



The Nerd Prince

by

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Chapter 1

Goddamn it. There was that horrible noise again.

Cade Ryan dropped the controller for his video game and stood up. Unable to focus on saving the world by killing bloodthirsty aliens, he stalked restlessly away from the television and toward the source of what he'd come to think of as That Godawful Racket.

Dreadful, tuneless squawks drifted down from above him, like a celestial angelic harp choir gone insanely tone deaf. He stood there and stared at the ceiling, clenching his teeth with fury.

If only Rhoda hadn't dumped him for a newer model, he wouldn't be stuck in this godawful apartment with paper-thin walls, listening to the sound of his next-door neighbors as they grunted atop a squeaking bedframe. Hearing a dog (in a supposedly canine-free apartment building) bark nonstop. Listening to That Godawful Racket.

Now Rhoda had the house. A perfectly good house. A rather nice house, in fact. A house some people might characterize as a mansion. Considering she was the one who'd ended their marriage, he should have been the one to keep the house, but he'd been so hurt and furious he'd simply walked out. And now he had absolutely nothing but a tiny, barely furnished apartment, with only the grating, offkey sounds to keep him company.

Abruptly he snapped. He'd had enough. He spun and walked with purposeful, angry steps toward his cheap stereo system ... pretty much the only thing he'd bothered to buy, besides a couple of pieces of flimsily constructed furniture. He leaned over, popped a CD into it, and turned the volume knob up almost as far as it would go.

Three seconds later, all hell broke loose.

Shell Anderson drew the horsehair bow across the strings of her cello, bringing forth the atonal sounds of Schnittke's cello sonata. She loved Schnittke, although his works weren't as pretty as the Bach Suites she'd been working on earlier. Schnittke was more of an acquired taste.

Abruptly a terrible noise erupted from the apartment below her, and she broke off with a squawk.

A guy had moved in below her a couple of months ago, but until today he'd been very quiet. Now it sounded like he was

throwing a party for the whole block, or else trying to make himself deaf. And her as well, she thought with irritation, laying the cello carefully down on its side and placing the bow on the music stand.

She really needed to practice. But it wasn't going to happen with that noise going on. She decided to give him a few minutes. Maybe he'd turn it off.

Fifteen minutes later, she couldn't stand it any more.

Shell stood outside the door of her downstairs neighbor. Here the racket was even more horrific. Out of the wall of sound she could barely pick out a saxophone, honking and wailing. She was amazed there wasn't an angry crowd of people in the hall, beating on his door. Then again, it was the middle of the day on a Wednesday and most people weren't home. That was the reason she had been practicing--she didn't want to annoy her neighbors.

She knocked on the door. She wasn't particularly surprised when he didn't respond, since the noise was so loud he probably wouldn't hear a bomb go off. She drew her fist back and pounded on the door as hard as she could.

Moments later the door opened, flooding the hallway with an unbelievable wave of sound, and she found herself facing a nerd.

There was really no other word she could think of that could describe him. He was somewhere around six feet tall, big and

awkward-looking, with a mop of shaggy brownish hair, stooped shoulders, and dark eyes hidden behind thick glasses. He wore a baggy, rumpled gray sweatsuit that looked like it hadn't been washed in a week, with a large stain of what appeared to be mustard adorning it.

He said something, but she couldn't hear him over the music. "What?" she yelled.

He raised his voice. "I said, are you selling Girl Scout cookies?"

She bristled. Just because she happened to be a bit on the short side and had a slim figure didn't mean she looked like a Girl Scout. She'd pulled her black hair back in a simple ponytail, and she was wearing a pair of jeans with one of the knees fraying, but she didn't look *that* young. Did she?

"Could you turn it down?" she shouted.

He gazed at her a moment longer through his inch-thick lenses, then lifted one shoulder in a shrug and disappeared into his apartment. A moment later, the noise stopped.

But her ears were still ringing.

She tried to get a surreptitious glance into the apartment through the small crack he'd left, but all she saw was a futon and a cheap end table, the kind you could buy at Wal-Mart and put together yourself. There was a beer can sitting on the floor, a Chinese takeout

box on the futon, and a sloppy pile of what looked like *Sports Illustrated* on the end table. She was willing to bet he was a bachelor ... a thought that gave her a warm rush of pleasure, for some odd reason.

Her view was blocked when he reappeared at the door.

“Better?”

“Yes, thank you,” she said, rubbing absently at her ear. “What on earth was that?”

“Bird. Charlie Parker.”

“It was--it was--” She cast about for a way of saying “the most horrible thing I ever heard in my life” tactfully, without a whole lot of success. At last she said instead, “It was really *loud*.”

The corner of his mouth twitched up in a sardonic grin. “It’s great music, isn’t it?”

“Um ... it’s not exactly my style,” she said honestly.

“Yeah, I’ve heard your style. That squawking stuff.”

Shell blinked. “Excuse me?”

“That racket you listen to. It’s not music, it’s Chinese water torture for the ears.”

Ordinarily Shell had a good sense of humor, but it flew right out the window when someone criticized her cello playing. “It’s Schnittke,” she said stiffly. “And I don’t--”

“*Schnittke*. What the hell is a Schnittke?”

“A Russian twentieth-century composer,” she growled.

“Jesus. Can’t you listen to something *normal*?”

Her eyes narrowed to dangerous slits. “I’m not listening to it. I’m playing it.”

She saw his lips part in surprise. “Oh,” he said. “I’m sorry. I didn’t know.”

“That’s all right.”

He looked at her curiously. “Aren’t you a little old to be taking up an instrument?”

An explosion of rage went off in Shell’s head. “Look,” she said tersely, “I am a professional cellist. I am playing this Schnittke piece in two weeks with the Swift Creek Chamber Music Ensemble.”

“Oh, my God.” He stared at her, and she thought with grim pleasure that she’d succeeded in impressing him. Then he opened his mouth again, and that illusion was shattered.

“You mean it’s *supposed* to sound like that?”

Shell made a hissing sound through her teeth. “Look, just keep down the racket, will you?”

“I will if you will.”

“I have to practice!” she said angrily.

His lips twisted in a smile. “Then I’m going to have to keep testing out my speakers.”

She blinked. “Are they new?”

“No. I just like testing them when you make that--that *noise*.”

“Son of a--” Shell broke off, aware that she was letting him get to her. She decided to approach the subject from a different angle. “Look,” she said, smiling at him, “I’m sure we can work this out. Maybe we got off on the wrong foot. I’m Shell Anderson.” At the questioning tilt of his eyebrow, she added, “No, it’s not short for Michelle. Just Shell.”

She stuck out her hand, and after a moment’s hesitation he took it. “I’m Cade Ryan.”

He had a nice, low, rumbling voice that gave her goosebumps, but she did her best to ignore that. It was ridiculous to get goosebumps over a geek. “You’re new here, aren’t you?”

A wary caution shuttered his eyes. “I moved in a few weeks ago.”

“I’ve been here for a couple of years,” she said, shaking his hand enthusiastically and then dropping it. “It’s a nice building.” She grinned. “Except for my cello playing, but everyone’s used to that.”

“I’m never going to get used to it.”

“Schnittke is kind of hard to listen to,” she admitted. “Usually I play prettier things, like Haydn and Franck.”

“Unless you play jazz, I don’t think I’ll like it.”

“The thing is....” She looked up at him, doing her best Bambi

eyes. “I really have to get my practicing done.”

He rolled his eyes. “How long?”

“A couple more hours, maybe.”

“Hell. So much for my video game.”

“You play video games?” she said. And here he was calling *her* young. What was he, a teenager?

“When I can *hear* them, yeah.” He sighed as if she’d condemned him to an eternity in Purgatory. “Fine. I’ll just go out for a really long jog.”

She wondered why he wasn’t at work, but that wasn’t really any of her business. “Thanks,” she said, and shot him a friendly grin. “I owe you one.”

He looked back at her without the slightest hint of a smile.

“How about dinner?”

She blinked. “Excuse me?”

“You said you owed me one. I figured I’d go ahead and collect. How about dinner?”

“Uh....” Shell hesitated. She didn’t usually go for poorly dressed, nerdy, video-game-playing guys. It was, she was perfectly aware, kind of shallow of her, but she preferred her men to be ... well ... attractive.

“I’m kind of busy tonight,” she said at last, awkwardly.

