



Can forced biological
pairing grow into love?

THE ASTRONOMER

Charmaine Pauls

Chapter One

July, 2165

The fuel cell car stuttered one last time before it came to a dead halt.

“Please. No.” Fraya pressed the ignition button, but all she got was another shudder from the engine.

“Crap. Crap. Crap.” She rested her forehead on the steering wheel.

She never ran out of hydrogen. Damn Gene. This was all his fault. If he hadn’t confessed his affair with Zita a week before their pre-mating party, she wouldn’t have rushed off like that. Now she sat on the curb of a secluded road in Zone 11, previously known as France, without a purse, ePad or phone. If the car wasn’t such an ancient model it would have had a built-in communication system, but the cheaper hydrogen rental was all she could afford.

The rumbling of thunder made her lift her head to look warily at the sky. Great. This was just what she needed. It was at least an hour’s walk back to Domfront. She glanced in the direction of the woods to her left. There was a shortcut through the green zone, the old Mortain forest that exited on the southern border of the village. If she ran, she could make it in thirty minutes. It was her only option. No one would know where to look for her and it would be dark soon. She sighed. This is what you got from driving around mindlessly in an emotional state.

A plump drop exploded on the windshield. “You are so dead, Gene Anderson.”

Fraya scurried from the Q9, heard the automatic lock activate and walked briskly to a sign she noticed a little way up the road.

When she felt a drop on her face, she swore. How could she have been so irresponsible? It was completely unlike her. Then again, her mate-to-be telling

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her he had slept with his high school sweetheart was a first. She didn't even want to come to Zone 11. It was Gene who had insisted they take a pre-mating holiday in one of the last green zones left, what used to be Normandy, and invite their closest friends and family to join them here and then in Zone 13, in the city of New Monte Carlo, for an old-fashioned engagement party. Gene's father had sacrificed a frightening number of points to enable them all to change zones for two weeks. It was, in her opinion, a terrible waste that made her feel guilty. Those points could have fed hungry people, or advanced research. Besides, she hated big parties. What she really hated, was the idea of facing Zita. She should hate Gene, but realized with a pang that his cheating bothered her less than her humiliation.

Another few wet blobs on her arms and her head, the interval between them shorter now, paused her thoughts as she increased her pace. Fraya stopped in front of the signboard she had seen from the car. It indicated the entry point of one of the forest footpaths. It was prohibited to be in the green zones after dark, and if caught, she could be detained and lose her license to study, but it was either risk it, or stick it out in the car on a deserted road. Without giving it further thought, Fraya jogged down the narrow trail.

It was raining hard now. Her summer sandals, white shorts and thin T-shirt weren't exactly suitable hiking gear, especially not in this kind of weather. She had to slow her pace when her feet started slipping in her shoes. Only the sharp pebbles prevented her from continuing barefoot. A mossy patch almost had her flat on her back. She swore under her breath again.

After another ten minutes her hair was plastered to her face and a steady rivulet ran down her back. Her body shivered in protest to the storm that assaulted her skin with sharp pricks of water. Fraya blinked the drops away and kept her eyes focused on the ground in front of her. They had been for a walk on this very same path—Gene and she—only two days ago. Why did he have to have an attack of conscience and tell her? It would have been easier if he had kept his mouth shut. The obscenity of that sentiment stuck another warning spike in her wheel of thoughts.

The trees and shrubs around her dripped with water canalled from their leaves to the muddy forest floor on which she carefully contemplated her step. The musty, damp smell she remembered from her previous visit was replaced with the fragrance of wet soil and fern. The path snaked through a towering gorge before bending toward the river. The rain washed out the sound of the waterfall that lay ahead, but she knew it was near when the rapids came into sight. Fraya stopped at the edge of the water. The wooden bridge was flooded.

“Ah, just great.”

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She stood, hands on her hips, inspecting the only means of crossing the stream. Technically, it wasn't even a bridge. Two wooden beams roughly nailed together spanned over the water. It looked more like a pirate walking plank from olden days.

Well, there was only one way forward. Swiftly, she removed her sandals. Clasping them in one hand, she lifted the other to give herself a sense of balance as she stepped onto the slimy wood.

The water flow was weak, but she didn't want to slip and risk going down the chute at the end of the rapids. She put one foot cautiously in front of the other. Only a few more paces. She bit her lip in concentration.

