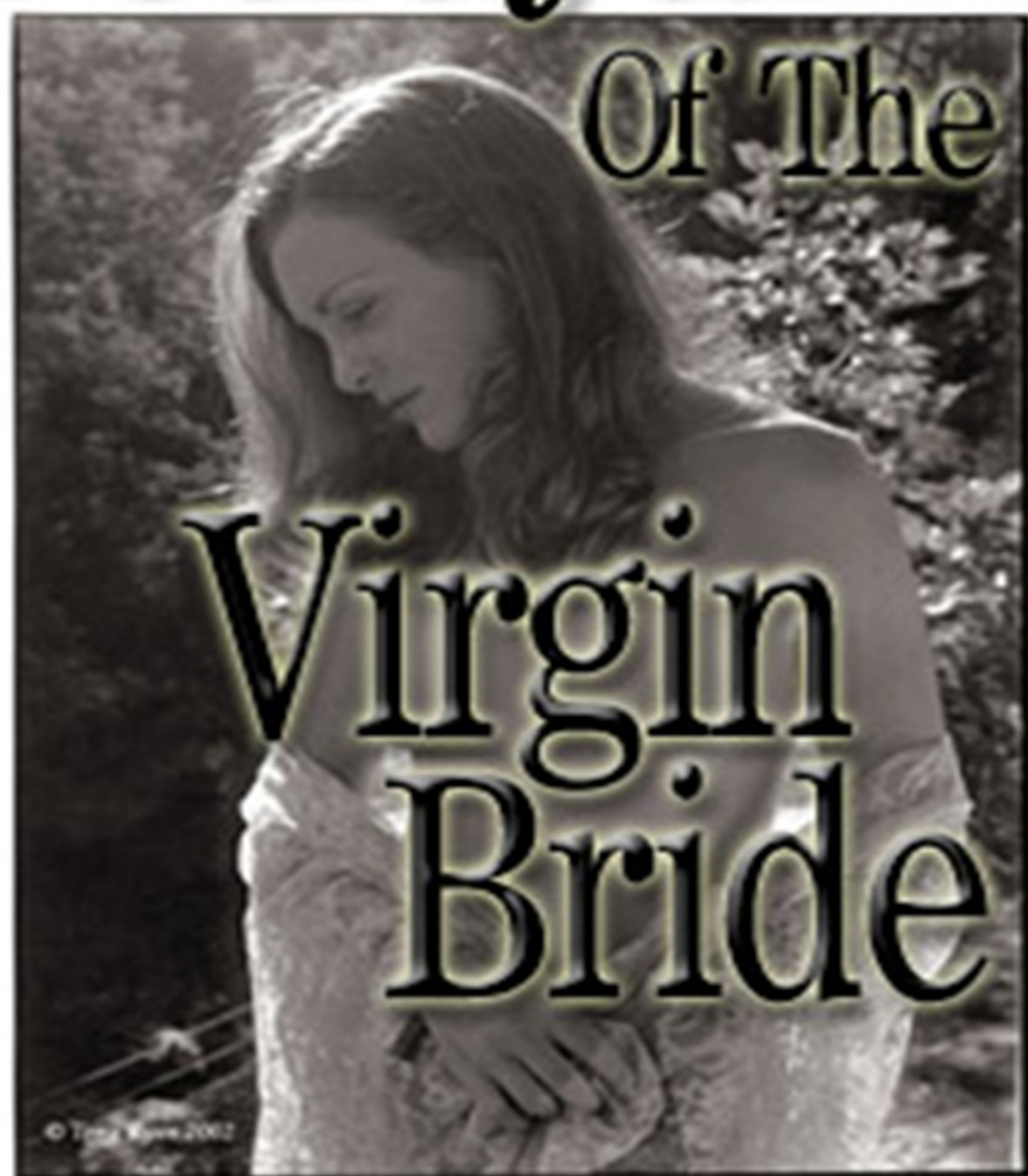


Betrayal



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Betrayal of the Virgin Bride
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Prologue

I prefer to think of my fate as a product of my own feral nature—a nature, that, in my naïveté' I was completely unaware of until it metaphorically slapped my face with its existence. In fact, I ignored the first few cold slaps, whining that I'd been the victim of cruel men's perversions, that I'd been unwittingly caught in a cunning trap of deceit. That was what I believed then. . . but now? I know that I have only myself to blame for the harrowing exploits that were thrust my way, seemingly forced upon me. In some respects, I created the life I've lived deliberately, as if the plan was clearly written well in advance.

