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XXV – Deadlines

Gabrielle pulled her car up by the house. She got out, wiping her eyes with a shiver. She felt horrible. The drive had been unpleasant enough as it was, but with her paws shaking from nerves, it had been a test of her resolve.

The house itself was actually very nice. Very unlike what one might expect if they didn't know Zig Zag. Gabrielle wasn't all that surprised. She'd come to see her boss as an amazingly varied and deep fur, who didn't fall into the stereotype others associated with her at any length. The bronco sighed. She was glad to be here, but she wasn't pleased with the reason. For a moment, she pondered looking at the mailbox to see what Zig Zag's given name was, but she shook her head and went up the path. She wasn't going to do that. If her boss wanted her to know such things, she'd say so herself.

Besides...to her, Zig Zag was, and always would be, Zig Zag.

She rang the doorbell and wiped her eyes again. A moment passed, before the door was opened and she felt herself enveloped in a tigerstriped hug.

"Come in, Gabby," Zig Zag said and looked up at the bronco after letting go.

Gabrielle nodded, quietly and stepped inside. She took off her jacket and hung it up. It fell down. It made her shiver and nearly break down again.

If anyone had told Zig Zag this could've happened a few days earlier she would've laughed in their faces. She realized that whatever had happened, it had to boggle the mind for Gabrielle to be in this state.

"Don't think about it. It's just a coat," she said and gently guided the equine into the large living room.

Gabrielle nodded again and sat down, putting her face in her paws. Her shoulders were shaking.

The skunk looked towards the bedroom door. "James, could you be a real dear and make a cup of tea for us all?" she asked and sat down next to the shaking bronco. "I'm not going to say it's alright, Gabrielle..." she whispered "...because clearly it isn't. But I'm here, and I'll do anything I can to help you."

Gabrielle nodded and sniffed, taking her paws away from her face. "I know, boss. I know but...he made a really nasty threat. He said if I'm not home by the midsummer soiree, he'll have me killed and my little brother will have to take my place and continue the line," she said, quietly.

Zig Zag frowned deeply. She could feel herself getting angry again. "That creep! How old is your brother?" she asked, quietly putting a comforting arm around Gabrielle's shoulder.

"It doesn't matter how old he is, boss. He's old enough. The problem is he's gay. According to Watson, before he sedated me, he'd be fawning over the same stallions my father would try to barter me off to."

"Okay...I can see why that'd be a problem," Zig Zag muttered. She could hear James pour water into the boiler in the kitchen in the background.

"It'd probably wreck him totally. And I'd be dead. I have no more choice..." the bronco whispered. "I really thought we could win. I *really* thought so."

"When is the midsummer soiree, Gabby?" Zig Zag said. She was keeping her voice very soft and comforting, despite an increasing sense of raging fury inside her. No one had the right to do something like this to anyone. Her memories of her own childhood were pressing their way to the fore. She knew all there was to know about abusive parents. Now she was looking at a different aspect of that, from what she'd experienced herself, and for once in her life, she didn't try to suppress her feelings about it. She just controlled them. Tightly.

"It's in just under two months, Boss. A month and three weeks, I think. On midsummer's eve. They always have it on the actual day."

"That's doesn't leave us much time," the skunk said, quietly.

"I know. There's no way we can get Anna to finish the script, get it proofread, have the sets built, the costumes made, get the cast prepared and instructed in their lines, the shooting done, the editing dealt with, the cover made and the tape multiplied in that time, boss. It's not *possible*."

James came in and sat down opposite of the two femmes. He was smiling a little. "I don't know the first thing about movie-making..." he said, in a kind and reassuring voice "...but I just explained to Zig Zag how to get a camel through the eye of a needle, before you called."

Gabrielle looked up and over at the coyote with a puzzled look on her face.

"James Sheppard. I'm pleased to meet you," James said and reached out a paw.

Gabrielle shook it, slowly. "I'm glad to meet you too, James. I'm Gabrielle, but you probably figured that out by now," she said.

James nodded and leaned back. He fell silent. This wasn't his time, and he accepted that.

