

A morous Passageways



The Seven
Wonders
of the
Ancient
World

GARDEN
OF
DREAMS

Foreword by
Ciar Cullen

Sandy Lynn

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Amorous Passageways - The Hanging Gardens of
Babylon

Garden of Dreams

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FORWARD: THE ORIGINS OF THE WONDERS

BY CIAR CULLEN

Psychology, the occult and numerology aside, we can possibly blame the ancient Greek mathematician Pythagoras for some of this affinity for things in quantities of seven, the prime number he favored and considered 'not too big and not too small'. The number was firmly established in Greek literature by the time the historian Herodotus (484 BC-425 BC) listed seven great ancient 'sites' in his *magnum opus*. (Some scholars attribute this list to a mechanic named Philo of Byzantium.).

So what's so wonderful about these wonders? Did they all really exist? Who built them, and why? For one thing, all seven wonders are big—really big by ancient standards—and opulent, each requiring years, even decades of labor and unfathomable financial resources. Thus they represent the pinnacle of human achievement at the time Herodotus listed them.

Two are tombs, two are statues of gods, one is a temple, one a lighthouse and finally, a fantastic garden. Two are in Egypt, two in modern Turkey, two in Greece, and one in modern Iraq. Ironically, the oldest of the wonders—the Great Pyramid of Giza—is the sole survivor of the ages. But researchers have

unearthed fairly convincing evidence for the rest of the structures either in ancient literature or through archaeological investigations. The Hanging Gardens of Babylon remain the most shrouded in mystery.

One interesting note: the oldest, the Great Pyramid, was already about two thousand years old when the next oldest (likely the Temple of Artemis) was erected, and already nearly three thousand years old at the birth of Christ. The Pharos Lighthouse was constructed not much longer ago than two thousand years. The wonder, magnificence, mystery and sheer romance of these great works of art and architecture increase with each passing century.

Within this series are seven tales of love and wonder. Perhaps by reading these stories you'll now be able to remember the names of the wonders, and become a believer in the magical power of the number seven. If you still have trouble, try this visualization: You are an ancient sailor, traveling the Mediterranean. You spot a lighthouse (1) and head for port. You steer your ship between the legs of the great Colossus of Rhodes (2). You disembark and head down the paved road. You are flanked by two tombs—a great mausoleum on the left (3) and a huge pyramid (4) on the right. You proceed up the hill and encounter two gods. On the left, Artemis (5) resides in her temple. On your right is a massive enthroned Zeus in his temple (6). You rest from your long hike under a flowering fig tree in the luxurious gardens of Babylon (7), where you await the arrival of your true love.

THE SEVEN WONDERS OF THE WORLD - THE HANGING GARDENS OF BABYLON

The most suspect of the wonders, the legendary location of the Hanging Gardens is about fifty kilometers south of Baghdad, Iraq, somewhere along the Euphrates River. The Babylonian kingdom reached its height during the sixth Century BC. Nebuchadnezzar II supposedly built the gardens for his wife or concubine, a woman who loved lush landscapes. Ancient Greek accounts (by writers who never traveled to Babylon) tell of maze-like terraces supported by great vaults and stone columns, all covered in exquisite trees and flowers. Excavations of the main palace associated with the era have unearthed a vaulted building and irrigation system that could reflect such a garden, but to date, the only strong evidence is literary. Alexander the Great's soldiers made note of the beautiful palm trees and flowers of the area, but curiously, the Babylonians themselves never mention the gardens.

DEDICATION:

To all the wonderful women that helped me with my story, especially Stef. Thank you for your patience.



CHAPTER ONE

Cassie sighed as she stepped out of the shower. After wrapping a towel around her hair, she pulled a long cotton robe around her wet body. Carefully walking across the bedroom floor, she put on her favorite classical CD, turning the volume of the stereo up loud enough so she would be able to hear it in the bathroom.

The sweet notes of a piano floated into the room as she brushed her hair. Glancing at the curlers lying on the counter, Cassie wondered if she wanted to spend all night with the torturous little devices all over her head just to get some body the next day. Having long hair was a pain sometimes. It took forever to style.

She was supposed to begin working with a new client, and rumor had it that he was a complete hottie. One of her fellow co-workers, Ann, had whispered, "I heard he's the type of man you don't kick out of bed for any reason; crackers, even loaves of bread... I heard most women wouldn't even mind if he ate soup in their bed! Even if he slurped it!"

The comment carried significance coming from

GARDEN OF DREAMS

her, a notorious neat-freak who hated to leave even the tiniest bit of dirt or dust on her desk.

Cassie had smiled and nodded, but said nothing. Looking around the bathroom, she had to admit she wasn't the neatest person. Everywhere she went she seemed to leave a little topsoil from her many excursions out into 'the field' or crumbs from the cheese-filled crackers she kept on her for a quick snack.

Wiping off the steamed-up window, she glanced behind her at her own small, well-loved garden. She loved being a designer, loved being able to help people create a special look for their lawns or offices. She just wished she didn't have to work in an office so much. She missed being able to feel rich soil running through her fingers; sweat rolling down her back as she helped plant the beautiful gardens she created. Cassie missed coming home feeling as though she had actually *done* something to make the world a more beautiful place.

Walking into the kitchen for a quick drink, she saw her travel mug sitting on the counter waiting for her to fill in the morning. She could still remember how excited she had been when her sister, Tara, decided to open her own landscaping business. She had instantly agreed to go work for her, and could even live with the name her sister chose: A Hint of Green.

Sighing, she headed back to her bedroom. The only thing she didn't like was being behind a desk most of the day and creating beautiful gardens, not with her hands, but with a few clicks of a mouse.

Tara hadn't told her about that part of her plan.

As the business grew more and more successful each year, Cassie saw less and less of her customers' yards. Unless she counted the times she went to see the property at the beginning of a project, then again to make sure her clients were satisfied with the design.

Again, she looked out at her own special garden. Ever since she was a little girl, she'd had a green thumb. It seemed almost anything would grow beneath her gentle, caring touch. And now, her life just didn't feel as complete. The less time she spent doing the one thing she enjoyed the most, planting, the more unsettled she felt.

Cassie shook her head to shake off the sudden sadness. *What do I have to be sad about? I have a wonderful bottle of wine chilling in the fridge for tomorrow night, I'm listening to my favorite CD and I've helped Tara's business to thrive. In just a few short weeks, A Hint of Green will be five years old. Most businesses don't last that long, especially not small landscaping ones. People usually want to go with bigger, more renowned companies, but we've made it work! We've begun to build an enviable reputation...*

Closing her eyes as a particularly haunting song began playing, she was pulled away from her thoughts and reminded of one of her more recent dreams. She wasn't sure where the dreams came from, or why they had started, only that she had quickly grown addicted to them. Every night, a mystery man came to her. It was always the same

GARDEN OF DREAMS

man, even if the setting changed.

Her eyes still closed, she lost herself in the memory of the most recent dream, set in some long-past era of long gowns and elegant balls.

Holding up her hand, Cassie imagined a dainty fan waving back and forth across her face as she waited eagerly to see him.

Around the room she turned, smiling when she finally spotted him.

Tall, with midnight black hair, and dressed in a somber black suit, he easily stood out amongst the eager blonde men dressed in lighter shades. He blended perfectly with the shadows, his movements full of grace as he approached her. Cassie wondered how she would describe his movements, if asked. She would never describe him as walking. He didn't walk; he stalked his prey like a great, beautiful panther.

Catching sight of herself in a nearby mirror, she was awed by the beautiful red gown she wore. It was simple but elegant, and her dark hair was piled high in a style that would take long hours and endless patience to achieve in real life. Her eyes locked on the black choker around her neck. Smiling, she touched the ebony ribbon that beautifully contrasted her pale flesh, accentuating her gown. No matter how much time she spent in the sun, her skin never darkened. But now, as she stared in the mirror at the vision she couldn't believe was her, Cassie felt grateful for that particular 'flaw'.

