

Tina Donahue's

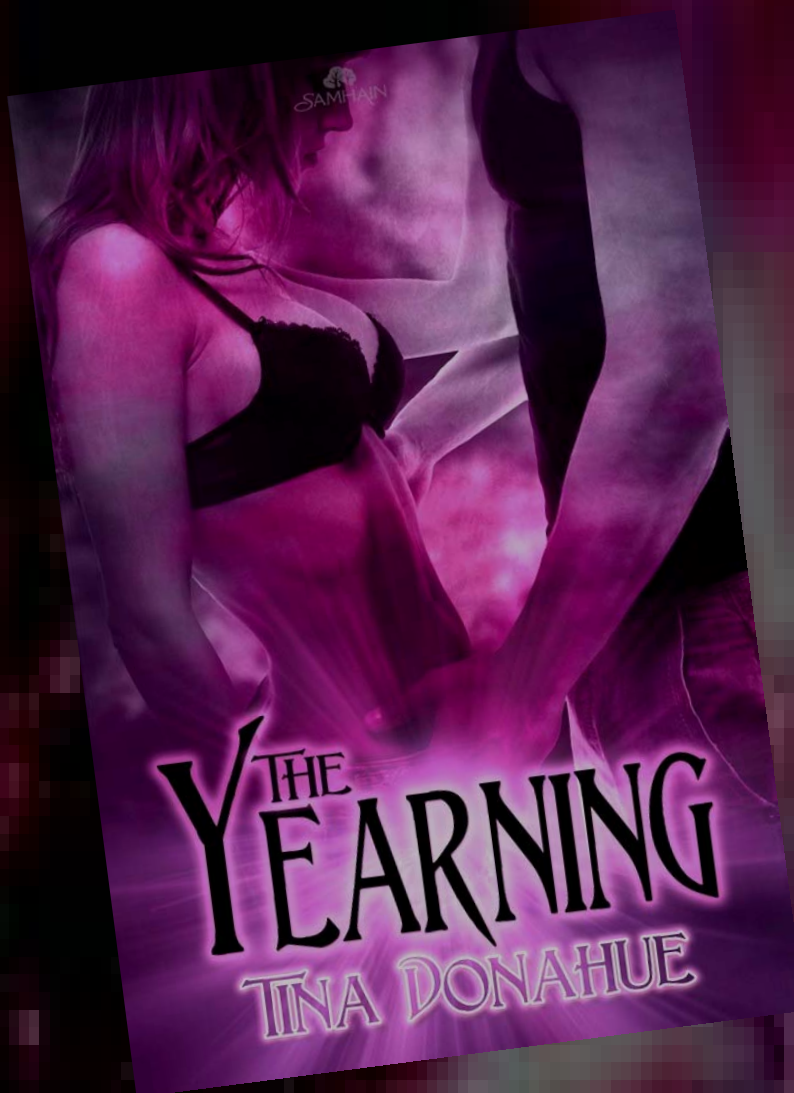
May 2011 - TinaDonahue.com

Heat with Heart



One Step Closer to Love

The Yearning



NOMINATED FOR BOOK OF THE WEEK
WHIPPED CREAM REVIEWS



FIVE LIPS



"Like your favorite mixed drink, The Yearning is the perfect blend of unbridled sex and sweet tenderness."

Sal - TwoLips Reviews

4.5 CHERRIES
WHIPPED CREAM REVIEWS

"My friends are going to love this book."

Myrtle - Whipped Cream

Cursed by a jealous rival over a man, Jasmine's conventional world spirals into one of insatiable desire, forcing her to seek pleasure no matter the danger. Haunting Key West's nightlife, she meets Mike, a commanding lover with psychic power and a guarded past. Desperately craving his potent masculinity, she lures then imprisons him so he's always available to feed her passion. Not about to be any woman's sex slave, Mike uses his power to secure his freedom, capturing her instead. Moved by her underlying vulnerability, he's determined to find the source of the curse and defeat it. Under his masterful rule, her ravenous yearning evolves into rapture as she surrenders to his hunger, her darkest needs, and the emotional connection that lies beyond.

<http://store.samhainpublishing.com/the-yearning-p-6248.html>

SAMHAIN - AVAILABLE NOW - TOP TEN BESTSELLER

Sensual Stranger

BOOK OF THE YEAR 2010 - EROTIC CATEGORY - BLUE MOON REVIEWS

Into his life she came—wanting...willing...wanton

It's no ordinary morning when Toni Starr arrives at Zach's garage. Flat broke, with a past she won't share, Toni's instantly taken by such a potently virile man. Direct and unashamed, she tells him she's a motorcycle performance artist who needs work and knows motors. Zach knows women, and Toni's unlike any he's met. Lushly sensuous, exceedingly assured, she'd easily be his match in business and bed. A provocative challenge that stirs him as nothing has since losing his wife. A chance he's reluctant to take, offering no more than a month's employment, then she'll have to be on her way. The hours tick by. Each word and glance intensifies their denied yet escalating desire, forcing them to surrender to passion and Toni's need for Zach's dominance. Driven by carnal hunger, conquered by yearning, they face the unforeseen truth of Toni's past and a future neither of them expected.



FOUR STARS - ROMANTIC TIMES

“Sexy and full of so much sexual tension and scrumptious emotional cat and mouse it is hard to put down.”

Brande - [Book Junkie](#)



“This story is incredible.”

