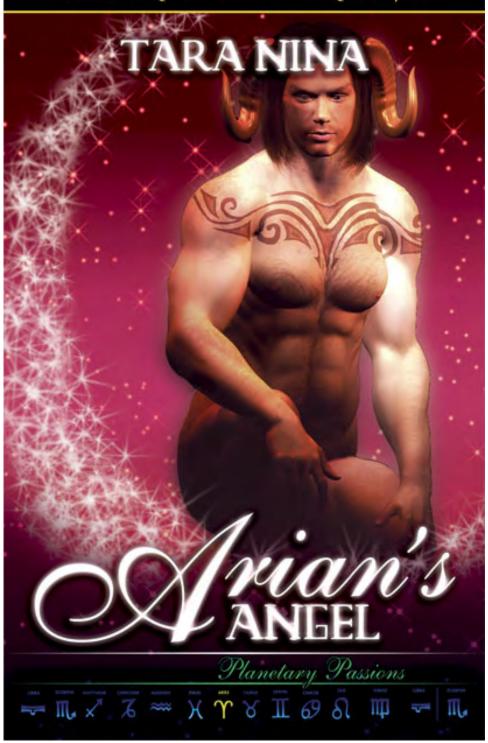
Ellora's Cave Presents



An Ellora's Cave Romantica Publication



Arian's Angel

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ARIAN'S ANGEL

Tara Nina

Dedication

I want to say thank you to my family for understanding my need to write. Without their encouragement and support, my characters would only live in my head and not on paper to share with other readers.

I want to extend a huge thank you to my critique partners for their help and guidance.

Most of all, I want to say thank you to Briana. Without your patience and wisdom, my work would not shine.

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Chapter One

"You killed her!"

Sister Mary Margaret's lifeless body lay on the ground in the eerie glow of the burning shed behind the shouting priest. What had he said? Sister Mary Margaret was dead? Her legs wobbled as she forced herself to stand. Blood trickled into her eyes, but from where? Was she hurt? She had no time to think. Distant sirens cut through the night. Would they believe her, a woman who for the life of her couldn't remember what happened, or the word of a priest?

Thick smoke filled the air from the burning shed and threatened to suffocate her tiring lungs as she ran. She needed to escape. Father Thomas had to be wrong. She could not have murdered anyone, especially Sister Mary Margaret. Angel loved Sister Mary Margaret. But for the life of her, she couldn't explain how her closest friend died. One minute she was bringing the older woman a cup of tea. The next she was picking herself up off the ground with a heavy head and the nun was dead. Severe pain slashed through her brain. Sweat beaded her lip and brow, her chest heaved and her body trembled. And still she managed to flee. Dark shadows chased her at every turn. She had to get away. Her heartbeat quickened. Her breath halted the moment a hand grasped her hair and snatched her back.

Violent thunder rumbled, shaking the air in its wake. A brilliant flash of lightning lit the night sky and the tight confines of the one-man tent glowed bright for a split second. Angel gasped and sat straight up. Darkness surrounded her, cloaking the danger from sight. Her clothing felt sticky against her skin as she clutched the tangled sleeping bag to her chest. She felt a sharp tug at her scalp. Her heart stuttered and she swallowed hard then forced her neck to turn so she could glance over her shoulder. Air whooshed from her lungs—it was just the zipper and not a man's hand wrenched in her hair.

"You're okay," she whispered, as if hearing the words spoken instead of in her thoughts would calm her frazzled nerves. "He's not here. It was just a dream."

She worked her long raven-colored hair from the zipper, untangled the sleeping bag and lay back down. Her stomach's angry rumble reminded her she'd eaten the last of her rations two days ago. Rolling to her stomach, Angel switched on her flashlight. She pulled a worn map from the side pocket of her backpack and plotted her next destination. If her calculations were right, the small Southern town of Chance should be a short hike down the highway.

Switching off the light, she rolled onto her back and stared up at the tent's wet peak. Father Thomas' sudden appearance two weeks earlier in the last town she'd visited spoiled her plans and forced her to leave without fresh supplies or the money she'd earned from the temporary job she'd acquired. She sighed, placing her arm across

her forehead. Hopefully, he didn't have a clue which direction she'd run this time. Why didn't he quit? Why was he after her? It wasn't his place to track a criminal, so why was he relentless in his search for her?

The dreary drizzle of the rain rhythmically pattered in tune with the rapid thump of her heart. She breathed in deep, trying to will her heart to slow before it exploded.

Angel pressed her palm against her temple and closed her eyes so tight she saw stars. But the answers refused to magically appear. If only she could remember. Sister Mary Margaret raised her from infancy. The knot in her gut tightened and threatened to make her dry heave. She knew she couldn't have killed the closest person to a mother she'd ever known. But who did? And why?

Behind Angel's tightly closed lids, the memory of Sister Mary Margaret's face reappeared. The reflection of a fuzzy image lingered in her unseeing eyes. Was it a glimpse of what had happened the night their peaceful existence ended? Though she tried to focus on the faint vision in her head, the events of that night remained hidden in a veil of fog. Blood had been on her hands that night but whose—hers or Sister Mary Margaret's? She'd been injured that night too but she didn't know how. Absently she rubbed the slender scar above her right eye. Had she fought with Sister Mary Margaret? Angel gritted her teeth and swallowed back the unshed tears, refusing to let them fall. Her path had been chosen, her course set. Until the memory of what happened that night returned, she was determined not to get caught.

She rolled onto her side, flicked on the light once again and glanced at the tattered map. "Chance" sprang out like a beacon. Maybe it was just that, a chance that she desperately needed. Angel snorted at her own grasp at a slender straw of hope. It'd been six months since Sister Mary Margaret's death and still he followed. What difference would a town named Chance make? But the rumble in her stomach decided for her that she had no choice but to take a gamble on Chance.

* * * * *

Click. Arian flinched and hoped the sound the key made in the lock didn't wake anyone. He held the screen door open with his backside while he pushed the solid oak front door open. He pulled the screen door closed as he quietly stepped inside and made sure the handle latched so it wouldn't bang if the wind picked up. When he shut the front door of his childhood home, he leaned against its cool wood grain. He took a deep breath and reveled in the comforting essence of warmth and family, which coated his battered senses and welcomed him home like a long-lost friend. It'd been too long since he'd been here. Rhiannon was right, he needed this. He was glad he left the house he shared with his brother in Beverly Hills and had chosen to drive cross-country instead of fly. It had given him time to think.

He took off his shoes and set them on the floor beside the door. He tiptoed up the stairs careful to avoid steps three and five which squeaked at the slightest amount of weight. A weary smile tugged at his lips. How many times had those stairs given him and his brother away before they'd committed to memory the ones to avoid?

Arian rolled his shoulders back and stretched his neck from side to side. The drive from California to the northwestern corner of South Carolina had taken several days. When he'd started this trip, he hadn't realized just how much he craved the wholesome family life his parents had given him and his brother. With each state he drove through, a low thrum had pulsated in his veins urging him to stop only when necessary for sleep, food or a bathroom break. The hectic movie-star life had taken its toll on his Southern boy nature.

And his love life...he snorted. His last relationship had ended in disaster. What a liar and a cheat she'd turned out to be. Just thinking of her left a bitter flavor on his taste buds. True, he had his pick of many women throughout his illustrious career. But from the moment he met her, she led him to believe that she was his perfect soul mate and he'd remained faithful right up until the end. She'd laid out what could have been considered an award-winning performance.

Driving home had been the right choice. It'd given him time to think and realize the truth behind the public devastation of his last relationship two months earlier. During their entire time together, something wasn't right. A nagging sensation tugged at his senses but he'd ignored it. How he wished he'd listened.

He hadn't truly loved her—he understood that now and accepted the fact that they'd both used the other in some form of the Hollywood game. This realization struck like lightning as he crossed the state line.

Yet still, an ember seared his gut. The possibility he'd ever forgive her completely lurched out of reach. Nope, he shook his head. Some actions never deserved forgiveness.

He swallowed, scraping his teeth along his tongue, trying to remove the imaginary foul flavor from his mouth. At the beginning of this trip, he felt like a dog that lost a fight to a cat and was running home with his tail between his legs. But now that he'd had some time to think, he agreed with Rhiannon. He sighed. Rest was what he needed. He hoped spending time at home with his folks would rejuvenate his soul. And his movie career—well, maybe it was time to rethink that direction in life.

Rhiannon wouldn't like it but his true dream was to raise horses on the beautiful piece of prime Southern real estate he'd bought last summer. A thin smile tugged his tired lips as he left the top step and crossed the hall to his room.

Every fiber of his body ached and begged for the sanctuary of his cozy bed. He reached for the knob, furrowing his brows. *Odd*. His bedroom door was closed. But that didn't matter, he shrugged. He knew what lay on the other side. He opened the door, stepped inside and closed it behind him. Moonlight filtered in through the partially opened curtains so he didn't bother with the light. He knew every aspect of the room by heart.

He dropped his jeans to the floor beside the bed, slipped off his socks then tossed his shirt onto the chair across the room. Lifting the covers, an unfamiliar scent laced with a hint of lavender and the essence of fresh air grazed his exhausted senses. A new fabric softener, he mused, sliding into his bed. Radiating heat flushed his back and he shifted inching closer to that side of the bed. A pleasant scent soothed his soul and the added warmth under the covers beckoned him to rest. Something didn't feel right but he was just too tired to care. Arian rolled over, snuggling deeper into the heat source then every muscle jerked taut against it.

His chest pressed unintentionally against *its* back and he went rigid. Someone was in his bed. His face landed in a cushion of feather-soft hair spread out on the pillow, tickling his nose. His arm fit nicely over the curve of *its* waist with his hand splayed on *its* taut lower abdomen warming his palm. *It* jumped, arching *its* back and brushing a tight derrière against the front of his boxer shorts, sending an instant spark to his groin igniting the immediate interest of the suddenly semi-hard cock in his shorts. Pure feminine essence washed over him, making him smile. Her scent filled with a faint hint of arousal made him lick his lips. Acting on pure male instinct, he tucked his growing hard-on tight against the small of her back. But just as quickly as he had touched her, he eased away, placing a slender gap between them the moment he felt her tremble. Who was she? He wasn't given the chance to ask.

The splendid unexpected welcome-home present cut short his wanting perusal with a sharp elbow jab to his midsection. He sucked air in deep between clenched teeth. Whoever the vixen in his bed was, she had the jab of a prize fighter.

It—or she as he'd quickly determined—leapt from the bed leaving an instant coldness in its wake and a twinge of disappointment in his shorts. Reflexes honed by the martial arts training he'd needed to perfect his action hero status automatically kicked in. Arian bolted upright and quickly blocked her escape. Standing beside the door, he flipped on the light switch.

"Who the hell are you?" tumbled from his lips. After his eyes adjusted to the light, he regretted his harsh words.

He was stunned to see that she wore his old football jersey but knew it had never looked this good on him. It swallowed the raven-haired woman, ending below her knees. Slender feet and ankles connected to firm calves made his palms itch to start at her toes and work his way up, massaging every aspect of her feet and legs until he reached the treasure between her thighs. His tongue darted across dry lips at the sight of hardened nipples jutting against the material just above the numbers of his jersey and he ached to taste the teasing mounds. But it was her eyes that stopped his heart. The palest blue eyes he'd ever seen pierced the very core of his existence. She was the most beautiful woman he'd ever seen, though she stood with sleep-tousled hair, her body lost in his oversized jersey and those eyes directed at him. He shivered.

Never had he wanted a woman more than he did right now. The bedroom door behind him creaked open.

"Ahem." Arian knew without looking it was his dad. He heard his subtle chuckle as his father spoke. "I see you've met Angel, Son."

One glance around the room and he understood the humor in his dad's voice. Bedcovers were strewn on the floor, the woman he now knew as Angel stood trembling in his jersey and he—

Arian attempted to cover the front of his boxers with both hands, but knew the damage was done. He stood with a raging hard-on in the presence of a woman named Angel and his dad. No wonder the old man found this funny.

"Angel, this is Arian." His dad's hand landed on his shoulder. "Son, don't you think you should put some pants on?"

Arian shot a "that's not funny" look over his shoulder at his dad which only made him chuckle harder.

"Ed, is everything all right?" his mother called from downstairs.

"Yeah, Arian's home," his dad answered. "We'll be right down." He turned back to Arian. "It's good to have you home, Son. See you downstairs, we need to talk."

His dad's hushed laughter as he left and went back downstairs didn't fall on deaf ears. Arian couldn't help but smile. He was a grown man and yet he felt like a teenager who'd just been caught in *the act* with a girl in his bedroom. But she wasn't just any girl. He focused on the feature that tugged at him most—her eyes. They looked haunted and yet he couldn't stop staring.

"Excuse me, Angel, is it?" he forced the words to exit the driest mouth he'd ever felt. Not even after an all-night tequila fest could he remember his mouth ever being this dry. "Could you throw me a pair of my sweatpants out of the bottom drawer? I left my suitcase in the car and I don't think the jeans I had on earlier would be that comfortable right now." He shifted his stance as he deliberately kept his hands in front of his boxer shorts.

Blushing, Angel turned away from the biggest pair of chestnut-colored eyes she'd ever seen. She recognized them from the family portrait downstairs. She'd heard him the moment he entered the room but she'd frozen in place. She wasn't sure who the intruder was. Her first thought...he'd found her.

She'd listened to him undress. The sound of a zipper, the shift of material to the floor had her heart pounding in her chest. It seemed so loud to her that she'd been afraid he would hear it and realize she was there. She knew she should've made her presence known. But the words caught in her throat when his shirt whooshed across her to the chair on the other side of the room. His cologne had trailed thickly in the shirt's wake and had tingled her senses with a hint of familiarity. It was him—the true owner of the bed in which she slept.

Since day one in this house, his eyes in the portrait had seemed to welcome her and his lingering essence in his room had made her feel safe. He filled her dreams at night and not once had she dreamed of being caught since she'd lain in his bed.

When he'd slid in the bed behind her, every nerve in her body had sizzled to life and her mouth went dry. The scent of faded cologne and leather—which she'd come to associate with this man she'd never met—washed over her senses. When he'd rolled over and touched her, time seemed to stop. Having lived her entire life in the presence of nuns, she knew better than to lie there. But when his body heat radiated through the jersey and goose bumps coated her skin, she ached for more than just a dream. She'd felt him nuzzle her hair and his arm lay possessively across her waist but it was the feel of his palm against her lower abdomen that made butterflies flutter in her stomach.

When he'd shifted closer and his penis rubbed the small of her back, she'd felt an unfamiliar moisture coat her panties. Her abdominal muscles flinched and she was rocked by a sudden burst of need. But a need for what? *His touch*? The disapproving face of Mother Superior flashed through her brain and she'd rocketed into motion. Reflexively, she'd jabbed him with an elbow and scrambled from the bed.

But now a part of her hungered to be back in that bed with him wrapped around her, holding her in the safety net of his strong arms. She shivered. He was home now and she'd have to leave. Her temporary reprieve from running was over.

Shakily, Angel moved to the dresser and threw him a pair of sweats from the bottom drawer. Timidly she gazed in the mirror above the dresser and hoped he didn't notice. Her good-girl conscience told her it was wrong to watch. A timid smile tugged at her lips as an unexpected devilish sensation took control. The imaginary sight of a miniature horned devil whispering in her ear *why not?* forced her eyes to linger on his reflection. There were no nuns around to correct her. She nervously darted her tongue across her lips at the sight of toned chest muscles bulging and biceps flexing as he bent to slip on the sweats. Her fingers twitched to touch his skin and follow the trail of his sweatpants up his well-muscled legs. When he shifted to tuck his boxer shorts into the sweatpants, she caught sight of the massive hardness he fought to contain and her breath stilled.

What was wrong with her? She lowered her gaze but an unexpected curiosity sprang to life at the base of her brain.

Were all men built like that?

Never before had she been confronted with a full-grown man's unclothed physique.

A slender smile tugged at her lips. She liked what she saw.

"I'm sorry. I didn't know you were there."

His apology made her look up and meet his eyes in the reflection of the mirror. She licked her lips then rasped shakily, "It's okay. We didn't know you were coming home for a visit."

"It was supposed to be a surprise." His smile showed the dimples, which added to the sexual magnetism of his face. "Surprise."

"Yeah, surprise." She returned his smile, turning to face him. Renewed warmth within her cheeks caused her blush to brighten. Had he caught her looking?

"You always help yourself to someone else's clothes?"

Angel swallowed hard and felt her hands tremble. He'd noticed. *You're standing in his room...in his jersey*. Wearing his shirt to bed from the time she'd found it hanging in the closet suddenly felt like a stupid idea. Even though his scent permeated its fibers and had lulled her into a false sense of security. But now he was home. She moistened her lips then forced the lie from her throat.

"I'm sorry." Her fingers twisted the hem of the jersey. "My pajamas are in the hamper. I'll wash it and return it tomorrow."

"Guess I'll see you in the morning then." Arian lingered as an awkward silence hovered between them. He wanted to tell her to keep it. Hell, his cock wanted him to tell her to take it off just to see if she wore anything under it.

He raked one last long gaze down the beautiful woman in his room. If she didn't look like she would bolt at any moment, he'd shorten the distance between them and thoroughly devour what he felt would be truly kissable lips. The sight of her nipping her lower lip nervously between her teeth almost melted his resolve and he knew he had to leave before he acted out his erotic visions.

He forced himself to turn, leave the room and shut the door behind him. He paused for a moment and shifted his cock. Walking wasn't exactly comfortable with a total hard-on. To sit and talk with his parents wasn't the top on his list of things to do at that very moment but he knew that his mother wouldn't go back to sleep until she saw him. He straightened his shoulders and thought as many undesirable things as he could while slowly descending the stairs. If he were lucky, his mother wouldn't notice. But his dad sure would. Arian grimaced at the thought. His dad would surely bust his balls over this one. If he were lucky, a few minutes standing in the cool air of the refrigerator and a cold drink could shrink his prominent problem before greeting his mother.

Just knowing Angel slept in his bed—alone—would haunt his dreams tonight and keep him up in more ways than one. He sighed as he reached the bottom of the stairs and headed for the kitchen.

* * * * *

Angel's hands shook as she pulled the covers back onto the bed. His being here changed everything. How long was he staying? Should she leave before the morning? *No.* She fought against her better judgment. *Myra needs me.* As she crawled between the sheets, Arian's lingering scent warmed her to the core. *I have to stay for Myra's sake.* She held the pillow his head had touched. His scent permeated her senses and she shivered as she snuggled into the spot where he'd lain. She should roll over. But an unnatural primal need urged her to stay and revel in his essence even if it was temporary.

Visions of his broad chest, strong arms and sexy eyes captivated the inner lining of her lids each time she tried to settle back to sleep. *This isn't right*. She shook her head trying to rid the erotic visions of him from her mind. She punched and fluffed the pillow several times and tossed and turned until exhaustion took over.

* * * * *

"I still don't like the fact that you and Mom didn't tell us about the accident." Arian poured a cup of coffee, and then sat at the round oak table in the kitchen of his parents' renovated farmhouse with his dad who was perched behind the morning paper. Arian noted that with his reading glasses on his father looked every bit the astute college professor of veterinary medicine that he was.

"Arian, we went over this last night. We felt it was best not to tell you or your brother about the accident." He heard the exasperated sigh as his dad flipped the page. "We didn't tell you because you'd leave the set and come here and that's not good for your career. And we didn't tell your brother because he'd tell you."

"You're right. Chet would've told me and I would've come home sooner."

"Well, it's over now." His dad refolded the morning paper, set it on the table and tucked his reading glasses into his shirt pocket. "Mom's home safe and sound and we have Angel staying here for a while to help look after her."

"Who's this mysterious Angel anyway?" Arian ran a hand through his rumpled hair. After the fruitless conversation last night with his parents about the woman in his bed, the rest of his night had been a sleepless one. The information his parents had on the young woman was vague at best and it didn't sit well with him that his dad had literally picked her up at the diner and offered her a cash-paying job complete with free room and board without so much as knowing her last name. "Have you had anyone look into her past or get references? Maybe find out who she is? Where she's from?"

"No. Your mother and I feel that she'll tell us when she's ready." His dad stood.

"Before or after she rips you off?" Arian huffed across the rim of his cup.

"Son, not everyone is out to get everyone else. Besides..." He turned and leaned against the sink. "Did you get a good look at her? Does she honestly look like the typical criminal to you?"

That was the problem. Arian had gotten a fantastic look at her. No matter how good she looked in his jersey, he had the distinct feeling she'd look even better out of it. He'd wondered if she wore anything under it and wished he was the jersey. Erotic visions of Angel had haunted him and kept him semi-hard and unable to sleep even though he knew nothing about her. And worse—she was living in his parents' home and they knew nothing about her. He stretched his long legs out under the table and shifted in his seat. Just the thought of her had him aching to be near her—or in her, as his renegade cock would prefer.

The grandfather clock in the hallway chimed, ending their conversation.

"I've got to go. I'm giving an early lecture on the intricacies of a horse's heart this morning. It's my class's last chance to bone up before finals." His father grabbed his briefcase and headed for the door. "We'll talk some more later."

"Yeah," he snorted to the slam of the back screen door. "Later."

He unfolded the local paper. Wonder what Rhiannon would think of this? But he knew it was too early to call so he flipped to the horoscope section. Ever since Rhiannon had taken over his career as his manager-agent and spiritualist, he followed the advice from her readings of the stars, the sun, the moon, the zodiac charts and the occasional flip of the tarot card. He felt her guidance had helped him choose the right movies to skyrocket his career. With hard work, he had become a better actor. His movies had prospered and his bank account contained more than he had ever dreamed possible... He'd gotten everything he'd wanted on that chosen path. But what did he want now? A heavy sigh escaped as he read today's prediction.

Aries

A change in your career may do your financial future good. The path of love is darkened by the past. Something or someone new may ignite your romantic interest.

Arian choked on a sip of his coffee. That was an understatement. Someone new had more than ignited his interest. She'd captured his thoughts since finding her in his bed. But what did he know about her? Seeing her again this morning with her hair pulled up in a ponytail as she took a breakfast tray into his mother's room only increased the pain in his groin. She had barely spoken or looked at him which added to the challenge of making her his... She was playing hard to get, something he wasn't used to. Women usually threw themselves at him. He snorted. It wasn't because of him that they did. It was because he was a star. He'd learned that the hard way.

He stood and walked across the hall to his parents' bedroom. Leaning against the doorframe, he sipped his coffee and watched her every move. Angel was brushing his mother's hair. The sight of her cute heart-shaped rump nestled on her heels renewed his blue-ball ache. Arian shifted his stance trying to loosen the snug fit of his jeans. Man, how this woman turned him on and he hadn't even tasted her lips yet. He watched her fingers twine his mother's hair into a thick braid of brown and gray. A vision of her straddling his lap with her hands laced firmly in his hair filtered through his thoughts. He raked a hand through his own hair.

"Good morning, Son," his mother spoke cheerfully.

"Good morning, Mom." He cleared his throat and tried to rein in his rampant thoughts. It hadn't been *that* long since he'd been laid. Why was she getting to him like this? He moved to stand beside the bed, bent over and kissed his mother's cheek then met the darting eyes of his erotic dream girl. "Morning, Angel."

"Good morning."

Her response was hardly above a whisper. He had to stop his hand from reaching over his mom to lift her chin and force her to meet him eye to eye. What was she hiding? As bad as he wanted her, he needed to know more about her, if not for him, for the safety of his parents.

"I hope you slept well."

"Yeah fine, Mom." He stood, sipped his coffee then asked, "How're you feeling this morning?"

"Better." She smiled up at him. "Thanks to Ed meeting Angel at the diner. We were lucky to find her since there wasn't anyone available from the hospital or a home health aide in the area until next month. The Christian woman's group from the church offered and so did Vicky but I didn't want anyone inconvenienced because of me."

"Vicky wouldn't have minded," Arian stated between sips.

"I know. She may be my best friend and all but I don't think I could live with her." She laughed. "You and I both know that Sam is earning his way to heaven living with her. Besides, I've got Angel. She's an answer to my prayers. Without her help, I'd never manage to even get myself dressed. Amazing how much you depend on the use of both hands. Never knew just how much until that silly fall dislocated this shoulder."

"You're just lucky you didn't break your neck," Arian stated firmly as he set his coffee on the bureau then helped his mom with the sling for her left arm.

"He needed to be ridden," Arian's mother stated frankly.

"Star's a handful for me even when he's been ridden on a regular basis." After tightening her strap, he tilted his mother's chin up and met the mirror image of his own chestnut-colored eyes. "Promise me you won't do it again."

"I'll promise nothing of the sort." Her eyebrows shot up and her taunting smile forced him to smile back as he shook his head. He knew his mother's deep love of horses. And also knew that telling her to stay off his black stallion, Star, was like handing her an open challenge to ride the beast again.

Arian straightened. Mother was going to be fine. Just two weeks after a fall from a horse and the spunk was flowing again through her sixty-five-year-old veins even with a broken leg, fractured ribs and a dislocated shoulder.

"With my ribs the way they are, it's been too uncomfortable for your father to sleep in here with me. That's why he's using Chet's room and Angel has been using your room. He's been meaning to clean out the spare bedroom but hasn't gotten to it. Do you think you could move all that stuff we've collected for the fall charity bazaar into the attic for now?"

"Yeah, I'll get it done for you today." Arian picked up his cup and leaned back against the bureau. "How long did Doc Matthews say it'd take for you to heal?"

He watched Angel slide off the opposite side of the bed. When she bent to pick up the dirty clothes basket off the floor, he nearly choked on a sip of his coffee at the tantalizing view of her delectable rump.

"Doc wouldn't give an exact date, said it's different for everyone. At my age, it could be a couple of months or so. But hopefully your father can move back in next week. I really don't sleep well without him. You know..." Her hand touched his and he had to force his eyes to leave the sweet little sway of Angel's bottom as she walked across the room with the clothes basket. "Once you've met that special someone and agreed to spend the rest of your lives together, it's hard to be apart. You grow accustomed to them lying next to you at night. I've missed that over the past few weeks."

Arian stifled his smile garnered by the slight nod of his mother's head in Angel's direction. Subtlety was not her forte. Yep, she was on the road to recovery and back at the matchmaking game. They'd spoken often about finding that special someone. He desired to have a relationship similar to that of his parents. Only later in life—after he'd reached the goals he'd set. But lately he'd been rethinking those goals. Especially, after his last breakup had gotten nasty. The abrupt way he ended his relationship with actress Candy Cannon had been plastered in every gossip rag nationwide. Nothing had been left private. She had made sure of that by leaking everything of interest to the press. And now, the lifestyle of being an actor had lost its glamour. He sighed. Maybe it was time for something *or someone* new in his life.

He glanced from his mother to Angel. His mother was known for trusting her gut instinct on most things and being right. But how could his mother even think that Angel was a possible girlfriend candidate? She hardly knew the woman. But he intended to fix that and his words came out straightforward and blunt.

"So Angel, where are you from?" He noticed a slight change in her stance, her back stiffened, her answer sounded shaky yet well practiced.

"I'm from all over. I've traveled around a lot." She shifted the laundry basket on her hip. "If you'll excuse me, I have laundry to do."

"You didn't answer the question." He stepped in front of her, blocking the door. Their bodies were close enough he could feel her heat and it stirred his hunger for a taste of her lips, but he resisted. He had to know more about her than just her first name.

"I'm from nowhere in particular." She softened her expression but he noted the subtle twitch under her left eye and a slender scar above her right brow. She was hiding something. He felt it in his gut.

"So what you're saying is that you're Angel of nowhere," he ground out a little harsher than intended.

"Son." Arian caught the hint of disapproval in his mother's tone.

"It's all right, Myra." Angel lifted her eyes and held them steady, firmly returning his glare. "I'm originally from the Lehigh Valley area." With that she pushed past him to finish her morning chores.

Chapter Two

How dare he, she thought. How dare he come home and ruin everything. Angel snatched a wet pillowcase from the laundry basket. Why'd I tell him where I'm from anyway? Her hands shook as she hung the laundry on the clothesline in the backyard. Even the fresh scent of the breeze flowing through the clean sheets couldn't flush his essence from her senses. Without looking in his direction, she had known the moment he stood in the doorway of Myra's room. She'd felt his presence. When she brushed past him to get out of the sudden confinement she'd experienced in that room, she swore she'd felt a rockhardness in his jeans graze her hip.

The way he felt against her last night left a lasting impression. She ached to have him close again. Angel shivered, lifting a damp sheet from the basket and securing it to the line. The breeze wrapped the sheet around her body, kicking her imagination into overdrive. Angel unraveled the sheet from around her waist and stepped through the maze of clean linens.

The heat of the morning sun and the lingering dampness from the sheet on her body combined with the memory of his touch ignited a flood of both cool and warm sensations throughout her newly heightened senses. Absently her fingertips stroked the spot on her hip where she'd brushed against him. Her skin tingled at the thought of his hand splayed on her lower abdomen, setting off another wave of moisture to her panties. At this rate, she'd have to wash another load of whites just to keep herself in dry underwear.

She walked to the gazebo in the back corner of the yard and sat down on the swing hanging from the roof. Red and yellow rosebushes twined up the gazebo's sides, filling this corner of the backyard with parklike beauty. The intoxicating scents of the flowers filled each breath she took but no matter how hard she tried—his scent lingered, overruling all others.

Angel lolled her head back against the swing's edge, listening to the lulling melodic cadence of the swing's gentle motions. Usually, this brought her peace, but today... She sighed, hoping for some relief from the tornado-sized knot twisting inside her stomach. The cause of that tornado — Arian. His presence threatened her hiding place.

Myra and Ed had been kind and understanding. They hadn't pressed her for information about her past. But he'd been here less than a day and had already confronted her. She sighed. He would definitely want her replaced with someone more qualified in patient care. If her temporary sanctuary was to last, she needed Arian to leave or—her brain clicked with a new idea—she had to prove she was capable of providing the care his mother needed. She gnawed at her lower lip. If she proved her worth, would he back off? Let her stay... If she stayed, could she handle being near

him? Angel rubbed her temples, hoping to relieve the sudden throbbing behind her eyes.

The moment her eyes closed, visions of him next to her in his bed sprang to life. How did he taste? Angel darted her tongue across her lips. What would it be like to kiss him? Suddenly, her oversensitive nipples pebbled at the thought of his warm mouth pressed against hers—and quite possibly against her breasts. *No!* She tried to stop the thoughts of him from invading and controlling her mind. She shot upright. *It's not right*. Her palm pressed against her temple then shakily smoothed a stray strand of hair back towards her ponytail.

Angel stood, walked down the gazebo stairs and across the yard. *Concentrate on Myra. Not him. Do your job.* And hopefully, things would be semi-peaceful once again. But she knew that with him here and the circumstances of what truly happened that horrible night six months earlier still blocked from her mind, there'd be no peace in her life. She grabbed the empty basket and took a deep breath before returning to the house to complete her chores. *Avoid him at all cost, but how?*

* * * * *

"Son, you have to trust us on this." His mom stared Arian directly in the eye. "I get the feeling she's alone, scared and in need of a friend. I don't know why, but I feel I can trust her. Give her a chance. In time, I know you'll feel the same way."

"I just hope that *Good Samaritan* heart of yours doesn't end up getting you hurt." Arian helped his mother into her wheelchair and adjusted her leg into a comfortable position on the leg rest.

"In all my years as a teacher, I think I learned a few things about people. There's good and bad everywhere and in everyone. Which way a soul turns, I feel is dependent upon how that person is treated in life."

"That's not necessarily true," Arian stated coldly as he gathered his mother's slipper and knelt at her feet. "How about those brothers who were born into money, treated to the best life had to offer and still killed their parents."

His mother cupped his face with both hands.

"What did that woman do to you? You used to be a more trusting and happy person." She brushed his hair from his brow just like she did when he was a child. Concern filled her eyes. He wanted to tell her everything but didn't. Talking about the bitch would only reignite the bitter anger he'd tried to control. So he forced his best smile and swallowed the truth.

"Nothing I can't handle."

"Unfortunately." His mother's sigh and sad eyes told him she knew his pain. He lowered his gaze to the task of tugging the sock on over the broken leg. "There are evil people out there who just can't be helped. But Angel isn't one of them. I see something in this young woman. Something good. And I think she needs us as much as we need

her. Your father and I feel that she'll tell us everything we want to know when she's ready. Promise me you won't ask her any more questions. I don't want you running her off. She's actually been wonderful at helping me without complaint. Did you hear what I said?" His mom's change in tone forced Arian to look up at her. He continued helping her slide the slipper on her good foot. "Give her a chance, please. Don't run her off. Understood?"

"Understood." He nodded, rose to his feet, maneuvered his mother's chair out the bedroom, down the hall and out onto the front porch. After careful navigation, he parked his mom in the sun with a paperback from one of her favorite authors. It amazed him how she held the book nestled in the bad hand, tucked against her body, and turned the pages with her good hand.

Arian settled into the front porch swing and stared out at the horses grazing in the meadow.

Running Angel off wasn't what he had in mind. He just didn't trust her. Showing up out of the blue, taking a temporary job and moving into a complete stranger's home, wasn't something done by most normal people. He wanted to know who she was. And most of all—what she was hiding. Was she running from someone, an abusive husband maybe? Was he the reason for that scar above her eye? If he was, he'd kill the bastard for hurting her. Arian's eyes sprang open.

Where'd that come from?

He swallowed hard and dropped his head back against the edge of the swing. What was this blue-eyed vixen doing to him? Pinching the bridge of his nose, he shifted on the swing to adjust to the sudden semi-stiffness of his cock at the simple thought of Angel. His mother was right. There was something about her. But in his case, it wasn't trust that made him curious.

The ringing of the phone jarred his thoughts.

"I'll get it." He stood, opened the front screen door and walked inside.

"Hello."

"Hey, Bro, how's it going?" his younger brother, Chet, greeted him from the other end. "I got your message this morning. How are the folks doing? Were they surprised to see you?"

"Not as surprised as me."

"What?"

After filling Chet in on the details of their mother's horseback riding accident—bruised ribs, broken leg and dislocated shoulder—he explained the events of the night.

"You mean to tell me, you found a woman sleeping in your bed and for once you didn't get a piece of her?" His brother chuckled.

"Yeah, what didn't you understand?" Arian snipped. His brother's reference to Angel as just another piece of ass made his grip tighten on the phone. If he could reach him, he'd punch him. He swallowed hard and ran his other hand through his hair.

Why'd he feel the need to protect a woman he didn't even know? He rolled his eyes and suffered through his brother's tirade of verbal jabs.

"What I would have given to be a fly on the wall! You in your underwear, a hardon, a gorgeous woman," his howling laughter echoed through the phone, "and Dad."

"Okay, Chet, you done?" Arian could just imagine his brother's face, a younger version of his own, but with the deep green eyes and light brown hair of their father. And he had the same tendency as their father to find humor at Arian's expense.

"Yeah, I'm done." Arian heard him gasp for air. "Can I talk to Mom?"

"In a minute, I need you to do me a favor. You still coming home next week?"

"Yeah, you need me to bring you something?"

"Information."

* * * * *

In the early morning hours, he pulled into a gas station on a desolate stretch of Southern highway. The lone figure nodded at the attendant then filled his car with gas. On the pretense of paying, he went inside.

