

Reception Interrupted

Rita Bay

Rated R



& A Collection Of First Chapters



This free booklet includes a new story

Reception Interrupted,

a full bridge story between

Search & Rescue and *Ely's Epiphany*,

from Secret Cravings Publishing.

The second section of the booklet

is a collection of the first chapters of my books

published in 2012 – 2013.

Thank you to my publishers for permission to share

the first chapters of my books:

Champagne Book Group
(Champagne Books & Carnal Passions)

Secret Cravings Publishing

Siren Publishing, Inc.

NOTE: Two versions are available.

One with all first chapters, another with EROTIC chapters removed.

This version contains all chapters.

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In *Reception Interrupted*, newlywed Army Ranger Captain Taylor Jackson is offered marital advice by his wife's gay ex-Green Beret guardian, Ely Locklear, in the bathroom of The Oyster's Shell—the site of their wedding reception. Jackson offers some “advice” of his own to Locklear. Needless to say, the bathroom of The Oyster's Shell will never be the same, especially when Lexie, the new bride, and Todd Anderson, Ely's partner get involved.

Reception Interrupted is a complete short story that bridges between the steamy M/F, Contemporary Military, *Search & Rescue* and the sizzling hot erotic M/M, Contemporary *Ely's Epiphany*.

SECRET CRAVINGS PUBLISHING

***Ely's Epiphany* (EROTIC Contemporary Military Holiday Romance, M/M) 15**

Will Christmas bring a breakup or a new beginning for ex-Green Berets Ely Locklear and Todd Anderson? For Todd Anderson, a West Point graduate from a wealthy family, it was love at first sight. Living with Ely wasn't easy, but it was the only life for him. When Ely plays too nice, Todd fears his partner—his first and only lover who introduced him to the gay lifestyle and sizzling hot sex—is preparing him for a Christmas breakup. Will this Christmas be their last together?

Ex-Green Beret Ely Locklear survived a childhood filled with poverty and abuse by building a wall around his heart. Although the millionaire entrepreneur has a family and partner who love him, the wall and rough edges remain. When his ward's new Army Ranger husband shows him that loving someone isn't a weakness, he wonders if it's too late for a fresh start with his partner of two decades.

***Search & Rescue* (Steamy Contemporary Military Romance, M/F) 18**

Not every search ends with a rescue. One look at Captain Taylor Jackson at a college Career Day and wealthy coed Lexie Carter knew he was The One. In six months they're engaged and the wedding set for after graduation. When Taylor was reported killed in action in Afghanistan two months before their wedding, Lexie was devastated, her hopes for a family of her own crushed. Can she survive a future without Taylor or will she succumb to her grief?

Army Ranger Taylor Jackson falls hard for young Lexie Carter. He introduces her to passion and she teaches him to love. While on a mission in Afghanistan, he is captured by insurgents. When Taylor escapes and returns home on what should have been their wedding day, Lexie has disappeared under suspicious circumstances. Can he find her in time to rescue her from her fate?

CHAMPAGNE BOOK GROUP***Into the Lyons' Den* (Steamy Contemporary Shapeshifter Romance, M/F) 22**

Wealthy recluse Anthony Lyons offers a mint to lure Marie Maxwell, Atlanta's most sought-after event planner, to coordinate a wedding and reception for a "very special couple" on his isolated estate in the mountains of North Carolina.

Despite her sophisticated veneer, Marie's a tough street-smart orphan without a past. Adopted by the owners of the elegant Hotel Maxwell, she's been raised in the business. Known for her uncanny ability to "make things go right," Marie accepts the challenge of planning a wedding for 200 guests in 10 days.

Marie soon discovers that an absent bride and groom is the least of her problems. Her arrogant and exasperating employer displays far too much interest in her and her personal life, especially her lost years. Confronted with a vengeful stalker, two thwarted murder attempts, and dark shadows from her shrouded past, she finds allies in an amorous feline of some unknown species and the mysterious Lady Bat. But who's got it in for her? And what's with Anthony and all the cats?

***Finding Eve* (Steamy Contemporary Shapeshifter Romance, M/F) 27**

Can a feral cat ever return home? Nicholas Lyons, chief physician to the Lyons clan of shapeshifters, has mourned the death of his promised lifemate until a rogue shapeshifter reports having seen her at an exotic animal sale. Accompanied by Marie Lyons who is no stranger to the dark side, her new lifemate Anthony, and the imperious Lady Bat, he embarks on a frantic search for Eve through the dangerous world of exotic animal trafficking.

Eve, whose first memories are of recovering from an injury at an isolated animal refuge, has lived through a succession of owners in a world filled with cages and cruelty. When Eve meets Marie at the exotic animal sale, she begins to have flashes of a different life – a life in which she was something other than feline. Her last sale, however, has landed her as prey to exotic animal hunters and the clock is ticking.

***Her Teddy Bare* (EROTIC Contemporary Fantasy Romance, M/F) 30**

Diana will be his to serve, if only he can convince her to play the game. After dumping her cheating fiancé, Diana Harper accepts an invitation "to attend a private event at Miss A's island retreat to experience your most secret dreams and fondest fantasies." Miss A gives "Teddy" to Diana as an "attendant." Despite his best efforts, Teddy isn't a submissive and the skimpy gold thong is ridiculous on a man his size. Although she's not a *domme*, Diana plays his game to see where it leads. When Teddy offers her profound passion, the best sex ever, and the prospect of love, will she take a chance on another broken heart?

Theodore Bareston will do whatever it takes to win Diana's love, even though "whatever" includes wearing a thong and posing nude in chains when Diana's interest in her art revives. As the sexual tensions builds and passions explode, Teddy is determined to convince Diana that he is the only man for her.

***The Aegis* (Very Steamy Contemporary Vampire Paranormal Romance, M/F) 33**

Melinda Kildare, antiquarian and rare book dealer extraordinaire, returns to her shop after an estate sale with a massive, sealed barrel. Too late, she discovers that the Aegis medallion that traps her head-first in the bottom of the barrel is the bait used by a family of vampires to capture and enslave women of power.

Light Warrior Damian Sinclair who has battled the Dark Ones for centuries answers Melinda's call—the Call of a lifemate. While protecting her from the Dark Ones who pursue her relentlessly, he introduces her to passion, love, and her heritage as a Shield Bearer of the Light.

Will they find happiness as they unite to fight the Dark Ones or fall victims to the Dark forces ranged against them?

SIREN BOOKSTRAND***His Obsession* (Steamy Georgian Regency Historical Romance, M/F) 38**

French Coast and North Africa, 1788

Emeliese Alexander, daughter of a wealthy Bahamian family and a student at an elite Parisian finishing school, boards a yacht bound for England after receiving an invitation to visit Robbie Montclair and his family. Her host, Robbie's father, has arranged an alternate destination for the girl who could ruin his marriage plans for his heir—a slave market in North Africa. Sold into a pirate's harem with no hope of rescue, Emmy vows to overcome the heartbreak of Robbie's betrayal and create a life for herself and her child, whatever the cost.

The Bahamas and England, 1796

Robert Montclair, the Earl of Ashford, has mourned the loss of his beloved and their unborn child for eight years. When he discovers Emmy and his son living in the Bahamas, he takes Will to his estate in England, certain that his Emmy will follow. After Emmy and her family arrive at Ashford Hall, Robbie begins an intense romantic and erotic courtship to vanquish her anger and conquer her fears, so they can begin a new life together. But first, they must confront old enemies and overcome new challenges.

***His Desire* (Steamy Regency Historical Romance, M/F) 45**

William Montclair, Baron Montclair, returns from the war with France and Napoleon Bonaparte determined to find a bride of a certain sort—one who will tolerate his beloved mistress who has returned with him to London.

Georgiana Janson, a widow who had married a family friend and followed the drum to avoid a forced marriage, must decide if she can accept what Will offers—love without marriage. When Georgiana's circumstances change and Will returns to war after Napoleon escapes, both must weigh their duties to their families against the love they share.

Reception Interrupted



Rita Bay

Note: Reception Interrupted contains graphic language

RECEPTION INTERRUPTED

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Standing barefooted in his underwear in the men's restroom of The Oyster's Shell, Army Ranger Captain Taylor Jackson tossed his mess dress onto a hanger and placed it in the garment bag. The formal uniform was new, bought especially for the occasion. Not nearly as comfortable as his fatigues or the casual clothing he wore off-duty, but Todd had supervised the tailoring to insure a perfect fit. Perfect, like everything else about the wedding.

He checked the clothing Todd had provided for the reception and nodded his approval. Lexie assured him her guardian had good taste. Two days after he answered a few questions and stood still for thirty minutes while a tailor took his measurements, Todd delivered a full, coordinated wardrobe to replace the one he'd lost. Better than he would have chosen and without the hassle of shopping. He doubted, though, he'd ever get used to shopping without checking price tags.

Taylor pulled on, buttoned, and zipped the tan khaki slacks. Another perfect fit. In the week they'd allotted to arrange the wedding, he'd left everything in the capable hands of Lexie, her guardians—Todd Anderson and Ely Locklear, and Mama who'd been a frequent and welcome guest at Lexie's suite at The Battle House in downtown Mobile. He'd spent his week's leave in Mobile visiting with Dad and occasionally sharing an opinion when consulted. Lexie's mother, Lindsey, had been a no-show. Fine with him, he was still pissed at her.

After trading his dress shoes and socks for loafers, he added the last of his formal wear to the garment bag and zipped it closed. The bright red linen shirt he slipped off the hanger was another Todd and Lexie selection. One of many decisions they'd made under the tight deadline, but not the most difficult. Lexie had been disappointed when the priest at St. Joseph's Chapel had nixed their wedding plans. Undaunted and determined to have her way, they relocated the wedding from the campus chapel to a church in downtown Mobile where a priest less judgmental of the wedding party had consented to marry them.

He would treasure his memories of their wedding ceremony forever. As her guardians escorted Lexie down the aisle, she looked magnificent in the simple but elegant wedding dress Todd had stored away after he'd been reported killed in action. Her recently-shorn, honey-blonde hair framed her face and hung below her shoulders in a mass of curls. Her leaf-green eyes danced when they locked with his. Her smile was for him alone.

Lexie had worn his grandmother's engagement ring and the matching earrings he'd given her as an engagement gift. None would guess her sparkling crystal necklace was actually an ancestral family treasure set with matched diamonds that cost more than he would earn in a lifetime.

The two ex-Green Berets, decked out in formal wear, dwarfed his petite bride. Todd was beaming, even Ely sported a crooked grin. A surprise the man's face hadn't cracked. Tossing tradition to the winds, his parents and Lexie's guardians stood with them while they exchanged

their vows. Mama and Todd shed a few tears, while Dad and Ely wiped their eyes on their sleeves.

Lexie's mother was a no-show again, but he suspected Ely's hand in her absence. Although a uniformed herald hand-delivered the local invitations, Ely handled Lindsey's personally. She sent her regrets citing a previous engagement—a month-long vacation in Costa Rica with friends—that prevented her from attending. No loss there, as far as he was concerned.

The Oyster's Shell, a trendy bar and restaurant on upper Dauphin Street, was a short trip from the church on the private trolley. The formal luncheon today, part of Ely's contribution to the festivities, was exactly what he would have ordered. Ely spent two days hands-on in the restaurant's kitchen, planning and overseeing the preparation of the rehearsal dinner, the wedding luncheon, and the reception.

He'd heard rumors Ely had threatened the head cook with a meat cleaver over a botched recipe for West Indies Salad. Regardless of his methods, the steak dinner last night and today's seafood luncheon had been tasty and plentiful. Ely, a classically-trained master chef, understood men appreciated good food but needed man-sized servings. During both meals, servers walked among the guests carrying trays piled high with food for seconds and thirds and bottomless pitchers of beer for those who wanted it—which was almost everyone. Rangers partied hard.

The reception was all that remained before he and Lexie could leave on their honeymoon. He'd made a few suggestions when Ely approached him about the menu. He'd also recommended a local band that played the blend of country and rock he and his friends liked.

Outside, the band pounded out the beat of rock's golden oldies, the beer was flowing free, and the bar was open. Just his style. They didn't need to worry about drunk drivers. Two floors of The Battle House were reserved for the wedding guests, even those who lived in town. The trolley staff would make sure everyone made it to the hotel, but he and Lexie would be long gone. They could . . .

The restroom door slammed against the wall. Ely stalked inside, shut the door, grabbed the only chair, shoved it under the doorknob, and turned on him.

"We need to talk."

* * * *

Taylor casually buttoned his shirt and ran a hand through his close-cropped hair, buying a few seconds to prepare to deal with Ely who on his good days was difficult. On his bad days—he didn't want to think about that. Ely had already changed into his casual clothing which closely resembled his own, except for his yellow shirt. His long black hair was slicked back into his usual ponytail. He looked to be of Amerindian heritage but claimed to know nothing about his family.

Ely filled any room he entered. Despite Todd's best efforts, the shirt pulled on his partner's massive frame. At six-four, he topped the man by a couple of inches, but Ely outweighed him by twenty pounds—all of it muscle.

He couldn't delay any longer. "Talk about what?"

Ely glared at him. "Lexie."

"Kind of figured that." When he met Lexie's guardians two years ago, he'd pegged them as prior military. Todd was a West Point grad from a wealthy family, well-educated, and more or less amiable. Ely had been an enlisted man with an off-duty reputation as a brawler and no-good, but he'd been the best search and extraction specialist in the military. Even though he was well

past forty, Taylor wasn't sure he could take him in a fair fight, especially since Ely wasn't known for fighting fair.

Ely blushed. "You ain't gonna make this fuckin' easy, are you?"

"If I knew what the fuck you wanted to talk about, I might."

Ely blushed deeper. He started pacing the narrow area between the stalls and sinks, and then stopped abruptly. "Lexie ain't like most women."

"Tell me something I don't know."

Ely growled. "Shut the fuck up and let me get through this. Lexie is special. When we rescued her, she wasn't squalling like most two-year-old brats would. She looked at me, held out her arms, and called me 'Mama.' I picked her up and told her 'I ain't your Mama.' She hugged my neck and whispered 'I love you.'" Ely looked away. "Nobody ever said that to me before. I knew she meant it."

Ely getting teary-eyed twice in one day? The man didn't do emotion well. He went on his guard.

"She was filthy. Been in the closet for a couple of days with no toilet. Don't know how much she'd had to eat or drink. Gave her some water and an energy bar. I tossed her in the sink and scrubbed her down good. Don't think they'd messed with her. I'd taken the three of them out when we entered, so I couldn't ask."

Lucky for them. He could imagine how Ely would have gotten his answers. "There's more, isn't there?"

Ely nodded. "Lexie wouldn't have gone home after her grandfather paid the ransom. The bastards had already put her up for sale. Todd found her exact location answering the ad."

"Shit." He couldn't imagine life without Lexie or his wife as the victim of sexual predators.

