



A wicked  
**Awakening**  
Book 1 in The Wicked Series  
*Calinda B*

# **A Wicked Awakening**

**By Calinda B**

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*Chapter 1 - Cam*



# Chapter 1

Last night, when I was tucked in between the sheets of twilight and dawn, I wonder if plans were being made, transactions secured, and documents were sent to the cosmos with the name Cheerio Manhattan stamped in bold in the header. Perhaps the floating islands of the cosmic sea had shifted in subtle ways along their orbits, causing fragments of stardust to twirl my way. Maybe spiral arms of gas and dust had morphed into a new galaxy causing shimmering light waves of disruptive energy to surge toward my house. Or maybe life was just rolling along the way it was meant to – with surprise and wonder. All I know is that I awoke with surprising cheer in my heart feeling the sun kissing my shoulders, two cats kneading my stomach with their stiletto-like paws, a gorgeous guy by my side and absolutely no sense of foreboding or anxious anticipation for the changes that were heading my way.

As a child, I often didn't wake in such good spirit. Frequently, a vague disturbance bubbled forth from deep inside like a festering pool of decaying poison. Sometimes, late at night, this disturbing darkness fingered the edges of my awareness. It whispered to me. It cajoled. It beckoned. It appeared as a nebulous sense of unease, a vague memory. When the shadowy gloom threatened to blot out any happiness inside and send me into a terrified tailspin, I conjured up images of wildflowers, fields of yellow blossoms swaying softly in the bright sun. Only then could I sleep.

I mused upon these old memories as I speed-walked from the public parking lot toward the community center where I taught aerobics. I'm not really a sauntering kind of girl. I can't seem to stand still. Instead, I bounced along, a hyperactive mess of anxious chaos, my mind wrapped around my cryptic, dark past, heading toward a neighborhood of Seattle, Washington known as the U-District.

The district was a tidy, middle class mix of long established homes, coffee shops, and offbeat clothing stores. Huge, evergreen trees stood in majestic spires. The houses along the street boasted timeworn gardens that trailed over rock walls. The gardens streamed with color bursts that cascaded and flowed like blossom-laden water rolling over rocks in a bountiful creek. I paused for a moment to inhale their beauty and summery fragrance. There's nothing like a Northwest garden on a warm summer day. Glancing at my watch, I bolted for the brown brick building where I taught Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays.

I wasn't just any aerobics instructor, mind you, but a line-out-the-door aerobics instructor. I might be shy and hesitant, stuttering over words when confronted, fading into the background in crowds, but as an aerobics instructor, my students told me things like "You're awesome, Cheerio!" Or, "Your workout routines are the best! Please, please, please make sure I get into the next session classes!" All such praise was immediately side-stepped and kicked to the curb of "you're kidding, right?" All I knew was that I loved teaching aerobics and keeping my body in good shape allowed me to think I had some measure of control over something – my weight. I pictured my over-plump, drunken sod of a mother, shivered and increased my speed-walk down the street.

You'd never have guessed that I'd become an aerobics instructor. As a teen, I shrank from all sports, hated gym class. The asthma I had as a child, and had nearly outgrown as a teenager, was always a useful excuse to get out of anything. "B-b-but Mr. Skol, I can't run today. I can b-b-barely breathe," I'd wheeze and whip out my inhaler. Mr. Skol always rolled his eyes and let me watch, instead of do. I'd stand on the edges of the playing field, hugging my stomach, wishing I were somewhere else. For team activities, I was always chosen with reluctance as a last resort. The team leader would glance my way, look to see if he or she was mistaken, then shrug and wave a hand in my direction. Last one picked, every time. It was humiliating.

Lost in thought, I tripped on the uneven sidewalk and lunged to grab one of those non-descript generic trees that lined neighborhood streets. "Ow!" I cried, glancing right and left to make sure no-one had seen my klutzy move. I shook my stinging palms. "Come on back, Cheerio. Stop these gloomy thoughts." I urged my 29-year-old body into a jog, my short red hair flying around me like a flame.

My birth name was Chérie Abella Manhattan. I adopted the Cheerio nickname in high school. In my junior year, our Advanced English class had a guest lecturer named Amelia Frances Goscelin. Ms. Goscelin, or "Gossy" as she requested to be called, was a fun and funny speaker whom we had all truly enjoyed. She spoke with passion and detail on the writings and upbringing of the Brontë sisters, Charlotte, Emily, and Anne, bringing their stories alive. I was fascinated by their tragic history. Raised by a violent father and a sickly mother, they found a way to channel their suffering into creativity. Charlotte found true love, married her love, and then died. At least she was happy in the end. I wondered what it would like to have true love.

I loved my boyfriend – or at least I thought I did – but I questioned whether I could have a passionate, deeply intimate relationship. Was it even possible? I sure didn't have good role models as a child, unless you could call violent arguments followed by drunken sex passionate. My parents were miserable. My mom hurled snide pot shots at my dad like grenades while my dad drank his way to numb. My relationship was more like faltering, bumbling re-takes and do-overs in the passion department. Take the other night – my boyfriend and I had made love, as usual - he wanted sex all the time. In the end it was more or less a wrestling match, with him rolling off of me in frustration – again. I just couldn't seem to let go and enjoy myself in bed. He'd become nice after that, stroking my body like I was a tender kitten, telling me that it didn't matter. *Right. Like I believed him, the guy who got a hard-on at a minute's notice.* It sure mattered to me. I sighed. “A passionate life, Cheerio, is not the life for you. Get over yourself,” I grumbled.

Still musing, I recalled how Gossy had regaled us with stories of other prominent women in history, like Louise Arner Boyd, an American explorer of Greenland and the Arctic. Louise Boyd became the first woman to fly over the North Pole. Defying stereotypes of what women could and should do, she traveled the Arctic, becoming a noteworthy and celebrated scientist. *What an exciting life! The first woman to fly over the North Pole!* I couldn't imagine being the first woman to do *anything*. A ripple of fear-tinged excitement rolled up my spine.

We had all sat riveted to Gossy's every word. When she left the classroom, she called out “Cheerio!” in her lilting British voice. My friends and I, social outcasts all, had taken to using the term when we hung up the phone on one another. Then, one day, one of my friends called me Cheerio, and the name stuck. I always liked the name. It made me feel wise and sophisticated like Ms. Goscelin, and it reminded me of women and their epic life stories. “What it would be like to have an epic life story?” I muttered. So far, my life seemed ho hum. I glanced at my watch and took off at a dead run.

Dashing around the corner, I arrived at the community center. Propelling my stick-skinny, spandex-clad, ugly greyhound dog of a body through the community center glass double door, I sailed into the Big Room, #1A. It was the biggest room in the community center. Since my classes were so popular, we needed the large space. I dropped my bright red and green cotton Guatemalan bag of CDs waiting to be transferred to my iPod, my iPod, and various workout clothes onto the floor with a clatter. I popped the iPod into the dock,

and tapped the display to the right playlist. The thump, thump, thump bass beat filled the silence, and I immediately began my hop, hop, jump, twist, warm up. Blood pumping, muscles humming, all thoughts of my dark past and future dreams ebbed into the distance. I was alive, awake, and present for the task at hand.

I loved to dance, as in L.O.V.E. can't live without it, love. When I hit the dance floor, I always smiled and laughed. I've never understood the serious dancers...you know, those people who politely swayed to the beat with a grim look on their faces. To me, dance was pure joy. The rhythm filled me. It was like a primordial heartbeat filling my body with delight. When I danced I was transported to faraway places filled with color, stars and brilliant glowing lights. I was always something other than myself when I danced. When I danced I was, for the briefest of moments, magnificent.

In this huge unoccupied room, I leapt, swiveled, jumped, and skipped. Filled with a soaring sensation, a roaring in my veins, I prepared to make a wide, flamboyant pirouette when a shrill, high-pitched voice called out to me, bringing my movements to a screeching halt. My expansive mood immediately shrank, popped, and ran for cover.

“Chérie Manhattan!”

The voice squealed and scraped down my inner blackboard. I cringed and flicked my fingernails. I hated that sound.

My boss Jill Primcott lumbered into the room and stood, her hands poised on her hips like bitch wings. Her hair, the texture and hue of dried liver, was pulled back severely in a bun. The result of that hair-do was a face as taut as cow hide stretched to breaking on a tanning rack.

I studied her, cold pinpricks of sweat forming along my face and neck. *What did I do now?*

A frumpy, middle-aged woman, she was all about the numbers of paying customers and the schedule of classes and all the things I couldn't be bothered with. I was never sure if she really liked me...okay... I *knew* she couldn't stand me, but she knew I brought in the students. My classes were always overflowing, so she at least tolerated me. “Chérie, can I have a moment?”

I bit my lip. “Right now?” I replied. My response sounded like a rusty mechanical mouse. I cleared my throat and tried again. “I only have a few minutes before students arrive.”

“This will only take a second. Pronto!”

Her dark eyes, cold as a frosty midnight on Halloween, narrowed and pinned me to the spot where I stood, trying to catch my breath. Like a moth in a science exhibit, I imagined myself impaled on a slab of Styrofoam with slender pins. “Okay,” I stammered. “I’ll be right there.”

She nodded, released me from her pointed gaze and pivoted, heading out the door.

I sighed and followed her high-heeled footsteps and jiggling body down the hall. Her massive behind quivered with each hammering clack of her high heel. It’s a wonder the heels didn’t snap off, she stepped so hard on the floor. As she thundered along, one foot pointed straight ahead and the other turned in at an awkward angle as if she were attempting to trip herself.

A funny image popped into my head as I pictured the floor tiles cringing underneath her bulk. “Work as a team!” their tiny voices shrieked from behind their stone faces. “Everyone, hands together!” they cried. I smothered a smile at this image as Jill pushed open the door of her office and waddled in, letting the heavy wooden door swing toward my face. My hands quickly reached out to stop the door from slamming into my forehead. Furrowing my brow, I slouched before her desk. Her dumpy frame, shrink-wrapped in a floral print dress, eased into the chair with a thud.

“Cheerio,” she said. She peered over the top of her glasses at me with a look that made my stomach knot in a bunch.

I stepped backwards. *What did I ever do to her?* I wondered.

“There’s been a change in the schedule and you are on for the week of August 3rd. You know we have the yearly Northwest Auction Gala fundraising event, and even though I know how much you hate big events, Kate and Sue can’t make it.”

“August 3rd!?! Come *on*, Kate and Sue are good at those kinds of things!” I groaned and then quickly shut my mouth. *Yikes! What was I thinking?* I was not in the habit of talking back to a superior, or to anyone actually. *You’re going to get me in trouble*, I said to my inner bitch. She smirked and folded her arms over her chest.

Kate March and Sue Klink were Jill's favorite employees. They were some kind of inseparable administrative assistants, under Jill's beck and call. Who knows what they did? Did they ever work? The only thing I ever witnessed was them skulking around the hallways, laughing and spying on me. Darkly, I wondered what excuse they gave to get out of the fundraiser as my protest drifted, unnoticed, to the floor.

August 3rd was when I was planning to go away with Cam, my boyfriend of two years, on a rock climbing adventure. With my day schedule as an aerobics instructor, his studies at the University, combined with his evening schedule as counselor for abusive men in recovery, we seldom got any "Cheerio and Cam" fun time.

"You're not contradicting me are you?"

"N-n-no, it's just that..."

She abruptly interrupted. "Wait, let me finish. Don't bother with the protests. It's a done deal. I'll give you the 12th through the 15th and that's the best I can do." She looked up over her reading glasses and shot me a chilling glare. Something sinister emanated from her face as she glowered at me. A strange halo of darkness surrounded her head causing my eyes to widen. My stomach churned as if it hosted a pool of writhing snakes. Then, she nodded and the frightful countenance disappeared. I was dismissed.

I slunk down the hall to teach my class, head hanging, hoping that the floor tiles rebelled and swallowed Mrs. Primcott whole. "Stop supporting her," I mumbled to the inanimate parquet. My foot came down in an angry stomp.

After class, I headed for home in my beat up, barely breathing Red VW, to give Cam the bad news. We'd been living together for about a year and were still getting the kinks worked out of our relationship. Cam was a nice guy, comfortable in his own skin, with blond hair the color of wheat. He was what most women would call a manly man – drank his beer out of the bottle, thank you very much, confident with his physical abilities, didn't like to process feelings, but he did try to be kind and thoughtful. His hair was often unkempt with a fringe of bangs that hung in his warm, sea-hued blue eyes. Around 6'1", Cam had a well-proportioned muscular build defined by years of rock climbing and other adventure sports. His hands, in particular, were

wiry and strong, as evidenced by his mastery of climbing holds, all requiring a viselike grip. Honestly, I could never figure out what he saw in me. The guy was a catch and then some.

I drove up the long dirt driveway amidst puffs of dust, gravel and worn-out VW exhaust fumes. I bit my lip and worked my face into a twist, wondering how Cam would take the news of our vacation rescheduling. “Uhhh, I hate this!” I spat out. A nervous tick made my eyelid spasm. I pressed my clammy hand over my eye in an attempt to stop my fluttering skin. Muttering, I said, “Maybe I could stall. No, I have to get this over with. Maybe he’ll be okay with the news.” I wiped my palm over my shorts, trying to sop up the damp sweat. “Maybe nothing. This is going to suck.” Grinding the gears of my aging vehicle to a halt, I stared up at the house. “Here goes.”

Our two-story house, bequeathed me by a favorite uncle, was a treasure. With a faded, wooden exterior, peeling beige paint and huge, arched windows, it sat atop a hill, just north of Seattle. It overlooked a dense stand full of evergreen trees and rhododendrons out the kitchen window, a grassy front yard, a tree-lined pasture along the driveway, and a distant vista of pure, white peaks and water. On clear, rain-washed days we could see the Olympics out the living room window and the Cascades out the bedroom window. They were utterly breathtaking. A small flower garden popping with color grew just next to the front and side of the house. Inside, the walls were painted with vibrant oranges and reds in some rooms, and sea greens and blues in others. Art Nouveau vintage posters and batik wall hangings peppered the wall. I picked flowers from the garden as often as I could and put them in colorful glass vases in the kitchen and dining area. I loved this old house. It was lively and festive throughout. As I entered the front door, I glanced at Cam and smiled. *You can do this.*

Cam tipped his pleasantly handsome face, infused with boyish charm, in my direction. “Hello, Cheerio,” he called absentmindedly, pushing back his hair. He sat in the small dining area surrounded by books about the cycles of violence in men and charts depicting something called the ‘Hearts and Flowers’ phase. Huge picture windows flanked both corners of the paper strewn room. His laptop glowed, awaiting its next task.

“Hello, Cam.” I wandered over and planted a friendly kiss on top of his head.

Mac and Jack, my two cats named after one of the best beers in the Pacific Northwest, strolled into the room, their tails high. They were my little pals. They communicated to me using thought bubble-like utterances. I could understand them just fine.

Mac and Jack were twin ruddy Abyssinians. Mac, a sturdy football player of a cat with short reddish hair ticked with black, rubbed against my legs suggestively with all the ardor of a lover. *He's been like that all day*, he thought.

*Head in the books*, Jack, his spry, sleek brother added.

*No time for rubs or treats*, Mac offered.

