Silhouette®

1576
April

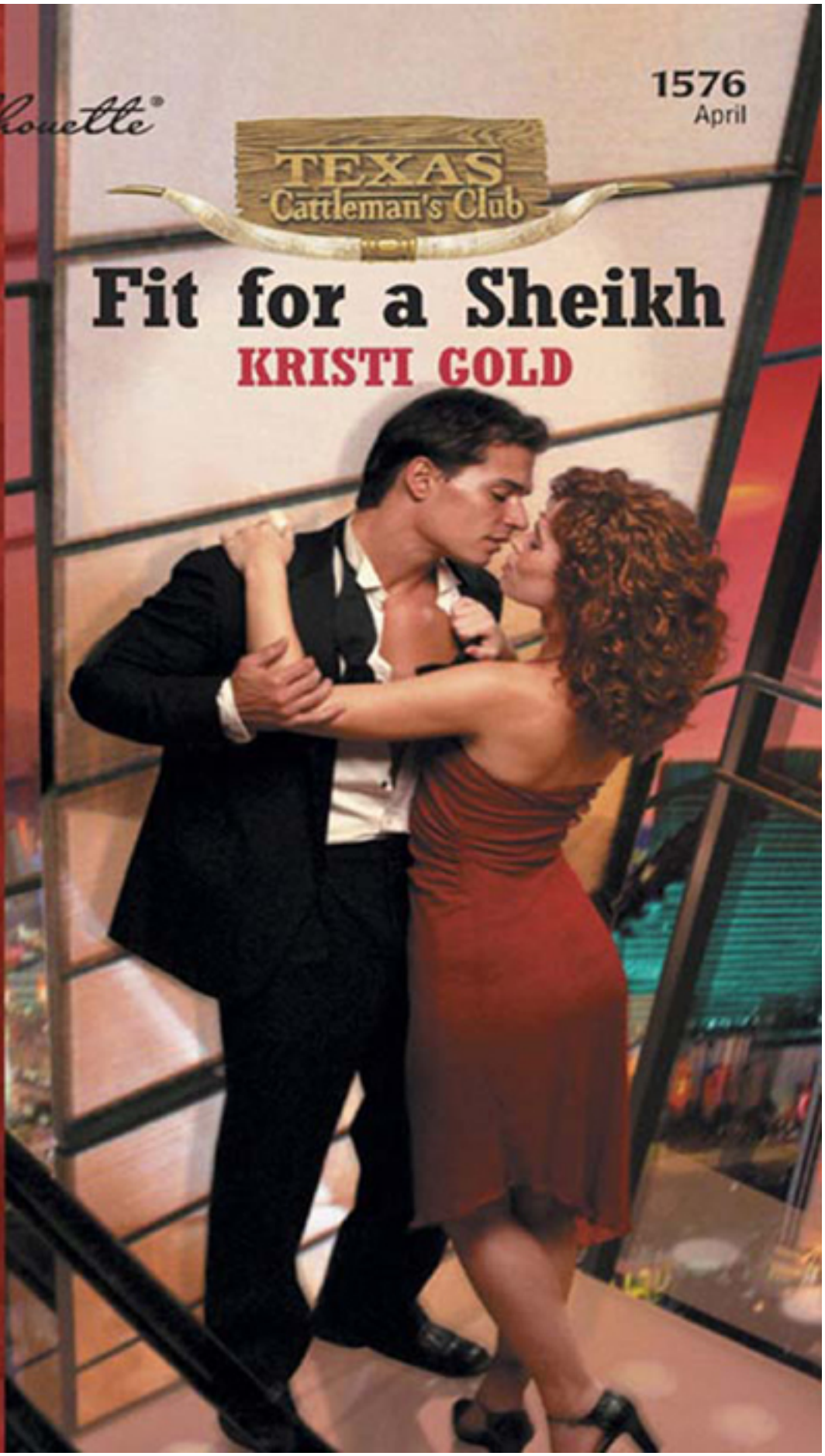
TEXAS
Cattleman's Club

Fit for a Sheikh

KRISTI GOLD

Desire®

passionate powerful provocative love stories



KRISTI GOLD

Fit for a Sheikh

«HarperCollins»

GOLD K.

Fit for a Sheikh / K. GOLD — «HarperCollins»,

Six wealthy Texas bachelors–all members of the state's most exclusive club–must unravel the mystery surrounding one tiny baby…and discover true love in the process!Tracker Darin Shakir worked alone. The mysterious Cattleman's Club member had been burned in the past and he wasn't about to see innocents hurt on this mission. But plans had gone awry–he'd wound up injured, and in bartender Fiona Powers's capable hands. The feisty redhead was more than a match for this brooding sheikh and insisted on helping Darin. But his temporary, sexy new partner was a very tempting distraction Darin didn't want, even as he yearned to show Fiona the fiery attraction blazing inside.

© GOLD K.
© HarperCollins

Содержание

Fit for a Sheikh 6
Books by Kristi Gold 7
KRISTI GOLD 8
Contents 9
One 10
Two 20
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента. 31

Our Texas Cattleman's Club gents have one more mission to complete….

Tricky and dangerous, Dr. Roman Birkenfeld is still on the loose, and no one will be safe until this villain is safely behind bars!

This month in

FIT FOR A SHEIKH

by Kristi Gold

Meet Darin Shakir—expert tracker and brooding man of mystery. He's determined to complete his mission on his own. But that's before he winds up in Fiona Powers's bed…and she finds her way into his heart!

SILHOUETTE DESIRE IS PROUD TO PRESENT THE

Six wealthy Texas bachelors—all members of the state's most exclusive club—must unravel the mystery surrounding one tiny baby…and discover true love in the process!

So join us as our sexy heroes bring this series to a satisfying, sensual conclusion….

Dear Reader,

Welcome back to another passionate month at Silhouette Desire. A Scandal Between the Sheets is breaking out as Brenda Jackson pens the next tale in the scintillating DYNASTIES: THE DANFORTHS series. We all love the melodrama and mayhem that surrounds this Southern family—how about you?

The superb Beverly Barton stops by Silhouette Desire with an extra wonderful title in her bestselling series THE PROTECTORS. Keeping Baby Secret will keep you on the edge of your seat—and curl your toes all at the same time. What would you do if you had to change your name and your entire history? Sheri WhiteFeather tackles that compelling question when her heroine is forced to enter the witness protection program in A Kept Woman. Seems she was a kept woman of another sort, as well…so be sure to pick up this fabulous read if you want the juicy details.

Kristi Gold has written the final, fabulous installment of THE TEXAS CATTLEMAN'S CLUB: THE STOLEN BABY series with Fit for a Sheikh. (But don't worry, we promise those sexy cattlemen with be back.) And rounding out the month are two wonderful stories filled with an extra dose of passion: Linda Conrad's dramatic Slow Dancing With A Texan and Emilie Rose's suppercharged A Passionate Proposal.

Enjoy all we have to offer this month—and every month—at Silhouette Desire.

Melissa Jeglinski

Senior Editor, Silhouette Desire

Fit for a Sheikh
Kristi Gold

MILLS BOON www.millsandboon.co.uk

To editor Stephanie Maurer and authors Sara, Laura, Kathie, Cindy and Cathleen for making participation in this TCC series such a pleasurable experience!

Books by Kristi Gold
Silhouette Desire

Cowboy for Keeps #1308
Doctor for Keeps #1320
His Sheltering Arms #1350
Her Ardent Sheikh #1358
*Dr. Dangerous #1415
*Dr. Desirable #1421
*Dr. Destiny #1427
His E-Mail Order Wife #1454
The Sheikh's Bidding #1485
*Renegade Millionaire #1497
Marooned with a Millionaire #1517
Expecting the Sheikh's Baby #1531
Fit for a Sheikh #1576

KRISTI GOLD

has always believed that love has remarkable healing powers and feels very fortunate to be able to weave stories of romance and commitment. As a bestselling author and a Romance Writers of America RITA® Award finalist, she's learned that although accolades are wonderful, the most cherished rewards come from the most unexpected places, namely from personal stories shared by readers. Kristi resides on a ranch in Central Texas with her husband and three children, along with various and sundry livestock. She loves to hear from readers and can be contacted at KGOLDAUTHOR@aol.com or P.O. Box 9070, Waco, TX 76714.

"What's Happening in Royal?"

NEWS FLASH, April—Looks like all the action is happening in Las Vegas these days! Alexander Kent just returned with his beautiful bride, Stephanie, in tow. What started off as a surprise engagement seems to have exploded into a passionate romance while they were in Vegas. The sparks that couple is giving off are enough to start a grass fire!

Sheikh Darin Shakir has recently been spotted in Vegas, as well…. Our roving reporter, on track of just what went down there, has informed us that this mysterious Cattleman's Club member was last seen in the company of a very sexy redhead. Darin is yummy enough to make any woman fall for him, but our reporter seems to think there was something more going on than a simple fling in Sin City.