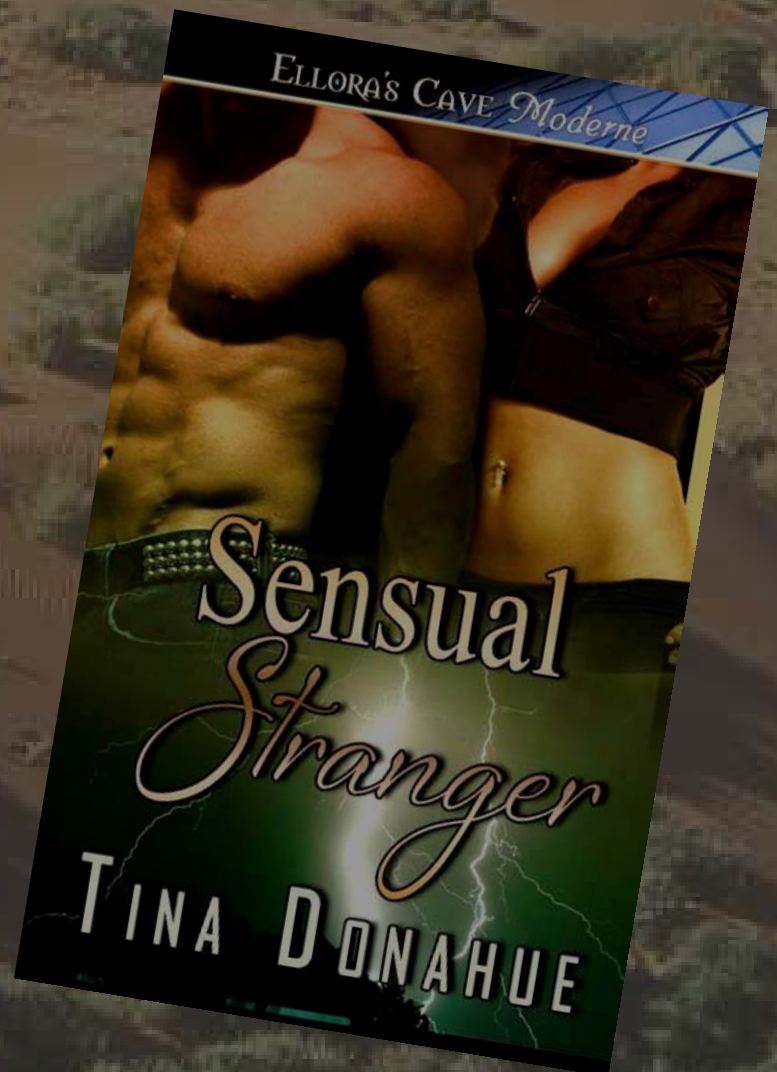
Dahlia - [Whipped Cream Reviews](#)



FIVE SIREN STONES

“The chemistry between Zach and Toni is mesmerizing.”

Stacey - [Siren Book Reviews](#)



Nominated for Book of the Week - WC Reviews
Nominated for Book of the Month - Siren Reviews

Buy link: <http://www.jasminejade.com/ps-8932-50-sensual-stranger.aspx>



IT'S WHAT'S INSIDE THAT COUNTS

MAY

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Owned by one man. . .loved by another

FOUR STARS - ROMANTIC TIMES



FIVE LIPS - RECOMMENDED READ



"From the first pages of *IN THIS ARMS* by Tina Donahue I was captivated, more like ensnared, actually commandeering every fiber of my heart and taking it for one heck of a wild ride!"

Brande - Book Junkie

"If you are looking for a book with an emotional punch, that has enough twists and turns to keep you guessing, then I highly recommend *In His Arms* by Tina Donahue."

Lillie - RR&H Novel Thoughts & Book Talk

"*In His Arms* is at times dark and raw. Tina has delivered a story that not many authors, especially those who write romance, would think of writing. This is one e-book I recommend everyone download."

Kate - Babbling About Books and More!



FIVE HEARTS - THE ROMANCE STUDIO



FIVE TEA CUPS!

HAPPILY EVER AFTER REVIEWS

Abducted and delivered into sexual slavery, Lori has surrendered her will in order to survive. For more than a decade, she's been known as Summer, a lovely submissive, her owner's possession until he gives her to his newest lieutenant, a mysterious man called RJ. Commanding and virile, RJ dominates without cruelty and possesses without threat, engendering a mixture of safety and passion. In his strong arms, Summer enjoys carnal pleasure she's never known and tenderness she's craved. In his heated gaze, she experiences a sense of recognition she doesn't immediately understand until it proves dangerous in a way she could never have imagined. Bound by desire and their growing love, RJ traverses the shadowy world of human trafficking, risking all for Summer's freedom only to learn she harbors a fateful secret that threatens to tear her from him, leading to an irrevocable event that risks both their lives.

Lush Velvet Nights

FINALIST - EPIC 2011 AWARDS

When wanton desires
& love demand all. . .

During the day, Adriana's a lonely corporate heiress, helming a supermarket empire. At night, she hires escorts, scripting provocative fantasies of kidnapping, lust, submission and endless longing. It's all she has to excite her until she meets Nathan Wynn. Tall, blond and muscular—like a modern-day Viking—Nathan's a labor relations attorney representing Adriana's union employees. His imposing presence intensifies her basest desires. When he protects her from an escort he believes is an attacker, she knows he's wonderfully dominant and unrestrained. Fascinated by Adriana's underlying sensuality, Nathan brings her to his secluded mountain estate, determined she submit fully to his hunger. At a gentleman's club, he makes certain she denies him nothing. Engaging in a seductive sexual journey, Nathan's caught off-guard by his stunning need for Adriana. An attraction he fears because of past events in his life. A growing emotional connection she will not let him deny.

FIVE SIREN STONES - SIREN BOOK REVIEWS



REVIEWER TOP PICK

"...a must-read!"

Kim Early
The Pagan & The Pen

FIVE ANGELS - FALLEN ANGEL REVIEWS



"Lush Velvet Nights is a winner." - Bella

FIVE STARS - JERR



"OMG! Lush Velvet Nights is a great read!"



A Word from Tina



Hey all!

It's been another busy month for me.

First, I've contracted another contemporary erotic romance with Ellora's Cave—whoot! The title is *Take Me Away*. The story involves an ex-football player (an absolute hunk if I should say so myself), who's fled the downside of fame for a little R&R and sanity. At least until an actress, who's having her own problems with the paparazzi, comes into his life. The moment these two hook up in his secluded cabin sparks fly. Their intimate moments are frequent and oh-so-delicious. Definitely *heat with heart*.

As soon as I have a release date and a cover, I'll let you know.

Next, I was asked by Romantic Times to blog on their site about my award-winning erotic romance *Sensual Stranger*. To have them invite me was an absolute surprise and an honor.

Looks like I'll also be blogging at the RomCon blog sometime in June (another surprise invite!). Still working out the details, but will let you know as soon as the date is finalized.

And lastly, I'm working on another erotic paranormal, the hottest I've ever done. Can't say too much more about it than that, except this one has two hot guys (okay, just use your imagination on that one). :)

See you all next month!

