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CHAPTER 1

Tuesday afternoon.

With a satisfied sigh, Suzanne Mitchell pushed her square, metal-rim glasses up her regal nose and clicked on the little icon labeled Print in her word processing program.

Once the laser printer began to hum, she wheeled her swivel-chair over to the high-strung office appliance - Suzanne had another word for it, though she'd never use it in front of her hard-nosed Editor - to wait for the hardcopy of the latest draft of her article that was supposed to go into the next edition of the Observer.

She didn't even wait for the warm piece of paper to clear the tray completely before she took it and gave it a quick skim to check for any faults in the logic. "An era is ending at the Mount Weaver pottery, by Suzanne Mitchell," Suzanne mumbled. "Hmmm, hmmm, hmmm, hmmm... Jayne... oh, toot... there's a typo in her name! There's no Y! One, two, three, four, five... oh, toot, six times..."

'Staff meeting in the conference room in two minutes!' the Editor's disembodied voice suddenly said, booming out of the intercom units that were placed on all the desks in the office.

Around Suzanne, her colleagues - all three of them - rose from their computer desks and made their way to the conference room at the end of the large, open office.

Suzanne squirmed in her husky blue skirt suit at the thought of presenting an incomplete draft to her rather picky Editor, mentally preparing herself to be admonished or passed over for the umpteenth time in her six-month tenure at the old, proud, local newspaper. "Oh!" she groaned, pushing her glasses up her nose. "Oh, toot, I gotta fix it... but I don't have time!"

Veronica Boothe, the cookery Editor and journalist in charge of reviewing restaurants, stopped on her way to the conference room and tapped her knuckles on the edge of Suzanne's desk. "D'you need a hand, Suze? You look a little pale."

Sighing, Suzanne looked up at her late-fifty-something colleague whose soft, round, early-gray features belied the fact that she had the mental strength and the backbone of a Marine Corps drill instructor.

"Uh... I've misspelled a subject's name... do you think you could stall the Ed while I do a search-and-replace and print it out again?"

"Dunno," Veronica said with a supportive smile, "but I'll give it a shot."

"That's all I can ask for... won't take me long... I hope," Suzanne said, sat down on her swivel-chair and scooted back to the PC to fix the typo.

Four minutes later, Suzanne knocked on the door to the sparsely decorated conference room and stepped inside without waiting for a reply. " 'Beg pardon for the delay, Ed."

Her Editor, Martin Nemeč, who at thirty-four was much younger than most people in that position - he was a hotshot recently transferred up from the headquarters of the conglomerate to give the old paper a kick up the backside, figuratively speaking - looked up from the apparently highly fascinating article Veronica held under his nose to shoot Suzanne a sharp look. "Mmmm," he said in a way that made his upper lip crease as he tracked Suzanne on her way down to her chair.

Veronica sent Suzanne a little wink before turning back to the Editor. "But it's interesting, dontcha think, Ed?"

"Mmmm. Please have a seat, Mrs. Boothe," the Editor said in a voice that didn't leave room for misinterpretation - Veronica hurriedly followed the command.

"So," Martin said and rose from his seat. "What do we have? Let's go round the table... Veronica, I've already seen your article. It's not enough for the front page. Suzanne?"

"Uh, yes, Ed," Suzanne said and fumbled with her glasses and the hardcopy of her article. "I, uh... the old pottery down by Mount Weaver is closing down. I've interviewed the owner, Jane Masterson, about her plans and-

"Page seven," Martin said and pointed at the next journalist before Suzanne had time to get to her punch line.

Feeling deflated, she sighed and let the still-warm piece of paper flutter onto the polished desktop.

Forty minutes later, the next edition of the Observer had been hammered out with the only highlights for Suzanne being her pottery article on page seven and a so-called 'funny' on the back page. '*And the funny will take me five minutes to find online...*' Suzanne said and sighed under her breath.

"Oh, and finally... one little thing," Martin Nemeč said as he made a few notes on an over-scribbled notepad. Claire St. John is holding an exhibition of her latest collection of... well, I s'pose you could call it art... next Saturday evening. Suzanne, are you up for it?"

Suzanne sighed and continued to look down at her fingers as she fiddled with the pottery article. Only after a few seconds did she realize that the Editor had actually given her a task. "Uh, I'm... pardon?"

Martin made a face and crossed his arms over his chest. "I said, are you up for covering Claire St. John's exhibition next Saturday evening? It's in the Avant-Art Gallery downtown."

"Downtown? Claire St. John? An exhibition?"

"Yes," Martin said, pulling out the word like he was speaking to a slow child. "You sit at the A&E desk, don't you? This is definitely Arts and Entertainment."

At first, Suzanne fiddled nervously with her glasses, but she was soon bobbing her head up and down. "Am I up for it? I mean, I'm up for it! Sure! Oh, sure!"

"Good. I'll email you the details. All right, let's move on to..." the Editor droned, but Suzanne had already zoned out, daydreaming about her first important assignment at the Observer.

A pair of identical snickers from her two male colleagues across the table made Suzanne scrunch up her face and shoot them - Gary Paulsen and David Birnbaum - a puzzled look. Thinking about it some more, she began to make a few associations in her mind regarding the name of the artist, but she couldn't quite put her finger on why it seemed familiar to her.

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Half an hour later, Suzanne let out a groan, took off her glasses and buried her face in her hands. The Editor had sent her the details as he said he would, but when she had performed an Internet search for the artist to get the full picture, the first link that had popped up was a very colorful article on a gossip site.

Embedded in the article was a jerky, minute-long video clip that someone had made with their phone that showed Claire St. John going ballistic and throwing a full bowl of brightly colored punch in the face of a male journalist while she ranted and raved over his lineage, his lack of sexual prowess and his audacity to print something or other that the crackling sound on the video hadn't quite picked up.

Suzanne sighed and clicked Play on the video again just to make sure that it wasn't a hoax made to put the artist in a bad light - it wasn't. After checking the date and realizing that it had happened after the unveiling of the artist's collection the previous year, she rubbed her face and leaned back on her creaky swivel-chair.

A few moments later, she decided she needed some water and got up to go to the water cooler at the other end of the open office. On her way past the desks of Gary and David, the financial reporter and the sports writer, respectively, she heard the same snickers she had heard in the conference room.

Determined not to let it get to her, Suzanne continued down to the other end of the office and took a cup of water from the cooler. As she looked down onto the private parking lot five stories below, her face was reflected in the large windows.

With her deep blue eyes behind the metal-rim glasses, her shoulder-length dark hair and her faintly olive-toned skin - a legacy of her Greek father who had long since departed company after being caught in the act doing unspeakable things to a younger woman's silicone-enhanced bosom - she knew she had classical good looks, though she'd had very little opportunity to use them for anything.

Already pushing twenty-five, Suzanne's dance card was mostly empty and it had been thus since she had discovered just why she couldn't handle all the supposedly cute boys her mother had been sending her way. Boys had been difficult for her; girls had turned out to be practically impossible.

Suzanne sighed for the tenth time that day and turned away from the window. Her eye caught Veronica who was hacking away at her keyboard to wrap up her scoop article revealing a food scandal where both daughters of the owner of a pizza restaurant had fallen ill after eating one of their father's products.

Veronica's fingers tapped a frantic beat on the plastic keyboard and Suzanne could almost see the smoke rising from it as it processed the data. "Ummm... Veronica?" Suzanne said, placing her skirt-clad rear on the corner of the desk.

"Yeah, Suze?" Veronica said, never taking her eyes off the monitor.

"I was thinking-"

Veronica paused long enough to shake her head. "No," she said curtly before going back to the document.

"But... you don't even know what I was going to say!"

"Sure I do, Suzanne. You were going to ask me if I wanted to take the St. John job," Veronica said over her frantic tapping.

Suzanne grimaced and moved off the desk. "Oh..." she said, pushing her glasses up her nose. "I guess I'm kinda reluctant to take the assignment. Did Claire St. John really throw a bowl of punch at that fella last year?"

Veronica stopped tapping on the keyboard and scooted over to the corner of the desk where she put her elbows on the tabletop. "She sure did. And not only that, I heard she kicked him where it hurts the most, too!"

"Good heavens, no! Really?"

"Really."

"Well I'll be Sweet Sammy Brown. Hm!" Suzanne said and began to chew on her already short fingernails.

Veronica chuckled at the nervousness displayed by the young journalist but waved her hand dismissively. "Ah, she wouldn't do anything to you. Unless you're going to critique her work, natch. Are you?"

"Critique her paintings? I have no clue about paintings... at the newspaper where I did my apprenticeship, I was a sidekick to the celebrity newshound. I'm just going to cover the exhibition itself," Suzanne said with a nervous chuckle.

"See? You don't have to worry 'bout a thing. You'll ace it," Veronica said and scooted back to her keyboard.

Suzanne digested the older woman's words for nearly half a minute before finally arriving at a new, possible solution. She stopped chewing on her index finger and took a deep breath. "What if I threw in a free ticket to a movie of your choi-"

"No chance, Suzanne."

"Oh, ding-dong-darnit."

"Look," Veronica said and leaned back in her seat. "Quit fretting. You'll do just fine. I know the Ed is giving you a hard time but it's something you'll have to get used to 'cos they're all like that... and truth be told, the stories you've unearthed so far haven't exactly set the world alight."

"Well-"

"They haven't, Suze. You may think so, but they've all been small-scale, nickel and dime stuff. Not pageturners at all... sorry."

Suzanne opened her mouth to complain, but deep down inside she knew her far more experienced colleague was right.

"But I will tell you one thing, though," Veronica said and winked conspiratorially at Suzanne. "If you could break down the barriers of eccentricity that seem to surround Miss St. John, you could be looking at a headlining story. If I was, oh, closer to thirty instead of fif-" - *cough, cough, cough* - "I'd love to have a crack at it."

"Oh, but you could-"

"No chance, Suze. This one's all yours," Veronica said with a broad grin.

"Oh." Sighing, Suzanne turned around and began to walk back to her own desk, but before she had made it very far, Veronica cleared her throat behind her. "Yes?" she said, hoping that her colleague had had a change of heart.

"You might wanna dress a little sexily when you go to the exhibition, Suze. A little cleavage has never hurt anyone... that buttoned-up schoolmarm look you seem to have perfected just isn't

gonna cut it in the art world. You're mid-twenties for God's sake, not mid-fifties like me... make 'em blow hot, not cold," Veronica said, winking like mad.

Suzanne didn't really have a reply to that, so she settled for a flat "Thanks. I'll consider it."

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Saturday evening, two minutes to seven.

Viewed from Suzanne's old Volvo 850 as she trickled past on the busy Boulevard to get into the parking lot, the golden light shining inside the Avant-Art Gallery gave it a dream-like quality that positively exuded class and sophistication.

The gallery had two uniformed doormen who made sure that only those with proper accreditation could enter; seeing that, Suzanne peeked down at the passenger seat where her formal invitation was next to her purse.

While she waited for the valet to tend to her, she noticed that the guests were all dressed like Hollywood stars - or in some cases, were Hollywood stars - and she felt horribly out of place. An unpleasant blush began to tint her cheeks and her survival instincts were sending her a clear, unencrypted message that she really should be on her merry way home instead of going into the lion's den.

Her thoughts were interrupted when a valet stepped into the Bentley Continental GT ahead of her and drove it into the lot. Soon, another valet came to Suzanne's door and held out a gloved hand.

"Good evening, Sir. I'm with the Observer. Here's my invitation," Suzanne said and showed the valet the hi-gloss paper that had her name written on it in a fat, golden script.

The short-haired female valet scrunched up her face and showed with a raised eyebrow that she wasn't particularly pleased with being called a Sir. "Good evening, Miss. You need to show that to the doormen, not me."

"Oh... of course. Silly me."

"Would you kindly-"

"Oh, of course!" Suzanne said and took the ignition key like she always did. She quickly unbuckled and began to step out of the old car.

"Miss, you'll need to leave the key in the ignition. I won't be able to drive it into the parking lot if you don't," the valet said in a funny voice, clearly struggling to keep a straight face.

"Oh... of course..." Suzanne said, wondering why her vocabulary had suddenly degenerated to a point where she couldn't find other words to say. "I, uh... thank you," she continued and put the key back in the ignition.

Snatching her purse and the invitation, she scrambled as gracefully as she could out of her Volvo and stepped up onto the plush red carpet that had been laid out all along the sidewalk from the parking lot to the main entrance.

As she moved along the carpet with modest steps because of her confining dress, several flashes lit up the evening air and she briefly wondered if a celebrity was walking behind her; then she realized the media were taking pictures of her.

'Oh boy, are they going to be disappointed when they check their images,' she thought, not considering at all that she provided a terrific target for their lenses with her black pumps, her long, shapely legs, the second-hand Vera Wang that she had borrowed from the daughter of her next-door neighbor - effectively making it a third-hand Vera Wang - and her tastefully pushed-up bosom.

Suzanne stood five foot ten on a good day, plus the heels, but the two doormen towered over her in a way that made her feel like a Lilliput on her first encounter with Gulliver. "Uh, hello... good evening, Sir," she said and held out her invitation.

The doorman closest to her checked her name against the list of invited guests and sent her inside after saying something she thought could have been "Welcome to Avant-Art," though she wasn't sure.

The gallery was a mere two steps up from the sidewalk, but taking the two steps transported Suzanne into a new world: the floor was covered in an expensive one-piece carpet adorned with bold, abstract patterns in shades of gray, the walls were held in a neutral off-white, and the ceiling had been lowered and equipped with dozens of filtered spotlights that lit the paintings superbly without exposing them to false light or heat.

Avant-Art had been built as a four-wing gallery with a large connecting hall at the center. For the event, the connecting hall had been turned into another exhibition area, but unlike the regular paintings that were already revealed, no less than twelve four by four-foot canvases were still covered by white sheets, awaiting the formal start of the unveiling.