There's plenty of hubbub in town since the dangerous Dr. Birkenfeld escaped last month. The sheriff was fit to be tied when he found out and the words he spewed at our reporters were just not suitable for this paper! No one knows exactly where Birkenfeld may be…or when he may come back. Our favorite gents at the Texas Cattleman's Club are still avoiding an interview, but it is clear they're worried. Come on, guys. Can we catch the baddie so that this crowd can have a true happily-ever-after?

Contents

Chapter One
Chapter Two
Chapter Three
Chapter Four
Chapter Five
Chapter Six
Chapter Seven
Chapter Eight
Chapter Nine
Chapter Ten
Epilogue

One

Men viewed him as a dangerous loner who would stop at nothing in the search for justice. Women considered him a compelling lover who would stop at nothing in the pursuit of pleasure. A dark prince. Enigmatic. Invincible.

As a former military tracker, tempting fate and defying fear had become a way of life for Sheikh Darin ibn Shakir. A means to escape his own demons and a noble legacy he had never embraced. Yet the mission he was about to undertake had resurrected past failures he would rather forget. But he couldn't forget, not this time. Not until he saw the murderous Dr. Roman Birkenfeld—who had stolen infants from their mothers then sold them as if they were his to barter—punished for his heinous crimes. Whatever it might take.

Preparing for his departure to Las Vegas, Darin began filling the black duffel bag with supplies and clothing he would need for his travels. He paused momentarily to survey the room where he'd resided over the past year. His cousin, Hassim "Ben" Rassad, had welcomed him into his home and facilitated Darin's membership into the elite Texas Cattleman's club, a group of men who assisted in apprehending criminals few would dare to confront. Although Darin was grateful for the opportunities, he planned to move on to the next mission alone, tracking an extremist in Obersburg who had threatened the royal family. He had no ties in America aside from his older brother, Raf, who resided in Georgia, and Ben. As for his homeland, Amythra, he'd vowed to never return. The place held nothing but bitter memories.

"The car is on its way."

Darin turned toward the door to find his cousin dressed in faded jeans and scuffed cowboy boots that gave no indication he, too, had been born into nobility. Glancing at the lone bag set on the end of the bed, Ben asked, "Is that all you are taking?"

"I do not anticipate remaining for more than a few days."

"You should pack this, as well."

Darin afforded a cursory glance at the square of white cloth and gold band Ben held out to him. "I have no need for a kaffiyeh where I am going." He'd had no need for any royal trappings for some time now. Ben's brother, Kalib, ruled as king of Amythra, therefore Darin was far down the line in terms of inheriting the throne. A good thing because he did not want that burden. He never had.

Ben offered the kaffiyeh again. "You could use it as a disguise, if for no other reason."

Seeing no need to argue that point, Darin took the kaffiyeh from Ben and stuffed it inside the bag's outer pocket.

"Alexander Kent tells me he has arranged assistance from the Bureau," Ben said.

Something else that did not please Darin, although he greatly respected Alex Kent, a former FBI agent and fellow Cattleman's Club member. "I would prefer to work alone."

Ben released a frustrated sigh. "Might I remind you that when you joined our organization, you agreed to work with the others as a team?"

Darin needed no reminders. He'd been working that way for the past year, and he'd had no difficulty adhering to the policy. But this was different. This was personal. "I did not realize that this assignment would include other branches of law enforcement."

"It is necessary since this mission does not involve private hire. The illegal adoption ring and extortion violated federal law. That is the way in this country."

"I will honor the law. I will also have Birkenfeld in custody in a matter of days."

Ben looked skeptical. "Do you really believe you will find him so quickly?"

Darin holstered the Beretta, secured the strap over his shoulder then slipped a black jacket over his T-shirt and the gun. "Birkenfeld is not as smart as he believes, even if he did escape the authorities." And that thought brought about Darin's anger. He had been involved in the doctor's

original capture, only to have the criminal slip through their hands due to Birkenfeld's cunning and desperation and one novice police officer's inadvertent mistake.

"Then you are certain he is still in Las Vegas?" Ben asked.

Normally Darin would be guarded with that information, something else he had pledged when he'd joined the Cattleman's Club. But Ben was still officially a member, though he'd retired from active missions since his marriage. Therefore, Darin had no reason to withhold details in the case. "He is there, according to the attorney, Larry Sutter, Birkenfeld's cohort. Birkenfeld contacted Sutter on his cell phone and arranged a meeting in some obscure Las Vegas lounge. I am to join an operative posing as a bartender."

"This Sutter is in Las Vegas, as well?"

"Yes, in a hospital under protective custody since he has decided to turn state's evidence in exchange for a lesser sentence. It appears he will be there for a while as he recovers from Kent's beating."

"Alexander Kent beat him?" Shock reflected in Ben's tone and expression.

"He was protecting his lover from Sutter while they were infiltrating the adoption ring. There are no limits to what a man will do for the woman he loves." Even kill if necessary, something Darin knew intimately.

Ben sent him a knowing look. "Very true. I, too, have been in that position."

So had Darin, yet he had failed where Ben had not.

Ben thrust his hands in his pockets and watched while Darin took a few more things from the bureau drawers and added them to the bag. Darin sensed his cousin wanted to say something more, and not necessarily anything he wanted to hear.

"Are you certain you should be the one undertaking this particular mission?" Ben asked, confirming Darin's suspicions.

"I volunteered. Unlike the other members involved, I have no wife with whom to be concerned." No one waiting for him. No one who really worried over his activities.

"It is past time for you to consider settling down, Darin. Past time you find a suitable woman to share in your life."

After stuffing the last of his clothing into the bag, Darin zipped it with a vengeance. "I have no desire to settle down. After Raf's wife died, I decided my brother and I are cursed when it comes to women."

Ben's smile was cynical. "I thought you were too logical to believe in curses."

"I was, before…" Before his world had come apart with the speed of a bullet.

"Before you lost her," Ben finished for him. "Yes, the outcome was tragic, but we are all fortunate, and grateful, that you stopped Habib before he did further harm. You had no control over the situation beyond that."

"I do not care to take the risk with another woman. Not with the life I choose to lead."

"Yet you risk your life much of the time. Why not take a chance on finding a wife? I did, and I have no regrets."

Darin recognized that Ben had found a very special woman, someone worth that risk. An American woman whose determination and spirit equaled most men Darin had known. He could not blame his cousin for falling for Jamie. She was everything a man would desire in a life partner, beautiful and full of passion. Ben and Jamie's commitment and love for each other was obvious in every look they exchanged, a painful reminder of what Darin had once had—and lost—and one of the reasons why he needed to leave their home. The other reason cried, "Papa! Papa!" as she rushed into the room and grabbed Ben around the legs, her light brown hair flowing over her tiny shoulders.

Ben picked up two-and-a-half-year-old Lena and lifted her high above his head, much to the little girl's delight. "You are full of energy today, yáahil." He brought her into his arms and kissed her cheek. "I thought you were making xúbuz with your mother and Alima."

Lena wrinkled her upturned nose. “I don’t like bread. I want cookies.” She sent Darin a vibrant smile, much like her mother’s, then pointed to his chin. “Scratchies all gone, Dawin?” she asked, as always mispronouncing his name, something Darin found endearing.

Ignoring the deep ache radiating from his heart, he rubbed his clean-shaven jaw and favored her with a smile. “Yes, little one. All gone down the drain.” He’d removed the goatee that morning to make himself less recognizable to Birkenfeld. He had also cut his hair to the top of his collar and now wore a gold loop in each ear. Hopefully enough of a change to disguise himself somewhat, which brought about a reminder of something he had almost forgotten.

Darin tucked his hair behind his ears and set the black baseball cap low on his forehead. He then picked up the bag and said, “I am ready.”

Lena leveled her dark eyes on him. “Where ya goin’, Dawin?”

He walked to her and ran a fingertip over her soft cheek. “To a place with many bright lights.” And a man who needed to be tracked down and punished.

She leaned over and touched his jaw as if fascinated with the absence of whiskers. “I wanna go.”

Darin took her hand and kissed her palm. “Not this time, little one.”

As Darin, Ben and Lena headed through the great room, Jamie met them at the front door. “Leaving again, Darin?”

“For a time.”

Jamie raked a hand through her blond hair and patted her distended abdomen. “I hope you’ll be back in the next few days for the baby’s birth. It’s really something to see big tough Ben here in nervous father mode. I swear, I thought he was going to pass out when Lena—”

Ben halted her words with a kiss, then wrapped his arm around her shoulder. “I was quite calm during Lena’s birth.”

Jamie grinned and Lena giggled. “If you say so, honey.”

True affection passed between father, mother and child, evidenced by shared smiles, Lena’s head resting against Ben’s chest, Jamie’s arm around Ben’s waist.

Needing to escape, Darin walked onto the porch, thankful to discover the sedan had arrived to take him to the airstrip. Seeing this closely bound family was almost too much for him to bear, although he would never reveal that to anyone.

