

WELCOME TO

SKULLCRUSHER MOUNTAIN



By Christine Pope

Illustrated by Joanne Renaud

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BASED ON THE SONG "SKULLCRUSHER MOUNTAIN"

BY JONATHAN COULTON

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ONE

Of all the ways Jenna Masterson had thought her day might end, none had included being slung over the shoulder of some monstrous, hairy...well, she supposed she'd call him a man for now, since she wasn't sure what else he could be. He walked on two legs, had two arms and a head and features roughly where they were supposed to be, but after that any similarity to any man she'd ever known before came to a screeching halt.

She hadn't had much opportunity for anything more than a quick disbelieving stare before he'd grabbed her and thrown her over his shoulder like a sack of potatoes. Her camera had gone one way and her digital recorder another, and her purse was probably still rolling down the side of the mountain. Not that she'd had anything more threatening in there than a half used-up tube of Rum Raisin lipstick.

Maybe if she'd listened to Old Henry down at the drugstore, she wouldn't be in this mess. He'd tried to warn her, but of course she hadn't listened.

“You’ll want to stay off Skullcrusher,” he’d said as he handed her a bag containing the lip balm and bug repellent she’d just purchased.

“Off what?” she asked, blinking at him. Was he psychic? How had he known that she was buying the bug repellent in preparation for an exploratory trip up the side of the mountain?

She hadn’t been in Plainfield very long, and she supposed he might be pulling her leg. Then again, Old Henry (everyone seemed to call him that, from her landlady to the barrista at Starbucks... trust Starbucks to have an outlet even here in the boonies) didn’t seem to be exactly the joking type. She’d seen cheerier expressions on Basset hounds.

“Skullcrusher Mountain.”

Jenna had taken the bag from him and raised her eyebrows. “You mean Black’s Peak?” It was the only place within twenty miles of Plainfield deserving of the designation “mountain,” although back in Southern California it would have hardly rated a second glance.

He made a noise deep in his throat that might’ve been a chuckle. Then again, he could have just been fighting with a particularly belligerent piece of phlegm. “That’s what it says on the map, but it’s Skullcrusher. Just stay away, and you’ll do fine.”

At the time she’d thought maybe Old Henry was a decade or so past retirement and talking dementia-induced nonsense, but now she knew better. There was a reason he’d called this place Skullcrusher. God knows she was getting a headache right now, what with the way her skull kept knocking into the unknown Neanderthal’s shoulder blade with every enormous step he took.

She couldn’t really tell where they were headed, as her best view at the moment was of the hard-packed dirt and pine needles underfoot, and even that sight was diminishing rapidly. It had been well past five when she’d turned to put her camera away. The

sun had been hovering just a few degrees above the horizon, and she'd known enough to realize that she had better get back to her car before dark. Not that she'd had the chance, as her captor had grabbed her just as she'd begun to unclasp the messenger bag she used to carry the camera and its spare batteries and one of the little notepads she took with her everywhere.

Now dusk was just about to give way to full dark—no shilly-shallying around with long, blood-tinged, smoggy sunsets out here; no, nighttime fell in a brisk and businesslike fashion, bearing a strong resemblance to most of Plainfield's residents in its no-nonsense approach to the procedure. By now she should have been safely back in the little two-bedroom house she was renting on the west side of town. Instead, she was being hauled steadily upward by the Missing Link...or at least its long-lost cousin.

Because they definitely were climbing, on and on into an increasingly dark night. The surveyor maps she'd looked at back in the newspaper offices pegged Skullcrusher Mountain—Black's Peak, that is—at 3,677 feet, which would have classified it as a foothill in her native Southern California. But here, climbing up out of the flat plain that had given the town its name, it looked a lot taller than that. It looked, well, mountainous.

Not tall enough to deter the ambulatory hulk who had snatched her. How he was able to see in the dark, she had no idea; the sun was gone, and the moon not due out for some hours, but he moved steadily, with no missteps or stumbles. She supposed she should be grateful for that. All the head-bobbing was painful enough without factoring a trip over a tree root or a gopher hole into the equation.

If they even had gophers up here, of course.

She'd tried screaming when he first snatched her, on the off chance there might be some hikers or thrill-seeking teenagers

roaming around in the woods. The Missing Link's cousin hadn't even bothered to tell her to shut up, and after a few minutes of turning her throat into the vocal equivalent of chopped sirloin, she realized he'd let her scream because there was in fact no one around to hear her. Ever since that moment of clarity, the journey up the mountainside had passed in silence.

And it was quiet up here...too quiet. Shouldn't she have been hearing the first owls, or sounds of some sorts of creatures in the forest? People in Plainfield had warned her about wolves, saying that the packs had been coming west out of Yellowstone for years. Not that she was really looking forward to a run-in with a bunch of possibly rabid lupines, but at least a wolf call or two would have reassured her that she and her captor weren't the only living things on the whole mountain.

Then the Neanderthal slowed to a stop. She heard grinding metal and twisted around, trying to peer past the mass of his deltoids to see what had finally halted his steady upward climb. A reddish light flowed out of an opening in the mountainside. She blinked. Were those torches?

"Not yet," he said, the first words he had spoken since he seized her. A large ham-like fist descended, and everything went blacker than the night.

She was exquisite. The best yet. She lay on the cot where Scarface had placed her, hair a fiery mass against the pillow. Her lashes formed two dark crescents against her cheeks. He knew it was necessary for Scarface to knock the women out before they were brought in here, and yet he wished she were awake.

He wondered what color her eyes were. Blue? Green? He supposed he would know soon enough.

Scarface lingered to one side, watching. He reached up to

scratch the back of his neck and said, “She’s a screamer, Master.”

His tone was too flat to be construed as overtly critical, but it still required some rebuke. “You say that about all of them.”

“It’s because they all scream.”

He knew there was no arguing with that statement. Yes, he supposed that someone taken off her guard might scream when confronted by as imposing a specimen as Scarface. But of course he wouldn’t admit that Scarface was right; doing so would only be a sign of weakness.

With some effort he turned away from his latest captive. Although he would have liked nothing more than to wait there until she awoke, he knew it would be some time before she regained consciousness. Scarface could bring her to him when the time came. It was always better to have the women come to him in the laboratory, where they could be properly impressed by their surroundings.

“I’ll be in my lab,” he said, and left without bothering to wait for Scarface’s nod. His assistant knew what to do.

As did he.

The last time she’d felt this craptastic had been after a night of drinking tequila shots at El Coyote with that photographer from *Newsweek*. Jenna pressed a hand against her throbbing forehead and forced herself to open her eyes.

A stone ceiling met her aching gaze. The light in here was odd — yellowish orange, with a strange flickering quality. Torches?

Stifling a groan, she sat up and took a quick glance around. No, not torches, but sconces which emitted illumination that at first glance appeared to be from candles but was far brighter. She forced her shaking legs over the edge of the cot and stood, then stumbled the few feet to the barred wall that enclosed the space

where she'd been left. One of those odd sconces was only a few feet away. By standing on her tiptoes, she could just see inside. It held a rectangular element, from which the not-candlelight emerged. It did waver the way a candle would, but the pulses were too regular, as if the device had been programmed to imitate a flickering flame but had fallen just a little short on the verisimilitude factor.

"The Master invented those," came a deep, almost familiar voice, and she whirled. The Neanderthal stood a few feet away from the bars of her cage.

His appearance did not improve on closer inspection. Now she could see the horrible scars that crisscrossed his face, turning his features into the world's most frightening topological map. What the hell had happened to him—tragic incident with a threshing machine when he was a boy?

"The Master?" she echoed.

"I will bring you to him now." From somewhere within the enormous shapeless coat he wore he pulled out a set of keys, one of which he stuck into the lock of her cell.

For one wild second Jenna entertained the idea of rushing him, taking him off-guard while the cell door was barely open, and fleeing into the night. Then she took a second look at the length of his arms and guessed he could probably grab her before she got two feet. She sighed. So much for heroics.

Meekly, she stepped out of the cell and allowed him to guide her down a short corridor and then up a long, winding flight of stairs. She noticed that the steps beneath her feet, the walls around her, and even the roof above were all carved out of dark-gray granite. Maybe she'd watched too many James Bond movies with her dad when she was a kid, but the place looked just like the secret lair of some super-villain.

Which two hours ago she would have said was impossible

and crazy, but who else but a complete whack-job would live in the guts of a mountain and employ someone who looked like the Missing Link to do his dirty work?

“Who’s the Master?” she asked, the words sounding a little breathless even to her. Apparently, all the stair-climbing machines in the world couldn’t quite prepare a person for the endless stairways inside Black’s Peak. Her head pounded in time with each step, and she wondered whether she dared ask for some ibuprofen.

“You’ll see.”

That sounded ominous. She tried to imagine what kind of man would have the *cojones* to boss someone like the Hulk here around, got a few mash-ups that fell somewhere between Hannibal Lecter and Darth Vader, and gave up. Unfortunately, she probably would know soon enough.

At last the stairs ended, and they emerged in a long, wide hallway. More of the sconces lit this area. From somewhere off in the distance she thought she heard male voices, but she saw no one. Not that anyone roaming around in here would be likely to help her out. Besides, while unnecessary heroics sometimes got you on the five o’clock news, they could also lead to you being messily dead. She’d rather wait and see how things shook out.

The hallway ended in a pair of riveted steel doors. Her captor paused and placed his thumb on what appeared to be a state-of-the-art biometric scanner on the wall to their right, and the doors swung inward.

Beyond the doors was a room that could have been cobbled together from every mad scientist’s wet dream from the dawn of black and white horror movies. Banks of equipment whose purpose she couldn’t even guess at thrummed and pulsed with



strange light. Some kind of generator hummed off in a corner. Rows and rows of glass vials and jars—some filled with unpleasantly proportioned specimens—filled an enormous stack of shelves off to her left. And was that a Tesla coil arcing and sparking over there to the right?

In the midst of all this Hollywood scene-setting stood a tall man in a white lab coat. His back was to the door, but he turned as Jenna and her jailer approached.

As mad scientists went, he could have been much worse. He definitely needed a haircut, and his nose was long and beaky and his eyes partially obscured by a pair of wire-rimmed glasses, but

even so, she'd had worse blind dates.

"Welcome to Skullcrusher Mountain," he said. He smiled as he spoke, although there was something off about his expression, as if he really didn't have much practice smiling at people.

Despite everything, she had the overwhelming urge to burst out laughing. This had to be a joke, right? At any moment someone was going to bust out the cameras and Ashton Kutcher was going to be laughing in her face, flashing that goofy grin of his.

Then again, that stupid show had been cancelled awhile ago, hadn't it?

She crossed her arms. "The maps say this is Black's Peak."

The mad scientist's smile slipped a fraction of an inch. He glanced past her to his henchman. "Scarface, leave us."

The Neanderthal nodded and then retreated out the door they'd come in through. Jenna didn't know if she should be relieved or worried that he'd been dismissed in such a summary fashion. And "Scarface"? Really? Nice way to keep throwing the guy's disfigurement right back in his, well, face.

"I am Dr. Black," the mad scientist told her. "This mountain has always belonged to my family."

"Convenient. Were they in the kidnapping business, too?"

"Kidnapping?"

"Well, that's usually what they call it when you grab someone and forcibly spirit her away to a secret mountain fortress."

He tilted his head to one side. She couldn't be entirely certain, because the light from the Tesla coil kept bouncing off his glasses, but she thought she saw his eyes narrow. "I prefer to refer to it as 'collecting.'"

A little surprised at her own boldness, she said, "Call it

whatever you want, but I'm pretty sure it's still a federal crime even around here."

His smile reasserted itself. "Perhaps, but I don't recognize your government."

Great. So not only was he some kind of mad scientist with a yen for redheads, but he also sounded like some kind of Libertarian Tea Party nut-job. They were the kind who wrote massive ten-page letters to the editor of the newspaper as to exactly why the federal income tax was illegal and why they had the right to declare themselves sovereign states and therefore free of any obligation to the United States of America.

She shot a surreptitious glance around the lab but didn't see any signs of stockpiled weapons or tinfoil hats. Not that that meant anything.

"I'm sure the local branch of the FBI would find that fascinating, Dr. Black. I'm guessing they'd be willing to give you a good amount of time to explain your position — something like five to ten years, probably."

No reaction. He didn't even blink. Either he honestly didn't think he'd done anything wrong, or he was so far around the bend that the prospect of an extended stay in federal prison didn't bother him a bit.

"Dinner?" he asked.

He hadn't blinked, but she did. "Um...what?"

"It's time for dinner. If you would join me?"

And he honest-to-God held out his hand to her. Jenna stared back at him for a few seconds, once again struggling against that incongruous desire to erupt into hysterical laughter. What would he do if she refused?

But she had no doubt that he was crazy, and she'd always read it wasn't wise to upset a crazy person...especially one who

appeared to have her completely in his power.

So she took a step forward, and then another, and laid her hand on top of his.

This one seemed to be smarter than the others. Not, of course, possessing an intellect anything close to his, but her apparent lack of fear and the pithy comments she'd delivered during their first encounter told him that she was a definite cut above the specimens Scarface had collected in the past.

Now she sat at the table across from him, looking quite beautiful in the reflected glow of the lamps despite her disheveled hair and stained clothing and the faint bruise on her forehead. Scarface tried to pull his punches when he could, but even the lightest of his blows always left some sort of mark.

As soon as she'd been brought here, he'd given the order for a fine meal to be prepared; luckily, one of his henchmen had proved to be a much better cook than he was brute muscle, and dinners of late had been uniformly excellent. This meal, though, had to be a cut above even that. He wanted to make a good first impression.

This time, things would be different.