"That's what we said. I gave Lexie a stuffed bear and held her all the way to her home. She was so cute. Petite with small bones and long golden blonde hair. Huge green eyes that saw everything. Didn't say a word, just stared at me like I was God. After we returned her to her grandfather, I heard her crying and calling my name until we were outside their home. Couldn't get her out of my mind. Went back to the house, searched their files, and hunted down every one of those damned predators, trying to make things right. Still didn't feel any better. When Mr. C asked us to work security for him a couple of weeks later, we jumped on it. Been with Lexie ever since."

Someone turned the door knob. "Open up in there."

Ely slammed the heel of his palm against the door. "Piss outside."

The door cracked some but didn't shatter. A little paint would conceal the damage.

"Fuck you."

"Say it to my face when I'm done."

"Fuck off." Footsteps trailed away.

Ely turned on him. "Know who the asshole is?"

Taylor shrugged. "Maybe."

Ely waited a moment. "You gonna tell me so I can settle it when we're done here?"

"Probably not." Dave had a big mouth. He was a good fighter but couldn't take Ely, armed or unarmed.

Ely bristled, ready to pounce.

Enough of this. "What the fuck will I say to Lexie when you ruin her reception by attacking a friend whose buddies will jump in to help him when they see you beating his ass? The restaurant would be in shambles and her reception over."

Ely relaxed some. “You’re right. Lexie deserves better. Guess I’m a bit jumpy about our talk.”

The doorknob turned again and then jiggled.

“I said ‘Fuck off.’” Ely slammed his palm against the door. The crack widened.

The would-be intruder walked away muttering curses.

“Let’s finish this before midnight, man.”

Ely crossed his arms and sent a killer glare his way. “It’s like this. Lexie’s petite. You’re a big guy. Almost ten years older than she is. You gotta take it easy with her tonight.”

Damn. Todd hadn’t told Ely about their talk the evening they’d met two years ago. Later, after they’d become intimate, Lexie hadn’t flaunted their relationship in front of her guardians. He wasn’t about to either, especially to Ely who was already on the edge. But Ely was giving him advice about making love to Lexie. “Let me get this straight. You’re giving me advice on how to make love to a woman. You’ve been partners with Todd how long? Twenty years? What the fuck do you know about sex with women?”

Ely growled, turned away, and put a fist through the restroom wall. Plaster and wooden laths flew across the room. *Another addition to the list of damages.* Ely turned to face him. He couldn’t remember the man looking so angry since they’d met.

“I don’t talk about our business, but I’m gonna make an exception this once for Lexie’s sake. Todd is as gay as they come. Ain’t ever been with a woman, never wanted to be. Never hooked up with a man until he met me.

“I ain’t gay. I had my first lover at fourteen, or maybe she had me. Back then, nothing was said when a young man—especially one who was man-sized—was tutored by an older woman. I had a lot of tutoring. Learned a lot. Enjoyed every minute of it, too.

“I lived in foster homes where you got fed but didn’t get much else, unless you misbehaved. Did a lot of that as I got older. By the time I was sixteen, a judge gave me the choice of joining the Army or going to jail. Put me on probation, pending my seventeenth birthday. I had to get my GED to join the Army. No way in hell could I have passed the test without some help. The GED teacher, Mrs. Powers, did her best to teach me what I needed to know. When that didn’t work, we made a bargain. Jenny promised I would pass the test, then took me into her home and bed. Eventually, Mr. Powers joined us. He—Oscar—taught me about sex with men, but mostly as part of a ménage with his wife.

“The Powers took good care of me until I hit seventeen. Jenny kept her promise. She gave me enough answers to get me through the test. We parted ways when I joined the Army. Heard she and her husband ended up in prison for making the same deal with someone who wasn’t as versatile as me.”

Taylor couldn’t listen to this anymore. It was way too personal. Coming from a sort of in-law made it worse. “Enough, Ely. I get the idea.”

“It ain’t nowhere near enough. You brought it up and I’m gonna finish it. After I joined the Army, I usually fucked women who came on to me with an occasional male hookup. No one ever left unsatisfied. Man or woman. I’m versatile. Top or bottom, pitch or catch, flip or flop, it’s all good for me. Until I met Todd.”

“One more word and I’m out of here.” He moved toward the door.

“Wait, I’m done. I’m just worried about Lexie. If you hurt her, I’d have to kill you and she’d be pissed.”

Might as well have it out now. “You don’t have to worry about me hurting Lexie tonight. It’s not an issue, hasn’t been since after we were engaged.”

Ely bellowed, then charged. Taylor dodged but the heavier man caught his shoulder and slammed him against the wall. “You sonofabitch, you’ve been fucking Lexie.”

Taylor tried to push Ely away, but the man barely moved. He grabbed two handfuls of his shirt and shook him as he spoke. “I didn’t ‘fuck’ Lexie. I made love to her when she was ready. When she reserved a hotel suite and gave herself to me. I love her, Ely. I would never have touched her until she wanted me to. You had to know. Todd did.”

A hard shove slammed him back against the wall.

“I didn’t know. Todd. Lexie. They didn’t say a word.”

Taylor pushed off the wall, straightened his clothing, and examined the dent in the plaster. *More damages.* “I’m not surprised no one told you, Ely. Look how you behaved when I gave you an honest answer. Would you have hurt Lexie or Todd, if either of them had told you about us?”

Ely leaned against the damaged wall by the sink with his head down. “I’d never hurt Lexie. Todd might get a piece of my mind, but I wouldn’t hurt him either. You’re a big guy. I didn’t hurt you much.”

Most of his life Ely had probably known only neglect and violence. Except for Lexie and Todd, the man didn’t trust anyone. That would have to change to make their living arrangement work, and he’d have to take the initiative. “We’re family now, Ely. I’ll have your back, and I expect you to have mine. When I saw you with Lexie the night we met, I knew she was safe with you. You love her. Treat her like a princess. Come to think of it, though, I can’t say the same for Todd. You treat him like shit.”

Ely’s head jerked up. “The hell you say. Todd was lost when we met. Knew he was gay but didn’t know anything about the life. I taught him everything he needed to know to keep him safe and satisfied. I watch his back. Saved his ass more than once. I cook for him. I wear the clothes he buys, even though I’d just as soon dress in jeans and t-shirts. I’ve never cheated on him.”

“That’s not what I’m talking about, Ely. Todd loves you. You’ve been together for over twenty years, but he still walks on eggshells around you. I fell hard for Lexie when I laid eyes on her. I’d do anything for her. She’s absolutely secure in our relationship. I’m not ashamed to tell her I love her. I don’t lose anything by showing my feelings for her. Even in public. But you...”

The dropped ceiling creaked above them.

Ely touched a finger to his lips. “Rats. I hate rats. I’ve got this, Taylor.” He pulled his Glock from his waistband and cocked it. The sound hung ominously in the small restroom.

Another creak. A ceiling tile moved to one side. A tousled head of honey-gold curls peeked over the edge. “I’m no rat, Ely.”

* * * *

Lexie peered over the edge of the ceiling from her precarious perch. Todd was right. Ely and Taylor were barricaded in the men’s restroom. Strips of wood and plaster littered the floor. One of the panels of the restroom door was split. The guys, though, appeared to be in one piece. Perhaps a bit tense, but, all things considered, unscathed.

She grabbed the metal channel strips of the ceiling grid, lowered herself as far as she could, then dropped to the floor. Hands on hips, she confronted her guys. “We have dozens of guests who are swilling beer like it’s water and you two have locked down the only men’s restroom. If you stay here much longer, we’ll have to replace the potted palms in the courtyard.” She pulled the chair away from the door. “What’s going on?”

Todd opened the door, slid inside, and jammed the chair back in place. He set a pair of red espadrille wedges on the floor beside her. She nodded a thank you and stepped into her sandals.

They added a couple of inches to her five-two but she didn't need those extra inches to handle this situation. No one was going to fuck up her wedding day.

Ely, appearing uncharacteristically subdued, gazed off into the distance. He looked more pensive than angry, but she couldn't tell for sure. She shifted her attention to her new husband. She loved his dark looks. His black hair and brown eyes were attractive and his tanned, hard-body physique was sexy. Then she took a good look at him. He was staring at her as though she were naked. *Shame on him.*

"Like what you see?"

Taylor jerked out of his reverie and smiled at her. "I'm a fortunate man. You are so beautiful. Your outfit is lovely. You look like a bird of paradise." He lifted his shirt. "We match."

Maybe she wouldn't be too hard on him. Most men weren't so observant. "Of course we match. That was the idea. The men in the wedding party are wearing khaki slacks. Their shirts and your parents' clothes are coordinated with the colors in my outfit. Your shirt matches the red in my dress. Mr. Tom's shirt and Miss Cathy's outfit match the green. Todd and Ely are wearing matching yellow shirts." She'd loved the multi-colored, silky linen outfit at first sight. The spaghetti straps and split sides were perfect for their honeymoon at the beach.

"How did you manage to climb in here dressed like that?"

"The slits make it easy to move around and the shorts underneath keep me decent." She pulled the slit open to reveal her matching shorts. "Todd gave me a boost into the ceiling from the ladies restroom."

Taylor cast an interested look at her exposed thigh. "That's not exactly what I meant."

"Oh, I see. You know I took dance and gymnastics for years. My guys encouraged me to climb at will. I scampered all over the monkey bars at the parks and on the play set at the estate in the Hamptons. It comes in handy sometimes." She returned her hands to her hips. "Don't think I'll ignore what was happening between you two, that is, when I discover what was happening."

"We've worked so hard to pull this off on a tight schedule. Can't we just enjoy the day?"

Everyone turned to Todd. He seldom involved himself in family spats. Why would he speak up now? He was the handsome, quiet one. Taller than either Taylor or Ely, he'd been a swimmer in college and had maintained his swimmer's physique over the years. With his long blond hair and friendly mien, he appeared more than a decade younger than his actual age. Until today. He'd worked harder than anyone to make her wedding a success and it had taken its toll. "Are you okay, Todd?"

He nodded and looked toward the door. "Sure. We should return to our guests, though. We're not being very good hosts."

Ely moved closer to Todd. *Unusual.* Ely always insisted Todd keep his distance in public. "Fuck the guests. Are you okay?"

Todd picked up on Ely's concern and smiled. "I'm fine, Ely. Really. A bit tired, maybe. The last few months have been hectic for us all."

Ely slapped Todd on his back. "You're right. We'll enjoy the rest of the evening, then close out everything here and at the hotel tomorrow. We'll take Tom and Cathy up on their offer to help with the guests. After we're done here, while Taylor and Lexie are at the Gulf Shores condo, we'll head to the beach for a few days.

Todd grimaced. "That would be nice, but we can't go to Costa Rica. We have the house to finish and the business is pending."

Ely nudged Todd in his side. "Nothing that can't wait a week."

She hadn't missed the Costa Rica reference and she had a pretty good idea what was going on. "Why can't you go to Costa Rica?"

Taylor cleared his throat. "I'll take responsibility for that one. I don't like Lindsey because of the way she treats you and her lack of concern for your welfare when you were missing. I wanted our day to be perfect. Ely said he would take care of it. I didn't understand what he meant, but I guess it had something to do with a month-long trip for six to Costa Rica."

Taylor knew her well. Mama's absence had been a relief. Lindsey had been practically a stranger to her until they moved to Mobile for her to attend college. Their relationship had been difficult from day one. When the wedding plans couldn't be as elegant as Mama envisioned, she started bitching. She didn't understand they could only accomplish so much in one week. Not like she was willing to do anything. Mama would be much happier in Costa Rica, especially with the spending allowance she'd probably demanded.

"Good call. Thank you, Taylor and Ely."

Her new husband slipped an arm around her waist and planted a kiss on the top of her head. "My pleasure."

She snuggled against him and rubbed her face in his chest. Ely growled but was cut short when Todd planted an elbow in his ribs. "They're married, Ely."

"Heard there was a lot going on when they weren't."

Todd sniffed. "If you weren't such a drama queen, I would have told you. I couldn't trust you not to kill or maim the man Lexie chose to marry. We both liked him and he invited us into their lives permanently."

Ely grimaced and looked away. "I see your point."

Todd's jaw dropped. "You do?"

She shared his surprise. Ely was obstinate. No way would he be this agreeable.

Ely scowled at Todd. "I do, but I ain't no fucking 'drama queen.' Anyway, we'll take a trip to the island as soon as we're done here. We can leave tomorrow evening."

"Really?" Todd threw his arms around Ely who for once didn't shove him away. "I would love that. It's my favorite vacation spot. I'll put the plane on standby."

Taylor looked at her and lifted his eyebrows.

"We own an island in the Bahamas." Then she mouthed "nude beach."

Her husband blushed and then smiled. "Think we could vacation there ourselves sometime?"

"Perhaps." She returned his smile, and then looked over at her guardians. "Group hug, guys, then back to the reception."

Taylor frowned and took a step backwards. "No way."

"It's not what you think, Taylor. We do this occasionally for relaxation and bonding. Put your hands on my shoulders and just breathe with us."

Todd and Ely joined them. She slid an arm around each of her guardians and they placed a hand on her back with their hands touching. Taylor cautiously caressed her shoulders. Her guardians clasped hands. Ely reached forward and touched Todd's side. *Totally out of character.* Todd smiled broadly and touched Ely. Ely tensed, then relaxed. They closed their eyes and breathed together for a couple of minutes. She could feel their tension draining away.

"Ready to tackle the world together, guys?"

"Ready."

She moved the chair blocking the door. Todd, their worrier-in-chief when it came to social events, grabbed Taylor's garment bag and exited first. She followed, but stopped outside the door to wait for Taylor. He joined her and slid an arm around her waist.

Ely slapped him on the back. “I’m good, if you are, Taylor. Who the hell am I to judge anyone? I’ll think about what we discussed.”

Taylor returned the slap with his free hand. “I’m good. Enjoy your vacation.”

“Enjoy your honeymoon.” Ely nodded to them, surveyed the room until he spotted Todd, and then headed his way.

“What was that all about? I’ve never seen Ely behave like that.”

Taylor shrugged. “I’m not sure. For a while, I thought I might be a dead man or, at least, maimed.”

Ely caught up with Todd. They spoke with their heads close. Ely put a hand on Todd’s shoulder, and they walked off together.

“He’s unusually laid back now. They never touch in public, seldom even at home. Maybe you’ll be a good influence on him.”

Taylor shrugged again. “Not likely.”

“Whatever. We can discuss Ely later. Let’s enjoy the rest of our evening.”

Taylor’s smile warmed her insides.

“Good idea. Let’s party.” He held out his hand to her and bowed. “Dance with me, Mrs. Jackson?”

She took her husband’s hand and curtsied. “My pleasure, Captain Jackson.”