His eyes were unreadable behind the thick glasses. “Fine,” he

said. “Maybe some other time.”

He turned on his heel and shut the door a little harder than necessary. She stood there for a moment, staring at the closed door, with the sinking awareness that she’d hurt his feelings.

Chapter 2

“So how’s the Schnittke coming along?”

Shell grinned at her father over the slice of lemon birthday cake he’d made her. She and her father had been inseparable ever since her mom had died when she was ten. “Not too bad. Although my new neighbor says it sounds horrible.”

“It’s supposed to, isn’t it?”

Shell snorted as she watched her father take a leisurely swallow of his beer. “I guess some people think so. I don’t think he’s into classical music.”

“Is he nice?”

“Who?”

“Your new neighbor.”

Shell frowned. “He’s kind of a nerd, Dad. In fact, he asked me out, but I turned him down.”

Her father put down the beer on a coaster--her dad’s house was always impeccably neat--and looked at her through narrowed eyes.

“Why?”

“He, uh, sort of wasn’t my type.”

“Because he’s a nerd?”

Shell floundered for a minute. Her father knew her too well.

“Well, I guess you could say that.”

“Haven’t you learned anything? You haven’t had a single good relationship, clear back to high school, and it’s all because you keep picking men based on their looks.”

“That’s not true.”

“Of course it is. What about Mark?”

“Mark was nice,” Shell defended herself.

“Mark was good-looking, but he could barely string two words together. And what about Joe?”

Shell shrugged. Joe had hit her. He’d only done it once, though, and her quick response with a cast-iron skillet had been ... stunning. “You’re right. Joe wasn’t so nice.”

“You can say that again. But he was a model.”

“I didn’t go out with him just because he was a model.”

“But that’s what caught your eye, wasn’t it? Handsome men always fascinate you, but somehow they never have the brains to go along with the brawn. Don’t you think it’s time you tried something a little different?”

Shell sighed, thinking about the guy--Cade--she’d met that

afternoon. There hadn't been much about him to catch a woman's attention, aside from a resonant baritone voice that didn't really fit his nerdy appearance. But there had been something about his unsmiling face, his dejected posture, that made her sorry she'd rejected his offer of dinner so bluntly.

Cade Ryan was different from the cocksure, egotistical, handsome jerks she'd dated in the past, that much was certain.

"Maybe you're right," she admitted.

"Of course I am." Her father grinned. "In fact, I'm so certain I'm right that I'm going to give you a direct order. Go out with this fellow. Give him a chance."

"Fine, Dad. I'll give him a chance."

"Attagirl."

Shell stood and stretched. "I have to get going, Dad. Thanks for the birthday cake. It was terrific."

"Oh, wait, I have a present for you."

"I bet I can guess what it is. At this rate my shell collection is going to be as big as yours."

"You're the only person I know who appreciates them." Her father's hobby was conchology--a fancy word for shell collecting--which was the reason she'd been named Shell. As long as she could remember, she'd been fascinated by the various kinds of seashells, and lately Dad had taken to giving her some of the prettiest ones from

his collection for her birthday and Christmas. He disappeared into the room where he kept his shells, then emerged with a small wooden box.

She opened it, then gasped. “Dad! This is a golden cowry!”

“*Cypraea aurantium*,” her father said pedantically, then added with typical childlike pride, “It’s gorgeous, isn’t it?”

“I really shouldn’t accept this, Dad.” The rounded oval shell was beautiful, its orange-gold shell gleaming in the light, but it was also fairly valuable, often selling for two hundred dollars or more.

“Oh, go ahead. It’s a birthday present. And twenty-five is a big birthday.”

She realized from the light shining in his eyes that he’d be hurt if she refused. “Okay,” she said, closing the box and tucking it carefully into her purse, then leaned up and kissed him on the cheek. “Thanks a bunch, Dad.”

Cade parked his Jeep on the street and turned off the ignition, bringing Branford Marsalis’ rendition of “Sweet Lorraine” to a halt. Getting out of the car, he headed toward his apartment building.

He’d gone out to dinner, just like he did every night, since cooking was definitely not one of his strong points. He’d combed his hair, in a half-hearted manner, but as usual lately, he hadn’t bothered to put his contacts in or to shave. He wasn’t sure what the point was.

Hell, he wasn't sure what the point was to anything anymore.

He'd felt pretty conspicuous sitting alone in the local hamburger joint, Willy's, watching all the happy, well-groomed families sitting together. He wished he had someone to sit with. But even when he'd been with Rhoda, he admitted to himself, he'd always had the feeling she was elsewhere.

Twenty feet ahead of him a small sedan pulled in at the curb, and a slim figure emerged. Despite the gloom of twilight, he was certain it was the young woman he'd met in the afternoon--Shell--and he quickened his steps, hoping she'd stop and talk to him. Her finely etched features were very pretty, he thought, not to mention her huge seagreen eyes, long, raven-black hair, and smooth, pale skin. He wasn't ready for a relationship right now, not when he was still technically married, but he couldn't help but feel drawn to Shell. He walked rapidly in her direction.

And then he saw a dark shape emerge from between parked cars and glide toward her, very quickly.

The figure snatched her purse from her shoulder, then turned and started to run. Shell made a futile grab in the thief's direction, but he took off like a running back. Cade heard her angry cussing--it sounded like she was calling the other man every vile name in the book--and he went after the guy.

The guy was dodging between parked cars, maneuvering like a

barrel racer, obviously aware there was someone behind him. He was fast, but Cade had been a sprinter in high school, and he still possessed a reasonable amount of speed. He gained steadily, then launched himself through the air in a tackle. They tumbled to the pavement together.

He managed to rip the purse from the other man's hands, but his head slammed into the concrete as he was knocked backward. The guy scrambled to his feet, yanked the purse back, and ran. Despite the ringing in his ears, Cade staggered to his feet and raced after him, stumbling slightly as the thief turned off the sidewalk and onto the grass of the nearby park. They raced downhill, toward the small body of water that gave the town of Swift Creek its name.

Cade was only a few feet behind the pursesnatcher. As the guy headed for the creek, he looked back over his shoulder and yelled, "If you want it that bad, then go get it!" He flung the purse outward over Swift Creek, then spun on his heel, turning hard to the left, and sprinted away.

Cade didn't bother pursuing the other man. He slid to a halt at the edge of the water. Despite its name, Swift Creek was a slow-moving body of water, and the purse bobbed lazily, barely visible as a dark blob in the moonlight. It was quite a ways out in the water, though. The guy had a good arm.

Behind him, he heard a feminine voice crying, "*Oh, no!*" It

sounded like Shell was still a long distance behind him, but there was no mistaking the distress in her voice. She wanted that purse back.

Cade sighed and waded out into the water.

Somewhat to his annoyance, the purse was far enough out that he had to swim for it. It sank lower and lower as it became waterlogged, and when he was only a few feet away it gave up the battle and disappeared. Cade dove after it. It wasn't easy to locate in the near-darkness, but he went under repeatedly until his groping hands found it. A moment later he was swimming grimly for the creekbank, the purse's strap clutched in one hand.

He clambered out of the creek and sat down on the bank, hard. Looking up, he saw that the stars were unusually blurry. Either his glasses had fogged up, or he was having a hard time focusing.

His head throbbed, and he realized his skull must have slammed against the concrete harder than he'd realized under the influence of adrenaline. Hell. He was lucky he hadn't passed out and drowned.

He heard running footsteps, and then Shell dropped down beside him. "Are you all right?" she demanded, shaking his shoulder.

"Ow. Stop that."

"Stop what?" she said, still shaking. His brain felt like it was rattling back and forth loosely in his skull, and getting bruised in the process.

“Stop shaking me,” he said through his teeth.

She stopped. “Thank you,” she said, gazing into his eyes.

“Thanks so much. If he’d gotten away with my purse it would have been just *awful*.”

He realized the stars were looking much clearer. His head ached a little, but not too badly, all things considered. “You shouldn’t carry too much cash. Then you don’t have to worry about it so much.”

“It’s not cash I was worried about. It was--” She stopped and gazed at him. “We ought to get you inside. Can you stand up?”

He got to his feet, lurching very slightly, and she put her arm around his waist, letting him lean on her. He let her, not bothering to tell her that her slight weight couldn’t possibly keep him upright if he fell. He thought it was better to keep that piece of information to himself. She steered him up the stairs and to his apartment door.

