

JO-ANNE
VANDERMEULEN



SUDDENLY
YOUR
NIGHTMARES
HAVE COME
TRUE ...

... AND YOUR
FORBIDDEN
PASSION
MAY NOT BE
ENOUGH

CONQUER
ALL OBSTACLES

CONQUER ALL OBSTACLES



A NOVEL BY

JO-ANNE VANDERMEULEN



THE LAURUS COMPANY
NORTH TEXAS

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*Dedicated to ALL ...
who have struggled with mental illness,
family and friends who have been affected by this disease,
and
to those women who are overcoming the trauma of violence.*

YOU can CONQUER ALL OBSTACLES.



ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

*We all have choices.
Today, I choose NOT to be a victim.*

I praise the Lord, my Shepherd, for I am never alone.
Without Him, I am nothing.

*“Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil,
for you are with me; your rod and your staff, they comfort me.”*

Psalms 23:4, the Holy Bible, New International Version (NIV)[®]

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—Jo-Anne Vandermeulen

NOW

Chapter 1



NOW

Gladstone Central Hospital
Mental Health Division
Gladstone, Saskatchewan

*T*he needle scribbled over the paper near Tara Robstead's right ear. The sound reminded her of fingernails scraping down a chalkboard. Engulfed in total darkness and feeling tape pinching her forehead, she pictured a machine hooked to her scalp assigning instructions to the instrument.

Turn that damn machine off, she yelled from the confines of her mind. Her pulse hammered inside her head like an air pump expanding her skull, but her body was like an unresponsive carcass.

Could use some blankets in here. Can anyone hear me? Hey, fellas, you trying to conserve heat in this building, or what? Her body remained motionless, strapped to the stark white hospital bed.

The door creaked open, as if pushing against the silence. Soft footsteps advanced, then stopped.

A sheet covers nothing. Might as well be naked. Guys, I feel like a specimen here. Eyes, I command you to open. Open now!

Nothing.

So dark.

Why am I here? Hello?

A soft hum came from above her that seemed to be growing louder.

Would somebody please fix that annoying light fixture?

Answer me, damn it! Who are you? The machine by Tara's left ear took on an extra beat.

I need to see who this person is. I need to be prepared.

What if it's him? Beads of sweat formed above her upper lip.

Why don't you speak so I'll know who you are? Not that I can distinguish voices. All of the voices sounded muffled, as if caught in the tunnel of a lead pipe.

I want to contribute to the conversation he must be having with himself. That is, if it is him.

The needle stopped. A rhythmic beat pulsed. The door creaked open again.

I should give that door a name. Anything that makes that much noise deserves a name. The confident click of not one but two pairs of shoes announced their entrance.

I know, I'll make this a game and call it "Blind Woman's Trivia." I'll get more points for guessing the identity of people who enter my domain—my castle. Yes, I like that much better. Appear before the draw-bridge, and you shall enter on my command. You are allowed to play the game only if I can properly identify you.

"Any change, Doctor Frances?" a deep voice asked.

No, no! You have to play by the rules. Can't use names unless you are ready to quit. Okay, Doctor Frances, you're out of here. You must now only watch us having fun.

"I am afraid it doesn't look good," Doctor Frances responded. "If she fails to respond in the next few hours, we will have to try her on some other mood stabilizers. If increasing the valproic acid is ineffective, we will have to try electroconvulsive therapy."

Come on, guys! You said that the last time you came in here. Don't sound so pessimistic. I'm going to have to deduct points if I don't get some good news here.

"You're going to shock her brain? But she looks like she's just sleep-

ing,” the third voice, a new visitor, responded.

“Some patients don’t appear sick even though their illness is severe.” Papers rattled near her right ear as Doctor Frances examined the data on the accordion stack of paper accumulating neatly under the printer. “It’s what makes this form of mental illness so difficult. Patients can go on living what appears to be a productive, happy life while masking the true anguish that fights constantly in their mind. We will increase her medication before we apply any electroconvulsive therapy.”

