

Bright Angel

Sacchi Green

Maura lounged against the railing, gazing out over the bright, vast gulf of stone dropping away at her feet. Dark sunglasses masked her green eyes, and those famous waves of long chestnut hair were tied down by a Hermes scarf rippling in the breeze.

"Are you trying to tell me all this was carved by that little trickle of a river?" But in spite of her studied nonchalance, I could tell she was as awestruck as any other tourist.

"The Colorado's wider than it looks from this distance. And it was carrying billions of grains of rasping sand over millions of years." I didn't look toward the river at all, gazing only at Maura's slim, vivid form. The view of the Grand Canyon from Mather Point had gripped me often enough over the years, and I had photographed it for many a magazine and guidebook, but long ago I'd come to terms with the inability of the human mind to fully comprehend its grandeur.

Comprehending Maura, however, might still be within my grasp. A year ago I had discovered how to penetrate her dark and bright complexities, to push her mind and body to the edges where she needed so desperately to balance. A year ago--and then came her first starring movie role, with filming on location in various exotic areas around the world. We'd only been able to meet sporadically, except when she'd insisted they hire me to do the still photos for publicity.

Did I even know who she was any more? When I'd picked her up at the Flagstaff airport she'd greeted me with a Hollywood air kiss, nothing to raise eyebrows even when directed by a drop-dead gorgeous twenty-something toward an aging, crop-haired butch like me. Then she'd dozed for most of the three-hour drive across the high desert. But at least she was here, as promised, keeping the date we'd made all those months ago.

I moved up close behind her at the railing, not quite touching. The April wind tugged several strands of hair free from her scarf and lashed them across my face and chest, rousing a tingle in my nipples just as though they were naked to those flailing whips of silk.

"Hey Roby," Maura said, without turning her head, "Too bad you don't have the balls to fuck me right here."

Oh yeah. I still knew exactly who she was. "If you'd had the foresight to wear a skirt," I told her, "You'd be bent over that railing right now praying you could hold on long enough to ride my fist to glory." I pressed closer and reached around to unzip the fly of her elegantly cut jeans. "You could still drop your trousers and make all these amateur photographers rich on sales to the tabloids. Or you can let it simmer a while, and I'll fuck you somewhere even better."

I could see out of the corner of my eye that we'd begun to distract a few tourists, most, of course, armed with cameras. Maura, even in scarf and sunglasses and denim, has the charisma of someone whose face could stare out at you with seductive arrogance from the pages of a fashion magazine. Whose face has, in fact, done exactly that, usually with the divinely sensuous participation of her body. More

often than not the eye behind the camera had been mine, back before she moved on from the pinnacle of the modeling scene to her virgin attempt at acting.

"Don't they say that no publicity is bad publicity?" Maura turned toward me. I reached out to untie her scarf and remove her sunglasses, tucking them away in the pocket of my leather jacket. The old challenge was in her eyes. Push me, it said. Force me to the edge. Make me feel.

"So you don't think your acting can stand on its own," I asked, wrapping strands of her windblown hair tightly around my fingers, "without the scandal of getting thrown out of a National Park before the movie even opens?"

She caught at my hands. I released her hair. "Maybe I'll give you a chance to show me somewhere you think is even better," she said, and headed back toward the car. I waited just long enough to appreciate the elegant undulation of her hips in tight jeans before I caught up.

Maura wasn't primarily an exhibitionist, in spite of her place in the public eye. Or possibly because of it. Her craving for danger was more complex than that. There had been times, once I had come to understand what my weathered skin and scarred body said to her, when she had begged me to mark the face the world saw so that it would become her own again. What she thought she wanted from me had nothing to do with tenderness. Still, whether she was aware of it or not, she needed something else from me, as well. Push me right up to the edge, her fierce eyes demanded, while a tiny tremor at the corner of her soft lips added, but don't let me fall.

While I checked in at Bright Angel Lodge, Maura watched the tourists signing up to ride down the nearby Bright Angel Trail tomorrow morning. Even in April, well before the high season, there was heavy traffic along the route. This late in the afternoon we wouldn't have had long to wait to see the mule train returning from the river at the bottom of the canyon, four-fifths of a mile straight down and eight miles of switch-backing trail below, but I had no intention of waiting.