As he fumbled for the key, she asked, “Do you want me to come inside?”

“Uh....” He blinked down at her, seeing her large green eyes wide with concern. “That might be a good idea.” He was pretty sure he wasn’t going to pass out, but he figured it wasn’t really necessary to tell her that.

She led him into the apartment. “You need to get changed.”

“Uh-huh,” he agreed. “I noticed that.” He headed for his

bedroom, where he stripped, hastily toweled his drenched hair so that it stood up all over his head, and exchanged his soaking wet sweatsuit for a dry one, then went back into the living room.

She looked up, and her eyebrows drew together. “That’s funny. I thought you said you were going to change, but that sweatsuit looks just like the other one you were wearing, except it’s not dripping on the carpet. Don’t you own anything besides sweatsuits?”

He thought of the thousands of dollars’ worth of woolen designer suits hanging in his wife’s closet ... if she hadn’t given them to the Salvation Army by now. Or let her cat tear them to shreds. Come to think of it, she was probably using them to line the cat’s litterbox.

“Sweatsuits are comfortable,” he said.

“Yeah, I guess.” Where his clothes were loose and baggy, hers were tight and revealing. She wore a pair of turquoise capri pants with big pink flowers, and a tight tube top in a pink that matched the flowers. Her knit top and tight pants clung to her body in a way that would have been indecent in another woman, but the fact was she didn’t have much to display. She had the smallest breasts and slimmest hips he’d ever seen in a grown woman.

But she was very pretty.

She shrugged. “You want to see what you rescued for me?”

He had to admit he was curious, given the outraged curses she'd shouted at the thief, and the sincere distress in her voice when she spoke of losing the purse. He walked over to her as she dug in her sodden purse and drew out a small, soggy box. She opened the box and showed him the contents--a glossy oval in a brilliant golden orange color.

"It's very pretty," he said. "But what is it?"

"It's a golden cowry."

His face must have reflected his confusion, because she said hastily, "It's a seashell."

He scowled down at her, suddenly very irritated. He'd practically drowned for *this*? "You were that worried about losing a snail?"

"It's not a snail!"

He cocked an eyebrow.

"Okay," she admitted. "It is a snail, kind of. But it's not just any shell. See how pretty it is? The natives in Fiji believed these were sacred. They were almost impossible to find until deep-water scuba diving became popular, and now it's become illegal to collect them some places, so they're pretty rare. People pay hundreds of dollars for these things."

Hundreds of dollars for a snail shell? Looking down into her earnest green eyes, Cade decided to keep that comment to himself.

He knew he was prone to seeing mere words where other people saw poetry, and to seeing splotches of paint where others saw masterpieces of art. He supposed one person's snail was another person's gold nugget. "I see," he said, determinedly neutral.

"My dad gave it to me for my birthday," she added. "So I'm very grateful you got my purse back."

"Your birthday? Is today your birthday?"

She nodded. "And I'm now officially too old to be in the Girl Scouts," she added with a wry smile.

"You're eighteen?" he said, aware of a sinking feeling. He was thirty, for God's sake. He didn't want to feel this kind of attraction to a teenager.

"No, I was just joking. I'm twenty-five."

With her slim body and ponytailed hair, she didn't really look it, but Cade thought it best to keep that observation to himself, too.

"Happy birthday," he said instead.

"Thanks." She closed the box and put it back in her still-dripping purse. "I guess you're feeling better?"

He considered pretending injury to keep her here, then decided against it. He wasn't that pitiful. Was he?

"Yeah, I'm fine, thanks."

"Great. Then I'd better get going." She turned and walked toward the door. At the last moment she turned back.

“Would you like to come over for dinner tomorrow night?”

He stared at her for a moment, sure he’d misheard her. He’d asked her to dinner yesterday, after all, and she’d blown him off. “Dinner?” he repeated at last.

“Yes, dinner. You know, the meal that comes after breakfast and lunch. And tea if you’re English. Want to come over about seven?”

He hesitated a long moment. He’d hardly said two words to anyone for the past two months. But he felt an odd certainty that Shell’s company could help fill some of the emptiness that permeated his life right now.

“Sure,” he said at last, and offered her a tentative smile. His face muscles hurt from the unusual exertion. “Thanks.”

Shell wasn’t particularly surprised when Cade showed up at her door the next evening wearing a rumpled sweatsuit. When she’d asked him yesterday if that was all he owned, she’d meant it as a joke. But she was beginning to suspect that was really all he had in his closet. It made her wonder what he did for a living--or if he did *anything* for a living. She was starting to think he must be out of work.

Too polite to ask, she smiled and let him into the apartment, glad she hadn’t succumbed to the impulse to make something fancy,

like chicken in orange and cranberry sauce. Dressed in his oversized sweats, he didn't look like a gourmet. "I made a pizza," she said.

"Hope that's okay."

"Pizza's great," he said, hesitating awkwardly next to her shell collection, which was located in a glass-fronted cabinet. She'd put the golden cowry in the place of honor on the top shelf. He glanced at the shells. "I see you have a lot of snails."

"Seashells."

"Right. Seashells."

Shell stifled her irritated sigh. It was obvious he wasn't impressed by her collection. He hadn't exactly gone out of his way to impress her, either, considering his generally scruffy appearance. It did look like he'd at least made an effort to comb his hair, although it was so straggly and overgrown it was hard to tell.

Cade was definitely a world-class nerd. But he was nevertheless kind of cute, in an awkward, shaggy way.

And, she was surprised to realize, he smelled good. A woodsy, masculine scent tickled her nostrils, causing a flicker of heat to ignite low in her stomach. Baffled by her reaction to this ungainly, nerdy man, she stepped away from him.

"Come on into the kitchen."

He followed her obediently into the pint-sized kitchen. She pulled out her china, adorned with musical notes, cut the pizza, and

handed him a slice. “Want something to drink?”

He took a big bite of the pizza. “Coke’d be good, thanks,” he said indistinctly.

She poured Coke into a glass, then turned back and saw that his pizza slice was half gone already. *Poor guy*, she thought, noticing the hollows under his cheekbones. *He doesn’t eat very well.*

Grabbing her own plate, she led him to her small, round table--a glass top set on a gilded treble clef--and they sat down. “This is great,” he said.

She was pleased, although she’d used a frozen crust, so she hadn’t done a lot of work on it. She’d piled it high with onions, mushrooms, black olives, sausage, and pepperoni, and used her own sauce. “Glad you like it.”

As he lifted the glass of Coke to his mouth, she noticed he had big, powerful hands, and a wayward image flashed though her mind--a vivid image of those hands on her skin, touching her ... everywhere. A wave of heat flooded her body, and she looked up and met his dark eyes for an instant, seeing the sensual awareness that lurked behind the glasses.

Hastily she glanced away, startled by the direction of her own thoughts. Cade was one of the most unsexy guys she’d ever met, so where on earth had that erotic image come from?

Cade appeared slightly uncomfortable, too. Averting his eyes,

he looked down through the glass at the treble clef that supported the table. “You like music a lot, don’t you?”

Relieved he’d picked a neutral subject, she nodded. “I majored in music in college.”

“Julliard?”

She chuckled. “Dad couldn’t afford Julliard, even if I could have gotten in. I went to the university here in Swift Creek. They actually have a pretty good music program.”

“So that’s what you do for a living? Play music?”

“It’s not exactly a living,” she said, standing up and retrieving two more slices of pizza. “I have to spend a lot of time practicing, but playing for the local group doesn’t pay much. I play a lot of weddings, too. But I still have to work most afternoons and evenings over at a department store in the mall to make ends meet.”

“Sounds like a rough career.”

“It doesn’t make a lot of money,” she admitted as she sat back down, “but I love it. One of these days I’d like to move up to playing with the Virginia Symphony in Norfolk.” She gave into her curiosity. “So what do you do for a living?”

He looked at her for a moment, and she noticed for the first time that his eyes were an unusual shade. Behind the coke-bottle glasses, it was difficult to be sure, but she was pretty sure they were midnight blue. At her blunt question, his eyes widened, giving him

an oddly vulnerable expression.

“Right now,” he admitted at last, “I don’t do much of anything.”

“I see,” she said gently. “Lost your job, huh?”

