



*#1 NEW YORK TIMES & USA TODAY
BESTSELLING AUTHOR*

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THE ART OF DECEPTION

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Nora Roberts



Silhouette® Books

Published by Silhouette Books

America's Publisher of Contemporary Romance

Adam Haines was an artist visiting the Fairchild mansion to do some undercover digging, and that was a problem for a man who preferred to be straightforward. An even bigger problem was Kirby—Fairchild, daughter of the world-famous painter he'd been sent to investigate. She was part child, part elf, and the most fascinating woman he'd ever encountered.

However, Kirby had a disconcertingly fluid sense of right and wrong—one completely at odds with Adam's own code of ethics. Adam wished he wasn't wrapped quite so tightly around her little finger.

For the Romance Writers of America,
in gratitude for the friends I've made
and the friends still to come.

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It was more like a castle than a house. The stone was gray, but beveled at the edges, Herodian-style, so that it shimmered with underlying colors. Towers and turrets jutted toward the sky, joined together by a crenellated roof. Windows were mullioned, long and narrow with diamond-shaped panes.

The structure—Adam would never think of it as anything so ordinary as a house—loomed over the Hudson, audacious and eccentric and, if such things were possible, pleased with itself. If the stories were true, it suited its owner perfectly.

All it required, Adam decided as he crossed the flagstone courtyard, was a dragon and a moat.

Two grinning gargoyles sat on either side of the wide stone steps. He passed by them with a reservation natural to a practical man. Gargoyles and turrets could be accepted in their proper place—but not in rural New York, a few hours' drive out of Manhattan.

Deciding to reserve judgment, he lifted the heavy brass knocker and let it fall against a door of thick Honduras mahogany. After a third pounding, the door creaked open. With strained patience, Adam looked down at a small woman with huge gray eyes, black braids and a soot-streaked face. She wore a rumpled sweatshirt and jeans that had seen better days. Lazily, she rubbed her nose with the back of her hand and stared back.

“Hullo.”

He bit back a sigh, thinking that if the staff ran to half-witted maids, the next few weeks were going to be very tedious. “I’m Adam Haines. Mr. Fairchild is expecting me,” he enunciated.

Her eyes narrowed with curiosity or suspicion, he couldn’t be sure. “Expecting you?” Her accent was broad New England. After another moment of staring, she frowned, shrugged, then moved aside to let him in.

The hall was wide and seemingly endless. The paneling gleamed a dull deep brown in the diffused light. Streaks of sun poured out of a high angled window and fell over the small woman, but he barely noticed. Paintings. For the moment, Adam forgot the fatigue of the journey and his annoyance. He forgot everything else but the paintings.

Van Gogh, Renoir, Monet. A museum could claim no finer exhibition. The power pulled at him. The hues, the tints, the brush strokes, and the overall magnificence they combined to create, tugged at his senses. Perhaps, in some strange way, Fairchild had been right to house them in something like a fortress. Turning, Adam saw the maid with her hands loosely folded, her huge gray eyes on his face. Impatience sprang back.

“Run along, will you? Tell Mr. Fairchild I’m here.”

“And who might you be?” Obviously impatience didn’t affect her.

“Adam Haines,” he repeated. He was a man accustomed to servants—and one who expected efficiency.

“Ayah, so you said.”

How could her eyes be smoky and clear at the same time? he wondered fleetingly. He gave a moment’s thought to the fact that they reflected a maturity and intelligence at odds with her braids and smeared face. “Young lady...” He paced the words, slowly and distinctly. “Mr. Fairchild is expecting me. Just tell him I’m here. Can you handle that?”

A sudden dazzling smile lit her face. “Ayah.”

The smile threw him off. He noticed for the first time that she had an exquisite mouth, full and sculpted. And there was something...something under the soot. Without thinking, he lifted a hand, intending to brush some off. The tempest hit.

"I can't do it! I tell you it's impossible. A travesty!" A man barreled down the long, curved stair at an alarming rate. His face was shrouded in tragedy, his voice croaked with doom. "This is all your fault." Coming to a breathless stop, he pointed a long, thin finger at the little maid. "It's on your head, make no mistake."

Robin Goodfellow, Adam thought instantly. The man was the picture of Puck, short with a spritely build, a face molded on cherubic lines. The spare thatch of light hair nearly stood on end. He seemed to dance. His thin legs lifted and fell on the landing as he waved the long finger at the dark-haired woman. She remained serenely undisturbed.

"Your blood pressure's rising every second, Mr. Fairchild. You'd better take a deep breath or two before you have a spell."

"Spell!" Insulted, he danced faster. His face glowed pink with the effort. "I don't have spells, girl. I've never had a spell in my life."

"There's always a first time." She nodded, keeping her fingers lightly linked. "Mr. Adam Haines is here to see you."

"Haines? What the devil does Haines have to do with it? It's the end, I tell you. The climax." He placed a hand dramatically over his heart. The pale blue eyes watered so that for one awful moment, Adam thought he'd weep. "Haines?" he repeated. Abruptly he focused on Adam with a brilliant smile. "I'm expecting you, aren't I?"

Cautiously Adam offered his hand. "Yes."

"Glad you could come, I've been looking forward to it." Still showing his teeth, he pumped Adam's hand. "Into the parlor," he said, moving his grip from Adam's hand to his arm. "We'll have a drink." He walked with the quick bouncing stride of a man who hadn't a worry in the world.

