

Party Wall



Cheyenne Blue



Chapter 1

THE SUN REFLECTED OFF THE window, obscuring the view of the shop inside. Still, Freya was hyperaware of the products on display. She shuffled her feet and coughed, but didn't move towards the door. In the window, she caught the reflection of Carly's easy smile, as if she frequented sex toy stores all the time. Freya moved to one side. Now the sun slanted low, slicing through the glass. A mannequin wearing red-and-black, skimpy, lace underwear caught her attention.

"Tasteless," she muttered.

Carly glanced sideways at her. "I've seen worse in the chain stores in Mackay. I think it's sexy. I'd wear it—if I were ten years younger and ten kilos lighter."

Freya sniffed. "There is so much inherently wrong with that statement. What you wear shouldn't be determined by an outside opinion of what looks good. Your self-worth isn't dependent on another's approval—"

"Okay, okay." Carly's interruption was tempered with a smile. "I didn't mean it quite like that." She pointed to a discreet sign in the corner of the window. "'A woman's pleasure is in her own hands.' Clever."

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“Why don’t they just show a purple dildo and be done with it.” Freya took a tiny step towards the shop next door. Her shop.

Carly shrugged. “No doubt there’s some law against it. When did you last see more than lingerie and posters in a sex shop window?”

“I’m not in the habit of looking.” Freya’s voice was riveted steel. “I’m surprised you are.”

“I don’t often.” Carly grabbed Freya’s hand and pulled her back towards the window. “After all, we don’t get much chance living here, do we? The last sex shop I saw was in Brisbane when Andy and I went down for the rugby. But that wasn’t like this—it appeared to cater mostly to men. This one seems different.”

In Freya’s jaundiced opinion, that was like calling a spade a manual digging implement. “It’s all the same. Catering to the baser instincts of men. Objectifying women. Turning them into sex objects.”

Carly turned to face her, and Freya caught the little wrinkle between her eyes. Good. Maybe she was getting through to her friend. This shop was everything she found repellent. Its silver-and-purple paintwork shone garishly in the sun. The wide window showed only the paltry display and a backdrop of black-and-silver cloth blocking the rest of the shop from view. Probably a good thing. Who knew what was behind those folds and artfully arranged drapes? The mannequin was on the left, and the sign Carly had noticed was propped up on the other side. The middle was empty, a blank canvas for... Freya shuddered. What would end up there? She already knew she wouldn’t like it.

Her gaze moved right, to her own shop window. A Woman’s Spirit. She narrowed her eyes and saliva filled her mouth.

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Even the name of the next-door shop, A Woman's Pleasure, was offensive, being so similar to her own. Her shop front was tasteful, painted the silver-green of gum leaves. Nothing stopped a passer-by seeing inside; indeed, the wide window drew the gaze inwards to the welcoming warmth of racks of books and tarot cards, to the stands of bright clothes, the shelves of crystals and pottery.

"It's great that there's a tenant." Carly rested her forehead on the glass and shaded her eyes, trying to peer inside. "It's been a couple of months since Diane moved to the coast. It can't have been good for your business, having a vacant shop next door."

Freya snorted. "Better a vacant space than this. Diane's organic produce shop and mine complemented each other—we got a lot of cross trade. I doubt there'll be any now."

"You might be surprised."

"Unlikely. But it doesn't matter. This shop won't be here long. I'm surprised the council approved the permit." Freya's gaze shifted to the window, where the permit was taped to the glass. "Maybe I should check that they actually did."

Carly huffed a breath. "I think you'll be wasting your time. There's no way the owner could get away with it in a town as small as Grasstree Flat."

Freya shrugged. "Maybe that's what they're relying on."

"Honestly, Freya? Drop it. I'm sure it's fine. Try and give the owner the benefit of the doubt. They're new in town, it's a new business. Surely it's better for you and your shop if they make a success of it." Amused exasperation tinged Carly's voice.

In front of the two women, the black-and-silver backdrop twitched, saving Freya from answering. A hand appeared through the gap and placed down some stands, the sort that

might support signage or photographs. The hand was tawny, with short, manicured nails. Two silver rings glinted on the fingers.

