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This story should, and eventually might go on, but it had to stop somewhere for now, and I hope I've given you enough of a happy ending.

The Seduction of Gabriel Stewart

Chicago Worlds Fair, 1893

Chapter One

Portia Stewart closed her lace parasol with a snap and turned to watch the throng of people shove their way into the shade of The Egyptian Theater building. Perspiration pooled at the base of her back, soaking into her chemise as she waited for her husband, Gabriel, to return with the tickets.

People shouted, pushing their way in. What were they clamoring about? It would be hotter in the building than in the ninety-degree sun. Despite the heat, the crowd was enticing, it was gathered for a reason, and she was about to find out.

Gabriel elbowed his way to her and cupping her elbow, handed the tickets over and propelled her to the stage where a straw hut and enormous clay urns stood to the side.

She heard the woman standing next to her whisper ‘naked’ and then something about scandalous movements.

Drumming and some eerie stringed instrument played by a turbaned man started off to the left of the stage but the shocked gasp of the crowd brought her head snapping back to the platform.

Portia's breath caught in her throat. She should have at least closed her eyes, but she was riveted. A woman with sallow skin holding veils tiptoed out into the center. At first glance it looked as if she wore no clothes; her top was a small-strapped top with hanging coins and the stomach that looked bare was covered with nude fabric. Her skirt was up to her mid calf, her stockings made to look like skin, and her hair, unbound, flowed down to her bottom and swayed with every step. Even her hairpiece sparkled with golden coins.

The building sign had shouted in painted red letters that Little Egypt, African Performer was dancing. But Portia had no idea that this...display...this must be what the crowds were about.

Drums sounded as if they were far off and as they became louder, the woman closed her eyes and began to dance while other similarly clad women formed a line behind her.

It was not a waltz, or any other acceptable ballroom dance, but slow rhythmic undulation of hips, side to side, her arms spread wide as she held the brilliant veils, framing her torso.

Portia was horrified. Appalled. It was all she could do to keep from hiding her eyes with her lace-gloved hands. But as repelled as she was, she was equally spellbound. The woman's stomach, although still covered with a nude colored cloth, rolled, the movements puckering the thin fabric she wore, and in an instant Portia understood. The woman wore no corset. Not the new pouter style that went down to the mid-thigh or even an older style. No, she wore none at all.

She was all but naked, up on a stage in front of hundreds of people. She knew she should be repulsed, but Little Egypt was too beautiful and alluring. The dance sensual

and erotic, so different than anything Portia had ever seen before, that its exoticness was like a swim on a humid day. Even though she wanted to watch, Portia was respected in the community, and it would be shameful for her to be seen here. She had her husband's reputation to think of. Gabriel would be disgusted; he was far too moral a man to sanction watching this. They must leave.

"Gabriel, this is most improper." She tugged on his sleeve to get his attention.

"Huh? What?" He ripped his gaze away. "What?"

"This is improper. We should leave."

He glanced behind them and turned back to watch the stage. "There's no way we can leave now, there's too many people pushed to the front."

She scanned the rapt faces, and looked back to the stage. The woman was making slow circles, her feet barely moving, but her hips rocking as she wove herself around and around.

Portia stared at her husband's profile, his straight nose and thick golden brown hair. His broad shoulders filled out his cream linen suit so smartly, but her admiration stopped there. His hazel eyes were transfixed on the woman, Little Egypt, his irises eaten up in black.

Pain squeezed her chest.

This is what it had come to. She never thought jealousy would hurt so much, or be so angry.

She would give anything to go back in time to meet him before he joined the Seminary. Maybe then she could have saved their marriage, even though they had not yet met. What was her husband like before he wanted to become a priest? Did they have a chance at all for the marriage she longed for? One where they were intimate partners and loving mates, not two houseguests who were never more than cordial?

She had done everything she could think of to make him look at her the way he stared at the performer. She asked, she even tried to be seductive, but her nervousness made her actions come off stilted, like a bad play where the actors were forever trying to remember their lines.

She even went as far as to ask for another child. She knew that procreation brooked no argument, and to do so, he had to touch her. Even though he was quick and regretful, those few moments of his weight on her were bliss. Enough to make her pleasure herself on the nights she spent alone in her bed, while he lay on the other side of the wall. Maybe if she didn't get pregnant right away she could beg more time together. On those nights at least he slept in her bed.

With the same intensity he stared at the woman, Portia watched him. His face was flushed, and disapproval wrinkled his brow, but his eyes were still fevered and black with lust.

