

Thieves' Honor

Lisabet Sarai

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Two heart beats and his wallet would be in my pocket. I almost could feel it there already, butter-soft leather, bulging. I took and held a deep breath, felt my heart slam against my ribs. With infinite care, I began to slide my hand out of his trousers.

"Not so fast," came a whisper. Fingers tightened in a vise around my wrist. I released the wallet and let my hand go limp. His grip did not relax. "Come here."

In the crowded subway car, packed with weary commuters, no one noticed how he pulled my body to him, my back tucked against his chest. No one heard him as he continued to speak softly, his breath ruffling my hair.

"I'm afraid you're caught, my little pocket picker. Red-handed, as it were."

"Let me go," I hissed. "You're hurting me."

"I'm sure that you can endure it for a station or two, Blaine."

"How do you know my name?"

"I've been following you. Studying your technique."

A shiver ran through me. Was he some kind of crazy stalker? Worse, was he a cop? I stole a quick glance back at him. Craggy face, wild black hair, expensive clothes. He didn't look like a cop. He was smiling, a calmly superior smile that infuriated me. I struggled, trying to break away. He only grasped my wrist more tightly, his arm wrapped around my waist.

"I'd suggest that you don't make a scene, Blaine. I'm sure that you would not want me bringing you to the attention of our fine men in blue."

So he wasn't a cop. That was a minor relief. Then I gasped as I felt my captor's other hand raising the back of my skirt. I couldn't believe his brazenness. He stroked my ass cheeks through my panties. I wondered if I should scream. I was standing with legs apart, braced against the movement of the train. It was all too easy for him to slip a finger inside my underwear and bury it in my cunt.

I arched my back, spasming around his hand. I couldn't help it. He chuckled under his breath, and inserted a few more digits, wriggling them inside me. *Damn him*, I thought, trying without success to hold still. I writhed against him, hating the spurts of pleasure he wrung from my body. Hating my own weakness, cursing my own smugness. I must have let down my guard, too sure of myself and my skills. How else could he have tripped me up?

His fingers rifled through my folds with the same dexterity that I had used rifling his pockets. "You're very wet," he whispered close to my ear. A hot blush crawled up my cheeks. "It's a turn-on for you, isn't it, stealing? The delicate, deliberate approach to the mark. Like foreplay. Your smooth entrance into his trousers, penetrating his defenses. The tension builds as you adjust your position, preparing for the final assault. Then the rush, the supremely sensual moment when you take possession of his treasures."

As he spoke, he reached forward between my sticky thighs and caught my clit between two fingers. He began to squeeze it rhythmically as he continued his discourse. I felt a climax coming from afar, swirling like a hurricane in my depths. He must have felt my insides quiver. He fell silent, manipulating me furiously.

I fought the orgasm, fought with every ounce of my will to rob him of that conquest. Much as I craved satisfaction myself, I could not bear that he should have power over me. We swayed there, on the peak, bodies packed together by the press of uptown commuters around us. Me, gritting my teeth, muscles taut, trying to ignore the fire between my thighs. My jailer, breathing a bit heavily himself, with all five fingers inside my sopping underpants, diligently working to bring me off.

I was a hair's breadth from the breaking point, when he suddenly removed his hand. My cunt was an aching, hungry emptiness. My clit felt as though bees swarmed all over it. I was hornier than I had ever been in my life, but that did not overwhelm my triumph. At least he hadn't won.

"Here's our stop," he said, pulling me toward the door. Throughout the whole scene he had not relinquished his hold on my wrist. In a moment we stood on the platform, while the crowd flowed around from us. I looked around. 72nd Street. I heard a metallic clink. Cold handcuffs replaced his warm grip. He snapped the other cuff onto his own wrist.

"Do you always carry handcuffs?" My voice sounded defiant in my ears.

"Only when I'm on the trail of a master criminal. Come on, we have a ways to go yet."

The mockery in his voice inflamed me. I grabbed a pillar and hung on. No one around us even looked twice; New Yorkers have seen it all. "You'll have to drag me out of here. And if you try, I'll scream."