Tina



Hey, Tina -

Just love your work. Just finished with *In His Arms* not long ago and I loved it. Still have to turn the fan on when I think about that book. Now, I'm waiting to get my hands on *Sensual Stranger*.

Terra

Terra!

Thanks so much for your comments. I'm so glad you enjoyed *In His Arms*. I loved writing that book and still think of the characters.

Tina

Hi, Tina -

I'm a French fan and I write reviews for a website. Each year we organize the Blue Moon Awards and for 2010 you're the winner. *Sensual Stranger* is the best erotic romance book for us.

Callixta

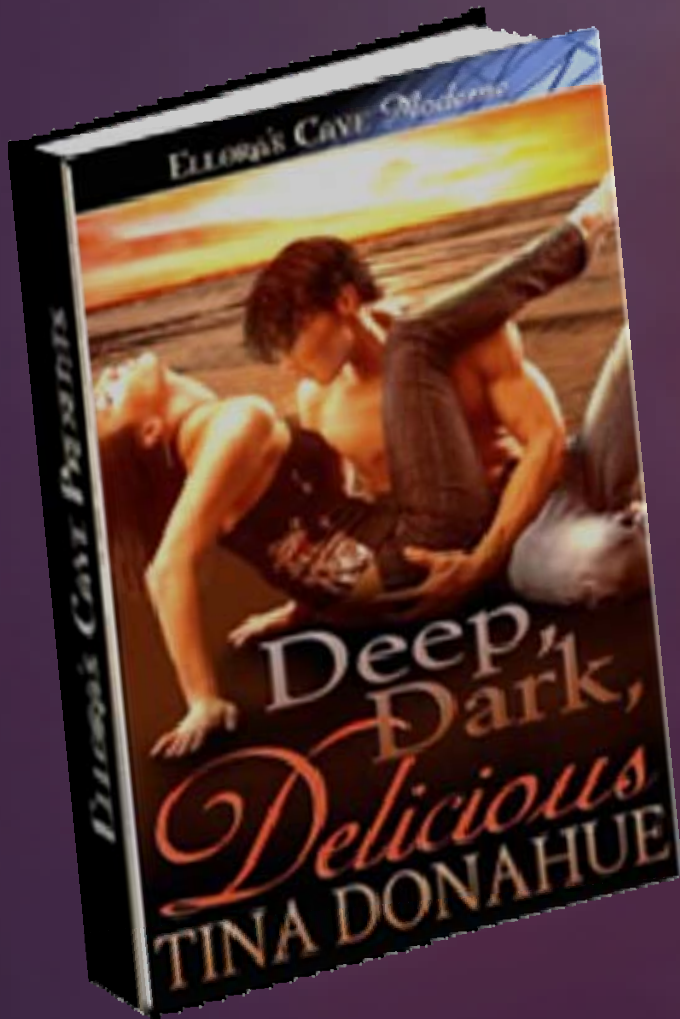
Callixta -

Wow!! I am so honored!! Thanks for choosing *Sensual Stranger*!

Tina

***At the worst time in her life. . .
she meets a man who'll turn her world upside down***

FINALIST - EPIC 2011 AWARDS



Eden DeCarlo may have narrowly lost Miami's best chef competition and the prize money she desperately needs, but she has caught the eye of dangerously virile Rafael Zayas, one of the judges and a wealthy restaurateur. Despite her vow not to let any man derail her life, Eden's captivated by Rafe's imposing masculinity, then challenged by the business deal he offers. He'll invest in her new venture if, for one month, she can satisfy his culinary expectations and the sexual attraction they both feel.

Dominant and unashamed, Rafe knows what he wants when it comes to carnal pleasure and will spare no seduction to have Eden in all the ways he demands – naked, wanting, submissive. Within thirty days, he will teach her the delights of yielding to passion, relinquishing all control to him and fulfilling her deepest, darkest and most delicious desires.

A wickedly sensual feast. . .4 Stars Romantic Times

BUY LINK: <http://www.jasminejade.com/ps-8080-50-deep-dark-delicious.aspx>

FIVE STARS - REVIEWER'S TOP PICK - NOR (Night Owl Reviews)

A must read for those who love an emotional journey for both the hero and heroine. " [Whipped Cream](#) - 4.5/5 rating
Nominated for BOOK OF THE WEEK

"This delicious tale did more than whet my appetite. . ." [Seriously Reviewed](#) - 17.5/20 rating

". . .a sinfully delicious and erotic story with two highly passionate lovers . . ." [Book Junkies](#) - 4.5/5 rating

"I was sad when this story ended. . .it's a story you must read." [Rebecca Rose](#) - 5 Blue Roses

Water Cooler (Happenings & Other Stuff)



WHERE I'LL BE & EVENTS ON MY BLOG IN MAY

<http://www.tinadonahue.com/blog/>

- MAY 1 - TIM SMITH BLOGGING AT MY SITE**
- MAY 2 - I'M BLOGGING AT PENNY EHRENKRANZ'S SITE**
- MAY 3 - MICHELE ZURLO BLOGGING AT MY SITE**
- MAY 4 - ANITRA LYNN MCLEOD BLOGGING AT MY SITE**
- MAY 5 - GEM SIVAD BLOGGING AT MY SITE**
- MAY 6 - I'M BLOGGING AT ROMANCE BOOKS 'R US
SHERMAINE WILLIAMS BLOGGING AT MY SITE**
- MAY 8 - JEAN HART STEWART BLOGGING AT MY SITE**
- MAY 10 - KELLY THOMPSON BLOGGING AT MY SITE**
- MAY 11 - ADELE DUBOIS BLOGGING AT MY SITE**
- MAY 12 - BERENGARIA BROWN BLOGGING AT MY SITE**
- MAY 13 - TARA NINA BLOGGING AT MY SITE**
- MAY 14 - LILY HARLEM BLOGGING AT MY SITE**
- MAY 15 - LISABET SARAI BLOGGING AT MY SITE**
- MAY 16 - I'M BLOGGING AT SWEET 'N SEXY DIVAS
MARY ABSHIRE BLOGGING AT MY SITE**
- MAY 17 - AMBER SKYZE BLOGGING AT MY SITE**
- MAY 18 - JENNIFER JAKES BLOGGING AT MY SITE**
- MAY 19 - DIANNE HARTSOCK BLOGGING AT MY SITE**
- MAY 20 - PHOEBE CONN BLOGGING AT MY SITE**
- MAY 21 - TONY-PAUL DE VISSAGE BLOGGING AT MY SITE**
- MAY 24 - COURTNEY BREAZILE BLOGGING AT MY SITE**
- MAY 25 - DANIELLE MONSCH BLOGGING AT MY SITE**

She's wanted him for years. . .