The attendant never knew what hit him. His body twitched then lay still in a pool of blood.

Sneering, the customer drove away from the scene. Another heist completed without a witness. The only living witness to one of his crimes lay somewhere on the road ahead. She'd been lucky but soon he'd catch her. He felt it in his bones. She couldn't be far ahead of him this time. He'd almost caught her a few weeks earlier but she managed to escape once again.

She'd cost him the best con he'd ever pulled. He hissed under his breath. She was going to pay. No matter how long it took, he'd find her. He'd make sure that ravenhaired bitch repented for her sins if it was the last thing he did. Absently he adjusted his collar then tugged to straighten the large crucifix around his neck. Out of habit, he glanced at the rearview mirror. Nothing but clear highway behind him. He clucked his teeth. There was a feminine morsel in need of salvation somewhere on the road up ahead. He laughed heinously to himself. In his twisted mind, it was his job to find her and set her soul free.

* * * * *

Out of the corner of her eye, Angel watched Arian reach for the cord to pull the attic stairs down. She fidgeted, placing towels aimlessly in the linen closet. His height of over six feet made it easy for him to reach the cord. When his T-shirt slipped upwards granting her a peek at his abdominal six-pack, her mouth dried. She clenched her fingers into a ball and fought the strong urge to trace his stomach muscles with her fingertips.

"Would you like some help?" Angel's voice slipped out barely above a whisper. Her feet moved before she could stop them and she stood next to the attic stairs. Heat permeated the air and laced each breath she took, it had to be from the attic. She darted her tongue nervously across her dry lips. The increased heat couldn't be from him. She swallowed hard. Being this close to Arian was dangerous. Hot sparks rushed up her spine when he turned to face her and their eyes met. Pure animal magnetism exuded from him and she balled her fist tighter, digging her nails into her palm. Mustn't touch him. Keep this friendly and maybe he'll go away.

Arian smiled down at her and Angel almost melted into a puddle at his feet. Feelings like this were positively sinful—she was sure of it.

"Sure, I'll bring the boxes up the stairs and put them in the attic. Do you think you could slide them against the wall up there for me?"

"Yes," she rasped as she stepped past him and made sure she didn't touch him in the process. Climbing the stairs, her legs felt like limp noodles.

His gaze glued to her ass. With each step up, her delicious bottom swayed in a seductive manner and lifted inch by inch until it was level with his face, tempting him to delve right into her scrumptious attributes. Arian's hands trembled at his sides. He fought the urge to grasp her by the waist, strip her bare and use his own form of erotic torture to get her to talk about her past.

When Angel reached the top rung, the delicious view disappeared into the attic. He spun on his heel and stomped into the spare bedroom, which contained boxes scattered on the bed and almost every square inch of floor space. *Get a grip! She's just another conquest...nothing more.* Shakily, his hand raked through his hair. He lifted a box and walked back to the attic stairs. Tilting his head, his gaze collided with hers. She stared down at him from the attic's opening and he hardened instantly. What was it about those eyes that controlled all blood flow to his cock? Damn, this was going to be a hard afternoon...literally.

Neither spoke as they worked. Arian climbed up and down the stairs lugging box after box from the spare room. Angel slid each as far to the side as possible until the last box. It was too heavy for her to move. Seeing her struggle, he climbed into the attic and pushed it effortlessly over to the others.

Angel stood and wiped a loose strand of hair that had escaped from her ponytail out of her eyes. Not paying attention to the cramped conditions, Arian stood and the back of his head smacked against the edge of a ceiling beam.

"Oh, shit!" Automatically, he crouched down, eyes tightly closed against the onslaught of flashing stars.

"Are you all right?" Angel stepped closer and touched his hand.

"Just fine," he grimaced.

"I'll get you some ice." She jerked her hand back, turned and scooted down the stairs.

Arian clambered down after Angel. You big oaf. In one shove, he swung the attic stairs closed with a thud. Rubbing his head at his own stupidity, he followed the sound of clinking ice cubes and found Angel in the kitchen making an ice pack. When she tiptoed to place it on his head, their bodies came within millimeters of each other.

The sudden rush of warmth at the juncture of Angel's thighs from this closeness to his masculine form caused Angel to shift off balance and she toppled against him. Immediately, his strong arms enclosed around her waist. The protective feel of his touch riveted her senses. Her heart pounded a conga beat. Electrified sparks raced through her veins, surging pure heat and moisture to her sex. His nearness made her feel the same wonderful sensations she'd experienced after the first time he'd touched her. Slowly, her gaze rose up his chest, along the corded strength of his neck, to his masculine jawline then lingered on his lips. Her mouth went dry. Instinctively, she licked a hungry tongue across her mouth as if doing so would grant her a tiny taste of his lips.

Unwillingly, she pulled away from his touch, needing to keep distance between them. Otherwise... She attempted to command the inner tingling sensations to stop. She tried to quell her rampant emotions as she spoke, stammering over her words.

"You'd better sit down. I'm too short to reach the lump."

Her body felt warm against his. Arian hated to let her go. The sweet innocent look in her eyes increased the ravished hunger coursing through his soul that wanted to make her the main dish in his next erotic meal. The sight of her tongue tracing the luscious outline of her lips seemed to dare him to plunder them as a tasty appetizer. Without speaking, he released her and sat in a chair at the kitchen table. The sudden weight of the ice pack placed gently on the swollen lump shot cold pain through his brain but was nothing compared to the near explosive state of his cock and balls caused by Angel's body and touch.

"Here, hold this." She grabbed his wrist, tugged it to his head then moved towards the refrigerator. "I'm getting a glass of tea. Would you like one?"

"Sure, thanks," Arian muttered, crossing his legs uncomfortably in a desperate attempt to hide his hardened condition.

After pouring the glasses, Angel sat in the chair across from him. His gaze was drawn to her mouth as she drank. It seemed as if she caressed the rim of her glass with each delicate sip. He envisioned her lips and tongue lavishing the sensitive head of his cock with nips and licks. Even though he held an ice pack on his head and rolled an ice-cold glass of tea across his forehead, he felt sweat bead upon his brow. What was she doing to him? He could have anyone he wanted. Why her?

The buzzer from the dryer sounded, breaking the stilted silence and signaling the clothes were ready to be folded. The sheets and towels would be awhile longer since Angel preferred drying them in the fresh air.

"Guess that's for me." She stood. "You need an aspirin or anything?" "No, thank you," he rasped. "I'm fine."

You sure are. The uncharacteristic thought popped into Angel's head. Never before had she felt so bold yet scared at the same time. Descending the stairs, her legs trembled. His touch had her on edge and every nerve ending tingled with just a simple brush of their bodies together. She hoped he didn't notice the effect he had on her.

She couldn't allow herself to get too close to anyone especially, someone like him. Hang on just a few more weeks. Give Myra a chance to heal. Keep your distance and at all cost don't look into those alluring eyes. The thought of his eyes sent chill bumps down her spine and placed an irrepressible smile upon her face.

Dropping the ice pack in the sink, he walked out the back door and headed to the barn. A good long ride, that's what you need, he told himself. You don't know anything about her. Stay clear of her until you hear from Chet. For all you know, she's running from a husband or killed off her family. As he saddled Star, his jet-black stallion, Arian hoped he was wrong. Angel had cast some sort of spell on him. A spell his body, cock and balls desperately craved, even if his mind warred against it.

* * * * *

After hours out riding, Arian returned dusty and tired. Though he'd ridden hard trying to rid himself of the burning desire for a taste of Angel, it hadn't worked. If anything, it had only increased his appetite. Bringing Star to a walk, they entered the red six-stall barn. As he slid down from the well-ridden animal, Sam Harris sauntered out of a stall. Sam tipped his cowboy hat back on his head and grinned at Arian.

"Hey! What a nice surprise. Myra told me you were home." He extended a hand to Arian. "How long you staying?"

"It's good to see you, Mr. Harris." He returned the welcome handshake of a long-time family friend and neighbor. "I don't plan to start another film any time soon. I'm leaving the summer open. Hopefully, hang out here for a while. How are Mrs. Harris and Sam Jr.?"

"Vicky's fine and Sam's doing great. He called yesterday. Said he hopes to come home some this summer. But he landed a job as a trainer with the new horse racing track over in Greenville. He doesn't know how much he'll be able to get away."

"That's great." Arian took the saddle off Star. "He always loved to work with horses. Must be in his blood." He nodded at the retired cowboy.

"Yep." Sam grinned, handing a grooming brush to Arian. "You want a hand with him?"

"Nah." Arian patted the horse's hindquarter. "I've missed this old stud."

Star stomped dangerously close to Arian's toes. Followed by a snort from the proud animal as it glared over its shoulder at him as if to say "who you calling old".

"Don't take it he likes being called old," Sam hooted.

"Guess not." Arian laughed, running the brush down Star's magnificent coat. "Don't worry, old boy." He nuzzled the stallion's ear. "After the run we did today, you proved you've still got it."

Star nodded his head up and down as if acknowledging his achievement then drank from the bucket of water Sam had gotten him.

The gentle slam of a screen door made Arian glance over Star's back and out through the open barn doors to the backyard. The sight of Angel taking down the laundry stopped all motion of the brush. His gaze glued to every stretch up to take an item off the line and followed every bend to place a neatly folded item in the basket. Her innocent motions at an everyday task increased his hunger and re-hardened his throbbing cock. The ride on Star hadn't taken the edge off his need—not when he desperately wanted a ride on Angel instead.

"Pretty girl that Angel," Sam stated followed by a low whistle.

"Uh, yeah I guess so." Arian jerked his attention back to Star and managed to force his hands to work. Pretty didn't fit Angel, gorgeous sex goddess was more like it.

"Well, I gotta finish taking care of Halley." Sam turned and walked back towards the stall he'd come out of. "Promised Ed I'd keep an eye on her when he's at work."

"Think it's going to be soon?" Arian resisted the urge to look out the barn door while he finished rubbing down his horse.

Halley was a gift he and his brother had given to their parents as an anniversary present last year. It made their mother ecstatic that she had a mating prospect for Star. Though Arian was convinced that mating a racing black stallion with a dapple gray jumper wasn't the best idea, Star hadn't seemed to mind. Obviously, since Halley was due to give birth at any moment.

"It being her first, you never know when a young filly is gonna foal. Could be any day now."

Arian led Star back to his stall and handed him an apple. The majestic animal nibbled while Arian held it for him to feast.

"There you go, boy." Arian patted the former champion racing horse known to the racing world as "Stargazer". "You deserve it. You're going be a papa soon."

The horse nuzzled Arian's palm as it took the last of the apple. Out of the corner of his eye, Arian caught a glimpse of Angel carrying a loaded laundry basket back towards the house. He fumbled closing the stall door, then spun on his heels and hurried out the barn.

"See you later, Mr. Harris," he called over his shoulder, "let me know if Halley needs anything."

"Yeah, see you."

Arian heard Sam's all-knowing chuckle echo behind him as he hustled across the yard to catch a burdened beauty.

* * * * *

Though she'd accepted his help with the basket, her "thank you" had been stilted and cold. He couldn't figure her out. She avoided his questions and declined his offer of help with dinner. *Had he offended her somehow?* Arian turned off the shower, stepped out then grabbed a towel. After drying his body, he wrapped the towel around his waist.

When Arian opened the bathroom door, Angel was lugging a backpack complete with camping gear across the hall from his room and was moving into the spare bedroom. For a moment, she stopped in the hallway, their gazes locked. He was tempted to drop the towel, take her in his arms and show her the true meaning of a hot and steamy shower. For a split second, he envisioned her naked and pressed up against the tile of the shower stall. Trembling hands at his sides itched to lather her breasts with creamy suds while his mouth watered, hungry to devour hers under the heated stream of water. He burned to feel his cock buried deep inside her with those sumptuous legs of hers wrapped around his waist instead of the towel. The feel of his cock twitching at the prospect made him tighten his grip on the towel.

Arian's appearance in the bathroom doorway draped in nothing but clean, masculine soap smell and a towel stopped Angel's heart. Her breath hitched in her throat at the sight of his broad muscled chest covered with tiny curls. She swallowed hard as her eyes refused to pull away. Involuntarily, her gaze trailed across his chest then lifted to his mouth. The sight of his tongue wetting his lips sent a wave of hunger to her. The moment her eyes met his, she swore pure heat burned in his irises. The sight shook her to the core and startled her into movement.

Angel's legs trembled and her panties moistened but she managed to slip into the spare bedroom before he initiated any further floods of emotions to tax her system. With great effort, she shut the door behind her. Pressing her back against it, she slid down the cool wood surface and sat on the floor, knees bent and her head resting in her hands. Her upper arms accidentally brushed across her pouting nipples and a jolt of electrical current beamed straight down her body and spurred a shocking reaction from the inner lining of her feminine folds.

What was happening to her? Why did she ache for his touch?

She gasped and tilted her chin up towards the heavens, her eyes opened wide. Was this what Sister Mary Margaret had meant? Many times she'd said that she hoped one day Angel would meet "the one" who'd shake her world to the core and fulfill what was naturally intended for a man and a woman?

She took a deep breath and willed herself to stand. This couldn't be happening now. He couldn't be "the one". She smoothed her hair and re-tucked her T-shirt into her jeans.

Hopefully, he hadn't noticed the way her body reacted whenever he was close, she thought, rolling her eyes to the heavens. Hopefully, she could gain control over her overactive hormones before... Before what?

A chill coated her skin at the thought of his touch. But she knew nothing could happen between them. She couldn't let it. Angel squared her shoulders, straightened her back and opened the door. When she saw that he no longer stood in the hallway, she let out the breath she hadn't realized she held. Now was her chance to seek the safety of the kitchen and the presence of his parents.

Arian entered his room. Even though he knew they'd cleared out the spare bedroom for Angel, it hadn't sunk in until he saw her move her things. She wouldn't be in his bed. Disappointment deflated his cock as he closed the door and dropped the towel to the floor.

The sight of his old football jersey neatly folded on the bed brought a smile to Arian's lips. He lifted it to his nose. Even though she'd washed it, he thought he could still smell a hint of her scent in its fibers. Had she worn anything underneath?

Nah, he liked the idea that she hadn't. The vision of her raven hair tousled about her slender face and shoulders, her pebbled nipples poking above his numbers, those sexy legs sticking out underneath and the penetrating gaze of those magnificent eyes was forever embedded in his brain. Arian couldn't imagine anyone else wearing his jersey, not even himself.

Maybe if he left her a gift, he'd gain a little of her trust. Then maybe she'd... His smile widened. After all, his mother had asked him to give her a chance. Gain her trust, get her to talk, then maybe...

He dressed, grabbed the shirt then left his room. A light tap with his knuckles on the spare bedroom door across the hall got no response. Arian turned the unlocked knob and pushed the door forward at a snail's pace then peeked around the door's edge hoping for a chance to leave his gift unnoticed. The light was off and Angel wasn't inside. Quietly, he slipped over to the bed, laid the jersey on her pillow, turned and left the room. Whistling, he went downstairs.

Yeah. There was something about her and he intended to find out what. Hopefully, Chet would come through with information. Until then, he'd have to maintain control over the growing lust he felt for Angel. And it was just lust. At least he hoped it was just lust. A shiver shot down his spine as he reached the bottom stair and caught a slight glimpse of her in the kitchen. Instantly, his cock re-hardened.

Hopefully, the cool night air would soften his situation. But he doubted it. After adjusting his thickened shaft, he joined his folks on the front porch.

Chapter Three

On shaky legs, Angel walked into the kitchen after dinner. Though subtle, throughout the meal his questions were directed at her past. How long could she appease him with vague answers? But that wasn't the worst of it. Each brush of his long legs under the table against hers sent chills skittering up the insides of her thighs to congregate in the continuous wetness of her pussy. Her hands shook as she filled the sink with water.

"You realize they have a dishwasher."

Arian's soothing tone rippled across her tense skin and automatically Angel's spine straightened. She darted a glance over her shoulder and saw he was right behind her at the sink with several serving dishes in hand. When she felt him ease to within an inch of her back, heat penetrated her cotton T-shirt and shot arrows of electrical currents straight through her chest to entice her nipples into hardened, hungry buds.

"Yes," rasped out huskier than she'd intended. Angel cleared her throat, hoping to strangle the frog which seemed to have taken up residence there. "I just like doing them this way."

Arian's essence surrounded her as he reached around her, placing the serving dishes on the counter beside the sink. Intentional or not—his chest pressed against her back and she shivered. It had to be the sudden warmth of the water in the sink. Angel decided this, forcing her hands into action washing dishes.

He didn't move. Instead, he pressed closer until she felt the steady rhythm of his heartbeat against her back. She swore her own heartbeat changed its tempo to match his.

Strong hands skittered featherlight down her arms sending chills across her skin. When his hands joined hers in the sink, her nipples jutted against her shirt and she hoped he didn't notice. His stance shifted and a prominent hardness nudged the softness of the small of her back through his jeans. Unbelievably, her nipples hardened and ached even more. Angel felt as if they'd spear through her shirt at any given moment.

"Here, let me help," he whispered against her ear and her knees went weak. If he didn't have her wrapped in his arms and her body lodged snuggly against the sink, Angel felt she would've slithered to the floor in a puddle of goop.

"I—" she licked her dry lips and choked out, "can manage, thank you."

She needed him to back off before her body took over and acted out the notions flooding her oversensitive system. His hands massaged hers in the water. Angel felt the sensual fullness of the lips she hungered to kiss brush her ear and she bit her lower lip. When the tip of his warm tongue outlined the sensitive rim of her ear, the breath hitched in her chest and a flash flood jetted to her already damp panties.

"Son." Relief washed over her when Ed entered the kitchen with more serving dishes in hand. "This should be the last of them. Oh." His eyebrows shot up when he reached the sink to set the dishes on the counter. "Angel, I didn't see you there."

"Angel's teaching me the fine art of dishwashing." Arian's voice floated over her head as heat flushed her face. His back straightened, giving her just enough space to make her escape.

Angel wiggled out from under his arm, leaving him standing with his hands in the sink of dirty dishes.

"I think you've passed the course." She managed a timid smile. "I'll grade you on the condition of the dishes when you're done." Angel couldn't look either of them in the eye as she spun on her heel and headed for the door. "I'll take care of Myra."

Arian pressed into the edge of the sink hoping his dad hadn't noticed his raging hard-on. The little vixen had done it to him again. Without even trying, she had him painfully erect and hungry for a taste of her body.

"You wash." Arian heard his dad's lighthearted chuckle. "I'll dry."

* * * * *

Arian left his parents content in the family room watching television. He'd tried to concentrate on a conversation with his folks. But knowing Angel lingered alone somewhere in their household kept his body on edge. He needed to find her.

A gentle breeze filtered in through the front screen door. He swore he could smell her subtle scent on the wind. Arian stood in the doorway watching the moonlight dance across her features as she studied the stars. His heart pounded and a knot formed in his throat. She was beautiful sitting on the front porch swing. Those fantastic legs of hers were curled up under her and her head leaned against the swing chain. The name Angel fit. Her soft features were purely angelic beauty to him. Instantly, he hardened when her chin tilted and her intense pale blue gaze locked on his through the screen door.

Stepping out onto the porch, he held the simmering radiance of her pale blue gaze. Man, those eyes made him melt on the inside and kept his cock hard. He took a deep breath and hoped she wouldn't bolt into the house before they got the chance to talk. Arian walked to the porch rail and sat on its edge, leaning back against a post. *Good.* She hadn't moved. Those powerful bewitching eyes were no longer on him but had turned towards the heavens.

Arian tilted his head and admired the view. A clear full moon perched off to the right, thousands of stars laced the night sky and Mars—the ruling planet of Aries—shone far off in the distance. A smile tugged at the corner of his lips. He wouldn't have known that Mars was his ruling planet if it wasn't for Rhiannon's persistence in

teaching him about the stars and the heavens in relation to his birth chart. Shooting a sideways glance at the silent raven-haired beauty, he wondered what was her sign. Arian rolled his eyes, glad he hadn't spoken that tacky pick-up line. But he did want to say something, anything to get her to talk. Maybe, if he could win her over as a friend...

"Beautiful night," he scanned the sky as he spoke.

"Yes it is."

"Mars is pretty bright tonight," he stated casually.

"It is," curiosity laced the interested pitch of her tone. "Which one is Mars?"

Arian turned to look at her. Her neck craned and her face turned towards the sky. A childish wonder filtered across her face. Finally, he'd sparked an interest in something they could talk about.

Thank you, Rhiannon. He smiled, moving to the swing beside Angel. As he snuggled close, he felt her body tense. Her scent permeated his nostrils as he pointed to the tiny red dot.

"There," he breathed against her hair, feeling its softness against his cheek as he spoke. "It's that speck of red just to the left of my fingertip."

"Oh," she whispered on a nervous breath, fidgeting to place a small space between them. "I thought that was the eye of the constellation Leo."

Coldness drifted into the gap, coating his chest and he secretly grinned at Angel's persistence to wedge distance between them.

"You know the stars?" He leaned back, brows arched, staring down at her.

"Just a little." She pointed up. "I know that bright star is the North Star and over there is the Big Dipper." Shifting in her seat, she pointed out another constellation. "And that is the Little Dipper."

"Also known as Ursa Major and Ursa Minor."

"I knew that. I just like their common names better." Angel looked over her shoulder at him but quickly snapped her gaze back to the heavens. "I've always been interested in the stars."

Her tongue darted across her lips. Automatically, he did the same which made his mouth water for a taste of hers.

"Really." Arian liked the way the moonlight highlighted the alabaster skin of her neck. Though he wanted to nibble her collarbone, nip the length of her sensuous neck, trail her chin with kisses then plunder her mouth, he refrained. He cleared his throat. "I like stargazing too."

Leaning closer, he purposely pressed his chest to her back and pointed. "Below Ursa Major is Leo, to the left and below that," continuing to outline the stars' patterns as he spoke. "Virgo, then..." He shifted, tightening his position against her and his other arm lined the back of the swing, practically encasing her in his arms. "There's the sign that's most compatible with mine."

"What sign is that?"

Her whispered breath wafted across his arm and his hardened cock threatened to burst from the strained zipper of his jeans. God, this was killing him. He swallowed repeatedly at the lump lodged in his throat and continued.

"Aquarius."

"Then you're an Aries." He heard the hitch in her breath, just before she lifted her chin and locked on his gaze.

"Do you believe in the power of the constellations?" Arian ran his thumb across Angel's trembling lower lip.

Turning away from his touch, she stared once again up at the stars. "I believe that the stars and their heavenly signs and patterns hold a controlling force over the outcomes of our daily lives. Certain signs belong together," she paused, "Aquarius and Aries are two that mix well."

Arian tilted Angel's chin so their eyes could meet.

"What sign are you?" The line he'd thought as tacky earlier seemed to fit perfectly in the light of the full moon and tumbled from his lips before he could stop them.

Angel didn't answer. Instead, she did the unexpected. Twisting in the swing, she captured his mouth. Gentle at first, she feathered the tip of her tongue across his lips. Though she knew she should stop, his taste enticed a hunger deep inside her soul and she couldn't pull away. She wanted more, hungered for more. The feel of his arms around her and his mouth upon her lips sent a rush of renewed heat between her thighs. She couldn't get enough. As if lured by some primal instinct, her lips parted slightly and Arian took command of her first kiss.

The hint of her flavor ignited his hunger. Arian's tongue plunged into the slight separation she timidly offered, taking over the degree of their first kiss. He felt her gasp around his tongue. The sweetness of her reaction rushed his system. Arian wanted Angel and he didn't care if it were right there on the front porch swing with his parents nearby.

Without releasing her lips, Arian scooped Angel into his arms and settled her onto his lap. Her taste was like no other and he couldn't get enough. He could sit there all night attached to her wonderful mouth. One arm encircled her waist, where his fingertips lazily drew circles in the small of her back. The other splayed palm open, massaging a trail up her spine.

Angel's bottom shifted in his lap as she wrapped her arms around Arian's neck, forcing an uncontrollable moan to rumble from his chest, up his throat and across their lips, enhancing the sensuality of the kiss.

He felt her tongue play with his, timid at first then bolder with each fluid motion. Pulling back slightly from the heat of her mouth, Arian suckled and nipped Angel's lower lip, reveling in every aspect of her flavor. With each wave of her delectable taste

on his lips and tongue, his cock hardened to the point of near explosion. But he couldn't stop, couldn't pull away from the intoxicating decadence of her lips, mouth and skin.

Following his lead, Angel nibbled his lower lip. Every aspect of her body tingled. A boldness she never knew existed took over as she suckled from his mouth and drank in his masculine flavor. It felt as if an unquenchable thirst sprang to life in her soul and no matter how much she took, she could not fulfill this need to kiss this magnificent man.

One wiggle in his lap and she knew how much he wanted her. The feel of his hard length against her bottom sent a tremor down her spine. Delving her tongue deep into his mouth, she savored his heady flavor. Moisture flowed on a wave of thrumming sensations rippling through her vagina. Was this how it felt to want someone sexually? Unintentionally, she brushed her nipples lightly against his chest, sending hot shafts of excitement through her system.

God, was it wrong to feel this good?

When his hand left a burning trail from her back, along her waist and up her side, her heart seemed to still in anticipation. The moment he cupped her breast, an unstoppable gasp escaped.

Arian heard the subtle gasp when his hand slid from the small of her back and crept up the path of her side to cup the perfect mound of Angel's breast. Heat filled his palm and the rhythm of her breathing increased in tempo.

Leaving the beauty of her mouth, he lavished her chin with subtle nips. A soft moan from her throat enticed him to lick and nibble his way down her neck. Feeling the low vibration against his lips of another soft moan as it drifted up her throat made him shiver.

He felt her relax as her head leaned into his hand, giving him sweet access to the very spot he hungered to taste. Arian ran the tip of his tongue along the sensitive juncture where shoulder and neck met, then suckled the tender skin. Angel's body jerked and he heard her surprised gasp.

The taut feel of her nipple jutting against his palm triggered his fingers into motion. Arian rolled the sensitive tip between his fingers and felt its hardened peak through her T-shirt and bra. Angel's back arched and her bottom wiggled in his lap, making his cock throb painfully in the prison of his jeans. If she kept wiggling like that, he'd spurt in his boxers for first time since puberty.

Arian ripped his mouth from Angel's neck and pressed his lips to the tender lobe of her ear. "Darling," he rasped coarsely, "hold still a minute. I wanna make this last all night."

Trailing a path from her breast in a leisurely motion, down her slender abdomen then traced the edge of her jeans, he hungered to touch her. At the same time his hand slid between her thighs, Arian captured Angel's mouth in a ravishing kiss. He felt her whole body shudder the moment his palm nestled deep between her thighs and rubbed against her pussy. He swallowed her gasp but lost his grip on the ravishing beauty.

Things had gotten out of hand. Her conscience forged through the erotic haze wrapped around her brain to form one clear thought...stop! Though her body begged for his touch, Angel pushed her palms flat against his chest. She sprang from Arian's lap, leaving behind a sudden wave of cool night air in her wake and setting the swing into a soft swaying motion.

"I'm sorry. We shouldn't do this," stammered from her trembling lips just before she spun around, opened the front screen door and darted inside.

Angel didn't stop until she was in her room with the door shut tightly behind her. Chest heaving and heart pounding, she leaned back flat against the cool wood door. Arian's touch had lingered on the pouting nipple of her breast. He'd kneaded it into a sensitive bead which throbbed, wanting more. Running her tongue across her thoroughly kissed lips, a timid smile tugged at the corners of her mouth. Arian sure tasted good. Not good but great.

A stern-faced Mother Superior flashed through her thoughts with a long pointy finger waving inches from her nose. Her strict mantra that "men only lead to trouble and good girls don't do naughty things with boys" echoed in Angel's ears as if Mother Superior was present.

"I'm not a girl," Angel huffed out loud. "I'm a grown woman with needs." Flailing her hand in the air above her head in an attempt to wipe the image from her mind, she pushed off the door and moved across the room.

The thought that she had needs surprised her. In all her life, she'd put everyone else's needs above her own, especially Sister Mary Margaret's. Though the nun had never asked, Angel felt she had done the right thing. Sister Mary Margaret had become ill. They left the orphanage to hike the Appalachian Trail. The short visit to the rest home was the first leg of their journey. *Rest, rejuvenate then hike the trail before returning to the real world*, were the words Sister Mary Margaret had spoken.

She flung herself onto the bed and landed on something with a vague hint of Arian's scent. Angel rolled to her side and switched on the nightstand lamp. Her heart stilled at the sight of Arian's jersey rumpled on her bed.

Clutching the soft, worn material to her chest, she breathed in the faint remnants of his scent from its fibers. She cuddled it in her arms, stretching out on the bed. It was because of him, her body was out of control.

A reawakened tremble traipsed down her spine and the inner muscles of her vagina tingled with eruptive spasms, adding more moisture to the heated stickiness between her thighs. Just the hint of his scent in the gift of his jersey had triggered this reaction. Though she tried not to, she smiled. Angel imagined Arian's touch caressing every aspect of her body, leaving nothing unexplored. She wanted his kiss, his touch.

Angel curled into a ball, wrapping around the only object of the man she could allow herself to touch. Never before had she felt this strongly. *This horny?* She swallowed hard. It wasn't common for her to think in such crude terms. Mother Superior would definitely frown.

"I'm not some dried-up prune like you." Angel regretted repeating one of Sister Mary Margaret's nicknames for Mother Superior the moment it left her lips. But if the flood of moisture in her crotch was any sign, she definitely wasn't dried up.

Shuddering against another wave of goose bumps trembling down her spine, Angel tightened her grip around the jersey.

Arian's touch had her thinking of hot sex and horniness. She knew the strong words spoken in reference to sex. She'd heard them spoken occasionally by the teens of the orphanage and a few of the male hikers had slipped in her presence—but now she didn't find the word *horny* offensive. Instead, she reveled in the electrified tingles her body felt and could only be described best by the word. Yes, she decided, she was horny for Arian.

Though she'd never experienced it, she knew about sex. Sister Mary Margaret had been very informative on that subject. It had been part of their discussions on life and choosing the right direction to take. The nun had been pro-sex—which Angel had thought as quite odd for a nun—not promiscuous sex but sex with the right one. Before, she'd always avoided men who made passes. Why not now?

Why did she feel drawn to Arian?

Because he's an Aries, that's why. Sister Mary Margaret's voice sounded as if it were inside her room and not just a memory.

Rolling onto her back, Angel shot straight up. Looking around, she searched for Sister Mary Margaret. She released the breath she hadn't realized she held, wiping tears from her eyes with the back of her hand.

She's not here. She's dead. Angel reminded herself, tumbling back onto the bed. She laid an arm across her forehead, hugged the jersey close with the other arm and wished for control over the flood of emotions, which threatened to drown her in the undertow.

Got to get control over this.

She swallowed. Remnants of his magnificent male flavor lingered on her tongue and increased the hunger she felt for another taste. But her conscience reared its head and demanded control over the influx of new desires.

Got to stop these feelings. Can't get involved with him. Not now. Not ever.

She rolled onto her stomach and allowed herself to do the one thing she hadn't done since the night Sister Mary Margaret was killed, she cried.

* * * * *

Arian sat alone with his eyes shut and head resting against the back of the swing. Every nerve ending hummed and his cock twitched angrily, begging for some form of release. This woman with no past had him completely on edge. He always got what—or who—he wanted. Why not now? Arian fumed. She'd left him hanging there in the swing, hard as a rock and ravenous for a taste of her sweet nectar.

"What happened?" his father asked, opening the screen door and walking out to join him on the swing.

"Not exactly sure," Arian replied without opening his eyes or lifting his head.

"Thought you could use a beer." He felt the cold bottle nudge against his hand and opened his eyes.

"Thanks." Arian grabbed the open bottle and took a long swig.

"Want to talk about it?"

"Nothing to tell." Arian held the ice-cold bottle with both hands steady in his lap. But the coldness didn't aid the painful situation of his cock and balls. "Thought you were watching TV with Mom."

"She got tired so I helped her to bed. When I saw Angel go flying up the stairs, I figured something was up," his dad said with a lopsided smile. "You know me, nosy, got to know what's going on."

"Obviously nothing," Arian huffed, raking a hand through his hair. He couldn't believe Angel was such a cock tease.

"Son, you've got to lay off of this one. If you scare her away with your persistent questioning, or other persistent prodding..." His dad waggled his eyebrows and pointedly tipped his beer in the direction of Arian's distressed lap. "Your mother will kill you. She likes this girl and doesn't care about her past. You understand?"

"Yeah, Dad." Arian snorted, shaking his head. "I understand."

"Well, just between you and me..." His dad leaned towards him and lowered his voice. "Don't let your mother know if she leaves this house with any less *virtue* than she had when she arrived."

"Judging from her sprinting ability..." Arian laughed heartily. Leave it to his dad to find levity at his painfully erected expense. "I don't think you have to worry about it."

Chapter Four

Arian slammed off the alarm clock buzzer. Throwing off the covers, he sat upright and slid his legs over the bed's edge. Every ounce of his body felt heavy and his cock throbbed. Sleep wasn't possible with the raging hard-on Angel left him with last night.

"Cock tease," he grumbled under his breath as he walked stiff-legged in nothing but his pajama bottoms down the hall, grabbed a towel from the linen closet, then headed for a shower.

After closing the bathroom door, he turned on the shower. The moment he stood under the steady stream of hot water, Angel's eyes haunted his thoughts. Her taste sprang to life on his tongue. He tilted his face up with his mouth open, hoping to rinse her flavor from his taste buds.

It didn't work. He spit, growling under his breath. Grabbing the soap, he thrashed it roughly across his chest. Sparks shot through his body when he grazed a nipple with his thumbnail. He leaned against the tile wall and closed his eyes. Visions of Angel's breasts came to life inside his closed lids.

The phantom feel of her breasts lingered in his palm. He ached to strum her nipples with his tongue, but lathered his own instead. The circular ministrations of his soapy fingertips to his sensitive nipples sent electric shocks down the center of his abdomen, to the hard shaft of his cock, then pooled in the taut sac of his balls.

God, just the thought of her had him granite hard and his balls taut. He had to do something before he burst.

Gripping the soap, he lathered his hands. Visions of Angel's body flamed him into action. Sudsing the velvet head of his cock, he wrapped his fingers around it. Caressing the marble-hard shaft until pre-cum dripped, giving added lubricant to the soapy lather in his palm. Though he knew how to please himself, he wished it was Angel's hand giving his cock relief.

Tightening his grip, he simultaneously released a soft moan from his lips. Increasing the up-and-down tempo, his breathing became erratic and his heart thundered but he couldn't stop. In his mind's eye, it was Angel's hand touching him.

He bit his lip as visions of her perfect mouth suckling his shaft danced on the inside curtain of his closed lids. Repetitive long, taut strokes from head to base, from base to head and his teeth gritted against the pressure building in his balls.

Desperately, he needed release. Both hands clasped his cock and jerked up and down, begging his balls for relief. He needed to come.

No! What he needed was to fuck Angel.

Reflexively, his eyes closed tighter. Hands gripped his cock and Angel's legs spread wide, displayed on the big screen inside his head. He envisioned her pussy dripping, opening for him to enter and pound her senseless. The sight brought success to his mission. Cum gushed and sprayed the shower wall. It felt as if the constant stream would never stop spewing from his cock.