In the parlor Adam had a quick impression of antiques and old magazines. At a wave of Fairchild's hand he sat on a horsehair sofa that was remarkably uncomfortable. The maid went to an enormous stone fireplace and began to scrub out the hearth with quick, tuneful little whistles.

"I'm having Scotch," Fairchild decided, and reached for a decanter of Chivas Regal.

"That'll be fine."

"I admire your work, Adam Haines." Fairchild offered the Scotch with a steady hand. His face was calm, his voice moderate. Adam wondered if he'd imagined the scene on the stairs.

"Thank you." Sipping Scotch, Adam studied the little genius across from him.

Small networks of lines crept out from Fairchild's eyes and mouth. Without them and the thinning hair, he might have been taken for a very young man. His aura of youth seemed to spring from an inner vitality, a feverish energy. The eyes were pure, unfaded blue. Adam knew they could see beyond what others saw.

Philip Fairchild was, indisputably, one of the greatest living artists of the twentieth century. His style ranged from the flamboyant to the elegant, with a touch of everything in between. For more than thirty years, he'd enjoyed a position of fame, wealth and respect in artistic and popular circles, something very few people in his profession achieved during their lifetime.

Enjoy it he did, with a temperament that ranged from pompous to irascible to generous. From time to time he invited other artists to his house on the Hudson, to spend weeks or months working, absorbing or simply relaxing. At other times, he barred everyone from the door and went into total seclusion.

"I appreciate the opportunity to work here for a few weeks, Mr. Fairchild."

"My pleasure." The artist sipped Scotch and sat, gesturing with a regal wave of his hand—the king granting benediction.

Adam successfully hid a smirk. "I'm looking forward to studying some of your paintings up close. There's such incredible variety in your work."

“I live for variety,” Fairchild said with a giggle. From the hearth came a distinct snort. “Disrespectful brat,” Fairchild muttered into his drink. When he scowled at her, the maid tossed a braid over her shoulder and plopped her rag noisily into the bucket. “Cards!” Fairchild bellowed, so suddenly Adam nearly dumped the Scotch in his lap.

“I beg your pardon?”

“No need for that,” Fairchild said graciously and shouted again. At the second bellow the epitome of butlers walked into the parlor.

“Yes, Mr. Fairchild.” His voice was grave, lightly British. The dark suit he wore was a discreet contrast to the white hair and pale skin. He held himself like a soldier.

“See to Mr. Haines’s car, Cards, and his luggage. The Wedgwood guest room.”

“Very good, sir,” the butler agreed after a slight nod from the woman at the hearth.

“And put his equipment in Kirby’s studio,” Fairchild added, grinning as the hearth scrubber choked. “Plenty of room for both of you,” he told Adam before he scowled. “My daughter, you know. She’s doing sculpture, up to her elbows in clay or chipping at wood and marble. I can’t cope with it.” Gripping his glass in both hands, Fairchild bowed his head. “God knows I try. I’ve put my soul into it. And for what?” he demanded, jerking his head up again. “For what?”

“I’m afraid I—”

“Failure!” Fairchild moaned, interrupting him. “To have to deal with failure at my age. It’s on your head,” he told the little brunette again. “You have to live with it—if you can.”

Turning, she sat on the hearth, folded her legs under her and rubbed more soot on her nose. “You can hardly blame me if you have four thumbs and your soul’s lost.” The accent was gone. Her voice was low and smooth, hinting of European finishing schools. Adam’s eyes narrowed. “You’re determined to be better than I,” she went on. “Therefore, you were doomed to fail before you began.”

“Doomed to fail! Doomed to fail, am I?” He was up and dancing again, Scotch sloshing around his glass. “Philip Fairchild will overcome, you heartless brat. He shall triumph! You’ll eat your words.”

“Nonsense.” Deliberately, she yawned. “You have your medium, Papa, and I have mine. Learn to live with it.”

“Never.” He slammed a hand against his heart again. “Defeat is a four-letter word.”

“Six,” she corrected, and, rising, commandeered the rest of his Scotch.

He scowled at her, then at his empty glass. “I was speaking metaphorically.”

“How clever.” She kissed his cheek, transferring soot.

“Your face is filthy,” Fairchild grumbled.

Lifting a brow, she ran a finger down his cheek. “So’s yours.”

They grinned at each other. For a flash, the resemblance was so striking, Adam wondered how he’d missed it. Kirby Fairchild, Philip’s only child, a well-respected artist and eccentric in her own right. Just what, Adam wondered, was the darling of the jet set doing scrubbing out hearths?

“Come along, Adam.” Kirby turned to him with a casual smile. “I’ll show you to your room. You look tired. Oh, Papa,” she added as she moved to the door, “this week’s issue of *People* came. It’s on the server. That’ll keep him entertained,” she said to Adam as she led him up the stairs.

He followed her slowly, noting that she walked with the faultless grace of a woman who’d been taught how to move. The pigtails swung at her back. Jeans, worn white at the stress points, had no designer label on the back pocket. Her canvas Nikes had broken shoelaces.

Kirby glided along the second floor, passing half a dozen doors before she stopped. She glanced at her hands, then at Adam. “You’d better open it. I’ll get the knob filthy.”

He pushed open the door and felt like he was stepping back in time. Wedgwood blue dominated the color scheme. The furniture was all Middle Georgian—carved armchairs, ornately worked tables.

Again there were paintings, but this time, it was the woman behind him who held his attention.