Before entering the car, he turned to wave goodbye, and little Lena with her father’s eyes and her mother’s smile, blew him a kiss.

Memories of what might have been crowded Darin’s mind, save for one cruel bastard who had taken three lives—Ben’s father, Darin’s fiancée and their unborn child. A man much like Dr. Roman Birkenfeld. Both had no regard for the sanctity of life and the rare gift of love.

Darin vowed to hunt down Birkenfeld even if it proved to be his last act on earth. But in the process, Sheikh Darin ibn Shakir would not allow himself to feel his own pain. Not if he wanted to succeed.

Not much went on in the off-the-strip Silver Ace Lounge on Mondays. The absolute height of boredom, a familiar concept for Fiona Powers. Hotel management student by day, bartender by night, the same-old, same-old since she’d moved to Vegas from Idaho five years before. But no one had said life would be easy for a struggling small-town gal with big-time dreams.

Fiona slapped a rag over the counter where some drunk had missed his big mouth, pouring his boilermaker all over himself and the bar. Fiona had tried to cut him off after two rounds, but scrawny, balding Benny Jack, the other barkeep, had kept on serving the guy as if he’d been doling out fruit juice. Thankfully, the inebriate had left an hour ago after Fiona had called him a cab, as well as some unflattering names under her breath.

“Slow night, huh, Fee-Fee?”

Fiona turned and leaned back against the bar, elbows braced on the counter, preparing to repeat the same admonishments to Benny Jack. “For the thousandth time, Fee-Fee is the name someone

would give a poodle, and I assure you I am not a poodle even if my hair is curly. I do not sit up on my hind legs and beg, nor do I leave puddles on the sidewalk. But if I were a canine, I would take great pleasure in planting my pointy little teeth in the middle of your butt. Better still, I would probably go directly for the nethers and give them a good shake."

Benny grinned, displaying his lack of teeth. "Didn't know you were into that kinky stuff, Red."

Red. The second-worst nickname Fiona had encountered. Obviously Benny was determined to cut his life short tonight. "Don't you have somewhere to be? Maybe some cave on the other side of the continent?"

Benny hooked his thumbs in his suspenders. "Yep. I got a date."

Great. Benny, the toothless, thin man had a date and Fiona was stuck tending regulars in a dive. "Just some advice, Benny. When you pick her up, don't drag her by the hair to your car."

Benny grinned again before turning toward the exit. "By the way, a new guy's coming in to relieve you in a while."

"What new guy?" Fiona said but received no response since Benny had already left out the back door to commence with his courting ritual that probably involved a back-seat roll with some big-haired broad.

And here she was, faced with a new guy no one had bothered to tell her about, not even Jimmy, the bar's owner. Oh well, at least she might get home early to do some studying. If the latest employee knew how to tend bar. Otherwise, she'd have to train him, and hopefully that didn't require newspaper on the floor. Jimmy had a tendency to hire knuckle-scraping morons—case in point, Benny Jack.

Fiona turned back to survey the limited occupants—two middle-aged guys in polyester pants shooting pool and bull, and one elderly man reading the paper and smoking a fat cigar that smelled about as delightful as stagnant sewage.

She leaned over the bar, propped her cheek on her palm and sighed. Yeah, just another night in nonparadise. But what could she expect when she chose to work in a place that served as stomping grounds for locals with the mean age of sixty? At least the tips were good, but for once she wished someone more interesting would come in.

The front door opened, and she expected another of life's little disappointments to enter in the form of an octogenarian. What she got was the surprise of her life.

He seemed to emerge from the smoky haze like some otherworldly presence who had recently landed from Planet Machismo where the all-male aliens survived on testosterone alone. He wore black, from his baseball cap to his combat boots. Black cargo pants, black T-shirt, black jacket—Jacket? No one wore a jacket in Vegas in April, unless they were hiding something or hiding from someone. He stalked toward the bar with confidence as if challenging someone to stop his progress, his dark gaze scanning the room.

Fiona's hopes soared when she considered he might be the new bartender. They dropped when he slid onto the stool with the prowess of a panther, directly in front of Fiona like any other customer. He studied her as if he expected her to swoon. She wasn't going to do that, although her knees did feel a little flimsy.

She sent him a smile. "What can I get for you?" Coffee? Tea? Me?

"Coffee."

Darn. "Black?"

"Yes."

This did not surprise Fiona, nor did the fact that his voice was deep as a water well. She had never seen such a perfectly chiseled face covered by skin the color and texture of melted milk chocolate. Obviously black was his signature color, right down to the shadow of whiskers framing his full lips and the long dark lashes outlining his eyes, which Fiona considered totally unfair. Her lashes showed up after applying two coats of mascara. A slight indentation to the right of the bridge of his

straight nose, as if it had been broken at one time, was the only true flaw in his face. But it sure as heck didn't detract from his incredible looks.

Forcing her gaze away, Fiona turned from the counter to the back shelf housing the coffeepot and realized the temperature had just risen about a hundred degrees. She poured some of the muddy brew into the mug, glanced in the mirrored wall, then tightened the band securing her hair high on her head as if that would improve her appearance. Her ponytail looked like a spastic bird's nest, random tendrils falling around her face like loose springs. Her sleeveless blue blouse revealed the results of happy hour and displayed all the freckles on her pale arms. Just her luck. Hank the Hunk had walked into her life and she looked like warmed-over deer dung.

Fiona gripped the cup in both hands, hoping it didn't slide across the damp surface and land in his lap when she set it down. Of course, then she would be forced to hop over the bar and clean it up, not an altogether unpleasant thought. But hot coffee on his crotch did not a good impression make, not to mention it might be painful if it seeped through his pants. Then he would have to take his pants off—

Earth to Fiona.

She turned back to the bar and set the cup before him, fortunately without incident. "It's kind of strong."

He kept his intense eyes fixed on hers. "I prefer it that way."

He might as well have said he preferred randy sex, considering the way Fiona's body reacted with a series of hot flashes and a fluttering heartbeat.

Fiona realized she should probably stop staring at him as if he'd grown a third eye. Moving a few feet down the bar, she pretended to straighten glasses that didn't need straightening, sending subtle glances in his direction now and again. He swiveled around on the stool, one arm resting on the bar, his large hand wrapped around the mug as he focused on the television suspended in the corner above the pool table.

How silly that she should be having such a strong reaction to this guy. His gold loop earrings, one in each lobe, and collar-length dark hair hanging down from beneath the cap made him seem just a little bit too dangerous. Of course, she hadn't been involved with anyone since the breakup with her erstwhile fiancé, Paul the potato farmer. Unfortunately, for the past few years, she'd been in a man famine. But Paul hadn't been the adventurous sort, and he hadn't given any credence to Fiona's dreams of owning and managing her own hotel. He'd simply told her goodbye when she'd asked him to come with her. Granted, that farewell had stung like a hornet, but now that she'd had some distance, she realized that she wasn't suited for a man like Paul. He'd preferred the quiet life and crops; she preferred bright lights and big city—and craved adventure.

Adventure was sitting only a few feet away in the form of a demigod with a black clothing fetish. A man who could probably show her the time of her life, if she worked up enough nerve to make the suggestion.

Fiona mentally cataloged all the bad pickup lines she'd experienced in her twenty-five years. Mind if I suck your lips off your face? Too obvious. Could I show you the back seat of my sedan? Too Benny Jack. Besides, her car was temporarily out of commission. And apparently so were her seduction skills.

Come-ons were not her forte, but she decided it was now or never. She would engage him in a conversation. Something simple. The weather. Jockeys or briefs?

Inhaling a cleansing breath, Fiona grabbed a moderately clean rag and began working her way back in his direction. When she was only inches from his hand, she asked, "Would you like more coffee?"

"Not presently." He subtly surveyed the area, something that might be lost on any casual observer, but not on Fiona.

"Are you looking for someone?" she asked.

He shifted back around to face her. “Yes.”

A man of few words. But that would not deter her. Tonight she would become Fiona the Fearless Flirt. “A woman?”

“No.”

Fiona wanted to cheer. “Okay. What does your friend look like? Maybe I’ve seen him around.”

“He is definitely not a friend.”

From his acid tone, Fiona wondered if she would soon have a fight on her hands. “I’m guessing he’s an enemy, right?”

He gave her a questioning look. “Are you interested in astrology?”

A totally unexpected question. Fiona didn’t see him as an astrology kind of guy, and frankly she was hard-pressed to believe that planet alignment controlled fate. Where was the tall dark stranger who was supposed to enter her life when Mars was in retro-something? Sitting right in front of her.

What the heck. She’d play along. “I find astrology somewhat intriguing. In fact, I’d bet you’re a Scorpio.” The oversexed sign.

“Correct.”

Bingo! Darn, Fiona, you’re good.

His eyes narrowed. “Are you a Leo?”

No, she was a Pisces. But if he wanted her to be a Leo, she could do that. She liked lions. In fact, he made her want to growl. “How’d you guess?”