*Can't be bothered*, Jack continued.

*When are you going to feed us?* Mac finished. These boys got to the point of things as quick as a flicked whisker. Just give me the news and move on – that was their motto. Mac flipped his tail for emphasis and rubbed his small cheek on the corner of the cupboard, watching as I retrieved the bag of cat food.

After sprinkling the dry food in their porcelain bowls decorated with cat stick figures, the boys protested, like they always do.

*Pure crap*, Mac sniffed. *Do we look like we were born to eat wooden crunchies?*

*We like raw*, Jack continued, licking his paws dismissively. *Think of cats in the wild.*

“Cats in the wild do not get three square meals a day,” I retorted. Cam watched me with a bemused smile on his face. I continued speaking to the cats. “And besides, you get your bit of raw for breakfast.” I had been making cat food, a mixture of ground turkey, sprouts, yams, and omega fish oil, for them since they were tiny kittens. It kept their coats glossy and their bodies healthy. The mixture was packed in ice cube trays in the freezer. One cube each per day was all they were allowed. I shook my head at their protests as they settled down to their meal of the dry, supplemental food.

Moseying back to the table where Cam was sitting, I plopped next to him, pressing muffin crumbs from his white paper napkin onto my index finger tip and licking them off my finger. I squirmed in my seat. *Stop it*, I thought. *You can do this.*

He smiled at me and turned back to his monitor. “Good day?” he asked, distractedly.



“It was okay.” I glanced out the window. “Hey, do you have a minute?” I clenched my hands together and bit my lip.

“Not really. What’s up?”

I scoffed and rolled my eyes. *Do you or don't you have a minute?* my inner bad girl protested. I muzzled her as my nerves erupted like firecrackers. My leg pumped up and down like a high-performance sewing machine. “It’s about our getaway.”

“Fuck! Now what?” he said. He turned away from the monitor and glared at me. “What do you have to do this goddamned time?”

At least I had his full attention. Cam and I were in a tense place. When we first moved in together, we got along well, like great friends. Lately, we’d been having major discord. Cam said it was because I couldn’t or wouldn’t stand up for myself. He sat in rooms night after night with men who assaulted their wives with varying intensity, with little or no protest from the women. He urged me to tell him what I wanted, not just agree with him. I wanted him to love me as I am. I mean, this was who he moved in with, right? And then there was the sex. To me, sex was a chore. I *wanted* it to be different. I loved kissing Cam. His kisses made me melt. It was when we veered south of the border that the war inside began. As a result, we’d been arguing more, communicating less. What started as a congenial, friendly connection with fairly decent sex, had slowly disintegrated into an on-edge, ready-to-shatter soap opera of a relationship. Some days I thought we should just break up and get it over with. Clearly, I didn’t deserve him.

A lump of stuck feelings lodged in my throat. I rubbed my hand up and down my neck hoping to ease the logjam and blurted like a bleating lamb. “It...its Jill’s fault. Really! She pulled me aside right before class and told me that I need to be there for the yearly auction. She knows how much I hate these things, but Kate and Sue are busy.”

“Right,” Cam responded with a sneer. “Fucking busy... like hell. Those two probably have a spa day planned. You know I can’t stand the Jackal Twins. I don’t trust them for a minute.” He ran a hand through his hair, wearily. “And, you, the Queen of Concession, you could not have just said *no* to Sergeant Jill? You

couldn't have said, 'Oh, say, my boyfriend and I have plans based on the time I arranged with you, bitch!' I am so tired of this! Goddamn it, Chérie."

"Stop talking to me like I'm one of the men you counsel," I retorted. *Good. I'm standing up for myself.*

"I'm talking to you like you're my girlfriend. You know - the one I made plans with *weeks* ago." He placed both his palms down on the table and worked his jaw from side to side.

*Uh oh, he's mad now.* My shoulders crept up toward my ears. "Well, she's giving me off the 12th through the 15th. Your schedule is somewhat flexible. Can't you rearrange a bit?" I looked over at him and smiled encouragingly, reaching a hand out to push his bangs out of his eyes. He batted me away.

My hand flew to my mouth as tears stung my eyes. Cam's not a mean man, but lately he's been prone to this kind of behavior. In my insecure moments, of which there are many, I think I bring out the worst behavior in guys. I pried my palm from my lips. "It's not my fault this time."

"Yeah, this time... maybe," he said.

"You can't blame me. I was looking forward to going away with you." *There you go. Stick up for yourself.* My inner cheerleader raised her pom poms high.

He sighed and reached toward me. "I'm sorry," he said, his voice subdued. "It's just that I've been awaiting this trip for weeks. I shouldn't take it out on you. I know what a bitch Jill can be. And Kate and Sue – those two are manipulative to the bone."

Mac and Jack were in the corner, having picked with derision at their organic, all-meat and veggies, grain-free nibbles. They licked their pint-sized paws and dragged them across their faces, sneaking glances at one another. I knew exactly what they were thinking.

*Shouldn't treat her that way,* hissed Mac.

*Shouldn't let him treat her that way,* added Jack with a purr. *She needs to grow a pair.*

I glared at them. *What do you know about growing a pair? You're both neutered.*

Mac scoffed inwardly and preened his lustrous coat. *Listen to her. She wouldn't tolerate his anger if she knew the stuff she is made of.*

Jack mimicked his brother's grooming. *She'll figure it out some day.*

Baffled, wondering what the heck they were talking about, my attention returned to Cam as he pulled me onto his lap.

“Come here,” he said gruffly. He hugged me and inclined his face toward mine, his lips poised for a kiss.

I leaned away. “Cam, wait,” I protested.

“What for? I’m trying to kiss and make up here. I’m being nice, babe.” He tipped my chin up and pressed his lips harder against mine until I gave up and yielded to the kiss.

Sex and intimacy had always been a challenge for me. I remember being 15, a self-conscious, virginal wisp of a girl. My two best friends, Lacey and Mariah, were sitting with me on the Walla Walla High School lawn, at lunch. We were all gangly and awkward, just coming into our bodies’ lushness.

“My birthday is next week,” Lacey says, adding a moan for dramatic emphasis.

“Mine is next month,” says Mariah. “We’re all 15, and we’re going to be 16, and we’ve never even been kissed by a boy!”

We looked around at the popular girls flirting with the football team. Each one of us felt ashamed that we had never even been asked out by a boy. We pictured ourselves as flies on a dung hill while the ponies frolicked nearby. I just got my braces off, and my eyes were peering through the tiny optical plastic of contact lenses now. Wherever I went, boys would taunt me and call me names. “Four eyes!” “Soup strainer!” “Stupid girl!” I’d hunch my shoulders and wish to God I could be invisible.

Even though Cam complimented me all the time, I carried that self-image around with me today, as evidenced by my reluctance to get close to him. With his lips fused with mine, I drifted through my pool of memories, remembering the first time we ever made love.

Cam lived in a tiny studio in Green Lake, one of the older and prettier parts of Seattle. The Green Lake area featured a natural lake and an expanse of green space within its dense urban setting. It had a walking/running/biking/pushing-your-baby-stroller path around its perimeter which got used on a daily basis. I’d even run there on occasion. Cam’s studio was on the corner of Greenlake Way and Wallingford Avenue. It overlooked the lake, which was refreshing if you had to live in the city. The small apartment

consisted of a sink, refrigerator, and stovetop for a kitchen, a closet-sized bathroom, and a futon bed. There were tiny windows through which the sun streamed like a golden fountain on the crisp, white walls.

We had been dating for a couple weeks, having met at U-Dub, slang for the University of Washington. Cam, an older 30 to my 27, had been there to see a seminar called “Stopping the War in the Home.” I had taken a shortcut through the campus to get to my aerobics class. He came to a halt as I weaved my way through the students.

“Hey!” he called.

“Hey,” I replied, eyes squinting against the intrusion. He ran up to me and asked me my name.

I hesitated before replying. “It’s Cheerio. Cheerio Manhattan.”

“No, really. What’s your name?”

“That’s it. Cheerio, short for Chérie.”

“It’s not really short. It even has more syllables,” he replied. With a quick burst of laughter, he invited me out for coffee – or tea, in my case. And so our relationship began.

In his studio, a few tea dates, a dinner, and a movie or two later, he had pushed open the door and swept a hand around the room. “M’ lady...my humble digs....”

I cautiously made my way in, scrunching my nose and biting my lip. The kitchenette was clean. The living area was strewn with books, papers, magazines, and newspapers as well as ropes, carabiners, and other rock climbing paraphernalia. He quickly pushed them aside with his foot and indicated that I should sit down on the futon, covered with a faded purple batik print. Shyly, I sat. He tossed a magazine across the room then came and sat down next to me. Then he held my face in his hands and kissed me.

We’d kissed a few times already after our dates were coming to an end, only they were more like kissing marathons. Cam was a great kisser. A completely sensual man, he liked to kiss long, slow, and deep, or impart brief little butterfly kisses over my neck and face. I loved having him suck my lower lip and then lazily investigate the inside of my mouth with his delectable tongue. After being delighted with Cam’s kissing, we’d sit back, panting. However, I always had an excuse ready when it looked like things were heading south to my...ahem...you know...private areas.

When he kissed me in his studio back then I'd stiffened. I knew where things were headed. He got up and crossed the room with a few brisk steps to open a cupboard. His hand reached inside and emerged with two glasses and a bottle of red wine.

"Drink," he said in a tone that brooked no argument, proffering the glass. I drank.

The wine had eased my anxiety enough to accept his next kiss. His hands delved further, pushing up under my sea green sweatshirt. They progressed under my camisole. Feeling both excited and terrified, my heart had been fluttering like a bird, beating a quick staccato. While his sumptuous mouth explored my lips, face, and neck, he eased down my jeans, and then loosened his own zipper. My awareness moved in and out like someone trying to focus a telescope. One minute I'd be excited. And then I'd drift away. Like a ghost, I hovered outside of myself, watching everything happening.

Cam had whispered to my disembodied form, "Just say no if you don't want to."

I just lay there, my attention coming and going, tempted and horrified. He pushed himself between my legs and lovingly undulated in and out. It actually felt good. Yes, it felt quite good. I could feel his heart entering me, not just a body appendix. He wasn't just using me. This guy seemed to care about me. Almost as soon as he entered, the energetic bliss of orgasm streamed up my pelvis.

I tried to bring myself back to the moment, to Cam's mouth on mine. *Good job being present here, Cheerio*, I chided. Again, I floated away, lost in thought.

It had been amazing to experience pleasure with a guy. I did not orgasm easily. In fact, I rarely experienced orgasm. I was the girl who, at age 16, went from having never been kissed, to letting Wesley, a friend of a friend's husband, drive me into the hills to have his way with me. After he was finished, he proudly held up the condom, clucking, "My, my, Wesley do fill da' bag." Clearly, I had not been essential to his moment of triumph. After that, I was the girl who led a double life. By day, I was a bright, intelligent, quiet, and shy student. At night, though, I'd sneak out with Lacey and Mariah. We'd go to parties, and I'd let the cute boy of the moment get me drunk, pull me into the bedroom, and pump my body full of him, while I lay there like a wooden doll, the room spinning. But in that small studio, there with Cam, I had actually

experienced some satisfaction, some care. In that moment I realized that he and I would stick it out for at least a while. We'd be more than a one night stand.

*Focus, Cheerio. Stop with all the thinking.* I snapped back to the present.

Cam pulled back from the kiss. "Are you with me here, babe?"

"Mm hmm," I mumbled. "Right here. Here I am." *Liar*, my inner cheerleader said. She threw her pom poms on the ground and stomped away. *You always disappear into a mental cloud*, she called over her shoulder.

Cam drew me into the bedroom, my initial reluctance subsiding. We lay down, and he whispered, "Don't worry, babe, we'll make our getaway happen. I can move things around in my schedule." He removed his clothing, and then tackled mine with ardent devotion. His hands caressed me with gentle tenderness and care. Our tongues tangled as he swept his fingers down my shoulders. We slithered, rocked, and rolled about our queen-sized bed. His lips locked with mine, soothing my anxiety, his fingers stroking and lulling me into a bit of satisfying pleasure. For once, I let go with Cam. Maybe there was hope for me yet. Afterwards, we drifted to sleep, my back snuggled into his warm spoon-like embrace.

I burst awake in the middle of the night, embraced by suffocating darkness. Something brushed my shoulder. I jerked and my eyes shot open. They were back - those gruesome fingers of dirty darkness from my childhood. A sickly sensation prickled through my skin, curdling the contents of my stomach.

A dark whisper pricked my ears, oozing with malicious intent. "We're going to get you, oh, yes-s-s-s we are."

The slithery voice was jagged and sharp. The sound slipped inside my head like a knife blade. I had never heard this whisper before, never felt the fingers, so bony and real. Not like this.

As the nightmare swept over me, a sharp rush of air filled my throat. I clamped the palm of my hand against my mouth to keep from waking Cam. He lay next to me, undisturbed, breathing in a slow rhythmic cadence. The guy could sleep through a soccer match. Mac and Jack, who had been curled up at my feet like bookends, leapt to attention and pounced on my stomach in a synchronized pas de deux. The whispers and fingers disappeared with a whoosh, like a cloud of dust.

*There, there*, thought Mac, purring loudly while licking my fingers with his raspy sandpaper of a tongue.

*Easy does it*, cooed Jack, pulling my left hand toward his head with one outstretched sharp claw. He watched his brother's passionate grooming of my right hand and stretched his tongue tentatively toward my cheek. *Disgusting. Simply disgusting, grooming your hairless skin.* He pushed his head under my fingers. *Better that you groom me.*

I chuckled quietly at his revulsion and let these two fine felines soothe me into a restless sleep.

## Chapter 2

The next day, Cam was the picture of sweetness as I got ready for class. He brewed my favorite tea, Mountain Tea Song, a sweet mixture of green tea swirled with fragrant jasmine flowers. He handed it to me with a huge organic blueberry bran muffin, dripping with butter and honey.

“Why so sweet?” I asked, reaching for the muffin. I pursed my lips. *Is he up to something? Has he forgiven me?*

“Oh, no reason,” he answered, grinning back at me. “I guess I just decided to man up, change my schedule, adjust my attitude and look forward to a different weekend away with my gorgeous Chérie.”

“Gorgeous, ha! You must be confusing me with someone else.”

Cam shook his head at me. “I’m pretty sure I got this one right, babe. I’m talking about *you*.”

I reddened. “Thanks, Cam. We’ll have a good time. Maybe the weather will be better on that weekend. Maybe there’s a reason the dates got rearranged.” I bit my lip and smiled up at him. “And I promise not to dwell on that stupid fundraiser, okay?”

“Did the cats jump on you last night?” he asked, ignoring my question.

“What makes you think that? I thought you were sleeping.”

“I heard something and figured it was the cats. Why do you put up with that?” He chuckled.

I recalled the disturbing fingers and whispering taunts that crept up my arm last night. I shuddered and brushed my arms.

“You cold, babe?” Cam asked me, popping the last of his muffin in his mouth. “I can turn the heat up.”

“No.” I nibbled the bran and raisin bun. It now tasted like cardboard. I swallowed and fidgeted with one of my fingernails. “Cam?” I fingered his strong arms, delicately tracing the golden hairs. “Do you ever feel things...strange things...like weird darkness trying to get at you?”