“I just never would have guessed that her moods were associated with a mental illness,” the new visitor added, a tinge of bewilderment in his voice.

Tara heard footsteps, then shuffling steps around her bed. She caught a whiff of Brut cologne and knew it belonged to the man with the deep voice. He had been there often. He raised his arms, stretching over her head. *Must be checking on intravenous bags or tubes, or something like that*, Tara mused.

Guys, you know you can talk to me. I’m right here. As for Doctor Frances, you can’t play anymore. And as for the other man, my new visitor, I’ll have to give you ten points for remaining anonymous. You sound like a nice man, but I’ve been wrong before. In fact, that’s what got me here in the first place. I’m always wrong.

“I feel I never paid enough attention. I should’ve been there for her,” the new visitor spoke. She felt her blankets tighten, as if his fists curled around the end of the layered cotton sheets, then a slow release as the fabric tucked evenly around her shoulders. “I should have seen it coming.”

Her arm was lifted. Pressure cuffed around her wrist.

Doctor Frances continued, “I really think we have to be careful not to place blame. Instead, it would be more productive to understand bipolar disorder. Symptoms are not always obvious. The patient may appear to be relatively asymptomatic—or normal, if you will—or the patient may have the more recognizable manic episodes, where they experience a soar of high energy one minute and dive to an extreme low mood the next. Unless the patient chooses to reveal their honest feelings and thoughts, the severity of their mental state can go undiagnosed for years. They may appear healthy and actually be quite ill. They may take on

denial as a form of reality and refuse to admit anything is wrong.

How come I can't seem to see it coming? I try so hard to look for clues, anything that would indicate danger. But, no, I just walk right in and sit right down. Hey, I think there's a song about that.

"Walk right in, sit right down."

Damn, I can never remember the words. Can always get the tune though.

"In Tara's case," Doctor Frances continued, "her negative test results lead us to conclude that she has been in mental denial. In her mind, she detects danger most of the time. She learned to hide her true inner state as a coping mechanism."

"But for her to be lying there for no apparent reason. I don't understand why she doesn't snap out of it." The new visitor's voice quivered as he spoke.

"At times, it only takes a single terrifying event to trigger deep depression at a level this severe, especially if one is already suffering from post-traumatic syndrome."

"How long will she be like this?"

"I cannot give you an answer right now. As doctors, we are often left perplexed. When the EEG results don't correspond with the symptoms, it is very difficult to determine the severity of the condition; it is truly trial and error finding the proper treatment. We have started Tara on a low dose of valproic acid, which is a mood stabilizer. If there is no improvement, we will increase the dosage as the day proceeds."

There was a long pause and a heavy sigh.

"I have to be honest with you. Recovery lies in the will of the patient. It is up to her if she wants to get better or not," Doctor Frances said.

You mean I have all the control? You seem to think I'm sick. Well, I am. I'm sick and tired of living with all these psychos in my life.

Rick? Is that you? Are you my visitor? Tara swallowed hard, the action causing the tape to tighten across her forehead.

It better not be ... Oh, my God! I thought he was dead. Devin? Her heart rattled in her chest like a drum roll before a hanging. I can't do this again. Don't make me. I can't. I have nothing left.

Her limp hand dropped, and she heard the click of a pen and

some scribbling. Someone touched her eye and pulled the eyelid upward, forcing it to open. "Without a proper diagnosis, there is no treatment. With no treatment, there is no cure," Doctor Frances explained.

Well, if that's all it takes, I can tell you everything right now. But, first, where did that light go? I think I know who my visitor is, but I can't be sure. If you'd just pry up these heavy lids for a second more, I know I could identify my mystery visitor. As for what's wrong with me, I can tell you everything you need to know. You just need to listen to me. I can recall everything that happened. But, no, that's not what you want to hear, is it?

The wand screeched wildly on the machine beside her head, the needle scraping faster than before.