I believe in self-produced destiny, not in accidents, bad luck or chance—although, I believe we sometimes cloud our life's desire in fabrication and twist our personal nature to match or defy the opinions of our immediate society. We think we know ourselves, but what we see is only the reflection of what others think we ought to be, staring back at us from the mirror of our world with eyes prepared to criticize or approve. We posture, we negotiate our longings, we procrastinate and we hide truths, until we are no more than like tattered papers tacked to a phone pole, one-dimensional, flat and torn, flapping in the breeze. We could fly away and be lost just as easily. I suspect that some, like me, sell out to convention, never to recover from the false shrouds of their youths. Considering where I am now, I must be grateful for my *bad luck*, my *twisted fate*, my *horrifying destiny*... because they eventually led me to myself, a woman fulfilled, self-knowing and content.

Chapter One – The Set-up

My fate began at twenty-two, when I stumbled upon George Gettys—a flashy older man of thirty-three with a wide grin, impeccable suits and an affectionate hands-on approach to wooing women. I was walking thoughtlessly, head down, along a busy city sidewalk, paying no attention to the throngs of smelly, worried, grimacing folk around me, when I ran smack into George's left shoulder. I believe he might have been staring up at the sky at a flock of geese that were winging their way north. It was early spring. George abruptly turned around, indifferent to the rude jostling and smiled.

"I'm terribly sorry," I immediately announced. "I guess I wasn't looking where I was going."

"Just as I was foolish enough to stand stock still in the middle of this crowd," he replied with a whimsical smirk and a slight, gracious bow. As if in a time warp, we stood immobile, gazing for a moment at the people who hurried by, tucking their heads against the cold wind and scowling because they had to move around us.

Then we giggled. That was just the effect George had on me that so endeared him to me. Otherwise, there was little reason for me to give him a second thought. We were miles apart in temperament—he was lackadaisical while I was a serious workaholic. He was a man of the world *and women*; while I was the straight-laced goody-two-shoes, a virgin and proud of it. He was the dreamer; I the pragmatist.

By the time I bumped into him, I'd been to several church-sponsored seminars telling me how to ward off his kind of smarmy, indolent charm, and fend off the lusty, yet inappropriate, innuendo that was certain to follow.

I had learned well. Being an attractive woman, I had to. Sometimes I cursed my looks—the big hazel eyes, chestnut-colored hair and trim build. I liked to smile because it seemed natural and gracious, kind and Christian. But it was constantly misconstrued as taking an interest in the

recipient, or worse, as a “come on”. I told myself this was my cross to bear; I would not capitulate on my ethics, which required that I put on a sunny disposition and friendly attitude toward everyone. I’m afraid that I also learned a cold shoulder technique—in one of those seminars—which was sometimes necessary for those men who jumped right on my friendliness as an invitation, who refused to accept my kind but firm regrets and move on.

At twenty-two, my life was a terrible struggle between what I believed myself to be and the quiet inner rumblings I had come to ignore. I thought I’d conquered the baser instincts of my sexually driven generation. But with George Gettys, I completely failed in my game plan to thwart obvious, scoundrel men. I knew from the moment I gazed into his heavy-lidded brown eyes that I was in for serious trouble. When he asked to me to coffee, following that first inadvertent exchange, I found that I was far too weak to make my usual excuses. And how easily he wooed me from my staunch purpose. All it took for my carefully constructed world to crumble was one pair of sexy eyes adoring me and a hand lay tenderly on my shoulder as if it belonged there. In reply, my heart raced like some schoolgirl following her first crush. Ten minutes later, there I was, Sally Kettering, the relentless virgin, drinking coffee in a retro diner, seduced by the enemy of our kind, and too head-over-heels infatuated to realize it.

I suppose it was because George was so much older that he succeeded where other men failed. Perhaps I trusted his age. Where I’d never have given in to a younger man, for some reason I was willing to let my guard down with a more mature one. In any case, George succeeded in capturing my interest. I was smitten. With every disclosure he made about himself, and every explanation I gave him about who I was, with every bit of amusing banter and every shared smile, I found myself more deeply engrossed in him. At the same

time I felt a growing awareness of how he made every nerve in my body flush with excitement.

"I'm sure I'm not like you, Mr. Gettys," I told him directly.

"And what is it you think I am?"

"A charming, very good-looking—"

"Thank you."

