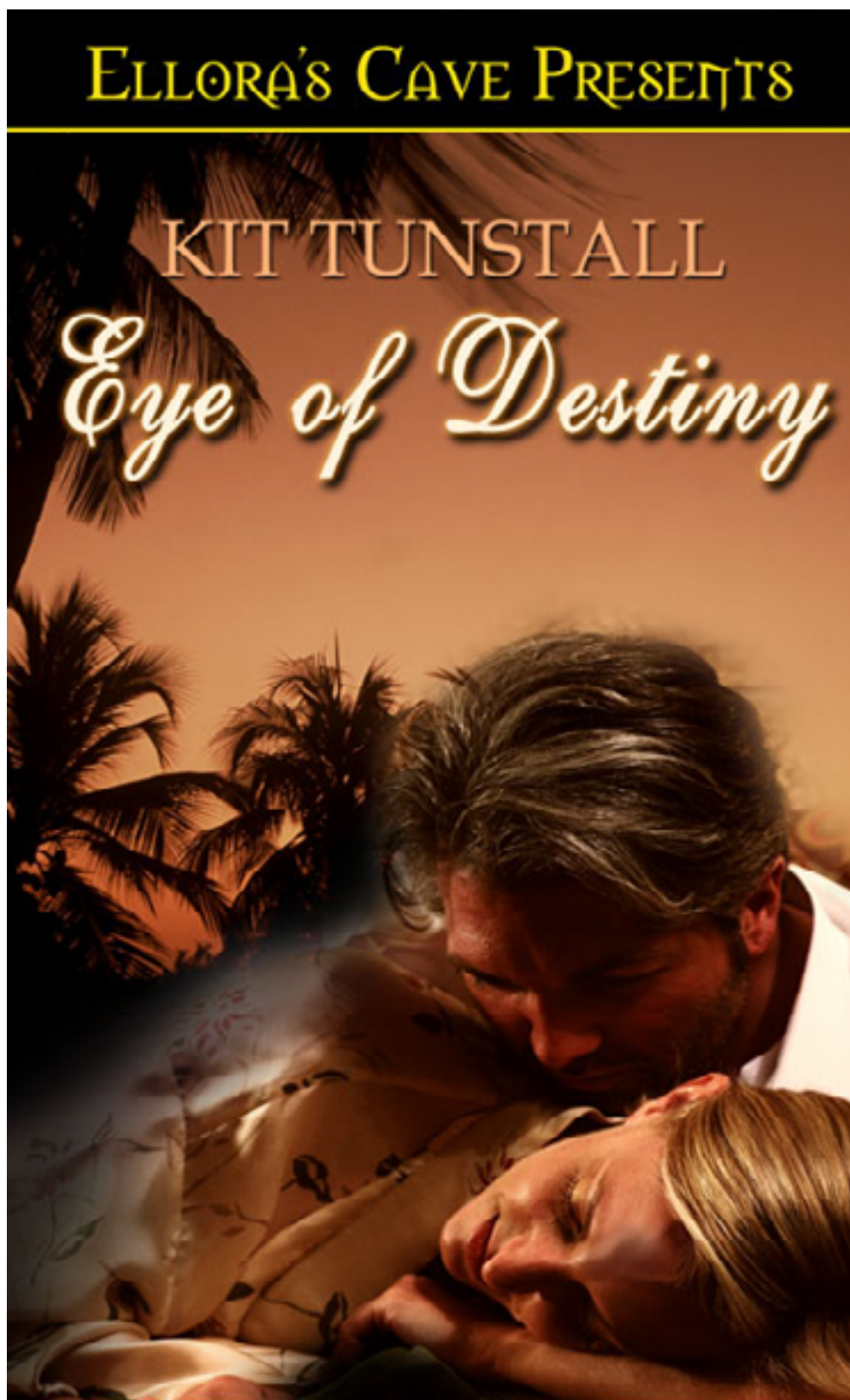


ELLORA'S CAVE PRESENTS

KIT TUNSTALL

Eye of Destiny



EYE OF DESTINY

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EYE OF DESTINY

Kit Tunstall

Dedication

For Ann Richardson, a superb editor and even better friend. Without her support, this book wouldn't exist.

Chapter 1

Hannah pulled another handful of clothes from the hamper, muttering to herself when she failed to find the elusive swimsuit. She dropped the dirty garments in a heap on the floor and strode to the doorway. Leaning her head out, she called, "Charles, do you know where my swimsuit is?"

She waited almost a minute for him to answer. She was about to go into the kitchen to ask him again when he called back, "Why would I know?"

"No reason," she muttered while returning to the hamper to stuff all the clothes back in. "It's not like you ever do any of my laundry." She snorted. "Or your own, for that matter."

Her hands stilled as she lifted one of Charles's white shirts from the floor. It wasn't the shirt that caught her attention, but rather, the lipstick stain on the collar—a lurid pink shade she wouldn't be caught dead wearing. As she shifted the shirt, her hand brushed the pocket, where she felt an object. She braced herself for the latest discovery of proof of her husband's philandering.

Her stomach dipped as she reached cautiously into the pocket to see what caused the lump. She sighed when she saw the folded-up cocktail napkin from a small club on 16th with the name Lorissa and a phone number scrawled on the napkin in the same shade of lipstick as that on the collar.

She tried to offer explanations for her husband having the number, and for the lipstick on the collar, but her excuses had worn thin. Still, she had to make sure. She walked over to the bed, brushing against her opened suitcase, and picked up the phone. With shaking hands, she dialed the number, half-hoping no one would answer.

It rang three times before a sultry sounding woman answered. "Hello, lover. I saw your number on the caller ID, but I didn't expect to hear from you so soon. I thought you weren't calling until wifey left on her trip?"

Without responding, Hannah disconnected the call and dropped the phone on the bed. She stared at it for half a minute, contemplating what she had learned from Lorissa. She had the voice of a hooker, and probably had the body of a stripper. Charles's taste ran to the young and exotic. He had the money to fund his tastes, so why not indulge himself?

In the process of returning the napkin to his pocket, she glanced at her wedding ring set. After all, what did twenty-two years of marriage count for when compared to a shot at young pussy?

Tears welled behind her eyes, and she blinked them away. With a resolute movement, Hannah bent down to zip her suitcase and carried it from the room with her. She closed her bedroom door with a soft click, her restraint amazing her.

Once, the recent revelation might have inspired anger and wrath. Now, only a curious sense of detachment remained. Was there even any pain associated with knowing Charles had once again been unfaithful, or planned to be? Maybe, or maybe it was just nerves from her upcoming trip that made her stomach ache.

She walked to Morgan's room and tapped on the door. Loud music pounded from the room, and she wondered if her daughter would even hear her knock. She waited a second before knocking again, louder this time. "Morgan?"

Seconds later, Morgan opened the door, looking annoyed. Even with her pout, Hannah was struck anew by her daughter's beauty. It seemed as though she couldn't go more than a week without realizing how beautiful her daughter had become, and knowing how thankful she was that Morgan had the chance to reach maturity. She blinked when she realized Morgan was staring at her impatiently. "Are you ready?"

"Yeah." Morgan turned away to switch off the stereo and lifted a large case. "I guess."

Hannah tried not to let her daughter's lack of enthusiasm hurt. Would she have been that eager to take a trip with her mother when she had graduated from high school? Probably not. In any event, she hadn't had the opportunity. Her mother hadn't had the money, and that was the summer Hannah met Charles. She had spent every minute she could with him. "The taxi will be here soon."

"Yeah." Morgan followed her down the hall to the kitchen, where Charles ate breakfast. As usual, the morning paper formed a barrier between he and his wife.

He immediately lowered it when Morgan hovered near him. "We're leaving any minute now, Daddy." Her light-blonde hair was a contrast to Charles's salt-and-pepper brown as she gave him a big hug and kissed his cheek. "I'm going to miss you."

"I'm sure you'll have a lovely time with your mother."

Hannah frowned, suddenly realizing Charles hadn't called her by her name in some time. Of course, they didn't really speak these days.

"But what will you do with yourself, Daddy? Are you certain you can't get away from the office to join us?"

"I'm sure, Morgan. Don't you worry about me." Charles patted her hand. "I'm sure I'll find a way to occupy my time."

An image of Charles fucking a woman slightly older than Morgan flashed through Hannah's mind. "I'm sure you will." She couldn't keep the trace of bitterness from her tone. It didn't matter anyway, because he didn't even look at her. Either he hadn't heard her comment, or he was ignoring her.

The taxi horn sounded then, sending them into a rush. In the shuffle, Hannah didn't have a chance to kiss Charles goodbye. He didn't make the effort either. As she paused

at the door leading outside, she looked back. Charles was already behind his paper again.

* * * * *

The first sight of the ship was more impressive than Hannah had anticipated. She had seen the brochure for the *Sea Princess*, but hadn't expected the ship to be so large. It made her feel small in comparison. As they worked their way through the crowd at Miami's port, she couldn't tear her gaze from the splendor. The ship was a sparkling white monolith rising several stories. Its sheer length made those milling about the pier seem insignificant. "It's beautiful, isn't it?"

"Yeah," was Morgan's disinterested reply.

Hannah looked away from the ship to her daughter. Morgan hadn't even removed her sunglasses. She was chatting to a friend on her cell phone while maneuvering through the crush of people. If they hadn't surrendered their luggage to a porter at check-in, she'd probably be carrying her suitcase too. Anything to avoid conversation with her mother. She sighed and turned away from Morgan to look at the ship again.

As she did so, her gaze locked with a man standing a few feet from them. Hannah's breath caught when he smiled at her. He was a few years older than she was, with a touch of gray at the temples of his thick, black hair. Aside from the air of maturity clinging to him, there was little else to betray he was likely in his mid-forties. She gasped when he winked at her. Immediately, she turned her attention back to the line of people in front of them, waiting to board.

Even as she walked forward, she was conscious of the man's eyes lingering on her. It gave her a tingling feeling, to know men still found her attractive, even if her husband didn't.

* * * * *

For the size of the ship, their stateroom seemed small in comparison. Hannah wondered how Morgan would feel about them sharing the small room with the two double beds for fourteen days. The bathroom was tiny, and her daughter had already claimed most of the counter space to spread out her cosmetics and toiletries. The room hadn't seemed so small when she went to the travel agent's office to view the video.

She turned to her opened case on top of the bed closest to the door and began removing items. She glanced up as Morgan came out of the bathroom, wearing a pair of white boy-cut swim shorts and a skimpy blue bikini top. She resisted the urge to say anything, reminding herself Morgan was an adult and could wear that if she wanted to.

She took a handful of underwear to the dresser they would be sharing and opened the top drawer. When Hannah turned back, she saw Morgan searching her case for something. "What did you want to do first?"

Morgan looked up. "Huh?"

"I asked what you wanted to do? We could take a pottery class." Morgan grimaced as she returned her attention to her case, making Hannah cringe inside. She firmed her mouth and ignored the reaction as she cast her mind for something to interest her daughter. "Or we could go to the sports deck. They have a four-hole golf course."

"We don't have clubs," Morgan said offhand.

She bit back a sigh of exasperation. "We can rent them."

Morgan found what she was looking for, lifting out a tube of sunscreen, and plopped on her bed. "You hate golfing."

"I don't hate it. I've just never learned how to play well." Charles hadn't spent the amount of time teaching Hannah that he had invested in Morgan's education of the game. She forced a grin. "Maybe you can give your mother some pointers."

Morgan shook her head. "Golf's mine and Daddy's thing, okay?"

Hannah swallowed the lump in her throat and forced herself to nod. "That's fine. It looks like you plan to sunbathe anyway. I'll need to get a new suit first, but—"

"Mother, listen, don't take this the wrong way, but I don't want you to come with me."

Why did her daughter's rejection still hurt? She should be used to it by now. "Okay."

Maybe Morgan heard the catch in her voice, or perhaps she realized she was being a brat. "We will do things together, but I want to explore by myself today."

Hannah nodded, trying to hide her emotions. "That's fine, sweetie."

Morgan's shoulders hunched, and her tone became defensive. "You know, it's not like I wanted a mother-daughter bonding experience or anything. I only agreed to come—"

"Because your father convinced you to indulge me." Hannah strove to keep any trace of bitterness from her tone. She wasn't under any illusion that her daughter really wanted to be here. She also wasn't under the illusion Charles had talked Morgan into it for her sake. No, he just wanted the house to himself for a couple of weeks. She wondered why he bothered. Morgan would be going to the university after the summer, and he wouldn't have to hide his affairs then.

Her daughter shrugged. "Yeah, I guess."

She struck a more cheerful tone. "Well, off you go. I'll finish unpacking for both of us."

Morgan stood up and walked to the door. She paused before turning the handle, and Hannah's heart stuttered with a stirring of hope. Had she changed her mind?

“Don’t worry about unpacking for me. I don’t want you going through my luggage.”

Hannah looked down quickly, but didn’t have to worry about formulating a response, because Morgan left the room without so much as a word of parting.

She stared at the stack of clothes in her case, without truly seeing them for the tears blurring her eyes. The same sense of defeat and anguish that always followed her attempts to reach Morgan welled up. Again, she wondered why her daughter hated her so much.

No, hated wasn’t the right word. Morgan treated her with apathy, not avid dislike. It was difficult to believe the girl had followed her everywhere and cried when she went to work for the first eight years of her life. Now, she was one-hundred-percent a Daddy’s Girl and had no time left for her mother.

Why had she thought going on this cruise would make them closer? Hannah shook her head, sending long waves of blonde hair that held only a trace of gray into her eyes. She didn’t remember her exact reasoning now. She only remembered this was probably her last chance to have a relationship with her daughter, but it seemed doomed to failure.

She firmed her mouth and swiped at her cheeks. Hannah ignored the partially unpacked case as she lifted the small purse she had bought for the trip and slipped the strap around her neck. She wasn’t going to spend her time in the cabin, waiting for Morgan to feel a shred of pity and spend some time with her. If her daughter didn’t want to be with her, that didn’t mean she couldn’t have fun on her own.

Chapter 2

Hannah found herself in the solarium, complete with a glass roof that allowed the sun in to nurture the profusion of plants. It could have been mistaken for a huge atrium, but the deck actually housed a number of shops and other diversions. She wandered through the crowd aimlessly, having no real destination in mind. She was busy people watching, and feeling just a bit envious of those who weren't alone.

Hairs on the back of her neck prickled, and Hannah turned her head, feeling as though someone was watching her. She gasped when she met the eyes of the man she had seen before boarding the ship. Color suffused her cheeks when he gave her a small wave. Heat pooled in her stomach as his eyes examined every inch of her, apparently approving of the white deck pants and yellow T-shirt.

Embarrassed by her own response, Hannah turned her head and ducked into the nearest shop. It was a clothing store, and the attendant behind the register greeted her with a small smile and a friendly, "Hello."

Hannah murmured a response as she made her way to the back of the store, hoping the people milling around would have kept the man from realizing where she went. It was disconcerting to have seen him twice already, and even more distressing to have reacted so juvenily this time, by ducking in here.

She found herself by a rack of swimwear and decided not to waste the opportunity. She flicked through the selections, but nothing stood out until a flash of scarlet caught her eye. She pushed aside the other suits and lifted the hanger to examine the red suit.

A laugh nearly escaped her when she imagined trying to wear such a thing. It was little more than two triangles held up with thin strings. She quickly examined the panties and thrust the hanger back on the rack when she saw it was a thong.

"There's something enchanting about a woman in red," said a deep voice behind her. The accent caused her to shiver, and the rich timbre of his voice made her breathless.

Even before turning, Hannah knew it would be him. It still didn't keep her heart from stuttering when she met his eyes. They were an incredible dark-blue shade. The lines around his eyes gave him character and confirmed he was a few years older than her. His khakis and Polo shirt were casual, and the shirt couldn't hide he had nice definition. His hair was just as thick and shiny as it had appeared in the sun, and the silver at his temples made her want to run her fingers through it.

She actually brought her hand up an inch or so before getting hold of herself. What was she thinking? She cleared her throat and tried to remember how to present a business-like façade. "Red isn't my color."

He lifted a brow. "That can't be true. Red must surely complement your bright blonde hair and stunning green eyes."

She shook her head. "Even if weren't the wrong color, it's not my style."

"It could be." There was a note of gentle coaxing in his tone as he lifted the hanger. "You would be beautiful in this."

His eyes were too enchanting for Hannah to maintain her cool, distant front. A small laugh escaped her. "I'm too old to wear something like that."

"Perfection knows no age," he whispered.

She shivered again, at his voice, and the way his fingers rested lightly against one of the straps. She could easily imagine him undoing that string and letting the top fall from her, before his hands took the place of the bikini top. Once again, she cleared her throat. "Thank you, but I really couldn't. For one thing, my daughter would be mortified."

He looked surprised. "What child will notice? She can't be more than five or six."

Although she suspected his words were designed to curry favor, she couldn't help being flattered. "She's twenty."

He nodded. "She is your stepdaughter."

Hannah shook her head. "No."

His brow furrowed. "You were young and impressionable. He was an older man, wasn't he? Her father must have dazzled you with his charm and stolen you from the cradle."

She couldn't hold back a laugh that sounded almost like a giggle. Good Heavens, was she flirting with him? "I was twenty-two when she was born."

With a decisive nod, he pushed the hanger into her hand. "Then you definitely must buy this."

Reflexively, Hannah grasped the hanger. "Why?"

His grin spoke of more than amusement. It seemed to whisper words of them making love in soft, warm sand. "To remind you of the girl you were. She thought nothing of wearing a bikini like this."

She frowned. "How do you know?"

He lifted a hand to push the hair off her face. "I can see a ghost of her in your haunted eyes."

She moved away from his hand, not certain if she was disconcerted by his touching her, or by his perceptive words. "I really don't think I should."

"Let me be your guide in this matter. I have an eye for color and design. It's a must in my business."

She brought the bikini closer to eye-level, more in an attempt to evade his gaze than a desire to study it. She knew what it looked like, and suddenly, she could picture herself in it. Not in the perfect young body she once had, but in the one she had now,

complete with minor sagging, a bit of cellulite, and a stomach that had long ago given up on having a six-pack of abs. Why shouldn't she? "All right, I will."

Before she could talk herself out of it, Hannah marched to the register, conscious of the presence of the man walking behind her, just close enough to make her aware of his body heat, but not so close as to be improper.

The girl behind the register rang it up quickly, saying, "I wish I could wear this. It's lovely."

"Yes." Hannah handed over her credit card, not feeling even a twinge of remorse at the exorbitant price of the suit. Charles could afford it, and he had likely spent much more on his string of girlfriends than this one suit cost.

Once the bikini was in the bag, Hannah left the store, with the man following her. She wondered how she would get rid of him, and then wondered if she really wanted to.

He paused a few feet from the entrance of the store, but out of the flow of foot traffic. "Are you suffering from seasickness?"

She shook her head. "I thought I might though." She lifted the small purse threaded around her neck and opened it, searching for the blister pack of tablets she had tucked inside. "I have some Dramamine—"

"Don't trouble yourself to search. I am not ill. I merely wondered if you would accompany me to brunch."

She hesitated, wavering. She really wanted to, but common sense told her to return to her cabin and avoid this man. He could be dangerous to her ordered existence. "I hadn't planned to eat yet."

"The fruit bar is supposed to be excellent, if you only want something light."

She looked up, meeting his persuasive eyes. Coupled with his voice, she found her resistance crumbling.

"Unless you have plans to meet your daughter? I do not want to intrude."

"No, I don't have plans with her today." What harm could there be in having lunch with the man? "Thank you, Mr. —"

He extended a hand, enveloping hers. "I am Lukas Pretorius."

She lifted a brow. "That's an unusual name."

He inclined his head. "I hail from South Africa, with Danish roots."

"Oh."

"Do you have a name?" As he asked, he lightly stroked her palm.

Hannah couldn't seem to draw in a deep breath as he caressed her hand and kept those entrancing eyes locked on her. "Hannah," she finally managed to say, with a slight squeak. She pulled her hand away, and common sense immediately returned. "Hannah Hays."

“Lovely to meet you, Hannah. I dreaded coming on this cruise alone.” He winked at her. “They say people our age are more likely to die in a bank robbery than make new friends.”

Before she could respond, he had taken her arm and tucked it through his, leading her to the dining room where the buffet tables seemed to go non-stop. She gave in and let him take her, while imagining a much more intimate place he could be taking her to instead.

Chapter 3

Morgan was bored with the whole cruise thing already. It didn't seem that much different from the resort Daddy liked to visit each year, except they were stuck on this hulking ship pushed out to sea. At least at the resort, she could rent a car and explore the area.

Of course, there was one nice thing about the ship: She was old enough to gamble, which in itself wasn't that thrilling. Instead, what she found exciting was the man standing beside her at the one-armed bandits in the Royal Casino. Admittedly, he hadn't so much as glanced at her yet, but she had only worked her way to this machine a minute ago, doing so casually, so she could look at him before approaching.

She liked what she saw. He was probably five or six years older than she was, with curly brown hair, a killer tan, and serious brown eyes. His body made her drool, and she struck what she hoped was a sexy pose, thrusting out her chest, as she put a quarter in the slot and pulled the handle.

A squeal of genuine excitement escaped her when the lemons lined up and several quarters dropped. She turned to him. "I won on my first quarter."

"Um hmm." He didn't look at her as he fed his machine.

A twinge of irritation swept through her when he didn't look at her, but she persisted. "How long have you been playing?"

"About an hour," he said, as a few quarters fell from the machine.

His slight English accent warmed her in delicious ways, making her tingle. "Oh? How much have you won?"

He still didn't look at her. "About twenty."

"What did you start with?"

"A dollar."

She interjected a note of admiration into her tone. "Wow. You must be really good at this."

He shrugged.

"Could you give me some advice?" Morgan lowered her voice an octave when she touched his arm. "Maybe show me a few things?"

He turned to her so abruptly their coin cups collided. "I'm not here to play babysitter or flirt with a kid. I just want to relax."

Her mouth dropped open. "I wasn't—"

"Yeah, sure." He pulled the lever once more, came up empty, and turned away from her. "Whatever," he said, as he walked to a different bank of machines.

Morgan's face burned with humiliation as she watched him saunter away. What a rude jerk! She wasn't a kid, for one thing, and she could do much better than him. She tossed her hair, shot him a glare, and turned on her heel to leave the casino. She was so angry, she had to share the story with someone. Even her mother would do, and she set off for their cabin, knowing her mom would be there, waiting for her.

* * * * *

A sense of relaxation filled her. It could be the second glass of champagne she'd already consumed, before doing more than nibbling at a plate of fruit, or it could be Lukas. He acted like an old friend, but she knew she'd never had a friend like him before. If she had, Charles might not have seemed like such a catch when they met. Maybe she should feel guilty for that thought, but she was too relaxed to muster the energy required for self-recrimination.

Lukas had nursed a single glass in the course of the few minutes they had been seated, and now set it down. "What brings you on this cruise? Romance, adventure, excitement?"

She giggled, and her cheeks warmed with embarrassment at the girlish sound, but she was too mellow to really care. "Of course not. I wouldn't know any of those things if they hit me on the head."

He practically purred, "That is a pity. You should be showered with romance." He lifted her hand and brushed his lips against her knuckles. Before Hannah could object to the familiarity, he replaced her hand on the table and continued in a different tone of voice. "And every day should be an adventure, whether on a cruise or simply in your own backyard."

She shook her head. "My days are all the same. That leaves little room to breed adventure...or romance." She avoided meeting his eyes by watching the server fill her empty glass for the third time.

He arched a brow. "How are they all the same?"

Hannah lifted her glass. "Suburbia claims another victim." She sipped the champagne, deciding to make three her limit, especially since the clock on the wall showed it wasn't quite two o'clock yet. "In answer to your question, I'm here with my daughter."

He nodded. "As you have mentioned, but I can't help wondering why you don't have a different companion?" He paused to sip his champagne and looked at her peripherally. "Why not her father?"

She had to struggle to keep her expression from betraying the twist of pain caused by Lukas's words. At one time in their marriage, they had planned the vacations they would take when there was more time, more money, and a brighter outlook for

Morgan. Somehow, those trips had never come about. "He's a real estate broker and isn't able to get away easily."

"Did your daughter beg you to take her anyway?"

Hannah hesitated, and then shook her head. "She isn't exactly thrilled about this trip. I think the last thing she wants to do is spend two weeks with her mother on a ship." The champagne loosened her tongue. "I suspect I'll be very bored and very much alone most of the time. This was a stupid idea."

Lukas briefly touched her hand again. "I will make it my personal duty to ensure you aren't bored, Hannah."

She could feel a blush staining her cheeks and dropped her eyes to the array of fruit arranged so appetizingly on her plate. She searched for a reply, one that would be tactful, but clear about her boundaries.

He continued before she could speak. "In that vein, will you be my dining companion this evening?"

She toyed with a chunk of papaya, not able to meet his eyes. "I really shouldn't."

His voice dropped to a low whisper. "That's exactly why you should. It will be fun." He touched her hand again, pausing to run a finger across the rectangular diamond in her engagement ring, nestled snugly below her wedding band. "It will be nothing more than you want it to be. I promise you that."

His tanned fingers stroking her hand and lingering over her wedding band drew her eyes. She eyed it for a moment, assessing the yellow-gold setting and large diamond, searching for a shred of emotion she could attach to it. She came up with none.

Charles had given her this set five years ago, replacing the tiny chip diamond and cheap gold band that had been her original set. The gift had been more obligatory than anything, and, she suspected, also offered as visual proof of his success to the outside world. Even before it came off her finger, the old set had lost its sparkle, in more ways than one.

Feeling a hint of rebellion, Hannah raised her head and met his intense blue eyes. "Dinner would be nice."

A smile brought the creases at his eyes into sharp relief, but it gave him a cheerful look, rather than emphasizing his age. "Excellent. Shall I call for you?"

Hannah imagined the awkwardness of introducing Lukas to Morgan. She squirmed at the thought. "Why don't I—" She broke off as she looked up and saw Morgan marching toward their table. Assailed by guilt, she looked down to make sure Lukas was no longer touching her hand. She shook off the response as her daughter dropped into a seat at the table and didn't even glance at her companion.

"Where were you? I went to the cabin, but you were gone."

Hannah lifted a brow. "You didn't really think I would spend the whole cruise in the stateroom, did you?"

She shrugged. "Anyway, I met the biggest idiot. He told me he didn't want to babysit, and then he..." She trailed off, seemingly realizing there was someone else at the table. She eyed Lukas with an air of distrust before turning to Hannah. "Who's this?"

Hannah cleared her throat. "Lukas, this is my daughter, Morgan. Morgan, this is Lukas Pretorius."

Lukas extended his hand, but Morgan made no move to accept it. She narrowed her eyes. "Where did you meet him?"

"I had the good fortune of meeting your mother in the shops. She agreed to accompany me for brunch." Slowly, he returned his hand to his lap.

"Oh." Morgan glanced at her watch. "I hope you're nearly done. Mother and I have plans."

Hannah frowned. "We do?" She glanced reflexively at her half-full champagne glass, wondering if she had drunk enough to forget their plans.

"We're playing golf. It was your idea, but if you want to blow me off..." Morgan glowered at Lukas before tossing her hair and settling into a sulk.

Her daughter's behavior embarrassed her, and she barely had the courage to glance at Lukas. She was surprised to see a glint of amusement in his eyes.

"I wouldn't want to delay your plans," he said. "Your mother and I can speak more this evening."

She could see Morgan didn't like the sound of that, and Hannah rose quickly, to prevent another outburst. "Thank you for brunch, Lukas."

"It was my pleasure. I'll meet you at your cabin and escort you to the dining hall, if you'll permit me to."

Why not? He had already met her daughter, who seemed determined to present her worst face. There was no reason to have them avoid each other now. "Yes, of course. We're staying in B17."

He nodded. "That's only a deck below me. Will seven-thirty be acceptable? That would allow us time to catch the second show, if you want to?"

She nodded, not committing herself to an extended evening, but not *not* committing herself either. She turned to Morgan. "Are you ready?"

Morgan nodded and rose from the table, following her from the dining room. Hannah headed back to their room, to drop off her new bikini and grab a hat, but she drew up short when Morgan clamped her hands around her wrist a few feet from the door of the dining room.

"Who was that man, Mother?"

"Lukas—"

She rolled her eyes. "What were you doing with Lukas?"

"Having brunch." Hannah had to resist the urge to roll her eyes in retort.

"I mean, why?"

She shrugged. "He offered, and I had nothing else to do."

"Lay a guilt trip on me, why don't you? Just because I did something on my own, that doesn't mean you have to take up with some strange old guy."

"I'm not laying a guilt trip. I'm answering your question." Hannah pulled her wrist from Morgan's grasp. "He seems very nice, and he's not old."

"Whatever. Do you think Daddy would like you having dinner with this *nice* guy?"

Hannah answered truthfully. "Charles wouldn't care."

"Well, I care. You're married."

"I know that," she said with exasperation.

Morgan frowned. "You shouldn't have dinner with him. There should be some older ladies on the cruise. Why don't you make friends with some of them? I think it's better that way."

She drew herself up straight. "I don't think that's better. I don't see any harm in spending some time with another person my age, who happens to be alone on this cruise."

"Mother, you can't—"

Hannah's eyes narrowed. "Listen to me. I don't accept dictates from your father, and I won't from you either. I treat you as an adult, and I deserve...no, I demand you treat me with the same respect."

"I don't think he's trustworthy," she muttered.

"Nonsense. You don't even know him."

"Neither do you," she said with triumph.

Hannah shrugged. "I will become better acquainted with him over dinner."

