

Alexis J. Levi

TAME ME IF YOU CAN

a novel

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Cover design by A.J. Levi
Translated by Carmen Bitsch
Title ID: 7339728
ISBN-13: 978-1548792077

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To my big, wonderful, loud, vivacious and solicitous family.

I have finished this book.

You can stop announcing wanted posters.

Prologue

Bell Torres looked terrified at the few ruins of her pitiful existence. After a short inventory there were a suitcase full of useful clothes, a broken TV, an empty bank account, a laptop and spare car key.

Sky LaVerne, this mendacious bastard, became the second worst disaster of her life. He had just run away with everything that had been dear and precious to her. Apart from her valuables he took her unlimited optimism, exploited her blind confidence, and her childlike carelessness. Bell's cheeks burned with shame as she remembered the unfortunate event barely an hour ago:

Dressed as a feathered chicken, the figurehead of her present job at Paris Fried Chicken, she arrived at six o'clock in the evening sweating and completely at the end of her tether in her current home.

'Oooh, Baby, do it again.' Bell heard the slimy voice of the cheating bastard, Sky LaVerne.

'Do you think I should bend so far,' asked a female Daisy Duck, 'or is it better this way?'

Giggling.

Murmuring.

Rumbling.

Bell pulled her tired red-stocked chicken legs up the steep staircase to Sky LaVerne's loft, while her yellow-blue striped cockscomb grazed on the ceiling. She stepped through the tin-gray open door and found herself in front of an almost unforgettable sight.

'Oh yes, deeper, touch him deeper,' Sky cooed like a pubescent eunuch.

Bell saw the bumpy butt of a Barbie doll come true in the part that represented the living room of the generous loft. Deep down, Barbie struggled together with Sky to lift up a TV - Bell's TV.

Sky, this horny monkey, stood next to Barbie and gagged blatantly into her deep, bulging cleavage.

Bell looked around. 'What the hell is going on here?' she shouted breathlessly into the cool air of the loft and became aware of what was happening at the same moment.

It hit her like a hammer. The entire apartment was emptied. All furniture had disappeared. The wide, king-sized bed, which had been visible from the hall-like living room, as there were no walls. The large comfortable sofa, the corner with Sky's precious toilet bowls - all had vanished into thin air. What on earth had happened?

The poor Paris Fried Chicken scratched herself helplessly and disbelievingly on her white-feathered chest, her cockscomb quivering furiously.

In the meantime the malicious couple had noticed Bell's arrival and the TV landed with a loud crash on the tiled kitchen floor. Like Bell's life, the screen shattered into thousands of shimmering parts.

'Just look at what you've done!' Sky muttered in Bell's direction. 'You ruined your TV.'

What she had done? 'Bingo, darling. The key word is my TV,' Bell said dangerously calm and with folded claws.

'Now don't be so fussy,' Sky muttered, shrugging his slender shoulders. Barbie nodded in agreement.

Really! This bitch had no saying here at all!

Bell tried to stare at the high halogen lamp, but her gaze was always distracted by Barbie's monstrous fake tits. Perhaps she had lesbian tendencies, because she always had to stare at these tits, for God's sake! Bell puffed. She was eager to calm her breathing, hoping that this dreadful dream would dissolve into air if she could finally wake up. But she already knew that she was neither sleeping nor dreaming.

In the meantime, the treacherous couple had moved inconspicuously closer to the entrance which was blocked by the chicken.

'Traitor,' Bell hissed, giving him an evil look from the big, orange-red chicken's beak.

With a start, Sky and his new girlfriend pushed through the entrance door, turned around there and announced bluntly, 'Bye, bye Baby, no offense. A small advice for your future: Get yourself some personality!' He pointed to Barbie's boobs.

'Oh, that's what you call it,' said a deeply wounded, quivering chicken with a scornful look at the other woman's boobs.

Bonnie and Clyde ran down the stairs boisterously and went on and off a few seconds later.

Of course, Sky LaVerne was a treacherous, characterless son-of-a-bitch. Unfortunately, he wasn't a complete idiot and for good measure he took all of Bell's cash and the hard-earned savings in her bank account. On top, he took her old, beloved 1992 Renault.

But his icing on the cake was Miss Mega-Boobs, who cheekily waved from the passenger seat at the helpless chicken, when Bell saw the two of them taking off in her car, and Sky blew a last dramatic kiss at her. Their malicious cackling sounded painfully in Bell's feather covered ears before it got lost in the sound of the Parisian rush hour traffic. A hysterical laugh escaped her lips.

This six feet tall Barbie with her melon-sized fake boobs and inch-thick make-up probably thought she had found her prince charming. Bell remembered their first meeting, about a week ago, in a cafe in downtown Paris.

'Bell, this is Pimkie, an incredibly talented colleague of mine,' muttered Sky.

Colleague? This scrounger never worked!

Piggy, or Pimpie, or whatever her name was, gave a loud scream. 'Uuuhhh, that's little Belli, how cute,' the woman squeaked. Bell would have slapped her on the spot if Sky had not stood beside her.

'Bell has no interest in art,' Sky said just snobby, 'she's more of ... how can I say ... the banal type.'

Bell didn't believe her ears. Just wait!

'Oh, Sky, Darling,' Bell squeaked, imitating Pimpie, 'that must be the nice colleague of you who visited you in prison after you went swimming in the Paris sewage treatment plant.' Bell covered her face and sighed dramatically. 'Oh dear, isn't he doing everything just to become famous? Got in the middle of the shit, just to experience the feelings of his toilet bowls,' she sighed theatrically, 'isn't he sooo gifted and creative as an artist?'

Blondie wrinkled her nose, Sky coughed.

Bell congratulated herself for this theatrical masterpiece. Anyway, now he was gone. With Barbie. And with all her stuff.

Hours later a sad chicken with a folded gaudy chicken tail in her lap sat on a rickety camping chair in Sky LaVernes empty loft in the outskirts of Paris. It rubbed its forehead, as if it could thus undo the whole disaster that had hit it so unprepared.

Once again, Bell scolded herself for her unlimited naivety when it came to her fellow human beings. Again and again she became the victim of such rotten eggs like Sky LaVerne. Not that she'd ever loved him. No way! She wasn't that type. This darn love thing had been off for Bell a long time ago. But she had felt a certain kind of friendship for him, when she had moved into his chaotic loft on the outskirts of Paris seven months ago, and stayed with him until today. She had sacrificed seven months of her life for this bastard!