"I'm sure that the police would respond with their usual promptness. Is that what you want?"

"At this point, it's your word against mine. You're the one who has me in handcuffs. I'll tell them you're trying to kidnap me!"

"Listen, Blaine. I have lots of evidence of your prowess that I am sure the police would find fascinating. Photographs. Videos. I told you, I've been studying you. Meanwhile, all I want is the chance to talk with you, in private, about a business opportunity that could be profitable to us both. To make you a proposition."

Yeah? The come-on in the subway was hardly businesslike. But I relaxed slightly.

"If you want to consult me on a professional basis, then why the cuffs?"

"Well, to be honest, I don't completely trust you." A lecherous grin lit up his rough features. "But mostly, I thought that it might turn you on."

"You know nothing about what turns me on," I told him, trying to put ice into my voice. But I remembered his touch, his words. I knew that he was right, that thieving gave me a thrill that was close to sexual.

"Let's go. I promise I won't molest you. I'll serve you a fine dinner and then we can discuss my little – project."

"Well, it seems as though I don't have much choice." I followed him up the stairs to the street.

We walked three blocks, my right hand linked by steel to his left. He stopped at a silver Mercedes sedan parked by the curb. I heard a chirp as he turned off the alarm.

He opened the back door for me, then gestured for me to be seated. Awkward in the handcuffs, I stumbled into the vehicle. He leaned in, rummaged in his pocket and held up a key.

"If I release you, do you promise not to run away?"

I sighed in exasperation. "Yes, I promise."

"Thieves' honor?"

"What the hell is that? Yes, whatever. I give you my word."

In a flash I was free. I rubbed my aching wrist. He was about to close the door, then paused as if some thought had struck him.

"Give me your panties."

"What?"

"You heard me. Off with them."

"You said you weren't going to molest me."

"Am I touching you? Don't make me angry, Blaine. Do it."

I don't know why I obeyed him, but I did. Raising my skirt as little as possible, I slipped the bikinis over my

hips and down to my ankles. They were more than a bit damp. Dangling them from one finger, I held them out to him.

"Here you are, sir." My sarcasm did not seem to affect him at all. He lifted the crumpled piece of silk to his nose and inhaled deeply. Despite myself, I blushed. Then he stuffed the panties in his suit jacket pocket.

He made no further comment as he closed the car door and climbed into the driver's seat. The door locks clicked as they slid into place. Dusk was falling, and the rear windows were tinted. I could see very little of our surroundings as he turned right and headed cross-town, but soon the lights twinkling across the river told me we were on the FDR. He took the Tri-Borough Bridge, then headed north on I95. Partly from the route, partly from the plush vehicle, I figured that he was aiming for somewhere in Westchester.

My captor drove silently, intent upon the road. I took advantage of his preoccupation to observe him more closely. He was powerfully built, his shoulders seeming too broad for his moderate height. He wore his hair a bit long. A few curls actually brushed the back of his shirt collar. From the back seat, I couldn't really see his face, but his prominent nose and jutting chin gave him a hawkish profile.

Not a handsome man, but striking, I thought. He conveyed a sense of power, a self-confidence that bordered on arrogance. All at once, I wanted to hear him speak again.

"I'm at a disadvantage here," I said. "You know my name, but I don't know yours."

"My apologies." His voice was controlled, cultured, with perhaps the tiniest hint of an accent. "I am Avram Aslanyan. At your service."

"I suppose that I should say that I'm pleased to meet you, Mr. Aslanyan. But I think that I'll withhold judgment for the moment."

"That is your prerogative, Miss Ford." His lips curved into mocking grin. So he knew my last name, also. What else did he know about me?

The ride seemed to go on and on. I began to get restless. Then I realized I was not restless; I was horny. The bareness underneath my skirt made me unusually sensitive. Every time I shifted, I could feel the seat cover sliding luxuriously against the thin fabric that separated me from the leather. I wanted to feel that leather on my naked skin. I smiled at the thought of smearing my juices on his expensive upholstery. With the same slow caution I'd use in picking a pocket, I raised myself slightly and slipped the skirt up, then settled back, pretending to doze.

