

Gilded Cage

By

Carolyn Faulkner

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Chapter One

Somehow, it was the overwhelming silence that finally shocked Faith into consciousness and once she realized her position, she wondered if perhaps her conscience had been trying to keep her from recognizing her own plight.

Although she was fully awake – if considerably groggy – she couldn't open her eyes. They were forced shut by some sort of sweaty, smelly band of cloth that appeared to be tied behind her head, if the uncomfortable lumpiness against the back of her head was any indication. When she turned her head, she learned that it wasn't just the blindfold that stank to high heaven. She was lying on some sort of bed, and apparently the maid hadn't serviced it in quite some time. A gentle tug on her aching arms revealed that each wrist was unforgivingly fastened to some sort of post, as was each ankle. Her senses were almost overwhelmed by the stench surrounding her.

Goose flesh broke out all over her body as Faith's breath froze in her lungs.

She was bound, spread eagled ... and completely naked.

And she had no idea where the hell she was.

Although every thought in her brain wanted to run helter-skelter away with her sanity, Faith forced herself to be as calm as possible although, it wasn't easy by any means. She'd never had a lot of control over her emotions; they always seemed to interfere at the least opportune moments. But, although her eyes were welling with tears of abject terror, Faith struggled to keep the spiral of fear from eating her alive. She had to assess her situation and see what she could do – if anything, her traitorous mind squealed – to extract herself from it.

She tried her best to concentrate on remembering everything that had happened prior to waking up. Behind the blindfold, her face crinkled unbecomingly with the effort. It was Sunday, her first Sunday in Columbia, and she was browsing at the Mercado de San Alejo. She remembered being amazed at the array of wares for sale. She hadn't set out to buy anything, but she knew she wouldn't be able to get away without snagging some hand crafted tchotchke or other for her handful of friends back home, if only to prove to them that there were other commodities for sale in Columbia besides drugs.

Her friends had thought that she was crazy to take this trip – and, since the last word anyone would use to describe any of them was quiet, they let her know of their displeasure in no uncertain terms. Not that any of their objections had served to deter her. Faith grimaced at the irony while tugging futilely at the bonds that held her wrists.

She wasn't stupid, though, and she'd done as much as she could to protect herself, including getting a gruesome number of preventative vaccines and booster shots. She could barely move either arm for a couple of weeks before she left. She didn't flash her money – what little she had – or advertise the fact that she was either a tourist or an American. She drank only bottled water, kept her mouth shut as much as possible, dressed as close to native as she could manage, and kept her eyes peeled for anything or anyone unusual – although it was a foreign country and pretty much everything was unusual.

Despite all the dire warnings and predictions, Faith found herself feeling relatively safe after a few days. She learned her way around Bogotá fairly easily, and found the majority of the people warm and friendly. She almost snorted at the thought now.

Nothing had seemed unusual that day, either. She'd been strolling leisurely from one makeshift stall to the other, taking in all the sights and sounds and smells, trying to immerse herself in the culture, but also trying to remain wary. Apparently she hadn't done a very good job of the latter.

She'd only really looked down the darkened alleyway for a second, but that was all it took for a group of rough, unkempt men to surround her and herd her away from the bustling market. Within seconds, one of them had reached around her face and clamped a wet cloth over her mouth and nose. Faith had a good idea exactly what it was that might have dampened that cloth, and did her best not to breathe, but it was a losing battle. Her eyes fell shut within just a few breaths. She couldn't even recall what any of the men looked like – no distinguishing characteristics, nothing. They were just a faceless group of men. She almost snorted. What the hell was she trying to remember details about their appearance for? It wasn't as if she was going to get out of this bed and head down to the local police department and fill out a complaint form. That wasn't how things worked here in the best of situations.

And this was hardly the best situation.

The stark, cold reality was that she would be lucky to get out of this alive.