Suzanne stepped further into the gallery and marveled at some of the paintings that were on display. One in particular caught her eye, but when she realized the discreet price tag read forty thousand dollars, she gulped loudly and moved on.

The buzz around her grew with the arrival of a man Suzanne recognized as one of the leading Hollywood producers. The middle-aged man had a young starlet on his arm who looked like she'd had a chemical pick-me-up too many somewhere along the line.

From her time as a sidekick to the celebrity newshounds, Suzanne knew that the starlet was neither the producer's wife nor his daughter, but she figured it wasn't really her concern. Instead, she adjusted her metal-rim glasses and walked further into the gallery.

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The time where the paintings were supposed to have been unveiled came and went, but instead of growing impatient, the spectators only grew more excited - Suzanne guessed they all understood the concept of being fashionably late.

The owner of the Avant-Art Gallery, the neatly groomed sixty-something Dwayne Moffatt, a multi-millionaire dealer in so-called sensual arts, finally came out from a hidden door and held up his hands. "May we have your attention, please! Claire St. John will be here shortly," the tuxedo-clad man said in a deep voice, earning himself a large round of applause. "Thank you... save it for the star, I'm just the bellboy," he continued, creating a new ripple of applause.

Behind him, the hidden door opened again and a woman stepped out into the connecting hall. At once, the buzz grew exponentially, as did a mad scramble to get to the head of the line to be closest to the artist.

Standing all alone at the back of the throng, Suzanne tried to get up on tip-toes to see what all the fuss was about, but found to her puzzlement that the artist had completely vanished in the sea of humanity - all she'd had time to see was a shaggy mop of white-blond hair. "Hmmm," she said, adjusting her glasses. With a shrug, she turned back to look at the older paintings.

"Oh, this is so exciting!" a woman standing next to Suzanne suddenly said before putting out her hand and expecting Suzanne to shake it.

Instinctively shaking the woman's hand, Suzanne gave the voluptuous thirty-something a thorough look. She recognized the redhead as a supporting actress from up North who had been in one of the bigger blockbusters the year before and decided on the spot that the only way the woman could have put on her tight, maroon dress was if she had been poured into it. "Uh, I-

"Oh, I loved your last movie. Goodness me, those erotic scenes! Whew!" the actress said and pretended to fan herself. "I'll bet you kept asking for another take, eh?"

"I, uh... I'm not a..."

"I know I would have. Somehow, I always end up playing against old, gray fellas, but you... oh, so sweet! The scenes sizzled! And it was all on camera... we saw your face the whole time! You were so brave, so brave... no body doubles there, eh?" the actress said and nudged her elbow into Suzanne's side.

"I'm a journalist," Suzanne stuttered, pushing her glasses up her nose.

That piece of unexpected news caught the actress by surprise and she took a step back and scrunched up her face. After a few seconds, she winked at Suzanne and came back at her. "You're doing Method research, aren't ya? Oh, I know all about that. Going for the Oscar, eh? Well, Miss Journalist, I hope you'll write a really hot article. I mean, with Claire St. John here, how can it be anything but, eh? Call me, okay?"

"I, uh... okay," Suzanne said, nodding through a veil of utter confusion.

"Hi de ho!" the actress said and disappeared into the crowd that had dispensed slightly while they had been talking.

A loud chorus of 'Awww!' quickly followed by an equally loud 'Ooooooh!' and a few wolf calls made it abundantly clear that the paintings had been unveiled. Once again, Suzanne tried to look over the heads of the people ahead of her, and once again, she had to give up.

Shrugging, she reached into her purse and found her trusty notepad and a ball point pen. Finding a chair in the only quiet corner of the gallery, she began to do what she did best - describing the scene.

Ten minutes later, most of the stars and starlets had left for the next station on their glittery whistle-stop tour of Tinseltown, making it easier for the remaining people to breathe without inhaling outrageously expensive perfumes or aftershaves. Grunting in a satisfied manner, Suzanne closed her notepad and got up from the chair.

The champagne had been brought out, and what seemed to be a small army of waiters and waitresses carried the fizzy drinks in slender flutes on silver platters. As Suzanne happened to come past one of the waitresses, she reached up and took one of the flutes. *'Since it's free, I doubt my Editor would object,'* she thought as she looked at the remaining guests, *'It won't go on my expense account... not that I have any.'*

Just as Suzanne took a sip of the champagne, a burly, bearded man in a tuxedo put an arm possessively around a far skinnier woman's waist and moved away from the painting they had been standing in front of.

The cold, fizzy liquid nearly went down the wrong pipe when Suzanne realized just what kind of motifs Claire St. John used for her large paintings - women; naked women - or to be exact, naked women seemingly writhing in the throes of passion.

All the paintings contained acres of uncensored nakedness, and although they were held exclusively in blues, reds and blacks instead of natural colors, it wasn't hard to discern that the artist's preferred zones on the female body were from the knees, past her thighs, up the front of her torso and up to her neck.

Suzanne cleared her throat and grimaced a couple of times to get the blush away from her cheeks - yet her eyes seemed to curiously return to the paintings when she wasn't paying attention.

Cocking her head, she noticed that Claire St. John had used different models for all twelve paintings, but that none of the faces were drawn particularly clearly. In fact, they were merely vague outlines on the canvas compared to the highly detailed torsos.

'Now why would she do that? So they can't be identified...? Hmmm... intriguing,' Suzanne thought, snickering into the glass of champagne. *'I wonder how she selects her models... oh boy, that must be an awkward process. Hi, wouldya mind gettin' naked, I need to see your- ahem.'*

Wholly indecent thoughts invaded Suzanne's mind, so she promptly turned around to try to see more of the gallery. She already had several pages worth of notes, but since she was there to cover the exhibition itself, she needed to get a feel for the general atmosphere - not to mention a closer look at the artist's work.

Strolling through the connecting hall holding the slender flute of exquisite champagne, she observed the other guests closely, hoping to find someone she could interview so she could hone her skills before she'd get a shot at the artist herself.

Suzanne set her sights on a short-haired, early-thirty-something woman in a classy tuxedo, but before she had time to reach her, another lady wearing a mint green evening dress came up to the tuxedo-clad woman and gave her a kiss on the cheek. The two women whispered something to each other that made Suzanne feel she was intruding on a private moment, so she turned away from them and found the burly, bearded man from earlier instead.

"Good evening, Sir, I'm from the Los Angeles Observer. Do you have a moment for an interview?" Suzanne said, shifting her flute to her left hand and putting out her right.

"No," the man said and walked away from her without acknowledging her invitation to shake hands.

"Okay... darn," Suzanne said under her breath. She looked over her shoulder to see if the tuxedo-clad woman and her ladyfriend were still present, but they had left, too. "Oh, double darn... toot, this is going from bad to worse... oh, well..."

Sighing, Suzanne turned back to the paintings. The third in line was a very detailed affair where Claire St. John had depicted a woman on all fours - viewed from the side - in front of several deep blue strokes.

Smoke-like tendrils were formed from the broad strokes and seemed to sweep around her bare thighs and up along the curvature of her rear, almost like they were caressing her in a sexual manner. The expression of rapture on the woman's face was a confirmation of Suzanne's analysis, even if the woman's facial features were as vague as the other models'.

The level of detail was astonishing; even though the woman was solid red with black highlights and shadows, Suzanne was easily able to see the muscles ripple along the woman's side and back, and even that she had a small nipple stud in the breast closest to the viewer.

The motif, the high level of detail and the clever use of reds, blues and shades of gray blended together perfectly to create a provocative painting that gave Suzanne a bigger buzz than when she zapped through the scores of cable channels past midnight.

Realizing that she was staring, Suzanne snapped out of the daze and moved to the next painting that depicted a woman who was sitting on her thighs with her front turned towards the viewer. The woman's long torso and magnificent breasts were drenched in a blue tide that came from her right shoulder and swept down across her body.

Once again, Suzanne found herself staring. Clearing her throat, she emptied the flute in one gulp and began to look for a refill.

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As the hands of the clock moved around past eight thirty, the mood of the gallery changed from one of glitz and glamour to a cozier, far more intimate affair. To Suzanne, it seemed that the lights were dimmed in the other parts of the gallery to highlight Claire St. John's new paintings, but she didn't know if it was true or just an optical illusion.

The guests changed, too. Gone were the vain, high-strung stars and starlets, replaced by an ever-increasing number of women in classy, yet casual fashion garments. Judging by the cheek-kissing, the sly winks and the occasional cold shoulders that Suzanne observed, most of them knew each other quite well.

She put her third, empty, glass of champagne down on a silver platter that happened to be standing on a sideboard and decided to mingle. At first, she felt a sense of being shut out by the other women, but after a short while, they seemed to accept her and loosened up.

As she looked at the women, a spark of recognition ignited somewhere deep in her mind, but it was slow in materializing into a proper thought so she didn't make the connection that there were twelve well-dressed women present - plus herself, of course - and twelve new paintings hanging on the walls.

Suddenly, they were joined by the person they were all there to see - Claire St. John. Suzanne's first real glimpse of the acclaimed artist nearly ended in disaster as the shaggy, white-blonde mop of hair, the laser-sharp emerald green eyes, the cute yet serious face and the off-white, formfitting v-neck tunic that emphasized the artist's bosom perfectly came together to give her a fair-sized kick in the gut that made some saliva go down the wrong pipe. '*Oh, toot... she's gorgeous,*' Suzanne thought, biting her bottom lip as she was trying to cough quietly so she wouldn't draw attention to herself.

With a smile, Claire St. John began to work the floor, kissing hands and offering sly looks and hushed comments to her guests that all seemed to appreciate the gestures. She and Suzanne briefly looked at each other, but since the journalist was a new face in the crowd, the artist just gave her a polite, non-committal smile before moving onto the next guest.

Suzanne had a hard time keeping her eyes off Claire's face, but she knew she was there for a reason - which wasn't ogling at gorgeous women - so she forced herself to look away and dig into her purse so she could get on with writing her article.

Ten minutes later, Suzanne had written six more pages when she happened to look up and lock eyes with the tuxedo-clad woman who had whispered conspiratorially with her ladyfriend earlier in the evening.

"Hi," the woman said as she came closer to Suzanne.

"Hi." Suzanne used one of the best professional skills she had and studied the woman's appearance closely. She was in her early thirties and had deep brown eyes, angular features and short, very pale blonde hair that she had used so much gel on that it was flat against her head in a very boyish hairstyle - Suzanne thought that if the woman had been using an ebony cigarette holder, she wouldn't have looked out of place in a Marlene Dietrich *film noir* from the 1940s.

"Are you a reporter? You're taking an awful amount of notes."

"Well, close... I'm a journalist," Suzanne said and adjusted her glasses.

The other woman offered Suzanne a friendly little smile as she came even closer. "There's a difference?"

"Oh, yes!" Suzanne said and forgot all about her notes. "A reporter is someone who's right there in the thick of things and reports on something that's happening live, a journalist is someone like me who looks at the big picture... uh... figuratively speaking," she continued, glancing at the colorful, evocative paintings.

"Fascinating. I know all about the big picture," the other woman said and added a husky, little laugh.

"Uh... that's good." - *'Is she flirting with me? Oh Sweet Diddums, she's flirting with me! But didn't she have a girlfriend with her earlier? That's so rude...'*

"Have you seen my painting yet? It turned out like a dream."

Suzanne scrunched up her face and stared at the boyish woman. The spark that had threatened to ignite earlier suddenly came to life and a realization that the remaining female guests were in fact the models jumped up and slapped her across both cheeks. "Uh... I... uh... I'm sorry?" she croaked, earning herself another husky laugh from the other woman who turned around and pointed at one of the paintings Suzanne hadn't had time to study yet.

"That one."

The painting depicted the boyish woman reclining on a chair with her arms behind her head, twisting her torso to expose her modest, yet exquisite bosom, and her legs pulled up to bring out the full effect of her shapely thighs. Everything was held in blue, except for the black outlines and the woman's thighs that were colored in broad, red strokes.

"Oh... uh, wow," Suzanne said, looking from the painting to the woman and back again.

"I know. Claire St. John asked if I wanted to be immortalized. At first, I was skeptical, but I'm glad I changed my mind. In fifty years when I'm old and wrinkled, I'll still have... that," the boyish woman said and pointed at the painting.

"Mmmm..."

"Oh, there you are," the lady in the mint green evening dress said as she returned. Coming to a halt next to the tuxedo-clad woman, she sneaked a hand around the slim waist and gave it a little squeeze. "Who's your friend? Oh, don't tell me, you haven't introduced yourself, have you? Figures... Hi, I'm Shayna, this is my wife, Crystal," the woman in the evening dress said and put out her hand.

Suzanne looked at the woman in the mint green dress who was as femme as her wife was boyish - her long eyelashes competed for attention with her cleavage and her full head of honey-blonde corkscrew curls. "Hi, I'm Suzanne Mitchell. I'm a journalist with the Observer. I'm here to cover the exhibition," Suzanne said and shook Shayna's hand, immediately rethinking her characterization of Shayna when she discovered the woman had a grip like a dock worker.

"Ohhh..." Shayna said, cocking her head. "So you're not one of the models? I thought you were 'cos you're exactly Claire's type. Isn't that right, honey?"

"Yep," Crystal said with a broad grin.

"Oh... okay," Suzanne said, scrunching up her face. "No, I'm uh... no."

Shayna grinned and pulled her wife and Suzanne over to one of the other paintings. "Have you seen my painting yet, Suzanne?" she said and nodded towards the canvas.

Suzanne nearly swallowed her tongue when she realized that Shayna was the model for the painting of the woman on all fours. "Uh, yes I have. It's quite... remarkable."

"It's sexy as hell is what it is!" Shayna said with a strong giggle.

"Well, that too..." Suzanne said and felt her cheeks grow red.

Her galloping thoughts were interrupted by Dwayne Moffatt, the owner of the gallery, who came over to her wearing a broad smile. "Hello, you must be from the Observer?"