She shrugged. "Fine, whatever. You're obviously not going to listen to reason."

"Obviously," Hannah said dryly, thinking of her own internal counsel she had ignored more than once today. "Now, did you really want to play golf, or was that just an excuse to end my brunch with Lukas?"

Morgan shrugged. "I guess we could spend a couple of hours together."

Hannah snorted. "You're so generous, darling."

Chapter 4

Morgan slid her feet into matching fuchsia shoes after zipping her dress. Then she sat on her bed and watched Hannah finish getting ready for her date with Lukas, doing nothing to hide her displeasure. "Are you sure you won't change your mind? We could have dinner alone, just the two of us."

Hannah paused in the process of fastening an onyx and silver earring that matched her black and silver floor-length dress perfectly. "No. Are you sure you won't reconsider? I'm certain Lukas wouldn't mind you joining us." She tried to sound confident about that, but after Morgan's earlier behavior, she couldn't be sure how Lukas would react to the idea if she suggested it.

"No way."

"I feel bad about you eating alone."

"Then cancel this guy and eat with me."

Hannah returned her attention to the mirror, striving for a level tone. "I can't do that. I've made plans, and it wouldn't be fair. But if you're concerned about finding a dining companion, please join us."

"Mother, I'm not a wallflower. I'll find somewhere to eat. I'd rather eat alone, naked on the stage, than have dinner with that man."

Hannah took a deep breath and went into the bathroom to apply her lipstick, leaving the door open so she could hear Lukas's knock.

It came just as she picked up a lip brush, and she started to drop it, but heard Morgan stirring.

"I'll get it...on my way out!"

She didn't know whether to shake her daughter for the bratty behavior or laugh about it. She didn't recall Morgan being so immature, but perhaps they hadn't spent enough time in close proximity the past few years for her to get a good sense of her daughter's personality. More likely, Morgan just felt threatened by Lukas's presence.

She heard the door open and Lukas say, "Good evening. These are for you, and these are for your mother." Hannah finished applying a coat of lipstick, and gripping the tube, she leaned sideways, peering around the doorframe, just in time to see Morgan eye a small bouquet of flowers before dropping them in the trash. She winced.

Lukas seemed amused by her reaction. "I take it you don't like sunflowers."

"Mother will be ready in a sec. I'm going now."

Hannah watched her scoop up an evening bag and stride to the opened door, pushing past Lukas. She held her breath when Morgan paused and turned to confront him.

“Mother and Daddy are happy together. Insanely happy.”

“I am pleased. Hannah deserves to be happy.”

Morgan snorted. “You should know that, because you don’t stand a chance of doing...well, whatever it is you’re trying to do.”

Even from her vantage point, Hannah could see Lukas frown. “There has been a mistake—”

“Sure. I’m not as naïve as my mother. I see what kind of man you are. I know what you want from her, but she loves Daddy. He’d rip you apart if you tried anything.”

“You are cynical for one so young.”

“I’m just perceptive. You watch yourself—”

Hannah dropped the lipstick tube and stepped out of the bathroom. “That’s enough, Morgan. Apologize for your rudeness.”

Morgan glared at her before stalking through the door and into the hallway, without looking back.

An awkward silence followed her departure, before Hannah blurted, “I’m sorry. I wouldn’t blame you if you wanted to cancel dinner and run far away from me.”

Lukas chuckled. “I’m not going anywhere.”

Slightly reassured, Hannah took another step toward him. He extended a bouquet of sunflowers and tulips, which she accepted automatically. “I don’t know what’s gotten into her,” she said, returning to the bathroom long enough to run a sink of water and place the flowers in it.

“She’s being protective.” When she returned, Lukas took her arm as they left the stateroom. She listened for the click of the auto-lock on the door before they proceeded to the elevators. “She’s obviously worried about my evil intentions.”

Hannah slanted a look at him as they stepped onto the elevator. “Are they evil?” He looked down at her, and she realized how tall he was—a good five inches taller than her own five-nine.

“Not evil, but not completely innocent,” he admitted, with a wolfish grin.

The elevator opened on the dining deck before Hannah could process his honest answer and form a reply. “You know I’m married,” she said, as they walked down the hall to the dining room.

“Yes, and it is a pity.” He seemed completely sincere, without an ounce of his jovial charm.

She didn’t have a chance to reply as a host directed them toward an intimate table for two. Hannah knew Lukas must have arranged for them to be one of the few couples

not seated at the larger tables. It wasn't until the wine steward filled their glasses and left that she was able to reply. "I would like to be your friend, Lukas."

He smiled at her. "I'd enjoy that."

She took a sip of the robust red wine for courage. "But that's all I'm interested in."

He sighed. "I know." He raised his glass. "To friends."

She clinked her glass against his and let some of her tension drain away. She sensed being Lukas's friend would require a delicate balance between friendly feelings and more-than-friendly feelings on both their parts, but she didn't feel the urge to run away. She tried to imagine Charles's reaction, but all she could see was a lipstick stain on his collar and hear the breathless voice of his current flame ringing in her ears.

With determination, she set aside the thoughts circling her head. "Are you ready to join the line?"

He got up first to pull out her chair, and then placed a hand lightly in the small of her back as they walked to the line for the salad bar. Hannah tried not to revel in the warmth of his hand through the silk of her dress, but it was difficult not to enjoy the simple contact. Her life had lacked any kind of warmth for much too long.

* * * * *

Morgan gnashed her teeth as she watched Pretorius put his hand on her mother. She slipped into line behind them, bypassing a pair of elderly couples who glared at her and whispered about rude children.

She maneuvered herself directly behind her mother just as Lukas said something amusing that made Hannah laugh and lean against him. She cleared her throat and was satisfied by the way that they broke apart like guilty teenagers. "Enjoying yourselves?" she asked sweetly.

Hannah's reply was bland. "So far. Did you find somewhere to sit?"

Morgan almost changed her mind about joining them, but couldn't bring herself to spend the next hour in the company of that man. "Yes. The host seated me at one of the larger tables. There are several people around my age sitting there." She turned her gaze on Pretorius. "A couple of the girls have their mothers with them, and those women are single."

Lukas didn't reply.

"I'm glad you're making friends too." When Hannah turned her back on her daughter, her determination to ignore all of Morgan's counsel, just so she could pacify that man she had no business being with in the first place, became clear. Morgan tossed her hair, glaring at her mother's back. What would Daddy say about Mother's new friend?

She stood behind them without saying anything else, waiting impatiently as they made their selections from the salad bar and strolled back to their quiet table, walking much closer than they should. Morgan turned her head to follow them, until her eyes locked with the man who had insulted her earlier in the day. He seemed to be eyeing her with interest, and his eyes followed her mother briefly before darting back to her.

Temporarily distracted from her mother's illicit romance, she quickly returned her attention to the selection of fruits and salads, cursorily adding food at will. She returned to her table as quickly as her heels would allow, determined to avoid another confrontation with that rude jerk. The fact that he was right about her flirting made what had happened even more embarrassing. She didn't want to repeat the experience.

Morgan settled at a different seat than she had selected, deliberately turning away from the salad bar, but still at an angle to see what her mother was up to with Pretorius.

She kept her narrowed eyes on them, watching as they clinked glasses. Once they had a sip, he must have said something to amuse Hannah, because she tossed back her hair and laughed. She looked like an old woman trying to be a teenager. Whom was she trying to impress? She writhed with humiliation at the thought of anyone watching her mother behave without a shred of dignity.

Her attention wavered from her mother when someone took the last seat at her table. She bit back a groan when she recognized the man from the casino. Her grimace turned to a frown of puzzlement when he smiled at her. She glared in return. "What are you doing here?" She wasn't aware of the shrill note in her voice until a couple of her dining companions turned to look at her. She averted her gaze.

He gestured to his plate of salad, as one of the staff of servers approached their table. "I'm having dinner."

"There are plenty of tables elsewhere. You wouldn't want to have to baby-sit during your meal."

He shrugged. "The host seated me here."

She looked away from him as the server, wearing a crisp white jacket with the cruise line's insignia on the breast and sleeves, said, "Our entrees this evening are dill salmon in butter sauce, broiled lobster, or filet mignon. What will you have?" He focused his attention at the other end of the table, working his way toward Morgan.

When the server looked at her, she opened her mouth to ask for salmon.

The man cut her off. "We'll both have the salmon."

She resisted the urge to change her order. That would be childish, and she loved salmon. Still, she bristled at his presumption. Once the server left, Morgan leaned toward him. "How dare you order for me?"

He gave her a crooked grin. "I ordered the right thing, didn't I? I saw you blink when he mentioned salmon. I knew that's what you wanted. Come on, admit it."

She pursed her lips, refusing to answer. "You had no right. I could be allergic to seafood."

He glanced pointedly at the shrimp on her plate. "Try another one, sweetheart."

"I don't like pushy men ordering for me. And don't call me sweetheart."

It was his turn to lean in closer. To anyone glancing their way, they would see a couple engaged in intimate conversation. Morgan shivered at the thought, but tried to school her expression into one of aloofness.

"If I had responded differently to your flirtations, you wouldn't mind if I called you sweetheart." He didn't bother to hide his arrogance. "We wouldn't even be here. We'd be in my cabin, having dinner in bed."

She recoiled from him, mentally blocking the way her body responded to the mental image his words inspired. "You're unbelievable. I wasn't flirting with you, and I certainly wouldn't have gone to bed with you."

He shrugged, but his expression showed he didn't believe her. "I guess we'll never know, since I can't change my response."

"Trust me. It wouldn't have happened."

He ignored her interruption. "All I can do is apologize for my rebuff. Since boarding, it's been a never-ending stream of desperate women throwing themselves at me." He gave a mock shudder. "Some are old enough to be my mother."

She feigned sympathy, making no attempt to hide how false the emotion was. "Oh, you poor thing."

His eyes narrowed, but he smiled. "Can I get a second chance?"

With a small smile of her own, Morgan grasped the glass of chilled fruit juice as she pushed away from the table. She gained her feet about the time she dumped the glass over his head. "Not on your life, *sweetheart*." To a chorus of gasps from those seated at the table, but a strange silence on his part, she turned and strode from the dining room, so upset she didn't even turn back to see what her mother was doing.

* * * * *

"Tell me more about you," Lukas said, as the server placed a steaming lobster before him.

Hannah paused in the act of cutting into her salmon, shaking her head. "We discussed me earlier. It's your turn."

He laughed. "Fair enough. What would you like to know?"

She shrugged. "Everything." Was her voice just a shade too intimate for the response? She quickly asked a question to cover her disquiet. "Why are you here? Romance? Adventure?"

He squeezed her hand. "Good karma or incredible luck, depending on your point-of-view."

She knew she should pull away, but couldn't make herself move her hand. "Seriously."

"I hate to fly, but I have to make a delivery in San Diego in two weeks. I was in Miami making a different delivery, so I seized the chance to avoid a flight. I saw a billboard for this cruise line, and they had an itinerary that suited my needs perfectly."

She tried to concentrate on each breath she drew in and released as Lukas brushed his thumb lightly across the back of her hand. "What sort of delivery?" In an effort to project an air of normalcy, she reached for her glass of wine and took a sip.

"I am delivering a commissioned order. My family owns several mines – diamonds, precious gems, and gold."

She choked on the wine, and her face turned red from lack of air. Lukas released her hand to tap lightly on her back. When her breath returned, she wiped her mouth before repeating, "Your family *own* mines?"

He nodded. "We have several holdings in South Africa. One of my brothers manages the excavation, as did our father, and the other handles security, along with his son. My sister and I assumed Mother's role when she retired."

"What do you do?"

Lukas pushed up the sleeve of his gray dinner jacket to show her his cufflink. Hannah's mouth dropped open at the intricate abstract design etched into the gold, surrounding the initials L.P. Two emerald chips formed the periods between the initials.

"We design jewelry. I've always had a flair for design, and it was the only aspect of the business that interested me."

Hannah nodded. "Did you design that?"

"Yes."

"It's lovely."

"Thank you, but it can't compare to you." He winked before continuing. "Father died ten years ago, and Mother decided to retire three years ago. She handed the company over to us. While my brother concentrated on our commercial accounts, I decided to expand our design division. We now provide jewelry for one hundred chains around the world, and we also design exclusive pieces for those who can afford it." There was no false modesty in his voice or expression.

"What were you doing in Miami?"

He looked around and lowered his voice before answering. "A certain politician has a young lovely. He wanted something equally lovely to give her. I was dropping off his order."

Her eyes sparkled at his secretive air. "I suppose you have to be discreet sometimes."

"Of course."

"Do you make all the deliveries?"

He shook his head. "No. Most, especially the bulk diamonds used by other designers, go through insured mail. A few clients insist on a person-to-person transfer. I actually have several meetings in California, so it will be no trouble to deliver the item to the customer in San Diego."

"It must be exciting."

Lukas shrugged. "That's not the word I would use. It can be dangerous. I must always be wary of thieves and liars." He frowned. "I don't enjoy having to look over my shoulder. I usually prefer to leave the deliveries to my brother's security team, but one of the clients in California insisted a member of the family make the delivery." He grinned, chasing away his melancholy air. "My brother asked me to make the American deliveries this time. I suppose I'm the most dispensable."

Hannah didn't share his lighthearted mood. She scanned the dining area. "Are you in danger here, even on this ship?"

"Everywhere, my dear. There are ruthless men and women who live quite comfortably by robbing companies such as mine. Diamonds and precious gems are easily fenced, and there is usually less risk involved than robbing a bank, for example."

She leaned closer, not even conscious in the shift of her posture. Without thought, she gripped his hand. "Aren't you afraid?"

He gave her a solemn look. "I am always cautious and sometimes alarmed, but I can take care of myself. One must in my business." He squeezed her hand. "Don't let this frighten you, Hannah. We're in no danger right now. As of yet, I've seen no evidence that there will be any peril on this cruise."

She couldn't help one more glance over her shoulder before lifting her fork to eat. Despite Lukas's sanguine assurance, she couldn't prevent a dart of apprehension, imagining there was a jewel thief hiding somewhere among the patrons in the dining room or on the ship. What worried her more than the possibility of someone robbing Lukas was that he could be hurt in the process. Her concern surprised her. She shouldn't care so much about someone she hardly knew. Those emotions would too easily take her beyond the friendship she felt safe with, to a place she shouldn't think about going.

Chapter 5

After her confrontation with the man in the dining room, Morgan wandered the ship aimlessly, finally ending up on the top deck, letting the sea air blow through her hair, after she released the clip and let it fall free. She was doing her best not to think of anything when she heard footsteps behind her.

She didn't expect trouble on the ship, but growing up in Miami had taught her to be cautious when she was alone in dark places. She whirled around, reaching for the can of mace she kept on a key chain, before remembering it was in her cabin.

She groaned when she recognized the intruder. He had washed the juice from his hair and changed clothes. He had been handsome in the white shirt and dark tie, but was downright breathtaking in the black T-shirt and skintight jeans he now wore. She forced a frown. "Don't you ever give up?"

He looked deadly serious as he stepped up to the railing beside her, into the glow of the light from the nearest deck lamp, reaching into his pocket as he did so. "I need your help, Morgan Hays."

Her eyes widened, and she took a step back, unwittingly revealing her unease. "How did you know my name?"

"I know everything about you that a quick search could turn up." He extracted something from his pocket. "Here."

She eyed the leather case without taking it. "What is it?"

He flipped it open and pushed it into her hand. "It's an Interpol identification."

Morgan looked down at it, examining the picture of him, along with the official badge. It listed his name as Scott Turner. It appeared authentic, but she eyed him skeptically. "You're pretty young to be an Interpol agent."

He shrugged. "I might be, if my uncle hadn't pulled a few strings and brought me into the agency straight from Oxford. He's been in the agency for thirty years."

She tossed her hair. "Is this supposed to impress me?"

He raised a brow, but didn't respond. Instead, he reached into his pocket again, this time removing a black-and-white photo he had carried doubled over. It had seen better days. He held it out to her. "Do you know this man?"

She gasped when she saw the picture. "It's Pretorius. He's my mother's new *friend*." She grimaced when she said the last word.

He sighed. "I was afraid that was him. Lukas Pretorius is a dangerous criminal, Morgan."

Her eyes widened. "What?"

“He smuggles gems.”

As he said it, the words resonated in Morgan, feeling right on a deep level. She had known there was something not right about the guy from the moment she saw him pawing her mother at lunch. “I knew he was slimy.”

“Indeed.” Scott hesitated. “I hate to ask, but I must. Is there any way your mother has knowingly colluded with him?”

She shook her head. “No way. Mother’s never even had a speeding ticket. She has no idea what he is.”

He appeared relieved, but still troubled. “I told the investigator in charge of the case that Hannah Hays was too clean to be involved, but he isn’t so certain.”

She leapt forward. “Mother hasn’t done anything wrong.”

“Yet,” he said softly. “Unfortunately, this is Pretorius’s M.O.”

She frowned. “His what?”

“Modus Operandi. It’s the way he runs his scams.” Scott sighed. “He targets vulnerable women—particularly those who are alone. He sweet talks them and charms them into making the actual drop for him. If his dupe gets caught, he’s already skipped the area before we can catch up to him, and off to another job.”

It made sense. Why else would he be interested in her mother? Hannah wasn’t the interesting sort, as far as Morgan could tell. She was attractive enough for being so old, but why would a man pursue her, especially since she was happily married? “He’s using my mother, isn’t he?”

His brown eyes seemed like melting pools of chocolate, and filled to overflowing with sympathy. “I’m afraid so. He probably hasn’t convinced her to do anything yet, but he’s beginning the process.”

“Mother never should have come on this cruise without Daddy. It’s just like her to do something foolish.” Maybe that was an unfair assessment, but her mother must be naïve. After all, she hadn’t even had a job since Morgan was eight. As a sheltered homemaker, she couldn’t be very wise to the ways of the world. Pretorius probably sensed that about her.

“Will you help me with this?”

She nodded. “I’ll speak with her tonight—”

“No!” He shook his head emphatically. “You can’t do that. I can’t risk having my cover blown, if she doubts you and goes to Pretorius. I’ve been chasing him for two years, and this is my chance to end this. It’s the first time he’s done something risky like taking a cruise. Here on this ship, he has nowhere to go, and only a finite number of places to hide the jewels he recently stole.”

She didn’t give a damn about his cover. Right then, all she cared about was ensuring her mother didn’t get herself into any more trouble. “Mother has to know. You can’t let her get involved with that man without knowing what he is, and what he wants her to do for him.”

He cupped her upper arm. "I hate to use her as bait, but your mother is perfect. She's just the type Pretorius targets."

"I know she'd help you catch him, if she knew what he's doing. I have to tell her."

He shook his head. "If you tell her now, she'll change how she acts around him. He'll suspect she knows and alter his plan. He'll try to slip away at the next port, and I'll lose him again. I need to catch him, with his hands in the mud."

She glowered at him and jerked away from his stroking hand. "I don't care about your career. My mother is what's important here."

"I agree," he said instantly, earning back a bit of her compliance. "I'll admit I would love to be the one to end his thievery. He's been at this nearly two decades, and it would almost guarantee me a promotion, but there are more important things at stake. Pretorius has ripped off a half-billion Euros."

A troubled expression came over his face. "But there's an even more important reason to stop him. The last woman he seduced was killed when the person picking up the jewels became aware of Interpol's presence. He thought she was one of our agents and shot her before we could intercede."

Morgan shook her head. "I definitely have to stop her. I can't let Mother get involved in this." The depth of her feelings surprised her. She knew she loved her mother, but hadn't realized she was so protective of her.

He sighed heavily. "I understand what I'm asking, but I'm begging you not to tell her yet. I swear to you your mother will be safe. I'll stop Pretorius before this ship docks in San Diego, but I can't do it without you. Will you please help me, Morgan?" He dipped his head lower to look intently into her eyes as he made his impassioned speech.

Her eyes widened when she realized just how close their faces were. She felt her neck moving in a nod. She licked her lips. "What do you want me to do?"

Scott seemed on the brink of saying something else. His pupils widened, and his breathing increased. Suddenly, he jerked upright, and his tone was all business again. "I need you to keep tabs on your mother and Pretorius. I want to know where they are at all times. It isn't necessary for you to always be with them, but we have to know what they're doing."

"I can do that."

"Sometimes, we'll need to follow them, and other times...well, we'll handle it as the situation develops." Scott gripped her upper arms in his hands, bending his head again. "I promise, you and your mother will be in no danger. If the situation seems perilous, I'll risk confronting Pretorius to get your mother out of this. For now, I have to be discreet. He knows my face, because we've met before. I'm counting on you, Morgan."

It gave her a warm glow to know she was important to his investigation. Her earlier ire with him evaporated. It was understandable that he had rebuffed her advances. After all, he was on a dangerous secret mission and couldn't afford to lose his edge.

However, now that they would be working in close proximity, maybe she wouldn't be a distraction, knowing his purpose for being there. She gazed into his eyes and let herself imagine where their adventure might take them over the coming two weeks.

* * * * *

Hannah brushed a tear off her cheek as the show she and Lukas had watched ended with the final scene at the port and a gradual increase of the lighting level in the large theater. When she put her arm back on the rest between them to lift her purse, he took her hand. She looked at him, wanting more than anything for him to kiss her right then.

He eyed her with concern. "Are you crying?"

She nodded, sniffing lightly. "It's silly, but the ending was so sad. He told her to go back to her fiancé, and she did."

"He knew she would have a better life with her betrothed."

"Who's to say it would be better?" she snapped. "Why? Because her fiancé was rich and of her social class? How did they know she wouldn't discover in a few years that she had become superfluous? That her husband won't cast her aside and take up with a string of other women?"

Lukas's eyes widened, but he didn't comment as he reached for his handkerchief and offered it to her. It was only when Hannah regained a semblance of control that he said, "You're taking the drama too seriously, I think."

She nodded, keeping her eyes down, too embarrassed to meet his eyes. What was wrong with her? The show had been moving, but not worthy of tears. Perhaps she had just identified too much with the main character, who had indulged in a shipboard romance, but returned to the life waiting for her because it was expected, not because it was what she wanted. "I'm sorry to be melodramatic and act like a ninny."

He put an arm around her shoulders, giving her a half-hug. "Never apologize for your emotions, *waardevol*."

"I'm not accustomed to sharing. Charles got tired of my tears when Morgan—" She looked at him. "What did you say?"

"*Waardevol*. It's Dutch for precious."

She smiled, charmed by him anew.

"I could also call you *deftig*," he whispered.

"What is that?"

"Afrikaans. It means beautiful." He glanced around the nearly emptied theater. "Shall we go?"

She got to her feet, making no effort to free her hand from his as they left their row and walked up the aisle, toward the exit. "How many languages do you speak?"

“Five-and-a-half,” he said, as they waited for two couples in front of them to leave through the exit. One of the women was fussing with her shawl and blocking the doorway.

She laughed. “What’s the half?”

“Japanese. I’ve studied it twice as long as any other language I’ve learned, but know only half as much.” He flashed her a grin.

She returned it. “And the others, besides Dutch and Afrikaans?”

He didn’t answer until he had navigated them through the crush of people milling about the hallway. “English, French, and Spanish.”

They stopped beside a smaller crowd waiting for the elevator.

“Where did you learn so many languages?”

He shrugged. “From my education and travels.”

They entered the elevator, squeezing in between two other couples. It was so crowded Hannah had to stand pressed against Lukas—or so she told herself. “I never had time to learn a second language.” But had she? What had she done with herself the last ten years, once Morgan had returned to school after her treatments proved effective, but Charles asked her not to come back to the office? She remembered her days being full, but couldn’t recall what she had done to fill them.

He put his arms around her waist as he leaned forward. He dipped his head, and his breath whispered against her ear. “I will teach you.”

She tilted her head to look at him, saying softly, “I don’t think I could learn a new language in two weeks.”

Lukas sighed, but didn’t reply.

They both jerked as the woman standing on their left accidentally bumped Lukas’s arm. She blushed. “I’m sorry. It’s just so crowded in here.” The woman appeared to be in her early sixties.

“None of the others seem to have a problem,” said her male companion, of similar age. “You’re clumsy, Helen. Always have been.”

Helen’s blush intensified, and she apologized again.

Hannah smiled at her. “I think if men had to balance in heels, they might have more accidents too.”

The other woman laughed, but stifled it quickly, shooting a glance at her glaring companion. The elevator stopped at one of the decks, and more than half the passengers got off. When the doors closed again, Helen asked, “How long have you been married? Robert and I are celebrating our thirty-fifth anniversary.”

Hannah opened her mouth to explain, but closed it without saying anything. With Lukas’s arms still around her, though there was no need to stand so close now, how could she say they weren’t married, especially when Helen’s eyes darted to her wedding ring?

"Twenty years this month," Lukas said smoothly.

The older woman's eyes misted. "I thought you might be celebrating your anniversary too. A cruise is so romantic, isn't it?"

"Yes," Hannah agreed quickly, as the elevator stopped at their floor.

"Perhaps we could—" Helen began.

"It was lovely meeting you," Hannah said, cutting her off, as she stepped off the elevator. She didn't want to be rude, but the last thing she wanted was an invitation to spend more time with that couple, having to pretend she and Lukas were married. She might like the pretense too much.

Once the doors closed behind them, she laughed. "You're a wicked man, Lukas, telling her we're married."

He grinned. "What else could I do?"

She shrugged, having faced the same dilemma. "It might be uncomfortable if we see them again, or if I'm with Morgan and run into them."

Lukas had turned left to escort her back to her room, but he paused and turned her to face him, with her back against the wall. "It's a large ship. I doubt you'll see them again." He lowered his head, bringing his mouth almost close enough for their lips to touch. "I know how you can avoid them, of course."

She struggled to draw in a breath with her heart racing in her chest. "How is that?" She sounded as breathless as he made her feel.

"You can hide in your stateroom for the rest of the cruise."

She shook her head. "I'd be bored."

Lukas chuckled, but there was a smoky note to it. "I can promise you wouldn't be bored, Hannah."

She locked eyes with him, feeling herself drawn into his blue depths. Her heart beat frantically, and every nerve ending in her body tingled with anticipation. Her nipples hardened, pushing against the fabric of the black and silver dress. She would have stood there all night, just staring into his eyes and savoring the feel of his body against hers, if they hadn't heard a laughing couple coming down the hall toward them.

Quickly, they broke apart, and the couple turning the corner moved past them without a glance in their direction. Hannah took advantage of the distraction to take a couple of deep breaths and try to regain control. She was much too close to asking Lukas to join her for the night, and she knew she couldn't do that. Her marriage was a pale shell of what it used to be, but she couldn't allow herself to give in to temptation. Besides, there was Morgan to think of.

Without speaking, Lukas walked her the rest of the way to her cabin. She fished her swipe card from the bag and started to unlock the door when he touched her hand. She looked up and was lost as his head descended. She closed her eyes and anticipated the first touch of his mouth on hers.

Instead, his lips brushed against her cheek. "Good night, *waardevol*," he whispered, before lifting his head.

"Good night," she managed to say as she fumbled to unlock the door. The knob turned after she got the card in the slot. Lukas turned away when she stepped through the door. She watched him until he turned the corner of the hall and disappeared from sight.

When she stepped into the cabin, she looked for Morgan, but her daughter wasn't there. She wasn't worried, since it wasn't even midnight yet, and Morgan hadn't had a curfew since starting her senior year of high school. Although her original goal of the cruise had been to spend more time with her daughter, she now hoped Morgan had found some friends to spend time with. Was that selfish? Yes, but maybe it was her turn to be a little selfish.

Hannah went into the bathroom, closing the door behind her. She stared into the mirror, meeting her shining eyes. For the first time in a long time, she didn't focus on the crows' feet forming at the corners of her eyes, or worry about her skin's elasticity. Instead, all she saw was the flush of excitement on her cheeks and spark of desire in her eyes.

It wasn't just her eyes. Her body thrummed with desire. She was so unaccustomed to being horny that it took her a while to realize her pussy was slick with arousal. She unzipped her dress and started to turn away from the wanton sight in the mirror, but twisted her head back as the dress fell to the floor. She found her own image captivating. The way her breasts rose and fell with each sharp breath drew her eyes.

The lace chafed her sensitive nipples, and Hannah unfastened the bra, letting it fall to the floor without regard. She eyed her breasts dispassionately, trying to determine if they were the breasts of a forty-two-year-old housewife. Admittedly, they weren't perky, but they were still firm, with little sag. The areoles were an inviting dusky pink, and her nipples were large and rosy. Most men would want to suck on them.

It wasn't just any man's head she pictured at her breast, when she closed her eyes. It wasn't her husband's either. She saw Lukas's dark head nestled there. It was his raspy tongue she could almost feel laving the sensitive buds. Her nipples tightened in response to her mental image, and her pussy spasmed. She was barely aware of throwing back her head and arching her back, offering her breasts to her imaginary lover.

When he failed to accept the invitation, Hannah opened her eyes, forced to admit she was alone. She tried to return to a dispassionate assessment of her body, striving to see what was so unattractive to Charles when he saw her naked that made him not want her anymore.

She cupped her breasts in her hands, deciding they were almost as firm as they had been when she was younger. Her hard nipples pushed against the pads of her fingers when she caressed them lightly before slipping her hands downward. Her eyes followed the line of her arms. Her upper arms weren't bulging with muscles, but they

were lean and trim. Maybe her hands weren't as young and supple as they had been, but they still had long, tapered fingers, tipped with well-groomed nails.

Her eyes focused where her hands had settled in the waistband of her panties. She gave her stomach a cursory assessment. It was softer than in her youth, but she wouldn't consider herself chubby.