Scarface had carefully gathered up her scattered belongings and brought them to him, and so he knew that his latest catch was named Jenna Masterson, that she must not have been in the area for very long because she still had a California driver's license, and that, according to the press card she carried in her wallet, she now worked for the Plainfield *Bugle*. A reporter, which would explain all the questions.

She held up a piece of meat speared on a fork and inquired, "What is this?"

"Prime rib."

"You get prime rib on Skullcrusher Mountain?"

He met her gaze. She'd answered at least one of his questions; her eyes were gray-blue, like storm clouds. "I can get anything I want here."

That seemed to unnerve her a bit. She glanced away and put the piece of prime rib in her mouth and chewed deliberately. Then she lifted the glass of wine next to her plate and took a swallow. "That includes Bordeaux, apparently."

"Of course."

Normally he didn't drink very much, but the prime rib called out for a worthy companion, and he thought the wine might reassure her a bit. After all, that was what people did, wasn't it—had dinner with wine and conversation?

He couldn't be entirely sure, as his previous captives had spent most of their time screaming, not engaging in polite dinner chitchat. What a waste of roast goose the last one had been. He hadn't even bothered to break out the wine for her.

But he had a good feeling about this Jenna. She seemed to be made of sterner stuff. He thought she might do very well. He hoped so, for her sake.

"So how do you do it?" she asked.

"Do what?"

She paused and regarded him carefully. Her features might have appeared delicate in repose—soft, even—but when she was awake her chin had a certain forthrightness that spelled possible trouble ahead. "Live in a mountain and do apparently whatever you want. No one notices?"

"People notice what they want to." He did not think it necessary to indulge in confidences, not in this, their first encounter.

"Hmm." She lifted the wine glass and drank, giving a little nod at the end that could have meant anything. Approval of the wine, possibly, or perhaps a simple acknowledgment that he was

the one in charge and therefore didn't have to give any responses he didn't want to. Then, "Old Henry told me to stay away from Skullcrusher."

Not surprising. It had been Henry Larkin's daughter who had gone missing all those years ago, who —

He reached for his own wineglass. No point in thinking of her laugh, silenced for more than twenty-five years now. He'd never dared ask his father what had happened to her, but he knew.

"Do you have a first name, Dr. Black?"

Jenna Masterson was staring at him, one eyebrow lifted slightly. He gazed back at her, nonplussed.

"Well, seeing as you were nice enough to invite me over and break out the good wine, I thought we might as well be on a first-name basis."

Impossible that she could be teasing him, but he thought he detected a certain glint in her eyes. Still, he would concede that she had a point. Giving her his name might advance a certain intimacy between them.

"Theophilus."

She made a slight choking sound, then swallowed a bit of Bordeaux. After one final cough, she replied, "Really? Is that a family name?"

He had no idea. It was the name his father had given him. "Not that I'm aware of."

"Theo," she said, as though testing out the word.

No one had ever called him that, not even his mother. But somehow he found he liked the sound of it on Jenna's lips. Yes, he would allow her to use the nickname.

"Is that better?" he asked.

"Yes," she said. "Yes, it is."

TWO

Somehow she managed to survive the dinner. Actually, the food was very good, rivaling meals she'd had in the best restaurants in Los Angeles, New Orleans, or New York. As for the setting and the company—

Well, he hadn't killed her yet, and appeared to be putting on what he probably thought of as his "company face." In other circumstances, Jenna might have even called him...well, maybe not charming, but definitely not the worst dinner companion she'd ever had. No, that honor still belonged to the asshole who'd worked for *Maxim* and who had informed her quite seriously that women were inferior intellectually to men because their brains were smaller. Jesus Christ.

After a crème brûlée so lush it could have been prepared table-side at Antoine's, Theophilus Black told her, "I must excuse myself—I have work I must attend to."

She didn't dare ask what that "work" might entail, but she did assay a smile and reply, "Then I suppose it's back to my cell for me."

“Oh, no,” he said at once, in tones of shock that might even have been genuine. She didn’t know him well enough to guess one way or the other. “That was only temporary. I had to be sure—” He broke off, then continued, “That is, I have an apartment waiting for you. Scarface will take you there.”

An apartment. That didn’t sound too threatening. Unless, of course, he planned to join her there later. She measured him carefully from beneath her eyelashes. *Could* she force herself to sleep with him? If given a choice between sex with Theophilus Black and certain death, well, the answer seemed pretty obvious. He wasn’t going to win any beauty contests, but at least he had an interesting face and looked clean enough.

Jenna hated herself for thinking such a thing, but really, while there might be worse things on this planet than death, sex with the reclusive scientist probably wasn’t one of them.

After all, it could have been a lot worse. It could have been Scarface.

She repressed a shudder, and told herself not to borrow trouble. True, it didn’t seem likely that this Dr. Black had kidnapped her just because he wanted a dinner companion, but you never knew. He seemed just crazy enough that he might have done that very thing.

“Great,” she managed by way of reply to his comment, and then pushed herself away from the table and stood. They’d eaten dinner in a room two hallways down from the laboratory. The place was decorated in early Hammer horror film, what with its pseudo-medieval heavy carved furniture and drapes of gloomy plum velvet at the window. Not that it was a real window—from what she could tell, the muddy stained glass only opened out on more rock, but at least some attempt had been made to have the chamber appear to be a real room and not just another space carved out of the mountain’s guts.

The doors to the dining room opened, and Scarface entered. Jenna could have thought of a lot of other things she'd rather see on a full stomach, but she didn't have much of a choice. Theophilus Black nodded at her and departed, leaving her to stand there and try to pretend that she wasn't really avoiding looking at Scarface.

If he noticed her averted eyes, he didn't let on. "This way," he said simply, and led her out of the dining room.

Jenna followed him. It was a little easier to look at him from the back, although even his shoulders appeared somehow misshapen, one slightly higher than the other but both still enormous, like two mismatched mountain peaks. As he mounted yet another of those agonizingly endless staircases, she tried to pay attention to where they were going and how they got there. The dining room had been at the end of a short hallway, and this staircase was about fifteen paces away from its entrance. The stairway had three landings, all of which appeared to branch off into additional corridors. And when they reached the fourth landing, it was another fifty feet and three doorways before Scarface stopped in front of a door, one that had another of those biometric thumb-print devices set into the stone wall next to it.

What she was going to do with all this information, she really didn't know, but she figured it might come in handy. Maybe there would be some chance to escape, one moment where they wouldn't be watching her closely. If she made a run for it, then knowing how many landings it took to get back to the dining-hall level might help.

Yeah, right. Because from there it'll be so easy to find my way back to the front door.

She couldn't even shake her head at herself, because at that moment Scarface placed his thumb on the scanner, and then opened the door. He didn't move, but said only, "Go in."



At least he didn't seem inclined to go in with her. Jenna stepped into the room. A second later, the door shut behind her. Automatically, she reached out and touched the doorknob, but of course it didn't budge. What had she expected?

Okay, so she was still a prisoner, but her cell had gotten a lot bigger. The apartment in which she stood appeared to be about the size of a large hotel suite; through one door she could see the bedroom, and her current location was the middle of a good-sized sitting room. She wondered if Theophilus Black or one of his predecessors had picked up all the furnishings in Skullcrusher Mountain at a Hammer Studios fire sale; the same heavy faux-medieval pieces filled the space, although here the drapes around the bogus windows were a dark blood red. More of the odd flicker lights gleamed from wall sconces, although a pair of matched table lamps with crimson glass shades had also been turned on. They gave off a depressingly sanguine light.

“Cheery,” she said, and headed toward the bedroom, where she was greeted with more of the same. The large four-poster bed with its dark red hangings looked as if its last occupant might have been the Marquis de Sade.

But at least it was a real bed. When she gave the heavy damask bedspread an experimental pull, it revealed simple white sheets that looked and smelled clean, and the bathroom that adjoined the bedchamber was also clean and presentable enough, with polished stone floors and walls and a complicated massaging spa shower head.

In fact, what it reminded her of was the bathroom in the suite she and Larry had once rented at the Madonna Inn in San Luis Obispo, where all of the rooms had different themes. Theirs had been the “Caveman,” as she recalled, with a rock shower not too dissimilar from the one she was looking at now.

Of course, thinking about Larry was a bad idea, because then she also thought about how things had ended, and how it was his fault that she was out here in Montana at all. Thanks, Larry.

Well, maybe that wasn’t completely true. She’d been stupid. Rule number one—don’t sleep with the boss. Rule number two—don’t sleep with a married man. And she’d managed to break both those rules in one easy step. Yes, he’d told her he was separated (oldest one in the book), but she still should have known better.

When she’d been looking for an escape, Montana had seemed like a pretty good idea. Montana was nice and far away from Los Angeles. And in a time when newspapers were folding right and left, the *Bugle* still did okay for itself—mostly because broadband still hadn’t reached a lot of these hinterlands, and people wanted to read a paper to get their news.

If someone had told her a year ago that she’d be able to survive on approximately half her former salary, she would have

laughed in their face, but it was a lot easier to get by in a place where you could rent a two-bedroom house for about six hundred bucks a month. Hell, she'd had friends back in Southern California with bigger car payments than that.

The problem with Montana and Plainfield, though, was Skullcrusher. If she'd stayed in L.A., she wouldn't be currently locked up by a mad scientist with henchmen who seemed to have no moral qualms over "collecting" young women. Assuming Theophilus Black was even a real scientist. All those machines in the lab could have been just for show, although Scarface had made that comment about his master inventing the little glow cubes that seemed to be ubiquitous here.

She'd been poking around on Black's Peak because her editor let her come up with her own story ideas in between the times she wasn't writing up dull reports on City Council meetings and even duller articles about next year's agricultural forecasts. No sensational murders or high-profile divorces here; it was an exciting week if she got to cover both a wedding and a funeral. So much for that Pulitzer.

At any rate, Black's Peak had interested her, not only because it was such a commanding geographical feature compared to the flat lands around it, but also because no one ever seemed to talk about it. Roads went around the mountain, but none went up it. Jenna, a native of an area where pretty much every patch of wilderness had its hiking trails or nature walks or campgrounds, thought that seemed more than a little odd. She'd thought it might be a good idea to take a look around and see what it was about Black's Peak that made it so different.

"Well, now you know, Brenda Starr," she said aloud, and reached out to test the taps on the vanity. They both seemed to work fine (better than fine; she got hot water here a lot faster

than she did in her own house). Further inspection of the drawers revealed a new tube of toothpaste and a toothbrush still in its wrapper. She also located a bar of soap and some unscented deodorant—apparently Dr. Black liked his women clean—but that was it in terms of toiletries. Maybe mad scientists didn't believe in moisturizing.

What she really didn't want to think about was how creepy it felt to know that he'd prepared for her arrival...or at least the arrival of some other victim. Jenna forced herself to take a deep breath and went back out to the bedroom, where she performed a similar inspection of the dresser drawers. She found a plain white cotton sleeveless nightgown and several packages of white cotton underwear in various sizes, all still in its packaging. Maybe Theophilus Black had never heard of Victoria's Secret...or maybe he just had a fetish for women in white undies.

Okay, let's not go there, she told herself. It was going to be hard enough to fall asleep in these surroundings even without torturing herself over Black's sexual predilections.

She also found her purse tucked inside one of the dresser drawers. The wallet appeared to have been rifled through, although nothing had been taken. And her Rum Raisin lipstick seemed to have come along for the ride. But her cell phone was gone, as were her car keys and her nail file. Nice precaution, but she couldn't have picked even a real lock with the thing, let alone the thumbprint scan device on this door. Likewise with the cell phone; even if AT&T decided to cooperate for once, there was no way her phone could have possibly gotten a signal inside the bowels of this mountain.

Black hadn't provided for any entertainment—no books or magazines, no iPad loaded with music and movies, so there wasn't much left for her to do except wash her face with that horrible

soap, brush her teeth, and put on the nightgown. She discovered that the wall sconces could be turned on and off by simply pressing a button concealed within their bases, so she did that before climbing into bed and extinguishing the lamp on her bedside table.

It wasn't completely dark; she'd left one sconce in the main room on as a sort of night light. Otherwise, the blackness would have been complete, what with the apartment's complete lack of any outside illumination. She wondered how Theophilus Black could stand being shut up in this place all the time, with no hint of sunlight or fresh air. Then again, for all she knew, he had some kind of penthouse carved out of the top of the mountain where he could see everything for miles and miles. At this point, she would believe just about anything.

But while the darkness was not absolute, the silence was. She heard her own heart beating, and her breath as it moved in and out of her lungs. Since moving to Montana Jenna had become more accustomed to quiet, but even in her small house on the outskirts of Plainfield she would still hear the occasional car, or the neighbor's cat meowing to be let in, or the ceaseless chirping of crickets. Here there was nothing.

She'd never been much of one for crying, not even when she'd seen her dreams of a successful career in Los Angeles crumble. No, she'd packed her bags and forced herself not to look back, and the hell with Larry Waters and the lies he'd told.

But now painful prickles of heat began somewhere beneath her eyelids and she swallowed, hard. She wouldn't. She would not cry. The hell with that.

She wouldn't give Theophilus Black the satisfaction.

Theophilus found himself wishing he hadn't sent her away, although at the time it had seemed like a good idea. Better to give her just a little taste of his company, just enough to show her that he meant her no harm. Besides, he had the notion that if he gave off the impression of having a number of very important tasks to do, and that she was just one item in a very busy schedule, perhaps she would be intrigued and want to learn more about him.

But she hadn't appeared all that disappointed to be relieved of his company, so perhaps that hadn't been the best strategy. And now he found himself sitting in the lab and staring at a jar of monkey brains, and wanting to hear the sound of her voice again.