"That's right, Sir, I'm Suzanne Mitchell," Suzanne croaked and put out her hand. Shayna and Crystal excused themselves and mingled on.

Promptly shaking Suzanne's hand, Dwayne flashed her another brilliant smile before growing serious. "I'm sorry I haven't had time to talk to you before now... I've been very busy. As you

probably know, we're running a little late, but I promise that Miss St. John will grant you an interview before the night is over. I hope that'll be satisfactory?"

"Oh... uh... sure. Sure!" Suzanne said, cringing on the inside when she thought of getting within shooting range of the volatile, yet intriguing, artist.

"Now," Dwayne continued, putting a hand on Suzanne's elbow, "I trust you have been briefed? When you conduct the interview, please respect the list of off-limit questions we have sent to your Editor."

Suzanne opened her mouth to mention that she hadn't seen any such list, but she couldn't even croak. Instead, her eyes grew wider and wider behind her metal-rim glasses as she realized that she'd be going completely unprepared into a potentially lethal situation. Gulping, she began to look for where the punch bowls had been placed.

Dwayne misread Suzanne's silence and continued on like nothing had happened. "Like most artists, Miss St. John is a sensitive soul though you'd never know it looking at her. All right?"

"Uh-huh..." Suzanne squeaked, adjusting her glasses.

"Good. And please, there's a reason why the first item on the off-limits list is the first item. Miss St. John is very tired of being asked about her recent breakup with Oxana Rhajib. Need I go into details? I trust you understand?"

"I, uh... I understand perfectly, Sir. That won't be an issue at all. No, Sir," Suzanne said, shaking her head vigorously. The news that Claire St. John was a lesbian made a few things fall into place for her, especially regarding the female guests and the way the paintings were glorious celebrations of the female form. She briefly found herself looking forward to talking to the acclaimed artist, however the positive feeling only lasted for a few seconds, then she remembered the punch bowl incident.

"Good," Dwayne said again, already turning his attention to something else. "It was a pleasure talking with you, Miss Mitchell."

"Uh... likewise, Sir," Suzanne said, but the owner of the gallery had already left her.

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Another twenty uneventful minutes later, Suzanne was suddenly whisked away by Dwayne Moffatt and led behind the hidden door in the connecting hall. "I trust you remember what I told you, Miss Mitchell?" the owner of the gallery said as they walked down a narrow corridor headed for a small room.

"Regarding the off-limits list? Yes, but I need to tell you-

"Excellent. Here we are," Dwayne said and gave Suzanne's elbow a gentle squeeze as he pushed her into the room at the end of the hall.

The room was clearly used as a temporary storage facility as several paintings were standing in strange boxes on wheels that Suzanne surmised were used for transportation purposes. Unlike the gallery's exhibition halls, the storage room had basic, whitewashed walls and even more basic linoleum on the floor. The only active light in the room was a small lamp on the table, though there were strip lights in the ceiling. The far wall was dominated by a solid-looking, dark green metal door labeled Fire Exit with a small wash basin and a mirror next to it.

Claire St. John was sitting at a utilitarian table with a glass of white wine and a light salad. Cautiously eyeing the journalist, she dabbed her mouth on a napkin and rose to greet her guest. "Good evening, Miss Mitchell," the artist said in a rich, golden voice.

"Good evening, Miss St. John," Suzanne said and shook hands with the woman who she noticed was even more gorgeous up close. There were a few faint, age-related lines around her eyes and along the edges of her mouth, but they didn't detract from her presence - if anything, Suzanne felt the features added to it.

Suzanne knew from her very brief research that Claire St. John was in her mid-thirties, but there was a timeless, natural quality to her face that Suzanne found quite refreshing after spending many hours during her apprenticeship talking to stars and starlets who had been nipped, tucked or otherwise artificially enhanced.

"Oh, please... call me Claire. Have a seat," the artist said and pulled out a chair for Suzanne that matched the one she had been sitting on.

"Thank you. My name is Suzanne and I would be honored if you used that."

"All right," Claire said and picked up her fork. "Mind if I eat while we talk, Suzanne? I'm starving."

Reaching into her purse to find her notepad and her ball point pen, Suzanne offered the artist a brief smile. "Oh no, go right ahead."

"You don't have a laptop or a voice recorder? How quaint," Claire said and wolfed down a large forkful of salad.

"Yes, well, I... I come from a relatively small newspaper, the Observer, but even if I didn't, I've always preferred the old-fashioned approach," Suzanne said and pushed her glasses up her nose. "My mother was a journalist back in the 1980s and I guess she has been a great influence on me... hence the pen and paper. Uh, not that it would matter to you," Suzanne said, rambling on nervously before realizing that Claire St. John had very little use for her family relations.

Once again, Claire used the full force of her emerald green eyes to study the journalist, but didn't let it show what she was actually looking for.

Suzanne cleared her throat in an embarrassed fashion, opened the notepad and flipped over to the first available page. Just as she clicked on her ball point pen so it was ready for use, she caught a glimpse of something in her peripheral vision that made her look towards the farthest corner of the storage room - she thought she had seen a punch bowl, but it turned out to be a water cooler next to the wash basin. *'Not that it would be any better... toot, there's even more liquid in one of those,'* Suzanne thought and gulped involuntarily.

Looking back at Claire, Suzanne just caught a sly look in the artist's eyes that almost begged for an explanation, but she didn't feel it would be proper to ask, so she kept quiet.

"Miss Mitchell, before we start, I have a question for you," Claire said and sipped her white wine.

"Certainly," Suzanne said and crossed her thighs, remembering to pull down her dress that was threatening to reveal more than she was ready for.

"You don't strike me as an art critic."

"A critic? Well, I'm not, I'm only here to cover the exhibition. But I do have a small plaque on my desk that says Arts and Entertainment, so... uh, it's what I like to write about."

"Good. Then we can talk," Suzanne said and took another sip of her wine. "What do you think of my paintings?"

"Wow, they're, uh... quite remarkable. I love the use of colors, b- but the motifs are, uh, unusual... well, not unusual, more like, uh, uh... evocative... but certainly really, really, uh..." Suzanne said, shuffling around uncomfortably on the hard chair. She noticed a cheeky sparkle briefly illuminating the artist's eyes, but she puckered up her lips and concentrated on her notepad.

Leaning back in her seat, Claire took another sip of her wine and studied the journalist above the rim of the glass. "Are you embarrassed by the female body, Suzanne?"

"Ah, no... I'm just not used to seeing it pictured quite like that..."

"Mmmm. I get that a lot. So, anyway... don't you have any questions for me? I'm tired and it's been a long evening..."

"Ah, yes, of course," Suzanne said and flipped through her notepad where she had scribbled various random thoughts she'd had as she had gone through the gallery. She knew the missing off-limits list was mocking her quite badly and she was mortally afraid of sticking her foot in her mouth. In the end, she decided that the truth was always the best approach. "Uh... Claire, I have to confess that I didn't receive the off-limits list that Mr. Moffatt said he sent to my Editor... so... so I don't actually know what's safe to ask you and what isn't..."

Hearing that, Claire scrunched up her face and sat up straight.

The change of mood was noticeable at once and Suzanne suddenly grew worried that she'd taste the water cooler after all.

"Somebody's screwed up. I have very little patience for screw-ups," Claire growled in a voice that was half an octave deeper than the one she had used before.

"I... I'm sorry, it wasn't me," Suzanne stuttered and frantically adjusted her glasses. She shifted her legs to cross them the other way, but the dark look in Claire St. John's eyes gave her a hint that the audience was over, regardless of what she felt. "I'm sorry," she croaked as she got up from the hard chair.

"Not your fault, Suzanne. Thank you for being honest and upfront with me. I really appreciate that. However, there are things I simply refuse to talk about that you may not be aware of, so I'm afraid we have to end this right now before it gets ugly. I hope you understand," Claire said and put out her hand rather jerkily.

"I d- do, Miss St. John. Th- thank you for your time, and, uh, your paintings are really beautiful," Suzanne said and hastily shook Claire's hand before spinning around and hurrying down the corridor to get to the hidden door.

Stepping outside onto the busy Boulevard, Suzanne lowered her glasses and gave herself a very hard pinch on the bridge of her nose. "Oh, Sweet Sammy Brown, that was the worst disaster of my career... not that I've had much of a career... and now I never will. Oh, toot!" she said out loud before walking back down the red carpet to get to the parking lot.

Very much in tune with her mood, all the photographers had left, leaving the sidewalk in relative anonymity.

While Suzanne waited for the valet to bring her her Volvo, a few words were formed in her mind that quickly turned into sentences and then paragraphs.

Despite everything, she found that with the information she had gathered - both technical and emotional - she would be able to create an article about the event, the guests, the paintings, and first and foremost, the artist herself that would be written from the point of view of an interested stranger in a sensual, exotic world. Nodding and clutching her purse, Suzanne punched the air in delight with her free hand.

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CHAPTER 2

Friday morning.

Suzanne smiled smugly as she leaned back on her swivel-chair with her phone lodged between her ear and her shoulder. "Yes, Sir, thank you, Sir," she said while she was checking the emails congratulating her on getting national coverage with her article on Claire St. John's exhibition and her paintings. "Thank you, Sir, it's a great honor. No, this is my first... yes. Yes. Thank you, Sir. I'm very honored by your call, Sir. Goodbye, Sir," Suzanne continued and clicked the little button on her phone.

Putting the cell down on her desk, she turned around and shot Gary and David, her two slightly envious male colleagues, an impossibly wide grin.

The two men hurriedly turned their attention to their own work, but Veronica Boothe rose from her desk at the other end of the open office and came up to Suzanne. "Who was that, Suze?" she said as she sat down on a corner of Suzanne's desk.

"The CEO of the conglomerate," Suzanne said smugly while she fidgeted with two newspapers, a copy of the Observer that had come out the day before and a current edition of the national Los Angeles Courier that had her article on the front page of the entertainment section.

"I'm happy for you," Veronica said and squeezed Suzanne's shoulder. "Of course, some of us have been working for years and years without getting a national cover, so perhaps you could be a bit more humble about it...? Mmmm?" Veronica said with a wink.

"Oh, uh... you're right. I'm sorry. I was just so..." Suzanne said and pushed her glasses up her nose. "... excited."

"Oh, I understand, I'd be excited, too. Don't forget to thank the Ed. If he hadn't been convinced by the quality of the article, he wouldn't have sent it further on in the system. Yeah?"

"Yeah, good point, Veronica. I'll do that. Thanks," Suzanne said and reached up to pat the older woman's hand that was still suspended on her shoulder in a very motherly fashion.

Once Veronica walked back to her own desk, Suzanne picked up the second section of the Los Angeles Courier and ran her index finger reverently across the by-line, feeling a warm glow swelling inside her at seeing her own name on the front of such a major newspaper.

Half an hour later, her Editor came out of his office with a puzzled look on his face. The clickety-clackety of fingers on keyboards gradually came to a halt as the four journalists looked up and waited for him to make an announcement.

"Miss Mitchell, my office, please," Martin Nemecek said after a brief delay and stood aside so the path to the office was clear for Suzanne.

The Editor's voice held a strange undertone that sent a chill racing down Suzanne's spine, but she couldn't fathom what it could be about. As she crossed the office floor, she could hear a familiar snicker from either Gary or David - or maybe both, she wasn't sure.

"Have a seat, Miss Mitchell," Martin said as he closed the office door behind him.

Suzanne offered him a smile and went for one of the two grand armchairs that were placed in front of the huge, busy desk. The Editor's office was decorated in a modern style with plenty of glass, chrome and smooth surfaces, and she knew the designer lamp that was on the corner of the desk cost nearly as much as she made in a year.

"So," the Editor said somberly on his way to his chair, sending a new chill down Suzanne's spine. "I've just been on the phone with the legal department."

"Oh?" Suzanne said and leaned back in the armchair.

"Yes. Seems like Claire St. John has been in touch with them to-"

Hearing that, Suzanne jumped forward with her eyes popped wide open. She kept a firm grip on the armrests, but it wasn't enough to stop her heart from jumping into her throat. "But I don't understand! I wrote that article with the utmost respect for her and her paintings! I did nothing but praise them! And her! And her guests, too! I don't understand! I don't wanna get knocked down by a punch bowl or kicked in the crotch... or anywhere else!" she howled in a voice that turned increasingly screechy.

"Whoa! Get a grip!" Martin Nemeč said and held up his hands. Once Suzanne had calmed down - somewhat - he ran a hand through his fancy hair that had been disturbed by the stream of screechiness. "Claire St. John wanted to know your home phone number, but she was told that we never disclose personal information."

"My h- home number?" Suzanne said as she took off her glasses to rub her weary eyes.

"Yes," Martin said, once again drawing out the word like he was speaking to a child. "She said that she was very impressed by your article."

"Sh- she did? Sh- she was?"

"Yes. That's why the legal department suggested that she called my office directly to talk to you, in..." Martin looked at his Rolex, "well, right about now as a matter of fact."

Suzanne stared at the cordless handset on the Editor's desk, waiting for it to ring. Right on cue, the phone lit up and began to send out a shrill, electronic *ding-a-ling*.

Picking it up, Martin smiled at Suzanne who fell against the backrest of the armchair and promptly flaked out in a boneless heap.

"The Observer, the Editor's office- Yes, Miss St. John, Miss Mitchell is right here, waiting to speak with you. Yes. All right, hang on for a second," Martin said and handed Suzanne the handset. "It's for you," he said with a broad grin.

Suzanne just stared at the handset like she had never seen one before. Eventually, she held it to her ear and said "Hello?"

'Hi, Miss Mitchell, this is Claire St. John,' the artist said at the other end of the line. At first, Suzanne thought it was all just a hoax, but the rich, golden voice simply couldn't be produced by anyone other than the sexy artist. *'I'm glad we could hook up like this. I just wanted to congratulate you on your article. Even I got excited, and I was there, ha ha!'*

"Oh, uh... thank you. Thank you very much, Miss St. John."