Her mystery man came to her, pulling her onto the dance floor, without bothering to ask if she wished to dance. He knew she wanted to dance with him; knew that she spent over half the night watching him, wishing for him to

approach her. That knowledge was in his every movement, the curve of his smile...

Beneath his jacket, Cassie could feel strong muscles; muscles that would make her feel safe, as though he would protect her from any danger that may threaten.

Around the room she swirled, dreaming she was in his arms, mimicking the dance steps in her memory, the movement helping to draw her more firmly into her fantasy, deeper into her beautiful dream.

As they danced, her mystery man guided her into the shadows where they could have some privacy. His arms pulled her closer and his lips descended to capture hers. Cassie knew she should stop him; that the gossips would be in heaven with such scandalous behavior. But she couldn't make herself care what they would say; she didn't care if they were caught.

The only thing that mattered was being able to taste him.

She felt the excitement building in her body as his lips descended closer to hers, ready and eager to feel his tongue filling her mouth.

Just as his lips were about to meet hers, Cassie was jerked out of her fantasy by the harsh ringing of her telephone. Unfulfilled desire swept through her body, and she looked around, momentarily confused, before shaking her head and looking at the caller ID. Recognizing the number, she answered the phone.

"Hello?"

"Cass, it's Tara. About tomorrow night, I know it's our movie night, but I'm afraid I have to cancel. Marc just called. His boss invited him to dinner, and, well,

GARDEN OF DREAMS

he needs me to go with him. It wouldn't look right if he showed up alone, not with the big promotion he's up for. His boss is a family man, and, well, Marc deserves that promotion just as much as any guy there with his wife."

Cassie nodded her head, giving "uh-huh," and "oh, really," and "of course," remarks in all the appropriate places as her sister went on and on about her boyfriend.

"Besides, I heard that Mr. Knight prefers to meet over supper. But I guess when you're that rich, you can afford to be quirky, huh, Cass?"

"Yeah," she answered her sister automatically.

"Have you finished the Jones design yet?"

"I'm meeting with them tomorrow to see if they are satisfied."

"Good, I want you giving your full attention to the Knight design. With any luck, he'll tell all his rich friends about us. Maybe we'll finally get the break we needed to get some of the bigger landscaping jobs."

"I'll do my best, Tara, I always do," Cassie said, stifling a yawn. Now that she was no longer lost in her fantasy, she couldn't believe how tired she was.

"Okay, well, Marc just walked in, so I have to run. Get plenty of sleep tonight, tomorrow is going to be a big day for you. Toodles." Tara hung up abruptly.

Cassie sighed in annoyance. That was just like her sister to ruin her fantasy, ramble on about her boyfriend and hang up. The woman should have a hurricane named after her. *Everyone beware of Hurricane Tara.* She laughed at her little joke as she

climbed into her giant queen-sized bed, pulling the blankets up to her chin.

Her mind drifted back to his image. She wondered if she would dream of her mystery man again tonight. Would they do more than simply kiss? She wasn't sure how much more sexual tension her body could stand. Every night, he drew her into his arms and kissed her until she prayed the alarm wouldn't wake her. Her body had been tensed and ready for so much more than stolen kisses for weeks now. Not even her favorite vibrator was able to ease the ache that this man caused inside her.

Cassie sighed as another sweet melody began to play in the background, the soft notes of the piano helping her to relax and drift into sleep where she hoped to meet her mystery man once again.



CHAPTER TWO

Cassie looked down at herself. Tonight she wore the color of royalty. Looking at her surroundings she was surprised at how different this place was from the last.

This time she was in a bar themed with nineteen-forties memorabilia. Her dress was a newer style, with thin spaghetti straps, a low cut bodice and a full skirt that reached just below her knees. Walking over to the bar she ordered a glass of white wine. What she always referred to as ‘happy music’ played in the background.

“Why do you call it happy music?” her stranger asked as he stood beside her at the bar, appearing as if from thin air.

She stared at him appreciatively. As always, he was dressed in black. Tonight it was a black suit, complete with black dress shirt and tie. She knew if she touched it, the tie would be made of the finest silk. The look was elegant on him, the slightly different shades of black complimenting each other and his midnight hair beautifully.

“Because you can’t be sad around this music. It just makes you want to jump up and dance.” She smiled, taking a small sip of her wine.

“Then by all means, let’s dance,” he told her, claiming her glass and sitting it on the bar. He spun her on the dance floor, and soon the crowd around them became nothing more than a blur of faces. No one else existed.

Cassie laughed as she danced with him, completing complicated dance moves she couldn’t remember ever learning.

“Relax, sweetheart, and have a little fun.” Her mystery man kept her in the middle of the floor as they moved in perfect harmony, song after song.

Her excitement grew when the band slowed down for a romantic song. She never knew when one would play, only that after they danced pressed tightly together, they would finally sneak away. Finally be able to spend time alone, away from the massive crowds that always seemed to surround them.

Easily flowing into his arms, she felt secure in the knowledge that he would never hurt her, never allow anything to harm her while he was near. She didn’t know how or why she knew that, but somehow she did.

“Why don’t we go someplace a bit more...private,” he suggested, tilting her head up and looking into her eyes.

She nodded, unable to speak due to her immense desire. Her hips once again intimately brushed back and forth against him as they continued dancing

GARDEN OF DREAMS

together sensually. She couldn't think, could barely breathe as she willingly drowned in his dark blue eyes. He kept her pressed close through the rest of the song, so close she could feel his hard cock pushing against her hip.

When the final notes left the saxophone, he began to lead her off the dance floor.

The crowd parted easily for her mystery man as he guided her to a back hallway filled with shadows that would help conceal them, should anyone try to seek them out.

His lips hungrily devoured hers as soon as they stopped. He kissed her as though they had been apart for months, instead of only one night.

"We have to stop meeting this way," Cassie joked half-heartedly as she tried to calm her pounding heart.

"What would you suggest? Can you think of any other way that would be as...exciting, as arousing and," he kissed her neck, "dangerous?"

"Dangerous? Oh, you mean the getting-caught aspect. No, I can't. And I have to say, I love dancing with you."

"The feeling is mutual, my sweet. Every night I cannot wait to hold you in my arms again. To taste you beneath my lips," his tongue traced her shoulder, pushing away the thin strap as it glided across her skin.

"How much longer will you tease me?" Cassie asked her voice husky. "How much longer do I have to settle for a few stolen kisses in shadowy corners

instead of what I really want?"

"And what is it you desire, sweetheart?" he asked as his lips traveled across her shoulder.

"I want to feel you naked..." Her breath caught in her throat. "I want to feel your hands, your lips on my body. I want to feel your cock buried deep inside me..." she gasped.

"Our wait will be over soon, my sweet," he promised as he nibbled on the sensitive flesh at the base of her neck. "We must be patient..."

"I don't want to be patient. I'm tired of being good. I don't even know your name, but I know I'll go crazy if I don't feel you inside me soon."

Cassie gasped as he pulled the other strap off her shoulder, his hands moving to cup her breasts through the thin material. When he released her, she felt his hands move to her back and lower the zipper to her dress slightly, only just enough to allow him access to her bare breasts.

Moaning, she enjoyed his ministrations when her dream lover closed his lips on her nipple and his tongue flicked across the hard peak.

"What if I want you now?" she asked, her head falling back as she enjoyed the feeling of his wonderfully sharp teeth against her skin.

"Now? With so many people around?" Looking at her, his hungry eyes betrayed his mockingly shocked comment.

"You've been teasing me for so long. I don't want to wait another night to feel you inside me. Not if I don't have to," she panted. "You were the one that

GARDEN OF DREAMS

just praised the dangerous and exciting atmosphere.”

Her mystery man gave a predatory smile that had her pussy dripping as his hands released her breasts and lifted her skirt higher. In the background, Cassie could still hear the crowd. Some people were laughing, some chatting and just slightly above the noise, she could still hear the saxophone singing its sweet notes.