Now's her chance to make her wicked fantasies come true

FINALIST - 2011 EPIC AWARDS



When tall, dark and delicious Adam Farrell crosses Danni's radar at a trade show in Vegas, it's not lust at first sight. He's been the star of her wicked fantasies for a while, pleasuring her in acts of domination and submission that leave her breathless. Aching for his masterful touch, believing she'll never have it, Danni indulges in a public sex act Adam alone witnesses. What follows is a night of wild and unrestrained passion in his powerful arms. It's only the beginning.

An undisclosed business deal has turned Adam from competitor to Danni's new boss. His hunger for her is absolute and he'll make her fantasies seem tame as he takes her in ways she never imagined – whenever he wants, wherever he desires.

Seduced by Adam's plan to mix exquisite control with adoration, Danni's swept into a sensual adventure she can't resist. Until corporate politics intrude and she learns what Adam's been hiding to protect her. . .a secret he's long feared will tear them apart.

PRAISE FOR ADORED

Four stars - *Romantic Times* - Second Place Winner - NEC RWA Contest

“...the fantasy scenes are that hot and the real love scenes between Danny and Adam are even hotter. A truly beautiful love story.” Lilly – [I Do Not Want to Wait, I Want the Book Now](#)

“Fantastic!” Brande – [My Foolish Wisdom](#)

“I loved this!” Angelika Devlyn - [Alternative-Read.com](#)

“...erotic & imaginative.” Stacey Krug - [Siren Book Reviews](#) - FIVE SIREN STONES

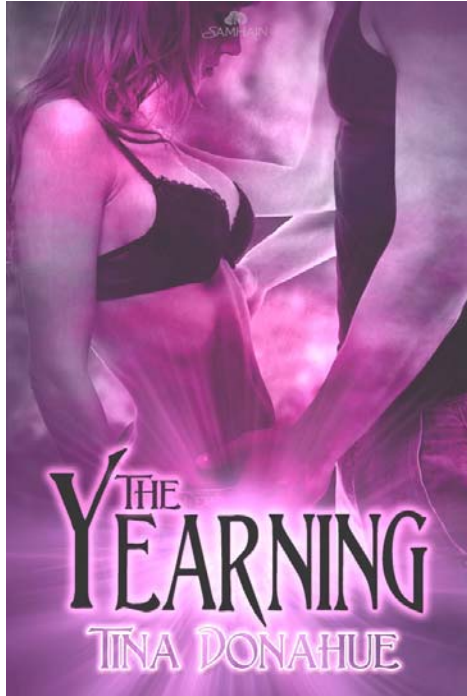
ELLORA'S CAVE – MODERNE AVAILABLE NOW IN EBOOK AND PRINT



Free Reads

THE YEARNING - CHAPTER FOUR EXCERPT

FINALLY AND FOREVER - CHAPTER THREE EXCERPT



THE YEARNING

Mike didn't have long to enjoy it. All too soon, Jasmine deserted his mouth and stood. "Your bed awaits."

Her enticing offer reminded him of a story he'd read in high school: Homer's *Odyssey*, specifically, the Sirens' song to sailors. As Mike recalled, the sea nymphs' sweet voices tempted mariners to shore as long as the men could get safely past the boulders. The poor jerks never did. Climbing her staircase seemed as daunting, given his fatigue. Not that he'd tell her. With meager energy and grace, Mike groaned inwardly as he got to his feet and scrubbed his face with his hands.

Jasmine ran her nails lightly down his backbone.

God. Shivers feathered outward from his spine to his fingers and toes. Heels leaving the floor, his legs wavered.

She looped her arm around his waist, draped his arm over her shoulder and placed his hand on her ungodly soft breast. "You ready?" Not waiting for an answer, she pushed to her toes and suckled his neck.

A tingling warmth reached parts of his body he didn't know existed. He huffed. "Let's go."

She headed toward the steps. He did not. Though beat, he possessed far more strength than she and encountered little difficulty turning them both toward her office.

Jasmine tightened her arm around his waist in a foolish attempt to hold him back. "What are you doing?"

Mike stopped and finished his yawn. "Getting my Glock." Having it in her office while they were down here was one thing. Leaving it one floor away as he dozed in her bedroom was quite another.

She shook her head. "What's a glock?"

"My pistol."

"No. Why? Nothing's going to happen to it on my desk."

"Something might, if anyone breaks in here."

"No one's ever broken in here. This is a safe neighborhood."

He rested his head against hers, closed his eyes and failed to inject any energy into

his voice. "Then why'd you tell me to park my bike in your garage?"

Her body stiffened as though she recalled her earlier words.

"See what I mean?"

"No, I don't. I wanted it in the garage so no one would hit it. My neighbors are elderly. They don't see as well as they used to."

If they were that old with bad eyesight, they probably didn't cruise the streets at midnight, now did they? Rather than point out the obvious, he stayed firm on his gun. "Whether your place is safe or not, there's always a first time and I don't intend to take a chance on either of us getting hurt. I'd feel better having it at my side."

She shrank away. "You're going to wear it in bed?"

He warned himself not to laugh at her adorable naiveté. "I'll put it on your nightstand. You do have one, don't you?"

"I have a dresser. We could put it in one of the drawers."

He pictured it beneath her underwear, if she owned any. Planting a small kiss on her forehead, he blinked repeatedly until he got his lids to stay up. "We'll pick the spot together, how's that?" Unwilling to give her time to debate it, he broke her embrace and dragged his tired body to her office.

She grabbed his wrist with both hands, stopping him from opening the door. "I'll get it. Wait here."

He used the muraled wall for support, overcome by another yawn before she returned. This time, unlike the last, she held the holstered gun in one hand and as far as she could from herself

"Careful." He eased the barrel to one side so it no longer pointed at his groin. Taking the pistol from her and lowering it to thigh level, he crushed her wavy hair in his left hand, using it as an anchor to keep her to him. "Thanks." Intent on showing his appreciation, and to erase the anxiety on her face, he dropped his head to her neck.