She was coming to the point of doing anything, and maybe this was the answer she was looking for. The fair would still be open for a few days more. Tuesday, while Gabriel was at work she would have the nurse watch Daniel and Ethan, and she would come back and find this woman who had captured her husband's lust with a few moves of her hips. She would ask for private lessons, just a few. Maybe she could somehow lure him the same way.

She knew Gabriel had never been unfaithful, but she would be damned if she settled for second best for the rest of their lives, and regardless, she loved him too much to not try.

"I demand this foul sinful show stop immediately!" The booming voice snapped everyone's head to the speaker.

“Stop this licentious display I say!” The shouter elbowed his way forward, his straw hat knocked off his head and he snatched it back from the woman that caught it.

The musicians stopped with broken notes and loud whispers overtook the room.

The man was at the base of the stage now, pounding it with a fist and Little Egypt and the woman who formed the troupe behind her shrank back to the door of the hut.

His gray hair, once a shiny helmet had skewed with the force of his shouting and pounding, and his portly figure stretched the buttons on his vest.

“Sol Bloom, you hear me?” He shouted to the back of the stage. “This is Anthony Comstock, President of the Society of the Suppression of Vice, and we demand that this wanton display of immorality cease!” His face, before red, now was mottled and purple in places.

A dark haired man wearing a fine summer weight suit and gold timepiece chain swaggered over his vest strolled out to the center stage, a smirk on his face. “And how would you make me?”

“Make you? We demand you stop this show right now, refund these people their money, and close this building.”

Sol slapped his thigh and laughed then took his time stopping, a chuckle still escaping. “Like I said, how are you going to make me?”

Mr. Comstock straightened and speared the air with his finger. “I will rally the Society to protest and hold a march in front of the building.”

“Well then, I’ll have to thank you for the free advertising.” Sol nodded.

Mr. Comstock sputtered. “The people who are moral will not stand for this debasement of their fine city. Heaven will prevail!”

“Amen!” A man shouted from the back.

Portia refused to look around for fear of meeting anyone's eyes she knew. Chicago was a big city, but meeting people you knew never happened at the best times.

She kept her eyes downcast and watched the woman, Little Egypt, who didn't look ashamed at all and admired her courage. If she could harness a morsel of that for herself maybe she could change her circumstances.

Through her lashes she studied the woman that inflamed her husband.

She wasn't tall, and actually Portia thought herself much finer looking, but in all it was beside the point if her looks didn't garner the attention she wanted. Could it be Egypt's dark coarse hair that hung down? Maybe the dress she had on, without stays and short, showing her calves and trim ankles that led to slender feet.

The argument flared around her, people nodded, some applauded but she, instead, formed a plan.

She would learn this dance. This sensual arousing dance that made her husband ashamed of himself, and she would seduce him. She would go into his room at night while he read and dance for him.

* * *

Gabriel shifted his weight and tore his gaze from the exotic woman. He was consumed with lust and would have to repent, but not here. A small voice told him he could slake his needs with his wife, but he refused. His faith was stronger. Just because he admitted he needed the fleshly desire to have a wife, didn't mean he would toss his faith aside and debase himself like an animal.

Control. His self control was stronger than any fleshly desire placed before him.

What drove him to go in here in the first place? He heard whispers from other men that the show was scandalous at best, that the woman dancing might have well been nude. In

this case he had not shown the best judgment. The best way to not succumb to temptation was to never enter it in the first place.

The drums had gotten louder and he was thankful no one could hear his heartbeat. Little Egypt's hips shook and swayed, her skirts brushing her calves and his lust surged again. He knew they should leave, but he couldn't tear his eyes away. Her hair was loose down to her ample rear and it flowed as she moved, like a flag beckoning him to look where it touched.

Shouting started and a ruckus broke out. He decided he'd have enough repenting to do and yanked Portia out of the building into the blinding sun.

"Slow down, slow down! I can't keep up." She pulled her arm out of his grip and straightened herself. Her parasol hung on her wrist and she opened it, the light on her face now dappled like a tree's leaves.

His breath caught.

Sometimes her beauty hit him like a fist in the chest.

His need coursed through him even stronger. Damn that Egypt woman. Now he would have to redouble his efforts to not give in to her. She was his thorn in the side. Her beauty coupled with her curves and the soft alluring way she spoke to him. Lately she'd been touching him more. She would take him by surprise with a caress on his arm, or a soft brush to his shoulder. It would take the rest of the day to get himself back under control. The one time she'd outright asked him to bed her he almost committed Onan's sin.