THE END

Note: *Reception Interrupted* bridges between
Search & Rescue (Taylor and Lexie’s story—a steamy M/F, Contemporary Military) and
Ely’s Epiphany (a scorching hot erotic M/M Contemporary about Todd and Ely).
Both are available from Secret Cravings publishing at

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A COLLECTION OF FIRST CHAPTERS



Rita Bay

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Search & Rescue

A Secret Cravings Publishing Book

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Chapter One

Captain Taylor Jackson stored his M9 Beretta pistol, SCAR rifle, and Multi-Cam kit under Tyler's cot. Whenever he was on a mission, he kept all his gear within easy reach. Fully loaded the kit weighed fifty pounds, but held everything a Ranger needed to survive in a hostile environment.

Tyler should have been waiting for him, but he'd learned years ago his twin seldom met anyone's expectations. He was probably somewhere nearby gloating about making his brother, the hotshot Ranger officer, cool his heels.

He kicked back in a chair and propped his boots on the small desk. His work was done for now. His Ranger Reconnaissance team's mission had been sent to locate insurgents active in the province of Khost who had been attacking the U.S. military and Afghan civilian populations and then melting into the barren landscape of Afghanistan or crossing into Pakistan. The Recon team was authorized to make incursions into Pakistan's tribal area of Waziristan, if necessary.

When his team failed to locate the insurgents and was scheduled to return to Fort Benning, Georgia, Colonel Cochrane gave him permission to visit his brother and look around to see what he could discover. With his natural tan, almost black hair and dark brown eyes, and fluency in Pashto, he could pass for Middle Eastern in a pinch. After his platoon departed on a transport from Camp Salerno, he hopped a ride to Forward Operating Base Chapman where Tyler was assigned. Lexie would be disappointed when he didn't return with his team, but she would understand. With her background, she would make a perfect Ranger wife. Still, he regretted missing the weekend they'd planned at Gulf Shores.

The door swung open and a corporal stuck his head inside. "Jackson, get your ass out here. We leave on patrol in fifteen minutes. Show up late and Sergeant Sandoz will put you on report again." The door slammed shut.

His brother was in trouble, as usual. It was expected, almost inevitable. God only knew where he was and what he was doing. Tyler was too laid back to conform to the rigorous discipline that controlled a soldier's life. If Tyler had talked with him before joining up last year,

he'd have given his wayward brother a heads-up about Army life. But Tyler surprised him when he enlisted at the local recruiting station and the parents weren't talking.

The door opened again, the same corporal. "The sergeant's talking Article 15, Jackson. What do you think that brother you're always bragging about will think when you're standing in front of the colonel for disciplinary action?" The corporal left the door standing open.

He couldn't let Tyler face an Article 15 hearing, even if he deserved it. It was a sure career killer. They were identical twins, best friends since they were old enough to know what friends were. No one would notice the difference except for the uniform, which he could easily conceal under the cover of darkness. After scribbling Tyler a quick note in their private language, he pulled his gear from beneath the cot, donned his body armor, shouldered his weapons and kit, and headed out the door.

A nighttime grunt patrol hadn't been part of Taylor's plan, but the darkness hid his uniform and equipment that would identify him as a Ranger. The territory they patrolled was barren with only occasional scrub growth.

Their route took them into a valley with steep slopes. He scanned the area looking for signs of insurgents. Except for some larger bushes, the landscape was identical to what they'd seen for the last two hours. Until one of the bushes moved. He quickly surveyed the hillside. Some bushes had been placed in a pattern, one that was ideal for an attack. A metal tube, possibly a grenade launcher, protruded slightly from one of the larger clumps of scrub farther down the trail.

He tossed two smoke grenades in front of the patrol, yelled "ambush," then dove for cover behind a small boulder. The insurgents opened fire, but the smoke obscured their targets. As the attackers emerged from the smoke, he picked them off with his rifle. He continued firing until the American soldiers who rushed past him were out of range. He lobbed a couple of grenades into the advancing force, hoping he could capture a couple of insurgents for interrogation.

A grenade landed nearby. He rolled out of the way, but it exploded too close. The flash of the stun grenade blinded him. The concussive force knocked him unconscious for a few moments, long enough for the enemy to advance on his position. He managed to take out a few attackers with his Beretta before he was surrounded. He took down a couple more with his knife before a blow to the base of his skull knocked him unconscious.

* * * *

A cute blonde coed lounged at a table on the other side of the cafeteria and stared at him. She turned to her girlfriends, whispered something, and then giggled. Her friends checked him out, giggled some more, and then one of them pushed her toward the recruiting table. She shook her head but didn't take her eyes off him.

Taylor regretted he'd volunteered for the Hometown Recruiter Assistant Program. He'd wanted a long visit with his family, but he'd been away from Mobile for too long. After graduating from Murphy High School, he'd attended West Point, been assigned to the Infantry, completed a few rotations in Iraq, and then attended Ranger School. He'd found his home there. Several challenging courses and a couple of missions later, he'd become all that he could be—a well-trained agent and killer, one of the best. He didn't belong at a Career Day at a Catholic liberal arts college in southern Alabama surrounded by innocents.

The girl stood up and walked across the room toward the recruiter's table, her long golden-blond hair swaying with each step. She was petite, but had some nice curves. Her expensive

clothing and jewelry screamed high-maintenance. Not the kind of girl who sought out men like him.

Captain Jeffries, the recruiter, smiled, mumbled his standard greeting, and held out a brochure. She walked past Art as though he didn't exist. She only had eyes for him. She stopped inches away. A man coming that close would have been on the floor, but she was either fearless or clueless.

She looked up a foot and more and batted her leaf-green eyes at him. "I'm Lexie. What's your name, Captain?"

He was speechless, captured by a pixie half his size. She would be his—and no one else's—forever.

A kick in his ribs awakened him.

"Eat, infidel."

The stale bread, his usual morning fare, landed on the filthy floor beside him. Hussein, the bearded, middle-aged Afghan farmer who'd been his captor for the last two months, slammed and locked the door.

Hussein walked into the main living area. "We'll soon be rid of the dog."

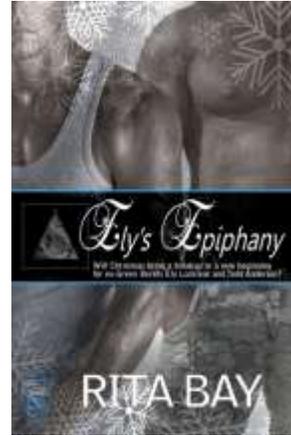
Ely's Epiphany

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NOTE: CONTAINS GRAPHIC LANGUAGE & EXPLICIT M/M SEX

Chapter One

Todd awakened slowly and lingered in the half-sleep where dreams occasionally mingle with reality. He imagined Ely lay behind him, his hard body caressing his back and ass. His partner teased his balls with a callused hand, and then grasped his cock that throbbed with need. An oiled hand slid up and down his shaft until his hips flexed restlessly. When he thought he couldn't stand it anymore, his lover circled and thumbed the head of his cock until he whimpered. When Ely returned his attention to his shaft, he was ready to explode. Slick strokes took him over the edge. He was so wrung out he couldn't move, not even to wipe the hot cum off his abdomen.

He gave himself a mental shake. A grown man well over forty indulging himself in a wet dream. Disgraceful! If Ely found out, he would never let him live it down. Like Ely, who wouldn't consider sleeping in his bed or engaging in a bit of morning play, would ever join in his fantasy. He reached behind him to grab his T-shirt to clean up and grabbed a hard body instead.

"Good morning, Sunshine."

"Ely?" He jumped out of bed, knocked over the lighted artificial Christmas tree on his bedside table, and faced his partner who sprawled bare-assed naked on his bed. He checked the far corner of the room. Ely's military surplus cot was empty and neatly made, his underwear lay folded on the spread. He grabbed the small Christmas tree off the floor and held it in front of him. Realizing how ridiculous the gesture was after their twenty-three years together, he returned it to the table.

"What the fuck's going on, Ely?"

His partner laid his head on the pillow and threw one hand behind his head. The pose was absolutely shameless, probably intentional, and revealed every inch of his ripped body.

Ely at six-two was several inches shorter than he was but at two-thirty outweighed him by twenty pounds, all of it muscle. Years ago, they'd opted for laser hair removal of the hair on their backs and chests. Ely's smooth, dark skin—evidence of his Amerindian heritage—was

breathhtakingly sexy. The shoulder-length, black hair he usually wore in a ponytail was icing on the cake. When his partner was oiled up, he was irresistible.

“You used to like a morning fuck, Todd. When I noticed your cock standing at attention, I thought I would indulge you.” Ely held up a towel. “It’s warm. Come back to bed and I’ll wipe you down. Then I have a surprise for you.” He waggled his eyebrows and patted the bed.

Todd grimaced as he stretched out beside Ely. He couldn’t turn down the invitation, even if he wanted to. He jumped at any opportunity for the attention he craved. Ely was not an affectionate man, never had been. In spite of his faults, he’d fallen in love with him twenty-three years ago when they were both Green Berets. He’d been a young officer only a few years out of West Point, still a virgin at twenty-five, and Ely was a bad-boy enlisted man a couple of years older and decades more experienced.

They’d managed to keep their relationship secret for the two years he’d needed to complete the remainder of his five-year commitment. Those had been the days of immediate dishonorable discharge for homosexuality, even before ‘don’t-ask-don’t-tell’. Then there’d been the problem of consorting with enlisted personnel which would have landed him in double trouble.

The warm towel massaging his abdomen returned his attention to the present. Ely smiled—so out of character for him—and then caressed his balls and cock. He reveled in his partner’s attentions. When Ely dried him off, covered him with the sheet, and left the bed, his sense of loss was acute. The impressive rear view of Ely walking nude across their bedroom to the doors concealing the kitchenette sent a jolt of lust down to his cock. That view was only exceeded by Ely’s return carrying a large tray. He stared at his partner, mesmerized by the bounce and sway of his cock and balls with each step he took as he returned to bed.

“Todd.”

“What?”

“Sit your ass up so I can set the tray down.”

“Oh. Sure.” He forced himself to look away and sat up with his back resting against the massive antique mahogany headboard.

A single red rose sat in a vase on the tray heavy with food. What the fuck was going on? Peach compote, his favorite apple crepes, date muffins, prune juice, and coffee. He sucked in a breath and looked at Ely who shrugged and picked up his own plate.

“I got up at four and made breakfast. That was before I found you—needy.” He paused. “I can cook something else.”

“No!” Todd grabbed his plate and stabbed a chunk of peach compote. “They are my favorites. Thank you for the rose. It’s lovely.” Ely was behaving strangely, unusually solicitous. He wouldn’t spoil the evening’s promise by asking too many questions.

The apple crepes were outstanding. An advantage of having a master chef for a partner. “You want to go over our plans for today?”

* * * *

Ely set his coffee cup on the tray and glanced at Todd. Did he suspect anything? He didn’t think so, but the man was brilliant. If it was electronic- or computer-related, Todd could use it, fix it, and improve it. If he had a clue something was going on, he was unstoppable.

His partner’s long golden hair, blue eyes, and tanned, hard body could be deceptive. Unlike most women and a lot of men, Todd wasn’t fragile—mentally or physically. At six inches over six feet with a swimmer’s honed body, Todd was a damned fine soldier he could rely on to have his back, even if he had been an officer.

On the down side, Todd always had to have things planned out, rather than letting life happen. When they worked security after leaving the Army, planning was important, but going-with-the-flow flexibility had saved his ass on more than one mission. Now that they were semi-retired, planning was even less important, but he would put up with Todd's pissy shit to keep him happy.

Ely sighed. "I need to finish some Christmas shopping. Before I leave, I'll give Taylor a personal home tour. I'll stop by the restaurant this afternoon. What about you?"

"I'm driving Lexie to Fort Benning. She left her car on post and rode home with Taylor yesterday. She thought they could drive in together today. The Chief Nurse's office called after she went off-duty and left a message for her to report in fatigues to the admin office for orders at eight a.m. Taylor isn't scheduled to be on duty until ten and needs to meet with you this morning. You have everything completed downstairs?"

He breathed a sigh of relief and sipped his coffee. Todd didn't think the schedule change odd. His partner on alert was not something he wanted to deal with. "I finished the last of it day before yesterday. Did a final check on your security system with Lexie's help. We're about as secure as Fort Knox. She's familiar with everything. Can't let her show Taylor, though. He's got no sense when she's around. They've been married six months already and he still behaves like a love-sick fool."

Todd swallowed the last of his muffin. "I like how he treats our girl. Like a princess. I shudder to think what would happen to him, if he didn't."

Ely slammed his cup on the tray. His warrior days were over—for the most part, but the thought of Lexie in danger set him off. He forced himself to relax. "I'd kill him. Real slow. But I've never seen a man treat his wife as good as he does. Maybe his parents are like that. Tom and Cathy seem to be real close. Come to think of it, he treats us damned good too."

Todd nodded. "You're right about that. Not many men would invite his wife's guardians to share a home with them, especially a couple of gay former Green Berets."

Ely scowled at him. He wouldn't revisit the 'I ain't gay' issue. They'd been exclusive from the day they met, but, even after twenty-three years, he was bi. Todd didn't understand their monogamous relationship was a choice, not a necessity. Todd hadn't ever been with a woman, hadn't wanted to be. He, however, had fucked more women than he could count. Some women—men too—liked bad boys, especially after a fight. But they'd all been quickie hook-ups, until Todd.

"Army Rangers don't know when they'll leave on a mission or when, or even if, they'll return. Taylor understands Lexie's more at risk than most dependents. He knows we'll keep her safe when he's away."

Todd laughed. "Keep her safe when he's away, stay out of the way when he's at home, and keep him well fed. Works for me."

Ely wiped his plate with the last of his muffin. "We all need our own space. Ten thousand square feet on sixty acres is enough space for us all. Nice that we can afford it."

Todd smiled. "Ten thousand we'll admit to. Are you going to show him everything?"

Ely shrugged. "Have to. I trust him. Might need the intel to protect Lexie someday."

"Speaking of Lexie, it's almost six-thirty. We need to start moving to have her at work on time. What about their breakfast?"

He reached his arms high above his head, allowing the muscles in his chest and abdomen to stretch and prepare to start the day. "When I cooked our breakfast, I left them some crepes and muffins in the kitchen and set the coffee timer for Taylor."

Todd reached across the tray and rested a hand on his chest. His whole body tightened as he leaned in to his partner's touch. When Todd's hand drifted over the tense muscles of his abdomen until it came to rest on his cock, he almost fell off the bed.

"You 'indulged' me this morning. May I return the service?"

He covered his partner's hand with his own, gave it a gentle squeeze, and smiled. "I think we both need a shower. Don't you?"

Todd returned his smile. "Absolutely, Ely."