During this time, he had offered her his company and had been an interesting conversation partner. He had never asked her to give more than she was ready to tell. He had contented himself with Bell's vague indications of her childhood. Since he had liked to speak himself the most, he hadn't realized that he knew almost nothing about Bell. After all, he had enough intellect that Bell hadn't been bored with him. He was thin, almost skinny and blond, not at all the type of man whom she usually found attractive, but somehow she was attracted by his extroversion. In retrospect, Bell could not tell what she had found so great about him. Only once, months ago, he had slept with her. Sex had been a pathetic farce and he had been done faster than Bell could say Amen. 'That was really a big blow, Baby,' Sky said, gasping for air after an accomplished sex act, where he had competed with Speedy Gonzales.

After that he never touched her again.

Of course, Bell blamed herself. She knew she would feel nothing great during lovemaking. No overwhelming feelings, no blood rushing through the veins, no hot bodies that moved in perfect harmony. Bell would never experience the fairy tale of the prince, of the one person in the world, the one and only counterpart who was able to bring absolute fulfillment to body and soul.

Often for days afterwards she could not even look at her reflection in the mirror, as she hated herself for her self-imposed emotional poverty. Bell had left everything in her childhood that went beyond purely superficial feelings.

But perhaps she could have done more? Maybe she could have acted as if ...! She would surely have been a woman amongst millions of others, who became Oscar winning actresses and screamed their heads off in a rather insignificant act. Well, life is a game. That's how it goes. Lying and cheating. Hiding and deceiving. Deceived and being deceived.

It was all relative. That's Life, Baby!

Oh, how many times had she admonished herself not to place her inherent confidence too carelessly? But she longed so much for company that she was often too confident in her intuition about other people. At least with material things, she often was not careful enough. I'm really hopelessly messed-up, she thought.

Okay, there it goes. Now the really destructive phase of her self-pity began. Her spirits crashed into the ground. She crouched on the pathetic chair and noticed that it was already getting dark. She rubbed her red, sparsely feathered chicken legs and her extremely lifelike plastic claws clattered on the bare concrete floor.

Clack.

Clack. Clackkkk.

How many hours had she already been sitting here, she mused. Bell had no more sense of time. She pulled off the chicken head. Her hair was tangled and sweaty around her head. She stared out of the large floor-to-ceiling window and looked at her blurred reflection.

Large black eyes stared back out of the darkness, almost like the secret image of her soul. Her usually boldly curved, full lips were twisted into the sad portrait of a clown. Her skin seemed almost translucent and white, although she was blessed with a healthy bronze skin color all year round, the Spanish heritage of her father, Eduardo Torres. Her striking, expressive face was edgy and seemed to consist only of skin and bones. In the mirror reflection her medium-brown hair with sunny strands looked like her second, darker self. The black and white illusion that stared at her reminded of a small, frightened elfin.

Lost in thoughts, Bell looked at her counterfeit. A figure, half woman, half chicken. If the situation hadn't been so serious, she would have laughed at her reflection.

Now her friends, who were scattered all over the world, were still right when they compared Bell with the elfin Tinkerbelle from the fairytale Peter Pan, she thought. All her friends ... they all were real. Nevertheless, Bell felt lonely because of the great distance to them, which was not only the geographic distance, but also a kind of spiritual distance.

What a miserable life she led! Yes, pathetic and pitiable. Bell knew so many people, was constantly communicative and seemed in good spirits. At least for the outside. Inside she was a dried-up little flower. Deceived and being deceived!

With a loud moan, she lifted her tense limbs out of the chair and switched on her laptop, the last witness of her vanished existence. The only safe hold on which her current survival depended.

The display glowed brightly in the now disturbing darkness of the foreign loft and she tapped her very last emergency solution: It was the homepage of the Couch-Club. Her salvation – or maybe her downfall?

The Couch-Club was the web address for the young and old, who carried the restless desire to get to know foreign cultures and nice people all over the world. The Couch-Club was the starting point for all those who were daring enough to spend a couple of days on foreign sofas at no extra cost. So to speak, free board and lodging.

She sent out a request into the wide world and prayed fervently that it would be heard. Only a few minutes later her inbox flashed and Bell exhaled shakily.

'Hi Bell,' she read. 'You are always welcome on our couch in Cascine di Buti in Tuscany. Just bring along a good mood, and then we already long for your arrival.'

Bell already felt a little better and continued to read:

You'll find directions and my address in the appendix. My name is Christobal Cox and I am the owner. The couch is located in a small cottage next to the main mansion. If we are not at home when you arrive, just make yourself comfortable.

See you soon, Chris. '

Italy, Bell thought dreamily. The country of spirited people and exuberant emotions; didn't sound so bad. As if she had a great choice ...

She felt a feverish, exciting tingling sensation. The feeling always came over her when she started out into the unknown. She grabbed the last little remnants of her belongings and, without looking back, she stepped out into the refreshing and very promising airy night.

Chapter 1

Big Ronson hit the brakes of his roaring truck at a busy intersection in Bientina in Tuscany and finally skidded to a halt.

'Final stop, Sweetie,' he rumbled in his usual, noisy chat, 'Uncle Ron must now take another direction, understand?'

Bell, who had fallen into a deep but restless sleep during the last part of the journey, awoke slowly. A persistently unpleasant but discreet pricking on her left upper arm forced itself into her dreams, but the dense fog in her head lifted only slowly.

'Hmm, did he jump into the sewage treatment plant again?' Bell muttered half asleep.

The man next to her looked confused and shook his hairy head. 'Kiddo, Uncle Ron has no idea what the hell you're talking about. But, you'll see, it will be better soon,' he said encouragingly, and held an open bottle of genuine apricot brandy from the Austrian Wachau valley under her nose.

'For God's sake!' Bell raised and rubbed her tearing eyes.

'There you go,' he grumbled patronizingly, 'Uncle Ron always rubs his hemorrhoids with that stuff. They come from hustling around in the truck, you know? Schnapps is good for everything, isn't it? Want a good swallow?'

'Uuuuhh, leave me alone with that so early in the morning,' Bell complained disgusted.

Ron amusedly raised his left eyebrow. 'Kiddo, Uncle Ron has to tell you, unfortunately, that it's seven o'clock in the evening.'

'Holy shit!' Bell was now definitely awake. 'Goddamn, where are we? Where do I have to go now?'

'Gerd to Ronson, Gerd to Ronson. Over,' it crackled from the worn radio device that was attached to the dashboard.

Bell smiled and pressed the intercom button. 'Hi Gerd, I hope everything is fine with your hemorrhoids?' Bell asked with a cunning look at Uncle Ron.

'Bell, darling, you're up and about again?' came the metallic reply from the radio.

'With Uncle Ron's driving style I had no other choice but to close my eyes for a few hours and pray,' said Bell.

'Pfft ...,' Ron snapped indignantly.

Bell patted his large paw.

'So you were bragging again, Dude?' Gerd joked over the radio.

'Over and out,' Ronson interrupted the banter and resolutely pressed the off button.

