

*For my mother,
who has given me my overactive imagination,
my husband,
who doesn't mind it,
and my friends and family,
who support me.
God bless all of you!*

Prologue

Marianne Webernec was completely average at age thirty, but what she desperately wanted to be was extraordinary.

Exceptional. Spectacular.

For once in her life she wanted to be the heroine in one of the Rachel Fire novels that she gobbled up as soon as they were published. To be tall, thin, and devastatingly beautiful. The kind of woman that men everywhere lusted for. The kind of woman who walked into a room and men fought each other just for her smile.

But what she was, even after her makeover, was a mere five-feet-four-inch size-10 woman with medium brown hair that was pinned back from her round face to fall just below her shoulders. She had eyes that were flat brown, not amber, not flecked with anything unusual or worth noticing. Her breasts were too small, her hips were too wide, and her feet were pinched by the narrow tips of her high-heeled shoes.

She was...

Average.

Painfully, woefully average.

"I think you're stunning."

Only if she had a stun gun in her hand.

Marianne looked over her shoulder to see Aislinn Zimmerman staring at her. Aislinn was what she wanted to be. Bach, model thin, with long, curly red hair, perfectly manicured nails, and big bright green eyes that seemed to glow. Aislinn was every bit as beautiful as her namesake from Aislinn's mother's favorite romance novel, *The Wolf and the Dove*.

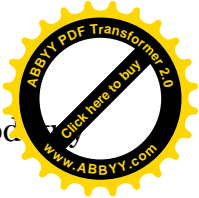
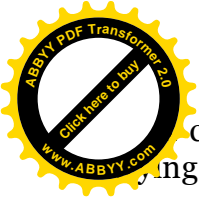
Marianne had spent her entire life hating women who looked like Aislinn. They were everywhere. On television, in magazines, and on the pages of the books that Marianne loved to read. Books where the gorgeous, drop-dead heroine nailed the gorgeous, drop-dead hero.

They were ever an unnecessary reminder that at the end of the day, Marianne Webernec would never be one of them.

She would always be average. White noise in the background of a world that went on oblivious to her presence no matter how much she longed for it to be otherwise.

"Thanks," Marianne said to her lamely, knowing the truth in her heart. But that was okay.

Because in the next few minutes she was going to walk through the door behind Aislinn and become the one thing she'd always wanted to be...



covert CIA agent pursued by the evil arch-villain who would turn out to be a good friend trying to uncover the man who had killed his brother.

Okay, the plot was a bit clichéd, even a little trite. But Marianne loved Rachel Fire's book *Danger in the Night*. She had read it so many times that her copy at home was in pieces barely held together by tape.

For the last four years that book and the hero Brad Ramsey had lived in her heart and in her mind. He was the man she dreamed of seducing every night when she closed her eyes.

She had licked every inch of his divinely masculine body from head to foot, and had made him beg her for mercy. They had made love everywhere from Caribbean beaches to the snowdrifts of Moscow.

In her mind she had ridden him hard and furiously, and made him hers.

Oh, to really be the book's heroine Ren Winterbourne. The sultry, sophisticated agent, woman of the world, who knew every way possible to make a man beg for her touch. Ren never doubted herself. She always knew exactly what she wanted and how to get it.

Marianne was still searching for her place in the world. And when it came to men, she would never understand them. They were completely alien beasts.

She sighed wistfully. Her entire life was a study in what could have been. If only she'd been smarter, taller, prettier...

But she wasn't.

Her mother had once told her that life was about acceptance. That she needed to be content with what was dealt her and be grateful it wasn't worse.

Starting this instant, Marianne was going to take her mother's advice.

Mostly.

She was going to walk out that door and...

Stumble, knowing her.

"Do I have to wear the heels?" she asked Aislinn, holding her foot out toward the beautiful redhead as she flexed her ankle.

Some things were best done with level feet. Especially when the last thing Marianne wanted was to be embarrassed. "I'm really not a high-heel kind of person. I'm more the I'll-stumble-and-twist-my-ankle kind of woman."

Aislinn laughed. "Sure. What would you like?"

"Got anything flat and black?"

Aislinn flipped open her stylish silver cell phone and pressed a button. "Hi, Gwen, Ms. Webernec would like a selection of flat black shoes to go with her rust-colored miniskirt dress. She's a size eight medium... Thanks." Aislinn closed the phone. "Give her ten minutes and she'll bring us a new boxload of them."

It was good to be queen.

At least for the day, or in this case, a whole month. Marianne smiled at the thought.

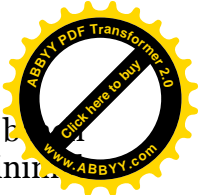
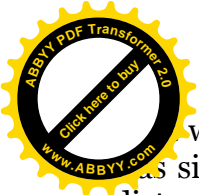
One full month of being catered to and pampered. Having her every want met without complaint.

Oh, yeah, forget Julia Roberts in *Pretty Woman*. This reality was so much better.

After all, Marianne Webernec, average Jane high-school teacher, was about to head off to Sex Camp.

Chapter One

Kyle Foster lay behind a short clump of bushes, scoping out the large compound that lay sheltered in the sand—his latest target.



It was fifteen hundred hours and all the explosives were rigged. Their timers set. The beach was silent with a mild northwesterly wind that would carry the shrapnel and debris a minimum distance, toward the empty lagoon.

He was watching the countdown on his watch, waiting for something that would alleviate his extreme boredom.

He'd thought it would be the well-placed, perfectly executed explosion.

It wasn't.

At fifteen seconds and counting, disaster struck as an unknown, unexpected civilian popped out of the small wooded area near the compound.

Kyle cursed. There was no way to stop the explosives, and he didn't dare shout at her.

Damn civilians never took orders well. Instead of doing as they were told, they invariably assumed the position of a deer in the headlights and asked, "What?" Which would be followed by the ever aggravating, "Why?"

By then it would be too late.

If he said "bomb," she'd scream and probably run straight for the explosion. Murphy's Law.

He was out of time.

Combat trained and ever ready to fight, Kyle launched himself from his covert position to intercept her before she drew any closer.

He mentally continued the countdown in his head as he ran full speed toward her...

Marianne saw nothing but a blur from the corner of her eye. One second she was heading toward the small sand castle that looked as if someone had constructed it with careful, minute detail. The next some large something had scooped her up into its arms and run off with her.

Breathless from shock and the feel of two extremely strong arms carrying her while the man ran across the beach, she didn't even have time to protest as the two of them flew in the opposite direction of the castle.

Just as they reached the pathway she'd been following, she heard a sharp *click*.

The man holding her threw the two of them to the ground and rolled them under some bushes as a massive explosion rent the air. The earth beneath them shook.

Her breath was knocked out of her from their fall, and panic welled inside her.

A sleek wall of muscle covered her body again as something began to rain down on the sand around them. She was overwhelmed by the combined scent of Brut, warm masculine skin, and Finesse shampoo.

Marianne instinctively covered her face until the "rain" stopped.

"What in the world just happened?" she asked, her heart pounding as she dared peek from between her fingers.

The man lying on top of her lifted himself up to look down at her.

Marianne gaped.

In all her life she'd never seen anything like him. His eyes were bright and blue. Electrifying and filled with mirthful mischief. They reminded her of the boys in her classes whenever they were planning some youthful prank.

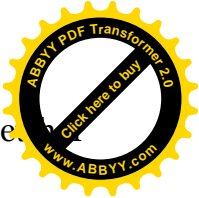
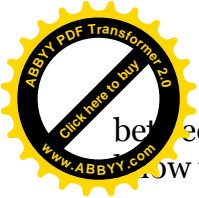
Only there was nothing boyish about the man on top of her. Obviously in his mid-thirties, his face was ruggedly handsome, with sharp cheekbones and at least a full day's worth of stubble on his cheeks and chin.

He was even more handsome than the actor they had playing Brad Ramsey.

And the feel of his long, hard body covering hers...

It was heaven. Pure heaven.

He swept a heated gaze over her face and body before giving her a devilish grin that should belong to the worst sort of Regency rake. Not to mention the fact that his waist was lying



been her legs, and she felt a sudden swell pressing against her intimately. One that let her know this was no small man. Nor was he completely uninterested in her.

It was all she could do not to moan in pleasure.

"Hi." The deepness of his voice was as startling as their meeting.

"Hi," she answered back rather lamely.

Kyle tried to remember what the woman had asked him a second ago, but all he could really think of was the peekaboo dimple she had in her left cheek. It flashed at him as she frowned.

Not to mention the fact that she felt damn good underneath him.

Her white tank top had fallen off of one shoulder, leaving it bare where it beckoned him to touch and kiss the smooth skin it revealed.

Her dark brown eyes were warm and friendly with a healthy dose of suspicion in them. She had sleek brown hair that fell around her head, onto the sand. It was the kind of hair a man dreamed of running his hands through. The kind of hair a man liked to feel whipping his chest while the woman who had it sat on top of him, grinding her body against his until they both came.

It took every ounce of control he possessed not to rub his swollen, aching groin against her and dream of sinking himself deep inside her hot, wet body.

Oh, yeah, he so wanted a piece of this woman. One small taste of her lush, soft, feminine curves.

"You... uh... you want to get off me now?" she asked, her voice sounding a bit peeved.

"Not really," he answered honestly. "I kind of like it here." More than he dared admit even to himself.

And he found himself suddenly fixated by the bared skin of her shoulder that didn't seem to betray a bra strap.

Was she naked under there?

His cock tightened even more at the thought of her naked, unrestrained breasts being only a tiny push of fabric away. Of taking one of them into his mouth and suckling its tip while she buried her long, graceful fingers into his hair.

Marianne arched a brow at the man's unexpected response and tilted her head as she watched him. She wasn't sure if this was part of her whole fantasy package or not. What with the explosion and all, it was possible he was one of the actors who had been playing out her novel.

But Rachel Fire hadn't written a scene about a sand castle being blown up.

Then again, there was a scene in a few more days where they blew up a cabin, so maybe the man had been practicing.

At any rate, he was a cutie-pie. Gorgeous in fact. His darkly tanned body held the muscular definition of an athlete. One that begged a woman to run her hands over it.

"You always sweep a woman off her feet like this and throw her on the ground?"

He laughed at that, a warm, rich sound that made her actually tingle. "No, I have to say this is a first. But given how it seems to be turning out, I might make it a habit." He winked at her, then pulled back from her slowly and held his hand out to her as if to shake hers.

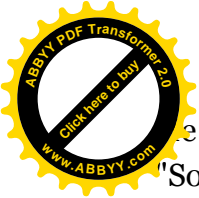
"Kyle Foster," he said.

Hmm, not one of the names in the book. Maybe he was one of the extras they had hired to play commando with.

"Marianne Webernec," she said automatically as she shook his large, callused hand and did her best not to think about what it would feel like to have it cup her breast or have those long, masculine fingers sunk deep inside her body.

He had beautiful hands. Powerful hands. Strong and manly, they appealed to her in the best sort of way.

"Oh, wait," she said, trying to distract herself from those thoughts. "I'm supposed to be Ren Winterbourne. Sorry, I keep forgetting."



She scowled at her words. "What are you? A federal agent or something?"

"Something, definitely something." She started to push herself to her feet.

Kyle helped her up with an effortlessness that overcharged her hormones and made her yearn to lean into the strength of his body until she swooned from delight.

What was it about this man that made her want to do him right here on the beach? She'd never been sexually flagrant before, but something about Kyle Foster made her long desperately to rip that tight white T-shirt off and have her way with him whether he wanted it or not.

"You must be from the other side of the island," he said in that innately masculine voice.

He released her all too soon, and she ached from the loss of his body heat being so close. It had warmed her more than the overhead sun.

"Uh-oh. Did I really come all that way? They told me I wasn't supposed to go too far away. Did I end up on the private side of things?"

"Yeah, but it's okay. I'm the only one staying here right now." He glanced around the vacant beach. "It's been boring as hell up until now."

"Tell me about it. For a fantasy vacation, it's been rather meek compared to what I was expecting."

Interest sparked deep in those electric blue eyes. "What were you expecting?"

Marianne squelched a smile. She'd been expecting something along the lines of studly fine Kyle Foster to come into her life and ravish her day and night until she couldn't move, never mind walk.

Marianne bit her bottom lip at the thought and lowered her gaze to the snowy sand to keep him from seeing just how embarrassed she was.

"I don't know," she said with a small shrug. "Some handsome man to throw me down on the ground and save me from an unexpected explosion?"

Kyle laughed again. He didn't know why. Normally, he was about as serious as they came. His sometimes partner, Retter, had often commented on the fact that Kyle's face would freeze if he ever cracked more than a half grin.

But something about this woman made him feel...

Well...

Kind of giddy. There was no other word for it. And he really hated that girly-sounding word. *Giddy* and *Kyle Foster* went together about like a cobra and a mongoose.

He must have been even more bored than he suspected. She wasn't ravishing or even beautiful. She reminded him of the woman next door.

A woman who shouldn't draw his notice at all, and yet he found himself staring at her and the way her light, tiny freckles kissed the skin across the bridge of her nose.

Even more startling was the desire he had to taste every one of those freckles with his tongue. To kiss and tease each one and see how many more she might have in other, more provocative areas of her body.

Like those creamy thighs that were virtually hidden by her drab tan walking shorts. Thighs that would look much better naked and wrapped around his neck...

Marianne felt suddenly awkward as she realized the T-shirt Kyle wore displayed more of his muscled chest than it concealed. Of course, built the way he was, it would take several layers of sweaters and a heavy overcoat to disguise that body.

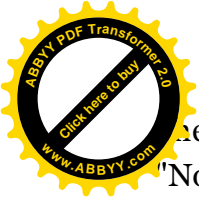
He reminded her of a linebacker. One with a very tight end.

He was gorgeous all over. From the top of his sun-kissed dark brown hair to the toes of his scuffed black leather biker boots.

She frowned as she noticed that.

"Who wears boots on the beach?" she asked unexpectedly.

He glanced down at his feet. "I didn't even think about it. Guess it's not normal, huh?"



He smiled up at him. "Says to me you don't spend a lot of time on the beach."

"Not really. I'm here under extreme protest. What about you?"

"I'm this month's winner."

He frowned as if he had no idea what she was talking about.

"You know," she said, "the Hideaway Heroine Sweepstakes winner? I'm the one they chose this time."

"Ah," he said, nodding. "So how's it going?"

Twirling a small section of her hair, she shrugged. "It's going, I guess. South more than north, but I suppose nothing's perfect."

"Now, why would you say that?" He indicated the vibrant blue sky with his thumb. "Just look at that sky. It's perfect. Great day. You got the beach to run around on, the surf sliding up. Hell, you can even hear birds chirping."

"Which is why you were blowing up a sand castle?"

He gave her a guilty smile that made her knees weak. "Well, okay, nothing's perfect."

Marianne licked her lips as she watched him hitch his thumbs into the front pockets of his jeans. He had such a manly stance. One of power, like some sinuous beast just prowling the beach waiting for a morsel to gobble.

How she wished she were that morsel.

"So," she said, stretching the word out, "do you do that a lot? Blow up sand castles?"

"Only if they deserve it." He glanced back to the hole in the beach where his sand castle had been. "That one, unfortunately, had gone bad. Real bad."

She covered her face as she laughed again. "I guess I better stay on the straight and narrow then, huh?"

"Marianne?"

She cringed as she heard the voice of "Brad" coming through the trees from the opposite direction of her uncovered pathway. The actor was extremely handsome, but was pale and rather feminine compared to the man in front of her.

"I guess I need to be going," she said reluctantly.

She started away from Kyle, but he caught her hand in his. The feel of that steely grip on her skin made her entire body burn.

Before she realized what he was doing, he'd pulled her against the hard, lean strength of his body and lowered his mouth onto hers.