“Then I guess you won’t need these any longer,” he said ripping the flimsy silk cloth that covered her on both sides before dropping the ruined material to the floor.

He knelt down in front of her, inhaling deeply. The gesture sent a surge of pure lust screaming down her body.

How long has it been since someone – anyone – went down on me? Even just in a dream?

Her new lover shifted closer to her and with the first swipe of his tongue her body began to fall, her legs no longer able to support her weight.

“No, my sweet, I’m not finished yet,” he purred against her skin. Lifting one leg and draping it over his shoulder, he helped to support her as he tasted her once again.

Looking down at the lush black hair peeking from underneath her purple skirt, Cassie laced her fingers through his hair, enjoying the silky feel of it sliding across her flesh. She saw the edges of a black garter belt holding her equally dark stockings up. Then all thoughts stopped as her eyes closed; all the buzzing and laughing was muted, all the music stopped.

Everything faded away until all that was left was the feel of his tongue stroking her wet pussy.

She cried out softly as his teeth grazed her sensitive clit, the pleasure-pain almost unbearable. She was grateful for his shoulder helping to hold her up as he continued to flick and caress her with his tongue, one minute burying it deep inside her, the next sucking her swollen clit into his mouth.

Weaving her hands into his hair, she tugged his mouth closer to her flesh, but he seemed to have other plans for her. Without pausing or pulling away from his feast, he took both her hands in one of his own and held them close to her chest.

"Oh," she panted as her body quickly neared orgasm.

Releasing her hands, he slid his finger into her mouth and Cassie greedily sucked on the digit. She felt more than heard his growl of desire. With every lick she sucked harder on his finger, knowing that was the only thing that was keeping her from moaning out loud, and possibly getting them caught.

The tension continued building until he sucked her clit into his mouth aggressively and her body shuddered, her pussy flooding with cum and her muscles trembling from the sheer force of her release.

Her lover stood up, smoothly shifting her leg from his shoulder to his forearm before he braced his hand against the wall. His other hand moved from her mouth to her ass; cupping one cheek, he drew her closer to him.

With eager hands, Cassie unbuttoned his slacks,

GARDEN OF DREAMS

then yanked down the zipper. Pulling his enormous cock free from its confinement, she tried to kneel, to give him the same pleasure he'd given her.

"Not tonight, my sweet. Tonight, I just want to be buried deep inside you."

In one smooth stroke, his cock thrust deep inside of her, stretching her deliciously.

"You're so tight, my love," he breathed against her ear, then thrust long and hard into her.

As he continued his strokes, Cassie pulled his mouth, down to hers, uncaring that he was still covered in her cream. Kissing him deeply, her tongue memorized the taste and feel of his mouth. When the kiss ended, she kissed and licked the rest of her cum off his face.

Her mystery man growled again, releasing her mouth as his thrusts became harder, faster. Releasing her ass, he grabbed her breast, raising it to his mouth to nibble on her already pebbled nipple.

Just as Cassie's second orgasm washed over her body, she felt a few seconds of pain as he bit down hard. Brushing his hair aside, she could see he had not only her nipple in his mouth, but also half her areola. She was about to ask him about it when his hand released the breast his mouth was still greedily suckling and pulled her hips more forcefully against his own, his finger teasing her clit until she was ready to explode once again.

Her concerns washed away as she covered her mouth with her hand, trying to muffle any screams that tried to escape. She felt him thrust deeply into

her again, then pause, groaning against her breast. Releasing her leg, he held both of her hips, keeping Cassie pressed tightly against him, his cock still buried inside her.

After another moment, he released her hip and placed his hand under her breast, lifting its weight as his mouth finally released her. With great care, as if she were made of porcelain, he tucked her back into her dress and slid both straps back into place.

"I wish I could stay buried in you forever," he told her just before he pulled back slightly.

His cock slid out of her easily, and Cassie was amazed at how empty she felt now, without him inside of her. She wanted to pull him close and beg him to fill her again. But before she could say a word, his tongue slid into her mouth. When the kiss ended, her dress was once more in place, completely zipped up with not even so much as a wrinkle to betray their passionate encounter.

"Do not worry, my love," he whispered against her mouth. "Now that I've tasted you, I do not plan on simply fading away." With a slight bow, he stepped back into the shadows.

"Wait, I still don't know your name..." she called out.

Her lover smiled, then stepping farther back into the shadows, disappeared.

She continued to lean against the wall for another moment, trying to find him in the dark shadows as their combined fluids began to drip down her leg.



CHAPTER THREE

Slamming her palm on top of the annoying buzzing of her alarm clock and hitting the snooze button, Cassie groaned.

“You couldn’t have waited ten more minutes?” she asked it grumpily. She tried to snuggle once more into the bed’s warmth, but it was too late, the dream was gone. Groaning, she felt something sticky coating the insides of her thighs. *Great, just what I needed, a wet dream!*

Mumbling under her breath she stumbled into her bathroom, cutting the shower on and allowing the water to warm. Feeling slightly more awake, she walked into the kitchen and started her coffee pot. By the time she shuffled back into the bathroom, the water was nice and hot.

Washing herself, Cassie got lost in the memory of the erotic dream she’d been yanked so rudely out of. Washing her breasts, she flinched with pain. Looking down, she studied them, and was shocked to find slight bruising around one nipple. She couldn’t figure out how she could have gotten the bruise while she

slept.

She remembered her lover biting down on her flesh, but quickly dismissed it. It had only been a dream, after all.

I probably just didn't notice it last night. It's not like I was looking for it. It could have happened anytime. And it would explain the slight pain from my dream lover's mouth. I probably just banged across it and created an excuse in my dream.

She finished washing herself without finding any other bruises or scratches on her body. Wrapping her body and hair in towels, she left the bathroom to get a cup of the aromatic coffee she enjoyed every morning. Automatically adding cream and sugar, she sat down at her table to compose a list of things she needed to do that day.

She began her list.

1. Visit the Jones home and see if they are satisfied.
2. Get address of Mr. Knight and take photos of his yard.

She smiled. With luck she'd be able to begin converting the images to her favorite program and toy with preliminary ideas just after lunch.

3. Contact Mr. Knight for a meeting.

Sitting there for another moment, she tried to decide if anything else needed to be added to the paper. Assured that everything had been written

GARDEN OF DREAMS

down, she quickly finished her coffee and went to her bedroom to get dressed for the day.

Grabbing a pair of faded, well-loved jeans and a baggy shirt, Cassie was careful not to further aggravate her sensitive breast as she dressed. Fully clothed, she sat on the bed and pulled on her favorite pair of hiking boots. Her sister wouldn't be very happy with what she was wearing, but she was determined to be comfortable as she explored her new client's yard.

Finishing her morning routine by pouring the rest of her coffee into a travel mug with the A Hint of Green logo across it, she cleaned the pot and replaced the used filter with a fresh one, scooping fresh coffee into it. Gathering the backpack she used to carry her supplies, she headed out the door and to work.

* * * *

"What are you wearing? Anyone that walks into this office right now will never believe you are one of our most successful and demanded landscapers!" Tara whined.

"But I'm comfortable. Do you know how irritating it is to try to walk all over a yard in heels?"

"I don't know why you insist on traipsing all over people's yards," Tara complained, following Cassie to her desk.

"I need the number for Knight. I don't want to end up being chased by someone's pit bull again any time soon."

"I put it on your desk..." her sister replied automatically.

"Thank you, excuse me." Scrolling through her Rolodex until she found a card for Knight, V. in her sister's handwriting, she smiled when she saw that Tara had even included the address on the card. Picking up the phone, she dialed the number.

"Hello?" a sleepy voice answered after the sixth or seventh ring.

Cassie paused, startled by the shivers that raced down her body from his voice. *I know that voice from somewhere, but where?* Shaking her head, she dismissed the odd feeling.

"This is Cassie Mathers with A Hint of Green. Am I speaking to Mr. Knight?"

"Yes," he groaned. "Could you call back at a more reasonable time, say closer to dusk?"

