words, *that he had fallen for her* .



# Abby Psych

RAE'S phone buzzed in her jeans' pocket, vibrating against her thigh.

At the front of the lecture hall, her abnormal psych professor was pointing to a graph on the huge projector screen and had her back to the class.

Rae eased the phone from her pocket and glanced at the glowing screen. The text from Wulf read, *We will arrive at your dorm at 8:00 AM tomorrow morning.*

Rae glanced up, her stomach clenching. Noontime sunlight shone hard through the windows and onto her cramped handwriting in her notebook on her tiny, student desk. Her chair was like a movie theater seat, except made out of hard, curved wood, with a clipboard attached to the right armrest.

Her abnormal psychology professor might notice if Rae texted back. Dr. Robbins was a stickler for cybermanners, which meant no texting in class, even though a hundred other students were scribbling notes in the echoing auditorium, too.

Rae dropped her hand to her lap and tried to text with just her left thumb while she took notes with her other hand. She typed, *U don't have to go .*

She took notes on the disorder of the day, Trichotillomania, which is compulsive hair-pulling, for a few minutes, trying to pay attention. The professor clicked her projector remote that she had clipped to her jeans' belt loop. An ascending graph drew itself on the screen, visible despite the glaring sunlight, and Rae copied it even though she would download the slides later.

Rae's phone, which she had wedged between her thighs, buzzed, sending shivers up her legs.

Wulf's text read: *Mulligan might try something. It is settled .*

*Thank you,* she texted back, surrendering the argument because Wulf was righter than he knew, despite that she would have done just about anything to keep Wulf and her family at least a hundred miles apart.

The drive to Pirtleville would take five hours, and the last three hours were nothing but an unobstructed view of cacti, scrub brush, rattlesnakes, and dirt.

They would have time to talk, because surely the emotionally reclusive

Dom of The Devilhouse was too sophisticated to have *fallen for* anyone, let alone a backwater country girl from the unfashionable southern side of the wide, snake-infested desert.

## Driving South

THE black SUV drove up to the dorm's front door at eight o'clock sharp. Rae had been waiting in the lobby since seven-thirty, knowing Wulf's penchant for punctuality.

Rae hoisted her backpack and trudged over to the SUV, ready to throw her stuff in the far-back and sit up front with Wulf. She had only brought clothes for the ride home tomorrow because she would wear stuff that she had left at her parents' house to church.

When the driver's side door flipped open, one of Wulf's staff members, Dieter, emerged and reached for her luggage. "Good morning, Ms. Stone."

"Hi?" She handed him the backpack.

"He wishes you to ride with us."

"Oh. Okay. That's fine." It wasn't fine but she didn't know what to do about it, and they were here already so it would be rude to put them to so much trouble and then bunk on them.

Dieter held the back door open for her, and Rae climbed into the frigid car's empty rear seat. The skin on her arms tightened into goose bumps. They must have had the air conditioning blasting the whole way from Wulf's house to her dorm.

She glanced up to the shotgun seat, expecting to see Wulf there, but yet another man on Wulf's staff nodded at her. She was pretty sure he was the guy who held her car door open for her in Wulf's enormous garage. "Good morning, Ms. Stone. I am Hans."

"Good morning, Hans. Please call me Rae. Um, where's Mr. von Hannover?"

"He will be following us. He prefers to drive whenever feasible."

Well, if Wulf didn't want to be cooped up in a car with her for five hours, so be it, and she certainly wasn't disappointed that they wouldn't have a chance to talk it out. If he didn't want to, *fine*.

Dieter drove the SUV out of the dorm area and headed for the freeway.

Rae glanced behind her into the way-back area of the SUV, which was filled with black duffel bags and long cases. "You guys know that we're

coming back tomorrow morning, right?”

“Yes. The plan is to be on the road by nine o’clock tomorrow morning.”

Rae had always been jibed about girls packing too much stuff for just an overnight, but all those bags were ridiculous.

Well, when you have that big of a house, you must have a ton of stuff.

A small black sports car, not the silver Tesla but something else, sped past them, and Rae caught a glimpse of Wulf’s bright blond hair in the low car. He didn’t look up, but tinting shadowed the SUV’s windows so he couldn’t have seen her if he had.

Another black SUV trailed them, obviously riding in convoy.

“So how’s Ms. Keller?” Rae asked Hans and Dieter. She felt like she was already home, reciting the obligatory question of general concern after greeting someone, *And how’s your mamma?*

“Busy. She *ist* very busy,” Hans said.

“Well, she has that big house to run. I imagine that’s a big job.”

“Yes, but the household, we are moving.”

Rae grabbed the seat back as if the road had bucked them off. She couldn’t seem to breathe. Her head buzzed like radio static.

She had to say something. “Where are you moving to?”

“Mr. von Hannover told us that we would be going back to Deutschland or Helvetica for a few months, then elsewhere. Singapore, he mentioned.”

She needed to know. “Why on Earth would he want to move?”

“I would not presume to ask.”

His prim tone admonished her.

Wulf was leaving. He was leaving *her*.

She had screwed it up, and it was really over.

It was better that she knew rather than make a fool out of herself.

She clutched her phone, hard, and waited for them to say something else, anything else, like the move was *tentative* or they had *assumed* they were moving, but the guys didn’t say anything .

She sat back and, keeping her eyes wide open so nothing squeezed out of them, opened her phone and caught up on all her “With Friends” games in about half an hour, trying not to think because her thoughts were a riot of self-recrimination and heart-ripping loss.

Her cousin Craigh had beat her at crosswords.

The SUV followed the speedy little black car through the bright city and out into the harsh glare of the desert. Wulf’s car looked like a black hawk

sailing on the asphalt's air currents with its wings swept back.

"Again, he is weaving," Dieter said and flicked his fingers at the black sports car ahead of them veering onto the shoulder.

Hans sighed and dialed a cell phone. "*Ja* , Herr von Hannover," and then *something-something-something* in Swiss or German or whatevs. Some more positive sounds, and then Hans hung up. "He says he will stop at the next truck stop for coffee."

"That is not going to help."

"He's not drunk, is he?" Rae asked, doubly concerned because it wasn't even nine o'clock in the morning yet.

"No," Hans said. "He never drinks more than one when he is driving, and never in the morning, but he does not sleep this week. He usually sleeps no more than three hours, but he sleeps some. This week, not at all."

"Not at all?"

"We have staff with him during the day, but he walks the house at night. The night staff tell us."

"Does he have insomnia often?"

"No."

"How long's it been since he slept?"

"We think he must have slept some, at some time, but it has been a week."

"A *week*? " People could die from lack of sleep, right?

Hans wrenched himself around in the seat and looked back at her. "At the truck stop, we tell him that you like his car very much and you want to try to drive it."

"I don't think he wants to be alone with me," she admitted.

Dieter snorted.

Hans backhanded him on the arm.

Oh, Jesus in Heaven, they did know that she and Wulf had slept together at his house and they were talking about it. Rae wanted to melt into the seat cushions and leak out onto the freeway asphalt.

Hans said, "If he doesn't want to ride with you, you can drive his car and he can ride in back seat with us."

"*Ja*, maybe the back seat will make him sleep," Dieter said. "My wife drives our little baby around if she won't nap. Doesn't work as well with hybrid cars, though. The babies, the engine noise, they like."

Hans told Rae, "You act happy and smile." He turned toward the

windshield and the busy freeway beyond. “He like it when you smile.”

Rae didn’t think that her smile would have any effect on Wulf at all, but she resolved to try.

A few more miles of cacti and sand slipped alongside the SUV, and they followed the little black sports car off the highway at the next exit.

When they pulled up, Wulf was leaning on his car, pumping gas. He was wearing black fatigues like his staff men, and it was the first time that Rae had seen him not wearing a suit. His body looked leaner than when he camouflaged himself with a suit, and his shoulders looked broader. He blended right in with his paramilitary-ish guys, from his woven belt and his athletic stance to his high-and-tight haircut. The only difference was that Wulf wasn’t wearing combat-style boots like his men, just black tennis shoes.

Dieter got out of the SUV and strolled over to him, looking like a secret soldier in his black fatigues and projecting nothing-to-see-here. Rae stepped out and leaned against the car, smiling hopefully at Wulf. He nodded to her, acknowledging her but neither curt nor friendly.

Dieter and Wulf spoke in some other language, presumably German.

Rae smiled big, trying to look interested in the car, which kind of reminded her of a seventies hatchback but she knew a Porsche 911 when she saw one.

Wulf glanced at her once, then nodded agreement. Dieter motioned her over.

“I’m going to get coffee,” Wulf said. He still had that closed look. The desert wind barely ruffled his short, blond hair. “Would you like some?”

“Yes, please. Cream and sugar, please.”

Hans stepped up. “Sir, I can get it.”

“I’ll get it,” Wulf said and walked into the store. Hans and Dieter oscillated for a second, clearly trying to decide whether or not to follow him, when yet another man in black fatigues stepped out of the other black SUV that had pulled up behind Dieter’s SUV and followed Wulf inside.

Dieter said, “Friedhelm has him.”

Hans and Dieter rounded on Rae. They were even taller than she was, and the two big, blond men stared down at her.

“We have to get his keys from him,” Hans said. “If he won’t give them to us, you get them.”

“Go to the driver’s side,” Dieter said. “Get into the driver’s seat and sit there with your hand out. You can drive manual transmission, *ja*?”

“Yeah, I can drive a stick shift.”

“*Goot*,” Hans said. The two tall security men marched backward one step and pivoted, standing about as relaxed as Marine honor guards at a military funeral, holding the flag, on the Fourth of July.

All that pomp must be exhausting.

Hans retrieved her backpack from the SUV and popped the hood of the ebony Porsche, which was so shiny that it looked like it was made out of black piano keys. He dropped her backpack under the hood, between the headlights. Rae peeked. The sealed-off storage area looked big enough for a wheelie overnight bag but not much else. Hans pressed the hood closed.

Wow. So Porsches had their trunks up front, like old-time Volkswagen Beetles. *Weird*.

Wulf came back from the store, holding a tray with four cups. The other oddly fit staff man, Friedhelm, also held a tray full of coffee cups, and he nodded to Hans and Dieter as if he were passing the responsibility to them before he climbed in the passenger side of the other SUV.

## Two Weeks

RAE curled her big toe to depress the touchy accelerator on the Porsche 911. With even that ginger touch, the Porsche kicked and pressed her back in the seat, speeding them down the flat, straight highway that cut through the desert.

Rae watched the shallow sand dunes roll by as she drove. At the heart of every dune lay the skeleton of a jackrabbit or coyote or murdered woman. Wind heaped sand over desiccated dead animals or anything else that caught the air. Snakes slithered between the berms and sunned themselves on the blazing asphalt until a car smashed them into roadkill.

Wulf hadn't said anything to her. He sipped his coffee and stared at the road. The toasted tar smell of their hot coffee overpowered the plastic new-car smell.

Rae didn't know what to open with. She wanted to bring up so many subjects: his black-clad security entourage like he was the freaking President, what he had meant by *fallen* because he sure didn't act like it, and why the heck he was moving, and where, and when, and why, oh Lord, *why?*

"This is a really nice car," she said. "Thanks for letting me drive it."

She saw Wulf nod out of the corner of her eye.

"The accelerator is kinda touchy."

He nodded again.

"Are you moving?"

Wulf nodded. Rae sneaked a look but didn't see any other reaction from him.

"*Why?*"

He sipped his coffee again and swallowed hard. "It's getting dangerous."

"Has someone threatened you?"

"Not as such. It's too dangerous for people around me. Friedhelm, who is in the other car, his father was hit in the spine the day that we were shot. He was in a wheelchair the rest of his life. It's negligent of me to take chances, to endanger them, and you."

"Me?" It squeaked out before she could stop it.



“Yes.” He sipped his coffee and leaned his head back.

“I won’t tell anyone about the tatt or the scar or your name. I haven’t told anyone. No one else knows anything.”

“Jeffrey saw the scar. He heard you call me ‘Wulf,’ though he didn’t recognize it as a name, but it is a matter of time.”

Rae tightened her fists on the leather-bound steering wheel. “I can’t believe you’re just going to up and move.”

“Perhaps it is rash, but it’s done and it’s the right thing to do. Besides, I still have some family, and they would rather that I wasn’t killed.”

“Of course.”

“I don’t want anyone else to die for me, or to be hurt. It is enough.”

“Are you in the Mafia or something?”

“No. It’s nothing that I have ever done.”

“*Who are you?*” She gripped the steering wheel, holding on as the highway and desert slipped behind them. Lizzy and Georgie had warned her about that question on that very first night in the limousine on the way to The Devilhouse party downtown. No one knew who Wulf was, *what* he was, under that shiny shell.

“It doesn’t matter,” Wulf said. “I’ve managed six years here, but it’s time to go.”

“Because of what I saw. Because of *me* .”

“Especially you. I couldn’t stand watching you die while someone pulled me to safety. I won’t let it happen.” He closed his eyes.

“I don’t want you to leave,” she said. If she could have taken it back, she wouldn’t have. She wanted him to know. If he still left her, fine. *Fine-goshdarn-fine, dang it.*

“I know.” Wulf set his coffee in the cup holder, reclined his seat a few degrees, and reached for her hand on the steering wheel. His fingers wound around hers, and he drew her hand down between them. “This, also I know: life is precious and all too short.”

The pain in those words drove into her chest. The news picture of the screaming child drenched in blood on a sunny day filled her memory again.

“Let’s enjoy these two weeks before I leave. Let’s not regret the time that we have.”

*Two weeks.* She had two weeks with him.

Why didn’t she tell him that every time she took a breath, her heart swelled with longing for him?

Because he was leaving in two weeks, and no matter how he tried to dress it up, he must have seen all her feelings for him written in her eyes last Saturday night, and that might be the real reason he was leaving.

Because he had told her that he wanted her to sit naked at his feet wearing nothing but his collar, but when Lizzy had offered him exactly that, he tossed her to some other guy because submissive women were as common as muck.

Because he was The Dom of The Devilhouse, and he liked women, *craved* women, in the *plural* , and everyone knew that he never took any of the girls out on a Dom-Date twice in a row.

Because Rae didn't want her heart to break, not just yet, not if she could have two more weeks with him before she broke all apart.

Rae said, "All right. Two weeks."

"I have sold The Devilhouse to a friend. You and everyone else will remain employed at the same rates. You'll be fine, Reagan. You can finish college. You can open your clinic. You'll have everything you want."

She hadn't even thought of that. The job and college bleached like bones in the desert, compared to the thought that in only two weeks, Wulf would be gone.

Rae held his warm hand while she drove down the open highway, passing dusty towns and winding through mountain passes, trying to think of anything that would make him stay.

After a while, his grip on her hand loosened, and his breathing deepened.

In sleep, some of the severity left his face, and she could see what that stern child in the photo must have looked like when he slept.

After a while, a black SUV drove up on their right, then drifted back. Rae wondered if Dieter and Hans were checking on them, or whether that was Friedhelm, who had seen his father confined to a wheelchair while in Wulf's security detail and yet had followed the same career path.

Rae couldn't imagine the responsibility of being the focus of such violence and trying to keep everyone around herself safe from it.

She would have gone to live in a cave in the desert with the rattlesnakes.

Holding onto Wulf's warm, soft hand, Rae drove two hundred miles through the searing desert, trying to hold onto each fleeting moment.

# The Ranch

THE brown slump-block houses of Pirtleville huddled with their rear walls to the constant wind-driven sand. Rae's family's ranch was on the outskirts of town, vulnerable to dust devils, scorpions, and rattlesnakes. Every year, they hacked back the tumbleweeds and scrub brush where the desert made incursions into their cattle pasturage. Locoweed grew everywhere no matter how they tried to eradicate it and drove the cattle mad. A locoweed-drunk bull will kill a grown man out of sheer cussedness.

As they approached Rae's family's ranch, Wulf phoned his staff and asked them to wait with the SUVs at the head of the dirt road. It wouldn't do to arrive with a parade, he said, and Rae and Wulf switched seats at the trailhead so he could drop her off and drive away.

The car's tires slipped on the gravel in the dirt driveway as Wulf stopped the car in front of the hunkered-down house.

To Rae's consternation, her father was sitting on the top rail of the fence beside the house, holding a rifle in the crook of his arm and reading a paperback book.

Good thing that Dieter and the guys had waited up the road. They might not have reacted well to a gun-toting welcome.

She suppressed the urge to jump out of the car and hug her dad because that would have encouraged him to hassle Wulf.

Her father hopped off the fence and landed heavily on the hard-packed dirt because the poor guy had arthritis in his knees from years of hard work. He advanced on the car.

Rae thought about her backpack under the car's hood, wondering if she really needed her toothbrush and stuff or whether she could grab it later so Wulf could get out of there.

Wulf set the handbrake between them. "I'll pick you up at three for the funeral."

"I can't. I'll ride with my family. You should meet us there." Rae pushed open the door and tried to step out of the car before her father could say anything to Wulf but he was already standing right there and opening the

door for her. She loved her father, but she knew how he felt about boys and his little girl.

“Hey there.” Her father leaned down to peer in the door as Rae turned back to Wulf, worried about how this might go. “Is this here that fellow Dominic that Hester’s been telling us about?”

*Dominic?* Oh, Rae had told Hester that “Dom” was Wulf’s name when she had freaked out over seeing those newspaper pictures.

She said, “Yes, this is my friend, Dominic. He’s *just a friend*. He just drove me down here because he didn’t want a delicate creature such as myself subjected to the open highway.” Good Lord, even accounting for sarcasm, her redneck accent had come right back. “Dominic, this is my father, Zachariah Stone.”

Her father leaned into the car and offered his hand to Wulf. “Right charitable of you to drive her down, Dominic. Is that a Catholic name?” Her father said it casually and with friendly tones, despite what Rae knew was under it.

Wulf leaned over the handbrake to shake her father’s hand in front of Rae’s nose. “Pleased to meet you. I was baptized Lutheran.”

“Well, there’s that, then,” her father said. “But you are a man of faith?”

“I would say so,” Wulf said, which surprised Rae.

“He’s coming to escort me to the Celebration of Life,” Rae told her father, looking him in the eye. “But then he’s going right back to town. He’s not staying.”

“How’re you getting back to that college?”

“I’ll ride up with Hester tomorrow.”

“Well, that’s all right, then.”

Rae stepped out of the car to end that ridiculous conversation, but her father dodged her and stuck his head farther into the car. He was spry for someone with that much arthritis. “Where’re you going until the Celebration of Life, Dominic?”

From inside the car, Rae could just hear Wulf’s deep voice say with his British accent, “I had planned to find lunch.”

“The Hungry Bear’s food isn’t all it’s cracked up to be. Come on in the house for a spell. We’re just about to eat. Plenty for company. It’s just simple fare, of course.”

“I would appreciate it.”

Rae froze. Dear Lord. Her family was going to get out the flood lamps

and truth serum and give Wulf the third degree. Or else they would get out the Bibles and drag him down to the creek to baptize him or hold him under until he agreed to a shotgun wedding.

It hadn't rained lately. The creek would be a dry ravine. They'd have to use the horse trough.

She leaned into the car beside her dad. "Dominic, don't you have people waiting for you?"

"I'll phone them. It would be nice to have a home-cooked meal."

Anything served in her family home would be an albino-pale imitation of the grandiose meals that were served at his house. Rae kept herself from cringing.

She loved her family, but Pirtleville was very different than how Wulf must have been brought up in Switzerland.

Dustier.

Less stuff.

Simpler food.

More real, she was sure.

"Reagan," her father said. "You run on inside and help your mother with lunch."

"Yes, sir."

Rae had gotten used to living outside the shadow of her father's proprietary attitude. Maybe Rae should establish her autism clinic, A Ray of Light, in Cochise, the next town over and three times the size of Pirtleville. Pirtleville didn't have enough autistic kids for the size of clinic that she wanted to build, anyway.

Rae went into the house to change into one of her long skirts and white blouses, as befitted an unmarried woman.

# Plinking

FOR Wulf, lunch was a tense affair, though he tried to set Reagan's family at ease.

Rae's mother fried cheese sandwiches, and Rae served the men at the table, who began eating as soon as she set the plates before them. Wulf waited until Rae and her mother sat down with their sandwiches, though the men pressed him to eat while the sandwiches were hot off the griddle.

He sat amongst Rae's family, whom she had described as the most important people in the world to her, and watched.

Ingratiating himself was preposterous. He merely wanted to ensure that no damage had yet come to Rae's relationship with her family. Any other motive was ridiculous.

He was being civil because it was the standard of decency, not from any ulterior motive, not because he wanted them to like him as if he might someday be a member of this family, and not because he wanted to understand Rae better. It was just basic decency and manners. Wulf was Swiss by nurture, German by birth, and carried a British passport. He was civilized to his very core.

He watched the glances and micro-expressions between Rae and her mother as they held a silent, complex conversation composed of notice, mock despair, and resignation about Rae's father's bluster and her brothers' table manners. Rae's mother would later chastise the boys but not her husband, Wulf was quite sure.

Rae's father, Zachariah, was a man who liked pry and to phrase his own prejudices as questions.

Some questions, such as Zachariah's inquiry about Wulf's age, he answered straight-forwardly. "Thirty-two," he said and watched Rae's startled reaction out of the corner of his eye .

Yes, he was a full decade plus eight months older than she, his little ingénue with a big heart. Her height and self-assurance had fooled him that first night when he met her at the party and he had thought her to be twenty-six or so, but Lizbeth and Georgie had corrected him the next day to his utter

dismay.

When they asked where he was from, he was once again mortified that people detected a Teutonic accent.

One of the supposed benefits of *Institut Le Rosey*, his childhood boarding school in Rolle and Gstaad in Helvetica, was the international student population and the opportunity to learn languages proficiently through osmosis, though very few Americans matriculated there due to the ten percent population cap per language group. Most of his Anglophone friends had been British and he had lived in London, so he knew his English was rather posh British English, but Wulf had thought he was more versatile than he obviously was. He had cultivated a Helvetian inflection and vernacular in his German when he had naturalized his citizenship to Swiss, but good Lord, might his French be accented, too? He would have to ask Yoshi about his Japanese. Wulf wasn't as proud of his Italian, Hindi, Mandarin, Russian, or Arabic. He had no illusions that he could pass for native in those.

But his English? He had thought he had an ear for English.

Wulf answered, "I am from the *Confoederatio Helvetica*, Switzerland."

"And how long have you lived in the United States?" Zachariah asked.

"Six years."

"You going to become a citizen?" her father asked. Again, Zachariah's sharp glance betrayed that this was not a casual question. There was a correct answer.

Wulf said, "I'm a permanent resident, so I have many of the rights and privileges of citizenship, with the exceptions of the vote and jury duty."

"You want to be an American?"

"There is much to admire about Americans and American culture," Wulf said.

"Bet you think we're funny, here, we Americans."

"Of course not. Europeans think America is like England, only bigger, with bigger cars, and everyone carries a concealed handgun."

"Dang straight."

Rae's brothers laughed. Their boisterous laugh was charming.

Wulf said, "Yes, and no. That rather shallow stereotype doesn't convey the kindness, the gentleness, and the innate decency of Americans."

"Yeah?" Zachariah leaned back in his chair and cradled his iced tea in his hands.

Rae's mother hadn't said a word the whole lunch, Wulf noticed. She didn't seem downtrodden, just the type who listened rather than spoke. Her brown eyes were as lively as her daughter's, and Wulf guessed that Rae's intelligence and altruism were from the matrilineal line.

Wulf said, "I lived in Chicago for a year when I first moved to the States. On one cold night, driving to a conference in Iowa City, I was sitting in my car at a truly enormous truck stop on Interstate Eighty while some friends went inside to fetch us some coffee.

"It was cold that night, Midwestern cold, cold enough to frostbite skin in a half a minute. Ice crystal snow scraped the windshield. I was starting to shiver, even though the car was idling. I had parked directly in front of the truck stop's sliding doors so that my friends could dash in and dash out, even though yellow lines marked it as a no-parking zone. Behind me, I saw a police car pull up, his lights flashing red and blue. The state trooper came up to the window, and I was prepared to tell him that I was sorry for parking there and I would move along. He told me that it was too cold to sit in my car, that I should go inside and warm up, and that he would watch my car while I was inside."

Zachariah nodded. "That was right nice of him."

"I have a dozen stories like that, of Americans being astonishingly decent."

Rae's family nodded at each other.

Wulf continued, "That, and you can generally count on the fact that when you meet an American, they are probably not drunk. In Europe, after ten o'clock in the morning, everyone is in their cups."

The boys all guffawed and drank their iced tea or crunched chips, while Wulf watched Rae and her mother smile quietly and continue eating their grilled cheese sandwiches.

"So, all's y'all Europeans think that Americans carry concealed all the time, do you?" Zachariah asked him with a bit more good humor.

"That's the prevailing stereotype." Wulf ate the dill pickle, which was garlicky and crisp, and he thought it must be homemade.

Rae's father asked, "You wanna go plinking after lunch?"

"Surely you have more important things to do," Wulf demurred.

"Not at all." Zachariah wiped his mouth with a paper napkin, crumpled it, and dropped it in the middle of his plate. "We'll round up some rifles and send some soda cans to meet their Maker."



Zachariah sat back in his chair and grinned, probably content that he would easily outshoot the effete European.

Wulf calculated whether he should let Zachariah best him.

After lunch, Rae's father opened the gun safe and distributed rifles. He handed Wulf one of the better ones, a Ruger Varminter .204, while Zachariah took a Remington .30-06 for himself. Wulf wasn't offended by the smaller gun. The Varminter was supposed to have excellent accuracy for a hunting rifle.

They fished some soda cans out of a blue bin to take with them and started walking out the door.

Wulf called back, "Rae? Aren't you coming with us?"

"Naw," her father said. "She's needed here."

Rae looked between them with her lovely brown eyes, obviously unwilling to disobey because, as she had said, she would do anything for them, even stay behind.

They treated her like a servant instead of the ambitious, intelligent young woman that she was.

No, not like a servant. Wulf had servants. Dieter was not more than two years away from incorporating his private security firm. Wulf's upstairs maid Lilli went to the local university a few hours a day and practiced her languages with him because she wanted to be a translator for the UN.

No, Rae's father treated her like a hunting dog, trained and useful in its duties, but it had better be in the yard when you needed it to fetch a dead bird for you.

Wulf watched Rae, torn between his invitation and her father's wishes.

Rae turned to her mother, who rolled her eyes and flicked her head toward the door, giving Rae tacit permission to go with the men.

"I just need to change," she said to Wulf. "Go ahead. I'll catch up."

The males started out into the desert. A pack of rowdy retrievers bounced around them, snuffling and barking at them. Wulf let them nose his hands, and they bounded away, satisfied.

They all traipsed out into the beige and sage cacti and brush, and Wulf was glad that he had worn these old fatigues and planned to change clothes for the funeral. It would not do to go plinking in a suit and tie. The desert smelled like wood that was smoking, just about to catch fire in the heat.

As they walked into the wild desert, Wulf caught rustlings around the tops of the dry and dusty ridges, though Rae's brothers and father didn't seem

to notice that Wulf's security detail was stalking them. He hoped they had brought the snakebite kits.

Wulf's mobile phone rang. He saw Dieter's phone number and answered it. "Ja?"

Dieter asked in German, *What are you doing going out "wo sich Hase und Fuchs gute Nacht sagen,"* which meant *where the hare and the fox say good night?* The connotation was of the wilderness, though the German made Wulf think of dark, cool forests, not glaring sand and brittle bushes.

*We're going shooting for sport,* Wulf told him, also speaking German. *So they are all armed?*

"Ja." Wulf told Dieter that he estimated the danger level at zero for intent and five for unintended consequences.

"Wunderbar," Dieter sighed.

Rae caught up with Wulf and her brothers. She was wearing jeans instead of those odd, archaic clothes she had donned before lunch. While Wulf generally had little opinion of people's clothes beyond utility, he was glad to see her in a modern outfit. The long skirt and tied-back hair had changed her appearance to shudderingly young and dismayingly innocent. When they got back to town, he would dress her in a sophisticated evening gown to assuage his conscience.

He would take her out on a proper date.

Perhaps several proper dates.

He would show her several of the things she had not checked on that Devilhouse application: concerts, travel, and perhaps a few things from the other list.

All in two weeks.

They had two weeks before Wulf moved his household, and then he would leave her alone. He had wrestled with himself for days, pacing at night and wanting to stay, imagining sweeping her up into his life and flying her to Paris now that she knew about Constantin and she had not run from him, and she had trusted him to truss her up in *kinbaku-bi* and still she had wanted him, but he couldn't risk her life. He could not stay with her.

Surely two weeks wasn't too much to ask. Surely nothing would happen to him or to her in only two weeks.

Rae glanced at the barren blue sky and then to the right, a double-flick of her warm brown eyes and lovely dark lashes that she did when she was nervous.

She asked, "Are you sure you're all right with going shooting?"

"Your family seems fine with it."

"I mean the guns. Are you all right with the guns?"

Ah, she thought he might have some lingering trauma associated with firearms. His scar stiffened like it gripped his back. "I'm fine."

"It's okay if you're not," she said. "I'll get them back inside. We don't have much time before the Celebration of Life, anyway."

"I'm acquainted with firearms." He allowed himself a bit of a smile, but he didn't want to seem smug. He shouldn't show off too much.

Yet he did not want to appear incompetent and thus earn their scorn.

Part of him wanted to best Zachariah after he had treated Reagan with such high-handedness.

A delicate balance.

Rae shrugged and hiked beside him.

Zachariah led the way between the cacti and thorny bushes, and they hiked up to a ridgeline in the hot desert sunlight. Her father sent one of the boys around to line up two dozen soda cans on another desert ridge fifty yards away, and when the brother had returned, they all took aim at the cans.

Wulf pressed the rifle on Rae. "Can you shoot?"

"Heck, I taught all these whippersnappers how to shoot." She ruffled her youngest brother's dark hair. The boy, whom Wulf estimated to be thirteen plus or minus one year, had the lean physique of a Greyhound puppy that was growing too fast.

He handed the rifle to her. "Show me."

Her eyes flashed with surprise, but she took it from him. "All right, then."

Rae held the rifle tight against her right shoulder, took her time, and sighted in on the cans on the opposite ridge. Wulf watched the red cans glaring in the harsh, desert sun. She eased off a couple shots with a nice, smooth pull on the trigger, hitting a can both times. One shot, one kill. Properly done.

She held the rifle correctly when she handed the gun back to him, pointing the muzzle toward no one. "Here you go."

Wulf smiled at her and wanted to touch her face, but he held back. "Very nice."

Rae's father called over, "Nice shooting, for a girl."

The skin on Wulf's back chilled despite the hot sun. Her dry father's tone

held no irony, and Rae didn't remark on the backhanded compliment. It pissed Wulf off just a bit more, just enough.

Zachariah shouted to him, "You know how to shoot that?"

Wulf called back, "I'll do my best."

The rifle felt too light and too short in Wulf's hands, though it was well-balanced. He pressed the stock against his shoulder, but it had been many years since he had shot a standard-sized rifle. He couldn't seem to get comfortable with it while standing.

Finally, he eased himself down to the desert dust and pebbles and curled his body into a knot around the gun. The rifle was still too short and wasn't equipped with a bipod, so he braced his left hand under it to hold up the barrel.

Wulf slowed his breathing, and a memory flashed behind his eyes, an image of rows of bunk beds in the barracks from his year of obligatory conscription. He had stayed a further year after that. Those years, when he and his friends around him had been armed, had set the standard for relief for him. He had been tempted to make the military his career, but his sister Flicka had quite correctly dispelled that notion.

Among Rae's family—four men who bristled with weapons—Wulf felt a modicum of that relief, that they could defend themselves and Reagan if shooting started. Rae stood behind the men who aimed at the cans on the ridge, watching.

The Varminter rifle had an amateur's scope on it, and Wulf settled the crosshairs near the top of the can, since they were so close. The red metal shone in the desert sunlight, glaring through his scope. A sustained breeze ruffled his hair, so he adjusted one-half of a mil dot upwind.

Wulf pulled his body rigid on the dirt, contracting his muscles into opposition, and slowed his breathing. Sharp rocks ground his belly and knees. He squeezed the trigger just to the break point.

His body pulsed with life and whooshed with air, jostling the rifle. The scarlet can bobbed under the crosshairs.

Wulf held his breath and waited for the pause between his slow heartbeats, then squeezed the trigger past the break point and released the round. The rifle's recoil shoved his shoulder.

The soda can plinked off the other ridge, spinning in the air.

He tagged it again while it flew.

The blued steel of the rifle warmed Wulf's cheek, and he breathed.

# A Worldly Man

AFTER lunch, while the men were retrieving the rifles from the gun safe, Rae's mother had cornered her in the hot kitchen, expecting answers. The black smell of the cheese that had leaked onto the skillet and burned lingered in the air.

"Dominic seems like a nice young man," Momma had said.

"Yeah. He's nice," Rae said. The house around her echoed with good memories: all seven sets of handprints pressed into the sidewalk outside, the stack of saddles in the barn, and the guns in the safe for home defense, fun, and hunting.

"But you can't marry him," her mother said.

"I didn't say anything about marrying him."

"A bird and a fish can fall in love, but where would they build their nest?"

"Momma, I'm not a bird, and he's not a fish."

"A man like that, a worldly man, would never be happy here in Pirtleville."

"It doesn't matter anyway. He's moving back to Europe in two weeks."

"Well, all's well, then. I've always said that it's just as easy to fall in love with a virtuous man as with a worldly man."

Rae didn't think of Wulf as being worldly, with its connotations of jadedness, selfishness, and greed, especially when he had been nothing but nice to them all through lunch no matter how her father had provoked him. Still, Wulf did look like a tall, pale oak tree planted among the Pirtleville scrub brush.

That was a stupid image, though. An oak tree would die in the desert.

While she and Wulf were walking out into the sharp scrub brush with her father and brothers and Wulf said that he was all right with the gun, she exhaled, relieved.

If Wulf missed the targets while shooting, that was fine. If he had been wussy about the gun, even considering he had nearly been killed by one, her family would have taken it out of Rae's hide later. She didn't want Wulf to

be the brunt of those jokes. A worm of discomfort wiggled in her brain that her family would impose such a rule, but they did, and she couldn't change it or them.

Now, Rae watched Wulf take aim from the prone position, his body wrapped around the rifle, lying on the hard desert clay.

His can popped up from the dusty ridge, sparked in the sun, and then pinged to the side, struck dead on *twice*.

The next three cans flipped off the dusty ridge and then all were hit *again* before they sailed into the thorny scrub brush: *plink-plink, plink-plink, plink-plink*.

Wulf's shots hit far too many cans in a row to be dumb luck.

Good Lord, he was a *really* good shot.

Seriously, was there *nothing* this guy couldn't do?

Wulf held the rifle easily, and even now, he carried it with familiarity in his hands as he climbed to his feet.

Okay, she was going to try horseshoes, calf roping, tap dancing, French braiding, the harmonica, and origami, and if he excelled at all those things, she was done with him because he must have sold his soul to the Devil or something.

After some boisterous congratulations by her brothers, Wulf walked beside Rae on their way back to the house. The sun was beginning to fall, though it was still hot and yellow in the brilliant sky.

It was getting late, and they had to change clothes before the Celebration of Life at the church.

With his expert shooting and easy conversation at lunch, Wulf had ingratiated himself with her family. He slid right in, very well, too well. His shiny mirrored shell might be at work again.

She said, "I thought Europeans didn't like guns."

"The world's largest marksmanship competition is held in Hannover, Germany every year, a five hundred-year-old tradition. The parade of five thousand marksmen is over seven miles long. There's a fair around it."

"Have you been there? "

"Every year of my life until I was fifteen. After that, I competed a few times and performed respectably."

Disbelief warred with the obvious evidence of the double-shot cans. She stopped walking. "You've competed in international marksmanship competitions."

“Several times. I formally learned to shoot in the military.” He turned to look at her. Amusement sparkled in his blue eyes. He carried the rifle easily with it leaned against his shoulder. “I wasn’t planning to show off quite so much.”

“You were in the military? *You?*”

“Swiss men are conscripted for national service for one year when they are twenty. Like most, I went into the army, though I stayed an extra year beyond my conscription. After that, men are enrolled in the home guard, like your national guard, and every household is issued a rifle and ammunition.”

Rae’s eyebrows lifted. “No wonder you weren’t fazed by all the gun talk. Kind of makes our gun laws look puny, since your government teaches everyone to shoot and then hands out guns.”

Wulf shrugged. “Being a neutral country means we defend ourselves.”

“What’d you do in the military?”

Wulf pulled in his lower lip.

*Dang*, but she wanted to play poker with him sometime. She could probably make enough off him in one night to open her clinic.

He said, “Don’t read too much into this.”

“Okay.” A sharp branch snagged on her tee shirt, and she stopped on the trail to free herself. The thorns had pierced the cotton, and she tried to unsnag the bush without ripping the thin knit. The desert exacted harsh penalties for not paying attention. The snakes were probably out of hibernation, too.

Wulf stopped beside her. Her brothers and father had walked far ahead of them.

He leaned down to where she could hear him whisper. “I trained as a sniper.”

Her mouth fell open, but she snapped it closed. Yeah, sure. Nothing to read between *those* lines.

*Yikes.*

She went back to tugging at the thorn and her shirt .

Wulf didn’t look away from her, and he lowered one pale eyebrow over his blue eyes at whatever must be written all over her face. “And?”

“Nothing.” She dislodged the barb.

“Nothing the psychology student would want to say?” His monotone was a bit dry.

“Sometimes a cigar is just a cigar.” As Sigmund Freud had never said. His curt nod might have masked anything.

“Did you ever shoot anyone?” she asked, far before she could stop herself. She had no freaking filter between her brain and her big mouth sometimes. Something must be wrong with her, asking the guy who got shot as a child if he had ever sniped anyone. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to ask that.”

This time, Wulf didn’t pull in his lower lip. “I had a man in my crosshairs once, but our team leader took the shot.”

“*Jesus.*”

“The assassin was aiming at the Pope, not Jesus.”

“You were hanging out with the Pope?”

“The Swiss Army provides security for the Vatican, though that particular division only recruits Catholics. There was a threat, and our unit in Rome didn’t want to involve the Italian police, so they called for reinforcements. We all went, even those of us who had a different flavor of holy water sprinkled on us as infants.”

Good Lord, infant baptism. That meant that he had never made a mature profession of faith, which her church insisted on. According to her First Baptist church, he wasn’t really a Christian.

According to her church, most people weren’t real Christians. Heaven was going to be sparsely populated without the Jews, the Muslims, the Mormons, the Catholics, the Episcopalians, the Lutherans, the Methodists, the Presbyterians, the Pentecostals, and the Southern Baptists. The Southern Baptists were close, but with all that singing and shouting out in church and such, they were surely going to Hell, too.

She was astonished at herself that she had ever believed that stuff.

Rae looked down at her father and brothers, who were all the way to the house and waving them in.

She waved back, letting them know she saw them.

Wulf caught her hand, pulled her toward him, and stepped backward behind a bush. Once they were hidden from the house, he wrapped his arms around her. His breath tickled her ear as he whispered, “Stay with me tonight, in the hotel.”

“*I cannot* . My dad will freak.” The sun shone hot on her head and shoulders.

“We have only two weeks.”

That wasn’t her fault. “My dad will gather a posse for a shotgun wedding.”

“They’ll never find us.”



“There are only two hotels in town.”

“You should stay with me.”

He obviously did not understand how small towns worked. “It’s different, here. I absolutely cannot stay with you in a hotel room. It wouldn’t be good-natured chiding. It would be bad, really bad, for me, afterward.”

He sighed. “I’ll retrieve your luggage from the car before I leave.”

Oh, yes, her backpack was still in the front-trunk of his Porsche.

He pivoted and took her hand while they were walking down to the house.

Now that she thought about it, a lot about Wulf was reminiscent of the military: his stride, his posture, that man-among-men demeanor, and even his golden blond hair was cut very close to regulation military style.

She dropped his hand when they came over a hill and got within eyeshot of the house. Someone was probably watching them from the windows.

# A Celebration of Life

RAE and her family arrived at the church at fifteen minutes before four o'clock. The spring sun hovered over the mountains, burning, still an hour or more away from the cool relief of sunset. They all stood outside in the dirt parking lot, withering under in the sunshine and waiting for others to arrive to provide the needed peer pressure to force them into that stifling wooden box of a church.

Rae watched the dusty road for Wulf's car, even though she wished he had not come to Pirtleville. It meant too much to people here when a girl brought a guy home.

Rae had changed back into the long skirt and white blouse, even though the outfit made her feel like she was sliding backward into a gaping hole. The long skirt swished around her ankles, hobbling her. Her hair was still long enough to twist into a red-striped bun on the back of her head but so short that it stretched the skin on her face to do so. Tendrils curlicued around her face no matter how many hairpins she stuffed into it.

Her mother had silently loaned Rae a white mesh bonnet to cover her hair because all of Rae's had been crushed in the backs of her drawers. The stiff bonnet reached around almost to her cheeks and pinned Rae's ears to her head, smushing the crease behind her ears. Her own bonnets had been the more modern kind, sweeping in back of her ears, but her mom was more conservative.

Her momma walked the walk, and Rae respected that. When Momma did speak, it was something important and she meant it, but she otherwise went about her work quietly. She held no truck with idle gossip or idle hands.

In the dusty parking lot, her father grinned and handed his car keys to Rae. Her mother never brought a purse to church, saying that she didn't want any distractions from the sermon, so her father had given Rae his keys to hold since she was fifteen rather than let them jingle in his pocket. He must have missed that while she'd been at college these last couple of years.

Rae stood between her mother and her oldest brother, waiting. For a moment, she relaxed. Belonging filled her. She felt still and quiet and at

peace in this gritty parking lot, surrounded by her family. Her brothers didn't fidget. They knew better.

Rae stood straight and wished she could play a game or check her email on her phone, but phones were always turned off when they went to church. Maybe it was just her lack of cellular reception, but she felt cut off from the outside world, which wasn't altogether bad. She felt fine where she was.

More cars pulled into the dirt parking lot, rooster-tailing dust.

Rae's maternal aunt, Alana, flushed her brood from her minivan. She had bought it cheap when an insurance company had totaled it because it was pockmarked with hail damage.

Alana's youngest son, Daniel, flopped to the ground. He stared at the sky, wincing, like crows were dive-bombing him. His hands flapped in the air like he was trying to ward them off.

Alana, ever patient, stood Daniel up and tried to pierce the autistic cloud around him with her voice, telling him they needed to go into the church.

Rae had babysat for Daniel when she was in high school for an hour a day for four years to give Alana time to get other things done, unpaid because they were family. Daniel probably didn't remember Rae because, even though she had been down on the floor with him the whole time, peering into his face and searching his wild eyes, she wasn't sure he had ever noticed her. He had needed better care than Rae knew how to give him.

Rae waved to Alana, but Alana was too busy battling Daniel to notice her.

Hester's old Chevy sedan pulled in next to Rae, and Hester and her mother, TracyJo, emerged. Aunt TracyJo's expression when she looked at the old wooden church turned lovelorn. Her weak gray eyes misted over.

Rae watched the road for a lone black Porsche or a couple of black SUVs

.  
A gleaming black pick-up truck painted with flames cruised in. Its rear tires spun, throwing gravel. It skidded into a spot near the front, and Jim Bob Mulligan slid out of the driver's seat. The lift kit jacked the truck up so high that Mulligan dropped the last couple of feet to the gravel.

Mulligan must have a pull-out step to climb back into his truck, or else he must swing up using handles like a ginger chimpanzee.

Rae turned back to her family and watched the county road that led past the Dairy Queen and the Sonic and then out to the vindictive desert, which would swallow up any blithe car or person that taunted it.

A big, brown SUV lumbered into the parking lot, and Mayor Harding emerged with his wife and their three teenage daughters. People said that he was the only beanpole in that garden of voluptuous butternut squashes. The ladies all wore traditional clothes like Rae's family: long skirts, long sleeves, and bonnets on their hair. Mayor Harding grinned and waved at everyone like he was in a parade passing by the grandstands, and Rae couldn't look at him for fear that she would burst out laughing at his hypocrisy or punch him for slumming around on his pretty wife. May would be devastated if she ever found out, and May had always put aside one of her brownies for Rae after church, every week, because she knew that Rae's mother only cooked hearty food. Maybe it was better that Harding utilized The Devilhouse rather than having an affair where he might fall in love and leave his girls.

Yep, everybody who Rae really didn't want to see had arrived.

Down the road, two black SUVs flanked a Porsche. All three vehicles turned into the church parking lot and picked their way to a slow stop at the end of the row.

Rae trotted to meet them.

Wulf peeled himself out of the low car, and his staff guys climbed out of their SUVs without looking like they were surveying the perimeter too much. All of them now wore black suits and sunglasses, and it looked like the government men in black had descended. She wouldn't have been surprised to see sleek black helicopters in the sky above their church's runty steeple, which would have affirmed all her family's conspiracy theories.

Indeed, her father had lifted an eyebrow when the SUV entourage pulled up. His hand hovered near the back of his pants, and Rae wasn't sure what would happen if he pulled his handgun around these guys.

Actually, she was pretty sure what would happen and she wanted to warn him, but surely her dad wouldn't unholster his piece for no reason. He wasn't the shoot-first type at all. Indeed, there had been several situations that he had talked everyone down when shots might have been fired in anger.

The parking lot went silent around Rae just as she reached Wulf. The whole congregation was staring at her back. She just knew it.

Wulf smiled and inclined his body toward her but didn't reach for her in any way, thank goodness. Inappropriate behavior at such a somber occasion and under everyone's scrutiny would have caused an uproar, and any behavior might be seen as inappropriate.

"Um, hi," Rae said. Wulf's blond hair was so light and short that he fairly

glowed in the unforgiving sunlight. "I'm glad you came."

"I wouldn't have missed it," Wulf said. He glanced behind her at all those staring eyes. Rae could practically feel all that staring tapping her on the back of her head and shoulders.

When there was no hullabaloo, people began to file into the tiny church. Rae waited with Wulf until her family turned to walk, then motioned with her head for him and his entourage to follow.

Wulf's staff fell in around them.

When they reached the single door to the church, a subtle negotiation ensued for who took point, who took the rear guard, and whether Rae should walk in before Wulf or after. Wulf cocked his head toward the door and she stepped forward, but Friedhelm squeezed her elbow and tugged to pull her back. Wulf lifted one pale eyebrow at Friedhelm, the subtlest of sharp looks, and Friedhelm released her arm so she could walk into her own family's church.

Jeez. That was just entering a small, backwater church. Rae could only imagine what these guys must be like in real public situations.

The congregation crowded in the hot aisle, jostling to their accustomed pews. The window air conditioners jammed in the first two windows fought a losing battle with the sun above and the hot bodies within. Perfume and industrial-strength antiperspirant combined into a simmering chemical smog.

Rae turned to follow her family into their pew, but this time Wulf touched her elbow and tried to maneuver her across the aisle and into an unoccupied section near the cramped windows. Wulf's low voice reached her ears. "Sit with me."

"No." She stared at the knot-holed floor and whispered, "I have to sit with my family." She didn't look up because she didn't want people to know they were having this conversation. "It was dicey to walk in with you. It *means something* if I sit with you instead of them."

"I understand being the object of scrutiny, when one's every act is interpreted. Sit with me."

"You don't mean what they will think," and they would all think it, and every one of seventy or so people in the church would ask her about it later.

His voice lowered further, and Rae could just hear him say, "Mulligan must think it so."

"Oh." She would have to bear the brunt of the congregation's questions when Wulf never came back, but that was later. At least right now, surely Jim

Bob wouldn't try anything, not at a Celebration of Life for his own aunt. She scooted into the pew and found herself wedged between Dieter and Wulf.

In the far aisle, Friedhelm dipped like he had tripped, and his hand touched his forehead. Hans grabbed his arm and whispered near his head. They slid into the pew on the far side.

Whispering hissed around them like a bucket of rattlesnakes.

Rae sat straight, crossed her wrists and her ankles, and didn't let her spine touch the wooden back of the pew. She stared straight ahead at the cross that towered over the pulpit up front. Hot stage lights threw cruciform shadows on the walls.

Wulf's thigh pressed against her hip, and she remembered his hands on her skin just a few days ago. This hard pew reminded her of the wooden battle throne in the rope room.

Her face heated beyond the stifling warmth that pressed her skin.

Rae tried to focus on something else, anything else, because surely these Godly people could see such depraved thoughts running through her tight-bunned head, like how he had muscled those ropes wrapping her body.

Wulf's leg jostled a little, and all her flesh rippled as he moved.

She tried to remember all the Bible verses that she had memorized as a girl, but none of them distracted her from Wulf's hard body pressing her leg and, now that he shifted, her arm. Verses from *The Song of Solomon* came to her mind, which she had read even though her Sunday School class had skipped over that Old Testament book.

Mayor Harding walked by and caught her eye for just a moment. He looked between Rae and Wulf, but he didn't so much as raise his ragged eyebrows as his gaze passed over them and he grinned at the people in the next pew.

"It is four o'clock," Wulf muttered to her. "Why aren't they starting the service?"

Rae said, "Aunt Enid's older son Amos isn't here yet. He'll be along any minute." Rae saw a friendly face and waved two fingers at her cute but crazed cousin Craigh, the one with whom she had a facetious pact to marry when they were forty so they could spawn three-headed babies before their biological clocks ran out.

Craigh waved back and winked at her, then pointed to the pretty girl beside him, his date. Craigh was sitting with the girl in church, in front of his parents and everybody. Must be serious between them. Rae gave him a

surreptitious thumbs-up.

Rae glanced at Wulf, who was glaring at his phone.

Wulf said, "If they do not start at four, the schedule will not hold."

"Yep. Sometimes that happens."

"I suppose we must accommodate." He jerked his chin up and sat ramrod straight, resigned to the lack of punctuality.

When Wulf pulled himself upright, his black suit shifted on him, and the scent of his clean male flesh, soap, and faint spice of his cologne escaped his white shirt. He must have showered when he changed clothes.

Every time Rae inhaled, she could smell him as clearly as if her nose were pressed against his neck. She could almost taste him. She inhaled deeply and tried like mad to think of anything other than how Wulf tasted and smelled and the feel of his mouth on hers.

Two weeks from then, when Wulf moved to wherever he was going, Rae was going to have a hard time of it.

Rae glanced around the church and noticed that Wulf's staff guys were also surreptitiously checking watches and phones and fidgeting.

"Do you guys need to be somewhere?"

"No. It is now four-oh-five."

"Yep, it is."

Behind her, Daniel grunted and made some kind of commotion, stimming by flapping his hands. Aunt Alana frantically hushed him, lest someone say something.

Rae knew that her Aunt Alana had done her best with the therapies that the pediatrician had told her to do, Sonrise- and Floortime-based ones, but that other therapies out there might have helped Daniel more. Real therapists might have helped him more than his untrained mother and a pathetically stupid high-school babysitter. Trained therapists utilizing modern therapies might have drawn words out of him, taught him language, and broken through the transparent haze that he flailed against every minute. Guilt caught in Rae's throat.

Sunlight glared through the church through the open doors at the back, and more people came in. Rae stole a glance back there and saw that Otis, Aunt Enid's oldest son, had indeed entered with Minister Stoppard. Otis was in his seventies and kept scratching at his shirt collar and patting down the few strands of hair that crossed the top of his head. He led his doddering wife up the aisle and to the front pew.

Minister Stoppard, who was in his late thirties, climbed to his place at the lectern and bowed his head, waiting for the Holy Ghost to move him to speak. His dark hair swayed like fringe around his face. The congregation quieted.

Rae watched the minister. The frown lines around his mouth and between his eyes had dug deeper into his sharkbait skin than the last time she had seen him, just a few months ago at Christmas.

Stoppard braced his arms on the pulpit and pushed until his arms shook. Sweat beaded his nose and forehead.

Rae clutched her hands together. Just like always, she tried to open herself up to the love of Jesus and the fellowship of the congregation. All she could think about was Wulf's leg pressing her thigh, his body next to hers, and that delicious smell that occasionally wafted from his clean, white shirt.

Minister Stoppard raised his head, and his crazed, black eyes filled Rae with dread.

Stoppard said, "Sister Enid Harding deserves to burn in Hell."

Rae looked down at her hands in her lap. Her knuckles knotted together hard on her dark calico skirt. She knew where the sermon was going—that we were all sinners and only redeemed by Divine Grace and never by good works—but it seemed wrong to say that about the woman who, before dementia had taken her, had run the poor barrel and ferried everything that she could spare or beg down to the truly destitute people in Mexico. Enid's life these last few years would have been more comfortable if she hadn't tithed twenty percent of her Social Security income to this church and given more than that to the poor. She hand-knitted baby blankets that she took down to Mexico and smuggled starving kittens the other way across the Border. Everyone had at least one of Enid's undocumented cats.

Rae stole a glance at Wulf. He had jinked up one eyebrow but hadn't otherwise moved. She turned back to the sermon.

Stoppard railed for forty long minutes on Aunt Enid's shortcomings: her sharp tongue, the paltry sums she contributed to the church and charity, her constant foisting of mangy cats on everyone, and anything else that he could make sound sordid.

Sweat dripped from Stoppard's nose and flew from his black hair.

Wulf shouldn't have seen this harsh side of Rae's family.

From the back, someone shouted "Amen!"

From the front pew, Enid's elderly son Amos sniffled and wiped his eyes



with a handkerchief.

After fifteen more minutes of Stoppard railing on Aunt Enid, if Rae hadn't known better, she would have agreed with him that Aunt Enid was a miserable excuse for a human being and deserved to rot in Hell.

But Rae did know better.

Sweat trickled through Rae's hair. Her fingers cramped around each other, and her heart constricted with anger.

Minister Stoppard said, "And yet, as sinful and black-hearted as Enid was, as much as she was caught up in worldly things, we are all sinners just as terrible as she was."

He began to harangue the congregation for their sins: sins of deeds, sins of thought, sins of omission, and sins of spirit.

"And there are those among us," Stoppard shouted, "those among us who go out into the world and acquire worldly things, to shovel offal into their minds so that they will not be as little children who come to Jesus as pure and innocent as a white sheep!"

The congregation rumbled around Rae, shifting in their hard pews. Overhead fans stirred the stifling air.

"And the worst of it is that some of these gatherers of excrement are the women among us, the women who are charged with raising up the next generation in fear of Lord!"

This was how it started when they had cast out Rae's friend Guadeloupe last year after she got pregnant out of wedlock. No one talked to her now. None of the other churches would have her. Loupe had finally moved away to have her baby and live apart.

Beside her, Wulf leaned toward her, pressing his arm against hers, as near to a touch of support as could be offered in this church.

Stoppard thundered, "Women going out into the world! Women subjecting themselves to the advances of predatory males who would take their innocence and corrupt them!"

Rae heard a commotion behind her.

She turned to glance back there, despite her bonnet's brim poking her cheek.

Aunt TracyJo had stood up, apparently about to witness. Her hand waved in the air like a palm frond in the breeze.

Beside her, Rae's cousin Hester held her mother's other arm and tried to drag her down, obviously pleading. Hester's bonnet had slipped back and was

in danger of falling off her tight bun.

Aunt TracyJo announced, “Reagan Stone is working in a tavern! She has been serving alcohol and associating with drunkards and persons of low morals!”

Gasps whooshed through the congregation.

Hester said, “Momma, no!”

*Oh, no.* Rae shouldn’t have told Hester anything at all. Rae snatched up her purse from the floor to hold it in front of herself, as if that would ward off what her aunt accused her of.

Wulf frowned and glanced at Rae’s family, but they didn’t budge. Rae’s mother didn’t even turn her bonneted head to look at her.

“And that *man* with her!” Aunt TracyJo shrieked and pointed to Wulf. “That man is a *barkeeper*! He works at the same speakeasy as that tramp, and he serves the liquor to the predatory males who come to ogle the young women!”

Rae’s family stirred. Their necks loosened, and their heads bobbed as they decided whether to turn toward Rae or toward the accusing congregation.

Confusion shaped her brothers’ faces.

When Rae’s eyes met her mother’s, tears overflowed her mother’s eyes, and she buried her face in her hands.

Fury and hot blood filled her father’s face, and when his glance met Rae’s, anger twisted his mouth .

Beside her, Wulf stretched his leg to pull his cell phone from his pants pocket. His thumbs swiped the screen as he texted.

Aunt TracyJo screeched, “And she’s working there for money for college, which is all just a Godless way to justify sin!”

They were going to cast her out. When Guadeloupe had been disfellowshipped, Stoppard had started with Hell and moved on to women’s responsibilities with increasing venom, and then the congregation had joined in, condemning her. Rae kept her eyes down on her hands twisting in her lap.

