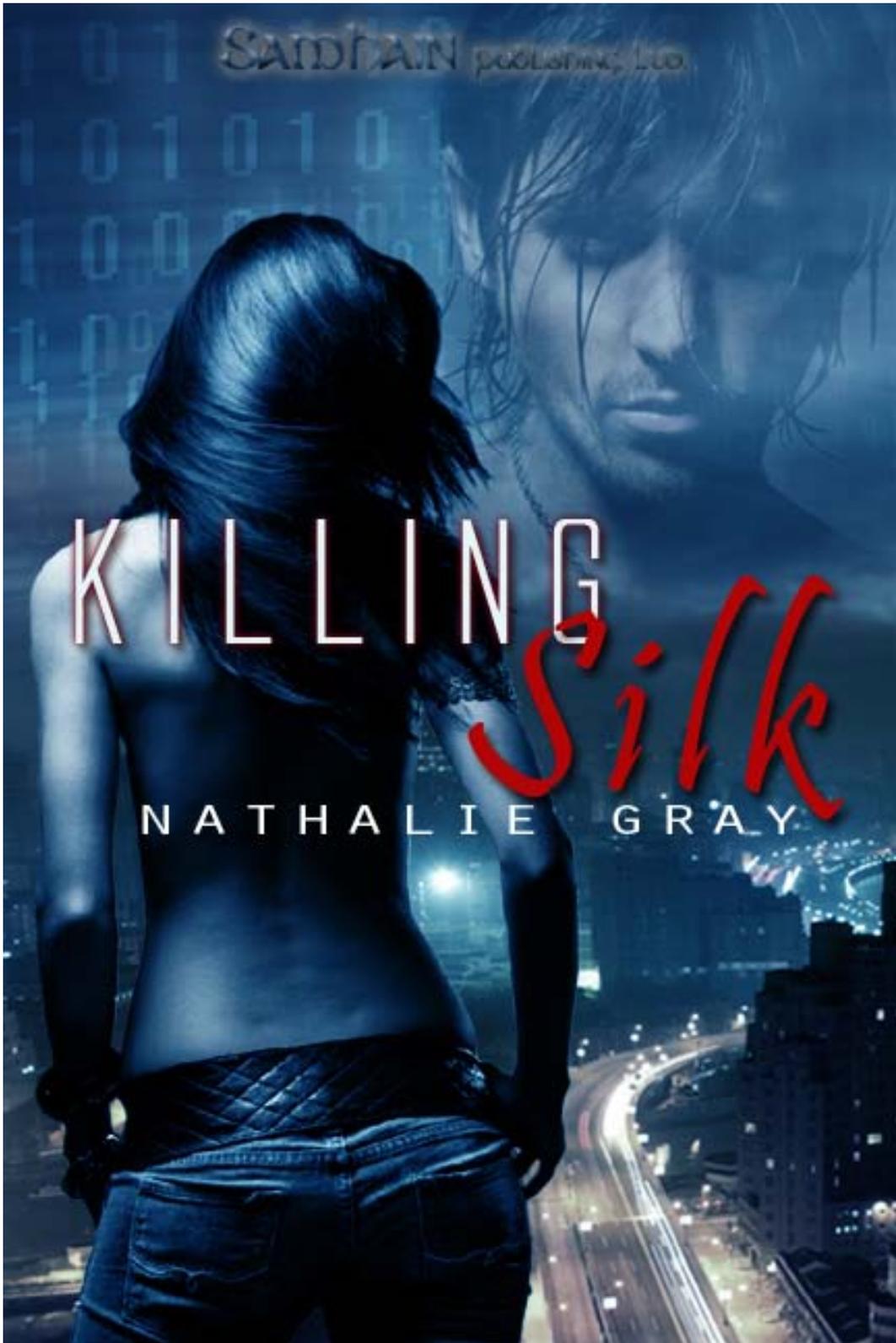


SANDYBAIN publishing, Ltd.

KILLING

*Silk*

NATHALIE GRAY



*A woman bound to secrecy. A man bound to protect her.*

Azalea's canvas is the human body. Her brushes—the colorful silk scarves and ancient ways passed down from a long line of Shibari masters. She has bound the rich and powerful, the beautiful and talented. But she has yet to find the one person worthy to trust with her age-old secrets.

Now a serial killer is imitating her unique style, leaving a trail of death across Tokyo. She knows she is in danger, but to reveal her alibi to the grave-eyed investigator would mean doing the unthinkable—breaking her clients' confidence.

In all his years on the force, Keveri Newman has never seen murder victims posed as lovers, limbs bound in exceedingly rare silk. Down to the last knot, the evidence points to only one suspect: Azalea. A woman who redefines elegance and mystery, who asks the impossible—for him to trust her.

Azalea is drawn to the plain-spoken, cynical detective with hands as wickedly skillful as her own. A third murder inextricably ties them to a single purpose, because that night, she wasn't alone. She was with Kev. And the killer knows the only way to get to her is to separate her from the one man who can protect her...

Warning: Here be futuristic car chases across Tokyo downtown, in the rain, with no lights and no caffeine in the bloodstream. That's love, baby.

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# Killing Silk

*Nathalie Gray*

# Chapter One

It was not until she tied the last knot, the very last twist of her delicate wrists, that he allowed the climax to overtake him. Semen spilled onto the black marble floor between his naked feet. Sweat stung his eyes, but he forced them to remain fixed on her and her alone.

Such beauty. In the way she straightened from her patron, now bound in the glistening cords she commissioned from a particular silk grower and dyed ultramarine blue using only the purest lapis lazuli imported from Italy. Or how shadows played on her pointy face and petite form. At her feet, her patron lay prone, his eyes closed in ecstasy. Only her skilled hands could bring such pleasure from the bind, only her legendary skill could bring a man to his knees at the mere thought of those silk cords rubbing against the skin.

He had tasted her exceptional skill enough times to know. She always seemed to know what would please him, the right amount of pressure, the exact number of times a knot could rub against his scrotum before it hurt too much. She would stop then, leaving him on the brink but never over the edge, and adjust the cord.

Eyes the colors of coals. Lips like cherries. He had tried to kiss her once. She had subtly angled her face away. For her, the discreet movement equaled another's slap in the face. He had not tried again.

Soon, he would. Not now. As he watched her work her magic on someone else, alone in his viewing room, his fist slick with his come and his envious eyes filled with her nakedness, he committed each of her unique knots to memory.

Soon, he would take from her more than a kiss.

The pressure wave from the shuttle buffeted him, sent him floundering back against the roof ledge. He fell on his ass, cursing and biting his tongue and coming *this* close to sliding off the rooftop. Upside-down behind him, a thousand feet of sky, busy with trains, shuttles and other crafts, waited to make mincemeat of him. Kev had no choice now.

He pulled his gun from inside his long coat, aimed at the retreating shuttle's aft thrusters and fired an economical shot. Not bad for an upside-down shot.

The blue tracer following his bullet illuminated a path from the muzzle of his gun right into the escaping shuttle's thruster, which disintegrated into black bits. A raven that'd swallowed a grenade. The

craft swerved left and right as its pilot tried to fight gravity, but in the end he could only avoid a full-on crash by pulling the nose up. With a teeth-jarring screech, the shuttle skimmed the roof, rebounded then skidded over to the next, where it stopped with a wail like a dying beast.

Kev rolled onto his front, pushed himself off and started running. He leaped over the divide between the building on which he'd just broken every police protocols—Captain Ng would have a cow again—and landed in a roll on the roof where the shuttle had just scraped to a halt. Both side hatches blew open at once. Smoke billowed from the interior and rose to create a pulsing, multicolor fog over the adjacent buildings covered in neon signs and flashing ads.

For a split second, Kev wondered what Tokyo would look like with all its lights off. Like a cemetery of glass and steel headstones, probably. A couple of tiny eruptions, barely an inch from the tip of his boots, forced him to take cover behind a ventilation duct. Small comfort for a guy who tickled the six-five mark. He checked his weapon gauge by the red light of an emergency refueling station hovering fifty feet over his head. Only thirty-seven bullets left. Shit. He'd have to make them count.

He cupped his mouth to be heard above the din of the city below and heavy traffic above. “Drop the gun and come out where I can see you!”

“Fuck you! I'm calling the cops!”

He sneaked a peek above the ventilation duct and caught his crook crawling out of the shuttle to tumble in a heap on the granular tar. Kev spotted a gun in the guy's left hand. “I'm the cops.”

“My ass. All I did was—”

Kev didn't wait until the guy finished his whining and instead jumped to his feet and placed a bullet somewhere below his knees. It wouldn't kill the guy. He needed him alive, but preferably disabled. A long howl told him he hit something crunchy. A faint clattering sound alerted him the crook had either dropped his gun or hit the ground with it because of the pain. Either way, he was otherwise *occupied*. Kev sprinted across the roof and reached the man, who writhed around on the concrete and made pitiful little sounds like a hamster. Oh, please. He'd been shot in the lower leg somewhere, not had his toenails pulled out.

“Oh, stop whining, for fuck's sake. It's undignified.”

Grabbing the man by the collar of his fancy white business suit, Kev hoisted him so he could have some face-time with the latest Triad member upstart who thought he could invade his turf, make trouble for his merchants, harass his prostitutes and not have to deal with Detective Keveri Newman in return.

“Do you know why Kabuki-cho runs smoothly? It's because it's my district. My district means my rules. And my rules means when I tell you to drop the gun, you fucking drop the gun like it's burning your hand. Why is that so hard to get? Didn't your Triad boss tell you that before you moved your lame trafficking biz up here? By the way, an idiot could spot your fakes.”

“Trafficking—? Argh! What trafficking? I don't—”

Kev gave the grimacing guy a good shake. “Think about what you’re going to say. Think really hard. ‘Do I want to piss off the really big guy with a gun *and* a badge, or do I want to be quiet and wait for the ambulance to get here?’ Hmmm? Choices, choices.”

Just in case the guy decided to bleed to death before Kev had his answers, he sheathed his gun, pulled his phone from the back pocket of his jeans, and slid a thumb over the holotransmitter. The tiny red screen blinked when the channel opened.

“Emergency channel. Please transmit,” purred the genderless, computerized voice.

“Detective Newman. Kabuki-cho District. One wounded from gunshot to both legs.”

“Emergency accepted. Standby for recovery team. Estimated time of arrival is seven minutes, fourteen seconds. Thank you for using Tokyo’s first and foremost telecommunication—”

Kev killed the link before the advertisement ran its course. Goddamn spam was everywhere. The guy squirmed on the ground, punching the air a couple of times. Maybe it made him feel better. “You shot me in *one* leg, not both, asshole,” he muttered.

“Not *yet*.”

Maybe it was Kev’s grin—which probably had the friendliness of a shark—or the way he exchanged his phone for his gun, but whatever it was the guy saw, it made him swallow hard.

He howled when Kev pinned him by the good leg. His sneaker made a dirty mark on the man’s white pants. “So,” he said, leaning forward and adding a few more pounds of pressure. “Where do you make those fakes anyway? Down by the Golden Gai?”

“Fuck you,” the man spat. “I-I have nothing to say to you.”

“Do you know how long seven minutes and fourteen seconds can be when someone has his foot on your balls?”

The guy blanched. But still he managed to snarl, “I’m suing you, y-y-you crazy bastard. I’ll have... Argh! God! I’ll have your *badge* for this.”

“Yeah, sure. Now for my question. Where do you make them? Either you tell me or I work my way up.” He pressed the muzzle of his gun in the guy’s crotch. “Oh, and if you ever rough up one of my prostitutes again, I’ll make sure she has her chance to get back at you while you’re conveniently tied to a bed. Facing *down*.”

“Your prostitute,” he hissed. “That slut?”

“Yeah, *my* prostitute, in *my* district. Call me territorial.” The man sucked in a gasp when Kev added more pressure to his gun.

“Okay, okay—God, man, I’m bleeding to death. I-it’s in a cube rental by...ah, by the Jinja shrine. Yeah, the shrine.”

“You’re not bleeding to death. I’ll let you know when you are.”

Kev knew just the building to which the guy referred, had gone there a couple of times to put the fear of God into the cretins renting out cubes to folks without checking for proper ID first. And without checking with him. He may be in charge of security in the unimportant and lowly red light district, but it was his responsibility, and dammit, he'd do his job. Well, until they forced him out at the end of his contract, which was scheduled to terminate in four months. He'd been a thorn in his bosses' sides for too long to expect or even hope for an extension. He had no idea what he'd do after his retirement from the force except that he wasn't planning on moving. He liked Kabuki-cho, liked the frenzy and energy. Everyone knew him here, it was his adopted home. Plus, he could get anything he wanted for cheap.

"Go on. Who's your supplier?"

"Man, I-I can't tell you that—oh God, I can't feel my leg anymore—they'll kill me."

"Awww." His gun pressed so hard against the guys' crotch that Kev felt the muzzle touch the pubic bone.

"Hanazono."

Kev cocked his head. "Be specific, buddy. The Triad or the restaurant?"

"The Triad. The T-T-*Triad*, you fucking lunatic!"

The ambulance's siren could be heard approaching, which put a big nasty smile of triumph on the guy's face. Kev toyed with the idea of riding the ambulance just to get a few more details out of that asshole, but his phone bleeped demandingly. He stepped away from the wounded crook as the ambulance circled overhead, looking for a good place to land. Wind and debris whipped his hair into his face as he bent over to check his phone. A simple text message from the central. They'd found another victim. Two, in fact.

"Shit."

No time to deal with this lowly crook, whose crimes ranged from stupidity, counterfeiting, blackmail and theft to assault on private citizens. Right now, Kev had a bigger, much more dangerous fish to fry. More like a barracuda.

As the ambulance lowered and swept its thick searchlight along the edge of the roof, Kev pocketed his phone.

"Oh, wait."

He aimed his gun at the man's intact leg and shot him in the foot. Over the yowl of agony, Kev muttered, "That's for that woman you called a slut."

He left the mayhem behind as he ran to his own shuttle waiting on the first rooftop. The matte black craft rumbled when he keyed in the activation code on his phone. The back hatch puffed out with a hiss of steam. Inside, his good old shuttle welcomed him home with the familiar smell of outmoded leather seats and adrenaline patches. He pulled a tiny packet from the torn box, ripped the old one from the inside of his

arm and slapped on the new one. At once, adrenaline shot into his bloodstream. He'd be good for another twelve, fourteen hours. Had to be sharp if they'd found another victim.

Once sitting at the controls, he typed his bosses a quick, one-handed note with a shaking hand to acknowledge receipt of their message and also to warn them a certain crook was about to sue them for police brutality. They must have had a team of lawyers just to deal with his *victims*.

Speaking of which, the new victims had been found together, according to the short message, in an abandoned building that used to be a bar frequented by expats back in the twenty-first century. It was all boarded up now, and no one but squatters went there. The perfect place to kill.

Kev swerved in and out of traffic lanes, flew around a couple of tall and slender glass spires—he wondered who lived in the expensive habitats—before finding a spot to land in a narrow alley. His passenger-side rearview screen scraped on the brick wall and triggered a long geyser of sparks as he lowered his shuttle right down to the ground and landed on three skids at once. The thud compacted his spine and made him curse. Maybe he should get the lower dosage of patches. But a guy his size needed the rhinoceros-grade ones.

He wasn't even all the way out of his shuttle before half a dozen police officers in uniform came to greet him. Leading the pack, his favorite of them all. He'd always had a special place for redheads.

"Detective," Officer Katja Cleven said. Her German accent made the rank sound like 'day-tek-tiff'. "No one touched them."

With a nod for the officers, he followed Cleven into a low doorway that reached up to his shoulders and stooped to enter the smelly place. A single static torch placed there by one of the officers illuminated a scene that burned an imprint of itself into his retinas.

Kev had seen murders in his years on the force. Twenty-second century Tokyo, with a population of thirty million, could produce some fine examples of crazy. But this was something else.

The killer had arranged the bodies on the grimy old linoleum floor, one man and one woman, side-by-side but in impossible positions, using the most complex technique of roping he'd ever seen. Then bled them dry so the only colors remaining were their hair and chalk-white corpses bound in ultramarine blue cords.

"Just like the first one."

By his side, Cleven nodded. "I took pictures from every position outside of a ten-foot radius. If you want them, I can beam them to you."

"Do it." He gave her his phone while he took a step deeper into the madness this killer had left behind.

He had no idea what this all meant, but he knew murderers. And this one was *crazy*. Tying people up this way, then bleeding them. Completely mad. Yet he couldn't completely discount a certain aesthetic beauty in the way the cords highlighted some of the woman's features, or how shadows played with the

bound limbs. Upon closer inspection, he found the cords had left blue imprints. As if the dye hadn't been dry.