He hesitated a moment then said, “I did not realize you were a woman.”

Ouch. Did she look that awful? And did he think she had bowling balls stuffed in her shirt? Granted, she’d always considered being a bit top heavy somewhat of a curse for someone with such a small frame, yet she’d never expected anyone to believe they weren’t real, or that she was a cross dresser. But, after all, this was Vegas. And it would be just her luck if he was gay. “Yes, I’m a woman. If you want a drag club, you might try downtown or the Strip.”

“My apologies.” His gaze settled on her breasts. “It is quite obvious you’re a woman. I meant I was not informed of your gender.”

Okay, she could forgive him. But she was still a trifle confused and a whole lot warm when he leaned forward and asked, “Have you seen anything?”

She saw the crease framing the right of his mouth that probably turned into a dimple when he smiled, something he had yet to do. But Fiona smiled, a coy one, or at least she hoped it looked flirtatious and not forced. “I’ve seen just about everything. What exactly are you looking for?”

Before he could answer, the drunk Fiona had ousted not more than hour ago picked that inopportune time to burst through the door, clamoring for a beer.

Fiona pushed back from the bar and said, “You don’t need to be in here, Chuck. I’m not going to serve you.”

Ignoring Fiona, Chuck staggered behind the bar. “Just one more brewsky.”

Fiona scowled at him and pointed at the door. “You’ve had enough, now leave.”

“Aw, come on, Fee-Fee.”

He was pushing his luck now. “Go home, Chuck.”

“After you give me another drink,” he slurred, bringing his foul breath with him as he leaned forward and pointed a bratwurst finger in her face.

“Do what the lady asks or you will have to answer to me.”

Fiona glanced at Scorpio who now stood by the stool, looking and sounding like a dark knight bent on coming to her rescue. And they’d said chivalry was passé. What did they know? Regardless, even if she didn’t have a black belt in karate, or any color of belt for that matter, she was quite capable of taking care of herself. “He’s harmless,” she assured him before regarding the drunk again.

When Chuck clutched Fiona’s collar in both beefy fists, Fiona grabbed his wrists and shouted, “Back off!” thrusting her knee upward toward the intended target, but Chuck moved back before she

could do any damage. No, not moved back. Yanked back by Scorpio who had somehow scaled the bar and now had the drunk pinned against the counter. He muttered something in a language that Fiona couldn't understand, but she didn't think he was telling Chuckie to have a nice night.

He shot a glance at Fiona. "What do you wish me to do with him?"

"Just put him out the door. I'll call the police if he comes back in."

Chuck looked as if he might blubber as Scorpio grabbed him by the nape and guided him toward the exit. Fiona felt like blubbering, too, as she watched her one opportunity to have some adventure walk out the door, probably never to return.

Darn. Another night in Dullsville.

As Darin stepped into the warm night, he silently cursed the drunk, cursed the fact that he'd been caught off guard by the FBI operative's gender. He'd expected a man when Kent had told him the agent would operate under the code name Leo, not an attractive woman with hair the color of a sunset, large green eyes and perfect breasts that he had not been able to ignore. But he must ignore her if he intended to complete his mission. He had no time for a liaison or lover even if he'd entertained those thoughts when he had first set eyes on her. That was before he realized she would serve as his partner in apprehending Birkenfeld, not his partner beneath tangled sheets.

As soon as he deposited the drunk in the parking lot, he would return inside to the agent and discuss their plans before Birkenfeld's scheduled arrival in one hour. He would also attempt to keep his eyes off her attributes, though that might prove difficult. But if all went well tonight, Darin would be back on the plane tomorrow morning and Birkenfeld would be back behind bars. And he would leave the woman behind without discovering if the fiery passion she seemed to possess held true in bed. Under different circumstances, he might attempt to find out.

Darin guided Chuck down the steps while the drunk whined, "Don't hurt me, man."

He had no intention of hurting him unless he attempted to harm the agent, although he suspected the woman could handle this troublemaker. After all, she had been trained by the best.

As they reached the walkway at the bottom of the steps, a passing man with a shaved head, his eyes lowered to the ground, muttered, "Excuse me."

Darin's blood ran cold at the sound of the voice.

With one hand on the drunk's neck, the other poised on the gun beneath his jacket, Darin turned and said, "Roman Birkenfeld."

The man spun around and their gazes connected. Recognition dawned in the demonic doctor's beady eyes before he shoved Chuck into Darin and took off.

Pushing the drunk aside, Darin gave chase, adrenaline pumping through his veins, his heart pounding with every step as he closed in on the criminal, but not before Birkenfeld disappeared around the back of the building.

Flattening himself against the brick wall, Darin moved into the dimly lit alley, his gun drawn, and came upon two figures struggling on the ground. He saw the shock of red hair then the silver glint of a knife poised above the woman's chest as she fought to hold Birkenfeld's arm at bay, shouting, "Get off me, you jackass!" Memories of another place, another time, another woman assaulted him.

Sheer instinct drove him forward to grab Birkenfeld by the arm. In a split second of stupidity, Darin took his attention from the fugitive in order to make certain the woman was not injured, allowing Birkenfeld the opportunity to strike.

The knife hit home, slashing first across Darin's left thigh, then his side. Anger overrode the pain but he couldn't see well enough to take a clean shot without risking shooting the agent who'd entered the fray, pummeling the back of Birkenfeld's neck but doing little to hinder the criminal's knife-wielding. Darin kicked out, landing the toe of his boot in Birkenfeld's ribs, and at the same time the blade cut across the back of his right ankle. The blow proved to be too much, dropping Darin to the gravel surface. The gun, wrenched from his grasp at the impact, skittered across the pitted pavement, leaving them both vulnerable.

Darin heard the sound of harried footsteps and rolled to his belly, fumbling for and finding the gun, but not soon enough to prevent Birkenfeld from escaping into the night before he could fire off a round.

He eased onto his back, his chest heaving from labored breaths, his head swimming from the wounds and the tactical errors he had committed. The mistakes of his past seemed bent on recurring whenever a woman's safety was involved.

Turning his head to his right, he found the agent on her knees next to him. At least she was alive. "Are you hurt?" he managed.

"I'm fine." She gave him a visual once-over, pausing at his thigh. "Oh, God, you're bleeding!"

Darin worked his way into a sitting position to assess the damage. The guard light above them provided enough illumination to see the slit in the T-shirt on his right side below his ribs. Fortunately, the jacket had provided enough protection against severe damage to his flesh. His thigh injury was worse, a dark stain fanning from the perimeter of the gash in his pants, indicating blood. But his ankle ached more and he suspected Birkenfeld's knife had done the most damage there. Nothing that would not heal, but it would hinder his pursuit, at least tonight.

He muttered several oaths in Arabic directed at his carelessness.

"I'll call an ambulance," the agent said, her voice surprisingly calm.

Darin clasped her wrist before she could stand. "No hospitals. No doctors."

Her eyes widened. "Are you nuts?"

"I've had worse injury, I assure you. Did you not have your gun drawn when you encountered Birkenfeld?"

"Birkenfeld?"

Obviously she was somewhat in shock. "The fugitive whom you were engaging in hand-to-hand combat."

She frowned. "First, I don't own a gun. Second, he ran into me when I was coming out the back with the garbage. Third, I don't know any Birkenfeld."

Darin scowled. "Did they not inform you that he was the man we would be apprehending?"

"Who are they? And who are you?"

Darin suddenly realized he had made two grave errors. "You are not FBI?"

She attempted a weak smile. "You have the F and B right, but that would be for Fiona the Bartender."

He gritted his teeth, braced his elbows on bent knees and lowered his head. Ben had been correct in assuming he was not the right man for this mission. Yet, now more than ever, Darin wanted Birkenfeld to pay.

She came to her feet and wiped her hands over her jean-covered thighs. "Let me get the bartender who just came in to relieve me. He can help me get you inside."

"No."

"Why not?"

Because the bartender was more than likely the real FBI agent, and Darin did not want the man to know what a fool he'd been. Letting Birkenfeld escape had been Darin's mistake, and he would correct it. But how? He was injured. He could not do this alone. He would need help, something he hated to admit.

Darin leveled his gaze on Fiona, her expression a mixture of confusion and concern. Even if she was not FBI, she was his only ally at the moment. He would be forced to rely on her assistance, if she was willing to give it. "Do you live nearby?"

"I have an apartment a couple of miles away."

"Take me there."

She braced her hands on her waist and stared down on him. "First, you have to tell me who you are and what this is all about."

He would only tell her what he must to reassure her. He would not subject her to more danger by revealing everything. “If you will see me to your apartment, I will give you details. I will say that I am working for law enforcement. The man named Birkenfeld is very dangerous. I’m here to apprehend him.”

Fiona’s expression brightened. “So you’re one of the good guys?”

“Yes.”

She frowned. “How do I know that?”

Darin lifted his arms from his sides. “In the right pocket of my pants, you will find my credentials.”