Panic clamped her stomach. If Rae were disfellowshipped, no one in her family would talk to Rae for fear of being cast out, too. Not her brothers. Not even her mother.

Rae stood and called out, “It’s not true!”

Behind Aunt TracyJo and Hester, in the back row, Daniel flopped and grunted. His eyes rolled up, and his body spasmed off the pew. Alana tried to

shush him, but he was locked in his autistic world, suffering.

Rae spun back around, and her mouth set a grim line. She wasn't going to drop out of college, *damn it*.

A man's voice shouted, "She's not a waitress!"

Rae spun.

Jim Bob Mulligan stood among the crowded pews and pointed over all the aghast faces at her. His triumphant face was crimson with shouting. "It's worse! She's not working in a bar! She's a whore!"

Rae glanced at Wulf. He was holding a different cell phone than his usual one and thumb-tapping the screen. Three texts were typed in the bold font that meant they were just-sent, all to different phone numbers.

Jim Bob's phone chirped, but he ignored it. "Rae Stone is a prostitute! That's how she's getting the money for that fancy college! She's an abomination to this church and her family!"

A phone fwheeped near the front of the church.

Jim Bob yelled, "*Shun her! Shun the whore!*"

At the front of the church, Mayor Harding stood up like a flagstick jutting out of a crowd. He stuck out his long, skinny arm. "You shut your mouth, Jim Bob!"

Everyone gasped and turned back to the front to look at the mayor. Around the edges of the church, some people stood for a better view of the chaos.

Mayor Harding said to Mulligan, "You are a lying sack of bull hockey and deserve no less, yourself!"

Minister Stoppard, up front, waved his hands, trying to restore order. "Brothers and sisters!"

More people stood, and the muttering became shouting. People moved into the aisles, blocking any way for Rae to leave. She held her purse and her arms across her chest.

Mulligan shouted, "She's a whore! *Shun the whore!*"

Mayor Harding yelled, "Mulligan, I will not do business with you! Stop this now! Tell them, Brother Horace, how we saw Rae waitressing at the pancake house."

Angry people came to their feet. Rae heard conflicting shouts of "Stop this!" and "Shut up!" and "Expel her!" and "*Whore!*"

They would believe the worst accusations. They always did. Her legs trembled.

Horace stood on shaky legs and wiped his hands on his jeans. “Yes. We had breakfast at the pancake house near the university and gave Reagan Stone a nice tip.”

Near the back, Craigh’s dad stood up. His knuckles were white where he clenched his cell phone. “They are right. She works at a pancake house. I saw her last week when I was up in the city. She spilled coffee on me.”

Wulf was still texting, and Rae could almost see the lines of force that he wove even through her congregation, wielding Mayor Harding and Craigh’s father as if they were weapons.

Mayor Harding texted something on his phone. Another phone in the back of the church played *Hallelujah*, and one on the side barked like a dog.

If her family stood and defended her, they might tip the balance, but they just muttered among themselves. Zeke bounced, almost standing, but Rae’s father reached behind her mother and pressed his shoulder down.

Jim Bob yelled over the commotion, “She is a *whore!* The Whore of *Babylon!* The whore of The Devilhouse! And that man Dom with her is *the Devil himself!*”

Mayor Harding yelled at Jim Bob, “You are only accusing her to distract us from your *perversions* and business with *drug dealers!* I cut you off because I will not do business with *criminals!*”

Wulf stood.

Rae looked through the crowd.

The congregation and her family were all looking between Mayor Harding and Jim Bob, but all the security guys had their eyes trained on Wulf.

She looked up at Wulf just in time to see him nod to them.

The five other black-suited men broke into the aisles, clearing the way. Beside her, Dieter took her arm and propelled her through the men. Wulf held her other elbow as they jogged through the space.

They crashed through the door at a sprint. Sunlight lanced straight across the desert and blinded her. Her eyes teared.

In the parking lot, Rae wrenched herself away from them all and ran to her father’s truck. She snatched the keys from her purse and clambered in. Wulf stood with the other men and, with a hand gesture, sent them running to the SUVs.

She didn’t blame Wulf at all. He had only tried to help her.

She didn’t blame her family. They had done exactly this type of thing in

the past and she knew what they would do if they ever found out.

Rae had made every wrong decision that led to this day of her own free will.

She *chose* to work at The Devilhouse to stay in college.

She *chose* to come home for the Celebration of Life even though Jim Bob would be there. She could have made some lame excuse, even though everyone would have called and pressured her to go.

Everything was her *choice* , and she had tried to gobble up all those worldly pleasures in an attack of gluttony—to have more money than she should *and* stay in college *and* open her clinic *and* no one would find out *and* no one would judge,—instead of doing the *right* thing, which would have been to *go home* and figure out how to do it *right* .

She needed hot, dry desert air to clear her head so she could figure out what to do.

Wulf stood in the parking lot for a moment, shining in the gold sunlight, as Rae cranked the truck's engine. The truck belched black, oily exhaust that streamed in the open window and burned Rae's throat.

The congregation would believe all those shameful accusations and make up other hateful stuff besides, and they would formally strike her name from the book and disfellowship her, leaving her entirely alone.

She had lost her family. They would go along with the disfellowshipping or be cast out, too. If no one from the church would do business with them, they would lose the ranch. She didn't want them destitute, too.

Wulf was leaving the country to get away from her, which was the deepest cut of all.

The dirt parking lot stretched out in front of her, leading to the small road that ran out of town.

Rae spun the steering wheel, jammed the truck in gear, and sped out to the road.

## **Book 7: Into the Desert**

# Into the Desert

RAE Stone drove her father's white pickup truck through the desert town of Pirtleville like a drunk teenager, skidding around intersections. In the rearview mirror, two black SUVs and a black Porsche tailed her. Out of habit, she reeled the seatbelt around her with one hand and leaned into the turn while she swerved the truck at breakneck speed over the hot asphalt.

She sped by the Dairy Queen, the Sonic, and the True Value hardware store. In the parking lots, no one even looked at her.

In the rearview mirror, the dusty stores and red traffic lights turned away from her, shutting her out. The SUVs and the sports car chased her, but she didn't want to talk to them.

Within minutes, she reached the desert.

The sun was setting over the mountains, streaking the blazing desert with the rich plum and navy blue of a deep bruise. Cacti and tumbleweeds shielded her from the far away homes and businesses and cross-streets and people and any reach of civilization. Fire-orange sunset light glared through the windshield. She squinted, trying to see through it.

She spun the truck left. Angry sunlight poured in the passenger-side window.

The church was, even now as she drove away, going through the process to disfellowship her, so now she was a pariah in her hometown.

She ran away from them all.

Her family who had let it happen.

Her mother who had cried instead of defending her.

Her father who had writhed in rage rather than helping her.

Wulf.

He was moving out of the country in two weeks, just to rid himself of her.

They were gone, all gone, and Rae was alone in the world. She felt like a seedling bitten off its roots.

As much as losing her scholarship had been terrible, as much as compromising her morals to work at The Devilhouse for tuition money had

upset her, all this, losing everyone, *hurt* .

The pavement ended, and Rae drove the truck at breakneck speed onto the dirt trail, rooster-tailing pebbles and dirt. The shocks bounced the truck over rocks, and Rae kept a tight hold of the jumping steering wheel with one hand while she wiped her eyes with the other.

She didn't know where she was going. She certainly had nothing to go back to.

In the rear view mirror, the black SUVs were farther back, and the Porsche was nowhere to be seen. Wulf had given up on her rather than go boonie-bouncing in his pretty car. He might have sent his security men after her for a while, but they wouldn't leave Wulf unprotected for long. She had to respect that they had followed her that far. Only a native could navigate the wild desert or was stupid enough to try.

She knew this fang-tipped desert better than she knew Pirtleville. She could lose them all.

Eventually, Rae could find the highway and drive back to college, where she could stay in her dorm with silent Hester, if Hester came back after that sermon. Rae could work in The Devilhouse and try to build her autism clinic somewhere else, because no one in Pirtleville or the Border region would darken her door now, even if they needed help for their child.

Even Aunt Alana and Daniel.

Especially them.

Everyone would know that she had been cast out, and no one would even nod if they passed her on the street.

Rae could do it all alone, without her family, and without Wulf.

That last thought caught in her throat, and she mashed the accelerator. The truck peeled out in the dirt, leaving a plume of empty dust hanging behind her.

She glanced in her rear view mirror. The two SUVs were farther back, more than a mile behind her in the wild desert. The SUVs looked different. Boxier, maybe.

It was probably a trick of the harsh setting sun glaring on the black paint. Who in their right mind drove black cars in the desert heat, anyway? It didn't matter. When she got to the foothills, she would lose them.

Ahead of her, the mountains neared. The sun blazed in the passenger window, so she didn't look out there. She felt like driving as far as she could and then sprinting up the mountain so she could lie in the cool snow of the



sky islands up there and just go to sleep, but suicide was stupid. She had a long, lonely life ahead of her.

The sun fell further, and Rae shielded her eyes with her right hand as she drove. Desert sunset glared off the inside of the windshield. Sometimes it blazed white. Sometimes, Rae could see the reflection of her own tear-streaked face in the glass.

A black pickup truck sped across the road ahead of her, and Rae swerved hard to avoid crashing into the flame job on the side.

Her pickup skidded and leaned sideways on two wheels, throwing Rae. The seatbelt held her chest, but her head snapped around. The tires boiled rubber smoke that stung her nose. The truck fell back and threw Rae the other way. Her head smacked the driver's side window.

Pain spiked behind her ear.

Darkness cleared.

The truck was stopped.

Breathing hurt her chest.

Pain lanced behind her eye.

The sun touched the mountains. Shadows crawled toward the dead truck.

"You!" Jim Bob Mulligan's face was scarlet behind his orange hair and stubble as he leaned in the passenger door at her. Blood vessels laced the whites of his eyes.

Rae recoiled, but he pushed closer. How did he get in her truck? She must have been knocked out for a second.

His hand gripped her wrist. His breath blew chile-hot on her face. He shouted, "They disfellowshipped me! Because I knew about *you*, they disfellowshipped *me*!"

"So they didn't cast me out?" Rae said, even though his face kept blurring into red and orange smears like jumping fire. Her head hurt worse than where he was bruising her wrist.

"Oh, yeah. They struck you first, then me. Those sanctimonious sons of bitches. You're the whore, and they shunned me! "

"Let me go."

"Hell, no. 'Thou shalt not suffer a whore to live.' You got me thrown out, you bitch."

That Bible quote was about witches, *Exodus 22:18*. "I didn't do anything to you."

"Sure as Hell you did." He yanked her arm and, finding her seatbelt still

attached, unlatched the buckle and dragged her across the seat with him. “Mayor Harding stopped doing business with me after that Dom called him, and now no one will. Those fucking warehouses are fucking empty! You cost me money, so I’ve got to get some of that money back. Get the fuck out of the truck.”

“No.” She struggled with him, but pain squeezed her head. She couldn’t concentrate on fighting him. A small part of her wanted Jim Bob to kill her, just so she wouldn’t have to think anymore and so the searing pain in her head would go away.

He jerked her arm again. She fell toward him and caught herself on the dash.

Black SUVs pulled up beside the truck. Wulf’s security guys would drag Jim Bob off of her.

Jim Bob hauled Rae across the seat and out the passenger door.

She fell head-first out of the truck and caught herself on the ground, skinning her palms on the gravel. Her hair on the left side of her head felt hot and wet. Her hand came away sticky with blood.

Rae looked up at the SUVs, ready for Wulf’s security guys to rescue her, but different guys got out of the truck. They had darker complexions than Wulf’s Germanic staff. Maybe Hispanic.

The guy who got out of the driver’s door sneered at her. “*Es esta la puta?*”

Rae couldn’t understand him. Her head hurt so much.

“Yeah,” Jim Bob said. “Glad you could get here on such short notice. She’s a natural redhead, even when she’s not bleeding. They’ll pay to fuck her. She’ll make a lot of money for you.”

The man snickered.

“Hey *puta*,” the man said. “*Mamame la polla.*”

Rae’s Border Spanish clicked in through the pain. *Puta* meant whore. The man had said, *Hey whore, suck my cock.*

“I wouldn’t have her suck you off just now,” Jim Bob said. “She might bite. She’ll take some breaking down.”

Jim Bob had sold her to these men. She was about to disappear into a prostitution trafficking ring, and no one would know because her family would assume that she had run off.

Pain wracked her head. Dizziness swirled her around.

“Jim Bob,” she pled. “How could you? You’re my cousin!”

Jim Bob yanked her arm, trying to haul her to her feet.

Rae grabbed her wrist away from him and flung her arm around and up, catching him under the chin with her fist. She threw another punch and slammed him in the nose. His face crunched under her knuckles.

Rae stumbled and ran.

Behind her, Jim Bob screamed like a rabbit in a coyote's jaws.

Desert thorns snagged her skirt. She stumbled, trying to run through the brush. Her useless shoes tripped her.

Mean laughter echoed on the mountains in the gathering night.

She ran. Sharp branches caught her long skirt and long-sleeved blouse, tore the fabric off her, and ripped her skin. She ran harder, fighting through the bushes that clawed her clothes.

A bang hurt her ears, and splintered rock peppered her arm.

*They were shooting at her.* Jesus, she was just going to be another whore, dead in the desert. No one would find her body out here. No one but human traffickers and drug mules wandered this part of the wild.

Another shot. Dirt sprayed her legs. She ran as fast as she could, trying to get to the mountain shadows so she could hide. Her white blouse glowed against the shadows.

More shots blew rock chips at her and kicked up dust beside her running feet. Behind her, the men jeered.

She pumped her legs and ran toward the mountains' thick shadows.

# Korporal Wulfram Hannover of the Swiss Guards

WULF lay among the desert boulders high up on a ridge, coiled tight around his long sniper rifle.

Beside him, Dieter peered through a spotting scope and called the distance and wind speed. Wulf dialed them into his ballistics computer mounted with his telescopic sight.

When Rae had outdistanced them in the desert, driving down paths that would have broken their vehicles' axles, they had climbed to this vantage point to scout her location. When they had seen the other SUVs converge on her truck, they brought out the weapons.

Crosshairs intersected the target's round head through the black tunnel of the telescopic gun sight. Hair ruffled on the target's head, and the head jolted back as the target discharged a handgun at the fleeing figure that Wulf knew was Rae but would not allow himself to consider the implications.

His hands must not shake.

Just like the hundreds of thousands of shots before this one, Wulf's body quieted. His heart rate slowed. He exhaled. He timed his heartbeat while squeezing the trigger just to the break point. The shadow in the scope bobbed with Wulf's coasting pulse.

In the hesitation between two heartbeats, he moved his finger on the trigger, and the round left the rifle.

The target's head popped with a dark spray and fell out of the circle of the scope's view.

Wulf nudged the rifle sideways to view the second target.

Dieter called the distance and wind speed.

Wulf fine-tuned the ballistics computer, timed his shot, and watched through the scope as that target exploded in a fine spray of blood and bone .

He surveyed the surviving targets through his scope. None held rifles. All fled back to their vehicles. The SUVs spun out, driving away from the fleeing figure and the mountains.

“Two kills confirmed,” Dieter said.

Wulf scanned the desert through the black tunnel of the scope, looking for targets or Rae. “*Is she down?*”

Dieter said, “No. She’s running. Come on. Let’s go.”

“You saw her?”

“She *ran*, Wulfram. She didn’t freeze and wait to be shot. She punched the guy who was holding her, and she made it to the hills.”

Wulf lifted his head and stared at the wide desert, cut into wedges by the black mountain shadows and sunlight that glared through the valleys.

Rae hadn’t stood shock-still in panic, waiting to be hit.

Dieter said, “Come on. Let’s go find her.”

Wulf’s hands were steady as he jerked the heavy sniping rifle off the ground and sprinted back to the SUVs with his men.

Flashes of exploding heads filled his mind, but he concentrated on finding Rae.

Wulf and Dieter vaulted into the rear seat of the SUV and broke yet more gear out of the black duffel bags while Friedhelm took the driver’s seat, jammed the vehicle into gear, and bounced over the desert toward the darkening mountains and the setting sun.

*She must be alive. She must be.*

Wulf did not allow other thoughts, other blood-soaked images, to intrude on his most desperate belief.

# The Aftermath of Betrayal

RAE sprinted through the desert, dodging between hostile bushes and past razor-sharp pillars of cacti, ignoring the stab in her head and the cramp in her ribs. Thorns clawed her legs. Ocotillo spikes pierced the skin on her arms. She stumbled, trying to stay on her frantic feet, and sharp rocks scraped the skin off her knees.

A different gunshot echoed on the raw mountains and across the darkening desert, louder and deeper, like cannon fire.

No dirt sprayed Rae that time. They had missed, but they were shooting at her with bigger guns, which meant they would be more accurate and have a longer range.

Shouting echoed behind her.

Rae jumped up and lurched toward the deepening desert shadows, only thirty yards ahead of her now. With every running step, slanting rocks twisted her ankles. Cholla spines stabbed through her flimsy shoes, and the barbs worked into the soles of her feet.

The sun dropped, and the shadows reached for her as she raced toward them.

Another bellow blasted from that huge gun, and then more shouting behind her.

*Damn*, she wished that she had a gun to shoot back. She could send all those bastards running for their cars, but all she could do was run away.

Rae risked a glance back while she ran and stubbed her toe on a pyramid of red rock, nearly falling.

The men weren't looking in her direction but were diving into the SUVs to chase her. Sunset glared from their windshields like wildfires.

Finally, Rae reached the shadow of the mountains, and she stumbled again and slammed into the ground. Hot blood from her head splattered her face. She licked her lips. Iron taste stained her tongue.

Engines roared and reverberated on the mountains behind her as the SUVs spun their tires, spraying gravel and grit.

Rae hunkered down behind a boulder, hiding.

Their engine growls echoed off the mountains and sounded like trucks were all around her. The SUVs might be racing toward her or speeding away. She covered her head with her arms.

The mountains' shadows deepened as the sun fell. The air temperature dropped. Sweat soaked her blouse from the hot church and then her sprint through the desert, and the dry air sucked the warmth away from her skin. Rae started to shiver, but she tucked her knees in tighter and held on. Hiding might keep her alive. If she could outwait them, she could survive in the desert and get home.

Surely her mother wouldn't turn her away.

The pain in her head hammered in time with her pounding heartbeat, and the SUVs thundered all around her, louder.

The First Baptist Church had been trolling for a way to throw her out for years, ever since she had had that blowout with Pastor Stoppard. They had only suffered her presence long enough to gather reasons to do it with a clear conscience. Pastor Stoppard railed against *modern women* every time she went home, glancing her way during the sermon.

The creosote bush beside her smelled like fresh tar and stung her nose. The jagged granite boulder scraped the skin over her spine where the desert thorns had torn her blouse.

Her disfellowshipping had been inevitable. She had been the only one blind to it.

But she hadn't been blind. She had been moving away for years, going home for shorter and shorter visits, slowly moving out into the world, and becoming the type of person who shalt do whatever the hell she wanted.

What she wanted most was A Ray of Light. Autism had stolen those kids away from their mothers and families and everyone who loved them. She was going to gather a posse and break those kids out of their prisons one brick at a time.

And she wanted Wulf. Of all the things in her worldly existence, as much as she wanted that dreamed-of clinic for autistic kids, she wanted Wulf, too, but he had decided to leave .

If she got away, *when* she got away, she would find a way to open her clinic. Sitting here behind the boulder while men shot at her stripped all the worldly distractions away from her.

She would find a way to build that clinic.

Even though her heart would break when Wulf left her.

A tear traced a cold line out of her eye and down the side of her face. The cold rock behind her sucked the warmth from her back. The chill shook her bones.

Twilight passed, and she shivered, freezing, in the cold desert night.

If she got out of this, if she got back to college, she would *free*. Freedom suddenly seemed like a blessing to be snatched up and guarded. If she survived this, she would be free of the slavers, free of stupid white bonnets, and free of the insane things that the church insisted that she believe.

Her blood-soaked hair stiffened.

*Engines.* She heard truck engines snarling in the dry desert air.

Definitely closer.

Rae knotted herself into a tight ball on the hard dirt and tried not to breathe.

Her dad and uncles could cut sign with the best of trackers. She didn't know if Jim Bob had learned to cut sign or not. If he had, he could follow that trail she had bulldozed through the brush as easily as an ant following a scent line back to the nest. Running for her life had left no time for stealth.

She closed her eyes tight, trying to adjust her eyes to starlight so she could run again. Her head pulsed with pain.

In the dark, someone yelled her name.

The voice was too far away. It might be Jim Bob or the coyotes. When she breathed in, grit from the desert sand coated her tongue.

The rock under her cheek sliced her skin. Her shredded knees bled on the sandy dirt. Though her muscles rattled, she crunched herself into a ball.

*"Reagan!"*

The men were closer now. She couldn't move. If she moved, they would see her. Once in the human traffickers' power, she would disappear into that captive world. A sharp rock on the desert floor poked her forehead.

*"Das ist her!"* a man yelled.

*"Yah, I see her!"* another yelled.

They clattered through the brush toward her.

Rae tried to stumble to her feet, but pins and needles crawled like stinging centipedes up her legs. She staggered, holding the rock beside her, but she couldn't run. Her hands shook.

In the thick darkness, men's hands heaved her up to standing. Her head buzzed like a high-voltage line ran through it. Starshine drew thin, gray lines on pipes that the men had stuck in their faces like cyborgs.



She tried to claw her way free, but they propelled her toward a big engine growling in the night like an unseen dragon.

She wrenched her arm and broke the man's grip. Cold touched her arms where the men's hands had held her, and she stumbled into the dark.

Hands caught her again, and this time, a man's arms swooped her off the ground.

She fought him, tearing at his hands and kicking him.

"Reagan!" His voice was hoarse but she knew him. "It's me! Wulf!" His accent had become so strong that he said *Wulf*.

In mid-punch, she changed her swing and clung to his neck. Her whole body shook with holding him because she thought she was dead and he was gone. "They were traffickers! They tried to take me!"

"They were what?" Again, his w's were lined with v's, like a German count in a movie.

"Human traffickers. Jim Bob sold me to them. They were going to kidnap me, make me a prisoner and a prostitute."

Wulf's walk stuttered, like he had almost missed a step, but he didn't drop her. Very quietly, he asked, "Slavery?" He drew out all three syllables.

"Yes. I would have disappeared. No one could have found me. I didn't know what to do except fight and run."

"I've got you now." Wulf cradled her close to his chest, so hard that he was almost crushing her. "Are you hurt?"

"No." Blood trickled down her neck. She clutched him tight with her tired, cold arms.

He carried her to the rumbling SUV and climbed into the back seat with her. The door slammed, but it was dark.

"Get the light on," Wulf said into the dark.

"If the shooters are still here, the light will draw their fire," another man in the SUV said.

"I can feel blood all over her. Do you see any vehicles?"

"No."

Light blinded her.

Wulf wore a contraption on his face, and he yanked it off, leaving red lines around his azure-blue eyes and across his cheekbones. He untangled himself from her and examined her arms. He asked, "They shot you?"

"I don't think so," she said. Her voice shook in her throat. Two men, Hans and Dieter, peered over the back of the front seat at her. Red lines

circled their eyes, so they had just stripped off goggle-things, too. “I cracked my head on the side window when I hit Jim Bob’s truck.”

“She is okay?” Dieter asked. “She is all right?”

Wulf continued walking her body with his fingers. Her clothes hung in shreds, and he shoved the tatters aside as he checked her skin. She just wanted him to hold her but he kept pulling away, so she tried to arrange the skirt so that Hans and Dieter wouldn’t see her underwear and white bra.

Wulf leaned her forward and ran his hands over her scratched back. He checked her neck and he parted her hair to look for bullet wounds on her head.

“She is all right?” Hans asked.

Wulf tapped a button on his mobile phone, and the screen glowed white. He waved the glaring light in Rae’s face and watched her eyes, checking for a head injury.

“She has a cut on her head,” Wulf said, leaning backward and wrapping his arms around her. “A bump and a cut. That’s all.” His arms tightened around her.

The light flipped off, and Dieter started the SUV’s engine. In the dark desert night, by starshine, between the red floating afterimages of Wulf’s phone, Rae could just see Dieter jam something onto his head and over his eyes.

Rae let Wulf hold her tightly, even though she felt like she should pull away. She was still cold, still shaking. Wulf pressed her face to his shoulder, shielding her eyes, and the sultry gunpowder smells of sulfur and steel clung to his palm. His black suit coat was stiff with dust against her cheek.

“Still no vehicles?” Wulf asked.

“I don’t see any engine heat signatures.”

Wulf said, “Gentlemen, take us back.”

Rae peeked between Wulf’s fingers at his two security men, but she could only see their shadowed outlines in the green glow from the instrument panel. The SUV rolled forward in the dark and turned in a wide circle.

Wulf reached into his pocket for his phone and dialed ten digits with his thumb. Rae didn’t get a look at the glowing screen, just noted that he dialed it really fast.

He said, “Hello, Mayor Harding.”

The Pirtleville mayor was Rae’s uncle and one of the few who had defended her, even a little, in the church, though she was sure that it had been

at Wulf's direction.

Wulf said, "There's been an incident. Mulligan tried to sell her to human traffickers as a prostitute."

A tinny screech leaked from the phone.

"No, I've got her. She's all right. There are two bodies to deal with."

Wulf listened a moment as the SUV bumped through the dark desert. The blue glow from his mobile phone lit her arms. Deep red scratches streaked her skin. She was so cold that she couldn't feel them.

"Just a moment." Wulf did something to his phone, then recited a long series of numbers to the Mayor that Rae realized had to be latitude and longitude. "I'll meet him there." He hung up.

"Who is he sending?" Rae asked. Her throat hurt from croaking it out.

Wulf wrapped his arm around her again. "Evidently, his brother is the sheriff."

Rae lay back in his arms. Wulf held her like he cared, and she blinked back tears. *Just believe it, she told herself. Just for now. Just for a few moments because otherwise the world is too terrible and empty.* "My uncle Vern is the sheriff."

"Quite. That's not incestuous at all."

"Bloodlines more tangled than the Plantagenets," Rae agreed.

This time, Wulf sighed. His chest whooshed under her ear. "How much do you know about me?"

"I know that you're leaving me. "

His arms tightened around her, scraping the raw skin on her shoulders. She felt his lips on her hair.

The SUV coasted to a stop. Dieter said, "We are here."

Rae looked around, but the dark surrounded the SUV and poured in all the windows, washing everything in black. The SUV's engine died. In the silence, even the faint glow from the dash faded, and the night reached into the SUV and filled it up with darkness.

Wulf said, "Send the other SUV a half-klick away. We don't want to look like an occupying army."

Dieter stuck his finger in his ear and said something in a Germanish-sounding language.

Outside, something growled in the night and crunched the dirt, then the sound faded.

Rae asked, "Where are we?"

“Where I killed the two of them,” Wulf said. His deep voice was so flat that it caught Rae’s heart.

Wulf had killed them? He was guarded by Swiss mercenaries, and yet *he* had killed them? Because he was the sniper? “Who were they?”

“One unknown man, and your cousin.”

“Jim Bob.” Rae searched the dark outside the SUV, trying to see bodies on the dark ground, but she couldn’t see anything except the stars in the moonless sky above.

Oh, she didn’t know how this would play out. If he had shot two traffickers, her uncle might be able to make it go away, but Jim Bob was an American citizen and connected to everyone in the Border town.

Rae’s eyes were adjusting to the night. Starlight frosted the top of Wulf’s golden hair and illuminated the slash of his jawline. “Are you okay?”

His arms wound more tightly around her. “Fine.”

Ah, the four-letter F-word that shut down conversations. She had had enough psychology to know that one. Maybe he didn’t want to talk now, in front of his men, but his body clutching her told her that there had to be more. “We’re near my dad’s truck?”

“It’s right there.”

“Can I get my purse?” she asked.

“I’ll get it,” Hans said. His door clicked open and slammed, letting a puff of cold desert night air into the SUV.

“Doesn’t he need a flashlight?” Rae asked .

“He’s wearing night-vision equipment,” Wulf said.

“You guys sure pack for an emergency, NVGs *and* sniper rifles.”

“One never knows what will happen.”

“What else are you guys carrying?”

Wulf’s shoulder under her face shifted as he shrugged.

The SUV’s front door opened and shut, and Rae’s purse landed in her lap. In the absolute dark, intermittent green light glowed through the open top. She found her phone by the blinking light that seemed like a strobe inside the bag.

Texts. She had three texts.

One from Craigh, her cousin whom she had promised to marry if they were both still single at forty: *Yep, they shunned you. Jerk-offs. Supper at my place tomorrow? Want you to meet your replacement: Kat.*

One from her cousin-roommate Hester: *I’m sorry. I tried to stop my mom*

*from doing that.*

One from her brother Ezekiel: *Momma wont stop cryin. Dad s forbiddin hr frm speaking ur name. u need anything? ride 2 dorm?*

Well, it seemed that she still had at least some contact with her family. Rae should have known that Craigh wouldn't give a hoot about the disfellowshipping. Ezekiel's and Hester's texts surprised her. She didn't want them to get in trouble, but her heart lifted for a moment. The church couldn't excommunicate the whole next generation, could they?

She supposed they could.

She stuffed the phone back into her purse.

The night flickered lavender around the SUV, and then the purple glow separated into red and blue whirling lights atop a police SUV bouncing over the desert.

Dieter flipped on the SUV's headlights. The police vehicle corrected its bearing toward them.

"Do you think it is advisable to admit involvement to the police?" Dieter asked.

"They were modern-day slavers. Shooting them was a service to this country."

"Then you could be in trouble at home," Dieter said. "The 1927 law."

"Being a mercenary requires payment." Wulf's sarcastic tone suggested Dieter had made a joke. "Been reading that law closely, have you?"

"Point," Dieter said.

The police SUV rolled to a stop beside them, briefly illuminating the inside of the vehicle. A high-speed pursuit engine growled under its hood.

"Stay here," Wulf said, untangling himself from her to get out.

She didn't want to be alone. "He's my uncle. I might be able to help."

Wulf glanced at her shredded clothes. He took off his suit coat and handed it to her.

She wrapped the jacket around her body, shoving her arms into the sleeves. The soft cloth smelled like Wulf: manly, musky, a little spicy like cinnamon tea, and a whiff of the sultry, smoky scent of gunpowder.

Wulf stepped out of the SUV and handed her down. The night chilled her through the jacket, and she drew it closer around her. She could smell him all around her.

Wulf withdrew his hand, and Rae raised her arm to block the glare from the police vehicle's flashing lights.

A man emerged from the police SUV. His skinny legs hit the ground first, and he heaved his pot belly out the door. "Is Reagan Stone here?" he called out.

"Here!" She didn't recognize him because she hadn't seen her uncle Vern Harding since before she went to college. He had gained a lot of weight. She hoped he was all right.

Sheriff Vern Harding trudged around the two bodies that lay in the SUVs' crossed headlight beams, shining his big police flashlight over them and into the desert. "Yep. Who shot these two?"

"I did." Wulf walked over to him.

Dieter and Hans shifted back and forth, looking at each other and then back at the Sheriff. Rae edged closer to them.

Sheriff Harding looked Wulf up and down. "You in charge here?" "Yes."

"And these men are?" He pointed back to the two staff members.

"Dietrich Schwarz and Hans Werner, my associates."

"I see." Sheriff Harding wrote on a notepad he carried. "Well, let me do the due diligence and run your plates." He lumbered over to his SUV and leaned in, typing the license plate numbers into the vehicle's computer. He frowned at the result, then leaned out of the SUV and squinted at Wulf.

Hans muttered, "Here it comes."

Rae wondered if she should dive for cover or prepare to explain herself. Wulf seemed at ease, standing with his hands tucked in his pockets and surveying the slice of desert lit by the SUVs' headlights.

The Sheriff shut the vehicle's door and pulled out his cell phone. He dialed a number, peering at the computer screen as he did so. He spoke for moment, looked thoughtful, and then tapped his phone.

Rae's nerves crackled. It shouldn't be taking this long. He shouldn't have to call anyone.

Sheriff Vern Harding got out of the car again, slamming the door. With his bloated belly and skinny limbs, he looked like an upright tarantula.

He ambled over to Wulf. "All right. Why don't you all tell me what happened?"

"From our vantage atop the ridge," Wulf gestured carelessly into the dark behind the police truck, "James Mulligan," Wulf pointed to the motionless body on the left, closer to Rae's dad's truck, "dragged Reagan Stone out of the passenger's side of the pick-up truck, and then two additional SUVs

arrived. Men emerged from the SUVs. There was arguing, and Rae ran across the desert, that direction. When she ran, Mulligan shot at her with a handgun. The other, with a rifle.”

The Sheriff looked around Wulf to Rae. “They tried to shoot you in the back?”

Rae nodded. Weren’t they supposed to get a lawyer before talking to the police, even if it was her uncle?

Sheriff Harding shook his head, clucking, and traced Rae’s footprints out into the desert with his flashlight beam, then played the light over the broken branches where she had run, cutting sign. He came back, crouched on his boot heels, and sniffed Jim Bob’s and then the other dead man’s hands, wrinkling his nose. He let the body’s hand drop back into the dust. Sheriff Harding asked Wulf, “And then what happened?”

Wulf pointed south again. “I shot them from that ridge to stop them from shooting Reagan.”

The Sheriff turned and shined his flashlight into the dark. “Jacob’s Ridge, back there? ‘Bout half a mile?”

“The one with the boulders,” Wulf said .

“Nice shot.” He leaned to the side to see Rae again. “Is that what happened?”

“Yes, sir. They were human traffickers. Jim Bob sold me to them. I ran, and they were shooting at me.”

Sheriff Harding shook his head. “That’s it, then.”

“That’s what?” Wulf asked.

“That’s it. You folks clear out of here. Won’t do to be discussing this with anyone.”

Wulf raised one eyebrow and glanced back at Rae. He asked the Sheriff, “Should we come to the police station to sign statements tonight or tomorrow?”

“Nope,” the sheriff said. “That wouldn’t do at all. Jim Bob, here, got himself involved with some sordid types. That other body must be his business partner. Seems some unsavory things were going on here in Pirtleville. I imagine *some* of them will come out, now that Jim Bob got what was coming to him.”

Wulf said, “One more thing, Sheriff.”

“Yeah?”

Wulf sounded entirely nonchalant when he said, “The ones who got

away, I want their names.”

“Sure thing.” The Sheriff opened his SUV door and hoisted himself into the cab. He grinned at Rae with a white, straight smile. “This just another unsolved murder in the desert among rival drug and trafficking gangs. I’ll send the coroner out here to mop up. Evening to you all, Reagan,” he looked right at Wulf, “Mr. Dom.”

The police SUV drove into the night, back toward the highway.

Rae’s knees wobbled. Hans caught her because he was closest.

“Fraulein!”

Wulf was beside her, and he helped her to her feet.

She said, “I can’t believe all that. That sort of stuff is not supposed to happen, even down here.”

“It was certainly interesting.” He helped her back to the SUV and into the back seat. Dieter and Hans clambered into the front seat. Wulf scratched one of his eyebrows and shook his head. “I think your uncles may have just used me.”

Rae didn’t believe conspiracy theories. She fastened her seat belt around her scratched and battered body. A headache streamed from the left side of her skull. “They couldn’t have set all that up. ”

“I don’t credit them with orchestrating a nefarious plan. However, I think Mulligan may have threatened your uncle the Mayor with exposure, and they were glad enough to be rid of him that we have even escaped paperwork. Quite agile of them.”

Dieter cranked himself around in his seat and asked, “To the hotel or back to the house?”

“The hotel, please.” Wulf wrapped his arms around Rae again. “A five hour drive would not be in our best interests tonight.”



# Shock

THE SUV sped through the dark, first bumping over the desert, then gliding along the highway. The other SUV swung into position behind them. Rae saw Dieter glance in the rearview mirror, watching it, and then his shoulders relaxed.

In the back seat, Rae wrapped her torn-up arms around Wulf, clinging to him, even though pulling away would be the smarter thing to do. Her arms and back were bleeding. His jacket wicked away the blood, and the soft lining stuck to her skin.

Wulf held her around her shoulders and pressed her face to his shoulder. The SUV jostled them, but his arms never relaxed, even for a moment.

Dieter pulled over on a dark corner, and Hans hopped out of the SUV to drive Wulf's Porsche, abandoned in a cotton field. Friedhelm emerged from the other SUV and took the shotgun seat. They convoyed into downtown Pirtleville, such as it was.

Downtown Pirtleville consisted of one claustrophobic block. Cheever's Department Store, a pharmacy, a post office, and the Marsden Hotel walled in the street. As it was well past six o'clock, all the shop windows were dark. Streetlights dropped yellow pools on the rutted asphalt.

The Marsden Hotel was a grand dame relic of bygone days when rich people came to the Southwest to cure their allergies, asthma, or tuberculosis. Legend had it that the chip in the third step of the four-story marble staircase was from when Pancho Villa rode his horse up the staircase on Ambrose Bierce's dare. The bullet hole high up one of the enormous marble columns was attributed to the nineteen-twenties gunfight that erupted in the lobby when the hotel manager insisted that a rancher's Mexican wife use the "colored" bathroom, thus ending segregation in that part of the state.

Rae had been inside the Marsden only for the wedding receptions of the better Pirtleville families.

They entered through the back doors from the parking lot but still had to climb the four marble flights of stairs. The lobby showed signs of disrepair that Rae hadn't noticed the last time she was here. A faint trail of grime

stained the marble floor from the front door to the reception desk. The carpets were worn threadbare in spots, unlike the lobby of that plush hotel in downtown Phoenix where The Devilhouse party had been held.

Something must be wrong. Probably the economy. During the wedding receptions, the floor had gleamed, she was sure, though the lobby had only been lit by candlelight. She tightened Wulf's suit jacket around herself. The fabric in back was stiff with dried blood.

Wulf's security detail closed around them. Wulf steered her elbow as they climbed the stairs.

The whole lobby staff must be staring at her shredded clothes and scratched legs sticking out of Wulf's suit jacket, and tomorrow, they would gossip that *Reagan Stone had stayed in a man's room* to everyone in Pirtleville.

Not that it mattered now.

Rae held her head high and allowed Wulf to guide her.

"Gentlemen," Wulf said, dismissing them, as he unlocked his room door with an antique key.

Rae walked into the hotel room ahead of him. The hotel bed was covered in a cheap, fiesta-style bedspread. The prints on the walls were Southwestern cliché posters of bug-eyed, black-haired children and legless horses that clashed with the bedspread. The room looked like it was trying to be authentic and real and welcoming and loving, but it was all fake.

Her legs wobbled, but she stood as straight as she could. Outside the door, Dieter and Hans peered at the ceiling as Wulf pressed the door closed.

To her horror, Rae's legs crumpled, and she collapsed in a ball on the floor.

Wulf was beside her. "I should have known that only willpower was holding you up."

"I'm fine." She tried, but she couldn't stand. Every time she tried, her legs went out again.

"Are you hurt?" The worry in his voice chastised her for her wussiness.

"No. I just can't seem to stand up." Even her voice shook.

"Come on, then." He picked her up in his arms, bouncing her a little at the top to readjust.

She laid her head on his shoulder. "No. You'll hurt yourself."

"You didn't protest when I carried you to the SUV."

A tremor drilled through her. "I wasn't thinking straight."

In the bathroom, he set her down on the edge of the tub. She gripped the rail on the wall and held herself up because the beige walls wavered. A mildew stain on the ceiling floated like a dirty cloud. “I don’t have any clothes.”

“We will get you some clothes.” He unbuttoned and stripped off his shirt and white tee shirt underneath, revealing his muscular chest and the deep black Japanese tattoo on his shoulder. He was so easy with her seeing it, a far cry from when he had hollered out his safe word in The Devilhouse just a few weeks ago.

He was beautiful, she noticed, even though she was muzzy. Not just handsome. Not only good-looking. His face was all strong cheekbones and jawline. Muscles rippled from his broad shoulders down his sides and abdomen to his tight waist. Fine, golden man-hair glistened on his chest. Every time she had seen his body before, desire had clouded her mind. She hadn’t *looked* at him.

Now, so exhausted, hurting, she could *see* him. He looked like a different species than all the other men she’d seen in her life.

Wulf said, “I’ll have Hans go out and buy whatever you want. He has wonderful taste.”

Burly, stoic Hans fretting over women’s clothes seemed ridiculous. “Really?”

Wulf glanced down at her, his blue eyes just visible from behind golden eyelashes. “Not at all, but he can read labels for size.”

“I just want to go home.” She wrapped her arms around herself. She was still wearing Wulf’s jacket, but she was so cold.

He dipped one eyebrow in consternation. “I can rouse Hans and Dieter, but the city is hours away.”

She rested her head against the frigid tile wall. “We don’t have to drive back. I’m fine. I don’t even know why I said that. ”

Because being around him was more painful than all her scratches and her throbbing skull.

“It has been a rather difficult day, *ja*?”

It sounded so weird when he said something in his posh British accent, *rah-thuh*, and then slipped in a German word. Sometimes her brain didn’t wrap around it properly.

He ran warm water in the tub behind her, then helped her remove her arms from his dirty, crushed jacket. The back of the collar was stiff with dried

blood.

She said, "I'm sorry. I think I ruined your suit."

"I don't care about the suit." He unbuttoned what was left of her blouse and eased it off. The fabric stuck to the dried blood on her back and arms and peeled off scabs. She tried not to wince.

When he had removed all Rae's clothes and her battered body was naked, he helped her sit in the hot water and began sponging her clean with a washcloth.

She kept trying to figleaf her breasts and sex with her hands, embarrassed. "You don't have to do this," she said. "I can manage."

His fingers were gentle as he washed her hair around the sore goose egg on her head. "It's all right to allow someone to help you."

Rae could hardly breathe, she was so tired. Her legs and back hurt. "I thought you didn't like submissive women."

"This isn't a sex game, Rae." His fingers under her chin turned her face up to his, and concern filled his blue eyes. He smoothed her wet hair back. "Let me help you."

The soap stung her scratches and cuts, but cleanliness felt better than grit on her sore skin.

"You won't disfellowship me?" She had meant it to sound flippant, but her voice sounded sad.

"No," he said. "Never."

Rae settled back in the tub, unsure what to say.

He wasn't casting her out. Wulf was leaving. Her heart thumped hard, drumming her temples and the goose egg lump on the left side of her head.

He squeezed clean water from a wash cloth above her shoulder, rinsing away the soap and revealing long red scratches. "It looks like someone whipped you with a particularly cruel cat o'nine tails."

"Flogged," she said. "Right?"

"Yes." He rinsed her other shoulder, revealing abrasions from the sharp granite boulder, and she saw his pale eyebrows dip just a fraction, a micro-expression of unease. She had read about micro-expressions in a counseling class, that when you could catch them, they would tell you what someone was really feeling.

Hysteria plucked at her, and she could have fallen apart into a soggy mess of tears and snot, but the calm way that Wulf bathed her, edging around her scrapes and cuts, which seemed all over her body, soothed her. She kept a

tremulous hold of her wits. His tender touch almost made her believe that he cared.

But he was leaving.

His hands spoke of kindness and caring. Even when he washed her breasts, even when he ran his hands up her thighs, it felt like caring, not like he was copping a feel.

Finally, he must have thought she was clean enough, because he helped her stand, and she managed to hold her trembling legs under herself while he wrapped a towel around her and lifted her again.

She insisted, "I can walk. I'm fine," but her voice was breathy with exhaustion. Her whole body still felt cold, even after the hot bath.

This must be what shock felt like.

"Of course you're fine." He carried her into the bedroom. She wrapped her arms around his neck and buried her face there. He smelled like man-musk, but she could still smell spiced tea and smoky gunpowder. His bare chest felt like satin on her shoulder.

She had thought that she could enjoy these last two weeks if that's all he could give her, but she couldn't. Her heart was already breaking.

He laid her on the bed, and the softness gave way under her. The muscles in her back and legs unknotted. A week ago, she would have allowed herself to reach for him and draw him down to her, but she pulled up the sheet to cover herself instead.

Wulf blinked, and his lips parted just a moment, another micro-expression. She wished she could read them, read *him*, but her brain seemed blurry.

Several suitcases sat on the bureau, lids open. Wulf rummaged through one and returned with a black tee shirt. She struggled up to sitting, clutching the sheet over her breasts. He handed the soft shirt to her. "You can sleep in this, if you like."

"Thanks." As she shook it out, she caught a glimpse of lettering and three musicians on the front. "The Police?"

"I apologize that it's an older shirt, but it's the longest one I have with me, if you're comfortable with it."

"No. I mean yes. I mean, I appreciate it. And I like them. I like Sting, anyway. He lives in a castle," she blathered.

Yeah, this was shock.

"It's more of a manor house," Wulf said.

“Have you seen it?”

He shrugged. “*Architectural Digest*, if I recall correctly.”

Surprise drew Rae’s eyebrows together. “You read a lot of house magazines, do you?”

His smile drew up one side of his mouth. “It was in an airport.”

That first night in the limo, Georgie and Lizzy had told Rae everything that they knew about Wulf, The Dom of The Devilhouse, which wasn’t much, but they had concluded that he liked live music, but no one knew what kind of music he actually liked.

Now, they were talking about music.

Despite the fuzziness in her head, or probably because of it, Rae decided that she should pry a little more.

After all, it didn’t matter.

“Have you been to a Police concert?”

“A few,” he said, an affirmative though a little vague. “Are you hungry?”

“I don’t even know.” She slipped the tee shirt over her head while she was under the sheet, hiding from him even though he had just washed her naked body. The cotton smelled sunny like laundry detergent, not like that cinnamon tea scent that had lingered in Wulf’s coat and on his neck. “Have you seen a Sting concert?”

“A few.” He tapped his cell phone, then said, “Hans, could you find us some sandwiches? Use all necessary bribery.” His eyebrows rose, and he smiled. “Have you? Your efficiency is unparalleled.” He hung up the phone. “Are turkey sandwiches all right?”

“Perfect.” She let the sheet drop to her waist, now that she was decent.

The door rattled with a knock, and Wulf carelessly opened the door.

A tray pushed the door open a little more, and Rae heard a short harangue in German, to which Wulf laughed and said something back.

“What was that?” she asked as he returned with the food and set it beside her on the bed. Sandwiches, at least five, were stacked on one plate, and another plate was heaped with fruit. Bottles of water stood around the plates.

“Operational security lecture. He’s right, though.” Wulf grabbed half a sandwich from the stack and stood. He walked toward the bathroom. “I am revolting. I shall shower and return. Please eat.”

She didn’t think he smelled bad at all, and she didn’t want him to leave her alone, but she folded her hands in her lap and stared at the stack of sandwiches.

Rae didn't know if she could eat, but he had already closed the bathroom door.

The sandwiches smelled like hot bread and roasted meat, and she wondered just how much bribery had been necessary to rouse the hotel staff at nine o'clock on a Saturday night. Probably a lot. Rae chewed one, and then she wondered how much more bribery it had taken to get these really good sandwiches anywhere in Pirtleville, ever.

She sucked down two sandwiches and a banana and two bottles of water.

Wulf came back after his shower, still bare-chested and with only a white towel wrapped around his waist. His skin looked golden, contrasted against the white towel like that, and she realized that he was lightly tanned. She had always thought of him as pale, but he wasn't.

Cold air poked her back and legs, and she tightened the sheet around herself. Hotel rooms were always cold, and this one was really cold, and she was so cold that she was shaking. She blurted, "So how many concerts have you been to?"

"Concerts? All of them?" His eyes darted down, glancing at her wearing his shirt, but his unreadable gaze returned to her eyes. He took another sandwich. "Including clubs with live bands?"

"Yep."

"And classical music? Symphonies?" He bit into the sandwich.

"Sure."

He looked around like he was calculating while he chewed and swallowed. "Hundreds." He sipped water. "No, thousands. Between two and three thousand, I would estimate."

There were only three hundred sixty-five days in a year, which meant there were less than four thousand days in a decade. "Good Lord. Don't you do anything else?"

"I've been attended fewer performances the last few years."

"That's still a whole lot of concerts. All of them in Switzerland?"

"Almost none in Helvetica. Only Montreux. My staff hates it, but I go every year."

*Mon-troh.* Rae admitted, "I don't know what a Montreux is."

"A town that holds a music festival in early July, near Lake Geneva. I should take you, sometime." He blinked and pulled his lower lip in, biting it.

Even though Rae's head was buzzy from all the crazy, she knew what that lip-sucking poker tell meant, but so she let his mistake about their future

pass. She held her breath in her sore chest, waiting for him to spill something important.

“When I lived in London,” he said, and his speech slowed to a crawl but his British accent stiffened. “I went out every night, for at least a few hours, sometimes two or three venues per night.” He paused. “Drove my security detail to distraction, I’m afraid.”

And he paused again, so she waited.

“I was invisible for the first time in my life.” The relief in his voice was obvious.

“I call bullshit. You’re the least *invisible* person I know. When you clear your throat, the whole Devilhouse turns around and looks at you.”

He paused, then sat on the edge of the bed, slanting the mattress toward him. All Rae had to do was slide downhill into his arms, but she didn’t.

“Here, I’m The Dom of The Devilhouse.” His wry smile and head tilt mocked himself. “Everyone sees the sex god. In Europe, everyone has seen that picture you found, many times.” He drew a deep breath, and his voice became a little drier with sarcasm. “Wherever I go, the mood becomes morose in deference to my eternal pain and grief. The newspapers call me The Survivor Twin in typical Teutonic morbid fascination.”

His glance flicked downward, a little more serious. “In Helvetica, however, people become defensive when they notice me. It seems that the entire country is vigilant to throw themselves before a bullet should the occasion arise, because on that day, they adopted me. I stayed in Switzerland, in Rolle. I didn’t retreat to live behind walls with tutors. That’s why I took out Swiss citizenship and served the national service requirement in the Swiss Guards. I took up arms for them in return.”

Holy cow, that was a lot to digest. Rae would have to suss out all the connections sometime she wasn’t chattering with cold. Maybe she could pry all she wanted to and then blame existential shock later, though there would be no later, so she said, “I thought you were born in Switzerland.”

“I said I am Swiss. I hold a British passport, too.”

“So you were born in England?”

“No.” And there he stopped. His smooth lip didn’t go into his mouth, so he wasn’t even contemplating going farther down that path yet.

She prompted, “But England is in Europe. Didn’t they stare at you there, too?”

He shrugged. “England is technically in Europe. In England, they have



the Royal Family to gawk at, plus the footballers and the fashion models. Other notables pale by comparison. After the first week, I faded away. I was so pale that I was transparent.” He blinked, then ran a hand through his light blond hair. “So to speak.”

“Right.” His knee nudged her bare thigh. Only the sheet separated their skin from each other.

He said, “So I went to clubs and to concerts. I still attend the Glastonbury music festival and the theatre festival in Edinburgh and sit in the crowd.”

“I thought you went to England for graduate school.” Between work and studying and classes, she hardly had time to breathe.

He shrugged. “I studied economics. It didn’t tax me.” He closed his eyes and turned his head to the side. “I must be in an odd frame of mind.”

“I like it when you’re funny.” Yep, she could blame it on shock.

He smiled at her. “I should never take you to London. Everyone assures me I am very British when I’m there. I don’t think I managed a joke the whole time. I still can’t use those emoticons while texting.”

Every time he referenced the future—a future that she wouldn’t be a part of because he was leaving—her chest hurt.

Maybe he was shocky, too. He had just shot two men.

Wulf cocked his head to the side, and Rae thought he was going to draw his lip into his mouth but he said, “Did you ever read the captions under those photos of Constantin and me?”

“Constantin?”

Wulf kept his eyes on her and nodded, barely.

Naming the dead child seemed to make even that shocking horror yet more real. “When I saw the pics, I could see that the child in them was you, and I dropped my phone on the floor. I hit the home button because I couldn’t see straight. I didn’t even know your brother’s name.”

“Why couldn’t you see straight?” Wulf’s deep voice was perfectly even. There was no sharp edge to it, not angry, not suspicious, not interrogating. Rae thought that he might be in *very British* mode right now.

“It killed me that anything so terrible happened to anyone, and especially to you.”

She reached out, and he took her hand.

Later, she could blame it on shock. “What didn’t I see? Are you a rock star or something? Am I supposed to know who you are?”

She watched his sapphire eyes, waiting for a micro-expression she could

read.

Instead, he wrapped his arms around her and kissed her, so softly, barely brushing his lips over hers. His muscled body radiated heat, and Rae was so cold.

His lips moved against hers. “No. You shouldn’t know who I am at all.”

She melted in his arms and clung to him, kissing him back. He smelled like clean man, all testosterone and musk. His body was so warm that he burned her chilled skin.

*One last time.*

One last night before Wulf left for somewhere else in the world, where everyone else knew who he was, and she never saw him again.

# One More Time

*ONE more time.*

Wulf wanted one more time with her before he told her *who* he was, *what* he was.

He kissed her carefully even though he was famished for her. His whole body had strained toward her every moment of the last half-dozen hours, from when that cult had excommunicated her, when she ran heartbroken into the desert, when he had thought those bastards had shot her and he had carefully, methodically searched for her, when he had found her in a crumpled heap amid the cacti, to every second that he had taken care of her since.

Were Wulf not so very civilized, anguish might have broken him.

Her arms snaked up around his neck, accepting him.

In every moment since he had seen those slavers raise their guns and aim at her, Wulf had verged on breaking down. His calm stillness masked his need to reassure himself of her safety and health and life.

His even voice belied the quiver in his soul because he had killed two men. He had repaid the universe in kind for the bullets that had changed his life.

The bed shifted under them as he leaned forward. He wanted to bury himself in Rae so that she couldn't get away from him.

Her arms tightened around his neck. He kissed her more, and her soft lips responded, kissing him back.

He grasped her soft skin, skirting her bruises and scrapes, so many of them, touching her body everywhere that wasn't bloody or blue. Her brassiere had protected her breasts, so first he palmed her through the tee shirt, then slipped his hands under the cotton and filled his hands with her. His hands were as sensitive as a tongue, stroking her skin.

He reined himself in because he didn't want to hurt her. Those brutal cuts on her limbs and torso felt imprinted on his own skin.

She leaned back, pulling him down atop her. His dick swelled, wanting her. God, he wanted her. He wanted her every time he saw her, but here, in

this odd hotel room far out of civilization, he wanted one last moment of innocence and seclusion. They would never have it again.

He kissed her carefully, because his entire being had quaked when he had thought she might be dead. All his training had come to the fore when he had curled himself around his rifle, slowing his heart and calming his breath so he could take the shots, but the moment he had looked up from the telescopic gun sight, panic slammed him again. He would have taken that desert apart with his bare hands to find her.

Her arms wound more tightly around his neck, and he almost shoved his knee between her lovely long legs and took her then, but he waited, wanting more of her. He rolled to the side.

Under her velvety skin, her muscles were knotted, so he smoothed her body, soothing the muscles, relaxing her with his hands. She sighed, and the sound blew through him.

Her eyes opened a little. She stared at him with those dark eyes through her long, black lashes, weakening his resolve to have this moment. He stroked her, first her breasts and stomach, then her thighs, and finally over her pelvis. Her body lengthened, relaxing, releasing.

He pulled his tee shirt off of her and bent his head to her breasts. He sucked on them until they hardened, until she whimpered every time he pulled on them. The sound of her losing control tormented him, driving him closer to giving in.

“Wulf,” she said, and her low voice was so breathy that she must be as consumed by passion as he was.

He trailed his hand down her body, stroking her stomach and lower. His fingers curled through her silky fuzz, then lower, into her. She arched against him, and his fingers found the slick spot in her center. He slipped a finger inside her, rolling his fingertip against her wet entrance, waiting for her.

He braced himself on one elbow and watched her face shine with desire.

Her eyes opened more, and he saw that she wasn’t befuddled by lust, but clear in her longing for him.

“Wulf,” she said again, his own name, and he felt like she was seeing *him*, just a man named Wulf.

*One more time.*

He moved above her again, reaching around her, still holding her gaze. She had such lovely, mysterious dark eyes, such a classically beautiful heart-shaped face, with that gorgeous burnished hair falling over the pillows, and

he suspected she didn't realize it. He gathered a tress in his fingers, rubbing the silkiness of it, watching the lamp bring out golden and ruby lights, as he held himself above her on one arm.

She pushed at the towel around his waist, and he stretched his body to allow her to whip it off.

Leaving her alone would have been the best way that he could have protected her, but now her life was broken apart. Her family, that church, Wulf had torn her away from all of them. While he suspected that the church was more of a cult and that her family did not value her, he would never have said so to her.

The fact was, however, that they had cast her out and left her unprotected when she needed them.