Marianne sighed at the taste of his lips as his tongue explored her mouth, flicking masterfully in and out. It made her breathless and weak. She held on to those broad, muscled shoulders as she felt the heat pounding between her legs. Heat that made her wet and desperate for this man.

His muscles flexed beneath her hand, whetting her appetite all the more. How she wished she were touching his tanned skin, sinking her teeth into all that lush, fabulous maleness.

Kyle growled at how good she tasted. But then he'd known instinctively that she would.

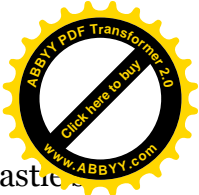
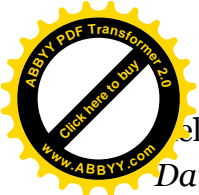
His cock hardened to the point of pain as he imagined what it would feel like to lay her down on the beach and spend the next few hours watching her come for him over and over again while he slid himself in and out of her sleek wet heat.

There were few things in life he liked more than the sight of a woman caught in the middle of an orgasm. The sound of her delighted cries as he nibbled and teased the last tremor from her body.

And this was a woman he could savor from now until the end of time...

"Marianne!"

He didn't want to let her go, but then, he'd never been the kind of guy to perform before an audience, nor did she strike him as the kind of woman who would appreciate him trying to broaden their horizons in that respect.



reluctantly he released her.

Damn. Kyle didn't say anything as he watched the klutz—who tripped over the sand castle crater as he crossed the sand—take off with his woman.

He glanced at the blackened hole on the beach.

Target number one had been destroyed.

Target number two...

She would have to be conquered.

For the first time in a month he felt the familiar adrenaline rush surging.

At last he had a mission.

Marianne Webernec and her sweet little mouth that had tasted like honey.

One taste and he'd been hooked. And he wasn't the kind of man to leave well enough alone once his curiosity was aroused.

Curiosity hell, his whole body was aroused, and he wouldn't be sated until he'd tasted a whole lot more than her lips.

No way. Before he was through with her, he would know every minute part of her body and every way to make her scream out in pleasure.

Kyle smiled at the lecherous thought.

This was one challenge he was going to savor well.

"Hey, Sam," Kyle said to the surly man behind the concierge desk as he entered the lobby of the small luxury hotel where he'd been staying literally against his will.

Since Kyle had been shot in the line of duty (about six times they assumed—five bullets had been dug out and there was some debate on what had caused the sixth wound), his boss had decided Kyle needed a vacation at the hotel his agency owned on a remote, private island out in the middle of the Atlantic.

Kyle thought the six-week "vacation" was completely unnecessary, but Joe had insisted, and anyone who had ever tried to argue with Joe Q. Public soon found out they would have a better time moving a mountain than budging Joe even an inch.

So here he was, a highly trained special ops agent, bored, healed, and raring to go, only to find Joe laughing at him every time he called and begged for a plane ride off this godforsaken island.

At least until twenty minutes ago, when fate had finally shined on him again. Suddenly the thought of the next week looked promising.

Kyle stopped at the desk where Sam sat holding a long-neck beer propped on his knee while watching a Lakers game on ESPN. In his mid-fifties, Sam looked like the picture-perfect image of a stout Scotsman. He had a ruddy complexion and a wide, serious face that was topped by a thick unruly mane of stark white hair. He wore black-rimmed glasses that continually slid down his broad nose and that he constantly pushed back up.

But the most interesting thing about him was his companion Roscoe. An old basset hound, Roscoe had about as much attitude as any dog Kyle had ever met. And in a strange way, Kyle liked that old dog as much as he liked Sam.

Kyle paused at the counter and respectfully waited for a commercial before he interrupted the hotel's manager. "Tell me something, Sam. What's on the other side of this island and why am I not supposed to go over there?"

Sam shrugged as he looked up from the small television. He took a quick swig of beer before he answered. "That's them weirdos from that publisher, Rose Books. You'd have to ask Joe for more details. He's the one who rents this part of the island from them so we can do some covert training, or in your case emergency R and R. I think he knows the owner of the publishing house or something."

"Do you know what goes on over there?"

"Yeah, and it's spooky as all get out."

"Spooky how?"

"It's Sex Camp."

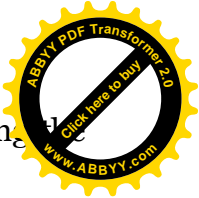
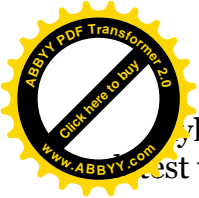
Kyle choked at the unexpected answer. "What?"

"Sex Camp," Sam repeated simply, as if there were nothing unusual about the title. "They have these women what read those romance books, and every few months or so one of them wins a trip out here to live out their fantasy novel, and they put on this whole grand show with the winner."

Sam pushed his glasses up. "Makes you want to know what's in them romance novels women read. I've been reading Tom Clancy for years, and all I get is submarines and war stories." He snorted. "I ain't never had the itch to run into the woods with a bunch of sailors and try to throw them on the ground. You know what I mean?"

Not really. Sam had a bad habit of not always making sense. "Beg pardon?" Kyle asked.

"Listen," Sam continued as he idly stroked Roscoe's head. "A word to the wise, son, you got to be real careful walking around after dark whenever one of them fantasies is going on. They don't call it Sex Camp for nothing. I've seen them do things on the beach that'll make you go blind. Hell, some of it I didn't even know was humanly possible."



He couldn't keep his mouth from hanging open as he thought about Marianne being the best winner. There was no way his sweet little visitor would do something like that.

Was there?

And if there was, then she'd better damn well be doing it with *him*.

"Are you yanking my chain?" he asked Sam.

"Nah, why would I?" Sam gave him an intense stare over the top rims of his glasses. "You think they're normal women when they come off the plane, but they're really raving nymphomaniacs cleverly disguised."

"Bullshit."

"Nah, boy, it's true. They come off the plane looking all nice and normal, and within twenty-four hours they turn into Debbie Does Dallas or Richard or whoever she can find. It's horrifying what happens to these women." He pointed to his dog. "See Roscoe here? He's only two years old. He went into the woods one night and now look at him. Their antics done aged him twenty years overnight. And don't get me started on them men they got. I don't know where they find them. But something about them ain't right, neither. So I stay on my side of the island as far away from all of them loons as I can get."

"I don't believe you."

Sam shrugged and turned back toward the television as the game resumed. "You don't got to believe it. Truth is truth. You should be here whenever they're doing one of those historical reenactments. They make us run around in costume in case we accidentally bump into one of their winners. It's a big pain. We have to say things like 'my lady' and shit. I feel like a blooming idiot. Can you just imagine my fat ass in a tutu or tights or whatever those godawful things are called?" He blew out a disgusted breath. "I got too-too much for those things, and their director, Aislinn Zimmerman, once tried to borrow Roscoe for scenery."

Roscoe whined at that.

"That's right, boy. Don't worry. Old Sam would never let them abuse you." He glanced back at Kyle. "That's why I keep Roscoe hidden. The last thing I need is my poor dog going blind, too."

Kyle stood there stunned by Sam's disclosures. He just couldn't see the woman he'd met doing something like that. She'd seemed so pure. Innocent.

No, he didn't believe it. But this whole scenario would require more research.

Heading for the elevators, he decided it was time to get down to business and do what he did best.

Research, infiltrate, and take whatever action necessary to achieve his objective.

Three hours later Kyle sat back in his office chair reviewing his reconnaissance data.

Marianne Webernec was a high school teacher from a small town outside of Peoria, Illinois, whose only claim to fame was once winning the statewide spelling bee in junior high school. She hadn't even been homecoming queen.

She'd graduated with good grades, not exceptional ones. Done college in five years, then went back to her hometown to teach German and French at the local high school.

She'd never even had a speeding or parking ticket. Not even in college.

There wasn't much here to say she was anything out of the ordinary.

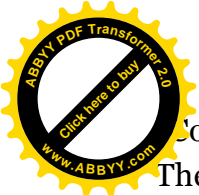
Nothing except for the way his body had reacted the moment he had held her in his arms. The way her hard, puckered nipples had looked underneath the cotton of her tank top.

The way her warm, welcoming mouth had tasted...

Someone knocked on his door.

Instinctively Kyle reached for his weapon, only to roll his eyes at the reflex. Some habits died hard. It was why Joe had sent him here to the island. There was no chance in hell any of his enemies would ever find him. In all the world, this was the only "safe" place any of the BAD agents had.

He pulled his hand back from the holster.



"Come in."

The door opened to show Sam with Roscoe at his feet. "Hey, you busy?"

Kyle swiveled his desk chair around. "Not really. What'cha need?"

"Well, after you left, Roscoe got me to thinking..."

Kyle arched a brow at that. The older man had a strange relationship with his pooch.

Sam came in and handed him a small paperback. "I sent Lee over to the other side of the island to find out what was going on over there for you, and he came back with that book. It's what they're reenacting at the moment, so I thought you might want to read it for a good laugh or something. I know you're not used to inaction, so I thought it might give you something to do."

Kyle inclined his head to him. "Obliged."

Sam nodded, then turned and left with Roscoe in tow.

Alone again, Kyle stared at the white cover with the title *Danger in the Night* and the author's name, Rachel Fire, emblazoned over it. On the spine was a single red rose logo from Rose Books. He turned the book over and scanned the back. The first thing that caught his attention was the name of the heroine, Ren Winterbourne, which was what Marianne had called herself.

The next one was the plot synopsis.

Undercover agents.

Kyle laughed out loud. This was perfect. His little schoolteacher was dreaming of...

Well, him.

Oh, yeah, this was the best. Leaning back in his chair, Kyle began to read the first page of the book, which was a small form and an invitation to the readers:

WHAT'S YOUR FANTASY?

Do you ever dream of getting away from it all? Just for a week or two?

Have you ever read a romance novel and thought...

What if?

Have you ever, just once, wanted to be the heroine in a book and to have the man of your dreams come in and rock your world?

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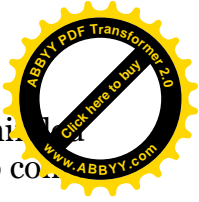
Kyle turned the page, and the hot sex scene on the first page was enough to shock him to his core and make his cock so stiff, he couldn't even sit comfortably.

Holy shit, this was what Marianne read for pleasure?

Just what else did his simple little teacher do for fun?

Marianne sighed as "Brad" pulled his gun out from under his coat. Of course, it got tangled in the hem and he almost dropped it, but once he finally wrestled it free, he pointed it at the others.

"Back off," he snarled, and yet it sounded somehow less than convincing even to her.



The other men around them made snarling noises and animal-like gestures that reminded her of an old campy *Batman* episode from TV. She half expected Olga and her Cossacks to come barreling out at any moment followed by Vincent Price playing Egghead.

It was all she could do not to laugh.

Strange how the idea of this hadn't seemed ludicrous when she'd told Aislinn Zimmerman that she wanted to be Ren Winterbourne, but for some reason the reality of it left her feeling like a fool.

"Come on, Ren," Brad said, taking her by the arm. "I'll get you out of this."

How she wished he could.

Unfortunately all of this would continue for at least another week until her fantasy life was over and she could return back home to Illinois.

Who would have ever thought *that* would be appealing?

Someone please save her from Brad, the bad actor, and the poor souls who were being paid to act like clean-cut criminals.

She half ran out of the building with Brad towing her along by her hand. This was the part where Brad in the book was supposed to pin Ren up against the wall and kiss her senseless.

Instead, Brad ran with her down the beach toward the hotel where they were staying.

"Are they behind us?" he asked.

"No," she said without looking. In her fantasy vacation package, unlike the book, the bad guys never really came after them. It was as if they were afraid of hurting her even though she had signed a legal waiver promising not to hold the Zimmermans or Rose Books liable should she be hurt.

Brad stopped and took a minute to catch his breath. Marianne idly found herself wondering if Kyle would be as winded as Brad after so short a run.

How ridiculous was that? But then, she hadn't been able to get that man out of her thoughts since Brad had "rescued" her from him. Especially Kyle's wonderfully tight rump that had been begging her for a covert fondling.

Too bad she had lacked the courage even to try and grope him.

Well, at least she'd gotten one really good kiss out of this experience.

Hmmm... Maybe she should plead a headache and venture to the other side of the island again in search of the only man who'd turned her head since she'd stepped off the plane three weeks ago.

Not that Brad wasn't gorgeous. He was. In fact, he was almost pretty. But his looks didn't make her weak the way Kyle's rugged handsomeness had.

Just as she was about to lament the lack of fireworks, a large unidentified object went whizzing over her head. The next thing she knew, something exploded to her right.

A tree crashed down.

"What the... ?" Brad whirled around to face a man in green camouflage.

His features obscured by the paint, the unknown man swung at Brad and knocked him back, then he turned on her, and before she could see much more than a blur, he tossed her over his shoulder and ran for the trees.

Draped over him, she caught sight of an exceptionally nice ass.

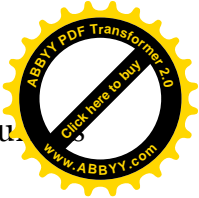
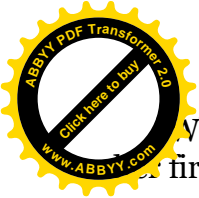
Kyle?

The hope hung in her heart as they raced away from the others.

Marianne couldn't form another coherent thought as he sped with her through the dense brush. His shoulder wasn't exactly comfortable as it slammed repeatedly into her middle.

She was about to tell him to put her down when more explosions sounded.

He turned sharply, narrowly missing another bomb.



"What's happening?" she asked in a broken voice that reminded her of Katharine Hepburn. Her first real wave of fear went over her.

This wasn't part of the book.

"It's the Big Bad, love. Keep your head down or lose it."

She would have recognized that deep, husky voice anywhere. "Kyle? Is it really you?"

He stopped and slid her down his body, which made her instantly wet and needy. Oh, but he had a body and build made for sinning. But she hated the fact his face was completely obscured by the green and black paint.

"Shh," he said, placing a finger over her lips.

He cocked his head as if listening for something.

She heard the faint sound of firecrackers.

"They're coming for us," he said. Taking her hand, he pulled her deeper into the woods.

"Who?"

"Tyson Purdue."

Her scowl deepened at the unknown name. "Who's that?"

"A nasty arms dealer. He's been looking for me for a long time now."

She looked at him skeptically. "Tyson Purdue? Why do I have a feeling that's a name you made up while at the grocery store?"

Kyle ground his teeth. Damn, she was a little too intelligent. Coming up with cover stories had never been his forte. He left that up to operatives such as Retter and Hunter. They were slick and fast with a lie.

His forte was explosives and muscle.

Still, the other agents had taught him one thing. People would believe anything provided you said it with enough conviction.

He gave her a sincere stare. "Well, we call him the Chicken Man. He kind of looks like a chicken. It's why he has such an inferiority complex. Imagine being tagged with such a name. You'd be psychotic, too. What can I say? The man wants me dead."

"So why am *I* running?"

Kyle froze at her question. The only thing he could come up with was a lame excuse he'd seen once in a bad spy movie.

"You kissed me," he answered partially. What the hell, it made about as much sense as anything else. "One of his minions saw it and now he's after you. I had to go back for you to save you before he used you to get to me."

By the look in her brown eyes, he could tell she wasn't buying it. "Yeah, right. I don't—"

He pressed the trigger for another remote explosive. Marianne took the bait. She cringed in his arms. "Are you serious?"

"Baby, I never lie about minions out to get me." At least not when it was helpful and not when it would keep her in his arms.

"Is this for real?"