He should have apologized to her after he yelled at her, but it made life easier for him when she stayed away. There was a price though. Instead of her eyes shining bright like iolite, they dulled and her countenance became shadowed. She wouldn't meet his gaze for days, and he found he missed her seeking him out.

Now with the sun dappled shadows on her face and brightness in her eyes she looked right at him. Almost through him, and he broke off, looking down the street lest she see his need for her.

He wanted to be strong for her. To make her proud of his religious convictions, that he was an excellent father and upright citizen. She could hold her head high while out paying calls that her husband would never fall into the lusts of the flesh, having affairs like so many of his coworkers.

He took a deep breath and let the sweat snake down his temple.

“Shall we get some refreshments?” He took out his timepiece. “We have two hours yet till we’re expected back.”

“That would be lovely. Such an awful crush of people made me thirsty, although I can’t eat in heat like this.”

“Fine. We’ll head down The Street in Cairo.” He slipped the map out and snapped it open. “Well, we can go see the International Exposition if we hurry. It’s said to be electrified.”

“Perhaps the Palace of Fine Arts?”

“You may come back as you like during the week and see everything you wish. They boys would enjoy the sights.”

She smiled, her face glowing, and his heart leapt.

“That would be lovely.”

He led her away, relief coursing through him that his weakness was not caught.

Chapter Two

Portia knocked on the oak door of the house and stepped back. It had taken her a week to work up the courage ask for the lesson. When it opened Little Egypt, herself stood and welcomed her in.

“I didn’t think you would come.” Egypt shut the door as Portia walked in. Her voice was light and melodious, nothing like she expected and the room smelled of patchouli and black pepper. The scent was strange and exotic, but not distasteful.

Today Egypt’s hair was loose around her shoulders, like at the show, but without the coiled headpiece she’d worn. Its waves caught the sun glinting red and Portia realized her eyes, which she first thought were dark brown, were actually almost as black as her pupils.

She dressed in an orange and fuchsia caftan threaded with gold and edged in an inch wide gold embroidered trim. Her pants billowed at her ankles and were gathered with the same trim on her caftan. A matching shawl was draped over her shoulder.

Portia was envious.

“Please excuse me, I forgot to introduce myself, my name is Ashea Wabe.”

Portia’s face flamed. “No, the apology is mine, my name is Portia Stewart.” Portia reached out for a handshake but was given a kiss on each cheek instead, and again given pause. “I admit, I was so taken with your beautiful clothes you rendered me speechless.”

Ashea laughed, a delightful tinkling of bells. “That’s still a better reaction than I’m used to at this point.” Her black eyes snapped and sparked.

“You’re the only one who’s come for lessons. Everyone looks, some I can see their anger, many their lust. Many women look at me with envy, but you’re the only one that has asked to be taught.” Ashea studied her face. “You must be very courageous.”

“No. Just desperate.”

Portia expected a shocked reaction to her words at the least, but instead a warm understanding filled her eyes. It was embarrassing, and Portia thought to lie, but what purpose would it serve? She was here.

“Shall we begin?”

“Please.” Portia nodded, grateful. Quickly, before that iota of courage ran out.

Ashea walked her into a large wood floored room that had one wall covered in mirrors. A tapestry screen blocked off a corner and a lone chair was against the opposite wall.

“There are pantaloons called pajamas for you to wear, and a short shirt called a choli that ties in the back. I’ll wait right here.”

“I must change?” Portia couldn’t hide the shock from her voice or face. To have to undress and to have to wear drawers like a man was not something she expected, but she couldn’t say she was disappointed. Rather she was a bit excited. It offered another chance to test her courage and do something daring.

Ashea smiled. “But of course.”

“But-“

“May I call you Portia?”

“Yes, but-“

“The dance is centered in the stomach. If you have a corset on, or I cannot see your stomach, how will you learn?”

“May I wear a dress like the one you performed in?”

“I don’t practice in that. It’s just for the show. To not offend.” She smiled, her white teeth brilliant in her olive skin.

“Will you wear one too?”

“Of course, how else would I teach you?”

“Well, alright then.”

Portia walked off to the screen where Ashea pointed. What if the clothes didn’t fit? What if someone came in and saw them? Her mind swirled with the possibilities of being found guilty, and yet she wasn’t doing anything wrong. She was a woman who loved her husband, and was trying to find a way to make their marriage better. To make it more intimate. And yet she knew if any of her friends found out about this, they would cast their eyes away as if she were less moral.

It always came to importance. Her marriage or her pride. And that was where she found courage.