Now, the best way to protect her was to stay with her.

His heart leapt.

He could have this beautiful woman, all her womanly curves and coppery, flowing hair, her humor and her sweetness, her determination and her ambition, and he could share every moment with her. He could wake to her and fall asleep with her, and he would take any bullet meant for her.

His knee came down between her legs, and she parted for him. Her hands held his shoulders, bracing him. He touched himself to the soft folds of her entrance, stilled himself there, stretching out the moment. Her wetness warmed the head of his dick, and he wanted to be inside her.

Her breathing quickened, and Rae stared at him like she was trying to memorize him. Her intensity shot to his heart. Her cheeks and breasts flushed dusky pink with rushing passion.

He rubbed her clit with his dick, pressing it through the tiny sheath. She blinked and gasped, almost sounding like pain, but her hips pressed down as she tried to take him in. His cock responded to her heat. She closed her eyes, reveling, but then her dark eyes opened again and she looked at him.

His heartbeat pounded in his ears, and his dick pulsed with rushing blood as their eyes locked. Looking at her occupied his whole soul.

He pushed his dick inside her an inch at a time, gazing at her, holding her with his eyes as she held him. Her lovely dark eyes, dewy with passion, stripped him bare, and his heart sped. He eased into her warmth, feeling her heat all around him. She arched, struggling to keep looking at him. She wanted to close her eyes and lose herself in it, he could see that she wanted that, but she held her eyes open, watching him.

*One more time.*

If he told her about himself carefully, gently, perhaps she wouldn't run from him, like any sane woman would.

She already knew some of the worst parts: that people had been gunning for him since he was a child and that everyone in Europe would recognize him. The European tabloids weren't as aggressive as the British rags, but they stalked him when he was on the Continent.

He would insist that he could protect her, no matter what happened. He would make sure Dieter understood his priorities.

When Wulf told her, he prayed that he wouldn't see that flash of goldlust in her eyes. He had seen it in women before, many women, every woman, especially European woman who recognized him and saw their future with him in the jet-set limelight. He didn't think he would see that avaricious fire take hold in Rae. He had faith in her, but he was cognizant of the complexities that people could hold.

But he had to tell her *who* he was, *what* he was.

And then, if she had the intelligence he credited her with, she would leave him.

He wasn't a sparkly vampire or a shape-shifting werewolf, like she had teased him that first night they had met.

He was The Dom of The Devilhouse, for one more week.

He was The Survivor Twin, as he thought of himself, known by sight across Europe and followed in the society columns. His own appellation differed from the one that the tabloids used by a single word.

He was Korporal Wulfram Hannover of the Swiss Guards, reserve, a trained sniper.

He was Dr. Wulfram von Hannover, who held a philosophical doctorate from the London School of Economics, had been a visiting professor at the University of Chicago for a year, and managed his family's fortune .

He was Wulfram Augustus Heinrich Ernst Georg Berthold Friedrich Wilhelm Louis Ferdinand, Prinz von Hannover und Cumberland, Prince of Great Britain and Ireland, Duke of Brunswick-Lüneburg, and heir to an assortment of other useless titles to extinct kingdoms and duchies including a three-digit succession number to the British throne through George V of Hannover, who had been George III of England.

All those damned titles were why he and Constantin, his older brother and the first heir to the Kingdom of Hannover, had been shot by an anarchist

when they were children, because the deaths of little princes always made international headlines.

The tabloids called him The Survivor Prince.

# One Last Time

WHEN Rae took Wulf into herself, when their bodies linked, Rae breathed.

Rae watched Wulf's so-blue eyes as he pressed into her, stretching her body around him. Her body trembled with wanting him, and she almost came when his cock pushed inside her to the hilt.

This was it, the last moment, the last time.

She tried to match her breath with his when he exhaled. Every time he breathed, the very last second of his exhale trembled like a gasp, but his eyes were clear, and he gazed at her as he took her—so intense, so controlled.

Rae tried to absorb everything about each moment: each thrust, each sigh. He smelled like vanilla and cloves and a green meadow, and yet she could smell that elemental, animal scent of *man* under it all. His body slid as he eased himself into her.

She stayed in the moment, desperately trying to drink it all in, to take all of him into her body. She laid a hand against his cheek. Blond stubble that she couldn't even see was rough on her palm.

He watched her eyes, that she thought he must also realize that this was their last time.

His body rose and fell above her like surging waves breaking on the shore. Her pussy tightened around his cock, fluttering, but she didn't want it to end so soon. Oh why, *why* had she rushed all their love-making, so eager to find out what was next and to climax, when she should have savored him?

They moved together, finding their rhythm, and Rae thought she might burst any second but held on, drawing it out. Every time he slid into her, she whimpered and tightened, almost *there*, but she stopped.

She wanted every last moment .

His lips parted, revealing his straight, white teeth, and his eyes clouded with passion.

"Come with me," he gasped.

"Oh, yes," she said, her body twisting inside, coiling so tight that she could barely breathe. He did that thing where he rose at the top of each thrust, dragging his body across her clit and pushing against her inside. She couldn't



hold back and gasped, “Oh, yes!”

Her body rushed into a tight knot and then blew into flecks of light. She cried out and couldn’t keep her eyes open. Darkness waved through her body, and she clutched Wulf’s warmth to her, holding onto his strong shoulders while she fell. His cock throbbed in her as he came, and his breath on her throat turned almost to a sob.

Her body flowed like waving seaweed, and she couldn’t speak, couldn’t think. His breath washed over her throat. His arms cradled her.

She held on, floating. His weight pressed on her, but it almost seemed to her flooded mind that he was speaking something else, Arabic or German, because her thoughts couldn’t wrap around what he was saying.

She barely heard him whisper into her neck, “Come with me to Paris.”

He murmured some more, but the words disconnected in her head.

His bass voice finally coalesced, and he said, “Say you will,” in her ear. He rolled off her, withdrawing, and he laid his head on the flat pillow beside her.

Rae curled when he dragged his dick out of her. She pressed her legs together to quell the ache. “Wh—what?”

He whispered again, and his breath felt like feathers brushing her ear, “Come with me to Paris next week.”

At first, she thought he was mocking her, but surely he wouldn’t be so unkind. He must know that her heart was breaking. “No.”

He held her hand. “Come with me.”

Practicality presented itself as a defense. “I can’t. I have to go to class.”

“That week is your spring break,” he said.

“Oh, yeah.” Air trembled in her lungs, and she spread her fingers on his chest, just to touch him. “Wait, how do you know that?”

“The Devilhouse closes during spring break.” He pressed her palm over his beating heart. “All the girls go to Mexico or Powell Lake.”

“Lake Powell,” she said, even though that was so beside the point and she only said it because she couldn’t think straight.

“What is the attraction of Lake Powell?”

“Houseboats.” She couldn’t seem to focus, but she was pretty sure that he had invited her to go to Paris, as if this wasn’t their last night together, and she was busy squelching the joy that bubbled up because she was surely wrong and her heart would break all over again.

And that was why she should not go *anywhere* with him.

“Houseboats?” he echoed.

“Don’t ask. You’d be shocked. Drunken debauchery that would put The Devilhouse to shame. Did you say *Paris*?”

“Yes.” The deep blue of his eyes was like the warm and brilliant Sea of Cortez on a sunny day. The room smelled like the clean, deep ocean from their love-making. “Come with me to Paris.”

“I’ve never been to Paris.”

“Smashing. So you’ll come.”

She recoiled, so afraid that he was mocking her. “I don’t have a passport.”

“We can have it by Tuesday morning. We’ll leave Friday. Plenty of time.”

Unease wormed into her heart. “How can you do that?”

“I will call friends of mine in Helvetica, who will call their counterparts in this government. It would help if you had a birth certificate. We could have someone open the courthouse for us.”

He sounded like he had everything arranged, or like he could arrange anything he wanted, anything at all. Like he could magic up sandwiches after every diner had closed. Like he could produce government documents on a Sunday with a phone call. Like he could walk away from killing two people. Like even within her church, he could raise three men to their feet to defend her like he was conducting an orchestra.

It crept Rae out. The only people she knew of with that kind of influence were involved in the drug cartels, and yes, that included her two uncles, Mayor and Sheriff Harding, among others.

People who crossed drug lords were sold into slavery or murdered in the desert.

Her guts twisted into what felt like strength for the first time. She had lost her family. She might lose the money to open her autism clinic if Wulf threw her out of a job before he sold off The Devilhouse.

She wouldn’t get involved with a drug lord, ever, for anyone, not even if Wulf was one, not even for only two weeks.

Rae sat up because panicked ultimatums can’t be delivered lying down. “No more secrets. I need to know everything that you’ve been hiding, and I know that you’re hiding a lot, that you hide *everything*. If you don’t tell me all of it, I’ll leave. I’ll call my brother to come get me.” Surely Ezekiel would drive her back to college, “And I went to high school here. That girl working

the hotel desk was my senior class treasurer. I have fifty cousins. I can find someplace to crash for a night and some way to get back to school.” She hoped that was true.

Wulf scooted himself up the bed to lean against the headboard. He rested his hands behind his head, and his biceps bulged. His abdominal muscles rippled down his stomach. “What do you want to know?”

Her worst fears boiled over. “You’re involved with drugs, aren’t you? The money, that huge house, The Devilhouse, the guns, the guards, knowing my uncles, everything. When Sheriff Harding ran your license plates, he called someone on the phone. That’s weird. No one does that. You’re some kind of drug lord.”

Wulf shook his head. “I’m not involved in drugs or anything else illegal. I never have been. I have a small connection with the Swiss consulate as an economic emissary that affords me certain immunity privileges, which is why your uncle spoke to someone there. The phone number is attached to our vehicle licenses.”

“Then why do you have so much money?”

Wulf pulled his lower lip into his mouth, deliberating. Finally, he said, “If I tell you, you might not believe me. Let me show you.”

“No. Tell me *now*. I want to know *now*.” Rae waited, trembling.

He reached out to her and held her arms above her elbows. “Rest. Eat some proper food. Let’s not do this now, near midnight, after this terrible day.”

“Wulf, I want to know. I have to know,” she begged.

His hands moved up, and he cupped her neck. “One more night, Reagan. Tomorrow, I will show you. Not now, not when you’re so tired, not when you’re so scared.”

“I’m not scared!”

“Of course not.” He rested his forehead against hers. “It’s a difficult thing. It’s a complicated thing. Let me have you for one more night.”

“I’m not going *anywhere* with you until you tell me *everything* .”

His eyes were closed. “Agreed.”

She sank into his arms and laid her head on his shoulder, limp and afraid to know whatever he didn’t want to tell her.

A part of her didn’t want to know because she wanted to go on just as she was, blissfully stupid, but she shouldn’t make decisions without knowing whatever he was hiding. It was stupid that he wouldn’t tell her, and she was

stupid for not insisting on it before, and this whole situation and all these stupid secrets and the crazy fear in her head were pissing her off.

*One last night*, she thought. She would give him and herself one last night, because tomorrow, everything would change.

He stroked her hair and soothed her until she slept.

# In the Darkness

RAE awoke in the thick dark of the early morning hours in the hotel room.

Wulf's arm pressed her waist. A slice of red light infiltrated the hotel room's window that overlooked downtown Pirtleville from a neon sign that someone had forgotten to turn off.

Rae rolled over and found Wulf staring at the light. A red slant reflected on his glassy eyes. She asked, "Are you all right?"

He took a slow breath. "I'm fine."

"You look awake."

"Honestly, I'm fine."

"I don't mean to pry, but are you sure?"

"The British always say that directly before they have nervous breakdown."

Rae blinked, surprised. She touched his shoulder and the dark cloud of ink under his skin. "Is that what's happening?"

"Of course not. I'm fine."

She didn't believe that at all anymore. She slid her hand over his shoulder. The hard muscle under his skin felt like suede-covered steel. "What's wrong?"

He inhaled deep and held it before he said, "I killed two men today."

"They were kidnapping me. You saved my life. I should thank you."

He blinked. "It's not killing them that perturbs me, *per se*, which is a definitive condemnation of my character. Sniping them was the only way to save you, and I would do it again." He looked away from the window and into her eyes. "I would do anything to save you."

"I can't imagine shooting someone." She thought she could do it to save her own or someone else's life, but she could not conceive of what it would feel like to kill a human being, so she just listened .

"I saw them through the scope," Wulf said in the dark. "I hit both of them in the brainstem, just where I aimed, back here," he touched where his skull met his spine, "and their heads *burst* . I have shot thousands upon thousands of rounds at targets and traced their vapor trails and watched each bullet tear

through the paper or splash in the dust, and yet I didn't allow myself to realize that I would see a hit through the scope. It seems obvious, in retrospect."

Visions of blood and blond children ran through her head. Rae found his hand and held it.

"He must have been able to see us," Wulf said. "He must have seen me fall and seen the blood on my coat, and yet he kept shooting."

His calm voice scared her. No one should be that blasé.

"He must have seen Constantin's head *burst*, and then he shot Yoshi. He shot three children and yet kept shooting." He closed his eyes. "I thought that I had forgiven him, or at least dismissed him. It had never occurred to me that he might have seen what he had done and yet continued to shoot."

Rae wrapped her arms around his neck, trying to shield him with her body.

He said, "I promised you that I would protect you from Mulligan, and I couldn't."

No reason to lie about the dead. "He was a terrible person."

"I should have found a way to keep him quiet in the church."

"He wanted to wreak havoc. He didn't care what it cost him. I don't know if he thought he could outsmart everyone or what, but he chose to do what he did. He probably did it to make sure they disfellowshipped me, and then he could sell me to the slavers and no one would even look for me if they thought I ran off."

"I never should have let you come here."

"It was my choice."

"I should never have let you out of my sight."

"I lost you guys in the desert on purpose. There was no way you guys could keep up with a native."

His measured voice sent chills up her spine. "I will never let anything happen to you, ever again."

"You aren't responsible for me, and you aren't responsible for the evil of madmen. You have to let all that go. And really, what can you do? Are you going to leave Hans here to protect me after you move to Europe or Singapore or wherever?"

Wulf kept his eyes closed. He didn't tremble. "They almost killed you."

"But they didn't. You saved me."

"You saved yourself. You didn't stand shock still and make an easy

target of yourself. When the moment came, you took the opportunity, slammed that man to free yourself, and ran. When they were shooting, you ran faster, and you ran for the cover of darkness. You stayed alive.”

Rae wasn’t sure what to say, so she wound her arms around his neck.

His arms tightened around her. He whispered into her shoulder, “I almost lost you.”

# Moonrise

HOURS later, Wulf lay on his side behind Rae in the stiff hotel bed and watched the moon rise. The horizontal blinds on the window sliced the silver moonlight into stripes as the moon skimmed over the buildings outside.

The shadows around the edges of the room drifted inward.

He stroked Rae's soft shoulder, careful not to touch the brutal scrapes. She slept in his arms, warm and safe. Her chest rose when she breathed, slow and soft.

What could he do to keep her safe even though he was leaving?

The answer was simple. He had known it the moment he had found her huddled behind that rock.

He would take her with him.

Slowly, carefully, he must convince her that the safest place for her was with him, despite everything.

A week ago, in his car while they drove from The Devilhouse to his home, Rae had asked him whether he felt anything when he was with her. He would have made a polite answer nevertheless, but his heart had shuddered at her question, shocking him. His instinct had been to say *yes, Oh God, yes*, and Wulf had broken out in a cold sweat. He had equivocated in his head and stammered out an answer.

That night, in his bed, he had buried himself in her and knew that he was falling for her.

When he discovered that picture on her phone, he had thought she knew everything and was feigning ignorance to ensnare him. He hadn't known whether to believe her when she had pled innocence. So many other women had pursued him for their own advancement. He had analyzed her every glance, her every gesture, everything she had said, for days, for nights, trying to believe in her .

Thus, he found his excuse to withdraw into the shadowlands again.

When those men had shot at her today, they might as well have been shooting at the sun to burst it like shattering a light bulb. His whole world hung on those seconds.



Turning off his horror so he could aim had been an act of will like none other in his life, and several events in his life had required momentous control.

His entire life, since he was eight years old, had been lived in the icy shadows. Brief flares had only sent him farther into the darkness, confirming that the light burned.

Rae slept, curled next to him in the bed.

Her warmth stole into his flesh.

It started where her hips fitted into his groin and where her back pressed against his chest. Her heat diffused through his skin and crept into his muscle, invading his body. It trickled down his arms and filtered through his legs, and he breathed in the sunny scent of her hair. Her warmth saturated him, filled him in, and last, it permeated that hard, painful mass of scar tissue on his back.

His heart beat harder, and his flesh warmed.

His breath caught in his chest.

Wulf had never realized how cold he had been, and for so long.

## **Book 8: Secrets of his Blood**

# Out of the Desert

WHILE Wulf drove them back to the city, Rae Stone clutched her purse to her chest and watched the desert slide behind the car, away from Pirtleville, away from her estranged family, away from everything she had grown up believing.

Ahead of them, the black road pointed through the parched ground and scrub brush toward the city, which was shrouded in brown, dusty haze. The sky straight above them was as brilliantly blue as Wulf's eyes, but dirty smog smudged the horizon all the way around.

Wulf's Porsche droned as it zoomed down the road, vibrating the seat under Rae's butt. She watched him, making sure he didn't weave or fall asleep at the wheel because he hadn't slept again last night, but he seemed fine. Every time she had roused herself, unaccustomed to sleeping entangled in a man's arms, he had been staring at the slice of red light from a neon sign across the street from their hotel.

Rae held onto her unanswered questions with both her arms wrapped around her purse and herself. Grit lined her eyes from trying not to cry and the dusty desert air.

In the child-sized back seat, one of Wulf's security guys, Friedhelm, rearranged his cramped legs, bent up with his feet tucked behind Rae's seat, and spoke German into his cell phone to the rest of the security men in the SUVs that flanked the sports car as they raced back to the city. After the brouhaha in the desert last night, the security men seemed extra twitchy and had insisted on someone in the car with Wulf and Rae, just in case the rest of them were *diverted* somehow.

That's how they put it: *diverted*.

When Wulf walked away for a moment for a phone call, Rae rounded on them asked them what they meant by *diverted*. Friedhelm and Dieter glanced at each other, reticent to tell her if she didn't already know.

Finally, Dieter muttered, "Grenade launchers. Surface-to-surface missiles. Like that."

Rae watched the glaring desert for the silver sparkle of weaponry.

Soon, if it rained, the desert would bloom, and the saguaros would wear crowns of white flowers and hold bouquets to the blue sky. Prickly pear cacti grew rings of flowers around their pads that ranged from light lemon through peaches and salmon to magenta. In the spring, the desert showed you its beauty, but the cacti still grew wicked thorns, and the shiny, baby rattlesnakes bit with the deadliest venom.

Last night, Wulf had convinced her to wait for answers, to see rather than be told.

She had been frantic to know, to be reassured that he wasn't involved in the heinous trade of drugs and weapons and women and children across the Border that destroyed everyone it touched, cartel lords and customers and chattel alike, but he had insisted that he was not involved in that.

All his investments were legal, he had said.

He would show her, he had promised.

They were safe, he said.

Yet every time she had awakened in the dark hotel, his arms and legs had been wrapped around her, protecting her, and he had been staring at that slant of red light intruding through the blinds.

A rattle at hotel room's door had awakened her twice, as the security men had shifted their weight while standing guard outside. The clatter sounded like someone trying to break in to shoot Wulf or take her away to slavery.

The desert sun blazed in the Porsche's windows. The blasting air conditioner sprayed cold air on her skin, cooling the sun's hot rays. She tried to calm herself, but she wanted to know what he was hiding and afraid to find out anything he had kept such a secret.

From the tiny back seat, Friedhelm spoke to someone on his phone and laughed a humorless snort.

"Where are we going?" Rae asked Wulf.

He sped down the blazing highway, trailing mercenaries. "The house, first, to show you my home office, where I do my real work, then we'll go to the office."

*The office* was his euphemism for The Devilhouse because he kept his lives separate. Only she and a few of his security men, Dieter surely, possibly Hans, had breached the privacy wall between them. "Why are we going to the office?"

He glanced at the rearview mirror at Friedhelm in the back seat. "Business."

No, not business. Secrecy. Friedhelm wasn't one of the men who moved between Wulf's two worlds.

Were there only two worlds that Wulf moved between, or were there more?

How many more?

Rae gazed out the window over the sun-bleached desert, her only world, from which she had been expelled.

# World War Three, the Home Edition

RAE and Wulf stood alone in the hallway of his palatial house, outside the door to his home office.

They had come in through the garage again, through the bustling kitchen, and then turned to go behind the grand staircase and back into the catacombs of the house. The honey-beige walls seemed so normal, nearly anonymous, but the sturdy oak door was locked.

Locked doors could hide things, even from his staff.

Wulf keyed a number into a beeping keypad installed on the wall beside the door.

Rae's heart thudded under her breastbone, though she was trying to play it cool rather than gawking like a country hick. She had a bad feeling that she might be all a-gape and a-gawp at whatever he was going to show her.

It probably wasn't going to be an artist's studio full of beautiful paintings. Artists liked light, and they were deep in the house. The room inside probably had no windows, so no one would see what happened in there.

A slight tang of ozone tickled Rae's nose, like something electrical in there was snapping.

Wulf rested his hand on the doorknob, pausing.

Rae wanted to tell him to open it already and get this over with.

Instead, he turned and wrapped his arms around her. His dark blue eyes were so serious as he looked back and forth between her eyes, searching. He said, "We have five days before we leave for Paris. I'll tell you everything, but this is my stipulation: I want those five days. No matter what you decide at the end, I need those five days."

Even though she had already promised to go with him.

"I have class this week." She couldn't be his beck-and-call girl when she had three mid-terms scheduled for the week before spring break.

"I'm cognizant of that. I won't disrupt your education, now or ever. But, I ask of you, no matter what you see, no matter what you think, give me until Friday. Talk to me. Don't run."

His gravitas was creeping Rae out. “There aren’t, like, frozen heads or something in there, right?”

Wulf closed his eyes and pinched his nose like he was fighting off a headache. “No. No frozen heads. Good Lord, where do you come up with these things?”

Because he was acting like he had done something truly horrendous. “Well, you know, you see things online.”

“Compared to frozen heads, perhaps nothing will shock you. That would be quite a turn of events. One that I would welcome.” He shook his head and untangled his arms from her waist. “Frozen heads. *Mon Dieu.*”

He opened the door to a dark, airless room.

She had kind of thought his “home office” might be a euphemism for a home *dungeon* with spiked sex toys and leather masks, or worse, maybe some of the really depraved stuff that she had read about on the internet, but it looked more like a computerized secret world government headquarters.

Eight huge flat-screen televisions, stacked two high and four across, curved around a large horseshoe desk with one chair. Wan lights glowed in the ceiling.

After all that wind-up, the pitch was a *desk*?

It was a really nifty desk, but it was just a disappointing *desk*. “This is it?”

He said, “This is where I work.”

She said, “It looks like you could launch World War Three from here.”

Wulf nodded. “I’ve always thought the next world war would be fought with computers and commodities rather than conventional weapons, so you aren’t off the mark.” He held her hand and jiggled the mouse.

All eight screens illuminated, bathing the two of them in green light. Multicolored numbers poured down the screens like waterfalls of confetti.

“It looks like the Matrix,” she said .

He shrugged. “Sometimes it feels that way.”

“Show me.”

Wulf released her hand and sat at the tall office chair in the center of the desk. All the screens were within his reach. He touched the screens, and the numbers followed his fingers, even across several screens, like they were enormous touchscreen tablets. He zipped them around, arranging the three- or four-letter codes and numbers, while he typed with his left hand on a keyboard. “I work in here in the mornings, from about three o’clock, local

time, until noon or two o'clock, when the New York exchanges close."

"I thought The Devilhouse was your job."

He switched hands, dragging strings of numbers across the screens to different sections, like the sorcerer's apprentice conducting brooms and buckets. "The Devilhouse is a minor project that now yields a positive cash flow, so it is time to divest myself of it. I made eighty-two percent on the investment after five years, a tidy profit, but not my best by any measure."

Rae watched the flickering numbers fly. "What do you do here? Buy stocks?"

"In a manner of speaking. I trade options, commodities, and futures in six different international markets. Watch. I sell this one, buy this one, all with a swipe or a click."

Numbers changed colors as he touched them.

"It's Sunday. Even I know that the stock market isn't open on Sundays."

"Monday pre-open futures in Hong Kong."

"Oh." So much for trying to look smart. She watched his hands fly over the screens and the lone keyboard. "What did you just do there?"

"Bought some call futures for tomorrow. It looks like a positive opening. I also bought back some options that I had sold on some stocks traded on this index."

Rae blinked. The craze of numbers made her eyes hurt. "That sounds backward."

"Indeed. In trading, the arrow of time flies both ways."

Rae put her hands up beside her eyes like blinders. "That sounds insane."

"Ah, then you've got it. Splendid."

"So, you're like an investment banker. "

"That's an apt analogy."

"So this is like a money market fund. This isn't your money."

He swiveled in the chair to face her. Green light glowed on the pale skin on one side of his face. Red light brightened the other.

He pulled her down to sit on his lap. She feared for the chair, but like everything in Wulf's house, it was built from solid materials and had probably cost ten times what she thought it should.

He said, "It's more like a hedge fund, but it's all my money. Mine and my family's. Most of our investments are illiquid, tied up in business partnerships and real estate like The Devilhouse, but I keep track of a good chunk of it in the markets, too."



Rae had no way to measure what he was doing. She dodged. “I can’t imagine how much this computer set-up cost.”

“Two hundred thousand dollars.”

*Impossible.* “Holy cow!”

That was more than five years’ income for her father.

He had the grace to neither look arrogant or falsely modest. “It increased my efficiency by eleven percent, an enormous increase.”

Two hundred thousand dollars was enough to open Ray of Light, her dreamed-of autism clinic, all here, as a *desk*. “Oh my God.”

He smoothed the hair around her face. “It sounds more impressive than it is. Investments accumulate. It’s cliché, but it’s true: turning one hundred dollars into one hundred ten dollars is hard work, but turning a hundred million dollars into one hundred ten million is inevitable.”

She had seen his house and cars. She had known he was loaded, not that it mattered to her.

Actually, it did matter, just not in a good way.

Her family would have pronounced spending so much money *on a desk* as obscene, that people shouldn’t be allowed to have so much money because firefighters and teachers weren’t millionaires, even as her parents protested increasing tax rates on the highest income brackets because it penalized job creators.

Her family had dumped her, so Rae didn’t have to worry about their reaction to Wulf’s excessive amounts of cash.

Her own shock, however, verged on horror. She felt foolish and like she had made so many faux pas in front of him. “Wulf, are you like, a millionaire?”

Even though his house and cars and servants proved that he obviously was.

“I have enough money for anything I would want.” Again, he said it like a statement about the weather, very British.

Flippancy seemed like a good defense. “Except, like, buy an island or something.”

His smile widened, showing a little too much of his canine teeth. “Would you like an island?”

“No! Wulf, that’s weird. Don’t even say things like that.”

He leaned and began touching the screens behind her back. On the monitors, he tapped through some drop down menus. His long fingers flew

across the glowing numbers like he was playing runs on a piano. The boards flashed like airplane flight displays adjusting themselves, but with Christmas-colored glowing digits on black. “You should know it all. I told you that I would show you, so I shall. The lower right-hand corner displays the total.”

Rae’s brain felt incapable of math just then. “What total?”

“The current net value for my personal trading assets, across all markets.”

Rae slid her gaze over the flickering screens, almost afraid of what the glowing number would be. Normal people never had so much money. Real people *shouldn’t have* so much money. Thus, Wulf was not normal and was not a person. He was a walking wallet or something. He might be stuffed with shredded-money wadding or bleed molten gold.

She had seen photographic evidence to the contrary.

He must despise her for how her family lived. She couldn’t believe that she had taken him to meet her parents on their dirt farm, never mind that they had surely disowned her.

She tracked through the flashing numbers on the multitude of screens and finally got to the lower, right corner.

The number down there had a lot of digits that flickered, fluctuating with trading values. The last five digits blurred, but several to the left shone steadily.

She couldn’t find a decimal point. “Am I looking at dollars, here?”

“Euros.”

“So that number there,” which had nine digits, which meant *hundreds of millions*, “is in Euros?”

“Yes. I tend to think in Euros. ”

“I’m afraid to ask what it is in dollars.” The first number was an eight.

“I can convert it.” He flipped his fingers at the screen, conjuring, and the lower-right number climbed by thirty percent.

A billion. A billion with a B. A number that should be expressed with exponents. “Oh, my God.”

“There is more.” When he looked at her, green-lit numbers flashed over his blue eyes.

“*I beg your pardon?*”

“This is my trading portfolio. As I said, my investments are primarily in land and partnerships. This number does not reflect those assets.”

“I don’t want to know.” She really didn’t want to know all this stuff.

“I totaled everything a few weeks ago for the end of the fiscal quarter. It came out to a tad over four billion.”

Billions with a B and an S. Billy-ions and billy-ions like stars in the sky. She sucked in a deep breath. “Euros or dollars?”

Not that it mattered. It was all too much. It was all too much *money*.

“Euros,” he said.

“But that’s your family’s money, right? Some type of a conglomerate? Like that family that owns most of Walmart or the Saudi families?”

“No. That’s an order of magnitude greater, if you include certain familial holdings.”

“Oh, my God.” Rae covered her face with her hands. “Why do you live in the Southwest? Why don’t you live in a castle in France or something?”

Wulf didn’t answer that one. He just wrapped his arms around her while she adjusted, or at least pretended that she could handle even the concept of such otherworldly sums of money.

“Why doesn’t everyone know? Why aren’t you on the cover of all the money magazines, every month?”

“Those magazines only pick up windfalls from IPOs or published holdings. It’s quite easy to be discreet with old money.”

“You’ve got so much money, more than enough money. Why are you still trading? How much more do you want?”

“The conventional answer to that question is, ‘All of it,’ but there’s more to it than that.” He bit his lower lip, a real bite this time where his teeth indented the soft skin under them so much that Rae put her hand on his arm to stop him from drawing blood.

He said, “There’s more to it.”

“You know, you don’t have to tell me everything. Just tell me the important stuff, hit the highlights, because I’m not sure that I want to know everything anymore.” Her breathy voice had a note of hysteria.

Wulf’s voice dropped even lower. “No one knows this. Not my family, not Frau Keller or Dieter or Yoshi. If this were known, they could push back. They could stop me. At worst, someone could take offense and come after me.”

“First frozen heads, and now you sound like a super-villain who’s planning to blow up Metropolis.”

He held both her hands in his. “I need your word that you won’t divulge this to anyone. You cannot hint. You cannot skirt the subject. You cannot

smile knowingly. No matter what happens between us, it goes no farther.”

Foreboding weighed on her. “As long as it isn’t illegal or evil, I won’t tell anyone.”

Wulf nodded. “That’s fair.”

“Do I even want to know this?”

“I stop wars.”

*Not computing. Not registering.* “You do what?”

His tight lips barely moved, like he did not want to say those words.

“Stop wars. I stop them from starting, or I turn them off.”

“So you, like, fly around the world and negotiate peace treaties? Wouldn’t people notice that?”

“That’s not how I do it. A few years ago, when I was writing my PhD thesis, a few unscrupulous traders crashed Iceland’s economy to profit on their short positions on the Icelandic Króna.”

The words jumbled and bumbled in her head and didn’t turn into a thought. “I didn’t understand that at all.”

Wulf said, “They bet against the value of the Króna, the Icelandic dollar. If the currency lost value, they made money. A few days later, a school chum and I were discussing the obscene amounts of money that were being made on positions buoyed by a civil war in an obscure African nation, mostly off commodities, guns, body bags, and the like. It occurred to me: What if I shorted *war*?”

“You can’t bet on a war. That’s unethical or something.”

“That’s not it. I use credit default swaps and commodities prices to suck the oxygen out of a war before it catches fire. I run up the prices on materiel. I soak up other investors’ liquidity and force them to double-down, which causes them to panic and run. I put downward pressure on the credit interest rates. If I need to, I call school chums who work at Goldman Sachs.”

Even Rae had heard of them. “Did you ever work for Goldman Sachs?”

Wulf said, “I am descended from pillaging robber barons and have been trained as cold-blooded assassin, but I would never work at Goldman Sachs.”

Rae frowned. “And that will stop a war?”

“All those guns and all those bullets are usually bought on credit with gold or diamonds for collateral. When I drive up the prices, it becomes very expensive to buy the guns and bullets to wage the war, plus the warlords cannot obtain credit because the very risky loans are saddled with abnormally depressed interest rates. No one will take the other side. Even a few points

will make the loans unattractive to major lenders because tenths of a percent mean hundreds of millions of dollars.”

“And you can do that all from here, from this computer.”

“It’s not a glamorous way to prevent war. Building schools with one’s name on them and cutting ribbons is far more stylish and garners better publicity, if you like that sort of thing. Most of the time I can even turn a profit on it, though I can lose spectacularly, but if the war holds off, I count it as a win. I’m willing to lose a few hundred million dollars a year, depending on how many lives it saves. I trade to make it back.”

“And that’s what you use all this money for.”

“Plus I maintain a certain lifestyle. People depend on me for their livelihoods and eventual retirements.”

She blurted, “Couldn’t you just give it all away?”

“That’s an interesting response.” Wulf lifted one eyebrow and almost smiled. “To whom?”

“I don’t know. UNICEF. Oxfam. Wounded Warriors. Autism research. Anybody *else* .”

He lifted one blond eyebrow as he regarded her. “And what would that do?”

“Then they wouldn’t come after you,” she said, “because it’s the money, right? If you gave it all away, you’d be safe. You wouldn’t need guards with guns. You wouldn’t have to live in a fort with security cameras and lights blazing all night. They would leave you alone.”

“It’s not just the money.” He settled his arms around her.

She felt his lips brush her hair as the glowing numbers flashed in her eyes. “I don’t think I want to know anymore.”

His voice rumbled by her ear. “You need to know.”

# Despite Everything

WULF drove the Tesla, that silent silver spaceship, to The Devilhouse. The noontime sun showered heat on the city.

Rae rode shotgun and wished that she was holding an actual shotgun instead of her stupid purse. Whether the drug smugglers or Wulf's stalkers were after them, she wanted something to shoot back with. The vulnerability ate at her.

Wulf's security SUVs flanked the car as they drove on the highway toward The Devilhouse.

They changed entourages in a gas station parking lot. The kid pumping gas into a souped-up Mustang watched the black SUVs dance around each other with his mouth hanging open.

Rae held her purse to her chest, pretending she wasn't shaking. She had been churning everything in her mind for hours, until it was all mixed up and mashed and she couldn't make sense out of any of it.

Her stomach jittered. "We need to talk," she said.

Wulf said, "Let us arrive at The Devilhouse. I'll secure one of the play rooms."

They hadn't been able to talk about anything after she had seen Wulf's home office because a make-up artist had arrived right afterward and a photographer came a half-hour later to take Rae's passport photos.

Rae had been astonished at the fuss, but Mrs. Keller had waved it all off while she bustled around, sticking tags on the ferns so they wouldn't be packed. "Two phone calls," she said. "We are pleased to see you again."

"Oh, thank you. I'm glad to see y'all again, too." She rested her hand on a huge crate, eight feet long and almost as tall as she was. Between the rough-hewn slats, carved, gilded wood was just visible among the Styrofoam wedges, like the edge of an enormous, ornate picture frame, but Rae hadn't seen any huge art works in Wulf's house. Maybe they had been in storage.

"Mr. von Hannover is pleased that you are here."

Rae's hands felt fluttery. "You can tell that?"

"Of course, I can. Last night, did he sleep?"

Rae blinked at that out-of-left-field question. "Um, not much. Not that I know of."

"Oh, my."

"He slept a couple hours in the car the day before. Maybe two and a half."

"That's good." Ms. Keller peeled off a sticker, and it stuck to her fingers and folded over, ruining it.

Rae said, "He was saving my life, but he killed two men yesterday."

Ms. Keller raised one well-manicured eyebrow. "Oh?"

"With a rifle."

"Oh, Lord." She glanced at the sunlight pouring in the long line of windows and over the pool outside. "Some kind of project, I'll task him with."

She didn't think Wulf was the type to glue colored macaroni to paper or crochet afghans. "Like, art?"

"Anything with hammering nails or carrying bricks. When I said that we should lay a garden, he to the home store went and all those bricks back there, he bought. Then all those garden beds, he built." She gestured out the window.

Beyond the pool, brick structures enclosed what Rae recognized were the incredible salad greens. Peas climbed a trellis. She hadn't noticed them the last time she had been to his house because it had been dark out there. "I didn't know he built those."

"At his school in Helvetica, they went on trips in the summers to Africa, Eastern Europe, Pacific Islands. The schools, houses, the students built them all. Herr von Hannover could build a house from the ground. Then Herr went as chaperone with his sister, when to those places, she went on her trips, for the two years between school and his conscription."

*A sister?* "Oh?"

"Those trips, they changed him. He was better for them. The work healed him more than any of those doctors, and I think watching over his sister did, too." She finished tagging the huge, stone urns with ferns. "Now, I need to oversee the packing of the china. You are going to Paris?"

"I'm not sure yet."

"You should go. Paris is a beautiful city." Ms. Keller lowered her voice and whispered near Rae's ear. "You should let him show you Paris, at least. He's a good man, despite everything."

Ms. Keller had bustled away to pack, her pumps clicking on the marble floor.

*Despite everything.*

Rae watched the strip malls fly by outside the Tesla, clutching her purse to her chest, hanging on to her wits and her temper.

If she knew what *everything* was, maybe she could make an informed choice.

The problem was, if they went to The Devilhouse and locked themselves in play room, he would pull his usual stunt and she'd end up agreeing to anything, probably by shouting *Oh, God, yes!*

*Dang him.*

Rae turned away from the strip malls streaking by outside the Tesla. "Wulf, we should talk *now* ."

Wulf blew out a great chuff of air and fiddled with something on the steering column. "I am driving. I want to give you my full attention. We'll arrive in five minutes."

The driving thing was a pretty good point.

But she wasn't going to let him sex her up until she couldn't think straight either.

Not that she could ever think straight around him.

"All right." She settled back in the seat and watched large cars full of families coming home from Sunday morning church.

Wulf seemed different to her, knowing that all that money was behind him, that he could do anything and that nothing could touch him.

When he had been just The Dom, he had seemed mysterious but not ominous.

She wished that he was just The Blond Hottie from the party again. She wished she could slam him up against a wall and screw him, back when she thought he was just a gorgeous guy, back when she thought that she was just a having one last wild night before she was sent home to her dull, boring, dusty hometown.

Even going home wasn't an option any more.

The black SUV followed them like a storm cloud, more menacing than an actual threat because it suggested that other dangers were always around but unseen.

"When was the last time someone tried to hurt you?" she asked.

Wulf flexed his long fingers on the steering wheel. "Two years ago.



Amateur attempt. Friedhelm saw him reach for a handgun in his coat. Dieter and Hans had him on the ground before I turned around. All my people are very good at their jobs. I trust them.”

“Where?”

Wulf cleared his throat. “Berlin.”

## Play Room 4

RAE stood in the center of Play Room Four with her arms crossed over her chest and her eyebrows raised.

Play Room Four looked like an idealized and impossible fantasy of a co-ed's dorm room—spacious, hung with pink frou-frou and college team pennants, and strewn with turquoise shag rugs,—and thus nothing at all like Rae's cramped dorm room that she split with her cousin-roommate Hester, who may or may not ever speak to Rae again.

In The Devilhouse's fantasy dorm room, a wide, carved desk with a few cheap books stood against one wall.

In Rae's room at the university, a flimsy desk built into the tiny study room's wall groaned under the weight of books and computer equipment, and no books at the university bookstore were ever cheap.

Flowery, girly scent drifted through The Devilhouse's air, a far cry from the subtle mustiness of the decades-old carpeting and the unwashed laundry pile that slouched in the dorm room's corner, waiting to be driven back to Pirtleville.

The bed, instead of two flat twin bed mattresses set on bare frames, was king-sized and braced by a sturdy brass headboard and footboard with high posts.

"This is a little weird," Rae told Wulf.

He shrugged. "Some of our clients like a youth angle. The staff was consulted, and we all agreed that any décor suggestive of younger than college age was to be avoided."

Rae swallowed a sour taste. "Yeah."

"Our screening methods eliminate most problem personalities before they get this far."

Neither of them mentioned her cousin Jim Bob .

"This room does, however, have rather comfortable seating," Wulf gestured to pink, furry armchairs. "My office seemed a little sterile, and that window can be problematic."

He hadn't minded the window when he had bent her over that big, glass

desk of his.

Maybe he was anticipating something worse.

Wulf waved to the black globe embedded in the ceiling and then flicked a finger across his neck, telling the person in the security booth to cut the camera feed. He removed his suit coat and hung it by the collar over a pink hitching post.

Wulf checked his phone, tapped the screen, and said, "All right. We're alone."

Wulf the Billionaire Dude seemed like an alien to her, someone she couldn't know, someone who a redneck girl like her should never meet.

She wanted one more time with The Blond Hottie. No worries. No future. No secrets. Just a moment of abandon like a quick, rough screw against a wall.

Rae leapt into his arms. Her lips found his and she kissed him hard.

She couldn't let him take over. She had to Domme the heck out of him or else he would tie her down and reduce her to giggling girl-jelly, and then he would tell her something awful, something that stopped her heart, or something so intimate that his soul must be ripped open, and then she would be stuck with whatever stupid, sex-crazed reaction popped out of her mouth. If one of the things that he had yet to tell her involved opening an emotional vein in his quiet, understated, very British way, an insipid reaction from her might hurt him, and she desperately didn't want that.

After the briefest of instants which Rae prayed to God was due to surprise, Wulf grabbed her around the waist and kissed her back. He kissed her like he was famished for her, sucking on her lips and crushing her to him. His heart beat hard under Rae's hand. He picked her up by her waist with one arm and swung her legs around, catching them in his other arm and cradling her to his chest.

She was still kissing him and then she was falling and landed on the bed. Wulf crawled on top of her and buried his face in her neck, mouthing her neck and shoulder.

No, she was going to have *him*. She wanted one more moment like that first night. She arched her back and grabbed his shoulders, pressing him to her.

He pushed back, startled.

She cocked a leg under herself and flipped him over.

Rae was raised with four brothers and fifty cousins, most of whom were

also male. Keeping her brothers and cousins in line had occasionally required wrassling one of them to the ground to reestablish the pecking order. Country justice can be rough.

Wulf landed on his back and she kissed him, hard, pushing him down into the pink bedspread.

When she broke for air, he chuckled and said, “My, we’re aggressive this morning, aren’t we?” He wrapped his arms and one leg around her, trapping her limbs, and rolled her beneath him again. “Remember, your safe word is *Macbeth* .”

Rae kissed him again, distracting him, and then flipped him.

Wulf landed heavier this time, a thump on that so-soft bed. She straddled him and grinned down. “And your safe word is—.”

He reached up and cupped the back of her neck, pulling her to him to kiss her again. He wrapped his hands in her hair, holding her curls back and, she noticed, quite in control even from below her.

He opened his mouth under her lips, tasting her. Rae opened her lips and touched her tongue to his, running the tip along the sides of his tongue. He deepened the kiss, fitting his mouth to hers and pulling her down to him by the back of her neck. His other hand roved her body, pressing her waist and hips and pushing her body down on his.

She kissed his lips, then his smooth chin, then lower. Wulf hadn’t worn a tie, just a black suit and a bright white shirt open at his throat, practically sloppy for him. She nipped one of the strong cords on his neck. He groaned and stretched, and his hands tightened in her hair. The scents of spiced tea and warm man wafted from his collar, and she raked her teeth over his neck muscle, tasting the faint musk in her mouth.

She popped one button lower and lipped down his chest. His torso rose when he caught his breath, and desire and power surged through Rae. She wished she could magic their clothes away and take him into her body, but far too much fabric separated them. She opened another shirt button and kissed lower.

Wulf pulled her head back by her hair and sat up underneath her. He stood her on her feet beside the bed and stripped her of her tee shirt and shorts, purchased and delivered by Hans just that morning, and then flicked off her bra and underwear.

She was still trying to work the next button on his shirt when he lifted her legs out of her clothes and she was naked. The air in the play room chilled

her skin, but her body heated as Wulf brushed his hands over her, almost tickling, as she struggled with his shirt buttons. His palms and fingers trailed over her back and ass, and her skin grew more sensitive. All her attention was on his hands touching her, almost grabbing her, as she fumbled with his shirt buttons.

He finally moved her hands away and, still kissing her, unbuttoned his own shirt, jerked it down his arms in back, and stripped his white undershirt over his head. Fine blonde hair softened his golden skin and the hard, heavy muscle that covered his chest and arms. A shimmering line ran between the ridges of abdominal muscles and into his pants. The dark cloud of tattoo ink clung to his shoulder.

Rae started to unbuckle his belt, but Wulf tackled her to the bed, flipped her over, and nibbled the back of her neck.

“No,” she said. “I want—”

“I’ll tell you what *I* want.” He kissed lower down her spine toward the small of her back. He jammed one of his knees between her legs, parting her thighs. Her pussy opened, and hot cream seeped between her folds. “I want to do all the things to you I’ve been holding back on.”

His hand slid over the cheek of her bare ass while he mouthed her back. “I thought you might run away screaming when I showed you those numbers.”

She tried to push herself up with arms and turn around, but he tipped her back down with one hand and braced himself on her shoulder. His other hand caressed up her inner thigh while his mouth worked the skin over her spine.

Rae could barely speak around the fluffy pink comforter, even when she turned her head. “Do most women run away screaming when they see that much money?”

“Most women don’t return jewelry, so you aren’t most women, are you?” His fingers reached the apex of her legs and trailed over her soft folds. Her pussy clenched at his first touch. His fingers stilled, resting just at her entrance.

She quivered, waiting .

He murmured against her spine, “Tell me you aren’t.”

“I’m not,” she admitted, though she might have told him whatever he wanted to hear at that particular moment.

He stroked her, one long stroke up from the top of her pussy, a smooth slide over her clit, a fingertip dip inside her, and she gasped. Then he kept

going, *kept going*, sliding her wetness back to her asshole, then he pressed, just a little, and she felt her body yield.

She tried to push up again but he shoved her back down.

He nipped her shoulder and then her neck. His knee kept her legs apart, even as she tried to slide them closer. His mouth was by her ear, and he whispered, “Do you submit?”

She was so turned on that her voice keened like a whimper. “What are you going to do to me?”

His knee between her legs and the pressure on her ass suggested that he wanted anal sex. She had talked to Lizzy and Georgie about it, and they agreed that you had to do *things* first, a hot bath and a massage and before that you had to do things that Rae had never heard of and had blushed to learn about. Some of the *things* took *days*. Rae hadn’t done any those things.

Yet, his rough knee against her pussy and her ass made her so hot that she wanted to do anything to please him. *Anything*.

He was turning her into a sub.

She would have to put a stop to that.

*Later.*

Sometime when his breath wasn’t brushing the back of her neck and his hand wasn’t hard on her shoulder.

He whispered in her ear, “First, I’m going to drive you wild.”

Rae closed her eyes and rubbed her cheek against his smooth face, groaning, “Check.”

“Oh, no. Far more.”

“Don’t think that’s possible.”

His hand reached around her and stroked the sides of her breasts. “Then, when you are wild with desire, I will adorn you with this.” Wulf reached over to the nightstand and she assumed that he was going for a condom, but he retrieved a small, red box. “I had been planning to bring you back here last Saturday night, so I left it here.”

He held a scarlet box in front of where she had turned her head and struggled to open it with one hand. He tore off the plastic overwrap easily enough, but the foil seal over the flaps thwarted him. He stood on his knees for a second to rip the cardboard apart.

With his weight off of her, Rae tried to flip over, but his legs still pinned her to the cushiony bed, and he tossed her back down and then rested on her back, showing her the thing by holding it front of her. His weight pressed her

into the bed.

It looked like a skinny, silvery, smooth torpedo, about the length of her longest finger. At the base, instead of a propeller, a sparkling red stone like a ruby jutted out.

*This* was one of those *things* that Lizzy and Georgie had told her about, though it was half the size of the one Georgie had rummaged through her nightstand to find. The reveal of Georgie's butt plug had finally driven Rae out of the room, laughing hysterically but firmly shutting their adjoining door.

Yet, everything Wulf did to her felt fantastic. Before Rae had met Wulf, all of her orgasms had been watered-down throbings, when they happened. Every time Wulf touched her, he played her body like a cello, bracing her with his arms and legs and then strumming every note to crescendo.

If he slid that thing into her ass, the glittering gem would look like jewelry, like a harem dancer with a jewel spirit-gummed into her belly button, but more naughty.

Way more naughty. Far more erotic.

Yeah, she wanted to try it, and yet the thought of it freaked her out.

Beside her face, Wulf smiled a knowing, wicked smile, showing her his white, even teeth. "Do you submit?"

"I don't know." Even while her pussy twitched as his knee bumped her.

"Do you trust me?" He mouthed her shoulder again, working his way around to the back of her neck. Sparks slid down her spine, and her pussy tingled.

The silver thing lay amid the pink ruffles in front of her. The overhead lights glinted glowing spots on the torpedo.

"Yes."

"What, then? You have your safe word."

"This is stupid. I feel stupid." Her desire ebbed just enough that she could wrap her head around words and say them. "It makes me feel," and she tried to find a right word, any right word, "worried."

"That church told you lies about love, about sex, didn't they?"

"My whole life."

"But you had already broken free, and then they excommunicated you. You aren't bound by them anymore." He whispered in her ear, a seductive devil. "You don't have to hear it anymore, ever again. You don't have to go back. You can have *this*, and you can have *me*, and you can open your clinic

anywhere you want in the world. Instead of taking a degree in counseling, you could go to medical school.”

“Oh, I *couldn't* .”

“Whyever not?”

*Why not?*

Rae’s heart clenched. “Because I shouldn’t leave home for that long, and because all that science would change me too much and it’s too worldly, and I don’t have the money and my parents can’t help me, but they threw me out, and now I work here and make plenty of money for any tuition, so none of that matters anymore.” Tremors quivered in her arms and legs. “I could *do* that. I could do *any* of it. I could do it *all* .”

“Yes,” he said. He mouthed his way down her spine again, slowly massaging her inner thighs, and she spread her arms on the bed. “Relax,” he said. “Open yourself. There is more to the world than you have dreamed.”

His hands worked the tension and fear out of her shoulders and back. He palmed her ass, rolling her body.

He said, “Let me show you what you’ve been missing.”

Her body liquefied, and she breathed, “Yes. I submit.”

Wulf pried her thighs open farther, exposing her pussy again. Cool air hit her wet flesh, and then his hand warmed her.

He moved sideways and flipped her over on her back, then pulled her to the edge of the bed. She thought he had changed his mind and was just going to take her, but he dropped to his knees between her legs, mouthed down her stomach, and lowered his head.

She pushed herself up on her elbows. “Wulf! No! Not that!”

“Unless you use your safe word, you are submitting to me. Now lie back.”

“You can’t *want* to do that!”

“I want to see you wild with desire.” He stood for just a moment, looming over her. “I want to see you so blind with passion that you can’t think.” He pushed her sternum back with one hand. “Now lie back before I tie you down.”

She pressed her arms over her breasts and turned her hips to cover her nakedness. “You don’t have to do this.”

“Blast it all.” He unbuckled his belt and whipped it out of his belt loops with one fluid motion.

Rae was shocked that he might hit her with it, but he grabbed one of her



wrists, held it over her head, pulled the belt through the buckle to make a tight cuff, and bound her hands together. He was really proficient at that.

His hard chest flexed above her as his arms worked. “Don’t move, or I will tie you to the bedposts.”

Rae let her head fall against the soft bed and stared up at the lights in the ceiling as Wulf kissed and bit her chin.

He kneaded her thighs, opening her farther. Her legs trembled.

She wanted to touch him, but he had tied her hands.

His hard torso wedged her legs open, pushing her soft thighs apart.

She twisted her wrists in the belt, but the leather held her arms together. She wanted to stop him because it seemed selfish of her to just lie there, and yet, because she couldn’t touch him, and she couldn’t think about his needs, all she could do was *feel*.

The bright lights in the ceiling glared down at her, and Wulf mouthed down her neck.

He reached her breasts and cupped them, bringing them together. Rae’s back bowed, pushing her breasts up toward him. His breath touched her nipple first, tickling and warm. He licked her boob, slowly, warmly and with the flat of his tongue, then drew the peak into his mouth. Rae moaned at his tender touch, so he sucked her nipple gently, then harder. Shocks flew through her from her breast down to her clit.

Rae tried to move her hands to run her fingers through his blond hair, but his belt still bound her hands. She strained against the leather, but it didn’t move. He was really skilled at tying people up. If her wrists had been crossed, she would have had a better range of movement, but he had bound her wrists flat together. She couldn’t do anything, so she let her arms drop above her head.

He sucked harder, and her boob pointed into his mouth, tightening. He mouthed her taut nipple, pulling it until it was so tight that Rae couldn’t breathe. She twisted her hands in the belt again, wishing she could stop him because even the thought of receiving oral always seemed a little embarrassing and that one guy just kind of prodded her with his tongue and that wasn’t even sexy, but the belt held her wrists firm.

Her other nipple grew hard, waiting for him. He moved across her, holding that breast and thumbing the hard tip, and he ran his tongue over her other breast. While he suckled that one, drawing her blood and pleasure up into the nipple, he slipped his fingers over her other breast, pinching, keeping

it fully erect. Twin bolts ran through Rae, constricting her breasts and tightening her pussy.

“Wulf,” she said. She could barely squeeze the words out because her head spun with every suck on her boob. “Wulf, *please* .”

He chuckled.

His mouth left her breasts, and the cold air chilled her, tightening her nips more. He kissed down her stomach and licked her belly button, and she nearly cried in frustration with wanting him inside her.

His mouth reached her pussy, and he touched her with his tongue.

She gasped and arched. The intensity of his tongue flat against her opening overwhelmed her. Her hands turned in their bonds, and she grabbed the ruffles to hold on and closed her eyes.

With her eyes closed, in the darkness, her pussy swelled under his mouth. She heard him whisper, “So wet already.” The words vibrated against her delicate skin.

His tongue slipped inside the folds of her pussy, and he licked her deeply. Pressing his tongue into the membranes, he sent waves up her body, traveling up her spine to her brain. Blood roared in her ears.

Then, for a moment, nothing, and she floated down like an autumn leaf, resting for a moment as the overwhelming sensation rippled away.

He opened the lips of her pussy with his thumbs, grabbed her thighs with his long fingers, and pressed his whole mouth to her.

Her body bucked upward from the onslaught, and she cried out. He flicked his tongue around her opening. All the skin there fluttered, sending her flying. He ran his tongue up one side, under her folds, and down the other, and around.

Her whole body clenched, forcing another cry from her mouth. His tongue pushed pleasure and desire up her body, and yet still she wanted more. She didn’t know how there could be more, but she nearly flew off the bed with wanting him.

His tongue glided around her pussy, just missing her clit but rubbing everything else. She wound tighter, grasping the ruffles behind her head. His tongue pushed inside her, licking *inside* her, and he fucked her with his tongue.

*Oh*, his tongue writhed inside her, running over her inner walls, and pleasure ballooned inside her, pressing outward. She pulled her legs up but Wulf pushed them back, widening her pussy to his mouth. She couldn’t

breathe but she heard herself crying out with each pant.

Just when she thought he was going to go on forever and she was going to die, Wulf licked upward, *upward*, and he caught her aching clit in his mouth and pushed against it with his tongue, and his tongue *moved*, rough on her clit.

Her body clamped down and shattered under his tongue.

Ecstasy surged and rolled through her again and again, every tiny vibration of his tongue inflamed another fiery wave, and time slowed as the orgasm rolled through her from pussy up her spine and into her brain.

His tongue licked her, slowly, endlessly, just skimming her clit, and fire spiraled up her flesh with every touch.

Then he was mouthing her navel, and she drifted on dark waves. She couldn't even open her eyes.

She felt her body flip over, and her cheek rested against the soft pink ruffles. Her hands were still bound together above her, and she stretched her fingers.

He massaged her lower back, a needless gesture because Rae was so wrung out that she couldn't move. His hands caressed her skin, gentling her. Her arms and legs flopped because that orgasm had eaten every last ounce of energy in her body. Under his hands, her limp muscles relaxed farther.

He ran one finger up the inside of her thigh, and she awoke, every fiber of her attention on his one finger that wove upward, nearing her pussy.

His hand veered away, and he rubbed her thighs.

She sighed in frustration, and she wondered how she could be frustrated because she had just had an earthquake orgasm, but she wanted him again.