Into the Lyons' Den

Champagne Books

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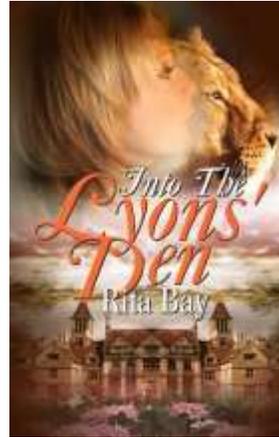
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Chapter One

Marie Maxwell's internal warning system went on high alert. Someone was stalking her. That was particularly offensive since she was used to being the predator, not the prey. She sniffed the air, then inhaled deeply. Something peculiar, yet familiar. Dangerous.

"Good evening."

Damn! No one could get that close without me knowing it. She spun around to find herself nose to chest with the most gorgeous male she'd ever seen. He was golden, from his close-cut hair to those oh-so-inviting eyes and that luscious tan. Her own ash blonde hair and blue eyes paled in comparison.

"Pardon me if I startled you."

His voice was liquid gold, a baritone for sure. The black Armani tux was a perfect fit, hinting at a kick-ass body. His chiseled features, down to that cleft chin, would be the envy of a male model. He held himself with the assurance that came with power and wealth. He could be thirty, or even forty. Usually, she would be drooling but something about him set off alarms. Best to put some distance between them.

"I am Anthony Lyons." He offered his hand. "And you are ...?"

"Hired help. If you will excuse me, sir, I am needed elsewhere." She bolted from her observation post behind one of the hotel's palms, then forced herself to a sedate stroll through the dining area surrounding the dance floor.

Her elegant black suit and discreet ear-clip set her apart from the guests swirling around her in designer formals and glittering jewels. A shortcut behind some props took her to a service area where she could monitor the event's progress undisturbed. The bride and groom were on their way to Hawaii and the reception was winding down. A popular DJ blasted dance music for the post-reception partying. The couple's parents relaxed at a table with drinks in hand and smiles on their faces. She breathed a sigh of relief but something wasn't quite right and that set her on edge.

Her family had been fortunate to book the Carleton wedding. The Carleton family, drowning in old Atlanta money, was demanding but they were willing to pay well for premium service and

she made sure they got it. The Event-Planning Department depended on referrals and the Hotel Maxwell survived on its events.

She flexed her toes in her serviceable black leather pumps and wished she were sprinting down the Silver Comet Trail in her favorite Asics or street racing with friends from her sordid past. She turned her attention back to...

“Dance with me, Kitten.”

She almost jumped out of her skin. He’d caught her unaware a second time, a record. *How did he manage to follow me?*

“It’s not allowed, sir.” She forced herself to step away from him, then took off. She imagined she could feel him inside her head demanding that she return. Fortunately, two hot chicks in slinky outfits flanked him on either side, leaving the field open for her retreat. As she made her escape into the kitchen, she glanced around to see if anyone else had heard his promise of retribution.

* * * *

Marie entered the General Manager’s office, comfortably dressed in a black, ribbed-knit sweater with matching slacks. “Morning, Dad. Frankie said you needed to see me. I had planned to take the day off to recover from the Carleton event.”

The elderly man behind the desk sent her a welcoming smile that warmed her heart. “Thank you for stopping by, Marie. We have been presented with a unique opportunity which I would not accept without consulting you.”

“Sounds interesting. Do I know the client?”

“We met last evening, Marie.”

Damn! Lyons had caught her unaware again. She spotted him standing beside the open office door. “You! What are you doing here?” Always sneaking up on her.

He moved closer, forcing her to step away. Although she was only a few inches shy of six feet, he towered almost a foot above her and he certainly used it to his advantage.

“I desire to engage your services.”

A faint accent that she couldn’t quite place intrigued her. His scent, redolent of earth and forests, distracted her. He filled out his suit—black Armani again—and pullover nicely. His Berluci shoes alone would buy her a season’s wardrobe.

“What kind of services?” She glared daggers at him, sending him a pointed message that she wasn’t about to fall at his feet.

“Marie, please.” She started at her father’s distress. “Mr. Lyons has proposed a contract that would be most advantageous to the Maxwell.”

“And just what are the contract’s provisions?” She had yet to break eye contact with the bastard and was not about to blink now.

His smile antagonized and challenged her. “I need you to plan a wedding—a very special wedding.”

“For how many?”

“Approximately two hundred.”

Piece of cake. “When?”

“In ten days.”

“What?” She could not possibly have heard that right.

“I said I want you to plan a wedding for two hundred in ten days. Do you have a problem with your hearing, Kitten?” That smile again.

“It’s Ms. Maxwell and my hearing’s fine, thank you.” Actually, it was excellent, more than excellent. “You have no idea of the complexities involved in event planning. Besides, the Maxwell isn’t available on short notice. We’re booked solid for the next two months.” That should end it. She would need to do some serious shopping when she got out of here.

“Actually, Ms. Maxwell, that won’t be a problem.” He paused while her aggravation built. “The wedding will take place on my estate in North Carolina. The invitations are being delivered as we speak.”

“Impossible! I can’t leave here.” Who did he think he was and what was his game? Maybe he operated some kind of white slavery ring and was using the wedding as a ploy to lure her away. When her father cleared his throat, she felt a stab of irritation.

“Marie, we can manage with the staff you’ve trained. As I said, Mr. Lyons has made a very attractive offer. Frankie could accompany you.”

Her father seldom stuck his nose into her event-planning operations. Lyons must have offered a mint.

“The reception last night was magnificent—exactly what I want for my family. I have offered \$250,000 for your services and carte blanche for whatever it takes to make the wedding memorable.”

The man had money to burn! She was the most sought-after event planner in Atlanta—probably because she usually knew what a client wanted without having to ask and could resolve problems before they occurred. But even she couldn’t command that kind of money.

“I have some very specific ideas about what I want for the couple.”

She fumed while he casually surveyed her from head to toe.

“I see that we have similar tastes so that should not be a problem. As a matter of fact, I’m sure we’ll get along fine.”

Seriously doubtful. The stalking incident from the previous night bothered her. It was as though someone had been in her head. Never one to lie to herself, she admitted her attraction to Mr. Thinks-he’s-so-damn-cool—that, too, was unusual. She liked her men gorgeous, but she liked to be in charge. She would definitely butt heads with this one. But then, there was the benefit to the hotel to consider—that was a hell of a fee. Finally, her curiosity, which had landed her in trouble before, got the best of her. “I’ll do it.”

His smile reminded her of a cat that had cornered his mouse.

“I was sure that you would. My driver will pick you up here at nine tomorrow morning.”

“Nine’s fine, but Frankie and I will drive there in my car.” His smile faded a tad. She gloated.

“Very well.”

Did he just growl? She looked at Dad—he didn’t seem to notice anything.

“Mr. Maxwell, thank you.” Lyons shook hands with her father, then swept her an elegant old-world-style bow.

“Ms. Maxwell, I look forward to our collaboration. My family has eagerly awaited this marriage.”

She didn’t offer her hand, only a grudging nod of her head. He set her on edge. She felt unsettled—less in control—around him. She was relieved to see his back as he strolled out of the office. *Good riddance!*

“Dad?”

Her father shrugged. “I don’t know, Marie, that’s why I called you. I have checked with friends who live in that area. He is extremely wealthy, known for his generosity to local

charities, and unmarried. He lives in a mansion surrounded by thousands of acres of prime, undeveloped forest.” He hesitated. “He deposited your fee in advance. We could really use the money.”

She rounded the desk and draped an arm around his frail shoulder.

“The decision’s made, Dad. Everything will be fine.” She hoped. “Frankie will be with me.” The former heavyweight’s hulking size and dark, grizzled features intimidated just about everyone.

She gave him a quick hug, then turned to leave. She paused at the door. “By the way, do you know how he made his money?”

Her father nodded and smiled. “Gourmet cat food.”

* * * *

Anthony’s driver leaned against the Mercedes sedan sporting a grin as if he’d just eaten a canary. Knowing Rob, that might be exactly what he’d done. Calling him a driver, though, was hardly fair since he held a powerful position within the clan. They’d been together for years—even looked alike. Rob, though a century or so younger, was not above teasing him but Anthony just wasn’t up to it today.

His meeting with Marie had left him on edge. He’d had to exert all of his self-control to avoid shaking the contrary female. *Damn, she’s one tough kitten.* At least he’d succeeded in coaxing her away from Atlanta. Would he be able to accomplish what he needed to in time?

“She turned you down,” Rob taunted.

Anthony gritted his teeth. He didn’t want the trouble he’d get into if he publicly assaulted Rob. “She returns with us tomorrow.”

“Then why do you look like you’ve bitten into a rotten piece of meat?”

He shrugged. “There is a problem. I tried to *influence* her to come to the estate. It didn’t work.”

“Damn. You’re screwed.” Rob walked around to the driver’s side, climbed in and slammed the door.

Anthony joined him in the front seat. “Possibly, but it was unavoidable.”

Rob started the car. “Unavoidable or not, you’ll regret it. Where to?”

“I need to do some shopping.” He laid his head back against the seat, closed his eyes and sighed. He regretted it already—and so much more. He’d thought she’d fall at his feet last night but she hadn’t even recognized him. Even Rob, who didn’t look much beyond his next meal or female, understood the extent of his failure. The situation couldn’t be much worse.

He should have brought Nicholas with him. His best friend, who was also the estate’s physician, might have helped—but no, he thought he had everything under control.

Maybe he had come on too strong. Chalk that up to eagerness.

Maybe he had pissed her off. Chalk that up to stupidity. Yeah, eager and stupid, but that was not his style. He knew the effect he had on females.

Whether it was his appearance, his status, or the aura of power that had grown around him over the years, he garnered more than his share of attention. Until now—when it was so damned important.

His Kitten had grown claws. She shouldn’t have known he was stalking her—his prey never did—but somehow she’d sensed him. She should have been at least amenable to his overtures, but she’d cut him dead.

And, most important of all, she was practically immune to his *influence*. A little push here, a small suggestion there and he was usually able to get what he needed. But not with her. She had fled the field last night but that was still a victory—not many could have done even that. Finally, to make his bad situation even worse, in his frustration he had unintentionally blasted a threat at her and she had run even faster. He'd spent the rest of the evening at the reception—without an invitation—waiting, in vain, for her to reappear.

He had underestimated her at every turn, but after today they would be in his territory. He couldn't read her the way he could most, but he had history on his side. With that knowledge, he would win the day. And his first sortie would be his shopping spree.

Finding Eve

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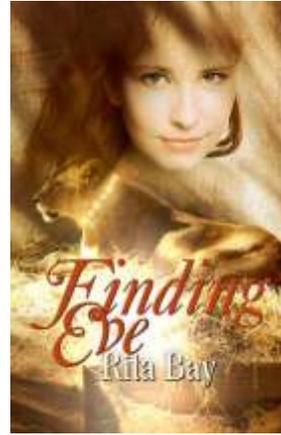
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The glare of the flood lights blinded Eve as she paced the length of her cage. Back and forth, four steps each way, then turn and back again. This wasn't the first time she'd been put on display before an auction. Before the night was done, she would have a new cage. A new master. A new hell.

The driving beat of the heavy metal music assaulted her senses. Servers walked among the guests, carrying trays heavy with food and drinks. Her stomach growled at the scent of the meaty tidbits, but there would be nothing for her this evening. The Master starved them before a sale. The hunger and rage of the merchandise charged the atmosphere, upping the bidding and increasing The Master's profits.

Tension built as the buyers argued the merits of the occupants of the cages ranged along the walls of the courtyard. She could feel those men—their greed, their lust. The women, who hung on their arms craving their attention, were owned like her. Dying inside, some high on the drugs that helped hide their fear and despair, but the signs were there. Eve could sense anyone, if they were close enough.

From across the room, a woman walked toward her, surrounded by a wall that defied her best attempts to breach it. The servers nodded at her orders and moved quickly about their business. The woman smiled at the guests as she deftly avoided their unwanted attentions. She didn't belong here. She wasn't like the others.

Then she moved closer. Eve inhaled her scent. *Good. Familiar? Maybe.* She still couldn't sense her, but her mask slipped and Eve caught her look of disgust. But the mask shifted back into place as The Master approached, holding a drink and sucking on a nasty-smelling cigar.

"You've outdone yourself, Marie. Our mutual associates said you were the best in the business, but this is beyond anything I expected. I'm the envy of all the buyers." He set the drink on a passing tray, then slid his arm around her waist. "They believe you're my mistress."

And the bastard hadn't told them any different. Eve inhaled deeply and savored the fragrance of the potted trees and shrubs decorating the courtyard. For once, she agreed with The Master. Marie had turned a vacant home with a dilapidated courtyard into a pagan temple surrounded by a forest glen. So different from the cramped quarters and foul air she endured daily, but trafficking depended on secrecy and those trafficked must remain hidden from prying eyes.

Marie stepped away from The Master. “Thank you, Mr. Rivera. What they believe is unimportant, as long as you’re satisfied with the service. This was not what I expected. I don’t often cater events away from the Maxwell.”

That she would likely never do it again went unsaid.

“So what if it’s not one of those boring, stuffy parties you throw in those fancy hotel ballrooms of yours. I was assured of your discretion. The money’s good, better than you’d make in a week at the hotel.” The Master stabbed the air with his cigar as he spoke. “Admit it, *cara*, you were glad to get away from that mausoleum.

The wall around Marie crumbled a bit. Eve felt the woman’s disdain and tasted her fury.

“I’m surprised you could get a short-term lease for this event, especially in Carroll County. It’s a beautiful area, but isolated and known to be clannish.”

“A realtor with a year-old listing with a foreclosure pending? Enough cash under the table can buy just about anything.”

Eve growled as The Master eyed Marie. He was easy to read. A handsome Latino who took pride in speaking and dressing well, he made easy conquests of women whom he used, then cast aside. He wanted Marie, and that was all that mattered. She was his type—fair, tall, and slender with a mass of silky, white-blond hair. Marie would be in trouble if he decided to pursue her, and there was nothing Eve could do. She hissed her frustration, which attracted Marie’s attention.

Marie strolled toward her cage. Eve wanted her to move closer. She liked the woman’s scent. Clean with a hint of the forest about her.

“She’s beautiful—all golden. I’ve never seen anything like her. A shame she’s caged.”

Scowling at the interruption, The Master joined Marie beside her cage. Much too close. Eve snarled at him, but he ignored her as usual. “She is unique, but of little value. Can’t breed her—never found a male of her species, whatever it is. Can’t fight her. She won’t engage the others. It’s uncanny how they won’t fight her.” He leaned close to Marie. “I like fighters.”

Marie reached a hand towards Eve. She would like Marie to touch her. Sometimes she vaguely remembered when touching was a good thing. Not now, though. But just this once, maybe. The Master grabbed Marie’s wrist. “Be careful. She’s dangerous. Not a fighter, like I said, but she has a hell of a bite.”