"Watch out!"

The male voice calling out above the noise of the storm and the rapids made her jerk her head up. She squinted against the rain, and there he was, his red T-shirt standing out like a lighthouse in a grey sea. She gasped. He clung to the wall of a cliff forming part of the gorge, his feet far apart and his hands gripping a ledge.

"To your left!"

Comprehension came a second too late as she saw the tree stump carried her way by the stream. A scream escaped her throat the same instant the trunk swept her feet from under her.

Fraya was aware of the icy coldness as she plummeted into the water, and of her shoes being ripped from her hand. A sharp pain infiltrated her skull, and then the clouds rolled in over her and her bleak day turned black.

* * * *

Emilio watched in horror as what he had feared happened. The woman's head disappeared under the water and he only saw it for an instant again as she drifted toward the rapids, in the direction of the waterfall. Disregarding all security measures, he unclipped the safety cable from his harness and, firmly grasping the rope in his gloved hands, almost free fell to the bottom.

With no small measure of relief he noticed the woman's small body had become entangled in the reeds, her face turned upward. Plucking the restraining harness from his body, he sprinted the few yards to the edge of the stream and managed to hook his hands under the arms of the female, pulling her to safety.

He panted as he lowered her onto the wet grass. A finger on a jugular vein in her neck ensured him she was alive. Emilio did a fast check for neck or back injuries and when he was certain it was safe to move her, he dropped her head back, pinched her nose shut and put his mouth over hers, blowing air into her lungs. She couldn't have swallowed too much water, because he felt her react under him after two breaths.

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Her eyes flew open and she stared at him as if he was a ghost. She had the darkest brown eyes he had ever seen, especially for a blonde like her, and for a moment, he almost forgot himself and the situation. When she moaned and coughed, he tore his gaze from hers and moved his hands over her body in confident strokes, checking for broken bones. Satisfied, he turned her on her side until the coughing eased, and then rolled her onto her back again.

“Are you alright?”

Her huge eyes, pools of hot, liquid chocolate, stared at him. Her body trembled. She should be freezing, and hurting, not to mention suffering from shock. Something inside of him came undone. It was a sensation so foreign he recoiled, alarmed by the intensity of a feeling he couldn't put his finger on. Emilio had an urge to inch closer again, a protective desire to wrap his arms around her, but she surprised him with the calmness with which she said, “I'm fine.”

“No.” He pushed her down when she tried to sit up. “I think you may have a concussion.”

A frown played between those intoxicating eyes. “What the hell were you thinking?”

Her clear voice washed over him. He was almost enchanted, until her words registered.

He raised an eyebrow. “What was I thinking? I was trying to warn you. What in the devil's name are you doing out here in the middle of a storm?”

She brushed his hands away and pouted, drawing his attention to her full lips, their sensuous arch now drawn into an expression of annoyance.

“You distracted me. It's your fault I fell. And speak for yourself. What were you doing hanging from a cliff in the rain?”

Despite himself, Emilio smiled. This time he didn't argue when she sat up. Why did he get the impression it would be fruitless to convince her to keep still? Blood diluted with raindrops ran down the side of her face.

His hand went to her hair, wiping the blonde strands away to inspect a cut above her ear. “You're injured. I don't think it'll need stitches, but you have to go to a health center for a scan.”

She turned her head abruptly, warding off his probing touch. “No! No health centers.” She tried to get up. “I told you I'm fine.”

He got to his feet to give her a hand, and just as well, because her knees buckled a second before he caught her.

She groaned. “Ouch. Shit.”

“Are you sure you're alright?”

“I think I twisted an ankle when I fell.”

He thought for a moment. “It'll be dark soon. We need to get to someplace

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dry where we can shelter until someone can come for you.”

She put her foot down, stepped on it and flinched.

He sighed. “I can see you’re the hardheaded type.” *And too courageous for her own good*, he added in his mind.

“Thanks for that unneeded psychological evaluation.”

“I’m not going to argue with you in the rain and the mud in the middle of the woods. There’s an abandoned church not far from here.”

Without bothering with further explanations, he scooped her up in his arms. She was really small. He wondered about her age. Judging by the fullness of her breasts she was no teenager. Still, she looked very young.

Within five minutes they stood in front of the ancient, stone building. The door was locked, but it only took two firm kicks before they were inside.

Emilio deposited her on a stone bench and took stock of the building.