She crouched down and rifled in his pocket for a few moments. Had he not been in such pain, he might have enjoyed the activity. After she withdrew the black folder, she looked at the fabricated license, looked back at him, then back at the license. “Frank Scorpio? Texas Peace Officer?”

“That is correct.” He shifted his leg and winced from the pain in his ankle. “Could we possibly leave soon?”

“I have to call a cab. My car’s in the shop.”

“I have a rental in the lot.”

“Okay, but I’m driving.” She rose to her feet again. “I’ll have the new guy lock up. It’ll only take a sec, so don’t go anywhere.”

“I promise I will be here when you return. And do not tell him I am here. The fewer people who know, the better.”

“Okay.” She pointed to the gun still in his grip. “Could you put that thing away? It makes me nervous.”

Darin holstered the Beretta for now, but he would take it out again in case Birkenfeld returned. “Anything else I might do for you before I bleed to death?”

She gave him a self-conscious smile. “I’ll hurry.”

Fiona sprinted back into the building, leaving Darin alone in the alley with his pain and the strong sense that getting involved with this woman could be the third mistake he’d made since his arrival in Vegas.

But he had no choice.

Roman Birkenfeld ran into the night. Ran until his lungs burned and his eyes teared. Ran aimlessly through the darkened streets. His throbbing side slowed his progress somewhat and he paused behind an odious commercial trash bin to feel along his ribs where Shakir had kicked him. Nothing broken, only bruised, he suspected. No punctured lung, otherwise he wouldn’t be able to breathe at all.

Damn the woman who’d run into him. He should’ve killed her. He would have, had it not been for that bastard, Shakir. The recollection of his knife slicing through the man’s skin gave him added strength and a good deal of purpose as he continued on at a sprint. He didn’t have to guess how Shakir had found him. The idiot Larry Sutter. The blood-sucking attorney had no doubt ratted him out, setting him up with a promise of money, enough money to purchase passage out of the country. He should have known not to trust him. Should have known that Sutter had lied when he’d said he was leaving the hospital, the meeting tonight a ruse to protect Sutter’s ass.

Damn Shakir and Sutter. If Shakir wasn’t dead, and he hoped he was, he would find a way to take him out. He would take them both out, beginning with Sutter. But how? He couldn’t get close to the hospital; they would recognize him.

Tommy Stokes. The ex-con had escaped from Texas but no doubt he would be back in Vegas by now, frequenting his favorite haunts, keeping company with less-than-upstanding citizens. Places where anyone could get anything, if the price was right. Business was good for a man with a thirst for blood and the absence of a soul.

He didn't have money to pay Stokes, but one thing was working in his favor—the thug hated lawyers. Stokes would agree to off Sutter for the sheer pleasure of watching him suffer as payback for the attorney who hadn't saved him from a five-year prison term. Now he would just have to find the ex-con, and he would. Tonight.

As it had been all of Roman Birkenfeld's life, people had tried to thwart his goals. They hadn't succeeded until now. His medical career was a bust, all the years of hard work and struggle gone down the tubes because of some determined East Coast loan sharks and a woman who'd enlisted a group of Texas vigilantes determined to destroy him. It always came back to a woman, in this case, Natalie Perez.

Natalie was out of reach this time, but Shakir wasn't. Someone would have to pay. It might as well be him.

Two

Fiona had finally composed herself enough on the drive to the apartment to stop shaking and help Frank out of the car. Well, she'd wanted some adventure, and she'd definitely gotten it when she'd been rescued from a crazed criminal by a dark stranger with biceps bulging from his iron-man arm now thrown over her shoulder. Thank goodness she lived on the first floor of the complex. No way would she have been able to drag him up the stairs. At least she was still in one piece, thanks to him. If he hadn't come along, the guy might have killed her. But she sure as heck hadn't intended to give up without a fight, especially when he'd held her down. Fiona could not tolerate being held down, and that had been more frightening than his knife.

After leaning her savior against the wall outside her apartment, she said, "Hang on a sec," then turned the lock, pushed open the door and was immediately greeted by Carlotta, her slobbering, overfed, Shar Pei who possessed enough wrinkles to keep spray starch in business for years. She stopped long enough to pat the dog's tan head and ask, "Hey, Lottie, what did you destroy today?" The answer to the question came in the form of random scraps that had once been a textbook scattered in the corner on the living room floor.

Fiona pointed a finger at the guilty hound. "Bad, bad girl." As usual, Lottie responded to the scolding by feigning innocence.

Taking Lottie by the collar, Fiona guided her into the lone bedroom and closed the door on her mournful expression before going back to Frank.

Frank. Ha! That just didn't fit. In fact, she hadn't bought that bogus name any more than she was buying his story about being a Texas cop. But she really hoped he was a member of some law enforcement agency and not some drug dealer from the back side of the law. She'd already taken a huge risk by not taking him to the hospital. And she'd be taking a bigger one if she allowed him in the apartment. But she couldn't in good conscience leave him bleeding on her doorstep. He was hurt and he needed her help. Maybe she might even earn some commendation for valor. Just getting a good look at him in the light would be enough reward.

On that thought she turned around to find he'd already made himself welcome on her green chintz sofa, his long legs stretched out in front of him, head tipped back against the cushions, his dark lashes fanning out below his closed eyes. The man was just too gorgeous for his own good. He also looked a little pasty, and she worried he'd passed out from the loss of blood. If that proved to be the case, she was calling 911 whether he wanted that or not.

Fiona closed the front door and double locked it in case the creepy criminal had followed them. Or had she locked herself in with a criminal?

Fiona, you are a fool. But she had to trust her instincts and her belief that she was safe with her friend, Frank.

She stood over him, her gaze coming to rest on the gash at his thigh where she'd fashioned a tourniquet with two bar towels, there and around his ankle. She took a seat next to him to get a closer look at his injured side, pulling back the jacket a bit to find the bleeding had been minimal. She couldn't be sure about his thigh unless he took off his pants. Considering they'd only met a few hours ago, disrobing him didn't seem at all appropriate. But it was pretty darned tempting.

Slowly Fiona lowered her hand toward his fly then drew back. She couldn't do it, but she could take a peek at the cut by removing the towel, or at least until she had permission to take off his clothes. His pants, she corrected. Only his pants and only to administer some first aid.

As she gingerly gripped the knotted towel with her fingertips, his large hand clamped her wrist with the speed of a cobra, causing her to nearly jump out of her own skin or at the very least, off the sofa.

"What are you doing?" he asked without opening his eyes or releasing her wrist.

At least he wasn't comatose. "I'm trying to look at your wound. It needs to be cleaned up."

He raised his head and stared at her with those intense black eyes that made her want to squirm and sweat. "Do you have any antiseptic?"

"You're in luck. I have that and some bandages." And limited first aid knowledge thanks to her one-year stint as a volunteer member of Shadowvale, Idaho's, fire and rescue unit. Of course, she'd probably been on three whole calls during that time, none that had involved knife wounds. "I'll do what I can, but I'm not making any guarantees."

"I would appreciate any assistance you might give me." He gave her a look of concern. "Are you certain you're not injured?"

She was moved by the sincerity in his expression and his worry over her well-being. At least he had that much honor. "I promise, I'm fine. Nothing more than a scratch or two on my back."

"I'm relieved. I was afraid he might have cut you, as well."

"He tried, but I managed to keep him from doing it."

"Unfortunately, I cannot say the same for myself."

"But you saved me. I doubt we'd be here now if you hadn't come along."

"Had it not been for me, you would not have been put in that position."

Fiona didn't care to debate the workings of fate, so she said, "Uh, you might want to get comfortable. I mean, you might need to take off…" Why couldn't she just say it?

He lifted a dark brow. "My pants?"

"Yeah. So I can see it better. Your cut. The one on your thigh. And your boots and socks, of course."

"Should I remove my shirt, as well?" He sounded almost amused, but then she sounded like a blithering idiot.

Her traitorous gaze picked that moment to land on his fly. "Sure. Or I could just lift it up." She yanked her attention back to his face. "Your shirt, I mean."

For a minute she thought he might actually smile, but it didn't happen. "Anything else you require of me?"

"Can I have my hand back now?" she asked.

"Most certainly," he said as he released his grip, but not before he brushed the inside of her wrist with a fingertip. Or at least that's what she thought he'd done. Maybe she was just hovering in imagination overdrive.

Attacked by a sudden case of the chills, Fiona came to her feet and pulled the throw her grandmother had knitted from the back of the chair. It was lopsided and an interesting shade of lime green, but it should be big enough to provide some privacy for him should he decide to undress. Of course, there was the matter of all those little holes and loose threads, thanks to Lottie's incessant chewing. But it was the best she could do at the moment.

She tossed him the throw and told him, "You can cover up with this," then headed for the bathroom before she did something really stupid—like insist he remove his pants immediately so she could get a good look at all his assets. How desperate she must be to consider seducing an injured stranger. At least she'd be assured he wouldn't be able to move very fast.