"Someone get a chemical unit here. Those cords and that blue stuff, I wanna know where it comes from."

Within the hour, he had the teams he'd requested. Of course, someone had leaked the newest murders to the press, who came sniffing around and tried to snap pictures from adjacent rooftops. He'd had the windows and doorway covered in a static-charged silver plastic membrane, just in case someone tried to sneak in a concealed recording device. His distrust was now infamous in the force. Another reason he needed the extra adrenaline—he did everything himself. No subcontractors for him, no fucking way. It was quickly becoming a zoo in here though, with different teams arguing over access to the bodies and to him. It was hard to think. Plus, rain fell in thick ropes that clicked and clacked on the boarded-up windows and maladjusted metal roof. The sound was deafening.

"He's getting good," Cleven remarked behind him.

Kev started. He checked his watch and winced. He'd spent the last half hour in front of the victims. There was something about those knots. In the way each was identical to the other, in perfect symmetry. Each like a pearl on a necklace. Much better than on the first victim, found the week before, stretched out on the table of a fancy restaurant. Except that young woman hadn't been bled as these two had. He wondered what happened to all the blood.

"They've been killed somewhere else," he said. "And he's not getting good. He's getting *cocky*." He nervously scratched his arm against his gun through the coat. Cleven raised an eyebrow. As usual, he didn't address her concern about his health. Mental or otherwise. She was pretty much the only person to whom he could safely talk, yet he chose not to. What if she turned around and backstabbed him?

Not that he'd been burned by one great big heartbreak or familial trauma. Nothing so dramatic. His folks had been too busy to bother with him, a *late* pregnancy. Still, life had served him a string of tiny disappointments and betrayals, personal and professional, until he'd decided if he wanted things done right, he had to do them himself. He'd never trusted anyone, not enough to be worth a damn anyway, and at forty-one, he wasn't about to change. Old dog, new tricks and all that. Yet sometimes, he couldn't help but wonder what it'd feel like to just drop his guard. Just once.

"Maybe he'll make a mistake. Cocky and careful don't go together well. Just like lack of sleep and a hard case."

"You trying to tell me something, Officer Cleven?"

A half-smile rounded her cheek. "I thought I did tell you and not just tried."

"I think I can handle my case the way I want."

"You *think*, or you *can*?"

"Cleven," he warned.

“Female genes, Keveri. We worry.”

“You shouldn’t. I’m fine.”

“If you look fine, then I look delicate.”

Was that one of those typically female trick questions? Jesus, women were complicated. Kev threw her a slanted glance, noted the mocking arch of eyebrow and realized she was just trying to lighten the mood. Probably for his benefit. An élan of affection made him shift from foot to foot.

“Look, Cleven, Katja,” he began, picking his words as he went. For a guy, that was hard work. “I’ll put that case to bed, the killer in jail—or maybe I’ll have his ass on a rotisserie spit if I’m very lucky—then I’ll tag a few days together and go somewhere quiet. Will your genes be cool with that?”

He’d never strung so many words together without a single curse or insult. He was getting old. And soft.

Cleven nodded. “That would be acceptable.” The accent lifted the word *would* like a spike on a heart monitor. *Dat VOOT bee ahkseptable.*

A wave of heat wafted out of his collar. He shrugged because he didn’t know what else to do with Cleven’s concern. Just to have something to occupy his shaking hands, he shoved them in the pockets of his long coat. On top of the adrenaline patch wrappers and the odds and ends, his right hand encountered a foreign object. He pulled it out. A business card. Ultramarine blue with a gold lotus flower embossed in the middle. *The Red Lounge* gleamed in cursive letters.

The one chi-chi-frou-frou establishment in his entire district, the Red Lounge was like an oyster—one just didn’t enter unless one was invited. He couldn’t even afford a parking spot there. He couldn’t remember picking this up. How had it ended up in his pocket? Someone must have put it there. His heart rate accelerated with the extra adrenaline and with the notion that someone had come close enough to him, unseen, and slipped this card into his pocket. As he raised the semitransparent card in front of his eyes, the color caught his attention. The same ultramarine blue as the cords.

“What’s that?” Cleven asked.

“An invitation, I think.”

She studied the card through narrowed eyes. He’d always thought she looked like a school principal when she did that. “An invitation to wh— Oh.”

He passed an index finger over the name that had just interrupted Cleven. “I know.” He looked around, everyone suddenly a suspect.

“It’s not yours?”

“No.”

To his shock and embarrassment, Cleven squeezed his wrist through the coat sleeve. “Keveri, don’t. Someone is playing with you.”

How had she known he was about to chase this new lead, right then and there and damn the protocols?

Cleven's solicitude touched him, but he couldn't just stand there and waste such an opportunity. Time wasn't a friend. It never was. "You take the lead here."

Her shoulders drooped a little but she nodded. "Sure."

He'd put someone else in charge. Surely there'd be a parade waiting for him when he got back.

"I'll be fine, Katja," he called when he reached the door and turned to see her still staring at him.

She snapped her chin up. Back to the old Cleven he liked. "I'll be waiting for that commendation, then."

He'd already put in a good word for a commendation. Twice. If he had his way, the Clevens of the world would hold all the positions of authority.

Once in his shuttle, he pulled out the card again as he flew deeper into his district, over the Jinja shrine and its upturned, tiered roof of red tiles and gold spines, rendered slick with rain, and landed directly on the roof of The Red Lounge. A pair of security guards in suits were coming at him before he was even done locking his hatch.

"This is private property, sir," one announced.

Kev pulled his wallet from his jeans pocket, flipped his ID so it faced the pair. It didn't seem to impress them in the least. "Unless you have a warrant for someone's arrest, Detective Newman, we have to ask you to leave."

His first reaction was to kick some common sense into these two, but instead he showed them the blue card with the gold lotus, thinking he'd get a raised eyebrow at most. He hadn't been prepared for the deference that washed over them. One nodded and turned right around, while his colleague indicated Kev should follow him.

All of a sudden, rain began to fall in torrents, as it always did at this time of the year. Thunder rumbled somewhere over the city that never slept. He hated spring. And summer too. The smelliest seasons. Nothing beat a good, clean winter to wipe any trace of smell from the air.

Kev was escorted to the roof's emergency exit then down a flight of steps that began concrete and finished snow-white marble. Clearly this led somewhere important.

They entered a small lounge with only two armchairs. Everything in red velvet. It reminded him of those old-fashioned, fancy VIP boxes, except there wasn't a stage in sight.

"The performance will begin shortly, sir."

*Performance? What the fuck is this all about?*

Kev nodded at the departing man and began pacing. No fucking way he was sitting down, not with the adrenaline sluicing his veins. But those seats did look comfortable and deep, so he tried one and couldn't

stifle the long sigh of contentment. That thing was perfect and he'd been on his feet all damn day. He checked his watch. Eleven forty-nine. Maybe the show—whatever it was—started at midnight.

He leaned his head on the backrest and closed his eyes. Maybe it was the cushy place or the velvet chair, but he managed to keep his eyes closed for a good few minutes. Atypical for him.

But, he could afford to let his guard down for a few seconds, right? He'd hear trouble long before it reached him. And in a place like this, the only trouble he could foresee was fighting off boredom. Damn, those armchairs were the *best*.

A faint rustling sound caused his eyes to open. And when one of the walls began to rise like a curtain of gold and red velvet to reveal a glass pane, Kev jumped to his feet. Beyond, a darkened circular room made entirely of mirrors, even floor and ceiling. So there were other lounges like his. A peep show?

“Argh, for Christ’s sake.” He raked his hair back from his face just as a narrow section of mirror slid inside and out came a man and woman, naked.

“Great...” he muttered as he narrowed his eyes at the coming spectacle. A sex show in front of a live audience hidden behind mirrors. Could the kitsch factor get any higher?

When a second woman followed the couple into the circular room and the mirror slid back into place, Kev couldn't help a long, appreciative look at the sexiest body he'd seen in his lifetime. She wore a cowl that hid her face and dropped in two panels of diaphanous blue fabric, one in front, and one behind. Small breasts tented the thin material, delicate limbs moved with fluid grace, long hair fell in black ribbons through the back slit of her cowl. Inside the mirrored room, light dimmed, darkened to rich amber that caressed the three naked persons and gave their skin a golden look.

Kev cursed under his breath when he got a good look at the man. “Well, fuck me,” he breathed.

The mayor's son, Frederick Tagawa, in all his oily self.

So this was what the man did with taxpayers' money, got himself booked on some sex show with two hotties while who knew how many people watched. But why had the person who'd slipped him the card bothered? Kev wasn't Vice, he didn't give a shit what Tagawa did in his spare time. The guy could target practice on bunnies for all he cared.

Muttering at the wasted time, Kev was about to turn around and head right out the door when something caught his eye. Not the naked mayor's son nor his partner, not the hidden woman's intoxicating beauty and raw femininity.

What froze him to the spot was the length of thin blue cord she held coiled in her hands.

## Chapter Two

Kinbaku. Shibari. Many names to the art that bloomed in her soul whenever she bound a person's body, thus freeing their spirit. An art she had learned from the best, perfected over the years, modernized and made her own. Part bondage, part science and part erotic art, her special style of bondage had made her the most popular Shibari artist in Tokyo, perhaps even in all of Japan. Her patrons ranked amidst the affluent and powerful, even if she sometimes allowed herself a little play outside of her formal work. Such as this evening in The Red Lounge. Frederick had asked for it, and she could never deny him anything. Except for the one thing she could not grant—apprenticeship. It had been twenty years since she had become a Shibari artist, and thus was expected to take an apprentice. Unfortunately, no one had caught her attention. Even her master had communicated his concern about this matter. Azalea pushed the intruding thought away to focus on her work.

The handsome man presently turned expectant, sparkling blue eyes to her and Azalea nodded. It was time. Around her, the circular room of mirrored panels graced her patrons' nakedness and replayed it a hundred times. Under the amber light coming from unseen sources above their heads, the couple resembled statues of gold come to life.

Without a word—she never spoke during a performance—Azalea let the coils of cord rest in both open hands, which she showed to the couple. Their eyes gleamed like gems. The other woman, a young brunette who went by the name of Joy, licked her lips.

She stretched the reeled silk cords—twenty-six feet exactly, dyed ultramarine blue to her specifications—while Frederick framed his partner's shoulders with his large, square hands. He was hard and ready.

Azalea circled the couple. Silk trailed in her wake like a thin pet snake. But not the ends, which should never touch the ground. She looped one end over Frederick's thick shoulder and, as she walked another circle around them, kept a constant pressure on the cord so it would graze up over his biceps, behind his neck, then flick off when it reached the end. She watched him shake with pleasure and smiled.

First, she looped a length of cord around Joy's torso, twice over her breasts, once underneath, and finished with an intricate knot that resembled a seashell. Another variant to her art—she had developed unique knots as ornaments to her work for no other reason than the aesthetics of it. She suspected male *nawashi*—rope artists such as herself—did not approve. Even her own master had thought little of these

frivolous touches. But she enjoyed the decorative knots, just as she enjoyed adding a second layer of fondant when preparing her favorite patisseries.

Blowing on her hand to create warm moisture, she applied her palm to the knot in the middle of the woman's back, which acted as transfer agent for the dye and left an imprint of itself on the fair skin. Marking her. By her side, Frederick leaned over and placed a kiss on Joy's shoulder. Then Azalea crossed another length of cord, looped it around Joy's head, slipped it under the horizontal binds already across her chest and used all three to separate and isolate her proud breasts. As she tightened the cord, the subtle grating sound filled the silent room, followed by the woman's sharp intake of air. She was a veteran of Azalea's art, but this first portion always seemed to thrill Joy the most. Azalea could relate. The first and last knots were her best touches.

Frederick knelt in front of Joy and waited with his hands splayed on her buttocks. Azalea made quick work of looping one end of a cord around each of his strong wrists and trapping his hands in their positions. Next came the first bind that would give the woman pleasure. Azalea reached between Joy's legs, threaded a cord up and underneath those crisscrossing her back and front, tightened it until it parted the woman's shaven, glistening sex. Blue silk against pink satin. With a simple figure-eight knot strategically placed over the vulva, Azalea gave the end of the cord for Joy to bite. Teeth flashed when she took the cord and raised her chin. A tightening of muscles on her belly and shaking of thighs told Azalea the knot was well placed. While the woman gave rhythmic tugs to her pleasure line, Azalea knelt behind Frederick, who arched back and waited until she had joined his ankles and bound them with seven passes, each closely packed against the other so that the end result resembled a ribbed tube around his ankles. Contrary to other Shibari artists, she preferred symmetry to highlight the human body.

Joy let out a small moan of pleasure as she tugged on her cord, which dug in her flesh and pulled it up. The dye had transferred to Joy's sex and turned it violet.

Straining against his bonds, Frederick gave a quick lick to Joy's pleasure line before Azalea looped the last length of reeled silk around Frederick's strong neck, threaded it down along his back and between his thighs. With the last few handfuls she had of silk, she bound his penis at the base, which bore traces of someone else's, harder, crueller touch. Azalea frowned at the red mark, but finished her work.

She circled Joy, pressed her hands on the brunette's shoulder blades, and as she arched, back, far back, Azalea gently lowered her to the floor. Supine, with her legs bent at acute angles and her knees on either side of Frederick's wide shoulders, Joy closed her eyes in ecstasy.

On a growl Frederick, his hands still trapped on his partner's buttocks, dove for her sex. He laved and sucked the length of cord pressing into the distended flesh, making low sounds in his chest as he did, sucking and biting and kissing.

As Azalea straightened and retreated to the secret door, she watched the man eating his woman with a voracity that bordered on frenzy. Frederick had never been one for half-measures. Displaying incredible

strength, Frederick hoisted Joy's lower half up to his face, biceps bulged, shoulders corded. The binds that crossed and elevated Joy's breasts tightened even more. Her nipples stood up like cherries on a *peach pudding renversé*. With their exertion and straining against the binding silk, the couple worked up a sweat that made a canvas of their writhing bodies. Blue stripes slashed their skin.

She left the cords there. After they had been used with a patron, they became that person's property, tied intricately to that specific spirit. She could never use someone's cord on another person. Even if they cost a fortune. She loved watching her patrons closing a hand over their personal cord, testing its texture and resiliency, the blue marking them physically but also symbolically. She had *touched* them. In a small way had played a role in their lives. And now someone else would come unbind them, long after she had returned home, long after the unseen audience had reached their fulfillment. These were not her affairs. These were not her gift.

She watched Frederick bare his teeth and dive for Joy's sex. On a long, plaintive note, she came.

Azalea surreptitiously knocked on the secret panel behind her then retreated into the darkened vestibule once the mirror slid into the wall. Her last glimpse of the squirming couple was Frederick slowly rubbing his penis against Joy's drenched sex before pushing in. Despite the distance, Azalea saw the cord squeeze to the side in the man's great assault. But as the panel slid closed, she raised her gaze to realize Frederick was not watching Joy. He was watching *her*.

Even after the panel slid shut, Azalea could not shake the feeling that Frederick had been more than watching her. As he took Joy, with his eyes on Azalea, she felt as though he had penetrated *her* instead. A shiver raced up her naked back.

He had often hinted at it, at becoming more than friends, as had other patrons. Even his father had, back a few years when she was still learning under her master's tutelage. But as much as she invested of herself emotionally in each of her patrons, she felt no love for them. Only affection and a deep wish to pleasure them. Sometimes, her lack of a deeper emotional connection to another person felt as if she was missing something, was somehow not living to her full potential. But such were her choices.

As per her instructions, she saw no one as she donned her dark blue robe, which had been draped over the back of a couch. Neither did she when she padded on silent, naked feet up the marble stairs to the rooftop, where her shuttle waited. Rain lashed the surface in thick ropes. Phone in hand, she was ready to remote-pilot her shuttle closer to the entrance when a large shadow blocked her view of her phone's dormant screen.

"I wonder how much they pay you for this kind of show?" asked a man behind her.

She kept a thumb on the emergency activation as she turned, slowly, heart racing, even if on the surface, no one would be the wiser. She had lived a lifetime hiding her true feelings, keeping the mask of the *nawashi* firmly in place. A stranger on a rain-swept rooftop would not change this, even if she took a precaution with her phone.

A man emerged from the shadows created by a recess in the rooftop entrance. Tall, dark blond, with eyes like twin black suns. Dangerous. He needed a shave and some style in his longish hair, but what he lacked in fashion sense, he more than compensated for in ruggedness and physical vigor. A lean tiger.

“I was well paid for the performance you enjoyed.”

“Who said I did?”