She tilted her head to grant him full contact, her fingers flicking down his throat. Her bewitching touch was nearly more than he could manage. His convulsive swallows bobbed his Adam's apple.

He suckled her neck one last time and got his head up, despite how heavy it felt. "Ready to go upstairs?"

Renewed passion showed in her dazed eyes. "Oh yeah."

He liked her enthusiasm and intended to reward her for it after a ten-minute nap. Like a good boy, he allowed her to pull him up the stairs. On the fifth step, he joked, "Does this stairway ever end?"

"We only have eight more steps to go. Not bad at all."

He turned his head so she wouldn't see his eyes rolling. She took the next step. He didn't.

Decorating the wall were numerous paintings, the kind you'd see at one of those

starving artists sales advertised on late-night TV. The uninspired landscapes and portraits didn't match the elegance of the rest of this place. Nor did the frames fit the spaces they occupied. The powder-blue paint was a shade lighter around their edges, as if something larger had been there previously. "What happened to the original paintings that hung here?"

She halted on the next step. Still holding his hand, her arm remained outstretched. "Those are the originals."

He lifted his face. She regarded the paintings. Given how her brows drew together, he knew she saw what he had.

He kept his voice mild. "All right, so there weren't any other landscapes or portraits there before these. How about photos?"

Her head swung to him. She opened her mouth and closed it without comment.

He wondered why it was such a big deal. He'd simply been curious and guessed she'd had money problems, which required her to sell the original paintings to pay the property taxes on this place. Only now, he realized there had been photos in these spots. So why take them down? The words were out of his mouth before he could stop them. "Did you have pictures of you and your parents here?"

Her face and chest flushed, darkening her rich skin.

"Hey, it's okay," he said, going up the steps to her. "If the pictures caused you more pain, there was no reason to keep them there."

Tears brimmed in her eyes. "I waited years to put them away. I just couldn't stand the memories any longer." She dropped her head and shook it.

He gave her a moment, then spoke as gently as he could. "Forgive me for having asked. None of my business. Maybe you should start telling me to shut up."

"No. It's all right." She ran the back of her hand over her eyes and smiled. More tears spilled from her lids.

Mike thumbed them from her cheeks, wishing he'd kept his stupid questions to himself. For a man who didn't like anyone prying into his personal life, he sure as hell was crossing the line when it came to her private stuff. His only excuse was he was as interested in her as she seemed to be in him. "You're sure?"

"Yeah." She covered his hand and brought it to her mouth, kissing his knuckles. "Let's get you to bed so I can throw together a snack. By the way, I have Corona and Heineken. Is that all right instead of Dos Equis?"

He considered asking her to make some industrial-strength coffee but didn't want her questioning his stamina. "Whatever you have is great. I'm not picky. Just make certain you return as quickly as possible."

Her voice hushed. "I couldn't stay away even if I tried."

He liked the way she talked.

She brought him to the top of the stairs and flipped a switch. Quaint overhead lights shaped like tulips in full bloom ran the length of the spacious hall and offered puddles of illumination. Brass vases dotted the walls. Philodendrons dangled over the shiny metal rims, their waxy green leaves creeping halfway to the floor. In between the vegetation were a variety of elegantly designed antique mirrors and a few accent tables, along with two doors on the left, two on the right and one straight ahead.

A man could get lightheaded with this bounty. "Are all of those bedrooms?"

"Four are. One's a hallway bath. Only my bedroom's in use," she added quickly, as though she'd guessed his intent in asking. "Materials for my business take up the other rooms, including the one behind us." She held his hand in both of hers and backed down the hall, stopping beneath one of the tulip light fixtures, which shone over the largest mirror. "There." She gestured to it with her head.

He allowed himself a moment to appreciate her nudity and jewelry. The diamonds swayed beneath her navel, pointing the way to heaven. *In a sec*, he told himself, soon as he rested a bit. Glancing over, he took in the mirror—a heavy-looking sucker with a partially naked woman on the right side, her arms arranged as if she were holding it. Her bare breasts tilted upward. The lavender cloth draping her hips flowed past her legs. "Nice. But you're definitely better looking."

Jasmine pushed her shoulder into his and laughed, a delightfully youthful sound, so different from her former gloom.

"Don't look at the nymph," she said. "Look at you." Her voice fell to a whisper. "You're awesome, just like I said."

Brows lifted, he glimpsed at his tangled hair, beard-shadowed cheeks, and barely opened eyes. He'd seen more attractive cadaver shots. "Damn. You're absolutely right." He blew himself a kiss.

She laughed recklessly and backed up even faster, pulling him to the end of the hall.

The door opened on a large, high-ceilinged room. Her bed, a queen-sized four-poster in a dark wood, possibly cherry, was dressed in frilly white linens and bathed in moonlight. Three windows stretched from the floor to the ceiling. Each wore gauzy white tie-back curtains. On either side of the bed were nightstands with no end of figurines, comparable to the mirror nymph, and brass lamps with shades constructed of pink seashells. To the left stood a large cheval mirror, positioned so it captured what went on in the bed. To the right, a bulky dresser dominated, presumably another antique like the bed and the downstairs desk. Larger figurines stood atop it. Hanging from the second handle, on a padded hangar, was an old-fashioned corset. The moon revealed its blue-green brocade and silvery laces.

Jasmine released his hand and went to the dresser, her fingers moving down the garment's crisscrossed front. "I'll wear it for you when I come back." She smiled se-

ductively and crooked her forefinger, gesturing him closer.

He approached slowly, and not only because of his two-orgasm exhaustion. She'd given him far too much to look at. His attention seesawed between her incredible body jewelry and the decadent corset. He imagined her lush curves confined by it, her full breasts plumped and threatening to spill over the top, the cloth kissing the flare of her hips, the front dipping to her cleft. "Put it on now."

"After your nap." She settled her palm on the side of his face, offering a month's worth of comfort with the simple endearment. His lids sank. She ran her thumb over his lashes, ruffling them. Her throaty voice enchanted. "You can lace me into it. We'll pretend I'm your sex slave, obedient to your will. At your command, I'll feed you. When you're full, you'll take me as a master should, using every part of my body for your pleasure. How does that sound?"