'Okay, sweetie, Uncle Ron will give you fifty euros, if you finally get out of my truck, because I have to keep a schedule, got me?'

Behind his unfriendly chatter she felt how hard the farewell was for him. Bell had to swallow, because she had become fond of the bearded, dangerous-looking giant with a heart of gold.

'Seventy euros and not a cent less,' she said firmly, suppressing a giggle. The guy wanted to haggle? No problem!

'Eighty, and this is Uncle Ron's last word.'

She leaned towards him and pressed a hearty kiss on his bearded cheek. 'Thank you.'

'And now, don't get all excited and get out of here, Uncle Ron doesn't have time all day.'

Bell threw her heavy suitcase out of the truck, followed it with a jump and landed harshly on the sandy roadside.

'Hey, Kiddo,' wad of notes flew to her in a high curve, 'take good care of yourself, and don't forget what Uncle Ron has taught you about proper boozing!'

He winked at her one last time, closed the door with a loud crash, and started off with spinning tires. With a loud honking his vehicle disappeared in a dusty cloud. Bell looked after him until he had vanished and sighed. She looked around without orientation.

Cascine di Buti, 6 km, she read on the road sign where Ron had dropped her. With determination Bell shouldered her suitcase, which was almost as tall and heavy as herself and started walking. She couldn't afford wasting time as it was already seven o'clock in the evening and soon it would start getting dark.

Next to her the typical Italian road traffic roared - emotionally charged and life-threatening. Heavy exhaust fumes stifled her breath and the dry heat caused her to sweat out of all pores.

Slowly her tired spirits came to life again. The peculiar dynamics of this vivacious country were too contagious and thrilling, so that no one could have escaped it for too long.

After a while, Bell stopped, panting, and lifted the huge monster of a suitcase from her soft, tender shoulders. Her baggy, dark brown linen trousers stuck to her sweaty buttocks and her washed-out, yellow Tweety t-shirt smelled suspiciously of sweat and Uncle Ron's cigarettes.

A rusty, old Fiat honked dully and people talked loudly from the open or at times not existing car windows. The slow-moving traffic stopped and a rickety, old cart loaded with white and brown goats came to a halt. The animals made a hell of a noise, bleating and grouching in the most varied pitches. Alongside Bell a dog barked challengingly.

The yelping seemed to be up close, so the young woman turned around and looked for the source. Behind an abandoned rusty vehicle without tires and interior, which was left at the roadside, she spotted a small, pitifully skinny street dog, who glanced out warily from behind the rust bucket.

It had the wiry, very thin physique of a wild animal. It looked like a wolf in the body of a coyote. It was constantly struggling with the adversities of life threatening its existence. His wolf-gray hair was lined with white tufts around its bat-like ears; its left ear had a bend in the middle, giving the dog a cute appearance. But only if it was in a good mood, thought Bell, which was not the case. She shuddered. When the miserable creature noticed that it had been discovered, it was baring its sharp teeth. She quickly took a step back. Just do not show fear. Bell figured she better made a bolt for it before this breeding accident infected her with anthrax or any other dangerous disease. Step by step she made her way backwards until she felt safe and far enough away from this flea trap. She turned around and continued her walk because she had to hurry up.

She inhaled the strange and intense odors. The smell of gasoline was mixed with the blooming scent of broom in their full end of June blossom and the acrid scent of goats. This floated as a dense cloud constantly above her. It was just awesome! This was the vibrant life she envisioned. She really liked the place and she would find work and stay for a while.

When she marched into Cascine di Buti an estimated two hours later, the burning, heat-generating sun disappeared in a real color explosion behind Monte Persecco, leaving behind a dark blue, slightly clear horizon. In the disappearing light she walked stooping down the paved road carrying her heavy luggage. In the dim light of a lonely street lantern she tried to read the directions Chris had given her.

Dong.

A dull banging in the darkness behind her.

Dong.

Again.

Fear overwhelmed her. She explored the darkness and could almost feel someone watching her. Standing in the light of the lantern, she peered out into the darkness. Concentrated, she pinched her eyes. Damned, there was someone!

Over there at the garbage cans.

'To hell with me ...!' Bell cursed as she discovered the source of the commotion. 'Watch out, dog. If you're going to bite me, you'll have a nasty surprise.'

The mangy mutt from earlier appeared from behind the filled garbage cans, and all of a sudden it did not look like the big, evil wolf anymore. On the contrary, the little doggy seemed hardly older than a few months.

Carefully it approached Bell. Step by step, as if in advance. It paused at a safe distance, still hesitantly, and carefully tilted its shaggy head. A low, high-pitched whimpering appealed to Bell's heart, shook her soul, and asked for admission, but that part of her had long ago frozen to impermeable ice. It really couldn't expect more than deep sympathy from her. She tried to drive off the mutt with a harsh movement of her hand.

'Go away! You see that I am a poor fellow just like you,' she boisterously told the mutt. Too boisterous, but what could do the pitiful creature about it? Bell was confident. Her unlimited good faith was obviously spread over all parts of her life.

'Just look around, you've got it much better than me, can eat from thousands of garbage cans!' She finally shouted at the dog, as it did not even move an ear.

Its bushy, greyish-brown neck hair went straight up, and a deep growl rose from the inside of its throat, which would have been an honor for the wildest wolf. His amber-colored eyes flashed dangerously in the dim light of the lantern, forming a bright contrast to his wolf-gray fur, which stood muddy and filthy in all directions.

'You're a very strong guy, aren't you?' she said in an appeasing voice and withdrew her steps for the second time since her arrival in Tuscany. What did she gain if her trip was over before it'd even started properly? There!

Bell violated all her principles and turned her vulnerable back to the dog. She walked away without turning around. Groaning, she shouldered her suitcase again. By tomorrow morning at the latest, she would need a rack. She sensed that this dark and dirty creature was on the lookout too. Like Bell, it only wanted a home. Well, she felt pity for the dog, but Bell was not a Good Samaritan, she could not even take care of herself.

The dog followed her strikingly unobtrusively.

Tap.

Tap. Tap.

In her back she heard its determined steps that followed her.

Monte Persecco was mostly used for agricultural purposes by the local countrymen. High up was an old, partly crumbled castle, which stood out in the bright moonlight. Today it housed a small restored chapel. She knew because she had studied Ron's Tuscany travel guide during the ride. The small town of Cascine di Buti, which nestled at the foot of the mountain, had about six thousand inhabitants and had not yet lost any of the charms of past epochs. A road winding down from the ruins to the valley ran along the large cobbled market square, which was the center of life for the local population; people met for conversation and did business. A large farmer's market was held every week with local products offered for sale. It was gossiped, quarreled, bargained and negotiated. Here, life pulsed in its purest form.