Azalea smiled at his curtness. “You just did.”

He did not seem to notice or mind that rain dripped from the ledge over their heads and onto his thick shoulders. Droplets descended along his long black coat like tears down a cheek. She thought he looked hungry, famished, starving. But not for food. And not necessarily for sex either, although there was a lot of that hunger in his dark gaze. She wondered from what craving he suffered and why he could not—or would not—satisfy it. When he pulled his hands from his pockets, she noticed that they shook. He showed her his wallet, flipped it backward so she would see the silver globe pin clipped to the black leather partition.

“Good evening, Officer...”

“Detective Newman.”

“Detective Newman. Can I help you?”

He approached another step, stopped as if he were loath to come any closer and shifted from leg to leg. Nervous. Restless. Perhaps he used drugs. Such a waste.

“On Monday, after six p.m. but before eleven, where were you?”

“In my bedroom, with a lover.”

He arched a dark blond eyebrow. “Name?”

“Mine or his?”

“Both.”

“Azalea Silla. Philippe Gaudet.”

“The blogstar?”

“Yes.”

When he did not make a note, she cocked her head up at him. “Will you not write them down?”

“I have an excellent memory.” He tapped his temple. “And earlier tonight? Were you with him?”

“Perhaps I was.”

“Don’t yank my chain, lady.”

“Would you enjoy it, Detective Newman, someone tying you by the neck? Just the right amount of pressure can bring ecstasy.”

Azalea tamped the fear down when he stalked up to her, did not lay a finger on her, but nonetheless managed to back her up against the wall. The mix of fear and exhilaration hardened her nipples. Between her legs, she felt as though she had melted. In a sharp contrast to her cold, naked feet, heat rushed up in a

wave as he held her in his gaze. She willingly let him do this to her. Such a titillating change to her normal life where she was the one with the control.

“I’d never let anyone with a rope near me. Not a fucking chance.”

“Why? Because you would not have faith in a person, even a lover, who tried to bind you? Trust is a powerful stimulant.”

He snorted. “Trust is a bullet to the brain.”

Azalea decided she liked him and smiled. “Perhaps some day I can convince you otherwise?”

“Thanks, but no thanks.” But a sparkle lit his eyes as he gave her a once-over.

“Are you looking for something?” Another wave of heat flared out of her robe when the detective smiled a wicked grin that rounded his hollow cheeks. He was close enough for her to touch by merely taking in a deep breath. Perhaps she should, if only to see his reaction. His eyes were so expressive.

“I’m looking to see if you’re strong enough.”

“To bind you?” The challenge it presented in her mind’s eye made her heart rate quicken even more. Such a tall and sturdy man, with undoubtedly firm muscles and a harder will. She shivered.

“To kill three people and truss them up like turkeys.”

No sound left her when she opened her mouth. Kill...?

Through narrowed eyes, he seemed to study her, as if gauging her reaction to his words. He could not be serious. Killing...? She *celebrated* the human body, its beauty and light and vibrancy. She would never hurt anyone. Why would this man think otherwise?

“So it wasn’t you then,” he murmured.

“Who said it was not?”

“You just did.”

She acknowledged his *touché* remark with a nod. “Then why are you here?”

“Because the killer ties his victims with ropes that look *a lot* like yours, using knots that are identical. That’s why I’m here. You have an admirer, Miss Azalea.”

“Identical silk and knots? Impossible. I am well guarded about my sources and techniques, I assure you.”

He shrugged as he rubbed a raindrop from his cheek. Like a tear. “Maybe a former client is thinking of starting his own franchise?”

“Shibari artists are chosen by a master. They are *formed*, through years of apprenticeship and careful observation. It is not an art that would appeal to those looking to start a franchise.”

“Art, huh? My mistake.”

“Are you afraid of me, Detective Newman?”

His smile was more rapacious than kind.

“If I were to invite you into my home, would you come?”

“Can’t. I’m on duty.”

“It would be work-related. I am cold, tired and very *wet*. I am sure we could continue this interview in my house. Would you agree to this?”

His nostrils flared. “Are you always such a tease, Miss Azalea?”

“Yes.”

Her blunt honesty seemed to please him, for he smiled, shook his head then escorted her to her shuttle. Cold rain made the soles of her feet feel tingly. After she had closed the hatch and sat at the controls, the detective backed away and watched her take off. Despite the rain making a mess of his hair—or perhaps because of it—Azalea thought he looked handsome this way, alone on a windswept rooftop, his coat flapping around his long legs. Dramatically handsome but utterly forlorn.

The rush of empathy flared out of a place in herself she had not known existed. She enjoyed company, had many friends and acquaintances, attended gatherings and social functions, yet she had never felt more than interest or conviviality for anyone. Part of her problem at finding an apprentice, despite Frederick’s enthusiasm for the position. She had certainly never felt fondness for a man she had known a mere ten minutes. An intriguing prospect, affection.

She remained below traffic lines so the detective could follow her home in his own shuttle. In the rearview screen, she watched his rough handling. His craft fit him perfectly—tough, no frills, direct. And, as with the man, the shuttle could have used a bit of TLC.

Smiling, Azalea flew up to the trio of tall and slender glass spires that reached two thousand feet over the Tokyo skyline. Advertisements exhorting commitments flashed and pulsed in myriad colors against buildings, hanging beneath hovercrafts or fluttering down in showers of sparks from launch tubes high above the city. Her left wing angled down, she pulled on the altitude lever, tapped the pedals—metal cold against her feet—and brought her shuttle aft end first along the steel terrace demarcating her penthouse. Engines whirring, she landed on two skids and gently let the third and last touch down. By her side, she watched as Detective Newman slammed his shuttle on the landing pad. Why did that not surprise her?

She was still smiling when she waited for him to join her in the glass entrance of her home. A lover had once said her home reminded him of Gothic churches of old, but in glass and steel.

“What are you laughing at, Miss Azalea?”

“Your piloting skills fit your personality very well,” she replied, turning to pass her hand over the control panel. The alarm system disengaged with a small click and both glass doors noiselessly slid into the steel framework.

“Which means?”

His voice was very close behind her and grazed her nape with his warmth. She could not stifle the shiver that tightened her shoulders. She wondered how hot he would feel draped over her. She loved when men did this, wrapped themselves around her and held her tight. *Very* tight.

She let him precede her into her home, let him take the initiative, even if consciously doing this meant *she* was the one in control. Despite the massive foyer of white marble floor, impossibly slender steel framework and glass-domed roof, he filled her home with his raw energy, his male presence. Even his scent reached her. Leather and wool, smells made richer for the rain clicking on the glass walls. A bubble only the two of them occupied. Outside, Tokyo watched with its multicolored eyes.

“You’re the only woman I know who doesn’t have her place filled to the rafters with girly stuff.” He turned back to watch her, narrowed his eyes. “But then, you’re not like other women, are you? You tie people up for a living.”

“Only when they ask for it.”

“And when they don’t, you kill them?”

“I thought we had agreed I was not your killer.”

He shoved his hands in his pockets. “So why did you put that card in my pocket then? To tease me?”

“Card?”

It had briefly crossed her mind. How had this detective been invited to her performance? Her patrons always asked her permission to bring non-initiates. Clearly, he was one.

“Ah, so it wasn’t you either.”

“No.” She removed her robe and let it fall on the floor behind her. Only her cowl remained, which she pulled from her head and let rest on her shoulders. She was essentially naked before him, feet cold and toes numb, yet would change nothing. His eyes flared, as did his nostrils, and again she was reminded of a lean, hungry tiger. “It is nothing you have not seen before.”

He moistened his lips. “You’re wrong. It’s like *nothing* I’ve ever seen before.”

A wave of pleasure rose from her belly, her chest and shoulders, up to her face. Had the light permitted it, he would have noticed her blush. Not many had made her blush in her lifetime. And he had not even touched her. Yet.

“In what way?” she asked, surprised at the breathless quality of her voice. This man had quite the effect on her. Between her legs, more wetness accumulated.

“You’re a beautiful woman, you’re practically naked, and you’ve been teasing me for half an hour. You think I’m made of stone?”

“I have not had the pleasure of testing. Maybe later?”

He shook his head as if to clear it. “You’re something else.”

Sexual tension coiled between them for the ten or so seconds they silently stared at each other. Was he waiting to see if she would initiate things? Was he not the sort of man who took matters in his own hands? Speaking of which, despite the fact he had shoved them in the pockets of his long coat, she could tell they were shaking badly.

“Come, Detective Newman. I will make tea.”

“Just Kev,” he muttered. “You have anything stronger?”

Azalea grinned behind her hand.

In the kitchen, more glass and steel and white marble, she prepared tea for two, a mix of jasmine and gyokuro—only the best for this peculiar visitor—and chose her favorite black earthenware.

“Please remove your coat. You will catch a cold in wet garments.”

Out of the corner of her eye, she saw him drape his long coat over one of the breakfast stools. A black turtleneck hid what she knew to be a strong neck that complemented his prominent jaw. She loved his jaw and his tall, spare build. All lean lines and wiry strength. Black jeans, worn out at the knees, told her he was not one to sit and let others get down and dirty. The thought of the handsome man getting down and dirty on her made her sigh. Azalea realized she had stopped counting the leaves as she added them to the teapot.

*Focus.*

“Silence doesn’t faze you, does it?”

She could not see him, but knew he was smiling. “Silence is said to be golden.”

He snorted an irreverent laugh. “Yeah, well, in my line of work, silent people look guilty.”

“And in mine, they look in bliss.”

When she turned with the small tray, Kev was right there waiting and took it from her hands. Their fingers touched. The simple contact sent a jolt of sensualization through her. She could feel even the tiniest sensation, like his breath on her shoulder and how some of her hair tickled the small of her back. Under her long silk cowl, her nipples hardened.

Kev’s gaze remained fixed on her face. A *tour de force* for any man in the presence of a naked woman. “My mom,” he croaked then cleared his throat with an impatient snarl. “My mom didn’t raise the kind of man who sits around and waits to be served.”

A series of shivers tingled down her spine as he backed up to let her pass. She felt the weight of his stare between her shoulder blades as she led him to the lounge. Cushions on the floor and a low table were the only pieces of furniture in the room. She loved open, airy spaces.

Both of Kev’s knees cracked when he crouched and put the tray on the table.

“You should take care of this. Sesame oil would work well.”

“I don’t have time to worry about that.” He scratched the inside of his forearm.

“Do you not have anyone at home who would have time to worry about it?”

“Nope.” He sat on his heels and grimaced as he rubbed his palms on his thighs. Tight and straining his fine legs, the jeans highlighted his male form in all the right places.

“I would worry about it if you were mine.” She poured tea in his cup then into hers.

“Yours, huh?”

She nodded as she sat on her heels on the same side of the table as him. “We belong to one another. Even for a short time. When I am with a lover, nothing else matters but that man and the pleasure we bring to one another. For one night, for a sustained relationship. It matters little.”

“We’re not lovers.” Was that regret she saw etched on his chiseled face? A muscle twitched along his jaw.

“But we could be.” She drank from her tea. The enjoyable burn on her lips made her sigh.

“I’d rather gnaw my arm off than let you—or anyone—tie me, so that pretty much kills it right there.”

“The way of the silk is not something I bring into my bedroom. It is my work, my art. This moment right here and now is different, it is my private life.”

He gulped a large amount of tea, grimaced and plunked the tiny, handleless cup on the table. She tried to imagine pressing her lips to his throat to feel the warmth of the tea as it seeped through the skin. Azalea had to squeeze her thighs together to alleviate the cramp of lust tightening her sex. She closed her eyes, sniffed delicately the faint scent from this man, this strong and capable man with nervous hands. Rich, earthy odors of wet wool reached her in thin tendrils and indicated movement on his part.

When she felt his breath on her face and his presence all around her, Azalea blindly put her teacup in the tray and waited. She would not initiate things with him. She would let him come to her. And he did.

## Chapter Three

Her eyelashes looked like fans on her cheeks as she sat with her eyes closed, a sphinx-like smile on her berry lips and a slight tilt to her proud head. Hair the color of coal cascaded over her shoulders. She seemed to be waiting. Sleeping Beauty. Or serial killer.

In his guts, which he'd trust until convinced otherwise, he knew she hadn't killed those people. She wasn't killer material. Unless that was his dick talking. He'd never met a more conflicting, unusual and arousing woman. Every time he sent a question and expected answer A or B, she threw back a Z. Slick and hard to pin down. And pinned down was exactly how he'd been visualizing her for the last few minutes. She'd feel glorious and lithe pinned by his hips as he pounded into her. Flashes of carnal abandon flitted through his restless mind. On her knees, sucking him. Up against the wall, hard marble crushing her against him. And there she sat still, waiting.

The skin of his palms tingled when he leaned over. Those few inches were the longest journey he'd had to take in his entire life. He changed his mind about twelve times. *Kiss her. Don't touch her.* He couldn't resist her. But he should. *What is he doing here? For fuck's sake, just take the invitation.* In the end, he did.

He'd expected fireworks as soon as his lips touched hers. Instead, he got...

Nothingness. Serenity. A bubble against the world. Nothing else mattered. Nothing else *existed*. Just them. Just the two of them. Even the adrenaline patch stopped itching his arm. Pure stillness. A garden in winter, scintillating snow like diamonds gently resting on delicate leaves, paths of tiny rocks glistening in the early morning sun, icy water gurgling inside a fountain of stone polished with the ages, and a sky blue enough to blind a man. Kev's heartbeat slowed, his limbs grew heavy. The chronic restlessness that stole his sleep and sometimes made a powder keg of his temper dissipated. Should he die that day, he would do so a happy man. She'd given him *peace*.

Kev cupped her pointy chin in one hand while he leaned on the table for support. Gently, he let his mouth travel over her lips, moth-light, discovering and demystifying her. Although he knew no mere man would ever get to the bottom of the enigma that was Miss Azalea. She was as enigmatic and fluctuating as a prism. One angle only revealed one color. She was myriads.

Hands made for pleasure touched him lightly on the forearm. A simple touch, really. Yet one that shot his nervous system—already laced with the double adrenaline doses—into the fever zone. Like butterflies, the tips of her fingers danced a course along his arm, over his shoulder, up his neck and cheek. He shivered

with the massive waves of pleasure she triggered. He pulled away so he could tug his turtleneck up and over his head, before literally jettisoning it across the table. It skimmed the smooth surface then slipped below view.

He heard her sigh as she ran both hands up and down his chest. “I knew it would be like this,” she murmured. Kissed a trail down his throat. “Exactly like this.”

Without using his fingers—he meant for this to last—Kev nudged with his chin the lapels of her long cowl wider apart so he could denude a breast. She had the most gorgeous, dainty little breasts he’d ever seen with dark points that rose like a challenge. He never turned down a challenge.

“Mmm,” he hummed deep in his throat. He liked to show a lady his appreciation.

The color of a plum, her nipple tightened even more when he blew on it. Softly, like a ribbon of air. Her sharp inhalation was all he needed. He did it again. Just blew on her nipple until he saw goosebumps rise all over her breast. When he knew she was ready, he licked her in one long pass from underside to collarbone. Then again. She arched for him. He reciprocated by suckling on her hard little point. Lotion that smelled of citrus fruit and something flowery invaded his brain and his ability to think rationally. Bending her over and taking her was quickly becoming an imperative he couldn’t deny.

Quick and precise, her hands worked the closure of his jeans. He was so hard it hurt. “Wait, not yet,” he snarled against her breast. A friendly little bite made Azalea tuck her bottom lip between perfect teeth.

He pushed the little tray, taking care not to rattle the delicate cups and teapot, to make some room for her. A pat to the tabletop seemed to be sufficient. Azalea rose to her knees to sit on the low table. She must have wanted the same thing he did. Her midnight gaze on him, she flicked a leg up over his head and spread herself wide. Ultramarine silk fell in a wide band that hid her pussy from him. And he liked it this way. Something this good had to take time. It had to last.

Azalea rolled her hips in lazy infinity figures as she planted her palms behind her. Skin the color of wet sand and shiny like coffee beans formed a canvas on which had been painted the most beautiful woman this side of the sun. Thighs that looked fit and firm twitched as she arched her foot. Smooth like silk.

She reached back, retrieved a teacup and tested the liquid inside with her lips. Smiling, she dripped tea over her chest, where it seeped into the silk band, turning it almost sheer. The garment looked as if it’d been painted on and exposed her form all the way down her belly and pussy, where it molded to her lips.

Kev was speechless as he watched her pour more warm tea down her belly. It glistened in thin rivulets on her skin. He could keep himself in check no longer. He dove for her sex.