"I'm sorry to wake you, Mr. Knight," Cassie pressed on. "I promise I won't take up much of your time. I simply wished to get your permission to walk around your yard today, to take pictures, and ask when you would like to schedule our preliminary meeting to discuss any design ideas that you have."

"And this couldn't have waited until later?" the voice grumbled.

"Mr. Knight, I am sorry to have bothered you. I'll be sure to pass your information on to another one of our designers, whom I believe will be a bit more to your liking. I apologize for waking you up. Good day..."

"I refuse to work with another designer," he said

GARDEN OF DREAMS

his voice turning angry. "There is a reason I specifically requested you. You will design my garden or I will take my business elsewhere."

"Then I am doubly sorry for the inconvenience. I know my sister very well, Mr. Knight. She would have given you advance warning that my methods are very precise. If you do not wish me to do my job, I suggest you find a different designer because I will not compromise my methods for you."

Cassie ignored her sister's red face and open mouth as she waited for his answer.

With a sigh he asked, "Do I have to go over the property with you?"

"That won't be necessary."

"Then by all means, feel free to walk anywhere you please. But I ask that you do not make too much noise, or come into the house. I am a very light sleeper. Do you have the address?"

"I do. Do you have any outdoor...pets?" It was better to sound like a fool than have another pair of her jeans shredded by an annoyed dog.

"No. Is there anything else, Ms. Mathers?"

"Just one more thing. When would you like to meet to discuss design ideas?"

"Tonight. Meet me at Antonio's, nine o'clock. Good day, Ms. Mathers." The line went dead. The man had not even waited to see if she was available at such a late hour.

Replacing the receiver, she was more than a little annoyed at the man she was now working for. Tara was still standing over her desk with her arms

crossed.

"Nine o'clock. He wants me to meet him at nine tonight, Tara! Why did you agree to this? I'm not doing it, no way." Cassie shook her head for emphasis.

"I told you, he's rich and it'll help us become more established. You have to do this for me, Cass! Have I asked you to do anything this big, this important for me before?"

Lowering her head slightly, Cassie glared at her sister.

"Well, not recently I haven't! You just *have* to do this for me."

She continued to glare at her sister, refusing to budge on the command.

"Just think, with all the money he brings in you'll be able to be back in the mud playing with bulbs and bushes again in no time!" Tara said, quickly changing her tactics.

"That's not fair, Tara, and you know it!"

Her sister wrapped an arm around Cassie and leaned her head down on Cassie's shoulder.

"Do it for me, please, Sis?" Tara looked up at her, a puppy dog expression complimenting her soft brown eyes.

"Fine," Cassie agreed, rolling her eyes.

"Wonderful! You are such a good sister." Tara stepped away from her and Cassie searched through her Rolodex for the Jones number.

"Just one more thing," Tara said pausing a few steps away.

GARDEN OF DREAMS

“What is it now?”

“If you ever tell another client to go to a different designer, I’m going to tell Mom where you keep your vibrator and all your naughty romance books.”

“I’m a grown woman. I don’t care if my mother knows I have a vibrator. It’s the twenty-first century, Tara.” Cassie rolled her eyes again. “Besides, I’m sure Mom would agree its better than having me just go out and pick up some strange man because I’m horny. And she’s seen me reading romance novels, so there,” Cassie stuck her tongue out at her sister.

“True. But does she know about your *other* collection? You know the ones that are less about romance and more about orgies?”

Cassie froze, shocked. “You wouldn’t...”

“I would. Remember to be nice to Mr. Knight tonight, I’d hate to have to give Mom a reason to call and yell at you.” Tara smiled before she turned and walked away, knowing she had won this round of ‘The Sibling Feud’. It was a game they had played for as long as either could remember.

“You realize I am so going to get even with you for that!” Cassie called out.

“I know. But it’ll take a little bit of time for you to come up with something wicked enough. And if you don’t mind, I’ll bask in my knowledge until you do. Toodles!”

CHAPTER FOUR

Sighing, Cassie looked over the garden. Both Mr. and Mrs. Jones had loved her design, but there in front of her was yet another reason she enjoyed being a part of the planting portion of the process.

The garden was beautiful, a wonderful oasis that any daughter would be proud to get married in. She took a deep breath of rose-scented air; the perfume was delightful as it surrounded her. It was perfect... with the exception of one flaw. She had specifically requested white roses, roses that would match the beautiful bride's bouquet. She had worked very closely with Mrs. Jones to make sure every detail was flawless.

Her scowl deepened as she looked at the yellow roses the gardeners had planted. She couldn't believe they had gotten the order wrong! She struggled to keep her temper under control.

"I apologize about the color, Mrs. Jones. I promise I will do *everything* within my power to have this corrected in plenty of time for your daughter's wedding next week."

GARDEN OF DREAMS

“It’s no big deal, Cassie. My daughter’s bridesmaids will be wearing light yellow dresses, so they will still match...”

“Damn it, Cora, I did not spend all that money so my backyard could match my daughter’s bridesmaids!” Mr. Jones fumed.

“I agree completely, Mr. Jones.” It was a special gift the bride’s parents were saving to surprise her with. They had even explained to Cassie how heartbroken their daughter had been when she discovered the garden she’d dreamt of having her wedding in was completely booked on the day of her vows. “I promise I will have this problem fixed before the wedding,” she promised them again.

Pulling her cell phone from the backpack she constantly carried, she dialed the number to the gardening company she had hired for this yard.

“Please excuse me for just one moment,” she told the couple, putting the phone to her ear.

“Davis Gardening, how can I help you?” a nasal voice answered the phone.

“Yes, I want to speak to Mr. Davis, please.”

“I’m sorry. He’s in a very important meeting and unable to be disturbed.” The woman’s tone was bored, as though she’d said the same thing many times, and was tired of repeating herself.

“I don’t care. I want you to disturb him. This is Cassie Mathers from A Hint of Green. I believe he will take my call.”

“Just a moment,” the secretary said, just a second before Cassie heard the easy listening music they had

for customers on hold.

"Ms. Mathers," the nasal voice returned. "I'm sorry, Mr. Davis promises to call you back at the earliest possible moment, if you'll just give me your number..."

"I'll call back," Cassie answered, the tight expression on her face belying the sweet tone of her voice.

She turned to the Jones' and smiled stiffly. Fighting to keep her tone even, she said, "Mr. and Mrs. Jones, I promise your garden will be perfect if I have to come back and plant the correct bushes myself. If you will excuse me, I promise to call you as soon as I know what's going on."

"You're going to go visit that Davis fella?" Mr. Jones' tone warmed up quite a bit toward Cassie.

"Yes, sir," Cassie nodded.

"Be careful. The men he sent out here were pretty rude to my missus when she offered them some lemonade and cookies while they were working."

"Thank you, Mr. Jones. I promise I will make sure your daughter's wedding is as perfect as she's always dreamt it would be."

"Thank you so much, Cassie, dear. Would you like to stay for some cheesecake? I baked it fresh this morning," the older woman offered.

"I wish I could. But I really have to get to Davis Gardening to straighten this out. I'm sure it's just some huge mix-up."

"You be careful with them," Mr. Jones warned again.

GARDEN OF DREAMS

Cassie laughed. "I think you should call them and warn them. I have a weakness for cheesecakes, especially the homemade kind," she winked. "I think they're the ones in trouble for making me have to refuse a slice of heaven."

The older couple was still smiling as Cassie waved to them before backing out of their driveway.

Mr. Davis *was* in trouble, and not just for making her miss a slice of her favorite dessert. She didn't appreciate anyone being rude to either her or her clients any more than she liked seeing the wrong flowers being planted.

Her anger grew as she drove, remembering the heartwarming reason the Jones' had told her they were getting their garden redone professionally. She had spent hours sitting in the garden Cora Jones told her had been her daughter's dream location, trying to come up with a design that was similar, but coordinated specifically for the woman's wedding.