It was a little lower than the voices of the local girls Scarface had taken, somehow throaty and sweet at the same time. He liked it; when he listened to her talk, her voice drowned out the whispering ones that seemed to always linger at the edges of his mind. Her voice matched the autumn-colored fall of her hair and the fullness of her mouth.

That mouth. He'd tried not to stare at it during dinner, but he'd found it difficult. He'd never seen a woman with richly curved lips like that, lips that had the faintest shadow of a quirk at their corners, as if she were constantly smiling at some secret joke.

He wondered if she was asleep yet, and what she looked like in the white nightgown he'd provided for her, with her hair spread out over the pillow. Wondered what it would be like to lie in bed next to her and hear her breathing and watch her breasts rise and fall as she slept.

A part of his anatomy told him that sounded like a wonderful idea, but he ignored it. All things in their time. If he tried to enter her room now, she probably would scream, and loudly.

He hated it when they screamed.

And really, things seemed to be going quite well. She had sat at the dinner table and eaten her meal while looking quite unruffled, if rather pale. Not like that one blonde girl who had kept crying and who'd made so many attempts to run for the door that one of his henchmen had had to tie her to her chair.

Theophilus had instructed Scarface not to collect any more blondes after that.

At any rate, rushing things never helped anyone. His father had impressed that upon him during all the hours they'd spent together in the lab, all the times they'd toiled away at the unending experiments designed to make Theophilus a worthy heir to Skullcrusher. Slow and steady, and always keep a watchful eye on the subject of your experiment.

"Master?"

He started, and then glanced away from the jar of monkey brains to see Scarface standing a few paces from the lab stool where he sat. The henchman could move with impressive stealth when he wanted to.

"What?" Theophilus snapped.

"Miss Masterson's vehicle."

"Her what?"

"A 2008 Jeep Wrangler, to be precise."

"What about it?"

"Should I dispose of it?"

He supposed he should have thought of that sooner. Then again, the last two girls had been taken as they were hiking in the woods a few miles from the base of the mountain, and so they'd left no vehicles behind as markers of their disappearance.

Scowling, he replied, "Yes, of course. Push it off a cliff or into a river or something."

"Very good, Master," said Scarface, and left.

The frown did not leave Theophilus' brow, however. He stared at the closed door through which Scarface had just disappeared and then shook his head. Sloppy. By now the vehicle would have been abandoned for some five or six hours. What if someone had seen it?

Not likely, of course. Although no true roads led up the mountainside, there were a few fire trails that wandered around the lower shoulders of Skullcrusher's slopes. He guessed Jenna Masterson had taken her Jeep there, abandoning it only when the fire road ran out. A newcomer, she probably hadn't known that no one ever traveled those trails. Or perhaps, being a reporter, she had ignored warnings to stay away.

Well, the problematic Jeep would be taken care of soon enough. A tributary of the Yellowstone River flowed not too far from the base of the mountain; Theophilus guessed Scarface would push the vehicle into the fast-moving water — after taking care to remove the license plates, the VIN tag from the interior, the serial number from the engine block, and any personal belongings Jenna might have left behind. The river moved fast, and even if the Jeep wasn't swept away with the current, it would be buried soon enough by the snows of winter.

And really, he was lucky to have a woman with him now who wasn't a native of the area, who had no real ties to Plainfield or anyone in it. Possibly her place of work might note her absence, but after all, she was from Los Angeles. With any luck, the few people who might be inclined to ask questions would think she had had enough of Montana and had simply returned to California.

Theophilus Black felt his frown relax into a smile. The world would forget Jenna Masterson soon enough.

He would just have to make sure that she forgot it as well.

THREE

Jenna opened her eyes. She stared up at the dark hangings overhead and blinked a few times. It would have been nice if she could have forgotten where she was, but no such luck. She recognized the Dracula-inspired decor at once.

She had no idea how many hours had passed. Apparently Theophilus Black didn't believe in clocks, either; there were none in her apartment. But she had the impression a good amount of time had gone by. Her headache had gone as well, although the spot on her forehead where Scarface whomped her still throbbed a little when she reached up to touch it. Good thing he hadn't given her a concussion.

She would've liked to blame her hours of dreamless sleep on Scarface's blow but knew it probably had more to do with the two glasses of Bordeaux she'd drunk with dinner. Black might be a madman, but he kept a pretty good cellar. That stuff had been strong.

Since she didn't have anything better to do, she crawled out of bed, grabbed some of the clean underwear that had been left

for her, and indulged herself in a long, hot shower. The bathroom door did have a lock, so at least she didn't have to worry about her captor or his henchman walking in on her when she was naked. And terrible as the shampoo and soap might have been, it still felt awfully good to get clean. A hot shower cured a variety of ills.

Her post-shower regime was depressingly short, lacking as it did a blow dryer, moisturizer, or any makeup. She blotted her hair as dry as she could with a towel and grimly put on some lipstick, wanting it for its moisturizing properties more than because she really thought it would do much to improve her looks. Besides, at the moment she really didn't give a good crap what kind of impression she might make. And since she hadn't been left any clean clothes, she had to climb back into her jeans and long-sleeved T-shirt, which had a new rip in the hem. Lovely. At least her dark green leather jacket seemed to have survived the kidnapping without any real damage.

She had no way of knowing how long she'd be left to sit alone here in her room, so she switched on both the bedside lamps and retrieved her purse. Theophilus Black had also left her the little notepad and pen she carried everywhere, and that was something. Maybe organizing her thoughts wasn't the best use of her time — maybe she'd be better off trying to short-circuit that thumbprint lock or something — but she'd know she'd go crazy if she just sat here and stared at the walls.

Notepad clutched in one hand, she climbed back up on the bed and sat there cross-legged, then started scratching away with her pen. She often did this sort of thing when she was brainstorming an article or just wanted to free-associate information she might use later on. Sometimes it helped to let her thoughts go where they wanted.

It seemed fairly obvious to her that she wasn't Dr. Black's

first “guest,” but she wondered how many young women had been spirited away here. What sort of power did he hold over the people of Plainfield to have earned their complicit silence? You’d think someone would have called in the FBI or at least the state police if the local sheriff wasn’t to be trusted, but it seemed that no one had said or done anything to prevent Theophilus Black from claiming his victims. Did he, in true mad scientist fashion, have some way of destroying the town?

Jenna frowned, wrote a question mark, and circled it several times. Logic suggested that Homeland Security or the NSA might be interested in an individual who owned a whole mountain and apparently had the capacity to zip an entire town’s collective lips, but it seemed as if Theophilus Black had been able to continue with his kidnappings and experiments and what-have-you without anyone on the outside taking notice.

And where had he come from, anyway? Had he bought the mountain? Or maybe been born here? If that were the case, then she wondered who his father had been, and his mother. Another captive?

A little shiver passed over her then. Maybe that was Black wanted—a mother for the next generation of little Blacks.

He’d definitely picked the wrong woman for that. Jenna prided herself on not having a maternal bone in her body. She’d spent too much time watching her mother sacrifice her own happiness to make sure her daughter wanted for nothing in the years following Jenna’s father’s death. Kids didn’t have any place in her future—it was something Larry had always liked about her. Of course he did, the asshole. Nothing more convenient than a mistress who didn’t want to play house. Anyway, as she’d gotten the Mirena implant a little more than a year ago, despite her doctor’s objections that it was really intended for women who’d had

at least one child already, Theophilus Black was shit out of luck when it came to impregnating her, unless he was hiding a gynecologist somewhere on the mountain.

Scowling, Jenna tore off the sheet of paper she'd been scribbling on and crunched it into a hard little ball before shoving it into her jacket pocket. Not that Scarface couldn't search her pockets with impunity if ordered to do so, but somehow hiding her frenzied musings helped her feel a little bit less helpless.

She stared down at the torn edge of her T-shirt for a long moment and grinned suddenly. Then she picked up her pen and began scratching out a list.

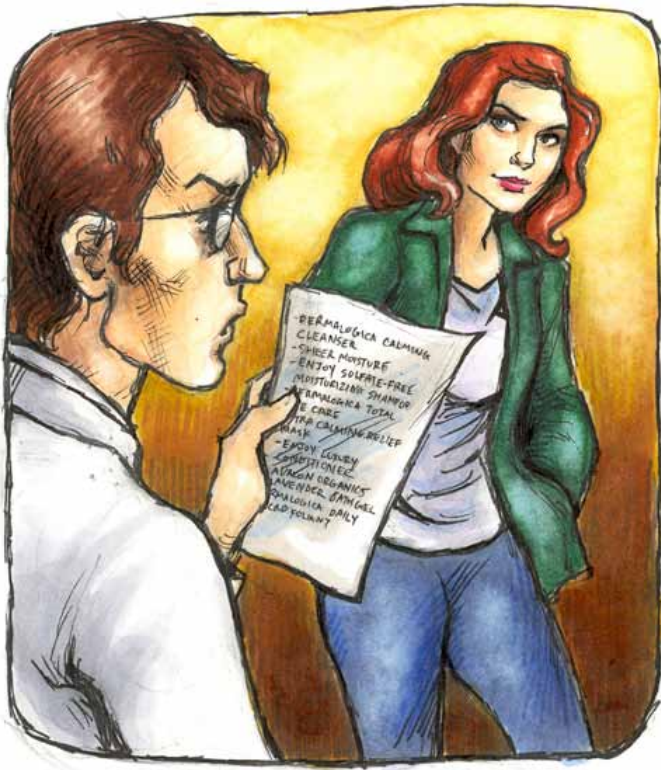
Theophilus waited until nine o'clock the next morning before he had her brought to him in the lab. While he had been up far earlier than that, he didn't know whether his guest was a late sleeper or not. Apparently not; Scarface reported that she was awake and dressed and appeared to have been that way for some time.

An important piece of information, one that Theophilus filed away against future use. When Jenna entered the lab, she looked rested, clean and scrubbed and with her hair waving against her shoulders instead of lying sleek and straight as it had the day before. He thought he liked her better this way.

She waited until Scarface had gone and the door had closed behind him. A little ghost-smile touching her mouth, she stepped forward, hand extended with a piece of white paper held between her thumb and forefinger.

"What's this?" Theophilus inquired. Despite his best efforts to prevent it from doing so, his forehead wrinkled in a frown.

"A list of demands," she said, her lips still curving with that faint hint of a smile. "Requests, if you prefer."



He repeated, “Requests?” even as he unfolded the piece of paper and began to scan its contents.

She had very clear block printing, clean as an architect’s. So he was able to make out the words without much difficulty, but their contents mystified him.

“Dermalogica Calming Cleanser, Sheer Moisture, Enjoy Sulfate-Free Moisturizing Shampoo—” He broke off and stared at her in consternation. “What on earth is this?”

“Just the necessities of life,” she replied calmly. “Be glad I’m not addicted to La Mer like some of my friends back in L.A. That stuff is a hundred and fifty bucks an ounce.”

“You can’t be serious.”

She didn’t blink. “If you’re planning on keeping me here for

some time, then you can at least show me the courtesy of letting me take care of myself the way I'm used to."

The smile faded slightly, and she crossed her arms and stared up at him, one eyebrow lifted in an expectant arch. He found himself admiring her technique even while he groped for some way to reply without showing her how much she had discomfited him. After a second or two he decided that a counterattack was probably the best response. The voices were mysteriously silent; perhaps they were as confounded by this Jenna Masterson as he was.

"And how on earth did you procure these items in Plainfield?" he demanded.

"Little thing called the Internet. You have heard of that, haven't you?"

"Of course," he said at once, stung.

"If you don't have it up here, you could have Scarface go into town and use a computer at the library—"

He cut her off, wounded pride spurring him to say, "I do have an Internet connection. And multiple firewalls, and IP masking, so don't bother hoping anyone could track you down by using it."

The precautions had all been his; it had been easy enough to read up on the requirements for setting up a secure installation and then having all the necessary components delivered to a blind postal drop in Billings, the closest big city. One of his more nondescript-looking henchmen handled all such pickups.

The smallest flicker of irritation passed over her features, but then she smiled again. "I'd never think any such a thing. Your computer?"

"Follow me." He led her over to the closest workstation and pressed a button on the remote he kept in his lab coat's pocket. A flat screen raised itself up out of the desktop, while a tray

containing the computer's keyboard extended itself from beneath the desk's surface.

"Slick," Jenna commented. "Very Star Trek."

He didn't bother to ask her what that meant, but instead moved past her to enter his access code and bring up a browser window. Then he stepped back. "Go ahead and place your order."

"Maybe we should have Scarface go fetch my credit card—"

"Now you are being ridiculous," he said. "Do you think I can't afford a few face creams?"

She lifted her hands in mock surrender. "Okay, okay. But I'm going to need some new clothes, too—"

"Just do it!" he snapped, then wished he could have taken the words back. It would never do to let her see she could make him lose control so easily.

If his outburst had unnerved her, she didn't show it. "No problem, Theo." She turned back to the screen and navigated to a site that appeared to cater to every possible beauty need a woman could have, filled her shopping cart with an alarming number of items, and then paused when she got to the payment screen.

The total was slightly staggering, but he had more money than he knew what to do with. He leaned past her to type in his false name and the address of the mail drop in Billings, along with one of his credit card numbers. He inhaled deeply so he could drink in the scent of her hair. How could the products she was ordering manage to smell any more delicious than that?

"Theodore White?" she asked, reading the name off the screen.

He gathered himself enough to reply, "Pseudonyms are a necessary component of my operation, Miss Masterson."

"Of course they are."

And with that she returned her attention to the keyboard and

visited another site, this one selling clothing. At least it appeared that she was purchasing practical items—trousers and shirts and sweaters and flat shoes. Even so, the total from this site was even more impressive. He held back a sigh as he handed over his payment information once again.