She slipped behind the screen and was glad for the shadows. It didn’t take her long to undress, and she laid her clothes and undergarments on the chair, but she came to her corset and realized she needed another hand.

“Ashea? If you could help me a moment?”

Soft tinkling footsteps came towards her and Ashea knocked on the screen.

“Can you help me loosen my strings?”

Ashea laughed. “Ah, yes.” She came round the screen and Portia saw that she wore a beautiful aqua half shirt covered with stringed coins and azure pants that were waisted and fully gathered. On top of the pajamas she wore a belt of coins, but what made the tinkling noise was her anklet made of tiny bells. Again, Portia was shocked at the beautiful colors and adornment. She even had a ring on her toe, and every glint of gold beckoned, ‘look here’. The sumptuousness of the ensemble was like a peacock in full fan.

Excitement filled Portia at the thought of being able to dress so beautifully and she turned. Ashea made quick work of untying the strings.

“Do you never wear a corset?” Portia unhooked the busk and took a deep breath.

“Of course I do. But when I am here or at home I wear what makes me comfortable.”

“But what if someone calls?”

“My friends accept how I dress and strangers expect me to be exotic. Sometimes they are offended, but they can always leave.”

Portia couldn't imagine a man not admiring the way Ashea's clothes showed her body.

“But what about your husband?”

“I have none yet. Maybe one day, but for now I have my work, and my friends.”

“I'm sorry, I'm being quite the busybody.”

“I'm used to it.”

Portia flushed. She stood in her chemise, afraid to finish, her modesty yet unable to bend.

Ashea smiled and left, the soft tinkles of the bells sounding with her every step.

She drew the chemise up over her arms and draped it on top of her other clothes and stood in her drawers. She let the air cool her skin and decided what to do.

Should she take them off? Leave them on? She wanted to ask, but couldn't bring herself to.

She stood there for a moment and chewed her lip.

It was almost too much baring her stomach, so she left them on. If they bunched up and showed then she would simply tell Ashea she didn't know what to do.

The clothes hung on hooks and she took them down letting the fine fabric slip like silk between her fingers.

None of it was as fine as Ashea's, but it was still beautiful to behold.

The skirt was a dark purple, and the pants a shade lighter. The skirt was made the same as Ashea's, but the pants were more like what she wore with the caftan.

Portia chose the skirt and then took the shirt, which was lavender. Strangely it fit snugly so that her breasts were held in, not lose and moving easily like she had first thought, and it simply tied in the back.

She took a deep breath and stepped into the room and looked at herself in the mirror. It was as if a stranger looked back at her.

"You forgot your hair." Ashea called from the chair. She got up and walked over.

"Oh." Portia reached up and started to pull the pins out, letting the corkscrews loose like a Gorgon's snakes.

"Your hair is so lovely." Ashea pulled the last of the pins and ran her fingers through the ends sending shivers down Portia's back.

"Oh, it's a mess. I hate my hair, so wiry and uncontrollable."

"No, it is a thing of beauty. Auburn and so thick. It is your veil for you to draw attention to your face." Ashea drew the wanton curls around to her front. "And to your breasts. See, where the eye goes?"

The dark sable looked good against the lavender of the shirt, but the humidity attacked it right away, making it curl even tighter. Still, it framed her small breasts. Ashea was right.

“Lean your head back and feel your hair brush your skin.” Ashea did the same.

Portia listened and closed her eyes as the hair covered her shoulder and back, the tips brushing the skirt top. Even though, it felt soft and luxurious against her skin.

“Now, reach your hands up, all the way, and crossing your wrists, place your palms together.” Ashea waited while Portia did as asked.

“Do you feel the stretch in your arms?”

“Yes.” It felt wonderful, her muscles working and loosening. She even noticed that her ribs and chest moved up where before she would have been stayed by the corset.

“Now, unhook your palm and slowly let them down until they rest at your sides.”

When she had Portia met Ashea’s gaze in the mirror.

“I want you to take a deep breath, raise your chest up, hold your stomach in and tighten the muscles.”

Portia watched Ashea’s stomach firm, and her breasts lift high.

Never before had Portia used some of these muscles. Her stomach moved like a wooden block, and her arms like bricks.

Well, maybe before, but not in a long time. Long enough to feel as if they’d never been used before, but when she and Gabriel were trying to conceive, and he got carried away...her hips rising up to meet him... Her chest and face flushed, and she looked at her feet.

“It is good to feel the muscles moving. Later you can isolate them for certain hip shakes.”