The petite woman caught his eye and gave him a cute, little frown. “This is an international museum dating back to 1200 BC and you just broke down the door.”

He shrugged. “I’ll have it fixed. It was either that, or being stuck outside.” He motioned to her breasts, the inviting peaks pressing against the wet fabric of her T-shirt. “And you’re cold.” He looked around. “I don’t see anything to build a fire with, unless I manage to break the pew.”

She crossed her arms. “And now you want to set fire to a priceless monument?”

He regarded her for a moment. For someone shivering as violently as she was, she was way too worried about a building when she should be concerned for herself.

“Listen, baby, believe it or not, I’m trying to help.” He lifted his arm, and activated the phone functionality on his wrist pad. “Who can I call for you?”

“No!”

The way her head shot up made him look at her with renewed attention. “Are you in some kind of trouble?”

She shook her head.

He propped his hands on his hips. “You still haven’t told me what you were doing on that bridge, on a day like this.”

She sighed, and suddenly looked tired. “My car ran out of hydrogen and I took the shortcut through the forest to the village. You go along and make your way back. I’ll find my own.”

He laughed. “You’re totally ridiculous. There’s no way you’ll make it anywhere on that ankle. And it’ll soon be dark. I can’t leave you here on your own. If you’re not arrested, you’ll freeze to death.”

She started to seem nervous, so he said, “Listen, I’m not a maniac or a

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serial killer. If you won't let me call an ambulance or someone to come and get you, at least let me help you back to town."

He watched as she bit her lip.

"Alright," she said after a short pause. "There's a food bar on the other side of the woods. I'll be thankful if you could just get me there."

Emilio deactivated his phone and lifted her into his arms once more. She weighed almost nothing. In fact, she fitted perfectly in the cradle of his arms. He had a thing for short women, but this one woke plenty of things inside of him he couldn't explain.

"Do you believe in destiny?" he said, surprising himself.

"No," she said, her tone cold, "only in the shit when it hits the fan."

Despite her icy demeanor, he felt her hiding her face in his chest as soon as they walked back into the rain. He grinned. She was a very pretty girl with a very cocky attitude. And perfect breasts. Emilio pulled his arms tighter around her to shelter her with his body from the onslaught of the weather.

Chapter Two

They made it to the forest exit in twenty minutes. Fraya was sorry for the loss of warmth as the muscled man put her back on her feet in the pouring rain. She shivered and hugged herself.

He wiped a dark fringe from his eyes, pushing back his wet, shoulder-length hair, and regarded her with something like curiosity through the drops of rain.

“This is my car.” He threw a thumb over his shoulder to a sleek, black fully electric A-Cell parked in the otherwise empty lot. “I can drive you to the food bar.”

“Thank you. That’ll be kind.”

He unlocked the door and helped her into the passenger side. She watched him from hooded eyes as he took the driver’s seat. The Lycra exercise pants did nothing to hide his powerful legs. His wet T-shirt clung to his broad chest and well defined abs.

As Fraya studied him, she became aware of a curious sensation. She had first felt it when he had had his hands all over her, assumingly examining her for injuries. It became a bit more pronounced in the church, but she had written it off to nerves. This was more than jitters. Her breasts felt heavy and her womb contracted with an anticipatory spasm. What was wrong with her? This couldn’t be normal. Something got seriously screwed up when she plunged into the cold water. Or could it have something to do with the man next to her? She regarded him cautiously, her curiosity piqued.

“I told you how I got caught in the woods in the rain. You still haven’t told me what you were doing rock climbing in bad weather.”

He started the engine and turned the heater on full blast. “Ah, so you noticed the rock climbing? I thought you said you didn’t know what I was doing on that cliff.”

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“It’s a bit hard to miss the gear. And I’ve been in this forest before. I know it’s a popular spot for abseiling.” A thought hit her. “What about your equipment? You left it behind.”

He smiled. “No worries. I’ll go back for it later.”

“Thanks for helping me.” It wasn’t fair for a man to have eyes that blue and hair that black. Not that she should be noticing.

“Don’t mention it.”

“So rock climbing isn’t adventurous enough for you? You have to do it when the sky’s falling down?”

His laugh was deep, his voice sensual. “Not even I’m that daring. Damn weather forecasts. Can’t trust them. Wasn’t supposed to rain until tonight. I was a quarter of the way down that cliff when it started to piss down.”