Carly nudged Freya. "See? A woman owns it."

"I gathered that already." Freya pointed to the sign that was already nagging in her head, an irritant not to be forgotten, like a mozzie bite on a hot summer day. "I doubt a man would run a store called 'A Woman's Pleasure'."

"Not necessarily."

The hand adjusted the position of the stands. A forearm extended through the curtain, then withdrew.

"I'm going to ring the council."

"And say what?" Carly said in a neutral tone. "That you think the new owner is breaking some law you're not aware of? The window is tasteful, Frey. I quite like it."

"It's only remotely all right now because it's mostly empty. You wait, that mannequin will only be the start." Her fingers twitched with the urge to rant some more, but she controlled it. Deep breaths. A slow inhale, hold that breath, and then let the tension of the moment expel in the whoosh of air through her mouth. She would not let this shop get to her.

On Freya's third exhale, the curtain dividing the window from the rest of the shop was pulled to one side. The owner of the hand came into view. The lighting behind her was dim, only enough to show a smooth-skinned arm, a full shoulder, and the curve of neck and breast. The woman wore a yellow singlet, and a bird's wing of smooth dark hair hung down, obscuring her face. In the dimly lit shop, she was bronze and sunshine, her top standing out brightly against her dark skin, a beacon in the shadows.

The woman placed a handful of lingerie in the window. She piled it in a bunch, with no attempt at display. A froth of lace

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and bright colours mixed with the darker sheen of satin or silk, something smooth and luxurious. She reached behind her and brought out another sign, which she propped on the stand she'd placed earlier: *Sensuous Reading for Women*.

"Dirty books. Porn." Freya grasped Carly's arm as a prelude to urging her away, into the safety of her shop.

The woman in the window straightened and saw them looking. She smiled hugely, her grin spontaneous and infectious under high cheekbones. Carly grinned in response, and Freya's own lips twitched before she schooled her features back to disapproval. The woman gestured to them with a smile that obviously meant "come inside".

"Let's go and have a look. Meet your new neighbour." Carly took a pace towards the door before Freya could reply.

"Go if you want," she said. "I have a shop to open."

"It's still ten minutes early." Carly glanced back to the window, where the woman watched them. The smile still graced her face, as though she was amused by their dilemma.

"Got things to do." Freya stepped into the porch between the two shop entrances and slid her key into her lock.

The two doorways slanted towards each other: Freya's green door, with the wooden sign stating *Welcome, Friend*. And on the other side, the as-yet featureless black door of *A Woman's Pleasure*. After a beat, Carly followed her in to her shop. Freya flicked the lights on to full and the familiar space calmed her more than any deep breathing could. Her space. Fashioned in a way to soothe her soul, filled with things that nurtured, that calmed, that strengthened. *A Woman's Spirit* was an empowering place, one where women could feel secure, could browse and relax in a space where they wouldn't be rushed, or harried, or cajoled to purchase. Freya walked to the back, past

the racks of feminist and spiritual literature, past the displays of crystals and stone jewellery. At the back was clothing from hill tribes in Thailand and Nepal, sourced from suppliers who paid the creators—all women—a fair and living wage, and donated a percent of the profits to ecological projects within the villages. The other side of the room had racks of pottery, hill tribe beadwork, and artwork. Himalayan salt lamps glinted in the light from carefully positioned spotlights. Freya moved past the couches set either side of a low coffee table, to the water urn and flicked the switch to heat it.

“Will you be at class later?” She turned to Carly, her words softening as she looked at her friend.

Carly’s brown hair hung in disordered array over her face. She grinned in response. “Of course. Wouldn’t miss it. I’ll see you later. I better get away now. I promised Andy I’d check on whether the tiles he ordered have arrived.”

“No worries.” Freya stretched up to kiss her on the cheek. “I’m expecting a delivery of tisanes from the new supplier. I’ll save you something good.”

“Thanks. You’re the best.” With a squeeze of Freya’s hand, Carly was gone, bouncing out into the morning sun. The door, with its Indian chimes, banged behind her.