Our cabin out behind the Lodge perched close to the edge, with just room for a narrow path and a wind-gnarled piñon pine between its wall and the canyon's rim. Even a year ahead of time it had taken luck and the pulling of a few strings to get the reservation.

While I brought in the luggage, two-thirds of it hers, Maura stood looking outward, one hand tightly gripping a piñon branch. The drop here was really not that abrupt at first. One could conceivably survive a slide down over a series of shallow shelves to Bright Angel Trail below.

"Are we going down there?" she asked.

"Not on that trail," I told her, "and definitely not on mules. Not all the way to the river, either."

"Oh, right, I'd forgotten about your poor knees." Her subtly mocking tone was just another variation on the game of challenge we played. I knew my old climbing injuries held a certain fascination for her, and she knew that my body still had more strength and stamina than hers would ever achieve from gyms and personal trainers.

"You'll get all you can handle," I told her. "Trust me."

"I'm more worried about how much you can still handle." Maura sauntered back to the cabin and stepped inside. I followed her eloquent butt, then stood in the doorway for a moment to watch her explore the interior.

The furnishings were of comfortably updated 1930s craft design, highlighting natural wood tones and artistically simple lines. The stone fireplace incorporated specimens of all the different rock strata revealed by the river's carving of the canyon, from pre-Cambrian black Vishnu Schist to the Kaibab Limestone of recent millennia.

The platform bed was modern, wide, and inviting. Maura prodded the mattress with a manicured finger, sat on the edge, then lay back. She eyed me speculatively, but without enough challenge to make it worthwhile.

"You must need to rest a while after your trip," I said with exaggerated solicitude. "Go ahead, take it easy. I understand." I began to unpack, hanging things in the closet, watching for her next move. She got up and started to unbutton her shirt. Not a bad idea. The day was getting hot. So was I, but I wasn't ready to take her deceptive bait. Maura is never that easy.

My own bait was more subtle. I moved into the living room, pulled open the curtains of the window beside the fireplace, and crossed to the far side to set my cameras and equipment out on a table. Maura followed.

I didn't let her catch me watching, but she knew I could see her in the mirror as she shed her jacket and peeled off a tank top damp with sweat. She hadn't bothered with a bra. Then, to enhance the temptation, she turned around to present a rear view while wriggling out of her jeans. Her lovely ass-cheeks paused in mid-wriggle as she saw the view presented by the wide window.

The vista, tinted gold and copper by the late afternoon sun, was breathtaking. Maura gripped her loosened jeans tightly and edged past chairs and coffee table to gaze out, spellbound. It was the same scene she had surveyed from the rim outside, but somehow intensified, made more personal, more deceptively comprehensible, by the framing effect of the window. From inside it looked as though the cabin extended right out over the shining void.

I waited five seconds for the mesmerizing effect of space and light and color to take hold, and then I was on her, pushing her hard against the log wall and window sill. I had her own silk scarf tight across her mouth and her pants and foolish thong undies down around her ankles before she could do more than gasp.

She could easily have escaped, even hobbled like that, although she despised looking ridiculous. While my weight kept her pressed into the wall, her hands were free, gripping the wooden window sill. Now and then people strolled by just outside on the pathway; if she rapped on the window, they'd turn to look. She knew how to make me let her go. But gagging was a special treat she wouldn't risk losing, a promise that she was going to be driven to extremities, permission to let it all out without reserve. I wouldn't always humor her that far. More than once she had cursed at me and demanded a gag. More often than not I had refused.

I gathered her thick chestnut hair in my fist and yanked her head back. "Surprise, my knees aren't all that decrepit yet," I hissed into her ear, and brought my right one hard up against her ass. She jerked, but spread her legs to let me thrust between her thighs and nudge into her crotch.

"You wonder how the river carves a canyon through rock?" I asked. "You think you're stone? Haven't I cut my petroglyphs into you?" My other hand worked its way around to her belly and slid down to her shaved pubic mound. The scars I'd given her, where even bikini photo spreads wouldn't reveal them, were too shallow for my fingertips to find like this, but I knew they were there; four tiny, curving lines forming a delicate circle like a secret mandala, cut by the business end of an ice-climbing screw.