"Is there anything I can do?" the new visitor questioned.

"You had better leave now," Doctor Frances said with a firm tone. She imagined his handsome head turned toward the monitor, watching the needle tracing madly up and down the page. "Later, when we get Tara settled, I will need you to come back and talk to her."

You want to know how I'm feeling? God, I hate that word—feeling!

Suddenly, what sounded like running sneakers pounded the tiled floor. *Great, now my castle is a gymnasium? The basketball player is going in for a lay-up before the net. He shoots, and the orange orbit remains suspended in the air ...*

My new visitor is leaving? I thought you wanted to know how I was feeling. Come back. Come back! I need to tell you what happened to me. You need to take some of the blame. This isn't all my fault!

"We need some help in here," Doctor Frances' stern voice called loudly, along with some garbled and incoherent words.

Get the whistle out of your mouth so I can understand you. And stop blowing it, I'm right here.

"Code sixty-six," Doctor Frances yelled.

You want me to talk to you? How can I talk to you when I can't even wake up? ♦

SIX MONTHS EARLIER

SIX MONTHS EARLIER

Tara Robstead's lungs fought for air as she watched the man she loved slump in defeat. The meeting had ended ten minutes ago when the twenty-five teachers they worked with had stomped out of the library. She chose to stay. Tara wouldn't see it any other way after what Josh Henderson had done for her. But did he realize she was still there, sitting in her faithful position front row center?

"I'm here for you if you need to talk," she spoke from across the empty room. Her loud voice bounced off the pasty cinderblock walls lined with bookshelves. "It's not your fault that Alex insisted on a need for more cutbacks."

Unlike her strong voice, Josh's voice had cracked when he delivered Alex's news to the room full of teachers. Remembering the tears that had threatened to spill from his moist eyes, Tara lowered her chin as she prayed for strength, unsure if the whispered words were for him, herself, or both of them.

Her mind slipped back to their first encounter. The clear images sprang to life.

Her tears wouldn't stop ... his arms opened, wrapping around her shaking body ... she didn't want to leave Rick, but she had no choice.

Tara sank back in the cheap stacking chair. An oversized cannonball remained in her gut. If only the cumbersome weight in her boss's stomach could shift, Josh could breathe for both of them.

Josh's deep, heavy sigh broke the silence in the room. "How can a new Assistant to the Director be better for the students," he cleared his throat, "if I have to cut another teacher? My promotion shouldn't affect others like this."

"But you had no choice," Tara countered, realizing she was stuck to the smooth surface of the chair as she tried to rise. She lifted her legs one at a time before extricating herself from the seat. Sitting in the same spot for two hours had taken its toll on her cotton outfit. Her fingertips brushed across the thin fabric of her mini-skirt, releasing it from its suction hold on her bare thighs. "You had to listen to Alex."

Glancing down as she stood, she noticed multiple creases in the front of her matching flowered blouse. The electric fans placed at each room's entrance only pushed around the dry summer air and did nothing to lessen the heat in Saskatchewan's Prairie Region. It wasn't until now that Tara realized how hot she really was. She sucked in her stomach and pressed the fabric down against her moist body and into her belted waist until the skirt and top looked like one.

She stepped around the clutter of chairs that had been pulled out from the rectangular table and stood within inches of Josh's deflated posture. He seemed to see only the sheet of paper before him. Tara's eyes traced to the spot where he stared: "*PROMOTION*." At the bottom of the neatly typed page was the name of the Director of Education: Alex Conway.

More images popped into her active mind.

His tears mixing with hers ... mingling stories of tender loneliness and broken hearts ... hugging ... kissing ... naked bodies connecting, quenching an uncontrollable need ...

"I like your tie," Tara's soft voice hinted playful sarcasm. Perspiration rolled down from her long neck, trickled down her cleavage, and cupped around each breast. She thought of the last time they had made love. Her nipples instantly grew hard.