Knees weak, he stood under the hot water massaging his cock and balls until the last drop went down the drain.

I haven't needed to do that for months. Arian laughed.

Wonder what it'd be like to fuck her?

Though he'd just jerked off, his cock stirred.

Damn! What's she doing to me?

He washed up, turned off the water and got out.

* * * * *

Should he knock and see if she was still in her room? No. Arian rolled his eyes to the ceiling and leaned against the wall beside Angel's bedroom door. The aroma of fresh coffee drifted up the stairs and he decided she must be in the kitchen.

He ran a hand through his rumpled hair. Visions of her breasts, her body, her hair, her scent and the sweet taste of her mouth kept him semi-hard, even after jerking off in the shower. But that hadn't alleviated anything other than the pent-up pressure in his balls.

Arian snorted. Never had a woman frustrated him more. Was it because she was inexperienced—quite possibly a virgin? His dad seemed to think that she was an innocent as he had put it.

Arian ran his tongue across his lips. The way she kissed last night didn't seem innocent. A sideways grin tugged at his mouth before his conscience reared its ugly head and whispered we don't know her in his ear.

Fists tight at his sides, he swallowed hard against the sudden blender of emotions whirling in his chest. One moment, he didn't trust her with his folks. The next, all he could think about was fucking her brains out. What was wrong with him? He could have any woman he wanted. Why did he want her so badly?

Pushing away from the wall, he pulled his cell phone from his pocket. He needed answers. He punched the number of his younger brother as he walked down the stairs. After several rings, he left a message then tried Rhiannon. No answer. Growling, he slapped the cell phone shut then dropped it in his pocket.

"Where the hell are they?" he grumbled under his breath.

Arian glanced around the kitchen. Angel wasn't at breakfast with his folks. Maybe, she was in her room. *Knew I should've knocked*. He huffed.

He walked in, poured a cup of coffee and settled into a chair. Unintentionally, his cup landed with a thump on the table as he picked up the sports page. He'd wait. She had to come down sometime.

"She's not here," his dad spoke from behind the section of the Sunday morning paper he held in front of his face.

"What?" Arian grumbled and snapped the paper open to hide his disappointment. She wasn't here, where was she?

"Angel asked for the day off," his mom stated from behind her section of the paper. "I guess that means you'll be attending church with us this morning. I hear you had a rather adventurous night last night."

Arian felt her gaze, even before he lowered his paper and met her arched eyebrow, arms crossed over her chest, pissed-off mother look.

"I'm not sure what you mean." Arian decided to play dumb and gave her the best innocent-boy look he could muster.

"I didn't get all the particulars." She shot a slanted gaze at his father who appropriately hid behind the headlines. *Chicken*, Arian thought before she turned both barrels back on him. "I had hoped the two of you could work out your differences. I asked you not to hound her about her past. You didn't say anything to hurt her, did you?"

"No." Arian cleared his throat as the memory of her lips' sweet taste watered his mouth. "I didn't 'say' anything."

"Ahem." His dad's swallowed chuckle didn't go unnoticed by Arian. Why'd Dad involve Mom in this?

"What was that, dear?" His mom's tone hinted a knowing edge, which garnered her a "nothing, honey" response from his dad.

"Well, you two better get a move on." She tapped the table as she spoke. "I don't want to be late to church. This is the first Sunday since my accident that I've felt up to going."

"I'll be ready when you are." Arian lifted his cup to hide the slight smile from his mom. He was a grown man, but to her—he was still her little boy in need of reprimanding. Rising as his dad pushed his mom around the table towards the hallway. Arian stepped in line behind him, leaned in close to his ear and whispered, "You trying to put me in the doghouse?"

"Nope." A twinkling pair of deep green eyes took on a feigned look of innocence and a jesting smile appeared on his lips as he replied in a whisper, "Just trying to keep you honest."

"Gee, thanks a lot."

* * * * *

Angel peeked out of the barn's loft. When she saw Arian leave with his parents, a feeling of relief laced with disappointment twisted her insides. Needing time to sort her feelings, she'd escaped to the barn for a few moments of peace.

But it didn't work. She slumped into a pile of fresh hay and rolled onto her back, staring at the ceiling. His scent lingered in her hair. Absently, she traced her lips with her fingertip. The wonderful taste and feel of his lips were forever etched there. All night, visions of his sexy eyes, muscled chest complete with scattered tiny curls, broad shoulders, strong arms and magnificent kissing ability invaded her thoughts and trashed any attempt at restful sleep.

During the night, she tossed and turned, and even once jolted awake and found her hand nestled between her thighs and her fingers moist with her own juices. Just the thought of it sent renewed wetness to her vagina and a heated flush to her cheeks. The simple brush of her arm across her chest set her nipples to full attention and Angel shivered.

Was this what it was supposed to be like? This empty ache and need to be filled by that special someone, *the one* as Sister Mary Margaret had called him. The ghost of her past invaded her thoughts. Angel shuddered, knowing there could be no future without first remembering that horrible night.

Why did he have to be an Aries? She rolled to her stomach and dragged herself into a standing position.

Angel needed to control this overwhelming urge to touch him. *Don't get close to him,* she thought, descending the ladder from the loft to the barn floor. *Think of Myra. She needs you. Just a few more weeks and she'll be fine without you and you'll earn enough to stay hidden for months.*

Angel groomed Star and Halley until their coats were soft and shiny. She normally enjoyed the time she got to spend with them. It helped her think but today it wasn't working. She gave them each an apple and then led them out into the fenced-in meadow.

After filling the water trough, she secured the gate, then perched up on the top rail of the fence. Though heavily pregnant, Halley followed Star's lead and ambled to the far side of the meadow to graze.

Bright cloud-free sunshine warmed her upturned face. Today would be a good day for a walk. She'd spent almost six months hiking, hiding and living in wooded areas and abandoned campgrounds. But this was different. This walk would be because she wanted to—not because she had to. Angel hopped off the rail. She'd often wondered while hanging linens on the line to dry what lay on the other side of the meadow secluded by the trees and today she was going to find out.

Angel walked through the knee-high grass, careful not to step in a hole or the occasional pile of horse manure. Star followed. When she reached the back gate, her decision to climb over instead of to open it won her a ticked-off whinny, a double leg stomp and a swish of his thick black tail.

"No way," she laughed. "I've heard the stories of your escapades and how hard you are to catch when you get out."

Star stretched across the top rail and she stroked his neck. He gave her a wide-eyed innocent look then nuzzled her palm. "Next time," she whispered in his ear, causing it to twitch. "Maybe if I get the courage to ride you..."

Turning on her heels, she followed a faint hidden trail into the woods, which Ed had told her was part of their property.

The song of the birds in the pine trees calmed Angel's twisted nerves caused by the lack of sleep. Not to mention the reason for that lack of sleep, she huffed. She looked up and caught a glimpse of a squirrel jumping from one tree limb to another. Strolling deeper into the woods, she picked the occasional flower. The sound of running water echoed through the trees and lured her to follow. The path dipped down a short incline, then opened up at a babbling stream which pooled into a healthy-sized pond of water surrounded by a grassy bank, beautiful wildflowers and trees.

It was the most beautiful spot she'd ever seen. A wrought iron bench sat at the edge of the pond underneath a huge old oak tree. A tire swing hung from a thick branch of the tree which held it precariously out over the middle of the pond.

Visions of a young boy on the swing, launching into the water, flashed behind her eyes. *Arian's childhood must have been wonderful*. A gentle breeze shifted the tire swing teasingly across the water. It seemed to call—*come out and play*. Angel answered the call.

Carefully climbing the tree, she eased out onto the branch and grabbed the rope. With rope in hand, she inched backwards along the branch and then shimmied down the tree. After securely wrapping the swing around the tree trunk, Angel stripped.

It wasn't normal for her to swim naked, but who'd see. She untangled the swing from around the trunk, mounted it and then jumped off the large rock under the tree.

The swing glided forward with her slender frame inside the tire. Angel started swinging. The freedom of the breeze flittering across her body made her giddy and she laughed out loud. Why hadn't she tried this before? Being naked in a swing was fun. Not to mention the incredible sensations she was feeling from just being naked outside in general.

When she finally had momentum going, Angel slid out of the tire, feet first and landed with a splash. She surfaced and gasped for air. The water was ice cold, yet it was the most refreshed she'd felt in a long time. She swam over to the rock, pulled herself up and lay there shivering. The sun's rays coated her body and made her breasts tingle as if touched by a tender lover. She shuddered at the thought. The only touch she'd ever felt was Arian's. And *oh* how she wished...

I can't spend my day laying here thinking of him.

She jumped up and caught the tire on a backward swing.

"Yeehaw," she screamed, putting the swing through its paces and getting it going at a breakneck speed, before letting go and sliding through the tire.

After about a dozen dives, she floated on her back. Chills rippled across her skin causing her to sigh. If nothing else—she thought—she'd freeze him from her system with the icy water.

Feigning a headache, he got out of church, procured a ride home with Sam Harris for his parents and returned to the house just in time to spot her walking across the meadow. In stealth mode, he followed and was glad that he did.

He grinned, watching from the shelter of the trees. Her water-dampened bottom glistened, nestled in the tire as it whizzed across the pond. Her childlike laughter made it difficult for him not to laugh right along with her. But he didn't want to disturb the moment, not yet.

A cascade of water shot up as Angel's slender frame broke the surface and disappeared. Then moments later, her face tilted towards the sun as she floated to the top and drifted across the surface.

Pert nipples broke through the water, goading him to take action. He perused the vision of pure angelic beauty floating on the surface with her eyes closed. His cock stirred to life at the sight of dark curls glistening between her thighs. Never taking his eyes off her, he stripped.

Making sure not to break any twigs or make any noise, he eased closer. He used the huge old oak to block him from her view if her eyes should open. At the tree, he hefted himself up on the rock at its base and caught the swing on his first try. Cautiously, he hoisted one foot into the center of the tire. He grasped the rope, which was secured around the upper portion of the tire and pulled himself up, then pushed off.

The tree limb creaked. He couldn't chance that she'd open her eyes and see him so he jumped from the swing on the first outward pass and entered the water with a geyser-sized splash.

Angel sputtered and splashed from the sudden wave that jarred her from the tranquil state she'd finally reached. She sank beneath the surface and treaded water to keep afloat. With her head barely above the surface, she scanned the pond for what caused the disturbance.

Something brushed her leg. Angel spun around but saw nothing. Her heart thudded in her ears. It had to be a fish, she reasoned. Her eyes sprang opened wide when a gentle touch skimmed up the inside of her thigh. She screamed and kicked, hitting something hard under the water then swam full throttle towards the rock.

He hadn't meant to scare her but couldn't resist touching her beautiful body under water. Before she reached the edge, Arian broke the surface, rubbing his jaw where her foot had connected. That was going to leave a mark. Sputtering "Angel" through clenched teeth, he followed her towards the shore.

The sound of her name reached her ears, though muted by the water as she frantically attempted to escape what she envisioned as a monster-sized fish. She stopped swimming, turned around while treading water and froze. It was him.

"How dare you scare me like that!"

Realizing her feet touched bottom, she stood. The water fluxed, just barely covering her breasts. *Ohmygod!* She crossed her arms over her chest and hoped he hadn't noticed. How long had he been watching? What had he seen? Heat flushed her cheeks, even though she sank deeper into the icy cold shelter.

"I'm sorry I scared you. Probably should have let you know I was here but I wanted to surprise you." Arian moved closer, brushing his hair out of his eyes. "I see you've found my favorite spot."

"Don't come any closer," Angel commanded, stumbling backwards. "I don't have on a bathing suit."

"Neither do I." He shrugged.

"It's not right," Angel stuttered. Unbelievably, she felt heated moisture between her thighs. How was he controlling her body? Her gaze glued to the droplets from his hair and followed them into the forest of curls on his chest. She swallowed hard then darted her tongue across her lips, aching for a taste of the water from his skin.

"What's not right about it?" Arian saw the tip of her tongue glide across her lips and his cock thumped his thigh. *Down, boy,* he reprimanded his cock as he saw what he hoped was desire in her eyes. But he felt her hesitation as if it were a wall between them.

Cautiously, he stepped towards her, extending his hand.

"We're two people just out for a swim." He held his hand steady, hoping she'd accept. "Why not enjoy the pond together?"

Though her conscience screamed it wasn't proper, Angel took his hand but kept her other arm firmly planted across her chest. Proper or not, she wanted to experience something exciting for once in her life. And Arian was just that. She sighed as she followed him deeper into the water. Every inch of her body tingled, her nipples felt sensitive against her arm and she wished he was holding more than just her hand. Misjudging her step, Angel slipped. Before she could go under, Arian's arm was around her waist, pressing her against him.

He swore he felt her heart pounding, even though her arm was caught between them, still protecting her breasts. Releasing her hand, he brushed her hair from her eyes while holding her steady with his other arm, until she could get her footing.

Man, the feel of her pussy against his thigh was driving his cock wild. He shifted his stance so his uncontrollable rock-hard cock couldn't touch her and scare her away. As bad as he wanted her, he was determined to let her set their pace.

"You okay?" he managed to whisper as he felt her reclaim her composure and place a slender gap between them.

Unable to speak, Angel simply nodded. Though he'd tried to prevent it, his cock had momentarily touched her thigh. How big is it? the invisible devil on her shoulder whispered as if daring her to touch it. All resistance to desire gave way and Angel slowly reached under the safety veil of water to brush her fingertips along his thigh.

Boldly, she lifted her gaze to his and felt his arm tighten around her waist. She heard his subtle intake of air the moment her hand found its prize and saw his pupils dilate. Timid fingertips traced the velvet skin of the head of his cock and she felt it twitch. She gasped and jerked her hand back. It had a mind of its own.

Instantly, he clasped her wrist. His gaze seemed intense as he stared at her and Angel couldn't move. She didn't want to.

"Please don't stop," whispered from his lips. "You don't know how much I've dreamed of you touching me."

He'd dreamed of her... Angel's lips parted slightly. Did he know she dreamed of him? She swallowed hard, forcing her lips to close. His words were the most beautiful anyone had ever said to her. Knowing what she wanted, she allowed him to guide her hand to his cock.

The moment her hand touched him, his mouth found hers. Heat thrashed through her body and Angel wasn't sure if it originated from his mouth, or the fantastic feel of his solid steel rod in her hand. His length astounded her.

Not hesitating, she deepened their kiss. She felt him release her wrist and cup the back of her neck. Intrigued by the power she held in her hand, she hungered to learn every inch of his cock. Baby-soft skin sheathed the solid rod in her palm. When she wrapped her fingers around his girth, she felt it tighten. Curiosity surged through her veins urging her further. Inch by inch she caressed the shaft until her fingertips brushed the taut ball sac. The soft moan she captured from his mouth sent electric shocks to the muscles of her vagina and tightened her clit to a sensitive new height she'd never felt before.

Oh God! Her body felt so good. He just had to be the one. He just had to be.

Acting on instinct, Angel moved closer without releasing the grip on Arian's cock.

When her pelvis brushed against the overly sensitive tip, Arian nearly came in her hands. Unlocking their mouths, he grasped her wrist and met Angel's surprised look.

"My turn," he rasped just before he disappeared.

Arian dove under and couldn't resist. The sight of her naked under the water, pert nipples deeply rose-colored daring him to taste, hardened him instantly. No shrinkage here. He grasped her waist and nuzzled his face in her dark pussy curls, then broke the pond's surface.

Angel's mouth gaped open, her eyes were wide and Arian knew he'd surprised her. He licked his lips and her taste coated his tongue. He had to have more. Without giving her a chance to breathe, he crushed his mouth to hers plunging his tongue deep. Arian savored her sweet flavor. Tugging her closer, he wedged his erection tightly between them.

Arian jerked free of her lips and growled huskily, "Wrap your arms around my neck. I want to feel your breasts against my chest."

He smiled when she followed his command and laced her hands in his hair. Though the quick dart of her tongue across her lips was inviting, it was her breasts he wanted this time. Arian capture a pearled nipple between his teeth just below the surface and suckled it in deep. He heard her gasp and smiled around the full mound. She wanted him.

The feel of the soft curls of her pussy rubbing against his thigh increased his excitement. He shifted and grabbed her heart-shaped bottom, pressing her pelvis against his hard cock and teased the slick pussy lips. Arian felt her fingers tighten in his hair and took it as encouragement.

He nibbled and lavished the tender bud until it stood reddened at full attention, then trailed nips and licks up her neck. Arian traced her earlobe with the tip of his tongue. Visible goose bumps trailed her skin.

Grabbing her thighs, he rasped, "Wrap those gorgeous legs of yours around my waist, baby."

Angel trembled. This felt so right. Though she hesitated, she was beyond control. Her good-girl conscience was locked tight in a box at the back of her mind as the invisible devil on her shoulder egged her on. Go for it. When will you ever get the chance to experience such pleasure again?

He's Aries. Angel reasoned for a split-second. He's the one.

Arian's mouth felt so good on her nipple. And the exquisite feel of his cock against her sensitive clit had her perched on a ledge as if waiting to dive off into a sea of erotic pleasure. She wanted something. She wasn't sure what, but she knew—he was the one that could give it to her. Angel followed his command and wrapped her legs around his waist.

The feel of Arian's thick, hard rod nudging between her lower lips, sliding up and down made her tremble. Every upward swipe of his cock sent tremors from her pussy to the sharp points of her nipples as if the two areas were connected. When the thick head thumped against her hidden bud, Angel moaned.

Arian nuzzled her ear. "Like that, do you, baby?"

He knew that she did without even asking. Her body molded to his touch as if she were made just for him.

Her bottom filled his hands. Using her slight body weight to his advantage, he added pressure to his cock by tugging her tighter against him. He shifted his hips back and forth, nudging the thick head of his cock up and down between her luscious pussy lips, making sure to brush her clit on each upward pass. He wrapped his lips around her other nipple and suckled it to perfection. Arian felt her heated breath skirt across his hair and her heartbeat thundered against his cheek as he nursed her nipple to a full rosy bud. He felt her tremble and her clit tensed with each upward thrust and he knew she was close to orgasm.

Arian released her nipple with a sucking pop and licked her earlobe.

"Come for me, Angel," he growled then traced his tongue around the tender rim.

Though it took tremendous strength not to plunge deep into her pussy, Arian continued caressing her swollen clit with his cock. Each short quick glide of his cock wrapped in her dripping pussy lips tested his resolve. She felt so good, so ready.

He had to hold on tight when Angel's back arched and her body shook. Lifting his eyes, he met her wild-eyed gaze and knew she was near orgasm.

Latching her hands on either side of his head, she focused on his face. A guttural growl erupted from somewhere deep and surprised even her. Her nipples felt as if they'd explode. She teetered on the edge of something wonderful, but she needed something more.

"Make me," she rasped. She wasn't sure what it was she was asking him to do. But at this point, she hoped that he would do it to her and ease this ravished need she felt burning inside her soul.

Whatever he did to her next could only feel fantastic. It couldn't be wrong to feel this alive, she decided. Every ounce of her hungered for more of him. He felt so right between her thighs. Each glide of his cock sent tingles up her spine and even more moisture flooded her vagina.

Funny, she thought. She wasn't cold in the icy pond anymore. Amazing how much heat his cock could generate within her tortured soul. And it was torture. She decided. Erotic torture. Having his cock tease her pussy the way that he did made her want to feel him buried deep inside.

Was it wrong to want him the way that she did?

Never before had her whole being felt so electrified. Was this how it was supposed to feel when a man brought a woman to orgasm? If it was, then she liked it a whole lot better than masturbation.

She shivered as another wave of tremors caressed her pussy when his cock thumped her clit.

Arian needed no other invitation. With her legs wound tight around his waist and her hands laced in his hair, he carried her. Each step was a test in restraint. The tickle of her pussy curls against his rock-hard cock tempted him to take her right there in the water. But the sudden flare of doubt in her eyes and the apprehensive nip of her teeth at the corner of her lip, made him realize he may be her first lover and he wanted to make it a memory she'd never forget.

Water sloshed from their bodies as they rose from its depths. Arian felt her indecision the moment the cool breeze flowed across their dripping wetness and she shook in his arms. Angel's grip loosened around his waist and her hands relaxed.

He kneaded the round globes of her bottom, flexing his biceps with just enough tension to rub her pussy lips up and down his throbbing cock, which twitched at just the right moment, thudding against the swollen bud of her clit. He captured her mouth and swallowed her gasp. There was no way he could stop now.

He had to have her.

Without releasing her mouth, he kept her nestled against his raging hard-on as he carried her to the grass. Pulling off the best balancing act of his life, he knelt beside his pile of clothes. Reluctantly, he ended their kiss. With her legs wrapped around his waist, he cradled her with one arm, while he grabbed his shirt and haphazardly laid it on the grass. Gently he lowered Angel to the makeshift mat.

After settling Angel on her back, Arian nipped her lips, her jaw then trailed down her neck to her breasts, where he tenderly ravished each nipple with circular ministrations. He heard Angel's subtle intake of air and smiled. Wrapping his lips around one luscious nipple, he suckled heartily enjoying her avid response. It was hard for him to concentrate on the covert search of his pants pocket for his wallet and the foil-wrapped object he needed before claiming his prize. Arian intended to taste *all* of her on his tongue before he taught her the meaning of a good fuck.

Feeling the hard length of his cock nestled against her throbbing pussy lips sent confused messages through every fiber of Angel's being. The fear of being hurt and betrayed fought the burning desire to be loved at least once in her life by a man. Angel's eyes flew opened wide.

What would the Sisters think? This was wrong.

Attempting to gain control, Angel pressed palms flat against his shoulders, which apparently he took as a good sign and switched to her other breast. The feel of his mouth caressing her breast, his tongue laving her nipple, then nibbling the tender bud between his teeth, overruled any notion she may have had to stop. She sighed as another shock wave rushed through her system and even more moisture flooded her vagina. This felt too good to be wrong.

Angel released the viselike grip of her legs around his waist and relaxed into the feelings that sparked through her bloodstream. Pure lava pooled between her thighs and she felt a deep primal need for something more. His mouth on her nipple, his hardness nestled between her moist labia, slipping slow and meticulously back and

forth, held her perched on a ledge waiting to dive forward and upward into the heavens.

Instinctively, her knees bent and she clutched his hips with her thighs. She scratched a light trail down his back and felt the rumble of his growl around her breast and an unexpected rush of heat to her core made her tremble. She had to touch him. Angel shifted then boldly slipped her hand between them. Feeling the sudden intake of air against her breast and hearing his moan the moment her palm made contact with the head of his cock made her feel powerful as if she controlled their world.

His cock! The thought that she controlled his cock made her tingle and a timid smile tugged her lips.

Remembering how he liked her touch in the water, she grasped it tenderly and slid from mid-shaft up to the thick head. Curling her fingers around its girth, she caressed from the plump velvet head, down its length then trailed her fingertips in the forest of soft curls at its base. Slowly, she repeated the process, relishing the feel of his massive cock in her hands.

Ohmygod! Were all men built this large?

Cool air replaced the warm wetness his mouth left behind when he released her breast and pressed his lips to her ear. Chills electrified her skin. She reflexively tightened her grip and sighed, when he spoke.

"Baby, that feels so good."

The heat of his words and the quick dart of his tongue around the sensitive rim of her ear made Angel's back arch. Since she held his cock positioned just right, the upward jerk of her pelvis inserted the head of his penis deep within her tight entrance. Gritting her teeth against the sudden pain, her eyes tightly closed.

Stars shot behind her lids, but not just any stars. Angel thought she saw the sign of Aries fire to life, mixed deep within her own sign of Aquarius.

Arian's covert condom quest immediately ceased. Having unprotected sex with Angel hadn't been his intent, but now was beyond his control. The moment his cock entered Angel's tight wet sheath, he felt the slight resistance of her innocence slip away.

He kissed the single tear sliding from the corner of her closed eyes. Arian hovered within millimeters of her face and willed control not to thrust deeper into the tight pussy his cock so desperately hungered to plunder. With the softest touches his lips could muster, he caressed Angel's brow, her cheeks, and her tight jawline then brushed across her thinned lips.

"Angel, look at me," he rasped fighting to maintain a shaky hold on his position nestled within the pure heaven of her warmth. Arian held his weight on his forearms so he wouldn't crush her. The feel of her pointy nipples against his chest made his cock twitch. As bad as he wanted to thrust deeper inside her, Arian swallowed hard and gritted his teeth. It was Angel's first time and he intended to make it memorable,

though the fantastic tightness of her pussy gloved around him wreaked havoc on his control.

When Angel opened her eyes, Arian swore he saw the heavens in her eyes and the astrological sign of Aries combined with Aquarius intertwined. He stroked the hair from her eyes and slowly pressed farther inside her warmth but stopped the moment her pupils dilated, dissipating the stars as she bit her lip.

"Still hurt?"

A nod was her only response. He brushed a gentle kiss across her brow and held still, buried partially in her warmth, though his cock begged to be deeper.

"Trust me." He tenderly grazed Angel's bottom lip with his thumb. While he held her wide-eyed gaze, he slid his cock out until only the thick head lingered in her entrance. "It'll get better."

Arian captured her lips in a tender kiss then lifted to hover within millimeters of Angel's face. Their gazes locked. He slowly slipped forward, penetrating just a little deeper than before. The slow in-and-out partial insertion was killing him. But he couldn't rush this—not at the price of hurting her any more than his oversized cock had already done. Arian bit his tongue and thrust back and forth in stilted control of his motions. Angel's gasp and sudden increased wetness around his cock made him smile and his balls tighten as he felt the inner spasms of her orgasm.

Chapter Five

The way Arian strummed her body like a fine instrument stripped away Angel's shyness. With each caress and pelvic thrust, she felt all inhibitions cease to exist. Her skin burned with every kiss and her heart beat in sync to the steady rhythm of his cock. An erotic concert of sensations thrilled her soul yet, kept her hovered on the edge of total enlightenment.

It wasn't enough, she wanted it all.

If just having a portion of his cock inside her made her feel this good she wondered how it would feel if she had it all. She bit the corner of her lip. Before she chickened out, Angel met his forward motion with an upward thrust of her own. An uncontrollable scream ripped from her throat.

Angel shuddered. The ability of her vaginal muscles to stretch and consume Arian's entire cock amazed her. Though it hurt, she felt powerful as she orgasmed. A flash flood of her juices coated the inner lining of her vagina and saturated the giant rod she'd managed to impale herself upon.

"Angel."

Feeling his heated breath graze her cheek and hearing concern in his tone, she pried her eyes open and met his wild-eyed gaze.

Arian lowered his brow to hers and kissed the tip of her nose.

"You okay?"

Unable to answer, she nodded. Trembling and stretched beyond belief, she wanted more. The initial pain of having his cock buried to the hilt hurt but not enough to make her stop. The depth his cock reached inside her was amazing. The sensations flooding her pussy were exquisite.

Angel laced her hands in his hair, held his gaze and slid her pussy slowly down his length until she gripped only the thick head of his cock. Without hesitating, in one swift motion, she took all of his cock deep inside. On each inward plunge, his sac slapped the tender skin beneath her entrance and sent shivers through her vagina.

Strained control showed in his face and a guttural growl rumbled from his chest, just before he ravished her mouth. His teeth raked across her lower lip, followed by the plunge of his tongue into her waiting mouth. Oh, how she loved kissing him, taking his tongue into her mouth and savoring his flavor.

Arian swallowed Angel's gasp and took over the tempo of their sexual motion. He slid his cock in and out, slow and deep, enjoying the feel of her gloved around him. With each movement, she got even wetter. He felt her rock beneath him taking him

deeper. Angel felt unbelievably tight around him and though he feared he hurt her with each plunge, he couldn't stop.

Urged on by her subtle sighs, he increased the rhythm of their pace. Enveloped by her scent, addicted to her taste and seduced by the rapture of being gloved within her exquisite pussy, he was lost. He couldn't get enough and wasn't sure if he ever could. Never had anything felt as right in his universe as she did now.

He nibbled Angel's nipples, then lavished the valley between her breasts with heated kisses. With the tip of his tongue, Arian forged a hot, damp trail to the nape of her neck. Tempted by her taste, he nibbled the sweet skin and tugged it between his teeth.

The moment he rimmed her ear, her back arched, sharp nipples dug into his chest and unbelievably, his cock penetrated even deeper. Arian swore the head of his cock pressed tight against her womb and hoped he hadn't hurt her even more. This was the one time he wished he wasn't so large.

When he felt her inner muscles grip his cock, he lost control. The rippling sensations of her orgasm coaxed his balls to come. Warmth and wetness coated his cock. The gentle spasms of her pussy milked him of his cum.

In a heart-stopping instant, his breath stilled and it felt as if his universe shifted on its axis.

Oh God!

He'd meant to pull out before he came. But Angel felt too damn tight, too damn wonderful, he'd lost all control. Tangled in her heat, his cock nestled deep, he felt each muscle twitch until every last drop spurted from his balls.

He held the majority of his weight on his forearms. Their bodies connected between her thighs. It felt as if his cock had found heaven.

This wasn't good, he sighed against her forehead. But at the moment—he truly didn't care.

Kissing her brow then her eyelids, he felt Angel's body tremble. Every muscle completely satiated, his heart pounded with love.

Love, where'd that come from?

Arian froze, staring down at the angelic beauty beneath him. Those mesmerizing pale blue eyes were closed and a smile laced her lips. He felt the even rise and fall of her breathing and the gentle contractions of her pussy muscles enticed his cock. He couldn't believe he was getting hard again just lying there inside her. He wanted her again. He wanted to be her second fuck as well as her first.

Hell. Arian closed his eyes and nuzzled against her hair. He wanted to be more than that.

The scent of their lovemaking filled his senses as a vision appeared on the inside of his eyelids. The ram of Aries drank from the water of Aquarius. What was he seeing?

Startled, he shivered. As he hovered above her, he opened his eyes and met the ardent stare of a woman completely sated. Arian swallowed the lump in his throat. He rolled off Angel and onto his back, draping one arm over the bridge of his nose.

His thoughts rambled through his brain as he lay trying to sort them out.

Earth-shattering sex. The ram and the water. The signs of the heavens. What did this mean?

He slanted a sideways look at her. What was he going to do with Angel? Why was he envisioning the signs of the heavens after having sex with her? Could it be she was his Venus? His cock twitched from semi-hard to a raging hard-on which was ready for action. Man, he had to do something before he followed the thoughts of the little head and lost himself in Angel completely.

Angel shifted onto her side facing him. She couldn't help but smile, even though her legs shook and her pussy throbbed. This felt better than anything she ever imagined sex could be.

Every muscle in her body quaked from his touch. The magic he performed with his... She bit the edge of her lower lip. She knew him intimately, but couldn't stop the shy blush of a schoolgirl from heating her cheeks. Rolling her eyes, she hoped Arian didn't notice.

She raked a gaze down his body and studied his cock. Boldly, she trailed her fingertips, featherlight down his abdomen to his navel. As she traced the sensitive rim of his belly button, she watched his cock instantly twitch, then trailed her hand even lower. *It* grew and hardened before her eyes with every minute descent of her fingers.

Suddenly, Arian's hand clasped around her wrist halting her perusal. Angel jerked her gaze to his face, but his other arm still hid his eyes.

"I'm sorry, Angel." His words sounded harsh and cold. "I hope your first fuck didn't hurt too much."

Angel's mouth opened, then shut and tears welled but she fought them. Those weren't the words she'd hoped to hear. From the first moment she'd seen those sexy chestnut-colored eyes of his, she'd felt something for him. All along, she'd tried to resist him but lust had taken control. She'd given in to her primal urges for sex and given Arian the only thing she had to give—her virginity.

And all he cared about was if her first "fuck"—as he'd so crudely put it—hurt or not. If she told him it did, would that satisfy his ego? Angel swallowed the harsh lump of foolish pride that welled in her throat. Here she thought she was falling in love with him. What a fool she was to think that love was possible for her. If anything, she had no intentions of letting him know how close her heart had come to being involved in this lesson on sexual intercourse. She shot to her feet.

It felt as if a fist tightened around her heart. Arian didn't feel the same as she. But what did she expect? She shouldn't have let this happen. It went against everything she'd ever been taught.

She froze at the sight of blood on the ground where she had lain.

Oh God, I think I'm going to be sick.

Spinning on her heels, she ran to her clothes and grabbed what she could on the move. She wouldn't let him see her cry. And for God's sake, she refused to let him see her barf.

Fumbling, she tugged on her T-shirt. Hopping on one foot at a time, Angel stumbled into her jeans but managed to keep moving through the trees. She heard the disgruntled growl of a cuss word wrapped in the rustle of clothes somewhere behind her. She couldn't let him catch her.

Angel sniffed back the tears and willed more energy to her tired and trembling legs. The rough material of her jeans rubbing against her naked crotch hurt but she had no time for panties. Instead, she stuffed them in her pocket as she fled with shoes in hand.

The cool breeze of the open meadow washed over her the moment she broke free of the trees and sprinted towards the fence. Angel couldn't chance Star getting out, so she climbed the rails and landed with a thud, gasping for air. Her lungs felt as if they'd collapse. A quick glance over her shoulder granted her a glimpse of Arian half dressed and gaining ground. Angel forced her lungs to work then lunged into a full-fledged run through the tall grass.

When Arian reached the fence, he saw Angel was halfway across the meadow. Teeth clenched, he lifted his tired frame to the top rail and gave a shrill whistle. Star trotted over and Arian straddled him bareback. He leaned forward and clasped Star's mane. Arian clicked his tongue against the inside of his teeth. The horse followed the command and galloped after the raven-haired beauty.

Hooves thundered. The ground vibrated beneath Angel's bare feet. The beat of her heart and the rush of blood through her veins almost drowned out the sound of the fast-approaching horse. Every breath hurt and Angel felt her legs weaken but she refused to stop. She screamed the moment she was lifted from the ground and plopped unceremoniously across his lap. If she didn't feel like she was going to puke before, this position sure wasn't helping alleviate the situation.

When they reached the front gate, Angel sank her teeth into his thigh and fought for freedom.

Arian gritted his teeth against the pain and fisted her hair, jerking her head back.

"Cut it out, Angel," he growled, glaring down at her tearstained face.

His heart sank. She'd been crying. Instantly releasing her hair, he felt like the complete clod that he was and gently helped her to the ground.

The moment Angel's feet touched land, she was off like a horse out of a racing stall at opening bell. Arian straightened, then swung his leg over and slid off Star's back. He

patted Star's hindquarters. The horse snorted before trotting to Halley's side, who'd followed them to the gate at a much slower pace.

Arian felt the sizzle of the glare she shot across the backyard, before she darted in through the screen door. *I deserved that.* He huffed, raking his hand through his hair. Hell, he deserved worse. He'd just had the most mind-blowing sex of his life. And instead of basking in the afterglow of Angel's first time—he'd ripped out her heart and stomped that sucker flat.

"Damn," he grumbled under his breath. He needed to make things right. Without hesitation, he jogged after her. The moment he opened the door, he was stopped by a phone being shoved in his face.

"It's for you." Angel's face showed total devastation and Arian's heart stopped. "It's your girlfriend, Candy."

"What?" He reflexively caught the receiver she threw at him.

