

Monday Erikka arrived at Gabriel's workshop promptly at ten in the morning. Now she waited anxiously. She'd been attuned to every nuance, every vibe Gabriel gave for the last two hours.

"How does it feel?" she asked.

"I'm getting the hang of it," Gabriel said. His dark brows were bunched together as he moved the mouse around.

"You don't have to learn it all in sixty seconds you know." Erikka resisted jumping in to help when he clicked the wrong icon. Seconds later he corrected his mistake.

"Like you said, this is kid's stuff. You're too busy to baby-sit me." Gabriel nodded when he successfully generated a report of his expenses for the previous month. "Damn!"

"What's wrong?" Erikka leaned over his shoulder.

"I spent way too much on supplies. I need to comparison shop. Trouble is I hate shopping." Gabriel scowled at the numbers.

"Browse the internet. I can show you how."

"First I'll master turning this thing on and off," Gabriel replied. He squinted at the figures as though he saw more unpleasant surprises.

"You're a bit past being that much of a tech dummy," Erikka joked. "Are you this intense about everything?"

Gabriel leaned forward and scrolled through two pages. "Sorry, did you ask me a question?"

"You answered it. Relax. Let's have some more delicious coffee." Erikka strolled over to the automatic pot. A red light indicated the coffee was ready.

"In a minute," he said without stopping his examination of numbers.

"I tell you what, you can work in my office anytime. I've never tasted coffee this rich." Erikka poured the smooth, dark liquid into a mug. "The secretary at the office where I worked made awful sludge."

"Colombian. I get it from a gourmet shop in New Orleans. Order by phone." Gabriel hit a key and his laser printer spit out a sheet.

"Bet they have a website." Erikka savored a sip. "Wow, that's good stuff."

"I think I finally get it. Oh-oh, should have kept my mouth shut." Gabriel jerked his hands away from the keyboard.

"You need to take a break. Here, let me look. Just hit the 'undo' icon. Remember, as long as you don't save it the basic form won't change." Erikka moved the mouse with one hand and kept the mug of coffee in the other.

"Whew, close call. Thanks for being patient with me." Gabriel tapped out more commands more slowly.

"That's what you pay me for, boss." Erikka saluted.
"But the perks are even better." She tasted more smooth
Colombian roast liquid heaven and sighed.

"You're a coffee lover I see." Gabriel finally relaxed
against the chair back.

"Mostly just chug it down to get going in the morning.
Not like this. I'm loving every bit of this stuff."

"I'm glad." Gabriel seemed about to smile, but the
corners of his mouth never quite lifted. His expression
stayed impassive instead.

"Uh, listen I kinda put my foot in it the last time I
was here and—"

"Don't worry about it," he broke in and turned to the
computer again.

"No wait. I don't want you to think that I believe any
old trashy gossip. Hell, I've been the subject of some
juicy talk myself lately and—"

"I said it's okay, Erikka." Gabriel made the desk
chair swivel around again until he faced her.

"Okay." Erikka cleared her throat as his golden brown
eyes bored into her.

"So you've got a past, too, huh?" Gabriel said. He
continued to gaze at her.

"If you call a Driving While Intoxicated conviction
and a brief stay in a psycho ward a past. I call it sowing

wild oats," Erikka wisecracked. She wondered why the truth had spilled out so easily.

"I see."

"Don't worry. I haven't been convicted for embezzling. I was, I am a top accountant," Erikka went on defensively. She searched his expression for any sign that he was judging her.

"Don't worry, I never thought otherwise despite the talk about you," Gabriel replied mildly.

"Yes, I-- Wait a damn minute. You heard gossip about me?" Erikka put her empty mug down with a thump.

"My Aunt Therese is a twenty-four hour news bureau all by herself.

"So much for keeping my business out of the street, at least around here!" Erikka grimaced. She would feel naked now each time she set foot outside Darlene's house.

"Bother you?" Gabriel said quietly.

She glanced at him then forced a grin. "Nah, not really. I don't care what these country folk think."

"Right."

"Maybe a little. In New Orleans you can keep a low profile among the millions. Here you sneeze and five people show up with a box of tissues within seconds."

Gabriel's laugh flowed out as rich as the Colombian brew he'd made. Erikka liked the sound just as much. His

baritone voice generated just as much heat and twice the zing, too. He crossed in front of her on his way to the coffee pot. She inhaled the subtle scent of sandalwood aftershave lotion.

"Welcome to your new goldfish bowl life, Erikka. I had to get used to it again when I came home." Gabriel filled his mug.

"You moved away?" Erikka settled in a chair.

"Don't tell me you didn't get the full story." Gabriel's eyes sparkled over the rim of the mug as he sipped coffee.

