

CHAPTER ONE

He was Man as God intended, strong legs braced to stride to a destiny of his own making. His head was turned to look into the distance for his foe, smooth brow frowning with fierce resolve. His arms were poetry in motion, sharply defined with strength, but not bulging. Broad, muscular shoulders tapered to a slim, flat waist. His firm hips cradled a manhood as perfect as the rest of him. Even in the shadows, he glowed with health and virility.

Honor Psyche Fitzhugh walked around her subject admiringly. The buttocks were pleasing to her eye, not too round, not too flat. Circling again, Honor touched his chest tentatively. She looked over her shoulder, but she was alone. She finally gave into temptation, running her hand over the smooth angles down to the hips, to the....The flesh warmed, seeming to stir at her touch.

Gasping, Honor jerked her hand away. She stumbled back, fumbling for the switch on the side of the stage. Brilliant light reflected off the pure whiteness of the life-sized statue. Her hand over her pounding heart, Honor stared, reassuring herself. The statue was so full of life and movement it was hardly any wonder she'd imagined living flesh instead of cool stone. After the months of preparation and research, an hour before the unveiling, her nerves were on edge. That was all.

Snapping the light off, Honor resolutely turned away from the most perfect specimen of manhood she'd ever beheld and went into the wings to review her notes again. Still, she couldn't quell a wistful sigh. How often over the months of living with him had she wished he'd step down off his pedestal and walk straight into her arms.

As he'd already walked into her heart....

"Dr. Fitzhugh!" The breathless voice preceded her assistant. "We just got confirmation of an acceptance from the Metropolis Director of Renaissance Art." Ernie Escavido climbed the side steps, his long, lithe legs and swiveling hips no less male because he was gay. Still, there was something in the graceful way he moved, the tilt of his head, the way he talked, that served as a red flag to heterosexual males.

And unfortunately, Honor thought ruefully, he tended to be attracted to very masculine men. *We all want something we can't have.* Poor Ernie was still in mourning over his broken romance with a handsome young construction laborer who'd left him for a musician. Honor was glad to see him so excited for a change.

"So congrats, doc!" Ernie hugged her. "Even the art world's heavyweights are giving us the benefit of the doubt. Maybe all those months of on-line chat helped, after all."

Without the usual cool reserve she showed most males, Honor hugged him back. Ernie was her best friend. Maybe even, sometimes, her only friend. He didn't threaten her, flirt with her, or push too hard. He was the kindest, most intuitive male she'd ever met, and she valued him both as a co-worker and as a decent human being. No matter what his sexual affiliation.

She replied, "Aided by those months of press releases and preparation for tonight. I couldn't have done it without you, Ernie. I'll just freshen up and then I'll be ready." Honor kissed his cheek and went back to get her purse. As she passed the statue, out of the corner of her eye, she caught movement.

Her skin crawling, she froze. Slowly, she turned her head.

The large almond-shaped eyes still scowled into the distance. The perfect male form still stood firmly on its pedestal. She took a deep breath, wishing, for the first time in her life, for a Valium. Books had always been both companion and sedative enough, but she'd never started

seeing things before, either. She swung her purse over her shoulder, turning to leave, but another slight movement stopped her again. She whipped her head to the side, blinking in disbelief, but the eyes were still, graven images in stone.

She stalked off, wiping her clammy forehead with her hand. For a minute there, she'd imagined....A wink? A statue winking at her? Nonsense.

Get a grip, Honor. This is your chance to be taken seriously, maybe even get offered your first curatorship. After tonight, she was taking a couple of weeks off. She obviously needed some rest.

Thirty minutes later, she put her lipstick back in her purse and blotted her lips on a tissue. She cocked her head and appraised herself critically. She hated the artificiality of make-up, and in fact usually only wore lipstick and light mascara. But this time, she'd added a bit of blush so she wouldn't be washed out in the lights. Her long blond hair was neatly smoothed back in a tortoiseshell barette that matched her tortoiseshell glasses. She brushed down her conservative navy suit and straightened her little lace collar so that it flared over her lapels, but her small breasts didn't offer much flare. Sighing, she stared at her depressing image, her father's comments ringing in her ears as if spoken yesterday instead of years before.