Through the wet, dark blue silk, he pressed his mouth to her, pulled at her lips and teased enough to part her with his tongue. The taste of tea mingled with that of the silk, before a hint of her honey seeped through. He sucked in greedy pulls, licked and licked until he’d managed to rub the wide band of silk aside. And there it was, the gorgeous core of her, dark and rosy and framed in twin, scalloped strips of black

velvet. This he took as well. With his mouth, his tongue, lips pulling, teeth nibbling. Azalea rolled her fine hips and undulated to his rhythm. He'd never had a woman do this before. Not like this. Never like this.

"Spread yourself for me," he murmured against the inside of her thigh.

With one hand, she splayed her lips, baring her satiny pussy that the spotlights high above their heads rendered like flower petals. An orchid blooming for him. As lightly as he could, he ran his lips along hers, did to that mouth what he had done to the first, gently, just enough to have contact between both their sensitive skins. Her breathing accelerated. He deepened his touch. Azalea closed her eyes and let her head loll back.

"Fuck me with your mouth," came the whispered request.

He went for it. Tongue-fucked and conquered her sweet, wet cunt, because if he didn't, he'd surely go up in flames. He added fingers to the mix. She was tight and sweet and drenched. And when she came, muscles banded her thighs. She trapped him there, with his face between her thighs, his fingers inside her, front and back, taking and pushing and rubbing, while with his mouth, he sucked on her little pearl.

When he pulled his turtleneck off, Azalea could not miss the sunburn-red circles on his left forearm. A patch had glistened there. Light pink, with a logo she knew well from the massive advertisement campaign the company waged on Tokyo and elsewhere in Japan. Adrenaline. So this was the reason the man's hands shook so much, and also why he appeared to be ready to pounce at a moment's notice. An adrenaline junkie in the purest sense of the term. A wave of empathy flared out of her. If only she could give the man peace. For a short while at least. Make him forget everything else and the reason he required the drug in the first place. His profession, no doubt. She had known others in the security field who had lived too-short and stressful lives.

*She* would give him that peace. Right here and now with her, she would make him forget it all. The job, the stresses and responsibilities. The fact a killer imitating her art was loose in the city.

Azalea would do this for him.

Her heart hammered to the rhythm of Kev's tongue work. Lick, lick, lick then suck. Her toes curled with the fine peaks of pleasure to which he took her. Again and again. With long fingers—he had strong, skilled hands, despite the shaking—he pulled her lips wide apart, denuding her to his hungry gaze. She watched for as long as she could. Watched his mouth melt her between the legs like butter under the sun. Watched his tapered tongue flick her clitoris. Watched as he fucked her with his mouth, as she had asked. When the moment came, when she stood on the very precipice of ecstasy, Azalea closed her eyes and let him push her beyond. Beyond control, sanity and self-awareness. She came.

Stillness enveloped her. Nothing else mattered. His mouth became her world. Her swollen sex the sun. In warm waves, she crested the orgasm to crash, shaking, headlong into the aftermath. Sensualization. A *sarabande* to primal pleasure. As he growled incoherent things, the vibrato of his voice passed to her

sensitive flesh and provided another layer of stimulant to her senses. She was drowning into herself, in a place deep and dark and warm. Solace.

Then cool air replaced his decadent mouth. The sound of a zipper forced her eyes wide. Oh, she wanted to see *this*.

Precise, economical, Kev's hands yanked his jeans apart then down. Almost angrily. As though the garment were an affront. She could relate. She, too, wanted him out of these offending clothes that precluded her from admiring the way his body moved. She wanted to see those lean and wiry muscles. The worn sneakers went flying, as did the faded black jeans. Until only black boxer briefs remained, straining to contain his erection. Then he discarded those too. Pulled himself out of his briefs. Like the rest of him, his member was long and lean and divine. When he knelt up, Azalea rolled off the table and scooted forward amidst the cushions, on elbows and knees, so she could grab him in greedy hands. Two fit easily. The head glistened invitingly.

"You are beautiful," she murmured. "So beautiful."

Into her mouth she took him. Deep. Because he was so tall, Kev could reach over her and rub her cleft in teasing passes. Front to back. Vulva to anus. She moaned against his shaft as she glided up and down. He gasped each time she pressed her forehead to his belly. His vocal appreciation became a metronome to her hands. She corkscrewed one hand down. She gathered pre-come with the pad of her thumb and spread it to his glans. She licked the thick veins along the underside of his shaft. And when his testicles constricted with the impending climax, Azalea was ready.

"Azalea," he warned, trying to pull away from her.

"Let it."

She took him deep again and pulled away when a tiny pulsation at the base heralded his release. He wrapped a shaking fist in her hair. His hips bucked. Semen jetted out of him in thin strands like spider webs. She collected it in her hand to rub it back on him, along his penis, around his scrotum, on his sinewy thighs. A delightful pliancy relaxed his cock. Smiling, Azalea laved him in affectionate passes of her tongue, which she made wide for added comfort. She wanted to do this for him, this peculiar man with the nervous hands. This adrenaline addict who had undoubtedly not *lived*, only existed.

"Here," she said, indicating the table. "Lie down for a while. I will take care of the rest."

Smirk in place, he did as she instructed and lay supine, long legs bent perpendicular and feet resting on cushions. With a sigh, he crossed his hands behind his head, closed his eyes. Dark blond hair cascaded over the table edge. Not a tiger. A lion. Same coloring, same indolence—temporary in his case—yet a body made for the physicality of his work. She climbed on top of him, sat astride his lean chest. Her long hair created a sort of tunnel that only their two faces occupied when she leaned over him. She smiled.

"You're beautiful," he whispered. "So beautiful it hurts my brain."

"I could say the same about you, except that it hurts my heart."

He shook his head. “Women.”

“Men.”

While they shared a quiet grin, Azalea fed him her breasts, one at a time in a lazy undulation of shoulders. Her hair must have tickled his arms, because he shivered. Loose muscles twitched on his biceps.

“Do you trust me?”

He scowled. “I told you—”

“Shh. Not you. *Me.*”

She got off him so she could kneel back on the cushions and gathered her hair in a ponytail. “Take it.”

“You like playing with fire?” He knelt behind her, carefully twisted his wrist to coil her hair around his hand then closed a fist over it. His belly connected with her behind. His cock pressed home between her thighs. She squeezed them to his hiss of delight.

“I know when it is dangerous,” she said. “And when it is not.”

“You don’t even know me. I could be a whackjob.”

“I trust you.”

“You shouldn’t.”

The pressure prickled her scalp. A small moan escaped her. She had not meant to, but could not keep it in. Such good hands. “Why not?”

“Because I don’t.” With the same care, Kev added pressure and gradually pulled her head back by the coiled hair. Distended, the skin all over her front created pleasant warmth that closed her eyes.

“Do not what? Trust yourself? Or trust me?”

A burning kiss landed on her shoulder. Teeth raked the tender skin under her ear as he devoured her neck. Still, he held her arched back by the rope that her hair had become.

“I’m not sure anymore,” he whispered in her ear before nipping her lobe. She hissed in pleasure. “You liked that, hmm?” He did it again. Changed ears, lipped and suckled and teased her before he closed his teeth on her tender lobe.

“I like it.” Her voice sounded forced with the position.

“And that, how does it feel?” He raked a hand down her back, fingernails waking every nerve ending there, and finished his course between her cheeks. A hand both gentle and proprietary cupped her sex from behind. Long fingers parted her, entered her.

“Mmm.” She could not manage more than a moan through the nose.

Her neck burned, her shoulders ached, her arms trembled from holding her upper torso off the table. Yet she would change *nothing*. No lover had ever elicited such a response from her, body, mind, soul. And even heart. She felt more than affinity for him, she wanted to know him better, wanted to hear his laugh, listen to his ideas and theories, yearned to wake in the middle of the night and straddle him. When she thought she had known every sort of pleasure imaginable, Kev’s simple but direct touch took her to heights

she had never reached. Dizzying and breathtaking. She could see herself developing a need for these hands, this man. A deep and burning need.

“Now, take me.”

“Like this?” Without preamble, he pushed inside.

Azalea emptied her lungs of air as his cock filled her sex. Stretched and branded her. So hot. “Yes,” she murmured. Her voice had failed her. “Like this.”

“What about this?” He bucked. “Is that good too?”

“Ah!”

“Yeah?” He retreated, still holding her hair captive, and thrust back in hard enough to lift her knees off the cushions.

With her senses on the verge of riot, she goaded him, demanded and pleaded and threatened him. He could not stop, she urged him. He could never stop. This had to last forever, until the stars fell out of the sky, until they collapsed from exhaustion, bodies drained but spirits full of the other. She took him and took him again. Her breasts bounced from the force of his claiming. Her hips burned from the strain. He alternately made love to her then fucked her. Demanding, gentle, unyielding, careful. Into her he pounded. The table scraped against the floor. Cushions squeezed out from under her kneecaps. She did not care about the discomfort, not when this man took her to heights unimaginable. Her voice filled her home. Ah. Ah. Ah. Ah. Then, on a moment of pure clarity, she peaked.

“Ah!” Her cry reverberated in the airy lounge.

Instead of continuing his vigorous hip work, he pushed one last time and grew still, sheathed to the hilt. He released her hair, smoothed it down her back and held her while he guided them both onto the floor. She did not know how he managed it, but she landed on the only cushion still in the immediate area. She knew he had done it on purpose. And if this were the only thing she knew of him, it would be enough to appreciate him.

Azalea smiled with her back to him when he squeezed in behind her and draped a long arm down her side. Perfect fit. They remained thus for a long time. She did not know exactly except that his breathing regularized and she knew he had fallen asleep. The notion pleased her. She had given him pleasure and solace, at least for a time.

Too soon, he woke with a start. Cool air replaced the pleasant warmth of his lean form. He sat, rubbed his hair back. “I should go.”

“Why? Are you not well here, with me?”

“I’m more than well, Azalea. That’s why I have to leave.”

She turned to him and rested her head on her hand. “Nothing precludes you from staying.”

“I have a killer on the loose.”

“Even detectives need to sleep.”

He made a face and scratched his left forearm, where the patch glistened. “Nah. I’m above that kind of frailty.” His mocking grin did not touch his eyes.

“Have you ever spent the night in a lover’s bed?”

“Nope. Neither have I spent the night on a lover’s table.”

Azalea shook her head. “Someday, you may have to prove yourself by spending the night with your lover.”

“I don’t *have* to prove anything.”

“Not to me, no.”

“Then who?”

“Yourself.”

His expressive eyes narrowed but he said nothing.

Why would she care about this man’s emotional state or how he lived his life? She had known him but a few hours. Yet she could not discount the attraction that ran deeper than mere physical compatibility. She enjoyed his presence. She would go even as far as admitting she *liked* Detective Kev Newman. Very much. Not only because he was a good man and obviously a great police officer, but also for the way he responded to her. Azalea wondered, for a brief instant, if she had perhaps found something in the edgy man, had touched a part of him that had triggered a reaction in herself. Like warming one’s hands over a fire.

“After you catch this killer,” she began carefully. “I would very much like to see you again.”

Kev cleared his throat. “I’m not boyfriend material. Half the time, I’m cranky and the rest of the time, I’m pissed off. Not much fun to be around.”

“You are not irritated now.”

“But I’m getting there.”

Azalea chuckled. She really did like this man. “You did not answer my question.”

He muttered a curse as he threw his hands up. “Okay, okay, Christ. I’ll think about it, okay. There. Happy?”

“Very much so.”

She was not lying. A great bubble of joy accompanied his, albeit gruff, promise. Like a piece of puzzle snapping into place. Satisfying and full of potential. Azalea could not remember the last time she had felt so giddy. Strange and new compared to her usual stoical style.

She stood and gathered her discarded garment. She felt his stare roam her naked body and enjoyed the effect she had on him. Another piece of puzzle found a home.

“Look,” he began, but hissed a tight curse when his phone interrupted him. “I have to take this.”

“I know.” She smiled. It was her turn to smile with her mouth only.

## Chapter Four

When he put the phone against his ear, Azalea saw his reaction change from frustration and irritation to shock, horror and white-lipped fury. He abruptly cut the communication with a snarled, "I'm coming."

"There has been another murder?"

He nodded. His throat was dappled in the red and white blotchy pattern of intense rage. "A cop..." He seemed to choke on the rest.

Azalea stood. "Take me with you."

She expected a fight, an argument why he could not, would not take a civilian to a crime scene. Instead, he pulled on his jeans while nodding emphatically.

"You're damn right you're coming."

Both dressed in silence. But if she pulled on her clothes with economic and quick movements, Kev literally wrestled his on. As if the garments had caused the murders.

"What else did the person tell you?"

He threw her a lethal glare, but his mouth softened. He shrugged, looked ill at ease with his emotional response. "Thanks for coming. I need a pro's take on it. But I warn you..." He shoved his shaking hands in his pockets and looked away. What was he not telling her? "It's not gonna be pretty," he finished in a long sigh.

And it was not.

Half an hour later, when Azalea followed Kev into the vault of a closed bank cordoned off with bright yellow film and antireflective membranes covering windows and doorways, it took her a second to assimilate the powerful, vivid scene.

Police officers milled about, in pairs or small groups. There was animosity in the air. Palpable like a thick, wet fog. A few came to pat Kev on the shoulder, murmur apologies and words of encouragement before he glared them away.

While Kev entered into a hushed conversation with a silver-haired woman who exuded authority, Azalea took a step deeper so that all she saw was the crime scene. Reality and soundness of mind were left behind as she entered into the madness.

Against the pearly gray of the tiles, blood scintillated as though still fresh. Crimson snakes slithered along the grout of the vault's tiled floor, reached farther in some corners than others for the floor's unevenness. Wide bands of sheer, ultramarine blue silk had been festooned over hanging fluorescents and

created a sort of shell occupied by the victim. Like an oyster violently pried open and raped. In the place of a pearl was a pale-skinned woman on her knees and chest, one arm tied back over her head while the other had been bound to one of her ankles. Blue silk cords and knots that resembled seashells. All familiar. Azalea's eyes welled when her gaze lowered to the victim's raised buttocks. The killer had pressed a lotus flower into her sex.

After she had pulled her self-control tighter around herself, Azalea tried to focus exclusively on the bindings and not on the woman in them. Despite the aesthetics of the scene the killer had created, Azalea found many flaws in his execution. Shibari was an exact—and exacting—art and no amount of ostentatious silk drapes could compensate for lack of skill. Plus, Shibari was not meant to kill, but to celebrate intimacy and trust. This poor woman, a fit-looking redhead, had been the victim of a killer, not a *nawashi*.

She felt Kev's presence behind her. Azalea shook her head. "He is not an artist, though I am sure he thinks himself one."

She heard his teeth grinding, and the lassitude and uncertainty in the way his shoes scraped the floor. "Cleven... What did that fucker do to you?"

Azalea's throat constricted once again. "You knew her?"

"She was a cop."

"I am sorry, Kev." She wanted to pat his forearm, make him feel better in some small way but he moved away so he could tiptoe closer to the woman.

"So you agree it's a guy we're dealing with? I mean..." He motioned at the cords. "The tying-up angle. It's a guy who did this?"

Azalea did not share her first reason why she thought the killer was a man—that a woman would not insert a flower into another's vagina. "Yes. His skill is unrefined, such as one would get from observation. Although he is not an amateur. Clearly, he sees the beauty of the binds and knows how to best highlight—"

"Yeah, okay. What, erm, about the ropes? Anything you can tell me?"

Azalea took her gaze from the woman's red hair spilled in a fan around her head to focus on the cords. Ultramarine blue. Silk dyed with a special compound that left the symbolic mark so dear to her patrons.

"They are mine."

His face registered shock, sadness, disbelief and settled into tight anger. People's emotions never touched her. But his did.

He swallowed hard, turned away. "You should go wait in my shuttle, Miss Azalea. I'll come get you for the official deposition. My boss will want to speak with you too. Hank!"

The cold tone hurt her heart much more than it did her pride. Reaching out to touch his hand, Azalea sought to meet his gaze. But he avoided the contact.

"Kev..."

A uniformed officer rushed into the vault. "Detective?"

“Escort the lady up to my shuttle, okay. I landed it on the rooftop. Don’t let the press get so much as a whiff of her, you hear?”

“Ma’am,” Hank said, extending his arm toward the door.

Azalea kept her expression composed and her words fit for public hearing, but inside, she ached to touch him, shield him, provide solace, even for a few precious seconds. But he would not let her. His choice, one she had to respect. “He will not stop, Detective Newman. Not until he *is* stopped.”

A tightening of Kev’s shoulders was her only reply.

