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# LAUGHLIN

Crown and Cross Book One

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This book contains fantasy themes appropriate for mature readers only.  
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## Chapter 1

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### *Suri*

I gazed out to the sea, sighing in contentment, as I ground my feet gently into the forgiving sand, loving the feel of the gritty wetness. My nostrils flared at the robust and pungent blend of seaweed and salt emanating from the expanse of water. I surveyed my playground, my happy place, the sea.

As I stretched out my arms, the moonlight danced on my skin, catching me in its silvery embrace. I felt sexy and alive as the light danced on my body. I was hypnotized by the rolling waves cast in the light from the moon and stars overhead.

My journey had begun, like I assumed many others had, with an invitation. A co-worker invited me to join her at a yoga retreat. She sensed I was unhappy and wanted me to have a positive experience and meet her cool yogi crew in New York.

On a lunch break near the end of that transformational weekend, I was knocked out and kidnapped by my stalker husband. When I came to, I was tied to our bed back in our

home in Boston. Edward became utterly unhinged, as he admitted to some pretty heinous crimes, including setting up a bevy of women at different locations around the country.

Edward admitted to millions of dollars in profits being skimmed from his father's company and a warrant out for his arrest. With the knowledge of his impending arrest, Edward lost it and planned on shooting me and then himself. I guess he decided he couldn't do time for his crime and couldn't stand the idea of being alone, even in death.

Edward had been spotted dragging my unconscious body into his vehicle by one of my new yoga friends, Tsui. Stacey, friend and owner of the yoga studio, called the cops, and they in turn called Boston.

Stacey and Tsui raced from New York to Boston, putting the retreat on hold until the next day. They arrived and found me beaten but alive. After a quick hospital trip, they drove me back to New York to complete my weekend and graduate with the rest of the students.

I was so incredibly grateful to my new friends who had gone out on a limb for me. Meeting genuine people at the retreat almost made the previous two and a half years of hell worth the pain and humiliation I'd endured. But all that was behind me now.

I wanted a change. I wanted to start life on a new page and write my happily ever after. Following the kidnapping and Edwards's subsequent death, the first year had not been easy, and I had not expected it to be. Stacey gave me the use of her tiny condo that she reserved for guest teachers at her studio. I took classes and did what she called karma yoga—when something is given for free, or in exchange for something. In this case, it was the use of her condo.

With no job, I was able to volunteer at her three-room yoga studio. At first, cleaning up and washing floors, helping with bookings and connecting the right teacher and student

for private classes. I moved up, eventually becoming an instructor.

A few weeks ago, a fellow teacher and friend, Tino, had invited me to join him on a trip to Turkey. I guess he had assumed by accepting, I also agreed to sex, and when I had made it perfectly clear that I was not interested, he made it perfectly clear that we would go our separate ways.

Fine with me, it was more important to be happy than to lower myself to make others happy. I have done that too many times, and I wasn't about to fall into that trap again. In fact, I had been quite irate at the idea of someone putting stipulations on our mutual travel after the fact. I felt like a newly enlightened yoga chick, and Tino's attitude just didn't fly with me.

Of course, I realized after I'd packed my stuff and found a cheap B&B by the beach that my irritation and condemnation wasn't part of my newly made self, either. That's why I had sought out the beach so late tonight. With everything quiet, I could spend some time in meditation.

I sat down and crossed my legs, resting the backs of my hands comfortably on my thighs. I imagined that my sits bones were like roots that descended deeply into the sand, creating a grounding effect. Then I spread my awareness, becoming more conscious of the earth beneath me and the subtleness of the air that sent tingles up my spine.

The breeze felt like the gentle caress of a lover's hand. I wore a smile on my face, as I often did when I tagged into the subtleties that allowed me to feel the world around me so intensely.

I focused on breathing, my favorite breath of inhaling for five, holding my breath for seven, and exhaling for eight. I called it my anti-anxiety breath, and it only needed to be performed three times to reset one's neurological center. Then I allowed my breath to become deep and natural.

My focus shifted to the subtleties of the breath, becoming aware of cool air moving in and warm air moving out. Each breath was fully circular in nature, with a beginning and an end. As I continued, I lost track of my surroundings, my breath now moving in time with the waves.

With my eyes closed, I gazed internally to the place above the bridge of my nose. It had taken a lot of practice to achieve perfect holding of this meditative gaze point. I had started with candle gazing, called Tratak, and eventually, I was able to imagine a candle flame in the center of my forehead.