"Apparently not."

"Neither did I. Aunt Therese didn't know about the, what did you call it? Trip to the psycho ward?" Gabriel tilted his head to one side.

Erikka suddenly regretted her leap into self-disclosure. She squirmed beneath the gaze then looked away. "Yeah, something like that. As you've probably guessed the accident is how I got these." She pointed to her left cheek before turning away.

"Got what? I don't understand" Gabriel said.

"Thanks, but you don't have to." Erikka's throat tightened. Pity from him would cut too deep. She got up to leave.

He followed her. "I'm sorry if I said something wrong."

"The scars." Erikka faced him. Might as well get it over with now.

"I saw them even with the makeup. I also saw a bright, funny and pretty lady underneath that makeup," Gabriel said in a muted voice. He looked at Erikka until she got busy gathering papers.

"Thanks. Anyway I'm out in the swamps to clear the cobwebs and let the heat cool off," she quipped.

"I see." Gabriel sat on the windowsill and drank more coffee. He seemed to put distance between them so she could be at ease.

"I came home after six years of cooling off time, for me and everybody else around here. I grew up almost overnight back then." Gabriel gazed at Erikka as though waiting for her to probe.

Erikka felt a kinship with him. She'd been poked and probed enough in the last few months by doctors, social workers, the judge and more. She looked through a glass window in one wall of the office that gave a view of Gabriel's workshop. He'd build beautiful things and fashioned a world where he felt comfortable. Erikka did not want to disturb the serene air. Somehow she felt they'd both said enough for now.

"To maturity," Erikka lifted her mug. "About damn time. I'm speaking for myself of course."

Gabriel laughed and lifted his mug. "Me, too."

Erikka gave him a playful grin. Gabriel's lips curved up only a little. She stared at his mouth a full minute before her gaze went to his golden brown eyes. He not only understood, but he cared. The promise in them left her bewildered. And afraid. She was in danger of reading too much into his kindness. Paradise found could lead to paradise lost.

Erikka swung the chair around to face the computer. "Hey, you better crack the whip on me. I'll goof off on your time all afternoon if you let me. This software is good, but it won't put in the numbers all by itself."

"Right. More numbers, more spread sheets. Tell me this will get easier. Please."

"You'll be absolutely amazed at how easy it will be." Erikka glanced at him over her shoulder.

"In other words the software is idiot proof," Gabriel teased.

"Let's just say this application is designed for people without an accounting background. In other words it's not full of the mumbo jumbo we use to impress our clients," Erikka joked back.

"Exactly what I suspected. Accountants are like lawyers, you live to keep us normal folks confused." Gabriel stretched out his long legs and watched Erikka work.

"Do you really want to navigate workman's comp, benefits packages and the IRS on your own?" Erikka set up a simple method for him to calculate his self-employment tax using the software.

"God no!" Gabriel put a palm over his heart in mock terror

"Then show some respect, dude, or you're on your own."

"Yes, ma'am. Deepest apologies."

Erikka switched to another screen. "I set up templates of forms for one employee. Just fill in the blanks. The calculations are based on what you said you would pay."

"One set for full-time and one for part-time." Gabriel leaned over her shoulder.

She relaxed into the warmth from his chest only inches away. Something in the way he moved nearer sent waves of calm through Erikka. Although his presence made her feel secure, she also felt power from his muscular body. Gabriel still had a kind of restless tension beneath the surface. Looks could be deceiving. He might be trouble wrapped up all neat and pretty like a bomb in a gift box. Erikka

wanted to believe otherwise and that was the problem. She couldn't afford to see only what she wanted to see.

"Here, I'll move out of the way so you can see."

Erikka pushed her chair sideways to allow him to roll his up to the desk.

"I'm good." Still he moved in closer to the computer, which put him closer to her as well. "You've been a big help. But I'm not sure your work is done."

Erikka gazed at the hint of stubble along his jaw line. The effect made him look even more like a rugged yet sensitive artist. As though reading her mind, Gabriel rubbed one cheek. The soft scratchy sound of his fingers against the hair made her shiver. Erikka wanted to feel the prickly sensation, then breath in the smell of his skin. To clear her head she stood up.

"Oh?"

Gabriel looked at her. His eyes reflected puzzlement for a moment then cleared. "Like you said I don't want to tackle red tape alone. I'd like to keep you on retainer."

"Sure," Erikka said without hesitation, forgetting that she should be observing caution signs.

"Great. Say three hours twice a month? Since I'm now so well trained." Gabriel's smile opened up and let more sunshine into the room. Dimples appeared in his cheeks. The

effect made him look like a cross between a charming boy and a stunning man.