'I'm sorry that your personal interview had to be cut short after the gaffe with the off-limits list.'

"Oh, that's-"

'Do you have any plans for tonight?'

"Ah, uh... uh... to- tonight?" Suzanne said and squirmed in her seat. "Ah, no..."

'How about coming over to my place, then? Perhaps at eight o'clock or so? I could give you the off-limits list myself and then we could continue with the interview...?'

"Eight o'clock at your place...? Uh..."

'Excellent, Miss Mitchell. We have a deal. I'm looking forward to meeting you out of the spotlights as it were. I'll even show you my studio if you'd like to see it.'

"Oh, your studio...? I, uh... very much so, Miss St. John..."

'Good. By the way, I live at seven-six-seven-four Washington Drive, Beverly Hills. All right?'

"All... uh, right..."

'Great! See you tonight, then. Bye!'

"Bye..." Suzanne said and closed the connection on the handset. For the first several seconds, she just stared into empty space, but then she rolled up her sleeve and nipped a few hairs off her arm. "Ow!" she squeaked, realizing that it hadn't been a dream - she really had been invited to spend the evening at Claire St. John's mansion in Beverly Hills.

As the rest of the world slowly came back to her, she noticed that her Editor was sitting with his hand stretched out ahead of him, no doubt hoping to get his phone back. With a trembling hand, she put the handset on the desktop and rose from her armchair.

Martin chuckled at the look on Suzanne's face and put the handset into the base station. "I trust it was a good conversation, Miss Mitchell?"

"Yes... yes... yes, it was," Suzanne mumbled.

"All right. Do you want me to escort you back to your desk?"

"No..." Suzanne said and put a hand on the doorknob. "I got it... thank you, Sir."

As she went back into the open office and closed the door behind her, she leaned against the cool, smooth surface and continued to stare into empty space - then she noticed an unfamiliar cell phone on her desk. Frowning her brow, she stepped forward to take it, but before she could get there, it started to ring using the Funeral March as the ringtone.

The somber tune was soon joined by identical snickers from Gary and David's desks, followed by random, juvenile questions and statements like "What kind of flowers would you like on your casket?" - "I hope you have a good dental insurance!" - "You better use a reinforced jock strap! She might wear boots!"

"Wha...? How in the world do you- Were you-" Suzanne said, scrunching up her face as she deposited the cell phone back on Gary's desk with a bang.

At the other end of the office, Veronica rose from her desk and shook her fist at the two guys. "They were standing at the door like a couple of little kids, listening in on your conversation."

"Really!" Suzanne huffed and adjusted her glasses. "You should be ashamed of yourselves! Now I won't tell you anything about her mansion. Ha!"

"Awwwww!" came the predictable reply from Gary and David.

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The rest of Suzanne's Friday flew past, and before she knew it, she was at home in her bedroom with her entire upper body inside her closet to try to work out what she should wear for her unexpected evening on the town.

The pile of clothes on the bed behind her proved that she had already been through eighty percent of what she owned, yet she still hadn't found the perfect combination.

"It needs to be classy," she mumbled to herself, holding up a blouse but discarding it at once. "Not slutty, not the schoolmarm, but classy... I don't have anything classy, ding-dong-darnit!" she continued, throwing yet another blouse over her shoulder and onto the pile of clothes.

From the living room, P!nk tried to soothe Suzanne's frazzled nerves by singing one of her biggest hits, but it wasn't entirely successful. As the song crossfaded into the next one, the singer's voice became more intense and coaxing.

"I know, I know..." Suzanne said inside the closet. "I just can't... hey... hey! Look at this!" she said and pulled out a dusty blue spaghetti-strap dress that she remembered was a really good fit.

Quickly shedding the jogging suit she always wore at home, she pulled the dress over her head and wiggled back and forth to get it in place. When everything was where it was supposed to be, she performed a quick, little posing routine in front of the mirror on one of the wings of the closet where she turned left and right several times to see herself from all angles.

"Mmmm... not too bad... not too bad," she said, trying to pull up the zipper on the back of the dress. Unfortunately, the zipper head could only get halfway up, then it simply refused to go any further. "No... ugh! Ugh, no! This isn't happening... I'm not that fat! Ugh! Aw, toot!"

Hobbling back to the mirror and looking over her shoulder, the reflection that stared back at her underlined the fact that it had been a while since she had worn the dress. "I don't believe it... it's... it's shrunk! Oh!"

Suzanne hurriedly pulled the zipper back down and shed the dress. Standing in her underwear, she buried her face in her hands and let out a grunt. "Okay, don't panic. When in doubt, go for the basics... a tank and a skirt. Yep."

Five minutes later, Suzanne ran her hands over her moussed hair to smooth down a few stray strands while she whistled along to her P!nk album. Deciding against wearing any makeup other than a sparse layer of foundation, she found her purse and checked herself against the mirror one last time.

Then she threw her purse onto the bed in frustration, growled somewhere deep in her throat and sent her tank top, skirt and shoes flying in all directions.

Another ten minutes later, she finally pulled her front door shut and made sure the lock was secure. Sighing deeply, she scooted down the stairs to get to her trusty, old Volvo, wearing the most basic outfit she had: ankle boots, dark blue jeans, a black v-neck T-shirt and a loose, bog-standard, pale blue denim shirt that created a perfect contrast to the deep blue eyes behind the metal-rim glasses.

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Once she had made it past the manned booth protecting the gated community - the security guard had stared incredulously at her twenty-year old Volvo 850 - Suzanne rolled along Washington Drive to search for number seven-six-seven-four.

The mansions lining the street were imposing, but Suzanne could hardly see them. Not only were they all hiding behind tall, impenetrable hedges or brick walls, most had huge lawns or parks in front of the buildings that did their best to obscure what little view there was.

The evening was warm so Suzanne drove slowly along Washington Drive with her side window rolled down and her elbow resting on the window sill. As she checked the house numbers against

her hastily scribbled note, she shook her head over and over again. "I couldn't live here... I simply could not live here... there's no music, no color, hardly any people except gardeners... there's no life! Nothing but expensive cars, white brick walls and... Oh! There it is!"

She slammed on the brakes at once and reversed a few yards to be able to roll up to an electronic panel on a metal column that had been placed in front of a seven-foot tall cast iron gate. As she came to a halt and got ready to use the panel, a video camera on top of the column turned around and locked onto her.

Before she pressed the button marked Call, she peeked through the iron bars and whistled slowly at the sight of an off-white three-story mansion situated at the top of a man-made hill roughly one hundred yards up a curved, gravelly driveway.

The mansion was surrounded by a garden the size of a park with, among other things, a large duck pond and scores of oak trees and other vegetation.

"Sweet Sammy Brown," Suzanne said quietly. "Painting naked women in red and blue must be really lucrative... okay, let's see what this button does," she continued and pressed Call.

'Yes?' a woman said in a tinny voice that was so distorted that Suzanne was unable to identify whether it was Claire St. John or not.

"Good evening, it's Suzanne Mitchell. I have an... uh, appointment with Miss St. John," Suzanne said, remembering to turn her face towards the camera so whomever was monitoring it could see that she wasn't someone to be feared.

'Welcome, Miss Mitchell. Please drive to the garage at the west wing. You can park there,' the tinny voice said, quickly followed by a deep buzz from the gate.

"I feel like I'm in a James Bond movie," Suzanne said out loud as she drove up the crunching, curved driveway. After a fairly exciting one hundred twenty yards where her jaw was constantly hanging around her chest at the sublime sights she went past, she came to a stop at the garages; there were five in total, but only one of the sliding doors was open. She figured that's where they wanted her to go, so she drove inside.

Stepping out of her Volvo, she realized that the other vehicles in the connected garages made her old car look positively awful - she had parked between a metallic blue Fisker Karma and a black Mercedes S-Class limo with tinted windows. In addition to the luxury cars, there were also a cream Honda Insight Hybrid and a fully equipped Devil Red Harley-Davidson motorcycle inside the garages.

The evening air was warm and pleasant so Suzanne strolled outside to look at the mansion itself. From ground level, the three-story house looked more like a castle - it even had a Roman pillar on either side of the front door - and Suzanne had to lean her head back to take in the splendor of the building. Here and there, cracks in the spackle around the twenty-four windows that faced the driveway tainted the pristine façade, but it wasn't enough to ruin the overall impression.

Even though they weren't that far from the cacophony of the Big City, all Suzanne could hear was a faint breeze rustling the foliage of the trees and the occasional quack from one of the ducks at the pond - and somebody's footsteps coming closer.

Expecting the person to come from the mansion's main entrance, Suzanne was surprised when Claire St. John finally came into sight on the gravelly pathway that snaked its way around the garages.

"Hi!" the artist said, waving her hand.

The first thought through Suzanne's mind was that the artist was even more gorgeous than she had been at the exhibition. Instead of the formfitting v-neck tunic, she was wearing a loose, white dress with golden highlights that made her look like Aphrodite personified. The slits in the sleeves offered a few tantalizing peeks at surprisingly toned arms, but the plunging neckline and the tanned flesh it revealed nearly took Suzanne's breath away.

"Good evening, Miss St. John," Suzanne said and shifted her purse to her left hand so she could shake hands with Claire St. John.

"Oh, we don't do that here," Claire said with a laugh and pulled Suzanne down into a cheek-kissing hug instead.

After they separated, Suzanne's cheeks were burning where Claire's lips had kissed them, and she was almost afraid to think of the effect those velvet-soft lips would have if they ever came into contact with her own. "Oh, uh... okay. Uh... thank you for inviting me," she said and adjusted her glasses.

"Oh, you're very welcome. Thank you for writing that article... it was really... mmmm... well-written and sober, given the potentially touchy topic."

"Thank you very much, Miss St. John."

"Oh, I insist... call me Claire."

"Claire, all right," Suzanne said with a smile.

Claire put a strong, but tender, hand on Suzanne's elbow and leaned in towards her. "And I hope I may still call you Suzanne?"

"Uh, of course..." - Deep inside, Suzanne wondered why the artist seemed so different from their other conversation in the storage room at the gallery, but she wasn't about to complain. *'It was probably just the pressure of the exhibition that got to her the other night... oh, I dearly hope she'll be offering me the punch instead of the punch bowl!'*

"Great. Come, let's go down to my studio. I have a lot of things I want to show you tonight," Claire said and turned away from the mansion.

"But I thought..."

"Oh, that I lived in the mansion? No, no, that belongs to Dwayne Moffatt, the owner of the Avant-Art Gallery. He's also my sponsor, you see."

"Oh... okay."

"Yeah, I live in my studio. He had it made for me down in the back garden when he discovered that I was the golden goose he had always dreamt of hooking up with," Claire said with a throaty laugh that made Suzanne's nape hairs stand on edge.

The two women began to stroll along the gravelly pathway, slowly leaving the neatly groomed area around the garages and venturing further into the slightly more wild, park-like garden. The journey was held in silence since Suzanne was too preoccupied with looking at the serene environment to have time to speak.

'I said I couldn't live here... I was wrong...' Suzanne thought as she observed Claire strolling gaily along the pathway with her loose dress flowing gracefully behind her and around her legs. *'The forest, the peace and quiet, birds singing in the trees, a simple, secluded life with someone like Claire... that would be perfect for me... Toot, what am I saying? I don't even like peace and quiet... and there's no way that our life would be secluded... Sheesh, what have I been smoking?'*

The gravelly pathway ended and evolved into a three foot wide, well-trodden trail. Above them, oak trees had grown so large that their crowns were entwined, creating a perfect, green canopy.

Walking on the trail, Suzanne felt her sixth sense tickle her ears, and she began to look over her shoulders, almost expecting to see bad men jump out at her from behind the gnarly old tree trunks - of course, none did. *'Get a grip, woman... you're not fourteen anymore... like when you needed a neon green night-light because you were scared of sleeping in the dark.'*

Thinking about one of her childhood phobias made her chuckle out loud and shake her head at her silliness.

"What's so funny?" Claire asked, offering Suzanne a sly grin.

"Oh, nothing. It's almost like I'm having flashbacks to something I didn't experience the first time!"

"Really? From walking here with me?"

"Yeah... I'm too silly for my own good sometimes," Suzanne said and chuckled again.

"Maybe you're reminded of a past life or something? Maybe you used to traipse through Sherwood Forest looking for the dastardly Robin Hood...? Or maybe you were Robin Hood...?" Claire said and rubbed her strong hand up and down Suzanne's arm.

The sensation was so comforting to Suzanne that she could only nod, and it wasn't until Claire removed her hand that Suzanne felt her voice return. "Or something. No, it's just me being silly."

Their conversation came to a natural end when they arrived at the building that housed the studio.

The rustic, wooden house was much larger than Suzanne had expected from Claire's casual description of it - nearly forty yards deep and one and a half stories tall - and the back part appeared to have been built into a small hill that stretched all the way down to the wall separating the garden from the street.

All in all, Suzanne was reminded of pictures she had seen of ancient Viking settlements, especially by the heavily sloped roof and the surprisingly narrow windows on the side of the building they were standing at.

"Wow... this is amazing..." Suzanne said, wishing she had brought her phone so she could have taken a picture.

"Oh, this is nothing. Wait 'til you see my patio," Claire said and pulled Suzanne around the corner of the house.

The wooden house was nearly thirty feet across, but the thing that really blew Suzanne's mind was the fact that the entire façade was made up of three, huge sections of glass separated by two very narrow vertical beams.

Stepping up on a flagged patio, Suzanne once again felt her jaw hang somewhere near her chest, but she didn't care. "Wow... the light must be amazing inside! Where's... oh, we're... are we facing south?"

"That's south, yes," Claire said with a grin, pointing towards the horizon. "When the weather's good, which it invariably is here, I have the sun gracing my humble abode from the early hours of the morning to late at night."

"Huh! And this is where you do all your work?"

