

Chapter One

The flawless, milk chocolate beauty of the young lady could only be regarded as exceedingly pleasing to the eye. Her long, coarse, pitch-black hair was pulled back severely into a ponytail which dangled loosely between her shoulder blades. The exotic slope of her almond-shaped, dark brown eyes gave the illusion of a perpetual smile. Although still in her teens, she had an exquisitely proportioned body and the promise of blossoming into a truly memorable woman. Her low, slightly raspy voice foretold a future of wonderfully intimate conversations.

In fact, Adrena Reynolds possessed every superficial physical element necessary to fulfill the yearnings of a healthy young woman; moreover, a pool of intelligence to be envied bubbled vibrantly beneath her stunning exterior.

Unfortunately, deeply-scarring emotional experiences had forced Adrena to grow up practically in seclusion. Happy thoughts of teenage girls the world over seldom, if ever, entered her mind. On the sofa of psychiatrist Dr. Vivian Matthews, Adrena had been revealing her life, real and imagined, since she was ten years old - state-assigned.

The years of discovery and growth shared by Adrena and Dr. Matthews had produced a relationship which surmounted all barriers to intimacy and, as a result, was more binding than one between a therapist and patient should be. Perhaps, if Adrena had not been Dr. Matthews' very first patient, it would have been different. If only there had been one other person in the world Adrena could have turned to – a mother, grandmother, or an aunt. If she had not been so young, so physically and emotionally savaged . . . so vulnerable and needy.

Or perhaps if the state had placed Adrena with a foster mother, as Dr. Matthews had recommended, and not with

couples. In their therapy sessions, Dr. Matthews had learned of Adrena's deep-seated distrust of couples. Adrena believed all women were born with minds of their own, but she also believed that the mind of a woman would be devoured by the man she loved, as payment for loving him. Only recently had Dr. Matthews been able to make any progress in altering Adrena's ideas of the dynamics of male-female relationships.

Over the past six years, Adrena had been placed with seven foster families. During that time, there had been two separate incidents in which Adrena set fire to the house while her foster parents slept, after one of them did or said something which she deemed unacceptable! Fortunately, there had been no loss of life. The first incident, which occurred when Adrena was eleven, was shared with Dr. Matthews, but the doctor had simply refused to believe that the beautiful, soft-spoken little girl could be capable of such a vicious act and insisted that the fire wasn't Adrena's fault – after all, with children, it was sometimes impossible to discern truth from imagination. On the second occasion, Adrena made it clear to Dr. Matthews that she was in fact the arsonist.

There were other tales Adrena did not share with Dr. Matthews. Nearing her twelfth birthday, Adrena was living in the foster home of Mr. and Mrs. Kevin Rose. There were five children in the Rose household – three natural children and two foster children. Adrena was the oldest and the only female.

Occasionally, Adrena's conspicuously developing body held the attention of Kevin Rose. Of course, he would never have admitted to wanting to take his attention any further than admiration – and, in fact, he never did. Kevin Rose was, for all intents and purposes, a good foster father. He spoke with such melodic clarity that he could help a child with phonetic spelling from way across the room. He could give math the kind of rhythmic spin that made it a wonder to the youthful mind.

Adrena saw how Mrs. Rose's angry eyes traveled constantly from her lusting husband to Adrena. However, Mrs. Rose never said a word to her husband; her only response was to send Adrena to the store or on some other unnecessary errand. Hadn't Adrena seen her own mother give her stepfather that same impotent look of defeated disgust on more than one occasion?

Taking matters into her own hands, Adrena began to give serious thought to stopping Mr. Rose from giving her that look only men seemed to deliver so well. As Adrena washed dishes after dinner one evening, the answer came to her while cleaning and preparing the coffeepot for Mr. Rose's morning cup. Adrena dabbed dishwashing liquid onto a paper towel, wiped the inside of the filter tray of the coffee machine, replaced it, and smiled.

No one questioned Adrena about Mr. Rose's heinous bout of nausea and diarrhea that forced him to leave work early the next day and spend the evening in bed. In the weeks that followed, no one questioned Adrena about Mr. Rose's sudden burst of manic energy after drinking Ritalin residue or about his deep, unrelenting Benadryl-induced evening naps. Dr. Matthews removed her from the Rose household only after Adrena began to complain about the other children.

The next foster family in Adrena's life only lasted two days. Mr. Jacobs made the mistake of innocently stroking Adrena's arm in greeting the first day. Then he allowed his hand to flow down her back the second day, and Adrena's reaction to his familiarity was immediate and violent. As Mrs. Jacobs frantically dialed for the police, Mr. Jacobs fought valiantly with Adrena, suffering deep scratches, dark bruises, and a vicious bite. He knew he had done something to provoke Adrena, but didn't know exactly what it was. He pressed no charges. Dr. Matthews retrieved Adrena from the police station and confined her patient in the medical wing of the orphanage for six months for further observation.

Adrena would waltz into Dr. Matthews' office for her scheduled visits and calmly admit to most of her despicable deeds. By observing Dr. Matthews' responses to certain revelations, Adrena developed enough of a survival instinct to know exactly which facts to filter out. Medications administered to unwitting foster parents were never discussed. Only fresh anger compelled Adrena to divulge the occasional indiscretion involving a human being; however, she told Dr. Matthews everything about the atrocities she committed against animals. Dr. Matthews would fervently admonish Adrena for acting out and threaten to institutionalize her if she couldn't rein in her more violent behavior. Then they would

discuss Adrena's unacceptable activities, how she felt about them afterward, and what appropriate responses could have been made.

No matter how horrendous Adrena's behavior, the remarkable little girl appealed to Dr. Matthews' unfulfilled maternal instincts. Taking on the extra responsibility of encouraging Adrena to reach up, rather than lash out at the world, was not originally an act of love for Dr. Matthews – it was simply humane. How anyone could see a child in desperate need, have a little time, intelligence, patience and a few extra dollars, and not share them was beyond the young doctor's comprehension. Dr. Matthews could tell no one exactly when the lines between doctor and patient became blurred . . . nor could she tell anyone the exact day she began to love Adrena as if she were her very own child.

Adrena's strikingly attractive features were all that were noticed by most people. Her behavior, in average situations, could only be viewed as normal, but in a stressful or intimate scenario one would begin to see Adrena's flaws. Dr. Matthews, however, didn't see them as flaws; she saw Adrena's reactions as perfectly appropriate under the circumstances. Adrena was striking back at a world that had, until the age of ten, violently abused and neglected her. As a matter of fact, Dr. Matthews saw Adrena's self-protective reactions as progress, for a child who once had lain passively catatonic, unless touched, for seven months and had not been able to speak for a year. Her entire existence had revolved around loneliness and fear. She feared everyone. And every painful step Adrena made from that state of being was not only a personal victory for her, but for Dr. Matthews, too . . . as were her missteps, regressions and failures.