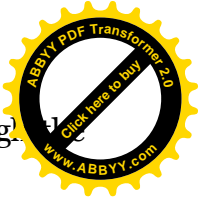
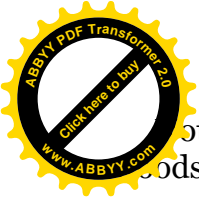
He triggered another explosion. "We have to get moving," he said, letting just a hint of an edge into his voice. "It's going to get ugly if we don't."

Marianne swallowed at that. Part of her still doubted that this could be real, but the look on Brad's face had been sincere. The man wasn't that good an actor. He'd had no idea that Kyle was going to show up.

Any more than she'd known.

"Where are we going?" she asked.

"Don't worry. I have a safe place."



Not sure if she should trust him, but having no other choice, she followed him through the woods until they came to a sheer drop-off near the crashing waves.

Kyle gave her a heated stare. "Feeling adventurous?"

"I can't go down there."

"Sure you can, love. I won't let you fall."

I must be insane.

She hated heights. She hated the thought of falling into the ocean below, and yet something inside her trusted Kyle implicitly. Not to mention the fact he seemed to know what he was doing while she had no clue whatsoever.

With him helping her, they carefully slid down the steep side of the cliff and moved across the beach until they came to a small cave.

Marianne looked at it skeptically. "You know, I have a really nice room back at—"

His peevish look interrupted her. "And it's just as likely to be riddled with bullet holes. Trust me, being shot hurts." He gave her a devilish grin. "Don't tell me my little teacher has lost her sense of adventure."

"No, but..." She paused as his words sank in. "How do you know I'm a teacher?"

"Aren't you?"

"Yes, but how did you know that?"

He hesitated before he answered. "The way you dress."

Marianne looked down at her khaki shorts and white button-down shirt. There wasn't anything to mark her as a teacher. She looked just like anyone else out for a stroll on the beach. "My clothes don't say anything."

"Sure they do," he said, moving closer to her.

Closer and closer until his large muscular body overwhelmed her with desire.

He unbuttoned the top button at her throat, making her entire body instantly hot with sexual anticipation. When he spoke, there was a deep, erotic timber in his voice. "Only a teacher would have her collar buttoned all the way up to her chin. What? You afraid of driving your students wild?"

"Hardly!"

He smiled down at her as he unbuttoned the next one. "I'll bet the guys you teach spend hours in your classroom staring at your ass while you're at the chalkboard, trying to imagine what you're wearing underneath all this conservative dressing—"

Marianne cut his words off with an outraged squeak. "Stop that. You're skeeving me."

"Skeeving?" he asked with a laugh. "What kind of word is that?"

"A perfectly good one that means I don't want to even think about what you're describing." She narrowed her gaze on him. "You're trying to get me off the topic, aren't you?"

Yes, he was. Damn, she was good. If he didn't know better, Kyle would think she really was a special agent. "Why would I do that?"

"I don't know."

Kyle couldn't keep himself from touching her lips with his thumb. She had a mouth that had been made for long, hot kisses, and the memory of her taste was still fresh in his mind. Under his skin.

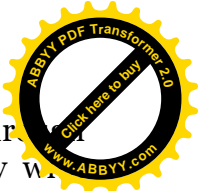
Simmering in his blood.

"You are beautiful," he breathed.

She actually snorted at him.

"What was that?" he asked with a light smile.

"Disagreement. They must be paying you a lot to do this."



"No one's paying me for anything where you're concerned," he said, lacing his hand through her hair. "I've done a lot of bad things in my life, Marianne, but I would never toy with someone's emotions. I'm not that cruel."

He lowered his mouth to hers.

Marianne sighed as his arms tightened around her. This man had more magic in his touch than every member of Harry Potter's school. She'd never seen anything like Jungle Jim.

He was incredible, and the woman in her was completely captivated by him and his powerful touch. His sensuous taste. His warm, male scent.

His mouth blistered a trail from her lips to her neck, where his breath scorched her. She buried her face in the soft locks of his dark brown hair and inhaled the warm, manly scent of his shampoo and skin.

Goodness, but this man set her on fire.

He pulled back to stare down at her with those captivatingly blue eyes. He rubbed gently at her face, letting her know he must have gotten some of his camouflage paint on her skin. "Have you ever made love to a stranger before, Marianne?"

"No," she said, her voice weak. In truth, she'd never before wanted to.

But she did now, and the depths to which she wanted him scared her.

He was truly irresistible.

Kyle took her hand into his and led it to the swollen bulge in his pants. She could feel the whole outline of his cock in her palm. Feel it straining toward her hand as if as eager for her touch as she was to touch him.

She should be offended by his actions.

She wasn't.

"Would you like to take a walk on the wild side with me, Little Teacher?"

This was insane. The very thought of it was...

Heavenly.

Decadent and frightening.

Dare she?

He trailed her hand up to the top button of his pants, where he lifted his shirt ever so slightly so that she could touch that hard, warm skin of his lower abdomen. He curled her fingertips into his waistband, then released her hand so that he could cup her face with his large hands.

She swallowed at the sensation of the short, crisp hairs that led from his navel downward.

"It's entirely up to you, Marianne," he whispered. "Do you have the courage to live out your fantasy?"

Did she?

How many nights had she lain awake dreaming of this? Dreaming of a some hot man saving her from something bad and then taking her madly into his arms and making love to her in some wildly erotic location?

More times than she could count.

Seize it or leave it.

Woman or weasel?

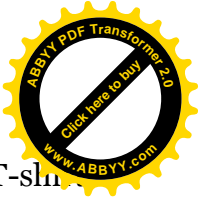
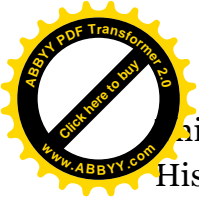
I'm a weasel I'm a weasel. I'm a weasel.

No, her days of weaseldom were over.

Taking a deep breath, she undid his pants.

Her heart stopped beating as she saw the size of the swell of him underneath the thin white boxer briefs. He was huge!

His smile was tender, warm, and if she didn't know better, she'd swear she saw relief in his gaze.



At this time when he took possession of her mouth, his kiss was demanding. Bold. His kiss literally made her dizzy. He pulled back long enough to jerk his olive green T-shirt over his head. He took a moment to wipe the paint off her mouth and then his, but ended up only smearing it more across his face.

Marianne laughed as she took the shirt from him and carefully removed the paint from his skin. "I suspected there might be a human somewhere underneath all of this." She'd meant the words to be light and funny.

He didn't take them that way.

Instead, he made an odd noise in the back of his throat. "Not really. Once I don the garb and assume the mission, the human in me was trained to be shoved deep into the background."

With his chin in her hand, she paused while wiping a particularly stubborn bit of camouflage from his temple. The sincerity of those deep blue eyes scorched her. "You were trained?"

"What they didn't kick out of me from birth, the military finished."

His words tugged at her heart, and she felt strangely close to him, as if he had just shared something with her that he didn't normally share with others.

As gently as she could, she wiped his tawny skin clean.

He watched her with a hint of suspicion behind his eyes as if it were more habitual than anything she'd done or might do to him, and at the same time she felt his trust. It was a heady contradiction.

And as she towed the last of the color from his face, she let her gaze roam his hard body.

Her breath caught at the sight of his wide chest and broad shoulders that tapered down into a narrow waist and lean hips. He was built like a professional athlete.

Every single muscle in his chest was discernible.

But what caught her attention most was the sight of several scars over his ribs and the two in his chest which looked vaguely like healing bullet wounds. Or at least what she thought healing bullet wounds might look like.

Having never seen a real bullet wound, she didn't have a basis for comparison. Still, those scars looked authentic, not like makeup or window dressing.

Before she could ask him about them, he picked her up, cradled her against his chest, and took her deeper into the cave. He laid her down on a pallet that was made up of several military blankets and an air mattress.

He turned on a small battery-operated lamp.

"What is all this?"

"Boy Scout motto. Always be prepared."

She trembled as he slowly unbuttoned her shirt. Her heart hammered in anticipation as she felt trapped between her common sense, which told her to run, and her lust, which told her to rip the pants off him and have her wicked way with all that lean, masculine strength.

"Are you always prepared for a tryst in a cave?"

"No, ma'am. But I was hoping you'd take me up on my offer."

"Because you were bored?"

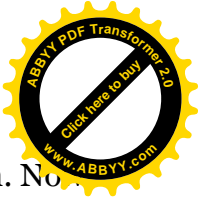
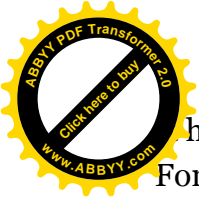
He paused his hand at the last button and gave her a hot, intense stare. "No, because I happen to think you're sexier than hell."

She had a hard time believing that, but there was no doubt *he* was sexier than hell. He had a body that had been torn from her dreams.

He undid the last button.

Marianne gulped for air.

Kyle slid his large, callused hand through the opening of her shirt to cup her breast through her white lace bra. She moaned at the feel of his palm against her swollen nipple. Even with the fabric of her bra between them, his hand was scorching.



had been way too long since she'd last made love to a man.

For that matter, it had been a long time since she'd really wanted to make love to a man. No all that repressed sexuality thrummed through her, wanting him desperately.

But with that desire came the fear that he might think her lacking from her inexperience. She wasn't the kind of woman who played the field, and in spite of what she'd done with Kyle, she'd never fallen into bed with strangers.

What was he expecting from this?

He pulled back from his kiss to smile down at her. His eyes were blazing and hot.

"Say the word, Marianne, and I'm out of here."

She answered him with a demanding kiss of her own.

Kyle closed his eyes as he inhaled the scent of her hair combined with the sweet scent of some kind of womanly perfume. But it was the earthy smell of woman that made his heart race even faster. Made his mouth water for more.

He'd never been with a woman like her before, and for the first time in his life he was nervous.

As a teenager, he'd run with the worst sort of New York gang. At fifteen he'd lost his virginity in the backroom of a run-down slum in the Bronx to a woman in her mid-twenties who was on the make and looking to nail any handy dick she could find.

He'd fought his way out of the streets to enlist in the Navy. At age eighteen he had done his best to turn his life around and not become another statistic of urban poverty and bad parenting. Even so, he'd never dared dream a woman like this would want to be with him.

Someone soft and gentle. A teacher. Not a woman on the make. Not an operative out to blow his cover or a criminal wanting a fast lay before she blew his brains out.

Marianne was just a nice, average lady from a small town in the Midwest.

She was safe. That word alone was so alien to him that it made him ache even to think of it.

He'd never known safety. Never known unconditional acceptance.

He could vaguely remember his mother once telling him that sometimes the best dreams were simple ones. He'd never understood that.

Not until this moment.

He didn't crave the excitement that was his life. He craved the slice of normality Marianne offered. The simple taste of wholesome woman.

The simple taste of Marianne Webernec.

Marianne was breathless as Kyle moved down her body to unlace her shoes and pull them from her feet. She couldn't believe she was doing this with a complete stranger.

It was so out of character for her.

And yet she couldn't stop herself.

"Tell me something about you, Kyle." She needed to know something so that she wouldn't feel so self-conscious.

He pulled her other shoe off and massaged her sensitive arch with his thumb. Oh, but it felt sinfully wonderful as it made her stomach tight. She felt a rush of moisture between her legs.

"What do you want to know?" he asked, his deep voice intoxicating.

Everything. There was nothing about him she didn't want to know.

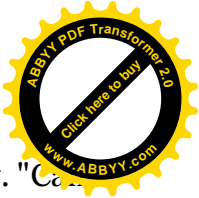
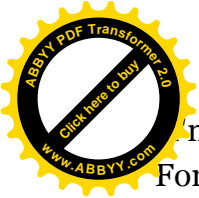
"What do you do for a living?"

He tossed her socks by her shoes and gave her an impish stare as he nibbled the arch of her foot.

She moaned in ecstasy.

He blew a stream of warm air over her skin before he spoke again. "Honestly?"

She nodded, unable to breathe from the pleasure that rippled through her.



"I'm a federal agent."

For a second she couldn't move as his words sank in. Then she laughed at the absurdity. "Can you break out of character for one minute and be serious?"

"I am serious," he said earnestly.

But she didn't believe it. It was too perfect to be real, and what were the chances of a federal agent being here with her right now when that was her fantasy?

He was just one of the men playing on the island. She didn't want that. She wanted to know about *him*. The truth. "Who do you work for?" she asked skeptically. "The CIA?"

"The Certified Idiots Association?" he asked, as if offended by her question. "Hardly. We eat those wannabes for breakfast. I'm with BAD, the Bureau of American Defense."

She scoffed. "There's no such agency."

"Yes, there is."

Part of her wanted to believe him, but the rational part of her knew better. She'd never even heard of such a thing. "And what part of D.C. are you located in? The White House?"

"We're not. Our offices are in Nashville."

She laughed even harder at that. "Oh, please. What kind of agency would have their headquarters there?"

His look was devilish. "The smart one. If D.C. gets wiped out or bombed, we're still able to function. No one's ever going to take out Nashville. It's barely on the terrorist map. Besides, we don't do anything by the book. Hell, our director is so whacked, he put us on the ground floor of the bat tower just for shits and giggles."

She arched her brow at that. "Ahh, the bat tower. Let me guess? Your director is Commissioner Gordon."

She groaned as he sucked her toe into his mouth and used his tongue to gently massage it. He nipped her large toe, then pulled back. "Trust me, BAD would make mincemeat out of Commissioner Gordon, Sergeant O'Hara, and Batman combined."

"BAD, huh?"

"Mad, bad, and dangerous to know."

"Have much luck with that line?"

He laughed gently as he crawled up her body like a languid panther and pressed his lips to her belly. His breath tickled her stomach as he parted her shirt more. "Sp far it's working."

Yes, it was. Much better than it should be. Who would have ever thought that she could be seduced by some cheesy little line?

No, she realized. She wasn't seduced by a cheesy line, but rather by his stunningly blue eyes. His tender lips.

Oh, who was she fooling? It was that sinful body that she wanted.

All of it.

She'd never made love to a man who looked like this.

One who was so handsome he should be on the cover of a book or in a movie.

One who set her blood on fire just by being with her.

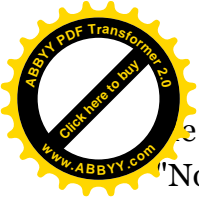
She stared down at him while his hot mouth skimmed the flesh of her stomach. He lay between her spread legs with his chest pressing against the center of her body.

Oh, how she ached for him. Marianne ran her hands through his dark hair, letting the swirls of his tongue sweep her far away from what they were doing.

She arched her back as he sat up slightly and pulled her shirt off. Then he reached behind her and unfastened her bra.

"Mmm," he breathed as he bared her. "What have we here?"

"Breasts," she said simply as she fought the urge to cover herself. "Two of them."



She laughed at that. "Good, 'cause I was afraid you might have three."

"Nope, no Anne Boleyn here. Just two, like any other normal woman."

Kyle smiled at her teasing and her intelligence. He couldn't recall ever being so at ease with a lover. It didn't feel as if they were strangers to him.

There was an odd sense of belonging with her. It didn't make any sense.

"Tell me something, Marianne," he whispered in her ear. "Tell me what schoolteachers dream about when they're all alone at night. Tell me what fantasies keep you awake while you lie in bed, wanting to feel someone inside you."

Her face went flush.

"Don't be embarrassed," he said, teasing the corner of her mouth with his lips.

He'd always wondered what "good" girls dreamt of. The scenes in the romance novel he'd read had shocked him more than the first time he'd read a *Penthouse* letter. He still had a hard time believing Marianne read such things.

"I don't know," she said with a small shrug. "I think of someone dangerous. Deadly. A larger-than-life officer or agent who can come in like Rambo and yet still be tender to me." Her brown eyes seared him with a heartfelt longing. "Someone who sees me."