Wondering how the killer could have acquired cords like hers—unique, custom-made—she climbed up to the bank’s rooftop landing pad through a side door that Hank showed her. The press had set up camp at the front entrance, hoping for some crunching footage of the killer’s latest victim. The force, after Kev told them about her chosen profession, would not want to alert the killer that they had found a Shibari artist as expert. Neither did she want to be seen in public outside of her performances. The two lives could not mix. Not in public anyway.

“Thank you, Hank.”

“I’ll take you to the shuttle, ma’am.”

“That will not be necessary.” She turned to look him in the eye. A young man, barely twenty with an adorable sprinkle of freckles. She wondered how long it would take to turn him into a Kev Newman. Or if Kev had ever been this innocent-looking.

“Erm, okay then. I’ll go back down. But if you need anything, I’m there, okay. Just ask.”

She nodded and softened her composure with a smile, which he returned before leaving.

Rain fell in a thin mist as she crossed the landing pad. Above, the pressure wave of shuttles flying by flapped her hair away from her face. Flashing ads pulsed to the rhythm of her heartbeat. Quick and hard. That poor woman...

“Azalea!”

She turned to find Frederick and Joy rushing out of a dormant shuttle she had not noticed near the end of the landing pad. Shadows from a few missing lights pooled in long strips. They joined her, faces rain-streaked and hair plastered against their skulls. How long had they waited?

“I did not expect to meet you here.”

Joy’s expressive eyes narrowed and flared alternately as she stood lance-straight by her partner, who held her against him as rain intensified to fat drops. He squinted, grimaced. “My father is not well, Azalea.”

“His heart?” Heart problems had forever plagued the mayor, one of her first patrons back when she operated under her master’s guidance.

Frederick nodded. Red rimmed his eyes. “I think this time... They don’t think he has long.”

“I am very sad to learn this, Frederick.” She took his free hand and kissed the back of it.

Joy nodded emphatically. “He’d, erm, he’d like to see you, Azalea. He asked for you.”

“Me?” She let go of Frederick’s hand so she could cross hers in the wide sleeves of her robe. “Perhaps he would like to see my master instead? They share more than we do.”

“He asked for *you*,” Frederick replied. A trace of anger laced his reply. Without his doting father, Frederick would be lost.

Azalea glanced behind her at Kev’s matte black shuttle, looking forlorn and morose sitting on its retracted skids, then back at the couple huddled against the rain. Azalea shivered. “Very well, then. I could never refuse him anything.” She said this with a smile, but knew her cold tone must have relayed her impatience with the ill-timed demand.

She joined them as they hurried back to their shuttle, which whirred to life and rose from its retracted skids. Rain glistened on its silvery hull and dripped off its stunted wings. An expensive affair. She could not help contrast the two men’s tastes, Kev and Frederick. One was the antipode of the other, in tastes and deportment, in character and lifestyle. Where Kev was lean and mean with nervous but skilled hands, Frederick was laid-back and decadent and had been graced with strong and precise hands. The first had built a life for himself, the other had one given to him. Although she could not fault Frederick for his family fortune. One did not choose to be born in poverty or riches.

The side hatch opened and Frederick leaned over to retrieve something under the passenger seat. While his back was turned, Joy turned horrified eyes to Azalea and mouthed the words “*help me, please*”. Azalea’s heart skipped a beat. Cold slush filled her veins. *No...*

She slipped her hand in her robe’s pocket to retrieve her phone. But before Azalea could back away, Frederick turned with a small white can and sprayed something in her face. The vapor had the effect of a punch to the chin. She reeled, would have fallen, had he not caught her in a strong arm. Dazed and stupefied, she watched the can roll around on the concrete roof. Like a discarded toy.

It was him. Frederick. Her cords... One of her patrons was the killer, using the cords she had given him.

“Frederick,” she murmured through deadened lips.

Still holding her with an arm, Frederick turned toward Joy, who remained rooted to the spot as if in terror. A small silver item like a pen flashed in his free hand. Joy’s eyes flared. He brought his arm in a wide and brusque arc. Despite her failing vision, Azalea saw a jet of arterial blood arc. Once hard. Weaker, two, then three times.

“Thanks, my love,” Frederick said as Joy slumped to the ground. Blood mixed with rain around her crumpled form.

Through it all, Azalea could not move the tiniest limb. Not finger nor toe. She could barely breathe. Panic seized her in its cold clutches. What had he given her? A paralyzant, obviously. But what else? She felt so sluggish. Black dots burst in her vision.

“I was made to be your apprentice, Azalea,” he murmured in her ear. Kissed her numb cheek. “And I’ll prove it to you. You’ll see.”

Azalea’s consciousness slipped from her as he repeated his last words.

She would see. She would *see*.

They were hers. The cords used to bind the victims were Azalea’s.

Could she have lied to him? Could he have misread her that badly? He’d always been a good judge of character, but maybe he’d been too busy thinking with his dick instead. Shit.

“Time of death? Someone? *Anyone?*”

“About two hours ago,” a man said from beyond the privacy membrane. Kev thought he recognized one of the lab techs.

“You sure?”

“Yeah. Got the results right here. Officer Cleven died of asphyxiation about two to two-point-four hours ago.”

*Two...*

That meant it couldn’t have been Azalea. As much as Cleven’s death crushed him, Azalea’s seeming innocence relieved him more than it should. He shouldn’t care that much, that deeply. But he did and that was that. Couldn’t do a fucking thing about it now. Right now was for Cleven. He needed his neurons all in a row.

“She, ah...” the lab tech went on, unseen behind the plastic covering over the door.

Kev’s temper slipped its leash. “I haven’t got all fucking night!”

“She, ah... She died *slowly*.”

His heart did another little dance. Tap-tap-tap. Hard and fast. He pulled an adrenaline patch from his pocket. The seal was broken and the foil was wrinkled, but he didn’t care. He tore the membrane off, pulled his sleeve up and stuck the patch to his forearm. Not ten seconds later, a rush of heat flared out of his coat.

He took a long inhalation to settle his heartbeat. Didn’t work. Light like tiny suns burst behind his eyelids. He squeezed his eyes shut. A metallic taste invaded his mouth, was gone the next second. But his mind cleared right fucking quick. How long since he’d slept? At least thirty-six hours. Not counting the bit of dozing off he did at Azalea’s place.

So it wasn’t her who’d killed Cleven. But it didn’t mean she hadn’t killed the others or that she didn’t have a partner somewhere doing the killings. Her cords, she’d told him. Those were *her cords*. So someone with access to her supplier?

Or to her house.

The thought left a cold, wet trail like a slug's. Jesus, what if some psychotic killer had snuck into her house to get the cords? What if she didn't have a thing to do with any of this, except for her cords?

"Someone cover her, for Christ's sake," he snarled after everyone had had his or her turn cataloging Clevon's sordid death. Who would tell him to go *fok himzelf* now? Shit, he missed the tough redhead already. No one could down a pint like... Who else could put a bullet...?

A deep sense of loss spread through him. Such a waste. Such a big, fucking, dumb, stupid waste.

"I'm sorry," he murmured. "I'm sorry I wasn't there."

Kev pulled himself out of this downward spiral to focus on the killer instead. When he caught him, he was going to make him hurt long and hard. He'd jam something up his ass too, the sick fuck. And it wasn't going to be no goddamn *flower*.

"So where is she?"

Kev whirled on the spot. Captain Ng stood right under his nose, her silver hair a mess and makeup put on in the shuttle, he was sure. Hard eyes drilled into his hide.

"Where is your expert? I want to talk to her."

"Yeah, so do I."

"But first, we'll say a few words to them." She pointed over her shoulder.

"We don't have to tell them shit—"

"Did I *ask* you, Detective? Come."

Cursing, he stomped back out of the vault, through the bank lobby. The front entrance was buzzing with people. A pack of hired cameras hovered in front of them, remote-controlled by press personnel from across town. He hated the annoying little things. As they stepped outside into the cold rain, one flew really close to his face. Not a good day for this shit.

"You know, I'm sick of these," he snarled. Pulled his gun and shot the thing right in the lens as it swerved back for another pass. It disintegrated into black little bits. Like a raven losing all its feathers at once. *Poof*.

"Newman, for fortune's sake!" His boss shoved a pointy elbow in his ribs.

A barrage of questions assailed them. Flashes of the remaining hovering cameras made him crankier than he remembered ever feeling. He was considering shooting another when someone called his name from within the bank.

"Detective Newman! It's urgent."

His boss could snarl all she wanted, he turned right around and rushed back inside the bank, where Hank waited, panting and his face the color of a white dishcloth. Kev feared the guy was about to faint dead on the spot.

"She's gone. There's a dead woman too."

"Who, for fuck's sake?"

“The lady you told me to escort upstairs—”

“What?”

His world vacillated.

Kev didn't wait for the explanation. Not when his poor heart stopped beating for a couple of seconds, not when his mind conjured up the blood-curdling and horrifying image of Azalea... *Not her. Please, not her.*

Stairs, four by four. One landing, then two. The door to the rooftop went clattering back against the brick wall. A slick and dark rooftop—fucking rain that wouldn't stop—couldn't hide the form prone on the concrete landing pad. He had never run so fast. But as he neared the woman, he could tell it wasn't Azalea. Hips too wide, shoulders too developed. Too tall, for starters. And the hair color was wrong. As he rushed around her to get a look into her face, he realized she was familiar. He had seen her before.

“Jesus fucking Christ...”

That hot brunette, he had watched Azalea bind her to the mayor's son. And here she was now, lying in a pool of her blood.

A bright spark of understanding ignited his mind. Azalea's cords. Her technique, even if coarsely emulated. Someone with basic knowledge and more strength than skill.

“Frederick Tagawa, you oily son of a bitch.”

It fit perfectly.

As he glanced to his shuttle, hatches closed and sitting there as though pouting on the opposite corner of the landing pad, Kev understood what had happened. The fucker had used that woman to approach Azalea then he'd killed her when she'd outlived her usefulness. Who else knew enough about Shibari, had access to Azalea's cords and technique? Too many coincidences.

Under the pressure wave of shuttles flying overhead, the flashing lights that never dimmed or went out, the frantic pace of the city's core district of Kabuki-cho, *his* district, goddammit, Kev stood. Somewhere in the city, Frederick Tagawa, filthy-rich papa's boy to the mayor, had Azalea with him. Kev could only imagine what he wanted with her. Terror he had never known invaded him. Right down to the soles of his feet he felt the fear. But on its heels came a bright, white-hot wall of rage. Fury replaced everything else. Drowned everything else. Nothing else mattered. Nothing else but finding Azalea alive.

And he knew exactly where to start.

He didn't even take time to tell Hank or anyone else any of this. He'd bark a few orders later into his phone. Cleven would make sure—

“Fuck,” he growled as he punched the console. Cleven wouldn't make sure of anything. She was *dead*.

The engines roared to life when he activated them and yanked the altitude lever. He tore off the rooftop in a hairpin turn, stunted wing scraping the concrete and sending a geyser of sparks in a two-foot

arc. He checked his watch, 3:58 AM glowed acid green like fireflies flying in formation. Despite the rain, a timid sun painted the horizon a paler shade of black and gray. Kev kicked the pedal and brought his shuttle level with the lowest level of traffic, usually reserved for older and slower crafts, but less dense than the faster lanes. And he gunned it.

Horns and sirens blasted out as security cameras recorded him flying at twice the speed limit. Halfway to his destination, he dinged an automated garbage shuttle, which veered and hit the corner of a building.

“Fuck!” Only a frenetic pull on the altitude lever and a kick on the right pedal averted the crash. Kev spread his feet wider, leaned deeper in the black leather seat. No time to lose. Fuck them all.

In the rearview screen, he caught flashing red lights. Traffic cops. He didn’t have time for this shit. Without slowing, he flicked on the remote ID switch. Not two seconds after, the red lights disappeared. They must have caught his bleep on their radar and recognized one of their own. Good, because he intended to break every speed record and traffic law on his way to the mayor’s house.

Kev slalomed between buildings and antennas, dove under bridges and sky train tracks. One time, he came so close to slamming into the twin pillars supporting one of Tokyo’s more flamboyant hotels, that he locked his elbows and gritted his teeth and waited for disintegration. It wouldn’t even hurt. But it never came. Rain made smears across his dirty windshield. No amount of mashing the buttons made it any clearer either, so he let it go. He knew the way to his destination. Most of it, anyway.

Finally, leaving angry commuters behind—no doubt they were on their phones right now, giving his license to the cops—he flew into the richer district where foreign dignitaries and bankers lived. And mayors.

Kev spotted the Prefectural Office, a giant building of glass and improbably shaped like a giant lotus pad. But more importantly, he spotted the place’s landing bay—the opening in the side of the lotus stem was big enough to house fifty crafts—and made a beeline for it. It was with engines roaring, skids scraping the ledge and Gs accumulating in his gut that he swerved into the bay, sideways and nose pointing a tad too high. He didn’t land, he more or less crashed. The handful of shuttles already in the bay provided a perfect crush-zone that lessened the impact on his own craft. Kev was already out of his seat and with a hand on the hatch lever by the time the shuttle stopped moving.

As with the Red Lounge, his landing brought the security guards out like a wallop on a hive would bring out the warrior bees. He didn’t even slow down. He had answers to get and he’d get them before his hull was cold.

One of the suits raised his arms on either side as if he meant to shoo away a recalcitrant group of teens. “Sir, you’re going to have to—”

“I’m a cop. Get the mayor,” Kev snarled in reply. “*Now.*”

Another suit, this one bigger and meaner-looking, shook his head. “Mister Tagawa can’t see you right now.”

A bit hard of hearing, huh? Kev went for this one first.

He greeted the shorter but stouter man with a kick to the inside of the leg that collapsed him on one knee. As the man growled in pain and reached inside his jacket, Kev followed with an elbow between the shoulder blades. The first suit hadn't hit the ground when another three rushed out of the entrance.

The closest guard, the one who had addressed him first, snapped a telescopic baton out of his jacket pocket. Only his height saved Kev from having the butt end of it smashed into his face. Instead, he caught the damn thing on the collarbone. A sickening crunch indicated something had given. He'd put his money on bone rather than graphite compound. Pain slashed through him like a lightning strike. But the image of Azalea in Frederick's hands drowned even that. He used his longer reach to block the next blow, dipped his shoulder and sent the guy flying over with a projection that made his broken collarbone grate and grind.

"You're starting to piss me off," Kev growled. "Get the mayor. Now."

"The police are on their way," replied an older man in a perfectly tailored suit. The shoulders belied the expensive cut of his jacket though and Kev recognized muscle and authority under the placid façade.

"I'm the police, for fuck's sake. Am I speaking goddamn Swahili? I'm seeing the mayor and I'm seeing him now. Move."

"I'm sorry, sir—"

"Yeah," Kev growled. "So am I."

A double hook to the chin and the older man went backpedaling with his arms like an out-of-control windmill. Two more guards fell on him. A punch right on the snout made him see stars. He blocked the next, sidestepped, pivoted as he grabbed the offending limb. In a complete rotation, he spun with the man's arm tucked under his own. A vicious kick to the other's balls made sure no one would get any ideas about his unprotected back. Kev used his greater height to snap the man's arm down. Hard and quick. He felt more than heard the bones giving against his elbow. That'd hurt like a bitch. A howl of pain from the man confirmed it.

"Get the mayor!" he roared. He pulled his gun and fired at the ceiling. Long fluorescents busted and sent cascades of sparks down on the concrete floor. Shuttles, some of them intact despite his arrival, took on different colors with the crazy light show.

Just as the old man floundered to his feet, Kev grabbed him by the back of his expensive jacket and reeled him in. "Lead the way."

He back-walked the guard against the wall then pressed the button for the lift with the muzzle of his gun. The man's eyes narrowed ever so slightly. "You're not going to claw your way out of this," he sneered.

"Shut your ass, old man."

After the door slid into the concrete wall, Kev again used his gun to mash the emergency button, which effectively locked the lift on this particular floor. He'd never been the trusting kind.

“Let’s go, now.”

The door to the stairs clattered against the wall, hit him back on the shoulder. His injury flared like a bad burn. Fuck, it hurt. But Azalea would hurt more. Could already *be* hurting. He forced his mind off that route. Nothing there but uncontrollable rage. Nothing there but hopelessness.

Up a level, three, six, eight. They emerged onto a posh-looking level, carpeted in shades of lush green.

“Tagawa! Come out now!” Kev roared. His voice surprised him. Much more raw than usual. He must have looked like a complete lunatic. The adrenaline patch was really doing a number on him this time. In fact, he might have overdone it. He’d deal with that later. Right now, if his heart could beat a bit quieter, maybe he’d hear something. It hammered against his chest. Sweat slicked his gun hand. Atypical for him.