“Those clouds did move in pretty fast.”

“So what are you going to do once I’ve dropped you at the bar?”

She reflected for a moment. Her plan was to beg a call from the owner for a cab to drive her back to her guesthouse for her purse. Then she would go to a gas station, get some hydrogen, and go rescue her car. She realized that in her current disabled state her plan was impractical. The car rental company was in Isis, the city that was also known as Paris. If she called them and they managed to send someone out, even someone from a nearby settlement, it would cost a fortune in points, points she didn’t have. She could call Gene. No. There was no way she was speaking to him.

She turned to the stranger. “Do you think you can just help me to get my car started? I was going to call a taxi from the bar, but…” She looked at her ankle.

He studied her, his blue eyes questioning. “You’re not from here, that’s clear. So you have no one who can come to your rescue?”

“No,” she said without meeting his gaze, “not right now.”

“This is going to sound like a terrible cliché, but what is a girl like you doing in a village like this, alone?”

“Holiday,” was all she said. She didn’t feel like explaining. The story was too long and complicated. It was easier to throw the question back at him. “You’re not French either. What brings you to Normandy?”

“Holiday.” He flashed a set of perfect white teeth. “Alright. So, the plan of action is to go get hydrogen and fill up your car so that you can go home.”

“Yep.” She shook her head eagerly.

“Where’s home?”

“Guesthouse.”

“Fine. But I’m going nowhere like this,” he said, motioning at his muddy clothes, “and neither should you. Besides having a possible concussion, you

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may catch pneumonia.”

She looked down and flushed. Her wet T-shirt was practically see-through. She crossed her arms over her chest. “What do you propose?”

“I’m going back to my hotel for dry clothes and then we go get your car. You look like you can do with a sweater.”

She didn’t have much of a choice. She would wait in his car, while he got changed and fetched her a jersey or something. Besides, she was shivering from head to toe and her fingers were numb from the cold. Her head started hurting too and her skin throbbed above her ear. And then there were other physical aches she didn’t care to examine.

“Fine,” she said, laying her head back.

She felt his hand on her arm. “God woman, you’re a block of ice. Are you sure you’re alright?”

She turned her head toward him. “To tell you the truth, I’ve been better.”

He removed his hand to put the car in gear. “Hold on, baby. We’ll get you dry and warm soon.”

She hated to be called ‘baby’, especially by a man she didn’t know, but she didn’t have the strength to object. Her eyes closed involuntary as he reversed the vehicle and headed for the center of Domfront.

He parked in front of the largest hotel on the main square. It was one of the only ancient buildings in the West World that had escaped the onslaught of modern stacked dorm constructions as the need for housing had started to outweigh the value of historic monuments during the last century. Half of the castle was a museum, while the other half had been converted into a luxury hotel to pay for its upkeep. The modern plaza with its colorful statues now looked bleak through the curtain of rain.

“Ready for another sprint through this storm? It’ll be cold again, but I promise to hurry.” He gave her a reassuring smile.

“I’ll wait in the car. If you don’t mind, I’ll borrow a sweater. You can bring it with you when you come back.”

“There’s no way in hell I’m leaving you in your state. Your teeth are chattering. Come upstairs. I said I’d get you dry and warm.”

Fraya was about to protest again, but he was already getting out of the car and coming around to her side. Before she could open her mouth, he had the door open and lifted her into his arms. Protesting loudly as he carried her through the busy hotel lobby and into the lift only attracted curious stares from the staff and other guests.

When the elevator doors closed behind them, she wiggled to free herself, but he held her tighter.

“You can put me down.”

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He gave her a devilish smile. "I don't want to."

She felt her cheeks grow hot. "Don't joke with me."

"I'm not," he said with a twinkle in his eyes. "Can you get the floor please? My hands are occupied."

She thought it better to ignore his comment. "Which number?"

"Top floor." He grinned down at her. "You're blushing. Are you shy?"

"That's a personal question."

"We're in a kind of a personal position."

She swallowed. Why the hell did her blood pressure suddenly shoot through the roof? Thankfully the lift pinged and the doors opened. He carried her down the hallway to the only door on that level. Was it her imagination, or did he just brush his hand over her bottom?

"It will be easier if you put me down, you know."