He frowned at her words. Who in their right mind couldn't see her? "I see you, Marianne," he whispered, kissing her, tasting the warmth of her mouth.

Her tongue was heaven. He loved the sensation of it stroking his while her breasts were flattened against his chest.

Marianne sighed as he left her lips and trailed scorching kisses over her. His lightly whiskered cheek scraped her while he moved down to her shorts.

She lifted her hips as he slowly, sensuously slid them down her legs and left her completely bare to him.

She'd never felt more vulnerable.

Kyle's gaze locked and held hers as he rose to his feet and kicked his boots off.

She held her breath as he reached to the waist of his unbuttoned pants and then slid them and his briefs down his long, hairy legs.

If she lived to the end of time, she wouldn't ever forget the way he looked standing there in the dim light of the lamp, his cock erect, his body perfect. He was pure male beauty. Completely unadorned and completely stunning.

With a charming smile he moved to a small backpack and pulled out a box of condoms and an army green bandanna.

"What are you doing?" she asked as he started folding up the olive green cotton fabric.

"Remember the scene with Ren in the cavern?"

Her face heated up instantly. "What about it?"

His smile turned ravenous. "I couldn't find the chocolate sauce, but..."

She stiffened as he put the bandanna over her eyes. "I don't know about this."

"Trust me, little teacher. I promise you, you won't regret it."

"I'd better not."

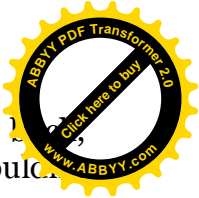
He knotted the blindfold over her eyes. Marianne swallowed as she tried to see through the fabric.

It was useless.

She had no idea where Kyle was. Not until she heard the sound of foil tearing. Then Kyle was back, his warm hands urging her toward the back of the cave.

"What are you doing?"

It felt as if he was seating her on a large rock that he had covered with one of the blankets. "I'm going to take my time savoring you, little teacher."



She rested her hips against the rock, then nudged her legs open. Marianne leaned into the assurance of why she was allowing him to do this, and yet it was so wildly erotic that she could not bear the thought of stopping him.

Her entire body sizzled and throbbed with anticipation. With demanding hunger that longed to feel him deep inside her.

He trailed his hands from her knees, up the insides of her thighs. She shivered in expectation of him touching her where she ached for him.

He didn't, and she almost whimpered in disappointment.

Instead his hands skimmed up her ribs, massaging and tormenting her more.

"Touch me, Kyle," she whispered.

She felt his lips touch her breast. Marianne groaned as he swirled his tongue around her nipple, drawing it deep into his mouth while his hand skimmed down the outside of her thigh until he finally trailed it to the center of her.

His long, hard fingers parted her nether lips before they stroked her swollen cleft. She shivered as he massaged her clitoris.

She hissed as he finally gave her a modicum of relief.

Kyle growled at how good she tasted and at how well she responded to his caresses. He liked a fiery woman, and this one had more fire than her share.

Wanting more of her, he left her breast and kissed his way down to the part of her he wanted most.

She actually yelped the first time he licked her cleft. Laughing at her reaction, he spread her nether lips wide and ran his tongue over the hard edge of her clit, sucking and teasing her until she was on the brink of climax.

Marianne struggled to breathe. She leaned back on her arms, giving him as much of her as she could. Never in her life had she felt anything more incredible than him tasting her.

Wanting to see him, she started to remove the blindfold only to find his hands stopping her.

"I thought you wanted to be Ren," he said.

She hesitated. Ren was the kind of woman who would be in this cave with a stranger, not Marianne Webernec. Marianne always played by the rules. She always played it safe.

Today she didn't want to be a Goody Two-shoes.

"Okay."

Kyle kissed her shoulder, then turned her over so that she was leaning on her arms and stomach against the rock. Her back was completely exposed to him.

"Mmm," he breathed, running his hand over her hips as his nails gently scraped her skin and made her tingle all over. "You have the nicest ass I've ever seen."

He licked his way down her backbone until he reached the sensitive spot at the base of her spine. His hands massaged her thighs, sending ribbons of pleasure through her while his tongue delivered stroke after ecstatic stroke to her flesh.

He slid one finger down her cleft, making her shiver again. "Do you want me inside you, Marianne?"

"Yes."

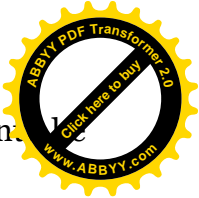
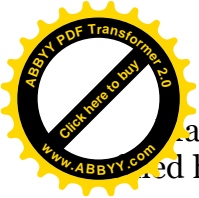
He slid two fingers deep inside. She moaned at the ecstasy of his touch as he teased her unmercifully while she slowly rode his fingers.

He leaned his body against her so that she could feel his erection against her lower back as he rained kisses on her neck and shoulders.

She was breathless and weak from the pleasure of his touch. No one had ever been more attentive to her. With Kyle, she actually felt beautiful. Desirable.

And that made her melt.

He moved his hand and then shifted behind her.



Marianne moaned as he slid himself slowly, inch by lush, incredible inch, inside her until he filled her to capacity.

Kyle growled at the feeling of her body welcoming his, of the way she felt as she lowered herself from her tiptoes down until he was even deeper inside her. It took every piece of control he had to make love to her slowly, gently, when what he really wanted to do was ravish her.

Since the moment he'd met her, he'd wanted nothing more than to have her.

And she was so worth it.

He held himself perfectly still as she rode him with soft, long strokes. Grinding his teeth to hold off his orgasm, he cupped her breasts with his hands and let her take her satisfaction first.

Every woman had a rhythm to her, and Marianne's was sweeping and sweet. Slow and sensuous like a gentle breeze.

He savored the sensation of her hips grinding against him, of her sweet low moans of pleasure.

He leaned forward, over her back, and braced one hand beside hers on the rock so that he could use his other hand to stroke her clit in time to their movements.

Marianne groaned aloud as he touched her again. She reveled in the feeling of him behind her and in her while his hand teased her, and when she came, it was so intense that she screamed out.

"That's it, baby," Kyle whispered in her ear. "Don't hold back on me."

She didn't. Nor did he. He continued to stroke and tease her until the very last tremor had been gleaned from her body.

Weak, she fell forward.

Kyle picked her up and carried her back to the air mattress on the floor and removed her blindfold. His smile was dazzling as he covered her with his body and entered her again.

Marianne arched her back, groaning as his hard shaft slid back into her sensitive sheath.

Kyle's heart hammered as he thrust against her, wanting his own satisfaction. Her legs and arms were wrapped about him, cocooning him in her softness.

It was all he'd ever wanted.

Her body was paradise.

And when he found his own release, his head reeled from it. Growling, he buried his face in the fragrant sweetness of her neck and let the pleasure rip through him until he could barely breathe.

Every spasm, every wave shattered some part of him until he couldn't do anything more than whisper her name.

Now, that had been the best sex of his life.

Weak and spent, he gathered her into his arms and held her against his chest.

Neither spoke for the longest time as they lay there, sheltered together, completely relaxed.

Kyle didn't care if he ever moved again. Nothing could top what he'd just experienced.

"Do you think Tyson will be back after us?"

It took him a second to remember who Tyson was.

"No," he said. "I secured the perimeter. I'd know if he was anywhere nearby."

"You sure?"

"Absolutely. I made certain this place was safe from any intruders."

Marianne sighed as she lay in the shelter of his arms.

Kyle ran his hand over her soft skin as he savored the feel of her breath on his naked skin. He'd always loved the sensation of feminine flesh against his, but never more than he did at this moment.



How strange that he'd been honest with her when he'd never told any woman what he did for a living. Not that there was any code of silence they had. BAD had been set up as a cover ghost agency. The government, even those who had commissioned their bureau, denied all knowledge of their existence.

The BAD agents answered directly to Joe, who only answered to the president, and not even the president would acknowledge their mandate. Each and every member of BAD was an orphan who had been recruited to lie, steal, cheat, and/or die or kill for their country. Whatever it took to secure their objective, they would do without anything as cumbersome as morals or ethics getting in their way.

They were the modern-day Spartans who either returned with their shield or upon it.

There was no such thing as family for them. The agency was the family.

In this world they only had each other, and up until now that had been fine with Kyle. But his last bout with terrorists that had almost cost him his life had got him to thinking...

He had been trained zealously to guard his country. But what was he really fighting for?

It wasn't until Marianne had smiled up at him that he'd remembered.

He fought for those who couldn't fight for themselves.

"Kyle?" Marianne paused as she traced one of the smaller scars along his ribs. "What is this from?"

He glanced at it and the two similar ones that were below it. "A bullet."

Marianne frowned at his words. From the sincerity of his eyes, she could tell he was being truthful. "It looks recent."

"About a month ago."

Her jaw went slack. "And these?"

"Same."

She leaned up to study his chest. Now that she was closer, she saw even more of them, and no, they weren't makeup. The scars were real. "How many times have you been shot?"

"What are you asking? How many *total* bullet wounds or how many times has someone shot me up?"

There was a difference? She was aghast at his nonchalance. "Both."

He actually had to pause to think. "I've had a total of twenty-two bullet holes. Though we're still debating one of them. The doc said she thought it was a bullet that passed clean through, but I think the wound was caused by some shrapnel that hit me when the grenade went off. As for assholes who've taken shots at me, I'm at the unlucky thirteen mark."

Marianne's jaw opened even more. "Are you serious?"

He nodded, then turned his head and showed her a scar behind his ear.

"That was the first one," he said, placing his finger over the small round scar. "I was only seventeen and it was a drive-by from a rival gang. They took out my best friend Angelo as we came out of his house, headed for a movie. I got caught in the crossfire." He shook his head. "It's what got me out of the gang and made me want to do something with my life other than be target practice. Little did I know it would lead me into a field where drive-bys are even more likely than they were in New York."

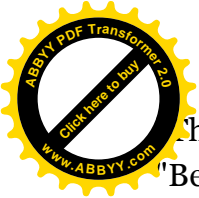
She didn't know what to say. Part of her believed him and part of her found it hard to swallow. It was too close to what she would expect from a Rachel Fire hero and too alien to the sheltered world she'd known growing up.

She couldn't imagine being shot.

"You really, truly—swear to the Lord above—are a federal agent?"

He made an X over the center of his chest. "Cross my heart. And hope not to die on my next mission."

She sat back on her heels. "How long have you been an agent?"



"The last two years."

"Before that?"

"I was a Navy SEAL."

Yeah, right. "You almost had me going. But for the record, the SEAL thing blew it."

"I swear," he said, as if offended by her doubt. "I really was a SEAL. I'd still be one if I hadn't been recruited for BAD."

She looked at him suspiciously. "What does BAD do?"

"That I can't tell you. Well, I could, but then I'd have to kill you, and no offense, I'm rather attached to you." He ran his hand down her backside and over her rump. "Especially this part here."

She squeaked as he clenched a handful of her buttocks.

He pulled her on top of him. Marianne straddled his waist and watched as he closed his eyes and sighed contentedly. She felt him stiffen against her hipbone.

Opening his eyes, he stared up at her and cupped her face in his hands. "You have no idea how beautiful you are, do you?"

"I've never had anyone call be beautiful before. Heck, I had a guy in high school run screaming from the room when he lost a bet and was told he'd have to take me to the prom."

"He was an idiot."

She smiled at his words, amazed by them. "Who did you go to the prom with?"

"I didn't."

"Why?"

He shrugged. "My junior year I spent prom night in jail waiting for my dad to sober up long enough to bail me out, and I didn't have the money to go senior year."

"Jail?" she asked. "What did you do to go to jail?"

"Nothing too bad. I was in for fighting."

"Over what?"

"Bella Marino. She broke up with her boyfriend and then threw herself at me. He got pissed and we got into it at the mall. He pulled a knife, I pulled a knife, and they called the cops on us."

"Kyle!" she said, stunned by his confession. "You're not making up any of this, are you?"

"No."

She let her breath out slowly as she stared into his blue eyes.

He laced his fingers through her hair. "I'm not proud of my past, Marianne. I've spent most of my life trying to forget it. I just..."

She waited a few minutes until it became apparent he wasn't going to finish his sentence. "You what?" she prompted.

"I don't know. I feel like I can tell you things and I don't know why. It's not something I normally do. Hell, I barely talk to anyone. And then I meet you on the beach and I can't seem to shut my mouth or resist you."

She leaned forward and kissed him. "I can't resist you, either."

His cock hardened to full size at her words. He pulled back with a wicked grin.

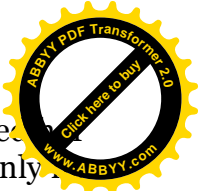
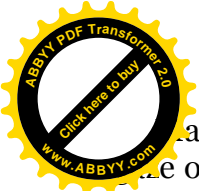
Marianne melted at the look. He was better than anything she'd ever read in one of her books.

A real-life hero. One with a very sad past. How she wished she could make it up to him.

She moaned as he lifted her up and set her down on top of him. He was so hard and full inside her, and the tip of his shaft went straight into her G spot from this position.

"Ooo," she moaned. "You keep doing that and I might not ever let you leave this cave."

He guided her hips with his hands as he watched her. "You keep doing that and I won't even try."



Marianne covered his hands with hers and felt the strength of him in his grip. She trailed her fingers over his tawny skin, pausing at the multiple scars. He was her fantasy come to life. Only this was real. His scars were deep and she suspected he carried a lot more inside than those she saw on his body.

How many more did he carry in his heart?

"Have you ever killed anyone?"

"That's a strange question to ask while I'm making love to you."

"I'm sorry. I guess it was rather nosy."

He trailed his hand up her body and sank it deep in her hair. "Yes, I have," he said softly. "And no I'm not proud of it. My life has been very ugly."

She held his hand against her cheek and kissed the scars over his knuckles. "I wish I could make it better."

"Trust me, love. You are."

She smiled at that.

Kyle raised his hips, tossing her forward, onto his chest. He wrapped his arms around her and rolled over with her until she was pinned under him.

How he loved the way she felt beneath him. The feel of her breath falling gently on his shoulder. The warm, sleek wetness of her around him.

How he wished he could make love to her without a condom. To feel the whole of her wetness surrounding him.

She was magnificent and he didn't want to leave her body. Not even when they came together in one swirling moment of blissful orgasm.

He still held on to her while she ran her hands over his bare back and shook under him. He was worn out and sated to a level he wouldn't have thought possible.

He laid his head down against her hard nipple so that he could feel the puckered areola against his cheek. It was the tenderest moment of his life.

But he knew it wouldn't last. Good things never did.

Marianne woke up mid-morning to find Kyle already awake and dressed. Or at least partially dressed. He wore a pair of faded jeans and those biker boots again, but the rest of him was gloriously bare and glistening in the bright sunshine.

Yum!

Resting on his knees, he had his back to her while he cooked over a small Coleman camping stove.

Wow, the man really was prepared for anything.

She felt a tiny shiver as she stared at him and remembered the night they had shared. They'd made love so many times and in so many different ways that she was sure she wouldn't be able to walk straight today. Not to mention, they would definitely need another box of condoms—which might be her only saving grace from all that glorious temptation he offered.

The smell of coffee and bacon made her empty stomach growl.

"How long have you been up?" she asked.

He looked at her over his shoulder and grinned as he came out of that deadly crouch like some lethal, languid panther who had only been tamed by her. "Morning, little teacher."

"Good morning."

He made her a paper plate of eggs and bacon and brought it to her, then went to the small cooler to fetch some butter for her toast and a small carton of orange juice.

"Wow, full service in bed. I like that," she said as she sat up on the air mattress which had been surprisingly comfortable while she slept. Marianne made sure to keep the sheet wrapped around her.