Zig Zag gave Gabrielle's shoulder a squeeze. "Hang on a few, while I call a few furs," she said and turned to pick up the phone.

The bronco nodded. Being in the presence of the skunk and the coyote was calming her down a little.

A moment passed, then someone answered the phone and Zig Zag spoke up; "Anna, it's Zig Zag. Hey, sorry to call you in the evening like this but I've got something to ask you."

Another moment passed while Anna seemingly answered. Gabrielle wiped her eyes again. James held out some tissue paper he'd brought from the kitchen. It was gratefully accepted.

"Thanks. Actually, she's here right now and she's a complete mess. Her father sent her a message after she left your place. A really *nasty* message, too. Listen...I need that manuscript very badly indeed. We've only got seven weeks to complete *everything*. The

only thing we can save time on is marketing since this one won't be distributed unless Gabrielle's father really screws up..." Zig Zag continued.

Again, Anna said something on the other end. Zig Zag nodded to herself at something and went on; "I'll pay you a bonus if you can have it done in a week, Anna. It's urgent. It's literally become a matter of life and death. And I'm not going to sit on the sidelines while Gabrielle's father treats her this way. You can? Great. You're a treasure, Anna. Thank you," the skunk said and hung up.

"We'll have the manuscript in a week. That does leave time for proofreading," she said and looked at Gabrielle again.

"Zig Zag...are you still saying we're going to make that movie?" the bronco asked, quietly. "What about my brother? I don't want him to get into trouble either."

"You just worry about yourself and let *me* deal with the rest of this!" Zig Zag said. She looked at James next.

The coyote nodded and got to his feet, heading back to the kitchen to get the tea.

"Thank you Boss," Gabrielle whispered and wiped her eyes with the tissue paper again. "I don't know how to repay you for all this."

"You work for me, Gabrielle. I told you, that practically makes you family. Don't think about how to repay me. I just want to see you through this," Zig Zag said, gently.

James returned with the tea and poured everyone a cup, before sitting back down.

Gabrielle reached out to take the cup, sipping it while Zig Zag dialed a new number.

"Hello Jacob, this is Zig Zag. I've got a rush job for you. I'm going to send you some schematics for some sets, one week from today. I need them done two weeks from today. Yes, that's right, you have a week to make them in. No...stop, don't start protesting. I don't want to hear it's impossible. You haven't seen what it is I need yet. And I'll make it worth your while," she said into the receiver, waiting for an answer. She nodded at whatever was said. "Good. That's what I like to hear. If you need to take on extra help for a week to do this, I'll pay their wages. Don't ask, okay? It's urgent. It's *extremely* urgent in fact. Good. Thank you. I'll send the information as soon as I have it."

James was smiling a little. Gabrielle looked at him. "She's determined when she puts her mind to something, isn't she?" the bronco asked, quietly.

"You bet," the coyote answered with a little smile. He sipped his tea again. "I have to say, I don't know much about what's going on. But for what it's worth, coming from a complete stranger, you have my sympathies, Gabrielle. And if anyone can help you, it's Zig Zag."

The skunk hung up the phone and nodded. "There we go. In two weeks, we'll have a proofread manuscript and the sets ready. I'll talk to everyone at the studio Monday morning, Gabrielle. We've got five weeks to shoot the whole thing and edit it."

Gabrielle nodded. She wanted to ask if Zig Zag really wanted to go through with this for her sake but she realized there was no point in asking. The skunk had clearly made up her mind.

She looked into her cup of tea and sighed. She wanted to hope. Wanted to dare believe that it'd all work out. But the baboon in the car had been...so horribly explicit. It was difficult to forget his words.

For a while, no one said anything. For a while, there was nothing more to say.

###

"Come on, chica. Danceeng eesn't goeeng to keell you," Esteban said with a grin.

Jean looked incredulous. "So you say, but you're talking to a historian. I can name several examples of furs who have dropped dead while dancing," she said. She even managed to look deadly serious while doing so.