No, she wanted him *still*. She *still* wanted him inside her, making love to her.

His hands were all over her, grabbing and releasing the traces of tension left in her. She relaxed into his hands, nearly dreaming, when he said, "Are you ready?"

She had kind of thought that he had changed the plan after giving her that orgasm. Surely, after that, he didn't expect her to be able to function. She was dang near out of it, but she nodded. She wasn't ready to let him go yet, either.

The cold and slippery thing nudged her ass.

She grew a little scared, a little worried that it was going to hurt or that she would freak and look like a fool to him, but he leaned over her and said, "You will like this."

“Okay.” She still wasn’t sure about it, but last Saturday night at the club, when the brute of a man had fucked the woman wearing the pink sundress in the ass, Rae had been so turned on while watching it.

“Push back.”

Rae complied, carefully.

The rings of muscle in her ass stretched, widening, as the thing pressed against her. She took a deep breath and pushed back, opening herself, and the thing pinched as it slipped inside her. The neck of it caught in the tight pucker of her asshole.

“Beautiful,” he said.

Rae couldn’t seem to catch her breath. All those nerve endings were already humming. That thing pressed against them.

*She was doing it.* She felt naughty but in a good way, like not getting caught doing something fun, and she wanted more.

Rae glanced over her shoulder at Wulf, who was caressing her hips. She lowered her voice until she thought she sounded coy, “Now what are you going to do to me?”

His grin was wicked, suggesting all sorts of naughty things.

He grabbed her hips, dragging her back. Rae tried to hold onto the bedspread’s pink ruffles, but he gripped her flesh and she slithered across the silky sheets toward him. Wulf crawled over her for just a moment, long enough to whisper with a voice rasping with desire, “I’m going to make you come again.”

“Impossible.” Rae rested her cheek against the satin and believed it as she said it.

“Ah, a challenge.” Wulf rose up behind her and yanked her hips to him, startling her. The leather around her wrists gave just enough for her to gather her elbows under her .

A small part of her brain whispered, *Keep the sub off balance* .

Her pussy slapped his pants, and she wanted him inside her. The thing in her ass, even though it made her feel full, it did nothing to slake her craving for him. She stretched, humming with need. “Please,” she whispered.

Her knees rested on the bed, and he dropped her hips. He eased one finger inside her pussy, rubbing, and the thing in her butt pushed down on his finger so that he rubbed her in a whole new way. She gasped and pushed back, wanting more.

“So tight.” His voice was lower, almost hoarse with lust and testosterone.

“Please!”

“Please, what?”

She couldn’t answer for a moment because his finger rubbing her inside occupied all her thoughts. Her whole body flexed, gripping him.

He chuckled, an almost desperate sound, as her pussy tightened around him. “Are you already so close?”

“It feels so good,” she gasped out.

“What do you want?”

Her whole body quivered, wanting him to fill her. “*You!*” she cried. “Please, I want *you!*”

His hands left her for a moment and she fell forward, resting her forehead against the soft sheets, but then he grabbed her again.

Rae stole a quick glance back at him.

Wulf had pulled his pants off, and his body gleamed with a fine sheen of sex sweat. The lights glowed on his heavy shoulders and ab ripples down his torso. He was an inverted triangle of muscle, burly shoulders squeezing down to his trim waist and hips. His cock, huge as he held it in his fist and leaned toward Rae’s pussy, jutted out straight. Veins engorged with passion lined the sides. His calm expression, just a narrow smile and sleepy lids over his blue eyes, belied the tension that made even his smallest movement look like he was straining against a wall.

The head of his cock touched her pussy, jolting her. She shied away, but Wulf rested one hand on the small of her back.

She hoped this was going to work and leaned back.

He dipped his cock into her, just a little, and then used the head to paint her folds with her juices. Rae sucked air in, reveling in his slow path around her pussy. Her body was tightening again, and she could feel another orgasm building.

Wulf rubbed his cock in her opening, teasing her that he might plunge in. Her pussy clenched down as she tried to grab him, but he pressed in and then popped free, denying her. “Please!”

“Ah, I love to hear that.” He did it again, screwing into her and then withdrawing, as she panted.

“Please, Wulf. I’ll do anything!”

“That’s even better.”

He pushed deeper this time, and she felt that thing in her ass press his cock down inside her. It felt like her first time again, not virginal pain, but

just stretching and unaccustomed fullness. “Oh!”

“Yes?”

“Oh my God that feels good.” She waited, holding her ass in the air on her knees and elbows, every fiber in her body vibrating, dying for his next thrust.

Wulf moved into her again, gently forcing himself inside. Despite his languid expression, his jaw didn’t move as his voice rumbled low in his throat, “You’re so tight.”

“It feels *so good* .”

He held her hips, stroking her slowly. The butt thing pressed him into her, and at the top of every stroke, his cock grazed *something* far inside her, and she blazed like a phoenix, reigniting.

“*What is that?* I don’t know *what?* ” she gasped into her bound, clasped hands. She was beyond making sense even to herself.

“G-spot,” Wulf growled.

“Oh!” Every stroke blazed a long trail of sparks up the front wall of her pussy that ended in a burst of ecstasy. Her voice climbed octaves and ended in a squeak. “Oh, *yes!* Oh, *Wulf!* ”

Every thrust inside her lit her fire, and yet the pressure built again.

“Oh, Wulf. *Harder.* ”

His hands gripped her hips and pulled her back to meet him. He wasn’t fast, but he shoved himself deep inside her.

Everything inside her built, tightened, and compressed inside her, and yet the anticipation kept building and wouldn’t release. The passion was beginning to crush her and she gasped, trying to breathe.

As he thrust into her, Wulf’s hand glided around her hip, following the line of her pelvis, and slid into the top of her pussy. He pressed, pushing her clit up and back, and his cock rubbed her as he pumped, lighting the spark.

The orgasm flashed inside her like lightning hitting a bomb. She flew apart in waves rolling through space, and she couldn’t see or hear anymore. She was blasted apart and falling.

Behind her, Wulf grunted and arched, straining upward, and his cock pulsed as he came. The thing in her ass squeezed him so tightly that could feel him throb deep inside her.

Another deep wave rolled through her body, scattering her very being and slamming her down.

She spun and then floated back down.

Her quivering heart slowed.

Her body gathered around her again, and her thighs and arms trembled.

Wulf pulled out and collapsed beside her on the bed, then yanked the belt, freeing her hands.

Rae's knees slid out from under her, and she collapsed onto the ruffles. She couldn't think, couldn't move, couldn't feel anything except the cool air on her back and shoulders and that her hands could move. She stretched her fingers.

Wulf tucked her under his arm, holding her. She laid one arm across his chest, feeling his solidity because her body was still floating. He massaged her wrist.

His bass voice drifted through the air to her ringing ears. "Are you all right?"

"Oh-my-God." Sweet air rushed into her lungs. Her body still ebbed and flowed, in and out.

"Did you like that?" A smile had crept into his voice.

"Oh, my God," she repeated, unable to think of anything else to say.

"Rae, there is something I should tell you."

"*Oh my God!* You're doing it again!" She jerked away from him, turned her face down, jammed a pillow over her head, and groaned into the hot ruffles and mattress. The last of the orgasm trickled away.

The pillow over her head muffled his voice somewhat, but his voice was so deep that those long, dark, British wavelengths rumbled through the stuffing. "I'm doing what?"

"Throwing bombs." She could barely breathe under the stuffy pillow but she squeaked it out. "Emotional hand grenades. Sometimes it's during sex. Sometimes it's before or right after. But it's always with sex and it's always this big revelation and I can't process it properly because my brain is goo."

"Do I?" he mused. The bed shifted beside her.

She lifted the edge of the pillow to peek out. He had rolled onto his side, and was peering under the fluffy, pink edge of the pillow at her. His blue eyes were so amused at her, *darn him*. "So totally."

His laughing expression bordered on exultant. "And your brain is *goo*?"

He said "goo" like it was a new word, like he, as an English gentleman, had never deigned to pronounce it before.

She said, "Heck, yeah."

"Brilliant."

“I can’t think worth beans, so don’t throw any bombs at me right now, ‘kay?”

“Well, then,” he rolled over on his back and considered the ceiling lights. “We’ve never had a proper date, have we?”

“Are you saying that I violated the three-date rule?” she muttered, though of course she had.

“I’ve been remiss,” he said. “We’ll go tonight.”

“My brain is goo, but I know it’s still Sunday.” The pink ruffles muffled her voice. “I have class tomorrow morning.”

“We’ll have you home by daylight.” His amusement fell away, and even though all his expressions were muted compared to Americans, Rae could see dismay written there. He said, “I don’t know what kind of music you like.”

“I don’t know. Everything? Fun stuff. Classic rock. You know, old Maroon 5.”

“Right. Something quite modern, then.” Wulf rolled toward her and leaned over her back. “Now let me help you with that.”



## Terminal 7

HOT sun beat down the asphalt parking lot, where Wulf's car and two security SUVs were parked in front of the three-story, slump-block building. A steel Quonset hut towered over the airport terminal that looked like a beat-up office building.

Rae took Wulf's offered hand as she unfolded herself from his dark Porsche. Sunlight scorched her eyes and the top of her head after the dimness inside the tinted windows of the car. Her hands felt cold as she stood on unsteady legs, and she held her fingers together and to her stomach, trying to warm up. A harsh whiff of airplane exhaust, like kerosene fumes, hung in the hot air.

Rae said, "I didn't know the airport even had a Terminal Seven."

Wulf checked the time on his phone. "It's private. I hired a plane."

"You can rent a plane?" And thus she made another poor-folks faux pas in front of the upper-class richies. She cringed.

Wulf smiled, and Rae was relieved that his kind smile wasn't condescending. A sultry breeze ruffled his blond hair. "I don't travel often, so I don't keep a plane. I hire one based on the circumstances."

They walked through the terminal's lobby that looked like a mediocre doctor's office with cubic orange chairs and outdated magazines on peeling linoleum coffee tables, though no doctor's office had the three-story panoramic windows with the view of a propeller plane buzzing down the landing strip right outside.

The plane outside the windows looked like a two-man toboggan that someone had bungee-corded wings onto. The windshield looked like it belonged on a motorcycle. A pilot signaled thumbs-up to the person behind him.

Rae's knees got wobbly because there was no way that she was going up in that crop duster, and she sat on one of the orange chairs. The fabric scratched her legs through her panty hose, and she could smell something metallic, like blood. "Is that our plane?"

Wulf glanced at the prop plane. "Heavens, no. That's someone's toy. I

booked a Gulfstream.” His phone chimed. “Ah. It’s ready. Shall we?”

The security guys clustered around them as they walked out the back doors of the terminal to the plane.

Oh, good Lord, they had just breezed through the lobby and bypassed the security checkpoint. She couldn’t even find the security checkpoint. Maybe it was hidden behind the potted palms or was back in one of the offices, but they were going to get into trouble if they jumped security.

Rae grabbed Wulf’s arm. “We weren’t screened. We didn’t go through security.”

Dieter laughed while he scanned the tarmac around them.

Wulf said, “And it’s a good thing we didn’t, considering all the weapons our friends are carrying.”

“Oh. Right.” And another gaffe. One of the stiletto heels on the strappy pumps she wore stuck for a second in a tarmac seam, and she teetered. Wulf steadied her.

A few hours earlier, she had dressed in The Devilhouse’s costume closet and been surprised to find not just the nine gorgeous gowns in her size and length that were hanging there a few weeks ago, but six more dresses: cocktail dresses, less formal party dresses, and a gray, pinstriped business suit, plus shoes. She scanned the other racks. There seemed to be a few new dresses tucked into the other sections, but nothing like the embarrassment of riches that had appeared in her size.

While it was nice, and more choices are always great, she had a feeling that Wulf was shopping for her, or more likely, tasking someone else to do it. Singling her out like that embarrassed her. It wasn’t fair to the other girls, even though the racks sections for dresses that were size four and average length already held dozens of gowns.

From the new ones, she had chosen a short navy blue silk dress with a ruffle just above her knees. She had smiled at the time, thinking that ruffles may have gotten into her brain.

Now, the sun’s heat radiated off the tarmac and warmed Rae’s legs all the way up her short skirt.

The group of them approached a jet airplane, which appeared small compared to commercial jets but got bigger as they neared it. A stairway reached down to the tarmac like the planes in old adventure movies.

Was it an old plane? Was it World War Two vintage? Would such an old plane be safe?

The security guys clustered around the bottom of the staircase, watching, while Wulf and Rae climbed the stairs. The engines radiated heat that came at her sideways, while the desert sun shone above them. She yelled above the jet engine noise, “Are they more nervous than usual?”

Wulf nodded. “Your escapade in the desert increased our security levels, but this tightening of security was inevitable.”

“What’s so special about now?” Her thighs burned as she climbed the steep steps.

“Next week, actually.”

He must mean the trip to Paris, or he might mean his move out of the country. Either way, they were nervous and he was leaving.

Inside the Gulfstream jet, Rae had expected to find tight rows of seats, suspiciously like the sardine-can seating of an airplane, but she had a moment of bobble-headedness because the inside looked more like a living room. Leather recliners were grouped around tables, not in rows. A couch was pushed up against one wall of the airplane.

Couches did not have seatbelts. Thus, planes should not have couches.

The windows were round, large circles like portholes on a yacht. Instead of durable plastic or strong metal on the walls, burl wood lined the curving walls.

Planes should not be made out of *wood*. Wood did not *fly*.

“Shall we?” Wulf gestured to a group of four seats around a table. He sat next to the porthole.

Rae took the seat across from him. She was trying not to stare at the brushed aluminum and mirror-shiny wood of the table, but she couldn’t stop herself from toying with the suede-soft white leather on the chair’s arms.

This plane must be built for luxury rather than durability.

Or sturdiness.

Or safety.

Her hand, still petting the leather, started to shake.

“I’ve arranged for a snack on the flight,” Wulf said. “The concert will begin relatively soon after we land, so supper may be late.”

“That would be great. What’s next week? You mean that trip to Paris, where I *might* go with you?” She reached into the corners of her seat for the seatbelt.

Wulf leaned forward and rested his arms on the table. “That’s something we should discuss.”

“Where’s the seatbelt on this thing?” Rae peered around her hips, pushing at the seat cushion.

“It’s in there somewhere.”

“But you *have to* wear your seatbelt for take-offs and landings, and you *should* keep it buckled the whole time.”

Wulf raised one eyebrow. “You can if you want to.”

He glanced out the window at the sun that glared on the table. Cirrus clouds streaked the azure sky. When Wulf turned back to her, she noticed that his eyes were same electric blue of the desert sky outside the porthole. He should have been born in the Sonoran desert, not across the ocean.

The security guys filed in and took the seats more toward the back. Most of them swiveled their seats around, stretched out, and closed their eyes, napping. Dieter and Hans asked the stewardess, whom Rae had just noticed in the very back of the plane, for a chess set.

The stewardess brought a wooden box over to the two men, then brought wine and glasses for Rae and Wulf. The lady poured the wine, the white kind, into the glasses.

The plane pushed backward out of the parking spot. The stewardess swayed but didn’t spill even a drop of the wine.

“Are we going to take off? Shouldn’t we give these back?” Rae asked, trying to hand her the wine glass.

“It’s fine, sugar. The bases fit right into the cup holders.” She pointed one manicured nail at a hole cut in the table and smiled at Rae. Her teeth shone porcelain white, and her lips were slicked with maroon lipstick. Her flawless skin was dark honey brown. The lady’s tranquil expression didn’t betray the least concern that Wulf was flaunting all the usual, sane safety standards.

“Shouldn’t we wear seatbelts?” Rae asked.

“You can if you want, honey. They’re right there in the corners. They might have fallen down a bit because people don’t usually pry them out.” She wandered back to the galley .

They all swayed as the plane reversed direction and taxied forward.

“This is weird,” Rae said to Wulf. Her knuckles whitened as she clutched the chair’s armrests. She took a swig of the brisk white wine, hoping it would calm her down.

“It is different than commercial travel.”

She blurted, “I’ve never been on an airplane before.”

Rae expected Wulf to snort or roll his eyes at such a hillbilly admission,

but he slid around the table, changing seats to sit beside Rae. He lifted the armrest between them, elbowed it up, and draped his arm around her.

She snuggled in. The warmth that drifted out of his suit coat smelled like lavender and cinnamon. “I’m not scared.”

He whispered into her hair, “Of course not. I just can’t keep my hands off you.”

The jet engines revved, and the plane accelerated, pushing Rae back in the seat and into Wulf’s arms, and they lifted off into the clear sky and flew all the way to Los Angeles.

## Dinner and a Show

AT the concert, *Rae's very first concert*, the speakers thumped the music all through her body. Her very cells reverberated with the bass drum, and her lungs rang with the cymbals' clash. The band, Killer Valentine, played long sets that rocked the house.

She sang along until she was hoarse, and the lead guitarist played straight to her for three songs because *they were in the front row*.

The weight of fifty thousand people pressed behind her, all wanting to dance right in front of the stage like she was doing. Sweet pot smoke wafted down from the rafters.

A little voice kept whispering in the back of her head: *Don't get used to this. Don't get used to this.*

Wulf had changed clothes in the airplane's minuscule bathroom and wore a black tee shirt and jeans to the concert. The tee shirt was not tight, but it clung to the round, hard muscles of his shoulders and chest. Except for those few hours in black fatigues before Aunt Enid's Celebration of Life, Rae had never seen him outside of a suit.

Well, of course she *had* , but he'd put the suit back on afterward.

Wearing the jeans and the black tee shirt, he looked younger, like someone who she might actually know instead of a bank manager who owned the mortgages on her family's ranch.

He looked like The Blond Hottie on his day off.

Rae laughed with him and danced to the music.

At the concert, as the music played and band sang, Wulf danced.

They had danced together at the party that first night, but that was a waltz. He had led with a firm hand but had not flung her around.

At the concert, Wulf danced like a man: a bit of leg movement, less arms, a subtle ripple of his torso, and watching Rae the whole time.

Lizzy and Georgie had lugged Rae to clubs last year, for which she would be eternally grateful. When she had insisted with a rising note of church-instilled panic in her voice that she *couldn't* dance, that she *wouldn't* dance, they had each grabbed one of her arms and hauled her out on the

flashing floor to teach her. Lizzy had shouted, “Free your hips!” and undulated around her. Georgie had danced in a more sophisticated manner, her long arms waving to the music. Eventually, to her surprise, Rae had picked it up, and more surprising, liked it.

The lead singer played his guitar and sang right above Rae as she danced. He smiled at her, so she let her body go and danced like a rock star was watching her. When she stole a glance at Wulf, he was still watching her, and his blue eyes were crinkled with delight.

During a song that sounded kind of Asian, Wulf danced with his arms up for just a minute like he was pushing away the ceiling, and the lead singer pointed at him and mimicked the motion. The move was obviously a reference to something, but she was dancing flat-out to the hard drums with the band *so close that the singer slapped her fingertips* and all was *amazing* with the world.

*Georgie and Lizzy were so never going to believe it*, and Rae was sure that she wasn’t allowed to tell them.

But this wasn’t something private about Wulf. This was a Dom-Date.

She really hoped she could tell them. She wanted someone else to know how happy she was.

After the concert, Rae nearly hyperventilated in the back seat of the car while they went to supper. Dieter drove them to a restaurant that looked like the Greek Parthenon with its forest of white columns, except that tourists throng the Parthenon.

Rae stopped inside the door. Hundreds of empty tables were laid with white tablecloths, like a pond choked with sparkling white lily pads. China, crystal, and silverware sparkled. No other people walked among the deserted tables. “Are they closed?”

“They’ll serve us,” Wulf said. “Where would you like to sit?”

Half the security guys fanned out around the restaurant. The other guys made a beeline for the kitchen.

Rae said, “We shouldn’t ask them open up just for us. I saw some taco trucks a couple blocks away.”

“The owner and chef used to be in my employ. I’m invested rather heavily in his restaurant. Besides, I haven’t seen Jacques for months. We must drop by.”

A black-suited waiter bustled out of a door at the back and waved to them as he walked between the tables. “Hello! Here we are! Do you have a

preference where you'd like to be seated?"

Wulf turned. "Do you, Rae?"

"Um, in the back? Near the kitchen?"

"Commendable." They threaded their way between the tables.

The waiter fidgeted with his white gloves until they reached him, then he presented a table to them with flourish of his arms.

Wulf circled the table, pulled out a chair, and stood behind it.

Rae pulled out her own chair to sit down before she realized what was going on, and then she scooted past the chair that she had already yanked out and sat in the chair Wulf offered her.

Well, it was a night of firsts for her. She should be more alert.

From the menu, Rae ordered a chicken dish that she thought she recognized, and Wulf told the waiter, "Tell Jacques to surprise me."

After the waiter scurried back to the kitchen, Rae asked Wulf, "What did you do when the band played that song? Where you did the 'raise the roof' move and the singer did, too?" She mimed pushing upward.

"That song had elements of Bhangra, music from northern India. The band is interested in Buddhism and Hinduism, so it must have been an intentional reference."

"A guy that I knew said that the only reason guys dance is to get in girls' pants. Male competition, female choice. He's a biology major."

Wulf laughed aloud. "He's never been to a Punjabi wedding. For Americans, that may be true, but for the rest of the world, it's a blatant falsehood. In Africa, in India, in South America, even Europe, men dance for the joy of it. Everyone dances. Old men. Old women. Babes in arms. It's ingrained in the culture."

"Oh. Cool." Rae had suspected that Blake had been mired in cynicism. "Have you been to a Punjabi wedding?"

"Two," Wulf said. "One was three days long, a minimalist affair. The other was eight."

"Eight days? For one wedding?"

"The divorce rate is lower in India. I suspect it's the fear of having to remarry in yet another elaborate wedding. Even many European weddings are two days, one for the civil ceremony and one for the religious rite."

"Here, you can get hitched in an afternoon. An hour, if you're in Las Vegas. "

"How refreshing."



“How did you end up at two Indian weddings?”

“Friends from school.”

“I thought you went to school in Switzerland.”

“It was an international school. No more than ten percent of the admissions were from any one language group. There were students from all over the world.”

“Oh, yeah. You’ve mentioned Yoshi.”

“Yoshi is Japanese. Sunil and Manpreet are Punjabi.” Wulf stretched his leg to pull his phone out of his pocket. He spun through the photos on it.

“Yes, here’s Sunil’s wedding.”

Wulf leaned over and showed her. His bare forearm brushed her arm. A man wore a white and gold turban and pajamas. The stunning Indian woman next to him wore a red blouse and scarf on her hair. Gold jewelry hung around her neck and wrists and was woven through her hair and strung from her ears to her nose piercings. “Wow.”

“Yes. Punjabi weddings are lavish. The food was excellent, too.”

Their plates arrived, and they both tucked in. Rae’s plate held a delicate tower of red, green, and white layers. She whispered to Wulf, “Is this some of that molecular food?”

“No. This is excellent Nouvelle French with California influences.”

From behind them, a man’s deep voice boomed, “So you think *zat* it is excellent, do you?”

Rae thought that his accent was French, but it sounded so different than her Cajun French TA’s inflections that she wasn’t sure.

Wulf said, “Jacques!” and gestured to the chair beside him.

Jacques was a black man with a body so slight that he did not pull out the chair but just bent into it as if he were made of pipe cleaners. He continued in French, “Monsieur von Hannover, I trust you are enjoying?”

Rae followed along as best she could, but they both spoke French so quickly.

“As always, this verrine is delicious.” Wulf replied and ate a bite for emphasis.

“I have made something special for your dessert.”

“I shall surely save room for it. Jacques, may I present Mademoiselle Rae Stone. Rae, this is Monsieur Jacques Boucher, my friend and the owner and head chef of the very successful restaurant The Butcher Shop, and previously, my personal chef.”

“Enchanté, Mademoiselle,” Jacques said. He swayed out of his chair and drifted around the table.

Rae turned to shake his hand. “Enchanté, Monsieur.”

“Ah, you are from Louisiana?” he asked.

“No. I studied French with a Cajun professor.”

“Your accent is delightful.”

Wulf asked him, “Jacques, I have been wondering, do I have an accent when I speak French?”

The chef turned to Wulf with innocent, wide eyes. “Why, Monsieur? Do you prefer to have an accent?”

“That wasn’t what I asked.”

Jacques glanced at Rae with the slightest hint of *get-me-out-of-this* tilt to his head but said, “Is there a reason you are asking?”

“Jacques, tell me.”

The chef sighed, his exasperated breath flapping his skinny body. “Perhaps a slight Germanic inflection, occasionally.”

“No.” Wulf’s blue eyes widened and one blond eyebrow rose, the subtlest of motions that Rae knew meant he was aghast, and she tried not to laugh.

“And sometimes,” Jacques mused, “you sound rather Anglophone.”

“That, too?” Wulf’s tone seemed even, like he was expressing mild curiosity, but Rae wondered if she and Jacques were going to have a major psychological crisis on their hands.

“I am afraid so, Monsieur.”

“*Mon Dieu.*”

“I must return to the kitchen. You will be in town soon to look over the books?”

“Next month, Jacques. This month is busy.”

“Yes, I can only imagine your schedule this month. When are you leaving for Paris?”

“Friday night.”

Rae caught Jacques’s glance at her, an unasked question.

Wulf shrugged one shoulder and smiled with one side of his mouth, a possibly positive but unconfirmed answer.

Yeah, she wasn’t going anywhere with Wulf until he answered a lot more questions, like how a person who Wulf had not spoken to for months knew that he was due for a trip to Paris next week.

# The Mile-High Club

RAE awoke, and her anxious dream—about a pop quiz in a class she had never been to before—dissipated.

The Gulfstream's jet engines squalled outside the dark porthole windows, and black clouds swept over the wings. Her neck hurt from resting her head on the hard sofa arm. A sofa in an airplane still creeped her out a little.

Wulf's bass voice carried from the back of the plane, even though he whispered. "Gentlemen, let us discuss security measures for Paris next week."

She cracked open her eyelids some more and squinted down the plane at the men lounging around the larger of the tables.

"You're going?" Friedhelm asked.

She was getting pretty good at telling their voices apart.

"Most likely. Ms. Stone may well accompany me, though these plans are not firm."

Friedhelm swiveled and said something short in that odd German to Hans. Hans sighed, got out his wallet, and handed a bill to Friedhelm.

"You bet against me?" Wulf asked, his voice rising in dismay, a weird tone that Rae had never heard from him before. "How many of you bet against me?"

Several of the little knot of men raised their hands.

Wulf surveyed the hands, counting. He turned to Dieter. His tone returned its normal, wry, British monotone. "Seven. That's over half of them."

*Hahf.* He sounded like a Shakespearean actor playing King Henry the Fifth sometimes, and Rae smiled at his broad back in the white chair. He would sound awesome reciting the St. Crispin's Day speech, when Henry, who had disguised himself as a common soldier and discovered his troops' low morale, rallied his soldiers to attack at Agincourt.

Dieter grimaced and handed Wulf a bill. "That was a sucker bet. I don't know why I took it."

"Stubbornness."

“It’ll come back around.”

“Indeed. We have made arrangements for a Gulfstream G650, so we can fly directly to one of the Paris airports. We will stay at the usual hotel. We’ll need proper attire for Ms. Stone. Frau and Herr Keller will fly tomorrow, and she can arrange a private show so we can order what she needs. Ms. Stone may want to see the Opera House or the Eiffel Tower, so we should make contingency plans.”

Dieter spoke up. “Why aren’t you speaking Alemannic?”

“I’ve found that I rather like English, of late. It’s a melodious language. Don’t you agree?”

Dieter said something else in that German-like language, something dry, and the men laughed a deep rumble like an earthquake. Dieter spoke again, and his voice tilted up at the end like a question.

“No,” Wulf said. “There is no particular chance that we will stay until the end of the week to attend Flicka’s wedding. We will pay our regards before the ceremony with a few suppers and such.”

Groans resonated around the plane. Every one of the security guys around the table plucked money out of his wallet and threw a bill in front of Dieter, who was grinning like a shark.

Rae sat up and blinked hard to moisten her eyeballs in the thin, airplane air. “Who’s Flicka?”

At Rae’s two words, Dieter’s expression morphed from exultant to crestfallen.

Wulf asked him, “What is the problem?” and Dieter admitted something in German.

Wulf said something back, something sarcastic, and Dieter grimaced. Wulf came over and sat beside her on the couch.

“What was all that?”

Wulf glared at the security guys, who all had found things to contemplate that were well away from where Rae and Wulf were sitting. Dieter stared downcast at his lap. Friedhelm appeared extravagantly innocent, and Rae was surprised he wasn’t idly whistling.

Wulf said, “Apparently, there is a betting pool concerning the day you will leave me.”

Her fingers found his strong hand, and she held on. “That’s cold.”

“Dieter’s wager is for the end of next week, and when he heard your question, he believed that he had lost.”

“Should I be concerned about this Flicka person?” Wulf had just said that he wouldn’t attend her wedding, whoever she was. Wulf’s first, true love? An unrequited passion? His disapproving grandmother?

Wulf shrugged. “We do tend to wager on everything else. I shouldn’t be surprised.”

“Wulf, who’s Flicka?”

He sighed. “Flicka is the nickname of Friederike von Hannover, my younger sister.”

A collective gasp and a lone “Eeep,” came from the group of security men.

“Oh, yeah. Someone mentioned that you have a sister.”

“Who mentioned that?”

Rae didn’t want to narc on Ms. Keller. “I don’t remember.”

“Rosamunde.” His tone was drier, still.

“I’m sure I don’t remember.”

“My sister Flicka will marry at the end of next week in Paris.”

“And you’re not going?”

“No.”

“Why not?”

“Several reasons.”

The security guys were as jumpy as frogs on a griddle. “How old is she?”

“Twenty-three.”

So that wasn’t it. Something else must be weird. “Who’s she marrying?”

“Pierre Alexandre Louis Rainier Grimaldi.”

“You Europeans sure do have a lot of names.”

“Indeed.”

The security guys were still watching her and Wulf like a flock of falcons jockeying for two small mice. “Is there something I’m not seeing here?”

“Let’s discuss this privately, at home,” Wulf said.

She stopped asking questions. One by one, the security guys’ shoulders lost their tension and slumped, and they wandered off to do other, security-related things.

Rae whispered to Wulf, “I’m missing something, aren’t I?”

“Let’s discuss it in private.”

Oh, heck, yeah, they would.

She slid her finger across her phone’s screen, turning the page of the book she was reading.

Wulf craned his neck to glance at her phone.

*"In Search of Lost Time ,"* she said.

"Proust, in the French."

"I read *Swann's Way*," the first volume, "in English for a class, but I'm on the third book, now. Just in case I do go to Paris with you, I thought I had better improve my French."

"How do you like *À la recherche du temps perdu*?"

"It's good. The literary tenses were a little confusing at first, but I'm okay now."

"Good. If you come to Paris with me, we will eat madeleines."

Now he was bribing her with Proustian butter cookies. It might work.

Rae snuggled up to him, and he draped his arm around her. The warmth of his body penetrated the silk dress she was wearing, and it almost felt like his naked flesh was pressed against her. Her body responded, and the whole plane seemed to grow brighter. She turned her head and pressed her lips to his neck, just above his black tee shirt.

"Ah, Rae, I thought you had classes tomorrow."

"I do."

He shifted and tugged at his jeans. "If we go back to my place, you might not arrive home in time for class."

"Why wait?"

"I beg your pardon."

Rae could not believe that she was doing this, but if the security guys were going to bet on Wulf and her breaking up, then they all deserved to scandalized. She would never see them again after Wulf left America, anyway.

What the heck. "Ever joined the Mile-High Club?"

Wulf didn't say anything for a moment, then said, "No."

"You're gonna." She took his hand and felt no resistance as she led him back to the tiny lavatory. Her hips swished as she strode through the plane, determined .

They passed by the table of security men, all of whom were busy checking their phones or reading on tablets. Dieter and Friedhelm appeared to be absorbed in another game of chess, so much so that their eyes did not move from the pieces as Rae and Wulf walked past.

Rae was positive that, if she turned around, she'd see every single one of them staring at her back, so she didn't turn around.

At the back of the plane, the stewardess had her back to them, examining the galley shelves.

The lavatory was more cramped than Rae had imagined. She stepped inside and shuffled out of the way.

Wulf squeezed in behind her and shoved the door shut beside them. “Reagan, I have always admired your creativity, my natural-born dominatrix.”

They stood belly-to-belly in the closet-sized restroom. The steel counter with the mini-sink poked Rae in the butt. She took stock of the commode and the counter, trying to figure out the spatial geometry of fucking him.

Wulf grabbed her arms, whirled her around, and pressed his body against her back. In the mirror, Rae’s own face stared back at her, and she was surprised at the blush in her cheeks and how red her lips were. She grabbed the metal sink to brace herself.

Behind her, Wulf’s blue eyes darkened with desire. She usually had her eyes closed or been caught up in the sensation, and his intensity astonished her. His cool demeanor had a chink in the armor. A hank of her coppery hair had caught on his nose, and he wrapped it around one finger and kissed her hair before he closed his eyes and dropped his head.

She could see what he was doing, but his breath on her shoulder sent a thrill through her, and he kissed the nape of her neck. He held her hair away, but his other hand wandered over her belly. He drew her body back against him, and she could feel his long hardness against her ass.

Rae reached up and stroked the back of his neck, pressing him closer. His rough cheek scraped her hand, and his blond stubble glimmered in the single overhead light. His face turned, and Wulf’s soft lips touched her hand. Her whole body blushed with wanting him. His mouth returned to her neck, kissing, then nipping her skin.

His hand wandered lower, toward her hemline .

He slipped his hand under her skirt, rubbed his palms up her hips, and hooked her panties with his thumbs. The silk dropped to the floor. She kicked them away.

He held her hips, rolling them between his hands and grabbing her ass while he bit the nape of her neck.

This was not part of the plan.

Rae spun to face him, jostling them both, and Wulf kissed her hard, grabbing her and crushing her to him. She moaned against his lips, unable to

think about anything but his hard body pushing her back against the sink. He mouthed her neck again, and her head fell back to stretch her throat against his lips. His teeth grazed the sensitive skin over her jugular vein, and she wanted to wrap her whole body around him.

He dragged her dress off her shoulder and kissed her there. She buried her face in his neck, wanting to taste him. The natural musk of him mixed with his cinnamon tea and clean lemon cologne, and she breathed him in as she pressed her lips to his neck. That rich scent curling in her nose swirled to her brain, and her pussy tingled.

A small part of her brain floated her the term *Pavlovian Response* , and she told that stupid part of her brain to shut up because she was busy.

His hands drifted lower again, reaching for her skirt to pull it up.

She grabbed his shoulders and inhaled hard, trying to steel herself but only gasping as his hands rubbed her bare ass under her skirt.

She clutched his shoulders and turned them so that her own back was to the flimsy door.

She tipped him backward, and he sat on the toilet lid and grabbed for the sink counter to steady himself. His blue eyes were laughing, and he inhaled hard.

She straddled him, her bare clit pushing against his pants.

He licked his lips and reached for his fly.

“No,” she said. Her voice was much more breathy than she wanted it to be.

“No?” Desperation strangled his voice. His hands on her hips clenched like he was holding on for dear life. His body stilled like he was trying very hard to not move.

Her brain whirled with passion. She wanted him inside her so much that she kissed him, sucking on his tongue because she wanted him in her mouth and inside her body .

She backed off and braced herself with a deep breath. Trying for a more Domme voice, she said, “Tell me what I’m missing about your sister.”

She sounded a little less like she was starving for him.

“I promise I’ll tell you everything—”

“Later,” she finished his sentence with him. She reached between them, brushing her own clit in the process and moaning, but she found his zipper and held it. “Tell me now.”

“It’s Grimaldi.” His eyes, still dark blue and fuzzy with desire, closed as



if he didn't want to see her reaction.

"What about him?"

"He's a Prince of Monaco." Wulf leaned his head against the wall behind him. "His Serene Highness, the Prince Pierre."

"Wow. So she's going to be a princess." She rubbed his cock through his pants, and he held his breath. His Adam's Apple, stubbled with blond fuzz, bobbed.

Wulf said through gritted teeth, "He's second in line for the principality. His uncle is the Sovereign Prince but has no legitimate heirs. His mother will abdicate because she has no wish to take the throne. Pierre will likely inherit, though probably not soon."

Rae was flabbergasted, but she still trailed her fingernails up and down his cock through his pants. His whole body shuddered under her thighs. "Is she nuts?"

"She must be. She's in love with that rat bastard."

Rae clicked open a few more teeth on his zipper. "Those royal bloodlines have few loose chromosomes. Isn't she afraid her kids will have hemophilia or three heads or something?"

"Genetic testing has come a long way, and I think the royal hemophilia gene is essentially extinct." His voice sounded strangled, and his fingers dug into her hips.

"I would never want to live like that. All those cameras. All that craziness."

"Please, Rae." He grabbed her and pulled himself forward, seeking her mouth to kiss her.

"They never left Princess Diana alone." She pushed him backward. "Has your sister considered that?"

Wulf sighed. His gaze flickered, and Rae thought she saw his eyebrows dip in pain, but he regained his composure so fast that she wasn't sure if she had seen anything.

Rae said, "Every time Diana got out of a car, it was like a nuclear blast of flash bulbs. That's a terrible life. I'm still not sure the British government didn't have her killed because she wanted to marry that other guy."

"It's difficult to put your life in the hands of others. All you can do is hope that they don't drive while drunk or betray you." His face was serious, like he was imploring her to not believe the conspiracy theories.

"Is your sister okay with living like that?" *Incredible*. Completely *not*

*credible* that someone would volunteer for such chaos.

"I believe she has become accustomed to it." Wulf's hands sought her face, and he kissed her. His tongue forced itself past her lips, and passion swirled in her again.

"Well, bless her heart. I hope everything works out for her," she said against his lips. She tugged his zipper the rest of the way down and reached in to free his cock from his underwear.

"Me, too," Wulf mumbled and leaned backward, angling himself.

The velvety head of his cock nudged her clit, and Rae gasped. He swirled his cock, running it through her folds, getting slicker every time he probed her opening. She was wet, soaking wet, and he pushed a little farther into her every time but she wanted him so much.

She seized him around his neck and used his shoulders to lower herself onto him, sliding down his hard chest and impaling herself. Her pussy stretched around him, and she felt her orgasm begin to bloom right way.

Wulf wrapped his arms around her waist like his *kinbaku-bi* ropes and shoved her down. Pleasure zipped up her spine, and she arched her back, pulling away, but he dragged her back and pushed into her.

The floor rattled under her feet as the plane hit turbulence.

"Wulf," she whispered into his neck. She pushed off the floor with her toes, helping him thrust into her.

He groaned and slammed her down, pounding her clit. Her knees knocked against the walls on both sides.

The plane popped up like they went over a speed bump, and she fell down on his cock, *so deep*.

She arched backward hard as the orgasm took her and whirled her around, and she blasted apart. "Wulf!" she squeaked, trying not to cry out but she couldn't even hear herself.

His hoarse voice rasped on her throat, and she folded her arms around his neck and head, feeling him pulse inside her. His forehead rested on her shoulder, warm. His breath rushed unevenly, feathering her breasts with moist warmth.

"Reagan." His hoarse voice sounded like begging. "Say you'll go to Paris with me."

She couldn't think, but she knew what she needed. "If you tell me everything. I know you haven't yet."

He held onto her waist and spoke into the soft skin of her neck. "We

won't go to the wedding. My extended family will be there, my father, my sister, my cousins. If I go, I will draw the fire to them."

"Bad things happen that aren't your fault," she whispered in his ear. "Jim Bob and his *chingasos* weren't your fault. You saved me from them."

"It's too risky," he said. "I would never forgive myself if someone else dies."

"She's your sister, and it's her wedding day. You have to go."

He nodded, pressing his face against her shoulder and tightening his arms around her.

Maybe it was the glasses of wine all night long or the exhaustion, but Rae said, "You have to go to your sister's wedding. Tell me the rest of it, and no matter what, I'll go to Paris and her wedding with you. Nothing will happen."

# Everything Has an End

WULF exited the cramped lavatory a few minutes after Rae, fooling no one.

The plane thrummed around him, and he drew deep breaths to tamp down any emotion that might leak around the edges of his demeanor.

In the center of the plane, his men were drawing up security plans for Paris in his absence, efficient as always.

Rae sat on the couch near the front of the plane, twiddling with her phone. She flicked the screen with one finger, still reading the Proust, most likely. She was probably not reading gossip websites about Flicka through the plane's wifi. He prayed she was not.

Once back at her dorm, she would. Such curiosity was natural.

He had to tell her *who* he was, *what* he was, and soon, or she would discover it on her own.

The blood-soaked pictures from the day Constantin was murdered would be the least of his problems.

Wulf twitched his head at Dieter, who followed him to the back of the plane. The stewardess sat in the jump seats ahead of the galley, reading a magazine.

Among the clinking cupboards and whirring refrigerators, Wulf bowed his head near Dieter's and whispered, "You might win the pool yet, Dieter. She's horrified that Flicka's marrying a Prince and is worried about Flicka dying like Diana or having children with hemophilia."

The rumble-whine of the jets covered their whispering.

"Good Lord," Dieter said. "What will she say when she discovers that Queen Victoria was your four-times-Great Grandmother?" His dry tone just veered away from sarcasm.

"I can only reassure her that, since I am descended from the male line and am healthy, there is no chance that I carry the sex-linked gene for hemophilia."

"Just like your cousins."

"Even so."

"There's always the Habsburg jaw."

“Off with your head, Dieter.”

“Will we be stopping in London to see your cousins?”

Wulf touched his temple. “No, but they will attend Flicka’s wedding, and she believes that I should go, too. She says that she will attend the wedding with me, if I go.”

Dieter rested his hand on Wulf’s shoulder, a gesture between them used only in exigency. “I’m sorry, Wulfram. She’s a sensible girl. You know that she will throw you over eventually.”

“I know.”

*“Alles hat ein Ende, nur die Wurst hat zwei.”*

*Everything has an end. Only a sausage has two.* The dour German humor suited Wulf’s dark mood.

Dieter’s voice rose carelessly. “You’re going to have to find yourself a nineteen-year-old idiot with princess delusions to marry you.”

Wulf glanced up the plane, but Rae seemed absorbed in her reading. The pale, overhead lights shone on her hair, deepening it to the color of dark fire. “She’s no idiot, but I had hoped she would overlook my dynastic problems.”

Dieter’s voice became still louder. “There’s not that much love in the world, *Durchlaucht* .”

Wulf rubbed his eyes in dismay at Dieter using his official style of address, which translated loosely as *Your Serene Highness* and colloquially to *Your Transparency* , suggesting the serenity of deep, still water. “Don’t use that.”

“She doesn’t speak German.”

Dieter’s callous remark struck Wulf to his core. “Don’t underestimate her. She’s had no advantages in life—a rudimentary education, not even the benefit of encouragement—yet she speaks three languages and, given the first opportunity for advancement, not only snatched it up but conceived of way to fundamentally change the lives of children even less fortunate than herself, and it’s a damn good idea.”

“A bit of business sense. ”

“Her phone’s book app is rife with the Western canon—philosophy, science, the great books—and quite a bit of other cultures, too, and she’s read and annotated all of them.”

“How would you know that?”

“I perused her phone when I took it away from her at the office.”

“You broke into her phone?”

“She has no password on it.”

Dieter rolled his eyes. “Operational security with her in Paris will be a nightmare.”

“Her notes on Shakespeare were insightful. She’s reading Proust in French to brush up. She read Don Quixote in the Spanish.”

“You’re impressed only because it’s one of the few languages you don’t speak.”

“Given just one opportunity, she educated herself. She is naïve and unexposed, but she’s a remarkable woman. In three months, I could have her speaking German. If we matriculated her to a major university, she could change the world with her heart alone.”

“Good Lord, Wulfram. It sounds as if you’re falling in love with this girl.”

“Of course not,” Wulf scoffed. “I’ve been assured on several occasions that the surgeons were mistaken and did not remove half my lung, but my entire heart.”

“That’s good,” Dieter said. “It would be terrible to have a half-lung and a broken heart.”

It would be more than Wulf could endure.

# The Prince of Hannover

WULF and Rae sat in the back of the SUV as Friedhelm drove back to Rae's dorm, coasting in the night.

Out the front windshield, the desert sun sparked, and the horizon caught fire. Out of the darkness, the eastern sky glowed over the dark city. The university's buildings jutted into the sunrise like black fingers grasping at the fiery light.

Rae closed her eyes against the sudden sunlight and dozed against Wulf's shoulder, feeling him breathe. His cologne under her cheek smelled so good, like orange cinnamon rolls, that she kind of wanted to lick him but she would have to wake up to do it, so she didn't. His arms were twined around her, and his chin rested atop her head. She had class in two hours, but for the moment, she could nap.

The black SUV pulled up in front of the dorm under the metal porte-cochere sunshade just as the sun broke free of the horizon. Rae pecked Wulf on the cheek and reached for the door handle.

"Wait," Wulf said. His voice was hoarse from not sleeping. His arms tightened around her. "Friedhelm, would you mind stepping out?"

"Of course." Friedhelm stepped out of the car, shut the door, and stood at parade rest a few feet away.

"You don't watch much television, do you?" Wulf asked her.

Rae rubbed her eyes, trying not to smear what was left of her make-up. "That's why you asked Friedhelm to get out of the car?"

"Do you?"

"Of course not." She leaned back where she had been lying against him, and he wrapped his arms around her. "I'm busy, *real* busy, with classes and studying and work and running off with you. I grew up without one. Too worldly, my parents said. Hester and I don't even have a TV in our dorm room." She looked up at him. "Why on Earth would you even ask?"

Wulf's serious expression was all out of keeping with a discussion about television viewing habits. "Flicka's upcoming wedding has been on some of the news channels."

Rae was awake now, even though she just wanted to sleep. The quiet SUV insulated them from the warm morning and the sounds of the campus waking up like they were in a hidden world. “Because she’s marrying the Prince of Monaco.”

Wulf sighed. “It’s more than that.”

*Oh, Lord.*

Wulf said, “She’s a princess in her own right.”

Foreboding gathered around her as if the sun had retreated from the dawn. “No way.”

Wulf tightened his arms around her, and his arms were so strong that Rae realized she couldn’t get away at the moment.

He said, “Flicka is Her Serene Highness Friederike Marie Louise Victoria Caroline Amalie Alexandra Augusta, Prinzessin von Hannover und Cumberland, Princess of Great Britain and Ireland, Duchess of Brunswick-Lüneburg, et cetera. If the Salic rules of succession were relaxed, as there has been talk of doing, her theoretical eldest son would be the second in line to the Hannover throne, except that she is marrying a Catholic and so her line is now excluded under house rules.”

Understanding flashed through Rae.

She pulled herself out of his arms like she was pulling tangleweed off a fence post. “Then what the hell are *you*?”

Wulf’s guarded glance spoke volumes. His voice was flat and breathy, like he was sighing. “First in line.”

Anger simmered in her voice. “Say it. Say it out loud because I must be wrong in what I’m thinking.”

“I am His Serene Highness Wulfram Augustus,” Wulf’s anguished tone mocked his own words, and he raked his fingers through his blond hair, “Hereditary Prince of Hannover and Cumberland, Prince of Great Britain and Ireland, Duke of Brunswick-Lüneburg, and a few lesser titles.”

“You *never* told me all that.”

“In my defense, I mentioned it, but you were shagging me against a wall at the time. I know I wasn’t paying attention to a damn word I said, either.”

“I do not remember you telling me that you were His Majesty the King of anything.”

“I’m not His Majesty, and I’m not a king. Only the English monarchs use that style. Henry the Eighth started the nonsense.”

“Then you’re not a king.”



“My father is the Hereditary Prince, Pretender to the Hanoverian throne, and when he abdicates or dies, then I’ll be the pretender.”

“So you’re just pretending.” She tried to brace herself on the front seat, but the SUV seemed jumbled up inside, like the seats were in the wrong place, or the world had flipped them upside down, and her hands missed the seat. She slipped sideways before she regained her balance.

“In America, most use the term ‘claimant.’ We do not have a constitutional monarchy like Great Britain. The Kingdom of Hannover was abolished in 1919, when all the monarchies and the nobility in Germany were abolished. Now the nobility use surnames as designations, which is why my surname is Prinz von Hannover.”

“Prinz. Like Prince. Von like of. Prinz von Hannover like the Prince of Hannover. I didn’t catch it at all.” She could not control in inane babbling. The black SUV, black leather seats and tinted windows, seemed like a black hole of crazy that she was falling down. Anger flew down after her.

The blazing sun and other college students outside were in a whole ‘nother reality from this dark place. “Does Dieter know? Does Friedhelm?”

“Most of my security detail served in the Swiss Guards with me or are family retainers, some back to feudal times. In the military, they knew who I was the first day, when the sergeant called my name during roll call, even though it was abbreviated to Wulfram Hannover.”

She was questioning everything because she couldn’t think of anything else to say. “I’ve heard the name Hannover. Why have I heard the name Hannover?”

“It’s also the name of the state that I’m from, where the marksmanship competition is.”

Her hands shook. Wulf was the king of the state that was named after him. “No. That’s not it. Something royalish.”

Wulf nodded. “Hannovers sat on the British throne for several generations. George the Third, from whom you Americans declared independence, was of the House of Hannover. Queen Victoria was the last Hannoverian monarch in England due to Salic descent laws, again. The titles reverted to the next male of patrilineal descent. However, everyone in line for succession to the British throne is descended from the Electress Sophia of Hannover, so our genes occupy the British throne.”

“I’ve heard of Salic descent, too.” *Babbling.* She was still babbling. “Why have I heard about Salic descent?”

“The Shakespearean play *Henry the Fifth*, mostly likely.”  
*God, Henry the Fifth.*

Wulf said, “Henry obsesses about Salic descent because it means he can claim the French throne and thus he starts a war with France.”

Wulf seemed easier discussing the minutiae than his great omission.

“Oh my God. So you’re related to all those guys?”

Wulf’s deep sigh cut through his wry ghost of a grin. “I’m a direct male descendant of George the Third. Also, Victoria.”

“*King* George the Third and *Queen* Victoria?”

“Bloodlines more tangled than the Plantagenets,” he agreed.

No wonder he had jumped like a frog on a hot griddle every time she had said that stupid phrase. “*Are you related to the Plantagenets?*”

Wulf ran his palms down his pants legs and grasped his knees. “Through Mary, Queen of Scots, who was the great-granddaughter of Henry Tudor, who was Henry the Seventh.”

Wait, Henry the *Seventh*?

“You’re related the Henry the Eighth? The one who went through wives like water?” She reached for the door handle behind her back.

“No.” He paused. “Not directly. Henry the Eighth’s sister married James the Fourth of Scotland, and that’s my line.”

“Oh, well, that’s so much better, then.” That Wulf was a prince of whatever made a stupid kind of sense, and she was stupid for not seeing it earlier, but who would suspect such an outlandish thing? The tears that burned in her eyes were one part embarrassment and ten parts anger at being duped. “Wasn’t George the Third the one who stuttered?”

“That was George the Sixth.” Wulf’s shoulders slouched. “George the Third was the insane one.”

“Oh, Jesus.” Rae grabbed her head with both hands because she thought her skull might explode. The rising sun poured in the front windshield, blinding her so that she could barely see Wulf. “So are you going to be the King of England someday?”

“Oh, no. Not a chance. Hardly any chance, statistically.”

“*Like how big a chance?*”

“I am three hundred and eighty-seventh in line, when last I checked. Not worth speaking of. It would mean stepping over the coffins of most of my family and closest friends.” His voice choked, like his throat had closed.

“You seem more comfortable talking about the higgly-piggly details than

about who you *are* .”

“Oh, *God*, yes.”

She had known that something was wrong with him, that something was far too different about him, from the moment they had met. She didn’t believe that kings and queens were fundamentally different than anyone else, except that they *so were* , and Wulf was one of *them* . “You should have told me.”

“I never set out to deceive you. I was a private person here for several years, with everyone. I never planned to be like Henry the Fifth, spying on his troops, or like Henry the Eighth who disguised himself to meet Anne of Cleves.”

“You sure know a lot about kings dressing up like peasants and fooling stupid commoners.”

“These titles are an accident of birth. I didn’t earn them. I didn’t attain them. I didn’t win them. They have made me a target and a spectacle my whole life. Because the kingdom is dissolute, I can’t even properly abdicate a throne that does not exist, and the press would not desist if I did.”

“You’re trapped.”

“I have led a charmed life in many ways. In reality, I inherited a significant amount of wealth, and I have been afforded every opportunity that life can offer. I have been given a world-class education and have friendships that span decades. If something were to happen to all the wealth, I have no doubts that those friendships would remain intact and that I have the skills to rebuild everything. I shan’t complain, but I cannot remove myself.”

“Is that why that guy tried to kill you when you were a kid? Because he didn’t want you to be on the Hannover throne? Or the British throne?”

“He was trying to start a war, like the assassination of the Archduke Ferdinand of Austria sparked the First World War. Insane. No one would go to war over the deaths of a few deposed royals these days.”

“So you aren’t the kind of king who can scream ‘off with their heads’ or anything.”

Wulf looked started. “Have you heard me say that?”

“No. Have you cut people’s heads off?”

“Not at all. None of us. Not for the last century, at least.”

“I don’t get it. Why would that guy shoot you?”

“He was insane. Insane people kill other people.”

“So no one’s trying to kill you any more, right? Because that one guy

was insane, right?” She prayed that she was right.

But she wasn’t.

*Two years ago.*

*Berlin.*

She covered her mouth with her hand even before Wulf began talking.

“Ever since Constantin was killed and I was shot, I’ve been infamous. Finishing the job would make headlines all over the world. I’ve been fighting it my whole life. One of the subsidiary reasons that I took out Swiss citizenship was because the Swiss won’t start a war with anyone, even if someone succeeds in killing me, so at least a war won’t be on my conscience after I’m dead.”

She dropped her hand to her chest. Her heart drummed like mad under her palm. “Oh, Wulf. That’s an awful way to live, to worry about the aftermath after someone—I can’t even say it.”

“There’s more. Just let me tell you all of it.”

Rae covered her face with her hands. Sunlight leaked between her fingers. “I don’t want to know any more.”

He gently pulled her hands away from her face. His blond hair caught the glaring sunlight and glowed. She could barely see the outline of his cheekbone and strong jaw in the pouring sun. She could hardly see anything at all through her tears. He had lied to her and made a fool of her and now she knew why he was leaving her.

He said, “In Europe, the photographers are always after me. It’s not as bad as it was for Princess Diana. Nothing is as bad as it was for Diana. But they’re after me, after my private life, whenever I’m on the Continent. In London, it’s not so bad, thanks to Wills and Kate and especially Harry.”

Rae felt lightheaded like she was falling into a fairy tale, and it was a long, long fall and she couldn’t fly. “Because *they’re your cousins*. The English Royal Family are *your cousins*. You said that you *lived with your cousins* in graduate school.”

“Yes, at Kensington Palace, because they have the security I need. In Germany, in Helvetia, even in France, it’s madness. If you come with me to Flicka’s wedding, we will be the Day-Two story, like Pippa was after Wills and Kate were safely married.”

“So you don’t want me to go with you.” Disbelief warred with the pain of the withdrawal of those last, few days that she might have had with him.

“I want you to know what is going to happen. There will be a mob.

Dieter and Hans and my men will take care of us, but it won't be like it is here."

"I can't believe that I didn't know who you are. You must have been *insulted* ."

"Not at all." He kissed the back of one of her hands, then kissed her palm and laid her hand against his cheek. "Not at all. You could see *me* , not all the newspaper articles and photographs."

"There are *more* newspaper articles?"

"I'm surprised you didn't see them."

"I didn't *look* . After that one time, I didn't *look* . I didn't want to know." The betrayed look in Wulf's eyes had hurt in her own chest.

"There are more. You will see more, when you look."

"*I don't want to.*"

"There was a state funeral for Constantin," Wulf said. "I walked the route. There are many pictures from that day."

"When you were a little kid?"

"Two weeks after we were shot."

"You should have been in the hospital."

"They released me from hospital for the funeral. I insisted. My father said that it was the first time that I had shown proper imperiousness. I walked the mile-long route to the church behind Constantin's cortege."

"I don't know what that means, but you're breaking my heart."

"His casket. I walked behind the carriage with his casket. My father and uncles walked beside me. The doctors were liberal with painkillers to keep me upright."

"Jesus, Wulf. You were *eight* ." She had no desire to see that little boy walking down the street behind his brother's casket.

"Constantin would have done the same for me."

"They shouldn't have let you."

"The press loved it. After that, I was The Survivor Prince."

"The Survivor *Prince* ." Not *Twin* .