"Hello! Hello!" a high-pitched female voice screeched. "Is anyone there?"

"Yeah, it's me," he stated coldly to the woman he recognized on the other end. "What do you want?"

"Ah, come on, lover! Is that any way to speak to me?" the woman purred back.

"Look," he growled harshly. "I thought we settled this before I left."

"Settled what? I knew you were angry when you left. That's why I waited until now to call." Her voice turned sickly sweet.

"Listen, I don't know what you said to Angel..." He tried to control the loudness and heated nature of his voice. "But I have to go."

"Who, darling?" The phoniness in her voice irked his soul. How had he ever gotten involved with her in the first place? Oh, yeah. He rolled his eyes. His jaw tightened. She had lied to him. "Oh, you must mean the young child that answered the phone. She sounded rather sweet and adorable. Is she a visiting relative? I'd love to meet her."

"I don't have time for this conversation. I meant what I said."

Arian slammed the receiver back on the wall unit, turned on his heels and almost ran face first into his dad.

"What was that about, Son?"

"Nothing." He snorted. "Just someone who can't take a hint. If you'll excuse me..." He stepped past his dad. "There's something I need to take care of."

* * * * *

Angel stood in the hot shower. Tilting her face into the stream, she tried to wash Arian away. But she couldn't. She leaned against the tile and ran her hands through her hair. His scent was everywhere around her. The steam seemed to heighten the remnants of him on her skin.

Trembling hands snatched the bar of soap from its cradle. Repeatedly, she lathered every square inch until she felt as if she'd removed the top layer of skin. The worst was between her thighs. Biting her lower lip, she swiped the soapy cloth between the tender folds of flesh.

It hurt.

When she saw a hint of pink curl around the drain, it hit her. She was no longer innocent, no longer a virgin. She'd made love. Tears welled as she shoved her face into the hot stream of water.

Love. She snorted and choked on a mouthful of water.

What had she thought she was doing?

She should've known that he was involved with someone else. A gorgeous man like Arian didn't go through life unattached. But it had taken a phone call to enlighten her to the fact that he was not available. She should have known, she reprimanded herself.

Did she think that someone like Arian could fall in love with her? And if he did, she couldn't stay. She couldn't live the dream of happily ever after. She was wanted for murder.

Sliding, back flat against the tile, she crumpled into a ball in the tub as hot water pelted her body. Thrashing her hands through her hair, she tried to think. In her heart she knew she hadn't killed that nun. But who would believe her? She was a nobody, an orphan. Though she'd spent her life working in the orphanage and with the nuns, she knew that wasn't enough to prove her innocence. It wasn't enough to fight against the word of a priest who claimed she'd committed the murder.

Would Arian believe her if she told him the little bit that she could remember from that night? No, she decided. He was the one person she couldn't tell.

Though she hungered for his touch, his taste and the feel of him buried deep inside, she knew it could never happen again. Not if she were to leave this place without any attachments. As soon as the job with Myra was done, she knew she'd have to go. The thought of leaving and never coming back made her heart hurt.

Even though he hadn't spoken the words she'd hoped to hear after they had sex, she knew it was too late—her heart was already involved.

She'd fallen in love though she knew it could never be. With her head tucked between her knees, clutched close to her chest and her arms wrapped tight around her legs, she cried.

* * * * *

Arian took the stairs two at a time. When he reached the top, he heard running water and suspected Angel was in the shower. He grasped the knob and turned but it was locked. The sight of her bedroom door slightly open made him thank his lucky stars. Without hesitation, Arian entered and waited patiently in the dark.

What could he possibly say to her that would fix this?

He listened for what seemed like an eternity for the water to stop. The moment it did, his heartbeat increased and most of the blood in his body rushed to his cock. Every line he rehearsed in his head vanished when he heard faint footsteps in the hall. The salvia in his mouth went dry.

Just knowing she'd be naked, wrapped in a towel and her skin moist from the shower, his cock hardened. The prospect of touching Angel again made his hands itch. He darted his tongue across his lips as he silently watched her slip through the slender opening of the doorway, then she shut it tight before switching on the overhead light.

"I hope you don't think you can wash me from you that easily."

With the quickness of a cat, he was behind her before she could turn around. The actual sight of Angel wrapped in a towel was better than anything he imagined. Blood pumped furiously through his veins. Arian needed to touch her, to hold her and most of all...he wanted desperately to taste her lips.

"Get out," Angel stammered.

The feel of Arian's heat close to her back and his hands on her bare shoulders made her shiver. She swallowed hard on the lump of emotions caught in her throat. Washing him from her system—now that was an understatement. Every ounce of her skin glowed bright pink from her efforts. Angel turned away from his face which hovered dangerously close to her ear.

Arian ignored her command. Instead, he closed the slender gap between their bodies and trailed his fingers down her arms. He felt Angel's grip tighten on the towel and her back stiffen. With her hair wrapped in a towel and her head tilted away from him, he paused.

Did she know how vulnerable that left her delectable neck to him? Obviously not. With butterfly-soft touches of his fingertips, Arian traced the outline of her neck, from shoulder to the tightly twisted towel wrapped around her hair. When Angel tried to step away from his touch, he captured her in a one-armed grip around the waist. His hand shook as he reached over her shoulder and tilted her chin, forcing her to look at him.

"Angel, talk to me."

Tears sat perched in the corners of her beautiful pale blue eyes and tore at his heart. When one escaped, Arian softly kissed it from her cheek. His cock twitched to life at the flavor of salt and soap on his tongue and tapped the small of her back.

Angel wiggled in his grip. She stretched as far as possible away from his lips, afraid that if he made contact, she'd lose the fragile grasp she had on her control.

"Please stop," she whimpered and closed her eyes, unable to look into his any longer. They made her heart ache.

The hardness of his cock rubbing in the small of her back renewed moisture between her thighs, igniting an undeniable hunger for his touch. Pouting nipples strained to be free from the towel. Angel white-knuckle gripped the towel to prevent Arian from seeing her body's traitorous reaction.

A tiny voice at the base of her skull shrilled through her brain. Remember the other woman.

Though she wanted his touch, to feel him against her and better yet—in her—she flinched. She couldn't be with him. At first, she'd thought it was her past that stood in the way. Now, a new reason had sprung to life, making it even more impossible for them to be together, Arian belonged to someone else. The invisible fist constricted tighter around her heart. She pushed harder to get away from him.

"I don't want to talk to you," she hissed between clenched teeth.

"Angel."

He tightened his arm around her waist. The little vixen was unintentionally killing him with every twist of her body. The rub of her bottom against the base of his cock made him hunger to throw her down on the bed and show her what she was doing to him. But he knew in his heart, he'd hurt her both emotionally and physically. He'd taken her virginity and instead of sharing in the beauty of the moment, he'd thrown that gift back in her face. Why'd he have to call it a fuck? Why couldn't he have been more gentle with her?

Because the vision scared him. He swallowed hard as the reality hit him. He'd seen a sign from the heavens. But did he understand its meaning? He wasn't sure. But the one thing he knew, he needed to make things right between him and Angel.

The soft feel of her skin, the sudden brush of her breast against his arm and he lost it. Arian captured the nape of her neck in his mouth and suckled. Grazing his thumb under the plumpness of Angel's breast, he heard her audible gasp and saw visible goose bumps on her skin.

Still, she pushed away.

"Please don't," she whispered, shaking her head so violently that the towel slipped from her hair and fell to the floor.

Her whole body shook in his grip. Though her face was hidden underneath her hair, he knew she cried.

Knowing he'd hurt her again, Arian's heart thudded. Spinning Angel around in his arms, he lifted her hair from her face. Though she tried to turn away, he forced her to meet his gaze. Tears flowed freely slicing his heart to pieces. He had to make this right.

Arian kissed Angel with every ounce of the passion he felt for her—but got no response. His tongue plunged deep—hers held still. His teeth grazed her bottom lip but she gave him nothing in return. Relinquishing her lips, Arian looked deeply into Angel's water-filled eyes.

Reflected in her eyes, he saw a vision of the ram sitting at the water's edge. Arian held his gaze firm, though the vision rocked him to the core. What did it mean?

"Tell me to leave and I will," he rasped on a ragged breath. Arian saw the hesitation flit across Angel's face but the word that followed knocked him cold.

"Leave."

Arian forced his back to straighten though his shoulders sagged. Not sure how he did it, he released her. He held his gaze locked on hers, hoping for another chance. When she didn't give him one, he commanded his legs to move and walked out the door.

Angel tilted her chin and refused to give in. It had to be this way. She forced her legs to hold her upright, until Arian stepped past, opened the door and shut it behind him. A whoosh of air left her lungs as she hurled herself onto the bed. Though she tried to prevent them, the tears flowed.

Chapter Six

Angel skipped dinner. She waited in her room until the house was totally quiet. Well after midnight she got her chance. She adjusted the weight of her backpack then peeked through the slender crack she held open in the bedroom door. The coast was clear. She felt certain everyone had finally gone to sleep.

Her insides quaked and her legs were rebelliously stiff. *This was the only way*. She reassured her tormented soul. Silently, she left the bedroom making sure to close the door tight.

With each step, an invisible fist constricted tighter around her heart, making her feel worse about her decision. Myra still needed her help.

She tiptoed through the kitchen, out the back door and closed it tightly. Inadvertently, she lifted her gaze and fixated on a certain star pattern. Angel diverted her gaze from the Aries constellation and forced her legs to work.

Hurrying around the side of the house, she hustled through the front yard. If she was to stick to her plan, she needed this place far behind her by morning.

Leave, before she did anything else as stupid as falling in love. Angel chastised herself and prayed for Myra's forgiveness.

In her haste, she missed the hulking lump shrouded by darkness on the front porch swing. She felt his presence before she saw him. A hard tug on her backpack stopped Angel dead in her tracks and spun her around. Off balance, she stepped back but righted herself before he could grab her again.

"That how it is with you, Angel," he growled, lowering his face within millimeters of hers. "You run away when things get too much for you to handle."

"Leave me alone." She bit her lower lip to halt its unwanted tremble.

"No." His one-word answer seethed on a heated breath across her face. His anger was palpable and she swore she tasted it on her tongue.

What right did he have to be angry? She shifted the weight of the pack and returned his glare.

"What's the matter?" She tilted her chin, held his gaze and forced her voice to remain steady. "No one ever fuck you then leave you before?"

Arian couldn't help but laugh. The word didn't sound right coming out of her mouth. But it did turn him on with the way that she'd said it. While rubbing the stubble of a day's growth on his chin, he taunted.

"Come to think of it, they usually come begging for more."

"Well, consider me not your usual fuck," Angel ground out between gritted teeth.

She turned to leave but was stopped short by his cutting grasp latched to her elbow.

He snatched her off balance, spun her around in his arms and glared down at her. Moonlight highlighted the heat in her eyes and added fuel to the raging fire in his gut.

"Baby, I never said you were usual," he growled huskily against her lips. Unable to stop, he attacked her mouth with a heated kiss and smothered any comment she might have made.

Not sure if driven by anger or pure unadulterated lust, Angel returned the kiss. She knew darn well she should back off. Maybe even slap him for touching her again, for making her want him again. She swallowed the moan that rose to her throat. This wasn't right. But God, it felt so good.

Just the taste of his flavor on her tongue and the pressure of his mouth against hers sent spasms rippling through her core and moisture to her panties. Would it hurt to feel him buried inside just one...more...time...

He felt her resistance weaken as she returned his passion. He nipped at her tongue and ravished her lips. As their kiss deepened, he felt of her grab his shirt and pull herself onto her tiptoes. An uncontrolled growl escaped from deep in his gut the moment her body connected with his. Grasping her heart-shaped ass beneath the backpack, he kneaded it like it was dough.

Controlled by the need to feel the heat of her sex against him, he grabbed her thighs and hoisted her up. Automatically, her legs wrapped around his hips and his cock nestled taut against the crotch of her jeans. Her subtle moan urged him on.

She clung to his shirt and he felt the muscles in her thighs tighten. Holding her light weight without strain, he power-walked them to the barn. He couldn't chance waking someone in the house. Not wanting to release her lips, he cracked open the barn door by feel.

Once they entered, Angel shoved the door with her foot but it didn't close all the way. With each step, his cock brushed her pussy, drenching her crotch with her juices and increasing the desperate need to have him buried to the hilt, fucking her until she screamed. Unbelievably, she became more turned on.

It had to be because he was the one, the perfect match to her soul, that she felt this unquenching need for hot sex. When she left, would it die? These cravings for his taste, his kiss, his touch and especially his cock—would they simply go away?

At the moment, she didn't care. She pushed the unwanted thoughts into the farthest recess of her mind. He was in her arms. Her legs were around his waist and his cock... His cock was teasing her tender bud with each bounce of their bodies together as he walked.

Just this one last time. Once more and then I'll go.

He carried her into the empty stall across from Star. The stallion whinnied and stomped. Arian gave a low whistle, followed by three short clicks of his tongue and the horse settled down.

Slowly, he lowered Angel to her feet and broke their kiss. He held her chin and brushed his thumb across her bottom lip. Moonlight filtered in through the slender gap of the partially closed door.

God, she was beautiful. He wasn't sure what he was going to do about her. But right now, he knew what he was going to do with her.

Grabbing her backpack, he removed it and set it aside. Arian fingered the edge of her shirt and lifted it slowly up her abdomen until she raised her arms and he tugged it free of her body. Palming the soft skin of her abdomen, he held on to her waist, worshiping every inch of her beauty while he lowered to his knees.

Hungrily, he tugged at the lace cup of her bra, spilling her left breast free. He heard her sudden intake of air when he blew warm, moist air across her pouting nipple. Learning she liked to be teased, he repeated the tortuous process of freeing the other breast in the same manner. He tormented the jutting tips with quick bursts of warm breath. But didn't touch them until Angel's hands plowed into his hair and smothered his face against her chest.

Arian smiled and suckled one perfect round nipple deep into his mouth. Unhooking her bra, he sucked one breast then the other, turning each into a proud, reddened mound.

He clasped her hips as he lowered himself, laving a trail to her navel. One quick swipe of its sensitive rim and he felt her shudder.

Though part of her knew she should stop, she couldn't for the life of her remember why. The teasing drove her crazy, to the point waiting wasn't an option any longer. She'd basically smashed his face against her chest and felt him smile around the nipple cuddled in his mouth. She loved the feel of him nibbling the nipples and how he caressed her breasts with his tongue.

Oh, what magnificent magic his tongue wove, licking its way down to her navel. Her knees went weak when he ran its warmth around the tiny belly button then darted inside for an instant. As if the two areas were connected, pure pleasure shot to her vagina and she bucked.

She felt his hands glide to the front of her jeans. Within seconds, he was shimmying them down her legs. Steadying herself, she placed her hands on his shoulders as Arian helped her out of her shoes, socks, jeans and then her panties. Surprised by her lack of shyness as she stood naked before him, she laced her hands in his hair and basked in the heat of his perusal.

His gaze raked up her body and halted on her eyes. A raging fire burned in his irises and she feared she'd melt. But she couldn't stop. She wanted to feel him touching her. She liked standing naked before him. The way he looked at her made her feel wanted if only for the moment.

While watching her face, he nudged her thighs apart. When he delved a finger into the wetness he hungered to taste, Angel's pupils dilated and her mouth slightly parted. The sound of her gasp as his finger dove deeper made him smile. Her scent teased his need to taste her.

Slowly, Arian slid his finger from her warm, wet pussy. Dripping with her juices, he slipped his finger in his mouth and suckled every drop of her sweet flavor. Seeing her look of heated surprise, he pulled his finger from his mouth. That one simple taste wasn't enough. He needed more. Without hesitation, he delved face first into her dark curls.

Arian parted her lower lips and felt Angel's knees buckle at the first swipe of his tongue down her sweet slit. Guiding her legs over his shoulders, he lowered her to the floor. The sensual scent of her pussy washed over him, increasing his hunger. With the fingers of one hand, he spread her open and plunged first one, then two fingers into the tight warmth. Her back arched and he lapped at the first rush of her juices.

God, how sweet she was. He could feast upon Angel's banquet all night and never get his fill.

Each gasp and wiggle encouraged Arian. He shoved his tongue inside her flavorful pussy. Over and over, delving deep, suckling her sweet nectar. He heard her ragged breaths and felt her fist tighten in his hair. His angel was on the crest of another erotic wave.

He swiped his tongue up her slick slit then captured the hidden bud of her clit between his teeth. Gently, he nibbled and suckled the tender bud until her hips bucked. Sticking his tongue inside, he reaped the reward he cherished. Her sweet juices coated his tongue as he drank from her wonderful pussy.

Deeper and deeper, he drove his tongue, lapping every drop of her fantastic nectar. He couldn't stop. Her flavor was addicting. It seemed the more he suckled, the wetter she got. She seemed to be a never-ending fountain of pussy juice.

He felt his cock straining against his jeans as if it were begging for a chance to replace his tongue. Though he truly wanted to fuck her, he was loving her flavor on his tongue. The feel of her wiggling beneath his face urged him to suckle even more. He couldn't get enough.

Though he had her body humming, Angel felt uncertain. Was it right to have his face where it was, stationed between her thighs? The very thought that this was sinful, disappeared the moment his fingers worked their magic. One, then two, in then out and

Angel couldn't catch a full breath. Natural instinct took over and she shifted, back and forth in time with his fingers.

Unintentionally, she tightened her grip in his hair. Electric sparks frazzled her system. She was on the edge. When his tongue teased her clit she arched, shoving his face deep. He felt fantastic between her legs. His tongue licking her slit made her tremble. Each plunge of his tongue into her pussy sent tremors up her spine. When he nibbled her clit, her nipples shot to full attention and felt as if they'd burst. But she didn't care.

Waves upon waves of fantastic feelings crashed through her system. He had control of every nerve with each swipe of his majestic tongue. This may be sinful but she loved it

His face buried between her thighs, his hair in her hands and his tongue tasting every aspect of her sex had her teetering on the edge of a cliff looking down on an ocean of pure erotic fun. Was she ready to dive off and enjoy all that he had to offer? Yes, screamed through her brain the moment he sucked her clit in deep as his fingers delved into her pussy.

Unable to stop she bucked against his face, drenching him with her orgasm. Feeling his tongue lap up her juices sent chills across her skin. But he didn't stop. He kept nuzzling his tongue in deep, sucking every drop and caressing her clit with his thumb.

Oh, God, if she died right now, would it be enough?

No, she thought. I need to feel his cock buried to the hilt, fucking me, making me feel as fantastic as his tongue made me feel.

Arian suckled and lapped until her body no longer shuddered. Lowering her bottom and legs to the floor, he sat back on his heels and smiled at his angel. Though her eyes held that heavy, sated appeal, he wasn't done. He needed to feel her gloved around his cock.

Stripping, he held her gaze then lowered into the perfect position between her thighs. Angel's arms laced around his neck. Heaven was having her legs wrapped around his waist and the head of his cock stroking her dripping wet entrance.

Taking in a breath, Arian devoured her mouth as he simultaneously plunged hilt deep. The feel of her velvet sheath fit snug around his cock was a perfect match, as if it was made for his cock and his cock alone. Though he didn't miss a beat in the hypnotic glide of his hips back and forth, it hit him.

No condom.

What was it about this woman that made him so careless?

Was it the fantastic fit of her pussy to his cock? He wasn't sure but at the moment he didn't care. He just wanted to fuck her, to enjoy her taste upon his tongue and feel her orgasm wet his cock. Angel tasted her essence on his tongue. His lovemaking skills were pure magic. What he'd done to her, she couldn't explain. But she knew she'd never feel that fantastic ever again. Tonight would be their last time together, she swore to her conscience.

But in the meantime, she wanted to experience all that Arian had to offer.

She jerked her pelvis upward, taking his hardness deep into her core. The hunger grew and she couldn't get enough. She returned his kiss for kiss and each pelvic thrust for thrust. She felt his balls slap against her with each pound of their bodies together. Wave upon wave of heat coated her skin and fire shot through her soul.

Angel rode Arian hard, increasing their rhythm. When she reached the top of another erotic wave, she dug her heels into his backside and smashed her pelvis against him, taking Arian into the deepest level she could possibly achieve. She jerked free of their kiss, tilted her chin up, arching her neck and back to their fullest extreme and screamed her ecstatic release.

Stars shot behind her tightly closed lids.

The image of Aries combined with Aquarius tattooed her brain.

He was the one.

Arian cradled the sleeping beauty in his arms and nestled his face in her hair. God, she was fantastic. Relaxing, he savored her sweet flavor which lingered on his taste buds. Her scent coated his skin. His cock twitched in its semi-hard condition as if it could spring to full hardness at the first sight of Angel's legs spread.

With her safely asleep in his arms on his chest, he could stay that way with her—forever. And he might *have* to, flamed to life in his brain.

Twice, he'd been careless.

Twice, she'd driven him into such a frenzy that he'd fucked her without a condom and emptied his semen into her sweet channel.

She was innocent. Did she use contraceptives? Was she on the Pill? He closed his eyes and cuddled her close. And how did he ask? He'd never done anything this stupid before.

There was something about her that made him not think straight. Was it her beauty? Was it the way she made him feel when they had sex? Or was it the visions he had when they were together? Was she his Venus?

If so what was she hiding? He had to know. But did it matter? Was her past really that important? He tried to convince himself.

For some reason, she felt so good in his arms, a natural fit as if they belonged together. Inhaling her scent, a vision of them as a family shot behind his lids and he opened his eyes wide. Would it be so bad if she were pregnant?

Where'd that come from?

Him...a father, he'd never given it any thought. She was a stranger. What did he know about her? And why did he feel this overwhelming need to protect her?

Angel's leg shifted across his waist, innocently rubbing her warm, curl-covered pussy against his hip. His cock hardened to attention. He rolled his eyes.

Got to stop thinking with the little head.

He took a deep breath and grappled for control. The scent of her arousal overwhelmed him. The feel of her lips on his nipple crumbled his resolve.

Arian tilted her chin up and was completely captivated by the sleepy-eyed vixen.

Once more couldn't hurt. The thought fleeted through his brain, knocking all other thoughts out of commission as he captured her lips.

* * * * *

"You can't just walk out like this."

Angel didn't answer as she dressed. With the sun on the rise, she'd stayed much later than intended. Their insatiable sexual appetite had them making love twice more last night, leaving her feeling raw. But a good raw, she sighed, turning her back on those chestnut-colored eyes as she hooked her bra and tucked her breasts in place.

"For some reason my parents trust you."

"And you don't." She spun to face him.

"This isn't about me."

Arian thrashed a hand through his hair. What could he say that would make her stay? Think! He'd fucked her three times last night. Never once had he asked her about birth control.

Tell her there's a possibility she might be pregnant, he thought but quickly dismissed. What if she comes back with the fact she's on some form of contraceptive? Disappointment washed through his system on the tail end of that thought and a small part of him didn't want to know. Part of him liked the idea she might be.

Looking at her standing there, in her bra and panties had him hard again.

Man, what had she done to him?

He licked his lips and stumbled through the first thing he could think of that would make her stay.

"This is about Mom. You can't walk out on her. She still needs you."

Angel grabbed her shirt and shoved it on over her head. The tiny hope he'd say that it was about him—that he loved her—evaporated. A heavy sigh escaped as she thrashed her arms into the shirt and pulled it down. Turning away from Arian, she grabbed her jeans. She couldn't look at him. The sight of him standing there naked had her wanting him buried inside her again.

Were you supposed to feel like this? Hungry for the man all the time.

Sister Mary Margaret never said anything about how to handle it, if *the one* didn't love you back. Angel willed away the tears. Now, she couldn't even ask Sister Mary

Margaret for advice. Gruffly, she cleared her throat. And to top it off, she was running out on the one person who needed her most—Myra.

The invisible fist reclaimed its position around her heart. Rubbing her chest, she felt that if the tightness didn't let up soon, her heart would stop for good. She shot a sideways glance over her shoulder. It was all because of him.

Taking a deep breath, she tired to control the shake of her hands as she stepped one leg into her jeans. Her foot got tangled and she hopped off balance. Warm hands encircled her upper arms and his chest pressed against her back as he steadied her from falling.

"What if I promise to leave you alone?" he whispered huskily close to her ear and chills shot down her spine.

It wasn't a matter of Arian leaving her alone, she determined. It was a matter of Angel keeping her hands off him. She closed her eyes and straightened her back. Stumbling out of his grip, she jerked into her jeans.

It wasn't her place to ask him to leave his family home. But if he did, she could stay without the temptation of him being around distracting her from her duties to Myra. Though she knew she'd regret it, she forced the harshest thing she could think of to leave her lips.

"Why don't you just leave until your mother doesn't need me anymore?"

It took extreme effort but she forced her gaze to meet his.

Wrong move.

He stood, bare-chested with his pants pulled up, zipped but the button undone and his eyes fixed directly on her.

"I can't." He stepped towards her.

The thought he might kiss her made her insides quiver. Not sure if she could handle it, if he did, she spun around and grabbed her backpack.

"This won't work." The words came out shakier than Angel intended.

Without warning, he was in front of her. Arian grasped a strap of the backpack preventing Angel from putting it on.

"Angel." He tilted her chin with his other hand, forcibly making her look him in the eye. "It's not because of Mom I'm standing here. If you don't want me to touch you again, I won't. Just don't leave." His tongue licked his lips then he whispered a single plea of "please".

The breath caught in her chest and Angel's heart skipped a beat. It wasn't exactly what she'd wanted to hear. But his "please" touched her soul. As if on autopilot, she released the backpack. Arian slung it over one shoulder, opened the stall and held it for her. After gathering the remainder of their clothes, she kept her distance as she stepped past him.

In silence, they walked into the morning light. The sunrise filled the sky with bright pinks, reds and yellows.

Arian clasped Angel's elbow, bringing her to a halt beside him. Her eyes were beautiful. He couldn't help but kiss her in the warmth of the sun's first morning rays. It took an iron-man strength he didn't know he had to keep the kiss to a simple delicate brush of her lips.

Yep, he decided, if the sunrise had a flavor, it would taste like Angel.

"You promised—" she stuttered before he cut her off.

"Won't happen again."

Momentarily, he stared into the eyes of the woman who had control over his body and quite possibly his heart. Smiling at the thought, his thumb grazed her lower lip, then he dropped his hand to his side.

Keeping his hands off Angel was going to be the hardest act of his life. He walked across the backyard, up onto the porch, pulled open the screen door then turned and waited. The sight of her standing still, with the wondrous colors of the sun coating her skin, re-hardened his cock.

Though the kiss was brief, the effect was intoxicating. Angel's legs felt weak. It had to be from the all-night marathon sex. The taste of him on her tongue watered her mouth and teased her taste buds. This was going to be the hardest thing she'd ever done. She sighed heavily as she watched him walk away.

The cute shape of his butt, the strength she knew he held in those legs, and his apt ability with the cock between his thighs... Squeezing her legs together, she tried to stopped the spasms in her crotch. Rolling her eyes upward, she prayed before taking a step.

Please give me the strength to resist him.

It had to be the close presence of Mars to the Earth and its location in his birth chart that was keeping him this horny. Arian rolled his eyes.

Rhiannon, you've dug this astrological stuff in deep. He snorted. His gaze lingered on Angel, who had finally started to walk at a snail's pace towards the house.

Yep, Mars or no Mars. He shifted his stance to ease the sudden discomfort caused by the rock-solid cock in his jeans. This was going to be the hardest act of his life.

Chapter Seven

God, could a week have been any longer?

Arian wished he'd never made that promise to Angel. Being beaten up by a hundred ninja stuntmen on a movie set would have left him feeling better than his balls felt right now. Not even jerking off had eased his desire to be with Angel.

Arian even tried to work her out of his system. He'd mended every fence, fixed everything that needed repair in the house and poor Star—he'd never been ridden so hard, not even during the height of his racing career.

Angel filled his every thought during the day. And at night, she played the starring role in his erotic dreams.

When his old high school buddy, Ebb, called and suggested they head over to The Shady L, he jumped at the chance to get away from Angel. He didn't even stay home for dinner. After a quick shower, he dressed and left without saying a word to anyone.

The Shady L was the same as always when he arrived. Situated on the border between Brownsville and Chance, it served as a restaurant, bar and dance hall for the locals. Loud country music wailed and the smell of cigarettes, stale beer and hot food assaulted his nose the moment he opened the door.

"Haven't seen you 'round here lately, handsome," a familiar voice called out as he entered the dining room section.

"Haven't been around." Arian hugged the redheaded waitress.

"Well now, why don't you come and sit yourself down at my station." She led him to a table in the corner. "And I'll take care of you. The rest of the gang showing up tonight?"

"Of course." Arian laughed at his favorite waitress. As young adults, he and his friends had hung out at The Shady L. Now, it just seemed to be their favorite place to meet when they were all back in town together.

"Let me get you a drink. What'll it be?"

"A nice cold bottle of Budweiser beer."

"Be right back, sugar."

After Cherry delivered his beer, Arian sat quietly watching people filter in. Many of the faces were familiar but some he didn't recognize. A few walked over and asked for his autograph. But most just ignored him, except for the buxom blonde sauntering in through the door.

"Fancy meeting you here." Her voice dripped with honey as she plopped into a chair at his table before he could object.

"Fancy that," he stated coldly then took a sip of his beer.

"You could at least offer me a beer." Obnoxiously bright lips pursed into a pretend pout.

"Cherry." Arian nodded towards the redheaded waitress, held up two fingers and his half-empty bottle.

"Listen, Arian," she paused, licked her lips, then continued. "I couldn't help but read about your last little girlfriend problem."

Arian chugged down the rest of his beer. This was not starting off the way he'd hoped. Dana's appearance left a bitter taste in his mouth, even the beer couldn't wash away. He'd hoped to hang out with his two closest friends, who wouldn't mention the "girlfriend" fiasco. But Dana wasn't one of them.

After thanking Cherry for the fresh beer, he handed her the empty. Arian narrowed his gaze on the intrusive blonde but didn't bother to reply to her comment. What the papers had reported was nothing compared to the truth behind that disaster. He took a swig of his beer.

"I just wanted you to know." She leaned forward, exposing more of her bosom than Arian cared to see. "I'm here to offer you a shoulder to cry on."

"It's not your shoulder you're showing me," he replied bluntly.

"Oh." A wicked smile touched her lips as she feigned an attempt to blush and sat back in her chair. "I know the pain of rejection." She patted her overexposed breast. "I just want you to know...I'm here to help you ease that pain." Batting her false eyelashes, she leaned forward to emphasize her meaning. "In any way you need."

Beer nearly shot through his nose. The town whore had just offered her services as if he'd take her up on it. He rolled his eyes. She was nothing compared to Angel. No woman was. Taking another sip of beer, he was glad to see Ebb and his twin sister, Abby push through the bar crowd and enter the dining room.

"Saved by the posse." He stood to greet his friends.

"For now," Dana whispered. When she stood beside him, Arian felt her breasts brush his arm.

* * * * *

Sleep wasn't possible. It bothered her that he wasn't home. Myra and Ed weren't concerned that he'd left without a word. So why did she care? Angel huffed, rolled over and punched her pillow.

He was a grown man and could do what he wanted. The thought that he might be with another woman stirred to life a nauseous sensation in her gut. She swallowed hard and took a deep breath, hoping to soothe the curdling feeling. Jealousy wasn't new to her. At the orphanage, when others were adopted, she envied them though she'd tried hard not to. They got a family, a home and love.

Stars shot behind her lids she held them closed so tight as Sister Mary Margaret's words resurfaced... The nuns and I are your family, dear. You should not be jealous of what others have, you should be happy for them. The phantom feel of Sister Mary Margaret's hand stroking her hair like she did when Angel was young made her tremble and sit straight up.

"Ugh," she growled, fisting her hands in the sheets. "I hate him for making me feel this way." If she could, she'd hit him.

No, she bit her lip as she flopped back. She wanted to touch him, to hold him, to taste his kisses, to feel him touch her skin. *Oh God*. This week had been the worst. Not even sleeping in the tent alone in the woods during a severe rainstorm was as bad as this.

Now that she knew how great sex felt, the thought of Arian with someone else made her sick. Every muscle clenched tight as she tossed and turned. She knew she shouldn't feel this way. He wasn't hers to keep. When she'd made the condition that he not touch her again in order for her to stay and take care of Myra, a small part of her wished that he would. As the week passed, he hadn't so much as brushed against her.

Had he gotten what he wanted? Had he had his fill of her and now she was a thing of the past? Angel bit back the tears that threatened to fall. It was better this way. She decided. It was best that she keep her feelings to herself and not make a fool of herself any further. *Take care of Myra, do your job and leave when it's over*. She repeated the silent mantra in her head but it didn't relieve the ache she felt deep in her soul.

He'd kept his promise. She sighed. He hadn't touched her. But, oh, how she wished that he had. Moisture flooded the juncture between her thighs as she rubbed her arms. Absently she traced her nipples and hungered for his lips wrapped around them. When they pebbled, she moaned softly.

Eyes closed, she pretended it was his hands instead of hers that trailed slowly down to the pinnacle of her pent-up frustration. One hand slipped inside her panties, the other continued pinching and rubbing her nipples through his jersey that she wore. She pressed her fingers against her throbbing clit and felt her pussy clench.

With her thumb applying just the right pressure to her clit, she delved a finger deep. Thinking of his mouth, his hands and his taut abs brushing hers as his cock plunged inside her body over and over set her hands into a frenzied motion. Adding a second finger, her hips bucked as her orgasm washed over her soaking her fingers with her juices.

Angel curled into a ball and tried to will herself to sleep. But she couldn't. Even masturbation hadn't eased the hunger she felt for him.

In the early morning hours, Angel sprang upright. Had she heard a car door slam? No, not just one but two then another, followed shortly thereafter by voices in the hallway.

On tiptoe, she went to the stairs and hid in the shadows, watching Arian being helped inside by a man and a woman. He seemed unable to stand on his own. Was he hurt?

The pounding of her heart made it difficult for her to hear. She took several steps down the stairs. Shoulders straight, back stiff, hand gripping the rail, she craned her neck, straining to hear what was said.

"I'm fine." Arian's words sounded slurred as he leaned against the doorjamb. "Thanks, Ebb."

"You sure?" The other man seemed reluctant to let him go. Angel took another step and she winced as the stair squeaked, loudly.

"Yeah." Arian's gaze lifted to Angel and a lopsided grin appeared on his face.

A feeling of relief warmed her soul but was quickly doused by a hint of anger. He wasn't hurt. He was drunk.

"Well then, here's your keys." The woman tossed him a set of keys. "Come on, Ebb, give me a lift home."

As soon as the door shut, Arian almost fell. Automatically, Angel rushed to his side, grabbed his arm and placed it across her shoulders. Though the smell of beer and cigarettes reeked from his clothing, his distinctive masculine scent filtered through and sent a chill down her spine.

"Do you need help getting him up the stairs?" Ed called from the top of the stairs.

"I think I can manage," Arian slurred as he leaned heavily on Angel. "That is, as long as I have Angel's help."

"I've got him, Ed," Angel replied, adjusting his arm across her shoulders.

"Well, your mother took her medicine, so she's out for the night. Guess, I'll see you two in the morning." He returned to his room.