His eyes turned dark, seductive. "I have to say that servicing you in bed gives me a great deal of pleasure."

She blushed even more.

"Not to mention you gave me quite an appetite after last night."

She smiled at the deepness in his voice, knowing exactly what it heralded, and one quick glance at his groin confirmed it. Kyle Foster was a sex machine.

"So, what's on the agenda for today?" she asked, before she took a bite of her bacon.

Kyle drew a deep breath as he thought it over. In the book they were supposed to be outrunning the drug dealers who were enemies to the arms dealer or some shit like that. For all he knew it could have been a car dealer chasing them.

He'd spilled coffee on the book earlier that morning and hadn't been able to finish the chapter. Not that it mattered.

With just the two of them, there wasn't really a way to fabricate a group of people pursuing them.

He was good, but that was beyond even his abilities.

So he'd have to think up something else for them to do.

"Well, I think we're safe here on our private beach. I say we enjoy the day. What about you?"

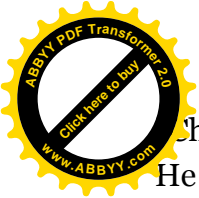
Her smile dazzled him. "It sounds like a plan to me."

Marianne finished her breakfast and dressed while Kyle cleaned up and shut down the stove. As soon as he had it cleared, he got up and pulled a gun out from under his folded shirt. Ejecting the clip, he checked his ammunition, then returned it to the hilt. He put the gun back in the concealed holster and then fastened it around his waist before he put his shirt on to cover it.

His movements appeared reflexive, as if he wasn't even aware of what he'd done.

"You always do that?" she asked as she tied her shoes.

"Do what?"



"Check your gun."

He frowned. "My gun?"

"The one you just put behind your back."

"Oh," he said, his face lighting. "My weapon. Yeah, I guess I do. I never thought about it."

She sucked her breath in between her teeth. "You're a scary man, Kyle Foster."

"So they tell me. But how about I put Scary Kyle away for the day?"

"I think I would like that." She pulled his shirt up. "Want to leave *that* behind?"

He cringed at her suggestion. "I don't think I can. That's like asking me to leave my arm behind."

"Yeah, but I don't want either one of us to get shot in the event I get a little frisky with you later."

One corner of his mouth twisted up at that as he pulled her into his arms. "Frisky, huh?"

She nodded.

He dipped his head down and kissed her while reaching behind his back to unfasten the gun. "All right, teacher. For you, but only for today."

He moved away to unload the ammo and then placed the gun and clip in a small box near the stove.

Marianne sighed in relief. She might like to read about cops and robbers, but real guns made her very nervous.

Kyle grabbed a hand shovel and bucket, took her by the hand, and led her down to the beach.

"You like clams?" he asked.

"Yes, why?"

"Want some for dinner?"

"Sure."

She frowned as he walked around the beach, studying the sand. After a second he bent over, presenting her with an exceptionally nice view of his butt.

He started digging.

It was awfully hard not to walk over to that butt and cup it. Or better yet, to cup the nice-sized bulge that she had become more than just a little acquainted with the night before.

"What are you doing?" she asked, moving closer to him.

She had to fist her hand to keep from stroking him while he worked.

He glanced up from his task. "Digging up dinner, want to help?"

She was astonished when he produced a clam from the beach. "I've heard of doing this, but I've never seen anyone do it before."

He examined the clam, then put it in the bucket. "Want to try it?"

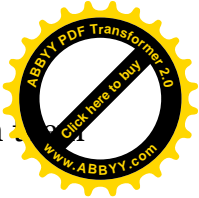
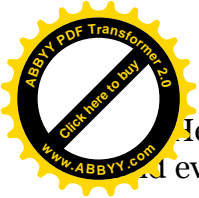
"Sure. What do I do?"

He took her hand and pulled her along the sand. "We're looking for airholes," he explained. He paused by a small dimpled circle in the sand and indicated it with the toe of his foot. "That one's called a keyhole. Clams make it so they can breathe. All you have to do is put the shovel a few inches away and then you can dig it up."

Marianne was a bit timid at first. "How is it a New York City boy knows about digging up clams?"

"Travis Lamb, one of the guys I was in the Navy with, showed me how to do it when we were on leave in Charleston years ago. His mother took the whole house full of guests out at dawn, and we dug up enough clams for her to make a shitload of chowder for an Independence Day party that night."

"You really were in the Navy, weren't you?"



"Well, I can even fax you the discharge papers if you want. They have the official seal on everything." Kyle smiled warmly, then helped her dig.

Marianne closed her eyes for an instant as she felt his warmth surround her. She'd never done anything like this or enjoyed anything more than just feeling him behind her as the sun shone down on them.

This was peaceful. Comfortable.

She laughed in triumph as she uncovered a clam of her own. Kyle reached for the bucket. His hips brushed against hers, letting her know he was hard again.

She felt heat sting her cheeks.

"Why are you always blushing?" Kyle asked.

"I... uh..." She cleared her throat, not sure what to answer. The truth was her sexuality had always embarrassed her, and Kyle was so at ease with it.

Then again she'd never been more sexually aware of anyone else. Every time she looked at Kyle, she wanted to take a bite out of him. Pull him into her arms, throw him down on his back, rip his clothes off, climb on top of him, and then ride him madly until they were both sweaty and spent.

Of course, she'd done a lot of that last night, and it still wasn't enough to satiate her.

She wanted more of him.

He stared at her intently as he took her hand into his. He laid a gentle kiss into her palm, all the while staring into her eyes.

"What's the matter, Marianne?" he whispered. "Are you scared of how much you make me want you?"

"A little."

He brushed a light tender kiss across her lips. She moaned at the taste of him as he moved her hand so that her palm was pressed against his swollen erection. "Have you ever made love on the beach?"

She cringed at the thought. "Someone might see us."

His look turned mischievous. "Afraid? I thought you were Ren Winterbourne. Woman of adventure."

She bit her lip to keep from laughing. "Ren doesn't have to live with herself or the embarrassment of being caught in flagrante delicto by a stranger."

He pulled his shirt over his head and tsked at her. "So much for fantasy, huh?"

Marianne stared at his tanned, muscular chest. He really was scrumptious. Irresistible.

And this time when he kissed her it was fierce, demanding. Every part of her thrilled at the taste of his tongue dancing with hers. At the way his hand felt cupping her face.

He laid her back on the beach.

The sane part of herself told her to push him away, but the repressed part of her refused. She'd lived sheltered and safe the whole of her life.

Kyle hadn't. A man who was riddled with bullet scars knew nothing of fear. Nothing of trepidation.

He only knew how to live in the moment.

How she envied him that.

He pulled back and reached for the buttons of her shirt. "Well?"

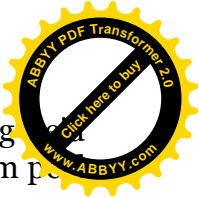
Marianne swallowed. "If *anyone* catches us, you're a dead man."

He laughed at that. "I'll even loan you my weapon to shoot me."

"Promise?"

"Absolutely."

Taking a deep breath, she slowly unbuttoned her shirt.



She watched breathlessly as she opened her top for him. It was the most erotic thing she'd ever seen. Strange. He'd had much better looking women striptease for him. Watched them peel their clothes off like a pro.

None of that had ever turned him on the way Marianne's timid movements did.

Her quiet hesitancy was a breath of fresh air. She wouldn't do this for someone else. He wasn't just another lay to her.

He liked the feeling of being special.

In his life, that was something that had always been sorely missing. The type of women he'd dated had always known the score. Always known their way around a man's body.

Not Marianne. She was just an unassuming woman from Middle America, living a life that was nothing special.

Nothing special to anyone but him.

He found her remarkable.

She moved her hands away from her shirt and ran them down his back. Kyle dipped his head down so that he could taste her bared flesh.

"Hmmm," he breathed as he flicked his tongue around her navel. "I think I'm addicted to your taste."

Marianne closed her eyes while his hot breath scorched her. This was the most unbelievable moment of a life she had spent playing it safe. A life made up of daydream fantasies of something like this happening to her.

To her surprise, she found herself laughing.

Kyle lifted himself up to stare at her with a stern frown. "You know, it's not a good thing to laugh at a guy when he's trying to seduce you."

She brushed his hair back from his face and smiled up at him. "I'm sorry. I was just thinking of how you swept me off my feet yesterday. Literally."

His frown faded as his face relaxed into a heated, intense stare. "Anytime you need a hero, baby, you just call me."

She moaned as he dipped his head down and kissed her fiercely. Mmm, how she loved the taste of his mouth. The way his muscles rippled around her.

Marianne wrapped her body around his and reveled in the sensation of his bare chest against the part of hers that was bared by the opening of her shirt. She felt him from her lips all the way to her toes.

Her heart thundering, she ran her hands down his back, feeling the dips and welts of old scars there. Her heart wrenched at the thought of how much pain he must have lived through.

"I don't know," she whispered against his lips. "I think you need a keeper a lot more than I need a hero."

Kyle froze at her words. "Would you care to volunteer for the job?"

"Would you let me?"

Her question hung in the air between them.

"I've never had anyone interested in it."

"Never?"

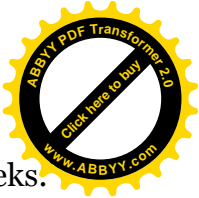
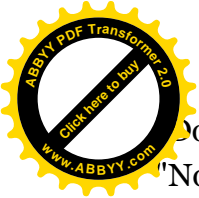
He shook his head as the truth of that sank in. "No, it's why I joined the Navy. All those sappy, stupid commercials about teamwork got to me, and I thought it might be nice to be part of some kind of family."

She toyed with his hair as she watched him quietly. "Did you find it?"

"I did with the SEALs. I knew with them I had a kindred bond."

"Then why did you leave?"

"Joe came in and selected three of us from my unit. Tony and Doug had been like brothers to me and I didn't want to let them down. When they signed up for BAD, I followed suit."



"Do you regret it?"

"Not until they dumped me on this damned island and told me to rest here for a few weeks."

She gave him a peeved stare.

He offered her a wicked grin. "Now I'm thinking I should thank them for it."

"You'd better be thinking that."

He rubbed himself against her, letting his body caress hers. "Believe me, Marianne, I am."

Marianne sighed as his kiss swept her into heaven. She didn't even protest when he removed her shirt and laid her back against the scratchy sand. Strange, this didn't look uncomfortable in movies and such, but in reality...

She groaned as Kyle unzipped her shorts with his teeth, then pulled them down her legs. And when he did the same with her panties, she almost came just from the sheer eroticism of the act. He was like a wild predator set loose on her.

One who wanted only to devour her.

What was it about him that made her burn like this? That made her forget the fact that they could be discovered at any moment?

"You do like to live dangerously, don't you?" she asked as he crawled sinuously up her body, nibbling every inch of the way.

"There's no other way to live." His hot breath teased her taut nipple before he opened his mouth and claimed it.

Marianne sighed in satisfaction as she cradled his head to her. His hair teased her skin while his tongue encircled her areola, teasing it to a hard, bitterly sweet nub that made her stomach contract every time he licked it.

The waves ran up the beach, lapping gently against her bare feet while the hot sun heated her almost as much as Kyle's touch did.

Kyle pulled away only long enough to remove his jeans.

Marianne couldn't fathom why a man like this was interested in her. "Are you sure you're not one of the actors they hired for this?"

"Positive. Why do you ask?"

"I don't know. You just seem too good to be real."

He snorted at that, then turned over with her so that she was on top of him. He reached for his discarded jeans and pulled out a condom, which he opened with his teeth, then reached around her so that he could put it on.

"I think you're the only person in my life to ever say such a thing to me. Most people I know curse the day they met me."

"I don't believe that."

She gasped as he lifted her up and set her down on his hard shaft. Marianne moaned at the feel of him inside her. The tip of his cock tickled her deep, making her entire body throb from the feel of him there.

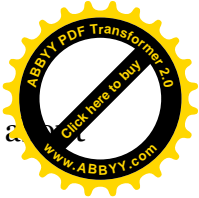
Bracing her hands on his shoulders, she rode him slow and easy, savoring every lush stroke of his body with hers.

"I can't believe I just met you," she said. It felt as if she'd known him much longer.

Kyle watched her as she milked his body with hers. Her hair fell around her lightly freckled shoulders, which had just a hint of red to them from their exposure to the sun. She was so beautiful there. Like some ancient goddess who had been washed up on the shore to seduce him.

He took her hand into his and suckled the pads of her fingers. He let the salty taste of her skin whet his appetite for her even more.

She was unlike any woman he'd ever met. She was cut from the same cloth as the pure, innocent homecoming queens he had dreamed about in his youth. The women he'd passed



countless times on public streets and elevators. Decent women who knew nothing about espionage or lies. Deceit.

She was the kind of woman who would turn in the wallet that contained a thousand dollars without stealing a single bill.

His head reeled as she quickened her strokes. He reached up for her and pulled her lips to his so that he could feel closer to her.

Let some of her decency creep inside him.

He wanted to crawl inside her body. To find a safe, warm spot where such a thing as goodness lived.

Maybe if he stayed with her just a little longer some of her decency would rub off on him.

She came calling out his name.

Kyle didn't move as he watched the ecstasy on her face. When the last tremor had shuddered through her, she collapsed against him.

He rolled over with her again so that he could take control.

Marianne held him close, brushing the sand from his back as he slid himself in and out of her, thrusting against her in a demanding rhythm.

He was incredible. Powerful. Every stroke went through her, exciting her, and when his orgasm came, he cried out, then lay down on top of her.

She held him there, letting his breath stir her hair as his heart pounded against her breasts.

She closed her eyes and sighed contentedly. "Wow," she said quietly. "I think I felt the earth move."

He chuckled, but didn't make any move to leave her. "More likely it's just the waves moving the sand out from under us."

She blew him a raspberry. "You're such a spoilsport."

He kissed her lightly on the lips, then pulled her into the surf so that they could bathe in the crystal clear water where little tropical fish swam around their feet.

It was a perfect, surreal day.

"I feel strangely like Jane in some *Tarzan* movie."

Kyle beat his arms against his chest in imitation of an ape and made a Tarzan cry.

Before she could draw the breath to laugh at him, he bent at the waist and rushed toward her, lifting her up and tossing her over his shoulder.

Marianne shrieked and laughed at his antics. Until she saw the sight of the pink wounds in his back. She had felt them while they made love, but this was the first time she had really seen them up close in the light of day.

Her heart thudding, she touched one long, ragged scar that ran just under his shoulder blade. "What is this from?"

"I think that one's from the razor-wire fence I slid under in Beirut about a year ago. Thank God I had my leather jacket on, or it would have done some serious damage."

"From here, it looks like it did."

"Nah," he said, setting her back on her feet. "It's a flesh wound."

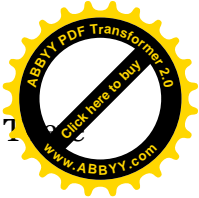
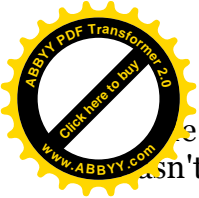
She rolled her eyes. "You're like that psycho knight in *Monty Python and the Holy Grail*, aren't you? The one who has his arm lopped off at the shoulder who looks at it and goes, 'Ah, it's just a scratch.'"

"Hey, in the neighborhood where I grew up, any sign of weakness was an invitation to a serious ass whipping."

"And where I grew up, we went to the hospital and got ice cream afterward."

Kyle frowned at her words and the idyllic world she described. "I don't think such a place as that really exists."

"Didn't you ever have anyone kiss your boo-boos?"



She thought about it a minute. "No. My mom was killed in a car wreck when I was five. There wasn't anyone around to kiss much of anything after that."