“Why did you do that?”

“Do what?”

“Put on that act at the door.” He walked back to where she stood at the threshold. Looking down he calculated that she barely topped five feet. For the second time he had the urge to brush the soot from her face to discover what lay beneath.

“You looked so polished, and you positively glowered.” She leaned a shoulder against the doorjamb. There was an elegance about him that intrigued her, because his eyes were sharp and arrogant. Though she didn’t smile, the amusement in her expression was soft and ripe. “You were expecting a dimwitted parlor maid, so I made it easy for you. Cocktails at seven. Can you find your way back, or shall I come for you?”

He’d make do with that for now. “I’ll find it.”

“All right. *Ciao*, Adam.”

Unwillingly fascinated, he watched her until she’d turned the corner at the end of the hall. Perhaps Kirby Fairchild would be as interesting a nut to crack as her father. But that was for later.

Adam closed the door and locked it. His bags were already set neatly beside the rosewood wardrobe. Taking the briefcase, Adam spun the combination lock and drew up the lid. He pulled out a small transmitter and flicked a switch.

“I’m in.”

“Password,” came the reply.

He swore, softly and distinctly. “Seagull. And that is, without a doubt, the most ridiculous password on record.”

“Routine, Adam. We’ve got to follow routine.”

“Sure.” There’d been nothing routine since he’d stopped his car at the end of the winding uphill drive. “I’m in, McIntyre, and I want you to know how much I appreciate your dumping me in this madhouse.” With a flick of his thumb, he cut McIntyre off.

Without stopping to wash, Kirby jogged up the steps to her father’s studio. She opened the door, then slammed it so that jars and tubes of paint shuddered on their shelves.

“What have you done this time?” she demanded.

“I’m starting over.” Wispy brows knit, he huddled over a moist lump of clay. “Fresh start. Rebirth.”

“I’m not talking about your futile attempts with clay. Adam Haines,” she said before he could retort. Like a small tank, she advanced on him. Years before, Kirby had learned size was of no consequence if you had a knack for intimidation. She’d developed it meticulously. Slamming her palms down on his worktable, she stood nose to nose with him. “What the hell do you mean by asking him here and not even telling me?”

“Now, now, Kirby.” Fairchild hadn’t lived six decades without knowing when to dodge and weave. “It simply slipped my mind.”

Better than anyone else, Kirby knew nothing slipped his mind. “What’re you up to now, Papa?”

“Up to?” He smiled guilelessly.

“Why did you ask him here now, of all times?”

“I’ve admired his work. So’ve you,” he pointed out when her mouth thinned. “He wrote such a nice letter about *Scarlet Moon* when it was exhibited at the Metropolitan last month.”

Her brow lifted, an elegant movement under a layer of soot. “You don’t invite everyone who

compliments your work.”

“Of course not, my sweet. That would be impossible. One must be...selective. Now I must get back to my work while the mood’s flowing.”

“Something’s going to flow,” she promised. “Papa, if you’ve a new scheme after you promised ___”

“Kirby!” His round, smooth face quivered with emotion. His lips trembled. It was only one of his talents. “You’d doubt the word of your own father? The seed that spawned you?”

“That makes me sound like a gardenia, and it won’t work.” She crossed her arms over her chest. Frowning, Fairchild poked at the unformed clay.

“My motives are completely altruistic.”

“Hah.”

“Adam Haines is a brilliant young artist. You’ve said so yourself.”

“Yes, he is, and I’m sure he’d be delightful company under different circumstances.” She leaned forward, grabbing her father’s chin in her hand. “Not now.”

“Ungracious,” Fairchild said with disapproval. “Your mother, rest her soul, would be very disappointed in you.”

Kirby ground her teeth. “Papa, the Van Gogh!”

“Coming along nicely,” he assured her. “Just a few more days.”

Knowing she was in danger of tearing out her hair, she stalked to the tower window. “Oh, bloody murder.”

Senility, she decided. It had to be senility. How could he consider having that man here now? Next week, next month, but now? That man, Kirby thought ruthlessly, was nobody’s fool.

At first glance she’d decided he wasn’t just attractive—very attractive—but sharp. Those big camel’s eyes gleamed with intelligence. The long, thin mouth equaled determination. Perhaps he was a bit pompous in his bearing and manner, but he wasn’t soft. No, she was certain instinctively that Adam Haines would be hard as nails.

She’d like to do him in bronze, she mused. The straight nose, the sharp angles and planes in his face. His hair was nearly the color of deep, polished bronze, and just a tad too long for convention. She’d want to capture his air of arrogance and authority. But not now!

Sighing, she moved her shoulders. Behind her back, Fairchild grinned. When she turned back to him, he was studiously intent on his clay.

“He’ll want to come up here, you know.” Despite the soot, she dipped her hands in her pockets. They had a problem; now it had to be dealt with. For the better part of her life, Kirby had sorted through the confusion her father gleefully created. The truth was, she’d have had it no other way. “It would seem odd if we didn’t show him your studio.”

“We’ll show him tomorrow.”

“He mustn’t see the Van Gogh.” Kirby planted her feet, prepared to do battle on this one point, if not the others. “You’re not going to make this more complicated than you already have.”

“He won’t see it. Why should he?” Fairchild glanced up briefly, eyes wide. “It has nothing to do with him.”