“I don’t think I have hips.” She still felt like a wooden block with all hard edges, whereas Ashea was supple silk.

Ashea smiled. “You look like you have hips. Now you need to move them, side to side, see?”

Portia tried, but what Ashea made a smooth hip thrust, she looked about to fall over.

“It will come, it will come. You have to realize your body, to feel the muscles. And the moves, they are quite like another dance, no?”

Portia’s face burned. “Yes.”

“When you go home you should practice moving in a circle with your hips, curving your stomach up, and then you will be able to do this.”

Ashea started to spin her hips in a circle, making the coins dance in a seductive beckon to keep looking. Flashing as she twirled and spun, her torso undulating.

Portia would practice until she couldn’t move.

* * *

Something infinitesimal, but yet overwhelming had changed in her. Gabriel could see it even in the way she placed a glass on the table, or put on a shawl. Mostly it was in the way she walked around the house. It wasn’t the same walk. It was a glide.

And he noticed she glowed. So much so that he would think she had conceived, but he knew that wasn’t possible.

Not that he wouldn’t like that.

Well, not really, the two boys were getting older and he was starting to have fun with them now. But maybe if they wanted another child he could actually see the difference that he only suspected so far. He could run his hands over her naked body to see if there was a physical change. He could touch her luminous skin that he remembered as being so soft. Or the way she closed her eyes and sweetly smiled as he entered her. His organ thickened, and he closed his eyes.

He wanted her. But the guilt that washed over him along with desire tore at his soul.

He was too much in love with her. He was making an idol out of her and that was wrong. He thought about her every day, moreso than God. He needed time in the chapel.

To remind himself of his vow of chastity and how pure he felt when he didn't fall into sin with his sexual needs.

The Fathers told him his lust burned too hot for the priesthood. That he needed more control, and when he confessed his sins he knew they were right.

At twenty-one he would sit in the carved oak boxes and wrestle with the gravity of his fixations. He would cry with his repentance, but even still the drives that brought him to confession would bring him yet again.

Finally he decided that he was not worthy of the priesthood. That a better man would master his flesh and make it submit. That in his inability it proved that he was not devoted to God enough, and so he left.

But on the day he walked out, he promised that at last he would have some control. Even though he would be living in the world, he would not be of it. That apart from begetting children, he would be master of his body and so prove his devotion to God.

He would do his good to remember his vows at times like this when he lacked the strength.

Sanctus, Sanctus, Sanctus, Dominus Deus Sabbaoth. Mea Culpa, Mea Culpa.

He hung his head and prayed, Paternoster, Quies in Caelis...

A soft knock yanked him from his reverie.

He knew it was her, and right now he didn't have the strength to face her. Not in his weakened state.

"Gabriel?" Her liquid voice floated through the wood, pulling at his insides.

"Gabriel, are you alright? You've been in there for hours, and I've saved supper for you."

Hours?

"Gabriel?"

He gathered himself. "I'll be right there."

"Oh. Alright."

Was that sadness he heard in her voice?

His gut knotted. He hated upsetting her. She didn't deserve it. She was the best of mothers to their two rambunctious boys, and she, in truth was a wife to be proud of. Always by his side to help him, and she respected his faith. Even though it censored her own desires. But he tried to explain to her that the road of sacrifice was worth the reward.

And he didn't want to defile her with his sins. It was how he showed his love for her. He couldn't bear the guilt of contaminating her soul too.

She knocked again, louder this time.

"Gabriel, please."

He opened the door and her perfume floated over him. It was something ethereal with the slightest hint of sandalwood, roses and skin.

"Thank you for saving me a plate." He inhaled. He couldn't help it. Dominus Deus.

"The boys are in their beds, would you go say goodnight to them?" She put her hand on his sleeve, and it was as if every nerve in his body centered there. "I told them you would, I'm sorry to bother you."

He straightened. "No, no Bother at all."

The lamplighter was making his way up the street and the house had paused in twilight. An eerie hush settled where a few hours ago the house was loud with Daniel and Ethan's playing. He should have realized how long he'd shut himself away just by the noise and light.

She'd followed him up the stairs and down the hall, her footsteps barely audible behind him. She pulled at him, even from back there. He should stop so she would bump in to him.

When he reached the door of the boy's room he smiled at the muffled laughs.

"Oh, I told them to go to sleep."

He didn't have to turn to hear the smile in her voice.

"They were waiting for me. It's my fault. They have no patience for waiting an hour."

"Two."

"Two what?"

"Two hours you were in the study."