She shook her head at him, then pressed her lips to the scar on his chest, the one just an inch to the side of his heart that was fresh and pink.

Closing his eyes, Kyle enjoyed the feel of her lips on his flesh. The strange warmth that rushed through him from her actions.

So this was tenderness...

He liked it a lot more than he should.

"Marianne!"

They both jumped at the sound of someone calling from somewhere in the trees.

Kyle moved away from her long enough to scoop up their clothes and hand her hers.

"Wait here," he said, pulling his jeans on.

Barefoot and shirtless, he reached for his weapon, only to remember he didn't have it with him.

Damn. His military training snapped, making him creep toward the sound of the intruder...

Marianne dressed quickly as she wondered what Kyle was going to do.

As soon as she was dressed, she headed off after him. No sooner had she reached the trees than she heard something snap.

A man yelped, then Kyle came running toward her, laughing.

He sobered instantly.

"What was that?"

"Nothing," he said, clearing his throat. "It was just one of Tyson's men."

"Let me down!" the unknown man's voice rang out through the trees.

She looked at him suspiciously. "What did you do?"

"I put him someplace where he can't follow us or tell Tyson where we are."

Unsure if she should believe him, she frowned. "Are you sure about this Tyson?"

"The Chicken Man is deadly, love. I promise. Come on, we need to go quickly before he sends more guys after us."

Still skeptical, she followed after him as he gathered their clams and shovel and headed off down the beach, far away from where he'd left "Tyson's" man.

They walked down the surf for quite some time before Kyle judged it safe again to dig clams. Once they had the bucket full, Kyle led her carefully up the rocky slope that led back to the wooded area of the island.

"Boo!" she said at one point, making him jump.

"Don't do that," he said in a hushed, peeved tone.

"I couldn't help myself. You look so serious."

"This is serious. One of those bastards could get his hands on you and take you away from me. That's the last thing I want." The sincere anger in his voice set her back.

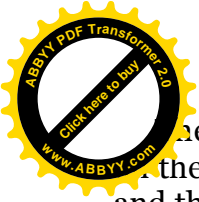
"Really?" she asked.

"Really."

Marianne bit her lip as warmth gushed through her. She laced her fingers with his and let him sneak her back to their isolated cave where they made steamed clams and made love until the very wee hours of the morning.

They made love until she was weak and breathless, but so well sated that she just wanted to sleep in the shelter of Kyle's arms for eternity.

For the next few days they hid in their cave, running during the daylight from Tyson's men and spending their nights getting to know each other and every detail of their lives.



There was nothing she hadn't shared with Kyle, and as she fell asleep snuggled against him on the fifth day, she knew all of this would end soon. She only had a few more days on the island, and then her fantasy was over.

Would Kyle still want her then, or would he put her on a plane and make ready for the next contest winner?

The anger and fear that question evoked startled her.

But what stunned her most was how much it hurt to think of letting Kyle go.

Kyle and Marianne sat on a blanket on the beach long after dark with a small fire crackling before them. He was leaning back against a large piece of driftwood with Marianne sitting between his raised legs, cradled against his bare chest while she wore his T-shirt.

He adored the sight of her in his clothes, which she had been wearing every day since he'd "kidnapped" her. There was no way he was going to let her return to her hotel room where one of the others might be able to keep her from him.

Not that they could. He just didn't want to have to hurt someone unnecessarily. But he would hurt anyone who tried to pry her away from him even a minute earlier than he had to let her go.

She was braless underneath his shirt, and the thin material reminded him constantly of the fact that she was ready for him at any time. Her nipples were puckered nicely against the thin white cotton fabric, begging him to reach out and touch her while she had her head resting back against his shoulder. Her hips were nested firmly against his groin, and every time she moved, his cock jerked with awareness of her warm softness so close to him.

With the awareness of just how much he enjoyed her company and her body.

It was quiet now with only the sound of the surf and fire to intrude on their peace.

But Kyle was concerned. The men from her side of the island were getting more resourceful and insistent that Marianne return to her "fantasy."

He'd be damned if he was going to let her go. Not until she asked him to, and so far she seemed utterly content to stay with him.

But those pesky vermin kept running after them, and today they'd gotten a little smarter.

One of the buggers had almost caught up to them on the cliffs. But a few well-tossed grenades had sent the man running back the way he'd come.

Tomorrow Kyle would have to move them to a new location farther down the beach.

Marianne continued to play along with the idea of their pursuers being Tyson's henchmen out to get them, but by the light in her brown eyes whenever he spoke of it, he could tell she didn't believe him.

It was just as well. Tyson had been a stupid idea, but it had brought him the best moments of his life, and if she didn't call his bluff, he wasn't going to confess the truth to her.

He just wanted to enjoy what little time they had left.

Marianne snatched her stick up as her marshmallow caught fire. She quickly blew it out. Her long hair tickled his skin as she moved, stirring the air between them so that he could smell the fragrance of his shampoo in her hair.

He loved the smell of his scent on her. It touched him on a level that was profound and frightening.

Entranced by her, Kyle watched as she pulled the gooey mess from the tip of the stick and carefully took a bite.

The sight of her tongue flicking back and forth over her lips undid him.

His body burning, he pulled her close to taste the sugar on her lips. She moaned the instant he swept his tongue against hers.

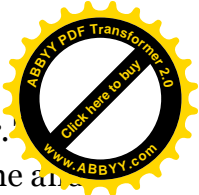
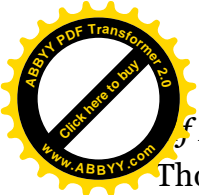
"Are you burning your marshmallow, Kyle?"

He rubbed noses with her and inhaled her womanly scent before pulling away to see his stick and marshmallow buried deep in the fire. "It would seem so."

She tsked at him. "And that was the last one, too. Shame on you."

Shaking his head at her, he tossed his stick into the fire. They were running low on supplies. He'd snuck over to his hotel to get a few more essentials such as soap and shampoo while she'd slept last night, but the truth was they would have to go back to the real world all too soon.

Their time was so limited.



If I have to die for my country, Joe, then I'd like to know what the hell I was living for.

Those angry words haunted him now as he remembered saying them to Joe right after he and Retter had blown their way out of the Middle East.

Marianne was the answer, but he couldn't stay with her. His duties were elsewhere. Men like him didn't have liabilities, and Marianne Webernec was a huge liability. He didn't need to have the stress of worrying about a widow who would be left behind if he died.

Such things guaranteed death with cold-blooded certainty. In the field the best soldiers were the ones who had nothing to focus on or worry about except the job.

The job was everything.

But at least now he understood what it meant to be alive. To feel deeply for a woman and to know, while he was getting the crap shot out of him, why his job was so important.

It kept people like Marianne safe. She was no longer some faceless stranger. An abstract ideal.

He had something real to hold on to.

Closing his eyes, he leaned his cheek against hers and just held her in the quiet solitude, wishing that time could stand still and that he could make this moment last for eternity.

He never wanted to leave her.

He never wanted to leave this island.

Marianne sighed as she absorbed the sensation of Kyle's whiskers lightly scraping her skin. His strong arms were wrapped around her chest as if he were afraid to let her go.

She loved that feeling, but more than that, she suspected that she might actually love *him*.

These last few days they had shared so much of themselves with each other. She had told him of her fears of dying alone without ever having one spectacular moment to say Marianne Webernec had lived. That she was important to someone other than her rogue tomcat.

Kyle had listened and he, too, had shared his sad past with her. And with every nugget he had entrusted her with, she had fallen for him more.

No one had ever been closer to her. Never meant more to her. Kyle was wonderful.

She didn't know how much of what he'd told her was truth and how much was made up, but she didn't think he was lying about the important things such as his best friend and mother dying. The pain in his eyes when he spoke of them was too real to be faked.

No, he had opened himself up to her, too.

Her heart thrilled at the thought. Warmed by him and his concern, she turned around to face him. The firelight played in his hair and across his face, making shadows along the sharp, handsome planes.

"You are so delectable," she said.

He arched a brow at that.

Smiling wickedly, she reached for the button of his jeans.

"What are you doing?" he asked.

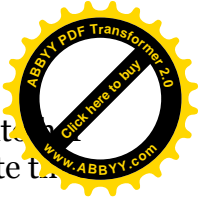
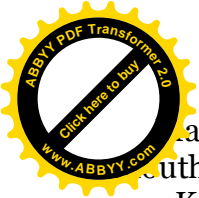
She unzipped his fly. "Why, I'm having my wicked way with you, sir."

His swollen cock, nestled by his short, dark hairs, jutted out, arching back toward his stomach. Luckily his underwear was still drying from where they had washed their clothes earlier, so now he was all naked and exposed to her.

Mmm, how she loved the sight of him like that. Hard and ready for her. She ran her hand down the length of him and delighted in the way his cock followed the motion of her caress. The way it lifted and arched in reaction to her touch.

She brushed her hand along the sensitive tip, letting his wetness coat her fingers.

Kyle watched her with hooded eyes as his breathing changed to sharp, intense breaths.



Marianne licked her lips and lowered her head so that she could draw the tip of him into her mouth. She closed her eyes as she tasted the salty sweetness of him. How she loved the taste of him. It was Kyle.

He hissed in reaction.

She growled deep in her throat as she took more of him into her mouth, while running her tongue around the large vein, and allowed the vibration of her voice box to add to his pleasure.

He cupped her face in his hands and ran his hands through her hair while she cupped the soft sac of him in her hand to massage him in time to her long licks.

Kyle's head swam as he leaned back to allow her more access to his body. There was nothing better than the sensation of her sweet little mouth teasing him. Her timidity was gone now after the days they had been together. She was bold with him.

And he liked that most of all.

She no longer hesitated to touch him. She'd learned he couldn't deny her anything. Whatever she wanted was fine by him, and in truth, he liked being her chew-toy.

She sucked him gently, then licked her way from the base to his tip. His pleasure was so intense, he swore he could see stars.

And when she reversed direction it was all he could do to not cry out in ecstasy. Oh, the feel of her mouth on him, especially when she kept going and drew one of his balls into her mouth to suck and nibble.

He dug his heel into the blanket as he carefully balled his hand into a fist in her hair without hurting her.

She didn't take an ounce of mercy on him. Instead, she continued her bittersweet assault. Breathless, he ran his hand down her jaw while she returned to his cock and took him all the way into her mouth again.

The sight of her there was enough to finish him off. Unable to stand it, he let his orgasm tear through him. His entire body shuddered and convulsed.

Weak and spent, he collapsed back against the driftwood. Marianne kissed her way up his body slowly, as if savoring every inch of his skin as much as he savored hers.

He groaned when she paused at his nipple to draw it deep into her mouth and flick her tongue back and forth over it. "I love the way you taste," she said, her breath scorching him.

"I love being tasted."

Her smile made his heart pound even more.

Then she dug into the pocket of his jeans and pulled out a quarter.

"What are you doing?" he asked suspiciously.

"Turn over."

He laughed nervously. "I'm not sure about this."

"C'mon," she said, wrinkling her nose at him. "It's something I've been wanting to do."

When he hesitated, she shook her head. "Don't be a baby, Kyle. Trust me."

Reluctantly he moved so that he could lie down on his stomach. "Okay," he said slowly. "But I want to be able to use that quarter later. You know what I mean?"

Laughing, Marianne pulled his pants down to his buttocks. "You are such a worrywart. Relax."

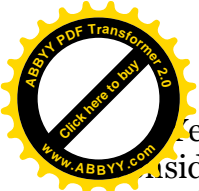
Suddenly very nervous, he lifted himself up on his forearms so that he could stare at her over his shoulder.

She stared at his butt, then took the quarter and bounced it off his left cheek.

"I knew it!" she said triumphantly. "Your butt is so tight the quarter actually bounces."

"What?"

She smiled even wider at him. "You have the tightest ass in the world, you know that?"



"Yeah, okay," he said again. This had to be the strangest moment of his life, and when he considered the fact he spent a great deal of time with drug dealers and terrorists, that was saying something. "You do this a lot?"

"Nope," she said, putting the quarter into her pocket. "I just wanted to test my theory."

"And now that you have?"

Her look turned wicked. "I have plans for that tight butt cheek."

She placed her hands on his cheeks and gave a hard, pleasurable squeeze before she leaned forward and took a nip in the same spot where she'd bounced the quarter.

Kyle laid himself down, content to let her have her way with his body.

Marianne never ceased to surprise him. He found the challenge of her the best part about all of this.

And as the night sped by, he realized something.

For the first time in his life, he was in love with someone.

Someone who had come to mean everything to him. Someone he was going to have to leave behind forever.

Kyle woke up inside the cave the next morning so sated that he was sure he must have died and gone to heaven. This last week with Marianne had been unlike anything he'd ever known.

The more he got to know her, the more he liked her.

No, it was more than like. She made him feel things he'd never felt for anyone.

And he adored the scent of her on his skin. The feel of her hands on his body. He loved waking up with her lying next to him.

Dreamy and warm, he rolled over to pull her close for some serious snuggling, only to find himself alone on the air mattress.

Frowning, Kyle opened his eyes to see the strangest sight of his life.

Someone had placed a toy rubber chicken on Marianne's pillow.

"Marianne?" he called, laughing at what he assumed was a prank. She had an odd sense of humor at times.

No one answered.

And now that he thought about it, where would she have gotten a toy chicken?

Extremely concerned, he sat up instantly. His gaze fell to the handwriting on it and his blood ran cold.

If you want to see Marianne alive again, call Tyson Purdue, 212-555-6209.

What the hell?

His heart pounding, Kyle shot out of bed and dug his cell phone out of the small backpack he'd brought along days ago. For the first time in a week, he turned it on and dialed the number.

"Kyle?" The voice was electronically distorted.

"Who is this?" he demanded.

"It's Tyson Purdue and you have been a bad boy. Literally. I'm sick of you interfering with my business, and it's time I taught you a lesson."

"What are you talking about?"

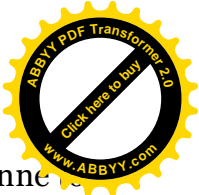
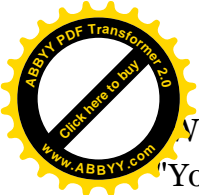
A sharp click sounded. It was followed by Marianne's terrified voice. "Kyle? What's going on? Who are these people who have me?"

He saw red at the fear he heard from her. He'd kill whoever had scared her like this. "It's okay, baby. Don't worry. I won't let them hurt you. Can you stay calm for me?"

Marianne didn't answer. Another sharp click sounded and then the electronic voice responded. "Don't worry, Foster. She's okay so long as you do what we say."

"What do you want?"

"I want *you*, Kyle Foster. I want you dead for what you've done."



"Who the hell are you?"

"You know who I am. Don't be stupid. And at the risk of being cliché, if you want Marianne to remain healthy and living, meet me at dusk on the south beach. Oh, and you'd better be unarmed."

The phone went dead.

Marianne was so scared she couldn't breathe. Couldn't move. All she knew was that one minute she'd been sleeping happily wrapped around Kyle, and the next minute someone had pressed a pungent-smelling rag against her face.

Then everything went black again.

She'd awakened a short time ago with a ferocious headache to find herself blindfolded, with her hands tied behind her back and her feet tied to the wooden chair she sat on.

From what she could tell, there were three men with her. The one who had awakened her to talk on the phone seemed to be an American. His voice was extremely deep and seemed to have a very light hint of an unknown foreign accent to it.

The man on her right spoke with a heavy Spanish accent while another man's voice was definitely German.

"Why did you tell him to wait until sunset?" the man with the Spanish accent asked. "I'm ready to get this done and go home."

"Reno, you were born impatient, *mi'jo*. The beauty of dealing with your opponent is playing with his head. Let's make him sweat a little. By nightfall he'll be so rattled, he won't even be able to think straight."