“What are you talking about?” He glanced over at me with a perplexed frown.

“Oh, I woke up in the middle of the night. There was something in the room with me...something creepy, trying to get my attention. I think the cats jumped on me to chase it away.”

“So those two cats are now ghost busters?” Cam turned to me and smiled. “I hardly think so. They probably wanted a midnight snack.” He ruffled my hair affectionately and wandered into the kitchen to get a



glass out of the cupboard. “Don’t worry about it, babe, it was probably just a bad dream.” He opened the Frigidaire and removed a carton of orange juice.

“Yeah,” I replied, unconvinced, and leaned down to scratch Mac’s head.

*More*, Mac purred.

A muffled melody interrupted our conversation. I sprang for my Guatemalan bag, stirring things this way and that to retrieve my cellphone.

“Hello?”

“Chér, it’s me.”

“Hi, Z! What’s cooking?”

Zuri Davidson was my best friend. A mahogany-haired beauty, with a Rubenesque womanly body, deep set summer sea eyes, and a slightly crooked smile, she had been my closest ally since we were 20.

“Well...” She stretched the word out, full of suspense. “I’ve got these two tickets to go see the Sungods tonight and wondered if you wanted to go with me.”

“I’d love to! Cam’s at work tonight so I can swing by after dinner, and we can go from there.”

“It’s a deal! We’ll work out the details this afternoon. I gotta jet. Ta!”

Cam looked over with a grin on his face. “You two Wonder Women going out on the town again?”

“Looks like it. You can meet up with us later, if you like.”

“Nah. Not tonight. I’ll probably be bushed after group. I’ll see you when you get home. “

He gave me a quick hug and rushed out the door.

In the stillness of the big house, I wandered into the living room and fell back onto the oversized couch. A gift from Cam’s grandma, the couch was a puffy sectional of soft green fake suede, inviting languor. It was the perfect perch to mull things over. I gazed out at the evergreen trees and sky. A soft mist left water drops lining the branches, twinkling in the sun that peeked through the clouds. A ruby-throated hummingbird darted to the feeder and took a dainty sip before zipping away like a tiny rocket. A red-tailed hawk circled in the distant sky. The moment encouraged peace and contemplation.

I thought about the shadowy fingers, the whispery voice. *What were they trying to tell me? What were they? Who were they?* I thought about calling my mother over in Walla Walla, but what would she know? And what would she do other than cluck and change the subject or tell me that I was making things up, as she often did.

Mother had been a formidable character in my childhood. A stern, chubby woman, Clarice and my father, Frank, had been married when they were 17 and 19. They'd lost their first child, Simon, to Sudden Infant Death Syndrome when he was only a few months old. I was born two years later. They'd thought it best to not try for another. Hence, I was their only child.

We lived in a boxy little home in the suburbs of Walla Walla on a road called Pleasant Street. Long established trees lined the streets, spreading their shade and comfort in the hot summers.

Mother Clarice, as she liked to be called, wore her blond hair in a frizzy perm most of the time. She worked at a nearby bank as a teller. Her face was usually red and rosy with sweat. Her nose sported tiny red spider veins. She tried, unsuccessfully, to cover her rolls of flab behind girdles and body shapers. Frank, a used car salesman, called her "my succulent little plumper" and grabbed her from behind when she was in the kitchen cooking her sorry-ass meals of Hamburger Helper and Rice-a-Roni. My face reddened in these moments, and I skulked from the room, embarrassed at their display of drunken affection.

I had a dog back then, a big black standard Poodle named Doodles. Doodles liked to think of himself as my protector. When Mother Clarice and father argued, as they invariably did each night after a few drinks, Doodles pushed me into my bedroom with his nose. I smiled at the memory of my dog.

*You don't need to see that, he chided. Better to busy yourself with grooming me.*

He picked up the dog grooming kit, a box of tools over which I had no mastery, with his mouth. Then, he trotted across the wooden floor, his nails clacking, his tail wagging, and dropped the box on the bed.

"Go away, Doodles. We did that last night."

*And you still haven't got it right. I'm supposed to have a round puff on top, not a cone.*

Sighing, I pulled the sharp scissors out and snipped at Doodles' top knot. Even with my tape player turned up high I could still hear Mother Clarice and Frank arguing. Inevitably, it would end with the clink of ice cubes in a chilled glass, the gurgle of liquid pouring out a bottle spout and Mother stomping into her

bedroom. Father would end up in the den, passed out in his easy chair. Only then would Doodles let me out to watch TV in the living room, with father snoring like a rumbling train and reeking of bourbon in the next room, sound asleep.

No, calling Mother Clarice was *definitely* not the answer, nor was talking to anyone else. Lost once more in musings, I was getting no further in my quest for answers. "I may as well go teach aerobics," I said to the cats. The two of them turned and sauntered out of the room.

## Chapter 3

Teaching at the community center was rewarding. I was in my own little world when I taught. Closing the door and turning up the sound, I shut out the rest of the world. It was the only place, in fact, where I actually believed I was good at something, like I was doing something worthwhile.

Today was the start of a new session of classes. My first class was called “EZ Step-tastic,” a beginning cardiovascular step class for those just starting out with step aerobics. Later, I’d teach “Pump It,” a challenging, strength training class which I had personally developed, followed by an easy yoga class.

As the students filed in for Step-tastic, their leotard and sweat pant clad figures dispersing around the room, I turned to greet them. Most of them were familiar faces at the community center.

“Hello, Sally! Beth, how’re the kids? How’s Tom?” I asked. This part of the class – the social interaction part – was not my favorite. I noticed a new student in the back, an elderly woman wearing a long plaid wool skirt and an oversized sweater of golden brown. Worn leather shoes poked out from underneath the folds of fabric. It was an odd costume for working out. I frowned and made my way back to her.

“Hello. Are you new?” I inquired, clipboard in hand, ticking off the names of the students. “What’s your name?”

The woman scrutinized me, unblinking, with cold eyes like an eagle with a mouse in her sights. Her auburn hair, streaked with white, hung in two braids down her back. Tendrils of escaped hair sprang in coils from the cloth that bound her braids, giving her the appearance of being caught in an electrical storm. She smelled of dried leaves and sweet herbs. Her skin was remarkably unlined and taut, yet she looked as old as a Roman temple.

“Not new, not by a long shot, girly. Been on this planet a long time.”

I took a step back and stammered, “I meant n-n-new to the class.”

“I know what you meant.” She regarded me silently, her face an unreadable mask.

Some of the students glanced over at us and tiny trickles of sweat popped out at my hairline. “Well, find a place, and we’ll begin,” I chirped.

“Oh, we began a long time ago,” she said softly, gazing steadily into my eyes.

A sizzling jolt shot up my spine. I swallowed and continued. “Just follow along. I repeat the steps over and over. If you have any trouble we’ll work on it after class.”

“And if *you* have any trouble, let’s just say we’ll be in touch.”

The hair on the back of my neck bristled like a pin cushion. I grimaced and staggered toward the front of the room. “Okay, ready? Let’s get moving.” I glanced toward the door and considered making a run for it. “Legs apart, toes turn out, take a few deep breaths as you raise your arms up overhead,” I began, still eyeing the back door. “Now reach to the side and breathe. That’s it, slow and easy. Take your time warming up.” I hoped my voice did not sound shaky. “Now, face the step and make an easy step tap, that’s it, step tap. One, two, follow the beat, step tap, step tap.” I kept what I hoped was a smile on my face and took the class through a well-memorized routine.

I kept glancing surreptitiously at the woman in the back of the room. She stood in front of her step, arms folded, eyes trained on me like she was looking through the crosshairs of a scoped rifle. She made no attempt to follow along. I focused on the other students, trying to appear calm and cheerful, all the while ready to race outside, hands outstretched, screaming madly like a lunatic. Time stretched into a long, slow ribbon of molasses. I kept watch on the clock, observing the hands inch along, willing them to move faster. Finally, the class was over. “And, that’s a wrap! See you next week!” I called, feigning gaiety. I blew my cheeks out and exhaled a long, slow breath.

The students made their way back to the dressing room as I gathered up my belongings, my back to the door. When the room was quiet, I turned to head to the next class. The old woman stood right behind me. “Oh!” I jumped, straight up, the CDs and iPod clattering to the floor. “I didn’t hear you.”

She didn’t say anything, just kept the steady stare. My solar plexus hummed with sensation. I clutched my palms against my stomach, like I did so many years ago at the edge of the field in gym class.

“Don’t,” she barked, in a husky, gravelly voice.

“D-d-don’t what?” I stuttered. I was the tongue-tied 16 year-old all over again.

“Don’t try to suppress what you are feeling. Take your hands away from your stomach.” She reached out to me, and I stumbled backwards.

“What are you doing? Get away from me.”

She backed me into a corner. “I won’t hurt you. I’m here to help you.” Her voice sounded diffuse and seemed to come from every direction.

“I don’t need your help.”

“Yes. You do. And you will, more and more.”

God, she sounded like she was going to be my sponsor or something. I didn’t need a sponsor. And I sure didn’t need her. My teeth clicked and chattered. My knees gave way and I slid to the floor. “Please, please, don’t hurt me,” I whispered, eyes closed, mouth dry.

“Hurting you is the last thing on my mind. You and I, we’ve got work to do,” she stated in firm, decisive tones. With that, she turned and strode gracefully out the door.

Jill stuck her head around the door. “Everything alright in here?” she called in her nasal, sing-song voice.

“Fine, just fine. Everything’s fine.” I picked myself up off the floor and brushed the dust bunnies off my rear.

“Who was that?” Jill asked.

“Oh, she’s just a new student. She had some questions about the routine.”

“I see. Shouldn’t you be heading for room 12?”

“On my way!” I brushed past her and ran toward the ladies room. Kate and Sue marched down the hall, heading right for me, arm-in-arm.

“What’s the matter, Che-e-e-e-rio?” Kate stretched my name out like the bubble gum she chewed. She laughed a short yap of a laugh, like the bark of a Chihuahua. Kate was stick-skinny and dressed like something out of a magazine, all low-rise jeans and high-heeled boots. Her mascaraed eyes and kohl eyeliner gave her the distinct look of a raccoon.

“Thank you for covering for us for the *fun*-raiser,” Sue quipped with her Southern drawl, intentionally forgetting to say the “d.” The phrase was iced with politeness like a frosted cake. “We sure appreciate it.” She looked out the corner of her trout gray eyes, giving Kate a conspiratorial glance. “We just can’t make it.” Sue, slightly curvier than her slender friend, Kate, also dressed for the runway, all Vogue, Harper’s Bazaar, and

Glamour clad. She blew out a bubble, popped it and sucked the gum inside her mouth, licking her lips like a predator.

“Can’t talk right now, gotta get to class,” I stammered, reaching for the bathroom door.

“The classroom’s *that* way.” They both laughed, pointing down the hall.

I hustled into a stall, closed the door and flipped open my phone. Gathering myself together as best I could, I punched the buttons of my best friend’s phone number. When she answered, I blurted, “Z, it’s me. I just had the strangest thing happen.”

“Sorry, love, I can’t talk right now.” Z’s voice was tight. “Boss-man will be in the room any second now. You can tell me all about it when I see you tonight. Gotta go... bye.”

Silence poured out the phone. I held it in my hand and scowled at it as if it had betrayed me. I snapped it shut and sighed. Unlocking the stall, I skulked over to the sink. Splashing water over my face with shaky hands, I tried to regain my composure. This day was getting truly weird. I didn’t know how I was going to make it to the evening. Standing there for as long as I could, I was grateful that no-one else entered. Taking a deep breath, I left the bathroom and trotted to my next class. Thank the stars that I could lose myself in dance.

## Chapter 4

After dinner that night, a to-go meal from Whole Foods that I picked at and pushed around the plate, I prepared to go out dancing with Z. Since this was a “sacred outing” to us, we always poured through our closets for just the right apparel. Dressing up was a way to shield myself with a costume. I could hide behind my outfit and pretend to be someone else.

My choice for the night was black spandex leggings with a short, red, form-fitting dress with asymmetrical sleeves – one draped down to the elbow, the other a spaghetti strap. Two red garnet earrings adorned my left ear, while three silver hoops of varying widths draped from my right. The last piece was a silver snake curling around my neck, his mouth grasping his tail. I slipped into two soft leather shoes with open toes to show off my recent pedicure. Scrutinizing myself in the mirror, I decided that this was as good as it was going to get. I grabbed my purse and threw my beloved battered leather coat over my shoulders.

Mac and Jack, who had been sitting on the bed watching this ritual with solemn eyes, each jumped down and rubbed against my legs.

I looked down at their furry bodies. “Is that a sign of approval?”

*Not,* thought Mac.

*We’re just marking you so you’ll be safe,* Jack added, with an extra rub against my leg for good measure.

I chuckled to myself over their declaration of protection. Why did little furry four-leggeds feel like they had to keep me safe?

*You’d be surprised,* Jack thought.

I widened my eyes, always surprised when they caught *my* thoughts.

*You are so naïve.* Mac flicked his tail at me and strolled out the door, his task accomplished. *We’re so much smarter than you think.*

Tossing my phone in my purse, I strode to the door to head downtown.

At Zuri’s apartment, a sleek, modern glass and granite building overlooking the Puget Sound, I buzzed her number. The door clicked to allow entrance. Taking the elevator up to the 6<sup>th</sup> floor, I tried to brush off the day’s strangeness.



When Zuri answered the door, she whisked me inside her contemporary apartment, all clean lines and bold colors. In the middle of her living room was a black leather wrap around couch covered with red, gold, and blue pillows. One side faced the Puget Sound through tall, sweeping windows. The other side faced a 50" TV placed on a low chrome and glass TV stand. A coffee table was festooned with a Chihuly glass sculpture, People magazine, and big books of photography by Richard Avedon, Helmut Newton, and Dorothea Lange.

"Here, have a drink." She handed me a fruity rum concoction.

I gave it a cautious sniff. "What is it?"

"It's supposed to be a Zombie." Zuri had been learning how to prepare various cocktails from her latest in a string of boyfriends, Alec.

"I sure don't want to be a Zombie tonight." I took a polite sip and set the drink down on the colorful coaster on her coffee table.

Zuri laughed. "Yea, but you want to be loose and ready! The Sungods percussion is crazy hot!"

"I don't need to be drunk to be ready," I muttered.

"Then here, take this." She extended a smoldering joint.

"No thanks, Z."

"Ah, Cheerio, come on. Let's be on the same wavelength." She inhaled deeply and fell back onto the mountain of pillows covering her couch, not caring whether I answered her or not.

"Remember I told you I need to tell you about something strange that happened today?"

"Yeah," Z replied dreamily. "Go on." She picked up her Zombie and took a long drink.

When I relayed the story, one long lashed eyelid opened from her stoned reverie. "You're shitting me, right, Chér?"

"No, I'm dead serious." I chewed on my fingernails.

"That's right out of a sci-fi book. Are you sure you aren't making it up?"

I picked up a couch pillow and tossed it at her head. "God, you sound like Mother Clarice! 'You're always making things up, Chérie.' No, I did not make it up, it happened just like I told you."