He caressed Marie’s arm, then slid his hand up to her shoulder. “My business demands I entertain often.” He nodded toward the buyers milling about the courtyard. “Look at them. You and your people treat these freaks like kings. They’re salivating to spend their money. Maybe I could interest you in a more long-term arrangement with me.”

Marie slipped out of his grasp again and stepped beyond his reach. “The Maxwell is a family business, Mr. Rivera. After my mother died, I couldn’t consider leaving my father to run the hotel alone, especially after I took over the Event Planning Department several years ago.”

Marie moved closer, laid her hand on The Master’s, then dug her nails deep into his palm. “But I appreciate the offer.”

The Master grimaced with the pain and then groaned with pleasure. *Strange*. She would have bitten hard anyone who hurt her paw. He fumbled in his pocket and pulled out a card. “If you change your mind, *cara*, call me and we can come to an arrangement satisfactory to us both. I can promise it will be worth your while. I appreciate women with special tastes and skills.”

Marie sent The Master an enigmatic smile, then nodded toward Eve’s cage. “Do you mind if I visit with her for a bit?”

He shrugged his shoulders. “Suit yourself. The bidding’s about to begin.” He turned to walk away. “Try not to lose a hand.”

Marie grabbed snacks off a tray as a server passed by. “You look hungry, my beauty.” She held out a chunk of meat. Eve accepted the offering and chewed slowly, savoring the treat. So different from the scraps and half-spoiled slop that was her usual fare. Marie continued feeding her until the hunger no longer gnawed. She occasionally caught glimpses of her new friend’s feelings. Mostly anger and no fear. Marie wasn’t afraid of The Master, but she should be. Everyone feared him. Marie’s servers were nervous and fearful. None of them could hide their feelings the way their employer could.

“I wish I could take you home with me, but there’s no way I can afford you.” Marie leaned close and touched Eve’s forehead through the cage’s bars. “I’m calling the police on these pigs as soon as I’m out of here. I’ll see they take good care of you—all of you.”

The Master and the buyers would be cleared out long before help arrived. There would be no rescue, but Eve would remember her time with Marie. She would treasure these memories wherever the sale landed her.

She leaned against the bars of the cage and reveled in Marie’s soft caresses. *Almost like they were kin.* She started. *Where did that thought come from?* She didn’t have any family. At least, not that she remembered. But she didn’t remember much before Ben.

She’d been hurt bad, but Ben had taken good care of her. There was the Time Before, before Ben, that she glimpsed in dreams. She’d been happy then, racing through the forests in the sunshine, stalking the occasional prey. *Why could she not be free like Marie?*

Eve lunged away from her friend and threw herself against the cage’s chain link gate. It held. She stood on her two hind legs and used her front paws to push against the gate. An attendant ran towards her, waving an electric prod. She retreated to the rear of her cage and roared her rage. The others took up her challenge. She crouched with her teeth bared ready to attack.

Marie shoved the man aside and approached her. “What’s the fuss, my beauty?”

Her rage washed away and her body relaxed as Marie surrounded her with calming, peaceful thoughts. Her belly was full and it was time for a nap. Exhausted, she lay down on the floor and followed her new friend through half-closed eyes as she drifted toward sleep.

Marie frowned as The Master rushed up to her cage. “What the fuck is going on?” he demanded.

“Nothing, Mr. Rivera.” She laid a hand on his chest. “She ate a few snacks, roared a bit, and then settled down for a nap. Is there a problem?”

The Master looked at the attendant who shrugged and returned to his post.

Marie sent a discreet hand signal to the servers who descended on the guests, plying them with offers of food and drink with a vengeance. The incident was over, except for The Master.

“She’s never lashed out like that. What the fuck did you do, Marie?”

Marie gouged her nails into the Master’s chest and held on. The Master grimaced with the pain, but Eve could feel his pleasure also.

“Nothing, Mr. Rivera. She is fine. The party is spectacular, and you’re going to make a shitload of money.”

He leaned into Marie’s hand for a moment then shook himself. “Fuck it, Marie! Tell me how you calmed her down. Then I’ll start the damned auction.”

Marie relaxed her hold on him, patted his chest, and shoved him away. “I’m told I have a way with cats.”

Her Teddy Bare

Champagne Books

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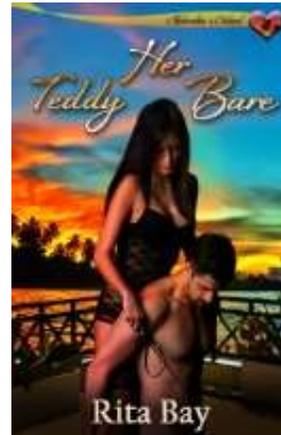
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NOTE: CONTAINS GRAPHIC LANGUAGE & EXPLICIT SEX & LT BDSM

Chapter One

Diana felt amazingly refreshed on the ride across the island to meet her hostess. Alex, Miss A's hot attendant, had met her at the Miami airport, escorted her to a small luxurious jet, seated her comfortably, served her an iced fruit drink, then...nothing. He'd awakened her with a whispered, "Mistress Diana, we've arrived."

When their small electric car turned into a driveway, the wild vegetation morphed into tended tropical gardens. Around a curve, she sucked in a quick breath. The sprawling villa would have been more at home on the slopes of Santorini. Situated on a cliff overlooking the sea, the terraces led down to a private beach on a lagoon. They stopped in front of an entrance that boasted fluted Ionic columns twice her height. Gauzy drapes covered carved doors, open to the breezes.

Alex led her through the doors into a receiving room that opened onto a terrace with a view of the sea across an infinity pool. Several naked men posed beside the pool as though they were part of the scenery, like the marble statues that decorated the ancient Greek and Roman baths.

"Nice view."

She almost jumped out of her skin. Beautiful didn't describe the woman reclining on the couch near the terrace. Curly strawberry blonde hair tumbled past her waist, framing eyes like the green of the sea. Fair skinned and slim, with curves in all the right places, she was the epitome of Womanly Perfection.

And Diana rudely stared at her. "I apologize. Everything is so overwhelmingly perfect."

Her hostess laughed which focused attention on her chest. Pink nipples peaked over the décolletage of her nearly-transparent linen gown. Diana blushed and glanced outside to see a couple of the men cavorting in the pool. She looked up at the ceiling, seeking safety. Confronted by a fresco of a bacchanalia with worshippers abandoning themselves to unimaginable excesses, her blush deepened.

"I like to be surrounded by beauty." Miss A indicated a chair near her couch and rang a tiny bell. "I've looked forward to meeting you. We'll have some refreshments while we talk."

As if awaiting her signal, young men wearing only golden leather thongs and matching leather collars entered the room carrying trays and pitchers. All were blond with golden tans and

sleekly muscled physiques. They moved efficiently setting up small tables, pouring drinks, and serving trays of fruit. The attendant who offered her fruit knelt down on one knee with his back slightly turned to her and hoisted the tray to his shoulder. The pose offered a stunning view of his tight, bare ass. She managed to transfer a few pieces of pineapple and strawberries to her plate, followed by a strangled, "Thank you."

Miss A laughed again. "They do their best to entertain."

Several men clustered around Miss A's couch with their eyes downcast. One held her drink; another, the plate of fruit. She was startled to recognize Alex as the near-naked man holding Miss A's plate.

"As you assumed, I'm Miss A. On my island, though, it's not who you are but who you choose to be while you're here." She accepted a grape from Alex and chewed slowly. "You might discover things about yourself that will surprise you."

She lightly poked one of her attendants in his backside with a painted toenail. He started, then turned toward Miss A with his head bowed.

"Bring Teddy."

He bowed his head even lower, mumbled, "Yes, Mistress," and left.

* * * *

The attendant returned in moments leading a linen-draped, blindfolded man by a thin chain attached to his collar. A head taller and more heavily built than any of Miss A's attendants, the man walked confidently toward her despite the blindfold. When the attendant halted in front of her, he put his arm out to stop the man she assumed to be "Teddy." He dropped to his knees in front of her—mere inches away—and bowed his head. She couldn't take her eyes off of him until she heard Miss A's throaty chuckle.

"This, Diana, is Teddy. He will be your attendant during your visit. Strip him to see if he is to your liking. If he's not, I'm sure we can find one more to your taste."

Teddy tensed at Miss A's remarks. Before she did anything else, she needed to discover what was going on. "Miss A, while I appreciate your hospitality, I can't stay here unless I know what all this is about."

Teddy hissed, then snapped his mouth shut.

"You're a wise woman for your age, Diana. A benefactor arranged for your visit. I know you are wealthy, but you don't have the connections to obtain an invitation here. Sometimes a respite from the mundane world can do wonders. Gives a girl a new outlook on life. Enjoy your fantasy. Take advantage of what you discover this week with us, dear."

"But what about the attendants, about Teddy?" She had a pretty good idea what they were but had never thought to try the lifestyle herself.

Miss A laughed again. "Rest assured that no one is here who does not want to be, and no one does anything that they do not want to do. That includes your Teddy, if you decide to accept him as your attendant for the week."

There didn't seem to be any obvious downsides to her proposal. A week's vacay in a tropical paradise waited upon by a gorgeous man? Even if she didn't have a fantasy fulfilled, it was well worth her time. She wouldn't be doomed to sit in an empty apartment.

She nodded. "Very well. Let's continue."

"Before we were side-tracked, I believe I had told you to strip Teddy to see if he was acceptable for your service."

Diana braced herself, then pulled off the linen drape. Teddy

shivered slightly. His tanned skin glistened with oil, each muscle clearly defined, the kind of physique that required intensive workouts in a gym or long days of manual labor. Like Miss A's attendants, he wore only a gold thong. On the others, it provided a degree of modesty. On him, it was merely a nod to propriety. His genitals would have barely been concealed in a flaccid state but he was fully erect, cock clearly outlined and straining against the thin fabric. She continued her inspection. His back, ass, and legs were as well-developed as the rest of him—a breathtaking sight.

She reached around and untied his blindfold. He looked down quickly but she caught a glimpse of warm hazel eyes.

Uncertainty, maybe, but no fear. He was handsome in the large-boned Nordic style, but she detected a hint of Mediterranean. About her age, maybe a little younger.

“He'll do.”

“Very well, dear. We have few rules here but we're very strict about enforcing them. There are no police, no judges. Everyone here is a consenting adult pursuing his or her own fantasy, sometimes with other consenting adults. On occasion, you might run into other guests. Ignore them. You won't want to share your fantasy and neither will they.

“Use first names only, no bios, no cameras, no phones. Clothing appropriate to the season and occasion has been provided for you. We're very green conscious here. Everyone walks everywhere. If there's an emergency, there's a call button in every building and at stations all over the island. Are we clear?”

She nodded.

“Now, let's talk about Teddy.”

Her attendant tensed but kept his eyes down. Miss A's attendant handed her the chain to Teddy's collar and took up his position beside her couch.

“I must warn you, he's not as well-trained as my boys, but I believe he will be more to your liking. As I told you before, Teddy will be replaced if you aren't satisfied with him. He's eager to serve, but his service might not always be satisfactory. I believe it would be better for you to punish him for unacceptable service rather than to trade him in.”

Diana glanced at Teddy. His body was as tight as a drum. His erect cock peeked over the top of his thong. Pre-cum glistened on the tip.

She sucked in a small breath. She was a little apprehensive about taking him with her until she looked at his face. He was watching her through half-closed eyes, definitely against the rules. He begged her with those eyes—for what she didn't know—but she'd give him a chance.

“Understand that Teddy is completely dedicated to your service, whatever your need. I believe that being very strict with a new boy from the beginning is important. Punish him if he's naughty; punish him if he's not naughty enough. He needs to understand who is dominant.”

Teddy was about to explode. They needed to leave quickly.

“I appreciate your advice, Miss A. I have no experience in this.”

Miss A nodded and smiled. “I neglected to mention that there's a selection of accoutrements at your villa for disciplining or punishing Teddy, also restraints should you need them.”

Teddy moaned softly.

She vaulted out of her chair, pulling Teddy's chain taut, and positioned herself between Teddy and her host.

“Thank you so much, Miss A. I'm looking forward to touring the island and the villa.”

“Dine with me tomorrow evening. Teddy will make arrangements with my boys. Until then.”

The Aegis

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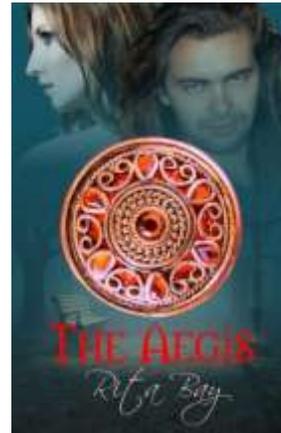
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Chapter One

Melinda Kildare kicked back in her favorite bergère chair, sipped her Chablis, and eyed the chest-high barrel at the back of her shop. The eccentric heir at the estate sale this morning had encouraged her to bid on the lot. Several hours of exhausting work had yielded no treasures, but she would finish the job before retiring to her apartment upstairs. Alone, as usual.

She snorted. A girl doesn't find her knight in shining armor crawling among stacks of musty boxes at yard sales or delving in dusty barrels in crumbling mansions, and men don't fall for an overeducated antiquarian who backs out on dates to build her business.

She sighed, gulped down the last of the wine, rubbed her arm, and forced herself back to work.

Near the bottom of the barrel, she spotted a leather-bound book embossed with an intriguing medallion. The familiar rush at the prospect of a new find overwhelmed her usual caution. She stood tiptoe on the stepladder and reached to retrieve the book. Her fingertips brushed the medallion, a light flashed bright red, and a jolt blasted up her arm. Startled, she tumbled face-first into the barrel.

She shifted to tip the barrel over, lost her balance, and fell back to the bottom, wedging her shoulder against the side. Wincing with pain, she stretched to hook her legs over the rim, slipped, and landed hard with a nauseating thud.

Time to regroup. She took a deep breath, then exhaled forcefully. The deliverymen had braced the heavy barrel in a corner, even wedged blocks at the base to make it more stable. Her cell was charging on her dresser upstairs, and the shop phone was in the showroom. Her only neighbor had closed his shop and left for home hours ago. She was stuck, head-down, legs waving in the air, with no prospect for rescue.

* * * *

Damian Sinclair savored the last of his rare filet of bison at the \$10,000-a-plate benefit for the victims of the world's latest natural disaster. He enjoyed dining in the Pool Room at the Four Seasons Restaurant when he was in Manhattan. The marble elegance and outstanding service reminded him of his past when waiters catered to their guests.

Accepting the invitation to the event, though, had been a mistake. He'd already dodged several men who wanted to talk business and a half dozen women who'd made more personal propositions. He grimaced at the inane chatter of the nearby guests. Perhaps he'd finish the main course, make his apologies, write a substantial check, and...the Call sounded.