Faith swallowed hard, her eyes filling with tears again that merely soaked the cloth that obscured them. She refused to give in to despair. There had to be a way out. There just had to be. With renewed determination, she began to pull at all four points where she was restrained.

Faith had no idea that there was a man in the room with her. Marco had been silent as a cat the entire time she'd been asleep, but as soon as he saw that luscious body stirring he left. El Diablo had left orders that he was to be notified as soon as the belleza showed any signs of waking. He'd also left explicit orders that she was not to be touched – and he'd looked right at Marco when he'd issued the warning, although it really hadn't been necessary. Marco valued his life – and/or various parts of his anatomy - far too much to cross the Boss in any way.

He knocked vigorously on the thick wooden door to the inner sanctum. "Come."

Marco didn't even have to say anything – the Boss saw him and stood up immediately, brushing past him in the big hallway and practically running down to the small antechamber where she was kept.

But this woman was no idiot. The door had banged open loud enough to wake the dead, but the pinioned body on the bed didn't so much as flinch. Marco knew that the Boss would have seen and noted this. Nothing – but nothing - got by El Diablo.

Cordero De La Fuente took but a second to drink in his captive, but he felt as if he'd known her for years. He'd been after this particular jewel for quite some time, but had never expected that she might fall into his lap as she had. He had expected to have to work much harder for her – which he was not averse to - in pursuit of his goals. Still, there she was, in all of her pristine ivory glory, awaiting whatever fate he decided to mete out.

Well, there was no sense delaying the establishment of exactly who it was that was in control of every single aspect of the situation. This woman, more so than any others he had met, was likely to give him trouble – or try to, anyway – if the natural order of things wasn't enforced immediately. His mind made up, and without removing his eyes from what he could see of her face, Cord drove his hand between her outstretched legs, cupping her warm femininity in the rough cradle of his palm.

Her response was instantaneous – she began to buck and writhe and wiggle as if her life depended on it, all in a desperate but useless bid to dislodge his hand. A dark, innately satisfied smile settled onto Cord's face and the men around him said a silent prayer of thanks that they

were not in the Anglo woman's place. His deep chuckle startled them – none of them had ever heard him laugh before – and its evil tone sent shivers up their spines.

Cord saw his men – out of the corner of his eye - unsuccessfully trying to hide their reactions, but it was this handful of woman that had his attention. She didn't shiver; in fact he could see that her jaws were clamped tightly together, as if she was barely choking back a scream. He wanted to reassure her that she needn't suppress her cries. She'd be screaming uninhibitedly not long from now.

“You're quite a beautiful woman, Miss Alexander.” His low, intimate tone of voice – as if they were alone in the room together instead of surrounded by six or seven other men – and the way his middle finger slipped between her nether lips belied the excruciating formality of his words.

Practically fainting from the force and rapidity of her heartbeat, Faith tried to raise her head, but found that with her arms anchored above her head, it didn't go far. Why was he calling her Miss Alexander?

“Yesss,” he drawled, letting the fingers of his other hand caress slowly up the slope of one breast to trap a taut pink tip. “Very beautiful.” As the fingertips of the hand between her legs explored inexorably until they found and began to tease her tiny love bud, his other fingers twisted her nipple cruelly, wrenching it violently and practically trying to wrap it around his hand.

“Aahhh-iiiiieyyoow!” Faith couldn't help herself. She had never experienced anything but pleasure from that private area, and her nipples had always been ultra-sensitive. It felt as if he was trying to rip her breast off by tugging on it.

He adored the way her body moved as she tried to avoid the pain he was inflicting on her. It was, quite unintentionally, a very sensuous dance – however stilted by her bonds. He could feel himself stiffening behind the zipper of his khakis. Cord released the offended nipple then crouched down beside the head of the bed, leaning over her, kissing along her jaw, never relenting in his exploration of that oh, so private area between her legs. “I think I shall have to take some pictures of you like this – or perhaps with some additions – to send to your father,” he whispered loudly in the general direction of her ear as he nibbled his way towards her lips.