"Skinny as a rail, that girl is. Keeps her silly head filled with fancy stories instead of doin' proper women's work. Pity her Ma, God rest her soul, filled her head with all them tales 'o heroes and flyin' horses and such. I never shoulda agreed to give her them strange names, neither." And her father, a tall, bluff man with the red hair of his Irish roots, shook his head mournfully at his listening friend. "Poor little gal won't never amount to nothin', and won't no boy never want to marry a pale little slip like her."

Honor swallowed hard, remembering how, at the tender age of fourteen, after overhearing her father's opinion of his only daughter, she'd slipped away to her crying tree. There, yet again, she'd grieved over her lovely, kind mother, who'd died in childbirth the year before while bearing her husband a fourth strong son. They were too poor to afford more than a midwife....Honor blinked back to the present, gripping the countertop hard.

This was no time for her old inferiority complex to rear its ugly head. Her Pa, who'd died of coal miner's black lung disease before she graduated from Wellesley, had been right about one thing, though.

"T'won't never turn a sparrow into a bluebird, Honnie. Don't do no good wishin' for what can't be."

Slipping her purse strap over her shoulder, Honor stuck her tongue out at her image. All her life, she'd wished to be a fiery redhead to match the secret passions she kept so fiercely in check. Instead, she was a washed-out blond with an almost washed-up career but for a lucky fall on a hiking trip. The few men who tried to melt her icy veneer usually retreated quickly with frostbite. Which suited her just fine. She'd come too far, on too hard a road, to be waylaid now.

Lifting her chin, she said softly, with the measured, careful diction that was perhaps her best legacy from Wellesley, "I hope you're watching, Pa. Because you're wrong about me. I will amount to somethin.' *Something.*" Pivoting, she swept through the bathroom doors and returned to the auditorium of the Portland Arts and Sciences Museum. Portland was as far as she could get from the coal mines of West Virginia and still stay in the U.S., but sometimes she felt like she carried coal dust with her, depositing residue and losing a bit more of herself with every step she took.

To her relief, Ernie was already circulating the room, greeting the early arrivals.

Plastering the Wellesley smile to her face, she held out her hand to the Life and Arts

Editor of the Portland paper. "Delighted you could come. Won't you have some punch and cookies?" She saw him to the refreshment table and then held out her hand to one of the museum's most important benefactors.

As the hour she'd awaited all her life drew near, the auditorium became so packed that new arrivals had to stand. Some of the art world's most powerful people sat in the front row in the reserved seating. Finally, five minutes before show time, Honor shook her last hand, smiled her last smile, and made the long, lonely walk to the stage. She studied her notes for a few more moments. Then, to remind herself why she was doing this, she touched the statue again. She closed her eyes. Inexplicably, she felt the strength and resolve the image personified flow through her. Slipping through the curtain precisely at the hour of eight, she took center stage.

The coughs, chair squeakings and whispers died as she walked gracefully to the podium. She stacked her notes neatly before her. She wouldn't have to refer to them because she knew her talk--and her subject--literally by heart.

After testing the mike, she smiled out at the multitude of faces turned toward her. Some of these people were tourists who'd happened into town during this much-discussed debut; others were art students; others were Portland benefactors. But the people she had to impress were the ones sitting in the first two rows. If she couldn't convince the art historians, the curators and the media that her find was genuine, then she might as well give up her aspirations, give in to her brothers' pleas and retreat back to the hills of West Virginia to raise a passel of ignorant kids, like so many of her ancestors before her.

The thought stiffened her spine and steadied her knocking knees. "Thank you all for coming. I am Dr. Honoria Fitzhugh, assistant curator of the Portland Arts and Sciences Museum, and I welcome you to our lovely city. I know many of you had to fly long hours to get here, and I'm grateful for your time and am certain you will be glad you came." She glanced down at her notes more for style than substance and began, feeling as if she'd just rowed across the Rubicon. "As many of you know, one of Michelangelo's most famous works of art is his David, now displayed at the Galleria dell'Accademia in Florence." The Italian words tripped easily off her tongue, for the two years in Italy as a foreign exchange student had helped her college Italian become fluent. Her Italian friend smiled at her approvingly from the second row.