Bell stopped. She panted and shivered. Throughout the day, she had sweat that she froze now after sunset despite her efforts. Her foot ached, especially the left. There were already several open blisters. This pain, however, was nothing compared to the agony of her sore shoulders.

Her colleague Samantha, the female part of the Paris Fried Chickens, say 'Honey, only if you're in pain, you know you're alive.' Well, Sam was one of the more pessimistic sorts. Liked being spanked and such things. She would have liked this torture in a perverse way, thought Bell. Most certainly!

In front of her she saw the brand-new sign announcing Podere la Buti, the estate of her host.

She was completely exhausted.

With her last ounce of strength, she dragged herself and her suitcase towards the hazy houses. As advised, she passed the larger building and went to the strung-out, low cottage. Next to the cottage the silhouette of a towering cypress rose like a spear from the gloomy landscape, shining in the silvery moonlight.

She looked around and saw her stubborn pursuers scurrying dimly through the spacious courtyard. Indeed, no one seems to be at home, she thought. The cottage door was unlocked and squealed as she entered. She was met by scent of dried herbs, bare stone walls and homemade bread. The air inside was wonderfully cool and a real treat for Bell's battered and tormented body.

She found a light switch in a corner next to the door. She turned on the lights and looked around curiously. As promised, the sofa in the middle of the sparsely furnished room was covered with fresh sheets and a blanket lay ready on top of it. The massive tension of the last few days fell like a ton-heavy load in the shape of her suitcase from Bell's shoulders. She sank gratefully to the modest camp, and seconds later she slept deeply, her clothing and shoes still on.

Chapter 2

Bell's sleep of the dead was suddenly interrupted the next morning by a mad barking and deep, menacing snarls mixed with a tirade of curses and shouting. A battle for life and death seemed to take place in front of the cottage.

'For God's sake, what ...?' she muttered sleepily.

A loud crack made her start and she rushed from her narrow sleeping-place to the hard, slippery wooden floor.

'Madonna mia, cielo, vattene botolo!' A dark, swinging and unnerved baritone mixed with the battle sounds in front of the cottage. Suddenly the heavy wooden door crashed open and banged to the wall. Bell crouched on the floor, rubbed her bumped elbow and caught sight of the dream come true of every mother-in-law appearing in the doorway. Goodness, what a man!

The sexy Coca-Cola Man in flesh and blood stood in front of her. He was beautifully tanned. His hair was the color of black olives and perhaps a trace too long to still look serious. A glance into his eyes was enough to send her into a deep, multi-layered blue ocean. The pearls of the sea. Every woman on God's ground would fall on the spot for this guy. Every woman except Bell, of course.

Where did such disgusting thoughts come from? Downright ridiculous.

However, at the moment a heavy thunderstorm was brewing in his fascinating blue eyes.

The filthy coyote from the evening before clung to his left ankle and tried to kill John Wayne's chunky western boots.

'What the hell are you doing here?' he bellowed foolishly in Italian. He lifted his left leg from which her stubborn companion dangled and gave a gurgling growl. 'And take your filthy wolf down from me before I have to deal with it myself!' He cursed so furiously that it rang in her ears.

Chris' disastrous start into the day seemed to even get worse, he thought, looking down at his long, strong legs, stuck in light blue jeans. His gaze was stuck to the shaggy brown something dangling from his five-hundred-dollar leather boot.

Could it get worse? His eight-year-old daughter, Lori, was ignoring him for days, and now he was attacked by a drooling wolf on his own land. Hopefully the beast was not carrying rabies.

And to ruin his day completely, Chris found a dirty, delicate, elfish woman on the floor of his vacant cottage, who watched him suspiciously with frightened eyes and wildly ruffled light brown hair.

'Ciò che essi hanno a guardare qui, signora,' he rumbled, his right eye beginning to twitch uncontrollably.

'Non ... um ... non capisco italiano,' Bell stammered embarrassed and cleared her throat.

Well, it wasn't the complete truth, but she was not yet ready to deal with this raging fellow, from whose ankle the unknown mutt dangled.

'Uhh ... sono Cristobal Cox?' she asked him if he was the owner.

'Chi altro. Era probabilmente l'amicizia illuminare me perché ho sonno sul mio Chouch pensi?' His violent words hit her like the cartridges of a machine gun.

'Oh, no ... not so fast, please,' Bell tried to concentrate her thoughts rapidly. 'This is not my dog! Never seen it. Parlo americano!' Bell shook her sleepy little head. What about the famous Italian hospitality?

The pungent smell of wet goat rose to Christobal Cox' nose and brought tears to his eyes. This mongrel would infect him with far more terrible things than rabies.

It was the punishment for his sinful life. He was condemned to walk around with a shaggy, stinking growth on his leg for the rest of his life. As if that were not enough, this frightened, strange woman crouched on his floor, and didn't look any older than his daughter Lori. She seriously wanted to make him believe that she couldn't understand him! She must think that he was a damn fool! Chris could see from the tip of her nose that she was lying to him. And the damn mutt, which defended her with its life ...?

'I am American,' he explained, and she exhaled with relief.

'Now I want to know exactly what you're doing here!' He was shaking his fist in front of Bell's nose. 'But first you are going to whistle back your crazy pit bull, for God's sake!'

Well, that was a clear command. This whole situation here seemed to be running out of control. 'I've already told you that this is not my dog.'

Mister Perfect rolled his eyes. 'Then try it anyway,' he said, barking, adding, 'now!' He crossed his arms and waited annoyed.

'Uh, come, doggy ... leave-it,' Bell ordered half-heartedly.

The mutt did not move an inch.

'Is it possible that it can't catch its mouth anymore?' she said, showing a little bit of compassion, which she certainly didn't feel for the rude stranger.

'Try it more seriously! And get up from the damn floor before I get stiff neck and your crazy mutt amputates my leg.'

Bell sighed. Chris Cox was definitely a strange guy!

'Well, I don't see why I should help you. I mean, what if you fall all over me? In the mood you're in ...' Bell concluded, rose ungracefully and tapped-off the dust from her clothes.

His eyebrows shot up.

'Lady, if I fall upon you, then certainly not because I'm angry ...,' he said with a dangerous glitter in his eyes and let her imagination finish the sentence.

She blushed deeply as she understood the enormity of his allusion. Cola Man clearly thought all women would fall for him!

'So, would you - please - be so kind as to free me from this millstone on my leg,' he said in a quiet tone and held his hands to his hips. My goodness, it seemed like he wanted to pull his imaginary weapon every second.

'But ...,' Bell replied.

Chris raised his index finger threateningly. 'Even if you have never seen the flea trap in your life,' he imitated Bell.

'You don't believe me, don't you? You'll see how much Fluffy will listen to me.'