“Maybe she was just some homeless walk-in. Where did she go when she left the class? Did you see what kind of car she drove?”

“No, Z, I didn’t stick around to play detective,” I said, smirking. “I just ran to the bathroom to get myself together.”

“Oh, my poor baby,” Z crooned, putting her arms around me. “What are we going to do with you?” She stroked my back and murmured, “I will not let you go down the dark rabbit hole, Chér. I will reach down in there and pull your head out by the hair when you start to go down.”

The image was slightly comical but there it was - that protective edge - cats, dogs, and now my best friend, always trying to stick up for me. *Couldn’t I take care of myself?* My inner bitch yelled at me in response. *I’d have more to do if you let me out now and then.* She and my inner cheerleader clinked shot glasses, tossed the fiery whiskey down their throats and laughed. *We’ve got nothing better to do,* they said in unison. I shook my head.

“Let’s get out of here.” I grabbed Zuri’s arm and hauled her up from the couch.

I drove us to Cam’s old haunts, Green Lake, since Z was more than a bit buzzed. We searched for a parking spot near Re-Fly High, the club where the Sungods would be playing. It was around 9 pm, early enough to get a drink and a good spot on the dance floor, front and center. That’s where we liked to be.

The club was a favorite among the non-pretentious, Seattle twenty-somethings who just liked to watch, drink, and dance. From the outside, it looked small. Once you entered the front door, a spacious dance floor, flanked by a bar on one side and tiny round tables and chairs on the other, allowed plenty of room to move. An actual photo booth stood in the back of the room, inviting old-school, Kodachrome proof of the night’s debauchery.

We ordered a couple of cocktails from the bar and stood talking, at the edge of the stage. Stagehands were bustling about moving the drum set and setting up amps for the opening band, Without a Prayer. One of them tapped the microphone, calling “Check, check, one, two, three, check.”

I sensed a tingly feeling at the back of my neck, like someone was staring at me. Sipping my drink, I examined the space. Three guys stood in the back of the room, eyes trained on us. I looked to the left. Two more trained their eyes on me. I had the uneasy feeling of being the main course in a shark tank. One of the

guys, a good looking dark haired fellow in tight jeans and a black t-shirt, was gesturing in my direction. His tall body had huge biceps and muscular thighs, perfectly evident through his body wrapping, tight attire. Abundant, glossy hair trailed down along his shoulders. His hair made me think of being in the middle of the woods at 2 am and regaling in the night sky, all blue black, twinkling stars and quiet mystery. I wondered what it would feel like to let those silky strands fall through my fingers. Jittery butterflies fluttered in my tummy as he waved his hand toward me. He leaned in toward his friend, and they both laughed.

“Cheerio,” Z said. “Are you with me?”

“Hmmm? Oh yeah, I’m right here.”

“I was saying, it looks like it’s going to be a good set tonight. Be prepared to shake it, ‘til it hurts.” She chuckled and wiggled her hips like a dog shaking off water.

“Oh, got it. No problem. ‘Shaking it’ is my middle name.” I joined her giggles.

I turned back to look at the guys. The dark haired guy looked straight at me. An electric shock shot straight up my spine. I closed my eyes and the room spun. I reached my hand toward the stage to keep from falling to the floor.

“Cheerio!” Z shook my arm, a note of alarm creeping into her voice. “What the fuck, girlfriend?”

“Sorry, Z. Must be the crazy day. Maybe I shouldn’t be drinking this cocktail.” I set it on the lip of the stage.

Z glared at me, her forehead creased. “Should I be worried about you? You’re kinda freaking me out.”

“No, no. It’s nothing. Just feeling a little light headed.” I glanced over to the corner where the men had been. I craned my neck to see where they went. “I just need to sit down a sec.”

We sat on the floor against the front of the stage immersed in the growing crowd. It was getting too loud to talk so we just sat, leaning against one another in familiar friendship. Finally, it was show time.

After the first set – a nothing special blend of rock and reggae – we waited impatiently for the next act. That first band, Without a Prayer, had an apt name. Their sound was off, their songs were ho-hum and their lead singer was loaded, stumbling all over the stage. *They truly did not have a prayer of a chance at making it*, I thought as the throng of people herded us closer toward the stage.

Everyone was talking loud or yelling to be heard over the increasing din. One of the reasons I liked to be up front was that the stage always seemed spacious. It was a place to escape when the crowd got thick like this. It loomed like a fire exit, making me feel safe. Not only that, when I was this close, there was no one but me and the band in the room. I could ignore the surging crowd.

Zuri, on the other hand, was in her element, preening, smiling her crooked smile at all the guys flirting with her. She allowed her curves to be curvier, her smile to be wider, and the chasm between her huge breasts to beckon a great fall into their depths. She loved the boy-toy devotion and commanded it like a madam at a House of Ill Repute. She had no problem telling a guy to get lost, if need be, or come closer if the mood arose.

The lights in the room were extinguished. A couple of people gasped. A hush spread through the darkness. We all stood still, full of anticipation. Nervous laughter erupted and then was quashed with a “Shhh!”

A single drumstick on a single drum shattered the silence. *Crack!* We waited, our collective breath held. Explosive pops and snaps erupted as hands pounded a djembe and the sound of percussion filled the room. The crowd roared with approval. Everyone moved, writhed, and shook. This was what we came for. This, this primordial beat of deep rhythm, this heartbeat, this groove was the god we prayed to. This was our nourishment. This throbbing sensation was our elixir, our drug of choice. We came here to dance.

I lost myself in the sensation of dripping perspiration and scintillating rhythm. Intoxicated with the beat of the drums, I writhed, swayed, and jumped, bumping arms, legs, knees, and elbows with my fellow dancers. We were one giant pulsating ball of sweat and energy, one immense beast of vibration. When the tribe of pounding humanity around me constrained my movement, I closed my eyes, planted my feet and shifted side to side. Someone, all solid muscles and heat, pressed a bit too close to my back. I stiffened and tried to turn my head, but two extremely strong hands grasped each side of my head, immobilizing me.

“Hey, sexy girl, just keep moving. I like the way you move.”

*Was he confusing me with someone else?* Alarmed, I wriggled against his hands. I struggled and pulled. My eyes darted wildly, wondering if anyone was watching. Everyone was lost in dance. I grabbed his hands. They were

warm and sensuous making me melt inside and lean against him. A deep rumbling vibrated against my back as if he was purring. My breath caught. The voice of reason inside protested. *Stop it! What are you doing, Chérie?* I jerked and wrestled against his grip.

“You’ll never get free. Let it go. Don’t bother.”

Utterly conflicted, I didn’t know whether to surrender or scream. I believed I *knew* this guy. A shiver pulsed in my solar plexus. *Pay attention*, my inner pep squad hissed.

“I’m gonna tell you a secret” he uttered in my ear, stressing the “s” in secret. “You’re going to like it. A lot..”

Soothed by his voice, I dissolved once more against his torso. “Okay. What is it?” My hands dropped to my sides and my head leaned back against his delicious warmth.

“Not here. Not now.”

“When?” I murmured. My voice seemed to come from far, far away. The music receded into the background. The writhing, sweat-soaked bodies faded out of sight. In this moment, there was only him and me in our own private universe.

“I’ll find you...when you are ready.” His hand caressed my face.

A shudder went down my spine. “I’m ready right now.”

“Not yet. Not here. Not now.”

“Puh-leeease,” I whined, cringing at my desperation.

“Not...yet.” He said each word slowly and distinctly.

I could feel them embed inside me like splinters. His hands left an ache of longing when they left my face. His touch left me quivering like a spotted baby deer without her mama in the middle of a meadow. I took one bottomless breath and turned quickly to see the back of the dark haired guy I had seen earlier, as he disappeared into the crowd. I stood, stunned, as the crowd writhed around me. Zuri forced herself through the tightly knit pulsating figures to stand next to me.

“Chér!” she yelled. “That scene made me *hot!* Who was that guy?”

“I dunno,” I yelled back. “Just some dude...he must have mistaken me for someone else.”

“Dude, indeed. I could feel the energy between you, too. You’ve got some ‘splaining to do.” She laughed her irrepressible laugh.

“Nothing to ‘splain, Reecky,” I mimicked Lucy Arnaz of the old Lucy-Desi Comedy Show. “He just got a little too close.” My inner cheerleader leapt into the air and performed a double hook. *You liked it. Go get him!*

“Well, send some of that too close my way next time. Hot, hot, *bo!*” Z said, as she twirled away.

After I arrived home and the drinks and dancing had worn off, confusion thrummed through my head. Sitting in the dark dining room, I mused about the night. I cared for Cam. He was my beau, my rock-steady. What was I doing even thinking about the dark haired guy? I was committed to Cam...wasn't I? And besides, the dark haired guy was so gorgeous, the kind of guy that women swooned over and girls like me never got. He was right off the cover of a magazine. Not that Cam wasn't handsome - he was. But I just didn't think I was pretty enough that any man would be attracted to me. Cam must have been desperate when he moved in with me. There was no way the dark haired guy was going to give me a second thought. And, truthfully, he must have been mistaken when he came up behind me.

Mac jumped on the table and sniffed my lips. Jack followed and sniffed my cheek. The cool puffs of air tickled my face. Neither one thought a word. At night, when the world was full of silent mysteries, they preferred the quiet stillness of simply being.

“Hi, kitties.” I scratched their heads and backs, stroking their fur until they purr.

My thoughts kept wandering back to that *guy*. What was I doing? What was I thinking? *I'll probably never see him again*, my logical mind protested. But logic did nothing to stop the thoughts that swirled through my head. Moisture bloomed between my legs as I thought of him. “Uhhh,” I said, gritting my teeth. I ran my hands through my hair, trying to clear my head. What was his secret? What was mine? There were just too many secrets in this world.

I climbed the stairs to the bedroom and pulled back the covers to slip in beside Cam's sleeping body. An overwhelming mixture of guilt, betrayal, confusion, and warmth settled around me like a peculiar blanket. I gingerly reached out and touched Cam's warm, muscular back. He stirred and let out a drowsy sigh, settling deeper into the soft mattress. I breathed in his warmth and his familiar smell as my mind worked to process

everything that had happened today. I let these unusual new feelings embrace me as I fell into the land of sleep and dreams.

My awareness popped into a lucid dream. In the dream, I stood on a precipice, a few feet above a dry creek bed. Bones were scattered here and there amidst the stones. Directly below me was the humerus of an arm...over there was a femur. A pelvis was nearby. Further down the dry bed lay a fibula and a scapula. A few ribs were scattered about.

My body did not have any bones. I was a mushy, amorphous shape held aloft through intention. I knew the bones were mine. Soft murmurs crooned from my left. I glanced over at two figures. They were too far away to discern, but they appeared to be a man and a woman. They had glowing eyes, focused right on me.

“Gather the bones, Chérie,” said one of the figures.

“Bring them home,” said the other.

“Find and gather. Reassemble. Make whole. Renew,” they chanted.

I knew, in that way you know something in a dream that things were going to change soon. A thunderbolt split the sky. A light drizzle fell, wetting my face, my eyelashes, and my hair. The chanting continued, hypnotizing me. I spread my boneless arms and willed myself to fly, their voices fading into the night.

## Chapter 5

The next couple of weeks went by without incident. I was so busy I nearly forgot about the dark haired guy in the club. Cam and I planned for our upcoming rock climbing trip, purchasing needed supplies with our limited income. We always splurged on equipment for our sports. Cam believed that, when it came to our safety, scrimping was not an option. Hence, we bought the best quality ropes, carabiners – metal rings with a spring clip used to attach a rope to climbing gear - figure eights, and other climbing equipment we could afford. I had purchased a good pair of used climbing shoes last year, as well as a quality used harness so I was all set. All I needed was a pair of new climbing pants.

A growing excitement as well as camaraderie grew between us as we prepared. The only hurdle to get through was that damn Northwest auction gala. Yesterday, I had spied Sue and Kate whispering in the hall as Jill pulled me into her office for a meeting about said fundraiser. They glanced over my way and giggled.

“Hey, Cheerio,” Kate called. “Thanks a million for covering for us. Oh, right, I already said that. Don’t want it to go to your head.”

Sue added, “You’re really just the lass for the night, girlfriend.” Why she had to add “girlfriend” was anybody’s guess. We were SO not friends. She and Sue had bumped knuckles and wiggled their fingers at each other and roared with laughter.

*What was their problem?* I wondered, gloomily, stepping into Jill’s stuffy office, my red sneaker soles catching on the linoleum. My inner cheerleader sat next to my inner bitch on a bench inside my head. They ignored me and painted each other’s fingernails. I lurched toward Jill’s desk before catching my balance. Today, her office reeked of stale perspiration and printer toner. Jill looked up from her pile of freshly printed papers. She wore a low-cut white blouse. Her heaving breasts appeared tortured as they peeked out over the edges of a huge white lace bra that cut into her skin. I imagined a set of pleading eyes on each breast, begging for release. She gestured toward an older man sitting in a chair to the right of her desk. She gave me one of her menacing glares before stretching her face in what must be a smile. I stiffened and stepped backwards.

“Chérie Manhattan, meet Joe Dallas. You’ll be Joe’s...Mr. Dallas’, I mean, Go-To girl at the fundraiser.”



The man, around forty-five years old, had graying brown hair and a pock-marked face. His teeth were stained a puke yellow hue. He had a handkerchief in his hand and kept mopping his brow. I noticed a slight tremor in his hand as he raised it to his forehead as if even he were hesitant to touch his greasy face. A green polo shirt stretched across his immense paunchy frame. A wrinkled jacket was folded in his lap. He plastered a leer across his puffy face and looked in my direction. I wrinkled my nose in distaste, a queasy feeling churning in my gut.

“What do I have to do?”

“Mr. Dallas is our M.C. for the evening. He’ll command the auction, with excellence I might add!” She paused and gave him a conspiratorial smile. A rosy blush flowered in her tight, strained cheeks. “And you’ll need to fetch the auction items, hand him descriptions of the pieces we want to sell, things like that.” She added, “You’ll need to dress very well, very well indeed.” She nodded to herself and to Joe as if that was obvious.

Joe Dallas chimed in. “Yes, wearing suggestive attire will help us sell things, sweetheart. You dress like a racy doll, and we’ll sell things like hotcakes flipping on the griddle.” He slapped his meaty palms together and rubbed them briskly. Taking in a breath, he blew it out slowly, as if savoring the image of me in some whorish costume.

Inwardly, I winced. I was not this idiot’s sweetheart. This guy gave me the creeps. There was no way I’d dress up for him or for Jill. Where was my inner bitch when I needed her?

“I’ll see what I’ve got in my closet,” I conceded.

“I can help you pick out something. I’ve got an eye for this kind of thing,” Joe added, glancing Jill’s way for confirmation.

“No, thanks,” I said, smiling weakly. Why did I always pretend to get along? Sometimes I disgusted myself. “I’ll manage.” My inner bitch raised one eyebrow in my direction. *I could help you know.* She dipped her brush into the bright pink nail polish and dragged it along my inner cheerleader’s nail.

“Get there early so we can fine tune the way we want to organize the evening. Be prepared,” she stressed, giving me a squinty-eyed, intimidating gaze.