“Anything else?” he inquired. Somehow he managed to keep his tone neutral.

“I think so. I hope you don’t mind that I asked for express delivery—”

“Of course not. Far be it from me to prevent you from receiving your moisturizers in a timely manner.”

In response she tilted her head to look at him. The smile had disappeared for the moment, but her eyes had a certain mischievous sparkle. “I have to say that you’re definitely the nicest mad scientist I’ve ever met.”

“I am not mad,” he said automatically.

She rose from her chair. “If you say so.”

For the barest second she remained standing there, so close that all he had to do was reach out and pull her toward him. Perhaps she wouldn’t have even resisted.

But then she stepped away, and the moment was lost. The pang that surfaced somewhere between his fourth and fifth ribs on the left side might have been regret...or maybe it was relief.

He didn’t know for sure. All he could do was watch her as she moved off a few paces and paused in the center of the lab’s main floor. She sniffed once, twice, and then the eyebrow went up again.

“Is that French roast?”

So okay, a mad scientist with deep pockets, a decent wine cellar, and access to crazy-good coffee. Maybe she’d have to revise her opinion of Skullcrusher Mountain and the odd Dr. Black.

Not that she was willing to give herself over for a killer cup of French roast and a couple grand of clothes from J. Crew and a few hundred bucks' worth of beauty products, but still, if he were all that evil, would he have acquiesced to her demands without so much as batting an eye? Okay, maybe his eyelid had twitched just a bit when he saw the J. Crew total, but still...

Jenna took a few swallows of coffee, broke off a bit of bagel, and tried to watch Theophilus Black without appearing as if she were watching him. It wasn't that difficult, actually—he'd already risen from the lab table where their impromptu breakfast had been laid out and was puttering around with a complicated gizmo that consisted of a multitude of wires coming out of a box covered with dials. The entire setup was connected to what looked like a seismograph. For all the attention he was currently paying her, she might as well not even be in the room.

His hair was a mess, she decided objectively. It looked as if he'd hacked away at it himself with a pair of not very sharp scissors, which was probably the simple truth. It almost touched the collar of the dark shirt he wore under his lab coat, and she guessed he kept it at that length because it wouldn't require frequent trimming, while at the same time not being long enough that it would constantly fall in his face. And somehow it helped to soften his sharp features a bit.

He glanced up then, and for a second or two his eyes met hers. She looked away at once and busied herself breaking off another piece of bagel.

"What is that?" she asked, and pointed at the gizmo. Maybe she could make him think she had been looking at the mysterious device and not at him.

His face didn't exactly fall, but somehow he seemed to deflate slightly. "An earthquake detector."

“There’s no way to detect earthquakes,” Jenna replied. As if the scientists at Caltech hadn’t been working on that sort of thing for decades. And Theophilus Black thought he could just pull an earthquake detector out of his back pocket?

“According to whom?”

“Every seismologist I’ve ever interviewed,” she replied. And there had been a good number of them over the years, Southern California being what it was when it came to earthquakes.

“They don’t know what they’re talking about.” An amber light flashed on the side of the device. He smiled. “A 3.0 in sixty seconds.”

“A what?”

“This area is more seismically active than you might think, what with its proximity to Yellowstone. We will have a 3.0 earthquake in less than a minute.”

She crossed her arms. “You don’t really think—”

And then she stopped, because she had felt it. Just a tiny tremor, nothing that a native of Southern California would even have noticed unless warned that it was coming. She looked from Black’s device to the seismograph, where a small cluster of black lines told her that the machine had recorded the same small quake she’d just felt.

“That’s impossible,” she said.

“And yet you see that it isn’t.”

He gazed at her, face impassive, eyes unreadable behind the wire-rimmed glasses. If he felt any pride in his accomplishment, it didn’t show.

Fine. If he didn’t seem to care, then she wasn’t going to let him know how impressed she actually was. And how selfish, really—he was just sitting up here on his mountain with an invention that could potentially improve the lives of millions of people,

and he acted as if he hadn't done anything more exciting than call heads or tails correctly.

Well, she could play that game, too. She shrugged, then poured the last of the coffee into her mug. "Is there any more of this French roast?"

FOUR

What a fool he was. He'd thought to impress her with his seismo-predictor, and all she'd seemed interested in was a coffee refill.

He'd sent her back to her rooms because he needed time alone to think, but now the echoing spaces of the lab seemed to mock him. The voices had remained uncharacteristically quiet. Well, he supposed he should be glad they hadn't told him it was time to rid himself of the bewildering Jenna Masterson.

"What do women want?" he wondered aloud.

"I have no idea," replied Scarface, who had just entered the room.

Theophilus didn't find that terribly surprising. If there were anyone on this planet with less knowledge of the fairer sex than he, it had to be Scarface. Still, as the henchman was the closest thing he had to a confidant, he asked, "Surely there must be something she likes. What do females find pleasing?"

The lumpy skin on Scarface's forehead rearranged itself as he appeared to consider. "Ponies?"

Interesting. Theophilus picked up a pen from the table next to him and tapped it against his chin. “Can you get me a pony?”

“Of course.”

Well, it was a start. He poured himself another cup of coffee and sipped as he pondered the thorny issue of earning of Jenna Masterson’s esteem. “There’s probably more to it than that.”

“Probably,” Scarface agreed.

Hmm. But what else? She had seemed mildly pleased by the orders she’d been able to place on the Internet, but he didn’t want to buy her random items. He wanted to make her a gift that meant something. If the mountain had possessed corundum mines or veins of gold or silver, perhaps he could have fashioned a sparkling treasure for her. But all Skullcrusher had to offer was its hidden lodes of uranium—very useful when it came to funding his operations here, but not so helpful when it came to making jewelry.

“What about monkeys?” he asked of his assistant.

“Monkeys?” repeated Scarface, who looked somewhat dubious. At least, that was how Theophilus interpreted the henchman’s expression. Sometimes it could be difficult to know for certain.

“Women love monkeys, don’t they?”

“Well—”

“They can be considered ‘cute,’ can’t they?”

“I—”

“That will be all, Scarface,” Theophilus announced. His brain thrummed with possibilities, with designs considered and then rejected. He needed time to work.

“Yes, Master,” Scarface replied. That could have been a sigh—or just the sound of the air moving through the vents. At any rate, he only nodded and left.

Excellent. Theophilus knew there was no way Jenna Masterson could fail to be impressed by *this* invention.

Jenna hadn't really known whether to be irritated or relieved when Theophilus Black sent her from the lab back to her rooms. On the one hand, she found it far less stressful to be alone. On the other hand, failing books, a television, or the Internet, her lonely rooms seemed a veritable fortress of tedium.

It would have been easiest if she could have napped, but she knew there was no way of that happening, not with three cups of high-end French roast thrumming through her veins. She experimented with various paper airplane shapes using paper torn from her notepad, attempted a French braid—amazing how she still couldn't master it, even with apparently unlimited time on her hands—and tried to play Hangman with herself, all to no avail. Eventually she lay on her back in the middle of the floor in the “living room” and stared at the carved rock ceiling. That outcropping there looked almost like Richard Nixon's profile, and that wavy shape farther on definitely resembled the prow of a sailing ship—

The door opened, and Jenna sat up. Funny how the arrival of Scarface merited only an “Oh, it's him” in her mind and little else. She thought then that maybe there was some truth to that old saying about a body getting used to anything.

He carried a brown cardboard box, which he set down on the table next to a wing chair covered in truly hideous flocked burgundy velvet. “To pass the time,” he said briefly, before exiting the room once again.

She got to her feet and went to the box. For all she knew it contained a colony of live rats, but even dodging rats sounded marginally more interesting than lying on the floor and ceiling-gazing.

To her surprise, the box contained stacks of paperback books, all of them (judging by the covers) from the seventies and maybe the early eighties. Many seemed to be romances that ranged from

standard Harlequin dime-store rack offerings to thicker tomes of the bosom-heaving, bodice-ripping variety.

“What the hell?” she wondered aloud. What was this for—to get her in the mood for some hot and heavy nonconsensual sex?

Fat chance of that. Still, she found herself lifting up a thick paperback with a raven-haired beauty on the cover and opening it to the first page. Neatly written on the inside cover was the name Marcia Black. The hand was rounded and feminine—definitely a woman’s.

Marcia Black. Jenna hefted the book in her hand and flipped through the pages. She saw no other writing, although pages here and there had been dog-eared, usually at chapter headings. Apparently Marcia Black hadn’t been able to get through the book in one sitting. Not that surprising, as the novel numbered a good six hundred pages.

“Who were you, Marcia?” Jenna asked of the empty apartment. Theophilus Black’s mother? That seemed the most likely answer; the dates on the books seemed to correlate if he were around thirty-five or so, which was her best guess as to his age. Odd reading material...or maybe not. She thought that maybe a woman kept here in Skullcrusher Mountain against her will would want to read something to take her far away, to an imaginary world where women were beautiful and men were dashing and where there was always a happily ever after.

Put that way, it didn’t sound so bad, even though Jenna had always disdained such reading material in the past. Still clutching the paperback, she went to the hideous wing chair, sat down with her feet curled up beneath her, and began to read.

Back in L.A., she’d never had much time for reading. Here, though, as empty hour stretched after empty hour, Jenna found

herself moving from one book to another, following lovely heroines as they dealt with rambunctious Scottish lairds or pirates with roving eyes. At some point Scarface reappeared to bring her a sandwich and an apple, and hours after that, a quite respectable half a roasted chicken and garlic mashed potatoes. It appeared one of the henchmen knew his way around a kitchen pretty well.

But there was no return summons to Theophilus Black's laboratory or dining hall, no one to accompany her as she ate in silence in her rooms. She wondered if she'd done or said something to offend him, but couldn't think what it might have been. And anyway, it wasn't her responsibility to make him happy. At least he seemed to be taking care that she was fed properly and had some form of entertainment, even if it wasn't one she would have chosen for herself.

At length she put down the book she had been reading — a convoluted tale set in the English Regency and having to do with lost heirs and a stolen inheritance, among other things — and put herself to bed. Really, this was getting ridiculous. If Black had kidnapped her just to keep her locked up in this room, the whole thing seemed to be a pretty pointless exercise.

Late the next morning, however, she had her spirits lifted by the arrival of the items she had purchased on the Internet the day before. One of the henchmen had to have been haunting the Billings mail drop. This seemed to indicate some level of concern on her captor's part as to her comfort, and although she'd already washed her hair, at least she was able to put on some moisturizer and feel as if her face wasn't about to crack if she smiled. And the clothes, although in need of a good pressing, at least were clean and stylish and didn't look as if she'd been sleeping in them.

The new clothes afterglow wore off pretty quickly, though, as it became clear that she wasn't going anywhere today, either.

The hours crept by, punctuated by meals she consumed in silence. Jenna began to wonder if a person could go crazy just by being forced to listen to her own thoughts hour after unending hour.

This went on for two more days. By the end of her enforced solitary confinement, she'd read roughly three-quarters of the books Scarface had left her. What would happen when she got to the end? Would he bring her another batch, or would she be expected to start over again from the beginning of the stack?

Luckily, she didn't have to find out, as the hulking henchman appeared at her door on the third day since Theophilus Black had sent her from his lab. She guessed it had to be late afternoon, since it seemed to be a few hours after she'd consumed lunch.

"He wants you," Scarface informed her, and jerked his finger toward the door.

The Jenna of a few days ago might have made a pithy comment about her not being at a mad scientist's beck and call. Now, however, she was so anxious for a break in the monotony that she found she didn't much care about defending her rights. She just wanted to get the hell out of those rooms for a few hours.

She tossed aside the book she'd been reading, then practically bounced off the edge of the bed. A pair of flats still sat on the floor by the bedside table, and she slipped her feet into them before turning to Scarface. "Did he say why?"

An ominous pause. "You'll see."

Well, that didn't sound very promising. But at the moment she didn't much care what Black had planned for her as long as it didn't involve shoving her directly back into this room. She settled for raising an eyebrow in Scarface's direction. He merely shrugged and waited for her to go out the open door. From there he led her back down toward the lab.

As before, he stepped aside after thumbing the lock, so she

entered the lab alone. The door slammed shut behind her, and she jumped a little.

A quick glance around showed no sign of Theophilus Black. “Hello?” she called out.

“Back here,” came his immediate reply.

Okay. Jenna gave a little shrug and picked her way past gleaming metal tables and shelves crowded with glass jars, all of which were filled with specimens whose vague outlines looked weirdly familiar and yet distorted, like the half-remembered monsters from her childhood nightmares. She swallowed and kept moving forward, beyond the now-still Tesla coil and a few pieces of complicated equipment she couldn’t quite identify, although some of it wouldn’t have looked out of place in an operating room. Just what *had* he been up to for the past three days?

The room narrowed down to a small alcove, and finally Jenna spotted Black. His normally pristine lab coat was now rumpled and smudged with reddish-brown stains whose origins she really didn’t want to guess at, and his hair was even more than usually mop-like.

But then she didn’t bother with looking at him anymore, because she had caught sight of what lurked beyond him in the dim light of the little alcove.

It was — well, she couldn’t say exactly what it was, as her outraged brain gave up any attempt at identification after a few seconds of bewildered horror. Before she could stop it, a tight little scream forced its way out of her throat. Then she clamped her jaw shut, as much to hold back the sour taste of bile as to prevent another scream from bursting forth.

Theophilus Black frowned at her. “You don’t like it?”

Like it? He really was crazy. How on earth could he have thought she would like that — that —



Finally she was able to focus enough to get a better look at the monstrosity. Maybe in another life it had been a pony — or maybe a monkey. Now it was neither, and much the worse for it.