For the moment, her eyes skipped over her hands and panties, instead gazing at her thighs. They were thicker, with a little cellulite, but weren't deformed or repulsive in any way, at least to her. The mirror ended mid-thigh, and she was forced to stop the evaluation or confront the one area she had avoided.

Hannah watched her hands push down the lacy black panties. She bent at the waist to remove them completely, kicked the dress out of her way, and stood up straight, with her thighs parted slightly. With a shaking hand, she flipped on the light switch controlling the bulbs around the mirror, bringing harsh illumination to her body. There was no hiding her flaws in this light.

But she had already confronted them and could see nothing that would explain Charles's lack of desire for her. With an air of seriousness, but a quiver in her belly that betrayed her arousal, Hannah pushed aside the curls shielding her pussy and parted the lips. Her clit glistened with moisture, erect with arousal, begging for a gentle touch.

When she slid a finger across her clit and down her pussy, she shot a glance at the closed bathroom door, listening for the outer door to open. A flash of guilt assailed her as she held her clit between her thumb and forefinger. She used her other hand to click the flimsy lock, and then propped one foot on the closed toilet seat. She was still able to watch her every movement in the mirror.

It almost seemed like a foreign hand manipulating her clit. The light-pink nails almost belonged to someone else as they pressed lightly against the swollen bud. The fingertips spreading moisture from her opening could have been anyone's. The hand didn't feel connected to her body.

The pussy did though. She could feel every slight vibration, spasm, tightening, and release as she masturbated. How long had it been since she touched herself like this? Years. It must have been. Somehow, she had convinced herself she didn't need sexual release as her sex life with Charles faded to nothing. She had told herself a woman her age didn't indulge in self-pleasuring.

She bit back a groan when she pushed two fingers into her opening, while still stroking her clit with her thumb. Convulsions were starting deep inside her, and she was tempted to pause, to let the momentum die and build up again, so the release would be even more intense.

Instead, Hannah thrust her fingers in and out, wincing the first time at how tight she was. Her clit pulsed with each thrust, and she pushed lightly against it, feeling its throb of resistance. She moaned, this time not attempting to stifle the sound. She was alone, and there was no one to object to her pleasure.

But she wished she weren't alone. Hannah held her breath as the convulsions in her pussy increased in strength and frequency. She could feel her orgasm approaching and closed her eyes, thrusting hard into her own pussy as it swept over her. At the moment when her climax peaked, her fingers became Lukas's cock, thrusting in and out of her with an intensity she had never before experienced. She let out a cry of release as tears formed behind her eyes.

She fell to her knees and let her forehead rest against the lip of the bathroom counter. Her hand remained in her pussy, and it seemed like several minutes before the sensation of the hard tile against her knees penetrated the afterglow from her release. Her legs were shaky when she finally stood up, clutching the counter for support.

She met her eyes in the mirror and was almost uncomfortable with how sexually sated she appeared. Was that woman really she? Had she finally come back to life?

Chapter 6

Hannah took advantage of Morgan's trip to the bathroom to change into the red bikini and quickly hide it with a terry cover-up. She wasn't ashamed of wearing the garment, but she figured it would be more difficult for her daughter to make a big deal out of it when they were at the pool, surrounded by people, instead of in their cabin. And she didn't doubt Morgan would have at least a few comments.

When Morgan came out in a blue one-piece, Hannah asked, "Are you sure you want to come with me today? I'm sure there are other things you must want to do besides hang out with your mother."

"I'm sure," she muttered. "There's not much else to do. The ship is dead."

She didn't seem to want to come, which made Hannah think her daughter had shadowed her the last two days just to ensure she saw very little of Lukas. If that was her plan, it was working. She had seen him only in passing. While her head knew that was the smart way for it to be, her heart and body clamored for more time with him. "Okay."

They walked to the elevator and took it up to one of the exterior pools. The place was crowded, with every deck chair taken, and the pool was filled to capacity on the shallow end. Fortunately, not many people had ventured into the nine and twelve-foot area, so Hannah and Morgan spread their towels on the deck. Within seconds, a uniformed waiter approached with a tray of tropical drinks.

She selected an iced fruit juice and didn't say a word in protest when Morgan chose a Mai Tai. She was less than eight months from legal age anyway, and Hannah wanted to give Morgan the benefit of the doubt that she was close to being a mature adult.

She took a deep breath before untying the terry wrap and dropping it beside her towel. She struggled to keep a cool façade when she heard Morgan's indrawn breath.

"Mother!"

She tried to summon a bland smile. "Yes?"

Morgan's eyes had bugged out. "What is that thing you're wearing?"

"It's a bikini." She stretched out on her stomach on the towel after replying. She rummaged in her beach bag for sunscreen and tried to project a nonchalant air. She resisted the urge to tug at the thin strip of material resting in her cleft that passed for a back to the bottoms of the suit.

Morgan shook her head, clearly disbelieving. "I know, but why are *you* wearing a bikini—especially that one? It's a thong." She screeched the last few words.

"It's pretty, and I liked the color." She had to admit she wasn't too fond of the thong buried between her buttocks though. No wonder she had given up the style years ago.

"You're too old –"

"I'm not," Hannah said sharply, cutting off her tirade. "I used to wear a G-string when I was younger."

Morgan shuddered. "That's just gross."

Hannah laughed. "Your father didn't think so." A dart of sadness pricked her at the words, as she remembered those days, but the accompanying pain was a dull ache, not a stab of fresh pain. She had been moving toward accepting the death of her marriage for a long time now. The question in front of her was whether she was willing to have so active a role in its demise by having an affair. Her daughter's voice distracted her from those melancholy thoughts.

"I can't believe you're wearing that. People will see."

She shrugged. "So? I have a decent body. I still have firm enough breasts to show a respectable amount of cleavage, and my butt isn't sagging around the thong." She winked at her daughter, delighting in Morgan's disgusted expression. "My cheeks just need a little sunlight, which I plan to get today." She dropped her light tone, meeting her daughter's gaze, straightening her spine proudly. "I'm not ashamed of my body or this suit."

"Well, I am, okay?" She stood up, still appearing disgusted. "I'm going swimming."

"Have fun," Hannah said in a lilting tone and lifted the paperback she'd brought with her. She suppressed a giggle until Morgan was diving into the pool, but then it escaped. She indulged for a few seconds before containing her mirth. She had enjoyed teasing her daughter, but she had been completely serious about having no shame wearing the red suit. She was thankful Lukas had insisted, because she wouldn't have had the nerve otherwise.

"Alone at last," said a voice behind her in a low whisper.

She turned her head and smiled at Lukas. "Hi. I wasn't sure if you would get my message to meet me here." She couldn't help noticing how nice his legs were in the Bermuda-style trunks he wore. They were tanned and muscular, just like his bare chest and still-flat stomach. He had a smattering of dark hair across his chest, but wasn't too hairy.

He crouched beside her. "I feel like I'm sneaking around behind your daughter's back."

So did she, and his perceptiveness disconcerted her. "I know."

"As we've done nothing inappropriate, I don't see the need." Lukas shrugged. "To be honest, you're both adults, so I don't like having to hide our...friendship."

A memory of masturbating while imagining him making love to her brought color to Hannah's cheeks and had her thinking her feelings for him were more than friendly.

She tried to force a smile. "Honestly, I'm not trying to hide anything from her. It's just...she's not reacting well to our friendship."

He brushed back a tress of hair that had escaped the twist she had earlier confined it in. "I understand."

"It's been so long since we've been close that I find myself always trying to accommodate her, hoping she'll finally forgive me." Hannah winced at the bald honesty in her statement. She hadn't planned to reveal so much.

He frowned. "What are you seeking atonement for?"

She looked down, realizing she was pleating the pages of the new Nelson DeMille beyond recognition. "It sounds silly, but I think she blames me for her illness. She was diagnosed with leukemia when she was eight."

Lukas's harsh exhalation announced his shock, but he didn't interrupt with questions.

"It was the most common form, and the doctor caught it early. Her prognosis was good, but it took two years for her to reach remission." Hannah blinked back tears that never failed to form when she remembered those bleak days. "Charles and I decided I would stop selling real estate at our business and stay home to care for Morgan."

She shuddered. "The treatment was almost worse than the cancer. It involved a lot of pain for Morgan, and a strict curtailing of her activities for long periods of time. For more than a year, she was too ill even for home schooling and fell behind..." She trailed off, swallowing the lump in her throat.

He touched her hand. "Surely, she didn't blame you for her having cancer?"

"Maybe. I don't think so." She bit back a sob before continuing. "In her mind, I think the experience became synonymous with me." She glanced up, ensuring Morgan wasn't approaching. When she saw her daughter in the pool talking to a young man with his back to her, she looked back at Lukas. "Charles was no help. He claimed to be unable to cause her any pain. His contribution was to fulfill her every whim. If it was something she couldn't do, I had to be the one to tell her no."

She took a deep breath. "Somehow, by the time it was over, she didn't seem to care for me any longer. She was strictly Charles's girl, and I was left feeling as though I had betrayed her." A sob managed to break through, and she was grateful for Lukas's hand moving in slow circles on her bare shoulder. She drew strength from him. "I think I've been trying to make it up to her ever since, but she doesn't respond to my overtures."

He squeezed her shoulder lightly. "You did nothing wrong, Hannah. You must know that. You did what had to be done, and thank God you could. It sounds like your husband couldn't. That wasn't caring about her. It was selfishness on his part."

Hannah nodded, recognizing the truth in his words. She had known that deep down, but hearing someone else acknowledge it lifted a weight. "I think this is my last chance to salvage a relationship with Morgan, but I'm so tired of being the only one who tries."

"That's understandable." His brow furrowed. "Have you tried not being the one who always makes the effort? Perhaps she takes it for granted that you'll constantly be there, so she feels no need to reconnect with you."

She nodded again. "I'm sure she feels that way." She cleared her throat, feeling a renewed sense of calm. When she looked up at him again, she managed a smile. "I'm sorry to drop this on you. My point was only to explain why I put up with more from my daughter than I should."

He grinned. "I understand. Do you think it would impede your relationship to take a day off?"

She cocked a brow. "What did you have in mind?"

"We go ashore in Aruba tomorrow. I'd hoped you would spend the day with me, if you haven't made plans with Morgan."

She was torn for an instant, knowing her daughter would object, but also knowing it would only be because Hannah planned to spend the day with Lukas. If she told Morgan she was going sightseeing alone, her daughter wouldn't care either way. That decided it. "I'll break it to her gently."

He smiled, causing his blue eyes to darken a shade. "Excellent. I was in Oranjestad a few years ago. I guess we'll see if I remember anything about the city."

"I look forward to it." With a new lightness, freed from some of the tight ball of pain she carried around inside her, she was able to look forward to the prospect with more enjoyment and less guilt or worry.

* * * * *

Morgan had barely surfaced from her dive when she saw Pretorius kneel beside her mother. She swam to the edge and was about to lift herself out when a pair of feet stopped beside her hand. As she looked up, the owner of the feet jumped into the pool beside her and treaded water, careful to keep his back to her mother and Pretorius.

"What are you doing?" he asked in a low, urgent whisper.

"I'm about to go intercede between my mother and that thief."

Scott frowned. "You've been her shadow for the past two days. If you don't let him have the chance to see her, he'll never be able to persuade her to help him."

She glared at him. "I've been thinking. I don't know if she should help—him or you. This is dangerous."

He sighed. "I know. We've been through that. It is dangerous, but I won't let him hurt her. You know I need both of you to catch Pretorius this time. I don't want to see him cause anyone else's death."

“What if it’s my mother who gets hurt?” Morgan’s eyes burned with unshed tears. She tried to dismiss it as the sting from chlorine, but knew it wasn’t just the chemical making her weepy.

“She won’t.” He tilted his head. “Look, I’m sure they’re planning to hook up tomorrow in Oranjestad. Why don’t we follow them discreetly? That way, we’ll know if he’s making progress, but I’ll be close if something goes wrong. Will that be acceptable?”

“I...”

“You know they have to spend some time together. There will be times when it’s advantageous to have him with your mother.” He lowered his voice. “I need to search his cabin, for one thing. You can be a big help to me, Morgan.”

Either he did it deliberately, or the water buoyed him close enough that the hair on his legs tickled her calf. She was suddenly aware of each breath she drew in and released, knowing her breasts were so close to touching his chest. She had to acknowledge he might be using her attraction to him to gain her cooperation, but she didn’t care. When he was near, she couldn’t think clearly. “Okay, but we have to follow them tomorrow. I don’t want Mother hurt.”

He grinned. “Following them in paradise, with you as my partner...I can’t think of a better way to spend a hot, sticky day.” He drew out the words hot and sticky, bringing erotic images to mind.

“Me neither,” she said in a throaty whisper, so low she wasn’t even sure he heard it. It was with a sigh of regret that she watched him hoist himself from the pool and melt into the crowd, all the while keeping his back turned to Pretorius.

She settled on her back, letting the water support her. She knew she should be thinking about her mother’s safety, but right then, all she could imagine was being in Scott’s arms on a beach, lying on sand heated by the tropical sun. The water was a comfortable eighty degrees, but she shivered. Not from cold, but with anticipation.

Chapter 7

Hannah met Lukas on dry land. She hadn't been aware of the subtle difference of traveling on the ship until she stood on solid ground. There was a moment of vertigo that quickly passed. By the time she walked the short distance to join him, she had regained her land legs. She held a large beach bag under her arm. It was only half-full, but she planned to fill it with items from the duty-free shops and the stalls at Schooner Market.

"Good morning." Lukas brushed a kiss on her cheek. "You look lovely."

"Thanks." The dress had been a last-minute purchase in the same shop where she'd bought the bikini. It was several inches shorter than her usual style, ending mid-thigh. The bright-blue background complemented her hair, and the pink and white tropical flowers brought out the color in her cheeks. It was sleeveless and V-necked, showing just a hint of cleavage. With it, she wore white sneakers and ankle socks, hoping she didn't look like an old lady dressing young.

"You look good yourself." The brightly colored Hawaiian shirt looked good against his tanned skin, and the shorts displayed his toned legs. He even had nice toes, peeking out the ends of his sandals.

"Thank you." He put an arm around her waist as they moved through the people milling around the port. "Do you want to start with the Schooner Market?"

"Sure." As they entered the city, Hannah caught her breath. The Netherlands owned Aruba, and the Dutch influence was immediately evident in the capital city, although one couldn't miss the Spanish influences mingled in.

As they moved slowly through the crowd of people, most having come off the *Sea Princess*, Hannah listened to the natives speaking to each other in a language she didn't understand. She moved closer to Lukas, so he could hear her over the babble of the crowd. "Are they speaking Dutch?"

He shook his head. "Most everyone speaks English, but Papiamentu is also common."

Her brow furrowed, and her tongue was clumsy when she tried to repeat it. "Papiamentu? What's that?"

"It's a little bit of everything, really. A hybrid of the native language, Dutch, English, Spanish, and even some French." He grinned. "It's mostly incomprehensible to me."

Hannah didn't respond as they reached the Schooner Market, located on the waterfront. She was too busy taking in the sights. Vegetable and fruit vendors

displayed their wares beside trinket sellers, fishmongers, and stalls stocking native clothing in so many bright colors they should have clashed, but didn't.

The nearest stand sold fruit, and they walked over to examine the local produce. Hannah breathed in the blend of sweet and tart aromas, and her stomach growled, despite a light breakfast less than an hour ago.

The man behind the fruit stand gave her a toothless smile. "Pretty lady has skin like a ripe mango."

She blushed, but couldn't help laughing when he handed her a ripe mango. She wondered how often that tactic worked. She smelled it, but handed it back.

He was undeterred. "Coconut milk will keep your complexion always so lovely."

She and Lukas traded a look. He was grinning too.

The old man pointed to a young boy beside the stand, who hadn't been immediately visible in the bustle. "My grandson will drill the holes for you himself. He is precise."

Lukas nodded. "One coconut please, with two straws."

A cunning look came over the vendor's face. "No straws here. My cousin sells some two stalls down."

Lukas passed over the money for the coconut, knelt down to take it from the youngster finishing up the holes, and took her hand to lead her two stalls down. The vendor was slightly younger, but no less crafty. It was a struggle to restrict their purchase to two plastic straws that resembled pretzels skewered on sticks.

Lukas's good-natured acceptance of the sly con impressed Hannah. She couldn't help comparing how Charles would have reacted. She didn't doubt he would have given the man a lecture about ethics before walking off.

The coconut milk, though warm, was light and refreshing. Hannah couldn't seem to keep her eyes from Lukas's mouth each time he took a sip. She easily imagined it was her nipple he was sucking from, instead of the hot-purple straw. The buds tightened, pressing into the lace of her bra, and she half-hoped Lukas's eyes would move to where they poked visibly against the thin dress. They didn't.

The next stall to catch their attention featured live birds, singing a dissonant chorus. Hannah laughed when a macaw landed on her shoulder and whistled at her. She stroked the bird's soft head, and he flapped his wings, beating one against her neck, before flying back to his perch among the others.

While she paused to admire a black bird with red markings, Lukas stepped closer. "Is Morgan upset that you're spending the day with me?"

Hannah shrugged. "I'm not sure. She didn't say much, and she didn't suggest accompanying us. It was very strange. She didn't even mention Charles, and that's been her favorite refrain since we boarded the ship: 'What would Daddy think?'" She rolled her eyes, having heard the phrase one too many times in the last three days.

Shadows grew in his eyes. "I don't doubt your husband would disapprove of our friendship."

She hesitated. "I don't know." She sighed, thinking Charles had lost the privilege to have an opinion with his first affair. "Why would he?"

"I wouldn't like it if you were my wife." He lowered his voice. "I think you could make me a very possessive man, *waardevol*."

She looked away, not wanting to meet his eyes, lest he see how much she liked the idea.

He touched her shoulder. "What troubles you, Hannah?"

She turned back to him, trying to keep her expression bland. "I was just thinking that he lost the right to have an opinion when he had his first affair." A sharp-edged laugh escaped her.

"Birds bring good luck," said the woman selling the birds, after finishing with a different customer. She seemed unaware of their serious expressions. "That bird ensures his love last long time." She inclined her head in Lukas's direction, but her eyes didn't waver from Hannah's.

She stopped stroking the bird and shook her head. "I can't." She turned away from the stall and waited for Lukas to fall into step beside her. They wandered through the rest of the market, but nothing caught her eyes. He seemed content to stay by her side.

He wore a frown. "Are you certain he has done this?"

She nodded. "Oh, yes."

"But how can you know?"

"It was a suspicion, at first. He worked late, but I couldn't reach him at the office—" She broke off. "Maybe I shouldn't discuss this with you."

He frowned. "Why not?"

"You must admit you aren't objective."

Lukas nodded. "I won't pretend to be, but I promise an understanding ear. I will try not to let my personal feelings color anything I say."

What did it matter who she told? Lukas would never meet Charles, and his presence in her life was temporary. It might feel good to relieve some of her burden. "A while ago, a woman came to me. She told me she and Charles had been having an affair, but he had ended things the night before."

Lukas's arm came around her shoulders. "That must have been terrible for you."

"It was." Her voice cracked. "The funny thing is, it was all very civilized. I even served her tea and offered her Kleenex when she cried."

He shook his head. "Perhaps she was untruthful."

Hannah tilted her head. "I never doubted her. Isn't that strange? I believed her immediately, because I had known he was fucking someone who wasn't me. Knowing who she was made it easier somehow."

“Did you confront him?”

She nodded. “It took two days to get the courage to do it. I didn’t ask him if he had slept with her, and he never denied it. I only asked why he was still with me if he wanted someone else.” Tears came to her eyes, and he stopped walking. After dropping the coconut on the ground, he turned her toward him to hold her in his arms. “He told me it was a fling, that it didn’t matter. I don’t remember him promising never to do it again, but I stayed with him.”

“Why?” Lukas swore. “You deserve so much better.”

“Morgan needed her father, and I guess I was...comfortable.” She lifted her head, swallowing a hiccup. “Isn’t that awful? I put up with it because I was afraid to change things.”

“It’s natural, I think.” His brow furrowed. “He did it again, didn’t he?”

She nodded. “At least three that I know of. Four by now, I’m sure. I found a number in his pocket the day Morgan and I left Miami. I called the woman, and she answered the phone very intimately, thinking I was him.”

“What happened the next time?”

She swallowed the lump in her throat. “I ignored the next incident, but I told him I wanted a divorce after the third woman. He said no.” She blanched, remembering the anger he had displayed on that occasion. In all the time she had known him, she’d never heard him raise his voice, until that night. He had screamed at her and thrown things. He never physically threatened her, but his fury had been enough to intimidate her.

Lukas shook his head. “You accepted this?”

She shrugged. “I was frightened of changing things, and I didn’t want to hurt Morgan.”

He made a low sound in his throat. “I don’t understand your husband. He has a beautiful woman like you, whom he obviously loves, but he still strays. I would never think of—” He shook his head.

Her eyes widened. “What makes you think Charles loves me?”

“He wouldn’t let you leave.”

She wiped away the tears on her cheeks. “I don’t think love has anything to do with it. He doesn’t want to lose what he has. We own the real estate office together, but my father left it to me. I added his name to the deed. The home we own was a wedding gift from my parents. I think he assumes I would try to take everything from him if I divorced him.”

“It would be your right.”

She shrugged. “I don’t care about any of it. I loved selling real estate, but only because I was near him every day. When Morgan went into remission and back to school, he didn’t want me to come back. He said it was because she had gotten accustomed to having me home, but I didn’t believe him. Even then, things were

beginning to fall apart. I didn't want to go back if he didn't want me, and I've lost touch with the office, the employees, and the industry. He can have it."

"And the house?"

She shrugged again. "Morgan will be in the dorms when she goes to college. Now, it holds nothing but painful memories for me."

He lowered his voice as a large group squeezed past them and continued down the road. "It sounds as though you want a divorce, Hannah."

She looked down, trying to hide her confusion. "I don't know. We're barely married anymore, but we've been together since I was eighteen." She lifted her head, meeting his eyes. "That's a long time. More than half of my life. It's a lot to throw away on a gamble." Before he could say anything – perhaps offer words of permanency she wasn't ready to hear – she added, "And there's Morgan to think of. She would be crushed to learn the truth about our marriage and the reason for divorcing."

He seemed about to say something, but then his expression cleared, and he was lighthearted again, although it seemed forced. "You have a lot to think about, but don't waste today with deep thoughts. Shall we go to the museum at Fort Zoutman, and then head out to Haystack Hill to see if we can climb all 562 steps? We could picnic by a divi-divi tree afterward."

She forced back her glum thoughts and mustered a smile. "That sounds great."

* * * * *

Atop Hooiberg, as the locals called Haystack Hill, Morgan watched her mother and Pretorius through a pair of binoculars. The setting sun made it difficult to focus on them, but she didn't miss the quick kiss he stole before feeding Hannah a grape. With a sound of disgust, she dropped the binoculars in his bag and turned to glare at Scott. "Did you see what he did?"

He lifted a brow. "No. You had the binoculars."

She ignored him. "He kissed her! And she let him! How could she let him?"

Scott shrugged. "What's the big deal?"

Her mouth dropped open. "She's my mother, as in, she's married to my father. It's a very big deal to see her cheating on Daddy, especially with a criminal."

His eyes showed a flicker of sympathy. "Yeah, I understand, but at least we know his scam is working. We'll be able to catch him soon, and this will be over for you and your mother."

"I don't know why I'm doing this. I should go down there and tell her who he is."

"Don't be stupid." He didn't attempt to hide his annoyance. "Pretorius is an international jewel thief. If you reveal him for what he is to your mother, one of you will be hurt."

“Don’t talk to me like that.”

“Then stop being so childish. Focus on why we’re here – to stop him, remember?”

“I know why we’re here.” Morgan turned away, hiding her hurt feelings. She had foolishly hoped Scott would view her as more than a means to an end, but having spent the day in his company, without so much as a touch, disabused that notion. He wanted her help, but nothing else.

She jerked with surprise when he put a hand on her shoulder. She turned to him, unable to hide her hurt feelings.

“I’m sorry,” he whispered. “This case has me tense. I’m concerned about your mother, but it terrifies me to think of anything happening to you.”

Her eyes widened. “Me? What would happen to me?”

“Nothing, as long as I can prevent it.” He shuddered. “Still, it frightens me.”

She forgot how to breathe as his arms went around her, drawing her near him. Her eyes widened when his cock pressed against her hip. “Why?” she whispered.

He tilted her head up. “Can’t you guess, Morgan?”

Before she could answer, his lips settled on hers in a hungry kiss. All she could do was part her lips as his tongue entered her mouth. Morgan sensed his urgency, and it ignited an answering spark. Her nipples hardened, and moisture filled her pussy when one of his hands slipped lower, to squeeze her buttocks and press her pelvis against his. She gave no thought to what would come next as she opened her mouth wider, inviting his tongue in deeper.

She blinked when Scott dropped his arms and lifted his head. His harsh breathing was the only indication he had just been kissing her. Disorientation seized her as she tried to figure out why he was no longer holding her.

He answered her unspoken question, whether inadvertently or because he sensed her confusion. “You might not have heard it, but the ship horn honked three times. That means we have forty-five minutes to get back. Your mother and Pretorius are packing up, I think. It’s hard to tell with the sun setting.”

She nodded, discreetly wiping her mouth. Morgan cleared her throat and took a deep breath. “We should get back too. I don’t want to miss the ship and have her alone with Pretorius.”

“That bastard isn’t escaping me this time,” Scott said, reaching down for his bag. He started down the steps, but paused when he realized she hadn’t gathered her things. “Are you coming?”

Temporary paralysis broken, Morgan knelt down to lift her bag and hurried down the steps after him, wishing vaguely that they hadn’t climbed to the top just to observe her mother and Pretorius.

Chapter 8

While Pretorius and Hannah dined together the following evening, Scott seized the chance to search his cabin. Morgan wasn't feeling too sure of the plan when she followed him down the hall to stateroom A2, one of the exclusive suites booked by the wealthy. They had the hallway to themselves while he worked at the lock with a device that looked like a gun. He had removed it from a small leather toolkit and inserted the probe extension into the keyhole.

It made a clicking sound each time he depressed the trigger. Morgan scanned up and down the corridor constantly, expecting someone to catch them at any moment. "Are you sure about this?" she hissed.

"Yes," he said, sounding impatient. "If we find the diamonds, I can arrest him and get your mother out of this situation."

"Will the evidence be admissible without a search warrant?"

Scott made a low sound of triumph when the lock opened. He entered the cabin and pulled her in behind him, closing the door except for a crack before answering. "You watch too many TV shows, Morgan. If I know where he has the diamonds, I can figure out the best way to trap him. If the diamonds are here, I won't be taking them tonight." He flipped the wall switch, illuminating one of the lamps by the large bed, before moving away from her.

Morgan glanced around the room, awed by its luxury. In addition to the huge bed, there was a built-in entertainment center with a big-screen TV and DVD player, a state-of-the-art sound system, and a wet bar against one wall. A door hid the bathroom, but she guessed it wasn't like the dinky one she was sharing with her mother. "I guess being a jewel thief pays well."

Scott nodded, but wasn't really paying attention to her, as evidenced by his intense scrutiny of the pictures on the wall. He did turn briefly to say, "Position yourself so you can see out the crack. Watch for Pretorius. We can't let him catch us here. This search is invalid, as you speculated."

She frowned at his admission. In movies, the cops were the good guys. It disturbed her that he was willing to bend the rules to catch Pretorius, even if his goal was admirable. "Doesn't it bother you to do it this way?" she whispered.

He paused in the process of removing an oil painting of a Victorian lady hiding her face behind a large hat to look at her. "What?"

"This seems wrong to me, coming into his room and searching without permission."

He snorted. "Let me tell you something, Morgan. In the real world, law enforcement personnel can't always play by the rules. I want to find those diamonds and seize Pretorius. If I have to do it this way, I can live with that, knowing I've saved lives he might endanger in the future – including your mother's."

As instructed, Morgan scanned the hallway, but her attention for the task was cursory. "I understand what you're saying, but I'm not really comfortable with this."

He wrenched the painting off the bed and cursed for some reason before returning it. "If you want to run back to Mommy, go right ahead. I've managed to work without a partner my entire career." He moved with jerking motions to Pretorius's phone, lifting the headset before turning over the cradle. With deft movements, he unscrewed the plastic case using a precision screwdriver from his case of tools.

She flinched. "Why are you like that? Why do you treat me like a kid sometimes, and then an adult other times?"

"Jesus, Morgan. Now isn't the time." He appeared to study the internal workings before taking something from his pocket and slipping it inside.

"I'm not a kid!" she insisted, barely resisting the urge to stamp her foot.

Without looking at her, he put the cover back on the cradle and replaced the screws. Then he worked his way to the nightstand. He opened the drawer, lifted out a notepad and envelopes, felt the insides, and shook his head. He dumped the stationary back in and slammed the drawer with more force than necessary. "That was too obvious," he muttered under his breath before walking to the next painting to look at it.

"Scott?" She hoped he didn't hear the hint of vulnerability in her voice. "I am an adult."

He sighed. "Yes, but a young one. You shouldn't be involved in this. It's best if you leave."

She tightened her mouth, determined not to abandon him when he needed her, even though she wanted to leave Pretorius's room more than anything. "I'm staying."

"Great. Now pay attention to the hallway." He removed another painting, this time of children wearing clothes from the Victorian-era, chasing each other in a garden lush with roses forever in bloom on the canvas. He put it back almost immediately.