Chris watched with narrowed eyes as she straightened her small, petite body to a total height of about five feet and three inches. Apparently, she tried to gain more authority. The situation would be almost ridiculous if her efforts hadn't been so serious. She straightened her back and he had to swallow hard. Under the old shirt he noticed firm small breasts. For God's sake, Cox!

He quickly looked up to the ceiling. Her breasts were none of his concern. A magical elfin testing his steadfastness was just what he needed. He had to get rid of her as fast as possible.

Bell puffed herself up. 'Dog, uuh, come here!' She ordered in a firm command tone.

Immediately White Fang let go of his enemy and came tail wagging towards her, enveloped in a cloud of biting sewage odor. Bell couldn't believe what had just happened. Incredulous, she looked down at the dog.

'There you go, I told you,' Mister Wise Guy said cockily and stretched his maltreated leg.

'What kind of cunning creature are you?' Bell whispered to her guardian, who sat innocently by her side.

'Okay, if you would be so kind to leave my property now,' he said, his voice tediously muffled. He had to get rid of this disaster on two legs as quickly as possible.

'But ... but you've invited me.' Bell suppressed a telltale lump in her throat. She no longer understood the world. Don't panic!

'I have invited you?' Chris narrowed his eyes and looked her up and down. 'You don't take drugs, do you?'

'Listen, mister, I came all the way here from Paris, because you had invited me. And I'm not taking any drugs, downright ridiculous,' Bell snapped. 'But you ... you seem to suffer from a severe loss of memory.'

Bell knew she sounded really hysterical. But if he threw it out now, she had almost no money to get away from here again.

He sighed in defeat and shook his head. His thick hair shone like polished. From deep blue eyes he stared at her. 'Listen, Lady ...'

'My name is Bell,' she interrupted him.

Yes, she looked like the little elf Tinkerbelle, he thought. Only at the moment she built-up like an Amazon in front of him and it didn't seem so easy to get rid of her. That's just what he needed! And yet, all his nerves were tingling electrifyingly. Already, Chris wanted to start his next attack, but a quiet whisper inside him made him stop.

'How should I have invited you at all, hmm?' He tried the sensible tour instead, his eyes fixed on the four-legged flea circus, which seemed to sense the slight tension between them and glared at him. 'Well, I see you today for the first time. We do not know each other. Believe me, if I had invited you, I would certainly remember.' He shook his head and looked at Bell sympathetically.

'You think I'm crazy,' she noted matter-of-factly and dug a crumpled piece of paper out of her pocket.

'Two days ago, you invited me over the Internet to sleep on your couch,' her outstretched hand held a printed copy of the email. 'There you see!'

He shook his head unbelievably. 'I would've never invited strangers to break into my house,' his masculine features turned into an angry red, 'and at all, what kind of people do themselves accommodate with strangers?'

Bell blinked.

He grabbed her slender shoulders and shook her so hard that her teeth rattled. Dog went into attack position.

'Hasn't anybody told you how dangerous it is, what you are doing here?' He raged. 'I could be Jack the Ripper, or anyone else!'

He had no idea where his concern for this crazy lady came from, but he had the infallible need to bring her to her senses. He was just a guy, damn! It certainly had nothing to do with the sweet person in front of him. His passionate Italian blood seethed violently in his veins. That's it. Yes, he mutated to Mr. Hyde when he saw a woman. Certainly not this woman in particular. The lady was just the only one who was around.

He had definitely a sex deficit; a normal need, then. A regrettable condition but at least human. Chris took a deep breath. This pretty flash in the pan, which stood intimidated before him, did not necessarily need to know that he was a hot stallion.

Dog made a gigantic fuss.

'Shut-up, Dog,' he hissed to the ground, where the mutt was already aiming dangerously at his right boot.

Combat dog was not impressed; he had already clearly shown where his sympathy was.

'That's not the way it is,' Bell tried to drown-out the furious barking. 'Couch-surfer are all very nice people, no psychopaths. Besides, you sometimes have no other option than to do something crazy,' she defended herself. Her eyes were full of suppressed tears, but her chin was pushed-up firmly and resolutely.

She was pretty tough, Chris realized. And infinitely naive, so it seemed. Her boundless amount of good faith caused him to grab her again by the shoulders.

Did he want to shake some sense into her head? She tried to free herself from his iron grip, and skillfully ignored the pleasant feeling that his rather rude touch had caused in her. Goodness, she was already quite confused.

Finally he released his grip.

'Damned rospo, let go, stupid flea bag.' He pointed to his right boot. 'Would you be so kind to call off your bodyguard?'

'Dog, let go!' Bell commanded, determined this time.

Immediately the animal let go of the boot and sat at her side. Fascinated, she shook her head and tried not to think more about her self-appointed guardian angel.

'Who are you?' he asked. 'And why the hell do you call your dog just Dog?'

Bell sighed. 'I have already told you that I have never seen this dog before,' she explained in a patient voice. This conversation was wasted effort anyway. She already felt a slight headache.

He was about to make his opinion quite clear, when a loud shout came from outside. Chris was about to pull his short, pitch-black hair out, and Bell decided that this man was far more troubled than her. To avoid a new rant, she pushed past him to see who or what caused the hustle and bustle. Dog didn't leave her side.

What she saw stopped her heartbeat for a brief moment. Gasping for air she looked around. 'It can't be true!' She stood there and buried her face in her hands.

Here she was. Yes, Bell landed directly in hell. Cranky twist of fate. Highway to Hell.

My God, what a glorious, colorful estate stretched before her. Bell peered sheepishly through her fingers. The warm sun of June was shining bright in a cloudless sky. The sky was the same significant blue as the eyes of the stunning curmudgeon, she noted. She stood in the middle of a huge, rustic, spotless courtyard belonging to the big building she passed last night in the darkness. The main house was built in typical Italian style. Her eyes caught sight of Monte Persecco, which rose above the estate and was crowned with gnarled olive trees and terrace vineyards. The ever present, strong cypresses grew even up there on the barren soil of the mountain, dividing it into random grid-like arrangements. Her gaze turned back to this - indescribably beautiful - place of terror.

Kissed by the sun, the walls of the long dwelling house shone in a warm, welcoming terracotta-red. The expansive flat roof framed the building in a deep chocolate brown and gave it a warm impression. The base of the house consisted of individual, medium-sized, white and grey marble stones, which had been lovingly stacked one stone after another in hard handwork several decades ago.

To the right of the building was an old stone fountain edged with dark cherry wood. A lonely grey tin bucket hung on a weathered rope. Flower pots stood along the house wall. The most exotic flowers bloomed there in all colors and shapes, and Bell would bet the shirt of her back that such plants weren't native in Tuscany.

Behind her, she heard angry snorting and impatient pounding.

Bell froze.

Within seconds her life ran through her mind. Her hair stood on end. 'No, please, don't ...,' she murmured as she turned around hesitantly.