Somehow she managed to dredge up the standard reply she always used when people asked for her opinion on something she truly hated. “Um...it’s different.”

“Different?”

Jenna didn’t like the sudden tightening of his mouth, but it was better to look at that than the franken-creature a few feet past him. “What is it?” she asked, hoping to distract him.

“It’s...” He trailed off. “Well, I suppose one could call it a ponkey.”

“A ponkey?” she echoed. *Oh, dear God, let that mean something besides a horrible mash-up of a pony and a monkey...*

But that had to be exactly what it was. It let out a grotesque sound that combined the shrillest elements of a pony’s neigh and a monkey’s shriek, and, startled, she gave her own mangled hybrid of a gasp and a scream.

Theophilus glared at her. “What’s with all the screaming?”

All? She didn’t think two little shrieks were enough to qualify for a comment like that, but what the hell else was she supposed to do, with that thing staring at her out of its multiple eyes and furry arms and legs sprouting outward in a variety of angles that managed to be grotesque and painful-looking at the same time?

“I —”

“I made it for you. I wanted to make you a present — and now I’ve ruined a pony—”

She couldn’t bear it anymore. Because as obviously insane as he was, what she heard beneath the anger in his voice was the confused hurt of a little boy who couldn’t understand why his gift hadn’t been taken in the spirit he’d intended.

That was enough. She didn’t even stop to think that the door of the lab had closed behind her and she probably had no way of getting out. All she knew was that she had to get out of there.

She bolted back the way she had come, and somehow, miraculously, Scarface was there. He opened the door and she blundered through it, running, running as fast as she could down those hallways and up those staircases she had memorized over the past few days. It wasn’t until she had blundered into her rooms

and thrown herself on her bed that she realized the door to her apartment had been standing open, waiting for her...

...almost as if Scarface had known this would be her reaction.

“That didn’t go well,” his henchman said.

Theophilus nodded miserably. How could he have been so blind? Jenna’s screams still rang in his ears. Granted, they hadn’t been as strident or as numerous as those of some of his other “guests,” and perhaps she’d had more provocation, but still...

“I thought she would like it.”

Scarface lifted his shoulders.

“You let her out, didn’t you?”

“I thought it best.”

Under other circumstances he might have taken his henchman to task for such presumption, but it appeared the other man’s instincts had been correct. Who knows what would have happened if Jenna hadn’t been able to make her escape?

“She went back to her rooms?”

“Yes.”

Well, that was something. At least she hadn’t attempted to flee the mountain altogether, but merely the lab. Perhaps she felt some modicum of safety in the apartments he’d given her.

The ponkey was hidden now behind the alcove’s doors. He didn’t quite know what to do with the thing now, but as it looked quite unhappy, he’d probably have Scarface dispose of it the same way the henchman had taken care of other troublesome creatures over the years.

Theophilus pushed his glasses back up onto the bridge of his nose. Somehow in all the commotion they had slid downward. “All I wanted to do was impress her.”

Scarface regarded him for a few seconds, his lumpy features

impassive. “Maybe you don’t need to try so hard. I hear these days you can impress a woman just by having a steady income and owning your own home.”

It couldn’t be that simple, could it? Then again, Scarface wasn’t exactly known for his sense of humor. He could be telling the truth.

To his surprise, the henchman stepped closer and patted him on one shoulder with a huge, ham-like hand. “Master, all is not lost. She’s still here, isn’t she?”

Theophilus nodded.

“And you want her to stay here, don’t you?”

He nodded again. Usually by now the voices would be whispering to him, telling him that she wasn’t the one. But they remained silent, and he was glad. It was the voices that guided his darkest actions, and as much as he was disappointed by Jenna’s reaction to her gift, he didn’t want to think what it would be like if he never heard her voice or saw her face again.

“What should I do?” he asked, and decided to ignore the ironic twist that fate had dealt him, that he, Theophilus Black, should be asking Scarface of all people for advice.

That meaty hand clapped his shoulder one more time, and Theophilus tried not to stagger.

“Don’t worry, Master,” Scarface said. “I’ll talk to her.”

FIVE

Jenna curled herself back up into the hideous flocked velvet wing chair because she didn't know quite else what to do. She'd grabbed her book, but of course she couldn't focus on the pages. Rather, the solid feel of it in her hand helped to remind her of the outside world, of a place where people acted pretty much the way you expected them to and you didn't have to worry about running into random monsters.

Not that that "ponkey" had been exactly random. No, that thing had been purely intentional.

She shuddered, and then started as she looked up and saw Scarface looming over her. Jesus Christ. She hadn't even heard him come in. No wonder he'd been able to sneak up on her like that back in the woods.

"Ms. Masterson?"

He sounded almost diffident, as if he wasn't quite sure of his reception.

She found herself smiling grimly. "What?"

"We need to talk."

At that reply, a rusty little chuckle emerged from her throat. God, she would've killed for a shot or three of Glenfiddich right about now. "Do we?"

"Yes."

His misshapen face was serious...or at least she thought it was. Not that she could read his expressions easily, of course. Somehow, though, she found herself curious as to what he had come here to say.

"It's your mountain," she replied. "Or I guess your master's mountain. Anyway, grab a chair and sit down."

Which he did, pulling the hideous wing chair's mate over with as much ease as if he'd been moving a bar stool. He sat, and she thought she heard the chair creak ominously under his bulk.

Somehow it held, though. He perched on the edge of the seat and folded his enormous hands over his equally mountainous knees and stared at her thoughtfully.

"What?" Jenna snapped. She didn't much care for being under anyone's close scrutiny, let alone a hulking henchman who could've pounded her into the ground like a tent stake without breaking a sweat.

"I do think you might be different."

"Different from what?"

"The others."

She asked, "The other whats?" although a cold flutter of unease somewhere in the pit of her stomach told her she knew exactly who he was talking about, even if she didn't want to acknowledge it right then. The ponkey had been bad enough.

"The other young women."

How the hell was she supposed to respond to that?

Something in her mind seemed to click coldly into place.



You're a reporter, she told herself. So act like one and gather the facts. Pretend this is happening to someone other than you.

"Were there so many?"

"Enough." He must have noticed the narrowing of her eyes, because he added, "Seven or eight."

"You don't know for sure?"

"Eight."

Eight. Good God. Eight young women whose lives had been snuffed out just because they didn't fit Theophilus Black's vision of the perfect mate. She thought of Old Henry's sad hound dog

face and his warning to stay away from Skullcrusher Mountain. Too bad she'd been too stupid and arrogant to listen.

"So he really is a monster."

"No."

She stared back at Scarface, nonplussed.

"Dr. Black isn't the monster. I am."

Words didn't often fail Jenna, but at the moment she found herself unable to do anything except stare back at Scarface, at his unreadable pale eyes and lumpen nose and wide slash of a mouth. Finally she cleared her throat and said, "I don't understand."

"He never could do it. His father enjoyed it, you see. He expected his son to be the same way. So when the time came for the first girl to be disposed of...I did it for him."

The cold moved its way from the pit of her stomach to the base of her spine. She'd seen a lot of things in her day—fires and floods and cold pale limbs emerging from hastily arranged body bags—but she never thought she'd seen anything quite as chilling as Scarface sitting calmly a few feet away from her and confessing to the murder of eight innocent young women as if it meant nothing.

"If you're born a monster, Ms. Masterson, you might as well be one. That's just the way it is here on Skullcrusher."

"That's...crazy."

He lifted his shoulders.

"But he must know what you've been doing. I mean, you're not telling him you've sent the girls off to live on a farm where they'll be safe and happy?"

Another eloquent shrug. "He might know...on some level. He keeps busy with his experiments. I don't bring him that many. It's been almost two years since the last one. He always hopes it will be different with the next one."

“So why tell me all this?” Surely it didn’t matter what she thought or didn’t think of Theophilus Black. He was going to do with her what he willed—or rather, he’d have Scarface do it.

“He likes you. More than any of the others. You should give him a chance.”

“A chance at what, precisely?”

Scarface cocked his enormous head to one side and sent her a pale, piercing gaze from beneath his sparse eyebrows. “I think you’re smarter than that, Ms. Masterson.”

So the henchman was some kind of misshapen pimp for his addled and morally ambiguous master. Lovely.

She folded her arms, matched his gaze with her own, and waited. She’d conducted enough uncomfortable interviews to know that often she could get what she wanted just by waiting out the interviewee.

Scarface remained silent for a few more seconds. Then, “That’s how it’s always been.”

“Always?”

“Since the first Black came here. I heard it’s been more than a hundred years.”

Generations, then. Generations of men born thinking it was natural to steal a woman from her life, force her to live in darkness and bear her rapist’s children.

Voice cold, she replied, “Some traditions aren’t worth maintaining, Scarface.”

“Maybe not. I can’t say Dr. Black’s exactly been living up to his father’s expectations. He’d have killed him for taking this long to get things done.”

Get things done. That was a nice, vague phrase to describe kidnapping and rape.

“Maybe his heart isn’t in it,” she said.

“I think you may be right.” Those pale eyes measured her carefully. “He never tried to make a present for the other ones.”

Some present. She shuddered.

Was that a twitch at the corner of his twisted mouth? “Not what you wanted, I’m guessing.”

“Not really, no.”

“But he was trying. And he never let any of those other girls order themselves thousands of dollars of stuff off the Internet, either.”

Those other girls. She shivered, thinking of all those young lives snuffed out. All right, maybe Theophilus Black hadn’t pulled the trigger—or whatever it was Scarface did to dispose of the unwanted women—but he was just as culpable as Scarface.

“He could have let them go.”

“Let them go where? Back home, where they’d tell everyone about this place? Right now all anyone in Plainfield has is rumors and speculation.”

“So what if they did tell? It wouldn’t be the end of the world.”

“Maybe not the end of their world, but the end of Dr. Black’s—and mine.”

After a hundred years of secrecy and murder and lies, she supposed it would be the end of this little dystopia the Blacks had built here under Skullcrusher Mountain. And the world would be a better place for it.

“The end of *your* world, Scarface?” she inquired. “Why are you so connected to the Blacks—beyond the whole accessory to murder thing, that is.”

He only regarded her calmly, refusing to be baited. “I was born here, just like Dr. Black. No, we’re not related,” he added, as she opened her mouth to ask the obvious question. “My mother was one of the discards. A henchman took a fancy to her. The

result was me. Augustus Black wasn't very happy, but he soon realized I could be useful. So he didn't have me killed, the way he did her."

He spoke so dispassionately he might have been discussing the death of a woman he had never met, instead of the one who had given birth to him. Then he shrugged and said, "The Blacks have taken care of me, so I take care of them. It's all right that Dr. Black doesn't have the stomach to do what's necessary, because I do."

"Is that a threat?" Jenna forced herself to sit very still, to ignore the pitifully small distance between them. He could have so easily reached over and snapped her neck—

"No. As I said, he likes you."

Well, that was something. Theophilus Black liked her, and as long as she kept him amused and didn't make too much trouble, he wouldn't give the order to Scarface to have her snuffed out. Great. So now she got to sit in the bowels of a mountain and play Scheherazade to an insane genius.

That didn't sound very appealing, but neither did ending up in an unmarked grave with the rest of Scarface's victims. At least she had some experience with trying to make the best of whatever crappy hands life might deal her.

She set down the book she'd been clutching all this time and said, "Let me go see him."

He didn't know why he'd stayed in the laboratory. Certainly his own suite at the top of the mountain was far more comfortable, and right now the lab only served to remind him of his failures, of yet another dream dashed. How could he possibly make Jenna his when he couldn't get even the simplest thing right?

The ponkey was gone; Scarface had led it away before he went up to speak with Jenna. What he planned to say, Theophilus

didn't dare guess. Perhaps he was trying to reason with her, to tell her that she needed to give his master another chance. Or perhaps he had resorted to threats, although Theophilus found he didn't much care for the idea of Jenna coming to him because she had been frightened into it.

Her voice then. "Theo?"

He looked up from the table where some of his notes had been scattered. She stood a few feet away, her face pale above the collar of the dark green shirt she wore.

He didn't reply, but only stared back at her.

She moistened her lips—those distracting lips—and said, "Look, I want to apologize."

If she had started speaking Swahili he could not have been more surprised. "Apologize?"

"Yes. I was startled, and I didn't stop to think — anyway, I know you were trying to do something nice for me, and I didn't handle it very well. I'm just not used to that sort of thing."

"What sort of thing?"

"People making me presents, being nice."

"I find that hard to believe," he said flatly. Surely back in the real world Jenna Masterson had had all sorts of admirers, men who could have given her gifts far better than a ponkey. If he knew more of the world, he might have known what she really wanted.

She laughed then, but she didn't sound very amused. "Well, all right, my mother did buy me a spa day for my thirtieth birthday, but that's about it."

He wished he knew more about women, how to talk to them. There was probably a better way to go about this, but he'd spent all his life working with quantifiable facts, with data he could trust. Facts were easy. You didn't have to worry about offending facts.

"That's all? No...boyfriend?" As she hadn't been wearing any

rings when she'd been captured, he'd guessed it was safe enough to assume she didn't have a husband, but surely a woman like her would have had some sort of other entanglements.

"Boyfriend?" she repeated, and then she grinned—a real grin, with a flash of white teeth and a dancing light in her storm-colored eyes. "Hardly. The last thing that jerk gave me was a pink slip."

Theophilus tried to parse that statement and ventured, "You mean...lingerie?"

Another laugh, this one much less bitter. "I didn't think that word would even be in your vocabulary."

"My vocabulary is quite extensive."