"—somewhat insincere ladies' man," I said quite decisively.

He smiled, almost as if he would blush he was so self-effacing. That really warmed me. "I'm afraid I'm all that. But I do try to be sincere, especially with women whom I don't want to take advantage of—for example, a lady like yourself."

"And what makes me different?"

"You have breeding," he replied without thinking.

I very much liked that appraisal and blushed a bit myself.

The rest of the afternoon was a whirl of hormonal activity, heart palpitations and prompt rationalizations for every red flag that waved before my glazed and delirious eyes. My staunch ethics lay in shambles and my defenses crumbled, invalidated by every heartfelt rejoinder George Gettys gave to the careful description I gave him of myself. I told him all the pertinent things, including my virgin status and why I thought it was so important to wait for the right relationship—and marriage—before a woman gave away her treasure.

He found my attitudes *refreshing, amazing, remarkable, bracing*... all adjectives he used throughout our conversation. He was particularly intrigued that I was not simply an uptight church girl, spouting what she'd heard in Sunday School, but that I'd carefully thought through my moral standard and held on fast because it was such a true reflection of my heart.

Had I so touched this rogue that he might change his ways? I had the audacity to wonder.

"So what could I possibly do with a man like you?" I pondered aloud. We'd already covered the fact that he was

well experienced with women, which I took to mean he'd bedded at least a hundred by the time he was thirty.

"You can give me a chance," he offered. "Spend some time with me. Let me prove to you that I'm more of a man than you expect me to be."

Oh, I was so easily won. Fate had knocked at my door and I answered with a pleasant welcome.

George Gettys and I were engaged to be married six months later, after what I thought was a cautious, carefully controlled courtship. I was proud of myself, for as close, as intimate, as affectionate as we became, we did little more than hold hands, embrace and kiss.

Oh, don't underestimate those kisses. They were distinct kisses, passionate kisses, filled with all the ardor of two people deeply in love. Of course, it was physical too. My body was on fire with just the thought of him. And his physical presence engendered that unexplored untamed need in me until some days I thought I would self-immolate and my body turned to ash.

As driven as I had been for chastity and holiness, I struggled to recall pure thoughts, but more often spent those twilight moments prior to sleep lost in the fantasy of our first night in bed. It pained me how my mind could crudely twist what I anticipated to be an untainted expression of love. My imagination created pictures too raw, too steamy; too lust-filled to square with the innocent virginal precepts that previously inhabited my mind.

Would I ever confess this to George? Of course not! Even though I gave him my heart, I was always one step away from believing that he'd press me for sex if I gave him even half a chance, that one small opening where he might pick apart my calculated Christian logic and sully me with a shameful seduction to betray everything I stood for.

Did I have so little faith in him, or was it faith in myself that was lacking?

I refused to entertain that question.

Toward the end of our engagement, I wore blinders—I suppose because I had to. A wedding to plan, even the smallest of affairs, takes time and emotion, which come in limited quantities. I knew that. If there were something wrong with the decisions I'd made up to that point—like the one to marry George Gettys—it was not the time dwell on doubt!

Even when Rikki Bowles came to see me, I blew her off with a lighthearted laugh.

"I really think you should know this," the blowsy redhead said as she strolled to my table at the retro diner. George and I always met there for coffee on Thursday afternoons—a romantic gesture in honor of the day I bumped into him on the street. I was waiting, he was late, and Rikki had spotted me from her seat at the lunch counter. The slut was wearing a bright floral dress two sizes too small. The colors made me wince. Who's to say that redheads shouldn't wear orange and pink? She looked like a Christmas tree ornament. Any moment I expected her gaudy jewelry to blink like neon. Regardless of my instantaneous repulsion, I accepted her as graciously as I would my choir director and offered her the vacant seat in front of me.

I knew that George knew her—he'd explained the situation to me... a lonely night, sad news about his sister's cancer, he'd needed her '*massage therapy*'. I knew they had sex, and this was just his way of couching the truth. The fact that he didn't lie about her was all that I required. And George absolutely never lied about his sexual past. He didn't explain it all, but he never lied to me, and he always offered whatever information I asked for. This I believe to this day. His better self wanted me, and being the simple man he was, he knew that a difficult confession would score more points than a feeble attempt to mask the truth. Even more importantly, he knew I was intuitive enough to know if he fibbed.

"What is it I really should know?" I asked Rikki Bowles. She was fishing through her purse, which was the size of her generous hips, not finding what she was looking for, saying, "Oh, drat!"