He thought he went in at six. He sighed. He would take them for a ride tomorrow in the carriage and maybe get some candy at the mercantile.

He opened the door to giggled shushes and schooled his face.

"It would seem you're not sleeping as you were told." He could never sound as stern as he planned.

"But father! You were late!" Daniel kneeled on his bed, bouncing.

Ethan popped out of his covers. "Yes, you were late!"

"Lie back down and I'll tuck you in."

Portia came around and settled them back, and he leaned down and gave each boy a kiss on the forehead.

"Sleep tight now, and we'll go for a ride to the mercantile tomorrow."

"Can we get candy?" they said, in unison.

"Not if you don't sleep."

They snuggled back under their covers and started to imitate an ogre's snore.

Portia gave each another peck on the forehead and closed the door behind her.

Maybe it wouldn't be so bad to have another. He quashed the voice that shouted what a liar he was, that he had only one desire, and having another child was not it.

He grabbed Portia's elbow and pulled her back, setting her against the wall and blocking her in.

Her eyes dilated, making the blood go to his groin.

"I want another child." The words growled out of him, and her cheeks flushed, but she stood straighter.

"No."

He stepped back. "No?"

"The boys are enough for me to handle. I am starting to enjoy the bit of freedom I have leaving them with Nurse. No, I don't want another child."

He studied her. Her eyes, her pinked face, the way she looked away from him. He confused her, with her body saying she wanted him, but her mouth saying no.

"But Portia—"

"No."

Chapter Three

How could he? How dare he think to ask her such a thing when she knew it was nothing but an excuse?

It had been a few months since she had taken her first dance lesson with Ashea, and in that time Portia had learned a lot. She liked herself more, she knew she was beautiful and the most important, she knew, beyond a doubt that her husband was destroying their marriage for pride. This ruse of wanting a child was a bold faced lie. He wanted to fuck her, plain and simple. She couldn't deny a thrill went through her that her lessons paid off. Gabriel, her thrice educated, soft spoken, considerate husband, was like an animal in full rut.

"I demand you tell me why. You cannot deny me my rights I'm your husband."

He held her pinned against the hall wall and whispered furiously in her ear. She couldn't catch the shiver that wracked her in time for him to not see.

“See? I know you want me.” He kissed her neck pressing his erection into her and she closed her eyes, savoring the feel of him, the way his breath blew against the skin on her neck shooting darts of need through her body.

It took everything within her to not melt. She too, had been denied all this time, and her control was precarious. It would be so much easier to give in, to reach down and stroke him. And she wanted to, to run her hand over his granite erection. But it wouldn't accomplish anything, and he would never see her as the woman who needed him. She took a deep breath burying those needs deep and pushed him back a step, and gazed into his black eyes.

“You are the most selfish man I know.”

He blinked.

“Yes, you.” She answered his unspoken question. “You not only have denied yourself in your religious pride, you have denied me what is rightfully mine.” He didn't answer and she continued, “I am your wife, not breeding stock.”

He had the decency to flush, which satisfied.

“You want to be a priest? You should have stayed in Seminary, because I did not get married to be a nun. Your body is rightfully mine, and you are not to deny me just as I am yours.”

She wondered what he was thinking because she couldn't provoke a reaction from him but to just watch her which was disconcerting. Regardless, he didn't leave. Only a fool didn't take advantage of a captive audience. She gathered all her strength for what she had to say.

“I did not marry you for love, but I love you now.”

To her amazement his eyes shadowed with anguish, and he rested his forehead and arm on the wall.

“Gabriel,” she ran her fingers through the hair by his ear and started to cry, her heart squeezing in her chest with love, and want and desperation, “Having relations with me is not sin, your pride that you are ‘too holy’ to love your wife with your body, that is where your sin lies.” She rested her face in his shoulder, not bothering to halt the tears coursing down her face. “I don’t want to sleep with you because you are lying to yourself; I want to have sex because you want me, the same as I want you.”

He said nothing for so long she could hear the grandfather clock in the foyer. With every tock she counted, she worried if she’d pushed him too far, and if all was lost. What she would do with less than what she had.

“That is not why.” His voice sounded like a carriage driving over gravel.

“What is no why?”

“Its not spiritual pride. It’s fear. I want you too much. It’s idolatry.”

He picked his head up and stared at her for an agonizing moment, his eyes tormented with pain, stark need and recrimination. She thought he might kiss her, at least comfort her, and she put her arms around his shoulders, but he drew away and walked down the hall, closing the door of his room behind him.

She failed, but she saw love in his eyes so there was hope. For one more day in their nine years of marriage, she could hang on to hope.