"I'll bet it is." She stepped closer and went on, "A pink slip is the little piece of paper you get when you're fired from your job. Although really, I was exaggerating—I quit before the bastard could fire me."

Again he had to pause for a second or two and run her comment over in his mind before he felt safe about replying. "You were...that is, you worked for your boyfriend?"

"That's one way to put it. Not a very healthy way to do things; I don't advise it."

As he didn't know how else he should reply, he merely nodded.

Now she stood only a few feet away. She watched him carefully for a minute before she said, "Can I ask you something?"

He nodded again, as his vocal chords seemed to have failed him. His mind churned away at the possibilities of what she might be about to ask. Nothing seemed too implausible when considered against the outrageous fact that she stood here before him instead of hiding away in her rooms. And she didn't appear anywhere close to screaming again.

“Did you ever stop to think there might be an easier way to do all this?”

He blinked.

A note of amusement entered her voice, as if she knew exactly how off balance she had put him. “I mean, you’ve got the Internet up here. You could’ve just run an ad on Craigslist or something—‘independently wealthy single scientist seeks adventurous woman, twenty-five to thirty-five.’ You know, that sort of thing.”

After her comment sank in, he demanded, “A—an *advertisement*?”

“Yeah, a personal ad. Lots of people do it. In most places it’s a considered a little more acceptable than kidnapping.”

She was serious. At least, he thought she was. He didn’t see much evidence of that little ghost-smile in the corners of her full mouth, but that didn’t tell him much. His experience with reading people was admittedly not large.

“I could never do that,” he said flatly.

“Too old-fashioned?”

“Er—”

“Then why not the old-fashioned way? Does anyone in Plainfield even know what you look like?”

“Of course not,” he replied. Did she think he was a fool? There was no way he would have ever allowed any of those plebeian personages to learn his identity.

Now she did smile. Her teeth were very white and even—a welcome change after years of being surrounded by evidence of his henchmen’s dubious oral hygiene.

“So you could’ve just walked right into Starbucks and struck up a conversation while we were waiting in line for lattes.”

“Oh, no,” he said, stunned that she would even suggest such a thing. That is— “What’s a Starbucks?”

“You really don’t get out much, do you?”

He shook his head.

“It’s a place to buy coffee. Fancy coffee with pretentious Italian names. But that’s not the point. The point is that if no one knows who you are, then no one can recognize you.” A little glint entered her eyes. “You could’ve just been Theodore White from Billings, passing through town. And I probably would have gone up and talked to you, just because you would have been a breath of fresh air after the truck-driving, boot-wearing hicks around here. Their idea of a hot date is a pizza and a six-pack.”

“You would—you would have spoken to me?” The concept seemed so odd that he was having a difficult time processing it. To be standing out in the world, in a Starbucks, whatever that was, and to have the most beautiful woman he’d ever seen come up and just start talking to him out of the blue? Surely things like that didn’t actually happen.

The glint never left her eyes. “I’m a reporter. Talking to people is what I do. But yes, I probably would have tried to talk to you. Especially if you were wearing that lab coat.”

Now he knew she was teasing, just a little. But he wondered what it would have been like, to sit in a public place and drink coffee with her as if it was the most ordinary thing in the world instead of something he would never have dreamed of doing in a million years.

He didn’t feel quite up to that. But he wanted more than anything else to spend time with her. And she didn’t seem terribly averse to spending time with him. What *had* Scarface said to her, anyway? Whatever it was, it seemed to have done the trick. Too bad he didn’t pay Scarface a salary; his little talk with Jenna had yielded results that would have been worth a hefty raise.

There wasn't a Starbucks in Skullcrusher, but there was his suite, where she had never been. It had its own dining room and kitchen; he usually took his meals up there. The formal dining room where he had first sat down to eat with Jenna was mainly for show. They could share another meal, and have a few drinks. And maybe, just maybe, she'd be willing to talk about the two of them, and what their future might be. He didn't dare hope for more than that. Not yet, anyway.

He thought he knew what her answer would be, but his breath still felt a little tight as he asked, "Will you have dinner with me?"

Her lips curved again, and she nodded. "Love to."

SIX

Somebody ought to nominate you for an Academy Award. Jenna leaned toward the mirror and inspected her eye makeup. Not too much, just a bit of liner and mascara and a brush of soft brown shadow, but it was still a long way from the bare-scrubbed look she'd been sporting lately.

He'd bought it. Didn't seem to see anything strange about her new friendliness or her ready acceptance of his dinner invitation. Thank God, because she'd have to keep up this act for—well, maybe forever. Her chances of escape still didn't look too good. But as she'd made her way down to the lab, she'd quietly accepted the fact that she'd probably do or say just about anything to avoid joining those eight nameless young women in their unmarked graves. Nothing to be proud of, but there it was.

The haul from J. Crew hadn't included anything like a cocktail dress, but she did have a drapery knot-front black shirt, and it was dressy enough when paired with black pants and studded flats. Besides, as Theophilus Black's idea of haute couture seemed

to be a clean lab coat, Jenna guessed even this simple ensemble would look dazzling to him.

Scarface was waiting for her outside her door; he nodded when he took in her decidedly more chic appearance. Great. So the pimp approved of her, anyway.

From her apartment he led her up flight after flight of stairs. Good thing she'd been practical and only purchased flats. And really, with all the thumb-scan door locks and Tesla coils and other assorted gadgets Black had filling up this place, he couldn't have invested in a goddamn elevator? Then again, after three days of sitting around on her ass, she figured she could use the workout.

It appeared her guess of a few days earlier had been right—the mad scientist really did have a penthouse suite at the top of the mountain. Scarface paused at the door and pressed his oversized finger against the button of an intercom unit.

The only reply was a buzzing sound, but the door swung inward. “Go on,” the henchman told her.

So she went inside.

Here, too, were more of the straight-out-of-Transylvania antiques, but the feeling was much less oppressive, as the ceiling had to be at least fifteen feet above her head, and much of it was taken up by an enormous multi-paned skylight, through which she saw the edge of a full moon just beginning to appear. It had been so many days since she'd seen the sky that she stopped there, staring upward.

“You like it?” Theophilus Black asked.

Jenna jerked her head downward and saw him standing on the other side of the room. Even now he wore the white lab coat, but at least it looked as if he'd combed his hair.

“It's beautiful,” she said honestly, because it was. “No wonder you don't mind living inside a mountain.”

“There’s more,” he said, and gestured toward another room beyond the foyer.

There didn’t seem to be much else she could do except follow him into a living room area that had as one wall an enormous bank of windows. They looked down over Skullcrusher’s dark flanks. Pine trees crowded from all sides, forming a natural frame for the jaw-dropping span of plate glass.

She moved closer to the windows, wishing it were daytime so she could see the vista more clearly. The moonlight did help to pick out patches of pale grass—or were those remnants of the first snows of autumn? It had been getting very cold in the days before she’d been kidnapped. Back in L.A. people were probably wearing short sleeves and enjoying the warm blast of the Santa Ana winds, but here she’d already started putting on gloves if she had to go outside after dark.

“Looks like you can see the whole world from here,” she remarked.

“Not all of it. But enough.”

His voice was very close, and she turned from the window to see him standing just a foot or so away. He held a glass of dark wine in either hand.

A drink sounded like a fabulous idea. Alcohol had the divine ability to smooth out rough edges and make things look better than they were. She took one of the wine glasses from him and raised it slightly. “To a room with a view.”

His eyebrows came together slightly as he appeared to puzzle over her comment, but he lifted his own glass. “You like the view?”

“Love it.” She sipped her wine; the taste was darker than the Bordeaux she’d drunk her first night here in Skullcrusher, with hints of spice. It also seemed vaguely familiar, as if she’d had something similar once while out on one of her more expensive

dates. Since she was no wine connoisseur, she couldn't begin to guess what it might be. She didn't want to ask.

"I like to watch the clouds. Some of the meteorological phenomena here can be quite impressive. I—"

He broke off, because a largish individual wearing an incongruous white apron poked his head around the corner and said, "Sir—"

"What?"

"Dinner is ready, sir."

"Oh, very well." Theophilus Black turned to Jenna and offered her his arm.

There was no way to refuse, and besides, doing anything besides taking the proffered arm would have aroused his suspicions. She placed her hand on top of his and allowed him to lead her on into the dining room.

It was smaller than the space where they had first shared a meal, but still large enough to accommodate a table that could have seated twelve without any difficulty. Two china place settings gleamed against a dark red tablecloth. Black sat at the head of the table and had her take the place at his left, so she could face another of those floor-to-ceiling windows. A row of tarnished silver candlesticks with red tapers marched their way down the center of the table.

The aproned individual reappeared, this time with a pair of chilled salad plates. He set them down and then disappeared, presumably back toward the kitchen.

Jenna stared after him. His physique suggested he should've been part of the brute squad with Scarface, not slaving away in a kitchen. "Is that your cook?"

"Yes." Apparently he detected a hint of incredulity in her expression, because he added, "He was one of my henchmen

originally, but he does much better in the kitchen than he did as another set of muscle. So I promoted him.”

“Hmm.” She just had to ask, “Where do you find them?”

“My henchmen?” He picked up his salad fork, then continued, “Advertising.”

Was he pulling her leg? She looked a little closer, but he appeared to be serious enough. “So it’s okay for henchmen but not girlfriends?”

“Of course.”

He didn’t seem inclined to acknowledge the irony of the situation, so she only said, “Advertising where?”

“*Soldier of Fortune* magazine.”

Of course. She should’ve known. “I thought they banned those ads.” Actually, she knew they’d banned them, because she’d done some research on the topic while writing a piece on a murder-for-hire in Pasadena, of all places.

“All I say is that I’m hiring private security in a secluded location. Apparently the editorial staff deems that innocuous enough... Jenna.” He sounded almost shy as he spoke her name, then glanced down and began applying himself with unnecessary vigor to his salad.

Well, it was a good salad—mixed field greens with a subtle vinaigrette. Over the past few days she’d become somewhat accustomed to the uniform excellence of the food here, but now that she’d seen the chef and had learned how Theophilus Black had acquired him, she still experienced a minor flicker of astonishment that she could be sitting here eating Cordon Blue-quality food prepared by an ex-merc.

“So,” she went on hastily. Any too-lengthy silences might signal Black that she wasn’t quite as comfortable with the current situation as she would like him to believe. “You’ve really never been off this mountain? Not once?”

A tremor seemed to go through him. He set down his fork and picked up his glass of wine. “Just once.” Without looking at her, he took two large swallows before he set the glass back down.

Must have been memorable. “If you don’t want to talk about it — “

“Perhaps I should.” Still not meeting her eyes, he pushed his glasses up the bridge of his long nose before he drank again. Jenna couldn’t help but note that he was already halfway through that glass of wine.

She helped herself to some wine as well, just because she couldn’t think of what else to do.

“I was ten years old,” he said then. His fingers tightened around the stem of his wine glass.

Trying to picture Theophilus Black as a ten-year-old kid was mildly amusing, but then she realized there was nothing funny about the bleak expression on his face. She waited, something inside her slowly knotting up as he paused again. Then he said,

“They discovered a new pocket of ore that day. We mine uranium here, on the other side of the mountain. My father went to investigate the shaft that was being dug. My mother told me that we were going to take a walk.”

His mother, the mysterious Marcia Black. So he’d known her, and had a mother for at least some part of his life. Jenna nodded, but she found she didn’t dare speak. She didn’t want to interrupt him in case he wouldn’t continue.

“I’d seen pictures of the sky in books, of course, but I hadn’t realized how big it was. And the air, how clean and cold it could be. We walked out through a side entrance I didn’t even know existed and began to make our way down the mountainside.”

He drained the last of the wine in his glass and reached for the bottle, which had been sitting in a silver floor stand a discreet

foot or so away from his left elbow. After filling his glass precisely half full, he returned the bottle to the stand.

“It was a long walk, but I didn’t mind. She was smiling and pointing out the various types of trees, the squirrels, at all the things along the path she’d never seen before. Then the wolves came.”

Candlelight was reflecting directly off the lenses of his glasses, so Jenna could see nothing of Black’s eyes.

“Wolves?” she ventured.

“We have packs of them on the mountain. I ordered them away the night Scarface brought you here, so you wouldn’t be frightened. But I wouldn’t advise taking a stroll on the mountain-side without such precautions.”

How the hell he’d been able to “order” them away, she had no idea. After all, he was a mad scientist, but he wasn’t Count Dracula. Then again, if he could create earthquake predictors and “ponkeys” and Lord knows what else, she supposed Theophilus Black could also come up with some kind of über dog whistle that only affected wolves.

“Anyway, the wolves came, and surrounded us in a clearing halfway down the mountain. We couldn’t go anywhere. And then, not long after that, my father arrived.” Black drank again, another disrespectfully large swallow of the wine. “We were taken back into the mountain. And I never saw my mother again.”

“My God,” Jenna breathed. He’d killed her. Just like that, for daring to defy him. For risking everything to give her son a chance at freedom.

He busied himself with his salad once again, his gaze studiously averted from hers. “So you see why I had no great desire to venture outside after that.”

“Theo, I — “ She hesitated. What could she even say after such a revelation? And incongruously, she found herself becoming

a little angry, because somewhere deep inside she thought she felt just the smallest tendril of pity for him beginning to grow, and that was definitely not part of the plan. She would not feel sorry for Theophilus Black. She wouldn't.

Luckily, the henchman-cum-chef came charging in after that carrying a platter with what appeared to be a roast goose, of all things, and then more and more side dishes until the table looked like something out of "A Christmas Carol" instead of what was supposed to be an intimate dinner for two. But the distraction was a welcome one, since it gave her a chance to regain a bit of emotional equilibrium.