"Awww, come on? Humor the lobo, eh? I want to dance and I'll have the best lookeeng femme on the dance floor weeth me. Look at them? They're all seextee years old. Why don't we show them *how* to dance?"

"I know you expect me to say "because I don't know how to" now, Esteban. The thing is I DO know how to dance. My mother was rather insistent that I took dancing lessons when I was a kid."

"You're keedeeng? You KNOW how to dance and you don't *want* to? Jean, thees ees unnatural," Esteban chided, good-naturedly.

"There are quite a few furs in this world who'd say *I* am unnatural, Esteban. I'm used to it. Try again. Besides, my legs are still hurting, remember?"

Esteban frowned and pondered. He couldn't think of something. He'd tried for twenty minutes to get Jean onto the dance floor and he had absolutely no luck. She didn't even budge. "Please?" he tried, feebly, giving her a really wet-eyed puppy-stare.

"Ack...that wasn't nice. The magic word. Now you're just plain mean. And will you stop making those big puppy eyes at me, Esteban? Argh...oh God, this is cruel," Jean grinned and squirmed in her seat. "Alright then, *one* dance. Then we sit down. And it has to be something upbeat at least. Alright?"

Esteban's tail wagged and he nodded vigorously as he headed up to the band. He leaned down to the mouse with the bass and whispered something to him, jabbing a thumb towards Jean at the table.

The mouse grinned widely and nodded. Esteban returned to the table and held out a paw towards Jean, "May I have the honor of thees dance, Señorita?" he said, even exaggerating his accent a little for effect.

For a moment, Jean felt like she was melting again, and she accepted his paw. "Very well, you may," she said, graciously, and got to her feet, smoothing down her skirt.

Esteban led her to the dance floor. The band went quiet...then struck up a new tune. Jean couldn't recognize it. It didn't matter. Esteban spun her around, into his arms and smiled, half-closing his eyes.

They had the dance floor to themselves. Completely to themselves. Esteban spun Jean back out and kept smiling, holding on to her paw before sliding up to her. Somewhere, far away, Jean realized the band was playing a jazzy version of a salsa number. It didn't matter what it was. She was being led. And led well. A few older furs were smiling and watching them. Her legs were hurting. She ignored it totally. She'd probably pay the price tomorrow, she knew. But for now, she'd just forget that it hurt.

A few furs around them were whispering. Jean didn't see anything...she didn't hear anything...except the wolf in front of her. Her heart was pounding again. She was in love...and for the duration of just one dance, the world did not exist.

###

Zig Zag closed the door behind Gabrielle as the bronco went back out to her car. She sighed and shook her head, going back to the living room. James was still sitting where she'd left him.

"And you wonder why I like you so much..." the coyote said, quietly, smiling. He beckoned her over.

Zig Zag smiled and said down with him, putting her head on his shoulder. "I'm sorry. This wasn't exactly what I had in mind for tonight."

"Don't apologize. You did the right thing in asking her to come over. She doesn't deserve the treatment her father is subjecting her to," he said, softly.

"She doesn't! And it's going to stop. Her father is going to learn the *hard* way that he can't have everything he wants," Zig Zag muttered. "My bronco being one of those things."

"*Your* bronco?" James teased.

"As I said," Zig Zag grinned. "I have her name on the dotted line."

"You're doing a good thing for her, Zig. It's going to cost you a lot of money to do this and you're still doing it."

"Money isn't everything, James. Money really isn't everything," she said and looked up at him.

"I know. But you're the one with a reputation for being a hard-nosed businessfemme, after all," he said, still teasing.

"Oh shut up, you," she giggled and kissed him.

###

Gabrielle got into her car and drove off towards home. It had helped a lot to talk to Zig Zag. That coyote had been very nice as well, though he'd been quiet most of the time. And yet, she instinctively found herself checking the back seat when she got in, just to make sure the baboon wasn't there this time too.

Zig Zag had seemed so certain they'd make it in time. But seven weeks for full production of a movie that could convince her father to give up his attempts to bring her back under his control? From the first word being written to the complete product. It did not seem possible.