Though she realized it was foolish, Kirby was reassured. No, he wouldn’t see it, she thought. Her father might be a little...unique, she decided, but he wasn’t careless. Neither was she. “Thank God it’s nearly finished.”

“Another few days and off it goes, high into the mountains of South America.” He made a vague sweeping gesture with his hands.

Moving over, Kirby uncovered the canvas that stood on an easel in the far corner. She studied it as an artist, as a lover of art and as a daughter.

The pastoral scene was not peaceful but vibrant. The brush strokes were jagged, almost fierce, so that the simple setting had a frenzied kind of motion. No, it didn't sit still waiting for admiration. It reached out and grabbed by the throat. It spoke of pain, of triumph, of agonies and joys. Her lips tilted because she had no choice. Van Gogh, she knew, could have done no better.

"Papa." When she turned her head, their eyes met in perfect understanding. "You are incomparable."

By seven, Kirby had not only resigned herself to their house guest, but was prepared to enjoy him. It was a basic trait of her character to enjoy what she had to put up with. As she poured vermouth into a glass, she realized she was looking forward to seeing him again, and to getting beneath the surface gloss. She had a feeling there might be some fascinating layers in Adam Haines.

She dropped into a high-backed chair, crossed her legs and tuned back in to her father's rantings. "It hates me, fails me at every turn. Why, Kirby?" He spread his hands in an impassioned plea. "I'm a good man, loving father, faithful friend."

"It's your attitude, Papa." She shrugged a shoulder as she drank. "Your emotional plane's faulty."

"There's nothing wrong with my emotional plane." Sniffing, Fairchild lifted his glass. "Not a damn thing wrong with it. It's the clay that's the problem, not me."

"You're cocky," she said simply. Fairchild made a sound like a train straining up a long hill.

"Cocky? *Cocky*? What the devil kind of word is that?"

"Adjective. Two syllables, five letters."

Adam heard the byplay as he walked toward the parlor. After a peaceful afternoon, he wondered if he was ready to cope with another bout of madness. Fairchild's voice was rising steadily, and as Adam paused in the doorway, he saw that the artist was up and shuffling again.

McIntyre was going to pay for this, Adam decided. He'd see to it that revenge was slow and thorough. When Fairchild pointed an accusing finger, Adam followed its direction. For an instant he was totally and uncharacteristically stunned.

The woman in the chair was so completely removed from the grimy, pigtailed chimney sweep, he found it nearly impossible to associate the two. She wore a thin silk dress as dark as her hair, draped the bodice and slit up the side to show off one smooth thigh. He studied her profile as she watched her father rant. It was gently molded, classically oval with a very subtle sweep of cheekbones. Her lips were full, curved now in just a hint of a smile. Without the soot, her skin was somewhere between gold and honey with a look of luxurious softness. Only the eyes reminded him this was the same woman—gray and large and amused. Lifting one hand, she tossed back the dark hair that covered her shoulders.

There was something more than beauty here. Adam knew he'd seen women with more beauty than Kirby Fairchild. But there was something... He groped for the word, but it eluded him.

As if sensing him, she turned—just her head. Again she stared at him, openly and with curiosity as her father continued his ravings. Slowly, very slowly, she smiled. Adam felt the power slam into him.

Sex, he realized abruptly. Kirby Fairchild exuded sex the way other women exuded perfume. Raw, unapologetic sex.

With a quick assessment typical of him, Adam decided she wouldn't be easy to deceive. However he handled Fairchild, he'd have to tread carefully with Fairchild's daughter. He decided as well that he already wanted to make love to her. He'd have to tread *very* carefully.

"Adam." She spoke in a soft voice that nonetheless carried over her father's shouting. "You see"

to have found us. Come in, Papa's nearly done."

~~"Done? I'm undone. And by my own child."~~ Fairchild moved toward Adam as he entered the room. "Cocky, she says. I ask you, is that a word for a daughter to use?"

"An aperitif?" Kirby asked. She rose with a fluid motion that Adam had always associated with tall, willowy women.

"Yes, thank you."

"Your room's agreeable?" His face wreathed in smiles again, Fairchild plopped down on the sofa.

"Very agreeable." The best way to handle it, Adam decided, was to pretend everything was normal. Pretenses were, after all, part of the game. "You have an...exceptional house."

"I'm fond of it." Content, Fairchild leaned back. "It was built near the turn of the century by a wealthy and insane English lord. You'll take Adam on a tour tomorrow, won't you, Kirby?"

"Of course." As she handed Adam a glass, she smiled into his eyes. Diamonds, cold as ice, glittered at her ears. He could feel the heat rise.

"I'm looking forward to it." Style, he concluded. Whether natural or developed, Miss Fairchild had style.

She smiled over the rim of her own glass, thinking precisely the same thing about Adam. "We aim to please."

A cautious man, Adam turned to Fairchild again. "Your art collection rivals a museum's. The Titian in my room is fabulous."

The Titian, Kirby thought in quick panic. How could she have forgotten it? What in God's name could she do about it? No difference. It made no difference, she reassured herself. It couldn't, because there was nothing to be done.

"The Hudson scene on the west wall—" Adam turned to her just as Kirby was telling herself to relax—"is that your work?"

"My... Oh, yes." She smiled as she remembered. She'd deal with the Titian at the first opportunity. "I'd forgotten that. It's sentimental, I'm afraid. I was home from school and had a crush on the chauffeur's son. We used to neck down there."

"He had buck teeth," Fairchild reminded her with a snort.