Marianne heard something click that sounded like a gun being cocked or maybe loaded.

Reno laughed. "You are an evil bastard."

"Yes, I am, and if you were wise, you'd be taking notes. Learn from the master, boys, and learn well."

Marianne was so afraid that her teeth chattered. She was freezing cold and shook even though her hands were tied behind her back.

She wanted to be brave for Kyle, but she wasn't a secret agent. The character in her novel would be able to get out of this. A small-town high-school teacher couldn't.

What was she going to do now? This wasn't supposed to happen to her. She was...

Marianne paused as the men started talking about blowing up the cabin she was in.

Wait, this was familiar to her. She knew this part. Being tied to the chair, the phone call.

The cabin explosion.

Chapter nine!

Her mind raced as relief coursed through her. *That's right. Halfway through the book Ren ends up captured by the villain and Brad has to come to the rescue, only Ren ends up being the one who rescues him.*

It was the book!

These men must be more actors, and they had finally recaptured her from Kyle.

Well, it was about time. They'd been woefully inadequate up until now.

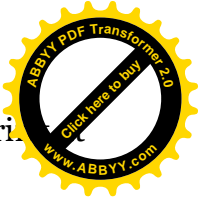
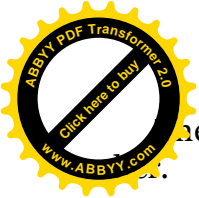
She relaxed at the discovery. This wasn't real. It was only part of her fantasy.

Oh, thank God no one was going to kill her or Kyle. She let out a long breath as she tried to wiggle out of the ropes.

"Okay, guys," she said, her voice surprisingly steady. "You can untie me now."

"Untie you?" the American repeated, his tone filled with disbelief. "Why should I?"

"Because I asked you to?" She waited expectantly for them to untie her.



They didn't. Nor did they say anything, and she had a sneaking suspicion they were starting.

"Look," she tried again, "I realize that you guys finally managed to get me away from Kyle. Bully for you, you did good for once. But now we're back to the book, and since I'm the heroine and I'm supposed to escape, I need some help. This chair is really uncomfortable and my hands hurt."

She waited for them to obey her, and again they didn't make a move to undo her.

Time stretched out interminably.

"C'mon," she said, hopping in the chair. "I can't undo these knots. See, I know Ren Winterbourne, Secret Agent, is supposed to be able to get out of the chair, but Marianne Webernec from Peoria can't, and until I get loose, we can't move on to the next scene, so would you guys help?"

"What is she talking about?" the Spanish man asked.

"Who is Ren Winterbourne?" the German asked.

The American laughed.

Another ripple of fear went through her.

They're just playing with you. You heard them, they like to play with people's heads.

Play with Kyle's head.

Marianne paused as she realized this wasn't about her. They might really be after Kyle after all. Otherwise why use the name Tyson Purdue?

Dear Lord, what if Tyson Purdue was a real man?

Stay calm, Marianne.

"C'mon," Marianne said again, hoping she was wrong and they were just being mean for all the times Kyle had scared them off. "I know this isn't real. Just let me go and I won't tell Mr. Zimmerman how bad you scared me."

"Do you guys know a Zimmerman?" the German man asked.

Marianne felt someone move closer to her.

"Not real?" The American stood so close that his voice was nothing more than a growl in her right ear. "Lady, do you know what BAD is?"

"Bureau of American Defense. It's the agency Kyle made up."

She heard the American move away from her then. It sounded as if he might have huddled with the others.

The men began speaking to each other in German. Little did they know, German was one of the languages she taught at her school, and she understood them perfectly.

"If she doesn't believe him, then we can let her go, right?" the German man asked.

"How much did Foster tell her?" the Spanish man asked. "You were the one who had him bugged."

The American answered, "A lot more than he should have. I don't know..."

There were a few seconds of silence, and again she heard something that definitely sounded like a gun being cocked this time.

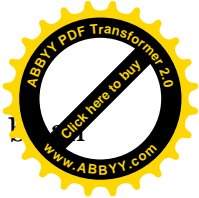
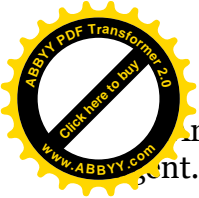
"I'm thinking she's a liability, and you know what I think of liabilities."

"Put your weapon down. You can't just kill her," the German man said. "I'm tired of cleaning up body parts after you get through."

Oh, God, it's real!

These weren't actors from the island.

Someone pulled the hair back from her neck, and then something sharp and cold was pressed against her throat.



"Are you scared, teacher?" the American whispered in her ear. "You said you wanted to die. Now you're silent. Were you really prepared for it?"

I don't want to die! The words tore through her mind. No, she didn't want this any more than she wanted Kyle to die.

Against her will, she started sobbing uncontrollably.

"Hey, hey, hey!" the American said as he moved whatever was against her throat away from her. "What is this?"

She couldn't speak past her wrenching cries.

"*Ay caramba!* What have you done? Look at her."

The blindfold came off instantly, and she realized she was inside a very small cabin that had next to no furniture. Her chair and a table appeared to be it.

Well, that and a whole lot of ammunition and guns. There were boxes all around her bearing the words: *fragile, danger, explosives, ammunition, grenades, etc.*

Marianne saw the three men through her blurry eyesight. The one in front of her was gorgeous for a psycho. He had shoulder-length black hair that fell around a face that belonged to some Calvin Klein model. His dark skin was perfectly tanned, his eyes so pale a blue they didn't look real.

He reached out and wiped the tears from her face. "Don't cry," he said, letting her know he was the American. "C'mon, I can't stand to see a woman cry."

Reno cut the ropes on her feet.

Angry and scared, she reacted without thinking. She kicked the American in the leg.

"Ow!" he snapped, moving away from her.

Reno untied her hands, flipped closed his knife, then slapped a hand against the American's shoulder. "*Pendejo!*" he snarled. "I told you not to tie her up like this."

The American hissed and took a fearsome step toward Reno, who stepped back instantly. "Don't come at me, *maricón*, unless you come bearing a weapon."

"I've got your weapon, right here," Reno said, flipping open the large black butterfly knife he'd used to free her with.

The tall, blond German stepped between them. His hair was cut short, and he wore a pair of black aviator-style sunglasses. His white T-shirt was tight over a body that was huge and well built like a major bodybuilder. He had a colorful tattoo spiraling down his right arm.

"Enough!" the German said, keeping them at arm's length with his body between them.

Marianne decided to take advantage of their fight to run for the door.

She'd barely reached it before the American caught her. He swung her up in his arms.

She kicked with everything she had and screamed while trying to claw his eyes out.

The other two men laughed.

The American sat her down hard in the chair and held her there with an ease of strength that was truly terrifying.

He turned his icy gaze back to hers. "Look, no one's going to hurt you, okay?"

"You're going to kill Kyle."

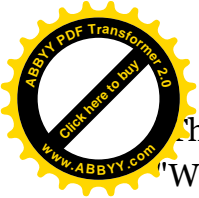
A lopsided grin broke across the man's face, showing her a set of perfectly white teeth. "Not today, I'm not. I just want to teach him a lesson."

She launched herself at him.

He actually laughed as he held her easily away from him. "Well, the little teacher has spunk." He set her back in the chair. Again. "Listen to me, Marianne. You had a fantasy to be a damsel in distress, right?"

She swallowed her tears as she looked back and forth between the men. "You don't look like actors."

"Yeah, well," the American said. "That's because we're not."



"Then what are you?"

"We're friends of Kyle's."

The German snorted at that. "Since when?"

Marianne glared at the American. "I knew you were lying."

"Look, I swear, I'm not lying about this." He looked at the German. "Dieter, really, don't help me here, okay?"

"Fine, Retter. Don't call me the next time you need some *Scheiflekopf* to help you."

That diabolical half smile played across the American's face. "Your words, not mine."

Marianne froze as the man's name registered in her mind.

Retter...

The name went through her like glass. She knew who this man was. Kyle had told her much about his pseudo-partner who didn't listen to anyone except himself. Kyle's exact words had been "Retter is a dickhead, but he gets the job done with scary reliability. The man strikes like lightning."

Retter turned back toward her. "I'm just playing a joke on Kyle for making me have to come out here to retrieve him. Since you wanted to be a damsel in distress, I was going to give you what you wanted while I jerked his chain. I'm sorry I scared you so badly. I'm used to dealing with agents who would sooner have their hearts cut out than cry."

She narrowed her eyes on the man before her. Still skeptical, Marianne wasn't sure what to believe. "How do I know you're who you say you are?"

"You'll just have to take my word for it."

"If I don't?"

Reno laughed. "I really like this woman, Retter. She thinks you're an asshole, too."

He gave Reno a cold, brutal look before those piercingly blue eyes moved back to her. "You'd be wise never to accept my word on anything, but if I kill Kyle, I'd have to explain it to Joe and then he'd get bent and then I'd have to kill him, too, and that would make his woman go wild on me. And it's all just more trouble than even I want to deal with at the moment. So, see, he's safe."

There was a light in his eyes that said he would enjoy the challenge of the fight in spite of what he said, but there was also something charming and oddly warm about this man.

Marianne nodded quietly at him. "He'd better be safe," she warned him. "I don't know who Joe or his woman is, but if you do anything to Kyle, I swear Joe's woman going wild on you will seem like a walk in paradise compared to what I'll do to you."

Kyle stalked back and forth in anger as he tried to figure out who could have taken Marianne while he slept.

He discounted the morons on the other side of the island. He'd been hanging them from trees and escaping them with barely more than a fierce growl. They could never have perpetrated anything like this.

It would have to be someone stealthy. Someone who knew how lightly he slept and how to move about without waking him...

He cursed as one name resonated in his head.

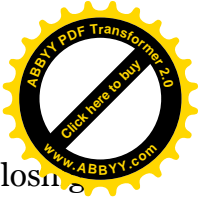
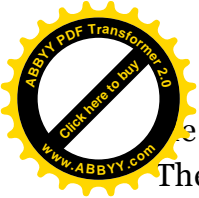
Retter.

There was no one else it could be.

Kyle's sight clouded at the thought. It had to be. Retter was the only man Kyle had ever known who could maneuver around him while he slept and not wake him. The man was part ghost.

But how did Retter know about Tyson Purdue?

He'd made the name up and...



He paused as he glanced back at the chicken and the crisp handwriting.

There must be a bug on him somewhere. There had to be. Joe was ever paranoid about losing agents and bugged almost every piece of equipment they had. The only reason Kyle hadn't thought of it sooner was the fact that every time he called Joe demanding a ride out of this place, Joe had laughed at him and told him to get lost.

It had never occurred to him that Joe would have the stuff on the island tagged, but since he'd raided the BAD supply closet for supplies, he should have known.

"Damn it."

Pissed and wanting blood, he called the number again.

No one answered.

So he dialed Joe's office where Joe's girlfriend The picked it up on the third ring.

"The, this is Kyle. Is Joe in?"

The (pronounced "Tee") Ho was the extremely attractive assistant director of the agency. She was a Vietnamese immigrant, and her intelligence was off the scale. So was her memory and her need to exact revenge on anyone dumb enough to mock her name. It was a mistake Kyle had made only once, and he was lucky he didn't have a permanent limp from the experience.

She was a top-notch agent and Joe's right hand, and she never let anyone forget those two facts.

"Well, well, Mr. Foster," she said in her crisp, flawless English—"The could speak somewhere in the neighborhood of fifteen languages fluently—"how nice of you to finally check in. Blown up any busboys lately?"

"I beg your pardon?"

"Please, don't beg, it's not becoming of you, Mr. Let-Me-Kidnap-a-Woman-and-Drag-Her-Back-to-My-Cave. Joe is so hot about you right now, you're lucky you're still living. He's on the phone with Wulfgar Zimmerman from Rose Books trying to assure him you haven't hurt Marianne and that she will be returned to him shortly."

"I'm not the one who hurt her. Retter kidnapped her from me this morning."

Silence answered him for a few heartbeats until The started laughing.

"It's not funny, The."

"Sure it is. You're just mad he got away with it. At least he didn't punch you in the nose before he grabbed her. The actor playing Brad Ramsey, in case you're wondering, is fine, but bruised. He also quit his job and was threatening to sue us until I introduced him to Tessa and convinced him that a lawsuit would be extremely hazardous to his health."

Tessa was The's prized Glock 33. Which was only slightly more deadly than The's other lethal weapon, Petey the killer Pomeranian.

"I swear, I'm going to kill Retter for this."

"Uh, no, you won't, hon. He's vital to national security and falls under extreme protection."

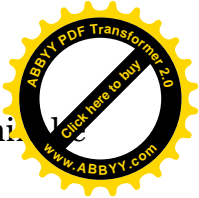
Kyle growled into the phone. "Then tell me how to get a hold of Retter and call him down."

"Ooo," she breathed. "I don't think that's possible. See, he was off in Rio having a grand old time on the beach when Joe had to call him in to come get you away from Wulfgar's tourist. You were bad, Kyle, not BAD. So sorry. If you want to talk to Retter, then call him. There's nothing I can do."

She actually hung up the phone.

"Fine," he said loudly, hoping that whatever mic was hidden, it picked up his voice. "You'd better hide, Retter, because tonight I am going to kick your rotten ass all over the beach."

Three hours later Kyle came across the beach, loaded for bear, or in this case, loaded for Retter.



He'd fought beside the bastard enough to know what he needed to beat him. And beat him as going to do.

For the last three hours Kyle had done total recog on the island. There was only one place where Marianne could be.

One place Retter would deem "secret."

He already had the small cabin in his sights. It sat alone at the base of a small mountain. It was used for supplies that Joe didn't want near the hotel in the event of a fire or something else that might make it explode.

Kyle didn't break stride or hesitate as he headed for it. He was less than three yards from the door of it when he heard a sharp click.

Cursing, he dived away from it an instant before the shack blew apart.

Debris rained all around him.

Kyle couldn't breathe as terror overwhelmed him. Marianne!

"It's not sundown, Kyle."

Kyle saw a two-way radio in the sand a few feet from him. He got up and grabbed it. "Where the hell are you, Retter?" He looked around, scanning everything.

"Look up."

He did and found Retter, Reno, and Dieter standing on the cliff. Marianne was nowhere in sight. "What kind of game are you playing?"

"Hide-and-seek. If you can find Marianne, I'll let you keep her."

"And if I don't?"

"Your loss. Literally." He saw Retter motion for Reno and Dieter to leave. Once they were out of hearing range, Retter spoke again. "Do you feel her loss, Kyle? Tell me the truth."

Yes, he did. He'd been feeling the emptiness of it since he'd awakened and found himself alone again.

Every minute he'd been away from her, he hurt. The desolation inside him was unlike anything he'd ever known.

He didn't want to live without Marianne.

But Lucifer would freeze solid before he ever admitted that to Retter. "Go to hell."

"I most likely will, but in the meantime the clock is ticking for you. If you don't find her by nightfall, it's over and you, my friend, are on a plane out of here."

It was all Kyle had wanted. But that was before he'd met Marianne and had learned to have fun without explosives. Fun without someone taking potshots at him.

What would he do without her?

He didn't want to find out. Tossing the radio down, he backtracked through the woods and tried his best to focus on where Retter would have hidden her now.

Marianne sat in the lobby of Kyle's hotel, wrapped in Kyle's jacket. The scent of his body clung to it, making her want to bury her face in the sleeve and just inhale it until she was drunk from the scent.

Sam sat behind the concierge counter, staring at her. His old basset hound lay beside him on its back with all four of its paws up in the air.

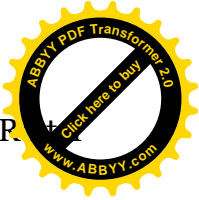
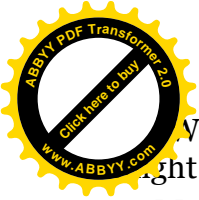
"Are you sure that dog's not dead?"