The horse snorted annoyed and caused a spectacular turmoil.

'Lord in heaven,' she whispered. A cruel joke? No, worse, a nightmare.

Her fiercely repressed childhood caught up with her like the fierce impact of a stomach swing. She tried convulsively to fight back her long-suppressed tears.

Indescribable shame and dreadful pictures, which did not even fit into the rural idyll, crashed into her mind and almost forced her to her knees.

Tears held back for a long time streamed down her face, but the young woman didn't notice it.

Her past had caught up with her - unprepared, without any warning and completely heartless.

In front of her spread vast, green pasture surrounded by a solid teak-brown fence. A beautiful, graceful, black and white marked Appaloosa mare grazed relaxed and couldn't be disturbed by any sound. At first sight one could recognize her noble ancestry. The animal was well proportioned and strongly muscled. Apparently, the mare was solidly trained. Isolated white dots adorned her straight otherwise pitch black head and her very gentle, intelligent eyes focused on grazing.

Bell swallowed hard and turned around. She saw the source of the uproar in the spacious round pen, a circular training ground, where an older, dark-skinned man trained a young, extraordinarily marked, colorful horse; an Appaloosa too. This breed originated from the Nez-Perce Indians and was a tough western horse with a captivating, soft gait and a robust nature.

The color of this animal was indescribable. This horse had to be worth a fortune. A deep, almost bordeaux-colored sweaty fur glistened in the sunlight - like an autumnal vine leaf, apart from the countless cream-white dots regularly spread on its entire body. This breed was highly appreciated for its kindness and its devoted and gentle character.

Not like this rowdy here, thought Bell. No sign of the gentle, dynamic and much celebrated heritage. This fantastic animal was a hot bombshell, difficult and smart, she realized immediately with her connoisseur's view. Some things were as easy as breathing, even if they had been left behind for a long, long time.

Bell giggled hysterically. The knife dug deeper into the reopened wound. As quickly as possible she would disappear from this devilish place!

Dog felt her desperate pain, looked sympathetically at her, and whimpered sadly.

Chris, who had approached her from behind, looked worried. 'Lady, is everything all right with you? Because if you are going to pass out, I will not catch you, so you'll know.'

'Thank you for your cordial welcome, Mister,' with her last ounce of strength Bell thanked him with an ironic undertone, and looked at him as dignified as possible with her tear-stained, even face.

'Oh, I think Dog had foam on his mouth yesterday,' she said. 'If I were you, I would be vaccinated as soon as possible.' She shouldered her bulky suitcase and started hastily to leave the Ranch.

That damned woman! 'It was nice to talk to you, Lady!' He shouted after her, wondering about the stale taste with which she left him behind. What was so special about her, that she got so much under his skin?

He worried about this strange little creature, which apparently stumbled from one misfortune into the next and could certainly not take care of herself. She seemed to have dished up quite some of fairy tales today, from her limited knowledge of Italian to her faithful, not very well smelling companion, which she allegedly had never seen before. And what the hell was this amazing scene about? He'd noticed that she'd almost collapsed when she'd looked around. He'd never met a person who accommodated herself with her few belongings on foreign sofas.

She must be crazy. Or weary of life. Or desperate. He frowned thoughtfully. Well, he had already wished her to the devil several times, and his prayers had been heard very fast. Then, why did he feel like the biggest asshole on God's ground?

Dog gave him a last, devastating look and trotted after the small lady, who carried more ballast than the burro of a gold digger.

Deep in thought, he noticed - too late - the terrifying bursting of the gate behind him and the painful cry of his faithful friend and coach Chrispin Mackenzie. Alarmed, he spun around as Tango, his young, rebellious stallion, plowed through the gate like an angry bull. That damn animal! Hadn't enough happened today?

Only with a courageous jump to the side Chris saved himself from the panic hooves. Chrispin lay close to the broken fence. His right leg was twisted in an unnatural angle and he groaned quietly. Chris wasted only a brief thought of running after the raging beast and immediately hurried to his help his friend.

In the meantime, Bell had turned around and had dropped her suitcase with fear. The furious beast bucked around the cobbled courtyard while his rider lay motionless in the sand of the corral. Chris stood by his injured friend and already called for help over the phone. Nobody paid any attention to the frantic horse.

Bell's heartbeat stopped when she saw the little girl stepping out of the big building into the courtyard.

'Watch out!' Bell shouted, Dog barking loudly. No reaction. The girl did not seem to notice the approaching danger. Her eyes were frightened and stared at the injured man on the ground of the dusty corral.

Without a thought about her own safety Bell started to move. Absolute calmness caught her limbs. She didn't realize what she was doing - or why she did it. She had disengaged herself and watched her body from the air, somewhere from far up.

She quickly ran to the girl, who had now recognized in which danger she was, but was so petrified with terror that she couldn't move and only a terrified scream broke out of her throat.

The stallion got even more into rage.

Chris had made sure to get help for Chrispin, who had certainly broken his right leg. He spoke to him in a soothing voice, as a blood-curdling scream made the blood freeze in his veins.

'Lori!' He shouted with terror. He had to watch helplessly as the ever-unpredictable horse raced towards his little girl. Everything happened so fast that his mind could barely grasp it.

From the corner of his eye he perceived a movement. The foreign lady moved towards the stallion like a supernatural appearance. It seemed as though she was in a trance. He heard murmured words he didn't understand which seemed not understandable for humans and not made for his ears or any others. Her words were solely meant for the panicky, furious animal.

At that moment, Bell had such a supernatural presence that Chris fell to his knees. He wasn't able to tell whether he was awake, or perhaps he just dreamed.

She seemed to have left her body and her mind became one with that of his stallion. Chris was so close to her, but so far away at the same time. He felt excluded, so narrow was the circle that this elfin-like being drew around herself and the animal. Everything had happened within seconds, but for him it felt like hours.

The woman was now standing directly before his girl, whose dreaded eyes showed naked terror. The stallion seemed to have directed all his energy to the mysterious stranger, his whole attention, as if he were testing how far he could go. The violent clash seemed inevitable, as the lady stretched out a small hand - like a symbolic stop sign.

Chris crouched close to Chrispin and didn't want to believe his eyes, when the biggest mistaken investment of his life came to a skittering stop on the cobblestones just a few inches away from his mysterious mistress.

Trembling and snorting, he stood there as she continued to calm down on him and took him by the bridle.

Then, Chris's leaden stiffness broke loose and he got up. He was bathed in sweat.

'What ...?' He started but couldn't think of anything more to say.

'Boy, I think you should go over to Lori, I'll be fine,' Chrispin said puzzled, 'but please tell me first what I saw was real.' Chrispin had even forgotten his pain for a moment.