The smooth caress of the leather on my bare ass made me ache again. My clit throbbed, screaming for my

attention. My cunt remembered his fingers and clamored for mine. Did I dare? From under drooping lids, I sneaked a peek at the driver. He seemed completely focused on his task, oblivious to me.

As if shifting in my slumber, I half-turned toward the passenger-side door, away from him. Then I placed my hands in my lap, one resting on the other. With the little finger of the hidden hand, I began stroking myself through the skirt. The stretchy cloth transmitted the pressure with delicious effect. At first, I just brushed the finger lightly over my hooded clit. Before long, I was digging into the crevice between my thighs, moving my little joystick back and forth at top speed.

I kept my eyes closed and worked to keep my body still. As I drew closer to climax, though, my breathing must have changed. Or perhaps the scent of my arousal wafted up to the front seat. Something, in any case, caught the driver's attention.

"Are you comfortable?"

"Yes, fine" I managed to keep my voice steady, though I was teetering on the edge of orgasm. "Just napping." Now, my clit demanded, squeeze me, pummel me, make me burst. I kept my finger moving.

"Sorry about the length of the drive. We're almost there."

Something in his tone made me open my eyes. Our gazes locked for a moment in the rear-view mirror and I knew that he knew what I was up to. Flustered, I moved my hands to my sides. He grinned. Damn him, had he intended this all along? Is that why he had taken my underwear? I should have gone back to frigging myself all over his fancy back seat, just to prove that I didn't care. Instead, I sat there like a dummy, sticky and frustrated, wondering how I had gotten myself into this situation.

The car stopped in front of a wrought iron gate, which swung open after a moment to let us through. We parked in the circular driveway fronting an imposing brick edifice with tall windows and balconies on the second floor.

Avram came around to help me out of the car. I just glared at him, refusing his proffered hand. I followed him up the steps to the front door, surreptitiously trying to straighten my skirt.

The door was opened by someone who looked like a professional wrestler dressed in a tuxedo. The uniform just didn't hang right on that muscle-bound frame. "Good evening, Sir," said the giant, stepping aside so that we could pass.

"Good evening, Burke. There will be two for dinner tonight. We'll be in the library. Please call us when it's

ready."

"Yes, Sir." I marveled at the incongruity of his blond hair flowing down the back of the formal black jacket as he headed down the hall, presumably toward the kitchen.

"Burke is my butler, bodyguard, cook and chauffeur," my host commented as he led the way to the library. "A man in my position must have as few servants as possible, and they must be absolutely trustworthy."

"What do you mean, a man in your position?" I took the seat he offered me, one of two armchairs flanking a marble fireplace. "Don't you think that it is time you told me who you are and what you want?"

Avram smiled his crooked smile. "A drink, first. Have you ever tried arak?"

I shook my head. I don't drink much. It dulls my reflexes.

"It's the national drink in the Middle East and Turkey." I watched as he poured an inch of clear, viscous liquid into a tumbler. The liquid turned milky as he poured in water from a carafe. A potent scent of anise filled the room.

I took a cautious sip while he prepared a drink for himself. It was delicious, sweet licorice with an alcoholic bite.

"Is that where you're from, Turkey?" I asked.

"I'm Armenian. But originally, my family came from Anatolia, in central Turkey. A long time ago."

"So. Tell me your story. I'm listening."

Avram settled himself opposite me and smiled. Resisting an impulse to tug my skirt down over my knees, I crossed one booted leg over the other, defiantly showing him a generous length of thigh.

"I am a businessman. Sometimes I do business on one side of the law, sometimes on the other. I use my brains and my craft to get what I want. Whatever I do, it pays for me to keep a low profile."

I looked him straight in the eye. "Are you a thief?"

"Perhaps. Sometimes. I prefer to think of myself as an adjuster. I adjust the balance of wealth in my favor."