As I forced the door open, I noticed Sue and Kate were still in the same spot. They both spluttered, staring at me. “Guess you met Mr. Dallas. You two will make a fine duo. So sorry we can’t be there to help you. You know how it is when something comes up that you just can’t avoid.” They were laughing so hard, tears were streaming down their faces.

Now I knew what their hilarity was all about – Mr. Dallas. My face reddened, and I quickened my steps. Once outside, I took a calming breath of the fragrant summer air. The high clouds in the blue sky were expansive and comforting. The sun touched me with a warm caress. I sighed.

The thought of working with Mr. Dallas was repulsive to me. Jill was frightening enough to be around, but this guy was an indecent nightmare. I jogged to my car in an attempt to ease my tight gut. As I turned the corner, I nearly ran into Michael Ziegler. Michael was good looking, in his early 30s. He wore faded jeans and a denim shirt covered with dirt from a day’s work as a carpenter. He leaned forward, shaking sawdust from his hair.

“Hi, Michael!”

Kicking his work boots against the truck tires to dislodge the mud from the soles, he answered, “Hi, Chér. How’s it going?” He tossed his tool bag into the cargo container in the back of his truck. It hit the truck bed with a jangling thud. Taking a key ring out of his pocket, he sorted through the keys until he found the right one. With a click he locked the bin.

“Oh, kinda crappy... I have to work at the Northwest fundraiser in a couple of weeks, and I have to work with this horrid man.” I wrinkled my nose in disgust.

“That sucks,” he commiserated, stuffing the keys back in his pocket. “Maybe I can help you forget your troubles. Why don’t you join me for a beer? No sense drinking alone.”

“Sure, that would be great. I’ll follow you in my V-dub.”

He climbed in his monstrous Ford F350 pickup truck and powered up the engine. With a wave, he peeled out onto the street. I jumped in my Beetle, turned the key in the ignition, and gunned the motor to try to catch up with him.

I had known Michael for many years, since I was 20. He was a confidant at times, a great pal to hang out with at others. I had never been attracted to him, although he seemed to want to play that way with me. Truth be told, though, he regarded most women that way. He loved the ladies, and the ladies loved him. That was for a fact. I just plain liked him. He had dark curly hair, velvety butterfly-wing blue eyes, and long eyelashes. His work in construction kept his 6' body tan, lean, and muscular. With an ever-easy smile and a merry disposition, it was hard to be in a sour mood around Michael.

Michael motored towards a bar down the street called Jingo's High and Mighty. He hung a right into the parking lot and sat inside the cab until I caught up. His side door opened and he climbed out, striding toward me. "Come on, girl, let's have us some brews." He threw his arm around my shoulders and pulled me inside.

Jingo's was a hip brew pub, serving some of the best suds around. It had high windows all around the perimeter, a darkened room off to the back with TVs blaring, a cherry wood bar lining the back wall, and a cozy room full of tables with comfortable chairs. We sidled up to one of the tables and settled into our seats.

A saucy looking woman with a long black braid, wearing a white shirt and black pants, waltzed over, ready to take our order. She had a beauty mark by her lip and chewed gum with loud smacking sounds.

"What'll it be?" she inquired, looking at Michael with 'I Want You' eyes.

"A couple of El Jefe Weizens," Michael replied, not sparing her even a glance. "That okay with you, Chér?" he added as an afterthought.

"Fine." I gave him a timid smile.

We settled back in our plush chairs, ready to relax.

"So what've you been up to, Michael?"

He smiled that ever ready smile of his. His deep dimples accented his smile like a couple of outward facing parentheses.

"Ah, working, working out. You know the drill."

"I *know* you Michael. If all you were doing was working, you'd be a very unhappy boy."

He laughed. "You got that right. Oh, you know, been seeing a couple of girls, mixing things up a bit."

"Only a couple?" I teased.

“That was last night. I tell you what, girl, I sure have fun doing the nasty.” He looked up toward the corner as if seeing a movie of last night’s revelry.

“Fun, huh?” was my quick retort. “What’s so fun about it?” Can’t say that I had ever said having sex was FUN. To me, it was an act that I tried really, really hard to enjoy. Every once in a while I got it right, other times I faked it. Fun was the last thing I ever imagined about coupling with another.

“Are you serious, Chér? Sex is the supreme act between two people, three people, or a whole bunch of people! It’s natural. It’s wonderful. And it feels *good!* Damn, it feels good,” he proselytized. “How can it *not* be fun?”

“I dunno, to me, it’s kinda hard.”

“It’s supposed to be hard, at least the man is,” he chortled and appeared to be pleased at his own joke. “I can show you sometime. Feeling is believing.”

“Thanks, Michael, but I’ll pass. I get what you mean.” I blushed and looked away.

The waitress edged over, dropped a couple of coasters on the table and placed a cold brew on each one. She gave Michael an appreciative glance. Michael kept his attention directed my way. The waitress gave up and stalked away.

We reached for our beers and took a long swallow. “Yum, that’s one of my favorites.” I licked my lips, savoring the delicious liquid as it cooled my throat. A delicious feeling of warmth spread through me, as the hops got busy in their job of mild intoxication.

“Mine, too,” agreed Michael, wiping the back of his hand across his generous, kissable lips. “Back to our last topic,” he continued. “If you ever want me to tap that,” he looked at my crotch. “I’m just sayin’...I’ll show you just how fun it can be.” He viewed me intently, eyes mischievous with delight.

“Michael...” I rolled my eyes in mock aversion. I seriously wanted to move the conversation in a new direction. This one was making me squirm and turn every shade of red.

An hour of light-hearted conversation later we each emerged from Jingo’s, a light buzz in our brains.

“You cool to drive, Chér?”

“I’m cool. I think I’ll scoot around the block to clear my head.”

He reached over and gave my cheek a friendly kiss. “Be safe, Chér. But not too safe,” he added, winking. With that, he hopped into his beast of a truck and zoomed away.

As I wandered, I thought about what he had said. Sex was fun? Sex was a lot of things, but not fun. I really wanted it to be fun. I wanted it to be something other than what it was to me, and what it was I could not say. I had always felt tortured...conflicted...drawn and repulsed...turned on, turned off. I was all mixed up. I loved to kiss, but when it veered below the belt, I was baffled and confused...averse and wanting all in the same breath. How had this happened? Was it my upbringing?

I remember Mother Clarice dropping pamphlets from the doctor’s office on the coffee table when I was about 15. She told me to read them if I wanted to know anything about the birds and bees. I glanced at them but they always made me feel embarrassed. They were so clinical: full of diagrams and illustrations. They made having sexual relations like visiting the doctor – something cold and impersonal to get through with and out the door. As to my father’s input, Frank and his cronies would, at times, lit with drink, whistle at me and howl when I sauntered through the house in my swimming suit. I would hug my towel around me and hurry through the kitchen where they sat, setting my sights on the pool in the backyard. I suppose they thought that was a good way to show me that I was pretty or something. It made me feel foul and violated, though.

When I became sexually active, it was *so* not fun - first, Wesley, then a string of forgotten faces. I’d dress in crop tops, ripped jeans, skin tight t-shirts – whatever got me attention. Mother Clarice would raise her head up from her mixed drink, tell me I looked like a slut and order me to change before venturing out the door. Frank would try to silence her, saying, “Let the girl be, Clarice. She’s gotta have a little fun.” He’d turn and wink at me. I never returned the wink. Instead, I’d sprint back to the bedroom, grab a sloppy sweatshirt and re-emerge, well-covered. They’d never check to see what was underneath my sweatshirt - the same costume as before.

As I scanned my memories, I could not find the source...the reason I was so confused. I knew at times I was angry about the whole sex thing....sometimes sad...mostly numb. Being intimate with Cam could be fun...sort of. When he was really tender, and I was able to stop thinking, stop trying so hard, at those times I could feel some fulfillment in it. If I was honest with myself, though, I couldn’t really call it fun. When Cam

and I had fun, it was on the wall at the rock climbing gym, racing our bikes down the street, or going out for pizza and drinking a couple of beers. Clearly, I was quite lost inside when it came to sex.

I continued my aimless wandering for quite some time. Gradually my thoughts turned in other directions. Remember when I said I was too busy to think of the dark haired guy? I was only fooling myself. When I wasn't busy, he'd slip in like a silky piece of cloth over bare skin. I'd quickly quash the thoughts when they arose, but arise they did. A strange tingle sizzled between my legs and up my spine as my thoughts turned in his direction. Oh dear, this had to stop. I looked up to see a lustrous black BMW with tinted windows all around ease slowly past me. Didn't I see that car a few minutes ago? Maybe the owner was lost, trying to find an address. When I looked directly at the front window of the car, it sped away. *That's odd.* It zoomed downed the street.

"Are you really that dumb?" a voice called out to me.

Where did that come from? I turned around in a circle, but couldn't see anyone or anything, other than the street, shops, homes, sidewalks, and flowerbeds. I peered through the lush ferns and fuchsias in someone's yard, in the direction that I thought the voice had come from.

"Yes, I'm talking to you, dear." There it was again. The voice sounded like...yes, it sounded like the voice of that old woman who had come to my class. Great. Now, I was hearing things. Without another thought, I ran to my car, locked the doors, and drove home chock full of paranoia.

## Chapter 6

Cameron Delaney Tyson sat at his worn brown desk at the Seattle High Road Recovery building. High Road Recovery provided treatment for substance abuse and DUI/DWI offenders, as well as various programs for women and men. Cam facilitated groups of abusive men, night after night. Court-ordered to participate, most of the men were manipulative and full of grandiosity, spending their time figuring out how to work the system, rather than change. Cam hated that. He often perceived himself to be a babysitter for grown men with the minds of childish bullies.

His office had flickering fluorescent lights overhead which drove him mad with their insistent flicker and hum. He'd asked to get it fixed on several occasions to no avail. Sometimes he wanted to take a hammer to it and be done with it. The walls were cluttered with posters about HIV, teenage pregnancy, and the escalating drug use in the greater Seattle area. A couple of miserable teens peered out at him from the poster, needles and pills at their side. In another, a beautiful young woman with bright smiling eyes was framed in a picture next to a snapshot of her current self: an old-looking, washed up 26-year-old woman with missing teeth who was hooked on meth. It was a sad poster.

He was dressed in a pair of light brown cargo pants, a green plaid flannel shirt with the sleeves rolled up, and a pair of Keen's hiking shoes. His desk was, as usual, cluttered with papers, articles he had brought in, and books. If anyone tried to straighten up his desk, he got pissed, way pissed. He knew where everything was in this landslide. He leaned back in his chair, a squeaky, clunky wooden chair from another era, and stretched. Man, what a long day. He looked up at the old circular school clock that hung on the wall. It was nearly 8:30 pm. He should finish up and head for home. Chérie would probably be there when he got home.

*Chérie...* He rubbed his hands over his jaw, lined with a day's stubble, and thought of her. How he cared about her. He remembered the day he first saw her at U-Dub. She was virtually bouncing along, golden reddish lights shimmering from her short, glossy hair. Her slender body was vibrating with energy. Damn, he loved that body...all taut muscles and smooth, sensuous skin. And her face – it was fine boned with golden Lynx-like eyes that made his heart melt. He was hooked right from the start. At first glance, he wanted to wrap her in his arms and kiss her long and thoroughly. He had wanted to claim her, like some territorial beast.

You, Jane, me, Tarzan. Where the fuck did *that* come from? Jesus Christ, he got hard just thinking about her. And *so* fucking sweet. She was probably the sweetest woman he had ever met. But goddamn it all to hell, he wished she'd stick up for herself. She let people run all over her, use her. He couldn't stand that.

He'd been raised by one son-of-a-bitch father who slapped his mom around a lot. His father would constantly berate her and, when drunk, use his fists to drive home his angry points, whatever the hell they were. "You're not doing this right, not doing that right." Cam had hated it as a child, and he hated it still. At 17, he'd finally stood up for his mother, belted his father in the jaw, and got the hell out of there, moving in with his Grandma Guinevere. He had never looked back, never hit another person...he'd also never seen his mom again. He'd had enough of living with violence. That's partly why he did these groups for men in recovery, if you could call it that. If he could make a difference in one man's life, he believed he'd atone for his father's failures.

Tonight he had had the *worst* suck-ass group. Those foul mouth lugs that he was supposed to be guiding on their way to non-violence were too much to take sometimes. He knew he wasn't making a difference in anyone's life in there. He got so tired of the stonewalling, the silence, and the refusal to take ownership of their behavior. It was just like being in his childhood home.

But he had a couple more months to finish his internship. He was finishing up a degree in counseling, and this gig at High Road Recovery was an important one. The only thing was, now that he was nearly finished, he wished he'd taken a different road. What he really wanted to do was become one of those Outward Bound leaders...take kids out into the world and change their lives through physical adventures...something like that. He liked creating change in people. He also loved physical challenges, craved them, and was good at them. Like when he was rock climbing, his hands knew where to go, where to reach. When he touched the wall, his mind raced with the information his hands provided.

Again, he thought of Chérie. He just loved stroking her tender skin, kneading her muscles, sore from all that exercise. Most of all he really enjoyed stroking her with parts of him that he would not share with anyone else...those parts that were stirring in his groin right fucking now.



He wondered why it was so hard for her to let go with him sometimes. Couldn't she feel how much he cherished her? Didn't she believe she was truly adored? It was probably her lack of self-confidence and her inability to say NO to him, to anyone. She groveled and shrank from people. She thought everything was her fault and that she had to fix it or just suck it up and chew on it. Like last night: he was pissed when he had come home from group. He'd taken just about enough of last night's collection of men. Those men were just buying time in the class. Since the only reason they were there was to avoid jail time, they'd show up and sit through week after week, with no change in their behavior. He was so sick of it, he was, well, let's face it – when Chér came in, he was having a tantrum, pitching books on the floor and stomping about. He slammed a book on the table, right when she entered the room. He wasn't proud of himself in that moment; he was just letting off steam. But she probably thought he was mad at her. He threw a newspaper across the room, and she had scuffled over to clean up the mess.

“Don't do that. It's my mess, not yours,” he had told her. He strode over and picked up the pieces of newspaper, angrily crushing them into a wad. Then he'd apologized, like he always did. He could be such an ass. But then he'd become mad at her subservience. That was just the way his mom had been with his dad. Mom just took it, night after night. So then he and Chérie got in another argument, like they'd been doing lately. He wanted to do right by her, he really did. But he wanted her to act differently, assume her strength. She was too good to be run over by the world. She had this spark of something inside, he could feel it. And he wanted her to feel it too. He wanted her to be different. She just made him so mad sometimes.

*Man, I'm starting to sound like the men in my groups.* He ran a hand through his hair.

“She asked for it.”

“I didn't want to hit her.”

Those were the kind of bullshit excuses the men gave to justify hitting their women. Well, Chérie, by God, was not going to feel anything but fear if he kept being a shithead. He knew he could do better than that. *Fuck, I'd better man up and act differently, or we're going to hit the skids.* And he didn't want that, not by a long shot.

He got up with resolve, picked up his brown leather jacket, and strode out to his forest green 1998 Range Rover, prepared to be a better man when he got home.

## Chapter 7

“You got some mail, from your mother.” That is what Cam first told me when I’d entered the door after hanging out with Michael.