Black also seemed somewhat relieved by the opportunity to busy himself with carving the goose, which he did with great enthusiasm and not a lot of expertise. Not that Jenna really cared; as her mother used to say about smashed cupcakes or pieces of pie with battered crust, it still tasted the same no matter what it looked like.

She asked an innocuous question about the goose by way of deflecting the conversation into safer channels, and he appeared to seize on the opportunity with some gratitude, launching into a detailed explanation of how the mountain was directly in the path of migrating Canadian geese, and how the henchmen always managed to bag a good amount each fall. From there he segued into a more detailed explanation of how he kept the mountain supplied than she probably would have cared to hear under normal circumstances, but at the moment she was glad of the distraction. Anything to avoid more personal revelations.

Because the truth of it was that she thought she could see more and more of the person he might have been peeking out, the man whose psyche hadn't been irretrievably stunted and deformed by a father who could have given Charles Manson a run

for his money in the soft and cuddly department. And she didn't want to give him a pass because of that. Lots of people had childhoods that were screaming nightmares from start to finish but didn't come out of it thinking it was okay to kill innocent young women. Then again, he obviously didn't think it was okay at some level, or he wouldn't have had Scarface doing his dirty work for him.

Jenna frowned at herself. That still didn't mean he wasn't culpable. It was hard to say; her thoughts had started to get a little buzzy after he'd cracked open the second bottle of wine somewhere in the middle of dinner.

"...step outside?"

"What?" She shook her head—as if that would help clear it—and then said, "I thought you didn't go outside."

"Not out out. But there's a balcony off the library. I thought you might want to see the mountain now that the moon is fully overhead."

That didn't sound too bad, and besides, after being cooped up inside for days, the thought of fresh air immediately appealed to her.

"Sounds great," she replied, and set her napkin aside and stood.

He got up as well and pointed at an opening in the far wall of the dining room. "It's through there."

They emerged in a hall that had doors on just the right side—arranged so they could all have windows opening out on the mountainside, she guessed. He opened the third door and led her through a room with walls covered in books, as well as huge desk dominated by a couple of flat-screen monitors so big they would have made any gamer geek green with envy. This room also had huge windows cut out of the mountainside, but on closer

inspection they turned out to be sliding doors that opened on a rough-hewn balcony only about five feet wide and maybe twice that long.

“You’d think someone would notice all these windows,” Jenna commented as he slid one open.

“No one can see them from outside. Look.”

Sure enough, after she stepped out on the balcony and turned to watch him shut the slider, it seemed to disappear, at one with the rough granite of the mountainside all around them. She leaned close to the glass, expecting to see her own reflection, but she saw only stone. “What is that? Some kind of hologram?”

“Something like that. I wanted the windows, but of course I didn’t want anyone to know they were there. So once I perfected the camouflage system, I put the windows in.”

So he’d still yearned to see the forbidden sky, all those years after it had been taken from him. What a mind he must have, to come up with invention after invention so brilliant it made even her rocket scientist ex-boyfriend—her one almost successful relationship, until he got a job offer on the East Coast he couldn’t refuse—seem like a dullard.

Unsure of what she should say next, Jenna instead lifted her head to the sky and the night wind. At any other time she might have shivered in the thin, icy breeze that tugged at the ends of her hair and seemed to find its way through her lightweight top almost as if it weren’t there, but despite the chill the fresh air tasted delicious, cold and clean, with none of the metallic tang of the recycled air inside the mountain. The moon drifted overhead, touched by faint bands of high clouds.

Theophilus Black stood a foot or so away, but he said nothing, either. He, too, had his face lifted to the sky and the moon, whose light glinted off his wire-framed glasses. In the soft light



his profile didn't appear as much beaky as chiseled and sharp, like something on an old coin.

He lowered his head then and looked at her, and she met his gaze with one of hers.

A stray thought passed through her mind—*oh, God, he's going to kiss me*—just as he stepped toward her. And his hands were somehow tangled in her hair, and his mouth met hers, and she felt her own arms go around him almost as if they were acting independently from her own will.

He tasted like the wine from dinner. Maybe she did, too. And at first it was awkward, their lips not quite meeting at the right angles, but she found as she shifted he did as well, adjusting to her movements almost before she could make them.

What she hadn't expected was the heat that exploded somewhere around her stomach—okay, a little lower than her stomach—and seemed to flood through every inch of her body. She shouldn't be reacting to him like this. She should be pushing him away...or, if she wasn't brave enough to do that, she should at least not be shaking, dizzy with need. Yes, it had been a long time. But she'd had dry spells before that were longer than the six months that had passed since her last time with Larry, and she still hadn't reacted like this when it came time to get kissed again.

After a minute or two he lifted his mouth, very gently, from hers. One hand reached up to caress the side of her face. He touched her so lightly she could barely feel the pressure of his fingers. For the first time she noticed how his hands were like the rest of him, long and thin and with a certain gawky, heron-like grace. But that touch was enough to make her shiver again, a shiver she knew had nothing to do with the chilly night breeze.

This whole thing was crazy. She stared up at him for a few seconds, as he watched her with a sort of fearful need, as if he wasn't quite sure she wasn't about to reach up and slap him across the face.

Oh, the hell with it. She smiled and said, "So where's your bedroom?"

SEVEN

Theophilus turned over carefully. He didn't want to wake Jenna, and since he'd never had anyone in bed with him before, he didn't really know how much movement it would require for her to wake up. To open her eyes, and realize that perhaps she didn't want to be there next to him after all.

He wondered whether she'd spent the night with him because in some odd way she pitied him, thought him to be a sheltered creature with no knowledge of the world. After all, he couldn't expect a woman to be with him because she really wanted to. That wasn't how things were done on Skullcrusher Mountain.

But still...

He glanced down at her. The darkness wasn't complete, as he'd left one sconce lit at half-power. So he could clearly see the messy spill of her russet hair against the pillow, the curve of one pale shoulder as it rose just past the concealing blanket. If she wasn't asleep, she was giving a very good impression of it.

That had to mean something. Could she have slept so soundly next to him if she didn't feel somewhat safe, there in his

bed? Then again, they had both exerted themselves a good deal just a few hours earlier. She could simply be worn out.

Quite a talented woman, this Jenna Masterson. Intellectually he had known what was supposed to happen physically between a man and a woman, but understanding the mechanics was a very different matter from experiencing them for oneself. His body stirred at the memory, and he wondered if he should wake her up after all. But she looked so peaceful, and they had already gone three times before they both slid into oblivion only a few moments apart from one another. He would let her sleep.

He himself needed very little; three or four hours most nights. Although there was no real way to tell day and night within the mountain, for some reason he always felt more productive during the dark hours when the rest of the world was asleep. Perhaps he would have to adjust his schedule if he were going to have Jenna here with him from now on—or perhaps she would have to learn to be wakeful in the evenings as well.

That could be assuming a future which might never come to pass, but he didn't want to think about that right now. Better to stare down at the miracle of her profile, to think of how it had felt to have her body pressed up against his. She hadn't acted or sounded like a woman who was doing anything but exactly what she wanted...which meant very little, of course. Most likely it had only been an act, to give him what he wanted and to make him think she would no longer struggle against her captivity.

Maybe if he kept her here long enough, that act would become reality.

Jenna rolled over and stared up at the stony expanse above her head. At first glance it didn't look all that different from the ceiling in her own room, but the bed that surrounded her was

even more grand, its carved posts almost touching that dark-gray surface.

The spot next to her was empty. So at least she'd been spared having to wake up next to him.

What the hell had she been thinking?

She supposed she could blame her actions on that second bottle of Chateauneuf-de-Pape—she'd stolen a glimpse of the wine bottle's label while Theophilus was carving another round of roast goose, so at least now she knew what was responsible for the insanity that had brought her here. Oh, who was she kidding? She hadn't been that drunk. Tipsy, yes, in that great light-headed way that made everything sound like a fabulous adventure, but not so drunk she didn't know exactly what she'd been doing.

The scary thing was, it had been good. She hadn't been expecting that. But even though he'd approached her at first with the sort of diffidence one might have expected of a worried worshipper approaching the shrine of a goddess whose reaction to his offering he couldn't quite predict, that shyness had disappeared pretty quickly once the lights were down and the clothing was off. Those slender fingers of his had turned out to be more than a little talented.

A little shiver passed over her at the recollection, and she shook her head. Maybe she really had gone crazy. That might be preferable to realizing Theophilus Black had been the best lay she'd had in a long time.

She had no idea where he'd gone, but it helped a little to be alone as she gathered up her discarded clothes and pulled them back on. Then she made the bed, located the bathroom—it was through the door in the south wall of the room—and got herself as cleaned up as she could, lacking her own toothbrush and toiletries. Splashing cold water on her face helped a little, but she would've killed for a cup of coffee.

Thoughts of the delectable French roast she'd had a few days earlier spurred her on, and she padded barefoot out of the bedroom and down toward the dining room, as she figured the kitchen had to be somewhere around there. And it was, looking like something out of a magazine with all its gleaming stainless-steel appliances and granite countertops. The rest of the mountain might be decorated in early Hammer Horror Film, but the kitchen could have been drop-shipped straight from some high-end house in the Hollywood Hills.

He had an impressive-looking coffee maker, one of those sophisticated ones that ground the beans for you so each pot would be ultra-fresh. The beans were stored in airtight containers in the cupboards right above the coffee maker; she selected some Kona Fancy, dumped them in the top of the machine, and switched it on.

It was noisy enough that she half-expected Theophilus Black to appear and demand what the hell she was doing, making herself so free of his kitchen and his pricy coffee beans. But all through the drip cycle she saw no one else, although she did locate some bagels in a bread box and appropriate one for herself. She'd eaten half of it by the time the coffee was ready, but that was all right—she found some mugs in the cupboard as well and poured a cup, then alternated between the bagel and the coffee until both were gone. Ah, caffeine and carbs, one of her favorite combinations.

There was still a good deal of coffee left in the pot, though, and she figured she'd procrastinated long enough. She got herself a second mugful and then poured one for Theophilus as well. Of course, he could have gone down to the lab, but Jenna thought she had an idea as to where he might be. The idea of facing him seemed a lot easier now that she at least was dressed and had had a boost from that delectable Kona Fancy.

His study looked far different now, with pale morning light slanting through the floor-to-ceiling windows. He faced outward, with one of those enormous flat screens blocking some of the sunlight.

She set down a mug on the desktop, in a spot she hoped would be safely away from his keyboard and mouse. “I thought you might like some coffee.”

He started, almost knocking over the mug with his elbow, but recovered himself in time. So much for the careful coffee placement. “Erm...thank you,” he muttered, without looking away from the computer screen.

Apparently she wasn’t the only one with a raging case of morning-after awkwardness. “It’s good coffee,” she said, her tone neutral.

“What? Oh, yes, I suppose so.”

Great. Jenna sipped at her own coffee, as it seemed a bit more acceptable than sighing in exasperation. Then she asked, “What are you working on?” The enormous screen showed some sort of wire-screen structure that rotated or changed its shape as he tapped away at the keyboard, but she couldn’t begin to guess what it was. Anyway, she figured if she were going to be shacked up with a mad scientist, she should probably at least pretend an interest in his work.

Eyes still fixed on the computer, he replied, “A submarine.”

What the hell he was doing with a submarine in a place as landlocked as Skullcrusher Mountain, she couldn’t begin to guess, but she supposed that was a mad scientist for you. “Sounds fascinating.”

He muttered something under his breath she couldn’t quite hear, but at least he swiveled away from the computer screen and picked up the coffee she’d brought him.

His hair looked as if he'd put it through a blender, and he wore a black bathrobe over a dark T-shirt and sweatpants. Somehow Jenna found him more approachable now that he was dressed like this. No, she wouldn't go so far as to say cute. Absolutely not. Well...maybe slightly adorable, in a rumpled sort of way.

No, she told herself. *You are not going there. Just because you slept with the guy—*

She really didn't want to contemplate the psychology of her current bout of reverse-coyote ugly. Obviously he didn't have any post-coital stars in his eyes; he appeared distracted and even somewhat cross, as if she'd interrupted something important. Maybe she had. She didn't know how important the submarine was—even if she still couldn't figure out what the hell he wanted with it. Anyway, it sure didn't seem as if he were going to be confiding in her any time in the near future.

"I think I'm going to get a shower," she said abruptly, almost as annoyed with herself for being irritated in the first place as she was with her taciturn companion. Really, why should she care if he were as grumpy as a bear roused from its winter hibernation? "Enjoy your coffee, Theo."

For a second or two he almost looked startled, as if he had expected her to say something else. Then, "I'll have Scarface take you back down to your suite."

Somehow she managed a nod before she turned and left. She made a detour to retrieve her abandoned flats, and studiously avoided looking at the bed as she retrieved them. Funny how the sheltered Dr. Black could manage to be as big an asshole the morning after getting laid as the biggest player in L.A.

Scarface was waiting in the living room as Jenna emerged from Theophilus Black's bedroom. She didn't want to look at him, either, and it wasn't just because she'd seen better-looking faces on

a shelf in a Halloween store. No, she just had no desire to see any satisfaction in his expression. The pimp's work was done.

At least he had the sense to remain silent as he led her downstairs. He thumbed open the lock to her room, and then paused. "You didn't stay very long."

What, did he think he was now her confidant or something? Next thing she knew he'd be asking to braid her hair or choose a new shade of toenail polish. "No," she snapped, and brushed past his bulk so she could get inside her suite. Not that she was really any safer there, but it did offer a spurious sort of privacy. "Your master made it pretty obvious he didn't want me hanging around. Now, if you'll excuse m —" And she hit the button for the door, shutting it right in the henchman's lumpy, puzzled face.