She was intrigued. "What are you doing?"

"I'm looking for the wall safe. It's practically guaranteed a suite like this would have one." He walked to the next wall as he spoke, where the last picture in the room hung. He removed the photo of the *Sea Princess*, circa 1950s, and made an ambiguous sound.

Morgan craned her neck to check the hallway, ensuring it was still clear, before hurrying over to Scott. He didn't say anything about her abandoning her post. She watched anxiously as he used one of the picks to pry open the intricate lock, along with an L-shaped tool. When it popped open with a click, she clapped her hands. "You're amazing."

He lifted a shoulder. "Don't give me too much credit. These safes aren't much of a deterrent. They're meant to reassure the rich fools who rent these staterooms, not to truly guard valuables."

Her eyes sparkled with admiration, despite his humble attitude. "Let's see what's in there."

He nodded and reached into the safe, withdrawing an envelope about half the size of a sheet of paper. She could tell from his expression that it wasn't what he hoped it would be, even before he opened the package. "What is it?"

"Vacation photos. Some moron put them in the safe." He showed her the stack, with the top picture showing a family of four standing beside a sign welcoming them to Cabo San Lucas, looking as though they were having a great time. The man and two kids had red hair and equally red sunburns to match.

Morgan touched his arm. "I'm sorry, Scott."

He wore an expression of disgust when he shoved the pictures back in the envelope and crammed it into the small safe. He closed the door and tested the lock before replacing the photograph.

"Where else will you check?"

"His luggage—" Scott broke off as the sound of laughter reached them. Morgan rushed to the door and tried to see who was approaching. He was right behind her. Seconds before someone approached, he snapped off the light and pressed himself behind her, looking out the crack.

She held her breath as footsteps reached the door, but went past. She caught a wave of strong perfume and saw a middle-aged couple stop two staterooms down and enter. She released her breath in a harsh exhalation and felt Scott's tension slowly drain away. With senses no longer focused so intently on possible danger, she became aware of his cock swelling as he thrust forward slightly, pushing her against the door.

She caught her breath again when he cupped her buttocks in his hand, squeezing lightly. "Scott?" she asked in a breathless whisper, as he slipped his hand lower, to the hem of her short skirt. Desire and apprehension warred inside her when his fingers slipped under the skirt and breached the side of her panties to caress the smooth skin of her buttocks.

He muttered something unintelligible as he pushed his body more forcefully against hers, sending her forward, and causing the door to close with a soft slam. She braced her hands against it, for support.

Morgan jerked at the sound and tried to pull away, but he held her immobile. While one hand stroked her bare buttocks, he used the other to push aside her hair. He buried his mouth against the back of her neck and nipped her. She shuddered as chills swept down her spine, originating from where his mouth was touching her skin.

"Do you want to fuck?" he asked in a hoarse tone, close to her ear. He thrust his cock hard against her hip. "Does the danger get you hot? Are you dripping for me?"

His hand moved from her buttocks to between her thighs and plunged a finger into her pussy.

She cried out at the penetration, shocked by his actions, but also excited. She *was* dripping for him, and she thrust against his finger. She was barely aware that their interlude was taking place in Pretorius's stateroom. She couldn't think of anything, except the feel of Scott's mouth on her neck, and his finger in her pussy.

"You're so wet," he growled. "I could throw you on the bed and fuck you until you're unconscious."

She whimpered at his rough language, disgusted by it, but also aroused. She tried to turn in his arms, to look into his eyes, but he held her still. Her muscles tightened when a second finger joined the first in exploring her tight opening. Her clit throbbed as he fingered her. Morgan ground her pussy against his hand, seeking relief.

He released her hair, but kept his mouth on her neck. Scott cupped one of her breasts through the thin cotton top, pinching the nipple enough to hurt, but the small pain reinforced the pleasure. His teeth grazed her skin, and Morgan arched her neck, offering him more. His tongue forged a path from the back of her neck to the bend of her shoulder, where he drew the skin into his mouth and sucked. His fingers continued thrusting shallowly into her pussy.

She cried out when he squeezed her breast too roughly. Scott tugged on the nipple again, this time causing more pain than pleasure. His fingers pushed deeper inside her, encountering resistance, but attempting to push past it. A burning ache accompanied his attempts, bringing clarity of thinking to the irrational moment.

What were they doing? Pretorius could return to his stateroom at any moment, and they were doing everything but fucking against the door. If he discovered them, Scott's cover would be blown, the investigation would be in shambles, and they could be in serious danger – along with her mother.

Not to mention, was she ready for this? She was attracted to Scott and had halfway decided he would be The One she would lose her virginity to, but this wasn't how she had pictured it, like some scenario in a porno movie. She wanted it to be special, not tainted with urgency and sleaze.

"Scott, we have to stop."

When he showed no sign of hearing, Morgan used her strength to push away from the door, breaking his hold. She turned to face him, noting his high color, shining eyes, and heavy breathing. "We can't."

He seemed to need a moment to compose himself. His hand shook when he ran it through his disheveled brown curls. He nodded. "You're right. This is stupid. If Pretorius caught us..." His eyes widened, as if he was now realizing exactly what they had been doing.

She offered a tentative smile. "It's crazy, huh?"

He nodded again. "Let's go to my stateroom. D14 isn't as glamorous as all this, but it has a bed. That's all we need."

She frowned. "I...what about searching his luggage?"

Scott sighed. "I have a handheld x-ray machine and portable monitor, but it was too bulky to bring along until I knew we could get in. If I don't find anything in the ship's valuables' office tomorrow night, I'll have to risk returning to search more thoroughly." His grin bordered on feral. "I have the rest of the night to make you scream."

She squirmed. "I don't think so."

He frowned. "What?"

She searched for a way to make him understand. "I'm not ready."

His eyes narrowed. "You were doing a pretty good imitation less than a minute ago. Your cunt was sopping wet, and you were making those breathless sounds, like a bitch in heat, begging for a good fuck."

She recoiled, as if he had slapped her. "Do you have to be so crude?"

"I'm sorry," he said with apparent insincerity. "I've never learned how to handle cock-teases gracefully."

Her mouth fell open as she grasped for a rebuttal. All that emerged from her throat was a guttural sound of rage. She spun on her heel, threw open the door, and marched down the hallway, sparing no thought for being discreet or avoiding Pretorius. She was still enraged when she reached her room, and it was with relief that she noted Hannah wasn't back yet. There was no one to witness her tears when she fell across the bed and let them come freely.

* * * * *

Hannah was giddy as Lukas spun her around the dance floor. A carefree laugh escaped her when he pulled her back into his arms before lowering her in a dip, just as the final note of the song faded. She took a moment to catch her breath as they walked back to the table where cocktails awaited them. She climbed onto the stool, trying to maintain an air of dignity, and took a long sip from the icy beverage.

She fanned herself with a napkin, unable to stop grinning. "I haven't danced in years, and I don't think anyone has ever dipped me before."

The lines at Lukas's eyes crinkled. "That's a pity. You're so light on your feet."

She inclined her head. "You're very good yourself. Where did you learn to dance like that?"

"My ex-wife was a dance instructor."

She lifted a brow. "You were married?"

Lukas nodded, pausing to sip his Scotch before elaborating. "We married when I was nineteen, and she was twenty. I saw her through the window of the studio and fell instantly in love." His smile turned wry. "Or rather, I thought I was in love. It was a whirlwind courtship. We married six weeks after meeting."

“You’re the impulsive type.”

He chuckled. “I know what I want and go after it.” He lifted a shoulder. “Unfortunately, we married too young. I didn’t like Hendrika’s clingy nature, and she hated me going to university without her. At the same time, she didn’t want to be ‘bored stiff’ by academics. The marriage lasted six months.”

Hannah sipped her drink, striving to digest all she had learned. “Did you have any children?”

He shook his head. “There wasn’t time, and she did love her figure.”

“Did you want children?”

He shrugged. “It wasn’t a priority then. Now, I think I’m too old. And my nephew is very like a son.”

“Did you ever marry again?”

Lukas shook his head.

“Why not?” She held her breath, awaiting his answer.

He looked into her eyes. “I haven’t met anyone that grabbed my heart so instantaneously and so thoroughly...until now.”

She looked down, breaking eye contact. They were straying into territory that was too intimate, and too appealing. A new song began, and she seized the distraction. “Do you want to dance?”

“For you, *waardevol*, I would dance to the ends of the earth,” he said, getting to his feet and taking her hand to lead her onto the dance floor again.

Chapter 9

Morgan lay on the bed for thirty minutes in a state of abject misery, feeling sorry for herself. Eventually, her tears dried, she calmed down, and her ire faded away, leaving only the vague ache of desire and lingering anguish over Scott's cruel words.

With perspective, she was able to realize she had left him in a terrible state. She knew men could physically hurt from being aroused without release, and her conscience pricked her. She didn't owe him anything, of course, but it wasn't as though she hadn't wanted him too. The intensity of the experience had just overwhelmed her.

Maybe her girlish fantasy of satin sheets, candles, and tender caresses was silly. People didn't really go to all that bother when having sex, especially when desire seized them so powerfully.

And did she expect him to read her mind, to know what she wanted? Scott didn't know she was inexperienced and had certain expectations. She had reacted very immaturely by running off like that, even with the provocation of his mean words. It was important to her that he regarded her as an adult, and she searched her mind for a way to fix his image of her.

It came to her that a mature adult would go to his room, explain, and at least clear the air. Even if they parted ways, she didn't want it to be acrimoniously. Anyway, she needed Scott to help her keep an eye on Pretorius, to make sure he didn't lure her mother into something criminal.

She sat up and wiped her eyes. They were puffy. With dragging feet, she went into the bathroom to repair the damage her crying jag had caused, determined Scott wouldn't see how she had bawled her eyes out like a little girl. It soon became obvious makeup alone couldn't fix her face, so she stripped off her clothes and took a quick shower. She held a cool cloth against her eyes while in the stall and was satisfied with the results when she emerged.

After drying off, Morgan gathered up her damp hair and secured it with a clear hair claw. She decided to skip makeup and hurried into the sleeping area to slip into panties and a matching bra. She spent five minutes scanning her wardrobe, looking for the perfect outfit. She finally settled on a short lilac Lycra dress. As she stuffed a few essentials in a small purse, she met her eyes in the mirror.

Under such close scrutiny, she couldn't deny her true purpose for going to Scott. Yes, she wanted to prove she was mature, but she also wanted him to finish what he had started. Intuition told her that the next time she met her eyes in the mirror, she would have changed forever. Looking back at her now were the eyes of a half-scared girl. By morning, they would be the eyes of a woman who had plunged headlong into her first taste of passion.

It was close to midnight, and several people were returning to their berths as she made her way through the corridor, to the elevator. When it opened on D-Deck, she nodded to a group of people waiting to board and exited. She turned left, hoping D had the same numbering system as B. A little too soon for her raw nerves, her feet carried her to D14. Before she could talk herself out of it, she lifted her hand and rapped on the wood.

He opened the door within seconds, wearing a toweling robe provided by the cruise line. His hair was damp, indicating he too had showered. His eyes widened when he saw her. "I'm sorry," he said, before she could say anything.

A tentative smile flashed across her face. "I came here to apologize."

His laugh sounded a little forced, and he seemed to feel as awkward about the situation as she did. He opened the door wider. "Did you want to come in?"

She hesitated for just a second, sensing if she went into his room, there would be no turning back. Knowing that was what she wanted, she was able to overcome her virginal fear. She forced her feet forward, until she had crossed the threshold, and he closed the door behind her.

His stateroom was smaller than the one she shared with Hannah. It had one double bed, a small dresser, and a semi-comfortable-looking armchair. Scott had turned on one lamp by the bed, giving the room a cozy glow. She stood there in a state of nervous anticipation, conscious of him standing inches away. She shivered when he placed a hand on the small of her back.

"You don't have to apologize," he said in a low whisper that caused heat to pool in the pit of her stomach. "I reacted like a bastard."

She turned toward him, until they were facing each other in the small entryway, displacing his hand from her back to her hip. "I wasn't trying to tease you." She wet her lips, seeking courage. "I didn't want it to be like that—all sordid and rushed—but that doesn't mean I don't want you."

One corner of his mouth lifted in a half-smile. "It was a bad place and time. I shouldn't have gotten so carried away." His hand inched higher, to curve around her waist. "Until tonight, I've never let pleasure interfere with work. I didn't expect you to be so tempting."

Her cheeks warmed with the compliment. "I knew you'd be tempting. I knew it before I ever spoke to you."

He grimaced. "Considering the way I acted when you approached me the first time, I'm surprised you ever bothered to speak to me again." He lowered his head, resting his forehead against hers. "I've been a complete asshole. What can I do to make it up to you?"

She closed her eyes briefly, took a deep breath, and said, "Make love to me." She opened them in time to catch his pleased expression.

He didn't verbally respond, but his lips taking possession of hers was all the answer she needed. Morgan dropped her purse on the floor and wound her arms around his

neck. Scott gripped her around the waist with both hands while his mouth explored hers. His lips started out soft and hesitant, testing the plump contours of hers.

Morgan moaned when he drew her lower lip into his mouth, sucking lightly. She buried a hand in his hair, pressing his head forward, wanting more. He responded by parting her lips and sliding his tongue in her mouth. Shyly, she stroked it with hers, and he flexed his fingers into her waist.

His robe was too bulky, putting too much of a barrier between them. Morgan trailed her hands down his neck to his back, then slowly around to his chest. It was a battle to overcome her fear of doing something gauche, so it took her longer than he might have expected to reach the tie of his robe. He didn't resist when she wrenched open the knot with one decisive motion and spread the lapels.

Before her *faux* courage could desert her, Morgan splayed a hand across his stomach, very aware of his naked cock just a few inches lower. She slid the other hand under the robe to caress one of his nipples. She broke away from his kiss and lowered her head, pressing her face against his smooth chest, feeling his scant hair tickle her skin. She inhaled the mingled scent of soap and his cologne, feeling almost lightheaded with desire.

"Morgan?" He cupped one of her buttocks and squeezed. "What do you want?"

"To taste you," she said softly. Her lips brushed against his skin, and she kept her eyes lowered, finding it easier to be honest when she could hide her expression.

He moaned low in his throat and thrust his chest forward. Morgan moved her head slightly, so her mouth was against his nipple. She parted her lips and blew lightly on the bud, eliciting another moan before drawing it in her mouth and sucking as he had done with her bottom lip. She swirled her tongue around it, and his stomach fluttered under her hand.

"I want to taste you too." His hand at her waist slipped down to join his other hand, and they traveled together to the hem of the dress. He gripped it with his hands and peeled the sheath upward with one smooth motion, leaving it bunched around her waist. Then he cupped her pussy through the sheer white panties. "I want to taste you here, before I fuck you."

She arched against his hand and inadvertently bit down on his nipple. His low groan vibrated through his chest and sounded like one of pleasure, rather than pain. She nipped him again, and his hand tightened around her pussy, squeezing the lips together and putting delicious pressure on her swelling clit. "I want that too."

That seemed to be all Scott needed to hear. He stepped away from her, putting enough room between them to strip the dress from her body, pulling it over her head. She didn't mention the zipper on the back. She was too aroused for matters of practicality. As soon as he removed the dress, she stepped forward, eager to touch him again, to taste him.

Scott backed away, taking time to shrug off his robe before moving forward. He scooped her into his arms and took her to the bed, lowering her carefully. Morgan lay

on her back with her legs spread, enjoying the fierce hunger in his expression. Her eyes dropped to his cock, and she took her time examining it. She had seen cocks in movies on HBO, and a health book in high school, but it was different in person.

He was uncircumcised, for one thing. His cock was thick and pulsing. Arousal had painted it deep purple. Curly brown hairs nestled his balls. She licked her lips, imagining running her tongue down the thick shaft and over the tender sac. She wondered how he would taste.

When she looked up to meet his eyes, she saw his gaze centered on her pussy. She grinned self-consciously. "It seemed too brazen not to wear panties."

He dropped to his knees on the floor, bracing his hands on her thighs. "It doesn't matter. That silky white scrap hides nothing." He stroked a finger lightly down her slit. "Especially since you're so wet the crotch is see-through." He pressed lightly, lifting a brow. "Shaved?"

She giggled. "Waxed. I had hoped this cruise would be worth the effort." She left unspoken her plans to find someone to fuck her so she wouldn't go to college inexperienced. Her friend Debra, about to start her junior year at the university, had told her there was nothing more pathetic than a virgin to the college men she knew. They sometimes made fun of the girls they had fucked if they discovered they hadn't had a man before.

He grinned. "I intend to make the effort worth your while."

She tensed as he bent his head. She jumped with surprise when he swirled his tongue around her belly button before moving lower. He left a wet trail as he made his way down to her pussy. She stiffened when he nestled his face between her thighs and inhaled her scent. Before he even touched her, heat pooled in her belly, and a flood of moisture made her wetter than ever.

A hint of breath whispered across the panties when he opened his mouth, inflaming the sensitive flesh underneath. She arched her hips to meet his tongue when he tasted her through the silk. She uttered a sound of protest when he lifted his head slightly, not wanting him to stop.

"Lift your hips."

She obeyed without question, and he peeled the panties from her before settling between her thighs again. His tongue sought out her clit, circling it with enough pressure to make her shiver. Spasms racked her body when his tongue slipped lower to delve into her opening. She dug her hands into the cover on the bed to keep from screaming when his mouth moved up, and he sucked her clit into his mouth.

All too soon, his mouth left her, and she raised her head, silently pleading with her eyes for completion.

"I want to feel you come around my cock for the first time," he said. "Later, I want you to cream in my mouth, but our first time, it should be together, don't you think?"

She nodded fervently, willing to say yes to anything if he would just end the tension building inside her. "It should be special," she agreed in a husky whisper.

He started to nod, but then a scowl replaced his forming smile. He cursed.

Her eyes widened. "What's wrong?"

He dropped onto the corner of the bed, putting a hand on her thigh, causing shivers to race through her with his light touch. "This cruise was supposed to be about work."

She frowned, wondering if he had decided it would be unethical for them to make love while he was on an assignment. "But—"

He shook his head. "I didn't bring anything."

Her frown deepened. "What?"

"Protection...a condom. I don't have anything."

She sighed with relief. "Is that all?"

He looked troubled. "You can't be too careful these days, Morgan. I never have sex without a condom."

"Me neither." No need to mention she hadn't had the opportunity. It didn't matter anyway, because she had long ago decided to be responsible about sex. "That's why I brought some." She pointed to the purse she had dropped on the floor. "You'll find a strip in there."

He stood up, pausing only to drop a kiss on her mouth. "Thank God. My cock's killing me. I thought I was going to have to forgo the pleasure of your pussy."

She watched his tight buttocks as he walked to the purse and bent to retrieve it. A whistle escaped her lips when he bent over. She was giddy and flirtatious. Hardly a niggles of anxiety remained, and she had no reservations about choosing Scott to be her first lover. Her one concern was that she should mention her virginity beforehand, but she held off, afraid he would once again think she was a child.

He was opening a package as he returned to her, dropping the remaining nine condoms on the bed beside her haphazardly when he came back to her. He rolled a condom onto his throbbing cock, but didn't join her on the bed just yet.

She held her breath, wondering what he wanted. He appeared to be awaiting a cue from her, but she didn't know what that was. The tension built, and she bit her lip. Finally, she asked, "What are you waiting for?" There was a note of impatience in her tone.

He chuckled. "That. I wanted to make sure you're as hot for me as I am for you."

She didn't think she could be any hotter, but when he spread her thighs and got on his knees between them, heat coursed through her, arousing her further.

He tilted her pelvis higher, so that her buttocks rested against his knees, and her thighs draped over his. Her eyes widened when he lifted one of her legs and propped her foot on his shoulder. The angle seemed awkward, but what did she know? Maybe this was a common position.

He entered her quickly, and she barely flinched. The pain hadn't been anything like she had expected. It was more of a pinching sensation, and she doubted he even noticed her slight reaction as he plunged inside her to the hilt. She soon figured out the reason

for the strange position—it allowed his cock in deeper. She winced at a flash of pain when he withdrew and plunged in again, but the pleasure accompanying his movements overcame any discomfort.

She hadn't known what to expect, but was awed by his possession. There was a sense of completeness with his cock inside her pussy, but it went deeper than that. It was the awareness of two becoming one, and for her, it was almost a spiritual moment.

She forgot her philosophical thoughts when Scott's thumb burrowed between her pussy lips and sought out her clit. Instinct took over, and her hips rose to meet each of his thrusts, while he massaged the hard nub. Gasping pants escaped her, but she couldn't breathe as his thrusts intensified. It was a heady, disorienting sensation, and the convulsions spiraling through her only augmented it.

His cock jerked inside her, growing larger than ever, and suddenly rock-hard. "I'm about to come. Are you close, Morgan?"

She nodded, too caught up in the sensations racing through her to form words. He plunged deep inside her once more, and his thumb stroked her clit vigorously. Her pussy spasmed, and a climax swept over her. It was all encompassing, making those she had previously experienced at her own hand pale in comparison. His cock convulsed, and she gave herself up to the moment.

She might have cried out when her orgasm peaked, but couldn't be certain. Scott's shout of satisfaction drowned out any sounds she might have made, and it reverberated in her ears even after he fell silent.

He lowered her leg to the mattress and slumped forward, supporting himself with his palms against the bed, and his arms bracketed on either side of her shoulders. He was panting, but so was she.

Her hand trembled when she lifted it to push a curl off his damp forehead. He turned his head and brushed a kiss against her wrist before lifting himself off the bed and turning to the small trashcan to dispose of the condom. When he turned back, he seemed composed, but there was still a flush to his cheeks. "Do you want to shower with me before you go back?"

She blinked. "What? Go back where?"

Scott frowned. "To your room." His expression softened. "I don't want you to go, but your mother will worry if you aren't there. We can't do anything to make her upset. If she tells Pretorius, he might become suspicious."

She shook her head. "Why would he care if I stayed out all night? Why would he become suspicious?"

He shrugged. "I don't know how his mind works. It's a miniscule risk, but we have to be cautious. We can't afford to do anything to jeopardize getting the diamonds and stopping Pretorius."

His earnest dedication to his mission was all that blunted the hurt welling inside her. She tried not to let his rejection bother her. He was right. They had to be careful until they stopped Pretorius. Afterward, there would be no need for caution.

Tears still pricked the back of her eyes, but she refused to let them fall. "I think I'll skip the shower. It's getting late, and Mother will be back to the room soon, if she isn't already." The truth was, she didn't want him to see her cry and think she couldn't handle the realities of the situation. She got out of bed, still wearing her bra, and scooped up her dress. She slid it on without unzipping it, grabbed her panties, and stuffed them in the small purse.

She slipped past him, deliberately avoiding his gaze so he wouldn't see the glint of moisture in her eyes. She stopped when he held out an arm, but still didn't look up.

He bent down, placing a gentle kiss against her lips. "Thank you for tonight."

She nodded, rendered speechless by the lump of moisture in her throat. He dropped his arm, and she hurried from the room, not relaxing her rigid posture until she turned the corner and was out of sight.

She maintained her stiff composure until she was in the elevator, then let a few tears fall, but brushed them away as the cab stopped on B-Deck. She made a conscious effort to hide her distress on the way to her stateroom. She opened the door quietly and slipped inside without turning on the light, hoping not to disturb her mother.

She needn't have bothered. Hannah's bed was empty, as was the rest of the room. She hadn't returned from her date with Pretorius yet, and it was after midnight. A twinge of concern pricked her, but soon thoughts of the time she had spent with Scott crowded out anything else. During a quick shower, and later in bed, before falling into a deep, dreamless sleep, she spun fantasies of a future with Scott. Once this Pretorius business wrapped up, she'd have him all to herself.

Chapter 10

Hannah was drunk, or at least tipsy. The combination of alcohol and the close proximity of Lukas's body during the hours they danced had left her in a state of pleasant intoxication. She knew her condition was due more to Lukas than the one glass of wine and two margaritas she had consumed over the course of dinner and three hours of dancing.

Her body sang when Lukas put his arm around her waist to lead her from the Starlight Room. The musicians were packing up their instruments, and most of the other couples had left already. She hated for the night to end. "The hot tub's still open. Do you want to take a dip?" Her eyes widened at the invitation when it issued from her mouth.

"Do you really want to, Hannah? It's getting late. When you return to your room for your suit, you'll wake up Morgan." He grinned. "She'll never let you leave."

She nodded. "You're right. I just don't want the night to end." She leaned closer, almost snuggling into his arms. "I'm having too much fun."

His blue eyes darkened. "It doesn't have to end."

She tilted a smile at him. "You have something in mind?"

He stopped in mid-step, right in the middle of the corridor, turning her toward him. His voice was rough with passion when he said, "Come to my room with me."

She shook her head. "I couldn't—"

He placed a finger against her lips. "You won't have any regrets, I promise you. I want to make love to you, Hannah. I want to touch you."

She nibbled on her lower lip. "Charles—"

His voice went deeper. "How long has it been since he touched you? How many nights have you lain alone, aching for him to show you some sign of desire?" He gripped her hand. "How long has it been since you felt like a woman in love? A woman loved?"

She could have blurted out that she felt like a woman in love right then, but held back the response, fearing where it would take them. Instead, she said, "It's been so long since Charles and I had sex that I can't remember the last time. He hasn't kissed me in months."

With one smooth move, Lukas had her pinned against the wall, and his mouth was on hers. His urgency was palpable, but his lips were gentle on hers, awaking sensations she had nearly forgotten. Of their own volition, her arms wound around his neck, and her fingers plunged into his thick hair. Her blood seemed to be boiling in her veins.

She opened her mouth and traced her tongue around his lips, eliciting a low moan. Hannah pulled him closer, parting her thighs so he could step between them. She gave no thought to their public location when she curled one of her legs around his, running the tip of her shoe up and down his calf.

He deepened the kiss, stroking her tongue with his. Breathing should have been difficult, with the way they were devouring each other, but maybe they were sharing oxygen. Or maybe catching her breath was unimportant when compared to savoring Lukas's lips.

She gasped when one of his hands sought her thigh under the A-line skirt. It had slipped between her thighs to reveal most of her leg, and he placed his hand mid-thigh, simultaneously too close and too far away from her pussy. She arched against him, groaning.

They froze when voices reached them. If they had delayed a second longer, the man and woman rounding the corner would have caught them in an intimate embrace. Lukas stepped away just as they came into sight, blocking Hannah with his body, providing her time to lower her skirt.

They didn't speak until the other couple got into the elevator. Once the doors closed behind them, a giggle escaped Hannah. In Lukas's arms, she remembered how it felt to be young and reckless. She yearned for more. In addition to a taste of youth, she wanted to feel alive and sexy again. That was more important. She wanted to get lost in him.

Charles's face flickered behind her eyes, but faded like a ghost image. She didn't doubt what he was doing that very moment. Surprisingly, she had no compunction about doing the same, now that the choice was in front of her. If she still loved Charles, surely she would feel even a modicum of guilt. Instead, a heady sense of liberation filled her.

She stepped forward, putting her arm around his waist. "Yes."

He didn't have to clarify what she was giving permission for. Lukas set a brisk pace to the elevator. They stood impatiently until it returned to the deck and opened. With the cab to themselves, Hannah wrapped her arms around Lukas's waist as soon as the doors closed. She put her mouth against his throat and breathed. His body jerked in response.

She trailed her hand down his waist to his buttocks. She squeezed gently before moving her hand around to the front of his pants. She palmed the bulge in his pants, and his cock strained against the confines of the fabric. She looked up and met his eyes, pleased by how they had darkened with passion. "I can't wait to get better acquainted with him." She stroked the length of his cock, cupping his testicles in her hand just as the elevator stopped on A-Deck.

Just before the doors opened, Hannah released her hold and stepped away. She needn't have bothered. They had the hallway to themselves. They could have thrown off their clothes in the cab and run down the corridor naked to his suite, and no one

would have known. Her pussy pulsed with excitement at the deliciously naughty mental image.

Lukas couldn't seem to go fast enough for her. She resisted the urge to break into a run as they sped down the hall. At his suite, he removed a swipe card and fumbled with the box for a few seconds. It was taking too long, and she turned his face to her, stretching up to plant a light kiss on his mouth. Of course, it wasn't enough, and his tongue plunged into her mouth.

She held onto his shoulders for support, tilting her head to allow his tongue deeper. Her bold behavior amazed her, but she didn't try to tame it. It had been too long, and she was too hungry to be cautious, prim, or restrained.

He broke away from her, muttering in a language unfamiliar to her. "If we don't stop this, I'll end up making love to you here in the hall."

Her eyes sparkled. "Would that be so bad?"

He swallowed visibly. "Don't tempt me, *waardevol*. I feel like I've waited forever for you." He looked down at the card, swiping it. "I can wait just a little longer – enough to get you inside, where we'll have privacy."

The door swung open, and he practically dragged her inside. He kicked the door closed with his foot as Hannah launched herself into his arms. He grunted with surprise, but supported her easily. He lifted her completely off her feet and slammed his mouth onto hers. The kiss took her breath away, but she didn't mind and responded with equal fervor.

She responded by tightening her thighs around his waist, briefly thankful she had chosen to wear a dress with a loose skirt for dancing. She clung to his shoulders with one arm, while the other pulled at his tie. It was awkward, but she managed to loosen it with one hand, so she could plunder the buttons underneath.

He eased her against the wall, letting it support her back. One of his hands remained under her buttocks, but the other was as busy as hers, roaming up her stomach to her breast. He squeezed a mound through the sequined cup of the black dress. His lips broke from hers. "I want to see you, touch you without any clothes."