After many long, gratifying hours of individual tutoring by Dr. Matthews and staff members, Adrena left the life of institutions and entered the world of real schools. Because Adrena would become sulky and belligerent if anyone other than Dr. Matthews entered school on her behalf, Dr. Matthews remained deeply involved in her school life. She always collected and signed all of Adrena's assignments, projects, and report cards. Dr. Matthews also doled out the appropriate feedback. She applauded wildly at every piano recital. So too was Dr. Matthews involved in every other aspect of Adrena's life. She wept and frantically paced the hospital corridor when

Adrena's appendix ruptured. She expressed disappointment when Adrena disobeyed her foster parents. It was also Dr. Matthews who tried desperately, through therapy, hypnosis and drugs, to give Adrena a glimpse of normalcy.

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Today, Dr. Matthews' precious, slightly imperfect, doll had taken a giant step backward. Adrena, with her uniquely impish but angelic smile, sat across from Dr. Matthews in the comfortably appointed office and shared her latest terroristic act. Life experiences from the ages of three to ten had robbed Adrena of any genuinely reliable emotions – hot or cold. Now, at sixteen, her richly seductive voice was a contradiction to her matter-of-fact manner of speaking.

"Doc, they've told me I can't come back to school for three days."

"Why, Adrena?"

In a breathless, but somehow unconcerned rush, Adrena said, "I really need to get back before then. I have a final on Friday. Can't you do something, Doc?"

"You haven't told me why."

With a barely perceptible tilt of her head, she said, "There was an incident in chemistry class today."

"Involving what and whom?"

"Involving a little liquid acid and Harvey."

Fighting an overwhelming parental urge to yell, Dr. Matthews asked, "Adrena, what happened to Harvey?"

Without emotion, Adrena began her story. "This morning, in homeroom, Harvey flicked his tongue at me. I ignored him, like you told me to, Doc. He sits behind me in English. Anyway, he kept leaning forward, panting like a dog, and making sickening, sucking sounds in my ear. I ignored him.

"During lunch, he came over to my table and stared. He picked up my ice cream cup, pulled the lid off, and licked the ice cream. Then, he closed it and put it back on my tray. I took a deep breath and ignored him. Just like you told me to.

"Everything was fine, until seventh period, Doc. That's chemistry. We were all working on erosion experiments. The teacher gave us each tiny vials of acid to do simulations.

"Harvey got up and headed in my direction. He walked right up to my seat, reached down, and that slimy bastard

touched my ass. He squeezed it, Doc. I closed my eyes, took a deep breath, and tried to ignore him. When Harvey came back, he did the same thing again. A couple of the kids laughed. I don't know why. Do you?"

Speaking therapeutically, Dr. Matthews said, "Some of the children were sexually excited. Others were nervous. Giggling was the only acceptable response they could exhibit and remain a part of the group. It's typical adolescent behavior, Adrena – as basic and old as time. They think of it as part of the mating ritual. As usual, they're wrong. What Harvey did to you, Adrena, was not acceptable behavior. Go on with your story. Did you continue ignoring him?"

Irritated by Dr. Matthews' detached reaction to the obvious sexual assault, Adrena responded sharply, "Doc, I tried. He wouldn't leave me alone. He kept touching me. I tried!"

"I believe you tried, Adrena. Just take a deep breath, calm down, and tell me what happened."

As always, Adrena followed the doctor's instructions to the letter. She took a deep breath, composed herself, and continued. "Breathing didn't work the second time Harvey touched me. I didn't blow up, Doc. Really. I raised my hand and asked Mrs. Marshall if I could refill my vial. She told me I could, if I didn't put too much in it and promised to be careful. I promised.

"I took the long route around the room, walked over to the cabinet and filled the vial to the top – carefully, the way Mrs. Marshall said. Without looking, I knew Harvey had spun completely around on his stool to watch me. He probably wiggled his legs in that disgusting way of his the entire time. If not exactly that, I know he did something because some of the kids were laughing and pointing in his direction. I didn't put the lid on the vial for my return trip.

"When I got close, Harvey grinned. I knew he intended to touch me again, Doc. I didn't try to duck him, either. Just like I expected, Harvey put his hand out and ran it over my ass again. Before he could squeeze, I turned and tipped the vial. That acid landed right where I wanted it to – all over the fly of his baggy jeans! I should have aimed higher though."

Adrena stopped her storytelling and smiled at the recollection before continuing, "I stood there just long enough to see the puff of smoke and the little holes flare out in

Harvey's pants. Then, I walked on. I was in my seat when Harvey started screaming like a little girl.

"Mrs. Marshall took Harvey's jeans and underwear off right there in class in front of everybody. He kept yelling, 'Adrena! Adrena!' I didn't care what he yelled. Mrs. Marshall didn't say a word to me until after the emergency medics took Harvey's bare ass off on a stretcher.

"I told Mrs. Marshall it was an accident. Harvey had pushed me. Two other people saw Harvey's hand. They told Mrs. Marshall it looked like he pushed me, too."

Mimicking Mrs. Marshall's words and mannerisms, Adrena said, "Adrena, you could have ruined Harvey's entire life with your carelessness. If you had simply followed instructions and put the lid on securely, the entire incident would have been avoided."

Resuming her own persona, Adrena continued, "She recommended a three-day suspension, Doc, and the principal agreed. Can't you talk to them, Doc? I really need to take that test. They may try to penalize my grade for taking it late."

"Adrena, I can't do that. What you did was wrong. You have to understand there are penalties."

"So what, if what I did was wrong? What he did was wrong. We were both wrong."

"That's right. Still, two wrongs didn't make it right, Adrena."

"What's so exciting about being right, Doc?"

"You'll be the one on the outside of the bars. Is that exciting enough for you?"

"His shit accelerated as the day went on, Doc! I ignored him! Was I supposed to just let him keep going? If he tore my clothes off, was I supposed to take a deep breath and continue to ignore him? When would it have been cool for me to pour the acid, Doc?"

"Actually, never, Adrena. Retribution should be handled by the proper authorities."

"I wasn't there for the vote, Doc."

Unable to avoid the smile creeping across her face, Dr. Matthews said, "I wasn't there either, but I abide by that decision. It's the law, Adrena. What you did wouldn't even be considered self-defense. It's called vigilantism. The authorities do not look kindly on it. Degrees of wrong are seldom weighed in courts of law. You were both wrong."

“His trip to the hospital made it right for me . . . for now. The best burns were on his thighs. Only a few drops landed where I wanted them to. If you talk to the principal, he’ll believe it was an accident, Doc.”

“Perhaps he would, Adrena. I won’t tell him that though. My participation would only mean I condone your behavior. I don’t. If losing a few points is the penalty, you’ll pay it. Didn’t you see any other alternative responses to Harvey’s misbehavior?”