Her body still thrummed with anticipation and anger and ferocious need. It was strange to realize that she wanted him more now than before. All of her skin was sensitized to the slightest of his touches and if he wanted, he could have slipped into her with one thrust. Maybe it was finally seeing the passion he held for her in his face, in the tension of his body, in the anguish of his voice.

He wanted her. He might be angry, but he wanted her. She could put to rest her excuses that she wasn't good looking enough, that her hair was too coarse, or that she was just not the type for a man to be sexually attracted to.

One thing she was sure of. He was teetering on a fracture point and she had to decide whether she would use that and keep pressing, or leave him be.

* * *

She dissected him and left him bleeding in an open field for the vultures to pick over, and as soon as he bound a piece of himself together, another started to hemorrhage. And so he sat on the edge of his bed, eviscerated, and unable to gather the will to staunch the blood.

She was right, she was wrong, she was so, so, wrong, but in the end it didn't matter because she was right and parsing didn't change the result.

He failed her.

And that brought more despair than the realization of all the suffering he'd been administering himself his whole marriage.

They didn't marry for love, but it was a convenience other than money or familial assets. His reasoning back then was that her unfamiliarity was safe. She expected no coupling, no attachments, and so she was the perfect choice.

At some time it became apparent that they should have children, and so he performed his duty by her, and she him. He never expected to fall in love with her.

It happened sub rosa, and one day while she raised his sons she looked at him and it was there, open and unfurled, and he'd been forever since trying to hide his heart.

His eyes swept his room and he receded into its comfort. Its sparse furnishings soothed him and kept him centered all these years. It was the one place he didn't allow her. There

was nothing soft or of her taste, and her perfume didn't tempt him here. It was his sanctuary.

He lay back on the mattress, his erection still straining and heavy on his stomach, and he brushed his hand down its length giving his taugt balls a tug.

How easy it would be to go down the hall and take what she offered. To slip into what was his and take his relief in her. He could go to confession later. But what she had said made sense. Maybe that was why the elder Priests had urged him to go back. Maybe there was something about him that showed he was not truly called, for all his desiring it to be so. Wanting things did not make them happen.

Even though he'd failed in his mission to become a Priest, he didn't have to fail in his effort to keep his standard. He would just have to redouble his efforts to withstand her. Saying it was much simpler than controlling his body. His body wanted completion, and his heavy erection ached with the need for release. He grazed it again and it jerked.

He needed to calm down and he took a few deep breaths and focused on the Pater Noster, saying it softly to himself.

The door opened and closed with a whisper and click. He thought he locked it, and before he could think to launch himself across the room to bar it, she was already standing before him almost naked.

His heart slammed into his ribs and his erection strained his trousers. She was breathtaking.

Her hair was loose; it's frantic curls soft around her face reaching the small of her back. Her breasts were barely contained in a tiny shirt that had gold coins sewn in fringes off it.

And he remembered.

It was a few months since he had lusted for the woman on the stage, and in front of his own wife. She had known, but now he wasn't sorry. Portia was all that the other woman was and more. She encompassed everything he fantasized about and all that he couldn't dare to imagine.

He tore his eyes off her breasts and took in the rest of her, letting his gaze linger on the smooth softness of her stomach as his breathing became deep pants.

Her skirt skimmed her hips at their fullness, again with a belt of coins daring him to look below.

And then she started to dance. Her hips didn't sway like when she rocked a baby, but they swung and lifted in an invitation. Her feet made small steps as she turned, still swinging her hips, the small of her back arching deeply into the skirt, playing come hither with her body.

Her arms splayed out, her hands held gracefully beckoning him to look here, then there, as she drew his attention across her body.

He wanted to slide his hands up her stomach and cup her breasts, lifting them out of the flimsy binding they were in. He wanted to slip his hands down her hips and under the skirt, making it tumble off.

Her eyes were heavy and hooded and she bit her lips together, not only in concentration, but the desire that draped her like a anointing.

She shimmied up to him, the coins like cymbals announcing her intent and she drew her breasts within an inch of his erection, teasing it with a voluptuous offer of skin.

There was not reasoning, not anymore, he was far beyond breaking and as she came again, her body a banquet, and he couldn't hold back.

She gasped as his trembling hands fumbled with the ties on her shirt, then giving up he tore it, releasing her nipples to his ravenous mouth.