"Something the matter?" I asked.

"No cigs," she droned.

"Well, it's a no smoking table anyway," I pointed out the sign right over our booth.

"Yeah, you're right." This seemed to perk her up, and her undulant body parts settled in comfortably, the way Jell-O settles in a dish.

"So you were saying..." I really did want to move this conversation along.

"I saw your boyfriend last night."

"My fiancé, George?"

"Yeah, your boyfriend."

"And..."

"The Pines Hotel," that's where George was living, "and there was a woman in his room."

"You're saying he was having sex?" I went right to the point without appearing rattled. "No," she shook her head, "didn't say nothing about sex. I mean they might have, might well have," her made-up eyes got bigger for a moment before they dimmed, "but they didn't have their clothes off or nuthin'."

"So what are you implying?"

"You wouldn't think that a guy about to be married would be carrying on with a woman in his hotel room, now would you?" she bit off rather sarcastically, her eyebrows now suspiciously raised.

I didn't like the sound of it either, but I was a master of keeping my emotions in check.

"What *were* they doing?" I asked.

"Don't really know. I only saw them together, 'cause these two guys, really scary guys, knocked on his door as I was passing by. He answered and I could look right in.

“What do you mean by scary?”

“One was this big black guy—I mean really big... bald head, gold pinky ring, leather jacket, straight out of the movies... the other was Chinese, or Japanese, or something like that... I can’t never tell for sure. George called him Mr. Sun.”

“And why were they so scary? They may well have been George’s business associates.”

“Ya think so?” She was not at all convinced.

“That’s the likely explanation.” George worked with importers, brokering deals between foreign and American markets.

“And why would they come to his room at nine at night?” She was asking me as if I had an answer.

“I haven’t a clue, but then I’m sure there’s a reason.”

“You trust him, doncha, honey?”

“Of course. I’m marrying him.”

“You think a leopard can change his spots?”

“I know his reputation, Rikki. But you have nothing if you don’t trust a man.”

“All I’m saying is that it didn’t look good from where I was standing.” She was all out of tales to tell; and, I’m sure, wishing there were much more of a story. “Don’t say I didn’t warn you.”

“What, exactly, didn’t look good?” I tried to press her.

She shrugged, which made her whole big body jiggle again. “Just a feelin, Miss Kettering. Just a feeling.”

She finally ambled to her feet. I could hear the bare skin of her thighs peeling away from the vinyl bench.

Then he was there, taking her place. George had seen us together so I had no way of extracting the untainted truth from him. But staying in character, he didn’t lie about anything.

“What did she want?”

“To tell me she’d seen you last night with a woman in your room...”

“And Mr. Sun knocking on my door?” he quickly added.

“Who’s Mr. Sun?”

“Ultimately, he’s my boss.”

“And he comes to your room at nine o’clock?” I sounded almost as skeptical as Rikki had been.

“It’s the nature of the business. I think you’d know that by now. My world doesn’t sleep.” He’d said that before and was saying it again a bit wearily. “Mary was there to take notes of the meeting, and Mr. Sun and Dac were filling me in on a shipment.”

“I’m not questioning you,” I chimed in. “Rikki was. I’m sure she thinks the worst.”

“And didn’t I call you at midnight for your kiss goodnight?” he reminded me, with his voice making almost imperceptible alterations toward the languid and sultry tone that so tickled my very anxious crotch.

“Oh, yes you did,” I answered with a gleaming smirk—wished I had the guts right then to suggest we forget formalities and get my virgin deflowering over with that afternoon. This was no way for me to be thinking, but I was getting used to the torrid pictures in my mind, and the squishy feeling in my panties and the way my untouched breasts ached for his caress. With our date pleasantly descending into the bantering of lovers, the incident with Rikki, the girl, Mary, and the two scary men was forgotten. I only mention it now because it was the only foreshadowing I would have of what would happen on our honeymoon.

Chapter Two – The Betrayal

When George announced that we'd be spending two weeks on a cruise ship, I was elated. "A luxury cabin," he added with a gleam in eyes that smoldered like a dying fire.

"Humm, sounds wonderful," I could already feel my thighs opening for that first foul breach.

"Of course, it is the company ship," he added a bit warily.

"And what does that mean?"

"All expenses paid, that's the good news," then he winced, "and a few business matters to take care. But I've been assured that it won't take up that much of our time. I thought it was a fine offer. I've heard great thing about Mr. Sun's private ship."