“Stay in your room!” the older man cut in.

Kev gave him a rough shake. “Shut up.”

A door opened at the other end and a smallish man in a ratty old robe stumbled out. He was putting his glasses on when he spotted Kev and his hostage.

“Oh dear—”

“Mister Tagawa, I’m Detective Newman. I’m in charge of the Golden Gai Killer case. Azalea is gone. I think it was your son.”

The barrage did not seem to take the man by surprise. In fact, he looked more sad than shocked. He nodded. “Everything is fine now, Alfred. I will take care of this. Alone.”

“Sir! This man shot—”

“All is well,” Tagawa repeated. Cold and flat. A business voice. “We will not speak of this to anyone. No charges, no word. To anyone. Understood?”

“Yes, sir.” Alfred’s mouth couldn’t have been any tighter. “I’ll have your badge for this,” he went on under his breath. “Detective or not, I’ll have your badge, Newman.”

Kev didn’t even look back as he slid his gun inside its holster on his flank. “Take a number.”

“Come,” the mayor said. He opened the door wider, followed Kev inside then closed the door.

“You don’t look very surprised, Mister Mayor.”

The man passed a trembling hand over his balding head. He slumped onto an ottoman that fit perfectly with the rest of the opulent room. Everything pulled right out of Edo-era Japan. Tokyo’s former name. “I was expecting something, sometime, although not this.” He waved in Kev’s general direction.

“It was you. The *card*...”

Tagawa nodded. “Through a friend on the force. It was not supposed to end this way. Miss Azalea... I cannot sit by. Not this time. Not this time.” He repeated this a couple of times, shaking his head, dejected.

“So it’s him, it’s Frederick? Fuck. He has Azalea *right now*, so I suggest you come up with a good place to start looking. Because I swear... I *swear*.” A lump kept the rest down his throat. He didn’t know what he’d do, but he’d do something bad. His heart thudded painfully against his sternum and for a crazy

second, nausea assaulted him. He was *not* going to puke in the mayor's bedroom. That'd just be too wrong. Plus, he didn't have time for this.

Tagawa looked up through welled eyes. "I love her as well. I would be lost without her art."

*Loved* her as well? Kev didn't love her. Didn't love anyone. That required trust, and, well, he had a history with that. Thanks to a lifetime of small deceptions and letdowns from people who should've known better. If at least it would've been a woman who had stabbed him in the back... But no. Not even that. Just his nature. A cynical, pessimistic loner. Charming. No wonder he was alone.

So definitely not love. No fucking way. Tears welled his eyes, even though he wasn't in any pain. Goddamn adrenaline patches. He had to quit that shit. It was turning him into an emotional mess. Love Azalea? Come on, he barely knew her.

"She taught me many things over the years," Tagawa went on. "She taught me to trust."

Kev refused to go down that road. He didn't love anyone and he didn't trust anyone. Even if a little voice in the back of his head told him otherwise. But he was good at ignoring it. *Not listening.*

"Come on, sir," he forced through his teeth. "Start thinking. Where could he be?"

"Frederick owns many properties. He has already, erm, used two. For the last two killings."

"And you knew that yet did nothing?"

"He is my son," Tagawa retorted. Tears rolled down his wrinkled cheeks. "But Miss Azalea... How could he?"

Kev's heart beat so hard, he pressed a hand to his chest and squeezed his eyes shut. Christ, it hurt. His shoulder, his head...his heart. Doubly.

"His properties," Kev snarled. "What else?"

"This is where he takes them... This is where he—"

"How many are we talking about here?"

"Eleven."

Kev opened his eyes to see the man's eyes no doubt reflecting the fear and horror in his own.

*Eleven.*

He raked both hands in his hair. It took only one word to deflate his burning lungs. "*Fuck.*"

Azalea woke to the sound of traditional Japanese music. Each pull on the phantom strings caused her heart to flutter. Events preceding the blackout flooded her mind's eye. Frederick, Joy, the poor woman with a flower in her sex. She inhaled deeply but quietly.

Was he here?

She waited to hear any sound before she would open her eyes. But no presence manifested itself. No sound, tiny or great. No smell whatsoever. As if she were in a cocoon. Except for sensations. Vibrations rumbled under her back. She lay supine, hands and feet free. Hope tried to make her act rashly. She tamped

it down. This situation required finesse, cunning. Even if, deep inside, she wanted to curl into a tight ball and cry.

One eye at a time, she opened them a crack. Sky was all she could see. Approaching dawn painted it brown and purple. Rain had ceased. She lifted her head off the woven rug. The most dazzling shade of blue. Ultramarine, like her silk cords. She slipped a hand in the pocket of her robe, hoping against the odds her phone would still be there. It was not. Despair engulfed her. Nausea forced her to wait for a few seconds before rising more fully. After a while, she knelt up to sit on her heels. A room overlooking Tokyo's harbor and facing east, since she could see dawn's birth. Except for the rug, nothing else broke the pure lines of glass walls and discreet metal fittings. Along the ceiling in a corner, she spotted a coiled length of fiber optic cable coming out of the wall. Perhaps the building had only recently been constructed. Azalea turned back to see how one entered into the room. Her breath caught in her throat.

"I always loved when you sat like this," Frederick said from his seat across the room. Naked in a modern chair made of gleaming, curving metal, his fine body still bearing the blue stripes of his binding, he looked at her as a cat would a fly. Mildly interested on the surface, but claws at the ready.

"What have you done, Frederick?"

He smiled. "You would not see, so I had to show you."

She sat so she faced him, placed her hands flat on her thighs. "Show me what, Frederick?"

"Stop saying my name like that," he snapped. He passed a gentle hand over his lap, where his cock showed signs of alertness. "Show you that you don't have to keep searching anymore. You have found him."

"Who?" She resisted the urge to say his name again.

"Your apprentice."

A long, plaintive note of a wooden flute filled the silence that settled in the room. Outside, the sky was brightening to gold and amber.

"You can never be my apprentice, Frederick. You were never an artist. I am truly sorry."

He leaned forward in his chair. Those dazzling blue eyes she had often loved to watch as he writhed in the throes of passion, bound and trusting, suddenly narrowed to murderous slits. Azalea fought the rise of fear. It clawed up her chest and sought to squeeze her throat tight. But she fought it. With all she had, with all the training and wisdom she had accumulated in her forty-one years alive and twenty-two as *nawashi*.

She cocked her head at Frederick. "Why did you kill these women? A true artist would never betray that trust. Once a person is bound, the trust that person places in the binder is sacred. You have defiled it."

He snapped to his feet. "You. Wouldn't. *See!*" He roared the last word.

"No, Frederick, you are wrong. *I could* see. And this is why you are not my apprentice."

“Oh, but I am. I learned. Watching you. I recorded our sessions and I played them, over and over. Until I had it right, every knot. Every single knot, Azalea. I’ve learned them all.” He marched toward her, dropped to his knees right in front of her face. His breath smelled of mint and citrus fruits. “You’ll see. I’ll show you. I’ll beat the master.”

Azalea shook her head. Such a shame. “I was never your master. You were never my apprentice. Just a cruel man with ropes.”

The slap rocked her to her side, where she lay for several seconds, prey to vertigo and another wrestling match with fear. In the end, she won again. But it had been a close call.

She blotted the blood with the cuff of her wide sleeve. “And what do...”

Somewhere in the background, a tiny alarm bleeped. Frederick rushed out through a doorway she had not noticed. A pocket door in the concrete wall. He returned bearing a phone and a triumphant smile.

“I’m glad we haven’t started yet. I’d hate to leave you hanging.” He grinned, showed her the tiny screen where a picture of a matte, black shuttle zoomed out of a building she knew well. The mayor’s residence. Kev must have pieced together the puzzle and come looking for Frederick Tagawa.

“My father was always a weak old man. But Alfred, he’s a friend. So let me go take care of your detective then I’ll come back for you. The best always comes last, right?”

This time, when dread clawed up her spine and squeezed her nape and throat, she could not do a thing to stop it. This fight with fear, Azalea lost.

## Chapter Five

“Goddamn, motherfucking waste of time.”

Kev ran back inside his shuttle after visiting—or more aptly busting into—the fifth of Tagawa’s properties. So he was a slumlord on top of a murdering lunatic. An apartment complex, a dilapidated shopping mall long populated with squatters, a pair of bars that catered to the rich and infamous and now this closed-down restaurant. Nothing. Not a clue, not a hint nor a fucking scrap he could use.

And the whole time, fear at what he’d find if he was too late battled with the hope of what Azalea and he could later build if he was on time. Despair against hope. Distrust against reliance. A new life against his old ways.

*I love her as well.*

Maybe Tagawa had seen something Kev couldn’t. Or wouldn’t.

Powering up the engines, he raked his hair back and ignored the demanding bleep on the comms console. Then it was his phone that buzzed. He ignored that too, after he checked the source. He’d answer his bosses’ collective fit *after* he’d found the sack of shit, not a moment before. He couldn’t lose a single precious second. Already, Azalea had been in Frederick Tagawa’s hands for almost three hours. The thought squeezed his chest and burned his already inflamed arm. Adrenaline sluiced his systems and pumped his heart. It hurt. So bad. As did his broken collarbone. But he couldn’t do shit about it. He felt the patch peeling on the corners because of the sweat coating him from head to toe. He yanked the altitude lever up and tore off the street. Horns greeted him.

“Fuck you!” he roared at the thickening dawn traffic, even if he knew they couldn’t hear him from inside his shuttle. Fuck them all.

One sweaty and shaking hand on the lever and the other on the control wheel, Kev flew up pretty damn close to forty-five degrees—the stall warning added its genderless, computerized voice to the cacophony. On his list, the next property to bust was a tall habitat tower under construction by the harbor. Well out of his district. He didn’t give a damn. Sweat stung his eyes as he tried to read his frenetic handwriting on the piece of crumpled plastic film. It was blue and reminded him of Azalea. Tagawa better find a deep hole to hide in, because if he hurt her... Merely *touched* her—

The impact was so unexpected Kev didn’t have time to even grit his teeth.

A god awful grating sound of metal against metal drowned even the alarm inside his cabin. He twisted to check behind him, spotted an expensive-looking, silvery shuttle fly back for another hit. What the fuck was *that* about?

A split second later, it hit the aft portion of his shuttle again, sent it swerving sideways like cops used to do in their four-wheeled cruisers, back in the day. He fishtailed out of control and hit the side of an armored support pillar on a bridge. That thing had been under construction for years and still looked eons away from completion. But it sure as hell was made solidly.

Kev snarled a curse as he fought gravity—that bitch—and regained control of his craft. Not for long if the other pilot had his say. Buckling his seat belt with one hand, he widened his feet. This clearly was either an ally of Tagawa's or the guy himself. Either way, Kev wasn't going to get fucked in the ass with his pants on. No way. Azalea depended on him to stay alive. If she still was. Kev shook his head.

*Don't go there, man. Stay focused.*

"Come on, you sonofabitch."

The worst thing was, he couldn't kill the guy or crash him bad enough to get knocked out. He needed Tagawa—or the accomplice—alive and *conscious* to learn where Azalea was being kept. But when he was done... There'd be another complaint of police brutality. And he'd enjoy that one. They could fire his ass if it pleased them.

In his rearview screen, the silvery shuttle swerved left and right, flew behind another row of pillars as though it were trying to goad him out in the open. Did the guy think he was a dumbass or something?

Now that he thought about it, the shuttle must have come from the east, since he'd been heading due west before the first hit. The habitat tower! That was the easternmost property on his list, the one he'd been about to visit. Tagawa must have intercepted him. So that meant she was still alive, otherwise Tagawa wouldn't have cared if the police found his place. So maybe he *could* kill the prick. But what if it wasn't the tower? She may die because Tagawa couldn't come back to her.

*You willing to gamble that, Newman?*

Gamble with Azalea's life? Never.

"You fucker," Kev growled. He couldn't hit him hard enough to kill him, but he could and *would* rattle him some.

Tagawa must not have been a very patient man, for he veered left and flew right in front of Kev's nose. Bad choice. His shuttle may be battered and in need of some TLC—not much unlike him—but it was still good for a few hits. Kev gunned it. The sudden acceleration pressed him back into his seat. He kept an eye for the altitude indicator, because flying at one hundred feet off the ground wasn't the smartest thing to do. Elbows locked and sweaty hands on the control wheel, he didn't slow until the other shuttle's aft was ten feet in front of him. Eight, seven, six feet.

*Knock, knock.*

Kev gave a brusque push on the tips of his pedals. Heat vortices from the other's thrusters disrupted his view, but he didn't give a shit. He rammed the other shuttle in the ass. Hard. The silvery craft rolled right, clipped a pillar with the tip of its stunted wing. Sparks arced high. Kev didn't let go for a single second and rammed him again as both shuttles flew tight around and changed headings. As if they were linked by an invisible cable, both flew up and down, left and right, the first trying to lose the second and not succeeding.

He followed Tagawa along the bridge's pillars then out toward the harbor. There, the silvery shuttle dipped below roof ledges, Kev hot on his heels. Mirrored structures flew past. They shot out from between buildings like proverbial bats out of hell. Maybe Tagawa thought his next stunt would lose Kev, but it didn't. Wing dipping low enough to touch the water, Tagawa swerved into a hairpin turn. Water arced in a thin but wide film and temporarily obscured Kev's vision. He mashed the control to clear the windshield, snarled a curse when it didn't do shit. Two could play that game.

Breaking his own personal record for speed—and craziness—Kev kicked the pedals, pulled the lever up between his thighs and groaned in pain as his shuttle overtook Tagawa's. It was his turn to use water as a screen. He sent a couple million gallons up the fucker's thrusters. With any luck, it'd choke the engines and Kev could board him. But then again, when was he that lucky?

"You slimy sonofabitch."

Tagawa leveled off. But instead of keeping some distance, he came straight for Kev. Shit. Both shuttles slammed together. A series of warnings beeped, flashed and calmly advised him to "pull up, pull up". Why the fuck for? He still had a good, oh what, twenty feet to spare. Kev treated the guy to his own sauce and crashed his old shuttle against the pricey-looking, silvery affair. To his right, he spotted a lone habitat tower, still under construction with cranes and machinery surrounding its base. Azalea could be in there. She *had* to be in there.

Another crash, this time from below, pushed Kev against his seat belt. His injured shoulder burned like acid had been poured on it. Lights flickered, control panels as well.

"Oh no, you don't die on me."

When Tagawa came for another helping, Kev stamped on the airbrakes. Hard enough to slam everything that wasn't bolted down into the nav console. Loose bits and debris littered the controls and him as well. Outside, Tagawa missed and bashed against a pair of pharos, which bent and broke off. Attitude jets firing concurrently, the silvery shuttle did a complete about-turn to face him.

Kev growled a curse. "You come get some, you fuck face."

He should've known his luck—that capricious bitch—wouldn't hold that long. When his shuttle suddenly died—everything went, controls, ventilation, propulsion—Kev could only brace his feet wide on the metal plates on either side of the pedals. Then freefall.

But apparently this wasn't enough for Tagawa, who flew directly for him.

Kev slammed a fist on the control wheel. He'd come so close. Azalea...

Tagawa's shuttle hit his so hard it dislodged bits of polymer trim. The emergency power switched on, but too late. Kev could only watch, stunned, blood filling his mouth, as the altitude indicator flashed 0 in acid green.

*Fuck me.*

Impact. Smoke and fire filled his cabin. Everything turned black and red and the smell of fuel invaded his brain. Like grape bubblegum.

If she pressed her face against the glass—with a thousand feet of air below her feet—Azalea thought she could see a crane near the building in which she stood. From her memory of Tokyo's harbor, she must have been in one of those new habitat towers that mushroomed along every square foot of coastline. Judging from the fiber optic cable dangling in a long coil, and the lack of electrical plates to close the boxes, the building must have been still under construction. She had tried to pull at the cable, but it had not budged. She had also knelt in front of the pocket door and tried to work the mechanism. Without success. And now, just as she was trying to see if she could get someone's attention—those crane operators had to look up and around once in a while—a faint sound forced her away from the window. She knelt back on the rug, facing the chair. Waiting. She stood more chance of using her mind to beat Frederick than her physical strength. He was far too strong for her to overpower. But perhaps she could reason with him, or downright deceive him into releasing her.

The door slid into the frame and Azalea got a fluttering look of another empty room. Except that this one had a real door. Frederick stepped into the room and slid the door shut behind him. His usually perfect hair was tousled and he bled from the bottom lip. But here he was, while Kev was not. She forced her heart to quiet. But it *ached*. At her loss, at the poignant timing of events. The same day she had found a man with whom she could be herself, he had been stolen from her.