"To the press, I am worth two royals because I carry Constantin's life with me."

"You sound bitter."

"Sarcastic, perhaps. To some extent, they are right. Constantin was the older twin, so he was the heir. I assumed his inheritance. The way they write about it, however, is facile, as if I am magic somehow. Such a shallow

interpretation.”

“Is that it? Is there anything else?” Her voice came out like she was begging for there to not be more.

The sun floated upward, and a tree shaded them. Rae could finally see Wulf through the glare. His eyes seemed filled with pain but not tears. While he usually seemed to be on the verge of smiling, his focused gaze implored her to listen. “One more thing.”

She was exhausted. She couldn’t take it. She might cry because she didn’t know how to process that he was a real, live prince, so far above her that it is the right thing for him to leave town and leave her behind because she was a dry desert rat.

That sweet little blue-eyed boy, walking behind a casket, flashed in her mind. A tear splashed over her eyelashes. “What else could there be?”

“You’re the most wonderful woman I’ve ever met.” His voice caught, and he cleared his throat. “I should do this someplace beautiful, on the French Riviera or in the Swiss Alps.”

“No,” she said and grabbed the door handle behind her. “You’re moving away. You *should* move away from here. I’m no one. Even my family disowned me.”

He said, “Rae, listen to me.”

“I can’t. I have to get out.” She jiggled the handle, but it was locked. The button hid far down in its hole like a rabbit that didn’t want to get caught. The car closed in on her. The buttery leather, the shining enamel, the new-car smell that permeated every car he owned, all those were *his* world, not hers. She belonged in a desert-faded Chevy pickup with ripped cloth seats stained with deer blood, not the armored cars and road toys of the super-rich and royal.

He said, “At least come to Paris with me. Let me show you Paris.”

“I would never know how to act. I’d embarrass you. Your friends will hate me. They’ll laugh at me.”

“My friends will love you. No one is a snob. Yoshi goes to the Amazon rain forest every year to take psychedelic herbs with aborigines to have visions of his own death.”

“No one I know would ever do that. Flying halfway around the world to do drugs with people who are poorer than you are is obscene. Just eat some peyote like everyone else.”

Wulf’s wry chuckle broke the turbulent air in the SUV. “In his defense,

he bought their lands from the government and then ceded them to the tribes in trust.”

Yeah. No one she knew could ever do that, either.

“Flicka would love you. I don’t mean she would be condescending. She’s a wonderful young woman. She’s selling her wedding photographs to a magazine in exchange for an extortionate sum for charity. She’ll build ten schools in Africa next year with that contribution.”

“She should get you to manage her money. Then she wouldn’t have to sell her wedding pictures.” She hunted for the lock release.

“It’s a multiplier. She forced them to donate, so her own contributions are freed up to go elsewhere, because there are so many things that need to be done. Plus she shamed her friends into matching it.”

“. . . That’s pretty smart.” She stopped trying to get out, but she huddled next to the door, far away from him.

“She’s a smart girl. Like you.”

“Stop.” Someone smart would have figured out who he was.

“Come to Paris with me. Come meet Flicka. I’ve told you everything now. I can protect you.”

They were different species. He was a monarch butterfly. She was a desert rat. “It’s better that we make a clean break. You knew it was the right thing to do, even if now you’re all befuddled.”

He picked up her hand off the seat and closed both of his warm hands around it. “I was leaving to protect you from someone who might be shooting at *me* . Evidently, I need to protect you from people who are shooting at *you* .” His voice ascended with a faint note of panic, which was so weird for him that it scared Rae. “I could not bear it if something happened to you and I wasn’t there to stop it.”

“Nothing’s going to happen to me.”

“Come with me.” In his adamancy, he squeezed her hand but not enough to hurt.

“I’ll think about it.” She could let him down easy some time that she wasn’t trapped in an SUV with him. She turned the door handle behind her. With two twists, it popped and cracked open.

“Your passport should arrive Tuesday.”

She opened the door, and campus sounds of chattering students and growling air conditioners invaded the SUV.

“We’ll fly overnight on Friday. I’ll text you the details.” He shifted

toward her on the seat and pressed her hand to his chest. His heart beat hard under his black tee shirt.

“Wulf, I don’t think I should.”

“Come with me.”

She had promised to go to his sister’s wedding with him. He wasn’t throwing it back at her, but she had promised him that she would go.

He wouldn’t let go of her hand until she said, “All right. I’ll go.”



## A Deal with Reverend Stoppard

RAE climbed the dorm's metal stairs and let herself inside her austere dorm room where Hester sat, waiting for her.

Rae almost groaned, but Hester was her roommate and had as much right to the room as Rae did.

Hester perched on the edge of her twin bed on the threadbare quilt, still in her church clothes, her ankles and wrists crossed, her hair covered by a prim, starched bonnet, despite the fact that it was just before six in the morning. Her sallow skin bore no make-up, and her eyelashes and brows were nearly invisible.

The dingy walls looked half-bare. Hester's Christian music posters were gone. The walls loomed higher, as oppressive as the silence. Dust motes floated in the dim sunlight that filtered through the insubstantial curtain over the high windows.

"I'm just going to sleep for a few hours," Rae told her. "It's okay if you can't talk to me or whatever. I understand. You don't need to get disfellowshipped, too."

"Your mother made a deal with Reverend Stoppard," Hester said. "You can come back."

"She what?" Rae dropped her new backpack on the floor. It thumped, heavy with the clothes and toiletries that Wulf had bought for her.

"She humbled herself. She begged him. I went with her," Hester said. "I told him that Jim Bob was lying and that it was just a bar where you were working, that I had seen for myself."

"You told them that *you* went to a bar?"

"He was unhappy with me, but he believed me."

"I can't believe they would let me come back." Rae plopped down on her bed across from Hester. She let her head drop into her hands. The left side of her face was still warm from Wulf's shoulder.

"I'm so sorry, Rae." A tear dripped out of Hester's eye. She mashed it away with one hand. "I'm so sorry that I gossiped. It was wrong of me. I beg your forgiveness."

“Are they making you do this?”

“No! They didn’t say anything at all to me, but it was all my fault and I’m so sorry. It was just stupidity and immaturity.”

“Everyone does it,” Rae said. “Don’t beat yourself up.”

“There are conditions.”

“Of course, there are.”

“They want you to drop out of school this week and move back home over spring break next week.”

That one was obvious. “Not even the end of the semester?”

“Reverend Stoppard said that it was the corrupting influence of education, especially psychology. I didn’t tell them about the theater classes. I swear I didn’t.”

“Oh, Hester.” Rae’s forehead felt burning hot under her hands.

“Reverend Stoppard quoted Mark eight, thirty-six, ‘For what shall it profit a man, if he shall gain the whole world, and lose his own soul?’ He said that it applies to women, too.”

What would it profit Rae to gain her family but lose her ability to help children? “But there’s Matthew twenty-five, forty, ‘Inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the least of these my brethren, ye have done it unto me.’ I can help Daniel and autistic kids like him. Surely, they’re the least of God’s brethren. How can I just abandon them?”

“I’m not allowed to argue with you,” Hester said. Her panicked voice sounded strangled.

Of course not. They would have told her that the Devil can quote Scripture for his own purpose.

Hester continued, “But I can beg you. Please, please, Rae. Please give up this worldliness and sin and go home.”

“I’m so tired. I can’t think. I’ve got to sleep for an hour before class.”

“You keep staying out all night. Were you really a—I can’t even think of it—a woman of ill repute? And is Dominic your—I don’t even know what to call him.”

“No,” Rae said. “I’m a counselor. I listen to people, and I help them. I’ve never had sex with anyone.” She meant a client, but she was so tired. “I’m not doing anything wrong.”

“Please give it up. Please go home. I don’t want to lose you.”

Rae lay down on the unforgiving mattress, still wearing the navy blue silk dress. She kicked her pumps off the end of the bed. “I just want to sleep.

It's all too much to think about."

She rolled Aunt Enid's afghan over herself and tried to sleep.

# The French Booty-Moon

AFTER Rae attended her classes, staring at her disorganized notes with bleary eyes, she opened the door to her dorm room, but no one returned her family greeting whistle. Hester must have gone to her own classes.

The study room, crowded with books on the desk, shelves, and floor, was silent. Rae's neglected textbooks lurked on the shelves and her desk. In the bedroom, the beds were rumpled and empty.

All of Hester's elementary education textbooks were still lined up on her shelves, grouped by class meeting time. Rae peeked in Hester's clothes drawers, and her clothes were still there, folded and tucked in. Hester must not have asked for a room transfer, or she hadn't received one yet. She must have taken down the posters for another reason.

Perhaps because even those posters were too worldly, and she wasn't going to lead Rae further astray with posters of Christian music.

At least she meant well.

Rae flopped on her bed, intending to nap until her lab at three-thirty.

Someone knocked on the door to the bathroom that they shared with Lizzy and Georgie, rattling the plywood door hung loosely in its frame.

"Come in," Rae groaned, though she wanted to be left alone to sleep more than anything.

Georgie stuck her head through the half-open door. Her wet hair stuck to her clean face. Rae had never noticed the pale freckles sprinkled over Georgie's nose and cheekbones before, probably because Georgie slathered on make-up before going to the dining hall for breakfast.

Georgie asked, "You alone? "

"Yeah." Rae struggled up to sitting, fighting the knit afghan and her own sleepy head.

Georgie pushed the door open and bounced on Hester's bed. "Good. Hester sobbed all afternoon yesterday. I could hear her through the walls."

"Oh, Jesus." Rae fell back on the bed, which barely bounced because the box spring was shot.

"What the hell happened?"

"I don't even know where to start." She flipped the afghan over her head. Sunlight wove through the yarn from the window high above.

"Where were you this weekend?" Georgie asked.

"Home." Rae could tell her that much, so she sat up, pulled the afghan from over her face, and explained about Aunt Enid's Celebration of Life turning into a fiasco when a Devilhouse client, her uncle-cousin-relation Jim Bob, outed her and tried to sell her to human traffickers as a prostitute-slave.

Rae could see eye white all the way around Georgie's brown irises. "Jesus, Mary, Mother of God, Joseph, and all the saints in Heaven! What the Hell!"

"It's a Border town," Rae explained. "All sorts of shit goes down."

Georgie leaned on her arms like she was watching a fascinating horror movie on TV. "How did you get away from them?"

And there lay the rub, and the secrets. A lot of secrets.

"I really need to talk about something, but I can't," Rae said. "I've gotten involved with something, with a guy, and I don't know what I'm doing."

To Rae's horror, a tear slipped out of her eye and splashed on the brown and red knit stripes. She rubbed the moisture off her cheek, but Georgie had seen it fall.

George switched beds and sat beside her. Rae let her face fall into her hands.

Georgie wrapped her arms around Rae's shoulders. She smelled like girly soap and the rosemary shampoo that she kept in the shower. "Go ahead. Tell me about it."

"I can't!" Rae was dangerously close to wailing. She gulped it all down.

"Tell me what you can." Georgie patted her shoulder.

"There's this guy." She stopped before she spilled Wulf's secrets.

"Is this guy a slave trader?" Georgie's tone carried less judgment than if she had asked about him being an accountant.

"No. He saved me from them. He shot two of them when they were shooting at me."

"Involved in some other crime syndicate?"

"No."

"Okay. Is he related to you?"

"He's as not-related to me as anyone could be and still be a human."

"Okay. That was going to be my next question. Does he want you to drop out of college and sign a contract to be his empty-headed sex slave?"

“No.”

“At least Lizzy’s Master isn’t two-timing her. Did you meet him at The Devilhouse? Because the contract does have a non-compete clause which could kind of cover that.”

“Not exactly.”

“I’m getting tired of playing Twenty Questions here, but it doesn’t seem like it could be that bad, whatever it is.”

Rae gathered her pride and ripped it up. She needed help, so she put her arms around Georgie’s slim waist and admitted, “It’s The Dom.”

“Oh, Rae. We went through this unrequited shit with Lizzy, honey. He’s not the type. He likes *women*, in the *plural*, a *lot* of women, and he’s just an empty, shiny shell.” She adjusted her arms around Rae, holding her tighter. “I shouldn’t have introduced you to him. You sweet girls are drawn to him like he’s chocolate-covered crack.”

Rae inhaled hard. Another tear slipped down her cheek. “He’s not a shiny shell. Well, he has a shiny shell, but he’s been hurt, a lot. He’s kind of hiding from the world, here.”

“Do you know stuff about him?” Georgie’s voice seemed like she was picking her words as carefully as hopping across a stream on moss-covered rocks.

“Yeah. He told me,” Rae inhaled, “stuff.”

“Like what?”

“He’s really private, but it’s not bad stuff. Or, it’s not evil stuff. I can’t believe some of the stuff about himself that he’s managed to hide from everyone here, for years.”

“Fine. Tell me something.”

“I can’t. Not right now. I don’t want to hurt him.”

“Okay, don’t tell me a secret, but tell me *something* about him. Something *real*.”

Rae drew a shuddering breath in, racking her brain and trying to plow past all the stuff that Wulf had dumped on her. “He’s funny, but he’s shy about it.”

Georgie cocked her head sideways, like that heavy nugget had rolled to one side of her skull and caused it to list to the starboard. “No shit. Those are two words that I didn’t think anyone would ever call The Dom: *funny* or *shy*. You don’t think of The Dom as having a sense of humor. Sure, he’s intense, authoritative, perceptive, calculating, domineering, controlling, and

freakishly charismatic, like you can't take your eyes off him, but there's always that little bit of panic in there that, if he turned all of that on you, a normal person would melt under the heat."

"I think he dials it up for The Devilhouse. When he's not there, he turns all that down a couple notches."

"Which one's real?"

"I don't know. Both?"

"Well, we still don't know what happened to that black cat that he said he'd 'take care of.' That still disturbs me."

"He took her home and named her Brunhilde, and she's spoiled rotten. She eats off his plate."

"*You've been to The Dom's house?*"

"Yeah. It's huge. He has a staff."

"God, a staff at his house. He must terrorize them."

Rae didn't answer that one.

"I'll be damned. The sweet little ingénue trapped the big, bad Dom. That's why no one has gotten a blow job bonus in, like, months."

"No, I haven't trapped him at all. He's leaving. He sold The Devilhouse and he's out of here."

"Oh, shit! He sold The Devilhouse?" Georgie pushed Rae backwards to stare at her face. "He's closing down the fucking Devilhouse?"

Rae waved her hands. "It's not like that! He said that everyone's contracts are still valid and that everything will be the same, same pay, same people, just a change of management."

"Are you sure?"

"Yeah. "

Georgie clutched her heart. "Jesus. I have everything riding on this. Without The Devilhouse, I can't even finish my undergrad, let alone go to law school. Are you sure?"

"He said that there'll be a staff meeting soon to explain it all. Nothing will change. He's going to have everyone sign binding contracts that can't be screwed up by the new guy. Don't tell anyone."

Georgie wrapped her arms back around Rae. "Okay, okay. So, he's leaving and you're sad. You'll get over him. Lizzy sure as hell did."

"He asked me to go to Paris with him next week for spring break."

"No shit." Georgie's voice held awe. "And *then* he's leaving you."

"Yeah. But he's right to. It's like," Rae cringed inside, "a bird and a fish

can fall in love, but where could they build their nest? It's just like that. One of us *should* break it off, now, before it hurts too much."

*Too late.*

Georgie said, "Wow. He is all kinds of empty shellness."

"He's *not*, and I don't know what to *do*."

Georgie rocked her a little. "So go! Have one last string of Dom-Dates in Paris—*freaking Paris!* —and then come back, work at the D-house, and save the cash for your autism clinic. Besides, after a whole week of Dom-Dates, I'll be the jewelry will be amazing."

"Oh, I've never accepted any jewelry from him."

"Are you *nuts*?"

"It's ridiculous, a guy sending you jewelry for being with him for one night. Made me feel kind of cheap."

"I think he does it in good faith. I've never seen him be cruel to a Devilhouse contractor."

"I gave it all back. I kept the used Shakespeare books that he gave me."

"Well, you should keep this jewelry that he's going to give you this time. I don't see a problem with you going to Paris with him, unless it's that you might not be able to walk for a month afterward. Damn, Rae. I am so jealous."

"Don't be." Rae started crying in earnest. "*I can't go. Oh, God . I don't know what's wrong with me. I don't ever cry like this.*"

Georgie rocked her back and forth. "Have you ever been in love before?"

"No! And I'm not *now!* Because he's *leaving!*"

*Oh, God*, she was lying, and she knew it. When he had admitted all that royal stuff, it was like a golden cloud had descended around him and cut off all the air that she was breathing.

Georgie asked, "How long?"

"I'm not! I'm really not!"

*Since I pulled his shirt off in the Devilhouse and knew there was more than that shiny shell.*

*Since he took me to his house, and when he made love to me, it was like he was looking into my soul and giving me all of his.*

*Since he went home with me, even though he didn't have to, and since he was kind to my family, even though they needed him.*

*Since he followed me into the desert, when no one else did.*

*Because when I'm with him, I can breathe.*



*Because when I'm with him, I don't feel all alone anymore.*

*Because when I'm with him, I feel like I can grow, and he will still love me.* "I'm not in love with him!"

"Oh, Rae. I'm so sorry, honey." Georgie stroked her hair. "Go. Just go to Paris. Give yourself one last week with him. Don't try to change his mind. Don't think about what-might-have-been. It might be a little bittersweet, but later, you'll regret it if you don't give yourself that time with him. I made that mistake once. Live for the moment."

Time to spill the rest. Rae smeared her tears with her hands and breathed hard until she caught her breath. "Or, instead of going to Paris with The Dom for an extended one night stand, I could quit college, trash the my stupid dream of having an autism clinic, and go back to Pirtleville so my family won't throw me out and never speak to me again because I've become too worldly and am losing my soul."

Georgie stopped rocking her. "They gave you an ultimatum?"

"No. They've already disfellowshipped me and shunned me. If I drop out and go back this week, they'll take me back, and I won't have to live the rest of my life alone."

Georgie smirked. "Well, that's a tough choice. Let me see. You could have all your dreams, help disabled children lead full lives, and take a booty-moon to France, or you could go back to the place where Hester is the norm and the autistic kids can go to hell."

Georgie was going to make a fine lawyer someday.

"But how can I trade my family for anything? They're *everything* to me."

"From what you said, *they* threw *you* out. "

"But they'll take me back. They'll forgive me, and I won't be all alone." Inside Rae's chest, something fluttered like a panicked butterfly caught between her palms.

"Honey, if they threw you out once, they will do it again."

"They won't. I'll know what's at stake this time. I won't argue with them. I'll be good."

"Rae, sweetie, during your initiation to vodka, you told me that going to that church made you feel like you were going to snap in half. Now, you can go back there and be as quiet as a little gray mouse for as long as you can stand it, or you can take that second step into the rest of your life. Which is it going to be?"

Rae had to choose her family. Of course she did.

*Right?*

## **Book 9: Rae Flying**

# Rae Flying

FRIDAY afternoon, dust floated in the dorm's parking lot air as cars flung gravel and sped away.

The college students who were going home for spring break had heaped their back seats with black garbage bags stuffed full of laundry. Those who were going to Lake Powell or Lake Havasu for a week of drunken debauchery on the houseboats were already wearing bikinis and swilling cocktails out of energy drink cans.

Rae Stone shoved her suitcase with all her clothes into the trunk of her Ford Taurus and tossed the plastic shopping bags with her shoes, her toiletries, and a couple paperback novels on top of that. The dust that hung in the air felt gritty on her face, and she could taste the cars' exhaust.

She owned little. Selling her textbooks back to the bookstore for a pittance had taken minutes. Packing her car to move back to Pirtleville had taken a half hour. All her pitiful dreams had folded so quickly that Rae barely had time to mourn them.

It was better that she didn't grieve for those stillborn dreams at all. She was choosing her family, her flesh and blood, rather than a career and a clinic that might be, maybe.

She had never had a chance for a real relationship with Wulf.

She laid the books of Shakespeare's poetry that Wulf had given her on the passenger seat. Sunlight glinted on the gold leaf letters that spelled out *Shakespear* on the brown leather spines. The misspelling was weird, but she liked the books anyway. She touched the cover, and the leather was warm from the sun and her arms. At least she had something to remember him by.

Another teal-wrapped box had arrived Tuesday morning. She had dropped it off unopened at The Devilhouse with Glenda during one last furtive trip around nine in the morning, when she was sure that Wulf would be trading European stocks or something.

Glenda giggled sweetly about The Dom never showing up before two, the degenerate slacker.

Rae walked around her car and slid into the driver's side. The seat

warmed her butt, and the steering wheel bordered on being too hot in her hands. Her eyes burned.

She wouldn't cry. She had made this decision, and she wouldn't cry. She leaned her forehead on the steering wheel, was surprised that the sweat on her forehead didn't sizzle on the plastic, and let her eyes drip because she couldn't drive like this anyway.

Cars swerved around her beat-up Ford that she had bought used with her own money from the summer that she worked at Dairy Queen. Maybe she could get that job back. Mrs. West was a pleasant boss, and you got one free cone per shift. She should look forward to soft-serve chocolate ice cream cones.

Thinking about chocolate made her eyes drip more, *dang it*.

Someone tapped her window, and she waved away whoever it was. She wasn't going to see anyone here ever again, except for Hester, when she graduated next year and came home to Pirtleville to teach kindergarten.

The tapping intensified.

Rae waved away whoever it was harder.

"Reagan!" A man's voice. A man's voice with a British accent that hid German inflections breached her misery, and she turned her face away from the window because she didn't want Wulf to see her for the last time like *this*

.

Dieter was staring in the passenger-side window at her.

*Oh, great.*

His gray eyes took in her tear-streaked face, and he glanced up at Wulf behind her.

His horror must have been communicated to Wulf, because Wulf's voice became more urgent. "Reagan, come on. It's time to go," Wulf called through the glass. "The plane is ready."

Rae cracked her window. "I'm not going with you."

"Did you not get the passport? You should have received it Tuesday."

"It came in the mail. Thank you for that. Thank you for everything. It was sweet, but I can't go. "

*"Whyever not?"*

Rae stared at the tear drops splattering her thighs. "I'm going home."

"How can you finish your degree down there? Will this college send tutors?"

Rae glanced up at him. "I'm dropping out."

Wulf closed his eyes and rested his forehead against the glass. "Have you already withdrawn?"

"I can officially withdraw online, later. I just decided this morning."

He opened his blue, blue eyes again and, even through the window, pinned her to the seat with his stare. "The Border region isn't safe for you."

Rae screwed her eyes shut and repeated what her father had said to that concern: "God will provide."

"You mustn't do this. You mustn't drop out of school. You're brilliant. You can help those children." He stood. "Dieter, some privacy, please!"

Dieter walked a few steps away and nodded to the SUV. Three other men emerged and stood at the four compass points around the car, but at a distance.

Rae rolled her window down to talk to Wulf. A wave of cooler air rolled into the car and washed over her face and shoulders, bare in her tank top. "God will send someone else. Or something like that. I can't give up my family. If I have a chance of making things right with them, I should."

Wulf rested his arms on the window sill. With his arms like that, she couldn't roll it up, and she couldn't drive away. He said, "If you don't want to come to Paris with me, I understand. I won't pressure you, but Rae, you mustn't give up on your clinic. It's a brilliant idea. It's needed, dreadfully needed, from what I've read."

She tried an end run because she should just drive away, back to Pirtleville, in a plume of dust and regret. "You're going to be *late* for your flight."

"It's *my plane*. If I'm not on it, it won't leave. I can stand here and argue with you for six days and still attend Flicka's wedding. If you haven't changed your mind in six days, I'll skip the wedding and argue with you some more."

"You can't do that. "

"My father would assure you otherwise. We had a running blowout for a month when I was fifteen. I can and will keep you in college, no matter the cost."

"I have to go home. I can't throw my family away."

"I have never wanted to say anything to your family's detriment, but I saw how they treated you. Your family doesn't recognize the love in your heart. That sect would steal your passion."

"Please, Wulf. Just let me go."

“You’re making it very difficult to keep it all British, here, but I’m good at business, Rae. I’ll help you make A Ray of Light a reality. I took a million dollar swindle and turned it into a profitable enterprise in five years and more than doubled my investment in my spare time. My father lived like God in France as a young man and squandered a good portion of our family’s holdings, and I rebuilt it all in eight years.”

Even with her window down, the blazing sunlight heated the air in the car. Warm sweat misted her scalp. “You must work really hard.”

“Work makes life sweet.”

“I have to go home.”

He spoke over her, “You can finish your education anywhere in the world: Yale, Princeton, Oxford, the Sorbonne. Wherever you want, I can arrange for your matriculation. You can attend a graduate program or medical school. We can put a Ray of Light clinic in every town in the world. Instead of helping hundreds of children, you could help *millions*. Come with me, Rae. You’ll have the resources and the connections to develop your clinic. You can do everything you want to, and I will support you. I will *help* you.”

Her family hadn’t offered to help her.

“I implore you, don’t give up on yourself!” His desperation in his voice shocked her.

“But what use is it to gain the whole world but lose my *family*?”

“If your natural family can’t be what you need, if they can’t love you for who you are, then build a family who loves you. I’ll do anything for you, including give you the money and walk away, if that’s what it takes, if that’s what you want.” He reached in the window and wrapped his arms around her shoulders, pressing his forehead to hers. “Don’t give up on yourself.”

Her chest pressed in on her heart until she couldn’t breathe. “I don’t know what to do, Wulf. ”

“Come with me to Paris.” His blue eyes were closed, like he couldn’t bear to see her, and his golden eyelashes and his hand on the back of her neck trembled. “If you want, I’ll send you back. Your text said that they demanded that you return home over spring break. That’s this whole week.”

“That’s true.” In the letter of the ultimatum, but not the spirit of it.

“We’ll establish a safe word. If you say *Macbeth*, we’ll stop whatever we’re doing, no matter what it is, and I’ll have them fuel the plane and fly you back. I won’t argue. I won’t debate. Please, give me the chance to show you the world before you retreat to that church that would crush you.”

That wasn't what her mother had negotiated for, Rae knew, but her heart leapt up at the thought of a few more days with Wulf before she was forced back to Pirtleville. "You promise?"

"I would never violate my word. I've never lied to you."

He had never lied to her. Major omissions, yes, but he had slowly, eventually, told her truth and all the truth, she thought. "Okay."

"Just get in the SUV. I'll buy whatever you need."

He wasn't taking any chances that she would change her mind.

She said, "My stuff is all in the trunk. I'll just grab a few things." Her purse held her brand new passport, so she took it and the book of Shakespeare's poems from the passenger seat.

He stroked her back the whole time that she threw some clothes, pajamas, and toiletries in her backpack, not letting her farther away than an arm's reach. Her stomach clenched as he led her to the SUV and helped her inside because she was positive that she was doing the wrong thing.

Yet, as Dieter drove the SUV down the freeway and climbed the overpasses to the airport, Rae felt like she was flying and finally free.

She twined her fingers in Wulf's strong hand and held on.



## Terminal 7, Again

RAE sat in the hot back seat of the SUV with Wulf. Cold air from the air conditioner poured on her face and bare arms. Like that terrible night when Wulf had plucked her out of the cold desert, his arms wound tight around her.

Traffic jammed the freeways all around them. They got separated from the two security SUVs twice, leaving them without support. Dieter and Hans, in the front seat, jabbered into their radios until the vehicles returned to formation. Hans unholstered his sidearm, though he kept it low and out of sight of other drivers.

Wulf clutched Rae's shoulders, holding her tight. He pressed her face to his shoulder. His suit coat was softer against Rae's cheek than her best sweater.

One of the black SUVs peeled off the freeway at the wrong exit, causing a commotion in the front seat and squawking on the radios.

Wulf's arms tightened. His hand moved up to the back of her head.

She glanced up. The icy calm in his eyes suggested determination as he stared out the front windshield. That scent—spiced tea and citrus and that dark hint of something smoky—drifted out of his suit jacket.

With his arms wrapped around her like that, with his scarred and tattooed shoulder behind Rae's head, Wulf wasn't just holding Rae, he was shielding her.

The other SUV sped up the next entrance ramp, and Dieter held traffic up to let the other team into the lane ahead of them.

Wulf's arms relaxed a little.

"Is this normal?"

"This was a short trip," Wulf said, "and due to the airport's construction, there are almost no alternate routes."

"Explains the traffic jam."

"It is more difficult to maintain security when we are funneled into a predictable route. While we have been safe here, that can change on any bright, sunny day."

The dropping sun blasted a shock wave of white light off the back

window of the car in the next lane, blinding them all for a moment. Rae grabbed Wulf around his waist.

The SUV screeched and tipped forward, stopping hard.

Traffic around them stood motionless. The engines growled in the sun, revved high to run the air conditioners.

They inched along their predictable route.

Maybe this traffic jam was a sign, giving her time to change her mind and go home where she belonged.

Rae nuzzled her face into Wulf's coat, unwilling to leave him.

All three SUVs finally lumbered down an off-ramp and drove to the same private terminal as the weekend before, the one that looked like a cheap doctor's office with three-story picture windows facing the runway. The jet airplane that came for them looked mostly the same from the outside, as far as Rae could tell. Maybe this one was a little bigger. The letters painted on the tail read *G650*.

The same kind of plane, probably. Familiar. Normal.

Jetting off to Europe in a private plane should not feel normal.

As they sat in the terminal waiting for their plane to be prepared, Wulf asked her, "Which mobile phone carrier do you use?"

Rae told him.

"Ah, good. Hand your mobile to Dieter for a few moments so he can unlock it. Dieter, we have extra SIM cards, *ja*?"

Dieter nodded and caught the phone that Rae tossed to him. After he called someone on it for a moment, he wrote down and dialed in a long string of numbers.

Rae sidled over to watch him.

Dieter laid the phone on the peeling coffee table, popped open the back with tiny tools from a kit, and jimmied something miniscule out of the inside, violating its integrity. The silicon wafer was smaller than Rae's pinkie fingernail. Intricate silver tracery covered the surface. Dieter flipped open a three-ring binder full of clear pocket pages to a set of pockets marked *Frankreich* and inserted a new silicon chip.

He reassembled the phone. "There. When we are in France, it will work. It will have a different phone number, so people here must call that phone number to call you."

"Oh. Thanks." Even her phone was turning into an alien, unlocked and equipped with new innards. "That is cool, what you did."

Dieter inclined his head as he shrugged, a modest gesture. “I will do the rest of the phones when we are in the plane, if you want to see.”

“Sure.”

Wulf’s phone chimed and, *en masse*, they all crossed the sweltering tarmac and climbed the staircase outside to the door of the airplane.

The front part of this plane had, again, LayZee-Guy-sized white leather seats grouped around conference tables. The sideboard sported two flower arrangements that perfumed the air with roses and orchids. The windows, instead of being round yacht portholes, were elongated ovals, stretched even wider than on the other plane.

The dozen security guys fanned out and snagged chairs. Most of the men flipped out the footrests, reclined, and closed their eyes. Some of them secured sleeping masks over their eyes. Dieter and Hans asked one of the three stewardesses for a chess set.

“We’re in the back.” Wulf pointed toward a door in the wall across the plane.

Rae followed. Wulf opened the door, pulled her in after him, and tossed his overnight bag on the blue-quilted bed.

Rae had seen pictures of rock stars’ tour busses that looked like rolling luxury apartments. This was a five-star hotel bedroom that could fly. The four-poster white-oak bed stood flush with the back wall. Huge orchid flower arrangements decorated the sideboards.

She said, “Wulf, you didn’t need to do this.”

“Do what?” He opened his hand luggage and tossed blue pajamas on the bed beside him.

“This insane airplane.” Her wide arms included all the extravagance.

He shrugged. “I always get a bed when I travel transcontinental. I flew sitting up, harnessed to a seat, while in the military and discovered that I detest it. I’m not terribly lavish with my tastes.”

“You’re *not*?” Rae hadn’t actually meant to say that out loud. Her face heated. “I didn’t mean—”

“Not at all. Some of my friends aspire to being Louis the Fourteenth with an auto collection, plus planes, plus yachts, plus apartments. It’s astonishing they can keep track of it all. The lavatory is in there.” He pointed to yet another door beside the headboard.

Rae went over and poked her head into another room yet farther toward the tail section of the plane.

Though everything was squeezed in for efficiency, a glassed-in shower stall took up one corner of the bathroom. The sink, commode, and an extra toilet-thing reflected in the gold-framed mirror on the wall. She pulled her head back and threw her backpack on the bed. "Oh, my God, Wulf. Seriously."

Wulf was busy arranging his things. "In the morning, as we're passing over England, I usually take breakfast in the main cabin so that my morning security detail can freshen up. The rest of them will proceed to the hotel to settle in, so they can refresh there."

So she should be prepared to vacate in the morning. "Um, what's the schedule?"

"Supper will be served soon after we're in the air, then we can retire in here to watch a movie, if you like, then sleep. We'll arrive in France about eight in the morning, local time."

Rae looked around the small room. "Is there a TV?"

Wulf reached over and tapped a button on the nightstand.

A huge flat-screen television ascended from the bed's footboard.

Rae jumped back. Luckily, Wulf was still looking for something in his small bag and didn't notice her hick reaction to such electronic folly. She would have to be careful not to embarrass him in front of his elite friends with her red-neckedness.

Wulf tossed a ditty bag into the bathroom and held out his hand. "Would you prefer to eat privately, or join the others?"

"Whatever you think."

His head cocked to the side. "Rae, you're allowed to have opinions."

Her anxiety came out in a small wail. "I don't know what opinions to have."

He gathered her into his arms. "You don't need to do anything that makes you uncomfortable."

Flying made her uncomfortable, but she wasn't going to admit that to Wulf. She cuddled harder into his arms, against his solid chest, and tried to bluster her way through. "Well, if I would've known about this plane, we would've waited to join the Mile-High Club instead of doing it last week in that teeny lavatory."

He laughed. "Come on," he said. "I usually sit down for take-offs and landings, then we'll eat. There are two seats out front for us."

She followed him because she felt like she was lost in fairyland and

didn't want to lose her fairy prince guide.

## The Mile-High Club, Again

THE plane tilted up and flew into the sky, made a sweeping turn that pushed Rae down and sideways in the white seat, and flew away from the blazing desert sunset.

Rae and Wulf sat at the forward conference table, facing the open cockpit door. The two pilots inside went about their routine, mumbling standardized phrases to the control tower and flipping switches. They tap-clicked squares on touchscreen controls.

Wulf held her hand. Even though she wasn't nearly as nervous about flying as last time, she didn't want to let go of his strong fingers.

This was it. The last week. She had been letting him go for so long in her mind that it was beginning to feel unreal, but a reprieve didn't mean that the end wasn't coming.

His palm and fingers warmed her hand. The engines keened, and the plane barreled out of the city and banked above the desert.

When they were at altitude, Dieter called something up the plane to Wulf, who answered, "Yes, release the beast." Wulf turned back into the table and asked Rae, "Wine?"

"No, thanks. I think flying makes me a little queasy."

"Oh?" He beckoned to one of the stewardesses.

"After we got back from Los Angeles, I was kind of dizzy the whole next day."

He ordered himself a glass and asked for still water for Rae.

The stewardesses served grilled trout and steamed vegetables for supper, and after a week of microwaved frozen meals with the so-apologetic and yet manipulative Hester, Rae dug her fork in and made short work of the delicate fish and fresh food that melted in her mouth.

The black cat Brunhilde appeared and wove through Wulf's legs.

Rae asked him, "You're taking your cat to Europe?"

"If I'm gone for more than three days, Rosamunde says that she cries and stops eating, so we obtained a veterinary passport for her. She's been to Japan and London, too."

Wulf lifted the cat onto his lap and pet her with long strokes that bordered on hula-dancing hand waving. One of his blond eyebrows rose, and his studied expression was diabolical. “Besides, how am I supposed to do my impression of an evil Teutonic overlord,” his German accent had become really pronounced, “unless I am stroking *zee* cat?”

Rae laughed at him. “That is so *wrong* .”

He shrugged. “And they say we Germans have no sense of humor.” He fed the cat a tidbit of trout out of his hand and set her on the floor of the airplane, where she arched her back against his leg, begging, so he kept feeding her. She occasionally begged for fish from the other security guys, and every one of them slipped her a tidbit.

No wonder her fur was so glossy. That cat was going to be a butterball in a few months.

After supper, Wulf led Rae back to the bedroom.

None of the guys snickered. Indeed, they all seemed quite busy making up the recliner airplane seats with sheets because all the chairs had folded down flat into twin beds.

In the airplane’s bedroom, their queen-sized bed had been turned down like they were in a hotel.

Good Lord, even the stewardesses knew what they were going to do back here.

Rae’s skin became more sensitive, anticipating Wulf’s hands on her, despite her mortification.

Wulf shut the door behind him. “It’s only eight o’clock, local time,” he said, “but we may want to retire early. We’ve a full day tomorrow, and the time difference can be disconcerting.”

They weren’t going to scruff like mad minks? Was he losing interest in her already? Maybe that was a sign that she should have gone home to Pirtleville, or at least that it really was coming to an end. “Okay.”

“I’ll freshen up first. Would you care to find a movie?”

“Sure.” While he was gone, Rae clicked through the menus and menus and lists of every movie she had ever heard of but couldn’t decide on one. It was all so confusing.

Wulf emerged from the bathroom, dressed in long blue pajama pants that shimmered like silk and a faded Noah and the Whale tee shirt. The soft material clung to his shoulders and rounded chest.

Rae took a quick shower in the airplane bathroom, careful not to use too

much water, and got ready for bed. She was glad that she had brought jammies because she would have felt pretty stupid if all she had was lacy underwear and Wulf rolled over and went to sleep.

Back in the bedroom, Wulf looked her up and down.

Rae cringed, knowing how not-like-a-princess she looked in her blue fleece jammies with puffy white clouds on them.

Wulf groaned, rolled across the bed, and picked her up in his arms. She even didn't have time to protest before his mouth found hers and he kissed her thoroughly. His lips nibbled and sucked on her lips, then her neck.

Rae wrapped her arms around his neck in relief and kissed him back.

He laid her on the bed and climbed on top of her. A puff of cinnamon-cloves and tangerines and masculine scent blew from his shirt.

"I should let you sleep," he said in between kissing her. "You should be rested for your first time in Paris."

She breathed. "I didn't think fleece jammies would do this to you."

"The pajamas are so young, so innocent, yet the fact that you are a *woman* shines through like sunlight through lace." He pulled at the neckline, mouthing her shoulder. "I've never seen a woman wear them before."

"Seriously?"

"Not even in my adolescent fumbblings." His hands slipped under her top, caressing the skin over her ribs. Rae stretched under his hands. "Everything is new, with you. Everything is different."

Maybe she was reading too much into things.

Maybe she should take Georgie's advice and live for the moment, hold Wulf tight, and enjoy one last booty-moon with him.

*Booty-moon*, that was funny, and she breathed a little deeper and kissed him.

His lips were soft on hers, and tender. His kiss wasn't the attack of a famished man ripping meat off a bone but the soft exploration of a man savoring something succulent. His lips brushed hers, sucking, holding, and he deepened the kiss until her mouth opened to him. His tongue stroked hers, discovering every sensitive part of her mouth.

A trembling started in the pit of her stomach, a little trepidation. It was easy to get swept away by passion. Lust could be explained away. This purposeful assault left her time enough that she knew he was going to possess her until there might not be anything left.

Rae lifted her arms and stroked his neck. For one more week, she should



let it happen.

He moved down from her mouth, taking the skin on her neck while he unbuttoned her pajamas. She scrunched up his tee shirt, but he reared up and stripped the shirt off over his head. His hard chest was all smooth muscle under her hands, and even that tattoo on his shoulder felt like suede.

He pushed the rest of their pajamas away and lay beside her, stroking her until her flesh burned for him. Rae arched under his touch and tugged at his shoulders, trying to roll him on top of her.

He resisted and stroked the undersides of her arms until she raised them above her head, like he was smoothing them into place. When her hands were stretched far up on the pillows, he captured them there with one hand and continued stroking her.

Maybe it was the unreality of a bed flying through the night, but she was so soothed that she forgot to be afraid of flying.

He held her hands pressed to the bed and kissed her again, probing her mouth with his tongue. Rae bent one knee and tried to push her body against him, but he rocked her hip back down to the bed with his free hand. His fingers trailed over her pelvis, wandering, while he kissed her.

His mouth finally left hers, and she gasped. He nibbled down her neck, her chest, and his hot mouth found her breasts. She arched, trying to hurry him, but his languid pace didn't change. She was going to be begging soon.

He cupped her other breast with his other hand, almost like he was measuring it, then he did the same thing to the one he was sucking. Rae cracked her eyelids open and saw him glance at her face, like he was concerned or confused, in a sharp way.

She opened her eyes, just about to ask if something was wrong, but he dropped his head to her breast and teased one of her nipples to a hard peak, until every tug of his mouth seemed to pull desire from her core, until it almost hurt with wanting. He moved to her other breast and did it again, drawing her into his mouth, and his hand meandered over her stomach.

He had always liked her boobs. He must still like them.

Just as he pulled his mouth away from her breast, his hand slid down her belly, reaching for her.

Rae's hips bucked up, trying to meet his hand, but his fingers parted just before he dove into her slit. He stroked the lips of her pussy, teasing her and pressing her together. Her clit swelled and her pussy heated, wanting his touch, but he held her hands above her head and rubbed her through her own

skin.

They rose and fell as the plane rocked in the air.

Her breath came so fast, and a cry formed in her throat. She whispered, “Wulf.”

“Say it again.” His fingers rubbed the center of her soft folds, even as he held her shut.

Her whisper was hoarse this time, “Wulf!”

“Wulfram Augustus,” he said and nuzzled her neck.

His name slipped into her ear, and she said it back to him. “Wulfram Augustus.”

His fingers parted her body, exposing the sensitive parts of her. He prompted, “Wulfram Augustus Heinrich Ernst.”

Her hands clenched into fists with tension. “Wulfram Augustus Heinrich Ernst.”

He slid a finger down her center, and a zing shot up her body, lifting her off the bed. She gasped hard. His breath roughened. “Wulfram Augustus Heinrich Ernst Georg Berthold Friedrich.”

She repeated it all, breathless around his name, and his finger slipped over her throbbing clit, slick with her cream. Ecstasy swam up her spine. “Oh!”

“Wulfram Augustus Heinrich Ernst Georg Berthold Friedrich,” he drew a shuddering breath, “Wilhelm Louis Ferdinand, Prinz von Hannover.”

“Wulfram Augustus Heinrich,” his hand was on her, “Ernst Georg Berthold,” his finger slipped *in* her, “Friedrich Wilhelm Louis Ferdinand,” and rubbed her inside until she thought she would cry out, “Prinz von Hannover. Oh, please, Wulf!”

He shifted his weight and parted her legs with his knee, thrusting inside her with one long stroke. “I wanted to hear you say it, once. ”

She was beyond being able to say it all again. He released her hands, and she clutched him to her, feeling his cock all the way inside her, and frantic energy drove her to wrap herself around him. “Wulf!”

He worked in and out of her as she tried to pull him deeper, wanting more.

He whispered, “Hold onto me.”

She grabbed his neck with her arms and held on for dear life because she was so close to coming that she might scream with need.

The bed dropped away, and Wulf’s arm under her back lifted her. Her

head lolled back. Wulf set her upright, still inside her, impaled on him. She slid down him, taking him all into herself, and her body clenched around his cock. Her breasts rubbed down the light hair on his chest, and she raised herself up on her knees and took him in again, sliding down him and milking him as she pulled up.

Wulf grabbed her, crushed her against his muscled chest, and kissed her hard, tangling one hand in her hair. He wrapped his other arm around her waist and pumped her onto himself. Pleasure whipped through her with every thrust, and her body clamped down on him, tightening as he forced himself inside.

Her orgasm ripped through her, and she bowed backward, fighting his strength. Wulf held her body tight to himself as he thrust. His hoarse grunts were soft on her chest, and her pussy fluttered around his hardness.

His cock pulsed as he shot into her. He held her hips down on him as he throbbed. Every pulse thrummed like a bass drum beat inside her body.

Rae's forehead pressed the black tattoo on Wulf's shoulder as her breath rasped in her throat, slowing. She tried to rise up, but he stopped her. His cheek was rough on her chest. His arms were so tight and his cock so deep in her that another spasm gripped her, and she whimpered, holding onto him.

His arms loosened. She slumped against his shoulder and kissed the black and cherry ink there. He caught her as she fell sideways and laid her across the bed.

He rolled, lying beside her, and stared at the ceiling of the airplane. "You're so young," he said with a catch like despair in his voice. His hand crept to his forehead, and he clutched his blond hair near his temple. "I should have left you alone. I should have let you have your life."

Rae curled around him, entwining her leg around his. "Not yet."

His arms gathered her in, and he held her.

"Yes," he said. "Not yet."

# Magic Carpet

RAE stirred in the warm bed in the airplane's dim bedroom, still unused to a man sleeping beside her with his strong limbs wrapped around her body. The lights in the ceiling barely glowed so that the room looked like late dusk in the desert.

Wulf's overnight bag and her backpack were darker lumps on the dresser. Outside the portholes, clouds and stars streaked by. Minor turbulence bobbed the bed, and Rae clutched the sheets.

She turned her head, just a little.

Wulf was sleeping beside her, turned toward her, breathing softly. Just like when she had driven them down to Pirtleville, he looked extravagantly innocent when he slept. His blond hair, mussed, feathered over his forehead. His arm over her waist was heavy-limp with sleep. His cologne—the spices and citrus—had faded, leaving just the subtlest notes of masculine scent.

The corners of his mouth lifted in the smallest smile.

Smoothing his hair back or touching his face would probably wake him up, so Rae didn't move, even though she wanted to kiss his smile.

The turbulence ended, and the plane glided through the night.

The tremors in Rae's chest smoothed, and she breathed, watching him sleep.

So much craziness warred in her mind when she was awake—that he was a prince and he hadn't told her, that so much money swirled around him, that their worlds overlapped so little in the smallest sliver of shared experience, that sexual magnetism that underlay every move he made—and it all got in the way of her being able to see him.

The airplane's faint light traced his cheekbones and jawline with pale blue lines. The blue tint in the light faded the gold of his hair to mere human blond. If he opened his eyes, that deep azure would overwhelm the pale lights.

How could she not have known that he was a different breed than she was, with his spun-gold hair and sapphire eyes? She was just a garden-variety American mud hen. She wasn't ashamed of who and what she was, but it

couldn't be changed, any more than he could change what he was.

*One more week.* She had one more week with him.

A cold tear dripped off her eyelashes. She turned her face on the pillow to wipe it away.

She wasn't going to cry this week away. This was her last week with him, and she was going to snatch up every moment and *live* every second of it.

Over the dip of Wulf's trim waist, two black triangles popped up.

Brunhilde the cat peered over Wulf's side at Rae. Her ears flipped back as she yawned, and her teeth snapped closed.

Rae dearly wished for her phone to take a picture for Georgie of the much-discussed cat sleeping along Wulf's spine.

The cat stood and stretched hard, then picked her way around the edges of the bed. She collapsed against Rae's side and purred.

Rae scratched the cat's soft ears, and Brunhilde purred harder and closed her moonlit eyes.

Yeah, a person would have to be pretty hard-hearted to let this little cat cry.

Rae drifted off again, sleeping in the bed that flew among the stars, and dreamed a magic carpet was flying her to Paris.

# King George V

MOTIONLESS cars surrounded the SUV, locking them in.

In the front seat, Dieter and Hans twitched like they always did in bumper-to-bumper traffic.

In the back seat of the SUV, Wulf had his arms wrapped around Rae but much more loosely while she texted her brother Zeke, her insane cousin Craigh, Hester, and Georgie.

*I've gone away for a few days to think. If you need me, I'll be at this cell number. ~Rae*

She tapped the screen to close the text page and hoped no one would call. When you fly away for one last jaunt into fairyland, the real world should not intrude via your cell phone.

She looked out the window, staring at her first sight of honest-to-God, sharp-as-a-paper-cut Paris.

Now Rae knew why that blue color on china patterns was called French blue, because the sky soaring above Paris really shined that rich true blue.

At the end of the street, the trees converged toward an enormous white slab with an arch cut through the middle. Sky and sunlight blazed through the tall center and all around.

Even Rae recognized the *Arc de Triomphe de l'Étoile* from her French classes, where her Cajun TA had tried to instill a respect for everything French in a class of slacker undergraduates.

They drove toward it, and it got bigger, and it kept getting bigger. The white mammoth towered over the twelve streets that radiated from it. People strolled and sunned themselves in the paved courtyard around the base.

The SUV drove around the traffic circle, and the *Arc* revolved outside Rae's window .

It looked half as thick as it was wide, and it was a lot bigger than in her TA's pictures.

The SUVs circled, then drove down the Champs-Élysées, the most beautiful street in the world.

Wulf tugged his wallet from his suit jacket pocket, poked around inside,

and handed a sheaf of multicolored Euros to Dieter, who took the hundreds, maybe thousands, of dollars without comment. He tucked the money in a breast pocket inside his suit jacket.

Wulf handed Rae a credit card with her name on it.

“No. I can’t.” She tried to shove it back in his hand.

“Your credit cards will not be operational unless you’ve made prior arrangements with your bank.”

“I’ll be fine.” Rae poked his chest with the card, trying to shove it in his suit jacket. “I’ll just borrow some money from Dieter if I need to, but I’ll pay you back.”

“Keep it for emergencies. If we go our separate ways for an afternoon, you might want lunch. You can buy anything you want, of course. I only ask that if you buy a car, we should go together.” He smiled. “I enjoy shopping for cars.”

Yeah, Rae had figured that one out. “I am so *not* going to buy a car!”

“Anything else, don’t bother mentioning it.”

“Okay, but just for emergencies.” She tucked the card in her purse.

Trees lined the wide street, and stores that Rae had never heard of but also a bunch that were at her local mall near the university, like Nike and The Gap, stood behind the sidewalk, which caused her a moment of feeling like she had fallen back into her normal life. One last glance behind the SUV at the *Arc* made her head spin. White stone buildings towered above the stores, and the lack of signs above suggested they were apartments or offices. Fluttering flowers overflowed window boxes on every one of the hundreds of window railings, a riot of reds, pinks, and peaches among the green trees and white stone because it was springtime in Paris.

Wulf scooted over, wrapped his arms around her, and watched the city go by over her shoulder. She leaned her cheek against his smooth skin, and that rich scent of oranges and cinnamon and sex emanated from his clothes. She could lie against his body and just smell him for hours.

The SUV turned right, and the buildings got whiter and the stores’ signs got smaller. Most of these store names, Rae didn’t know: Louis Vuitton, Hermès, Jean-Paul Gaultier, Givenchy.

The SUV rode up on the curb, and Hans and Dieter hopped out and surveyed the sidewalk and the road as they held the doors for Wulf and Rae.

She stepped out, and Dieter took her elbow and hustled her around the SUV to the sidewalk.

Three arched doorways opened from the street, and a bellman trotted to meet them. Black ironwork scrolled around glass panes that glittered with lights within. Above one door, gold laurels blazed behind gold letters that read *George V*, whom Rae assumed was yet another king somewhere.

Man, everything that Wulf did was somehow related to royalty. She really needed to read up on who all these guys were.

Dieter intercepted the hotel man crossing the sidewalk and said, “Herr von Hannover’s advance party checked in two days ago. He will take the suite.”

“*Oui, Monsieur. La Suite Empire. S’il vous plait?*” He led them below the *George V* engraving and into the lobby.

Rae smelled the rich perfume of roses before her brain registered that the dozens of fuchsia bursts around her were tied rose bouquets. The flowers were braced in clear crystal globes filled with yet more fuchsia rose petals. Tiered arrangements of those spherical vases flanked the front desk and filled the space of the lobby. Pale green hydrangea bouquets topped the displays like shooting stars, towering six feet over Rae’s head. She tried not to gawk, but the lush flowers assaulted her, crowding her from all sides. The roses’ fragrance overpowered her nose, and she could taste rose water on the back of her tongue.

Wulf took her elbow and nudged her toward the elevator over to the side.

The lobby staff inclined their heads to Wulf as they walked through, and Rae watched her ballet slipper flats stepping on a white marble floor so glistening that she felt guilty for walking on it.

Once they were all inside the elevator, the bellman pushed the button with a seven on it. They rose, and Rae held onto Wulf’s arm, trying not to look as insignificant as she felt.

“Flicka has the top floor,” Wulf said. “We’ll freshen up first.”

Oh, Lord. They were going to meet his sister right away. Shouldn’t Rae take some etiquette classes before she met a princess? Wasn’t some sort of formality instructor supposed to show up and teach her how to not be an idiot and improve her pronunciation? That was how all the stories went, dang it.

She blurted, “What should I wear?” She had thrown her better clothes, some sundresses and the snug black suit, in the suitcase, but everything loomed larger here.

“I brought some clothes from the office.”

Surely an evening gown would be overdressing for a Saturday morning,



but a gray business suit and a couple cocktail dresses had appeared on The Devilhouse racks in her size a week ago.

He must have bought them two or even three weeks ago. If he had bought them for her to wear here in Paris, he must have been planning this for weeks. She was annoyed at his presumption and frantically grateful that he had. “Did you have someone buy all these clothes for this trip?”

“Two weeks ago, I had no intention of being in France this week at all. There just weren’t enough clothes in your size.”

The bellman opened the suite door for them.

Yellow rose bundles were tied into bubbles of buds and propped in the same glass globes in this room, set off by more pale green hydrangeas. Violets sprawled from vases on the cherry dining table and the coffee table in the living room.

Rae’s mind verged on hysteria because the hot pink roses from the lobby would clash with this suite’s pale gold silk drapes and matching stuffed furniture and the dark blue carpeting with scrolling gold laurels and the alabaster busts of Napoleon and Josephine perched on a shining dark wood pedestals, so the yellow roses were in much better taste and *oh, Lord*, she wouldn’t know how to match flowers to a room like this ever at all.

Rae glanced back. Dieter handed the bellman some bills from the stash in his breast pocket.

Their luggage had beaten them to the room, and Rae’s purple backpack and dirty plaid suitcase huddled among the pile of matching black suitcases and garment bags. One of Wulf’s other security guys leaned over the balcony railing, surveying, while another one checked the other rooms. The traffic on the Champs-Élysées whirled in the distance.

A small, black, furry face peeked around the hill of luggage and meowed.

The knock at the door surprised her. Was there yet more luggage to bring up?

Instead, hotel waiters wheeled two room service food carts inside.

Wulf shot a look at Hans, who shrugged. The other three security guys watched the carts roll in.

Wulf inspected the carts and lifted the top off a silver teapot and sniffed. “They must have a file on me.”

He poured from the teapot into two delicate white cups and handed her one. The scent of chocolate mixed with the fragrance of the roses.

He snagged a pastry. “Rae, would you like some?”

Cinched-tight evening gowns and lumpy cocktail dresses rose in her memory. “I’d love some of those grapes.”

“Good. Fruit is very healthy.” He handed her a china plate with bunch of red grapes so plump with juice that Rae wasn’t going to be able to get a finger between them to pry them apart. “I usually take a vitamin in the mornings. Would you like one?”

“Sure.” She held out her plate.

Wulf rummaged in his carry-on and found a bottle of multi’s. He shook one out and set it on her plate. “Do you usually take a vitamin in the morning?”

“Yeah.”

“*Goot.*”

This solicitousness about her health was weird. “Thanks.”

“Are you sure you don’t want anything else to eat?”

“No. I just feel like eating lightly.”

“Perhaps a little sick from the plane?”

“Yeah. Maybe.”

“Right.” He turned to his security guys, all of whom were displaying a classic Pavlovian response to the French pastries. “Then, *Welfenlegion*, you may attack.”

The security guys descended on the cart with destruction in their eyes.

Rae set the hot chocolate cup on a desk and ate a grape. The taut skin burst when she bit down, releasing a torrent of grape juice into her mouth. The taste was amplified, like it had more grapiness than any grape she had ever eaten. Rae slurped a sweet drip rather than let it run down her chin.

Brunhilde the cat clambered to the top of the luggage pile and perched there, her tail swishing, staring at Paris like the whole city was a French mouse she wanted to chase.

Rae really had to text Georgie and tell her that she could stop worrying about that cat.

The grapes and the hot chocolate calmed her, and the jitters were just leaving her legs enough that she thought she might be able to sit down, when Rae looked out the silk-framed window over Paris.

They were on the seventh floor, far enough into the blue French sky to afford them a clear view over the antique buildings all decorated like gothic cathedrals, all the way to the Parisian spire of the Eiffel Tower.