Cord was smart enough, however, not to kiss her. He knew that she was much more likely to bite him than join in the kiss, and, although he could understand that response from her,

it was not one he would ever tolerate. So he studiously avoided her mouth, deciding instead to leave a warm, wet trail down to the crest that he had so recently abused.

As his hot mouth settled over the vulnerable tip, suckling avidly at it, the thick fingers between her legs drove themselves deep inside her. Cord almost lost control at the feeling of being surrounded by her moist woman's flesh, but he managed to reel himself in – barely. Then his mind flashed on one thought – his fingers were drenched in her honey, and he had another struggle for control of his own body on his hands, although, there truly was no question as to who was going to win. He was in control. He was always in control of everyone and everything. Always. There was no other alternative.

He hunkered down just a little more, so that he could truly whisper in her ear as he brought his fingers out and up her crease until they hit that little morsel of flesh he'd explored so hurriedly before. Slowly, methodically, he began to rub the rough tips of his index and third fingers over, around and over the top again, coaxing an obvious, if decidedly reluctant, response from her. For a long moment, he just watched her, luxuriating in the power he had over her. This was going to be a lot more fun than he'd anticipated. It wouldn't have been nearly as amusing if she'd been some frigid thing. Instead, he was going to have the excruciating delight of not only bringing her to the limits of her sanity from pain, but also from pleasure.

And her blush – it turned nearly the whole of her milky white skin a becoming shade of dusky pink, not unlike that of her nipples. She was responsive, yes, but was also the modest sort. That was her crowning glory, as far as he was concerned. To inflict pain was one thing, but to inflict shame at the same time ... and, nowadays, even in Columbia, it was hard to find a woman who was truly modest. He hadn't expected a virgin – she was far enough from a teenager that that would have been some sort of a record. But he was even more impressed by her modesty about her body since she was an American. Cord had long since lost his belief that there were any self-conscious American women. Most of them threw themselves at him with abhorrent abandon. That type of woman was the last kind who would ever strike his interest.

But this lovely Senator's daughter – this particular Senator's daughter ... what a find! Just when he'd been organizing a daring, some would say foolhardy kidnapping just to teach her father a lesson about promoting reform in countries where he had no business sticking his nose, Juan and Alessandro spotted her in the market. Cord shook his head. He couldn't believe how

easy this had been. Somehow, it was even a little too easy, but who was he to look a gift hostage in the mouth?

“My fingers feel good to you, don’t they, little one?” As he expected she turned her head as far away from him as possible, but then he merely followed her. She couldn’t get away from him, no matter what she did, and he intended to impress that fact on her, starting right now.

With his lips almost on her ear again, he continued in a soft, teasingly sensual voice, “I bet even that little pinch of your titty felt good to you, didn’t it?”

Faith wanted to scream “NO!” at him, but refused to give him the satisfaction. She preferred to keep her strength for her eventual escape.

Cord didn’t expect her agreement. But he could see how her body was responding to him, despite how her mind must be railing against it. It was one of the most powerful things in the world, one of the things that brought him to instant granite hardness, bringing an unwilling woman to pleasure. And he was determined to do so to her, right here, right now.

And sometimes, spelling out the truth of their situation only added fuel to the fire – perhaps it gave them some sort of out intellectually, he didn’t know. “We’re not alone here, you know. There are five other men in this room. All of them can see you – every bit of you – because you’re naked. They can see how red your nipple is from where I twisted it – they can see how taut it’s remained, and how distended the other one is ... “

Faith’s eyes filled with tears that she immediately tried to blink away. If he would hit her, or abuse her as he just had – that kind of treatment she would have expected and could have dealt with. She was at least somewhat mentally prepared for pain ... for rape. But this – this oversized hand pressing between legs that she couldn’t close against it ... the ultimate invasion when thick sausage fingers forced their way inside her, rooting rudely around, setting fires in nerves she would have given anything at that moment not to have. And then this soft, almost cajoling voice, ever so slightly accented, cinnamon fresh breath wafting over her cheek as he continued to talk to her, and continued to molest her, making her feel damnably good while she recited multiplication tables in her head and tried not to think about how his slick fingers and thumb had surrounded her most sensitive point, plucking at it gently yet firmly.