I laughed, looking around me and noting the elaborate stereo system, the furniture fashioned of rare woods, the walls of books, the Oriental carpet and the oil paintings. "It seems that your adjustments are quite a success." The arak sang in my veins, soothing my irritation, softening my resistance.

Avram shrugged. "I do well enough. But I cannot afford to be complacent. Besides, if I'm not working on some - project - I get bored."

"So, what do you want with me?"

"I need an assistant in a new undertaking. Someone intelligent, cool-headed and resourceful. Someone willing to take risks in order to reap the rewards. And, incidentally, this someone needs to be an attractive, sexy young woman."

I didn't know whether to be flattered or insulted.

"There's a man who stole something from me, something of priceless value." Avram's face clouded over with a suppressed rage. I marveled at his sudden intensity. "I plan to retaliate in kind."

His eyes softened as he turned his gaze back to me.

"I first noticed you on the Lexington line a month ago. Even before you had chosen your mark, you caught my attention. Something about you – your posture, or your fashionable but forgettable clothes, or that calculating look in your green eyes – made me watch you carefully. I saw you sidle up to your target, casual and relaxed. I saw your slender fingers disappear into his coat pocket, even as you looked the other way and seemed to study your phone. I saw you pluck his wallet and submerge it in your tote bag in one smooth, fluid motion, like a dancer's gesture. And I saw your parted lips and your heightened color, afterward."

He leaned forward. "I knew then that you were the woman I needed. A woman who steals for the excitement, as much as for the cash."

I found my heart was beating hard in response to his description. My mind flashed back to the train and briefly, I felt ghostly fingers squirming in my sex. I pushed the recollection away, but it was too late. I was wet again, and aching.

"Raise your skirt for me, Blaine," Avram continued, his eyes riveted on my reddening visage. "Let me see how wet you are."

I wanted to refuse him, wanted to slap his face, turn on my heel and head out that fancy front door. Why didn't I?

I could use the alcohol as an excuse, for I was indeed feeling a bit loose. But that would be lying to myself. I wanted to refuse him, but at the same time I wanted to obey.

I uncrossed my legs. Slowly, as if in a dream, I pulled the black fabric up until it was bunched around my waist. My eyes did not leave his. It was he who first broke the stare, dropping his gaze to my exposed crotch. I

watched a grin steal over his face.

He licked his lips. "Not a natural brunette, I see."

"No," I replied, "but I prefer my hair black. It suits my character." I was amazed at my own poise.

"Oh, I don't know. Red-heads have a reputation for being fiery and passionate. Don't you think that describes you?"

"Not at all. I'm as cold-blooded as they come."

Avram grinned. He reached out a hand as if to touch me. "Oh, really?"

Instinctively, I spread my thighs wider, showing him the pink lips nestling among my russet curls. *What am I doing?* asked one part of my mind. I am never this needy, this out-of-control. I gripped the arms of the chair, knuckles white, fighting my own impulses. A bit of liquid trickled from my cleft and was absorbed by the velvet upholstery. Avram's eyes glittered. I understood that his observant gaze had not missed this detail.

It seemed that we sat frozen in this tableau for long minutes, with his blunt-fingered hand inches away from my naked sex. Touch me, I screamed internally. I bit my lip to keep myself silent. Avram seemed to be involved in some inner struggle as well, though I couldn't imagine its nature.

There was a knock on the door, and the spell broke. Burke entered, in shirt sleeves and a chef's apron. "Dinner is served," he announced evenly. He gave no indication that he noticed my ignominious position, though it could hardly have been more obvious.

"Thank you. We'll be right there." My captor and host held out his hand to me. "We can continue this after dinner." His tone left me wondering whether he meant our business discussion or our sexual confrontation.

Burke served one of the tastiest meals I have ever eaten. I was too preoccupied to enjoy it. I must have made small talk, but my attention kept returning to my miserable, swollen pussy. I hardly noticed when Burke refilled my wine glass, which seemed to empty itself of its own accord. I watched Avram's movements, decisive and yet graceful, and felt a strange hollowness in my chest.