His heart pumped brutally, driving most of his blood toward his weary rod. He parted his lids. "Are you serious?"

"You don't like to play games in bed?"

"Oh, honey, that's not a game. That's—" He stopped, unable to find the appropriate word or any word. If she kept amazing him like this, he wasn't certain what he'd do.

Yeah, right, his thoughts mocked. He'd play any game she liked. If she wanted him to be Napoleon, he'd oblige.

She brought back her hand. "I'm sorry." Her voice vibrated with shame. "It's too weird. I shouldn't have brought it up."

"I'm glad you did. Believe me, it's not weird. It's just more than most guys can ever hope for or even fantasize about."

"You mean it?"

"Let's get rid of this—" he lifted his Glock. "—and I'll show you."

"No. You need to rest first, then I'm going to feed you, and then we'll play." She pointed at the far wall, painted the same shade of pink as her seashell lampshades. Ferns hung from white wicker planters on either side of two closed doors. "The bath's on the left. If you don't mind, your gun will be perfectly safe on the counter in there. I'd feel better if it wasn't in the same room with us."

"I'll put it there now."

"I will." Her hands covered the leather holster. "Go on, the bed's waiting. Relax. Let me serve you."

He saw no reason to object and released his weapon. She held it as she would a dead rat and went to the bath, flicking on the light. Bottles rocked on the counter as she moved them aside, gingerly placing his gun where they had stood. Next, she lifted a slender container of pink liquid and spritzed it on her wrists and slender column of throat.

His interest ratcheted up several notches, urging him to join her. His body, however, pleaded for rest. Backing toward the bed, his calves bumped the mattress. He draped his watch over the largest figurine and pulled down the lacy comforter to fall upon sweet-smelling linens, soft as kitten fur. Lured by the texture, he pressed his face into the pillow. Its lack of resilience told him it contained goose down, not foam. Seriously nice.

Arms around the pillow, Mike allowed himself this momentary weakness. As Jasmine had said, he'd nap and she'd feed him, after which they'd indulge in some slightly kinky bed games.

What could be better?

She watched him from the bath. The faint rise and fall of his shoulders told her he slept. Jasmine whimpered at how beautiful he was—firm muscles on a large frame—intimidating in size, unusually kind in nature. The type of man she'd always longed for. One who wouldn't have glanced at her before the curse. She'd been too ordinary, dull, reserved. Men who asked her out did so because they couldn't attract the attention of a woman as exquisite as Desiree. Or, if they were handsome like Connor Rolands, they wanted an adoring fan so they could talk about themselves.

Mike seemed oblivious to his obvious appeal. If anything, he appeared embarrassed by her compliments. She'd never known a more down-to-earth and empathetic man. How she enjoyed his consoling embrace and teasing him even as he teased her in return. How she liked just being with him. He seemed to like her too—what little he knew about the person she really was—though his feelings would quickly turn to hate if she went through with the plan.

She rolled her forehead over the door's edge. If only she could relax long enough to sleep, to think. The curse wouldn't allow it. At first, she'd been edgy after six hours of rest. Now, she was lucky to manage four hours a night. How long could this go on?

You will want as I want.

Teeth clenched, her fingers gripped the wood. The tenuous peace Mike's lovemaking had provided was already gone. Fearful of her building obsession, she slipped on her silk robe and left the bath.

Halfway across the room, she looked back. Mike's hair fanned over the pillow, sable against all the white. The moon tinted his skin a lighter brown. Wanting to protect him, even though she'd done everything possible to bring him here, she went to the bed and pulled the top sheet over his slumbering body.

It didn't disturb him at all.

Her hand stilled above his head. Smoothing his hair was an indulgence she didn't deserve and couldn't chance, not with the others not knowing what had been going on.

Jasmine left the room and turned to Ben, not surprised to find him waiting in the hall. The overhead light brightened his dark blond hair, cut short and worn spiky like a rocker. It reminded her of Lily's hairstyle. They were both twenty-six, their friendship and artistic talents bringing Ben here. Lily painted the fabrics Violet used for her designs. Ben illustrated their catalogues. Like Mike, Jasmine was the only one in the group without a creative bent. She served as business manager, running the show.

Ben took charge now. His fingers curled around her wrist, giving her no chance to escape as he led her down the hall to his room. His art nouveau sketches papered the walls. The acrid bite of inks, paints and turpentine lingered from today's work. He leaned one shoulder on the closed door, hurt and anxiety evident in his pale blue eyes, his voice low so only she could hear.

"You all right?"

She knew he'd heard them in the hall and probably watched from the stairway as she and Mike had made love. Being observed during an intimacy bothered the woman she'd been, bringing warmth to her chest and throat, even as it hardly fazed the woman she'd become. She spoke in an equally subdued voice. "I'm fine."

"How can you be? Jas, that jerk has a gun and is obviously —"

"No." Her fingers went to his lips to stop his quiet outburst. "Don't call him that. He's a good man. Better than I deserve."

Ben's blond brows rose to his hairline. He moved her hand away. "You've got to be kidding. You picked him up at a club."

Laughter gurgled at the base of her throat, along with a sigh. "He wasn't born there, Ben. He used to be a US Marshal."

"So I heard while you two were downstairs. You actually believe that?"

"Why would he lie?"

The muscles in his neck corded with exasperation. "Did you tell him the truth about why you wanted him here tonight?"

Tears stung her eyes. "I wanted to and I should have. I believe him, Ben. Even if I didn't, I don't care what he did for a living or where he works now. He's a good man."

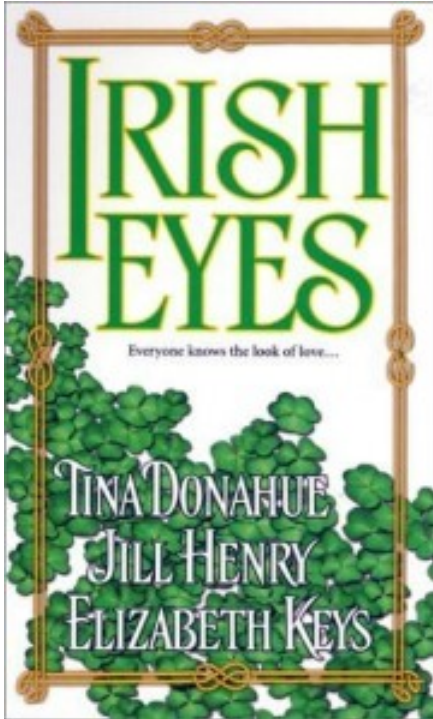
"Like Travis, the last guy you trusted?"