Stop it, Fiona.

Once in the bathroom, she rummaged through the cabinet beneath the sink, knocking over several boxes and bottles before she found what she needed. After retrieving bandages, a damp rag and some antiseptic cream, she made her way back into the living room…and nearly dropped the supplies she clutched tightly to her chest.

Two bare, blatantly masculine legs covered in a fine layer of dark hair extended from their owner who had stretched out on his back lengthwise, his head resting on the sofa's arm and his eyes once again closed against the light. His bare chest, smooth as a baby's behind except for a slight shading of hair between his pecs, revealed valleys and planes of tanned muscular terrain. No shoes, no

socks, no denying the man was prime perfection without his clothes. But Fiona couldn't see anything vital due to the throw draped across his manly strategic area.

Manly strategic area? A few hours in his presence and she was thinking in sexual military-speak. She was also thinking that she would bet her dog that he had one notable missile beneath his briefs. Black briefs, she'd guess. Maybe she would have the opportunity to confirm that. And she needed to get her mind out of the sewer and back on the situation at hand—examining his wounds, not his essentials.

Fiona dropped to her knees beside the sofa and considered praying to Planet Mars for strength. Instead, she took the warm cloth and pressed it against his side. His eyes drifted open but she saw no indication she was hurting him.

She focused on the cut, willing her hand to hold steady. "This doesn't look too bad. I don't think it even needs a bandage." She could use one to tape her mouth closed before she moaned with approval.

"Only a scratch," he said, his voice grainy and seriously sensual. "I'm more concerned with my thigh and ankle."

Fiona was more concerned with what was above his thigh. Putting away those concerns for the time being, she scooted down and examined the gash. "This looks worse. It could probably use a few stitches."

"A bandage will suffice."

"If you say so," she said as she dabbed at the cut, then applied the ointment. After positioning several adhesive glow-in-the-dark, happy-face bandages lengthwise across his skin, she noticed they did little to close the edges of the wound. But boy, did he have one heck of a solid thigh. Lots of muscle and tone. She wondered if he did squats or if he just came by his physique naturally.

He scrutinized the bandages, looking displeased. "Very festive. And somewhat ridiculous."

"It's all I have, so you'll have to live with it."

"My ankle now," he said in a tone that sounded just a little too demanding.

She sent him an acid look. "I'm getting to that. Roll over."

He did, and Fiona nearly swallowed her razor-sharp tongue. Well, now she knew. He didn't have on black briefs or white ones. He didn't have on boxers, either. Nothing covered his sculpted buttocks aside from taut skin a shade paler than his hair-spattered thighs. His lack of underwear somewhat surprised her, not to mention what it did to unseen places on her person. She could analyze his reason for removing his drawers, or she could get back down to business and check out his ankle.

But who in their right mind wanted to look at a foot when faced with a fine, bare bottom? Come to think of it, she had no doubt his feet were probably as sexy as the rest of him.

Fiona tore her gaze away from his fanny and forced her attention on his injured ankle. When she flexed his foot forward, revealing the depth of the gash, she heard his sharp intake of breath, the only indication whatsoever he was in any pain.

This particular wound was much worse than the others. This cut couldn't be fixed right with a few flimsy bandages and cream. Since he had his face now buried in his folded arms, Fiona stared at his bare back that sported a lengthy horizontal scar. "You need to go to the hospital."

"It will heal."

"Dear Frank," she said in a syrupy-sweet voice. "The guy nearly cut your foot off. You'll be lucky if you're able to walk on it again. Someone needs to look at this."

He regarded her over one broad shoulder. "Do you know a doctor? Someone you can trust?"

Fiona didn't know any doctors aside from the one she'd seen annually since she'd been in Vegas. She doubted he made house calls, and even if he did, this was not a gynecological problem. But she did know Peg, her friend two doors down who worked as a nurse in a medical office. Peg might know what to do. It was worth a shot.

Fiona pushed up from the floor to stand. "I know a woman who can help."

He frowned. “A female doctor?”

“Do you have something against women, Frankie?”

He looked as if he’d just downed a dill pickle. “No, and I do not answer to Frankie.”

“Your name’s not Frank at all, is it?”

“No.”

“Then do you mind telling me your real name? I mean, you’re naked on my sofa so I think we should be on a first-name basis, don’t you?”

“You may call me Scorpio.”

Drat him. “Okay, you may call me Fiona. And if you call me Fee-Fee or Red, I will pour salt in your wounds, is that understood?”

A smile curved his full lips, bringing the dimple and perfect white teeth into view. “Are you always this aggressive?”

“Honey, you don’t know the half of it.” But he would.

With that, she left behind his sinful grin and beautiful butt to make the call to Peg in the kitchen. But she couldn’t escape the vision of him lying on her couch—or the one of him lying in her bed, naked, taking her on an all-night journey to cloud nine. As if that was going to happen.

Darin had believed knife wounds would serve as a deterrent to a man’s desire. He’d been wrong. When Fiona had touched his side, he’d experienced the first sexual stirrings. When she’d moved to his thigh, he’d grown as hard as his handgun. Of course, when she’d manipulated his injured foot, that had somewhat alleviated any thoughts of sex. But even now, even though his ankle still throbbed, he would gladly relieve his current predicament in her bed, deep inside her body, in order to keep his mind off his injuries, and his errors.

Working his way back into a sitting position, he left the ugly blanket draped across his lap to hide the effect of his questionable cravings, urges most likely resulting from adrenaline and the length of time since he’d been to bed with a woman. He had no cause to consider seduction when his mission was paramount. It would be best to allow Fiona’s medical friend to treat the wounds, then be on his way.

“She’s on her way,” Fiona said as she reentered the room and took the very pink chair across from him.

“Good. And she is a physician?”

“She’s a part-time nurse.”

“This is your idea of medical expertise?”

She folded her arms beneath her breasts. “Do you have any better ideas?”

Yes, he did, but they had nothing to do with tending his injuries and everything to do with learning each curve, each crevice of her enticing body with his hands and mouth. He moved his injured foot, sending a sharp pain up the back of his leg in order to limit his increasing erection, and to remind him of his goals. “I would appreciate any medical attention she can provide. And if you will retrieve my bag from the trunk of the car, I will have clothes available for my departure.”

She brought her legs onto the cushions and crossed them in front of her. “You really don’t think you’re going anywhere tonight, do you?”

“I must if I wish to continue my mission.”

“You’re going to go running through the back alleys of Vegas looking for this Birkenfeld who has—” she checked her watch “—about an hour’s head start? Do you plan to do that on your knees?”

He could certainly think of one thing he would like to do on his knees before her. “I have endured worse injury.” To his body. To his soul.

She sent him a skeptical look. “I’m sure you have. But even if you do manage to walk out of here, and I have my doubts you can tonight, don’t you think he’s probably long gone by now, maybe even left the state?”

“Not likely.”

"How do you know for sure?"

She asked too many questions, required too many answers, knew too much already. But Darin had possibly put her in peril by having her bring him here. The least he could do was reveal a few details. Perhaps then she would understand the consequences if Birkenfeld was not captured immediately. "Can I trust that whatever I tell you will go no further?"

"My lips are sealed and I'm all ears."

She was all sensual, seductive woman, Darin decided before forcing his thoughts back to the dire situation at hand. "Birkenfeld established a black-market adoption ring he operated using his obstetrics practice as a front. He stole newborns and sold them for large amounts of money. He also murdered a doctor in Texas in order to assume his identity so he could infiltrate a hospital, looking for a woman whose infant he had attempted to kidnap. Fortunately, he was stopped before he could harm her but later escaped authorities."

"He's a murderer and a baby thief?" Anger resonated in her tone, the same anger Darin had experienced each time he considered Birkenfeld's crimes.

"He needs money to pay off East Coast loan sharks and to feed his gambling habit," he continued. "We have an informant who claims that Birkenfeld has connections here that will enable him to obtain funds. This city also has places where he can easily hide." But Darin would ferret him out, and soon. Birkenfeld would not escape again.

She remained silent for a few moments as if needing time to analyze the information. "Look, even if that's true and he's still in town, you can't accomplish anything tonight with a bum ankle, especially if you're not sure where to look."

She had a valid point, though Darin was reluctant to admit it. "I suppose you're correct in terms of Birkenfeld going underground."

"Of course I am. You can stay here tonight then go after him again in the morning, if you're feeling up to the challenge."

When she streaked her tongue over her bottom lip, Darin recognized he was definitely up for one challenge unrelated to Birkenfeld.

A strange shuffling sound drew his attention from Fiona's mouth to the closed door adjacent to the living area. "What is that noise?"

She lifted one shoulder in a shrug. "It's just Lottie. She heard I had a naked man on the couch."

This was all Darin needed, involving another innocent party. "You should have informed me we are not alone."

"Oh, you can trust her. She won't say a word. I'd let her out but she'd just jump all over you and lick your face."