Rae’s trembling legs managed to stumble to a chair, and she sat, sipping

rich chocolate, while she stared at the Eiffel Tower that dove upward into the sky. Sunlight danced on the side facing her.

Six weeks ago, when she had filled out The Devilhouse application that asked about all the countries she had never been to, she could not have imagined *this*.

Wulf sat beside her. “It’s beautiful, *ja*?”

“Yeah.” She ate some more grapes and was careful not to drip juice.

“I never tire of looking at it. You’re all right with the jet lag?”

“I’m okay. A little tired. I’ll sleep well tonight.”

Wulf gathered her under his arm, and the cinnamon and oranges of his cologne mixed with the roses warming in the spring morning.

# The Princess of Hannover

A bellman wearing a black and gold uniform came to collect them from the Empire Suite, and Rae and Wulf rode the elevator yet farther up the hotel to the very top. Rae's feet felt heavy, like she was just exhausted.

She had worn one of her own sundresses, still reticent about wearing one of The Devilhouse's cocktail dresses, which were all too short and beaded and tight to meet Wulf's sister, the princess. Her sundress seemed tight across the bust. Last week's self-pitying cupcake binge must have added a few pounds.

When she had emerged from the bathroom after changing, Wulf had given her a glance that might have scalded her body right through the thin cotton, though one of his eyebrows dipped to make his grin blondly devilish. He did seem to like her boobs.

A man opened the door and allowed them entrance into the foyer, which had a light wooden floor, honey cream walls, and heavy bronze drapes. Rae reached out and touched one, letting her fingers trail over the smooth silk that felt as thick as burlap. Wulf touched her other hand, not scolding her for gaping but leading her into the penthouse.

*Penthouse.*

The Marsden Hotel in Pirtleville didn't have a penthouse. The Bridal Suite was just two regular rooms with a wall knocked out.

She had read about penthouses in books, but she wasn't prepared. The hallway led to a living room with gilded furniture and modern couches that was bigger than her parents' house. Maybe it only looked bigger because the French doors, opened to the terrace outside to catch the cool spring breeze, displayed all of Paris at the hotel's feet. The Eiffel Tower was right there, again, just off to the right, reminding Rae that she-was-in-Paris-she-was-in-Paris-she-was-in-Paris .

She clutched Wulf's arm.

In the middle of the living room, a young woman stood on a stepstool while a man crouched at her feet, pinning the hem of her sleek white dress that shimmered in the morning light. She looked up, smiled at Rae, and then

her face broke into a huge smile as she leapt off the stool and ran.

“Wulfie!” The woman skittered with tiny steps and threw herself into Wulf’s arms. She spouted a happy babble in German that Rae couldn’t follow at all other than there seemed to be some scolding mixed in with the delirium.

The guy fitting her dress rocked back and sat cross-legged. He spat pins into his hand.

Behind him, Ms. Keller came through a door, waved to Rae, and bustled off. Wow. Wulf had brought his house manager to Paris for his sister’s wedding. That was nice.

Of course, he had brought his cat, too.

After patting the young woman’s back a few times, Wulf set her back from himself. His smile was equal parts bemusement and fondness. “Rae, may I present my sister, Flicka. Flicka, this is my friend, Reagan Stone. She prefers ‘Rae.’ English, French, or Spanish.”

“Pleased to meet you.” Flicka held out her hand. Her bright smile and posh English accent, just like Wulf’s, set Rae at ease.

Rae shook her hand, and Flicka’s hand seemed to be perfectly soft skin all over. She didn’t have a hangnail or a writing callus anywhere. Her face had no pores. She was a blond princess doll, come to life, with brilliant green eyes that really blinked.

Rae said, “Pleased to meet you, too. Is this your wedding dress?”

“Yes. It’s Elie Saab Couture.” Her generous inflection was the same as if Rae had praised Flicka’s pot roast and she had recited the recipe, including the secret ingredient. “Who are you wearing to the wedding?”

“I’m not sure I’m even going.”

“Of course you’re coming to my wedding.” Flicka turned to Wulf. Her tone dared him to contradict her. “Isn’t she?”

Wulf smiled at Rae over Flicka’s head. “If I must go, you must come with me. That was the bargain.”

Rae nodded, accepting. Going to a wedding together must not *mean* to royalty what it would *mean* to the plain folk of Pirtleville .

“Good. Now, who are you wearing?”

Rae looked up at Wulf, but his blank stare and shrug meant that no help was coming from that quarter. “I don’t know.”

“So we should find you some clothes?” Flicka glanced at Wulf for confirmation, and he nodded. Flicka raised one perfect eyebrow. She turned back and looked Rae down and then up. Rae stood straight for the inspection.

Flicka's eyes slid sideways to accuse Wulf. "She's very young, *ja*?"

Wulf bit his lower lip. "Twenty-one."

"Oh, Wulfie," Flicka sighed. She looked back at Rae, scrutinizing her figure and height. Rae should have been dieting for months. Flicka announced, "Marchesa."

The French word for *walk* is *marcher*. Had Flicka told her to walk across the room to be better dissected in a French-like dialect, or maybe Italian? No one seemed to be staring at her, expecting anything, so she didn't move.

Wulf asked, "Can we find something *prêt-à-porter*?"

"Not for *my* wedding, you won't. This is Paris. She'll need a day dress for the religious wedding and a gown for the reception. I'll call my people to take her measurements this afternoon. We'll have a fitting Monday and a final fitting Thursday, mark my word. I'll send someone to do her hair and make-up on Saturday, too." To Rae, "Tomorrow is a spa day for you, *chère amie*." She turned back to Wulf. "Have you procured jewelry for her yet?"

"I was hoping to stay in France," Wulf muttered. His British accent made it sound like *Frahnce*.

This was all shorthand for something else. Rae listened, trying to decipher what they were saying.

Flicka rolled her eyes. "Take her to *Schloss Marienburg*. She has a heart-shaped face. The Laurel Tiara will suit her. I'm using the Wedding Tiara, of course."

"You think Rae should wear the Laurel Tiara to your wedding?" Wulf asked. His eyebrows had drifted up.

"Absolutely." Flicka's voice focused like she was ready to argue.

Rae watched the brother and sister discuss something entirely other than jewelry.

Wulf said, "You met her five minutes ago."

"And yet I know that she would look beautiful in it. And what are *you* wearing to my wedding, Wulfie?"

His imperious glance down at her seemed sarcastic. "I hadn't given it a thought."

Flicka rolled her eyes again. "Armani is doing Pierre's uniform and his men's tuxedos. I'll call them to fit you at the same time that my people come for Rae. Honestly, Wulfie, you show up *to my wedding* at the last minute and expect me to provide you with proper clothes."

Flicka turned to Rae. Her lips were pursed tight, though a gleeful smile

lurked around the corners. “I don’t know how you put up with him.”

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Back in the extravagant elevator, as Rae’s feet lightened and they descended to their floor, Rae elbowed Wulf. “Wulfie?”

Wulf’s smile tightened. “My sister takes certain liberties that are unbecoming our station in life. Please don’t call me Wulfie. It was cute when she was six.”

Madeleines and Lost Time

AT the spa appointment the next morning, Rae was painted, polished, trimmed, styled, waxed, depilated, exfoliated, and considering defenestrating herself if she didn't get away from all the fuss, when Wulf collected her and took her to lunch. His slow perusal from her pink toenails to her new, layered haircut that brought out her soft curls made the morning worth it.

Rae and Wulf spent their days exploring the glory that is Paris, every twisting street, every park blooming in the spring, the grand palaces and museums, and everything else that Rae had ever read about in books.

For breakfasts, Wulf took her to perfect sidewalk cafes for croissants so flakey that they collapsed when she bit into them. They went to crêperies for snacks, and he dodged into chocolate shops at every opportunity, feeding her nut-sprinkled mendicants and intense little truffles.

They ate madeleines dipped in tea at a tiny café in the Latin Quarter.

Wulf said, "The first time I ate these was at *Le Rosey* afternoon snack when I was six, though we drank hot chocolate, not tea. Constantin tried to steal mine, but I didn't let him. He pouted."

Rae set her hand atop Wulf's hand, wishing she knew something to say.

Dieter, sitting at another table, glanced over at them. His eyes had widened, and he glanced over at Friedhelm near the back wall, who wore the same, shocked expression. When Dieter saw that Rae had noticed him, he resumed reading on his phone.

Wulf said, "That was a good day, eating cookies."

"I've never had madeleines before," Rae said, dunking the buttery cookie in her tea. "I guess I'll always remember you."

Wulf's hand turned under hers, and they sat, holding hands and eating shell-shaped cookies.

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After a few days, the jittery newness wore off, and Rae's family's ultimatum receded in her mind.



Occasionally, tentatively, Paris became real around her.

Wulf's security guys revolved around them like a swirling bubble while they toured museums and walked the tree-lined streets.

For suppers, Rae and Wulf dined in restaurants with no prices on the menus with the irrepressible Flicka, who quizzed Rae on what she had seen, what she thought, where they had shopped, and how the fittings for her dresses had gone.

Supper took hours every night, which ran counter to Rae's American expectation of efficiency.

Wulf dropped his head beside her shoulder. "In France, when you reserve a table, it's your table for the night. They expect you to sit and talk for hours."

And so they did.

And so did the chattering crowd around them, who never stirred from their tables, either, so it must have been all right.

The first night, when they went to Le Meurice in a hotel across from the Tuileries Gardens, Flicka eventually left to attend to wedding details, and Rae and Wulf made up for lost time and talked about all the silly things they had never told each other, their favorite music, books they had read, and childhood stories.

Rae began feel *real* again instead of like a weepy bundle of nerves, so she told him stupid stuff to make him laugh, like when she won the county sheep-riding rodeo when she was four, and how the measure of a man's ego may be taken by the size of his belt buckle.

Wulf still didn't talk much, just a short anecdote here and there when Rae began to run dry, but he found pictures using his phone's internet browser to illustrate his sparsely detailed stories.

One picture showed himself and three other men bundled in thick ski clothes. Ski goggles hung around their necks, and they held ski poles and long rifles. Wulf's skin was ruddy with cold. Wulf was reared back laughing, and they all held bronze medals stamped with the five Olympic rings around their necks up for the camera.

Rae's jaw dropped yet again. "You were in the *Olympics*?"

Wulf's smile was self-deprecating. "Swiss team, four-man relay biathlon, skiing and marksmanship combined. Switzerland is not large, biathlon is not a popular sport, and a school chum was the team captain. He needed one more man for the relay. I had just mustered out of the military, and I have

skied all my life. My most pertinent qualification was that I was available. Sadly, it was more nepotism than athleticism.”

*Yeah. Right.*

While Sigmund Freud, the father of modern psychology, probably never actually said that “Sometimes, a cigar is just a cigar,” Rae would have bet that a sniper’s rifle, the gun that killed Wulf’s brother, blew holes through Wulf and his friend Yoshi, and charged Wulf with notoriety, was not just a gun to Wulf, not when he had mastered it to the point where he was demonstrably one of the best marksmen in the world.

She wasn’t sure that she could ever ask him about it, but she saw his pain under that shiny, shiny shell.

Rae took a deep breath and went on with the conversation. “So, the super-modesty thing is because you’re kind of British, right?” she asked.

Wulf paused. “Yes, and German and Swiss. I’ve had a triple dose.”

“Fine. You’re modest. So I’m pressing. Tell me five things about yourself, real things.”

Wulf toyed with the stem of his wine glass. “I’m not sure what to say.”

“Anything. Tell me *anything*.” Anything that she could hang onto when she remembered him.

“All right,” he said. “On one condition.”

She raised her eyebrows and looked askance at him.

“You must, also.”

Rae nodded, satisfied, though she suspected that her stuff wasn’t going to be nearly as good as his.

Wulf glanced at the ceiling. The pristine plaster crenelations and glittering chandeliers buzzed with the conversations around them.

He said, “I don’t like shellfish. Not mussels, clams, lobster, not any of them.”

“Okay, I’ll count that as one, but I meant awesome things.”

“You did not specify. Your turn. A food you don’t appreciate?”

“Rocky Mountain oysters.”

The confusion on his face was priceless.

“Go,” she said. “Awesome things, this time.”

He kept biting his lip, clearly ruminating on making a run for it. “Before I joined the military, my hair was down to my shoulders.”

*Thick, long, gorgeous blond hair?* Rae might have swooned. “Pics or it didn’t happen.”

Pics that she could pin up on her wall.

He said, "I'm sure there are photos somewhere, but Ms. Keller and Flicka can confirm it."

*Dang.* "I had long hair, too. I had never cut my hair, ever, until I got to college. It was down past my hips, almost to my knees."

Wulf's blue eyes took on a predatory shine. "I don't suppose you'd consider growing it again."

"I will if you will."

They were talking as if this week would never end.

Just because he said things like that didn't make them real.

She said, "Three more awesome, wonderful, Wulfie things."

He winced at the nickname, and she thought he almost rose out of his chair to flee. "I speak nine languages passably, but Spanish is not among them."

"And they are?"

He swallowed, clearly uncomfortable. "Alemannic, Arabic, English, French, German, Hindi, Italian, Japanese, Mandarin, and Russian."

"That was ten."

"You kept track."

"And they were alphabetized."

"A mind for details. Smashing. Alemannic and German are similar, and I tend to think of them as one in my head, though they are not the same."

"What's Alemannic?"

"Alemannic is Swiss German. It's more than a simple dialect. It's the language Helvetians speak with each other."

"An in-group thing." Her psychology classes came in handy, for once.

"Right. "

"That's kind of like Border Spanish. I took the real thing in high school, Castilian Spanish, but the lisping sounds snooty to me, and there's a thing when you speak Border Spanglish with someone, a recognition of shared experience."

"That's it precisely."

"*Bueno. Dos mas,*" she said.

"Show off."

"Come on."

"All right, two more." He stared at the ceiling and smiled at her, considering. His amused smile, less reticent, easier, seemed like he was

almost, nearly, perhaps, *basking* in her attention.

“If I were to believe in reincarnation, I have thought that I must have been a pirate in a previous life. I enjoy sailing, the openness of the ocean, and I am a bit too attracted to some of the more ruthless tactics in finance.”

Rae the psychology student could dissect that magical thinking for hours. “I always thought I must have been a scullery maid because I still hate washing dishes. Last one.”

He leaned one elbow on the table and covered his mouth with the side of his fist for just a moment.

Good Lord, he was shushing himself.

This was going to be good. Rae leaned in, coming closer to suggest that he could whisper.

He leaned in farther, too. His mouth was near her ear, and his breath brushed her neck. Wulf whispered, “I have a good memory.”

“Yeah, I’ve noticed that.” She braced her hand on his shoulder, holding them together.

“It’s better than I let on.”

Rae felt her eyebrows rise. Better than being able to learn ten languages and finish a PhD in economics in three years while attending thousands of concerts? “*Really?*”

“When I was in hospital, *Le Rosey* sent a tutor so I wouldn’t get behind in my classes. He decided we should begin multiplication. He explained the concept and handed me a table. I looked at it for a few minutes and handed it back.”

Understanding dawned. Rae said, “Because you’d memorized it.”

Wulf nodded. “His reaction was disconcerting, but it was too late to hide it. We did division the next day, then fractions, then algebra. I was doing simple calculus by the time I left the hospital. Differential equations, by the end of the year.”

“Wow.” The timeline of Wulf’s life, which had seemed inordinately compressed, made sense in Rae’s head.

He sat back, finished divulging secrets. He took her hand from his shoulder but held her fingers below the table.

Rae said, “This prince-thing is kind of the least impressive thing about you, isn’t it?”

His suppressed grimace suggested disbelief. “You’re the only person in the world to think so, and I don’t think all that is particularly impressive. The

maths and finance are the same thing. The rest of it is mere memorization.”

The marksmanship wasn't. The business sense wasn't.

Rae reached over and took his hand. Her smile was gentle because she wanted to offer him a way out. “You must think I'm a dolt for failing statistics.”

“Not at all.” He shook his head. “I went online a few weeks ago and looked at that professor's syllabus. He's teaching it wrong.”

“He is?” Shock popped in Rae's head. “I thought I was an idiot.”

Wulf said, “You're not. That class is in shambles. It would confuse rather than teach. An intelligent person would fare worse. If you want to learn statistics, we'll sit down with your textbook and I'll have you doing it in an afternoon.”

“I already sold back my textbooks,” she admitted.

Wulf's startled expression bordered on cold anger for an instant, but he brushed it off. “No matter. Take that credit card when we get home and buy them back.”