He shrugged. “I spend a lot of time playing video games.”

She noticed he hadn’t quite answered the question, but she didn’t remark on it. Instead, she said, “That sounds like fun.”

He appeared to contemplate her comment. “Actually, it’s not,” he said at last, as if surprised.

Conversation languished after that, and they finished their pizza in silence. When they were done, Shell said, “Want to come out to the living room?”

He nodded and followed her back out into her tiny living room. She sat in the only chair in the room, leaving him the sofa. Instead, he paused and frowned at a black case in the corner.

“Is that your instrument?”

“That’s my cello, yeah.” She stood up and walked over to it. Flipping open the latches, she opened the case and showed it to him.

“It’s a big violin.”

“Yes, that’s basically what it is.” She traced one of the sinuous curves with a loving finger.

“Looks kind of old,” he said, looking at the battered, reddish brown finish with a dubious expression.

“It’s almost a hundred years old.”

“Couldn’t afford a new one, huh?”

She scowled. “A new cello doesn’t have a nice sound. It takes quite a few years to break them in. An old cello is a good thing.”

He obviously realized he’d made an error and backpedaled hastily. “It’s very pretty.”

“Yeah, it is.” She grinned wryly. “Although it’s a little embarrassing to play an instrument with more curves than I’ve got.”

“Curves aren’t everything,” he said.

She shut the case and latched it. “Uh-huh, sure. Tell that to the guys I’ve dated. Two of them suggested I ought to get breast implants.”

He looked at her for a long moment. The vibrant sexual awareness Shell had sensed earlier suddenly filled the air between them, charging the atmosphere of the room and making her skin tingle. She saw his eyes turn dark and stormy, the color of the Atlantic in a hurricane, and knew that he felt it too.

Very slowly, his hand reached up to cup her cheek. His fingers were hard yet gentle, and she felt an inexplicable shiver as they brushed lightly across her face. She stood frozen, unable to move.

“Those guys were idiots,” he said softly. “I wouldn’t change a thing about you.”

For the first time she noticed that he had really nice lips.

Beautiful, sculpted lips--the kind of lips you'd see on a movie star, or a male model. Lips that were totally wasted on a scruffy nerd.

Although, she thought pragmatically, maybe they wouldn't be *totally* wasted if she kissed him.

Abruptly she backed away. Where on earth had the idea of kissing him come from? It was one thing to ask the guy over for dinner, quite another to kiss him. He definitely wasn't the sort of guy you kissed. He was a friend kind of guy, not a kissing kind of guy.

She remembered her conversation with her dad and felt a touch of shame. Why did she insist on judging men on their looks? God help her, she was as shallow as the men who'd suggested she'd get breast implants.

Maybe, just maybe, there was more to this guy than mere nerdiness.

"Do you want to come hear me play tomorrow night?" she said abruptly.

She saw his forehead wrinkle with consternation. "Are you going to play that--that noise?"

"The Schnittke? No, not tomorrow. Just some pretty stuff, like Bach and Mozart. You'll like it. Besides, I'm playing a solo."

He hesitated for a long minute. At last he said, "Sure. I'll be there."

Chapter 3

Cade felt ridiculously conspicuous when he walked into the small auditorium in the Swift Creek Convention Center the next night and saw the men in the audience attired in suits and ties, and the women in glamorous silk dresses. He'd known he should have gone out to the mall and gotten himself something decent, but somehow he just couldn't bring himself to go to the trouble. Ever since the day he'd stalked out of his house, with nothing packed in his suitcase except a few of the sweatsuits he went to the gym in, very little had seemed worth the trouble.

But for the first time in a couple of months, he wished he had neatened himself up a bit. Thank God he didn't see anyone he knew, but still ... wearing a wrinkled gray sweatsuit and unshaven as he was, he probably looked like a homeless guy coming in off the street to find air conditioning.

Feeling that everyone was staring at him--as they probably were--he found his seat and sat down. Before long, Shell and three

other musicians walked out on stage.

Shell was dressed in a long black dress with a full skirt. The bodice was tight and low cut, but even that didn't do much to give the illusion of cleavage. She simply didn't have anything there to cleave. Her black hair was drawn up on top of her head in a simple, elegant style that emphasized the delicate lines of her graceful neck.

He all but laughed at the ridiculous direction of his thoughts. He was lusting after her *neck*, for God's sake. He had never really noticed a woman's neck before. It wasn't the first part of a woman's anatomy a man was inclined to notice, after all.

But in Shell's case, everything about her was worth noticing.

When she sat down, one knee on either side of her cello, he realized why her skirt had to be full. For some reason the sight of her sitting with her legs wide apart, despite the modest draping of her skirt, caused a scattered burst of erotic images in his brain. He imagined her naked. He imagined himself kneeling between her widespread legs and bending over to stroke her with his tongue....

As she drew the bow across the strings and began tuning the instrument, he yanked himself out of that fantasy before it could go somewhere. He wasn't between her legs, for God's sakes. The cello was.

Lucky cello.

He shook himself mentally. What the hell was wrong with him,

feeling desire for a woman who was sitting thirty feet away from him on stage? How on earth could a man be envious of a cello?

But as her fingers roamed gently over the cello, he realized he very definitely was envious.

The group stopped their discordant tuning, and there was an expectant hush. Then the musicians began playing a lovely, spritely tune. Cade looked down at the paper he'd been given when he bought his ticket and discovered that it was a Mozart quartet. It *was* pretty, he thought as he watched Shell's strong, agile fingers leaping over the strings like deer bounding through a meadow.

The next movement was slow, and at times the cello part rang out above the rest of the ensemble. When he could hear the cello, he noticed the notes had an odd trembling quality--vibrato, he thought it was called. It sounded for all the world as if the cello were moaning.

Shell's fingers moved with a slow deliberation, and he was assailed by the image of what it would feel like to have those fingers on his body, stroking him everywhere, caressing him lovingly, the way she caressed her instrument, until he moaned with pleasure.

He shook himself again. *Hell*. He was totally losing it, sitting here in a crowded music hall and getting hard. Obviously it had been way too long since he'd had any, or he wouldn't find the sight of a woman attired in a prim, Victorian-length dress so arousing.

And yet, as the music went on, as her fingers continued to slide

up and down the strings, he drifted back into the fantasy of her talented fingers exploring him, brushing over his heated flesh, until he shattered in an intensely fiery climax....

When the Mozart was over, he jumped, slightly startled by the applause, and hastily joined the rest of the crowd in clapping his hands. He was grateful that Shell couldn't possibly see him blushing from the stage.

Then Shell turned her chair slightly to face the audience. She began playing again, all by herself. He looked down to the paper again and saw that she was playing something called a Bach cello suite. It sounded like dance music, and it reminded him of her-- bright, cheerful, and sprightly.

Totally enraptured, he didn't move for the rest of the piece. He couldn't have taken his eyes off her if he'd wanted to. Despite her slim figure, Shell was every man's fantasy. At least she was everything he'd ever dreamed of in a woman. In only three meetings he'd discovered she was funny and tenacious, and her cello playing clearly illustrated that she possessed a passionate nature. She was pretty, too, but he was mature enough to know by now that prettiness didn't count for much. Rhoda had been beautiful, but that hadn't mattered much in the long term.

Shell had a basic kindness to her that attracted him more than her face did. He suspected she was a complex person, her personality

as multi-faceted as her cello playing, but her bright, happy nature shone clearly from the music she created. It had been a long time since he'd experienced happiness, he thought glumly. He'd lost his ability to feel joy a long time ago.

He wondered if Shell could help him find it again.

Shell sighed as someone knocked on her door. She'd just finished a long, draining concert, it was eleven o'clock at night, and she was beat. Having changed into a T-shirt and shorts and let her hair fall loosely around her shoulders, all she wanted now was to watch a little television, then go to sleep. But when she crossed to the door and checked the peephole, she saw it was Cade. She opened the door quickly.

"That was incredible," he said.

She blinked. "The door opening?"

"Of course not," he said impatiently. "The concert."

Delighted that he had chosen to attend, she felt a smile tugging at the corners of her mouth. "I didn't see you there. I'm glad you came."

"Your playing is beautiful. In fact, the only problem was that I felt a little out of place."