Josh moved as if her words had awakened him from his hypnotic state. He reached up for his glasses and danced them off his face, the

life in his expression gone. His usually twinkling brown eyes appeared distant, until they began a slow crawl up Tara's body.

"Is that a smirk I see on your face?" Tara whispered, feeling more like a teenager than a woman of thirty-five.

Thoughts of what she might have done in her younger years to raise his mood washed through her mind: Standing and waving her arms in the air like a fan during a Roughrider football game, painting her face green and screaming at all the horrific calls, and wearing a watermelon as a hat.

Now, maybe she should shake green and white pom-poms at her side and scream through a megaphone: *It's time to blow this Popsicle stand! So, you lost this one*, she visualized her hip snapping out to the side and the entire fabric of her skirt flipping up over both butt cheeks, *and I still love you!* Tara covered her mouth to stifle a giggle.

Josh chuckled as if he read her mind. "Now, how can I not smile when I have a goddess in front of me?" The deepness of his voice contrasted the expression he wore just a few seconds before.

"You are just too kind." Tara's lips parted, her tongue slowly traced the fullness of her bottom lip. A gush of desire filled her, igniting her face to a beam.

"You were awesome," she quickly changed the subject, so as not to draw too much attention to herself. This was neither the time nor the place.

Joshua's head dropped and shook back and forth. "I really hate my job sometimes." His form remained bowed, his chin disappearing into his chest. He seemed to be examining the sheaf of notes in front of him, but she knew better. His tailor-made navy suit seemed to sag, pulling his broad shoulders down with his mood. He raked his long fingers through his thick, full head of dark brown curls.

Tara moved closer to him. She gently placed her hand on the back of his neck. "Hey, someone's got to do it, and I thought you were marvelous." The clean scent of his shampoo permeated her nostrils, and she could feel his heat radiating into her palm. She imagined how she could really take his mind off his work.

He raised his head, pulled his tall frame out of his chair, and stood in front of her. "I think your words are just a little biased," his gaze slid

to hers, “but thanks anyway.” He lifted a stray lock of her black hair that was curling around her chin and gently tucked it behind her left ear, being careful not to disturb the diamond stud piercing at the top. “You are so beautiful, more like an angel.”

Her eyes closed. She tingled under his gentle touch, as if under a magical spell.

He pulled her against his firm body. Could he feel her heart thumping through her blouse? She swallowed and opened her eyes.

His lips were relaxed and slightly parted. His head leaned down.

She yearned to graze her lips across his for just a taste of him. Reality became nonexistent. Everything was forgotten except the memory of his lips on hers.

And then he stopped.

Tara remained standing, poised to meet his kiss.

It was as if a warning alarm had fired in Josh. His eyes grew wide. He stepped back from her trance. “I’ve got to go pick up my boys.” He stared at his watch, more out of habit than necessity.

“What?” She stepped back.

“You know my family comes first.” A muscle worked on the inside of his jaw, just like it always did when he was angry.

“This isn’t about your kids.” Angrily, she placed her hands on her slender hips and widened her stance. “So don’t try to use them as your excuse.” Tara pushed past him, and Josh stumbled back against the chair.

“When are you going to tell me the truth? What is the real reason we can’t be seen together? Why can’t you just admit what’s bothering you?” Bending down, she began flipping the stacks of paper on the tables they had used in their meeting, bouncing them as if handling a deck of cards at a Blackjack table.

She glared back up at his wide eyes and open mouth. “All I ask from you is a little love and respect,” she spat through clenched teeth. “You got the loving right, I have to admit, but the respect? When are you going to think about me and my needs for a change? And I don’t mean in the bedroom!” Her hands were moving in fast motion, scooping spoons, napkins, pens, and anything she could grab to fire into a pile. “When are you going to start looking at yourself and get honest about what *you* want in life, so you can stop lying to yourself and to me?”

“Now wait a minute here.” His hands gestured like a cop directing traffic. “You know the deal. What if someone were to walk in?”