Freya closed her eyes briefly. Carly was her good friend, her best friend, her long-time friend. But sometimes she was over the top. Too bubbly, too accepting, as she skated and danced her way through life. Freya went into the small kitchenette at the rear of the shop. She really needed a cup of tea, and the urn would take far too long to boil. As the kettle built up its head of steam, thoughts of the woman next door intruded. Sex. Porn. The physical lusts of life.

Everything that she avoided. Everything that she tried to rise above.

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The kettle boiled. Freya selected a jasmine green tea, poured water into her mug, and went back to her shop. Time to open up for the day.

* * *

Just past five, Freya turned the *Welcome, Friend* sign around and climbed the narrow, rickety stairway to her flat above the shop, stepping past the fourth stair where the dry rot threatened to crumble under her weight. Her cat, Dorcas, greeted her, entwining around her legs in a noisy appeal for love. Freya picked her up and Dorcas snuggled under her chin, purring her appreciation. With the cat balanced on one arm, she made a cup of ginger tea with her free hand.

Freya moved to the front room, where a wide balcony overlooked the street. Grasstree Flat's main street was quiet at this time of day. After most of the shops closed, before the single pub became busy, there were generally just a few people dashing into the convenience store, walking dogs, or ambling home. She sat on the couch overlooking the street, and Dorcas settled on her lap. For a few minutes, she sipped the spicy tea and watched the late afternoon sun slant down the hill to the main part of town. She lifted a hand in acknowledgment to one of her yoga pupils, but didn't say anything. Dorcas's contented rumbling purr and the occasional car driving slowly past were the only sounds.

Until the music started. It wasn't the blast and blare of a car radio turned loud with the windows down, nor was it particularly unpleasant. The salsa beat was catchy and infectious, a happy tumbling of notes. But it was loud enough that it disturbed Freya's space, intruded in her peaceful sanctuary.

And it was coming from the flat next door. The flat above *that* shop. She looked at Dorcas; the tabby didn't seem

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disturbed; she continued to knead the cloth of Freya's loose pants with her claws.

Someone must now be living there. Or maybe someone was renovating it for another purpose. Diane had had a house in Grasstree Flat where she'd lived with her husband and kids, so although she'd used one room of the flat above for an office, she'd never lived there. The after-hours time had always been Freya's alone.

She sipped her tea and tried to relax into the late afternoon. But it was impossible. The music played on. And then, to make things worse, a loud and off-key voice lifted above the tune, singing in Spanish. Freya waited. Surely, at any moment, a normal person, a *considerate* person would think of their neighbour, and the fact the wall between the flats was only a single skin of wooden panelling. Queensland houses, especially the older ones, didn't have the solidity of build that houses further south in the cooler states had.

The music paused, and Freya exhaled in relief. But then a blast of horns led into the next tune, one that was even louder and faster than the previous piece. Tipping Dorcas from her lap, Freya stood and moved to where her balcony adjoined next door's. A flimsy piece of lattice separated the two spaces. She rested her hands on the railing and leant out so she could see around the lattice to the next balcony.

It was a mess. A confusion of plants in planters and pots were strewn haphazardly across the floor—tomatoes, a jumble of herbs, and some sort of climbing vine. She sniffed. If she looked harder, she'd probably find a couple of dope plants, something that was very definitely not legal. A wicker couch faced the street in front of a low table piled high with boxes, as if the owner had taken the contents and left the empty boxes

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there to deal with later. No one was in sight, but the music played on, as loud and intrusive as ever.

“Hello,” she called. “Can you hear me?”

No one answered.

“Hello.” Her voice was nearly a shout, but it still didn’t make a dent in the wall of sound. “Can you turn the music down. *Now.*”

Still no response. Freya clenched her jaw and stalked back to her own front room. She raised her fist and banged on the wooden wall, once, twice, a third time. The singer next door paused. Freya waited for her to get the hint and turn the music down, but after a few moments, the singing resumed.

The insensitivity of it. Just what she would expect from someone who ran a sex shop. Just what she would expect from someone with no care or concern for people or community. She raised her fist again and banged on the wall in an irregular rhythm, not stopping until first the singing stopped, and then—blessedly—the music was turned down. Freya waited for it to cease completely, and when it didn’t, she banged again.