He frowned, but he did lower her to the ground to push his thumb onto the electronic identity pad on the wall. A welcome message ran over the screen, followed by the evening's dinner options. Real beef? Eggs? The food in her guesthouse was synthetic. Had to be expensive to eat here. He opened the door to what seemed like a very large suite. "Here we are."

Fraya's mouth felt dry. Alright. She only wanted to get something warm to put on and go back downstairs as fast as she could. Her body's intensifying reactions worried her. It seemed to multiply when he touched her. Being alone with him in his hotel room wasn't a clever idea. He didn't look like a serial killer, but one never knew, these days. Although, that wasn't what really worried her. Only a sweater, she reassured herself. When she started to hop forward on one leg he placed a hand on her arm.

"Hold on, baby." He lifted her like she was nothing more than a kitten, kicked the door shut and deposited her on a sofa facing a gigantic old-fashioned four-poster bed.

"You should know I don't like to be called 'baby', especially not by strangers."

His sardonic eyes laughed at her, she was sure.

"I'll keep that in mind," he said.

Fraya glanced around the elegant room. It had to cost all the points she'd ever accumulated in her life, and more. "Nice suite."

"Penthouse, but not my style." He disappeared through a door and returned with a towel, which he handed her.

"No?" She wasn't going to tell him that they—Gene and she—were staying in the cheapest stack dorm guesthouse in town, their room a concrete cubicle with grey walls and floors. "What *is* your style?"

"Modern."

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“Don’t you feel just a little bit of a thrill to stay in a castle dating from the eleventh century? This is one of the only original buildings in Zone 11 that was preserved, you know.”

He chuckled. “Typical woman, to see only the romantic side. The walls are damp and the wiring is a mess.”

“Oh.” She stared at him and forgot what she wanted to say. Surely it was something clever and reprimanding. Instead, she looked at his face, his mass of dark hair falling to his shoulders, the tightness of his pants around his thighs and... Her eyes shot back to his face as she realized that she was shamelessly undressing the man with her eyes. A white-hot flame flowered in her belly.

He grinned, as if he knew where her thoughts were dwelling. She looked away quickly and started toweling her hair.

“I’m going to get rid of these wet things,” he pulled at his T-shirt, “and then I’ll run you a warm shower. I’m sure I can find you something to wear.”

She jerked her head up in alarm. “I don’t need a shower. I can just borrow something dry.”

“We’ll both get warm, clean and dry first. You’re shaking like a leaf.”

He went back into what she assumed to be the bathroom. Fraya looked at the door. She could hear him fiddling around, opening and closing what sounded like cupboard doors. She should leave. She was about to get up when he reappeared to open more doors and drawers in the room, going through the antique armoire in the corner and a suitcase lying open on a chest. With those Lycra pants sculpturing his ass she couldn’t help but notice that it was a rather nice ass. She tore her gaze away from him, pretending to be looking at the view through the window.

“I found something that’ll do.”

She nearly chocked when she turned her head back to him. A burning arrow pierced the base of her spine. He had pulled his T-shirt over his head, revealing a set of muscles that would make any male model envious, dusted with dark chest hair that disappeared with his happy trail down to...

Her eyes shot up, just in time to catch the amusement in his, as he watched her sizing up his body. At least he was a gentleman about it, not commenting except for holding up a Foreigner Twenty-Second Century Band Tour T-shirt and a grey sweater.

“This alright?”

She cleared her throat. “Thank you.”

What the hell was wrong with her? She couldn’t have these reactions. She was getting engaged to be mated. This was starting to freak her out. The sooner she could get away, the better.

She got up, supporting herself on the armrest. “May I use your bathroom?”

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He rushed to her side, dropping the clothes on the bed. “Careful. Not so fast. Let me help you.”

“I’m not an invalid,” she said, but her hand went to her temple that had started throbbing painfully with her sudden movement. A burst of strange need had her clenching her thighs. The untimely and foreign arousal didn’t help the pain. It seemed to amplify it. She groaned.

“I can see that. But you’re injured.”

He moved until he stood almost against her, their bodies a hair width apart. He was much taller, so that her eyes locked onto his powerful torso, and she could see his chest move with the fast intake of his breath. Fraya’s heart started pumping furiously, the beat echoed in her aching skull. She felt herself heating from the inside out, her cold forgotten, her trembling now not related to the weather at all. She held her breath in a futile effort to stop the erratic little gulps that had replaced her normal respiration.