He sucked like a man dying of thirst pulling her nipple back to the soft palate of his mouth. He tried to temper himself to not be rough, but the fullness of her breasts in his face, the hardened nipple in his mouth brought him outside himself to where he was simply reacting. His erection swelled, as if that were even possible, and he could feel liquid dripping from its head. At the same time he ran his hands up her thighs and grabbing the globes of her behind pulled her to him until her mons was pressed into his thigh. She moaned and ran her fingers through his hair sending shocks down his spine to his groin.

Being outside her one minute longer was a torture he couldn't bear, his control was shattering, and he rolled her onto the bed and straddled her, tore his shirt off and threw it to the floor. She pulled at his shoulders, bringing him down to her mouth, and an intoxicating mixture of love and lust broke over him.

Her kisses weren't sweet or demure but frenzied, and her tongue, wet and hot tangled with his in a feverish attempt to devour. He broke away, his lungs like bellows while she nipped at his burning lips and teased his nipples, sending lightning strikes to his groin. The skin on his hair tightened and in one minute more he would be spurting into his pants.

Her skirt bunched up around her thighs and he ripped his trousers open and pulled his drawers down. His erection fell heavy on her thigh with a slap and she arched up to position him, nestling him at her wet entrance and he took a deep breath, shoving his twinges of guilt far down. Her body stilled beneath him in anticipation, her breasts smashed into his chest.

His breath came in shuddering gasps, he was harder than he could imagine, almost to pain, and as the tip of him broached her and slid in she sighed. She was slick and soft and warm, gripping him as if she never wanted him to leave. Not that he wanted to. Now that

he was deep inside her he wanted to stay forever, but she bucked under him, demanding more. Slowly, with agonized rhythm, sweat dripping onto her shoulders, he started to move.

She arched to him, her muscles taut under his hands, and tiny moans escaped her as they met, driving him further to his goal.

What he didn't know was that his heart would be the first to burst. That he would fall in love with her a million times over with each quiver and whimper. He looked down at her, her closed eyes and flushed face. Tears crept down her temples into her hair. Guilt washed over him again. Not for his loss of control, but because he had hurt her so deeply. His whole chest squeezed for the pain in his heart, and he kissed her face and let the watery salt of her tears baptize his mouth.

Chapter Four

His weight pressed her into the soft down mattress and as he filled her she couldn't hold her tears back. He kissed them, and still she couldn't stop. She wanted him there, heavier and deeper. If he could melt into her it wouldn't be close enough.

The head of his erection bumped her womb and she shuddered, her peak thundering closer and he slipped in and out, her juices drenching them both. The old Portia would have died of embarrassment knowing that she was getting him wet. The new Portia loved the suction sounds they made, and the musky scent that filled the room, the taste of his salty skin as she bit at his shoulder.

He filled her with a roar. His long strokes reached all the way inside her and catapulted her to her peak. Her insides squeezed on him, sucking him deeper and making her shudder with each climax as her knees fell out to her sides shaking.

He rested on her shoulder, his sweaty hair sticking to her skin.

"I'm sorry." He mumbled into her, vibrating her neck.

She stroked the hair off his forehead with her nails. "Why?"

"Because I attacked you. I was like an animal."

"I remember doing some biting myself."

She could feel his smile.

He levered himself up onto his shoulders and looked at her. "I am sorry."

"I'm not. I refuse to be. That would mean I regretted it, and I don't." She glared at him, "I don't."

"But Portia—"

"I don't want to hear this. I cannot believe I'm hearing this." She wanted to scream and pound at him with her fists and here he was still on top of her. Even inside her.

"I don't regret it, but I'm having a hard time reconciling."

"Did I act attacked? Did I act as if I was repulsed by any part of you? No. I loved loving you like that. I loved how you desired me. I want that for us all the time. I want you to know that I desire you with all of my heart and body. I want you to know that I get wet when you touch me, when you look at me as if you were going to devour me. What part of that is hard to reconcile? What part of that is a sin?"

He pulled out of her and she was saddened at the vacancy even though their conversation was hard. It was as if he disconnected from her. She clamped her thighs around his hips and he tugged away.

"I want to go wash."

She covered her eyes with her hands and sighed and he pulled her hands away to make her look at him.

"We can start. We can start from here. But you need to give me time to adjust. I can't undo in one night what's taken thirty-seven years to instill." He cupped her face in his

hands. “Can you give me that? Can you allow me to work through this? Can you work through it with me?”

She bit her bottom lip and nodded. “Will you sleep with me tonight instead of going to your room? From now on?”

He paused to think and her fears came rushing back in. “Yes, I can do that.”

It was a start. And she looked forward to the rest of the journey.