Emboldened, she continued more easily, "As historians are also aware, Michelangelo did extensive preparations for many of his statues, sometimes spending years sketching and working with smaller models before beginning the final sculpture. He was still in his twenties when he completed David, unarguably one of the greatest sculptures of all time." She nodded at Ernie, who lowered a huge screen from the ceiling and turned on the overhead projector. A picture of David was beamed onto the screen.

The few in the audience unfamiliar with the statue gaped. Even in the flat portrayal, the beauty of the sculpted muscles and tilted head was striking. Sling relaxed over his shoulder, a naked David looked as if he saw Goliath in the distance and was about to stalk off the screen in pursuit.

Using a laser pointer, Honor indicated the height of the statue. "The accepted original work of art is over fourteen feet tall. It is still considered the high achievement of Michelangelo's early style, and was carved out of a block of Carrara marble intended for a work by Agostino del Duccio that was begun and abandoned. Historians have speculated that the *operai*, or cathedral committee members, gave the young Michelangelo the important commission both because of his impressive Pieta, and because his proposal used this single historic 'badly blocked out' piece of marble rather than adding new marble to the old, as his

competitor Andrea Sansovino planned. His progress was closely monitored, and he worked on the piece between 1501 and 1504, when it was placed in the Piazza Della Signoria in front of the Florentine town hall. Furthermore, of all of Michelangelo's works, David is most symbolic of the new Florentine Republic, in its emblematic defeat of the tyranny of the Medicis. It also, unarguably, solidified Michelangelo's growing prominence as an artist and garnered him an additional thirty-three commissions, though he is *known*," she emphasized the latter word slightly, "to have completed only four of these, possibly because of his inability to delegate work." A few of the art historians on the front row nodded their agreement.

So far, so good. Now that she'd proved she knew her subject, Honor paused for a deep breath, then used the pointer again to outline the face. "Observe the fierce determination of the expression, which art historians term *terribilita*. This fiery personality is often characteristic of many of Michelangelo's figures, and, most say, of himself. And yet if you look closely, you can see a certain wistful longing behind the determination, for what or whom, well, I guess those answers lie in the hearts of each of us."

The silence in the auditorium was so complete now that Honor's soft voice seemed to reverberate with the power of her convictions. "In short, it is my belief as both an art historian and an art lover, that Michelangelo imparted so much of himself into David that I am skeptical any other artist could ever copy this vitality. Furthermore, Michelangelo was so meticulous, and no doubt keenly aware of what was at stake in this commission, that it is highly possible, in my opinion, that he could well have sculpted a smaller model prior to the final work."

She turned off the pointer. Ernie lifted the screen and went to the side of the stage, where he stood waiting to tug open the curtain. Honor took an even deeper breath. "When I returned to Italy a year ago to see my friends from my foreign exchange days, I had no intention of working, or of starting such a controversy. But the moment I saw this work of art, I knew it came from the hand of Michelangelo himself. No one else could copy his astounding mastery of the male nude so well." She nodded at Ernie.

The red curtains swept aside. Soft lighting fell on the statue from all sides. People in the back craned their necks to see, and those closer gasped. Whispers flitted about the room.

Honor waited to let the admiration die down before she spoke again. "As you can see, this version is slightly less than half the size of the original. But look closely at the curvature of the muscles, the vitality of the figure. Even the chisel marks in the base have the same strokes. And observe carefully the facial features, wearing the same fierce expression. No artist save one, no matter how talented, could so exactly capture the wonderful life of the original. I believe, that while my months of attempting to get written authentication in Italy have yielded little, that this statue was actually the original David, a smaller model Michelangelo completed before attempting the accepted work."

Honor paused to let the murmurs and excited speculation quieten before she concluded, "However, as Michelangelo only signed one of his works, verification will be, to put it mildly, challenging. I have several more months to complete my research before the statue must be returned to Michelangelo's home town of Caprese, where I found it. Any help I can get with the documentation from my learned colleagues would be greatly appreciated." Honor bowed slightly toward the front rows. "I now open the podium for questions."

A hand immediately went up on the first row. Bruno Trotterman, the Metropolis director, was a portly little man Honor recognized from pictures. "How did you get the statue out of the country? How do we even know it originated in Italy, and this isn't some publicity stunt you've devised for your museum? It wouldn't be the first time--"

Honor interrupted, "I have permission from the Italian government to keep him here for six months while I try to authenticate him. I did find him, after all."