I did notice, almost automatically, that we ate off antique china, with solid silver flatware. This guy must be really loaded. What was this proposal of his, anyway? Why did my gender or my looks matter, if he wanted me for a heist? Maybe he needed me as a decoy, to keep someone busy while he got the goods? But any hooker could do that; he wouldn't need a professional like me.

I caught Avram studying me and blushed furiously. Damn, what was it about this man that I found so unsettling? Usually I could take any guy and wrap him around my little finger. Whereas when this character turned his gaze on me, I melted into a sodden puddle of helpless lust.

I was confused and giddy when I stood up from the table. "Let's get back to business," I proclaimed. I was surprised at the slurring in my voice. The room spun around me, and I would have fallen if Avram had not caught hold of me.

"I think that is going to have to wait until tomorrow. You are very drunk, Miss Ford!" He slipped his arm around my waist to support me.

"I am not!" I exclaimed, but I knew he was telling the truth. Meanwhile, I was glorying in the strength of him, exulting despite my intoxication that he was finally touching me.

"I'll take you upstairs and put you to bed. We can continue our discussion tomorrow."

Yes! I thought. *Let's go to bed.* Meanwhile, I could barely put one foot in front of the other.

He half-carried me up to a pleasant, spacious room and sat me down on the four-poster bed. Before I could stop him, he had pulled off my boots. Then he turned to leave.

I attempted to rise and stop him. Somehow I couldn't get to my feet.

"Sleep it off, Blaine. I'll see you at breakfast."

"No, wait..."

"And I've decided not to lock you in. I know you'd never try to steal my silver. Thieves' honor and all. In any case, all the outside doors and windows are alarmed."

Damn! He was so infuriating! He closed the door behind him, and I sank back onto the pillows, raging in mingled frustration and fury.

The door opened again. "Oh, by the way, you'll find what you need in the night table drawer." He smiled, a caricature of sweetness. "Goodnight, Blaine."

"Goodnight," I mumbled. What was he talking about?

A wave of dizziness took me when I sat up. After it subsided, I pulled open the drawer next to me. I didn't know whether to laugh or scream when I saw the assortment of dildos and vibrators. Damn, damn, damn! He was the devil himself.

I turned out the light and tried to sleep. I was just too horny. Finally, I relented. I dumped my rumpled blouse and skirt on the floor. Then I chose a shiny silver, variable-speed toy and went to work on myself.

I had been in a state of continuous arousal for hours, since our encounter on the train. I expected to come almost immediately. Yet somehow, I couldn't. I savagely twisted my clit, turned the speed up to maximum, plunged the vibrator into my cunt again and again. I imagined that Avram was tied to the bed and that I was riding him mercilessly, abusing his cock while he begged for release. Oh, how I'd love to get even with him! The thought of having him in my power, of fucking him forever while he remained frustrated, brought me close, very close.

But it was only when I reversed my fantasy and imagined myself pinned beneath him that the orgasm broke over me, and washed me into temporary unconsciousness.

The climax cleared my head, burning through my alcoholic haze like sunlight through fog. It was obvious that I had to get out of here. This man was dangerous. He knew too much about me. But first, I had to relieve him of that evidence he had gathered on me. And maybe, just maybe, I could find something to incriminate him, something to keep him away from me in the future.

It shouldn't be too difficult, I reasoned, for a professional.

I put on the terry robe hanging in the closet, pocketed the miniature flashlight I always keep in my bag, and crept along the carpeted hall and down the stairs on bare feet. The silent house welcomed me.

The library door was ajar. Remembering the mahogany desk, I slipped sideways through the opening into the room. Inside, it was black velvet. Cautiously, I turned on my light and swung it around the room. One of those paintings might well conceal a safe. But first, the desk.

Picking the lock took me about thirty seconds. There were three drawers. Quickly but methodically, working hard to control my breathing, I examined their contents.