"I agree. You can always call me in between," she put in impulsively. "Extra fee for consultations of course."

"Of course." Gabriel nodded. He seemed to relax as though he'd cleared some hurdle.

Erikka felt they'd crossed some boundary as well. She smiled at him. "What next?"

"Lunch," he said suddenly. "You've been here longer than we agreed. I can at least treat you."

"There's a restaurant near here?" Erikka suddenly felt her stomach rumble just at the mention of food.

"No. I'll fix us something." Gabriel stood. He watched her expectantly, waiting for her reaction.

Erikka blinked rapidly as the implications of his suggestion sank in. "At your house you mean. We go over to your place."

"Yes."

"Right. Sure."

Erikka rubbed her now moist palms against the thighs of her cotton slacks. She went through the door when he opened it and motioned for her to go first. As they walked she grabbed her small shoulder purse and portfolio. They crossed the twenty or so yards to the deck behind his home. The view was lovely. A bateau tied to a long wooden dock

rocked gently in the shallow water. Further down a larger bass boat was anchored.

"You like to fish?" Gabriel asked as he unlocked his back door.

"Before I became too mature and sophisticated I loved it. My paw paw would take us down to the river and we'd fish from the bank. None of that fancy rod and reel stuff. We used long cane poles with those little red stoppers that bobbed when the fish took the bait."

Erikka chattered on brightly to cover her nervousness. She followed him down a short hall. They went past a small laundry room to the right. The kitchen opened up with an expanse of windows looking out into the bayou. An oak butcher's block center isle contained an array of spices. The cabinets wrapped around the airy kitchen. Stainless steel appliances gleamed.

"Wow." Erikka walked around touching appliances she had only dreamed of owning.

"I took a few cooking classes. Someone I knew helped outfit this place. Don't think I picked out this stuff. But I do enjoy it."

"You bake bread?" Erikka wanted to kiss the bread maker. She'd drooled over it when she'd seen it in an upscale home magazine.

"Not me. Like I said—"

"Your girlfriend. Right?" Erikka had to admire the woman's taste in kitchen equipment.

"Former." Gabriel turned to the refrigerator. "We can have sandwiches or something more substantial. Roast beef po-boys with melted Swiss cheese, curly fries and cream sodas or shrimp stew over rice."

Erikka joined him. "You got a restaurant in there?"

Gabriel laughed easily. "My mother stocks up this place like I'm living in the desert. I try to stop her but she shows up with groceries every few weeks."

"Takes a big man to admit he can't control his mother. I feel ya on that one." Erikka patted his shoulder.

He faced while her hand still rested on the olive green cotton shirt. "Women are still something of a mystery to me."

Erikka looked at his shoulder for a few seconds moved away. She wanted to kiss him. Not seduce him, just barely brush her lips against his wide full mouth. Erikka wanted physical contact to feel pretty again, to feel desirable. Rejection, or worse pity, would be more painful than glass they'd scraped from her skin. Instead she made a joke.

"What do we want? Pretty simple. It changes from day to day. Just be prepared to give in," Erikka said with a grin.

"I had suspected as much," Gabriel replied.

"Sandwiches would be lighter and fast."

Erikka pretended interest in the scenery outside his kitchen window. "Yeah. I do have another appointment today."

She let out a long breath, walked to the table and sat down. Gabriel worked on the sandwiches and talked about his balance sheets. He was apparently too busy to look at her. Erikka offered token responses as she watched him. No one could be that intense about applying mayo and mustard, she mused. She'd had either embarrassed him, scared him or both. He appeared to have recovered by the time he joined her at the table.

"Here we go. Hope you like corn chips. My nephew ate everything else. These are the only kind he doesn't like." Gabriel put both plates down then went back and got the glasses of soda.

"Hey, I'm eating for free. I won't complain." Erikka munched on a couple of chips.

Gabriel glanced at her with a shy smile. "Thanks again for everything, the advice and computer lessons."

"You're welcome. But you are paying me."

"You went above and beyond. You earned way more in New Orleans for the same amount of advice."

"True. Until I screwed up that is. So, I guess my crash and burn was God's plan to send you help." Erikka shrugged.

Gabriel laughed out loud. "The great cosmic plan."

"Something like that," Erikka said. "I don't hate being here nearly as much as I thought I would."

"Well, that's nice," he deadpanned.

"My friends back in New Orleans feel sorry for me. To them there is no meaningful existence in the rest of Louisiana." Erikka laughed.

"What do you think now?" Gabriel propped an elbow on the table.

"I miss the city. I miss the music, all the places to go for a great time." Erikka plucked at the corner of her paper napkin.

"Sounds exciting." Gabriel gazed at her. He hadn't touched his food.