Obviously agitated, Adrena barked, “No!”

“Why didn’t you tell Mrs. Marshall that Harvey was touching you?”

Adrena asked, her voice dripping with sarcasm, “Why didn’t Harvey tell Mrs. Marshall he was going to touch me? Besides, you should know by now that the only woman I depend on to save me, is me.”

“I don’t question the fact that you were provoked, Adrena, but I would be shirking my responsibility to you if I didn’t help you find alternative responses. Socially acceptable responses. Non-criminal behavior. Mrs. Marshall isn’t your mother, Adrena. Mrs. Marshall might actually have done something constructive.”

“Look, Doc, I know Mrs. Marshall’s not my mother. If she was Mildred, I wouldn’t have wasted a drop of acid on Harvey’s sorry ass. A big stick would have sent him off to the hospital, too. I like Mrs. Marshall. She’s a real nice lady. Sort of reminds me of you. I talk to you, but I don’t expect you to rescue me from the Harveys of the world, Doc. All women do is talk. It sounds nice, but men don’t understand talk. They understand fear, pain, death, acid. Real things.”

“Adrena, if you continue to act out, you’re going to destroy everything you’re working so hard to accomplish. Straight A’s and a scholarship all down the drain for one impulsive act.”

“I never act impulsively, Doc. I know exactly what I’m doing, when I do it.”

“There’s not one flicker of remorse for causing Harvey that much pain, Adrena?”

“Not a flicker, Doc. Since you’re not going to talk to the principal, let’s talk about something else.”

“Okay. Your mother will be here for your next visit. How do you feel about that?”

There was a slight tilt of Adrena's head and a pause before she responded, "I don't feel anything about that either, Doc. My mother's dead. She married good old Bartholomew. Remember?"

"Well, your mother's ghost will be here. She has something to tell you."

Adrena closed her elegant eyes and said dreamily, "Adrena, my dearest daughter, Mama's got a terminal illness. She'll be dying soon. Of course, there will be a great deal of suffering beforehand. Will you be there for me?"

There was the briefest of pauses before she said, "Oh Mama, I wouldn't miss your suffering for anything in the world. When does it start? I'd like to have refreshments on hand!"

Moaning audibly, Dr. Matthews said, "Adrena, that's cruel."

"Hey, Doc, we're talking about the woman who sat in the room and watched her husband tie up and rape her own ten-year-old daughter. The woman who knew he intended to sell me to every sick junkie in the city, all for the price of getting high. My suffering didn't pull one drop of motherly love from her, and her suffering won't get a drop from me either. The colder and deader the slut is, the better I'll like it. If you're really hoping to mend those fences, Doc, save it for somebody else. My mother and her husband are the owners of my final emotion."

"Is hate your final emotion, Adrena?"

"It's deeper than hate, Doc. Darker. Colder. More like hate's great, great, great-granddaddy."

"Adrena, hatred will consume you. Destroy you. There has to be some other emotion you're not acknowledging."

Adrena closed her eyes again. She slowly rocked her head from side to side, mimicking an internal audit. She opened her eyes and said frankly, "Nope. Can't find another emotion worth mentioning, Doc."

"How do you feel about me, Adrena?"

A faint smile touched Adrena's sensual lips before she said, "I like you better than any other human on this planet. I would die for you, Doc. Now, I bet you want to know why."

Dr. Matthews said, "Yes, I'd like to know why."

As if she were reading the ingredients on a cake box, Adrena said, "Because, somehow, I know you would die for

me. At first, I thought you were throwing me pity parties. Doing things for the poor, little, homeless, emotional idiot. I told you the very worst things I could think of. Most of it true, by the way. Very few lies. You would shrug and tell me I was on the wrong track. Then, you would cross your arms and tell me one or two other ways I should react in the future. When my session was over, you would give me a gift for some special occasion.

“Doc, I don’t know why you do, but you love me in spite of the fact that I can’t love you back. I know the state doesn’t pay you for all of the sessions I have. They never paid you for visiting my schools or the hospital. You never forget my birthday, Valentine’s Day, Easter, or Christmas. Every Halloween costume I’ve ever had came from you. Every special dress. Extra shoes. Money for class trips. Gym clothes. Piano lessons. You’re the molder of all the happiness I’ve known. Led me to the only peaceful corner in my mind. If there is one iota of good in me, and I sincerely hope there is for your sake, you are its mother. Just remember, I didn’t say there was.”

“Adrena, there is no greater love than laying down one’s life for another. You’re saying you love me.”

“No, I’m not. I’m stating facts.”

“Okay, young lady, your time’s up. No more crimes at school. You’re not too old, pretty, or intelligent for another confinement trip to the orphanage. Is there a note or anything I need to sign for school? A call I have to make?”

“No note. You have to be with me when I show up on Monday morning though. The principal wants to speak to you. Personally, I think he likes looking at you, Doc.”

“He’s not my type, Adrena. Okay. I’ll pick you up at seven-thirty. Continue your breathing and concentration in adverse situations. If anything else happens, call me before you retaliate. Take your medication. I don’t know what your mother has up her sleeve, so be prepared for your next session. If you need to talk before then, call me.”

As Dr. Matthews watched Adrena proudly prance in the direction of the elevators, her final goal for Adrena crystallized in her mind. More than anything in the world, she really wanted to hear Adrena say she loved someone. Dr.

Matthews would settle for her admitting she loved *something*, but Dr. Matthews' ultimate goal was to hear Adrena admit to loving Adrena *someone* . . . just once.

Chapter Two

There were only two people in the world Adrena would admit to having some regard for – Dr. Matthews and Mrs. Stanley, her foster mother. Thanks to the intervention of Dr. Matthews, Adrena had managed to live with the Stanleys for two years, which was a record for Adrena. Other couples had given up on her and called the authorities after one or two unpleasant events. The key to the present successful union was Mrs. Stanley. She always contacted Dr. Matthews in emergencies or if the couple had any concerns.

Dr. Matthews had visited with the Stanleys before Adrena moved into their home and given them a complete rundown of Adrena's habits and peculiarities, assuring them that as long as Adrena took her medication and did not feel threatened, she would be a most pleasant houseguest. As is commonly practiced when placing emotionally troubled children, Dr. Matthews had not gone into Adrena's mental or physical history or conveyed a diagnosis.

Upon Adrena's arrival at the Stanleys', she was the only foster child living with them, and Dr. Matthews suggested it stay that way until Adrena bonded with the couple. Being the only child in her biological family and not having attended school until she was ten had deprived Adrena of the socialization skills required to cope with living with other children. Wanting nothing more than to provide a good home for Adrena, the Stanleys followed Dr. Matthews' lead.