Drawer one was uninteresting in the extreme, just stationery and office supplies, meticulously organized. There was a gorgeous silver letter opener, probably an antique, which tempted me briefly, but then I reminded myself of what I was really seeking.

The second drawer held files, mostly financial records. Would any of this link him to illegal activities? I also found a small leather-bound notebook. I flipped through the pages of cryptic entries, initials, dates, times, in various colored inks. Definitely suspicious. I slid the book into the pocket of the robe.

The third drawer held only a thick manila envelope, secured with a black ribbon. I held my breath as I undid the ribbon. This could be it, just the size to hold photos or a camcorder cassette...

There was a photo inside. But not of me. The woman in the image had the delicate features of a Botticelli Madonna. (I did learn something from the nuns at Saint Theresa's, even if they thought I was irredeemable.) Chestnut curls tumbling over her shoulders, china-blue eyes brimming with intelligence, full lips curved into a half-smile that threatened to break into laughter. Who was she?

The bulk of the envelope contents consisted of two bundles of letters, the pages in one bundle penned in a bold black script, the other in a lighter, more flowery hand. I itched to read some of them, but I knew I didn't have the time. Once again, this was not what I needed to find.

As I held the envelope open to replace the letters, something shiny rolled out and landed silently on the rug. My pulse quickening, I bent to retrieve it.

In the light of my flashlight gleamed a woman's wedding ring. On a hunch, I shone the light inside. "To Olivia," the inscription read, "with my eternal love". Didn't sound like the sort of thing my urbane and ironic host would write, but then who knows? I dropped the ring back into the envelope, retied the ribbon, and carefully replaced the package where I had found it.

Well, if not the desk, perhaps I could locate a safe. I had to stand on my toes to reach the first painting. With infinite care, I nudged it aside to look behind it. Nothing but blank wall. Disappointed despite myself, I moved on to the next one.

All at once light flooded the room. "You won't find what you're looking for there, my little cat burglar." I blinked, temporarily blinded, and whirled around to face the mocking grin of my host. "I know better than to keep something that valuable in the same house as you."

Aslanyan had crept into the room on feet as bare as mine. His torso was bare, too, above his drawstring pajama pants. I fought with myself to avoid staring at his semi-nakedness, the rich olive hue of his skin, the tangled black forest of hair on his chest.

I licked my lips. My breath was ragged. My heart hammered against my ribs. My nipples ached whenever terry cloth brushed across their swollen tips. Once again, my traitorously wet pussy threatened to spill over and reveal my weakness.

Then he was towering over me, pinning my arms behind me, his warm, damp breath in my ear. "I knew that I shouldn't trust you, Blaine."

"What do you expect?" I struggled against his grip, but I might as well have been back in the handcuffs. "You kidnap me. You threaten me. Don't I have the right to look out for myself?" I glared up at him, trying my damndest to look formidable. "Anyway, I didn't take anything, though heaven knows there's stuff in here worth a fortune."

He searched my face as though seeking confirmation, his smile leeching away. Abruptly he released me and turned to the desk. He pulled out the bottom drawer. "I left this locked..." He glowered at me, clearly upset.

"I was looking for the photos and videotapes. What do you think? Look, if we're going to be partners, it has to be on an equal basis. Free choice and all. Give me the dirt you have on me, and then we can talk about your scheme, whatever it is." My wrists were still sore from his grasp. My cunt throbbed. I was trying to sound rational, but really I was begging. And not just for the tapes.

"Did you look inside the envelope?" He seemed to be ignoring my plea.

His gaze skewered me. I nodded. "But I didn't read any of the letters." He closed his eyes, as though in pain. "She's lovely," I added softly.

There was desperation in his eyes. He stared down at the carpet. "Lovely, yes. She was indeed lovely."

"Was?" I knew I was treading on risky territory. "Did she die?"

When he returned his gaze to me, his face was a mask of agony. "Die? No, she didn't die. As I told you, she was stolen."

"Stolen?"