This time, the hint was taken and the noise stopped in mid-note.

Chapter 2

LILY HUMMED UNDER HER BREATH as she put the finishing touches on a display and stood back to assess the impact. By law, customers had to walk around a partition to access the shop, but once inside, they would see that this was very different to the usual sex shop. There were no wall racks holding sealed sex toys, displayed with all the finesse of kitchen utensils. No displays of porno magazines in plastic wrappings, or cardboard boxes containing life-size blow-up dolls, their pink mouths permanently puckered to take a cock. Walking into the average sex shop was like walking into a tacky discount store. But, it seemed, that sterile, functional sort of atmosphere was what the average customer wanted. The average male customer, that is.

Lily's previous store had been exactly like that. She'd managed a busy sex shop in Sydney's Kings Cross. Turnover was brisk, but the average punter stayed only a few minutes. They'd swaggered in, or shuffled furtively, browsed the shelves, swept something up, paid, and then left as fast as they could. She'd dealt with groups of giggling women on hens' nights and the bluster and bravado of blokes let loose from the pub. She had more shoplifters each day than the average supermarket got

in a week, and more underage kids trying to sneak in than to any suburban pub on a Friday night.

But A Woman's Pleasure was her store and things were different. The shop was warm and welcoming, almost cosy. Warm lighting, rather than the harsh glare of fluorescent, illuminated sunny tones. The polished floorboards were springy underfoot—a remnant from the previous tenant. Lily had painted the walls a soft yellow, and the side windows had blue blinds. She moved to where four slouchy chairs faced each other across a low table and rearranged the books and leaflets piled on the table—quirky, humorous, educational, or informative brochures, aimed at women across the gender and sexual-identity spectrum. It was the sort of place two friends would sit and share confidences. No dirty sniggers would be allowed in this place. And certainly, no men intimidating female customers, making asinine comments about how their own equipment and charm were far better than any vibrator.

A Woman's Pleasure. Focus on *woman*. Men were welcome, but Lily hoped the feel of the shop would put off those looking for a porno mag and quick jollies.

Anticipation thrummed in her belly. Starting from today, she was open for business. *Her* business, not beholden to anyone else. She didn't have to toe a company line, she *was* the company. Or rather, she was a sole trader. One side of her mouth quirked up. Even Bill Gates had started somewhere.

It was still early, so she went to the tiny space at the back of the shop and made coffee. She took the cup outside to feel the sun's warmth for a few minutes. Resting against the veranda post, she looked down the sloping street to the centre of Grasstree Flat. A steady stream of cars passed, and people stepped into the grocery store, or took coffee at one of the

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outside cafés. Saturday was market day and many people carried bags of dark green avocados or ripe tomatoes.

She switched her gaze from the bustling main street to rest on the shop next door. Which of the women she'd seen peering in her window was the owner? With luck, it was the one with the curly hair and wide smile. The other woman, the older one, had a sour cast to her, as if life was hard and the world was looking the other way. Maybe they ran it together.

It was nearly nine. Lily threw the dregs of her coffee—the strong, sweet espresso her Cuban father always drank—into a large planter. The flowers in it were wilting slightly; she'd water them later.

A click made her look up. The sour woman she'd seen yesterday opened the door of the adjoining shop and switched the sign to *Welcome, Friend*.

Lily took a couple of paces towards her. "Hi, I'm Lily. You must be my neighbour." She smiled and offered a hand. "I'm happy to meet you."

"Freya." She grunted the name, as if it were some secret code, shared reluctantly. She folded her arms. "What did you just empty into my flowers?"

Lily's hand hovered in the air and she withdrew it. "Just the dregs of coffee. I'll water them later."

"Don't touch them." Freya stalked over to the planters and peered suspiciously at the blooms, as if Lily had tipped weedkiller over them. "I'll care for my own plants."

"They're lovely." Lily offered a conciliatory smile. "I thought the council maintained them, as they're on the street."

"Mine." The word was clipped. "I take pride in *my* community."