I looked over on the table where we sorted the day’s mail. Sure enough, there was one of Mother Clarice’s snail-mailed envelopes, stuffed full. When she was drunk (which was often) and the mood struck (which was also often), she had this habit of sending me odd bits of news clipped from the paper, pictures, and articles from magazines – anything that caught her fancy and carried the message of the day. I made my way over and picked it up, frowning. What stupid thing did she want me to know about today? I pitched the envelope into the junk drawer to be opened at a later date.

I looked over at Cam. “Did you eat?”

“Yea, I snacked a bit...how about you?”

“I stopped for a sandwich on the way home.”

He gave me an intense look. “Come here, babe. I missed you.”

I looked at him quizzically and politely sauntered over to him. Hadn’t he just seen me this morning? He nuzzled my neck and slid his lips up for a kiss. “Mmm, you taste like beer.”

Pushing him back, I answered, “Yeah, I had a beer with Michael after my meeting with Jill.”

“Oh, I forgot about that meeting. How did it go?”

“Not the best. I have to work with this greasy guy name Mr. Dallas. He and Jill want me to dress up like a slut to sell their auction items.”

“Like a slut? What makes you say that?”

“That is what they said. Mr. Dallas told me, ‘Dress in something racy and we’ll sell lots of auction items.’ Jill agreed.”

“Wear whatever you want, babe. Don’t let them push you around.”

“I won’t.” I glanced over at Mac and Jack, staring at me. “Did you feed the boys?”

Mac sauntered over. *Did not.*

Jack looked up from his grooming. *Empty bowls.*

“Hold on a minute, and let me feed them.” I slipped from Cam’s arms and strode over to the cupboard where the cat food was kept.

“Cam...” I said in a tentative voice. “Do you think sex is fun?”

He paused for a second before answering. “I guess I never thought about it, but sure. Why do you ask?”

“Oh, Michael was telling me how much fun he has with sex.”

“Michael does not have a serious or committed bone in his body. When it’s a one night stand on his and his terms alone, how can it be anything BUT fun? Of course he said that.”

“It sounded good to me. I want it to be fun. Are you saying it’s not fun having sex with me?”

Now Cam tensed a little. “No, I am not saying that at all. I love making love with you.”

I considered that. “Yeah, me, too... I just wish I didn’t have such a hard time letting go. I get so nervous sometimes. I...I just check out and tense up.”

“That has never bothered me,” Cam said.

I looked at his face, searching for a sign that he was telling the truth. “Well, okay. I believe you. But are you ever attracted to anyone else?” I asked, thinking about the dark haired guy.

*Uh oh...* Mac thought.

*Here we go,* thought Jack. *It’s this topic again.*

Cam narrowed his eyes. “Why are you asking me this? We’ve had this talk before.”

“I just wondered.”

“Well, don’t wonder. The same is true as always. I notice women, I look at them, but at the end of the day I only want to come home and be with *you*.”

“Uh huh.”

“What do you mean ‘Uh huh?’” Cam’s mouth worked into a snarl. “Are you attracted to Michael now?”

“God, no, not Michael...I’m attracted to *you*.” I smiled as sweetly at him as I could, pushing a persistent thought of the dark haired guy under my inner rug. I hoped Cam sensed that the hotness I was feeling was for him – not the dark haired guy.

“Then come here and show me,” Cam said, eyes still flinty.

When I did as he requested, he seemed to relax. I slipped my hands under his flannel shirt and caressed his back.

“That’s better,” he murmured, offering a reciprocal embrace and calming even more. “Let’s take this into another room, shall we?”

I politely followed him up the stairs.

## Chapter 8

That night I had another weird dream. This time I was watching a woman stretched out on a wooden pyre. She looked extremely sad. Tears were falling down her cheeks, creating huge puddles on each side of her face. The puddles leaked down the sides of the pyre in long, uneven streaks. To the left of her were all these hovering, dark, ghostly figures. They were gazing at the left side of her chest. “There’s still a lot of work to be done,” they said in low sinister voices. “Still some heart left in this one. We’ll have to extract it soon.”

I watched them, detached. I floated overhead to get a better view. I snapped to attention in the dream, lucidly conscious. That woman was *me*. I tried to wake up for real, but could not. I willed myself to wake up. “Wake up, wake up, wake up, wake *up!* Come on, come on, come *on!*” I panicked and freaked out. I could not, or would not, wake up. “*Wake up, Cheerio, wake up!*” I wailed, as the sight of me surrounded by those ghastly characters continued under my spectral gaze.

I rose in a sudden burst of swiftness like I was on a super-fast elevator. In the next scene, I was sitting in a desert somewhere, stars twinkling in the indigo night, a slice of new moon in the sky. The dark haired guy was sitting across from me, legs folded in a cross legged position.

“Hi, sexy girl...”

I stared at him, mouth open and aghast. His golden eyes were utterly hypnotic, reminding me of a show I had seen about solar flares. As he looked at me, I pictured those bursts of energy exploding off the surface of the sun, all magnetic energy and sudden gusts of mega-heat.

“My, my, that’s not a proper greeting. Here, try this.” He leaned forward and moved his lips inches from mine. A curious surge of energy sizzled between us as his lips got closer. I thought he was going to kiss me, but he stopped when his lips were a mere half-inch away from mine. “Don’t move,” he said in a sultry voice.

I sat there, breathing slowly and quietly, as this pulsing sensation poured down me. On the in breath, I could feel warm, soft, honey-like, liquid-like energy coursing through my windpipe, passing my heart, and filling my pelvis. On the out breath a rush of pleasure gushed inside, rolling like a wave, from between my legs into his mouth. In breath, out breath, in breath, out breath...we inhaled and exhaled like that for a long, dream-like time.

*I really, really want to kiss you*, I thought in his direction.

*I really, really will not*, he thought in return. *No more thinking, just breathe*. We breathed.

My thoughts arose again, this time with insistence. *I really, really, really want to kiss you*.

*And I really, really, really will not. If you won't stop thinking, this will end*.

I tried to just breathe, but my wanting was so acute I ached with need. Unable to stand this any longer, I moved my lips toward him. With a burst, the dream disappeared. I woke up, completely aroused, next to Cam. I shot out of bed with a start.

“What’s the matter, sweetheart?” Cam asked drowsily.

“Nothing...it’s nothing. Go back to sleep.” My breath was bellowing hard and fast, like I’d been running. I slipped to the other side of the bed and kissed Cam’s cheek. “Go back to sleep. It’s nothing...odd dreams.” I stood there, naked and shivering, until his deep, slow breathing filled the room. I grabbed my robe and headed downstairs.

Sitting in the dining room, in the dark, I listened to the night sounds coming through the open window. There was the hoot of an owl...the yowl of a cat. I hoped the cat was not yowling because of the owl then thought better. The owl wouldn’t exactly announce his presence, would he? This thought made me smile. “Hey, cat – over here,” I pictured the owl saying with a hoot. Wouldn’t happen...it was more like “Hey, cat – watch your back. I’ve got my eyes trained on *you*.” The bushes rustled softly and I wondered if a deer or raccoon was moving about. As I concentrated on these sounds, my breathing slowed. I rubbed my forehead with my fingers, and then pressed them into my temples. The stirrings of arousal still pooled in my pelvis from my dream-meeting with the dark haired guy. *Shit, shit, shit*, I thought. I was not prone to cursing, but they just seemed like the right words at this moment.

To distract myself, I padded my bare feet over to the junk drawer to find the bottle opener. Maybe I would have another beer. I was not much of a drinker, but this moment called for it. Moving my hand around inside the drawer, I came across Mother Clarice’s latest news packet. That would distract me. It might even upset me – even better.

I pulled the large envelope out of the drawer and ripped it open. Emptying the contents onto the dining room table, I turned on a soft lamp. An assortment of paper clippings and pictures were spread inside. There were notes in the margins, paragraphs circled with red pen, and Post-it notes if the message couldn't fit in the margins. The notes read: 'Chérie – here is an article on aerobics for children...thought you might like it.' And, 'Chérie, read about banking problems in the Midwest before you think about investing.' Like I had any money to invest. Here was a good one: 'Chérie – here is tax advice about filing under married status.' The word "married" had been underlined twice. She knew Cam and I were not even considering getting married.

I dropped the clippings and their respective notes into the trash can in the corner and some photographs fluttered out. I picked them out of the trash. Mother Clarice had written on them in ink: 'Here is your uncle George.' And, 'This was our last family reunion. Wasn't that a blast?'

*No, it sure was not*, I thought. I picked up another photo – this one black and white – that read: 'You, as a child, with your Uncle Anders, your cousin Samantha, and your aunt.' I squinted at the picture. I had never seen it before or at least don't remember seeing it. Uncle Anders? Aunt Something or Other? I didn't recall that pair. Did they die? Were they on my mom's side or my dad's? I looked all of about seven or eight years old in the picture. There was a scowl on my face, my mouth was turned down. I stood between my supposed aunt and uncle, arms clenched around my tummy, legs stiff and crossed at the ankles. I wore little shorts with a flower on one leg and a collared, short-sleeved shirt with buttons down the front. My short bangs were uneven and poked out at funny angles. I didn't remember anything about that picture. How odd. I sure looked miserable.

My uncle in the picture was looking down at me, beaming. My aunt's shadowed face was looking at my uncle with an accusatory glare. This Samantha girl was looking down at the ground. "What a weird shot," I mused, tossing the picture into the trash with the remainder of the envelope's contents. Foraging in the refrigerator, I found a beer in the back. I took it out and twisted the top off, then chugged it down my throat in one long, mind-numbing swallow.



## Chapter 9

The next day was Thursday, two days before that dreaded fundraiser. I decided to go out shopping with Zuri after she got off work and finished doing errands in Northern Seattle. I needed to pick up a pair of climbing shorts. Plus, I wanted to buy something to wear...MY choice...to the fundraiser. Zuri churned up the dirt driveway in her silver convertible BMW. She worked as an office manager, the Queen Bee, really, at a downtown financial firm so she made good money. She also inherited some money when her father had died. I always teased her about having a convertible in Seattle, as we had loads of rain. Even when it was not raining it could be what we called “soft” – meaning wet with mist. But on the few days when the weather was “convertible ready,” we loved riding around with the top down. Our hair would blow into a tangled fury in the wind, and we would revel in the stunning beauty of the lakes, the Puget Sound, the mountains, the trees – it was all a gorgeous kaleidoscope of color.

I ran out of the house in my favorite jeans and t-shirt, flip flops on my feet. The weather was unusually warm for Seattle, in the 80s. I threw back my arms, turned my face toward the sky, and twirled in a circle. Zuri leaned over from the driver’s side and opened my door. Before climbing in, I noticed some papers caught on a dead branch in the driveway. Reaching down, I picked up the pictures from Mother Clarice’s envelope. There was that picture of those strange, unknown relatives. They must’ve fallen out of the trash when Cam emptied it this morning. I crammed them into my bag and tossed it in the back seat.

Zuri sped down the driveway, spun into the street, and we were on our way. We planned on stopping at the flagship REI for climbing pants, and then heading downtown to scope out some of the offbeat, boutique clothing stores.

As we rode along, Zuri filled me in on her latest conquest, Peter. “What happened to Alec?” I inquired.

“Came and went,” Z replied. “We had some fun for a bit, and then grew tired of each other.” There was that fun word again.

“You mean you had fun being together or fun in bed?”

“Both. I like to have fun, you know that. When the fun’s gone, so is the boy-toy.”

That seemed a bit shallow to me, but I still liked the idea of fun. Today had not been fun. It had been an exercise in suppressing my thoughts about the dreams, as well as attempts to quell my headache from the slammed down beer. That had put me to sleep alright, but I awoke with a massive headache and an upset stomach.

“So, what’s Peter like?”

She considered for a moment. “Well, he’s tall, dark, and handsome.”

I sat up with a start. “How dark? How handsome?”

She laughed. “Relax, he’s not your dark haired fling from the club. What’s the matter? Are you and Cam okay?”

“No,” I replied, a little too quickly. “That man wasn’t a fling. I told you he was just some guy who bumped into me by mistake. I just...well, I just wondered what your new boyfriend was like, that’s all.”

“O-o-o-o-o-KAY,” she said, emphasizing the “K” and drawing out the “O.” “If you say so...”

“So, tell me.”

“I just did – he’s tall, dark hair, rides a motorcycle...he’s great in bed...has loads of money. What more could I ask for?”

“Good conversation, a loving heart?” I said.

“Oh, hearts are for sissies. They get broken too easily. And when would we find the time to have a conversation? We’re either out on his bike or in bed. Better to just keep it light and easy.”

“If *you* say so,” I said.

“I do.”

At REI, I tried on a few pairs of loose fitting, Prana climbing pants, popping out of the dressing room with each pair to show Z.

“Oh, *those* are perfect,” she stated on my last attempt. “You are such a tiny little thing; those really show off your athletic legs.”

“What are you talking, ‘tiny’? I’m nearly 5’ 4.”

“Small *boned*, Chér, small *boned*.”

Thinking of bones made me shiver. I thought of my dream from a few weeks back. Then, I thought of last night's freaky dreams. I grabbed my thigh and pinched myself to bring me back to the moment.

"What are you doing?" Z arched an eyebrow.

"I had an itch."

Zuri gave me a bemused glance. "Well! That's one way to take care of an itch. Another way is to scratch it. You sure can be strange sometimes."

*Tell me about it*, I thought, enigmatically.

We left REI and headed downtown. At one of our favorite clothing stores, a trendy store over in Pioneer Square, we spotted Riva behind the counter. Riva was the owner of Fierce Looks, a combination consignment store of interesting attire hand-picked by Riva, and new stuff, also hand-picked by the proprietor. Riva always looked fantastically outrageous. A slinky 5' 9" with short, shimmery brown hair and smoky blue-grey eyes, she'd wear fishnet stockings, Prada high-heels, and a miniskirt just skimming her behind on one day, a slouch-neck sweater and long pencil skirt paired with Durango Flirt cowboy boots the next. She had a body that looked good in anything, and a face that morphed into any look she desired. Sensual, sultry, cute, fresh, sophisticated— Riva was a beautiful chameleon.

She smiled when we wandered in and waved us over to the counter. "Ladies, I just got these in," she gushed in her smoky voice, pulling a couple of boxes from behind the cash register. She reached into one of the boxes and brought out a bright red Vivienne Westwood Priestess dress with an asymmetrical neckline and ruched detailing.

"Nice!" I said. "It's just what I like."

"I thought so." She handed the dress to me. "Go try this on." To Z, she offered a mid-thigh length Lumiani sleeveless dress, sure to emphasize Zuri's voluptuousness.

We both flounced out of the dressing rooms at the same time. "God, Z, you look fantastic!"

"And you, you're smokin' hot!"

Z was just being polite, no doubt, I thought. I didn't believe I ever looked smokin' anything. After chatting with Riva a bit, we paid for our new clothes and made our way to Pike Place Market to grab a bite to

eat. As we sat nibbling on turkey burgers, I told Z about my dread of the upcoming auction and working with Mr. Dallas.

Z commiserated. “Geez, he sounds like a creep. That sounds awful. Will Cam be there?”

“No, in order to get his schedule rearranged for our rock climbing trip, he had to agree to work that night.”