"By a man I called my friend." No wonder he was so detached, so guarded. A flash of pity arced through my body, followed by a bolt of lust. It seemed to illumine the room. Avram looked at me, no, looked through me, his fists clenched.

I took a step in his direction, drawn by his intensity. "So now, you want revenge, right? Do you really think she's worth it?" I deliberately provoked him, wanting that passion of his turned in my direction. "Give her up, Aslanyan. You shouldn't hold on to someone who betrayed you."

Avram seemed to wake from his trance and finally to see me. "Is that so? And who should I hold on to? A deceiving little minx like you?" He took a step toward me, roughly dug his fingers into my shoulder. The robe fell

open, and I shrank backwards despite myself, shaking with mingled fear and desire. I couldn't hold his gaze.

I could feel the heat radiating from his bare flesh. I could feel the challenge of his dangerous, provocative smile. For a long moment we hung there, transfixed, silently taking each other's measure. Then he lifted me up, threw me over his shoulder and carried me up the winding staircase.

I didn't struggle. I didn't want to. Absurd visions of Scarlet O'Hara and Rhett Butler ran through my head. I expected him to throw me on the mattress, bind me to the posts, tear off my robe and ravish me. Okay, I admit, I wanted him to do that.

Instead, he positioned me gently at the edge of the bed, parted my thighs, and brought his mouth to my sex.

His nimble tongue and muscular lips vanquished me in a way that his cock never could have. I opened myself to his hot, wet strokes. I writhed and twisted, gripping the bedposts until my fingers cramped (though of course I didn't notice at the time). I screamed loudly enough to wake the neighbors, in a less exclusive area. Again and again, he brought me to the edge, then coaxed me over.

No pride, no shame, no fear: Blaine Ford, née Bridget Flanagan, allowed herself to be pleased until she was limp and sore and closer to heaven than the nuns would ever have believed.

Only then did he strip off his pajamas and reveal the granite erupting from his hairy crotch. I thought my lust was spent, yet it roused again at the sight. He slipped into my soaking, swollen cleft as smoothly and softly as I would slip a hand into an unguarded pocket. His slow, steady rhythm hypnotized me, until I felt drunk once again, dizzy, hovering in a sweet delirium.

When he finally grew urgent, though, pounding me with all the force in that muscular body, I answered him, met him thrust for thrust. And when we came together, at exactly the same moment, I found myself laughing out loud in sheer delight.

I woke to find the grayness of dawn filtering through the drapes. Avram lay on his back next to me, his black-thatched chest rising and falling with the even breath of deep sleep. I resisted the urge to brush my palm over those appealing curls. I didn't want to risk waking him.

In less than two minutes, I was dressed, minus panties of course. I transferred the notebook and my flash from the robe to my bag. Boots in hand, I tiptoed down the stairs.

I didn't look back. I didn't dare.

For a long time I stared at the front door. Avram had said that it was alarmed. Did I believe him? Anyway, what choice did I have? Turning the bolt, I slowly pulled it open, then waited, listening. Nothing. Lying bastard.

The morning was wonderfully cool and damp as I made my way down the country road lined with stone walls and fancy gates. The breeze smelled of growing things. Huge old trees twisted above me, their boughs drooping with summer foliage. I didn't know where I was, but I figured that at some point I'd find a phone where I could call a taxi. Or maybe I'd happen upon the commuter rail station. I hummed to myself, sincerely glad to be alive, to be free.

I had been walking about half an hour when I heard the car. With gated mansions on both sides, there was nowhere for me to hide. I waited until the Mercedes pulled up next to me and the window rolled soundlessly down.

"Blaine," he said. "You have something that belongs to me." The car was too dark for me to read his expression. His voice was calm, without any discernible emotion.

"I don't know what you're talking about."

"You can't lie to me, Blaine. I know you. Give me the notebook."

I pulled open the car door and confronted him. He looked disheveled and weary, dressed in a teeshirt and jeans. "Give me the photos and tapes, then, and we'll call it a deal."