And, as her body continued to betray her and respond to him almost wholeheartedly, she knew she was going to lose this first battle, and waves of shame crashed over her, setting loose the tears that had puddled in her eyes.

Cord could hear her breathing becoming more and more labored even though she was facing away from him. He could see her breasts rise and fall rapidly, and he deliberately slowed his fingers until they were barely moving across the barest top of her clit, keeping it surrounded and slick and warm and wet, but not stimulating beyond that.

“Did you know that all of my men are watching you right now? They can hear your heavy breathing. They can see those beautiful titties of yours rising and falling ... they can see the way your hips move with my hand when you’re not thinking about how much you hate me. When all you’re thinking about is how good my fingers are making you feel.” He gently contracted the tips of his fingers on her engorged nub, then began to circle around it, fluttering his fingers, vibrating them, watching her like a hawk for each and every iota of her reaction.

When he knew the inevitable was at hand, he whispered, “They’re going to watch you come, right along with me. We’re going to hear you shout, and watch your hips buck against my hand as I bring you off. We’re going to watch your breasts bob with every motion, and I’m going to be able to feel each and every contraction.”

Everything he said, everything he did, this stranger who held her life in his hands apparently so blithely, should have turned her completely off. She should have been retching in his face rather than writhing and panting to the tune he called with his hand. She didn’t know him! She’d never even seen his face! She should be so scared to death that she didn’t feel anything!

But, leave it to her overactive libido to kick in at any given provocation. And, she remembered from freshman psyche, fear is an aphrodisiac. That certainly appeared to be true in her case. Faith could feel that familiar tingle at the base of her spine, letting her know that it was only a matter of seconds. She used those seconds to prepare herself. This monster seemed to be getting his own jollies by watching her, so she intended to give him as little a show as possible.

Cord was close enough to her that it was impossible to miss the squeal she couldn’t quite suppress, and the strong contractions against his hand. But other than that one peep and the convulsions she couldn’t suppress, she showed no other outwards signs of having reached her pleasure.

Somehow, even though he’d won and imposed his will on her, it was a hollow victory. Cord’s mouth twisted in a grimace that had his men taking an involuntary step back. That look

on his face and in his eye spoke louder than any raised voice. The Boss almost never raised his voice. He didn't have to.

It was on the tip of Marco's tongue to ask if she'd come, but as soon as he saw his Boss's set face, he knew better than to ask. It was better to assume such things, anyway. There were very few women who could resist El Diablo when he set his sights. And even if he weren't courting her, this woman would bow to him, just like all the others had.

Cord was busy, still whispering to his captive. "That was very naughty of you, Miss Alexander," he breathed, reaching out with the hand that had just satisfied her, still coated with her honey, to harshly pinch the nipple he'd neglected before. He was rewarded by her stiffly indrawn breath. "But you'll learn, I'm sure, that I don't allow you to stifle your feelings about what I'm doing to you. I want to hear it all – everything. The moans, the groans, the screams and the squeals. We only have a short time together before I have to let your father know that you're enjoying my accommodations. I'm sure he'll be willing to pay just about anything to get you back – even at the risk of his own career."

"My father?"

A big finger that still smelled strongly of herself was pressed to her lips. "You may only speak when I ask you a direct question, Miss Alexander. But you'll soon learn that rule, also."

"Fuck you! I'm not who you think I am! My name is Faith Whittaker! Let me go!" Faith screamed, suddenly unwilling and unable to hold still even a second longer.