She moaned when he flicked his thumb over a hard nipple. "Oh, yes." Although knowing his purpose, it was almost painful to be parted from him when he lowered her to the floor. She stood on trembling legs, regaining a miniscule shred of control before turning around so he could unzip her. His fingers were warm and just a shade rough as he pulled the zipper to her waist and splayed his hand across her lower back. She leaned against the wall, not able to stand on her own.

His lips sought and found a sensitive spot on the back of her neck, just under where she had bunched her hair in an elegant twist. He kissed the spot, and then licked it. "You taste like honey," he whispered against her skin, his breath tickling.

She tipped her head forward, allowing him more room to explore, but he was finished with her neck. His lips moved lower, and his tongue traced her spine, causing her to shiver. Her nipples pressed insistently into the soft material of the lined bra, built

into the dress. The material was chafing her, and she shifted restlessly, lowering her arms to her sides.

He pushed the dress from her shoulders, but his mouth didn't leave the area he'd claimed on her lower back. His tongue swirled patterns on the spot, sending convulsions spiraling through her. Once the dress fell below her waist, she pushed it down the rest of the way before planting her palms against the wall again, needing its solid bulk to keep from falling.

Lukas's mouth ventured lower, following his hands when they pushed her black panties below her hips. His breath tickled the indent where her spine and buttocks met. She stiffened with surprised pleasure when his tongue darted into the niche before sweeping lower, teasing the cleft of her buttocks, without venturing inside.

"Lukas." His name emerged as a shocked squeak, but there was no hiding the underlying note of curiosity and pleasure.

He paused to strip off the panties, and they fell to the floor around her ankles. Then his tongue went lower, flirting with the opening of her pussy, before sweeping down her left thigh, to the back of her knee. She squirmed and giggled when he nipped the sensitive spot.

He stood up suddenly, pressing his cock against her buttocks. The fine wool fabric itched against her inflamed skin. His mouth sought her ear, and he drew the lobe inside, sucking gently. His hands cupped her buttocks, massaging the cheeks. He released her lobe, and his voice was little more than a soft breath flowing into her ear canal. "Would it ruin this experience for you if I turned you around and took you against the wall?"

His voice, rough with passion, ignited sparks of excitement in her. She wet her lips to be able to speak. "No, not at all. I don't know if I can make it to the bed," she confessed.

A smoky chuckle escaped him. He placed his hands over hers against the wall, holding them in a light hold for a second before releasing. "Turn around, *waardevol*. Let me see your breasts. Let me sheath my cock inside you."

It took an effort of will to summon the strength to turn. She pressed her back against the wall and stepped out of the black silk around her feet. Lukas dipped his head forward to take a nipple into his mouth. He sucked deeply, eliciting darts of pleasure that radiated from her nipple down to her stomach, as though it was being dragged into her pussy.

He paused his erotic consumption to say, "I knew you would have beautiful breasts. Your nipples are perfect, Hannah. So firm and hard. I could suck them all night."

She gasped as he nibbled lightly on the hard peak. She buried a hand in his hair, trapping his head against her breast, not wanting him to stop. He showed no sign of doing so, as he drew more of her breast into his mouth. One of his hands cupped the other breast, and he fondled the nipple with teasing caresses.

She arched against him, needing him inside her. He responded by plunging two of his fingers into her opening. If she hadn't been masturbating the last few nights while thinking about him, she wouldn't have been ready for it. As it was, she needed more satisfaction than his two fingers could provide. She released his hair. "Please don't make me wait any longer."

He lifted his head from her breast, meeting her eyes. His fingers continued to push into her, finding all her secret places. "I don't know how I've waited this long." He released her long enough to open his pants and push them and his underwear down around his thighs, but his body remained close to hers. "Next time, it will be slow and easy," he said, as he aligned his cock with her pussy.

As the head of his cock slid inside her, she tilted her hips forward, meeting him halfway. "Forget slow." She wrapped her arms around his shoulders as he sank against her, pushing his cock deeper into her. "Fuck me, Lukas."

The use of the word should have shocked her, as she had never even considered using it with Charles, but it was the perfect word to convey her urgency. Why had she shied away from it in the past? Maybe because Charles had never inspired this mindless need in her.

His hips pistoned as his cock plunged in and out of her, pushing her buttocks against the wall each time he filled her completely. Hannah pushed against him, meeting his thrusts with equal fervor. At one point in their frenzy, her shoes fell off, but she didn't worry about retrieving them. She was too consumed with pleasure, as convulsions began in her womb and extended outward, contracting the sheath of her pussy around his cock.

He pulsed inside her and cupped her buttocks, pulling her tightly against him. She strained to take in more of him, rotating in a little circle. The friction against her clit triggered an orgasm, and the convulsions of his cock spilling inside her increased it, until she was clinging to him and sobbing with the strength of it.

It seemed to last forever, although she doubted it could have been more than a minute or two. Only their harsh breathing, mingled in a duet of spent passion, broke the silence of the room. Her heart still raced, and small spasms continued to rock her pussy. Lukas's cock was still partially hard inside her, and it seemed to be growing harder again. Was that possible? She certainly hoped so.

After shedding his pants, he lifted her carefully and carried her to the bed. Lukas came down on top of her, and his cock stayed inside her. It wasn't her imagination. He was hard again and would soon be ready.

She relaxed into the mattress, savoring its softness after spending so much time pressed against the wall. In the throes of passion, she hadn't noticed any discomfort, but now her lower back ached a little.

Lukas bowed his back, so he could place his mouth against her nipple. "That was amazing, *waardevol*."

“Definitely.” She gasped when his cock twitched inside her. Her pussy responded, as Lukas’s mouth sought out one of her nipples and rolled it lazily between his teeth, without applying pressure. “I can’t believe you’re ready again.”

He looked up, wearing an expression of concern. “Do you want to stop? If you aren’t ready, tell me. I never want to hurt you.”

She thrust her hips upward. “I’m more than ready.” *I feel like I was made just for you*, she added silently. She hesitated to voice her thoughts, knowing what she had with Lukas would end when their ship docked in San Diego. With the ring on her finger, and her daughter to think about, how could it be any other way? “But maybe you could take your clothes off this time,” she added, forcing away her solemn thoughts, not wanting to waste a moment of their time.

* * * * *

It had been difficult to force herself to leave him, but Hannah didn’t want to upset Morgan by staying out all night. It was a little before four a.m., and she expected her daughter was working herself into a lather as it was. Much as she didn’t want to, she would have to face the consequences of her actions.

Her brow furrowed with dread when she unlocked the door and let herself in. To her surprise, Morgan was in her bed, snoring softly. She moved quietly into the bathroom, shedding her clothes once the door closed behind her. She had showered in Lukas’s suite, so she dropped a nightgown over her head and slipped into the bedroom.

She had just settled in bed when she realized Morgan wasn’t snoring any longer.

“Where were you, Mother?” She sounded cold, and didn’t attempt to mask her disapproval. “It’s four in the morning.”

“We were dancing and lost track of the time.” A mental image of their bodies dancing together in an age-old rhythm made Hannah’s nipples bead, and she was glad for the sheet covering her. “It’s late. You should go to sleep.”

“I was asleep, until you woke me. Did you even think about me when you decided to stay out so late?”

“No, I didn’t. Believe it or not, my life doesn’t revolve around my adult daughter, Morgan,” Hannah said, with just a hint of sharpness. “I was having fun, and I don’t have a curfew. May we drop this?”

From Morgan’s vicinity came a disgusted grunt and a mumbled, “Whatever.” Hannah accepted the subsequent silence gratefully. It wasn’t long before the night’s activities took their toll, and she fell into a deep sleep.

Chapter 11

Morgan had gone by the time Hannah rose. She made a genuine attempt to find her, looking in the casino, at the breakfast buffet, the pool, and the weight room. Wherever her daughter was, she didn't want to be found. A trace of guilt flashed through her when she realized how much time she had spent with Lukas, but it faded upon remembering how reluctant her daughter had been to spend any time with her in the beginning, before she met Lukas.

With a clearer conscience, she sought out Lukas, going directly to his cabin. His habit was to rise a little past nine, but they had been up late, so she hazarded a guess that he would still be in his suite.

He opened the door to her tentative knock wearing a towel wrapped sarong-fashion around his waist. "Come in, *waardevol*."

Unexpectedly, shyness beset her when she stepped into his suite. The door closed behind her, and she had a moment of panic, as though the walls were closing in on her. As soon as his arms enfolded her, the sensation passed. She rested her cheek against his chest, listening to the steady thump of his heart. It soothed the last of her ragged nerves.

"How did it go with your daughter? Was she very angry?"

Hannah shrugged. "Probably, but I didn't give her much of an opportunity to vent. I was too tired."

"I was unusually fatigued myself." The quality of his embrace shifted slightly, so he could cup one of her buttocks in his hand. "It was a pleasant state."

"Um hmm." She snuggled closer, putting her arms around his neck.

"There was one thing missing."

She lifted a brow. "What?"

"You," he whispered, before his mouth settled on hers in a gentle kiss.

When he lifted his head, she said, "That can be remedied, Lukas. I'm here now, and I have no plans for the day."

His eyes sparkled. "You mean, you want to miss the excitement of standing above-deck while the *Sea Princess* cruises the Panama Canal?"

She trailed a hand down his front, to rub his cock. "I have all the excitement I can handle in this room."

He chuckled, low in his throat. "You don't yet, but you will." He pulled her tighter to him, bringing his mouth to rest on hers. His tongue slipped into her mouth with no resistance, to probe the sweet recess.

Hannah trapped his tongue between her teeth, nibbling lightly. She brought her hands to the towel and undid the knot holding it. It fell with a whisper to the carpet, while her hands sought out his cock. She grasped the base in her hand and stroked lightly up to his head. She paused to thumb his sensitive spots, causing Lukas to stiffen against her.

He reached for the ties on the shoulders of her sundress, but Hannah evaded his hands. She stepped away from him to undo them herself. "Sit on the bed."

He did so without protest, sitting with obvious discomfort while she slowly untied one of the strings. His cock was so hard it was practically lying against his stomach. Color filled his cheeks, and his heavy breathing was audible from the distance separating them.

Sensing his excitement, her breath caught. She made a conscious effort to keep her fingers steady as she undid the other side of the dress. She wore no bra underneath. He might have realized that already, but she wanted to savor the moment of unveiling, in case he hadn't. With slow movements, she finished the second tie, and the bodice dipped into her cleavage. With a saucy wink, she turned her back on Lukas so he could see her working the zipper.

Her fingers were just as slow as she brought down the zipper. He moaned when she turned around to face him again. She grasped the bodice of the dress and pulled it down to her waist, revealing her breasts. His harsh exhalation brought a smile to her face as she wriggled out of the slim-fitting khaki dress. She jutted her buttocks into the air, at an angle almost facing him, when she knelt to pick up the dress.

She straightened, folding the garment slowly and carefully, while watching him peripherally. Finally, she draped the dress over an armchair, pulled off her shoes, and started toward him.

His eyes remained glued to her swaying breasts while she walked to the bed. She stopped in front of him, threading her hands through his hair. "I want you." She didn't give him time to respond as she drew back his head, lowered hers, and claimed his mouth. Her kiss was hot and hungry. She didn't try to hide her desire for him. After last night, she didn't think she could if she tried.

She shivered when his hands settled on her hips. He pushed down her white briefs, leaving them around her thighs. She broke the kiss long enough to push the panties down and kick them off. Then she lowered her mouth to his neck, arching her back in the process. When Lukas stroked her clit, she nipped him at the bend where his shoulder and neck met. His fingers, moving over the slick bud, blotted out the slight twinge in her back from her awkward position.

His tongue swept across the tops of her breasts, leaving a molten trail of sensation. When his head went lower, she straightened slightly, bringing her nipple to him. As his mouth closed over the tight bud, she tightened her fingers in his hair, seeking support. Her dormant body had awakened, and she couldn't remember ever being so responsive in her life.

She tossed back her head, letting her long hair fall almost to her waist. She arched her hips when Lukas's fingers probed her opening. As one slipped inside her, accompanied by another twinge from her muscles, aching from unaccustomed use, she lowered herself onto the bed, sitting with her thighs on either side of his. Her knees were by his buttocks, and her feet dangled off the bed into air. The new position brought his fingers deeper into her, and she thrust against them instinctively.

Her breast had slipped from his mouth, and he buried his head in the hollow of her throat. His breath rasped across her skin, making her whimper with pleasure. "Hannah." Her name was both a sigh and a breath from his lips.

She put one hand on his shoulder, but the other ventured between them, to find his cock. Lukas grunted when she held it in her hand again. She worked her hand up and down his length a few times, until his cock spasmed in her hands.

"I don't want to come yet."

She nodded, slipping her hand lower, to cup his balls. She wanted to taste him, to lick his cock from the head all the way down to his perineum. Her fingers followed the thought, and she sought out the delicate area behind his balls, causing Lukas to jerk with surprised pleasure. Gently, she pushed her finger against him, while moving in a small circle.

He arched his hips upward, offering freer access. "I have to have you." He sounded as though the admission had been torn from his throat. For emphasis, he buried a third finger in her pussy, and his thumb flicked across her clit. She arched against his hand. "I think you must have me too," he said, following the words with a strained chuckle. "You should enlighten me if I have misinterpreted your requirements."

Hannah put both hands on his shoulder to steady herself. She placed her lips against his ear, speaking in a guttural whisper. "What I require is you, Lukas. Specifically, your cock filling me, thrusting into me, until I can't even remember my own name." The words were daring, but they made her feel liberated, rather than ashamed.

Despite what one of his ex-girlfriends had told her about his wild proclivities in bed, she knew Charles shied away from talking of any sort during sex with her. Such words from her would have appalled him. His mistresses might beg to be fucked, but not his wife.

Thinking of Charles brought a frown to her face, and she pushed away her thoughts. She allowed her eyes to drink in the sight of Lukas's face, contorted with passion and stained red with the exertions of pleasure, to blot out all thoughts of her husband. As he positioned his cock against her opening, she lowered herself onto him, taking his cock inside her. Hannah bent her head to kiss him as she arched her hips, needing to feel more than a sexual connection with him.

She didn't have to search very hard. His emotions were obvious in the tender kisses he returned, in the slow thrust of his hips, and the careful way he cradled her on his lap,

ensuring she didn't fall. She tightened her arms around him and followed her body's instinct to meet his thrusts, allowing her concerns to fade.

Time took on a peculiar quality. It seemed to stretch to nothingness. She was lost in the sensation of his cock thrusting into her pussy, in his slow kisses, in the way his hand cupped her breast and tweaked her nipple, while the other remained on her back, to steady her. She was also lost in the feelings coursing through her. Sexual feelings, of course, but more than that. Feelings that were unnamable, but almost alarming.

His cock spasmed, signaling his orgasm. As he climaxed, Hannah gave in to her own release. The convulsions in her pussy could have lasted seconds or hours, for all she knew. As she let the pleasure sweep her away, her mind supplied a tentative name for the emotions overwhelming her, but she shied away from it. It couldn't be. There was no future for them.

She refused to fall in love with Lukas Pretorius.

* * * * *

As Morgan followed Scott into the recently opened door of the ship's valuables' office, she still couldn't believe she had agreed to come with him. His credentials as an Interpol agent wouldn't do either of them any good if they were caught rummaging through the priceless items stored in this room. He would most likely lose his position, and the investigation of Pretorius would come to a halt.

He seemed to think the risk was justifiable, and she had found herself giving in. After all, he was the professional. Morgan grimaced. She was just his Watson. A small grin curved her lips as she remembered last night. She doubted Watson had ever done *that* with Holmes. A giggle escaped her, but she cut it off when he scowled at her.

"Be quiet. No one can know we're here." He followed his admonition by closing the door with a soft click.

He hadn't turned on a light, and complete darkness enveloped them for a moment. There were no windows in this office. In fact, it was located in the belly of the ship, amid employee quarters and service facilities. She didn't know how he had discovered it. She imagined he had used his contacts at Interpol. "How can you look for the diamonds if we can't see?"

Her hands tightened around something cylindrical he slipped into her hand. She realized it was a flashlight when her thumb brushed the bulbous head. A second later, he clicked on his flashlight, cupping his hand over it. A small beam escaped his hand, providing scant illumination. He brought his wrist to the beam, to look at his watch. "Security personnel patrol this corridor every ten minutes. We have eight minutes to get in and get out."

Her stomach clenched. "What if they catch us?"

"They won't." He sounded supremely confident.

“Don’t they have cameras?” Why hadn’t she considered that possibility until now?

“Of course. Why do you think we’re wearing masks, and I told you to cover your hair?”

She nodded, and his reminder of the abrasive ski mask she wore caused the skin under it to itch. She scratched surreptitiously. “Is that why you had me put on your baggy sweatshirt and told me to wear loose pants?”

“Exactly. Gloves aren’t our only precautions.” His fingers danced briefly across her neck. “That way, the camera won’t be able to identify you as female.”

She frowned. “But you just said I was —”

The light barely shone enough to show him shaking his head. “They don’t have audio recording capabilities. I investigated their security system last night, after you went back to your room.”

A dart of relief shot through her as he moved away from her. He’d had another reason for sending her away, besides alleviating Pretorius’s possible suspicions. He must have been trying to protect her from the really dangerous things.

There was a slight clicking sound, followed by Scott saying, “It’s going to take me thirty-two seconds to disable the electronic system that keeps the boxes locked, including breaching each individual security code. My program seizes control of the electronic master override program. For three seconds following that, anyone monitoring this room will realize there’s been a breach.” It sounded as though he was typing on the laptop he’d brought. “After that, my program takes over, and everything will appear as normal on their terminal.”

She swallowed a lump in her throat. “What happens if someone catches those three seconds?”

“We’re screwed,” he said with a remarkable lack of concern. “There’s only one way out of this office, and that’s through the door we just came through. But don’t worry—I picked the timing to coincide with a shift change, and I’ve done this before.” His teeth gleamed in the dim glow from the flashlight when he looked over his shoulder in her direction. “I know what I’m doing.”

She nodded, not at all reassured. “What do you want me to do?”

“Nothing until the security system is disabled. After that, I want you to look through as many boxes as you can.”

She tightened her grip on the flashlight in her hand. “You said there were three hundred boxes. We can’t search them all in eight minutes.”

“Six minutes, actually, by the time I disable the electronics system. Don’t worry about them all. The large boxes on the bottom row, against the floor,” he moved the arc of the beam briefly, to show her what he meant, “hold the most valuable items. Their security system assigns a number, rather than a name, so I don’t know which one is Pretorius’s. If you find diamonds, let me know.”

“How many do we have to search?”

“Seventy-five. That’s twenty-five per wall. The fourth wall holds a computer terminal and a desk, but no deposit boxes.” He waved the flashlight at the rows. “Are you ready?”

She nodded, although she was anything but ready for this. Her heart raced with a combination of nerves and excitement. She hadn’t realized how heady covert operations could be.

The thirty-two seconds seemed more like thirty-two years. She was trembling with nerves when his laptop screen showed *Engaging With Host* in light-blue letters on the black screen. Even when the readout changed to *Host Engaged*, she couldn’t relax. Mentally, she counted three seconds, waiting for alarms to go off, lights to flash on, and big men with guns to arrest them.

It was only when his laptop read *System Secure* in large red letters and Scott stepped away from the laptop that she relaxed even marginally.

“Hurry,” he whispered urgently, as he dropped to the floor and opened the first box.

Morgan followed suit, going to the opposite wall. She turned the handle on the first box, finding the supple gloves Scott had provided didn’t impede her dexterity at all. He had come prepared with all the right equipment. The thick metal door swung open, revealing a briefcase. She started to pull it out, but stopped when he spoke.

“That’s too big. Don’t worry about searching briefcases. You’re looking for a black case about the size of a cigar box.”

She bit back a retort about it would have been nice if he told her that to begin with, and closed the door, moving on to the next.

When he had said they would have six minutes to search all the boxes, she had imagined it was impossible, but the process went quickly. She had accessed at least fifteen before finding a vault containing a black box. She opened it and found a stunning diamond necklace. She laid the box by the floor in front of the vault and went on to the next one.

Soon, she met Scott on the third wall. “I found something,” she said, seeing by the tense set of his shoulders that he hadn’t. Other than the necklace, she hadn’t spotted anything else either.

He gripped her hand. “That’s my girl. Show me.”

She led him back to the only opened vault, lifting the box. He flashed the light across it, and his indrawn breath gave her hope. “Is that Pretorius’s?”

He shook his head. “No. The crafty bastard has a different hiding place. This is the *Eye of Destiny*.”

She frowned. “What?”

“It was a piece commissioned for a diva last year by her actor fiancé. It was supposed to be a wedding gift, or so I heard. When they broke up, no one uttered a word about what had happened to the necklace.” With a gloved hand, he stroked the

flawless, oval, cornflower-blue sapphire suspended in the center. It was half the size of his fist and surrounded by large diamonds that looked like sparkling eyelashes. "I wonder what it's doing on this ship?"

She ignored his speculation as a sick feeling rose in her stomach. "That means you still don't have Pretorius."

Scott sighed. "No, not yet." He stiffened suddenly. "Damn. Did you hear that?"

"No..." She trailed off as sound reached her — the sound of footsteps. "Oh, no. What do we do?"

"Don't panic," he said, getting to his feet. He still held the jewelry case, seemingly without thought. "Close that door and get under the desk. We'll have to hide and hope it's just the patrol coming a couple of minutes early."

While Morgan closed the vault and rushed to hide under the desk, which thankfully hid most of the foot space by its design, he hurried to disengage his laptop. It seemed like he had barely curled beside her under the desk and shut off the flashlights, setting the computer between them, when the sound of voices reached them, pausing right outside the office.

She tensed, and Scott's hand on her shoulder was an enormous relief, although she knew he couldn't do much to protect her if Security discovered them. This was a rogue operation.

"So, she's drunk off her ass, with her husband passed out on the bar. I'm the only one in the lounge, and she comes over to me, drops on my lap, and thanks me for protecting the ship."

His companion scoffed. "She thanked you? I thought you said this story was good."

"It is. After that, she offered me a blowjob...on the caveat I whip out my dick right there and let her suck with her husband not ten feet away."

"What did you do?"

"Am I stupid? I'm not going to turn down a blowjob. The piano player never batted an eye. In fact, he played music to accompany her..."

Morgan let his words wash over her. She remembered how to breathe again, and her indrawn breath escaped in a harsh exhalation. "What are they doing?"

"It sounds like they're shooting their mouths," Scott whispered. "I don't think they're here to investigate. As long as they don't come in, we're safe."

"How long will we be here?"

"Until they leave."

As the unseen man told his friend about his supposed blowjob, Morgan shifted positions, with her cheek against his thigh. Her hand brushed his cock, and the gloves didn't diminish her ability to feel his hardened cock. "Is his story turning you on?" she asked with a hint of outrage, albeit in a whisper.

A soft laugh escaped him. "Not at all. It's having you so close that's making my cock hard. Now, if you were the one offering the blowjob..." His hint wasn't exactly

subtle, especially when he shifted so that her mouth was next to the bulge at his fly, dislodging the laptop so that it lay against her leg. "Who knows how long we'll be here?"

She was still sick with fear, but had to admit she was also aroused. After pushing the ski mask off her face, she cautiously brought her hand to his zipper, lowering it carefully, to keep from making too much noise. The men outside the room continued talking without pause, and she sighed with relief.

His cock pushed against his briefs, demanding release. Morgan slowly freed it, and the head brushed against her lips as his cock jutted out. She started to put her mouth around him, feeling apprehensive about betraying her inexperience, but his hand on her head stopped her. At first, she thought the men were leaving and a combination of disappointment and relief swept through her at not having to go through with it.

Instead, he said, "Wait." Scott opened the jeweler's case holding the necklace commissioned by a man in love. "How would you like to wear three million dollars?" Apparently, he had been *really* in love.

Even though there was no illumination, other than that filtering in from the corridor where the men had snapped on a light, the necklace still sparkled. What harm would it do? They would return the necklace as soon as they finished. She nodded.

His fingers were quick and confident when he fastened the necklace around her neck. "It's beautiful," she said, stroking it.

His voice was little more than a breath when he said, "You make it beautiful, not the other way around."

She lowered her head again, taking the head of his cock into her mouth. Somehow, wearing millions of dollars in precious jewels around her neck gave her a measure of confidence, and she didn't hesitate. She took in as much of his cock as she could, swirling her tongue around the corona, pausing to flick against the tip. When he let out a groan, hastily cut off, she knew she was pleasing him.

She increased the tempo of her sucking, moving her head up and down, letting instinct guide her. His cock got harder when she plunged a finger into his briefs to stroke his balls. She gripped the base of his cock with her other hand, mentally reminding herself to suck quietly.

He tasted salty, but not unpleasant. As his fluid leaked into her mouth in steady streams, she swallowed it. It wouldn't be her beverage of choice, but it wasn't as repulsive as her friend Debra had inferred. She giggled inside.

"Morgan," he whispered, with an underlying note of warning, as his cock spasmed repeatedly.

His fluid filled her mouth, and she swallowed quickly, while still trying to maintain suction. The mask he wore muffled his heavy breathing, but did nothing to disguise the rapid rise and fall of his chest. She continued to suck until his cock grew flaccid. She turned her head and wiped her mouth discreetly on the back of her hand while he hid his cock. When she turned back, he surprised her with a quick kiss.

“Put your mask on,” he said, when lifting his head. “They’ve gone.”

She was relieved they could make their escape, but also annoyed he hadn’t said anything. Was his kiss enough acknowledgement? She didn’t know blowjob etiquette well enough to decide.

Laptop in hand, he left the recess under the desk first and grasped her hand, pulling lightly to signal her to follow. He released her hand when Morgan got to her feet, but she stayed close to him while they crossed the dark office. She hesitated with apprehension when he stepped into the hall, convinced security personnel would be waiting for them.

Her fear proved groundless. She followed him into the hall, stopping only when he paused to lock the door behind them. Her quick pace matched his as they left that section of the ship. It was only once they were ensconced in the relative safety of the elevator, secure enough to remove their masks and gloves, that she spoke. “Will they know you hacked into their system? Did you have time to get out completely when those men showed up?”

He nodded. “I designed the program to be an easy disconnect. All I had to do was hit Escape and all trace of my program interfacing with theirs disappeared. All the vault boxes closed behind us too. They have no reason to look at the footage that captured our presence when we first entered, since we took nothing. They’ll never know we were there.”

She looked down at his laptop, and her eyes fell on the jeweler’s box he held. She touched her neck, cursing when she felt the necklace. How could she have forgotten about it, even with all the excitement? The thing weighed a ton. “I’m still wearing the necklace, Scott.” Panic churned in her, and she grasped his shirt. “I stole the *Eye of Destiny*. No one will believe I didn’t mean to.” Tears burned behind her eyes. “They’ll review the tape for sure now. I’m going to prison for the rest of my life.”

His laugh did nothing to assuage her nerves. “What’s so funny? I’m a jewel thief. Don’t you understand? I’m no better than Pretorius.”

“Calm down.” His tone was level, and all trace of amusement had disappeared. “First, you’re not anything like that scum Pretorius. It was an honest mistake.” His fingers moved to the nape of her neck, and he unfastened the necklace. “Second, they wouldn’t identify you anyway, Morgan. All they’ll see is a slight form in black.”

“But—”

He didn’t let her finish. “Besides, you aren’t going to prison. I’ll return this as soon as I see you back to your cabin.”

Relief caused her knees to tremble, and she was weak with relief. She leaned against the wall of the elevator as Scott secured the necklace in its box. He had barely stuffed the box down his shirt when the lift doors opened. Fortunately, there was no one in the hall.

She hugged him, wanting to sob for receiving the reprieve, but determined to hide the reaction. “Thank you.” She pressed her mouth against his with more relief than

passion. "Thank you," she said again. Then she took a step back. "I don't want you to have to carry that any longer than possible. I'll be fine getting to my stateroom."

He inclined his head. "If you're sure you'll be fine, then I'll return this right now."

She frowned. "Will it be dangerous? Do you need me to come with you?" The last thing she wanted to do was return to the scene of the crime, so to speak, but she didn't want to endanger Scott.

He shook his head. "I'll be fine. I needed your help before because of the sheer number of boxes we had to search. Returning this will be a piece of cake." He cupped her face in his hand and placed a kiss against her nose. "Don't worry. All will be well."

The doors started to close, and she stepped off the elevator. "Be careful."

He gave her a crooked grin. "I'm a professional, babe. I'm always careful." He had time to give her a jaunty wave before the doors closed and the cab went down.

She wished she could share his confidence as she made her way back to the stateroom. Worry for Scott so consumed her that she didn't notice her mother hadn't returned yet, though it was past one in the morning.

Chapter 12

Morgan caught up with Scott above-deck. "Mother and Pretorius are visiting the Monteverde Cloud Forest Reserve. Are we following them?"

He snorted. "For what purpose? We've been his shadow for the past two days, trailing them around the ship and the stop at Fuerte Amador, Panama without finding even a hint of where he stored the diamonds." His anger was palpable, causing a vein in his forehead to throb.

She touched his arm, offering silent support. "They're probably in his luggage, just like you said."

"They had better be, or this trip was a waste." His lips skinned back over his teeth. "We have four days to catch him, Morgan. Once he's off the ship in San Diego, my jurisdiction ends."

She nodded, trying to hide her hurt. She knew Scott hadn't meant the voyage was a complete waste. He was only referring to his assignment. She knew he cared about her. The past two nights spent in his cabin told her that, even if he hadn't vocalized his feelings for her yet. He must be awaiting the successful outcome of his assignment before deepening their relationship. "Do you want to search his cabin while they're gone?"