"Yeah. Guess I had too much excitement for one woman. So, here I am." Erikka lost her appetite. She put down the chip she was about to eat. "Listen, I'd better get moving."

"I'll wrap up your lunch to go." Gabriel stood and went to a wide pantry.

She watched him put the sandwich and chips in a plastic baggie. "Thanks. You must have worked at a fast food place back in the day."

"Tasty Sandwich Shop. I was there every day after school and for three summers until I could buy my own motorcycle. My parents refused to pay for one." Gabriel handed her a paper bag with the lunch in it.

"A determined man even then," Erikka said.

"Not the spoiled frat boy you took me for, right?"

Gabriel grinned.

"You're very different alright," Erikka replied. Then felt self-conscious. "Thanks again for lunch."

"You're welcome."

Erikka picked up her belongings. "See you later."

"Two weeks?" Gabriel folded his arms.

"Sure. I think you'll survive without me for that long."

"Crossing my fingers. You did say I couldn't totally destroy all you set up, right?" Gabriel followed her to the door.

"Trust me, I took good care of you." Erikka faced him then blushed at her own words.

"Yes, you did." He opened the door for her.

"Well, bye." Erikka turned to leave.

"There is a lot more to do around here than you might think."

"Thanks, but I'm not into rounding up chickens or slaughtering hogs," Erikka said a grin.

"I like that city girl sense of humor. I accept the challenge."

"What challenge?" Erikka liked the way his mouth curved up and the gold in his russet eyes sparkled when he was amused.

"To prove that you can have a good time in the swamp." Gabriel spread out his arms.

"Yeah right. Name one thing." Erikka waved a hand and started for the door.

"I'll do better than that." Gabriel followed her. He stopped her just as she was about to grab the doorknob.

"I'm serious. What about this Saturday?"

Erikka turned around. She had to tilt her head back to look up at him. "Okay, what about this Saturday?"

"It's a surprise. Good clean country fun. I promise." Gabriel raised one palm.

"Nothing that involves farm animals, please!" Erikka pointed a forefinger at his nose.

"No problem," Gabriel said with a grin.

"I don't know." Erikka stared at expanse of broad chest before her. She imagined the word "temptation" written across it.

The man had a lover stashed somewhere. Erikka was sure of it. Rumors of his past made her look like a rookie at bad behavior and he seemed secretive. In other words he was

just the kind of man she'd chosen before. The word 'no' flashed in her head. She should find ways to be comfortable in her own skin, not jump into another soap opera scenario. As seconds ticked by Gabriel's smile slipped then stiffened.

"You just thought of an urgent appointment on that day. I understand. Goodbye." He opened the door.

"You're a client and I'm not that great at choosing men. Not that I'm implying you're no good. What I mean is—" Erikka groaned. "Hell, even I don't know what I mean."

"I really do understand." Gabriel wore a composed, empathetic expression.

"Right. On that happy note I'll leave," Erikka replied with a weak smile.

"See you next time," he said.

She went out the door and to her car. After she got in Erikka sat there for about five minutes. Gabriel waved to her and Erikka waved back. She put the key in the ignition, started the car but shift to reverse. More minutes went by as she drummed her acrylic fingernails on the steering wheel. Gabriel left the door but returned a few seconds later and stared at her. Erikka turned off the engine, got out of the car and marched back to the door.

"You want to have fun with me or what?" Erikka stared at him as he swung the door open wider.

"Yes, I want to have fun with you," Gabriel said in a solemn tone.

"Damn, that didn't come out right," Erikka blurted then laughed until her side ached.

Gabriel stepped outside laughing just as hard. "I'll pick you up Saturday around two."

Erikka hoped her makeup hadn't smudged as she patted moisture from her face. "In the afternoon? Look, I refuse to go square dancing at the local Moose lodge."

"We don't square dance. Now a good zydeco throw down, mais yeah," Gabriel replied.

"See you Saturday." Erikka walked backwards away from him. "Jeans and a T-shirt okay?"

"Whatever."

"Ah come on. Give me a hint!" She stopped.

"Casual dress is fine." Gabriel's brown eyes flashed with mischief.

Erikka liked his playful side. His reserved manner softened quite nicely, she mused. "Intriguing. Come to think of it I prefer being pleasantly surprised."

His sideways grin stirred the heat inside her more. Erikka forced herself not to spoil things by strolling right back to him and planting a searing kiss on his cinnamon lips. She was supposed to change her ways after all. As she drove off Gabriel appeared in her rearview

mirror. He waved and Erikka waved back. Tall and rangy, Gabriel looked more inviting than any man had a right to in blue jeans. The sight made her anticipate an afternoon of country style entertainment.