“That’s too bad. Tell you what: I’ve got a late date Saturday night, as in booty call late. Why don’t I stop by the community center earlier in the evening so I can make sure Mr. Dallas behaves himself?”

“Oh, would you? I’d feel so much better knowing that you were out there somewhere. That would be great.” I was relieved at the thought of having a friend somewhere in the audience I reached over and squeezed her hand.

“No problem, girlfriend, I’ve got your back. You know that.”

When the bill came, I reached in my purse to pull out my wallet. As I drew it out, the pictures I had shoved into the bag fell out onto the table.

“Who are *those* people?” Z grabbed one of the images out of my hand. She studied the one with me and my so-called uncle and aunt. “That’s you, isn’t it? You were such a cute little girl. I wonder what you were unhappy about, though.”

“That’s the bizarre part – I don’t remember ever seeing that photo or those people. Mother told me they are relatives of mine, but I’ve never seen them before.”

“Never seen them? You probably just don’t remember.”

“Maybe...but doesn’t it seem odd that I don’t remember them at *all*?”

“A bit,” Zuri said. We both looked at the pictures a minute longer. Finally, I thrust them into my purse and we left.

## Chapter 10

Cam pulled his Range Rover into the parking lot of Whole Foods. He had agreed to do the grocery shopping for the week, since Chérie had to prepare for that damn god-awful event. He was starting to worry about Chér. She had been acting strange lately. Sure, she always talked to the cats as if they were having an actual conversation, but that's one of the things he liked about her – her imagination. But there was something else going on. That conversation they had last night was an example.

Was she actually jealous of him? Worried he was interested in someone else? Why did she ask him if he was attracted to someone else? He made it clear, whenever he thought about it, that she was the one for him. No one else.

And all that talk about sex as fun. Michael, he was a nice enough guy, but to take anything he said about sex as gospel, well, that was just nuts. The guy was a sex machine. A dog when it came to the ladies.

It was true that he wished she would let go more in bed. He was lying when he told her that he wasn't bothered by her tension in bed. It bothered him – a lot. But not for the reasons she probably thought. He just knew they would both enjoy it more if she would relax a little. Well, he could be patient. He cared for her and that was that. You didn't give up on someone you cared for.

And she'd not been sleeping well, he could tell. Last night she had burst out of bed like a fucking firecracker. What the fuck was that about? And she came back to bed reeking of beer. That was not like her. She was a moderate drinker, if she was anything. He pushed the cart around the aisles, tossing in bread, veggies, cheese, pasta, and wine. Maybe he'd make her a nice dinner after this whole event was over with, like Sunday.

As he rolled the cart around the end-cap of the aisle, he ran into one of the guys from the group – Martin. The group maintained a strict code on anonymity out in the world, but Martin said hello and reached out to shake Cam's hand.

“Cam, I want to thank you, man.”

“What for?”

“For putting up with my bullshit...I know I haven’t been very cooperative in the sessions, but I’ve been listening. And get this – last week a freaking homeless nut job held me up at gunpoint...at *gun point*, bro. It scared the shit out of me, I swear to God. I gave him my wallet, and he bolted. But afterwards...afterwards it hit me – that must be how my wife feels, every damn day when I come in the door.”

Cam looked around to make sure no one else was listening. “Sounds like you had a revelation.”

“Yeah, like a visit from the Man Himself, and I don’t even believe. I went home and held my wife and wept like a baby...like a fucking baby. I told her how sorry I was to have hurt her and that I’m willing to work hard to change. I dunno, though. It might be too late.”

“Why is that?”

“I found divorce papers in her drawer the other day when I was looking for something.”

Cam interrupted him. “Looking for something or spying on her?”

“Okay, Okay.” Martin said sheepishly. “I was going through her things to spy on her. I wanted to know if she was having an affair.”

“Trust is the basis of any good relationship, Martin, you know that.”

“Yeah, but I’ve been too much of an asshole to trust anyone. Anyway...I just wanted to let you know that I’m going to try really hard to change in those groups, man. I’ve got to give it one last shot.”

“I’m glad for you...glad for your wife,” Cam replied. “Maybe you two can have a better relationship after all.”

“I hope so, bro, I hope so. She’s all I got.” With that, he hurried away.

Cam strode over to the checkout stand with new warmth in his heart. He had worked with the groups for a couple months now. Never had anybody shared any thought of changing or having done anything wrong for that matter. This was encouraging. Who was he kidding - this was fucking *great!* Maybe he did make a difference in there. Then, he thought about Chérie. Maybe he could make a difference in his own life, with her. After hearing from Martin, he was inspired to change...for her, for him...even for those goddamned cats. With a smile, he dashed out of the store.

## Chapter 11

When I opened my eyes Saturday morning, I groaned. It was the day of the Northwest Auction Gala fundraiser. I pulled the pillow over my head. Cam plucked the pillow off of my face and rolled on top of me.

“What’s the matter sleepyhead?” he said, smiling. His body was warm from sleep and had a faint odor of perspiration and musk. Usually the smell turned me on, but this morning I was super jumpy. He lowered his mouth on mine and sucked my lower lip. His tongue reached out to lick the corner of my mouth, then, probed deeper, urging mine to come out and play.

“Cam, wait,” I protested, twisting my head to the side.

“Wait for?” he said in a soft, low voice, nuzzling his nose up and down my cheek.

“Just a minute...really, wait.” I squirmed. I could feel his hardness stirring down below.

“Are you sure?” he said.

“I don’t know...maybe...I don’t know...”

“I could help you decide.”

Obviously, he was not interested in stopping his advances. I quit protesting and just lay there. He continued for a few more moments, and then rolled to the side of me when I failed to respond.

“Got it,” he said, “not interested.” He pushed the covers back and got out of bed, grabbing his pants off the floor. “Why don’t I go fix you some breakfast?”

I screwed my face into a grimace. Was he kidding? We always argued when I wasn’t interested...argued or got cold and distant, one or the other...sometimes both. “Wait, I’m sorry, come back.”

“You made it quite clear that you are not in the mood. I got it. I’m not about to force myself on you.”

“Yeah, but I was just being silly...come back.”

“No. You are not...in...the...mood. I am going to go make you breakfast. Now just relax, and let me do something for you that you might enjoy.”

I was suspicious of his kindness but agreed. “Okay. What are you going to make?”

“What would you like me to make?” he said, with a heartfelt smile.

This was kinda freaking me out, but I said, “um, pancakes...with blueberries....and Mountain...”

“...Mountain Tea Song tea,” he finished. “I *know* you.”

Gosh, he was being nice. What was the matter with him? What was the matter with me for being distrustful?

As Cam traipsed down the hall, whistling, I got out of bed and twisted the shower faucet. The water was brutally hot and sprayed out like little needles on my skin. I let it pummel me until my back was beet red. Then I washed my face, armpits, crotch, belly, and legs with minty shower gel, washed and conditioned my hair, and turned the water off. Toweling off my hair and tugging my robe around me, I bounced down into the kitchen.

“This smells wonderful,” I exclaimed. He strode over with a steaming hot cup of tea and commanded me to sit. He placed a napkin in my lap and a plate on the placemat in front of me. Then, he came back from the stove with a stack of blueberry pancakes and set it down in front of me. The butter dish and syrup were placed just within reach. There was a single strawberry, juicy red and glistening, perched to the side as a garnish.

“Thank you,” I said, my voice infused with genuine appreciation. “Why are you being so nice?”

“Are you implying that I am *not* nice?” he said, with a twinkle in his eye.

“No...I am not saying that. But usually when I am not in the mood...well, we usually fight or something.”

“People can change, babe.” He grabbed a plate and piled it with pancakes for himself. Sitting next to me, he let his knee fall to touch mine. This was so intimate, I was at a loss for words. My leg worked up and down like a sewing machine needle. I forked a bite of pancake and chewed, letting the sweet, sticky syrup ooze down my throat. We ate in silence until our plates were clear. Then, Cam said, “Are you nervous about tonight, sweetheart?”

“Yes!” I said with a snap. “Sorry, I didn’t mean for that to come out so sharp. I really, really, really don’t want to go. I have thought up all sorts of excuses to get out of it.”

“You’ll be fine. Z will be there, and I will be here when you get home. Don’t worry, babe.”

“I sure don’t trust Mr. Dallas – or Jill – for that matter.”



“You’ll be fine, Chér,” he said again. “What could possibly happen with all those people around? Look for Zuri in the audience if you get scared and remember that I will be home waiting for you.”

“If you say so...”

“Trust me – you’ll be fine. Nothing’s going to happen with all those people in attendance. You’ll be great.”

Cam was being so darn nice to me, so supportive, that I melted inside.

“Cam...” I said; my voice all timid and shy. I pushed my empty plate away from me.

“Yes?” His face lit up with that same tender smile he had been using all morning.

“We could...I mean, I could...I mean, if you wanted to, we could go back into the bedroom.”

“And what would we do there?” Clearly, he was not going to make this easy for me.

“We could...you know...what we started to do earlier. I guess I wasn’t ready.”

His languorous reply rolled off his lips. “Hmmm... what, exactly, did we start earlier? Refresh my memory.”

“Cam...you know what I am talking about.” I was getting uncomfortable trying to voice the words.

“Do I?”

“Yes, you do.”

“Let’s see...was it when I got up and pulled my pants on?” he said, tracing the inside of my thigh with his warm hand.

“No...n-n-no, not that.”

“Was it when I asked you what you wanted for breakfast?” he said, brushing his fingers softly along the inside of my knee.

“Not that, either.”

“Hmmm, I need more clues,” he said thoughtfully, leaning in and circling the very tip of his tongue around my parted lips. “Maybe it was when I did this.” He again nuzzled my cheek with his nose. “Or maybe it was this,” he said, probing my mouth with his tongue. “Or maybe it was when I thought of doing this,” he said, pulling my robe open and circling my small breasts with his fingers.

“I think you are getting close,” I whispered, as he pulled me over to the couch.

“Am I? Well, then, I think I would like to get even closer,” he quietly replied.

“Okay...where would you like to go to get closer?”

“Hmmm...table’s too hard...let’s go over to the couch.”

Cam took my hand in his, and we headed over to a morning of pleasurable satisfaction.

## About the Author

**The Fun Part:** Calinda B was told early on that she should be a writer. She heard frequent praise for her writing, as well as her sense of humor. Scoffing at such admonitions and praise, she went on to pursue her life of adventure, chock full of the things that make up a well-rounded adventurous life: music (yup, she was a singer in a rock and roll band), dance (even performed hip hop in Russia), rock climbing (ever hung from a rock wall a few stories up? Yikes!), fire walking (taught high-ranking Moscow fire officials how to walk the coals), kayaking, scuba diving (she's in love with sharks), travel, and falling in love again and again.

**The Daily Grind:** An award-winning web designer and certified SEO specialist, Calinda B has worked in the Internet industry as a web page designer/developer since the early 1990's. She has also taught web site design and computer graphics at community colleges in Northern California. In addition to writing, Calinda B creates fine art and music, and enjoys scuba diving, kayaking, and bike riding. Calinda B makes her home in the Pacific Northwest with the love of her life and her two cats. She is currently working on the third book in The Wicked Series, *A Wicked Whispering*.

You can find Calinda B here:

[www.calindab.com](http://www.calindab.com)

## BONUS!

### Excerpt from **A Wicked Beginning: Book II in the Wicked Series**

#### Prologue

*It was just a small tear, that tiny separation of atoms and particles which occurred on the edge of the Milky Way Galaxy. Was it the mere breath of the beast that caused it, or was it a naturally occurring phenomenon? It didn't matter. What mattered was that the breach was large enough for a silvery sliver of sharp claw to push through, then a paw, then a powerful sinewy leg, followed by a brilliant burst of electromagnetic energy that represented the body of the beast. Once it had pushed through the fissure, it shook its powerful body, causing a luminous burst of gasses to shimmer off of its form and whirl through space. Following a trail of stars, the pulsing energy moved through the galaxy until it got to the furthest reaches of the atmosphere of Earth. It burst into the heavens like a comet, trailing a long fiery stream behind it.*

*Anyone who happened to be up at that time of the day would think a meteorite or space junk was plummeting to Earth. They might feel a thrill at the phenomenon, whip out their cell phone and take a picture, hoping to be the first to capture this exciting moment. When they tried to retrieve the photo, however, all they'd get was a blank screen. For this meteorite was a vibrating ball of energy whose sole intention was to find the person it had been looking for, for a long, long time. And once it found its mark? That was up to the man, now, wasn't it?*

#### Chapter 1 - Cam

Cameron Delaney Tyson awoke with a heaving lurch from another one of those goddamned nightmares he'd been having lately. He'd gone to bed bored, wishing he had more excitement in his life. This was not excitement by any stretch of the imagination. *Shit. What the fuck is up?* He didn't usually dream; didn't even believe in dreams as anything more than the daily recycling of garbage. But he'd been having this same dream now, for weeks, ever since he'd returned from San Diego last fall. The dreams were always the same. Black, gooey gobs shaped like, what was it, bats? These bat things were streaming after him like he was in some

horror show. He'd be running and running and running. And there was always a woman, the same woman, in the middle of the goo, chasing him, like some hysterical wraith. She'd claw at him with long, pink fingernails. She'd try and wrap herself around him. She'd try to take his cock into her mouth while all the gooey fuckers would surround him, salivating and slurping as if they were hungry, and he was the main dish. That was the point at which he awoke, every single time.

*Fuck.* He couldn't deal with this kind of shit. Flipping back the covers, he sat up, fully clothed. He hadn't even bothered to undress last night. Yawning, he rubbed his stubble-lined face with his hands, raked his fingers through his blond hair, and surveyed his surroundings. He'd lived here for a few months now, but he just came and went, in and out the door, never really looked around. Today, he decided to examine the space he currently called home. The bed he was sitting on was a double – small, but it sufficed. There was a six-drawer dresser parked on the burnished oak wood floor, pushed up against an apricot painted wall devoid of pictures or art. On the opposite wall, double folding doors opened up to a fairly large closet, which held all his clothes, and most importantly, all his rock-climbing gear. A door to a generous sized bathroom with a huge sunken tub and a separate glass-lined shower stall was on the facing wall. A window opposite his bed opened to Manoko's amazing garden, which was flooded with bright morning sunlight. A door led to the yard so Cam could come and go in privacy. In addition, he had space enough in the garage for all his kayak gear. The only thing missing was Chérie Abella Manhattan...Cheerio...Chér...whatever she liked to be called. *She's the one for me*, Cam thought with a sigh. *The things I'd like to do to her in that big tub in the bathroom...for starters*, he mused.

He was renting the room from Manoko Wikaira-Williams. The house was a sweet customized home in West Seattle, in a friendly neighborhood close to shops, coffee houses, and places to eat. Mano, as his close friends called him, was a huge 6'5," 220 lb. guy with tattoos everywhere and a serious 'don't fuck with me' attitude. ½ European Mutt, ¼ Native American, and ¼ Maori, his bronze face sported traditional Moko – Maori tattoos – in homage to his ancestry. His ears sported heavy gold hoops, and he wore his thick, glossy, black hair short, with the exception of one long braid threaded with strands of red silk on the left side. The result was an exotic, scary looking dude with a bad ass looking face. Cam knew the truth about Mano,

however, having been friends with the guy for ten years, since they were in their early twenties. Mano could rip the heart out of a rival if he wanted to, but in truth, he was a pussycat whose cooking skills could rival any top chef in the world. The guy gave these awesome dinner parties – he and Chérie had been to a couple of them – with food and drink in abundance. As a result, Mano had a garden out back that was small, but brimming with herbs, vegetables, and fruit trees.