Mr. Stanley's normally quiet, non-aggressive behavior made him the perfect man to have in Adrena's company. He spent most of his time tending the plants in his hothouse. A year would pass before Adrena felt secure enough in his presence to ask questions. Mr. Stanley was so soft-spoken, Adrena strained to hear his answers. This, coupled with the

fact that Mr. Stanley seemed almost as disinterested in Adrena as she was in him, made him appear to be much less threatening to her than other men.

Adrena and Mr. Stanley had long talks about plants. He told her they were not only beautiful, but that many of them held power over life in their precious petals. Even with these conversations under his belt, Mr. Stanley never assumed the barriers were down. He never addressed Adrena directly. Mr. Stanley was sensitive enough to know Adrena had to initiate conversations or contact, or there would be problems.

It was Mrs. Stanley who interacted with Adrena most of the time. Knowing how fiercely protective all foster children are of their limited privacy, she seldom entered Adrena's space without permission. In Adrena's presence, Dr. Matthews had insisted Mrs. Stanley monitor all of Adrena's on-hand medications. This gesture from the only person in the world Adrena trusted made Mrs. Stanley's requests to inspect her room, or to check her supply of Zoloft, Ativan and Benadryl, less threatening. From time to time, Adrena even sat and talked with Mrs. Stanley in her bedroom. They discussed school, teenage grooming woes, and Adrena's refusal to make friends with girls or boys.

In time, Mrs. Stanley could tell when Adrena was overdue for medication. Familiar with Adrena's unusual sensitivity to tones of voice, Mrs. Stanley would calmly say, "Adrena, you're a little anxious. What time did you take your medicine? Should you take the Ativan?"

Unperturbed by this request, Adrena would take a quick glance at the clock and say, "Wow! You're right again. My whole life revolves around taking pills. I wish I didn't have to take them anymore."

"I know, honey. But, the Doctor thinks it's best for now, and she hasn't steered you wrong yet. Has she?"

A little sulkily, Adrena would respond, "No, ma'am."

"Well, go to it, girlie."

Adrena would leave and take her medication. Her levels were maintained and monitored in Dr. Matthews' office every week, but it didn't take much of a lapse to tilt those levels. Dr. Matthews had experimented with several antidepressants, before finding one which gave Adrena a functioning balance. Only once in the two years Adrena had been with the Stanleys, had she waited too long to take her medication. On that

occasion, Adrena did not move after Mrs. Stanley reminded her about taking it. Adrena's stillness and the light film of perspiration coating her top lip alarmed Mrs. Stanley, and she softly told Mr. Stanley to call Dr. Matthews. He left his wife and Adrena in the living room and made the call in the kitchen.

Adrena's behavior slowly swayed from still, quiet, and lightly perspiring, to a minor neck tick, to paranoid questions, and accusations. "I know what's going on. Where did he go? If that old bastard thinks he's going to touch me, he just might die doing it! It won't happen to me twice, old lady!"

Remaining calm, Mrs. Stanley tried to reassure her. "He's going to call Dr. Matthews, Adrena. You didn't take your medicine. Something is going wrong with you. What do you think Mr. Stanley is going to do to you? He wouldn't ever hurt you, honey. You know that."

Mr. Stanley returned and stood silently in the doorway, poised to pounce if Adrena made a threatening move on his wife or on herself. The moment Mrs. Stanley moved, Adrena's fears swelled, and she yelled them all at the Stanleys. "You thought I didn't know what the two of you were up to, didn't you?! You thought I would fall asleep! Then you would sit there knitting, while he did whatever he felt like doing! Didn't you?! Or, did you plan to join him in some little sex game you two cooked up just for me?! You don't fool me, you old biddy! Men who don't talk do the same shit as the ones who do! I know that old bastard's running this show! You're just his stupid mouthpiece to get to me! I'm telling you now, I'll kill you both before I let anybody do anything else to me!"

Getting her first glimpse into the true depths of the damage that had been done to Adrena made tears sting Mrs. Stanley's eyes. Gritting her teeth and rallying her emotions quickly, Mrs. Stanley said adamantly, "Adrena, no one will ever hurt you under this roof. Not me. Not Mr. Stanley. Nobody. If they do, I'll help you kill them."

Unable to process this response amid her rapidly scattering thoughts, Adrena stopped momentarily. Fleeting, Adrena wanted to grab what Mrs. Stanley said, hold on and hide behind it, but before she could, thoughts of past betrayals quickly hustled those thoughts out of her range of

consciousness. The venomous ranting continued and escalated.

“Touch me! Come on you old, dried-up bastard, touch me! Which part would you like to touch first, you sorry old fuck?! If you think that old babe can help you hold me, think again! What I won’t break hasn’t been named yet!”

A half-hour elapsed before Dr. Matthews arrived. Adrena was well on her way to being out of control, and the web of anxiety and paranoia made giving Adrena a shot almost impossible for three people. After all, to do it, she had to be touched.

Dr. Matthews had held Adrena’s drugged, sweat-drenched body in her arms, rocked her and whispered reassurances. The moment the fight left Adrena’s body, the doctor insisted she get the antidepressant medication down her throat. If Adrena fell asleep without taking the antidepressant, a devastating depression would loom larger than life for her when she woke. That would trigger another violent episode. If that happened, a trip to Huntingdon Psychiatric Center might be required to stabilize her, and Dr. Matthews would do anything to prevent another stay at Huntingdon for Adrena. Convincing an adult patient that commission to a psychiatric facility didn’t mean they were insane was an arduous task. Convincing a teenager was much closer to impossible.

Like most patients tethered to medications, Adrena wanted desperately not to have to take them. Her mother’s dependency on street drugs had motivated Adrena’s need to be free of them. She refused to accept the fact that her sanity was being held hostage by drugs, and she found herself experimenting with longer and longer lapses between doses. The withdrawal episode, however, had frightened Adrena. She gained a respect and fear for medicine when, for the first time, she experienced the true effects of addiction . . . and the Stanleys came to realize that Adrena’s self-control could never be taken for granted.

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After relating the Harvey incident to Dr. Matthews, Adrena returned home to the Stanleys. Although Adrena only mumbled a greeting, the Stanleys found nothing out of the

ordinary. They were used to her occasional mood swings and didn't notice the steam seeping around the rim of Adrena's normally tightly sealed self-control. However, the Stanleys did notice when Adrena slammed her bedroom door. That was something new and demanded investigating.

Mrs. Stanley followed Adrena upstairs to see if everything was all right. She knocked on Adrena's door. There was no response. Mrs. Stanley knocked again.

With a tinge of anger, Adrena responded, "Yes?"

"Are you okay, honey?"

"I'm fine. Just got a headache. I'm going to take an aspirin and lie down."

"May I come in for a minute?"

"For what? I told you I have a headache. Why do you want to come in?"

Not bothering to lie, Mrs. Stanley said, "I'd like to come in to take a look at you, for my own peace of mind. As grown as you thing you are, you're still a child, Adrena. You may be overlooking something."