"Yes. Now, Suzanne, ummm," Claire said and walked over to a table in the center of the patio that had been set with plates for two. "I hope, ummm... that you don't mind a vegetarian dinner. I wouldn't touch meat to save my life, so... anyway, it's tortilla wraps with stir-fried mushrooms and bean sprouts in a thick tomato sauce spiced with oregano and a dash of lemongrass," she continued and removed a shiny aluminum lid from a ceramic pot.

As the heat was liberated, tendrils of steam rose slowly from the pot, releasing a rich smell that drifted across the patio until it found its way near - and into - Suzanne's nostrils.

Struck mute by the unexpected development, it suddenly dawned on Suzanne that Claire had set everything up as a date - and that she was on a date, a *real* date with a woman who may have

been a decade older than her but who looked better than ninety-eight point three percent of the women in her own age group. "Oh! You shouldn't have! Uh, I mean... I mean... oh, that smells delicious," Suzanne mumbled and hurried over to the table to take a long, deep sniff from the pot.

Looking up, Suzanne locked eyes with Claire and held the contact for several seconds until the spell was broken by another throaty laugh from the artist.

"I was a little worried about your reaction," Claire said and pulled out a chair for Suzanne. "I didn't want to make it look like I was sizing you up for a score or anything."

"No, it's... we're cool, Claire. But the interview...? And the off-limits list and all those things?" Suzanne said as she sat down.

"Oh, we can still hold the interview, and I do actually have the list... somewhere. But first, let's eat. Oh, I nearly forgot... is red wine okay with you?"

"Well, I'm driving, so..."

"But not for a while, I hope," Claire said and shot Suzanne a sly wink.

Suzanne didn't really know how to respond to that, so she settled for taking the napkin that had been laid out ahead of her and folding it across her lap with very deliberate moves. "No... not for a while," she said after several heartbeats.

"Good. I'll be right back."

As Claire left the patio and moved into the house through a glass sliding door, Suzanne just stared into empty space, unsure how to react to the feeling that she was about to embark on an adventure unlike any she had ever been on. When she had arrived, she was worried that she might face drenching by punch bowl, but now her mind was filled with completely different - and far more pleasant - images.

"Liquid dinner is served," Claire said as she came back out of the house. She quickly poured a small amount into her own glass and tested it. "Beautiful," she said and filled her glass.

Once Suzanne's glass was full as well, Claire sat down at the table and put the bottle into an empty wine cooler. "Here's to you," she said and raised her glass.

"Your health," Suzanne replied and raised her own. As she sipped the ruby red wine, she noticed the husky look in the artist's laser-sharp emerald green eyes and felt a little spark of lust ignite deep inside her.

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The cozy atmosphere on the patio, the great food and the even better company made Suzanne loosen up and break out into a few bashful giggles at some of the weird, wacky stories the artist told from her time in the Academy of Fine Arts. *'Ha! If Gary and David could see me now... they'd choke on their strawberry milkshakes...'*

"... so all in all, my first exhibition wasn't exactly a positive affair as I'm sure you can gather," Claire said and took a small sip of her red wine.

"Wow, I never knew how much backstabbing there was in the art world. I guess I've always considered it glamorous and... huh. I was definitely wrong there."

Looking over the rim of her glass, the artist shot her guest a little wink. "Well, it can be really nice sometimes. I never knew how pleasant journalists can be... must depend on the individual. Hmmm?"

Suzanne felt a strong blush tint her cheeks so she concentrated on scooping up the last of the thick tomato sauce with a part of the tortilla wrapping. "You know, Claire," she said to steer back to a safe topic, "this was a fantastic dish. Really exquisite."

"Thank you," Claire said with a beaming smile that momentarily faded before coming back at full force. "It's so rare I get to cook for others. I wanted it to be something extra special, but I didn't know if you, well, would like it. Hey, you could have been a hot dog girl..."

The way Claire said it - and the curious expression on her fair face - made Suzanne pucker up her lips and lean back on her chair. *'Did she just ask me what I think she asked me? Sweet Sammy Brown, I think she did... wow. Holy Toot, she really *is* interested... oh Jeez... she's definitely fishing for a response, but... yikes...'*

All this had taken place within the first two heartbeats, but as time passed on, Suzanne knew she had to come up with an answer that would be funny, knowing and maybe even a little flirty - but, much to her despair, she had never been fluent in Flirty. "Well, Claire, it just so happens that I, uh..." she said but came to a stuttering halt. "Uh... tried hot dogs when I was a teenager but they didn't do anything for me."

'How's that for an answer!' Suzanne thought and leaned forward to take her glass.

The curious look on Claire's face changed to a broad grin and she leaned forward to claw the back of Suzanne's hand. "Well, that's nice to know," she said and shot Suzanne another sly wink.

"Uh... yeah. Uh, anyway, would you like to hear why I got interested in journalism? It's a funny little story, actually," Suzanne said to take her mind off the fact that she could still feel the artist's fingers on the back of her hand even though they were long gone - and that her skin felt like it was on fire.

"Oooh, yes please," Claire said and poured some more wine into their glasses.

"Well, it all started when..."

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The next time Suzanne looked at her wristwatch, it suddenly read nine thirty-five. The company she'd had and the conversations they had held had been so pleasant that she hadn't paid any attention to the air losing its warmth, but now that she had become aware of the time, it was very noticeable.

She felt a chill run up and down her arms and rubbed them discreetly, thinking that she should have worn something a bit warmer. That thought made her look at Claire's loose dress, and she furrowed her brow at the apparent fact that the artist didn't seem to be affected at all by the chilly evening air.

"Are you cold?" Claire asked, dabbing the corners of her mouth on a napkin.

"A little. Aren't you?"

"Not particularly. I have a furnace inside me... or so I've been told," Claire said and drained her glass. After putting it down, she pushed back her chair and rose. "Let's go into my den. There's no point in any of us catching a cold."

"Or the flu," Suzanne said with a chuckle as she got up from her chair. "Thank you so much for that wonderful dinner. It was sensational."

"Awww... you're welcome."

"Uh... but the dishes?"

"Ah, leave 'em. I'll fix it in the morning. And besides, I'm dying to show you my home," Claire said and put a hand on the small of Suzanne's back.

Through her denim shirt and the black T, Suzanne could feel that Claire had been right about the furnace - her hand was warm.

Claire moved aside the sliding door and held it open for Suzanne. Once the journalist was inside, she closed the door and locked it. "For protection," she said off Suzanne's puzzled look. "We're never fully safe, not even here in my own, little Garden of Eden."

"I understand. I have two sliders and two safety locks on my apartment door. It's a pain in the rear, but the alternative is worse," Claire said and looked around the first room of the house.

"Mmmm."

Suzanne was surprised to find that the entire ground floor was dedicated to the studio, apart from several support pillars, a pinewood staircase on the left that led to an open, hanging deck upstairs and a small room halfway down to the rear.

It ran the entire length and width of the house but didn't actually consist of much apart from a bare floor that was horrendously discolored by a galaxy of paint stains in every shade known to Woman, stacks of unused and half-finished canvases, an easel where a fresh, white canvas was waiting for Claire to get started on a new painting, and a low sideboard that carried many jars with brushes of all sizes and assorted other tools of the trade.

On an inner shelf in the sideboard, can after can of paint, thinners and acetone were lined up label-forward so they were easy to find and use.

"Wow, now I understand why it wasn't a candlelight dinner!" Suzanne said, staring at the row of highly flammable cans.

"Yeah, that would be suicidal," Claire said, flicking an imaginary piece of lint off the corner of the new canvas. "I don't have anything in here that could create a spark. I know that some artists sell even better after they've passed on, but I'd like to push that off for a few more decades, if you don't mind."

"Brrrr, yes... preferably," Suzanne said and got the shivers.

"I didn't mean to be morbid. Sorry," Claire said with an apologetic smile. "Anyway... that's the studio. Would you like to come upstairs into my den and have a drink?"

"Uh... well, I'm driving, so..."

"But not for a while, I hope," Claire said, repeating the exact same words she had used earlier. When Suzanne didn't answer at once, Claire ascended the pinewood staircase and eventually turned on a light in the kitchen somewhere up on the hanging deck.

Suzanne kept standing in the studio, chewing on her cheek and digesting the artist's words - and their meaning. She had no ring on her finger, no strings on her arms that she needed to dance to, no wife who would call and ask where she was or how long she'd be. "No... not for a while," Suzanne said quietly, shuffling over to the staircase where she began a slow ascent.

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The upper deck was made solely of naked pinewood that had been lacquered to bring out the timber's natural texture. Here and there, rugs in colorful Native American designs graced the floor, but it was mostly bare. The first section was a cozy den with a couch, a low table, two armchairs and a sideboard up against the wall with a small stereo and a few empty vases made of porcelain.

A narrow hallway led off to the left, and Suzanne went down it to search for Claire - she found her in a kitchenette that was opposite the bathroom. "Wow, you have such a wonderful home..." she said, leaning against the doorjamb.

"Thank you. I love it here," Claire said, pulling several bottles out of a cupboard and onto the kitchen table. "What's your poison? I have gin, scotch, bourbon, Southern Comfort, Amaretto, Blue Curaçao, white rum, dark rum, several kinds of vodka... uh, ouzo, brandy, uh... Martini, Campari, Pernod..."

Suzanne leaned her head back and laughed out loud at the comical sight of Claire buried behind an entire regiment of bottles of various sizes. "Oh! I'm sorry I laugh, but it just looks so tootin' funny," Suzanne said and pushed her glasses up her nose.

" 's okay, I didn't mean to take them all down... it just sorta happened," Claire said with a chuckle.

"Claire, I hope you don't feel I'm implying anything... but why do you have all these bottles here? I mean... there's enough for an entire frat house!"

"To tell you the truth, they're Dwayne Moffatt's... he always gives me liquor for some reason. I don't actually drink much, but... he still gives them to me," Claire said and picked at a label on one of the bottles of scotch.

"Maybe he doesn't know you're not interested, you know, as a -"

"Oh, it's not that. He's as gay as I am."

"Oh... really? Huh." Suzanne went up to the many bottles and began to look at the labels. "Okay. Uh, I'm going to reveal my age now and ask for a white rum and Coke... if you have a Coke."

"I certainly do, Suzanne. On the rocks and with a dash of lemon?"

"Oh yes, please. That would be a treat."

"All right," Claire said and started putting the bottles she wouldn't need back into the cupboard. "Tell you what, why don't you find a seat and kick back a little, and I'll make you a baby rum and Coke... okay?" - she added a sly wink to take the sting out of the insult.

"Oooh, maybe with a pink stirrer?" Suzanne said and returned the wink.

"Good idea!"

The two women locked eyes again and let the easy banter sink in. A warm, genuine smile slowly spread over Suzanne's face; one that was matched every step of the way by the artist who even added a nose crinkle and a throaty hum that made Suzanne's nape hairs stand on edge all over again.

The moment went on for several heartbeats, but it was eventually broken when Claire turned around and put more bottles back into the cupboard.

Suzanne let out the breath she had been holding and nipped a few hairs off her arm - the pain that shot up confirmed that she was where she thought she was, doing something she couldn't fathom was really happening. "Uh, before I sit down, I need to use your bathroom, please."

"Sure, it's that door right there," Claire said and pointed at the door opposite the kitchenette.

Once nature's call had been heeded, Suzanne unzipped and kicked off her ankle boots and sat down on the comfortable couch that overlooked the garden beyond the glass façade. The look from the hanging deck was amazing; because of the way the house was designed, it was impossible to see that they weren't at ground level.

The leading edge of the deck was a two foot-tall pane of glass with a pinewood railing that ran from the wall to the staircase, adding a horizontal guideline to the visual feast.

Sighing, Suzanne shook her head slowly, stunned by the stark contrast to her own home on the fourth floor of an anonymous apartment complex made of concrete and steel.

Just then, Claire came out of the kitchenette, whistling a jaunty tune and carrying a wooden tray with two glasses, two napkins and a tomato red stirrer shaped like a hand with the fingers spread out wide. "Look what I found!" she said as she put down the tray on the low coffee table.

"Oh, wow! I'll cherish it forever!" Suzanne said and grabbed the stirrer.

"Awww..." Claire said and put her hands on her heart. After turning off one of a pair of upright lamps to make the light less glaring, she quickly took off her sandal-like slippers, sat down next to Suzanne and folded her legs up underneath her.

Suzanne froze momentarily and focused intently on the stirrer so she didn't need to think about the reincarnated Goddess sitting so close to her. After a few heartbeats, she realized that she was behaving oddly and took Claire's glass and one of the napkins. "Here you go," she said and gave the items to the artist.

"Thank you. I do have hands you know," Claire said and gently nudged her shoulder against her younger guest.

Chuckling, Suzanne reached over to take her own napkin and glass. "Oh, I've noticed." She began to stir the rum and Coke with her tomato red stirrer until it was well and truly mixed.

"Mmmm?"

"Listen, uh... Claire..." - Suzanne leaned back and wet her lips. When that wasn't enough to coax her courage out of hiding and into action, she took a sip of her drink and discovered that it was made just right. "I've sort of been wondering..."

"Yeah?"

"You're a highly desirable woman... you could have anybody. Goodness knows there were scores of beautiful women at the exhibition, and, uh, they were all your models, so uh... I guess I'm trying to ask... why me?"

"Suzanne, if you're uncomfortable, we can-"

"No! No, no, no," Suzanne said and hurriedly put a hand on Claire's leg before the moment was shattered for good. "I wouldn't want to be anywhere else in the world right now, believe me... I just don't understand why you... what I've done to deserve it. Was my article really that good?" she continued, offering Claire a smile to show that she was being sincere in her confusion.

"Well," Claire said and took a gentle sip of her premixed Vodka Cranberry before putting it back on the tray. "I'll tell you why. Last Saturday, at the gallery, you were the only one of the journalists I spoke to who seemed genuinely interested in me and my paintings."