'I'm not quite sure ... I ... don't move, I'll be right back.' Chris jumped over the broken fence and ran toward the two women, the smaller one had still not moved.

Bell woke from her trance and stared at the horse next to her. What had just happened? Oh my God, the child!

She turned around and saw the chalk-white girl who was hiding behind her. She let go of the horse and leaned over to the little one.

'Hey, is everything all right with you?' Bell ran her fingers cheerfully through the girl's hair.

'Is Chrispin dead?' The little girl asked with a squeaky voice.

'Chrispin?' Bell peered cautiously over her shoulder and saw from afar that the man raised his upper body to have a better view. 'Oh ... Chrispin! No, he is not dead. He will be all right again soon. You know what? Just look for yourself.'

The girl peered carefully around Bell and breathed a sigh of relief when she saw the man moving.

'What's your name, little one?' Bell still stroked her hair.

'I'm Lori, and you must be Bell,' she said, her voice trembling, but a little bit of color had already returned to her face.

'How come?' Bell asked. 'Oh, let me guess, you've invited me to your couch, right?' Now she understood.

'Dad is certainly terribly angry at me,' the girl said sadly.

Bell wondered what the girl could mean. Was she talking about the couch story or the fact that she was almost run over by the crazy horse?

'Oh, nonsense, why should he be angry with you?' Bell said, then fell silent when she saw Chris approaching with a dark expression on his face. His gaze became softer as he leaned down to the girl.

'Lori, darling, are you alright? Are you hurt?' He began to pat down the child until the little girl withdrew from his grasp.

There's the rub, thought Bell, as she looked at the inconspicuous, delicate girl, who couldn't be older than seven years. The little girl had withdrawn as soon as Chris approached her.

The crazy flea circus sat at Lori's feet and licked her hand reassuringly while it growled menacingly and the horse threw his head into the air and snorted nervously. Chris glanced warily at the animal.

'Quiet now, both of you.' The resolute command came from the lady and was directed at the upset animals. They obeyed. Just because. Both of them.

Had all living creatures conspired against him?

'Who the hell are you?' His question was directed to Bell. 'A mixture of Dr. Doolittle and Monty Roberts?'

At that moment the doctor arrived and Bell was spared an answer, although her response wouldn't have been satisfactory for him anyway. How should Bell explain something to him that she herself did not understand?

'I'm going to the hospital with Chrispin,' Chris told the girl. 'The Lady stays here and takes care of you in the meantime,' he commanded and gave Bell a warning look.

'But ...,' Bell began, but immediately fell silent again. They stared at each other. Out of consideration for the girl's feelings, she spared Wild Bill from an answer. To add insult to injury, he pointed to Bell and said, 'We are not finished yet, so don't even think about leaving in the meantime.' Dog growled, and Bell realized that this was meant as a threat.

'Damn shitty day!' Chris cursed and looked quickly for Lori. 'When I'm back, I'll shoot him.' He pointed to the stallion. The horse let his little head hang and pushed out a troubled horse sigh. He probably felt remorse.

The furnishings of the spacious kitchen definitely reflected a woman's taste. Bell was lost in her thoughts and looked through the large, bright window into the spacious courtyard, which was now abandoned and quiet.

The local doctor, Lorenzo Novotny, had left with Chrispin and Chris.

The stallion Tango, who bore the blame for all the misfortunes, had behaved well when Bell had reluctantly taken care of him. Lori had recovered slowly from the shock and had gone outside to bathe the dog.

What a beautiful place it was! Bell sighed loudly. She might have enjoyed it, hadn't she been so preoccupied. Anyway, in her momentary, tricky situation, her nape of hair immediately got up as soon as she admitted to some of her long-buried feelings.

Bell had concluded definitively and irrevocably with her past long ago. It also included the perfect fulfillment and spiritual liberation in dealing with noble and strong creatures like horses. This intimate familiarity with an animal that often had so much more to offer than people; unconditional love and fidelity, never questioned or sneakily exploited. All that and much more she could never allow again! Back then Bell had thrown away this love and fidelity as a dirty rag. That she had fled from her home at the age of eighteen and had put her needs over those of her beloved mare Dessie was completely her fault.

Not only had she pushed her astounding gift for dealing with animals away from one second to the next, no, she'd sworn to eliminate these feelings forever. That was why she had mechanically taken care of Chris' young stallion like a marionette. Each of her movements was fitting. She did everything expertly and for the good of the animal, but without any feelings. She felt no satisfaction, no joy, and yes, not even grief. She just felt nothing.

Tango was a witty, funny, and a little bit impetuous little fellow if he wasn't frightened to death. What had Chrispin just done to him, that the animal had reacted like this?

It couldn't have been brutality, Bell had noticed in spite of her desperate condition. Impatience? Had he just asked for too much? The stallion had been completely disturbed and deeply insecure, when she had led it back to the stable and into the box with his name plate. Tango had had behaved very well and gentle. Without great words and deeds he had respected Bell. Like an invisible veil, she had this unique aura around her. Only Bell herself was not interested in it. She could not explain why her past caught up with her and her gift was returning. Wasn't she loaded with enough problems anyway? Was it the ironic attempt of fate to see how much she could bear?

Suddenly she saw him: Eduardo Torres, star of the Californian rodeo scene, dream of all women far beyond the borders of California. Eduardo Torres, successful horse breeder, father and bastard of a very special kind.

Chapter 3

Bell's lips twisted painfully as she reluctantly recalled her past. Until her fourteenth birthday, she almost begged for the love of her father. Her mother Kiera had died in her childbed. Eduardo was her only reference, her only living relative.

Bell worshiped him. Yes, she adored him. He was her hero. It was all the more painful to his mouth twitching with disgust when she was around him. She knew she was too fat, too ugly, and too unathletic. But desperately as she was, she never stopped to beg for his love.

On her eleventh birthday he gave Bell a young mare - probably only to get rid of her. Bell called the mare Dessie and concentrated all her exuberant love on her. That was the beginning of the end.

Stunned Eduardo Torres watched as his wayward daughter blossomed. From day to day she became more feminine, more adult and grew up to a very attractive young woman. Not only with her good looks but also with her handling of the horses she stole his show. Her unique feeling for all creatures, animals or humans, was unmistakable, instinctive, and with frightening accuracy. She seemed to be surrounded by an invisible aura of love, righteousness, and a heartfelt, never judging affection for all living creatures.

On the other hand, Eduardo was not a particularly sensitive or even considerate person. But even he couldn't entirely escape her special charisma. From this moment he began to fear his daughter; her skill and her gift.

It was only a matter of time that Bell would mean the end of his career, which he knew as surely as the Amen in prayer. Bell was a serious opponent and was destroying his reputation more and more. Yes, beside his daughter, he felt like a fool who knew nothing about horses. At first, Bell participated only in small, regional reining shows. Eduardo thought it couldn't hurt that Bell promoted the popularity of his horses and his other services.