Taking a moment to compose herself, Adrena wiped the perspiration from her upper lip and said, "Okay."

An obviously concerned Mrs. Stanley rushed into the bedroom. She held Adrena's face in her hand and looked into the beautiful brown eyes. She ran her hand over Adrena's brow and neck, and asked anxiously, "Has your stomach been upset or something?"

Submitting to Mrs. Stanley's ministrations because she knew the lady meant well, Adrena answered, "No. My stomach is fine, Mrs. Stanley. I have a headache. You fuss over me like I'm a baby."

"Well, that's my prerogative, Miss Adrena. Is your medicine giving you a headache again? Did you tell Dr. Matthews about it when you were there?"

In disgust, Adrena spat, "It's not my medication. It's my mother."

This puzzled Mrs. Stanley. Adrena had never mentioned her mother before. "What about your mother?"

"She's coming to see me next week."

"What are you talking about, child? She's not coming here. I don't care what Social Services says – if you don't want to see her, you don't have to. Nobody told me about it. How did you find out?"

“She’s not coming here, Mrs. Stanley. She’s coming to Dr. Matthews’ office.”

“Oh . . . well, if Dr. Matthews agrees with it, Adrena, maybe it’s not such a bad idea. The doctor always has your best interest at heart. There’s no telling where you would be, or what condition you would be in, if not for Dr. Matthews. She will be there with you, won’t she?”

Adrena answered with growing agitation, “Yes, Ma’am. Neither one of us knows what she wants, though. I haven’t seen her in six years. She called me a few times, but I refused to talk to her. I have nothing to say to the woman, and I don’t want to hear her voice.”

“Okay, Adrena. You calm yourself down now. We’ll see you through this some way. The doctor will be there with you in the office, and I’ll be here when you get home. Nothing’s changing. Don’t stress yourself. Come down and eat your dinner. Take your regular medicine and that Ativan. Get some sleep and face each day as it comes.”

A wan smile touched Adrena’s lips. She said, “Okay, Mrs. Stanley. I’ll be down in a few minutes. I promise.”

Mrs. Stanley left Adrena sitting on the side of her bed. Adrena’s hatred held much more venom than Mrs. Stanley could ever imagine. There were so many unusual scars on the child. Most were obviously surgical. Still, there were some with no explanations. Mrs. Stanley’s mind would never be able to sink low enough to gather all of the pieces of Adrena’s puzzle on her own. The best she could hope was that Adrena would share it with her someday.

Adrena sat quietly on her bed. The sweat film returned to her top lip. Familiar pictures and fragrances filled Adrena’s senses. Her mother’s dirty scarf, with the thick, greasy knot in the back and huge, suffocating clouds of cigarette smoke. The stench of unclean bodies, blatant sex, and filth. Blackened fingers, empty liquor and soda bottles, and an array of drug wrappers on the floor. Roaches scampering. A McDonald’s bag thrown here and there.

The parade of filthy, disgusting men coming in. Her mother performing one sickening sexual act after another with them. The men either paid or argued over the price with her stepfather – no one caring that there was a five-year-old crouched in the corner of the room.

One memorable night from the past began to unfold before Adrena's mind's eye. She saw herself as a five-year-old, sitting in the middle of the dismal, one-room living space she shared with her mother, stepfather, and two other women to whom Adrena could never assign a role. Adrena heard the approach of people arguing. Recognizing her stepfather's voice in the crowd, she knew they would be coming to their room.

Grabbing her imaginary doll, Adrena shuffled herself toward a corner. As usual, Adrena's tiny frame wasn't buried deep enough into the corner to satisfy her stepfather, Bart. He rushed over and gave the little girl a hard kick with his big, ragged, sneakered foot. To make sure she wouldn't turn around anytime soon, Bart gave her several extra kicks. This was the only way Bart ever touched Adrena, and he never spoke to the child. All communications passed from Bart to her mother, Mildred, to Adrena. Food dwindled down the same way.

With Adrena out of the way, Bart turned to Mildred and grunted, "Do it now."

Sounding drunk, Mildred slurred her response, "Why can't one of them do it?"

"You do it! You do it now! If I have to tell you one more time, your ass will be out! Out of everything! Got it?!"

A strange man's voice said, "C'mon, baby. I ain't dat bad. We can work this. C'mon. This is jus' a li'l freak show."

One of the women with no names said, "Yeah, jump to it, ho'. We ain't got all night."

There was a loud slap, a yelp, and scuffling. Frightened to look and worried someone would fall on her, Adrena dared to take a peek. Bart held Mildred by the neck and forced her down on her knees in front of one of the four men in the room. Adrena heard the man unzip his pants. Saw him fumble, retrieve his goods and present them to Mildred's tightly clenched lips. Bart squeezed Mildred's neck until she opened her mouth. Hoping her mother wouldn't have to do that again and not wanting to see it, Adrena closed her eyes.

Every time Adrena peeked, the vulgarity of the acts had accelerated. At the height of the atrocities, her mother and one of the other women sexually serviced all four men at one time. The extra woman tried to persuade Bart to do something with

her. He turned her down for a while; then he let her drop down on her knees for him, too.

Finished with the two men she had been with, Mildred saw what Bart and the woman were doing. Clad in nothing but a tee shirt, Mildred ran over and dragged the woman's face from Bart's crotch. Mildred drew her fist back and slammed it into the woman's face so hard a tooth hit Adrena in the corner. Bart's laughter mingled with that of the other men in the room. The two near-naked women tussled viciously. When Bart tired of the entertainment, he moved to separate them and said, "Now, you two kiss and make up."

One of the men said in an excited rush, "Hell, yeah! Make 'em kiss and make up, Bart, man! Yeah!" He lit a joint and leaned on the wall.

The glitter of the knife Mildred produced from thin air changed the tone of excitement. Bart gave her his lethal stare and attempted to take the knife from Mildred's hand. She sliced his arm open from the elbow down to his wrist. As soon as she realized she had cut her beloved Bart, and seeing her high going down the drain, Mildred started babbling an apology, "Baby, I'm sorry. You know I can't stand to see you with no other woman. You know I love you, baby. Don't be mad at me. They'll give you some good shit for the pain when you go to the hospital, baby. Shit you like. C'mon, I'll go with you."

Bart grabbed his arm and spun in a circle. Blood dripped and flew around the room. It ran down Mildred's dirty tee shirt when Bart clamped his arm around her neck. Bart squeezed Mildred's neck in the fold of his wounded arm, until her eyes bulged and saliva ran from her mouth and mixed with his blood. He let Mildred's nearly nude body slide down to the floor and kicked her toward Adrena's corner. Bart kicked Mildred over and over, harder and harder, until she was in the corner with Adrena.