But the striped skunk hadn't even seemed to doubt the possibility. Gabrielle sighed and turned a corner. She passed a patrol car. For a moment she pondered stopping to talk to the policefurs.

But what was she going to say? "Help, my father tried to abduct me, and now he wants to kill me? Sorry, the only witness was the dachshund at the Hilton, but I'm telling you the truth"? It didn't seem like a terribly good idea. Without evidence, she couldn't get help that way. She shook her head.

The problem, she realized, was that her father was unlikely to lay off her for those seven weeks. And if he kept pestering her, no amount of dedication and good will from Zig Zag or anyone else for that matter, would make this work out. She had to buy her boss more time. Or at least make sure that there wouldn't be any interruptions.

She gritted her teeth and turned another corner. Time or peace. One or the other. Either would do the trick. Zig Zag's plan was still good. The more she thought about it, the better the plan seemed.

Her mind wandered. Memories were swimming to the fore as the city lights drifted past, lazily. In her memories, she was back in Denver. Just fifteen years old.

Her mother was sitting in the red room. Her father was standing by the fireplace. She'd been summoned from her room. The memory took over. She could even smell the scent of burning wood from the fireplace again.

"I need to talk to you, Gabrielle," Theodore said, his voice sounding rather distant.

"What have I done this time?" she answered.

"Nothing, for once. I need to talk to you about your future. About what your mother and I expect of you," Theodore said, calmly.

"My future? I'd like to act. I'm thinking about taking acting lessons..." she'd started saying.

Her mother had held up a paw and stopped her with a sharp look. "No daughter of mine will ever display herself to the public like common property. You can put that thought out of your head instantly, young lady."

"But *Mom*..."

"Don't call me that. You know how vulgar it sounds," Roxanne said, irritably.

"MOTHER then...." she'd said.

"Don't argue, Gabrielle. It's time you started taking lessons in a few things your mother and I believe you will need for your future life as the wife of a suitable husband. Needless

to say, we cannot condone you seeing some of the...friends...you seem to have made, anymore. You're fifteen years old. You need to start acting responsibly and in the best interest of the family."

She'd been shocked. Hurt. Stunned. Her father continued droning on about her responsibilities. She hadn't heard most of it.

Finally, he'd sent her back to her room. A little later, Watson had brought her a cup of hot cocoa with marshmallows. He'd taken his jacket off and sat down on the bed next to her, putting a paw on her shoulder.

"Your father knows what is best, Milady. You mustn't judge him so harshly," the dachshund had said, quietly.

"I *hate* him. Why can't I live my life? Why do I have to stop seeing my friends? Why can't I be *me*??" she'd asked.

"Because of duty, Milady. Sometimes...duty is greater than a single life. Responsibility is bigger than you or me."

"I don't care. I want to live. I won't let him stop me."

The dachshund had sighed. He'd looked so very sad. It was the only time in her life she'd seen him show any real emotion.

"Please don't do what you're thinking about, Milady. It won't work. I don't want to see you hurt. Your father is just that. Your father. That makes him right. Always," the butler had said. Then he got up and left.

She'd cried herself to sleep that night. Like so many nights before and so many nights after.

The memory faded and she blinked to clear her mind of it. Watson had seemed so nice then. She'd forgotten that memory. Now she understood why he'd looked so sad. He knew he might one day be ordered to come after her. He'd known already then. And he'd done it.

"You old fool, Watson," she muttered and turned the last corner. "Loyalty, responsibility, duty...that was really all that mattered to you in the end wasn't it?"

She parked her car and got out, sighing. She couldn't forgive Watson. But it was hard to remember him as the butler who'd brought her hot cocoa to make the pain go down easier, and then remembering him sitting on her couch, pointing a gun at her. She

gritted her teeth and looked up at the moon. It was late. The sky was dark. Slowly her lips parted in a sneer.

"You've tried ruining my life for the last time, *Dad*," she hissed. "Never again. *Never*, do you hear me? You won't get away with this. Not with me, not with Timothy. Not with anyone in the family."

She turned sharply and headed inside. Suddenly, everything was so clear to her. There was only one thing that would stop her father, and she knew what it was.