By the time she'd parked and entered the small office, she was so mad she felt she could 'spit a penny nail' out of her mouth, as her grandmother used to say.

"May I help you?" the nasal-voiced woman from the phone asked.

"No, thank you," she replied walking past the desk to the office she knew to be Mr. Davis'. Not bothering with knocking, Cassie ignored the secretary's screams of "Stop, you can't just walk in there," and opened the door.

"Mr. Davis, I have a problem and you *will* speak to

me about it," she told him heatedly.

Sitting calmly behind his desk, Mr. Davis gave the appearance of being accustomed to strange women bursting into his office and making demands. "If you will just wait outside, I promise I'll be with you just as soon as I finish with my clients."

Looking over, Cassie was surprised at the clients sitting in front of the man's desk. She'd been so angry she hadn't even noticed them. Then she took a closer look.

Their elegant, designer clothes were more expensive than anything she had ever seen the Joneses in. One look at the many large gems on the woman's hand had her even more furious. The woman's jewelry probably cost as much the Joneses earned in one year.

She didn't begrudge anyone having money, whether they earned it or they inherited it. But she would not sit around and let this man treat her clients like second class citizens simply because they didn't belong to the same tax bracket as the ones sitting in front of his desk.

"Of course. I'm sure your clients won't mind getting the wrong color flowers planted," she added cattily as she walked toward the door.

"Wrong color?" the woman asked, turning to look at Cassie. "I know you! You're that woman that helped my aunt design her garden last year! Beatrice, Beatrice Stanley."

Smiling, Cassie's tone was much softer when she spoke again. "I remember Mrs. Stanley. She was a

GARDEN OF DREAMS

pleasure to work with. She had wonderful ideas for what to plant around the fountain. I remember she had a love of forget-me-nots."

The client beamed at Cassie's quick recollection of her aunt. "She still tells me all about how you bought all the bulbs and plants from five stores just to fill her garden the way she wanted! She sings your praises any time someone compliments her garden."

"I'm glad to know she's still enjoying it." Cassie's anger was briefly pushed to the side as she basked in the warm compliments. But more important to her was the fact that Mrs. Stanley still adored the garden they had designed together.

"Enjoying it! My dear, any event held at her house from the first bloom in spring until the first frost of winter is outside. She loves her garden even more than the designer entertainment room her husband surprised her with!"

"I'm glad. Please, tell Mrs. Stanley hello for me, and if she ever has any problems with the annuals, please give me a call."

That was another reason her clients loved her so much. She didn't simply write them off as soon as their garden was planted. She had a reputation of standing beside her work. Word had even gotten around when she'd gone back to help a previous customer from three years ago when her yard flooded from faulty plumbing, replanting the garden for her free of charge.

Cassie could still remember her sister's reaction when she heard the tale. Tara had been livid when

she'd found out, but Cassie had simply stuck her tongue out and shrugged. "What I do on my own time is none of your business," she told her sister. Tara stopped complaining when the grateful woman sent three more customers begging for Cassie to design something for them.

"What were you saying about Mr. Davis giving us the wrong color flowers?" the woman's husband asked, bringing Cassie back to the present and entering the conversation now that he knew she wasn't a complete nut.

"I'm sorry, I can wait. I don't want to waste your valuable time with my problems."

"No, no, dear, I insist. Please, tell us what's wrong."

Cassie looked at Mr. Davis waiting for permission she knew he would be giving. He wanted these clients too badly to turn her away now and risk their displeasure.

"If Mr. and Mrs. Forrest don't mind, then by all means, please tell me what the problem is."

Cassie sat down in a chair near the desk. "You see, the problem concerns some clients of mine..."

"Very lucky people to have gotten you, my dear," Mrs. Forrest nodded.

"Thank you. I filled out all of the appropriate paperwork, but it seems when your men came, they planted the wrong roses. Yellow roses, when I specifically requested white ones." She turned to look at Mrs. Forrest. "It's a surprise for their daughter's wedding, you see, and they want everything to be

GARDEN OF DREAMS

perfect.”

Mrs. Forrest nodded in agreement. “I’m sure it was simply an oversight. I promise there will be men out there just as soon as possible to fix the problem.”

“That’s wonderful. Can I tell them when to expect your men?”

“A couple of weeks,” Mr. Davis supplied vaguely.

“I’m sorry, but I need it done before the end of the week.”

“Before the end of *this* week?” he asked in shock.

Cassie nodded. “And please send a different crew. The men you sent before were terribly rude to Mrs. Jones.”

“Mrs. Jones?” Mrs. Forrest asked. “Cora Jones?”

Cassie nodded again.

“Bless their hearts! Her daughter is marrying our middle son,” Mrs. Forrest bragged. “They are such a sweet couple!” She turned her gaze to Mr. Davis. “Your men were rude to her?” she asked, clearly upset.

“I promise I’ll take care of this immediately.” Picking up the phone, Mr. Davis quickly dialed a number, demanding the person on the other line come to his office immediately. “The problem will be corrected today, Ms. Mathers. Please, don’t hesitate to call me if there are any further problems.”

Giving a brief nod, Cassie had to struggle to hide her smug grin.

“Ms. Mathers, I was wondering, would you mind if we made an appointment? We’d like you to look at our garden, and maybe design something special for

the newlywed's home as well?"

"Please, call me Cassie," she told the woman with a smile. "And of course not," she pulled a business card from her pocket and began to hand it to the older woman. "But only on one condition."

"What?" Mrs. Forrest asked eagerly.

"You can't tell anyone about the garden. Mr. and Mrs. Jones want it to be a surprise for their daughter."

"We won't tell a soul," the other woman promised, promptly taking the card.



CHAPTER FIVE

Sitting in the restaurant, Cassie impatiently waited for her client to arrive. Her fingers were drumming on the tablecloth and her foot tapping impatiently beneath the table. Looking at her watch again, her anger grew when she saw that it was almost nine-thirty. She sighed when the Maitre d' came up to her with a man that she assumed was her client.

"Mr. Knight regrets that he will be unable to make it and apologizes for making you wait," the man told her unemotionally. "He asked me to bring you this note and to tell you to please enjoy your meal with his compliments." The man turned to the Maitre d'. "Put anything she orders on Mr. Knight's bill."

The Maitre d' smiled broadly, no doubt anticipating that she would be so furious she would order expensive food just to get even with the man for standing her up.

She had to admit it was tempting. She had rushed home, showered and put on one of her nicest dresses for their meeting tonight! She even wore the three-inch heels that matched her dress, and Mr. Knight

couldn't even be bothered to show up? She grew furious as she thought of all the time she'd wasted walking around the state park he called a yard.

Wasted, since he couldn't even be bothered to show up at the meeting he had scheduled.

"That's a very generous offer, but it won't be necessary." Pulling a twenty out of her small purse, she laid it on the table, knowing it was more than enough to cover her soda and leave a generous tip for the waitress.

Taking the note from the messenger, Cassie walked out with her back straight and her anger tightly leashed.

She kept herself under rigid control until she arrived at her house. The spoiled brat had stood her up! At that moment she didn't care what her sister told their mother, she refused to meet the pompous jerk again.

Ignoring the note, she dropped it on the table where she wouldn't forget to grab it in the morning. She'd show that note to her sister, then tell her about the projects Mrs. Forrest wanted her to work on. That should help to soothe her sister's ego at losing Mr. Knight for a client.

Wanting to calm down before she slipped into bed, Cassie played the same CD she'd listened to the previous night while she changed and brushed her hair.

Closing her eyes, she could almost feel her mystery man's lips brush over her shoulder, sending a shiver down her body.

GARDEN OF DREAMS

With a deep breath, she climbed into her large bed, eager for her dreams to start. She wanted her mystery lover to come back to her, to make her forget all about the rich jerk that enjoyed playing games with her time. She wanted to feel something other than her vibrator—which she had moved to a new hiding place as soon as she got home from work—filling her.

Last night had been so real, such a wonderful dream...