Lily chose to ignore the faint stress on the *my*. "Mine too now. I'm looking forwards to life here, to the space and

peace after where I've been living." It was an opening of sorts, designed to lead Freya into conversation. Most people would have responded with "Oh? Where did you live before here?" but Freya remained silent. Her nostrils flared slightly, as if she smelt something distasteful.

"I've come from Sydney. Newtown."

"Did you own the same sort of shop?" Freya's eyes were a piercing silver, and when she turned her gaze on Lily, it was as if she were pinned to the window behind.

"Yes. But A Woman's Pleasure is my shop. Before, I managed other people's."

"And you didn't stay somewhere that such a shop would be welcome?"

"Meaning the city?"

"Exactly."

She forced a smile onto her tight lips. "I hope my shop will be welcome here."

"It's not."

Tread softly, Lily. She's your neighbour. She's an arrogant bitch. She quashed the thought that jumped into her head. "Time will tell."

Freya sniffed. The morning sun turned her thin body into silhouette. Her wiry hair escaped the confines of the wide rag band she used to keep it off her face. Strands of grey made silver by the sun glinted as Freya turned on her heel and strode to her doorway. "And I don't appreciate you trying to connect your shop with mine."

"What do you mean?" Lily frowned. "We share a porch. That's not my doing."

"I mean the name. It's tacky. And it's obviously designed to make people think our shops are related."

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Lily arched an eyebrow. The self-centredness of Freya's comment was mind-boggling. "It's nothing to do with you. My Australian Business Number is clearly displayed. Why don't you look it up? I've owned this business name for the last four years."

Freya pushed open her doors. Indian chimes tinkled a welcome. "I will." And she was gone, leaving Lily staring at the sign. Welcome, Friend indeed. She hoped Freya was nicer to her customers than she was to her.

* * *

Lily didn't expect to be busy, not on the first day, but she hoped for some curious passing trade. She expected some initial reluctance, but her research on Grasstree Flat told her this was the perfect little town. The population was younger than in many hinterland towns, a mix of commuters to the coast less than an hour away and the local alternative community. This sort of town, with its new-age energy and alternative vibe was perfect.

She just had to entice customers through the door.

Under the guise of putting out her chalkboard, she took a look up and down the street. A trickle of people were passing, but more people were bustling in and out of the naturopath, and the old-fashioned gentleman's outfitters in the main part of town. Lily put her board on the footpath. A bright sunflower and a flight of bluebirds shaped like an arrow pointed to her door with the words *Curious? Come and look.*

The Indian chimes on Freya's shop door tinkled. A young woman manoeuvred a baby stroller across the porch to the street. Lily smiled and stood aside to let her pass.

"Thanks," the woman said, and smiled in return. After her neighbour's snark and prickles, it was welcome.

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Back inside her shop, Lily made another cup of coffee and took her tablet to one of the comfy chairs, where she could see if anyone entered. The document was still a jumble, but somewhere in the mishmash of words and ideas was the outline for a workshop. Sexual Fluidity. It was a topic close to her heart and was one that would hopefully be popular. Not immediately, but soon. She needed to get people comfortable with the idea of her and her shop before she could start her workshops. The outline took shape as she jotted some headings: *Comfortable in your skin. I am who I am. Sexual identity—why do I have to fit into a box?*

The buzzer on her door sounded, harsh and abrupt, so different to next door's chimes. Maybe she could get something softer too.

Three girls entered the shop, giggling and nudging each other. One darted to the nearest table. "Hey, Evelyn, look at this. What d'you reckon this is for?"

Lily frowned. Her first customers, and if her assessment was right, she was going to have to ask them to leave. Standing, she went over to them. "Hi, girls."

They looked up at her voice. Lily heaved a breath. If these three were older than sixteen, then she was a vicar's uncle. "Can I see some ID?"

"Left it at home." One, bolder than her friends, smirked as she looked Lily in the eye.

"All of you?"

"Yeah. Didn't think we'd need it. Everyone in town knows us." The second girl hung on to her friend's arm and giggled.

"Well, as you can tell, I'm new here, so I need to see some ID before I can let you in."

"Why?" The quietest of the three had a gentleness about her that her brash and sassy friends lacked. "We're only looking."