She didn't know if a shower would really make her feel any cleaner, but she knew she had to start somewhere.

"Master?"

"What?" Theophilus snapped. Really, how was he supposed to get any work done with all these interruptions?

"I took Ms. Masterson back to her suite."

"And?"

"She seemed...upset."

Of all the—Theophilus pushed his chair away from his desk and rotated it so that he faced his henchman. Scarface appeared placid enough, but that didn't mean much.

"I think you should talk to her."

Theophilus weighed several responses, and realized he didn't quite know what to say. Yes, Jenna had been almost curt, but perhaps she just wasn't a morning person, even after several cups of coffee. He frowned, reflecting on their brief exchange. Perhaps she had expected him to be there when she awoke? He had no idea

whether that was standard protocol, as he'd never had a woman in his bed before last night. Really, though, how foolish to expect him to stay in bed when he'd had his usual four hours of sleep and had so many things he needed to get done. She would have to understand that he was a busy man.

"You do want her to stay, don't you?" asked Scarface.

She must stay, said a small, quiet voice from some almost-forgotten corner of his brain. It had been so long since he'd heard any of the voices that he sat there for a long moment in silence, considering. In the past the voices had only counseled him when it was time to give up on a woman. This was the first instance he could remember of a voice instructing him to keep someone.

Well, that appeared to settle it.

He pushed his chair out from the desk and stood. "Perhaps I should see how she is doing."

"That might help."

Scarface's tone had been too mild to be construed as judgmental, but Theophilus shot him a narrow-eyed glare all the same. "You would do well to remember, Scarface, that you work for me."

The henchman's expression never flickered. "Of course, Master."

Theophilus scowled again, then went to change into a proper shirt and trousers and a fresh lab coat. Bad enough that Jenna had seen him in such untidy clothing earlier. He did not want to repeat that mistake.

He did remember himself enough to press the buzzer on the door instead of walking straight in. If she were already annoyed with him for some obscure reason, it wouldn't do to irritate her further by entering her suite unannounced.

A long moment ticked by. He began to wonder if she intended to task him by making him wait an unreasonable amount of time. She would have to learn that he did not care to engage in such

petty power plays. But even as he raised his hand to push the buzzer again, the door opened, and she stared up at him, eyebrows lifted. “What?”

It seemed she had just emerged from the bathroom; although she was dressed, her hair lay wetly against her shoulders, and her face was clean of cosmetics. Theophilus cleared his throat and asked, “May I come in?”

Jenna put a hand up to her damp head, then shrugged. “Sure.”

She stepped aside to let him enter and allowed him to close the door. He spotted the pile of books next to one of the wing chairs at once, and for some strange reason his throat tightened for a second or two. How many years had it been since he’d seen those silly paperbacks with their lurid covers? And yet his mother had loved them so. Scarface must have found them in some obscure storeroom and brought them here. Funny, he’d never have thought his henchman possessed the perception to realize that Jenna would need something to do with her time.

He cleared his throat again. “Scarface informed me that you appeared to be rather out of spirits.”

“Oh, he did, did he?” Her mouth tightened a bit before she added, “What, is he your own personal Dr. Phil or something in addition to being your muscle?”

“My who?” What on earth was she talking about? It should be patently obvious that Scarface was not a medical doctor.

“Oh, never mind.” She stalked away from him and sat down in the wing chair, then picked up a wide-tooth comb that had been lying next to one of the paperback novels. Without looking at him, she began running the comb through her damp hair.

This was ridiculous. He had no idea why she should be so upset with him, and even if she were, what did that signify? He

was Theophilus Black of Skullcrusher Mountain. He shouldn't have to answer to her whims and fancies. But despite all that, he did want her to stay, and he would prefer there not be so much friction between them. Surely she must realize that he had no experience with these sorts of things—he hadn't been trained to speak of personal matters. Still, perhaps now was the time to at least make the attempt.

“Do you—that is, possibly you regret last night.”

She looked up at him then, her blue eyes cool and direct. “Do you?”

“Of course not!” he said immediately, surprising even himself with the force of his reply. “That is, it seemed as if you enjoyed yourself at the time. Unless it was—” He paused for a moment as he attempted to articulate his feeling that she had only slept with him out of some sense of obligation. “—Unless it was some sort of pity sex.”

A short, humorless laugh followed that remark. “No, more like ‘I don't want to die’ sex.”

What on earth? He shook his head. “Surely you don't think—”

She set down the comb and shot him a glance of curiously mixed confusion and annoyance. “That's laying it on a bit thick, even for you. You think I don't know what happened to those other women?”

“Scarface took them away,” he said automatically, but for some reason his pulse had quickened slightly. There were some things he never discussed. When a girl didn't work out, his henchman removed her from Skullcrusher. He thought little of the young women after that. He'd always been good at not thinking about things he didn't want to think about. For instance, exactly where his mother had gone after their abortive trip down the mountain.

This time Jenna's expression was almost sympathetic. She stood and took a step toward him. "And you never asked what he did with them?"

Theophilus shook his head again. It had always been so easy to occupy himself with the latest experiment or invention. He could direct his thoughts in productive channels, and not have to think about where the girls had gone.

"Wow," she said. "I've seen some denial in my time, but this takes the cake."

"What cake?"

"Oh, for Christ's—" She gave him a rueful smile. "Scarface was right. I thought he had to have been exaggerating, but—"

"Right about what?"

"You."

Well, he had asked his henchman to go talk to her, but now more than ever Theophilus wondered exactly what had passed between them during that exchange. He did know that he preferred this discussion to go in an entirely different direction. "It was not my intention to make you angry."

"It never is." Then she appeared to relent, and added, "I'll let you in on a little secret. Most of the time, if you sleep with a woman, it's probably a good idea to show her at least a little attention the next morning. You barely looked at me. So I got cranky."

That was all? He wasn't sure whether the wave of relief that passed over him had to do with the fact that she'd allowed him to maneuver the conversation to safer topics, or simply because the reason for her ill temper appeared to have stemmed from the fact that she'd felt deprived of his attention. Which meant she must enjoy his company on some level, or why else would she have been hurt by the lack of it?

He said, “I was not aware of that. It was not my intention.” Apologies were another thing he had little experience with, but he knew he didn’t want her to be angry with him. “This is all new to me, you understand. I would appreciate it if you could show me how these things are supposed to work.”

For a few seconds she said nothing. A little line appeared between her brows as she appeared to consider, and then it smoothed itself away as she nodded. She reached out and took his hand in hers, and gave it a little squeeze. Her skin was soft, but her fingers felt strong against his, firm and matter-of-fact. “Yes,” she said, “I think I can do that.”

Maybe there was something in the air inside Skullcrusher Mountain that made you crazy. Jenna found herself halfway believing in such a thing, because Theo sure wasn’t playing with a full deck, and she appeared to have succumbed to his insanity as well. How else could she explain slipping easily into a routine with the mad scientist, to the point where after another few days she agreed to come stay in his quarters full-time? True, they were much nicer than hers, as at least there she could watch the sun and the sky and not feel so much like a prisoner, but still...

But there it was. By that point she’d been missing for almost a week, although she managed to forestall at least some inquiries by emailing her mother and informing her that she was going on assignment and would be difficult to reach by phone. Theo didn’t seem to mind her sending the emails as long as she revealed nothing of where she really was. Jenna hated lying, but she knew if she hadn’t contacted her mother she would have flipped out when she couldn’t get hold of her daughter for their ritual Sunday afternoon phone call. This way, at least that edge had been smoothed down. God knows what they were thinking back in Plainfield about her

disappearance—probably that she was a typical crackpot flake from Los Angeles, and what else would you expect?

Otherwise, she found herself a little bit astonished by how easily she inserted herself into Theo's routines. True, she needed almost twice as much sleep as he did, but that was all right; he worked while she slept, and she made a point of giving him plenty of time to follow up on his experiments. Also, he'd moved a computer into one of the spare rooms in his suite and let her have her own office, where she made more progress than she would have imagined on a book about the Clark Rockefeller case. The layers of lies and multiple aliases he'd used had always fascinated her, and she'd put together some notes but hadn't gotten much farther than that, her schedule being what it was. Well, she had plenty of free time now that she was basically a kept woman.

Even so, she couldn't quite imagine how she could live like this for the rest of her life, trapped inside a mountain. Theo seemed content enough, but he'd never known anything else.

She thought of their conversation of several days ago, when she'd suggested that he could have left the mountain. He'd seemed shocked by the idea, but really, why couldn't they leave? It probably was insane, but she knew she would never turn him in. Odd as it might sound, she actually had become rather fond of him. Okay, a little bit more than fond, if she wanted to admit it to herself. Probably she was just experiencing a raging case of Stockholm Syndrome, but there it was. She knew she'd miss the sound of his voice and his faintly pedantic turn of phrase and the way he pushed his glasses up his nose with his little finger. Good thing her friends from L.A. weren't around to see her descent into sentimentality. They'd either laugh themselves silly or have her committed.

On the Tuesday morning following her email to her mother it had snowed a little, not enough for any real accumulation, but

her breath hung in the air like smoke as she stood on the balcony outside Theo's study, a blanket wrapped around her for warmth. He found her there and said, "Isn't it a bit cold for that?"

"I suppose so." Really, despite her thin Southern California blood, the cold felt good. Bracing. Real. "I like the fresh air."

He tilted his head. His hair looked particularly untidy; she guessed he'd been testing something in the lab. He was always trying out new configurations. "I assure you that the air inside the mountain is rigorously cycled and refreshed."

Of course it was, but that didn't make it any less canned. Still, she came inside and shut the sliding door behind her. "I was just thinking."

"About?"

"Remember how I said you could've just come into Plainfield and met me in Starbucks?"

"So?"

"So...let's go to Starbucks. Actually, screw that—let's go have dinner at Antoine's."

He pushed his glasses up on his nose and frowned. "What is Antoine's?"

"A ritzy restaurant in New Orleans."

"New—" A bemused expression passed over his pointed features. "What on earth are you talking about?"

She went to him, took his hands in hers. His fingers were warm against her chilled ones. "We don't have to stay here, you know. There's a whole world out there. I want to show it to you." He opened his mouth, most likely to protest, and she went on in a rush, "You've already got a fabricated identity you can use. What's stopping us, really?"

He said, sounding a little strangled, "The mine—"

"Scarface can run the mine. You as much as told me he

does that now anyway, so you can work on your experiments. And we can set up a lab for you someplace when we're tired of traveling. We could go to Paris. Wouldn't you like to see Paris?" She paused then, because she could see the ebb and flow of emotions in his face, from doubt to worry and then on to a sort of fragile hope.

"I—perhaps, but—"

"Well, then."

A second ticked by, and then another. Jenna didn't dare breathe. She didn't want to do or say anything else that might interfere with his decision. At last he nodded, and gave her a thin smile. "You will be relieved to know that Theodore White has a valid passport."

Without thinking, she threw her arms around him, pulling him close. After a brief hesitation, he reached out to hold her as well. She tried not to notice how his lean form shivered, almost as if he had been the one standing out in the freezing air.

Perhaps he had gone mad, but if so, it was a divine madness. He could only imagine what his father would have said if he'd lived long enough to see his son leave the mountain that was his birthright. But Jenna was right. There was a whole world out there, and he wanted to see it before he died. Just being with her had shown him that life could be much more than mere existence. And the miracle of it was that she wanted to share it with him.

Scarface could manage Skullcrusher. Really, the mountain was just as much Scarface's as it was his. The henchman had been born there, too, and would be a good steward. Possibly even better than Theophilus Black himself. Rationalizations, true, but he'd always been good at rationalizing. At least now he could put that talent to good use.

As he couldn't drive, he sat in the passenger seat of the truck his henchmen used to drive back and forth to Billings to pick up supplies. Jenna fastened her seatbelt and said, "Good thing I had a boyfriend in college who taught me how to four-wheel drive."

"Will you show me?" he asked. It seemed as if it would be a good skill to have.

"Absolutely. But not today — there's some snow already, and I want to get out of here before it gets any worse."

He nodded, and experienced an odd constriction in his throat as she pointed the big truck out of the cavernous hangar



they used to store various heavy equipment and vehicles. How strange to leave the gloom of the mountain behind and to drive out into the changeable sunshine. The door to the hangar closed behind them.

“Do you know where you’re going?”

An odd little smile played around her full lips as she nodded. “Second star to the right, and straight on ’til morning.”

She had to be joking. “What?”

Briefly she lifted her hand from the gearshift and placed it on his. The warmth of her fingers seemed to spread through his whole body, and the tightness in his throat disappeared as if it had never been.

“Don’t worry, Theo,” she told him, as the sun broke from behind a cloud and washed the road in a flood of golden light. “I know exactly where we’re going.”

POSTSCRIPT...

As Scarface had never been the sentimental type, he saw no point in ruminating on how empty the mountain seemed with Dr. Black and Jenna Masterson gone. Skullcrusher still had its complement of henchmen and miners, and so it actually was far from empty. True, the lab would see little use now, as Scarface did not share his master’s scientific bent, and somehow he couldn’t quite bring himself to occupy the lofty suite that had been home to the Blacks for generations, but really, other than that life inside the mountain hummed along just as it had for a great many years.

No doubt Augustus Black would have thundered in rage to see his son abandon everything he’d been taught was important, but the man was long dead, and Scarface didn’t believe in ghosts.

He didn't begrudge Theophilus Black his happiness. He'd seen his own share of misery in his short life.

All the same, Scarface thought of one tradition he'd like to continue. Soon he'd begin to wander the mountainside again, just as he had for his master.

After all, Skullcrusher Mountain would always need a new bride...