Hearing the word lick did nothing to help Darin's threatening state of arousal. "Does she always greet your guests in that manner?"

"Oh, yeah. She's kind of wild." Fiona nodded toward the shreds of paper strewn across the floor in the corner. "Today she got bored and tore up my textbook."

"Are you a student?"

"College student. I'm studying hotel management. And in case you haven't guessed, Lottie is my dog."

He was relieved over both revelations. Being alone in an apartment with a woman not of legal age would be another mistake in a long line of many. "I had assumed you were older."

Her smile faded. "Gee, thanks."

He was failing miserably at all his endeavors tonight, but at least he had kept her alive. "I meant older than your early twenties."

"I'm twenty-five, almost twenty-six. I started my career late. Better late than never, I guess."

"Are you from Las Vegas?"

"Actually, I'm from Idaho. I've been here for a few years. I work the bar at night to pay for my school and this dump."

Darin could not fathom being without adequate funds. He admired her conviction as much as he admired her body. However, he did find her stubborn nature somewhat disconcerting on one level. On another, he found it intriguing. That much passion might translate well in bed. He shifted and looked away.

"How about you?" she asked, again drawing his attention. "Have you always lived in Texas?"

"I have lived everywhere. I have no permanent home."

"Everyone has to start out somewhere, Scorpio," she said. "My guess is that you're not originally from the States."

"Your guess is correct. I was born in a small country near Oman, but I have not been back for some time."

"No wife or girlfriend waiting for you? Or are you the kind of guy who has a girl at every stop?"

"I have no ties." He wanted no ties.

"What about your parents?"

"Both dead."

She looked sympathetic. "I'm sorry. My dad died when I was young, but my mom's still alive. She taught me everything I know about bartending because that's how she supported us. She makes the best gin martini in the good old U. S. of A. Probably in the world. She also taught me how to fight when the situation called for it."

Her ability to fight had been apparent to Darin when she'd taken on Birkenfeld in the alley. At least he was somewhat assured she could handle herself during a dangerous situation—but only to a point. He would make certain she was not faced with that prospect again—all the more reason for him to make a quick exit from the apartment and her life.

A bark and a whine came from the room at the same time the knock sounded, saving Darin from having to answer questions of a personal nature. He had already revealed more to her than he should.

When he started to stand, she pointed a finger at him and said, "Don't get up. It's just Peg."

"Make certain before you open the door," Darin cautioned. "Birkenfeld could have followed us."

She frowned. "And I'm so sure he would be polite enough to knock before he kicked down the door."

When Fiona walked to the entry, Darin withdrew his gun from the discarded holster on the table and laid it on his lap. He, too, greatly doubted that Birkenfeld would knock, but he intended to be prepared for anything, although he had not been prepared for this woman named Fiona.

He questioned his wisdom in spending the night with her—a woman who had sparked his imagination and effectively lowered his guard, something that could prove costly if he did not practice more care. Yet the prospect of giving her one night of pleasure beyond the limits caused his body to stir to life once more. He was in no shape to chase after Birkenfeld tonight, but he wasn't totally incapacitated. Despite his caution and his wounds, he would most gladly make love to her in ways she would not soon forget.

But only if she agreed to the terms. No ties. No emotional entanglement. No promises. Whatever happened between them during those hours between dark and dawn would be solely up to her.

Tomorrow he would return to his solitary existence where nothing mattered beyond the mission. He had no need for a permanent relationship—even though at times he longed for that very thing.

Fiona peeked through the peephole to see fifty-something Peg standing on the threshold dressed in baggy red-heart-spattered white pajamas, her brown hair shooting from her scalp like frizzy fireworks. "It's her," she told Scorpio without turning around.

She opened the door only far enough so she could slip outside to join her neighbor on the porch, closing the door behind her. “That was fast.”

Peg held up a brown bag. “This is what I had on hand. A few butterfly closures, gauze wrap and tape and some antibiotic samples. I wasn’t about to go traipsing down to the clinic this time of night and risk setting off the alarm.”

Fiona took the bag and looked inside. “Thanks, Peg. You’re a jewel, as always.”

“So where is it?” Peg asked.

“Where is what?”

“Your cut?”

“I don’t have a cut.”

She nodded toward the bag clutched in Fiona’s hand. “Then who is that for?”

“A friend.”

Peg frowned. “A friend? Fiona, you better hope your ‘friend’ isn’t allergic to penicillin. I don’t want to be responsible if they go into anaphylactic shock. I could lose my job.”

“I’ll be sure to ask him.”

Peg’s wide smile farther inflated her dumpling cheeks. “Him? You got a man in there?”

Boy, Fiona had really done it now. “Yes, and don’t start making assumptions.”

Before Fiona could issue a protest, Peg stepped to one side on the porch and peered into the picture window through the break in the curtains. Her mouth dropped open and her eyes went wide. “You have a half-naked man with a gun on your couch!”

“He has his gun out?” Fiona moved behind Peg to confirm that fact.

Peg turned, alarm in her blue eyes. “Is he holding you hostage?”

In a manner of speaking, at least her libido. “Of course not. I would’ve called the police. In fact, he is the police, working undercover.” And she could imagine how well he would work under the covers. “That’s why he has the gun. He got into a fight at the bar and he doesn’t want to blow his cover by going to a hospital.”

Peg turned back to the window. “Impressive gun. Impressive guy. How well does his other pistol work?”

Fiona took Peg’s pudgy arm and pulled her back around and away from the window. “This is not what you think, Peg.” Unfortunately.

Peg smirked. “Are you sure the sex didn’t get a little wild and you clawed him?”

“In my dreams.”

“Well, if I were you, I’d make those dreams a reality. You’re already halfway there. You got him naked.”

“He got himself naked.”

Peg shrugged. “A minor point. Now all you have to do is get yourself naked and climb onboard the temptation train.”

“Don’t be obtuse, Peg. He’s beat-up. He’s not interested in sex.”

Peg released a metal-scraping laugh. “And don’t be stupid, Fiona. I don’t know one man who would let a little cut stop him from having sex.”

“It’s not a little cut, Peg. It’s three cuts, and one’s pretty bad. That’s why I need you to take a look, as long as you promise not to ask any questions.”

“I promise.”

“And no snide remarks.”

“I’ll try,” she said with less conviction.

Fiona opened the door and Peg followed close behind her. Scorpio was still sitting on the couch, the throw now wrapped around his waist. Fortunately, he’d put the gun back in its holster.

Fiona gestured at Peg and said, “Frank, this is my neighbor, Peggy Jones. She’s going to see what she can do about your cuts.”

Scorpio nodded at Peg. “I would be grateful for your aid.”

Peg elbowed Fiona aside and plopped her hefty frame next to Scorpio. “No problem. Now show me where it hurts.”

He lifted the throw, exposing his thigh to Peg’s scrutiny. “This isn’t going to do,” she said, and began ripping away the bandages. Fiona figured the poor guy’s thighs would be stripped of hair before Peg was done with him, yet Scorpio’s expression remained impassive. Obviously, he had a high pain threshold.

After Peg closed the wound with the sturdier strips she’d brought with her, she said, “Okay, that’s one down, two to go. Where are the others?”

“The cut on his side isn’t that bad,” Fiona said. “He has to turn over for you to see the worst one.” She immediately regretted her words when Peg sent her a devilish look. “It’s on his ankle.”

Peg stood. “Okay, Frank. Roll over and let me see.”

After Scorpio complied, again burying his face on his folded arms, Peg sat down on the sofa and rested his foot in her lap. The look she sent Fiona this time was void of humor and full of concern. “This is pretty nasty. I’m not sure the strips are going to hold it all that well. I wouldn’t be surprised if you’ve nicked a tendon.”

Scorpio glanced back at her. “Do what you can. I will manage.”

“You might manage to get one hell of an infection,” Peg said. “But you don’t need to walk on it for at least two days, if you live that long.”

Scorpio’s face showed no sign of fear. “I assure you I will live.”

“He’s had worse injuries,” Fiona added, apparent from the jagged scar on his back.

Peg sealed the slash the same way she had his thigh, then wrapped it tightly in gauze. After she was finished, she patted the back of his calf as if he were a child. “Okay, sugar. We’re all done here. Don’t blame me when you get gangrene.” She stood and stared down on him. “Are you allergic to penicillin?”

Scorpio resumed a sitting position, careful to keep the throw bound around his waist. “I have no allergies.”

“Good.” She dug in the bag and handed Fiona the box of samples. “Give him two of these a day for seven days. If he spikes a temp, get him to the hospital.”

“I’ll try.” Fiona figured she would probably have to call in the cavalry to convince Scorpio to cooperate. Besides, she doubted he’d be around for more than one day, much less seven.

“I am grateful for your assistance, Ms. Jones,” Scorpio said.

Peg sent him a sunny smile. “Oh, you’re welcome. My husband and I would love to have you and Fiona over for dinner.”