"Ben, please." She didn't want to discuss this and wound him further. "Get out of my way."

Shoulders to the door, he hooked his thumbs in the front pockets of his paint-speckled shorts. "If you'd only give me a chance, I could take care of you."

"No, you couldn't." She kept her voice kind but firm. "You know the curse doesn't work that way."

He began to argue, though it seemed more like a plea. She interrupted, "I have to go downstairs. Lily and Violet might be waiting for me."



FINALLY AND FOREVER

A short time later, Briana was wrapped in a sheet with naught but her undergarments beneath. Although they also needed to be mended, she was not about to give them to Mrs. O'Donnell, the seamstress.

"It is hardly the tragedy you are making it," Aidan said.

Briana's gaze slid sideways to him, then back to what remained of her dress since Mrs. O'Donnell had cleaned it. The right sleeve was now gone—*It surely turned to dust when I simply brushed it*, the seamstress had cried—while the patches on the skirt had been brushed so well, they now had holes in them just like the ones they were intended to hide.

Briana covered her eyes with her hand. "That would be me—my only dress."

"Then we shall have to get you another," Aidan said.

Briana dropped her hand and looked at him, then the seamstress, who seemed delighted at the prospect. She took what remained of Briana's dress and tossed it outside for the dogs to play with.

Briana cried, "I liked that dress, I did!"

"'Twas surely made when you were no more than a girl," the seamstress countered, "as it hardly fit."

Briana regarded the woman's stout frame stuffed into her well-made dress. "It surely fit better than this sheet I now wear."

Aidan glanced over his shoulder at her, then continued moving about the shop, touching one fine gown after the other, in colors as lovely as any rainbow. "Perhaps one of these will fit," he said.

The seamstress was quickly at his side. "Oh no, Captain, those would be for Mrs. Sweeney."

Briana's hand again covered her eyes, for she knew Mrs. Sweeney quite well. The woman had often come to town to give Briana's mother and aunts trouble when Briana had been small. At the time, Briana had been prone to kicking Mrs. Sweeney in the shins in the hopes of getting rid of her.

To this day, Mrs. Sweeney had not forgotten those kicks.

Aidan, of course, knew none of this for he easily dismissed Mrs. O'Donnell's concerns. "Mrs. Sweeney will simply have to make do with one less gown, will she not, Briana?"

She moaned behind her hand.

"I could make the girl a dress of her very own," Mrs. O'Donnell said. "It would surely take me no more than four full days."

Briana whimpered.

"One of these will have to do," the Captain said, then offered a sum that had Briana gasping and Mrs. O'Donnell squealing in delight.

"Very well, Captain, which dress do you want?"

Briana hoped against hope he might pick the one the dogs were currently playing with, only he did not.

"The one that matches the color of her eyes," he said.

Briana lowered her hand and saw the gown in question. It was constructed of a pale green taffeta with a quilted petticoat that had delicate flowers embroidered on it.

"Do you like it?" he asked.

Briana liked it so well, her eyes filled with tears.

"Perhaps the rose one would be more to her liking," the seamstress said.

"No," Aidan said, his gaze still on Briana. "This is the one she wants and it shall be the one she has."

She looked at him, then back to the dress as tears rolled down her face and over the flour on her cheeks.

Aidan took in the scene and felt such a wave of tenderness, he feared he might weep. What power this wee bit of a girl had over him! Clearing his throat, he turned to the seamstress. "You will help the young woman get dressed." He leaned close and whispered, "Would you also have a basin of water so that she might wash her face and hands, and then give her a brush to be used on her hair?"

The woman quickly nodded, then went to Briana. "Come, dear girl, we have much to do."

Mrs. O'Donnell did not own a light touch. She scrubbed Briana's hands and face, then brushed her hair with such fervor, the girl was surprised she had any hair or flesh left.

At last, though, she was clean and in the gown with a lace-edged linen cap upon her head.

"Oh, my," Mrs. O'Donnell said as Briana commenced weeping. "There, there," she cautiously added, "dry your tears and take off the gown and —"

"Take it off?" Briana cried. "Not on me life!"

"What goes on here?" Aidan asked, stepping into the room.

"Not on *my* life," Briana quickly corrected herself, though Aidan hardly seemed to notice.

His gaze went from her hair to her face to the gown, then returned so that he might take that same journey again.

"My apologies, Captain," the seamstress said, "the gown does not fit, so I shall—"

"Not fit?" Briana protested. "It fits me as well as the other I come in."

"Came in," Aidan corrected absently even as his gaze remained on her breasts.

"The gown would be far too snug at the top and too loose at the waist," Mrs. O'Donnell said.

"Aye," Briana said. "The same as the dress I *came* in."

Aidan smiled briefly, then lifted his gaze to hers. "Do you like it as it is?"

"I do."

The seamstress frowned. "Then why are you weeping so?"

Why else? This was the most beautiful thing Briana had ever seen. . .save for her Claddagh ring, of course.

"Her tears are ones of happiness, are they not?" the Captain asked.

Briana nodded shyly.

"Then the gown is yours," he said.

"Oh, my," Mrs. O'Donnell said as Briana buried her face in her hands and truly wept.

Aidan turned to the seamstress. "Would you be kind enough to leave us for a moment?"

The woman hurried from the room, making certain to close the door.

At that moment, Briana ran to Aidan, throwing herself into his arms.

As he staggered back, she cried. "I cannot thank you enough for this!"

Having her pressed against him was surely thanks enough, though Aidan was not about to voice those thoughts. "It's only a gown, Briana."

"But surely the loveliest one in this world," she said, then pulled her arms from him and stepped back. "We must go outside and get my other dress from the dogs."

It was a moment before he understood what she had said for he was still feeling the loss of her sweet body against his. "And why would we want to do that?"

She used the back of her hand to wipe the tears from her cheeks. "Why else? So I can mend it and wear it once more." She looked down at her new gown. "This is far too lovely for me to be wearing very single day—I shall have to save it for something special. . .perhaps the day I am wed."