Struggling to maintain his composure, he tossed his napkin aside and rushed to the men's room. It was no surprise when the shift that would transport him to his lifemate came. He'd known what to expect for centuries.

In an instant, he stood outside an antique shop on a brick-paved street where the wrought iron-trimmed porches overhung the sidewalks—probably New Orleans. The gold lettering on the glass of the door read Antiques & Curiosities, LLC, Melinda Kildare, Proprietress. Wherever he was, he was not alone. He could sense his lifemate and she was in distress. He reached out to her and saw only darkness. He knocked and waited for the invitation he needed to enter. He extended his senses into the shop and then heard her, barely a whisper.

“Help me. Please, help.”

He opened the door and called, “May I come in?”

“Please hurry.”

He quickly navigated the conglomeration of treasures and trash in Melinda's shop, anxious for a first glimpse of his lifemate. He spotted her in the storeroom at the back of the shop surrounded by stacks of books. He stopped dead and stared. In all his years, he'd never seen such a sight.

His lifemate was sprawled upside down in a massive barrel, her bare legs waving in the air. He stepped closer. A brown silk skirt covered her face. Below her waist, she wore a black V-string, a mere wisp of shiny satin that revealed far more than it covered. He admired her long, shapely legs and firm bottom, then shifted a little for a better view. He grinned—his lifemate was a natural redhead.

“You seem to be in a bit of trouble.”

“Don't just stand there. Get me out of here.”

He stole a final peek, reached in the barrel, and grasped her around the waist. Heat sizzled between them as he lifted her out of the barrel and set her on her feet with her back to him. Her auburn hair fell almost to her waist in a tumbled mass of crinkled waves. Like most of the Light, she was a pale beauty of Celtic descent.

She turned toward him, her fair face flushed, her leaf green eyes burning with anger. Her sleeveless, scoop-necked black silk shell caressed her generous breasts, except where she cradled the book with the Aegis medallion. The skirt clung to the curves that he already knew well.

She cleared her throat to interrupt his perusal and gestured toward the front of the shop. “Thank you for your assistance. The shop is closed for the day. I'll see you out.”

She thought to show him the door. He would never leave her, though he must tread carefully—women today were so independent. But he knew her kind—curiosity could be their downfall. “No, Melinda. Please. I'm Damian Sinclair.” He bowed deeply in the old-fashioned style that never failed to impress the ladies. “I suspect you have acquired a stone from a Gramail Aegis.”

She eyed him intently, her interest piqued. “How do you know my name and what's a Gramail Aegis?”

“Your name was on the front door. As for the Aegis stone, if I may.” He pointed to the book. She crushed it against her chest. When his warm smile, intended to inspire trust, didn't work, he

used a little compulsion to convince her to release her death grip. The medallion's fire faded as she reluctantly surrendered her treasure.

Sensing her distress, he quickly pried the medallion from the cover of the book. A thin gold chain fell away and dangled in his grasp. "I thought so. The book has no value, but this is priceless. It is intended to be worn as a necklace. Like so."

He looped the chain around her neck. The medallion slid beneath the shell to nestle between her breasts. He could feel the heat building where it lay against her skin, reflecting her untapped power. She pulled the shell off her chest and his breath caught. The Aegis stone blazed bright red.

She held the Aegis stone to the light with a collector's eye. "This is a most unusual piece. I don't believe I've seen anything like it, except maybe the mood rings from the 1960s."

He exhaled the breath he'd been holding. She was interested, enough to allow him to remain in her shop. "They are quite rare and they don't glow for just anyone. You have a..."

Impatient rapping at the front door interrupted him. As Melinda huffed and walked toward the front of the shop, he sensed the presence of a powerful Dark One.

"Wait." Damian rushed through the shop after her, but she reached the door first. He ducked behind a nearby wardrobe before she opened it.

The Dark One bowed, then looked around the shop suspiciously. "I'm Steven Fields. You remember me from the auction."

Melinda wrinkled her nose and nodded. "The heir from this morning's sale."

Fields leaned into the room but, like any of the Dark or Light, couldn't enter without an invitation. "May I come inside? I must speak with you."

Damian bristled at the sight of the Dark One so close to his lifemate. In the glow of the streetlights, Fields looked ghastly. His face was a pasty grey-white. His blue eyes were glazed over like a dead fish. Mucous drained in tracks from the corners of his eyes down his cheeks. His thinning black hair straggled in greasy clumps around the leather tie that had bound it. Either his outdated black suit or Fields himself smelled like roadkill.

Damian gestured frantically to Melinda and shook his head. She ignored him.

"I've had a long day. If you wish to speak with me, the shop will open Monday morning." She started to close the door.

He sighed his relief and then rested his forehead against the wardrobe. Melinda had the good sense to deny the Dark One entrance, but they would have only a temporary reprieve.

Fields slammed his hand against the door, sending it flying out of her grasp. "You have something of mine and I will have it returned now. Do you understand me, Miss Sinclair?"

Fields' dark power washed around Melinda in waves. Though the Aegis stone shielded her from the worst of it, Damian could sense that the compulsion to obey him was overwhelming her defenses. He freely offered her his own power and protection. He felt the Aegis stone flare, thrumming with her heartbeat, its power surrounding her. The darkness dissolved. The air cleared.

She shook her head and then returned her attention to Fields. "I believe I do. Perhaps you want this." She pulled the Aegis stone from beneath her blouse and held it up. It pulsed even faster. She shouldn't have been able to wield its power yet, but a red beam of light shot into Field's face.

Fields recoiled under her unexpected assault. With a highpitched scream, he covered his face with his hands and lunged out of the doorway. He hissed at her, then bared his teeth. His stained incisors elongated into fangs. "I will have my Aegis stone and you with it. You will give me

power beyond imagining. Did you think I came alone?" He threw back his head and howled into the night. Answering calls sounded nearby.

Melinda's distress infuriated Damian. He stepped close beside her, placed a hand around her waist, then surrounded her with a sense of well-being. "She is not alone either."

"You!" Fields hissed. "You think to take what I have claimed? I will destroy you both." The snarls of whatever Fields had summoned sounded closer.

"You will destroy nothing!" Damian slammed and locked the door.

"Damn." He was weaponless, with no time to summon assistance. Nothing would hold against a concerted attack by a pack.

Melinda tensed, then looked to him for reassurance. "Are we safe?"

"For now." He cupped her cheek and laid her head against his chest. "Fields will launch an attack soon. They will persist until they destroy your Shield and force their way inside. You are very powerful but untrained."

"Just what are they?" She paused. "And what am I?"

"You know what they are, love. Humans call them vampires and you, Melinda, are of the Light that battles them. If they had caught you alone before you were able to focus the Aegis stone's power, they would have made you one of them and used your power for evil. If you had been unable to light the Aegis stone, you would have been dinner."

He rubbed her back, each stroke intended to comfort. Their peril weighed on him. The Aegis stone that had called him to Melinda had also alerted the Dark Ones. She had fallen into a trap set by a master. Their options for escape were limited.

Melinda looked from him to the street where Fields and his minions gathered for the assault, clearly assessing her alternatives. She sucked in a deep breath, blew it out, and straightened. "I don't want to die or become one of them, Damian. What are we to do?"

He hesitated, considering what to tell her. "Our only option is not one I would choose, if there were any other."

She laid her hand on his chest for a moment, gathered her courage, then locked eyes with him. "Do whatever you must. I have no desire to die"—she glanced nervously toward the door—"or worse."

He owed her romance and courtship before offering her the choice of the Joining. But she had made her choice, even though Fields had forced it. Better to proceed without warning. He cradled her against his chest and allowed his incisors to lengthen. Her fleeting look of horror mixed with betrayal before he closed on her neck tore at his heart. As she fainted in his arms, he savored the blood of his lifemate for the first time.

* * * *

Although Damian's blood sang with the gift he had received from Melinda, it would be a while before he could transport her away from the evil that gathered outside. To buy time, he carried her up the stairs that led to her private residence. He moved a chiffonier in front of the stairwell and then cast a glamour to hide their trail and a ward to slow the Dark Ones' advance.

The large expanse of the combined living and dining area had been exquisitely decorated with an eclectic mix of antique furniture and accessories. At his command the pocket doors slid open and he rushed through another open area that included a kitchen and den. The pocket doors slammed together and the lock fell into place.

He found her bedroom at the end of the hallway, gently laid her on the ornate brass bed, and then locked the door. Downstairs, the wards he'd placed at the shop entrance gave way. Fields and his family rushed into the shop on the ground floor.

He hoped that the wards and glamour he'd set around the stairs and the wardrobe he'd moved in front of the stairway would hold long enough for his Companion to recognize Melinda. He felt the last of his wards fail and the glamour fade. The snarls of the Dark Ones signaled an impending attack on the second floor. He would have to take a chance. He tossed a few personal items from the top of her dresser into a bag, wrapped Melinda in quilt, gathered her against him, and shifted.

His Obsession

A SIREN-BOOKSTRAND TITLE

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Chapter 1

Coast of France, 1788

“Welcome aboard the *Paladin*, Mademoiselle Alexander.”

Emeliese took the callused hand and stepped onto the deck of the yacht. Her oily-mannered host brought to mind the villain in the romance novel hidden beneath her mattress. Some might call him handsome, but his steely blue eyes were cold, perhaps even cruel. He looked vaguely familiar, but they had never met. Madame Foret did not include sailors dressed in gaudy red brocade in her students’ circle of acceptable associates.

“Captain Nick Reynolds, at your service.” Dark curls barely confined beneath a black felt tricorne fell over his shoulders as he bowed and kissed her hand. The cad’s gaze fixed on her bosom. She tugged her hand out of his grasp, surreptitiously wiped it on her reticule, then pulled the fichu draped at her neckline tighter. She dropped the wayward captain an abbreviated curtsy accompanied by a sniff and her sternest look of disapproval.

The unrepentant rogue dared to laugh. The gentlemen of her acquaintance would have been devastated by her cut, but this one could not care less. The clump of boots on the gangplank announcing

Uncle Jacque’s arrival was a relief. Her uncle, a prominent artist who gloried in the lifestyle of the libertine elites of Paris, was a powerfully built man who could have been a boxer, well able to handle the likes of the captain.

Linking arms with her chaperone, she smirked at the offender.

“Captain Reynolds, allow me to introduce my uncle, Jacque Alexander.”

Neither man bowed. Neither blinked. They took each other’s measure like two swordsmen preparing to engage. Several long, uncomfortable moments passed before the captain broke eye contact with Jacque and turned his attention to her.

“You speak English like a native, darlin’.”

She forced a smile, despite his impertinence. “Thank you, Captain. Madame Foret, my school’s headmistress, insists that all her students speak both English and French. It was not difficult for me. My family speaks both in our home.”

“A valuable skill,” he replied absently as he scanned the dock. “I was told there would be two ladies traveling with you.”

His interest in her friends was mildly unsettling, but manners demanded a polite response. “My schoolmate, Elizabeth Howard, and my teacher, Mademoiselle Boutin, who was to have been our chaperone, are both ill. Beth was disappointed that she could not make the trip, but I promised to write every day. Fortunately, my uncle offered to accompany me.”

“His Lordship will be disappointed.” He looked midship, where the crew was completing preparations to sail. “Pardon me. I have duties to attend before we cast off. My men will see to your comfort.”

He executed an elaborate bow then strode off calling orders punctuated by curses.

His Lordship? Their host for the visit—certainly not a lordship—was to meet them at Portsmouth, then escort them to his family’s estate. Could she be mistaken? She bit her lip then shook her head. No, she would not even consider it.

Closing her eyes, she lifted her face to the warm sun and inhaled deeply. The scents of the ships in port, exotic cargoes, and the sun bleached docks mingled to remind her of her home in the Bahamas.

The brisk, salt-tinged breeze that ruffled her hair would make for a fast trip across the Channel. Soon, she would be in Robbie’s arms.

Sailors carrying their trunks pushed past them, mumbling rough apologies.

Jacque glared after them. “I do not like the look of this, Emmy. We should postpone your trip or find other passage.”

“No and no.” She fisted her hands on her hips and donned her best pout. “Do not be silly, Jacque. You are my favorite uncle, but you can be too cautious on occasion. I was fortunate to receive an invitation to visit my friend’s family.”

He snorted. “Cautious! No one has ever called me cautious.” He dabbed his brow with a monogrammed lace handkerchief, her Christmas gift to him. “Careful, maybe. Especially when I smell something amiss.”

Ignoring his concern, she surveyed the yacht that would transport them to England. Few private families could afford such an extravagance. Constructed of the finest oak, the double-masted brigantine could make an Atlantic crossing.

Her own excitement growing, she tried to cheer her uncle. “Look at this magnificent yacht our host provided for us. It reminds me of our fleet at home.”

Jacque shook his head, his customary smile replaced with a grimace. “You might know ships and shipping, Emmy, but at your age, you do not know men. Look around you. You would not find these ruffians on one of our ships, more likely on a privateer. I wager you did not meet your friend at Madame Foret’s.”

She bristled. How dare he challenge her judgment? “I am eighteen and know enough. Not everyone is as fortunate as I to attend Madame Foret’s Academy for Young Ladies.” She would not allow her usually even-tempered uncle’s fussing to take the pleasure from her journey.

If Jacque discovered the truth about their visit, he would have her off the ship and on the road to Paris in a moment—maybe even on a fast ship home to the Bahamas.

Though miffed with him at the moment, Jacque was the best of uncles. Paris allowed a measure of freedom to young ladies of her class, but travel without a chaperone just was not done. When her friend and their chaperone had taken sick, she had sent a note to his apartment. The dear had insisted on accompanying her. She regretted deceiving him, but it was only a small deception that would be easily resolved when they met Robbie’s family.

She stood on tiptoe and kissed his cheek. “Thank you for escorting me.”

Jacque wagged a finger in her face. “Your maman and papa will hear of this. When I agreed to serve as your guardian while you attended school in Paris, I did not expect to play nursemaid. I kept my promise to leave you undisturbed except for occasional visits at a café. You have taken advantage of the freedom I allowed.”

“How can you betray me, Jacque? Our visit is only for a few days. I—”

With the snap of unfurling sails her only warning, the yacht left the dock with a lurch. She slammed face-first into Jacque’s chest, her panniers tumbling askew. She struggled to right herself, straightened her skirts, then rubbed her aching nose.

Her uncle smoothed his lace-trimmed lilac frock coat and straightened the matching tricorn. “Damn. Wait till I get my hands on the bastard.”

Her uncle scanned the deck. The bastard was missing. The captain had been beyond rude since their arrival. It was time to put him in his place, and Jacque was just the one to do it. But first they must find him.

The sailors piled on full sail sooner than was wise, or even safe, and the docks receded quickly. Still no captain. When they were in open water with no other ships in sight, Captain Reynolds finally appeared, wearing a smug grin. A half-dozen grim-faced sailors ranged themselves around her and Jacque in a loose circle.