"A ship or a yacht?"

"A really big yacht. I think it actually could qualify as a ship. Whatever, it's pretty impressive for private ownership. We'll be sailing to the South Pacific, hitting several resorts..." He was waiting for my approval.

"Well, this is getting better and better," I enthusiastically decided.

"Oh, I'm glad you think so," he seemed relieved by my response.

"Why wouldn't I be? How else could we afford a honeymoon so extravagant?"

"Exactly." He was all smiles, while the roar in my nether regions had another dose of fantasy to keep it hot.

We sailed from San Pedro in the afternoon, following a morning wedding ceremony. The reception was small, exactly as I'd planned. I had always been selfish about such things. I wanted to concentrate on George and our romance, not a lot of guests. The honeymoon couldn't have been more perfectly arranged to give us the privacy I wanted. Even if George had a few commitments to attend to, I trusted they'd be brief. Who didn't respect the rights of honeymooners to enjoy the first days of married life alone and without interruption? That is why I initially balked when

George told me we'd be having our first dinner on board with Mr. Sun and his friends.

"But it's our first night!"

"I know." He seemed pensive, worried. In fact, he had seemed to be preoccupied in that manner all day. I considered it wedding jitters and the worst of it should have been over by then—considering that he was finally getting on to part of the day he was looking forward to most. Perhaps his anxiety had to do with bedding a virgin, something he'd rarely done... and not just a virgin, but his wife!

I was jittery too. All my sexual dreams came down to this one moment, and it was fraught with worry. What if I didn't live up to his expectations? What if he didn't live up to mine? What if it hurt... or worse yet, what if George had a tiny little thingy! My panic increased as these awful possibilities began to explode in my mind, along with those driven by my unfed lust.

"I wanted our first time to be perfect..." I whined a bit, "to be romantic, just the two of us, a bottle of wine and ..." I drifted off, pouting sadly, hoping he'd change his mind about the dinner.

"And that's exactly the way it shall be, Sally," he assured me. "We'll just have to wait until after dinner, once Mr. Sun has toasted our marriage." His mouth pulled taut in a pained grimace. Perhaps he was as nervous about his business meetings as he was our first married night. I hated the idea that anyone had eclipsed my importance to him, but I had no choice but to live with this fixed reality. I would be patient, dutiful, the good wife. I expected that of myself as much, maybe even more, than he expected it of me. As I dressed for dinner on my wedding night, I had no idea how important being the 'dutiful' wife would become in the hours ahead.

Had my mind a lifetime to dwell on the possibilities for my first sexual experience, it would never have conjured up

the scene that played out that night. The panic, the anxiety, the jitters never subsided, but then too, neither did the excitement.

Unfortunately, there was no time to dwell on romance—no romancing at all. All my fine and frivolous fantasies were dashed. As if I were living a nightmare, my carefully constructed world of vestal virgins at the altar of love and shameful rogues becoming knights in shining armor disintegrated around me. I was left to navigate in the murky waters of salacious lust and depravity, stripped of my dignity, humiliated and debased.

We toasted our marriage with a table full of well-dressed gentlemen, George's business associates including an inscrutable Mr. Sun and the black man, Dac. There were four others, two Chinese businessmen, a Polynesian trader, Julio, I'd met once before, and a quietly elegant black man—whose first gaze bore right into me, as if he could see beyond every pretense to the hidden truth about me. His patronizing look was not a sexual one, though it served to place me beneath him in the pecking order of the evening's gathering. I suspected that all of the men in the room felt the same way about me, believing that I was subordinate to them; a second-class person, like a servant or whore would be in their eyes. Maybe it was just my imagination that leapt to that conclusion, I tried to rationalize, but the whole setting gave me the creeps. I clung to George's side like a silly girl as I offered the men a self-conscious smile.

Maybe it was how I dressed—which was quite a departure from my unusually modest attire. The body-defining sheath clung closely to my natural curves and its emerald color seemed to shout quite boldly. Thankfully, the deep slit up the skirt was hidden when I sat down. I'd worn the sexy dress for George—certainly not for these men. After all, it was my wedding night, this was my husband; no time was more appropriate for flaunting my wares! But I instantly regretted my choice when six pairs of eyes converged on

the deep décolletage and the way my bra pushed my breasts upwards, so that they jiggled noticeably when I moved, as if I deliberately planned to attract their lurid stares.