Rae didn't answer him because she didn't know which side she should argue.

~~~

Tuesday night, during the endless supper at Les Tablettes with courses and courses of food but no wine, when Wulf took a phone call away from the table and left his steak unattended, Flicka and Rae sat together on a tangerine booth seat against the wall. Flicka leaned over to Rae and asked if she was all right.

“Yeah. Why?” Rae's confusion at the question must have shown on her face. She ate a bite of her chicken, sauced with yet another velvety, buttery gravy that she had never eaten before.

“Good. Wulfie can be a bit too intense for some people, sometimes. Also, has he been drinking a lot, lately?”

“Um, not that I know of.” Worry bloomed in Rae's head. “Why? Has he had a problem with that?”

“*Madre Dios*, no. God forbid he overindulge in anything and lose control. It's weird that suddenly there's no wine with supper, though. He shushed me about it.”

Rae leaned in. If they were going to talk behind Wulf's back, she got to ask questions, too. “I know this sounds weird, but is there anything he's *not*

good at?”

Flicka usually giggled prettily, but at Rae’s question, she *snorted*. “Oh, *merde*, yes.”

Siblings always know the dirty secrets. Rae leaned farther toward Flicka, until their shoulders touched. “Like what?”

“Music,” Flicka said. “He was technically proficient on the piano and the guitar, practically perfect, but his music had no passion, no emotion. It gave you chills to listen to it. He hasn’t played for years.”

All those concerts, all those symphonies. Was Wulf torturing himself?

No, she had seen him at that concert and again at the symphony he took her to Sunday night. He had thoroughly enjoyed the music. He was generous that way. “What else?”

“He obviously has no fashion sense. Wulfie has a tailor in London who practically tells him what to wear each day and what shoes to wear it with. His only sensibility is *understated*. He also cannot cook, unless he’s learned. He used to measure the amount of mayonnaise or mustard in milliliters when he made sandwiches for me when I was little, until Frau Keller finally told him that he could estimate. Is he sleeping?”

So everybody knew about his insomnia. “About three hours a night. Four hours, sometimes, before he gets up and works in the living room on his computer.”

Flicka grinned and flicked her hand in dismissal. “Three hours is normal for him. Four hours is utter laziness.”

Last night, Rae had slept in his arms for five whole hours before he woke her up and made love to her yet again.

Every time they made love, because it might be their last time, Rae tried to hold him, to memorize him.

Wulf was at times demanding, ravenous, insatiable, even sweet, and his repertoire and creativity were impressive, but it seemed like he was holding something of himself back, protecting himself, because the end of the week drew nearer each day.

Rae should take that to heart.

She should be happy during this last week, but she should remember that the week would end all too soon.

When it did, Rae had to walk away. She wasn’t sure if Wulf was even flying back to the States with her or whether he was just going to see her onto a plane. Whenever it was, whether she had to walk away from him to board a

plane or walk away from his SUV that dropped her off at her dorm, she had to walk, and keep walking, no matter what went on in her head.

And she must not look back.

Wulf and Dieter

OUTSIDE the hotel, in an alcove just off the crowded sidewalk, Wulf tapped his phone screen to hang up. Beyond him, bundled-up tourists and Parisians strolled through the chilly night, chattering in so many languages that even he couldn't follow any of them.

Dieter stood a few feet away, smoking.

Concerned, Wulf glanced over at him. Dieter had given up the habit a decade before, a few months before they had mustered out of the Swiss Guards together.

Dieter asked, "Problem at the office?"

"Handled," Wulf said. "Jeffrey was your best hire. If they don't keep him on, I'm hiring him for our staff."

Dieter smirked. "I want to be there when you tell him who you are." He sucked hard on the cigarette and held in the smoke.

Wulf switched to Alemannic so they could speak privately amidst the crowd. "Did this trip come at a bad time for you?"

"No. I'm fine." Dieter sucked another deep drag off the cigarette.

"Everything all right at home?"

Dieter didn't answer.

"Do you need to return?" Wulf asked him.

"No." Dieter stubbed out the cigarette and threw it in a rubbish bin. "I'm not sure of the situation. If I'm wrong, I would prefer to keep it private. If I'm right, I would prefer to keep it very private."

Wulf put his hand on Dieter's shoulder, a quick squeeze of support, and dropped it. Dieter knew that Wulf would listen, should he need it. After that God-awful night in the Helvetian barracks, Dieter should know that Wulf could listen for hours, if needed.

"What are you doing in there?" Dieter gestured back to the restaurant where they had left Flicka and Rae.

Wulf shrugged. "Same as always. Trying to convince her."

"You're not doing a very good job. She's always on the verge of tears."

There might be confounding factors for that. "She'll bolt if I'm more

forward. I'm trying to show her my life, my real life. On the plane on the way home, I'll lay it out for her. She isn't safe there. We can protect her."

"*Ja*. Girls love that romantic German logic. Make sure you start with that, *Durchlaucht* . Then try commanding her like His Royal Pain in the Ass. She'll kiss your feet."

Wulf raised one eyebrow. "Are you sure you wouldn't rather discuss something? Or take care of something at home?"

Dieter rubbed the side of his face. "Honestly, I'm fine."

The Hereditary Prince of Hannover

WEDNESDAY, yet another set of black SUVs drove Rae, Wulf, and their security guys from the airport outside the city of Hannover, Germany into a thick forest.

Rae watched out the SUV's window, her nose a scant inch from the cool glass, at the emerald and malachite and jade shades of green, green, and more green.

In the Sonoran desert where Rae had grown up, gray and brown tinted the plants. Some desert leaves were silver or beige to blend in with the sand and dust and resist the burning sun.

In Germany, the foliage burst in a riot of fertility. The greenness sucked up the rich sunlight and bred more trees, more plants, more soft green grass.

"It's so green," she said to Wulf, who was sitting beside her in the back seat, tapping on a tablet. "It's beautiful."

"I'm glad you find it so." He held the tablet with one hand and typed on the screen with the other, his hand fanning across the on-screen keyboard while glowing numbers flickered and fell like rain.

Rae resumed watching the enormous trees fly by outside the window of the SUV. At least this SUV was a modest Volkswagen Touareg. The engine growled through the car and shivered her bones. Rae had never even suspected that Porsche and Mercedes made SUVs, which they had ridden in the Southwest, LA, and Paris, but she was learning scads about the world just being around Wulf. Most of it was dismaying, but some of it was as beautiful as a German forest in the late spring.

Rae had not thought of Europe as having forests. Over the centuries, first the Romans and then the Europeans must have razed the land during their wars and then paved them over, but this was a Red-Riding-Hood forest. Hansel and Gretel could get lost among the thick, old trees.

"How far are we going?" she asked Wulf.

"About twelve miles. If you want your mobile to work, we have German SIM cards."

She handed her phone to Dieter in the front passenger seat, who was

breaking cell phones apart and needling tiny chips into the innards again. His notebook was turned to a pocket page labeled *Deutschland* .

Dieter smiled at her, and she leaned over the back of the seat to watch him perform microsurgery on her phone. “Will it have another new phone number?”

“*Ja,*” Dieter said.

Out of the corner of her eye, she saw Wulf watching her, then returned to his tablet, engrossed in the numbers.

If she watched what Wulf was doing with numbers, she might learn enough statistics to pass Dr. Gonder’s infamous statistics class, but she knew that was a lost cause. She had stopped attending the statistics lectures to concentrate on her other classes and take her lumps. Her other grades were straight A’s.

Dieter clicked her phone closed and handed it back to her.

“*Danke,*” she said and scooted back.

Dieter grinned at her and glanced at Wulf, but his expression was more quiet amusement, as always.

“*Bitte,*” Dieter said and resumed unscrewing the back of another cell phone.

She slid back in the seat and texted another quick message to Georgie, her brother, and her cousins Hester and Craigh so they’d have today’s phone number. If she maintained some sort of connection with them, maybe they could buy her some time.

The forest outside the windows dropped away from the road as the SUV climbed a hill. Stone walls held back the exuberant trees and grass.

“Oh, look!” Rae said to Wulf. “There’s a castle up there.”

Interlocked treetops rolled together like emerald storm clouds of leaves and billowed upward. A castle soared above them on a hilltop. The gray stone was sculpted into battlements and spires and towers and crenelations.

Wulf leaned across the seat to peer out her window. “Indeed.”

“It looks a thousand years old! ”

“It’s less than two centuries old, built during England’s Victorian Period, just before your Civil War. It is Neo-Gothic, so it resembles twelfth-century architecture,” he said.

“So, practically new, then.”

“Quite.”

“Wow. I’d love to go through it.”

“That’s fortuitous.”

“Why?”

“My father lives there.” His tone was as dry as a desert riverbed cracked with drought.

“*What!*” She should have noticed Dieter snickering in the front seat.

Wulf said, “*Schloss Marienburg* is the summer residence of the House of Welf, of which the House of Hannover is a cadet branch, but we own it. As my father styles himself the King of Hannover, he lives in the castle.”

The SUV stopped for a yellow-barred roadblock while Rae tried to think of anything to say. The middle-aged policewoman checked their identification and squinted through the tinted window, trying to see in.

Wulf lowered the window. “*Guten Morgen, Fräulein.*”

The cool air that rushed into the SUV even *smelled* green.

The policewoman’s jaw hung a little open, and she touched the door frame where the window had retracted. A trace of moisture floated on her lower eyelids.

The woman raised her chin. “*Guten Morgen, Herr von Hannover.*” She snapped the passports back into the driver’s hand and stepped back, allowing them to pass. The yellow bar flipped up.

Rae looked askance, and Wulf shrugged. “I have rarely been here since I was fifteen. After my mother died, there was little attraction.”

The road curved through the trees, ascending.

Gravity pulled Rae into the upholstery. “So that’s why we went shopping yesterday? Because your dad lives in a castle?”

“You’re a beautiful woman, Rae. You should have proper clothes for the occasion.”

They had had fashion shows yesterday in private rooms within the Chanel and Dior stores, where waify models strutted in clothes that would look entirely different on Rae. Flicka had picked out three outfits for Rae. Wulf had suggested that Rae wear the pearl-gray sheath dress with a matching long jacket today, so she had .

After the shows and back at the hotel, Wulf had handed her the three teal boxes that she had returned to him at The Devilhouse. The rips where she had torn into them were still visible.

She protested, “Wulf, I don’t need these.”

“Consider them a loan, if you like.” He laid his hand over hers on top of the boxes, so she put the jewelry in her luggage. She wore the diamond drop

earrings and bracelet with the triple row of diamonds, and they hung on her ears and arm.

In the SUV, Rae had a quiet attack of nerves about meeting Wulf's father. This was going to be almost as bad as her own father giving Wulf the third degree and then marching him out into the desert, holding a gun.

The trees parted and gave way to a stone bridge that led into the castle. The antique block walls on either side were topped with very modern razor wire.

"What did you do for vacations?" Rae asked.

"Pardon me?" He looked up from his tablet.

"You said you haven't been back much since you were fifteen years old. Didn't you have summer or Christmas vacations from school?"

More lip-biting. She needed to play poker with him, even if it was strip poker.

Especially if it was strip poker.

He said, "You mustn't tell Flicka that I told you this."

"Of course not." Good Lord, Wulf was gossiping. Rae leaned toward him.

Wulf sighed and laid the computer behind him on the seat. "Mother coddled Flicka a bit more than she had Constantin and me, so they were quite attached. Her illness was hardest on Flicka. Our mother had just died, the day before the term started at *Le Rosey*. My father shipped Flicka off on schedule. At *Le Rosey*, she sneaked out of her dormitory every night for a month to sleep in my room. The dorm mothers were devil-fox wild. Hers, because one of the youngest children was missing from bed and the building every night. Mine, because there was a female in the gentlemen's dorm after curfew, even though she was my six-year-old sister. We finally got a dispensation to take a house in Rolle and a hotel in Gstaad for the winter term, even though I was fifteen."

Rae's jaw dropped open. "You lived by yourselves? When you were *fifteen*?"

"I hired Ms. Keller, a driver, and a few others to look after us."

That meant Ms. Keller had been with Wulf since he was a teenager caring for a traumatized child.

He continued, "That was how she met Pierre. He was my roommate that year, and he gave her his bed and slept on the floor that month. I tried to sleep on the floor, but there were some problems with scar tissue. When he saw

that I couldn't lift my arm to take notes in class, he insisted."

"You didn't go see your father at all? Either of you?"

"There was no need." A small smile crossed his face. "Can you imagine, a fifteen-year-old idiot with means and the freedom of a house? It might have been a disaster, except that Flicka sobbed herself to sleep every night for a year."

"Oh, Wulf." Rae inched closer to him and held his hand.

"After I graduated, I stayed in Rolle and Gstaad with her for two more years until my conscription, when I was twenty. I took classes at the University of Lausanne, which is in the same canton."

"So you put your education second to your family," Rae said.

"There is a substantial difference between caring for a grieving child who has no one else and a sect that demands ignorance and destructive conformity."

His words cut Rae, and she started to pull her fingers away from his hand.

Wulf's eyebrows pinched in the middle. "I apologize. I will not denigrate your family, but it is upsetting that they would require such a choice from you."

He sighed again and gathered himself. "It has turned out for the best. The amusing part is that Flicka wanted the same arrangement when she turned fifteen, and I told her to get back to the Virgins' Dormitory until she graduated. Hypocrisy comes naturally to Hannoverian princes."

Rae smiled at him, tentatively, and the twinkle in his eye told her that he had meant to be funny.

The SUV drove around a bend, and the castle slid out of the forest.

They drove over a bridge that looked like it used to be a drawbridge because a *moat* was dug out beneath it. They stopped under a stone-fashioned porte-cochere.

A *moat* , like for invading armies .

A real, stone porte-cochere like for horse-drawn carriages, not like the aluminum sunshade at her dorm.

Rae had to have slipped out of her usual time-space continuum and into some sort of fairy tale parallel universe.

A man wearing a house livery uniform like their driver opened the SUV's door on her side. She stepped out into the paved courtyard of the castle and stood in her new shoes that had cost as much as her used car.

That sealed the deal. She was lost in the multiverse somewhere.

The sun sailed into the sky, warming the amber stones. Spires rose around her like the castles of every handsome prince in every little girl's treasury of fairy tales. This was a castle built for romance and love and happily-ever-afters. "Why wouldn't Flicka want to have her wedding *here*?"

"Memories," Wulf said. He strode through a great set of double doors.

Rae followed, her heels clicking on the pavers.

A man wearing a gray suit trotted to keep up with them. "Your father is in his study."

"*Danke, Herr Arbeitman.*" Wulf handed him a list and said something else in German.

The corridors stretched long and labyrinthine. Every time Rae thought they might have reached an end, the hallway turned and there were more windows that overlooked more forest or the tiled courtyard.

What kind of money and folly did it take to tile the yard, anyway? They might as well carpet the forest.

The furniture—gilt and gold chairs and tables grouped into conversation pits—reminded Rae more of a hotel than a home. It smelled like old wood and the formaldehyde tang of brand-new fabric.

Wulf strode ahead of her, not looking at the extravagant furniture or the portraits of people who must have been related to him. The people in the oil paintings wore ball gowns, sharp uniforms, suits, lace, satin, velvet, and jewelry, lots of jewelry, pins and brooches and sashes and man-neck-things and rings and thick necklaces and medals and bracelets and tiaras. No wonder Wulf thought nothing of sending her these lavish gifts.

Rae increased her stride to keep up with Wulf even though she was worried that her sharp heels might poke holes in the woven carpeting. He hadn't slowed a whit.

Wulf had been to Rae's family's ranch in Pirtleville last week. Shame rose in her stomach at what he must have thought of that dirt ranch and tiny house, and yet she was ashamed of being ashamed because there was no shame in working the land and raising cattle, so she refused to feel ashamed, and then she didn't know what to feel.

Wulf stopped outside a double door and waited for her to catch up. He leaned down and whispered, "We will be announced. Do not curtsy or bow. If he offers to shake your hand, take it. Sit when I do in a chair beside me."

"All right." Seriously, if she was going to live the life of Eliza Doolittle,

she needed someone to teach her manners and diction and elu—elah—electrocution. Otherwise, her rough manners might *shock* these blue-bloods. A panicked giggle died in her throat.

Someone cleared his throat behind her, and Rae turned, startled. Dieter stood at parade rest, his hands clasped, calm as ever. She hadn't even heard him walking behind them on the thick carpet. She nodded to him, glad for a friendly face. He winked at her.

Wulf opened the doors. A man beside the door glanced at them and announced, "Prince Wulfram Augustus and friends."

Inside, the gilded furniture outshone the pictures that Rae had seen on the internet of the Sun King's Palace at Versailles. If it had been solid gold and stuffed with mink fur, she wouldn't have been surprised.

An older man sat in the most ornate gold chair. Yes, it brought to mind a throne. Rae's astonishment with the riches was beginning to fade into exasperation.

The man's chiseled features bore evidence of sun damage in wrinkles and spots. His golden hair was shading to silver.

Yet, the golden apple that was Wulf hadn't fallen far from that blue-eyed, golden Hannoverian tree. Wulf was still going to be handsome in thirty years or so.

A gray sling holding his father's arm matched his gray suit. A black cast around his thumb just peeked past the sling.

Wulf stopped short, so Rae did, too. He bowed his head, more a nod, really. "Hello, Father."

His father said something in German. Rae caught, *Guten Morgen*, which meant *Good morning*, but the rest was incomprehensible.

Wulf said, "May I present Ms. Reagan Stone, a very good friend. She speaks French and English and prefers to be called Rae." Wulf drew a deep breath. "Rae, may I present His Royal Highness Phillipp Augustus, the Hereditary Prince of Hannover and Duke of Brunswick-Lüneburg."

Having been told not to curtsy, Rae smiled and inclined her head at him. She repressed the urge to wave.

Phillipp Augustus nodded. Rae might have described that nod as curt, but she didn't judge such things.

Wulf walked over to the chair across from his father. Rae followed and sat down in the rather firm chair next to him, as instructed.

The men exchanged pleasantries. Rae tried not to move. Luckily, her

church's three-hour services had prepared her well for sitting stone-still, hands and ankles crossed, back not touching the chair, and looking like she didn't have a thought in her head.

Wulf's father cast his stony gaze on Rae. "So what do you think of Hannover?"

Oh, Lord. He'd spoken to her. "It's beautiful. The drive up here was gorgeous."

"You should see it during the summer. We have a marksmen's tournament. Wulfram has performed passably well the last few years."

Wulf didn't react at all.

Considering his dead-eye aim from that Southwestern ridge, Rae would have laid twenty bucks that Wulf had done better than passably well. "That's great."

The conversation faltered. Rae looked between the two men, but they didn't say anything. She glanced back at Dieter, but he was doing his best impression of a piece of the wall.

"If you don't mind me asking, is your arm all right?" Rae asked.

"It's healing," Wulf's father frowned. "I crashed a Formula One car in the Australian Grand Prix a month ago and broke my arm. No one else was hurt."

Before Rae remembered to be sophisticated, she went roughneck on the pretender to the kingly throne of Hannover. "*Nice!* Did it destroy the car?"

"Utterly." His father smiled with one side of his mouth.

"Did you walk away?"

"I waved to the crowd with my other arm as I walked off the track."

"Righteous," Rae said. "I'll bet that would have killed an ordinary man."

"It's all in how you control the impact."

Rae said, "My brother ran into a saguaro once with a pick-up, and it came down on the cab, *smash!*" She karate-chopped into her hand to show the impact. "Those things weigh tons. Smashed the cab right through the middle."

"Yes! That's exactly of what I speak! The light pole came down right through the middle, *smash!*" He karate-chopped with his good arm on his knee. "It missed my head by a centimeter."

Philipp Augustus scooted to the edge of his throne and explained to Rae the mechanics of the car and the particulars of the crash.

Between Rae and her two brothers who were old enough to drive, they

had totaled five vehicles so far, so she commiserated for and admired the crash in equal quantities.

After a few minutes, Wulf rose and walked toward the door.

Rae signaled him, trying to put “Please for all that is holy don’t leave me alone with your Father the King” in one tiny, beckoning hand gesture.

Wulf said, “This Friday is options expiration day, so I need to adjust my positions. I’ll return shortly.” He smiled at her and then leaned down, whispering something to his father.

His father laughed and went back to describing to Rae the angle at which he had wrapped his horrendously overpriced race car around the light pole.

Wulf nodded to Dieter as he left the room. Dieter nodded back and resumed his immobile parade rest.

When they finished with the deconstruction of the accident, Rae asked him, “What did Wulf say to you?”

“Oh, he warned me that I’m not to flirt with you. He said he shot the last two fellows who were too forward. Amusing.”

“Oh.” She could still see Wulf staring into the darkness at the Marsden Hotel, too haunted to sleep.

“There’s not an imperious bone in his body. Now his sister, Flicka. If she were a boy, she would have made an excellent king. Too bad about Salic Law.”

Rae could feel that her whole face had drawn up like someone pulled an incredulous string between her eyebrows. “He’s quite impressive, you know.”

“Nonsense,” Prince Phillipp scoffed. “Wulfram can barely lead a waltz.”

“I’ve always found him quite, well, *dominating* .”

“He’s not really kingship material. It’s a good thing he has a minor talent with numbers.”

“He finished a doctorate at the London School of Economics in three years.” Shock made Rae tremble.

“Pish. Tricks and figures. He sails only passably, and he hasn’t played polo for years. I don’t know how we’ll get him married if he doesn’t excel at a sport.”

“You know he won a *bronze medal* in the *Olympics* , right?”

“Yes, but it was not in a sport suitable for our position, such an equestrian event.”

“And he does financial things really well. He taught economics at the

University of Chicago, which is the best place for that in the world.” She should listen to Wulf more, and learn more, because he was a freaking wizard.

“Yes, but the people he is forced to associate with are horrid. What House are you connected with, anyway?”

“I’m *not*.”

“Not?” His profound frown jutted out his jaw. “Nonsense. Wulf knows better than to present a common girl. We still have standards in the House of Hannover. I would *disapprove* of a commoner.”

His pronunciation of the word *disapprove* sounded like he was casting a curse. Rae recoiled.

“Not that I particularly approve of that Monegasque fellow that Friederike insists that she will marry, if she goes through with it. There’s a difference between a princely family and a royal family, and this marriage elevates those Grimaldis to a status they don’t deserve. They are descended from Italian soldiers, not kings.”

Rae said, “Wulf is going to help me open clinics for autistic kids.”

Wulf’s father frowned. “Good Lord, you don’t *work*, do you?”

Oh, that was it. She was not shrill, and her voice was firm. “Of course, I do. Or I will, when I’m done with college, because work makes life sweet.”

“You sound like Wulfram.”

“And you should *be* so lucky as have me for a daughter-in-law. My parents *disapprove* of Wulf. ”

She left the Hereditary Prince holding a fox hunting magazine and glaring at her back. Dieter held the door for her and followed her a few steps back as she stalked through the palace.

She had never had illusions that this was any kind of a permanent arrangement. Wulf was, as she had known from the beginning, a man who liked women, *lots* of women, women in the *plural*, and evidently, he had never brought a single, solitary woman home to meet his family or even his house staff.

She wasn’t an exception. She was just a slip-up, a commoner who would be *disapproved* of.

Rae paused, leaning her arm against a gilded column. Dieter stopped behind her and stood just far enough away that she didn’t feel the need to talk to him.

She should go home.

She should go home while she still could, because if she stayed in Europe with Wulf, she would lose her family, too.

She asked a roving staff person—a burly guy wearing the black and gold livery—where Prince Wulfram Augustus had gone and followed him through the maze of gilded hallways with Dieter trailing her.

No wonder Wulf could navigate the twisty office corridors of The Devilhouse. Maybe he'd built it to replicate this asylum.

She found Wulf squinting at two laptops, a tablet, and his phone, all propped up in an enormous dining room that looked like something out of a, well, a medieval castle where princes dined with kings and their fifty knights and all their associated ladies and they all threw the bones to their wolfhounds, except that the spotless carpet looked like dogs had never scratched it. The emerald velvet upholstered thrones—because they were so much more than dining chairs—looked like no one had eaten chicken off the bone in here, either.

Or doves. Or turkeys. Or pheasants. Or swans. Rae didn't know what kind of poultry royalty ate, but it was probably something weird. Rae could picture Wulf's dad tearing a leg off a roasted swan and eating it.

"Wulf!"

Wulf straightened and stretched his arms. "It appeared you were getting on well with my father."

Rae ran to him despite her high heels, down the long line of ornate chairs, past the oil portraits of his haughty ancestors, under the cathedral ceiling. She grabbed him around the neck. "I need to go home. Back to America. *Now.*"

He dragged her off of his neck and stared at her. Wulf's blue eyes had turned fierce. "What did he say to you?"

She held onto his wrists and refused to let stupid eyes drip *again*. "Nothing. Nothing that isn't painfully obvious."

Behind her, the dining room door thunked closed.

He held her shoulders. "I swear to God that this time I will commit regicide. *What did he say to you?*"

No more stupid crying. She turned it into anger and stared back at him. "I just want to go home."

"Whatever he said, it isn't true. He's a venal man clinging to customs that were extinct generations before he was born. I should not have brought you here. I should have sent you to the spa or shopping with my sister, but I didn't want you to be concerned that I wouldn't take you to meet my father."

“I understand. I understand that you were damned if you did and damned if you didn’t. I understand that he said what everyone else thinks and what you know is true. I’ve always known that this thing between us isn’t permanent, that it’s just for fun, that this is just one last booty-moon in Paris.”

“Oh, Reagan. That’s not true, either.”

“Yeah, it is. It’s truer than truth. It all shocked the heck out of me at first, but I’m *fine* now. I hadn’t realized how much this little dalliance meant to me, but it can’t be anything more and I’m *fine* with that. I need to go home and salvage things with my family.”

Wulf said, “If you say your safe word, I will have them fuel the plane and we can fly straight back from here, but I’m asking you to stay.”

Rae’s hands crept from his wrists to his broad shoulders and she braced herself against him. Her voice would not shake. “I can’t stay. This is all futile and it’s breaking my heart and I am screwing everything up with my family and everything is wrong.”

Wulf’s voice was quiet, but distress tightened his throat until it sounded choked. “*Your Majesty*.”

His safe word echoed in her crazy head. “—What?”

“*Your Majesty*. I’m using *my* safe word. We have lost control, and this must end. Everything stops here. We will leave this place. We’ll go to the plane. We’ll fly back to Paris. We will discuss what went so terribly wrong. When we get to Paris, if you still want to go home, we’ll file the flight plan from there. We can have someone pick up your things at the hotel. You wouldn’t want to leave those volumes of Shakespearean poems, I hope.”

“No. I love those books. I don’t want to leave them.”

“Good, and I must say goodbye to my sister.” Wulf slammed the lids of the laptops and stacked them on his briefcase. A stack of wooden boxes towered behind his briefcase. “We can leave immediately.”

Common sense reasserted itself in her head. She fought for something sensible to say. “Did you get what you came here for?”

“I found everything here that I had expected to.” He thumb-tapped the screen of his phone.

Okay, she had been sensible once. She could do it again. “Don’t you need to do your option thingees?”

The dining room doors opened, and Dieter and three other men walked toward them.

Wulf gestured to the boxes. He said, “I’m done. The rest of them are so

far out of the money that they will expire worthless tomorrow.”

“I’m sorry.” She wondered how much money he had lost.

“That’s the side that makes money.”

He must be shooting the arrow of time again, or whatever he had called it. “I wish you could teach me about all that.”

Wulf smiled at her, though his smile seemed tired. “Let’s head back to Paris first.”

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After the plane took off, Rae let Wulf lead her back to the bedroom at the rear of the plane.

The security guys probably thought they were going back there to make the beast with two backs. *Fine*. Let them think that. It was better than the truth.

Wulf closed the door behind them with a firm push. He turned. “What did he say to you?”

Rae sat on the side of the bed. That fancy gray shift dress wouldn’t let her sit cross-legged. She pried off her shoes with her toes. “It doesn’t matter.”

“It does, but you obviously don’t want to reiterate it. All right.” He shook his head and sat beside her. “Let me say this: *I need this week with you.*”

Rae’s breath caught in her chest. Wulf’s shiny shell was showing some cracks, perhaps, or maybe he was mirroring her need to stay. “You do?”

“Yes, *I need this week with you.* I’m asking you to stay.”

She wasn’t sure she believed him. “Why on Earth would you need me?”

His blue eyes were as wary as Rae had ever seen them. “I need a friend, this week.”

“You have lots of friends. Your security staff is one big fraternity.”

“Not like you.”

Surely he didn’t mean someone in his bed. Wulf was never crass.

Rae paused and studied her hands with their first manicure, sweet pink polish, clasped in her lap on her gray silk skirt. The diamond bangle caught the sunlight and threw spangles over the whole airplane bedroom. “How like me?”

He took her hand and held it between his. “Someone who knows *me*.”

She squashed her impulse to say, *I don’t think I do know you*, because that would be cruel, but that little bit about someone who knew him was not enough. “Tell me what you’re thinking.”

His fingers tightened around her hand. It didn't hurt, yet. "I don't want to let you go."

Rae drew in a great gulp of air. "I don't want to let you go, either, but it's abundantly clear that we're going to have to do just that."

He scooted closer and took her into his arms. "Give me this week."

She nodded. At the most, she was Wulf's friend, and he had brought her to his sister's wedding for comfort. That thought warmed her. If she could be his friend who comforted him, that was enough for her, for now, for this moment.

Like Georgie said, like Rae had decided, this was one last booty-moon where she could enjoy being with Wulf, live for the moment, and then go home and live the rest of her life.

She wasn't going to think about the rest of her life just yet.

"All right," she said. "I'll stay."

# The Civil Ceremony

THE civil ceremony was held Friday afternoon in a skyscraper office in downtown Paris. Rae had always thought of Paris as the city of light with the most beautiful street in the world, full of petite cafes and spectacular cathedrals, but business people strode the city streets, clutching briefcases and yammering on cell phones while taxis vented exhaust and people smoked stinky cigarettes outside, just like any street of any city in the world.

Except that the business people's suits and dresses seemed more stylish, like all of them used to be runway models.

Rae stepped out of the SUV and dodged across the sidewalk, following Wulf.

A dozen wedding guests spilled out of SUVs. An equal number of security people flanked them. Everyone trotted across the sidewalk and through the doors to the skyscraper. Rae tried to turn and gawk, but Dieter took her elbow gently and hurried her inside.

He whispered, "Photographers get pushy if we linger."

Inside the magistrate's office, the security guys formed a wall of black suits across the back of the room.

Rae stood beside Wulf behind Flicka's chair.

Wulf's father, the Hereditary Prince Philipp Augustus, stood beside her chair but a step away.

Pierre Grimaldi, the groom—whom Rae had a hard time looking at because his dark eyes, dark hair, and cheekbones were so stunningly gorgeous—sat in a chair three paces away from Flicka. His family, all beautiful people who bore traces of Grace Kelly and money, stood around him.

Rae didn't fit in with the glistening gold and silver von Hannovers, and she didn't fit in with the glamorous Grimaldis, either.

When the official photographer raised his camera to document the event, Rae slipped behind Wulf and stood in his shadow.



## Saturday Morning

EARLY Saturday morning, the make-up artist Siphiwe, a black woman so lean she looked like lines drawn with a calligraphic pen, arrived at the hotel right after breakfast to do Rae's make-up for Flicka's church wedding and the reception that night.

They set up in the master bathroom of the Empire Suite. Siphiwe arranged her pots of color and brushes on the caramel marble countertop. She ordered Dieter to bring in a dining room chair, and he obliged without comment. The soaking tub that Rae could see in the mirror behind her should have been described as a squared-off marble pond. The spigot and handles were gold.

The air brush machine whooshed as Siphiwe layered the scented pigments onto Rae's skin. She felt like she was being encased in marble for display.

When Siphiwe had finished, Rae stared at herself in the mirror, afraid to smile, lest she crack the work of art.

"You don't like?" growled Siphiwe.

"It's amazing," Rae said. She turned her head, and the beautiful woman in the mirror pivoted, too. The glamorous make-up drew up her brown eyes until she seemed mysterious and exotic. Her skin appeared flawless. On Rae's best days, her *very best* days and there weren't many of them, Rae thought that she might rise to girl-next-door pretty, but somehow the woman in the mirror was beautiful. Either that mirror was magic or Siphiwe was.

"You're a miracle-worker."

Siphiwe packed her potions and brushes. "Good, then."

"Yes! Thank you!"

"You have good skin. Good bones." Siphiwe smiled with ivory teeth.

"Don't cry at wedding. Mascara will run."

Rae caught a glimpse of Wulf walking through the hallway outside. He glanced in and saw her in the mirror, and his eyes lit up. He seemed like he was about to say something, but he must have thought better of it because he walked on.

# Basilica Sacre-Coeur

FLICKA'S church wedding was held at ten o'clock on that bright, spring morning in the Basilica Sacre-Coeur that topped one of Paris's hills in the Montmartre district, in the 18th arrondissement.

Dieter drove the SUV, winding through the medieval streets lined with interconnected French houses, all of them sporting blooming window boxes and balconies overloaded with dwarf fruit trees and herbs and greens, and then up, and farther up, and still farther up a hill until Paris poured out below them like Rae was watching from the top of the world.

The shining basilica had the towering columns of a Roman temple and the majestic domes of a Russian cathedral. Stained glass windows cut blocks of color into the basilica's white walls like wildflower beds in an alabaster field. They drove up to the back of the church, which was all crenelated, curlicue columns and far less ornate than the front.

"I could see this church from our hotel," Rae said.

"You can see it from everywhere in Paris." Wulf looked out the window and fidgeted with the end of his silver-blue scarf-tie. He looked at his hand, realized what he was doing, and tucked the tie inside his vest.

The SUV braked in the small driveway at the back. Dieter emerged and surveyed.

Rae reached for the handle, but Wulf grabbed her other hand. "Wait."

After surveying the area, Dieter nodded to them through the window, and Wulf handed Rae out of the SUV.

Rae and Wulf trotted across the paving stones to a back entrance, away from the photographers and press and spectators that crowded the lush manicured lawns flowing down the hill at the front of the church.

The make-up artist Sipiwe was packing clear cases in the hatchback of her tiny electric Citroen. Rae waved, and the lady waved one ebony hand back.

Safely inside the basilica, Wulf straightened his tie and brushed black cat hair off his black suit. Rae wore an emerald green dress that Flicka had ordered for her at the Chanel store that matched the river stone-sized

emeralds in the necklace and earrings set that Wulf had brought from his castle. Flicka had sent a milliner over to make Rae a matching fascinator headband-hat, stunning Rae that, again, such professions as hat-makers still existed.

Wulf's suit looked particularly pressed, though it wasn't a regular business suit. The jacket was long, and the pearl gray vest was cut flat at his waist. His trousers were dark gray, and his tie was silver-blue. It looked like a hybrid tuxedo-suit. "Is that suit new?" she asked.

He scowled, though his amusement leaked through. "Flicka insisted I wear morning dress. I brought six perfectly good suits with me, spanning the color spectrum from charcoal gray through midnight blue to black, but she insisted on formality. Shall we visit the bride?"

"The blushing bride?" Rae teased.

"Nothing could make that incorrigible sister of mine blush."

They skirted the main floor of the cathedral, keeping to corridors, passing French Catholic priests wearing some kind of dresses. Rae let them pass. She was positive that they didn't have any mystical power and yet unwilling to test that belief.

The air smelled like strong perfume and smoke, much like the scent that leaked from the door two rooms away from Rae and Hester's dorm room because Sylvia and Gayle believed that incense would mask pot smoke.

They found Flicka in the bride's room, where all four of her bridesmaids were pressing tissues under her eyes to catch the tears stained with professionally applied mascara and begging her in a babble of languages to not cry because she would ruin her face.

"Flicka!" Wulf strode in. He closed the door between himself and Rae, saying, "Sorry. I'll be right out. Obviously a problem."

Rae held her hands out in front of herself and said, "It's okay. Take care of it. I'll wait out here," and the door thunked closed.

The French Catholic priests stared at her as she waited, maybe because she wasn't wearing as much lace as they were.

Making herself useful seemed like a better plan.

She trotted out into the parking lot as quickly as she could in those pointy shoes that felt like her feet would burst out of them if she stepped down wrong and found the make-up artist still packing her tools and powders in her car.

Dieter trailed behind Rae, watching the swarming crowd out front. He

touched his ear and said something low in German or Alemannic.

Rae's French was halting and strange because she didn't trust her vocabulary or her Creole accent, "*La jeune mariée, elle pleure,*" but Sippiwe understood the problem with the crying bride and bustled her stuff back inside to mitigate the damage. They waited outside the bride's door, leaning against the polished stone wall.

Rae retrieved her phone from her purse. No texts. Nothing must be blowing up at home, unless they hadn't gotten her texts and didn't know where she was, or unless no one would communicate with her.

*Living for the moment, living just for today,* Rae chanted in her head.

She leaned her head back against the stone wall and could hear them inside. They were all arguing in some other languages. Rae couldn't pick the voices apart, other than Wulf's calm, male German tones that all descended to end on a commanding note.

The door beside her opened. Rae was just turning to speak to Wulf when four women in slim white dresses were bum-rushed into the hallway. The door slammed, leaving them outside, and they all stood with astounded, lipsticked mouths hanging open.

"Hi?" Rae said to them.

They all turned like perfectly painted marionettes.

"He threw us out!"

"He told us to get out!"

"He said that we were making things worse and threw us out!"

"The nerve of him!"

"Yeah," Rae said. "I'm Rae." She offered her hand to shake. "I managed to find Sippiwe in the parking lot."

The women recovered their manners with a contagious shiver. They all nodded to Sippiwe, essentially dismissing her, which shocked Rae.

Sippiwe leaned back against the wall and closed her eyes, waiting.

One young woman said, "*Je m'excuse.* I am Marie-Therese Grimaldi, cousin to the groom." Her black eyes flashed as she tried to control her irritation with getting thrown out of Flicka's room.

"Reagan Stone. I'm a friend of Wulf's. Call me Rae." Rae shook the woman's hand with a handshake so delicate that Marie-Therese's arm felt weightless and her hand, boneless. Her opera-length white glove was so soft that it must be silk.

Now Rae understood how a princess could get beaten bloody by a pea.

The rest of the introductions went counter-clockwise.

Mathilde fussed with the pins in her blond chignon until Rae offered to help. Rae guessed that the glittering hairpins that decorated the roll of her French twist must be real diamonds because everything else seemed to be. Rae pinned it in a little tighter.

Victoria Adelaide held her hands clenched in front of her stomach. A few strands of her brown hair escaped from her updo to curl near her face, but their casual draping seemed at odds with her rigid posture. She shook Rae's hand firmly, what Rae's father would have called a proper handshake.

Alexia turned and acknowledged Rae, with a shake and a tight smile, just enough to be polite, but she trained her eyes on the bride's room door like staring at it might eventually blast it to smithereens.

Josephine curtsied to Rae, looking downward so that her thick, black eyelashes swept over her pale green eyes, so Rae curtsied back, sending a titter through the girls, but their amusement seemed as innocuous as the sunlight that played through the stained glass windows.

Rae glanced at Siphwe, but the woman seemed to have no inclination to join the conversation, so she let her be. Beyond Siphwe, Dieter stood at parade rest, barely leaning against the wall.

"What was all that about, in there?" Rae pointed to Flicka's dressing room.

Mathilde rolled her enormous eyes so far up that the irises disappeared except for a gray sliver. That was quite a trick. "Flicka's father is causing problems. He stormed in and told her not to go through with it, that Pierre wasn't worthy of marrying a *prinzessin*, and that he *disapproved*. She's afraid he'll make a scene at the church."

"At her wedding?" Good Lord, Rae's cousin Jim Bob wasn't the only person on the planet jerk enough to ruin a religious ceremony, although Jim Bob wasn't on this planet any more. Rae refused to pretend to be sad about anything other than the possibility that he might have changed in the future.

"I don't know why he's doing this now," Mathilde said. "The civil ceremony was yesterday. They're already married."

Behind the carved wood of the door, the bride's room went silent. They all turned.

Wulf opened the door. His posture was as straight as a German Kaiser about to invade France. "Ladies," he acknowledged them. "Rae, you will be all right for a moment?"

“Sure.” She was in a French Catholic cathedral with women whom she suspected were princesses, and she didn’t know the first thing about royal etiquette or Catholicism. Her nervous mouth was so dry that she considered drinking the shallow vase of water bolted to the wall by the bride’s room door, but it had probably had flowers in it or something.

The other women nodded, and they all watched him stalk down the hallway.

## Being British

WULF'S gait had the bearing of an angry tyrant as he marched through the polished stone corridor of the Basilica Sacre-Coeur, determined to have it out with his father. Seventeen years ago, while their mother lay dying, Wulf had lost the month-long, vicious argument about sending Flicka to *Institut Le Rosey* at the beginning of the term. Even though the slated departure day had turned out to be just one damned day after their mother died, *one day*, their father had packed the child off to boarding school on schedule.

Wulf would not allow their father to ruin Flicka's wedding.

The leftover anger from Dieter's summary of his father's conversation with Rae boiled below the current problem. His father and Rae had been getting along swimmingly as she had a perfect measure of naiveté salted with admiration for bravado, and then his father cocked it up, cloaking his refusal to engage with noble prejudice. Rae's daughter-in-law quip brought a smile to Wulf's face because she had evidently considered the possibility and because more people should stand up to that old narcissist.

One of these days, his father would crash that race car and not walk away. Wulf only prayed that it was another light pole rather than a grandstand. The problem with a death wish is that, eventually, the wish will be fulfilled, leaving everyone else to deal with the damage.

Wulf paused and braced himself against the wall, feeling the cool stone under his palms and fingers. Wulf wasn't a raging teenager any more. This must be handled properly.

The hot-headed emotionality of the Americans was the wrong track. A blowout would serve his father's purposes, which was to derail the wedding.

Icy German sangfroid would be useless. His father wouldn't notice an appeal to logic through his self-absorbed haze.

The imperious demeanor of the Prince of Hannover would backfire. His father might be shocked but would also resist any authoritarian overture.

Wulf must be subtle, and he must be obeyed.

So he had to be British.

Wulf found a door near the altar rail that led into the basilica. The neo-

Roman architecture with its towering columns was a bit rococo for his taste, but Flicka loved it. Considering that construction on the basilica had begun as a reactionary measure after the German occupation of Paris by Bismarck's Prussian army, and Bismarck had deposed their ancestor George V of Hannover in the 1860's because George V had chosen the wrong side of the Austro-Prussian War, Wulf had approved of the basilica. My enemy's enemy, and all that.

The gold-gilt statues and vibrant icons were still a bit much.

His father sat in the first pew, thumping a hymnal on the wood beside his leg and scowling. His black sling for his arm cast matched his morning suit's jacket. The buttons in his vest strained at their buttonholes over his waist, Wulf noted as he sat down beside his father, and the crimson cravat did little to draw attention from that. He must not have bought a new morning suit, an indication that his intention to interrupt the wedding had been planned.

"It's too late, you know," Wulf said. "They're already married."

"A civil union can be annulled if we don't proceed with the religious wedding." His father thumped the hymnal harder, jarring the pew under Wulf's backside. "I never liked Grimaldi."

"Of course not. There's nothing to like about such an unsuitable match," Wulf lied. Pierre and Wulf made time for drinks whenever they managed to find themselves on the same continent, though Wulf was not particularly happy about Flicka marrying Pierre.

His father said, "I told the girl not to entertain that social climber, but she did, behind my back."

"Young people, these days."

"Indeed."

*Thump, thump, thump, thump.*

Wulf wanted to take that hymnal away from him. "Yet, backing out of the match at this late date, having to arrange for a French annulment, all these would be beneath our dignity. "

"Yes, but I cannot countenance this marriage. She's too young. Her mother was twenty-two, and our family still has not recovered from that disaster."

Ah. The shock of seeing Flicka in her wedding dress had probably dredged up all of this. Pale, blond Flicka, with her green eyes and willowy figure, looked so much like their mother that it had caused Wulf a pang of memory in the bride's room. Flicka's slim wedding gown differed from their



mother's bouffant bubble of a dress, but her eyes, her face, and hopefully her happiness, all these would shine like in the pictures of their mother on her wedding day thirty-five years ago. "You must let her go. It's the natural order of things."

"I will not approve of this marriage."

Reagan had grown up on a ranch. Perhaps she could hog-tie a seventy-three year old man. "Then let us think of a way for you to express your disapproval and yet not incur the shame of an annulment."

His father stopped banging the hymnal and turned it over in his hands. "I could leave. If I don't attend, people will infer my disapproval."

Too much. Even after everything, Flicka would be as devastated as when their father had missed her skiing championships and university graduation. He was here, damn it.

Wulf nodded. "You could do that. People would wonder where you were, however, more than they would know your mind. When you are presented at the reception tonight, it might convey a mixed message."

He frowned. "What then?"

"If you attended the ceremony but didn't give her away, it would be a more subtle message of disapproval. You would be the soul of discretion and propriety."

His father nodded. "So she would walk down alone."

"I could give her away," Wulf said, making sure it sounded like an offhand comment. "People might notice the substitution more than a simple absence."

"Excellent," his father said.

"The service should begin in a half-hour. You could stay here. Not walking in with the wedding party would further confirm your stance on the marriage."

His father nodded .

Wulf left his father sitting in the pew, contemplating God.

When Wulf passed Dieter at the door, Wulf whispered, "Three men on him. If he so much as draws a deep breath, remove him from the church out this side door."

Wulf wondered how people without their own paramilitary force coped with recalcitrant relatives.

# Wulf and Flicka

RAE watched Wulf stride down the basilica's stone hallway and wished she could be helpful.

As soon as Wulf was out of sight, the four bridesmaids slammed open the bride's room door and rushed to Flicka, who reclined on a fainting couch, holding black-stained tissues under her eyes.

"Are you all right?"

"He wasn't terrible to you, was he?"

"He never comes to anything and yet he's interfering."

"You are all right?"

Rae hung back by the door. In high school, Lynda the Buttinski had appeared every time someone was crying like a tissue-summoned demon.

Flicka fluttered one hand toward the dressing table. Mathilde snatched fresh tissues out of the box and replaced the ones Flicka held, checking for stains on Flicka's face and dress but finding none.

Rae checked her phone and the weather, trying to find something to say. She tried to imitate Dieter, who was doing such an excellent impression of not-being-there that she hadn't noticed him for minutes.

Wulf was only gone for a few minutes. When he came back, he glanced around the room at the bevy of ladies ministering to his sister. They retracted their hands when he came in. "Ladies, may we have a moment, please?"

Rae took a step toward the door. They shouldn't interfere with family matters.

Flicka held her fingers to her temples. "They're okay, Wulfie. Just tell me what he said."

Rae leaned against the wall, trying to be invisible. Dieter glanced at her, and she shrugged. One corner of his mouth twitched up, and he resumed staring straight ahead.

Wulf's blue eyes met Rae's before he turned back to Flicka. "He will sit in the front pew to show his support for the wedding. He will say nothing during the ceremony. I will walk with you down the aisle and give you away."

Flicka nodded, then her face crumpled into tears again and she reached with both hands up toward Wulf. He scooped her up in his arms and cradled her.

“He won’t say anything,” Wulf crooned to her. “If anything happens, I have men ready to escort him out. He’ll be gone before anyone notices a commotion.”

Flicka huddled against Wulf’s shoulder and looked for all the world like a lost child instead of a princess bride. “I always wanted you to give me away. He’s been insisting for months, but I always wanted you.”

Wulf said, “I wanted to.”

Rae watched them with a practiced eye.

As Rae had studied in her child development class, more than five years age separation between siblings began a new birth order cycle. Thus, because Wulf was nine years older than his sister with no intervening children, Flicka should act like an only child, birth order-wise.

Wulf was a mystery. He was a twin in birth order, which meant that he should be a parallel-first, but he was raised to be not the heir but the spare during those oh-so-formative years until he was eight. Constantin was the heir and, having seen Wulf’s father, she bet that Wulf had felt his place as a second child. From birth order, she would have bet that Wulf would have become a beta male to Flicka’s, *ahem*, bossy little princess, but he wasn’t.

Watching the way he held her, he wasn’t a beta male in the slightest. He had become her father.

Considering how Flicka clung to him, he had probably been a good father, even though the role was thrust upon him when he was only fifteen years old.

Rae’s heart swelled and broke at the same time.

“It’s all right,” Wulf murmured to Flicka. “I’ll take care of it. You need to get ready.” He beckoned Sipiwe. “Madam, if you could help her.”

Wulf led Rae out into the hallway while Sipiwe repaired Flicka’s make-up with the whooshing airbrush.

He said, “I wish I could have handled your cousin so easily. Here, if my father begins to make a scene, everyone will understand if my security removes him.”

“Yeah. That wouldn’t have worked out at home.” In Pirtleville, if men in black suits had hustled Jim Bob out of the church, everyone would have assumed that the revolution had begun and it was time to go home, dig up the

ammunition, and load their assault rifles because the black helicopters were coming. “You were really good with her.”

Wulf reached for Rae’s hand. “You’ll have to sit alone for the procession. After I give Flicka away, I can sit with you. Will you be all right with that?”

Rae took his hand and felt the warmth and strength there. “It’s okay. I understand family duty.”

The sharp look in his blue eyes suggested that he understood exactly what she meant, but he didn’t pursue it.

# The Procession

THE shifting of royal and noble butts on the wooden pews rumbled as everyone in the church stood and turned to look at Flicka and Wulf standing in the back of the enormous church. The string quartet played something lilting that was swallowed up by the cavern of the basilica while they strolled down the aisle.

Rae sat near the aisle in the second row, holding a seat for Wulf. She could see over most of the heads of the crowd, so she saw Flicka's lovely smile and her white knuckles on Wulf's arm. A diamond and gold tiara that looked like ocean waves held her long veil on her blond hair.

Wulf gazed down at his sister.

Everyone was looking at the bride, of course, which was why Rae was confused when Wulf turned his head and looked straight at Rae for a moment and about half the crowd followed his gaze.

Rae blushed under their stares and dropped her eyes to her green handbag on the shining floor.

When she looked up, Wulf had turned back to the front again, and no one was staring at her anymore.

Very quietly, she sucked in a deep breath to quell the panic.

She had gotten used to him being just Wulf, her own Blond Hottie.

For those few moments, under the stare of the crowd, he had become The Dom again and commanded their attention, even as he directed it toward Flicka.

But he had slipped and looked at Rae, and they had all followed.

Her heart pounded so hard that she was sure that Wulf would hear it as he sat in the pew beside her.

He changed so fast.

This was their last day together in Paris, and she missed Wulf already.

## Just Another Bright, Sunny Day

AFTER Flicka's wedding Mass, Rae held the back of the pew in front of her and stared at the cave of white columns. The domed nave soared as high as heaven. The priests' chanting, much reviled in Rae's childhood church as superstition and witchcraft, filled the air as much as the incense perfumed it. "It was beautiful, Wulf. It really was. I couldn't believe they sang *Matthew Six*."

"You mean The Lord's Prayer?" Wulf stretched, lifting his arms and lengthening every joint.

On the other side of Wulf, Ms. Keller smiled at Rae and walked out the other end of the pew. The older gentleman who had served their dinner at Wulf's house walked in front of her.

"It was so *beautiful*. It was more like theater or art."

"I've always liked the Mass. Catholicism has its charms."

"Yeah?"

"The Lutheran churches in Germany are more conservative than in the States. The service is more similar to the Catholic Mass. My mother used to stand between Constantin and me to help us understand and find our places in the hymnals, and to make sure we behaved. I can almost feel my mother holding my hand sometimes. Can you imagine having two four-year-old boys at the same time?"

His nostalgic smile broke Rae's heart. "She was beautiful, too. Your sister, I mean. Her smile was beautiful."

"She looked happy." His smile softened, turning sadder.

"You aren't sorry that she married him?"

"Certainly not. That spoiled child and the rat bastard deserve each other."

Rae said, "Sometimes men are sorry when their younger sisters or daughters move on," because she was a psychology major and couldn't help herself.

Wulf looked over at her, making eye contact with those dark blue eyes of his, and he smiled a slow, self-mocking smile. "A little, but it means both she and I can both 'move on' to the next phase of our lives."

Rae couldn't look away, and neither did Wulf, for a long moment in the church that seemed to turn to clouds around them.

He couldn't kiss her of course. Not in a church. Not with all his family and friends watching. Everyone would get the wrong idea.

She would get the wrong idea.

Wulf turned and offered her his arm. "Dieter will meet us in the back. We have a few hours before the reception."

*Oh*, he meant that he could move on to the next phase of his life, without her.

Of course he did.

Hoping that he meant anything else was unrealistic. Living in the moment didn't mean engaging in fantasies.

A spark of anger flared, that he would toy with her like that.

She had one day left with him. She didn't want to spend that day angry.

She banked that spark of anger for later. The grieving process generally went through denial, then anger, then bargaining, then depression, then acceptance. She would need stuff like this for the anger part of it, so she saved it up. Yeah, this would piss her off later.

She was pretty deep in the denial part just then.

It was good to know these things about oneself, psychologically healthy. She dove into the big pit of denial and felt obliviousness close over her head.

Rae tucked her hand under Wulf's strong arm and smiled up at him as if this bright, sunny morning would never end. They walked out of the pew.

Dieter appeared over to the side of the church, near a dark alcove, and beckoned to them.

They followed him through the rear hallways of the church, picking up security men as they walked the corridors until a crowd of black suits surrounded them. If Rae hadn't recognized all Wulf's security guys, she might have been intimidated.

Behind them, another crowd of black suits bustled around Flicka and Pierre.

When they hit the back doors of the basilica, the security men broke their tight formation and fanned out, pushing back the crowd while Wulf, Rae, Flicka, and Pierre strode with just a few security staff to the waiting black SUVs.

The noontime sun blazed overhead and washed their shadows down to black puddles at their feet.

The royals were all looking to the cars while Hans and Friedhelm beside Rae scanned the crowd.

At the SUVs, the doors were opened for Rae and Wulf. Flicka and Pierre were a step behind them and veered off for the other SUV. Rae reached back for Wulf's hand, just because they were practically in the cars and no one would see.

She glanced back at the alabaster basilica shining in the Parisian sunlight.

Behind Wulf, past his dark blue eyes and the black shoulder of his morning coat, silver sparkled in the crowd.

Sparks spat.

Rae grabbed Wulf's hand and threw herself backward, yanking him to the ground.

Confusion clouded his blue eyes as she felt herself falling, but the bang echoed off the marble and cement around them.

Wulf wrapped his arms and legs around Rae as they fell, shielding her.

Men scuffled beyond what Rae could see, people screamed, and another sharp blast from the gun pounded her ears.

Wulf's legs clamped around her. His arms closed around her head.

Black suits landed on top of them both, and the air was gone.

Rae gasped to breathe.

More screams, and a Bluetooth lying on the ground beside Rae's head squawked, "*Gun! Gun!*"

Scrambling rattled above her, and they were both encased in a thick shell of black suits.

Wulf huffed beside her head.

Hearing him breathe quenched some of the panic. If he was breathing, he wasn't dead.

The gun cracked one more time, and Wulf's whole body flinched and tightened around her .

Rae gasped again, trying to breathe.

There was no air.

*Drowning.*

*Suffocating.*

*Dying.*

She needed *air*.

No more gunshots tore through the air.

The Bluetooth beside her squalled, "*Frei!*"



Hands grabbed Wulf's shoulders and pulled him off Rae.  
She still couldn't breathe. Her lungs fought for air.  
Wulf fell to his knees beside her. "Rae! Are you all right? Rae!"  
Her lungs strained against her sides and broke free.  
Rae gasped great gulps of air, trying to get enough.  
His hands stroked her torso, and Rae touched his chest, reassuring herself that no crimson blood stained his clothes.

She leaned on the side of the SUV for support while she breathed.  
The razor-sharp metal edges of a bullet hole sliced her finger.  
He said, "You're all right? When they landed on me, I couldn't hold myself off you. Are you all right? Were you crushed? Is there pain?"  
"Fine," she gasped. "I'm fine. Wind knocked out of me. Fine." Wulf examined her arms, grabbed her shoulders, and twisted her, checking her for, she assumed, bloody gaping wounds. His hand stroked her stomach. "Wulf, I'm fine. You can stop."

The wind brought the sulfuric smell of gunpowder to them, stinging Rae's nose. Gunpowder smelled the same all over the world.

A shrill blast of a woman's scream shattered the air around them.

Wulf turned. "Flicka."

He shoved Rae down to the ground with one hand, pointed to her while staring at Hans, and sprinted to the other SUV. Four of his guys ran with him.

Hans tackled her, even though Rae was already sitting on the ground. She yelled, "Get off me! She's hurt!"

Hans tried to keep her from jumping up, but Rae pulled his hair to drag him off, got her feet under her, and ran.

Hans pounded right behind her.

Near the other car, Wulf slid to the ground beside his sister. A blob of scarlet blood stained her white dress down the left side. Two of Wulf's security staff tugged at her arms, trying to get her up and to the cars. Another black suit stood above her, pointing his pistol at anyone who moved on the perimeter.

Wulf shouted, "Flicka!"

"I'm not hurt! Dieter!" Flicka cried and pointed.

On the grass beside her, Dieter lay on his side, clutching his upper arm.

Rae ran to Dieter.

A few yards away, a pile of burly men sprang apart, hauled Pierre Grimaldi to his feet, and hustled him toward a limo.

Pierre turned and reached through their broad backs, shouting, “Flicka! No! *Retourne!*”

As Rae ran toward them, Flicka told Wulf, “I’m fine. He got Dieter!”

Rae dove to the ground beside Dieter. Blood spilled between his fingers where his hand clamped his arm and soaked his black suit coat, darkening it. He said something harsh in German.

Rae grabbed Dieter’s arm and pressed her hand on the hot wound, which ran across the side of his arm, back to his triceps.

Wulf yanked off his coat and vest and said something to Flicka just as the first fweeping police car skidded in front of the limos.

Flicka tore at the slip inside her dress, ripping off a long white bandage and throwing it to Rae.

Rae caught the white streamer out of the air, wadded it up, and crammed it against the wound, pressing, trying to stop the bleeding.

Wulf twisted his vest into a long strip, looped it around Dieter’s arm and the wad of ivory silk, and twisted the cloth, making a compression bandage.

Flicka ripped another swatch of cloth off and tossed it to Rae.

Rae dabbed the blood around the bandage, which was already turning scarlet from the inside like veins on a chrysanthemum.

Rae crooned to Dieter, “It’s okay. It’ll be okay.”

Dieter cussed like a Swiss sailor.

An ambulance wailed and stopped beside the SUVs.

Rae looked up. A wall of black suits surrounded them, facing out. Handguns pointed outward in all directions like a firearm phalanx.

Beyond the security guys’ legs over by the basilica, a man lay on the ground, held down by more men in black suits. The gunman strained against the security guys. One of the suits punched him in the ribs.

Wheels and running feet came toward them. The security guys around Rae parted to let the stretcher through.

The orderlies lifted Dieter onto the stretcher and wheeled him away. If his cursing was any indication, he was going to be fine. Pissed off as all hell, but fine.

The other security men lifted Rae and Flicka to their feet. Wulf hopped up.

Hans said, “*Wulfram. Now. We should leave now.*”

Wulf grabbed Rae’s arm and pushed Flicka toward a group of his men. They all trotted back to the SUVs. Flicka got into the SUV behind them.

In the back seat, Wulf wiped off the blood smeared on Rae's hands with his suit coat. "Are you all right?"

"Yeah. I'm fine."

"I couldn't hold myself off you. My knee slipped when my staff piled on." His hand stroked her side and rested on her hip. "Are you sure you weren't crushed?"

"It just knocked the wind out of me. I'm fine, now."

He wrapped his arms around her. "My security did their jobs, you see? No one was killed. They took him down. We're safe, *ja*?"

"Yeah," she said. "It's not that big a deal."

He reared back and stared at her. His blue eyes held mortification and then, oddly, hope. "It's not?"

"Wulf, honeybunch, I grew up in the shadow of The Border." She was shaking a little, so she went full-blown, gun-totin' Western stereotype to compensate. "Back home, illegal drugs and trafficked people ran across our ranch all day, all night. Snipers sat on the ridge lines and shot you if you took out a cell phone because they assumed you had seen the drug mules and were calling *La Migra*. My brothers and I used to find dead drops of drug bales, and if the drug lords had known that we knew where their stashes were, an elimination team would have broken into our house and killed my whole family in our sleep. This ain't nothin'."

He dragged her back into his arms. "So this didn't frighten you off."

"In Pirtleville, one amateur with a gun who barely managed to crease one person in a crowd wouldn't even be enough to gossip about after church. That crackpot couldn't hit the broad side of a barn, from the inside, with the doors closed."

Her heart trembled, but not too much.

Wulf's great inhale and sigh could have been an aborted sob or the last gasp of panic leaving him.

## Their Last Afternoon in Paris

AFTER the wedding, back at the Empire Suite at the *George V* hotel, the yellow roses and violets had been replaced with fresh ones, just like every day. The petals were firm, and rose perfume hung in the air.

Mountains of decaying flowers must choke the landfills of France as new blooms were trucked in to replace the barely wilted ones.

Even the flowers lasted such a short time and were whisked away to die out of sight.

Clouds floated in the azure sky outside the window over the Eiffel Tower and Paris. Traffic over on the Champs-Élysées droned, but the hotel was a block away from that main boulevard. A bubble of quiet and birdsong separated Rae from real people.

Rae sat on the couch in jeans and a tee shirt, stretching her toes. Taking off those pumps felt like the bones of her feet had exploded out of them. She didn't lean back because the hairdresser had been very specific about how to clip the tiara into her updo for the reception tonight because the lady wasn't coming back. Rae throwing herself to the ground hadn't mussed her hair at all, a small miracle in this day of near-disasters.

Her make-up had to remain perfect, too, for four more hours.

So no leaning back and no crying.

A breeze cooled her face, but her chest trembled.

Wulf was sitting in the dining room with Hans and the security guys, finalizing the security arrangements for the reception that night. Their calm chatter sounded more like a business meeting than trying to keep people alive.

"Five of our men with Flicka," Wulf said. "Evidently, the Grimaldi security team's orders must be to protect Pierre first."

It all seemed deadly serious now. These guys had formed a shield with their bodies around her and Wulf. A bullet meant for Flicka had creased Dieter instead.

Someday, Rae might turn on the news and see crimson staining Wulf's crisp, white shirt.

Her heart squeezed, hard.

Herr Keller had been dispatched to the hospital to act as a go-between, and he had reported that, other than Dieter's constant, mortifying language, everything was fine. He had received seventeen stitches and a tetanus shot.

Rae scrolled through emails on her phone, but nothing urgent or personal had arrived. She flipped through the screens to her texts and reread the quick text from Georgie congratulating her on her good sense in going to Paris and admonishing her to have a good time.

Rae had almost closed the texts page, but her eyes lit on the texts between her and Wulf the week before they had left for Paris. She scrolled back, replaying their texted conversation.

The first thing that she noticed was, though she had thought that she had told him that she was going home, none of her texts actually said that. At best, they were vague. One from Thursday night said, "I have to go pack," and didn't say what she was packing for.

No wonder Wulf had shown up at her dorm, ready to take her to the airport.

A real psychologist would have made all kinds of hay out of those texts. The subtext was pretty clear that she had not wanted to tell him no.

Far down the scroll, she found a text from Wulf from the previous Wednesday sandwiched between longer, meandering texts from her. They had been flipping texts back and forth so fast that she had missed it.

*I miss you.*

Good Lord. It must have been hard for that so-very-private man to write that text.

And she hadn't replied.

She glanced over at the dining room, but Wulf and the security guys were still hashing out the particulars. Dieter's absence looked odd.

Even though she knew that he was leaving the Southwest for pragmatic reasons, she had not considered that he might regret that it had to be done .

Keeping these blinders on was getting harder.

Over in the dining room, someone slapped the table, and they all stood. Some of the guys left and went back to their own rooms.

Wulf came over and stood beside her. "You are all right?"

"Of course." She stood.

His fingers trailed down her arm. "When I landed on you, at the church, it wasn't too heavy? It didn't hurt you?"

*Again?* “Really, it just knocked the wind out of me. I’m fine.”

His hand rested on her hip. “No pain?”

“Good Lord, Wulf. My butt might be bruised, but luckily, it’s got plenty of padding.”

This seemed to satisfy him. His fingers wound around her fingers, and he was standing so close to her. “This is our last day in Paris.”

*Their last day.* She nodded.

“We have a few hours. We could walk around, have a croissant and some coffee, or we could go to the Eiffel Tower. We haven’t been there yet.”

*One last day.* She had one last afternoon with Wulf.

She was dying inside on this, their last day. Tomorrow would be nothing but a plane ride and a commute back to the dorm, and she would stand in the parking lot and decide whether to drive to Pirtleville and putter away her life or to walk back into the dorm and explain to Hester why she was frittering away the chance that Hester had bought her, probably at some damage to Hester’s reputation and definitely at her own mother’s expense. People on the outside didn’t know and wouldn’t see it, but those subtle power shifts mean everything in a closed community.

One last day. A few, last hours. The Eiffel Tower would still be there when she got back to Paris someday. So would the Opera House.

No crying. The mascara must not run.

Since this was the last afternoon she had with Wulf, she knew what she wanted, even if all the security guys stared at her while she walked past them.

She stood on the thick, woven carpet, her bare feet with their first pedicure cold against the royal blue and gold laurels, and squeezed his hand. “Come on.”

She led him past the security guys who studied the carpet, the drapes, their tablets, or the threats outside the window .

Rae kicked the bedroom door closed behind them. “The make-up lady and the hairdresser aren’t coming back.”

“And so?” Wulf stepped toward her, and his hand brushed under her chin, lifting her face.

Her heart was fluttering even more than her hands were shaking. “So no kissing.”

“That will be difficult.” His hands brushed her arms, trailing his fingers like kisses. He picked up her hands and kissed her palms, then her wrists. His hands slid around her, and he picked her up.

She knew she didn't have to protest.

She wanted his lips on hers and to kiss him, but all the fragile airbrushing on her face would fall apart at the least touch. She was tempted to not care, to go ahead and ruin it all because one last day was worth it, but as she closed her eyes and bent toward him, Wulf said, "Look at me."

Rae stopped, backed up. His blue eyes were so serious.

He laid her on the gold bedspread, carefully, but she propped herself on her elbows so her head didn't touch the bed. Above her, the draperies on the wall rose to a crown at the ceiling. In the Empire Suite, even the beds were crowned.

Wulf rested a knee on the bed beside her, starting to crawl over her.

She wanted to say to hell with it all and fall back on the bed and let him have her because their lives were so fragile and short, but she wanted to look right for him tonight.

Last impressions were important, too.

She scooted out from under him and hopped to her knees. He wasn't wearing a tie, and his collar was unbuttoned, so she grabbed handfuls of his shirt front and drove him onto his back.

He laughed as she flipped him and slapped the bed on both sides as he landed.

She wanted to kiss him to stop him from laughing at her because this cracking in her chest was killing her, but kissing would ruin her lipstick and the air-brushed foundation around her mouth when her lips swelled from crushing them against his.

He started to sit up to tussle some more.

She wanted to look right for him tonight and not like some hayseed off the dirt farm. Everything inside her head was swirling and making her dizzy .

She backed off the bed.

He pushed himself up to his elbows, confused by her retreat. His hand wave might have been construed as irritated except for the grin on his face and in his blue, blue eyes. "Come on, Rae. I won't muss you."

"I don't know what you want me to be," she said. "I want this last time to be special, but I don't know what to do. Sometimes you demand that I submit, that I act like a sub, like you want me to sit naked at your feet and wear your collar." Her chest tightened like she couldn't breathe. "Then you *laugh* when I fight you, and it seems like you want me to slam you up against the wall and screw you again." If she ignored the gaping pain in her chest,

*this* was what was wrong in her head. “I don’t know what you want me to be .”

He sat up and scooted to the edge of the bed. Taking her hand, he drew her down to sit beside her and wrapped his arms around her shoulders, careful not to touch her hair. “I want *you* to be *you* , Reagan. You should not conform to what anyone wants you to be, not even me. You don’t have to hide behind a Dominatrix’s leather mask or one of those white hats from your church. I won’t cast you in a role, a societal construct, and demand that you be that and only that. You should be complex and nuanced. Everyone has told you what to be, what to think, what to do, your whole life, haven’t they?”

She nodded.

“Be *you* ,” he said. “Shove me up against a wall and tell me what *you* want.”

Her body tingled, remembering.

“Submit and allow me to perform a truly depraved act upon your body that will leave you breathless.”

She kind of wanted to know what that was, and she started to smile.

“Lie in my arms, and I will gaze into your eyes until I know you.”

Sometimes he seemed like a sparkly vampire, except that the soft Parisian sunlight filled the room like cool water, and Wulf was still the same. “You could do that, couldn’t you?”

His expression had turned gentle. “It’s not magic.”

No, it was love. It was because she loved him that he could see past every barricade that she had built to wall off parts of herself that had always been unacceptable to the people around her.

If she could only have him for this moment, their last day in Paris, she wasn’t going to waste a moment. This might be the only time in her life that anyone, ever, would look into her eyes and see all of her.

She stood. To get her tee shirt off, she stretched the collar and eased it over her head, careful not to brush her made-up face or bump her coiled hair. She dropped her bra on the wadded red shirt.

Wulf watched. His gaze sharpened, and all that intensity was turned on her. It did feel like the glare of the sun, but Georgie was wrong. Rae didn’t melt. Instead, she felt that light all around her, and she glowed, too.

She shucked her jeans and panties.

Wulf eyed her naked breasts and hips.

She jerked her chin up, because the last time he saw her like this, she was



going to be smiling.

His gaze moved up to her face, and his mouth parted in a smile. His breathing roughened. “*God*, you’re beautiful, Rae.”

He grabbed at his own clothes, unbuttoning and nearly ripping his shirt to get it off. He kicked off his shoes and unhitched his belt. His torso undulated as he pushed his pants and underwear down his slim hips and thighs in one muscular movement.

Rae’s heart thumped like it was flipping, and she ran her hands up his hard thighs and over his hips, grasping his long shaft. He inhaled when she touched him. His skin was pale gold, a lighter shade than her tan, but his swimsuit zone was pale. His rosy cock verged on violet, from the base to the soft foreskin gathered below the head.

Rae clambered on top of him and pushed him back on the bed, but he crab-walked backward until he leaned against the golden draperies on the wall.

Rae straddled him, standing on her knees above him. “You can’t kiss me.”

“I can’t kiss your mouth.” Wulf stroked over her ribs and down her belly, watching her face. “I can have everything below your collarbones.”

His other hand drifted upward, pressing the curve of her waist and up to her breasts. He thumbed her nipple, a shock at the sensation, and she gasped at even that tweak.

He leaned forward and took her breast into his mouth, tonguing her nipple. She arched her back and held his hair. The military-short cut was fuzzy in her palms. His blond hair was lighter than the skin on her fingers, and she could see her rose nail polish peeking from his thick hair.

He moved to her other boob, rolling her nipple with his tongue. A hot zap arced through her body, bowing her backward. Her breath scraped inside her chest.

His hands slid around to her back and bare ass, grabbing her flesh. Rae held his broad shoulders and rubbed her fingers and palms over his skin, lolling her head back as he suckled her. Passion zinged through her, and her clit tingled with wanting him.

He reached under her, between her legs, and stroked her folds, sending a shock from her clit to her head. His hand found her center and slicked her slip over her, rubbing the skin around her entrance, and she pushed his hand away because she wanted his cock that bobbed against her thigh in time with his

heartbeat.

He guided her hips down on him. She pushed down, wanting him all.

His dark blue eyes were misty with desire. He held her hips down on himself as he breathed, struggling for control. "You're so beautiful."

She wanted to rest her forehead against his shoulder while she panted, trying for her own control. His citrus and cinnamon tea cologne mixed with the clean ocean smell of sex. She ground her hips down against him, and he arched his neck as she took him deeper into her body.

Wulf slid down the headboard, and she braced her arms on his shoulders. She lowered herself until her face was an inch from his, almost close enough to kiss.

His eyes half-closed, and he groaned, swiveling his hips and thrusting up into her.

She was making love to a real-live prince in Paris and about to attend a royal wedding reception in a couture gown while wearing a diamond tiara, and it wasn't enough. It wasn't nearly enough.

Going back home wasn't an option for her any more. She didn't want to go back where she was too different to be wanted, but if they let her go, it would mean that she had rejected their values and beliefs, and that would be intolerable to them.

Even though her whole family was there, even though she had no idea how she would survive without them, she didn't want to go back.

That was the plain, honest truth, as unadorned as a white, mesh bonnet. She wanted to say yes to life.

Yes, she wanted to start a clinic for autistic kids. Yes, she would sacrifice anything and everything for it. Yes, it was a risk, but she had to try.

Yes, she wanted to love and be loved, even for just this last day.

Pirtleville was inundated with the desolation of *no*.

No, you couldn't ask questions. No, you shouldn't think for yourself. No, you couldn't enjoy a relationship with a gorgeous man because everyone would gossip that you had become too worldly. No, you shouldn't try to make things better because this existence was a vale of tears and hardship.

She moved on Wulf, working her body down his shaft and milking him with her pussy as she rose up on her knees. Ecstasy tightened in her core. She pushed herself up for leverage to take him deeper.

Under her, Wulf panted, kneading her hips with his hands as he pushed her down on himself. His abs contracted as his hips rose, rippling under his

skin. “Rae—”

She answered, “Wulfram Augustus.”

Wulf locked his gaze on her.

She could feel barriers falling away. “Wulfram Augustus Heinrich Ernst Georg Berthold Friedrich.”

“Rae—” he said again, like he was trying to say everything with just her name. He didn’t look away.

She inhaled hard, trying to remember it all. “Wilhelm Louis Ferdinand, Prinz von Hannover.”

His gasp was as tight as if he was in agony. “No. I’m just Wulf, with you.”

“*Wulf.*” She pumped down on him hard, grinding at the bottom, until he shouted a hoarse cry and she gasped and flew apart in a burst of light.

Rae floated, drifted.

She found herself suspended in the air on Wulf’s outstretched hands.

He had caught her body when she fell forward and was holding her aloft over his chest with his fingers spread wide. His blue eyes studied her, taking in every curve of her face and the light in her eyes.

She pushed herself up on shaking arms. “You didn’t let me fall.”

He smoothed a strand of her hair back into place and whispered, “Never.”

# The Prince of Hannover, Again

THAT night, the interior lights glowed dimly in the back seat of the limousine, and the heavily tinted windows kept out the night and people's stares. Plastic new car smell swirled through the cool air streaming from the vents.

Rae clutched the skirt of her sapphire, crystal-encrusted ball gown and adjusted the layers of fluff.

Wulf smiled at her but didn't comment on her fidgeting.

"It will wrinkle," she said.

"You look utterly beautiful."

"They made the top too tight." Her boobs were plumping out of the bustier cups.

"I think it looks marvelous."

Rae fretted, "I am trussed up like a blue-ribbon pig goin' to prom."

Wulf chuckled. "That's adorable. Speak some more Western for me."

The car rolled to a stop.

Outside, a crowd fenced by barricades turned to look at the car.

"Never mind," he said. "We're here. A few, quick notes."

Rae kept trying to adjust her skirt to keep it from wrinkling but she was worried about leaving damp handprints on the dark blue silk. "Why didn't you tell me these *notes* in the hotel an hour ago?"

"You might have thought about them too much. I'll emerge from the car first and walk around the back. I'll open your door and hand you out. If you drop my hand quickly, the flashes will die down. If you touch me while we're walking into the reception, it will provoke the photographers. I will leave it up to you."

The heavy fabric of her dress clung to her knees like it was anticipating the joy it would get from tripping her. "Should I walk behind you?"

"Absolutely not. Walk on my right. Keep your chin up. A small smile will ensure that you don't look scornful but will not make your cheeks cramp."

Wulf's door opened behind him. He stepped out and walked around, just

like he said.

The time it took his long legs to cover the ground behind the car was nearly enough for Rae to give in to panic and hyperventilate, but not quite.

Her door opened. Wulf's hand hung in the air, waiting for her to come out.

Beyond his hand and black tuxedo cuff, camera flashes sparkled.