“He’s leaving soon,” Fiona added before Peg had the opportunity to suggest she help pick out the wedding cake. “Isn’t Walt waiting for you?”

Peg kept her gaze locked on Scorpio, laid a palm over her liberal chest and giggled like a schoolgirl. “Walt’s my husband.”

Scorpio’s smile seemed strained but sincere. “He is a very lucky man.”

Oh, brother, Fiona thought as she took Peg’s arm, turned her toward the door and guided her outside. She pulled the door closed when Peg kept trying to look inside. “Thanks bunches, neighbor. I owe you a lot for this.”

Peg patted Fiona’s cheek. “Yes, you do, sugar. And you owe yourself to get to know that one a whole lot better. He is one fine specimen.”

Fiona couldn’t agree more. “He’s a friend, Peg. Just a friend.”

“Sure, Fiona. And I’m too old to have sex.” Peg glanced in the direction of her apartment. “Which reminds me. I left Walt in bed and almost in the mood. If I hurry, maybe he won’t be in REM sleep yet. If he gets that far, I can forget about getting some action.”

Wonderful. Peg and Walt, and probably Benny Jack and his date, were all going to have sex, and Fiona was having a hard time getting Scorpio to smile at her. “By all means, go and rouse Walt.”

“Okey-dokey. And you go and rouse the hunk.”

Peg pivoted on her furry pink slippers and headed down the walkway while Fiona pushed back into the apartment, closing and locking the door behind her.

“I’ll be back in a minute.” She bypassed Scorpio and went into the kitchen to draw a glass of water so he could wash down the antibiotics. On afterthought, she retrieved a bottle of pills she’d had filled following a little incident in the bar where she’d intervened in a brawl between two regulars. Who would have thought that a seventy-year-old senior would have packed such a powerful right hook? Fiona’s jaw had learned that lesson the hard way.

The bottle was almost full since she’d only taken one of the painkillers that had basically rendered her brainless. Scorpio would need something for pain in order to sleep, whether he cared to admit it or not. She shook one pill from the bottle as directed, then took out one more. Considering his size, he probably needed two to garner any relief.

Fiona strode back into the living room and offered him the glass of water and the pills housed in her open palm. “Here. These will make you feel better.”

He eyed the capsules with disdain. “I do not see the necessity.”

“Well, I do. One will thwart infection, the other two are for pain.”

“I’m experiencing minimal discomfort. At least in the vicinity of my wounds.”

Obviously he considered her a pain in his posterior. Too bad. “These will ensure you won’t have any pain at all, at least tonight. You’ll sleep like a baby.”

He nailed her with his fathomless black eyes. “And if I refuse?”

Of all the obstinate men. Good thing he was cute, otherwise she’d toss him out. “Then I’ll do to you what I do with Lottie. Grab your jaws and shove the pills in the back of your mouth, then rub your throat until you swallow.”

“You are determined to persist in this matter?”

“Yes, I am. So be a good boy and take them.”

Releasing a frustrated sigh, he slid the pills from her palm, put them all in his mouth then swallowed the water. Fiona decided that even the bob of his Adam’s apple was sexy. If only she had the courage to proposition him, as Peg had suggested, but she didn’t. Not tonight. After all, he was wounded, and regardless of Peg’s assertions that injuries wouldn’t stop a man’s ability to perform, Fiona was hard-pressed to believe it. Besides, tomorrow he would probably be gone. She’d never had a one-night stand. No need to start now.

Oh, well. Easy come, easy go.

“Open your mouth,” she demanded. “I want to take a look and make sure you swallowed them.”

“Do you not trust me?”

“Not exactly, so let me see.”

With lightning speed, he clasped her wrists and pulled her forward between his parted legs. She planted her palms on his shoulders to keep from toppling into his lap, although that didn’t seem like a totally abhorrent prospect. “How will you know for certain by using only your eyes?” he said in a deep, persuasive voice. “I could be hiding them.”

“They would’ve dissolved by now.” Her voice sounded like a rusty wheel.

“Perhaps, or perhaps not.”

“Are you going to force me to pry your jaws open and put my hand in your mouth?”

His near-black eyes looked bedroom drowsy. “I would prefer you not put your hand in my mouth, but I would be open to other suggestions.”

“I’m not quite sure I’m following you here, Scorpio.”

He clasped the back of her head and pulled her closer, his lips only a fraction from hers. “You have other means to conduct a search.”

Was he giving her an open invitation to engage in a little tongue tango? That's what she thought he was doing, but she'd been wrong before. Better safe than really sorry. "You want me to do a little mouth-to-mouth expedition?"

"If you wish to know for certain, I see no other recourse."

Whew, boy. Peg had been right on. A near-death experience had done nothing to quell his manly urges. Or maybe it was the drugs. "Those pills are obviously doing their job if you want to kiss me."

"I have found your mouth quite fascinating from the moment we met. And since we are obviously stranded together for the evening, I propose we enjoy each other's company." His eyes closed, then slowly opened. "If you are willing."

Noting his words were somewhat slurred, she'd be darned if she'd do this with him when he was under the influence of painkillers. "We don't know each other."

"I know that you are a beautiful woman."

Beautiful? Now she knew he was high. "Come on, Scorpio. That's a stretch."

He slid his callused palms up and down her arms. "Are you calling me a liar?"

She was calling herself a fool for actually buying into this. "Believe me, I've heard many pickup lines from many men, enough to know that telling a woman she's beautiful is only a means to an end."

"I am not a man who uses false flattery to seduce a woman. True beauty cannot be hidden." His gaze tracked to her breasts then back to her eyes. "However, I will not force you into anything you do not wish to do."

His smile arrived, only halfway, but affected Fiona all the way. "Let's just say I do agree to do this. What's in for me?"

"You will have to find out."

She wanted to find out. Boy, did she want to. A little adventure. Just a little kiss.

Leaving common sense in the dust, she traced her tongue over the seam of his lips and without any coercion his mouth parted, giving her full advantage in this game of chance. Chances were meant to be taken, and she couldn't help believing that she was destined to kiss this man. And she did, with all the gusto of a woman who had done without this kind of intimacy for far too long.

But she didn't find any pills lurking on his tongue—a gentle, provocative tongue that stroked against hers until she thought she would collapse from a charisma overdose. She swayed forward and he brought her down on the sofa next to him in his strong arms.

Fiona didn't care that his evening whiskers abraded her chin. She didn't care that Lottie was in the next room, pitching a fit while her master was making out with a master kisser. A stranger no less. A stranger with one wicked tongue and one deliberate touch as he made light passes with his thumb over the side of her breast.

But soon he took his hand and his mouth away. Fiona opened her eyes to find him bowed forward, his elbows braced on his knees and his face in his palms.

"What did you give me?" he muttered.

She scooted to the edge of the cushion, her pulse pounding away like a jackhammer, this time from fear over his current condition. "Painkillers. They're supposed to be mild."

He fell back against the sofa. "Not mild enough. My head is spinning."

So was Fiona's, not only from his kiss but also from the fact that she'd drugged him into a stupor just when things were getting good. Worse, she might have really compromised his well-being.

She bolted from the sofa. "I need to call Peg."

He stretched out, and within seconds his eyes closed and his breathing grew steady.

Fiona grabbed the cordless phone from the end table and pounded out Peg's number. Before her neighbor could even say "Hello" she spewed the explanation about what she'd given Scorpio and how much, trying not to sound too panicked. Peg assured her that he wouldn't croak from taking two of that particular pill, but he would sleep soundly for several hours. In the meantime, she should watch him closely.

After Fiona hung up from Peg, she felt somewhat assured that she hadn't done Scorpio any real harm, and terribly disappointed that the evening had come to an abrupt halt. Probably just as well. She should have her head examined for actually kissing him, especially since she didn't even know him. But in some ways, that was the appeal. Doing something kind of risky, even if it was unwise. During her formative years, she'd had to be the logical one because of her mother's penchant for carefree living and questionable taste in men. Maybe it was more than time to live a little.

Lottie continued to whine and claw at the bedroom door. Worrying the noise might wake Scorpio, she coerced the dog from the bedroom with doggie bacon, intending to shut her in the kitchen with a bowl of water and a warning to use the newspaper. But before Fiona could stop her, Lottie bounded to the sofa and began bathing Scorpio's elbow with her black tongue, amazing since she wasn't all that fond of men. But this particular man wasn't like most men, and Lottie must have recognized that, too. Luckily, Scorpio didn't go for his gun, or even flinch for that matter. But that in itself concerned Fiona. What if he didn't wake up? What if she had inadvertently put him in a coma?

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

Текст предоставлен ООО «ЛитРес».

Прочитайте эту книгу целиком, купив полную легальную версию на ЛитРес.

Безопасно оплатить книгу можно банковской картой Visa, MasterCard, Maestro, со счета мобильного телефона, с платежного терминала, в салоне МТС или Связной, через PayPal, WebMoney, Яндекс.Деньги, QIWI Кошелек, бонусными картами или другим удобным Вам способом.