Out of spite for what Mildred had done to him, Bart wrapped a filthy shirt around his bleeding arm, sat on the bed, popped a few bright orange capsules into his mouth, lit a joint, and opened a bottle of Jack Daniels. He glared hatefully at the huddled, whimpering mother and daughter in the corner and took a big gulp.

Needing to join in on the alcohol and drug festivities, Mildred absentmindedly stroked Adrena's face with her

blood-soaked hand and begged for Bart's forgiveness. The texture and smell of the blood, semen, marijuana, and alcohol made Adrena retch. If she had eaten anything at all that day, it would have been splattered all over herself and Mildred, too. Adrena tried to wiggle away from her mother's rancid and bloody touch. Everything about the woman revolted the little girl.

Mildred continued to whine and beg until Bart lay down on the bed and the same woman climbed up and lay on top of him. Mildred crawled around the room, shoving drug-dozing people out of her way, as she searched for her knife. With that knife in her hand, Mildred dragged the woman from the bed and sliced her face up one side and down the other. In his drugged stupor, the injured Bart was no match for an angry knife-wielding Mildred, and the battle raged in slow motion.

On her bed in her pretty room at the Stanley's, Adrena could see and hear Bart and Mildred screaming at each other over women, drugs, alcohol, and money. She cringed at the loud, cracking sound of Bart's hand slapping her mother, the countless thuds of Mildred hitting walls, radiators and floors. And after Mildred stabbed Bart, his loud vulgar curses.

Their voices camouflaged Mrs. Stanley's calls. Memories of being cold, hungry, frightened, kicked and terrorized completely enveloped Adrena. Sweat poured down her face. Trembling, Adrena clenched the bedspread in her fists.

Moments later, Adrena didn't see Mrs. Stanley standing in her doorway. She flinched violently when Mrs. Stanley pressed the Ativan on her. Mindlessly, she swallowed the tiny pill without water.

Mrs. Stanley's prayers somehow blended into the pictures and sounds that flipped from her mother and Bart, to Harvey, to Dr. Matthews. Adrena couldn't distinguish who had done what to her. Before drifting off, Adrena only had one clear thought. "They will all pay."

Chapter Three

At five-thirty, Dr. Vivian Matthews walked out of the perfectly air-conditioned, hermetically sealed Chambers Building and into the blinding sunlight. Vivian's soft, buttered-brown complexion glowed, as her body quickly thawed in the heat of the day. She leisurely strolled the one block to the garage with her shoulder-length, sleekly waved black hair and full hips swinging in unison. There was a healthy bounce to her ample bosom. Vivian's long, shapely legs afforded her a generous stride; she'd been told they made her outfits sing. No one was fooled by the tailored, eggplant purple suit. It only appeared professional while Vivian sat behind her desk. The shortness of her skirt hinted heavily of the playful and sensuous side of the good doctor.

Male heads swiveled in appreciation of the drop-dead gorgeous woman passing. This always alternately repulsed and reassured Vivian . . . and it kept good old Howard Shaw, the great love of her life, on his toes, too.

At the garage, Vivian waved to the attendant and climbed into her white Maxima. She sang along with the radio as she pulled out of the garage and into traffic. Howard would be waiting for her at the restaurant. They had designated Wednesday evenings as their night out, and it always began with dinner at the Board Room. After dinner, activities varied – movies, theatre, shows, dancing. The night always drifted off with them entwined in each other's arms. Vivian loved the way Howard asked, "Flowers or stripes?" – his way of determining whether they would be sleeping in his bed or hers.

Howard's business partner, Clayton, spotted Vivian entering the lounge before Howard did and greeted Vivian with a hug and kiss that drove his watchful partner nuts. Clayton loved irritating Howard, but, although handsome and charming, Clayton was not Vivian's type at all. Any commitment, outside the stock market, frightened him to death. He'd ask half-jokingly, on many occasions, "Why can't I commit, Dr. Viv? Didn't my mother wean me properly?"

Vivian's response would always be, "She weaned you just fine, Clayton. She forgot to worm you though. You'll commit when you run up on the right hydrant. Don't worry."

Together, Howard and Clayton formed the brokerage firm of Williams and Shaw. They belonged together. Clayton was flamboyant, suave and free-flowing. Howard was conservative, calm, and borderline obsessive. Their clients usually loved one, hated the other, and after reading the growing bottom line of their investment statements, highly respected both.

Howard approached with a smile for Vivian. After turning and giving Clayton a scowl, he wrapped his arms around Vivian, kissed her leisurely, and said, "Hi, sweetheart. Is this man bothering you?"

Shaking her head in playful, coquettish innocence, Vivian responded, "No, dear. You know I'm not into tall, dark and handsome."

With a mock frown, Howard said, "I'm afraid to ask, but I have to know. Exactly what kind are you into?"

Still securely wrapped in his arms, Vivian replied slowly, "Tall, dark, handsome, intelligent, sensitive, and sexy with substance."

Howard looked Clayton in the eye, shrugged, and said, "I knew she liked me better. I wasn't worried."

Clayton smirked and said, "Yeah, sure, man. You're secure. That's why you always swell up and get that murderous glow going in your eyes when somebody looks at her."

Howard said calmly, "Say what you will, she's mine. Are you joining us for dinner?"

"No, Howard. I'm going hydrant hunting tonight. And, when I find it . . ."

They all said together, “After you sniff it a few times, you’re gonna piss on it and move on.”

The threesome howled with laughter. It was probably the first time that day any of them had felt free enough to truly express themselves. When the laughter died down, Howard and Vivian excused themselves. Their table was ready, so they bypassed the bar and ordered drinks there.

As Vivian sipped her Manhattan, Howard silently played with her fingers on the table. He stroked, caressed, and flicked them one at a time, always beginning with the thumb and working his way to Vivian’s little finger. He loosely interlocked his fingers with hers for a few moments and began again. There were times when Howard studied Vivian’s hair, ears, knees, nipples, or navel with that same intensity. A year ago, it bothered her. When asked why he was studying one of her body parts with such rapt intensity, Howard would always respond sweetly, “Because it’s yours, Viv.”

To break the spell, Vivian asked, “How was your day, Howard?”

After a quick bite of his bottom lip, he said, “Fine. A little too quiet. I could actually hear Clayton’s business and personal conversations most of the day. Does he talk in his sleep, Viv?”

“How would I know? I’ve never slept with him, Howard.”

“Am I confusing psychiatry with mysticism again?”

“That, or you’re implying I’ve slept with your partner.”

“Well, I know that hasn’t happened. Clayton wouldn’t be able to wait to get to the office to share that with me. He’d stop at a phone booth in the middle of the night, call me at home, and gloat over every detail.”

Laughing at his obviously feigned irritation, Vivian asked, “Howard, if Clayton upsets you so, why did you go into business with him?”