"Him? Come now, doctor, your bias is showing. The statue is surely an it, not some divine creation," chided Trotterman. With his upstanding coif, his bow tie and scruffy suit, he himself looked more like an 'it' than a him, Honor decided. No wonder he was jealous of her statue's male beauty.

He seemed to read the hostility in her cool gray eyes, for he blustered, "And a pretty sterile copy at that, I'll warrant, when the truth be known. Why have you not published your authentication tests in any of the accepted journals?"

"Patination and other molecular tests are still being performed. I expect the results any day. I am confident that, though this stone seems to come from a different stratum, it will prove to come from the same quarry in Italy Michelangelo used for the larger statue. When our tests are final, I assure you I will publish my findings."

"I won't hold my breath," he said in a huff, sitting down again.

Honor gripped the podium, quelling her urge to retort. "Any other questions?"

The reporter she'd spoken to earlier stood. "Could you tell us exactly how you found the statue?"

"I was on a hiking tour of the Italian countryside when I fell into an abandoned cistern. It was dry, and so primitive that it looked like it had been dug in Roman times. Along with the statue, we found several weapons, since dated as being from the mid-Renaissance period, and a trunk of clothes from the same era. Plus various other toiletry items such as an old mirror, a silver brush set and so on."

The reporter frowned. "Are you telling me someone lived in this cistern?"

"I have no idea. I do know, and tests since conducted verified it, that it looks as though this cache remained hidden from the time of its burial until I found it last year." Honor glanced at the director again. "I would ask, since the weapons and clothing were authenticated, and the cache appeared undisturbed, how the statue itself could be a modern copy? From a purely scientific viewpoint, in my opinion, the facts support my conclusion. As to how it got there and who put it there, I haven't an explanation. I doubt we shall ever know, but I will go to my grave believing that this statue is a creation of the divine angel himself."

More hands went up, but Honor was exhausted. "Thank you again for your interest. And please return for our upcoming exhibit of Egyptian art, with priceless antiquities from the Old, New and Coptic Kingdoms of Egyptian history." Honor walked off stage.

A few days later, Honor returned to the site of her recent victory, the taste of ashes in her mouth. In her limp hand, she carried the Portland paper. She still couldn't believe the headline that had glared her in the face that morning as she drank her coffee.

"*Assistant Curator Fakes Statue!*" The story went on to report that an anonymous source had prereleased the test results on the tiny stone flakes they'd taken from the base of the statue. The flakes not only didn't originate from the Carrara marble quarry in Tuscany, they weren't even stone! They were some type of new hybrid material, obviously manmade, as yet unidentified.

Honor's coffee cup had slipped from her hand to shatter on the floor. When she'd collected her scattered wits, she'd reached out to call the lab director at Cal Tech, who'd promised to release the test results to her before anyone else. The phone rang. The curator ordered her to come in immediately.

Hours later, here she stood, darkness lapping at the windows outside, threatening to consume her. She'd been summarily fired, and with the scandal, she was informed, she'd never work in the museum or art world again.

Honor cleared her throat, but the ache only grew worse. Since this morning, she'd stifled tears. The past year, so exciting, so revelatory, was all she'd take away of the only life she'd ever wanted. Since her earliest memory, when her mother used to read mythology to her and show her tattered art books of the worlds' treasures, Honor had wanted to spend her life among beautiful things.

Honor gnawed the back of her hand to stifle a sob, but once tapped, her grief was a bottomless well. Most of her things were boxed and in her battered Toyota. She'd failed to renew the lease of her apartment, intending to move to a larger one with the new raise she'd counted on, so she had nothing to keep her in Portland. Where she'd go, or what she'd do, she had no idea, but she had to get far away.

Tomorrow, the curator had informed her, a representative of the Italian government would arrive to take the statue back to Italy and conduct his own tests. Both the Museum's board and the Italian government would decide, depending upon their conclusions, whether to prosecute Honor for fraud. She'd promised to give them a forwarding address. When she had one.

Her gaze blurred, she staggered up the stage steps behind the curtain and snapped on the light. There he stood, as perfect and unattainable as all he represented. Strength. Honor. Nobility. Masculine passion. Someone to believe in. Someone to finally believe in her. Someone who needed her.