What the hell was wrong with her? This had never happened before. She had a long friendship with Gene before they got engaged. Falling head over heels in love was not her thing. Neither was getting weak-kneed for a man she didn’t know from Adam.

He brushed her long hair away from her face and grabbed it in a ponytail at the base of her neck. “I need to check this cut, but I’ll have to clean you up first. Can’t see anything through the mud and twigs.”

Only then did she look at the mirror on the wall. She flinched. What a lovely mess she was. Her hair was tangled, brown with soil and full of sticks and shafts of grass from the reeds. There was a little bit of blood on the side of her face. As for the rest of it, she couldn’t be sure what lay under the dirty streaks covering her cheeks and chin.

“Come.” His voice was gentle. “I’ll clean you up in the shower.”

She gaped at him. “You’ll what?” she finally managed through dry lips.

Instead of answering, he scooped her up and carried her to the bathroom. He left her at a loss for words on the toilet seat while he turned the tap in the shower on. A water shower? She had only ever had vapor showers.

“Drink that.” He pointed at a glass of water and two painkillers on the side of the basin. “It will help.”

Glancing at the pharmaceutical name on the white tablets, ensuring she recognized the brand, she did as she was told before sneaking a look at his broad back. Another flash erupted through her body with a burning sensation that lingered in her spine. Holy crap. Only when steam filtered into the cubicle, did he turn and kneel in front of her.

“I’ll have to help you, unless you want me to dump you on the shower floor.”

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Help her? A mental picture of them in the shower invaded her mind and caused a fist of lust to punch her in the gut.

“Yes, just dump me on the floor.”

“Not a good idea. We’ll shower in our underwear. Alright?”

He seemed to be very good at giving reassuring smiles as he gently lifted her arms and pulled her wet shirt over her head. Her skin burned under his fingertips.

This was so not happening. Her arms went around her breasts. She watched as he dropped her dirty shirt on the floor before bending over her, his hands going to the waistband of her shorts.

She wanted to protest, to pull away, to insult him even, but instead she found her body arching forward, obeying the silent command of his hands when he tugged on the clip button and pulled down the zip.

“Lift your ass,” he said.

Like a hypnotized snake dancing to the flute player’s tune, she lifted herself on her arms just enough for him to slip the pants over her hips, down her legs, and over her ankles. Thank goodness she was wearing her new push-up bra and matching French panties. NO. What on earth was she thinking? He picked up her injured foot to study it and, when he had felt his way around her ankle, his hand smoothed up her calf.

“Such a pity to blotch such a perfect skin,” he mused. “You’re already turning blue.”

He straightened abruptly and stripped the black cycling shorts from his narrow hips, pushing them over his muscular thighs, until it ended up on the same heap as her soiled garments.

She was almost too terrified of her reaction to glance at his black briefs, but she couldn’t help the magnetic force that pulled her eyes in that direction.

Fraya thought she saw his lips twitch, ever so fleetingly. Without another word he picked her up and carried her into the shower. He positioned her body against the wall and adjusted the spray of the water to fall over her shoulders. It was pure, delicious heaven. She watched with mesmerized fascination as he took a sponge and soaped her body. She flinched as his fingers moved over her ribs.

He turned her sideways. “You’re blue everywhere,” he said, almost sounding angry.

She gasped as his fingers trailed a path to the lower curve of her breast. The heat diffused in her body was now near painful. Watching her with guarded eyes, he moved the sponge over the sensitive mounds, teasing her through the fabric of her bra, and she couldn’t help but close her eyes. She had to make it stop. It took all her willpower to grab his arm and move it away.

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“I’m not injured there,” she snapped.

He didn’t apologize for his wandering fingers. Instead, he clasped her chin in his hand and tilted her head. “I’m going to wash around the wound. This may sting.” He took the shower nozzle from its hook and moved it to her head, smoothing back her hair.

She uttered a cry as the water burned the cut where her head had taken a knock.

“Sorry,” he said, smiling apologetically, his hand moving down and flattening over her tummy, as if he could sense her discomfort and spasms. The warmth of his palm sent shockwaves over her skin. They exploded and rippled to a part of her body that begged for release. She needed to get out of here. Her body shook, her knees battling to carry her weight. Even as she braced her back against the wall, moving away from him, her hips tilted forward. Her mind was going to dissolve. She could feel reason slipping away. She gazed up at him in awed shock, biting her lip so hard she tasted blood. What was going on? That knock had crippled her brain.