"I suppose you think the water always flows gently, smoothly, taking forever to wear away resistance." My fingers moved lower, stroking gently, too gently, over her clit and lush outer lips. "Working down through layer after layer," I went on, going deeper, sliding back and forth in her growing slickness, keeping it up slowly, slowly, as her accelerating whimpers of demand were muffled by the silk gag. When she arched into my touch, desperate for more, harder, faster, I drew my fingers away and approached from the other side, starting with long strokes down between her buttocks and into the tender strata of her soaking crotch.

"But sometimes storms batter at the rocks, and spring floods from mountain snowmelt surge through the ravines." I was really getting into it now. "The water pounds, thrashes, filled with sharp silt and uprooted trees." I raised my hand suddenly to the nape of her neck, still holding her hair roughly back. The scent of her juices on my fingers roused my own. With my fingernails, short but strong, I scraped a line down the valley of her spine to its base. A shiver passed over her skin. Then I veered first to one side and then the other, tracing the delectable swell of her ass, leaving curving pink grooves just shallow enough to fall short of drawing blood. Her gluteal muscles flexed, and her muted voice rose in pitch.

A pair of college-boy jocks passed by outside; even through the gag she could have made enough noise to attract their attention. I felt a shudder wrack her body. She wanted so intensely for them to see...but would I pull back, drop her, rather than risk a scandal that might, at the least, distort her career?

I don't know, myself, what I would have done, but they moved on past. My teeth fastened onto Maura's right shoulder, and her taste filled my mouth. I had no more words. Moans and incoherent curses vibrated from her body through mine as she writhed toward my touch. I spread my fingers then and slapped hard, again and again, overlaying the scrapes on her buttocks with red hand prints like the marks on the walls of ancient Anasazi cliff dwellings far below in the Canyon.

Suddenly Maura lurched backward, pushing off from the window sill, nearly toppling me. I lifted her just enough to swing her around and then dropped her hard onto the Navajo rug in front of the fireplace. In the seconds it took for me to get a latex glove from my pocket onto my hand she had torn off her gag and kicked her pants free of her ankles, and now she crouched, long hair falling forward to veil her face, her butt lifted toward me and her swollen labia exposed.

"Do it!" she snarled, so ready that there was no need for lube. I thrust into her, slid out, thrust again, and then she was pumping herself onto me, heaving, panting, her cries rising higher as my other hand pinched her nipples. When the spasms struck, tightening her cunt around my hand and wrist like a trap, I supported her until her grip finally loosened and I could withdraw, gently, holding her wide open for a few seconds and admiring her glistening folds.

"Dusky rose," I said softly, "Like the sandstone layers of the canyon wall at dawn." Maura whispered something I could barely hear. I leaned closer.

"Was this the 'better place' you had in mind?"

"No," I said honestly, not sure whether she was working up to another challenge.

"This was just an opportunity seized. You'll know when you get there."

And she did.

It wasn't along the rim trail or at any of the famous points where cameras clustered, not even Pima Point at sunset when the river winding far below to the west turned briefly into a ribbon of gold. It wasn't the moonlit vista of the canyon as we leaned together against a spreading branch of the piñon pine outside our own cabin. It wasn't anyplace that easy.

We were up at dawn the next morning, breakfasting on the Bright Angel Lodge terrace. "Why 'Bright Angel'?" Maura asked.

I told her about Major John Wesley Powell's exploration of the Colorado river, and the story that after his men named one muddy incoming stream the Dirty Devil, the Major had compensated by dubbing the first clear creek they came to Bright Angel, flowing down from the north to join the river across from what later became Bright Angel Trail. I thought, watching Maura's beautiful face, as luminescent in its own way as the morning light suffusing the mist rising from far below, that he must also have been thinking of Lucifer before the Fall, Milton's "angel bright" of Paradise Lost. Or, just possibly, he had known someone like Maura.

Three hours later we were far below the rim, three miles along the Hermit and Dripping Springs trails. Maura's cheeks and forehead were smudged with rock dust, and sweat trickled down between her breasts. Her hair was tangled and tied back with a bandanna. Her eyes had never been brighter.

"Just a little farther," I said, urging her past the spring, its fringe of greenery lively with small birds. "We'll fill our water bottles on the way back." A hundred feet off the trail, through a crevice between boulders, we were on a narrow shelf out of sight of passing climbers at our own level. Our view of sky and rock seemed as wide as infinity, and hikers and rafters deep in the Canyon could see us easily if they looked up; see us, but not clearly enough even with binoculars to recognize Maura's features from past magazine spreads or future appearances on the big screen.