* * * *

Cassie looked around in awe. This dream was unlike any of her previous ones. She was in a beautiful garden under the light of a full moon. Looking down, she saw she was wearing a flimsy, sheer nightgown.

"Where am I?"

"That depends. You're technically still in your bed sleeping, my sweet," her mystery man said, coming up behind her and kissing her neck. "But if you mean where this garden is, it exists only in the past."

"But it's so beautiful," Cassie said, her feet enjoying the feel of the lush grass beneath her toes.

She didn't even notice her thin gown as she walked over to a beautiful grouping of white flowers shaped like a star.

"Hairy Nightshade," she said sniffing the delicate blooms. From there she went to a flowering bush, smiling. "And Myrtle." She gingerly touched the fragile blossoms, looking over all the different trees.

"Where are we?" she asked as she continued to float from flowerbed to flowerbed, touching a few

petals with her fingers, smelling each new specimen.

"Babylon."

"Babylon? Wow, what did I eat before I went to sleep tonight?" she asked herself.

"I can't believe someone with your obvious love of plants has never heard of the famous Hanging Gardens of Babylon."

"Of course I have. They were built by Nebuchadnezzar for his wife," she said as she admired yet another blossom. "It was part of what got me into gardening. So many people look at the Taj Mahal and say, 'There! That proved just how much a man could love his wife'. But they simply write off the Hanging Gardens as a whim or just a myth. How much more clearly can a man prove his devotion to his love than by building her a lush garden oasis in the middle of a desert?"

"Would you like a tour?" Her mystery man extended his hand waiting for her to accept his offer.

"Really?" Cassie willingly put her hand in his and listened as he described the ancient Gods and Goddesses immortalized by sculptures.

"You know a lot about this place..."

"Stories of this garden have been passed down through my family. My Grandfather had a fondness for this place. He retold the story to us every chance he got. He was awed by the beauty, the...soul of it. He swore that the spirits of Nebuchadnezzar and Amyitis, his queen, remained here until the garden was finally destroyed."

"Wow. How am I able to dream about this? I never

GARDEN OF DREAMS

imagined it would be so beautiful... Don't get me wrong," she quickly added. "I imagined it was beautiful, but this," Cassie looked around the garden; at the fountains, the lush foliage, the streams and stairs. When she spoke again, her voice was full of awe. "This is like nothing I could have ever imagined, nothing I ever could have dreamt..."

"That isn't true, my love. You're dreaming it now." With a gentle tug, he pulled her closer to him.

For the first time since their meetings had begun, Cassie slipped through his arms, walking over to a pear tree instead. Plucking a fruit, she polished it on her gown, then took a bite out of it. Closing her eyes, she savored the sweet taste. Swallowing, her tongue darted out to catch a bit of juice that began to slide from the corner of her mouth.

"I can't remember the last time I tasted something so delicious," she said in awe as he wrapped his arms around her. "Would you like some?"

Cassie felt him shake his head. "I doubt it would taste as sweet to me." Lowering his lips to her neck he placed a lingering kiss to her flesh before whispering in her ear. "Especially when I have something far sweeter in my arms. Will you allow me to devour you?" he asked, his voice teasing.

She forgot all about the pear as it dropped from her hand, her pussy filling with heat and moisture.

"I...I still don't even know your name," she said, her voice shaky with her increasing desire.

"Does it matter?" He nibbled on her shoulder, his hands stroking her body.

“I’d just like to know what to call you. What to name my vibrator...” she moaned.

He chuckled against her neck then turned her around to face him. “My name is Vincent,” he told her before capturing her mouth.

Pulling back, Cassie stopped him as he attempted to pull the nightgown off her.

“You have nothing to be ashamed of, my love, you are perfect. But if it makes you feel more at ease, we will leave your gown on. I enjoy being teased with glimpses of your body.”

For the first time since she arrived, Cassie looked down, shocked. She’d completely forgotten how sheer her gown was. She resisted the urge to cover herself, but only just barely.

Vincent smiled and continued to walk with her around the garden. They stopped at a particularly beautiful fountain of a couple embracing.

“Who are they?”

“King Nebuchadnezzar and Amyitis. That was added so that they would always be here, enjoying the beauty of the garden for as long as it existed.”

Stepping closer to Vincent’s warmth, her heart filled with longing from the romantic gesture as the gentle sound of the fountain relaxed her. “He truly loved her, didn’t he?”

“He did. What about you? What could a man do to prove his love for you?”

“I just want a man that will accept me as I am, flaws and all. I want someone that will rub aloe and sunburn cream into my shoulders when I’ve lost track

GARDEN OF DREAMS

of time and spent all day in the sun planting bulbs. I want someone that will listen to me ramble, someone that will dance with me in a garden even if no one else is around.

"I want someone that will hold me and make me feel special, wanted. A man that is willing to protect me if I ever need protection. One that will stand behind me, supporting everything I do. A man that will stand beside me as my equal as we grow old together.

"Why can't I meet a man like you outside of my dreams, Vincent?"

"Perhaps you will. But for now, I don't mind being the only man in your life. I enjoy our time together." Bowing, Vincent held out his hand. "May I have this dance?"

Cassie smiled. She knew she had to be blushing as she stepped into his arms.

Once again they began to dance; a wonderful, sensual dance Cassie could not remember learning. This time when he lowered his mouth to hers, she met his tongue eagerly, her body ready for his touch.

Raising her arms over her head, Vincent tugged her gown up and off her body. She stood, unashamed beneath the full moon, surrounded by the sweet smell of so many exotic flowers and trees.

"I want to see all of you tonight as well, Vincent."

CHAPTER SIX

Cassie pulled the black shirt out of his jeans and Vincent quickly pulled it over his head, letting it drop to the grass. Unbuttoning his black jeans, she quickly removed that barrier with his help. He stood in front of her proudly as she stared at his body.

"Are you sure you aren't one of those ancient gods, come to tempt a mere mortal woman with your beauty?" she asked playfully.

"I do not wish to tempt anyone but you, my love. And you are far from being simply a mere mortal."

Vincent's hands cupped her ass, pulling her tight against him so she could feel his hard cock pressing into her stomach.

"I want you. I want to feel you wrapped around me with the wind blowing over our skin and the Moon watching from up above, kissing us with her light."

Cassie just looked at him, completely speechless. That was the type of line she had wanted to hear since she'd found out about sex. It was the type of romantic nonsense that sent her running to some of the corner

GARDEN OF DREAMS

romance novels.

It was the type of thing that no man had ever said to her before.

He picked her up and gently laid her on the cool grass, then quickly joined her, waiting for her response.

"Can you read my mind?"

"Only if you allow me to," he said vaguely.

This isn't real. This is just a dream, so of course he'll tell you what you've always dreamt of hearing, you silly fool.

But she didn't care. It was enough that he said it.

"This can be as real as you wish, my love. Will you allow me to make love to you, to claim you as my own with the Moon and all her daughters, the stars, watching?"

Nodding, Cassie was unable to speak around the lump in her throat.

With infinite gentleness, Vincent dropped feather-light kisses all over her torso. Resting his weight on one arm, the other stroked her leg.

In the distance, as if from somewhere far away, Cassie could hear a piano playing a sweet melody.

"Vincent, please hurry," she urged, suddenly afraid of being yanked from the beautiful dream. "I don't want to wake up before we..."

"Have no fear, my love. We have all night. I promise nothing will disturb us before dawn."

Suddenly she felt calm. He'd promised her all night, and she believed him.

Gasping, Cassie's hips lifted closer to him when he dipped his tongue into her navel.

“I want to taste you again,” he murmured against her flesh, his lips sliding ever lower.

Gently spreading her legs, his tongue delved deep between her folds. Cassie moaned deep in her throat as he found her clit and began to circle it with his tongue.

“I’m so glad we are alone tonight. I wish to hear your passionate response to me,” he told her before dipping his head to circle her clit once again.

He teased her, his tongue sliding in and out of her body, caressing her clit until she moaned loudly, positive that every star in the heavens had fallen to be closer to them as an orgasm shook her entire body.