“He reminds me of my oldest brother. They get some kind of sick kick out of precariously holding me by my thumbs and dangling me over a cliff. They both excite, frighten, and irritate the shit out of me. Still, I love and admire them. Go figure, Doc. That’s enough about that numbnut. How was your day?”

From long-established habit, Vivian referred to her patients as “they” or by their diagnosis. No names, ages, or genders. Vivian couldn’t risk anyone ever being able to say she broke the doctor-patient oath of confidentiality. Keeping the secrets of the clinically depressed could be depressing, but to do otherwise was perhaps the most common way that psychiatrists lost their practices and even their licenses. If they discussed a patient’s problems with foster parents or school officials, it could create an unnecessarily prejudicial environment for the patient. Even to law enforcement, psychiatrists couldn’t reveal information given them by a patient. In fact, keeping the secrets of a psychopath had driven many wiser than Vivian to suicide.

“My day was good, Howard. Only one rattled my cage a little. They suffer from post-traumatic stress disorder and exhibit socio and psychopathic behaviors. Seems like old demons may be gearing up. If I don’t handle it properly, someone could really get hurt.”

“Can’t you just crank up their medication?”

“You have to be very careful when medicating a non-institutionalized, potential psychopath, sweetheart. If you short circuit the don’t do it switch, there will be corpses everywhere.”

“Has this person ever actually killed anyone, Viv?”

“Not that I know of, but they claim to have killed some pets. I can only guess if they’re telling me the truth, but the way they described how they did it makes me think it’s true. They are such a highly intelligent, devious person – the type that can go undetected for an entire lifetime.”

“How did they do it?”

Lost in thought, Vivian didn’t know what Howard was asking. She gave him a puzzled frown.

“How does this person kill pets, Viv?”

“Oh. Lures them away from home, preferably to a wooden area – then removes the tags, poisons them, watches them die, buries the tags, goes home and reports an injured animal at the location to the SPCA. They hang up before anyone has a chance to ask any questions. The SPCA comes out and finds the poor thing dead, with no identification. They take it in and

incinerate it. At best, they'll only take a guess at what killed the dog. The owner thinks Buffy ran away from home. If any questions are asked, no one has any answers anyway."

"Viv, what about the voice of the caller? Wouldn't that give them a clue?"

"Nothing concrete. Voice interpretation varies from person to person. How many times have you misinterpreted a voice? Thought the person was this or that. Thought their age to be this or that. Black or white. Saw them and been completely wrong?"

With a sniff of indignation, Howard said, "I usually get the sex right."

"Have you ever gotten it wrong?"

"Only once, Viv. She sure did sound like a guy though. On the phone and in person."

"Can't convict on a sound-like, Howard. The person who called could have been a concerned citizen. Innocent people call the police every day to report things they don't want to get involved in."

Howard continued to question Vivian, trying in vain to figure out some way that the authorities could find out about the patient Vivian was treating without her revealing it herself.

"Even if you connected all the dots, Howard, all you'd have is a line – you wouldn't have any proof." Vivian told him.

Howard asked, "Has this person done this more than once?"

"Yes, dear. Several times. Just never in or near the same place. Poisoned one right in the owner's yard. Sat in theirs and watched the thing twitch until it was dead, too. No one ever suspected this person actually did anything to the dog. It just somehow got into something that killed it."

Howard was really disturbed by the callousness of Vivian's patient and said, "You should report them to the authorities yourself, Vivian."

"I can't do that for obvious reasons, Howard. You ever heard of doctor-patient confidentiality? I wouldn't have a patient if I snitched on one of them. Nor would I have a license to practice."

"I don't like this person, Vivian. Do you have to treat them?"

"Don't be silly. Of course, I have to treat them."

"Please be careful then."

"Oh, I will. I'm the only one who knows what this person is truly capable of doing."

Howard gave Vivian one last look of concern and changed the subject. "What are we doing after dinner tonight?"

Feeling tension of the day in her shoulders, Vivian groaned miserably and said, "If you don't have any definite plans in mind, I'd like you to take me home, give me a massage, and hold me for the rest of the night."

With a grimace, Howard asked, "Just hold you?"

Vivian purred, "Oh, you know how grateful I can be when you hold me right, Howard. Are you saying you're not up to the challenge?"

"You're in luck. I happened to bring both of my arms with me today, sweetheart. All you have to tell me now is stripes or flowers."

Stripes meant Howard's house. Flowers meant Vivian's. Really wanting to unwind, Vivian said, "Flowers."

"Did you remember to pick my shirts up from the laundry? If not, I'll have to stop first."

"I remembered."

"When a woman remembers your shirts, you have to give her flowers."

"Thank you. Can you call the waiter now? I'm starving."

While Howard ordered dinner, Vivian thought about Adrena. If Howard had known how much that young lady really meant to Vivian, he would have fallen flat on the restaurant floor. If he knew Vivian was glad they hadn't been able to link Adrena to any of those dogs, he would have insisted she see a shrink, too.

And Vivian couldn't imagine how Howard would handle what Adrena had done to poor Harvey. He would probably want to know why Vivian hadn't committed her. Men are particularly sensitive to those types of injuries. They all draw up, wince, and groan at the thought of a groin injury. Collective penis consciousness.

Harvey had stirred Adrena's pain pool. He was lucky that was all she had done to him. The fact that Adrena had said, "For now," haunted Vivian. Adrena seldom made empty remarks. That one meant she fully intended to do something else to Harvey. If Vivian could get into her head, maybe Adrena would tell her what it was. If not, Vivian would have to persuade Adrena to temper her anger toward Harvey. Sometimes that worked. Sometimes not. This is where Vivian wished there were a pill for what ailed Adrena.

Howard and Vivian ate dinner and talked about insignificant things. Howard told her he had tickets for the Jazz Festival. Vivian told him she wanted to go to the art show on Saturday. Finally, they talked a little about their families and then headed for home.

Snow greeted Howard and Vivian at the front door. She was the first gift Howard had ever given Vivian. A pure white Persian cat. Not being an animal lover, Vivian had put a bright red collar with a bow and bell on Snow. According to Vivian, Snow would scare the crap out of her otherwise.

Snow only tolerated Vivian, but she was truly fond of Howard. In fact, Vivian had to fight Snow for her spot on the sofa sometimes. Snow would leap up and curl up on Howard's lap the moment he sat down, look up at Vivian and roll her exquisite green eyes. Vivian dismissed Snow and drew the line at her bedroom door.

Howard and Snow headed for the kitchen. He cuddled, kissed, and fed her. She purred loudly and lapped it all up. Sort of the way Vivian did when Howard cuddled, kissed, and fed her. Vivian understood Snow perfectly. She just didn't like her.