She frowned at him in incomprehension, then noticed what he was wearing. "Are you saying you went in that?" she asked, nodding

toward his rumpled sweatsuit.

“I’m afraid so.”

She giggled, thinking of the way others in the audience must have reacted. “I admire a man who isn’t a slave to fashion.” She looked up at him and saw the vaguely hopeful expression in his eyes, half hidden behind his thick glasses. “Want to come in?”

“Yeah. As a matter of fact, I do.” He walked in and stopped in front of her glass-fronted cabinet. “Tell me about your shells.”

Shell closed the door and looked at him thoughtfully. Yesterday he’d called them snails and seemed totally disinterested in them. She wondered what had happened to make him want to learn about them. “What about them?”

“What do you call them?” He pointed at a glossy, rounded shell. “That one’s like the golden thingamabob, isn’t it?”

“It’s a cowry, yes. It’s not very expensive, though, because those are pretty common. That’s a tiger cowry.”

He blinked at the spotted shell. “A tiger cowry? Why would you call a spotted one a tiger cowry?”

“Don’t blame me. I didn’t name it.” She stepped up next to him and pointed to a white shell with rows of long, slender spikes. “This one’s name makes a little more sense. It’s a venus comb murex.”

“Those spikes do look a bit like a comb. It’s a pretty thing.”

“Pretty, but very delicate. It’s hard to find intact ones.”

He looked at the shell a long moment. “They’re not just snail shells, are they?”

She shrugged. “The animals look pretty much like snails, or slugs. But the things they create are totally unique works of art.”

“Unique and beautiful,” he said under his breath. “Just like your music.”

She was shocked to hear the reverence in his voice. He hadn’t struck her as the kind of man whose emotions could be deeply moved by music. Obviously she’d been entirely wrong in her judgment of him.

Her breath caught in her throat as he lifted his hand and slid it into the depths of her long, loosely flowing hair. His dark eyes dropped to gaze at her lips, and she felt a joltingly electric tingle in response, a spark as hot as if he had touched her mouth with his own.

“Just like you,” he said softly, and bent to kiss her.

His lips tasted as good as they looked, she thought hazily as they slid over hers. And no, they definitely weren’t wasted on him. There was no doubt he knew how to use them.

She discovered her exhaustion had evaporated, leaving her alert and entirely awake, almost painfully conscious of her own body. Her nerves hummed, her blood sang, and she suspected her skin would glow in the dark every place his hands and lips touched her.

She moaned and pressed herself against him, surprised to feel the solid hardness of his abdomen. Underneath the baggy gray shirts, he was much more muscular than she'd guessed.

Their breath mingled as his lips moved slowly over hers in a slow, chaste movement that drove her wild. This was crazy, she thought vaguely. She hardly knew this man. He wasn't the type of guy she usually went for, and yet she wanted more than a sweet kiss from him. *A lot* more.

She was suddenly, vividly aware of his scent, the masculine odor of evergreen forests and the outdoors. Wrapping her hands in his hair to prevent him from moving away, she slid her tongue across his lower lip. He made a small noise that sounded like equal parts protest and passion. Ignoring it, she drove into his mouth, stroking his tongue with hers, enticing him to respond, until their tongues tangled in an erotic dance. His lips were hard against hers, but his tongue was velvet soft, and the taste of him was absolutely incredible.

At last he pulled back. "Shell," he said in a rough voice, his arms still locked around her waist.

"What's wrong?"

"I think--" He hesitated, then heaved a sigh. "I think this is the point in our relationship where I should mention that I'm married. Sort of."

She gave an indignant huff and broke away from him. It served

her right for making out with a stranger, she thought grimly, angry with herself as well as with him. “Sort of married? What the hell does that mean?”

He gazed at her, dark eyes solemn behind the thick lenses. “It means my marriage has been dead for three years, but I didn’t admit it until two months ago.”

“What happened two months ago?”

“My wife let me know she was making plans for her wedding to another man.”

The pain in his voice cut right through her. “Oh, Cade. I’m so sorry.”

“Don’t be. I knew--” He cleared his throat. “I knew things were over between us. I even knew she was sleeping with the other guy. I just couldn’t bring myself to walk out, until she told me to get the hell out of her life.” He gave her a wry smile. “Stupid, huh?”

“Kind of, yeah.” She took a step closer to him and laid a hand on his arm. “And kind of human, too. I guess it’s not easy to admit your life is falling apart that way.”

“Falling apart, hell. It had already shattered, and I didn’t want to look at it. It was sort of like looking at a glass you’ve dropped on the floor and stepping over it every morning instead of just sweeping it up. I was sure to get cut to ribbons eventually.”

She looked at him for a long moment, really *looked* for the first

time, seeing the anguish deep in his eyes, the downward slump to his shoulders. She looked at the rumpled sweatsuit and the overgrown hair, and for the first time she recognized them for what they were-- signs of a very unhappy man who just didn't care what he looked like anymore, or what the world thought of him. He wasn't the nerd she'd originally taken him for; he was simply lonely, and suffering from the worst sort of hopeless despair.

"You shouldn't let her cut you to ribbons," she said at last.

"She isn't worth it."

"We'd been married for five years," he said.

"Any kids?"

"No. Thank God, no. I wouldn't want to drag kids through this disaster."

"What was her name?"

"Rhoda." He looked bleak for another moment, and then his lips abruptly twitched up in a smile, and he chuckled.

"What's so funny?"

"Her name."

"Rhoda? What's so funny about that?"

"Rhoda was short for her real name. She hated it and wouldn't let anyone use it. I had practically forgotten it."

"And her real name was...?"

He grinned. "Rhododendron!"

Shell burst out laughing. “And to think I used to hate my name because it was unusual,” she said between giggles. “Rhododendron ... oh, my *God*. What could her parents possibly have been thinking?”

Cade made a rumbling sound that she realized was a rusty-sounding laugh and put his arms around her again. “Rhoda reminds me of one of your shells,” he said into her hair. “She’s beautiful on the outside, stunningly so. But on the inside....”

“She’s a slug?”

“Exactly.” He laughed against her hair as she giggled again. “God, Shell. I can’t think of the last time I laughed with someone.”

“At least two months ago, I’d guess.”

“Longer than that. My life has been grim for a few years now. But for some reason, ever since I met you, things seem to be looking up.”

She wrapped her arms around his shoulders. “Funny,” she said softly. “I feel exactly the same way.”

Chapter 4

Cade knew he ought to say good night and get out now, while he still could, but she felt so good. So warm. So right in his arms. Having her lithe, soft body against him helped to fill the gaping void in his soul, helped to heal the wounds Rhoda had inflicted.

And besides, she didn't seem inclined to let go of him, either.

She began, very slowly, to kiss his throat. Little tingles of sensation raced down nerves that hadn't been stimulated that way in a hell of a long time. He leaned his head back and made an incoherent sound of pleasure.

Her lips trailed up, tracing a delicate path along his jawline--the jawline that he suddenly realized he hadn't bothered to shave in a couple of days. "Ow," she said, in her softly musical voice. "It's a lot like kissing a cactus."

For the second time in ten minutes, he found himself laughing. It felt damned good to laugh. "Fine," he answered. "I'll shave tomorrow. Okay?"

“But in the meantime, I have wounded lips. What are you going to do about that?”

He responded instinctively to the teasing tone in her voice. “Sounds like an awfully painful place to apply a Band-aid. What do you want me to do about it?”

“Why don’t you kiss them and make them feel better?”

That, he could do. He lowered his head and found her lips with his. Her mouth was soft and entirely natural. She wore no lipstick, no lipgloss, no artificial enhancements to the beautiful, pink, lush lips that would drive any man crazy. God knew they drove him crazy. He thrust his tongue into her mouth the way he wanted to thrust himself into her body, hard and fast, and he heard her strangled gasp.

His hand slid slowly from her hair, down to where her nipple stood hard and erect against her T-shirt, and he caressed her small breast. “You’re not wearing a bra,” he said hoarsely.

“You’re kidding, right?” She flashed a self-deprecating grin. “They don’t even make training bras in my size.”

“Don’t say that,” he whispered. “They feel beautiful. I bet they *are* beautiful.”

She stepped back and sent him a feline smile. “Want to judge for yourself?”