Arian staggered with Angel's help, up the stairs and into his bedroom. When she tried to remove his arm from around her neck at his bedside, he pulled her onto the bed on top of him. Before she could move, he rolled over, pinning her beside him, with an arm and a leg sprawled across her. As she attempted to wiggle free, he snuggled closer.

Acting drunk, so his friends could bring him home, got him out of Dana's clutches. At first, they hadn't understood his request to continue the charade. But the slight elbow he'd received in the ribs from Ebb at the sight of Angel on the stairway let him know they understood. Or at least his oldest buddy did.

Arian nuzzled Angel's neck and palmed one breast. The warm breath she released against his hair in the form of a subtle gasp hardened his cock. This was killing him.

But it was better than not touching her at all. He cuddled his face into her hair and whispered in her ear, continuing his drunken charade.

"Angel," he slurred, "I love you."

God, how he wished he could tell her that for real and not as a part of some drunken act. His eyes sprang open.

Where'd that come from?

Did he truly love her or was it just the part of the drunk he played? His hand slid, instinctively from her breast down to the taut flatness of her lower abdomen. A vision of Angel, round and plump with his child, flew through his thoughts. His chest expanded and his heart grew, spreading warmth throughout his soul. His child, he sighed and snuggled closer, keeping his hand resting above her womb. Somehow, that felt good and right.

Angel froze. His choice of words warmed her soul as his hand slid lower. She knew they were spoken out of drunkenness. But she wanted to pretend that they were real.

When his hand stopped and settled on her lower belly, she released the breath she hadn't realized she held, as disappointment washed over her. She wanted his hand to touch her lower, his fingers to slip inside her and bring her the erotic sensations she knew he was capable of making her experience.

She inhaled deep and a warm fuzziness soothed her system. Where his hand lingered, it felt comfortable for some reason. Angel snuggled deeper within his grasp and settled against his chest for the night. The rhythm of his heartbeat against her cheek warmed her to the core and the feel of his steady breath across her hair tickled all the way to her toes. But she couldn't move, though she knew that she should. This felt so good even if it were only for the moment.

Arian lay awake with his sleeping Angel in his arms.

Rhiannon was right.

Angel was his Venus.

He'd thought that his conversation with Rhiannon earlier hadn't been much help, but now her cryptic message made sense.

"Venus has crossed into the path of your Sun sign. What you do with it, is up to you."

Her words played over in his head. Angel was his Venus. Was he ready for that phase in his life—the commitment phase, love, marriage and children?

* * * * *

Arian woke to find Angel gone. He snuggled into the spot where she had lain. Her scent filled each breath and his cock hardened.

Warmth pooled in his belly as he stretched, rolled onto his back and placed his hands behind his head. This woman was meant to be his.

Angel was his Venus.

Was he okay with that? Just the thought of her made his heart skip a beat and his blood rush through his veins. He ached to hold her and kiss that delectable mouth, among other areas of her body. A sly smile tugged at his lips.

Oh yeah, maybe he was ready.

Arian's cell phone rang on the nightstand. After clearing his throat, he snatched it up on the second ring.

"Hello."

"Arian, you alone?"

Arian sat straight up. Chet never called him anything but *bro* unless something was wrong. His mouth went dry and his heart stopped.

Had Chet found out something about Angel?

Did he want to know?

God, he raked a hand through his hair, swung his legs from under the covers and over the edge of the bed, holding the phone to his ear. Why had he set his private eye brother loose on Angel's past?

"Arian, you there, man?" Chet snapped.

"Yeah," he rasped, leaning forward, placing his elbows on his knees and rubbing his forefinger and thumb across his brow. "What's up?"

"More than I can tell you over the phone," Chet stated. "Before I lose you," he spoke quickly, "I'm on my way home and should be there next week. Got to tie up a few lose ends. Keep an eye on Angel. Don't let her leave."

"What?"

Chet's signal got worse. Before he lost it completely, Arian could only make out three words.

"She's...wanted...murder..."

* * * * *

With a cup of coffee in hand, Arian paced the length of the porch. Chet had to be wrong. Aimlessly, he stared at the long driveway out to the county road.

Angel couldn't have murdered anyone. His gut instinct told him that she was innocent. But what had happened? Why was she on the run?

He thrashed a hand through his hair. How long could a doctor's appointment take anyway? The note had said that his mother had an early appointment with Doc Matthews and they'd be back later.

A huge gulp from his cup and he gagged. *Cold coffee, yuck.* He flung the rest of the liquid from his cup over the rail and set the cup on the wicker table. Arian tugged the cell phone from his pocket and tried Chet again but the call went straight to voice mail. Either he had his phone off or he was still in a dead zone.

What would Rhiannon think of this? He snorted. His Venus was possibly wanted for murder. He rolled his eyes as he plopped into the front porch swing.

Why'd he listen to her astrological nonsense? Because she's right, he huffed. Don't doubt Rhiannon now, he reprimanded himself. The stars are always right. He stared up at the clear blue sky. The sun's midday rays grazed his skin and soothed his soul.

She'd led his career from the rough early stages to a successful action hero status. She'd managed to increase his paychecks by more than he'd ever imagined. And if he'd listened to her advice about a Cancer eating at his soul—that last relationship would've never happened.

That last relationship had all been a lie, he gritted his teeth. Candy had lied.

He shot to his feet. The town wasn't that big, he decided. Maybe he'd catch them there, sitting here was driving him crazy. The need to see Angel thrummed through his veins.

Arian got in his car and drove the thirty minutes into Chance. He parked on the end of the main street. After walking several blocks, he found his mother's car parked in front of Doc Matthews office. The sign in his window stated that he was *out to lunch*.

Damn, I missed them. Arian sighed, shoved his hands in his pockets and stared down the street. Chance remained the quaint little Southern town, with its Charleston-like appearance. He walked down the tree-lined, cobblestoned sidewalk and greeted the usual Saturday shopping crowd. He passed the drugstore but didn't see either his mom or Angel inside. They weren't at the video store or the grocery. Arian was about to give up and go wait on the hood of his mother's car when he saw her through the window of Ellen's Boutique across the street.

Arian crossed the two-lane street and stood at an angle where he could see in the window without either of them seeing him. Though she wasn't actually in the dress, she was beautiful. Ellen held a pale blue, sleeveless knee-length dress up in front of Angel as she stood looking in a floor-length mirror.

Any doubt he had was shot down by the sight of pure, innocent beauty to his eyes. Arian felt it in his heart. If something as bad as murder had happened and Angel was somehow involved, it had to have been self-defense. Angel wasn't capable of murder. Not with the way she handled his mother. Chet had to be wrong. The minute he heard from his brother, he planned to tell him so.

The glance at the tag and the shake of her head sank Arian's heart as Ellen placed it back on the rack. She would've looked fantastic in that, he decided. When he saw Angel wheel his mother towards the door, he ducked around the corner of the building and held his breath as they walked right past.

"Angel, you should've bought that dress. It would've looked lovely on you." He heard his mother say and silently agreed.

"Thank you, Myra. But honestly, where would I wear something like that?" Where would she wear something like that?

A smile crossed his lips as his eyebrows rose. Chet said to keep an eye on her and not let her leave. A secret plan sprang to life. What better way to keep her occupied? Whistling, Arian walked into Ellen's.

* * * * *

The sight of a bright red sports car parked in front of his parents' house made Arian snarl and a hard knot clenched in his stomach. What's Candy doing here? He couldn't believe she'd driven up from her vacation home in Miami, Florida.

He'd spent the rest of his afternoon shopping and putting the finishing touches on his plans for the night. He'd even called home and spoken with his dad, laying the groundwork for his evening. Absently, he patted the inside pocket of his leather jacket, checking the surprise hidden there.

Arian parked, turned off the ignition and got out. The vanity plate, *1CANDY*, seemed to glare at him as if it were a neon sign. In her opinion, she was everyone's number one candy. He snorted harshly. She wasn't his candy. She'd been a great fuck. But that's all she was, nothing else.

The front door swung open before he could grab the handle.

"You've got a visitor," his dad greeted warmly for all to hear, but whispered as Arian stepped inside. "It's Candy. I suppose she was the phone call you got earlier this week?" When Arian nodded, his father continued. "Son, you know how your mother feels about her."

"Trust me, I didn't invite her." Arian grimaced, stepping around his dad to see the silicone-beauty dressed in her typical overdone style. She was wearing a tight red jumpsuit which was barely zipped up past her navel with her large fake boobs tucked in a visible black slinky bra and high-heeled spiked, red leather boots. Her bleached blonde hair was whipped into the latest fashion magazine style. Nothing original there, he grunted.

"Dahling." She sashayed around the coffee table in his direction but he managed to cut her off.

"What're you doing here?" he snapped. Seeing her made his blood boil and his skin crawl. She was nothing more than a liar and a cheat and didn't belong in *his* family home.

"Why dahling, I just thought that with the help and guidance of your mother, maybe we could fix whatever went wrong with us," she purred, stepping towards him and reaching for his cheek.

Once again, he sidestepped her and her fake pout turned his stomach. He refused to make a scene and upset his mother.

The glance Candy shot over her shoulder at his mother curdled his stomach. The bitch had no right bringing his mother into this demented game of hers.

The stiff smile and strained look on his mother's face increased the rage boiling in his gut. Though he'd never told his mother, he felt she knew Candy's actions were one of the reasons he'd left acting temporarily. He licked his lips, took a deep breath and tried to control his temper. If it were up to him, he'd kick her out.

Angel walked in with Ed at her side and a tray of glasses and a pitcher of iced tea in her hands. She set the tray on the coffee table and served the tea.

"Oh, what a cute little maid." Candy accepted the glass from and settled on the couch, as if it were her domain. "Good help is so hard to find these days. Wherever did you find her?"

Arian saw the dagger-filled glare Candy sent at Angel. If they'd been real, Angel would've been dead. He narrowed his gaze at the unwanted visitor who simply smiled at him and patted the place next to her.

"Angel's not a maid." Arian accepted the glass from Angel. He wanted to see her eyes but she held her head lowered as she turned to hand a glass to his mom.

"She's more like one of the family. We're lucky to have her," his dad chimed in and plopped onto the couch beside Candy. "With Myra injured, Angel's been a godsend," he intentionally prattled on about how he met Angel at the diner and nudged closer to Candy as he spoke.

When his dad took the seat that she'd intended for him, anger dilated Candy's pupils and Arian felt a slight grin tug at his lips. Leave it to Dad to take the edge off a bad situation.

As Angel turned to leave, Arian grasped her elbow and shook his head *no*. He escorted her to a chair and then settled into a chair beside her. He felt the heat, even before he met Candy's glare from across the coffee table.

Sitting across from Arian's woman made Angel feel uncomfortable. The air in the room was stifling and she had difficulty taking a deep breath. Did Candy know that she'd had sex with Arian? Could she tell somehow?

Though she tried not to, she squirmed in the chair under the direct stare of the other woman. Why wouldn't Arian let her leave? Nervously, she darted a sideways glance at him. Did it make him feel superior to have two of his conquests in the same room together?

What was he thinking? Angel sipped the tea in hopes it would alleviate the desert dryness of her throat. Hopefully, the woman wouldn't ask her any questions.

"Candy," Myra interrupted Ed politely. "Will you be visiting our area long?"

"Well," Candy exhaled an over-exaggerated sigh. Quick as a cat she stood, rounded the coffee table and sat in Arian's lap as if staking a claim. Her arms snaked around his neck, before he had a chance to respond. "I've heard such wonderful things about this place." She wiggled in his lap and Arian's back stiffened. "I plan to spend as much time as possible, here with Arian."

At the sight of Candy in Arian's lap, it felt as if Angel's heart sank from her chest to her stomach. The growing knot between her shoulder blades tightened. Did he like that? The way she wiggled in that outfit, didn't it put a strain on the seams? If she bounced a little harder, her breasts would pop out. Angel bit her tongue, trying to stop the jealousy springing to life in her thoughts.

Every muscle clenched in his abdomen as he rose, forcing Candy to her feet. Grabbing her wrist, he pried her grip from around his neck.

For a second, he met Angel's astonished stare before returning to the task of removing Candy from his home.

"You won't be staying here." With difficulty, he held his anger in check and his voice calm. He glared down at Candy. "There's a motel, out on the highway near the exit, where you got off to come here."

"Arian," his mother interrupted. "That's not a nice place for her to stay."

"Thank you, Myra," Candy's eyes twinkled and an *I've won* sort of smirk covered her face.

"Ed, why don't you give her directions to that new place over in Henderson? I'm sure that would be more to her liking."

Arian grinned at the dropped-jaw look that shot for a split-second across Candy's face, just before she turned, with a plastered-on smile towards his folks.

Meeting his mom's gaze over the top of Candy's head, he saw the victorious twinkle in her eyes that told him—no one messed with her family.

"What a great idea," his dad added as he stood. "I'll go write down the directions. And if you like, I'll call ahead and have them reserve a room for you."

"That would be wonderful." Candy's voice dripped, sickly sweet. But Arian felt her anger in the grip she held on his elbow as she stood, arrow straight at his side.

"Well then." His mom smiled unlocking the wheels of her chair. "If you'd be so kind as to help me, Angel, we need to get ready for dinner."

With shaking hands, she grasped the handles of Myra's chair and pushed her towards the door. She wanted nothing more than to be out of that room. Away from the two lovers. Before she could escape from Arian and his woman, Myra caught her son's hand.

"Reservations are at seven, aren't they, Son?"

"Yes, ma'am," Arian answered but his eyes were on Angel, who was avoiding looking at him. "I managed to get your favorite table at the country club."

"Oh, goodie." Candy pushed in front of him and Arian bit his tongue. Why'd he let that slip?

"So, we're going out tonight?" She wrapped her hands around his arm. "Walk me out, Arian," she purred. "See everyone later," she called over her shoulder as she took the paper with the directions from Ed and sauntered with Arian in tow towards the door.

The moment they were outside, Arian pried his arm from her red-tipped, clawed hands.

"Tonight's about family," he growled within inches of her face, "something you wouldn't understand."

"Oh, Arian." She pouted, running the tip of one long nail across his cheek. "The little tart's not only too young for you, she'd never understand you the way I do."

He felt her palm the front of his jeans. In a flash, he grasped her wrist and jerked her hand from his zipper. His cock hadn't responded to her touch at all. If anything it'd gone into hiding from the bitch. Gritting his teeth, he bit back his anger. Angel wasn't a tart.

"Trust me," he hissed, shoving her arm away. "You couldn't get me hard if you tried."

He watched her eyes narrow to thin slits and saw her jaw tense. Her hand rose as if to slap him but stopped in midair. A wicked smirk covered her face as she crossed her arms over her chest.

"You know as well as I do—every living being does what they have to do to get where they need to be especially in Hollywood."

Swallowing the choice words he wanted to say, he balled his fist tight at his sides. It would only start another fight and he just wanted her out of there.

"Leave," he commanded between clenched teeth. "There's nothing here for you."

Candy reached as if to hug him and he stepped back. Her arms dropped to her sides. With an exaggerated flair, she turned and stomped off the porch, marched to her car, then shot him a tear-filled gaze.

So, she learned to finally cry on cue, rolled through Arian's thoughts as he glared back at her. Her jaw opened as if to speak, then shut without uttering a word as she got in her car and left.

Arian watched her drive away before he went to his car. There was something he still had to do and he wasn't letting Candy's unwanted visit spoil it.

Chapter Eight

Though Angel tried desperately to get out of going to dinner, Myra insisted. Even her lame excuse of nothing to wear was shot down. Myra loaned her a basic black dress with matching shoes. The shoes fit comfortably. Since Myra was a shorter, more petitesized woman than Angel, the dress fell to mid-thigh and felt snug around her breasts and hips.

"It's not fancy, but it'll do. You should've bought that dress today."

"Who knew?" Angel shrugged and changed back into her clothing. She thanked Myra then marched upstairs to get ready.

Why was Arian including her in this venture? She wasn't family. And it was terribly obvious, she wasn't his type, Angel huffed. Especially after that...that woman showed up and was all over him. A soft growl escaped under Angel's breath as she leaned against the bedroom door, shutting it harder than intended.

While they searched Myra's closet, she'd wanted to ask Myra about Candy but swallowed her questions. Arian's actions towards Candy didn't seem like those of a happy lover. But what did she know? Angel pushed away from the door. Arian was her first and only experience with love.

And look what that got her?

She laid the dress on the bed, the shoes on the floor and then headed to the bathroom for a shower. Apparently, Arian made reservations for dinner at seven.

How was she going to get through this? she mulled as she stepped into the shower. She'd never been anywhere fancy like the country club before.

How was she supposed to act? She and the Sisters had eaten out at different restaurants but was she expected to act a certain way at a country club? Were the rules of this society-type different? What if Candy was there? She would definitely look stupid around someone of Candy's caliber.

Angel shoved her face directly into the hot stream of water. *I have to do this for Myra not Arian*, Angel decided.

Sit next to Myra and follow whatever she does, Angel surmised. That would be her best bet to make it through this evening. Turning off the water, she got out and toweled dry. After wrapping a towel around her wet head and another around her body, she returned to her room.

A large box wrapped in yellow paper and a satin yellow ribbon sat on her bed, with a matching smaller one right beside it. Angel glanced around the room. The black dress and shoes were gone. Deftly, she closed the door and sat on the bed.

Who was it from?

No card was visible. Her hands shook as she unwrapped the box.

The name embossed upon the lid was Ellen's Boutique. Angel's breath stilled. It came from the dress shop she visited earlier.

Myra must have done this. Then why loan me a dress? Her eyebrow cocked up. As if in slow motion, she opened the lid.

A small note card sat nestled upon the tissue paper.

Please wear this tonight.

Angel swallowed hard as she lifted the tissue paper to find the beautiful pale-blue, sleeveless dress. Never had she owned such a dress. Living with the nuns, she hadn't needed one. Carefully gathering the dress by the straps, she lifted it from the box and held it in front of her. It was beautiful. She laid the dress on the bed and opened the other box. A matching pair of shoes lay nestled inside.

Quickly, she slipped into the dress. The silk material felt soft against her skin. The length fell perfectly just above her knee. Angel felt heat rush her cheeks at the sight of the low scoop neckline. Though her breasts were basically covered, the plump globes peeked above the lace cup of her bra even though she adjusted her straps and made sure they were hidden under the slender straps of the dress. Could she wear this? Angel bit the edge of her lip. Yes, she decided.

When she bent to put on the shoes, her breasts plunged forward, revealing more of their plumpness. She stood upright and giggled. *Just don't lean over*.

Slipping into the shoes made her feel like a princess going to a ball. She pulled her hair up into a bun but not as tight as she normally wore it. To accent her face, she slipped several strands free. As she stood in front of the mirror, putting on the makeup Myra had given her, the memory of the rainy afternoon during her first week with Myra flooded her thoughts.

"It doesn't take much to highlight your beauty," Myra had said as she taught Angel the basics of makeup application. They had spent the afternoon talking, doing nails, makeup and Myra even showed her a few new twists to accent her hair as best as she could with one hand. A slight smile tugged Angel's lips at the image of her and Myra struggling with her long raven-colored locks and trying the latest twist from a fashion magazine as they sat on Myra's bed. It had been a great day. It was like having an older sister or a mom...or Sister Mary Margaret. That day reminded her of the countless times she and Sister Mary Margaret had shared "girl talk". Angel missed that feminine closeness. She missed Sister Mary Margaret.

What would Sister Mary Margaret think of me now?

Angel sniffed back a tear as she stood in front of the mirror in her bedroom. The person looking back at her was unrecognizable. A beautiful woman, full of hopes and dreams of a lifetime to spend with one man, stood staring at her.

Just go out and enjoy the evening. When will you ever get the chance to play dress up again? She laughed.

"You're right," the words slipped softly from her lips as she answered her conscience. After one last look in the mirror, Angel walked out to meet the rest of the party downstairs.

Stepping onto the top stair, Angel froze. Arian looked gorgeous. At first, she stood unnoticed, soaking in the glorious essence exuding from his masculine stance as he spoke on his cell phone. When he lifted his gaze to hers, Angel felt liquid heat all the way to her core. Her knees went weak and her panties moistened. He wore a gray jacket with matching slacks and comfortable-looking leather deck shoes. But it was his shirt that brought a smile to her lips, its color was matched closely to that of her dress. She swallowed the lump in her throat and forced her legs to move.

Arian could not take his eyes off Angel as he finished his call. It had taken tremendous effort to concentrate long enough to complete the phone conversation. The dress fit perfectly, accentuating every curve. The sight of her full breasts nestled in the low neckline sprang his cock to life. He shifted his stance casually and hoped the growing bulge in his pants went unnoticed.

He couldn't have been more right—the color did match her eyes. He didn't speak, only watched, as Angel seemed to float gracefully down the stairs.

"Arian, could you..." Ed stopped fumbling with his tie as he followed Arian's stare. The two men stood quiet until she reached the final step.

"Thank you," Angel spoke softly, without looking at Arian.

"I'd hoped it would fit." He stepped towards her, lifting her chin. The color of the dress only emphasized the beauty of her eyes, which could never truly be matched. "You look beautiful."

"Angel, you're beautiful. Now if you'll excuse me," Ed moved out of the hall and back into the bedroom. "I'll get Myra to help me."

"I feel out of place," her voice trembled.

"How so?" He brushed his thumb across her lower lip. Desperately, he wanted to taste her mouth, to feel her in his arms but fought the incredible urge.

"This dinner is a night out for you and your family—" Angel didn't get to finish. Arian put a finger to her lips, halting her words.

"Your outfit isn't complete."

Slipping his hand into the breast pocket of his sports coat, he pulled out a white box tied closed with a red ribbon.

"I can't," Angel stuttered, shaking her head as he held the box out to her.

"You can." Arian smiled as he tugged off the ribbon, opened the box and lifted out a heart-shaped ruby, outlined in diamonds, which hung on a solid gold chain. Angel's mouth dropped and Arian laughed huskily.

"Turn around, so I can put this on you."

When she didn't move, Arian tucked the box under his arm, stepped around her and lifted the necklace over her head. He stood within millimeters of her silk-covered back and breathed in her scent, then forced his hands to focus on the simple task of clasping the necklace around her neck. Being this close to her had him hard as a rock. Slowly, he glided his fingertips from the clasp, down the chain to the jewel in the front. The chain's length made it lie perfectly hovered above the crest of her breasts. He heard Angel's subtle gasp and lowered his lips to her ear as his fingertips took the slow torturous return route up the chain, to the base of her neck.

"The red color of the ruby is a symbol of fire and excitement to an Aries male," he whispered huskily against the tender skin of her earlobe, "which I've seen in you."

"And the diamonds..." He licked his lips as he reached over her shoulder then tilted her chin so he could see her eyes. "The diamonds are the magical birthstone of Aries which attracts love, luck and success. Tell me, Angel." He leaned further over her shoulder and nuzzled her cheek with his lips as he spoke. "What attracts you?"

Angel's mouth went dry and her lips parted. The clearing of a throat stiffened her spine and she shot out of Arian's reach. She ducked her chin and clutched nervously at the necklace as Ed wheeled Myra into the hallway.

"We have plenty of time, dear," Ed assured Myra. "Sam and Vicky are meeting us there. I'm sure they'll hold our reservations for us."

Angel released the breath that she held, certain that they hadn't seen her about to kiss their son. *Oh, God.* She smoothed the front of her dress. *What would Myra think of her if she knew she'd had sex with Arian?* Angel bit her lip.

"They will," Arian added. "I just confirmed them a few moments ago."

"Angel," Myra exclaimed. "You look beautiful. That's the dress. How'd you—" Arian cut his mother off.

"Let's just say a little birdie told me it would be perfect while I was out today."

With a wink at Angel, he took her hand and led her towards the door, grabbed the shawl that he'd bought to match her dress from the coat rack and wrapped it around her shoulders.

"Come on, beautiful." He tucked her hand close to his chest. "Let's go to dinner."

* * * * *

Arian drove his parents' sedan. His heart skipped a beat each time he glimpsed her looking at him in the rearview mirror. God, she was beautiful. His cock swelled.

How could anyone think she was capable of murder? *Down, boy*. Arian shifted in his seat in an attempt to reposition his cock without visibly touching it.

Funny. He smiled at her reflection and she blushed. She hadn't even touched him, wasn't even looking directly at him and still she had him hot, hard and horny. Yeah. He ran his tongue across his lips, she had to be his Venus.

Michelangelo's was the name of the restaurant at the Henderson Country Club Golf Course located at the crossroads where the towns of Henderson, Chance and Brownsville met. It took Arian about forty-five minutes to drive them there.

On the trip there, Ed filled Angel in on the story behind its location.

Arian pulled into the driveway in front of the Victorian-style two-story building, containing the restaurant on the first floor and a dance pavilion on the second. The front of the restaurant was surrounded by beautiful gardens of flowers and evergreens, lit by pathways of lights which intertwined around a patio setting, with bistro tables.

When the valet helped Angel out of the backseat, warmth crept up his neck at the idea of someone else touching her. He eased around the car and clasped her elbow, shooting a *she's mine* glare at the valet.

"Sure am glad Doc traded my cast for this walker-boot contraption," Myra stated happily as Ed helped her into her wheelchair.

"Me too," Ed replied. "Now you won't be knocking over tables with that leg sticking out anymore."

"Oh, Ed." Myra laughed. "We wouldn't even have this problem if you'd let me use my cane."

"Myra." Vicky waved as she and Sam walked over. "I'm glad you invited us." She leaned and gave Myra a hug. "My goodness, Angel," she exclaimed as she stood. "Honey, you're beautiful."

"Thank you, Vicky." Angel looked down at her hands as she fidgeted with the shawl.

"Vic's right, you're gorgeous, kid." Sam added as he kissed her on the cheek and shot a wink at Arian.

"Thank you." Angel felt the heat deepen in her cheeks, as she pinched the shawl tighter to conceal the low neckline of the dress.

Over the past weeks when the Harrises had come to visit Myra, Angel had grown to like Sam and Vicky, even though she didn't think Vicky trusted her with Myra's care.

And why should she? Angel looked at Myra's oldest friend. Vicky wouldn't want you near her friend, if she knew the truth. If she knew you were wanted for murder.

As if he knew her inner turmoil, Angel felt Arian's arm wrap around her waist and his hand nestled open-palm on her hip. She tilted her head and met the warm gaze of his eyes. She rubbed the ruby and diamond necklace and a smile tugged at her lips. Even though, she knew she couldn't keep such an extravagant gift, it made her tingle inside just knowing she could wear it for tonight and pretend that they had a future.

"Have you been waiting long?" Myra asked as they moved up the walkway.

"No, not long. Sam and I went inside when we first got here. They offered to seat us at the bar or out here while we waited. With it being such a beautiful night—" Vicky's voice stilled at the sound of a car's tires squealing behind them.

Simultaneously, they turned around to see a platinum blonde in a skintight, short minidress being helped from the car by several valets.

"That was until now," Vicky mumbled. She leaned forward and whispered to Myra but not low enough that Angel couldn't hear. "What's she doing here?"

"It seems she's invited herself along," Myra stated.

"Well, don't you worry." Vicky stood, back straight, shoulders squared and shot a wink at Angel. "I'll help you eliminate that pest problem."

Myra's subtle laugh didn't quell the sharp pain Angel felt in her gut at the approach of Arian's woman. Though Arian's hand tightened possessively on her hip, she felt uncomfortable.

Candy was his woman and was here to stake her claim. Her breasts were barely concealed in a bright red halter-dress and those long legs clearly visible, all the way up to her... Angel gulped. If she bent over, her panties would show.

Doubt she's wearing any. The thought flashed through Angel's thoughts as the buxom beauty flounced up the walkway to the group.

"Now the gang's all here," Candy pronounced while her unreadable gaze locked on Arian's.

What the hell is she thinking? Arian glared at the unwanted arrival. A cool gap slithered between him and Angel as he felt her try to slip out of his grasp. But he refused to let her. The bitch wasn't going to intimidate Angel. Not as long as there was a breath left in his body.

"Candy." The sound of her name seethed between Arian's clenched teeth. "You're not—"

Arian felt his mom's hand on his wrist and glanced down at her. He looked over his mother's head, in the direction of her slight nod and realized a crowd had gathered.

Returning his glare to Candy, her smile said it all, she was behind this. The bitch knew he wouldn't make a scene at the cost of upsetting his mom. He felt his shoulders tighten, his teeth grit and his gut knot at the prospect of having to tolerate Candy's presence. This was going to be a long night. He rolled his eyes. Hopefully, he'd find a way to get rid of Candy without creating a public show in front of his mother.

Ed turned Myra's chair and wheeled her up the ramp provided to the left of the stairs. Sam escorted Vicky.

"Coming, lover." Candy winked at Arian as she deliberately bumped against him then pranced up the stairs with an exaggerated hip sway.

Angel took a step and tried to ease free of his arm without adding to the scene that had already played out to the people gathered at the bistro tables in front of the restaurant. Gaze focused on the ground, she felt his lips press against her ear and swallowed the lump that rose in her throat.

"Angel." His warm breath floated across her skin and sent a chill down her spine.

"I didn't invite her." Strong fingers tilted her chin upwards, until she met his gaze.

"It's you I want here." His thumb brushed her lower lip and she almost melted. "Not her."

Angel forced a thin smile and a slight nod before he led her up the stairs and held the etched-glass door open. When she brushed against his chest, she glanced into his eyes and the molten gaze lingering there made her feel wanted all the way to her toes. His palm against the small of her back intensified that feeling. Angel tucked her chin and smiled into the shawl bunched around her shoulders.

He wanted *her* here.

Not Candy.

Ed had already informed the maitre d' there would be an additional seat needed so the preparations were made when they entered. They were led to Myra's favorite table in the back corner of the large dining room. The view was magnificent. The back gardens were lit with landscape lighting and tall, Victorian lanterns littered the stone pathway, which led to a round gazebo.

Arian pulled out a chair for Angel that would give her a perfect view of the grounds but Candy nudged between them and wiggled into the chair.

"Oh thank you, dahling." The words seemed to purr from her lips as she batted her fake lashes.

Angel stiffened but Arian didn't miss a beat. He stepped around Candy, pulled another chair out for Angel and then sat in the one between Candy and her. In no way was the bitch attacking Angel without going through him.

Ed settled Myra's wheelchair in at the table next to Angel, then took the chair next to his wife. Vicky and Sam took the seats next to Ed, which placed Sam next to Candy.

"Well, now if everyone is settled, this evening your waiter will be Tad. He'll be with you momentarily," the maitre d' stated, spun on his heels then left.

A hush surrounded the table. Angel felt completely out of place and hot all at once. She knew she should've stayed at the house. She slipped the shawl from her shoulders and felt Arian grab the silky material. The brief touch sent a sizzle across her skin and she stared at him.

"Here, let me help." He smiled, gathered the wrap and draped it over the back of her chair.

"Thank you," she whispered, unable to pull her gaze from his.

"My pleasure," he replied, his eyebrow cocked and she swore she saw pure heat in his eyes.

"Hi, I'm Tad," the young male waiter interrupted and Angel jerked upright in her chair. "And I'll be your waiter for the evening. Would anyone like something from the bar?"

When Angel saw the waiter staring at her, she felt heat flush her cheeks. She fidgeted with the necklace and wished she still had on the shawl. Oh, God, was he staring at the low neck of the dress?

Leaning back, Arian dropped a possessive arm across Angel's chair. A narrowed gaze shot at the young man sent the message, the woman was his. The waiter tipped his head at Arian, with a grin on his face that read "man, are you lucky".

"Would you ladies care for a bottle of wine this evening?" Ed asked.

"That'd be fine, dear. I'd love a glass." Myra smiled.

"Make that two." Vicky chimed in.

"Then, I guess it'll be wine all the way around." Candy leaned forward on her elbows, emphasizing her oversized breasts, flashed her brightest smile and still the waiter failed to notice her.

"Here, Son, you pick."

Behind the wine list his father handed him, Arian chuckled lightly at Candy's cheap play for attention. She definitely wasn't used to not being noticed. He shot a sideways glance at Angel. But who in their right mind would want plastic when someone so real and naturally beautiful sat at their side?

"I think we'll try a couple different things tonight." Arian motioned to the wine menu. "Please bring us this Cabernet Sauvignon and this bottle of White Zinfandel, that way there'll be something for everyone."

Ed smiled as he put his arm across the back of Myra's chair. "I could go for a glass of wine tonight."

"I'm game," Sam retorted happily.

"What about you?" Candy leaned forward and Arian caught the look she shot towards Angel. "Don't you speak?"

"I speak." Angel cocked an eyebrow, lifted her chin and refused to relinquish Candy's not-so-subtle, deadly glare. "But I usually don't drink."

"Oh, come now, I think tonight you should give it a try." Angel couldn't miss the jab in Candy's tone, when she added, "All the women are doing it."

The air seemed to sizzle with the challenge and she caught a glimpse of Candy's hand in Arian's lap, just before he brushed it off his thigh. Angel's jaw tightened. The

woman couldn't take a hint. When Angel slipped her hand in Arian's lap and he didn't shove it away, she saw Candy's gaze narrow.

Touché. Angel shrugged with a wry smile on her lips.

As he turned towards Angel, he took her hand in his under the table. He leaned close to her ear.

"Baby, don't play her games." His voice rasped huskily. "It turns me on when *you* touch me." To emphasize his meaning, he pressed her hand against his semi-hard cock.

Angel couldn't help but smile as he sat up straight, holding her hand nestled in his lap.

For taunting his Angel, he should kill Candy. But he kind of liked the possessive heat he saw in Angel's eyes. He sipped from his water glass and shot a sideways glance at Candy. Now, if he could just get rid of her...

"Oh, Candy, dahling."

Arian was stunned by Vicky's precise rendition of Candy's snooty attitude and he had to choke back a laugh, when she mimicked her hand gestures as well while she spoke. "I recently read you're in a new film. What's it about?"

"I didn't know you followed my career," Candy purred, oblivious to Vicky's mocking.

"I don't." Vicky's tone returned to her natural Southern drawl. "It was just part of an article I read about Arian. You know the one, where it tells all about your breakup and how you're both venturing on in your careers and relationships."

Vicky's words struck harder than anything Arian could have said. Leave it to his mother's best friend to stir the pot. Every muscle in his body tensed as he waited for the snake to recoil and strike.

But instead, Candy relaxed into her chair, with a cold-eyed stare fixed directly at Vicky.

Saved by the waiter, Arian released the breath he held and glanced at his mother, who sat peeking across her menu with a sly smile on her face. Arian couldn't help a slight, sideways smile. Did the two country women know what they were up against? Candy was a veteran city-raised bitch. He sighed and nodded for the waiter to pour.

When all the wineglasses were filled, the waiter left to give them a few more minutes with the menu. Candy held her glass, gently swirling the wine and Arian knew the look on her face. If she got out of line, no matter what his mother said, he was asking Candy to leave, either she'd leave on her own, or by his hands pulling her out of the restaurant, scene or no scene.

"Why, Mrs. Harris, I didn't know you read those gossip magazines."

Arian sat on the edge of his seat, ready to pounce should Candy say anything he didn't like to his mother's best friend.

"You know, you should never believe all that you read. Obviously..." Her hand slithered through Arian's hair and he flinched. "Not everything stated in that article was true."