“Oh, baby,” he said, groaning and resting his forehead on hers, “if you tease me by pushing your thighs against me like this,” he looked down, “I can’t promise that I’ll keep my hands to myself.”

She followed his gaze and sucked in her breath. “Oh. Sorry. I... You’re hard... I mean...”

He laughed softly, but his voice was strained. “I’m turned on. And so are you.”

He studied her, his eyes sharp and clever. Of course she was. It was a bit hard to deny when you had your pelvis pressed into a man’s private parts and your thigh draped around his ass. She tried to flatten herself further against the wall and turned her head away.

“I’m sorry. I don’t know what came over me. Must be the bump I took to my head.” She looked back at him and whimpered. “Oh God, what’s wrong with me? What did you do to me?”

He took her face between his hands. “I don’t know, but you did the same thing to me.”

“I should go. This frightens me.”

He kissed her forehead. A wave of intolerable want crashed over her.

“I know, baby. Stay. Let me make it alright.”

“There’s something wrong with me. The fall, the knock, did something.”

“Don’t lie about what you feel. You know we both want it. We’ve wanted it since I’ve laid my hands on you in that forest. I can see it in your eyes.” His hand stroked up her thigh, cupping her hip, sending a delicious shiver through her. “I can feel it under my palms.”

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She shook her head. "I don't know what's wrong with me." She paused as another attack weakened her knees. "I can't," she whispered.

His stare was imploring. Suddenly a dark, predatory look came over him. He took her left wrist and turned it up. He closed his eyes fleetingly and breathed in. His thumb brushed over the untainted skin.

"You don't have a mark. You're not mated. Then why won't you accept me?"

She grasped for the final shred of reason that remained in her dazed mind. "This isn't right. I don't do things like this. I don't pick up men and have ... do stuff..."

"But you want to. If the physical signs I read in your body are anything to go by, you're suffering as much as I am."

"Just let me get out of here. Please."

He watched her for another moment before his look shifted. "Warmer?"

She nodded, not trusting her voice to speak.

He turned off the water. "Stay there." He reached for a towel and draped it around her, before he tied another one around his waist.

She couldn't object as he lifted her from the shower onto the bath rug. She could only watch as he towed her dry, carefully inspecting the marks the accident had left on her body.

Finally, gently wringing the water from her hair, he bent down and, when she least expected it, brushed his lips over her jaw. It was almost her unmaking. Her hands found his shoulders, her nails digging into his skin as he scraped his teeth down her neck.

She gasped, trying to push him away, the need and pain now unbearable. "You're torturing me."

He immediately let go. "Look at me."

She almost cried out, torn between guilt and need as she fought for control, her eyes pinched shut, her only awareness the craving of her flesh.

His voice drifted back to her. "Baby, look at me."

She opened her eyes reluctantly.

"Does it feel like a thousand nails are shooting into your gut?" he said softly. "Like your skin is on fire and your insides are being ripped apart?"

She blinked. "How do you know?"

"Because that's what you do to me. Your touch on my skin, it burns me alive. And it's getting worse. Since we've left that damn forest it's gone from a spark to a fucking intolerable fire. Just let me make it better."

"How?" she asked uncertainly. "How can you know what to do if we don't even know what's wrong with us?"

He smiled wryly, his grin now almost a grimace. "Maybe it's not that

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there's something wrong with us. Maybe it's just perfectly right.”

“You're not talking any sense.”

“It's not talking we want to do, and you know it.”

She was close to tears now, biting back the pain as it hit her between her knees. “I can't.”

“I'm at the end of my control, seeing you suffer like this.” His voice held a warning. “Why won't you? Tell me your reasons. Just let me assure you.”

Oh, she had reasons, alright. She belonged to another. “The guilt...”

His fingers enclosed on her wrist, the left arm, and brought it slowly to his mouth. When his lips touched the flesh meant for the mating mark, her eyes fluttered close. His wicked tongue licked over the spot, sending a shiver down her spine that had her arching her back. Her control unraveled when he nipped at her skin with his teeth. A cry escaped her lips.

His other hand went to her hair, pulling back her head, exposing her ear for his lips. His words breathed over her, soft brushes of air. “What if you don't have a choice? Would that take away the guilt?”