God, yes, he wanted to see them, to see *her*, more than anything he’d ever wanted in his lifetime. But he was struggling to get control

of himself and the situation, and a striptease wasn't going to help any. "I really don't think--"

"Don't think," she advised him. "It's not really necessary in a situation like this." Slowly she drew her T-shirt over her head and stood before him.

Her breasts were small, very small, but beautifully wrought and remarkably firm. The kind of breasts that would always be perfect, that would never need a bra to make them shapely, no matter how many children she had. Her nipples were rose-colored and erect, and he ached to draw them into his mouth and to suckle until she cried out, until her knees buckled.

He was so hard he ached, just imagining it.

She moved toward him and stopped in front of him. He stood still as a statue, afraid to move, uncertain what she wanted from him. Reaching down, she took his hand firmly and put it on her breast.

That seemed clear enough. He brushed his thumb over her nipple, very lightly, and felt it harden instantly. He hardened right along with it.

He stroked it again, feeling it grow even more rigid, and heard her soft moan. Unable to restrain himself any longer, he bent and sucked her nipple into his mouth.

She tasted incredible, and he drew on her hard, until her hands dug into his hair, until her back arched wildly and her hips twisted

against his lower body in a way that drove him to the verge of madness. At last he stopped and lifted his head, panting.

“Shell,” he rasped, “we have to stop. I haven’t given a lot of thought to condoms recently, since I haven’t really had a need for them lately. I don’t have any.”

“We don’t need condoms,” she whispered.

“Don’t be reckless, Shell. Of course we do.”

“No. There are plenty of things we can do without condoms.”

Her hands sought the waistband of his sweatsuit, shoved at it, and he let her. He couldn’t have stopped her if he’d wanted to. He was the metaphorical putty in her hands, although his erection felt a lot more like granite than putty. She pushed the sweatpants and his white boxers down to his ankles, leaving him hobbled, unable to move away. Which, he admitted, was damned unlikely anyway. He didn’t see himself going anywhere anytime soon.

Her hand encircled him, caressed him, exactly as he’d imagined while watching her play the cello earlier. As her long, graceful fingers stroked up and down, just as she’d touched the strings, he knew exactly how the cello felt.

That was one damned lucky cello.

Her fingers drove him wild, stroking lightly over his most sensitive spots, making him quiver and shudder, drawing incredible pleasure from him the way she’d drawn beautiful music from her

cello. His eyes drifted shut, and a low, guttural sound grated in his throat, a primal sound of surrender he hadn't heard himself make in years. It had been a long, long time since he'd taken such pleasure in a woman's touch.

And then she knelt at his feet.

He had to grab at her hair and steady himself when her small pink tongue reached out and stroked the tip of his erection, or he surely would have fallen over. Burning ecstasy shot through him like a flaming arrow. "*Shell.*"

She didn't answer. Her soft, moist tongue explored him, every contour, every ridge, until he was swollen beyond all possibility, until he ached with a violent need only she could assuage. Somehow he managed to stay on his feet, despite the bone-melting bliss she was inflicting on him, and stood gripping her hair, his head thrown back, breath coming in short, harsh gasps.

At last she drew back slightly, leaving him desperate. "*Shell,*" he whispered again, pleading, yet not precisely certain what he was pleading for. He wanted her to stop, yet the fact that she had stopped nearly killed him.

"Do you like that?" she said softly.

"Oh, God, yes," he said with such fervor that she chuckled. He added, "But maybe it's best that you stopped. I don't think I could take much more."

She looked up at him quizzically. “Do you really think I’m going to leave you like that?”

He gazed down at her. “Rhoda never wanted to--I mean, I don’t think most women--”

“It’s what you want,” she said with quiet intensity. “It’s what you need.”

He understood that she wasn’t talking about just his physical needs, but about what he needed from a woman, and had never had. A woman who felt the genuine desire to make him happy, a woman who was occasionally willing to put his desires above her own, at least for a little while. That was what he needed.

Shell was what he needed.

She leaned forward and licked him again, over and over, until he was so taut he was ready to burst through his skin. At last, when he couldn’t bear the slick warmth of her tongue against his sensitized flesh a moment longer, she slowly drew the hot, hard length of him into her mouth.

The startling intimacy of it drove him right over the edge. He heard himself crying out hoarsely as he exploded in a burst of heat and light, shaking violently as wave after relentless wave buffeted him. Her gentle mouth took him to heights of pleasure he’d never before experienced, ecstasy he’d only imagined in his most private fantasies, fulfillment beyond his wildest imaginings.

At last she moved away slightly, and he crumpled slowly to his knees, put his arms around her, and buried his face in her shoulder. “Shell,” he whispered again.

For long moments he didn’t move, only rested while his rough panting evened out to normal breathing, while his racing heartbeat slowed. Her hands stroked his hair gently in a way that was nearly as intimate as what she’d done a few minutes before.

With a single act of generous lovemaking, she’d healed something within him that had been broken for a long time, and he didn’t have a clue how to tell her how much it had meant to him.

At last he lifted his head and looked at her. “Thank you,” he said softly.

She flashed her cheerful grin, refusing to let him turn the moment into something too serious. “Don’t thank me. I enjoy bringing men to their knees. Although I must admit, I’ve never done it so literally.”

He found himself returning her grin. He hadn’t smiled this much in two years, he thought in wonder. Maybe three. Standing up, he yanked up his pants and lifted her up easily into his arms.

“What are you doing?” she asked.

“For what I have in mind,” he said, heading for her bedroom, “we really need a bed. The floor’s not comfortable enough.”

He fumbled for a lightswitch, found it, and turned it on,

flooding her bedroom with light. It was a pretty room, he noticed vaguely, filled with golden oak furniture. There were paintings of shells on the walls, and the comforter on the bed was exactly the same shade of seagreen as her eyes. He laid her on the bed, then turned back, closed the door, and flipped the light off, veiling the room in darkness.

“Don’t you want to see me?” He heard the hurt threading through her voice and recognized how very insecure she was about her body, despite the striptease she’d performed earlier. It made him want to slug those two insensitive idiots who’d suggested she augment her perfectly lovely breasts. He spoke gently.

“I plan to see you a whole lot ... later. Right now I want the lights out. The truth is, I’m not very good at being uninhibited. I think it’ll be easier in the dark.”

He heard her soft chuckle. “Uninhibited sounds nice.”

“I think I might like it. At the very least, it’s worth a try.” He began stripping. “Take off your clothes.”

He heard the soft rustling sounds as she took off her shorts. The thought of her lying there in the dark, utterly naked, her body already wet and responsive, just waiting for him to make love to her, was exciting enough to make his limp and exhausted penis twitch to life again. Stark naked, he made his way to the bed, reached for her, and found her soft body sprawled across the comforter.

“I can’t see you,” he said softly, “but I remember the way your nipples looked a few minutes ago. Are they still hard?”

“Check and see,” she invited in a hoarse, throaty voice.

He did. Against his palm her nipples rose erect and eager. He recalled their dusky rose color, vivid against the creamy white of her skin, and a hot rush of desire surged through his veins. “You have the most beautiful breasts I’ve ever seen,” he whispered, tracing their contours.

“Now you’re teasing me.”

“No. I’m not. They’re a beautiful shape. I’ve never seen a woman whose breasts don’t sag, at least a little. Yours don’t droop at all.”

“Nothing for gravity to work on,” she said wryly, but he recognized the pleased tone in her voice.

Bending over, he drew her nipple into his mouth again, and at the same time his hand slid down her narrow waist. Her hips were slim too, but there was a unmistakable curve there, a curve that said she was very definitely female. He rolled her slightly to the side, letting his hand roam over her butt. It was tight and well-muscled, but it felt as good as he’d imagined it looked. His fingers tingled with the desire to explore further.

Drawn irresistibly lower, his hand slid over her hip and found her curls. In the inky darkness he couldn’t see, but he could easily

imagine her patch of soft fur, black as sin, a stunning contrast to her snowflake skin, and another shot of excitement coursed through him. He let his fingers slip through the dense thatch until he found what he was looking for. She was damp and hot, and as his fingers dipped gently into her she cried out sharply.

He moistened his fingertip with her dampness, found her most sensitive spot, then began to slide his finger back and forth across her delicate flesh, very slowly, until she was clutching at his shoulders, sobbing. He envisioned what she must look like, her pale body writhing against the seagreen coverlet, her eyes closed, her lips parted as she gasped and panted for breath, and he discovered he was hard again.