"But... that interview was a disaster!"

Claire chuckled and ran her fingers down Suzanne's arm. "Well, it wasn't the worst one I've ever been in, let me tell you."

"I think I know what you're talking about... the punch bowl incident...?"

"Oh, you know about that?"

"Well, it's all over the Internet..."

"Huh, figures. That man was an art critic... only he didn't critique my work. I'm used to people making derogatory comments about my work so that wasn't why I flipped out. No, what he did was to fabricate tasteless rumors about myself and a woman who was married to an actor at the time... it was an open secret that their marriage was on the slide. I guess there were headlines to be made, hence the filthy, malicious lies about me and her. The woman divorced her husband soon after."

"I'm so sorry... there are some bastards like that out there. But there are many great reporters and journalists, too..."

"Oh, I know," Claire said and caressed Suzanne's arm a bit more.

"Did you really kick him in the-"

"Oh, yes!"

"Sweet Sammy Brown..."

"We settled out of court... oh hell, I don't wanna talk about that anymore. Back to last Saturday... when I saw you and your youthful enthusiasm and nervousness, I just thought... wow! I need to spend some time with her!"

Suzanne snickered in a highly embarrassed fashion and ducked her head way down between her shoulders.

"What?" Claire said and moved her hand up to rub Suzanne's upper back. "Nobody ever told you you're one hell of a wow-girl? I find that very hard to believe."

"Oh, I've... well, I guess people have always called me a goof. And then they called me a lezzie goof," Suzanne said somberly and adjusted her glasses.

Claire smiled and let her sparkling eyes roam across Suzanne's body. "I haven't seen you do any goofy things while you've been here, Suzanne. What I have seen, however, is a smart, attractive, charming, witty young lady with a knockout smile and eyes to die for."

"Ohhh, you're gonna make me blush," Suzanne said and turned away from the artist. "Phew, it's hot in here," she continued, fluttering the hem of her v-neck T-shirt to get some cool air down her suddenly heated front.

Claire chuckled and moved her hand slowly down Suzanne's back. "Maybe your rum and Coke is too strong?"

"Yeah, could be," Suzanne said and turned back towards the artist. "Thank you so much. Nobody has ever said anything like that to me... and I do mean 'ever.' "

Her deep blue eyes locked onto the artist's emerald green ones for the umpteenth time that evening and saw plenty of warmth and sincerity sent her way. A part of her wanted to go for a kiss while the connection was there, but another part whispered in her ear that she should slow down. In the end, the cautious part won out, though only just.

"You're welcome, Suzanne. Every single word is true. Hey, do you want to listen to some music?"

"Oh, sure."

"Jazz?" Claire said and rose from the couch. In two quick steps, she was at the stereo, found a CD from a small, gray aluminum rack and inserted it into the player.

"Oh, well, jazz... I'm not exactly..."

"I think you'll like this album... it touches me profoundly whenever I listen to it," Claire said as she adjusted the volume.

After pressing Play, she went back to the couch, but hesitated before sitting down. As an instrumental started playing, she took the coffee table by the edges - mindful of their drinks - and shifted it to the side. The two chairs quickly followed, and finally, she sat down on the Native American rug with her back against the couch. "C'mon... let's make it real cozy," she said, patting the floor next to her.

While Suzanne slipped down onto the rug, Claire reached for the tray with their drinks and presented the rum and Coke to her guest once she was in place with her long legs stretched out ahead of her.

"Thank you," Suzanne said and took a sip.

"You're welcome," Claire purred, moving up against the younger woman's side.

On the CD, the introductory instrumental faded out and was replaced by a female vocalist who began to recite a poem in such a rich, smoky alto that a pleasant buzz crept across Suzanne's chest and left her nipples standing alert. The recitation was soon joined by a distant muted trombone that underscored a few of the lines and counteracted others.

"Wow... who on Earth is that? I've never heard anything like it," Suzanne said, staring at the stereo.

"A little known all-female jazz ensemble called Sister Wolf. Two sisters and their best friend from the music academy. They're trying to break through... unfortunately, there's not much room for jazz in this hectic day and age."

"You sound like you know them?"

"I do, I've met them several times. I actually helped them finance the CD we're listening to. They typically play at very intimate venues... you know, the progressive bars and places like that."

"Well, I don't go to those kinds of bars to be honest. What's the poem she's reciting?"

"Oh, it's from a journal written by one of the female beat poets from the 1960s when she traveled India... I forget her name. Told you you'd like it," Claire said and nudged Suzanne's side.

"Yeah..." The song blossomed and the smoky vocalist was soon joined by a much fairer voice who filled out the background with wailing harmonies that mixed perfectly with the trombone. "That lead singer... she's not exactly straight, is she?"

Chuckling, Claire took her Vodka Cranberry and held the cool glass to her chest, leaving a line of little droplets of dew. "None of them are."

"Wow... both sisters?"

"Yeah."

"Hm!"

With that, a contented silence fell over the journalist and the artist. Suzanne glanced at Claire who was sitting so close to her that she could feel the heat of her body through her shirt. Feeling bold, she snuck her arm around the slim but strong waist and pulled her even closer.

When Claire didn't object, and in fact leaned in to rest her head on Suzanne's shoulder, Suzanne closed her eyes and allowed the wonderful music and the cozy mood to sweep over her and soothe her soul.

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CHAPTER 3

As the CD went on, the music became livelier and the final song was a stirring rendition of an old traditional that made both Suzanne and Claire wiggle back and forth on the Native American rug while singing along joyously with their arms hooked inside each other.

A wah-wah by a muted trumpet marked the final note and Suzanne leaned her head back against the edge of the couch and laughed out loud. "Wow... I don't think I've ever heard When The Saints Go Marching In quite like that before... Sweet Sammy Brown, that lead singer had a sexy voice."

"I'll tell her she has a new fan the next time I go see them," Claire said and snuggled up to her wiggle-partner.

"Do you know if their music is online?"

"I don't think so... but who knows these days. Maybe someone pirated them. I know for a fact they've only made a limited run of compact discs."

"Oh... I don't have a CD player," Suzanne said with a chuckle.

Claire pulled back and stared at her young guest. "So you only listen to music on your phone or online?"

"Pretty much, yeah. You don't?"

"I don't even have a computer," Claire said and rested her head against Suzanne's shoulder.

Now it was Suzanne's turn to pull back and stare at her older host with a slack-jawed expression on her face. "Uh, I... you... wow. I didn't think that was possible today."

"Jesus, you make me feel like I was a hundred and fifty years old!" Claire said with an embarrassed chuckle and promptly buried her face in the nook of Suzanne's shoulder. "My sponsor have several up in the mansion that I can use whenever I feel like it... which is almost never. There's always something wrong with them when I try. Ah, they just don't like me... and the feeling is mutual!"

"Oh," Suzanne said, acutely aware that the gorgeous artist had moved herself so close that her shaggy mop of white-blond hair was tickling the side of Suzanne's throat.

The news that Claire didn't have a computer made Suzanne look around the den to see what else was missing. She had already noticed that the artist didn't have a TV either, but the thing that really struck her was the complete absence of personal items, like photos or the little mementos that everybody seemed to collect. The two porcelain vases on top of the sideboard were the only objects that didn't seem to fit with the clean lines of the rest of the den, although Suzanne expected that other items - most likely books and magazines - were hidden behind the sideboard's two doors.

"Hey..." Suzanne said and gave Claire a little squeeze that the artist responded to with a cute sigh. "May I ask you a personal question?"

"Ummm... sure."

"Why aren't there any photos here? I think I have two dozen family pictures on the walls of my apartment..."

"Well... I don't have a family," Claire said with her face pressed into the side of Suzanne's chest.

The resigned tone in Claire's voice made Suzanne look towards the heavens and feel like giving herself a fair-sized smack across her brow for bringing it up. "Oh... oh, toot, I'm so sorry, Claire. I didn't mean to pry."

"It's okay. You couldn't know. I had a younger brother but he was killed in a bicycle accident while he was still a little kid. My father's disowned me because of who I am and what I do... and my Mom died of cancer, oh, nine years ago now. The two vases by the stereo were the only items of hers my father allowed me to have. There's a photo of her downstairs, by the way."

"Claire, I'm so sorry. It was rude of me to even ask," Suzanne said and began to pull away, but Claire's strong hands kept her in place.

"Don't go."

The simple, whispered plea was enough for Suzanne's breath to hitch and her stomach to do a pleasant flip-flop. She felt a warm tidal wave roll inside her; a feeling that was only intensified when she looked at the hopeful, sparkling gaze in the artist's emerald green orbs.

"I know this will sound pathetic," Claire said quietly, "but for the first time in a very long time, I'm... well, happy. Right here, right now. With you. I know we're moving at a breakneck pace, but... hell, I can't help it. I have never connected with anyone the way I do with you... please tell me you feel it too..."

"I do," Suzanne whispered. The attraction and the connection between them were undeniable - even magnetic - and she could do nothing but to lean in and brush her lips gently against Claire's silky soft mouth.

When the first, gentle brush was responded to by a sensual sigh that clearly spelled out an urgent need for more, Suzanne moved around a bit to have better access - then she closed her eyes and claimed the artist's lips in a warm, loving kiss.

Overcome by the strong current of need and lust that began to swirl inside her, Suzanne sighed breathlessly into Claire's mouth, a reaction that was matched almost at once by a moan and an insistent tongue that traced Suzanne's lips.

Suzanne wasn't slow in allowing Claire access to her mouth, and soon, their tongues danced against each other in a frenzied - yet loving - tango.

The need for air eventually overpowered the need to stay connected, but they only moved back an inch and looked at each other with such an intense gaze that it was very clear to both of them where they were headed.

"You're a great kisser," Claire whispered, tracing Suzanne's cheekbone and nose with a finger.

"Thank you... you're even better."

"No, you're the best."

"I can't say for sure... I need some more proof," Suzanne said and claimed Claire's lips again to test which of them really was the best kisser.

When they separated again, Claire chuckled throatily and began to nibble at Suzanne's lips. Moving on, she ran her tongue over the corners of the journalist's mouth and took her upper lip between her own in a rather suggestive manner.

The cheeky look in Claire's eyes gave Suzanne an emotional jolt that went due south, and she couldn't stop a new moan from escaping her lips. To stop the sweet torture, she put her arms around Claire's back and gave her a little squeeze.

"Do you know what I like about you?" Claire whispered as she pulled back from Suzanne's lips.

"No?"

"You're not jaded. These days, nearly every woman I'd like to know better is a cynical creature with a What Have You Done For Me Lately attitude... but not you. You're not playing a game, you... you respond immediately... you let me know if you like what I do... it's just so refreshing. Stimulating."

"Wow... I do all those things?"

"Yeah!" Claire said with one of her trademark throaty chuckles that - as always - sent an electrical current down Suzanne's body.

"Wow," Suzanne said and studied the gorgeous artist whose fair face was mere inches away from her own. The shaggy hair, the delicate eyebrows, the emerald green orbs, the faint dusting of freckles on her cheeks, the pert nose and the wonderfully kissable lips all came together and formed what could only be described as a Goddess among women. *'Careful... you're falling in love with her. What if she's only looking for entertainment for tonight?'* Suzanne's conscience whispered in her ear, but in her heart, she knew that she had already crossed that particular threshold.

"Claire-" -- "Suzanne-" they both said as one.

"You first." -- "Go on," came the inevitable reply.

Grinning from ear to ear, Suzanne made a zipping gesture across her lips to tell the artist that she should go ahead.

"Suzanne, what would you say if I..." Claire stuttered to a halt and held a finger to her lips, for the first time visibly unsure of how her guest would react. "Well, if I asked if I could make a drawing of you...?"

"A drawing?"

"A very special drawing."

"Oh, uh... oh! You're talking about a n-" -Images of Claire's paintings filled Suzanne's mind. In a vivid flash-forward, she saw a blue-and-red nude picture of herself hanging on the wall of the Avant-Art Gallery, and she saw herself mingling with the other models Claire had used, shaking hands or kissing cheeks with some and giving others the cold shoulder, just like she had seen Shayna and Crystal do the week before - then she saw her mother flat on her back and in dire need of mouth-to-mouth resuscitation from discovering that her little baby had done something so adult and daring.

At first, Suzanne's mind was dead against it, but deep down inside, she felt a spark ignite at the thought of modeling nude for Claire. Like Crystal had said, it was something for the ages, something she could look at and be proud of when she was an old woman.

Because she had been the first among her peers to mature and fill out, she had always been very conscious about her body - an emotional inhibition that had followed her into her adulthood. Suzanne thought about Veronica always ribbing her about her sensible 'schoolmarm' skirt suits and the like, and suddenly felt excited about the prospects of showing her older colleague that she was very much a woman under the heavily clothing. *'And besides... I trust Claire completely, even if I've only known her for such a short time. I know she won't make anything filthy or pornographic.'*

The initial look of shock on Suzanne's face slowly melted away and was replaced by a wide, genuine smile. "I'd like that very much, Claire," she said and pushed her square, metal-rim glasses up her nose.

The artist released the breath she had been holding and shook her head slowly. "Boy, you had me worried there. You should have seen the look on your face. I hope you don't feel I'm pressuring you into it...?"

"No. If I were, I'd say get lost in a heartbeat," Suzanne said, adding a wink to take the sting out of the words.

"My kind of girl," Claire said and leaned in to give Suzanne a quick kiss on the lips. "Okay... I need to set it up, so... uh, so how about you found a new CD we could listen to while we draw a pretty picture?"

"That's a deal..." Suzanne said and kissed Claire back. "...if I can figure out the old technology."

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Five minutes later, Suzanne found a CD called What Now My Love by Herb Alpert's Tijuana Brass. The colorful cover appealed to her and she opened the CD tray and inserted the disc. After finding and pressing the Play button, she took a step back to wait for the album to start. The first tune opened with a bouncy South American beat that made her wiggle her hips all the way down the pinewood staircase.