He shook his head, just once. "No. It's too risky during the daytime."

She breathed a silent sigh of relief. She had looked forward to spending the day with Scott away from the ship. She had hoped he would tear himself away from Pretorius and the investigation for a few hours. "Do you want to go ashore? Puntarenas has several interesting attractions."

He grunted.

She persisted. "I'd like to go to the Manuel Antonio National Park, maybe go to Cathedral Point and explore the rain forest there."

Scott shrugged. "I don't know. How close is it to where your mother and Pretorius are going? He can't see me."

She smiled, sensing he was about to capitulate. "It has a separate tour bus and even leaves a half-hour after the one heading for Monteverde." She pouted her lips just slightly, moistening them with her tongue. "Will you come with me?"

"Yeah, I guess." He didn't sound interested.

Morgan rolled her eyes, resisting the urge to smack him. She knew Scott's focus remained on the investigation, but she wanted to spend the day pretending they were a normal couple that had met under normal circumstances. He could indulge her that much.

* * * * *

“Oh, my God,” Hannah squealed, putting up a hand to block her face as something brushed against it.

“Relax,” Lukas said. “It was only a Resplendent Quetzal. If you hurry, you’ll still see his striking green and red plumage before he flies away—assuming you can uncover your eyes.” His amusement was obvious in his tone.

She looked up quickly, catching a glimpse of the red and green bird as it flew high into a tree. A lizard on the ringed trunk of a nearby Cecropias tree caught her attention. She watched the yellow and green reptile dart up the tree, while an Emerald Toucanet harangued it from a branch above. Once the lizard disappeared behind one of the tree’s palmate leaves, the bird fell silent. “I can’t believe the variety of animals here. It’s more than I’ve seen in a lifetime.”

Even the slight annoyance of the mist constantly hovering around their feet didn’t detract from her pleasure. They had chosen to hike through the Cloud Forest in a guided tour, and their guide had been diligent about pointing out the various species. She didn’t know if she would remember an Emerald Toucanet from a Collared Redstart by the time she returned to Florida, but she was having fun.

Still, she couldn’t help wishing for a bit of privacy to indulge in a passionate exchange with Lukas. She could feel the clock ticking, and four days didn’t seem like much time for them.

It was almost as though he read her thoughts. He picked up her hand and pulled her closer to him. “If there was some way to stay here forever, I would make it happen. This is a magical place.” He sighed. “I would stay anywhere with you. Time is passing too quickly.”

She squeezed his hand. “I know. I was just thinking that.”

He smiled down at her. “Our minds are becoming one.”

She shook her head, but a pleased smile tilted her lips. “What am I thinking right now?”

Lukas cocked his head. “You’re thinking you would like to have your way with me in the mist.”

She laughed. “How perceptive.”

His expression turned serious. “Will you come visit me in South Africa? The landscape is different from this, but equally beautiful. I would show you my family’s holdings and take you on a tour of the country.”

She shook her head, reluctant to cast a somber inflection on the day, but feeling she must be honest. “You know I can’t. How would I explain it to Charles?”

He cursed, but then took a deep breath. “Very well. I understand you can’t come for a visit. That is too uncertain.” He pulled her off to the side of the trail, letting those behind them pass before speaking again. “What if I offered you a more permanent arrangement?”

Her brow furrowed. "What do you mean?"

"Will you come live with me in South Africa? I have a large estate outside of Johannesburg."

Her eyes widened. "Lukas—"

He touched her lips, pressing them closed. "Hear me out. I love you, Hannah. If I didn't the first moment I laid eyes on you, it happened the first time I spoke to you." His eyes closed briefly. "Making love with you is pure bliss. I don't want to give you up."

She swallowed, torn between the temptation his words stirred and common sense. "I can't do that."

"Why?" His eyes sparkled with mingled anger and frustration. "Why won't you? Do you not love me, Hannah?"

She looked away, refusing to answer a question she had deliberately avoided examining, even in her own mind. "Think about what you're saying."

"I have, *waardevol*. I know all the reasons why it wouldn't work, but in my heart," he lifted her hand, pressing it against his chest, "I know it would, because I love you."

His heart thumped steadily under her fingers, making her want to replace her hand with her cheek. She wanted him to hold her, but resisted her own urges. "How can you love me? You've only known me a few days."

"But I know everything about you. We've spent hours talking, laughing...making love. How can you not love me, Hannah?"

She looked away from his intense blue eyes. "I didn't say I don't, but it's just transient."

He shook his head, firm, but not angry, when he spoke. "You know that's not true."

She whipped her head around to meet his eyes. "Do I? I thought I loved Charles. I thought our marriage was strong, built on a solid foundation. How do I know our relationship would be any different?"

His eyes narrowed, and lines of anger bracketed his mouth. "I am a loyal man. I would remain faithful to our bond, and I would never betray you."

She nodded. "I know. I'm sorry. It's still a valid point, Lukas. How do I know our relationship would last if I uprooted my life to move to South Africa?"

He shook his head. "There are no guarantees, *waardevol*. All I can do is promise to love you for the rest of my life. The rest is up to fate."

Hannah sighed. "That isn't enough for me. Besides, there's Morgan to think of."

Lukas's shoulders slumped. "Yes. Your daughter must come before you." He lifted his head, and there was a hint of a smile on his lips. The sadness in his eyes was so well masked it was almost invisible. "We'll always have Costa Rica," he paraphrased.

"And the *Sea Princess*," she added with an air of lightheartedness she was far from feeling. As she followed Lukas back onto the trail, hurrying to catch up with the group,

she allowed her mind to worry at her conflict. Her heart urged her to accept Lukas's offer, but her head counseled against giving in to wild abandon. And with Hannah, her head always won. She was too practical to let it be otherwise.

* * * * *

Although she had expected the remainder of the day to be awkward, Lukas had surprised her. He had made a concerted effort to keep things light and flirtatious. She had responded in kind, and before she knew it, they were laughing again. It seemed impossible that it was almost time to return to the ship as they pulled up to the passenger depot where other passengers of the cruise ship were getting off the buses and vans that had taken them to various locales.

Hannah threaded her arm through Lukas's, covered by a flannel shirt, and snuggled closer. The sun was setting, and the coming night had brought a hint of coolness to the air, much to her surprise. He put his arm around her, drawing her closer.

She might not have noticed his slight stumble if she hadn't been pressed so close, but she wouldn't have missed the way he stiffened and paused, even if she was still walking beside him and not against him. "Lukas?"

His eyes remained focused off to their left, on a man who froze when he saw them, and then slipped into the crowd before she even had a chance to get a look at his face. "Lukas?" she asked again. "Is something wrong?"

He shook his head and looked down at her. "Just a phantom image, I hope."

She continued to frown up at him until he patted her hand.

"Never mind, *waardevol*. Let's return to my cabin and indulge in that Jacuzzi bath we planned during our trek."

* * * * *

"Shit," Scott cursed vigorously.

Morgan struggled to keep up with him as he made his way through the crowd and down the path to the port, where the *Sea Princess* gleamed in the twilight. "What's wrong?"

"He saw me. I know he did. Dammit!" He kicked at a rock in the path, and then muttered a curse under his breath. He lifted his foot to rub his large toe, exposed by the style of his sandal, where the rock had gouged his flesh.

Her stomach dropped. "Pretorius recognized you?" She groaned. "My mother —"

“My investigation.” His mouth tightened, and he continued his rapid pace back to the ship, leaving Morgan struggling to catch up.

When she did, she touched his shoulder. “Maybe he didn’t see you.”

“Maybe.” He didn’t sound optimistic about the possibility. “There’s nothing I can do if he did. I’ll just have to be more careful now to stay out of his line of sight.”

* * * * *

They never actually made it to the Jacuzzi. They were nowhere near the bathroom. Their hunger for each other overwhelmed them by the time they returned to Lukas’s suite. Their clothes seemed to melt away, as if by magic. Hannah couldn’t hold back a girlish squeal when he swept her into his arms and carried her to the low chaise lounge in the sitting room. At first, it didn’t look like a comfortable piece of furniture, but she changed her mind when he laid her on it.

The minimal back curved around to the right, offering an armrest for that side of her body. She stretched out, supporting her upper body against the rest, and parted her legs to entice Lukas—not that he needed any enticement. He immediately got to his knees, leaning forward to kiss her.

She opened her mouth, meeting his tongue with hers. Her hands latched into his hair, holding him closer. She sensed quiet desperation in him and realized, with a start, it mirrored her own emotions. Time truly was slipping away too quickly. She grew queasy just thinking about boarding the plane in San Diego and parting from Lukas forever.

She jumped with surprise and loosened her hold on his hair when he trailed his tongue across her chin, down her neck, and across her left breast. Hannah’s nipple came alive when his tongue flirted with it. The bud beaded to a hard point, and she arched her back, offering him more. She groaned with frustration when he declined, instead slipping lower.

Her stomach muscles quivered with anticipation as he licked a line down her navel, swirling briefly around her belly button, and slipped lower. She parted her thighs wider, giving his head room, as his tongue sought out her clit, nestled among a shield of curls. She moaned when he brought a hand to her pussy, to part her lips, so his tongue could slip inside.

When he flicked the tip of his tongue across the swollen hood, she stiffened. The fluttering sensation in her stomach increased, and little shockwaves seemed to radiate to her thighs. They increased in intensity when he drew the bud into his mouth and sucked with just enough pressure to almost be painful. Her body responded with a spasm, and she tightened her thighs around his head unconsciously.

He withdrew his mouth and lifted his head, chuckling. “I need room to work, *waardevol*.”

A blush heated her cheeks, but he missed it when he dipped his head to taste her again. She opened her thighs wider and formed fists of her hands, determined to endure the exquisite torture of his tongue teasing her. She shifted on the chaise, but kept her legs parted when Lukas's tongue explored her slit, before dipping into her opening.

She arched against his mouth, but concentrated on keeping her legs apart. She was almost grateful to have that mundane task to focus on. Otherwise, she suspected she would be a writhing, sobbing heap of mindless pleasure. There would be no coming back to her mind after her orgasm.

It was definitely a pleasurable way to go, but she wanted to savor the rest of her time with him. She focused on taking deep breaths, even as his marauding mouth caused a heavy dragging sensation in her stomach, as if her pussy was pulling it down. Small convulsions racked her continuously, and she was vaguely aware of the litany pouring from her. "Please, oh, please, please..."

She caught her breath as Lukas thrust a finger into her opening, while drawing her clit into his mouth, where he sucked it forcefully. Her body sensed impending release, and she couldn't seem to let out the breath she held until it came to her.

She shuddered then, and it seemed to release the floodgates. The small convulsions that had swept through her, tautening each of her nerve endings, now came in waves, breaking over her and making her entire body shake. She let out a harsh exhalation as her orgasm peaked, finding breathing possible again.

Even as she was recovering from her climax, Hannah reached for Lukas, wanting him with her for the next. It had been physically satisfying, but the orgasm lacked something that made it truly special: Lukas.

He covered her body with his own, covering her face with kisses, even as his cock nestled into her opening. His fingers parted her, easing the way, and then he surged inside her. "You were made for me, Hannah," he said, obviously straining to speak through the force of his pleasure.

She didn't respond, other than to bury her face in his chest, but only because she was physically incapable of forming words right then. Her mind supplied an easy agreement. Indeed, he did feel as if were made for her, and not just sexually. His personality and interests were a direct complement to hers. Why hadn't she met him first?

His fingers sought out her sensitive clit, stroking lightly in concert with his thrusts, mimicking each entry and withdrawal. Hannah locked her thighs around his, straining to pull him closer. Her womb convulsed, and another orgasm spiraled through her, gaining intensity. When Lukas cried out her name and spilled his satisfaction, the tremors in his cock triggered deeper ones in her. She managed to say his name in a breathless whisper as pleasure consumed her.

This orgasm was more intense than the last, simply because she held him close. His heartbeat echoed hers, and his hips continued to piston gently in time with hers as they

rode out the climax together. It was several minutes before Hannah became aware of anything besides the sounds of their mingled breathing, the racing rhythm of their hearts, and the way her sheath still held his cock in a tight grip.

Only one thing brought her back to awareness. It was like a dash of ice water on her heated skin. Lukas sagged carefully against her, supporting his weight on his arms. His lips brushed against her ear, and he whispered, "I love you." She stiffened, but couldn't answer, no matter how her rampant emotions urged her to. His words were a double-edged sword, causing her heart to sing with joy, while simultaneously cleaving it in two.

With an aborted sob, she scrambled away from him. She shook her head. "Don't say that."

"Hannah?" His eyes darkened with a mix of pain and frustration. "Do you hate to hear those words from me?"

"Yes," she said fervently, wincing when he flinched. "No." Tears streamed down her cheeks. "Hearing you say that only makes it harder for me. Do you understand?"

He cursed, getting to his feet. "How can I not? Do you not think this situation is difficult for me too? I have spent my life looking for the right woman to love, and now that I've found her, she doesn't want me."

She held out a trembling hand. "That isn't true. I do want you."

He lifted his cock. "This is what you want, isn't it? You don't want *me*."

She tried to restrain the impulse, but her feet carried her toward him. She put her arms around him, ignoring his stiff resistance. "I do, Lukas. If only I had met you first..." She trailed off, unsure how to voice the thoughts swarming in her head. Only one thing made sense to say, and she said it. Hannah sensed a weakening of her resolve even as she did so, but was unable to bear his pain. "I love you."

Gradually, his stiff posture relaxed, and his arms came around her. He murmured sweet nothings into her hair, while drawing her close. At that moment, the embrace was anything but sexual. It was simply two people in love, basking in the moment.

Eventually, they separated long enough to venture into the bathroom, where they shared a soak in the Jacuzzi tub. Lukas didn't seem to want to make love. He was content just having her within touching distance, stroking her hair, and pressing warm kisses to her lips between cleaning ablutions.

He was the first to get out. Hannah lifted her head from the bath pillow propped on the ledge, about to follow him.

"Stay, my darling." He shrugged on a toweling robe. "I need to make a call. You might as well relax while I do so." A grin flitted across his lips. "And now that we've satisfied one appetite, perhaps we should appease another?"

Her mind immediately conjured up all kinds of erotic possibilities, but the glint of sexual hunger faded from her eyes at his next words.

"I'm starving. We'll see about dinner once I've placed the call."

“Tease,” she accused with a smile, watching him leave. She couldn’t help wishing he hadn’t bothered with the toweling robe, so she could enjoy the sight of his taut buttocks as he walked across the Grecian marble floor.

She leaned her head against the pillow again, but the bath had palled without him there to share it with her. Hannah released the plug and stood up. She stepped onto the fluffy bathmat and dried off quickly, before taking the other robe from the rack. The tile was cool against her damp feet as she padded from the bathroom and entered the bedroom.

Lukas was still on the phone, with his back to her. “I know it was Turner. I’ve been hounded by him enough to recognize the whelp, even though we’ve never been formally introduced.” He paused, obviously listening to the other side of the conversation. “Yes, he could prove a distraction. The last thing I want him doing is interfering with my business in San Diego.”

Hannah walked forward, dropping onto the bed. She tucked a strand of damp hair behind her ear and smiled at him. After a moment of distraction, he smiled back.

“Yes, Koenraad, that would be an excellent idea.” After another hesitation, he said, “Yes, that will work. Goodbye.”

When he hung up, Hannah touched his hand. “Is everything all right?”

His eyes were shadowed, but his smile seemed genuine. “Nothing more than a minor inconvenience, I hope, and certainly not worth ruining our evening.” He put his arm around her, pulling her closer. “About dinner...shall we dine out or,” he wagged his brows, “Stay in?”

A throaty chuckle escaped her, and she knew she would be satisfying more than one hunger tonight. “We should definitely stay in.”

Chapter 13

Morgan was getting a little tired of Scott's attitude, and she intended to tell him that—if he would open his door. He hadn't made any effort to contact her since their return from Puntarenas two days ago. She had tried to get him to go ashore with her at Acapulco, but he had ignored her knocks on his door. Likewise, he hadn't bothered to respond to the message she relayed through the ship's operator.

Enough was enough, she decided, as she stormed down the hallway to the elevator on B-Deck. She would pound on his door all night if she had to. He couldn't keep hiding from her. Whatever had upset him in Costa Rica, he owed her an explanation.

She pressed the button impatiently, silently fuming at how long it took the car to reach her floor. She was so preoccupied with her righteous indignation that she failed to give more than a cursory examination to her companion. She noted he was a few years older than she, with dark hair extending to below his collar and a dark tan, but the brim of his khaki hat hid his face.

When the elevator stopped, she automatically stepped forward, until she realized she was on C-Deck. She tried to step back, but the man was suddenly behind her, propelling her forward. She opened her mouth to scream, but his large hand covered her lips, preventing her from uttering a cry. She tried to resist as he forced her forward, but his breadth and strength overwhelmed her. He lifted her into his arms and carried her at a brisk pace down the corridor.

She prayed for someone to turn the corner and see the picture they presented. Even someone who was drunk after a late night of celebrating, wouldn't fail to realize she was being kidnapped—but for what purpose?

Several possibilities occurred to her, and they were all repulsive. When the man lowered her to her feet, clamping her against his body with a hard hold, while he fumbled to retrieve a swipe card from his pocket, the most terrifying one emerged. He was going to rape her. No, she tried to protest, even as she struggled physically to escape his seemingly effortless hold. Things like this didn't happen on nice cruise lines, and especially not to her.

A momentary feeling of hopelessness overwhelmed her, transporting her back to the days when she had been housebound and bedridden, fighting a disease she couldn't see, not even certain if she would live to her ninth birthday.

The despair seizing her brought on a renewed determination to break free, and she almost succeeded when she slammed one of her three-inch stiletto heels onto his toe. He grunted and cursed in a language she didn't understand. His grip slackened briefly, and she wrenched away from him. She made it all of two steps before he slammed her

back against him, lifted her, and carried her through the door he had finally managed to open.

The sound of the door slamming behind him caused her already racing heart to accelerate to overdrive. Morgan attempted to wrench away again, and to her surprise, he let her take a step back. Still, her kidnapper kept his hand across her mouth and held her loosely against him, with his arm around her waist.

She inhaled, taking in the scent of his cologne. Her heart fluttered, but not with fear. She met his eyes under the brim of his hat, and the stark gray color chilled her, while his rugged features sent tingles down her spine. Her eyes widened with dismay at her reaction. What was wrong with her? She wasn't actually attracted to this man, was she? How could she be? He was a rapist.

"You keep dangerous company," he said in a low tone. His voice bore the trace of an accent she couldn't place.

She tried to wrench away, to free her mouth. Morgan was suddenly desperate to escape him. She managed to open her lips wide enough to fasten her teeth around the meat of his palm. She bit down as hard as she could, causing him to curse and release her.

She froze for half a second, indecisive about whether to try to squeeze past him and run for the door. Should she just scream? Surely, someone would hear her, despite the lateness of the hour. Security would come to investigate. She opened her mouth while trying to dodge away from him as he came forward, cradling his bleeding hand.

The beginning of a scream escaped Morgan before he caught up with her, coming at her with a leap. His hand clamped around her mouth as they fell to the floor. His other hand was there to cradle the back of her head, protecting her from serious injury, even as they made impact with the thin carpet.

Her breath left her in a whoosh, and tears of shock blurred her vision. Her buttocks stung from the jolt against the floor, and dull pain throbbed up her back.

Despite her aches, she attempted to dislodge his hold. She was determined not to let the animal rape her, and she bucked with all her strength.

"Cease your struggles, Morgan Hays." He did not attempt to hide his irritation. "I mean no harm to you."

She didn't believe that for a moment. She redoubled her efforts to free herself, but he seemed to hold her effortlessly. Her chest rose and fell with her exertions, causing her breasts to rub against his chest. To her shame, they beaded with awareness.

He glanced down briefly, and then quickly looked up again. "Your relationship with Turner puts you in danger. If you persist in your association, it could get you killed."

She flinched at the threat. She shook her head, trying to free his hand from her mouth. To her surprise, he released her briefly. "You can't frighten me."

He sighed heavily. "I thought not. I knew this was a waste of time."

She blinked, wondering if he had moved beyond threats to action. She tensed, preparing to withstand him as long as possible. He surprised her with his next move.

He got to his feet and leaned forward to offer her his hand, in a mocking display of gallantry. Morgan took it, but pulled with all her might, bringing the man sprawling onto the floor beside her. The move backfired when he ended up half-lying on her. She wet her dry lips, frozen with shock.

He chuckled. "I had no idea you were so eager for a real man, *engel*. Is Turner that unsatisfying?"

She glared at him. "Get off me, you pig." She followed the order by shoving against him as hard as she could. He seemed unaffected by her attempts to dislodge him, but complied immediately by getting up. He didn't offer his hand this time. He seemed to have little interest in her either way while he placed several feet of distance between them. Conversely, his lack of attention irritated her as she slowly got to her feet and eased toward the door. He seemed not to care that she was trying to escape.

Nerves made her palms slick when she grasped the knob to turn it. Her heart lurched when he came up behind her, turning her to face him. The experience was surreal, and she didn't know whether to be frightened or angry when he bracketed his hands on either side of her head.

"I've decided to take you up on that unspoken invitation, *engel* – given when your nipples hardened and you wet those pouty lips while I laid atop you." His lips descended on hers, covering them forcefully, before she could protest.

Morgan pushed against his chest, even as her lips softened under his. Her nipples tautened further, pressing against the fabric of her dress, making it impossible to deny her reaction to the man who had taken her hostage. Even as she tried to push him away, her body molded itself to his. Her pussy dampened when his hard cock pulsed against her stomach. Had she become such a wanton that any man could arouse her? What about Scott?

Sudden awareness of what she was doing flooded her, and Morgan turned away her head, panting. She couldn't meet his eyes, and her hand shook as she fumbled for the knob. "Don't come near me again."

He lifted a shoulder. "Be sensible and steer clear of Turner. Players in this game have little regard for innocents, *engel*. You will not like what happens to you if you continue to assist him."

Words of bravado hovered on the tip of her tongue, but she succeeded in opening the door and abandoned the idea of speaking them. With a small sob, Morgan stepped aside and threw it open, hitting the man in the shoulder as she fled into the corridor. With tears scalding her eyes and blurring her vision, she half-ran, half-stumbled to the lift. When it opened, she pressed D by feel and allowed a sob to escape when the door closed behind her.

She scrubbed her cheeks with her hands while the elevator carried her to Scott's deck. She didn't feel anywhere close to composed when she stepped out and wondered

how obvious it would be to anyone she might pass. Fortunately, the corridor remained clear, and she made her way to Scott's cabin without encountering anyone else.

She was prepared to knock on his door all night, as she had decided earlier. It seemed even more important now to see him than it had earlier. He had to know that man had threatened her. Scarlet stained her cheeks when she remembered what else he had done. She withered internally with shame as she lifted a hand to his door. She still didn't understand how she could have reacted that way.

She didn't have much time to ponder it. After only a light tap, Scott's door opened a crack. She squinted, trying to see him in the shadows. "Scott?"

He opened the door and pulled her through quickly, pausing only to examine both ends of the corridor before slamming the door behind them.

She blinked, noticing the only light came from Scott's laptop he had left open on his nightstand. "Where have you been?"

He came up behind her, putting his arms around her waist. His hold was almost too tight when he clasped her to him. "Morgan," he said into her hair. His voice broke. "It's over, baby."

She tried to turn her head to look at him, but found herself held immobile. "What's over?"

"Pretorius saw me in Puntarenas. I thought he had, but I wasn't sure." As he spoke, Scott's hands roamed over her body, pausing to squeeze one of her breasts, before sliding lower, to cup her stomach.

"How do you know?" Her stomach quivered as he pressed his hand into it, but not with excitement. Rather, it was an edgy fear she experienced. Something about Scott's current mood made her tense.

"I tapped his phone the night we searched his stateroom. I recorded a call he placed to his nephew. Koenraad Pretorius has now boarded the ship."

The blood drained from Morgan's face, and she swayed. If Scott hadn't been holding her so close, she would have fallen. "Koenraad Pretorius?" she repeated with shaking lips. It all made sense. The man who had accosted her even looked like a younger version of his uncle, except for the color of his eyes. The warning he had imparted suddenly took on new meaning, when she realized she and her mother were both in danger.

"It's over," he said once more, with more anger this time. He cursed, and his roaming fingers became more insistent as they explored her body through the Lycra dress she had worn their first night together.

"What's over?" she asked again, with an audible tremble. She tried to deny the fear stabbing through her, but the hairs on the back of her neck stood up, and her stomach churned with nausea. She bit back a cry when he twisted one of her nipples.

"The investigation," he growled, as he buried a hand in her hair and pulled back her head, revealing her throat. His lips sought out the tender spot where her neck and

shoulder met. "I got the orders tonight," he said, just before biting her with more force than passion.

She wanted to free herself from his hold, but guilt assailed her. What was wrong with her? He needed her, and all she could think of was leaving him. After the way she had behaved so shamefully with Koenraad Pretorius, she owed Scott anything he asked of her. She swallowed her doubt and snuggled closer. "I'm so sorry. I know how hard you worked."

He lifted his head, and his hand left her hair to press into her stomach, urging her buttocks to cradle his pulsing cock. "Those bastards ruined it all. I'll never recover those diamonds now, baby."

Awkwardly, she reached a hand behind her to touch his waist. "What can I do?"

"I need you. I need to feel something besides this rage right now." Scott propelled her toward the bed, bending her facedown into the mattress, so that her knees were on the floor. "I need to know you're still here for me, Morgan."

"I am." The comforter muffled her voice, and she braced herself on her hands so she could lift her upper body a few inches off the bed. She yelped with surprise when Scott pushed her dress up to her waist. His fingers sought out her pussy through the cotton fabric of her pink underwear. Surely, he didn't mean to make love to her while they were both dressed? "Scott? What are you doing?"

He didn't answer her tentative question verbally. Instead, he wrenched her panties down around her thighs, and his fingers pushed into her insistently.

Morgan squirmed at the intrusion. She wasn't ready for him, and it hurt to have his fingers probing her. She opened her mouth to protest, but a moan escaped instead, when Scott's fingers gentled, and he started circling her clit with his thumb. Dampness spread through her, easing his passage. Her hips thrust backward to meet his fingers, and she writhed with a combination of pleasure and shame. How could she respond this way to two different men in less than an hour?

Despite her inner turmoil, she had no difficulty physically responding to Scott as he stroked her clit while thrusting his fingers into her opening. She grew wetter, and her small cries of pleasure interspersed Scott's ragged breathing. Her pussy spasmed around his hand, and she bucked her hips, urging him in deeper. His fingers pushed as deep into her as he could get them, and her pussy contracted around them. She sobbed as convulsions raged through her.

At some point during her climax, she collapsed against the bed, bracing her thighs against the edge. It took her a moment to realize he was no longer behind her. She turned her head to look for him and saw him taking protection from the nightstand. She started to roll over, but he returned before she had moved very far.

His hands settled on her hips, holding her in that position. "I need you," he said again, with urgency.

Her heart melted, and she parted her thighs wider, giving him more room. It was disconcerting to have him make love to her from behind. She missed seeing his

expression. In fact, she craved looking into his eyes when his body fused with hers, but he seemed to want it this way. She repeated to herself that she had no right to protest, after practically fucking a stranger.

Even as she acknowledged to herself that was too harsh, that she hadn't done more than kiss Pretorius's nephew, Scott had sheathed his cock and was sliding into her. She was still tight, and it hurt to have him fill her. She relaxed as he plunged into her and withdrew, repeating the process several times. She had just begun thrusting against him in return when he withdrew his cock completely from her pussy.

She turned her head, catching a glimpse of part of the scene in the mirror above his dresser. He wore an expression of concentration, but there was a trace of something else. Her insides squirmed when her brain tried to identify it as contempt. She blinked, and his expression had changed to passion. She must have imagined the derision. She waited for him to continue, wondering why he had hesitated.

Her eyes widened when he parted her buttocks, and his thumb slid over her anus. She shook her head, but his thumb moved down, finding the opening of her pussy. He entered her, thrusting for a moment, before removing his appendage. Then his thumb was back at her anus, pushing into the opening, widening the snug passage.

"Scott." She couldn't hold in a whimper. She didn't want this.

He leaned forward, pressing a kiss between her shoulder blades. "You'll like it."

She wanted to tell him no. A small voice inside warned her to stop this now, but the voice of guilt blocked it out. She didn't want Scott to want her this way, but he needed her, and she deserved whatever he did to her, after the way she had behaved. This was her punishment for feeling something for another man when she loved Scott.

She gritted her teeth when his cock pushed against the opening. He entered quickly, not giving her time to adjust to his size or the intrusion. She cried out with pain as he thrust into her, but he seemed beyond hearing. Morgan drew in her lower lip and bit down until she tasted blood, struggling to withstand the pain.

To her surprise, it soon eased. Scott's thrusts had slowed down, and he was saying her name constantly, in a soft tone. She stiffened with surprise when he moved a hand under their bodies, seeking out her clit. Her body reacted, and she thrust against his hand, as his hips followed, pushing her forward, before releasing.

His thrusts increased again, but it didn't hurt any longer. His fingers gliding over her clit blocked out any discomfort she might have experienced, and she moaned low in her throat when her pussy convulsed. She stiffened as the convulsion tightened her anus around his cock, inciting a flash of pain. Before she had time to think about it, Scott's cock pulsed inside her, and her name became a grunt passing through his lips.