As his tongue entered her body one more time, she moaned again, amazed to still feel the cool grass beneath her flesh. She’d been almost positive that her body had exploded from pleasure.

Vincent moved his body between her legs, positioning himself at her still-trembling pussy. Thrusting deep inside her, he held himself still.

“I love the way you feel around me. So tight, so hungry... I could make love to you until the Moon herself fell from the sky.”

He thrust into her gently, leisurely. Cassie lost herself in the feelings once again. She couldn’t stop the husky sounds that were coming from her, and she didn’t want to. She didn’t try to increase his pace; she was too caught up in how wonderful he felt. She could almost believe he was made just for her; he filled her so perfectly.

As his pace increased, she stopped thinking,

GARDEN OF DREAMS

concentrating instead only on the rising pleasure she felt within her body.

He lowered his head and kissed her deeply, his tongue playing with hers until he coaxed it out of her mouth and into his. He sucked on her tongue before plunging his own back in her mouth.

Kissing a trail down her neck, he didn't stop until he held her breast in his hand. Laving a nipple, he bit down on it gently before repeating the gesture with the other one. His hair slid forward, covering his face once again and she screamed from the immense pleasure and slight pain as he bit down on her breast. It was the same breast, the same spot he had bitten the night before. As he bit her, another moan was ripped from her throat as his tongue swirled around, then over her nipple.

As he suckled her breast, Cassie felt her orgasm coming faster and harder than she would have believed. One hand tangled in his hair, pressing his head closer to her body as the other gripped his firm ass. Vincent's thrusts became harder and she met him with as much force as she could manage. As her orgasm drew closer, she screamed out Vincent's name.

Her eyes wide open, Cassie saw the heavens turn to a rainbow. The stars were no longer diamonds in the sky, they were rich blood-red rubies, sapphires the color of Vincent's eyes, emeralds as green as the lush grass she lay on. No color was left out of the heavenly canvas and as her body shattered with the force of her orgasm, the colors swirled, dancing

together then bursting in an explosion. In their wake they left a single, perfect star, one that shone more brightly than any near it.

He pumped into her a few more times before Cassie felt his hot cum spilling inside her.

Releasing his hold on her breast, Vincent laid his head down on her chest. Her hands ran up and down his back, feeling the sweat that covered his torso.

"I'm sorry if I caused you any pain..." he told Cassie, still buried deep inside her.

She looked at him in confusion. Smiling he used his tongue to circle first her nipple, then the large bruise.

"Oh, that. That was nothing. It felt so much nicer this time, I enjoyed it. Why did you do it?"

"I could not resist any longer. I'm glad that you enjoyed it. I wish I could have made it more enjoyable for you last night, but the first time is always painful. I promise I will make it up to you..."

"If I had to have a little bit of pain to be able to experience what I felt tonight, it was well worth it," she reassured him. As she looked into the heavens, Cassie easily located the star she had imagined was created as the orgasm shattered her body.

"By the gods, woman, you are more than I ever dreamt of finding in my long life. But my wait, the years I have spent searching for you, are easily forgotten when you wrap your arms around me."

"How long have you been searching?"

"Over three hundred years."

"Wow, you look good for three hundred," she teased.

GARDEN OF DREAMS

"It is almost dawn. I'm afraid I will have to leave you soon."

"Don't go," Cassie pleaded, holding him tightly to her. "Lay here and look at the stars with me."

He dipped his head to hers, kissing her deeply. His tongue caressed hers, rekindling her body's desire for him. His cock began to harden again and with a groan, Vincent slid out of her and rolled away.

For the second time in two nights, she wanted to cry from his loss. But instead of disappearing as he had in the previous dream, he lifted her until she was lying beside him, her head resting on his shoulder.

"Do you see that star, the really bright one?" Vincent pointed to the star she thought she'd seen being created.

Cassie nodded. "It wasn't there before..."

"It is a symbol of our love. It will burn brightly in the heavens for as long as our love remains strong and true."

"That's beautiful," she told him, feeling sleepy. He's such a romantic, she thought with a sigh, resisting the temptation to fall asleep. She didn't want to waste a single moment she could spend talking with Vincent, being held by him. "But how can it be a symbol of our love?"

"You gave yourself to me tonight. Here in this mystical place, you pledged yourself to me and allowed me to do the same. The Moon and Stars are our witnesses. They will still celebrate our union long after mankind has forgotten us."

"Vincent..."

“Sleep, my love. Sleep, and know that very soon, I will claim you again. And when I do, I will not leave you ever again.”

He kissed her gently, then spooned behind her, his arm thrown across her waist, his hand lazily caressing her belly.

Cassie was lost in the peacefulness and beauty of the moment, the joy and safety, she felt in his arms. Her heart singing from Vincent’s claim of love, she fell asleep, tucked safely in her lover’s arms.



CHAPTER SEVEN

She woke up on her own, a few minutes before her alarm clock would signal the start of her day.

She wasn't sure how, or why, but somehow she felt much more energetic and alive than she had the night before. She practically skipped into the bathroom and the kitchen to begin her morning ritual.

She froze when she saw the note from the previous night.

Opening it on an impulse, she almost dropped it as she read what it said.

Cassie, I want you to design my garden with as much care as Nebuchadnezzar built his famous Garden of Babylon. I want a garden filled with dreams and desire, and love.

– V. Knight.

How had he known she was going to dream of the Hanging Gardens? Cassie quickly put the note down and continued her morning. Showering quickly, she didn't bother to drink a cup of coffee, instead pouring as much as she could into her travel mug and

hurrying out the door without bothering to clean her mess, only barely remembering to turn the coffee pot off.

Not ready to go into the office just yet, she drove to the Jones' house. When she got there, she was pleased to see no sign anywhere that the day before the garden had been filled with yellow roses.

Mr. and Mrs. Jones hurried out, still in their bathrobes, and thanked her for fixing their garden. Mrs. Jones rushed back into the house and brought out a covered dish, pressing it into Cassie's hands.

"What is it?" she asked, surprised.

"Cora here just had to make you her famous cheesecake the moment those men came and began replacing those roses yesterday. I don't know what you said to him, but Mr. Davis himself came out and made sure each and every one of those young men said 'yes, ma'am,' 'no, sir,' 'please,' and 'thank you'."

"How can we ever thank you, Cassie?"

"Your happiness is thanks enough, Mrs. Jones."

"Well, honey, anytime you want a fresh homemade cheesecake, you give me a call, you hear me?"

"Yes, ma'am." She hugged the couple and climbed back into her car with her treat.

When she got into the office, she grabbed one of the forks they kept in the tiny lounge and dug into her treat, her eyes rolling up in pleasure.

"Hey, the least you can do is share that..." Tara said as soon as she saw her.

Cassie slapped her sister's hand, but somehow the woman managed to get a bite of her dessert.

GARDEN OF DREAMS

“Where did you get that?” Tara asked, her voice filled with pleasure. “I don’t think I’ve ever tasted a creamier cheesecake.” She lowered her fork to the delicious pie to snatch another bite.

Pointing her fork threateningly at her sister, she said, “Your fork dips into my pie again, and you’re losing that hand. Mrs. Jones made this for me.”

Tara shot her sister an angry look, but tossed her utensil into the sink and sat down across from her sister, watching jealously as Cassie devoured the dessert.

“Mr. Knight just called, but you weren’t at your desk. He apologized for not being able to make your appointment yesterday, and promises to be there tonight. Be at Antonio’s at nine o’clock tonight.”

“No.”

“Cass, please.” Tara sighed. “I promise, if you still don’t want to work for him after your meeting tonight, I won’t say a word.”

“You promise?”

“I promise. Cross my heart, may Mom find out about my tattoo if I break my promise.”

“I’ll hold you to that. You know I have pictures...”

“Then you’ll meet him?”

“Fine. I’ll meet him. Now go away and let me enjoy my cheesecake in peace.”