Maura stood with her arms outstretched like wings and her back to the cliff. Just above her head a twisted juniper grew out from a cleft in the rock, casting a tracery of shadows across her face.

"This is the place," she said with certainty. "Right here. Right now."

I drew a wet trail with my tongue along her dusty cheek and kissed her, for once, gently. For once, she allowed the tenderness, kissing back with more sensuality than challenge. Maybe wearing her out was the secret. Or did the vastness of the world spread out before us make petty conflict seem too insignificant?

More likely, it was just that she had grander things on her mind than private games.

"Roby...do you think anyone is watching?" Her fingers scrabbled in haste at the buttons of her shirt, and when she'd cast it aside and yanked off the tank top beneath, she went to work on the silver Navajo belt buckle purchased just yesterday. Sunlight glinted from its highly polished surface like spears of fire.

"I'd bet there are at least a dozen pairs of binoculars and as many cameras aimed right up there," I told her, pointing out the peregrine falcon riding the breeze above us, undoubtedly watching for one of the small birds by the spring to stray from the sheltering shrubbery. "And now that you've been wriggling hard enough to flash signals from that silver mirror sliding down along with your pants, most of them must be checking you out, and calling their buddies to look, too."

Maura kicked aside her jeans and raised her arms. Her fingers could just grasp the gnarled trunk of the juniper. "Tie me," she said.

I pulled the bandanna loose from her hair. A twist around slender wrists and up over the juniper, and she was bound just far enough out from the cliff for me to slide behind her and press my thigh hard up against her butt, bending my knee slightly, taking some of her weight. That juniper must have been clinging to life here for a hundred years or more; I hoped to spare its roots for another hard-won century, in spite of her thrashing. And she would thrash.

"So show them what you've got, girl," I muttered in her ear as I pulled on a latex glove. I'm not sure she even heard me. Her focus was far out over the bright canyon, past labyrinthine ravines and spurs and phallic turrets carved by water, wind, and time. The sharp pinch of my fingers on her breasts grabbed her attention, though, and over her shoulder I watched pink nipples swell and darken into nubbled peaks as wildly beautiful as any rock formation. To my tongue, they would feel tender as well as rigid, straining, begging to be sucked, hard...

No. In this tableau, this ritual of exposure, I belonged behind the scenes, only my hands coming between Maura's offering of her body and the sun-struck gulf of space and stone.

So I reached around her and my hands went to work, one alternately flicking and squeezing her breasts, one stroking between dampening thighs. When she tried to press toward my touch, I moved the top hand down to knead her belly and hold her steady while the fingers of the lower one approached the growing slickness of her cunt. Approached, but refused quite to enter, slipping forward and back in the wet folds just short of where she needed me most.

Maura began to twist and strain. I nudging her clit erratically, lightly, too lightly; she rocked and bucked, muttering curses interspersed with gasps, making the juniper's trunk creak. Bruised bark added its scent to dried sweat and the intense musk of sex rising from both of us. The friction of her firm ass against my crotch was driving me toward the edge along with her.

"Now!" I thrust up inside her, fingers twisting, pressing forward, my upper hand sliding down to give her seeking clit the hard, fierce strokes it demanded. Short, sharp gasps punctuated my movements, intensified, accelerated... Until, abruptly, she tensed, the arc of her slim body between tethered wrists and denim-bound boots so beautiful that I ached to capture the vision on film, but could only try to fix it in my mind. "Now! Let it out!"

And out it came, her long, triumphant cry, echoing from rocky outcroppings, vibrating through her body and into mine as I crushed my mouth against the nape of her neck to muffle my own cries. Through the soft dark tangle of her hair, out of the sun-dazzled corner of my eye, I thought I saw, for the briefest moment, bright angel wings soaring off into the golden distance.

Then Maura slumped back against me. I cut her down from the juniper and crouched with her in my arms. Another beat of wings caught my eye, but it was only the falcon veering off toward her hidden aerie. Maura would fly again, to far-off places where I couldn't or wouldn't follow; but for this rare moment of surrender I knew exactly who she was.