She stopped. “And so what if someone did? I’m sure your buddy, Alex, wouldn’t scratch you off the precious application list for Assistant Directorship.” She glared and then began stacking chairs. The noise escalated, competing with their voices.

“When will you learn? The world doesn’t revolve around only you. I have other responsibilities.” His hands caught her wrists.

Tara couldn’t move, numbed by the sudden forced restriction. Her inner ears felt as if she had just dived twelve feet under water; the pressure felt as though it would burst her eardrums.

“This promotion means everything to me.” He stared directly into Tara’s eyes.

Tara struggled for control. “What makes you think changing jobs will help your boys when you’ll be working longer hours and will be home less?” The words came out through her clenched teeth.

Never taking his eyes off of hers, his grip tightened. “Just leave my stuff alone,” Josh ground out the syllables. “I can do it myself!”

Words and even the odd physical blow to her body she could handle, but not being constrained. When she heard a man’s deep, threatening voice, it was as if her world was going to collapse, leaving her in the rubble—the same garbage she’d crawled out from under following her twelve years of marriage. Never would she be able to ignore the condescending tone of someone being mad at her.

Tara’s hands trembled. She yanked her fists free from his grasp. Twirling around, she marched toward the closed door in the same manner her coworkers had done earlier. Stopping, she turned back and shouted, “You know, I just don’t get you,” pointing a finger with a waggle. She looked at him with a wide-eyed glare. “*If* you are really standing up for what is right, then *why* are you not standing up for what is right *here*?” Her arm made a sweeping wave across the room where he had just delivered his bad news to the teachers. “I can’t stand here and watch this brick wall spring up between us anymore.”

In just three strides, she reached the exit. In one continuous motion, she flung the door open, marched through it, and slammed it shut.

The loud bang reverberated within her head while she watched a

half dozen pairs of shoes rock on the boot rack, domino each other, and tumble off the top shelf. She pushed out the breath she was holding and watched the wooden plank wobble and vibrate in the same frequency as her racing heart.

Tara needed time to cool off. Josh walked out of the library and down the long, vacant hallway that was walled with steel lockers. The click of his dress shoes echoed with every step. The only shred of light seeped from under the bottom of her fifth grade classroom door. He stopped, knocked three raps, paused, two more, then continued on down the hall, following the red glow of each exit light.

Entering the staff room, he went directly to the crusted coffee pot that had been left stinking on the burner. He rinsed the container under the tap and then switched off the machine.

The window air conditioner roared as he walked into the darkness of his ten by twelve foot office and made his way around four heavy chairs that circled a round conference table. He walked past his desk that was cluttered with open folders, stacked textbooks, and piled one-inch binders, and sank into the worn green couch located on the adjacent wall next to the heavily draped window. Resting his head back, he closed his eyes. He would just wait. How many times this week had she yelled at him, expressed her hatred, and tried to change his way of thinking? He couldn't possibly think of only her. Could she not see what this promotion would mean for his boys? If only she would listen and just back off, life would be a whole lot easier.

Josh rose, walked behind his desk, and sat down. He stared at the four by six inch framed photograph of the parents standing behind the two children propped on chairs in typical staged fashion. Could those four smiles work miracles and fool others, or were they just trying to convince themselves?

In the breast pocket of his dress shirt, he felt for his glasses and put them on to again view this image of a perfect foursome.

He barely recognized his own family.

Sure, the picture had been taken over seven years ago, but the boys looked so small. Had they really been that young for what seemed like a snapshot taken only yesterday? Where had the time gone? Nathan now

rose above his own father, and Michael's arms, when stretched over his head, could graze the ceiling as if dunking a basketball.

Josh chuckled while studying their expressions: Nathan's cute smirk as he got the final jab into his brother's ribs, and Michael's serious expression as if afraid the legs might give out beneath his perch.