While Suzanne had selected the music, Claire had spread out a large, discarded duvet cover that she used when she worked with a live model. As Suzanne came down the stairs, Claire finished the makeshift set by adding a few pillows so Suzanne would have something to lie on or play with, depending on what they agreed on. "Herb Alpert, eh?" she said as she dug out her sketchbook and her charcoal pencil.

"Is that someone I should know? I just picked it because the lady on the cover looked really nice," Suzanne said and moved up to stand in the middle of the studio.

Claire turned around and put her hand on her forehead for effect. "Oh, the kids these days!"

Suzanne laughed, but the laughter died down when she realized that a major part of the process of making a nude painting or drawing included the model undressing and sitting like a side of

beef at a meat parade. When she sought out Claire - who was still finding her tools - to get her worries under wraps, she could feel a calmness fall over her; a calmness and a sense of trust she had rarely felt when it came to the unfortunate combination of her naked body and another woman's eyes.

A brief, nervous smile creased her lips as she took off her denim shirt and her socks and hung them over the backrest of an old, wooden chair that stood just outside the duvet cover.

"Oh... not the chair," Claire said and pointed the charcoal pencil at the chair. "Ummm... we may need it."

"Oh... okay," Suzanne said and looked around for another place to put her clothes.

"Nah, tell you what, put 'em on the chair. We'll do something different... the pillows will suffice. Yeah... have you thought about which position you'd like to appear in?"

"Gosh, no!" Suzanne said and unbuttoned her jeans. She felt a new wave of uncertainty flow over her and decided that she'd take her T-shirt off first. After putting her glasses temporarily on the seat of the chair, she quickly whipped off her T and crossed her arms over her chest.

Claire offered Suzanne a supportive smile that gave her confidence a little boost, and she lowered her arms and picked up her glasses, thinking that it had to be one of the top-five most awkward things she had ever done.

"Don't fret, Suzanne. We've got all the time in the world. We won't start until you're one hundred percent at ease. Ummm... usually, I have the worklights on to catch all the details, but tonight, I'll just settle for what I can get from that uplight," Claire said and pointed at a lamp that stood next to the chair.

"Thank you," Suzanne said, pushed down her jeans and stepped out of them.

The happy, bouncy Hispanic rhythms did their best to add a cheerful spirit to the proceedings, and slowly, Suzanne felt that she was ready to reveal parts of herself that less than a handful of women had seen since her birth twenty-five years earlier, a figure that included her mother.

Exhaling to make the catch easier to use, she reached behind her back and opened the little lock on her bra. The black garment became loose and eventually fell into her hands, liberating a pair of well-rounded, slightly heavy breasts.

Suzanne felt her cheeks burn like they had rarely burned before, but the look of admiration that played across Claire's fair face gave her the boost she needed, and she padded over to the pillows and knelt down.

"You are so beautiful I can hardly find the words," Claire said, emphasizing every syllable of every word. She hurriedly put down her charcoal pencil and closed the distance between them - once by Suzanne's side, she leaned down and claimed the journalist's lips in a sweet, little kiss.

"Thank you," Suzanne whispered once they separated. As Claire went back to the sketchbook that she had placed on the easel, Suzanne scrunched up her face and began to think about which position she'd like the best. A movie that she had seen recently crept into her mind, and she let out a little *Yip!*

Quickly removing her undies and throwing them aside, she folded her legs up underneath her and sat like the popular image of a Mermaid. A moment later, she shuffled her legs from her right side to her left side for better comfort. "How about this one, Claire?" she said and put her arms into her lap.

"Mmmm... that's a very good starting point. If you... ummm... if you put your arms behind your head so your gorgeous torso is stretched, it'll be absolutely perfect," Claire said, surveying the setup with one eye closed and one as sharp as a laser.

"Like this?" Suzanne said and folded her arms behind her head. The movement naturally exposed her bosom and made her feel quite vulnerable, though at the same time, she felt a spark of lust pinging around in her heart.

"Mmmm... if you... hmmm..."

Seeing the artist's scrunched-up face, Suzanne shifted a little to the left and cocked her body ever so slightly towards the side where her legs were, thinking that it would make her look like she was about to dive into a swimming pool.

"Don't. Move. A. Muscle!" Claire said and hurriedly began to draw the first lines of the sketch that would later form the basis of her painting.

Suffering through the slightly uncomfortable pose, Suzanne watched the charcoal pencil storm across the sketchbook, adding soft and hard lines, curves, shaded areas and various details at a feverish pitch. She knew she was watching a master at work so she didn't want to say a word out of fear of breaking the spell that had so obviously claimed Claire St. John - in fact, she hardly even breathed.

Seventeen furious minutes later, Claire nodded repeatedly while she finished the sketch by adding the last few details. "Uh-huh... not long to go now," she said, looking from the sketch to Suzanne and back again. Several times, she went back to the sketch and adjusted a few minor items.

"Thank God," Suzanne croaked.

"Okay... okay... o... kay... done!" Claire said and took the sketch off the easel. Quickly signing and dating it, she brought it over to Suzanne. "And here we go."

Letting out a long, slow sigh - not to mention letting down her arms and stretching her legs - Suzanne promptly keeled over and flopped onto the pillows where she panted quite hard for the first few seconds.

"You could have breathed, silly!" Claire said and knelt down next to her newest model.

Taking both pillows, Suzanne used one to cover her center and the other to put across her breasts. "Well, I didn't want to disturb your concentration!"

"It would have been worse if you had fainted," Claire said with a chuckle. "Look, it turned out pretty good. I still need to make a few, little adjustments here and there, but that's normal."

Holding the pillows in place proved to be troublesome, so Suzanne turned over onto her stomach so she could have both hands free to study the drawing. Even though seventeen minutes wasn't very long at all, the drawing was all but complete. Claire had added several dotted lines and scribbled notes on top of and next to the image, but the nude body was unmistakably that of Suzanne Mitchell.

Her pose had turned out remarkably well with the centerpiece being her gently twisted torso from the curve of her hip bone, past her belly button and into an oblique line just below her breasts. The same visual guideline moved around her breasts and up to her armpits from where it disappeared up her arms. "Wow... it's just... fantastic. I'm just... wow. That's me! I can't believe it!"

"I get that a lot," Claire said with a chuckle.

"Wow, I can't wait to show this to Veronica! She won't believe her eyes."

"And Veronica is... who?" Claire said, frowning her brow.

"Oh, my colleague at the Observer. She's the one who gave me a kick in the rear when I fretted about not going to the exhibition last weekend."

"Uh-huh? Good. I think I'll send her a case of champagne," Claire said cockily.

"What do the dotted lines mean?"

"Oh, that's where I'll add the blue or red strokes. You look like you're about to dive into a pool-"

"That's the image I was trying to convey!" Suzanne said with a broad grin.

"And it certainly came across," Claire said and patted Suzanne's inviting rear. "Anyway, I think I'll use a blue background and red strokes on this one. 'Cos you're hot, you know."

"Oh, toot... thank you," Suzanne said and blushed for the umpteenth time. To get back to a subject that wouldn't make her cheeks burn, Suzanne put a finger on the drawing and traced her

throat and jaw that had only been drawn as very faint outlines. "Claire, why do you never draw the faces?"

Clearly looking for an answer, Claire pulled up in her dress and sat down on the floor next to Suzanne. The artist chewed on her lips for a little while and then shrugged. "I guess it's because I don't want anyone to be able to identify them. Most of the models come with their fiancées or spouses, but some don't. Some don't want to be identified, maybe because of jealous partners or whatever. I did draw faces on the first few, but... well."

"Oh... I can definitely understand that," Suzanne said and looked at the drawing of herself.

"The funny thing is that it was **my** girlfriend who got so jealous she couldn't stand living with me anymore, not those of the models," Claire said quietly without explaining further.

Suzanne kept quiet for nearly a minute, but then her curiosity got the better of her and she looked up at the artist. "Oxana Rhajib?"

"Yeah. Hey... you're not supposed to ask me about her... it's the first item on the off-limits list!" Claire said and pretended to pout.

A brief flashback to the punch bowl incident rushed through Suzanne's mind and she hurriedly looked down her very nude self and then around the studio to look for anything that could be thrown at her. When there weren't any suitable objects, she let out an embarrassed snicker and ducked her head down onto the duvet cover. "Sorry," she said in a muffled voice.

"Oh, I forgive you," Claire said and put a warm hand on Suzanne's bare back.

A few moments went by where the only sounds came from their breathing. Suzanne was beginning to feel the chill creep into her extremities when Claire rose from the floor and went over to the upright.

The artist kept standing at the lamp for a few seconds before she turned it off and let the studio fall into semi-darkness, leaving the room illuminated only by the second upright on the hanging deck and the ghostly blue-white rays of moonlight that came in from the large glass façade.

Wondering what was going on, Suzanne sat up on her thighs. Her modesty was well protected by the darkness so she didn't even bother to pick up the pillows. She could feel that the mood had changed somehow, but she didn't know if her mentioning of Claire's old flame had anything to do with it.

Claire slid back through the darkness but stopped a few paces from the sitting Suzanne. With a sensual sigh, she opened two small buttons on her sleeves to let them flutter freely. Moving another step closer, she reached up and released two rings that held her loose, Goddess-like dress on her shoulders.

As the delicate garment fell to the floor and Claire's toned, nude body was revealed, Suzanne gasped loudly at the sight of the artist standing with only a small low-rise pantie covering her most private area. A mule kick of lust hit her squarely in the lowest part of her gut and spread rapidly to other parts of her body, creating a prickly, warm sensation that swept her entire being. Rising quickly, she closed the distance between herself and the woman she had no doubt was Aphrodite personified.

Up close, even in the semi-darkness, it was easy for Suzanne to see that Claire's body was even more gorgeous than she had predicted. The strong legs, the abdominal muscles, the smallish but perfect breasts, the sculpted shoulders and the toned arms - the older woman's body was a study in the effects of exercise, yet it had only increased her beauty and sexiness instead of detracting from it like it often did for those who didn't know when to stop. "Wow... just, wow," Suzanne whispered on her way to claiming the artist's lips in a sweet kiss.

"Do you like what you see?" Claire whispered back once they separated.

"Like? Oh, toot... you are... wow, so beautiful... so sexy."

"Thank you," Claire whispered and pulled Suzanne into a tender embrace. The two women discovered that they were a perfect fit; like two adjacent pieces of a jigsaw puzzle, their bodies melted into the other and were able to touch from head to toe without anything getting in the way.

As the tips of Suzanne's breasts pressed up against Claire's warm body, the result was immediate. An electrical current ran from her nipples and due south, and it wasn't long before she felt her skin catch fire from Claire's tender touch as the artist's skilled hands roamed Suzanne's back and rear.

She was unable to keep a sensual sigh inside her and she simply had to find Claire's lips again or else she'd burst at the seams. Fortunately, they were close by.

Kissing and nibbling at each other's lips, the two women held each other tight and gently rocked back and forth to an imaginary beat, listening to each other's rapid heartbeats and simply following their deepest desires. Their hands were everywhere, drawing intricate patterns on their heated skin and going on journeys of exploration to seek out the zones where their new lover-to-be responded the best.

For Suzanne, that was her throbbing, super-sensitive center that was practically begging for the artist's fingers to begin the intimate dance of love. A tidal wave of heat rolled inside her that she was sure Claire could feel through their contact. She knew it was futile to even think of containing it so she didn't bother to try - instead, she leaned in and reclaimed Claire's lips. When her tongue traced the soft mouth, she was immediately invited inside.

After a little while, Claire pulled back slightly and took Suzanne's hands in her own. With a sly wink, she led the two of them towards the pinewood staircase.

During the slow ascent, Suzanne's heart beat impossibly fast in her chest. She knew exactly where they were going, but it wasn't until Claire reached the door to the bedroom down the hall that she actually dared to believe it - believe that she was about to make love to one of the most desirable women she had ever met.

The handle on the door to the bedroom proved problematic for Claire as she tried to open it behind her back and with her lips attached to Suzanne's, but they finally managed to get inside.

A small reading lamp on the nightstand was quickly turned on, and the colorful Native American quilt and the spread that covered the bed were equally quickly thrown onto the floor.

With a breathless moan, Claire put her strong hands on Suzanne's shoulders and pushed her backwards onto the Queen-sized bed where she bounced twice, squealing like a kid at a funfair.

At once, Suzanne took off her glasses and put them on the nightstand next to the bed. Scooting up on the comfortable bed - and relishing the fresh scent of clean sheets - she couldn't believe her eyes as she took in the impressive sight of Claire standing at the foot of the bed, appearing almost electric and panting like a wild animal. With a broad grin, Suzanne put out her hand to invite Claire into her own bed.

The artist accepted the invitation and quickly shed her undies before climbing up into the foot-end like a tigress on the prowl. Crawling on all fours, she never took her eyes off Suzanne's as she edged closer and closer to her.

When they were finally close enough for physical contact, Claire went straight in for the kill and began to nibble and bite teasingly at Suzanne's throat.

Suzanne felt her insides clench at the artist's touch and she couldn't stop a moan from escaping her lips. Feeling her skin catch fire, she wanted to give as much as she was getting, so she wrapped her arms around Claire's body and turned them over so she was on top.

As they moved, their legs entwined, and Claire's knee happened to brush against Suzanne's sensitive center. The touch was brief but highly effective, and for a moment, Suzanne forgot all about returning the favor - all she could do was to lean her head back and moan.

The throaty chuckle that followed from Claire was enough for Suzanne to redouble her efforts in making sure that it was an equal game. Leaning down, she kissed the same spots Claire had nibbled at before, only she added a trail of wet, warm kisses from Claire's collarbone and down toward the swells of her breasts.

Suzanne thought the warm, flushed skin under her lips tasted so deliciously that she simply couldn't stop feasting on it. Moving with deliberate slowness, her tongue put down a wet trail around Claire's right breast, a move that made the artist moan and arch up into Suzanne's body.