Vivian played her messages and thanked God there was nothing pressing. A few friends and an invitation to dinner on Sunday from Howard's sister, Talia. Of course, they would go. Vivian got along well with all of Howard's siblings, except his oldest sister, Lula. Lula was suspicious of every woman in any of her brother's lives. She thought they were all gold diggers. Lula was known to go to great lengths to get rid of them, too. So far, she'd failed with Vivian.

Howard yelled from the kitchen, "You want me to bring you anything while I'm in here, Viv?"

"No. Are you going to play with that cat all night?"

"Is that jealousy I hear in your voice?"

"Could be."

"She's a cat, Vivian."

"Does she have our undivided attention, Howard?"

"Momentarily."

"Well, then she's competition. Jealousy is not necessarily a species-specific phenomenon."

"What?!"

"Leave the damn cat alone and get in here. That's what."

With jacket in hand and a devilish smile on his deep brown, incredibly handsome face, Howard sauntered into the living room. Six-feet-tall, lean, and muscular, Howard moved with smooth, feline precision. His white shirt with crisply-starched collar and cuffs provided the perfect accent to his black suit pants, full-cut charcoal vest, and red tie. He had a straight, broad nose and gleaming, white teeth, with close-cut hair, black and wavy. His heavily lidded bedroom eyes and magnificent smile had broken more female hearts than he would ever know. Now Howard stood in front of Vivian, slid his arms around her waist, and gave her a generous, warm kiss. Vivian purred deep in her throat to show her appreciation. Howard giggled.

Barely taking his lips away from Vivian's, Howard announced, "I'm all yours now."

Sighing and pouting, Vivian said, "It's about time."

There were a series of small kisses. Then, one long, hot, wet and sensuous one. Tongues danced from one mouth to the other. Their bodies strained to be closer. Hands roamed, stroking, and caressing. Thoughts fell away. Sensations ran rampant.

Suddenly, something foreign, ever so softly, brushed Vivian's ankle. She shuddered and jumped away from Howard. It was Snow. Vivian had to get a bigger bell. She hadn't heard one ting that time.

Thinking it very funny, Howard chuckled and said, "It's just the cat, sweetheart. Why are you so nervous?"

Perturbed with Howard and the cat now, Vivian snapped, "I'm not normally nervous. It's just when varmints creep up and barely touch me, that I get wound up."

Still grinning, Howard said, "Snow only wants to be loved too, Vivian."

"Tell her to stay away from my leg! Go find her own man or cat! She gives me the willies when she does that!"

Separating Vivian and Snow, Howard took Vivian by the hand and led the way upstairs to her bedroom. Of course, Snow followed. Seeing her, Howard gently picked the cat up, put her down outside the bedroom door, and hurriedly shut it. Snow started meowing immediately. In a matter of moments she sounded like a baby in distress. The frown on Vivian's face deepened. In defeat, Howard threw up his hands, flopped down on the bed, and reached for the remote control. Vivian left him there; she had to use the bathroom.

Vivian undressed, freshened up, and put on a nightgown while she was in there. When she came out, Vivian found Howard leaning on one elbow, flicking stations, as only a man would bother doing.

She slid down next to him and said, "Howard, choose a station and leave it there, or turn it off."

His eyes darted from the television screen to Vivian's face. The flicking slowed. She stared at him. Suddenly, the screen went black. The remote control flew through the air and landed on the pillows. Howard pounced on Vivian, tickling and poking. He smothered her with tiny, wet kisses. Laughing and screeching, Vivian couldn't return his kisses.

Breathlessly giggling, Vivian said, "Howard, you promised to give me a massage and to hold me. This is not what I had in mind."

Howard stopped abruptly. "Oh, that's right. I forgot."

Giving her one last peck on the nose, Howard got up and started to undress. Vivian made a mad dash for the door. He asked, "Where are you going?"

Over her shoulder, she yelled, "I'll be right back!"

Almost stepping on Snow, Vivian mumbled angrily, "Get out of my way, cat."

Vivian returned with two chilled glasses of white wine. She put them down on her night table and threw Snow out again, nowhere near as carefully as Howard had done. She flipped on the radio, dropped down onto the bed, sipped, and watched.

It was Vivian's turn to lean on her elbow. Howard had a magnificent body. The fact that he always undressed slowly, carefully folding and hanging his clothes, made it seem more like a program. Completely nude, except for his socks, he sat down on the bed to pull them off. This show always ended the exact same way. Howard, meticulously rolling and tucking those socks into his left shoe. If he ever tucked them into his right shoe, Vivian would be asking the most mindboggling questions he'd ever heard for hours.

Howard slid back, took a sip from Vivian's glass, leaned down, and tenderly kissed her. Vivian closed her eyes and enjoyed the sensation of Howard's wine-cooled lips warming up on hers. Taking the glass out of Vivian's hand and setting it on the table, Howard moved closer and wrapped his long arms around her. The heat from his body was intoxicating. He began to firmly stroke and massage her back and hips. It felt so good, Vivian sighed audibly.

As the tension left her body, Vivian's head dangled back. Howard nuzzled and nibbled her neck. He slid the tiny straps of her gown down and exposed the tops of her breasts. His hands went back to stroking and massaging Vivian's back, while his nuzzling and nibbling moved down slowly. With little effort, Howard worked Vivian's entire gown down around her waist and devoured her breasts, never interrupting the motion of his hands on her back.

With a parting kiss on the tip of Vivian's nipple, Howard rolled Vivian onto her back. Looking deeply into her eyes, he lay on top of her. His lips descended onto hers. Howard's warm, wet kiss was so passionate, Vivian gripped his sides tightly. He moaned.

Without breaking the mood of his kiss, Howard began to make the most delicious nibbling motion with his mouth, gradually working his way down to Vivian's navel. She felt completely adored when Howard kissed and caressed her that way.

Vivian's gown disappeared. Howard's lips and tongue danced and darted over every part of her anatomy. Howard teased and taunted Vivian's body until she didn't know whether to pull his hair out or her own.

On Howard's return trip, he comfortably slid into Vivian, and she arched her hips to receive him. Panted, pinched, and moaned. As Vivian met Howard's thrusts, he told her how much he loved her. Asked if she loved him.

In the midst of tiny, trembling explosions, Vivian groaned, "Oh, yes."

Never breaking his stride, Howard asked, "Are you going to marry me and have my babies, Vivian?"

"Oh, yes."

"When?"

"Whenever you're ready."

As Howard's pace quickened, he moaned, "I'm ready, Vivian. Oh, God, I'm ready!"

One thrilling physical eruption after another made Vivian squeal, screech, pinch and claw. That just made Howard work harder. Finally, he shuddered, groaned, and squeezed the pillow.

Howard rolled onto his side and started snoring immediately. If it wasn't early and Vivian didn't know he would wake up again, she would have been upset. Instead, she cuddled up close, kissed Howard's sleeping lips, and dozed off, too. Still, the final echo in her mind was Adrena's, "For now."