"Don't you want to know what happened?"

"You are here," she replied, surprised her voice sounded so calm. She had frozen on the inside.

Her reply did not seem to please him. He yanked his leather jacket off, his belt and jeans, kicked off his shoes. "His shuttle *disintegrated* when it hit the water."

When she said nothing, he removed the rest of his clothes and indicated she should do the same with hers.

"I cannot fight you, I cannot overpower you. But I *will* not help you."

He shrugged. "Fine."

Azalea tried not to cringe when he marched for her, gripped her by the front of her robe and hoisted her to her feet. In quick, economical tugs, he yanked her robe apart, belt and all, pushed it wide then off her shoulders. Through it all, she stubbornly stared up at him. He would not cow her. He would *never* cow her.

Poor Kev. Her heart broke for him. He had tried to help and had died for it. When it would have been easy to wait for reinforcements, he had come for her, in his dented shuttle and worn sneakers, probably cursing and ready to break heads. Knowing that every minute counted. So dedicated. Yet in the end, his valor had not been enough to beat Frederick's malevolence. A wave of heat flared out of her. She would have loved, so much, to become intimate with the gruff detective. Perhaps even more than as occasional lovers. She enjoyed his presence, as morose as it was. She enjoyed his hands and what they could do to her body. She loved to touch him, learn his preferences. Learn from him and teach him about her. He had been intensely willing to discover and explore. What else could she have taught Kev Newman? What else would he have been willing to try for her? The wasted potential, the loss pure and simple, broke her heart. Frederick had stolen it all. He had taken the spark.

"Come back to me," Frederick murmured as he placed a kiss on her forehead. Then slapped her across the face when she ignored his kiss. Just as she had on the few occasions he had tried to kiss her while she worked.

The sting of his hand spread up to her temple. "Your father will be so disappointed. As I am."

Another slap, this one much harder, brought tears to her eyes.

"You know what disappoints me?" he demanded. "You going on and on about the way of the silk and tradition, yet not taking an apprentice when you had someone right under your nose. *That's* disappointing. I should have been that apprentice, Azalea. Me. I was the only one worthy of it. But you were just too proud."

Frederick backed to the chair, rummaged around in his jacket and pulled the thin silk cords from a pocket. "But, in a way, I will be. I've learned all your knots, your technique, everything."

"Shibari is more than a collection of knots and technique, Frederick. It is an art. Unique to the individual practicing it."

"As mine is." He uncoiled the cords and let the ends touch the ground.

"The ends should *never* touch the ground, Frederick."

She cringed when he raised his hand to slap her again.

"I could have showed you so much more," she went on, trying to appear calm. "Some things cannot be demonstrated in public performances and require years of intimacy, of friendship and trust. Your art will be incomplete."

He cocked his head. "What do you mean, incomplete?"

Azalea's heart fluttered. Hope glimmered like a mirage. She licked her lips, raised her chin to face him more fully. The man could have been a blond Adonis if not for his callous soul.

"An artist will not share all of his or her ways with the same pupil. With me gone, Frederick, you will not learn the final stages, you will not reach the same height. A pupil should always best the master."

His kiss landed like knuckles on her mouth. She recoiled, tasted blood. His dazzling blue eyes blazed when he leaned very close to her face and grinned. “You’re good, Azalea, at everything you do. Except *lying*.”

She swallowed the blood and the fear alike as he turned her around and looped the first cord around her chest. He tied it tight under her breasts, then brought the end of it down along her belly, making her shiver in disgust when, from behind, he snaked a hand between her thighs to catch the cord. He stood again and pulled it taut. It parted her sex and dug in her sensitive flesh. Too hard. He may possess the method, but he had none of the skill required.

“How’s that?” he murmured in her ear. “How do you like it?”

“I do not. Your method is crude and mean.”

“Mean? Hmm.”

She gasped when he yanked on the cord, which forced her to stand on the tips of her toes. Burning pain spread down to her thighs.

“Kneel.”

Azalea could barely comply for the cord’s tightness. Frederick held her by the shoulders as she slowly knelt, then pushed her onto her elbows. He looped a second length of cord around her waist.

“Give me your hand.”

“I said I would not help you.”

He snarled a curse as he gripped her wrist and forced her arm behind her back. She collapsed on a shoulder. The undignified position brought tears of shame to her eyes. But she fought it.

“The cord is too high.” She used her coldest tone possible. “You should have worked on your skill instead—”

“Shut up!”

Cord cruelly bound her wrist to the middle of her back. He tied a slipknot, which he looped around her head. Azalea gritted her teeth as he tightened it around her neck. Tight. Tighter. Tiny black bursts peppered the inside of her eyelids. They reminded her of Kev’s eyes. She focused on him as Frederick did his work. She would have loved nothing more than to explore the potential in their union. They were compatible—had been—in so many ways. Perhaps she even could have taught him to trust her enough to...

She would never know.

“I can keep you like that for hours, you know,” Frederick murmured in her ear. “Close to suffocation but not quite dying. That’s something I wish you would have done to me. You were always a coward in that way, Azalea.”

“Suffocation...” She tried to swallow but could not. “Is not...p-part of Shibari.”

Frederick pushed a strand of her hair from her face. “Pity.”

Azalea had always been very aware of her body and the minute changes on the fine hairs along her arms and legs. When a change in air pressure created a frisson up her bound arm, Azalea tensed.

A split second later, the pocket door literally burst off its railing and clattered inside. In the doorway, filling it with his height and terrible anger, stood Kev, dripping wet. His long coat was gone, as was his holster and most of his turtleneck. His hair looked singed on one side and blood covered his chin. The smell of smoke accompanied him as he rushed inside.

Frederick only had time to curse before Kev tackled him off Azalea. But in so doing, tightened the cord around her neck hard enough to make her see stars. She clawed at it with her free hand but could not loosen it. Air stopped coming.

She could only watch, slowly suffocating, as the two men went at each other. Displaying incredible strength, Kev seized the metal chair and sent it at Frederick, who barely dodged quickly enough to avoid the missile. The chair crashed through the window, tempered glass and all. The wall of glass turned milky before it crumpled into a cascade of cubic diamonds. Wind whistled plaintively. Azalea collapsed onto her side as she desperately tried to loosen the slipknot somewhere down her back. Fumbling, she finally found it between her shoulder blades. Black dots danced in her vision. She felt veins swelling along her temples. She needed air.

Frederick's shuttle may have bested Kev's old craft, but he clearly was no match in fighting skills. Kev pummeled the shorter man with punches that snapped the blond head back and bent him in half. But she did notice that he favored an arm. Frederick seemed to have spotted this flaw as well, for he grabbed Kev's left hand, which tore a howl of pain from him, and sent him waltzing against the wall. While Kev backpedaled and windmilled his good arm, Frederick made a run for it. He did not get very far. Kev caught him by a fistful of hair and reeled him back.

"You slimy sonofabitch." Another punch to the belly forced Frederick to his knees.

With his good hand, he dragged Frederick back to the window, where he looped the fiber optic cable around and around the other's neck.

"Like knots, do you?" Kev snarled.

Azalea's vision turned red. Her limbs grew numb. Yet she saw Kev's eyes turn to her. His expression changed from white-hot rage to concern. Frederick chose that time to knee the taller man in the groin. Instead of keeping Frederick from lurching away, Kev sent him back with a push in the sternum. Back toward the window. And a thousand feet of air. Frederick's feet scraped the ground as he arched, arms reaching for purchase. His blue eyes were huge in his face. He fell back, cable still looped around his neck. Azalea closed her eyes to sever the vision of the man falling below the window ledge. When the cable ran out, the violent shock abruptly broke the man's cry. She did not hear his voice again nor see the cable move.

Kev did not glance once at the window as he rushed to her and quickly found the cord that suffocated her. When air—sweet, glorious air—filled her lungs again, she only had enough energy for a thankful smile.

Kev would've preferred the fucker hung there and died by suffocation, not have his neck snapped by the fall. Slimy prick had punched out way too easy. Plus, he would have loved to shoot him in the ass, the fuck, to repay him for Cleven. But his gun was somewhere at the bottom of Tokyo Bay, along with his ride.

But Azalea was safe. He'd almost been too late. He'd crawled out of his burning shuttle, only to have to swim to the pier a couple of feet away. There, he'd climbed up to the promenade, and spotted Tagawa's property. Still under construction, it'd been easy to spot the one level—the penthouse—that looked inhabited and finished. So he'd climbed there, using one of the lifts that served the first hundred floors then switching to the stairs to make sure no one could hear him coming. And when he'd stood there, Azalea on her knees and shoulders, having that...that *fuck* tie her up. It'd been too much. His poor heart.

"I'm sorry," he whispered through her hair and into her ear. "I'm sorry for taking you with me. I should've sent you the images instead. I wasn't thinking. I just didn't trust anyone else with this." Trust, his old Achilles heel. It'd almost cost this woman her life. She'd almost died because he couldn't trust anyone to deal with the investigation the way he wanted. Cleven had died for it. And Azalea had come *that* close. What the hell was wrong with him? It was one thing to blame his folks for putting a key around his neck before he was old enough to reach the damn lock. But the rest, it'd been his doing. Or undoing. No one had forced him to have expectations and standards. No one had turned him into a demanding, malcontent asshole. He'd done that all by himself.

Azalea patted his arm as she straightened up to her knees. "T-t-thank you." Her voice was barely a ribbon of air. Rage filled him anew. If that nutcase wasn't dead already...

Kev couldn't help himself. He wrapped his arms around her and held her tight. Very tight. She let out a sigh of contentment. He untied her then helped her back into her clothes.

"When I got to that roof and you were gone..." Kev began. Fuck, he couldn't even form the words.

"You came for me." The warmth of her breath felt like silk on his cheek. "You should have waited for reinforcements."

"I couldn't wait. Not when I knew he had you."

Azalea squeezed his arm tight and rested her forehead against his shoulder. Something clicked into place for him.

"I wasn't telling the truth when I said I'd think about it."

"Think about what?" She sighed and held him tighter.

If his heart swelled any larger, it'd burst out of his chest. What a crazy day. "About seeing you again. I don't need to think about it. I know what I want. I want to see you again. A lot."

“As do I.”

“But you have to know—”

“We will find a way, Kev. We will find common ground.”

He'd never wished for anything with more ardor. They *would* find a way. But for now, they had to get the hell out of there and get her some medical attention.

After a quick kiss to the forehead, he coiled and pocketed the cord before escorting her out of the room. Good thing he still had his phone. He called his boss. Captain Ng's face appeared like a tiny ghost over the holotransmitter.

“Newman, you better have a damn good reason—”

“The killer is dead,” Kev cut in. “Azalea is safe and Frederick Tagawa is dead.”

“Tagawa?” she gasped. “The mayor's son?”

“I'll fill you in later.”

Despite the tiny screen, he saw her scowl reach epic proportions. He'd fucked up this time. He knew he had. Yet he wouldn't change a single thing. “You can also draft your resignation letter, Detective Newman. This was the proverbial straw.”

“No problem.” He slid his thumb over the screen and cut the call. The boss was already pissed off, so why not hang up on her?

“I am sorry,” Azalea said. She swallowed repeatedly. “You ruined your career.”

“It'd been a job for many years, not a career. I'll find something else, don't worry about me.” Although, inside, he did wonder what the hell he was going to do with himself. No job. Nowhere to be. Who would they appoint to protect his district? Some greenhorn? Or worse, an incompetent veteran? Argh.

*Just let it go, you control freak.*

“Come.” He wrapped his good arm around her shoulders and held her tight. “I wish I could sweep you off your feet and carry you out of this hellhole, but I think my collarbone's just given out entirely.”

She grinned up at him. Despite the events, the fear and pain she had endured, she found the strength to smile at him. “You already *have* swept me off my feet, Detective Newman.”

As he watched her navigate the broken door and construction material, Kev was reminded that he could've lost it all. It wasn't his to begin with, but still. He could've lost a great deal. The mayor's parting words rang in his head again.

*“She taught me to trust.”*

Hell knew he'd *love* to be able to trust someone, even a little bit. He couldn't go on in life the way he had so far. It was killing him. Adrenaline patches, sleeping with his gun between the pillows—those which should belong to a lover but didn't because he'd never, ever slept beside a woman. Even in his own bed. He couldn't even trust a lover to sleep beside him. How pathetic was that? But Azalea. She was different. In fact, she made *him* feel different. With her, he was entertaining the chance that maybe, just maybe...

Azalea's wounds had long healed, the blue dye from her cords had been washed off. Yet she had not seen Kev Newman since he had come to rescue her. As soon as she was safely in the paramedics' care, he kissed the top of her hand and disappeared into the crowd. She had followed the end of his momentous career in the news, as had everyone else. Kabuki-cho district would have to find another champion, despite their calls and petitions to keep their surly detective on duty. It was as if he no longer cared. She had not heard of any appeal on his part. She had put in a good word with the mayor—as well as offered him her condolences for the loss of his son and only child—and hoped Kev would find employment complementary to what he had done so far. She had not tried to contact him though. If he came back into her life as he had said he would, it would have to be on his terms. She could not force or convince him. But she missed him. So much.

Now, a month later almost to the day, Azalea returned from a performance to find a small note pinned to her door. Old-fashioned paper the color of a pale winter sky. Heart beating, she opened it. Empty. No note.

"I didn't know what to write," Kev said from behind her.

She turned to find him leaning against the wall, both hands squeezed behind his back. Rain fell against him and made his face a glistening mask of frustration. "How lame is that? I bought that paper, even bought a fancy pen to write on it. Then I couldn't figure out what to say." He shrugged.

He had not changed at all. Except for his eyes. Dark circles rimmed them. He looked a bit more worn, a bit more tired. Her heart went out to him.

"How is retirement life?" she asked gently.

"It sucks."

"Would you like to come in?"

He wiped water from his eyes. "Should I? What if I do? What will it mean then?"

"That you wish to take shelter from the rain and have a cup of tea with a friend."

"Is that what we are, friends?"

She swallowed hard as she tried to find a reply that would not betray her heart. "I am not sure."

A sardonic smile rounded his hollow cheeks. "Yeah, me neither."

"I have missed you," she murmured without looking at him. She could not stomach the chance he would look displeased or uncomfortable. She had, indeed, missed him terribly. And had also contemplated the meaning of her affection for him. She had found the one person she could trust entirely. Even with her art. Although she knew he wanted no part of it.

"So have I. But I couldn't come... I've been trying to figure out a few things."

"And?"

“And it’s not going too well.” He raked his hair back, grimaced. “Fuck, I don’t know what to think anymore. I don’t know what to do. I feel like something’s pulling me in two directions at once.”

“What does your heart tell you?”

He snorted a mirthless laugh. “That dried-up old thing? Nah, I haven’t listened to it in a long time. Ask any of my exes.”

Azalea tried—failed—not to let his words touch her. But they did. Deeply. She would love nothing more than soothe his worry, ease his pain. He looked so forlorn standing there in her entry yet not willing to join her under the small roof. Rain pelted him yet he did not move.

“If you listen carefully, I am sure you will hear it. Come. Come have tea with me.”

Kev peeled his tall frame off the wall and followed her into the foyer. But he froze there. A puddle accumulated around his worn sneakers and dripped from the ends of his fingers.

“Azalea...” He hung his head.

She turned, but waited for him to finish what he had started. She felt him on the verge of a decision, facing a precipice. She would respect his choice, whatever it turned out to be. But her heart did beat harder and faster. Affection was a strange new feeling for her. But then again, perhaps her feelings had deepened into more than affection.

Kev filled the space with his height and raw intensity. He panted as if he had run a great distance. Running from or after something, Azalea could not tell.

She stood transfixed when he stalked up to her, grabbed her by the upper arm and crushed his mouth to hers. She received the kiss, sensing an internal battle waged in the conflicted man, sensing if she gave him time and the opportunity to purge the demons, he would. To her shock, he broke the kiss when he collapsed to his knees. The sound of his kneecaps hitting the floor made her wince. Rain parted his hair into thick ribbons. Like cords of golden silk.

He looked up into her face. She had never seen this expression on him before. Despair, joy, pain and hope. Tears welled his eyes, which were rimmed in red. His proud chin quivered.

“Azalea.”

As though unable to bring himself to say more, he raised his fist to show what he held in his hand. A length of aquamarine silk cord, rendered midnight blue from the water soaking it, glistened in his palm and left a blue stain on his skin. Just like the mark she left on those she bound.

Kev pushed the cord into her hand, where it also stained her skin. “Please,” he whispered. “Please...teach me to trust.”