He sighed. "There are no photos. No tapes. I invented that story to make you come with me. Now, why don't you be reasonable, get into the car and give me the notebook?"

No photos. No tapes. No evidence. So now he was in my power. Triumph surged briefly through me.

But why should I believe him?

"Please. Get into the car. Come back and we can talk."

Oh, I was tempted. At the same time, I was seized with a sudden panic. I remembered the feeling, only a few moments ago, the intoxicating sense of freedom. I didn't want to lose that, not ever again.

Then I remembered something else, his mouth, and the way he had opened me, set me free in a different sense altogether. Maybe I could trust him after all?

I held his eyes. "No photos? No tapes?"

He nodded.

"Thieves' honor?"

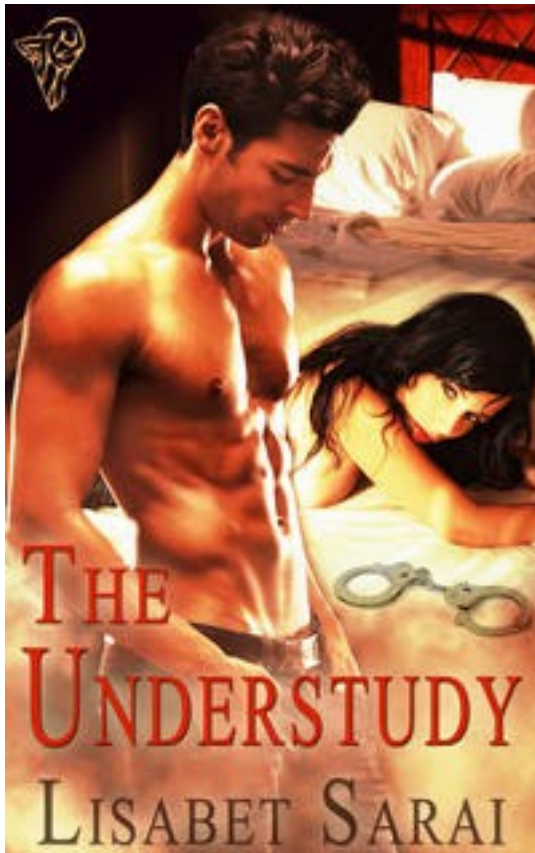
His slow smile bloomed like a rising sun. He nodded again, reached out his hand to me.

I climbed into the car and let him take me away.

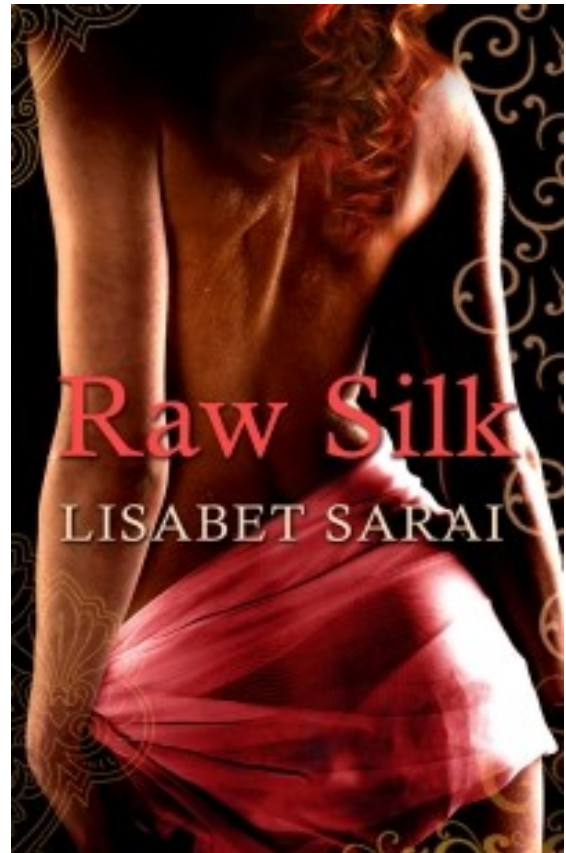
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