The warmth of his ejaculate reached her insides, even through the condom. Her pussy clenched, and she could feel her orgasm coming. She held her breath, readying herself for release.

She needn't have bothered. Scott withdrew from her anus, and his fingers slipped from her pussy, leaving her unfulfilled. He went to the bathroom without speaking, and

she tried to stand. Her legs shook from being in an awkward position for so long, and she settled for pulling up her underwear while she turned onto her back. She heard the shower turn on and knew he wouldn't be joining her for a few minutes.

Tears burned the backs of her eyes. She shivered at the slimy feeling coming over her. She was just like an actress in a porno movie—used and discarded. She tried telling herself it was ridiculous to feel that way. Scott had gotten her off the first time. She frowned, knowing it wasn't so much that she hadn't come the second time. It had more to do with his attitude. He seemed so callous when he pulled out of her body and disappeared into the bathroom.

A tear rolled down her cheek, and she brushed it away quickly. She didn't want Scott to see her crying. He'd had so much bad news already, and she knew he hadn't deliberately meant to hurt her. He needed comfort, and she had provided it. She couldn't expect him to be thinking of her needs right now, when everything he had worked so hard for was slipping away.

Besides, you deserved to be treated like a whore. That's what you are, whispered a nasty voice in her mind. She unconsciously shook her head, trying to deny the truth of the words, but it was impossible. After all, she had to believe the evidence. In two weeks, she had become a slut who would respond to any man, apparently. She deserved whatever humiliation she received.

Even more damning to her previously perceived self-image was how much she had enjoyed Scott taking her that way, just as her body had responded when that criminal kissed her. What was wrong with her? Why was she so depraved?

She heard the water turn off and quickly dried her tears. She struggled to compose her face into a mask of pleasure. By the time Scott returned to her, wearing a towel around his waist sarong-style, she had managed at least a wan smile.

He sat down on the bed beside her. Beads of water from his damp hair trickled down his chest, pearling on his tanned skin. With a shaky finger, Morgan wiped away a drop of water in what she hoped was a sexy motion. "What will you do now?"

He shrugged. "I'm supposed to keep a low profile until Cabo San Lucas. I'll meet a contact there for debriefing. Then I'll fly to Lyon, France to find out if I'm still an agent with Interpol."

She got into a sitting position, scooting closer to him. "Why wouldn't you be?"

"I've blown my cover and wasted two years of investigation, not to mention the mounting costs of following Pretorius." He hung his head. "Not only that, I've tipped off the murderer to my presence. He won't make the drop now."

"Does that mean my mother is safe?"

He nodded with a jerking motion. "Yes. It really is over. Pretorius will get off the ship in San Diego with a fortune in stolen diamonds, which he'll fence elsewhere, when the heat dies down. Meanwhile, I return home empty-handed." A tear sparkled on his lashes. "I've embarrassed my family, and I've proven right those bastards who criticized my uncle for getting me in at such an early age."

He slammed his hand into his thigh. "Dammit. I wanted this so badly, Morgan. If only I'd gotten the diamonds, at least I'd have something to show for all the work." Scott shook his head. "I can't get them though. If I go near Pretorius and things end violently, I would definitely lose my badge."

Her mouth opened, and the words came out before she could call them back. "Let me go then. He and my mother have taken to dancing the night away. She doesn't usually come back to the cabin until three a.m." She saw his eyes widen, and his mouth opened to protest. "I can do this. I want to do this." Her stomach dropped when she told the lie. Going to Pretorius's stateroom to recover stolen diamonds was the last thing she wanted to do.

He drew her into his arms suddenly, pressing kisses across her face. "I don't deserve you. Despite everything that's gone wrong on this investigation, it was worth it just to meet you." With a damp hand, he pushed strands of hair off her face. "I love you."

Her heart beat an unsteady rhythm, and her eyes blurred. Thinking he loved her and hearing him confirm it were two completely different states of being. The difference between misery and perfect happiness. "I love you too." If all she had to do to make him happy again were help him finally catch Pretorius, she wouldn't hesitate. "Now, tell me what to do." The note of confidence in her tone pleased her. She barely noticed the way her stomach clenched with nerves.

Chapter 14

Morgan clutched the handheld x-ray device in one hand, and the lock picking gun in her other hand. Scott had explained how it worked in meticulous detail, while warning her it was illegal for her to have one. The LockAid Gun was strictly for use by law enforcement personnel and professional locksmiths. Considering the magnitude of other laws she planned to break to assist Scott's investigation, that was the least of her worries.

She slipped the needle-shaped pick into the lock and squeezed the trigger. That same clicking sound she remembered from before resulted, and she tensed, anticipating someone hearing her. She scanned the corridor while squeezing the trigger again.

She hoped it wasn't as loud as it seemed when she depressed the trigger a third time. The pick jiggled loosely, and she gave the knob a cautious twist, finding it turned under her hand. She stuffed the LockAid gun into the small purse threaded over her neck and shoulder, shoved the bag behind her back, and carefully opened the door to Pretorius's room.

She squeezed through the slight opening she made and fumbled for the light switch. A gasp escaped her when the bedside lamps came on and revealed the last thing she wanted to see.

Her eyes first registered her mother lying asleep, with her hair spread over the pillow. The bare flesh revealed by the light blanket did nothing to hide Hannah's state of undress. She turned to harangue Pretorius for seducing her mother, but her breath caught in her throat. He had a small handgun pointed at her.

He looked troubled when he reached for the phone. As he spoke quietly into the receiver, Hannah stirred beside him. When she opened her eyes, they moved toward Morgan, and she cried out with shock.

Morgan stood there glaring at her mother. How could she betray Daddy like this, with that man? She turned her glower to Pretorius and noticed he had lowered the gun, but hadn't put it away. Her feelings of anger lessened, and she was aware of the danger. "Mother," she said in a shaking voice, "He has a gun."

Hannah didn't react with the alarm she had expected. Instead, she pulled the sheets up to her neck, belatedly hiding the evidence that she was naked. "What are you doing here, Morgan?"

"Mother, he has a gun," she said again, with more urgency.

"I know," she said with remarkable calm. "He has to protect himself."

Her eyes widened. "My God! Are you so enthralled by him that you think it's okay for him to do what he does?"

Hannah frowned, and her confusion was obvious. "What are you talking about?"

The door opening drowned out Morgan's reply. She stiffened when she saw the man who had taken her into his cabin earlier in the evening. Her cheeks burned with embarrassment, even as her nipples beaded, seeking his fingers. She ripped her gaze from him to look at her mother again. "They're going to kill us."

Lukas chuckled. It wasn't sinister, as she might have expected. Rather, it held a note of amusement. "We won't be killing anyone, my dear girl." He turned to look at Hannah, lifting her hand. "Hannah, darling, this is my nephew, Koenraad. I told you he would be boarding the ship in Cabo San Lucas, but he was able to catch an earlier flight and join us at Acapulco."

Morgan watched with a sense of disbelief as Hannah inclined her head and murmured a greeting. Her stomach churned with nausea when she contemplated the idea that her mother knew the Pretoriuses were criminals and didn't care. Could she be in on the scheme? Why not? She had casually betrayed her wedding vows. What were a few laws compared to that?

She swallowed down a trail of bile working its way up her throat. Morgan reversed a step, pressing her back to the wall. She eyed each of them warily, longing for Scott to burst in and rescue her. She didn't doubt he would if he knew something had gone wrong, but she hadn't yet had a chance to slip on the wireless headset that would allow her to communicate with him. She was alone in this, unless he realized something unplanned had happened.

"Why have you come here?" Koenraad asked. He showed no sign of remembering the moments of passion they had shared. "Did Turner send you?"

Hannah frowned. "What's going on? Who is Turner?"

"He's the jewel smuggler I told you about, *waardevol*."

Morgan gasped, with outrage instead of fear. "You liar!" She turned fully toward her mother, keeping her back to Koenraad. "Scott is an Interpol agent, Mother. He's been trying to capture Pretorius for two years." She turned to Lukas, stabbing her finger in his direction. "He's the jewel thief." She waited for her mother's shock.

Instead, Hannah shook her head, and a small laugh escaped her. "Lukas, a thief? Don't be silly."

Morgan's eyes flashed. "If you don't believe me, look in his case. Scott says he has a bag of diamonds he's trying to fence. You're supposed to be his mark, Mother," she said with a hint of superiority. How could Hannah be so blind?

"If you will allow me a moment of modesty, I would be happy to show you the contents of my case, Miss Hays," Lukas said with stiff politeness. "Please close your eyes."

As he started to slide from the bed, she quickly closed her eyes, while Koenraad turned his back. She wasn't at all anxious to see the man in the nude, even if it meant leaving herself vulnerable.

After what seemed like an eternity, he said, "You may open your eyes now. Please come closer, Miss Hays."

Morgan approached the bed, conscious of Koenraad trailing behind her. Hannah had taken a moment to slip on a robe identical to Pretorius's, and she sat on the edge of the bed. She seemed to be avoiding Morgan's eyes, and a flush stained her cheeks. Morgan got a sense of satisfaction in knowing her mother was ashamed of her own behavior.

With efficient movements, Lukas unzipped the large case, revealing a few personal items, empty compartments, and papers, but no velvet jewelers' bags. He even turned it upside down to shake the contents onto the comforter. "Would you like to examine the bag for yourself, to check for secret compartments?" His suggestion obviously amused him, since he didn't show even a hint of anger or worry.

She shook her head, feeling doubt creep in. "I don't understand. He was certain they must be in your luggage. After we found nothing in the wall safe in this suite, and then the valuables' office—"

Koenraad was suddenly beside her, holding her arm tightly. "He entered the office? Did he take anything?"

She glared at him. "Don't touch me." She jerked free, surprised when he released her so easily. She glared at him. "If Scott found the diamonds, do you think I'd be here now?"

"What are you doing here? And just who is this Scott person?" Hannah's voice was firm, making it clear she expected an answer. She turned to Pretorius. "Is he really a thief?"

Lukas nodded. "I'm afraid so. The young man has been persistent in his attempts to acquire some of our fortune. He first appeared in Johannesburg three years ago, and he's been a thorn in our side ever since."

"This time, we're stopping him for good," Koenraad said with cold finality.

Morgan shivered. "You can't just kill him! People will know...Interpol will know it was you." She frowned when Lukas Pretorius walked toward her. She stiffened when he stopped before her and tried to take her hands. She backed away. "Stay away from me. You might have fooled my mother, but I know what you are."

He shook his head. "It's you who has been fooled, Miss Hays. Scott Turner, a.k.a. Sean Moyer, has convinced you to be his accomplice in a crime."

"Morgan, no—"

Lukas turned slightly toward her. "It's all right, Hannah. We will not be pressing charges against your daughter. She was duped."

Morgan shook her head. "No, you're lying. You're the thief. You and that, that...sex maniac," she spat out, turning toward Koenraad. "Scott's going to arrest you. You won't kill anyone else."

Lukas recoiled, and his look of befuddlement appeared genuine. He was a consummate actor, she reminded herself. Instinct propelled her to seek out the door, and she backed toward it, keeping a suspicious eye of the other occupants of the room, even her mother, who had risen and was coming toward her, wrapped in the bed sheet. When she felt the knob under her hand, she twisted and pulled it open. "You can't get away this time," she said, barely aware of the note of panic in her voice.

She stumbled into the corridor, finding a margin of security, but also surprised they had let her get out of the room. She didn't hesitate to turn and run away from them. A slight throbbing in her buttocks reminded her of the humiliation of having Scott taking her anally, and her doubt increased. If he really loved her, how could he treat her so indifferently?

She shook her head and clamped her hands to her ears to drown out her internal voice, not even aware of dropping the handheld x-ray device. She bypassed the lift and shoved open the door to the stairwell. She plunged down the stairs recklessly, and the hairs on her neck stood up when she realized someone was following her, at a more sedate pace.

If she got to Scott, she would be safe. She managed to increase her pace, praying the high-heels she wore wouldn't send her hurtling to her death and make the task of killing her easier for either Pretorius.

By the time she arrived at D-Deck, her heart raced in her ears, and her breathing was ragged with fear and exertion. She pulled open the door and raced into the hallway. As her feet took her closer to Scott, the sound of footsteps behind her had her craning her neck. She cried out when she saw Koenraad bearing down on her. The arrogant bastard wasn't even running to keep up.

She reached Scott's door and pounded with all her strength. The door swung open, and her heart dropped into her stomach. As anxious as she had been to reach him, now she couldn't make her feet take her into the darkened room. She held out a hand to push open the door wider, hoping to find Scott waiting with a gun drawn, ready to arrest Koenraad Pretorius.

The room was too dark to make out any details. She still held a faint hope of finding him hiding in the shadows when she turned on the light. Koenraad appeared beside her. She should have been terrified, but a strange numb haze swept over her. It was ridiculously easy to lean against him when he offered support. They walked across the threshold together, and he flicked on the light.

Illumination revealed a spotlessly neat room. It looked like it was waiting for a guest to check in. There was no evidence anyone had recently stayed here. Somehow, she broke her paralysis and moved away from Koenraad to check the bathroom. The first sob swept through her when she saw it was empty, save for a message on the mirror.

Koenraad joined her, and he cursed when he saw the symbol on the mirror.

"What is it?" she asked, unaware of how her voice trembled. Tears sparkled in her eyes, but she blinked them away. "I don't understand."

"It's an eye." He pointed to the drawing of an eye on the mirror, done in Morgan's own lipstick. "As in, the *Eye of Destiny*."

She blinked. "What?"

"It's a very expensive piece of jewelry Lukas was to deliver to a client, and it contained the only jewels he brought with him on this ship. There is no bag of diamonds." Koenraad's hand made a meaty splat when he slammed it against the Formica counter. "The son-of-a-bitch stole the necklace."

Her head spun, and she swayed. His arms were there, bracing her, holding her up. "No, this can't be happening." She looked up at him, realizing all her fear of him had melted away. She pleaded with her eyes. "He's with Interpol. He needed my help—"

"—to steal a three million dollar necklace," Koenraad said, almost gently. "Scott Turner is not who he claimed, Morgan."

Her knees buckled, and she ended up on the floor before he could catch her. "I stole it. Omigod, I stole it." She looked up at him with tears streaming down her cheeks, as he knelt beside her. "He fooled me into taking it for him."

"Calm down." His fingers were gentle when they pushed the hair off her face. "Tell me what happened."

The story spilled from her, amid sobs and self-recrimination. Humiliation seared her until she squirmed with internal heat. How could she have been so stupid? She was going to rot in prison while Scott partied his life away from the proceeds of the necklace she had been stupid enough to steal. And, God, she had even sucked his cock before she stole it! She held back that piece of information, refusing to share just how deeply he had deceived her.

"All isn't lost. He must still be on the ship. We'll catch him before he disembarks in Cabo San Lucas." Koenraad got to his feet and helped her up. "I'm sure he hasn't fenced the necklace yet."

"I'm going to prison." Her stomach churned, and she had the urge to vomit. Fortunately, she hadn't eaten for several hours, and the feeling passed with a few deep breaths.

"No." He shook his head for emphasis. "Turner is the thief. You were misled. Uncle Lukas won't let anyone arrest you."

His voice was soothing, and she allowed it to lull her into a numbed state. She let him guide her, with his arm around her waist. He took her out of Scott's cabin and to the lift. He kept up a steady stream of reassurances as they rode to B-Deck, but Morgan didn't hear them. They blurred into a whisper of calm, and her eyes seemed to have weights tied to the lids.

He extracted her swipe card from her purse to open the door, and then led her into her room. She heard him telling her to go in the bathroom and change into comfortable

clothes, but she couldn't get her body to move. She watched him with wide eyes as he directed her toward the bed and knelt in front of her to remove her shoes.

"Do you want me to help you?" He smiled, and his gray eyes changed. They were now melted silver, instead of cold ice.

She wanted to answer, but her tongue was thick. He must have taken her lack of response for assent, because he stripped off her dress with quick movements and helped her into the pajama pants and T-shirt lying across the foot of her bed, where she had left them that morning. His eyes didn't move lower than her chin, and he had an air of efficiency about him during the process.

Like a child, she let him tuck her into bed. A small smile curved across her lips when he brushed back her hair and pressed a kiss to her forehead. She snuggled into the covers and watched him lift the phone.

He dialed quickly. When someone answered—she presumed Lukas—he gave a succinct summary of what she had told him. He added, "She's resting now. I think she's in a mild state of shock. I'll stay with her until her mother gets here. Then we'll tear this ship apart for Turner." He hung up the phone and sat down on the edge of her bed.

Sleep was catching up quickly, and Morgan decided he was right. She was in shock. She liked the protective layer it gave her, buffeting her from the truth of what she had done, and how gullible she had been. Her heart shattered into a million pieces when she realized just what Scott had taken from her—what she had voluntarily given him.

Tears streamed down her face, and she was aware of his thumbs wiping them away, although she didn't feel the physical sensation.

"Why are you crying, *engel*?" he asked in a husky voice.

"Why couldn't I have met you first?" she asked softly, as her eyelids closed, and she drifted into sleep.

Chapter 15

Morgan came awake suddenly, with surprising mental clarity, considering the state she had been in last night. She almost expected to find Koenraad at the foot of her bed, still keeping watch. Instead, she saw her mother reading by the window. Anger swelled at the sight of her, when she relived the experience of discovering Hannah's fallibility. How could her mother have behaved so shamefully?

Before she could begin a tirade that mirrored her anger, her mother's words brought her up short. "Lukas and Koenraad, along with most of the security personnel on the ship, caught Scott Turner this morning, when he tried to sneak off the ship in a disguise."

She swallowed a lump in her throat, finding it almost impossible to speak civilly to her mother. "The *Eye of Destiny*? Did they recover it?"

Hannah nodded. She closed her book and got up to come closer to Morgan's bed. "Yes, it's back safely with Lukas." She sat down, seemingly not aware of the way Morgan recoiled when she reached forward to brush the hair off her forehead. "How did this happen, sweetie?"

The endearment caused Morgan's mouth to curl, as she imagined Hannah using it with her lover. "It's all your fault. I was trying to protect you." A thrill of victory shot through her when she saw her mother blanch. "If you hadn't been so wrapped up in Pretorius, you would have realized something was wrong."

Hannah spoke with surprising calm. "This isn't my fault, Morgan."

Her mouth dropped open at the contradiction. "How can you say that? If you hadn't been so busy fucking a stranger, betraying my father—" She cut off with a squeal of surprise when Hannah's palm connected with her cheek. She cradled her face, feeling more of a sting of shock than pain from the slap. "How dare you?"

"How dare you?" Hannah countered quietly. "You make judgments without all the facts, you attack me for stealing a moment of happiness..." She trailed off, running a hand through her hair. "What happened between Lukas and I has nothing to do with this situation. That is my private business."

Morgan shook her head. "No! There's no excuse for what you've done to Daddy and me. When he finds out—"

Hannah's shoulders sagged. "He won't care, Morgan."

"How can you say that?" she practically screeched. "He adores you."

She snorted. "Wake up to reality. Charles adores *you*, Morgan, not me. We're barely hanging on by a thread. You are the only thing keeping our sham of a marriage together."

"You're lying. He loves you. He would never do what you did."

Hannah's eyes sparkled with anger. "He's doing it right now, just as he has been for a long time. Your father is with a woman named Lorissa, probably this very moment, so don't preach to me about what I've done." She rose, and her spine was straight. There wasn't a trace of shame in her stance. "I don't believe this is an appropriate conversation. I'm leaving for now. If you need me, I'll be in Lukas's stateroom."

Her eyes dared Morgan to challenge her. She didn't hesitate. "Yeah, you wouldn't want to waste the last couple of days of the cruise on me. Your happiness is much more important. You can't tear yourself away from him."

Her mother stared at her for a long moment, holding the silence, until Morgan grew uncomfortable under her scrutiny. Finally, she said, "If my happiness was more important to me than yours, I wouldn't be telling him goodbye in San Diego." Without another word, she turned and marched from the room. Her spine never sagged.

Morgan watched her go, enraged at her mother's attitude. Her hands trembled as she reached for the phone, impulsively dialing her home number. Daddy would be home this early on a Saturday morning. Perhaps she wouldn't have told him about Hannah's indiscretion if her mother had been contrite, but now she knew she had to. She couldn't let Mother fool Daddy the way Scott had tricked her.

The call seemed to take forever to connect, and then it rang several times. She was about to hang up when someone finally answered. "Hello," said a breathy, feminine voice on the other end.

Morgan froze. "Uh..." She couldn't seem to speak any intelligible words.

"Hello?" The voice was more impatient. "Is someone there?"

"Lorissa?" she asked timidly, feeling her breath catch in the back of her throat. It couldn't be.

"Yes," she said. "Who is this?" She sounded puzzled, as if no one knew she would be at the Hays' home.

Before Morgan could think of a response, she heard her father in the background. "What are you doing answering the phone? I told you not to pick up." Before she could hear anything else, she slammed the handset back onto the receiver and placed the phone on the night table. Her hands shook with the effort, and she tucked them against her sides. A wave of nausea overwhelmed her, and she stumbled from the bed.

Halfway to the bathroom, she fell to her knees on the floor and leaned forward, resting her forehead against the carpet. The room spun around her, and she closed her eyes, trying to regain focus. She wanted to deny what she'd heard, and what her mother had said, but the husky voice of her dad's lover still rang in her ears.

No. That woman wasn't her father's lover. Mother had to be mistaken. Morgan sat up and got to her feet. She went back to the bed and snatched up the phone, stabbing the keypad with her index finger. While she waited for it to connect, she paced a small circle in the range of the cord. The phone rang only once, and this time her father answered. "Daddy," was all she said, before tears overwhelmed her.

“Morgan? What’s wrong?”

The caring in Charles’s voice almost made her forget about Lorissa answering the phone. Still, the woman’s voice haunted her. “Who was that woman who answered the phone, Daddy?” Dead silence followed her question. Morgan wrapped the cord around her finger, waiting to hear his logical explanation. Maybe he was selling her a house.

Finally, he spoke, sounding slightly apologetic. “Darling, you have to understand what—”

“No,” she shouted into the receiver. He wasn’t even going to deny it?

“Morgan, don’t shout. I would like to discuss this as adults. Can we do that?”

Tears streamed from her eyes, and she didn’t think she could get words past the lump in her throat. She managed a grunt, which he must have interpreted as a yes.

“A man has needs, Morgan. Sometimes, he might care deeply for his wife, but still need the companionship of another woman. Can you understand that?” He sounded so smooth, as if the idea was logical, and the practice commonplace.

She shook her head, even as she said, “No, I don’t understand. You love Mommy.” The use of the childhood ‘Mommy’ shocked Morgan. She hadn’t called Hannah anything but Mother for years...not since her illness.

Charles sighed. “Your mother and I are friends, and we have a certain affection for each other, but it’s normal for a relationship to grow tepid.” He sighed again, sounding impatient. “You don’t really believe a man and woman love each other forever, do you?”

“Yes,” she said, but in a whisper so low, she wasn’t sure he heard it. How could she say for sure? Twelve hours ago, Scott had professed his love, but he had been lying. Morgan’s stomach churned with nausea when she remembered telling him she loved him. How could she have ever believed she was in love with him? At the time, she had been sincere, but now she loathed him. How could love turn to hate so quickly, if it was an enduring emotion?

“It’s naïve to assume spouses remain faithful for the duration of their marriage. Your mother would understand, if she knew.” He sounded just a little hesitant when he said that. “It is just biology, Morgan. My affairs have nothing to do with mine and your mother’s marriage.”

Her eyes narrowed, and she couldn’t force down the spiteful reply that issued from her lips. “I’m glad you feel that way, Daddy, because Mother has met someone on this cruise who she’s gotten very close to, but I’m sure it’s just biology.”

A stream of curses followed, many of which labeled her mother in unflattering terms. His tirade shocked Morgan, and when he called Hannah a whore, she cut in. “But, you said—”

“It’s different for a man,” he said, sounding irritated. “Some women are meant to be used for pleasure, while others are for marriage. Your mother isn’t the woman I thought she was.”

His words stabbed through her. Somehow, she managed to say in an even tone, "And you aren't the man I thought you were either, Father." She replaced the receiver into the cradle and dropped onto the bed, struggling to process everything she had just discovered about her parents and their marriage.

Even as she tried to view it objectively, as an adult, all she could recall were her father's words that some women were "meant to be used for pleasure". The moment of Scott taking her so aggressively flashed into her mind, and she again experienced a sensation of shame. He had used her, but she had let him, just as she had responded to Koenraad without even knowing him. She didn't want to be that kind of woman, but how could she stop herself?

Chapter 16

As Lukas's mouth worshipped her nipple, Hannah let herself sink into the sensation and temporarily forget the events of the previous night and this morning. His tongue laved a peak, and she arched her back. "Lukas." She sighed his name.

He lifted his mouth from her nipple and glanced up at her, resting his chin on her breast. "Yes, *waardevol?*"

She shook her head. "I like saying your name. I wasn't suggesting you should stop what you're doing."

With a chuckle, Lukas returned to his appointed task with such enthusiasm that Hannah groaned. Her pussy was wet, and she wanted to feel him inside her once more before they parted. Was she selfish for stealing this moment with him when her daughter needed her? Not that Morgan wanted her, she reminded herself.

Thoughts fled once more when Lukas's mouth drifted lower, leaving a moist trail down her stomach. He nipped her by the belly button, eliciting a startled giggle. Before she could fully absorb the playful action, his mouth was lower still, with his breath caressing her pussy. "Lukas," she whispered again, so low he probably didn't hear her. She arched her hips, encouraging him to taste her.

He didn't hesitate any longer. His tongue was swift and sure, probing inside her, seeking out her most responsive areas. When he sucked her clit into his mouth, the world shook. She delved into his thick hair with her right hand, holding him close. As his tempo increased, her hips responded in concert, moving to an internal rhythm only they could hear.

One of his fingers surged inside her while his tongue stroked her. Hannah winced at the tenderness of her pussy. Pleasure consumed her, but the dart of pain took away some of her ardor.

Lukas lifted his head. "What's wrong?"

Sheepishly, she said, "I'm sore. It's been awhile, and you and I have certainly made up for lost time the past few days."

He nodded, withdrawing his finger. "Does it hurt when my tongue is inside you?"

She shrugged. "Only when you go deep." A blush swept over her cheeks at the admission. Why did she suddenly feel like a virgin again?

He sat up. "Then I'll just hold you."

Disappointment pricked her. It wasn't just that she wanted an orgasm, or wanted one for him as well. She knew this was their last chance to be together, and she wanted to make love.

Lukas turned her to her side and settled behind her, gathering her in his arms. His cock pressed against the soft flesh of her buttocks, a reminder of their lack of fulfillment. It didn't seem to bother him as he nuzzled her neck, but it bothered her.

Her mouth turned dry with nervousness when an idea occurred to her. Only once had she tried it before, and the experience hadn't been satisfying for her. Lukas gave her new courage though, and she cleared her throat. "Make love to me from behind."

"You're too tender. The position won't matter." He pressed a kiss under her ear. "I can live with a little discomfort, *waardevol*. Just holding you makes all the difference."

She shook her head. "That wasn't what I meant. There is another way, if you're willing?" He didn't respond for a moment, and her anxiety grew, withering her brief rush of courage. She was about to tell him never mind when he finally spoke.

"I am honored you would allow me this privilege."

Relief swept through her, mingled with fear. From what she remembered, that method of lovemaking was painful in the beginning. Still, she trusted Lukas and knew he would be gentle. Her needs came first with him.

Lukas rolled away from her, and Hannah turned her head. "Where are you going?"

"I believe I saw some massage oil in the bathroom. It will help ease my way."

As he padded into the bathroom, Hannah lay still, focusing on what was coming. Just imagining Lukas inside her so intimately took the sting out of her fear, and she had relaxed completely by the time he returned to the bedroom, holding a sample-sized bottle of amber oil.

He knelt on the bed, looking at the bottle. "This is not the best lubricant to use, but I think it will do for one occasion."

"I'm sure it will." She turned on her back. "How do you want me?"

He gave her a mock leer. "Any way I can get you."

She laughed, shaking her head. "Seriously. I don't know what to do. I've only done this once, and I didn't like it very much."

His eyes softened further. "We shall have to change that. Roll onto your stomach and lift your bottom into the air. It might help if you get on your knees."

Hannah complied, turning over to rest her head on the pillow. She curled her arms around the soft down-filled linen and propped her lower body up a few inches by kneeling slightly.

"Perfect." Lukas moved behind her, kneeling between her spread thighs. His hands were warm and slippery when he caressed her buttocks, squeezing gently. In small circles, he worked his way toward her crack, making Hannah shiver with pleasure at each little touch. By the time he parted her buttocks and slipped a thumb down to her anus, she was writhing with impatience and felt no anxiety at all.

"Relax."

"I am." Was that impatient tone really hers? She couldn't wait for Lukas to touch her. Her anus was the most sensitive spot on her body when he rubbed it lightly with

his thumb, slipping inside just an inch. The intensity of the sensation surprised her. She had already accepted Lukas wouldn't hurt her, but she hadn't known if the actual act would be pleasurable. So far, it was wildly enjoyable.

His thumb eased inside her anus completely. "Does that hurt?"

"No. It feels amazing."

His response was to cautiously ease a finger in to join his thumb. "Does this hurt?"

"No." She had a stretching sensation, but it was pleasant, not painful. "I want more."

"Are you ready for my cock?"

She didn't hesitate. "Yes."

His fingers left her anus, and the sounds of him shifting on the bed reached her, but she didn't lift her head to see what he was doing. She just waited, letting the urgency build to a fever pitch.