“I don't understand.”

“If I tie you up, you won't have a choice.”

“What?” Her eyes widened but the fire had already pooled out to every crevice and peak of her body. Alarmed and surprised that his words had such an effect on her, she took a step back and flinched when she put her weight on her swollen ankle.

His grip tightened in her hair. “You're frightened. Of your feelings. We'll play a game. I'll tie you to my bed so that I can take you, do with you as I please. You won't have control. And you needn't feel guilty.”

Her lips parted in both shock and excitement as she stared at him.

His finger traced her bottom lip. “You have a perfect mouth. And a perfect body. You're so small, so tiny.” He frowned. “How old are you?”

“Twenty-seven,” she said, her eyes fixed on his hypnotic mouth.

“Ah. Good.”

She pulled her arm free. “I should go.”

“How unlikely is it for two people to be out in a forest, in a foreign zone, in a rainstorm, on exactly the same day, at exactly the same time? How unlikely to feel, to burn, like we do?”

She shook her head in a weak attempt at denial. “I don't get what you're insinuating.”

“This was meant to be.”

She shook her head again and opened her mouth, but he placed a finger over her lips. Convulsions of pleasure ripped through her. “Feel that. Feel what my touch does to you. I never do this kind of thing either.” His voice lowered.

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“I need you.”

“Oh God. I can’t do this.”

“You don’t have to do anything. Let me seduce you. I’ll take care of everything.”

Her body was a trembling mass. “You don’t understand. I’m—”

“I have to have you. I feel like I’ll die if I don’t. I swear to God, this is the first time I’m saying this to someone, the first time I’m feeling this ... this ... craziness. And it’s killing me. Give me your control. That’s all I’m asking.” He closed the space she had put between them. “I could take your control with one kiss. I know I can, because that’s how close I am to losing mine. But I don’t want to steal it. I want you to give it to me.”

His closeness was like a powerful drug. She felt her strength falter as her need spiked. “I don’t like not to be in control.”

“You only have to say the word, and I’ll untie you. I won’t do anything you don’t want, or like.”

She was crazy, for sure, because for an insane second she conjured an image of her tied to his bed, his muscular body posed over her, and she felt her breath quicken painfully.

“Trust me,” he said gently.

“And why would I trust a complete stranger?”

She looked at the door, but she already knew she wasn’t going anywhere. The strange thing was that she did trust him. There was no doubt in her mind he would let her hop through the door right now if she wished. The problem was that she couldn’t turn away from her bizarre craving. They both knew there was no way either one of them could walk away.

Fraya guessed he had sensed her hesitation, because he took it as his cue to lift her and swiftly move into the bedroom, depositing her in front of the bed.

His hands went to the clasp of her bra, while his mouth went to her ear. “There’s one condition. If you don’t intend to honor it, tell me now, and I’ll let you go.”

She was beside herself with need. She was wild, panting. His hands smoothed down her back and she dug her nails into her palms not to wrap her legs around him and beg him for release. Her bra dropped to her feet. She craved him so badly she felt feverish. She wanted nothing more than to feel his skin against hers, but he held her at arm’s length.

“Listen to me. This is important.”

She was going out of her mind and he was still talking?

“Open your eyes, baby. Just for a second. What did I say?”

“A condition?” she said in a haze, forcing her eyes to focus on his face.

“I don’t do holiday romances. Neither once-offs.” His hand slipped into

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her panties, forcing the elastic over her hip. “If I have you, I’m going to have you again and again.”

She moaned under his hot hands—scorching, burning, hands.

“Please,” she begged. Nothing had ever felt this good.

He nibbled at her ear. “Do you get it?”

She was going to faint. “Yes,” she whispered. She couldn’t care one way or the other for his conditions now. She’d say whatever he wanted to hear, as long as he didn’t stop.

“I’m going to tie you up now, baby, so that I can make you come in ten different ways. Do you understand?”

She nodded.

“Tell me you want it.”

“Yes.” Oh, yes. She wanted it more than she’d wanted anything in her life.

He paused. “Look at me.” He took her chin to aid in his command. “If you want me to stop, or to untie you, just say the word, and I will. Understand?”

“Mmm.” She pushed her body against his and slipped her hands into his briefs, forcing it down his legs with hurried passion. She heard him gasp, and felt herself being lifted and laid on his bed.