Mano had rented the room to Cam, shortly after Cam and Chérie had split up last autumn. For that, Cam was grateful. Cam had been doing a lot of thinking lately, and this was a good place to think. It made his brain ache to think so much, but he had to sort some things out. For one, what was he going to do with his life now that he was done with school and internships? Second, what was he going to do without his beautiful Chérie? Damn, he missed her. But he knew he had some work to do to get his head right. Last year, when Chérie had found out she'd been molested as a child, he'd awakened some inner demons of his own, buried after he'd split from his abusive family. He'd grown frustrated with Chérie's distance. He'd also been freaked out by her super human powers and the fact that she began to glow – as in light up like a Christmas tree – which he later discovered she'd learned from a guy he referred to as Fabio – while they were still together, mind you. He left her as a result, heading down to San Diego for a weekend of too much smoke, way too much drink, and angry sex with Angela, a former work associate.

Angela – bah – when he thought of her, his stomach recoiled. That was one fucked up female. Their last sexual foray had happened on the night Chérie had been drugged and nearly raped in a plan conceived by Chérie's boss Jill Primcott and her Merry Band of Miscreants. Since then he'd kept his distance from Angela, spooked by something Chérie had told him...something about how Angela wanted him like a snake wanted a mouse. Chérie had got *that* right. Angela had been calling him so much, texting him at every hour of the day, telling him how she was 'there for him,' and she wanted to be his 'comfort,' blah, blah, blah; he'd finally put a block on her number. He'd finished up at High Road Recovery, the place where he'd done his internship, moved in to Manoko's, and he was sure she didn't know Manoko or where he lived. As he wandered into the bathroom to shower, he assumed that was that with Angela. *Good riddance.*

*But Chérie - Chérie is a different matter altogether*, he thought, stripping off his clothes and cranking on the water. Sure, they'd evolved as "friends" if you could call it friendship when two people spent time together and one of them lusted for the other and the other seemed to feel the same lust, but kept putting up roadblocks. Sure thing...friendship it was. But Cam was not convinced that they'd remain in this state of confusion forever. He hoped they'd work it out and fucking engage again. Last time he saw her, she was flaming, instant orgasm hot – so gorgeous – he could barely stand to be around her without exploding on sight...bursting into fragments like a fireworks display on the Fourth of July. In fact, thinking of her, his arousal became evident. Glancing down, he thought, *Well, shit*. This was becoming a regular occurrence for him. The only person he seemed to be having sex with lately was himself. He wasn't used to this. He'd had a fair amount of female play pals ever since he was 13, but when he met Chérie, he fell hard in love. As a result, he didn't want anyone else. Not until he proved to himself, for once and for all, that he and Chérie were through...or not...preferably the 'not through with each other' option. But how was he going to do that? They hadn't seen each other lately. That was her call.

Sighing over the lack of sex play in his life, he soaped off his chest, his face, his underarms, his legs, and then got busy taking care of his needs. He brought to mind the last time he and his pretty amber-eyed Chérie had been to the rock climbing gym together. Using her slender 5'4" body, she'd pushed him to the floor, pinned him with her super strength, but then he'd flipped her and turned the scales in his favor...until he kissed her, that is. He'd grabbed her auburn hair and kissed her deeply, French kissed her sweet mouth, savoring her lips and responsive tongue in return. Only this act had awakened some super sexual power she called the ka'kriyayaga or some shit like that. When this force was awakened in her, she did an amazing thing with her hands, stroking his back, pushing a river of sensation up his spine, like Class 5 rapids. The feeling was so sudden and intense it nearly caused him to orgasm, right there on the floor of the gym in front of a crowd. He wondered what it would feel like to be inside of her when she was in that place. Sadly, he'd never had the chance to find out. She'd called it quits.

Lost in thoughts of Chérie, he turned his back to the shower spray and continued to pleasure himself. As his free hand roamed his body, he fantasized about being with Chérie, sucking her nipples, massaging her

small, firm breasts, nibbling her neck, and being inside of her, moving in and out and in and out. The thought of it got him hotter and harder. He kept up his fantasy until he exploded, creamy fluids painting the shower stall. After his release, his body relaxed against the wall, and the hot water washed his torso and flushed his juices down the drain.

As he leaned one shoulder against the red, blue and yellow tiles, a loud scratching echoed through the water spray, as if someone was forcefully dragging a dagger tip down the wooden door of the bathroom. *Odd. Is someone out there?* He wrenched off the faucet and cocked his head.

*Maybe Mano's hyperactive mutt, Severe, is digging along the outside wall? Yeah, that must be it.* "Stop it, Severe," he yelled, pounding his fist a couple times on the wall.

The bathroom door burst open, slamming against the porcelain sink with a crack. Cam jerked and hit his head against the metal shower nozzle. "Shit!" He gingerly ran his fingers across the protruding knot in his skull before wiping the thick condensation off the shower door. Paw print outlines bloomed on the glass. "What the fuck?" He threw open the door and it thwacked against the shower enclosure, vibrating to a halt. Cautiously stepping out, he peered around the spacious room. *Nada.* The bathroom door hung wide open, but no sign of that mutt, Severe, anywhere. He examined the chipped sink and stared at his blurred image in the foggy mirror. "There's got to be an explanation."

Quickly toweling off, he whipped on his green t-shirt and clean jeans and dashed into the kitchen. Mano stood at the stove, stirring vegetables and beans in a simmering pot. "Hey, Mano."

"Good, you're here." Mano replied. "I'm trying out a new recipe I've been creating. The flavors have to marry throughout the day. Care to join me for dinner tonight?"

"Uh, sure, man, that'd be great. It smells fantastic." With a trembling hand, Cam seized a carton of orange juice from the refrigerator shelf. He grabbed a glass from the counter and poured, splashing liquid onto the bright Italian counter. "Say, where's Severe? She must've gotten into my bedroom. She scratched the bathroom door open and jumped up on the shower stall door."

"I don't think so, Cam." Mano brought a spoonful of sauce to his lips. He slurped, paused and snatched a glass container from the spice cabinet. "She's at the dog park with Jayze and Marilyn."



Cam's face contorted. "Oh, really?"

"Yeah, man, really. They picked her up come daybreak. She's been gone for two hours. They'll return later this afternoon."

"Right....I must've heard a dog in the neighbor's yard." *A really, really loud dog...*

"Whatever. Hand me that towel, will you?"

Cam tossed the towel to Mano. Abandoning the glass of juice, he raced down the hall to his bedroom. He inspected the bedroom door. No marks of any kind. He slowly inched across the rug-covered floor, looking right and left, and stopped at the bathroom door. Sure enough, colossal claw marks scored the wood. His skin prickled and the hair on the back of his neck bristled. "Hey, Mano" he yelled.

"What?" Mano yelled back.

"I think you should look at this."

A few minutes later, Mano strode into the bedroom, wiping his hands on an apron tied around his waist. The big man whistled. "What the fuck, Tyson?"

"I know, right? I sure didn't make those marks."

Mano scratched the back of his head. "You're telling me you heard scratches while you were taking a shower just now?"

"Right."

"Then what?"

Cam considered his answer. He hesitated, rubbing his chin with his hand. "I saw the bathroom door fly open."

"Then what?"

"The room and shower door were all foggy. I didn't see anything enter but I did see paw prints on the glass."

"Let's go take a look."

The two stepped into the still steamy bathroom. The moisture on the stall door was fading, but faint outlines of paw prints were visible. Mano's face furrowed. "I've done some animal tracking up in Canada.

Those prints are big, man...about eight inches across. And look at the shape...those look like a big cat, Cam. Like an enormous lynx or something.”

Beads of sweat popped out of Cam’s face and neck. He ran a hand through his hair.

“What?” Mano asked.

“I don’t know...shit...I had this freaking dream about a lynx when I was staying in the basement a few months back.”

“A dream, huh?” The big guy went back over to the bathroom door. Mano rubbed his palms together briskly and placed them an inch from the scratches. With his eyes closed, he said “Holy Spirits. Feel this, Cam.”

Cam put his palms near the scraped door. “I don’t feel anything.”

“Huh...right. I forgot you’re Mr. Nothing Outside of Your Reality Exists. Well, the energy here is intense. It has a particular signature, and it could only mean one thing. You’ve got a star dreamling on your trail, Cam. And those scratches – those are not from the cat spirit trying to get in. No, those are the dreamling marking the door to say...well, to let all other dreamlings know you are his.”

The skin stretched tight over Cam’s face in a grimace. His arms, legs, and back peppered with little goose bumps. “What the fuck is a star dreamling? Are you fucking serious?”

“Dead serious, Cam. Ancient Ones speak of a tribe of beings known as the Galaxy Dancers. The Dancers roam the universe like gypsies, and they have these creature spirits called star dreamlings. The creatures are usually only visible in dreams but they’re said to move freely through this dream we call reality. And if they mark you, sorry to say, that means you belong to the one that did the marking.” He whistled through his teeth and shook his head, causing the tiny strands of silk in his braid to shimmer.

“Whoa, Mano.” Cam backed away from the door. “This is freaking me out. Are you putting me on?”

“Nah, Cam, I wish I were. Here’s the rub, bro. If a star dreamling marks you, that means that you have ancient ties, and you are either an ally to the dreamling or an enemy.”

Cam narrowed his eyes. “You know I don’t believe in any of this stuff, right Mano? All that psychic mumbo jumbo and energy shit is just that – shit.”

“Yeah, I hear that. Only this has nothing to do with belief. Keep your eyes open. You have been given a sign, bro. Best to heed the call.”

“Heed the call? What the hell does that mean? What do I do?”

“Pay attention, and see what’s next. That’s all you can do.” Mano placed his palms on his knees and pushed himself up to standing. He patted Cam on the shoulder. “If the dreamling is your ally – well, that’s a good thing. It means you’ve got something special inside. If it’s your enemy...” He drew his hand across his neck in a slicing motion. “I gotta get back to the kitchen. It smells like it’s about to burn.”

Another chill washed over Cam’s flesh. “You gotta get back to the kitchen? You just tell me that I’ve got some freaking star dreamling after me, it might be an ally or it might kill me, and then you say you’ve gotta get to the kitchen?”

Mano just shrugged. “Gotta finish what I started, man. Apparently, you do too.”

As Mano wandered away, Cam staggered over and sat down on his bed, his legs shaky. He grabbed a pair of dirty pants from a pile and fished around in the pocket for a stick of gum. Pulling it out of the wrapper, he folded it in two, jammed it in his mouth and chewed with a vengeance. He was *trying* – operative word “trying” - to quit a recently renewed dance with cigarettes. So far, he was winning, but shit like this sure made him want to reconsider. *Fuck. A star dreamling? Manoko and his superstitions - there had to be a better explanation than that.* He just wasn’t going to go there. He looked out the window at the beautiful blue sky. Next, he surveyed the floor, searching for his shoes. He had to get out of here...go outside and find something better to do than all this fucking thinking. The phone caught his eye, blinking with a bright green light. He picked up the black Droid, tapped the message icon and pressed it to his ear.

“Cam. It’s me. It’s Chérie. I wondered if you wanted to, er...” Pause. “I wondered if you wanted to go to the river with me. Call me.”

His body flushed with excitement. “Hell, yeah!” He quickly touched the speed dial to her number. He hadn’t had the heart to erase it.

“Hello?”

Words spilled from his mouth in a rush. “Hey, Chérie! Sorry I missed your call. I just got your message. It’s good to hear from you. It’s been weeks. Change of heart about me, huh?”

Chérie laughed. “Slow down. It has been weeks. I’ve, uh...I’ve been...”

“Missing me? Say it. Say you’ve been missing me,” Cam blurted. Quiet sprouted in his ear and spread through his cheeks in a flush of heat. He squirmed and tugged at the collar of his t-shirt. “Are you still there? Chérie?”

“I’m still here. I just wondered if you wanted to go to the river today. I’ve got the day off and nothing to do.”

“So I’m your fallback plan?” The words slipped out before he could edit them. Cam’s heart clenched and he gripped the phone. *Shit. Say something positive, don’t blow this.*

“Cam, don’t. I’ve...”

“That came out wrong. I’ve got the day off, too and there’s nothing I’d like to do better than spend it with you.” He tensed, waiting for her response.

“Good. Good,” she said in a small voice. “Okay.” She paused. “I’ve been missing you. It’s true.”

Thick, weighted silence hung in the air. Cam counted. *One breath. Two breaths. Three breaths. Four breaths.*

“That’s good to hear,” he said at last. “Me, too.”

A big sigh whooshed through the phone. “Whew! That was hard!” She laughed.

“It was,” Cam agreed. He grimaced and raked his hair with his free hand. *Don’t blow this.* “But we got it out of the way, so let’s do this. It’ll be great to go to the river. What time?” He listened to her reply, relaxed and laughed. “Okay, hot stuff. Just give me time to find my shoes. I’m on my way. Oh wait - want me to bring the kayaks? Or were you thinking of hiking?” He paused, listening. “Cool. That’s what I had in mind. Okay, well, I’ll pop them on top of the car. Bring all your gear, okay?”

After he hung up the phone, he stood in the center of the room, clenching the phone. “Don’t blow this, Tyson,” he urged for the thousandth time. He shoved the mobile in his pocket, threw his fist into the air and whooped. “Hell, yeah! We’re going to do a river run! Fucking awesome!”

As he strode down the hall to the front door, he called to Mano. “Hey, Mano, I’m heading out for the day. I’m going kayaking with Cheerio. Want me to pick anything up on the way back?”

“Maybe some more beer, bro,” Mano called back. “And why don’t you bring Chérie back for dinner? I’d love another victim to try this meal.”

“I’ll ask her, thanks. I’ll let you know before the day is over. Thanks again for the invite.” Cam closed the door behind him with a smile. Today was going to be a good day; he could just sense it in his bones.

He tramped out to the garage, hefted the two single Liquid Logic Remix kayaks on top of his faithful green 1998 Land Rover and strapped them onto the saddles of the Thule rack. Next, the back of the car was loaded up with paddles, Neoprene boots, lifejackets, drysuits, and other kayak gear. When he turned toward the front of the car, a blur of silver and brown disappeared around the back of the garage. The hairs at the back of his neck prickled. *Weird*. He traipsed over to check. *Nothing there*. He swallowed, scanning the area. *Nada*. He looked down. Distinct tracks dotted the dirt. A sudden gulp of air filled his lungs and his face froze. The tracks looked like those on the bathroom door. *Calm down. There are lots of critters in the city. Hell, coyotes even prowl the streets, snatching up cats and little dogs for snacks*. Still, a sense of unease caused his stomach to knot. Racing back to the car, he leapt into the front seat, and glanced back at the garage. Two bright specter-like eyes peered around the corner at him. “Shit.” With his hair standing on end, he quickly revved the engine, slammed it into reverse, and peeled the fuck outta there.

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