“I wish I could be inside you,” he whispered throatily.

“So do I,” she moaned.

He wanted to satisfy her completely, totally, the way she’d satisfied him. But he couldn’t expose her to the possibility of pregnancy. She trusted him, after she’d only known him for a short time, and he wouldn’t betray that trust, no matter how much she wanted him to right now.

He felt her moist, scorching flesh quivering beneath his fingers and knew she was about to climax. He stopped.

“*Please*,” she implored.

“Soon.” He moved his hand slightly and thrust his finger into

her heat. She was completely wet now, and his finger slid all the way inside her without any resistance. She sighed with pleasure as he filled her, and he moved his finger back and forth, thrusting hard, the way he ached to move inside of her.

In the darkness, he couldn't see her naked body straining against him. He could only hear the soft, sobbing noises she made and smell the feminine scent of her arousal. But he felt her hips moving, and he slid another finger inside her, and then a third, stretching her tight, wet passage to its limits. Her hips rose to meet his hand, and he thrust faster and faster, until he heard her crying out, until he felt the long, drawn-out spasms wracking her body. He didn't stop until she gave a long, shuddering sigh and relaxed back against the comforter. Then at last, slowly, he withdrew his wet fingers.

She lay inert, gasping for breath. At last, long moments later, she turned and cuddled against his chest. He put his arms around her. "Satisfied?" he said.

"Definitely. How about you?"

He thought about it. "You know, I'm not quite as satisfied as I was half an hour ago."

She reached down and found his erection. "Yeah, I see that. But you know what?" She wrapped her fingers around him again, and he groaned. "I'm pretty sure I can do something about that."

Chapter 5

Cade was gone when Shell woke up. She stretched lazily in bed, savoring the glowing feeling of having been totally and completely satiated. They had done everything last night except actual intercourse, and that, she felt certain, would occur before too long. Assuming, of course, that Cade wanted to pursue a relationship with her. She felt a little frisson of unease at the fact that he'd left before she'd awakened, but it was entirely possible he had had something important to do.

Like play video games, a doubting little voice whispered in her head.

Shrugging off the voice, she got up, showered, and went about her everyday life. The phone didn't ring all day, although she expected it to, and she got several hours of uninterrupted cello practice in. Around six she dressed to go to work at the mall. As she headed for the door, there was a knock.

Cade. At last.

She threw open the door and found herself face to face with a stranger. A *gorgeous* stranger.

The man was clad in a charcoal gray business suit with a red and blue striped tie. The jacket clung to his broad shoulders. His dark brown hair was short and neatly brushed, and his strong, square jaw was smooth and utterly devoid of any stubble. His sculpted lips were quirked into a slight smile, as though he were enjoying a private joke, and his cheekbones were high and prominent. He was one of the most beautiful men she'd ever seen in her life, she thought, gazing into his midnight blue eyes--

Midnight blue eyes.

"Cade?" she squeaked.

The gorgeous hunk grinned, obviously amused by her shock. "I guess I look a little different with the contacts in, huh?"

It was Cade's deep voice, all right, although she had a hell of a time reconciling this Cade with the one she'd made love to last night. But the difference was more than just the lack of glasses. This man looked lightyears removed from the scruffy, nerdy man she'd met three days before. He even seemed taller, she thought, bemused. His shoulders were squared, his chin held high, and he looked as if he cared what the world thought of him again.

"Uh ... come in," she said at last.

"You looked like you were on your way out."

“I’m supposed to be going to work. But I was going to grab a bite on the way, so I have a few minutes.”

She stepped aside, and Cade walked past her. Even the way he moved had subtly changed, she realized. Before, he’d walked like a beaten man, head and shoulders down, his feet falling heavily. Now he moved past her with easy, athletic grace.

She closed the door, and he turned to face her. “I’m really sorry I left so early this morning,” he said without preamble.

“That’s okay. You’ve obviously been busy.”

He nodded. “After what happened between us last night, I realized I couldn’t go on sulking forever. I’ve been as uncooperative about the divorce as possible, not because I want Rhoda back, but just because I was furious with her. But this morning I called my lawyer and told her to go ahead and get the divorce through as soon as possible. And then, having finally gotten that done, I decided I should go to work. But I suddenly realized I couldn’t go looking the way I’ve been looking.”

“You have a job?”

“I guess I sort of implied I was unemployed, but yeah, I have a job.”

She scowled. “You just haven’t gone to work for two months? How come they didn’t fire you?”

“They couldn’t fire me.” He sent her an apologetic smile. “I

own my own business. Print Kingdom.”

“Oh, my God.” Shell blinked. Print Kingdom had been a small copy shop in downtown Swift Creek. When the current owner took it over, he’d taken it regional, giving the local economy a big boost. Now it was one of the most successful printing chains in the South, getting big writeups in the business section of the newspaper on a regular basis. “I think I’ve seen you on those commercials.”

To her amusement, his cheekbones flushed a dull red. “Yeah,” he admitted. “I’m the Print Prince.”

“And I thought you were out of work!”

“I was just trying to figure out how to fix my life.”

“You thought you’d figure that out by playing video games?”

He shrugged. “I just didn’t feel like coping, all right?” He looked at her, his dark eyes very serious. “Shell, I’m still not sure how to fix my life, but I realize now I’m not going to figure it out by sitting in my apartment all day. Last night helped me get my head on straight, for the first time in a couple of months. But I want you to know I’m not ready to get married again right now, or even right after my divorce goes through. I just don’t want to rush into anything.”

“I don’t remember mentioning marriage.”

“You didn’t. But I didn’t want there to be any misunderstandings between us.”

“It’s okay, Cade. I’m not ready to get married, either. We

don't know each other well enough. Maybe one day ... I think when we're ready, we'll know."

"I'm glad you feel that way." He gazed at her intently. "Even though I'm not thinking marriage right now, Shell, I'd like to pursue a relationship with you."

She reached out and took his hand. "I'd like that too, and not just because you're suddenly a gorgeous hunk. I was actually planning on telling you that this morning."

He smiled, clearly relieved, and then cocked an eyebrow at her. "While I was out shopping for suits today, I stopped by a drugstore."

Shell frowned at him for a moment, and then it hit her. "Oh! You got condoms."

"Uh-huh. Want to try them out?"

"I'd love to. But I really need to get going, or I'll be late for work."

"Can't you call in sick?"

"I missed a day a couple of weeks ago, when I had a cold. I don't think I dare call in sick again." She smiled. "But I'll be back at midnight."

"Terrific." He smiled right back. "I'll be waiting for you."

A few minutes after midnight, Shell ran up the last few stairs to her apartment. Posted on the door was a note, in bold masculine

handwriting: *Meet me in the park.*

She went into her apartment and changed into shorts and a T-shirt, then went down the stairs and outside, into the warm night air. Although it was August--generally an unpleasantly hot, humid month in this part of Virginia--a cool, refreshing breeze blew from the direction of the creek. She headed across the road and toward the park, following the path her pursesnatcher had taken. She had a hunch she'd find Cade near the creek, where he'd rescued her cowry.

On the bank of the creek she saw an indistinct figure sitting on a blanket, waiting for her. Despite the fact that it was midnight, she had no difficulty recognizing the figure as Cade, thanks to the light of the half moon that rode low in the sky. He stood up as she approached, and she saw that he'd changed out of his suit. His chest and shoulders were so broad and well-muscled they strained the fabric of his black T-shirt, the jeans he wore emphasized the narrowness of his hips, and his biceps bulged. He couldn't have looked less like a nerd if he tried.

"Hi," he said.

She stretched up and kissed his cheek. "You do realize no one's supposed to be in the park after sunset, don't you?"

Cade grinned, a smile so breathtaking she wondered how she'd ever taken him for an unattractive nerd. "This way we have some privacy."

“Unless a cop happens by,” she remarked dryly, although she wasn’t really too worried about it. This was a fairly nice section of town, so cops didn’t patrol it too frequently, and the patch of bank they were sitting on wasn’t visible from the road. Unless a police officer decided to take a moonlight stroll, they were probably safe.

She let him draw her down onto the blanket he’d spread over the grass and sat next to him, so close their thighs touched. “It’s beautiful out tonight,” she said softly as the breeze ruffled her long locks.