Aidan's heart started beating fast. He pulled at the neckcloth about his throat, but it did not ease his breathing. Deep inside, he told himself he should run from this room and never look back. Still deeper inside, he told himself he was not yet capable of leaving and that made his heart beat even faster until he feared he might swoon.

At that moment Briana finished blowing her nose on a piece of cloth. "You all right?" she asked.

He never was when she was about. . . or so close, for she had unexpectedly moved toward him and was gazing into his eyes.

He whispered, "Why do you stare so, Briana?"

"You are not at all hard on the eye," she said in reply.

"And you are beauty beyond compare."

Her cheeks pinked up quite nicely. "I believe I will give you a kiss for making me so."

Aidan was completely stunned, then quickly eager—at least, until she cupped his face in her hands, turned it to the side, then pressed her soft lips to his cheek, kissing him as if he were her brother—one whose bones she did not wish to break.

Aidan frowned, in particular when she began to pull away, a matter he was not about to abide. Keeping her to him, he was of a mind to take her right here and now, and would have if she have been any other girl. But she was Briana MacCullen, the bonesetter's daughter and a young woman who demanded respect.

To that end, Aidan simply pressed his cheek to hers, but also gave her a warning. "Briana, you must not tempt me so."

Her body trembled against his, but her voice was strong. "Then I shall not."

"Just a moment," he warned, keeping her to him. "I am not yet finished with you."

He held her close, enjoying how she finally softened in his arms. She would make a worthy bedmate, thought he, for she would be both strong and yielding, and that set his heart to beating even faster until his passion was nearly out of control.

So, too, was Briana's for her arms were now about him.

As luck would have it, the seamstress took that moment to pace in front of the door, most likely wishing to come back in.

"We must leave," Briana said, her cheek against his chest. "We must get *my* ring."

Aidan smiled at her proper speech and breathed hard in response to every other part of her. Lowering his mouth to her ear, he whispered, "Take care, girl, for I shall know the sweetness of your lips."

Briana withdrew her arms, but she did not push away. Instead, she pressed her hands against his chest and lifted her face to his.

He saw beauty and innocence, softness and strength. He saw what he wanted.

Trouble was, the seamstress wanted entrance and was now shouting loud enough to wake the dead. "Might I come back in, Captain? Has the girl stopped weeping?"

Not only had she stopped weeping, she had taken to blushing and was quickly moving away from him.

"I warn you," he said, "I shall not be put off forever."

Her blush deepened, even as she arched one brow. "And I warn you, Captain, the first man to kiss me shall also be the man who will wed me."

Aidan's heart was again beating fast.

"You may come in," Briana finally called to the seamstress.

"Would all be well?" the woman asked as she looked at Aidan, then over her shoulder as Briana fled the room.

"Where would you be going?" Mrs. O'Donnell called out.

"To get my dress from the dogs!" Briana shouted back.

She was able to save nothing but the remaining sleeve and that was only because the dog coveting it was but a pup.

Sighing deeply, Briana glanced at Aidan's hand that was extended to her, palm up. She placed the damp sleeve on it.

Aidan arched one brow, threw her sleeve to the side, then took her hand in his. "To Mrs. Walsh's," he said, and commenced walking.

Those who passed them this time were far different from the last. The men all tipped their hats to Briana and offered their greetings to the Captain, with the women being even friendlier.

"My, what a lovely gown," one of them said, giving Briana a dear smile before turning to her companion. "I believe Mrs. Sweeney told me she was having one made in the very same fabric."

"Careful," Aidan murmured, holding tight to Briana's hand. "If you run now, they will know the truth of the matter."

Indeed. She lowered her voice to a whisper. "Might we, at least, walk fast?"

Aidan nodded, wished the women a good-day, and hurried along with Briana to Mrs. Walsh's house.

It was only when the dwelling was in sight that Briana's step slowed.

Aidan saw the wonder in her eyes and the doubt in her heart. He also saw the tree she was wont to hide behind and led her past it.

"Go on," he said when they reached the door, "use the knocker as if you belong here."

"As I do not, I see why they have placed it so far above my reach." That said, she

lifted her skirt and thrice kicked the door with her foot.

Aidan resisted scolding the girl and laughing at her antics, for her unorthodox manner of knocking surely brought a servant running.

"Yes, Captain," the elderly man said, then turned to Briana. "Good afternoon, Miss—do come in."

Briana's breath caught as she stepped onto a rug that was softer than new grass. She gaped at the circular staircase, nearly high enough to reach the clouds, and the walls covered with the loveliest paintings she had ever seen.

"What might I do for you, Captain?" the servant asked.

"You will address the young woman," Aidan said, "as she is the cause of this visit."

The man turned to her. "Yes, Miss, what may I do for you?"

Holding back a sigh, she squared her shoulders, lifted her chin and said, "I have come for *my* Claddagh ring."

The elderly man briefly arched his white brows. "And would you have lost it here during one of Mrs. Walsh's gatherings?"

Briana started to laugh, until Aidan squeezed her hand. Quickly sobering, she said, "Ah, no, Your Honor—ah, that is," she amended when Aidan again squeezed her hand, "no, I did not."

"I believe the young woman needs to speak to the lady of the house," Aidan said. "Would you be so kind as to tell Mrs. Walsh that Miss Briana MacCullen and Captain O'Rourke await her?"

Minutes later, the lady in question was fairly beaming as she hurried into the gold-and-ivory drawing room where Aidan and Briana had been asked to wait.

Seeing Aidan first, Mrs. Walsh retained her smile. Seeing Briana next, that smile surely paused, then turned to an outrageous frown.

"*You!*" the woman said, then quickly turned to Aidan. "Good work, Captain. Did you catch this one peering into my windows? She does that, you know." She turned on Briana. "Whose gown is that you wear?" She looked back to Aidan. "Did she steal it from someone you know, Captain? Did she tell you she stole something of mine? Did she—"

"Something of *hers* has been taken," Aidan said, his voice icy and low.

Mrs. Walsh's mouth moved for a moment more, but produced no words.

Aidan spoke to Briana. "Go on," he said in a voice that was now quite soft, "tell this woman what you've come for."

Briana looked at Mrs. Wash's stunned expression and could not help but smile. Oh, how she loved this moment and this man. How ably he protected her. Though now, Briana knew it was her turn to shine.



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