His legs brushed against her thighs when he returned to kneeling between hers. He parted her cheeks, and his cock nestled against her anus. Hannah took a deep breath when he slowly entered her, feeling not even a twinge of discomfort.

As soon as he had sheathed his cock inside her, he stopped moving. "Do you feel any pain, *waardevol*?"

"Umm, no. It feels amazing." The stretched sensation had returned, and she enjoyed it even more with his cock inside her. Her clit was swollen, and she swore she could feel his cock stroking it from inside her when he carefully thrust in and out of her. She wriggled her buttocks, urging him to go faster.

He caressed one of her cheeks. "Not too fast. I don't want to hurt you."

"You won't. I need more, Lukas."

His thrusts sped up, increasing her pleasure. Hannah grasped the pillow in her fists, squeezing tightly to keep from screaming with pleasure. She was unsuccessful in holding back a shout when Lukas's fingers slipped into her pussy, to roll her clit between his thumb and forefinger.

His thrusts came faster and stronger, but she arched her hips each time to meet them, hesitating not at all. Her pussy was as slippery as her anus when he fingered her, and she panted, burying her face in the pillow to hold in her shouts of joy. Lukas's cock spasmed inside her, signaling his body was finding satisfaction. Hers responded instinctively. Release came suddenly, breaking over her in waves. It seemed to center everywhere, not just her pussy. She had never had such an intense orgasm in her life. Tears streamed from her eyes, and a sob escaped her.

He withdrew immediately, turning her toward him. "I've hurt you." He lifted her into his arms. "I'm so sorry, *waardevol*. I lost control at the end. I didn't mean to cause you pain."

She shook her head, finally finding her voice. "It didn't hurt. It was incredible. I've never..." She cupped his cheek. "You were amazing."

The guilt left his face, and he leaned forward to kiss her forehead. "You frightened me. I'm not accustomed to making women sob in bed."

She smiled. "What about outside of bed? Will you make me cry?"

"Never." He spoke fervently, embracing her.

With her face hidden against his chest, Hannah allowed the teasing glint to fade from her eyes. He was wrong, whether he knew it or not. Lukas was going to make her do a lot of crying in coming days, starting with their goodbye.

* * * * *

They must have dozed off. When she awoke, they were lying on top of the covers, with their arms around each other. Hannah had her head on his chest. At some point, Lukas's tender embrace of comfort had changed. She was aware of the way her heart rate sped up, and the way his breathing deepened, growing rough. Her body responded again to the proximity of his, even as her mind returned to the events of last night and this morning.

She melted against him, drawing comfort and pleasure from the feel of his arms holding her. A heavy sigh escaped her.

Lukas must have known where her thoughts had taken her. "Morgan will be fine, *waardevol*. Youth has resiliency. She'll bounce back in no time."

Hannah shook her head. "Not Morgan. She's always been tenacious, and she rarely forgets anything. I doubt she even realizes consciously that she links me to her bout with leukemia, that she resents me for making her go through the treatments and causing her pain, but it has shadowed her reactions to me all these years. I'm so afraid she's going to internalize this and be scarred forever."

"You will be there to help her." He placed a tender kiss against her lips, and then lingered. He seemed reluctant to acknowledge his renewed desire, just as she did, but their bodies communicated freely. He lifted his head with a sigh.

"We don't even know what that bastard did to her." She looked up when Lukas failed to respond. He wore a pensive expression. "What?"

He cleared his throat. "Turner has requested I meet with him. I was supposed to do so earlier, but I didn't plan for what happened between us taking place. I didn't realize Morgan would still be angry about...seeing us last night and send you away. I had planned to get it over with and forget it."

She frowned. "You weren't going to tell me?"

He shook his head. "I have never met Turner, but am convinced meeting with him will be a waste of time. I've heard he likes to play games, and I suspect he'll spend the

few minutes toying with me. I didn't want to put you through that, but if you think it will help your daughter to know what's going on, you may come with me."

She drew in her lower lip. She knew Turner would reveal things about Morgan if he saw her, but were those things she should know? Would it be more traumatic for her daughter if Morgan found out others knew the details of Turner's manipulation of her? Would Hannah be better able to help her if she knew what had happened? Slowly, she nodded. "I think I should hear what he has to say."

* * * * *

Scott Turner was in the sole jail cell housed in the cruise ship. It was at the back of the security office, and no one was in the room when Hannah followed Lukas and Koenraad inside. Three chairs were lined up in front of his cell, and she sat in one of the cheap plastic models, staring at the floor. It was sparkling clean, and nothing like she would have imagined. Of course, she hadn't spent much time visualizing what a jail would look like.

When she grasped she was counting the black squares of the tile to avoid looking at the man who had hoodwinked her daughter, Hannah forced her head up. She bit back a gasp when she met his eyes. He had been staring straight at her, and he made no effort to hide his insolence. He was a handsome young man, but his chin was weak, and his eyes lacked any warmth. She glared at him.

He laughed, but it held a sharp edge, rather than any real amusement. "Look at that fire. Morgan was like that...at first." An unpleasant grin curved his face. "That was before I went to work on her."

Koenraad leaned forward. "What do you want?"

His eyes remained on Hannah's breasts, even as he turned his head in Koenraad's direction. "I want a deal."

Lukas scoffed. "You have nothing to bargain with."

"Wrong." He finally moved his gaze to meet Lukas's. "I have two things of importance. First, I hold the fate of Morgan Hays in my hands."

Hannah surged from her seat, reacting to the threat underlying his words. "What are you talking about?"

"I can implicate her easily enough. I have a picture of her wearing the necklace out of the office, taken with the web cam on my laptop." He smiled. "If you view the footage, you'll see I'm not anywhere in the shot."

Hannah's stomach tightened with fear, and she was ready to offer him anything. She turned her head to look at Lukas when he waved his hand.

"No one will take you seriously. You have a record of thievery, and she's just an innocent whom you manipulated. We won't be intimidated by your threats."

Scott sighed. "That's a shame. I really wanted you to see that shot." He turned to look at Hannah, and his eyes gleamed with maliciousness. "It's too bad I didn't get the whole episode on my computer. I'd love to be able to watch your daughter sucking my cock over and over again, to keep me company while I'm in prison."

Hannah recoiled, even as Koenraad lunged forward. Before he came anywhere near reaching Scott, the other man had taken a couple of steps back, out of range. He ignored Koenraad and turned his eyes to Lukas. "Is it like mother, like daughter, I wonder, or is Mrs. Hays skilled at blowjobs? Little Morgan was a tad too inexperienced, but what she lacked in technique, she made up with in sheer enthusiasm."

Finally, he looked at Koenraad. "Do you know how pleasurable it was to turn her into my own personal toy? She would have done anything I asked her to, and all it took were some simple mind games and three little words." He laughed, but it was more like an exhalation of breath. "You should have seen how ashamed she was when she came to me after you took her into your cabin to warn her."

The color drained from Koenraad's face. "What? How did you know she was in my room?"

"Because I always keep tabs on anyone who might cause me trouble. As soon as you boarded and dropped off your luggage, you left to meet with your uncle. Since then, there's been a camera in your room. I took advantage of your absence to pay a little visit."

He turned to Lukas. "I've been recording everything that happened in your suite since the night Morgan helped me break in there. She thought we were searching for diamonds, but I only wanted to tap the phone and put a little camera on one of the pictures."

His leer settled on Hannah, and he licked his lips obscenely. "It was certainly entertaining watching you. I see where your daughter got her appetites." He feigned a yawn. "It's really too bad she was just too easy. I was already bored with her by the time Koenraad boarded the ship. I would have cut her loose that night, if he hadn't made things briefly interesting again."

Koenraad growled and tried to reach him again. Turner remained at the back of the cell, watching them all condescendingly.

She refused to look at him, although her cheeks burned. "Lukas, did you confiscate all of his things?"

He nodded. "I'm afraid the laptop and all his disks will meet with an unfortunate accident before we turn him over to the authorities in San Diego."

Scott seemed unbothered by that, as evidenced by his full-throated chuckle. His amusement with his own deceptions was obvious. "Suit yourself. It doesn't matter if you destroy the evidence. I never planned to incriminate her. I knew the necklace was in a vault in the valuables' office all along, so I never needed her help, other than to help me search all those boxes. Even I'm not slick enough to go through seventy-five in six minutes."

"Then why the hell did you send her to my uncle's suite to recover diamonds you knew didn't exist?"

Turner lifted a shoulder. "I wanted to see how far she would go for me, and it was a diversion so I could slip away without you breathing down my neck." His mouth twisted. "I thought I would be off the ship by the time you sorted out the mess, but my contact failed to meet me with the transport he promised. If I had known he would let me down, I wouldn't have announced my involvement so boldly before leaving the ship."

Koenraad scowled. "The message on the mirror."

"And sending my faithful puppy to you, to fetch my slippers, if you will," Turner added with a laugh.

"Why did you draw my daughter into this?" Hannah asked.

"Because I could." He shrugged. "I guess her involvement will buy me no leeway, judging from your tight-ass expression, Pretorius."

"That's right," Lukas said in an arctic tone. "You will get nothing from us, other than a long prison sentence." He got to his feet, and Hannah did the same, as Koenraad joined them.

Even that didn't faze him. "Wait, Mr. Pretorius, you haven't heard about the other bargaining chip."

"Make it fast, Turner." Koenraad had obviously lost what little patience he had left.

"I have one of the *Tears of the Leopard*, and I know where most of the other shards are. I propose a partnership."

Hannah frowned when Lukas and Koenraad both stiffened. Lukas turned slowly to look at Scott full on. "That is nothing but a legend. Surely, you don't expect to trade information about something that doesn't exist to shorten your prison term?"

"It isn't a myth," Scott said with intensity. He surged forward, as if trying to reach Lukas. His eyes glowed, and he gripped the bars of his cell, pressing his face against them. "I have a shard, and I have a good idea where the heart of the *Leopard Eye* is."

"Have you heard enough, Uncle?"

Lukas nodded.

Hannah's eyes widened when Koenraad stepped up to the cell and hit Turner in the face as hard as he could.

"That's for Morgan, you son-of-a-bitch." He shook his hand, obviously to dissipate the sting. He seemed to consider it a small price for the satisfaction of knocking Turner flat.

They left the man lying on the floor of the cell, holding his face. Hannah didn't look back. She had no desire to ever again set eyes on the man who had so ruthlessly hurt her daughter.

When they entered the corridor to walk back to the lift, Hannah put a hand on Lukas's arm. "What was he talking about? That thing about a leopard?"

"It's a myth," Lukas said, waving a hand.

"There are some who believe the Zhouzu tribe owned a large emerald that contained mythical properties, called the *Leopard Eye*," Koenraad added. "For those who could wield the power, they could have anything they wanted. The power corrupted them, and they ruined their way of life. A few of the tribal elders decided the emerald had to be destroyed."

Hannah lifted a brow at the information. "You don't believe that, do you?"

"Of course not," Lukas said. "It's just a silly belief, but there are those who have spent their lives chasing after the shards, whimsically referred to as *Tears of the Leopard*, hoping to re-form the gem and harness its powers."

She frowned. "Wasn't it destroyed?"

Koenraad shrugged. "If it ever existed, it most likely was. The few *Tears* people claim to have collected are probably the only remains of the emerald."

"It matters not," Lukas said. "Turner is even more foolish than I believed if he thought we would be swayed by his information of the *Leopard Eye*. We're logical people."

"It was only another game." Grim lines bracketed Koenraad's mouth.

Hannah nodded, shuddering at the way the man had manipulated Morgan. "He certainly likes to play those."

* * * * *

Back in Lukas's suite, Hannah dialed the number to her stateroom with a shaking hand. She wanted to reassure herself Morgan was fine, but she didn't want another exchange of hostilities with her. The girl had been through too much to add to her distress, but Hannah refused to feel guilty for her relationship with Lukas. She feared it would leave them at an impasse.

Morgan answered on the third ring, with a dull, "Hello."

"Morgan?" She swallowed, wondering how to begin. She had hoped approaching her daughter first by phone would be easier for both of them, but that form of communication had the disadvantage of not allowing her to read Morgan's body language. "How are you?" What a stupid question. She knew how she must be.

"I don't know."

The stark answer broke Hannah's heart. "Will you let me come be with you?"

"No." She didn't give her rejection harshly. In fact, her voice lacked any tone.

"Please, Morgan, I want to be there for you right now." She clenched her fingers around the cord, until Lukas appeared beside her. He took her hand from the phone cord and cradled it in his, offering silent support.

"I need to be alone. I have to think." Morgan's voice broke. "Mom, I...please, just give me some time by myself."

Hannah's heart thumped with hope when Morgan called her 'Mom'. Despite her anger with Turner and her worry for Morgan's mental state, a dart of excitement jabbed her. Morgan didn't seem as furious as she had earlier. She didn't know if her numb state was an improvement, and hated to leave her alone, but how could she ignore the girl's plea for solitude? "All right, I'll stay away for now, but promise you'll call me if you need me."

"I promise."

Hannah listened to the dial tone in her ear for several seconds before remembering to hang up the phone. She turned to Lukas and let his arms enfold her. As he gave her comfort, she wished she could provide the same for Morgan. Would her daughter ever turn to her again? Could she forgive Hannah for the sins she perceived her to have committed? Had her relationship with Lukas ruined any chance of salvaging one with Morgan?

Chapter 17

Morgan sighed with annoyance when someone knocked on the door about five minutes after she hung up with her mother. She assumed it would be Hannah, ignoring her request for isolation. She wondered why Hannah didn't just let herself in. Maybe this was her mother's tactful way of approaching her. She rolled her eyes as she got off the bed and walked to the door.

Her mouth dropped open with surprise when she opened it to reveal Koenraad. "What are you doing here?"

He arched a brow. "May I come in?"

With a shrug, Morgan opened the door wider to let him pass. She patted her mussed hair, wondering how disheveled she was. She frowned when she realized where her thoughts had taken her. She mentally distanced herself from her views as surely as she physically distanced herself from him by closing the door and putting several feet between him. She eyed him impassively.

"It wasn't your fault." He spoke in a low tone, and his eyes were soft with understanding.

The words penetrated her fragile defenses as nothing else could have. When he opened his arms to her, she went willingly. Morgan snuggled closer, burying her face in his chest. His arms were warm and solid around her, soothing, but also alarming. Her heartbeat accelerated, and she tried to ignore her physical reaction to him.

Tears came of their own accord, and his shirt proved to be the perfect fabric to absorb them. She gave in to them as he patted her back and ran his fingers through her hair. She wasn't even sure of the reasons she cried. Was it because she had learned her parents were real people? Was it because of what Scott had done to her? Was it because she now didn't like the person she saw in the mirror?

Or was it even because she wanted something from the man holding her that she shouldn't crave? Was it because she was a wanton? She flinched. He must have felt her body tighten, because he eased her away from him enough to tip up her chin and force her to meet his eyes. His fingers were warm and lightly callused against her skin. His eyes mirrored his concern, but also his desire. Her stomach clenched at the sight, even as her body reacted.

"How can I help you?"

She shook her head, not certain how to answer. Part of her longed to lose herself in his arms, but she withstood that impulse. She couldn't let her body rule her. "I..." She trailed off, and fresh tears watered her eyes, spilling down her cheeks.

"*Engel*," he said, and his head descended. His lips brushed hers, and they were pliant, molding to the contours of hers.

With a moan, Morgan threaded her fingers through his hair, pulling him closer, even as her mind urged her to push him away. Her nipples came to life, and her pussy throbbed with need. When his hands moved lower, cupping her buttocks, she pressed her body against his. His cock pulsed in response to the close contact, and he groaned.

His mouth pressed more urgently against hers, and his tongue swept inside, sending shivers down her spine. Morgan shuddered in his arms, pulling him closer still.

He withdrew his mouth from hers and rested his chin on the top of her head. He was breathing as raggedly as she, and his cock gave proof of his aroused state. "I need you, Morgan."

The words cut her like a knife. She gasped and pulled free, taking several steps backward to escape him. She wiped her mouth with the back of her hand. "Get out."

He reached out a hand. "What's wrong?"

"I'm not doing this with you. What, you think I'm easy?"

His eyes widened. "I don't understand what I did to upset you. After I found out how Turner manipulated you, I thought it would help you to talk. I didn't come here for sex. I didn't plan what just happened."

She glared at him. "Yeah, sure." Her eyes narrowed. "What do you mean, when you 'found out'?"

He sighed. "I spoke briefly with the bastard. I know how he must have hurt you —"

"No, you thought you could have me on my back with my legs spread for you, just as easily as I did for him," she accused. Her voice had taken on a shrill pitch, and her breathing was too fast. She burned with humiliation, knowing he knew the details of how foolish she had been. "I won't be used again."

He swore, and the first traces of anger appeared in his demeanor. "I didn't come here to hurt you. I wanted to offer you comfort."

"Why did you kiss me?"

He shrugged. "Because I think you're a beautiful woman, and my body responded. I wouldn't hurt you. I only want to pleasure you."

She stiffened at the word pleasure, remembering the refrain of her father's that had repeated through her mind all afternoon. He assumed she was a woman to seek pleasure from — in other words, an indiscriminate, promiscuous whore. "You will never touch me again. Now go away before I call Security."

His expression revealed his disbelief. He shook his head and strode toward the door. He paused in the act of turning the handle and looked back at her, seemingly on the verge of saying something. She hardened her expression and her heart, knowing she had to defend against his advances and her own urges if she wanted to preserve a shred of dignity.

When he continued to stand there, she searched for a way to fill the awkward silence. Her tongue acted of its own volition. "What are you waiting for, a doorman to open the door and escort you out? Or maybe you'd like a goodbye kiss?" she asked in a mocking tone.

"I don't think so. Your sharp tongue would surely cut too deeply, and I would bleed to death." He left without another word. The set of his shoulders denoted his anger, as did the slamming of the door behind him.

Morgan maintained her stiff posture for several seconds after he had gone, before she sagged and dropped onto the bed her mother had been using. Suddenly, she wanted nothing more than to have her mother there. She fumbled for the phone and dialed Lukas's extension. Her mother answered on the first ring. "Mom, can you...?"

"I'll be right there."

It took several minutes for Hannah to arrive. When she opened the door and entered, Morgan was there. She launched herself into her mother's arms and gave in to the remaining tears she hadn't managed to rid herself of yet since learning of Scott's betrayal. Being in Hannah's embrace transported her back to her childhood, and she realized whenever she was hurting, always her mother soothed her pain.

She didn't speak as she cried, and her mother didn't press for details. A tenuous new bond built between them as Hannah provided the comfort she needed. Some emotion she had never identified seemed to fade away, along with the tears, and she was refreshed when the last drop of moisture fell.

As Hannah led her to bed and settled her, all the while holding her hand and stroking her hair, Morgan said, "I love you, Mom."

Tears sparkled in Hannah's eyes. "I love you too."

"I'm sorry," she said softly.

Hannah frowned. "You have nothing to apologize for. Turner—"

Morgan shook her head, rustling the fabric of the pillowcase with her hair. "Not for that. I'm sorry for..." She trailed off, searching for the words to explain why she was sorry. She didn't even know herself, but knew she had many things to be sorry for. "I've treated you badly."

Hannah leaned forward to kiss her forehead. "It doesn't matter, darling. Why don't you rest now?"

"It does matter." She grasped her mother's hand. "I don't want to lose you, now that I feel like I've found you again."

Hannah's mouth wobbled. "You won't, Morgan. I'll always be here for you. Rest now."

Morgan allowed her eyes to close and gave herself to healing tears. A smile curved her lips, and the lingering feeling of renewed closeness with Hannah followed her into her dreams, giving her a peaceful rest.

* * * * *

Hannah stayed by Morgan's side for the rest of the evening. By the time the sun rose and they docked in San Diego, her back ached from sitting in the straight-backed chair, but she maintained her post. She would have remained in that pose until her daughter awakened if the phone hadn't buzzed at nine-thirty. She answered it quickly, to keep the ring from waking Morgan. It was Lukas.

"I'm about to leave, *waardevol*," he said in a choked voice. "I have a meeting with the client who commissioned the *Eye of Destiny* at noon. First, I have to stop by the police station and file a report against Scott Turner, so the authorities will look for him."

She frowned. "I don't understand."

His sigh bespoke his weariness. "He escaped sometime last night or this morning."

Her heart dropped. "Are you in danger?"

"I doubt it. He won't get the necklace now, and that was his target...this time. I would like to say I've seen the last of Turner, but the man is persistent."

"You will be careful, won't you?" Her heart pounded with dread, imagining all the things that could go wrong and leave Lukas injured.

"Of course." His voice lowered an octave. "Is Morgan's state fragile? Would it be possible for you to slip away and join me on deck for a few moments, to say our goodbyes?"

She looked down at Morgan, noting she was still snoring. "How soon are you leaving?"

"Five minutes."

She swallowed the lump in her throat and tried to ignore the ache in her chest. "I'll meet you a deck up from where the passengers disembark, so I can find you easily."

"I'll count the seconds," he said softly, before replacing the receiver.

Hannah got to her feet, careful not to wake Morgan. She replaced the phone and went to the dresser, where her brush and other things remained. She had repacked many of her things in the days leading up to leaving the ship, but a few items remained out. She smoothed her hair and sprayed on perfume, conscious that she hadn't showered in some time. She didn't want Lukas to remember her smelling of perspiration.

A wan smile crossed her lips. He wouldn't remember that about her. He would remember all the good things, just as she would. She met her haunted eyes in the mirror, wondering if she would ever be able to forget him.

With an awareness of time ticking, she paused to write Morgan a quick note, telling her she had gone up top to bid Lukas farewell, in case her daughter woke and panicked when she saw Hannah was gone. She left the note on Morgan's nightstand and rushed from the room, eager to see Lukas again, while simultaneously dying inside, knowing she would never see him again after today.

He was waiting for her. He looked crisp and handsome in a white shirt and khakis, paired with brown loafers. The lines around his eyes belied his casual state, as did his arms when they tightened around her with more force than usual. He held her for several seconds without speaking, and she relaxed against him, listening to his heart pound against her ear.

Eventually, he pulled away, but gripped her upper arms. "I never would have believed two weeks could pass so quickly."

She nodded, feeling a lump burning in her throat. "I'm going to miss you."

He tried to smile. "Maybe you'll come visit me in South Africa some day."

She wanted to play along, but couldn't, anymore than she had been able to the last time he had made the suggestion, at Monteverde. She shook her head. "I won't."

He sighed. "I know." Then his arms were around her again. His lips settled against her ear. "I want to beg you to come with me, but I won't. I will not put you in that position, of having to choose between me and Morgan."

She pressed her hands into his back, trying to pull him closer. "I appreciate that."

Once again, he put enough distance between them to meet her eyes. "I love you, Hannah. This was never a holiday fling for me."

She nodded, and the tears she had tried to suppress slipped free. She let them fall. "I won't ever forget you."

He stepped away from her. "I have to go."

"I know."

He leaned forward long enough to brush a gentle kiss against her mouth. Then he stepped away and kept walking. He didn't turn around until he was at the stairs that would lead him to the lower deck. "Goodbye, *waardevol*."

She wasn't capable of speaking. She pressed her fingers to her lips, trying to hold the feeling of his parting kiss forever. It hurt too much to watch him walk away, so she turned her back. A sob escaped her, but she forced it down, in the same manner she forced her feet to take one step at a time back toward her room, putting her farther from Lukas with each one.

"Mom."

She looked up when Morgan called to her. She was stunned to see her daughter running toward her, still wearing pajama pants and a T-shirt. She hadn't even bothered with shoes. "Morgan, what are you doing?"

Morgan didn't stop running until she reached Hannah. "Don't let him go, Mom."

Hannah frowned. "You shouldn't be out here in your pajamas. Let's get you back to—"

Morgan's grip was tight on her forearms. "Listen to me, Mom. Don't let Lukas get away. He loves you, and you love him. I figure you're lucky to find that once in a lifetime, let alone make it work." A shadow crossed her eyes. "Don't throw it away just for me."

Hannah shook her head. "You don't understand. I can't go with Lukas. I don't want to leave you. You need me."

Morgan's smile looked a little forced. "I'm a big girl, Mom. I'll be going to college in a few months. There's no reason for you to give up a chance of happiness just to see me on breaks and during the summer." Her smile brightened. "I can fly to South Africa about as easily as I can drive home."

Hannah experienced a stir of hope, but tried to nip it in the bud before it could grow. There were a million reasons why she couldn't do it. "Your father...I'm married."

"I'll explain it to him." She frowned. "He doesn't deserve you."

"I..." She searched for another reason why she couldn't go after Lukas, but nothing came to her. "Are you sure? You'll need support in the coming days."

A brittle mask formed over Morgan's features. "I will be fine, Mother," she said emphatically. "I want you to go. Please." Hannah stiffened with surprise when Morgan drew her in for a hard hug, whispering in her ear, "I need to believe love can exist. Go prove it to me."

When she stepped away, Morgan was wearing what looked like a real smile. She had tears in her eyes, but not a trace of anger or resentment. Hannah found herself wrenching off the wedding set on her left finger. She pressed it into her daughter's palm. "Give this to Charles for me. I know he'll want it back." She hesitated, picturing her daughter having to explain the situation to her husband. "I'm sorry to put you in this position."

"It's all right." Morgan physically turned her. "Now, go, before he disappears. I'll send your things on to his hotel, if you call the operator on the ship and leave a message telling me where you're staying. The flight back doesn't leave until five o'clock."

"Thank you, darling." She squeezed Morgan's hand before turning from her.

"Good luck," Morgan said.

With no other reason not to, Hannah started toward Lukas. Soon, she was running, and her feet took her down the stairs. She plunged into a crowd of vacationers waiting to get off the ship, searching for Lukas all the while. She craned her neck and stood on her tiptoes. She called his name, and several people turned to look at her, but he wasn't among them.

She moved deeper into the crowd, but didn't see him. Her eyes lit on a pyramid of luggage, stacked on a wheeled cart. Before she could talk herself out of it, she hurried over to the cart and climbed it. She gripped the bar and swung her leg over it, hoping for enough height to see over the heads of the crowd to spot Lukas. When she was perched on the top bar, she raised her voice. "Lukas? Are you down here?"

A few people stopped talking to stare at her, but most remained unaware of her. She took in a deep breath and called his name as loud as she could. Her eyes picked up a ripple in the crowd, toward the ramp, and she thought she saw Lukas's head. She waved her arms, making her perch even more precarious. "Lukas, don't leave yet," she shouted again.

The crowd parted, revealing him making his way toward her. Hannah left her perch on the luggage transport and met him on the ground. She threw herself into his arms before giving him a chance to speak. "I'm coming with you, if you still want me." She lifted her head to read his expression. Doubt assailed her when she wondered if she had been only a fling for him, and if his words had been as cleverly manipulative as Scott Turner's actions toward her daughter.

The silly fear left her when she saw tears glistening in his eyes. He pulled her close and kissed her until she was breathless. When he lifted his head, he said, "Of course I still want you. I want to marry you."

Some might have thought her impetuous or foolish for rushing into this relationship so soon, without even a divorce decree dissolving her existing marriage, but she didn't care. She had to follow her heart. "I would love to marry you." Her eyes widened when he bent down to open his carryon. They widened even further when he pulled out a small black box and opened it.

She gasped at the square diamond solitaire, surrounded by amber chips. "Where did you get that?"

"I asked Koenraad to bring it with him. I designed the ring for our catalogs, but never could part with it. I knew I would give it to the woman I loved when I asked her to share my life." He extracted the ring from its velvet bed, letting the box fall to the deck with a small clatter. "Will you accept it?"

She nodded, too overwhelmed to speak. She noticed the white line left on her finger from the wedding set Charles had placed there years ago, but the white-gold ring Lukas slid on her finger covered the section. It also hugged her finger as though it had been specially made for her. As soon as it was on, it was as though the ring had always belonged on her finger. Wearing Charles's ring was already fading to a distant memory. "Why didn't you offer it to me sooner?"

"I was going to, but then we discovered how Turner had hurt your daughter. I knew I couldn't ask you to come with me when she needed you." Lukas frowned. "What changed your mind?"

"Morgan." Hannah caressed the ring, but tore her gaze from it to meet his eyes when she said, "She told me not to waste a chance at happiness." A shaky smile curved her lips. "I never knew my daughter was so wise."

"Thank God she is," Lukas said, pulling her into his arms again. "What would I have done without you?"

"You would have been miserable, just like me." She clung to him, needing the reassurance of his arms around her. She trembled as he held her. They had come so close to parting forever. As Lukas kissed her, she said a silent, "Thank you," to Morgan, for helping her feel free to take this chance with Lukas. She knew she wouldn't regret it.

*Morgan Returns in
Tears of the Leopard, 2004*

Author's Note

I made a conscious decision to have Lukas and Hannah eschew protection in this book, despite the relevance of birth control and STIs to contemporary plots. I think this decision better reflects their personalities, and the timeframe and cultures they would have grown up in. With Scott and Morgan, I chose to have them use condoms, because I think that choice better reflects their age and outlook of the world. In real life, you should always make the safest, best decision for yourself. Thankfully, this is fiction, and not real life.

About the author:

Kit Tunstall lives in Idaho with her husband, near family and friends. In addition to books available through Ellora's Cave, she is the author of *365 Days of Lara Branson* and *Undercover Mother*. Her shorter works have appeared in more than a dozen markets, including *Sex on the Edge*, *Boise Weekly*, *Epiphany Magazine*, *BloodLust-UK*, and *Bridges Magazine*.

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