"Love conquers all," Kirby decided.

"The Hudson River bank is a hell of a place to lose your virginity," her father stated, suddenly severe. He swirled his drink, then downed it.

Enjoying the abrupt paternal disapproval, she decided to poke at it. "I didn't lose my virginity on the Hudson River bank." Amusement glimmered in her eyes. "I lost it in a Renault in Paris."

Love conquers all, Adam repeated silently.

"Dinner is served," Cards announced with dignity from the doorway.

"And about time, too." Fairchild leaped up. "A man could starve in his own home."

With a smile at her father's retreating back, Kirby offered Adam her hand. "Shall we go in?"

In the dining room, Fairchild's paintings dominated. An enormous Waterford chandelier showered light over mahogany and crystal. A massive stone fireplace thundered with flame and light. There were scents of burning wood, candles and roasted meat. There was Breton lace and silver. Still, his paintings dominated.

It appeared he had no distinct style. Art was his style, whether he depicted a sprawling, light-filled landscape or a gentle, shadowy portrait. Bold brush strokes or delicate ones, oils streaked on with a pallet knife or misty watercolors, he'd done them all. Magnificently.

As varied as his paintings were his opinions on other artists. While they sat at the long, laden table, Fairchild spoke of each artist personally, as if he'd been transported back in time and had developed relationships with Raphael, Goya, Manet.

His theories were intriguing, his knowledge was impressive. The artist in Adam responded to him. ~~The practical part, the part that had come to do a job, remained cautious. The opposing forces made him uncomfortable. His attraction to the woman across from him made him itchy.~~

He cursed McIntyre.

Adam decided the weeks with the Fairchilds might be interesting despite their eccentricities. He didn't care for the complications, but he'd allowed himself to be pulled in. For now, he'd sit back and observe, waiting for the time to act.

The information he had on them was sketchy. Fairchild was just past sixty, a widower of nearly twenty years. His art and his talent were no secrets, but his personal life was veiled. Perhaps due to temperament. Perhaps, Adam mused, due to necessity.

About Kirby, he knew almost nothing. Professionally, she'd kept a low profile until her first showing the year before. Though it had been an unprecedented success, both she and her father rarely sought publicity for their work. Personally, she was often written up in the glossies and tabloids as she jetted to Saint Moritz with this year's tennis champion or to Martinique with the current Hollywood golden boy. He knew she was twenty-seven and unmarried. Not for lack of opportunity, he concluded. She was the type of woman men would constantly pursue. In another century, duels would have been fought over her. Adam thought she'd have enjoyed the melodrama.

From their viewpoint, the Fairchilds knew of Adam only what was public knowledge. He'd been born under comfortable circumstances, giving him both the time and means to develop his talent. At the age of twenty, his reputation as an artist had begun to take root. A dozen years later, he was well established. He'd lived in Paris, then in Switzerland, before settling back in the States.

Still, during his twenties, he'd traveled often while painting. With Adam, his art had always come first. However, under the poised exterior, under the practicality and sophistication, there was a taste for adventure and a streak of cunning. So there had been McIntyre.

He'd just have to learn control, Adam told himself as he thought of McIntyre. He'd just have to learn how to say no, absolutely no. The next time Mac had an inspiration, he could go to hell with it.

When they settled back in the parlor with coffee and brandy, Adam calculated that he could finish the job in a couple of weeks. True, the place was immense, but there were only a handful of people in it. After his tour he'd know his way around well enough. Then it would be routine.

Satisfied, he concentrated on Kirby. At the moment she was the perfect hostess—charming, personable. All class and sophistication. She was, momentarily, precisely the type of woman who'd always appealed to him—well-groomed, well-mannered, intelligent, lovely. The room smelled of hothouse roses, wood smoke and her own tenuous scent, which seemed to blend the two. Adam began to relax with it.

“Why don't you play, Kirby?” Fairchild poured a second brandy for himself and Adam. “It helps clear my mind.”

“All right.” With a quick smile for Adam, Kirby moved to the far end of the room, running a finger over a wing-shaped instrument he'd taken for a small piano.

It took only a few notes for him to realize he'd been wrong. A harpsichord, he thought, astonished. The tinny music floated up. Bach. Adam recognized the composer and wondered if he'd fallen down the rabbit hole. No one—no one normal—played Bach on a harpsichord in a castle in the twentieth century.

Fairchild sat, his eyes half closed, one thin finger tapping, while Kirby continued to play. Her eyes were grave, her mouth was faintly moist and sober. Suddenly, without missing a note or moving another muscle, she sent Adam a slow wink. The notes flowed into Brahms. In that instant, Adam knew he was not only going to take her to bed. He was going to paint her.

“I've got it!” Fairchild leaped up and scrambled around the room. “I've got it. Inspiration. The

golden light!”

“Amen,” Kirby murmured.

“I’ll show you, you wicked child.” Grinning like one of his gargoyles, Fairchild leaned over the harpsichord. “By the end of the week, I’ll have a piece that’ll make anything you’ve ever done look like a doorstep.”

Kirby raised her brows and kissed him on the mouth. “Goat droppings.”

“You’ll eat your words,” he warned as he dashed out of the room.

“I sincerely hope not.” Rising, she picked up her drink. “Papa has a nasty competitive streak.” Which constantly pleased her. “More brandy?”