Zig Zag had been right all along.

###

Sergeant Miranda Spermophilus turned off her television set. She looked over her shoulder towards the kitchen and smiled. Her husband had dozed off, sprawled across the kitchen table. Paperwork was spread everywhere. Miranda got up and headed over to the table, gently nudging her husband a little.

"Hey, Peter, you're asleep."

"Nuh uh...I'm not," came a mutter "'m jus' ressin' m'eyes."

She giggled a little. "Come on, let's get you to bed, sleepyhead. Why did you bring work back home anyway?" she asked, gently.

Peter opened one eye and smacked his lips. "Gotta get this done over the weekend, sweetie. But I don't want to spend every minute on it. There'd be no time for you."

"What is it anyway?" she asked him.

"Your case, actually," he mumbled and rubbed his eyes to wake up a little. "The Ryder-case. It makes no sense. The butler did it? It's bad comedy. Cliché to the nth degree."

"I know. And then he got killed after someone paid half a million to get him out of jail. It stinks a mile away of cover-up. But I have no evidence. All we know is that Engelbert Watson is dead. Whoever did that is a professional. The forensic furs didn't find a single shred of evidence in that room."

"There's always evidence, Miranda. You might not know where it is, or what it is. Could be staring you in the face. What did that Ryder-bronco tell you anyway? I didn't get that far in my reading."

Miranda shrugged. "She said she's completely convinced her father is behind this. Watson had said as much. But we only had his word for it, and he isn't talking anymore. Then there's her, of course. But...Peter...I hate to say this, we can't pin one of the most influential businessfurs in Denver up on kidnapping his own daughter on her word alone. Any lawyer who isn't brain-dead would be able to convince a jury that she's unstable...just look at what she does for a living?"

"But you believe her, don't you?" Peter said. He was waking up more completely now. He sat upright and smiled slightly.

Miranda nodded. "I do. I believe every word she said. She could've had everything most furs dream of, Peter. Money enough to buy half of the city of Denver...if not all of it. A completely secure life where she'd never have to lift a finger except to call for a servant. And all she wants is her freedom. It makes absolutely no sense for her to live a life where she literally has to get by on her good looks and the lecherousness of whatever furs would buy her movies when the alternative is the life her father is offering her."

"Except it sounds like a life devoid of love," Peter said and put a paw on Miranda's hip, leaning his head against her stomach.

"That's what I'm thinking too. Y'know, hon...I'd really like to help her. I hate to sit here and feel so helpless. I know her father is behind this and I want to nail him to the wall for it. And all I need is one *sliver* of evidence to connect him to this."

Peter nodded a little. "You're probably not going to find it. But if you want to help her, I'm sure you'll find a way. Have you considered asking her if there's anything she feels you can do?"

"Yeah, I have. But the problem is, the investigation is officially still going on. She's a material witness...she's the *victim* in fact, of a kidnapping attempt. If I get myself involved in this on a private level...it's going to look like I've lost my objectivity," Miranda sighed and shook her head. "It'd take half a second for Captain Archibald to replace me on the case, and I'd be out of the loop. You know I can't help her if I don't know what's going on."

"I know. Well...perhaps a good night's sleep will help you see things clearer?"

"I can't sleep yet. You go ahead, hon. I'll join you soon."

Peter looked dejected. "I'd be asleep already."

"Well, if you can't stay awake an hour or three, waiting for your wife, while your incredibly soft pillow tries to lure you to sleep, you don't deserve to get any," she teased.

Peter mumbled something about the cruelty of femmes and headed off to bed, tail hanging low.

Miranda giggled. She knew he was only kidding. He had looked positively exhausted, and he needed his sleep. She turned and headed to the fridge. She opened it and took out a couple of oranges and put them in the juicer, pressing them.

Then she headed back to the couch. Sitting down and sipping her juice, she tried to think of what it was she might've missed. The poison used to kill Watson had been arsenic. A rather large doze of it in fact. It had been ingested, so the food had been poisoned. The kitchen staff at the hotel had been checked thoroughly and the kitchen was clean as well. Whomever had put the poison into the food would've had to do so while it in transit to Watson's room.