She took his hand and, clutching the crystal-encrusted skirt of her ball gown, gingerly stepped out of the car.

He smiled at her, gently, kindly, just like always.

Wulf lifted his head to face the crowd.

His expression hardened with the intensity of a hunting falcon. His blue eyes glittered, and even though he was tall and always held himself with good posture, he seemed to grow, to take up more space, to dominate even the crowd pressing them from both sides behind the flimsy, wood-slat barricades.

Every one of the people in that throng gazed up at him. Some raised their phones to take pictures, and sparkles turned into a wave of white light.

For a second, just before the flashes blinded her, Rae saw The Dom again, the man who could intimidate with a glance, and then she saw *more*.

Wulf wasn't The Dom.

Wulf had become even more imposing, more commanding, like he could ride at the head of a charge into battle with ten thousand men at his back and drive back the enemy with the force of his will.

Rae blinked, and her hands shook.

The Dom was a pale imitation of the Prince of Hannover.

The camera flashes subsided.

Shadowy shapes of the crowd shifted beyond the glowing confetti that fell through Rae's vision from the flash bulbs.

Rae stepped backward, fully intending to get right the heck back in that limousine .

Wulf must have felt her fingers trembling because he didn't drop her hand like he said he would. He wrapped her fingers in the crook of his elbow and held her hand there.

Rae straightened. This was a gantlet she had to run.

She inhaled, picked her chin up, and smiled.

Wulf stepped forward, and they walked between the barricades. The closest people in the crowd jostled for position and snapped their pictures

with blasts of light from cell phones or tourist cameras or professional cameras with bazooka lenses. A pulse of silver flashes ran the red carpet in front of them.

The cool spring breeze funneled between the museum buildings flanking the courtyard and whipped Rae's skirt against her legs.

Rae lifted the skirt of her ball gown in front so she wouldn't stomp on it and rip it to shreds.

Wulf's warm hand comforted her as they walked toward a glass pyramid that glowed in the darkness like a portal to a magic world. The pyramid was so bright that she couldn't see inside it.

Above them, brilliant lights drowned out the Parisian stars and the flash bulbs.

Behind the barricades, people shouted and waved amid the blaze. Their mingled voices echoed off the buildings all around the courtyard.

Wulf nodded to them, still smiling, while he escorted Rae to the doors ahead.

Just before they entered the blazing pyramid, Wulf turned her toward the crowd and raised one hand in a restrained greeting. Rae kept that terrified smile plastered on her face and her chin, up.

The royal watchers went nuts, screaming and cheering. One barricade teetered, but the people behind it steadied the flimsy wooden slats rather than risk chaos.

They went inside the Louvre, away from the crowd, and Rae took a deep breath. "Can they see us in here?"

Wulf shook his head. "The lights are placed to shine outward, so that the pyramid blazes with light. We're quite out of sight for a few minutes."

Inside the glass pyramid entrance to the Louvre museum, over the railing and below the landing, down in the subterranean lobby, dozens of round banquet tables looked like red rose-studded icecaps. The whine of violins and thunder of the chattering crowd drifted through the air, and acrid fresh paint irritated Rae's nose. Thousands of people milled around the floors, sat around the tables, and danced. Couples waltzing to the quartet that played chamber music swirled in the center of the lobby. They swarmed counter-clockwise around the floor like a flock of gaudy birds in flight.

Three sets of escalators and staircases transported people from the lobby below, now a ballroom, to the upper passages, where more of the same crimson flower arrangements peeking over the railings meant that yet more

banquet tables waited for the second tier guests.

Behind the tables, the hallways opened to The Louvre's collections, and Rae glimpsed yet more people strolling among the glittering glass cases beyond.

Rae turned left to go down the escalators to the lower floor, but Wulf tugged her hand to the right.

He guided her to top of a staircase that seemed to float in the air and spiraled down to the lower level, but surely it didn't float because that would be magic, and Rae didn't believe in magic.

Wulf took cuts near the end of the line in front of his own father, who nodded to the two of them, but they didn't speak further.

Rae nodded and smiled at Wulf's father. He didn't smile back.

She peeked over the railing. A few steps from the bottom of the spiral staircase, a man in a red uniform stood with a gentleman in a tuxedo and a lady wearing a dress the grayed color of peach fuzz and a pale blue sash. The man in the red uniform announced, "The Prince and Princess of Oranje-Nassau," and his amplified voice echoed among the dancing and milling wedding guests.

Photographers gathered on the floor below. A few flashed their cameras at the Prince and Princess.

Rae said, "It looks like everyone else is already here. Are we late?"

Wulf shook his head. "We are scheduled for an eight o'clock entrance. We have ten minutes to spare."

Seven couples stood in line in front of them. Rae's eyes felt as wide as a newborn foal's, and her legs were as wobbly.

Wulf was wearing some kind of mix between a tuxedo and a military uniform, which seemed moderately vampiric. Rae didn't know enough to draw any sort of conclusions, other than it was a black tuxedo-ey thing with tails, a vest, and a white shirt. A thick, dark crimson sash crossed his white shirt and vest from under his coat at his right shoulder and was pinned on the left side of his trim waist by something sparkly. A matching crimson tie-like ribbon dangled a blue cross pendant at his throat below his white bow tie. The center of the cross was a man on horseback fighting a green dragon, and a crown linked the upright cross to the ribbon at his throat. An eight-pointed silver-and-diamond star that had the same guy fighting the same dragon shined on the left side of his black tuxedo jacket. A row of medals lined up above the star.

Dragons and vampires and magic portals, *oh my*.

All the people in front of them wore sashes and badges and glittering stuff.

Even though Rae was wearing the dark blue, crystal-encrusted Marchesa gown that Flicka had picked out for her and she glittered like a walking sapphire, she felt underdressed. Wulf had loaned her a set of sapphire jewelry from his castle, and her auburn hair swept around a tiara of diamond laurel leaves.

Rae felt underbred as well, but that couldn't be helped.

Wulf wound her hand into the crook of his arm and patted her hand. "When we make our entrance, there may be a bit of a commotion. It was not announced that I would attend."

"But they all saw you at the wedding," Rae said. "You walked Flicka down the aisle."

"Evidently there was some speculation that I would slip in for the ceremony. Doubtless there are mobile phone snaps of Flicka and me, but the photographers and many of the people at the reception were not invited to the ceremony. It is well-known that I am a great recluse and never attend formal functions, so there will be a moment of surprise when we enter."

"So they'll be looking at you here, too." That was fine. She could handle them all looking at him.

"The fact that I brought a woman will be the most fascinating thing they could imagine. All eyes will be on both of us."

"Oh." The carpet waved under her feet.

"There will be more pictures. There will flash bulbs in our faces. Smile. We can't have another picture with you hiding behind me. The barrage should fade quickly. After that, we will make the rounds and then be on our own for a few hours. There will be refreshments and more dancing, later."

Rae could not imagine all the bejeweled and bedecked aristocrats getting down and funky.

"In a few hours, Flicka and Pierre will arrive, after they have been presented and made the rounds at the charity reception. Later, she will claim you and introduce you to the more influential dowagers and ladies."

"This is like Jane Austen." Rae tightened her grip on his arm, trying to hold herself up.

"Shakespeare and the Elizabethan court are better preparation than Austen."



“With paparazzi. It’s like the Elizabethan court *with paparazzi*.” The air around her seemed too thin, and she couldn’t breathe in enough of it to keep her lungs from starving. She grabbed the railing. The air stretched below them.

“The facial expression that you want to display for the photographers is that you know you are beautiful, that you are loved, and that you have a secret. Flicka told me this, once.”

“Yeah. Right.” Rae gulped air. “What expression are you going to have on your face?”

His subtle smile and one raised eyebrow had vague echoes of his Teutonic evil overlord impression. “That I rule the world.”

The gentleman of the tall couple ahead of them turned back and grinned at Wulf, having overheard the comment. He was as tall as Wulf and taller than Rae, and he said to her, so Britishly, “Hello.”

Rae tried not to react like a country bumpkin but *she knew who that guy was*. She had seen his face a thousand times, starting with pictures of him as a baby through his wedding pictures.

That meant the woman beside him was—and *Kate* turned around and smiled at Rae.

*Kate* waved, and her quick gaze took in Rae’s entire ensemble, from the diamond tiara to her sapphire earrings and necklace set to her shoes. She smiled. “Hi.”

Rae’s lame grin was forced. Her voice quavered. “Hi.”

*Kate* turned to Wulf. One of her arched eyebrows rose, a question in a code that Rae didn’t understand.

Prince William had a slight grin on his face. He nodded to Rae and said something in French to Wulf, and in her star-struck reverie Rae just caught that he asked, “Are you going to beat Henri to the altar? ”

Wulf retorted, in French, “*Everyone* will beat Harry to the altar. Is Kate still punching you when you snore? Also, Reagan speaks French.”

William laughed and winked at Rae, sending her into a silent tizzy of déclassé panic. She smiled bigger, trying to cover it up.

Wulf made the proper introductions to his cousins in English.

They both held out their hands to shake before Reagan had to decide whether to drop a curtsy or faint dead away.

Wulf said to Prince William, in French again, “I need to speak to your *grand-mère*.”

Prince William's casual expression became quite interested. "Do you?"  
"Oui." Wulf's tone conveyed nothing.

Kate's eyes drifted up to the crystal pyramid above them, as if a confirmation of *something* had been offered.

"I can phone her tonight, if you like," William said, switching back to English.

The sudden language switches were making Rae even more dizzy. She clutched her stomach, afraid of being sick.

"If we find a moment," Wulf said with all the intensity of a comment about the phase of the moon.

Rae picked up that Wulf's nonchalance was him being very British, maybe more so since he was standing there with two very prominent members of the British royal family, who were also being so understatedly British that Rae couldn't figure out any of the subtext that was going on no matter how many psychology classes she had taken, so she smiled.

"Splendid." William nodded to Rae and turned back to the gaping double doors.

Wulf mused, "I believe his French has a distinct Anglophone accent."

She whispered to Wulf, "Those guys, *those guys* are here."

"I should hope so. They were my flat mates for years, and Flicka and I attended their wedding."

*Desert rat. Desert rat.*

Rae's knees gave out. Wulf caught her around the waist as she sagged and tangoed her backward a few steps until he pressed her against the railing. Rae looked over his shoulder but all the other couples had their backs to them, except Wulf's father, who was studiously observing a flower vase on the opposite side of the landing. She wrapped her arms around his shoulders because the room was growing dim. His scent drifted out of his clothes: spiced tea, oranges, and clean, strong man.

Wulf bent his head to whisper in his ear. "Remember: you're beautiful, you're loved, and you have a secret."

"I'm none of those," Rae whispered with desperation squeezing her voice. "I'm a plebe among the patricians." *A desert rat among the eagles: pitiful, cowering, and about to become lunch.*

"You *are* beautiful. You're the most beautiful woman I've ever seen, a vibrant rose among these pale, inbred, hothouse lilies."

At least Wulf thought so.

Her heart slowed its panicked vibration. Her hands on his shoulders shook less. She held his shoulder, where the dark red sash lay over his shirt, the black storm cloud of a tattoo, and that devastating scar that all these people would know about. He was back where he was The Survivor Prince.

She couldn't make a scene. It would embarrass him in front of all these people if she did something so silly as to faint, and it would draw yet more attention to him, which he wouldn't want.

His whisper dropped lower, and his breath slid into the sensitive shell of her ear. "And here is your secret: *I love you.*"

Her heart was slowing, but she certainly couldn't breathe.

Rae shouldn't say anything back because her throat had clamped down tight and because it would make tomorrow so much harder. She wrapped her arms around him more tightly and nodded for fear of crying.

*Mascara. Professionally applied mascara.*

He said, "I would spirit you away and ravish you in the ruins downstairs, but I shouldn't muss your hair and make-up. I want them all to hate me for being with the most beautiful woman they've ever seen."

Tomorrow was going to be the hardest day of her life.

He pried one of her arms off his neck and kissed her palm. His voice dropped a half an octave and thickened with desire. "But I will have you later. Know that every time you see me, I am thinking of having you."

Her body filled with passion for him, blurring the panic. "Again?"

"Absolutely."

And now that she had sex-flushed cheeks and damp panties, *now* she was going to enter a ballroom full of princes and duchesses.

She started to smile at the absurdity of it all.

"That's better," Wulf said.

She smiled a little more.

"Better yet. Here's another secret."

She didn't think her heart could handle any more. "Okay?"

He whispered, "I don't give a fig's end what these people think. There are only a few of these grand events, birthday celebrations and weddings and funerals, per year. You've been kind to Rosamunde, Dieter, my staff, Glenda, your parents, and even my intractable father. Rather than fall apart or freeze, you can bandage a gunshot wound and shake it off. At college, you've figured out how to help children rather than merely eke out a life for yourself."

“It’s no big deal,” she said.

Yet, for a moment, she felt equal to the princesses and earls out there.

Ah, Wulf was building her up so that she wouldn’t make a fool out of herself. That made sense. He was smart like that.

And kind.

Wulf glanced ahead to the huge doorway, where the last couple ahead of them, Prince William and the Duchess of heart-stopping Cambridge, had swished down the stairs to be presented and make their entrance. Applause roared like a rockslide while camera flashes sparkled on the white railings around the landings, and a great flash of white light erupted at the bottom of the stairs.

Wulf said, “It’s time to go.”

Wulf draped Rae’s hand on his arm. The warmth from his arm filtered through the opera gloves she wore and warmed her cold hand like sunlight. He nodded, and they proceeded down the staircase into the grand lobby of the Louvre.

With every step downward, Wulf took on the imposing presence of the Prince again.

Either Rae’s panic was causing her hearing to go out, or silence spread through the lobby as they descended the stairs.

Wulf handed a card to the uniformed man standing there who was so short that he barely reached Wulf’s biceps, and Wulf leaned and muttered to him, “The Hereditary Prince’s card is behind mine.”

“Oh, thank you, sir. I had heard he never offers one,” the stocky man whispered back. He straightened and read the card. The little man stole a glance at Wulf and swallowed hard.

Rae raised her chin, and her breath caught because Wulf had said he loved her. Warmth bloomed in her heart and spread over her face as a smile. She was going to hold this night in her heart for the rest of her life.

Wulf said, “That’s good,” and he smiled down at her for that one last second. His blue eyes were kinder than she had ever seen them, and for a moment, she thought he would kiss her.

An enormous voice boomed from the short man and rang among the staircases and balustrades. “His Royal Highness Prince Wulfram Augustus, Hereditary Prince of Hannover, and Ms. Reagan Stone.”

Silver light slammed them like a tidal wave.

# Prince Brilliant

AFTER their entrance, Rae held it together as Wulf made the rounds of the room, greeting everyone he met.

Everyone seemed pleased, if surprised, to see him. He shook everyone's hands, kissed the ladies' knuckles, knew everyone's name, and asked each of them about something.

Rae watched him work the huge, royalty-filled ballroom.

*"Bon jour, Madame."* Wulf greeted a portly woman swathed in red satin and continued in French. Rae followed along without too much trouble.

"How are you?"

The woman beamed up at Wulf and offered her limp hand for kissing, though her smile seemed maternal. "Wulfram Augustus, it is good to see you. Your sister looked beautiful this afternoon."

Wulf brushed his lips over her gloved knuckles. "I will tell her you said so. Is Victor here? No? I'm sorry to hear that. Rae, may I present Madame Marie-Louise Emmanuelle, the Duchess of Aquitaine. Marie-Louise, this is my very good friend, Miss Reagan Stone. And is your Brazilian rain forest charity flourishing as always?"

After the French duchess, Wulf called in English to a man, "Edward! Smashing to see you." He shook his hand with a hearty handshake. "How's Ophelia? Lovely. May I present my very good friend, Miss Rae Stone. Rae, this is Edward de Vere, the Earl of Oxford, and his lovely wife, Anne. He's a writer, but it's a great secret." The guy laughed. Wulf continued, "And so everyone knows it. Edward, we should catch up. I'll be in Helvetica this summer."

Edward moved past, and Wulf looked toward a bony guy who could have passed for Ichabod Crane. "Philip! I haven't seen you since Kent!"

Philip's delighted confusion at seeing Wulf came out as a cackle.

"Wulfram! You made it! You look tanned. Your hermitage is agreeing with you? "

"How is your knee, Phillip? Rae, may I present Lord Philip Darcy, the Baron Darcy de Knayth." She gave him her hand, intending to shake as

always, but Lord Darcy also kissed her knuckles.

Rae saw Dieter a few paces away, hovering, and smiled at his friendly face.

He winked at her.

She pointed to her own arm, asking how he was.

His stoic nod and grimace suggested that he had never cussed and spat at the wound. His right arm did appear bulky with a bandage under his black suit.

Beside her, Wulf said, "Rae, may I present Johan, Count of Lagergren. Johan, may I present my very good friend, Miss Rae Stone."

The guy who looked like romance novel Swedish ski instructor said something that Rae did not understand.

*"En français,"* Wulf said.

*"Enchante, madam."* Johan's smarmy French was accented, and he kissed her hand a little too long.

*"Enchante, monsieur,"* Rae was glad she was wearing these ridiculous opera gloves that Flicka had insisted on. She might have caught something from him. Plus, the gloves were keeping her knuckles from getting chapped from all the kissy greetings.

"Johan, your wife is watching you," Wulf said.

Johan dropped her hand and checked his six, but no one was there.

"Nicolai!" Wulf had found someone else to talk to.

And so on.

For *hundreds* of people.

Wulf finally slowed. He took her hand. "That should be most of them." He still nodded at people, but they were able to walk through the crowd without being accosted by long-lost friends and relatives.

Wulf tucked her arm in the crook of his elbow. "Sorry about all that. Ancient obligations."

"It's fine. Did we get everyone?"

"The most important ones, I think."

Wulf's hiding out in the Southwest seemed more logical. Rae considered crawling under one of the white tablecloths and cowering until she got her equilibrium back.

Near the ballroom floor, amid the milling royals and nobles, a tuxedo-clad waiter offered Rae and Wulf glasses from a tray crowded with champagne flutes.

Rae accepted one, but Wulf held out his hand to her. She could hear his deep voice over the rumbling conversation and string music, “Shall we dance?”

She took his hand but leaned in. She whispered through her teeth, “I can’t waltz.”

“Rubbish,” he said. “We waltzed the night we met.”

“Not like these guys.”

“I’ll lead properly this time.” He took the untouched glass out of her hand and set it on the empty tray of another waiter going by.

Wulf led her onto the floor. She assumed the position, her left hand resting on his thick shoulder, the shoulder with the crimson sash, the Japanese tattoo, and the terrible gunshot scar, and her other hand clasping his warm hand. They waltzed among the hundreds of other couples, all moving counter-clockwise around the ballroom.

Rae did her best, and Wulf led the heck out of the dance. He didn’t fling her around, which would have been bad because Rae would have stepped on that ball gown skirt and torn it off of herself, but his body was muscularly rigid as he steered her around the floor. It was like his arms clamped her in a cage.

He smiled down at her, a kind smile that meant she wasn’t screwing it up too badly.

Mostly, he watched over her head to make sure they didn’t crash into anyone else, like a bizarro game of bumper cars where the object was to avoid the other jewel-encrusted cars.

The orchestra’s music filled the air with shimmering strings, Wulf held her in his arms, and Rae relaxed.

Wulf must have felt the change in her body, because he let her go of her waist and flipped her hand. She spun, following the way he turned her arm, and ended up clasped in his arms again, safe.

Then she really relaxed and let him lead.

After a couple more minutes, she managed conversation. “You look like a sparkly vampire in that get-up. Vampires always wear black tuxedos and sashes and man-jewelry.”

Wulf chuckled. “Dracula was merely a count.”

“What is all this, anyway?” Rae traced the silk crimson sash across his chest .

He shrugged. “Frippery. The protocol is to wear the highest honor

bestowed by the host country, but since this wedding is in a neutral country, most people are wearing Hannoverian or Monegasque honors. If they have neither, they wear their highest honors from their home country. Most of these orders and knighthoods and such, they gave each other during official state visits or their parents bestowed when they came of age. These particular insignia—the red sash, badge, and neck badge—are for the Hannoverian Order of St. George, thus the man slaying the dragon.”

“Did your dad give you that when you were eighteen?”

“No. I was eight.”

An eight-year-old blond child kneeling before a king wielding a sword filled her mind. Considering Wulf’s dad, she wouldn’t have been surprised if he had nicked Wulf. “So young?”

Wulf’s implacable expression alarmed her because she could feel that he was being very British about something. “The video of the Constantin’s murder showed quite clearly that I leapt and tried to cover him, even though I had already been shot. It impressed my father, that I had attempted to save the life of the heir, so he bestowed it as an order of merit when he named me the heir. The ceremony was televised.”

So everyone saw it, everyone in this room, perhaps most people in Europe.

She cradled his cheek with her hand. Wulf’s chin drifted toward her palm, but his blue eyes never broke eye contact with her.

The orchestra segued into another waltz, one with a little more tempo, and Wulf led her through it.

“You really are quite famous here,” Rae said.

“Notorious, perhaps.” Wulf spun them in a tight circle.

Rae tried to phrase this as subtly as she could, despite that she was more used to forthrightness than subtlety. “Why didn’t anyone figure you out, back home?”

Wulf glanced down back into her eyes for a second, but he watched the other dancers around them. “Financial and legal barriers.”

Georgie and Lizzy had mentioned layers of corporations and holding companies. “Okay, but you’re a celebrity.”

Wulf continued, “Hardly. Had you ever heard of any of the claimants for the extinct kingdoms and duchies of Europe? ”

Like she didn’t have anything better to do, like study in college. “No.”

“Would you know any of the twenty-two dukes of the British Isles by



sight?”

“Well, your cousin over there.” She glanced at Prince-slash-Duke William, who was handing Duchess Kate a glass of champagne.

Wulf said, “I was excluding those who also hold royal titles.”

“Oh. Then, no.” She stepped around his feet as he spun her in another twirl.

“Precisely. The American West rather unimpressed with such things.” He leaned, and his voice dropped. “It was a rather simple charade to uphold, until I told you my name. At that point, I realized how gossamer it at all was. One name could destroy it.”

“I still can’t believe you told me.”

“It was an impulsive move. Everyone around us at that party was so ensconced in role-playing, being the sub, being the Dom, and yet you saw through all of it. You were magnificent. With you, I wasn’t a vampire or a werewolf or a prince or The Dom. I wanted someone to know me as Wulf, just Wulf.” He shook his head at himself. “Utterly impulsive, quite rash. Perhaps there was a subconscious wish to divest myself and leave. Perhaps I wanted to be found out.”

Rae grinned at him. “Now you’re talking my language. Tell me more about your Jungian archetypes and subconscious desires.”

His slight smile and the flicker of one of his eyebrows bore hints of devilishness.

When she was breathless from the dancing, they went back to the tables. Wulf somehow knew where they were supposed to sit. Indeed, her name was embossed on the card on her plate. Someone had properly tagged and bagged her, anyway. She slipped the card into her purse as a souvenir of her night with the princes and princesses.

Wulf flipped his tuxedo tails behind him as he sat.

An Asian man wearing a tuxedo and an Order of St. George crimson sash and eight-pointed star identical to Wulf’s flopped in the chair beside him. “I’ll be damned. You did show up. I have lost a thousand Euros on you.”

His accent was also impeccably British.

Wulf said, “You know that I am bad luck, and thus liable to turn up anywhere.” They shook hands with a strength that suggested a brusque hug. Wulf leaned back and introduced Rae across the table. “Rae, this is Kuni Kuniyoshi, who prefers to be called Yoshi,” and he introduced her.

“Hello. Pleased to meet you.” She shook hands with him. When Yoshi

bent over the table, his left arm didn't move properly.

Wulf asked Yoshi, "Did you bring someone?"

"Alone, I'm afraid." He crossed his arms across his chest, closing himself off.

Wulf said, "Flicka didn't mention you were attending. I would have thought she would have used your presence as additional pressure on me."

"Other way. She emailed me a few days ago to announce that you had appeared in puff of brimstone."

Ice water congealed in Rae's throat, and she coughed. Surely Yoshi didn't know about The Devilhouse.

Wulf stroked Rae's back, but that one cough had cleared her throat.

Yoshi continued, "I had to fly commercial. There's a shocking shortage of Gulfstreams this week. It's better that I saw her marry the Rat Bastard with my own eyes."

Wulf clapped Yoshi on the shoulder but didn't say anything more.

Rae swiveled her cold water glass between her hands, watching them. Watching Wulf with his friends and family revealed new layers of him, and it caught Rae like a deer in headlights every time.

Yoshi flagged down a waiter and took three highball glasses off the tray. He set one in front of Wulf and one in front of Rae, and Yoshi began to relax as he drank and as the two men spoke of inconsequential things for a few moments.

Rae lifted the whiskey to her mouth, and the astringent fumes warmed her nose.

Wulf reached over and stole Rae's highball glass from her fingers.

"Hey!" She reached for it back.

"I am quite sure that Yoshi is about to say something that will require me to drink several of these." Wulf swirled the ice in the glass of whiskey.

Yoshi turned to Rae. His evil grin was infectious, and Rae found herself smiling back.

Yoshi asked, "So what do you want to know about The Quiet One, here?"

Rae glanced at Wulf, but he seemed perfectly at ease. She said, "I'm just fascinated that you call Pierre the Rat Bastard, too. I thought Wulf just didn't like him marrying his sister."

"We all had school nicknames. I was Yo-Yo."

"No one called you that," Wulf said.

Yoshi gestured to Wulf but spoke to Rae. “He didn’t call me that. The Rat Bastard called me that to my face. I am Asian, I played the cello, and my name is similar. It is so obvious as to be trite.”

Rae asked, “Why do y’all call him The Rat Bastard?”

“Just look at him!”

“You mean because he’s a pretty boy?”

“Because every woman who sees him, hands him her panties.”

“My goodness, that’s graphic.” Rae glanced at Wulf to see his reaction of this assessment of the man who was marrying his sister.

Wulf glanced up at Yoshi. His question was sharp. “Do you think he will cheat on her?”

Yoshi looked back to Wulf. All the joking had fallen out of his expression. “God, I hope not. What will you do?”

“What are the odds?”

Yoshi sighed. “People are getting five to one for this year. Three to one, for a two-year spread. Will you shoot him from a hilltop?”

Wulf jiggled the ice in his drink. “I would be more concerned about Flicka.”

Yoshi stared at his lap, thinking, then turned back to Rae. “Pierre earned that nickname, several times over. On the other hand, Wulfram here,” Yoshi pointed with his hand in front of his chest as if he were being cagey, “had several nicknames. We called him The Quiet One, for the most part, but that was his nickname from first standard.”

That nickname must have been from before Constantin was killed, because it implied if there was a Quiet One, there was also a Loud One. It was a twin nickname.

Wulf’s expression had not changed one whit, but his gaze slid over to Rae.

Yoshi said, “Later, we called him Prince Brilliant because he started taking maths at the university when he was eleven.”

Wulf muttered into his glass, “We could have conversed all night without mentioning that.”

“Eleven?” Rae asked Wulf.

Wulf drained one highball glass and picked up the other one.

Yoshi leaned in. “You didn’t know?”

“He’s modest,” Rae told Yoshi.

“Yes, modest. Some people might say, deceitful. His other nickname was

The Lone Wolf—”

“Yoshi.” Wulf’s tone had turned threatening.

Yoshi grinned harder. “—because we all thought that he was the last virgin in our class.”

“Oh?” Rae rested her elbows on the table.

Wulf swirled his drink, melting the ice. “Yoshi, you realize that Rae is my *date*.”

Yoshi ignored Wulf’s protests and grinned at Rae. “But we got it all wrong. We thought he was chaste, but he was merely discreet. We used to take the mickey out of him about it, but he never said a word.”

“Yoshi, there is only so far—”

“We should have known that, if he were a virgin, he wouldn’t have laughed with us *quite so much*. He’s told you that he lived off campus in upper school?”

“Yeah, I knew he lived off campus.” Rae glanced at Wulf, who studied his drink.

Wulf’s lips were pressed in a thin line. “Reagan, shall we dance?”

“In a minute. Go ahead, Yoshi.”

Yoshi said, “It was years later that the girls finally began confessing that Prince Brilliant had his car wait for them near the gate. He would take his dates to his house, feed them dinner, then take them upstairs.”

That sounded astonishingly familiar. Rae’s jaw dropped open.

Wulf tipped the rest of his drink into his mouth and set the glass on the table with a bit more authority than was customary.

Yoshi didn’t flinch. “The girls used to giggle about it in their dorm, but not one of them told the rest of us lads. He swore them all to secrecy, telling them that if anyone knew about it, the trick would no longer work.”

Rae snapped her mouth shut. *Layers and layers*.

Yoshi continued, “In their defense, none of the girls wanted to lose their virginity in a dorm’s single bed with a rubber band on the door knob.”

Yeah, Rae could understand that.

She looked around the enormous lobby at all the scores of beautiful princesses and heiresses in their gorgeous designer ball gowns, glittering with jewelry, and back to Wulf, who was staring into his drink.

Scores of them. More than *fifty* of them. Perhaps *hundreds*.

Wulf cleared his throat. “I believe that legend has been exaggerated in the intervening years.”

“We could take a survey.” Yoshi twisted in his seat, looking around the clamoring ball room. His left arm, again, seemed stiff. “Most of our class is here, and the next few classes, too.”

“Rae, *for the love of God*, will you consent to dance again?”

She settled her fingers in his hand, and he lifted her out of the chair by her fingertips.

On the dance floor, the band was playing a soft, slow song, not a formal waltz. He folded her into his arms. “You must know that Yoshi’s numbers have been grossly inflated. I was certainly *not* the gateway to womanhood at *Le Rosey*.”

“So how many were there?” Unease was a worm in her heart.

“Fewer than Yoshi would believe. Four, I think, over three years. He made it sound harmless.” His subtle expression, mostly flickers between his eyebrows, bordered between irritation and outrage.

Rae watched him, fascinated. “You’re distressed about this.”

“I almost got one girl killed. She was Saudi. I was too callow and careless to know what could happen to her.”

Rae’s breath left her. “Is she okay?”

“She was married off quite suddenly, but she is fine. Even happy, from what I heard through mutual friends. She has children. Quite a lot of them.”

“So you’re okay?”

“Certainly.” He glanced down at her and smiled. “I was seventeen. It was a long time ago.”

“Good.” She snuggled into his arms. She had known about the girls in The Devilhouse, but everyone knew those weren’t relationships, not with the man with the shiny shell.

Getting jealous now was stupid. Rae was going to be just another woman in Wulf’s past within a few hours.

She breathed hard. *Live for the moment. Live like tonight will never end.*

Tears burned in her eyes. Was the depression phase of grief starting so soon? She hadn’t even noticed the bargaining phase, and she had kind of thought the anger phase was going to take some more work .

Well, the phases of grief didn’t have to occur in the standard order. This whole week in Paris was a form of bargaining for just a little more time.

“I was hoping Yoshi would bring someone,” Wulf said.

“Oh?” If Rae made encouraging sounds, he might tell her more.

Wulf set her back a little and ducked his head to whisper near Rae’s

shoulder. “The pressure on him to marry a court lady and sire a son is enormous. There’s a line-of-succession crisis in Japan. He’s third in line for the imperial throne now. The Crown Prince has only a daughter. The second-in-line has only daughters. He’s third in line through his grandfather. It’s that damned Salic Law again, though they call it something else.”

The pressure on Wulf must be enormous, too.

“Yoshi almost took himself out of the running by flirting with Flicka for a while, but she was already enamored with Pierre.”

“The Rat Bastard,” Rae finished for him.

“Ah, you’ve met him.” Wulf grinned at her. “And there he is.”

The lights dimmed, and a follow spot picked out the couple at the bottom of the stairs.

Rae glanced over to where Flicka stood with her groom in the photographers’ glare. Pierre Grimaldi’s fine features and lean stature suggested that they would make beautiful children.

The air around them sparkled.

Rae said, “Wow.”

“Oh, God. Not you, too.”

“What? No. I mean, he’s okay.” Rae moved her hand up his arm, and Wulf glanced down at her. The Louvre had darkened for the bridal couple’s entrance, but Rae could see Wulf’s blond hair and strong jawline. She held tight to her nerves, because this was all over tomorrow, but she had to say something at least once. “He’s not my type.”

Wulf’s hands circled her waist, and he drew her body against his.

“You must have rarified taste.” Wulf leaned in, coming closer.

The darkness in the ballroom should cover them, and everyone was paying attention to the bride and groom’s grand entrance, but nerves fluttered in her belly. The dense crowd jostled around them, all turning toward the staircase for the grand introduction.

“I love you, too,” she breathed.

Wulf’s lips brushed hers, barely touching her, and she closed her eyes just as a silver flash roared out of the darkness at them.

# That Should Have Been Constantin

LATER in the night, after the formal dances and proper ceremonies, Flicka drew Rae into a small knot of beautiful young women and introduced her around, first names only.

Rae suspected that, again, a whole bunch of royal titles were being omitted.

Each woman shook her hand and smiled, so Rae smiled back even though she considered curtsying all the way down to her knees.

Through the crowd, Rae caught a glimpse of Wulf, who was standing with his cousin, Prince William, over by the bar. William held his cell phone out to Wulf, who took it and contemplated the bright screen for a moment. The glare lit his face from below with blue light.

Between Rae and Wulf, the crowd of nobles chattered like a flock of thousands of peacocks, and the orchestra, determined to be heard, thundered and wailed in the ballroom. Rae had no chance of hearing what the men were saying from across the lobby of the Louvre, so she watched.

Wulf held William's phone, and the conflict in his body was like he wanted to buy it but didn't have the money. She saw his shoulders rise and fall in a huge sigh, and he tapped the screen once. When Wulf brought the phone to his ear, his posture straightened, and he stood at stiff military attention.

Beside her, Flicka craned her neck to see what Rae was looking at, and she watched them, too.

People crowded between them, and Rae stretched to look over their heads and tiaras. It was good thing that she and Flicka, and William and Wulf, were all tall people. It made spying on him so much easier.

While Wulf spoke on the phone, he stared straight ahead, keeping eye contact with William. William rested his hand on Wulf's shoulder, not looking away.

Rae had the feeling she was watching something important and very intimate, but she didn't understand it, kind of like the whole rest of the night. "They're really close, aren't they?"

Flicka nodded. "They have a lot in common."

Rae glanced at Flicka, who was watching the two princes like she would like to run over to them but didn't dare.

Wulf nodded with the phone still at his ear, and William clapped him on the shoulder. After another few lines of conversation, Wulf handed the phone back to his cousin, who spoke seriously on it for a moment before he hung up.

When all that was over, William jostled Wulf with the hand he still held on Wulf's shoulder, grinned, and offered his other hand to shake. Wulf shook, and then they hugged in the quickest of shoulder-bumps before they broke apart and looked around to make sure no one in the throng of people surrounding them had noticed, which of course they had.

Flicka's sad tone caught Rae's attention when she said, "That should have been Constantin."

"What was he doing?" Rae asked.

Flicka's green eyes widened with exaggerated innocence. "I'm sure that I have no idea." She smiled, and she looked beautiful, and loved, and like she knew a secret.

These Hannover royals and their secrets were going to make Rae's head explode one of these days. "Come on," Rae whispered. "Give it up."

"*Moi?*" Flicka asked. "*Je ne sais pas quoi que ce soit*, but I need to talk to you, quickly, before he comes back."

They both looked over and saw Wulf and William separate and push through the crowd. Wulf glanced up and caught Rae's eyes. He began swimming through the swarming people.

"*Merde.*" Flicka lowered her head to whisper by Rae's ear. "Quickly. Listen to me. I do not want to influence you in this most personal decision, but if you need to tell him no, please be kind. I am begging you, be honest, but kind. You can hurt him so badly."

"I don't ever want to hurt him, but I don't know what you're talking about."

"You know about Constantin and the shooting, right? "

Those were facts. "Um, yeah."

"You know about his memory, right?"

"Uh, I couldn't say."

"I'll take that as yes. It's better than he has told you, no matter what he has told you. He hides it. He puts up a false front so that no one will know."



Rae nodded. "A shiny, mirrored shell."

"Yes, just like that. I didn't realize why until I was sixteen, and I think I'm the only one who knows the extent of it. I was a terrible person at sixteen. A monster."

"Everyone is. It's developmentally normal." So Wulf had been twenty-five when this happened. Rae looked over the crowd that glittered with jewels and shined with satin.

Wulf edged closer.

Flicka's whisper was harsh with emotion. "I was a spoiled brat of the worst kind. Too much money, too early. I developed a habit of methamphetamines."

"Oh, Flicka! Are you all right?"

She whispered faster, "*Listen to me.* I smuggled some from Helvetica to England when I visited Wulfram for Christmas. He found it and was incensed. I did the most terrible thing. I hit him where I knew it would hurt him the most."

"Constantin," Rae said. She looked up, and Wulf smiled at her. She smiled back while Flicka whispered in her other ear.

"I told him that Constantin had died seventeen years before and he needed to get over it, and so Wulfram told me what he remembers."

Rae watched Wulf sidle past the dukes in their white-tie tuxedos and the princesses in jewel-colored ball gowns, closing on where Flicka whispered horrors to Rae.

"He remembers *everything*," Flicka said. "Not just numbers, not just facts, *everything*. Every moment, every comment, every glance, every emotion, absolutely everything. Everything is as fresh and present for him as if it has just happened a moment ago."

"Oh, my." No wonder counseling hadn't helped him.

"Our parents were distant at best, especially for the twins. Wulf remembers his deep, innocent bond with Constantin, his brother, his twin. He remembers every day that they had together, even the first moment when both of them knew that they only had each other in this life, when they were three. Their favorite nanny had been let go, and they knew that everyone else around them might leave. He remembers every second of the morning when Constantin was killed. He can recite the conversation they had. Wulf wanted to slip away and play outside, but Constantin convinced him to go to class. He remembers where each drop of blood flew and the ghastly warmth when it

hit his face. Nothing fades for him.”

“Oh, no.” When Wulf had found that picture of Constantin and himself on her phone, when he had looked up at her with eyes as tranquil as deep, blue water, despite his calmness, Rae knew she had hurt him.

Oh, what she would do to take back that moment.

“That’s why he never discusses it and why he doesn’t even say Constantin’s name.”

Rae started to contradict her but she bit her tongue. Her chest clenched like a shaking fist. “What happened, after he told you that?”

“I was making a mess with crying. He forgave me. He’s not cruel with it. He will forgive anything, but he cannot *forget*.”

Flicka looked up and followed Rae’s line of sight to Wulf, only three rows of people away. He dodged left, going around a rotund woman in emerald green.

Flicka whispered quickly, “Please, if you have to tell him no, *please* be kind. That moment will stab at him for the rest of his life.”

Flicka stood up. “Wulfie! I was just telling your friend here how beautiful she looks.”

Tears misted Rae’s eyes, and she looked up at the glass pyramid soaring into the dark sky far above them to keep the tears from falling.

*Lord*, she had been so emotional the last week, crying at anything and everything. She was all weepy when she saw Wulf’s desk and his money. She was practically hysterical when Wulf finally came clean about being the Prince of Hannover and the Duke of Earl and five other titles. Tears were wiggling in her eyes all the frickin’ time.

Growing up, her four brothers and hyper-macho father had made sure that she didn’t cry like a girl. She got *mad*, but she didn’t *cry*.

She needed to seriously cowgirl up and stop this mushy nonsense.

Rae hadn’t cried this much since she was thirteen and completely crazed by that puberty-associated estrogen surge. The year she had gotten her periods had been a rough one for the whole ranch .

Speaking of which, this was the last week of March. Shouldn’t she have

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“Reagan? Are you all right?” Wulf’s lazy smile faded.

“I’m fine,” Rae said.

Wulf glanced at Flicka, who evidently had inherited the Hannoverian trait of snapping on a perfect shiny shell. Flicka smiled serenely at him.

With that denial, Wulf took Rae's hand and led her back over to their supper table, where the wait staff had cleared most of the leftover plates. Flicka followed them over.

Wulf was just leaning down, whispering, "What did she say to you?" when Dieter met them at the table.

Dieter's right arm was bulky with a bandage under his black suit. "Ms. Stone." He held her phone out to her with his left hand. "You've had a phone call on your mobile."

"I did?" She glanced at the screen. Her brother's phone number still showed.

Something must be wrong, really wrong, for him to call.

Rae said to Flicka, "I need to make a phone call. Is there someplace quiet, someplace private?"

"There are a thousand little rooms in here. I'll have someone take you up."

She signaled one of the waiters, who called a man in a black suit, who escorted Rae and Wulf up the elevator to the top floor of the Louvre. Dieter rode the elevator with them.

The Louvre security guy showed her into a room filled with French paintings of women wearing ball gowns. Wulf whispered to Rae that he and Dieter would wait at a reasonable distance.

Rae held her cell phone and stared at the dark walls lit by spotlights on the paintings. Lemon polish drifted from the floor, and the oil paints gave up their last vapors of linseed oil.

The portrait that caught Rae's attention was of a woman sitting at a desk, surrounded by books and holding manuscript paper. Behind her, a guitar neck stuck up from a couch. Blue-white powder dusted her hair like in pictures of Americans during the Revolutionary War. Light illuminated her face, and Rae thought the woman was beautiful, but she also looked smart. No one had told this woman that education would ruin her .

Far below and away, the reception murmured on without her, and the small orchestra played something soothing. Her heart tripped and beat faster, out of sync with the serene music.

Rae had to call her brother. She took a deep breath, stretching the gown's tight elastic and whalebones that cinched her waist. The phone screen glowed blue, daring her to call.

She tapped the phone screen to call up her contact list.

Nothing happened. The blue glow remained unperturbed.

The phone wasn't responding.

A moment of panic washed through her. Tapping the blue buttons again didn't work.

Rae chastised herself for being a bloomin' idiot, stripped off her gloves that went past her elbows, and dialed the dang phone.

After a lot of beeps and a pause—during which Rae felt ridiculous holding a cell phone and standing in a gallery of paintings that were hundreds of years old—a woman said, "Hello?"

That voice had awakened Rae from sleep every school morning for thirteen years. "Momma?"

Her mother asked, "Reagan? Where are you?"

Rae stared at the fussy gilt frames and portraits of noble ladies wearing impossible gowns. "In a museum. Is everything okay?"

"Why haven't you come home?" her mother asked. Her small voice sounded oceans and continents away. "Didn't Hester tell you?"

"Yeah, she told me, Momma."

"Why didn't you come? Reverend Stoppard is asking where you are."

"I can't right now."

"Why not? Are you kidnapped? Is someone keeping you?"

"I'm fine. I'm safer than I've ever been in my life."

"Then why wouldn't you come home? I know in my heart that Reverend Stoppard is wrong, that you haven't become too worldly, that you're still an innocent sheep in the Shepherd's flock."

"I need a few more days, Momma. I just need to think."

"I can't buy you another couple days." Panic lit her mother's soft voice. "Get in your car and come home, now, or you *can't* come home. Do you understand me? They won't let you come back if you don't come home right now!"

Rae steeled herself and looked at the paintings of royalty on the walls. She knew that she didn't fit in with them, but she was a sticking-out sore thumb in Pirtleville, too. Even if this thing with Wulf didn't work out, and it wasn't going to, she wanted a full life, with love and helping people and using her own power to change the world. "I'm not coming home, Momma."

Relief swept through her like the wind had been knocked out of her for her whole life, and she had finally drawn a deep breath.

Wow. She had kind of expected to collapse into a pathetic heap of

hysteria.

Her mother whispered, “*What?*”

“I want to help autistic kids, Momma. They’re locked into their own worlds, and they’re trapped.”

“It’s that man, Dominic, isn’t it? He’s a worldly sort, and he’s tempted you with his evil ways. He drinks alcohol, doesn’t he?”

Rae continued, “I can see how Daniel flails around, scratching to get out of his own head. I can help him, all of them. If I finish my degree, no matter what else happens, I can figure out how to start that clinic.”

“No, no, and no. You come home right now. I won’t have my daughter traipsing around, making a fool of herself, playing with some psychology witchcraft.”

“I want to change the world, Momma. I just want to make the whole world a better place, and I want to start with those children because they desperately, desperately need my help.”

# Double or Nothing

WULF stood around the corner from Rae, studying a seventeenth century print of an earl and his hound and restraining himself from running to her when he heard the torment in her voice.

Dieter, beside him, cursed under his breath.

“Something wrong?” Wulf whispered to him in Alemannic.

“She’s not leaving you this week, damn it. I am losing a week’s pay on this.”

Wulf rocked forward on his toes. Dieter had been his friend since the Swiss Guard barracks, a member of his security detail since they had mustered out together, and had taken a bullet meant for his sister just that afternoon. “Do you want to make it all back?”

“How would I do that?” Dieter’s eyebrows pricked up, along with his metaphorical ears.

“Double or nothing.” Wulf pulled a small, black box from his trouser pocket and snapped it open. The museum spotlights caught the fire in the ring’s dark blue center stone and sent sparks coursing through the white diamonds surrounding it. He tilted it, and the center stone turned red in the slanting light.

“*Sheisse!*” Dieter hissed.

He snapped it closed. “I retrieved it from *Schloss Marienburg* . The setting was my grandmother’s.”

“Tonight? Now?”

“I have been trying to figure out a way to get her alone someplace proper. I nearly dragged her to the top of the Eiffel Tower this afternoon. I didn’t think of a mobile call. Bloody brilliant.”

“*Sheisse*. I put down a thousand Euros two years ago that Harry would beat you to the altar.”

“You should demand good odds. ”

“Are you sure? Women can be nothing but heartbreak.”

Wulf smiled. “You have ten minutes.”

“I had better get ten-to-one for this.” Dieter muttered into his lapel and

waited, fidgeting, for two squirming minutes.

Wulf did not fidget, but he was in a quandary.

He had been holding the ring for two days.

He had privacy and a location, finally.

He was under no illusions that his proposal would be automatically accepted.

Ever since he had told her the squalid truth about his dynastic problems, she had been ready to bolt. He remembered each and every time that her warm brown eyes darted away from him at every mention of royalty. He considered the implications for every sentence that she had said to him about family duty over the past week, and all of them ran together in his mind like riffling a deck of cards.

He remembered the warmth of her body cuddled next to his at night and how she clung to him as if she could not bear to let him go.

He had thought, that afternoon, when she had been so desperately casting about for a role with him, that she might be readying herself to break free of that church, once and for all. Such liberations can be terrifying.

She would resist. Even though Wulf could hear her severing ties with her family as he leaned against the wall, just out of her sight, while he regarded the portrait of the snobbish earl and his dog, she would resist him. Every glance, every undercurrent when she spoke, every shiver of pain that went through her body at the thought of losing her family told him this.

Even though she had decided to expand her world, to have her clinic, it did not mean that she wanted a life with Wulf. Taking on his baggage was an entirely different decision.

Asking her to make two such enormous decisions in an hour was cruel, but the compulsion to ask her now, *now*, had seized him.

Maybe it was Paris.

Perhaps it was seeing the sister whom he had raised from childhood marry.

Probably, it was that he could not stand another moment without his ring on Rae's hand.

Half the people downstairs assumed they had already married, secretly. Most of the women and a few of the men had noticed Hannover royal jewels around her neck and the Laurel Tiara sparkling in her auburn hair. Traditionally, only married, royal women wore tiaras, so Wulf had implied to them all that Rae already was, or at the least would soon be, a Hannover

*Prinzessin.*

Hannover princes had a genetic weakness for arrogance.

Wulf had reveled in every glance at her wearing the jewelry and the tiara, followed by an eyebrow raise, and he smiled.

Yes, she was his.

Yes, he was deliriously happy.

Wulf studied the painting of the nobleman, looking for inspiration in his haughty expression, but found none.

Dieter was right. Countering Rae's fears with icy German logic would not reassure her.

British understatement and command would send her running for the jet, possibly tonight.

Wulf had to break through the bulletproof armor around his heart, rip it out, and give it to her, like an American.

Friedhelm relieved Dieter from his post with Wulf, and Dieter sprinted to the staircase and pattered down it, mumbling into his lapel the whole way down.

Friedhelm looked askance at Wulf.

Wulf shrugged and tapped the ring box through his trousers, feeling his nerves begin to sing.



# The Ghost

RAE held her cell phone to her ear and contemplated the noble lady in the portrait. The pale overhead spotlight lit the noblewoman's face as if she were smiling out of the canvas at Rae. She begged the lady for help across the centuries.

The lady sat immobile.

Her mother said, "Reagan, I can't condone what you're doing."

"I don't expect you to. But we're family. Can't we still be family?"

"Your father has forbade it." Her voice drifted up at the end, as if that wasn't an ironclad pronouncement.

"He doesn't have to know, Momma."

"I can't keep secrets from my husband."

"It's not like it's a secret *from* Daddy. It's just a female thing, which we never discuss with him."

"That seems like equivocating."

"Sure it is, but nothing should come between a mother and her children."

"—There is that."

Rae sank onto the padded bench and stared at the oil paintings and soft pastels. "I'll call you when I get back to college, Momma."

"You should use your brother's phone number. We don't want to start a fight over female things."

"Thanks, Momma. I love you."

"I love you, too, sugar."

Rae hung up. Her hands shook so badly that she let the phone fall to her lap and clasped them together.

*Mascara. Professionally applied mascara.* Her breath trembled in her chest, but she held it in.

It was done. It couldn't be undone, but elation filled her lungs and she thought she might float.

Making the choice had freed her. She could take that next step into the rest of her life.

She stared at the accomplished lady in the portrait, who looked composed

and happy.

Wulf's voice rode the air to Rae and echoed off the paintings and the ceiling far above. "You told her that you aren't going back."

Rae looked up. In the gloom, she could see only his strong form standing in the shadows and overhead light glinting on his blond hair. Rae told him, "She said that I had to come home immediately, and I obviously can't."

"I can call the pilot. We'll be in the air within the hour."

"This is your sister's wedding reception." The phone teetered on the crystals and crinolines of her skirt, nearly falling.

"Fine. You will be in the air in an hour. I'll stay."

"I'm just making excuses. Please, Wulf, please let me tell you excuses."

"You can tell me anything."

She squeezed her hands into fists to hold in the tears. Even though it was the right thing to do, even though she would have been miserable otherwise, it was still hard to walk away from her family. "I don't want to go back. I've been trying to get out my whole life. I feel like a snow crocus planted in the desert. My whole life, I've thirsted for *something*, and everything around me felt wrong no matter how hard I tried to take root."

He shifted on his feet, and his broad shoulders slid sideways in the shadows to lean against the wall. He was waiting, letting her speak.

"I want to make a difference. Even if it costs me my relationship with my dad and my brothers and the rest of them, even my momma, I want that clinic. I want to make a difference. I'll work eighteen hours a day and live in a shack to make it happen."

"We can do it together."

"We can't. I won't make a scene or anything. You're moving away, and it's right that you should. Like Yoshi and Flicka, we shouldn't prolong this." Her heart hurt. "I appreciate everything you've done for me. I'll work at The Devilhouse. If I can't, if the new owner goes another direction, I'll figure out how to get it done, but I *will* make it happen."

Wulf walked through the pools of light to where she sat. "I meant what I said. I'll do anything."

"You don't have to do anything."

The phone fell off her blue-sparkled skirt and tumbled to the floor. It skittered away.

Wulf flipped it off the floor and handed it her. Their hands touched, and Rae felt his hand, warm under hers.

As she took the phone from him, he switched his hand under hers and tugged her to standing with a practiced twitch.

Just like when they were waltzing, she followed his lead.

With her heels on, her eyes were just below his, and his blue eyes searched hers. “Wulf—”

His lips came down on hers, and he kissed her softly, so softly, like he was saying goodbye.

Tears gathered on Rae’s eyelashes, and she wished she had tissues to blot them before she ruined her make-up.

He slid down her body until he kneeled on one knee in front of her.

No.

“Oh, my word, Wulf, get up. That photographer might still be stalking us and everyone will get the wrong idea.”

“Rae—”

Couldn’t he see that her heart was breaking? She had been trying so hard all week to not let the regret and anger surface, but this was their last night. She couldn’t hold herself together if he made this so *hard*, and she had no one to help her pick up the pieces of herself.

Her fluttering hands and her frantic voice rose. “*Please, Wulf. Please* get up. You’ll give me the wrong idea and you’ll make me cry and I don’t want to cause a scene at your sister’s wedding. Get up.” She tugged at his arm. “Up! Up!”

Wulf’s blue eyes and all his energy and intensity focused on her, and the warmth scared her. This was too *hard*.

His whisper was as intense as his gaze. “*Marry me.*”

From around the corner, a man muttered, “*Sheisse.*”

Surely this wasn’t happening. Surely he couldn’t propose to her, not when she had been steeling herself to let him go. “So you’re not leaving?”

“I am leaving America,” Wulf said. “It is too dangerous for me to live there much longer, and it is far too dangerous for you to be so near the Border. Come with me.”

“I can’t.” All the old excuses ran through her head: *she couldn’t leave, she couldn’t leave her family, her family and church would be against it, she couldn’t go out and become too worldly, she couldn’t do anything that would cause her to be disfellowshipped*, but she pushed all that aside. “I just cut myself off from my family because I want to finish school. I have a six weeks left of this semester and another year past that. I can’t leave *now*.”

Even though her heart was longing to, she *wouldn't*.

"Finish the semester, and then you can complete your degree at any university in the world. You can go to graduate school or medical school, whichever you wish, wherever you want."

"You've thought this all out, and I haven't. I was ready to let you go. I was ready to walk away and not look back."

"Say yes."

"I *can't*." She couldn't fathom it. His voice was so far away that she felt like she was falling. "We can't. Your father was clear. He said that he would *disapprove*."

Wulf's frown was more in amusement than concern. "I wonder where he has gotten the idea that his disapproval carries any weight at all."

"He's the King. He's your king. And your dad. Can't he cut you out of the line of succession or your inheritance or something?"

"Not at all. The Hereditary Prince is a figurehead title. The members of the House of Hannover elected me as the Head of the House a few years ago. I gave Flicka permission to marry Pierre under House rules. I could sell *Schloss Marienburg* out from under him. The only person who needed to grant permission for me to marry was the Sovereign Head of the House of Welf, of which the House of Hannover is a cadet branch."

Rae wanted to wail but she knew people must be listening. She whispered, "But he won't give you permission. I'm nobody." *Desert rat. Desert rat.*

"She already has. I spoke to her this evening."

"She's *here*?" To head a royal house, the woman must be an enormous Viking woman, the warrior-queen of the House of Welf, wearing a bronze breast-plate. "Do I have to meet her?"

"She's not here. Wills phoned her so I could ask."

"Prince William phoned her?" Under the Louvre's glass pyramid, Wulf had asked to speak to Prince William's *grand-mère*, his *grandmother*, and across the ball room. Rae watched the moment between William and Wulf with the cell phone.

Her knees gave out and she sat on the padded bench with him still on his knees in front of her. "Oh."

"She's very gracious. I think you'll like her."

"I think I'll fall flat on my face and embarrass you." And she would. She would do something stupid and redneck and horrify everyone, even Wulf.

“You could never embarrass me.”

“You say that now, but after a while, my stupidity won’t be cute any more. I’ll just be a country drudge to you.”

His smile dropped away. “Never.”

“Sooner than you think.”

“Every time you talk about helping people, especially about your clinic, you smile. Your face shines. You look like an angel.”

He could remember *every time*. Rae felt like she couldn’t breathe.

Wulf said, “Your heart and your kindness are nothing to ever be ashamed of. You are the person I need by my side when I’m funding an orphanage in Kenya or meeting with people who have had their lives destroyed by an earthquake. I want to spend my life with you, a woman who can dream up autism clinics.”

“You could have any woman in the world. You don’t want me.” Her voice choked. “You’re the Prince of freaking Hannover.”

“The first night we met, you asked if I was a sparkly vampire or a werewolf.”

He could probably recite her stupid patter. Her choked laugh was a desperate hiccup. “I didn’t think to ask if you were Prince Charming.”

His voice focused to a laser-point whisper. “I was *neither*. I was a ghost. I had been floating through life, insubstantial, watching the world through a veil, unable to touch or be touched. When I touched someone, anyone, I felt cold.”

“Oh, Wulf.” She laid her palm on his face because she couldn’t bear the thought of him being so closed off and alone.

“I can’t keep my hands off you because I can *feel* you. Every time I look at you, I can *feel* that first moment when I knew I loved you.”

*Every time*. Rae’s whole body trembled. “When?”

Wulf’s throat worked as he swallowed. “In the Marsden Hotel, two weeks ago. I already admired so much about you—your strength, your resilience, your ambition, your heart—and those men nearly killed you. I would have left America to keep you safe, but since I couldn’t buy your safety, I couldn’t leave. Holding you in my arms while you slept shook me to my core. Every time I look at you, it feels like I’m standing in the warmth of the desert sun, and everything else in my life falls away.”

Her chest was fluttering so much that she couldn’t say anything. She touched his arm with her other hand. His biceps were hard under his tuxedo,

but he wasn't shaking at all, certainly not like she was.

He held her hand against his smooth cheek, pressing her flesh to his, and said, "You have brought me to life. I love you, more than I have ever loved anyone."

He took her hand from his face and pressed it to his chest. Even though all the layers of the tuxedo and the silk crimson sash, his heart beat against her palm. "I would defy them all for you. I would abdicate everything and give it all away, or you can take me as I am, and we can change the world together."

Rae's heart thumped in her chest, and her knees twitched under that full silk skirt.

*She didn't have to let him go.*

Her heart opened, and she could breathe. She wished she had a smart-aleck answer to make him laugh but she just wanted to say yes.

"Marry me." He kissed her palm, then the inside of her wrist, and his soft lips made the whole world go away for a few moments.

"Oh, Wulf. Yes."

He pulled the ring box from his pocket and showed her the ring. She had expected a huge honkin' diamond, but the modest navy blue stone at the center was far more beautiful.

He said, "Do you like it?"

"Oh, yes! It'll match denim perfectly. I'm much more of a blue-jeans person."

"It's a blue garnet."

"Garnets are semi-precious, right? It's so much better than something unreasonable."

Wulf blinked. His golden eyelashes and pale lids slid over his blue, blue eyes, twice.

She could see the gears spinning in his head.

He said, "I'm glad you like it."

"I feel like I'm missing something again."

Wulf still knelt in front of her. "Blue garnets are quite rare."

Yeah, this was what she was missing. "How rare?"

"Exceedingly rare, like you."

"How flippin' rare?"

"Far more so than diamonds. This one is insured for three million Euros."

"That's insane! You can't give me that! It's not right." She snapped the

box closed and tried to shove it back into his hands.

He pried it out of the box and slipped it on her finger. "I will spend the rest of my life convincing you that you are worth these trivial things."

The blue garnet and diamonds glittered on her finger. The white metal swirling around the stones shone like moonlight.

Good Lord, it meant that she was marrying him. That's what that ring meant, there on her finger, that she was marrying His Serene Highness Prince Wulfram Augustus of Hannover, The Dom of the Devilhouse, The Blond Hottie, her Wulf.

Rae's breath rose in her chest and became fluttery again. "At least it doesn't look ostentatious."

Wulf sat beside her and kissed her, not softly this time, but his kiss was deep and thorough. He drew them both up to standing like energy had lifted him to his feet, but Rae's legs felt like rubber bands. The ring weighed heavy on her hand, but she was too busy kissing him to admire it.

When he broke away for air, his voice was hoarse with emotion. "Marry me right now."

His arms were still around her, and it was a good thing because her high-heeled shoes had become teetery. "*What?*"

"Tomorrow, before we fly back to the States. We can have the civil ceremony tomorrow and the religious one in Helvetica in a few weeks. We don't need a parade like Flicka, unless you'd like one. There's no reason to wait another minute."

"I have class on Monday."

"We'll make it back in time."

"But you sold your house."

"I'm renting it to Yoshi. He would like to live quietly for a few years. I can stay with him for a month."

"Did you sell The Devilhouse to *Yoshi*?"

"God, no. I found proper buyers for The Devilhouse, people with the necessary skills and background."

"But tomorrow's so soon. I can't wrap my head around it."

His eyebrows twitched, and he looked into her eyes as if he was searching for something. "Time is of the essence, isn't it?"

His look stopped her prattle. She said, "I don't know what you mean."

Wulf studied her for another few seconds, his sharp blue eyes so solemn, while Rae rotated through three different facial expressions that meant she

had no freaking idea what he was talking about.

He said, “Perhaps I’m mistaken, but I don’t think I am.”

“It’s all so *rushed*.”

“It’s only the afternoon in the States. You could call Georgie and Lizbeth or anyone, and I’ll arrange for tickets on an overnight flight. They can be here tomorrow morning.”

“But your family,” she said.

“Everyone I care about is here. My sister won’t leave for her honeymoon for a few days. Yoshi and Wills will stand up with me. My mates from the military are all in my security detail. Rosamunde could see both of us get married in one weekend.”

“But we could get married this summer. Or Christmas. Or after I *graduate*.” Her eyes burned. She was getting all blubbery again, dang it.

Wulf sucked his lower lip into his mouth and bit it.

*Oh, good God, he was so hiding something! “What!”*

“I want to spend my life with you, every moment of every day. Don’t forget that. I almost asked you to marry me when we returned home from Los Angeles two weeks ago, but you jumped out of the SUV. I didn’t even have a ring, but it seemed that you thought those titles and rubbish made some sort of a difference. I wanted to propose then, before I suspected.”

*“Suspected what?”*

His gentle smile was reassuring. “Unless I’m mistaken, a short engagement might be best.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.” She might strangle the Prince of Hannover in the Louvre if he didn’t spill it. Dieter would probably let her strangle Wulf at least half to death before he pulled her off.

“I’ll tell you tomorrow, after you marry me.” He kissed her forehead, “But I assure you,” he kissed her nose, “that whether I am in error or not,” he kissed her mouth and Rae melted into his arms, “you have made me the happiest I have ever been in my life.”



# Epilogue I

**GEORGIE: Did I just see you on TV at that freaking royal wedding in Paris?!?!?!? W/ The Dom? WTF?!?!?!?!?**

Rae: U have passport?

**Georgie: Yah.**

Rae: Throw some clothes in overnight bag. Get a cocktail dress or 2 from the DH. NOT SLUTTY. Plane tix will be at Lufthansa counter for 8PM flight tonight.

**Georgie: Have class next week.**

Rae: Will be home Monday morning.

**Georgie: Lizzy is here at dorm. Can't leave her.**

Rae: Will be tix for her, too. Get her butt on that plane b4 she gets stupid again.

**Georgie: K. Wanna tell us WTF going on?**

Rae: Tell you when you get here. Secret!

## Epilogue II

WULF paced.

The Empire Suite at the George V Hotel in Paris was too cramped for his long legs. He had become accustomed to his house in the Southwest or the corridors of Kensington Palace. Going out on the streets of Paris would inconvenience his security detail because they only had two men in place at night. He didn't want to wake Dieter or Hans.

Wulf paced around the yellow roses and the dishes of violets. He paced around the dining table and through the living room area, past the alabaster busts of Napoleon and Josephine perched on columns, and through the entryway. His bare feet padded softly on the thick carpet, mindful of the people who must be sleeping below him.

That gunshot had been too near. He had placed all the people he loved in one location and then brought the fire down on them. Recriminations chattered in his head in ten languages.

Wulf paced.

He had shoved all this turmoil down in himself for the reception and the proposal, even though it simmered.

Now, his mind blazed with memory.

Blood on Constantin.

Blood on Yoshi.

Blood on Dieter, and his blood staining Flicka's white dress.

Blood on Wulf himself.

When Wulf had returned to the hotel, Dieter's blood from the bubbling crease had been smeared on his hands and his shirt.

Wulf had fallen on Rae when his security men had landed on top of him, hard enough to knock the wind out of her.

His hands shook .

Wulf paced.

Brunhilde the cat watched him from her perch atop the back of one of the chairs in the living room. The nocturnal creature seemed to approve of his nighttime wakefulness. He scratched her soft ears as he passed her.

Friedhelm, who sat in the living room, reading a book on his tablet, glanced at him. "You need anything?"

"No. I'm quite all right."

Friedhelm went back to reading, leaving Wulf to pace past him.

The Paris sky outside the sprawling windows was navy blue, as dark as it ever was in the City of Light. A pale glow hung over the block of apartments and hotels around them. Farther, against the stars and dark sky, lush green light traced the Eiffel Tower along its skeletal sides.

Wulf paced.

He was so absorbed in treading around the room, the blood and gunshots over the years ringing in his mind, in the horror that he had called the fire down again on people whom he loved, that he almost walked past Reagan, leaning against the doorjamb to the bedroom.

He stopped. "What are you doing up?"

She raised an eyebrow at him. "What are *you* doing up?"

"Nothing. I'm fine."

This earned him a look of utter disbelief on her lovely face.

"Honestly, I'm fine," he said.

"Wow. You do that really well. Anyone else would have believed you. Come to bed."

"I'll toss. I'll keep you awake. You need your sleep."

She yawned. "I can't sleep without you," and she held out her hand.

He took her warm, soft little hand.

Rae led him back into the bedroom and kicked the door closed behind them.

Wulf said, "I don't want to keep you up."

She crawled under the covers and patted the bed beside her. "Get on in here."

He complied. The sheets slithered over him like a smothering fog. "If I keep you awake, tell me, and I'll go back to the living room."

"Close your eyes." She wrapped her arms around him. "You're getting married tomorrow. Sleep."

"I shouldn't have come," he said, tightening his arms around her lithe body, so warm next to him. "I shouldn't have brought you here."

"Shhhh. You aren't responsible for the actions of madmen. You aren't responsible for all that is evil in the world. Close your eyes."

"You're sure that you're all right. No pain, no bleeding?"

“My feet feel like hamburger from those shoes your sister made me wear, but that’s it. Sleep.”

He laid his exhausted head on the pillow and closed his eyes.

Rae stroked his back and his arm, slowly.

He whispered, “I love you.”

Wulf heard her whisper near his ear, “I love you, too.”

He breathed and rested one hand on her hip, pulling her pelvis closer, feeling her body press against him.

He would do anything to protect both of them.

Rae stroked his back, and the urge to pace faded.

The blazing fire of Wulf’s mind cooled, died down, and glowed like warm coals.

Rae’s warm brown eyes and soft smile were the last things Wulf remembered before he slept.

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### ***Flicka von Hannover***

*This is the night my life ended,  
and though I didn't know it at the time,  
the night I was reborn.*

The long hotel hallway, lined with doors, stretched in front of Flicka von Hannover as she ran as hard as she could.

Her ankles wobbled in her gilded, stiletto sandals every time her feet thudded on the carpeting. Her slim, crystal-encrusted skirt was bunched around her thighs so she could stretch her long legs. Her purse dangled from her wrist and bounced against her thigh with each stride.

Just a few more doors.

—432, 434, 436—

If she could reach room 460, she had a chance.

She glanced behind her, risking a stumble as she sprinted.

Doors studded the silent hallway behind her. Shimmering sconces threw dim light over the grand hotel's gold carpeting, and black night pressed against the windows. She could still taste the metallic tinge of blood in her mouth.

No other hotel guests were standing around in the hallways at four in the morning.

—442, 444, 446—

When she had escaped from her own suite minutes before, the Secret Service men, armed with handguns and large knives, had been chasing her. Flicka had leaped into the closing elevator, rolling on the floor and slamming her shoulder against the back wall. It had been a stroke of luck that the elevator was at the penthouse and the doors had been closing just as she had run. That little bit of luck had allowed her to make it this far.

At the fourth floor, she had pushed all the buttons to send the elevator lower into the hotel, hoping to confuse her pursuers.

—450, 452, 454—

Flicka ran harder, trying to make it.

She looked back again.

The hallway behind her was still empty. Her husband's Secret Service men hadn't expected her to be able to sprint so quickly in high-heeled shoes and a slim ball gown, but princesses are accustomed to wearing evening dress. She could probably rappel down a cliff face in petticoats and pumps.

Flicka von Hannover was a real, modern princess, not a fairy-tale one, and she had run for her life more than once.

The Secret Service men must have made for the stairwells, splitting up to search each floor for her, planning to communicate her position to each other for reinforcements. That's how she would have orchestrated the search. They would come thundering out of the stairwells at each end of the hallway at any moment and see her racing through the hotel with her pale pink dress hiked up around her hips and a diamond tiara glittering in her blond hair.

*Room 460.*

Flicka pounded on the door and held her hand against the wood, willing it to open *right now*.

The door moved under her hand.

The tall, blond man opening the door saw her, and his gray eyes glanced down the corridor—worried. A white towel was slung low on his hips below the accordion pleats of his abs, and a livid scar creased the skin on his biceps on one arm. Other, fainter scars criss-crossed his pale gold skin.

*“Durchlauchtig?”*

Flicka whispered, “He said he'd kill me.”

Dieter grabbed her wrist and pulled her inside, bending to survey the hallway after she passed him. Dieter Schwarz was one of the bodyguards who'd protected her from assassins for years. “Did anyone follow you?”

Flicka leaned against the wall beside the door, still out of breath from running. “I lost them.”

Dieter pressed the door closed and flipped the locks. “You're sure?”

“—I think so.”

He held his finger to his lips, watching through the door's peephole.

Flicka flattened herself against the wall. Her purse dropped off her wrist and thumped on the floor.

Dieter waited, peering through the lens, and then dodged to the side, ending up standing inches in front of her. He flicked off the lights and turned, shielding her from the sight of anyone looking through the other side of the peephole. The view through the lens probably didn't go far to the sides and no one should be able to see them in the darkness, but she hid behind him anyway.

In the faint light misting from the bedroom, Dieter's chest and shoulders were broad, so wide across, and his muscles were chiseled lines in his flesh. The scent of fresh soap and an herbal, spicy cologne wafted off of him, faint until her nose was literally two inches away from his tanned skin and rounded chest muscles. He must have showered after they had both closed down Flicka's brother's wedding reception that night, only a few hours before.

Flicka tried not to breathe, tried not to gasp and cry in rage or frustration. Those emotions whipped around inside her until she couldn't help herself any longer.

She leaned toward him and rested her cheek against Dieter's strong shoulder, seeking comfort.

His bare skin and silken chest fuzz warmed her face. She breathed in his comforting, male scent that had felt like safety to her for so many years. A little bit of cinnamon. A little bit of clean soap and wildness.

She knew she shouldn't. She knew she should lean back and pull away from him.

But the terror subsided a little, so she didn't move.

Dieter's hand cupped the back of her head, cradling her. He moved closer, resting his forearm on the wall as they waited.

Revulsion and terror warred inside Flicka. She didn't want anyone, *anyone at all*, to touch her. Her guts twisted in her stomach, and yet this was *Dieter*, just Dieter.

She'd loved him once, and she'd hated him, but she couldn't imagine running to anyone else when her life was in danger. If anyone could protect her, it was Dieter Schwarz.

And if no one else would take the chance, Dieter would.

Flicka snaked her arm around Dieter's tight waist to hold onto him, lest her shaking knees give out.

Under her arm, the sinews woven around his torso slid under his skin as he barely breathed. His terrycloth towel snagged on the crystals covering her silk dress.

Dieter wrapped both his arms around her shoulders and whispered near her ear, “Does he know about us?”

Flicka shook her head. “I never told him.”

“Good.”

Footsteps marched down the hallway outside and paused outside the door.

Flicka held onto Dieter’s strong waist more tightly and tried not to breathe.



[at Amazon!](#)

After Blair Babylon wrote *Billionaires in Disguise: Rae*

readers emailed, asking, “And then what happened?”

So she wrote some short little stories about them.

Read them all here:

[\*Billionaire Ever After\*](#)

## **More Billionaires and Rock Stars in Disguise**

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R EADING O RDER

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[“Skiing in June, A Rae and Wulf Epilogue #1” \(Billionaires in Disguise: Rae\)](#)

[“Kidnapped, A Rae and Wulf Epilogue #2” \(Billionaires in Disguise: Rae\)](#)

[“Rae and Wulf: At the Hospital”](#)

[Lay Your Hands On Me \(Billionaires in Disguise: Georgie and Rock Stars in Disguise: Xan, #3\)](#)

[Nothing Else Matters \(Billionaires in Disguise: Georgie and Rock Stars in Disguise: Xan, #4\)](#)

[“Montreux, A Rae and Wulf Epilogue #3” \(Billionaires in Disguise: Rae\)](#)

[The Rock Star’s Secret Baby \(Rock Stars in Disguise: Cadell\)](#)

[“Dream On” \(Billionaires in Disguise: Georgie and Rock Stars in Disguise: Xan, Epilogue #1\)](#)

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[\*At Midnight \(Runaway Princess #4\) \(Billionaires in Disguise: Flicka\)\*](#)

[\*Happily Ever After \(Runaway Princess #5\) \(Billionaires in Disguise: Flicka\)\*](#)

[\*Stiff Competition \(Runaway Billionaires #4, Maxence\)\*](#)

You don't have to read everything perfectly in this order. I try to recap or make books as standalone as possible. The mini-series within this overall list, such as the Lizzy books or the Georgie books, should be read in order. ~BB

Also, just so you know what you're getting up there, *novel-length books are in italics, like this*, but "short forms," like short stories and novellas, are in "quotation marks."

[\*\*Check for New Releases by Blair Babylon at Amazon\*\*](#)

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I get this question at least once a week, and this time when I wrote out the answer to a reader, it went pretty well. So here's why the Wulfie/Rae story of *Billionaires in Disguise: Rae* just keeps going:

Everyone seems to *love* Rae and Wulf, and ever since I published the omnibus, I keep getting emails like, **"AND THEN WHAT HAPPENED?"**

At the end of *BID: Rae*, they are engaged and will be married the next morning, and she's quite pregnant as well. So, that's a lot of a resolution. Honestly, I was planning to end it there.

Then the emails started. Not to mention the FB PMs. Even a phone call over Facebook. Plus some tweets. **AND THEN WHAT HAPPENED?**

And so I continued their story in Lizzy's books (Billionaires in Disguise: Lizzy, *Falling Hard*, etc.), having her go to their wedding because people wanted to see the wedding.

The Lizzy books should be the next ones that you read in the greater Blair Babylon universe. They're an incredible story, dark and suspenseful. They do, indeed, contain Wulf and Rae's wedding as a major plot point. When you get there, you'll see why I couldn't just rip it out of that book and slap it into this one. Read more about the first book in Lizzy's story [here](#).

More emails. **AND THEN WHAT HAPPENED?**

So, I wrote some epilogues for some boxed sets where people paid 99c and got a whole bunch of books by a bunch of authors (*The LOL Boxes* and the *Red Hot Boxed Sets*), so that was a good deal for everybody. They got an epilogue and a bunch of books for a cheap price.

Still more emails. **AND THEN WHAT HAPPENED?**

And so I wrote about their religious wedding and big fancy reception in the Georgie books.

I'm sure you can guess what I got in my email after that.

So, the next series of books after that (after final Killer Valentine book because I'm also getting emails about **AND THEN WHAT HAPPENED WITH XAN AND GEORGIE?**) is the books about Wulf's little sister, Flicka. You'll see Wulf and Rae's baby in that one. Yes, it has blue eyes.

All the Wulf and Rae epilogues can be found in [this omnibus volume, and it's cheap, too.](#)

Thank you so much for your support for Wulfie and Rae. I love them, too.

~~*Blair Babylon*



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Dear Reader,

Thank you for reading *Billionaires in Disguise: Rae*.

If you'd like to know when my next books come out, please visit my website or sign up for my email list.

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Again, thank you for reading!
Blair Babylon

Shockingly, Blair likes to talk, too.
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Q. Are Blair's Billionaires Books erotic romance or erotica?

A. Blair's Billionaires Books are all erotic romance or contemporary romance.

Erotica generally centers around the sex act, a preponderance of the page count is given to the sex act, and the main characters usually do not build a life together after the sex act. The main character usually discovers or accepts something new about herself or himself, thus it is a journey of self-discovery.

Erotic and contemporary romance concerns itself with the two

people falling in love and, usually, building a life together in a very, very sexy way. Romance novels generally end with an HEA (Happily Ever After) or at least an HFN (Happy For Now).

Q. I want to read more of The Billionaires in Disguise Books. How can I be notified when another one is published?

A. Sign up for the email mailing list [HERE](#) . Email subscribers get discounts or free episodes in addition to special deleted scenes and epilogues.

Q. I want to tell you how awesome The Billionaires in Disguise Books are. Where can I tell you this?

A. The best way to support writers whom you enjoy is to leave a review at your ebook store, even a short one. Blair reads all her reviews at all the ebook stores and appreciates every one of them.

You can email Blair Babylon by putting her name in the subject line when you email [Malachite Publishing](#) . She loves to hear from readers, reads every email, and does her best to respond to everyone. You can also connect with Blair via her [Facebook Group](#) or [Goodreads Page](#) .

Q. Do you have a study guide for book groups?

A. Seriously? You're reading *The Billionaires in Disguise Books* in a book club? Blair wants to hang out with your awesome dirty book club. Email her above. She likes to Skype or do Google Hangouts with book clubs.

About Blair Babylon

Blair Babylon is an award-winning author who used to publish literary fiction. Because reviews of her mainstream fiction usually included the caveat that there was too much deviant sex in her novels, she decided to abandon all literary pretensions, let her freak flag fly, and write hot, sexy romance novels. She's having much more fun, now.

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6th Edition: October, 2018