Then there was Margaret standing beside him. He frowned, and his breath caught in his throat. It must have been a good day for her. She looked presentable from this distance, wearing her usual smug expression. Only if standing right next to her would someone have a clue. Only then could they see her glassy, blood-shot eyes, the red nose, and smell the stench of alcohol on her breath.

Josh glared at his own reflection and shook his head. He had been beaming into the lens with pride and contentment. How could he have spent all those years living a lie? His motto, "Fake it 'til you make it," got him where he was today. It had worked for him then, but would it work for him now? Perhaps it was time for a change. Maybe it *was* time to confess his secret passion, as Tara had said, and become honest with himself and everyone around him. Lay the cards face up on the table, and let the chips fall where they may. For once, it would be nice to have a genuine smile in a photo.

His gaze returned to his boys. In another year, Nathan would be going to college. Matthew would go in two more years. Josh swallowed hard as he thought of the promises he had sworn to keep.

He laid his head on the desk and squeezed his eyes shut. The bills had piled up. Finding money to deposit into their education fund every month became more and more difficult.

Lifting his head, Josh picked a paper off the stack. He read the Assistant Director job description. Doing the math with the increased income released the tightness in his chest and sent a flutter stirring high and tight within his stomach. Being Assistant Director of Education for the final years before his retirement would solve all of his financial problems and allow him to meet the goal he had always intended for his sons. His family would be set for life.

But what about Tara and all of the promises he had made to her? His chin dropped to his chest. What did he have to look forward to but another decade of pretending he was content without her in his life?

He had no choice. He just couldn't have both.

A knock interrupted Josh's thoughts as he quickly shoved the paper under the stack of files. Three more slow raps, a pause, and then one more could faintly be heard over the loud roar of the air conditioner.

"Enter." His voice sounded gruff as his eyes focused on the backside of the closed door of the principal's office. He could not swallow the lump in his throat.

"Come in." His voice softened as he tried to concentrate on the firm decision he had made.

Slowly, the door opened. Tara's form gracefully slid through, her arms hidden behind her. His breath sucked in.

The backside of her body closed the door. The lock clicked.

He held his breath as he examined the long muscular legs that traveled forever up from her high heels to the curve of her hips, right up to her voluptuous breasts.

There was more to her than her obvious beauty. Josh envisioned her perfectly straight teeth and her full lips drawn back into a wide smile. Her entire face glowed after they had spent time together. The striations of darker blue in her irises sparkled when she stared adoringly into his eyes as if he were the only man alive. She hung on his every word, causing him to feel that what he had to say was of the utmost importance. She always seemed to know how to respond to make him feel like a man.

Tara prowled slowly around the dark office. She seductively dipped her chin, causing the black strands of bone straight hair to swung forward and cup around her oval face. She paused in front of the diplomas hanging above the bookshelves, examining each as if she were actually reading the fine print.

Every time she was near him, he dissolved like a sugar cube in water. He soaked in the sweet taste of their combined concoction.

Her hands were clasped behind her back. She totally ignored his presence, but continued to advance.

His heart raced, pulsated inside his ears. His mouth was instantly dry as he caught a whiff of her sweet rose fragrance mixed with heat like an aroused feline beast. He imagined his whiskers catching on her soft hair as he breathed in all of her sensuality.

She was so close.

Through the thin fabric of her blouse, he could see her breasts lift as she inhaled. His mouth watered, and he swallowed the moisture. His hands wanted to grab her and squeeze her firm muscles within the short grey skirt.

He stood and stepped closer to her back. "I'm sorry," he whispered into her ear, nuzzling his nose into the blanket of softness. His body pressed firmly against hers. She released a heavy sigh as her body shook.

"When are you going to tell her?" Tara spoke without turning around, as if speaking to the walls.

His arms hugged her body. Her head fell forward and then tipped back to rest on his shoulder.