“Your father has a...unique personality.” An emerald flashed on her hand as she filled her glass again. He saw her hands were narrow, delicate against the hard glitter of the stone. But there’d be strength in them, he reminded himself as he moved to the bar to join her. Strength was indispensable to an artist.

“You’re diplomatic.” She turned and looked up at him. There was the faintest hint of rose on her lips. “You’re a very diplomatic person, aren’t you, Adam?”

He’d already learned not to trust the nunlike expression. “Under some circumstances.”

“Under most circumstances. Too bad.”

“Is it?”

Because she enjoyed personal contact during any kind of confrontation, she kept her eyes on his while she drank. Her irises were the purest gray he’d ever seen, with no hint of other colors. “I think you’d be a very interesting man if you didn’t bind yourself up. I believe you think everything through very carefully.”

“You see that as a problem?” His voice had cooled. “It’s a remarkable observation after such a short time.”

No, he wouldn’t be a bore, she decided, pleased with his annoyance. It was lack of emotion Kirby found tedious. “I could’ve come by it easily enough after an hour, but I’d already seen your work. Besides talent, you have self-control, dignity and a strong sense of the conventional.”

“Why do I feel as though I’ve been insulted?”

“Perceptive, too.” She smiled, that slow curving of lips that was fascinating to watch. When he answered it, she made up her mind quickly. She’d always found it the best way. Still watching him, she set down her brandy. “I’m impulsive,” she explained. “I want to see what it feels like.”

Her arms were around him, her lips on his, in a move that caught him completely off balance. He had a very brief impression of wood smoke and roses, of incredible softness and strength, before she drew back. The hint of a smile remained as she picked up her brandy and finished it off. She’d enjoyed the brief kiss, but she’d enjoyed shocking him a great deal more.

“Very nice,” she said with borderline approval. “Breakfast is from seven on. Just ring for Cards if you need anything. Good night.”

She turned to leave, but he took her arm. Kirby found herself whirled around. When their bodies collided, the surprise was hers.

“You caught me off guard,” he said softly. “I can do much better than nice.”

He took her mouth swiftly, molding her to him. Soft to hard, thin silk to crisp linen. There was something primitive in her taste, something...ageless. She brought to his mind the woods on an autumn evening—dark, pungent and full of small mysteries.

The kiss lengthened, deepened without plan on either side. Her response was instant, as her responses often were. It was boundless as they often were. She moved her hands from his shoulders, to his neck, to his face, as if she were already sculpting. Something vibrated between them.

For the moment, blood ruled. She was accustomed to it; he wasn’t. He was accustomed to reason

but he found none here. Here was heat and passion, needs and desires without questions or answers.

~~Ultimately, reluctantly, he drew back. Caution, because he was used to winning, was his way.~~

She could still taste him. Kirby wondered, as she felt his breath feather over her lips, how she'd misjudged him. Her head was spinning, something new for her. She understood heated blood, a fast pulse, but not the clouding of her mind.

Not certain how long he'd have the advantage, Adam smiled at her. "Better?"

"Yes." She waited until the floor became solid under her feet again. "That was quite an improvement." Like her father, she knew when to dodge and weave. She eased herself away and moved to the doorway. She'd have to do some thinking, and some reevaluating. "How long are you here, Adam?"

"Four weeks," he told her, finding it odd she didn't know.

"Do you intend to sleep with me before you go?"

Torn between amusement and admiration, he stared at her. He respected candor, but he wasn't used to it in quite so blunt a form. In this case, he decided to follow suit. "Yes."

She nodded, ignoring the little thrill that raced up her spine. Games—she liked to play them. To win them. Kirby sensed one was just beginning between her and Adam. "I'll have to think about that, won't I? Good night."

Shafts of morning light streamed in the long windows of the dining room and tossed their diamond pattern on the floor. Outside the trees were touched with September. Leaves blushed from salmon to crimson, the colors mixed with golds and rusts and the last stubborn greens. The lawn was alive with fall flowers and shrubs that seemed caught on fire. Adam had his back to the view as he studied Fairchild's paintings.

Again, Adam was struck with the incredible variety of styles Fairchild cultivated. There was a still life with the light and shadows of a Goya, a landscape with the frantic colors of a Van Gogh, a portrait with the sensitivity and grace of a Raphael. Because of its subject, it was the portrait that drew him.

A frail, dark-haired woman looked out from the canvas. There was an air of serenity, of patience about her. The eyes were the same pure gray as Kirby's, but the features were gentler, more even. Kirby's mother had been a rare beauty, a rare woman who looked like she'd had both strength and understanding. While she wouldn't have scrubbed at a hearth, she would have understood the daughter who did. That Adam could see this, be certain of it, without ever having met Rachel Fairchild, was only proof of Fairchild's genius. He created life with oil and brush.

The next painting, executed in the style of Gainsborough, was a full-length portrait of a young girl. Glossy black curls fell over the shoulders of a white muslin dress, tucked at the bodice, belled at the skirt. She wore white stockings and neat black buckle shoes. Touches of color came from the wide pink sash around her waist and the dusky roses she carried in a basket. But this was no demure *Pinky*.

The girl held her head high, tilting it with youthful arrogance. The half smile spoke of devilment while the huge gray eyes danced with both. No more than eleven or twelve, Adam calculated. Even then, Kirby must have been a handful.

"An adorable child, isn't she?" Kirby stood at the doorway as she had for five full minutes. She enjoyed watching and dissecting him as much as Adam had enjoyed dissecting the painting.