But there was no way to do that. The plate had been put in the small kitchen lift and sent up to the upper floors. Miranda had checked that elevator herself. It was so small not even a five year old field-mouse would fit into it without breaking several bones in the process. There was only room for food. Plates...glasses...

She sighed. The glasses had been checked too. Even the cutlery had been checked. Arsenic was a metal-salt after all. But nothing. The poison had been *in the food*. In a doze perfectly suited for killing a grown dachshund with a good health. It was as if the killer had *intimate* knowledge of Watson. Which also corroborated her theory that Gabrielle was right and that her father was behind it. If he wanted to shut up a potential leak before it sprang, it made sense to have Watson killed off.

"THINK Miranda. There's a filly out there in a lot of trouble and if you don't get this *right* she might very well lose her freedom. For crying out loud, the thirteenth amendment is still in force!! How *dare* he," she told herself and sipped her juice again.

Crossing her legs on the table, she rubbed the bridge of her nose and sighed again. "Nothing could've gotten into that elevator. It had to go up five stories to get to Watson's floor. There, a chambermaid took it and brought it to him. He ate. He died. The maid was so shocked when she learned that she had to be taken to a shrink. She's been checked. It wasn't her. No residue on her fur. She's not a suspect. The chefs couldn't have done this. They'd risk spreading the poison to every meal they were cooking. They've been checked too. No residue on them either. How can someone administer a poison in

an elevator too small to fit into? Think Miranda. *Think!* Find the killer and you find the one who ordered the dachshunds death."

She shook her head and turned on the television again. An old Tarzan-movie was playing. Johnny Weisspelz was swinging through the jungle.

"King of the apes...why not?" Miranda mumbled and leaned back.

Suddenly, realization hit Miranda Spermophilus between the eyes.

"Good grief. He didn't..." she muttered and got up, forgetting movie and orange juice as she went to the computer and sat down.

###

It was getting late. Very late in fact. Not late enough for the music to have stopped playing yet, but definitely late enough for Jean to feel very tired.

Esteban had somehow managed to get her on the floor for just a single dance. It was more than she'd danced for several years. She always felt embarrassed on a dance floor. Felt like everyone was staring. Tonight, she *knew* everyone had been staring and it didn't matter. They'd been staring for the right reasons.

Besides, Esteban had turned out to be a remarkable dancer. He really had rhythm in his soul. She realized she'd have danced with him even if he hadn't. It felt nice.

Now, they were sitting at the table. Talking about little nothings and the weather. It didn't matter what they were talking about, Jean thought. She liked hearing Esteban's voice.

Esteban was letting his mouth run. He felt elated. The couple at the table next to them, a pair of cats in their sixties, were smiling. Occasionally they nodded or winked in their direction. He almost felt bad for having such a good time, knowing that Gabrielle was at home in the apartment, upset. But Jean had said they should go...and it had been a fantastic date. Just the two of them...alone, in a crowd. They could've been standing on Times Square at the stroke of midnight on New Years Eve, and he'd still have felt they were completely alone. For a moment, he wondered why he'd fallen so completely for the vixen in front of him.

He'd put it down to a case of instant chemistry. He didn't want to think about the 'why's' and the 'how's'.

He cleared his throat. "You're lookeeng tired, Jean. Let me take you back home?"

She nodded. "We probably should go. We'll need to get a cab. My legs really can't take any more tonight."

"I'm sorree. I deedn't mean to make you uncomfortable," he said, looking honestly sad.

"I wouldn't have danced with you if I didn't want to, Esteban. They're my legs...and it's my pain and I'll deal with it."

"You know...I deedn't even notece you leempeeng out there."

"Limps can be suppressed. At least this one can. But it hurts worse when I try to walk normally. I limp because it takes means alleviating the pressure for a moment longer. Anyway, the ache is why you didn't see me support myself on my right leg whenever you spun me," she explained. Her right leg was by far the one that had been hurt the worst. The left one was mostly sore. But being slung into the wall had broken her arm, hurt the muscles and ligaments in her leg and broken two ribs. All on the right side of her body. She chuckled a little. "You know, you were dancing with a cripple. A broken arm and hurt legs."