"Let's talk later," he whispered. His lips grazed up the side of her long neck. The soft skin pulsed under his tongue. He nibbled her lobe and could hear his own breath quicken in rhythm. Never before had a woman affected him in such a manner. It was pure lust. A sensual heat of madness swirled in his groin. His body burned.

Her fingers found his belt, button, and then his zipper. She traced her full lips with her tongue and then gasped as she found him at full erection.

He bulged with hunger as he pressed himself against the back of her skirt. He wanted nothing in the way, only to feel her moistness surrounding him, her muscles tightening and constricting as she took him in and swallowed him whole.

"I need you." His warm breath exhaled into her ear. His head was dizzy, as if in another world with only one thought on his mind: how he would love to take her right here, right now. But, no, he wanted that ultimate pleasure of pure passion—seeing her fully satisfied.

"Slow down, baby." He breathed heavily down her neck. He kissed the side of her throat, tasting the salt. Releasing his hold, he placed his palm over her mouth to silence her panting. "Shhh," he murmured in a deep voice, cupping his hand over her lips. His two fingers entered her mouth. She caressed down both tips with her rough tongue and then sucked hard.

Another moan escaped. She shifted her hips back, pressing harder as if she couldn't get enough.

His fingers found the buttons on her blouse. Expertly, he guided each button through its hole. A soft kiss at the back of her neck for each

release added to the slow and gentle rhythm.

His moist breath reflected back onto his face.

Her hot skin quivered.

Reaching under her blouse, he fingered the bra hooks open. Slowly, he traced the contours of her breasts, while the backs of his hands spanned out as if to remove the day's creases from the garment.

A deeper groan escaped from her throat.

Now, everything about her was inside his head as his traveling mouth rode over her tiny goose bumps. Her skin tickled the palm of his open hand. He released a button, and her skirt fell to the floor.

He spun her around and effortlessly lifted her onto the edge of the solid mahogany desk. Leaning into her, he kissed her hard. His teasing tongue flicked and contacted hers.

Sliding his hand up the inside of her thighs, he sank to his knees and kissed the exact path his hand had previously explored. The soft flesh on her legs muffled his ears as his lips reached her center.

She was soaking. The most ultimate pleasure had just begun.

Everything about her tantalized all of his senses at once, all in perfect rhythm—touch, smell, taste, and sound; so sweet.

Her breathing quickened.

His lips sucked while his tongue flicked her swollen nub.

Her body rocked with each stroke, vibrating into his hands that were cupped firmly around her buttocks. She gasped as her body tightened and shuttered.

Josh rose up, standing tall between her quivering thighs. Tara's arms were around his neck, and the motion pulled her body against his. She wrapped her legs tightly around his waist, hugging his body. His cock plunged deep inside her hot, dripping cavern. Rocking back and forth, his manhood throbbed quicker by the second.

All muscles taut, she arched her back, and lifted her hips. She knew exactly what to do. With one arm she reached behind her and cleared a spot on the top of his desk, never missing a beat.

He rose above her and entered her again. All momentum focused inside. Her internal vise pulsated, milked him in spastic motion. He pumped his entire being into complete oblivion. The rush exploded inside his head and erupted from the length of his manhood. Jolts of

electricity sparked his entire body into a seizure of stars.

He was still, floating somewhere between this world and another. Stroking his back, Tara giggled between short bursts of air.

“What’s so funny?” Josh asked, still trying to catch his breath.

“We’ve been sneaking around for over two years, and I don’t even know how you like your eggs cooked.”

Josh turned to straighten his disheveled clothing.

Tara stood naked and grabbed his arm. A stern disapproving look replaced the smirk. “I deserve my ‘happily ever after,’ too.” The tears glistening in her eyes were close to brimming over. He had never seen her cry, not even while telling him the horrific stories of what she had experienced with Rick, how much work she had to do to make up for his lack of parenting, and the bruises that were left on her body when she didn’t measure up to his standards.

“I’m going to tell her soon.” Fastening his belt, he smoothed his hair back, tucking the unruly curls behind both ears. He deserved happiness, just as much as she.