Jerking her hand from his hair, he felt his jaw tighten and swore the air thickened as he glanced around the table. His dad and Sam sat sipping their wine and dissecting some game. But he caught their sideways looks. His mom and Angel—though she sat, back straight and shoulders tense—quietly discussed the menu.

But Vicky—she looked as if she was on a mission. When Vicky leaned forward, placed her elbows on the table and swirled her glass of wine in both hands, mocking the arrogant star, Arian held his breath. The show was about to begin and he was stuck in the middle as ringmaster.

"Which part wasn't true? The part about the movie, or the one where Arian and you are no longer dating due to the producer he found you in bed with. I'm curious..." Vicky sat back, wine in hand and eyebrow cocked. "Which was it?"

Arian choked on a laugh as his gaze locked on Vicky, who mockingly tipped her glass at Candy, then took a sip.

Absently, he drew circles in Angel's palm with his thumb under the table.

No one knew the actual truth behind their breakup. The rags only reported the sordid details. True, Candy had cheated. But she had also lied. Arian half snorted, half laughed at the fake, shocked look on Candy's face as the thoughts of how they'd gotten together in the first place ran through his head.

She pretended to be something she wasn't, based on the knowledge of his belief in the astrological signs. Acting out the part of devoted lover, she fooled him completely. The bitch convinced him she was a perfect match to his Aries zodiacal sign and he'd believed her blindly.

Rhiannon warned him, a Cancer was eating at his soul. And she had been right. As soon as the initial, hot-passion flames died down, nothing was left of their relationship and Arian saw through Candy's lies. She wasn't the sign she claimed to be. She'd lied about her birth date. Cancer was her true astrological sign and not compatible with his. In no way was she his Venus. Somehow, he had known the entire time they were together. He felt it in his gut. But at the time they'd met, he'd needed something in life, something real.

Nothing about Candy was real. One glance at Angel and he understood what was.

He tipped his glass at Vicky then took a sip and surveyed the damage around the table.

Ed and Sam sat quietly, staring at Candy.

Myra laid down her menu, arms crossed over her chest and a "what do you have to say for yourself" look on her face, stared straight at Candy.

Angel sat toying with the necklace and staring out the window.

Arian lifted her hand to his lips and brushed a kiss across her knuckles. When Angel turned her gaze to his, he winked. The instant flush to her face made him smile.

She was his true compatible sign of Aquarius. He knew this without her ever having to say it. Angel was his Venus. His heart pounded harder in his chest just thinking about Angel as his soul mate.

"Arian dahling," Candy's sharp tone snapped his attention back to her. "I think it might be best if I leave."

Arian released Angel's hand, stood and pulled Candy out her chair roughly by the elbow.

"That's the first smart thing I think I've ever heard you say." With a devilish smile on his lips, Arian leaned towards Vicky, without releasing his grip on Candy.

"To answer your question about which fact wasn't true in that article, Mrs. Harris...it was the movie. Apparently, she wasn't *good* enough to get the part and the producer chose someone else."

Vicky laughed loudly. Candy huffed, snatched her arm free and stomped out of the dining room. Patrons at other tables, who had overheard Arian's statement, stared and laughed in Candy's wake.

Arian turned and touched Angel's shocked face.

"I'll be right back."

Following Candy outside, he met her at the valet desk where she was demanding her car. Dramatically, she whirled around when he reached her.

"How dare you," she snarled. "We're supposed to be a team."

"How dare me," he stated keeping his voice low. His back straightened and he tucked his hands in his pockets, out of fear he might hit a woman for the first time in his life. "It wasn't *me* auditioning horizontally for that part."

"You could've defended me in there." The anger in her words cut through the night air around him like the blade of a new steel knife, but still he held his ground. Arian was determined to see her safely to her car and out of his life. Hopefully, this time for good.

"I told you months ago, we were over."

"How can you say that?" She ran one long nail down the center of his shirt. "We were so good together, dahling."

"No." He grabbed her wrist before she could slither her hand lower. Shaking his head at the pathetic creature in front of him, he wondered what he'd ever seen in her besides a quick fuck. "No, we really weren't. You never loved me. You just loved the idea of being part of Hollywood's hottest new duo."

"That's not true." Her feigned innocence curdled his stomach and he shoved her hand away, as if he had been burned.

"Oh, get off it, Candy. I knew he wasn't the only one. You never were faithful the entire time we were together. I was," he growled, leaning close to her face. "But you

don't understand the meaning of monogamy. I can't have a relationship like that. I wasn't raised that way. And, I refuse to live my life that way."

The air grew silent and thick around them. He watched the vein in the side of her neck throb, violently. When he lifted his eyes to hers, he almost felt sorry for the silicone beauty.

"You'll never get anywhere without me!" she hissed.

The valet pulled to a stop in front of them and moved away from the car as she slid into the driver's seat. Arian grabbed the door before she could close it.

"You seem to have forgotten." He leaned in close to her face. "I was already making movies before you entered my life. I'll still make movies long after you're gone. It's acting talent that keeps an actor working. Not fucking talent. That is, unless you're a porn star."

With that, he slammed the car door and stepped back. Candy stomped on the gas. The car shot out of the circular drive and out onto the road.

I shouldn't have been so rough. He ran a hand through his hair as he watched her taillights disappear. In the future, I hope she gets what she wants. He turned on his heels. It just won't be me. He sighed as he trotted up the stairs.

Chapter Nine

When Arian returned, the table was family-cozy, as it should have been. Arian couldn't help but smile. The sight of his Venus sitting beside his mom warmed his soul.

This felt right. Everything but that little murder thing, he swallowed the lump of doubt rising in his throat. Need to discuss that with her, he eyed the table. Here was not the place. Have to wait until later.

"Thought you didn't drink." He spoke softly against her ear as he slipped into his seat.

"I usually don't." Angel turned to face him with the wineglass in her hand. "But after the fiasco that just occurred, I thought a taste might be calming."

"You might want to go easy, since you've never drank alcohol."

"You misunderstood." Angel's eyebrow cocked and a sly smile crossed her lips. "I said I don't usually drink. I didn't say I never drank before."

"We decided to order several different appetizers. That way, all of us can try a variety," his dad stated.

"Good idea." Arian relaxed into his chair, resting his arm along the back of Angel's.

She amazed him. He sipped his wine as he glanced at her profile. This woman intrigued him beyond his normal Aries nature. He shifted in his chair as the stiff reminder of just how much she intrigued him strained at the zipper of his pants.

"How'd it go out there?" Vicky asked, cheerfully. "I assume that was her tires we heard."

"Yeah, it was," Arian stated, pulling his gaze from the luscious neck of Angel to meet Vicky's mischievous gleam. "Hopefully, she understands this time there's no way we're ever getting back together. I told her that months ago." As if nobody else was there, he stared deep into Angel's eyes and added, "Honest."

"Can't blame her for trying though," Sam chided. "Look at him. Hell, if I was a woman, I'd be after him."

"Gee, thanks a lot, Mr. Harris." Arian rolled his eyes comically. "That makes me feel a whole lot better."

Everyone laughed at the joke, even Angel. Thanks to Sam, the mood lightened up and the rest of the evening was off to a more enjoyable start. Arian was glad nobody spoke of Candy.

Arian enjoyed watching Angel. As the evening progressed, she seemed to relax. Though he was uncertain if it was because of the wine or the fact that there was safety in numbers. She laughed and smiled as his parents and the Harrises' shared stories

about his childhood. Each time she caught him looking at her, she blushed, which made Arian smile. Though he knew every inch of her luscious body intimately, she blushed.

"Hey Arian, remember the time you wanted to be a superhero." His dad added to the slight roasting they were giving him.

"Yeah, and he and the other two decided he could fly," Sam added between snickers of laughter.

"Broke my leg in two places." Arian leaned towards Angel. "I was nine."

"Yeah, but it was mighty funny seeing that cape come flying out of the barn loft, with you attached to it." Ed howled. "What better way to teach you about gravity."

"If it wasn't for the hay bales he landed on, he would've broken his neck." Vicky's eyebrow cocked as she reprimanded the two older men.

"Ah Vick, you got to admit it's pretty funny now." Sam wiped the tears from his eyes. "When it happened, it wasn't. But now it is."

"Now that you've heard some of my most embarrassing moments." Arian slipped his hand over Angel's on the table and held her gaze captive with his. "How about sharing something from your childhood memories? What's the funniest thing you can remember ever happening to you?"

Angel's smile softly faded and Arian felt the change in her mood, as if a gray cloud hovered over her. Even though he held her other hand, she nervously fidgeted with the necklace. Her gaze lowered to the napkin in her lap. Reading the sadness she tried to hide, he wished he hadn't asked. The questions had slipped out before he had thought.

"It's okay," he leaned and whispered against her ear. "You don't have to—"

Angel's finger lifted to his lips, halting his words. After a deep inhalation, her chin lifted and she stared directly in his eyes.

"My life wasn't the same as yours."

He swallowed hard on the lump that rose in his throat, seeing tears perched on the verge of falling in her eyes as she spoke.

"I lived in an orphanage and was raised by nuns. There really wasn't much allowed. They kept us fed, healthy and as happy as possible. I was a little luckier than most of the other orphans."

"How's that?" Vicky asked curiously.

"One of the nuns had a soft spot for me."

Angel turned away from Arian and looked at Vicky. Visions of happier times with Sister Mary Margaret paraded through her thoughts. But came to an abrupt halt, when images of a dark night flashed in her brain temporarily blocking out the good memories. A searing sensation burned at the base of her brain when she tried to focus on the snippets of information from that horrid night blurring through her thoughts. As fast as the images had appeared in her head, they disappeared, leaving her feeling momentarily disoriented.

She shot a quick glance around the table and hoped nobody noticed her momentary lapse. Swallowing hard, Angel forced a level of control to her voice that she didn't feel.

"She sort of took me under her wing and looked after me. But that really was a long time ago. Things were different then."

"Well, dear..."

Angel felt Myra grasp the hand she held in her lap balled around her napkin. Looking at the woman she had come to admire over the past weeks, she saw more than just friendship. She thought she saw the love of a family in the older woman's expression and almost cried when Myra continued.

"You have us now. And for as long as you like, you can stay with us. No need for you to traipse around the countryside in that tent of yours."

"That's right," Vicky chimed in. "You have all of us now to help you."

"Thank you." Angel swallowed hard and forced a timid smile.

Would they really feel this way if they knew the truth? Her stomach churned and she felt like such a fake, no better than that Candy person.

"There have to be some happy memories." Sam smiled, wagging his eyebrows at her. "You don't just know how to camp, you have to be taught. Where'd you learn to take care of yourself in the woods?"

"Sister Mary Margaret" slipped out before she could stop it.

Her mouth felt suddenly dry, Angel gulped down some of the water in her glass. She hadn't said the nun's name to anyone in months. It had to be the wine loosening her up. Biting her lip, she chose her next words carefully.

The feel of Myra's hand covering hers and Arian's thumb, drawing slow, torturous circles in the palm of her other hand as he held it positioned, comfortably snug in his lap as if it belonged there, coaxed her to speak.

"She was one of the nuns at the orphanage. She loved the outdoors. On warm summer nights, she'd take a few of us out into the courtyard between the church and the orphanage. We'd spend the night beneath the stars. She taught us how to build a fire, cook, set up a tent and showed us which berries and things were edible. That part she taught from a book, of course. There weren't many berry bushes in the courtyard."

Angel felt a sudden warm sensation wrap around her heart as if talking about the happier times with Sister Mary Margaret soothed her tortured soul. The nun had been the biggest influence in her life. She swallowed hard then continued.

"As I got older, I worked at the orphanage with the other children. I believed I wanted to become a nun."

"Well," Vicky asked. "Did you take your vows?"

"No." Angel shook her head.

A half smile tugged at her lips at the memory of Sister Mary Margaret talking her out of that one. Telling Angel there was more than just a belief in God that could help direct her choices in life. She taught her about the stars, the heavens and planets and

how she believed in the astrological birth signs and their strong influences in a person's life path. As Angel had grown to understand the church, Sister Mary Margaret's beliefs seemed unusual but that's what made her unique. She wasn't the typical nun and that made Angel love her even more. Teaching her non-biblical things had kept Sister Mary Margaret at odds with Mother Superior. She could still picture the two of them disagreeing on many topics especially those concerning Angel.

Angel glanced sideways at Arian. Boy was she right about finding "the one". Visions of Arian naked flashed through her thoughts. The feel of her nipples pebbling, sent moisture to her panties and she hoped nobody noticed. She glanced down at the front of her dress and exhaled. Though they tingled in her bra, they didn't show through the material. Not yet, anyway.

"What happened?" Vicky prodded her to continue and Angel's gut clenched.

She had already said more than she wanted to about her past. Taking a deep breath, she steadied her nerves and continued.

"Sister Mary Margaret talked me out of it."

She forced a timid smile. Arian's touch on her hand helped calm the quake she felt rolling through her stomach. But if Vicky persisted, how much longer could she hold out, before blurting the wrong words—she was wanted for murder. Angel bit her lip and tightened her grip on Arian's hand.

"That doesn't sound like something a nun would do," Vicky stated.

"Vicky," Myra interrupted, "I don't think that's any of our business."

"It's okay, Myra." Angel leveled her gaze on Vicky. The suspicion she had that Vicky didn't trust her was confirmed by these questions.

"She wasn't your typical nun. According to her, my path in life was a different one to follow than that of a nun."

Angel was grateful when Myra steered the conversation away from her past, before Vicky could grill her more. Ed and Sam jumped in too, helping to keep the mood light.

Arian noticed the change in Angel. She seemed more reserved and less talkative. At the first chance he got, he tilted her chin and captured her gaze. Pure pain clouded the false front of happiness she presented and his heart ached.

"I'm sorry," he whispered.

"About what?" She shrugged.

"About Vicky." His lips hovered close and the warmth of his words brushed across her cheek. "Your past is your past. It's not important to me."

Angel wished it was that simple. If he knew the truth, would he feel the same? She forced a smile and turned to look out the window.

Problem was...the past did matter.

Until she remembered the events of the night Sister Mary Margaret died, the past would always haunt her. Angel sighed and took the last sip of her wine as she glanced around the table.

Tonight is about pretend. You're a princess. She looked at Arian. And he is your prince, if only for the night.

When dinner was over, the group gathered their things and walked outside.

"Looks to me as if the night is still young," Ed stated as he stared up at the stars.

"Yep, guess you could say that," Sam replied as he dug around in his pocket. "Mind if Vick and I catch a ride home with ya'll?"

"Nope, not at all."

"Then it's settled." Sam turned to Arian. "That's a great-sounding band upstairs. I'd take advantage if I were you." He handed over his valet ticket. "You might need this later. I'll get the car tomorrow. See ya."

"Goodnight, you two, have fun," Myra called as they pushed her towards the waiting car.

"Ever get the feeling you've been set up," Arian stated.

"Yeah," Angel laughed. "You think they planned this?"

"Who knows." Arian shrugged. "But we might as well enjoy it. Come on, let's dance." He nodded as he took her arm.

"But I don't know how to dance."

"Well, tonight's the night you learn." His whispered breath against her ear sent chills down her spine.

Music filled the air as they entered the upstairs pavilion. It was like stepping into another world for Angel. Half of the pavilion was covered by a roof, but half had the night sky as its canopy. Glass walls surrounded three sides of the covered section, while high garden brick walls enclosed the outer section, with beautiful topiary scattered along its edges. Tables and chairs lined the walls and a bar sat nestled, just inside the door.

Arian tipped the doorman, which granted them a table out under the stars and they were seated in a private corner. He slid his chair around the back of the table and tugged Angel's closer, so they had full view of the outer dance floor, with the corner of the wall behind them.

Smiling, he snuggled his arm across her shawl-covered shoulders. "You cold?"

"A little."

Angel settled into the crook of his arm and rested her head on his shoulder. It felt so good to be nestled beside him, watching the few couples on the dance floor.

An older couple caught her eye as they twirled past. They seemed so happy, locked in each other's arms, stepping in unison to the rhythm of the music. Angel sighed, it looked so easy.

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"Want to give it a try?"
"I "
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Arian didn't give her a chance. He led her out on the dance floor in front of their table. In one hand he clasped hers. The other palmed her hip as he guided her through the motions. Angel's giggled apology wiped away any pain she caused when she stepped on his toes, repeatedly.

"I don't think I was meant for this." She bit her lip and rolled her eyes up at him.

"You're doing fine."

He twirled her then recaptured her waist with one arm as he dipped her, brushing her face with his other hand. Angel's surprised gasp when he lifted her upright was irresistible and he captured her mouth in a tender kiss.

Arian reluctantly released Angel's lips and snuggled her close as the music changed into a nice slow song. She was the perfect fit, her cheek against his chest, the feel of her hand nestled in his and her other hand's fingers, absently played with the hair at the nape of his neck. He breathed in deep. This felt so right. Having her in his arms hardened him, instantly.

All thought of murder, of questions, of distrust, were pushed aside as he enjoyed the feel and scent of her. There would be another chance to talk, he reasoned. Right now, he wanted to be inside this raven-haired beauty.

Angel relaxed into his arms and felt the beat of his heart against her cheek. She had never known such happiness. She smiled against his chest. Dancing in his arms, time didn't exist and life didn't matter. Secretly, she wished this fantasy could last forever. She sighed, snuggling in his arms.

When the song ended, he led her back to the table, but they didn't sit. Arian tilted her chin up and his gaze melted her to the core.

"You ready to go?" he huskily whispered. Angel nodded, nervously. His fingers grazed her skin as he helped her with the shawl and Angel bit her lip against the wave of shivers coating her body. She didn't want the fairy-tale evening to end. Though she knew it was wrong, she wanted to make love to her prince, once again.

They walked silently to the valet and retrieved the Harrises' car. Arian cut off the attendant and helped Angel into the seat himself. The glimpse of her thigh as she adjusted her dress and the view of her breasts made his balls tighten. He had to have her. He leaned in and brushed his lips to her ear, before he shut her door.

"I want you," he whispered on a heated growl.

Tucking her chin into the shawl bunched around her shoulders, she couldn't stop the grin splitting her lips. He wanted her. A warm glow flicked to life in the pit of her stomach and spread. Anticipation of his touch sent a chill down her spine. Simultaneously, the inner muscles of her pelvis quivered and her clit tightened to a hardened bud. Shifting nervously, she knew she wanted him too.

As soon as they were on the highway, she slid across the bench seat of the older model convertible. One arm cradled her shoulders, tugging her close.

Tenderly, she kissed his cheek then nibbled his ear. His soft moan sent chills along her skin. The need to touch him made her palm itch. *I wonder if he likes to be teased?* She slid her hand along his thigh then boldly slipped her fingers up and down his zipper. When she cupped his balls through his pants and massaged, he growled.

That wasn't enough. The need to touch him burned through her body. She needed to feel him in her hands. She rimmed his ear with her tongue and heard his hissed intake of air just before his hand clamped around her wrist.

"Angel, you're killing me."

Angel playfully pouted as he lifted her hand from his balls to his lips. When he nipped then kissed her palm, sparks raced down her spine, her nipples hardened and her heart seemed to skip a beat. Yep. She shivered. Teasing Arian was fun.

"I want to touch you."

"Oh baby, you will." His sideways glance backed the promise of his words and Angel couldn't help but smile.

Their hands intertwined, he tucked them in his lap as Angel cuddled her head on his shoulder. Instinctively, he pressed the gas pedal harder and prayed he didn't get pulled over. He felt that the longer he wasn't inside her, the harder his cock got. And at that moment, he decided granite was softer than he was.

"You missed the house," she whispered a half hour later against his ear.

"We're not going there."

A few miles farther, he turned onto a dirt road, stopped at the gate, got out and unlocked it. It squeaked loudly as he pushed it open. When he got back in, she sat upright, staring. The road cut through a thick grove of trees. But darkness made it hard to see passed the glow of the headlights.

Where was he taking her?

After a few minutes, the trees opened up into a large meadow, which seemed to shimmer in the light of the moon and stars, which blanketed the sky. It was beautiful.

"Where are we?" She managed to force the words from her suddenly dry throat. Why'd she have to think of the others? Tilting her face, she focused on the night and tried desperately to calm her fears. For some reason she couldn't put her finger on, she wanted to be the first and the last woman he brought to this place. Quit being silly, she reprimanded herself. This is only temporary...sit back...relax and enjoy.

"The property bordering Mom and Dad's place. I bought it a few years ago."

After lowering the convertible's top, he turned off the car and headlights.

The sight of Angel's face highlighted in the moonlight as she stared at the night sky, renewed his convictions that she wasn't a murderer. Innocence exuded from her essence as he inhaled deeply. No matter what, he intended to determine the truth, just not tonight. Clasping her hand, he tugged her closer. Unable to stop, he spilled his desires for the future.

"I plan to build a house here and raise horses." The thought of children shot through his brain as he watched the sparkle of the stars reflect in her eyes.

"It must be a pretty big piece of land if you plan on horses."

Her hand rested on his thigh and he covered it with his. The heat of her palm made his balls ache and it took tremendous restraint not to rip her clothes off and fuck her immediately. But he wanted to know more about her. To learn what made his folks trust her. Trust. It was the one thing not easy for him to give anymore.

"It's a little over two hundred acres. The property wraps around behind Mom and Dad's place and goes as far as Sam and Vicky's." Arian lifted her hand and brushed a gentle kiss across her knuckles. "You like horses?"

"Yes," she managed to rasp. Acres of land, horses, a home, it was more than she could ever hope for. Her eyes locked on his wondrous chestnut-colored gaze. Was he offering that to her?

All her life, she cared for others. What did she want for herself? It didn't matter, she decided. The future could never be. What she had was now. And now was better than nothing.

Closing the gap between them, Angel wrapped her arms around his neck.

"I didn't come here to talk." A primal growl came from somewhere deep in her throat and surprised her as she attacked Arian's delectable mouth.

Uncontrollable need thrashed through her, she wanted him on her, in her, wrapped around her, tasting her the way she wanted to taste him. Her eyes sprang open. She wanted to taste him the way he had tasted her.

With a nip to his bottom lip, Angel sat upright then shoved him back against the driver's side door. It felt so good to take control. She thrilled at the sight of him shifting on the seat and making room for her between his thighs. One of his long legs stretched out on the seat. The other was bent at the knee with his foot rested in the floorboard.

Coherent thought dissipated. Unable to stop, Arian wrestled out of his jacket and tossed it into the backseat as Angel ripped open his shirt. Buttons sprang everywhere, but he didn't care. The moment her face brushed his chest hair, his skin burned for her touch.

Shock waves shot to his cock when she nuzzled one of his nipples, circled it with her tongue then suckled. He felt her hands make quick work of his shirt and tie without his help, then whipped open his belt, unbuttoned and unzipped his pants to invade the slender gap of his boxers and grasp the object of her mission. He couldn't help but hiss and buck the instant her hand touched his flesh. The feel of her slender hand wrapped around his cock sent heated arrows through his body. Never had someone's touch gotten him this hard.

Hot kisses sizzled his skin as she trailed them down the center of his abdomen. Heated breath tingled his navel and he felt his cock twitch. Gentle motions up and down his shaft with one hand, while her other cupped his balls in a loving embrace held Arian teetering on the edge.

The moment her tongue swiped across the head of his cock, he almost lost it.

"Angel," he gasped, thrashing his hands into her hair, lifting her head so he could see her eyes. A look of pure lust and confusion greeted him. Tensing his abdominal muscles, he grappled for control.

"Am I doing something wrong?"

"Far from it," he rasped huskily.

"I want to taste you."

The words every man wants to hear delved into his balls and shot a drop of precum to the slender slit of his cock head. With a shaky hand, he ran his finger across the moisture and lifted it to her lips.

"If you put that delectable mouth of yours on me again..." He swallowed deep, not believing he was telling her to stop. "I'm done."

The sight of her tongue darting from her slightly parted lips and licking the drop from his finger tested his resolve. Never had he wanted a woman as much as he wanted Angel. In an instant, she wrapped her lips around his finger and sucked it in deep. The warm wet suction of her mouth made him whimper and his cock teared another drop as if begging her to taste him again.

Urged on by the rush of power in her veins, the salty taste of him on her tongue and the throbbing need to feel him deep inside, she released his long, hard cock and quickly shifted, straddling his hips. The silky fabric of her dress electrified her thighs as she slid it up around her waist. Hearing her panties rip as Arian tore them from her body made her clit tighten and moisture flooded her folds. The nipples held captive in her bra hardened, aching for his touch. She wanted him. With his flavor fresh on her tongue, she had to have his cock buried to the hilt.

It didn't matter how brazen she felt, her pussy wanted cock and she wasn't about to deny it. Positioning the head at her entrance, she rubbed it against her clit. Gasping as moisture coated the engorged thick cap, she eased down, taking him in, inch by inch.

"Angel," the hoarse whispered word, warmed her cheek as she wiggled and pressed his cock into her body.

Ohmygod! Fantastic, it felt fantastic as she stretched to fit around him. She groaned as the first ripple of her orgasm sparked through her system. Each wave coated his cock until it was slick with her juices. It amazed her how her pussy stretched to swallow his massive cock. Unable to look anywhere else, she watched as his cock sank deeper until she was settled on his full length.

The feel of her tight pussy gloved around him shot the thought of birth control out the window. He truly didn't care. Maybe, if he got her pregnant, she'd stay. Hell, he sighed as he savored her wiggling on his cock, pressing tender kisses to his brow. He wanted her to stay because of him. Matching her stroke for stroke, as his Venus increased the tempo of her ride, he was lost and he knew it. He was in love with his Angel.

"Arian," ripped from her throat as she bucked, captured on the wildest ride of her life. Not wanting to stop, Angel pressed her hands against his chest and dug her knees into his waist as Arian pounded upward, meeting each of her downward strokes. The motions turned frantic as a volcanic wave crashed through her system. Unable to get enough of him, not sure if she ever would, she hovered on the edge of an eruption that only Arian could trigger.

Vibrant blue flames glowed in Angel's eyes. Her pussy contracted around his cock and drove him to the crest of the wave of her orgasm. Arian sat up, wrapped her legs around his waist and latched on to a nipple, suckling the silk and bra covered flesh in as deep as possible. His cock delved, over and over into the warmth of her pussy, as if it had a mind of its own and he was just along for the ride.

On a downward swipe as her bottom teased his balls, he tweaked the hidden bud of her clit. The sound of his name screamed from Angel's lips was pure music. Feeling her orgasm ripple up and down his oversensitive cock, milking every ounce of seed from his sac, was the closest he'd ever come to heaven, he was sure of it.

When he finally caught a full breath, Arian unwrapped Angel's legs from around his waist. Cradling her in his arms, he settled back against the driver's side door with her stretched out, facedown on top of him. Nestled happily inside his Venus, his cock twitched as if it were on top of the world with no intentions of leaving. The image made him shake his head. When had his cock taken control of him?

He gently kissed the top of her head and felt her smile against his chest.

"Rest, baby," he whispered against her hair, "I'll wake you for round two later."

Arian lay awake, relaxed and happy with Angel sleeping in his arms. The stars above shone bright. He watched as the patterns of Aries and Aquarius lit up brighter than all the others. A shooting star danced across the sky, touching only their patterns in its path. Grinning, he stared, watching the constellations dance.

It was a sign from the heavens...she was his.

Chapter Ten

As he descended the stairs, Arian whistled. The vision of Angel's legs wrapped around his waist as they had silently made love in the hot, soapy shower after sneaking into the house in the early morning hours was still fresh on his mind. He smiled as he started the coffeepot. At first, she was afraid of getting caught. But he nibbled her earlobe, the nape of her neck and fondled her breasts, while sneaking in at daybreak, until he had worn down her resistance.

He didn't think he'd ever get enough of her. He sighed, leaning against the counter. Though they'd made love just before he came downstairs, his cock stirred to life at the thought of her. God, she was going to be the death of him. He rolled his eyes to the ceiling at the sound of the shower turning off and he knew she was toweling that gorgeous body dry.

When his dad walked into the kitchen, he shifted his stance to hide his semi-hard cock. "Morning." His dad sat at the table, spread the morning paper open and tapped his finger on a picture. "I see you and Angel had a great time last night."

"What?" Arian pushed from the counter and grabbed the front page.

Captured for all to see, Angel was in his arms as he dipped her on the dance floor.

The headline read, "Local golden boy's latest fling. Who is this mystery woman?"

As he skimmed the article, he felt his jaw tighten.

"Rumor had it he and Candy Cannon were back on. Guess this proves that they're not."

An unflattering picture of him and Candy, obviously arguing outside the restaurant, sat perched at the end of the article.

Candy had to be behind this. He grimaced. Somehow she had managed to get a photographer into the country club. That was why she showed up in the first place, a publicity stunt. He huffed and dropped the paper on the table as the coffeepot signaled it was ready.

"Want a cup?" Arian asked.

"Sure," his dad replied. "You're not angry over this."

Returning with two cups of coffee in hand, he sat.

"Nope," he smiled with a nod, "not at all. Looks to me like Candy's plan backfired. And that's a *great* picture of Angel, don't you think."

"What picture?" Angel asked as she entered.

With her hair pulled into a wet ponytail, her body clothed in worn jeans and a light pink T-shirt, she looked sexy. Arian went from semi-hard to full hard-on Yep. He smiled, turning the paper for her to see. She was going to be the death of him—but what a way to go.

Though she tried to control it, her jaw dropped and she couldn't breathe. How had this happened? Fighting to keep her hands from visibly shaking, she swallowed hard at the ball of bile that rose in the back of her throat. What was she going to do?

If he saw this, he would certainly be able to find her. If he found her, what would happen to Myra, Ed or... She gazed across the paper's edge. What would Arian do if he knew she was wanted for murder? Biting her lip, she tried to halt its tremble. She needed air. She had to get out of here before somebody else got hurt.

That look in her eyes, he'd seen it before. She was going to run. But why? Not now. Not after what they had shared. Arian wasn't going to let her leave that easily.

Last night, he saw their future as they made love on the land he intended to be their home. That place would never be shared with anyone other than Angel. He had no intentions of losing Angel. The signs of the heavens weren't wrong. She was his.

And he knew in his gut, Angel was no murderer. The picture had upset her. It had to be because of her past. Arian rose from his chair. The time was now and he needed her to know he stood beside her no matter what lay in the shadows of her past.

Staring blankly at the picture, Angel felt lost, until the warmth of Arian against her back soothed the nauseous sensation that ravaged her stomach. Turning her head, she looked over her shoulder and their gazes locked. She opened her mouth to speak then closed it, uncertain what she should say. How was she going to tell him she had to leave?

He took the paper, dropped it on the table and laced his hand in hers.

"Let's go for a walk." He tugged her towards the back door. "It's time we talk."

Arian led Angel to the gazebo and made her sit on the swing beside him. Silence hung thick in the air between them.

How was he going to convince her the past didn't matter? Whatever happened was not important. What was important to him was their future together. Unintentionally, his gaze dropped to the flat of her tummy. And the future of their child, flashed through his thoughts. Not sure how to begin, he cradled her hand in his and held it to his heart.

This was the one woman he couldn't lose.

"Angel."

Moistening his suddenly dry lips, he felt his heart pound. Never had he said this to anyone, other than in a love scene on screen. But this was for real.

"I love you."

Please, tell me he didn't just say that. Angel struggled for a breath against the growing pain in her chest. The words she longed to hear reverberated in her ears. This was wrong. Jerking her hand from his, she jumped from the swing.

"You can't," Angel sputtered, crossing her arms tight and grasping her elbows against the sudden pain in her chest. It felt as if her heart would burst.

She couldn't tell him the truth. She couldn't tell him she loved him. He deserved better than a murderer. All her life, she'd waited to hear those words, and now...

Breathe, she reminded herself, just breathe. Don't cry.

"I can't!" He stood and spun her around to face him. This wasn't going as he had hoped. Cupping her chin, tugging her head up, he forced her to look him in the eye.

"Too late. I already am in love with you."

Before she could move, he captured her mouth. Her taste washed over him as he slipped his tongue in through her defenses. Feeling her tremble, he wrapped his arms around her, pulling her closer. When Angel pushed against his chest, he broke their kiss but refused to let her go.

"Arian, you don't even know me."

Tears slid down her cheeks, shattering Arian's heart. He had to make this right. Whatever had happened in her past, he had to fix so they could be together.

"If you knew the truth..."

"Then tell me the truth." Arian brushed a loose strand of hair from her eyes and kissed her lids. "Let me help you."

Angel shook her head violently as she shoved free of his grasp. With one foot on the gazebo steps, his next words froze her in place.

"Tell me about the murder, Angel."

* * * * *

What unbelievable luck. There she sat, big as life on the page. A wicked grin twisted his face as he nodded to the waitress in the shabby roadside truck stop.

"You know this guy?"

"Yeah." She grinned. "That's Arian Adams. He's a local golden boy all right. Made it big as a Hollywood action hero."

"A local?"

"He's from over in Chance." She nodded as if he understood.

It didn't matter that he didn't know where Chance was located. He had a map. And now, he had a destination. Laying a couple of dollars on the counter, he grabbed the

paper and walked out to his car. He slipped into the driver's seat, reached over and pulled out a tattered map from the glove compartment and searched for the coordinates of a town named Chance.

From the map, it seemed to be about an hour or two south of here. He huffed and glared at the dingy front window of the truck stop. *Local, my ass.* He figured out the most direct route then started the car. As he turned onto the highway, he whispered a silent prayer.

Don't worry, Angel, your soul's salvation is on its way.

* * * * *

"How'd you know?" The question whispered so low from Angel that he almost didn't hear it.

"It doesn't matter." Arian moved to stand behind her and put his hands on her shoulders. What was important was making her understand how much he loved her. "All that matters is you."

How long had he known and never said anything? Shoulders sagging, she turned to face him. And how had he found out?

"I don't care what Chet said. You're not a murderer."

"You set your brother on me." Snapping upright, she punched him in the chest. "Before or after we..."

More stunned than hurt, Arian stepped back. When she continually hit him, he grasped her wrist to stop her before she injured herself. As she jerked to a halt, he saw her defiant glare laced with tears.

"I did it before I knew that I love you." He tugged her close, wrapped his arms around her and rested his chin on top of her head.

"I did it to protect my mother. Think about it, Angel. Dad met you at the diner, gave you a job taking care of my mother and they knew nothing about you at all." He leaned back and saw the pain in her eyes.

"They didn't even know your last name." Forcing a thin smile to his lips, he added. "Hell, I don't even know your last name and I think I know you a little better than they do."

A weak laugh escaped on an exasperated breath. It was true, he knew her *body* better than anyone but how could he think he knew her? With what happened to Sister Mary Margaret, she wasn't even sure if she knew herself. Angel brushed the back of her hand across her eyes and sniffed.

"I don't know my real last name. The nuns gave me the name of O'Reilly after one of the favorite priests of the parish. But I never use it. As far as I'm concerned, it's only Angel."

"I can fix that." Kneeling on one knee, he rested his hands on her hips and stared, hopefully into her eyes. "That is, if you'll have me?"

"Don't say that, Arian." Breathe, don't cry, she silently chanted. Had he just asked her to marry him? She should be happy. But instead, her gut twisted into a cyclone-sized whirlwind as she crumpled to her knees, clasping his face in her hands. "You don't know what I've done."

"I know what you haven't done." Arian tilted his head slightly in her hands and placed a tender kiss in her palm. "You're not capable of murder, Angel."