Tara quickly grabbed her sister’s fork, shoved another bite into her mouth, then winked and walked away.

“Hey! I don’t know where your mouth’s been!” Cassie called after her sister. When she was out of

sight, Cassie wiped her fork off on her shirt, then continued to devour the creamy bit of heaven in front of her.

* * * *

She was sitting at her desk when a deliveryman entered.

"I'm looking for a Cassie Mathers," he said reading from his list.

"She's over here," Ann called with a smile, when Cassie didn't answer him.

"Just sign here, ma'am..." The deliveryman handed her a clipboard and showed her where to sign to accept the delivery.

"What did she get?"

"I'll be right back with it..." he said, leaving his clipboard on the desk.

A minute later, the deliveryman had a large basket in his arms and was walking toward her desk.

She quickly cleared a spot on her desk so the man could sit it down. With a smile he picked up his clipboard, and wished them all a good day.

Coworkers piled around Cassie's desk as she looked at the basket. Inside there was a small Myrtle plant and some clippings of Hairy Nightshade, all in their own pots. Looking at them, she knew exactly where she wanted to plant them when she got home. She shifted the plants to the side and saw, to her surprise, a smaller basket of pears sitting in the center.

"Who sent it?" one coworker asked.

GARDEN OF DREAMS



"Read the card!" another shouted.

Opening the card, she grew more confused.

"Who's it from?" Tara asked, joining the group.

"I don't know."

"Well, what does the card say?" her sister asked anxiously.

"It says, 'To Cassie, far sweeter than this fruit shall ever be.'"

"How romantic," Ann exclaimed.

Staring at the basket, she wondered who could have possibly known what happened in her dream the previous night.

* * * *

Cassie sighed as she waited yet again at Antonio's for her client to show up. She had allowed Tara to convince her to 'dress up' again, and was quickly growing angrier by the minute. It was quarter after nine when she saw the Maitre d' approach her with a man, yet again.

"Ms. Mathers, Mr. Knight..."

"Mr. Knight regrets he's unable to make his appointment again. Yeah, yeah, yeah. Please inform him that he will need to find another designer, one who does not mind playing games and jumping through whatever hoop he decides to toss." Cassie knew the Maitre d' had no control over whether the man showed up or not, but it felt good to finally vent some of her anger, even if her venting was toward an innocent man.

She stood up and without looking where she was going, walked straight into a wall, one that felt suspiciously like a very solid man. Hands rose to quickly steady her on her feet.

"I'm so sorry," she began, looking up into the stranger's face. Getting a good look at him, her mouth hung open in shock.

It couldn't be! What was Vincent—her mystery man, her dream lover—doing in this restaurant?

"Actually, I'm the one that should be apologizing. I did not realize traffic would be as thick as it was. I hope you received my apology for being late?"

Cassie nodded, dumbly.

Why is he acting as though we've never met?

Stupid girl, of course you've never met! Ann was right, I wouldn't kick this man out of my bed for any reason. Not cookies, crackers, bread or even soup! Hell, he could get a seven-course meal all over my sheets and not once would I think about telling him to leave!

Mr. Knight smiled knowingly at her as he helped her sit back down at their table.

"I'm so sorry, Mr. Knight, I'm usually not so rude. Its just, you look like someone I..."

"It is never a bother when such a beautiful woman stares at me," he assured her with a smile.

A waiter placed a glass of white wine in front of her. Lifting her wineglass, Cassie drank deeply, praying that it would help calm her nerves.

"And please, call me Vincent."

Cassie choked on her wine and Vincent was there in a flash, patting her back.

GARDEN OF DREAMS



"Are you all right, Cassie?"

"I'm so sorry. I swear I usually don't act like this," she sputtered.

He knelt beside her chair. "I know. You're beautiful, graceful, caring and gentle. And you enjoy pears," he added with a wink.

"How do you know that?" she asked confused. Had he been stalking her? Did he have someone investigating her past?

"No, my love. I know, because I know you. I've danced with you in a crowded hall filled with costumes, in dance clubs and under the light of a full moon in a beautiful garden."

"How could you..." Cassie couldn't even seem to form a complete thought.

"I promised you last night that I would claim you soon, and that when I did I would never leave you again."

"How..." Her thoughts were flying too quickly for her to catch any one.

Still kneeling in front of her, Vincent pulled out a black velvet box. When he opened it, inside was a diamond that shone as brightly as the star they had created in her dreams. "Will you marry me?"

"Wait a minute. This is moving too fast. We just met. And if you know about my dreams, what about what you told me...about *your age*," she lowered her voice leaning closer so only he could hear her.

"I spoke the truth." *I've drunk from you twice. Once more and our souls will be joined for eternity,* his voice whispered in her mind, but somehow it didn't

frighten her. It felt as natural as his caresses.

"And you are a..."

A vampire in love. And we've known each other longer than a few minutes. "Look deep in your heart, my love. I promise to accept you just as you are. To dance under the full moon with you, in the garden of dreams that you create for us. To accept you, flaws and all. I promise to listen to you ramble and help soothe your skin if you stay in the sun too long. To protect you, to support you. To treat you as my equal in every way. Can you accept me as I am?" He shifted back to speaking inside her mind. Can you accept a vampire that has been searching for his love so long he had almost lost all hope? Can you accept my love and my touch now that you know what I am? "All I ask is that you look into your heart for your answer."

Cassie looked at him, and flashes of her dreams came rushing back. He made her feel safe and loved. Could she accept that the man of her dreams—literally of her dreams—was a vampire?

"What about the..." She closed her eyes, unsure of how she could ask. *How do I ask him about his liquid diet without making him sound like a freak or an alcoholic?*

All I need is you, he told her, his tone soothing, a smile on his beautiful lips.

She stared at his smile, his mouth and images leapt to her mind. Some were from the past few nights, others felt more like promises of things to come. She wasn't sure if the images came from her mind or his, but suddenly it didn't seem to matter. All of the images sent a flood of warmth straight to her pussy,

GARDEN OF DREAMS

until her body ached to be held in Vincent's arms again.

Could she accept him?

How could she not when he promised her to accept her, flaws and all?

Cassie held her trembling left hand out for him, nodding as tears formed in her eyes.

He slipped the ring on her finger, and gently kissed her lips.

All around them, women sighed and patrons began to applaud and shout their congratulations.

"When do you want to...Should we set a date?"

"We'll marry when our garden is finished. I want to marry you under the full moon, in our very own garden paradise. Price is no concern. I want you to create the garden of your dreams for us, Cassie, my love."

"I know just how it should look," she told him remembering the hanging garden from the previous night. "I hope King Nebuchadnezzar doesn't mind if I copy some of his designs."

"I'm sure he would like that. After all, it was for love that he created his garden. I believe he will smile down on us as we stand in a replica, filled with the same love and devotion he had for his wife."

Ignoring the people surrounding them, still watching the newly engaged couple, Cassie threw herself into his arms, kissing him hungrily.

"If you don't mind, could we skip supper? I think I'd like to finally be able to spend all night in your arms without the fear that I'm going to wake up and

lose you."

He laughed. "Your wish is my command."

Leaving behind a disappointed Maitre d', they exited the restaurant, holding hands. Looking up into the night sky, she easily found their star.

"I told you, love. The stars will celebrate our union long after mortals have forgotten us."

"Am I...will I...turn into..." She looked into his deep blue eyes, hoping he understood what she was asking.

"You are the other half of my soul. We will be together for the rest of our lives. One more bite and we shall be joined for eternity."

With another too-brief kiss, Cassie whispered, "Then what are we waiting for?"

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Sandy Lynn lives in Virginia with her wonderful husband, beautiful daughter and spoiled Chow Chow. Her tastes are very eclectic, and you never know if you'll hear her singing along to bands such as Smash Mouth and Disturbed, or singers Toby Keith and Terri Clark. When she isn't writing, Sandy can be found playing with her family, reading her favorite authors, or playing online, whether it's with a group of her friends, updating her website or playing with a graphics program.