Sam glanced at him. "Nah, ole Roscoe always sleeps like that."

She nodded, then frowned. Sam was a strange bird. "How long before Kyle gets here?"

"I dunno. Depends on what Retter does to him for taking you."

"Do you think they'll be really harsh on him?"



"Well, back when I worked for the CIA, we'd have killed him for being such a pain, and F...
ght yet. He's got a lot of the old school in him."

Marianne felt the color drain from her face.

"But his boss, Joe, is a bit more understanding about such things, so it's hard to say. I figure the worst thing that could happen to Kyle is nothing."

"What do you mean?"

"Well, he must have thought a lot of you to keep them actors and all on their toes. He had to have known that sooner or later Mr. Zimmerman would call in Joe to come get him. So to my way of thinking, he must have thought you were worth the trouble that's now coming his way."

Before Marianne could speak, Aislinn Zimmerman came running into the lobby. She was followed by an extremely tall, devastatingly handsome man. There was an air of refined elegance to the man, who wore an expensive tailor-made suit.

"Oh, Marianne!" Aislinn exclaimed. "Thank goodness they found you. We have been worried sick."

The man with her rubbed his brow as if Aislinn's dramatics were giving him a headache.

He held his hand out to Marianne. "Hi, Ms. Webernec. I'm Wulfgar Zimmerman, and I just wanted to tell you personally how sorry I am for your ordeal."

So this was the mysterious owner of Rose Books. He was devastating and rumored to be one of the richest men in the world. Marianne shook his hand. "There really is nothing to apologize for. I've had the time of my life."

Aislinn snorted. "Yes, but that was before that lunatic, Kyle Foster, ruined it."

"You're the one who put her here, Ais," Wulfgar said calmly.

Aislinn turned on her brother with a snarl. "Well, the next time the island is occupied by *them*, I wish you would put something down on paper."

He arched an elegant brow. "Forgive me, but I thought the word *occupied* on the schedule was self-explanatory."

"I thought you meant it was occupied by *our* people, not *theirs*. You're supposed to put *training* down when they're training here."

"Excuse me," Sam said, interrupting them. "But I take exception to that. Me and Roscoe are always here, and we definitely fall under the *them* category."

"You're you, Sam," Aislinn explained. "You don't count."

Sam looked extremely offended by that.

Wulfgar shook his head. "You'd better stop while you're behind, Ais. You're just getting in deeper at the moment."

Aislinn ignored the men and took Marianne's arm. "Don't worry, hon. I'll take care of this mess. We'll extend your stay another week and get back to your fantasy."

"It's okay, really," Marianne said. "I've had a great time with Kyle." She stared up at Wulfgar, hoping to make him understand. "Look, I don't want Kyle to get into trouble. Had he not shown up, I was ready to call you and ask for the fantasy to be canceled."

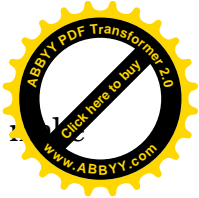
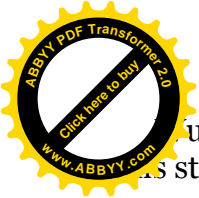
"Really?" Wulfgar asked.

She nodded.

He looked at his sister, who appeared horrified. "Well, how was I to know Brad was having an affair with Spencer?"

"I don't want to go into that again, Ais, but this is the last time I leave a fantasy package up to you."

"Fine," Aislinn snapped. "I don't want to do another one anyway. You get entirely too cranky when the guest goes AWOL. So I leave it up to you from now on. I'm through." Aislinn stalked out of the hotel and left Marianne alone with Wulfgar.



ulfgar gave her a patient stare. "Tell me something, Marianne. What could possibly
s story turn out to be a happily-ever-after for you after everything that's happened?"

Marianne opened her mouth to say having Kyle as her own, but the minute the thought
occurred to her, she realized something.

Mr. Zimmerman might be a billionaire magnate. But he couldn't give her the one thing she
needed.

Only Kyle could do that.

And right now she had no idea if he even wanted to.

Kyle searched all the likely places Retter might have stashed Marianne.

He was out of options.

Disgusted and angry, he leaned back against a palm tree at the edge of the beach and raked his hands through his hair. If he closed his eyes, he could feel Marianne with him. Feel the touch of her hand on his skin. The warmth of her body under him.

He just wanted to see her one more time.

"C'mon, Kyle," he said to himself. "Think through this. You've never given up on anything in your life. You can do it."

Nothing had ever been more important to him.

He had to find her.

The best hiding place is always the most obvious. No one will ever think you're dumb enough to put something there. Kyle froze as Joe's words from training went through his mind.

Most obvious...

Surely Retter wouldn't have done that. He was never obvious. The bastard loved being complicated and vague.

But the more he thought about it, the more sure he was that Retter had chosen someplace easy. After all, Retter wouldn't think he'd think to look there.

Running as fast as he could, Kyle headed back to his hotel. Time seemed to slow down as he ran. He couldn't remember anything ever taking longer.

Please let me be right...

If he was wrong, then he was totally screwed.

As soon as he reached his hotel, he went crashing through the door, only to find Sam sitting at his desk, watching TV

There was no one else in the place.

No one.

Damn it to hell!

It had been a stupid thought.

His heart heavy, Kyle actually wanted to cry in frustration. What would he do now?

"Welcome back, Mr. Excitement," Sam said, looking up from the TV "Heard you've had a high time with them weirdos from the other side of the island. I told you not to go over there, didn't I? Told you they'd do strange things to you." He paused as he adjusted his glasses and frowned. "You okay, boy? You don't look right."

Kyle couldn't speak. All he could do was struggle to breathe past the pain in his chest. One that had nothing to do with his mad sprint and everything to do with what he'd lost.

"Where's Marianne, Sam? Have you seen her?"

Please tell me she's here...

Sam scratched his cheek. "Well, she was here a while ago, but that Mr. Zimmerman from the publisher came and took her away."

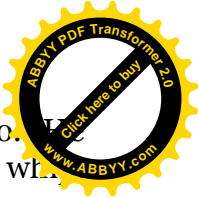
Kyle's heart leaped with hope. "Where did he take her?"

He shrugged. "Marianne said she wanted to finish out her fantasy. I'm not sure what that means."

She must be on the other side of the island again, which meant he could find her.

Sam opened up the small red Igloo cooler at his feet and pulled out a cold beer. "Here," he said, twisting the cap off. "You look like you could use a drink."

"No, thanks. I've got to find her."



Sam nodded as if he understood. "You know, I had a woman I loved once. Long time ago. I dreamed dreamily. "Her name was Ethel Burrows. Oh, she was beautiful. Smart. Quick as a whiff. She made me feel like I could fly."

Kyle frowned at his words, wondering why Sam was sharing this with him when Sam usually shared very few personal things. "What happened to her?"

A sad, faraway look covered Sam's face. "Me mostly. I didn't ever tell her how I felt about her. I was about your age and working for the CIA all the time. I was afraid to take a wife. Afraid I'd get killed or she might be in danger. Either way, I knew I wouldn't be home much to be with her. I didn't think it would be fair to her to be married and have to go off on missions while she stayed behind with my kids." He pierced Kyle with a dark, meaningful look. "I never stopped to think about what would happen if I *didn't* die."

"What do you mean?"

"Well, at the time I had fourteen more years of active service before they sent me to the desk or retired me. Fourteen years seemed like forever when I was twenty-eight. It didn't dawn on me that I'd be spending more years than that alone, wondering what would have happened to me if I'd just asked her to marry me." Sam reached over to scratch Roscoe's ears. "But that's okay. I've got Roscoe here to keep me company in my old age."

Kyle stared at the man and his dog, and in that instant he saw a very sobering future for himself. One he didn't want to even contemplate.

"Thanks, Sam."

Sam nodded at him and started drinking the beer he'd offered him. "Don't make my mistakes, Kyle. Go find your woman and tell her what she means to you."

Kyle tore out of the hotel and headed for the other side of the island.

He had a destiny waiting for him, and come hell or high water, he was going to find it.

At least that was what he thought. By five o'clock Kyle knew it was hopeless.

Marianne was nowhere on the island. Nowhere.

He'd searched every place he could think. Every corner, every cranny.

It was as if she'd vanished off the face of the earth. Of course, none of the busboys or actors from the other side would help him. Hell, they barely spoke to him after the trouble he'd given them while they had tried to find her and he'd scared them off.

It seemed they thought turnabout was fair play.

One of the little bastards had even laughed at him when he'd asked if the man had seen her.

That was okay. He'd stopped laughing the minute Kyle shot out his tires.

At four-thirty he'd finally found Aislinn Zimmerman in Marianne's hotel, debriefing the staff for their next guest, who would be arriving within the next few weeks. The redhead had promptly read him the riot act for screwing up the one and only fantasy her brother had entrusted her to run entirely on her own.

"You want Marianne?" she'd snapped at him. "Then find my brother. Last I checked, she was flying *off* on his private plane back to civilization."

Kyle had gone immediately to their airstrip, only to find out Wulfgar Zimmerman was long gone.

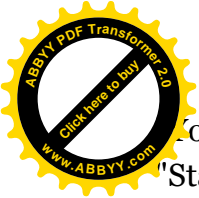
Which meant so was Marianne.

Damn it!

Defeated and tired, Kyle walked the long distance back to his side of the island. He didn't stop to say goodbye to Sam, though he should have. He just couldn't face the old man right now.

So he bypassed the hotel and went straight to the private airstrip they used that wasn't all that far from where he'd been hidden with Marianne. His throat tightened at the thought.

Retter was standing by the small luxury jet, waiting for him.



"You're right on time."

"Stay away from me, Retter. In the mood I'm in, I just might kill you."

"No luck, huh?"

"Shut up."

Retter stepped aside so that Kyle could reach the stairs to the plane.

Kyle snarled at him as he paused by his side. "I really hate you for this. Couldn't you have given me twenty-four hours before you came crashing in?"

"Would that have been enough?"

No, it wouldn't have. It wouldn't have made any of this a bit easier to swallow. Shoving Retter aside, Kyle ascended the stairs and bent his head down to enter the plane.

Retter was only a few steps behind him.

He saw Reno in the cockpit, wearing the pilot's headgear, waiting for them.

"So what did you do with her?" he asked as he took a seat up front, not far away from Reno.

Retter shrugged as he sat down in the row across from him. "Talked to her for a while. I found her fascinating."

Kyle saw red at his words. "Don't talk about her like that. She's too good for you."

"She's too good for *you*," Retter shot back.

Kyle didn't say anything. It was true.

It still didn't lessen the pain he felt.

Reno started making their flight plan.

In that moment Kyle knew what he needed to do.

He stood up again. "Reno," he said as he neared the cockpit. "I want you to fly us to Peoria."

Reno's jaw went slack. "Excuse me?"

"You heard me."

"I can't do that, *mi hermano*. Joe wants you home."

"Fuck Joe and what he wants."

"Whoa," Retter said, moving to stand behind him. "I think you need to take a more civil tone, bud. Have you any idea how much your little 'date' has cost us already? There are countries with a smaller GNP than the tab you've spent on Marianne. Now you want us to fly your ass to Peoria?"

"Fine," Kyle said angrily. "I'll just book the flight when we land in Nashville and head out then."

Retter shook his head. "Are you insane? Joe will fire you for this."

"Then let him."

Retter's face hardened. "Think about this for a minute, Kyle. You'll lose everything. Is she worth it?"

He didn't even have to hesitate. "She's worth everything in the world to me."

To his surprise, Retter stepped back and smiled.

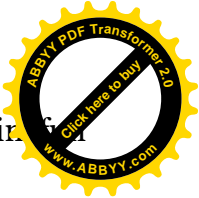
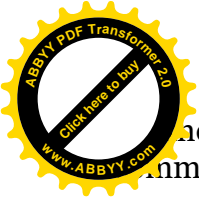
Three seconds later the rear emergency door was ripped off the airplane and a smoking canister was thrown into the aisle way.

Before Kyle could reach for his weapon, a small commando dressed all in black tripped through the doorway carrying an M-16.

She paused at the opening and stared agape at the plane. "Wow, this is really nice."

Kyle smiled the instant he recognized that less-than-fierce voice. Not to mention he'd know that body anywhere, even when it was decked out in ill-fitting fatigues and her face was covered in black paint.

It was Marianne.



and she was joined by another commando he recognized as Dieter, also dressed in commando gear. "Terrorists," Dieter whispered to her loudly, "hostage, remember?"

"Oh, yeah," she said, gripping her weapon and looking fierce, or at least as fierce as a high-school teacher could look. "Don't anyone..." She started coughing from the smoke as she moved through it.

Dieter pounded her lightly on the back and nudged her out of it. "It's okay. Breathe deeply."

Marianne coughed a few more times and nodded. "Don't..." She coughed more.

"She says don't move," Dieter finished for her.

She started toward Kyle, only to be stopped the instant her gun got wedged between the two seats on opposite ends of the row. She *whoofed* as it caught against her middle.

"That thing's not loaded, is it?" Kyle asked Retter.

"Hell, no. I told you I spent the day with her. Last thing I want is to be shot dead by friendly fire."

Dieter helped her get unhooked.

Retter held his hands up.

"You!" Marianne said, waving Retter aside with her gun. "Stay out of my way or I'll blow your head off."

"Yes, ma'am." Retter moved toward Reno.

Marianne took another step forward with her gun a little higher this time. "I'm Ren Winterbourne, Secret Agent, and... um... um... um..." She paused, thinking. "Wait a second... I'm Ren Witnerbourne, Secret Agent, and..."

"And I'm here for the hostage!" Reno shouted out.

Kyle turned to see Reno in the cockpit with a copy of the book for Marianne's fantasy.

Marianne took a step toward him, but Dieter caught her and showed her how to walk down the aisle without catching the gun on the seats.

"Move, you scum," Reno prompted again.

Kyle stared at Marianne as she came even with him. He couldn't take his eyes off her.

"Hey," Reno said, raising his voice. "Move, you scum. This is the part where you make the terrorists get down on the ground and tie them up."

"Bullshit," Retter said. "This is the part where she shoots the pilot."

"*Nein*," Dieter joined in, moving past them toward the other two. He pulled a copy of the book out of his back pocket and opened it up to a bookmarked page. "She makes you get down, Retter, and eat the floor. It says so right here. You must get down."

"Yeah and this is the part where you get sent back to Pakistan, Adolph. I'm not kissing dirt for nobody."

"I am not Adolph, I am Dieter."

Kyle was only vaguely aware of the others arguing about the book. His attention was solely on the woman before him.

"Were you really going to fly to Peoria?" she asked him.

"Well, yeah. I thought that's where you were. Aislinn told me you were on Wulfgar's plane."

She smiled. "I am, kind of. We both are."

Kyle glanced around the luxurious jet. He hadn't noticed just how nice it was earlier. It should have dawned on him the minute he entered it.

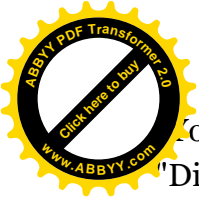
But then Marianne always had a way of distracting him.

"You know," she said quietly, "I always wanted to be the heroine in the book."

"Funny, I only want the woman who is reading the book."

She smiled up at him and his groin jerked.

"So how does the story end?" he asked her.



"You kiss her, sheez!" the guys said in unison.

"Didn't he read the book?" Dieter asked. "It says right here—"

"Shut up, Dieter," Retter snapped. "I think we should leave them alone."

Laughing, Marianne stepped into his arms and held him tight. "It ends like all good romances do. We live happily ever after."