Sensing my nervousness, George leaned over to me as we sat down and whispered, “You’re doing just fine.”

I was in no position to argue, but if he’d given me the chance I would have excused myself and left. That being impossible, I quietly ate my meal while a business conversation whirled around me in an unintelligible language. Yes, they were speaking English, but I had no clue what they were talking about. Toward the end of the meal—and much to my surprise—Mr. Sun addressed me specifically and, suddenly, all eyes turned my way. I think I preferred their indifference.

“Mrs. Gettys, a toast is in order, in celebration of your marriage.” I looked toward Mr. Sun and blushed. He lifted his glass in the classic gesture and the other men followed suit with muted smiles—if they smiled at all. “I suppose, though, that George has not informed you of our evening’s further activities,” he went on to say.

I looked at him bewildered. “No, I don’t believe he has,” I finally answered.

“Well then, I’ll let Mr. Sands explain,” he nodded to the elegant black man, who again stared at me with such profound intimacy that I felt my spirit weaken and my body quake. Not that it was necessarily a bad feeling, but it was certainly something that made me uncomfortable, especially since that feeling was becoming increasingly sexual.

“George, what is this about?” I asked my husband as we moved into the adjoining room—a large finely furnished stateroom. I remember very little about the room now, except how the polished brass fixtures gleamed like gold in the soft light.

He seemed as nervous as I was, but answered only with a sad, "I'm sorry." Then he pulled out of my grasp, to leave me standing in the center of a circle of men, who'd taken seats in the provided chairs. The men from dinner were all there, the two Chinese businessmen, Julio, Mr. Sands and Dac. Mr. Sun, however, was at the back of the room some distance away, sitting too, but apparently there only to observe.

I looked around, rightfully alarmed. "What is this?" The assertive side of me that dared to take on legions of men had been submerged to that point. But it suddenly returned quite forcefully as I sensed the threat closing in around me.

"Let's not panic, Mrs. Gettys," Mr. Sands stood up. Moving to my side, he placed his hand on my shoulder tenderly. "You relax and do what we say, you might even enjoy your night."

"I have every intention of enjoying my night. . . . with my husband!" I told him firmly, while trying to turn and catch George's gaze, but Mr. Sands' body was in the way.

"And he'll be here, in fact the whole night is about him, so I imagine he'll never be far from your mind."

"What is this?" I tried jerking from his settling grasp, but his hand turned to steel as he gripped my shoulder tightly.

"Don't be frightened," his voice deepened. The force of his fingers clawing into my shoulder seemed to weaken me again, as if he were taking over my body. At the same moment, a strong pulse of desire began beating in my crotch. Though I tried to force it away, it only seemed to beat more fervently for my efforts to squash it.

"Please," I wanted to cry, to grab for George and fly from the room, but I knew that would never happen. I was afraid. Something about this cruel turn of events signaled an abrupt and definitive end to my romantic honeymoon.

"You won't be hurt in any significant way, girl," Mr. Sands went on to say. "And you'll be doing your husband a great favor. He has a debt to pay, one I don't think he could pay

without your help. And that fact puts him in a very precarious position with us. He's dependent on your cooperation." This time, I managed to turn enough to see George's face.

"What is this about?" I asked him.

But his face was vacant and his body tense as though he were about to walk the plank. "I'm sorry," he said again.

"Let's not bother asking him questions, Mrs. Gettys," the soothing Mr. Sands interjected, "I have all the answers you need." He was stroking my back gently, as if that might ease the truth of what he was about to say. "You love your husband?"

"Of course, I do."

"And you'd do what you can to help him out of a bad situation?"

"What situation is that?"

"*Don't* answer my question with a question, Mrs. Gettys," his voice turned cooler. "Do I have your cooperation or not?"

"But I don't know what I'm agreeing to."

"You're agreeing to help George pay his debt, simple as that." His voice was like velvet meant to soothe the agitated nerves that transmitted messages of danger and flight just beneath my fiery skin. "The one to Mr. Sun and his associates. Your husband has been embezzling from the company for some months, taking money that doesn't belong to him."

"You're not serious?" I turned again to George, but this time he refused to meet my gaze.

"We're very serious," Mr. Sands answered for him. "And your husband is in a very serious predicament. We can either turn him over to the authorities, which will mean he'll spend a long time in prison, or," he paused to let this information sink in, "you can do us a favor. You wish to help him?"

"Of course, I do," I jumped right in, despite the nagging suspicions that my 'help' would take an ugly turn.