He wrapped his arms around her. “It sure is,” he agreed, pressing his face into her hair.

For long moments they sat there, unmoving, simply enjoying each other’s company. The only sound was the rippling of the water. Then, slowly, he drew her shirt up and pulled it off, exposing her bare breasts to the cool night breeze. Her nipples went rigid almost instantly. He leaned over and ran his tongue over one, then the other, wetting them thoroughly.

She waited for him to do something else, but he lifted his head and simply sat there, arms around her, gazing at the water. She squirmed as the light wind blew over her dampened nipples, making them even harder. Her breasts began to ache.

“How was work?” he asked, apparently oblivious to her squirming.

“Fine. I spent most of the evening looking forward to seeing you.”

“Glad to hear it. I hope I can make it worth the anticipation.” At long last, his big hand slowly moved up, and his fingers lightly brushed her nipple. A jolt of heat shot through her.

His fingers kept stroking over her, very softly, igniting a fire deep within her, until she was moaning low in her throat. He put his other hand over her mouth. “Quiet,” he reminded her. “We’re in public.”

“You expect me to keep quiet while you do that?”

“Have you ever made love in public before?”

She shook her head.

“Me neither. I figure it’s something everyone should try at least once.”

“I’m not fond of being arrested,” she said breathlessly.

“The Print Prince being arrested for public lewdness wouldn’t do wonders for the image of Print Kingdom,” Cade admitted. “But I think we can get away with it, as long as we keep quiet.”

She remembered the way he’d made love to her until she cried out last night. And the idea of making love to him out of doors, in the silvery moonlight, excited her almost beyond bearing. She wasn’t certain she *could* be quiet under these circumstances.

His hand stole down to her shorts and began to stroke her

through the thin material. She leaned her head back against his shoulder and moaned again.

“Shh,” he said, and kissed her, muffling her soft noises of pleasure.

She was certain he must be able to feel how wet she was despite the barrier of the material. Seized by the desire to know if he was as aroused as she was, she reached behind her and groped for the crotch of his jeans. She could feel the hot, bold shape of him, straining against the denim. At her gentle touch, he gave a rough groan.

“Shh,” she reminded him, and began to move her hand up and down.

In the moonlight she saw his face, rigid with the effort of controlling himself, saw the hard set of his jaw as he struggled not to make a sound. She discovered she wasn't satisfied with touching him through thick fabric.

She needed more.

Unzipping his jeans, she released his erection from its confines and let it spring free. It was heavy, hard, and incredibly long. Just the thought of what it would be like to take him into her body was almost enough to make her climax.

She encircled him with her fingers and stroked her thumb over the broad, smooth tip, delighting in the moisture that welled up at her

caress, thrilled by the feel of him jerking convulsively in her hand. She could hear him gritting his teeth with the effort of keeping his silence.

“I think this might be a good time to find the condoms,” he said, hoarsely.

He groped behind him, reaching into his back pocket, and pulled out a foil packet. Shell took it from him and unrolled it slowly over his engorged shaft, stroking and caressing and teasing as she went, until he was trembling. “Shell,” he groaned. “Don’t--I mean, I can’t--”

Realizing he was very close to the edge, she yanked off her shorts and panties, then faced him and straddled his lap, both of them still sitting up, his relentlessly throbbing erection cradled between her thighs. Her hands slid up under his shirt, caressing his heated skin, exploring the solid muscles of his abdomen, stroking through the light dusting of hair on his chest. Beneath her questing fingers his skin grew damp with perspiration.

His lips found hers as she slowly lowered herself onto him. He was scorching hot and hard as marble, and a soft noise of ecstasy escaped her as he began to slide into her swollen, wet flesh. He gasped, wrapping his arms around her waist to keep himself upright, then flexed his hips and drove deep into her.

She sobbed against his mouth as Cade thrust hard, all the way

to her womb, filling her body and soul, more completely than anything she'd ever imagined. And then he withdrew, and drove into her again.

Hot, raw ecstasy seized her, flooding her whole body with warmth, spasm after spasm wracking her with each thrust. She felt herself contracting around him, heard his soft, drawn-out groan as he shuddered right along with her.

At last she sighed and collapsed against his chest. He leaned his face into her hair and chuckled.

“What’s so funny?”

“You are. If that’s your idea of quiet, I’d hate to hear you being loud.”

Shell frowned. She didn’t remember crying out. “Wasn’t I quiet?”

“Only in the sense that an air-raid siren is quiet,” he said, grinning.

“I really couldn’t help it, you know.”

“I know. I’m glad. It’s nice to make love to a woman whose reactions are honest and real. I like it. I think I could get used to it.”

She smiled up at him. “I think I could get used to making love to you.”

“I certainly hope so.”

She reached out, got her clothes, and slid them back on, then

stretched out on the blanket and wrapped her fingers around his. “It’s a strange thing,” she said as she looked up at the moon. “I’ve only known you three days. And yet I feel more comfortable with you than I’ve ever been with any man.”

Cade zipped up his pants and stretched out next to her.

“Maybe you haven’t been dating the right guys,” he suggested.

Shell thought about her father’s words, and she laughed softly.

“You know, I think that’s exactly it. I’ve been looking at the wrong men. It’s funny, but all the princes I’ve dated turned out to be frogs.” She squeezed his hand. “And the man I thought was a nerd turned out to be a prince.”

Epilogue

Twelve months later

Shell put down the telephone with a worried frown and walked out to her small living room, where her prince was cheerfully frying aliens in a video game. *Once a nerd, always a nerd*, she thought with amusement, watching Cade shoot an ugly green one. But at least he restricted this pastime to a few hours on the weekends now, and spent the rest of the time living.

In the months since she'd met him, their lives had become inextricably entwined. He was supportive of her career, always attending her concerts, even when she was playing what he referred to as That Godawful Racket, and he'd continued to keep his own business growing and thriving. His divorce--the only shadow that had hung over their relationship--had been final for months. Six months ago he'd sold his house, severing his last link with his ex-wife, and moved into Shell's tiny apartment.

Their kingdom might be small, but Shell had no doubt that her

nerd was indeed a prince. She'd never been so happy in her life.

At least, she'd been happy until now.

He glanced around, saw her anxious expression, and dropped the controller. "What's wrong?"

"I've got a problem," she said. "In fact, we've got a problem."

He stood up and looked at her, his midnight eyes concerned. "What's wrong?"

"I've just been offered a job playing for the Virginia Symphony," she said faintly.

He picked her up and swung her around. "That's terrific!" The Virginia Symphony was a very good orchestra, nationally known, and definitely a big step up for her. "So why the sad eyes?"

She buried her face against his chest. "Cade, it's in *Norfolk*. That's two hours away. I'm going to have to move. And you have to be here, because Print Kingdom's main offices are here."

He held her, evidently considering her statement. "What if we buy a house halfway between Swift Creek and Norfolk?" he suggested. "That way we'd both have a commute of an hour, more or less. Would that be fair?"

"Buy a house together? That's kind of a commitment, isn't it?"

He shot her a mysterious smile. "Funny that you should mention commitment. I was going to do this tonight for your birthday, but...." He reached into his pocket and pulled out a box. He

opened it with a flourish, showing her a brown and white shell with triangular markings all over it.

She stared for a long moment. “Is that a Glory of the Sea?”

“*Conus gloriamaris*,” he said, then added with a wry grin, “At least that’s what your dad called it when I showed it to him. I don’t think it’s as pretty as a golden cowry, but he said you’d like it.”

Cone-shaped, long, and narrow, the Glory of the Sea wasn’t as glossy as a cowry, but it was rare and fairly valuable. Like any shell, it was a unique, exquisite creation ... just like the life they had built together. “I love it,” she said softly. “It’s beautiful.”

“Will you marry me, Shell?”

She glanced up from her appraisal of the shell and blinked at the serious expression on his handsome face, then grinned with amusement. “Are you telling me this is an engagement seashell?”

“Pick it up.”

She lifted the shell carefully out of its box. As she did so, she saw something beneath it, something that glittered. A ring with a huge diamond.

“You told me once,” he said, “that we’d know when we were ready.” Removing the ring from the box, he slid it onto her finger. It fit perfectly.

He gazed down at her, his blue eyes very intense. “I’m ready, Shell.”

She wrapped her fingers around his hand and smiled. “So am I,” she said.