Cord, who had been temporarily rendered deaf by the fact that she had bellowed with all her might almost directly into his ear, sat up slowly. "Apparently you didn't hear what I just said, or perhaps you didn't understand." He stood next to the bed and stared down at the nubile young woman's heaving, writhing body. "But either way, I guess you need to be taught my rule about speaking only to me, and then only when I have asked you a direct question, sooner than I had expected."

Faith couldn't hear anything but a soft jingling of metal, then the zipper-like sound of something being pulled through something soft, like fabric. She was entirely unprepared for the excruciating pain of what happened next. A woman's breasts, as far as Faith was concerned, were meant to be treated gently. Hers had never been treated any other way, by anyone, especially on those few days a month when her hormones ruled and they throbbed very nicely all

on their own. At those times, she could barely stand her bra around them, much less let them be manhandled in any way.

So, nothing in her experience prepared her for the searing thud of something striking her left breast – the one he hadn't twisted, thank God. The tip of whatever it was snapped against her nipple just as it was withdrawn. Faith couldn't take a breath. She couldn't. She'd expelled every ounce of air in her body as the pain exploded in her flesh, and was just beginning to draw it back in when another excruciating explosion lashed the inside of her right breast.

A belt. The word blasted into her mind unexpectedly. This monster was taking a belt to her breasts.

The next blow covered the top of her breast and wrapped around so that the tip licked fire on the tender side of her breast. This time Faith had enough breath, and she screamed with all of her might, pulling and tugging against the bonds. But she remained in place, exactly where he wanted her, so that she could not avoid the fourth and fifth lashings. Faith thought she was going to die from the pain, or worse than that, that she was going to live through it.

Cord watched her beautiful body writhe and twist and an unusual compulsion hit him – he wanted to send his men away, lay his body over hers and kiss the pain away. The thought made him angry – angrier than he'd been in a long time – and the last kiss of the strap that he bestowed raised an immediate welt on that bouncing flesh.

He wanted to throw the belt away when he was done, but his iron will wouldn't allow it. In slow, deliberate movements, he threaded the thick black belt back through the loops of his pants, all the while staring down at the sobbing, shaking woman it had left in its wake. Using a deep, threatening tone to deliberately frighten her even further, he said, "There's a lot more of that to come, Miss Alexander. I hope you've learned your lesson."

Faith wanted nothing more than to curl in on herself, both mentally and physically. This was a nightmare, and she hoped and wished with all her might, with her eyes squeezed shut so tightly they hurt, that when she reopened them, she would be home in her bed in Hagerstown ... but it didn't work. In the meantime, it seemed that each of the stripes he'd laid across her chest were throbbing and thrumming in unison, their pain doubling and tripling with each second. Faith thought she would lose her mind if someone didn't loosen just one of her wrists so that she could rub her assaulted breasts. Someone had to do something to ease her pain, didn't they? Surely one of them would have some sympathy for her –

But as she was trying to wrap her mind around the agony of the fire in her flesh, someone put a gag in her mouth and everyone left. She was left alone to try to cope with her situation as best she could.

Her fear spiraled out of control as she wept and moaned pitifully for long, tortured moments. Eventually, exhausted and hurting incredibly, she shook her head trying to clear her mind. Faith knew that she had probably just been given the merest taste of what was in store for her if she remained in the hands of the maniac that had done this to her. He obviously thought that she was Sherry Alexander, the daughter of the prominent Senator Albert Alexander from Maryland. He was probably expecting some sort of rich ransom for her safe return – or at least the rich ransom. Somehow, after only a few minutes of acquaintance, Faith doubted that he intended to return her alive – even though she hadn't seen anyone's face and certainly couldn't have pointed any of them out.

She concentrated on trying to control her breathing to block out the pain and keep herself from thinking about the fact that she was probably going to die here in some horrible way.

Or, worse, be kept alive for their amusement ...