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Lily softened her tone. “You need to be eighteen to come in here. State law.”

“We’re eighteen.” It was Miss Bold again.

“Great. Then you’re welcome to come back with your ID. But now I must ask you to leave.” She crossed to the door and held it open.

For a moment, she thought they were going to refuse. But then the quiet girl tugged on Miss Bold’s sleeve. “Come on, Ev. We better go.”

The first two girls trooped out, ignoring Lily. The quiet girl slipped out after them. “Thanks,” she said.

Lily nodded, and stood in the entrance, watching them make their way down the street in the direction of the market. For a moment, she thought about going next door, taking a look inside Freya’s shop, but the memory of gimlet-sharp eyes and a clipped voice dissuaded her. There would be another chance, maybe at a better time.

The banging on the wall of her flat last night had probably been Freya. It made sense that she too lived above her shop. Lily had tapped the dividing wall after she’d turned the music off and been surprised at how thin it was. Maybe a single plank. No plasterboard, no insulation. No wonder her neighbour had been annoyed.

She went back inside and sat again, picking up the tablet. *Emotional needs and sexual needs: what if they’re not satisfied by the same person?* That was a topic for later in the course. Maybe.

An image of Freya participating in such a course leapt into her head. Sitting on the beanbags and informal seating she preferred for such groups, laughing with other women, sharing stories. She shook her head. No, she couldn’t imagine her neighbour attending.

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Lily wrote for a while longer, but the empty shop yawned hollow and couldn't be ignored. She went to the window and twitched aside the dark curtain that shielded the interior from the outside. Two women stood and chatted in the street right outside her window. They didn't even glance her way.

Something was missing. Her chalkboard should have been exactly where the women were standing. Lily went to the door and looked out. The chalkboard was propped against the wall, the yellow sunflower and bluebirds facing inwards. The day was hot with not a breath of wind. It couldn't have blown over

She went outside, tossing a hello to the women on the pavement. She placed the chalkboard back where it would be seen, close to the women.

One of them looked at the sign. "I'll have to come in."

"Anytime." She didn't push it, just went back inside and left the door open.

Chapter 3

“THANKS, MOLLY.” FREYA HANDED OVER the brown paper bag containing the smudge sticks. “I’ve included the instructions for use and a meditation that may be beneficial before you begin. *Namaste*.” She turned to the woman waiting. “Jill, I’m happy you’re here. Your book came in this morning.” She reached under the counter and produced the Pilates book Jill had ordered.

“Thanks.” Jill caressed its smooth cover. “I hope this will be helpful. Can I leave it on the counter whilst I look around? I’m after more candles. My bloody dog chewed up the coconut one I got last time. I said it smelt good; Bolto obviously agreed. I better go for something less appealing.”

“Try something citrus. Dogs generally don’t like that.” Freya came around the counter and over to where the candles were. She plucked an orange blossom candle from the shelf and handed it to Jill.

“That’s good.”

“Or grapefruit.”

Jill sniffed the wax of the second candle. “Heaven. If Bolto chews this, I’ll slice him open to get it back.”

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Freya took both candles back to the counter and wrapped them in tissue paper.

Jill browsed her way along the rack of books, pulling out a couple to read the blurb before sliding them back. “Have you been in to the shop next door?” She turned to face Freya, a book on jewellery-making in her hands. “I thought at first it was connected to you... The name, y’know, but the lady in there says you’re separate.”

“We are. The name is just a coincidence.” After her last exchange with Lily, she’d looked up Lily’s ABN. Sure enough, A Woman’s Pleasure had been registered to Lily Garcia for the last four years.

“They work well together.” Jill returned to the counter and pulled out her credit card. “The shop is good. Tasteful, don’t you think?”

Freya’s lips thinned. “I wouldn’t know.” She pushed the card reader towards Jill. “I haven’t been in.”

She hadn’t bumped into Lily either. The occasional snatch of song that drifted through the wall or an open window in the evenings had been subdued, as though the singer was now conscious of her neighbour and the thin party wall. Tension radiated through Freya’s shoulders at the memory.