He stood very straight—prep school training, Kirby decided. Yet his hands were dipped comfortably in his pockets. Even in a casual sweater and jeans, there was an air of formality about him. Contrasts intrigued her, as a woman and as an artist.

Turning, Adam studied her as meticulously as he had her portrait. The day before, he'd seen her go from grubby urchin to sleek sophisticate. Today she was the picture of the bohemian artist. Her face was free of cosmetics and unframed as her hair hung in a ponytail down her back. She wore a shapeless black sweater, baggy, paint-streaked jeans and no shoes. To his annoyance, she continued to attract him.

She turned her head and, by accident or design, the sunlight fell over her profile. In that instant, she was breathtaking. Kirby sighed as she studied her own face. "A veritable angel."

"Apparently her father knew better."

She laughed, low and rich. His calm, dry voice pleased her enormously. "He did at that, but not everyone sees it." She was glad he had, simply because she appreciated a sharp eye and a clever mind. "Have you had breakfast?"

He relaxed. She'd turned again so that the light no longer illuminated her face. She was just an attractive, friendly woman. "No, I've been busy being awed."

"Oh, well, one should never be awed on an empty stomach. It's murder on the digestion." After pressing a button, she linked her arm through his and led him to the table. "After we've eaten, I'll take you through the house."

“I’d like that.” Adam took the seat opposite her. She wore no fragrance this morning but soap—clean and sexless. It aroused nonetheless.

A woman clumped into the room. She had a long bony face, small mud-brown eyes and an unfortunate nose. Her graying hair was scraped back and bundled at the nape of her neck. The deep furrows in her brow indicated her pessimistic nature. Glancing over, Kirby smiled.

“Good morning, Tulip. You’ll have to send a tray up to Papa, he won’t budge out of the tower.” She drew a linen napkin from its ring. “Just toast and coffee for me, and don’t lecture. I’m not getting any taller.”

After a grumbling disapproval, Tulip turned to Adam. His order of bacon and eggs received the same grumble before she clumped back out again.

“Tulip?” Adam cocked a brow as he turned to Kirby.

“Fits beautifully, doesn’t it?” Lips sober, eyes amused, she propped her elbows on the table and dropped her face in her hands. “She’s really a marvel as far as organizing. We’ve had a running battle over food for fifteen years. Tulip insists that if I eat, I’ll grow. After I hit twenty, I figured I’d proved her wrong. I wonder why adults insist on making such absurd statements to children.”

The robust young maid who’d served dinner the night before brought in coffee. She showered sunbeam smiles over Adam.

“Thank you, Polly.” Kirby’s voice was gentle, but Adam caught the warning glance and the maid’s quick blush.

“Yes, ma’am.” Without a backward glance, Polly scurried from the room. Kirby poured the coffee herself.

“Our Polly is very sweet,” she began. “But she has a habit of becoming, ah, a bit too matey with two-thirds of the male population.” Setting down the silver coffee urn, Kirby smiled across the table. “If you’ve a taste for slap and tickle, Polly’s your girl. Otherwise, I wouldn’t encourage her. I’ve even had to warn her off Papa.”

The picture of the lusty young Polly with the Pucklike Fairchild zipped into Adam’s mind. It lingered there a moment with perfect clarity until he roared with laughter.

Well, well, well, Kirby mused, watching him. A man who could laugh like that had tremendous potential. She wondered what other surprises he had tucked away. Hopefully she’d discover quite a few during his stay.

Picking up the cream pitcher, he added a stream to his coffee. “You have my word, I’ll resist temptation.”

“She’s built stupendously,” Kirby observed as she sipped her coffee black.

“Really?” It was the first time she’d seen his grin—quick, crooked and wicked. “I hadn’t noticed.”

Kirby studied him while the grin did odd things to her nervous system. Surprise again, she told herself, then reached for her coffee. “I’ve misjudged you, Adam,” she murmured. “A definite miscalculation. You’re not precisely what you seem.”

He thought of the small transmitter locked in his dignified briefcase. “Is anyone?”

“Yes.” She gave him a long and completely guileless look. “Yes, some people are precisely what they seem, for better or worse.”

“You?” He asked because he suddenly wanted to know badly who and what she was. Not for McIntyre, not for the job, but for himself.

She was silent a moment as a quick, ironic smile moved over her face. He guessed, correctly, that she was laughing at herself. “What I seem to be today is what I am—today.” With one of her lightning changes, she threw off the mood. “Here’s breakfast.”

They talked a little as they ate, inconsequential things, polite things that two relative strangers

speaking about over a meal. They'd both been raised to handle such situations—small talk, intelligent give-and-take that skimmed over the surface and meant absolutely nothing.

But Kirby found herself aware of him, more aware than she should have been. More aware than she wanted to be.

Just what kind of man was he, she wondered as he sprinkled salt on his eggs. She'd already concluded he wasn't nearly as conventional as he appeared to be—or perhaps as he thought himself to be. There was an adventurer in there, she was certain. Her only annoyance stemmed from the fact that it had taken her so long to see it.

She remembered the strength and turbulence of the kiss they'd shared. He'd be a demanding lover. And a fascinating one. Which meant she'd have to be a great deal more careful. She no longer believed he'd be easily managed. Something in his eyes...

Quickly she backed off from that line of thought. The point was, she had to manage him. Finishing off her coffee, she sent up a quick prayer that her father had the Van Gogh well concealed.