Time passed. I couldn't really say how much, as the intention was to get out of linear time and get into the life cycle's eternal time. I felt sufficiently relaxed and centered within myself. My thinking moved to Tino and why I had been so offended by his actions and words. Beyond the obvious, I realized my reaction was because he'd hit a trigger.

I believed that being part of a more sacred community came with a set of responsibilities. I expected more from people. They were, after all, supposed to be highly evolved and beyond typical pitfalls. That was my mistake. I never should have assumed.

Then, he'd tried to control me with sex, something my ex would have done. That wasn't the truth, though; that was my perception. What he'd done was made a huge assumption, and we weren't on the same page. I took a deep breath, and when I let it out, I felt better. Then I thought of the more profound question—was I ready to get back in the saddle? Ready to date, or at least imagine being with a man?

[An image of a gorgeous, primal man flitted into my subconscious. The same face I had dreamt about before leaving New York. In my dream, he held me in his arms, a look of concern marring his brow. He was the most gorgeous mountain of a man I'd ever seen. Then, in the dream, I passed out, and in my bed, I woke up. When I shared it with

my girlfriend Stacey, she had smiled and said I'd been sent a vision of my future.

Tino's invite then seemed like the go light I'd been waiting for. I left New York and felt an eagerness for what was to come, to see new sights and maybe meet someone in Turkey. Well, if he was here, I hoped I'd meet him soon. I sighed and slowly moved away from meditation. I could feel the lateness of the night and knew it was time to get moving.

When I opened my eyes, I glanced down at my phone. It was after midnight and time to get back to my lodgings. I loved my alone time, but I doubted the wisdom of being on the beach at this late hour. I was packing up the few items left strewn on the sand when I heard a grunt.

Peeking over the log behind me, I saw three men on the sand about fifty feet away. Two were standing, one of them pointing a gun at the third guy, who was on his knees in the sand. They had chosen a spot that was dark, the buildings behind them shading their corner of the beach.

*Crap! What do I do? If I shout and distract the bad guys, they will no doubt come after me. But I can't let them shoot that poor man, no matter what he's done, assuming he's done anything. Maybe this is just a simple robbery.*

I glanced above me, to the full moon overhead. In a moment, the few clouds in the night sky would pass over the moon, shading where I was hiding. I needed a distraction so I could run and hopefully the man being held at gunpoint could as well. I called the police, whispering as loud as I dared, and told them the general location, but I don't know if they even understood me.

With the clouds almost in place, I grabbed a few rocks and stayed low, waiting for the perfect moment. From where I was hiding, I could hear the man on his knees. I assumed from his tone, he was begging for his life. I had no idea what he was saying, but anyone could recognize desperation.

The gunman cocked the gun while the other guy quietly threatened him, in what I recognized now as the Turkish dialect. They wanted information from the guy on his knees, but he wasn't giving up anything.

Just then, the clouds overhead passed over the moon, providing me with an opportunity. I silently thanked Ganesh for providing me with his assistance and, in quick succession, threw the rocks over the men, hitting the stone pavement and a large garbage bin several feet behind them. As they turned, I ran for the boardwalk. I was almost to safety when I heard a shot ring out and men shouting.

I turned back in time to see the man who had been on his knees running down the beach in my direction, with the other two in hot pursuit. Damn man, why couldn't he have run the other way? Behind me, more gunshots rang out, and a bullet ricocheted off a building to my right.

I was desperate as I ran, looking for an open doorway or anyone who could help me, as no sirens were coming to my rescue. At least I could say *yardim*, which meant help. I went tearing around a corner and saw an open bar. Being summer in Turkey, I ran straight in through the open patio, turning for the washroom, when I ran into a wall and would have fallen back onto the tiled floor if the wall hadn't reached out and grabbed my arms.

I gazed up into the face of the most handsome man I'd ever seen. *That figures, I probably just ran into Mr. Perfect, and now I am going to die.*

"Please, help me, there are men with guns. I saw them; they were going to kill someone, and now they are chasing me." I hoped I was imparting the same sense of urgency I was feeling.

The man said something in Turkish to the bartender, who nodded his head and began closing up shop while the wall



ducked down the hall, his hands still wrapped around my forearms, propelling me out the back door.

We stood in the alley and heard the pounding of feet pass our hiding spot. More gunshots rang out, piercing the quiet. They must still be chasing the man who had escaped, continuing the chase no doubt farther into the beachfront community. I had been panting, more from fear than from the run. I almost died, I almost... I promptly passed out.