"How do you know?" Angel's lip quivered. "I don't even know myself."

Arian scooped Angel into his arms, sat back on his heels and cuddled her in his lap.

"Tell me what you do know," he whispered against her brow, rocking back and forth. "We'll work this out, together."

"I don't know." As fragmented visions of that night flashed through her brain, the palm of her hand dug against her temple. "That's just it, I can't remember."

"Then tell me what you do remember. Who was killed? And how were you involved?"

Instinctively, he wrapped her tighter in his grip as he felt her whole body tremble.

"Sister Mary Margaret."

"The nun you were close with?"

A simple nod was her reply.

"Angel." He stroked her brow and tucked a loose strand of hair behind her ear. "Tell me everything you remember about what happened."

The sight of her tongue darting across her lips made him hunger for a kiss but now was not the time. He felt her take a deep breath before she spoke. The grimace on her face spoke of the horror she had seen and he knew just talking about this brought her pain. If he could, he would absorb her pain and suffer the agony for her.

"Sister Mary Margaret and I were staying at this religious retreat up in the mountains of northern Tennessee. She hadn't been feeling well and requested a leave of absence from the orphanage so I went with her. I didn't want her to be alone." Angel's gaze dropped to her lap. "We'd never been apart. She raised me at the orphanage from the time I was abandoned on their doorstep."

Arian kissed the tear sneaking from the corner of her eye. How could anyone abandon someone as beautiful as Angel? As gorgeous as she was now, he could only imagine how cute she was as a baby.

"On the night she died..."

Closing her eyes, Angel paused and Arian crushed her tight against his chest. The pain was almost palpable but he knew she had to get it out. It was the only way he could help her overcome the past so they could get on with their future.

Angel's voice cracked as she continued.

"We were packing for a camping trip. We plotted a course along the Appalachian Trail. It was something both of us had always wanted to do." A thin smile twitched her lips and Arian smiled back at her.

"Sister Mary Margaret loved the outdoors. Every chance we got we were in a tent somewhere under stars. She taught me everything I know about survival in the woods and about the heavens. She loved the stars."

Innocently, Angel looked up and Arian couldn't help but follow her gaze to the morning sky.

"Since we were leaving early the next morning, she was outside, stowing our gear in the shed. We didn't want to wake anyone. By putting the gear in the shed, we'd limit the amount of noise we made. I went into the kitchen to fix her a cup of tea. When I came out..."

Angel paused, brows wrinkled as if she concentrated on a painful scene being played out in her head.

"What happened?" Arian tightened his grip around her waist.

"I remember carrying two cups of tea when I rounded the shed." Darkness and pain filled her thoughts, causing her to rub the heel her hands against the sides of her head. No matter how hard she pressed, the pain persisted. "Then everything goes black from there."

"Goes black? What do you mean?"

"I'm not sure." She shook her head. "One minute I was carrying two cups of tea, the next I woke up to find Sister Mary Margaret dead beside me and a bloody shovel in my hand."

"Something doesn't sound right." Arian nestled his chin on her head and snuggled her close. "Try to think, baby. Was anyone else there?"

A blurred face came to light as she fisted his shirt. Though painful, she forced her thoughts to focus. A shadowy face leered, deadly close to hers in the scene playing out in her head. Fire singed her synapses, fading the memory to black once again.

"Father Thomas was there when I woke up. He was shaking me and screaming, 'why'd you do it'. I panicked, grabbed my pack and ran. He's been after me ever since."

"Who's been after you?" Jaw tight, back straight, he didn't like the idea that someone was after his Angel.

"Father Thomas."

Now that really didn't make sense.

A priest chasing after her, why not a cop?

Feeling her shiver, he held her and rocked her like a baby in his arms. She didn't kill anyone, especially the woman who raised her. He felt it in his gut. Something didn't click. And he intended to find out what.

* * * * *

Candy roared, ripping the page to shreds. This had not turned out at all as she planned. She paced in front of the window of the largest suite the Henderson Mineral Resort and Spa had to offer.

She'd lost that movie role because of Arian. It wasn't from her lack of sexual prowess. She snorted loudly. She promised Arian as part of a package deal and when he dumped her—the deal fell through. The producer did not want her without Arian's star status to carry the flick.

The plan had been to get her picture taken in Arian's arms and have the word spread through the gossip magazines that she and Arian were back together. But one of the "help" had ruined her plan. She fumed and stomped on the remnants of Angel's smiling face.

Candy grabbed the champagne flute from the breakfast tray and tossed back the mimosa. Carelessly flouncing into a chair at the table, she poured herself another drink from the premixed pitcher. There had to be something she could do to get back at the untouchable Arian Adams.

Standing, she grabbed her drink and paced. She needed to think of something to ruin the "golden boy" in the face of his hometown people. Candy gulped from her glass. There had to be a way to make the people in this two-bit town think *she* was a victim of Arian's insatiable lust of pretty women.

"Ugh," she screamed, spiking the pointed high-heel of her fuzzy slipper through Angel's picture on the floor. "You're just one in a line of many."

When someone tapped on the door, she spun around.

"About time," she grumbled, marched over and jerked the door open.

The sight of a tall masseuse with an athletic physique, long blond hair pulled into a ponytail at the nape of his neck and the face of a chiseled Greek god made Candy smile and lick her lips.

Now, this was a way she could start her day off—right.

"I'm Vince. You ordered a massage."

"Why of course." Candy cocked a brow and smiled seductively, shutting the door behind him as he rolled the cart in the room. "I requested a 'total' body massage."

Candy raked a hungry gaze down the muscled cheeks of his rump as he unfolded the portable massage table. With each candle he lit, an idea sparked to life in her wicked little mind.

Use the locals. Play on their sympathy. And in the meantime, have some fun.

"So tell me Vince." As sultrily as possible, she glided around the massage table. "Where do the locals go for fun?"

Without looking up at her while removing scented oils and creams from his bag, he replied, "Most hang out at a place called The Shady L."

"And you," Candy asked huskily, maneuvering to within inches of his chest. "What do you do for fun?"

The robe slithered off her shoulders and gathered around her bare ankles. His broad grin and instant bulge in the front of his pants told her he appreciated her nakedness, even if Arian didn't.

"I give massages."

Chapter Eleven

When Arian and Angel returned to the kitchen, breakfast was ready but neither of them was hungry. They told his parents most of what Angel could remember about the night Sister Mary Margaret was killed. The fact that Father Thomas was chasing Angel was something they chose to keep to themselves. Neither wanted to upset or scare Myra.

"That doesn't mean you killed her," Myra stated. "Just because some priest found you with the body, doesn't make you a murderer. I don't believe you have it in you to kill anyone or anything."

"Thank you." Angel forced a timid smile. "I just wish I had your confidence."

Arian stood behind Angel with his hands on her shoulders as she sat at the table. Absently, he rubbed tiny circles with his thumbs at the base of her neck. Something did not make sense about that night and hearing it retold to his parents reinforced that gut feeling. Angel was innocent.

Why would a priest take it upon himself to chase after a supposed criminal and not a cop? That part bothered him.

Leaning forward, he brushed a fingertip along the scar above her right eye.

"Did you get this that night?"

"Yes." She swore she saw true love shine in his eyes. But she couldn't help but say a silent prayer. She hoped that they would not get in trouble for helping her—a murder suspect.

"Do you know how it happened?"

"No." Shaking her head, she continued. "When I woke up, I remember my head throbbed and there was blood on my face. But I can't remember what happened."

"Well." Seeing his mother's eyebrow cock, he felt the heat of her displeasure for going against her wishes. "Since Chet is already involved in this, let's wait and see what he's found out."

"He's not answering his cell," Ed said as he returned to the table. "So I left him a voice mail." Arian met his dad's worried gaze. "Maybe now that there's a message from me, along with your messages, he'll get back to one of us."

"It's probably nothing to worry about." He tried to reassure his dad. "You know how he gets when he's on a case. Give him a couple of days and I'm sure he'll get back to us."

"I think it's best if we all hang around the house today," Myra added, tapping the paper. "With this article out, it wouldn't do for Angel to be bombarded with any more publicity."

"Staying home's not a problem," Ed replied. "I was going to suggest we miss church today, anyway. When I checked on Halley earlier, she was showing the signs. If everything goes right, her foal will be here soon. I called Sam and he's on his way over."

"Ever see a horse being born before?" Arian smiled down at Angel, who for the first time in several hours had a sparkle in her eyes as she shook her head no. Thank you, Halley. Arian sighed. At least for a little while, they had something else to worry about other than waiting for Chet. "Well then, you're in for a miracle."

"We'll take shifts watching her and making her comfortable while we wait." Ed nudged Angel as they helped Myra, who was determined to walk with a cane. "As with every female, it's a waiting game at birth time. Take Myra here..." his voice trailed off as they walked away from the house.

On the pretense of cleaning the breakfast mess, Arian hung back. As soon as they were out the door and almost to the barn, he pulled out his cell phone and dialed. It rang and rang, then slipped to voice mail.

Damn it, Chet! Why aren't you answering?

* * * * *

Would this woman ever stop impressing the hell out of him? Putting her own problems on the back burner, he watched her jump in and do whatever was necessary to help make Halley comfortable.

Between his dad and Sam, he knew Halley was in the best care possible. In his prime, Sam had been a top-ranked cowboy on the rodeo circuit. Before turning to teaching, his dad was a veterinarian. But it wasn't in him to have to put an animal down. It brought him more joy to teach, though he never declined to help any farmer or rancher in the area.

When his dad gave Halley a shot, Angel's soft singing and gentle hand kept the mare calm. Watching Halley give birth was a magical, yet long and tiring event. At some point, he expected Angel to wear out. But she didn't. Instead, she sat cross-legged for hours, with Halley's head nestled in her lap. He knew Angel's back had to be killing her and her legs were probably numb. But she didn't quit consoling the mare. She kept soothing Halley as the young mare struggled with her first birth.

There was no way she was a murderer. Arian smiled. Not someone as caring as his Angel—his Venus.

Myra and Vicky kept food, drinks and warm blankets coming out to the barn as Sam, Ed, Arian and Angel did everything possible for Halley. Early on, Arian set Star loose in the meadow so the male would not upset his mate. Though each time he checked, the stallion seemed to pace the front fence like an expectant father in the waiting room of a maternity ward.

At ten p.m., the miracle finally happened. A strapping male foal was born. The foal had gotten twisted. Under the guidance of his dad, Arian helped pull him out.

Every muscle in her legs tingled as she stood and her back ached. A colt had been born right before her eyes and she had helped. It was the most amazing thing she had ever seen in real life. Of course, she'd seen animals give birth on the Discovery Channel but that was nothing compared to actually being involved in a delivery.

Though he was covered in goo, Angel stood in awe of her handsome prince. He had helped bring a new life into this world and lay there laughing, with a squirming slimy baby horse in his arms.

As she stretched and watched the men take care of the colt, she couldn't help but smile at him as their gazes met. If horse birth was this messy, she wondered if childbirth would be as bad.

Ohmygod!

They hadn't been careful. Pregnant... She could be pregnant. There could be a little Arian growing in her womb. Though her heart skipped a beat at the idea, she knew this wasn't good. A knot twisted her insides and she nervously rubbed her lower abdomen. She hadn't thought...

As if he read her thoughts, Arian stood, set Halley's baby down, wiped his hands quickly on a towel then clasped Angel by the elbows. He slid his hands slowly down her arms, until they covered hers.

He did not care that his parents and Sam and Vicky were standing there, or that he was covered in hay, blood and goop. This was important. From the worried look in her eyes and the way she fidgeted with her hands against her lower abdomen, he had the feeling he'd been right, she didn't use birth control. The thought that he may have planted a seed filled his heart to the brim. A child, with Angel, there wasn't a man in the world happier than he was right now.

Finding her ear with his lips, he whispered, "I said I love you and hopefully..." Nudging his thumbs underneath her hands, he rubbed her lower abdomen, "A little one of our own."

"Arian, I'm scared," she whispered against his cheek.

"Don't be." He kissed the tip of her nose. "I won't let anything happen to you. I promise."

Feet shuffled along the railing behind them and a throat cleared.

"You ready?" The sight of her slight shake of her head sank his heart to his stomach. Eyes closed, he swallowed hard. As much as he wanted her to say yes he understood.

The truth about her past needed to be discovered before she could commit to a future with him. She was being true to her sign. He admitted that to himself. His perfect match had to be the truth seeker Aquarius.

He wasn't sure how he would accomplish it—since patience wasn't his greatest virtue—he would wait for her to say yes and marry him. Hands held tight in a knot against her tummy—and possibly his child—he took a breath, pressed a kiss against her forehead then turned to face the others.

"I asked Angel to marry me." Before the congratulations could start, he cut them off. "But with everything that's going on, she wants to wait to give me an answer."

"What could possibly be more important than giving Arian an answer?" Vicky quipped, with her eyebrow cocked and her arms crossed over her chest.

Myra elbowed Vicky.

"That's between them."

Meeting Myra's gaze, Angel felt she would be welcomed as one of the family. A quick glance at Vicky and she knew it would take time to win the other woman over to her side.

Family.

It was all she had ever wanted. Sister Mary Margaret had been the closest thing to family, she had ever known. If only the past wouldn't come back to haunt her.

And it would, she felt certain. What if Arian was right and she didn't kill Sister Mary Margaret? That meant someone else did. What if they were after her, thinking she knew who they were, that she could identify them? A knot coiled in her stomach as it dawned on her. Would they hurt the people that now meant the most to her...Myra...Ed... She lifted her gaze to Arian. ...and Arian.

"Ya know what's important right now?" Sam interrupted, snapping her from her thoughts. "It's naming that there stallion."

"I say let Angel do it," Ed stated.

What? They were going to let her name the colt.

"So, what'll it be, Angel, what's the little fellow's name?"

"I've never named a horse before." She couldn't believe they'd given this honor to her. "Sure you want me to do this?"

"It's not hard." Arian smiled down at her. "Just look him over and think about it. Give him a name from your heart."

Angel stepped out of Arian's arms and walked over to the colt, who was trying his best to stand on wobbly legs. Everyone couldn't help but laugh at his newborn antics. Less than an hour old and already he was trying to avoid being cleaned by his mother. Though his legs wiggled and threatened to throw him to the ground, he did a funny prance in a stream of moonlight that filtered in through the barn door and spotlighted him in the stall.

"Moondancer." She reached out and the colt nuzzled her hand.

"Moondancer it is." Arian moved to within inches of her back and rested his hands on her shoulders.

Leaning into his chest, she felt the steady rhythm of his heartbeat. As they stood watching Moondancer and his mom, the world felt right, if only for the moment.

* * * * *

After midnight, he followed them to the Bluebird Motor Lodge. He watched from across the street as the pair registered, got a key then stumbled their way into their room.

Must be my lucky night. He snickered as he pulled into the parking lot. With the headlights off, he eased into the spot in front of his rented room. He made sure the inside light didn't come on when he opened the car door, got out then shut it without a sound.

After getting lost on the back country roadways, he had made it to Chance much later than he had hoped. The close proximity of this cheap motel to The Shady L bar had been an added highlight to his day. Being close to finding the prize of his six-month quest had his blood racing. She was near. He could feel it.

Though right now all he wanted to feel was the buxom, bleached blonde that was in the room next to his with some local from the bar. He shifted his semi-hard cock then pulled the room key from his pants pocket.

Most of the evening he spent watching the woman in the bright red dress, while hidden in a corner. The more she drank—the higher the dress inched, until the smooth skin of her ass cheeks tempted every male around. Not to mention, the fact that her large fake breasts were barely contained and threatened to pop out of her dress with every movement she made. He ran his tongue around his rough, dry lips as he inserted the key in the lock.

She'd put on quite the tease show. He grinned wickedly as he opened the door, entered the room then silently closed the door. He ran his hand along his zipper. She had him and every other male in the bar hard as a rock. But one young stud was the sole winner of her attentions. After many drinks, they left with his hand wrapped possessively on a highly visible cheek of her ass.

The lone man stripped and lay naked on his bed, which was against the same wall as the bed in the room next door. The walls were paper thin and though he couldn't understand all that they said, he knew what they were doing.

Feminine laughter filtered through and his cock hardened. A solid thump clapped the wall and his heart thundered. They were on the bed. He listened intently as they got louder, not caring if anyone heard them in their drunken stupor.

"That's it," he heard her shout. "Ooooh, yeah baby, lick it like that."

Automatically, he grabbed his cock and jerked up and down, envisioning his face buried in her pussy, lapping up her juices.

"Oh, yes! Fuck me hard!"

His bed vibrated as the headboard on the opposite side banged in a rapid rhythm. The thin wall shook. Sultry moans drifted to his ears. A smile split his face as he jerked his cock harder, matching the rhythm of the bed beating the wall.

Yes, my sweet little red dress. The thought rolled through his head as he pressed his ear against the wall.

"I hear you calling me. Let him finish. I'll soon be there. Your chance to repent is nearer than you know," he whispered.

"Oh God!"

The words screeched from his buxom beauty. He grasped the base of his cock hard and squeezed, shooting cum at the wall as if she could taste it through the plaster.

There, there, my sweet.

He rolled onto his back, resting his head against the now quiet wall.

Your god will be with you soon.

I promise.

Chapter Twelve

Arian carried Angel into the house as the sun rose.

At the top of the stairs, candlelight flickered from the bathroom. So tired she could barely keep her eyes open, she wasn't sure if she was dreaming. The scent of lavender tickled her nose. The dim light cast peaceful shadows around the tub.

How romantic. She sighed as she felt him lower her to the toilet seat. She sat upright and brushed the back of her hand across her eyes as she yawned. If she just had the energy...

She was so tired she kept her eyes closed as she felt him untuck her shirt. Coldness grazed her abdomen as he peeled it up. Lifting her arms as if on autopilot, he tugged her shirt free in a gentle motion, then brushed her hair from her eyes. She tilted her head and hoped for a kiss. But instead, his fingers trailed down the back of her neck, to her back, until she felt her bra loosen.

Gently, he lifted her breasts from her bra. Forcing her eyes to open, she met smoldering heat in his gaze. The feel of him cupping her breasts, his thumbs brushing her nipples made her tremble. As tired as she was, she wanted him.

She stood. Fumbling with her jeans, she let him take over the task. When he knelt to shimmy them down her legs, the heat of his breath upon her skin shot chills throughout her body and moisture pooled in her panties.

The scent of her arousal tempted him to trail hungry kisses up her tummy to taste those perfect, pouting nipples but he gulped down the rising ball of need. Though he'd showered earlier, he was tempted to join her in the tub. One look and he knew she was exhausted.

Next time, he sighed.

He bit his tongue as he hooked his thumbs in the waist of her panties and slowly, peeled them from her hips. On one knee, his face hovered, within inches of the raven curls his cock throbbed to be buried in, as he slid them down her thighs, to her knees, down her calves. He felt her hands on his shoulders as she stepped one foot from the panties, then the other, in what seemed to him as a slow, erotic torture to his soul.

Heat scorched his cheek when the raven-colored curls of her pussy briefly brushed him in her efforts to undress. The breath hitched in his throat. God, how he wanted to bury his face in her mound and taste her sweet nectar.

Arian willed the strength to stand. He wasn't doing this for himself. He reprimanded his libido to back down. This was for Angel. She was exhausted and

needed sleep. But when he stood and met the sparkle in her eyes and the thin smile on her lips, his determination nearly melted.

Damn, he shook his head. This was harder than he thought. Taking a deep breath, he lifted her then lowered her slowly into the tub.

The soft, subtle moan that escaped as she settled into the warmth tightened his balls. Every ounce of him wanted to strip and crawl in there with her. Arian closed his eyes and took another deep breath. This deep breath thing wasn't working, wasn't it supposed to be calming him down?

When he opened his eyes, Angel was soaking comfortably in the tub. Her eyes were closed, her head was back and her body lay visible beneath the water's surface. She was beautiful. Carefully, he cradled her head in one hand, while gently wetting her hair with the other. With tender massaging motions, he shampooed her raven locks.

He was not sure she was still awake until she slipped out of his grasp and dunked her head into the water. Reaching under the surface, he helped rinse the shampoo from her hair. When she sat up, he brushed her hair back in one fell swoop from her face then wiped the water from her eyes with a cloth.

The devilish gleam on her face and her whispered words of "join me, the water's fine", nearly crumbled the last of his thin wall of resistance. He pressed a kiss to her brow and whispered, "Next time," as he lowered her back into a resting position.

He ran his tongue across his lips. There definitely would be a next time. He rolled his shoulders, gathered the soap and washcloth and began the tortuous task of cleaning his Angel—without stripping and taking her up on her offer as his cock thickened and begged him to.

Though she truly wanted him to join her, Angel relaxed. The warmth of the water soothed her tired muscles. The heavenly scent of lavender soothed her soul. And Arian made her feel fantastic. The moment the cloth touched her skin, she couldn't help but react.

Uhm. The murmured sound escaped her lips as he lifted her leg and washed suds from foot to knee then trailed the soapy cloth along her thigh into the water. Her breath caught in her throat when he stopped before he reached her pelvic region. His heart thundered and his cock demanded release from the tight constraints of his jeans as he did the same slow cleansing to her other leg.

He gathered one arm and soaped from fingertip to hand, to wrist then the length of her arm. At her armpit, he tickled lightly, which made her giggle and squirm, as he washed her clean, then repeated the action on the other arm. With her eyes closed, his teasing aroused her even more. Not knowing exactly what, where or when he would touch heightened the experience. Though she rested in hot soapy water, chills raced up her spine. Her nipples hardened at his next move.

Trailing the cloth in slow, meticulous circles around each of her breasts made her back arch, exposing the taut nipples through the sudsy water and his mouth hungered for a taste. He licked his lips and swallowed deep, resisting the urge to feast upon the tempting morsels, as he continued bathing his beauty.

He wanted her to relax and feel how beautiful she was to him.

She was his treasure. His Venus. The match to his Aries nature. With each swipe of the cloth, he showed her how much he worshiped her body.

This moment was about her. He sighed.

The instant he covered her tummy with the cloth, a vision shot as if on a bolt of electrical current up his arm and straight into his soul. It was the ram of Aries and the water bearer of Aquarius intertwined. He met her wide-eyed gaze and knew she felt the heat and envisioned the same as he. It seemed to glow in her iris.

Arian leaned against the tub, keeping his hand on her tummy and kissed her lips softly. It was written in the stars. They were meant to be together. He had finally met the woman he was destined to be with and he had no intentions of losing her.

The vision was real. The heavens had spoken, she was his. Her sigh against his mouth increased his hunger for her taste. He wanted more of her and he wanted it now.

Wet arms encircled his neck as he moved in closer. His fingers trailed lower to the curls between her thighs. He worked the soap into a lather, without releasing her mouth and felt her subtle gasp, as he cleansed her lower lips.

Moist heat welcomed his finger as he plunged inside, making his cock throb and his balls reached blue status, instantly. He forced himself to relinquish her mouth and smiled at the sight of pure pleasure on her face. Slipping in another finger, he was gifted with a husky sigh.

Arian locked on the crystal sparkle of heat in her eyes. Easing his fingers in and out of her warmth, he watched her pupils dilate in time with his motion.

The moment his thumb massaged the hidden nub of her clit, Angel's eyes closed, her head lolled back onto the bath pillow, stretching her delectable neck. The avid pulse at the sensual base where shoulder and neck meet teased him to taste and nibble but he resisted. She was close. He felt it in the way her hips rocked against his hand and her increased slickness coated his fingers. Arian nuzzled her brow.

"Come for me, Angel," he whispered as the tempo of his fingers and the sway of her hips rose to a frantic beat. Water sloshed over the edge of the tub but he didn't care.

Angel was on the verge and he intended to carry her into that erotic orgasmic ocean. When her back arched and one scrumptious nipple cleared the water's surface,

Arian latched on. He suckled the pouting pinnacle in deep, as his fingers pumped furiously, bringing his Angel pleasure.

Wave upon wave of her feminine juices coated his fingers and he smiled around her nipple.

She had come for him.

Oh God, did he know how to give a bath. If he was willing, she'd let him give her one every night. She reveled in the feel of Arian's magnificent bathing abilities. The way he'd cleansed her body, gently massaging each inch made her want him buried deep inside her body even though she needed rest.

What a horny thing I've become because of him. She'd just had an amazing orgasm in the tub and now she was lying there thinking how good it would feel to have him between her thighs, pumping her pussy with his magnificent cock until she screamed. An irrepressible smile tugged at her lips as she sighed.

Maybe in a minute, she'd act on her thoughts. But right now, there wasn't an ounce of tension or ache left in her muscles as she stretched out in the tub. The warmth of the water caressing her skin, the relaxing scent of lavender drifting to her nose and the knowledge that Arian hovered near took her cares away. This was heaven.

Water dripped from Arian's face as he released the taut, red nipple then kissed her closed eyes. Bathing Angel had taken strength. He'd wanted her relaxed and he'd managed to help her reach that point. But he wasn't done. He couldn't be. Not with the hunger for her taste gnawing at his gut. He lifted her from the tub, set her on the closed toilet seat and toweled her dry. Her content smile and the feel of her hands in his hair warmed his heart.

Gently, he nudged her legs apart. The sight of her pink pussy lips glistening made his mouth water. Arian licked his lips then delved in, tasting the sweet nectar of her slit in one, slow, deep swipe of his tongue.

Angel gasped as she hooked her legs over his shoulders. Heat from his tongue shot up her spine and she felt as if her nipples would explode.

"Arian," she rasped, huskily on a whisper, "don't stop."

He had only meant to take one taste but she wanted more. Grinning, he suckled the tender bud of her clit.

He was more than happy to oblige. As his tongue tasted every inch, his finger plunged inside her slick, wet slit. He felt her heels dig into his shoulders. Her fingers tightened in his hair, as she met the in-and-out motions of his finger with a frantic rocking of her hips.

He held her hovered on the crest of another wave and he liked reaping the rewards of her ecstasy.

When he shoved two fingers knuckle-deep and simultaneously sucked on her clit, he felt her thighs tighten against the sides of his head. Her bottom lifted off the seat and his face was flooded with her sweet juices. Face buried, he drained every possible drop of her addictive nectar. He could do this forever and never get enough of his Angel.

Gasping, her entire body shuddered; every muscle went weak and showers of stars pranced behind her closed lids. Arian was a god sent to her from the heavens. She was sure of it. Tremor upon tremor cascaded through her vagina as she lost the battle against fatigue.

Several moments passed before he dragged his face from the fountain of treasure he loved, placing gentle kisses on the insides of her thighs as he unhooked her rag-doll limp legs and stood.

Arian lifted a completely sated and exhausted Angel and carried her to bed. He tucked her naked under the covers. It was the hardest thing he had ever done. But he kissed her on the brow then left his beauty to rest.

* * * * *

After catching a few hours of much-needed rest, Arian stood, leaning in the doorway of Angel's room and watching her sleep. She looked beautiful and peaceful. Memories of the early morning bath burned in his brain and immediately hardened his cock. The alarm clock on the night stand by her bed read one o'clock in the afternoon.

Let her rest.

He shut the door and ambled downstairs. He was used to working on a few hours sleep. Obviously, she was not.

When he passed his parents' room, the door was open and the room was empty. Knowing his mom, she had his dad out at the barn the minute she woke up. Arian grinned.

They were two of a kind—his mother and Angel.

No wonder he loved Angel. She was quite the woman—taking care of his mother without complaint, staying up all night caring for a horse and then its newborn colt. Apparently, this was her nature.

He poured a cup of coffee, took a sip and reviewed what they had discussed about her past.

Angel lived in an orphanage.

She was raised by nuns.

She'd spent most of her life with one nun in particular, Sister Mary Margaret.

And she's dead, he grimaced. Angel lost the one person in her life that cared for her. That was until now.

He smiled against the rim of his cup as determination set in. The truth needed to be found. He would help his Aquarian Venus find the truth that would set her free to marry him.

She was *not* a murderer.

It was not her nature. He pulled his cell phone out of his pocket, flipped it open and tried his brother again. No answer. He snapped the phone shut.

What was wrong with his brother? Why hadn't he called back?

He needed to talk to him. Something did not make sense about this Father Thomas and he wanted to find out what. It nagged at him that a man of the cloth would track Angel and not a cop. The breath hitched in his chest, his eyebrows rose, unless the man after Angel wasn't a priest.

Maybe he killed the nun and framed Angel. But why?

When he heard her scream, his cup hit the floor. Arian took the stairs two at a time, threw open her door and sprang for the trembling mass of woman tangled in the blankets. Angel shot into his arms. Her skin felt clammy and moisture beaded on her upper lip.

"It's okay, Angel." He rocked her. "It was only a bad dream."

"He's here." He felt her whispered words against his chest as she nuzzled closer, as if she tried to crawl inside his skin.

"Who's here?" Arian cupped her chin and tilted her face, so he could see her eyes. Tears streamed down her cheeks and her lips trembled.

"Father Thomas." Her eyes darted, frantically. "He's near, I feel him."

* * * * *

Chet arrived in the early afternoon. He stood in front of the police station in the center of Chance as his old buddy Charlie Green was walking out. The look in Charlie's hazel eyes and the unusually taut stance of his six-foot four-inch, hulking frame told Chet something bad had happened.

"Hey." He shook Charlie's hand and felt the tension in his grip. "I was just on my way to see you."

"Haven't got time." The big man nodded, brushed back a lock of hair then tucked it under his hat. "I'm on my way to check out a possible homicide."

"In Chance?" Chet's eyebrows rose, unable to believe what the youngest deputy sheriff in the county had just said. "You gotta be kidding."

"Wish I was."

"You need a hand?" Chet asked, while following him to his car. As far as he could remember, there had never been a murder in Chance. "You know I scored higher at the police academy than you did." Chet waggled his eyebrows at his friend and received a half-laugh, half-snort from Charlie.

"Okay, get in." Charlie shot him a sideways glance over the roof of the car. "But I still think you cheated somehow."

"Me, never." Chet laughed, sliding into the passenger side of the county sheriff's cruiser. "So, where we headed?"

"The Bluebird Motor Lodge." Charlie started the car, pulled out of his parking space and drove onto the main street headed out of town. "The reason you dropped by to see me wouldn't be the young lady living with your folks, now would it?"

"Yeah, how'd you—"

"Small town, remember." Charlie cut him off. "Besides, she's a pretty young thing, couldn't miss her."

"Pretty or not, she's wanted for questioning in the murder of a nun in Tennessee." Chet shrugged.

"You sure about that?" Charlie gave him a raised eyebrow glance, before returning his attention to the road.

"Wish I wasn't." Chet sighed, leaning his tired head back on the seat.

When he arrived in town, he avoided going home. Instead, he opted to talk things out with his oldest friend. From the voice mails he had gotten from Arian, he figured his brother had it bad for this mysterious Angel.

"But..." he continued. "Everything I've dug up so far hasn't proved she did anything other than being in the wrong place at the wrong time. The local authorities just want to question her about the nun's death."

"Think she had anything to do with it?"

"Not sure. The woman killed raised her at an orphanage where they both worked until a few months before the murder. It seems that wherever one went," he huffed, "so did the other. They were never apart. When the nun got ill, they transferred to this sort of rest home for religious persons out in the northern mountains of Tennessee."

"You said she was raised at an orphanage," Charlie interrupted.

"Yeah, according to the records." Chet pulled a pad from the inside pocket of his brown leather jacket and flipped it open. "She was left on the doorstep as an infant, never adopted and when she turned eighteen she accepted a position with the orphanage. She worked there for seven years, until she moved to Tennessee with this Sister Mary Margaret, who was killed."

"Odd," Charlie surmised, "she was never adopted. She's one heck of a looker, must've been a beautiful baby. Why wouldn't someone want her?"

"Hit a dead end on that one," Chet replied. "These nuns were tight-lipped when it came to those two. All I got out of them was that Angel was a blessing to the orphanage and that the children miss her dearly. But I got the feeling that Sister Mary Margaret had something to do with Angel not being adopted."

"Think Angel may've held a grudge about not being adopted and took it out on the nun?"

"From everyone I interviewed, there wasn't any way possible she could've killed anyone, much less this Sister Mary Margaret. Besides, the evidence leans me away from her being capable of doing it. The nun took fatal blows to the head and neck with a shovel. The coroner's report stated she was struck on the side of the head first. The second swing slit her throat to the point of almost decapitation. I don't think this girl was capable of something this gruesome or anywhere near strong enough physically. I'm just not sure why she took off the night of the murder."

He looked over at Charlie.

"And there's something else odd about this case."

"What's that?" Charlie asked.

"A priest went missing the same night of the murder."

"Think he's involved?"

"Maybe," Chet huffed. "Wouldn't put it past him. Seems he'd only been at the rest home for about a month before Angel and Sister Mary Margaret arrived. None of the others there knew much about him. Gut instinct told me he wasn't liked very much. But you know the religious sort don't like to talk bad about anyone. Though they did let it slip there had been a problem with money and other items going missing during his stay."

"So, let me guess." Charlie smiled. "You've been tracking him."

"At first." Chet nodded. "I thought they might be together since they disappeared at the same time. But now, I don't think they are. I think he's following her for some reason. And I don't think he's a priest either."

"What makes you say that?"

"Because there seems to be a trail of death in this man's wake."

* * * * *

Charlie pulled into the parking lot of the Bluebird Motor Lodge. He parked near the yellow crime-scene tape. The conversation with Chet was fresh in his mind, as they assessed the area and he ticked off a list in his head.

A murder in his town.

A mysterious Angel.

A priest—or maybe not a priest.

Great. He reached for the packet of cigarettes normally in his shirt pocket and pulled out nicotine gum instead. Just wonderful, he grumbled under his breath. What a fine time for his girlfriend, Abby to decide he needed to quit. But he promised so he popped a piece in his mouth.

He lifted the tape and walked under, with Chet following behind. Stopping just inside the doorway, he saw Doc Matthews, who acted as the coroner for their county. The Doc was examining the body, which was obviously female, naked and dead.

"Hey, Doc. Got any info for me?" he asked the older man.

Doc Matthews stood, took off his rubber gloves, gathered his bag and walked to the door.

"Hello, Charlie. Far as I can tell, the time of death was around six this morning. She died from an apparent gunshot wound to the left temple. And you're going to love this part." He adjusted his glasses and glanced over Charlie's shoulder to Chet. "According to the driver's license in her wallet, she was that actress Candy Cannon."

"Arian's ex," Chet sputtered and stared at the body, whose face he couldn't see from this angle.

"Think you could ID her?" Doc Matthews asked Chet.

"Sure." Pushing past Charlie, he eased towards the bed, careful to watch his step so as not to disturb anything on the floor that might be considered as evidence. One look and he swallowed hard. "Yep." He shook his head. "That's her."

"Any witnesses?" Charlie asked the young rookie, Officer McCloud, who stood just outside the door.

"The maid found her that way around noon." The officer shook his head no. "As far as I've found out, nobody saw or heard anything."

"Considering there's pillow feathers everywhere," Doc Matthews stated. "I'd say it was quite possible the pillows were used to muzzle the sound of the gun. I'm guessing from the size of the wound that it was a small-caliber pistol. Be able to tell you more after the autopsy."

"Thanks, Doc," Charlie replied, turning his attention back to the officer. "Did she check in alone?"