"The tour begins from bottom to top," she said brightly. Rising, she held out her hand. "The dungeons are marvelously morbid and damp, but I think we'll postpone that in respect of your cashmere sweater."

"Dungeons?" He accepted her offered arm and walked from the room with her.

"We don't use them now, I'm afraid, but if the vibrations are right, you can still hear a few moans and rattles." She said it so casually, he nearly believed her. That, he realized, was one of her biggest talents. Making the ridiculous sound plausible. "Lord Wickerton, the original owner, was quite dastardly."

"You approve?"

"Approve?" She weighed this as they walked. "Perhaps not, but it's easy to be intrigued by things that happened nearly a hundred years ago. Evil can become romantic after a certain period of time, don't you think?"

"I've never looked at it quite that way."

"That's because you have a very firm grip on what's right and what's wrong."

He stopped and, because their arms were linked, Kirby stopped beside him. He looked down at her with an intensity that put her on guard. "And you?"

She opened her mouth, then closed it again before she could say something foolish. "Let's just say I'm flexible. You'll enjoy this room," she said, pushing open a door. "It's rather sturdy and staid."

Taking the insult in stride, Adam walked through with her. For nearly an hour they wandered from room to room. It occurred to him that he'd underestimated the sheer size of the place. Halls snaked and angled, rooms popped up where they were least expected, some tiny, some enormous. Unless he got very, very lucky, Adam concluded, the job would take him a great deal of time.

Pushing open two heavy, carved doors, Kirby led him into the library. It had two levels and was the size of an average two-bedroom apartment. Faded Persian rugs were scattered over the floor. The far wall was glassed in the small diamond panes that graced most of the windows in the house. The rest of the walls were lined floor to ceiling with books. A glance showed Chaucer standing beside D. H. Lawrence. Stephen King leaned against Milton. There wasn't even the pretense of organization, but there was the rich smell of leather, dust and lemon oil.

The books dominated the room and left no space for paintings. But there was sculpture.

Adam crossed the room and lifted a figure of a stallion carved in walnut. Freedom, grace, movement, seemed to vibrate in his hands. He could almost hear the steady heartbeat against his palm.

There was a bronze bust of Fairchild on a high, round stand. The artist had captured the puckishness, the energy, but more, she'd captured a gentleness and generosity Adam had yet to see.

In silence, he wandered the room, examining each piece as Kirby looked on. He made her

nervous, and she struggled against it. Nerves were something she felt rarely, and never acknowledged. Her work had been looked at before, she reminded herself. What else did an artist want but—— recognition? She linked her fingers and remained silent. His opinion hardly mattered, she told herself, then moistened her lips.

He picked up a piece of marble shaped into a roaring mass of flames. Though the marble was white, the fire was real. Like every other piece he'd examined, the mass of marble flames was physical. Kirby had inherited her father's gift for creating life.

For a moment, Adam forgot all the reasons he was there and thought only of the woman and the artist. "Where did you study?"

The flip remark she'd been prepared to make vanished from her mind the moment he turned and looked at her with those calm brown eyes. "École des Beaux-Arts formally. But Papa taught me always."

He turned the marble in his hands. Even a pedestrian imagination would've felt the heat. Adam could all but smell it. "How long have you been sculpting?"

"Seriously? About four years."

"Why the hell have you only had one exhibition? Why are you burying it here?"

Anger. She lifted her brow at it. She'd wondered just what sort of a temper he'd have, but she hadn't expected to see it break through over her work. "I'm having another in the spring," she said evenly. "Charles Larson's handling it." Abruptly uncomfortable, she shrugged. "Actually, I was pressured into having the other. I wasn't ready."

"That's ridiculous." He held up the marble as if she hadn't seen it before. "Absolutely ridiculous."

Why should it make her feel vulnerable to have her work in the palm of his hand? Turning away Kirby ran a finger down her father's bronze nose. "I wasn't ready," she repeated, not sure why, when she never explained herself to anyone, she was explaining such things to him. "I had to be sure, you see. There are those who say—who'll always say—that I rode on Papa's coattails. That's to be expected." She blew out a breath, but her hand remained on the bust of her father. "I had to know differently. *I had to know.*"

He hadn't expected sensitivity, sweetness, vulnerability. Not from her. But he'd seen it in her work, and he'd heard it in her voice. It moved him, every bit as much as her passion had. "Now you do."

She turned again, and her chin tilted. "Now I do." With an odd smile, she crossed over and took the marble from him. "I've never told anyone that before—not even Papa." When she looked up, her eyes were quiet, soft and curious. "I wonder why it should be you."

He touched her hair, something he'd wanted to do since he'd seen the morning sun slant on it. "I wonder why I'm glad it was."

She took a step back. There was no ignoring a longing so quick and so strong. There was no forgetting caution. "Well, we'll have to think about it, I suppose. This concludes the first part of our tour." She set the marble down and smiled easily. "All comments and questions are welcome."

He'd dipped below the surface, Adam realized, and she didn't care for it. That he understood. "Your home's...overwhelming," he decided, and made her smile broaden into a grin. "I'm disappointed there isn't a moat and dragon."

"Just try leaving your vegetables on your plate and you'll see what a dragon Tulip can be. As to the moat..." She started to shrug an apology, then remembered. "Toadstools, how could I have forgotten?"

Without waiting for an answer, she grabbed his hand and dashed back to the parlor. "No moat," she told him as she went directly to the fireplace. "But there are secret passageways."

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