Besides, the brat hadn't looked so bad lately. Bell won one competition after the other and with understanding, a lot of perseverance and love for the horses she reached the top of the Californian Western riders and left Eduardo dumbfounded.

One day it happened: No longer Eduardo Torres was the center of attention, but his daughter; the young, charming Bell who enchanted the animals, the audience and the judges equally with her extraordinary charm. Eduardo had always been an unscrupulous businessman. Yes, he literally walked over dead bodies.

In order to limit all the celebration of Bell's he started to use her boundless good faith and childish naiveté for his cause.

Usually she avoided all thoughts about her childhood, but now and here it got rather close to her. All of a sudden she felt like she had been taken back in time to the day when she was a delicate teenager and her entire world collapsed like a card house, making her the woman she was today.

She looked through the large window of the spacious kitchenette into a bygone era. How stupid had she been? Blind of love and the boisterous joy of finally being accepted by her father. Eduardo Torres knew how to free himself from the tricky situation his daughter had maneuvered him in. To limit her time she spent with the horses, he simply arranged his beautiful daughter to meet with his most important business partners.

Yes, Eduardo had never done anything for her or for anyone else. He was a salesman, and Bell was his merchandise. It was as simple as that, she thought, and a tremor passed through her body.

She forbade herself any further thoughts about the day ten years ago, which had destroyed her life so dramatically. Yes, ten years had passed, but Bell could still feel the violent pain, the burning shame and the bottomless humiliation. Until today it was there, this pain as violent as a volcanic eruption, beginning with an almost endless explosion inside her heart. A silent cry for help which no one could hear and no one perceived. A humiliation that had mercilessly extinguished her carefully built-up self-esteem and the existential vitality of a young woman.

Bang.

With a single blow.

The gift of oblivion, she thought, was a grace of nature not given to humans. She was left with self-contempt that made her life a complete farce. A wilted soul always on the lookout for the past; as it once had been.

She stared out into the bright courtyard and quivered. It happened on that one fateful day that Bell had lost her God-given gift.

The closing of the entrance door brought her back brusquely to the present. Lori stepped inside the kitchen, while Dog was gambling around her.

'I've washed the doggie with a horse shampoo,' she said.

'The shampoo smells strongly of horses,' Bell stated firmly and wrinkled her nose. Dog rubbed around her legs.

'She has thrown herself into the horse dung,' Lori said, apologizing with her narrow shoulders.

'What an ungrateful fellow you are, hmm?' Bell stroked the animal with her fingers.

'He's actually a She,' said Lori and Dog barked reassuringly. 'And I think she needs a name.'

'But darling, this dog is a wandering dunghill, not a family dog. It will surely not stay here, but soon run away again.' Just like me, Bell thought. As if to underline her words, she nodded violently.

'Why can't she stay? She is such a nice dog, and certainly wants a nice home,' lamented Lori.

Bell shook her head and looked down at the animal. Dog lay down on his back and spread all four legs.

Lori held a piece of sausage under her nose and thought loudly. 'How about ...?'

Bell raised her hand warningly. 'You know what they say: As soon as you feed a dog, you will never get rid of it.'

'So, what? I want her to stay,' Lori exclaimed. 'Why don't you want to keep her? Don't you like dogs?' Lori and the dog looked accusingly at Bell. Dog whimpered softly.

'No ... yes ... well, I don't know. I just have no room for a dog.' I don't even have a place for myself.

'Can I call her Lulu?' The little girl looked at her with bright blue puppy-dog eyes. She had the same eyes as Chris, perhaps a trace brighter, Bell noticed.

'You don't need to ask me, I mean, it's not my dog.'

Oh, my goodness ... Lulu?

'I thought about Dirty Harry,' Bell heard a deep, very masculine voice in her back.

Okay, so the Indian chief had returned.

'Dog is a girl,' Bell explained.

'I think she looks like a Lulu,' the little girl defended the animal.

Chris wrinkled his nose. 'At least she smells like one.'

Dog looked up at Chris with dreamy eyes. This little bitch is already hitting on him, Bell thought amused.

'Come with me, Lulu, we're looking for something to eat for you,' Lori said, storming out of the kitchen with the mutt at her side.

Meanwhile, Bell furtively watched the man in the doorway. My goodness, he was really a show-piece. Her gaze wandered up his muscular, long legs, lingered briefly on his firm butt, and then continued to his flat stomach and muscular chest. He wore a washed-out jeans shirt, which he had hastily stuffed into his trousers. The top buttons were open, and she could imagine the skin underneath tanned by hard outdoor work. Fine black hairs peeked through the open buttons. Finally her gaze remained on his face.

A thunderstorm seemed to converge. 'And, did I pass the test?' He grumbled and looked at her challengingly.

'Well, if you ask me ... you are just not my type,' she stated perky.

His right eyebrow fluttered upwards. 'Now I can never sleep again.'

'Don't panic, not your fault.' Bell tried to be fair. 'Only mine.'

He blinked, puzzled. 'Because?'

'... I am lesbian. Yes, I don't think you are hot. Not just you, but all men. Only women,' she chattered away.

Well, at least she was no longer in the stupid situation of having to find him attractive because he would believe he wasn't interesting to her anyway. Bell had hedged in all directions. He was no longer a danger to her. Sometimes she was just a genius.

To her astonishment, Chris burst out laughing.

Of course she lied! 'Okay, I understand,' he replied inscrutably, and her triumph got small cracks.

'As I said, no offense.' Bell did not want to destroy his self-confidence. 'You're not supposed to feel bad now,' she stammered embarrassed, 'or unattractive, or so.' The guy clearly made her nervous. Normally she was not talking herself into an early grave.

'Actually, I feel rather hot,' he explained.

Bell hissed. 'Well, that's why I'm going now. It was a pleasure to make your very interesting acquaintance.'

Her words were followed by profound silence. Dog - no - Lulu ran to her and greeted her like a long-lost friend.

'Listen, Lady, I've been thinking about your situation,' he began, pushing Lulu aside with a soft kick as she was attacking his boots again.

'Bell. My name is Bellona Torres. Well, Bell.'

'Strange name.' But it seemed familiar to him.

'I am really honored,' she said, 'that you have racked your brain about me,' Bell shook her sweet little head regretfully, 'but my lover is waiting for me, in, uhh, Pisa.'

Lover? What nonsense. He sighed. 'You don't have any money,' he stated.

'Oh, come on, I have a lot of money. I am so rich that I, well, that I ...'

What the heck was she talking about? 'I doubt it,' he interrupted her, crossing his arms. 'Just hold your breath and listen to the deal I suggest.'

Deal?

He came closer.

'Okay, what I suggest is the following ...'