How could I have been so wrong?

Tears streaming down her face, Honor knelt before her David and wrapped her arms about his strong calves. Even losing her job was not as wrenching as this parting. She'd known it would come eventually, but not like this. In disgrace, the statue possibly even slated for destruction if it was proved to be a cheap trick. Instinctively, she recognized in this graceful creature the soul mate she'd always pined for and the champion she sorely needed. But she was to lose him, too, as she'd lost all she'd ever loved.

Honor's tears flowed faster, dripping down her nose and cheeks, staining those perfect feet and ankles. "Oh God, why can't you be real?" Honor's grief echoed down the years past and the years yet to come.

A hush fell on the room, blanketing out the distant, quiet chaos of a bustling museum. There was only the girl, the statue, and the magic of dreams....

A faint tinkling sound came, so slight that it didn't impinge on Honor's consciousness. A slight wisp of air stirred above Honor's head, as if an angel hovered over her with protective, beating wings. A mist of white flakes fluttered down.

Then a hand fell gently on the back of her head, stroking down over the hair she'd loosened in her grief. "You save me with your tears, sweet little virgin. But why do you cry?"

A breath caught in Honor's throat. For a moment she thought Ernie must have heard the news and come to comfort her. But Ernie didn't speak with that deep-timbred Italian accent. And why did the legs she still clutched suddenly feel warm?

"Come now, *belissima*," the voice spoke again. "Tell me who has hurt you and I will kill him."

Her dazed mind resisted, but slowly, she tilted her head back and looked up.

David still towered above her.

But he was no longer white, and he was no longer cold.

His skin was a glorious golden color, dusted lightly with gilded hair. His thick, wavy hair absorbed every available ray of light, casting it back in luminous shades of brown, red and gold. And his eyes, those fearless, almond-shaped eyes, were the most piercing blue she'd ever seen. They glowed down at her, as if lit from within by an unearthly light she could neither explain nor capture.

Weak-headed, Honor closed her eyes, swaying on her knees. Dear God, she was losing her mind. Somehow, she found strength to scramble back.

"Wishing don't make it so, Honoria Psyche," her father's voice echoed in her ears.

Biting her lip until she drew blood just to assure herself of her own place in reality, Honor opened her eyes. The statue was gone!

Her pounding heart almost choked her. She staggered to her feet, one hand at her throat, turning her head wildly. Then she saw him, pulling a janitor's dirty coveralls over his lean hips. Living, breathing proof of her own madness. She stared stupidly at the bare pedestal, then back at him. Joy fluttered inside her like the beating wings she'd felt earlier.

Could he be real?

Could she keep him?

Could miracles really happen?

But fear stilled the fragile wings, showing them, dewy and weak, back in the hard shell of reality. No, she wasn't crazy. Somehow, there had to be a rational explanation for this. Dumbfounded, she stared at him.

He seemed to have some trouble with the zipper, twisting the end oddly as if he'd never seen one before, but finally he got it pulled up and walked toward her again. The confident grace of his strides, the arrogant tilt of his head as he eyed her as if he owned her, rather than the reverse, mocked her sane discourse with herself.

Sent by heaven or hell, creation of the divine angel or not, somehow her find was made flesh. Honor backed away as he advanced, sensing that if he touched her, this dream of her heart and mind would own her, as she'd longed to own him. "S-stop!"

He paused, but his determined expression did not change. "Something has frightened you. Surely it is not I you fear? I am but your humble servant, saved by your tears and your prayer. This is the dawn of a new millenium, is it not?"

She couldn't believe it, she just couldn't believe she was talking to a statue. Honor kept backing away, getting dangerously close to the stage steps. "Y-yes. How did you know?"

He whistled softly to himself. "Five hundred years. Odd. I remember Caprese as if it were yesterday...."

Honor kept shaking her head in denial, but he'd begun to approach her again. "Careful, *signorina*. You come too close to--" He grabbed, but he was two steps too far away.

Honor's foot slipped, missing the top step. She fell backward, hitting her head. The horror-wonder went black. Her last conscious thought flitted through an overloaded brain before it short-circuited.

Wishing does make it so, sometimes.