"I know. I deedn't theenk the arm would be a problem, though. I'm sorree eef the leg gave you a lot of trouble. Eet was really thoughtless of me," Esteban said, quietly.

"Yeah, it hurt. But you know, the way it made me feel to have you lead made it worth it. When it stops aching all the time...will you take me out again...to dance?"

Esteban nodded and wagged his tail. "Si. *Salsa*, chica. The best way to dance."

She giggled and got up. "You're incorrigible."

"Don't you just love eet?" he asked and got up, immediately reaching out to support her.

"Yeah...I do," she muttered and leaned on him as they left the jazz hall behind.

###

Gabrielle looked at the telephone. This wasn't a call she wanted to make. Not for a moment. But she had to and she knew it. She picked up the receiver and dialed. The distance made the line a little scratchy. The receiver was picked up on the other end and a voice introduced the speaker.

"Hello Father..." Gabrielle said, wearily. "Stop. Right there. Don't even start. I've got something to tell you."

Theodore fell silent on the other end.

"I'm coming home, Father. For the midsummer soiree, like you want. You win. I give up. All I ask is that you give me time to put my affairs in order, and to arrange for Jean to get another roomie so she won't lose the apartment. She can't pay for the rent on her own. I'll be home the day before the soiree."

"That isn't soon enough. That simply won't do, Gabrielle. You'll need your dress fitted, you'll need all sorts of things prepared. You will come home immediately," her father responded, flatly.

"Take it or leave it! You can have me home the day before the party, or you can send your baboon to tear me to shreds. You have nothing to lose. I'll send mother my measurements so she can get the dressmaker started. All that'll need to be done is last minute changes and that can be done in half an hour or an hour the day I come home. I'll be home the day before. Not one day sooner. I want to enjoy the last weeks of freedom I have. You're taking my life away. The *least* you owe me for continuing your precious bloodline is to give me those seven weeks to remember for the rest of my life. It ends the day I come home," Gabrielle said. She kept her voice neutral. She realized she was sounding tired.

"There's no need to be so melodramatic. Your mother lives a quite excellent and full life. There is no reason you can't do the same, Gabrielle."

"I am not mother. Nor is her life full or excellent. It's hollow and filled with material wealth to make up for all that is missing. But I will not let you force Timothy into something that'll crush him. He's a good kid and I'm not going to have *him* pay for *my* freedom. Besides, I wouldn't have my freedom anyway. You'd make sure of that, and we both know it."

"I'm glad you've finally come to your senses, Gabrielle. Very well. Seven weeks. I will send someone to get you," Theodore said. There was a hint of triumph in his voice.

"No you won't. I'm not going to Denver on the lap of one of your simpering cronies. I said I will be home, and I'll be there. You have my word," Gabrielle responded.

"What word would that be, then?" her father continued, smugly.

"The word of a Bigglesworth-Farthington von Salzburg, father. You know I won't break that oath and shame the family name."

"Excellent. *Excellent*. Very well then. I will see you then."

"One last thing, Father," Gabrielle sighed.

"What is that? Don't you think you've made enough demands already?" Theodore said, sounding irritated.

"I want to have these seven weeks in *peace*. If I see one of your henchfurs lurking about...if I have the faintest feeling that you're not letting me live my last moments in freedom in peace...the deal is off and you can have me killed for all I care."

There was a long moment of silence from the other end.

"Very well. You'll have your seven weeks but if you're trying to find a way to escape so you won't have to come home..." Theodore said, the threat hanging unspoken in the air.

"I gave you my word, Father. The day before midsummer's eve, I will be in Denver," she said.

"As it should be. In that case, Gabrielle, I will see you in seven weeks. Precisely."

"Yeah...see you then, Father," Gabrielle said and hung up.

She turned and looked out at the night sky once more.

"Never again, dad. Never...ever again," she whispered and crossed her arms over her bosom.