“You should.” Jill continued, clearly oblivious to Freya’s withdrawal. “It’s welcoming. The owner is great. Very warm, but knowledgeable. Unembarrassable.” She grinned. “I guess that last one’s a plus in her industry.”

Freya handed the card back. “It doesn’t belong here, that shop. We’re a small town, a close-knit community. That sort of thing belongs in the city.”

Jill’s brow arched up. “I think you’d be surprised, if you went in.”

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“I’m surprised the council let it through.”

“It took a while. My hubby works in the council offices, and he said there were a couple of conditions, but the owner was easy to work with.” She took the bag. “I’ll leave you to it, but I’ll see you later for yoga.”

“No worries.” Freya nodded and waited until Jill left before making a cup of spice tea. She needed the pick-me-up. Jill was the third customer in the last couple of days who had commented on the shop next door, and nearly all the comments had been positive. The only faintly condemning one had been from a schoolteacher, who mentioned that two of her students had boasted how they’d gone in. She had been about to quiz them on it, when their friend, quiet little Melissa, said the owner had asked them to leave. Nicely asked, she said.

It didn’t fit with Freya’s jaundiced view of sex shops and their predatory nature. She moved over to the wall that divided the shops. Most of it was covered with her displays, but if she pushed aside the hemp clothing, she could squeeze in alongside. She hesitated. What did she care what went on next door? But she did care, she acknowledged. She could justify that curiosity under the guise of gathering evidence to get the shop closed down.

Before she could talk herself out of it, she picked up a glass from the spring water fountain, and squeezed in behind the hemp jackets. From there, without the baffle of clothing, she could hear soft music. Something slow with a jazz vocal. Sensuous. The low buzz of voices filtered through, but she couldn’t make out the words. She put the glass to the wall and pressed her ear to it.

Nothing. Just the same voices, a bit louder, but still no words. Freya lowered the glass and stood with her palm on the timber wall. Really, what was she thinking? Eavesdropping like

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a teenager spying on her parents. She turned, glass in hand, and pushed past the clothing again to come face-to-face with a couple staring at her.

She flushed but lifted her chin. “There’s dry rot in that wall. I was checking the spread.”

The couple eyed her askance but didn’t comment, and after browsing half-heartedly through the pottery and cookware, they left without a backwards glance.

* * *

“... and into cat...” Freya, on all fours, arched her spine and dropped her head. “Tuck your tail bone underneath you. And now, back to cow.” Her back hollowed and her chin came up.

She broke the pose and stood, casting a glance over her class. Most of the twelve or so women were regulars, well used to the poses. Carly, who seldom missed a class, grinned up at her from the front row. Her bright floral leggings and loose pink T-shirt stood out from the other women’s more restrained garb.

Freya moved over to one of the two beginners. “That’s it, Cass. Relax your shoulders and lower back.” She placed a light hand on Cass’s spine to demonstrate, nodding as the woman’s body softened under her touch. Now her cow took on the sway-back posture of an old dairy cow.

The yoga room was bright with diffuse sunlight coming through the windows. Soft pan pipes played in the background. The humped backs of the women stretched out in hare pose made spots of colour on their yoga mats. Freya moved around the airy room, occasionally correcting a pose, sometimes returning to the front to demonstrate.

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She let the class rise to their feet and led them in a series of lunges. Nobody talked; even the beginners knew these poses. Freya concentrated on her breath and awareness of her body, moving slowly, sensing the stretch and flex of muscles, the strength and flow of energy down through the soles of her bare feet. She focused on the present, breathing into it to anchor her awareness in the moment. The soft notes of the soundtrack resonated quietly. Freya stretched into an upwards salute.

There was a rattle, then a series of bangs as if someone were shaking a stuck door. Freya frowned and glanced at the two doors that led to the studio: one from her shop, one from the backyard. Another rattle, then a thump.

“Warrior pose,” Freya said in a calm voice. “Focus on your breathing, on the position of your body.”

A puff of dust and a few flakes of paint fell from the old painted door near the front of the room. A door that had never been used in the seven years Freya had operated A Woman’s Spirit. Rusty hinges creaked, and then the door was flung open. Lily burst in as if she’d been shoved from behind.