Just as she was about to move her tongue closer to the enticing nipple that stood erect in the center, Claire suddenly grabbed hold of Suzanne's arms and turned them over again.

Pinned down under the white-blond Goddess who immediately straddled her hips, Suzanne watched in wide-eyed awe as Claire started pleasing her by running her skilled fingers all over her skin, drawing abstract patterns on her upper chest, around her breasts, on her sides, her stomach and down to her abdomen.

The sensations were so strong that Suzanne leaned her head back and let out a groan that sounded like it came from her very core. Breathless and super-sensitive, she reached out to pull Claire down for a kiss, but the artist had other plans.

Moving down next to her young lover, she only came as far as the full breasts where she began to feast on the slightly olive-toned flesh and the erect peaks.

Another deep groan shot through Suzanne's throat and she could already feel the pressures starting to build inside her. Not wanting to climax so soon, she reached down and caressed Claire's hair.

When the artist looked up, Suzanne offered her a husky smile. "Please... take it easy... okay?" she breathed, earning herself a nod and a wink.

Claire kissed her way back up to Suzanne's face. For a few moments, the two women were content with lying side by side and gazing deeply into each other's eyes, but, predictably, they couldn't stay away from each other for too long and soon leaned in to claim the soft, inviting lips of their lover.

The kiss started chaste but rapidly grew in intensity until Claire moaned into Suzanne's open mouth.

Suzanne felt that was the perfect invitation to carry on where she had left off earlier, and turned them over one more time so she was on top. Grinning broadly, she zoomed in on the artist's breasts and nipples that were visibly begging for someone to tend to them.

Wanting to heed the call, she wrapped her lips around Claire's left nipple and gently flicked her tongue across the hard tip. When Claire responded favorably by sighing sensually, Suzanne really put her back into giving her new lover the best possible rush and went to work caressing the erect nipple and the soft mound to the best of her abilities.

Once the left breast was well loved, Suzanne shifted to Claire's right where she started over while continuing to stimulate the left nipple with her fingers, quickly earning herself a few breathless groans and muted, nonsensical pleas for more.

Suzanne could hear and feel from the sighing moans and the trembling, heated skin under her lips that Claire was already well on her way to her release, so she decided to leave the beautiful peaks behind and inch down to the golden triangle of closely cropped hair.

On her way there, she noticed the faint outline of a surgical scar on the lower right side of Claire's otherwise smooth stomach and briefly wondered if it had been an operation to remove

the appendix. With the golden prize so close, she didn't have time to think about appendixes and soon left the area behind to concentrate on the really important things.

Suzanne scooted down to the foot-end of the bed to be in the best position to please her older lover's pink, glistening flesh. For the briefest of moments, she was worried her relative lack of experience would mean that Claire wouldn't get the maximum of out of the lovemaking, but the throaty, husky moan that escaped from Claire's lips when she leaned in and closed her mouth on the heated wetness proved that she was doing it right.

With Claire breathing heavily and wrapping her thighs around Suzanne's head and shoulders, Suzanne soon found a tempo that worked for both of them. Allowing the ancient instincts to take control over her motions, she did everything she could think of and was rewarded by a series of increasingly throaty groans.

Then the moment came - Claire stilled for a second and then bucked wildly, groaning out loud and crying Suzanne's name in a raw voice that sent a flurry of goosebumps all over Suzanne's body.

Suzanne kept at it for a few seconds more to get everything out of her lover, but Claire soon reached down and touched Suzanne's hair to signal that she needed a break.

Quickly wiping the fluid off on the sheets, Suzanne climbed up and pulled Claire into a tender embrace. When she caught a glimpse of the fire that burned ferociously in the emerald green eyes - that seemed far darker than normal - her breath hitched and her inner muscles all clenched hard at the same time. To relax, she claimed Claire's lips in a sweet kiss, but they had to break it up almost at once because of the artist's heavy panting.

Claire shook her head and chuckled from somewhere deep in her throat. "That was wonderful... thank you so much," she whispered, reaching up to muss Suzanne's neck and hair.

"No, thank you. I still can't believe we're actually doing... what we're doing," Suzanne said in a matching whisper.

"Can you feel this?" Claire said and gently moved her hand down Suzanne's back to claw the smooth, young skin.

The fingers moving across Suzanne's flushed, sensitive skin left a trail of fire that shot through her with tremendous speed before it pooled at the juncture of her legs. "Uhhhh... uh-huh," she breathed, closing her eyes to get the most out of the probing fingers.

"Good... that'll make this so much better."

Claire suddenly growled like a tigress and flipped Suzanne over. Moving down at once, she began a merciless campaign of drawing abstract patterns on Suzanne's abdomen and inner thighs with her strong, skilled fingers, seemingly intent on paying back the favor with a vengeance.

As the incredible sensations hit Suzanne's nervous system - and as Claire's fingers ventured closer and closer to her throbbing center - her eyes popped wide open and she let out a surprised yelp that quickly turned into a moan and then a deep groan. Soon, she discovered just what experience was worth as the artist seemed to know exactly where to touch, where to tease, where to stroke...

Still moaning from the strong release that had shot through her, Suzanne flopped onto the bed in a breathless, boneless heap. Her body was singing, but even as she tried to regain her breath, a warm shroud of afterglow descended upon her and sent her on a journey she didn't want to come back from.

Claire eased up next to her and got comfortable on the bed that had turned quite messy from their spirited lovemaking. With an exhausted moan, she reached over the side and pulled up the long-forgotten quilt so their glistening bodies wouldn't get too cold.

"Sweet Sammy Brown, that was wonderful..." Suzanne said, taking a very deep breath and letting it out slowly.

"Yeah..." Claire said and snuggled up very tightly to her new lover. "Tell me, why do you say that?"

"Huh, I don't know... I suppose my Mom has taught me that women who use blue language are uncouth."

Claire chuckled throatily and buried herself even closer against Suzanne's warm, flushed body. "You sure didn't have a problem using the F-word just now..."

"Oh... really?"

"Yup. You said, 'Oh, F me,' and I'll bet you know the rest." - The comment was accompanied by a wide, toothy grin.

"I... uh... didn't even notice," Suzanne said with a half-shrug that was impeded by the gorgeous blonde who was resting on her right shoulder. When the only reply was a new chuckle, Suzanne scooted a bit away and rolled onto her right side so she was face to face with the artist. "Mmmm. You. Are. An. Amazing. Lover," she said, punctuating the sentence with a line of little kisses on Claire's eyebrows and face.

"You're not so bad yourself," Claire said and returned the favor by claiming Suzanne's lips in a series of nibbles and kisses.

"No, I mean it. You made me feel so comfortable... so safe... so wanted."

Claire smiled and moved away a stray lock of damp hair that threatened to fall into Suzanne's eyes. "It should always be that way. Shouldn't it? I know too well that it isn't, though."

"No," Suzanne said in a slightly bitter voice. For a moment, she drifted off from the paradise she was in to remember another pillow talk with another lover; a far more experienced woman than Suzanne who had been upset that her young lover hadn't felt comfortable about trying her favorite kink after all. The conversation had turned condescending and spiteful, and for a long while, Suzanne's love life had come to a grinding halt after only her second time in bed with a woman.

"Hey... where'd ya go?" Claire said as she ran an index finger down the outside of Suzanne's eye socket and onto her cheekbone.

"Oh, just revisiting my bad old days."

"What...? Somebody hurt you?!"

"Not physically, no, but..."

"Oh, baby," Claire said and wrapped her arms around Suzanne's body.

Suzanne could feel the air being squeezed out her lungs by Claire's strong arms, but she didn't care one bit. Sighing, she allowed herself to be held by the strong yet gentle woman next to her, leaning into the touch and just wallowing in the warmth of the human cocoon that enveloped her completely. "Thank you," she whispered into the artist's hair.

Claire pulled back and shot Suzanne a blinding smile. "You're welcome."

"It felt great," Suzanne said and returned the grin.

"Yeah. Mind games... I hate them with a passion. With me, what you see is what you get. People have told me I have my heart on my sleeve, and that's probably true. Lord knows it's been broken often enough in the past. But I just can't-"

A sudden thought flashed through Suzanne's mind and she spoke up the second it was formed: "Your heart is safe with me!" - After the words had left her lips, she realized just what she had said and blushed furiously. The blush eventually became so bad she had to close her eyes and press her face into the pillow.

When she hadn't felt a reaction after a few seconds, she cracked open an eyelid to see if Claire had been taken aback by the surprise announcement. Indeed, the artist had a look of shock on her face, but it was the good kind of shock. Her green eyes were sparkling with an emotion Suzanne could only describe as love, and there was a slight tremble around the corners of her mouth, almost like she didn't know whether to laugh or cry.

In the end, she did neither. Leaning in, Claire claimed Suzanne's lips in a sweet, loving kiss that Suzanne could feel was very different to those they had given each other before or while they made love.

Once they separated, Suzanne's right arm was growing numb from being under her body so she shuffled over onto her back. Soon, she began to look around the bedroom while she mulled over the sincere, emotional look on Claire's face. She couldn't see all that much without her glasses, but she didn't want to reach for them, either, since she knew it would suggest that she was ready to break the moment - which she wasn't.

Claire followed her new lover and draped herself over Suzanne's shoulder to keep the contact, sighing contentedly and giving the younger woman another little squeeze.

The bedroom was simple with bare pinewood walls and pinewood furniture. It wasn't large, but what it lacked in size, it had in coziness. Next to the Queen-sized bed, a narrow desk with a few utensils had been placed against the wall underneath a narrow window where the curtains were drawn. The two remaining walls both carried picture frames with pressed, dried flowers that Suzanne imagined that Claire had made herself.

"Suzanne?"

"Yeah?" she said and turned her head to the right.

"I gotta pee," Claire said and began to shuffle away from her living cushion. Throwing aside the quilt, the artist sat back on her thighs and climbed off the bed.

The firm, fit and starkly nude body reminded Suzanne of what they had shared, but just to be sure - as she watched Claire's two wonderful rearward-facing globes wiggle their way out the door and up the hall - she nipped a few hairs off her arm, with inevitable results: "Ow!" she cried and rubbed the spot. "I gotta stop doing that! With so many crazy things happening to me these days, I'm gonna end up hairless..."

Three minutes later, the two women met in the hallway. Suzanne loved the fact that she could walk around completely naked without feeling mortified, and the strong release she'd had made her feel liberated and very much alive - the goofy grin on her face confirmed that.

In the meantime, Claire had put on a terrycloth bathrobe and she handed Suzanne a similar one. "Well, don't you look happy," Claire said as she helped the taller woman stick her arms down the sleeves.

"I am," Suzanne said as she swept the dark blue robe around her body. "Claire, just for fun, when the painting of me is done, how much do you think it'll go for?"

"Oh, that depends on the market, the buyer... the quality of the painting. I'd say, oh... ten, twelve, fifteen thousand dollars," Claire said casually.

Not quite believing her ears, Suzanne chewed on her cheeks and pushed her glasses up her nose while she digested that amount. "Okay..."

"But to me, you're worth a billion."

"Awww, thanks," Suzanne said and pulled her new lover into a hug. "Listen, do you have the time?"

"It's late, that's all I know," Claire said and took a step back though she kept her hands firmly on Suzanne's arms. "Do you need to go home?"

"Well, uh... not really. There's nothing there."

An uneasy silence filled the hallway. Suzanne thought about the dark, lonely apartment she'd get back to: the single plate in her cupboard, the single pillow on her bed, even something as silly as the single toothbrush in her bathroom. She hadn't been wrong, there was nothing there for her.

"Do you want to go home?" Claire whispered, still clinging onto the dark blue bathrobe.

One look at Claire St. John's pretty, fair face and her emerald green eyes that were shaded in a curious mix of trepidation and hope was all the incentive Suzanne needed to make up her mind. "Definitely not," she said warmly and broke out into a wide smile.

"Then stay."

"Claire, I don't want to intru-"

"Stay. Please. Take a shower, use my shampoo... just think about it. Okay?" Claire said, inching closer and closer to Suzanne.

"Well... when you put it like that..."

"Suzanne, to tell you the truth..." Claire said and finally closed the distance between them. Sighing, she leaned in and wrapped her strong arms around Suzanne's body. "I'm so dead-tired of waking up in an empty bed.... of eating alone... of spending the nights alone with a romance novel I've already read five times. Of not being able to give a gorgeous girl like yourself a proper good morning kiss, or to share a funny story over breakfast. Will you please stay? At least for tonight. Tomorrow, we can talk a bit more and find out what we-"

"I'll stay," Suzanne said decisively and reached up to caress Claire's cheek as a relieved smile graced the artist's features. "Inside, I'm scared absolutely stiff over this... but... the thing you said about waking up in an empty bed... that's how I feel, too. Enough is enough. I want to live a little before I'm too old to care..."

"Hey... I'm ten years older than you!" Claire said and nudged Suzanne's side.

Adjusting her glasses, Suzanne ducked down her head and let out an embarrassed snicker. "Oh, you know what I mean!"

"Yeah."

When Suzanne noticed that Claire's eyes sparkled brighter than ever before, a sequence of thoughts flashed rapidly through her mind: through her entire adulthood, she had essentially been a goof with so many inhibitions, hang-ups and insecurities that it was no wonder she couldn't get anyone to make a serious pass at her, but now she literally held the key to her future in her hands - and what a key it was.

As she leaned down to claim Claire's silky smooth lips, she felt her inhibitions and insecurities fly out the window. All she wanted was to take the gorgeous, sublimely talented artist with the shaggy white-blonde mop of hair, the sculpted shoulders, the toned body, the sparkling eyes and - last, but definitely not least - the skilled hands into the bedroom and ravish her until daybreak.

"Come," she husked to the beaming Claire as she pulled her back towards the bedroom, "let's write a new chapter in our story."

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THE END.