"Considering the two empty glasses, the empty wine bottle, the fact she's naked and not to mention the condition of the bed," Chet quipped as he gazed around the room. "I'd say no."

"Who signed the register?" Charlie ignored Chet's sarcasm.

"Sir, you're not going to like this," Officer McCloud replied, hesitantly.

"Well." Charlie tipped his tan sheriff's patrol hat back on his head. "Who signed the register?"

"Your brother." The younger patrol officer nervously shifted his stance.

"Which one?"

"Jason."

Deputy Sheriff Charlie Green stood silent, shaking his head. Jason was not capable of murder. But his name was on the register and that did not look good.

"You know Jason couldn't have done this," Chet replied. "He couldn't even shoot that ten-point buck last season." He glanced back at the bloody mess in the room. "There's no way he did this."

"Has Sheriff Miller been notified?" Charlie expelled an exasperated breath as he chomped on the nicotine gum.

Damn, he wished he had a cigarette.

"Not exactly, sir. His wife said he went out fishing this morning and left his phone home. She sent their neighbor, Bill Jeffers, out after him. It could be awhile."

"Wonderful." He rolled his eyes and took out his cell phone.

Could this day get any worse?

"The young lady in there was famous," Charlie stated to Officer McCloud. "I'll place a call over to Henderson and have the crime scene team from the lab sent in to investigate. Until then, we need the press and the area kept contained." He noticed the officer's baffled expression. "Trust me. She was a movie star, found dead naked in a motel room. The press will be all over this like vultures especially in a small town like this one. Absolutely no unauthorized personnel within the tape. Got it?"

"Got it." Officer McCloud's head bopped like he had a spring for a neck.

After placing the call to Henderson, he called his brother Jason and asked him to meet him at the station house in town. He turned and nearly collided into Chet.

"What's with you?" he snapped.

"Just so happens," Chet whispered. "I took a quick glance over the last page of the registration book, before it was bagged and tagged by one of your officers." He flipped open his notepad and showed Charlie what he had written down. "And you're not going to believe who registered a few hours before your brother and his hot date."

Charlie's brows furrowed as he glanced at the signature. Then he looked at the dark expression on Chet's face.

"That's the one you been following," he stated.

When Chet simply nodded, Charlie drew his weapon. Being a multi-state licensed private investigator, Chet pulled his gun out too and they eased towards the door next to the crime scene.

Charlie lifted a finger to his lips and nodded at the room, informing the officer posted outside the murder scene something was up. The officer followed suit by pulling his gun and moving into a backup position, covering the window. Charlie stood next to the door, leaning against the wall and banged on the wood, with Chet stationed on the opposite side facing him.

"Open up, sheriff's office. We need to talk to you," he shouted.

When nobody answered, Chet kicked in the door and Charlie swung inside. The room was empty but his signature was on the wall, written in blood.

Another soul's salvation granted.

Father Snatas Nissassa.

"Think that's her blood," Charlie stated as he sheathed his weapon.

"You can bet on it," Chet replied. His brows furrowed. He had seen this signature on the registry and something about it bothered him. It had to mean something. His eyes sprang open wide as he grabbed the pad and pen from his pocket. He scribbled down the letters in opposite order.

"Damn," he rasped, handing the paper to Charlie. "Take a look at this."

Satans Assassin.

Charlie stared from the paper to the wall, then turned his wide-eyed glare at Chet.

"Holy crap."

He dug in his pocket for more gum. This day had just gotten worse.

Chapter Thirteen

Whistling, Jason Green walked into his brother's office. He had no idea why his brother needed to see him so urgently. But he knew he had an alibi.

"Hi, Charlie." Jason walked right into his brother's office and plopped into a chair. "What's so important I had to hustle down here anyway? I was out mending back fences with Jack all day. I'm tired, hungry and slightly hung over. Besides, Mom is holding dinner for me at home so let's make this quick."

Charlie leaned back in his chair. Jason was the spitting image of their mother and the youngest of the brood. He was the shortest at six foot even and stocky built with red hair. But out of all of his brothers, Jason had the biggest heart and could not harm a fly. If it had been one of the others, well... He exhaled the breath he hadn't realized he held.

"There was a murder here last night."

"A murder! In Chance? No way." Jason laughed.

"Yes," Charlie continued and leveled his gaze on his brother. "And I need to know where you were last night."

"You think I was involved?"

"I didn't say that."

"You didn't have to," Jason snorted and stood, sending his chair toppling over.

"Calm down, Jason. You're not being accused of anything." Charlie stood and forced a level of calm to his voice that he certainly did not feel. He did not like having to question his brother. But Sheriff Miller had not gotten back yet and he did not want the crew from Henderson interrogate him first. "I've just got a few questions for you. That's all."

"I'm not involved, Charlie." Jason righted his chair and sat back down with a smug look on his face. "Besides, I've got an alibi."

"Okay, Jason, let's hear it." Charlie settled on the edge of his seat. "Where were you last night?"

"I spent the night with a beautiful woman. But if you want the details." A sly grin crossed his lips. "I can't give you that. You know a gentleman doesn't kiss and tell."

"How about you checked into The Bluebird Motor Lodge with a hot little number in a red dress last night," Chet stated as he walked into the room with two cups of coffee in his hand.

"How'd you know that?" Jason shot a glance at Chet over his shoulder and followed his movements.

Chet leaned against the edge of Charlie's desk, handed Charlie a cup then took a sip out of the other.

"Because your alibi is dead," Charlie stated.

"Candy is dead?" Jason's voice trembled as he spoke and disbelief washed over his face. "Charlie, that can't be true. There must be some mistake."

"There's not." Charlie shook his head as he stared at his brother. He knew Jason had not done it. But he had to conduct this interview as a matter of due process. "And it doesn't look good that you're the last one to have seen her alive. Tell me everything you can remember about last night."

"She was alive when I left her this morning. I swear it! I kissed her goodbye. She was still alive. I watched her roll over before I ran out to the truck. Jack picked me up there this morning around five thirty or so."

"How'd he know where you were?" Chet piped in. He had agreed to witness the interrogation as an impartial party on Charlie's behalf. Though evidence in the room next to where they found Candy's body led them to believe his suspicions concerning the supposed priest were right.

"We were all out together last night. You know blowing off steam down at The Shady L."

"Who's we?"

"You know, the gang, Ebb, me, Jack, Pete, Arnie, Dana and Abby. We were all just hanging out, when she walked in."

"How'd you end up with her?" Chet asked.

"I won the coin toss."

"Charlie." Melanie, the sheriff's personal assistant, beeped in through the intercom on his desk phone. "There's a federal agent out here to see you. Says it's urgent."

"Send him in." Charlie shot a raised eyebrow look at Chet, who just shrugged and shook his head. "You can go on home now, Jason. Call me if you think of anything else."

"You bet." Jason stood.

"Jason." The younger man looked at him. "Don't discuss this with anyone, especially not Mom." Charlie grinned at his younger brother. "We wouldn't want her worrying for nothing, now would we?"

Jason shook his head, opening the door just in time to let in a tall, slender man. He wore a dark suit complete with white shirt, black tie and dress shoes. The man brushed past Jason without so much as a nod in his direction and closed the door, leaving Jason on the outside with his mouth hanging open as if he were going to say something.

"I'm Federal Agent Abe Henley." He flashed his credentials at the same time he flipped opened a folded piece of newspaper with Angel's face plastered in its middle. "And I need to find this girl before there's another murder in your town."

The three men froze as the door banged open and Melanie waltzed in unannounced, claiming, "Boss, we've got a problem." She flipped on the small television set in the corner of his office. As the picture cleared she continued, "Trixie Timmons is out at The Bluebird."

"Great." Charlie ran a hand through his hair. This day had just gotten even worse. He stared at the local newswoman from Henderson.

His focus was drawn to her red-colored lips as she announced to the world...

"Though no local authority would confirm it, a source told me that local golden boy, Arian Adams' ex-girlfriend Candy Cannon was dead in a motel in Chance."

* * * * *

Arian paced the family room. Candy was dead? Had he heard that right? He grabbed the remote and flipped through the channels. No other station seemed to have that news. He turned the television off and tossed the remote on the couch. It had to be another one of her publicity stunts. He huffed, raking a hand through his hair.

It just had to be.

He walked into the kitchen, out the back door and stood on the back porch. The sun sank and he watched the last rays slide from the horizon as he moved to the top step. He rested his chin on folded hands with his elbows on bent knees, staring out at the growing shadows across the yard and ticked off the items bugging his gut.

Chet had not returned his calls.

Angel was a frightened mess.

No matter what he did, she remained jittery and jumpy. He was unable to convince her that it was just a dream, Father Thomas wasn't near.

Maybe he couldn't because he wasn't entirely sure that Father Thomas wasn't. Every molecule of his skin seemed on fire. His scalp tingled and a slow headache started at the base of his skull. The moment he closed his eyes, the sight of his inner ram with horns held high, front hooves stomping the ground in a fierce stance, stationed in front of Angel, flashed on the inner lining of his lids. He rubbed his temples and snorted an exasperated breath through his nose.

He stood, something bad was in the air and it was his job to protect Angel.

Arian shook his head as a half-grin, half-laugh crossed his lips.

Thanks, Rhiannon. Now I'm reading the signs and predicting my next step.

He raked a hand through his hair and headed for the barn.

When he entered, he found Angel with his mom watching the newborn feed from his mother. Her ponytail had a haggard appeal, with escaped strands scattered about her face. She leaned heavily on the stall, with her hands interlocked on the top rail and her chin nestled on them. Fatigue marred her beauty. Arian sighed. She needed to rest.

"Beautiful sight," he spoke, arms crossed on the top rail and one foot hitched on the bottom rail. Tilting his head, he stared at the tired gaze on Angel's face. "A mother feeding her baby, can't think of anything more beautiful."

Gently, he stroked a loose strand of hair from her eyes. She'd been out here all afternoon with his mom. It amazed him how giving and beautiful she was. He envisioned her feeding their child in her arms as he cradled them both against his chest.

God, this woman was meant to be his. He swallowed hard and kissed her brow, then laid a possessive arm across her shoulders as they continued to watch Halley with her baby.

"Hey, Myra." Ed entered the barn. "I called that new pizza place over at the crossroads and ordered a couple of pizzas for dinner. What do you say to my best gal riding along with me to pick them up?"

"I'd love to." Myra smiled and latched one arm through his and leaned on her new walking cane with the other. "Been dying to try that place. Catch you two later," she called over her shoulder as they left.

"You look wiped out." Arian rested his chin on Angel's head.

"Gee thanks," she quipped, tugging her head from under his chin and looking up at him, with a thin smile on her lips. "You really know how to charm a person."

"Charming you is not what I want to do." He brushed his forefinger under her chin and his thumb across her lower lip, just before he placed a butterfly kiss to her lips. As he caressed her cheek, he lifted to within millimeters of her mouth.

"Taking care of you is my top priority. What would you say to a hot bubble bath and a cup of herbal tea?"

"Anything like the bath you gave me earlier?" She smiled mischievously at him.

"I think we can work something out." Arian grinned and felt his cock harden, instantly at the prospect of being in his woman especially when she palmed the front of his jeans.

Star whinnied and stomped his foot in his stall.

"Star's feeling a little left out." Angel nodded towards the horse. Slowly, she trailed her fingers from his jeans, up his chest then traced his jaw, watching his pupils dilate as she spoke.

"How about you fix me that cup of tea while I give the proud poppa a good rubdown?" Latching her hand around the back of his neck, she tugged him down to her level. She held her lips close to his ear and whispered as huskily as she possibly could, "Then I'm all yours," then ran a quick dart of her tongue around the rim of his ear.

Arian's growl rumbled from his chest. His cock thickened and his balls tightened at her commanding tease. Catching her head in his hands, he captured her mouth before she could move. He plundered his tongue deep and savored her taste, releasing her as quickly as he had taken her.

"I'll be back in a few minutes with that tea." He held her heated gaze. "You got that, Star?" he stated without looking at the horse. "You've got my woman for just a few minutes then she's *all* mine."

As if he understood, Star nodded and Angel laughed at Arian's stiff-legged walk from the barn. She knew he wanted her. The power of feeling him harden in her hand thrashed through her veins. Taking a deep breath, she smiled. It felt good to have that kind of power over someone.

But was it right? Her brows wrinkled as she grabbed Star's brush and opened his stall. Easing close, she ran the brush down his side and Star neighed.

It had to be the power of love, Angel surmised. It felt good when she touched Arian and his body reacted. Chills shot down Angel's spine at the memory of the feel of his hardness in her palm and a sly smile tugged at her lips.

The feel of his hands bathing her earlier ghosted her skin and thrilled her soul, as heat warmed her body and moisture formed between her thighs. It was fantastic the way her body felt whenever he touched her.

Though she had been totally exhausted when he bathed her, Arian had made her feel special. He gave and did not take anything for himself.

But tonight she planned to change that. It was his turn to receive. Angel bit her lip and felt her nipples harden at the naughty thoughts flashing to life in her mind. *It's definitely my turn to taste*. Just the thought of tasting his cock made her mouth water.

She automatically increased the tempo of the brush down Star's back. The quicker she finished this task, the quicker she could be in Arian's arms. At least for a little while.

A cold sensation prickled her skin and she shivered. Though Arian had tried earlier to convince her differently, somehow she felt the priest's presence and knew in her gut, he was near. She knew she had to leave, before he caught up with her. But she wasn't sure if she had the strength to run. How could she leave the one man she had ever loved?

Angel brushed a single tear from her cheek with the back of her hand. It felt as if shards of glass cut through her chest on the thought of leaving Arian and it hurt to breathe. But she knew, if he and his family were to be safe she had to go and soon.

Star shifted his stance and whinnied nervously. Halley responded. Her whinny was high-pitched and seemed odd to Angel.

Did they feel her indecision and fears?

Star stomped the ground with one foot and snorted hot air across her head.

"Whoa, boy." Angel patted his neck. "What's bugging you? Did I hit a sensitive spot?"

"Hello, Angel."

Angel froze mid-stroke of Star's neck.

That voice. It couldn't be.

It took every ounce of effort to turn around. Her heart stopped. She felt the blood drain from her face and her chest tightened. She was unable to take a full breath.

He was here.

"Father Thomas," rasped from her suddenly dry lips.

He stood in the opening of Star's stall with a gun in his hand.

Would he use it?

Angel swallowed hard at the bile which rose to the back of her throat. His clothes were dirty and his white collar was a dingy shade of yellow. His eyes seemed wild and dark.

What had happened to him?

"Surprised to see me, Angel?" He sneered and Angel felt pure hatred fill the air around her. "I'd say this meeting is six months late in happening. You've given me quite the chase."

What was wrong with him?

When he stepped towards her, Angel instinctively stepped back.

"What do you want?" She stumbled over the questions that had plagued her conscience. Arian made her realize that something was not right. "Why have you been after me? You're a priest—not a cop."

"My dear Angel."

The sharp, wicked snicker lacing his words cut her to the bone and Angel had to force herself not to visibly shiver. He didn't look right, he looked...crazy.

"I would've thought you'd have figured it out by now."

Oh, God.

Angel bit her lip and held her gaze leveled on the wild-eyed face of the madman. Arian was in danger. Had he hurt him already? She had to find out.

Keep him talking. Think!

"Figured out what?" She forced a strength to her voice that she didn't feel, as her thoughts raced. She needed to keep him busy. She needed to buy some time. Absently, she ran a hand down Star's neck, hoping to calm the obviously startled animal that stomped and snorted beside her.

"This'll make too much noise. I wouldn't want anyone else to know I'm here."

Angel strained to hear his mumbled words as Father Thomas tucked the gun in the front of his pants and grabbed the shovel, which leaned against the stall.

"Should've known you weren't that bright." Clicking his teeth, he continued. "But that Sister...she was too smart for her own good. What with threatening me that she'd go to the police if I didn't keep my hands off you. Didn't leave me much choice in the matter, now did it?"

It seemed as if the air dissipated, she couldn't take a breath.

When he raised the shovel, the memory of that horrid night sprang to life from the darkest recesses of her brain. Angel rubbed the scar above her brow as her eyes cocked open wide.

His face, the shovel, pain, blood and then Sister Mary Margaret was dead.

"It was you," trembled from her lips as she backed away, pointing at the crazed man who stood, shovel raised, wicked grin on his face and a wild look in his eyes. "You killed her!" Angel's head shook violently side to side. "Not me."

"And now it's your turn to die."

He lunged at Angel, who threw the brush she had forgotten she held at his face. But it didn't matter. Star rose on his back legs and connected with man in one swift movement. The horse kicked him in the chest and sent him flying out of the stall where he landed against the barn wall with a thud.

Star stomped and snorted as if daring him to move. Angel darted around the horse in time to see Father Thomas dragging himself up the wall. In a hunched-over position, he stood wheezing and gasping for air as he drew the gun and pointed it at the horse.

"No," she screamed and her actions felt as if they were in slow motion. Angel lunged at his shaking arm, wrapped her hands around his wrist but the gun fired. In an instant, her mouth dropped open and she stared at his face just before she slumped to the ground.

A gut-wrenching scream pierced Arian's soul. He ran the last few feet to the barn door. The gunshot rang in his ears as Angel crumpled to the ground at the feet of a stranger, in a scene he wished was part of a movie set and not in his reality.

"Angel," he gasped as he rushed to save her but was stopped short when the madman shakily turned the gun his way.

"Too late," hissed between the man's dirty, clenched teeth as he leaned heavily back against the wall.

The wicked sneer turned Arian's stomach. Straightening his back, he lifted his shoulders, squared his jaw and stared at the man dressed like a vagabond priest. It looked to Arian as if the man could barely stand and he might pass out at any moment.

"Would you care to join her?" His brow cocked as the gun wavered.

"You first."

Arian tossed the tray he held in his hands. Scalding hot tea covered the priest's chest and arms as Arian sprang into motion. He kicked the gun from the other man's grip but not before a misdirected shot went through the roof. The martial arts training he had learned for movie roles took over and the moment turned into a blur.

When he finished, the priest lay unconscious in a pile of manure-covered hay and Arian crouched over his woman in a defensive stance.

He shifted, sat beside her and gathered her wounded body in his arms. A small puddle of Angel's blood pooled on the ground and the breath hitched in his throat. He

couldn't lose her—not now. Frantic, he searched for the entry wound of the bullet and found it in her left shoulder. Gently, cradling her to his chest, he searched her back for the exit of the bullet but didn't find one. The bullet had to be lodged inside. He released the breath he had not realized he held.

"Arian," her whispered word touched his ears and he prayed thank God.

"Angel," he choked on his words, "it's going to be all right."

The butterfly-flutter of her eyelashes, the slow dart of her tongue across her lips, made her look so fragile. She gifted him with a weak smile as he brushed the hair from her eyes. As he stood with her in his arms, she struggled to breath and nodded towards the broken cup, the upturned tray and an array of scattered fruit.

"Looks like I'm not gonna get that tea after all."

Star nudged passed him, nibbled at the fruit then stood over the unconscious man and peed. Though they both laughed, Arian felt her pain. The weak, gargled cough against his chest stilled his heart. He had to get her to the hospital before she bled to death.

"Arian!"

He heard his name shouted and relief washed over him. His brother, Chet, the deputy sheriff Charlie Green and a tall man dressed in a dark suit ran into the barn.

The posse had arrived.

Chapter Fourteen

A strange beep echoed in her ears and stark white surroundings greeted her squinted gaze, was she dead? Shifting slightly, pain seared her shoulder. Her throat felt desert dry. If she could feel pain and thirst, she wasn't dead. But fire burned down her arm when she tried to sit up.

She felt his hand on her arm. Prying her eyes open, his face blurred, became fuzzy then filtered into focus.

Dark circles lay under his eyes and chestnut-colored growth shadowed his face. It looked to her as if he had not shaved for days. She tried to speak but her mouth was too dry to form words.

"Don't."

A warm finger touched her lips and she felt the bed shift her into a more upright position. He fluffed the pillow then turned and poured her a glass of water. Cradling her head, he helped her sip from the cup.

"Better?" he asked.

"Father Thomas," croaked from her lips. She had to know what happened. Was he dead?

"Don't try to talk, Angel." Lifting her hand, he pressed a kiss to her knuckles. "You need your rest. You were shot in the shoulder. And thanks to my brother Chet and his friend Charlie showing up when they did, Father Thomas is in custody and you're on your way to recovery."

"How long?" she rasped, dragging her fingers across his straggly beard shadow.

Arian smiled and clasped her hand to his cheek.

"You've been in the hospital for almost two days. They did surgery to your shoulder to remove the bullet and rebuilt the bone that was damaged. But you don't need to worry about that now, baby. You need to rest. Don't worry. I'm here looking out for you."

As if a weight lifted from her chest, Angel breathed deep and closed her eyes. A wave of relief washed over her. It was over.

* * * * *

"Did you tell her?" Myra asked as Arian walked into the kitchen.

"No." Arian shook his head. "He wanted to tell her himself."

"When," Myra huffed, "it's been two weeks."

"Mom, don't worry." Arian smiled. "He's coming over tonight. He wanted things to settle down. You know with the press coverage of Candy's death... He didn't want Angel to have to deal with any more than she already had and neither did I."

A hollow void pitted his stomach at the thought of her. Though she was a liar and a cheat, she was still a person. Since Candy was broke and had no known family, he paid for her funeral arrangements under one condition, it had to be kept anonymous.

No one deserved to die the way she did. He swallowed hard. The only good thing to come of Candy's death—the press was too busy with covering the movie star's demise to be bothered with Angel. He was grateful Chet, Charlie, Sheriff Miller and Federal Agent Henley had been able to keep Angel's involvement out of the papers.

Using her cane, his mother walked into the family room. Arian carried the tray loaded with a pitcher of iced tea and glasses and followed her. Angel looked beautiful sitting on the couch, even though her arm was nestled firmly in a sling.

The surgeon at the hospital in Henderson explained that Angel had been lucky. No vital organs were injured and the damage to the bone had been surgically repaired. Now all that was left to do was heal. He had released her into the capable hands of Doc Matthews.

Handing her a glass of iced tea, Arian kissed her brow and sat on the couch beside her. Now, if he could just get her through the next few hours...

The front door opened and Arian stiffened. Chet walked in with Federal Agent Abe Henley as scheduled. Though he didn't know the answers to Angel's past, he knew the truth lay with this man. Was he ready to hear it? He glanced at the beautiful woman at his side.

Most importantly, was she?

Not sure why the agent wanted to talk with her, Angel's back straightened. Was it about Sister Mary Margaret? Father Thomas? Sipping her tea, she tried to quell her nerves. She thought she answered all the necessary questions at the hospital.

Once the initial pleasantries were said and everyone was settled into a seat, she felt Arian's arm rest along the back of the couch. It soothed her soul to know he'd placed it there for her as she leaned into his subtle touch. But nothing could prepare her for the words that came out of the agent's mouth.

"You look just like your mother when she was your age."

Had she heard him right?

"How do you know that?" she stammered as she stared at Agent Henley.

Did he know who her mother was? Where she could be found? Hope roared to life in her veins as if on the upswing of a roller coaster, her mother could be found. But did she want to know? After all... She held her head up and forced a steadiness to her voice that she didn't feel.

"I never knew my mother. She abandoned me on the doorsteps of an orphanage when I was born."

Not even the minuscule circles Arian drew in her palm could calm the rush of blood through her veins or the hearty pound of her heart. If anything, his touch added to it. Angel forced her focus from his fingers and back onto the face of Agent Henley.

What did this man know that she didn't?

After clearing his throat, he spoke.

"What I'm about to tell you may be hard for you to digest at first." She watched him wet his lips, nervously. "But I have information about you and your mother."

Angel's mouth dropped.

He knew her mother? How?

She couldn't help but stare as he reached into the inside coat pocket of his suit and pulled out a small manila envelope. Opening the envelope, he dumped its contents on the coffee table in front of her. Several old photographs lay for all to see.

One captured her eye. She released the death grip she had not realized she held on Arian's hand and snatched the picture up for a closer look.

"And who are these pictures supposed to be of?" rasped shakily from her lips. It couldn't be what she was thinking. He had to be wrong.

"The one in your hand is of your mother."

It couldn't be, she gasped, glanced from the picture to Agent Henley then back to the picture.

"But this is..."

"Yes, it is." His formerly stiff voice turned soft and caring as Angel stared at the picture. "She was your mother."

"That's not true." Though she grappled for control, her voice trembled and her head shook. It wasn't possible. "She would have told me."

"Angel." Arian's arm wrapped possessively, around her shoulders, being careful not to tug on the injured side too tightly. "You know her?"

He cupped her face, lifting it to see her expression and his heart sank. Tears coated her eyes and her face had turned pale. Her whole being seemed to shake in his arms.

"It's Sister Mary Margaret."

"What?" Ed and Myra said in unison.

"Are you sure about this?" Arian covered Angel's hand with his and stared at the man sitting across from them. There had to be an explanation and this man wasn't leaving until he gave them one.

"Yes." Agent Henley fumbled through the photos on the table, found the one he was looking for then handed it to Arian and Angel. "I'm Angel's uncle."

With great effort, Angel looked at the picture. A young Sister Mary Margaret dressed in a wedding gown stared back at her. On either side of her stood two men

dressed in tuxes, a younger version of Agent Henley and a man with the same pale-blue eyes as she.

Agent Henley did something Angel never expected. He left his chair and knelt at her feet. Angel lifted her gaze from the photo and realized his eyes were the same shape and shade of deep blue as Sister Mary Margaret's.

"Angel, she couldn't tell you."

"Why?" Angel sniffed back a tear. "Why couldn't she tell me?"

"She was in the witness protection program." He touched her cheek. "You both were. A little over twenty-five years ago, she was a witness in a very important federal case. She was pregnant with you when everything happened. She gave birth to you at the convent where she was hidden. After your birth, they moved you and your mother to the orphanage. It was a better place for the both of you to blend in."

"Is this my father?" She spoke hardly above a whisper.

Sister Mary Margaret was her mother. Oh, God, it made sense. Somehow in her heart, it made sense.

"Yes."

"Where's he?"

"Your mother witnessed his murder."

He paused and Angel watched him take a deep breath before continuing.

"Both of your parents were forest rangers. They loved the outdoors and traveled from national park to national park doing research on the trees and wildlife. It wasn't just their job, it was their life. They were truly spiritual beings and believed in astrology. Heck, they even planned their wedding by the alignment of the stars and the planets in essence with their birth signs."

Again he cleared his throat, but managed a timid smile before continuing.

"One morning, your father was in a secluded area of one of the national parks, when he spotted two men digging. As a ranger, it was his job to intervene but he didn't believe in carrying a weapon." His voice cracked. "He never had a chance. They simply gunned him down. Your mother was following just a few feet behind him. When she heard the shots, she hid behind a tree and took pictures of them with the camera they used for documentation. It was her pictures and testimony that put one of the biggest crime bosses in jail."

"So her death was a contract hit?" Chet asked.

Lip quivering, she fought not to cry. She had to know. Had the man her mother helped send to prison somehow found them after so many years? Was she still in danger? If she was, did that mean they would have to hide her again?

She could not ask Arian to give up his family to be with her. It was not right. But she did not know if she could live without him, the one perfect match to her soul. Angel couldn't breathe.

Time seemed to stop as she waited for his answer.

"No." Agent Henley stayed kneeling at Angel's feet with his hands rested on her knees. He turned his gaze to Chet as he spoke. "The crime boss my sister testified against died years ago and that branch is run by an entirely new group now. It turns out," his gaze found Angel's once again as he spoke. "She died protecting her daughter. We found a diary in her belongings that listed her suspicions about Father Thomas and the way he acted towards you. Angel, I've been following your trail since she died. You were her life. And I hope you'll let me be a part of your life now."

She shivered uncontrollably. It all made sense. Though she'd refused to acknowledge them, Father Thomas had made sexually oriented advances. But she'd managed to avoid him. Thinking back, his actions had never been one of a man of the cloth. Why hadn't she seen that? Why had it taken the death of her...

"That's why I was never adopted," Angel whispered and Abe nodded his head yes. "That's why she wanted me with her."

The dam broke. Tears free flowed and she felt Arian's arm tighten tenderly around her shoulders while, his other hand covered hers. She looked into Arian's eyes and saw a tear streak down his cheek.

"I was hers, Arian. I was hers."

Burying her face against his chest, she cried.

"Oh, Angel," Myra's tear-filled voice comforted Angel. She felt the older woman settle on the other side of her and Myra's hand tenderly stroked her hair. "She must have loved you so much. It must have been terrible for her not to be able to tell you the truth."

"You're not alone anymore, Angel." Arian pressed his lips against her hair. "You've got us now."

* * * * *

Arian stood silent. His brother and father both stood in the gazebo with Reverend Graves and Rhiannon. Each man wore a tux during this early evening affair.

The swing was removed for the ceremony. A table sat in the center, covered with satin cloths of red, white, amethyst and aqua blue. The family bible sat spread open in the middle of two satin white pillows on top of the table.

On one pillow sat the religious symbols of marriage—two golden wedding rings. On the other sat the ethereal symbol of eternal bonding—two golden bands of eternal commitment.

Several tall candelabras stood in a semicircle with their candles lit, enhancing the moonlight glow. Candles lit a pathway between the rows of chairs filled with family and friends to the back steps of the house.

Glancing up at the heavens, he knew all was perfect. They waited two months for everything to be right. Mars hovered visibly in the distance. A full moon added magnificent light to the yard, along with hundreds of lit candles. The signs of Aries and

Aquarius shone bright overhead. Everything was in the proper alignment for the most important night of their lives.

The music started. The back door opened. His mother came out first, dressed in a light amethyst-colored bridesmaid dress followed by the most beautiful woman Arian had ever seen. Angel looked glorious in his mother's wedding dress. Ellen, from the dress shop in town, had worked wonders, nipping and tucking here and there making alterations so it would fit. The scoop neckline accented her breasts and his mouth watered. The short-sleeved dress had a beaded bodice, which flowed into a full long skirt that helped hide the secret he and Angel shared.

After all Angel had been through, their child survived.

His heart swelled and beat fervently at the thought. His child grew in the womb of his woman.

Arian couldn't take his eyes off Angel as her Uncle Abe escorted her down the aisle. The closer she got, the harder it became for him to hide the growing tightness of his cock.

Kissing his cheek as she passed, his mother took her place in the gazebo beside his father. Angel and her uncle stood silent in front of him at the base of the steps. When the words were spoken—who gives this bride to be wed and her uncle released Angel to him—it was all he could do not to strip her and make love to her, claiming her as his life mate right there in front of the whole procession.

"You're beautiful," he whispered.

"You're not so bad yourself." She grinned and her faint blush made him smile.

She knew him better than anyone, was pregnant with his child and still she blushed.

Arian led his woman to the center of the gazebo then stood before the reverend and Rhiannon. He felt his heart pound and his love grew with each word that was spoken.

They had agreed to follow the religious ceremony, which was performed first to please his folks. But it was the ethereal bonding ceremony that they truly felt was right for them.

After Angel learned of her parents and their strong belief in the guidance of the heavens, she understood her deep-seated love for astrology. In its subtle way, she felt it had led her to her one true life mate, the match to her Aquarius—Arian's Aries. It was important for Angel to have the same bonding between her and Arian that her parents had experienced during their wedding ceremony, which her uncle had described to her in great detail. Being a high priestess in astrological circles, Rhiannon was ecstatic to perform the ethereal bonding ceremony.

By the time they exchanged the gold wedding rings, Arian was hard as a brick. But there was one more ceremony necessary to complete their marriage before he could sneak Angel up to the bedroom and make love to his wife. It was the reason Rhiannon stood beside the reverend. They had completed the vows of man and wife through the normal religious words but they both wanted something more. Heart pounding, he smiled down at his beautiful Angel.

Her happiness was all that mattered. She wanted the wedding of her parents and he wouldn't let her down.

Since learning of the love-filled life her parents shared, how they had lived by the signs of the heavens and had led their life, giving back to the earth, Angel and Arian wanted to follow their guidance, Because they believed their union was written in the heavens and stars just as Angel's parents had been, they both wanted Rhiannon's touch to finalize their commitment to one another for all eternity.

Happiness washed over her. This was the most wonderful night of her life. Holding his hands, feeling his heartbeat thump through his veins and knowing it was because of her his cock was so obviously hard in his pants made her realize how fantastic true love could be. Waiting two months had been strenuous. Not having Arian in her bed made the anticipation of tonight even more heightened.

Hopefully, she could last until the ceremonies were over. Was it wrong to want to fuck a man so badly? Looking at his smoldering gaze of sexual promise, she decided it wasn't. After all, he was her husband, her soul mate.

Rhiannon stepped forward. Her waist-length golden locks were braided and wrapped around her head. She was dressed in a long, flowing silk ceremonial red robe, which swallowed her petite frame. She lifted the pillow with the golden bands and raised it to the heavens. Her vibrant green eyes seemed to glow. Soft ancient words chanted from her lips in a blessing of the bands that Arian and Angel had agreed to wear along with their wedding rings.

Rhiannon lowered the pillow to Arian. He lifted one of the solid gold bands from the pillow.

The four-inch-wide solid bracelet was lined along one edge with the stones most valuable to Aries—diamonds, the symbol of love, luck and success—and rubies whose red color symbolized fire and excitement. The other edge was lined with stones most valuable to Aquarius—amethyst, the symbol of faithfulness—and brilliant blue sapphires, which symbolized the blue freedom of the sky. Directly centered between the line of jewels was the symbol of the ram of Aries drinking from the water of the water bearer of Aquarius etched into the golden surface.

Rhiannon shifted the pillow to Angel. She lifted the other matching band from the pillow. Heat filled Angel's soul and the vision of her parents appeared between Rhiannon and Arian. Smiles were on their faces and Angel couldn't help but smile in return. Somehow, they had made it to her wedding and she felt they granted their blessing though no words were passed between them. Angel's heart felt full.

The heavens and stars had blessed this union. She turned her gaze to the man she loved with all her heart and soul.

Arian brushed a light kiss across Angel's lips then, carefully, placed the band around her wrist, with the Aries stones towards her heart and squeezed until it clasped shut.

He pulled the sleeves of the tux jacket and shirt back into a bunch at his elbow.

Following the ritual of the ethereal ceremony, Angel brushed a light kiss across Arian's lips then placed the band with the Aquarius stones towards Arian's heart around his wrist and squeezed with both hands, until it clasped shut.

With the bands in place, closed symbolically for eternity, the ceremony had one thing left to make it complete. Angel and Arian licked their lips in unison.

Reverend Graves stepped forward beside Rhiannon and together, they said the words.

"We now pronounce you man and wife. You may kiss the bride."

Arian wrapped his arms around Angel, captured her mouth and plundered. Her taste enticed him. Inhaling deep, her arousal filled his senses and his cock unbelievably hardened even more to the point of pain. He planned to share his life with the woman of his dreams, his gift from the heavens for eternity.

Now, if he could just figure out a way to sneak her to the bedroom and skip the wedding reception.

About the Author

Tara Nina is a romantic dreamer whose dreams are now a reality through the publication of one of her romantic fantasies. She resides in Northern New Jersey along with her husband, two children, two dogs and a cascade of supportive friends and relatives.

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