She pivoted to face the room and her brows lifted as she took in the dozen women in leggings and oversize T-shirts now staring at her, their warrior poses in disarray.

“Hi,” she said. “Sorry to interrupt. I thought I was fighting my way into a very stubborn closet.” The comment appeared to amuse her for some reason; a grin formed and fled her face.

“There is a class in progress.” Freya grated the words. “Please leave.”

Lily’s mouth opened again, and for a moment she seemed as though she would argue. Out of the corner of her eye, Freya could see her class had, as one, abandoned warrior pose—although in truth, to hold it this long required quads

Party Wall

of steel, something few of them possessed—and were standing in relaxed positions. She caught a couple of smiles and nods of recognition directed at Lily.

Lily drew herself in. “Of course. My apologies for the unintended interruption.” She disappeared back through the door to her shop and closed it gently behind her. Only dust and paint flakes remained to show where she’d been. But in Freya’s head, she stood there still; a large, colourful woman, her dark hair scrunched on top of her head, a wide, easy smile that flashed white against her copper skin, and a blur of bright clothes. She left behind an aura of vitality and humour that reminded Freya of the tumble of music that had come through the wall. Freya’s bare soles tingled. It was as if a flight of king parrots had wheeled through the room, all noise and disruption and garish colours, but still beautiful to see.

She turned back to her pupils. “Stand tall, ladies. Deep breaths in a four-seven-eight pattern...”

* * *

The Indian chimes tinkled a couple of hours later. Freya left the new stock she was unpacking and went to see to the customer. She frowned at the sight of Lily browsing along the teak tables and display shelves. She looked bigger amongst the small items Freya sold, tall and solid amongst delicate things. But her bright gauzy blouse could have come from Freya’s own racks of clothing.

“Can I help you?”

Lily turned at Freya’s voice and put down the brass candle snuffer she’d been holding. More like fondling it, Freya thought with a twist of anger. She’d been running a finger over its shiny surface, feeling the edge and curves of its shape.

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“I’m sure you can.” Lily advanced a pace. “I’m working on a schedule for my workshops. They don’t require as much space as yours, but all the same, the studio at the rear of the shops is the best place to hold them.” She picked up some tiny spice dishes made of bright pottery. “These are gorgeous. They remind me of my Cuban gran, my *nona*. She used dishes like this when she cooked. A pinch of this, a twist of that. I’ll have to come back with my purse and get some.” She stacked three non-matching dishes in a pile and smiled at Freya. “And actually, the studio is the only place for my classes. I can’t run them in my shop. Not enough room. I’m going to start three, maybe four, classes each week, depending on demand, of course. But you were here first, so I’d like to fit in with your schedule.”

“I beg your pardon?” Even in her own ears, Freya’s voice sounded brittle, like stained glass crunching underfoot. “I’m sorry, but I’m not willing to rent you studio space. Even if I were, I don’t think your classes would be an appropriate use.”

Lily cocked her head to one side. “I don’t get what you’re saying. I don’t need to rent it; that studio is on my lease, shared with you.”

“You’re wrong. I’ve leased my shop for seven years, and in all that time, that space has been mine alone. Diane, who had your shop previously, never used it.”

“Maybe she didn’t need to. The lease clearly states it’s not for storage. Maybe she had no other reason to use it.”

“There’s nothing to talk about. You will have to find somewhere else.” Freya turned away, her shoulders in a stiff set of dismissal. The Indian chimes tinkled. “Excuse me. I have to see to my customer.”

She ignored Lily’s bemused shrug and moved to greet the newcomer.

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“I’ll come around after closing time with my lease. Then we can work it out.” Lily’s tones were polite, but there was something unbreakable in her voice. As if she expected a battle.

Let her think that. Freya had battled before. She was no stranger to the combat between people. She had worn down officials, councillors, medics of all types. She had protested causes and signed petitions, donated and rallied, asked strangers for money, their time. Their caring. If Lily thought she could beat her down, she would soon learn.

In all of Freya’s forty-one years on this earth, she had only lost one time.

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PARTY WALL

BY CHEYENNE BLUE

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