The captain stepped closer and offered his hand. “Allow me to escort you to your cabin, mademoiselle.”

An icy shiver ran down her spine. That had been an order, not a request. There was something different—something sinister—about the captain that screamed “run away.” She feared that if she took his hand, her life would change forever.

She shook off her sense of foreboding. The invitation had been most cordial. Certainly their host intended no harm. They could not blame their host for the captain’s gauche behavior. They...

Jacque pulled a pistol from a coat pocket, his face hardened into an angry mask. His body was tensed—ready to pounce.

“That will not be necessary,” he growled. “Return us to the dock or launch a skiff, and we will row ourselves back to port.”

What was happening? Her uncle was not one to upset easily. Maman had hinted that he occasionally associated with persons of bad character. Perhaps he saw something that she did not. But what would Robbie say?

Still unwilling to admit the danger that surrounded them, she challenged her uncle. “Jacque, what are you doing? We are guests. We must not offend our hosts.”

Her uncle did not break eye contact with the captain. “Emmy, get behind me. Quickly.”

Startled, she froze like one of the ice sculptures at the balls she attended. Jacque had yelled at her. She forced herself to take a step toward him. Captain Reynolds grabbed her from behind and jerked her against him. She scratched his arms and thighs, but he ignored her. Her shock at being manhandled turned to anger. She stomped his feet, but her slippers were useless against his heavy boots. Frustrated beyond bearing, she realized just how helpless she was against him.

Jacque moved toward them, pistol at the ready. “Release her. We will leave in peace.”

She tensed at the snick of a blade leaving its scabbard then felt the cold steel of Captain Reynolds’s dagger against her throat. A slip of his blade would be fatal. She tasted real fear for the first time in her life.

“His Lordship has other plans for this one.”

A shot rang out. Jacque dropped his pistol and grabbed his shoulder. The crewmen swarmed over him. One struck him on the back of his head with a belaying pin. He slumped to the deck unconscious.

“No!” She strained to pull away from the captain.

He wound his free hand in her hair then jerked her head backward, scattering pins across the deck. The knife pressed harder against her throat. “I do not want to kill you, but I will,” he grated, all pretense of civility gone. “It will not be quick.”

“Captain, what about this one?” A scruffy crewman nudged Jacque with his toe.

“Wait till we round the point, then toss him over the side.”

“No!” Jacque was dying or dead, and it was all her fault. She had ignored his warning, and he had paid the price of her folly. She struggled to break out of the captain’s grasp. Her head exploded with pain. Then she fell into the darkness.

* * * *

Emmy awoke with a throbbing headache. She forced her eyes to open. She was lying on a dark leather sofa in the yacht’s luxurious stateroom, her hands and feet bound with strips of her fichu. The events of the afternoon flooded her memory, clearing the last of the cobwebs. She tested her bonds. Escape would be impossible. Then she saw him.

A richly attired man sat at a small dining table sipping from a snifter of brandy while he watched her intently. He could be in his sixties, perhaps younger. His puffy face and neck and the reddened and enlarged veins that formed spiderwebs across his cheeks evidenced his dissolute lifestyle.

“You are awake. I feared Nick might have killed you. That would have been most unfortunate.” He walked over to the sofa and pulled a chair up beside her.

She struggled against her bonds again then glared at him. “Where is my uncle?”

He shrugged. “Over the side, hours ago.”

She squeezed her eyes shut. Her heart raced, and her throat constricted. *My God!* The animals had murdered Jacque, who had done nothing except try to protect her. She would carry the guilt of his death for what remained of her life. She wished that she could say she would make them pay, but, considering her situation, that was unlikely. These men were cruel beyond her experience.

Her skin crawled. She opened her eyes to find her captor staring at her, his eyes traveling up and down her body, assessing her like the merchants examined the cargoes of her family’s ships when they came into port.

“You are a beautiful girl, all golden. Small for my taste, perhaps, but perfect. Some men find that very desirable. My son does have good taste in his women.”

“You are Robbie’s father?” A silly question. He had just said that, but she was still a bit groggy. She must put her fear aside and gather her wits, then discover his intentions. His men had thought nothing of murdering Jacque. Was he toying with her before she met the same fate or worse?

“I admit my guilt.” He saluted her with his snifter. “Jonathan Montclair, the seventeenth Earl of Ashford, at your service.”

“Robbie is from a noble family?” Robbie had introduced himself as Robert Montclair. He had never mentioned that his family was noble. The English nobility were very particular about who their offspring could and could not marry. She would almost certainly fall into the “could nots,” and Robbie knew why.

The earl cocked a brow. “Baron Montclair. The heir. He did not tell you? I thought you were a fortune hunter looking for a wealthy protector.”

“No, I am a student at Madame Foret’s Academy for Young Ladies. I am not looking for anyone. I will return home to my family next year.” At least, that had been her intention until she had met Robbie. Her future was neither bright nor secure now. The man was evil or insane or both. And he controlled her fate.

The earl threw back his head and laughed, then gulped his brandy.

“No, my dear, you will not. Your existence is inconvenient, a liability to me. Did you really believe that my son loved you?”

His laughter was like a slap in the face. Robbie had courted her, proclaimed his love, and won hers in turn. He had sworn that he loved her. She had been sure that he meant it—then. He could not have lied. But his father planned to murder her because she was an inconvenient liability?

“He does love me.”

He dismissed her with a negligent wave. “My son wants nothing further to do with a mulatto wench that he took as a mistress. No matter how beautiful you are, he has tired of you. He left Paris because he did not wish to dispose of you himself.”

Her heart sank. Maybe he had betrayed her after all. The earl knew about her heritage, or at least a distorted version of it. Robbie was the only one who could have told him. But had he told him everything? He had never spoken well of his father. She must tread carefully.

“You are mistaken. I would never become any man’s mistress. A girl of my class should expect nothing less than marriage. I accepted the invitation to visit your estate only because Robbie had told me he planned to introduce me to his family soon.”

She caught a flicker of interest in his eyes.

“No, my dear, I am not mistaken. But you would have me believe that you are a virgin?”

How dare he imply that she was a strumpet! “I do not care what you believe.”

He grabbed the lacy fabric that bound her and twisted. The tie cut deep into her wrists, but she could not escape him or the pain he inflicted.

He leaned close. She pulled away, nauseated by the stink of the brandy on his breath.

“A warning, girl. You will answer me with respect, or I will have Nick take a whip to that pretty golden skin of yours. Understand?”

She nodded, terrified as she had never been before. No one had ever threatened her like this. If his intent was to murder her, would he not have done it by now?

“Answer my question.”

If she responded with her customary irreverence, the consequences would be dire. She sucked in a deep breath. “I vowed to my parents before leaving home for Paris that I would remain chaste until I married. I would never break a promise to them. Robbie was content to wait. He promised to return to Paris when his mother recovered and escort me to his home to meet his family.” There, she had told him the truth. At least, for the most part.

“It was never his intention to return to Paris or you. He is preparing for his wedding to his betrothed.”

“No!” Could everything Robbie said been lies meant to seduce her? Was she really only his mistress, his whore? No, it could not be true. “I do not believe you.”

She twisted away, but his slap landed hard. Her head reeled, and her vision clouded. She rubbed her cheek as best she could with her hands tied. Tears welled in her eyes. No one had

ever struck her before, but the earl's smile was cruel, his eyes glittering. He had enjoyed hurting her.

"It does not matter what you believe. Robert marries Charlotte Graham within the month. You are not invited to the nuptials. You will be engaged elsewhere."

"What do you mean?" God only knew what this madman intended for her.

The earl leaned back in his chair and steepled his fingers. "The earldom has numerous sources of income. We occasionally have business with smugglers in a small village on the French coast. They trade with buyers of special merchandise in North Africa. You, my dear, will be the cargo this trip. I am disappointed that the other young ladies were unable to accompany you. It will cost me, but a beautiful virgin will bring a high price."

My God! He planned to sell her. Her family despised slavery and would not tolerate it on their island. The stories the freed slaves on her family's plantation told were the stuff of nightmares. Robbie could not possibly have intended this fate for her. She struggled to tamp down the terror that was building inside and swallowed to hold back the screams.

"My family is wealthy. They will pay ransom." *Then they will kill all of you.*

The earl shrugged. "Since your uncle died while our guest, your family would not be satisfied paying ransom. I wish to be rid of you, nevertheless. The arrangements have been made. We should arrive at our destination soon. Our time together is short."

He turned toward the cabin door. "Nick."

The captain opened the door and sauntered over to where she lay.

"This will not take long, darlin'." He twisted her bound wrists above her head, grasped her upper arms and shoved her against the seat of the sofa. She lay helpless against his greater strength. The earl set a lamp down beside her, lifted the chimney, removed his ring, and held it to the flame. "I like to ship my merchandise with my personal brand. A parting gift, if you will. You, my dear, need a reminder to never reach as high as my son."

Horror dawned as he loomed over her, a twisted smile on his face. There would be no reprieve, no mercy. She struggled to pull away, but the earl pushed aside the bodice of her dress. His red-hot ring burned deep into her breast. She screamed her agony until she fainted.

* * * *

Ashford Hall, Kent, England

"Robert, dear, we must leave."

Robert Montclair shook Mama's hand off his arm and returned to watching the estate workers shovel dirt into the grave in the chilling drizzle. Each clump landing on the coffin's lid struck a blow to his heart. As the hole slowly filled, he realized that Emmy was truly lost to him. Two weeks ago in Paris, they had lain in each other's arms planning a future together. This morning, she was lying in her grave with the odor of the damp soil of Kent mingling with the pervasive stink of her decaying flesh. Dead at eighteen. How could he live without her? Maybe he should take the pistol from his pocket and put an end to his pain. They would not need to dig another grave. Let him lie there close beside her.

"Go home, all of you. Do not think you'll be dining on my penny." His father, sober for once and unaccompanied by his mistress, was sending the mourners away with his usual insults. After the last villager had departed, Father turned his attention on him. "You have disappointed me again." His face—old beyond his fifty years—reddened, and he seemed barely able to speak. "You are fortunate that I allowed the chit to be buried in the estate's cemetery. You almost

ruined my plans for you.” He fumbled in his pocket, retrieved and uncapped a flask, then drank deeply. “What else should I have expected? You are your mother’s son.”

He clenched his fists. His father’s cruelty had brought him home from Paris. Emmy must have followed him across the Channel uninvited, but the boat she had hired had gone down. Her corpse, bloated beyond recognition, had washed ashore amid the wreckage two days ago. Water-soaked papers among her personal possessions had brought the authorities to their estate yesterday. He touched the pocket where her ring rested. He had fallen in love with her the day they had met. She had loved him without the plum of snagging a noble husband. They were supposed to have spent their lives together.

At nineteen, he was alone—would remain alone for the rest of his life.

His mother’s sob brought him back to the present. His father was glaring at his mother then took a step in her direction. He knew what would come next. But no, he was a man now—he would protect her. He grabbed the sleeve of his father’s coat and jerked him around.

“You will never touch her again.”

His father laughed in his face, a sick, derisive laugh that held no humor. “And who will stop me?”

He pointed his pistol in his father’s face. “I will—and I’ll not allow you to hurt anyone else.” He shoved his father away and pocketed his pistol.

His father grabbed his chest and gasped for breath. “I’ll have what I want from you, then to hell with you both.” He spat on the ground at his feet and stomped away, then climbed into the coach and rapped on the roof. The coachman turned the horses toward Ashford Hall and whipped up the team.

He put an arm around his mother to still her shaking, then returned his attention to the men who had finished their task and were tamping the dirt on Emmy’s grave. “Do you know his intentions, Mama?”

“I am never privy to his plans.” She buried her face in his coat. “At least your Emmy is at rest with us, dear.”

As he would never be until he joined her. He awkwardly patted his mother’s back. “Thank God for that.”

His Desire

A SIREN-BOOKSTRAND TITLE

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Chapter 1

London March, 1815

“It is time to fill my nursery.”

William, Baron Montclair, winced when his father’s pool cue missed the ball entirely and skidded along the rich-green felt of the mahogany pool table.

Father cleared his throat, glanced over his shoulder toward the bar, then turned his attention on him. “Did I hear you correctly, Will?”

“You did, sir.” He had always felt uneasy when his father’s piercing blue eyes pinned him like an insect in a display case.

“Do you have a mother in mind for these children?”

“Not at this time.” He had hoped the conversation would be less difficult. He had always had a close relationship with his father, ever since he and his mother had moved to England from his childhood home in the Bahamas. “I plan to begin my search this season and to have the deed done within a month or so.”

“Let me understand this.” His father stood to his full height and faced him, eye to eye. “You plan to marry an as-yet-to-be-identified young woman because you want children?”

“Yes, sir. It is past time.” He would not dwell on the horrors he had seen as an officer during the late war with Napoleon. He had come to appreciate life when his own had been at risk daily. His command of the French language and knowledge of the culture had made him a natural choice for missions when General Wellesley, now the duke of Wellington, required a presence behind the French lines.

“I, too, had concerns about the succession when you were on the Peninsula. God forbid that your drunken cousin inherit. He would have bankrupted the earldom in a few years.”

His father draped an arm around his shoulders, a rare display of affection since he had grown into adulthood. “Knowing for three years that our only child and heir was in constant danger was a great burden on your mother and me. But we were proud of you, son.”

“A man could do no less, sir, after Ciudad Rodrigo.” It had not been an easy decision when he was but twenty-two to leave all he held dear for a war on foreign soil, but Napoleon had been

a threat to his country and his family. Now it was time to fulfill the rest of his responsibilities, however distasteful.

His father laid his pool cue on the table, settled in one of a pair of comfortable leather chairs in front of the fireplace, and indicated that he take the other one. He removed cigars from the humidor, clipped the ends, and handed one to him. They lit up and smoked in silence for a few moments.

His father finally broke the silence. "What are you not telling me, son?"

How honest could he be? His mother had been only seventeen, a student at an elite Parisian finishing school, when his nineteen-year-old father had swept her off her feet and married her. They had been cruelly separated by his grandfather, the old earl, before he was born. When they had reunited, he was already seven years old. His father was as much a friend as a parent. But to this day, his parents remained so deeply in love that his father would probably not understand his dilemma.

"I am very aware of my responsibilities to the title, sir. Many would suffer needlessly if I fail to produce an heir. I am determined to do my duty."

His father shook his head. "I cannot believe that you plan to enter into a ton marriage, Will. When I thought your mother had died, I mourned her loss those seven years. I did not even consider remarrying. We are too much alike for you to enter into a loveless marriage. It is not in our nature."

That was true. Except for the golden eyes he had inherited from his mother, he and his father were uncannily similar in looks, build, and temperament. When he looked at his father, still youthful and agile well-past forty, he could see himself in twenty years or so. And, yes, he understood profound passion and love but they would have no place in his destiny as heir to the earl of Ashford.