Azalea accepted the gift and held it tight in a shaking fist. Cradling his wet head against her belly, she let the tears come.

“I love you,” she murmured too low for him to hear. There would come the perfect opportunity to share herself with him and he with her. It was not now, but it would come. She could see it in his eyes, even if he probably could not yet bear the thought. It was more than duty that had made him fly to her rescue.

For now though, she would take the gift of his trust and return it with her own. Perhaps she had found more than a friend and lover. Perhaps she had found the person to whom she could confide her soul and share her art. An apprentice.

“Tonight,” he murmured against her belly, “I’m sleeping in my lover’s bed.”

She agreed with a nod.

## About the Author

To learn more about Nathalie Gray, please visit [www.nathaliegray.com](http://www.nathaliegray.com). Or, send an email to Nathalie at [mail@nathaliegray.com](mailto:mail@nathaliegray.com)

*Heat and need lie below the veil...*

## Veiled Heat

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*A Heat Series story.*

Demoted and tossed into the farthest reaches of the universe, Trooper Callie Justice finds herself surrounded by the Ventura's crew of slackers, dimwits and delinquents. The depressing realization that her career is over, combined with her uncontrollable lust for the ship's sexy captain, confirms it—she's losing her mind.

Captain Rafe Vantry led with his ego when he bet he could take the worst ship in the fleet and turn it around. But nothing on the Ventura works, least of all the crew—and the idea he's going to lose seriously pisses him off. On top of that, the Relaxation Program has malfunctioned, matching him with an unknown woman for a night of anonymous sex. His strict sense of protocol forbids it, but the lure of losing himself in a woman's body proves too great.

As things heat up between Callie and Rafe in the cool, silent darkness of the Relaxation Chamber, everything around them falls apart. A supervirus is running rampant, and Rafe's suspicions of sabotage grow stronger when Callie's personnel files mysteriously disappear.

When the veil is finally lifted, the glaring light of truth will reveal what is real—and what could destroy them all.

*Warning: Hot sex, adult words, and lots of adventure in and out of the sack!*

*Enjoy the following excerpt for Veiled Heat:*

Whoever came up with the Relaxation Program had to have been insane and brilliant at the same time. Rafe had often envisioned a bunch of senior brass sitting around a conference table, trying to figure out how to keep the men and women on a ship from, as his friend Jigs used to say, "Fucking like bunnies."

Fifty years ago, someone had proposed letting the Troopers have sex, but keeping their partners a mystery.

While it went against all the rules of the service and the top brass were a conservative, older lot, they had to face facts. The gods had built the human form to need sex and to lie, cheat and disobey orders to get it. The longer the tour, the more fornicating in dark corners occurred.

When a computer program was developed which not only matched monogamous partners for the whole tour but also kept those soldiers from knowing the identity of one another, the brass had finally found a way to make sex palatable. Rafe had to admit, it appealed to him on some level as well. He was, at his heart, a guy who wanted to come home every night to one woman. He'd always thought if he found the

woman he loved, he'd leave ship duty and take a desk job at HQ. Raise a family. All that stuff people talked about as fairy tales.

Of course, that was no longer an option for him. His days of being able to transfer on his own whim were over.

It had been years since he'd entered the Relaxation Program. Once he'd made it to second in command of a ship, he'd given it up as one of the costs of being a leader. But he'd been happy with it before. The ship had always chosen an adequate sexual partner. Nothing spectacular, but certainly someone good enough to keep him balanced.

After seeing his new major without her clothes, he felt like one of the bunnies Jigs referred to. He was more than ready to meet the woman his crippled, duct-taped ship had picked for him.

Stepping into the male side of the preparation chamber, he took a deep breath, suddenly having second thoughts. There were reasons the brass decreed that captains couldn't sleep with crew, even in the Relaxation Program. There was no chance of being matched with an equal, no doubt at all he would be engaging in sex with someone who reported to him.

What did it matter now? He was stuck on this heap of junk for the rest of his career, never to be seen again. His whole life as he'd envisioned it was over. Done. Gone.

He'd been brought down by his own hubris.

Anger directed wholly at himself flashed through him, goading him into pulling the tab holding his uniform shirt in place. He'd give himself this one time, then he'd never come back again. Just this once. Afterwards he'd return to trying to be perfect.

In seconds, he was naked, staring at himself in the mirror.

Not bad, he knew. He kept himself in top shape, even here in the middle of nowhere. Sure, he'd been banged up a bit in the Alien Wars when he'd first joined the Troopers, but the laser scars were almost faded now. Not that his partner would ever see them.

With that thought, he stepped into the entrance hall. Automatically the door slid shut behind him, enveloping him in darkness.

The hum began, a low buzz which would rise to a screaming pitch if he or his partner tried to speak. He'd heard rumors of people communicating through sign language or drawing letters on each other's skin, but there was no way he would let his partner know who he was. Ever. Besides, with only forty-five minutes between them, she wouldn't want to know.

A dull green light glowed on the wall to his right, signaling the lock had popped on the door he knew stood before him. He ran his hand down the cool metal until he found the handle.

His cock throbbed in time with his heartbeat. He needed this so badly. Just the physical release would fix something that had broken inside him when he realized he had no chance of whipping the Ventura into shape.

Sliding the door open, he entered the small room which was the size of a large bed, the floor one giant mattress. Most patrolships had four or even six compartments. His ship had only one, jammed into a section of the cargo hold.

The air smelled vaguely of cleanser and purified recycled air. As he moved forward, it felt as if he swam through water, the air thick with the deadening sound-prevention waves.

Slowly he inched forward, drifting his hand along the soft cloth of the bedding below him. *If she's here, she's short or not lying with her legs straight.*

*Or the damn ship hasn't matched me with anyone. It's probably a malfunction and I'm in here by myself. That would be my luck.*

The chuckle rising in his throat faded as his fingers brushed a woman's toes.

He stopped, curling his hand around her foot, keeping the touch harmless and light, enjoying the comforting heat of another human's skin against his own.

The standard form he'd filled out had asked about every one of his secret desires and for some reason, he'd actually clicked the box which said he liked to touch/kiss/handle women's feet. He'd never admitted that before, since it always seemed a bit weird and fetish-like to him. Most women hated to have their toes touched, recoiling in laughter, screaming that it tickled. But she must have said she didn't mind or she wouldn't be here.

He'd filled out his form with complete honesty because he'd assumed when he'd done it that he'd never be matched with anyone. He'd just been stepping through the process to make sure each stage worked and that the system was functioning at a certain level. When he submitted the final form, instead of being rejected due to his rank as captain, he'd received an inter-ship mail saying he'd be matched when an appropriate partner became available.

He'd planned to have the program fixed the next time they were in port, but by the time they'd arrived, there were hundreds of other critical issues which had surfaced, and he'd had to prioritize.

Still kneeling, he slowly massaged her feet, one in each hand, enjoying the feel of them. How long had it been since he'd been with a woman? It felt like a lifetime, even though he'd had a final night of fun before he'd left to join the Ventura four months ago. Still, he didn't think any woman had ever felt this good before. All warm and alive and his for the span of forty-five minutes.

He brought her right foot up and kissed her instep. Inhaling deep, he searched for her scent, looking for some marker to drown out the annoying vision of his new major bending over to fix the communications equipment. This wasn't the major, it couldn't be. And he wasn't going to be a complete ass and spend his time with his partner thinking about another woman. That just wasn't fair to either of them.

At the end of his deep breath, he caught the faint whiff of flowers, real ones, expensive and sweet. Another indication it wasn't his new major. She wasn't the flower kind.

He lightly scraped his teeth along her instep, enjoying her jump of surprise, emboldened by the knowledge that she must like this, too, or she wouldn't be here. He held her still as he captured a toe in his mouth, tasting clean woman and that same vague hint of floral.

Sucking lightly, he massaged her with his tongue, liking the way she relaxed her foot more firmly into his hands. With patience he rarely displayed and lately didn't know he even possessed, he moved from toe to toe, licking and nibbling along at a leisurely pace.

All at once, she sat, her action snapping him from a pleasant trance. Her hands tugged at his legs, as if she wanted him to move.

He concentrated, letting himself become as pliant as possible, so she could do what she wished. When she didn't take her own legs from his hands, he realized she was trying to stretch his body out alongside hers, so his head was at her feet and her head was at his.

A shiver raced down his skin as she stroked along the muscle in his calf. They were going to touch each other at the same time. Instead of lying still while he did all the work, she would explore him too. Gods.

He took a steadying breath, knowing he'd need every ounce of his legendary control to keep from imploding within minutes.

*How do you choose between freedom and love?*

## Her Master's Pleasure

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When Jalil first wakes up after her ship crashes, she thinks she's having some kind of head injury-induced hallucination. She's a starship pilot, not a sex slave, but she finds herself tied naked to a rack and examined by her new master. It doesn't matter that Zand of Teymour, is hot enough to melt an ice queen. The last place she belongs is in a harem.

Zand is fascinated by the first outsider to stumble upon his planet in thousands of years. His people hide themselves from the rest of the galaxy by choice—therefore, Jalil can never be allowed to leave. But Jalil refuses to submit, and if he can't find a way to tame her, life on Teymour will be its own kind of torture.

Soon Jalil learns that Teymour possesses priceless, First-Civilization technology long thought lost. If she can distract Zand with her body and escape back to the Federation with what she knows, she'll be rich. But with each passing night in her master's embrace, she discovers the dark pleasures of passion.

In the end, gaining her freedom may cost her only chance for love.

*Enjoy the following excerpt from Her Master's Pleasure:*

Straining with all her senses to compensate for the engulfing blackness, Jalil heard her retreating footsteps and the sound of a door opening and shutting.

Alarmed, she pulled against her cuffs. They refused to give. Warning pains shot down her arms and up her legs. A gust of wind blew in through the open doors, lifting the silky fabric and exposing her even more. Not that the gown hid a damn thing. She might as well be hanging naked.

An almost inaudible click told her the door had opened again. Jalil's throat went dry. Her heart began to pound. Despite her blindfold, she felt a powerful presence in the room. Zand?

Footsteps crossed the room. Only one person, as far as she could tell.

"You are lovely. I thought you would be once you were cleaned up." The deep male baritone rumbled somewhere near her ear. With a start, she realized Zand had halted next to the rack. Damn, she could picture him standing there and staring at her.

The thought made her traitorous nipples grow harder. She squirmed in her cuffs and swore at him, but only a muffled grunt emerged from the gag.

"You're a woman of spirit, I see." Zand's breath tickled her ear. He possessed a cultured voice and something warm and playful in his tone eased a little of her fear. At least he didn't sound like an insane despot.

Without warning, a finger touched her chin. She jerked back. Zand chuckled and pressed his hand into the soft flesh of her breast. His palm brushed over her taut nipple. A zing of electricity rushed down her nerve endings to curl her toes. Outraged and mortified, she writhed in her constraints.

“Relax, my beauty. This is the seraglio. There is no escape. You’ll submit to whatever I desire.”

Footsteps circled the rack. Jalil imagined him staring at her body through the flimsy silk, at her back, at her buttocks.

As if he’d read her mind, Zand cupped the bottom of her butt with his strong hands. Jalil gave a muffled cry of surprise. She stiffened with anger and glared into the blackness.

His hands moved upward, kneading her ass, caressing her skin through the silky garment. She tried to hold onto her anger, but his hands were deft and skilled, massaging her buttocks with a firm but pleasing touch, creating little rivulets of pleasure that prickled over her skin and roused a surprising heat deep in her core.

His fingers slid into the crack of her butt cheeks, spreading them. This time she stayed motionless, refusing to give him the satisfaction of a reaction.

He chuckled again and encircled her waist with both hands, his fingers playing with her navel.

She cursed her ticklish skin, cursed the heat that uncoiled in her belly, cursed the wiggle she could not control. For a moment her butt pressed against him. Something long and hard dug into her rear. He had an erection.

She froze, not daring to breathe. He laughed and kissed the back of her neck. His lips were warm and soft and full. They lingered a long moment on her skin, tasting her. He lifted her hair and swept his tongue along her hairline.

“Yes, I like you, and I’ll have you soon, very soon.”

She yelled a protest through the gag, but the only sound that came out was another helpless grunt. Laughing, he lightly slapped both her ass cheeks.

Blood pounded in her temples, but she could still hear him walking around her again. He stopped and faced her. Her breasts rose and fell with her quickened breathing. With maddening deliberation, he continued her sensual torture.

His hands touched her thighs where the hem of the gown fell. He pushed the silk upward, and a cool breeze teased the suddenly smoldering flesh between her legs.

“The pathway to your womanly core is marked with gold.” She heard surprise and delight in his voice. His hand stroked the soft patch of hair between her thighs. The tips of his fingers brushed over the place where her clitoris lay hidden beneath the folds of her pussy. It hardened, swelling upward, and she squirmed in mortification.

“Ah, what’s this? You like my touch.” His finger circled the thickening flesh, rubbing it. The pressure made her pussy throb with need. Little bursts of pleasure shot through her body. Her inner flesh grew damp and tightened with anguished need.

Jalil stiffened, her breath caught in her throat. She stared into the darkness behind the blindfold. What next? Was he going to finger-fuck her, rape her before she’d even so much as seen his face?

Instead, the man gave a low growl of approval and withdrew his touch from her intimate flesh. “You are indeed a prize, one to be savored, not rushed. I hear your eyes are the color of the sea and the sky. I want to see them, and I want to hear your voice. Sepella warns me, though, that you’ve not yet learned obedience. So I tell you this: If you act against me, you’ll be punished, and the punishment will be severe. Do you believe me?”

Jalil pressed her lips together. She wanted nothing more than to spit in his face the moment he removed the gag. But that wouldn’t get her back to the *Gypsy*. Forcing down her anger, she nodded.

“Good. Act with wisdom and I’ll treat you with respect.” He sounded amused. “Attempt to revolt and you’ll find yourself back on this rack, bound, gagged and blindfolded. And I won’t be so gentle a second time.”

His fingers plucked at the knot behind her head, and the gag loosened. He pulled it out of her mouth. Breathing hard, she bit back a curse. She hated yielding to him, even in the smallest thing, but she needed to regain some measure of freedom so she could figure out how to escape from this tyrant.

When she’d stayed silent a few moments, he untied her blindfold and it fell away. Jalil blinked and saw the handsome man who had leaned over her in the wreck. He was standing a few feet away from her, regarding her with calm possessiveness.

“You find the idea of revolt by a woman laughable?” She put all the scorn she could muster into her voice. Lifting her head, she swept a haughty glance over his body. Midnight black hair hung to his shoulders in the many braids she’d remembered. They framed a strong face with a long nose and full, sensual mouth. As before, his eyes reminded her of the dark, velvety depths of space pulsing with the distant sparkle of stars.

He was tall, half a head taller than her, with a broad chest and wide shoulders. He was no weakling, this Lord of Katarsh. Unlike her, he wore clothes, a long thick purple robe belted in scarlet at the waist. It fell to the floor, hiding his legs. His muscled arms were bare, though, and adorned with golden bands.

To her surprise, her pussy tightened and a series of little shivers darted up her spine. This man was smokin’ hot. She’d like to tie him down on a bed and have her way with him. The idea that he might do that very thing to her was making her insides go molten.

He took a step back and stood with his hands on his hips, regarding her. “Despite what you may think, Teymour is not a savage world. But I imagine our culture is unique.”

Jalil struggled to regain her equilibrium. His nearness was overwhelming. Somehow he managed to dominate the space around him. She was finding it difficult to breathe. She had to fight back. With an effort, she found her voice. “It is, although not in a good way. Where I come from, a man isn’t allowed to touch a woman without her consent.”

He lifted his brows. “Forgive my ignorance, but we’ve been cut off from other worlds since the First Civilization fell. Where do you come from?”

“It’s called the Federation. It rose from the ashes of the First Civilization.”

“But it’s just as sexually prudish, it seems.”

“If you call simple decency prudish.”

Zand laughed. “You think I have sex with women without their consent? Each of the women in my seraglio is chosen—and thrilled to be here.”

“Like you chose me? Against my will?”

His expression grew serious. “You would like the alternative less. If I hadn’t brought you here, the Lord Emperor would have claimed you. I assure you, he cares nothing for the niceties.”

“He’s worse than you?”

“Far worse. The sexual rules are different here on Teymour, but I enjoy conducting my sexual games with mutual consent. That is a tradition on our world. In certain hands, though, our games of submission and dominance can turn darker.”

He stopped, but shadows moved in the depths of his eyes. Jalil shuddered, imagining what he meant. Was she lucky after all? Frick! The thought shocked her. Her wrists and ankles already ached from the cuffs holding her in place. The man was trying to brainwash her.



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