Her hand clutched tighter around his forearm, a deep crease formed between her eyebrows, and her full lips pressed into a fine line.

“I promise.” His thumb moved up the bridge of her dainty nose, smoothed the wrinkle with gentle umbrella-shaped strokes, and then moved onto the forehead and through the follicles of her hairline. Her eyes fluttered closed, and her grip loosened on his arm.

He couldn’t let her go.

Suddenly, there was a loud knock on the door. The voice on the other side yelled, “I know you’re in there!” The door rattled as if it would soon come off its hinges. “Let me in.”

“Oh, my God, it’s her,” Josh mouthed to Tara. His heart pounded like a sledgehammer, and his body lost all of its strength. He felt as though he might pass out. ✧

NOW

NOW

Gladstone Central Hospital
Mental Health Division
Gladstone, Saskatchewan

This is jail—total confinement. There's no comfort when I'm wrapped like a cocoon. Tara wanted to cry, but couldn't.

Why does everyone insist on cuddling me? The doctors, nurses, and even that nice sounding man keep tucking me in. I'm no baby. I want some answers. Her muscles refused to move. It was an effort to breathe.

I can manage anything in life. I'll prove they're wrong. I can do it.

She imagined herself a smiling clown, simply juggling three balls. The circus music blared through the speakers, and dust entered her nostrils, along with the stench of fresh manure.

Isn't life a simple and manageable act to please the audience?

The spectators rose in the stands, grinned, and clapped their hands, until she heard a synchronous rumble of astonished gasps escape from the hundreds of mouths. Their bulging eyes stared and waited for the show to go on. *I won't let you down. I'll give you what you want.*

"Throw in the last ball," the clown yelled toward the audience.

A shadow in the sidelines flinched.

She squinted past the halogen lights, trying to recognize the bulky form, unsure if he was someone familiar or another stranger entering her ring. Again, Tara called to the mysterious human form, *"Hey, Mister, what are you waiting for? They're all waiting."*

Slowly, he shook his head no in response to her command.

"Come on, toss it to me, I can do this with my eyes closed." Tara's voice took on a teasing quality, as if she was daring someone to walk the same tightrope she had just crossed.

The man shrugged and then attempted to lift the massive black ball in his muscle-bound arms. He looked like a competitor lifting very heavy dumbbells in a weight-lifting competition. His legs wobbled under the extreme weight.

Tara tossed the three balls, rolling them rhythmically in the air. *"Your job is easy: just wait for my signal, then throw it to me,"* she called over to the man.

"Hey, musicians, you forget the drum roll?" The crowd grew silent. The fluorescent spotlights stopped wandering over the walls of the circus tent and beamed solely on her. Beads of sweat drenched her forehead, threatened to roll down her face. She concentrated on the three balls juggling before her eyes. A sideward glance, one more signal, her chin bounced up and down in time to her flipping hands.

She stopped. *"I need to hear some banging on those drums,"* she yelled over her shoulder to the orchestra who looked as if they had been paused with a remote and had decided to watch rather than do their job. *"Don't you guys know what I want? Do I have to do everything myself?"*

"Get this stupid coat off of me. Now!" She dropped the three balls beside her bare feet that were black with filth. Her toes disappeared into the soft dirt. She tugged down on her coat and wiggled to bring her elbow back up through the body.

"Who's sewn my cuffs together?" There appeared to be no opening as Tara continued to struggle with the jacket.

No matter how hard she tried to pull her arms through, the material stuck. Now it wasn't her arms that moved, it was the fabric. As if alive, the material cinched together like a boa, clutching tighter and tighter around her wrists.

Her eyes grew wide. Her hands were stuck down at her sides, strapped in long bandages of cotton fabric. She gulped for air.

Now she couldn't exhale. The cloth wound tighter and tighter around her body, squeezing the air from her lungs.

She was trapped. ♦