He rose and walked, cigar in hand, to the liquor cabinet, then poured two snifters of his father's favorite French brandy. It was legal now, one of the benefits of the peace that his sacrifice and that of his comrades had helped secure. He handed one to his father who waited until he was settled before continuing.

"You cannot be serious about your intentions unless there is something you are hiding, something so horrific you will not tell me."

His father, who usually sipped his brandy, savoring its rich flavor, drank deeply and exhaled.

"Are you a lover of men?"

The brandy burned as it spewed out his nose and sprayed his spotless cravat. He gasped for air, then choked, laboring to catch his breath.

It was several moments before he could speak. "No, Father, I can assure you that I am not. You yourself have chastised me for my exploits as a young man." Some of the Ashford Hall staff and the village women had been very open to his attentions, indeed, had even seduced him. But his father had held him responsible and punished him accordingly.

"No offense intended, but your mother and I had noticed your lack of attention to the young ladies since your return. Before you left for the Peninsula, you were a favorite of the ton. The matrons practically threw their daughters at you. Since your return, you are seldom at home and never at the ton parties."

Thank God his father was not the meddling sort. He could not say the same for his mother who gloried in gossip and intrigue with her friends from her school days in Paris. For that very reason, he had decided to approach his father in the one place in the house his mother refused to

enter. By tradition and mutual consent, his father smoked only in the pool room where he and his influential friends and acquaintances were free to gather, smoke, and determine the fate of the world.

“I am aware of that, sir. Rest assured that you will see me out at every opportunity. I do not plan to take an inordinate amount of time to make my selection. This is a case of if it is to be done then let it be done quickly.”

His father laughed, one of those deep laughs where he had have been holding his belly if he had had one. “I believe that when Shakespeare wrote that he had in mind an assassination, not a wedding.”

“And I am no Macbeth, sir, only a determined groom in search of a bride.” Maybe this might be easy after all.

“What, may I ask, are you looking for in a prospective bride? Your mother would be the best judge. She and her circle of friends will know every likely candidate, her family, and her family’s history.”

He shook his head. If Mama knew of his quest, his business would definitely not proceed so easily. She would not be nearly as tolerant of his intentions as his father. She would likely stick her nose into his business and, given her skill and determination, would discover things he would rather keep hidden.

“I would prefer that my quest remain private between us. When I have narrowed my choices to a few young ladies, I will certainly discuss the final selection with her.” She still would not be satisfied with his candidates. He knew they would not be what she wanted for him, but they would be what he needed.

His father set his snifter on the table with a thump. “I asked, Will, what you are seeking in a bride. I assume you have given some thought to it.”

“Certainly, Father.” He had devoted hours to considering the kind of girl that would best suit his needs. He was quite proud of his results. He pulled the crisp paper from his pocket and presented it to his father.

He sipped his brandy while his father examined the list. It was short and to the point, simple really. What was taking him so long?

His father, usually very amiable, muttered a curse, wadded up his list, and threw it into the fireplace.

He leaped out of his chair, grabbed the poker, and frantically began pulling the crumpled paper from the flames. Gingerly smoothing the list flat, he was relieved to discover that his list, though scorched around the edges, remained legible. But now he had to calm his father who, for some unfathomable reason, appeared very upset.

“I perceive, sir, that you do not find the contents of my list agreeable.”

“Agreeable!” His father puffed hard on his cigar. “Have you lost your wits?”

“No, sir, I have not. I believe my criteria to be rather well thought out.”

His father stood abruptly and started pacing, all the while sucking on his cigar, harder and harder. “Then you have no idea what makes a good marriage. Have you learned nothing from seeing your mother and me and her friends and their husbands together? Your list is a sure route to one of those unhappy ton marriages. Just look at it!”

His father made to grab his precious list but he jerked it away in the nick of time.

“I do not have to see that list to recall what is on it, Will.”

His father raised a finger. “Comely. Not beautiful, but comely. What is wrong with beautiful? Your mother was magnificent, still is. Why should you settle for less?”

“Frankly, sir, even now you must guard against eager swains who seek her favors. How many duels have you fought or threatened over her?” His mother was a beauty. A golden-haired, pocket Venus who attracted men like flies to honey. It did not matter that she was madly in love with his father and offered them no encouragement. They still pursued her—even his own friends.

“How many friends have I lost because I have had to step in when they made advances toward her?” He realized that, at some point in their discussion, he had risen from his chair and his voice was as loud as his father’s. He forced himself to lower his voice.

“I do not want a wife who, however virtuous, I must guard constantly. I watched you do it, sir, for years. That is not for me.” He needed to bring their conversation to his concerns. “What about the rest, Father?”

“It only gets worse. You want a wife that is young and biddable?” His father snorted. “What is the appeal of that? You are over twenty-five and do not need a child bride, especially one that is biddable. A green girl just out of the schoolroom would bore you to death inside of a year. And if you want biddable, buy a dog.”

His father paced faster. “By the way, do not think young will get you biddable. My Emmy was only seventeen when we married and she was far from biddable. Her spirit was what attracted me to her. And, frankly, son, spirit begets passion. Do you want to bed a cold fish? This is the rest of your life we are discussing.”

“I will take that under consideration, sir.”

“You had better, young man. As for the rest of your list—capable of running your home, meeting your social obligations, and bearing your children. You want a housekeeper, a secretary, and a brood mare. Do not do this to yourself, Will, or to some unsuspecting young chit who craves a title.”

Will knew he would do what was needed to meet his obligations to his family and the title. Perhaps confiding in his father had been a mistake. The conversation had left him in turmoil, ready to be away. He sat his glass on the table, stood up, and walked to the door.

“Thank you for your advice, Father. As I said, I will take it under consideration.” He bowed and left the room, closing the door with a bang.

* * * *

Shaking his head at his son’s foolishness, Rob walked past the liquor cabinet and opened the door that led upstairs to his suite. He barely caught the girl that fell into his arms. The glass she held tumbled to the floor and shattered. She squirmed in his arms. It took only a few moments to bring her under his control. His slow perusal took in every curve and the feather duster clutched tightly in her hand. The maid’s dress outlined the curves of her rather lithe figure where it had pulled tight from their struggle. Despite the golden hair and eyes, the golden tint to her ivory skin hinted of her island origins. Gorgeous.

“Well, I will be damned.” He slid a hand down the length of her body, savoring the feel of her. She froze.

“Monsieur, please no. Madame, she will kill me, then toss me on ze street.” She struggled against him but soon went limp in his arms, exhausted. She was at his mercy.

“I take my pleasures where I find them. Madame has no say in this.” He rained kisses on her neck and shoulders.

“Ow!” The blow to the back of his head took him by surprise.

“Shame on you, Robbie! You know Madame has a say in everything.”

She swatted him again.

“Stop it, Emmy. That hurts.” He released one hand and rubbed the sore spot.

“Then say it.” She rapped him harder with her duster. “Say it.”

“Very well, love. Madame has a say in everything.”

She squirmed out of his arms and straightened her clothing.

He reached for her but she threatened him with the feather duster.

“Emmy, let us play our game some more. Please.” He knew better than to try to touch her without permission when she was in costume. God only knew how she might change the rules.

“You want to play one of our sex games when our son is about to make the mistake of his life?”

“So you heard.”

She glanced at the glass shards scattered on the rug. “Everything. What are we going to do?”

“I promised not to tell you about it.”

“I already know, so it does not count.”

He considered that for a moment, then nodded. “I suppose it does not.”

She wrinkled her nose. He thought it a very cute nose, especially when she wrinkled it.

“It stinks in here. I do not understand why you like those nasty cigars. You even introduced our son to your vile habit.

“I think we should go elsewhere—perhaps our bedroom.” She sniffed his clothing. “You seem to be in need of a bath.” She trailed her fingertips up his leg and lightly brushed the back of her hand against the bulge outlined by his snug breeches.

“I dismissed your valet for the evening, so we must fend for ourselves.”

He tensed when she rubbed against him as she squeezed through the door that opened to the stairs leading to their suite. He watched, fascinated, as the fabric pulled against her bottom with each step.

Emmy turned, catching him. She sent one of her come-hither smiles his way. “Hurry, Robbie. We can discuss what to do about Will in our suite.”

“I think not.” He bounded up the first few steps, caught Emmy around her waist, and threw her over his shoulder. Ignoring her kicks and the swats from her duster, he tossed her on the large bed in their suite, removed his jacket, and lay down beside her.

Her small hand cupped his cheek. “Oh, Robbie, I love you so much.”

Her touch and words, as always, warmed his heart. He kissed her palm. “As I love you, Emmy.”

“We cannot allow our Will to settle for anything less than what we share.”

He wished he could make things right for her and his son. “He seems determined to settle for far less. I do not understand his reasoning.”

“We have seen little of him these last few months since his return from France. He does not live here or go about in our circle. Perhaps we know less about him than we think.”

She gave that little nod that told him she had made her decision. It would be pointless to argue—not that he wanted to.

“I will speak with Tariq tomorrow. He always keeps a close watch on Will, even though he is grown.”

Emmy sat up and twirled her feather duster. His mouth went dry. “In the meantime, my lord, I did say you are in need of a bath.”

* * * *

Emmy rushed into the breakfast room and poured herself a cup of tea. She hugged the other occupant of the breakfast table and took the seat beside him. Denton, the underbutler, served her a croissant with strawberry jam that constituted her usual breakfast, then discreetly withdrew.

“Good morning, Tariq. Have you eaten breakfast?”

He gave a curt nod which was about all the answer she could hope for. The Amazigh warrior had been her guardian and companion since her father-in-law had kidnapped her and sold her into slavery.

“Why did you summon me, Wiza?” She really did not like to use her Amazigh name. The fact that her mother’s family descended, several generations removed, from an Amazigh noblewoman was not something they generally acknowledged.

Tariq was even a very distant cousin. The golden-skinned warrior of the North African desert wore the flowing, blue-and-white robes of his Tuareg tribe, disdaining the staid British clothing. In the wide leather belt at his waist, he carried a matched sword and knife of Toledo steel sheathed in intricately embroidered scabbards. He likely had a pistol or two and a few more knives secreted about his person.

“I need your help.” She did not expect much of a response from her taciturn guardian. He was a man a few words. What she could count on was action. He had defended her and Will on numerous occasions over their twenty-five years together. He always knew where she and her son were and what they were doing.

“Robbie and I are worried about Will.”

“And what is that to me?”

She spread the strawberry jam on her croissant, took a generous bite, and chewed slowly, savoring the light and buttery texture of the croissant mixed with the sweet jam. “I must know where he goes and with whom he spends his time. We fear he is about to make a disastrous mistake.”

“Where a man goes and what he does are his own business, woman.”

She held her tongue, exerting her hard-learned self-control to overcome her aggravation. It was difficult to converse with a man who was certain that all women were inferior by birth.

“I agree. We would never consider interfering, if Will had not shared his bizarre plans with Robbie last night.” She grasped Tariq’s arm. “He plans to find and marry a girl just out of the classroom who will provide him with the heirs he requires and little else. You know that is not Will—at least not our Will who went to war three years ago.”

“Wiza, it is none of your business.”

She released his arm, sat back in her chair, and sniffed. “Very well, if you will not help me, I will discover what I need to know myself.”

“Rob should not allow it. Virtuous women do not wander the streets freely.”

She bristled. After all the years he had spent in Britain, Tariq still maintained his rigid opinions of a woman’s place. “Robbie approves of my plans.”

“I spoke with him while he dined this morning, Wiza. He was befuddled by last night’s sex play. I have never met a man as capable and intelligent as he who can be so obsessed with his woman.” He rubbed a hand over his face and grimaced. “It is not seemly.”

This from the man who had befriended and guarded the harem of the infamous pirate, Muhammed ibn Ismail?

His cup rattled against the saucer when he slammed it down. “Your husband should beat you more often.”

She glared at him. “My husband never beats me.”

“Then maybe he should start. I will discuss this with him when next we meet.”

She tore into her croissant and chewed hard. Tariq and her husband had established an uneasy truce when first they met. Over the years, it had developed into a friendship and partnership based on their love for herself and Will. Occasionally, it worked to her disadvantage.

“This is not the harem, Tariq. I am no man’s slave and you are no longer a harem master. Robbie and I decided that I was better suited to discover the lay of the land. I do not need your help. I will proceed alone.”

She sipped her tea. “Of course, it will take me longer and heaven knows what trouble will befall me in my quest.”

Tariq muttered a curse in Tamazight, his native language—one she knew well. He usually did that just before he gave in to her.

“Her name is Georgiana Janson.”

A woman! Well that, at least, was no surprise. Women she could manage, but she had to get a closer look at this Georgiana. “What have you learned about her?”

“She is English, a soldier’s widow. She returned from France with Will. There is a child, but it is not his—the girl is too old.”

“Where does she live?”

“Thirty-five Clarges Street.”

“That is almost around the corner from us.” When they were in town, they lived at Ashford House on Berkeley Square. The massive Palladian mansion which occupied two lots fronting on the square was centrally located and convenient to everything, especially Gunter’s. And less than two blocks from Clarges Street.

Tariq nodded. “Will keeps lodgings on Curzon Street but he is seldom there. The rear entrance of his rooms backs up against the woman’s home on Clarges. A trip through the mews takes only a minute.”

“That clever boy! He is free to come and go as he pleases.” She took another bite of her croissant. “I must meet this woman who has such a hold on my son.”

She rapped the table. “Tariq, Will’s happiness is at stake. You simply must discover a way for me to meet her else I must be a beggar at her door.”

Tariq shook his head. “It is none of your business.”

“But we know nothing of this woman or her family. What if an angry father or brother appears and murders my poor Will?” She shook a finger in his face. “If anything happens to Will, it will be on your head.”

“You push me too hard, woman.”

“Please, Tariq.” She laid her head against his shoulder.

“Enough, you know I cannot tolerate your begging.”

She threw her arms around him and breathed a sigh of relief.

“Last week, I followed her to an office. She entered, then returned outside very quickly. She appeared distressed, perhaps crying.”

He took a sip of the strong coffee he preferred. “It was an employment office for ladies. For a hefty bribe, one of the women there told me that the clerk had insulted her about her living accommodations, then refused to accept a hiring notice from her. It was for a governess.”

“You have saved us once again, Tariq.”

She jumped out of her chair and ran toward the door.

“Wiza, where do you go?”

“Shopping, of course. I have nothing to wear to apply for a position as a governess.”

“Dress, and I will await you here.”

“You abhor shopping. I plan to purchase a suitable wardrobe and visit her this afternoon. It is but a short walk through a safe neighborhood.”

“Wiza, I will accompany you shopping, walk you to within a short distance of her house, then escort you home when your business with her is finished.”

If she did not agree, he would follow her regardless and skulk about street corners, peeping around trees and building. He could be arrested for loitering.

She sniffed. “Very well, if you must.”

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